Ariel

24

Rapid #: -3147007

IP: 134.114.228.9

Status	Rapid Code	Branch Name	Start Date
Pending	MBB	Main Library	2/10/2010 12:17:21 PM

CALL #: **P96.S48 W66**

LOCATION: **MBB :: Main Library :: Main Library - Stacks**

TYPE:	Article CC:CCL
JOURNAL TITLE:	Women's studies in communication
USER JOURNAL TITLE:	Women's studies in communication
MBB CATALOG TITLE:	Women's studies in communication.
ARTICLE TITLE:	Pleasure, Power and Consent: The Interplay of Race and Gender in New Jack City.
ARTICLE AUTHOR:	Rogers, Richard A.,
VOLUME:	16
ISSUE:	2
MONTH:	
YEAR:	1993-09-01
PAGES:	62-85
ISSN:	0749-1409
OCLC #:	
CROSS REFERENCE ID:	313312
VERIFIED:	

BORROWER: **AZN :: Main Library**

PATRON: **Rogers, Richard**

PATRON ID:	
PATRON ADDRESS:	
PATRON PHONE:	
PATRON FAX:	
PATRON E-MAIL:	
PATRON DEPT:	
PATRON STATUS:	
PATRON NOTES:	EBSCO:Communication & Mass Media Complet

Pleasure, Power and Consent:
The Interplay of Race and Gender
in *New Jack City*

Richard A. Rogers
University of Utah

A central problem in critical theory concerns the process of gaining the consent of oppressed and marginalized groups to the existing social order. While this consent commonly is understood as something other than a "free" choice by autonomous agents acting in their own "best interests," the exact nature of the consent is a matter of debate. An undialectical and elitist Marxism constructs the oppressed as victims of false consciousness and elevates the critic to the position of dictating to them what is, in fact, in their best interests. Althusserian, structuralist Marxism posits our very subjectivity as constituted "always already" in ideology, seemingly closing off any possibility of agency or oppositional consciousness. Both of these views have been adopted by critics operating from feminist, anti-racist and other liberatory programs.

A more commonly accepted position in contemporary cultural studies adapts Antonio Gramsci's (1971) conceptualization of hegemony as an on-going process characterized by a fluid push-and-pull of contesting discursive frameworks. Consent is "always already" fractured, structured in contradiction, and therefore constantly needing to be rewon by reconstructing "common sense" notions of reality. Gramsci's position is appealing both because it does not present the game as rigged from the start, thereby preserving some optimism for on-going struggle, and because it leaves the particular character of the hegemonic process open. In other words, Gramsci suggests that the process of winning and maintaining consent is historically contingent. For the interventionist critic interested in social transformation, an examination of the *particularity* of the "current relations of force" becomes a necessary step (Hall, 1988, p. 54).

A site for the manufacturing of consent which is of particular interest to communication scholars and feminist critics is mass mediated "entertainment." In order to emphasize the importance of the media in maintaining hegemony and follow Gramsci's lead, *the viewing (or reading) process must be historicized and contextualized.* Given this framework, I want to examine the role of popular film in maintaining the consent of the group whose participation in the dominant social order is constructed in the mainstream media as the most unstable: African-Americans, particularly American-American men. Given the pessimistic projections regarding economic and political advancement for the inhabitants of inner cities and the construction of this situation in the mainstream media as a primarily black versus white issue, how is the consent, however minimal, of subjects occupying this social position being maintained?

Conventional approaches to the problem of consent, including many of those informed by Gramsci, generally separate analyses regarding gender, race, class, et cetera, and thereby assist in the reification and naturalization of these categories. Such reification runs counter to the historical imperative in Gramsci's formulation by failing to acknowledge the radical interdependence between cultural constructions such as race, gender and class. Once these categories are understood as interrelated discursive constructions, we can begin to analyze how they can be manipulated within specific historical conditions to turn disempowered groups against one another or to gain the consent of a disempowered group to the dominant order.

In 1991, amidst events such as the beating of Rodney King and the struggle over the confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, a number of films were released which addressed the status of black-white relations and the conditions of the inner city. Two of these films directed by African-Americans, John Singleton's *Boyz 'N the Hood* and Mario Van Peebles' *New Jack City*, received considerable media attention because of criticisms that the films were responsible for inciting "gang-related" violence (Leland, 1991a, 1991b). Spike Lee's representations of African-Americans and their socio-economic conditions in films such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Malcolm X* also have become important sites around which frameworks of sense-making are circulated and contested.

Mario Van Peebles' *New Jack City*, while in many ways one of the least outstanding of these attempts, embodies what I believe to be an

important mechanism for the maintenance of hegemony amidst the economic, political and ideological context of the United States in the 1990s. The film follows the development of a group of black youth into a powerful drug cartel and the attempts of a multi-ethnic (African-American, Asian-American, Italian-American) group of police officers to bring them to "justice." Through an examination of this film I want to argue that intersections of race and gender, as discursive constructions, provide the mainstream media with a rich and powerful resource for the maintenance of hegemony. Specifically, I will demonstrate how *New Jack City* works within the contradictions of the social position of black male viewers to push them to identify with the white power structure. This identification is accomplished by drawing on gendered discourses to feminize the black, male criminals in the film and grant phallic pleasure and power to the police as representatives of the (white) power structure.

