

## I WANT THE BLACK ONE:

### IS THERE A PLACE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE IN COMMODITY CULTURE?

#### BEING DIFFERENT

Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs - all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured.

(Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 20)

In her powerfully compressed first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison scrutinizes the influence of the white-dominated culture industry on the lives and identities of black Americans. She tells the story of three young girls: Claudia and Frieda, who are sisters; and Pecola, who comes to stay with them during a period when her own brawling parents are cast out of their store-front home. The book's setting is a working-class urban black neighbourhood during the 1930s and 1940s, a time when it is already clear that American culture means white culture, and that this in turn is synonymous with mass media culture. Morrison singles out the apparently innocuous - or as Frieda and Pecola put it, 'cu-ute',<sup>1</sup> Shirley Temple, her dimpled face reproduced on cups, saucers, and baby dolls, to show how the icons of mass culture subtly and insidiously intervene in the daily lives of Afro-Americans.

Of the three girls, Claudia is the renegade. She hates Shirley Temple, and seethes with anger when she sees the blue-eyed, curly-haired child actress dancing alongside the culture hero that Claudia claims for herself: Bojangles. As she sees it, 'Bojangles is [her] friend, [her] uncle, [her] daddy, [and he] ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with [her]'.<sup>2</sup> Claudia's intractable hostility towards Shirley Temple originates in her realization that in our society, she, like all racial 'others', participates in dominant culture as a consumer, but not as a producer. In rejecting Shirley Temple, and wanting to be the one dancing with Bojangles, Claudia refuses the two modes of accommodation that white culture holds out to black consumers. She neither accepts that white is somehow superior, thus enabling her to see Shirley Temple as a proper dancing partner for Bojangles, nor does she imagine herself miraculously translated into the body of Shirley Temple so as to live white experience vicariously as a negation of blackness. Instead, Claudia questions the basis for white cultural domination. This she does most dramatically by dismembering and tearing open the vapid blue-eyed baby dolls



' . . . icons of mass culture . . . '

her parents and relatives give her for Christmas presents. Claudia's hostility is not blind, but motivated by the keen desire to get at the roots of white domination, 'to see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped [her], but only [her]'.<sup>3</sup>

Claudia's unmitigated rage against white culture, its dolls and movie stars, is equalled only by her realization that she could axe little white girls made of flesh and blood as readily as she rips open their plaster and sawdust replicas. The only thing that restrains Claudia from committing mayhem is her recognition that the acts of violence she imagines would be 'disinterested violence'.<sup>4</sup> This is an important point in Morrison's development of Claudia as the representation of a stance that Afro-Americans in general might take against white domination. By demonstrating that violence against whites runs the risk of being 'disinterested violence', Morrison suggests that white people are little more than abstractions. As the living embodiments of their culture, all white people partake of the Shirley Temple icon. To some extent, all are reified subjects, against whom it is impossible for blacks to mount passionate, self-affirming resistance or retaliation. In defining Claudia as someone who learns 'how repulsive disinterested violence [is]'<sup>5</sup> Morrison affirms the fullness of her character's humanity.

Morrison's treatment of Claudia explores the radical potential inherent in



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the position of being 'other' to dominant society. The critical nature of *The Bluest Eye* may be best appreciated when apprehended in relation to efforts by Edward Said and Frantz Fanon to expose the emotionally crippling aspects of colonialism. Morrison's genius as a writer of fiction is to develop the experience of 'otherness' and its denunciation in ways that were not open to either Said in *Orientalism* or Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. This is because Morrison's fictional characters, while they articulate history, are not themselves bound by historical events and social structures as were Fanon's patients whose case histories are the narrative raw material of his book. Morrison's portrayal of Pecola is the most horrifying example of the mental distortion produced by being 'other' to white culture. She transforms the Fanonian model of a little black girl caught behind a white mask into a little black girl whose white mask becomes her face. Pecola's dialectical antithesis is, then, Claudia who tears to shreds the white mask society wants her to wear.

However, Claudia's critical reversal of 'otherness' is short-lived. Indeed, she later learned to 'worship'<sup>6</sup> Shirley Temple, knowing even as she did 'that the change was adjustment without improvement'.<sup>7</sup> In this, Morrison suggests that

white cultural domination is far too complex to be addressed only in a retaliatory manner. A simple, straightforward response to cultural domination cannot be mounted, let alone imagined, because domination is bound up with the media, and this with commodity gratification. Claudia's desire to dance with Bojangles raises a question so crucial as to put all of American culture to the test. That is, can we conceive of mass culture as black culture? Or is mass culture by its very definition white culture with a few blacks in it? Can we even begin to imagine the media as capable of expressing Afro-American cultural identity?

Morrison addresses these questions by way of a parable. She tells the story of how Claudia and her sister plant a bed of marigolds and believe that the health and vigour of their seeds will ensure the health and vigour of their friend's incestuously conceived child. Morrison makes the parallel explicit: 'We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt.'<sup>8</sup> But there were no marigolds. The seeds 'shriveled and died'<sup>9</sup> as did Pecola's baby. The parable of the flower garden resonates with more meaning than the mere procreation and survival of black people. In its fullest sense, the parable asks if we can conceive of an Afro-American cultural garden capable of bringing all its people to fruition. In the absence of a whole and sustaining Afro-American culture, Morrison shows black people making 'adjustments' to mass white culture. Claudia preserves more integrity than her sister, Frieda; but both finally learn to love the white icon. Pecola magically attains the bluest eyes and with them the madness of assimilation to the white icon. Maureen, the 'high-yellow dream child with long brown hair',<sup>10</sup> mimics the white icon with rich displays of fashion: 'patent-leather shoes with buckles',<sup>11</sup> coloured knee socks,<sup>12</sup> and a 'brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur and a matching muff'.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, the four young girls represent varying degrees of distortion and denial of self produced in relation to a culture they and their parents do not make, but cannot help but consume. Can we, then, conceive of Afro-American culture capable of sustaining all four young girls, individually and collectively? And can such a culture take a mass form? To open up these questions, I want to move into the present out of literature and into advertising, where mass media culture has made black its 'other' most frequently viewed population as compared to the less visible Asian-Americans and all but invisible Hispanics.

