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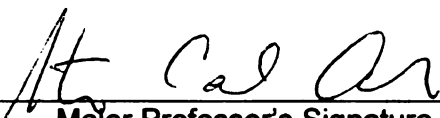
THE PERFECT ALIBI: LAW AND SOCIAL TABOO IN
REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERRACIAL DESIRE

presented by

Melissa Kathryn Fore

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OF INTERACIAL DESIRE

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Melissa Kathryn Fore

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ABSTRACT

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By

Melissa Kathryn Fore

This project examines how interracial eroticism has a complex, ambivalent relationship to the law and social taboo. Understanding this relationship requires an awareness of how the concept of “interracial” is both legally and culturally constructed, the contexts within which it operates, and the ways cultural and artistic texts influence, echo, and ratify prohibitions against interracial desire. By focusing on moments when the ulterior stakes of the law are visible with an emergent erotics, this project traces the law’s role, which would seem to be central, as an effect of other forces which the law both masks and suppresses. Some of these other forces are simultaneously present in contemporaneous literatures as well as public scandals, political pamphlets, and other cultural phenomena. In analyzing these erotic events, generated from deeply entrenched prohibitions, my project examines the intersections of prohibition and desire to expose the spectacular phenomenon of regulating interracial sex.

In this project, narrative and psychoanalytic theory provide the foundation for examining texts and cultural forms of interracial desire. Peter Brooks’ analysis of the middle of the text and Freud’s work on improper aim / object offer insights into how narratives of interracial eroticism are both constructed and consumed.

To Ọmọlọlá, Carolyn, Mom and Dad

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Introduction

This project examines the policing of interracial desire and exposes the self-contradictory structure of laws and social taboos surrounding mixed race sexuality. The laws and social taboos that forbid interracial sex were by no means rational or in the citizenry's best interest; instead, I would argue they were put in place to alibi the consumption of what should have been private affairs between consenting adults. In order to clarify my language, I want to specify early on that when I use the term interracial, I mean specifically black/ white relationships. Although the term includes numerous other pairings, I will be focusing on black and white couples and their inability to escape laws and social taboos prohibiting marriage, sex, and intimacy. The prohibitions against interracial relationships provide the occasion to *see* such depraved crimes against morality as *fornication* and *cohabitation*. Every detail of court testimony, every police stakeout, every judge's deliberation, all granted titillating accounts of the "illicit" activity taking place between interracial couples. Because of the alleged illegality of interracial intimacy, there was an excuse to see it, to root it out, and to bring it from behind bedroom doors.

This phenomena is perhaps most visible with lawmakers themselves—characters like Strom Thurmond, who spoke about black people and their voting rights for a total of 24 hours and 18 minutes on the senate floor. Thurmond's speech was the longest filibuster in history and allowed for quite an extended fantasy. Fortunately, he had a black mistress and biracial daughter to corroborate his aversion to race mixing. Or there's senator Larry Craig, who votes against any civil rights legislation involving same-

sex couples and is quite vocal on his anti-gay position. (That is, until he goes to Minnesota and plays footsie with a potential date.) The laws provided these men with inroads to sexual satisfaction and fodder for erotic fantasies much like laws against interracial sex provide the occasion to see manifestations of it in public forums. What happens as a result of prohibiting interracial desire, then, are moments of erotic spectacle that delight willing participants who need a pretext for enjoying the show.

What centuries of these prohibitions create are pathological and immoral representations of interracial sexuality. Black men are depicted as rapist who would stop at nothing to ravage a white female (*Birth of a Nation*), white males are characterized as sadistic torturers of enslaved black females (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) white women are depicted as frigid, cruel and abusive (*Our Nig*). Throughout history these representations change only slightly, but always retain their pathological texture. For instance, Amiri Baraka's Lulu in *Dutchman* is the counterpoint to the black male rapist, so sexually aggressive and violent that she thinks nothing of murdering one black man and moving right to the next. Chester Himes, too, creates female characters that prey on black males and pushes them to the brink of insanity. Interracial sex is depicted as violent and sadistic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, indecent and forbidden in *House Behind the Cedars* and *Passing*, or unachievable in *Jungle Fever*. There are few representations of idyllic scenes between black / white couples and their existence seems like a cultural impossibility.

Because this project looks at social and legal prohibitions over a changing racial climate, it spans several centuries and crosses national boundaries. Examining specific historical moments when the law had a significant effect on interracial intimacy—the

implementation of Jim Crow / Segregation laws, the civil rights movement, and the supreme court case Loving v. Virginia—gives a panoramic view of the prohibitions guiding mixed race sex, but assumes a false linearity and precludes a discussion of social taboos and other cultural forces that worked to condemn mixed race couples. Although this project examines cultural phenomena from the 19th to the 21st century, (admittedly a vast period of time) it does so to uncover the ways in which prohibitions fluctuate not solely according to history but in accordance with class, sex and gender transformations as well. What a study of the cultural representations of interracial intimacy will ultimately “show” is the structures of desire when mixed with prohibition and taboo. In addition to a theory of narrative structure, this project will also expose the structure of public desire, uncovering their fascination with mixed race sex and the ways in which public spectacle of interracial sex is condoned and consumed.

Law vs. Social Taboo

Channeled and shaped by the law, but functioning outside of legal registers were social taboos surrounding interracial desire. Unlike laws regulating interracial intimacy, social taboos lacked the judicial force to punish transgressors; but community members functioned as pseudo officers, judges and juries, specifying what behavior would be tolerated. The tenets of social taboo, although not recorded in a federal or state legislation, carried the same weight of punishment and censor by means of violence or rejection. Rather than being fined or imprisoned, interracial couples would be pushed to the periphery of towns and treated as social pariahs. Social taboos reinforced the boundaries created by the ruling class and although interracial sex across the color line was begrudgingly tolerated during the period of enslavement, as Emancipation brought

new freedoms for blacks, social dictates restricted their romantic options. It was typically acceptable for white males to have sex with black females, but white females were forbidden to engage in the same sexual contact with black males.

Documentation does exist of white women having affairs with house slaves and black males living in the cities, but stories such as these are scarce compared to the countless histories of slave rape and “kept” women. Martha Hodes’s “Wartime Dialogues on Illicit Sex: White Women and Black Men,” uncovers two studies, conducted by white male abolitionists during the Civil War, that detail interracial sex between white women and black men. Hodes tells of Captain Richard Hinton, an abolitionist in charge of a brigade of black soldiers, who made a rather difficult confession: “I will tell you a fact that I have never seen alluded to publicly, and I suppose a man would be scouted who should allude to it publicly; but my relations with colored people have led me to believe that there is a large amount of intercourse between white women and colored men” (116). Another abolitionist James Redpath, told the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission “about sexual liaisons between white women and black men in considerable detail” (117). Besides revealing a deep curiosity about interracial sex shared by both men, this history alludes to a pervasive panic that provided an excuse for recording intimate details of black / white intercourse. A government agency dedicated to the transition from bondage to freedom became involved in monitoring interracial sex and thus began the cycle of prohibition, desire, and the resultant spectacle.

Social taboos were only as powerful as the communities that enforced them and certain individuals (wealthy, white males) could ignore the prohibitions with impunity.

Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slave Made*, a comprehensive study of slavery in America, gives examples of white men who ignored social dictum and lived freely with black women:

Some prominent planters flaunted the slave mistresses and mulatto children.

David Dickson of Georgia, one of the most celebrated leaders in the movement to reform southern agriculture, lost his wife early in life, took a mistress, and accepted a measure of social disapproval to live openly with her and their children [. . .] other white observers report such relationships, displayed publicly and accepted by society with nothing worse than muttering and minor social ostracism (418).

The men of these examples, though, were powerful planters, mayors and business owners; their class and social standing had much influence over the community's tolerance of their sexual affairs. Social taboos, then, shifted registers depending on who committed the "crime." Certain white males could ignore social codes and still maintain power in the communities as if social taboos were only "suggestions" for proper conduct.

Although taboos against interracial unions were always firmly entrenched in the south, by the end of Reconstruction, the new found "freedoms" blacks enjoyed as a result of the war shifted again, and the notion of what would be tolerated by communities who fought to reinscribe precarious racial boundaries was quickly changing. White men who wanted to marry black women were socially ostracized and white women who would take black lovers were not only pushing against social mores, but placing their black lovers in danger of being lynched. In many instances, it was not the law but social taboos that spurred lynch mobs to violent action. These Lynch mobs relied on legal sanction as

justification for their murders but circumvented the law in order to exact their own form of vigilante justice. In many circumstances, black males accused of raping white women would be wrestled from jail cells where they were supposedly protected by the law until proven guilty. But the outrage at supposed interracial rape was enough to turn a blind eye to the legal procedure and lynch mobs would storm county jails and remove prisoners to face their death at the hands of armed and incensed citizens. The practice of lynching demonstrates a collision between law and social taboo, one that uses state prohibitions to feed misguided social mores.

So while the law and social taboos run parallel in many instances, each set of prohibitions function in different registers. In states where interracial sex was not prohibited, social taboos were influential in keeping racial borders in tact. Social prohibitions had the power to sever family ties, prohibit children from receiving their inheritance, and brand mixed race couples as outcasts in their community. These tacit understandings, for social taboos were never transcribed in courthouse documents or copied into county registers, served as the measure of normal and decent behavior and those who dared to challenge these taboos felt the obvious disapproval from a public deeply committed to preserving the status quo.

A tangled network of influence makes understanding the law's relationship to interracial eroticism a complex undertaking; deciphering the elaborate system of prohibitions as well as other cultural operations that mitigate interracial sex requires that we understand the relationship between several legal concepts, some used interchangeably and others ambiguously. The specific codes, social compromises, and governing ideologies that have shaped laws prohibiting interracial sex have shifted in

relation to their locale, the race and gender of perpetrators, and the trends of historical moments. Statutes defining and prohibiting segregation, fornication, adultery, miscegenation, and illicit cohabitation, have been utilized to punish sexual liaisons that crossed the color line; these statutes created a nexus of prohibitions that converged on issues of selective enforcement and questions of evidence.

In each of these categories, the language and interpretation of statutes, the selective and widely racist enforcement, the type and reliability of evidence, and the varying degrees of punishment act as a failsafe against interracial intimacy and reveal cultural and racial biases inherent in prosecuting crimes against morality. In “The Many Faces of Overcriminalization: From Morals and Mattress Tags to Overfederalization,” Sara Sun Beale discusses the unjust nature of morals legislation: “statutes that are vague and overbroad delegate so much discretion to the police and prosecutors that they invite arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement” (759). In the case of enforcing bans on interracial sex, clearly identified as morals legislation, arbitrary and discriminatory practices were standard procedure. As evinced in the language of fornication, illicit cohabitation and miscegenation laws, the expansive range of offensive behaviors listed under the umbrella “crimes against morality,” allowed law enforcement officials to penalize interracial intimacy in myriad forms.

Another way of viewing the relationship between law and interracial sex is to examine the layers of prohibition that over time created an interlocking barrier against miscegenation. Segregation laws were a blanket of sanctions that established boundaries between whites and blacks and laid the foundation of separation between the races in almost every sphere of public and private life. Segregation, when paired with domestic

laws (which are statutes that address matters of marriage, spousal support, child custody and other family relation issues) produced another system for prosecuting the crime of miscegenation. Under the umbrella of miscegenation, though, are other criminal offenses such as fornication, adultery and cohabitation, all supposed affronts to the sanctity of marriage since they involve sexual trysts outside of matrimonial relations. These provisions showcase an alliance of public policy and racist attitudes and construct a coalition of statutes making interracial sex, in any situation, against the law. In combining segregation with domestic law, intimate sexual relationships that occur in the domestic space were exposed to law enforcement officials. This commingling of prohibitions invited the law into the bedrooms of mixed race couples and transformed their private sexual affairs into public fodder. What this overview of legal prohibitions makes clear are the ways in which laws prohibiting interracial sex were part of a larger scheme to observe and participate in scenes of interracial sex.

Segregation

Perhaps the broadest measures enacted to curtail social intermingling between races, segregation laws helped to curb opportunities for sexual relationships between whites and blacks. Created in the 1870s to counteract Reconstruction and implemented well into the 1960s, segregation laws severely crippled black Americans' ability to accede to their full constitutional rights. Segregation laws curtailed voting rights, limited job and educational opportunities, and restricted access to transportation and other public facilities. An appeals case in Alabama during the 1960s best illustrates the pervasiveness of segregation laws and the ways in which they were used to systematically construct divided communities. When a black member of the Montgomery community attempted

to use the public library and visit the attached museum, he was told by the attendant that “we do not serve Negroes in this library” (*Cobb v. Montgomery Library Board*, 207 F. Supp. 800; 1962 U.S. Dist.). After browsing the stacks for a few minutes, the man and his friends were accosted by the library’s director who “informed them, among other things, that if they did not leave, he would call the city police.” Under segregation law, Police officers were utilized to arrest black library patrons and visitors of public museums. Although not specifically instituted to ban interracial sex, Segregation laws made social interactions and activities, typically a precursor to sexual encounters, against the law. Dining out, going to the movies, laying on the beach, sharing a train ride, dancing at school proms, these types of exchanges were outlawed for interracial couples under Jim Crow and successive government mandated segregation.

Jim Crow Law, allegedly derived from an early caricature of an African American man “jumping Jim Crow,” established firm boundaries of separation, primarily in southern states, alongside court mandated segregation like *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which justified “separate but equal” public facilities such as railroads, restrooms, cafes and schools. Legalized segregation prevented those who perhaps wanted to intermingle from having a feasible means of socializing. Definitive boundaries were set for public interactions so that any crossing could be visible to an anxious white public. Racial boundaries were so obvious (separate restrooms, restaurants, waiting rooms, theaters) that any crossings would be easy to police and regulate. These carefully constructed prohibitions, though, attest to an intense desire for whites and blacks to socially intermingle; indeed, if the urge didn’t exist, the excessive regulations would have been unnecessary.

When slavery was abolished and whites and blacks had the opportunity to marry before strict Miscegenation laws closed any loopholes permitting legal unions, the law was used in very creative ways to restrict interracial marriage. Eugene Genovese explains how lawyers in Kentucky attempted to foil a white man's desire to marry his ex slave: "The Supreme Court of Kentucky refused to judge insane a white man who wanted to marry the slave he had just emancipated. However repugnant, the court declared, such concubinage occurred too often to permit denial of the attraction" (415). Throngs of insanity cases would have been pushed through Kentucky courts had the Supreme Court let this ruling stand, illustrating how frequently interracial relationships occurred and how desperate the public was to prohibit them. The implications of allowing an insanity charge against a white male for taking a black woman as his wife were too treacherous for the Kentucky court to touch. Connecting sanity to romantic preference did not seem in the court's best interest, especially since they admitted that interracial attraction occurred quite frequently. Interestingly enough, this insanity charge would be commonplace fifty years later. When white women wanted to marry black men against their family's wishes, exasperated families would institutionalize their daughters rather than accept a black son-in-law.

Miscegenation

Miscegenation is the term broadly applied to any sexual relations, marriage, cohabitation, fornication, adultery, or procreation between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Dating back to the 1660s in Virginia and Maryland, laws against intermarriage began as regulations barring relationships between whites and slaves or indentured servants. By the 1690s, the definition of intermarriage included free blacks

and outlawed all unions between the races. The term *miscegenation* derived from a post Civil War pamphlet entitled “Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro,” written by George Wakeman and David Goodman Croly in 1864. In this propaganda piece, circulated to create anti-miscegenation sentiments that would ruin Abraham Lincoln’s reputation and stall the abolitionist movement, a caricature of a thick-lipped black man kissing a white woman with the caption “What Miscegenation Is!” gave the reader information on the benefits of interracial unions and the superiority of interracial offspring. Terrified that the abolition of slavery would cause an increase of interracial relationships, the South’s answer was to implement Anti-Miscegenation laws. In *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance*, Rachel Moran argues that “interracial relationships threatened to muddy the divide between black and white, slave and free. To keep these distinctions clear, antimiscegenation laws treated sex and marriage across racial boundaries as antisocial, dangerous acts” (4). But the waters were already “muddy” from decades of slave rape, southern white women exercising power over black servants, and romantic involvement between free blacks and whites—miscegenation laws of the mid 19th century could only hope to deter the burgeoning interracial relationships by outlawing marriage, a social contract not necessarily a prerequisite to sexual contact.

Throughout history, miscegenators, with their potential to produce interracial offspring, have been associated with the spread of disease and social ills. Lawmakers compared the threat of miscegenation to toxic contagions and warned the public of the potential for a widespread outbreak of interracial desire. Miscegenation was deemed “a threat to health and morality of the population,” and the “resources of the state were

dedicated to its prevention and punishment” (Hartman 186). This rhetoric was swiftly applied in the case of *Young vs. State of Georgia* 1880, where a Black man was accused of raping a white prostitute. The prosecution instructed an all white male jury “that they ought to put a stop to miscegenation as there was no telling where it would stop if it were not cut off” (65 *Ga.* 525; 1880 *Ga.* LEXIS 246). The counsel compared miscegenation to a malignant disease requiring swift amputation of the infected part; without legal intervention, the proliferation of interracial intimacy could reach epidemic proportions.

In 1880, the Georgia prosecutor could not have anticipated how literally his advice would be taken as thousands of black men from 1880 – 1960 were lynched, castrated or mutilated for the crime of “raping” a white woman. In lieu of a Federal mandate that would protect the public from a rash of interracial marriages, many states adopted statutes outlawing interracial unions. For example, in 1887, Alabama Supreme Court gave this ruling regarding interracial marriage:

Manifestly, it is for the peace and happiness of the black race, as well as of the white, that such laws should exist. And surely there can not be any tyranny of injustice in requiring both alike, to form this union with those of their own race only, whom God hath joined together by indelible peculiarities, which declare that He has made the two races distinct. (58 *Ala.* 190; 1877 *Ala.* LEXIS 204)

Upholding miscegenation laws became a matter of separating the “peculiarities” of each race and keeping God’s mandated boundary in tact. Georgia Representative Seaborn Roddenbery unsuccessfully lobbied for federal intervention in 1913, and his petition to the House of Representatives reveals the anxieties of a white population whose fanatical

beliefs about sexual segregation foreshadow an apocalyptic vision of the U.S. if mixed marriages were allowed to take place:

Intermarriage between whites and blacks is repulsive and averse to every sentiment of pure American spirit. It is abhorrent and repugnant to the very principles of Saxon government. It is subversive of social peace. It is destructive of moral supremacy, and ultimately this slavery of white women to black beasts will bring this nation a conflict as fatal as ever reddened the soil of Virginia or crimsoned the mountain paths of Pennsylvania. ... Let us uproot and exterminate now this debasing, ultra-demoralizing, un-American and inhuman leprosy”

(*Congressional Record*, 62d. Congr., 3d. Sess., December 11, 1912, pp. 502-503.)

In Roddenbery’s view, allowing the proliferation of intermarriage would have dire consequences; the infection, both un-American and inhuman, would disfigure and malign the body of moral values. Like the call for amputation in the Georgia case, Roddenbery asks for extermination before the infestation of interracial unions spread across America.

Faced with an increasing number of interracial unions after the Civil War, law enforcement agents sought to increase punishments and broaden definitions of miscegenation in order to deter any interracial affairs; in this paradigm the law works both ways—negotiating and negotiated by interracial relationships. Although the law attempted to intervene and punish black / white sexual relationships, it was also re-made and reconfigured as mixed race couples became more visible. Once each state outlawed interracial marriage, most by the mid 1880s, law enforcement officials could rely on clear and irrefutable codes of conduct to protect the institution of marriage. Miscegenation laws created a set of rules against interracial sex that not only hoped to hinder

intermarriage but also to curtail any physical contact between whites and blacks. These laws were written and revised by legislators who abhorred race mixing, who struggled to maintain shifting boundaries that threatened the racial status quo, and who represented concerns of the general public. Mediated by the fears of interracial offspring and the deterioration of white supremacy, the laws attempted to erect an impenetrable barricade against interracial sex and marriage.

Perhaps the interweaving of prohibitions is best seen in the vast *interpretation* of anti-miscegenation laws, where fornication, adultery, and illicit cohabitation are all mentioned to cover multiple transgressions. Whereas other codes against sexual misconduct omitted race, miscegenation laws made it central:

If any white person and any Negro, or the descendant of any Negro, to the third generation inclusive, though one ancestor of each generation was a white person, intermarry or live in adultery or fornication with each other, each of them must on conviction be imprisoned in the penitentiary, or sentenced to hard labor for the county for not less than two nor more than seven years.” Alabama Statutes (1866) Art. 1, Sec. 61.¹

This statute, covering a variety of sexual crimes, was on the books in Alabama until 1970, demonstrating the endurance of social taboos and the law’s willingness to regulate interracial intimacy. The penalty for miscegenation ranged from monetary fines, prison

¹ Examples of similar miscegenation statutes: Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 63-107 (1939) makes a marriage between a Caucasian and a person of certain named races and their descendants null and void. Such a union is not only voidable but null and void and may be shown in any proceeding when material. In state of Louisiana: Section 1 of Act No. 87 of 1908 reads as follows: Be it enacted by the general assembly of the state of Louisiana, that concubinage between a person of the Caucasian or white race and a person of the Negro or black race is hereby made a felony, and whoever shall be convicted thereof in any court of competent jurisdiction shall for each offense be sentenced to imprisonment at the discretion of the court for a term of not less than one month nor more than one year with or without hard labor.

sentences or hard labor, and always carried a greater punishment than “unlawful” sex between white couples.

Fornication

The laws governing morality in Colonial America were borrowed from English Ecclesiastical courts, sometimes termed ‘bawdy courts’ due to the explicit nature of the crimes brought to trial. These laws, enacted and enforced by the Anglican Christian church, dealt specifically with issues that many citizens deemed private and were usually sexual in nature. Specifically, the crime of fornication was defined as illicit sex between unmarried persons and punishments ranged from public beatings, fines, imprisonment or compulsory marriage. Linked to concerns about failing morality, fornication laws were enacted to preserve decorum, maintain the sanctity of marriage, protect against diseases, and safeguard against illegitimate children. Because many lawmakers and judges viewed the law’s role as defender of virtuous and decent behavior, fornication laws survived well into the twentieth century; indeed, through the 1960s, fornication was illegal in all but ten states. Fornication laws varied from state to state but typically rendered illegal sexual relations between non-married persons. Many states listed fornication under a section of codes outlining moral mandates and listed them under crimes against decency, morality, and chastity.

Prosecution and interpretation of fornication laws also varied according to state. Some states, such as Alabama, mention race in their definitions of fornication as seen in code 1876 section 4189 which “makes it a felony for any white person and a negro, or descendant of a negro to the third generation inclusive, to intermarry, or live in adultery or fornication with each other.” This definition, like many, encompasses fornication,

adultery *and* miscegenation, creating an impenetrable front against the “indecent” and “immoral” act of interracial sex. Although laws against interracial fornication acted as a safety net to prosecute adults having sex across the color line, not all fornication laws mentioned race, nor did they have to, several other laws were in place to reinforce the illicit nature of interracial sex. Altered or abolished throughout history to accommodate laxer moral standards, fornication laws have been challenged on several grounds, and in state Supreme Court cases questioning their necessity, attorneys have cited personal privacy, due process, and fundamental rights as reasons to strike them down.

Specifically, the Fourteenth Amendment has been called upon by defense attorneys in fornication trials to render certain that “no state shall [. . .] deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws,” a privilege most often ignored in criminal sexual conduct trials involving interracial couples.

The evidence required to prosecute interracial fornicators was typically unsubstantiated or unconvincing and yet prosecutors had much success pinning this crime on mixed race couples. In a 1948 slander case involving rumors that Marcella Frank, a white woman, was seen keeping company with a Black taxicab driver, her neighbor Mrs. Virginia Crockett testified that “if you should catch a white girl and colored fellow together you would know they would not be out just for the pleasure of riding together” (240 *Mo. App.* 425; 208 S.W.2d 783; 1948 *Mo. App.* LEXIS 276) When the prosecutor asked her if she knew what it meant for a white woman to “keep company” with a black man, Mrs Crockett stated “There is only one reason a white woman would do that, and that would be for immoral purposes, according to my ideas.” Mrs. Virginia Crockett was not an expert in black / white relationships or even a viable witness, but her feeble

testimony was admitted in court. What Mrs. Crockett's testimony illustrates, though, is that the specter of a black man and white woman "caught," as if lurking about in secret, conjures fantasies of carnal desire, her assumption being that interracial relationships always exist outside the boundaries of natural courtship. Frank herself testified that the false rumors of her interracial affair had damaged "her reputation as a pure, virtuous and chaste woman" and that "she has suffered great humiliation and disgrace thereby; that she has been brought into contempt and ridicule, exposed to public wrath and hatred, and deprived of the public countenance and social intercourse among her former friends and acquaintances." Court proceedings, witness testimony, and charges of impurity were all the result of small town gossip and the fear of intermingling; Marcella Frank's false indictment as a fornicatress illustrates the public's frenzied response to interracial relationships and the fantasies that force rumors into criminal court.

In punishing fornication crimes, a disproportionate number of black males were imprisoned for having sex with white women, compared to white males who were able to have sex with black females with little threat of reprisal. So as the law worked to control sexual relationships between whites and blacks it did so based on the sex and race of the perpetrator. Although the law specifically stated that white males would be held accountable for the crime of fornication with a black woman, these "crimes" went largely unpunished.

Punishment typically varied according to the race of the perpetrator and played a central role in determining the severity of the charge. For instance, in section 4189 of Alabama state code 1876, fornication between a white person and a "Negro" was a felony while fornication between a man and woman of the same race was "a misdemeanor,

punishable with a money fine.” In Mississippi, the punishment for fornication was “a maximum penalty of a \$ 500 fine and six months imprisonment in the County Jail” while fornication “between persons of different races shall be punishable as a felony with a maximum penalty therefor of ten years in the State Penitentiary” (Section 2000 of the *Mississippi Code* of 1942). The punishment for interracial fornication, being both nonequivalent and selectively enforced in many Southern states, not only speaks to the duplicitous nature of the law and its agents but also evinces an apparent disregard for impartiality and justice. The ways in which lawmakers, judges and juries skirted around blatant misuse of the law to guard against sexual intercourse between interracial couples reveals the desperation of a society to maintain the racial status quo and exposes the cultural biases woven into the fabric of the legal system. But in charging mixed race couples with felony fornication and bringing the case to trial, all the sordid details of the affair must be entered as evidence, guaranteeing an erotic spectacle that is directed by the legal community. The very evidence needed to convict a couple of interracial fornication is the particulars of their sexual relationship; the state prosecutor builds his case from the titillating testimony of witnesses who observed the couple’s supposed crime. Witness statements, which are then recorded and reiterated by the prosecuting attorney, create multiple layers of voyeurism.

Illicit Cohabitation

Illicit cohabitation in its most general form is defined as “the offense committed by an unmarried man and woman who live together as husband and wife and engage in sexual intercourse” (*Blacks Law Dictionary* 87). Defined in relation to marriage and straddling fornication and miscegenation laws, illicit cohabiters showed a blatant

disregard for the sanctity of marriage and challenged the very foundation of domestic relations. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, when laws regulating sexuality were more likely to be enforced, illicit cohabitation between two white offenders hinged on whether or not the couple lived in the same residence and acted as legal husband and wife, enjoying all of the benefits of matrimony. When paired with interracial sex, however, cohabitation became more threatening and involved a variety of “indecent” acts. In Arkansas, a person guilty of illicit cohabitation across the color-line was guilty of “concubinage.” As recorded in statute 41-810, “concubinage is hereby defined to be the unlawful cohabitation of persons of the Caucasian race and of the Negro race, whether open or secret.” Illicit cohabitation between a white woman and a black man was no more heinous a crime than if it were between two adults of the same race, but the laws regulating interracial sex produced a different narrative, one that made black/white sexual relations much more threatening. The dangers of interracial sex produced a necessity for surveillance; members of the community and officers of the law patrolled the bedrooms of interracial couples in order to impede any “criminal” activity. The assumed “threat” of interracial cohabitation simply provided an excuse for sanctioned peeping.

The interpretation and enforcement of illicit cohabitation statutes highlights the desperate and anxious attempts of law enforcement officials to monitor and observe interracial sex. The case history also alludes to prosecution’s rather creative and imaginative approaches in applying evidence to interracial sex crimes. For instance, Mary Rose, a white woman, and her unnamed black male lover, were convicted of illicit cohabitation in Mississippi in 1958. To complicate matters, though, the court initially

accused the two of having an incestuous relationship. Outlined in Mississippi Code Ann. § 2000, the law stipulates that:

persons being within the degrees within which marriages are declared by law to be incestuous and void, or persons whose marriage is prohibited by law by reason or race or blood and which marriage is declared to be incestuous and void, who shall cohabit, or live together as husband and wife, or be guilty of a single act of adultery or fornication, upon conviction shall be punished by imprisonment in the penitentiary for a term not exceeding 10 years.

