
Crossing the Color Line: Interracial Couples in Films From "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" to "Die Another Day"

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Crossing the Color Line: Interracial Couples in Films From *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to *Die Another Day*

The movie *The Pelican Brief* (1993) is an excellent indicator of popular trends in the cinematic treatment of interracial coupling of blacks and whites. In a revealing scene at the film's closing, two of America's most popular movie stars, Denzel Washington, playing Gray Grantham, and Julia Roberts, playing Darby Shaw, having been increasingly drawn toward one another, look dreamily into one another's eyes. Both actors have relatively high erotic screen personas and there should have been a lingering kiss, but there wasn't. The situation reminded one of the Cuban missile crisis when the US and Soviets were staring eyeball to eyeball, and "the other guy [i.e. the Russians] blinked." So did the filmmakers of *The Pelican Brief*. In what could have been a landmark scene with potentially far-reaching social meanings and consequences, the film makers blinked and closed the scene with a peck from Darby onto Gray's cheek.

On the other hand, movie makers in 2001/2002 presented two examples of white males in an intensely sexual and/or loving relation with black females in *Monster's Ball* (2001) and the latest James Bond film *Die Another Day* (2001). Both films starred the same "black" actress Halle Berry, whose mother, we can easily learn from a web

search, was white. Both of these interracial couplings were looked upon as right, and in the case of *Monster's Ball* even admirable, as Billy Bob Thornton's Hank Grotowski overcomes the steady drip, drip, drip of racism's poison from his redneck Louisiana environment and from his racist father (Peter Boyle) who lives with him. Another 2002 film, *Far From Heaven*, is bound in the segregationist attitudes of the 1950s, which is the era in which the film is set. In fact, in that film a white woman's falling in love with a black man is less acceptable than her remaining married to a homosexual. Major Hollywood filmmakers have avoided showing a high sex appeal black male actor in an erotic/loving relationship with a white female. The implications of this trend seem worthy of more inquiry.

Some might argue that a much earlier example, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), disproves the preceding generalization. That film, however, focuses primarily on the dislocations felt by white upper-middle-class parents, the Draytons (Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn) when their lily white daughter "Joey" brings home a black suitor, Doctor John Wade Prentice (a near saintly Sidney Poitier) to announce their engagement. The plot is further thickened when the black doctor's parents also express indignation at the race mixing that is proposed. Poitier is/was widely recognized as the first black leading man and, as such, was under tremendous pressure to keep a squeaky clean image. Thus, any trace of sexuality in his high-minded characterization was white-washed over by an exaggerated pose of nobility and high purpose. Since the film emphasizes the exasperation of the parents as opposed to the love relationship, every ounce of passion is drained out of the proposed interracial coupling. Even the photo on the VHS cardboard cover shows the white actress about two feet in front of Poitier as no hint of contact, much less sexual love, is allowed. Harvard professor of African-American Studies and *New York Times* film reviewer Henry Louis Gates commented on Poitier's characterization as being "the perfect un-Negro, M. D. in hand, hair neat and closely cropped, not a trace of the plantation, or the ghetto in

his voice” (121). Interestingly, an Internet Movie Database contributor had this to say about the film: “[T]he matter of race is the thinnest of veneers here, and isn’t treated at all, even by 60’s standards” (“*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*”).

Details in the film negate any hint of sexual attraction. Only one kiss is shared and it is so out of focus and edited so fast—being viewed from the perspective of a cab driver in his rear-view mirror—that even a close observer might think the young actress merely nuzzled Poitier’s cheek. Age differences, as in *Othello*, also defuse the sexuality: she is 23; he is 37. Like Desdemona, she is attracted by a black man’s talking. She adolescently says she fell in love with him “twenty minutes” after striking up a conversation. To ensure the audience that nothing is wrong with him sexually, the film gives us the information that he was, indeed, married before and had been able to produce enough sperm to engender a male child but that the mother and child were killed in an accident. (Miss Drayton’s masculine nickname “Joey” suggests that she might be a replacement for his lost son.) To further assure us that there is nothing wrong with him despite his low libido, Joey describes him to her mother, saying, “He doesn’t have any tensions in him.” She further reveals to her mother that they haven’t been to bed with each other. Implying that she was willing to engage in premarital sex, she says, “He just wouldn’t,” because of “respect.” She bussess him on the cheek once in the film, but immediately also bussess a family friend, a Catholic priest, in the same way, further suggesting Prentice’s celibacy and further defusing any hint of sexuality.