In order to demonstrate how *New Jack City* functions hegemonically in this manner, I first will elaborate some of the specific historical forces involved in analyzing the intersections between race and gender in an African-American context. Second, I will develop a semiotic framework for reading race and gender as systems of codes, "languages" that not only intersect but are in fact interdependent. Third, I will use an existing approach to spectatorship that, while of limited critical value, makes evident the contradictions involved for black viewers of *New Jack City*. These contradictions both require and make possible the use of gendered codes to push the black male viewer to accept the "preferred" (that is, hegemonic) reading of the film.

Intersections of Race and Gender

The black man in America has always been expected to function as less than a man; this was taken for granted, and was the ugliest weight of his enslavement. The liberal white man has always promised the de-testicled black some progress to manhood. In other words, "We will let your balls grow back . . . one day! Just be cool." (LeRoi Jones, quoted in Wallace, 1978, p. 18)

LeRoi Jones' comment reflects a recurring theme among African-American men fighting for liberation: Their oppression has been intimately linked with their inability to be "real men," to reap the benefits

of the penis/phallus (Cleaver, 1968; Wallace, 1978). As a result of this intersection between race and gender, expressions of black manhood become linked with racial liberation. As bell hooks explains,

> Historically the language used to describe the way black men are victimized within racist society has been sexualized. When words like castration, emasculation, impotency are the commonly used terms to describe the nature of black male suffering, a discursive practice is established that links black male liberation with gaining the right to participate fully within patriarchy. (1990, p. 76)

While the writings of LeRoi Jones and others provide African-American feminist critics the evidence to claim the existence of this theme among African-American men, Euro-American policy-makers have also contributed to this peculiar definition of liberation. In the 1965 Department of Labor Report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (more commonly known as the Moynihan Report), large amounts of sociological "data" and "expert" opinion are mustered to support the claim that the "tangle of pathology" (crime, drug-use, unemployment, et cetera) in the black community can be traced to the matriarchal structure of the black family. Using "every index of family pathology—divorce, separation and desertion, female family head, children in broken homes, and illegitimacy," Moynihan and his colleagues conclude "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male" (1965, pp. 19, 29). Eldridge Cleaver echoes a similar conclusion, albeit with a somewhat different ideological accent:

> There is a war going on between the black man and the black woman, which makes her the silent ally, indirectly but effectively, of the white man. The black woman is an unconsenting ally and she may not even realize it—but the white man does. That's why, all down through history, he has propped her up economically above you and me, to strengthen her hand against us. (1968, p. 162)

What is interesting is not so much whose version of the story is accurate—the black man's as represented by Cleaver, the white man's as represented by Moynihan, or the black woman's, as represented by Michele Wallace's (1978) critique of both Cleaver and Moynihan—but that two disempowered groups have been pitted against one another, in a classic hegemonic move, through an intersection between the semiotic constructions of race and gender.

These statements arise from the particular socio-historical context of the late 1960s. There is, I believe, substantial evidence that this rift and these themes remain with us today, although, admittedly, in altered form. While Cleaver and Moynihan pointed to the black woman's advantage in the realms of education and economics, the current debate often focuses on the cultural realm, in particular, literature and film. In the context of a set of dialogues between an African-American man and woman (Cornell West and bell hooks), hooks (1991) explains that:

> competition between Black women and men has resurfaced around the issue of whether Black female writers are receiving more attention than Black male writers. . . . the myth that Black women who succeed are taking something away from Black men continues to permeate Black psyches and inform how we as Black women and men respond to one another. (p. 13)

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, for example, served as a site for a debate over negative representations of black men by black women (Butler, 1991; Wallace, 1990). Spike Lee's films have also sparked heated debates in which feminist and Afrocentric critical programs sometimes clash (hooks, 1990; Wallace, 1990).

In October, 1991 these tensions, along with many others, manifested themselves in the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings. While the media often reduced the Hill-Thomas hearings to a case of "man versus woman"—the dynamics of race having been "canceled out" since both Thomas and Hill were coded as black—the responses within the African-American community indicate that this was a contemporary case of the tensions between *black* men and *black* women (Bikel, 1992; Chrisman & Allen, 1992; Morrison, 1992). From statements such as LeRoy Thomas' "I don't think a person who was really looking out for the race would have done what Anita Hill did" (Bikel, 1992) to Rebecca Walker's "When will progressive black men prioritize my rights and well-being? When will they stop talking so damn much about 'the race' as if it revolved exclusively around them?" (1992,

p. 212), it was clear many African-Americans stood in different camps. These camps were often seen to be in stark opposition and were constructed as those supporting "feminism" versus those backing the concerns of "the race" (an opposition which conveniently ignores many of the deep divisions within each group). As Gayle Pemberton concludes, "There is a crisis between black men and women and the hearings disclosed just how deep and resistant to change it is" (1992, p. 195).

