

BLACK ARTS QUARTERLY

Volume 2, Issue 3

Spring/Summer 1997

A Cultural
ESSAY

Cannibalistic Kiss: Gender-play and the Consumption of Subversive Identity

by Tim'm T. West

Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other, but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization.

—bell hooks in "Eating the Other," in *Black Looks*¹

What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire

—Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*²

How would you know if you were kissing a cannibal? His or her deceptive intent may appear more seductive than dangerous. Demystifying the seduction, interpreting the gaze, sensing the danger is how I approach representations of subversive identity. We have reached a historical moment when many identities, which we believe operate against institutional power apparatuses, fail to function subversively. We see evidence of how racial, gender and sexual identities constructed to undermine power are, instead consumed by power; how, moreover, they reinforce and strengthen power's grip on the subject. For example, I have personally been concerned with the extent to which queer identities appropriate aspects of heterosexual normativity in their attempts to be legitimized. The juridical and social triumphs (though far too few) which recognize and affirm queer identity as respectable, often provide illusory liberations. And it is precisely because the subversive act necessarily assumes an antagonistic relation to industrial power that I have embarked on an exploration of the intersection between gender-play, subversive identity, and consumer culture. Is it possible to characterize the tensions between subversive identity and institutional power as a form of violence? Furthermore, is subversive-

ness an illusory rebellious identity claim which is unfailingly committed to institutional power? And finally, if we ultimately believe in truly subversive identity, how might we protect it from the manipulation and seductiveness of power—that complex force which strategically maneuvers to undermine its Other?

Prologue

While on the Brooklyn-bound A train, I sit beside Malik, a neighbor I met last summer at an annual block party. Commuting between Bedstuy and Greenwich Village often provides some rather entertaining and exhilarating experiences, given the mixture of ethnicities and



CK "be" AD MODEL

bizarre characters present on the subway. It seems the deeper you get into Brooklyn, the browner the train gets—its colors and hues now primarily signifying black-folk, Nuyoricans, Asians, and working class whites (who, I would argue, are colored by their lack of privilege). I don't

know many of my neighbors, but I distinctly remember Malik because I initially mistook her for a boy. No more than sixteen or seventeen, I assumed that she was a part of the underworld to which I once belonged—that New York underground scene of queer youth of color. Some kids played with gender and were best rewarded for their performances when they could successfully pass for the Other sex. Many of them embraced such an underworld because they were met with disownment by family and had nowhere else to go. Beautiful as a girl or boy, I befriended my neighbor because I felt it was necessary—felt that her healthy existence in my community depended

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No Time For Fake Ones.

Conversations on Eroticism, Performativity and Spectatorship

Editor's Prologue: *The following dialogue about the possibility of "mirroring the erotic" took place in cyberspace between six black undergraduate and graduate students. In reading the performances of other black women, "Stardust," "Butterfly," "Nzinga," "Nina," "Myla" and "Sunflower" explore the ways they gauge the sex appeal of women performers— those in the entertainment business and those in 'real life': performers represented through media images and performers actualized through self-representation. Their "fe-mails" express personal, political and intellectual concerns about desire and performativity. As the correspondence indicates, a unique set of questions emerge once the "watcher" and the "watched," the "aroused" and the "arouser" are black and female: When black women direct a scopophilic gaze toward black female performers, are erotic subjects produced? How do race and gender (re)form an erotic gaze infused with (or refusing) power? Is the spectator's position always one of privilege? What are the cultural terms, emotional risks and political implications of spectatorship and consumption when all participants are black women? Are only the watchers complicit? The discussion includes commentary on Lil' Kim, Erykah Badu and the legendary "women on motorcycles" at the Freaknik traffic jam.*

Butterfly Ok. Here is the first question for a discussion I've been wanting to have: "what are the political issues regarding 'women in the media' when you are a woman who likes women?" I sometimes have physical responses to black women's performances, like Lil Kim's album cover, and even to women sexualizing themselves at Freaknik¹. But I don't know what to do with the severely conflicting emotions both performances inspire. On the one hand, I'm extremely turned on. At the same time, I wonder if the music industry controls Lil' Kim's sexuality; and regarding Freaknik, the environment lacks something, despite what's otherwise the power of women's sexuality in that context.

Myla I don't live the lives of those other women [performers]. And yes: there are other arenas open to me for attention, for affection, for lime-light. I love myself (well, I'm working on it, aren't we all); I like my family. There's affirmation for me and my mind and my cuteness all around me. Were this not the case, I'd be *significantly* less resistant to the sure affirmation I'd garner by showcasing my body in Freaknik. People need love, attention. We want to feel beautiful and wanted, period. The Freaknik environment provides that to some extent. I can totally see the fun that women have out there, being whistled at, recorded on tape and pursued, although I feel like it's 'mad' limited and 'mad' hurtful at the same time that it's fun. Maybe that's my own privilege(s) talking.

