

# Seeing Red over Black and White: Popular and Media Representations of Inter-racial Relationships as Precursors to Racial Violence

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*Le meurtre récent d'Anthony Walker, au Royaume-Uni, témoigne de l'antipathie persistante, et même de l'hostilité ressentie à l'endroit de personnes engagées dans des relations interraciales, notamment celles entre un homme noir et une femme blanche. Le jeune Walker, âgé de dix-sept ans, a été sauvagement battu, puis tué à coups de hache sur la tête; l'élément de «provocation» de cette agression étant la relation entre ce jeune Noir et son amie de cœur de race blanche. Cet article se penche sur les perceptions et les mythes qui ont marqué l'histoire et qui, encore aujourd'hui, continuent de stigmatiser les relations interraciales. On y examine de manière plus spécifique la manière dont ce phénomène est présenté dans les divers médias populaires. Les auteurs soutiennent que ces représentations médiatiques contribuent à un environnement «qui facilite, pour ne pas dire favorise» la violence à l'endroit des personnes engagées dans des relations interraciales.*

*The recent U.K. murder of Anthony Walker attests to the lingering antipathy, indeed hostility, toward intimate inter-racial relationships, especially those involving black men and white women. Seventeen-year-old Walker was brutally beaten, then fatally assaulted with an axe to his head – the “provocation” for the attack being this young black man’s relationship with his white girlfriend. This article assesses the historical and contemporary images and mythologies that continue to stigmatize inter-racial relationships. Specifically, we look at the representations disseminated through various popular media forms. The article suggests that these mediated constructs condition an environment that facilitates, if not encourages, violence against those in inter-racial relationships.*

Remember those wonderful Saturday mornings as a child when you were firmly planted in front of the television, watching cartoons? Do you remember, specifically, watching *Krazy Kat*? It was a typical cat-and-mouse cartoon, much like *Tom and Jerry*, right? Apparently not. In retrospect, with the wisdom of middle age, we can now see the raced, gendered, and sexed undertones that permeated that "study in black and white." While not the first, *Krazy Kat* was perhaps the most creative "documentary" of images of intimate inter-racial relationships (IIR) in the media.

The authors of this article have been exploring the issue of public responses – including violent responses – to IIRs for some time now. One issue that arises with some regularity is the foundation for what have typically been negative reactions to black–white IIRs. Undoubtedly, the basis is to be found in associated cultural images. And while these emerge in myriad sites – legislation, political rhetoric, and white supremacist websites for example – our present interest is in media representations of IIRs that reinforce the images of such relationships as dysfunctional at best, dangerous transgressions at worst. The prevailing trend has been either to deny the existence of IIRs by rendering them invisible or to portray them as "unnatural" border crossings. What we offer here are some tentative first thoughts on media representations of IIRs – "tentative" because there is a glaring paucity of literature from which to draw conclusions. While racialized images have been the focus of considerable inquiry, this analysis has not extended to how these images bleed into representations of inter-racial relationships.

Our discussion opens with a consideration of the role of controlling myths in shaping our perceptions of difference. In particular, we emphasize the ways in which cultural constructions of race and gender set up the context in which IIRs are subsequently enacted and perceived. We then turn to the heart of the article: observations on the ways in which the images noted are portrayed in one cultural form, that is, the media. While there are some exceptions, the tendency has been to portray IIRs in very derogatory ways, whether as inherently doomed or as inherently dangerous to "racial purity." We close with a brief discussion of how these widespread mythologies might inform subsequent violence against those involved in IIRs in the real – as opposed to mediated – world. Throughout, our discussion focuses on the U.S. context; however, we also draw on material and examples from the United Kingdom.

