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Susan Courtney: Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation

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What Happened in the Tunnel and Other Open American Secrets

THE INTERRACIAL SCREEN KISS

A recent cover story in *Jet* entitled “Is It Still Taboo for Blacks and Whites to Kiss in Movies?” helps me articulate two apparently simple but persistently significant characteristics of this book’s subject: its particular forms of cultural familiarity and spectacularity, both of which function (paradoxically) to keep us from thinking about what the filmic representation and repression of interracial desire can mean. The first of these is evidenced by my strong, if unsubstantiated, memory upon discovering the cover at the grocery store of having seen others like it at checkout counters past. That this sense of familiarity is not simply that of an author’s with her subject is further evidenced by the most recent waves of films that feature, and loudly contemplate, interracial couples (e.g., *Far from Heaven* [2002], *Monster’s Ball* [2001], *Bulworth* [1998], *Jackie Brown* [1997], *Lone Star* [1996], *One False Move* [1992], *Zebrahead* [1992], *Jungle Fever* [1991]). Our cultural familiarity with such representations predates these films and is certainly tied as much to the extensive legal, extralegal, political, economic, and familial histories of “miscegenation” in the United States, as to the extensive history of interracial fantasies throughout American popular culture and its cinema.¹ What I am calling cultural familiarity might also be described as a sense of cliché, or “obviousness,” that clings to them.² To say this is to suggest that to the degree such fantasies have become cliché, the ideologies sustained with them remain obstinately obscured.

The simultaneous sense of our collectively knowing and not knowing about this subject is demonstrated by the story that lies behind *Jet*’s inquiring cover. Apropos of checkout stand literature, and of *Jet*’s particular interest in black celebrity, the story effectively consists of a star-oriented list, with pictures, of contemporary black actors who have and have not kissed whites and in which films. The “still” of the title’s question is given no historical context; there are none of the expected references to first or forbidden interracial kisses in film and TV history, and scant attention is paid to the politics of the filmic “taboo.” The most direct answer to the title ambiguously asserts: “If it’s still taboo, they [Lau-

rence Fishburne, Whitney Houston, and Lela Rochon ha]ve all committed the forbidden act.”³ Perhaps because the structure of the question wants a “yes” or “no” that is not forthcoming, the most interesting complexities hinted at are not acknowledged or pursued.⁴

I begin here not because I expect critical analysis in the checkout line but because this example so resonates with the popular screen productions that preoccupy this book; and because, until recently, the academic world, certainly in film studies, has been a good deal like the reader constituted by the article in *Jet*: we knew such couples signified a lot, we did not take much care to consider exactly what.⁵

Certainly that state of academic affairs has changed considerably in recent years, as is attested by the growth of scholarship in history, literature, and a range of critical “studies” (e.g., legal, cultural, American) interrogating “border” crossings, breeches of “the color line,” and the like.⁶ Such scholarship, much of which has emerged in the course of this book’s writing, signals increasing awareness that representations of interracial desire and sex have much to teach us about the erection and transgression of racial categories. In a short but provocative essay, Nick Browne declared as much about Hollywood film in particular, arguing that “the ideological centerpiece of American popular representation of racial relations” was a certain “constituting prohibition”—“no non-white man can have sanctioned sexual relations with a white woman”—that effectively “constructs parallel racial worlds and puts a boundary between them.”⁷ Interrogating open transgressions of such boundaries via blackface, Michael Rogin proposed in a different vein, borrowing from the lyrics of an Al Jolson song, that the figurative couple “Uncle Sammy and My Mammy” is fundamental to the cultural production of white American identity.⁸ The project at hand pursues these and related issues that emerge when one recognizes that a whole range of interracial pairs, triangles, and quadrangles have perpetually served as key sites of American cinema’s mutual constitution of race and gender, and of continuous, shifting relations among these and other categories of identity and difference.⁹