Stardust My main problem with Lil' Kim is that I don't feel she is empowered. (But, I am not living her life either so she doesn't need me to feel anything for her; but hey, this is my commentary!) I feel like she is being pimped. This is why her lyrics are painful for me to hear. You can tell which songs a man wrote, especially when you listen to her album around men. They are big-uppin' Kim for some songs that Biggie [Smalls] wrote.

Sunflower Right?! When her lyrics are violent and contradictory, I have to wonder if Lil' Kim speaks for herself. Is she demanding her own orgasm? Or is the source of the demand elsewhere, i.e. the imagination of a differently-minded Biggie writing Kim some lyrics with a different meaning? I really need to examine my investment in Lil'

Kim's image, in why I want to give her her power so much, why I want to see her as more than just being pimped.

Partially, it's because I am moved by the idea of a sexually powerful woman with no investment in traditional femininity and purity and good-girlness. I can see how Lil' Kim crosses a line, how she can't really be empowered in the realm and on the terms within which she chooses to work. But I still identify with her demands for empowerment. I think she is so rude, and she is so demanding, and has such a "f*ck-all-y'all" attitude; something in that speaks to me, even as I can see its flaws.



LIL KIM 2

Nina Lil' Kim seems like a supreme act, so much of a show, that I am completely unable to read anything she does as a representation of anything she may ever feel. I admire a subtlety that Lil' Kim kind of runs roughshod

over. But other women of hip-hop are appealing— like Yo Yo and sometimes even Queen Latifah. But Kim? Well, she's just so over the top, so blatant, that my lasting impression is that she covertly communicates something *not* sexual, although she's "flippin' the script" on being a "good girl" in the patriarchal system, as you pointed out. I find myself much more attracted to my women friends.

Sunflower Me too; but needless to say, erotic attraction between women friends is sometimes problematic, unrequited, even painful. Yet, I still am interested in/turned on by/in love with friends and never quite sure what to do with that. Transferring my female-attraction to women on-screen and in the music industry is safer, b/c they don't have to respond. It *is* more detached and less emotionally complicated.

Nina I am pro-pornography politically. People should be able to do whatever their desire (beside pedophilia of course) wants them to do, so long as consenting adults are involved. Yet, porn is such a drain; I don't feel that I've "gotten" anything from pornography, even lesbian pornography just makes me feel tired: it makes me wanna drink, not make love.

Sunflower I'm definitely anti-censorship myself. (I do partake in film once in a while). But I don't want to claim



porn is all good just because everybody's consensual. I'm not all that convinced that that's true, first of all. And secondly, just because I agree to do something doesn't mean it might not be harming me. Censorship is not my goal, but maybe I want a better understanding of not only where my own lines should be drawn but also an idea of what this means in the larger sense, about desire, about people's needs, about exploitation, about sex. I wish that we (the collective we, the society, I guess) could think about how porn could be more life-affirming, so that instead of making you wanna drink, it would make you wanna make love, and feel good about that.

Butterfly ooh, yes! life-affirming porn! I like it.

Nina I don't feel like pornography, and/or Lil Kim's very watered down version of it, is degrading or threatening to women. Many times porn simply substitutes for the real, life-giving, very hot sex. I think that sex should be had frequently and with many partners, but not with a guy you meet in a rodeo, nor at the "doctor's office" nor with the girl in the locker room of your gym. These porn scenarios are draining.

Butterfly D-r-a-i-n-i-n-g is how I see Freaknik and the music industry. Both really remind me that money and sex go together for us in the industry. Freaknik is more draining because it is so all encompassing, you can't escape it. Your presence signifies compliance. But my arousal for the Freaknik women on the motorcycles manifests a paradox, that within something I acknowledge as draining, I can also be turned on. I've talked with men (who think I'm straight) who've confessed similarly conflicted feelings. They tell me how down they are with feminism but can't understand how they still respond sexually to *Jet* "Beauties of the Week." And what I wanted to say, but didn't, was: "I *do* understand. I, *too*, used to check for them every week when I was nine." I feel that it's important for me not to have the split between those who are objectified (by the photograph) and those who are attracted to the image. You can't just make that assumption. When we do, we erase a big part of the problem: that we are all being pimped, not just the person in the picture/ on the album/ motorcycle. But also, not just the women, and not just the people who aren't turned on by the image. I don't want to assume my simple consumption of a woman as product/sex object is acceptable. I think I need to accept my own implication, and see how my complicity affects the whole desire/impulse to consume sex simply.

Sunflower Somebody needs to fill in re: "The women of the motorcycles."

Myla The "women on motorcycles" refers to three motorcycles that passed us when we were stuck in traffic at Freaknik. (Don't you envy motorcycles' traffic immunity?) The bikes were being driven by three men, and behind them on each bike was a woman, wearing a halter top or half-shirt, platform sandals, BAPS-type hair, and lycra/spandex shorts—the kind that are really like bathing suit bottoms or patra-pants. The women were hugging the men, leaning forward, backs SUPERarched, booties turned up in feats of gravity defiance, flexibility, and endurance that I as a dancer can admire. Lots of flesh was showing, lots of belly, lots of leg, lots of *ss. They

were clearly — to use the terms of our discussion — sexualizing themselves; they were doing their best to look like pinups, I think— sexiness incarnate... and succeeding. They cast lots of sultry looks at the men around them.