#### SHOP TILL YOU DROP

I don't want to know! I just want that magical moment when I go into a store and get what I want with my credit card. I don't even want to know I'll have to pay for it. (Comment made by a white male student when I explained that commodity fetishism denies knowledge of the work that goes into the things we buy.)

There is a photograph by Barbara Kruger that devastatingly sums up the abstraction of self and reality in consumer society. The photograph shows no more than a white hand whose thumb and forefinger grasp what looks like a



Barbara Kruger, 'Untitled', 1987

red credit card, whose motto reads 'I Shop Therefore I Am'.<sup>14</sup> Kruger's photo captures the double nature of commodity fetishism as it informs both self and activity. The reduction of being to consumption coincides with the abstraction of shopping. This is because 'using plastic' represents a deepening of the already abstract character of exchange based on money as the general equivalent.

If shopping equals mere existence, then the purchase of brand names is the individual's means for designating a specific identity. Consumer society has produced a population of corporate logo-wearers: 'Esprit', 'Benetton', 'Calvin Klein', 'Jordache', and the latest on the fashion scene, McDonalds 'McKids'. The stitched or printed logo is a visible detail of fashion not unlike the sticker on a banana peel. In the eyes of the corporate fashion industry, our function is to bring advertising into our daily lives. We may well ask if we are any different from the old-time sandwich-board advertisers who once patrolled city streets with signs recommending 'Eat at Joe's'.

Until recently it was clear in the way fashion featured white models that buying a brand-name designer label meant buying a white identity. The workers who produce brand-name clothing today are predominantly Chinese, Filipino, and Mexican; or, closer to home, they are Hispanics and Asian Americans; but the corporations are as white as the interests and culture of the ruling class they maintain. The introduction of black fashion models in major fashion magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Glamour* may have at one time represented a potential loosening of white cultural hegemony. But this

was never fully realized because high fashion circumscribes ethnic and racial identity by portraying people of colour as exotic. Today, blacks appear in all forms of advertising, most often as deracinated, decultured black integers in a white equation. This is even true in many of the ads one finds in such black magazines as *Ebony* and *Essence*, where the format, models, and slogans are black mirror images of the same ads one sees month by month in the white magazines. For instance, in February 1988, Virginia Slims ran a magazine and billboard ad that featured a white model in a red and black flamenco dancing-dress. Black magazines and billboards in black neighbourhoods ran the same ad, same dress. The only difference was the black model inside the dress.

The question of whether or not black people can affirm identity by way of a brand name is nowhere more acutely posed than by Michael Jordan's association with 'Air Nike'. Michael Jordan *is* 'Air Nike'. He is not just shown wearing the shoes as some other champion might be shown eating 'the breakfast of champions'. Rather, his name and the brand name form a single unified logo-refrain. No other sports star, white or black, has ever attained such an intimate relationship between self and commodity. However, the personal connection between product and star does not suggest a more personalized product, rather it speaks for the commodification of Jordan himself. Moreover, the intimate oneness between the black basketball player and the white sneaker does not represent an inroad on the white corporation, but it does ensure that thousands of black youths from 16 to 25 will have a good reason for wanting hundred-dollar shoes.

A decade before Michael Jordan made black synonymous with a brand name, Toni Morrison used another of her novels to demonstrate the futility of affirming blackness with a white label. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison depicts the anguish of Hagar, who wakes one morning to the realization that the reason for her boyfriend's lack of interest is her looks. 'Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible.'<sup>15</sup> Hagar's 'look' is black urban, northern, working-class, with a still strong attachment to the rural south. What little connection she has to the larger white culture has been fashioned out of her mother's sweepstakes prizes and her grandmother's impulse purchases. There is nothing contrived or premeditated about Hagar and the way she spontaneously defines herself and her love for Milkman. Her boyfriend, on the other hand, is the progeny of the urban black middle class whose forebears conquered the professions and gained access to private property. Not as fully assimilated to the brand name as Michael Jordan, Milkman, nevertheless, is a walking collection of commodities from his 'cordovan leather' shoes to his 'Good cut of suit'.<sup>16</sup>

In rationalizing her boyfriend's rejection of her as a fault of her 'looks'. Hagar assimilates race to style. She had previously been devastated by Milkman's flirtation with a woman with 'penny-colored hair' and 'lemon-colored skin',<sup>17</sup> and decides that in order to hold on to her boyfriend she must make herself into a less black woman. What Hagar doesn't grasp is that Milkman's uncaring regard for her is an expression of his primary sexism as well as his acceptance of the larger society's racist measure of blacks in terms of how closely an individual's skin and hair approximate to the white model.

Hagar lives her rejection as a personal affront and turns to the only means our society holds out to individuals to improve their lot and solve their problems: consumption. Hagar embodies all the pain and anxiety produced when racism and sexism permeate an intimate relationship; and she is the living articulation of consumer society's solution to racism and sexism. That is: buy a new you. Transform yourself by piling on as many brand-name styles and scents as your pocket-book will allow. The solution to a racist society is a 'pretty little black skinned girl',<sup>18</sup> 'who dresses herself up in the white-with-a-band-of-color skirt and matching bolero, the Maidenform brassiere, the Fruit of the Loom panties, the no color hose, the Playtex garter belt and the Joyce con brios';<sup>19</sup> who does her face in 'sunny-glo' and 'mango-tango'; and who puts 'baby clear sky light to outwit the day light on her eyelids'.<sup>20</sup>

Morrison reveals her sensitive understanding of how commodity consumption mutilates black personhood when she has Hagar appear before her mother and grandmother newly decked out in the clothes and cosmetics she hauled home through a driving rainstorm: her 'wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair'.<sup>21</sup> If Hagar had indeed achieved the 'look' she so desperately sought, she would have been only a black mimicry of a white cultural model. Instead, as the sodden, pitiful child who finally sees how grotesque she has made herself look, Hagar is the sublime manifestation of the contradiction between the ideology of consumer society that would have everyone believe that we all trade equally in commodities, and the reality of all marginalized people for whom translation into the dominant white model is impossible.

