

**“What Is It”? Containing the Threat of the Black Male Body in  
American Popular Culture.**

**Jonathan David Tomas Ward**

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### Abstract.

This thesis takes a critical look at the representation of the black male body in American popular culture throughout the twentieth century, intending to examine the meanings ascribed to this body and analyze the ways that these meanings are communicated to the consumers of these cultural productions. The focus will be on visual examples of popular cultural productions, with the intention of examining representations of the black male body in film, photography, and television, and the viewer. In looking at these cultural texts, the thesis will seek to examine the relationship between visual text and spectator, in terms of how these contribute to understandings of black masculinity. Because of the impact of cultural productions upon conceptions of the world, the self, and the relationship between the two, this thesis will seek to develop an understanding of the way that black masculinity is depicted visually, and what the implications of this are for American culture.

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“What Is It?” Containing the Threat of the Black Male Body in American  
Popular Culture.

## Introduction

William Henry Johnson, an African American sideshow freak performer, was employed by Phineas Taylor (“P.T.”) Barnum and displayed as the missing link between humans and apes under the name of the “What-Is-It?”<sup>1</sup> Johnson was exhibited from the 1860s to 1924, accompanied by the following pronouncement:

Is it a lower order of MAN? Or is it a higher order of MONKEY? None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both. It is beyond dispute THE MOST MARVELLOUS CREATURE LIVING, it was captured in a savage state in Central Africa, it is probably about 20 years old, 2 feet high, intelligent, docile, active, sportive, and PLAYFUL AS A KITTEN. It has a skull, limbs, and general anatomy of an ORANG OUTANG and the COUNTENANCE OF A HUMAN BEING.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont. Photograph by Ken Burns. (Thomson 1997: 57)

<sup>1</sup> James W. Cook, Jr provides useful biographical information about Johnson, in “Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts” in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. NY & London: New York University Press, 1996. Pp. 139-157.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson 1997: 37

The choice of language to describe Johnson here is telling: he is consistently referred to as “it,” and there is the overt questioning of whether he is human or not. If he is human, the description makes clear that he must be of a “lower order,” or he is compared in animalistic terms: “creature,” “kitten,” or “orang outang.” There is the implication of deception here as well, in that although Johnson may have the “countenance of a human being,” he possesses all of the other intellectual and physical characteristics of something non-human. Thomson observes that part of the appeal of Barnum’s shows lay in the presentation of the opportunity for the audience to ‘exercise their expertise in defining truth,’ that being the “truth” of the body that could be detected visually. The imperative of making the body intelligible is abundantly clear; not only does this appear to be a legitimate question in terms of the desire to understand what exactly is being looked at by an audience of observers, it also establishes the way in which non-normative bodies can be perceived as either sub-human or non-human. These bodies cause anxiety when they do not necessarily fit into an oppressive taxonomy of humanness. As Judith Butler remarks, ‘the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer “humanness” on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than human.’<sup>3</sup> William Henry Johnson’s impact is a stark reminder of the frequent dehumanizing ways in which black men have been perceived and described within American culture. The appellation of the “What-Is-It?” takes on greater significance within a history of the black male body being understood as a threat because of its lack of immediate legibility as human. Michel de Certeau discusses intelligibility in terms of its formation relative to the other, and as

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<sup>3</sup> Butler 2004 (Undoing Gender): 2

something that can figuratively be inscribed upon the body: '*intelligibility is established through a relation with the other* [...] the body becomes a *legible* picture that can in turn be translated into that which can be *written* within a space of language. [...] The body is a cipher that awaits deciphering.'<sup>4</sup> The intelligibility of bodies relies upon their being positioned in relief to each other, each being co-constitutive of the other: the identification of the other and the process of making intelligible lies in the identification of what the self is *not*: the pleasures of looking at the black male body within Barnum's freakshow lay in the confirmation of the superior whiteness inherent in having the privilege of the look. Intelligibility brings the body into the realm of discourse, which as Teresa de Lauretis discusses, has the power to 'do violence to people, a violence which is material and physical', the violence here being the deprivation of humanity, and its attached privileges of citizenship, that results from being understood as non-human.<sup>5</sup>

As Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains, the freak show allows for a clear distinction to be made between the spectacle and the spectators, and between the normal and the deviant. The distinction between spectacle and spectators is made clear in a publicity poster for the *What Is It?* (Fig.2). Not only is this difference starkly racialized, as the darkness of the *What Is It?* stands in immediately noticeable opposition to the whiteness of the onlookers, but also in the staging of this picture: the *What Is It?* occupies the centre of the image and is encircled by the white audience, eliciting the spatial organization of the freak show space where the freak is situated centrally as a spectacle of intrigue; the normality of the viewers is confirmed by them wearing the 'respectable garb of the middle class,' and being composed of men, women and children, implying the reputability

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<sup>4</sup> de Certeau 1988: 3

<sup>5</sup> de Lauretis 1987: 17

of this as family entertainment.<sup>6</sup> This publicity poster also works prescriptively: the audience are informed implicitly who the intended viewer is, and what they should look like, therefore if they do not enjoy the pleasures of the freak show in terms of its confirmation of their identity as opposing that which they are gazing upon, they are positioned as outside of the vision of whiteness suggested by the poster.



Figure 2. Adams 2001: 168. © Collection of the New-York Historical Society

This ritual allows for the audience to be active in their self-determination as normative, which allows for the body of the Other to be inscribed as such, thus quelling anxiety about ways in which to control this body. Once the body is seen, it is marked and thus contained:

Freak shows framed and choreographed bodily differences that we now call “race,” “ethnicity,” and “disability” in a ritual that enacted the social process of making cultural otherness from the raw materials of human physical variation. The freak

<sup>6</sup> The freak show constituting “proper” family entertainment foreshadows that of the lynching, where the spectacle of black otherness was to be enjoyed by all (whites).

show is a spectacle, a cultural performance that gives primacy to visual apprehension in creating symbolic codes and institutionalizes the relationship between the spectacle and the spectators. In freak shows, the exhibited body became a text written in boldface to be deciphered according to the needs and desires of the onlookers.<sup>7</sup>

The freak show provides a useful analytical tool within this thesis: the body of the black male is othered, produced as spectacle for an audience who are taught to look at this body in rigidly prescribed ways, and finally commodified; the black male body takes centre stage as the freak within the case studies I have chosen as a tool through which to cement whiteness itself. In the chapters that follow, I will explain how the logistics of the freak show are played out in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the lynching postcards of James Allen's *Without Sanctuary*, Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Black Book*, and Tom Fontana's *Oz*. The freak show operates through spectacularizing a body understood as Other for a white audience to collectively cement their perception of whiteness. Where this body is put on display and utilized as confirmation of the rigid and impermeable boundaries of the humanity of the viewer, the production of this body as a commodity for profit to be made for a white owner occurs with the simultaneous diminution of the subject's humanity. The case studies used in this thesis will elucidate the particular ways in which the black male body becomes the "freak" in these respective cultural productions.

The exhibition of William Henry Johnson exemplifies the way in which blackness was perceived as indicative of the strength of the binary of human vs. non-human, where any non-normative bodies are understood as non-human; this of course has been well established throughout America's colonial history, most pertinently in the example of the transatlantic slave trade in relation to African American identity. The extant belief of

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<sup>7</sup> Thomson 1997: 60

blackness as non-human or sub-human not only allowed for the successful exhibition of Johnson as the “What Is It?”, but also makes clear the interest of white audiences in inscribing his body (and all black bodies) with meaning: the formulation of “he cannot be human, so therefore what exactly *is* he” can only exist in tandem with the perception of black bodies being that they are, without doubt, something other than human. James W. Cook, Jr. highlights Barnum’s calculated promotion that relied upon the exhibition of Johnson as an incitement to simultaneously see this body as Other and to categorise this body: ‘In both its name (“What Is It”) and its ingeniously evasive classification-type (“nondescript”), Barnum’s early 1860 hybrid both literally and figuratively begged the public to fill in the blanks.’<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates not only the ways in which the meanings of race -- and how race can be read through the body -- are mutable, but also crucially the way in which this meaning is so strenuously sought out. Barnum was able to capitalize on the need to define the body and could manipulate the way in which his audience came to see Johnson, and thus to understand themselves. Barnum’s staging inscribed Johnson’s body with Otherness, while the audiences who came to stare had their normative whiteness reaffirmed. The photographs taken of Johnson by Matthew Brady (Fig.3) demonstrate some of the narrative tricks used in the showing of Johnson, in their ability to suggest racialized Otherness, such as the fur suit, the shaved head, the walking stick, and the exotic backdrop.

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<sup>8</sup> Cook, Jr 1996: 140



Figure 3. Thomson 1996: 143. Circa 1865, by Matthew Brady. Courtesy of Meserve Collection, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

The exhibition of the “What Is It?” also exemplifies the power held by Barnum in his “selling” of Johnson as a curiosity to be gawped at: ‘both as a popular museum manager and as a white, antebellum New Yorker, Barnum’s handling of the entire “What Is It?” episode placed him squarely within the ideological mainstream of his social milieu’, Cook Jr argues.<sup>9</sup> Emphasising the fact that aside from his tapered head (which, it was speculated, was caused by microcephaly) Johnson had no unusual or anomalous physical attributes, Leslie Fiedler comments that he ‘was, in short, a triumph of packaging and “humbug,” in which it would be nice to believe that he participated as a co-conspirator rather than a victim and that, therefore, his much-advertised “last words” (“Well, we fooled ‘em a long time”) were authentic, and not just one more, posthumous con.’<sup>10</sup> Given

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 144

<sup>10</sup> Fiedler 1981: 165

this suggested lack of “otherness”, the successful exhibition of Johnson as the subhuman missing link between Man and beast demonstrates the way in which blackness itself can be read as a cipher for absent humanity. The placing of Johnson in this psychic space also shores up the supremacy of white bodies as the epitome of humanness: the white viewers need to be absolutely convinced of their whiteness as key signifier of humanity in order to then question the humanity of any non-white bodies.

Rachel Adams, in her comprehensive study of the cultural importance of the American freak show, notes the racialized element of the bodies on display to satiate the overwhelming curiosity of the paying audience: ‘Although they have often been treated as an ephemeral form of amusement, freak shows performed important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine, from exotic dark-skinned people, to victims of war and disease, to ambiguously sexed bodies.’<sup>11</sup> It is worthy of note here that blackness is given as an example of one of ‘the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness’<sup>12</sup>, occupying similar space to those bodies which exhibit traumatic conflict and disease, or those which threaten understandings of gender. Fiedler, in describing his study *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, states that he ‘found that the archetypal outsider was figured not by the woman, the homosexual, the Jew, the Red Man, and the Black, as it often has been in classic American literature.’<sup>13</sup> Instead, he ‘discovered that the strangely formed body

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<sup>11</sup> Adams, Rachel. *Sideshow U.S.A. Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 2

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Fiedler, Leslie. “Foreword” in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York & London: New York University Press, 1996. Pp. xiii-xviii (xiii)

has represented absolute Otherness in all times and places since human history began.’<sup>14</sup> Within the confines of this thesis, I will examine the ways in which the black male body and this ‘strangely formed body’ that Fiedler describes in fact overlap (bringing some of those other categories of outsidership back into the equation). Both are bodies which are perceived to be absolutely Other, and both are captured within a system of discipline that first and foremost relies upon a process of distinguishing the body as non-human and in need of containment, which is inextricably linked with the necessity of being able to be visually detected: the body is inscribed with a message of non-humanness. The thesis will demonstrate the ways in which the black male body is transfigured into spectacle in order to shore up the boundaries of whiteness and therefore confirm its normative power, where the representation of this body not only exists as an analogue to the freak show but replaces it. The black male body is repeatedly depicted as ‘the strangely formed body,’ concretizing the meaning of black masculinity as deviant Otherness. As Bridget Byrne highlights, whiteness itself is often only legible when situated in contradistinction to that of non-whiteness; it relies upon the presence of a racialised other because in and of itself, whiteness is not racialised: white people ‘may only feel, or be conscious of being, white in the presence of racialised others. [...] whiteness is more than a conscious identity, it is also a position within racialized discourses as well as a set of practices and imaginaries.’<sup>15</sup> Thus whiteness is strengthened as the unmarked ideal when figured alongside the deviant black male body.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Byrne, Bridget. *White Lives: The Interplay of "Race," Class and Gender in Everyday Life*. London: Routledge, 2006. Pp.2-3

## Control

It is also important to note that not only did freak shows appeal to their audience because of their perceived potential to contain the threat of these bodies, but this very containment allowed for the control of these bodies – a process which this thesis seeks to explore in various permutations. Adams addresses the way in which skin colour is conflated with notions of African primitiveness and danger: 'In a climate of more overt racism, dark skin was enough to secure a position as a wild African savage, a sideshow staple until at least the middle of the twentieth century.'<sup>16</sup> The importance of skin colour in relation to black bodies is also important within an American historical context: black skin was utilized as a marker of slave identity; to be black was to be fixed within the socioeconomic system of chattel slavery as a piece of property and thus not human.<sup>17</sup> This solidified the perceived need to read the body in order to maintain social order: the legibility of the body as black was inextricably connected to economics. Slaves were sought out because of their black skin, while simultaneously their blackness was used as a justification of their enslavement. Where blackness became conflated with enslavement, predicated upon the perception of the absence of humanity, blackness itself became the signifier of the non-human. Within this historical context, passing becomes particularly problematic because it poses a financial threat: if black bodies could not be

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<sup>16</sup> Adams 2001: 12

<sup>17</sup> Blackness as a signifier for absent humanity was crystallized by the Supreme Court ruling of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856). Thomas Ross discusses this case in terms of its denial of the humanity of black people, where the 'rhetorical ends of white innocence and black abstraction' were 'achieved perfectly.' (Ross 1997: 90). Anthony Lemelle, Jr. also discusses the longstanding dehumanization of the black male within US history: 'The founding documents of the U.S. are also part of anti-black male thinking. [...] An essential part of the thinking is that black males do not deserve full citizenship. They deserve different treatment in terms of patriarchy.' (Lemelle, Jr. 2010: 125)

incorporated into the economic system as tools of productivity, the need to make the body legible in racial terms becomes all the more urgent.

### **Spectacle**

The freak show is not only useful to this thesis in terms of addressing the connotations associated with black skin that were cemented by this form of entertainment; the function of spectacle to allow for the visual interrogation of the body whilst remaining protected by any imagined contamination from that body is also key. Black masculinity provokes intrigue and desire, and compels the white viewer to inscribe it with narrative, but this can only happen in a space where the black male body is contained and unable to represent a threat to those that gaze upon it, or to their whiteness. As Adams notes: 'there is no question that there is a gap between the object and its viewer. The spectacle functions to avoid contamination.'<sup>18</sup> Somewhat counter-intuitively, there is an attraction to the frightening, the uncanny, unnerving, or threatening; the freak show exemplifies the allure of looking at that which ideally would never be seen because it would be eradicated arises from the impossibility of this; the freak will always exist, bodily and racial difference will continue to make their presence known visually, and so the freak show constitutes a space in which this difference can be controlled and seen.

Grace Elizabeth Hale discusses the importance of spectacle in relation to its utility in the narrativization of white racial identity: where once something has been made into a spectacle, it has impressive power to shape perceptions: 'A picture, a representation, could convey contradictions and evoke oppositions like white racial supremacy, white racial innocence, and white racial dependency more easily and persuasively than a

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<sup>18</sup> Adams 2001: 13

carefully plotted story.’<sup>19</sup> The importance of the black male body being produced as a spectacle is key to this thesis: the way in which this body is viewed is not simply reflective of social relations within society, it contributes to the creation of these relations. As Guy Debord highlights, ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.’<sup>20</sup> The spectacle of the black male body is not simply reflective of a culture imbued with white supremacy, it has a part to play in the creation of this white supremacist ideology. The case studies analysed within the thesis do not operate simply as images with which the viewer is presented, they function as an incitement to collude with the images, to become complicit with the racist narrative that they provide of black masculinity, and to behave in specific and proscribed ways. There is not only a relationship between image and viewer that is under examination, but also a relationship amongst the audience of the image, through which racial identity is created and regulated.

The freak show epitomizes the way in which ‘the human is understood differentially depending on its race [and] the legibility of that race:’<sup>21</sup> not only is the freak perceived as being distinct from the “human,” but this distinction is produced through the absence of whiteness. Butler’s focus upon the importance of legibility here is crucial: the freak show offers a solution to anxiety about the passing of the body, in its explicit mechanics of labelling the body and ensuring that it is a readable space for the audience to view. The freak show’s appeal reflects the way that “passing” causes anxiety: passing raises questions about the efficacy of identity categories to capture and be controlled. It is not

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<sup>19</sup> Hale 1998: 7-8

<sup>20</sup> Debord 1994: 12

<sup>21</sup> Butler 2004: 2

the freak or black body that is threatening in and of itself, they become threatening when they can evade detection and disrupt the boundaries of normative whiteness, implicating that whiteness itself may be permeable. This explains the desire to watch the freak show – or its analogue in the black body as spectacle – because the freak show is explicitly reliant upon the freak being identified, labelled, controlled, and viewed. The process of categorization, wherein bodies are named and conceptualized in terms of the space they should inhabit, quells anxieties. This explains our attachment to identity categories such as gender and race, where we convince ourselves that these can be seen. In its situating of whiteness as a communal identity in which the audience can take pleasure and assurance, the freak show makes whiteness legible because it is privileged as the normative position from which one can look at the freak.

Within the confines of the freak show where the body is produced as spectacle, this production allows the audience, constructed as white, to luxuriate within the privilege of possessing unmarked whiteness, which equates with the privilege of being unseen in racial terms. Judith Butler remarks upon this process: 'what can be seen, what qualifies as a visible marking, is a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative whiteness.'<sup>22</sup> The freak show constitutes an extreme vision of this binary of marked/unmarked, where not only are particular bodies marked, they are captured under the spotlight upon the stage, while the body of the viewer sits not merely unmarked, but concealed within the darkness of the auditorium. The freak show space allows for the Othered body to be placed front and centre in a process that results in illusory control over bodily difference that affords pleasure to the audience. The opposite

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<sup>22</sup> Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York & London: Routledge, 1993. Pp. 170-71

of this would be the unease felt when confronted with a body that either troubles categories of identity because it is not easily definable, or when a body is revealed to have been passing. The boundary between audience and subject in the freak show is not simply a logistical one: it symbolizes that one is either normative and thus can take pleasure in the collective visual inspection of the body of the Other, with the knowledge that this body is contained upon the stage, or else one is a freak and therefore has to be captured within the gaze which both regulates and disciplines the body as that which would be threatening if it successfully evaded detection and constraint. The audience has no place on the stage: they should not be subject to the gaze, in the same way that the freak has no claim to sitting in the auditorium, part of the freak show's appeal lies in the notion that the freak cannot "look back".

As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explores, there is a need to examine the 'ethics of looking.'<sup>23</sup> Utilizing the freak show space as an example, those who look and those who are looked at does not simply reflect choice, but exemplifies the power dynamics at play. The freak show becomes a coercive tool: not only does the process of being objectified discipline the freak, it also constitutes a disciplinary mechanism controlling the audience; in order to retain the power that derives from this process of looking at the freak, the audience has to distance themselves from the other and actively claim a normative status, in order to demonstrate their belonging to the privileged mass. In an act of figurative enunciation, looking upon the spectacle of the freak establishes that one is certainly not, cannot be, a freak. This process becomes coercive as the onlooker has to embrace and align themselves with all that being normal entails, whether in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and so on. The freak show, in its positioning of participants as either normal or

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<sup>23</sup> Garland-Thomson 2010: 199

deviant, elicits identification with normativity, making the audience complicit in this creation of a unified collective. Although there is space to resist being co-opted into the racial position of implied viewer, this is perilous: to resist the narrative encapsulated within the spectacle, of white normativity and non-white deviance, leaves this “resisting reader”<sup>24</sup> without access to racial privilege and left in a space replete with ambivalence. Formulated as a binary of “us” and “them,” the claiming of normativity simultaneously establishes disavowal of any commonality with deviance. This dynamic is consistent with the case studies used in this thesis: the black male body is contained through spectacularizing the body, offering pleasure to an audience unified as white through the mechanics of the image, through the confirmation of racial impermeability, and the perception that the black subject will not gaze upon the viewer.

The perceived racial contamination that Adams discusses is key: not only is blackness perceived as something which is threatening, but the fact that it can contaminate whiteness points to the instability of whiteness itself and thus the need to protect its boundaries. The positioning of the non-white star of the freak show concretizes the whiteness of the viewing public: ‘these encounters assume an opposition between the whiteness (normality) of the audience and the deviance of the racial freak’, within which “the public” is conceived as a featureless, uniform mass’, she argues. ‘Part of the cultural work of the freak show was to reassure diverse audiences of their claim to citizenship,’

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the potential of the reader to resist narrative, see Judith Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Although Fetterley is discussing literature and the female reader specifically here, I am using her argument more broadly in terms of thinking about popular culture as a “text” which we “read.” Her arguments that power ‘is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else,’ and the fact that ‘to be excluded from a literature that claims to defined one’s identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness,’ where this powerlessness is a result of the ‘invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male – to be universal, to be American – is to be *not female*’ are of use to this thesis, where not only is the experience of black men when confronted by the case studies examined that of feeling powerless, but also these case studies situate the viewer as white and male, regarded as universal and American. (1978: xiii)

she emphasises.<sup>25</sup> Adams' specific use of the term "conceived" here is particularly revealing: the spectacle of the freak show itself creates a unified audience; from disparate individuals a collective implied viewer is born, shoring up the racialized boundaries of performer and viewer.<sup>26</sup> Adams goes on to point out the ways in which the freak show inscribed the black body with savage deviance:

Freak show savages equated race with a monstrous deviance made clearly legible on the surfaces of the body. [...] As the black body was transformed into a hypervisible spectacle, the audience aspired to blend together into a transparent, homogenous whiteness. Those most anxious about their own status as citizens applauded the reassuring vision of non-white bodies that absolutely could not be assimilated.<sup>27</sup>

This aspiration of blending together in racial terms is a result of the need of the viewer to accept and align oneself with the implied whiteness of the audience space, or risk being seen as Other through any refutation of the freak show's proscriptive creation of white identity.<sup>28</sup> Blackness here has value in its ability to shore up the boundaries of white

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<sup>25</sup> Adams 2001: 31

<sup>26</sup> Throughout this thesis the terms "viewer" and "audience", unless explicitly stated otherwise, refer to the *implied* or *intended* viewer/audience: i.e. *white*. Although it is clear that non-white people can, and do, view these images, as the non-intended recipients of these representations their subjective or collective experiences, when considering the way that these images are intended to operate is not an essential consideration, although the impact of these images of black men upon non-white consumers is clearly related to their problematic nature, and of course needs to be considered when thinking about the potential for resistance. In terms of the potential of the case studies examined within this thesis to reveal the ways that whiteness operates, the implied viewer's experience is central, both in terms of how they are interpellated by each cultural example, and in their response.

<sup>27</sup> Adams 2001: 164-5

<sup>28</sup> This process resonates with Eric Lott's reading of the minstrel show in terms of audience dynamics in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. Hale also comments on the blackface minstrel show, in their potential to cement the power of whiteness: 'Focusing on the visible, [white people] attempted to control both the geographical and representational mobility of nonwhites. African Americans were clearly inferior in the South because they occupied inferior spaces like Jim Crow cars, often literally marked as colored, and across the nation because they appeared at fairs, in advertisements, and in movies as visibly inferior characters. Yet whites made modern racial meaning not just by creating boundaries but also by crossing them. Containing the mobility of others allowed whites to put on blackface, to play with and project upon darkness, to let whiteness float free. These transgressions characterized and broadened modern whiteness, increasing its visibility and its power.' (1998: 8)

identity and to confirm the superiority of whiteness.<sup>29</sup> Given its utility in maintaining the boundaries between whiteness and blackness, the fact that the 'racial freak's dominant message is the unassimilability of the dark-skinned body'<sup>30</sup> is crucial: if racial assimilation is understood as being an impossibility, whiteness can be enjoyed as a safe space. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson explicates, the freak completes essential cultural work of confirming the security of the audience's normative identity, impermeable to contagion from the deviance of the freak: 'The figure of the freak is consequently the necessary cultural complement to the acquisitive and capable American who claims the normate position masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class.'<sup>31</sup>

### **Containment**

The visual representation of the black male body simultaneously creates and contains threat as spectacle: where this body is understood to be the locus of racial anxieties and the potential endangerment of white purity, the fixing of the body within a space of spectacle allows for pleasure to be taken in looking at this body which both attracts and repels. This established fixity enables the viewer to enjoy the scopophilic delights that this body offers while simultaneously confirming that the body is contained within the image, and thus defused of potential danger. Rendering the black male body as spectacle with the function of eliciting pleasure for the implied viewer, in terms of its confirmation of their whiteness and the supremacy of this racial identity, relies on the fundamental

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<sup>29</sup> Although superficially the freak show may seem to represent chaos and lack of order, the reverse is true: its appeal lies in its potential to soothe racial anxieties and to reinscribe the distance between black and white identities.

<sup>30</sup> Adams 2001: 164-5

<sup>31</sup> Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies, Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 64-5

importance of the look, a look which renders captive the black male body and contains it within a racist imaginary. The body is contained through this look, which narrativizes, aestheticizes and eroticizes.

Keith Harris discusses the containment of the black male body which occurs along two trajectories, which interconnect with each other. He discusses the first of these trajectories as that where the black man is conflated with the monstrous black penis, turning the black male figuratively into a hypersexual beast within the white imaginary. The second of these is that where the black male is the object of the erotic gaze, this body is reduced to beautiful object.<sup>32</sup> These two trajectories interconnect in that they produce the black male body as spectacle which offers scopophilic pleasure within the gaze, a gaze which is informed by being oppositionally different to that body which it delights in looking upon. Both the hypersexual and aestheticized objectification require that the black male bodily space be inscribed and infused with excess: an excess of masculinity, sexuality, bestiality, or an objectified absence of human subjectivity.<sup>33</sup>

### **Gendering the freak**

Thomson also addresses the gendered nature of the freak show attraction:

Cast in opposition to the ideal American self – who is, among other things, male by definition – the freak is represented much like the woman: both are owned, managed, silenced, and mediated by men; both are socially defined as deviations from the ideal masculine body; both are marginalized in the realm of economic production; both are appropriated for display as spectacles; both are seen as subjugated by the body.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Harris 2012: 42

<sup>33</sup> Harris discusses four ways in which the black male body is visualized, in ways that are of particular use for this thesis: 'the kneeling, shackled body is the newly emancipated body, draped in the ironies of abolition and humanity redeemed [...]; the abused, shackled, prone body or the tied, hanging, lynched body [...]; the shot of the black naked male backside, which, when in frame, serves as a formal invitation to sodomy [...]; the containment of the black male body or the violent death of the black male body (a more final, less lingering containment) [which] motivates the redemption and recuperation of white masculinity and the white male body.' (2012: 42-8)

<sup>34</sup> Thomson 1997: 70-1

This feminist lens that Thomson is using allows for thinking about containment itself, and the ways in which this might be specifically tied to the process of being feminized; to be viewed in the same way as a woman is viewed is exactly that: to be viewed. In the same way that to be female is to be subject to the male gaze, in a formulation which implicitly posits woman as Other, to be a freak is to be subject to the normative gaze. Being produced as that which is made into spectacle positions the body in this way in order to achieve intelligibility, containing the body in the process. The disciplinary nature of the gaze upon the body is described by Foucault: ‘the examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement’ where ‘the examination transformed the economy of visibility into the exercise of power.’<sup>35</sup> The freak show is overtly reliant upon an act of examination of the freakish body, just as the spectacularization of the black male body predicated upon the examining look as a process of surveillance and policing.

Thomson mentions the link between the freak and display: ‘the Latin word *monstra*, “monster,” also means “sign” and forms the root of our word *demonstrate*, meaning “to show.”’<sup>36</sup> This etymological linkage suggests the importance of the spectacle that the Other body constitutes, and the exhibition of that spectacle within understandings of Otherness: the Other cannot simply be, it has to be seen in order to operate successfully within the binary of human normality and nonhuman deviance. The body of the Other needs to be seen and marked (either literally and/or figuratively) in a strategic framework that reifies the boundaries of humanity, where the human is marked by a

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault 1995: 184-187

<sup>36</sup> Thomson 1997: 56

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negation of deviance or freakery, and the deviant or freak is simultaneously marked by a negation of human identity. Thomson ties the freak show not only to the process of formulating the self through a performative process of showing off and looking at the body of the Other, through which participation constituted an announcement of normality, but specifically to formulating the American self:

These collective cultural rituals provided dilemmas of classification and definition upon which the throng of spectators could hone the skills needed to tame world and self in the ambitious project of American self-making. [The freak show] testifies to America's need to ratify a dominant normative identity by ritually displaying in public those perceived as the embodiment of what collective America took itself *not* to be.<sup>37</sup>

Here we see the conflation of nation and individual, what is at stake in the very process of establishing a normative identity is citizenship itself, the freak not only fails to be included within normativity, but fails to be an American.

### **Key terms**

#### **Black**

Frantz Fanon discusses the way in which blackness is framed in relation to whiteness, where 'not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.'<sup>38</sup> Fanon characterizes the process of being captured within the white imaginary as racial Other as one of oppressiveness, where he recounts the sensation as 'being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*.'<sup>39</sup> This fixity is important: although there is resistance to this categorization of the black self as Other, there is little possibility of escape. Fanon discusses the way in which blackness has been simulated: 'I was

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<sup>37</sup> Thomson 1997: 59

<sup>38</sup> Fanon 1967: 110

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 116

responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'."<sup>40</sup> He also discusses the experience of being racialized as black as one of fragmentation, dislocation, and trauma: 'unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But it did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men.'<sup>41</sup> The way in which Fanon describes becoming an object in terms of intentionality is striking: it is in some ways more of a sensation of exercising agency when he makes this choice to "make himself an object," as a way of making this objectification tenable, rather than being understood as an imposition upon his body without sanction. Yancy makes the point that to 'theorize the Black body one must "turn to the [Black] body as the radix for interpreting racial experience.'" It is important to note that this particular strategy also functions as a lens through which to theorize and critique whiteness: for the Black body's "racial" experience is fundamentally linked to the oppressive modalities of the "raced" white body.'<sup>42</sup> Dinesh D'Souza provides a useful historical account of the way in which blackness was conflated

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.: 112

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.: 112

<sup>42</sup> Yancy 2005: 216

with primitivism, brutality, and animalistic sexuality, allowing for the dehumanization of black people within the white European imaginary.<sup>43</sup>

### **Male**

Although this thesis will utilize the corporeal binary of man/woman and male/female, I wish to acknowledge here that these are as social constructions that act to discipline the bodies of people within American society. As Judith Butler contends, 'gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings.'<sup>44</sup> The fact that this gender binary, whether ignored, unnoticed, contested, or refuted, works to shape the experience of Americans in quotidian life, as a reality (whether essential or socially constructed) legitimizes the application of these terms when examining popular cultural representations. The thesis will work to make clear the constructed nature of masculinity, in the need of each respective case study to shore up the boundaries of (white) masculinity, in an effort to overcome its continued instability.

### **Masculinity**

In accepting the corporeal space of "man" as problematic, in terms of the way in which the gender binary has been argued to be a social construction rather than biological reality (a contention with which I agree), yet still using the binary of male/female as one which has utility, not because there is any "truth" to it, but because it still remains entrenched within American popular culture as a disciplinary mechanism of the body, I want to equally problematize the notion of masculinity. Although equally a social

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<sup>43</sup> D'Souza 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York & London: Routledge, 1993.  
(x)

construction that does not necessarily only arise from male bodies, I use this term throughout the thesis with the understanding that within popular American culture, masculinity is consistently positioned as being the behaviour(s) which are attached to the body constructed as male. As R.W. Connell illustrates, 'true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body.'<sup>45</sup> In using Connell's explanation here, throughout the thesis I will be using the term "masculinity" to describe the gender(ed) identity and behaviour perceived to arise from the bodies of black men.

### **Body**

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf discusses the body and the way in which it is a space upon which discourse is inscribed, wherein 'inscriptions and incorporations of power onto the body' produce a useful body.<sup>46</sup> This body is "useful" in the sense that it is a tool of hegemony, through which the supremacy of whiteness is maintained. Bakare-Yusuf also focuses on the black male body specifically, and discusses the importance of conceptualizing the black body in relation to the impact of slavery. He notes that in becoming aware of the slave experience as embodied, the relationship between embodiment and subjectivity can be understood, in addition to the perception of the surface experience of the body. He notes that the body is a 'surface that can experience and be inflicted with pain, tortured and terrorized,' but can also be a surface that can 'be pleased and is pleasuring.'<sup>47</sup> In understanding the ways that 'bodies are linked in distinctive ways through capitalist modes of production,' the forcible subjugation of the body is used in order to transform

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<sup>45</sup> Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 1995. (45)

<sup>46</sup> Bakare-Yusuf 1999: 313

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: 313-4

the body into one that is both productive and reproductive.<sup>48</sup> Robyn Wiegman notes that ‘corporeal significations supposedly speak a truth which the body inherently means,’<sup>49</sup> and that to ‘imagine ourselves outside such regimes of corporeal visibility is not only at some level unthinkable but also intolerable to our own conceptions of who and what we “are.”’<sup>50</sup> Thus the body is of intrinsic importance to conceptions of self, and by extension the Other. Where she discusses the ‘economies of visibility that produce the network of meanings’ that are attached to bodies, they ‘are more than political and hierarchical practices; they are indelibly subjective ones as well.’<sup>51</sup> This highlights the importance of visibility within constructions of identity, and this visibility entails a consideration of the way that bodies are inscribed with meaning, and the plasticity of this corporeal meaning.

#### **Narrativization**

Foucault discusses the way in which the body has become conceptualized through ideas of power, utility and legibility: the body that is policed, trained, manipulated is both ‘object and target of power.’<sup>52</sup> The raising of the ‘question, on the one hand, of submission and use and, on the other, of functioning and explanation,’ results in the conclusion that there is a ‘useful body and an intelligible body.’<sup>53</sup> In terms of the black male body, both usefulness and intelligibility are crucial: it is useful in terms of keeping the boundaries of whiteness protected by existing as an Other against which whiteness can be measured and celebrated as the ideal, not to mention its utility as an economic resource to retain

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Wiegman 1995: 4

<sup>50</sup> Wiegman 1995: 4

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Foucault 1995: 136

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

white supremacy (as seen in slavery and the prison industrial complex). Its intelligibility is of equal import: the body needs to be marked as black in order to police the body itself, but also race: if blackness cannot be “read,” then the fictive reality of race may potentially come into relief. George Yancy states that “‘The body’ is codified as *this* or *that* in terms of meanings that are sanctioned, scripted, and constituted through processes of negotiation that are embedded within and serve various ideological interests that are grounded within further power-laden social processes.’ He goes on to conclude that the ‘historical plasticity of the body, the fact that it is a site of contested meanings, speaks to the historicity of its “being” as *lived* and *meant* within the interstices of social semiotics.’<sup>54</sup> This explanation allows us to think about the body as a canvas upon which meaning is inscribed, sometimes in the case of phenomena like the lynching ritual, an extremely violent inscriptive act.

### **Popular culture**

I have chosen to examine popular cultural products because of their reiteration of existing racial politics, but also because of their reflection of mass white understanding of black masculinity; popular cultural scripts have the power to impact upon individual identity, but the way in which these scripts work to obscure their complicity with white racism needs to be explicated, in an attempt to disrupt the power of these images in maintaining racial inequalities within society. An understanding of the world in which we live, and our position within that world, occurs through our interaction with cultural productions: what we see is caused by what we understand, what we understand is caused by what we see. This means that the way in which specific identities are represented visually within our culture has fundamental ramifications for the way in

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<sup>54</sup> Yancy 2005: 216

which we perceive social reality; in thinking about the position occupied within American society by black men, the visual depiction of the black male body requires an essential consideration and analysis. By “consumption”, I refer to the way these images of the black male body are perceived and understood within the dynamics of spectatorship by white audiences, the ways in which audiences are constructed as white, and the way in which white spectators are taught to look at black male bodies by popular cultural products, in a process that reinforces white racist notions of black masculinity.

### **Spectator**

I have chosen to specifically look at the reception and perception of these images that arises from white spectatorship because I am interested in the process of looking from “the inside to the outside”; in an attempt to combat the privileging of whiteness within American society, it is imperative that there is an analysis not only of how the black male body is made intelligible, but why the black body needs to be made intelligible, where the white body remains unmarked. Just as Wayne Booth discusses the implied author<sup>55</sup> and Wolfgang Iser talks about the implied reader<sup>56</sup> (construed as the ‘communicational counterpart of the implied author’<sup>57</sup>) I argue that not only do the case studies examined within this thesis have an implied spectator, but that they function to produce this figure. Although there may be significant differences between this spectator and the real white spectator, these works operate as coercive tools of white supremacy, wherein they collapse the real white spectator and the implied white viewer into the same entity: the

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<sup>55</sup> Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987.

<sup>56</sup> Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

<sup>57</sup> “Implied Reader” in David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005. 240

viewer is manipulated into a receptive position where they accept the messages, both explicit and implicit, inscribed within these cultural productions, and as a result become complicit with the ideals of the supremacy of whiteness.<sup>58</sup> Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation is useful here: the texts examined within this thesis all contain the ideology of white supremacy and work to produce the implied white spectator discussed above. Althusser comments that 'ideology "acts" or "functions" in such a way that it "recruits" subjects among the individuals, or "transforms" the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation*'<sup>59</sup>. These texts transform the white spectator into the implied spectator through interpellation. The spectator has limited ability to refute the narrative presented to him in these texts, in part because of the 'absolute authority or finality of the fixed image.'<sup>60</sup> This is because 'white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity.'<sup>61</sup> To take pleasure in the viewing of the black male body as spectacle, as examined within the works in this thesis, is to accept and endorse racism which relies upon the differential categorization of racialized bodies. In focusing on the "white spectator," I am referring to the ideological position of the spectator, rather than simply thinking of their racial identity: by this I mean that the case studies analysed in the thesis are intended to reify and strengthen the ideology of white supremacy, and

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<sup>58</sup> In *The Other Pleasures: The Narrative Function of Race in the Cinema*, Anna Everett addresses the issue of the implied spectator, suggesting that film 'imposes narrative conditions on the fulfillment of pleasure for its privileged or ideal spectators.' (281) She goes on to describe the allure of film even when one does not occupy the role of ideal spectator: 'These spectator positions are dependent on the hegemonizing nature of racialized cinematic narratives wherein spectatorial identification is achieved via the lure of highly desirable racialized characters as ego-ideals [...] These narratives construct a preferred reading of the narrative events which, accordingly, require the construction of a preferred spectator to interpret the given work.' (Ibid.)

<sup>59</sup> Althusser 1971: 162-63

<sup>60</sup> Cavell 185

<sup>61</sup>Lipsitz 1998: viii

have as their intended viewer the white viewer. This is not to suggest that there is no resistance on the part of the spectator to refute this ideology, or indeed that all white viewers are white supremacists, but more a way of thinking about white supremacy as a systemic framework of oppression in which white people are privileged, and which relies on their tacit complicity in order to function.<sup>62</sup> Although there are certainly many white viewers who are not racist, this is a systemic issue rather than a personal one, and unless there is radical resistance taking place, the supremacy of whiteness as an ideology retains its strength.

### **Threat**

Leon F. Litwack notes, 'The closer the black man got to the ballot box, one observer noted, the more he looked like a rapist.'<sup>63</sup> This makes explicit the way in which the black man as political threat needs to be transformed within the American imaginary as something terrifying and immoral, thus justifying his eradication. The mythologizing of the black male as rapist is central to this project: in a neat tying together of racism and misogyny, the black male threatens whiteness through his menace to the sanctity of white womanhood, and as such needs to be contained. Although the narrative of the black male as a rapacious and hypermasculine threat is ostensibly the threat perceived within American culture, this is a façade: the real threat is the potential of the full enfranchisement of black people and the erasure of white privilege, which is simply reconfigured as the threat of a deviant black male body.

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<sup>62</sup> In terms of thinking about ideological position rather than racial identity, there are also non-white spectators who also internalize the narrative of white supremacy and tacitly become co-opted into this ideology; there is more inherent resistance to this narrative because they are explicitly situated outside of the space of racial privilege which white supremacy provides.

<sup>63</sup> Litwack 2010: 30

### White identity

Hale discusses the way in which whiteness was constructed, and the tenuous nature of this racial identity.<sup>64</sup> She notes that whiteness was being reconceptualised from the beginning of the twentieth century, where it was becoming constructed as a 'modern racial identity,' which entailed its being understood as a 'mass cultural rather than a localized, socially embodied, particularized self, an absolute division that dissolved any range of racially mixed subjectivities, a natural and embodied but not strictly biological or legal category, a way to mediate the fragmentation of modernity and still enjoy its freedom.'<sup>65</sup> She notes the importance of segregation in the construction and maintenance of whiteness as a stable social category, commenting that 'the whiteness that some Americans made through segregation was always contingent, always fragile, always uncertain.'<sup>66</sup> Where segregation provided a sense of racial stability and the potential for it to be policed, it also constituted an inherent vulnerability, in that it had the potential to be transgressed: 'positing an absolute boundary and the freedom to cross only in one direction, segregation remained vulnerable at its muddled middle, where mixed-race

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<sup>64</sup> In dealing with whiteness, the privileges that are accorded to it, and the instability of this space of identity, implicit within this critique is that this will also necessarily be a critique of white masculinity. In a system which not only positions whiteness at the top of the social hierarchy, but maleness as well, whiteness and the way it is structured within (and simultaneously structures) American society consequently entails a focus upon white masculinity. This is in part because whiteness becomes conflated with white maleness within a patriarchal system, but also the instability of whiteness is informed by the volatility of masculinity itself.

<sup>65</sup> Hale 1998: 8

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

people moved through mixed spaces, from railroad cars to movies to department stores, neither public nor private, neither black nor white,<sup>67</sup> Hale notes.

### **White supremacy**

As George Lipsitz describes, 'White supremacy is [...] a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility.'<sup>68</sup> Part of this system relies upon specific representations of blackness as Other, in order to perpetuate the perception that black people are less deserving of these opportunities, and the consumption of these representations: this consumption produces collusion with the system of white supremacy, wherein white privilege is cemented.<sup>69</sup> White supremacy relies upon the process of whiteness being idealized, while it simultaneously contains normative power.<sup>70</sup> Peggy McIntosh describes this as the following: 'Whites are taught to think of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.: 9

<sup>68</sup> Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998. (viii)

<sup>69</sup> Frances Lee Ansley, in *White Supremacy (And What We Should Do About It)*, also provides a useful description of white supremacy, which will be the definition used in the thesis: white supremacy is 'a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings (1997: 592).

<sup>70</sup> Within this thesis, I am very deliberately using the term "white supremacy" as an interchangeable one with "racism". This is because I want to highlight that although there can be antagonism, prejudice and ignorance from all racial groups to others, these are individual failings, as opposed to being systemically entrenched within American society. Where racism is sometimes used erroneously to describe these individualized moments, racism occurs when these moments are supported within a system that gives institutionalized support to ignorance, prejudice, and hatred, when whiteness is privileged above non-whiteness: racism is white supremacy. Clearly when "white supremacy" is used in daily language, there are very specific images that are conjured: the southern Klan lynching black men and burning crosses outside black churches, being two of these. In my use of "white supremacy," although I am referring to a much larger selection of actions and institutionalized practices than these narrow descriptions, I am intentionally evoking these as the most extreme vision of racism, in order to reassert the urgency with which contemporary American race relations must be analyzed and overthrown. The political choice to use "white supremacy" rather than simply "racism" is one which is motivated by the need to reiterate that racism works to solidify the superiority of whiteness,

their lives as morally neutral; normative, and average, and also ideal.’<sup>71</sup> One of the privileges of whiteness is being able to read bodies in racialized terms while remaining unmarked in racial terms, as long as they conform to normative whiteness - a process which reinforces Richard Dyer’s contention that a property of whiteness is, in racial terms, ‘to be everything and nothing’.<sup>72</sup> In the context of this thesis, this results in the viewing of black male bodies for pleasure: the spectacle with which the viewer is presented can purport to inform the spectator about the nature of black masculinity, while whiteness remains unquestioned. One of the key ways that white privilege works so successfully is the fact that it relies upon whiteness itself escaping unseen and unacknowledged within American culture, resulting in the privilege attached to this identity space being made invisible. Lipsitz addresses the lack of attention which is paid to the question of what whiteness actually *is*: ‘As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.’<sup>73</sup> One of the privileges of whiteness is its position as the centre, the normative, the legitimate, and it is internalized as such without examination or interrogation. As Martha R. Mahoney contends, racial privilege escapes unseen by whites, but from the perspective of people of color, white privilege is something that can never be ignored, forgotten or

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and in using “white supremacy” I am deliberately drawing attention to the way that whiteness needs to be critiqued with the constant awareness that it is privileged above non-whiteness within social stratifications of power. This issue is drawn attention to in the conversation between George Yancy and Judith Butler, entitled “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’” ([http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/? r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/?r=0))

<sup>71</sup> McIntosh, Peggy. “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to see Correspondence through Work in Women’s Studies” in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.) *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997. Pp.291-299 (293)

<sup>72</sup> Dyer 1999: 458

<sup>73</sup> Lipsitz 1998: 1

unacknowledged.<sup>74</sup> This ignorance on the part of white people is complex, with layers of different meanings and perspectives of white privilege all going unnoticed; in addition to not seeing whiteness itself, whites 'not only fail to see themselves clearly, they also fail to see the way white privilege appears to those defined into the category of "Other".<sup>75</sup> In addition to this reluctance to see that whiteness is in itself loaded with privilege, there is a key difficulty in acknowledging the advantages afforded through being defined as white: 'Privilege is not visible to its holder; it is merely there, a part of the world, a way of life, simply the way things are.'<sup>76</sup> White privilege becomes normalized as the status quo and drops out of sight where it eludes being questioned.

When considering whiteness and its normative power, Lennard Davis provides the useful insight that within the history of the norm and its relation to eugenics, rather than using the idea of the average to define normality, Sir Francis Galton utilized the idea of ranking:<sup>77</sup> the norm is used to create a new kind of ideal where bodies are defined in relation to normality, rather than the norm simply referring to the most common. In terms of thinking about race, whiteness does not simply exist as the norm because it may be the average, but because it is the most desirable. Whiteness then takes on normative power: where it is consistently seen as the ideal it is the racial standard to which all bodies are compared, which has repercussions for the way in which whiteness itself is

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<sup>74</sup> Mahoney, Martha R. "Racial Construction and Women as Undifferentiated Actors" in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.) *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997. Pp. 305-309. (331)

<sup>75</sup> Mahoney 1997: 331

<sup>76</sup> Wildman, Stephanie & Davis, Adrienne D. "Making Systems of Privilege Visible" in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.) *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997. Pp. 314-319. (316)

<sup>77</sup> Davis 2010

understood. Whiteness does not simply consist of the skin colour of the majority of the population: it becomes idealized and with this process the expectations of whiteness become more entrenched, where ideal race is bound together with other elements of identity, whiteness is the ideal because it is also connected to normative gender, sexuality, and class etc. So the disciplinary power of race is couched in terms more complicated than merely skin colour, to be ideally white one has to be so much more: heterosexual, middle class, male, able-bodied, and so on.

### **Key Theoretical Points of Departure**

Michel Foucault and his theoretical work on biopower prove useful to this thesis and the ways in which the black male body is disciplined in systemic ways in order to situate this body as a productive tool. Foucault discusses the theory of biopower as 'an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population*. The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted these two poles around which the power over life was deployed.'<sup>78</sup> Jana Sawicki identifies disciplinary power that works to 'attach individuals to normative self-understandings and practices that render them docile and useful at the same time', which creates a space in which individuals feel as though they have control over their bodies (and identities which are tied to the body), whereas biopower actually engineers the availability and choice of possible self-understandings, which in turn contains the body in a panoptic system.<sup>79</sup> Foucault discusses the 'explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of

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<sup>78</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (trans. Robert Hurley) London: Penguin, 1978. P. 139

<sup>79</sup> Sawicki 382-3

“biopower”.<sup>80</sup> Foucault goes on to link the importance of the idea of the “norm” with the strength of biopower as an organizing social principle: the norm has increasing power to define bodies; the consequence of failing to attain “normal” (or normative) status is punitive social action. When Foucault speaks of death being the “last resort” as a result of failing to be designated as “normal”<sup>81</sup>, it is possible to view this as a figurative death as the lack of succeeding in being deemed “normal” results in having one’s human status put into question – once deemed something other than human, there is a process of “social death”, where one is defined simply through lack, which unlike the horrors of the death penalty is still “productive”.<sup>82</sup> In addition to this figurative death, Foucault’s mention of death also allows for reflection upon the mortality rate of black men in America, a subject which all of the ensuing chapters of this thesis will consider.

Foucault goes on to discuss the inability of the law to be objective: ‘the law operates more and more as a norm, and that the juridical institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory. A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centred on life.’<sup>83</sup> The law ceases to be “objective”: (it is debatable whether judicial institutions can ever operate without being affected by human subjectivity in practice – instead relying on the notion of fairness) it becomes one singular element of an arsenal of social mechanisms which define normative identity, and by

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<sup>80</sup> Foucault 1978: 140

<sup>81</sup> Foucault 1978: 144

<sup>82</sup>The importance of the process of normalization is discussed by Joel Whitebook, in connection with the specific apparatuses of capitalism which benefit from the incorporation of normative identity: “Against Interiority: Foucault’s Struggle with Psychoanalysis” in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* ed. Gary Gutting. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp.312-347.

<sup>83</sup> Foucault 1978: 144

extension those bodies that remain either on the margins of normative identity, or completely “othered” and in a space of deviance, such as the black rapist of *The Birth of a Nation* or the lynching postcard. It is crucial to remain cognizant of the interconnected relationship of these mechanisms that exist as a “continuum of apparatuses”: the law operates to maintain and police normative identity within the framework of regulatory controls, simultaneously utilizing other apparatuses to bolster its own strength while also adding to the legitimacy and power of these other mechanisms.

The importance of biopower when thinking about the formation of racism is fundamental: as a strategic interconnected network of techniques for achieving control and discipline of the body, racial classification constitutes one facet. Biopower is contingent upon racial identity being formed and maintained. Laura Ann Stoler argues:

It is not biopower per se that produces racism, but rather the “calculated management of life” consolidated in the nineteenth century bringing together the two “poles” of biopower that emerged separately two centuries earlier. One pole centers on the disciplining of the individual, on the “anatomy-politics of the human body”; the second centers on a set of “regulatory controls” over the life of the species in a “biopolitics of the population.”<sup>84</sup>

From Stoler’s contentions here the way in which biopower indirectly creates racism is brought into intellectual relief: the simultaneous control of populations and the regulation of the individual body is reliant upon hierarchical distinctions of race.

Lennard J. Davis addresses the construction of normalcy and the way in which the concept of the norm appears in European culture in the nineteenth century:<sup>85</sup> not only is the appearance of the norm as a concept a relatively late addition to Western culture, it

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<sup>84</sup> Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995. 33

<sup>85</sup> Davis, Lennard J. “Constructing Normalcy” in Lennard J. Davis (ed.) *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York & London: Routledge, 2010. Pp. 3-19.

also reveals a telling 'connection between the body and industry.'<sup>86</sup> This process of the body being conceptualized in terms of industrial utility exemplifies Foucault's theory of biopower: bodies become disciplined through the requirements of capitalist industry.<sup>87</sup>

The way in which the norm eclipses the ideal as a desired state of being is important: 'The concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm.'<sup>88</sup> This privileging of the norm has the simultaneous impact of demeaning the non-normal body: a diminution which can clearly be seen with the spectacularizing of the black male body; it is the very abnormality of this body which is the allure. As Davis comments, 'with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes.'<sup>89</sup> where the narrative of black masculinity is predicated upon an assumption of deviance, it becomes clear that this is caused by the notion of the norm. Just as the concept of a normal body creates the concept of the disabled body, analogously the normal body also creates the black body: where the norm signifies whiteness, blackness becomes conflated with deviance.<sup>90</sup> Davis' work is useful in its situating historically the process of normalization as a consequence of industrialization: not only does this illustrate the importance of industrial productivity

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.: 5

<sup>87</sup> The positioning of the norm as an aspirational designation, rather than the ideal, is discussed by Davis in a recognition of the appearance of what we would now describe as normativity: 'It was the French statistician Adolphe Quetelet who contributed the most to a generalized notion of the normal as an imperative. [...] The social implications of this idea are central. In formulating the idea of *l'homme moyen*, Quetelet is also providing a justification for *les classes moyens*. With bourgeois hegemony comes scientific justification for moderation and middle-class ideology. [...] With such thinking, the average then becomes paradoxically a kind of ideal, a position devoutly to be wished.' (2010: 5) The importance of the norm is concretized within a consideration of productivity, particularly because Marx's concept of labor value is inextricably linked to the idea of the average worker.