The debates about black women writers and other so-called "traitors to the race" indicate that significant tensions still exist between African-American women and men, tensions which, at least potentially, can be made to serve the interests of the ruling Euro-American patriarchal establishment. More specifically, the equation of black liberation with participation in patriarchal domination remains an active force, as in Clarence Thomas' (1991/1992) outrage over being lynched (a trope highly coded in terms of the historical violence directed against black male sexuality) and the revival of the central arguments of the Moynihan Report by journalists and other media (Lubiano, 1992). To my eye and ear, this ideology is manifested even more blatantly in *New Jack City*. To understand how, I want to develop a framework for reading the codes used to classify bodies into their "natural" categories.

Toward a Semiotics of Race and Gender

There is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical (superficially, at least) than the process of establishing an order among things; nothing that demands a sharper eye or a surer, better-articulated language. . . . There is no similitude and no distinction, even for the wholly untrained perception, that is not the result of a precise operation and of the application of a preliminary criterion. . . . The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—establish for every [hu]man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which [s/]he will be dealing and within which [s/]he will be at home. (Foucault, 1970, pp. xix-xx)

Once we take a position that classifications such as gender and race are cultural constructions instead of essentialist, *a priori* categories—once we have rejected the naturalness of our taken-for-granted

ways of being and perceiving—we can begin to expand our understanding of the codes by which we make such identifications. We rarely have the information we "really" need to make decisions about another's sex (primary sexual characteristics), class (income) or race (ancestry).[1] Instead, we rely upon the codes displayed on and through the body: dress, hair style, jewelry, nonverbals such as stance, stride, gestures, facial expressions, et cetera. These are the signifiers (the material element of the sign) to which we attach signifieds (meanings) such as black or white, white collar or blue collar, man or woman, straight or gay. In recognizing these as cultural codes, we are bringing to bear Saussure's (1959) insight about linguistic signs, that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. In pointing out the conventional nature of these particular signifier-signified connections, we are recognizing that race, gender and class (to name but a few categories) are constructions and reifications. These classifications are naturalized when we unconsciously and automatically connect the signifiers and signifieds, as we tend to do with many linguistic and nonlinguistic signs (Barthes, 1972).

One of the implications that follows from this understanding is that bodies which are "really" in one category can carry codes from another.[2] The code we normally assume to be primary—phenotypical traits such as skin color, for example—can be present along with secondary codes that seemingly contradict the primary code. So, for example, *The Cosby Show* has been criticized for using African-American actors to represent a somewhat "white" family, partially because the codes which affiliate them with a bourgeois lifestyle (their careers, education, language-use, aesthetic sensibilities, and support of dominant ideologies such as "family values") are class-based codes which are "normally" clustered with (i.e., confused with) "white" racial codes.

Indeed, the very notion of primary and secondary codes can be collapsed; style of speech, dress, gestures and other "secondary" codes of race or gender may be as important as the seemingly "primary" ones of skin color, sexual characteristics, et cetera. Recent work in the analysis of representations of race in film and other media has begun to emphasize the importance of the intersections between these sets of codes.[3] Robyn Wiegman states the impetus behind these efforts:

The demand for feminist theory in the closing decade of the twentieth century is precisely the articulation of how various structures of difference reinforce one another, for it is the complicity among categories of oppression that enables U.S. culture to enhance hegemonic power even in the process of negotiating with "marginalized" groups and discourses. In this sense, race as a category of difference is not a structure that parallels gender relations, but one that intersects and confirms them—a structure intrinsic to the patriarchal economy of U.S. culture. (1991, pp. 310-311)

To frame my analysis of how these "structures of difference" function hegemonically in *New Jack City*, I turn now to a discussion of the dynamics of spectator identification in the film.

Spectator Identification in *New Jack City*

New Jack City is a film about the rise of a group of black, inner-city youths into the world of organized crime and the efforts of the police to shut them down and send them to prison (in short, a contemporary gangster film). Nino Brown (played by Wesley Snipes) is the leader of this "family"—called "CMB" for Cash Money Brothers—and Gee Money is his lieutenant. After discovering crack, they eventually take over an entire housing project by terrorizing its inhabitants and set up a high-volume, high-tech crack operation. Over the years, the police become increasingly frustrated by their inability to obtain enough evidence to convict Nino and the others. Captain Stone (played by Mario Van Peebles) convinces the police chief to authorize a special operation, and puts two rogue cops, Scotty Appleton (Ice T) and Nick Peretti (Judd Nelson), in charge.

After several failed attempts by the police to infiltrate the organization, Nino begins to distrust Gee Money, who has become a crack addict. Nino kills Gee Money after discovering that he had a side deal with Scotty and that Scotty, whom Gee Money vouched for, was an undercover cop. Eventually, the police obtain enough evidence and arrest Nino. However, at his trial Nino manages to displace the blame and turn state's evidence, getting almost no jail time. The police are disappointed in the results of their efforts, but not for long. An old man from the project Nino had taken over shoots and kills him on his way out of the court room. "Justice" is done.