### **Border crossing**

The hostility toward inter-racial relationships and inter-racial sexuality is ultimately grounded in the essentialist understanding of racial difference. Boundary crossing is thus not only unnatural but threatening to the rigid hierarchies that have been built around these presumed differences. This sentiment is evident in a letter to the editor written in response to a photo of black and white youths dancing together:

Interracial marriages are unbiblical and immoral. God created different races of people and placed them amongst themselves . . . There is nothing for white Americans to gain by mixing their blood with blood of other peoples. There will only be irreversible damage for us. (qtd. in Mathabane and Mathabane 1992: 186)

The essentialist, mutually exclusive categories of belonging that frame hostility toward those in IIRs assume an either/or understanding of identity, in which one is forced to choose "a side." Discrete, "normally" impermeable boundaries are assumed. Consequently, identity formation is often concerned with "drawing boundaries, engaging in boundedness, configuring rings around" the categories of difference (Weis, Proweller, and Centrie 1997: 214). The task of difference, then, is to police the borders between categories. There is no room for elision or "border crossing," since this would threaten the "natural" order.

Either side of these borders is significant to the extent that each is "posted" with exclusionary signs that keep whites on one side of the fence and blacks on the other. They are integral, then, in creating the boundaries that inform public responses to IIRs.

When we speak of IIRs, sexuality becomes a particularly important "construction site." Every culture can be characterized by a series of definitions of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" sexual forms. Specifically, these definitions "provide permissions, prohibitions, limits and possibilities" with respect to activities, partners, and objects of sexuality (Messerschmidt 1993: 73). Given these definitions – which typically include prohibitions on inter-racial couplings – certain behaviours and identities become marginalized at best, stigmatized and demonized at worst. Again, whatever is outside the norm is considered deviant, the negative Other, and therefore subordinate in the hierarchy of sexuality.

Popular culture – including the media – is integral in reinforcing these prohibitions. David Goldberg (1990: 297) describes a relatively consistent discursive formation characterized by

a totality of ordered relations and correlations – of subjects to each other and to objects; of economic production and reproduction, cultural symbolism, and signification; of laws and moral rules; of social, political, economic or legal inclusion and exclusion. The socio-discursive formation consists of a range of rules: “is’s” and “oughts,” “do’s” and “dont’s,” “cans” and “cannots,” “thou shalt’s” and “thou shalt not’s.”

Popular culture thus plays a vital role in reminding black and white people alike that “thou shalt not” cross the boundaries of sexuality that have been built up since the first black slave was brought to North America’s shores. From the perspective – historical and contemporary – of white Americans, one of the most palpable realms of difference between “us” and “them” lies in sexuality. And it is in this context that people of colour – and people who transgress the boundaries – are often subject to the most vicious opprobrium and hostility precedent to racial violence. While people of colour are perceived generally as threatening – in economic, political, and social terms – they are especially to be feared, ridiculed, and censured on the basis of their presumed sexualities. Black male sexuality is constructed as a “dangerous, powerful and uncivilized force that is hazardous to white women and a serious threat to white men” (Daniels 1997: 93). Moreover, women of colour are also feared and reviled on the same basis: they are racialized, exotic Others who do not fit the Western ideal of womanhood. Whether male or female, people of colour – and their white partners – are most at risk of public opprobrium when they visibly cross the racialized sexual boundaries by engaging in inter-racial relationships.

On the basis of these controlling images of people of colour, white women and, especially, white men are fearful and suspicious of the sexualities of the Other. Speaking of the white fear of black bodies in particular, Cornel West contends that this

fear is rooted in visceral feelings about black bodies and fueled by sexual myths of black men and women . . . either as threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power over whites, or as harmless, desired underlings of a white culture. (1993: 119)

White Western culture has long clung to paradoxical controlling images of the sexualities of people of colour. Foremost among these has been the tendency to imagine people of colour as "excessive, animalistic, or exotic in contrast to the ostensibly restrained or 'civilized' sexuality of white women and men" (Frankenberg 1993: 75). At different times, in different contexts, most non-white groups have been perceived as sexual predators, guided by their animal-like instincts. Since all but the white race were historically held to be subhuman creatures anyway, it was a small step to paint the Others' sexuality in similar terms. Unlike their white superiors, people of colour had not learned to tame their sexual desires or to direct them toward "appropriate" objects (i.e., members of their own race).