The fulcrum of the film’s plot is the ultimatum the noble-minded Prentice delivers that he will not marry her without her parents’ blessing. Although there is some talk from Prentice’s mom about how the young feel the heat of sexual passion that the old have forgotten, there is none between the characters nor the actors in the film. In fact, Prentice refuses to use her nickname Joey, preferring the formal Joanna, instead. Clearly this film has little to do with physical interracial love.

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Physicality is also removed from *Far From Heaven* (2002). The sexually deprived housewife, played with a desperate gaiety by Julianne Moore, craves some physical affection because her husband is using his after-work energies initially to chase men and later boys. The only physical contact she has with her baritone black gardener (Dennis Haysbert) is a brief dance in a black tavern; otherwise, he is as saintly and “un-Negro” as Poitier was. Despite being a blue-collar worker in the segregated 1950s, he has not a trace of ghetto English or intonation. In fact, he is a college graduate, and like Poitier in *Guess Who’s Coming*, he is a widower who lives an apparently monastic life taking care of his daughter. One of his nurturing actions—perhaps somewhat out of character for a gardener—is to take his daughter to the local art museum for a new show. At the climactic moment of parting between the two “lovers,” he places a hand on the housewife’s shoulder with her facing away from him (again about two feet), and tells her to be “brave.” They do not embrace or kiss in the film. The attitude of her best friend seems to be shared by many contemporary film-makers: it is more acceptable for her to live with a cruising homosexual white male than to have a close physical relationship with a black male.

The apparent fear/loathing of a sexual relationship between black men and white women is certainly nothing new. America’s first great film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) showed a renegade former slave “Gus” (ironically, played by a white actor in black face make-up) who wanted to “marry up” with one of the white daughters of a former slave master named Cameron. This prospect was so horrid that she was ready to leap off a cliff rather than succumb to that horror. In another scene in the film, a father was ready to bash his daughter’s brains out rather than let her fall into the arms of one of these black renegades and suffer a fate supposedly worse than death—sexual contact with a black male.

The list of films of any note focusing on black males with white women is extremely short. We might mention in passing films such as

The Great White Hope (1970), which revolved around the then scandalous relation between heavyweight champ Jack Johnson (James Earl Jones) and his white mistress (Jane Alexander). The film's historical setting and fact-based plot tended to limit its significance for the contemporary audience. If anything, it suggested black male/white female race mixing was a short route to disaster. We might also mention another Poitier film, *A Patch of Blue* (1965), which also completely defused sexual passion between the movie's blind white female and her increasing friendship, devoid of erotic subtext, with a black man. The Spike Lee film *Jungle Fever* (1991) dealt with the fall out following an extra-marital encounter between Wesley Snipes' improbably named professional "Flipper Purify" and the very dark-skinned Italian actress Annabella Sciorra, whose character Angie is, in the words of a *New York Times* critic, "hardly the blond haired, blue eyed succubus" that Flipper's wife imagines she is (Gates 122). There is little emotional involvement, but only a momentary attraction and curiosity about the other's race between the two. According to *Video Hound's Golden Movie Retriever*, the film illustrates the idea that "interracial love is unnatural, never more than skin deep . . ." (538). The most challenging of the list of films featuring this kind of interracial coupling is *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which contains the very waspish coke-sniffing Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) who is married to the very dark skinned Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames) although we would hardly know it since they do not appear intimately together in the film, and we would hardly know they're married if not for conversation about the fact.

By contrast, the number of commercially successful films featuring white men with black women is much larger; furthermore, the issue of sexuality is not downplayed as it is in most black male/white female films. A printout of film titles with white men/black women relations in them from the "Black Women, White Men: Interracial Romance in the Movies" internet source ran eleven pages, whereas for films with black men/white women, the list ran only five pages, or less than half.