Morrison's condemnation of commodity consumption as a hollow solution to the problems of race, class, and gender is as final and absolute as are Hagar's subsequent delirium and death. Unable to find, let alone affirm, herself; unable to bridge the contradiction in her life by way of a shopping spree and a Cinderella transformation, Hagar falls into a fever and eventually perishes.

If consumer society were to erect a tombstone for Hagar, it would read 'Shop till you drop'. This is clearly the ugliest expression ever coined by shopping mall publicity people. Yet it is currently proclaimed with pride and glee by compulsive shoppers from coast to coast. Emblazoned on T-shirts, bumper stickers, and flashy advertising layouts, 'Shop till you drop' attests the ultimate degradation of the consumer. How often have you heard a young woman remark, such as the one I saw on *The Newlywed Game*, 'Whenever I feel low, I just shop till I drop!?' This is exactly what Hagar did. The difference between Morrison's portrayal of Hagar, and the relish with which the *Newlywed* contestant characterizes her shopping orgies, is Morrison's incisive revelation of the victimization and dehumanization inherent in mass consumption. 'Shop till you drop' is a message aimed at and accepted largely by woman. (I have yet to hear a male shopper characterize himself in such a way.) The extreme sexism of the retail and advertising industries could not be more abusively stated. However, the victimization, the sexism, the degradation and dehumanization - all go unnoticed because the notion of consumption is synonymous with gratification. To demonstrate the fundamental impossibility of realizing gratification in commodity consumption, we have only to shift

the focus from consumption to production. Now I ask you, would anyone wear a T-shirt proclaiming 'Work till you drop'? The cold fact of capitalism is that much of the workforce is expendable. Are we to assume that a fair number of consumers are also expendable provided they set high consumption standards on the way out?

#### FROM BLACK REPLICANTS TO MICHAEL JACKSON

Toni Morrison's strong condemnation of the fetishizing quality of white-dominated commodity culture is by no means unique to the tradition of black women writers. In her novel *Meridian*, Alice Walker creates a caricature of the reification of white society that is even more grotesque than Morrison's frozen-faced white baby dolls. This is the dead white woman whose mummified body is carted about from town to town and displayed as a side-show attraction by her money-grubbing husband. In death, as was probably the case in her life, the white woman's labour power is the basis for her husband's livelihood. As a dead body, she is literally the embodiment of the congealed labour that exemplifies the commodity form. What Morrison and Walker are documenting in their portrayals of reified white characters is the consequence of the longer and deeper association with the commodity form that whites in our society have had as opposed to racial minorities. In reacting so strongly against the fetishizing power of the commodity, contemporary black women's fiction stands aghast at the level of commodity consumption that Hagar attempts in *Song of Solomon*, and suggests that total immersion in commodities is a fairly recent historical phenomenon for the broad mass of Afro-Americans. Indeed, one way to read *Song of Solomon* is as a parable of black people's integration with the commodity form that is depicted across the book's three female generations, from Pilate who trades and barter for daily needs and very seldom makes a commodity purchase; to her daughter, Reba, who gets and gives a vast array of commodities that she wins rather than purchases; to Hagar, who desperately yearns for and dies because of commodities. The larger implications of Morrison's parable suggest that while the commodity form has been dominant throughout the twentieth century, daily life economics may have been only partially commodified owing to the many social groups who, until recently, did not fully participate as consumers.

While Morrison rejects out of hand the possibility of creating a positive, affirming black cultural identity out of 'sunny-glo' and 'mango-tango', Kobena Mercer, the British film and art critic, dramatically affirms the contrary. In considering the politics of black hair-styles, Mercer defines an approach to consumer society that sees commodities giving new forms of access to black people's self-expression.<sup>22</sup> Mercer contrasts the social meanings associated with the Afro, a hair-style popular amongst black radicals in the 1960s, and the general cultural movement that promoted 'Black is beautiful' on into the 1970s, with the conk, a hair-style contrived during the late 1930s and early 1940s by urban black males. Mercer sees the popular interpretation of these two hair-styles as wholly influenced by the way western culture, ever since romanticism, has validated the natural as opposed to the artificial. The 'Fro'

was read culturally as making a strong positive statement because it was taken to represent the natural. Then, because western mythology equates the natural with the primitive - and primitive with Africa - the 'Fro' was seen as truly African, hence, the most valid form of Afro-American cultural expression. Mercer deflates these myths by pointing out that the 'Fro' was not natural but had to be specially cut and combed with a pik to produce the uniform rounded look. Moreover, the cultural map of African hair-styles reveals a complex geography of complicated plaits and cuts that are anything but natural. Mercer's final point is that if the 'Fro' was seen as natural, it was defined as such by dominant white society for whom the longer hair-styles of the late 1960s meant Hippies and their version of a communal back-to-nature movement. In this way, dominant white culture assimilated the 'Fro' to its meanings - including its counter-cultural meanings.

By comparison, Mercer sees the conk as allowing a form of Afro-American cultural expression that was not possible with the 'Fro' precisely because the conk was seen as artificial. At the time of its popularity and even on into the present, the conk has been condemned as an attempt by black men to 'whiten' their appearance. Mercer gives the prevailing line of thought by citing Malcolm X on his own first conk: 'on top of my head was this thick, smooth sheen of red hair - real red - as straight as any white man's . . . [the conk was] my first really big step towards self-degradation.'<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Mercer's opinion of the conk is very different. As he sees it, if black men were trying to make themselves look more white and more acceptable to white ideals of style, they would not have chosen the conk. The hair was straightened by what he calls a 'violent technology' and treated to produce a tight cap of glistening red to orange hair. For its artificiality, the conk made a radical cultural statement that cannot be inscribed in dominant racialized interpretations of culture.

Far from an attempted simulation of whiteness I think the dye was used as a stylized means of defying the 'natural' colour codes of conventionality in order to highlight artificiality and hence exaggerate a sense of difference. Like the purple and green wigs worn by black women, which Malcolm X mentions in disgust, the use of red dye seems trivial: but by flouting convention with varying degrees of artifice such techniques of black stylization participated in a defiant 'dandyism', fronting-out oppression by the artful manipulation of appearances.<sup>24</sup>

Mercer's point is finally that black culture has at its disposal and can manipulate all the signs and artefacts produced by the larger culture. The fact that these are already inscribed with meanings inherited through centuries of domination does not inhibit the production of viable cultural statements, even though it influences the way such statements are read. The readings may vary depending on the historical period as well as the class, race, and gender of the reader. Mercer's own reading of the conk is facilitated by current theories in popular culture that see the commodity form as the raw material for the meanings that people produce. From this point of view, the most recognizable commodity (what's seen as wholly 'artificial') is somehow freer of past

associations and more capable of giving access to alternative meanings.