Nowhere have white fears been more palpable than in their historical relationship with black men; no other group has been so narrowly defined by their sexuality. This was clear under slavery, where "bucks" were valued for their breeding capacity while, at the same time, the subordination of the black male slave was justified on the grounds of his savage and bestial nature. As James Messerschmidt (1997: 23) contends, black masculinity was irrevocably defined in terms of black sexuality, which, in turn, was seen as "animalistic and bestial." Thus the unrestrained instincts and desires of black men could be reined in only through the use or threat of violence.

The sexualized image of black men was reproduced in post-bellum culture. In fact, to the extent that blacks' sexual independence was correlated with their economic and political freedom, they presented an even greater threat to white masculine superiority. The fact that alleged black rapists were as often castrated as lynched suggests an attempt to emasculate the "savage" by symbolically (and literally) erasing his identity – much as one would control a wild dog. The vicious forms of punishment meted out to black men served to highlight their animal nature, at the same time that it reinforced the power and hegemony of white men. Consequently,

Both race and masculine difference were reproduced through the practice of lynching and castration and ultimately emasculating the African American male body. (Messerschmidt 1997: 36)

The presumption of black man as sexual predator continues to underlie racial difference and racial violence in the contemporary era. In fact, the myth of lascivious, rapacious, and insatiable black sexuality is perhaps one of the most enduring themes in Western

racialized cultures. It emerged in the 1988 Willie Horton presidential campaign ads; it was also evoked by Clarence Thomas's claim that he was the victim of a "hi-tech" lynching; and it ensured Mike Tyson's conviction for sexual assault. The image of the black sexual predator is the cultural lens through which whites perceive blacks. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see inter-racial relationships as anything other than a threat under the weight of such an age-old historical legacy.

### **Creating the images**

The above-mentioned popular images of IIRs make their way into the popular imagination in myriad ways. They float freely in casual conversation; they find their way into sermons from the pulpits of many religions; they have, in the past, been embedded in anti-miscegenation legislation. The focus, here, however, is on the ways in which the media (mis)represent IIRs. Most striking, perhaps, is the relative absence of IIRs across media forms. As bell hooks reminds us, "True love in television and movies is almost always an occurrence between those who share the same race. When love happens across boundaries as in *The Bodyguard*, *Zebraland*, or *A Bronx Tale*, it is doomed for no apparent reason and/or has tragic consequences" (hooks 1995: 113). This representation contrasts with data on the actual rates of inter-racial marriage; for example, U.S. census figures reveal that approximately 10% of marriages are inter-racial (Nagel 2003: 24). In the United States, in marriages between black and white people, the odds are three to one that the wife will be white. In the United Kingdom, specifically in Greater London, twice as many black men as black women are in an IIR. Of the 363,000 black/white marriages existing in the United States in 2000, 73.8% were composed of a black husband and a white wife.

These patterns tend not to be reflected in media representations of IIRs. Such media couplings have been rare historically; their invisibility has, in fact, been mandated by various state and local laws. A 1930 Mississippi state law expressly forbade literature involving inter-racial marriage, and Hollywood's Production Code banned "miscegenation" in film from the 1930s until the 1950s.

Ironically, the medium that seems to have garnered the most scholarly attention is the one that probably has the least impact on audiences. Analyses of IIRs in literature are arguably the most common academic forays into this area, yet readership remains very low in both the United States and the United Kingdom. A recent report

by the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States found that less than half the population polled in 2002 had read any literature (novels, short stories, plays, or poetry) in the preceding year – down 10 percentage points from 1992. Only 12% and 4%, respectively, indicated that they had read poetry or plays (NEA 2004).

While tragic for a number of reasons, these low reading levels also suggest that looking to literature as a key source and support for popular images of inter-racial mixing is misplaced. The irony is that this has, historically, been among the richest sources of both the celebration and the denigration of IIRs. Anti-slavery literature, for example, was replete with characters who successfully crossed the colour line; of course, detractors also had their literary outlets (Sanchez-Eppler 2000). “Southern fiction” generally tended to explore inter-racialism, intimate and otherwise, almost obsessively (Arbery 2000). So threatening was even the hint of miscegenation that, as noted above, states legislated against the mention of inter-racial marriage in any piece of literature.