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A black female student of mine opined that the apparent acceptability of the white man/black woman model of interracial coupling may be a holdover from the period of slavery when it was relatively normal even for a President of the United States to have a black mistress or sex partner. It could also arise from a widely held belief about the sexual superiority of the black male; thus, mainstream film-makers could be chary of presenting that kind of disquieting image on the screen for the mass audience.

A quick rundown of some representative titles may further illustrate the prominence of white male/black female films: *Angel Heart* (1987) featured some extremely erotic scenes between Mickey Rourke and Lisa Bonet; *The Bodyguard* (1992) focused on the growing attraction between Frank Farmer (Kevin Costner), a hired gun protecting his boss, a rock star named Rachel (Whitney Houston); *Bulworth* (1998) revolved around a pixilated Warren Beatty getting his groove back by coupling with Halle Berry. Even the English followed the same pattern of white male/black female coupling with films such as *Mona Lisa* (1986) which showed an obsessed character played by Bob Hoskins trying to protect a black hooker because he loves her. Pam Grier, the erotically charged star of many black exploitation films, prepared to get it on with Robert Forster in 1997's *Jackie Brown*.

To complete this much abbreviated rundown, we must mention the box office smash *Die Another Day* (2002), overwhelmingly the most commercially successful of the films featuring this model of white male/black female interracial coupling. It is important to notice that the eroticism is wholly overt, not covert or absent, as it is in the black male/white female films, and the women are consistently of a type: light skinned and largely devoid of stereotypical Negroid features. Just as Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming* was described as "un-Negro" in his language and demeanor, the female stars of white men/black women films tend to be largely un-Negro in appearance.

The plot of *The Bodyguard* is driven by the sexual attraction between a passive white male bodyguard, Frank Farmer (a slightly

refined good old boy who drives an El Camino and likes country music), and an aggressive (and abrasive) black female rock star, Rachel. He is a loner who expresses how he is no good in permanent relations. As he says, his “feet go to sleep.” She taunts him about his sexual orientation when he asks for a glass of orange juice. “Straight?” she asks. “Yeah,” he replies sardonically. She sings, “I’ve got the thing that you need; the stuff that you want.” When she cajoles him into taking her out, she tantalizes him by asking if it will be a “full service date?” They eventually end up in bed together and apparently have satisfactory sex, although the film fades out after a brief tight-lipped kiss. Her arm behind his back is virtually the same shade as his neck.

Next morning, however, Frank feels he has violated a code. It might be a racial code, but it appears to be a professional code. (Typical of popular American culture, a man’s job often takes precedence over his own desires.) At the film’s end, after much squabbling that arises from male/female dominance, they kiss and part while “I Will Always Love You” blares *con brio* on the soundtrack—even though they haven’t gotten along well. That race may be a partial cause of their parting (in addition to the fact that Rachel is a thoroughly unlikable character) is hinted at in a scene in which Frank and his dad resume a long interrupted game of chess: Frank says, “I’m black.” His father retorts, “You know you’re white.”

In *Die Another Day* (2001), sexual attraction is overt, as we would expect in a Bond film. As Jinx (Halle Berry) emerges from the waters of Cuba, she is all physicality in a bikini revealing her ample cleavage and with her hips sashaying in a titillating manner. She is as sexually aggressive as Rachel was in *The Bodyguard*. When Bond says he is an ornithologist, she replies that is a “mouthful,” and tantalizingly rolls her tongue around in her mouth. That night they engage in open-mouthed kissing and aggressively simulated sex. Her skin is hardly darker than the well-tanned Pierce Brosnan’s. She is an American agent who fights as an equal alongside of Bond. She has no trace of black dialect except for a brief retort of “Your mama.” Though

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Bond beds down another female, a white female member of MI-5 who turns out to be a double agent, he runs away at the end of the film with Jinx who moans to him not to “pull it out,” superficially referring to a diamond in her belly button. Earlier he had revived Jinx with mouth-to-mouth which turned into a soul kiss. Clearly, the sex between the white male and black female is treated frankly and as normal, desirable behavior.