<sup>88</sup> Davis 2010: 6

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.: 7

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

when looking at the categorization of the human (and non-human) body, but also in its focus on specific forms of processing of the body. In particular, the discussion of the invention of fingerprinting as a tool of discipline and identification allows for considering the ways in which identity is connected to the body, and inscribed upon its surface:

The notion of fingerprinting pushes forward the idea that the human body is standardized and contains a serial number, as it were, embedded in its corporeality. Thus the body has an identity that coincides with its essence and cannot be altered by moral, artistic, or human will. This indelibility of corporeal identity only furthers the mark placed on the body by other physical qualities – intelligence, height, reaction time. By this logic, the person enters into an identical relationship with the body; the body forms the identity, and the identity is unchangeable and indelible as one's place on the normal curve.<sup>91</sup>

Fingerprinting here works as a lens through which to look at the body: the body is understood as the manifestation of some essential identity and simultaneously the body creates identity: in this way blackness can be understood as both constitutive and reflective of abnormality or deviance. Davis compellingly ties the appearance of the normal to cultural production itself, as he defines the novel as being inextricably linked with the notion of normalcy:

The novel form, that proliferator of ideology, is intricately connected with concepts of the norm. From the typicality of the central character, to the normalizing devices of plot to bring deviant characters back into the norms of society, to the normalizing coda of endings, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel promulgates and disburses notions of normalcy and by extension makes of physical differences ideological differences.<sup>92</sup>

This is particularly useful for the arguments I am making in this thesis: conceptualizing the power and allure of popular cultural scripts as profoundly connected to the perception of the normal, and their utility in solidifying their audience in terms of hegemonic normality, resonates with the way in which these case studies cement their

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.: 8

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.: 17

viewer in terms of normative whiteness. The case studies used in the thesis all have one thing in common: they have the result of concretizing a white supremacist view of the world. Wolfgang Iser, in discussing textual functions, states: the text 'offers guidance as to what is to be produced, and therefore cannot itself be the product.'<sup>93</sup> Using this observation, what is produced by these texts is a collective white identity, predicated upon the otherness of black masculinity. A common thread of these different examples of the spectacularizing of the black male body is that the viewer is coerced into colluding with the images themselves in solidifying the boundaries of whiteness, through agreement with the narrative of black masculinity inscribed upon the body, and disavowal of any commonality with this body itself.

### **Thesis Outline**

*What Is It?" Containing the Threat of the Black Male Body in American Popular Culture* focuses upon the consumption of images by white spectators of the black male body within American popular culture in the twentieth century, and the relationship between the consumption of these images and the state of black masculinity within American society. It is my contention that the body requires narrative in order to attain intelligibility: the body is narrativized in a semiotic model which positions the body as sign, signifying a highly specific ideology of the black male as occupying a space outside of normative gender; it is understood as representing a deviant masculinity which is violent, animalistic, and hypersexual within a racist imaginary. My thesis will primarily look at different visual depictions of black male bodies within American popular culture: the "mythologized body" of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*; the "wounded body" of the lynching postcards in James Allen's *Without Sanctuary*; the "sexualized body" of

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<sup>93</sup> Iser 1978: 107

Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*; and the "criminalized body" of Tom Fontana's *Oz*. The overlap between these cultural modes that the black male body inhabits will be utilized to demonstrate the stability of the narratives attached to the black male body, despite particular instability and/or mutability in the individual examples of images of black men. These processes of mythologizing, wounding, sexualizing, and criminalizing allow for the body to be contained and therefore commodified. The theoretical model that will be utilized within the thesis operates along successive levels of interpretive process: the body exists without narrative (i.e. "What Is It") which represents the space of most anxiety: to exist outside of narrative requires lack of comprehension on the part of the viewer, and to exist without intelligibility poses a disruptive potential. To remove ambiguity from this body necessitates a process of narrativization, wherein the body is mythologized, wounded, sexualized, and criminalized. Through this level the body is given a specific narrative and made intelligible as a stereotype, which consequently means that the body, or the threat that it poses, can be contained. The reason why this containment is not only crucial but also desirable is that this then allows for the body to be commodified and reduced to its economic value. The black male body is useful to a capitalist economy as commodity, but in order to function as such the body must be contained, the level at which it is reduced to specific and reductive meaning. The level of containment cements these multiple narratives to the corporeal, which results in the black male body as only existing with these simultaneous inscriptions.

The visual representation that will be discussed in this thesis consistently works upon the black male body to produce as/reduce to spectacle, which then allows for the figurative (if not also the literal) containment of the body. By making the black male body become a narrativised visual spectacle, the threat of that body is contained and all that is

seen is the body rather than the humanity attached. When perceived as hyperbole, the intricacies, nuances and specificities of black male humanity can be forgotten and thus when seen one-dimensionally, black masculinity can be contained in the service of maintaining white supremacy. By looking at these variant lenses through which the black male body is processed, a deconstructive model will be established in order to historicize and examine more productively the way in which black men are imagined within American culture.

The specific examples given within the thesis represent ways in which to test this model as a means for understanding the space which black masculinity occupies, but the ultimate intent is for this model to be rigorous and flexible enough to be utilized in order to disrupt the narrative attached to black men's bodies in alternative cultural products. This thesis represents an exploration and testing of this theoretical framework, but its intention is to succeed in providing its reader with an analytical tool which has the potential of recognising and disrupting the problematic narrative of black masculinity.

This thesis seeks to further the dialogue about race within American popular culture and there is a political urgency to this timely intervention; 2015 is not only the centenary of *The Birth of a Nation* which arguably represents an early concretization of racist tropes that have pervaded modern cinematic production, but is also the temporal space in which anti-racist activism gained traction (both inside and outside the US) through the positioning of the idea that #BlackLivesMatter – a dialectical positioning which seeks to dismantle racism informed by the mobilization of nuanced criticism, communal frustration and anger at the extant white supremacy which informs American politics, media, social policy and daily life. The appearance of the claim that “black lives matter” provides a valuable insight into the widespread realisation that white bodies, and the

lives that they contain, are privileged over others whereas black bodies are inscribed with specific narratives which are utilized in order to maintain those bodies' inferior status.

### **Chapter One: Lynching Postcards**

The practice of lynching, constituted both of the violent torture and killing of black men, and the accompanying imaging of this through the photographic postcard which was then circulated amongst racist white Americans, worked to cement the myth of black rapaciousness. In propagating the notion of the black male body as the locus of the rape of white women, the black male body contained fears of miscegenation and white masculine inferiority. The lynching enabled a corporeal space for these anxieties to be played out, and bore the trauma of American racism. Lynching secured a space in which to contain the black male body, within the desiring look and physical destruction. The ritual of lynching constituted a systematic positioning of black men as inhuman and white supremacy. The way in which this practice was so thoroughly informed by the visualization that the postcards engendered meant that the black male body was concretized as a spectacle of violent otherness, through which white people learned to consolidate their racial identity. The use of the body as proof of the narrative of black hypersexuality and deviant masculinity was central to this practice. The inscription on the postcards with ideas of white ownership of the black male body reflected the figurative bodily inscription of this narrative upon this corporeal terrain. The lynching not only crystallized this narrative of black masculinity, but used this narrative as a way of teaching white Americans how to look at this body, and how to contain the perceived threat. The lynching, as sanctioned extralegal practice, cemented the power of whiteness, and worked to police American behaviour, both black and white.

**Chapter Two: *The Birth of a Nation***

*The Birth of a Nation* continued the cultural work of the lynching postcard, in its cementing of the mythic black rapist as a “truth” of American society, and captured this truth on film. This film gave legitimacy to white fears of black masculinity, and made clear that the castration of the black male was a vital catharsis, both in terms of its containment of the threat of black masculinity, and its utility in consolidating white identity. *The Birth of a Nation* constitutes the birth of modern American cinema, thus knitting the destruction of black masculinity even more fundamentally into the fabric of the nation. This film also worked to further codify the ways in which the black male body became the visual metaphor for the rape of white women, and reasserted the danger that the black male posed to the workings of the American political system.

**Chapter Three: *The Black Book***

The photographic work of Robert Mapplethorpe continued the eroticization of the black male body that was fundamental to the lynching ritual. As an alternative vision of containment, Mapplethorpe’s work reiterates the hypersexual threat of the black male body, and positions the black male body as available for the satiating of the white gaze to penetrate the body, as vengeful punishment for the perceived rapaciousness of black men. Where the black male body is hung from the walls of the art gallery as opposed to the literal hanging of the body from the tree branch, the violence enacted upon the black male body is also transformed from the literal violence of the crowd to the figurative violence of the look which objectifies this body, and has the same result of pronouncing black men as devoid of humanity.

**Chapter four: *Oz***

*Oz* represents the development of the strategies of containment discussed in the previous chapters, incorporating the additional element of the literal containment of the black male body through incarceration. The analysis of this representation of imprisonment enables a focus upon new institutionalized forms of white supremacy, such as mass incarceration, and changes to the legal system, allowing for black men to still be at the mercy of a racist America, despite the disappearance of the extralegal practice of lynching as a widespread practice of racial regulation. *Oz* also continues the tradition of the gaze as a method of containment, both in terms of its mythologizing black men as dangerous rapists, and in the erotic potential of the body. *Oz* also constitutes a development of the depiction of black men as sexual menace to white people, both men and women alike.

**Conclusion**

In drawing together the body of the thesis, the conclusion will look at two contemporary examples of American visual culture: the album artwork of 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2003) and Quentin Tarantino's reworking of the spaghetti western, *Django Unchained* (2012). These two examples will provide a lens through which to see that the visual spectacle and narrative of black masculinity that is perpetuated and reiterated in the other case studies of the thesis have not changed. The visual tradition of positioning the black male body as spectacle of interconnected erotic desire and visceral damage, as described within the main body of the thesis, is still at work here. Although the specifics of the spectacle may have changed somewhat, the conclusion will illuminate how black masculinity, in the way it is perceived, narrativized and spectacularized has undergone very little change, and continues to operate in the same way within American

culture. In having analysed these various cultural productions, the thesis will demonstrate how the consistent reiteration of the threat of the black male body, and the spectacle of this body as a repeated icon satisfies the scopophilic delight of the intended viewer, do not actually tell us anything concrete about black masculinity itself, but rather demonstrate how it is a tool used for the consolidation of white masculinity within a white supremacist culture.

## **Chapter One: Framing the Black Male Body in the Lynching Postcards of James Allen's *Without Sanctuary***

### **Lynching as a Social Tool**

Not only does lynching exist as an undeniably important facet of American history, but forms a fundamental part of the narrative of black masculinity,<sup>94</sup> and the way in which this narrative is utilized to shape white American identity. This chapter will focus upon the ways in which lynching became codified as a ritual. What this ritualization illuminates about the narrative of black masculinity that pervaded (and, as outlined in the Introduction, continues to pervade) the white American imaginary will be demonstrated,

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<sup>94</sup> The practice of lynching did not exclusively feature black men as its victim, but both within the popular understanding of lynching as a tool of social control and in the statistics of lynching victims, black men were disproportionately figured as the focus of the lynching act. Joel Williamson gives useful statistics for the specifics of lynching victims: 'In the 1890s in fourteen Southern states, an average of 138 persons was lynched each year and roughly 75 percent of the victims were black. From 1900 to 1909, the number of lynchings declined by half, but Negroes were 90 percent of those lynched and the lower South remained its special scene. Between 1885 and 1907 there were more persons lynched in the United States than were legally executed, and in the year 1892 twice as many.' (Williamson 1984: 185). Grace Hale discusses the logistics of lynching post-1890 in terms of the impacts of advances in transport, technology and communication as the lynching became systematically codified, which resulted in the cultural impact of lynchings gaining power despite actually decreasing in frequency, as more Americans 'participated in, read about, saw pictures of, and collected souvenirs from lynchings even as fewer mob murders occurred.' (Hale 1998: 201)

with a particular focus upon the produced images of the lynching postcard and the ways in which the postcard existed within the mechanisms of lynching as an example of white supremacy. Not only was the lynching a ritual which involved a white crowd enacting extreme violence upon the black male body – often with the inclusion of mutilation, hanging, burning, shooting, and/or castration, and culminating in the death of the black male – it was also a process which utilized the photographer’s camera to commemorate the event as the image was turned into a postcard to be inscribed by the sender and disseminated to friends and family through the mail. As a form of entertainment, the lynching worked to cement the white identity of the watching crowd.<sup>95</sup> Lynching was not simply about the punitive destruction of the body, but about how that process enabled a communal catharsis for the crowd.

The lynching of Thomas Shipp & Abram Smith on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1930 in Marion, Indiana, is captured in two different plates in *Without Sanctuary*, giving some insight into how the lynching postcard operated. (Figs. 4 & 5)

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<sup>95</sup> Harvey Young discusses the function of the lynching as a form of ‘public performance’ within American culture: “lynchings far surpassed all other forms of entertainment in terms of their ability to attract an audience and the complexity of their narratives”, he argues; ‘A lynching was an event – something not to be missed.’ (Young 2005: 641)



Figure 4. *The Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana.* (Allen 2010: Plate 31)



**Figure 5. *The Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana. Framed Photograph with Hair.* (Allen 2010: Plate 32)**

The first image is a simple reproduction of the lynching tableau, demonstrating some of the typical hallmarks of the ritual: both men are hanging from a tree, symbolizing the return to nature of the black body, as well as the situating in a space outside of civilization.<sup>96</sup> Both bodies are clearly mutilated and the clothes are bloodied, signifying the level of violence endured by both men before their deaths. The faces of the crowd are turned towards the camera, confronting the viewer with their gaze, confirming both their role and power within the spectacle. One particular participant stretched out his arm and

<sup>96</sup> Although there were clearly many variations of the spectacle lynching, from region to region and over time, there are some commonalities which appear frequently, such as the hanging from high above, a naturalistic setting away from signs of civilization, wounding of the body and ripping or removal of the clothing.

points towards one of the hanged bodies, in a direction to the viewer to look at the “spoils” of the lynching.<sup>97</sup> The following plate sheds more light on the context of how these images worked within American society: the image is this time framed, along with some of the victim’s hair, inscribed with the words: ‘Bo pointn to his niga,’ indicating the sense of ownership over the black male body that was affirmed by the lynching. The framing of the image indicates that this was something that was displayed proudly, and the addition of the victim’s hair confirms the importance of the souvenir body part in addition to the visual relic. The Shipp and Smith lynching also reflects the importance of how the lynching tableau was posed: both men were dead before they were hoisted from the tree (both were beaten to death), implying that the importance of hanging was of a visual nature, rather than as a method of killing.<sup>98</sup> This staging would also guarantee a greater potential for terrorizing black Americans: even if there was nothing left of the corpses after the frenzied dash for souvenirs had taken place, having a defined lynching space would potentially haunt the imaginations of black folks more effectively. Wiegman notes that lynching situates its victims as ‘the culturally abject – monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the spectacular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return.’<sup>99</sup> The lynching existed as a public spectacle both through the event itself (and any remains of the black body kept as souvenirs), but also through the resulting spectacle of the postcard images produced.

Harvey Young discusses the statistical findings of Walter Brundage, who extrapolates his findings from Georgia and Virginia and estimates that approximately one third of all

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<sup>97</sup> This resonates with images of game hunters, who pose with their “trophies” proudly.

<sup>98</sup> Allen 2010: 176.

<sup>99</sup> Wiegman 1995: 81

lynchings involved mass mobs (crowds of sixty or more). If his estimate is correct, then more than 11,000 black individuals died before mass mobs.<sup>100</sup> Brundage observes: 'Mass mobs, more than any other type of mob, were likely to torture or burn victims. The size and fervor of mass mobs and the anonymity offered by the vast crowds incited lynchers to acts of almost unlimited sadism. In Georgia, news accounts suggest that mass mobs tortured and mutilated nearly a quarter of their victims in grisly ceremonies.'<sup>101</sup> Brundage's mention of "anonymity" here highlights a key way in which the experience of being a part of the lynch mob differed to that of being a part of the photographed lynch mob: while there may have been a sense of anonymity felt during the lynching itself, this anonymity is removed with the focus on particular individual's faces in the photographic evidence of the lynching, heightened further with any accompanying inscription on the reverse of the postcard, proudly proclaiming individual presence at the event and implied ownership of the lynched black body.

Commented [JW(3)]: 28-30

Part of the power of the postcards is that once anonymity has been removed, they produce a sense of personal triumph over the black body which is contingent upon the individual claiming personal ownership. Conversely, the ownership over the black body and the sense of anonymity felt during the ritual itself implies a loss of individuality, necessitated by the claiming of a communal white identity. So, whereas the postcard highlights individuality, the lynching event itself causes a sense of white superiority to be felt when identifying as part of the crowd rather than on the personal level. This sense of anonymity perhaps reflects the loss of individual identity with the adoption of a communal sense of white selfhood.

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<sup>100</sup> Young 2005: 640

<sup>101</sup> Brundage 1993: 42

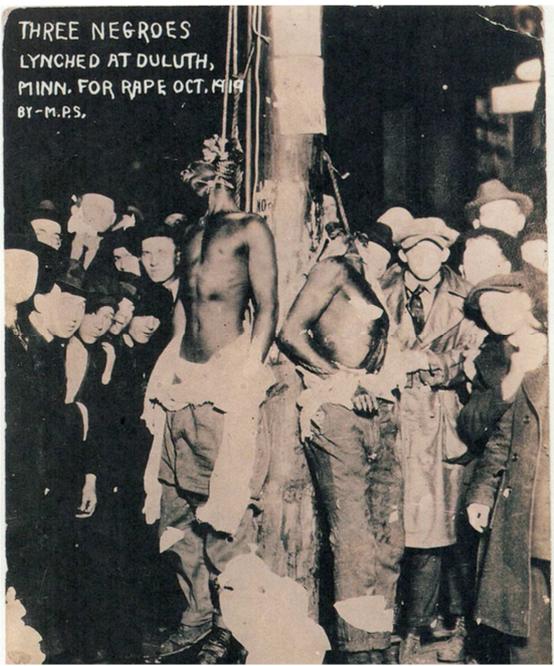


Figure 6. *The Lynching of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie. June 15, 1920, Minnesota. (Allen 2010: plate 28)*

The mass mob here allows for an enactment of collective white identity, with the call to perform in specific ways to confirm a sense of belonging. Having said this, there is an example of anonymity still remaining despite being photographed as a lynching participant in Allen's collection. There are two images that Allen has of the lynching of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie of June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1920, in Duluth, Minnesota. Both of these differing images of the lynching crowd avoid revealing the identities of those present at the lynching, either because the facial features are so overexposed that they would not have been able to have been identified in the former (Fig. 6), or in the latter image this technique is combined with the photograph being taken from such a great distance that personal recognition would have been incredibly difficult. (Fig. 7)

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Figure 7. *The Lynching of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie. June 15, 1920, Minnesota. (Allen 2010: plate 29)*

This would have allowed the former utility of anonymity as part of the crowd during the event to still have functioned for these participants, but would also allow them to have disseminated this image, boasting of having been there, without any fear of reprisal.

The torture and destruction of the black body not only coincides with the affirmation of whiteness: this affirmation is reliant upon this violence. Whiteness here is being produced through the denigration, removal and destruction of blackness. What is important here is that the postcard works to simultaneously remind the viewer of this sense of collective white identity engendered by the event itself, while also confirming the individual agency of the pictured individual. The postcard is so effective as a tool of white supremacy because it bolsters a sense of individual power within the shelter of collective white identity.

Grace Elizabeth Hale reads the lynching in terms of its importance as a way of appeasing anxieties created by segregation. Lynching was a way of disciplining bodies

according to the color line, while segregation was intended to maintain the superiority of whiteness, it also carried with it fears of how to police the barrier between the races, and how to discipline those who traversed racial boundaries: 'Publicly resolving the race, gender, and class ambiguities at the very center of the culture of segregation, spectacle lynchings brutally conjured a collective, all-powerful whiteness even as they made the color line seem modern, civilized, and sane.'<sup>102</sup> So the lynching ritual represented a way of easing these fears of how to regulate America as a racially segregated space, while also reifying the desired space of whiteness as the powerful centre. Hale discusses the way that the lynching ritual overcomes the 'contradictions at the heart of segregation,'<sup>103</sup> through focusing on the spectacle of black otherness as a way of shoring up the fixity of white racial identity. She goes on to describe the way in which the lynching ritual was codified:

Over time, lynching spectacles evolved a well-known structure, a sequence and pace of events that southerners came to understand as standard. The well-choreographed spectacle opened with a chase or a jail attack, followed rapidly by the public identification of the captured African American by the alleged white victim or the victim's relatives, announcement of the upcoming event to draw the crowd, and selection and preparation of the site. The main event then began with a period of mutilation - often including emasculation - and torture to extract confessions and entertain the crowd, and built to a climax of slow-burning, hanging, and/or shooting to complete the killing. The finale consisted of frenzied souvenir gathering and display of the body and the collected parts.<sup>104</sup>

The codification of the lynching spectacle is also engineered through the postcard itself. Posing for the photographer (or even the mere awareness of their presence as a reminder that this was something to be memorialized) served as a reminder of the importance of

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<sup>102</sup> Hale 1998: 203

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*: 228

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*: 204

affirming white identity; purchasing the image, sending the postcard to friends and family, and the retention/display of the postcard, all represent additional ways of enacting and enunciating white supremacy. The lynching postcard acted as a memorialization of white identity as engendered through the destruction of black masculinity.

As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall states, 'lynching was an instrument of coercion intended to impress not only the immediate victim but all who saw or heard about the event.'<sup>105</sup> Lynching was deliberately a continuous way in which to discipline the black male body: it did not simply consist of the horrific and violent destruction of its victim(s), it constituted a warning of the outcome of transgressing the boundaries of race, a reminder of the demeaned and dehumanized space occupied by black masculinity, and an indicator of the superior power of whiteness. This was achieved through giving the lynching a temporal imprint which lasted beyond the actual lynching itself: the disciplinary coercion of the lynching was maintained through the remaining evidence of the lynching, whether in the form of the displayed corpse which remained, the body part as keepsake, or the extant postcard image.

Lynching was one aspect of a larger system of white supremacy; lynching was not a violent outlier in an otherwise civil and egalitarian society, it was simply an example of the existing vehement fear and hatred of black bodies within American culture. Hall situates lynching within a larger legal system designed to give legitimacy to the notion of black deviance, excluding black bodies from citizenship: 'Laws were formulated primarily to exclude black men from adult male prerogatives in the public sphere, and lynching

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<sup>105</sup> Hall 1983: 330

meshed with these legal mechanisms of exclusion.<sup>106</sup> This exclusion worked to give credence to the perception that black people were not American citizens because of a lack of humanity. The efficacy of the lynching ritual to discipline black male bodies was such that it did not require direct participation from black people: the only literal black presence at the lynching was that of the victim(s), with the undiluted whiteness of the crowd working to confirm a sense of a cohesive and collective white identity. Yet the knowledge of each lynching event clearly terrified and coerced black men into submission: as Dora Apel notes of the lynching ritual, 'it was not necessary to look to be terrorized by the spectacle of lynching; it was enough to know that thousands of others looked and were amused'.<sup>107</sup> Thus the power of the narrative of the lynching did not rely upon the presence at the event itself: the message was clear enough to be felt by black people in absentia.

As Susan Donaldson and Amy Wood note, the narrative power of the lynching ritual was felt outside of the specific temporal and physical space of the event itself: 'white mobs sought to make their violence as public and conspicuous as possible in order to imprint the fiction of white supremacy into popular consciousness. Even the most private lynchings were made spectacular through photographs, news accounts, and other kinds of narratives that celebrated and justified the violence.'<sup>108</sup> In terms of the disciplinary workings of the lynching ritual, the mourning of the specific black lives lost to the baying white crowd stood in stark relief to the narrative of triumphant white supremacy told by the lynching postcard.

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<sup>106</sup> Hall 1983: 331

<sup>107</sup> Apel 2003: 469

<sup>108</sup> Wood & Donaldson 2008: 12

Michel Foucault discusses the utility of the public execution as a regulatory tool of society:

The public execution, then, has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular. The public execution, however hasty and everyday, belongs to a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored; over and above the crime that has placed the sovereign in contempt, it deploys before all eyes an invincible force. Its aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength.<sup>109</sup>

The sovereignty that Foucault discusses here can be read as a cipher for the sovereignty of whiteness: white supremacy utilizes the lynching ritual for its restorative potential; the black male is positioned as the criminalized individual who has dared to disrespect whiteness, and as a retaliatory act whiteness uses its institutional power to make a spectacle out of its ability to destroy the black male body. The lynched body constitutes a disciplinary warning of the might of whiteness and conversely the diminution of blackness. The terror of the lynching ritual worked to reify the power of white supremacy. In Foucault's terms, 'the ceremony of punishment, then, is an exercise of "terror" [...] to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign. The public execution did not re-establish justice; it reactivated power.'<sup>110</sup> The power of whiteness is exercised through the lynching ritual, where the terrorizing of black people demonstrated the evidence of white superiority, located within a systemic framework of white supremacy<sup>111</sup>. Foucault discusses the disappearance of the 'great

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<sup>109</sup> Foucault 1995: 48-9

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.: 49

<sup>111</sup> Foucault situates the public execution within the penal system, noting its institutional position: 'Its ruthlessness, its spectacle, its physical violence, its unbalanced play of forces, its meticulous ceremonial, its entire apparatus were inscribed in the political functioning of the penal system.' (Foucault 1995: 49)

spectacle of physical punishment' where 'the tortured body was avoided' and 'the theatrical representation of pain' was excluded from the punitive process in a nineteenth century European context; interestingly, this is clearly at odds with the lynching ritual.<sup>112</sup> Despite this move away from Western modes of punishment manifesting as spectacle, the black male body is still clearly being subjected to continued physical punishment and torture. The tortured black male body is not simply avoided, it is exalted as the manifestation of white supremacist power; the ritual also exemplifies theatre: the lynched body is the "show" which cements those watching as a cohesive audience who are enjoying the visual spectacle. Whereas the criminalized body that Foucault is discussing did not need to be made into a commodity through spectacle and thus no longer needed to be imaged and imagined through this visual representation of torture as entertainment, the black body still constituted a threat significant enough to necessitate such an extreme display.

The lynching provided a perfect way to contain and constrain the black body, particularly post-Emancipation, with its combination of opening up a space for white identity to be strengthened and black identity to be commanded. Robyn Wiegman notes that lynching is 'about the law- both the towering patrolman who renarrates the body and sadistically claims it as sign of his own power and the Symbolic as law, the site of normativity and sanctioned desire, of prohibition and taboo.'<sup>113</sup> The ritualized lynching works in exactly the same way as Foucault attributes to the public execution, which 'had to manifest the disproportion of power of the sovereign over those whom he had reduced to impotence. The dissymmetry, the irreversible imbalance of forces were an essential

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<sup>112</sup> Foucault 1995: 14

<sup>113</sup> Wiegman 1995: 81

element in the public execution. A body effaced, reduced to dust and thrown to the winds, a body destroyed piece by piece by the infinite power of the sovereign constituted not only the ideal, but the real limit of punishment.’<sup>114</sup> The importance of the physical destruction of the body is clear here: as a reaction to the threat to society that the criminalized body represents, the full power of the juridical system is exercised. The criminalized black male body constitutes the space upon which the institution of white supremacy is inscribed: ‘If torture was so strongly embedded in legal practice, it was because it revealed truth and showed the operation of power,’ Foucault writes.<sup>115</sup>

The public torturing of the body was important as it represented the inscription of the corporeal site with the categorization of criminal, and defined the body as outside of the norms of society. In Foucauldian terms, ‘it assured the articulation of the written on the oral, the secret on the public, the procedure of investigation on the operation of the confession; it made it possible to reproduce the crime on the visible body of the criminal; in the same horror, the crime had to be manifested and annulled.’<sup>116</sup> The torturing of the body publicly is the manifestation of societal revenge against criminal transgressions and the reinstating of the power of the state. Foucault discusses public executions as an act of communication; a symbolic notion of reacting to the whisper of an individual criminal act with an institutional bellow, signalling the imbalance of power in a process intended to intimidate:

The public execution formed part of the procedure that established the reality of what one punished. Furthermore, the atrocity of a crime was also the violence of the challenge flung at the sovereign; it was that which would move to make him to make a reply whose function was to go further than this atrocity, to master it, to overcome

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<sup>114</sup> Foucault 1995: 50

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*: 55

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

it by an excess that annulled it. The atrocity that haunted the public execution played, therefore, a double role: it was the principle of the communication between the crime and the punishment, it was also the exacerbation of the punishment in relation to the crime. It provided the spectacle with both truth and power; it was the culmination of the ritual of the investigation and the ceremony in which the sovereign triumphed. And it joined both together in the tortured body.<sup>117</sup>

The tortured body and the postcard which contain the image of that body both constitute communicative acts: the tortured body as a means of communicating to black men the violent peril that resulted from transgressing racial boundaries,<sup>118</sup> and the postcard as a form of communication between white people reaffirming the narrative of white superiority and the deviance and inhumanity of black people.<sup>119</sup>

### **Anatomy of a lynching**

Hale frames the spectacle lynching as being a direct consequence of consumer culture, as they 'became a southern way of enabling the spread of consumption as a white privilege.'<sup>120</sup> The violence both helped create a white consuming public and the structure

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<sup>117</sup> Foucault 1995: 56

<sup>118</sup> This is not to imply that all lynching victims had in fact committed some form of transgressive act. Many were simply victimized for being black within a white supremacist society and accused falsely of criminal acts.

<sup>119</sup> To return for a moment to the freak show, there is an analogous relationship between the lynching ritual and the freak show: the body is spectacularized for entertainment and has torturous practices enacted upon it in an analogous process whereby the deviant body is of interest precisely because of what it is believed to be capable of – a capability which is distinctly understood as non-human. This also explains how this torture can be sanctioned: the body is not human, therefore not deserving of human compassion. Rosemarie Garland Thomson's analysis of the stages of the freak show's operation illuminates this: 'Safely domesticated and bounded by the show's forms and conventions, the freak soothes the onlookers' self doubt by appearing as their antithesis. The American produces and acts, but the onstage freak is idle and passive. The American looks and names, but the freak is looked at and named. The American is mobile, entering and exiting the show at will and ranging around the social order, but the freak is fixed, confined by the material structures and the conventions of the staging and socially immobilized by a deviant body. The American is rational and controlled, but the freak is carnal and contingent. Within this fantasy, the American's self determines the condition of his body, just as the freak's body determines the condition of his self. This grammar of embodiment culturally normalizes the American and abnormalizes the freak.' (Thomson 1997: 65)

<sup>120</sup> Hale identifies the lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas, as the 'founding event in the history of spectacle lynchings'. She discusses this particular event in detail, identifying the key features of this lynching that confirm this as the point of origin for the spectacle lynching: 'The 1893 murder of Smith was the first blatantly public, actively promoted lynching of a southern black by a large crowd of southern whites. Adding three key features – the specially chartered excursion train, the publicly sold photograph, and the widely circulated, unabashed

of segregation where consumption could take place without threatening white supremacy.<sup>121</sup> Wood echoes the way in which the lynching enshrined white privilege within consumption, commenting that lynching was a ‘form of mass commercial amusement, which like other forms of mass culture, marked and regulated racial privilege.’<sup>122</sup> Hale also ties in the workings of the lynching to modernity: ‘To the newspaper story, the warning or bragging word overheard, and the remembered sight of fingers floating in alcohol in a jar were added as the decades passed these more modern ways of spreading knowledge: the radio announcement, the Edison recording, and even the gruesome picture postcard sent and saved.’<sup>123</sup> The ways that the lynching is mediated for both white and black here is important, as this variation allows for a significant proportion of Americans to be exposed to and absorb the message of the lynching and its attached narrative of black masculinity as danger. The repetition of the message of lynching through the endlessly printed postcard images also ties the lynching into modernity in the form of the mass produced image. The importance of the lynching as a

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retelling of the event by one of the lynchers – the killing of Smith modernized and made more powerful the loosely organized, more spontaneous practice of lynching that had previously prevailed. In what one commentator aptly termed a “neglected feature of railroading,” from 1893 on railroad companies could be counted on to arrange special trains to transport spectators and lynchers to previously announced lynching sites. On some occasions these trains were actually advertised in local papers; with railroad passenger service, even small towns could turn out large crowds. Even after automobiles cut into the railroads’ “lynch carnival” business, a 1938 commentator found that “modern trainmen, schooled in the doctrine of service,” helped “in an informative way” by relaying news of upcoming lynchings to train passengers and townspeople “all along the rail lines.” As crucial as the innovation in transportation, however, was the publication, after Henry Smith’s lynching, of the first full account, from the discovery of the alleged crime to the frenzied souvenir gathering at the end: *The Facts in the Case of the Horrible Murder of Little Myrtle Vance, and Its Fearful Expiation, at Paris, Texas, February 1, 1893*. This widely distributed pamphlet is perhaps the most detailed account of a lynching ever written from a lyncher’s point of view. It included a photograph of Smith’s torture, probably also sold separately. This pamphlet initiated a new genre of lynching narrative, the author as eyewitness and in this case also participant.’ (Hale 1998: 207)

<sup>121</sup> Hale 1998: 205-6

<sup>122</sup> Wood 2005: 377

<sup>123</sup> Hale 1998: 228

way of maintaining white supremacy as a visual rather than experiential tool is important: Hale considers the spectacular nature of the lynching as being more important than actual presence during the event, even if one was absent from the lynching of the black male, the absorption of the message of the lynching could equally happen if mediated through images of it. The issue of remediation here is also noted by Hale: a person's participation within the lynching itself would go through a process of reimagining when confronted by the souvenir, postcard, or narrative disseminated via word of mouth or the media. Part of the codification of the lynching was not simply in its repetition of the narrative of black masculinity posing a danger to whiteness, but also in its reproduction and remediation. She states that from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, 'representations of spectacle lynchings increasingly fell into a ritualistic pattern as the narratives constructed by witnesses, participants, and journalists assumed a standardized form. Spectacle lynchings, then, became more powerful even as they occurred less frequently because the rapidly multiplying stories of these public tortures became virtually interchangeable.'<sup>124</sup> This transposable nature of the lynching ritual, despite any specific differences makes complete sense in terms of the black male body being the axis: the body itself could be interchangeable as it was symbolic of black masculinity in general, rather than being about the singular black victim. This is related to lynching being an act of systemic racism rather than individual: the guilt (or lack thereof) of the specific lynching victim was not particularly relevant: the lynching was the result of black masculinity posing a threat to whiteness, rather than simply arising from one individual's actions.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.: 206

Viewing the practice of lynching as a systemic evil rather than a personalised one, allows for the understanding of the lynching postcard as performing as much of the disciplinary work, if not more, as the lynching of the body itself.<sup>125</sup> The imaging of the event allowed for the message of white supremacy, and the containment of the terrorizing force of black masculine sexuality by white men, to be reiterated to those who had been witnesses during the event, but also to iterate this message to an audience, both larger in number and spatially distanced. The taking, purchasing, selling, exchange, and discussion of, the postcard allowed for the initial violence enacted upon the black male body to be relived constantly. Although Hale describes all of these actions as 'removed from actual involvement,' all those who participated in the circulation of the lynching postcard were clearly complicit in the workings of the lynching to police black male bodies. Here we can think of the prison industrial complex as an analogue: those who benefit from increased political representation, buy cheaper goods produced by prison labour, etc. are "still involved" within the system of the prison industrial complex.<sup>126</sup> Hale discusses these constructed narratives that frame the understanding of black masculinity for viewers of the lynching image, as though they alleviate the inherent racism of the image, yet we are always impacted by constructed narratives that are created and recreated within culture. We always perceive the world around us through a cultural lens, we are never in a vacuum where there is just text and reader – even these positions are culturally constructed.

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<sup>125</sup> Earl Hutchinson, gives an example of how deeply entrenched, and how high within the political echelons of society the perception of the black male as rapist had proliferated: when Theodore Roosevelt addressed Congress in 1906, he stated: 'The greatest existing cause of lynching is the perpetration, especially by black men, of the hideous crime of rape.' (1997: 27) Although Roosevelt did denounce the "lawbreakers," this claim from the US president would no doubt have given the lynching legitimacy as a tool of social control.

<sup>126</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the workings of the prison industrial complex, see chapter four.

The lynching ritual needs to be repeated in order to confirm and maintain the narrative of black masculinity as threat: the repetition allows for this trope to come into existence. Hale goes on to link the codification of the lynching ritual to the technological advances of modernity, such as train and car travel being utilized in order to make attendance easier and increase numbers of those present, the use of radio, telephone and camera to commemorate and disseminate the news of the lynching and its attached meaning, all of which became repeated features of the lynching: 'As a dominant narrative evolved and circulated more widely, innovations added in a particular lynching were easily spotted and picked up by subsequent mobs.'<sup>127</sup> Thus the lynching is flexible enough to incorporate elements of modern life into the ritual as a means of reifying collective white identity; the lynching became associated with advancements in travel, technology and communication, and so was read as a modern practice which reflected an improvement in daily American life. The repetitive nature of the ritual evokes the religious sacrifice, in terms of its ability to cleanse and to strengthen – in this case, rather than the soul and the religious belief being the recipients of a cleansing and strengthening, the lynching purified the sense of whiteness and thus the belief in the superiority of whiteness was made stronger.

Joel Williamson describes the ritualization of lynching, noting that the lynching's popularity was altered by time and space. July represented the time of year when the lynching would peak, and the spatial context of the lynching was also important: 'Lynching tended to happen in the areas where a lynching had happened before. Also they tended to occur in areas undergoing rapid economic changes or in counties where

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<sup>127</sup> Hale 1998: 206

murders had been frequent and murderers rarely punished.<sup>128</sup> This need for the lynching ritual to be repeated in specific ways and the use of repeated physical locations hints at the instability of the narrative at the heart of the lynching: the consistent repetition affirms and reaffirms the tenets of white supremacy, an ideology which remained unstable without constant reinscription.

The lynching of Virgil Jones, Robert Jones, Thomas Jones & Joseph Riley in Russellville, Logan County, Kentucky, on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1908, demonstrates some important things: the repetitive style of the staging of lynchings – echoing the repetition of the message, and the way in which the lynching was as much about the consolidation of whiteness as about policing and terrorizing black people.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Williamson 1984: 186

<sup>129</sup> Allen 2010: plate 74.



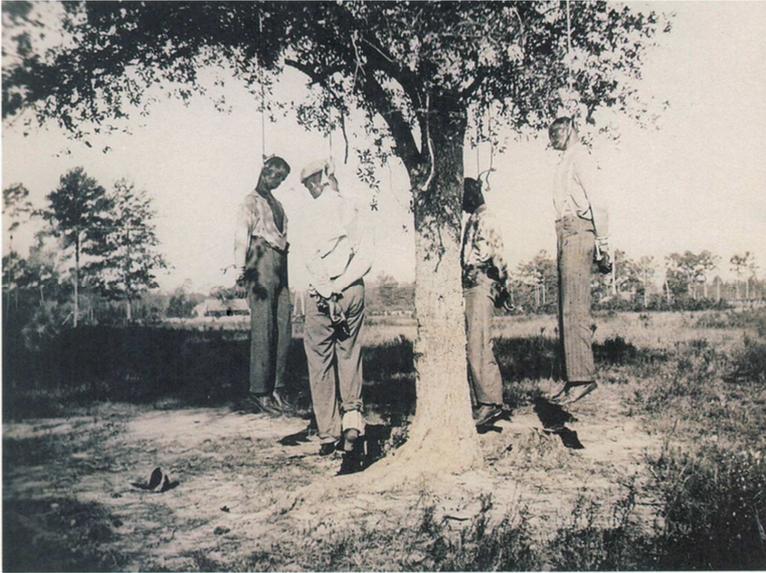


Figure 9. *The Lynching of Four Unidentified African Americans. Circa 1900, Location Unknown.* (Allen 2010: plate 16)

In terms of repetition, this image is almost identical to a lynching of four unidentified African Americans, circa 1900,<sup>130</sup> which in itself reveals that the lynching did not need to be attached to specific black men or actions: the lynching victim was useful to the needs of white supremacy in that the victims were interchangeable and symbolic of the mortal danger with which all black men lived daily. The lynching of Riley and the three Jones' victims is notable because of something else: the image features the presence of two black onlookers in the background, illustrating the other audience for whom the lynching was intended; black people were also meant to see these savage scenes in order to also carry away the message of white supremacy. In terms of the lynching acting as dire warning to black folks, a note pinned to one of the bodies reads 'Let this be a warning to you niggers

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<sup>130</sup> Allen 2010: plate 16.

to let white people alone or you will go the same way.’<sup>131</sup> On the reverse of this image is typed ‘Four Niggers hanged by a mob in the State of Georgia for assaulting a white woman.’<sup>132</sup> Allen notes the following: In fact this lynching occurred in Kentucky, and the men were known for their public criticism of the white-run legal system – this is the most likely reason they were executed. The false information reflects a common justification for lynching in the South – that blacks were inferior and sexually uncontrollable. Such justification by southern leaders fostered the misconception that blacks were lynched predominantly for sexual assault, but few lynching victims were actually convicted or even indicted for such crimes.<sup>133</sup> This is another reminder of the pervasiveness of the connection between the black male and the rape of white women within the lynching ritual.

The instability of white supremacy also partly accounts for the constant repeated photographing of the lynching, as a way of solidifying white supremacy, resonating with Susan Sontag’s observation that photographs ‘help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure.’<sup>134</sup> Hale also notes, in terms of the emotive importance of spatial context, that in an attempt to re-establish a sense of social order, ‘white southerners chose geographic anchors, whether the imagined spaces evoked by narratives or the physical spaces recaptured through spectacle, literally to ground their racial identity within the mobility of modernity.’<sup>135</sup> Williamson’s comments also give clarity to the

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.: 196

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.: 195

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Sontag 1977: 9

<sup>135</sup> Hale 1998: 9

scapegoating of the black male for the perceived failings of the legal system. The importance of the lynching being legitimized as a form of conferring justice upon American society is addressed by Williamson: ‘Lynchers saw lynching as “justice.” The platform upon which Henry Smith was tortured bore that single word conspicuously displayed in large printed letters.’<sup>136</sup> In its utility as a tool of maintaining white supremacist ideology, the lynching ritual had to be defensible: rather than being a story of white racist violence, it had to be a narrative of black male rapaciousness being contained through justice meted out by whites. Williamson details some of the specific violence that was enacted upon the black male body:

Sometimes the victims were hung without having their necks broken by a fall so that they slowly strangled to death. Usually in such cases, after the bodies had hung for several minutes they would be riddled with bullets.<sup>137</sup> In that process, sometimes, armed men would be organized like soldiers into a firing order – some in front on the ground, another rank kneeling behind, and a third tier standing. The way would be cleared, and at the command hundreds would fire into the body or bodies. Now and again the lynchers would halt their proceedings and pose with their victim so that photographs could be taken or, sometimes, stand aside so that the victim could be photographed alone. Such discipline suggested recognized leadership, understood procedures, and concerted purpose.<sup>138</sup>

The importance of the composition of the image here is clear, and is certainly indicative of the dehumanization of the black male, not simply in terms of the horrendous violence visited upon the body, but also in the emotional distancing required to take time out to “dress the scene” for maximum impact. This monstrous lack of empathy should not be confused with lack of passion, rather this was manifested in the passionate hatred of

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<sup>136</sup> Williamson 1984: 187

<sup>137</sup> This penetration of the black male body can be read as a direct retaliation for the presumed penetration of the white female body by the black male. This homoerotic element of the lynching ritual calls to mind the homoerotic charge of blackface minstrelsy, as detailed by Eric Lott in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*.

<sup>138</sup> Williamson 1984: 188

black masculinity and the earnest effort to image and memorialize the event at its most effective.<sup>139</sup> James Allen also ruminates upon the active intrusion of the photographer into the lynching ritual: 'the photographer was more than a perceptive spectator at lynchings. Too often they compulsively composed silvery tableaux (natures mortes) positioning and lighting corpses as if they were game birds shot on the wing. Indeed, the photographic art played as significant a role in the ritual as torture or souvenir grabbing'<sup>140</sup>. The image to be produced out of the lynching spectacle (a spectacle both the same and different from the event itself) is clearly important, important enough to affect the structure and timeline of the enactment itself. The imaging of the lynching ritual implicates the importance of the camera: as Amy Wood states, the camera functioned as 'an integral part of the lynching (as "spectacle within the spectacle"), reinforcing the violence for the perpetrators'.<sup>141</sup>

### **Spectacle**

The importance of spectacle within the workings of the lynching ritual is fundamental. Not only does this specific public act rely upon the spectacularizing of the black male body, but it also relies upon the spectacle of the white crowd as a testament of the strength of a communal white identity, with the presence of the camera's eye as an ever-present reminder that the lynching not only needs to happen in order to mete out extralegal punishment, but it needs to be seen in order to be fully effective. The lynching relies upon the torture and destruction of the black male body working as a spectacular entertainment for the white crowd. Elias Canetti, in *Crowds and Power*, argues, 'the real

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<sup>139</sup> This resonates with the way in which the more recent incidents of torture at Abu Ghraib were documented. A closer analysis of these images will follow in the conclusion.

<sup>140</sup> Allen 2010: 204

<sup>141</sup> Wood 2001: 195

executioner is the crowd...It approves the spectacle, and with passionate excitement, gathers from far and near to watch it from beginning to end. It wants it to happen and hates being cheated of its victim.<sup>142</sup> This implicates the power of the crowd – and its analogues in the film/TV audience and photographic spectator – to demand a specific conclusion; in the process of looking the implied spectator is pushing for a specific conclusion to what is presented visually. It is useful to think not only of the spectacle of black otherness (lynching victim), but also of the spectacle of white unification (the baying crowd). The crowd also becomes something that needs to be beheld in order to celebrate in this sense of white supremacy and victory. The lynching ritual, as Young states, ‘stages the transformation of the living body into a set of lifeless parts to be collected; the spectacle becomes materiality.’<sup>143</sup> The spectacle of the lynching ritual is felt as something tangible, something concrete that can be collected and used as a tool for reinforcing white supremacy.

### **Ethics of Looking**

There are clear ethical considerations that arise with the display, viewing and circulation of lynching images. Amy Wood and Susan Donaldson consider the ethical implications of looking at lynching images: there are questions that bring up ‘the curious dynamic between remembering and forgetting, of giving voice to and disavowing past wounds that seem to defy both comprehension and articulation, and in particular the ethics of responding to and articulating scenes of devastation and pain without succumbing to the lures of sensationalism and objectification.’<sup>144</sup> Wood and Donaldson

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<sup>142</sup> Canetti 1998: 51

<sup>143</sup> Young 2005: 655

<sup>144</sup> Wood & Donaldson 2008: 7

ask the following important question: 'How does one go about trying to represent what initially appears beyond description, and how does one do so without reimposing upon those victims of past atrocities the utter debasement and abjection they experienced in ritualistic acts of violence and murder?'<sup>145</sup> These concerns are certainly legitimate, and within the confines of this work it can only be hoped that the explication of the imaged lynching ritual results in some form of reparation to the historical diminution of black masculinity, as well as an alteration of the narrative attached to the black male body.<sup>146</sup> As Allen comments of the postcards, 'lust propelled the commercial reproduction and distribution of the images, facilitating the endless replay of anguish. Even dead, the victims were without sanctuary.'<sup>147</sup> To keep looking at these lynching images certainly runs the risk of perpetuating an "endless replay of anguish."<sup>148</sup>

Although there is clearly a very real risk of affirming the spectacular power of the lynching – if left without analysis the events will still have taken place – but if framed appropriately to mitigate any continuing power to inscribe white supremacy, and kept under continued consideration, there is the potential of some recuperation to come out

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<sup>145</sup> Wood & Donaldson 2008: 7

<sup>146</sup> The issue of ethical engagement is one which pervades throughout this entire thesis, although it most fervently emerged in the reading of the lynching postcard. As a piece which attempts to dismantle the racist situating of the black male body as a destructive force upon whiteness, and an attempt to read these different cultural examples in a bid to assess what can be surmised about the state of whiteness, and its need to position black masculinity as this dangerous and deviant identity, there is the possibility of reiterating the primacy of white cultural creators within a system which already privileges them over black artists. However, it is the intention of this work to destabilize both the supremacy of whiteness and inferiority of blackness as presented within these case studies; a turn to art which is foundational to American culture is necessary for this. This is certainly not to demean the important cultural work that is being produced by people of colour in response to these racist images, but an affirmation of the importance of interrogating these hegemonic narratives of race.