The bookend-like “classics” near the historical extremes of this study, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), make it apparent that to imagine an interracial couple in popular American cinema has always meant to imagine identity in ways that put into alignment, and utterly bind together, a series of identity categories.¹⁰ *Birth* begins with highly patriarchal and bourgeois depictions of family and home that are then threatened and restored in explicitly interracial terms that in turn give birth to the white supremacist and decidedly phallic nation finally celebrated. In *Guess* the alignment moves in the opposite direction. With its “How would you feel if *your* daughter . . .” prem-

ise, the film takes us from the public space of a crowded airport where the young lovers are first spotted to the private, patriarchal space of Tracy and Hepburn's modern mansion and, ultimately, to the titular dinner table of the film's final shot—here figured as the last stand and absolute core of all social relations. In any number of permutations, with an assortment of functions and outcomes, and despite common assumptions that they are simply “about race,” Hollywood fantasies of miscegenation thus invariably bind together multiple registers of difference, necessitating interrogation of that very binding despite, and because of, the excesses of cliché that also often accompany this process—excesses that drip and bleed from *Guess* and *Birth*, respectively.

While the chapters that follow attempt to map the crowded intersections of difference thus embedded in, and negotiated through, American screen fantasies of miscegenation, I should clarify from the outset the primacy of race and gender for this project.¹¹ For the inextricable join between these categories in popular American cinema is perhaps nowhere more visible than in texts that fantasize interracial desire.¹² And here we arrive at the second point I take from *Jet*'s cover story, more specifically from its images, and that is the spectacular quality of my subject.

The cover is filled by four stills of interracial embraces (not kisses) from four contemporary films.¹³ The story within is also photo-filled, with thirteen more illustrations, nine of which are explicitly intimate. The text asks, without really answering, the title's question. But the sheer volume and repetition of images—mostly close-ups and medium shots of couples holding and touching each other, in compositions that emphatically juxtapose light and dark faces, arms, and hands—insist that even if interracial desire is not categorically taboo (there are seventeen images after all), it is nonetheless a sight to behold.¹⁴ Even so, despite all this exposure, the sight of interracial kissing itself is mostly withheld, even in the photos from films that the text reports include it.¹⁵ Nevertheless, whatever the identities of individual readers attracted by the cover, and however they might interpret the ambiguous messages about the subject (something “still taboo” for better or worse? a liberating sign of changing times? a titillating transgression?), all are invited by the serial repetition of seventeen photographs to consume it as an immanently visible one.¹⁶ Like the publicity still that covers the front of the videotape box for Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, a close-up of interlaced white and black fingers, the details of photography and layout in *Jet* produce the interracial screen couple as an iconic image that presumes to signify instantly, transparently. In fact, such representational details produce the complex and ambiguous subject *as if* its meaning were transparently visible.¹⁷

What is more, these images produce race and gender as themselves visible categories and insist upon the certainty of each in part by drawing

upon the visual codes of the other. The repeated juxtaposition of contrasting skin tones draws attention to skin color in ways that reaffirm the notion that it is a natural, “obvious” signifier of “race.”¹⁸ And visual codes of heterosexuality and gender also permeate the depictions of bodily posture (the men often hold protectively as the women cuddle under and wrap around them), hair (shortly cropped vs. long and “soft”), and states of dress and undress (floral prints, bridal gowns, plunging necklines; suits, athletic and military garb). In combination these images make especially clear that if the possibility of sexual “mingling” across racial lines always implies the potential dissolution of those “lines” and the categories and social structures they enforce, then such destabilizations of race are partly grounded by the rigid conventions of gender identity and heterosexual romance also on display. Conversely, on the occasions when those conventions seem less absolute (e.g., when couples are dressed or undressed similarly), lighting and casting often produce differences of skin tone and hair as *more* visible. This kind of interplay, wherein temporary transgression of one register of difference is negotiated or stabilized through the reassertion of another, is a regular feature of interracial screen fantasies, providing unique opportunities to interrogate such simultaneous, but shifting, coproductions.