The most compelling and intense of the interracial films with white males and black females is *Monster's Ball*. The film is slightly reminiscent of *Huckleberry Finn*. The central character, played by Billie Bob Thornton, Hank Grotowski—whose name sounds like “grotesquely”—is a macho redneck Southern prison guard who must, like Huckleberry Finn, transcend everything he has been taught about blacks to see Leticia Musgrove (once again Halle Berry) as a human being, worthy of compassion and even love. At the film's beginning, Hank, who also suffers from an excessively tough idea of what it is to be a male, condemns his son “Sonny” (Heath Ledger) as being too soft, “just like your mother,” a “piece of shit.” Sonny feels compassion for a death row inmate who is married to Leticia and who is also a fine sketch artist. Comparing the superiority of drawing to photography, the inmate says, “It takes a human being to see a human being.” Hank's journey to humanity arises when Sonny kills himself in a desperate attempt to punish Hank. Hank gradually identifies with Leticia when her son also dies after being struck by a hit-and-run driver. Hank develops a feminine, nurturing personality as he helps out Leticia, first with large tips in the restaurant where she works, later with a gift of Sonny's truck, and eventually with a home to move to when she is evicted from her house. He professes he wants to “take care” of her.

Previously, Hank's only contact with women in the film was visits to a motel with a local prostitute for impersonal doggy-style intercourse. When Leticia drunkenly asks him to make her “feel better,” Hank starts to resume the doggy-style position, but she turns to face him and there is much intense open-mouthed kissing and passionate

simulated sex. The next morning Hank throws up as though he is vomiting the poison of racism from his system. (Similarly, Sonny had earlier thrown up in horror at the execution.) Hank quits his job at the prison and burns his prison guard uniform, rejecting the rigid masculinity and racism he has adopted following the family tradition set up by his father. When his father insults Leticia in a sexually and racially degrading manner, Hank banishes his father to a nursing home, making a clean break with the past. In the home, his father says, "I'm stuck." "Me, too," responds Hank, but he is coming unstuck. He buys a gas station/diner and names it "Leticia's." He moves her son's belongings into the formerly padlocked room in which he kept Sonny's belongings, which he calls "my boy's room." He has moved her household goods to his home, including, we assume, the tacky "red curtains" she got on credit. Hank has repainted the inside of the house, a symbolic action suggesting renewal. "I want to take care of you," Hank says. When she agrees that she needs it, he makes love to her, including cunnilingus, a far cry from his father's musings about sex with black women. In other films, Halle Berry has been an "un-Negro," but in this film, she is clearly identified as lower class Southern black by her dialect and intonation: "Where dey at?" she asks her son about his candy bars. She wails, "I'm fikin' [fixing] to lose my house." She cries to Hank that she didn't want her boy to be fat because you can't be a fat black man in America. She argues with Hank that the police won't seek out the hit-and-run driver because after all her son was only a black boy. Leticia, then, is clearly a Southern black woman.

But Leticia, too, makes a clean break with the racist past when she sells the wedding ring given to her by a black man to buy the formerly racist Hank a gift of a fancy hat and when she forgivingly does not ask about his past involvement in the execution of her husband. She senses the goodness inside Hank despite the racist environment he has been nurtured in. No other interracial film clearly posits race, sexual attraction, and humanity into such a moving whole.

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“I think we’re gonna be all right,” says Hank at the film’s closing, and we sense that he is right.

The films mentioned, then, illustrate several ideas. Black male stars in films paired with white women tend to be dark skinned but devoid of classic Negroid features. In the romance department, they tend to be low libidoed near-Eunuchs. They are normally very well educated and have removed black dialect from their speech patterns. White women are often attracted by their talk. The old racial cliché, “He speaks well,” is amply illustrated. Black female stars coupled with white males are normally light-skinned and have few classic Negroid features. Unlike black males, however, they are sexual dynamos, illustrating the old cliché, “Once you’ve gone black, you don’t go back.” They occasionally reveal their racial background by their dialect. Is there any larger significance?

Popular culture usually tends to be morally and politically very conservative, reflecting the values of the mass audience, but can sometimes serve to introduce new or radical ideas and normalize that behavior. The popularizing of tattoos by rock bands and MTV is a good example. Thus, in films, black males in interracial couplings are still marginalized, but, significantly, black females in interracial relations are being normalized. It is as though popular filmmakers, who are mostly white and who thus reflect the values of the white majority audience, are suffering from what might be called “the O.J. Simpson nightmare,” in which a powerful black male captures the most desirable white females.