There is, however, an important consideration that is not addressed either by Morrison in her condemnation of commodity culture or by Mercer in his delight over the possibilities of manipulating cultural meanings. This is the way the dominant white culture industry produces consumable images of blacks. Considerable effort in Afro-American criticism has been devoted towards revealing racism in the images of blacks on TV and in film, but little has been written about more mundane areas such as advertising and the mass toy market. I want to suggest a hypothesis that will help us understand consumer society in a more complex way than to simply point out its racism. That is: in mass culture many of the social contradictions of capitalism appear to us as if those very contradictions had been resolved. The mass cultural object articulates the social contradiction and its imaginary resolution in commodity form. Witness the way mass culture suggests the resolution of racism.

In contrast to Morrison's Claudia, who in *circa* 1940 was made to play with white baby dolls, black mothers in the late 1960s could buy their little girls Barbie's black equivalent: Christie. Mattel marketed Christie as Barbie's friend; and in so doing, cashed in on the civil rights movement and black upward social mobility. With Christie, Mattel also set an important precedent in the toy industry for the creation of black replicants of white cultural models. The invention of Christie is not wholly unlike the inception of a black Shirley Temple doll. If the notion of a black simulacrum of Shirley Temple is difficult to imagine, this is because only recent trends in mass marketing have taught us to accept black replicants as 'separate but equal' expressions of the white world. In the 1930s a black Shirley Temple would not have been possible, but if she were a 5-year-old dancing princess today, Mattel would make a doll of her in black and in white and no one would consider it strange. I say this because as soon as we started to see those grotesque, sunken-chinned white 'Cabbage Patch' dolls, we started to see black ones as well. Similarly, the more appealing but curiously furry-skinned 'My Child' dolls are now available in black or white, and in boy and girl models. Clearly, in the 1990s race and gender have become equal integers on the toy store shelf. I know many white girls who own mass-marketed black baby dolls such as these, but I have yet to see a single little black girl with a black 'Cabbage Patch' doll. What these dolls mean to little girls, both black and white, is a problem no adult should presume to fully understand, particularly as the dolls raise questions of mothering and adoption along with race. I mention these dolls because they sum up for me the crucial question of whether it is possible to give egalitarian expression to cultural diversity in a society where the white middle class is the norm against which all else is judged. This is another way to focus the problem I raised earlier when I asked whether it is possible for Afro-American culture to find expression in a mass cultural form.

In an essay inaugurating the new magazine *Zeta*, Bell Hooks develops the important distinction between white supremacy and older forms of racism. Hooks sees white supremacy as 'the most useful term to denote exploitation of people of color in this society'<sup>25</sup> both in relation to liberal politics and liberal feminism. I would add that white supremacy is the only way to begin to

understand the exploitation of black people as consumers. In contrast to racism) which bars people of colour from dominant modes of production and consumption, white supremacy suggests the equalization of the races at the level of consumption. This is possible only because all the models are white. As replicants, black versions of white cultural models are of necessity secondary and devoid of cultural integrity. The black replicant ensures rather than subverts domination. The notion of 'otherness', or unassimilable marginality, is in the replicant attenuated by its mirroring of the white model. Finally the proliferation of black replicants in toys, fashion, and advertising smothers the possibility for creating black cultural alternatives.

While the production of blacks as replicants of whites has been the dominant mass-market strategy for some twenty years, there are indications that this formula is itself in the process of being replaced by a newer mode of representation that in turn suggests a different approach to racism in society. I am referring to the look of racial homogeneity that is currently prevalent in high fashion marketing. Such a look depicts race as no more meaningful than a blend of paint. For example, the March 1988 issue of *Elle* magazine featured a beige woman on its cover. Many more fashion magazines have since followed suit in marketing what's now called 'the new ethnicity'. The ethnic model who appeared on *Elle* is clearly not 'a high-yellow dream child', Morrison's version of a black approximation to whiteness circa 1940. Rather, she is a woman whose features, skin tone, and hair suggest no one race, or even the fusion of social contraries. She is, instead, all races in one. A perusal of *Elle's* fashion pages reveals more beige women and a greater number of white women who have been photographed in beige tones. The use of beige fashion models is the industry's metaphor for the magical erasure of race as a problem in our society. It underscores white supremacy without directly invoking the dominant race. To understand how this is achieved we have only to compare the look of racial homogeneity to the look of gender homogeneity. For some time now the fashion industry has suggested that all women, whether they are photographed in Maidenform or denim, whether they are 12 years old or 45, are equally gendered. Dominant male-defined notions about female gender, such as appear in fashion advertising, have inured many women to the possibility of gender heterogeneity. Now, the suggestion is that women with the proper 'look' are equally 'raced'. Such a look denies the possibility for articulating cultural diversity precisely because it demonstrates that difference is only a matter of fashion. It is the new autumn colours, the latest style, and the corporate logo or label, a discrete emblematic representation of the otherwise invisible white corporate godfather.

I mention *Elle's* beige women because the fashion industry's portrayal of racial homogeneity provides an initial means for interpreting Michael Jackson who in this context emerges as the quintessential mass cultural commodity. Nowhere do we see so many apparent resolutions of social contradiction as we apprehend in Michael Jackson. If youth culture and expanding youth markets belie a society whose senior members are growing more numerous, more impoverished, more marginal, then Michael Jackson as the ageless child of 30 represents a solution to ageing. If ours is a sexist society, then Michael

Jackson, who expresses both femininity and masculinity but fails to generate the threat or fear generally associated with androgyny, supplies a resolution to society's sexual inequality. If ours is a racist society, then Michael Jackson, who articulates whiteness and blackness as surgical rather than cultural identities, offers an easy solution to racial conflict.