How might various viewers position themselves within (or be po-

sitioned by) such structures of meaning? Stuart Hall (1980) argues that the gap between the dominant ideology encoded in mass media texts such as *New Jack City* and the social positions of various readers necessitates a negotiation between text and reader. Three general reading positions follow. The first is the dominant reading, wherein the ideology and social position of the reader fit with the "preferred reading" of the text; typically, this manifests itself as a strong identification with the protagonist. Second, a negotiated reading is one wherein the final reading is consistent with the dominant ideology but the fit with the reader's social position is imperfect, therefore requiring some adjustment (for example, identification with a secondary character). Finally, an oppositional reading is one in which the reader goes "against the grain" of the text's preferred reading, as when a feminist reader, for example, interprets a mass media text as an appalling example of patriarchal values and the oppression of women. Oppositional readers fail to find positive identifications in the text and, most likely, would not continue or repeat their exposure to the television series, film, magazine, et cetera (Fiske, 1987).

Manthia Diawara, in his critique of Hollywood cinema, works from this general theoretical framework to argue that "the Afro-American spectator is denied the possibility of identification with black characters as credible or plausible personalities" (1988, p. 72). In *New Jack City*, for example, the choice is between black characters who represent and uphold the legitimacy of the institution that abused Rodney King or others who exploit the economically disadvantaged inhabitants of the inner city by addicting them to destructive and pacifying drugs. This does not mean African-American viewers do not manage to identify—that option is open through negotiated readings—but those readings are not *resistant*, and therefore are undesirable from the standpoint of a political program such as Diawara's that is working for the liberation of African-Americans.

As Diawara might predict, the subject position that makes for the "best fit" with this film is that of a white, middle-class male and the preferred reading is one that upholds law and order, private property, and an unmistakable anti-drug message.[4] Clearly, the black criminal figures such as Nino not only are opposed to this viewer racially, but also are opposed in terms of their violent, criminal acts ("cold-blooded" killing, terrorizing "good" families, buying off the local clergy, et cetera). Sander Gilman (1985) advances the commonly-accepted po-

sition that we project our anxieties about ourselves onto our "others," that the content of our negative stereotypes is an indication of those aspects of ourselves that we fear losing control over, such as sexual desire, disease and the individual/group distinction. Similarly, Marianna Torgovnick (1990) documents how the culture of Euro-American masculinity has constructed the "primitive" as a site for the displacement of its aggressive and sexual impulses. Hence, I would argue that this film functions to reassure the white male spectator that the brute violence, animal sexuality and unrestrained entrepreneurial spirit embodied in the black criminal figures in *New Jack City* are not *his* (my) violence, *his* (my) sexuality, or *his* (my) economic ideology. However, the anxiety indicated by the construction and pleasurable consumption of representations of primitive Others such as Nino points to the fact that this sexuality, violence and unrestrained drive for success *are* his (mine).

This projection helps explain how a viewer positioned in this way (i.e., as a white, middle-class male) can successfully identify with the cops, who are either men of color (Scotty, Stone) or coded as lower-class and ethnic (Peretti). These characters are clearly opposed to the very blackened criminal figures because they do not as blatantly embody these signs of "otherness," and thus identification with the police by a white viewer is not blocked. It is, in fact, made possible by means of the opposition they share: the cops against the criminals and the viewer against his Other. This identification by means of a common enemy functions to minimize the potentially disruptive difference in racial identification. In addition, the two main black cops are coded as somewhat "white": Stone via his dress, class status, and familial status (he wears conservative white collar clothing, holds a fairly high position of authority, and is implied to be in a stable, nuclear family) and Scotty through his significantly lighter skin.[5]

As with much mainstream cinema, the position of the female-identified spectator of *New Jack City* is problematic. Very few real possibilities for identification would seem to exist for this viewer, for this film is clearly set up for the male gaze through the objectification of female bodies.[6] The female characters in this particular film are not only relatively undeveloped, they are explicitly portrayed as animalistic. For example, Gee Money's "woman" is charged as having an uncontrolled sexuality by Selena, the other major female character, as they fight over the right to be possessed by Nino. Keisha is a silent,

violent figure and the female District Attorney is well-intentioned but ultimately disempowered. Jacquie Jones, in an essay cataloguing the dismal portrayal of black women in recent African-American films, points out that "*New Jack City* fails to establish even one nuanced female character with singular relevance of value to the film's text" (1991, p. 34). Female-identified spectators would seem to have to be male-identified or at least focus more on other facets of their subjectivities (such as class or race) to identify in ways similar to the white male spectator discussed above.

What about the black male spectator?[7] To say that identification for this viewer is made problematic in this film is an understatement. First, the black criminal figures are made so cruel, violent and animalized that there is little positive meaning to be made there. Second, the identification with black cops also is problematic because of their role in reinforcing white structures of dominance and ignoring the economic plight of ghetto blacks. However, if a black resistant spectator were to attempt to make a place in this film, the criminal figures would seem to offer the best hope. Such a viewer could attempt to dismiss or downplay (or even delight in), for example, Nino's cruelty, selfishness and excessive entrepreneurial spirit and highlight the critical voices that he speaks: his critique of Reagan, his recognition of the economic exploitation of the poor and people of color, his argument for the legalization of drugs, et cetera. However, this film attempts to block this move and push the black spectator, resistant or otherwise, to identify with the cops. I want to argue that the producers of *New Jack City*, at some level, were aware of the bind of the (resistant) black male spectator and offer this viewing position special incentives for "appropriate" identification, rewards for engaging in the preferred reading.