During the appeals process, Mary Rose fought the conviction based on incest and won a reversal after the judge deemed their relationship miscegenetic rather than incestuous.

The initial conviction of Mary Rose, though, speaks to the public's willingness to interpret the law in ways that place interracial sex along a vast continuum of deviant behavior. Incest, often stereotyped as a lower-class phenomenon amongst people with limited intelligence, is viewed as one of the most "unnatural" sex crimes. Labeling interracial sex as incest reinforced the notion that only sexual deviants, unable to follow society's moral codes, would engage in sex outside of proscribed racial boundaries.

Like the tangle of fornication law, illicit cohabitation codes made it impossible for interracial couples to enjoy any *legal* sexual relationships outside of marriage. The definitions of "unlawful cohabitation" included fornication, adultery, lewd behavior and miscegenation so that any and all sexual conduct between interracial couples was considered a crime. In North Carolina, for instance, Pink and Sarah Ross were "indicted for fornication and adultery in living and cohabiting together without being lawfully married," (76 N.C. 242; 1877 N.C.) even though their marriage was legally recognized

in South Carolina where it was solemnized. As Reconstruction crumbled and gave way to the notorious Redemption period, emergent Jim Crow laws and later widespread state sanctioned segregation laws (1877-1900), made interracial marriage illegal in almost every Southern state. As a result, every interracial couple who attempted to live as man and wife were straddling multiple prohibitions. For example, Florida State code specified that “Any Negro man and white woman, or any white man and Negro woman, who are not married to each other who shall habitually live and occupy in the nighttime the same room shall each be punished by imprisonment” 798.05 (1874). Because blacks and whites were legally barred from marrying in Florida until 1967, the cohabitation law made *all* nighttime activities between them illegal. In addition, Florida’s illicit cohabitation statute was the only regulation that mentioned race and the only one that did not require proof of intercourse; rumors and innuendoes were enough to arrest suspects of interracial intimacy.

Much like the arbitrary punishment for fornication between interracial couples, illicit cohabitation also brought excessive penalties. In Arkansas, illicit cohabitation between persons of the same race was listed as a misdemeanor; concubinage, however, was a felony, punishable with a lengthy prison sentence and the possibility of hard labor. While white offenders could expunge their records by paying a fine to the courts; interracial couples were imprisoned, containing all of that unrestrained passion safely behind bars.

Exposing the inherent racism of the legal system has been the task of Critical Race Theorists for the past few decades. Scholars committed to making visible the discriminatory practices of both conservative and liberal lawmakers see both friend and

foe as participating in the disenfranchisement of people of color. In his forward to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (1995), Cornell West explains that critical race theorists have, for the first time, “examined the entire edifice of contemporary legal thought and doctrine from the viewpoint of law’s role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination” (xi). Equally concerned with issues of domination and subordination, my project seeks to understand the law’s role in the construction and maintenance of interracial eroticism and the ways in which legal apparatuses function to make black / white sex into public sites of titillation and fantasy fulfillment. By interrogating laws that forbid interracial desire and examining the cultural artifacts produced by those prohibitions, I will demonstrate how domination and subordination function when sex and the law collide.

My first chapter closely examines the Rhinelander annulment suit of 1925 as a microcosm of race, erotics and the law working together to reveal public anxieties, irrationalities of the law, a surplus of pleasure, and the racial politics of voyeurism. This chapter also explores how the outlaw status of mixed race sexual relationships produce a titillating spectacle made possible by legal prohibitions. Preserved in countless court proceedings, filmic representations, and literature are the stories of interracial couples who experience a certain fame and visibility when they cross the long-established boundaries of race. The public character of this transgressive relationship exemplifies the couple as social delinquents, but also fulfills fantasies about mixed race desire and provides the opportunity for voyeurism. Indeed, Alice Rhinelander, the bi-racial woman who married a wealthy white male, was herself an invisible middle class woman until her legal union plunged her into the spotlight. Newspaper reports, case history, love letters,

court transcripts, and fabricated “photographic” evidence provide countless opportunities for erotic pleasure, all under the pretext of prohibiting interracial affairs. Adhering to legal strategy becomes the excuse for indulging in courtroom revelries that expose Alice Rhinelander both as a temptress and harlot. Finally, this chapter illustrates how the “outlawed” black body is offered to a greedy public, whose yearning to participate in the forbidden pleasure is deemed acceptable, even sanctioned by prohibitions governing interracial sex.

The second chapter examines how the figure of wealthy heiress Nancy Cunard, who flirted with social taboos in her interracial relationship with Jazz musician Henry Crowder, was spectacularized by both the American and British public. Like Alice Rhinelander, Cunard was also vilified as a promiscuous woman who ignored racial boundaries when it came to romance; thus her sex life, rather than her scholarly contributions, became her enduring legacy. Although much attention has been paid to Nancy Cunard in the form of memoirs and biographies, these gossipy accounts portray Cunard as the renegade daughter of a wealthy family who sacrificed her inheritance for a brief love affair with a black man. In scholarly essays, her personal life is privileged above her essays and poetry with a paucity of attention paid to Cunard the intellectual. My premise that the “outlaw” position brings certain visibility extends to Cunard’s life, especially her sexual choices, eclipsing her contributions to art, literature, and civil rights. What differs from the Rhinelander case, though, is Nancy Cunard’s own preoccupation with spectacularizing her interracial relationship and playing the exhibitionist in several of her works. This chapter explores Nancy Cunard’s investment in showcasing her status as an outlawed white female who is sexually involved with a black male. In one of the

most visible and public demonstrations of her interracial affair, Nancy Cunard published a pamphlet of her private life entitled: *Black Man and White Ladyship* with her lover Henry Crowder. Cunard's scholarly contributions to *Negro*, her scandalous pamphlet, and her polarized images taken by Barbara Ker-Seymer, all speak to a preoccupation with self-"othering" that in turn creates an erotic spectacle. Cunard's sexual exploits, and her conscious desire to showcase them, creates a dynamic of othering and exhibition that pivots on prohibition and social taboo. Rather than skirting the prohibitions, she courts them, and becomes a willing participant in the erotic spectacle.

The third chapter examines how legal regulations and social codes control the erotic movement between blacks and whites as represented in literature. The interracial relationships in Charles Chestnutt's *House Behind the Cedars*, Gilbert Millen's *Sweet Man*, Willard Motely's "The Almost White Boy," each portray the movement from static to ecstatic as caught in a cycle of deferral and revival, creating erotic moments that mirror the strip tease. In each text, erotic desire is fueled by the social and cultural taboos making the moment of sexual fulfillment almost unobtainable. The narratives play on the ambivalence surrounding interracial relationships, legitimizing the illegitimate and granting readers a "safe peep" into interracial desire. Readers can enjoy the intimate details of interracial sex and authors avoid persecution by creating cautionary tales of interracial romance; indeed, the happy ending never comes to fruition. The outlaw nature of interracial relationships invites readers to engage in the fantasy of interracial sex while simultaneously diminishing any chance of erotic fulfillment.

In addition, this chapter examines how frequently representations of white/black sexual desire are linked to violence, acknowledging the relationship between legal

prohibition and sadistic passion that results in cruelty and death. Graphic scenes of literary and filmic violence as a result of interracial intimacy take root in slave narratives like Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, major motion films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Jungle Fever*, the Blaxploitation genre, and literature by both white and black writers. In literary representations like *Soul On Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver's confession that he raped black women as practice for raping white women establishes a strong connection between a raced power and sex, one that Haki Madhubuti argues black males draw on to retaliate against white supremacy. By reading Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *The End of a Primitive* against Richard Wright's short story "The Man of All Work," the cycle of erotic deferral is played out in treacherous scenes of violence and terror, making the unlawful nature of interracial sex the cite for sadomasochistic fantasy.

My last chapter will explore how the artwork of Kara Walker disrupts the cycle of prohibition, desire and spectacle and invites an alternative register in which to see interracial eroticism. I begin with a comparison of Walker's work to the equally controversial art of Robert Mapplethorpe. Concentrating on Mapplethorpe's nude black male photographs as a precursor to Walker's art, I place his work on the continuum of prohibition and desire by analyzing the NEA's response and censoring of his exhibitions. In the same way, Kara Walker subverts the process so firmly entrenched in cultural forms of interracial desire by removing the taboo, inviting the spectacle, and employing caricatures of race to create sexual fantasies without apologies. Her silhouettes, massive and imposing, rely on several stereotypes of both blacks and whites to reminisce on slavery and post-Emancipation relationships between slave and master, mammy and

missus, pickaninny and master's son. Images of bestiality, sodomy, fellatio, slave rape, excrement, semen and torture reflect Walker's vision of the past and invite viewers to acknowledge their own fantasies about slavery and domination, especially through sexual imagery. Walker's work can be viewed as interracial sex exposed, all of its sullied beginnings rendered in black and white silhouettes on a stark gray background. The tension between illicit and authorized is blurred if not erased in her artwork, allowing for a reading of interracial sex that rejects prohibitions and exploits the taboo.

Cultural Implications

By placing these cultural phenomena in close proximity, I hope to illustrate how centuries of prohibitions both legal and social have shaped rather disparaging representations of interracial intimacy and created configurations of desire that are trapped in cycles of deferral. Each chapter addresses exhibition, an erotic tendency that seems so closely aligned with interracial sex. Perhaps one of the reasons interracial sex remains so censorious is so that we can see it. Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" was made into such a spectacle that over three million people replayed it on YouTube, while the FCC made new laws to safeguard against future "smut" being broadcast on live television. Bringing together such disparate cultural forms such as court cases, public figures, pamphlets, novels and artwork allows for an extensive examination of how prohibitions surrounding interracial sex have shaped public fantasies and provided the perfect alibi. The public outcry concerning Nancy Cunard's vacations in Harlem or well know relationship with Henry Crowder are on the same scale as public outrage over Kara Walker's artistic renderings of interracial sex. The public's fascination with details of interracial sex are exposed in the Rhineland trial and made

evident in the curiosity surrounding Cunard's friendships with black males. The inability for interracial couples to be represented in any redeemable way is emphasized in novels of the 19th and 20th century and in Kara Walker's grotesque images of black women sodomizing white males. Each of these cultural forms, then, elucidate the ways in which prohibitions shape our understanding of interracial desire.

Chapter One

Rhineland v. Rhineland: The Excuse for an Erotic Annulment

“So the stage is set for the most sensational moment of the trial this morning, with the odds favoring a continuation of the suit. The courtroom doors, which have been stormed every day by a fighting crowd, will face an even larger and determined mob this morning” (*New York Times*, Nov. 20th, 1925).

“The testimony at the beginning of this week with the disrobing of Mrs. Rhineland and the reading of Kip’s unprintable mystery letters which threatened to halt the suit last Thursday has been of a nature that revealed the most outrageous and disgusting filth that probably has ever been heard in a courtroom” (*Chicago Defender*, Nov. 25th, 1925).

In 1924, New York City enjoyed a scandal that would dominate the headlines for months. Accounts of bawdy sexual encounters, mistaken identity, family fortunes, and ultimate rejection flooded the daily newspapers on a national scale. In modern terms, the controversy surrounding the annulment trial of Rhineland v Rhineland equaled that of the OJ Simpson case, where relentless media coverage and public fascination fueled an obsessive desire to witness the courtroom drama. Like the millions following Simpson’s trial, American citizens in 1924 devoured any scrap of news coming out of the courtroom, and media outlets were poised to release sensational accounts of the interracial couple’s romance. But for Leonard “Kip” Rhineland and his wife Alice, the media circus would not only destroy their love affair, but also show the nation how

constructions of race were definitively proscriptive in the realm of marriage, especially for a wealthy white man and a working class black woman.

When Leonard and Alice Rhinelanders tested the limits of proscribed racial and sexual boundaries, the individuals charged with maintaining those borders stepped in and the charge of fraud was levied against an unsuspecting wife and a reluctant husband. At the behest of his father, Leonard Rhinelanders accused his wife Alice of misrepresenting herself as white. The subsequent legal battle presents a compelling correlation between the legal tradition, interracial erotics, and the law's willingness to expose intimate sexual details of a couple's private life. The legal community delved into the couple's sexual relationship as if they were prosecuting a criminal fornication or illicit cohabitation trial, not a civil annulment suit, and the tawdry tidbits of the Rhinelanders' sex lives took center stage when they should have been irrelevant.

What took place during the Rhinelanders trial was not a typical annulment suit, but an erotic panoply; and the couple's outlawed relationship would be exposed through countless love letters and graphic inquests. Under the pretext of establishing racial identity, the judge allowed Alice Rhinelanders' attorney to parade the naked body of his client in front of the jury and prosecution. As a result of this spectacle, newspaper reporters crafted the first ever graphically manipulated "photograph" called a composograph that claimed to capture the scene behind closed doors. By cobbling together previous trial photographs and staging the scene of Alice Rhinelanders' humiliating ordeal, *The Evening Graphic* was able to produce photographic "evidence" of the erotic courtroom scene. The letters, the disrobing, and the composograph evince a

wide array of social anxieties, individual fantasies, defense mechanisms, and obsessions made visible by court proceedings operating under the pretext of seeking justice.

Under the guise of regulating illicit relationships and revoking fraudulent marriages, statutory law in America functions as a set of inroads into interracial erotic titillation so that prohibitions are pretexts for voyeurism and fantasy fulfillment. Laws prohibiting interracial fornication, illicit cohabitation and marriage provide a forum for interracial erotic spectacle; what is outlawed is simultaneously made visible through the very act of restricting and prosecuting these “crimes.” Exploring how legal procedures function as part of a larger preoccupation with black / white sex yields an understanding of the psychosocial aspects of outlawing interracial desire. Demonstrated in numerous fornication, miscegenation and illicit intercourse cases, forbidden interracial intimacy produces the very spectacle of what the law seeks to impede. The Rhinelander annulment trial of 1924 is perhaps the most glaring example of such laws responding to voyeurism and titillation surrounding interracial desire.

The Players

The cast of characters in the Rhinelander trial is comprised of Leonard, a young, wealthy love-sick man and his overbearing, image-conscious father Philip; Alice, a biracial woman with a working class background; her unassuming interracial parents George and Elizabeth Jones; two overzealous attorneys who eagerly expose intimate details of the couple’s sex lives, and a dubious judge who admits every salacious tidbit of the couple’s romance into evidence. Leonard and Alice’s divergent social and racial backgrounds are the mitigating factors for legal intervention and pivotal to understanding

how the Rhineland scandal made such an impact on the American public, whose fears and fantasies were inflamed with every newspaper account.

Leonard Rhineland was the son of successful real-estate tycoon and high society figure Philip Rhineland, who abhorred the relationship between his son and Alice, and on several occasions tried to prevent their budding romance. Portrayed as a dupe and simpleton, Leonard Rhineland was little more than a wayward puppy in the eyes of the American public, and could not have realized the implications of his unfortunate match. At age thirteen, Leonard lost his mother in a terrifying accident—as Adelaide was dressing for the evening, she tipped over a kerosene lamp, caught her dress on fire and died from the burns several hours later (Lewis and Ardizzone 51). In addition to the pain of his mother's death, Leonard also suffered the loss of his older brother, who died of a fever in France during World War I (Lewis and Ardizzone 52). The prosecution argued that the death of both his mother and brother had psychically damaged Leonard and caused him to become mentally unstable. Although he was institutionalized for general anxiety and shyness along with a seemingly debilitating stutter—conditions that were mild and certainly treatable—the prosecution portrayed him as feeble minded and as vulnerable as a child. Ultimately, Leonard Rhineland was institutionalized by his father in hopes of transforming his son into a man more befitting the Rhineland name. But while he was in treatment, rather than focusing on his legacy and commitment to the Rhineland family, Leonard met and fell in love with a bi-racial woman whose affections helped him overcome the shyness and awkward mannerisms that had previously defined his character. Leonard's attorneys would ignore the positive effects Alice had on Leonard and shift the focus to the palpable difference in the couple's mental

capacities. In their estimation, Alice preyed on an innocent and unworldly Leonard in order to secure his family fortune.

Labeling Leonard as mentally ill helped the prosecution explain why a white male of obscene wealth would take a lower-class bi-racial woman for a bride and jeopardize the strict social order created and maintained by white elites. In painting Leonard as feeble-minded, his legal team was setting up a sharp distinction between “normal” and “pathological;” indeed, a sexual relationship that had the potential to erode class and power structures could only be explained by his psychosis. The investment in “othering” individuals based on mental capacity and race is explored in Sander Gilman’s *Difference and Pathology* (1985) where he examines the ways in which mental illness is used to create separation between the “good” self and the “other.” He argues that “Every group has laws, taboos, and diagnoses distinguishing the ‘healthy’ from the ‘sick’”(23). In order to maintain the status quo, in this case strict boundaries that preserved class and race lines while safeguarding “pure” bloodlines for the sake of procreation, Leonard’s condition was deemed pathological. Gilman’s assertion that pathology “is disorder and the loss of control, the giving over of the self to forces that lie beyond the self” can provide the answer to Leonard’s peculiar infatuation with Alice and also begin to explain public sentiment surrounding her character (64). Seen as a wanton temptress who had multiple sex partners, Alice Rhineland was cast as a sexual deviant. The legal community succeeded in othering both Leonard and Alice by making a public spectacle of his mental instability and her supposed sexual aberrance.

This portrait of Leonard as feeble minded and withdrawn was the prosecution’s proof that their client was seduced by the worldly and wanton Alice Jones. Leonard’s

passive nature and almost helpless demeanor made it possible for his father to demand the annulment and expunge Alice from the family registry. In order to maintain the strict division of class and race boundaries, Leonard's defense had to argue that his mental incapacities were to blame for the blatant disloyalty to social codes of conduct. To win the annulment suit, Leonard had to maintain that he was misled by Alice Jones and that he believed her to be white when they married. As proof of the supposed trickery, Leonard pointed to the marriage certificate that bore the answer "white" in response to the question of both the bride and groom's racial heritage.

Leonard's wife Alice had more humble roots. Daughter of George and Elizabeth Jones, who met as domestic servants in England and emigrated to the United States, Alice was a moderately educated middle-class woman. Judging by her love letters to Leonard, which were riddled with grammatical mistakes and spelling errors (she even spelled Leonard's name wrong), her eighth-grade education was well below Rhinelander standards. Alice's father, George, accumulated a modest amount of real-estate while operating a taxi stand in New Rochelle, a suburb of New York City, but his pedigree was of concern to the Rhinelander family as he was rumored to have West Indian parentage (Lewis and Ardizzone 25). When asked about his parent's racial history George responded "My mother was a Caucasian of pure English decent. The only information which I have about my father is that he was a native of one of the British Colonies" (74). Attorney Mills' unsuccessful exploration into George Jones' past wasted countless resources and amounted to "a wild goose-chase, for which they should be reimbursed" (74). The ambiguity surrounding Alice's race was never clarified by investigating her father's heritage, but that she was biracial was apparent to every member of the

courtroom. Sitting next to his daughter in court was a very visibly dark-skinned George Jones, and by contrast his daughter had a light, olive complexion. That Leonard knew the Jones family and still claimed to believe she was not of mixed race parentage seemed absurd to courtroom onlookers. Alice Jones carried on her affair with Leonard, though, as if they were above scrutiny, seemingly indifferent to American racial politics governing the rules of marriage.

Alice's mother Elizabeth Jones, a plump white woman with a bun of silver hair and an air of sophistication, showed the utmost sympathy for her dishonored child and defended Alice's moral purity. But Leonard's attorneys unearthed some rather unsavory details about Elizabeth Jones' past and "tried to portray the unquestionably white Elizabeth Jones as something less than the idealized image of white womanhood—perhaps something less than white" (189). Elizabeth's "less than white" discretion was sleeping with her wealthy employer's son and having her first child out of wedlock. The prosecution argued that Elizabeth's shattered dream of transcending class boundaries was cultivated in her daughter, molding Alice into a social climbing temptress. Alice's reputation was attacked on the first day of the trial and prosecutors shredded her character in front of a jury, painting her as the black seductress eager to acquire the Rhinelander name. Rumored to have slept with both a white and black man before having sex with Leonard, Alice was described by the prosecution as a "fast woman" who possessed little concern for decorum or decency; she was the quintessential "gold digger."

Before deciding to marry, Leonard and Alice Rhinelander enjoyed a three - year love affair. The lovers existed on the margins, not meddling in family fortunes, property rights, paternity cases, or any issues that might place them under public scrutiny. They

flitted about New York on unchaperoned vacations, spending nights in a local hotel, cavorting with friends, and all the while developing a loving relationship. The legal marriage, however, changed the course of Leonard and Alice's lives and thrust the most intimate details of their affair into the public's eye. Had they never married, one might speculate that their relationship would have continued until they grew tired of each other or succumbed to pressure from Leonard's family. But when the marriage was made public and recorded in the high society pages of the New York Register, everything changed. Alice Jones was now given the name Mrs. Rhineland and could claim familial ties to one of the most powerful families in New York. Not just a girlfriend that Leonard kept in the shadows, Alice was legitimized by marriage, and their previously scandalous relationship would now be sanctioned by the state and visible to the public. Surrendering to his father's coercions, Leonard filed for annulment claiming that Alice, in concealing her blackness from him, had misrepresented herself as a white woman. Leonard and Alice's high-profile interracial marriage lasted only six months.

The Case

Leonard's annulment suit called into question the legitimacy of the Rhineland's marriage and addressed the overarching anxieties of a white public who needed assurance that class and race boundaries were still intact. Had Leonard filed for divorce rather than annulment, he and the Rhineland family would have recognized the union as legal and state sanctioned, an act of betrayal to his blue-blood family and the elite community following the trial. By asking for an annulment, Leonard was asserting his class loyalty, acknowledging the marriage as illegitimate and stripping Alice of any rights she had to his money or social standing. But the annulment suit, with its questions of

misrepresentation and fraudulent enticement, turned out to be the pretext for a courtroom show of the couple's erotic relationship. What transpired throughout the yearlong trial was unprecedented and at times, tragically tawdry.

Insisting that Leonard was unaware of his wife's *true* racial heritage, Attorney Isaac Mills, a venerated attorney and former New York Supreme Court Justice, asked the court for an annulment on the grounds that Alice Jones had misrepresented herself as "white." To levy the charge of fraud against Alice Jones, Leonard's attorneys needed to prove that she intentionally deceived him; in effect, they needed to argue that the marriage would never have taken place if Leonard knew the truth about Alice's racial heritage. According to New York domestic relations law, "A marriage will not be annulled for fraud unless the facts misrepresented or concealed go to the very essence of the contract" (Domestic Relations Law Supplement 11). In other words, if information emerges about a person that would have greatly influenced a decision about entering into marriage *after* the marriage is already solemnized, the court can annul the marriage based on fraud.

Rhineland v. Rhineland also illustrates how ideologies about race and intermarriage, shaped by fears and anxieties about malleable borders, are played out in the court of law, translated into public policy, and then made into fodder for public speculation and consumption. The state had an interest in marriage, despite its status as a private relationship, as evinced in an annulment case dating back to the turn of the century. A New York Supreme Court's annulment case decision addresses the importance of overseeing and managing private relations: "The contract of marriage is something more than a mere civil agreement between the parties, the existence of which

affects only themselves. It is the basis of the family, and its dissolution, as well as its formation, is matter of public policy in which the body of the community is deeply interested” (*Fisk v. Fisk* 6 A.D. 432; 39 N.Y.S. 537; 1896). The community, via Leonard’s father and an expert legal team, made the Rhinelander marriage a matter of public concern—dissolving the nuptials helped to preserve the greater good of a community “deeply interested” in family relations that remained within established boundaries. Public interest in the Rhinelander case, most obvious in the unrelenting press coverage and accounts of frenzied citizens lining up for courtroom seats, reveals a series of anxieties about class and race purity. A simple annulment case would never draw such enormous publicity, but the Rhinelander case had the power to change the face of American families and redefine class boundaries. A biracial child with the Rhinelander name would further obscure the separation between black and white, rich and poor; Leonard’s family needed the law to protect these borders and clearly reinscribe categories of difference so that crossing them would not yield the benefits granted to Alice Rhinelander. During the trial, the prosecution did its best to clarify the categories of black and poor, humiliating Alice both mentally and physically.

Examples of fraudulent marriages cataloged in the 1916 New York Domestic Relations law, the supplement available to Leonard’s legal team, included concealing previous marriages, false statements of prior chastity, concealing insanity, and intentional desertion. The precedents Leonard’s attorneys were drawing on to bolster his lawsuit included *Svenson v. Svenson* (1904) an annulment suit filed because a husband failed to mention to his wife that he contracted a contagious venereal disease prior to their nuptials; or *Wendel v. Wendel* (1898) where a wife told her new husband (who wanted

more children after his first wife died) that she might not be able to conceive, even though a few years earlier she had undergone a full hysterectomy; or *Keyes v. Keyes* (1893) where a husband neglected to tell his wife that he was a professional thief and was about to be imprisoned; or finally, *Smith v. Smith* (1920) where the wife decided to conceal from her husband that she was clinically insane. Alice Jones was in the company of liars, thieves, and the mentally ill and her alleged misrepresentation was placed in the same category as those couples concealing secrets that would affect their reproductive and/or domestic futures. Leonard's attorneys would have to convince a jury that the truth about racial ancestry could be as destructive to a marriage as syphilis or impending incarceration.

That the case focused on anxieties about race and sexuality was evident in attorney Isaac Mills' opening statement to the court. He asked the jury to ponder six questions:

1. At the time of the marriage was the defendant colored?
2. Did she ever represent that she was white?
3. Did she make such representation in an attempt to defraud the Plaintiff?
4. Was the Plaintiff induced to marry her under the representation?
5. Did the plaintiff marry her with the full belief that she was white?
6. Has he lived with her since?" (Lewis and Ardizzone 50).

Although these questions specifically address terms of an annulment based on fraud, they also try to establish an unambiguous distinction between "colored" and "white."

Revealing the strict binaries in place for racial identificatory practices, Alice was either "colored" or white; and the distinction needed to be established, especially in cases where appearances were deceiving. In an age where passing had become common practice for light-skinned blacks, Alice's racial ambiguity insinuated that the categories of black and

white were not only fluid and malleable, but that appearances were downright misleading. Attorney Mills needed to shore up the borders and establish clear demarcations of race to accuse Alice of fraud.

Mills' second question asks if Alice *represented* herself as white, acknowledging that race could be performed or staged. This question reveals much about the mutability of race and the anxious responses of a white public to shore up categories of black and white. If Alice was indeed "colored" by definitions established in 1920s America, then it was alarming to a white public that she represented herself as white in order to elevate her position. Alice's passing wasn't simply to secure higher wages or obtain social stability, her act was social climbing at its most egregious. If Alice did pass as white and deceive Leonard, her trickery elevated her status to heights unimaginable to any working-class woman; she was now intimately related to one of the most powerful and prosperous families in New York.

Underlying the discussion of Alice's *true* racial identity is the dubious history of race classification in America. As early as 1662, Virginia law stipulated that children born of interracial affairs would be either free or enslaved according to the mother's status. An overwhelming number of those offspring were begot from white men raping black women or forcing them into "relationships," so the biracial child was always classified as black. Visible markers of race were difficult to assign or identify, especially when interracial couples produced offspring that were racially "ambiguous." In 1806, Judge Tucker of Virginia invented a test to prove whether or not a person had black heritage. He explained that "nature has stamp't upon the African and his descendants two characteristic marks, besides the difference of complexion, which often remain visible

long after the characteristic distinction of colour either disappears or becomes doubtful; a flat nose and wooly head of hair.” (*Hudgins v. Wright* 1806 139-140). Judge Tucker believed that hair texture, especially, was the last physical trait to diminish as a result of race mixing. The fumbling attempts of lawmakers to establish criteria for assigning race reveals a frenzied effort to maintain hierarchies and points to a losing battle against shifting power structures. Categorizing people as black or white became a complicated undertaking for lawmakers, and they were forced to establish rules that acknowledged a changing racial landscape. Legislators’ attempts to create blood fraction laws and physical assessments (that were difficult to detect and enforce) reveals white America’s anxiety over the invisibility of race and the impossibility of legislating identity.

Assigning race based on the mother’s status continued until Emancipation, until states then had to reinvent categorizations and fortify racial barriers. When Tennessee adopted the one drop rule in 1910, several southern states were quick to follow, with states like Kentucky, Nebraska and Utah clinging to their blood fraction laws. With blood fractions, a person with the slightest fraction of black blood (1/32) would be considered black. In essence, anyone with even a distant black relative was considered black. To take the guesswork out of racial identification processes, Virginia passed the Racial Integrity Act in 1924. The absurdity of this Act, and the absolute impossibility of establishing a person’s racial identity, is evident in the convoluted instructions for submitting the paperwork:

Prepare a form whereon the racial composition of any individual, as Caucasian, negro, Mongolian, American Indian, Asiatic Indian, Malay, or any mixture thereof, or any other non-Caucasic strains, and if there be any mixture, then the

racial composition of the parents and other ancestors, in so far as ascertainable, so as to show in what generation such mixture occurred, may be certified by such individual, which form shall be known as a registration certificate.