Ironically, in light of such legislation, positive portrayals of IIRs were rare even then. Both white and black writers railed against mixed-race relationships in their fiction. Jerome B. Holgate’s *A Sojourn in the City of Amalgamation* (1935) is an early dystopian novel featuring rampant IIRs; a modern parallel is found in William Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries*, published under the pseudonym Andrew MacDonald (1978). Black authors, too, wrote disparagingly of boundary crossing. A 1967 novel by John Olliver Killens, *Sippi*, “portrays interracial intimacy as an infantile phase that many black men go through before taking on the serious responsibilities of racial loyalty and leadership” (Kennedy 2003: 134). Sadly, even those novels whose central theme revolves around a critique of racism – like those of William Faulkner – tend to reproduce images of IIRs that treat it as “a problem – a problem, moreover, surrounded by shame, misery, ostracism, violence, and death” (Kennedy 2003: 135). In short, pessimism prevails even in those works that recognize the cultural constructs that give rise to the divisions between black and white.

Contemporary audiences are much more likely to turn to electronic media for their entertainment (NEA 2004).<sup>1</sup> TV and film are the media of choice for the vast majority of Americans and Brits. In these media, it is clear that depictions of IIRs are rare and, where they appear, not entirely flattering. We look first at television programming. In the opening paragraph, we referred to the cartoon *Krazy Kat*.

Meant as much for adults as for children— perhaps more — *Krazy Kat* was a conscious statement on race and gender by its creator, George Herriman. It is remarkable, in retrospect, that it survived the censors' scissors, which is perhaps a testament to the subtlety of the cartoon's writing. Here we have a complicated interspecies — and inter-racial — love triangle involving a black (African American, judging by the dialect) cat, a white mouse, and a white dog (also a police officer). In some respects, the cartoon was self-consciously autobiographical: "the playful universe of *Krazy Kat* can be linked to Herriman's life as a mixed race individual living in a world where people were forced to be either black or white" (Heer 2005: 11). *Krazy Kat* is particularly refreshing if we consider its contemporaries. Written during the 1930s and 1940s, this was a subtly anti-racist tract, surrounded by largely conservative cartoons and comic strips, as evidenced, for example, by the frequently racist caricatures and dialogue of the likes of Bugs Bunny cartoons.

After *Krazy Kat*, it would be many years — decades, in fact — before IIRs were even suggested on the small screen. The historical trend has been toward marginalizing, if not excluding, IIRs generally. In the contemporary era, consider the ever-popular soap-opera genre. In spite of their daytime broadcast, soap operas do not shy away from highly charged intimate relationships or overt sexuality; among TV genres, they excel in the portrayal of intimate relationships generally. Yet they rarely feature inter-racial relationships. *General Hospital* did carry an inter-racial storyline for some time, but this was the exception, rather than the rule. Sharon Bramlett-Solomon and Tricia Farwell (1997) found no examples of IIRs in their study of 132 hours of soap operas over an eight-week period. Even for this often risqué genre, IIRs appear to be a taboo subject area.

Daytime talk shows are especially complicit in characterizing IIRs as inherently dysfunctional and, in fact, dangerous for those who engage in them. Motivated by the desire to provide titillating morality plays, shows such as *Geraldo*, *Dr. Phil*, and even *Oprah* tend to be dominated by inter-racial couples who have experienced censure rather than support, tragedy rather than joy. The message conveyed by this consistently negative imagery is that IIRs are "unnatural" and incapable of long-term success; so great is the raced and gendered border crossing that participants cannot hope to survive the leap. In *Race Mixing*, Renee Romano reports the experiences of IIR couples she interviewed. Many of them had been rejected from inclusion on such shows because their stories were "not exciting" — that is, because



they had not experienced widespread problems in their interactions with others or between themselves:

A white man married to a black woman felt as though he and his wife had been asked to participate in a freak show rather than a serious discussion of the issues of being an interracial couple. Producers of the *Geraldo* show were "very disappointed that there was nothing weird about our relationship and that we were accepted by all the people that we socialize with and work for." (Romano 2003: 277–278)

This is obviously not the stuff of daytime TV, which thrives on controversy and pain. The audience does not tune in to hear about others' successes but wants to hear about their failures. Consequently, as Romano concludes, "a show on dysfunctional interracial relationships may serve to stigmatize all who are intermarried by giving credence to negative stereotypes that still circulate in the wider society" (2003: 278).