<sup>147</sup> Allen 2010: 205

<sup>148</sup> The provocation to look is one to which I will return, in chapter three while discussing Robert Mapplethorpe.

of these postcards. This issue of how to look at these images is also a concern for Wendy Wolters as she questions the efficacy of James Allen's intention to "look differently" at these lynching images: 'As the audience of the photographs today, are we better equipped to look *at* instead of *with* the spectators, or do we just affirm the spectacle of the lynching? When confronted with the history of the event, the spectator gaze within the photograph, the spectator gaze of the photograph, and Allen's gaze of the collection of photographs, with whose experience do we identify?'<sup>149</sup> Wolters' notion of "looking differently" here is intriguing: is this accomplished simply through having greater emotional and temporal distance from the events pictured, or is it a matter of contextualization? In terms of how *Without Sanctuary* handles these ethical considerations, the book does attempt to frame and contextualize the images with the inclusion of a foreword by Congressman John Lewis, writing by Leon F. Litwack and Hilton Als, and an afterword by Allen himself. This succeeds in undercutting the ability of the images in the book to simply reinscribe white supremacy, but Allen's afterword in particular moves the focus away from the actual lynching victim (and black people more broadly as those victimized by lynching) to himself:

These photographs provoke a strong sense of denial in me, and a desire to freeze my emotions. In time, I realized that my fear of the other is fear of myself. Then these portraits, torn from other family albums, become the portraits of my own family and of myself. And the faces of the living and the faces of the dead recur in me and my daily life. I've seen John Richards alone on a remote country road, rocking along in hobbyhorse strides, head low, eyes to the ground, spotting coins or rocks or roots. And I've encountered Laura Nelson in a small, sturdy woman who answered my knock on a back-porch door. In her deep-set eyes I watched a silent parade across a shiny steel bridge looking down. And on Christmas Lane, just blocks from our home, I've observed another Leo, a small-framed boy with his shirttail out and skullcap off center, as he made his way to Sabbath prayers. With each encounter, I can't help

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<sup>149</sup> Wolters 2004: 400

thinking of these photos, and the march of time, and of the cold steel trigger in the human heart.<sup>150</sup>

The emphasis here is not on the terrible violence and death experienced by John Richards, Laura Nelson or Leo, but upon how the seeing of these figures is felt by Allen as painful trauma. Aside from the misrepresentation of lynching as something which equally victimized black men, black women and Jewish men, Allen frames the lynching in terms of how he has been damaged; the centrality of white experience obfuscates the suffering of the actual lynching victim. The ambivalence felt in looking at these lynching images is echoed by Hilton Als in his entry in *Without Sanctuary*:

I'm assuming this aggressive tone to establish a little distance from these images of the despised and dead, the better to determine the usefulness of this project, which escapes me, but doesn't preclude my writing about it. Too often we refuse information, refuse to look or even think about something, simply because it's unpleasant, or poses a problem, or raises "issues" – emotional and intellectual friction that rubs our heavily therapeuticized selves the wrong way. I didn't like looking at these pictures, but once I looked, the events documented in them occurred in my mind over and over again, as did the realization that these pictures are documents of America's obsession with niggers, both black and white. I looked at these pictures, and what I saw in them, in addition to the obvious, was the way in which I'm regarded, by any number of people: as a nigger. And it is as one that I felt my neck snap and my heart break, while looking at these pictures.<sup>151</sup>

Although it is important and necessary to keep these images under consideration as a way of attempting to undo white supremacy, the continued ability of these photographs to traumatize is clear: to look at the images collected by Allen is to be reminded of the violence of white supremacy and to be vulnerable to repeated victimization. Als goes on to note that although there are clear differences between himself and the victims in these

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<sup>150</sup> Allen 2010: 205

<sup>151</sup> Als 2010: 38

images, they act as a reminder of what it means to be black in America, and the way in which lynching exists as one element within the system of white supremacy:

Of course, one big difference between the people documented in these pictures and me is that I am not dead, have not been lynched or scalded or burned or whipped or stoned. But I have been looked at, watched, and it's the experience of being watched, and seeing the harm in people's eyes – that is the prelude to becoming a dead nigger, like those seen here, that has made me understand, finally, what the word “nigger” means, and why people have used it, and the way I use it here, now: as a metaphorical lynching before the real one. “Nigger” is a slow death. And that's the slow death I feel all the time now, as a colored man.<sup>152</sup>

Als' stance is useful in terms of the way that it allows for the lynching ritual to be seen in a larger context of American racism: although it remains startling for its extreme violence and obvious hatred of blackness, lynching is not an isolated practice in an otherwise racially egalitarian society, it is simply an extreme example of the ideology of white supremacy upon which America was founded and continues to operate. Wendy Wolters, in her larger discussion of the intent and result of *Without Sanctuary*, compares the different ways that the same image of the lynching of Lige Daniels appears in the book, and what impact this has upon our understanding of the image. Daniels features on both the cover and the inside of the book, but the image is crucially different: whereas on the cover the image is clipped, thus erasing the majority of the spectators, in the body of the collection the spectators at Daniels' lynching remain seen, looking directly into the camera or at the lynching victim. Wolters comments 'the clipped version of the photograph of Lige Daniels' lynching sets the tone for the text that follows it; the spectacle of a lynched body is reproduced for a new audience, and the spectacle remains at the center of this project.'<sup>153</sup> Through this editorial choice, the result of *Without Sanctuary* is

Commented [JW(6)]: Lige daniels images 54-5

<sup>152</sup> Als 2010: 39

<sup>153</sup> Wolters 2004: 400-1

altered to that of making the spectacle of the black male body the main focus for our consideration, rather than the brutality of the lynching crowd. In contrast to the narrowly clipped image of the Lige Daniels on the cover, which is not only cropped erasing the majority of the spectators and rendering this lynching as a more intimate affair, but is dwarfed by its black background, thus directing the gaze directly at the black body. Thus this image contextualizes the lynching by encouraging the visual assessment of the tortured black body, reproducing the gaze of those participating in the lynching (both those who were present and those who were involved in the circulation of the postcard). The cover image is also reproduced in black and white, a visual reproduction of the racial binary of black and white. In contrast to this, the full image of Daniels' lynching<sup>154</sup> is reproduced in sepia tones, reducing the emphasis of color difference. Viewing the fuller image also allows a greater field of depth to the image, making it clear that the white crowd stand in the foreground, with the hanged body receding somewhat in the background above the participants. With the improved depth of the picture, it is also far easier to focus on the detail of the faces of some of the crowd, with one particular participant who is cropped out of the cover version (an older teenaged boy who appears closest to the camera, with a striped shirt and short tie) showing through with the most clearly detailed features. Aside from making it clear that the black body is hanging behind the crowd, this sepia version also shifts the focus from the black body to the white crowd; showing them in more detail and in larger numbers makes the (literal) focus of the image the engaging stare as the participants look out from the frame directly into the camera, thus engaging the viewer of this image. This makes clear that the lynching was not really about the black male at all, his death was simply a way of engineering *for* whiteness to be

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<sup>154</sup> Allen 2010: plate 54

experienced as a collective identity, the strength of which was confirmed through the communal torture and killing of the black male. To view the postcard in this altered context effects a reflection upon the distance between the position of implied viewer and white lynching crowd: a decision has to be made whether to join this space, or distance oneself, thus confirming or denying whether the viewer belonged within this collective white identity. The lynching of Lige Daniels is also given greater context in the following plate, which features the inscription on the reverse of the postcard bearing the lynching image: "This was made in the court yard, In Center Texas, he is a 16 year old Black boy, He killed Earl's Grandma, She was Florence's mother. Give this to Bud. From Aunt Myrtle."<sup>155</sup> Aside from being startling in its casual tone about such an extreme act, Daniels was lynched in the courtyard of the Center, Texas jailhouse from an oak tree; the fact that this image was produced in the same courtyard suggests the immediacy of visual reproduction of the lynching, reflecting that these were well-choreographed events because of constant repetition. Not only is the viewer responsible for the trauma enacted upon the black male body within the image, they are directly responsible as consumers: as cultural products all of these case studies rely upon the presence of an eager audience who are willing to pay for the pleasure of seeing the tortured body, they do not exist in opposition to societal demand.

### **Ethics of Memorialization**

How to memorialize the lynching ritual, and the ethical complications that arise with this conundrum is an essential reflective question, a question to which contemporary reactions upon this blood-soaked legacy provide a useful perspective. The notion of how

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<sup>155</sup> Allen 2010: plate 55

best to memorialize something is in itself problematic.<sup>156</sup> This needs to be remembered when thinking about how lynching can and should be memorialized: as Dora Apel notes, “collective memory” and “community” are complex fictional abstractions. Memory is not uniformly collective nor does a homogenous community exist in most places; instead there are many voices, divisions, and ideological agendas.<sup>157</sup> There is not a singular account of the lynching ritual within American history, but many. ‘One of the most significant aspects regarding the subject of lynching,’ as Fuoss states, ‘is precisely the way in which the *true and complete story evades the truth-telling capacity* [emphasis mine] of even the most ablest investigator employing the most insightful and uncompromising methods.’<sup>158</sup> Although Fuoss’ comments are intended to focus upon the huge variation in the specifics of the lynching ritual, this idea of there being a “true and complete story” that can somehow be captured within the “telling of truth” by a historian is limited. Wood and Donaldson address the issue of these images lacking objectivity by reminding us that these pictures have been taken with a very specific agenda, and by asking about the way that this impacts upon our complicity as viewers:

The [lynching] photographs are not, of course, objective, and therefore, in some sense, distanced or impartial records of torture and murder; rather, they are taken from the point of view of the perpetrators, who gather around corpses with pride and pleasure. The violent exploitation of the event is thus bound up in the photograph itself. To look at these images is to recognize the objectifying gaze of the perpetrators and to position ourselves in relation to that gaze, even as we may shudder at the thought of it. Precisely because we are implicated in the images’ violence in this way, we are denied any aesthetic or emotional distance; instead we are impelled to engage actively with this past, creating a historical memory of

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<sup>156</sup> There is a necessary requirement to resist the notion that there is a single story to be told, or that indeed there is some central or more faithful retelling of historical events.

<sup>157</sup> Apel 2008: 218

<sup>158</sup> Fuoss 1999: 4

lynching through the ways we convey and transfer this visual encounter with suffering and death into the future.<sup>159</sup> This highlights the difficult space in which contemporary viewers of these images find themselves: how best to understand and mitigate the narrative encoded within these images, without reaffirming the white supremacy at the heart of these photographs.

These contemporary reimaginings of the lynching ritual offer a way of thinking about the misremembering of the lynching ritual and its purpose of not simply ending the lives of black men and taking pleasure in the extreme and protracted violent destruction of that body, but more as a mechanism for policing the behaviour of all black men. Tyler Shields, and his *Historical Fiction* series of 2014 of which the image below is part (Fig. 10), offers a useful entry point to thinking about lynching in these terms.

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<sup>159</sup> Wood & Donaldson 2008: 14-5. Olin discusses the Abu Ghraib torture images, in terms of their ability to 'urge participation in the perpetrator's activity, and we have to be willing to comply in order to bear looking at the photograph.' (2012: 232-3) This complicity with the violence enacted through the image is relevant to all of the case studies presented here, as the viewer becomes complicit in the violent representation of the black male body as threatening in their looking (and especially in their continuing, or repeated, look). Despite any personal assurance that this complicity is not present, it is simply a disavowal of personal responsibility. As Olin goes on to state, if we 'shrink from the gaze of the torturers, it does not mean that we are always innocent of torture, but merely that we are not happy to look into its face.' (2012: 234) Dora Apel also provides a fascinating comparison of the lynching postcard to these more recent visions of torture in *Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib* in *Art Journal*.



Figure 10. Tyler Shields: *Historical Fiction* (2014)

One of the problems with Shields' photograph is that it appears to calculatedly rely upon the sensationalistic nature of lynching images to further the photographer's personal agenda. Wood and Donaldson reflect upon the problematic aspect of representations of lynching: 'because lynching was so often perpetrated through spectacle and sensationalism, any attempt to represent it risks re-engaging in that spectacle or exploiting the sensationalism once again.'<sup>160</sup> Although Shields subverts the lynching tableau to feature a Klansman being hanged rather than the expected black male, because of the grisly familiarity of the usual victim within the lynching ritual, the viewer is still reminded of the brutalized black male body, and so Shields' image still has the result of reinforcing the message of the lynching ritual.<sup>161</sup> Given that the name given to the series

<sup>160</sup> Wood & Donaldson 2008: 16

<sup>161</sup> It is possible that Shields may be attempting to dissect the lynching through dark humor, where the subversion of the viewer's expectations is meant to provoke shock or a startled laugh. Although there may be a subsequent dislocation from this humorous outburst because of the exposure of the conventions of the standardized lynching as constructed, this is not a sufficient recuperation of this image. This subversion situates the lynching arising from the acts of individuals, which explains the potential humour in the "revenge" of the black lyncher, which elides the systematic nature of white supremacy, and the role that lynching played

from which this image is taken is *Historical Fiction*, the message of this image is ambiguous: is Shields suggesting that lynching itself is a fiction of kinds, or is he simply describing a fictitious revision of the lynching ritual? What is seen as history and what is seen as fiction is unclear – as is the distinction between the two as imagined by Shields. The viewer also cannot tell if the black man is hoisting the Klansman up to his death, or whether he is playing the role of rescuer. What is certainly not ambiguous is the highly problematic nature of how the black male is depicted in this photograph: the focal point of the image is the Klansman, while the naked black male is relegated to the sidelines, yet still allowing for the viewer to take scopophilic pleasure in lingering over his bared musculature. Combined with his nudity, the way in which the black male body is rising out of the water and tonally blends in with the trees in the background of the image suggests he is being depicted as uncivilized.

Whatever Shields' intentions may have been with this particular imaging and imagining of the lynching ritual, he succeeds in maintaining the objectification of the black male body. In his attempt to subvert the mechanisms of the lynching tableau, Shields reiterates the importance and erotic appeal of the black male body. The visual appeal of the lynching photograph, aside from its demonstration of the supremacy of whiteness, lay in its satisfying of the racist desire to see the black male body as the site where sexual desire and vitriolic hatred became conflated. These images, which offered the viewer the pleasure of seeing the body robbed of its humanity, did so through the sexualized violence visited upon the black male. This is elided in Shields' image: the Klansman is in no way sexualized or the victim of the mutilation, burning, shooting, or

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within this systemic racism. The reversal also encourages the viewer to "fix the mistake," thus exposing the underlying racism in the everyday negotiations between white and black identities.

castration that typified the black male experience within the lynching ritual. Not only is this sanitized in terms of the erasure of the violence experienced by the lynching victim, Shields perpetuates the sexual objectification of the black male body by having him appear naked. This photograph obfuscates the violence that lay at the heart of the lynching image, not just in terms of the sheer level of torture that was enacted upon the black male body, but in the appeal that lay in being able to *see* this violence manifested upon the corporeal terrain. This may be because contemporary viewers of these images are somewhat desensitized to these violent images – as Sontag discusses, the proliferation of violent images reduces our capacity to respond with ‘emotional freshness and ethical pertinence.’<sup>162</sup> This is exacerbated by little understanding of how lynching worked as a systemic tool of white supremacy, perhaps most disturbing of all, Shields clearly misunderstands the mechanics of lynching. If we are to suppose that the black male is occupying the role of lyncher and the Klansman is his victim, this simplistic racial switching of the figures suggests that within the lynching ritual the lynchers were acting in isolation as lone figures, rather than simply being active participants in a larger system of white supremacy. If a black man were to hang a white person, he would be acting outside of the legitimization of a racist culture, and so this reversal constitutes a false equivalency: it would not even be accurate to term this switching as a lynching, as the lynching was constituted of far more than the extralegal torture and killing of black men. This was a systematic ritual that relied upon the combination of institutional racism and white supremacist narratives of race. The incident of three lynching effigies being hung by an anonymous art collective on the campus of UC Berkeley on December 13<sup>th</sup> 2014 (two from Sather gate and one from a tree) also highlights the way in which the lynching

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<sup>162</sup> Sontag 2003: 97

ritual can be misrepresented.<sup>163</sup> Although it was intended to confront contemporary manifestations of racism and black lives being brutalized at the hands of white supremacy, this installation also resurrected the trauma of the lynching through repeating of the spectacularization of the brutalization and death of the black body.<sup>164</sup> The lynching is not about the specific victim any longer, it is about a generalized black masculinity and the threat that is perceived to arise from all black male bodies. Although the lynching is inherently tragic on a personal scale where there is the individual loss of life, to see it in these narrow terms is to fail to understand the lynching ritual itself, a failure which these student installations clearly exemplify. This raises the question of how to memorialise the lynching victims without getting entangled in sentiment that prevents clearer understanding of the larger cost of the lynching ritual. This is not to underestimate the potential of emotion in its potential to motivate resistance to the practice of lynching, but this cannot be where the response to the lynching image stops: to move from a single act of compassion for, empathy with, or pain about the plight of one person to a knowledge of, and reversal of, a whole system is how this emotion should be

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<sup>163</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) 2014

<sup>164</sup> Full artists' statement read as follows: 'We are a collective of queer black and POC artists responsible for the images of historical lynchings posted to several locations in Berkeley and Oakland. These images connect past events to present ones – referencing endemic faultlines of hatred and persecution that are and should be deeply unsettling to the American consciousness. We choose to remain anonymous because this is not about us as artists, but about the growing movement to address these pervasive wrongs. For those who think these images are no longer relevant to the social framework in which black Americans exist everyday – we respectfully disagree. Garner, Brown, and others are victims of systemic racism. For those who think these images depict crimes and attitudes too distasteful to be seen – we respectfully disagree. Our society must never forget. For those under the mistaken assumption that the images themselves were intended as an act of racism – we vehemently disagree and intended only the confrontation of historical context. We apologize solely and profusely to Black Americans who felt further attacked by this work. We are sorry – your pain is ours, our families', our history's. To all, each image represents a true life ended by an unimaginable act of ignorance and human cruelty: Laura Nelson, George Meadows, Michael Donald, Charlie Hale, Garfield Burley, Curtis Brown. We urge you to further research the lives and deaths of these individuals. History must be confronted.' ([www.berkeleyside.com](http://www.berkeleyside.com) 2014)

mobilized to effect cultural change. While the artists' intentions were to connect a history of black oppression to contemporary American events (most prominently the repeated killings of black men, often at the hands of police officers which were going unpunished, such as Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and many others), what they failed to acknowledge and mitigate was the way in which the lynching site was not only used in order to celebrate white identity, but as a tool of intimidation and coercion for any black people who encountered the bodies themselves – either directly or through mediated images. So for the black people who were confronted by these effigies (particularly when seeing the effigies hung without being able to read the inscription of #ICan'tBreathe or the name of the lynching victim along with the year of their death, or indeed before reporting had brought these figures into clearer context), this work simply repeated this menacing mechanism of the lynching itself.



Figure 11. University of Berkley Installation 2014 ([www.campusreform.org](http://www.campusreform.org))

It is interesting to note that this protest so heavily focused upon Laura Nelson as a historical example of lynching, presumably so that those confronted by the display would understand the artwork's intent to focus on both men and women within the

#BlackLivesMatter grassroots movement. While this attempt at inclusivity is both understandable and admirable, it nevertheless underscores the way in which this installation misrepresents the reality of the lynching ritual that was something which overwhelmingly incorporated black men as its victim. Wood and Donaldson note that there is a consistent lack of knowledge about historical lynching in the students they teach, and of the way in which it operated: 'there appears to have been a profound social amnesia about lynching in this country. Most of the college students we have taught come to class with a foundational understanding of the history of slavery and a passing knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement but remain sadly ignorant of lynching',<sup>165</sup> This "sad ignorance" resonates particularly loudly with the Berkeley bodies. As Wood and Donaldson go on to note: 'it is as if lynching haunts our social memories, but we are reluctant to grasp it or hold it carefully up for view. In this sense, lynching perhaps acts less like a lens and more like a prism, since our perception through it is multiple and refracted, and it can obfuscate as much as it clarifies.'<sup>166</sup> This is useful in thinking about these contemporary reimaginings of the lynching ritual; although lynching is clearly never far from the collective American memory when thinking about race relations, it often manages to evade sufficient scrutiny which results in clouding our vision of white supremacy, and the ways in which this can be effectively tackled.

### **Representation**

Ronald Jackson poses the question of how to dismantle the power of overwhelmingly negative images of black men, and how to escape the inherent "essential" blackness that accompanies these representations: 'what does one do with fictive corporeal

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<sup>165</sup> Wood & Donaldson 2008: 8

<sup>166</sup> Wood & Donaldson 2008: 10

representations that eventually become so fixed in the public imagination that they are no longer considered false? Repeatedly being presented with certain images irrevocably alters an individual's analytical understanding of that image; for Southern whites repeatedly being shown black men as rapists, the equation of black man = rapist would have been inescapable.<sup>167</sup> This illustrates another element of the workings of the lynching ritual. This ceremony and any remaining evidence cemented the black man within the white supremacist imaginary as being part of a terrifying threat of rape that needed to be contained. Where a significant proportion of encounters with black men – whether directly through presence at a lynching or mediated through images of the lynching victim – occurred in the form of the lynched (presumed) rapist, black masculinity would come to be understood as nothing more than this rapacious threat.

As Jackson comments further, 'cognitive psychologists have proven again and again that repetition of signs and signifiers eventually becomes an integral part of an individual's automatic and heuristic processing.'<sup>168</sup> This highlights the way in which part of the lynching ritual's function was to encode the black male body as that which was a direct threat to white supremacy, through the way it constituted a peril to the purity of white womanhood, which worked as the cradle of whiteness. Hale notes the importance of representing the lynching ritual in terms of dissolving the individual participant's experience into that of the crowd's: 'Representations of lynchings, multiplying and increasing their power with the spread of consumer culture, made the line between individual and collective experience much more permeable than the line between the

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<sup>167</sup> Jackson 2006: 57

<sup>168</sup> Jackson 2006: 57

racism.<sup>169</sup> This blurring of the boundary between individual and collective identity was fundamental. The white spectator needed to adopt the sense of collective white identity in order for the lynching to function to indoctrinate them into the ideology of white supremacy. This meant that regardless of individual experience or perception of blackness, the lynching crowd could justify the violent death of the black male as restitution for the wrongs done to whiteness at the hands of black men. Dora Apel, for instance, discusses the way in which the lynch mob of the postcard is demonstrating the perceived validity of their violent and repulsive actions:

These events, in part staged for the camera, occur because [the] perpetrators, in their loftiest rationalizations, believe they are committing their deeds for the good of a nation, or, at the least, that their acts are sanctioned by a larger community and serve the interests of that community. This belief illuminates the fact that the exercise of such sadism and humiliation is a fundamentally political act. The viewer is meant to identify with the proud torturers in the context of a political and cultural hierarchy.<sup>170</sup>

Any individual resistance to the violence and sadism of the lynching ritual is subsumed by a sense of belonging to the community of whiteness, a belonging that is enshrined with the protection of any threat to that collective identity. The lynching is legitimized as a tool for ensuring that whiteness does not suffer any damage from outside, damage that will arise from black masculine aggression.

### **The Mechanics of the Lynching Postcard**

Within the politics of representation, black bodies act as signifiers of “essential” blackness, working within the theoretical framework of what Jonathan Markovitz, adapting a model he finds in the work of Kenneth Burke, refers to as “the semiotic

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<sup>169</sup> Hale 1998: 228

<sup>170</sup> Apel “Torture Culture”: 89

principle that something is “standing for” something else”, which, in turn, becomes “a device for seeing something *in terms of* something else.”<sup>171</sup> These lynching postcards exemplify this process whereby the black male body becomes *the* metaphor for rapacious criminality, and the inevitable and “justified” site of the punitive reaction of lynching. Markovitz, in discussing the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition, comments that the contemporary reactions to these lynching images provide a reminder that ‘meaning does not reside within the photograph but is, instead, determined through social interaction.’<sup>172</sup> The point made by Markovitz here allows the focus upon the specific contextual production of the image; the monumental power that was wielded by these postcards was precisely because they legitimated white violence enacted against the black body and encouraged its continuing presence upon the battleground of American race relations.

The images of Frank Embree, who was lynched near Fayette, Missouri on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1899, also illuminate the importance of the visual documentation of the lynching. (Figs. 12-14)

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<sup>171</sup> Markovitz 2004: 35

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*: 141

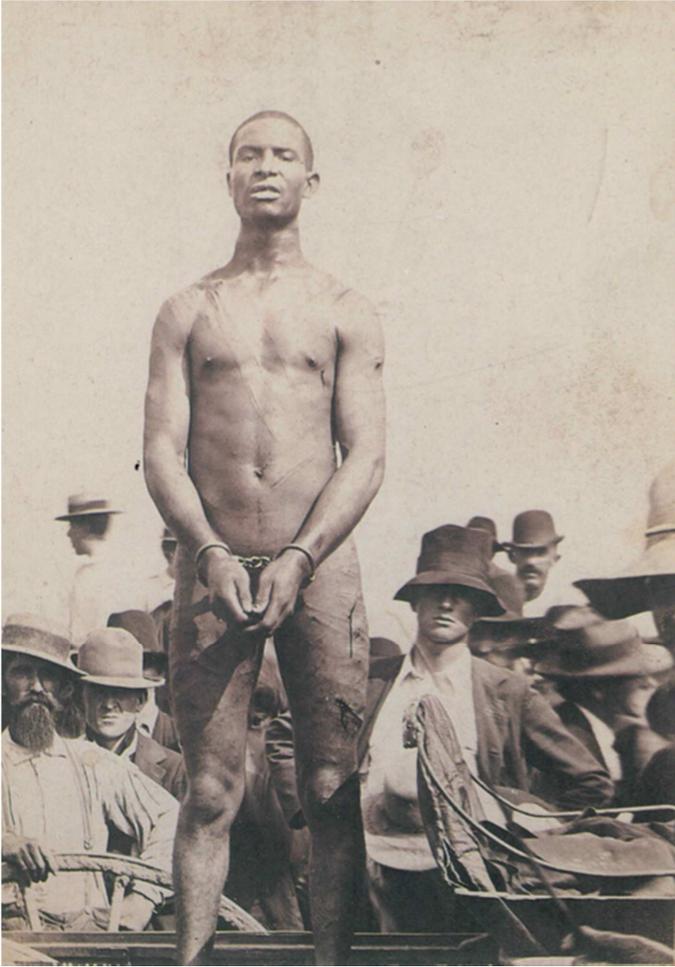


Figure 12. *The Lynching of*

*Frank Embree. July 22, 1899, Fayette, Missouri. (Allen 2010: 42)*



Figure 13. *The Lynching of Frank Embree. July 22, 1899, Fayette, Missouri.* (Allen 2010: 42)

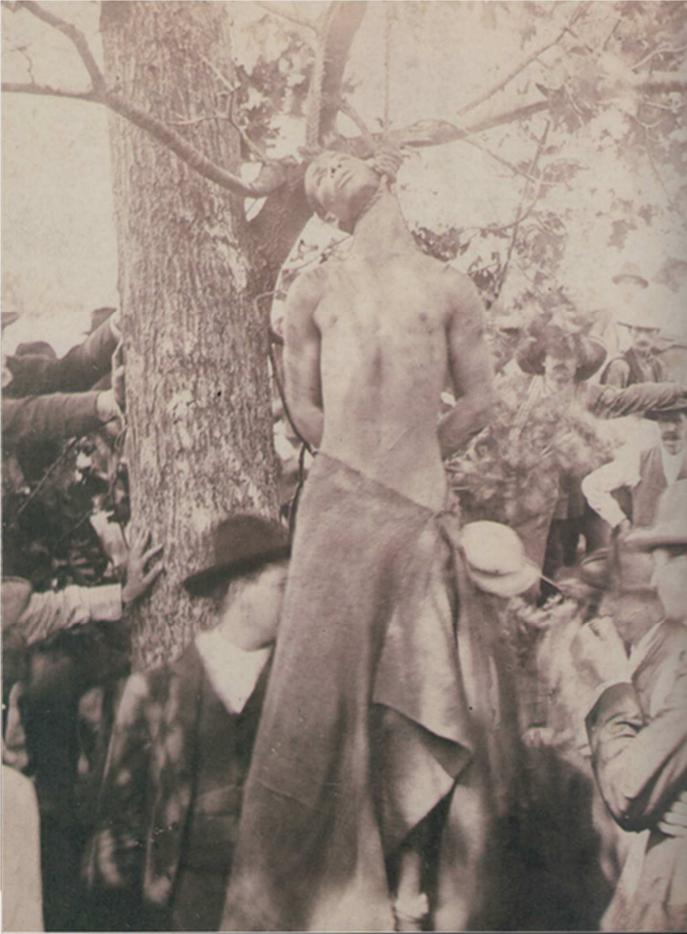


Figure 14. *The Lynching of Frank Embree. July 22, 1899, Fayette, Missouri.* (Allen 2010: 43)

There are three images of Embree, which according to Allen were ‘at one time laced together with a twisted purple thread, so as to unfold like a map.’<sup>173</sup> In the first image, the viewer is presented with Frank Embree posed in the foreground on top of a buggy, stripped, handcuffed (his hands covering his genitalia) and mutilated, staring directly

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*: 181

into the camera, engaging the spectator with what appears to be a challenging sneer, or with what Allen describes as 'undiminished dignity.'<sup>174</sup> A group of white men are surrounding the buggy (used as a stage to amplify that the wounded black male body is a sight that needs to be seen) in the background of the image, also staring straight into the camera. The second of the triptych uses the same arrangement, but this time with Embree's back to the camera, allowing increased showing off of more scarring of his back, buttocks and legs. The final image shows him hanging dead from a branch, again surrounded by the lynching crowd. The combination of the three images is important: the "map" of Embree's torture allows the third image in the triptych to be truly understood for what it is; the final depiction of Embree looks almost peaceful and the material is suggestive of a Christ-like loincloth, yet because of the previous images we know that the marks on Embree's torso are not simply striations of light from the sunlight through the trees, but the marks of a whip's lash. The torture of Embree's body, and the power of the white man over the black male that this torture demonstrates is an essential part of the lynching postcard: threatening black masculinity is able to be shrugged off with the knowledge that this threat can be contained and defeated – literally – by white hands. The attachment of the images together effectively gives a narrative of the lynching, and in this way it could almost appear as if Embree is being put to death in the final image for his defiant stare in the initial photograph. In contrast to the two initial images, the third which features the black male corpse has the crowd's gazes averted, leaving the viewer to bypass this engagement and simply stare directly at the murdered black man. These images highlight the importance of the "look," both as a form of challenge by blacks of the power of whites, but also the power of the white look during the lynching, which

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

necessitated the extreme violence enacted upon the black body, in order to ensure the spectacular entertainment for the crowd.

Young notes the way in which the image in and of itself is not sufficient as an act of communication, as “Show and tell”. “To simply stand before an assembled audience and show something is not sufficient”, he argues. ‘A narrative is required. In fact, the acts of showing piques interest and creates a *desire* for the telling.’<sup>175</sup> The lynching postcard is an example of the way in which we are shown black bodies and told of their meaning, illustrating the fundamental import of narrative. The way that the lynching ritual underwent such rigorous repetition means that this narrative of black deviance and white supremacy can be understood with increasing ease. The sequence from needing to be present at a lynching to revel in the sense of collective white triumph, to simply being able to see more iterations of this ceremony, to simply seeing a lynched black body swinging in the wind, to seeing black men as potential and deserving future victims of the hangman’s noose, were all increasingly more simplistic visions of the same belief: whiteness was superior, but could only remain so if viciously protected from the danger that black masculinity represented.

When thinking about the workings of the lynching postcard, the violent images themselves clearly need to be considered, but of equal importance is the function of the postcard as material object. The lynching postcard exemplifies Sontag’s observation that photography functions as a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.<sup>176</sup> The postcard allows the lynching to continue as a communicative act between whites far beyond the event itself. The postcard encapsulates the sense of white racial identity

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<sup>175</sup> Young 2005: 643 (n.5)

<sup>176</sup> Sontag 1977: 8

fomented by the lynching itself and being part of the crowd (which itself is a metaphor for the larger white community), but also allows for literal communication to occur, and for the meaning of the lynching to be shared throughout the nation among like-minded people. Through the postcard, the lynching does not end in terms of its message, the photograph persists as a reminder of the power of whiteness and a lasting warning for black people. As Sontag notes, each photograph 'is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again.'<sup>177</sup> The message of the lynching ritual does not evaporate with the termination of the black male body at the close of the event, but haunts the imaginary. Acting as both an endorsement of lynching as a practice and as a coercive tool for complicity within the violence of lynching, the postcard allowed for more individuals to be enveloped in the phenomenon of lynching as extralegal practice. The intrusion into, and occupation of, the home symbolizes the bringing of the public into the private, signalling that the collective white identity felt and identified with in public needed to continue in the domestic space of the home. Through these souvenirs the individual is constantly reminded of their belonging to a larger community. That lynching postcards were displayed in the home effects an additional feminization of the black male: in addition to the usual codified castration, the image of the black male was then situated in a space overwhelmingly associated with femininity and the female experience. The situating of the imaged black male body within the domestic space co-opts the narrative of the female body, in that it should not independently engage with the external world of men, in public spaces, but rather needs to be contained within the constructed space as defined within a patriarchal system.<sup>178</sup> Body parts were also "contained", and

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<sup>177</sup> Sontag 1977: 18

<sup>178</sup> The "constructedness" of the home is used both literally and figuratively here: literally in the sense that the physical home would be produced through the handiwork of men, carrying out the demands of a capitalist

through this fetishistic containment the black male is feminized because the experiences of fragmentation, fetishization, and containment within the home are reserved for women. The castration also performed a very important part of this process of feminization of the black male body. Robyn Wiegman discusses the importance of this ritual of violent dismemberment, and contends that not 'only does lynching enact a grotesquely symbolic, if not literal, sexual encounter between the white mob and its victim, but the increasing use of castration as a preferred form of mutilation for African-American men demonstrates lynching's connections to the socio-symbolic realm of sexual difference.'<sup>179</sup> She also notes that the castration works to remove the black male's claim to citizenship within a system which privileged the white *and* male – spaces of identity which were closed to black men. She observes that in 'severing the black male's penis from his body, either as a narrative account or a material act, the mob aggressively denies the patriarchal sign and symbol of the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallus and thereby reclaiming, through the perversity of dismemberment, the black male's (masculine) potentiality for citizenship.'<sup>180</sup>

Young discusses the attitudes that are implied by the postcards: 'Although these words [inscribed on back of postcards] were written in a relatively public forum (the postcard), they signal the types of conversations and exchanges people would have held within a private space.'<sup>181</sup> This highlights the way in which the postcard blurs the boundary between public and private, particularly in terms of the performative nature of sending

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system, and also figuratively, in the sense that the domestic space is delineated within patriarchy as the prescribed space for women (or in this case, the "failed" man that the African American represents).

<sup>179</sup> Wiegman 1995: 82

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*: 83

<sup>181</sup> Young 2005: 645

these postcards and the very public enunciation of the diminution of the black body and its relationship to the maintenance of white identity. The fact that the postcard's message is unobscured and available to be read for any individuals coming into contact with the object, as opposed to the letter's message which is concealed within the envelope, only heightens its collapsing of private into public. Wood discusses this blurring of the public and private, commenting that by 'writing on the card, often directly onto the image, the spectator could render a communal and commercialized event personal and intimate.'<sup>182</sup> The dissemination through the American postal service of such graphic images of white supremacy at work constitutes a way in which the lynching ritual worked as a coercive tool for both black and white.

For black people the lynching was a reminder of the violent dominance that whiteness sought within society and the need to constantly monitor one's behaviour in accordance with societal proscriptions (although this was actually no guarantee of escaping racist violence), for whites the postcards, as 'extended tools of terror,' repeated the reminder that to maintain white privilege one had to be complicit with the sadistic demands of this collective identity.<sup>183</sup> To be seen to be a sender or receiver of the lynching postcard was confirmation of one's whiteness. It was also confirmation of racial privilege, a reminder of the way in which the racial stratification of American society valued whiteness and not blackness, to the point where the extinguishing of black lives became an enjoyable

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<sup>182</sup> Wood 2005: 391. Wood makes this observation as part of a larger historicity of the postcard as a mode of communication, wherein she notes that two significant changes in the American postal service dramatically increased the postcard's popularity: in 1898 free rural delivery was offered by the United States Post Office, meaning that post would be delivered to people's homes directly. In addition to this, a reduced rate for privately printed cards (as opposed to commercial trade card) was offered. The postcard also enabled the imaging of events which most newspapers – aside from the largest urban publications – did not have the technology to print until the 1920s. (2005: 390-1)

<sup>183</sup> Apel "torture" 90

national pastime. As Dora Apel notes, postcards were meant to stay within a community who shared the same ideology of white supremacy, therefore when these images ‘found their way into the possession of Northern left-wing and liberal activists, Southern town leaders were incredibly distressed.’<sup>184</sup> This implicates the fervent need to shore up “proper” whiteness as it was imperilled by those who did not actively maintain white supremacy. Apel also mentions how lynchings were captured on camera by hundreds of amateurs and reproduced in their thousands by professional photographers, with mayors sometimes taking a portion of profits from the sales of these images, making clear the systemic nature of the lynching and the importance of the imaging of these ritual killings.<sup>185</sup> She goes on to analyse the way in which the postcard enabled the narrative of the lynching ritual to be felt even more keenly by those exchanging these images:

When lynching photos were transformed into souvenir postcards, they were sent to friends and family with the senders’ proud boasts of having been in the mob, making blackness an exotic spectacle and privileging the “look” of whites over blacks. Spectacle lynchings similarly relied on the look of the crowd to reaffirm notions of superior white “manliness” over the stereotype of the hypersexual black male, even as many white men in the mob acted on repressed homoerotic desires and many white women found vicarious pleasure in the mob’s exposure and penetrations of the black body.<sup>186</sup>

The importance of the various “looks” incorporated into the postcard is important here: the look of the white crowd upon the black victim, the look of the camera upon the spectacle of white supremacy, and the look of the recipient upon the postcard as a way of including larger numbers into the event itself, despite their absence.

### **Rape**

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<sup>184</sup> Apel “torture”: 91

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.: 92

The black male body is framed in various ways in the lynching postcards. There is the literal framing of the body through the lens of the camera, but the black male body is also framed as the literal embodiment of rapacious criminality. Within the contexts of Southern lynchings, the black male was also figuratively “framed” – accused of crimes which in reality were often not committed – and thus the victim of lynchings which owed more to the white racist understanding of “essential” black maleness than illegal behaviour. The establishment of the myth of the black male rapist was one which happened in order to legitimize the lynching ritual, but this was not simply an issue of white feminine purity and white male valor. Lynching, as a response to the threat of the rapacious black male, constituted a concealment of what was really at stake: white political power and ultimately, white supremacy itself. Robyn Wiegman notes that the ‘de-commodification of the African-American body that accompanies the transformation from chattel to citizenry is mediated through a complicated process of sexualisation and engendering.’<sup>187</sup> Leon Litwack observes in his essay in *Without Sanctuary*, that the closer black men got to the ballot box, the more they came to resemble rapists.<sup>188</sup> This makes clear that the black male as rapist was effectively mere subterfuge: in order to legitimize the violent torture and killing of black men, they had to be represented as a violent threat that had to be contained, in order to keep the threat of full black political participation at bay, and to sustain white privilege and supremacy within American society.

In the postcards, the black male body is framed as rapaciously criminal in order to legitimate the extralegal process of lynching; in their remediation of the lynching event, the postcards reiterate white supremacy through the communal punishment of the black

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<sup>187</sup> Wiegman 1995: 82

<sup>188</sup> Litwack 2010: 30

rapist's body. Markovitz comments: 'Representational politics constituted a crucial arena of struggle against lynching and in order to eradicate lynching, it was necessary to challenge racist cultural projects, particularly those involving images of the black rapist.'<sup>189</sup> I would argue that although it is true that the persistence of the practice of lynching owed a huge debt to representations of black men as rapists, the imagined connection between the image of the lynched black male body and the crimes which had led to this eventuality was so tight that the lynched black male body became *the* visual metaphor for the rape of white women by black men. James Allen points out the dissonance between the perceived crimes of the lynching victim and the reality of their actions: 'White fears were based on the assumption that most lynchings stemmed from sexual assault. But in many cases, reports of sexual assault proved entirely baseless or upon closer examination revealed only that a black male had broken the rules of racial etiquette, had behaved in a manner construed as a racial insult, or had violated the bar on consensual interracial sex.'<sup>190</sup>

Yet another explicit manifestation of this preoccupation with the rape of white women by black men appears: the reverse of the postcard of what is identified as the charred torso of an African American male in 1902 in Georgia is inscribed as follows: 'Warning. The answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to black brutes who would attack the womanhood of the South.' (Fig. 5)

Commented [JW(9):

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<sup>189</sup> Markovitz 2004: 37

<sup>190</sup> Allen 2010: 23-24

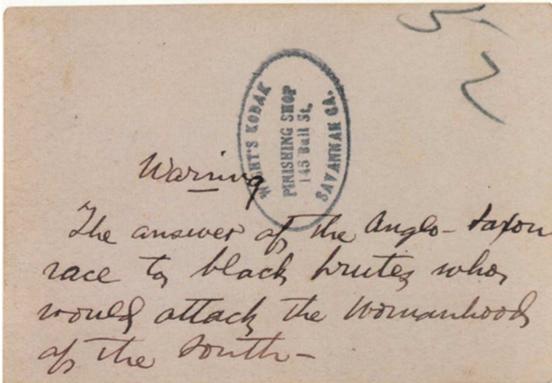


Figure 4. *The Charred Torso of an African American Male. 1902, Georgia. Front and Back.* (Allen 2010: Plates 59 & 60)

It is interesting because it is not known among whom this postcard was circulated, so it was either intended as a reminder for blacks who came across it, or potentially a reminder for whites of the penalty of racial transgressions: the lynching image was a tool to police both black and white actions. Walter White discusses this in his comprehensive study of lynchings, *Rope and Faggot*, revealing that the more common lynched black man was the victim of imagined rather than actual sexual assaults upon the sanctity of white womanhood. bell hooks describes a convergence of 'racist sexist thinking about the black body, which has always projected onto the black body a hypersexuality. [...] Central to

this fantasy is the idea of the black male rapist. If white men had an unusual obsession with black male genitalia it was because they had to understand the sexual primitive, the demonic beast in their midst.<sup>191</sup> Delgado and Stefancic discuss this notion of the black male rapist, as justification for the practice of lynching: 'the newly created stereotype of the recently freed male Negro as brutish and bestial' which appeared during the Reconstruction period, which was used to 'justify the widespread lynching that took 2,500 black lives between 1885 and 1900.'<sup>192</sup>

### **Conclusion**

While the lynching postcards are important in their utility as historical documents of the sheer violence and mechanics of the lynching ritual, they are of particular importance within this thesis in terms of solidifying the spectacle of the wounded, tortured, and destroyed black male body, as a background upon which white masculinity could be defined and strengthened. This violence enacted upon the black male body did not only represent the containment of the threat of black masculinity, but it reframed this threat as one of rapacious intent. This reconfiguration obfuscated the workings of white supremacy, which in order to maintain the centrality and power of white identity, has to systematically privilege whiteness over non-whiteness, and in order to give this process legitimacy, mythologized the figure of the black rapist who needed to be captured. The lynching ritual worked to solidify the connection between the black male body and rapacious threat to white femininity, which constituted a threat to the purity of whiteness itself.

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<sup>191</sup> hooks 2004: 67-8

<sup>192</sup> Delgado and Stefancic 1997 "Images of the Outsider": 171

## Chapter Two: Filming the Black Male Body in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*

### The Representation of the Black Male Rapist on Film

With the lynching ritual existing as a particularly visual pastime, David Wark Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* constituted a pertinent cultural accompaniment: where the lynching was the practice, *The Birth of a Nation* could be understood to be the theory. The black male body is framed in various ways in the film and the photographic lynching postcards; there is the literal framing of the body through the lens of the camera, but the black male body is also framed as the literal embodiment of rapacious criminality. Echoing the dual framing of the black male for the rape of white women and within the frame of the accompanying postcard, *The Birth of a Nation* centred the black male body in the frame of the cinema screen. In *The Birth of a Nation* and the lynching postcards, the black male body is framed as rapaciously criminal in order to legitimate the extralegal process of lynching; the film explicitly shows a black man subverting racial codes and lusting after a white woman, then attempting to rape her, which the film then resolves by portraying his lynching which is justifiable according to his actions. In their reimagining of the lynching event, the postcards reiterate white supremacy through the communal punishment of the black rapist's body.

When examined together, the film and the postcards reveal that within the white racist imaginary, acts of rape by black men can not be disconnected from the process of lynching; in *The Birth of a Nation* the audience is encouraged to demand the lynching of Gus as the inevitable punitive reaction for his attempted rape of a white woman; in the postcards the lynched black male body is intended to be read as resulting from the assumed violation of white womanhood. Thus the lynched black male body becomes the

symbol of black rapacious sexuality. Jonathan Markovitz comments: 'representational politics constituted a crucial arena of struggle against lynching and in order to eradicate lynching, it was necessary to challenge racist cultural projects, particularly those involving images of the black rapist.'<sup>193</sup> The persistence of the practice of lynching owed a huge debt to representations of black men as rapists, a representation which zeroed in on the black male body as the scourge on the sanctity of white womanhood. The connection between this body and the rape of white women was entrenched within the white imaginary, and the vision of the black male conjured the destruction of white femininity as its presumed trajectory. Within this semiotic process, these lynching postcards worked in conjunction with *The Birth of a Nation* to maintain the racist imagining of black man as rapist; whereas the film did have to at least pay lip service to notions of fair and accurate representation of black people, these postcards operated in a completely different context of production whereby they escaped surveillance of organizations such as the NAACP calling for censorship of the film.<sup>194</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* and the lynching postcards have in common the representation of "the real"; while the postcards are literal images of real events, *The Birth of a Nation* was understood by its audience and promoted by Griffith as a retelling of America's "true" history. The fact that the film used direct quotes from Woodrow Wilson's *A History of the American People* only

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<sup>193</sup> Markovitz 2004: 37

<sup>194</sup> In terms of censorship and/or surveillance of the lynching images, Allen notes that as of May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1908, there was an amendment to U.S. Postal Laws and Regulations forbidding the mailing of 'matter of a character tending to incite arson, murder or assassination. (2010: 195) Illustrating this alteration to the law, one of the postcards sent a few months after this amendment is inscribed with the following: 'I bought this in Hopkinsville 15c each. They are not on sale openly. I forgot to send it until just now I ran across it. [...] A law was passed forbidding these to be sent thru the mail or to be sold anywhere.' (Ibid.) Aside from the tone suggesting that this is a new impediment, this would indicate that prior to this legal change there was not any issue with censorship of the lynching postcard. Amy Wood also notes that this amendment 'did not stop the production of lynching photographs, as the many postcards of post-1908 attest, but they were now perhaps sent in envelopes or circulated locally. (2005: 393)

served to increase its claim to historical legitimacy. This relationship between the image and “reality” encouraged the viewer to internalize these images without questioning any potential political agenda behind the production of these images: they were simply looking at the “truth” of blackness – criminality and rapacious hypermasculinity.

The film’s depiction of American race relations and real-life Southern violence were firmly connected. In its celebratory imagining of the Ku Klux Klan’s violent retaliation against the perceived subversion of racial codes by “uppity” blacks, the film sanctioned the violence that was happening outside of the space of the movie theater. The inextricable link between the image and the encouragement to enact further violence upon the black male body is clear; as Ed Guerrero comments, ‘African Americans had every reason to fear that what was depicted on the screen could easily be acted out against them in reality.’<sup>195</sup> The emotive impact of the film upon its white audience could be particularly extreme. As Phillip Dray writes: “‘Ku Klux Fever’ gripped the South, and Klan hats and other souvenirs were sold. Watching the movie, Southern audiences whooped the rebel yell and, at one showing, emptied their revolvers into the screen.’<sup>196</sup> This enactment of masculine violence mirrors the violence which proved to be both exciting and cathartic within the lynching ritual itself. The lynching postcards provide harrowing proof of the extreme violence that resulted from the white racist imagining of “essential blackness”. Both the film and the postcards became sites whereby the “truth” of blackness could be referenced and revisited. The film and the postcards also serve as legitimating forces upon each other. The film’s images of black men inspired violence against black male bodies through lynchings that were then recorded through the

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<sup>195</sup> Guerrero 1993: 14

<sup>196</sup> Dray 2002: 204

postcards, while these postcards then become understood as the depiction of a defensible judicial process against the rape of white women by black men whilst reinforcing the perception that *the Birth of a Nation* was simply an accurate depiction of black men. 'Erasing the fine line between civilized ritual and savage spectacle, the photographs [of the 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington] appeared widely in the weeks afterward, provoking regional and national condemnation and challenging the often recycled story of the white community in action. Despite *Birth of a Nation's* declaration of national reunion, the narrative of white unity would not hold.'<sup>197</sup> In order to cement the unity of white racial identity, where the lynching or viewing the film as a singular event failed, there was a need for the constant repetition of the destruction of black masculinity and the reiteration of the supremacy of whiteness. The lynching ritual (which itself had to be codified and consistently re-enacted) and *The Birth of a Nation* mutually strengthened the narrative strength of the other, in a frantic bid to maintain the strength of whiteness as the ideal.

Ronald Jackson's comments earlier<sup>198</sup> about the importance of repeating signs in order to cement their signified meaning is useful when thinking about *The Birth of a Nation*: the film was notable for the way in which its audience would view it repeatedly and the postcards would be exchanged between men and women domestically, increasing the likelihood that these images would be seen repeatedly through public display, in keeping with the public nature of the lynching itself.<sup>199</sup> The popularity of lynchings – cinematic and real – was not simply the manifestation of white anger at the

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<sup>197</sup> Hale 1998: 219

<sup>198</sup> Jackson 2006: 57

<sup>199</sup> Stokes 2007: 3

perceived increases in freedom experienced by blacks: the visual nature of the lynching is incredibly important. Harvey Young's statement that 'as public performances, lynchings far surpassed all other forms of entertainment in terms of their ability to attract an audience and the complexity of their narratives. A lynching was an event – something not to be missed' is again germane.<sup>200</sup> This extreme popularity is resonant with the popularity of *The Birth of a Nation*; although there are varying figures for the success of the film, a figure which repeatedly occurs within the scholarship on the film is a gross of approximately \$10 million, which would be equivalent to over \$200 million in modern terms. Hale claims that in *The Birth of a Nation*, 'Griffith reworked the spectacle lynching into a gripping film scene and appropriated its power to advance a national rather than southern white unity. [...] Making a spectacle of lynching, *Birth* both provided a ground for the national unity necessary in the Great War and created the modern film industry.'<sup>201</sup>

The popularity of both lynchings as public events and the film was reliant upon the use of spectacle; it is the way in which the black male body was displayed that was compelling, not the news of a black man being killed by whites. The lynching occupied a space where it was fascinating visually but banal in terms of factual information. The reduction of the lynching to the level of the quotidian event occurred through the overwhelming frequency with which these events took place. As James Allen documents, 'hundreds of lynchings were accorded only a brief mention, particularly as they became routine affairs by the end of the century, requiring no more notice or comment in some

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<sup>200</sup> Young 2005: 641

<sup>201</sup> Hale 1998: 216

newspapers than the daily weather.’<sup>202</sup> This “double space” which the lynching occupied was exacerbated through the exchange of lynching postcards. In addition to exposing more people to the individual lynching than those who were primary participants, the annotations upon the image and the often accompanying souvenirs enabled the lynching to exist as both compelling spectacle and frequent domestic souvenir. Although the frequency of lynchings did mean that they were often afforded very little public notice, the experience of viewing the spectacle of a lynching was very different to simply hearing the news of a lynching. In the case of *The Birth of a Nation* and the lynching postcards, these are not simply images which the audience passively watched and then dismissed. They would shape the experiences of their viewers through a psychic reaffirmation of essential notions of white supremacy and black rapacious criminality, and so in the communal consumption of these texts ‘we need to understand how we actively interact with images from all arenas to remake the world in the shape of our fantasies and desires or to narrate the stories which we carry within us’, as Rogoff argues.<sup>203</sup> There needs to be a focus upon the specific contextual production of the image; the monumental power that was wielded by these postcards and *The Birth of a Nation* was precisely possible because they legitimated white violence enacted against the black body, made it cohere with a sense of justifiability through visualizing black male bodies within a specific narrative, and encouraged its continuing presence upon the battleground of American race relations.

Hale comments that *The Birth of a Nation*, in its combination of the spectacle lynching with the violence of the Reconstruction period in a film which was seen by hordes of

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<sup>202</sup> Allen 2005: 18

<sup>203</sup> Rogoff 1998: 16

Americans, situated the spectacle of lynching as a central American entertainment, containing segregation as its essential core:

The symbolic reunion of North and South that *Birth* captured so vividly and to such popular acclaim echoed the political reconciliation evident in the election of the southerner Woodrow Wilson to the presidency in 1912 and the segregation of Washington, D.C., during his first term. The North, then, had accepted southern whites' version of Reconstruction as black space and installed the culture of segregation at the very center of the nation.<sup>204</sup>

She goes on to note the way in which Wilson relied upon the popularity of the film in order to strengthen the sense of American unity, although this was only a unification of white Americans, leaving African Americans on the margins of his vision of the American populace: "The president borrowed *Birth of a Nation* imagery to celebrate another American ride to the rescue, the entrance of America into the war. In both the movies and in life, the spectacle of African American otherness created white unity and gave birth to the modern nation. [...]As Wilson understood, the film "wrote history in lightning" because of the pleasure of the looking.'<sup>205</sup> The spectacle offered by the film crystalized that of the black male body within the postcards, a spectacle that reiterated the necessity of racial segregation.

The lynching ritual and watching *The Birth of a Nation* also had in common the pleasure taken in returning to segregated space: during the lynching itself the only black presence was that which was being destroyed for the delight of the crowd, while the exchange of the postcard image was an implicit reassurance of acts of communication solely between white people. As Elizabeth Abel points out, the viewing of the film also happened within a context of segregation as movie theaters were divided racially, with blacks sitting at the rear of the cinema space in a balcony keeping them separate from the

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<sup>204</sup> Hale 1998: 221

<sup>205</sup> Hale 1998: 221

white viewing space below. Abel notes that not only did this reinforce racial difference, but also produced two different kinds of spectator: 'the segregated balcony installed into a single viewing structure not only two races, but also two kinds of viewers or viewing publics – one constituted as conscious, the other as unconscious, of itself as much.'<sup>206</sup> Stephen Berry discusses the segregation of these spaces as a division which not only reinforced the color line and kept blacks and whites separate, but privileged whites in terms of comfort and convenience: whereas white people were 'accorded a relatively direct and short route from the ticket window to their seats,' for black patrons their demotion to the balcony 'often meant walking outside and up an additional flight of stairs,' with some people recalling being out of breath once they reached their seats.<sup>207</sup> In addition to this, the viewing experience from the balcony was one of deficiency, where 'black moviegoers found themselves in a section far away from the speakers, close to the noise of the projector, and often facing the screen at an odd angle. Sending blacks to the balcony allowed whites to have a more comfortable viewing experience.'<sup>208</sup> Thus even the viewing experience for whites was one of privileged comfort.