Without a certificate “guaranteeing” racial authenticity, couples could not marry in Virginia. In addition, if the county Clerk believed the person to be lying on the certificate, he was to “withhold the granting of the license until satisfactory proof is produced.”

Curiously absent from the Racial Integrity Act is *how* to obtain the satisfactory proof.

What is the proof of whiteness or blackness or mixtures of Asiatic Indians? The pseudo science of linking race to bodily cues was a global concern, especially to countries where European colonizers mixed with the indigenous population and created a new racial landscape. In South Africa during Apartheid, for example, officials would insert a pencil into the hair of its ambiguously raced citizens. If the pencil got stuck in a person’s curly hair, he or she was classified as black. In the United States, myths surrounding visible cues of race allude to the color of palms or the yellow tinge of pupils. Ultimately, pseudo science and false indicators did not establish racial identity, and the status of children born to enslaved women, the one drop rule, blood fractions and the Racial Integrity Act failed give law officials a foolproof means of identifying someone’s race.

Because Alice’s suspected racial status was the impetus of Leonard’s course of action, the prosecution challenged it from the first day of the trial. In a bold move, attorney Lee Parsons Davis admitted that his client did indeed have “colored blood,” much to the shock of a packed courtroom. Rather than denying the subtle appearance of Alice’s mixed race heritage, Davis decided to make it a non issue, arguing that of course Alice was “colored” and Leonard knew it from the moment he met her. With this

admission out in the open, the prosecution fumbled to prepare a new attack. Mills had anticipated that Alice would claim her racial status as white and had created an airtight case to disprove her contentions. Now that he was stripped of this attack, Mills needed to prove that Leonard was duped into marrying Alice. Both attorneys then compelled their clients to surrender boxes of love letters, the overtly sexual contents of which were read aloud to an eager courtroom. How these details could help decide an annulment case is uncertain at best. In his final act of showmanship, defense attorney Davis forced Alice Jones to partially disrobe for judge and jury. The court ordered striptease, Davis argued, would prove that Leonard Rhinelander must have known his wife was black; her dark nipples and brown breasts acted as undisputable evidence of a black body.

Before the trial's close, each one of Alice's family members would be called as witnesses to confirm her racial ancestry. Each witness for Alice reaffirmed that Leonard either knew about his wife's race or never considered it an issue in their relationship. After hearing this testimony, Alice's attorney employed a strategy that would make Leonard just as guilty of fraud and prove that "he had wanted to claim Alice as white despite other evidence to the contrary, that he had known and acknowledged her nonwhite ancestry" (179). Davis interviewed newspaper reporters, Leonard's friends, and even his chauffeur and each person's testimony was the same: Leonard knew that his wife was "colored" and simply did not care; indeed, his only concern was keeping the relationship a secret from his father. When the jury left to deliberate, they were asked to ponder the initial questions set out by Attorney Mills about whether or not Alice had misrepresented her racial heritage and tricked her husband into marriage. The jury came back with the unanimous verdict that Alice was indeed "colored" and had never hid this

fact from Leonard. They also stated that Leonard would have married Alice regardless of her racial status—a decisive victory for Alice Rhinelander.

As evinced in the trial overview, the Rhinelander case provides multiple examples of the law’s ability to display as a question of both fact and law the definitions and boundaries of race. This quest for justice, though, provides the general public, whose desires were inflamed by the prohibitions themselves, ring-side seats to a tantalizing display of interracial erotics. In allowing the performances to proceed, the judge was also complicit in feeding not only his own desires, but also those of the jury and members of the courtroom. Outside the courthouse an eager public awaited whose demand for details of the case fueled newspaper reports across the country. Titillating accounts of Leonard and Alice’s lovemaking were leaked to the press with ellipses marking the most salacious details. If sordid details of the case were unavailable to reporters, they would simply fabricate them in order to appease a hungry public, whose appetite for sensational gossip was never satisfied. The Rhinelander case delivered erotic exhibitions that would momentarily satiate yet simultaneously inflame the desires of a public fascinated with interracial sex. Annulment aside, this case was always about the public consumption of intimate sexual details between Alice and Leonard; and countless libidinal urges were tantalized under the pretext of enforcing New York Domestic Relations Law.

The Letters

The erotic spectacle of interracial love began with the shy and embarrassed Plaintiff and blushing Defendant reluctantly sharing (at their attorney’s requests) their sexually explicit love letters with a packed courtroom. Leonard fidgeted on the stand, clearly humiliated and “throughout his narrative, guided alternately by Mills and Davis,

the lawyers read from more than four hundred letters they had collected from their respective clients” (Lewis and Ardizzone 82). Although both attorneys argued that reading the parties’ love letters was necessary to “document their growing attachment to each other,” (85) the overindulgence of the courtroom participants is striking. Ignoring their obvious fascination with the couple’s affair, the courtroom participants could indulge in the sexually explicit letters under the guise of constructing a solid case. It would seem that a few key letters entered into evidence would prove the couple’s affections for each other; but listening to over four hundred pieces of correspondence exposes public’s voyeuristic desire to consume every detail of the couple’s intimacy; indeed, a surplus of desire was aroused with each new confession. Agents of the law had no rational reason for cataloguing every salacious detail unless they were driven by their own fantasies of interracial sex and sought to fulfill their desires in ways that were sanctioned and even deemed necessary by the court of law. But what occurs during the letter reading session is both exciting and tragic, a mixture of shame and provocation that reinforces the forbidden nature of interracial sex and entices the courtroom observers.

That Leonard and Alice were mortified at their letters being read aloud is not unusual, the contents of their correspondence was never meant for public consumption. What is unusual, though, is the duration of their humiliation, each person was on the stand for hours as their countless letters were entered as evidence. In addition to causing them great shame, the letters also helped to corroborate damaging stereotypes of interracial romance. In reading the letters aloud, the prosecution and defense created a scene of humiliation where the judge, jury, and packed courtroom could cast their disapproving eyes on the interracial couple. With their sighs and disapproving stares, the

courtroom participants could reassure themselves that interracial couples *were* debased and debauched; indeed, the contents of the letters, with references to masturbation, sexual intercourse and possibly anal sex, confirmed the “outlaw” nature of their relationship. The courtroom participants could indict the couple for indecent behavior and reinforce their own notions of race, sex, and class based on the awkward phrasing of Alice’s love letters and the sexual innuendos on each page of her correspondence. Alice and Leonard’s relationship, as a result of the public shaming, was viewed solely as a sexual one, reinforcing the idea that interracial couples shared carnal pleasures, but nothing more.

The erotic material was managed and controlled by two male attorneys and Judge Morchauser; they dictated who could be included in the performance. After reviewing a rather forthright letter that Alice wrote to Leonard, the judge acted to “safeguard” certain courtroom observers: “The presentation of this letter in particular led Judge Morchauser to clear the courtroom of all women, since he deemed the contents inappropriate for them” (88). Titillation mounting, Judge Morchauser, very much invested in preserving “decorum,” prevented females from being affected by the scandalous love letters. The courtroom was transformed into a gentleman’s playground for aural interracial pleasure. With this distinction, Alice became less of a woman, writing sentiments and details unbecoming of feminine conduct. Her presence in the courtroom, when all other women are banned, makes her an obvious outcast amidst the throngs of men and members of the court could witness Alice’s outlaw status, evident in her sexual liberation.

Rather than understanding the love letters between Alice and Leonard as evidence of a budding romance or deep affection, some were taken as proof of Alice’s blackness.

A *New York Times* article commented on one of her love poems arguing that it had “a natural negro rhythm” (Nov. 13, 1925). More accurately indicators of her education and class status than her black ancestry, the spelling and grammatical errors that riddled Alice’s letters also contributed to her lesser status in the public’s eye, making it that much more unbelievable that Leonard would take her as a wife. Attorney Mills believed that the wanton correspondence would prove Alice’s seductive nature and demonstrate the power she held over Leonard:

Dearest Lenard,

I am sitting down for a few minutes, to write you a few lines, what I promised you dear. Well sweet heart how did you get home, after such a wild excitement with me. But I would love Leonard to be with you day and night, but I feel terrible lonesome for you, when I do not see you, and to think I cant see you every night any more, as often what I am doing to do in the evening alone, no one hear but father and mother, And myself, and most of the time, I am hear alone, when I do not see you. But you will after give me Len, one of your picture, because thats what I want in my room, and I no that you want me to think a great deal of you. Listen, Lenard, I have had some sweet hearts, but I have not loved them, like I have taken to you so. I have never let a fellow love and carress me, the way you do Lenard, because you make me feel so happy, and lovable toward you dear. But would it be awful if you had me my self alone. What you would not do to me. I can imagine.

*Good by Dearie,
Love Best Wishes,
ALICE
(Lewis and Ardizzone 88)*

Alice’s requests for a picture of her sweetheart, her references to being alone in her bed thinking of Leonard, and her fantasies about what he would do to her body if they were alone, all demonstrate the deep love she had for Leonard. These letters, with veiled references to masturbation, show Alice as comfortable with her sexual needs and desires. In several correspondences, Alice makes mention of being alone in bed, reliving what she and Leonard had done with each other: “I hopped in bed, and layed there, thinking of you dear heart” (90). As further evidence of Alice’s late night dalliances, Leonard writes

to her about taking matters into his own hands: “Last night, sweetheart, after writing three full pages to you. I undressed and scrambled into bed, but not to go to sleep. No baby, do you know what I did? something that you do when my letters arrive at night [. . .] Alice can you imagine me reading your tempting notes in bed last night and . . . (142).

In newspaper reports, ellipses were added and the sensational parts of the letters removed either to preserve decorum, or to titillate readers by allowing them to fill in the gaps.

Unfortunately, the original 1925 court transcripts are missing, and yet even with the omissions, these confessions portray Alice as the corrupting force. Identifying Alice as a prostitute at the beginning of the trial and labeling her as a sexual degenerate makes the downfall of Leonard that much more plausible. He mentions masturbation only after she alludes to it; Alice is the corrupter, reinforcing the myth of the Black Jezebel. Leonard’s purity is infected by Alice’s deep-seated sexual desires and again, interracial sex is likened to a disease that in this case, infected a gullible, young white male. According to Freud’s theories, masturbation is viewed as a perverse act perpetrated by the sexually degenerate. The origins of the perversions, then, lie with Alice and for the court observers, reveal her racial character.

The love letters, filled with such phrases as “how did you get home, after such a wild excitement with me,” and I have never let a fellow love and caress me, the way you do Leonard,” provide the jury with ample evidence of a torrid love affair (88). However, this wasn’t a miscegenation trial; the couple wasn’t charged with fornication or illicit cohabitation. Had the prosecution needed to show proof of interracial sex, these letters would have been a smoking gun. But *Rhineland v. Rhineland* was an *annulment* trial and evidence of interracial sex had no legal bearing on the case; indeed, reading the

countless love letters aloud only confirmed the prurient interests of the attorneys and the willingness of the judge to participate in peddling private erotica. Attorney Mills' case hinged on whether or not Alice lied about her racial heritage in order to defraud the plaintiff, but the letters mentioned nothing of race or keeping it concealed from the public. In order to charge Alice with fraud in the annulment trial, the letters would have to prove that she claimed to be white, or at least tried to conceal her race from Leonard. If she had written accounts of shielding Leonard from her dark-skinned father, in order to protect her "white" identity, perhaps the jury would have used the letters as evidence of fraud. But the corroborating evidence simply was not there, and yet letter after letter was read and recorded.

In fact, Leonard was the one who mentioned keeping secrets. In one of his love letters to Alice, Leonard writes, "Oh! Alice, love, be good, dear child, because I want you in the days to come and remember to keep our SECRET locked safely in your heart" (Lewis and Ardizzone 142). The secret Leonard asked Alice to keep was never revealed—perhaps it *was* her racial status or the explicit details of their lovemaking at the Marie Antoinette hotel, but the letters never mentioned anything that would hint at Alice's race or prove Mills' theory of fraud.

Such critics as Nadine Ehlers in "Hidden in Plain Sight: Defying Juridical Racialization in *Rhineland v. Rhineland*" argue that the case "allows for an analysis that considers the possibilities for racial agency when race is re-framed as a performative construction" (315). In other words, Alice's rejection of a "true" black identity can be seen as defiant in the face of the law's demand for strict racial boundaries. Her reading of race as a Butlerian performative, though, does not take into account how the

performance of Alice's "blackness," as shaped and controlled by the legal community, enacted a sexual spectacle in the name of fixing racial identity; or how the performance itself, (the method of which was devised by both legal teams) promoted a version of blackness mediated by white male attorneys. Because the attorneys wanted Alice's letters read aloud in court, they were the ones directing a racialized performance of her love affair. In the letters, grammatical mistakes became markers of *race* rather than *class*, and sexual innuendoes were indications of Alice's raced desires. These performances of "race," then, were not voluntarily carried out, but rather staged in order to oversexualize the black female and provide pleasure for courtroom participants. The performance of race in the Rhinelander trial, far from revealing Alice Rhinelander's subversive power, reflects the legal teams' fantasies concerning interracial sex and their ability to manipulate the courtroom proceedings to fulfill their desires.

Although Ehlers reads Alice Rhinelander's rejection of a black identity as subversive and defiant, she fails to consider the implications of denouncing mixed race heritage in order to claim whiteness. Power structures and racial hierarchies that were firmly entrenched in 1920s American culture established privileges and civil liberties based on skin color. Alice's decision to pass as white, then, only strengthened the notion that having even one drop of "colored" blood was undesirable. Indeed, Angela Onwuachi-Willig explores this paradox by arguing that "Alice, through her own self-definition, was not challenging hierarchies of race, but rather reifying them by trying to rise higher within those established and oppressive hierarchies through a form of passing" (2418). Ehler's claim that Alice's "performative disobedience" can be seen as a "counter practice" to those totalizing categories of race seems to ignore how attorneys and judges

made her perform their version of “blackness,” and endure several days of shame and humiliation, the lasting effects of which would never be erased by claims to whiteness. By only focusing on Alice’s performance of whiteness, via a rejection of blackness, Ehlers loses sight of the real performances—scripted and directed by legal professionals—that portray Alice as a sexual deviant, a manipulator, and a seductress. Even though Alice Rhinelander initially denounced any claims to mixed race heritage, the legal team made sure that stereotypes governing black female identity were fully inscribed on both her character and physical body, an attack she was powerless to resist.

The Striptease

If the letters failed to provide ample proof of fraud, the next step was to examine the naked body of Alice Rhinelander, which Leonard would have seen and would be proof that he knew Alice was bi-racial. The November 28th edition of the 1925 *Chicago Defender* reported on the problematic reasoning of both the defense and judge in deciding whether or not Alice should be stripped naked for the jury. In the exchange between counsel and judge, a plea was made for Alice’s disrobing on the grounds that her racial identifiers (read breasts) were hidden under her clothes. Meanwhile, the defense exposes Davis’s plan for what it is, pure exhibitionism, but the judge’s curiosity was piqued and the ensuing argument reveals his misguided reasoning, and the seductive nature of Davis’s proposition:

Mr. Davis—I desire to have Mrs. Rhinelander brought in here and I am going to request that this court room be further cleared because I am going to ask this witness to identify the color of her skin.

Mr. Mills—I shall object to any such performance at that. There is no warrant for that whatever. He has had this Jones family—I don’t mean to use any disrespectful term—he has had them stand up a dozen times in court and had the jury look at them and had the witness look at them and answer. Now, the proposal to exhibit the naked body of the girl to this jury is not competent. (Morgan 1).

Attorney Mills is accurate in labeling Davis's request for Alice's exhibition a "performance." Alice, essentially on stage in front of a captive audience, would be "performing" her race for eager onlookers who would use stereotypical bodily cues as proof of blackness. Is race, then, located at the site of darkly shaded nipples or light brown breasts? Can race not be "performed" when a person is fully clothed? Davis is asking Alice to bare her naked body under the pretext of gathering evidence, much like anthropologists did with such tragic figures as Saartje Baartman, whose labia were examined and offered as proof of an insatiable sexual appetite. Baartman was displayed in tawdry sideshows around London and Paris during the early 19th Century, people paying a pittance to stare at her naked body as she was paraded up and down a small stage. Sander Gilman argues that Saartje Baartman's "genitalia and buttocks summarized her essence for the nineteenth-century observer," (88) much like Alice's racial essence was reduced to her exposed breasts, the sum total of her racial ancestry situated at the site of her dark nipples. The comparison between Alice and Baartman places her on the continuum of black women's bodies that were objectified as a result of immense power differentials, and underscores the authority of the law, like the social sciences, to demand flesh as evidence. But while anatomists and scientists like George Cuvier and J.J. Virey presented the advancement of medical science as their flimsy rationale for humiliating and debasing Saartje Baartman, Alice's attorney had no reasonable explanation for wanting his client to undress. His groundless contention that having Alice strip would prove without a doubt her racial history returns to the specious reasoning that race can be observed through bodily cues, and also exposes a curiosity for what is hidden under her clothes. If interracial sexual relationships were taboo and the males in the court had no

access to this forbidden fantasy, legal strategies would provide access to Alice's body; her outlaw status was perfect justification for the legal community to enjoy the pageantry.

Judge Morchauser's justification for allowing Alice to disrobe divulges his own curiosity and investment in the flesh parade. In his rationale to Attorney Mills, Morchauser confesses that he doesn't know what Alice's naked body looks like, and would like to see if her blackness was obviously visible to Leonard:

The Court—I only limit it as to the question of whether he ought to have known that she was of Colored blood and was justified in believing that when he saw her body. I don't know what her body is going to be. Who do you want to leave the room?

Mr. Mills—I enter an exception to that.

Mr. Davis—I ask, if it meets with your honor's approval, that this be done in chambers, out of this public court room.

Mr. Mills—You can't have the jury in the chambers.

Mr. Davis—Yes, you can have the jury there and the witness.

The Court—I will follow out any suggestions. It may be embarrassing to the young lady. The jury will retire to their jury room. The stenographer, Judge Mills and myself can go in there. That is as far as we need to go. Is that right? Unless you want your associate counsel with you.

Mr. Davis—The witness will have to identify her.

Mr. Mills—You go through the farce of exposing her body and asking him if she is the girl. What a ridiculous thing that is. Is there any possible question about it? He has been asked to look at her a dozen times in court. It is an indecent proceeding your honor.

The Court—I doubt if it is an indecent proceeding to let them look at her back.

Mr. Davis—I am only going to let them look at her upper body and her lower limbs.

The Court—That is all.

Mr. Mills—Can there be any possible question but that he will identify her? Hasn't he over and over again?

The Court—That he saw her condition at that time.

Mr. Mills—He said he saw her naked the second time.

The Court—There is no evidence of what her condition is to the eye—whether it is dark or light—and for that limited purpose it may be received.

When Judge Morchauser admits that he has no idea what her "body is going to be," its as if Alice has tentacles hidden under her dress. The judge's statement further distances Alice from what is considered normal and her body becomes the site of freakish

possibilities. Morchauser's curiosity about Alice's "condition" highlights the ways in which black bodies were oversexualized, dehumanized, and made to look abnormal next to white bodies. The palpable excitement in the judge's responses attests to his need to understand the mysterious sexual powers hidden under Alice Rhineland's clothes. Like a Siren who lures men to their deaths, Alice coaxed one of the wealthiest men in New York to his social and financial suicide and Judge Morchauser believed that the secret to Alice's power would be revealed in her exposed body. What Alice would "be" for Judge Morchauser, was a site of sexual gratification.

The judge also organizes the striptease, stipulating who can see Alice and what, exactly will be revealed on her body. He admits that the proceedings "may be embarrassing," thus participating in the degradation of Alice with little thought of how seeing her naked body would pertain to the case. In fact, Judge Morchauser has to work quite hard to refute Attorney Davis' contention that the suggestion for Alice to disrobe is absurd and absolutely unnecessary. With each objection from the prosecution, Morchauser chimes in as the voice of "reason," setting up the parameters of the event and attempting to justify his decision. When Attorney Davis calls the proposal indecent, Morchauser explains that simply looking at her bare back could do no harm. The defense then explains that he wants the top half of her body exposed and Judge Morchauser lays down the law with the statement "that is all." His feeble attempts to preserve order and decorum in the courtroom are subordinate to his sexual satisfaction. Knowing full well that stripping Alice and exposing her back and breasts would embarrass her and prove insignificant to the case, Judge Morchauser surrenders his ability to prohibit the charade and becomes an accomplice in Alice's humiliation. In failing to safeguard Alice's rights

and essentially manipulating the legal system for their own sexual fulfillment, both the judge and prosecuting attorney lose sight of acceptable legal procedure. Like the officers who hid in the bushes waiting for “evidence” of interracial fornication, these men were able to hide in the judges chambers in order to gather “proof” of Alice’s blackness.

When Alice was forced to disrobe, the judge’s chamber was transformed into a strip-club, with leering jurors compelled to gape at Alice’s body. Reports of Alice being forced to remove her clothes spread through the media, creating a frenzy of photographers eager to snap images of the naked defendant. This latest exploit revitalized the arousal that had been steadily waning after the love letters were read aloud. Now the courtroom participants and the voracious public had something more to fantasize about. The climax would stop short, though, when all photographers were banned from the judge’s chambers. The judge’s decision to have a private screening of Alice’s body is telling. Perhaps aware of the irrationality of his decision to let the exhibition proceed, Judge Morchauser needed to control the scene. In directing Alice’s body, the judge could fulfill his own fantasies and still maintain an outward show of professionalism and decorum. Allowing every courtroom participant to feast their eyes on Alice’s naked body would, as Judge Morchauser suggested, embarrass her; he agrees to limit the audience and house them in his private chambers, an invitation for the onlookers to enjoy the spectacle in privacy. Much like the arrested development of sexual fulfillment after a dancer leaves the stage, followers of the case would be left to speculate what went on behind closed doors.

The judge then explains to Attorney Davis that the disrobing should ensue because there is no evidence of her whiteness or blackness to the *eye*. By this logic, the

color of Alice's skin on her face, arms, hands, and legs was not visible to the eyes of the courtroom participants and her breast would be the only true markers of race. Visual representations of race located at sites of interracial desire are explored in Robert J.C. Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. Although his criticism focuses primarily on colonial subjects, his discussion of the visual as it pertains to race is valuable to this analysis. Young argues, "As racial theories show in their unrelenting attempt to assert inalienable difference between races, this extraordinary vision of an unbounded 'delicious fecundity' in Virginia Woolf's phrase, only took on significance through its voyeuristic tableau of frenzied, interminable copulation, of couplings, fusings, coalescence, *between races*" (181). The visual differences, evident in such physical characteristics as skin color and other extremities, that Young mentions produce the eroticism that not only fuels the "desiring machine", but also fixes desire in the field of vision (181). Alice's body, then, on parade for a group of white onlookers, becomes the site of difference—her naked breasts, in close proximity to Leonard Rhinelander's hungry stares, conjure up the wildest fantasies of what these two actually *did* with each other. Although the audience finds titillation in Alice's naked flesh, they are further aroused at the suggestion that Leonard had access to this "forbidden fruit."

Accounts of the disrobing incident paint a picture of Alice, with her dress hanging loosely around her hips and tears rolling down her cheeks, exposing her naked torso and breasts. What this proves, her attorney argued, is that Alice was most certainly black; Leonard Rhinelander must have been blind not to notice her dark skin. Disgrace is mixed with carnal delight as the jury is invited into the peepshow. Although Alice's bare arms in a sleeveless dress or her exposed face and neck would have disclosed the same visual

“proof,” the lawyer believed that her naked upper body would offer all the incontrovertible evidence the jury would needed to see. Lee Parson Davis’s strategy to have Alice strip for the jury shows a desire for Alice to be seen as black, privileging the body as a tangible marker of race, but also reinforcing the interracial eroticism flourishing in the courtroom. If there is anxiety about Alice’s racial heritage, for her confirmed whiteness would open countless doors in society and invalidate Leonard’s accusations, there may also be a desire to prove that the affair *was* between a black woman and white man. Without the component of mixed race, the public attraction would diminish. In order to keep working towards a climax, the visibility of Alice’s “black” body and confirmation of her “otherness” must be established. The closest proof of Alice’s racial heritage was her recording of “white” in the New York marriage registry. Much like enforcers of Virginia’s Racial Integrity Act, Davis was attempting to gather proof to disprove her claim to whiteness; his proposal was to look for it under her shirt.

Birth of the Composograph

Davis must have known the implications of his actions, essentially fueling the media storm surrounding the Rhinelander case as reporters frothed in anticipation for Alice’s partially naked body to grace the front page of newspapers across the country. On the day of Alice’s disrobing, throngs of photographers packed the courtroom, ready to capture a picture of the naked and humiliated defendant. The judge, however, immediately turned the photographers away and blocked their entry to the tragic performance. Although the photographers were excluded, that would not stop them from publishing their version of “the truth.” When the newspapers were distributed the next

day, a “photograph” of what appeared to be Alice Rhineland, with her back to the camera and naked from the waist up, graced the pages of the *Evening Graphic*.

This picture would be the first ever composograph in journalism history and exposes the eagerness of newspapers to pander to their incensed audience. If they could not deliver a naked picture of Alice to the awaiting public, they would create one. Composographs consisted of models who were staged in positions that would mimic real life situations that photographers were unable to capture on film. Once the models were photographed in the “staged” scene, pictures of the real players were superimposed on the model’s faces. The *Evening Graphic*’s instincts that a naked Alice Rhineland would fetch a generous return were well founded; the composograph of Alice brought the readership from 3,000 to 150,000 in one issue (Danson 23). For the courtroom strip scene of Alice, showgirl Agnes McLaughlin was hired to stand with her dress falling down below her breasts. All of the other faces in the picture were superimposed images from previous trial photographs and the end result was an image that gave the appearance of Alice baring her breasts to a courtroom of onlookers. In *Sauce for the Gander*, Frank Mallen describes the particulars of manipulating the photograph, confirming that artistic editor of the *Evening Graphic*, Harry Grogan, “touched up Miss McLaughlin’s body to a brownish tint for realism,” and the *Graphic* “became famous overnight by publishing the most amazing thing that ever appeared in a newspaper” (29). The photograph itself, like the couple in question, enacts a mixed-raceness. The burlesque model, light skinned but slightly darkened for the photo, creates an interracial spectacle. In the staged reproduction of what *really* happened in the judge’s chamber, the imaginary is reaffirmed in the documentary authority of a photograph. But the erotic interracial spectacle is

fabricated, essentially a fiction of a fiction. The artistic editor's attempt at "realism" in the composograph is merely a representation of fantasy.

The staging of the composograph reveals myriad psychosexual elements such as the coupling of arousal and discipline, fascination and shame. In the contrived scene, a half-naked Alice faces a group of onlookers with her attorney pointing his finger directly at her covered breasts. With Davis's finger directing viewers towards Alice's covered breasts, it's as if her fraudulent nipples were on trial. The scene is reminiscent of Charcot's exhibition of "hysterical" female patients, women surrounded by eager audiences ready to witness their supposed pathologies. In Alice's case, hidden under her dress was the symptom of a contagious disease, her dark nipples and torso the markers of blackness. She is flanked on the other side by Leonard's attorney, who looks unabashedly at Alice, and members of the jury stare from the background. Even farther behind the jury sits an embarrassed looking Leonard, his gaze shifting away from Alice's body. Perhaps most unsettling is the person who appears to be front and center to the erotic spectacle—Alice's mother. Although Mrs. Jones witnessed the event, her position in the judge's chambers was not documented. In the composograph, Mrs. Jones sits directly in front of her naked daughter, avoiding eye contact with Alice and honing in on one member of the jury with a hawk-like stare. With obvious disapproval, Mrs. Jones witnesses the humiliation and punishment of her child. By making her the focal point of the scene, the composograph reinforces Mrs. Jones' inability to protect her daughter and heightens the shame Alice must have felt at being exposed in front of her mother.

Because the composograph depicts Alice with her back to the "camera," her suffering is rendered visible through the audience's reaction to her humiliation. Although

her hunched body signals pain and discomfort, it is the piercing stares from the courtroom participants and the turned head of her mother that reveal her suffering. Susan Sontag explores this union of spectacle and torment in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, arguing that “Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in painting as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people. The implication is: no, it cannot be stopped—and the mingling of inattentive with attentive onlookers underscores this” (42). Because the composograph is not an authentic photograph, although one could argue against the authenticity of any photograph, its contrived nature can be read more like a painting, thus revealing the spectacle of torment through multiple levels of desire. The composograph is staged in such a way that several of the witnesses, including Alice’s Mother and Leonard Rhineland, are turning their heads away from the scene, attesting to Sontag’s notion that an observer’s indifference draws attention to the power dynamics at work in a scene of torment. The witnesses not engaged in looking at Alice’s naked body are unable to prevent the performance and must then submit to the desires of the legal team. In effect, the power of the law to disgrace and humiliate Alice is felt by both active and passive participants and creates a masochistic atmosphere in the courtroom.