To be fair, recent years have seen some shifting, some willingness to push the boundaries of viewers' tolerance. Prime-time television, for instance, has moved toward greater diversity in its portrayal of intimate relationships. Some very popular and very successful television shows have integrated either ongoing or single-episode relationships between black and white individuals. As Romano notes,

While a single touch between black and white singers on a television show elicited howls of protest in the 1960s, by 1975 it was possible to feature a married interracial couple on a regular television series. *The Jeffersons*, which premiered in 1975 and ran for ten years, featured Tom and Helen Willis, a white man and black woman, who were the neighbors and friends of George and Helen Jefferson. (2003: 275)

More recent programming has also introduced inter-racial story lines. Ratings winners such as *LA Law*, *Ally McBeal*, *The West Wing*, and *Sex and the City* have all featured inter-racial relationships, with little evidence that they suffered a subsequent loss of viewers. While these relationships are generally portrayed as relatively unproblematic, the fact that they are treated as exceptional within the plot attests to the fact that they continue to be seen as abnormal, if not "freakish." Rather than being woven seamlessly into the storyline, they *become* the storyline.

The advertising that accompanies television programming adds an interesting ingredient to the mix. In general, couples shopping for cars, appliances, or other household goods are of the same race and also, typically, white. Few campaigns risk social censure – and, worse, loss of consumers – by featuring characters who do not represent the norm. Consider VISA's commercials featuring the New York Yankees' Derek Jeter. He is seen out on the town, moving from upscale bar to upscale bar, always in the company of very light skinned but still "black" women. In fact, Jeter is well known to have had relationships with white women as well as women of colour – so well known that he has received death threats accusing him of being a race traitor. The ad campaign suggests that this very mainstream corporation was unwilling to risk challenging the public's tolerance for racial transgression.

In an effort to be commercially successful, cinematic films also tread very carefully around racial themes. This has not always been the case. In the early days of film, the likes of D.W. Griffith were not at all demure in their attacks on inter-racial relationships. In 1915, Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* offered what amounted to the very first cinematic portrayal of inter-racial sexuality. However, the scene in question was not so much a loving IIR as a stereotypical representation of the salacious black man (a white actor in blackface) stalking and threatening the virginal white woman. This portrayal fit quite nicely with the sentiment of the day, reinforcing as it did the standard perception of animalistic black men. It would also set the tone for cinematic treatments of IIRs that emphasized the historical continuity of the predatory black man but not the parallel theme of the sexual exploitation of black women. That we have not come very far is evident in the 1995 movie *Just Cause*, which is the modern-day parallel to *Birth of a Nation*. Here, too, sexual relations between blacks and whites are characterized as violent, involuntary couplings dominated by the "black rapist-cum-murderer" (Courtney 2005: xvi).

In the interim between *Birth of a Nation* and *Just Cause*, there have been successive attempts to present both disparaging and sympathetic portrayals of IIRs, with the former predominating. As noted previously, there was a gap between the 1930s and the 1950s when the Production Code militated against movies with "offensive"

themes, including miscegenation. Not surprisingly, perhaps, with the eradication of the code in 1950,

Interracial tropes examined in earlier periods return with a vengeance in attempts to fortify increasingly beleaguered white male subjects facing increasing demands for racial justice and a host of gender pressures. And when old methods repeatedly fail, new and sometimes drastic measures are taken to restore white male privilege and vision. (Courtney 2005: 16)

The demise of the Production Code unleashed a veritable duel between pro- and anti-miscegenation themes. Most memorable and lasting was, of course, 1967's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. This was a ground-breaking film that directly confronted the American psyche with the "challenge" of inter-racial marriage. It offered a fictional scenario responding to the often-asked question, What if your daughter wanted to marry a black man? More significantly, it "represented a very public refutation of the long-accepted white position on interracial marriage. It not only argued that interracial relationships could be healthy, but also suggested that social opprobrium should not prevent couples from marrying and placed whites who opposed interracial relationships as wrong" (Romano 2003: 204). Yet it did so in a relatively safe, neutral way. There was no intimation of sexuality; the relationship between the central characters was chaste, with only a fleeting kiss seen through a rear-view mirror. Thus the "threat" was minimized.