### ***The Birth of a Nation in Context***

*The Birth of a Nation* represents a landmark moment in the histories of film and American race relations. The film, originally entitled *The Clansman*, was based on Thomas Dixon's novel of the same title, and purported to tell the history of the American South through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the aftermath of these historical events. Griffith used the medium of film to create a unified white audience, to whom he could

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<sup>206</sup> Abel 2010: 200

<sup>207</sup> Berrey 2015: 40

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

teach the dynamics of how to look at black bodies, showing the fundamental impact that racial tensions had upon American life, from a white supremacist perspective. *The Birth of a Nation* was a pioneering filmic work; it ended the era of the two-reeler and ushered in the reign of the full-length feature, it brought the middle classes into new picture palaces and was hailed as cinema's first true masterpiece as the first great classic of the silent screen. *The Birth of a Nation* presented white audiences with the figure of the black male, complete with a mythologized predatory sexuality, which could only be satisfied with the forced sexual conquest and destruction of white womanhood. The presence of this threat that the black male posed to white supremacy haunts Griffith's film throughout, producing hysterical fear of blackness within the racist white imaginary. Wiegman comments that Griffith's film is the 'classic example of the hysterical tie-in between the African-American's social participation and the discourse of the black rapist.'<sup>209</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* was particularly effective in fomenting of white racism; the white spectator was not equipped with the discursive tools required to question both the core message of the film and the insidious methods utilized by the medium of film itself to persuade its audience of a particular ideology.

*The Birth of a Nation* represents a moment in which white audiences could absorb unrestrained racism and the "history" of America specifically through cinematic spectacle. As Melvyn Stokes explicates in greater detail, the technological and historical features of *The Birth of a Nation* contributed to its persuasive power as a *spectacular* story of Southern white American life, and the problems caused by black Americans. Stokes compiled an extensive list of filmic landmarks broken by *The Birth of a Nation*:

This film would bring about a revolution in American movie-going. *The Birth of a Nation* was the first American film to be twelve reels long and to last around

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<sup>209</sup> Wiegman 1995: 222

three hours. It was the first to cost \$100,000 to produce. It was the first to be shown mainly in regular theaters at the same admission prices of up to \$2 that were charged for live performances. It was the first to have a specially compiled musical score to accompany the film's exhibition. It was the first movie to be shown at the White House, the first to be projected for judges of the Supreme Court and members of Congress, the first to be viewed by countless millions of ordinary Americans, some of whom had made long journeys to see it, the first to run in so many places for months at a time, the first to attract viewers who returned to see it, sometimes again and again, and the first to have its existence as a story in its own right in local newspapers.<sup>210</sup>

The technological innovations which Griffith employed in the production and distribution of *The Birth of a Nation* only gave the message of white supremacy more appeal to his white audience, but the film was also highly successful in conveying its white racist message because of the emotive strength with which Griffith imbued his motion picture. In fact, as commented upon by Stokes, critics pointed out that 'it was the first film to challenge the artistic supremacy of live theater, its emotional impact on spectators was *much* greater than that of the theater, and the synthesis of images and music it offered could truly be interpreted as the birth of a new form of art.'<sup>211</sup>

The physically violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan that are defended by *The Birth of a Nation* are in direct contrast to the way in which Griffith depicts Southern white life before Civil War, when the position of black people is policed by social codes of subservience and deference to their white masters. Griffith repeatedly presents Southern white society as a pastoral idyll, with the ownership of slaves being a complementary part of respectable family life. When we are shown the Cameron plantation, we are presented with the image of happy slaves picking cotton leisurely in the sun, before they are shown dancing during

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<sup>210</sup> Stokes 2007: 3

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*: 4

a two-hour break, with the white family happily observing their gleeful abandon.<sup>212</sup> These scenes are instrumental for the audience's intended understanding of the Southern way of life, as not only do white and black coexist harmoniously, reliant upon the social structures of slave ownership, but there is also the implication of regulated working conditions which grant the blacks the freedom to indulge in simplistic pleasures, under the gaze of Griffith's whites who appear as benevolent figures. This romanticization of Southern life continues. There is a sense of very personal sacrifice in the South for the purpose of war; the Cameron family's mortal loss of their youngest son is intended to inculcate a sense of empathy within the white spectator. Griffith couches this personal sacrifice in terms of white Southern womanhood: One of the film's intertitles states 'A mother's gift to the cause – three sons off for the war.'<sup>213</sup> This protectiveness towards white womanhood is echoed by Lincoln's acquiescence upon being entreated by Mrs Cameron to pardon her eldest son – another intertitle reads: "Mr. Lincoln has given back your life to *me* [emphasis my own]"<sup>214</sup> - thus the audience is presented with the protection of white Southern womanhood as being sanctioned by the highest office in the country. The formation of the Ku Klux Klan by Ben Cameron is shown within the film as the natural consequence of the South's protection of white womanhood; the film itself became a weapon of propaganda used by the Klan in spreading their message of white supremacy: As the Klan rose and fell in the 1920s, the film functioned as a propaganda and

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<sup>212</sup> Scenes 84 through 106, Lang 1994: 48-49

<sup>213</sup> Scene 201, *Ibid.*: 56

<sup>214</sup> Scenes 485 through 497, *Ibid.*: 81-82

recruitment film. (It would continue to be screened to Klan audiences at least until the 1970s.)<sup>215</sup>

*The Birth of a Nation* exists as both a defence mechanism of the Klan's existence and violent actions, but also acts as an incitement for the audience to act upon their white racism and join the Ku Klux Klan. The importance of the film's position as instrumental in the new era of the motion picture is iterated by Michael Rogin. He argues that 'American movies were born, then, in a racist epic. "The film that started it all" builds to its sustained climax from two attempted rapes of white women by black men. It depicts, after the triumph of death in the Civil War and in Lincoln's assassination, a nation reborn from the ride of the white-robed Knights of Christ against black political and sexual revolution.'<sup>216</sup> The fact that the "first" American full-length feature is so unrelentingly racist indicates the extremely pervasive racism of white American society in the early twentieth century; this "racist epic" relies upon visual spectacle in order to persuade the audience of its racist ideology. The film works to endorse white racism so convincingly for its audience in part because it was *so* spectacular, at a time when the epic film was still in its infancy, and cohesive plot and large-scale special effects would have been particularly impressive. *The Birth of a Nation* was notorious for its racist agenda; it illustrated the enormous power of the motion picture medium to communicate ideological arguments. As Roland Barthes states, the connotative levels of signifiers 'have a close communication with culture, knowledge, history, and it is through them, so to speak that the environmental world invades the linguistic and semantic system. They are, if you like, the fragments of

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<sup>215</sup> Stokes 2007: 9

<sup>216</sup> Rogin 1994: 251

ideology.’<sup>217</sup> Griffith’s melodramatic retelling of the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction posited a villain. That villain was the African American. For Griffith, the birth of the nation depended upon the subjugation of the African American and the maintenance of white privilege. If *The Birth of the Nation* marked the birth of classical Hollywood cinema, then that birth was grounded in white racism. Joshua Bellin comments: “To extol Griffith’s film for its formal innovations while pardoning its noxious and unremitting racism is thus not simply unacceptable on ethical or theoretical grounds. More fundamentally, such a separation obscures the fact that *The Birth of a Nation* is definitive precisely *because* it crowned a cinematic tradition that had toiled from the start to construct an impregnable barrier between whites and blacks and to punish any who dared to transgress it.’<sup>218</sup> Rather than attempting to compartmentalize the racism of Griffith’s film and focusing on his accomplishments purely in terms of technological innovation and narrative mastery, the vehement racism of the film has to be part of any successful critique: the appeal of his film lay in the fact that his narrative struck a chord with the audience and this arose from the way in which it exacerbated the racist vision of the black male within society. Griffith did not create this mythic black threat anew, he simply echoed the way in which black masculinity was perceived within the white supremacist imaginary and cemented this image through his dexterity as a storyteller.

Bogle states that ‘in the South, the film was often advertised as calculated to “work audiences into a frenzy...it will make you hate.”’<sup>219</sup> In discussing this claim, Margaret Russell confirms the importance of the implied spectator: “The “you” to whom this

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<sup>217</sup> Stuart Hall, 513

<sup>218</sup> Bellin 2005, 32

<sup>219</sup> Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Viking Press, 1973. 15

exhortation was addressed, of course, was not a neutral or universal “you,” but a specifically targeted one: the white viewer threatened by integration and fearful of black insurgency. Through a carefully constructed fusion of unprecedented technical wizardry and degrading racial stereotypes, Griffith sought to convince his audience that his was the “true” story of the old South and that white domination was necessary for their survival.<sup>220</sup> Russell links the implied spectator to the power of the gaze: ‘as a text about race, dominance, and the American legal/social order – *The Birth of a Nation* exemplifies what I would call the “dominant gaze”, he writes, i.e. ‘the tendency of mainstream culture to replicate, through narrative and imagery, racial inequalities and biases which exist throughout society.’<sup>221</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* both reflected the existing dehumanization of black people within American culture, and amplified it.

### **The Mechanics of Cinema**

W.J.T. Mitchell theorizes “picture theory” as the emergence of visual culture as a subject which contests the hegemony of intellectual practice in which the written word is privileged: ‘the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that “visual experience” or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality.’<sup>222</sup> The problem of how we interpret images becomes still more complicated when the specific images we are attempting to “read” rely, in part, upon the use of text to be fully intelligible. The interplay of word and image provides a useful lens through which to

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<sup>220</sup> Russell 1999: 265

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*: 268

<sup>222</sup> Mitchell 1994: 16

compare D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, with its reliance upon text in the form of intertitles, and photographic lynching postcards from James Allen's *Without Sanctuary* which are inscribed with annotations: both use the combination of image and text in order to be fully coherent. One of the ways in which *The Birth of a Nation* succeeded in disseminating its racist message was its impact upon the way in which people viewed films; in a change to storefront nickelodeons, the film was mainly viewed in picture houses. This appealed more to the middle classes, but also changed the expectations viewers had of the moviegoing experience itself.<sup>223</sup> While changing the relationship between viewer and motion picture, Griffith's film also appealed to the spectator's desire to be entertained. The changing context in which films were viewed enabled the sating of this desire; viewers of *The Birth of a Nation* went to see the film numerous times, implying its compelling nature for white audiences, but also the fact of its lengthy run in theaters. These repeated viewings would only succeed in giving Griffith's film more persuasive power over its white audience. The way in which *The Birth of a Nation* stunned its white audience with its advances in film technology and emotive storyline was clear: the film's impact endured longer than its running time; it remained implanted within the viewer's heart and mind because of its innovative telling of American history. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, the 'spectator's engagement with *The Birth of a Nation* did not always end when the screening did. Viewers continued to talk about it with family members, neighbors and friends.'<sup>224</sup> The importance of the subject matter as a "tea table topic" encouraged the white audience to ruminate further on the issues explicated within the film, and as

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<sup>223</sup> For more details of the changing cinema experience, see *Ibid.*: 125

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*: 126

spectators they were therefore active in their consumption of the film and engagement with its white supremacist message.

*The Birth of a Nation* was successful in cementing a unified white audience; its message of the worrying prospect of the social freedom of blacks, which the film positioned as potentially triumphing over white supremacy, and leading to the loss of white privilege and increasing miscegenation, was one which struck terror into the imagination of the white viewer. This cementing of a unified white audience was engendered through the appeal to a common racial position; despite divisions of geographical allegiance, age, gender, and class, Griffith appealed to desires to maintain the status quo of white supremacy, and this appeal was enabled through the accessibility of viewing the film for many white Americans: '*The Birth of a Nation* was the first American-made film to be seen by a heterogeneous (if largely white) national audience. Old and young, rich and poor, in the gallery and in the choice seats, united in the heartiest cheers and shouts of applause and often wept together'.<sup>225</sup> Stanley Cavell, in discussing the mechanics of cinema, contends that the screen 'screens me from the world it holds – that is, makes me invisible.'<sup>226</sup> This invisibility felt by the spectator helps to make concrete the sense of a collective racial identity: the individual is folded into part of the collective audience, who have in common their whiteness, in a process similar to that of the lynching postcards and their erasure of the individual differences in collapsing people into the crowd. *The Birth of a Nation* was a fundamental moment in film history, but more crucially, a key event in race relations within the United States; not only did *The Birth of a Nation* address issues of race as they had never been tackled before, more importantly it co-opted whites

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.: 127

<sup>226</sup> Cavell 1979: 24

into being a cohesive audience. This audience crossed all social barriers (other than race), and not only reinforced racist notions of blacks, but the screenings and their aftermath worked to police the white imaginary of racial politics. In being so thoroughly entertained by the film's emotive dexterity, white audiences were told exactly how to think and feel about the film's subject matter, all of which was reinforced as historical "truth" by the overwhelming critical acclaim garnered by the film. It must also be remembered that this white audience would not have had significant exposure to the methods of film in working to inculcate ideological argument, thus reducing their ability to question political ideology and propagandist publicity surrounding a monumental film like *The Birth of a Nation*, all of which contributed to the efficacy of the film in exacerbating existing racist notions of blackness. The perceived divisions between white immigrant groups, who held allegiances to separate cultural histories, were tackled by Griffith, in his presentation of a common *American* identity: "To concerned American audiences of 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* offered a reassuring vision of national unity. By depicting Lincoln as a symbol of reconciliation and unity, the film provided a fragmented and increasingly insecure society with an iconic hero."<sup>227</sup> So, *The Birth of a Nation* was in part alluring because of its appeal to white audiences to become unified; this sense of unity was achieved through the affirmation of a communal racist imaginary. This sense of harmony was not just that of a sense of American identity, it was a specifically *white* American identity. As Rogin contends, *The Birth of a Nation* was offered by Griffith as 'the screen memory, in both meanings of that term, through which Americans were to understand their collective past

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.: 207-208

and enact their future.'<sup>228</sup> This "collective past" would only have held true currency for the unified white audience created by the film.

The monolithic white audience that Griffith constructed was one which was self-reinforcing; in making *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith envisioned a united white America and produced the film in order to cement white harmony. The way in which *The Birth of a Nation* utilised technology and the changing social relationship between consumer and filmic product created his desired white audience, who understood American race relations through the vernacular given to them through what Michael Tratner describes as the 'universal language of film.'<sup>229</sup> As Judith Mayne explores in her book, *Cinema and Spectatorship*,<sup>230</sup> it became apparent how *The Birth of a Nation* was able to influence its audience into absorbing the white supremacist message of Griffith's work: 'Moviegoers, sitting in the dark, watching emotionally provocative scenes, became receptive to effects that played on deep psychoanalytic structures to turn everyone into a single unified model of a "spectator."<sup>231</sup> These dynamics of the movie theatre space are also analysed by Laura Mulvey:

The mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the

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<sup>228</sup> Rogin 1994: 252

<sup>229</sup> Tratner 2008: 1

<sup>230</sup> For more on spectatorship theories, see Mayne 1993

<sup>231</sup> Tratner 2008: 12

position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer.<sup>232</sup>

There was, in the early part of the twentieth century, a fear that movies were directly responsible for the erasure of individualism, replacing it with monolithic audiences more susceptible to suggestions from the films themselves. In response to this, there was a concerted effort to regulate what could be allowed to appear on screen. The Hays Code of 1930, as explicated by Michael Tratner, was one such example of intervention: 'the Code implies that because such varied kinds of people face the same suggestion all at once, the "moral mass resistance to suggestion" of the entire nation is lowered. Movies seemed capable of altering the psychology of those watching, so that they no longer had "individual" personalities but rather joined together in a "crowd mind" that was inherently "lower" in morality and unable to resist suggestions.'<sup>233</sup> This concern over the inability of the audience to remain distinct individuals, and the encouragement to form a cohesive white identity as "spectator" indicates Griffith's dexterity in engendering this sense of monolithic white identity.

Part of Griffith's success in reiterating white racist ideology is because of the filmic techniques which he employs throughout *The Birth of a Nation*. There are various scenes in which he strategically uses the camera and the gaze in order to position the white viewer in a space where unrestrained black masculinity threatens subjectivity. In the introduction of Silas Lynch to the white audience<sup>234</sup>, he enters a scene in which Lydia Brown is shown in medium long shot gazing directly at the camera and therefore the

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<sup>232</sup> Mulvey 1989: 17

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.: 4-5

<sup>234</sup> Scene 628, cited according to "The Continuity Script" found in Lang 1994: 94

white viewer, thus transgressing racial codes at the time which would have prohibited the direct gaze at whites by mulattoes. As he enters, his gaze shifts from her to the camera, reinforcing the combative feel of the black gaze. He approaches the camera which represents the white spectator, looming larger and larger, increasing his threat to the audience. As he stands beside Lydia, they represent the potential biological future of America where all men and women are tainted by miscegenation. Another example of the way Griffith makes his white spectator complicit in his fear of unrestrained black masculinity is when a group of black soldiers march down the sidewalk, culminating in a confrontation with Ben Cameron.<sup>235</sup> This mob of black soldiers who confront Ben Cameron are made to look thoroughly intimidating through the alignment of black maleness with militaristic threat, as well as the fact that they are all dressed uniformly which makes the group appear larger than the actual sum of its individual members; their militaristic garb transforms the black male body into signifier of black violence against whites. This unified mass of black masculinity marches directly towards the camera, thereby directly approaching the white spectator, and as they loom increasingly larger in the frame, their threatening presence is reinforced by the fact that they stand taller than Ben Cameron as they confront him, rather than letting him pass. This is a clear moment in which the white spectator is intended to feel this affront to Ben Cameron's white privilege as an affront to their own. A further example also involves a confrontation between Ben Cameron and the singular black male. Gus approaches the gate of the Cameron house<sup>236</sup>, attracted by the sight of Flora Cameron. Ben sees this, and prevents Gus access. While the two of them are arguing, Gus places his hands in his trouser pockets,

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<sup>235</sup> Scenes 691 through 693, Lang 1994: 99

<sup>236</sup> Scenes 899 through 912, *Ibid.*: 113-114

while pushing his jacket open and pointing his pelvis towards the camera/audience. His hands in his pockets literally frame the threat which Ben is trying to combat: the black phallus, and its perceived danger to white womanhood. Gus then repeats this action and approaches the camera as he exits, transferring the threat to Flora to the white women in the audience. These scenes exemplify the way in which the threat of black masculinity is transferred from its filmic environment to the white audience, thus unifying the white audience in their position of endangerment from the black male.

The inability of this unified white audience to dispute Griffith's stereotypes of blackness (as well as a total lack of investment in so doing) contributed to the danger of the inherent and overwhelming racism of *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith presented his audience with images of mythic blackness which were pervasive within white racist ideology, with the result of strengthening white hatred of blacks themselves. The white spectator of *The Birth of a Nation* understood these racist archetypes as representing real black people. Donald Bogle writes that 'the naïve and *cinematically untutored* [emphasis my own] audiences of the early part of the century responded to the character types as they were the real thing. As far as the audiences were concerned, the toms, the coons, the mulattoes, the mammies, and the bucks embodied all the aspects and facets of the black experience itself.'<sup>237</sup> These images represented the very real danger of *The Birth of a Nation*: white racism did not merely exist as ideology; it was responsible for the extreme violence enacted against black people in America. As Ed Guerrero explains in *Framing Blackness*, 'One of the film's most obvious dangers arose from the timing of its release; it appeared in the middle of a period, from 1890 to 1920, when Jim Crow segregation was on the rise; lynching was at its height; and in general mob violence, murder and

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<sup>237</sup> Bogle 2001: 17

oppression against African Americans was rampant and intense throughout the land.<sup>238</sup> This bloodthirsty climate, in combination with *The Birth of a Nation's* romantic depiction and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, most certainly contributed to the public's tolerance of Klan criminality and its expansion to its greatest membership ever, about five million, by 1924.

*The Birth of a Nation*, in representing a landmark moment of technological innovations within the world of film, caused a complete change to the way in which motion pictures were consumed by viewers. D.W. Griffith successfully created an audience unified along racial lines, which would engage with his film and in the process of so doing, perpetuate the message of white supremacy and the crucial importance of maintaining white privilege through the prevention of miscegenation, and black sexual freedom. *The Birth of a Nation* was an 'epic of white supremacist mythology'<sup>239</sup> which confirmed the status of the black male as animalistic, hypersexual beast within the white racist imaginary, and yet also provided a clear answer to the problem of the "black buck;" in Griffith's production, the formation of the Ku Klux Klan and their violent actions were justifiable in their ultimate intention of maintaining white supremacy through the preservation of the sanctity of white womanhood. The "haunting" of the white racist imaginary by the spectre of black male sexuality is one that is understood to be ever-present, and the only way in which this threat can be confronted is through the violent policing – imaginary and physical - of black sexual behaviour by unified white Americans.

In thinking about the way that the black male body is presented on screen, Laura Mulvey's influential *Visual and Other Pleasures* has proved invaluable. The black male is

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<sup>238</sup> Guerrero 1993: 13

<sup>239</sup> Butters 2002: 82

figured as other, both in terms of race and gender: normative identity works to remain so by existing as an unmarked central position, and also does so through an intersection of various elements of normative status, so the black male is positioned as deviant through both racial terms (in its failure to be white), but also in terms of gender in its failure to be normatively male (normative maleness does not simply arise from being recognised as male, but this maleness has to be white, able-bodied, heterosexual, etc.). Because black masculinity exists as a counter to normative masculinity, it can be understood as occupying a space similar to that of femininity,<sup>240</sup> which is why Mulvey's analysis of femininity and the way it exists on screen are illuminating. In occupying this feminized territory, the black male body can be produced as a spectacle of objectification, existing for the scopophilic pleasure of the (implied) white male viewer. Mulvey comments that, 'film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle.'<sup>241</sup> This revelatory power of film allows us to see the ways in which the black male body represents the focus of the gaze, shaped by an erotics that centres the body within a frame of desire, revulsion, and otherness. The viewer is encouraged to both repudiate and gaze upon the black male body, as a way in which to shore up their collective white identity; blackness defines the margins of a sense of whiteness in its existence on the periphery. As Mulvey goes on to state, 'the magic of the Hollywood style at its best arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the

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<sup>240</sup> More will follow on specific ways in which the black male body is feminized later in this chapter.

<sup>241</sup> Mulvey 1989: 14

dominant patriarchal order.’<sup>242</sup> Film is alluring because it allows the (intended) subject to rework the “real” world in keeping with the visual representation of film from which he derives pleasure. It is important to note here that the “dominant patriarchal order” is one in which white masculinity defines the central normative position of identity, thus qualifying black men as a deviant other.

Mulvey notes that ‘there are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure,’<sup>243</sup> which partly explains the popularity of the imaging of the black male body, but not completely: the pleasure derived from gazing upon the body of the black man is also created by the viewer’s perception that they are beholding that which is other, and therefore defines them as superior. Mulvey discusses the Freudian arrangement of objectifying the othered body: ‘[Freud] associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a curious and *controlling gaze*.’<sup>244</sup> (emphasis mine) Figuring the black male body as spectacle is not just important in terms of the scopophilic pleasure that it affords the implied white spectator: to be objectified within this dynamic is to be controlled, to be contained, and it is this containment which is foundational for the maintenance of white supremacy. Where Mulvey describes the activity of men and the passivity of women as cinematic viewers, this splitting can be applied to the way in which the black male is also figured as passive object within mainstream film which defines non-whiteness as other: ‘pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are

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<sup>242</sup> Mulvey 1989: 16

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.<sup>245</sup> As an indicator of exotic otherness, blackness can also be argued as connoting “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Where Mulvey positions the female figure within film as being the source of spectacular entertainment and narrative function, this too can be applied to the black male figure in *The Birth of a Nation*: ‘mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative. The presence of woman is an undisputable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.’<sup>246</sup> Gus, just before pursuing Flora through the forest, is presented to the audience in a moment of “erotic contemplation,” as he frames his penis for the camera to focus upon. The narrative pauses while the viewer can consume his body visually, while understanding what this body represents and its rapacious potential. This representation works to make the preceding and succeeding action of the film coherent: we are made to understand the consequence of increasing emancipation of the black body, and the supposedly inherent black male violence Gus represents makes Flora’s terror understandable; her death is legitimized as a scheme for avoiding rape by a black man.

Mulvey discusses the way that cinema not only positions women as that which is objectified upon the cinema screen, but relies upon the viewer looking at her in a specific way which is incorporated into the pleasure of this spectacular form of entertainment: ‘going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.: 19

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.<sup>247</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* gives the spectator visual pleasure in its display of the black male body, where the threat of this other body is made palatable through its containment upon the cinema screen: the menace that is posed by Silas Lynch and Gus can be viewed because the spectator can engage with this vicarious thrill while safe in the knowledge that this is merely a representation of black masculinity, rather than any real threat. This viewing does carry real danger for black people, though: the narrative of the film legitimizes the lynching of black men in the real world as a necessary response to unrestrained black masculinity in the world outside of the cinema.

### **The Representation of the Black Male**

*The Birth of a Nation* presented white audiences with the spectre of the black male, complete with a mythologized predatory sexuality, which could only be satisfied with the forced sexual conquest and destruction of white womanhood. The presence of this threat that the black male posed to white supremacy haunts Griffith's film throughout, producing hysterical fear of blackness within the racist white imaginary of his audience. *The Birth of a Nation* was particularly effective in its fomenting of white racism, because the white spectator did not possess the analytical skills required to question the message of the film and the insidious methods utilized by the medium of film itself to persuade its audience of a particular ideology. The figure upon which the fear of miscegenation depends is the rapacious black man, or the "black buck".<sup>248</sup> The black male is heavily

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.: 25

<sup>248</sup> Donald Bogle explains the profile of the "black buck": "The brutal black buck type could be divided into two categories: the black brutes and the black bucks. Differences between the two are minimal. The black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc. Audiences could assume that his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed. In *the Birth of a Nation*, the black brutes, subhuman and feral, are the nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage. They flog the Cameron's faithful servant. They shove and assault white men of the town. They flaunt placards demanding "equal marriage." [...] But it was the pure black

stereotyped within the white racist imaginary as animalistic, violent, bloodthirsty and sexually obsessed with the conquest of white womanhood. This stereotype can be attributed to the need for black civil rights to be suppressed in order to allow for the perpetuation of white supremacy.<sup>249</sup> This “black buck” which is portrayed so thoroughly by Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation* is the character upon which the fear of miscegenation is fundamentally based; the defence of white womanhood is only required against the perceived onslaught of animalistic sexual advances from black men who want to overthrow the white race and satisfy their unrelenting carnal desires through the violent destruction of the sanctity of white womanhood, which represents the cradle of white superiority. *The Birth of a Nation* also depicts black men as constituting a threat aside from a rapacious violence: within the political sphere as black men were gaining traction through emancipation and potential representational power, Griffith takes the opportunity to depict black men as damaging to American democracy. Margaret Russell notes of one particular scene: ‘Griffith’s first black legislators are contemptible, priapean fools; swigging from whiskey bottles and gnawing on fried chicken legs, they conduct their first legislative session with shoes off and legs splayed carelessly across their desks. The film depicts emancipation as destructive of the private sphere as well; freedmen lust after Southern belles, and communities fall prey to “ruin, devastation, raping, and pillage.”’<sup>250</sup> Within the film, black men are not to be entrusted with political power as they

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bucks that were Griffith’s really great archetypal figures. Bucks are always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh. No greater sin hath any black man. Both Lynch, the mulatto, and Gus, the renegade, fall into this category.’ (Bogle 2001: 13-14)

<sup>249</sup> For more detail of the evolution of this stereotype, see Ed Guerrero 1993: 12

<sup>250</sup> Russell 1999: 265

will squander the opportunity, and constitute a danger to the American citizenry, both on the streets and in the legislature.

Mason Stokes discusses the way in which nineteenth-century American scientists and theologians utilized the Bible in defence of the argument that black people were non-human, using the Garden of Eden 'as the setting for their racist imaginings of the "Negro's" place (or more accurately, lack of place) in the human family.'<sup>251</sup> As Stokes demonstrates, there is a long and extensive history of the non-humanness of black people becoming conflated with non-Christian identity. Utilizing Stokes' argument here, it becomes evident that the threat which black men pose to whiteness is also a threat to Christian identity; the purity of whiteness is not merely racial, but also couched in religious terms. This is clear in rhetoric decrying miscegenation, where the perception of white womanhood as constituting the vessel of whiteness often becomes expressed in terms of the Christian purity of white women. Stokes states of whiteness: 'its hegemonic power can render it readable in a way that blackness often is not.'<sup>252</sup>

### **Miscegenation**

The ultimate dystopian future, as perceived by Griffith, is one in which there is freedom for the blacks to mix with whites, resulting in miscegenation. This subject provides the inspiration for the film's most vehemently racist scenes, as Griffith attempts to demonstrate the inherent danger of cross-racial sex to the power of white supremacy. Silas Lynch provides a showcase for Griffith's fears about the dangers possessed by the mulatto towards white supremacy; he shows condescension towards white characters

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<sup>251</sup> Stokes, Mason. "Someone's in the Garden with Eve: Race, Religion, and the American Fall" in *American Quarterly* Vol. 50, No. 4 (Dec 1998), pp. 718-744. 719

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*: 736

around him, and is described in an intertitle as follows: 'Lynch a traitor to his white patron and a greater traitor to his own people, whom he plans to lead by an evil way to build himself a throne of vaulting power.'<sup>253</sup> Lynch exemplifies the dreaded issue of cross-racial desire; he is repeatedly positioned as desiring Elsie Stoneman, and these fears are confirmed by his later assault upon her. Rogin explains the fear caused by the mulatto's existence in terms of the racial slippage presented by the mulatto's racial designation. Located in the space between the binary of race where one is white *or* black, the mulatto points out the lack of rigidity of these categories of identity because of the possibility of being something "unreadable" which combines the two: 'the order of things is confused by this merging of opposites, and *The Birth of a Nation* finds it convenient and logical to designate the mulatto as the villainous consequence of "the bringing of the African to America".'<sup>254</sup> Mulattoes are presented as thoroughly dangerous because they represent the blurring of the racial lines, which need to remain rigid and distinct in order to be policed, and therefore allow white supremacy to maintain its power within society. Of course, mulattoes are only framed within the notion that they result from miscegenation between rapacious black men and chaste white women; there is no acknowledgement of the long history of white men raping black female slaves which also resulted in mulatto children. Leslie Fiedler connects the mulatto – the symbol of miscegenation imbued with fear – with the white imaginary: 'The earlier European myth of freakish aliens located at the ends of the earth when crossed with the myth of evolution spawns two others that have profoundly influenced our notions of what it means to be human. The first is the myth of the missing link [...] And the second, intimately related to the first, is that of

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.: 102

<sup>254</sup> Rogin 1994: 20

devolution: the nightmare fear that through “miscegenation” our children or our children’s children may create in the future the subhuman we cannot find in the past.’<sup>255</sup> Fiedler links this to Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (the inspiration for Griffith’s film): ‘In its climactic scene, a white father says to the Harvard-educated “mulatto” who has asked for his daughter’s hand, “I happen to know the important fact that a man or woman of Negro ancestry, though a century removed, will suddenly breed back to a pure Negro child, thick-lipped, kinky-headed, flat-nosed, black-skinned. One drop of your blood in my family could push it backward three thousand years in history.’<sup>256</sup> This conflation of the black male with an animalistic lack of civilization is borne out by the way in which Griffith depicted his white actresses with black characters: Joshua Bellin<sup>257</sup> recounts an anecdote told by Lillian Gish, who plays Elsie Stoneman in *The Birth of a Nation*:

“One day while we were rehearsing the scene where the colored man picks up the Northern girl gorilla-fashion, my hair, which was very blond, fell below my waist and Griffith, seeing the contrast in the two figures, assigned me to play Elsie Stoneman.” Though only a single remark by one of the company’s players, Gish’s terms are nonetheless suggestive: the association of the African American man with a gorilla, the revelation of blondness as the paradigmatic symbol of white womanhood, and the desire to exaggerate through this visual “contrast” the gulf between whiteness and blackness.<sup>258</sup>

<sup>255</sup>Fiedler, Leslie. *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* Middlesex, England: Penguin Books 1981, p.241

<sup>256</sup> Fiedler 1981: 241-2

<sup>257</sup> As Bellin’s work makes clear ‘Griffith’s film was also, in ways at once incidental and inescapable, foundational for another film that dramatized the death of the black beast: *King Kong*. [...] Merian C. Cooper is reported to have used nearly identical terms in his instructions to Fay Wray, a natural brunette, when casting her for the role of Ann Darrow: “Of course you’d have to be a blonde. We’ve got to have that contrast.” The contrast of white and black that Griffith and Cooper labored to institute was born from the threat of miscegenation, the ultimate abrogation of racial difference; the lynching of Gus, the black man who stalks the younger Cameron sister in *The Birth of a Nation*, is clearly a cinematic precursor to the gunning of Kong (a fact signalled by the similar spatial iconography of both films, in which the ascent to and fall from a height surround the fact of violation and violence). In both instances, then, racial contrast is achieved through the thwarting of black male sexual predation; white superiority is secured in a violence both expressive of and validated by the fear that white identity has been pushed to its most tenuous contingency.’ (Bellin 2005: 33)

<sup>258</sup> Bellin 2005: 33

The threat that was posed by miscegenation needed to be made explicit for the audience; even though transgressing the racial boundary between black and white was already cemented in the spectator's mind as representing a societal peril, Griffith makes this even more apparent with his connection of blackness to animalism and savagery.

### **Rape**

Angela Davis asserts that 'the myth of the black rapist was a distinctly political invention.'<sup>259</sup> In discussing the mythic black male rapist, Margaret Hunter comments that it 'served primarily to socially control and repress African American power, especially in times of economic recession or increasing black civil rights. This myth is not a relic of the past. It is routinely used in popular culture as well as political debates about schooling, crime, and the economy.'<sup>260</sup> Some of the most dramatic scenes of *The Birth of a Nation*, and certainly some of the most vehemently racist, involve the "rape scenario" where Flora Cameron finds herself pursued by Gus. With the use of his intertitles, Griffith refers to unrestrained black male sexual desire for white women: Griffith makes clear the animalistic sexual desire of black men for defenceless white women that will be unleashed by any white acceptance of miscegenation. The depiction of Gus watching Flora from the shadows and lusting after her occurs directly after this intertitle appears, and precedes the dogged pursuit of Flora Cameron by Gus, which culminates in her plunging to her death from a cliff top. Flora is presented as the epitome of Southern womanly innocence and virtue; despite a warning not to do so, she goes to fetch water for her family from a spring, and then frolics in the forest entranced by a squirrel. Gus is

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<sup>259</sup> Davis 1981: 184

<sup>260</sup> Hunter 2005: 32

deviously following her without her knowledge, and scares her with his approach and proposal of marriage to her. He then chases her when she runs away, shouting “Wait missie, I won’t hurt yeh.” Despite this appeal to her, his actions – at this moment, and earlier – would constitute a serious threat to her within the minds of the white spectators. She is obviously completely terrified of Gus and yet his continual pursuit of Flora increases the tension of the film, culminating in her entreaty to “Stay away or I’ll jump.” Gus refuses to “stay away”, and foaming at the mouth, scares her sufficiently to cause her to jump to her death. Her lack of recognition of the potential danger of her going alone to the spring is completely reversed when she is confronted by Gus; the mere sight of a black man acts as a terrifying omen of interracial rape. The film’s claim in another of the intertitles that ‘For her who had learned the stern lesson of honour we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death’<sup>261</sup> confirms that Flora’s death is a better result than her having failed to protect her chaste womanhood from a black man.

In analysing the power that *The Birth of a Nation* had in perpetuating white racism within the consciousness of its white audience, it is crucial to read the scene according to how it would have been perceived by the audience for whom it was made. Gerald Butters reads this scene between Flora and Gus as being a moment of dangerous interaction for Gus, rather than Flora.<sup>262</sup> In his explanation of this through the racial privilege which

<sup>261</sup> Scenes 1024 through 1093, *Ibid.*: 120-123

<sup>262</sup> Butters’ reading of the scene is as follows: ‘Considering the racial climate of the period, Gus would certainly have been lynched for even approaching Little Sister. He had more to fear than Little Sister did. [...] Gus approaches the ledge while Little Sister screams for him to stay away or she will jump. This particular scene has been considered as a potential rape scene. The interpretation is that Gus follows Little Sister in an attempt to sexually have his way with her. The foregone conclusion was that all black men want white women and what all black men are interested in, in terms of white women, is sexual conquest. An oppositional reading implies nothing of the sort. Gus never implies anything provocative; he never makes any sexual advances. [...] For Little Sister, who has presumably been fed a steady diet of the mythology of black licentiousness, death is better than any physical or emotional contact with Gus, so she jumps.[...] The protection of white women becomes one of the central themes in *The Birth of a Nation*. Little Sister is a symbol of white womanhood and white civilization.’ (Butters 2002: 79) It is true that Gus does have more to fear than Little Sister for his approach to her, however

Flora exerts over Gus (as opposed to the racial *and* gender privilege held over him by white men), Butters fails to take the opportunity to examine further the complex layers of privilege; although Flora could be said to hold more power within society than Gus, her power solely resides in her accepting the oppressive gender role of woman as *either* chaste victim and paragon of white womanly virtue *or* wanton temptress who desires the taint of miscegenation. Butters' reading of this scene in his book *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen* is from a modern perspective; although this may make this scene more palatable to watch, it is erroneous - this scene *must* be read as a rape scene because this is how Griffith would have wanted it to be interpreted, and indeed how his white audience would have unquestionably viewed it. Of course, an African American viewer could have adapted an oppositional reading of this scene (and possibly the entire film), but Griffith did not make this film for such a viewer: *The Birth of a Nation* was very deliberately produced as a warning to its intended white audience of the dangers of social freedom and sexual mobility of black Americans. The reason for Griffith's creation of a unified white audience is specifically to internalize the film's message of white supremacy, and reproduce the Ku Klux Klan's enactment of racial violence against black people. Butters' analysis of this particular scene removes the taint of social subversiveness from Gus's actions, and places the blame for Flora's death firmly into her own hands, caused by her hysterical fear of black men. Although Butters' reading as an oppositional spectator has validity, he seems to miss the salient point that this reading, in the context of the power

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a white audience would have understood his actions to be highly "provocative," and would have echoed the "foregone conclusion" that black men are simply waiting for the opportunity to rape white women; the approach of a black man towards a white woman with any connotation of cross-racial desire would have been incredibly inflammatory within Southern white racist imaginations. The white spectator is encouraged to view Flora with a sense of admiration, for in her mortal sacrifice, she protects her white womanhood from the taint of black manhood (as well as preventing the white audience from having to witness any implication of miscegenation) and the Klansmen that take up her cause become the central heroes of whiteness in the perspective of Griffith's film.

*The Birth of a Nation* held over its audience in 1915, is irrelevant; the white audience would have their own (already) racist perceptions of black masculinity as dangerous reinforced - having also been “fed a steady diet of the mythology of black licentiousness” – and would find their concern over the mixing of the races escalated into hysterical fear.

### **Castration**

In the original version of *The Birth of a Nation*, Gus is castrated by the Klan after being lynched, although this was later censored by the National Board of Review.<sup>263</sup> Although not seen by the majority of its viewers, the lynching of black men would have been an image with which the white audience would have closely connected the punitive process of castration. Gus’ unforgivable attempt to rape Flora would have given the audience all the justification they may have needed for wanting his brutal emasculation. Rogin asserts the importance of Gus’s castration in terms of its restorative potential:

Stopping black men from penetrating white women gave birth to a redeemed nation. The nation was born in Gus’s castration, from the wound that signified the white man’s power to stop the black seed. [...] Castration protected white women, in the film’s ideology. “The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demonic.” [...]The scene at *The Birth of a Nation*’s final climax in which [Silas] Lynch assaults Elsie is intended to repeat, invert, and justify Gus’s castration.<sup>264</sup>

Not only is this scene one of restoration, it also does the work of what Harris describes as ‘narrative redemption,’ which rely upon the ‘containment of the black male body or the violent death of the black male body (a more final, less lingering containment)’, which successfully establishes the ‘redemption and recuperation of white masculinity and the white male body.’<sup>265</sup> The lynching (and castration – at least implicated if not actually

<sup>263</sup> For more detail about the castration scene, see Rogin 1994: 277-278

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.: 279-280

<sup>265</sup> Harris 2012: 48

seen) of Gus positions Ben Cameron as the hero of the piece, as it is through his vengeful creation of the Klan after his sister's death that results in Gus' violent end, which constitutes the unification of whites in order to achieve this death.

The ritual practice of castration of black men is one which carried heavy ideological weight within the minds of racist white Americans; within the format of the ritualized lynching, this violent act was profoundly symbolic. As Dora Apel contends, 'as a violent and perverse homoerotic exchange, castration reveals the common white obsession with the black penis and a displaced desire to "consume" the body of the Other. Not surprisingly, the fascination and the fetishization of the black penis made it the most highly prized lynching souvenir.'<sup>266</sup> This castration of the black male echoes the reality of what was happening upon the battleground of American race relations; black men were being lynched *and* castrated by mobs of white supremacists, and these brutal actions were given moral sanction by the widespread myth of black male licentiousness and predatory sexual conquest of white women. Castration existed as a way in which to allay white fears of violent and unchecked violent black male hypersexuality. Returning to the idea that the black male is figured as not male, and therefore similar in representational terms to women, the way in which the female constitutes a psychoanalytic fear of castration and the way in which the black male is often literally castrated within the lynching ritual, Mulvey's analysis of the female figure in film becomes more useful.

Discussing the female threat of castration, she notes:

in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus

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<sup>266</sup> Apel 2004: 136

the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally sanctified.<sup>267</sup>

Using this dynamic, the black male body – imagined in similar ways to the female body in terms of inferior gender – allows for pleasure to be taken in the spectacle of this body but goes beyond the pleasure taken in the female: as a body which has explicitly undergone castration at the hands of the white crowd (or Griffith's narrative), there is no anxiety of the threat of castration of the white male, as this castration has already been enacted upon the black male body, confirming the superiority of white masculine power.

### ***The Rebirth of a Nation***

*The Rebirth of a Nation* is the title given to Paul D. Miller's (aka DJ Spooky) 2008 film reconfiguration of *The Birth of a Nation*.<sup>268</sup> In questioning the importance of *The Birth of a Nation* in contemporary culture, Miller's film exemplifies its continuing relevance within discussions of the dynamics of American race relations, and the social position of African Americans in the twenty-first century. *The Rebirth of a Nation* attempts to dismantle the power of white production and consumption of media products, in a reconfiguration of black experience as central to destabilizing the status quo of white privilege within American society. The work of Miller yields an essential interruption to the power of *The Birth of a Nation's* rhetoric, and enables analysis of the production techniques which succeed in making Griffiths's film so compelling, both in 1915 upon its release, and today. With *The Rebirth of a Nation*, Miller reworks and reconfigures the infamous Griffith film by mixing in different images and sounds with original film footage.

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<sup>267</sup> Mulvey 1989: 21

<sup>268</sup> *The Rebirth of a Nation* was originally commissioned in 2004 by the Lincoln Center Festival as a large scale multimedia performance piece, a DVD version of which was released in 2008. All references to this work here will be to the 2008 DVD version, rather than the various live performances.

The film attempts to create an aesthetic of the DJ through visual cut ups and layering. According to Miller, the aim was to see how the present audiovisual culture of fast editing, loops and digitization was already configured by the style of Griffith in 1915. His work is also an attempt to show how current historical events resonate with the past, especially the uglier aspects of American society. As one of the initial voice-overs of the film states, “As Paul Miller broke down and remixed these images to expose the supremacist nature of this film and architecture of American culture, he asked how much of this is in the past, and how much exists in the present? The DJ as director concept is based around the idea that there are many different versions or possibilities to any story”.<sup>269</sup> This implicit questioning of the veracity of the “history” presented in Griffith’s film is highlighted by Miller’s use of the same style of intertitle: the boundary between Griffith’s and Miller’s artistic creations are blurred, and there is also the echoing of the same plea for a lack of censorship which Griffith made. The use of the antiquated technology present in *The Birth of a Nation* segues into overtly modern technology as Miller’s intertitle becomes 3-D, suggesting that if not an improvement on Griffith’s work, Miller’s film is at least a development upon the original. Interestingly, even when the textual content of the intertitles is that of the original film, they are still shown within Miller’s frame, calling into question issues of artistic ownership: these are Griffith’s shots but edited by Miller, raising questions of who retains ownership over these images, and whose artistic production we are watching. Miller consistently relates (through voice-over) the film to current race relations, and the way in which America’s perception of race is profoundly affected by the way in which “reality” is filtered through the lens of cultural representation: “Griffith binds audience to his characters, and his *fiction*”, “Griffith’s

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<sup>269</sup> Miller 2008

subtle manipulation of realism in dramatizing Lincoln's assassination was revolutionary at the time, and set the stage for media propaganda throughout our modern history, leading all the way up to Hurricane Katrina and Iraq."<sup>270</sup>

The devices employed by Miller include the manipulation of original images with colour; changes of perspective; rapid movement of the camera; alternate musical scoring; animation "laid-over" film image: all of these mechanisms call into question which other manipulations have taken place: those "unseen," "naturalistic" or obscured directorial methods which encourage a particular reading of each scene. Stuart Hall's description here proves useful: 'naturalism and "realism" – the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented – is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the "real". It is the result of a discursive practice.'<sup>271</sup> Many of Miller's changes deliberately announce themselves as insertions of technology into the space of the film, calling into question what other ways the film is encoded with a certain meaning, and encouraging an enquiry into the agenda of the director. The nature of the film changing so fundamentally through different musical scoring is particularly clear with the climactic scene of the Klan's ride to rescue Elsie Stoneman from being raped by Silas Lynch: in the original this scene is accompanied by Wagner's rousing "Ride of the Valkyries" prompting a sense of triumphant excitement within the audience; whereas the same scene's accompaniment with trip-hop in Miller's version harshly undercuts this emotive manipulation. This raises questions of the importance of *sound* and the way in which it heavily contributes to an emotional response to an ostensibly visual medium. Miller's film also raises the question of what happens when the visual action on screen

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Hall 1999: 511

doesn't match the score. The importance of lighting is also something which is made evident in Miller's work: the way in which Griffith lit his white and "black" actors is disrupted through Miller's play with colour – he highlights blackface makeup as an explicit façade. Also, the departure from sepia tones forces the spectator into a process of surveillance of the figures on screen; it becomes far more difficult – at times impossible – to detect who is "black" and who is not, pointing towards the futility of assigning "race" based upon visual presentation. Miller makes clear with his various ways of "framing" characters the power of the director to frame audience perception and to direct attention; the cinematic spectator is told where to look, what they are looking at, and what to think.

In Miller's version, the "rape" scene between Flora and Gus is filmed more favourably than the original; the shots of Gus spying on the Cameron girls are far briefer, and the scene where he approaches the camera and literally fames his penis between his hands when they are in his pockets is also edited out; it becomes a little easier to read Gus in a more ambiguous way, as he contains less apparent threat. Miller also mitigates the extremely racist reading of Gus which would have been intended in the Griffith version; as a preface to the intertitle announcing "for her who had learned the stern lesson of honour we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death," Miller frames the reading of this scene through voice-over (v/o): "The white woman's choice of death over the dishonour of a black soldier's advances is meant to bond the audience with the cause of the colonel. Griffith has introduced revenge as a theme which will resonate throughout the rest of his film." The sacred status afforded to the little sister's death not only makes manifest the danger that unregulated black sexuality constitutes, but becomes a site through which the rhetorical operation of justification can function. Here, Miller's v/o trumps the intended reading of Griffith's film; the authoritative voice allows

for a reading of Griffith's racism, rather than one which obscures this racism through a depiction of "the history." Whereas other narrative events work to justify the creation of the Klan, the little sister's death provides justification for the actions of the Klan: the lynching of Gus. The juxtaposition of scenes as they appear in Griffith's original alongside Miller's newly edited scenes in *The Rebirth of a Nation* draws attention to the way in which film *always* appears to the audience having been deliberately produced in highly specific ways; even when we are not cognizant of the director's control over the images we are seeing, we can now imagine far more easily the traces of this manipulative hand without the explicit clues. *The Birth of a Nation*, which sustains an intricate narrative for three hours of screen time, held audiences spellbound. As noted by John Belton in *American Cinema, American Culture*, one of Griffith's assistants, Karl Brown, reported his reactions to seeing the fully assembled film for the first time on opening night:

"What unfolded on that screen was magic itself. I knew there were cuts from this and to that, but try as I would, I could not *see* them...All I knew was that between the ebb and flow of a broad canvas of a great battle, now far now near, and the roaring of that gorgeous orchestra banging and blaring battle songs to stir the coldest blood, I was hot and cold and feeling waves of tingling electric shocks racing all over me."<sup>272</sup>

What is interesting here, aside from the clear indication from Brown of the emotive strength of Griffith's masterpiece, is the importance upon *seeing*; despite the fact that he is fully aware of the director's cuts to the film, the inability to detect them visually allows the viewer to fully immerse themselves into the racist narrative. This makes abundantly clear how important work like *The Rebirth of a Nation* is; Miller's film enables Griffith's film to be perceived with a critical eye, particularly outside of academia. As Miller's voice over in *The Rebirth of a Nation* makes clear, the threat of the black male cemented by

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<sup>272</sup> Belton 2005: 15

Griffith had a significant impact upon the narrative of black masculinity which would be told throughout American film: “Griffith creates a vision of the strong white hero up against evil men, and taking them on his own. His vision would characterize American film heroes from Superman to Tarzan and beyond. In this case white justice is carried out by the Klan; a sign of things to come.”

As Mulvey argues, ‘cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.’<sup>273</sup> In this way, Griffith is responsible for creating a specific environment in which he centres the black male as rapacious threat, he is not simply just reproducing reality, but synthesizing existing racism and his own narrative producing something far more immune to being critically dismantled. Markovitz points to the legacy possessed by *The Birth of a Nation* as its concretizing of the black rapist and the resulting necessity of the lynching ritual to restore white supremacy: ‘Ever since Flora Cameron attempted to “preserve her honor” by throwing herself off a cliff [...] Hollywood has had a particularly strong fascination with imagery associated with interracial rape and lynching.’<sup>274</sup> The way in which Griffith cemented the figure of the black man as violent rapacious threat within the American cultural imagination is not bound by the confines of his film; this trope of black masculinity is one which has retained mythic power throughout contemporary culture. To find this trope one only has to skim the surface of American culture: the terrifying and violent black man is never hard to find. Griffith cemented the lynching as a part of American visual history, in his situating of the spectacle of black male rapaciousness within filmic codes, and allowing his audience to take vicarious pleasure in the death of the imagined black beast.

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<sup>273</sup> Mulvey 1975: 17

<sup>274</sup> Markovitz 2004: 34

His legacy is not just that of pioneering and innovative film production, but in the consolidation of an American national identity that had the supremacy of whiteness as its foundation.

### **Chapter Three: Objectifying the Black Male in Robert Mapplethorpe's**

#### ***The Black Book***

##### **Reimagining the Black Male Rapist**

In a similar way to *The Birth of a Nation* and the lynching postcards, the Mapplethorpe images in *The Black Book* work to unify a white audience but achieve this unification in very different ways. The segregation of early movie theatres allowed for the cementing of film's viewers into one cohesive community bound along lines of racial

identity: positioned by the architecture as a solely white group and bound by the simultaneous absorption of Griffith's narrative of race, the sense of racial communion is clear to behold, particularly given that other social differences (such as sex, class, region, etc.) would have been minimised in the democratic space of the cinema. In fact, the only unifying aspect of this created community that would be self-evident would be race, thereby creating a sense of monolithic whiteness. The creation of this group along lines of race would only be strengthened when aligned against the threat on screen that blackness posed, setting up a binary wherein affirmation of one's whiteness would allow the individual to take comfort in race as a communal space, and to take pleasure in the mutual perception of whiteness as the idealized racial identity.