Sunflower I don't know if you remember but when they passed I said, "You know, they were really beautiful," which at least one of them was, her face I mean. With regards to what I find sexy, face is very important to me— probably more important than body. That is one reason porn doesn't always do it for me. In the porn context, the faces and hair aren't doing what I want them to be doing.

Butterfly Me too. Face and hair and vibe, which is why, I think, part of what endeared me to that last motorcycle woman was when she laughed, she *was* really pretty and she seemed to be a little shy; that shy, pretty smile that accompanied her scantily clad beautiful body sort of underlined her humanity. Likewise, its those moments where Lil Kim talks honestly (I'm thinking of an interview I saw with her on BET) that she gets me, you know? I really do react to how she looks, in a way that I never respond to Foxy Brown. But only when she's being honest, being a person. That's what gets me about my paradoxical response to her album cover, which is 1) that I am really bothered by the extent to which she (necessarily?) sets herself out like that—and maybe sets me out, too, by playing on that old stereotype of the hypersexualized black woman, dressed in animal print and all—and 2) that she turns me on. The fact that I could have both of these responses breaks my heart repeatedly.

Myla Before I can even *consider* the issues of our right to display sexuality on a broad, theoretical scale, I have to deal with the fact that Freaknik is a HIGHLY male-defined space... just brimming over with beer and patriarchy and bass music and testosterone every single place you look. The t-shirts for sale at Freaknik are OVERWHELMINGLY inscribed with nearly naked *women* in positions highlighting sexual availability. The women there *perform* for the men in ways that the men simply do not perform for the women; in no way do women enter performance space on equal sexual footing. Who has the video cameras, for the most part? The men. Who is asked/ encouraged/ coerced into performing for those cameras? The women. And when women dance, the men enact a kind of audience-participatory role which involves swarming around the woman who's flashing and dancing. I don't know what they do to the performer once they have her surrounded in those circles. You can't see the woman anymore after she's swallowed.

Sunflower Well, I too was somewhat disturbed that the motorcycle women were such a spectacle. It was sad for two reasons. First, that I responded to them with attraction on *any* level (because in some ways, everything we perceive as attractive is learned from society's picture. Then again, much of what I sometimes find attractive has nothing to do with what society tells me I should like. So go figure). Second, it was sad that the women needed to put themselves on display like that. None of this changed the fact that if one of those women had locks or an afro and was more fully clothed in jeans or maybe a lappa, she would have been someone I would have admired rather

(continued next page)





exist beyond everyone's personal investment in it, such that buying sexiness is just exploitative, whether or not the person being bought "thinks" she enjoys it? Or is that too moralistic and narrow? 'Cause I can think that a man yelling "hey baby!" means that I am attractive and loved, which it probably doesn't mean. But does the fact that I enjoy it mean that it's not sexist and wack?

Butterfly I'm thinking that capitalist consumption of women is institutionalized, you know? Over-determined.

Sunflower exACTly. But maybe the question is, "Is it possible to 'consume' women's sexuality in terms of a pornographic display (whether it be sistas on a motorcycle at Freaknik or in a video or picture) and not fall into the institutionalized, patriarchal bullsh*t mentality that keeps all of us oppressed? With regards to women, when I'm simply aroused by her body or a picture of her body, what is my entry into that attraction and arousal? Is it other than the good old "women are objects to be consumed" idea? How is my looking different from a man's looking, except that I'm a woman? Does the fact that I'm a woman save me? I don't know if it should. Is the answer to quit looking or is the answer to find a new way of looking? Or, is the answer to find/make new and different kinds of displays?

Butterfly This relates to how I can deal with strippers in a way that I can't deal with the motorcycle women. Money draws the line for me. My response to women who are freaky for money is different from women who give freaky performances without charge. There are multiple issues that differentiate the two positions: what are they getting out of it? Where do they make the choices? What are the acts good for? Maybe, I can't really deal with people taking the opportunity to be freaky whenever or however, without contingency. I also respond better to people being freaky in pictures, writing, or music videos, than to people being freaky in person (on motorcycles or stages). If I were to give freaky performance, I think it would be easiest without having to deal with the whack vibes spectators can give in freakiness, disengaged at some level, as a non-participant. But I also ask myself, whether the strippers, on some level, are people who aren't getting the attention they should really get in some non-commodified way, you know? What does the money *really* mean?

Sunflower: Is it okay for us to consume a stripping woman b/c she is getting paid? Or is it still robbing her of her humanity? I think the obvious answer is yes. In some way she (and all women) are being robbed of being seen as whole women. Can this be validated by the fact that she is being paid and paid well for it? Or is that a capitalist trap? I think it might be a trap.

Butterfly I think so, too. It keeps us from having to ask how it might be damaging to the stripper and the watcher. Just because we're all complicit and getting something we really want (money, our jollies) doesn't mean that we aren't in harm's way.