The composograph also reveals a multilayered voyeurism present in the courtroom scene: The courtroom observers looked at Alice’s naked body, while an eager public looked at the courtroom observers *watching* the naked Alice while they themselves also consumed the image of Alice’s naked flesh. The scopophilic desire of the judge and jury, coupled with the shame and debasement felt by Alice Rhineland provided a kind of masochistic pleasure for the onlookers. The ways in which viewers are attracted to

masochistic scenes of shame and degradation are explored in Kathryn Bond Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" meets "Queer"* and although her argument focuses on filmgoers' reactions to scenes of humiliation, viewers of the composograph can also be indicted in her assertion that "the state of mind produced for a viewer may be better described as additive, one allowing for a composite stance in the face of debasement—for fascination, even humor, and sorrow simultaneously, and also allowing for the violence (the uncontrollable force) that can be a part of attraction itself" (104). The thousands of people who purchased a copy of *The Evening Graphic* in order to see Alice's naked body must have acknowledged their composite stance. For one, readers witnessing the humiliation of Alice, represented by her slumped posture and desperate attempt to cover her face and breasts, would feel a sense of uneasiness at her obvious agony. However, the multiple reactions Stockton alludes to, allow for readers to experience an attraction to seeing her this way, as evinced in the tremendous increase in newspaper sales on the day of the composograph's publication. The public's feverish fascination with the representation of Alice's naked body reaches fanatical heights, and both purveyors and readers of the newspaper participated in the violence perpetrated on Alice's body.

Alice's humiliation at being stripped naked for the crowd of onlookers reifies the fantasies governing this scene: black flesh on parade, white males controlling a black female body, the Jezebel gets what she has coming. One newspaper captures the moment in vivid detail, revealing the tangle of repulsion and delight located in Alice's humiliation: "The disrobing of Mrs. Rhinelanders before the jury set a disgraceful though spectacular precedent in New York Court Practice. The embarrassed wife was required

to remove all her clothing, save a small band around her waist, while the curious eyes of ignorant jurors were allowed to satisfy themselves as to her racial identity” (*Dallas Express* 1). This article mentions a certain legal term that carries substantial weight when trying a case: precedent. Although the newspaper is using “precedent” to mean standard or model for future trials, legal precedent is the standard authority by which other cases are decided. If the court permits the disrobing of one woman, whose face and arms do not yield certain racial identity, then future ambiguously raced women may be compelled to strip in the judges chambers as well. Because precedent is the record of what has been decided in previous appeals cases, Attorneys review this information in preparation for each new trial. Alice Rhinelanders’ ordeal, then, could be reviewed by countless attorneys in preparation for annulment suit cases; her debasement becomes simple legal procedure and her bare breasts and torso become creditable pieces of evidence.

Images pretend to represent reality, an unmediated version of the “truth.” But in this composograph, the “truth” has already been manipulated in accordance to what an American public wants to see. No one knows what went on behind the doors of the judge’s chambers and no visual evidence exists to analyze the violence perpetrated on Alice’s body. What exists is a visual fiction of what transpired and this contrived image adds another layer of erotics to the case. The public could read countless testimonies, including the salacious details of Alice and Leonard’s love letters, but the visual images, mostly cartoon drawings of the couple, did not provide the erotic equivalent that the trial somehow promised. With the *Evening Graphic*’s publication of the composograph, a visual representation of the Rhinelanders trial offered up a sensational image to compliment the factual details of the case.

In darkening the photograph (the original model was white) the *Evening Graphic* exoticized Alice's body and attempted to provide proof of racial identity. But the darkening of the skin only reveals the carnal fantasies of the journalists and general public. For the raced body, exposed for a group of white onlookers, becomes a guilty pleasure. The visual image resulting from the Rhinelander case demonstrates the ways in which prohibition produces voyeurism, allowing the public to see things they are simultaneously invested in suppressing. Because of the social and cultural taboos concerning interracial marriage, the Rhinelander trial created a large-scale forum where a desirous public could hear the details and see the images of the forbidden affair. The social sanctions, then, provided an occasion for fantasy fulfillment via scopophilic desire. The Rhinelander composograph created a safe distance from the object of desire, mainly Alice's dark naked flesh, and authorized an inroad for sexual titillation. The motive for voyeurism, whether it's to satisfy curiosity of the "other" or satiate desire in the form of sexual climax, is gratified with the publication of Alice's court ordered exposure. In addition to the visual pleasure, the composograph reveals a mingling of sadism and exhibitionism. The spectacle of Alice covering her breasts as hungry eyes devour her body reveals the sadistic wishes of her attorney Lee Parson Davis. Knowing the trauma Alice would endure from having her private letters read aloud in court, he must have realized the emotional distress that disrobing in front an audience that included her estranged husband would cause her. This unnecessary pageant of flesh must have satisfied Davis's own curiosity about what was hidden under Alice's clothes. The irrational legal ploy not only humiliated Alice, but also portrayed her as exhibitionist.

Highly publicized representations of interracial relationships like the Rhinelander affair were sensationalized to the point of caricature. The public's demand to see the intricacies of interracial romance led to courtroom mayhem and overindulgences made possible through legal procedure. Leonard and Alice's relationship, revealed through sultry love letters and bawdy courtroom testimony, was defined solely by their sexual interactions and the visual "proof" of their intimacy was a fabricated photograph of Leonard staring at his wife's bare breasts as she scrambled to cover them from the jury's eager eyes. If these were the representations of interracial romance, as mediated by the legal system, disseminated by the popular press, and demanded by the public, then black / white relationships were cast as sites of pornographic pleasure.

Juxtaposing the Rhinelander trial with a contemporary legal battle sheds light on the ways interracial sex is still repeatedly criminalized, punished, and spectacularized. In the 21st century, agents of the law continue to create inroads to sexual spectacle masked as standard legal procedure. Acting as a conduit for titillation and sexual delight, police officers, lawyers, judges, and lawmakers still provide the public with the sordid details of the sexual encounters of black "perpetrators." Perhaps the most glaring example of this dynamic is the case of Genarlow Wilson, a seventeen year old African American high school student in Georgia who was sentenced to ten years in prison for engaging in consensual oral sex. Although Wilson's "crime" involved another black teen, the way it was investigated, tried in court and publicized includes a vast number of white onlookers, making obvious the interracial sex component. Under Georgia sodomy law enacted in 1842, oral sex between consenting teens constitutes a felony, although very few teens

have been prosecuted for the offense. As a result of Wilson's trial, the law has since been repealed but will not be applied retroactively in order to free the young man who has already spent three years in prison. Recently, the district attorney released over three dozen copies of the video showing the sex acts between Wilson and a fifteen year old girl. Under Georgia's open record laws, anything entered as court evidence can be requested by the public, even sex tapes of minors engaged in sexual activity. What the law allows, then, is the distribution of private sexual acts under its control even if they are considered illicit material. AP news and other Media outlets have requested the tape but so have several members of the general public—average citizens keen on watching young African Americans engage in fellatio and sexual intercourse. Under federal law, this tape is considered child pornography and should not be distributed, but in Georgia, the district attorney, an agent of the state, has paved the way for a desirous public to watch the intimate sexual activities of African Americans. In most "child abuse" cases (aggravated child molestation was the charge against Genarlow Wilson) tapes are not distributed or at the very least the faces of victims are obscured in order to protect their identity. But in this case, the tape is not altered, giving law officials and the public the full effect of an essentially pornographic display of black teen sex. By appearing to punish a serious crime (private sexual acts between consenting teens) agents of the law can divulge intimate details that fulfill multiple sexual fantasies, all the while professing to uphold moral decency.

Establishing the interplay between prohibition and permission, pretext and context, the Wilson case acts as a lens for viewing private sexual acts not meant for the courtroom. Several congressmen admitted that after seeing the film they changed their

mind about Wilson's innocence, believing that he should be imprisoned for the "lewd" sexual activities. Lawmakers might outlaw teen sex altogether if they were able to view sex tapes of weekend high-school orgies or witness the drunken debaucheries taking place in numerous hotel parties across the country. Not only has the law imprisoned a black teen for the crime of receiving oral sex, reinforcing the notion that the state has the power to control sexual behavior of African Americans, but lawmakers possess a trophy of the trial and have full access to play and replay the scenes at will. The legal system, acting as an adult superstore peddling kiddy porn, panders to an eager audience who simply fill out the proper request forms. What both the Rhinelander and Wilson case highlight, then, is how the law provides an avenue for white voyeurs' tawdry relationship with African American sexuality.

Chapter Two

Erasing the Prohibition, Embracing the Transgression:

Nancy Cunard's Invitation to Interracial Erotic Spectacle

But very often (too often, to my taste) I have been photographed and knew it. Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice. –Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida

But in 1928 Nancy blundered into, and for the next few years floundered around in one of the most intractable and serious of human problems: the sexual, social, and political attractions and antagonisms of whites and blacks. –Anne Chisholm, Nancy Cunard

Like Barthes' awareness of his subject position in the moments before a photograph is taken, Nancy Cunard possessed a keen sense of her own transformative power. Able to move from socialite to rebel and from androgynous to hyper femme, Cunard made and remade herself in several photographs, literary genres, and art forms. Like Barthes, Cunard was an active participant in constructing her image, offering moments of exhibitionism for a public who were voyeurs to scenes of what Anne Chisholm calls "the most intractable and serious of human problems" (145). Cunard's intractable and serious problem was an attraction to black men, an attraction made visible and sensational because of her desire to confront very publicly the taboos surrounding interracial intimacy. Her scholarly endeavors, heavily steeped in the personal, offer a constant barrage of sexual innuendoes that incensed both the British and American public who viewed race mixing as an aberration. In her efforts to forge new territory in the name of Communism, sexual freedom, and black arts, Cunard willingly exposed

moments of interracial intimacy; she was the exhibitionist who challenged prohibitions by reveling in the public spotlight. Showcasing her relationship with Henry Crowder, a black jazz musician she met in Paris, and courting publicity on every corner of Harlem, Cunard ignored the prohibitions against interracial sex and offered the spectacle free of charge. The public, willing voyeurs to her show, could engage in boundary crossing from a safe distance and enjoy all of the excitement of Cunard's transgressions without espousing interracial sex. Producing a dynamic that allows for risk-free titillation, Cunard's mode of exhibitionism both enables and alibis erotic fantasies around interracial sex. Reporters who flocked to her Harlem hotel could celebrate her interracial affairs while seeming to disparage them. As seemingly opposite, celebration and disparagement are two sides of the same issue; and those voyeurs who followed Cunard's dalliances with black males could surreptitiously embrace both sides.

How Nancy Cunard came to be such a celebrated socialite, rebellious artist and social activist had much to do with her upbringing and rejection of class values. Daughter of wealthy shipping heir Sir Bache Cunard and American born Maud Alice Burke, had a rather solitary and forlorn childhood—both parents took little interest in raising their daughter and placed her in the care of several nurses and governesses from birth. Maud Burke was more concerned with her socialite status, throwing extravagant London soirées and hosting lavish tea parties with such distinguished guests as Lady Asquith, Somerset Maugham, Ford Madox Ford, and Max Beerbohm. Nancy spent her childhood at the periphery of these gatherings, captivated by political debates, eavesdropping on reports of the latest scandal, and smitten with her mother's closest friend George Moore. Throughout her formative years, Nancy Cunard was schooled in

such subjects as poetry, art, romance languages, and history, but her emotional development was essentially ignored. At the time of her parents' separation, Nancy Cunard was a pensive young woman who had cultivated quite a disdain for the British elite.

This contempt for the privileged class would influence Cunard's artistic and political leanings, shifting her away from typical high society clubs and towards some of the most Avant-garde groups in Paris and London. Intimate with notable figures such as Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett, Louis Aragon, Langston Hughes, Aldous Huxley, and René Crevel, Cunard frequently blurred the line between friend and lover, and her reputation for frequent sexual interludes became the subject of novels such as Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat*. Cunard's distinctive appearance and vibrant personality were captured in photographs by Cecil Beaton, Barbara Ker Seymer, and Man Ray; depicted in paintings by John Banting, Eugene McCown, Oskar Kokoschka and Adrian Allinson; sketched by Wyndham Lewis; and sculpted by Constantin Brancusi. During the Spanish Civil War, Cunard acted as field reporter; rejecting any claim to neutrality, she sent praises of the republic and condemnation of the fascist German and Italian regimes. Towards the end of her life Cunard spent her days furiously drinking and writing, trying to record all of her latest thoughts and convictions for a public who was simply not interested. Although once lauded in many intellectual circles, Nancy Cunard died in relative obscurity, "alone, under an oxygen tent in a public ward" (Chisholm 336). Only a handful of mourners, none of them family members, came to pay their respects.

Cunard's predilection for publicity drew interracial eroticism out from the shadows, offering a view of interracial romance that was determinably visible, as if black

/ white romances were natural and socially acceptable. This attempt to disregard taboos was offensive for those who viewed race-mixing as dangerous and seditious, and Cunard's transgressive actions threatened to blur social boundaries and collapse the distinctions upon which privileges were founded. Cunard's boundary crossing could not be more divergent than that of Alice Jones, the passive woman who altered the Rhineland family tree. If Alice Rhineland tried to slip quietly past the barriers of race and class, Nancy Cunard came at them with dynamite and a wrecking crew. Cunard's willingness to "out" herself as a lover of black men serves as a direct contrast to the reluctant spectacle teased from the Rhineland trial. In the Rhineland annulment suit, every detail entered into evidence was gained by coercion, creating an undercurrent of shame and agony when each love letter was read aloud. This humiliation provided proof of the forbidden nature of interracial sex and inflamed the public's desire for more details. In addition, Alice Rhineland was a middle class black woman who was already fighting negative assumptions about her race and sexuality. Her affair confirmed the suspicions of a white public who viewed her as the hypersexual gold digger. For Alice Rhineland, the interracial love affair indicated manipulation, border crossing, and deception.

Cunard, on the other hand, was the willing participant, flaunting her sexual conquests to a bewildered public who simultaneously detested and delighted in her interracial love affairs. Cunard's willingness to expose her sexual proclivities granted audiences a safe peep at a forbidden eroticism between races. The reversal of power, gender, and wealth also allowed Cunard a stage from which to perform interracial fantasies. Without coming too close to psychoanalyzing Cunard, a mode of analysis that

proves tempting at times, we can see her status as wealthy white woman with access to artistic communities as an inroad to exhibitionism. Cunard's power and wealth afforded her a bit more freedom to express her sexuality and enter circles where interracial sex was even tolerated. Her sexual trysts were playful acts of defiance that pushed against the boundaries of white female virtue. Because Cunard was independently wealthy, her sexual conquests with black men were viewed as the eccentric rebellions of a discontented socialite. Each woman's status brought with it a set of ideologies governing their behaviors, and Alice Rhineland was consistently branded as the villain in the press while Cunard was painted as more of a sophisticated anomaly. While both women's affairs across the color line were made public on a grand scale, Alice Rhineland was the unwilling participant while Nancy Cunard was the consummate exhibitionist. Her mode of exhibitionism, though, offers a compelling view of the unwilling voyeur.

Cunard's position as exhibitionist is a complex one, part of a larger dynamic that includes voyeurism, sadism, and masochism as elements of her mode of expression. By constantly playing and then replaying her interracial attractions, Cunard provides a public, whose voyeurism is aroused by her spectacles, with erotic material that, in themselves provide a surplus of titillating layers. Photographs of her wearing African scarves and bracelets against her extremely white skin provoke transgressive desire in audiences who both resist and enjoy this amalgamation. The eroticism of her presentation hinges on the three term structure of voyeurism where the look, its object and the prohibitions allow for viewers to "witness an auto-erotic act" (Roof 122). Cunard's continual flaunting of her interracial attraction provides the occasion for the look, where she constitutes the object of desire, while the taboos surrounding black /

white sex create the prohibition. Even though we would be speculating on Cunard's own pleasure in performing such acts, her political deployment of these moments supplies erotic fantasies to an eager audience. Cunard's performance as sadist offers the details, taunts the audience, grants the peep, but forbids audience participation. Like the stripper who dances suggestively while removing article after article of clothing, only to retreat backstage after the music stops, Cunard gives the glimpse, sells the fantasy, but then reclaims her privacy. Her exhibitionism creates moments of metaphorical bondage for the public who want to see; they are part of Cunard's sadistic amusements by taking pleasure in the withholding. The viewer's masochistic position, then, is not only fostered by Cunard's moments of exhibitionism, but also by the laws and social prohibitions acting as the literal double bind. Masochist, it seems, is the only possible position for the voyeur of interracial eroticism.

The photographs taken of Nancy Cunard by both Barbara Ker-Seymer and Man Ray provide the clearest examples of her pseudo bondage, sadomasochism, and exhibition at play with notions of forbidden desire. It is possible to read these photographs as pornographic, as sites for arousal and sexual titillation, while simultaneously imagining Cunard's self-gratification through their production. Because eroticism occurs in the moments before climax, pornography's role is to capture and produce the progression from disinterested to enthralled. Pornographic images and films must entice viewers, extend their fantasies and intensify their desires (Williams 5). Pornography "works" because the viewer participates in the visual scene, mainly in order to be aroused to climax. Linda Williams suggests that pornography "is often measured by the degrees to which audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (4).

Responses of bodily pleasure—orgasms, moans, erections—would signal a positive audience response to visual representations of eroticism whether it is on screen or in still shots. Critics who analyze Cunard's photographs recognize them as images of suffering and torture and compare Cunard's posed body to lynching photography. But if the interpretations of these photographs are reduced to pain and bondage, viewers can only share in the experience as sadists. But if we see these images as sites of interracial pornographic pleasure, an interpretation more closely aligned with Cunard's sexual politic, their erotic nature is clearly part of an exhibitionist performance.

The first image of Cunard, leaning against a stark leather backdrop with a string of beads laced several times around her neck, evokes all the trappings of sadomasochism. Staring at the camera with a lifeless expression, she rests against a black leather background. Black leather, the material of choice for bondage suits, calls to mind masks with zippered mouths and ball gags, and Cunard plays the role of submissive with perfection. Her lips, darkened to call attention to the slightly opened mouth, are perhaps ready to perform oral pleasures and the two straps from her dress have fallen down, exposing her bare shoulders. The photograph is cropped at her breasts, staging the appearance of a strip tease and suggesting that Cunard might let the whole dress slip from her slender frame. This still frame, for nothing seems to be animated in this image, captures a Cunard frozen in time, perhaps exhausted from autoerotic asphyxiation.

The ambiguity of the photograph suggests that Cunard is either unable to complete the moment of ecstasy or just finished climaxing, her fatigue made visible in half-closed eyes and wilted limbs. Perhaps Cunard looks so utterly weak and powerless in this image because her clavicle and shoulder bones are jutting out from her taught,

white skin. Cunard's emaciated frame looks as though starvation is also part of her self-abasing punishment. Although critics have argued that the strands of black beads form a lariat, conjuring images of the lynch ropes used on black men who allegedly raped white women, they also strongly resemble the neck extension rings used by both South African Ndebele women and Kayan women in Thailand. Appearing to elongate her slender, white neck, the beads are visual referents to the exotic women in African and Asian ports. Cunard's masquerade, then, serves as another way to exhibit her body, one that transgresses class and race boundaries and places her in the position of exotic sexual subject.

The second Ker-Seymer photograph, a solarization that reveals a black-skinned Cunard, can be viewed as a complete transformation, one that blurs the lines of both race and sex. Utilizing a process of developing that overexposes the film, solarizations make the white skin of Cunard appear black and the dark background and black beads appear white. The effect of this technique on someone like Cunard, who is known to love everything "African," is striking. In the black and white image the exotic black beads become a pearl necklace, both precious gems and semen drops that cover Cunard's neck. This photograph also plays with sexual boundaries, and without the accessories of lipstick and slipping dress straps, Cunard resembles a young boy. Her androgynous look creates new fantasies of young, naked black males and this race and sex swapping allows the exhibition of Cunard as an image of the "other" she so covets. Because the autoeroticism of this photograph seems palpable, viewers are once again caught in the cycle of masochistic bondage. Nancy Cunard's body—simultaneously black and white, male and female—is a mixed race fantasy, one that is exhibited for public consumption.

Frozen in time, the photograph itself acts as both prohibition and titillation, stopping short of a live performance and presenting only a fragment of the fantasy.

Critics disagree about the effects of Cunard's bondage photographs. In response to the Ker-Seymer's photographs, Jane Marcus argues that "The erotic performance of pain of the victimization of blacks and women, slaves and sex objects, may have allowed certain white women modernists empowerment through fetishism" (46). In this read, Marcus understands Cunard's body language, her look, and positionality as indicating pain and suffering and her resemblance to chattel as transformative. Susan Gubar's read takes issue with Marcus's analysis, suggesting that "if we interpret this racechanging figure more skeptically [. . .] Cunard's eroticizing of a master/slave psychology could be said to perpetuate racial and sexual scripts of thralldom that bequeath only the most degrading form of power to men, that of sexual domination; only the most demeaning form of submission to women, that of anorexic self-abasement (200).

What both Marcus and Gubar overlook in their readings are the ways in which Cunard is exhibiting pleasure and providing titillation in these scenes. By focusing on the specter of pain, critics ignore the contradictions and titillations in these photographs. Why, as Gubar states, must the photograph suggest a gendered master/slave psychology? In these photographs, the figure of Cunard can be viewed as her own master and slave, taking satisfaction in her self-imposed domination and subjugation. Cunard's complete racial transformation in the solarization allows her to be both white and black, male and female, dominatrix and subordinate. Although one interpretation might view the "negative" quality of the solarization as a literal lack, one that signifies Cunard as "woman," "black" "other," this reading positions *viewers* as exclusive subjects and

discounts any of Cunard's agency as transgressor. The bondage images can also be read, then, as representations of masochistic pleasure, scenes that allows for Cunard to be her own tormenter. In "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," Linda Williams's discussion of pornography, horror and melodrama provides a theory of pain that is useful in understanding Cunard's aesthetic performance in these photographs:

Under a patriarchal double standard that has rigorously separated the sexually passive "good" girl from the sexually active "bad" girl, masochistic role-playing offers a way out of this dichotomy by combining the good girl with the bad: the passive "good girl" can prove to her witnesses (the super-ego who is her torturer) that she does not will the pleasure that she receives. Yet the sexually active "bad" girl enjoys this pleasure and has knowingly arranged to endure the pain that earns it" (8).

This idea erases the male participant in scenes of sexual torture and rejects what Gubar sees as a model of male/ female domination and subordination. Nancy Cunard, embodying both the "good girl" and "bad girl" stance in these photographs, her weak, submissive look juxtaposed with an open mouth and bare skin, can be viewed as a self-determined erotica.

In one of her most famous photographs, taken by Man Ray in 1926, Cunard wears her signature ivory bracelets up to her elbows and glances away from the camera, implying that someone lies beyond the frame. An imaginary participant draws Cunard's attention away from the lens and viewers wonder who she is staring at so intently. Her skin, so white it glows against the backdrop, looks almost ethereal, and the slight turn of her head emphasizes her sharp features. Dressed in a leopard print shirt with kohl

darkened eyes, Cunard again plays the part of racial “other.” Invoking the exotic, Cunard’s shackles, pallid skin and demur glance remind viewers of the Japanese Geisha. Existing solely to entertain, Geishas are essentially lovely and deferential exhibitionists with vast cultural knowledge. Like these elegant performers, Cunard was trained at an early age in music, art, history and etiquette and her mother modeled the behaviors of a perfect hostess. Underneath the pale makeup and elaborate costume, though, was a woman who demanded an audience much grander than a tea ceremony or private performance. Cunard’s exhibitionism was always played out to a wide audience, an audience who at times were unwilling participants in her sexual revelries.

Most obvious in this photograph is the excess of bracelets that Cunard wears, a style that she would make her trademark. The act of threading the ivory bracelets onto her thin arms is a symbolic penetration of the other, an act she does over and over again as a ritual of getting ready for the day. As the lone subject, Cunard performs interracial fantasies by fusing European and African signifiers on her body; she literally becomes the site of coalescence. There is an obvious sexual politic that comes through in Cunard’s photographs, a deliberate manipulation of cultural stereotypes and strict racial boundaries that become part of a pattern in Cunard’s exhibitionism.

Black Man and White Ladyship

Nancy Cunard’s public airing of her feud with Lady Cunard provides another occasion to see her exhibitionism working in conjunction with her racial and sexual ideologies, a strategy that provides a defense for her exposing a relationship with Henry Crowder. A jazz musician who followed Cunard from country to country on her many projects and publishing ventures, Henry Crowder tried and failed to temper his

companion's adventurous spirit on many occasions. Unaware of the racial politics that made certain situations dangerous for the interracial couple, Cunard went with Crowder to France, England and the United States, usually insisting that they share a hotel room. When Lady Cunard heard about her daughter's escapades with a black man, she essentially removed Nancy from her will and severed all contact with her. As a result of their fateful trip to England, which was interpreted as Cunard flaunting the affair in her mother's face, the couple was harassed and asked to leave their hotel room. One year later, Nancy Cunard penned a scathing indictment of her mother's racist attitudes and accused the entire British upper-class of bitter intolerance. "Black Man and White Ladyship" was meant to attack racist views and explain the plight of African Americans in the United States, but like her other works, it actually gathered attention for Cunard the exhibitionist and lover of black men.

Cunard's publication and dissemination of "Black Man and White Ladyship" can be seen as an attempt to contest her outlaw status, but she does so by creating a public spectacle that mirrors the very behaviors she finds loathsome in her mother. So in one reading of this text, Cunard is pleading for some recognition as the good child who was maligned by a wicked mother, but in another she is the spoiled and precocious daughter who uses a platform of seeking racial justice as a pretext to publicly lash out at her mother. Setting up the strip-tease moment once again, Cunard gives the public an excuse to consume the details of her irrevocable split with Lady Cunard. In all likelihood, the scandal was probably forgotten, and her Ladyship's friends had swept the incident under the carpet, that is until Nancy Cunard rehashed the whole affair, this time committing it to print and essentially memorializing her act of exhibitionism.

Cunard begins the essay with a justification for publishing “Black Man and White Ladyship: An Anniversary,” exactly one year after her fateful trip to London, a gesture that casts a hesitant and uncertain tone on the otherwise vitriolic text. She explains to her audience that “the reason for it’s having been written will, I imagine, be clear to those who read it” (1). This opening statement seems unusual for the confident and uncompromising Cunard, and reads like a plea for acceptance rather than a demand to be heard. In this moment, readers are voyeurs in an argument between mother and daughter. Cunard’s audience, her mother’s high society friends and members of the London elite, will never understand “the reason” for airing family disputes in such a public manner, and Cunard’s name dropping and unflattering anecdotes depicting her mother’s friends as gossiping dim-wits can only further alienate them from her social cause and lifestyle choice. There seems to be ambivalence in Cunard’s gesture—she attempts to justify her actions and then ridicules the very people she garners sympathy from. She ridicules Sir Thomas Beecham for sending her a scathing letter “in the best Trollope style” and abhors Lady Oxford’s embarrassing outbursts and extreme snobbery, and yet this is her audience. Although this very public rejection of her mother distances Cunard from the politics and values of the British elite, she makes several angry references to her mother cutting off her allowance, sounding more like an overindulged child than an indignant rebel.

Cunard directly addresses her mother in one instance, acknowledging the rift between them as a direct result of her affair with Henry Crowder. She explains that ever since her “unauthorized” trip to London last year she has not seen or spoken to her mother and admits, “I trust we shall never meet again. You have cut off first a quarter

(on plea of your high income tax) and then half of my allowance. You have stated that I am out of your will. Excellent—for at least we have a little truth between us” (2).

Cunard’s sarcastic exclamation of “excellent,” with the dash construction invoking a grimacing pause, uncovers her frustration with this new financial arrangement and the “truth” between mother and daughter is that Lady Cunard would rather disown her child rather than welcome a black man in the family. Like the clash between the Rhinelander family, the rift between the wealthy Cunards centered around the inclusion of an African American into the family fold; indeed, both the Rhinelanders and Cunards could not accept their children’s willingness to diversify the genealogical tree.

In an attempt to paint a clear picture for her readers on the horrors of slavery, Cunard again relies on an exhibitionist mode, placing herself at the center of a tale of harsh cruelties. By doing so, Cunard creates a fantasy of bondage and rape where she, instead of a black female, is ravished by a powerful black overseer. This plantation fantasy role reversal invites readers, particularly white readers, to perform the role of victim, and to envision sadomasochistic sex play. In a compelling discussion on terror, spectacle, and slavery that is useful in understanding Cunard’s rhetorical moves, Saidiya Hartman examines John Rankin’s abolitionist texts and uncovers an odd tendency for whites to envision themselves as slaves in order to empathize with those in bondage. Hartman finds this trend problematic, questioning whether “the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm[s] the materiality of black sentience only by feeling for himself” (19). In her pamphlet, Cunard attempts to place herself, and other white readers, in that witness position, asking her readers to play the masochists in a most diabolical scene:

Now how does it seem to you put this way: several hundreds of thousands of whites have been torn from their country, chained in pairs in boats, flogged across the Atlantic, flayed at work by a nigger overseer's whip, hunted and shot for trying to get away, insulted, injured, thrown out, imprisoned, threatened with lynching if they dare ride in the black man's part of the train, their houses burned down, if, despite everything they seem to get too prosperous, their women spoken of as 'dirty white sluts' and raped at ever corner by a big Negro buck. (8).