The lynching postcards also make use of a racially segregated space in order to present the opportunity for racial unification of their audience, but, unlike the overtly public nature of the movie theatre, exist within a space that is ambiguous in terms of whether it is private or public. Despite the fact that the Mapplethorpe images have the potential to be viewed in a racially integrated space, whether in a gallery or private space, a unification of the audience is still engendered along racial lines: the images, I argue, place the viewer in a position of identification/dis-identification, where the declaration of whether or not one identifies places the individual into a relative space with other viewers. In this formation, the viewer looks at a Mapplethorpe image and sees oneself either reflected or absent within the image. Despite the overt homoeroticism of the images, the visual onus is placed on the blackness of the models, thereby affirming white viewers in their racial difference from the pictures, but – more importantly – in their racial similarity with other white viewers. The images work to bind white viewers in a collective whiteness, enabling a sense of racial cohesion to take place, despite the fact that

the actual viewing may occur in a more racially integrated context. Particularly given the nature of Mapplethorpe's works as courting controversy and encouraging affirmation of/resistance to the narratives of normal and deviant, the disavowal of identification with the images is important: in refusing any common ground with the photographic subjects essential ideas of what blackness is and whiteness isn't are reinscribed. Blackness is (still) overt sexuality and uncontrolled desire, whiteness is not these things and all the more superior for not being so.

Images work, in part, in their requirement of their consumers to exhibit specific behaviours which in turn confer specific identities onto those who act in certain prescribed ways. For example, in eliciting a disavowal of identification, the Mapplethorpe images, I argue below, not only unify the audience along racial lines, but also shore up whiteness as the ideal which, when achieved, can be a space of gratifying superiority. Thus whiteness in this case becomes conflated with maleness because the pictures do not entertain any gaze other than the male gaze, and heterosexuality, because this male gaze is trained upon bodies that are racialized and feminized, and therefore not seen as normatively male.

George Yancy describes the body as 'a battlefield, one that is fought over again and again across particular historical moments and within particular social spaces.'<sup>275</sup> Mapplethorpe's nudes, in common with the other examples of imaged black masculinity, constitute both the battleground and the casualties of white supremacy. This corporeal landscape provides the setting for the contestation of masculinity to occur, with white masculinity claiming ownership over, and destruction of, the black male body as the spoils of war. The emasculating violence done to the black male body in the moment of

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<sup>275</sup> Yancy 2005: 216

castration is not only present during the lynching ritual, but is symbolically enacted when the black penis is the object of the white supremacist gaze. It is possible to draw an overlap between the lynching ritual and Mapplethorpe's nudes when David Marriott observes that 'to look at the penis and to castrate, and destroy it, can amount to the same thing.'<sup>276</sup> While the castration as part of the lynching involves the literal removal of the black penis, the white supremacist gaze upon the black male body is a symbolic removal in its attempt to take away the power of the black phallus. While the black penis, and by extension the black male, is a threat to whiteness in its potential to literally disrupt the hermetic borders of whiteness through sexual transgression of the barrier between white and black, the black phallus poses a threat in its ability to destabilize the superiority of whiteness, in both the disavowed desire for, and avowed hatred of, black masculinity. The menace arises from the anxiety created from this simultaneous desire and revulsion: the cracks in the veneer of white masculinity move closer to the surface.

The work of Mapplethorpe continues the cultural work of the lynching postcard, in that the black male body as site of threat and sexual desire remain the focus of the white supremacist imaginary. Where these images constitute somewhat of a departure is in the absence of explicit violence, yet this is not a complete absence: there is still a form of violence done to the black male in the form of being sexually objectified, robbed of humanity and having the body seen merely as a tool to satisfy the need of white masculinity. To be defined in contrast to black masculinity, which is confirmed as being inferior, is to solidify whiteness. In *On Black Men*, David Marriott focuses on one particular image in terms of its ties to the lynching tableau imaged in the postcards. He reflects upon how this image impacts upon him as a black spectator, and on his refusal to simplistically

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<sup>276</sup> Marriott 2000: 27

think of these photographs from the implied spectator's position that encourages an eroticized contemplation of the black male body:

*Hooded Man*, for example, forces us to confront, with something like ferocious irony, a history of looking at black men in lynching scenes and images. Apparently courting the accusation of racial sadism towards the black male body, Mapplethorpe imposes those scenes and images on his hooded model (the same model featured in *Man in Polyester Suit*), as the iconography of the Ku Klux Klan stares out at us from the frame. To look, as a black male spectator, at such an image is to be aware of a leash around your neck, one formed by racial fear and sadistic fantasy and the terrifying-satisfying spectacle of castration.<sup>277</sup>

The image of the hooded man (Fig. 16) works, as Marriot points out, as a very clear evocation of the lynching ritual, with the subject of the image being posed in a way that suggests the rope circling the neck, and his head sheathed in a covering similar to that of the Klansman (itself a reminder of the trauma enacted upon the black male body by white supremacists). Aside from the arresting nature of the Klan and lynching signifiers, and the way in which it 'is practically rubbing our faces in an uncomfortable scene of black desolation,'<sup>278</sup> there is further signalling of the lynching and the way in which the black body necessitates such violent control: the foreskin mirrors the shape of the head covering, and in a similar way is working to cover that which threatens white supremacy; the head covering contains the threat of the individual black man as symbolized by the face, and the foreskin sheaths the threat of black male sexuality, as symbolized by the head of the penis.

Commented [JW(10):

<sup>277</sup> Marriot 2000: 30

<sup>278</sup> Marriot 2000: 31-2



Figure 16. *Untitled*, 1980. (Mapplethorpe 2010: 54)

The fact that this photograph faces *Man in Polyester Suit* on the following page is important: the black male as a body which poses a threat and refuses to be contained constitutes an important diptych in the collection, and encapsulates all of the meaning which Mapplethorpe is folding into black masculinity. That this acts as the centrepiece of *The Black Book* is particularly useful in terms of the constructed narrative that Mapplethorpe is providing for his viewer; these two images provide the visualization of the central on-going historical narrative of black masculinity adopted by Mapplethorpe: the black male body is hypersexual, dangerous, uncivilized and needs to be tamed or

obliterated. This photo is performing the same cultural work as the lynching postcard: it constructs a universal white privilege, by situating blackness as explicitly and implicitly dangerous and in need of the violent imposition of coercive correction.

Although Mapplethorpe's images are using some of the same visual vernacular as the lynching postcards, there is also an important departure that happens: both exemplify the white supremacist desire for the black male body and the violent destruction of the body, but where the lynching postcards focus explicitly on violence and mask (literally, in the case of the KKK,) the eroticism of the gaze, Mapplethorpe inverts this and plays up the erotic charge through veiling the violence. In the Mapplethorpe photographs the look constitutes a violence of its own, as a tool of surveillance that through the sexual objectification of the body and perpetuation of the narrative of black masculinity as hypersexual threat, severs the black male from any claim to humanity, and as Marriott suggests, there is significant commonality between the castration and the look, stating that they can 'amount to the same thing.'<sup>279</sup>

Arthur Danto, in commenting on Mapplethorpe's work, states that it 'is the mark of fantasies that we return, obsessively and repetitively, to the same images and scenarios, over and over again. We do not for the most part live our fantasies out, and so they never evolve.'<sup>280</sup> This "obsessive return" to the black male body, both in the lynching configuration and Mapplethorpe's work, needs to be consistently repeated: although these represent the efforts of white masculinity to contain the threat of the black male body, this whiteness is never secure in its superiority and so a constant historical cycle of iteration and reiteration is necessary. The white supremacist imaginary has to demean

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<sup>279</sup> Marriott 2000: 32

<sup>280</sup> Danto 1996: 7-8

and destroy the black male in a repeated process, this repetition both sensationalizing the spectacle of the black male body and desensitizing the spectator to the trauma enacted upon this body. The image becomes more potent in meaning, with less potential for the viewer to recoil from the problematic or traumatic elements, and so the viewer becomes more ready to internalize the narrative of black masculinity as dangerous and other.

### **Maintaining the Narrative of the Black Male as Rapacious Threat**

Somewhat counter-intuitively, these detailed historic narratives implied by Mapplethorpe's images seem to resist detection: the photographs are so polished that it is tempting for the viewer to simply bask in their beauty.<sup>281</sup> These bodies are so overwhelmingly polished – literally shining in the gaze of the camera, complete with idealized male beauty and the displaying of musculature for the scopic delight of the viewer -- that the impulse is to simply *look*, rather than *see*; the meanings inscribed upon the black male body are absorbed subconsciously without critique or dissent. As Susan Bordo notes, there is culturally 'a more general failure to recognize that looks are more than skin deep, that bodies *speak* to us', mobilising a 'notion that bodies are mere bodies, empty of meaning, devoid of mind, just material stuff occupying space', going back as far as Descartes.<sup>282</sup> These bodies do not simply just sit waiting to be gazed upon, they are consistently engaging in a process where they are "speaking of" the narrative of black masculinity with which Mapplethorpe presents the spectator, waiting to have this narrative affirmed by the perception of blackness by the viewer.

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<sup>281</sup> See Olin 2012 for more on "basking"

<sup>282</sup> Bordo, Susan. *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA & London: University of California Press, 1997. P. 124.

This is particularly problematic when these narratives are interrogated; Mapplethorpe's work successfully maintains the connection between black men and a type of masculinity that is uncivilized, animalistic, hypersexual and most importantly, a threat to white superiority. Positioning the black male as a figure from whom deviance emanates, sets up a dynamic wherein the viewer is encouraged to consider the black man as Other, which assures that the centrality of whiteness remains intact. Mapplethorpe sets up the relationship between viewer and image so that it imparts these enduring associations between black male identity and deviations from normative masculinity, whilst simultaneously also evading awareness of the way in which the black male body is cemented in this overwhelmingly negative narrative of black masculinity. This constitutes a destabilizing and destructive force upon whiteness. The importance and efficacy of this dynamic lies in the pleasure that it allows the viewer; the process of eroticised visual consumption disavows the racist nature of these photographs while it shores up the integrity of white identity as ideal. These images rely upon the conflation of blackness with inferiority, in a politically charged exchange resulting in pleasure taken in the superiority of white identity.

The Mapplethorpe images reify the binary between the constructed/implied whiteness of the viewer and the blackness of the subject which is well established within a Western perception of blackness: Jonathan Rutherford comments,

the history of imperialism and the colonial experience has produced a meaning of blackness, of an Other, that constructs a sense of white supremacy and coherence in relation to this alien threat. The white man has *embodied* (emphasis mine) this meaning in the black man. He *need not be present*, (emph. mine) but the idea of him, the knowledge of his existence, both disturbs and reinforces who we believe we are.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Rutherford 1988: 60

Rutherford highlights two key issues at play here: both the importance of the black male body in making blackness and whiteness intelligible (blackness and the body become conflated where the black male body becomes the signifier for blackness), and its accompanying connotations – which are arguably functioning more like denotations.<sup>284</sup> What Rutherford also implicates is this paradoxical situation where we need to see, or have seen, the body, even if the body is absent; once the body has been used as the container for the perceptions of blackness, this association is so robust that the body itself can disappear or be erased. Thus black masculinity haunts the white imaginary in absentia. This haunting in absentia is also interesting in terms of how we can analyse the importance and efficacy of blackface performance. In an ironic twist, this narrative that is so inextricably linked to corporeality gains so much traction within the white imaginary that the foundational body is eventually no longer required; the physical sign of blackness is usurped by the meaning(s) signified. This dovetails neatly with the cultural compulsion to disavow the body – either literally or figuratively – while avowing the threat that is represented by this body.

Mapplethorpe's images and their focus upon the exotic physicality of black men allow for an exploration of the preoccupation with the bodies of black men held by his audience, and the way in which this corporeal fascination conflates black masculinity with the black male body, precluding any potential consideration of black men other than solely as bodies. As Rutherford explains, the black man's body here too acts as a source of fascination and fear, and allows for white men to project fantasies of a superior white

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<sup>284</sup> For more on the process of connotative and denotative signification of the image, see Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1971)

masculinity and a demeaned black masculinity onto the same bodily space. Rutherford states:

The white man allows the black man one thing: his body. But it is a body filled with white fantasy and foreboding. For the white man the black man's physicality is what defines his presence. For the white man the black man is more violent, more of a rapist, more misogynist than himself. White men project their own misogyny and disgust with women on the black male. He becomes the *constructed* (emphasis mine) image of white men's repressed lust; imbued with an animal-like sexuality and a huge penis, a body closer to nature than the "cultured white man."<sup>285</sup>

This one-dimensional perception of black men allows for the portrayal of black masculinity as something which deviates from the narratives that establish the sense of a normative masculinity. These narratives firmly place white masculinity as that which is idealized in a dynamic which allows for whiteness to be the space where the virtues of masculinity exist, leaving blackness as the space where anxieties surrounding masculinity are located. This formulation represents one of the repercussions of racist thought, wherein black men are considered to be devoid of humanity and thus their bodies can be manipulated (literally and figuratively) as tools which confirm the superiority of white identity: 'Classical racism involved a logic of dehumanisation in which African peoples were defined as having bodies but not minds; in this way the super-exploitation of the black body as muscle-machine could be justified', Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien write.<sup>286</sup>

Mapplethorpe depicts the black male as an extension of a machine in *Bruce, 1980* (Fig. 17) which exemplifies Bill Brown's observation that within American cultural logic, the black man becomes codified as an instrument in order to maintain a defence of slavery

Commented [JW(11):

Commented [SG12]: Can we find a synonym for one of these 'machines' to soften the repetition?

<sup>285</sup> Rutherford 1988: 63

<sup>286</sup> Julien, Mercer 1988: 137

as natural: 'if the "natural slave" is he "who is able to execute with his body what another contrives," then any American machine "naturally" appears as an American slave, which means: a black American.'<sup>287</sup> This process of naturalizing the black man as machine can be seen in *Bruce, 1980* through the visual parallels between the black male model and the machine: the contrasting colour of the silver bolts and the black body of the machine are echoed in the contrast between the silver jewellery and black skin of the model; there is a sheen on the curve of the model's bowed head which replicates the way that the circular part of the machine also catches the light of the studio. Both circular elements of the image are connected by the extension of the model's arms which suggests the similarity of the two; both "figures" in the photograph are named similarly - "Bruce" and "Brent", not to mention the fact that with the bowed head of the model means that his face is unable to be seen, thus erasing his individual identity. This erasure of identity is evocative of the interchangeable aspect of machines and negates Bruce's individuality.

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<sup>287</sup> Brown, Bill "Science fiction, the World's Fair, and the Prosthetics of Empire, 1910-1915" in Amy Kaplan & Donald E. Pease (eds.) *Cultures of United States Imperialism* Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993. Pp.129-163. 131-2



**Figure 17. Bruce 1980. (Mapplethorpe 2010: 24)**

The erasure of the model's surname here is also important: this makes invisible the model's claim to any kind of personal history – an erasure of familial connection evocative of the experience of African Americans subjected to slavery. During slavery this process was used to rupture a sense of identity as each individual was seen as nothing more than a piece of property, a deliberate act which resonates with that of Mapplethorpe's, as the de-naming of his subject implies that Bruce has no purpose other than that of existing purely for the utilization of Mapplethorpe as photographic matter. The choice of Mapplethorpe to use a clay slab roller in this image is also of interest: the process of

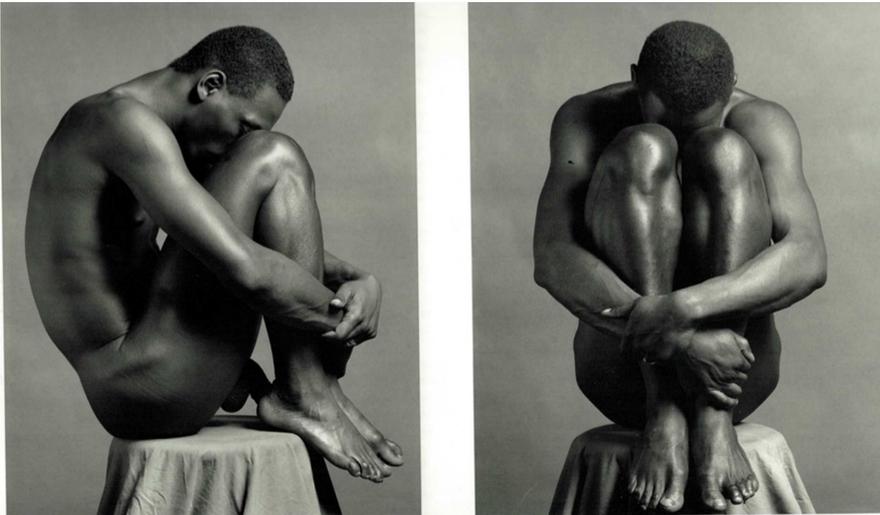
forming inanimate matter into a person is evocative of the Biblical creation of Adam from earth, implying that through the narrative trajectory of the image (which is of course controlled by Mapplethorpe), the black man can be transfigured from non-human to human, but that this is a process which has yet to happen: the black male is not yet human. So Bruce's non-humanness in this image is established in two different ways: he is either aligned with the machine as part of its workings, or he is merely the raw material which can be transformed by the machine (and the workings of man) into human. What is also of interest in this particular image is the presence of another machine – the unacknowledged camera. Replicating the use of the clay slab roller as an implication of Mapplethorpe's ability to mould the black body into something usable out of formless matter, the camera also exists as the machine through which Mapplethorpe will exert his power over Bruce in order to turn him from a body with no agency into an aestheticized commodity. The focus on the machine in the image allows for the obscuring of the presence of the machine which creates the image: through sleight of hand Mapplethorpe obfuscates his power over what the viewer is seeing by making his camera seem separate from the image with which we are presented.

The black male body is fixed within Mapplethorpe's images, not simply because of the desire to contain black masculinity, but also because of the impact that this has upon the foundation of white masculinity. In order to perpetuate white supremacy, the black male body has to be looked at and understood in terms of its deviance. Where the black male body is configured as other, dangerous and hypersexual, this then confers normative status upon its binary opposite of white masculinity, as it exists as superior relief to the menace that black men pose. Yancy comments that the symbolic meaning of black masculinity is particularly useful within a culture of white privilege in the way that it

boosts the superiority of the white male body: 'it is not only the "Black body" that defies the ontic fixity projected upon it through the white gaze, and, hence, through the episteme of whiteness, but the white body is also fundamentally symbolic, requiring demystification of its status as norm, the paragon of beauty, order, innocence, purity, restraint, and nobility.'<sup>288</sup>

### **Contextualizing Mapplethorpe within the Art World**

In discussing the position which Mapplethorpe occupies within the cultural domain of American art, Apel notes that he is working within an established artistic tradition: 'Mapplethorpe relied on a classically modernist and refined technique to present the idealized black male nude, which nonetheless intersected with the black male sexual stereotype.'<sup>289</sup>



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<sup>288</sup> Yancy 2005: 217

<sup>289</sup> Apel 2004: 202 (See Fig. 18 as an example)

Figure 18. *Ajito*, 1981. (Mapplethorpe 2010: 1)

Mapplethorpe is not doing anything revolutionary in terms of technique or narrativization of the black male body, but he is producing images which are both beautiful and deftly adhere to a racist perception of blackness that remains hard for his viewer to resist. Both Bridget Cooks and bell hooks note his success in being seen as the pinnacle of accomplishment as a photographer, while his popularity means that his work enjoys a sense of being prioritized above other contemporary artists. Cooks comments that Mapplethorpe's photographs 'have been privileged as the quintessential images of this genre not only in the art world but in popular culture. Because of the popularity of Mapplethorpe's Black male nudes, all other artists who work with the same subject matter are pressured to reference Mapplethorpe's work in their own.'<sup>290</sup> bell hooks notes that this privileging of Mapplethorpe's work 'subordinates all other image-making of the black male body both by insisting that it reference or mirror this work and by continually foregrounding these images in ways that erase and exclude more compelling oppositional representations.'<sup>291</sup> In contrast to these views of Mapplethorpe, Apel counters some of the criticism of Mapplethorpe's work as follows: 'Mapplethorpe's idealization of black men not only made them visible, but structured them as a universal ideal, like the Greek sculpture that originated such ideals but historically excluded the black subject. As objects of desire, moreover, they have helped pave the way for a reclamation of black homosexuality in the work of another generation of artists.'<sup>292</sup> Although Mapplethorpe did indeed heighten the visibility that the black male body enjoyed within American

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<sup>290</sup> Cooks 2011: 118

<sup>291</sup> hooks 1995 "Art on my Mind": 210

<sup>292</sup> Apel 2004: 204-5

culture with his work, this was a conditional visibility, one which utilized the body as evidence of the danger of black masculinity and confirmed the sexualized appeal of the black male, within the confines of a colonizing mind-set. To be seen is not in and of itself a liberatory experience, particularly when being imaged consists of a white supremacist attempt to contain the threat posed by the body and the emptying out of a sense of human subjectivity.

Apel describes the friction between those who wish to critique Mapplethorpe as perpetuating colonial stereotypes and those who see the potential for an oppositional look. She notes that while Mapplethorpe is indeed engaging in racial dynamics that perpetuate white superiority and black inferiority, 'there is nothing to prevent the black desirous look. Indeed photographs such as *Dan S.* present and subvert the stereotyped foundations of both "whiteness" and "blackness" while equalizing them as signs of the beauty of the human body.'<sup>293</sup> In response to this, these photographs are so overwhelmingly encoded with the exotic objectification of the black male body in a confirmation of colonialist desire that they cannot sufficiently repair the fragmentation and damage that black masculinity suffers at the hands of white supremacist desire. Audre Lorde comments that the 'master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,'<sup>294</sup> which highlights the way that images of black masculinity that are thoroughly soaked through with racism cannot be used as a reparative tool in the establishment of the beautiful humanity of the black male body: they are too heavily imbued with white supremacy to be capable of this task.

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<sup>293</sup> Apel 2004: 204-5

<sup>294</sup> Lorde 1984

Richard Marshall describes the origins of Mapplethorpe's career in terms of his continuing a tradition of visualizing the black male body as the epitome of otherness, rather than as a creator of unique and novel imagery. Mapplethorpe 'was not yet taking his own photographs, but rather was exploring the idea of the found object and questioning traditional notions of authorship and originality by making art with pages torn from books and magazines.'<sup>295</sup> This suggests that he did not create the white supremacist ideology encoded within his work, but rather represents the internalization and reiteration of these cultural narratives. This exemplifies the way in which white supremacy is not a stable ideology: it needs to be constantly repeated in order to make its message concrete. The black male as rapacious threat is not only codified within American culture, but also has to be returned to as corporeal reality in order to retain solidity.

The debate over whether Mapplethorpe's work constitutes erotic photography or pornography,<sup>296</sup> is one which is thoroughly racialized. Because of his position as a white male, his work is defined within an artistic realm, rather than one of exploitative voyeurism. Asen describes his images as 'erotic – as opposed to pornographic,' and this typifies the assumptive tone of many critics when analysing the images. The "pass" that Mapplethorpe receives for being white mirrors that which he receives when his images are described as depicting BDSM practices: although there are certain fetishes that are acted out in his other work, within *The Black Book* the images remain more simply as sadistic (and masochistic for the black viewer). Where they incorporate a form of violence that is enacted upon the black male body, this happens without the explicit

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<sup>295</sup> Marshall 1988: 11

<sup>296</sup> For more on this debate, see Marshall 1988, Howard 1988, Sischy 1988.

consent that characterizes actual BDSM scenes. Mercer, and his reappraisal of Mapplethorpe's images (1994),<sup>297</sup> also allows Mapplethorpe more freedom from criticism: although Mercer's own response to these images in recognising the element of his own desire for these sexual objects should not be refuted, it should also not be appropriated by white critics who wish to rescue Mapplethorpe from accusations of his work perpetuating white supremacy.

### **Spectacle**

In a pattern similar to the lynching images, Mapplethorpe's image rely upon the production of the black male body as a spectacle that satisfies the desire to look at the black male body in a space of vulnerability, and acts to provoke further intrigue about black masculinity. Anthony Farley notes that this spectacle is one which is contingent upon the diminution of black masculinity; he comments that 'the black body is made to perform its so-called *natural* inferiority as its white audience gazes upon the spectacle.'<sup>298</sup> The creation of the spectacle is inextricably linked to the pleasure taken in looking upon this body, and works in order to give a sense that the menace of this body has been contained. Crispin Sartwell notes that 'the [white] oppressor seeks to constrain the oppressed [Blacks] to certain approved modes of visibility (those set out in the template of stereotype) and then gazes obsessively on the spectacle he has created.'<sup>299</sup> This obsessive gaze is also the process of enacting white supremacy over and upon the black body. Michael Hatt notes the utility of this spectacle as a way of shoring up masculinity, commenting that the 'confusion of gender and sexuality ignores the fact that the male

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<sup>297</sup> For more detail on this reappraisal, see Mercer 1994.

<sup>298</sup> Farley 1999: 69

<sup>299</sup> Sartwell 1998: 11

nude, the male body as spectacle, is one of the most powerful means of consolidating masculinity.<sup>300</sup> In regard to the Mapplethorpe images, this spectacle does not simply consolidate the masculinity of the object of the frame, but more importantly for Mapplethorpe's spectator, white masculinity experiences consolidation. As John Berger notes, 'every image embodies a way of seeing,'<sup>301</sup> and these images literally embody white supremacy in that they visualize the black male body as deviant other.

In being confronted with Mapplethorpe's black bodies, the implied viewer is not simply consuming the narrative of white normativity and black inferiority, there is an engagement with these images which necessitates reflecting upon self-identity, the experience of which allows for the simultaneous satiating of the sexual desire to look at the nude body, and the pleasure of revelling in a space of racial superiority. Richard Leppert claims that viewers are 'active participants in determining meaning,'<sup>302</sup> and this is the activity to which he refers. Mapplethorpe successfully creates a sense of racial unification, as he presents his viewer with the demeaned black body, while they demonstrate complicity and agreement with this, with the shared experience of white commonality. Saunders states that in Mapplethorpe's work, 'the male nude becomes erotic spectacle, passive, posed, yet phallic power is celebrated in physique and the implicit potential for action.'<sup>303</sup> This "celebration" is more complex than Saunders implies: the "potential for action" here is threatening, and aside from this threat providing a sense of thrill for the viewer when faced with it, ultimately the celebratory moment is

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<sup>300</sup> Hatt 1994: 135

<sup>301</sup> Berger 2008: 10

<sup>302</sup> Leppert 2007: 5

<sup>303</sup> Saunders 1989: 72

when it is confirmed to the white (or white-washed) viewer that the black male's potential for action has been contained and emptied out of ultimate danger.

An image that makes explicit the danger and "potential for action" that is inherent within black male sexuality is *Cock and Gun*, 1982 (Fig.19): the viewer is presented with the erect penis, and a gun held above the shaft, ready to shoot.<sup>304</sup>



Figure 19: *Cock and Gun* (Mapplethorpe 2010: 35)

The length of the weapon is shorter than that of the black penis, implying that the sexual threat is greater than the destructive potential of a firearm. The black fingers are clutched around the trigger, implying imminent danger, and the penis and the gun are mirrored: the handle of the gun looks similar to the shaft, the gun is also black in colour, while the sheen on the barrel of the gun mirrors that on the sheen on the glans. Amplifying this visual paralleling of the firearm and the penis is the width of the cylinder is similar

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<sup>304</sup> Celant 1992: 181

to girth of the penis: black semen becomes conflated with bullets, where the bullets hold the ability to destroy life, in its evocation of interracial sex the black man's seed has the potential to destroy the purity of whiteness.

### **The White Gaze**

George Yancy comments that: 'the trick of white ideology; it is to give the appearance of fixity, where the "look of the white subject interpellates the black subject as inferior,"'<sup>305</sup> leaving the implied viewer as comfortably assured that their racial identity is maintained as the norm. Because their whiteness is defined by what it sees and what is explicitly not the same, it is defined against a black male body devoid of humanity. This defining gaze is one which acts to discipline the spectacle with which it is confronted; as Yancy continues, there 'is nothing passive about the white gaze. There are *racist* sociohistorical, epistemic conditions of emergence that construct not only the Black body, but the white body as well.'<sup>306</sup> The gaze not only works to contain black masculinity as inferior and to mitigate the threat of the black male body, but reflects back upon the viewer's identity as they have their position at the top of the social hierarchy legitimated. Where the black male body represents a corporeal landscape against which whiteness can be consolidated and unified, Yancy's observation that this corporeal space exists merely as '*just a thing to be scripted* (emphasis mine) in the inverse image of whiteness,'<sup>307</sup> illuminates the way that when being made intelligible as the physical

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<sup>305</sup> Yancy 2005: 217

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.: 220

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

embodiment of a dangerous and hypersexual masculinity, the white male body is also constituted.<sup>308</sup>

Manthia Diawara discusses the way in which narrative positions the viewer as the figure who retains power within the dynamics of looking, where every 'narration places the spectator in a position of agency; and race, class and sexual relations influence the way in which this subjecthood is filled by the spectator.'<sup>309</sup> Steiner notes that these 'photographs are not merely an aesthete's art but a hedonist's art; they not only deliver pleasurable images but raise the specter of unlimited pleasure.'<sup>310</sup> This observation exclusively focuses on the pleasures of the implied viewer, where these images may indeed offer "unlimited pleasure" within the confines of whiteness, they constitute the continuing dehumanization of black masculinity. The Mapplethorpe images, therefore, need to be examined in terms of who is allowed to look, who is permitted the privilege of the gaze, and who is denied this. Saunders comments that 'staring is a male prerogative, a strategy for dominating women, controlling and circumscribing their actions.'<sup>311</sup> Who can claim this prerogative and who is dominated within these images? The position to "stare" is only available to white men: the black man is subjected to this control and domination, leaving no space for either a black male or white female gaze.

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<sup>308</sup> This can also be thought of in phenomenological terms as intentionality, in Merleau-Ponty's observation that object (in this case the objectified black body) and subject (in this case the implied white viewer) interact with each other and are constitutive of each other, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. I discuss this further in my chapter on *Oz*.

<sup>309</sup> Diawara 1990: 33

<sup>310</sup> Steiner 51

<sup>311</sup> Saunders 1989: 25

Yancy notes that 'the Black body is *looked at*. The Black body does not return the gaze. The white body is *the onlooker*', 'Black male bodies are mere surfaces.'<sup>312</sup> This is certainly borne out when looking at *The Black Book*: many of the images crop both the photograph and body so that the black male literally becomes mere surface. His body becomes a territory that is fragmented and sectioned, and the whole is lost to the spectator encouraging an amnesiac glaze to be applied to the viewing process, with the fact that it is a human body being focused on forgotten. Aside from this, the "look back" is certainly something that Mapplethorpe wants to avoid in the vast majority of his imagery. Of a total of ninety-eight images in the collection,<sup>313</sup> ninety-seven of which feature the black male body as the focus of the image, seventy of the photographs avoid showing the model looking back at the camera, confronting Mapplethorpe and the viewer. The way that Mapplethorpe avoids giving his black subjects the potential to engage the viewer optically, and thus removes the possibility for visual communication, means that in the absence of any engagement or sexual invitation, the encouragement to the viewer to penetrate the black male body exists without any sense of consent, either explicit or implicit. In this formulation, any penetration of the objectified black male constitutes a symbolic rape, which allows for a sense of restitution or revenge to be enacted upon the black male for his crossing of the racial boundary in the assumed rape of white women.

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<sup>312</sup> Yancy 2005: 228

<sup>313</sup> The final of these is of Mapplethorpe himself, looking resplendent and smug in a dinner jacket and bowtie, gazing quizzically at the viewer, as a reminder that these images are ultimately his creation. The formality of his dress is an interesting counterpoint to the only other formal attire seen in *Man in Polyester Suit*: Mapplethorpe symbolizes the way in which whiteness "succeeds" when it wants to be dressed up, whereas blackness ultimately fails, both in its choice of cheap and coarse man-made fibre, and in being contained within the clothing itself.

bell hooks notes that there is 'power in looking,'<sup>314</sup> and that historically black people have been denied the right to use the look as a way of asserting power, because the 'politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze.'<sup>315</sup> Given this observation, it is then interesting to look at Mapplethorpe's black men in terms of how many (or few) are allowed their right to the gaze, to engage the viewer in an ocular confrontation. With this in mind, the black men of Mapplethorpe's photographs are imaged in one of the following ways: their eyes are seen but closed (11 of the images), the eyes are open but looking away (12), the eyes are shielded by the body (4), the head is turned away from the camera so any looking back is precluded (12), the model is shown from behind so to look back would be impossible (20), or the head is cropped out of the frame (11). Conrad notes the importance of severing the head from the body through cropping of the images, in terms of its impact upon the objectification of the black male body: "These men are bodies first; they acquire heads only later, if at all. And as the head is detachable, an object to be studied in isolation from the body it surmounts, so the genitals can be unhinged and carried away for observation."<sup>316</sup> This symbolic severing and fragmenting of the body unsurprisingly resonates with these literal enactments within the lynching ritual. Asen comments that portraits 'make no claims to universality. They represent the most individualized aspect of individuals: our faces.'<sup>317</sup> If this is indeed the case, the fact that Mapplethorpe is

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<sup>314</sup> hooks 1992 "Black Looks": 115

<sup>315</sup> hooks "black looks": 115

<sup>316</sup> Conrad 1988: 17-18

<sup>317</sup> Asen 1998: 57

explicitly using the artistic form of the portrait but erasing the face through cropping, the individuality of his subject is elided.

Thus we can see that the vast majority of these images avoid having the implied viewer being confronted by the humanity of the subject: the black male is simply not allowed to assert a sense of agency through their own gaze. Although hooks does comment that 'spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see,'<sup>318</sup> *The Black Book* does not constitute one of these spaces. When the look back does occur, as it does in twenty-seven of these images, it is another example of the way that the black male body is permitted to pose some sense of danger for the viewer, in order to remain a source of vicarious thrill, but the other ways in which white supremacy is rigidly encoded within these images means that the few times when the black male is permitted to look into the camera, the threat of this gaze and engagement is mitigated. Although hooks discusses the potential for an 'oppositional gaze,'<sup>319</sup> this does not completely repair the damage done to the viewer who resists the implied spectator's position: in resisting this identity the oppositional viewer does not enjoy the benefits of being defined as the superior norm.

Margaret Olin describes the process of gazing at a photographic subject, looking them directly in the eyes as they simultaneously gaze outward from the frame at the viewer: 'to share a gaze with this subject is to establish a relationship with them.'<sup>320</sup> She also, however, notes that there is a 'threatening element in such a gaze.'<sup>321</sup> This sharing of the

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<sup>318</sup> hooks "black looks": 116

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Olin 2012: 29

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

gaze could potentially be threatening because it will destabilize the previous dominance possessed by the viewer over the photographic subject, and remove 'the privilege of the one who is allowed to gaze.'<sup>322</sup> Where the gaze constitutes a tool of containment, if the black subject looks back in confrontation this will disappear. The look back also confronts the viewer, challenges the imprisonment of the gaze, and makes them culpable for this attempted domination. She goes on to state that the 'beheld person who returns the gaze objectifies the original observer; he or she becomes the master of the situation, and defuses the power of the gaze.'<sup>323</sup> This is why Mapplethorpe prevents the vast majority of his subjects from looking back, keeping them contained under the surveillance of the viewer. Where Asen states that 'averted glances and averted eyes substitute for direct engagement with the camera,'<sup>324</sup> this ignores the very deliberate choice of Mapplethorpe to elide any direct look at the viewer by the black male subject, precisely because the avoidance of any direct engagement is constitutive of the black male remaining nothing more than object, rather than entering into the realm of the human through communication with the spectator.

### **Racism**

As Brian McNair points out, Mapplethorpe was important within a larger history of American artists:

He was the first artist (gay or straight) of the sexually explicit (and the explicitly deviant) to become a household name. His NEA supported *Perfect Moment* exhibition, which toured the United States in 1988-90, became a symbol of the "culture wars" and made him famous. Second, he was the first *homoerotic* photographer to break through into the mainstream art world. And third, he was the first photographer of *black* male nudes to do so. For all of these reasons he has

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.: 31

<sup>323</sup> Ibid: 30

<sup>324</sup> Asen 1998: 52

become not only a key figure in the history of gay art, but a pivotal figure in the debates around sexually transgressive art in general – a symbol of its radical potential, or its degenerative effects, depending on your viewpoint.<sup>325</sup>

This acknowledgement of Mapplethorpe's cultural importance ignores the problematics of privilege: as a white photographer Mapplethorpe wields power over his black subjects and utilizes them in a process that improves his own social position, whilst doing nothing to ameliorate the demeaned social space occupied by black men. Instead, he simply uses them as sexualized props of white male desire. That artistic production rewards the artist rather than the subject is of course nothing new, but in the case of Mapplethorpe it is important to note that he is often credited with improving the way in which black men were imagined within American culture, particularly in their increased visibility within Mapplethorpe's work: 'Mapplethorpe was virtually the only photographer [of his time or before] who was giving them [black men] exciting and beautiful images of their race', notes McNair.<sup>326</sup> This characterization of his importance ultimately ignores the way in which black men were exploited to enhance Mapplethorpe's career and financial position.

McNair's analysis of whether Mapplethorpe was racist in his depiction of black men seems to be rather limited, relying on the central notion that the use of black men as sexualised photographic subjects negates any potential racism, and indeed must imply some kind of reverence:

More serious than the question of whether Mapplethorpe exploited his subjects in the manner that a male pornographer might be argued to exploit his female "object", is the question of whether he was a racist. This issue arose, paradoxically, because Mapplethorpe was the first photographer of nude black men to gain wide public attention. He was sexually attracted to black men, and had many black lovers, some of whom are immortalized in his best-known works. He clearly found black men

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<sup>325</sup> McNair, Brian *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* London & New York: Routledge, 2002: 182

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*: 186

inspirational, and his representations of them are dignified and statuesque, as well as highly sexualized. Their large penises are often accentuated in the frame, as in the famous portrait of Milton Moore, *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1981).<sup>327</sup>

It is not quite clear why the question of whether Mapplethorpe was racist or not is more serious than that of whether he was exploitative, or more importantly of how Mapplethorpe's potential racism can actually be separated from exploitation, but it is interesting that McNair seems to visualize exploitation as a process which can only be done to a woman by a man, implying a rather simplistic understanding of exploitative actions. Of greater interest is the way that McNair focuses on Mapplethorpe's desire for black men and his framing of the penis as focal point of desire as a way of demonstrating a *lack* of racist thought, even though to equate black men with oversized genitalia that exist for the sexual pleasure of white men surely exemplifies racist perception. Anne Friedberg makes the point that 'identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo.'<sup>328</sup> To recognize oneself, therefore, is to be complicit within the white supremacist perception of blackness.

Asen notes that the representation of the black body 'cannot be separated from the historical subjugation of black bodies,' and that 'erotic representations of the black body cannot be separated from fantasies of mastery and racist stereotypes of black hypersexuality.'<sup>329</sup> He goes on to note the importance of Mapplethorpe's own identity and the privilege this brings: 'Intentionality aside, Mapplethorpe's own subject-position as a

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid.: 185

<sup>328</sup> Friedberg 1990: 45

<sup>329</sup> Asen 1998: 56

gay white male frames issues of race and power as constant, underlying, and unresolved themes.<sup>330</sup> Marriott questions whether these images do allow for a ridding of inhibition for black men that is simply replaced with a reliance upon being made abject within Mapplethorpe's frame.<sup>331</sup> The racial privilege that Mapplethorpe exerts over his subjects is brought into greater clarity by his reliance upon racist prejudices attached to black masculinity. He evokes criminality (mug shot) and inferior otherness in his images, and as Mercer notes, he recalls the 'anthropometric uses of photography in the colonial scene, measuring the cranium of the colonized so as to show, by the documentary evidence of photography, the inherent "inferiority" of the Other.'<sup>332</sup>

The anecdote recounted by Ntozake Shange in *The Black Book* in her foreword, where she recounts a discussion between Mapplethorpe and herself illuminates the racist perception of the inability to see these black men as individuals, rather it positions them as forgettably interchangeable: 'Mapplethorpe and I finally met in Houston. We flipped through the photographs looking for former lovers we knew were somewhere in the book. I said, "I can't seem to find him now, but I know he's there somewhere." Robert lifted his head slightly with a telling half smile: "I know what you mean, I can't find mine either.'" <sup>333</sup> This makes clear their impulse to see these objects of sexual desire as interchangeable: these photographs are not images of the individuals they depict, but are the visualization of archetypes of black masculinity that these bodies represent: it is not possible to "find" the individual black male because he has been obscured by the

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Marriott 2000: 32

<sup>332</sup> Mercer 1994: 180-1

<sup>333</sup> Mapplethorpe 2010: 8

signifying black male body which stands as the aestheticized monolithic confluence of animalism, hypersexuality, and threat. The men in the pictures are figurative vessels into which meaning has been poured.

When Ingrid Sischy describes *Ken Moody and Robert Sherman, 1984*, she discusses how 'racial splits'<sup>334</sup> are gestured to by Mapplethorpe in his imaging of the black Moody and white Sherman. However, she then undercuts the racialized differences between the two by claiming that 'the color difference pops up, and then the same light that revealed it reveals patterns of sameness – made stronger since both men are bald as a result of alopecia – until it feels as if the overlapping profiles could collapse into one, yet still retain their individual outlines.'<sup>335</sup> In this effort to downplay race, Sischy fails to address that race is used to implicate difference far more glaringly than any sense of sameness within this image; the primacy of the frame is given to the white man because he looms larger in the foreground and is the prioritized focus of the camera. It is also important that Sherman's eyes are open whereas Moody's remain closed, suggesting greater intellect, awareness, or engagement with the viewer through the gaze: the black man is yet again denied the opportunity of the confrontational "look back" at the spectator. This is then confounded that in *The Black Book*, Moody is pictured eight times, and has his eyes closed or averted from the camera in all of these. In a medium such as photography, vision carries important meaning: the power of photography lies partly in the trust of the visual, there is a trust of the eye of the camera to capture objective reality, and of the trust of the self to see the photograph successfully so that the meaning can be absorbed. The photograph of Moody and Sherman privileges the white model with vision and not the

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<sup>334</sup> Sischy 80

<sup>335</sup> Sischy: 80

black model, constituting the barring of the black male from participation within this exchange of looks, and thus from engagement too.

Robert Asen suggests that Mapplethorpe's nudes 'invite viewers to assume divergent and potentially contesting receptive stances.'<sup>336</sup> While this is certainly true in the sense that the racism encoded within these images produces an experience in some viewers of opposition to the narrative of black masculinity with which they are presented, this is not, to borrow the formulation of W.J.T. Mitchell, what these "pictures want."<sup>337</sup> This receptive stance sits outside of the intended experience for Mapplethorpe's implied viewer: there is a calculated attempt to have them absorb and agree with his presentation of the black body and its inscribed narrative. Dyson claims 'the Black male body is polemical. It is a site of public and private contestation.'<sup>338</sup> Mapplethorpe is an example of the way in which this contestation happens both publically and privately, in the gallery and within the desires of the white imaginary. Frantz Fanon describes the power of the look as both a tool of discipline and sexual objectification: "This "look," from – so to speak – the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire.'<sup>339</sup> The way in which this white desire for the black body is ambivalent is because of the way in which it simultaneously positions the body as that which fascinates and frightens. There is a frisson in this oscillation for the implied viewer,<sup>340</sup> where the sexualized appeal is made more exciting by the perception of

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<sup>336</sup> Asen 1998: 50

<sup>337</sup> Mitchell 1994

<sup>338</sup> Dyson 1996: xviii

<sup>339</sup> Fanon 1967: 109

<sup>340</sup> This frisson exists for the other case studies used here, where the black male body offers a space that both threatens and arouses.

danger, and equally the sense of danger is somewhat mitigated by the erotic thrill. Marriott also discusses the tension between desire and repulsion when looking at Mapplethorpe's photographs: these images act as an incitement to 'incorporate, to eat, through the eyes; to want to look, and look again, in the name of appreciating and destroying, loving and hating.'<sup>341</sup> Gill Saunders delineates the difference in function of the female body in relation to the male: 'the female nude (there is no male equivalent) has no purpose beyond the more or less erotic depiction of nakedness for male consumption. The male artist constructs for his own or his male patron's enjoyment the perfect partner – passive, receptive, available.'<sup>342</sup> This illuminates the way in which the black male body is feminized within Mapplethorpe's work: these bodies exist for male consumption in a similarly eroticized space, and Mapplethorpe certainly implies that these bodies are passive, receptive and available for white male domination. Where "men act and women appear," Saunders' suggests that the 'nude female body is commonly presented as sexual spectacle, the picture set up as an invitation to voyeurism.'<sup>343</sup> This implies that the black male occupies this feminized space, and in combination with being seen as having deviant masculinity (through his hypersexuality), becomes confirmed as a "failed man," thus situated as female as an opposition to normative white masculinity. Robert Reid-Pharr discusses the 'specter of black boundarylessness, the idea that there is no normal blackness' for the black man to access: black masculinity is thoroughly deviant, there is no space in which blackness and normality co-exist.<sup>344</sup> So where there is no existence of

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<sup>341</sup> Marriott 2000: 27

<sup>342</sup> Saunders 1989: 23

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Reid-Pharr 1997: 353-4

“normal blackness,” the black male body becomes more easily configured through a feminizing lens.

### **Sexual Objectification**

The way that Mapplethorpe sexualizes his black male subjects is problematic, not simply because it reduces the black man to an exotic totem, but also because it legitimizes the dehumanizing process of racial oppression: the logic behind racism is that non-white people are inferior and therefore less-than-human, and this logic is sanctioned by viewing non-white bodies in ways that consistently erase all traces of their human worth. In the case of the Mapplethorpe images, this erasure of the human worth of his subjects does not, however, mean the diminishing of other ways that these bodies remain valuable: through being aestheticized these bodies take on great commercial worth and retain their function as valuable commodity for the artist.<sup>345</sup> Indeed, this is the same logical framework behind *all* oppression: oppression relies upon the construction of hierarchical identity, wherein maleness sits as the primary focus, but this supremacy of maleness is also contingent upon other intersecting categories of identity which are reliant upon a binary arrangement of normative/other. Here, maleness relies upon the intersection of definitions such as whiteness, heterosexuality, or able-bodiedness for its supremacy to be maintained. Where maleness is reinforced by the presence of specific intersectional identity categories that also exist as the unmarked normative default position, non-maleness can be conflated with other deviant identities, which exist as marked bodily categories. As an example of this theoretical arrangement, the statement “that’s a man” does not simply refer to sex identity, it also refers to other accompanying identities:

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<sup>345</sup> The commercial worth of the black male body is a topic to which I will return in my analysis of *Oz* in chapter four.

“that’s a man” cannot be simply translated into “that’s a male person”, but rather “that’s a male person who can successfully be seen as male because of the presence of whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and other normative categories of identity.” These identities converge within the idealized male body, which lies unmarked, not only in terms of sex, but also race, sexuality, gender, etc. This is why the issue of representation is so important: not only are Mapplethorpe’s black men divorced from their human complexity in favour of utilizing them to reassure the viewer of their own superiority *because* of white supremacist compulsion, but they also are the *cause* of a psychic formulation in which the less-than-human status of black men can be seen as “fact”, therefore explaining the need for containment of this black masculine threat. It is therefore particularly dangerous to dismiss the consequences of such representation in favour of more “serious” issues of social justice. A case in point is Pinar’s assertion that ‘Black men may for a time still suffer entrapment within the White male gaze, but being desired sexually is not exactly the problem that lynching was, that being imprisoned is, and that being trapped in compulsive hypermasculinity is.’<sup>346</sup> Pinar here makes it sound as though these are all separate problems; whereas lynching, containment, and compulsory hypermasculinity are all, in particular ways, firmly connected to the sexual desire and/or process of exoticization of the black male body within the white gaze. These are *symptoms*, rather than *parallels*, of white male desire for the bodies of black men. It is more effective to view these different aspects of black experience as interconnected, rather than being disparate examples of oppression. Yancy describes the process of being objectified through the white gaze as a sensation of invasion: ‘To have one’s dark body invaded by the white gaze, and then to have that body returned as distorted is a powerful

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<sup>346</sup> Pinar 2006: 230

experience of violation.<sup>347</sup> Marriott's observations echo this sense of powerlessness that Yancy notes, where the 'transference of white fantasy to black experience [...] contrives to haunt the black imaginary.'<sup>348</sup> To be objectified within the white gaze, and to be rendered without humanity within the system of white supremacy results in trauma for the black male.

Marriott's discussion of the way in which Mapplethorpe's images of black men were received by critics highlights the way that the white gaze, and its understanding of the black male body, dehumanizes its subject in its reification of the trope of black man as hypersexual and animalistic: 'neither [Arthur] Danto nor [Andrew] Graham-Dixon says that what they are looking at is a black penis, though they both find themselves talking in terms of the non-human: the black penis as bestial, elephantine.'<sup>349</sup> Here, as Marriott makes clear, Mapplethorpe is not unique in equating black male bodies with animalistic hypersexuality, he is merely perpetuating a longstanding societal preoccupation with black men as being shadowy sexual predators, lurking on the margins of idealized white normative sexuality, driven by lustful desires to penetrate the purity of whiteness. The visual language which Mapplethorpe uses may be shocking, but it is only so because of the explicitness of some of his images, rather than the narrative he is presenting. Mapplethorpe fails to bring anything new to any existing dialectic of black male sexuality. His images also perpetuate the tradition of black bodies only being intelligible through the lens of the white gaze, the subjects themselves have no agency, they exist purely to be fetishized within the white male imaginary. Marriott goes on to further dismantle the

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<sup>347</sup> Yancy 2005: 217

<sup>348</sup> Marriott 2000: ix

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*: 25

process of being “looked at” by a white gaze, and the notion that the black male body is made comprehensible through stereotypical notions of black masculinity; these images are disturbing not simply because their explicitness runs counter to social acceptability, particularly in their depiction of taboo sexual proclivities (such as urination into a man’s mouth and the anal insertion of a bullwhip – a totem of sadomasochism), but in their potential to taint or corrupt the sexuality of the viewer. He comments, the black penis is ‘not something you’d want to take in, then, via eye or mouth’, continuing, ‘but what if looking is a form of incorporation, of taking something inside?’<sup>350</sup> This “taking in” of the image becomes analogous to the literal penetration by the black penis – the singular act which most terrifies but also fascinates. The look is also felt as a kind of fragmentation or dismemberment, as Marriott describes: ‘Mapplethorpe is cutting up, cutting away, at a black male body; his “black fever” [...] a response to the frustration aroused by his own fetishistic investment in that “forbidden totem of colonial fantasy:” the black phallus.’<sup>351</sup>

### Submission

Mapplethorpe opens *The Black Book* with an initial image of the black male “going down,” either kneeling in a motion of submission, or in preparation for sexual gratification orally. (Fig. 20)

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<sup>350</sup> Marriott 2000: 27

<sup>351</sup> Marriott 2000: 28

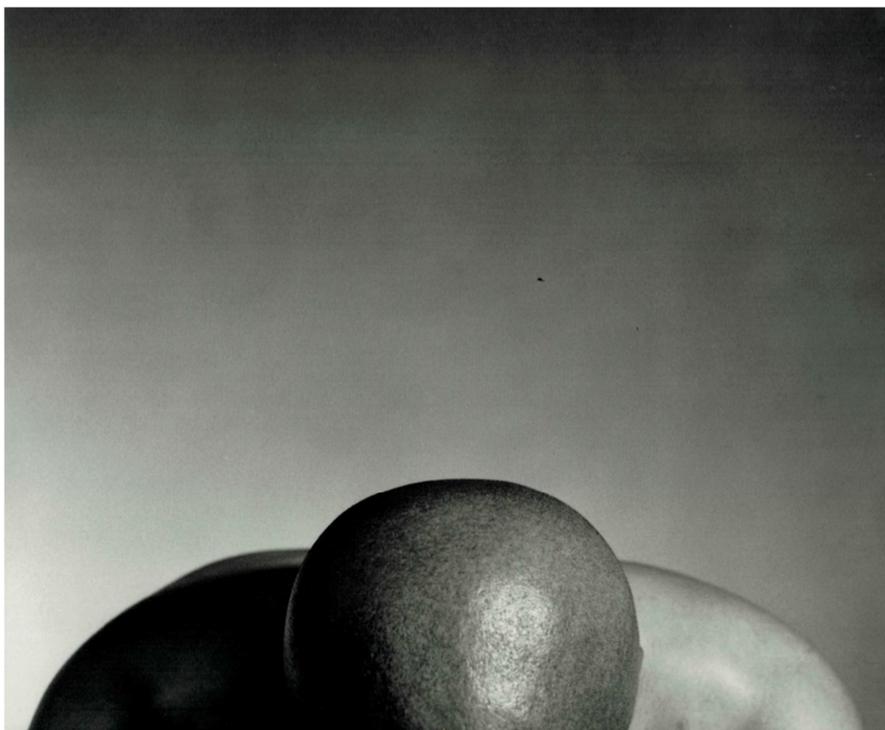


Figure 20. *Cedric*. (Mapplethorpe 2010: 1)

In thinking about the logistics of exhibition, with the portrait hanging on a wall, the figure in the images might literally be at the waist height of the spectator. The black male exists solely at the very bottom of the frame, with two-thirds of the frame being empty space, implicating how low down the black male is, how he literally is at the bottom (or *is* the bottom in terms of homosexual sex acts, as reiterated in many of the other images that follow.) So, we are introduced to “black man” as bottom. The sheen on the top of the model’s head implies a mirror, or reflection of the viewer: the diminution of the black male reflects the superiority of the implied viewer’s white male identity.