Sunflower I tend to think that any job which pays, say, \$500 a night, which stripping does, is something to be reckoned with. \$500 for approximately 5 hours.?! So the oppressive aspect of sex industries is that these are the only industries where women can make money like that. But, I refuse to discount the money or forget that making \$500 or the approximate equivalent of \$100 an hour is a great thing. The money strippers earn is significant. Women should be allowed to make that kind of money. Stripping should not be our only avenue to making money though. Strippers, like the women on the motorcycles, might be attention-wanting women who must get it through objectifying themselves, but at least at the end of it they have \$500!! Let's think for a minute about all the things we could use \$500 (after only one evening's work) for. I personally have a long list.

Butterfly I do, too, which brings me to another question. How many times have I thought how nice it might be to have the extra money and time a stripping career provides? Then, I thought I could never do it. Even if I weren't conservative (or shy), I doubt I'd perform my freaky side on stage, getting naked. Factoring in sleazy people watching/touching makes it even more improbable. Even putting me on stage, in a totally non-sleazy environment, before women and men whose touches I could imagine, doesn't change much either. I'm left with the impulse that says, "You could never nohow noway get naked for money." Even for the \$500 that could pay for a better apartment or another car. Doesn't that impulse need to be a part of how I consider the meaning of my reaction to stripping?

Sunflower There are several things at stake here: socio economic class and black women's inability to make that kind of money any other way; the need for attention/affirmation; the difference between male versus female gaze. I'm not trying to say that money justifies all. I am trying to say that money changes the dynamic. A woman could certainly have different motivations for doing what she's doing when she's getting paid. We're talking about capitalism and class dynamics in a context different from adorning scanty-wear displaying herself for free. What is *she* getting out of it?

Butterfly Fun? Affirmation? Is that enough? I think what you suggested earlier is possible: to find/make new and different kinds of displays. What I'm not sure can be done is finding new ways of looking. We might be looking anew, with a new consciousness, but does that disrupt the metanarrative? Dig? Does it change anything when you are in a car in the middle of Freaknik traffic? And then, does it matter, anyway? I'm not sure. For whom, besides myself, does it matter that I am looking at a woman on a motorcycle, when I am in a car at Freaknik? Might my new way of looking be irrelevant to all for whom it matters?

Nzinga As a woman who loves wimmin, and digs the beauty in many members of both the male and female categories, I can truly say that sexual expression holds

'Cause I can think that a man yelling "hey baby!" means that I am attractive and loved, which it probably doesn't mean. But does the fact that I enjoy it mean that it's not sexist and wack?



EASILY say, "Myla's so full of sh*t; she used to be a cheerleader. Now she's just pimping that afro-centric image." '92 photo notwithstanding, my image reflects personal changes and progression. I mean, do we really expect Alanis Morissette to be the same person as she was when she was fourteen? Nina, I know you're not saying "down with Badu cos she's sexy and African and thinks she's cute." I know you feel the complexity behind the fact that you, too, are sexy and African and think you're cute. And so am I, do I. For me, it's the commodification of it, of her, of ME through her, that makes me sad. A dress that I wore the week before the album dropped got no comment from anyone. A week *after* the album dropped, the same dress became a magnet for comments like "Who are you? Erykah Badu?"

Stardust I was so high on her when she first came out (and I still love to play her cd and chill). My real critique of her began when I picked up on how she alters her performance (albeit a little) for white audiences. When I saw her on "Regis and Kathy Lee," she had taken off a few of her rings (including the large and in charge ankh ring) and she lost the pretense that dynamized her appearance on BET's "Planet Groove." It seemed she thought she'd offend her white audience, or isolate them from folks who might buy her records. And let's not overlook how gendered the whole play in her "Next Lifetime" video was. She acted as one of the typical don't-speak, just-support "black power" women, bringing back that played nationalistic sexism. Although marketing sets the standard in the music industry, I wish she'd keep it real. I too have questioned what the overplay of the incense and tea was all about. Sh*t, I drink



BADU 2

orange tea and burn my incense constantly, but so do many other people I know. I still love Badu's song stylings but I'm beginning to question what she is really about. If you are trying to make money *and* introduce something new on the frontier of dying hip-hop don't attempt to create a marketable image by seducing the public to believe you are a midwife of truth and earthy justice.

Nina I feel you! Both she and Lil' Kim could be understood in interesting and new ways with a Foucauldian analysis. Foucault writes that the problem with binaries (or, maybe the 'good' thing) is that they can always be subverted by being inverted. So here, on one side, we have the oh-so-righteous Eryka Badu. As polar opposite, we have Miss un-original sexploitation Lil' Kim.³ Both are subverting a whole set of floating signifiers and binaries, performing what Spivak calls "changing the sign-system." Badu is saying, "Hey, I don't front like Kim setting herself all out, and I still get to have the finest men in hip-hop!" While Kim is saying, "Look how sexy I am, and I know the brothas desire 'an interlude in the nude' with me." Both are subverting something while at the same time, promoting some of the same old problems. Like Stardust said, Badu tends to reify a sexist, black nationalistic ideology; while Kim, well, we know what Kim's doing.