Cunard's portrait of white slavery, replete with graphic violence and terror, is meant to rouse the compassionate sentiments of her readership and instigate catharsis. But another effect of this rhetorical strategy is to create a scene where Nancy Cunard can take center stage. Painted as the "dirty white slut," Cunard can grant the fantasy to other white readers, inviting them to take the position of "slave."

If Cunard and her white audience can only understand terror and suffering through an exchange of subjectivity, then white people are privileged as those who feel and experience emotions; black people's suffering is only translatable through white empathy. Hartman explains that "if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (19). Cunard's attempt at empathy does, in fact, rely on a masochistic fantasy, one that she plays out in many of her scholarly ventures. Her attempt to shock Londoners into understanding slavery by creating a rape scene where a "white slut" is ravaged by a "big Negro buck" only serves to conjure up fantasies of her own relationship with Crowder. By substituting white for black, Nancy Cunard is

again making this an account of *her* journey from slavery, *her* abuse from black overseers, and *her* rape from the towering black man. Once more positioned for sadomasochistic sexual fantasies, the audience can envision these vividly illustrated interracial spectacles supplied by Cunard.

What seems to be most fascinating about slave / master role reversals and Cunard's exhibitionist tendencies are the ways in which they highlight the fact that interracial sex has consistently been understood within economies of power, pleasure, and pain.

Lest the reader forget that Nancy Cunard is an admirer of black men, she concludes the pamphlet by arguing that "Nature gave him [the black man] the best body amongst all races" (11). In a list of "his" accomplishments, Cunard praises the black man's music, sculpture, logic and customs, but ends with his body. Cunard never explains what she means by this claim, but the reference makes one thing very clear—Cunard the exhibitionist is also Cunard the voyeur and her gaze has determined that black male bodies are the finest in the world. Again the layers of sadomasochism abound. The mostly white audience this pamphlet was intended for must have cringed at Cunard's statement and then realized that Cunard must have thoroughly examined the bodies of black men in order to make her judgment. While readers are fantasizing about Cunard's voyeurism, they are constrained by the lack of information she offers about why black male bodies are superior. Furthermore, in touting herself as the expert in body types, Cunard's heterosexual prowess is made evident in the phrase "amongst all races," intimating that she has surveyed countless "raced" bodies before choosing the black man as champion.

Rarely, if ever, do literary scholars discuss Nancy Cunard's political activism, publishing history, and writing talents without first speaking of her "bad girl" image. Attention to Cunard's negative image and rebellious nature eclipse her contributions to the field of cultural studies, most notably her anthology *Negro* (1934), a massive collection of African and African diasporic art, music, history and literature. Much critical examination of *Negro* focuses on Cunard's personal investment in publishing the anthology, and not on the anthology itself. In fact, in "Transgressive Reading: Nancy Cunard and *Negro*" Holly McSpadden blames Cunard herself for this: "it is Cunard's transgressive subject position that allows critics to target her behavior in order to preclude critical consideration of the anthology and its potential contributions to the field of cultural studies" (60). Because Cunard's style, physical appearance, sexual proclivities, and political ideologies all pushed against the established "norms," critics made those elements, and not her rich contributions to art, politics and literature the focus of their attention. McSpadden makes a case for the critical examination of *Negro* and yet closes her essay by arguing that if the anthology is disregarded, "Nancy Cunard will continue to be known by her bad reputation rather than by her work" (70). For McSpadden, it seems as if Cunard's transgressive position translates into a "bad reputation," and she reifies the same short-sighted analysis of Cunard that she hopes to correct. In reading Cunard's transgressive subject position in terms of "good girl" and "bad girl," the very categories she hoped to explode are re-employed and the reason her scholarship continues to be ignored is linked to those imaginary categories of deportment. Mc Spadden, a voyeur of Cunard—reacting perhaps too much against her image—passes the voyeurism on through her scholarship.

Maureen Moynagh explores Nancy Cunard's position as political and racial tourist as she gathers material for the anthology *Negro* in places such as Harlem and the Caribbean, but does not examine how these travels provide opportunities for Cunard to exhibit herself as white and sexually liberated. In her essay "Cunard's Lines: Political Tourism and its Texts" Moynagh argues that "the conditions for Cunard's utterances, her representations of black diaspora in the anthology, are rendered unstable, are continually subject to contestation through her travels, where blackness and whiteness shift, and where she is repeatedly 'put in her place' as a white woman, as an outsider, as tourist, whenever she tries to step out of it" (77). In many instances, through her exhibitionism, Cunard creates her own "place," and is seen as a white woman, outsider, and tourist because she constructs those images, seeming to delight in her difference. Moynagh examines a photograph taken by Cunard in Cuba to demonstrate how the figure of Nancy Cunard, the traveler and political tourist, is also scrutinized by her subjects in the photograph, as well as by the men standing in the background. In this moment, Moynagh argues, a fourth line of sight is present in which the person looking at the photograph can see the constructions of race, class, and gender that Cunard was complicit in constructing. In her production of *Negro*, Moynagh sees the figure of Cunard as challenging racist assumptions and reads her silences about gender as a way to adopt an identity outside of class boundaries. Although Moynagh's contentions offer a way to view Cunard's activism and anti-racist struggles as "stepping out" of her white, elitist status, I would argue the contrary. Cunard consistently flaunts her whiteness and privileged status, and her gender struggles are made visible in the exhibition of her sexual relationships with black men.

Throughout *Negro*, Cunard's contributions cast her as the outsider, garnering special attention to her status as a white woman. As chief editor of *Negro*, Cunard determined what pieces were included in the anthology, commissioning numerous poems, essays, short stories, political articles, photographs, examples of sculpture, jewelry, art and other cultural artifacts. Her decision to publish hate male from the American public, though, seems incompatible with the rest of her collection, and plays on those exhibitionist tendencies that showcase her sexual connection to black men. So while Moynagh argues for Cunard's alternate subjectivity via her scholarship and global travels, I would argue that rather than rejecting class and race boundaries, her work makes a spectacle out of both her affluence and whiteness, reinscribing rather than rejecting her privileged position.

Jane Marcus, a scholar committed to understanding the elusive psyche of Nancy Cunard, attempts to resurrect an "authentic" version of her subject; but in doing so, has failed to see her own investment in Cunard's desires. Perhaps unaware of her own fascination with interracial eroticism, Marcus has focused so intently on what Cunard really meant that she fails to see these performances as part of a political move on Cunard's part. Her article "Bonding and Bondage: Nancy Cunard and the Making of the Negro Anthology" describes Cunard's physicality as "a body which breaks the rules of gender, a body which suggests sex without motherhood, interracial sex and intersexual racing" (38). Submerging herself in the Cunard artifacts, though, may have lured Marcus down a treacherous path, one that assumes insights into Cunard's character and motivations and narrows the lines of scholarly exchange. In effect, Cunard becomes Marcus's fetish.

In an attempt to read Cunard's bondage pictures semiotically, Marcus argues that Cunard "really meant the performance of bondage to signify her political bonding with black culture. She meant it as literally as she meant to break the biological bond with her mother by publishing *Black Man, White Ladyship*" (42). Although Marcus makes interesting connections between Cunard's physical body, maternity, and interracial desire, she does so by assuming to know what Cunard "really meant," in posing for the photographs. Making the assumption that Cunard posed herself, Marcus never questions Cunard's agency in the production of the photographs or how the images work as sites of autoerotic pleasure.

Reneta Morresi's essay "'Negotiating Identity: Nancy Cunard's Otherness'" hopes to recuperate the political and artistic talents of her subject while avoiding the same condemnatory read of her personal life. She admits that many biographers and contemporary scholars are more invested in Cunard's "adventurous life than in her writings and political activities," and that an examination of her politics and commitment to surrealism can offer the "possibility of troubling whiteness" and "altering traditional representations and gender roles" (150). But neglecting the personal aspect of Nancy Cunard does, in fact, neglect the political. Nancy Cunard's countless sexual relationships with men and women are just as much a statement of her sexual politics as is her publication of *Black Man and White Ladyship*. So when Morresi argues that Cunard's narrative voice "tends to erase her own gender," she fails to recognize that Cunard's very existence is a clash against gender norms—in fact, she troubles gender just as vigorously as she troubles whiteness (157). In addition, while Cunard might conceal her gender, she clearly reflects her sexuality so that audiences are presented with self-representations that

are both masculine and feminine, but always sexualized. Divisions between sex and gender are impractical, and Cunard's experimentation with multiple partners, her tendency to cross-dress, and her rejection of heteronormative traditions are at play with binaries of homosexual / heterosexual, male / female. Morresi proposes a division between the personal and political, one that neglects Cunard's fluid movement between identity categories, a bifurcation that erases much of what she does in her work.

Taking the dynamic figure of Nancy Cunard out of her work is an impossible feat, especially when she makes herself the central figure in most of her writing. But seeing her presence as an aesthetic performance rather than a trace of the "real" Cunard allows for an examination of the political and sexual power of exhibitionism. For instance, when painting a brilliant scene of Harlem life, Cunard draws attention to herself as author, alerting the audience that while she was collecting information for the piece, a white male screamed a degrading remark out of his car window at her. Unnecessary in this sketch of Harlem, Cunard's presence detracts from the scene and shifts the focus to her position as sex object. In another example of her exhibitionism, Cunard places herself at the center of Henry Crowder's musical score cover by wrapping her arms around his neck and shoulders. Although the image looks as though Crowder is draped by a colorful scarf, he is really adorned by Cunard's ivory bracelets, her arms bearing down on him as if to say, "you could not have done this without me." In another scene of bondage, Cunard lays her arms on Crowder's body as an indication of their intimacy. But she also hides behind him, the disembodied figure that places both her lover and the viewer in restraints.

Cunard's *Negro*

Although the public was fascinated with Cunard the “figure,” critical reception of her anthology *Negro* was not only sparse, it was non-existent. Taking into consideration the magnitude of this 840 page volume, with contributions from celebrated artists, writers, essayists, musicians and cultural critics, Cunard’s anthology should have received a great deal of critical attention by scholars of the Modernist period. To understand the scope of Cunard’s project, one needs only to hold the anthology, which weighs a hefty eight pounds and contains over eight hundred pages. Divided into main categories such as “America,” “Negro Stars,” “Poetry,” and “Africa,” Cunard’s anthology was the largest and most comprehensive collection of black culture, customs, literature and art ever compiled. A transnational and multicultural venture between Americans, Africans, South Americans and Caribbeans, *Negro* showcased some of the brightest scholars of the twentieth century. For instance, in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “Conversions and Visions,” “Shouting,” “The Sermon,” “Mother Catherine,” and “Uncle Monday,” Zora Neale Hurston explains in her anthropological style African American culture and religion. Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” is a linguistic analysis of black American’s speech patterns, and gives readers categories such as “Verbal Nouns: Uglying away,” “The Double Descriptive: Chop-axe” “Metaphor and Simile: You sho is propaganda,” and “Nouns from Verbs: “She won’t take a listen.”(25).

Also included in the collection is William Carlos Williams’s “The Colored Girls of Passenack,” a bizarre little memoir about Georgie, Williams’s housemaid when he was a young boy and the first woman he saw naked. The account tells of other black women who try repeatedly to have sexual relationships with white, married men. Maud Cuney

Hare's "Folk Music of the Creoles," is a "discussion about the spirit and song of a created race," and features lyrics from several popular tunes (244). Georges Sadoul's essay "Sambo Without Tears," translated from French to English by Samuel Beckett, is a study of harmful and derogatory images of the black man which are circulated in cartoon style in popular French presses meant for children. The *Cri-Cri*, *l'Epatant*, and *l'Intrépide*, issued hundreds of thousands of these cartoons with captions such as "The Negro is a drunkard," and "The Negro is a buffoon"(349) and Sadoul's essay explores the negative impact these images have on young, impressionable children. Among the essays and works of fiction are several photographs of Ugandan "Luo men with hippo teeth head-dresses" and "Masai girls in British East Africa" (400). To finish, images of fetish objects from the Belgian Congo, bronze head sculptures and brass anklets from Nigeria, and wood carvings from Madagascar fill the pages of this expansive collection. Only a thumb-nail sketch of Cunard's anthology, this description helps readers to understand the massive scale of her project and realize its import to both artists and scholars. Unfortunately, readers of her time dismissed *Negro* and after one printing, Cunard's remarkable project was forgotten.

To understand the disparity between Cunard's reception and the treatment of other publications during the same time period, we can look to Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), an anthology of African American fiction, poetry, drama and histories. When *The New Negro* was published in 1925, critics immediately sung its praises, crediting Locke with the creation of a powerful Manifesto. Countless reviews from such newspapers as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender* and *The Southern Workman*, and little magazines such as *Messenger* and *Opportunity*, kept conversations about

Locke's anthology alive for several years after its first printing. Scholars of the Harlem Renaissance credit Locke with the birth of the movement, and his work has a permanent place in African American Literature. Locke's insider status as black man writing about black art and literature paved the way for his critical acclaim; Nancy Cunard's status as a European white woman collecting works by black artists, however, placed her on the periphery. Her endeavors to collect scores of materials, arrange countless pieces, solicit fiction from well know black writers, and secure a publisher for the unruly text is completely ignored by cultural critics and scholars of African and African American literature. Regardless of the reasons Cunard was ignored, the implications of the snub evince dissatisfaction with her sexual politics.

Compared to the numerous reviews of *The New Negro*, Cunard's anthology only secured a few prominent reviews. Published in the leading black southern newspaper *Norfolk Journal and Guide* in 1934, Arthur Schomberg's critique stated that "the anthology is here in time to fill a needed and necessary space in our libraries" (2). Yet only 1,000 copies of the anthology were published, and few requests were made for Cunard's important collection. As she waited for reviews to pour in from national labor newspapers, friends who had promised reviews, and British presses, Cunard "remained puzzled, and not a little annoyed, by the strange silence" of the American presses. One reviewer from the *Amsterdam News*, Henry Lee Moon critiqued Cunard rather than her work, stating: "I remember her as a rail-thin woman with an unfortunate faculty for producing reams of scandalous publicity. Just another white woman sated with the decadence of Anglo-Saxon society rebelling against its restrictive code, seeking new fields to explore, searching for color, she was not to be taken seriously" (5).

On a national scale, Cunard was not just ignored, but silenced. African and South American countries censored the anthology, furious with its inclusion of seditious essays on corrupt governments and political figures. Cunard was neglected by scholars of her time, silenced by governments who disapproved of her political leanings, but acclaimed for her fascination with the “Negro.” Her efforts were partially acknowledged by anthropologists in 1935 and 1936 by a smattering of articles in the *Royal Anthropological Institution of Great Britain and Ireland*. Rather than recognizing her efforts in gathering essays on topics such as Ibo religious ceremonies and Zulu wedding rituals, the anthropologists merely listed Cunard’s *Negro* as a line on their works cited page.

Contemporary critics have argued that Cunard’s seditious nature was to blame for the dearth of interest in her work, that perhaps no one took her seriously because of her rebellious attitudes and rejection of class values. I would argue, though, that by censoring Cunard and silencing her voice, critics and the public alike were enacting the same disapproval of her interracial relationships as did her own uptight and racist mother. Had Cunard been a revolutionary figure like Djuna Barnes or Gertrude Stein, artists whose sexual relationships challenged heteronormativity but not race barriers, she may have avoided the scorn and exclusion that came with her sexual choices. Her peers and colleagues, both black and white, were essentially reinforcing the same prohibitions on interracial sex in their disavowal of her anthology. By ignoring Cunard’s contributions to the field of literature, art, music and cultural studies, her contemporaries legitimized the prohibitions governing interracial sex.

Cunard’s own contributions to *Negro* are somewhat paradoxical. Although she created the anthology to showcase black art, literature, and culture, many of her pieces

allude to intimate sexual involvement with black males. In one of the most peculiar editorial moves, Cunard includes some examples of hate mail she received while compiling the anthology. In a section entitled “The American Moron and the American of Sense—Letters on the Negro,” Cunard reproduces several letters, some from members of the KKK and some from supporters of her cause. It would be a mistake to call these “Letters on the Negro,” and more accurate to call them “Nancy Cunard on the Negro.” Many of the letters directly address Cunard’s attraction to black men and have little to offer the collection of truly spectacular works of art. But to Cunard, these letters are spectacular and deserve publication *not* to showcase her diligent work as editor, but to exhibit her position as black men’s sex object.

In exhibiting these letters, Cunard’s anthology elicits the multiple layers of prohibition that come with transgressing racial barriers. The letters act as castigations, and reprinting them exhibits Cunard’s scolding to a wider audience to witness, something she seems to enjoy. The letters, then, make public in a very candid way, what Nancy Cunard actually *does* with black men and what she wants the public to *know* she does with black men. And exhibiting these sordid letters also seems to excite Cunard; in the prefatory remarks to the collection she states, “I should like to print all the raving, illiterate, anonymous letters—some are very funny indeed, mainly from sex maniacs one might say—but what is to be done? They are obscene, so this portion of American culture cannot be made public” (121). Cunard’s politics of exhibitionism in publishing these responses shows their titillation value and again highlights a sadistic tendency to show the flash of skin without offering the payoff. What she admits to her audience is that the most sexually graphic letters, the ones containing salacious details from “sex

maniacs” will have to remain in her private collection. Readers are left to speculate on the filthy content of the letters and are themselves positioned as masochistic voyeurs. In fantasizing about the omitted letters, readers experience the titillation but fail to realize satisfaction.

Although Cunard confesses that the obscene letters cannot be reproduced, she does, in fact, include explicit references to sex. One letter that begins with a thinly veiled death threat instructs Cunard to “Either give up sleeping with a nigger or take the consequences.” (121). Another writer tells Cunard: “your life won’t be worth the price of your black hotel room” and commands her return to England (121). (One assumes that a “black hotel room” is a hotel room containing a black man.) The rest of his letter is omitted because Cunard believes it “might be considered obscene” (121). Playing the part of a dancer who slinks offstage after her striptease, Cunard’s editorial moves offer the carnal delights but then stops short of delivering them. She controls the exhibition in an erotic performance that ironically takes into account definitions of *obscene*. For many, her collaboration on the anthology *Negro* and public friendships with black males are already obscene. Omitting the letters because they are deemed lewd and offensive falls back on ideas of law and social taboo, the very prohibitions that produce moments of bondage and deferral.

In a moment of self-conscious exhibitionism, I will include the “obscene” letters in order to replay the fantasies that were already replayed in Lois Gordon’s biography of Cunard. The original uncensored letters will show the multiple layers of exhibitionism and voyeurism at work (you, reader are also implicated unless you skip down a paragraph) and the frenzied attempts to loathe and delight in the idea of interracial sex.

For example, one enraged letter writer claims to know the real reason Nancy Cunard came to New York City, minimizing her collaborations with black artists and addressing her personal desires: ““You dirty lowdown cocksucker, you are trying to convince the white race of NYC that you came here to write a book about the negro race, we know that you came here to suck the black pricks. . .” (Moynagh 85). In another graphic attack, the writer simply states, ““I don’t know what they call your kind in England but here in America they call them plain nigger fuckers or prostitutes of the lowest kind. . .” (Moynagh 85). Lois Gordon’s biography of Cunard includes an even more pointed attack: “Miss Cunard, you are making a lousy hoer of yourself associating with niggers can’t you get a white man to satisfy you I have always heard that a negro has a large prick so I suppose you like large ones. . .” (169). These letters, while brutal castigations, are also invocations and exercises of fantasy—why write such graphic and detailed descriptions of what you think Cunard is doing unless you *want* to envision it; the letter writer is participating in the sex act. The writers know that Cunard, in her reading of their letters, will willingly or unwillingly share in their fantasy, and the letters produce a ménage à trios—white man, white woman, black man, all involved in carnal pleasures. Although these men protests Cunard’s involvement, they also want to see what happens in those “black hotel rooms.” As the final layer of voyeurism, Cunard includes the letters in her anthology, an exhibition of her own sexual interests and an excuse for titillation.

Cunard’s additional contributions to *Negro* are equally bewildering; besides an in-depth discussion of the Scottsboro case, she pens an ethnographic study of Harlem life that is replete with self-indulgence. Her tour through Harlem streets gives viewers a slice of Harlem life mediated through European eyes. She reports on social and religious

customs, styles of music and dress, the typical sights and sounds of Harlem on a busy day. But she also makes her presence felt, a trademark of ethnographic writing that firmly locates the author in the center of the snapshot. Cunard begins the piece with her first impressions of a street in Harlem: “When I first saw it, at 7th avenue, I thought of the Mile End Road” (47). She connects her experience in Harlem to something familiar in London; the famous Mile End Road with its bookshops, restaurants, bars, and attractions, seem to mirror the bustle of 7th avenue.

Taking the reader on a visual tour of ice cream shops and hotels, Cunard suddenly breaks into her own narrative to report an incident that happened while she was walking down the street. She recounts: “Just across the Harlem River some white gentleman flashing by in a car take it into their heads to bawl, ‘Can’t you get yourself a white man?’—you are walking with a Negro” (47). Cunard’s substitution of “You” for “I” makes it seem as though the reader is walking in Harlem with a “Negro,” and her decision to switch from first person to second person distances her from the event. This shift marks a major assumption—“You” can only mean white woman in this context.

This piece was probably meant to show that even in Harlem, whites were harassed for socializing with black companions. The juxtaposition of Cunard’s story with the descriptions of Harlem life creates cultural miscegenation. Everywhere she goes people harass her for accompanying a black man. Cunard’s readers can not overlook this fact given the number of texts in *Negro* that position her as object of desire. What the author does in these moments is court the prohibitions and invite the disapproval of a wide audience by rejecting race barriers in both a British and U.S. context. Unlike the Rhineland case, which was spectacular as a result of the law suit, Cunard in *Negro*

confronts the taboos, using them as an occasion for transgressive exhibitionism and turning erotic the act of prohibition itself. While the courtroom proceedings of the Rhinelander annulment trial provided moments of erotic fulfillment, Cunard's blatant provocation of social taboos provides the erotic spectacle. Most of this eroticism, one can assume, is self-gratifying. Even though Cunard's actions are very public in their scope, she seems to take great pleasure and satisfaction in the performance of her politic.

Cunard's descriptions of Harlem nightclubs, perhaps unintentionally, calls attention to her position as voyeur. Affixing agency to the droves of white patrons who visit Harlem's hot spots, Cunard writes as though blacks have no interest in mingling with whites. She argues that whites come to Harlem "out of curiosity, and jealousy, and don't-know-why" (49). The "don't-know-why" that Cunard mentions is the psychosocial aspect of interracial desire that always remains elusive. She claims that whites are curious and jealous, two concrete reasons to see the sights in Harlem, but the final reason leaves more questions. She further argues that "The desire to get close to the other race has often nothing honest about it" (50). Perhaps unaware of the self-indictment in this statement, Cunard is asserting that race mixing is a one way street, depicting whites as predatory visitors who need to "get close" to Harlem blacks (50). This representation of race mixing engages the taboo—whites do not understand why they flock to Harlem, or why they ignore social dictates to satisfy their curiosities. According to Cunard, no reasonable explanation exists for their burning desire to socialize with the black community and nothing about this mixing is "honest." The dishonesty, then, must be located in the crossing, in the illicit nature of that desire that sends droves of white voyeurs out into the streets of Harlem with the hopes of getting intimate with the "other."

In her description of the “real” Harlem, Cunard makes clear her attraction to black males by creating scenes of heterosexual desire that position her as sole sex object. Black females, perhaps viewed as competition, or ill-fitting in her heterosexual dynamic, are excluded from these sketches. To understand just how relentless Cunard is in neglecting the black female in her piece, one must simply glance at the photographs included in her text. The only large, brilliantly captured photograph of a black woman in Cunard’s study is of “Jessie,” a black man in drag. In her final descriptions of Harlem, Cunard declares that the city is “*hard* and *strong*” suggestibly sexual references that set the scene for her final photograph (53). Arguing that Harlem is the “personification of restlessness, desire, brooding,” Cunard closes with her own interpretation of the city: “As everywhere the real people are in the street. I mean those young men on the corner, and the people all sitting on the steps throughout the breathless leaden summer. I mean the young men in the Pelham Park [. . .] the strength of a race, its beauty” (53). Slipping back into first person, Cunard focuses her final impressions on the sexual allure of Harlem and invites her readers to do the same. Using such terms as restlessness, desire and breathlessness, Cunard creates a scene that reveals her own attraction to the young men in Pelham Park. Through Cunard’s repetition of the phrase “I mean the young men,” the reader is meant to understand that the “people” who make Harlem sultry and enticing are really just the *men* of the city. The voyeur herself in these depictions, Cunard also controls the gaze by telling the reader who to observe.

A photograph of several young black boys with their shirts off attempts to capture what Cunard describes as the “hard and strong” essence of Harlem. The caption under the photograph reads, “Young men in Pelham Park, just out of New York” (53). The

problem with this caption, and its description in Cunard's essay, is that it completely ignores the young black girl in the very center of the photograph. Smiling confidently with her hand on her hip while wrapping the other hand around a young man's waist, the girl is the focal point of the picture. To ignore her presence when it is obviously central positions Cunard as the sole female participant in a scene of mutual enjoyment. Her commentary on the young men, whose strength and beauty stand in for the entire black race, position her once again as voyeur and exhibitionist. Interpreter of the photograph, Cunard sees only the beautiful young men, her gaze locked on their shirtless bodies and alluring poses.

Cunard's final contribution to *Negro*, an essay entitled "Colour Bar," is another instance of the political blending with the personal. The article closely examines the phraseology of laws against black guests spending the night in public hotels and places Britain's trend of discrimination in line with American race relations. Although "Colour Bar" is meant to expose racist policies of the British hospitality system, the implication being that Cunard cannot abide by rules dictating her sleeping arrangements with black males. To provide evidence of the rampant racism in British and French hotels, Cunard publishes the responses to her letters of inquiry requesting a room for her "friends," (a black man and white woman). Two separate hotels furnished similar replies: "a large part of our clientele does actually consist of members of good New York society and we cannot risk incommoding them by accepting as clients a mixed couple in the same hotel as themselves" (344). The manager of the Hermitage wants to respect members of "good" New York society by protecting them from interracial clients, or the "bad" counterparts to the chaste and upstanding white patrons. In every example of prejudice

chronicled in this essay, including one from the President of the Anti-Imperialist League, the subjects who are refused room and board are white women and black men. Cunard's attack on the hotel industry, then, serves as a rather public acknowledgement of her lodging needs and her offense at being refused a room. Not lost on the reader, her advocacy for equal rights centers on accessible bedrooms.

The man Cunard shared a bedroom with for over eight years also found exhibitionism to be a fitting end to their affair. After separating from Cunard, Henry Crowder published his memoir *As Wonderful as all That?*, a virtual tell-all of their relationship that painted a scathing portrait of Nancy Cunard. His justification was purely selfless, as evinced in this confession: "I owe it to my race to let it be known, [to] disclose all the sordid details of this relationship. . . It is my hope that the experiences that I have gone through may be of some value to colored men who become enamored of white women" (4). But no one cared about Crowder's "sordid details" and the memoir was not published until 1987, fifty years after their relationship. The public fascination with interracial relationships, in both the Rhineland and Cunard cases, was largely due to the family name attached to the scandal. When Crowder attempted to cash in on the shock value of his interracial affair, it seemed as though his status as jazz musician from rural Georgia did not provide the erotic attraction that Cunard's boundary crossing did.

Nancy Cunard's exhibition of her sexual and racial politics also makes visible the public anxieties around interracial sex. Inflamed by such transgressive behaviors as her avant-garde photographs, scathing pamphlet, and publication of *Negro*, Cunard's public both railed against her personal involvements and delighted in their published accounts. That Cunard worked so relentlessly to expose her romantic involvement with black males

shows an awareness of audience and a desire to feed the beast, so to speak, but also a tragic unawareness of the political implications of her actions. That *Negro* was summarily ignored has less to do with its magnitude and organizational challenges and more with the perception of Nancy Cunard, the woman who reviewer Henry Lee Moon argued, “should not be taken seriously.” In “Nancy Cunard’s English Journey,” Maroula Joannou argues that “what complicated Cunard’s politics for feminists today is her erotically and racially charged sexual self-projection” (146). But perhaps this self-projection can be read as part an economy of representing interracial eroticism, an economy that includes sadomasochism, voyeurism and exhibitionism as avenues for sexual discovery.