This is then immediately followed by the literalization of this metaphor on page two, as Mapplethorpe takes the muscular buttocks of the black male as the focus of the next image. The model's legs are clenched (as are the buttocks) and seemingly crossed outside of frame, given the spatial relationship between the thighs: although the black bottom is visible as an enticement, it is a teasing one because it is implicitly, as yet, denying entry. The third image poses the black male front on, focusing on the torso from just above the nipples to just above the top of the penis.<sup>352</sup> The tease continues as the singular totem of black masculinity remains unseen, the scopophilic desire not yet satiated leaving the viewer wanting more. This positions the viewer as being drawn slowly in to the collection, rather than being confronted immediately with the threatening black phallus. The next image features the model bent over at the waist, compounding the submission depicted in the first image, leaving the viewer to only see his inclined back.<sup>353</sup> The eye is immediately drawn to the light reflecting off the model's vertebrae, leaving the eye to traverse across black flesh, drawn towards the bottom that disappears over the horizon. As we approach the bottom that remains unseen but simply encouraged as a destination, the closer the viewer gets to the prize of penetration, the closer he is drawn to the darkest space of the photograph, as Mapplethorpe's lighting leaves the top of the buttocks without the glow that the rest of the body occupies in the frame.

The following image again repeats the standing rear view found on the second page, with the alteration that the buttocks and thighs are no longer clenched, and the legs are simply side by side, indicating a model more at ease, as amplified by the relaxed hand

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<sup>352</sup> *Charles Bowman, 1980, ibid., 3*

<sup>353</sup> *Donald Bowman, ibid., 4*

grazing the thigh.<sup>354</sup> The following image is a departure from the previous repetitions, as we are presented with the feet as the centre of the frame, toes pressed together as if in the throes of orgasmic climax.<sup>355</sup> The position of the feet suggests that the model is lying on his back with the legs in the air, and the eye is drawn down through the negative space between the model's legs and along the leading lines of his legs, towards the unspoken source of erotic intrigue: the black man's anus. Again, this attraction does not have to be fully acknowledged because the anus remains unseen, although from the vantage point of the photographer it would be easy to perceive that the model is "presenting," not just his body for capture by the camera, but the now accessible sphincter for penetration. Leppert contends that 'to be looked at sexually is to be consumed or taken *by sight*. Not for nothing is the gaze - the stare - said to be penetrating'<sup>356</sup> and such penetration is the way that Mapplethorpe's images encourage the containment of black masculinity.

The successive image in *The Black Book* is that of a profile of a face, with the model in question being drenched in sweat.<sup>357</sup> Mercer and Julien discuss sweat in terms of its connotations, focusing on the black male body as spectacle of violence or rampant sexuality: 'it suggests physical exertion - the bodies of black boxers always glisten like steel and bronze', and 'in porn, sweat acts as a signifier to suggest intense sexual activity.'<sup>358</sup> In its implication of either sex or work (or indeed both), the body here signals sexual exertion, especially magnified because of the preceding narrative implied by the

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<sup>354</sup> *Marty Gibson*, *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>355</sup> *Ron Simms*, *ibid.*, 6

<sup>356</sup> Leppert 2007: 162

<sup>357</sup> *Eddie Jones*, *Mapplethorpe* 2010: 7

<sup>358</sup> Mercer & Julien 1988: 149

previous images. Bora also discusses how sweat can 'enhance and fetishize "blackness"', where the 'shiny, polished sheen of black skin becomes consubstantial with the luxurious allure of the high-quality photographic print.'<sup>359</sup> Thus the sheen aligns the black male body as a valuable commodity in its aestheticized appeal.

This pose is followed by the black male model sitting at ease in a chair; here the viewer is finally permitted to see the penis, in a moment that further satisfies the implied spectator's desires.<sup>360</sup> It is notable that this revelatory moment only arrives after the black male has been implicitly penetrated, both by the camera's eye and the imagined sexual partner within the narrative presented in these images: the threat of the black penis has been mitigated by the confirmation of the superiority of white masculinity, which has successfully emasculated the black body through sexual conquest.<sup>361</sup> The threat of the black male is also reduced because of the closure of the eyes: there is no stare to confront the spectator and engage them in an implied conversation about intention or desire. Although these opening images have a clear narrative framework holding them together, Mapplethorpe still errs on the side of suggestion: the viewer is permitted to exist in the liminal space between desire of the black male and fear of the threat posed by this body. Mapplethorpe proceeds to present the viewer more confrontationally with the sight of the black bottom, with the model bent over at the waist but this time facing away from the camera so that the buttocks, and what they are hiding, are presented as the final destination of the eye.<sup>362</sup> The centre of the frame is the back of

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<sup>359</sup> Bora 1997: 104

<sup>360</sup> Rick, 1980, *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>361</sup> This is not to suggest that there is something intrinsically emasculating in being the passive participant in anal sex, this is a reflection of the misogyny that constitutes the gaze, in addition to its racism.

<sup>362</sup> Ajitto, 1981, *bid.*, 10

the black man's head, which looks like a void of nothingness: with no depth to it the centre of the frame simply appears to be a black hole, while the eye is then drawn towards the intergluteal cleft and the unseen but visually suggested black hole (by the back of the head above) that lies therein. The lines of the body lead the eye towards the back of the head, visually evoking a train travelling towards a tunnel which looks like a sphere of darkness; the final destination is the black hole which is imaged within the frame of the photograph, which suggests the black male anus. Without being explicit, Mapplethorpe uses the reverse shot of the head to distance the viewer from being confronted by the visualization of their desire, yet there are enough signals within the image that the impulse to enter the black male body sexually can be addressed. It is important that before Mapplethorpe presents us with this image, he depicts the black male with his head turned away from the camera, and his face cropped out of the image.<sup>363</sup> The viewer is sanctioned to look directly at the black male bottom, with the security that the black male is unaware and not looking back at the viewer, not confronting the desire of the spectator to simply dwell on the black body in terms of its penetrative potential: the viewer escapes any sense of surveillance of their desire, they are free to gaze upon the black male bottom unquestioned. The fact that we are presented with the side of the head is important, it is not simply the absence of an engaging look from the black male that is necessary -- this absence has to be abundantly clear. Seeing the model's head turned away from the camera reminds us of the possibility of the "look back," and so Mapplethorpe reminds us that this a potential experience at the same time comforting the spectator by having the model appear to look away: the viewer then can take pleasure in having escaped being seen by the objectified male.

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<sup>363</sup> *Rick, 1980, ibid., 9*

The image that brackets this direct permitted look at the black male backside continues the suggestion that the relationship between black subject and viewer is not necessarily one informed by consent: we are shown the back of the model with his arms held behind his back, hands balled into fists. (Fig. 21)

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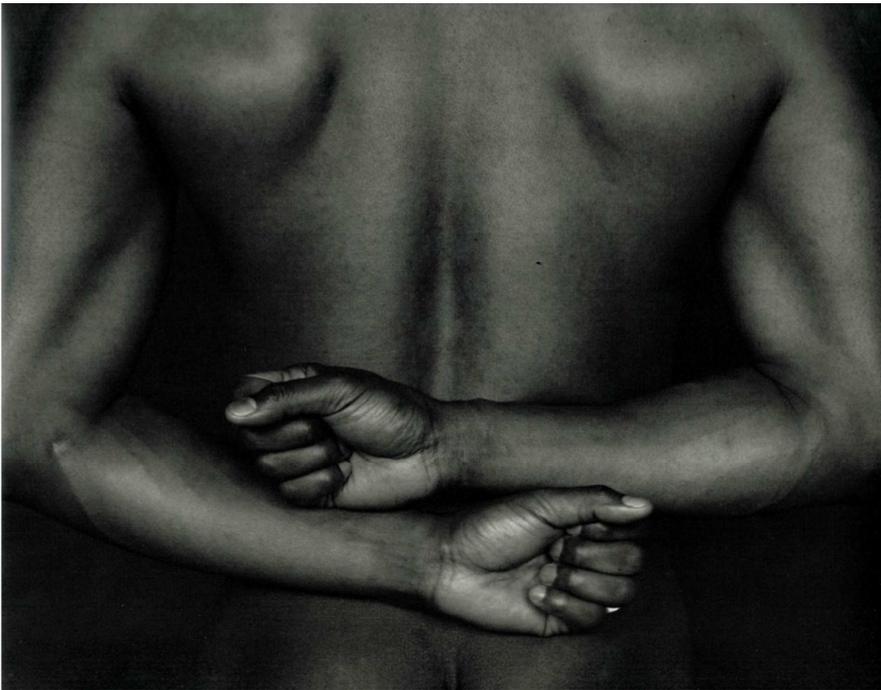


Figure 21. *Lyle Stuart, 1980.* (Mapplethorpe 2010: 11)

This clearly resonates with the hands being tied during the lynching ritual or being handcuffed. The mirroring of handcuffing works twofold: it allows Mapplethorpe to situate the black male body into the realm of sadomasochism and connect black masculinity to criminality. It is interesting that Mapplethorpe chooses to play up the element of taboo in the suggestion of sadomasochism: in his other notable works where sadomasochism is the focus the models are white but the images possess additional

indicators of sadomasochism, such as fetish wear or the performance of certain taboo sex acts. Yet here, the suggestion of perversion or deviance is simply created through the possession of black skin. In this image, the black male exists outside of normative space, regardless of his actual behaviour.

### **The Black Male as Sexual Threat**

The reduction of the self to a symbolic monstrous phallus enacts damage upon the black male psyche, and satisfies the desires of white masculinity. Fanon comments that 'the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis.'<sup>364</sup> This conflation of the black man with the phallus, and all of the pervasive connotations that are carried with this means that the black male finds it hard to resist this definition of the self as non-human. Fanon explores this delineation of black hypsersexuality: 'The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast; if it is not the length of the penis, then it is the sexual potency that impresses him,'<sup>365</sup> and claims that for 'the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions.'<sup>366</sup> The photograph that illuminates this most clearly is *Man in Polyester Suit* (Fig. 22), one of Mapplethorpe's most famous images.

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<sup>364</sup> Fanon 1986: 170

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*: 177



Figure 22. *Man in Polyester Suit*. (Mapplethorpe 2010: 55)

Marriott describes *Man in Polyester Suit* as containing 'a history that refuses to fade from memory, a way of seeing black male sexuality that not only unsettles, but is marked by a withdrawal of black men from any vestiges of the civilised, the human.'<sup>367</sup> In pictures such as *Man in Polyester Suit*, note Julien and Mercer, 'the dialectics of white fear and

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<sup>367</sup> Marriott 2000: 34

fascination underpinning colonial fantasy are reinscribed by the black man's "enormous" phallus'

The black subject is objectified into Otherness as the size of the penis signifies a threat to the secure identity of the white male ego and the position of power which whiteness entails in colonialist discourse. Yet, the threatening phobic object is "contained," after all this is only a photograph on a two-dimensional plane; thus the white male viewer is returned to his safe place of identification and mastery but at the same time has been able to indulge in that commonplace fixation with black male sexuality as something "dangerous," something Other.<sup>368</sup>

Where David Morgan discusses the 'over-phallicized picture of man,'<sup>369</sup> in *Man in Polyester Suit*, the viewer is presented with the image of the black male body, dressed to suggest participation within an executive profession, yet with one major failing: his penis hangs menacingly out of the zip of the suit trousers. Not only is the spectator confronted with the black penis "out of place," but this is a startlingly large member, carrying implications of hypersexuality. We do not see the model's face so he remains anonymous, without individuality, and therefore can be interpreted more readily as standing in for all black male bodies.

Arthur Danto compares *Man in Polyester Suit* and *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10½)*, noting Mapplethorpe's claim that the former subject "did not want to be associated with an enormous tool," observing that Mark Stevens is 'apparently proud of what the man in the polyester suit is dubious about.'<sup>370</sup> This demonstrates Danto's lack of awareness of how a large white penis would not necessarily condemn the owner to accusations of being hypersexual, animalistic or worse, rapacious -- he simply would be seen as an individual

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<sup>368</sup> Julien, Mercer 1994: 194

<sup>369</sup> Morgan 1993: 70

<sup>370</sup> Danto 1996: 107

who is endowed with large genitalia. Conversely, the black man in the polyester suit may be cautious about having his face photographed because he knows that he will be consigned to the realm of the stereotype of the “black buck” and his singular body will be used as evidence of the state of all black manhood. It is unsurprising that although Danto does not explicitly deal with the racial implications of *Man in Polyester Suit*, he does associate the black penis with the animalistic, describing it as ‘like the trunk of an elephant.’<sup>371</sup> The evocation of an elephant’s trunk is also heightened by the grey tones of the image, the suit jacket could read as the elephant’s ears framing the focus of our attention: the menacing member. Danto also makes the problematic linkage of the black male body to being “hung;”<sup>372</sup> although he is relying on the colloquialism of “being well hung,” there is the immediate resonance with the lynched body.

Discussing *Man in Polyester Suit*, Apel comments that this is the ‘work that seems most deliberately aimed at the tenaciousness of the “big black dick” stereotype and the stereotype’s resistance to the thin veneer of corporate capitalism’s civilizing influence.’<sup>373</sup> Apel notes the curious actions of senator Jesse Helms, a vociferous opponent of the exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s photographs, who despite this aversion also carried around a copy of *Man in Polyester Suit* to show to reporters: ‘How many times did Helms handle this photograph? What was it about the idea of the black phallus that he found too obscene for public consumption but compelling enough to carry around in his own pocket?’<sup>374</sup> Leaving aside any personal desires which Helms may have been negotiating

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid.: 109

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.: 117

<sup>373</sup> Apel 2004: 202

<sup>374</sup> Apel 2004: 202. This resonates with the lynching postcard: concealed within the domestic space of the home, yet available for private contemplation. The implications of class should not be ignored here: Helms felt that it was his duty to protect the “masses” from becoming corrupted by Mapplethorpe’s images, whereas as a

privately, his actions illustrate the tension between the vicarious thrill of encountering the black male body – both repulsive and fascinating – while it was contained safely to allow for this body to be gazed at without posing a threat, and this body containing the potential to escape constraint. Like many other conservatives, Helms perceived that if this body were to be exhibited publicly it would no longer be safely contained and would pose a threat in its sanctioning of the black male body as being legitimately desirable, and in the enticement to traverse racial barriers. This cuts to the real danger of maintaining the othered body so close at hand as spectacle; the closer the spectator feels to the image, the greater the rush from a sense of risk. The knowledge that the spectacularized black male body poses no actual threat to the viewer is not stable, and so there are moments of genuine fear which are also, in their own way, perversely pleasurable.

In terms of presenting the threat of the black male body, Mapplethorpe also addresses the issue of miscegenation. With his image of *Dan, 1980* (Fig. 23) Mapplethorpe depicts a muscular nude body of a black man, seen from behind with arms pulled tightly in front and hands placed on opposite shoulders. The body is lit so that there is a bisecting line of shadow running down the middle of the back, rendering half of the body dark-skinned and the other light-skinned. Because of the stark difference in tone, the image suggests the combination of black and white within one corporeal space. Apel notes that image

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member of the American political elite, he was immune to the lure of the desirability of the black male body. Apel notes further: 'During congressional hearings in September 1989 on federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, Helms offered private viewings of the Mapplethorpe photographs while warning that they should be regarded as incentives to homosexual behavior that led to illness. The mere sight of a large black penis, Helms seemed to suggest, was sufficient to urge the viewer not merely towards homoerotic thoughts or feelings, but *acts*. Helms' self-appointed role as keeper and presenter of the "offending" photographs premised on the unspoken assumption that he and his fellow senators, as part of a knowing elite, could handle images too "provocative" for the masses, harks back to a form of nineteenth-century elitism that structured sexual images as "erotica" for upper-class consumption while condemning such imagers as "pornography" for the masses. His obsession with the black penis also recalls the perverse fascination revealed in a remark by one of the 50,000 visitors: [...] "I've been here four times already and this show disgusts me more each time I see it.'" (Apel 2004: 202-3)

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produces 'the charged status of race-mixing,' where we have the visual literalization of the blending of these two distinct opposites, highlighting both the potential permeability of the color line and the extreme differentiation of black and white. She goes on to observe that the 'visual representation of the black/white binary starkly demonstrates how the two terms depend on each other for meaning, performing the startling feat of making both "whiteness" and "blackness" visible as social constructions equally subject to manipulation.'<sup>375</sup> This image represents the anxiety of blackness and whiteness being melded together as a result of miscegenation, as we are faced with the existence of both blackness and whiteness in one singular body, with the hand creeping over the shoulder as the threatening hand of black desire, claiming the interracial body as its reward. Although the body is lit in such a way to suggest an interracial identity, it remains a black body that is simply lit in another way, resonating with fears of the potential of the interracial body to attempt to "pass" as white, as well as with fears that the mixing of black and white results not in a blending, but in blackness simply tainting whiteness.

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<sup>375</sup> Apel 2004: 204-5



Figure 23. *Dan*, 1980. (Mapplethorpe 2010: 14)

### Context of looking

The Mapplethorpe images provide a useful lens through which to look into the logistics of visual consumption. The photographs are available for consumption in different social and spatial contexts, varying from exhibition in a public gallery space; availability for purchase as original artworks; enclosure within Jesse Helms' red envelopes and dissemination as evidence of the moral corruption of America; reproduction as postcards, calendar or "coffee table" books, and so on. These different contexts not only impact upon the way in which these images may be read, but also invite different sets of social

behaviours which shape the dynamic between the meaning of each image and the way in which this perceived meaning can shape the sense of identity of the reader. Thinking of Pierre Bourdieu's use of the idea of habitus, we can not only start to question why specific individuals may or may be disposed to view these images, but to consider the way in which this viewing acts as a way of classification of consumers – a classification which is engendered in part through grouping individuals together as unified groups according to similar or variant behaviour.<sup>376</sup> For example, the purchase of *The Black Book* for viewing pleasure in the private space of the home acts as a marker of self-perception; this is a public enunciation of the following self-identification: I am someone who appreciates contemporary art, first in gallery spaces where I spend my leisure time, then as a commodity which I wish to possess, with all of the designations of class, taste, and experience that this appreciation connotes. This ownership also allows for others' perception of the individual to be shaped as it may act as a way of communicating the dispositions of the individual, but also of those who are privy to this home space. Thus what may have originated at the stage of private contemplation by an individual is transformed into a communicative act with others, accompanied by the classification of the self and of others relative to this sense of identity. In the specific case of the Mapplethorpe images, racial identity and cultural sensibilities are particularly pertinent: what does it mean to "own" these heavily eroticized black male bodies? Is the ownership of such a publication a way of communicating appreciation of aesthetic beauty, rather than simply being shocked by nudity which a less "cultured" reader would find shocking?

Wendy Steiner notes that the 'photographic arts belong to a reality in a way more literal than any other aesthetic representation', and that photography's 'imperfection is a

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<sup>376</sup> For a full explanation of "habitus," see Bourdieu 1979.

sign of the victory over the artist's efforts.'<sup>377</sup> This seems to naively assent to the duplicitous intentions of the image; the photographs are invested in inculcating a belief in the "reality" they are presenting to the viewer, to see black men as they "should" be seen. The very strength of photography lies in its ability to masquerade as reality, in the process of purporting to tell the viewer of some truth it also contains the potential for the spectator to delude themselves into presuming to have garnered some greater awareness of an essential reality. Wendy Steiner discusses how 'photography "recycles" the real,'<sup>378</sup> as it results in spectators being 'trained away from reality while assuring they are coming ever closer to it'.<sup>379</sup> Photography's strength as a tool of persuasion is inherent within its ability to present a mediated construction, which masquerades as unaltered reality. Furthermore, the very appeal of photography (particularly in the case of Mapplethorpe's visual renditions of fetishized black masculinity) is that it offers its viewers the delusion that there is an insight into some "truth" which will enhance and advance perception through its consumption. This is clearly a manipulation of the ego: the viewer will have learned of some complexity of the world if their powers of perception are suitably adept, rather than simply being persuaded of the photograph's political agenda.

Margaret Olin discusses the way that photographs enter into a dynamic of communication, where they represent more than an image of something, they enter into a relationship between each other and the viewer. She notes that although they are made 'possible by context, photographs are more than context; they touch one another and the viewer. They substitute for people. They can be, and even demand to be, handled' --

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<sup>377</sup> Steiner 1995: 40

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.: 40-1

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

'photographs are part of our community.'<sup>380</sup> The way in which images work as part of a system of communication, and frame our perception of the world is important, particularly when thinking about the community of whiteness, as it is consolidated with the communal look of the gallery visitor in the case of Mapplethorpe.<sup>381</sup> Olin goes on to discuss the presence that photographs have within our phenomenological experience: 'how photographs look may be less central to their habitus than how people look at them. Or how people refuse to, fail to, or simply do not look at them. The fact that a photograph, once taken, can become a visual presence in our world does not only mean that we look at photographs. We also are *with* photographs; and spend time in their presence.'<sup>382</sup> Even when the gaze is not consuming certain images, the narrative encoded in these images still has an impact beyond the pleasures of scopophilia, a society which sanctions these images and becomes complicit in their meaning effects the world in which we live. Her mention of the duty of the exhibition to 'explain, demonstrate, and even persuade and lead [the spectator] to a planned and direct reaction'<sup>383</sup> is indicative of the way that the viewer of Mapplethorpe's images is manipulated into leaving the exhibit (or the experience of leafing through the collection) with a very specific perception of black masculinity as deviant danger. This process entails a satisfying oppositional production of white masculinity as the superior norm for the spectator. To look at the photograph and obfuscate what is actually being looked at, in favour of having the image reflect an

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<sup>380</sup> Olin 2012: 16

<sup>381</sup> This is analogous with the consolidation of the community of whiteness that occurs with being part of the crowd at the lynching ritual or part of the interpersonal networks that exchanged the postcard, and the cinematic audience in the case of *The Birth of a Nation*.

<sup>382</sup> Olin 2012: 17

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*: 109

already known reality, is defined as “basking” by Olin, where the viewer chooses to ‘to let [the image] see itself in us.’<sup>384</sup> In this formulation, basking in an image is not to “see” it, but to have the image reflect what we already “know.”

Ruth Barcan discusses the way that the naked body carries metaphorical meaning, which becomes useful in the delineation of the body into categories of identity,<sup>385</sup> and although it may be stripped of clothing, it is never stripped of ‘meaning, value and political import,’<sup>386</sup> particularly when there is the likelihood of a ‘submerged racial politics.’<sup>387</sup> The naked body is important in its ‘ability to symbolize the raw human being<sup>388</sup>, the human being outside culture, time and artifice,’ and this is the point where ‘boundaries can be drawn, bodies regulated and disciplined, and cultural work performed.’<sup>389</sup> In relation to *Man in Polyester Suit*, Barcan’s observation that the ‘opposition between body and clothing has been roughly understood as corresponding to a division between nature and culture’<sup>390</sup> proves useful, as it is the black penis and hands (symbolic of sexuality and physical labour, calling to mind the enslavement of the black male body) that are explicitly those elements of the black male body that sit outside of culture. In terms of the specifics of the image (aside from the literal “unsuitability” of the black male body where clothing as a marker of the civilized state, or civilized humanity, fails to contain black male

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<sup>384</sup> Olin 2012: 199

<sup>385</sup> Barcan 2004: 2

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.: 9-10

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.: 14

<sup>388</sup> In relation to Mapplethorpe’s nudes, this goes one step further in that the black male body is encoded as non-human in being made into an object, so the inability to contain this body within clothing – i.e. civilization – takes on more profound ramifications.

<sup>389</sup> Barcan 2004: 72-3

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.: 31

sexuality) the specific of the suit being polyester is important: as material it does not offer tactile pleasure, in relation to the potential pleasures of black skin, it also implies that something man-made fails to contain black sexuality, symbolizing the struggle of white masculinity to contain black manhood. Polyester is also far cheaper than natural fibres, so aside from the fact that the black male body is distanced from both the natural and the civilized, it also hints at the inability of the black man to fit into the sartorial prescriptions of corporate culture: the black man is revealed in his failure to embody successful executive style, his body rendered unsuitable on all levels. Renu Bora also discusses synthetic fabric in terms of being emblematic of the artificial, feminine, Oriental or tacky, and in these ways too Milton Moore is Othered by his clothing.<sup>391</sup>

### **Containment**

In looking repeatedly at these images and recognizing that certain aspects evoked previous images in my research, or indeed in looking at Mapplethorpe's photographs and seeing resonance with more contemporary depictions of black men, a specific phrase arose: *feminized containment*. By this, I mean the varied ways that these photographs aim to delimit the potential threat of black masculinity by containing the body; a containment which is achieved through the feminization of this body. This is not to say that containment is always a form of feminization, but simply in this case that containment of the black male threat arises from being feminized within Mapplethorpe's photographic work. In terms of gendered power, the process of being feminized, being seen as female, is not in itself a negative process, but becomes so when seen through the lens of social position: to be female is to be deprived of the privileges of maleness and to have one's body marked as deviant, necessitating surveillance and control. In the case of

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<sup>391</sup> Bora 1997: 104

Mapplethorpe's black male subjects, the combination of blackness and male identity which is feminized within the images results in the notion that this is a specific identity in dire need of urgent containment, while legitimizing the use of black manhood as spectacle which can be enjoyed, but more importantly as that which needs to be interrogated visually in order to control the threat therein. This process allows for the mitigation of the perceived threat posed by the black male body, while simultaneously allowing this body to be the focus of the white gaze, presenting the possibility for the body to be the focus of visual assessment. This assessment itself contributes to the feminization of the subject; to be objectified visually is the usual territory of women within artistic works. This visual assessment is of key importance: the black body is perceived as that which needs to be kept under surveillance because it is the locus of deviance which is inextricably linked to blackness; black skin is not simply a physical feature, but the marker of negative attributes, such as propensity for violence and rapacious sexuality. The presence of black skin is particularly useful in this formulation, because where these associated attributes cannot be seen, blackness is understood as that which can be visually detected and therefore the process of surveillance is both required and more importantly, possible. It is crucial to address at this point that blackness itself is conflated with deviant sexuality; black identity is always understood as black *sexual* identity, and it is impossible to divorce one from the other. Thus, the blackness which is the ultimate focus of this visual enquiry whose goal is to locate, fix, and ultimately contain.

This is highlighted in part by the trauma caused by passing: if blackness cannot always be seen, visual surveillance cannot be consistently used as a way of countering the threat of black bodies. Containment is a useful strategy for white supremacy here: it implies that black masculinity is something which needs to be kept under control, but

once such a containment has been successful, it allows for black masculinity to be entertaining as spectacle without risk of damage or taint to the viewer. Take the example of a visitor to a zoo -- looking at an exhibit of lions held behind bars allows for the visual enjoyment of these wild animals as spectacle, but part of this pleasure lies within the exhilaration of being close to something which is dangerous, but yet is explicitly unable to pose a threat because of its enclosure. In this scenario, the bars of the cage act as a visual cue for the inherent danger of the animals which provide the entertainment.<sup>392</sup> Mapplethorpe's images work in a similar way: the desire to be exposed to the black male body can be satiated with the knowledge that the viewer is immune to the threat of this body. Containment of the black male body has practical utility: it provides an answer to dismantling the threat of black masculinity which is indelibly inscribed upon the black male body, while also reaffirming the notion that this is indeed a body which *needs* to be contained. This is a cyclical process: the black male body needs to be kept under control, therefore it is contained in a process which presumes both that this body is threatening and that it can be controlled. Once contained, the body is perceived as something that can be made intelligible which allows for the threat to be completely understood and thus contained with efficacy. Once contained, the body can then be the focus of a voyeuristic gaze that aims to make the body intelligible without the viewer fearing the repercussions of this (visual) intrusion. This theory explains why the black male body can be enjoyed when objectified through imagery (or performance), yet when it is seen in contexts where it is understood to not be contained, such as on the street, incidents like the Trayvon Martin murder occur. Where the black male body is perceived as uncontained there is an accompanying fear of the potential threat of this body, and therefore an overwhelming

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<sup>392</sup> This is particularly evocative of William Henry Johnson, as discussed earlier.

need to counter this threat – in this particular case the shooting of a black male equates to an erasure of the unquestioned threat of the black male body. This is not to say that there are not various hegemonic mechanisms within public life (seen or unseen, acknowledged or unacknowledged) that also effect to contain this body, such as institutionalized racism within the legal system. In this methodology, the body can be contained through acts of individual racism and systemic racism; the visual containment of the black male body within specific Mapplethorpe photographs exemplifies an individual racism, whereas the (highly disproportionate) spatial containment of the black male body within the prison industrial complex exemplifies systemic racism, both of which are examples of how containment of the black male body is utilized throughout American culture as a means of mitigating the threat of black manhood. The body is feminized in various ways, either being associated with attributes designated as female in a Western gender binary: animalistic, uncontrolled sexuality, intellectually inferior; objectified as exotic/erotic for display, where men are perceived as those *who look*, and women are deemed as those *who are looked at*. Paradoxically, this feminized body is also hypermasculine, which in a rigidly enforced gender binary where anything that fails to achieve normative masculinity is relegated to the space of “other”, that which is “other” or “not masculine” being deemed feminine.

Mapplethorpe’s images are undoubtedly beautiful depictions of an aestheticized black male body, but this in itself is problematic: the process of “becoming” beautiful, or perhaps more pertinently in this case, being *perceived* as something beautiful takes something away from the potential power of his photographic subjects: that which is successfully beautiful needs to remain in this fixed state to retain its visual power and, more importantly, needs to remain silent in order for its beauty to work. With an

inanimate object this is not an issue, but when the subject is human this has significant impact upon the way in which the subject is then understood by the viewer: these photographs only work to appeal to their audience with the guarantee of the silence and fixedness of black men. Not only literally framed for the viewer, Mapplethorpe's images figuratively frame black masculinity in highly prescriptive ways, allowing for their consumption to be untainted by racist fears of unleashed black manhood. This process is ingeniously disguised as a visual experience which assures the viewer of their liberal tastes: revelling in the beauty of black masculinity surely reifies the absence of any racist desires on the part of the audience, whereas the reality of this exchange is that the viewer has black manhood contained as spectacle for them, while simultaneously reducing black men to the space of fetish object. The very process of reducing the black male body to beautiful thing diminishes any potential power that black masculinity may attempt to garner, which is the threat which Mapplethorpe's photographs work to contain and therefore control. The process of reducing the black body to a decorous object is one which can be described as feminizing because of the way that the gender binary works within visual media: men *look at* and women are *to be looked at*; in a composition where men are designated as the object to be looked at, the result is that these men are then understood through the lens of femaleness and are thus feminized. In a social context where to be female is to be in a subordinate position to men, this process of feminizing black men results in their subordination. Thus it becomes clear why the aspect of feminization is so crucial within depictions of black male bodies; the use of an incredibly stable hegemonic framework to maintain the inferiority of black men proves remarkably effective, not only in its very stability but also because as a system of power based on the

gender binary, its utility for oppression across racial barriers works in part because of its potential for flexible application in terms of race (amongst other sectors of identity).

The way that Mapplethorpe uses the codes of the still life when he is depicting the black male is also problematic: turning a man into a still life perpetuates the dehumanization of the black male, and makes his body the object which houses the perception that it is without human subjectivity. The two images, both named *Phillip Prioleau, 1979* (Figs. 24 & 25), particularly exemplify this: the black body is placed upon a pedestal, aestheticized as an inanimate object rather than a human subject. Rutherford comments that there is no 'democracy in this image, nothing reciprocal between the viewer and the object of his gaze'<sup>393</sup>, and Mercer and Julien also note that in these photographs Mapplethorpe's gaze asserts control by "feminising" the other into a passive, decorative *objet d'art*.

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<sup>393</sup> Rutherford 62

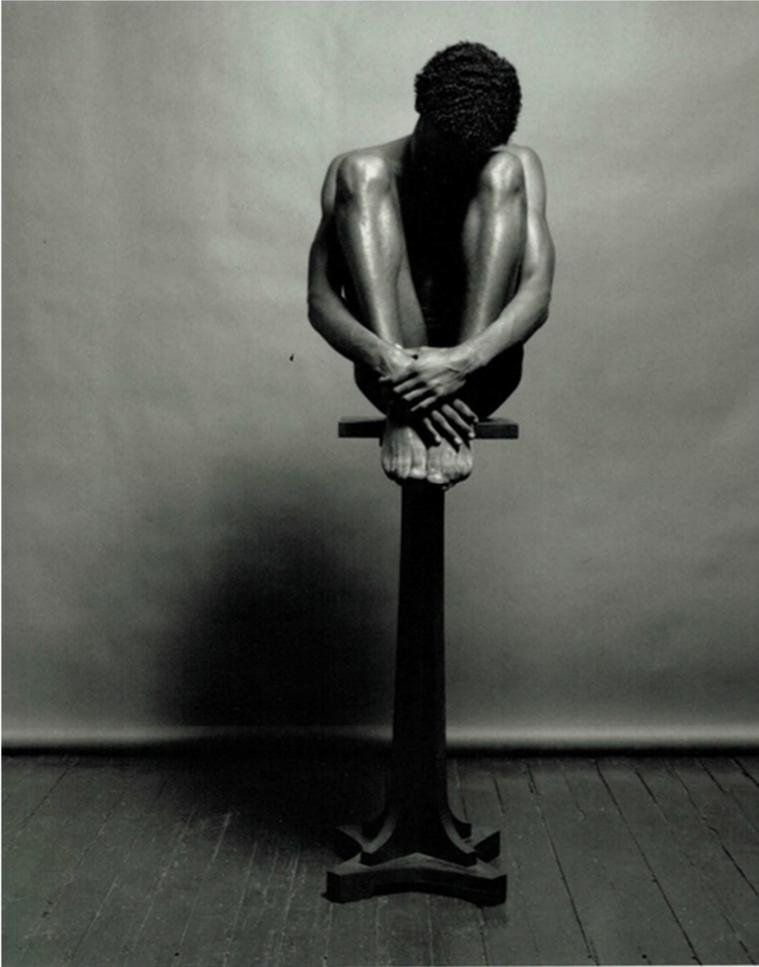


Figure 24. *Phillip Prioleau, 1979* (Mapplethorpe 2010: 36)



Figure 25. *Phillip Prioleau, 1979* (Mapplethorpe 2010: 37)

When Phillip is placed on a pedestal his body is literally putty in the hands of the white male artist – raw material to be moulded, sculpted and cast into shape. His body, like many others in this code, becomes pure plastic matter remade into the ideality of abstract

aesthetic Form.<sup>394</sup> They go on to claim that ‘we do not glimpse a real person, we are not invited to imagine what they are thinking or feeling as they are being photographed, because each body is “sacrificed” on the altar of some aesthetic ideal to affirm the sovereign mastery of the white man’s gaze which has the power of light and death.’<sup>395</sup> The black body becomes seen as that which has an absence of humanity, remaining simply a beautiful object (Fig. 26).

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<sup>394</sup> Julien & Mercer 1988: 147

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

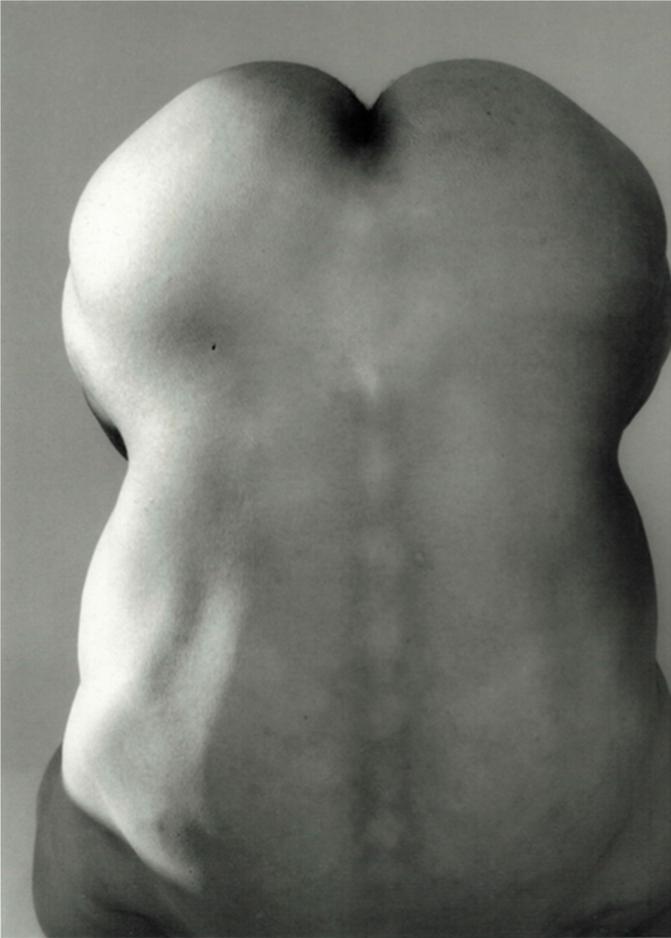


Figure 25. *Raymond*, 1985. (Mapplethorpe 2010: 78)

The containment of the black male body is pervasive throughout Mapplethorpe's work: in the mobilization of these bodies to imply sexual activity, whether it be in the sweaty post-coital glow of *Eddie Jones*, 1980<sup>396</sup> or *Mike*, 1982<sup>397</sup> or the more overt

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<sup>396</sup> Mapplethorpe 2010: 7

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*: 33

invitation to penetrate *Ajitto*, 1981<sup>398</sup> and *Ken Moody*, 1985<sup>399</sup>, or in the cropped documentation of body musculature to suggest the black male body as tumescent penis (Fig. 27), Mapplethorpe presents us with a body replete with hypersexuality, the threat of which needs to be contained, and also provides visual assurance that this body has indeed been contained for viewing pleasure.

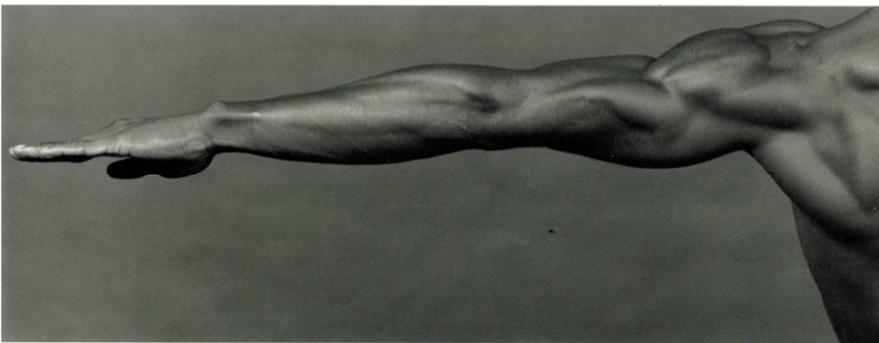


Figure 27. *Derrick Cross*, 1982. (Mapplethorpe 2010: Foreword)

This containment is implied in variant ways, one of the most notable being that the penis is never shown erect: we are always confronted with the black penis in its flaccid state symbolizing impotence; under the glare of those consuming the image, the black penis loses its potential for unwanted sexual action and withers into a visual prompt which can be seen without fear. In a series of images which are ostensibly about sex, and in which a cipher for the erection can be seen, the audience is never exposed to the black male body in complete readiness for penetrative sexual activity, unless it is as the recipient of anal penetration. Another way that Mapplethorpe contains the black male body and the meanings that can be inscribed upon that body is through his invocation of classical

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*: 10

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*: 89

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sculpture. Although the images of Phillip Prioleau<sup>400</sup> seem to idealize the black male body in a visual tradition which includes Michelangelo's *David*, in the positioning of the black male body as athletic hero, the images actually work to counter any sense of the black male body as ideal. The model ultimately fails to exemplify this idealized masculinity because of his overt blackness: when one looks at classical sculpture such as *David*, there is a whiteness which is both striking and overwhelming, which becomes part of the allure which is clearly lacking in Mapplethorpe's black men. This sense of difference is also heightened by the way that Mapplethorpe uses lighting: the sheen of black skin is indicative of the machinations of the studio and therefore the benevolent hand of Mapplethorpe upon the models. This is in total contrast to the glow of Mapplethorpe's own white skin in the self-portrait at the close of *The Black Book*<sup>401</sup> - here this glow appears to be internal, evoking the sense that the essential goodness of whiteness is emanating from within.

#### **Chapter Four: Oz**

##### **Containing the Threat of the Black Male Body through Incarceration.**

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<sup>400</sup> Mapplethorpe 1986: 38-39

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.: 94. This editorial choice reinforces the fact that the gaze is white; symbolizing white male ownership of the black body, Mapplethorpe retains the final say, the final gaze, the final look.

*Oz* aired from 1997-2003 as HBO's first dramatic production.<sup>402</sup> The crime drama, free from network television's viewing constraints, depicts the events that unfold in a maximum security prison in New York State with gritty, confrontational, and violently melodramatic spectacle. Focusing mainly on "Emerald City" – an experimental unit concerned with rehabilitation rather than punitive actions – within Oswald State Penitentiary (later changed to Oswald State Correctional Facility),<sup>403</sup> *Oz* has a large cast and multiple sub-plots, all of which enables the programme's viewers to ruminate upon the various social concerns within American culture in relation to crime, punishment and the prison industrial complex (PIC).<sup>404</sup> The naming of the prison as *Oz* gestures towards Russell Oswald, who was state commissioner during the 1971 Attica prison riot, inviting 'comparisons to events at Attica through its attention to racial conflict, prisoner abuse, and corrupt authorities.'<sup>405</sup> The name also refers to *The Wizard of Oz*, a connection that is only heightened by the alteration of the phrase "There's no place like home" from the feature film to the tagline of the series which reads "It's no place like home."<sup>406</sup> *Oz* provides a particularly useful text for thinking about American race relations and the

<sup>402</sup> Home Box Office: an American premium cable and television network.

<sup>403</sup> The alteration in the institutional naming here is significant: the programme moves from an indication that the inmates are penitent for the crimes they have committed, to instead representing them as having some essential nature which can be corrected; the inmates become marked by the inherent rather than the behavioural.

<sup>404</sup> Eric Schlosser defines the prison industrial complex as 'a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need.' "The Prison Industrial Complex" *Atlantic Monthly* December 1998 <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/304669/> (last accessed 3/3/2015) For more on the workings of the Prison Industrial Complex, see Angela Davis "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex" *Colorlines* September 1998 [http://colorlines.com/archives/1998/09/masked\\_racism\\_reflections\\_on\\_the\\_prison\\_industrial\\_complex.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/1998/09/masked_racism_reflections_on_the_prison_industrial_complex.html) (last accessed 3/3/2015)

<sup>405</sup> Wlodarz, Joe. "Maximum Insecurity: Genre trouble and Closet Erotics in and out of HBO's *Oz*" in *Camera Obscura* 58, Volume 20, Number 1, 2005, Duke University Press, pp.59-105. 65

<sup>406</sup> More on the racialized connections between *Oz* and *The Wizard of Oz* will follow later in this chapter.

various ways that the black male body - and the presumed threat of that body - are contained, both within the show, but more broadly within American culture.

*Oz* is not only of interest for this thesis because of the narratives it attaches to the black male body, but also because of the way in which this televisual mediation of incarceration is actively praised by its viewers for being realistic, despite the fact that many fans simultaneously claim to have no experience of being imprisoned.<sup>407</sup> This slippage between fiction and reality becomes a pressing issue when contextualized in the way white imaginations position black masculinity: when the dramatic plotlines in a televisual product become misconstrued as reflective of reality, particularly when the depiction of blackness in *Oz* overwhelmingly legitimizes white supremacy and the workings of the prison-industrial complex, this becomes incredibly problematic.

As John Sloop articulates,

Mass mediated representations of prisoners function as a public display of the transgression of cultural norms; as such, they are a key site at which one may investigate the relationship of the individual to culture in general, as well as the cultural articulation of "proper behaviour." Hence, the cultural articulation of the prisoner and the punished teaches everyone, convict and law-abiding citizen alike, his or her position relative to cultural institutions that constitute the culture at large.<sup>408</sup>

Here it is made clear that one of the functions of mediations of prisoners, of which *Oz* is an example, is to allow a space for rumination upon the position of the individual relative to mainstream culture; building on this it becomes possible to see that *Oz* allows for citizenship itself to be placed under examination, as the relationship between the

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<sup>407</sup> For more on this, see Yousman, Bill. "Inside *Oz*: Hyperviolence, Race and Class Nightmares, and the Engrossing Spectacle of Terror" in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2009, pp. 265-284

<sup>408</sup> Sloop, John. *The Cultural Prison: Discourse, Prisoners, and Punishment* Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996. 174

individual and the state is explicitly involved when the state intervenes and labels the citizen as criminal.

The depiction of criminality and prisons in America that *Oz* creates for its viewer is coherent within 'a particular discourse about crime and punishment – one that justifies the expansion of the prison-industrial complex, race and class-based discrimination in incarceration, and the cruelty of inhumane prison environments.'<sup>409</sup> The way in which the audience of *Oz* consider themselves as viewers of reality rather than a mediated spectacle of American imprisonment is important: not only does the show inform racist notions of blackness, but it also has an impact upon the way in which public policy concerning mass incarceration is disseminated. The representation of blackness in *Oz* does not simply remain an abstract problem: issues of crime and punishment inform various elements of American life, and are borne out in a wide variety of institutionally racist examples, such as policies regarding security in schools; funding for social programs whether at state or federal level; felon disenfranchisement laws; "redlining"<sup>410</sup> practices; and the list goes on.<sup>411</sup>

### **Panopticon**

The model of the panopticon is crucial within a discussion of punishment, surveillance, and the modern prison. Jeremy Bentham's creation relies upon the idea that constant visual inspection of individuals within specific establishments is key to ensuring that they

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<sup>409</sup> Yousman 2009: 267

<sup>410</sup> Martha Mahoney provides a useful account of the practice of redlining in "Residential Segregation and White Privilege" in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (ed.) *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997. Pp. 273-275

<sup>411</sup> More on the relationship between *Oz* and mass incarceration will follow later in this chapter.

function successfully.<sup>412</sup> Key to the success of Bentham's *Plan for a Penitentiary Inspection-House* is not only an architectural design that allows for inmates to be watched at all times, but those in charge of inspecting prisoners and their behaviour cannot be seen by the prisoners, resulting in a sense of being watched constantly, regardless of how much time one is actually being viewed. The strength of Bentham's panopticon as a disciplinary tool arises from the recognition of the importance of surveillance: 'The essence of it consists, then, in the *centrality* of the inspector's situation, combined with the well-known and most effectual contrivances for *seeing without being seen*.'<sup>413</sup> When combined with the importance of the way in which the panopticon offers the illusion of being watched constantly, due to the '*apparent omnipresence* of the inspector,'<sup>414</sup> it becomes clear why the panopticon has constituted such an enduring idea in terms of regulating behaviour. *Oz* subverts the panopticon model: the idea of the panopticon is of particular interest when thinking about the filmed world of *Oz* (both the filming involved in its existence as a televisual product, but also filming in terms of closed-circuit television cameras existing within the world of *Oz*). The use of the security camera in *Oz* is interesting: at the main control desk from where the Correctional Officers sit and survey the prisoners, there is a bank of video screens, showing footage presumably feeding back directly from security cameras positioned throughout the prison. However, the use of filmed footage as a disciplinary tool is never referenced by either inmates or those in control, thus giving the impression that the feeling of being constantly under surveillance

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<sup>412</sup> For more on the specifics of Bentham's panopticon model, see Bentham, Jeremy "Panopticon" in Peter Hamilton (ed.) *Visual Research Methods (Volume One)*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Pp. 3-18

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*: 13

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*: 15

by technology is not a concern. In a step which increases the melodramatic potential of the show, yet also heightens the sense for the viewer that this is a world resisting control, the use of camera footage is also never invoked as a way of clarifying the truth of dramatic events; for example in the many incidents of murder, rape, beatings, theft, and drug dealing and usage, there is not a single moment when reference is made to the security camera as a revelatory tool. Given this, combined with the prominence of the video screens at the control desk, *Oz* implies a process of the C.O.s looking, but not seeing; as a vital part of surveillance they are failing. This failure makes all the more urgent the panoptic control of the television camera: the audience is called on as a tool of surveillance in order to engender the possibility of control over the inmates.

As Christian Laval comments, the panopticon is a 'technique of disciplinary power based on an architectural principle [aimed] at isolating the individual from his environment to deconstruct him analytically inside a closed institution.'<sup>415</sup> In a scene which foreshadows the later loss of institutional control and rioting,<sup>416</sup> the camera is positioned above the control area of Emerald City and pans down, making the correctional officers seem small in comparison to the prisoners looming large from a floor above them. Not only is the control desk completely overlooked by the prisoners' "pods", it is also completely open and without walls, leaving the correctional officers (COs) vulnerable at all times to attack by the inmates. The reversal of the panopticon model is engineered not only through the control area being visible from all the cells, but also through the prisoners not always being visibly detectable, meaning that the COs feel as

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<sup>415</sup> Laval, Christian "From [Discipline and Punish](#) to [The Birth of Biopolitics](#)" in Anne Brunon-Ernst (ed.) *Beyond Foucault: New perspectives on Bentham's Panopticon* Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing 2012. Pp. 43-60.  
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<sup>416</sup> *Oz* Season 1/Episode 8

though they are being watched even though this may not be the case. This “reverse” panopticon is achieved through the walls of the pods being made of glass, meaning that the glare from the institutional lighting renders the inmates invisible, so the correctional officers cannot ever be completely sure if and by whom they are being watched. Rather than the inmates being coerced by the illusion of constant surveillance by the COs, the prison guards themselves are placed on display while attempting to maintain control over the carceral space. This is made particularly evident in “A Game of Checkers,”<sup>417</sup> where the viewer is presented with a view of the control room being overlooked by the prisoners’ cells and completely open without any protective barriers: the camera is positioned above and the lack of structural armour evokes a sense of complete vulnerability, particularly given that the world of Oz is one that is eternally on the brink of chaotic, riotous destruction. There is never reference made to security cameras being utilized to observe the inmates: in its place the televisual camera becomes the all-seeing panopticon rather than the infrastructure of the prison itself.