In the course of illustrating this process in *New Jack City*, I will be operating from Robert Scholes' (1989) more fluid conceptualization of a textual economy which organizes exchanges of pleasure and power. This model, I believe, not only allows for a more nuanced reading but is more consistent with the Gramscian project of historicizing the hegemonic process than the preferred/negotiated/oppositional triad. In the case of this text, such a model allows for an engagement of the problem posed by Wallace, hooks and other African-American feminists: articulating the relationship between racial- and gender-based oppression.

A qualification is crucial: I am not making claims about what actual spectators (black or otherwise) do and I do not wish to portray them as cultural dupes. My analysis concerns *subject positions* produced by ideological structures of sense-making and manifested in specific texts such as *New Jack City*. A living, breathing black male viewer would not necessarily arrive at the interpretation that I will construct for that viewing position any more than I would necessarily arrive at the interpretation I will argue best fits the viewing position of white, middle-class male.[8] As Fiske (1987) points out, it is important to find out how real audiences, who actively produce meanings, respond. Absent such ethnographic data, analyses such as this one, which focus on the structural components of the text that constrain and enable those "real" readings (i.e., which organize certain exchanges of pleasure and power), can still provide important insights into the processes of reading/viewing as well as the meanings being circulated to and within certain audiences.

The Feminization of the Black Criminal in *New Jack City*

The primary mechanism *New Jack City* employs to push the black male viewer to identify with the representatives of the dominant ideology is the repeated feminization of the black criminals through an overdetermined complex of cultural codes. The radically contingent, conventional nature of these racial and gender codes—in short, their lack of any "real," essential foundation—can be used to reinforce existing power relations. Certain social positions can be made undesirable (i.e., identification by viewers can be blocked) through the subtle articulation of negatively-valued codes with those positions. In the case of *New Jack City*, the reinforcement of white hegemony is attempted by attaching traditionally feminine codes to the black, male, criminal figures. By feminizing these characters, the identification of a black male viewer who equates liberation with patriarchy can be made less desirable.

New Jack City in particular and film in general are by no means unique in the use of this strategy of feminization. Men (as well as women) who are raped, put on display, or classified as hysterical (to cite but three instances) can all be seen as being feminized in some way, "degraded" by being placed in a position conventionally occupied by women. They are "coded" as feminine: as objects of violent penetra-

tion and control; as objects of the gaze; or as overly emotional and "out of control." Several such codes are used in *New Jack City*.

The first code is in relation to crack. All users of crack are feminized in a number of different ways in the film. The most obvious connection here is that smoking crack is referred to as "sucking on the glass dick." More elaborately, Gee Money performs a marriage ceremony between himself and crack, ending with "you may now kiss the bride," although the metaphoric link of pipe and penis would seem to make him the bride, the passive partner (or, alternatively, homosexual; the effect would seem to be similar in this instance since many dominant codes for homosexual men are feminine codes). Users of crack are portrayed as passive, undisciplined and out of control (i.e., addicted): a catalog of classic patriarchal definitions of femininity. Finally, Peretti claims that crack is "not a black thing, not a white thing, it's a death thing." While the link is less direct, long-standing cultural codes link women to death because their visible role in reproduction is seen as a connection between the worlds of life and death (Schott, 1988). Hence, we could rewrite Peretti's statement as "it's not a black thing, it's not a white thing, it's a *female* thing" (or, "it's a castrating thing"). While most of the crack users in the film are not potential figures for identification, this move functions to block any strong, positive identification with either Gee Money or Pookie (an addict used by Scotty to infiltrate the crack operation).

The most obvious black criminal figure that could serve as a site for identification is Nino, but I believe him to be one of the most feminized male figures in the film despite his disavowal and avoidance of crack. First, Nino is portrayed as a coward. When the mob retaliates, Nino uses a little girl as a shield instead of protecting her. We are told that he originally got into the drug business by killing a defenseless woman. On a related theme, in order to get a lighter sentence, Nino constructs himself as a victim in his courtroom testimony, another code associating him with patriarchal notions of femininity. Second, we are told Nino's female companion is incapable of having children, but this could be telling us that it is Nino that is incapable; either way, that is the effect, and we are explicitly told in the film that a "man" should leave children behind to carry on his legacy. The third set of codes that feminizes Nino is his masquerading as an upper-class body. We see this both in his style of dress and the excessive jewelry he and others in his "family" wear. This cluster of codes functions to feminize Nino, I

would argue, because upper-class codes, while dominant, are closely related to prevalent codes of femininity: soft, civilized, vain, pampered, et cetera. Eldridge Cleaver makes this link in his "Allegory of the Black Eunuchs" (1968) and it is also present in working-class attitudes towards white collar workers and the upper class.

A less obvious but frequent code used to feminize Nino is the use of fluid imagery. As will become clear below, masculinity is defined as hardness, and hence, following the law of duality, fluidity signifies femininity.[9] Nino's dress is characterized by a looseness that causes it to flow about his body. This code is heightened by his characteristically African-American walk, which is more flowing than the stereotypical white male stride (a code explicitly parodied by Eddie Murphy in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch in which he passes as white). Finally, three scenes in *New Jack City* quite directly make Nino's body fluid: the close-up of his excessively sweaty face right after his people kill the Italians, his tears before he kills Gee Money, and the bloody, reformed state of his face after Scotty beats him up near the end of the film.