Chapter Three

Extended Foreplay and the Unachievable Climax:

Literary Representations of Interracial Intimacy

In his afterward to *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov discusses the initial reaction of publishers who read his manuscript and branded it lewd, immoral, and pornographic. The subject matter, that of an older European man seducing a twelve-year-old American girl, was utterly taboo; and a close friend urged him to publish it anonymously. Few subjects, Nabokov maintained, carry this kind of cultural prohibition in America. One is the story of *Lolita*. Another is the tale of a happy atheist who lives a full and prosperous life, and the other, Nabokov argues, is “a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren” (314). Perhaps the proximity of atheism and pedophilia to interracial romance in Nabokov’s statement reveals much about the peculiar relationship between interracial intimacy and social taboos in literature. The idyllic tale of a happy interracial couple like the one Nabokov mentions was never written. Instead, plots of loneliness, rejection, heartache and death are typical of narratives involving interracial love affairs. The didactic feel of the narratives makes moments of interracial eroticism safe to enjoy, presenting private accounts around which readers might fantasize without penalty. That the characters are punished provides an alibi; readers can enjoy narratives of interracial intimacy with both pleasure and rectitude. In addition, erotic pleasure can also be hindered by the novel’s lack of climax and closure. The plot structure of most interracial narratives provides mounting desire between interracial couples, but seldom produces moments of blissful

passion and closure. Instead, the story's yearning diminishes into scenes of loathing, shame, or death.

Like Alice Rhineland's strip tease and Cunard's publication of "Black Man and White Ladyship," literature featuring interracial romance also performs a sort of erotic dance with the reader, exposing moments of heightened arousal, only to pull back into the safety of prescribed racial boundaries. This pattern of attraction and repulsion, produced and influenced by laws and social taboos as well as narrative representations that mimic denial and exposure, create moments of extended foreplay and erotic deferral that establish a blueprint for representations of interracial intimacy.

One of the reasons novels of interracial intimacy are different from other narratives is their tendency to get stuck in the middle, to replay scenes of desire over and over again without climax. If we examine the plot structures of interracial desire in relation to Peter Brook's ideas of the narrative middle, we can understand why these relationships seem to get stuck. Brooks argues that the middle is the place of threat because it can stop the story short through a series of repetitions that "suspend temporal process." (288). If typical narrative structure is the movement from beginning towards wholeness or completion, interracial desire adds a kink that keeps the story from realizing fullness or closure. The narrative middle, then, can be seen as a detouring or divergence from closure, one that offers the "false erotic object-choice" (292). In narratives of interracial desire, the black/white coupling is the false erotic object-choice, one that keeps the story from completing in a way that matches the dominant cultural values. A side effect of this narrative dynamic is the possibility for extended fantasies or what Brook calls systems "of textual energies, offering the possibility (or the illusion) of 'meaning'

wrested from 'life' (296). The middle of the narrative offers the possibility that interracial couples might realize sexual fulfillment, and the moments leading up to desire seem free of obstructions. But unlike typical narratives that grant the reader climax, or insight, the structures of desire in narratives of interracial intimacy provide the delay, heighten the arousal, but fail to produce the climax.

In many novels of interracial desire, the characters are either ostracized, punished or die, creating narratives of transgression that on one hand reinforce the pathological nature of race mixing but also alibi the reader. The prohibition which is the transgression is also the prohibition that permits the reader's pleasure. Many novels of interracial desire, then, are playing out in narrative form two dynamics at once. One is a narrative that hesitates in the middle, returning to sites of foreplay over and over without delivering the erotic payoff. Another is the narrative of transgression and punishment which alibis the reading and enjoyment of the novel under the auspices of following social convention.

The ways in which novels of interracial intimacy ignite and perpetuate eroticism, through the use of repetitions and deferrals, necessitates a closer look at narrative movement in connection with theories of sexuality. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud defines Eros as the sexual instinct, the drive towards sexual pleasure guided by the libido. Invoking movement and progression, eroticism is the mounting urge towards sexual climax. In this definition, a *condition* of sexual arousal and the libidinous *drive* signal a temporality as eroticism emerges in moments of progression from static to ecstatic. Eroticism, then, is located in the spaces leading up to sexual arousal; the *anticipation* of sexual satisfaction creates a temporary blockage that intensifies pleasure

(much like the dams of social prohibitions and inhibitions that Freud mentions). Rather than a specific moment of sexual fulfillment, eroticism occurs in foreplay, revealing hidden pleasures far more stimulating than the actual fulfillment of desire. In this model, foreplay is the essence of eroticism, functioning to extend sexual gratification while holding at bay the moment of ecstasy. Much like the cycle of erotic desire, literary representations of interracial intimacy are burdened with cessation. Taboo surrounding interracial sex produces the desire, but the law defers completion so that the progression to sexual climax is continuously interrupted, suspending the characters in a state of permanent foreplay. In many instances, this deferral manifests in either the death of the lover or the dissolution of the relationship.

Perhaps Chester Himes's *The End of a Primitive* (1955) best reflects this pattern of erotic deferral that stalls progression towards climax. *The End of a Primitive* is the story of Kris and Jesse's violent and perverse mating ritual. Kris, a lonely white woman who survives on prescription uppers and copious amounts of alcohol, is relentlessly searching for male companionship to boost her rather deflated ego. Jesse, the somewhat jaded black writer who recently divorced his wife, is also looking for love and companionship, and finds sympathy with his past lover Kris. Throughout the novel, both Kris and Jesse argue incessantly about racial politics, past love affairs and personal accomplishments, always with an air of sexual tension between them, yet the tension never culminates in any sexual satisfaction. For example, when Kris talks of her past university days studying anthropology, she mentions to Jesse that "the kids used to say it was the science of man embracing woman." (146). Jesse replies by saying "Race relation is the science of black man embracing white woman" (146). These flirtatious

conversations heighten the erotic tension and Kris and Jesse's foreplay begins in the kitchen or on the living room couch with each character full of passion. But the moment of climax never comes as Jesse or Kris is either too drunk or too angry actually to have sex. For the duration of the novel, Jesse is simply trying to get "a piece in peace" (158) as he explains to Kris; but constant interruptions permanently delay any union.

Towards the end of the novel the sexual tension mounts and Jesse and Kris actually begin to have sex: "the next thing he knew she was struggling beneath him on the floor with a great rent down the front of her rompers giggling with such intense sexual fury she felt an orgasm being forced unwillingly from her subdued body. The telephone rang and her glands closed in an absolute dispersion of passion, like a turtle drawing in its head" (180). The narrative provides fleeting moments of excitement that are constantly interrupted or cut short as evinced in the fantastic turtle imagery, calling to mind an unresponsive, flaccid penis. During one of their heated arguments that illustrates the replay of the middle, Kris exclaims, "I'll never let you sleep with me again as long as I live" before taking off all of her clothes in front of Jesse and staggering into the bedroom" (192). After consuming countless cocktails, Jesse finally moves into the bedroom, where the reader is left to conjecture whether or not the couple actually had sex. In the morning, Jesse looks over at Kris to find a kitchen knife lodged in her chest and his frantic attempts to revive her are fruitless. The murder, destroying the chance for a perfect union between Jesse and Kris, has ultimately stalled the narrative in a perpetual state of foreplay.

Kris and Jesse's fervent arguments and sexual play are what Freud calls forepleasure, or a "tension produced by sexual excitation" that is both pleasurable and

painful (68). When a man discharges his sexual substance, “the pleasure is highest in intensity” (68) and the couple can go back to the state before this tension consumed them. But in texts of interracial eroticism, there is never a climax or moment of ecstasy that relieves characters of this pleasure/pain dynamic and the narrative continuously stumble in the middle. Freud would argue that this middle, or forepleasure, might also consist of perversities such as voyeurism, exhibitionism, sadism and masochism, homosexuality and fetishism and he argues that “the mechanisms of many perversities is of such a nature; they merely represent a lingering at the preparatory act of the sexual process” (70). There is nothing inherently wrong with looking or exhibiting, according to Freud, as long as the “proper” sex act is accomplished. The danger in Kris’s strip tease and sudden disappearance, is that it encourages voyeurism and masochism while revealing sadistic exhibition, it ends without completion, and it forces the couple to linger at the threshold of sexual intercourse. This pattern of sadomasochistic foreplay continues throughout the narrative, circling back to the middle of the text rather than progressing towards closure.

The inability of narratives of interracial erotics to escape the middle suggests that these relationships themselves are perversities not because they are immoral but because they are incompletable, or that they are incompletable and must stay in the middle. In Freud’s discussion of proper aims and proper objects, he creates a scheme for “normal” sex that involves heterosexual reproduction (proper aim) and a penis or vagina (proper object). With narratives of interracial erotics, the racial difference creates a problem of the proper ending and characters engage in perversities like voyeurism, sadomasochism, and exhibitionism—they may have the proper aims but not the proper objects. Individuals may become excited by seeing and exposing but not really care about completing

intercourse with the proper object. Working in tandem with perversities are people's own psychic forces like "loathing, shame, and moral and esthetic ideal demands" (39) that act as dams to restrict the sexual life. Because interracial sex has been cast as an aberration and outside of moral law, sexual fantasies involving black and white couples include feelings of loathing and shame, creating a barrier to sexual fulfillment. Kris always asks Jesse if anyone saw him enter her apartment, ashamed of what the neighbors might think of her interracial tryst. So although she has feelings for Jesse, they are stuck behind barriers of shame and embarrassment at the thought of being seen with Jesse mortifies her. Unable to escape his shame and loathing, Jesse leaves Kris's apartment after a night of debauchery and decides that he "better wash this white stink off" (151), as if Kris's touch leaves a foul stench on his skin. Both ashamed of their intimacy, but unable to resist each other, Kris and Jesse seem to simultaneously loathe and delight in their intimacy, generating erotic feelings that get stuck behind impenetrable barriers. The dam, then, also works to keep the narrative stuck in the middle and the ambivalence constitutes both excitement and barrier.

In literature of interracial desire, constant repetition of erotic moments bring the reader back to the middle without offering closure. When Jesse and Kris move towards sexual intercourse, the narrative stutters and stalls before completion each time starting back at the moment of foreplay. When they begin to flirt by saying niceties such as "I like your slack suit," and "I like your legs, you've got gorgeous legs, baby," (144) the movement towards closure slowly develops. But as the night progresses, alcohol, fury and complete blackouts suspend the temporal process and Jesse wakes up in a stupor realizing that somehow "it was Sunday afternoon" (160). The next scene is a replay of

their previous stalled attempts at lovemaking: “For the moment following her vicious abuse of him she felt passionate, but it soon waned and she broke away” (167). This stop / start motion that returns to the middle creates an illicit feel to the narrative, as if Kris and Jesse are not meant to be together. If the couple were to enjoy a night of passion and romance, the novel would progress towards insight and closure, allowing for their lovemaking to be read as possible or socially acceptable. But a constant circling back to the moment of foreplay, getting stuck in moments of sadomasochistic sex games, creates tension in the text that can never be resolved.

Cultural ideologies that discern what can and can not be completable prevent narratives of interracial desire from completion. An example of an “incompletable” act would be incest, or what Brooks describes as “too perfect” of a match, a convergence that has too much sameness. To take Brooks’ theory one step further, interracial couples have too much difference. Although there is a complimentary man and woman in these novels, the difference between black and white creates a surplus of difference that prevents sexual completion. The narrative inevitably stalls, then, because there are no complimentary opposites. With heterosexual interracial couples, the abundance of difference doesn’t allow the narrative to conclude so that even though Kris and Jesse are attracted to each other, and have mutual desires and fantasies, there is no cultural configuration to fit their story or vice versa. Kris’s whiteness, emphasized in images of her bare back and puffy face, and Jesse’s blackness, intensified by descriptions of his sepia skin and kinky hair, create too much difference for the narrative’s heteroideology to accommodate them. The only answer to their affair and the only way to erase difference, as conceived in the text, is through punishment and death.

Charles Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars* (1900) with its sensual descriptions of Rena Walden and her passionate affair with George Tryon, offers readers this glimpse of interracial sexuality that never reaches climax. Throughout the novel, Rena conceals her bi-racial heritage from Tryon, and yet continues to engage in passionate embraces and tender caresses, knowing all too well that her secret could be discovered at any moment. The narrative keeps playing with the reader, inviting titillation but at the same time cautioning against foolish dreams of interracial bliss. The reader, then, is caught in a continuous cycle of erotic revival and deferral, the prohibitions against miscegenation permitting, invigorating and forestalling the moment of sexual fulfillment.

Willard Motley's "The Almost White Boy" (1963) is the story of Jim, a biracial young man who falls in love with Cora, a white girl he meets at a local dance, and like the other narratives, it gets stuck in the middle. When the reader first meets Cora, her physical appearance leaves nothing to the imagination: "Her breasts stood erect and her red lips were parted in a queer little loose way. They were always like that. And they were always moist-looking" (137). This provocative description of Cora sets the stage for erotic play between the characters, one that is simultaneously inflamed by social taboo and diminished by the suggestion of marriage. Although Cora's sexual pleasure intensifies with the news that Jim is bi-racial, when he offers to make their relationship a legal union, she recoils in disgust.

Gilmore Millen's *Sweet Man* (1930), like *House Behind the Cedars*, presents readers with vivid descriptions of interracial desire, but through intricate plot twists, postpones the moment of climax until the last few pages of text. The novel focuses on John Henry's pursuit of interracial sex, and each conquest with a light skinned black

woman brings him closer to the prize of Barbara Penfield, a high-society white woman who hires him as a chauffeur. The erotic moment between black man and white woman is suspended for the entire novel, culminating in a scene of murder / suicide. Whatever sexual fulfillment John Henry and Barbara Penfield realize is cut short by the social prohibitions that doom their tryst to failure.

Similar narratives like Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) rely on the same pattern of fascination and repulsion to frame the sexual interactions between black and white characters. In this novel, fantasies of rape and domination are played out between the overbearing white character Madge and the rather detached black character Bob, both tempted by the social taboos that forbid their sexual relationship. This dynamic creates scenes that are caught in constant cycles of erotic deferral—Madge spews her venomous refusals at Bob and seconds later begs him to violate her. The prohibitions structuring their sexual interactions are laced with masochistic fantasies and violent foreplay, but the moment of fulfillment is never realized.

Finally, Richard Wright's short story "The Man of All Work," (1940) is perhaps the best example of social taboo and sexual tension colliding to construct a narrative of erotic deferral. Like the previous examples, characters in "The Man of All Work" never realize sexual satisfaction, but countless allusions to interracial sex maintain the erotic texture of the narrative and bring it back to the middle. Prohibitions in this story, however, function on multiple registers. The main character Jim, a black man who disguises himself as a black woman in order to secure employment, finds himself in precarious situations with a white woman. As a result of his passing, Jim is allowed to bathe the mistress of the house and stare at her naked body. As Jim reluctantly peeks at

his mistress's body, the narrative provides readers voyeuristic pleasure, and this story offers a rather comical peek into interracial eroticism, one that is influenced by several modes of passing and multiple sites of desire.

Narratives of Transgression

In the African American literary tradition, prohibitions that had denied interracial couples the privilege to love across the color line became the basis for many narratives of transgression. Jon Christian Suggs' *Whispered Consolations: Law and Narrative in African American Life* claims that in African American fiction, "The grounding presence of the law escapes notice in the fictions primarily because it is so fundamental, because all these fictions promote, argue, defend, lament, put case for, and premise every action on the question of the legal status of African Americans" (44). Suggs' premise that law infiltrates all African American texts is especially evident in stories where romances that cross racial barriers are associated with tragedy, loss of fortune, and death. Specifically focusing on the legal status of African Americans, and their access to equality under the law, Suggs examines case histories and statutes to explore how *laws* become *customs*. In *Iola LeRoy* (1892), for example, a white male criticizes a society that forbids interracial marriage: "If I make her my lawful wife and recognize her children as my legitimate heirs, I subject myself to social ostracism and a senseless persecution. We Americans boast of freedom, and yet here is a woman whom I love as I never loved any other human being, but both the law and public opinion debar me from following the inclination of my heart" (280). Moralizing speeches that confronted miscegenation laws were typical of turn of the century novels and literature reflected the legal and social dilemmas faced by interracial couples. But they also allowed a crack in the veneer, for the character who

gave this speech did marry his ex-slave and they enjoyed a few idyllic years before his death.

Literary works by Frances Harper, Harriet Wilson, and William Wells Brown focus on the law's ability to fix racial identities or secure property and marriage rights when interracial intimacy threatens to undermine social structures. Many of these texts examine the ramifications of interracial intimacy when the white husband dies, leaving his light-skinned mistress and their children to be sold back into slavery. Tales of the tragic mulatto explore the female's inability to secure property rights or name her children heirs to their father's fortune. The law, usually in the form of several white male neighbors or relatives, decide in a hurried fashion that the black woman has no legal right to the family fortune, or even her own children. But when the threat of legal punishment abated as a result of rescinded miscegenation laws, powerful social mores were enough to reinforce the forbidden nature of interracial intimacy, and fiction written by black authors began to explore how public attitudes towards interracial sex and marriage remained censorious. Even though many of these texts examined the inability of laws to protect the rights of blacks, they did so by contesting inequality on an erotic terrain.

For instance, Charles Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars* is a cautionary tale against race mixing, but located in these prohibitions are moments of interracial titillation. By preaching antimiscegenation doctrines, *House Behind the Cedars* gives the appearance of following the rules while producing moments of interracial intimacy that are safe for public consumption. *House Behind the Cedars* is the tale of a light skinned brother and sister who leave their mother in North Carolina to move to the more progressive South Carolina in order to pass. Chesnutt's story chronicles the life of Rena,

an isolated, lonely woman who lives in a small town and cares for her aging mother. Light skinned enough to pass, Rena meets and falls in love with Tryon, who suspects nothing of her racial heritage. Tryon asks for Rena's hand in marriage, but later discovers her appalling secret and calls off the marriage. Still in love with Rena, the heartbroken Tryon decides to beg for her forgiveness and suggest reconciling. But before he can get a message to Rena, a terrible bout of fever claims her life.

In *House Behind the Cedars*, the rules governing interracial intimacy are actually explained by a judge, a narrative strategy that firmly situates the symbolic function of law as prohibition. Judge Straight, the wise voice of reason who provides counsel for many of the characters, laments the plight of light-skinned blacks while still espousing the rigid rules of the racial caste system. When the judge realizes that Rena might be discovered as having black ancestry, he wonders about Tryon's reaction: "Would the young man's love turn to disgust and repulsion, or would it merely sink from the level of worship to that of desire?" (80). The judge posits that Rena, as a white woman, deserves worship and adoration, typifying the image of white female as chaste and innocent. But the black Rena could evoke feelings of repulsion or desire, characteristics attributed to the licentious black female who is depicted as inherently exotic and sexual. When Rena's character moves in and out of racial boundaries, standards of beauty and moral purity shift, making her either virginal and chaste or wanton and beguiling. The narrative reveals that even if Tryon and Rena could keep the secret of her identity, somehow the sanctity of their marriage would be sullied by her true racial heritage.

Again the erotic movement is controlled by the social taboos guiding Tryon's judgments. At the close of the novel, Tryon, fully aware of Rena's racial heritage,

attempts to meet her once again. She rejects his offer in written correspondence, explaining that her dignity and self-respect prevent her from ever seeing him again. The narrative reveals Tryon's rising pleasure at the thought of their illicit encounters: "Rena's letter had re-inflamed his smoldering passion; only opposition was needed to fan it to a white heat" (177). Reminiscent of Judge Straight's predictions now that the legal boundaries of their affair were clearly drawn, Tryon sees Rena only as a sexual object. The white heat, referring possibly to his previously flaccid appendage, is aroused by the resistance of his now certainly bi-racial lover.

Tryon's motivations at this point become driven solely by sexual urges: "He meant her no harm—but he must see her. He could never marry her now—but he must see her" (177). One can only wonder at what Tryon wants to "see" when he meets Rena. If his desire was only to look upon her, he could "see" her leave the schoolhouse after her day of teaching or casually run into her in town, but Tryon's urges went deeper than a casual glance at his former fiancé. It seems as though he wanted to see her in a new light, one that measured her against this newly discovered racial identity. Like the judge and jury who needed to "see" the naked Alice Rhineland for proof of race, Tryon also pleads to see those fleshy markers of race, somehow invisible in their previous encounters. Because Rena dies before a final meeting can take place, the reader is left to speculate about whether Tryon's carnal desires drove his lover to death. Although he contends that "love is the only law" (194), vowing to marry Rena if she survives a brain fever, prohibitions and nature trump Tryon's passion and the union never takes place.

House Behind the Cedars offers its readers an ambivalent take on interracial romance, at once putting forth the hope that black / white couples could survive despite

society's concerns and then killing off the biracial heroine before Tryon can redeem himself and marry her despite the taboo. The narrative hints at keeping Rena's identity secret and perpetuating a clandestine affair, setting up a circle back to the middle once again. Rena herself laments to her brother after Tryon rejects her outright: "'He did not love me, or he would not have cast me off—he would not have looked at me so. The law would have let him marry me. I seemed as white as he did. He might have gone anywhere with me, and no one would have stared at us curiously'" (120). Rena acknowledges that the law permitted their marriage but it was the social taboo that ultimately haunted Tryon and made their relationship intolerable. For Tryon, the legitimacy of a legal union was not enough to erase the truth of Rena's racial heritage. Because the narrative plays it safe and resists any real challenges to social and legal dictates, readers of *House Behind the Cedars* are given an alibi to enjoy moments of interracial eroticism.

At the close of the novel, the narrative circles back to the middle, offering the reader one more promise of interracial foreplay. When Tryon is overcome with passion for Rena, he attempts to circumvent social mores and convince himself that a relationship with Rena could actually succeed: "If he should discover—the chance was on in a thousand—that she was white; or if he should find it too hard to leave her—ah, well! He was a white man, one of a race born to command. He would make her white; no one beyond the old town would ever know the difference" (140). Tryon's power as a white male allows him essentially to change a woman's race to fit his desires. If the law deems Rena black because of the one drop rule, Tryon will override the decision and claim her as white. Because Tryon is "bound to command," he can alter Rena's racial heritage,

expunge her black mother from existence and assert her true whiteness. Again, the text suggests that tangled ties between whites and blacks can be erased with the fearless and gallant deeds of a commanding white man. Moving towards closure and a rather poignant insight on the mutability of race, the narrative hints at the possibility of an interracial union. All is lost, however, when Rena dies of heartache and fever, extinguishing the chance for a happily ever after ending between an interracial couple. Located in the starts and stops, moments of passion and indifference, and movements towards climax and cessation are scenes of erotic tension, each one carrying a certain amount of ambivalence.

Hesitant to offer a vision of the triumphant interracial relationship, Chesnutt's novel offers readers possibility, something that seemed unobtainable in the racial climate of early 20th Century America. But in following this narrative structure, *House Behind the Cedars* allows prohibitions to triumph over transcendence and the story become one of transgression and punishment. Although veiled in scenes of defiance against social order are moments of romantic possibility, the narrative eventually retreats into the confines of tradition. Like the strip tease, *House Behind the Cedars* offers flashes of skin and promises romantic delights only to draw back behind the stage, away from the hungry stares of the public.

Narratives of Erotic Deferral

Literary representations of interracial intimacy already had a forbidden nature of desire woven into their tapestry; indeed, many romantic relationship between whites and blacks are burdened with illicit temptations and with numerous prohibitions guiding erotic behavior and suspending the climax, just the anticipation of interracial sex created

narrative tension. This same premise functions in pornographic films, magazines, stripteases, and peepshows; each avenue invites observers to participate in erotic fantasies while simultaneously distancing them from the sexual act. The distance heightens the arousal, for what is hidden and suppressed is realized through the participant's fantasy.

Roland Barthes explores the significance of this suppression in *The Pleasure of the Text* arguing that "it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as disappearance" (10).

Many literary representations of the erotic interplay between interracial couples mirror this strip-tease and the climax is seemingly unobtainable. For example, in Gilmore Millen's *Sweet Man* (1930) a bawdy tale of lust and sex, the black character John Henry is introduced to his white mistress Mrs. Montrose during an altercation she is having with her husband. Rather than carry out this altercation clothed, Mrs. Montrose strips down to her undergarments; as John Henry tries to roust her drunken husband from his place on the couch, he glances up to see Mrs. Montrose, "standing by him, clothed in nothing but pink chiffon underwear, and silk stockings and pumps" (51). From this moment on, John Henry becomes fixated on having a white lover. Mrs. Montrose's state of undress, during the middle of an argument with her husband, can only be seen as a rather clumsily inserted plot device that inflames John Henry's fascination with white flesh.

This is a gesture towards a literal middle analogous to the middle Brooks maps. Narratives of interracial erotics set in motion a repeating strip-tease that will last the duration of the novel. The reader is given a glimpse of what John Henry desires, and

then waits for him to experience fulfillment, a climax that in this case, results in death. The narratives of interracial romance are disjointed, dislocated and the progression to romantic fulfillment is fraught with moments of uncertainty. But these moments indicate a turbulent cycle of attraction and repulsion, foreplay and climax— reflecting a deeply anxious public, one who simultaneously loathes and delights in the idea of black /white copulation. Because both John Henry and Barbara Penfield die, readers are exculpated from their own guilt at taking delight in interracial intimacy and thus safely reassured that their pleasure is risk-free.

Anais Nin, author of scintillating erotica, best illustrates how formations of desire such as foreplay and deferral are used to heighten arousal. Her collection of sexually explicit tales in *Delta of Venus* elucidate the seductive nature of anticipation, especially when prohibitions underline the affair. Specifically, the tale of “Artist and Model” constitutes a theory of interracial eroticism that pairs foreplay with moments of deferral. This narrative structure heightens passion between the two characters, enacting Barthes’ “staging of an appearance as-disappearance” (10) so that arousal hinges on the fantasy of what is to come. In this narrative, Louise, the “chalk-white” faced heroine with an unquenchable thirst for sex, is married to a man who cannot satisfy her. He tolerates Louise’s infidelities as long as they are not with South Americans, Cubans or Negroes; men that he believes possess, “extraordinary sexual powers” (36). Louise’s description as “chalk-white” sets a brilliant contrast to the brown skin men who are considered “forbidden,” and the anticipation of her illicit affair begins when she meets Antonio, “a tremendous brown man, extraordinarily handsome, with long, straight hair”(38). The illicit nature of their tryst is framed not only by infidelity, but also around the supposition

that Antonio is “different,” than Louise’s white lovers; that he asserts a phenomenal potency that is unknowable.

When they sneak off to a hotel room, narrative progression slows and passion smolders as Antonio slowly tears away pieces of Louise’s dress, producing the strip-tease foreplay. At the moment Louise is consumed with passion, Antonio again forestalls the climax saying, “There is time, there is plenty of time. We are going to stay in this room for days. There is a lot of time for both of us” (39). The repetition of the word “time” reinvigorates the fantasy, for in those extended moments Antonio alludes to, the possibilities for ecstasy are limitless. In the narrative middle, then, both the character and reader are suspended in time and the eroticism intensifies with each repetition of Antonio’s postponement. Moving towards the ending, the narrative creates scenes of erotic deferral with Louise surrendering to Antonio’s power until “her desire died in her from sheer exhaustion” (39). Although the couple completes the act, it seems secondary to the tempo and staging that went into creating the erotic scenes. In effect, “Artist and Model,” provides narratives that are less about sexual intercourse and more about the promise of pleasures to come. Nin’s model shows how the middle, or suspension of foreplay offers readers heightened arousal, or an extended fantasy that builds while waiting for the climax. In this way, novels of interracial desire offer readers prolonged pleasure, titillating scenes that might stretch the entire duration of the text. Readers enjoy their voyeuristic delights and share in the erotic tension without committing themselves to the fantasy. In other words, readers can savor the extended fantasy while sidestepping the prohibitions against interracial romance.

Reminiscent of earlier tales of interracial desire, Willard Motley's short story "The Almost White Boy," (1963) employs law as a subtext that governs the narrative and creates an impenetrable frame. But this story also examines power in relation to sexuality and portrays the white female as sexually aggressive. The story of Jim, a young biracial man in love with Cora, a white woman with rigid beliefs on intermixing, "The Almost White Boy" probes at both the law and society's willingness to accept interracial relationships. Motley evokes the taboo in his early description of Jim's light-skinned mother and establishes the authority of socially constructed borders: "his mother was a brownskin woman with straightened hair and legs that didn't respect the color line when it came to making men turn around to look at them" (134). Already, we have a pair of bare brown legs seducing white men to disobey social dictates. The color line, an imagined demarcation acting as a set of guidelines, impersonates legal statute and carries as much if not more authority. In this description, the narrative creates a safe peep from the very beginning, inviting readers to imagine the sensual body of Jim's mother. When she complains to her white husband about being seen in public, she laments, "'We can't go on the street together without everybody staring at us. You'd think we'd killed somebody.'"(136). In comparing interracial relationships to homicide, the narrative firmly plants the family outside the boundaries of public decency. But in addition to simply breaking social codes, Jim's mother compares herself to a murderer, connecting her actions to the most violent of crimes. The beginning of the plot, where the moment of arousal is located, occurs during the initial meeting of Jim and Cora. When the sexual tension ignites, the language of prohibition both suppresses and stimulates the budding

interracial romance. This governing scheme shapes the erotic relationship between Jim and Cora, and an implicit set of social regulations functions as their virtual chaperone.