Significantly, the generalizations about popular cinematic interracial relations seen in this study do not square with what is happening in American society. The normality of black female/white male relations and the marginality of black male/white female relations in films are out of synch with the practices of Americans. In fact, it is just the reverse. According to *Statistical Abstract*, in 1980, there were 167,000 black husband/white wife marriages in America, compared to 45,000 white husband/black wife marriages, a ration of almost four

to one. By 2000, those numbers had increased, with black male/white wife marriages growing faster to 363,000, and white husband/black female marriages growing more slowly to 95,000 (U.S. Census Bureau). As Rebecca Gardyn surprisingly shows, 7% of married black males have white spouses (11). Gardyn also reports that, because of social disapproval, white women are three times as likely to live with interracial partners than they are to marry them (12); thus, the pattern of black male/white female pairings is even more dominant than the statistics reported for interracial marriages. Popular films simply do not reflect this pattern of American behavior.

Interestingly, films that normalize white male/black female relations may be doing a strong social service for black females. According to *Newsweek* magazine's "The Black Gender Gap," the educational and professional accomplishments of black females are largely outstripping those of black males, a large number of whom serve time in prison in America. Further, statistics show that many "high achievement" black males marry outside of their race. Because of the generally higher societal achievements of black females and a limited supply of eligible black males, *Newsweek* argued that black females will either marry below their social status, remain single, or marry outside of their race (46-51). Currently, according to Gardyn, only two percent of married black females have white spouses (11), but that figure is bound to increase dramatically.

Interracial relations, particularly black and white couplings, will almost certainly continue to increase in number as more and more young Americans accept the idea. According to Richard J. Payne's 1998 study, only 27% of Americans over the age of fifty approved of black/white marriages, whereas 56% of Americans between thirty and fifty approved of them (153-154). Furthermore, interracial dating patterns have grown markedly. Karen S. Peterson reports on a 1997 *USA Today*/Gallup poll showing that 57% of teens who date say they have dated someone of another race or ethnicity (48). Today, as Gregory Rodriguez reports, this pattern of interracial dating/marrying

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is most prominent in states that serve as immigration pathways, especially California (95). That pattern may not hold, however, when we examine Deep South states with extremely large black populations. According to the 2000 census, Louisiana has African-Americans as more than 32% of its population; South Carolina 29%, and Mississippi more than 36%. Ironically, because the pool of interracial mates is largest in these states, those states that have most fought against interracial marriages may well see the greatest increase in them. Faint beginnings of that pattern may be seen in Alabama's black/white marriages, which though only 2.5% of all in the state, increased three-fold in the ten years from 1990 to 2000, and nationwide, according to Tim Padgett and Frank Sikora, interracial marriages now make up five percent of all marriages. Clearly, America seems headed toward being a true melting pot.

When I began to explore this topic, I felt that the summer of 2003 might give rise to a major motion picture in which a black male and white female bond in a joyous marriage and/or an intensely sexual relationship. But popular film on that issue still tends to be very conservative and not truly reflective of our culture's practices. When will another film such as *The Pelican Brief* come along, and this time, without the ending that blinked at the idea of interracial romance between a black male and a white female?

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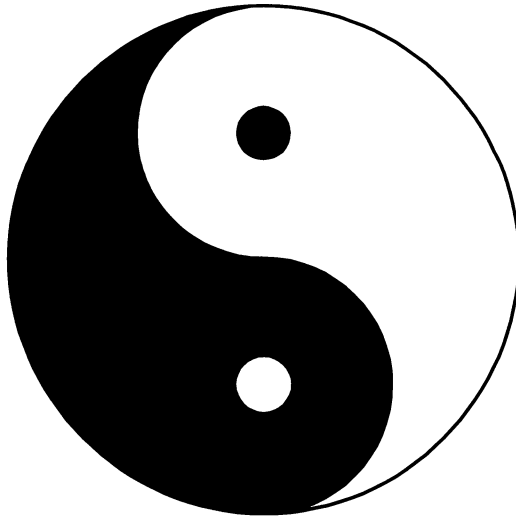
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