Two contemporary films explicitly comment on the familiarity and spectacularity of popular fantasies of interracial desire, one largely suggesting and the other all but insisting on their cinematic histories. In Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* the camera suddenly aligns itself with an unidentified gaze from an apartment window that (mis)sees a playful lovers’ quarrel on the street below as a black man’s assault of a white woman; this look of white surveillance quickly results in the black man’s harassment and near beating by police. The combination here of the camera’s pronounced alignment with an invisible witness (the only such shot in the film), the instantaneous judgment that presumably leads to the phone call to the police, and the police’s arrival with blinding lights (and guns) immediately pointed at the accused emphatically places the scene in a history not only of lynching and police brutality but also of vision and visibility. Indeed, the view from the window Lee momentarily forces us to occupy is in part the product of a history of white vision that cannot be read apart from the history of American cinema.¹⁹ And insofar as this is the moment that makes Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes) turn away from his white lover (Annabella Sciorra), the overwhelming force of that white gaze and the blinding violence it portends are pivotal to the film’s final rendering of what the relationship between the black man and the white woman signifies. For this is the encounter that makes Flipper flip back, so to speak, to his black family and neighborhood to purify himself and the young (light-skinned) black prostitute he protectively embraces in the film’s final shot.²⁰

In Warren Beatty's *Bulworth* the spectacular status of a very different interracial couple is also unmistakable, and its familiarity is called out. When a powerful white male senator (Beatty) finally goes public with his desire for a black woman (Halle Berry), a circus of reporters' flashing cameras literally renders their kiss a mass tele-photo event. While the film's politics are debatable, it speaks one cinematic truth for this book in the implied assertion of a knowing bystander, played by Amiri Baraka. Admonishing the gathered spectators who stand agape at the spectacular interracial kiss, he asks, "Why are you looking like you haven't seen this before?!" Reading "this" not simply as the sexual encounter of a white man and a black woman—that most disavowed but institutionally sanctioned miscegenetic encounter in U.S. history—but also as the production of miscegenation fantasies for our viewing pleasure, this book confirms that viewers of American cinema certainly *have* seen it before, or at least have been sorely tempted, whether or not we remember it. And when cinematic energy has not been expended on showing "this" to us, it has been spent in equally meaningful ways on withholding it from view.

TUNNELING BACK: THE MISCEGENETIC BIRTH OF A NATIONAL CINEMA

Perhaps the most striking evidence of Hollywood's preoccupation with the subject is the fact that the most long-beloved origin story of classical Hollywood cinema itself depends upon a relentless fantasy of miscegenation. For it is the ostensible fear of black men raping white women that not only sets the narrative of *The Birth of a Nation* in motion but increasingly fuels much of the cinematic form that caused an earlier generation of film historians to celebrate the film as the "birth" of Hollywood cinema, and to crown its director, D. W. Griffith, as that cinema's honorary father.²¹ Identifying the desire it strives to eradicate, but upon which it ironically depends, in one of its intertitles the film names miscegenation, like a kind of shadow title, the "blight [of] a nation."

But the mixed origins of American cinema can be traced back further to a host of early short films, beginning at least with Edwin S. Porter's *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903). And ongoing Hollywood preoccupation with the subject is evidenced not only by a wide range of films produced in each subsequent decade but also by the industry's explicit prohibition against it for nearly thirty years. With a clause inherited from the guidelines known as the Don'ts and Be Carefuls (1927), the Production Code forbade the depiction of "miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races)" from 1930 to 1956. Interrogating such striking appearances and disappearances, this book attempts to understand miscegenation as variously defined and denied by popular Ameri-

can cinema itself, focusing on fantasies of black and white sexual relations when appropriate but also considering related fantasies of desire between whites and Native Americans, Asians, Mexicans, and a range of typically unspecified islanders. In analyzing such a range, I aim to discern how such fantasies are depicted and modified throughout the larger historical period, and to what ends.

I do not attempt a comprehensive treatment of this history. Rather, I read pivotal clusters of popular films, censorship documents, and related cultural material at a series of punctual moments. In the process, my readings are guided by two primary concerns. The first I have come to think of as the musical chairing of popular Hollywood (and pre-Hollywood) fantasies of miscegenation: the arrangements and rearrangements of players and interracial scenarios that invite us to consider how perpetually shifting and recurrent paradigms are revised and resurrected over time. The second focuses on matters of cinematic form, interrogating how conceptions of gender and race have been mutually produced and negotiated through filmic articulations of vision, visibility, voice, and cinematic space. The ways in which these two conceptual paths repeatedly converge in turn lead me to propose that particular interracial scenarios in particular historical periods reflect not only historically specific ideological concerns but also specific filmic mechanisms for (mutually) constituting race and gender.