Contrast *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to more recent fare, which is characterized by some diversity in its treatment of IIRs. There are those that seem to reproduce the 1950s "innocence." In the 1993 film *The Pelican Brief*, for example, Denzel Washington and Julia Roberts' characters share only a platonic relationship, while the novel on which the film is based features a romantic involvement. *Jungle Fever* (1991), on the other hand, has been widely criticized for denying the viability of black-white relationships. Different still are feature films in which the relationships between black and white characters are explicitly eroticized – films such as *Bad Company*, *One Night Stand*, and *Bulworth* (released in 1995, 1997, and 1998 respectively). Perhaps more promising are those, such as 1992's *The Bodyguard*, in which "interracial intimacy is of little or no significance. This is an important development because presuming the normalcy of interracial intimacy – treating it as 'no big deal' – may be more

subversive of traditional norms than stressing the racial heterodoxy of such relationships" (Kennedy 2003: 133). Still, such representations are disturbingly few.

### **From image to action**

White and black people learning lessons from mass media about racial bonding are taught that curiosity about those who are racially different can be expressed as long as boundaries are not actually crossed and no genuine intimacy emerges. (hooks 1995: 113)

Should the "lessons" alluded to by hooks not be learned – whether on the screen or on the street – the potential consequences are dire. Both on film and on the street, those engaged in, or perceived to be engaged in, IIRs are subject to ridicule, abuse, and even violence. This was the tragic lesson learned by black murder victims Anthony Walker, killed in Merseyside, U.K., in 2005, and Jody-Gaye Bailey, killed in Florida in 2006. Both were killed by young white men offended by their relationships with white men and women. The most dramatic illustration are the murders committed by American white supremacist Joseph Paul Franklin: It is estimated that between 1977 and 1980 Franklin took the lives of 13 victims, both black and white, all of whom had been involved in inter-racial relationships.

Among the potential effects of the media tendency to stigmatize or demonize IIRs is that it contributes to a culture that bestows "permission to hate" – indeed, permission to engage in hate crime. As Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986: 464) have argued, the media frames pointed to here do more than provide entertainment, and even more than shape perceptions: They can also serve as a "guide to action." Media constructs define and assess their objects, but they also "suggest remedies" (R.A. Entman, cited in Greenberg 2002: 183). Among the remedies available for re-aligning intimate relationships that have blurred raced and sexed positions is bias-motivated violence.

That media images are at least complicit in this process is clear, though not self-evident. Earlier, we referred to Romano's (2003) interviews with inter-racial couples. One such couple claimed that the film *Jungle Fever* had given racists – black and white alike – a weapon to use against them; they were frequently met with taunts using the title as a sobriquet for their transgressive behaviour. Similarly, Mark Mathabane, writing of his own experiences as part of a mixed-race

couple, recalls that he and his wife became the focus of attention as they left the theatre after viewing the same movie.

To the extent that individuals or groups "perform" in ways that correspond to the "mythical norm" or in ways that correspond to normative – as given by the media – conceptions of one's identity construct, they are held to be doing difference appropriately (Messerschmidt 1997). In so doing, they uphold the boundaries that separate them from the Other and, ultimately, the social relations of power. Conversely, when individuals or groups cross those boundaries, when they fail to perform their identity in normative ways, they are held to be doing difference inappropriately, and thereby leave themselves open to censure. Indeed, where they appear to personify the stigmatized characterizations seen through the media lens, they are especially likely to evoke hostility and, occasionally, violence:

Racialized depictions of sexual purity, dangerousness, appetites, desirability, perversion are part of the performative construction of sexual respectability and disreputability, normalcy and deviance. Ethnosexual frontiers are exotic, but volatile social spaces, fertile sites for the eruption of violence. Racial, ethnic, or nationalist defence and enforcement of in-group sexual honor and purity strengthens ethnic boundaries and subjugates members enclosed inside ethnic borders... Negative images or accusations about the sexuality of ethnic Others contribute to the creation of disreputable and toxic outgroups and can be used to justify their exclusion, repression, or extermination. (Nagel 2003: 55)

In such a context, those perceived to be publicly involved in IIRs may become vulnerable to attack. With this in mind, we can answer Neil Miller's questions:

When does...confrontation with difference have negative effects: when does it lead to great difficulty, deterioration, and distortion, and to some of the worst forms of degradation, terror and violence – both for individuals and for groups – that human beings can experience? (1995: 57)

The answer: when boundaries are threatened, when men or women, black or white, forget their place, when they reach across raced borders and dare to become intimately involved with the "wrong" person. The threat must be repressed and, in the context of IIRs, raced boundaries of sexuality preserved. It is here that hate crime can

emerge as a response to the media portrayal of these "unnatural" relationships, as a punishment for those in the real world who have chosen an inappropriate partner. Within the essentialist understanding of identities, there is very little space for ambiguity, or for crossing the boundaries between categories of difference. In other words, accountability involves the assessment of behaviour as either conforming to or deviating from culturally normative standards. Whenever we "do difference" – which is a recurring effort – we leave ourselves open to reward or censure. So it is that we are discouraged from the "attempt to cross the line, to transgress, desert or quit" (Pierre Bourdieu, qtd. in Fine 1997: 58).

One thread that binds together the cultural images highlighted above is the co-construction of the black sexual predator and the white saviour. At the height of white resistance to black citizenship, South Carolina Senator Bill Tillman expressed the black threat and the white response:

The white women of the South are in a state of siege . . . Some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed, her chastity taken from her . . . So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine . . . We revert to the impulse to "kill, kill, kill." (qtd. in Weigman 1993: 237–238)

Only by avenging the "defilement" of the white woman can the white man reclaim his appropriate position as the "protector" and "saviour" of white women. This simultaneously reflects the black male image of "evil" and the white male image of "goodness" (and, of course, of white women as defenceless). As noted above, especially in film portrayals, this theme has been a historical constant.

Michelle Fine uncovered contemporary evidence of this dichotomization in interviews with white male high school students, who proclaimed both a right and a duty to preserve the chastity of white girls for themselves:

Much expressed racism centres on white men's entitled access to white women, thus serving the dual purpose of fixing black men and white women on a ladder of social relations . . . This felt need to protect white girls translates as a code of behavior for white male students. It is the fact that *Black* men are invading *White* women, the property of *White* men, that is at issue here. (1997: 57–58)

In defending their white girls from the unrestrained sexuality of black boys, the white boys are also defending themselves – that is, the sanctity of their own carefully restrained, “civilized,” normative sexuality. These youths are reacting to messages received from the broader culture, including the popular media forums discussed above. Few other interpretations are available to them when a high school principal can ban inter-racial dating with the disclaimer that “it is not that I have anything against interracial dating . . . It’s just that those black boys really want our white girls” (qtd. in Fine 1997: 59).

### **Next steps**

What we have offered here is not the definitive last word on the issue of media representations of IIRs. On the contrary, our remarks must be seen as very tentative preliminary observations. What is drastically needed is more extensive research, like that done by Bramlett-Solomon and Farwell (1997) on daytime TV drama, for example. There have been very few such concrete analyses of media treatment of people in IIRs, or of the media treatment of the dynamics of those relationships. It is quite likely, as we have suggested, that different media may, in fact, offer quite different representations. There is some evidence to suggest, for example, that TV sitcoms have been sympathetic, but feature films less so, in the imagery they offer. Consequently, the necessary research will involve discrete analyses of specific media as well as subsequent comparisons of these varied forms.

### **Note**

1. The NEA report claims that “the decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices” (2004: xii). This article makes no attempt to explore the theme of IIRs in these electronic alternatives, focusing instead on television and film. If the literature on these is sparse, that on new electronic media is virtually non-existent.

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