Nzinga Consequently, through their music, both Lil' Kim and Erykah Badu express black women's journeys toward empowerment. Yet, neither one escapes criticism; both accentuate the multifaceted ways in which we tackle the commodification, erasure, censorship and misunderstanding of our culture and experience.



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¹Myla: Freaknik is the annual convergence of thousands of African American partiers in Atlanta... spring break, bacchanal. Each year, its planners try to foreground its role as "Black College Spring Break," with a wholesome concert festival. But it really is not. All kinds of people of all ages come, from high school kids to middle aged men. The city closes itself off and each year concert promoters lose thousands of dollars because no one can ever get to any venues. An annual part of Freaknik is the traffic jams because the city blocks off just about every major road in Atlanta so that the only ways you can get somewhere is by backwoods routes. Once they block all the exits off of the interstates Freaknik is one big drama of stopped traffic on the highways and major roads. You know what happens: people party in the streets. Tops are down, people are hanging out their cars, music is cranking.

²Professor of English and Women's Studies at Spelman College, Gloria Wade Gayles teaches a class entitled "Images of Women in the Media." As a critic of these representation, Professor Gayles examines issues of fragmentation and sexualization of women and their bodies and their effect on a woman's ability to accept/ love/ have control over her body and her psyche. Four of the five discussants attended Spelman and took her course. The fifth discussant affirms that even without the course, "if you are close to Professor Gayles, then you get it anyway."

³Sunflower: Can I just say that while Biggie may have written many of Kim's lyrics, wack or not, what does that say about "him"? How many men can successfully write from "any" woman's point of view? Maybe Biggie should have helped John Singleton write "Poetic Justice."

Three Turtle-Neck Men's Jazz

by Lenard D. Moore

The middleman lends wind
to the shiny saxophone;
he tilts the instrument up
and down, up and down.
A man on each side of him:
a blue steel guitar,
a black bass guitar—
their right hands rightly pluck.
Three magical instruments blessing
and out of three long black speakers.
How hotly harmony heats
our eardrums
and paralyzes us
in these sunbleached lawn chairs.
No one has ever sent flames
of sound like this.
We can't hardly get enough
of this set that's making our bodies surf.

September 5, 1996
9:25 am

Lenard D. Moore, a native of Jacksonville, North Carolina, received his B.A., magna cum laude, from Shaw University. He is currently pursuing an M.A. in African American Literature at North Carolina A&T University, where he teaches Freshman Writing. His poetry has appeared in many publications, including Callaloo, African American Review, Soulfires, I Hear A Symphony and Midwest Quarterly Review. Twice awarded the Haiku Museum of Tokyo Award, Lenard Moore received CLA's Margaret Walker Creative Writing Award: Poetry Division for 1997.

Demystifying the “Tragic Mulatta”: *the Biracial Woman as Spectacle*

by Stefanie K. Dunning

“You know redbone girls got a problem.” —Cassandra Wilson, “Blue Light ‘Til Dawn”

*“Indigenous like corn, like corn the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn, a female seed-bearing organ—the mestiza is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads.”*¹

*“They had splendid eyes, dark, luminous and languishing; lovely complexions and magnificent hair.”*²

To talk about the complexities of subjectivity is to enter into a discussion which necessarily locates itself at the intersection of race, clans, gender and sexuality. When thinking about my own subjective position, I am confronted by constructions that simultaneously identify, name, abridge and abstract me. Sometimes they help guide my thoughts about myself; at other times, they limit my thinking, reducing me to general categories of color, class, and desire. My present task, interrogation of a biracial subject position, is as much a gender discussion as it is a racial one. My investments in this discussion are deep; I am writing theoretically and distantly about myself—looking for truths about biraciality that I recognize in the words of other theorists, hoping to trace for myself and my audience one thread within a complex, unraveling cultural text.³ I am not interested here with how biracial subjects manage their subjectivities; such an approach inherently positions biraciality as problematic, the historical consideration of which falls beyond the scope of this project. Instead I will explore the way biracial subjectivity is gendered through its construction.

Women are the primary signifiers of miscegenation in literature and film. Likewise, the critical discourse on biraciality foregrounds the “tragic mulatta.” Yet, theorists regularly circumvent the issue of gender and theories lack interrogation of the point at which race and gender meet to sign biraciality.⁴ Visibility, i.e. what biracial people “look” like, makes up a significant part of biracial women’s experiences with uniraical onlookers. Moreover, visibility informs biracial women’s response to the uniraical “gaze.” This paper posits that biraciality is read differently “along gender lines.” While discourses about “mulattos” efface biracial men, biracial women are discursively foregrounded as “exotic.” Effectively, biraciality is inscribed with a specifically female status: the desire of ‘uniraical’ onlookers to exoticize biracial women inform the “gaze” which casts biracial women, “spectacle.”