A look at *What Happened in the Tunnel* is instructive here. In this short comedy a white woman and her black maid respond to a white man's persistent flirtations with the white woman (fig. I.1) by trading places with one another as their train passes through a tunnel. When the train emerges into the light, the man who has moved in the dark to kiss the white woman finds himself kissing the black woman instead (fig. I.2). The film ends with the women's laughter as the flustered kisser pretends to read his newspaper (fig. I.3). The first interracial screen kiss is thus staged as a kind of spectacular secret exposed, an "attraction" advertised by the title that dare not name it but sets us up to want to see and know it.²² That we do only fleetingly, that we are denied the critical moment within the tunnel itself and experience more its aftershock than its occurrence (the man pulls away almost as quickly as they come back into the light), further toys with our pleasure in interracial screen fantasies, as Jane Gaines and Sharon Willis have both suggested in different contexts, as one of seeing/not seeing, knowing/not knowing their conditions and implications.²³ And for good reason: if we extend our contemplation of the scenario much is exposed, even by this shortest of films.

Most significant, perhaps, is *Tunnel's* open display, albeit fleeting and significantly qualified, of the very interracial sexual encounter that will be most avidly disavowed for many decades to come, namely, that between



FIG. 1.1. *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903). Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division.



FIG. 1.2



FIG. 1.3

a white man and a black woman. For, as we will see, the future suppression of this interracial pair, and thus of the legally sanctioned history of sexual exploitation under slavery it might threaten to evoke, combined with its replacement by the far more popular and enduring Jim Crow era fantasy of the black rapist, will profoundly shape and obscure the meaning of “miscegenation” in dominant American cinema, and American culture, for the better part of a century.²⁴ While later chapters will consider how such a profound restructuring of popular memory and fantasy occurred at the movies, here it pays to consider how even this momentary flash of racial-sexual history is filmically negotiated in 1903 before being more forcibly denied.

Lasting no more than a minute all told, several seconds of which feature a black screen, even this very short and relatively simple film foregrounds the routine complexity of interplays between multiple orders of difference in film fantasies of miscegenation, as well as cinema’s capacity to position and reposition the spectator in relation thereto. Most obviously, the blackout experienced by the onscreen passengers is also experienced by the film’s spectators, a reminder that we, too, are subjected to the machinations of an apparatus that locates us in space, time, circuits of desire and identification, and the looks that enforce and subvert such relations.²⁵ And in this case that positioning has been much debated. Several feminist critics have seized upon *Tunnel* as evidence of resistance to patriarchy (the women laugh at the man) and/or of its restoration (the women are defined as spectacle, despite and beyond their laughter), often noting the intersection of these with the film’s racist humor.²⁶ Jacqueline Stewart reads it also as an example of early cinema’s registration of black mobility into formerly “white” spaces in the period and white anxiety about that movement.²⁷ And Jane Gaines has recently prodded us to pay more attention to the importance of sexuality in this film: “There is room here to consider the acceptance or rejection of the heterosexual kiss as a position equal in importance to race or gender. Wanting to be or not wanting to be kissed may override everything else” (90). My contribution to such readings is to insist not only that we need them all but also that if we read *Tunnel* as negotiating anxieties about the simultaneous instability of multiple orders of difference, we can develop our understanding of how it intricately binds those orders together, negotiating potential breakdowns of one through the strictures of the others.

As its critics have observed, the film’s racial joke depends on visual codes that direct the spectator how to read the women as (proper and improper) spectacle.²⁸ It is because the black woman is inscribed as not properly a “woman,” as anything but the object of this man’s desire, that the racial divide is so rigid in the first place.²⁹ This is enforced even before the joke through the direction of the man’s attentions and the represen-

tation of the women. The white woman, first centered within the shot as the recipient of the diegetic male look, wears a dark, high-fashion hat and dress with an elaborate collar that frame her face to be seen. The black woman, wearing a mostly white maid's uniform, is obese and very dark. Displayed in this fashion, her facial features almost disappear in the composition, and she is visually marked as "other" than the white man and woman, who are more visible and visually joined.