This is contrasted with the many spaces within the walls of Emerald City where the inmates act explicitly without surveillance, due to the disproportionately high number of inmates and low number of institutional employees. In the liberally idealistic environs of Emerald City the disciplinary actors find themselves vulnerable to, and overwhelmed by, the inmates; in a move which confirms the political conservatism of the show, this dystopia focuses on the deficiency of rehabilitation rather than punishment as prisons which do not successfully command the bodies and actions of the criminal masses constitute systemic failure. The hegemonic disciplinary gaze that exists in the domain of *Oz* is that of the television camera: in a formulation wherein the inmates’ illicit actions

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

are often only seen by the televisual viewer, the notion that the prisoners act without constraint is given credibility. The panopticon in *Oz* is subverted through a dynamic where the viewer becomes the virtual panoptic surveyor; this is how the show manages to escape rousing any anxiety over the imbalance or lack of panoptic control, the viewer becomes the control measure. Parenti describes the fiscal realities of how mass incarceration operates in terms of economic resources (i.e. the prisoners and their labour) and employment:

Besides the quantitative question of growth, prison stimulus has disturbing qualitative implications. Like prison itself, the incarceration business often advances racist agendas. In the prison economy, people of color are the fodder: two-thirds of all prison admissions are Black or Latino people. Meanwhile downwardly mobile white working class men are most often the keepers. In most states well over half of all guards are white men. [...] Private prisons also achieve economies by eliminating labor through specially designed, automated “hands-off” prisons. Eric Bates describes what happens at new private prisons when the panopticon meets the bottom line: “The design of the “control room” will enable a guard to simultaneously watch three “pods” of 250 prisoners each. Windows in the elevated room afford an unobstructed view of each cell block below, and “vision blocks” in the floor are positioned over each entranceway so guards can visually identify anyone being admitted. The high-tech panel at the center of the room can open any door at the flick of a switch.<sup>418</sup>

As is made clear here, the panopticon has utility beyond its potential for imagined constant surveillance of inmates by prison guards: as a means of control the panopticon has appeal for its reduction in fiscal outlay.

Augustus Hill is almost always shown at the outset of each episode in a glass box, while he breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the viewer with a monologue that sets up issues pertinent to the action of the particular episode. This heightens explicit awareness of the viewer and the display of the prisoners for the gaze of the audience. He still continues to deliver these impassioned speeches after his death has

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<sup>418</sup> Parenti 1999, 217-221

occurred, pointing to the elasticity of the fictive boundaries of *Oz*. Hill constantly breaks the fourth wall in his direct addressing of the camera, confirming the viewer as the acknowledged surveyor, concretizing them as the panoptic control. Aside from the way in which every single episode contains a direct address from inmate to viewer (Hill's speeches to the camera), *Oz* breaks the fourth wall in other ways: in the final episode of the fourth series we see the inmates watching television, during which we see the HBO credits. Although this is not an explicit reference to the fact that *Oz* is a television show, in its habit of stamping its identity all over its original programming, HBO becomes inseparable from its shows, thus there is the oblique recognition that if the inmates are not only aware of the channel but also watch its programming, there must be an acknowledgement of the *Oz* viewer, thereby confirming the viewer's stake in a position of surveillance over the inmates. The cover of Hill's book is the same image used as in the promotion by HBO of *Oz*<sup>419</sup>: again we see the fourth wall being broken here with the explicit reference to *Oz* as a televisual product, situating the viewer within the world of *Oz* and therefore being a complicit actor within the events of the show.

The panopticon is inextricably linked to the mechanics of biopower and its working to discipline bodies: within this formulation the panopticon constitutes merely one regulatory control. Michel Foucault's theory of biopower provides an informative lens through which to examine the way that prisons are used as a mechanism for the control and regulation of bodies, which in turn gives greater depth to an elucidation of the role of prisons within a capitalist system, where bodies are utilized in terms of their fiscal potential. *Oz*, with its depiction of the lives of African American men captured within the

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<sup>419</sup> *Oz* 6/3

US prison industrial complex, provides a clear example of the ways in which the body is disciplined and the population held under regulatory control. This world exists as a heightened microcosm of the bodily discipline and regulations found in wider society: the black male body becomes subjected to discipline, to regulation, at a far higher statistical rate than other American body, all in order to satisfy the needs of capitalism, and this disproportion is maintained within the prison system consistently through institutional racism.

This bodily regulation exists as a continuation of the control over black bodies which has existed since, and was systematically created by, the institution of chattel slavery in the US. As Sawicki comments, biopower works as a highly effective lens through which to understand the deployment of bodies within the prison-industrial complex precisely because – in a move similar to that of the feminist impulse of centring “subjugated knowledge” – it allows us to focus upon the disciplinary power exercised by institutional systems.<sup>420</sup> The prison industrial complex would certainly act as one of these disciplinary mechanisms, but in terms of the containment of black masculinity (literal and figurative), this containment is achieved through criminalizing, wounding, eroticizing, and commodifying (or indeed, a combination of more than one of these) the black male body, these all being examples of the ‘techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.’ The way in which Foucault describes biopower and its connections with capitalism also cements the prison as a clear emblem of its mechanisms: ‘biopower was without question an indisputable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of

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<sup>420</sup> Sawicki 381-382

population to economic processes.’<sup>421</sup> Where biopower is a crucial element in maintaining capitalism, the use of prison labour and the prevalence of the “school-to-prison pipeline” within the prison industrial complex denote the institution of the prison as emblematic of the workings of biopower.

David Ingram considers the centrality of the criminal’s body within the workings of capitalism in his consideration of Foucault’s work on biopower:

‘The emergence of capitalism had already rendered the premodern dismemberment and destruction of the body costly. The labouring power of the criminal’s body was something to be preserved, strengthened and disciplined.’<sup>422</sup>

The importance of the cost of the criminalized body to society is made clear in the first episode of the third season: when the healthcare provision in *Oz* is taken over by the Weigert corporation, the constant mention of cost-cutting and expense makes explicit the way in which the bodies of the inmates are considered as a financial liability: the body needs to remain productive and in order to ensure this productivity a certain level of healthcare needs to be given, all of which is identified solely in terms of the cost to the taxpaying citizen, who is diametrically opposed to the criminal in this formulation.

### **Biopower**

The regulatory control and disciplining of the body that Foucault defines through biopower is exemplified within the workings of mass incarceration. Foucault distinguishes between disciplines of the body and slavery: ‘They were different from slavery because they were not based on a relation of appropriation of bodies; indeed, the elegance of the discipline lay in the fact that it could dispense with this costly and violent

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<sup>421</sup> Foucault 1978: 140-141

<sup>422</sup> Ingram 2003: 246

relation by obtaining effects of utility at least as great.<sup>423</sup> This observation brings into relief the logistical continuation of the way that the black male body has been controlled throughout American history; the commonalities between slavery and mass incarceration as systems that are predicated upon the black male body as a useful resource are evident. In the specific case of the black male experience in the US, the disciplines of the body are not all that different from slavery.

Aside from the obvious ways in which the black male body is disciplined within legal and correctional systems, the importance of nomenclature as a regulatory device becomes evident. Michael Wiatrowski, in discussing criminal justice policy in the 1990s, describes 'the shift from offenses to offenders'<sup>424</sup> whereby individuals become marked by a perceived criminal predilection, and thus understood as consistently posing a threat, rather than simply having committed an offense. This is not simply a benign change of terminology: the linguistic shift is reflective of a conceptual shift, the importance of which should not be underestimated when thinking about the ways in which mass incarceration, and its reliance upon the public perceptions of the criminalized, retains such an extreme and detrimental impact upon the lives of African Americans.<sup>425</sup> The shift in appellation and the importance that lies therein is also reflected by the alteration in the name of the Oswald State Penitentiary, as mentioned above. Referring to programs

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<sup>423</sup> Foucault 1995: 137

<sup>424</sup> Wiatrowski, Michael D. "Three Strikes and You're Out": Rethinking the Police and Crime Control Mandate" in David Schichor & Dale K. Sechrest (eds.) *Three Strikes and You're Out: Vengeance as Public Policy* London: Sage, 1996. Pp. 117-134. 125

<sup>425</sup> A useful way to think about this psychic move from offenses to offenders is to consider other changes in terminology which illuminate deliberate political gestures to modify perception, such as the move from "criminal" to "criminalized," or "racial" to "racialized." With the mention of these alternate examples I am in no way implying that they arise from a similar political position, in fact they are particularly useful because of their potential to reverse the negative impact posed by the presumption of an inherently criminal self rather than the commitment of acts that contravene the law.

such as the Serious Habitual Offender Criminal Apprehension Programs (SHOCAP) and the Integrated Criminal Apprehension Programs (ICAP), which were developed to reduce criminal behaviour, Wiatrowski notes that ‘the result of these programs was the burgeoning prison population of the United States with California, Texas, and Florida at the forefront,’<sup>426</sup> while also remarking that the ‘the difficulties of predicting who should be incapacitated to reduce crime should not be minimized.’<sup>427</sup> Likewise, thinking about the practice of lynching, this torturous practice was utilized far more as a tool of deterrent for black men who would be haunted by this possibility being inflicted upon them, rather than as a means of judicial redress for the (perceived) criminal actions of the lynching victim. The transformation of perceiving the criminalized body in terms of its productivity has a serious impact upon the way in which crime is understood: rather than being seen in terms of being an act which breaks the law (as a result of environmental factors), the body becomes viewed through a lens which separates bodies into categories of normalcy and deviance: the deviant body is implicitly understood as being inherently criminal and thus predisposed to committing criminal acts, so the body then becomes treated in terms of its threat, rather than its actions:

No longer is one punished according to what one did (a discrete and quantifiable act capable of definite representation), but according to what one might do, based upon a psychiatric examination of one’s infinitely malleable and reformable character. In short, punishment increasingly has as its aim the disciplining of the body as a source of *productivity*; and discipline, as a softer and less visible – albeit more global – form of punishment, has as its aim the training of a pliant, productive population.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Wiatrowski, 1996: 126

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.: 125-126

<sup>428</sup> Ingram, David. “Foucault and Habermas” in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* ed. Gary Gutting. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 240-283. 246.

**Commented [AP20]:** “again, I’m thinking that your thesis intro could be about the active display of the BM body and this chapter focuses on the way this feeds ‘productivity?’”

The plasticity of the criminal as a definitional bodily space is remarked upon by Karen Halttunen, where she links the reconfiguration of this body to the Gothic tradition: ‘The most important cultural work performed by the Gothic narrative of murder was its reconstruction of the criminal transgressor [...] into moral monster from whom readers were instructed to shrink with a sense of horror that confirmed their own “normalcy” in the face of the morally alien and with a sense of mystery that testified to their own inability even to conceive of such an aberrant act.’<sup>429</sup> This mention of the Gothic ties into Judith Halberstam’s comment that ‘The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities.’<sup>430</sup> The fluidity of meaning of this body, capitalized upon in order to fix conceptions of the criminal, evokes the example of the freak show as discussed earlier, and made clear by Elizabeth Stephens: ‘the figure of the freak, like that of the monster before it, cannot be seen to have an essential meaning in and of itself but, rather, functions as a highly flexible category, a stage on which various ideas and concerns about the body are played out, and around which new ways of seeing are simultaneously constructed and contested.’<sup>431</sup>

The example given by Ingram above delineates the importance of control of the black male body, and the need for this to be done extensively: when the body is feared in terms of its potential acts rather than those already committed, control over the body needs to include both surveillance and containment. This notion of the body being perceived in terms of threat, the *potential* crimes it may perpetrate rather than those that have actually

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<sup>429</sup> Halttunen, Karen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. 4-5

<sup>430</sup> Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1995. 27

<sup>431</sup> Stephens, Elizabeth. *Anatomy as Spectacle: Public exhibitions of the Body from 1700 to the Present* Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2011. 97

been committed, remains particularly pertinent when thinking about the black male body: as the locus of fears of miscegenation (with its implicit assumption of the rape of white women by black men) the black male body has historically been viewed through the lens of potential criminality rather than criminal acts undertaken previously.

As Ingram discusses, the criminalized body becomes monetised: it is a tool which furthers capitalist ends.<sup>432</sup> Discipline of this body is perceived through a lens of productivity; while the body remains productive it is therefore contained as a cog in the machine of capitalism. It is interesting when Ingram discusses the movement of punishment models from being purely based on retribution towards a model based upon rehabilitation; although the more idealistic perception would consider it to be more progressive where the criminalized are moulded into productive members of society and freed, these actions are not necessarily connected: in a society which criminalizes black men and where the infrastructure of capitalism benefits from the prison industrial complex, black men can still be seen as a valuable resource and “productive” while incarcerated. While remaining imprisoned (and a conveniently controlled labour force) black men are simultaneously punished for their criminality while also proving themselves as (literally) productive members of society. Sharon Holland describes the inextricable connection between the prison industrial complex and the institution of slavery, particularly in terms of the defence of such practice through the lack of humanity possessed by black people: ‘the (white) culture’s dependence on the nonhuman status of its black subjects was never measured by the ability of whites to produce a “social heritage”; instead it rested on the status of the black as a nonentity; and [...] that the transmutation from enslaved to freed subject never quite occurred at the level of the

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<sup>432</sup> Ingram 2003: 246

imagination.’<sup>433</sup> This idea of black people occupying the space of “nonentity” is interesting, and allows for the space of blackness to be thoroughly deemed as that which is “other.”

Formal emancipation called for an abrupt about-face for a system too entrenched to change as mandated by law. Manumission dictated that the peculiar social status of enslaved people be transferred to and shared by another space altogether. Not willing to comprehend fully the freed state of formally enslaved subjects, masters and their kin reserved a special place in their *imaginings* for this new being. Although seeing the black subject as a “slave” was now prohibited by law, there was no impediment to viewing this subject in the same place s/he had always already occupied. In this way, the enslaved-now freed person, either “black” or close enough to this category, began to occupy the popular imagination.<sup>434</sup>

In Holland’s argument, we have the idea that despite significant changes to the legal infrastructure of race within the US, blackness is still maintained as something akin to an enslaved identity: black people are still perceived as being a corporeal resource to service the needs of whiteness.

Given the disproportionate levels of black men sentenced to life imprisonment and the consequences of the “three strikes rule”<sup>435</sup>, African American men can still fit into this narrative of prisoners being turned into future productive members of society; this designation is not mutually exclusive with being granted freedom. The change in prison sentencing as reflective of what one has done to what “one might do,” that Ingram discusses, is particularly pertinent when considering the position occupied by black men. Given that the black male body is consistently perceived as a threat which needs to be

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<sup>433</sup> Holland, Sharon Patricia. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000. P. 15

<sup>434</sup> Holland 2000, 14

<sup>435</sup> For more on “Three Strikes and You’re Out” legislation, see Austin, James “The Effect of ‘Three Strikes and You’re Out’ on Corrections” in David Shichor & Dale K. Sechrest (eds.) *Three Strikes and You’re Out: Vengeance as Public Policy* London: Sage, 1996. Pp. 155-176; Engel, John. W. “Three Strikes Laws” in *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, January, 2013 (accessed 05/01/2015)

contained, bodies being disciplined through the juridical system according to their potential future acts necessitates a subjective assessment of the body's intentions, thus when the body being disciplined is black and male, the discipline "required" will be more extensive. The extensiveness of this discipline can be corroborated when looking at the extreme violence enacted upon the bodies of black men in the lynching ritual; the threat of the black male body was understood to be so extreme that the body needed to not only be destroyed and life definitively extinguished, but torturous mutilation was also a necessary accompaniment.

In continuing to think about the utilization of biopower, Heather Anne Thompson gives valuable insight into the specific contextual realities of the workings of prison and their relationship to space – both bodily and public: "The dramatic postwar rise of the rise of the carceral state depended directly on what might well be called the "criminalization of urban space," a process by which increasing numbers of urban dwellers – overwhelmingly men and women of color – became subject to a growing number of laws that not only regulated bodies and communities in thoroughly new ways but also subjected violators to unprecedented time behind bars."<sup>436</sup> It is crucial to think about this "criminalization of urban space" in tandem with the idea of criminalized bodies – how does this relationship between bodies and space work? Thompson argues that 'In the same way that rural African American spaces were criminalized at the end of the Civil War, resulting in the record imprisonment of black men that undermined African American communities in the Reconstruction and Jim Crow-era South, the criminalization of urban spaces of color, in both the South and North, during and after the

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<sup>436</sup> Thompson, Heather Anne. "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History" *The Journal of American History*: December 2010, Vol.97, Issue 3, pp. 703-734. P. 706

1960s civil rights era fundamentally altered the social and economic landscape of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century United States.<sup>437</sup> The way in which black identity was consistently criminalized through racism and juridical legislation allowed for the expansion of the prison industrial complex and its perceived need as a solution to the “problem” of blackness, which was conflated with criminality. The racialized dynamics of identity position blackness as a threat to whiteness:

In stark contrast to white working-class Americans, who increasingly claimed the mantle of crime victim over the course of the twentieth century, poor blacks were increasingly blamed for any crime problem America had. [...] By the late 1960s, however, with African Americans across the country actively laying claim to equal citizenship, the urban spaces in which they lived were criminalized to an unprecedented extent. One of the most important mechanisms by which urban spaces were newly criminalized after the civil rights sixties was a revolution in drug legislation. [...] New York’s urban spaces were so impacted by drug legislation in the last decades of the of the twentieth century that by the new millennium 66 percent of the prisoners who filled the state’s vast prison system had been arrested in, and were from, New York City.<sup>438</sup>

Thompson goes on to discuss the way in which not only does the prison system resolutely define blackness as criminal, institutionalize the black body as a tool of labour for capitalism to flourish, and irrevocably damage African American communities, but it also provides a mechanism for disenfranchising black Americans: ‘In ways quantifiable, the mass incarceration of the later twentieth century had given whites an amount of political power that had not been so disproportionate since before the Civil War, when they had been able to count each African American body as three-fifths of a white person for the purposes of political representation. Ultimately, the rise of the carceral state had undercut one of the most important victories of the American civil rights movement, the

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.: 706-707

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.: 707-708

Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>439</sup> Mass incarceration becomes a huge asset in the racist agenda of denying black Americans not only their citizenship, but also their humanity and their political agency.

When we are presented with the scene in which McManus is confronted with his failure in reducing violence in Oz and imagines seeing all those inmates who have died during his management of Emerald City,<sup>440</sup> there are six in all: two are white, one Italian American, one Latino and three black; the actual demographics of those who are imprisoned are mis-represented. In the fourth episode of Season two, we see Judge Gable preside over Hill's appeal to overturn his prison sentence as a result of the judge in his case having been proved to be biased: in a legal situation where a black man has not been the recipient of legal impartiality, and has legal representation in the form of a fellow African American inmate (Said), his sentence remains the same and there is no acknowledgement that the legal system may be flawed, much less as a possible consequence of racism. The judge has no qualms about justice having been done in this situation, yet when it comes to Beecher's case (in which she presided), she claims to have been haunted for the past 16 years over whether justice has been done: this frames the white male as the figure who is harmed by the legal system, as opposed to African American men. The way in which *Oz* conceals the disproportionate impact that mass incarceration has upon black lives, in favour of positioning whiteness centre stage is a frequent feature of the programme where the privileges of whiteness are ignored: the parallels drawn between Said and McManus as mirrors/adversaries conceals the uneven

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid.: 733. For more on this and the additional connections of the three-fifth's law to money and property, see Barbara Fields' "Slavery, Race and Ideology" in *New Left Review*, issue 181, May-June 1990, p. 95.

<sup>440</sup> *Oz* 1/8

power dynamics between them and the system of white supremacy that positions McManus as the white saviour figure, and Said as an example of the black male criminal. These incidents illustrate the way in which the black male body is consistently de-valued within the carceral space, exacerbated by the distortion of the reality of mass incarceration as being a social issue that disproportionately impacts African American lives: primacy is given to white experience.

In the initial episode of the third season, we see the takeover of the medical care by the Weigert corporation; this sub-plot makes abundantly clear the perceived value of the criminalized body, as the company makes it explicit that value is placed upon maintaining the body as productive, but going no further in terms of medical care and attention. As long as the body maintains its utility as a tool of production, Weigert in its position as one of the institutional elements of the prison industrial complex remains satisfied. In an exchange between Dr. Garvey (the representative of Weigert within Oz and sole decision maker in terms of the healthcare that the inmates will receive) and Dr. Nathan, the fiscal protection of Weigert takes precedence over compassionate care for the criminalized:

Nathan: "There is a real need for proper healthcare."

Garvey: "Yeah – proper healthcare, not excessive. I know you don't support the privatization of the system here at Oz, but by paying Weigert a fixed rate, no matter what care the inmate requires, the state reduces its costs."

Nathan: "But because Weigert gets paid the same amount, no matter what treatment we prescribe, wouldn't you limit my ability to call in specialists, or to use expensive tests?"

Garvey: "This is no different than HMOs [Health Maintenance Organization] in the public sector."

Nathan: "There is a difference. The state has laws to protect consumers from cuts in medical services. There are no such laws for inmates. Weigert has no incentive to provide quality care."

Garvey: "Look, we're both doctors – I took the same oath you did."

Nathan: "Then why cut Miguel Alvarez's antidepressants?"

Garvey: "Because as I told you, I consider this unnecessary care. And if you hadn't spent too much money on unnecessary care, the state wouldn't have had to bring us in."

Nathan: "Alvarez is suicidal."

Garvey: "Well maybe it's all for the best."

Nathan: "What?!"

Garvey: "Well god knows, he's not doing anyone any good while he's alive."<sup>441</sup>

This exchange highlights the way in which the criminalized body is seen as having no value, and when the profits of corporations enter the situation, they take clear precedence over what is perceived as the financial burden of medical care for inmates.

*Oz* does attempt to convey the institutional racism that lies at the heart of mass incarceration, through its focus upon particular incidents which demonstrate the impact of systemic racism upon individual characters. When Wangler turns eighteen while incarcerated, this exemplifies the way in which young black are tried as adults within the juridical system, as he has been in *Oz* for two years by this point and represents the workings of the "school-to-prison pipeline."<sup>442</sup> Through the figure of Wangler we see the way that the prison industrial complex captures and contains the black male body, relying on mechanisms of institutional racism, and the way in which inescapability of this complex has become normalized. In the first episode of the fourth season, Hill's direct address to the audience is as follows: "Congratulations America. This year the prison population has reached an all-time high: 2 million. 2 million people are – what do ya call it.....incarcerated. 2 fucking million – that's the population of Vienna. That's the population of Houston, Texas."<sup>443</sup> As the camera pans out, the minority of the prisoners surrounding Hill – presumably intended to be representatives of the demographics of this incarcerated population – are black. Even when *Oz* addresses a very real issue and

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid.: 3/2

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.: 3/4

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.: 4/1

supports this with statistics, it misrepresents the racialized reality of this, dismissing the way in which mass incarceration affects African American men disproportionately.

When watching Governor Devlin's political commercial calling for his re-election, in which Devlin claims that crime is down as a direct result of the "three strikes rule," Busmalis comments that he would vote for Devlin.<sup>444</sup> Aside from this being an implicit defence of Devlin's commentary, when Hill informs Busmalis that he can no longer vote as a consequence of being a convicted felon, Busmalis replies "That's ok, I never used to vote anyway." This neatly sidesteps any critique of the disenfranchisement of the criminalized, and downplays the negative impact of this element of the US penal system.

The conspiracy between Said and Adebisi to manipulate Glyn into hiring a black man to run Oz ultimately only serves to legitimize the prison-industrial complex: the idea that more black management will solve the issues of mass incarceration disavows the intrinsically problematic elements of the PIC, implying that it is individual rather than institutional racism that is to blame for the ways in which people of color are disproportionately affected by the workings of the PIC.<sup>445</sup> *Oz* openly criticizes the way that the PIC works, but this only obfuscates the ways in which the show ultimately puts forward a defence of a system which simply needs adjustment, rather than complete evolution or even better, removal.

The Census Bureau counts prisoners as residents of the particular township where the prison in which they are being held is, rather than where they were convicted: this results in state financial aid funds getting spent on smaller populations (not including prisoners), rather than on programs which might actually lower poverty and crime rates. This is

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

addressed in *Oz* when Hill observes: ‘The Census is sense-less.’<sup>446</sup> This is just one aspect of the way in which the PIC utilizes the prison population as a means of engineering disproportionate economic and political power for those who live near prisons but would not be captured on the “wrong side” of the prison’s confines.

Although the above examples offer some potential for a critique of the workings of mass incarceration and the American penal system, *Oz* consistently undercuts this potential for its reliance upon the depiction of black masculinity as deviant, or focuses on a narrative of redemption or escape from the system. Redding tells Hill: “If it wasn’t for Supreme Allah, you wouldn’t be in that wheelchair – you wouldn’t be in *Oz*.”<sup>447</sup> When Supreme is positioned as the cause of Hill’s incarceration, *Oz* again ignores the systemic in favour of the individual and dramatic. This particular example frames black criminality and betrayal as factors to blame, rather than societal causes such as poverty. The close at the end of the first episode of the fifth season preaches that love of the sinner is essential: *Oz* consistently positions itself as a defender of the humanity of prisoners, yet in its actual methodology of representation, it reiterates the racist perception of inherent black deviance, anger, violence, and criminality.

Gov. Devlin announces that private corporations are to be set up inside *Oz*: “In these tough times, it’s essential for the state government to work hand in hand with the businesses to create new economic opportunities. Today, I am pleased to announce that privately owned enterprises will be set up, inside our penitentiaries, employing prisoners full-time on a merit basis.”<sup>448</sup> This implies that it is for the good of the state rather than

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<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*: 4/7

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*:4/12

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*: 6/2

private corporations and that it is also a privilege for inmates to work there, rather than simply being an alternate version of slave labour. The exchange between Devlin and Loewen where they are discussing how Loewen has been imprisoned, as a result of Devlin's hand having been forced by the public protests in response to the mayor's alleged involvement in the murder of two African American girls:

Devlin: "Wilson, they were burning down the city."

Loewen: "Correction: they were burning down their city. Their neighbourhood. Their businesses."

Devlin: "The violence was escalating, spreading."

Loewen: "So you send in the National Guard – tear gas, rubber bullets. [...] If you don't give me my pardon, I will call a press conference and I will tell tales, Jimmy – tales of corruption, tales of voter fraud."<sup>449</sup>

This demonstrates the way in which the corrupt institutions of law and politics are strategically traversed by white men in order to avoid punishment for conspiring to end African American lives. When Reese (CO) lets Lemuel Idzik in to Oz while he smuggles a gun through security with the intention of assassinating Said, and Glynn confronts him for his lax checking of prison visitors their exchange is as follows:

Glyn: "You have a job – a responsibility and you failed. As a result, a man is dead."

Reese: "A prisoner."<sup>450</sup>

This exemplifies the lack of value attached to the lives of the criminalized; Reese makes a clear distinction between a man and a prisoner, symbolizing the dehumanization of inmates within the prison system. The dehumanization of inmates is also evoked with Officer Murphy's statement that "I didn't become a zookeeper just to behave like one of

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid.: 6/3

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

the animals.”<sup>451</sup> The dehumanization of black men within the system of mass incarceration is repeated within the racial politics of the show.

### **Whiteness in *Oz***

The audience is introduced to the world of *Oz* through Tobias Beecher, a white middle-class lawyer who from his initial appearance is depicted as someone who does not “belong” in prison; he preserves the inferred viewer as a white middle-class male. Through the invitation to identify with him, the viewer occupies the position of voyeuristic visitor into the world of incarceration. In the overwhelmingly racially diverse world of *Oz* (the majority of the inmates are African American, followed by Latino and White), Beecher’s race remains unmarked yet crucial, as his identity becomes conflated with that of the inferred viewer as they are exposed to this world of criminal brutality, with which Beecher seems as equally at odds.<sup>452</sup>

The way in which the name *Oz* calls our attention to *The Wizard of Oz* is not accidental: the connections between these two becomes most evident when we look at the figure of Beecher and the way in which he mirrors Dorothy, as an outsider surrounded by those designated as non-human. Although *Oz* inverts *The Wizard of Oz* in terms of being a nightmare rather than a dreamscape, Beecher constitutes a double of Dorothy as the innocent protagonist who clearly does not belong in this world. By “innocent,” I mean that although Beecher has actually committed a crime he is presented as simply having made an error of judgement or a mistake, rather than as having maintained a criminal life

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid.: 6/5

<sup>452</sup> In terms of the identity of the inferred reader of *Oz*, it is of particular relevance that the show is commissioned and shown by HBO: Home Box Office is a premium cable channel operated by Time Warner and remains the most expensive of the US premium television services, meaning that consumption of *Oz* is indicative of economic position. It could be speculated that this has an impact upon the class of the viewer; combined with the fact that the viewer is intended to sympathise with Beecher, this could strengthen the viewer being co-opted into a white middle-class perspective.

reflective of an inherently criminal self. It is also *Oz* that represents the threat to normative family life rather than Beecher's/Dorothy's actions. Beecher's killing of Kathy Rockwell is actually what places him in the prison domain, likewise, Dorothy actually ends up in *Oz* as a consequence of failing to control her dog Toto, ignoring a letter from the sheriff and finally running away from home. Despite this, both Beecher and Dorothy are presented as being victimized by others. There is also the clear parallel of the accidental killing of Kathy and the Wicked Witch of the East: we are never encouraged to sympathize with the casualties, only their killers. This is explicit in *The Wizard of Oz*, where the death of the witch is actually celebrated, but it is also implicit in *Oz*: when we see Kathy hit Beecher's windscreen in flashback scenes, it is always a close-up of his face contorted with horror and sadness that is presented to the viewer. These flashbacks are also only played to contextualize the victimization of Beecher in *Oz*, presenting him as the sole sufferer of this experience. Beecher also struggles to make sense of this world which points to his identity as an outsider, just as Dorothy also does: as an example, her encounter with the apple trees where she is confused by their ability to talk and feel proves that she does not understand this world.

Beecher also works to mirror the viewers of HBO programming, while setting up a clear distinction between himself and the other inmates: Bill Yousman points out that "The HBO audience is wealthier, more educated, and more suburban than the general population of television viewers. Demographically, this is the precise opposite of the US prison population."<sup>453</sup> In his position as a universal "everyman," figure, the deliberate deployment of Beecher works to cement the viewer into a male, white, middle-class

**Commented [AP21]:** Connect HBO audience to one who would be interested in seeing world of *Oz* as "realistic" depiction of race in America

<sup>453</sup> Yousman, Bill. *Inside Oz: Hyperviolence, Race and Class Nightmares, and the Engrossing Spectacle of Terror* Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2009, pp. 265-284. 266

position. Even if this is not necessarily the identity of the viewer, the way in which the show exhorts sympathising with and sharing his perspective potentially negates any alternative reading. Beecher, more than any other character, operates within *Oz* as a lens through which to understand this world of incarceration and as such, he motivates the reader to inhabit his perspective; despite the reality of the reader's identity, Beecher infiltrates their position as observer and works to overpower any reaction to this domain which may diverge from his. Through the conflation of Beecher and the viewer, their identity is figuratively "whitened", "maled", and "middle-classed", meaning that not only is the inferred reader a white middle-class male, but there is a heady encouragement for those who are not to adopt this identity – and its presumed accompanying allegiances – as a means through which to understand and process the world of *Oz*. In *Oz*, where race operates in the foreground, Beecher's racial identity exists in the background: all the other characters are marked in terms of their race and the other white inmates have their ethnicity overtly marked - as Irish and Italians - or are racially marked as "other" in terms of the Aryans.

The ways in which Irish and Italian ethnicities are understood within American culture reflects the fact that whiteness is both unstable and mutable: it is not simply a fixed half of a racial binary with impermeable boundaries; it is more useful to think of race operating as a ladder of privilege, with normative white identity sitting at the top, superior to all other formulations of identity. Proceeding down this ladder, the possibility of claiming whiteness, and all its attendant privileges, becomes more and more difficult, as the designation of "white" is contingent upon the operation of other facets of identity, such as gender, class, sexuality, and so on. This procession of decreasing whiteness culminates in the designation of whiteness's binary opposite: blackness. Understanding

race in this way allows for us to see how one can be designated as non-white without necessarily needing to be designated as black. In addition to this, there is a space where certain bodies can exist between whiteness and blackness.

Jennifer Guglielmo addresses the workings of race in this way in specific reference to Italians:

The epithet *guinea*, for example, was used by whites to mark African slaves and their descendants as inferior before it was applied to Italians at the turn of the twentieth century. Italians also learned that they were racially “other” in the United States in ways that went beyond language: lynchings; the refusal of some native-born Americans to ride streetcars with or live alongside “lousy dagoes”; the exclusion of Italian children from certain schools and movie theaters, and their parents from social groups and labor unions; segregated seating in some churches; and the barrage of popular magazines, books, movies, and newspapers that bombarded Americans with images of Italians as racially suspect. These conventions received approval from the federal government in the 1920s when entry of immigrants from Italy was restricted on racial grounds. Yet, paradoxically, as far as the state was concerned, Italians were quite unequivocally “white” – they had access to citizenship, could vote, own land, and serve on juries; and were not barred from marrying other Europeans.<sup>454</sup>

This demonstrates the way that the racial identity of Italians could oscillate between black and white: although they never fully occupied the space of blackness, they also failed to attain the status of whiteness, thus occupying a hybrid status which troubled the binary of black and white. This liminal racial space is also occupied by the Irish, as addressed by David Roediger:

*Low-browed and savage, grovelling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual* – such were the adjectives used by many native-born Americans to describe the Catholic Irish “race” in the years before the Civil War. The striking similarity of this litany of insults to the list of traits ascribed to antebellum Blacks hardly requires comment [...] it was by no means clear that the Irish were white.<sup>455</sup>

<sup>454</sup> Guglielmo, Jennifer. “Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths” in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (eds.) Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno. New York & London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 1-16. 11

<sup>455</sup> Roediger, David R. *Race and the Making of the American Working Class* London & New York: Verso, 1999. 133-4

Noel Ignatiev corroborates Roediger's contention that the racial categorization of the Irish as white was by no means a given, declaring that it 'was by no means obvious who was "white",' and that the ways in which the Irish and blacks were colloquially termed indicates a blurring of the boundaries between the two: 'In the early years Irish were frequently referred to as "niggers turned inside out"; the Negroes, for their part, were sometimes called "smoked Irish," an appellation they must have found no more flattering than it was intended to be.'<sup>456</sup> The ways in which Irish and Italian identities are marked as non-white here only heightens the ways in which Beecher is legitimately white, allowing him to be utilized within *Oz* as the symbol of white vulnerability and where the Irish and Italian inmates are associated with criminality, Beecher successfully avoids this taint and is instead situated as a victim of circumstance and poor personal choices, rather than as the possessor of an inherent criminal disposition.

The Aryan Brotherhood (AB) have their whiteness operate in divergent ways from that of Beecher; whereas Beecher's whiteness exists as unmarked and normative, the AB are linked with a sense of "hyperwhiteness" – their racial identity in its very explicit marking resists being seen as the normative ideal. The representation of the AB also delimits their whiteness in that they are associated with elements usually associated with non-white identity: violent, criminal, Southern and lower-class. The depiction of the Brotherhood provides an interesting complication in racial terms: although they are clearly white, their whiteness is posited against that demonstrated by Beecher. Beecher's whiteness becomes valorized as "normal" whiteness whereas theirs occupies the space of deviancy. The troubling of whiteness through the AB occurs through the fracturing of this supposedly stable category; whiteness itself becomes seen as a binary of normativity

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<sup>456</sup> Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish became White* New York & London: Routledge, 1995. 41

and deviance, with Beecher representing the normative and the AB the deviant. Although this does provide an initial problematizing of whiteness, it resolves itself through a return to class identity: Beecher in his firmly middle-class identity exemplifies “proper” whiteness, whereas the AB in their staunchly working-class designation represent whiteness that is ultimately a failure. The whiteness of the Aryan Brotherhood fails to operate successfully (and therefore remain unseen) because of its class position: this antagonism between the racial designations of Beecher and the AB merely serves to highlight that whiteness only exists as normative when operating in tandem with accompanying elements of normativity – in this case middle class identity – to shore up its superiority; normativity relies upon the connections between and conflation of various categories of identity. In this theoretical formulation, whiteness only “succeeds” when it is also male, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and so on. The positioning of the AB as this problematic “white, but not quite white enough” is given clarity when we consider the ways in which “white trash” has become utilized as a means of discussing deviant whiteness.<sup>457</sup>

The fact that Beecher exists as a stark contrast to the other inmates who are racially marked as non-white, coupled with the distancing of him from inherent criminality, lends credence to the idea that to be non-white is to be inherently criminal; this formulation in tandem with the way in which black inmates are depicted in *Oz* implicitly stages blackness as inextricably linked to criminality: in *Oz* to be black is to be a criminal. It may seem strange to focus upon the representation of a white male figure within the confines

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<sup>457</sup> For more development of this analysis as the position of “white trash” being a space of otherness in which whiteness resides, see Anthony Harkins *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford University Press, 2005); William Matthew McCarter ‘Homo Redneckus: Redefining White Trash in American Culture’ in *Americana@* Volume II, Issue I (2005)

of a thesis about the black male body, but Beecher proves an incredibly useful way in which to examine the ways in which the black male body is understood. As Toni Morrison contends, whiteness is understood within the white imaginary through its opposition to blackness; even when blackness seems to be absent, it is always present and informs the ways in which whiteness is known:

Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not “about” Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. It is no accident and no mistake that immigrant populations (and much immigrant literature) understood their “Americanness” as an opposition to the resident black population.<sup>458</sup>

Morrison’s contention can be used here if we think of the figure of Beecher as representing a text about whiteness: although not explicitly about blackness, Beecher does nevertheless illuminate the ways in which blackness is understood.

The fact that Beecher becomes the only character who is “successfully” white (a whiteness that is successful because it refuses to be recognized in terms of race) becomes incredibly important when coupled with the fact that he is consistently depicted as someone who does not belong in the Oz; middle class whiteness becomes seen as the antithesis of criminality and this bolsters the voyeuristic pleasure taken by the inferred reader when being exposed to the foreign domain of incarceration. Joel Wlodarz describes the sympathy we are intended to feel with Beecher: “Tracked by a mobile, handheld camera, Beecher enters the prison (followed by the viewer) at the opening of *Oz*’s pilot (“The Routine”). As the camera moves into the holding cell, where the inmates are chained together, an African American man randomly stabs new Latino inmate

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<sup>458</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1992. 46-47

Alvarez<sup>459</sup>, and the camera's retreat from this shocking action matches Beecher's screams as he bangs against the bars of the holding cell while Alvarez clings to his leg in pain.<sup>460</sup> The emotional trauma that Beecher experiences here is given primacy over the trauma felt by Alvarez, not to mention that the first black inmate to whom we are exposed is guilty of a seemingly random and extreme act of violence – an act of violence that only points to racial conflict which occurs outside of white middle class actions. The primacy of this scene is given to focusing upon white male suffering, where the physical wounding of a person of color has no importance outside of its impact upon the white male who bears witness. As Joel Wlodarz states, 'There is an inherent irony in this sense of personal violation through having violence thrust upon the viewer: a large part of the appeal of *Oz* is the voyeuristic pleasure it affords in being able to observe an(other) world, a pleasure which partly lies in the confirmation given that this is a world in which the viewer does not deserve to be imprisoned.'<sup>461</sup>

The character of Beecher preserves the inferred viewer of *Oz* as white, middle-class, male and heterosexual, and allows entry into this "other" world for visual inquiry. The viewer is implicitly permitted to partake in a pleasurable surveillance of "otherness", while watching the inmates be explicitly watched by the prison guards, which lends justification to this voyeuristic process. *Oz* successfully depicts a nightmarish domain in which a white, middle class man has become the outsider; all of the privileges that are afforded Beecher as a result of his identity become disrupted in *Oz* and he comes to represent an intrusion into this world wherein non-white and/or working class men are

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<sup>459</sup> It seems worthy of mention that the first act we see taken by a black man in the series is stabbing another man: in the world of *Oz* this can easily be read as deliberately evoking a rape scene.

<sup>460</sup> Wlodarz 2005, 68

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

seen as the cause of violence, criminality, and deviance. When placed into the world of the “other”, with its own codes and conventions, Beecher is lost but this only reiterates his normative superiority.<sup>462</sup> Beecher exists as trespasser, or outsider, precisely because his identity as a white, middle-class heterosexual man imply that he does not belong in the carceral space; there is a dissonance between his white, middle-class heterosexual identity and the experience of imprisonment. This dissonance functions to shore up the perception that it is only working-class and/or men of color are the rightful occupants of the carceral space; their containment within the prison-industrial complex is not only because they have committed crimes, but because the criminalization inflicted upon them becomes conflated with being everything that Beecher is not: to be working class and/or a person of colour is in and of itself that of being criminalized. As the seasons of *Oz* progress, we see that Beecher gradually becomes less of an outsider in the penitentiary: as he proceeds to commit violent criminal acts we see the workings of prison sentences in the sense that they often completely fail to rehabilitate in favour of disenfranchisement and punitive action. It is no coincidence that Beecher’s descent into criminality happens simultaneously with his increasing association with characters who stand for deviance (Keller – working-class and homosexuality, Said – blackness and Islam), symbolizing that criminality is inherently connected to categories of sexuality, race and class.

Whiteness works to actually conceal its raced position in a dynamic where to remain unmarked and invisible confers the privileges of normative identity, and anything other is marked as deviant and non-white: because the Aryans have their race so explicitly

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<sup>462</sup> This is certainly not to say that Beecher does not benefit from male, white, or middle class privilege in an institutionalized context: just one example is that he is the only inmate who we see released throughout *Oz* (apart from Bob Rebadow, who is an elderly inmate and has served his full sentence).

marked and seen, I would argue that this becomes akin to being non-white. Rather than thinking of whiteness as a stable monolithic space, it is more productive to look at whiteness as a space in which it is possible to be designated as “not white enough” or “excessively white”: both of these designations are ultimately failed whiteness, which in turn becomes non-whiteness. Examining whiteness in this way, rather than as a stable and fixed category, allows for an understanding of why whiteness is constantly claimed and re-claimed; as a category whose boundaries are permeable, whiteness needs to be kept under control and surveillance in order to ensure its power remains. The uncertain terrain where whiteness successfully evades being neither absence nor excess is the locus of white privilege, and as such needs to be fiercely protected. So in the context of *Oz*, Beecher epitomises this area of whiteness that – while protected from the taint of non-whiteness – exercises normative power, whereas the AB are relegated to the space of non-white because of their excessive or hyper whiteness. As Mason Stokes states in his approach to whiteness, ‘it works best as unattached abstraction, as that which flows through us without staying in one place for too long. Like a fugitive, it knows to keep moving.’<sup>463</sup> This happens with the simultaneous conflation of the Aryans’ depiction having much in common with how non-white identities have often been represented, with the prerequisite tropes of poor education, violent criminality, and Southern religious fervour all being present.

In terms of whiteness being posited as being imperilled by mass incarceration, Attica is explicitly mentioned<sup>464</sup> as something that haunts McManus as a symbol of trauma: implicitly it is a white man who is damaged by this event, providing a figurative

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<sup>463</sup> Stokes 1998: 736

<sup>464</sup> *Oz*: 1/8

whitewashing of this racialized event. The spectre of miscegenation rears its ugly head for Schillinger when he suspects that his granddaughter might be mixed-race,<sup>465</sup> constituting his greatest fear that his whiteness might be “tainted” by the proximity of blackness. We normally see miscegenation and its attendant anxieties being implicitly addressed within *Oz* with the issue of interracial rape (analysis of which will follow later); this is one of the few times when the show can explicitly talk about miscegenation. McManus operates within *Oz* as the epitome of the white saviour figure: he is positioned as the inspiration for White’s rehabilitation into the “model prisoner,” and given the fight that breaks out when White is defending McManus from Guerra’s criticism, White has obviously elevated McManus to his superior upon a pedestal.<sup>466</sup> Their relationship becomes evocative of a dysfunctional father and son dynamic: this positioning of McManus as a paternal figure gives credence to the idea that blackness needs to be rescued by whiteness. Schillinger points out the class differences between Beecher and himself (and by extension, the AB): “it’ll happen. Those cocksuckers on the board will see a rich boy like you sobbing his heart out – their hearts will melt.”<sup>467</sup> This acknowledgement of the importance of class demonstrates that whiteness rapidly loses privilege when negated by lower class identity.

When Winthrop kills Beecher’s father, it is engineered through a complicit black CO.<sup>468</sup> The background of the looting and burning of public property outside the walls of *Oz* (shown through a televised news report) in response to Gov. Devlin’s comment that he

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid.: 4/14

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.: 4/16

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.: 6/1

would pardon Mayor Wilson Loewen if convicted of aiding and abetting the murder by the KKK of two ten-year old African American girls (during which time he was the Sheriff of the respective county) fades behind (literally as the televised images fade behind the action of the stabbing, and figuratively) the drama of the stabbing of Beecher's father: here we have another example of white suffering taking precedence over black, notably this time this white suffering is engineered through the reliance upon a black man in a position of authority and his actions. Even when *Oz* offers a critique of institutional racism it simultaneously disavows the negative impact on communities of colour caused by mass incarceration. The Winthrop-Beecher storyline also stands as a point of coherence in contrast to the overlapping voiceovers in the protest storyline, muddling the viewer's perception of events and commitment to this particular plot development. This is exemplified by the SORT (Special Operations Response Team) team who enter Em City to quell the racial unrest, but discover Beecher's father, at which point the action stops and the camera cuts away from the scene. This occurs while the racial unrest storyline simply plays out on a television screen in an abandoned recreational space, engineering a disconnection from these events while the death of a white man remains centre stage. When we continue watching the television footage of these protests, it is after Hill prefaces the images with: "senseless violence. Yeah, senseless violence. Comes in all shapes and colours,"<sup>469</sup> again demeaning any useful critique of the entrenched racism within mass incarceration, as he aligns the violence of people protesting institutional racism with the violence enacted upon the body of colour by this system itself.

### ***BLACKNESS***

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid.: 6/2

The three other lead characters in *Oz* are all represented as being deviant in some way; aside from the fact that they are all black and therefore are non-normative in racial terms, there are also other elements of deviance with which they are associated: Augustus Hill is in a wheelchair, thus being associated with ideas of the body as being damaged or diseased; Simon Adebisi is connected with violence, heavy drug usage, homosexuality and African-ness; Karim Said is portrayed as a Muslim which attaches connotations of religious extremism and violence to his body.

The turmoil that Said experiences because of his inner demons implies that he has a well of rage that cannot be tamed by respectability and/or religion: black male anger is positioned as more destructive and powerful than anything else. Said, who is held up throughout the show as the exemplar of righteousness and respectability, confesses to Arif that: "I have such rage inside of me – rage unlike I've ever known. I don't think I can [control it] much longer. I feel like I'm possessed."<sup>470</sup> This scene points to the pressing need for him (and his fury) to be contained. As he pounds away at Robson in a vicious beating, he yells "you wanna see a nigger in me!", the "nigger" referring to the manifestation of black male anger: the "nigger" is just bubbling away under the surface until it breaks free. By the use of the term "nigger" in this way, *Oz* utilizes Said to confirm that blackness is always marked by rageful violence, supporting the cornerstone of white supremacy. At the climax of this scene, the camera lingers over the blood-spattered (from his victim) face of Said, with his teeth bared and eyes burning with fury. The essence of being a "nigger" is concretized as being violent threat that is uncontrollable and uncontained.

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid.: 4/15

Beecher comments to Said: "I saw your face the moment after you killed him, and a bit of Adebisi had bled into you: his anger, his violence. Your entire life you've kept tight control over your feelings – you denied the Adebisi in you, but you can't do it any longer. You gotta make him part of you Karim. Make him a part of you."<sup>471</sup> The "African-ness" of Said (and symbolically every black man) is that which taints his American identity, representing the source of deviance, unrest and anger. Here where we see blackness conflated with African identity, blackness itself is positioned as a threat to whiteness, which in itself symbolizes America. When Said stabs Schillinger and Robson (fulfilling their perception of the angry black man that needs to be contained), he does so with the words "Adebisi lives"<sup>472</sup> – at this point Adebisi has become a cipher for African savagery that is so extreme that it does not even need his existence in order to form an attack on whiteness.

In the season one finale, we finally see the flashback of Adebisi's crime which landed him in *Oz*: in a gesture which heightens the presentation of him as a primitive African, we see him beheading his victim. Adebisi, in his evocation of African blackness, represents the conflation of black man, Africa, and AIDS: when he deliberately infects Napa with HIV<sup>473</sup> we are confronted with the fear of contagion that the black male body holds. Adebisi is consistently marked in terms of his African identity, the spectacular representation of him relies upon an exoticization of imagined African primitiveness: we see the potential of African culture to provoke trauma.<sup>474</sup> When Jara (Adebisi's mentor,

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid.: 4/16

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.: 3/2

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.: 2/7

reminding him to reconnect with his African heritage) is killed in the cafeteria,<sup>475</sup> Adebisi is placed centre frame as a primitive spectre: his strength is exaggerated as he tosses the guards aside when they try to “tame” him, he is undressed for the lingering gaze of the camera to pan over his musculature, and he is then circled by the C.O.s in a configuration that evokes the cautious attempt to calm and control a wild animal.

The fight scene between Said and Adebisi which culminates in Adebisi’s death represents the struggle between the two available modes of blackness available to African American men: that of respectability politics being pitted against “authentic blackness.” Said epitomises the struggle to be viewed as an equal citizen through the adoption of “appropriate” dress and behaviour, although he ultimately fails because of his religious beliefs. Adebisi demonstrates an alternative mode of existence: that of remaining “true to oneself”, where he refuses to assimilate to American cultural norms and retains his African identity –in a society where blackness itself is conflated with primitive African identity. The deployment of these two to uphold these reductive positions for black masculinity keeps intact the conservative perception that black men either try (and fail) to inhabit respectable identity, or stubbornly refuse to absorb American culture and remain threatening figures on the margins of normative identity.

Through *Oz*, it is possible to see the ways in which black male identity becomes contained: not only is black masculinity delimited through being criminalized (spatially situated, and, to a lesser extent, eroticized and wounded), the bodies of black men are literally contained through mass incarceration. This has the impact of further curtailing black identity through the numerous and far-reaching repercussions of imprisonment

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid.: 2/8

upon the African American community<sup>476</sup>; the effects of locking black men behind bars are felt far more profoundly than simply inside the space of the prison walls. *Oz* becomes symbolic of the prescribed, designated space for black men: the prison space serves as the “solution” to the “problem” of black men in the logical formulation which posits black masculinity as a threat which needs to be subdued; imprisonment allows for the black male body to be contained and constrained outside of emancipated society rather than being permitted freedom to exist in public spaces. *Oz* presents us with a vision of black men in both desirable and undesirable spaces: when incarcerated black men pose no threat to “innocent” society and are a source of free labour and revenue for the state, compared to when they are not incarcerated they represent a violent threat and social burden. *Oz* depicts certain social spaces being occupied by black men as being negative, for example, through Warden Leo Glynn: in the first episode of season one, the first time we see Glynn performing one of his responsibilities in his addressing of the prisoners of Em City, the scene descends into one of chaotic violence and lack of control; Glynn supports the perception that positions of power and authority are one of the social spaces which should not be inhabited by black men, even when they are the epitome of “respectable” blackness, rather than black criminality. This notion of black men being unfit to occupy positions of social responsibility is prefigured in *The Birth of a Nation*: in a scene depicting the ‘negro party in control in the State House of Representatives, 101 blacks against 23 whites, session of 1871,’<sup>477</sup> the scene of supposed organized legislation simply becomes one of mockery of the black politicians, who do nothing but inappropriately put bare feet on desks, gnaw on chicken legs, and argue childishly; black

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<sup>476</sup> For more on the specifics of these repercussions, see Thompson 2010.

<sup>477</sup> Griffiths: 1915

men are also seen to pose a threat when in positions of power, because of corruption or lack of ability. In a similar way to the positioning of Beecher against the Aryan Brotherhood in a step which works to valorize a specific manifestation of white identity as normative against that which is deviant, the pitting of Warden Leo Glyn against the black inmates of Oz exemplifies the “respectability politics” argument: this is the perception wherein African Americans occupy the lower echelons of society because of lack of assimilation into what becomes encoded as “cultural norms”, which is a smokescreen for the racist belief that black people fail to exhibit the hallmarks of desirable (white) cultural behaviours. The existence of Glynn as the head of Oz works to reiterate the idea that positions of power are open to all in an American meritocracy, allowing institutionalized racism and its accompanying social fallout to be denied. In a particularly ingenious sleight of hand, the depiction of Glynn and the African American inmates reifies the idea that black identity can be desirable rather than completely deviant, yet even when in its desirable manifestation, African Americans are still underqualified for social positions better occupied by whites, all of which provides a handy refutation of equality measures such as affirmative action.