I. The Contingent Race and Gender of Biracial Subjectivity

“And finally, multiracial females are especially likely targets for sexual objectification because of their real and perceived vulnerability as a group. By this I mean that multiracial women are characterized in academics and popular culture as vulnerable in the sense that they are mentally, emotionally, morally, and socially weak, powerless and tormented.”⁵

For biracial subjects, the meaning of one’s appearance depends on the social context in which subjects’ bodies are read. Claire Huang Kinsley opens “Questions People Have Asked Me. Questions I Have Asked Myself” with a response that introduces the paradox: of bi-racial self-location: “To start with, I don’t know what I look like.”⁶ Within colored communities, “light” skin often signifies biraciality, although the subject may be uniraical. Thus, “lightness” associates the subject with racial mixture (specifically with white people) and subsequently with whiteness. The converse is true in white contexts, where “race” is “read” in terms of darkness, and an otherwise “white-looking” person seems biracial due to the “darkness” of her skin. For biracial women occupying spaces in each social context, “color” is read *viz.* gender. Consequently, biraciality is gendered female.

Current casting patterns in Hollywood expose the mainstream preference for lighter-skinned women and darker-skinned men who appear uniraical.⁷ Although most Hollywood actresses are biracial, the opposite is true of their male counterparts. Within the cinematic paradigm of racial representation, male subjects are uniraical, female subjects are biracial, and biracial male subjectivity is eliminated.⁸ The experiences of biracial filmmaker, Michael Mayson, suggest that biracial men are excluded from representation based upon how they “read” against biracial female subjectivity: “Black actors who are light are often turned down for roles that call for virility, menace, or sexiness.”⁹

The dismissal of the “mulatto” through his emasculation is historically grounded: “so frequently did nineteenth century writers depict octoroons as delicate beauties that the word itself began to conjure up images of passive femininity. Although by definition an octoroon was either a male or a female with one-eighth Black blood, Black men in novels were rarely described as such.”¹⁰ There is, of course, an immense bibliography of work (primary and secondary) concerning the “tragic mulatto” as a typically female protagonist, who is unable to find her place in society because of her biracial heritage.¹¹ This displacement has sexual implications, explains Cynthia Nakashima: “[b]ecause of the structure of power and domination in the American gender system...weakness and vulnerability can be very exciting and attractive when applied to females.”¹² Although the mulatta narratives are intended to evoke sympathy, they often culled readerly desire instead.

Because the biracial subject position has historically and primarily been represented as feminine, the term “mulatto” and/or “biracial” almost automatically reads “feminine.” White women, Richard Dyer explains, are often endowed “with a glow and radiance that has correspondences with the transcendental rhetoric of popular Christianity.”¹³ Thus, in some ways, as Vron Ware explains, women stand in for all that is “good” in relation to whiteness.¹⁴ The conflation of color and value function similarly for white and “light” women because lightness is evaluated against a white standard. In turn, bira-

cial women—for whom lightness is inscribed on a female body—function as a standard by which biracial men are regarded.

Gendered “female,” biraciality readily lends itself as the commodity of spectacle. Thus, “beauty,” and therefore the “gaze” is placed appropriately without upsetting conventional definitions of heterosexual identity. The unwillingness to simultaneously read ‘maleness’ and ‘biraciality’ has everything to do with **who** performs the looking. Usually, within exoticizing contexts, the “who” of the gaze is white, and for the most part, male. Since the gaze implies desire, and racism disallows any kind of white desire for colored males within the heterosexual order, male biraciality does not accommodate spectacle.

II. (Re)envisioning the Beautiful: (E)rasing the Gaze

“When each day I push through the sea of white eyes staring at me on the bus as if I were some strange fruit as if my vulva was hanging outside of my skirt whispering exotic welcomes.”¹⁵

There is a sense in which readers expect more from Carol Camper’s *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women* anticipates readers’ expectations for visual gratification. In addition to narratives, the text also includes a “Family Album,” featuring photographs of the authors during their early childhood, and with their own children later in life. The text answers the reader’s desire to gaze



HORNE

upon a biracial body; but publication of the photographs puts the authors on display. This publication detail raises a crucial question about visibility and biracial subjectivity: Who needs to see what these women look like and why? Feminist and psychoanalytic discourse helps answer these questions.

These discourses determine female spectacle as “the site of castration, act[ing] to wed the masculine subject to himself”; consequently, “the female body is cast as spectacle, reaffirming the primacy of the visible by emphasizing the **sighting** of difference.”¹⁶ Spectacle, then, can be said to signify difference while positioning the “onlooker,” or the subject possessing the gaze, as having mastery over the spectacle.¹⁷ With regard to women, spectatorship seeks mastery through possession, control, and limitation. The biracial woman as spectacle necessarily includes the general conditions of spectacle that relate to femininity—“color” complicates the process. Visible color enables a particular version of reading the spectacle; it allows for readings which exoticize. With this exoticization, comes an increased desire to “read” beauty into the biracial visage. The notion of the “doomed beautiful” as biracial, is intimately connected to perceptions of biracial women as “exotic,” therefore paradoxically abominable and desirable. Thus, while “the covert result of endangered beauty is to furnish the spectator with certain illicit titillation,”¹⁸ it is also clear that the exoticizing of

subjects is accompanied by “a compulsive libidinal attraction disavowed by an equal insistence on repulsion.”¹⁹