At the same time as the film's racism thus depends upon conventional terms of sexual difference and heterosexual (male) desire, these women—traveling alone, pulling such a trick, and enjoying their laugh at the man—clearly signify female movement and transgression of male control.³⁰ But, in a reversal of the gesture whereby the film manages racial chaos through conventional orders of gender and sexuality, we can also read the racial joke and its assumptions as the sanction and the limit of the women's transgression. They travel without men, but with an evident racial and class order of mistress and maid that makes them appear as a "proper" female couple. And their switch and laughter can also be read as in part complicit with the assumption that the black woman is not a proper object of desire for a white man.

Hence, in this earliest film fantasy of miscegenation, we find a structure that at once allows for the expression of anxiety about the unstable state of dominant racial and sexual affairs but also offers, in its dovetailing of said affairs, means of negotiating its multiple anxieties. If there is one thing that binds together all American film fantasies of miscegenation, this is it. Throughout this book I aim to interrogate the ways in which race and gender, most vividly, are thus repeatedly defined and redefined through one another in such texts—in a host of different ways, at different moments, in response to a host of particular and ongoing worries and pleasures.

HISTORY, FANTASY, AND FILM

Even this introductory glance at the project's main concerns should make it evident that the racial and sexual logics at work throughout the texts under examination, and already in *What Happened in the Tunnel*, are not unique to the cinema. Fantasies of miscegenation, and the desires and relations they articulate, have a much longer and wider history than cinema itself. While this study cannot attempt to address all of that history—including extensive rhetorics of miscegenation in the law, literature, science, and so forth—we must keep it in mind in order to discern the particular ways cinema inhabits and shapes that larger cultural landscape.

The complex relations that can obtain between American cinema's investments in miscegenation and those beyond it are suggested in part by the way *The Birth of a Nation's* title echoes the first antimiscegenation statute in the United States. Passed in 1661 by the Maryland General Assembly, that statute deemed intermarriage between white women and black men "the disgrace of the nation."³¹ Yet, although this originary law and Griffith's film both imagine sexual union between blacks and whites as tantamount to the ruination "of the nation" itself, the former targeted quite a different relation than those that made it to the screen. While *Birth* is fixated on a fantasy of newly freed black men chasing upper-class white women in the reconstructed South, the Maryland statute addressed intermarriage between black male slaves and white female servants.³² Indeed, it capitalized on that relation by declaring that a white woman who married a black man "was to serve the master of her husband, and all her children were to become slaves." In other words, as one legal historian explains, "What the Maryland miscegenation statute did . . . was to insure the slaveholders the right to keep in bondage both parties of a miscegenous marriage as well as their children. This property aspect of the Maryland statute quickly spread to the other states. According to some historians it became a practice of plantation owners to encourage their slaves to marry low class white women in the hope of gaining more slaves."³³ This juxtaposition of a legal and a filmic treatment begins to demonstrate that even when the rhetoric is similar, the two spheres of discourse can function quite differently. Whereas miscegenation law so often works to protect and fortify white male property, dominant filmic treatments of miscegenation typically work to fortify and protect white male identity.³⁴ And while such projects certainly overlap (the law keeps boundaries of "whiteness" and "maleness" intact, and cinema legitimates systems of material privilege), American cinema's ongoing concern with miscegenation is more squarely devoted to negotiating the *psychic* colorations, if you will, of identity and desire.

At the same time, without forgetting the very real and often brutal social histories that have given rise to, and resulted from, dominant cultural fantasies of miscegenation, it is nonetheless also relevant that significant portions of that history have also taken place within the field of representation. The rhetoric of miscegenation that sought to legitimate lynching was targeted by Ida B. Wells already in the late nineteenth century as itself a misrepresentation. As Hazel Carby quotes and paraphrases her, Wells argued that "the association between lynching and rape was strictly a contemporary phenomenon. . . . there was no historical foundation for that association, since 'the crime of rape was unknown during four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one.'"³⁵

The “bestial” image of black men appears “all at once” when other attempts to justify black disenfranchisement had failed. As Carby vividly writes, “The cry of rape was an extremely effective way to create panic and fear . . . the charge of rape became the excuse for murder” (308). While the reported (real) violence sparked by Hollywood fantasies of miscegenation has fortunately never approximated anything of the catastrophic magnitude of lynching, these texts have nonetheless long fed and solicited anxieties, desires, and beliefs of considerable consequence. This book thus interrogates popular cinema as a unique form of history in its own right, as a record of dominant fantasies consumed in the course of everyday life by whites and people of color alike.³⁶