Recently I was struck when Benson on the television show by the same name remarked that Michael Jackson looked like Diana Ross. The show confirmed what popular opinion has been saying for some time. The comparison of Michael Jackson to Diana Ross is particularly astute when we see Jackson both as a 'look' and as a music statement. Rather than defining Michael Jackson in relation to the black male music tradition, I think it makes more sense to evaluate his music with respect to black women singers - and to go much further back than Diana Ross to the great blues singers like 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters. Diana Ross and the Motown sound is in many ways the mass cultural cancellation of the threatening remembrance of 'ladies who really did sing the blues'. In a path-breaking essay on the sexual politics of the blues, Hazel Carby shows how the black women blues singers attacked patriarchy by affirming women's right to mobility and sexual independence.<sup>26</sup> Getting out of town and out from under a misbehaving man, refusing to be cooped up in the house and taking the initiative in sexual relations - these are the oft-repeated themes of the black female blues tradition. By comparison, the incessant chant style developed by 'Diana Ross and the Supremes' features refrains aimed at the containment of women's desire and the acceptance of victimization. Background percussion that delivers a chain-like sound reminiscent of slavery is an apt instrumental metaphor for lyrics such as 'My world is empty without you, Babe', 'I need your love, Oh, how I need your love'. By physically transforming himself into a Diana Ross look-alike, Michael Jackson situates himself in the tradition of black women's blues. The thematic concerns of his music often take up the question and consequences of being sexually renegade, i.e. 'bad'; however, Jackson ultimately represents the black male reversal of all that was threatening to patriarchy in black women's blues music. Where the black women singers affirmed the right to self-determination, both economically and sexually, Jackson taunts that he is 'bad' but asks for punishment. Jackson toys with the hostility associated with sexual oppression, but, rather than unleashing it, he calls for the reassertion of a patriarchal form of authority.

This does not, however, exhaust the question of Michael Jackson. As the most successful Afro-American in the mass culture industry, Jackson begs us to consider whether he represents a successful expression of Afro-American culture in mass form. To begin to answer this question we need to go back to the notion of the commodity and recognize that above all else Michael Jackson is the consummate expression of the commodity form. Fredric Jameson offers one way of understanding Michael Jackson as a commodity when he defines the contradictory function of repetition.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, repetition evokes the endlessly reproducible and degraded commodity form itself. Jameson demonstrates how mass culture, through the production of numerous genres, forms, and styles, attempts to create the notion of newness, uniqueness, or

originality. What's contradictory about repetition is that while we shun it for the haunting reminder of commodity seriality, we also seek it out. This, Jameson sees, is especially the case in popular music, where a single piece of music hardly means anything to us the first time we hear it, but comes to be associated with enjoyment and to take on personal meanings through subsequent listenings. This is because 'the pop single, by means of repetition, insensibly becomes part of the existential fabric of our own lives, so that what we listen to is ourselves, our own previous auditions'.<sup>28</sup>

From this point of view, we might be tempted to interpret Michael Jackson's numerous physical transformations as analogous to Ford's yearly production of its 'new' models. Jackson produces a new version of himself for each concert tour or album release. The notion of a 'new identity' is certainly not original with Jackson. However, the mode of his transformations and its implications define a striking difference between Michael Jackson and any previous performer's use of identity change. This is particularly true with respect to David Bowie, whose transformations from Ziggy Stardust to The Thin White Duke were enacted as artifice. Concocted out of make-up and fashion, Bowie's identities enjoyed the precarious reality of mask and costume. The insubstantial nature of Bowie's identities, coupled with their theatricality, were, then, the bases for generating disconcerting social commentary. For Jackson, on the other hand, each new identity is the result of surgical technology. Rather than a progressively developing and maturing public figure who erupts into the social fabric newly made up to make a new statement, Jackson produces each new Jackson as a simulacrum of himself whose moment of appearance signals the immediate denial of the previous Michael Jackson. Rather than making a social statement, Jackson states himself as a commodity. As a final observation, and this is in line with Jameson's thoughts on repetition, I would say that the 'original' Michael Jackson, the small boy who sang with the 'Jackson Five', also becomes a commodified identity with respect to the subsequent Michael Jacksons. In Jameson's words, 'the first time event is by definition not a repetition of anything: it is then reconverted into repetition the second time around'.<sup>29</sup> The Michael Jackson of the 'Jackson Five' becomes 'retroactively'<sup>30</sup> a simulacrum once the chain of Jackson simulacra comes into being. Such a reading is a devastating cancellation of the desire for black expression in mass culture that Toni Morrison set in motion when she asked us to imagine Claudia dancing in the movies with Bojangles. This interpretation sees the commodity form as the denial of difference. All moments and modes are merely incorporated in its infinite seriality.

Commodity seriality negates the explosive potential inherent in transformation, but transformation, as it is represented culturally, need not only be seen as an expression of commodity seriality. In the black American entertainment tradition, the original metaphor for transformation, which is also a source for Michael Jackson's use of identity change, is the blackface worn by nineteenth-century minstrel performers. When, in 1829, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a white man, blacked his face and jumped 'Jim Crow' for the first time, he set in motion one of the most popular entertainment forms of the nineteenth

century. By the late 1840s, the Christy Minstrels had defined many of the standard routines and characters, including the cake walk and the Tambo and Bones figures that are synonymous with minstrelsy. In the 1850s and 1860s hundreds of minstrel troupes were touring the American states, generally on a New York-Ohio axis. Some even journeyed to London where they were equally successful. By the 1880s and 1890s there were far fewer troupes, but the shows put on by the few remaining companies expanded into mammoth extravaganzas, such as those mounted by the Mastodon Minstrels.