This last scene connects fluidity with the most blatant mechanism by which Nino is feminized: He is made the object of violent, male sexuality. The cops break into Nino's apartment and Scotty and Nino begin a long fist-fight. As their fight moves into the street, a crowd gathers and begins to cheer, urging Scotty on. In the background, we can occasionally make out specific encouragements from members of the crowd (e.g., "kill him," "kick his black ass"). As Scotty finishes beating Nino to a pulp and threatens him with a gun, he not only calls him "bitch," but says "I wanna shoot you so bad my dick's hard." Nino whimpers, helpless.[10] Eventually, Nino is handed off from Scotty to Peretti to Stone.

I would argue that in addition to the blatant sexualization and feminization of Nino through Scotty's words and his brandishing of a gun, this scene has some strong structural parallels to a gang rape. One of the best-known gang rape scenes, from *The Accused*, has at least three commonalities with this scene from *New Jack City*. First, in both cases a crowd gathers to watch the "action." Second, both crowds encourage the perpetrator of the violence through general howling, yelling and cheering as well as specific statements—in *The Accused*, with lines such as "stick it to her," "go for it," "pump that little college ass," and a collective chant of "poke that pussy." Third, in each scene the object

of violence is traded between three men (cops in one case, rapists in another). These two scenes are different in a number of other ways, but I feel the parallels further encourage the use of gendered and sexualized codes to make sense of the relationship between the cops and criminals in *New Jack City*.

The Trade-Off

This sexualization in general and Scotty's line in particular lie at the center of my argument. In order to dissuade the black male spectator from identifying with the criminal figures, they are feminized. In order to persuade the black male spectator to then identify with the representatives of the white power structure, and thereby reestablish the current hegemonic order, the cops are given the ability to obtain phallic pleasure and power. In other words, the film establishes a contract with the black male spectator: In return for appropriate spectatorial identification (in Hall's terms, engaging in the preferred reading), the black male spectator is offered that which he has been denied and consistently promised—his (patriarchally defined) masculinity. Identify with the cops and we will masculinize you, this film tells its male viewers. While the promise of phallic power would seem to work for any male viewer, this message would seem to be particularly suited for black male viewers given the feeling (at least historically) that manhood is what black men have been denied. In addition, more work is required to get the oppressed to consent than the oppressors: Since the social position of a black spectator is less consistent with the preferred reading, additional incentives would be needed.

In *Protocols of Reading*, Robert Scholes argues that the "textual economy is marked, in particular, by exchanges of power and pleasure. The rhetoric of textual economy that I am proposing, then, will take the form of an investigation into the flow of pleasure and power that is organized by any text" (1989, p. 108). For the viewer positioned as white, middle class and male, the exchange may take the form of scapegoating: project the fears of what you may be (i.e., the knowledge of what you are: violent, exploitative, and ultimately disempowered) onto the black criminals, and then participate in their destruction (by identifying with the cops) in order to purge your fear and guilt. The pleasure comes from the purge; not incidentally, it is a purge heavily coded with male (hetero)sexuality. The power is in the continuing consent to participate in the political, economic, legal and

cultural structures that oppress some and empower others. For the viewer positioned as a black male, the pleasure is in the (admittedly vicarious) exercise of phallic power; the power side of the transfer is, again, in the consent given to the dominant ideologies and existing social relations.

The result is that the (successfully positioned) black male viewer is given the illusion of empowerment (phallic power) while simultaneously being disempowered in relation to the dominant by granting his consent to the ideologies of private property, law and order, and anti-drug morality—not to mention the belief that the poor state of the ghettos is the fault of the black community, not the white economy. This "trick" is made possible by the intersection of codes I have referred to throughout this essay. As Ella Shohat explains,

> The intersection of ethnicity with race, class, and gender discourses involves a shifting, relational social and discursive positioning, whereby one group can simultaneously constitute "norm" and "periphery." A given community can in a single context exist in a relation of subordination to one group and at the same time in a relation of domination toward another. (1991, p. 216)

Not only is the hegemony of the dominant reinforced, the black male viewer's misogyny is enlisted to assist in the continued oppression of women. The incentive of phallic power and the identification-blocking strategy of feminization attempts to place the black male viewer "in-between," creating the illusion of his empowerment and reinforcing the reality of the patriarchy.

This reading can be questioned by pointing out that the cops are disempowered in the end: Nino manipulates the system and gets off with almost no jail time. The cops' ability to fully experience phallic pleasure is frustrated and it is the old man who finally kills Nino. Several interpretations of this ending are possible. It could reduce the incentive for the black male spectator to identify with the cops; however, I think the film is still potentially successful in doing so for two reasons. First, the cops obviously appreciate and support the old man's actions. In the end, they really do win, aside from whose finger pulled the trigger. Second, even though the black male spectator does not get as much out of the bargain as he had hoped (direct identification with a completely uninhibited exercise of phallic power), identification with

the cops is still the best deal in town. Alternatively, identification with the old man could be seen as working with the strategy I have so far outlined. As a disempowered, weak figure—i.e., a castrated one (here we see elderly and feminine codes overlapping, not insignificantly)—the black male viewer may be enticed into identifying with the old man, since disempowerment is something black male viewers may readily relate to (although not uniquely). The effect would be similar: adopt the dominant ideologies, as this old man has, and you will gain the phallus, in this case in the form of a gun used to kill the feminized representation of oppositional ideologies.