The couple's initial desire intensifies when Jim tells Cora about his racial identity, and this confession produces a shift in the sexual dynamics. When Cora recovers from the initial shock, she then drinks him in: "Her lips were parted a little. She looked at him strangely, deep into him in a way that made him tremble, then down his body and back into his eyes" (139). Cora gives Jim the kind of look usually reserved for the stereotypical predatory black male character who is obsessed with white female bodies, a cultural image created by whites as an excuse for extreme acts of racial violence and an apology for lynching. The imagined "black brute" of this scene is Cora, the white female aggressor. As she takes a good hard look at Jim as a "black" man, she stares all the way down his body, as if this new information could change the way his pants fit. Jim is the object of Cora's desire, revealing a shift in power dynamics from the male to the female, a pattern that substitutes the depictions of black male as violent rapist with that of the white woman as intimidating seductress. That black authors depicted their white female characters as oversexed, aggressive, and morally bankrupt subverts the conventional portrayal of black males and indicts white women for their part in instigating interracial relationships. Either way, interracial sex is still portrayed as the act of a depraved and immoral fiend.

"The Almost White Boy" also reads like other cautionary tales that propagate the notion that interracial relationships bring about the ruin of society and social restrictions are established for our own good. Jim is the "tragic mulatto" character who straddles two worlds, never content as black or white, and doomed to fall prey to such plot

machinations as fever, suicide or murder. After falling desperately in love with Cora, Jim suffers the same purgatory: “Jim and Cora went together for four months. And they had an awful time of it. But they were unhappy apart. Sometimes they seemed to enjoy hurting each other. Jim wouldn’t call her up, and he’d be miserable. She wouldn’t write to him or would stand him up on a date for Chuck Nelson or Fred Schultz (obviously white names); then she’d be miserable. Something held them apart. And something pulled them together” (142). This *something* pulling them together and pushing them apart is the social taboo, regulating the attraction and desire while also relegating their relationship to *something* immoral and indecent. But the *something* is also an interracial desire, an elusive, unnarratable occurrence that keeps the narrative plot stuck in the middle.

The ways in which taboos function to heighten the erotic tension in this story again expose the confederation of prohibition and desire. Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* examines this relationship between prohibitions and taboos arguing that “Behind all these prohibitions there seems to be something in the nature of a theory that they are necessary because certain persons and things are charged with a dangerous power, which can be transferred through contact with them, almost like and infection” (28). Jim and Cora’s relationship does indeed hold a dangerous power, especially if they decided to marry and procreate. Their offspring would have the power to blur the lines of racial purity and alter white hegemony. Because Jim is already light-skinned enough to pass, their children would effortlessly integrate with a “white” population and produce what Freud calls an infection. The children could also intermix among whites until countless people were inflicted with the interracial contagion. Interracial desire, then, seems to cast a

strange and terrible shadow over the natural order of racial hierarchies. In addition, because interracial couples can spread the visible signs of their desire by means of reproduction, they can also be seen as working against the wholeness of the text. If, as Brooks argues, the narrative desire is a desire for wholeness, or the union of opposites for the purpose of reproduction, Jim and Cora's desire would threaten the dominant culture's ideology.

In the final moments of their affair, Cora is once again the aggressor, asking Jim to make love to her in an abandoned field under the stars: "Her eyes were closed. She was breathing hard. Her lips were parted and moist" (143). "'There's nobody here but us,'" she said. Her fingers unbuttoned the first button on his shirt, the second. Her fingers crept in on his chest, playing with the little hairs there." (143) The social taboo has worked both of them into a sexual frenzy, and Cora pleads with Jim to complete the forbidden act. Prolonging the foreplay, Jim refuses, telling Cora that he can not have sex with her unless they are "legitimate," and asks for her hand in marriage. As soon as Jim moves their tryst out of the realm of dangerous and unsanctioned, Cora recoils in disgust and says "you damn dirty nigger," and storms off, leaving Jim alone and in tears (143). Coupling the term "dirty" with marriage is not only unusual, but totally contradictory to what Jim is suggesting in this scene. A supposedly "dirty" act would be to engage in sexual intercourse without any commitment or loving relationship, but Cora identifies marriage between a bi-racial man and white woman as the indecent act.

Before a legal union is suggested, the erotic tension between Jim and Cora mounts steadily; but somehow the law, in this case state sanctioned union, deflates any move towards climax. In Motley's short story, social regulations function to heighten erotic

tension, producing foreplay that promises climax; but a marriage proposal, with the promise of license and authority erases the taboo and deflates rising passion. Cora is less excited about her sexual partner and more excited about the implications of their actions. For Cora, the pleasure exists in the boundary crossings and once those are erased, so is the desire.

Sweet Man, like “The Almost White Boy,” has the same narrative structures of erotic deferral and offers readers two hundred and seventy nine pages of foreplay. The story chronicles the life of John Henry, son of a light-skinned black woman and a southern cotton broker with a predatory desire for black women. Much like his father, John Henry is portrayed as a ladies man who is never satisfied with one woman, until Ida Hopkins tames his wandering spirit. After only one year of marital bliss, John Henry’s unsuccessful attempt at sharecropping leaves the couple destitute and he must abandon Ida to find work. The remainder of this picaresque novel chronicles John Henry’s journey from Memphis to Chicago, New Orleans to Hollywood, in search of love and fortune. Readers meet Red Helena, Vera, Constance and Cora, each woman failing to quench John Henry’s forbidden thirst for white flesh. The novel concludes with John Henry’s death at his own hands, the result of a tumultuous affair with the white woman of his fantasies.

In *Sweet Man*, the lighter skinned the female, the more sexually aggressive she acts towards John Henry and this exchange of power begins a pattern of representing white women that is common to mid twentieth century African American texts. When John Henry finally meets the white woman he would “conquer,” she is depicted as so overly sexed and forceful that he is terrified of her. Barbara Penfield, the wealthy white

woman who attracts John Henry, hires him as a chauffeur to shuttle her around from shopping trip to tea party. When her friend insinuates that she hired John Henry as a chauffeur so that she could bed down with him and fulfill her voracious sexual appetite, Barbara utters innocently, “My dear, you surely don’t suspect me of that” (262). At bridge parties amongst the upper crust Hollywood circles Barbara “loved to talk of episodes she had read about in books of erotology [. . .] when she brought up some outlawed subject [. . .] and told of some particularly startling incident she had just read of, she was actually placing herself in the part of the actor, or the actress, or sometimes both” (263). Not only is Barbara confessing to reading erotica, an admission of female desire that defies social mores, she also admits to adopting the persona of both the male and female characters in the pornographic scenes.

Barbara Penfield, the libidinous “transsexual” with an appetite for porn is the white character enamored with John Henry. Of course she couldn’t be a demure society woman who devotes her time to charitable organizations or raising her three wonderful children, she has to be a sex-crazed lunatic in order for the narrative to alibi the pleasure. This characterization of Barbara as lecherous and depraved illustrates how narratives of interracial erotics pathologize those who transgress boundaries. Like Nancy Cunard’s craving of the spotlight, Barbara Penfield’s fondness for making a spectacle out of herself hinges on the outlaw nature of the illicit stories she reads; her desire to be the spectacle and engage in those forbidden acts make her an aberration and provide the pornographic mood of the text.

The description of John Henry and Barbara’s lovemaking is perhaps the most straightforward example of how prohibitions enhance interracial desire. The taboos

surrounding their interracial affair is the site of eroticism for Barbara: “He never understood, as she did, that it was, besides him, the striking contrast between what the world thought she was doing, and what she was actually doing that charmed her into its continuance” (281). For Barbara, the suggestion of illicit behavior to the outside world stimulates her desire. She sees herself through her friend’s eyes as a defiant sex goddess who disregards social taboos and claims John Henry as her *sweet man*. The phrase “what the world thought” highlights public fascination, curiosity, and voyeurism surrounding interracial sex, as if only the most depraved acts could be taking place in the bedroom of these sex crazed couples. Like Marcella Frank, who testified that the only reason a white woman would be with a black man is for immoral purposes, Barbara Penfield also believed they were committing indecent acts. For Barbara, the prohibitions against interracial sex and not John Henry heightened her arousal. In the end, like most interracial couples, they both die—Barbara from John Henry’s gunshot and John Henry from a self-inflicted wound to the chest. Much like *House Behind the Cedars*, *Sweet Man* leaves readers with the same arrested development, and the narrative offers death as a substitute for climax.

John Henry’s desire for a white woman and his unconscious yearning to be white are seen through repetitions of blood imagery that create another layer of perversity in the narrative. Surplus pleasures, or the excess of the middle are captured in repeating images of spilled blood, revealing a preoccupation with familial ties, sexual violence, and sadomasochistic pleasure². As an erotic trope, blood symbolizes a fertile, menstruating

² A mode of inquiry that aids in understanding John Henry’s pathology and uncovers hidden narrative desire is Claudia Tate’s *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*. Tate employs Freudian and Lacanian theory to probe for deeper meaning in African American texts, resisting a reading that relies solely on challenges to racial oppression and white supremacy. She calls for an alternate model of black literary criticism that

body, the loss of virginity, or the aftereffects of rough sex. For John Henry, these repetitions sustain an erotic connection with “raced” blood that is replayed throughout the novel. While the blood imagery brings John Henry back to sites of interracial pleasure, it serves as a fetish object and perversion by offering both the improper aim and object so that the sex act can never be completed.

The first mention of blood in the text reveals a sensual connection to violence and death, one that connects John Henry’s interpretation of the scene to his own fascination with mixed race blood. John Henry’s jealous girlfriend grows tired of the constant affection bestowed upon him by fellow prostitute Cora. Called “French” Cora because of her light skin, she follows John Henry from nightclub to nightclub when Red Helena is busy working in the brothel. Red Helena’s fury culminates in a vicious bar-room murder, recounted from John Henry’s point of view: “He saw the red blood spill from Cora’s powdered cheek [. . .] and he had seen her left hand striking and clawing at the red face of the woman on the floor slowly and as violently as if its fingers were sensing exquisite pleasure in warm red flesh” (165). The narrator grants the reader access to John Henry’s erotic perception of what unfolds between the women, and the warm, bloody body of Cora becomes the site for tactile pleasure. In the position of voyeur, John Henry notices the contrast between the white, powdered face and the dark red blood, interpreting it as a scene of erotic pleasure rather than brutal murder. That he finds sexual elements to the mutilation reveals a sadistic desire, one that continues to bring him excitement

seeks to uncover the conscious, preconscious and unconscious discourses located in African American literature. Her examination of Emma Dunham Kelly’s *Megda* develops essential insights into Meg’s desires, her erotic connection to spirituality and her longing to connect with the mother figure in the text. Tate argues that “discourses of unconscious desire are those that implicitly express a subject’s unacknowledged longing. Language stages such desire in a signifying performance and its satisfaction by means of a masked fantasy in which enigmatic signifiers create a specter of surplus pleasure” (27).

throughout the narrative. Cast as perverse and depraved, John Henry's object and aim for sexual pleasure are the wrong choice, and keep returning him to sites of erotic foreplay.

John Henry's aberrant fascination with white and mixed race blood is also repeated in a gambling room altercation with a white man. When John Henry loses a substantial amount of money to Dan Felman, a fight ensues where both men reach for their weapons. Before Felman can grab hold of his revolver, John Henry punches him in the mouth with force enough to render him unconscious. John Henry then takes out his knife and stabs Felman before fleeing the bar. What is significant, though, is John Henry's ritual by the fireside later that night. After throwing the switchblade into the fire, John Henry "put his sticky right hand to his lips and licked it with his tongue until it was not sticky any more" (222). John Henry is the amalgamator in this moment, by licking his hand he is combining the blood of whites and blacks in an erotic ceremony of passing. Swallowing the white man's blood also refers back to John Henry's thoughts of having sex with white women: "Often the thought came to him that he was mostly white—and that it was natural for him to want to make love to women whose blood he partly shared" (181). John Henry's obsession with mixed, white, and black blood is itself an obsession with sex and race mixing; the commingling of these "raced" bloodlines only occur when two people engage in sexual intercourse.

Like his sexual excitation at seeing Cora's spilled blood, John Henry becomes fascinated with the "white" blood on his hand, this time tasting it and engaging in an autoerotic act with his own blood covered flesh. His lips and tongue, those parts of the body that are central to acts of foreplay, are turned on his own flesh to create an autoerotic scene of pleasure mixed with violence. Symbolic of all interracial unions,

John Henry experiences the pleasure and pain and perversity of his act in a secret, shameful fireside ritual. These blood scenes, then, cast John Henry as the sexual deviant, someone whose desires for interracial sex are not only perverse but diabolical. Readers who witness John Henry's erotic blood play can safely distance themselves from his bizarre behavior and dismiss it as part of a larger pathology. This distancing allows for the pleasure in looking without implicating readers in their own desires.

Narratives of Violence and Sadomasochistic Pleasure

The continued demonizing of characters who sought out interracial sex became a major trop in literature written by black males in the 1950s and 60s. Depictions of black males as aggressive sex fiends who lust after virtuous white females switched to include white women as the sexual assailants who preyed on unsuspecting, black males. Jesse in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers let Him Go* (1945), Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940), and Amiri Baraka's Clay in *Dutchman* (1964) are all the victims of overly sexualized and aggressive white females, relocating the power dynamics of sexual interaction that had been firmly entrenched in literature and film of the early 20th century. White females, with their brutal and sadistic urges, are then sexualized to the point of caricature. Just as Nancy Cunard was portrayed as a sexual predator who devoured her share of black lovers, white female characters become simple reproductions of the black male brute persona made famous by D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. The dislocation of power from black male to white female results in more murderous and deviant interactions between interracial couples, creating scenarios that rely on rape fantasies and violent foreplay.

Representing interracial sex in scenes of violence and sadomasochistic pleasure is another side effect of prohibitions in these stories, adding another layer to the narrative middle. Graphic accounts of dysfunctional interracial sex reinforce the forbidden nature of interracial desire and these violent exchanges and horrific deaths become typical of “intimate” relationships between white and black characters. A marked difference between novels like Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars*, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, though, seems to be that turn of the century writers espoused the beliefs of white Americans in their rejection of interracial relationships while Himes and Wright's stories come out of a much stronger climate of hate and violence. Surfacing in mid 20th century texts, the rejection of interracial intimacy parallels the rejection of white supremacy and the bodies of white women become battlegrounds for brutal race wars.

Perhaps one of the most graphic scenes in literature to portray black / white eroticism in conjunction with the threat of violent legal punishment is found in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). The sexual encounter between Bob, an African American shipyard worker, and his white co-worker Madge erupts with moments of desire inflamed with the legal repercussions of interracial sex. When Bob arrives at Madge's grimy hotel room door and demands to enter, Madge says, “If you don't get away from there I'll call the police and have you put underneath the jail” (144). Perfectly clear in her intentions, Madge explains that police will bury Bob under the jail if he doesn't comply with her wishes. When Madge abandons the coy act and finally lets him into the hotel room, a fierce struggle ensues with Bob roughing up Madge and forcing her to the bed. When Bob becomes bored with the violent foreplay, Madge plays

the aggressor, opening her robe and exposing her naked body: “‘Ain’t I beautiful?’” she says, “‘Pure White’” (146). The text establishes firm binaries in this moment, suggesting that the white race is indeed “pure” and establishing Madge as the unpolluted “pure white” woman about to sully her blood-line. After Bob glances at her bare, slack skin Madge replies, “This’ll get you lynched in Texas” (147). The text depicts Madge as a debauched lunatic, impressed with her own sexual prowess and fascinated with Bob’s impression of her whiteness. Like in *Sweet Man*, though, Bob is less enthralled with Madge, acknowledging that her fixation on bedding down a black man hinges on violating the social taboos that sexually excite her.

This exchange of agency calls to mind Ida B. Wells’ brazen words during her late nineteenth century anti-lynching campaign. When black males were charged with raping thousands of white women, Wells offered that it was perhaps the white woman and not the black man who was interested in crossing the color line. Wells proffered that “nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women” (35). This *conclusion* was that white women desired intimacy with black males and were compelled to use the excuse of rape when caught with their black lovers. The white female characters created by Motley, Wright, and Himes are just as exaggerated as the black male ravagers in the novels of D.W. Griffith, and the possibility for romance between black and white characters is seemingly impossible.

Coupled with the possibility of sexual intercourse are images of death, dismemberment and torture, all sanctioned by Texas “law” and all serving to simultaneously hinder and stimulate the erotic desire experienced by both Bob and Madge. Although “lynch law” was on steep decline by the 1940s, the memory of thousands of deaths resulting from false rape accusations was not such a distant history. Madge’s white naked body becomes a symbol of raced and gendered power, one scream and Bob could be arrested and killed. Madge’s power over the situation places her in a traditionally masculine role, dictating the parameters of their sexual escapades and ordering Bob around like a puppet. But in their final interaction, Madge switches once again to the helpless female as she says with excitement, “All right, rape me then nigger,” and Bob leaves in disgust (148). The violent exchange, Madge’s rape fantasies, and Bob’s forestalled desire, all pivot on the threat of legal punishment both real and imaginary. For Bob, the threat of imprisonment and police brutality is a reality that serves to erase any desire he feels for Madge. For Madge, though, the punishment itself is imaginary, and her threats function more as fantasy fulfillment. The record of black men lynched for the “rape” of white women provided Madge with a base of power and leverage that proves sexually stimulating, and also allows for her to adopt an alternate masculine persona in the bedroom.

Another instance of terror and violence commingling with interracial desire is Richard Wright’s short story “The Man of All Work” (1940). The narrative plot, so implausible that it reads like a farce, offers scenes of mistaken identity, voyeurism, homoeroticism, and exhibitionism in a setting devoid of realism. The contrived plot also allows for rather bold statements concerning interracial lust without seeming didactic or

moralizing. In “The Man of All Work,” the main character Carl, a black man whose wife has taken ill and lost her housekeeping job, decides to dress as a woman and work as a domestic for a white family. Little does he know, the last housekeeper abandoned her position in order to avoid Mr. Fairchild, the randy father who likes to drink whiskey on his lunch break and “wrestle” with the housemaids. On his very first day of domestic service, Carl, who changes his name to Lucy is asked to enter the bathroom and help his white mistress bathe. While bathing Mrs. Fairchild, Lucy is told that she should never take a drop of alcohol around Mr. Fairchild and should avoid his sexual advances at all costs. Mr. Fairchild wants to “wrestle” with Lucy on her first day of work but “she” pushes him away with what he considers superior strength. But when Mr. Fairchild pins Lucy’s arms and starts to embrace her, Mrs. Fairchild bursts in and catches them in a compromising position. She immediately screams in anger and shoots Lucy in the thigh. Mr. Fairchild then calls for a doctor and when he tends to the wound, notices that Lucy is, in fact, a man. The story concludes with Carl receiving a tidy sum for payment of his silence, as no one must ever learn of his terrifying ordeal.

The first moment readers are aware of the connection between terror and eroticism is when “Lucy” bathes her mistress. The fear of being discovered as a black man washing a naked white woman is palpable in their bathroom exchange and all of the taboos of interracial sex are employed. “Lucy,” in this moment is both predator and captive, and the narrative plays with stereotypes of the figurative black male rapist. “Lucy’s” actions, though, are baffling to Mrs. Fairchild, who views the black housemaid as sexless:

— Don’t you feel well Lucy?

—Yessum

—Then come here and wash my back
 —Yessum
 —That's it. Scrub hard. I won't break. Do it hard. Oh, Lord, what's the matter with you? Your arm's shaking. Lucy?
 —Ma'am.
 —What's come over you? Are you timid or ashamed or something?
 —No'm
 —Are you upset because I'm sitting here naked in the bathtub?
 —Oh, no, ma'am
 —Then what's the matter? My God, your face is breaking out in sweat. You look terrible. Are you ill, Lucy? (128)

The overtly sexual suggestions of Mrs. Fairchild when she says, “do it hard,” are not lost on the reader, and “Lucy” is obviously too afraid to put her sturdy muscles into the job. Lucy's trembling arm that fails to “do it hard,” evokes both a feminine uneasiness at seeing naked flesh and a surrogate limp penis, unable to perform under the psychological terror of being discovered as a black man masquerading as a female servant. Like exhausted bodies after coitus, Lucy's skin is covered in sweat, her body manifesting signs of both pleasure and terror. The bathroom scene stimulates erotic tension, as readers share the secret of Lucy's true identity and with that knowledge become voyeurs to a panorama of visual pleasures. What if Lucy becomes aroused during the scrubbing and shows an obvious sign of pleasure hidden under her dress? What if Mrs. Fairchild realizes an attraction to Lucy, only to discover she's really a man? The erotic tension, supplied by the multiple prohibitions at play, provide fantasies of race, class, and gender crossing sex.

Also in this scene, “Lucy” is urged to examine his mistress's body for flaws. Mrs. Fairchild stands naked in front of the man and asks, “But my breasts—aren't they much

too large?” “And my thighs, aren’t they rather too large too?” To which “Lucy” replies, “Well, not especially, Ma’am” (130). Burdened with carnal implications, this scene interrogates stereotypes of raced bodies and divergent beauty standards—Mrs. Fairchild criticizes her voluptuous breasts and thighs while the “Lucy,” shows no signs of displeasure at the sight of her ample figure. The gaze of the black man in this scene gives tacit approval to Mrs. Fairchild’s curves, affirming the myth of black men’s proclivity for thick women, and the reader, yet again, shares the voyeuristic pleasure. Because the likelihood of severe castigation exists for Lucy if “she” is discovered, the forbidden nature of this peep show provides the occasion for heightened eroticism. Readers hang in the balance, waiting to see how Mrs. Fairchild’s exhibition and “Lucy’s” voyeurism plays out. Because of the dramatic irony in this examination scene, the reader is allowed to watch from a safe distance and enjoy the sexual charade.

Passion continues to rise when Mrs. Fairchild asks “Lucy” to sit down in the bathroom, keeping her captive while she applies talcum powder all over her body. “I want to talk frankly to you,” Mrs. Fairchild says, “as one woman to another,” (129) and “Lucy” must sit attentively in front of her naked mistress. Mrs. Fairchild proceeds to dust her body with powder while asking “Lucy” a question about the former housemaid. She tells “Lucy” of her husband’s lecherous behavior towards the black housekeepers and alludes to the sexual activity that happened on a regular basis in her home: “And, when both of them started drinking—well, you can imagine what happened” (129). Mrs. Fairchild invites “Lucy” to imagine the sexual mischief between her husband and the previous maid, creating new moments of erotic titillation that are mediated through multiple positions. Mrs. Fairchild, assuming that “Lucy” can relate to her as a woman

and empathize with her betrayal, casts the sex as sordid and shameful. “Lucy,” however, may imagine the dalliances between the dominating Mr. Fairchild and the exploited housemaid with certain ambivalence, or even arousal. After this sultry discussion, “Lucy” feels compelled to look after young Lily, and leaves Mrs. Fairchild to dress. Pulling the reader back to the middle, the narrative keeps repeating moments of foreplay that have no real chance of moving past the initial arousal stage. Mrs. Fairchild’s request to be washed, her insistence on being examined and powdered, and her plea to avoid Mr. Fairchild all present the opportunity to have sex. But in this story, narrative difference turns on itself, creating a surplus of the surplus with the Carl/Lucy character being both man and woman and unable to complete the act with Mrs. Fairchild.

The climax of the story is prompted by Mrs. Fairchild’s rabid anger at discovering her husband and “Lucy” in a passionate embrace. The gun in Mrs. Fairchild’s hand grants her a certain gendered power and by shooting “Lucy,” she performs a fruitless union of bullet and thigh, an alternative to intercourse that nearly castrates her victim. Aware of the legal repercussions of his wife’s fury, Mr. Fairchild tries frantically to excuse his wife’s behavior. When the doctor informs the panic stricken couple that “Lucy” is indeed a man, Mr. Fairchild creates the perfect alibi: “This nigger put on a dress to worm his way into my house to rape my wife! Ha! *See?* Then I detected ‘im. I shot ‘im in self-defense, shot im’ to protect my honor, my home. That’s our answer! I was protecting white womanhood from a nigger rapist impersonating a woman! A rapist who wears a dress is the worst sort!” (147). Mr. Fairchild’s response is voyeuristic in nature, his excitement, his graphic imaginings, all position him as willing participant in the rape fantasy he’s constructed. The reader, too, shifts from “Lucy’s” gaze of white

naked flesh to Mr. Fairchild's fantasy of interracial rape. Now in the position of rapist, the reader must accompany Mr. Fairchild's on his masochistic revelry.

These patterns of representation seems to suggest that interracial sex can only be read as erotic if there is prohibition, something inherent in most narratives of interracial desire. Without the prohibition, can blacks and whites realize any attraction to each other according to these structures? With Nin's erotica, the prohibition between black and white characters existed because of racial difference and infidelity, with Tryon and Rena, Barbara and John Henry, Cora and Jim, the prohibitions against race increased the erotic tension and became central to the love affair. Perhaps all of the greatest love stories have this underlying theme of "forbidden love,"—*Romeo and Juliet*, *Anna Karenina*, *Casablanca*, and *Wuthering Heights*, and yet the characters in these stories are not portrayed as sex fiends or deviants because they want to cross class lines or love outside of their marriage. With narratives of interracial desire there is always the component of indecency, immorality, and ugliness. Rather than creating beautiful moments of forbidden desire, narratives of interracial intimacy leave the reader feeling comforted that one or both characters is dead. The cycles of erotic deferral in tales of interracial romance provide readers with a glimpse of seduction and lust, only to retreat into the safety of fixed racial boundaries. Narratives of interracial sex are safe, as well, because they suppress climaxes that could result in a very real danger: mix-raced offspring. Because the coitus is always interrupted, either by legal prohibitions, social dictates, or death, the boundaries of race purity always remain intact. Other cultural forms, though, can push the limits of prohibition further—perhaps none more successfully than visual art forms. Art that depicts interracial eroticism, especially works by Robert Mapplethorpe

and Kara Walker, grants the participants an unencumbered view of desire through the same modes of fetishism, exhibitionism, masochism and voyeurism, but does so by inviting the spectacle.

Chapter Four

Courting the Taboo and Inviting the Spectacle: Kara Walker's

Dynamic Deployment of Interracial Erotics

Kara Walker's artwork so completely engages the taboo of interracial sex that viewers are essentially liberated from their imaginations. In other words, Walker's creations of black and white characters offer such a dazzling array of silhouetted sex play: fellatio, sodomy, sadism, and masochism, and brings the prohibited so plainly into view that the position of voyeur is made effortless. In addition to the massive cut paper silhouettes, this sexual panoply takes many forms—tirades scribbled on paper, watercolor and gouache paintings mounted on boards, typewritten thoughts on index cards, and a series of mixed medium collages—each one offering a deliberate engagement with social taboo and legal prohibitions surrounding interracial sex. For example, one of Walker's watercolor paintings depicts a young black girl, her youthful innocence marked by two pigtails with little ribbons tied on each end, suspended in the air by two white male penises. One heavy-set white male has his penis in the girl's mouth while the other is sodomizing her, and both are saluting each other with frothing libations while simultaneously holding hands. Contained in this scene are moments of homoeroticism, made explicit by the two men touching each other while witnessing the other's sex act. Implicit in the representation of pedophilia and double penetration are sadistic pleasures, evinced in the curled body of the young girl who hangs lifelessly from the men's erections. The wide assortment of fantasies contained in just a single example of Walker's artwork illustrate how she deploys the taboo in such exaggerated ways as if to distill countless narratives of interracial desire into one single image.

Walker's silhouettes capture decades of what might be called "plantation fantasies," as life-size characters perform fellatio, murder, defecate, fondle, and give birth, all in one continuous scene sprawled across museum walls. In one of Walker's exhibits, several collections of the silhouettes are placed on three sides of a museum wall so that viewers are essentially entombed in scenes of amusement, horror and violence. Walker's silhouettes are such grand spectacles not simply because of their size, but because of the ways they engage the viewer. Just as Debord argues that "the spectacle is not a collection of images, it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images," (4) Walker's art provides a landscape of multiple images that are at play with the public. Although Walker's art makes no claim to realism, her images spring from familiar places and times. Debord would contend that "the spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality" (8), and Walker's art, with its distortions and caricatures, is a byproduct of the troubled representations of interracial desire.