The projects of Camper and Lise Funderberg both unwittingly play to the reader/viewer’s desire to inscribe difference, i.e. spectacle, onto the body of the biracial subject. (Lise Funderberg’s *Black, White, Other* also includes photographs of its contributors, over half of whom are women.) The inclusion of photographs might also reveal an impulse to communicate “the idea that multiracial people are beautiful and handsome [and this] is a most persistent and commonly accepted stereotype.”²⁰

The gaze directed towards black women whose bodies are not marked as light and/or biracial is different from that directed towards light-skinned and/or biracial women. As Bogle discusses in the context of Hollywood, light actresses have held a privileged position.²¹ But read as spectacle, the biraciality of privileged actresses is proven problematic. Since women generally function as spectacles in mainstream culture, it’s no surprise the same function applies to the cultural role of biracial women. Because it is more common to locate beauty on a female body, biracial women are more likely to be exoticized, and therefore more sexualized, than biracial men. Michelle La Flamme addresses this sexualization and exoticization of biracial women in “Yo White Boy”:

Wanna know where I am from?
Wondering why I am brown?
Wondering if I will live up to your idea of the exotic, the erotic,
Black, brown-skinned beauty with a grin?²²

As La Flamme’s piece dramatizes, the voyeur who looks upon “brown women” is often a white male. Mercedes Baines underscores the regularity of this in “Where Are You From? A Broken Record Writes”:

A white young lusty man asks hoping for a delicious exotic entree [...]
Where are you from?
Why— I ask
do you want a taste of the exotic?
To fuck another other?
Does it make you feel...²³

Feeling and looking involve pleasure and mastery. White male “looking” represents a desire to take “other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.”²⁴

Representation of the biracial woman as “exotic” or “sexy,” primarily for the satisfaction of the male gaze, consummates the male onlooker’s mastery over the biracial spectacle. A uniracial spectator who has internalized notions of biraciality as “degenerate”²⁵ gains a mastery of the biracial woman as spectacle because he valorizes homogeneity. This places the biracial woman as spectacle not only because of her gender, but also due to the spectator’s assumptions about her (historical social role)—unstable, mutable and exotic. For the onlooker, she is convenient: “the determining gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.”²⁶ But for the woman cast as spectacle, exoticization brings pain and anger. Anger is one of the feelings recalled by Lena Horne, a very light-skinned entertainer whose Hollywood career flourished during the 1940s. Describing the gaze of her audience, she notes, “[t]here are so many ways they look at you, their emotions aren’t

(continued next page)

Demystifying the “Tragic Mulatta”

(continued from page 1)

disciplined.”²⁷ Her observation is significant for the speculative context. Horne’s role as stage performer foregrounds the power dynamics of voyeurism: the onlooker’s “undisciplined” gaze inherently objectifies because it takes for granted that the performer is an unresisting and unknowing spectacle.

Read against Horne’s experience in the entertainment industry, the photographs in *Black, White, Other* and *Miscegenation Blues* take on voyeuristic signification. Functioning as spectacle, the photographs replace the discursive economy and reinscribe biraciality as a “visible economy.”²⁸ In the first text, the photographs of women authors are more aesthetic than journalistic. The pictures of women authors are extreme close-ups printed in black and white of their smiling faces. Furthermore, each shot is slightly askance. The “Family Album” in the second text includes both posed and informal shots and are also primarily of smiling women. The gallery is ironically positioned before a section entitled, “My Name is Peaches... objectification, exoticization.” The gallery and the section which follows may be seen as gathering the authors as kin and unifying them as a category. Naming this interrelationship “family,” subtly communicates the need to establish biracial people as a group. Considering that “race” has been constructed as a “fact” and that “the body [is] the origin of racial truth,” the inclusion of photographs might be motivated by the impulse of asserting the “difference” of biracial people from their unracial ancestors, thereby underlying the decision to prepare and formulate a separate racial category.

On the other hand, the inclusion of the photographs can be read in divergent ways. There is no singular, correct way of understanding the historical and symbolic presence of a biracial and female body. Female mixed race subjectivity resonates theoretically with the lived experiences of subjects. There is more work to be done for disclosure of solutions to de-objectifying ourselves. We must continue to explicate the ways in which spectacle relates to oppression. This project begins a conversation I am having with myself, with “mulatta” discourse and with my audience. It is from writing resistance that I make invisibility visible, it is from this place that I find I am able to “return his stare.”²⁹▲

¹Anzaldúa, Gloria. “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness.” in *Making Face, Making Soul, Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990.

²Harper, Francis. *Iola Leroy*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) p. 48.

³Though many biracial families and people are working politically to gain a biracial category-- a subject of intense debate--I will not broach this topic.