Broadly speaking, the minstrel shows portrayed blacks as the 'folk', a population wholly formed under a paternalistic southern plantation system. They were shown to be backward and downright simple-minded; they were lazy, fun-loving, and foolish; given to philandering, gambling, and dancing; they were victimized, made the brunt of slapstick humour and lewd jokes. The men were 'pussy whipped' and the women were liars, cheats, and flirts. No wonder the minstrel shows have been so roundly condemned by Afro-American intellectuals, including Nathan Huggins for whom the most crippling aspect of minstrelsy is the way its popularity prevented the formation of an alternative 'Negro ethnic theater'.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, a few critics have advanced the notion that minstrelsy represents a nascent form of people's culture, whose oblique - albeit distorted - reference to real plantation culture cannot be denied.<sup>32</sup> What's interesting is that neither position in this debate seems adequate to explain why blacks performed in minstrel shows; and why, when they did so, they too blacked their faces with burnt cork and exaggerated the shape of their lips and eyes. If the shows promoted the debasement of blacks, can black participation in them be explained by their immense popularity, or the opportunity the shows provided to blacks in entertainment, or the money a performer might make? If the shows were an early form of people's theatre, was it, then, necessary for blacks in them to reiterate the racist stereotyping that blackface signified?

An initial response to these questions is provided by Burt Williams, one of the most famous black actors in this century, who joined the Ziegfeld Follies against the protests of the entire white cast. Williams proved incredibly successful, earning up to \$2,500 a week. Nevertheless, he chose throughout his career to perform in blackface. In their anthology of black theatre, James Hatch and Ted Shine suggest that blackface was for Burt Williams 'a badge of his trade, a disguise from which to work, and a positive reminder to his audience that he was a black man'.<sup>33</sup> These explanations get at the motives behind Burt Williams's choice, but I suggest that we consider blackface as something more than a disguise or mask, and apprehend it, instead, as a metaphor that functions in two systems of meanings. On the one hand, it is the overt embodiment of the southern racist stereotyping of blacks; but as a theatrical form, blackface is a metaphor of the commodity. It is the sign of what people paid to see. It is the image consumed and it is the site of the actor's estrangement from self into role. Blackface is a trademark and as such it can be either full or empty of meaning.

In his comprehensive study on minstrelsy, Eric Lott interprets blackface in terms of race and gender relations.<sup>34</sup> He describes it as the site where all sorts

of dissimulations and transformations take place that have their origin in social tensions. In blackface, white men portrayed black men. Black men portrayed white men portraying black men; and men, both black and white, became female impersonators and acted the 'wench'. Audiences enjoyed flirting with the notion of actually seeing a black man on stage, when such was generally not allowed. And they enjoyed the implications of seeing men put themselves in the bodies of women so as to enact sexual affairs with other men. Blackface allowed the transgression of sexual roles and gender definitions even while it disavowed its occurrence. As Eric Lott points out, minstrelsy was highly inflected with the desire to assume the power of the 'other', even while such power is being denigrated and denied. As he puts it, minstrelsy was 'a derisive celebration of the power of blacks' (and I would add, women, too) which is contained within the authority of the white male performer. So, on the one hand, blackface is heavily laden with overt racist and sexist messages; but, on the other hand, it is hollowed of social meanings and restraints. This makes blackface a site where the fear of miscegenation can be both expressed and managed, where misogyny can be affirmed and denied, and where race and gender can be stereotyped and transgressed.

The contradictory meanings of minstrelsy offer another way of looking at Michael Jackson who from this perspective emerges as the embodiment of blackface. His physical transformations are his trademark - a means for bringing all the sexual tensions and social contradictions present in blackface into a contemporary form. From this perspective, Jackson's artistic antecedent is not Diana Ross or even Burt Williams, but the great black dancer Juba, who electrified white audiences with a kinetic skill that had people seeing his body turned back to front, his legs turned left to right. While Juba performed in blackface, his body was for him yet a more personal means for generating parody and ironic self-dissimulation. Juba's 'Imitation Dance' offered his highly perfected rendition of each of the blackfaced white actors who had defined a particular breakdown dance, as well as an imitation of himself dancing his own consummate version of breakdown. This is the tradition that best defines Michael Jackson's 1989 feature-length video, *Moonwalker*. Here, Jackson includes video versions of himself as a child singing and dancing the Motown equivalent of breakdown; then ricochets this 'real' image of himself off the image of a contemporary child impersonator who imitates Jackson in dress, face, song, and dance; and, finally, bounces these versions off a dozen or so other memorable Jackson images - his teen years, Captain EO - who are preserved on video and appear like so many Jackson personae or masks. In fading from one version of Jackson to the next, or splicing one Jackson against another, *Moonwalker* represents transformation as formalized content. Not surprisingly, most of the stories on the video are about transformation - a theme stunningly aided by the magic of every cinematic special effect currently available.

In opening her analysis of the sambo and minstrel figures, Sylvia Wynter states that the 'imperative task' of black culture is 'transformation'.<sup>35</sup> Wynter's optimistic account of the power of stigmatized black and popular culture to create a system of subversive counter-meanings leads her to see minstrelsy as

the place where black culture 'began the cultural subversion of the normative bourgeois American reality'.<sup>36</sup> Michael Jackson's *Moonwalker* opens with the desire for equally sweeping social change. The initial piece, 'Man in the Mirror', surveys the faces of the world's disinherited, vanquished, and famished people, along with their often martyred benefactors - Gandhi, Mother Teresa, the Kennedy brothers, Martin Luther King, Jr - against whom are counterposed the images of fascist oppressors from Hitler to the Klan. The message of the song, hammered home to the beat of the refrain, is if you want to change the world, begin with the 'Man in the Mirror'. That the desire for social change is deflected into multitudinous self-transformations is to varying degrees the substance of all the video narratives assembled in *Moonwalker*. Two of these specifically demonstrate how blackface is redefined in the rubric of contemporary commodity culture.

In 'Smooth Criminal', the grease and burnt cork that turned the minstrel artist into 'Jim Crow' or 'Zip Coon' are replaced by the metallic shell and electronic circuitry that turn Michael Jackson into a larger than life transformer robot. The story has Michael Jackson pitted against a depraved white drug lord bent on taking over the world by turning all young children (white, black; boys and girls) into addicts. The drug lord is aided by an army of gestapo-style troops, reminiscent of the storm-troopers from *Star Wars*. At the story's climactic moment, the army encircles Jackson, trapping him in the depths of their drug factory hide-away. Writhing on the floor under a relentless spotlight, completely surrounded by the faceless army, Michael Jackson is caught in a setting that dramatically summons up a parallel image: the rock star, alone on the stage in an immense stadium where he is besieged by a wall of faceless fans. The emblematic similarity between the story of persecution and subjugation and the experience of rock stardom establishes a connection to the minstrel tradition where the theatre was the site for enacting the forms of domination and their potential transformation.