In the final episode of the first series of *Oz*, we are confronted with the image of the black male as a destructive figure full of rage, intent on wreaking vengeance: the “homeboys” are the only group to destroy public property and start looting – an image which is clearly evocative of news broadcasts of African Americans during national emergencies or uprisings tied to racialized news events.<sup>478</sup> They are also responsible for

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<sup>478</sup> For some examples of this, see Aaron Kinney “‘Looting’ or Finding” *Salon* September 2005 [http://www.salon.com/2005/09/02/photo\\_controversy/](http://www.salon.com/2005/09/02/photo_controversy/) (last accessed 3/3/2015); Benjamin D. Singer “Mass Media and Communication Processes in the Detroit Riot of 1967” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 1970), pp. 236-24; S.R. Sommers, E.P. Apfelbaum, K.N. Dukes, N. Toosi, E.J. Wang “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications, and Future Research Questions” *Analyses of social issues and public policy : ASAP* Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006, pp. 39-55; Becca Stanek “9 Photos of White People

the attempted murder of cellist Eugene Dobbins, symbolizing the threat of the violent black criminal male to the white middle class. It is also the homeboys who are the only apparent drug addicts in the world of *Oz*: blackness becomes conflated with heroin addiction. At the apex of the rioting in this episode, we see Said raising a gun aloft and firing, his silhouette mirroring the Black Power salute: the black man becomes crowned king through violence in this carnivalesque ritual.<sup>479</sup> The destruction of Dobbins' cello by Jackson Vahue reiterates the danger that the black male represents, not just to white middle class lives, but to prized property as well.

Holland addresses the bind of blackness where one's status as "living" human is never recognized, thus allowing for the exploitation of black individuals to maintain white culture, while conveniently providing justification for the abuses visited upon the black body: 'When "living" is something to be *achieved* and not *experienced*, and figurative and literal death are very much a part of the social landscape, how do people of color gain a sense of empowerment?'<sup>480</sup> Holland uses the idea of blackness as a lens through which everyone develops a sense of self, in terms of their relation to blackness as that which is other, marginal, or invisible: 'Blackness is the yardstick by which most peoples in this nation measure their worth – by something they are *not*.'<sup>481</sup> Blackness resolutely remains a space of absence, or negation. This could be extended to the way that American national identity itself is formulated: if it is a country defined implicitly as that which is not black, this goes some way to providing an explanation for the history of black American identity;

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Rioting that put Ferguson into Perspective" *Mic* November 2014 <http://mic.com/articles/105198/9-photos-of-white-people-rioting-put-the-ferguson-demonstrations-in-perspective> (last accessed 3/3/2015)

<sup>479</sup> For more on the carnivalesque and its operations, see Mikhail Bakhtin *Rabelais and his World* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1941.

<sup>480</sup> Holland 2000, 16

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*

with the utilization of slavery and its aftermath, black people were a crucial resource within the US, yet had their citizenry – their very humanity – consistently denied. “Snake” epitomizes the black buck figure that is so threatening within the white imaginary: he brutally rapes and murders a suburban white family in an extremely violent situation,<sup>482</sup> which is also notable for the respect it garners him from Wangler.

The inversion of power between Schibetta and Glyn undermines Glyn’s authority, implying the ineffectiveness of African American men in positions of power.<sup>483</sup> This is exacerbated by the positioning of Glyn’s brother, Mark, as a criminal, as blackness is connected to criminality. Glyn only takes an ethical course of action (encouraging his brother to confess to the murder he committed) in order to reassert his power as this will enable him to remove the hold Schibetta has over him, rather than because of any morally driven motivation. The state of undress of Adebisi and Wangler as they enter the kitchen represents the imaging of the service worker as uncivilized and unable/unwilling to conform to standards of respectability.<sup>484</sup> The positioning of the homeboys as the kitchen staff evokes the experience of the black male as domestic help: here we can see that they constitute a contemporary analogue of the “house negro”.

The character of Johnny Basil/Desmond Mobe as an undercover policeman who then becomes addicted to heroin and commits murder gives credence to the idea that black men should not be in positions of power or authority because they will become corrupted, not to mention the implied inherent criminality of blackness. When Querns changes the “management” structure of *Oz* and instates Adebisi, Pancamo and Morales as trustees,

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<sup>482</sup> *Oz*: 3/2

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*: 2/5

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*: 2/6

accompanied by the progressive moving of white inmates to Unit B, *Oz* presents a black man as the cause of a segregated population, with non-white men running a lawless society of prisoners: this is the dystopia imagined within *Oz* when there is a lack of white control. This restructuring of power becomes most evident when we see that Adebisi is allowed to have curtains put up in his pod: not only has Querns given the most power to three men of color, the inmate who has the most is notably black.<sup>485</sup> In a space where part of the punishment derives from a lack of privacy given to the inmates, Adebisi's curtains constitute an important symbol of the special treatment he is receiving from the Warden. The curtains are also interesting in a different way: they imply a need to cover or hide the deviant acts that are enacted within the black male's space, and also make Adebisi all the more alluring for the viewer; as already commented upon, part of the appeal of *Oz* lies in the fact that the viewer is placed in the position of panoptic surveyor, with all areas of the prison space being accessible to the gaze, yet when Adebisi is explicitly being hidden from sight the desire to see him is heightened precisely because it is prevented.

In one of Hill's opening monologues, he states the following: "Seven out of ten inmates are from cities. But 90% of the prisons themselves are in rural areas, you know, farmland, hillsides, forests. Now you'd think such bucolic surroundings would have a calming effect on those inside. But no, out in the wild, things only get wilder."<sup>486</sup> As Hill says the words "out in the wild" the camera simultaneously zooms in on a white couple being surrounded by a group of seven black inmates, who emerge from the shadows accompanied by a background sound effect of wolves howling. This conflates urban spaces (read black ghettos in inner cities) with blackness, criminality, and animalistic threat. This scene

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<sup>485</sup> Ibid.: 4/6

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.: 4/7

visualizes the perception of white innocence being under threat from black masculinity. Mondo Brown's flashback clip before he is imprisoned in *Oz* shows him in an industrial walk-in fridge next to a torso that has been beheaded and dismembered, positioned as though he is claiming a trophy.<sup>487</sup> This is a particularly stark image, given that it is so highly evocative of the lynching ritual, but inverted here with a black man as the perpetrator. This evocation is further heightened when Brown exhales smoke over the torso, as the burning of black bodies was a repeated feature of the lynching spectacle. This, combined with the other scene in *Oz* where Alexander Vogel is hanged by the AB with the word "Jew" carved into his chest (which also resonates with the lynching image),<sup>488</sup> works to diminish the reality of the black male as the lynching victim.<sup>489</sup>

The union of Said and Adebisi is shot through with menace: the solidarity of blackness is presented as a threat wherein black men recruit others to follow the path of violence and militancy as a mindless protégé.<sup>490</sup> The hand gestures and Adebisi's alteration of Said's dress is also particularly evocative of imagery from the Black Power movement. This is borne out by the murderous intentions of Clayton Hughes towards Gov. Devlin: despite the summary given by Hill explaining the specifics of how political representation is increased within prison areas (from which non-inmates benefit while the incarcerated cannot exercise political freedom), leading to greater political power and incentive to pass laws to maintain mass incarceration of people of color, *Oz* positions the black

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.: 2/3

<sup>489</sup> This of course is in no way meant to imply that black men were the exclusive victims of lynching, merely that this ritual overwhelmingly worked as a means of disciplining black men and their behavior in an overwhelmingly disproportionate manner compared to other lynching victims.

<sup>490</sup> *Oz*: 4/7

vigilante male as the source of problems, rather than the prison industrial complex itself. The fight between Said and Adebisi is shot like the Mandingo fight of *Django Unchained*, wherein these two black male bodies are focused on by the camera as it pans slowly over their sweat-soaked musculature.<sup>491</sup> The problems of segregation and illegal/immoral activity flourishing under Qwerens' supervision of Em City are eradicated with the death of Adebisi: he is the root cause of Em City's dysfunction, rather than problems in the system itself. We see here the apex of "black on black" crime in the show.

When Burr Redding is placed in the "cage" the scene is shown with him pounding on the bars and howling, evoking the image of an animal held captive in a zoo, yet again conflating the black male with uncontrolled animalistic anger.<sup>492</sup> The next time we see the cage being used Redding is still being held captive, pacing while the rest of the prison population surrounds the cage: drawn in by the spectacle of the black male body, this again calls to mind the image of animals being displayed in a zoo, or equally pertinently, the human freak show exhibit. This, combined with the revealing of the cage with a flourish of brightly coloured cloth beneath which the cage is hidden, evokes the freak show exhibit, which of course relied heavily on using blackness as an exotic spectacle as evidence of "freakery".<sup>493</sup>

In the first episode of the fifth season, Hill states the following: "rapists, paedophiles, hustlers, we got all kinds of men in Oz," while in the background we are presented with a sea of naked male bodies behind him, the majority of which are overwhelmingly black. Thus *Oz* delivers two neat tricks here: the viewer has their voyeuristic desire satiated

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<sup>491</sup> The Mandingo fight will be discussed at more length in the conclusion.

<sup>492</sup> *Oz* 4/10

<sup>493</sup> This resonates with William Henry Johnson, as discussed in the introduction.

with the lingering presentation of the naked black body, while this body is presented as the visual locus of rape, paedophilia, and hustling. When an African American CO discovers Cutler hanged in his cell, he comments: "Well ain't that a kick. One of you actually went and lynched yourselves," as he cuts down the body.<sup>494</sup>

The lack of professionalism displayed by the homeboys with the telemarketing business symbolizes the inability to attain respectability and operate successfully within the world of work: here the implication is that prison is "needed" to "tame" the black male.<sup>495</sup> When we see the homeboys get fired from the telemarketing firm and the inability of the Muslims to operate the production line in the printing business, the black male is again depicted as being unable to succeed within the workplace. This is amplified by Arif's failure to balance the finances of the company.<sup>496</sup> The friction between legitimate work and the black male is also established through the way in which Redding is demonized by the homeboys for making them "do work that's just plain fucking work," rather than dealing heroin.<sup>497</sup>

Joffrey Naima, the former Black Panther Party radical appears in the final season: the evocation of Eldridge Cleaver through him is produced particularly through his relationship with Suzanne Fitzgerald, which brings up anxieties associated with the seduction by black men of white women as a political act. This is established through his disdain for Ryan O'Reilly, which is couched in racial terms: "Get out of my cell

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<sup>494</sup> *Oz*: 6/4

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*: 6/5

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

whiteboy.”<sup>498</sup> This storyline brings up the fear of the black male destroying the white family, as Ryan frames the relationship between Naima and Fitzgerald as being destructive of his parents’ marriage: “He’s the one that got you to leave Dad and abandon me, right?”<sup>499</sup>

### **Rape**

Rape is used within *Oz* as a site of trauma, anxiety and fear; not simply because it constitutes an act of sexualized violence, but also because it is where racial identities and meanings become concretized. The threat posed by black men in *Oz* is keenly felt with its depiction of the subject of rape; consistently throughout the show male rape is felt as an undercurrent laced with fear and violence. Given the graphic nature of the drama, this is an act of violence not only feared by the characters, but also as a viewer with the potential of being exposed to visceral and disturbing scenes of male brutalization. Rape serves as a way to maintain social hierarchies within the prison space, but it is notable that rape is something which we most often see done to white men. As Joel Wlodarz comments, ‘the prominent scenes of rape in the program exploit white male vulnerability.’<sup>500</sup> Although he notes that within *Oz*, rape is something done to and by white men, this needs to be unpacked further: the times when the perpetrator is white are exclusively when the perpetrator is a member of the Aryan Brotherhood; in an ironic twist, the race of the Aryans becomes so heavily marked that I would argue that they actually become identified as non-white.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> *Oz* 6/4

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>500</sup> Wlodarz 2005: 69

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*

When we see rape victims on the show: most often they are not members of the Aryan Brotherhood, and their whiteness exists as an unmarked racial category, thus in this racial configuration the white male successfully remains seen exclusively as the victim of rape, rather than as existing on both sides of this equation, and so the myth of black rapacious sexuality with whiteness as its victim remains intact. In discussing the way in which the sexualisation of the male body works to enhance the voyeuristic pleasure taken from the viewer's perspective, Wlodarz comments that: 'Exploiting both the anxiety and the sexual charge of the male body in and out of control, *Oz* uses the prison setting to eroticize subjection, especially that of straight white men.'<sup>502</sup>

On Beecher's first night in *Oz*, he is placed in Adebisi's cell and is immediately presented with the threat of rape by the imposing Nigerian: As Adebisi moves close to Beecher's bed in the dark, he claims ominously, "I won't be fucking you, prag.....at least not tonight." Wlodarz notes that the 'camera's eroticization of Adebisi's muscled body contrasts with Beecher's anxiety and thus suggests both white fear of *and* fascination with black male sexuality.'<sup>503</sup> Although nothing happens at this point, the threat of black male sexuality has been felt, and this is something which permeates throughout *Oz* for its inmates and also its viewers.

According to the National Inmate Survey 2011-12 conducted by the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 2.9% of white inmates reported inmate-on-inmate sexual victimization, compared to 1.3% of black inmates, giving credence to the representation of white male fear of rape in *Oz*. When looking at the rates of reported staff sexual misconduct, the rate of white inmates almost halves to 1.6% whereas the rate

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<sup>502</sup> Ibid.: 86

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.: 68

of black inmates doubles to 2.6%, indicating that rape is used against black inmates with an implied sanction from the prison industrial complex.<sup>504</sup> Put another way, where white men suffer within prison at the hands of black men, black men's suffering is directly caused by the prison industrial complex and its systematic punishment of African Americans. According to Brian Jarvis, 'studies of sexual violence in modern US prisons state that the majority of rapes (70-85%) involve black aggressors and white victims.'<sup>505</sup> This, in conjunction with the persistent underlying threat of white men being raped by black men in *Oz* works to shift any sense of those being damaged within the prison system being primarily African Americans to white men being the "real" victims.

The way that rape is depicted in *Oz* is of particular interest in racial terms: all of the characters who are known by the audience as being rape victims are (with the exception of Gloria Nathan, who is Latina) white males: in the world of *Oz*, black men are only involved in rape when they are the perpetrators, they are never seen to be the victims. Despite the fact that white inmates do commit rape in *Oz*, the only time when we are explicitly shown this violent act is when the perpetrator is black, in the case of Adebisi and Peter Schibetta: Adebisi revels in this extremely violent act and it becomes a dramatic spectacle to be enjoyed by the other inmates and the viewers of *Oz*. In terms of highlighting the racialized differences in the way that we are shown the process of rape, Peter Schibetta's narrative arc is useful: after the particularly explicit rape scene between Adebisi and Schibetta is shown, we then see Schibetta raped by Vern Schillinger and his Aryan brotherhood comrades. In this scene however, we only see the events that

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<sup>504</sup> Figures from BJS National Inmate Survey 2011-2012, found at: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/svpjri1112.pdf> (accessed 09/06/2014)

<sup>505</sup> Jarvis, Brian. *Cruel and Unusual: Punishment and US Culture* London & Sterling, VA, Pluto Press, 2004. P. 236

precipitate the rape, and Schillinger references the rape of Schibetta by Adebisi with the words “You know, I always wondered, was Adebisi’s dick bigger than mine?.....You be the judge.”<sup>506</sup>As he says these words, Schillinger also coats his fingers with a black, tar-like substance (presumably to use as lubricant): through the rape of Schibetta, Schillinger’s penis will literally be blackened. Thus, even when rape is carried out by a white man, it is inextricably connected with rape scenarios where black men are the perpetrators, and there is the unsurprising obsession with the black male penis.

Mason Stokes’ analysis of Charles Carroll’s extensive writing on the temptation of Eve illustrates that the spectre of black male sexuality representing a threat to the purity (white and Christian) of Eve (and by implication all white women) has a longstanding history in the collective American imaginary. In discussing a scene where the temptation of Eve occurs at the hands of a black woman, he comments that ‘the fact that Carroll’s tempter is far removed from this conventional iconography of black female lasciviousness further demonstrates that his interest in this black woman is to some extent a dodge – a cover for his greater interest in the sexual temptation of black masculinity [...] Carroll keeps black masculinity relatively intact and retrievable.’<sup>507</sup> Thus even when the black male is not explicitly present, the threat of black masculinity remains: it is a fear which has become so ingrained within popular consciousness that it remains despite the lack of a visible black male body from which to emanate. In the case of *Oz*, this constant fear helps to explain why the fear of rape is consistently firmly attached to the notion of black men as the perpetrators: the rapes which are committed by the AB remain associated with non-whiteness, leaving the psychic connection between

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<sup>506</sup> *Oz* S5, E3

<sup>507</sup> Stokes 1998: 731

the black male body and rapist intact; it is black male bodies which need to be feared above all others in the space of the prison. As further demonstrated by Stokes, Carroll is not introducing a new anxiety into the American consciousness, he is simply one example of a longstanding preoccupation with the threat posed by black men: 'it is possible to see *The Tempter of Eve* – and all of those tracts and pamphlets which precede it – as one long attempt to both document and erase black male sexual threat from the nations' collective white consciousness – from that primal scene in the Garden of Eden.'<sup>508</sup> The black male threat is firmly linked to ideas of Christian purity, and the protection that purity necessitates in the face of black male sexuality. Stokes links his analysis to Toni Morrison's conclusions in *Playing in the Dark*:

"the fetishizing of color" undergirds much, if not all, of America's literary aesthetic. For Morrison, canonical American literature depends upon the "thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy – an informing, stabilizing, and disturbing element" of a specifically white literary imagination. By black surrogacy Morrison means the unacknowledged, but never silent, Africanist presence that fuels so many white imaginings of the so-called "American experience" [...] If Morrison is right in her insistence on a "dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" in the American Eden, then *of course* there is a black Templar in the Garden.<sup>509</sup>

The threat in *Oz* only makes sense when there is a black presence (which by its very nature is perceived as constituting a threat), regardless of where the threat is actually coming from. Thus, even when rape is perpetrated by white men the notion of rape is maintained as stemming from the actions of aggressive black male bodies. The characters Tobias Beecher and Franklin Winthrop are two white inmates who share more in common than only being victimized by rape; they are both "saved" from being raped by black men to then fall prey to other white inmates, thus in the domain of *Oz* rape has

**Commented [AP22]:** "this is a subtle point – if the thesis ends up making more of the fact that all chapters so far have had to think about rape then this needs to go in the intro"

<sup>508</sup> Stokes 1998: 734

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.: 737

differing social meaning according to the race of the perpetrator: to be raped by a black man is more traumatic and somehow worse than being raped by a white aggressor.

As discussed in Christian Parenti's *Lockdown America*, rape is used in American prisons as a semi-official tool of discipline: 'Rape is both absolutely central to, and yet largely invisible within, the politics of incarceration. Hundreds of thousands of men [...] suffer this most horrible of physical and emotional tortures as an unwritten part of their sentences. [...] The cult of "Manhood" – and the struggle to defend, defile, and define it – is the axis around which the prison sex system turns.'<sup>510</sup> Susan Brownmiller, in her exploration of prison rape, includes anecdotal evidence which maintains the conflation of being anally penetrated and being a woman: "Prisoner and warden were against him and he was quickly made into a woman." The womanizing process was methodical and brutal. "I've seen young boys stand up and fight for hours for their rights," he related. "Some wouldn't give up." Prisoners and guards would watch the assaults on young boys with impassive interest. "They knew a young woman was being born. [...]"<sup>511</sup> The notion that one can "become" a woman simply through the act of being sexually penetrated provides a useful insight into prevalent understanding of how sex and gender operate, and it is interesting that this conflation is not critiqued by Brownmiller. She uses some of the testimony of Haywood Patterson (chief defendant in the Scottsboro rape case – America's most famous rape case) to illustrate the pervasiveness of prison rape, but it is one of his comments regarding race which provides interest: 'Patterson mentioned with satisfaction, "I once heard Deputy Warden Lige Lambert tell some state patrolmen that fifty percent of the Negro prisoners in Atmore were gal-boys – and seventy percent of the

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<sup>510</sup> Parenti 1999, 184

<sup>511</sup> Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975. P. 261

white.”<sup>512</sup> Brownmiller notes Patterson’s satisfied tone in what is presumably his contention that white men are far more frequently the victims of prison rape. It is no mere coincidence that the chief defendant in what is perhaps one of the most overtly racialized trials in US history maintains the perception that black men are the aggressors, whereas white men remain the victim of black male hypersexuality. How do the dynamics of race and privilege work within a prison setting: do black men have more power or threat simply through greater numbers? Given the pervasive stereotypes that black men have to contend with, combined with the perilous position of having one’s manhood questioned within carceral spaces, is it surprising that these figures suggest black men are the aggressors more often than their white counterparts? Could this also be the one of the repercussions of being perceived as hypersexual and excessively masculine: running counter to the external world where this becomes a damaging badge which is pinned upon black masculinity, within the prison this hypermasculinity confers greater respect and freedoms? Do black men use the reality of “power in numbers” to enact vengeance for the pervasive racism felt within American culture at the hands of whites, particularly in a space of incarceration which is disproportionately filled with men of color as a direct result of institutionalized racism? Could there also be the more simplistic argument that black men have far more to lose when reporting cases of rape, and therefore the figures are somewhat skewed?

Returning to *Oz* for cultural representations of rape within carceral spaces, it becomes clear that rape is not only a gendered issue, but also a racialized one. Schillinger still believes that his rape and victimization of Beecher constitutes saving him from “that

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

black bastard” Adebisi<sup>513</sup>: this demonstrates the strength of the mythic black man as rapist within the white imaginary. Said points out to Peter Schibetta that he will always be known as one of “Adebisi’s bitches,”<sup>514</sup> highlighting that being raped by a black man is seen as a stain that cannot be eradicated: Schibetta is permanently marked by this process, and in being so, is completely emasculated: the Sicilians refuse to take orders from him because he is perceived as having insufficient masculine power to lead them. When Franklin Winthrop is being housed in Gen.Pop., Clarence, the epitome of the stereotypical black rapist, wanders into his cell with the words: “Yo – you need a helping hand there, pretty boy?”<sup>515</sup> This represents the apex of white male fears of being penetrated by blackness; the obesity of Clarence is key here: he is literally “too much” man for Winthrop to fight off, the subtext here being that black masculinity, in being excessive constitutes a danger to whiteness. When Clarence follows this with the words “You ever suck cock before?” Winthrop is rapidly “rescued” by the AB, with Schillinger standing centre frame. The depiction of Winthrop needing to be saved from the taint of blackness is confirmed with the following exchange between Winthrop and Robson: “He was gonna rape me.” “Fucking Nigger,” where the black male is conflated with rape. The fear that rape inspires is not that of being assaulted, but of being emasculated: there is no sympathy given to the female rape victim of Adam Gunzl and Winthrop, and Beecher makes no connection between the rape perpetrated by Gunzl and the potential rape from which Beecher wants to save him: rape is feared because it will destroy masculinity, not because it is a forced act of violence and abuse.

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<sup>513</sup> *Oz*: 4/12

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*: 5/3

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*: 5/4

When we see the pleasure that Robson takes in cutting into Lalar's body and the way in which the camera hovers over the traumatized face and mutilated body of the black male, what takes precedence is not the horror endured by Lalar, but the catharsis felt by Robson: in a scene which completely resonates with the lynching ritual, this moment is about Robson taking retribution for being raped – as was the case with the lynching, this rape does not necessarily need to have happened in reality, the perceived threat of the black male rapist is the foundation upon which violence enacted upon the black male body is based. In the rape survivors group (in which only two inmates are black), one inmate talks about being targeted because of his virginity, highlighting the way in which being the rapist of a virgin confers power or celebrity: this resonates with the way in which female virginity is perceived as something to be protected from violation. One of the black inmates states: "I was rented out. He said he'd bought me for two cartons of Kools,"<sup>516</sup> linking the black male within this scenario to the position of being chattel: no other inmates describe this experience of being sexually enslaved as a commodity.

*Oz* continues to focus on the spectacle of the black male body as rapacious and violent, while also focusing on that spectacular body through a lens of eroticism, in the same way that the lynching postcards, *The Birth of a Nation*, and Mapplethorpe do. In this particular manifestation, it becomes even more clear with the absence of female bodies through which to filter the anxieties about the threat posed by this body, that these are fears that are really reflective of the insecurity of white masculinity. Where white femininity does not present itself as a space whose boundaries have to be policed and protected against black penetration in *Oz*, these anxieties are manifested within the carceral space and the landscape of the white male body.

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid.: 6/5

## Conclusion

### Thesis Summary

The black male body, and the ownership over that body, has been shown to be an asset of financial usefulness. As discussed earlier, this particular body and the history of the ways in which that body has been marketed and displayed are inextricably linked with the history of the American freak show. In terms of this connection, where Thomson describes P.T. Barnum as ‘the apotheosis of American entrepreneurship [who] brought the freak show to its pinnacle in the nineteenth century by capitalizing on America’s hunger for extravagance, knowledge, and mastery, along with its simultaneous quest for self-apprehension’ proves particularly useful: ownership of the black male body remains an asset for (white) American entrepreneurial power.<sup>517</sup> The issue of ownership and profitability has particular relevance when it is taken into consideration the fact that all of the case studies in the thesis focus on the spectacle of the black male body, as produced and curated by white men: the lynching photographer, Griffith (*The Birth of a Nation*), Mapplethorpe (*The Black Book*), and Tom Fontana (*Oz*).

As a range of interconnected examples of the way in which the black male body has been visualized within American popular culture, the case studies in this thesis illustrate the rigidity of the narrative of rapacious black hypermasculinity, and the way in which this narrative has been encoded within the spectacle of the black male body which has retained significant currency throughout the twentieth century. The spectacularization

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<sup>517</sup> Thomson 1997: 58

of this body has given further credibility to the black male body being made intelligible as deviant and dangerous, while the reiteration of this spectacle has simultaneously afforded pleasure to the white gaze, and confirmed that the purpose of this spectacle is purely its potential to consolidate the superiority of whiteness and maintain the diminution of blackness, within the racist imaginary.

Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) and 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2003)<sup>518</sup> are pertinent to this thesis, in demonstrating the cultural strength of the spectacle of the black male body at the end of the twentieth century and beyond, because of the way that they represent the black male as a danger to whiteness, and the way that they visualize the violence enacted upon the black male body as an eroticized spectacle to be enjoyed within the gaze of the implied white viewer.

#### ***Get Rich or Die Tryin'***

In terms of relevance to the argument of the thesis, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* illustrates the legacy of the spectacularization of black masculinity, and the way in which the visual capital of this spectacle has developed throughout the twentieth century, and still informs contemporary cultural representations of the black male body. The depiction of 50 Cent's body perpetuates the eroticized wounding of the black male body, the suggestion that this body represents the violent menace of black masculinity, and this body as commodity. Once commodified and contained, the black male body can be situated within a schema which maintains its erotic potential for the white supremacist gaze, and consolidate the superiority of white masculinity. Cent claims, in his autobiography *From Pieces to Weight*, that "I haven't sold my scars on television to sell records. I haven't let

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<sup>518</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, it is the album artwork that is being considered, rather than the music.

journalists feel the hole in my gum because it sells records.”<sup>519</sup> He goes on to note that this choice was motivated by a desire to remind the American public of the trauma faced by black Americans, and to see in his healed skin the bodies of those who never survived to go through the healing process. He then goes on to complain that although this was the framing of his decision to bare the “truth” of his scarred skin, through the media it has been ‘turned into a gimmick.’<sup>520</sup> Although he is distancing himself from the profitability of the black male body as wounded and mythologized, what is implicit here is the fact that these wounds do indeed “sell records.” This elision of the importance of the visibility of his body as evidence of his lived trauma, in favour of the utility of the spectacle of the scarred black body speaks to the way in which this body remains one of intrigue and desire: the (implied white) viewer has been taught that the black body is a spectacle that should be gazed upon, for its potential to satisfy curiosity and longing. The desire that this body creates and satisfies is that which specifically wants to see the black male body damaged, dismantled, dehumanized, and destroyed. Cassandra Jackson notes that his ‘resistance to the media spectacle of his wounded body acknowledges a long history of spectacle violence against black bodies, since the age of slavery.’<sup>521</sup> What is clear here is that even when black bodies are mobilized in order to focus attention upon the violent oppression experienced by these bodies, this is then manipulated into an opportunity to simply reiterate the scopophilic delights that such bodies represent, and maintain the black male body as a spectacle of Otherness.

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<sup>519</sup> 50 Cent 2005: 2

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Jackson 2011: 42

Mercer and Julien, describe *The Black Book* as a 'catalogue of vantage points and "takes" on the black man's body,' in which 'the camera's gaze is directed to a single, unitary, vanishing point – an aesthetic and erotic objectification which reduces black male bodies to a homogenous visual surface thoroughly saturated with sexual meanings.'<sup>522</sup> The fact they use the terms "points" and "takes" is an interesting lexical choice, as these are all physical actions enacted upon the black male body by Mapplethorpe's camera, these all can be, and are done to the body. Where 'each camera "shot" turns the black man's body to stone, frozen and fixed in time, enslaved to the white man's imaginary,'<sup>523</sup> it is similarly notable that the photographer "shoots" the black male body, resonating with the actual violence that the black male experiences. This symbolic violence that Mercer and Julien are describing is particularly resonant with the literal violence that has been visited on the body of 50 Cent, a violence that whether figurative or literal is played out upon the terrain of the black male body, a violence that gratifies the racist gaze as it simultaneously renders the black male body erotic object.

Elizabeth Alexander states that black bodies 'in pain for public consumption have been an American spectacle for years.'<sup>524</sup> Where this body has been conveyed through images as a site for white masculine manipulation, this exemplifies Jackson's observation that part of white privilege is the ability to define how the black body will be depicted and narrativized. Jackson notes that this privilege allows for the black male body, and its damage at the hands of white supremacy, to successfully be defined as deviant, where 'whites have had the privilege of interpreting those scars, and thus

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<sup>522</sup> Mercer, Julien 1988: 143

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Alexander 1994: 92

since the time of the auction block, black scars have been viewed as signs of the moral degeneracy and viciousness of the victim, rather than of the victimizer.<sup>525</sup> When *Rolling Stone* magazine described 50 Cent after *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* had been released to record sales figures in 2003,<sup>526</sup> they described him in terms that celebrated his status as criminal outsider, as a 'hunted man', listing moments from his violent past as though it were a badge of honour: perpetuating the mythologizing of the black male as violent criminal, rather than focusing on his talents as a rapper of business acumen.<sup>527</sup>

Cent's body appears to be fragmented in the way that the image is refracted through broken glass – seemingly from a bullet hole.<sup>528</sup> The viewer is positioned as potential shooter, presenting the black male body as a landscape to be penetrated. The shattered glass also implies a target – Jackson notes that in the positioning of the viewer as shooter, the cover 'actively markets a fantasy of wounding', in which the viewer is encouraged to play the role of the executioner.<sup>529</sup> The combination of this violence that is suggested by the bullet hole and the visual fragmentation of the body, and the revelation of underwear and the highlighting of bared musculature, works to make the wounded body the focal point of erotic objectification. Where Jackson observes that 'the image of the wounded black man confirms not only the equation between blackness and suffering, but also the equation between whiteness and bodily integrity,' the image of the damaged body serves to contain black hypermasculinity through the objectification and eroticization of the

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<sup>525</sup> Jackson 2011: 43

<sup>526</sup> *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 and sold in excess of 800,000 copies in just four days. (Jackson 2011: 44)

<sup>527</sup> Touré 2003:44

<sup>528</sup> Jackson situates 50 Cent within a long tradition of images of the black male body being used to perpetuate the notion of animalistic violence and hypersexuality, in order to justify violence against black men, incorporating the history of lynching and the issue of police brutality. (2011: 43)

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*: 45

black male body.<sup>530</sup> The eroticization of the violence enacted upon the body of 50 Cent, and the way that this is performed for the gaze resonates with what Hazel Carby terms the 'dissecting gaze of the lynch mob.'<sup>531</sup> Cent exemplifies Harris' observation: 'images are visualized in response to and in dialogue with the discursive elements of existing imagery and visual traditions.'<sup>532</sup>

### **Django Unchained**

Just before turning attention to Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, it is useful to briefly focus on his earlier work in *Pulp Fiction*, in terms of how the black male body is treated and how this sets up the display of the black male body in *Django Unchained*. Tarantino depicts black male life as dispensable and as a dangerous menace which needs to be contained. Harris discusses a visualization of sexualized black masculinity, which 'is constructed in a particular use of camera angle, frame, placement of the body in the frame and in the overall composition of the image,' which often features the naked black male body, shot from behind, which constitutes a 'formal invitation to sodomy.'<sup>533</sup> This "invitation to sodomy" recalls the Mapplethorpe photographs where the black male body is positioned as inviting white penetration – either through the gaze or literal penetration. Harris suggests this in relation to *Pulp Fiction*, where he describes it as 'literal containment through sodomy,'<sup>534</sup> referring to the scenes between Marsellus Wallace and Butch, and the rape scene which takes place in the

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<sup>530</sup> Jackson 2011: 45

<sup>531</sup> Carby 1998: 68

<sup>532</sup> Harris 2012: 41

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.: 44

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

“Mason-Dixon pawnshop.”<sup>535</sup> Harris notes that the ‘explicit shot of Marsellus’ backside is crucial to the scene’s discursive play on manhood, honor, integrity and race through the humiliation of forcible anal sex,’<sup>536</sup> where the viewer is ‘sutured into a visual economy of looking that objectifies the prone body in a violent, penetrating gaze.’<sup>537</sup> The rape of Marsellus carries out similar symbolic work as the lynching, in its punishment of his “transgressive” behavior of marrying a white woman and wielding his power and status over white characters. His “stepping out of place” is punished through this rape, which symbolically puts “him back in his place.” The fact that his assailants are associated with the stereotypical “Southern redneck” also immediately calls to mind the operations of the lynching, with its association with the Southern Klan.

Building upon his representation of the black male as dehumanized in *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino exploits the success of this narrative in *Django Unchained*, a film that Kate Temoney describes as ‘entirely spectacle.’<sup>538</sup> While claiming to recuperate the black man in American culture by depicting him as the hero of a thoroughly American genre – the iconic cowboy of the Western, Tarantino succeeds in making a film that is fundamentally a film about whiteness, its power, and its success. Using the black male figure as a device to which he anchors the plot of the film, Tarantino perpetuates the black male body as visual terrain upon which white masculinity can be defined and

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<sup>535</sup> The sign outside the pawnshop features this signification: evoking immediately the history of the division between North and South, framing the following sequence of events through the attached connotations of slavery.

<sup>536</sup> Harris 2012: 45

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.: 47

<sup>538</sup> Temoney 2014: 123

exhibited as superior. While reifying whiteness as normative and superior, Tarantino offers his viewer visual delight in the form of sexualized violence that the black male body suffers, and the depiction of the black male as being a threat to whiteness – in this case, both white bodies and white spaces.

After purchasing Django, Schultz has to elucidate the choices that the slaves now have, implying they are unable to think for themselves, and need to have the guidance of a white man in order to make intelligent decisions. Schultz explicitly ignores his own racial privilege when he claims that although he “despises the slavery business,” he’ll make the “malarkey work for his benefit” by coercing Django into being his sidekick as a bounty hunter. In this moment, although he claims to despise the business of slavery, his actions constitute an indictment of the cruel, but individualized behavior of some slave owners, rather than being a critique of slavery itself as a systemic evil.

When Django and Schultz first enter into town on horseback, Tarantino frames this as an assault upon spaces encoded as white: first we see Django at the centre of the frame while the periphery of the camera shot is filled with white bodies, standing in elevated positions looking down upon the black male, affronted by his presence. Having implied that the black male is still “lower down” than the whites in this scene, Tarantino amplifies this sense of racial infiltration of white space by having a hangman’s noose appear in the foreground as we see Django’s head pass behind it – offering a snapshot image of the black body swinging from the lynch rope. Tarantino then exacerbates this sense of white space being penetrated by blackness by zooming in on the white tooth atop Schultz’ carriage, which is being skewered by a phallic black coil, making the tooth waver in the wind, as if recovering from a violent intrusive

presence. This metaphorical suggestion works to build on the composition of Django's entry into the white town to signify a necessary sense of panic at this menacing interloper. This scene culminates with the focus upon a white woman looking down upon the figure of Django riding on horseback through town with what appears to be desire and intrigue. She is shown in her undergarments, and this combined with her presence above the inn is suggestive of her being a prostitute, which mitigates the sense of inappropriateness that might arise from the portrayal of white female desire for a black man: if she is "impure" already there is nothing to be lost to the purity of whiteness in her lascivious gaze.

From the immediate opening of the film, the viewer is presented with the image of the scarred black body, as the camera lingers over the group of slaves walking the desert and announces the spectacle of their mutilated bodies for the visual consumption of the audience. Not only is the black male body presented as that which is damaged, but it is also eroticized in the absence of clothing and the suggestive sheen of moisture that covers the torso. This visual resonates with *The Scourged Back* photograph which circulated during the nineteenth century (Fig. 28).<sup>539</sup>

Commented [AP23]: Fig?

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<sup>539</sup> The image of *The Scourged Back* is re-imaged on the album cover of *Nas* (2008) informing the contemporary visualization of the black male body and returning it to an enslaved status within the white imaginary.



Figure 28. *The Scourged Back* (1863). Prints and Photographs Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. (Taken from Jackson 2011: 13.)

Through the visual mirroring of this image, Tarantino immediately gives his viewer the representation of black male suffering as something to be looked at, in order for black male trauma to have any real meaning it must be spectacularized. Tarantino implicitly suggests that this body is in some way Other, not only by focusing on marks which are a result of being dehumanized, but he also draws a visual parallel between the slave body and the animal body: the horses walking alongside the slaves exhibit the same rhythm of step (the feet of the slaves are shackled, thus giving them a faltering step which is similar to that of the horse in this particular scene), and their skin is the same shade of brown in the frame, blurring the boundary between black male and animal on screen. This sense of being interchangeable is echoed in the following scene when Dr. Schultz wanders along the line of slaves, inspecting their faces to find the particular slave he is seeking (Django). In this moment he has to go back and forth, visually assessing them at close quarters but

seemingly unable to distinguish them, relying on Django to speak up and announce his difference. When Dr. Schultz is offering to buy Django from his owners, the language he uses is particularly telling in establishing that the black male is completely dehumanized within the institution of slavery, referring to the group of black men as “inventory,” “specimens,” “acquire,” and “poor devils.” The black male is immediately framed as non-human when Tarantino’s narrative commences.

*Django Unchained* is a film which further codifies the black male body as a corporeal space which has value in its appeal to the intended white viewer, an appeal that lies in the eroticized appeal of it being damaged. Tarantino presents this body to the camera in scenes that dwell upon the violent mutilation that the body has undergone, as a way of assuring the spectator that the threat of the black male has been contained, both through the objectifying look itself, but also through the violence enacted against it. This process offers pleasure, not simply in the implied mitigation of the threat of black masculinity, but also in the way that this legitimizes the body being framed as spectacle for the gaze to be satisfied. When Dr. Schultz removes Django’s leg iron after purchasing him, this is a moment where the look is rewarded with the sight of the wounded black body: even when it seems that the body is being liberated this is framed through an understanding that this is a body which poses no threat. This constitutes one of the ways that Tarantino relies on the spectacle of the black body as Other, and allows the audience to satisfy their desire to look at this eroticized body, from a space of safety.

Ornella comments that *Django* is essentially a film about spaces in which there is disorder and that the film ‘creates spaces only to ridicule those who defend their

boundaries.<sup>540</sup> The same anxiety about the ramifications of integration that we have seen throughout this thesis are evoked: the spaces in *Django* are “messy” because of the disruption of clear regulations regarding the occupancy of, and appropriate behavior within, spaces.

Much like *The Birth of a Nation* utilized a very specific vision of American history to ensure its racist agenda was more persuasive for the American audience, Tarantino also uses a historical framework to disseminate the ideology of white supremacy. As Nichole Kathol and Ryan Weaver observe, ‘*Django* provides an attractive view of history for white, mainstream audiences in which both renegade slaves and heroic whites battled wicked slavers for life and liberty. The heroism of the two main characters in *Django Unchained* not only offers redemption from the lingering sins of slavery, but the film also works to protect white supremacy’.<sup>541</sup>

Moon Charania criticizes *Django* as ‘black on black violence, constructed by and for the white fetishistic gaze’.<sup>542</sup> In reflecting upon the complicity of the white viewer when watching *Django*, when Candie is introduced within the film watching a brutal Mandingo fight during which he orders his fighter to kill his opponent by the end of the bout, Ornella questions whether the implied viewer is not simply mimicking Candie, in ‘safeguarding what we perceive as our Western civilized space creating and gazing at the violent savage Other’.<sup>543</sup> Tarantino is, just as the other case studies explored here, consolidating his audience in terms of their role in reifying the supremacy of whiteness, through the

**Commented [AP24]:** Penetration of white space symbolic of penetration of white (female?) body

<sup>540</sup> Ornella 2014: 99

<sup>541</sup> Kathol & Weaver 2014: 245

<sup>542</sup> Charania 2013: 58

<sup>543</sup> Ornella 2014: 116

containment of black masculinity. Desilet notes that the majority of historians are in agreement that Mandingo fighting was not a Southern antebellum practice; Tarantino presumably inserts this into the narrative of the film as an example of the casual brutality and dehumanization of black men within the practice of slavery.<sup>544</sup> In discussing Tarantino's inclusion of this practice, Douthat adds that slaves 'were far too valuable to be sacrificed in a kind of human cock-fighting.'<sup>545</sup> Given that this was not a realistic portrayal, the fact that Tarantino chooses to dwell upon the spectacle of the violent destruction of the black male body seems to simply continue the tradition of scopophilic pleasure being taken in the enactment of violence upon black bodies. Douthat characterizes the focus on the Mandingo fighting as evidence of Tarantino's focus upon violence rather than sex, ignoring the way in which the black male body is shown as the site where sex and violence are infused.<sup>546</sup> The Mandingo scene in *Django* parallels the case studies provided in this thesis, in that the black male is a threat, and that this threat can be contained through the objectifying gaze and violence visited upon the corporeal space.

Given that Tarantino is not using Mandingo fighting to establish his film's historical veracity, why have it be such a feature? This could be partly explained by it allowing the invocation of Richard Fleischer's 1975 film, entitled *Mandingo*. Carpio notes that 'from its first scenes the film highlights the deep libidinal and commercial investment in black bodies that masters and slave traders share.'<sup>547</sup> The importance of the look as a way of

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<sup>544</sup> Desilet 2014: 30

<sup>545</sup> Douthat 2013: 54

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Carpio 2013: 5

establishing the “truth” of the body in *Mandingo*, as well as framing the black male body as site of eroticized contemplation inform the action of *Django Unchained*, as Tarantino can benefit from this established dynamic, without making himself so vulnerable to accusations of racism. In his reliance upon the objectifying look of *Mandingo*, which includes scenes where a slave’s anus is inspected by a trader as assurance that he is free of hemorrhoids, the fondling of a slave’s genitalia in order to “test” his prowess, (evocative of the homoerotic scene where Django is almost castrated, and the lingering feel of his genitalia by the white slaver) O’Brien notes that *Mandingo* haunts *Django* as a ‘looming presence,’ with which Tarantino is in ‘constant dialogue during the latter half, and which at times ‘seems determined to surpass both in brutality of imagery and in the unalleviated expression of race hatred.’<sup>548</sup> Tarantino encodes his film as a space where black masculinity should be gazed upon as a site which affords pleasure, excitement and eroticism. Despite claims that the *Mandingo* fighting was a prompt for his audience to understand the horrific and violent nature of the institution of slavery, Tarantino situates the black male body as the terrain whereupon sexualized violence occurs. Temoney notes that the *Mandingo* scene will offer a kind of pleasure for the viewer, an enjoyment that engineers complicity with the film’s violence against the black body: ‘being amused by the violence in the *Mandingo* fighting scene in *Django Unchained* creates a vicarious, even if not fully acknowledged, experience of delving into the dark side of our humanity by having our enjoyment of watching a violent scene reflected back to us in watching slave owners take pleasure in watching slaves savagely fight and kill each other; far from encouraging us to avert our gaze or assume the role of voyeur, Tarantino implicates us in

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<sup>548</sup> O’Brien 2013: 32-3

the violence, exposing a portion of our dark nature.<sup>549</sup> Temoney here seems to be willing to be interpellated by Tarantino without any sense of resistance; this occupancy of the space of implied white viewer is problematic. Although she is attempting to assign responsibility to the spectator for complicity within violence being visited upon the black male body, as a form of recuperative culpability, she still succeeds in implicating the way in which not only is the violent destruction of the black accepted, but it can be an *enjoyable* spectacle.

Despite Andrew Urban's description of Django as the 'archetypical hero comprised of pure agency,'<sup>550</sup> Django's lack of agency is reflected in the passive verbs that Newman uses in her description of the plot: where she notes that Django is 'bought and freed and partnered by German dentist-bounty hunter Dr King Schultz,' he is also 'dressed up in knee britches and ruffles', and 'hung upside down with a knife at his testicles.'<sup>551</sup> All of Django's experiences consist of actions done to him by white characters, highlighting a distinct lack of black agency in a film that purports to repair the oppression of slavery by providing a reparative black hero. From the very beginning of the relationship between Schultz and Django, it is the passivity of Django and Schultz' direction of Django that informs the dynamic of their relationship: Schultz tells Django to take Speck's coat at which point he immediately complies. This illustrates his deference to the white character, but in addition to this confirmation of the power in their relationship, immediately preceding the moment when he puts on Speck's overcoat, Django removes his blanket which allows the audience to see his scarred back yet again: fixing Schultz as

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<sup>549</sup> Temoney 133-4

<sup>550</sup> Urban 2014: 85

<sup>551</sup> Newman 2013: 36

the voice of authority which produces the spectacle of the bared black body (and by extension, Tarantino). The flourish with which Django throws off his garments suggests an awareness of being watched: he makes an ostentatious show of this for the benefit of the white viewer, implying a knowledge of the capital his body possesses as visual entertainment for white spectators. This of course, parallels the audience of the film itself, in Tarantino's pandering to their desire to return to the visual site of black suffering, extending upon the initial teasing shot of this wounded corporeal space. The knowing revelation of his wounded back results in the gratification of the desiring gaze, a gaze which fixes the black male body as an erotic spectacle which is erotic specifically *because* of its mutilation. As Schultz' eyes linger over the injured territory of Django's back, this lingering is ambiguous: whether it is desire, disgust, paternalistic pity, or a combination of these reactions remains unclear. This gives permission to the viewer to react in a way that does not need to be named: if there is a provocation of desire arising from looking upon damaged black male flesh, or the power felt from knowing that the black male is undressing for the pleasure of the watcher, it does not have to be claimed. When the slaves approach the fallen slaveholder after Django has taken the Speck brother's coat, they also remove their blankets, in a gesture that mirrors Django's stripping of clothes: this simultaneously reminds the viewer of the bodily evidence that slavery inscribes upon the black body, and of the erotic potential of undressed black skin, all the while privileging their gaze as that whose scopophilic pleasure is the main focus. Leonard notes that '*Django* is ultimately a story of whiteness,'<sup>552</sup> and in discussing Schultz' centrality within the narrative of *Django*, Leonard notes that without him freedom, redemption and life

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<sup>552</sup> Leonard 2014: 270

itself for black people evaporates: 'Black death remains a feature of democracy.'<sup>553</sup> He goes on to suggest that by mediating the violence of slavery through spectacle, he 'distances the violence of slavery from whiteness, from hegemonic institutions, and the nation as a whole.'<sup>554</sup> Leonard's description of *Django Unchained* ultimately constituting a film which is about whiteness, as the thesis has shown that the spectacle of the black male body is simply a tool used to explore and reify whiteness, and more specifically white masculinity itself.

### **The Legacy of the Spectacular Black Male Body**

In conversation with each other, the cultural productions discussed in this thesis work together to repeatedly re-imagine the black male body as a means for understanding and consolidating white masculinity. Keith Harris observes that images 'are visualized in response to and in dialogue with the discursive elements of existing imagery and visual traditions,'<sup>555</sup> and where he observes that the 'image of the black body has a long history as discourse, rhetoric and metaphor, a history of being visualized as stereotype, allegory and in caricature,'<sup>556</sup> it can be understood that this historical representation of the black male body becomes solidified as it is reiterated at various cultural moments, all of which legitimize each other in regard to the veracity of the image of black masculinity that they convey.

Where Mulvey comments that 'the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed

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<sup>553</sup> Ibid.: 271

<sup>554</sup> Leonard 2014: 275

<sup>555</sup> Harris 2012: 41

<sup>556</sup> Ibid.: 40

desire onto the performer,'<sup>557</sup> this is not just of use in thinking about cinema spectators: all of the case studies used in this thesis constitute the ways in which the narrative and spectacle of black masculinity provide an opportunity for whiteness to repress and project desire onto the site of the black male body. In terms of this "conversation," these two contemporary examples illustrate the point that the black male body being produced as a spectacle of dangerous hypersexuality is not one which stands without significant cultural support: the range of images examined here act to reinforce each other as a network of racist texts. This network derives strength from its cultural proliferation, where each spectacular depiction of the black male body as the locus of menace to whiteness appears, it is reinforced by a background of similar representations.

Looking at *Django Unchained* and *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* illustrates the way in which the black male body as spectacle of eroticized subjection has been codified and refined throughout the twentieth century within American popular culture. As an example of this, Tarantino comments that he is 'obsessed with *The Birth of a Nation* and its making,' highlighting the dialogue that these cultural productions are engaging in with each other: even though he claims to want to reverse the racism of *The Birth of a Nation*, Tarantino is still operating within the visual vernacular given to him by Griffith.<sup>558</sup>

The case studies used within the thesis demonstrate the trajectory of how the spectacle of black masculinity has been solidified, and is the space around which normative whiteness congeals. These case studies, as moments within American popular culture, interact as though in conversation with each other, learning the visual codes for the

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<sup>557</sup> Mulvey 1989: 17

<sup>558</sup> Gates Jr 2013: 53

display of the black male body, and building upon this narrative to strengthen and reiterate the power of whiteness. Black masculinity constitutes a space of negation within American culture, against which whiteness sits as that which is superior. The black male body provides the space for whiteness, in particular white masculinity, to be consolidated and reified. The narrative of black masculinity being a rapacious threat, arising from its deviance and hypermasculinity, then solidified as spectacle which provides pleasure for the gaze, is instructive to white masculinity because it is defined by what it is not, and in so being, is situated as the normative which shores up the supremacy of whiteness.

The instability of white masculinity is clearly demonstrated when confronted with the insistent repetition and reiteration of the black male body as deviant, as it is only through this cycle of representation that whiteness retains its power; this is a supremacy which is conditional.

Where the lynching postcard produced the spectacle of the eroticized abjection of the black male body, it then codified this spectacle within an institution which governed the power relations and structures of American society, *The Birth of a Nation* then built upon this and cemented this spectacle within the realm of film and disseminated far more broadly, both inside and outside the borders of the United States. The film perpetuated the myth of the black male rapist that was central to the practice of lynching, and codified the spectacle of this body as that which offered scopophilic pleasure to its audience within the realm of film.

The commodification of the eroticized, fetishized black male body of hip hop is linked by Jackson to the emergence of Mapplethorpe's nudes, and the interest that they aroused,<sup>559</sup> and she goes on to connect the eroticized wounded body to the ideological framework

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<sup>559</sup> Jackson 2011: 49

that informed the images produced as part of the lynching ritual.<sup>560</sup> Not only are there clear visual connections between contemporary images of black male bodies, posed as damaged and desirable spectacle, but these also arise from the eroticization of the criminal body in *Oz*, not to mention the clear visual debt that these depictions owe to the lynching postcard and *The Birth of a Nation*, which solidified the mythic black rapist and portrayed his body as being a dangerous, yet contained menace.

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid.: 54

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