Implications

This analysis calls attention to two interrelated issues of relevance to feminism and other efforts for social transformation. First, once a nonessentialist position is adopted, one implication that follows immediately is that cultural codes construct identities and there is no reason to believe these are independent of one another or that one set of codes is more primary than another. The point is not to reduce either set of codes to the other (race to gender or vice versa), but instead to recognize how disempowered groups are constructed through similar codes. Doing so helps us understand the complexity of specific hegemonic strategies, to identify some of the historically contingent mechanisms and forces at play in producing certain kinds of readings.

Fredric Jameson (1990) urges cultural critics to avoid oversimplifying the means by which mass culture texts reproduce existing social and economic relations. He argues that mass culture texts raise utopian, liberatory impulses which then are harnessed and channeled for hegemonic purposes. While this film does indeed raise such impulses as the empowerment of African-Americans, it immediately, simultaneously, counteracts such an impulse by the very definition of what "empowerment" is: participation in (white) patriarchy. Hence, I would argue, the definition of liberation so evident in the discourse of Cleaver and Jones remains in circulation and can be appropriated to encourage specific exchanges of pleasure and power.

Second, fostering a critical consciousness concerning these codes and their intersections potentially can reduce tensions between oppressed and marginalized groups (such as those in South-Central L.A. or within the African-American community as a result of the Hill-Thomas hearings) and increase the possibilities of collective resistance.

We need to work toward a knowledge of ourselves, in Gramsci's terms, "as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in [us] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 324). The naturalized "languages" of race and gender are two of these traces that must become known—become denaturalized—for, as Gramsci writes,

> every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses ... who are at first resistant, and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves, who have no ties of solidarity with others in the same condition. (quoted in Bennett et al., 1981, p. 194)

Creating misery hierarchies—seeing one form of oppression as more real than another, seeing one axis of difference as underlying all other forms of oppression—fosters hostility, dismissal and fragmentation. On the other hand, seeing the links between the discourses of race, gender, class and sexuality (to name but a few) potentially can help denaturalize these codes, make apparent the hidden interarticulations in the structures of oppression, and create possibilities for a critical consciousness that fosters solidarity in resistance.[11]

A search for an ultimate foundation (economics, sexuality, gender, race) can miss the trick played by these codes, a con game in which the overturned shells are shuffled in such a clever fashion that we never can seem to find the pea—the *a priori*, objective basis—but still believe it to be there "somewhere." Hence we "pay up"—in this case, with our participation in our own and others' oppression instead of our cash.

Notes

I wish to thank Barb White and Kathryn Stockton for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. I recognize that there are other elements that make up each of these categories—in fact, the definition of each is a (legitimate) site for contention. "Class" is not only an economic category, "sex" is not only biological, and "race" is not only hereditary. Part of the purpose of this paper is to call into question the "real" nature of these categories by focusing on the codes by which they are constructed. We could easily add other categories as well—age and sexuality come immediately to mind.

2. Many of the ideas in this section were inspired, more and less directly, by Kathryn Stockton's work on the relationships between western codes for race, class, gender and sexuality. Without them, this essay would not have been possible.

3. The existence and function of these intersections has been documented by Sander Gilman (1985) in his analysis of stereotypes of sexuality, race and madness. For example, he demonstrates how black Africans historically have been sexualized to a greater degree than whites, with a particular focus on their "excessive" sexuality and "abnormal" sexual characteristics. These codes were, in turn, used to explain "abnormalities" in white sexuality (such as prostitution and lesbianism) and to sexualize representations of white women. The latter function was accomplished in artistic representations of white women (e.g., Victorian-era paintings) by including either an accompanying black servant or anatomical traits associated with the sexual abnormalities of African women. Hence, through the linking of African women's sexual "abnormalities" to white prostitutes and, in turn, to representations of white women, these women were *sexualized through racial codes*. Similarly, the "dark continent" of black Africa becomes, for Freud, the "dark continent" of female sexuality.

4. Anti-drug messages are not intrinsically white and/or bourgeois. There are significant differences between, for example, Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No!" campaign and the position taken by many in the African-American community that drugs are the white man's genocidal tool. The moralizing in this film strikes me as having more affinities with the former than the latter.

5. Obviously, the interpretation of Ice T's role as Scotty would be significantly complicated if positioned after the "cop-killer" controversy.

6. Mulvey's (1989) psychoanalytic framework for analyzing film argues that film functions in a similar way to Lacan's mirror phase: Mainstream narrative film conventions provide viewers the opportunity to identify with an ego ideal, almost always a male protagonist, which results in a loss of the spectator's ego—i.e., the misrecognition of the filmic ego ideal as the viewer's self. Ultimately, through the "loss" that is the identification with the ego ideal, the viewer's self—in the case of mainstream film, a self which desires phallic power—is reinforced. From a feminist standpoint, the issue here is that female-identified subjects are denied this identification process because fe-

male figures in mainstream films are made the object of the male gaze (both the gaze of the camera and the male protagonist), thereby creating a barrier to the identification process described above. All viewers of mainstream film are interpellated (Althusser, 1971) as masculine subjects, or at least as desiring phallic power and the male gaze. Hence, only a male-identified viewer can gain pleasure from mainstream film, at least insofar as that pleasure is seen in terms of the state of identification, the (mis)recognition of the self on the screen.