Jackson's submission to the forces of domination is broken when the drug lord begins to beat a little girl whom he has kidnapped and whose cries push Jackson to the brink of superhuman action. Suddenly, Jackson's face, already tightly stretched over surgically sculpted bones, becomes even more taut; indeed, metallic. His eyes lose their pupils, glow, and become lasers. Jackson rises and a control box pops out of his stomach. His feet and arms sprout weapons. Michael Jackson is a robot. The transformation makes a stunning commentary on all Jackson's real-life physical transformations that *Moonwalker* cites; and suggests that robotics is the logical next step in medical technology's reshaping of the human body.

However, the most powerful implication of Jackson's transformation - one that every child will grasp - is that Michael Jackson has made himself into a commodity. He is not a generic robot, but specifically a transformer. This, Jackson demonstrates when he subsequently transforms himself from robot warrior into an armed space vehicle. In this shape, he ultimately vanquishes the drug lord. Jackson's assimilation to transformer includes the erasure of gender traits simultaneous with the assumption of absolute male sexual potency. The transformer represents industrial technology in commodity

form. If in this country, industry and the market are controlled by a largely white male hierarchy, then Jackson's transformation figurally raises the question of social power relationships. The question is whether Jackson, in becoming a transformer, appropriates an image associated with white male economic and sexual domination, or whether he has been assimilated to the image. Is this a case of usurping power; or has Jackson, as 'other', merely been absorbed? Another way to look at this question is to ask if the appropriation of the commodity form is in any way analogous to previous instances where blacks have appropriated white cultural forms. We might substitute religion for the commodity and ask some of the same questions. Has religion, commencing with colonization and the slave trade, functioned as an ideological arm of white domination; or does the appropriation of religion by the black church represent the reverse of colonization where blacks denied salvation claimed God for their own? We are back to the dilemma that I initially posed with reference to Toni Morrison, who might well argue that the transformer represents a form of colonization even more dehumanizing than that embodied by the blue-eyed Pecola because in it race and gender are wholly erased. In contrast, Kobena Mercer might be tempted to see the transformer as today's equivalence of the conk.

As if in response, and to consider the commodity from yet another angle, Michael Jackson enacts another parable of transformation. In 'Speed Demon', the video wizards employ the magic of claymation to turn Michael Jackson into a Brer Rabbit figure, whose invisible popular culture referent is, of course, Gumby. 'He was once a little green blob of clay, but you should see what Gumby can do today.' This is a refrain familiar to childhood TV audiences of the early 1970s. The song is about transformation from blob of clay to boy, making Gumby a proto-transformer. Indeed, Gumby's boyish degendering corresponds with the erasure of gender traits that we see in the transformers. His body absolutely smooth and malleable, Gumby's only noticeable features are his big eyes and rubbery mouth. If gender is deemphasized, Gumby's green hue suggests possible racial otherness. Bear in mind that Gumby coincides with the advent of *Sesame Street* where multiracial and multicultural neighbourhoods are depicted by collections of multicoloured humans, monsters, and animals. Purple, yellow, green, and blue are the colours of *Sesame Street's* Rainbow Coalition.

'Speed Demon' reworks the themes of pursuit and entrapment in a theatrical setting that parallels, although in a more light-hearted way, the portrayal of these themes in the transformer script. In this case Michael Jackson is pursued by overly zealous fans, who, during the course of a movie studio tour, recognize Michael Jackson and chase him through various lots and sound stages. The fans are grotesquely depicted as clay animations with horribly gesticulating faces and lumpy bodies. At one point Jackson appears to be cornered by a host of frenzied fans, but manages to slip into a vast wardrobe building where he discovers a full head mask of a rather goofy but sly-looking rabbit. At this point, Jackson undergoes claymation transformation. This completely redefines the terms of his relationship to his pursuers. Claymation turns Michael Jackson into a motor-cycle-riding Brer Rabbit, the

trickster of the Afro-American folk tradition who toys with the oppressors, outsmarts them, outmanoeuvres them - and with glee! The Speed Demon is Gumby, he is Brer Rabbit, and he is also most definitely Michael Jackson, whose 'wet curl' look caps the clay head of the rabbit, and whose trademark dance, the 'moonwalk', is the rabbit's particular forte.

At the tale's conclusion, Michael, having eluded his pursuers, greets the sunrise in the Californian desert. Here he removes the rabbit disguise, which at this point is not the claymation body double but a simple mask and costume that Jackson unzips and steps out of. But lo and behold, the discarded costume takes on a life of its own and becomes a man-sized, moonwalking rabbit who challenges Jackson to a dancing duel. In a video rife with transformations and doublings, this is the defining instance. In dance, the vernacular of black cultural expression, the conflict between the artist and his exaggerated, folksy, blackface *alter ego* is enacted.<sup>37</sup> Like Juba dancing an imitation of himself, Michael Jackson separates himself from his blackface and out-moonwalks the commodity form of himself.

In posing transformation as the site where the desire for black cultural autonomy coincides with the fetishization of commodity capitalism, *Moonwalker* denies commodity seriality. Instead, it defines the commodity form in the tradition of blackface as the nexus of struggle. The cultural commodity is not neutral, but instead defines a zone of contention where the terms of cultural definition have been largely determined by the white male dominated system of capitalist production, and reified by the fetishizing nature of the commodity itself.