As viewers approach on of Walker's exhibit, they first notice the familiar 19th century costumes and settings and are themselves pulled into the scene. If an image of a southern catalpa tree is projected onto the silhouettes, viewers might walk in front of the projector, casting their own shadows amongst life-size characters on the wall. Unable to extricate themselves from the colossal representations, viewers notice that the first wall depicts a white male peering up the skirt of a black female who swings from a tree and knocks off his hat. Glancing to the right, viewers see two black children witnessing a mangled white soldier devouring the foot of a topless black female. The final wall features a helpless black woman tied to a post with two white children poised to penetrate her with a play sword. Further down, three black women suckle each other while a young

black boy leaves a trail of defecation across the stark white wall. Perhaps the most imposing of her artworks, some of them thirteen by eighty feet, Walker's silhouettes create a striking narrative of antebellum life with haunting caricatures of the mammy, pickaninny, sambo, and Uncle Tom juxtaposed with images of the old master and uptight mistress. The stereotypes of both black and white characters suggest hypersexuality, violence, lust, pleasure, pain and rage—all in the hushed medium of black paper on a white background.

In other scenes, Walker paints a black woman with a rat lodged in her vagina, or a white soldier sucking on a black woman's nipples as she drops a chicken leg. Her written words on paper include notes to the master, thanking him "for fucking my brains out when my brains needed fucking" ("Letter From a Black Girl" 161). Although smaller in size, Walker's musings on paper seem enormous in their unapologetic spewing of hate. "Love" notes to the ex-master or subversive plans to destroy David Duke are visibly frantic—the size of the words vary, the punctuation is excessive, and some words are blacked out, producing a disjointed narrative. What appears to be pages ripped from a diary, Walker's musings on paper contain passionate diatribes, grotesque doodles of black and white faces, and terrifying cartoon images. Each one of these pieces relies on graphic language or visual images to address past histories of terror and abuse. Her watercolor and gouache paintings, unlike the silhouettes and charcoal images, use color, most vividly in depictions of blood, feces, water, and darkness. The watercolor figures, unlike the crisply defined cut-outs, are amorphous and almost excessive in their fluid movements. In direct contrast to the nebulous paintings, Walker's typewritten note cards, especially the "Most Black Women," collection, use clipped, tight speech in linear

patterns to discuss issues such as welfare queens and masturbation. Walker's collages utilize 1970s style pornographic images of black women placed over historical documents from the Civil War. These aberrations are the subject matter of Walker's art. Not only does she spectacularize interracial erotic fantasies, she also uses stereotypical images of African Americans to play on conventional scenes of the antebellum south, a choice that has made her a pariah in certain art circles. Never subtle or veiled, Walker's art hyperbolizes interracial sexual spectacle, inviting the viewer to participate in lurid fantasies that come together in a long, drawn out narrative. Her representations of race-mixing explode barriers and render them useless while also critiquing the legacy of prohibitions governing interracial sex.

The previous chapters explore the relationship between prohibitions and desire showing how interracial erotics both feed on and suffocate under strict prohibitions. Also seen as the perfect alibi, prohibitions against interracial sex provide the excuse to see these "crimes" against morality. The public's mission, then, is to observe and protect against threats to societal norms. This final chapter will explore how the regulations against interracial sex are used to create erotic moments. Instead of working around taboos and regulations against interracial sex, Walker exhibits them, representing openly what previously needed the occasion of law to alibi its viewing. Like the censoring of Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment*, Walker's shows have been cancelled not simply for their "lewd" subject matter, but *how* the subject matter is depicted. She exposes the system of prohibitions for its opportunistic voyeurism, reverses the power structures of interracial sex, gives life to lurid fantasies, and lets us see the inner workings

of the failures of interracial desire itself. All of this makes her a threat to the system by which the imagined borders of prohibition turn out to have been fantasy and pleasure.

A predecessor to Walker, and equally controversial, Robert Mapplethorpe reignited the taboo of interracial sex with his depictions of nude black males. Walker's place in the history of controversial and censored art is situated next to Mapplethorpe, who challenged the boundaries of interracial sex by queering the desire. His exhibit, which included the highly controversial Y Portfolio containing pictures of an uncircumcised black penis dangling from an open zipper, and nude images of a black model Ajitto, crouching with his testicles and penis visible between his legs, was banned in both Washington D.C. and Cincinnati Ohio. Because of the considerable pressure from the National Institute of the Arts, who labeled both Robert Mapplethorpe's and Andres Serrano's artwork pornographic, art museums cancelled Mapplethorpe's exhibit rather than lose their valuable government endowments. Before Walker outraged certain communities with her graphic sexual images, Mapplethorpe depicted interracial eroticism with the added taboo of homosexuality and sadomasochism. His images not only flaunted homoeroticism, but exposed the power of the white male gaze to manipulate black bodies. This glimpse into the inner workings of interracial homoeroticism was unsettling for viewers, it rendered visible the attraction and desire of white males for black male bodies. The subject matter itself was deemed pornographic, but the way in which Mapplethorpe posed the black males, the way in which he manipulated their bodies, once again provoked the anxieties of a public who feigned disgust in order to alibi their pleasure.

Congressional reviews of Mapplethorpe's art, the long sessions on what constitutes "pornography" and "indecent material," the imagined scenarios about what viewers of the exhibit would experience, all provided an extended fantasy of interracial erotics. Like the Rhinelander trial, Mapplethorpe's exhibition provided the excuse to talk about, look at, ring hands over, look at again, write legislation against, and finally suppress, the erotic images of nude black males. Judith Tannenbaum, acting director of the Institute of Contemporary Art during the Mapplethorpe controversy attests to the power of prohibition to increase desire and fascination. She explains that "once the controversy arose, attendance grew substantially every time the exhibition moved to a new city. In fact, in Cincinnati, more than eighty thousand people saw the show [. . .] further, the museum more than doubled its membership" (75). That people flocked in tens of thousands to see Mapplethorpe's artwork after it was deemed obscene and pornographic illustrates how consumption of interracial erotic art is steeped in prohibitions, a tendency that quite possibly enhances the erotic valence of the exhibit. In those moments of viewing the photographs, patrons could experience heightened eroticism as the result of disregarding lawmakers and political officials' request to ban the material. Viewers, then, are essentially transgressing the law with their gaze and the transgression reinforces the notion that interracial eroticism is something outlaw and indecent.

As a result of Mapplethorpe's exhibit, Jesse Helms created an entire set of guidelines called the *Helms Amendment* to outlaw public spending on artwork deemed, "obscene or indecent [. . .] including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts" (Stychin

14). But in order to agree on the definition of “obscene,” committees would have to meticulously analyze and continually discuss these pieces of contentious art, thus making more of a spectacle than ever was intended. For example, Jesse Helm’s criteria, although seemingly transparent, is encapsulated in a statement to the *New York Times*: “There’s a big difference between *The Merchant of Venice* and a photograph of two males of different races [in an erotic pose] on a marble-top table” (B6). What is curious about this statement, though, as Richard Meyer explains in “The Jesse Helms Theory of Art,” is that Robert Mapplethorpe never photographed such an image. In a rather derisive tone, Meyer argues that he would not expect “Helms to be a particularly careful viewer of Mapplethorpe’s photographs. But the way in which Helms gets the pictures wrong reveals how the language of censorship summons its own fantasies of erotic transgression and exchange” (133). The act of censoring Mapplethorpe’s art provides the occasion for Helm’s own fantasies about black and white males sprawled on marble tables.

Helm’s desire to prohibit, then, generates and then prolongs interracial homoerotic fantasies. In fact, Patti Hartigan’s report on the political fallout from the Mapplethorpe exhibit reveals Helms’ persistence in eliminating obscene art. Hartigan includes an interview with the frustrated Rep Chester Atkins, a Democrat from Concord who admits that he “is sick and tired of having to sit in conference committee and have people pass around pornographic pictures that Jesse Helms has had reproduced” (1). The levels of voyeurism that Helms creates in his quest to censor are innumerable. First, Helms must find these pornographic pictures, thus allowing him to peruse artwork that is deemed explicit and controversial. Then, assuming that he contracts the job of

reproducing these images to other members of his staff, several assistants are then asked to make numerous copies of the obscene art, providing them with the occasion to look and Helms' certainty that they are looking. Finally, the images are disseminated to several representatives on political committees in order to gather their opinions on whether the images are, in fact, pornographic. When the pictures are being scrutinized around the table, members of the committee can look at their colleagues looking at the obscene art, thus creating the final layer of voyeurism. Helms' strategy of reproducing so called "obscene" art allows for a certain amount of exhibitionism and masochistic pleasure. He is in control of what images are released to committees, thus managing pornographic images to reflect his own notions of obscenity and then shocking viewers with their content. Just as Cunard's staging of her photographs permitted the engagement with interracial eroticism, Helms' distribution provides his audiences moments of titillation and allows for sexual stimulation without the promise of fulfillment. Helms' sadistic acts of distribution, occurring all too frequently for Rep Atkins, are made possible and even excused under the guise of maintaining moral decency.

Walker's Art

One of Kara Walker's paintings plays with the same theme of regulating exactly what a viewer wants to see and attacks the power structures that outlaw in order to enjoy. In a watercolor painting with angry words scrawled across the canvass, a red-headed flapper with a bright red dress stands with her hand on her hip as if ready to hit the town. Instead of a mink stole draping her shoulders, though, a towering black woman with heaving breasts adorns her body and stares cross-armed from the canvass. On the side of the watercolor image is this angry hypothesis: "Now you come along and suggest that all

the white supremacist, racist, sexist, art power structure wants is to see pictures of black women's breasts and that when they do they will walk out of the gallery, say, and not just wonder what yours feel like, but will write laws that will enable them greater access to them" (*Untitled* 1998). What's interesting about this commentary is that it directly confronts the critic Howardena Pindell, who argues that certain black artists are not funded if they refuse to employ negative stereotypes of black people in their work (5). Pindell does not address the lawmakers who use their power to generate sexual fantasies but instead speaks of how the black arts movement has been co-opted by racist whites who exclusively support artists who create derogatory representations of blacks.

The text that accompanies this painting emphasize the law's power to control black bodies and serves to pull back the curtains on the lawmakers who want access to pictures of black breasts or homosexuals on marble tables. She turns on the lights at the strip club, opens doors at the peep show, and exposes certain lawmakers as purveyors of pornography rather than agents of justice. Walker's text over the image also suggests that the black woman, not the red-headed flapper, "dominates the scene" and she relies "on the lazy-fair attitudes of whites to get her point across." What is evident in this painting is Walker's awareness of the power structures that govern stereotypical representations. If, in fact, she is being funded because of her stereotypical images, she undermines any attempts to categorize her work or grasp its politics. The depiction of the naked black woman draped across the white woman can be read as derogatory, her short cropped hair and dangling breasts can be seen as an ugly counterpart to the demure red-head in a delightful party dress. But then a viewer notices that the black woman is three times the size of the white woman who is collapsing under the weight of her human

shawl. In stark contrast to the compelling black woman, the white woman has bags under her eyes that make her look cold and lifeless. Finally, the word “Black” is in the largest script on the canvas and her play on laissez-faire charges white audiences with being baffled by what is taking place in her art.

Throughout the long history of representing interracial desire, artists have laced their depictions with underlying pathologies such as sadism, masochism, voyeurism and exhibitionism and Walker’s work, rather than trying to deviate from this model, uses it to the point of excess. As if plucked from an A. N. Roquelaure novel, Walker’s sexual scenes are of such exaggerated proportion that they play with multiple fantasies and engage several taboos. For example, in one watercolor painting, a black house maid sodomizes a white-haired gentleman as he bends over on all fours. The man is either a soldier or wealthy elite and his prone position provides a striking contrast to his social standing. His backside raw from excessive abuse, the man looks timidly at his dominatrix as she penetrates him with a feather duster. Although the woman’s face divulges anger and malice, the placement of the feather duster allows for a certain amount of self-pleasuring as she enters her subject. Not at all integral to the sodomy scene, the black woman’s upturned breasts and round bottom are exposed for the viewer. As she grips the feather duster like an imaginary penis, gender, class and racial hierarchies are overturned and the viewer is invited to a scene of sadomasochistic sex play.

Dragging fantasies of interracial sex out of the hidden and hushed mediums of court documents, private pamphlets and moralizing novels, Walker speaks openly about “racialized sex play” and uses her exhibitionism to represent even the darkest of

fantasies. This sex play Walker depicts is similar to what the popular blog “Racialicious,” a site that exposes “intersection of race and pop culture [. . .] the latest celebrity gaffes” and offers a “no-holds-barred critique of questionable media representations,” attempts to address in a recent interview (www.racialicious.com). Sexual correspondent Andrea Plaid interviews Mollena, a “race play” specialist, on the politics of slave / master bondage play and how black people, especially, find it problematic to engage in this kind of “kink.” Plaid asks Mollena: “how can we move the conversation within our communities so we can talk about BDSM and race play as sexual/erotic possibilities?” And Mollena responds by saying:

Yeah. there is the rub. First off: people who do play this way have to come out of the closet. Until players stand up, there will be a continued marginalization—and that there is the easy part. The harder part is having people within the community put down the “Us vs. Them” thing. It can’t be all about being apart from our desires because they are scary—there has to be room in the dungeon for everyone’s emotional play. Every person who is ashamed of their desires is another person we damage indirectly with our scathing commentary and harsh judgments. (www.racialicious.com).

What is interesting in Mollena’s response is her use of the term “out of the closet” to refer to black people who want to engage in BDSM play with white people. This type of race play, amidst the vast arena of sexual experimentation, is considered detrimental and damaging to black participants so that rules and regulations against the very taboos that created the situations are passed down through generations.

Plaid and Mollena's conversation argues for the possibility of pleasure in subjugation and with the added dimension of racial hierarchies, allows for the recreation of slave / master relationships that have transformative possibilities. Like Kara Walker's controversial statement, "All black people in America want to be slaves just a little bit," Mollena's sex play allows for black people to embrace their sadomasochistic desires, ones that Walker would argue are suppressed. So many literary representations of interracial relationships written by both black and white authors (*Native Son*, *The Bondmaster*, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, *Beloved*) rely on this sadomasochistic dynamic, presenting what Mollena identifies as "scary desires" of violence, pleasure, hatred. If this kind of sexual/erotic play is possible, Plaid wonders, how can we move from banning the prohibitions to accepting them as part of a sexual economy that attempts to rupture stereotypes of black / white sex?

Walker's artwork accomplishes this rupture, using the tropes of rape and violence in ways that subvert traditional narratives and shift power dynamics while simultaneously engaging the erotic. For example, in what looks like a page torn from a notebook, Walker scribbles in blue watercolor her plans for "taking down" avowed white supremacist David Duke. The painting reads: "in my first Racialized Sex fantasy me and an (unnamed) black girlfriend decide to "Bring Down" David Duke the former klansman and almost Louisiana Senator in SCANDAL! Yes, he's ~~seduced~~raped by two black girls and then tied, humiliated, photographed, etc" (Walker 208). Walker's use of the term "racialized" sex fantasy creates a scenario where all sex between blacks and whites is figured through racial contexts. Walker's interracial sex fantasy, then, is constructed around the differences between two black women and an avowed white supremacist. The

surplus of difference is what makes the “racialized” fantasy so complex and full of erotic potential. The racial signifiers, conspicuously omitted in the painting, are left to the audience’s imagination. Walker’s words read like a script with viewers in charge of creating the imaginary scene of rape and humiliation.

In another moment of rupture and ambivalence, Walker crosses out the work seduced and replaces it with “rape,” hinting at the mutual attraction felt by interracial couples when power dynamics are vastly divergent. “Seduced” implies a certain amount of agency and pleasure as opposed to the violence and terror of rape. Walker’s decision to paint “seduced” on the canvas creates a rather seditious speculation, one that allows for seduction to be foreplay for rape. What strikes at historical representations of interracial sex in Walker’s word choice is the potential for seduction and rape to be part of the same dynamic or even complimentary. In so many literary representations of interracial sex between white women and black men the sex play engages fantasies of rape (*Birth of a Nation*, *The Dutchman*, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, *Native Son*) in ways that engage stereotypical notions of black male sexuality. In Walker’s artwork, the black female is both the seductress and rapist, mapping the established narrative onto characters who rarely play the lead role in interracial sexual fantasies. The idea of mutual affection and attraction between black women and white men during the slave era seems implausible and to suggest otherwise usually creates heated debate. Walker’s scene of the house maid sodomizing a southern gentleman, then, acts as a revisionist history, one that conveys black female sexual power and agency.

Walker’s painting describes the torture of David Duke replete with bondage and humiliation, fantasizing that she captures everything on film. The reproduction of these

images, then, as many reproductions of interracial sex would mirror the pathological qualities of black / white sex and create layers of violence and voyeurism much like the composograph of the naked and humiliated Alice Rhineland or the strangled half-clothed Nancy Cunard. The literal and figurative bondage and binding in these images confine representations of interracial intimacy in the realm of the perverse and reinforce the notion that black / white sexual relationships collapse under vastly diverse power structures. Scenes of bondage typically involve one participant in a vulnerable and dependant state while the dominator manipulates the submissive's body. Walker seizes on the theme of power and targets one of the most prominent and influential white supremacists in U.S. history.

Many African American artists such as Betye Saar, Camille Billows, and Angela Franklin have been successful in employing derogatory caricatures of the past in order to empower figures like Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, but the raw violence of Walker's imagery, deployed through disturbing exaggerations of black and white bodies, forces a dialogue about the sexual interactions between blacks and whites that have been fraught with issues of power, pleasure and pain. This dialogue has been muted and reluctant, dismissed and rejected in many cultural forms leading up to Walker's exhibition. For example, the Rhineland trial presented tiny morsels of interracial sex, foreplay for the imagination that was reluctantly extorted from a couple deemed "pathological." The press releases, public images and court transcripts each vilified and denounced interracial sex through references to mental illness, voracious sexual appetites, and unusual carnal delights while simultaneously affording the moralistic girding for their delectation. The

dialogue of interracial sex as pathology continued with Nancy Cunard, whose willingness to exhibit her attraction to black males was dismissed as sexual deviance.

Literary dialogues of interracial eroticism were so hedged in by social and legal prohibitions that the dance to expose ecstatic moments was done in hesitant measure. But Walker's art, in its rejection of constraint and ambivalence, creates the most disruptive scenes of interracial sex in order to transgress the taboo. Her artwork stands as a set of assumptions questioning assumptions; In other words, her use of stereotypical representations of blacks and whites in the silhouettes are not questioned in relation to the acts they are performing. When viewers observe a girl with a kerchief on her head and pig-tails poking out from beneath, even though the character is only a silhouette, they read "black." Likewise, when a male character is dressed in a long overcoat and has his hair combed in a crest, the viewer reads "white."

Walker's silhouettes are spectacular in both their subject matter and scope, imposing their stories of illicit sexual acts on a rather diminutive public who see fantasies springing from art, literature, folk-tales, films, and other cultural forms that have shaped representations of interracial sex. Exhibiting these silhouettes on such a grand scale has several effects, one being that the viewer cannot escape the lure of the setting, and the towering figures pull the audience into the scene. Darby English's critical assessment of Walker's silhouettes explores how the cutouts interact with their background. He argues that since the silhouettes "are destitute of surrounding context, the works become groundless landscapes set into ruthlessly anti-geometrical space—not unlike the space of imagination itself, where the relation among elements is purely associative" (149).

Walker's silhouettes do, as English contends, mimic the imagination, with the scenes of

carnal delights but I would argue their context is not absent but-- Literary representations of interracial eroticism were so self-conscious of the patterns and rules of representing interracial desire that their structure was formulaic. Walker's images, on the other hand, seem to indiscriminately float in a sea of whiteness, their sheer size a defense against rigid structure and an invitation to interracial fantasy. Once again the viewer's stance is what Stockton calls "composite," both able to observe the pain in the images and capable of experiencing pleasure from scenes of torture and abuse. The "associate" relation that the viewer experiences comes from knowing these cultural forms, producing a context where English argues one does not exist. The context, then, is the familiarity of the images, the presumptions that each character will perform the vile acts Walker has them poised to do.

The subject matter of Walker's art also adds a rich layer to the understanding of gender dynamics in representations of interracial desire. Unlike the typical portrayals of interracial desire produced from the heated exchanges between white women and black men, Walker's images cast black women as the leading role of provocateur. In most slave narratives, black women endured horrid abuses, and were characterized as unable to protect their bodies from rape and violence. Narratives of the enslaved such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, portray black females as vulnerable to the master's sexual urges. Annette Gordon Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008), attempts to untangle the relationship between coercion, ownership, consent and love that is woven into the fabric of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson's forty year affair. In turn of the century novels of interracial desire, the black woman was always represented as the "tragic mulatto," an

object of beauty only if she was light skinned. The voice of the black female as sexual subject has historically been silenced, quite consciously, in order to dispel the myth of the licentious slave woman.

Walker gives her black female subjects a sexual presence that both liberates them from the yoke of Jezebel, and grants them pleasures independent of male and the typical dominant / subordination dynamic. For instance, one of her silhouettes depicts a black women sucking on another black woman's breast while a white woman looks on and fondles her own nipple. Again shifting registers, Walker allows for the white woman, typically rendered as frigid and austere, to take pleasure in observing the passion between two women. This depiction embodies lesbian delights through both the foreplay of the black women and the self-pleasure of the white onlooker; without a male character to control the erotic scene, the women are free to engage in sex that is seemingly free of power contestations. Layers of voyeurism abound as viewers of this piece observe the white woman pleasuring herself while looking at the black women pleasuring themselves. Both sadist in its form and subject matter, viewers can only see the silhouetted impression of the sex act and interact with a moment frozen in time; again, the image's ability to tantalize the audience and yet prohibit the climax creates a symbolic bondage of the spectator.

Because Walker constantly changes the positions of her silhouettes depending on the exhibition, the staging of interracial desire can take multiple forms. Like giant paper dolls that can be moved from room to room to create new scenarios, Walker's massive cut-paper silhouettes can be placed on a museum wall according to her caprices. The possibilities for presenting scenes of torment, pleasure, agony and delight constantly shift

according to which shape comes in contact with the other. Perhaps the white woman touching herself could observe a white soldier defecating; or the suckling black women could be placed on their own private wall, without the intrusion of greedy onlookers. With Walker's cut-outs, the possibilities for erotic fantasies are innumerable, much like the very imaginations they emanate from.

The Critics

Walker's critics have suggested that her derogatory images pander to white audiences, the same people who purchase a majority of her artwork. Sponsored and praised by many white critics, Walker's work is highly esteemed in the "white" art community. Certain members of the black art community, however, spearheaded by renowned artist Betye Saar, have expressed outrage and embarrassment at Walker's representations, especially the images depicting sex and excrement. Betye Saar was so repulsed by Walker's San Francisco exhibit in 1997 that "she sent out over 200 letters and packets to writers, artists and politicians containing information about Walker, samples of her work, and a statement which asked: 'Are African Americans being betrayed under the guise of art'" (Bowles 4). Saar also argues that "it is the responsibility of people to 'point fingers' at troubling situations" such as Walker's immediate fame and success in the art world. This debate smacks of the old guard vs. new guard dispute that pitted figures like W.E.B. Dubois against the younger generation of Harlem Renaissance artist like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, who were more invested in artistic freedom than pleasing their elders.

For those who would see the debate as a problem of the generation gap, Howardina Pindell weighs in as the voice of "younger" African American artists, arguing

that “Walker unconsciously or consciously seems to be catering to the bestial fantasies about black culture created by white supremacy and racism” (2). This critique overlooks the possibility for fantasies about interracial sex created *by* black people and reads every representation of African American culture through a white lens. Contained in Pindell’s essay is a list of “acceptable” black artists, their medium, style, and execution, unlike Walkers, are all quite suitable: For instance, Pindell mentions Sana Musasama, a New York artist who “creates ceramic sculpture installations that reflect her travels throughout the world. Her unusual tableaux utilise urn, plant vine, tree, and hand like forms, creating phantasmagoric flora.” (4). Walker’s “phantasmagoric flora” are typically inserted in her subject’s vaginas or cradle a demonic figure, reminiscent of different “travels” than those experienced by Musasama. Another “approved” artist, “Carole Byard [. . .]creates installations and sculpture from natural elements, including earth, wood, clay stone, sand, gourds, mud and wax. She avoids toxic commercial art materials and creates shrines and totemic forms about healing, ancestors, spirit, history and memory” (4). Perhaps the “toxic” art material used in Walker’s pieces are not watercolor and gouache but images of sodomy and rape, bestiality and pedophilia. Like Byard, Walker also addresses ancestors, history, and memory; but rather than offering “shrines” and “healing,” Walker’s art picks at old wounds and moves scenes of sex and violence from their holy place of secrecy out into the open.

Kara Walker’s art has been the subject of art critics who attempt to understand her derogatory representations without recognizing the complex dynamics of interracial sexuality. That these representations have historically been linked to pathological behaviors or cast as aberrations could not be more clearly outlined in visual form. When

combined with personal interviews, Walker's art performs a kind of self-debasement that mirrors the same sadomasochistic tendencies of literature of interracial desire.

Reminiscent of the bondage play interview on *Racialicious*, Walker's art engages some of the most painful histories of black/white interactions and allows for them to be mischievous and playful. Because of her uncomfortable deployment of certain cultural images, critics lose sight of the transformative power of Walker's work and dismiss it as solely pornographic. One of the most widely referenced critiques of her art, published in *The International Review of African American Art*, argues that Walker's moments of greatness are yet to come and her talents will be realized by a larger community (read black artists) once she experiences a life-changing event. The possibility of achieving greatness is "particularly favorable now that Kara Walker is pregnant with her first child. Pregnancy, childbirth and mothering are totally transformative experiences" (8). This criticism fails to account for the countless representations Walker has already created concerning pregnancy, motherhood, and birth that are themselves transformative experiences.

Several of her silhouette installations depict babies stolen from their mother's arms by white "masters," or cut from their mother's uterus by a white, knife-wielding "mistress." Other pieces show a baby struggling to nurse from three black women sucking on each other's breasts, or a pregnant black woman's belly hanging to the side while she looks vacantly at the viewer. These compelling images of pregnancy and childbirth, created before Walker gave birth, give a visual referent to the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass and the literary representations of Toni Morrison and Shirley Anne Williams. How these representations might be "tempered"

by Walker's own birthing experiences is unclear and what this criticism suggests is that motherhood is a fundamental part of becoming a great artist. Considering Walker's marital status (her partner is a white, German male), this assessment implies that her husband's virile seed will remedy the deficiencies in her artwork. The central concern is with Walker's repulsive and yet titillating images and the belief that these nightmares could not possibly emanate from someone with a maternal sensibility.

Conclusion

Contemporary filmic and literary versions of interracial sex, rather than evolving, have repeated the same *Birth of a Nation* theme of pathology and rape (*Black Snake Moan*), painted interracial race couples as evil and deceitful (*Obsessed*), or designated them as novelties to be jeered at or kept hidden in hotel rooms (*Guess Who, This Christmas*). *Black Snake Moan*, (2006) replete with graphic violence surrounding interracial sex, master / slave reversals, and stereotypical representations, would not grace Howardina Pindell's list of acceptable films. *Lakeview Terrace* (2008), a thriller about an interracial couple harassed by their psychopathic neighbor, features a white male and black female who endure unrelenting abuse at the hand of their bigoted neighbor. Finally, *Obsessed* (2009) casts Beyoncé in the role of enraged wife whose black husband is being seduced by a beautiful white office assistant. Reminiscent of fatal attraction, the white woman will stop at nothing to have her black lover and the film offers audiences brutal cat fights that are suggestive of interracial lesbian femdom. Literary representations of interracial intimacy, like Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, also rely on tired stereotypes and present unredeemable interracial couples. For instance, the white female in *Caucasia* is morbidly obese while married to her black husband, but when they

divorce, she loses weight and is able to attract a white man. As expected, the interracial couple must divorce, separating their bi-racial offspring in a quasi mixed-race *Parent Trap*.

This list of modern representations of interracial eroticism underscores the fact that Kara Walker's art, with its feces, sodomy, rape, and violence, creates brilliant hyperbole that plays with rather than engages tired depictions of black / white sex. In fact, her caricatural and exaggerated forms reject any ties to historical accuracy and confront the very real problems of representing interracial intimacy. But while films and literature heed cultural prohibitions against interracial intimacy and fail to challenge or subvert their power, Walker uses the prohibitions themselves against a totalizing discourse on interracial sex. In her artwork, the bondwoman sodomizes the master, or pleasures another slave while the mistress looks on—scenes that reject notions of dominance and subordination and play with what can and cannot be represented. Walker's images and text are already outside the boundaries of "moral" and "decent," boundaries that have characterized interracial sex as deviant and pathological throughout history, so her utilization of taboo subjects only seems fitting when the blueprint for "normal" doesn't exist. Rather than representing interracial sex as loving, marital, and romantic (A giant cut-out of a black figure holding the hand of a white figure with a grayish baby between them), Walker's images deploy the forbidden, shape the unthinkable, and pervert the landscape of a mixed race Eden.

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