Focusing on the status of miscegenation *fantasies* in this project for a moment, a final consideration of those lurking outside the cinema can better attune us to reading the filmic versions in which we will soon enough be immersed. Useful here is Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, a book which “begin[s] . . . an inventory of whiteness as a subjective terrain” by analyzing interviews conducted with thirty white women in the mid-1980s on their attitudes about race.³⁷ From a chapter on these women’s ideas about interracial sexual relationships, two interviews are especially relevant here. The first is with a woman given the pseudonym Chris, in her early thirties at the time, speaking of her middle-class upbringing in an all-white community on Long Island:

CHRIS: The Black boys—I was just scared to death of them, figured they wanted to be sexual with me.

FRANKENBERG: Why did you feel that?

CHRIS: I think, a stereotype I’d learned.

FRANKENBERG: Where from?

CHRIS: Books, TV, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we studied it in school a lot. . . . [We learned] that there were parts of the country where things aren’t so rosy—the South, that had slavery and the thing that happened there all the time was that Black men wanted to rape white women. (79)

In a strikingly conscious manner, Chris openly attributes the “stereotype” of the black rapist to cultural representations, seeming even in her list of sources to conflate those with her “education” proper. Yet as soon as she acknowledges the effect of this representational saturation, she disavows it by projecting the fantasy onto an alleged history of distant “parts of the country . . . the South.” Chris’s divided belief in the myth of the black rapist—her knowledge of its being a pervasive, influential construction and her disavowal of her own investment in that construction—is indicative, I think, of the wider status of such fantasies in dominant

U.S. culture. Even when we as subjects of that culture, especially “we” white subjects, can begin to recognize where they come from, we do not seriously admit the degree to which they have invaded us.

It is this invasion of American subjects by cultural fantasies of miscegenation, and the forms they can take on within and among us, that is this book’s deepest concern. Because popular cinema is such a ripe site for analyzing collective belief, it offers an ideal set of texts for such a study. And Frankenberg’s interviews with real people not only confirm the power of popular media to disseminate such fantasies but highlight the complex and contradictory ways we can internalize them.

Chris’s singling out of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is particularly suggestive. For the only text she names as a source for her belief in the myth of the black rapist is one whose narrative seeks to expose and critique that myth. Although the visible majority of white townspeople in the novel and the film are quick to believe Mayella Ewell’s charge that Tom Robinson raped her, the extended courtroom scenes prove Tom’s innocence and go so far as to suggest that Mayella’s white father is the true abuser. And yet, defying the logic and purpose of this narrative, Chris remembers the myth and forgets the critique. Certainly *Mockingbird* gives her the means to do so insofar as the jury convicts Tom despite his innocence, and he is shot to death when he tries to escape. Nevertheless, still striking is the degree to which the accompanying critique of that chain of events disappears from Chris’s account of the representational education that taught her “that Black men wanted to rape white women.” This suggests that what makes these fantasies is in part their ability to supplant and reconfigure rational logics of classical narrative with the often blatantly fictional and contradictory maneuvers of the psyche and representation.

Such forms of contradiction are further suggested by another of Frankenberg’s interviewees, a white woman raised in Alabama in the 1930s:

GINNY: Black people would ride in the back of the bus, had different rest-rooms, and couldn’t eat in the same cafeteria as a white person. When I went into town with my husband to buy my kids some clothes—it’s funny, I guess you’re raised like this—if you see Black people touch anything, you won’t buy it. I don’t know why.

FRANKENBERG: Because that’s how you’re raised?

GINNY: Yes. But since I’ve got older and especially since I’ve come to California, I always—never taught my kids that. I said I didn’t want them to marry into it, you know what I mean. But as far as being friends, I’ve had Black people in my house. . . . To me, they’re like me or anyone else, they’re human. (96)

Recognizing the contradiction between Ginny's simultaneous insistence on sameness ("they're like me or anyone else") and difference ("I didn't want them to marry into it"), Frankenberg interprets it to mark a "shift [in a racial boundary that nonetheless] remains intact: from a position of full avoidance of shared space, Ginny will now allow Blacks into the house and into the friendship circle, but not into the family and not into the bodies of family members" (96). After examining such overtly sexual anxieties about interracial contact, Frankenberg concludes that the idea of interracial relationships threatens boundaries of race, culture, and, "more than that," the economic hierarchy that depends upon those boundaries (100).