In my accounts of 'Smooth Criminal' and 'Speed Demon', I suggest that some commodity manifestations provide more room for counter-statements than others. The transformers are so closely associated with high-tech capitalism that they offer little opening other than the ambiguity over-appropriation versus assimilation. By comparison, the complex relationship between Gumby, Brer Rabbit, and Michael Jackson creates a space where the collision between black vernacular and mass media forms suggests the subversion of domination. 'Speed Demon' deconstructs the commodity form; and with it, Michael Jackson as well, who by the end of the video emerges as a multiple subject reflected back from a dozen commodified mirror images. *Moonwalker* engages commodity fetishism and opens up the commodity form, but does it provide a platform for the emergence of what Stuart Hall calls the 'concrete historical subject'?<sup>38</sup> Is there a Meridian in this text, capable of discovering a self out of the social fragments and conflicts? Can anything approaching the autonomous subject be discerned in this text? *Moonwalker* suggests a split between contemporary black women's fiction, which strives to create images of social wholeness based on the rejection of commodity capitalism, and what seems to be a black male position which sees the commodity as something that can be played with and enjoyed or subverted. Where Michael Jackson tricks the commodity form, and is able to do so precisely because its meanings are fetishized and therefore not culturally specific, Alice Walker refuses commodity fetishism and, in *The Color Purple*, imagines a form of cottage industry that has Celie organizing the collective

production of customized pants for her extended community of family and friends. Jackson reaches back into the culture industry to minstrelsy and seizes blackface, updates it in contemporary forms, and unites himself with the history of black male actors who were made and unmade by their relationship to the commodity. Contrary wise, Alice Walker looks back upon commodity production, sees its earliest manifestation in the 'slops' produced for slaves,<sup>39</sup> its continuation in the fashion industry that destroyed Morrison's Hagar, and summarily denies the possibility of the mass-produced commodity as having anything to offer Afro-Americans.

#### MINSTRELSY: THE DISNEY VERSION

If, as a cultural commodity, Michael Jackson occasionally opens the commodity form to reveal its contradictory subtexts, this is not necessarily the case in the culture industry as a whole. Indeed, it is a rarity. Most often, the commodity effaces contradiction by compressing its varied and potentially contradictory subtexts into a single homogenized and ahistorical form. To demonstrate what I mean, and to underscore the potentially radical discontinuities that Michael Jackson articulates in *Moonwalker*, I want to cite another figure from mass culture who is even more popular than Michael Jackson and who embodies the compression of contradiction in commodity form. I am referring to Mickey Mouse. The scandalous point I want to make is that Mickey Mouse is black; indeed, a minstrel performer. Of course, at the same time, he is quite simply Mickey Mouse, the most famous cultural icon, born of Walt Disney's entrepreneurial genius and, as a commodity, laundered of all possible social and historical associations. Nevertheless, the original Mickey Mouse was often portrayed dancing an erratic jig: animation's version of what it must have been like to jump 'Jim Crow'. Then too, the escapades and narrow escapes that typify Mickey's early cartoons closely resemble those found in the 'pickaninny' cartoons from the same and a somewhat later period. In fact, Mickey's physical features - scrawny black body, big head, big mouth - differ from those of the 'pickaninny' only in the substitution of big ears for kinky hair. The 'pickaninny' cartoons invariably showed a black baby being chased and swallowed by alligators, hippos, lions, and other beasts with cavernous mouths. These are the sight gags that Mickey Mouse reverses in his debut film, *Steamboat Willie*. Instead of being swallowed, Mickey beats a tune out of a cow's teeth and twangs a goat's tongue. Significantly, the tune is 'Turkey in the Straw', a melody originally sung by George Washington Dixon, an early blackface performer.

The fact that I can tease out references to minstrelsy in *Steamboat Willie* and establish comparisons between Mickey, whose black body is not stated as a signifier of race, and the 'pickaninnies', whose black bodies signified race, testifies to the partial iconographic commodification of the 1929 version of Mickey Mouse. I doubt any of these buried referents can be brought out of the bland, big-cheeked Mickey of the 1960s, whose morphological development from rat to baby-faced mouse is the subject of an interesting essay by the popular science writer, Stephen J. Gould.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, submeiged

references to minstrelsy were evoked as late as the 1950s by two other cartoon figures: Heckle and Jeckle, a pair of magpies whose plumes are the naturalized equivalent of the black tail-feathers that Burt Williams wore to emphasize racist stereotyping. There is yet another buried minstrel subtext in the depiction of Heckle and Jeckle. In their particular magpie loquaciousness, the way the birds practise verbal one-upmanship, Heckle and Jeckle re-create two stock minstrel figures: Mr Tambo and Mr Bones. Where Heckle and Jeckle are invariably shown perched on a branch and 'signifying' at each other, Tambo and Bones stood at opposite ends of the minstrel line of players. From these positions, they bantered back and forth through the straw dog mediator: the 'interlocutor'. By its very nature, the commodity form - and particularly the mass media commodity as compared to earlier forms of commodified entertainment - reduces the historical specificity of its referential material and combines a tremendous array of cultural sources. Besides being minstrel players, Heckle and Jeckle are also Jekyll and Hyde. And finally, they are simply Heckle and Jeckle, two magpies invented by Terry Toons.

The advent of cultural icons such as Mickey Mouse and Heckle and Jeckle signals the moment when it is no longer possible to distinguish the historical subtexts at the point of consumption. Mickey Mouse came to the screen some twenty to thirty years after the height of the minstrel tradition. Indeed, as a cultural commodity, Mickey Mouse is finally not black. He is precisely the cancellation of the black cultural subtext, and quite possibly the 'retroactive' eradication of the original minstrel performer who jumped 'Jim Crow' to the tune of 'Turkey in the Straw'. This first-time event, now apprehended from the cultural moment defined by Mickey Mouse, is, then, redefined as a simulacrum of the Disney tradition.

We might unwrap and unpack all our homogenized commodity icons as I have done with Mickey Mouse in order to reveal how each and every one compresses and negates social contradictions. However, the deconstruction of commodities is not a transformation of the social and economic inequalities inherent in commodity capitalism. Or, like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, we might reject the commodity for its reification of human qualities and cancellation of cultural difference; and attempt, as they do in their novels, to imagine Utopian social relationships. Such a strategy has the potential to estrange the racism and sexism that are internalized in relationships, so that these can be apprehended critically. However, this approach risks essentializing, if not blackness, then a rural over an urban experience or a prior historical period such as the 1930s or 1940s over the present. Or, like Michael Jackson, we might fully assume the commodity and, with every act of cultural statement, stake the risk of absolute reification against the possibility of generating transcendent cultural images. This approach fully relinquishes a connection to the social for the sake of developing control over the image as a commodity. All these strategies are partialities, and can only be so, in a system where the totalizing factor is the commodity form.

#### NOTES

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