⁴It is necessary here to acknowledge the limits of this piece. While I understand that biraciality does not speak exclusively to black/white unions, much of the discourse available that deals with biracial subjects operates within a black/white paradigm. While I do not intend to exclude biracial people of other backgrounds from my project, my analysis centers black/white biraciality. I believe many of the ideas regarding biracial subjectivity are applicable to subjects of white and “colored” unions.

⁵Cynthia L. Nakashima. “An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-Race People in America.” in *Racially Mixed People in America*. ed. Maria P. P. Root (London: Sage Publications, 1992) p. 169.

⁶Kinsley, Claire Huang. “Questions People Have Asked Me. Questions I Have Asked Myself.” in *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*. ed. Carol Camper. (Canada: Sister Vision Press, 1994) p. 113.

⁷This is primarily evident by observing the prevalence of light-skinned (in many cases biracial) actresses and dark, apparently unracial actors. There is an obvious and dubious void when it comes to lighter-skinned and/or biracial male actors.

⁸Furthermore, it seems that the masculinity of mixed raced male subjects prevents exoticization, yet the intersection of female subjectivity and biraciality allowed “the black female...to be the object of White’s fantasies and curiosities” (Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: And Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 9. In colonial and early post-colonial American contexts, sexism and racism provided for white male desire for mulattas, but precluded white women’s desire for mulattos.

⁹From an interview with Mayson in *Lise Funderberg’s Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity*. (New York: Morrow and Co, 1994) p. 170.

¹⁰Bogle, p. 9.

¹¹Williamson, Joel. *The New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*. (New York: The Free Press, 1980) p. 54.

¹²Nakashima, p. 169.

¹³Dyer, Richard. “White.” in *The Matter of Images: Essays and Representation*. (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 161.

¹⁴Vron Ware. *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*. (London: Verso Press, 1992).

¹⁵Baines, Mercedes. “Bus Fucking.” in *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*. ed. Carol Camper. (Canada: Sister Vision Press, 1994) p. 150.

¹⁶Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. ed. Philip Rosen. (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) p. 200, my emphasis.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁸Snead, James. “Spectatorship and Capture in King Kong: The Guilty Look.” in *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*. (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 22.

¹⁹Robert, J.C. Young. “White Power, White Desire: The Political Economy of the Miscegenation.” in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. (London: Routledge, 1995) p. 149

²⁰Nakashima, p. 165.

²¹Bogle, p. 15.

²²La Flamme, Michelle. “Yo White Boy.” in *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*. ed. Carol Camper. (Canada: Sister Vision Press, 1994) p. 160.

²³Baines, “Where are You From?” in *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*. ed. Carol Camper. (Canada: Sister Vision Press, 1994) p. 151.

²⁴Mulvey, p. 201.

²⁵Nakashima, p. 169.

²⁶Mulvey, p. 201.

²⁷Bogle, Donald. *Brown Sugar: Eighty Years of America’s Black Female Superstars*. (New York: Harmony Books, 1980) p. 96.

²⁸Wiegman, Robyn. *American Anatomies*. (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995), p. 24.

²⁹Baines, p. 150.

Composition

by Keith Leonard

She does not have lovely tresses. A braid
Wanders down her face, silhouetted and dark
Against the bowing trees beyond the window.
Still, I can see her smiling to the music,
(Otis Redding, Mr Pitiful), and reach
With candor and grace for her herbal tea.
Before her brown eyes greeted mine, herbal tea
Seldom meant that someone with wandering braids
Would in harmony sway, and then reach
For scented tea; yet she, solitary, dark
And distant, bowing in time to the music
With the trees, wind-blown beyond the window,

Sips and sways. But she is not dancing. The window,
With its trees, surrounds her and her herbal tea,
Fading with the grey dusk and waning music.
Facing me now, barred behind her long braid,
She shows the smile I only sensed before, as dark
As memories of other smiles. I reach

For the stereo, just beyond my reach,
To change the sad songs. Shaped within the window
Her smile and face and cup are the only dark,
Beautiful in the grey silence of sipped tea.
If she would move her face from behind the braids,
Two locks across her face (unmoved by music

Since she isn’t dancing), she could hear music,
What I would sing but which could not quite reach
Through her silence. (As breezes through her braids,
Her silhouetted sighs blow the trees in the window.)
The distance, I thought, was bridged by the tea;
She should smile some light into the greying dark—

But she has not spoken. Not to clear the dark.
Even the braids that edge her face fade. The music
I choose doesn’t matter. If only I were herbal tea. . .
But she will not sway and she does not reach.
Yet, there is hope and still some light, a window
To the swaying trees, if they sway. But her braid

Like her dark smile, is more image than braid,
More remembered smile than one in reach by the window.
The music blares on. I pour myself some tea.



Keith Leonard is a third year student in Stanford’s PhD program in English Literature.



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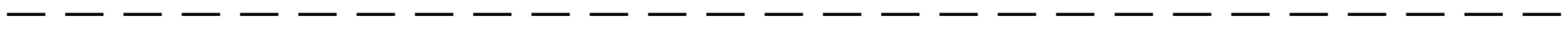
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