While Ginny's racial-sexual phobias certainly do work to shore up economic hierarchies, in our context the complexity of her utterance begs further analysis. What seems missing is attention to the fact that the stakes of her narrative are not simply cultural and economic but also fantasmatic. The continuing fluctuations of uncertainty and contradiction ("I always—never") seem to mark it strikingly as an eruption of unconscious desire—an eruption that only makes sense if we listen to the contradiction, the mistakes, the certain uncertainty it repeatedly trips over. Because Ginny's text seems to operate more by the illogic of a transcribed dream than by the rules of rational thought, it seems appropriate to dissect and rearrange it to pursue the relations between her segregation memories and interracial phobias.³⁸ For there are distinct echoes between her analysis of shopping and her conception of white woman as sexual commodity: "I didn't want them to marry into it." "If you see Black people touch anything, you won't buy it." Ginny, mother of a white daughter, implicitly links these statements herself when she describes a white woman she knows who married "into the Black" and had a child in that marriage and now "she can't go with a white guy" (96). To marry "into it" is to touch what black people touch and to be touched by "it," to become spoiled goods in a white sexual marketplace.

Yet these echoing details suggest an even greater horror. To marry "into the Black" is to lose that inexplicable distinction ("I don't know why") that kept *them* at the back of the bus, in different rest rooms and cafeterias. This distinction and the hierarchy it works to maintain seem all the more tenuous when we read the clues in Ginny's speech elsewhere that mark her lower-class background (89, 96). To keep your child from marrying into it, as Frankenberg claims, is to keep the distinction alive and certain. Further, the social and economic reasons underlying racial difference are obscured precisely by being displaced onto an even deeper psychosexual layer of racial beliefs.³⁹ In Ginny's narrative the shift from shopping to marriage facilitates a restructuring of racial knowledge, such that the reason for segregation—the fact that racial difference and sepa-

ration worked to secure social and economic hierarchies—becomes forgotten and is supplanted by the “self-evident” belief in the miscegenation taboo: she cannot explain why you don’t buy what black people touch (“I don’t know why”), but she assumes there is no need to explain why you don’t want your children to marry into it (“you know what I mean”). As racial ideology is mapped onto the sexual, its “reality” is thus firmly implanted and secured at the level of psychic belief.⁴⁰ Only by recognizing this kind of displacement of the social apparatus of racism onto the fantasmatic, and the kinds of affective investments in often contradictory and irrational beliefs it facilitates, can we begin to understand how Ginny and the dominant white culture of which she is a part can come to speak and believe such an open contradiction as, in effect, “they’re just like me or anyone else, they’re human; they’re nothing like me, they’re not human.”⁴¹

Without a doubt, Ginny is not alone in having “forgotten” whatever explanations she might have once known about race, segregation, and interracial contact. Indeed, the racial-sexual fantasies and beliefs imparted to her in the South in the 1930s seem quite close to the ones that Chris “studied in school [and out] a lot” on the East Coast in the 1960s. Moreover, I think we have only just begun to understand the degree to which such psychologies structure dominant American fantasies of race and sex. At the very least, these white women’s words strikingly illustrate the constancy and strength of dominant miscegenation fantasies, and their dissemination throughout the United States throughout the twentieth century.⁴² In addition, they would seem to call our attention to the ways in which the social, cultural, and economic hierarchies held in place through the fiction of racial difference are in fact installed in us, produced and reproduced, through sexual fantasy. While Frankenberg’s project is a welcome attempt to begin uncovering such relations in the white imagination, it also implicitly reveals the need to pursue that project in the field of representation, a field uniquely devoted to the production of cultural fantasy. For only through such examination can we begin to see, and remember, the meanings behind fantasies of miscegenation that are in many ways still as “obvious” in our national unconscious as in Ginny’s. Because of Hollywood’s unique contribution to the production of such “obviousnesses”—its powerful mechanisms for inviting spectators to desire, identify, and believe—it is to that cinema that I now turn.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into three parts, interrogating dominant American screen fantasies of miscegenation before, during, and after the Produc-

tion Code's express refusal of them. Chapter 1 considers a variety of short films from 1903 to 1912 that flirt with interracial desire, most of which were directed by D. W. Griffith at Biograph. Proposing that these films mark a transitional phase in the development of classical modes of constructing gender and race, as well as a significant backstory to *The Birth of a Nation*, I analyze the ways they regularly subject not only women but also men and the spectator to states of intense vulnerability. I then consider how such representations were transformed into the now "classic" spectacles of white female suffering, an investigation that continues in chapter 2. There I begin with the inflamed contemporary rhetoric that surrounded black boxing champion Jack Johnson, arguing that the popular fantasy of a black man beating a white woman was a direct effect of the repression of the fantasy of a black man beating a white man. I demonstrate how this process is cinematically elaborated in *Birth* to produce a transcendent form of vision for its white male protagonist that is systematically differentiated from forms of white suffering Griffith now confines for the most part to female bodies, and from a form of black male looking he insists is utterly carnal. It is the fusion of these forms, I propose, as well as the familiar ideologies they perpetuate, that gives rise to the film's new "nation," its privileged white subject, and a filmic spectator modeled after him.

Turning in the second part to the Production Code's prohibition, I argue that although Hollywood's was not the only such ban, its forms and effects were considerable and unique: it shaped not only who could be imagined doing what with whom but also how spectators would be cinematically trained to read "race."⁴³ Chapter 3 offers a cultural context for, as well as a history of, the Code's miscegenation clause and selectively surveys the files of the Production Code Administration (PCA) to decipher what the Hollywood censors did with it. Reading their often confused and contradictory interpretations of a seemingly specific ban on "sex relationships between the white and black races," I argue that the PCA was ultimately complicit with the reduction of questions of "race" in U.S. culture to issues of "black" and "white," and that it helped to construct those identities in increasingly visual terms. Chapter 4 expands this argument through case studies of two tremendously popular films from roughly the beginning and near end of the Code's strict ban, *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *Pinky* (1949). Reading these extraordinary PCA files and the films that eventually emerged, I argue that with the help of the miscegenation clause classical Hollywood cinema gradually shifts the location of racial meaning from invisible discourses of "blood" and ancestry to visual discourses of skin, color, and cinema itself. And these racial projects, it becomes clear, thoroughly depend upon classical cinematic mechanisms for producing sexual difference as well.

In the last part, chapter 5 considers the surge of miscegenation films in the 1950s, following the dismantling of the Production Code's ban. Interracial tropes examined in earlier periods return with a vengeance in attempts to fortify increasingly beleaguered white male subjects facing increased demands for racial justice and a host of gender pressures. And when old methods repeatedly fail, new and sometimes drastic measures are taken to restore white male privilege and vision. The extremes to which the films go in this period, I argue, reflect both the tremendous strains on, and the stubborn tenacity of, conventional representational systems. In chapter 6 such trends culminate in arguably America's favorite miscegenation film of the late twentieth century, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. I probe the high stakes of this popularity by juxtaposing *Guess* with two other profoundly influential interracial texts of its day, the 1967 Supreme Court decision that put an end to laws prohibiting interracial marriage and Eldridge Cleaver's best-selling *Soul on Ice* (1968), a book that boldly diagnosed the effects of dominant miscegenation fantasies on the politics and experiences of everyday U.S. life. This triad throws into relief what the popular film could and could not do: it could embrace the transformation of the dominant racial order but only with forceful reassertions of the dominant sexual order; and it could renounce the miscegenation taboo only by updating and reasserting a series of classical Hollywood identities and forms that had long been sustained with it.

By the end of the book it is clear that American cinema has envisioned the very meaning, appearance, and limits of racial and gendered identities in perpetual relation. While the Biograph films openly display masculine failure and suffering, they can only do so against the backdrop of an extremely conservative racial order; and when that order is disturbed in the most popular silent miscegenation film, an emphatically white masculinity emphatically reasserts its authority and privilege. Conversely, Hollywood's codification of "race" through the Production Code utterly depends on the malleability of female bodies and identities. And as psychic and political battlefields shift in the late fifties and sixties, with new spaces opening up to black men—albeit in highly regulated ways—it is masculinity that is protected above all. Understanding this legacy, I hope, puts us in a better position to understand its continued, shifting forms and effects.