7. I do not wish to create the illusion that I have exhausted the categories of potential viewers. I have not explicitly addressed viewers who are lower class or members of other ethnic groups, nor have I dealt with other potentially relevant variables such as rural/urban/suburban or sexual orientation. In addition, any particular viewer will be a composite of several of these subject positions: race, class, gender, sexuality, et cetera. How those subjectivities would intersect and which, if any, would predominate during a viewing of this film is beyond this analysis. I am choosing to highlight a viewer positioned as both black and male for several reasons. First, contemporary viewers are taught and encouraged to interpret texts and events (for example, the Los Angeles Rebellion) in racial terms far more than many other equally legitimate options. Furthermore, "race" is predominately interpreted in terms of "black" (versus "white") and "black" is often implicitly seen as black *men*. Second, the positioning of the black viewer is problematic in relation to this text. Third, it is the black male viewer, not the black female, which this film both recognizes as problematic and specifically attempts to address. This last point will, hopefully, be evidenced by my subsequent analysis.

8. This essay is written from the social position of a white, middle-class male with leftist and feminist politics. This identification is not (solely) to assuage or purge my guilt, but to avoid the pretension that what I write as an academic comes from some transcendent position that is adequately indicated by my name in the author's slot and a brief institutional identification. Not only do I not have direct access to the experience of black male viewers; my analysis, arising as it does from a critique of a definition of liberation proposed by some African-American men, carries with it several risks and tensions. I, a white man, am arguing that a film directed by an African-American serves the interests of the white power structure by creating a kind of "false consciousness" for its male African-American viewers! While I do not wish to

reinforce the binds of an essentialist identity politics, this essay can (legitimately!) be seen as somewhat presumptuous. It also could be read as further evidence of the alliance between the black woman and the white man or to add further justification to the hostility among some African-Americans toward (white) feminism.

I do not wish to pretend my authority in these matters supercedes that of African-Americans and Euro-American women; nor do I wish to believe (for my own white/male/leftist guilt-ridden reasons!) that I am completely trapped in my biological and social positionings. However, neither can I in good conscience—as much as I may like to—fall back on some naive plea to my readers to "let my argument stand on its own merits" (though my choice to place this discussion in an endnote is partially motivated by that desire). All I know how to do is write from within the tensions of my position (but that sounds too easy, too trite—and unconvincing given the relative absence of "my" positions in this analysis). The standard conventions of academic writing (i.e., academic *authority*), even interpreted loosely, provide little opportunity to integrate these discussions into our arguments—and that is no accident. The least I can do is call attention to that constraint and the illusion it works to perpetuate.

9. Irigaray (1985, ch. 6) identifies fluidity in opposition to the dominant (masculine) symbolic and as a characteristic of femininity in Western culture. While fluid imagery is one of the means by which women are denigrated (and maleness/solidness valued), Irigaray also draws on fluidity as an explanation for why the category of woman cannot be contained or exhausted by the dominant symbolic. See also Hayles (1992).

10. Identification with Nino by a resistant spectator also is blocked by his espousal of traditional American ideologies such as capitalism and patriotism. While clearly ironic, Nino's support of America and the opportunities available therein would seem to go against the grain of the politics of many resistant spectators.

11. The nature of such a solidarity has become the center of debates within feminism concerning exclusionary politics and the tensions between a need for unity and a desire to affirm differences. See, for example, Judith Butler (1990).

References

Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.) (pp. 127-186). New York: Monthly Review.

Barthes, R. (1972). Myth today. In *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.) (pp. 109-159). New York: Noonday Press.

Bennett, T., Martin, G., Mercer, C., & Woollacott, J. (Eds.). (1981). *Culture, ideology and social process: A reader.* London: B. T. Batsford.

Bikel. O. (1992, October 15). Public hearing, private plan. *Frontline,* aired on PBS.

Butler, C. B. (1991, July-October). *The Color Purple* controversy: Black woman spectatorship. *Wide Angle, 13,* 62-69.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York: Routledge.

Chrisman, R., & R. L. Allen (Eds.) (1992). *Court of appeal: The black community speaks out on the racial and sexual politics of Thomas vs. Hill.* New York: Ballantine.

Cleaver, E. (1968). *Soul on ice.* New York: Delta.

Diawara, M. (1988). Black spectatorship: Problems of identification and resistance. *Screen, 29,* 66-76.

Fiske, J. (1987). British cultural studies and television. In R. C. Allen (Ed.), *Channels of discourse: Television and contemporary criticism* (pp. 254-289). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: An archeology of the human sciences.* New York: Random House.

Gilman, S. (1985). *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, Eds. and Trans.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall et al. (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128-139). London: Hutchinson.

Hall, S. (1988). The toad in the garden: Thatcherism among the theorists. In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 35-57). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Hayles, N. K. (1992, Summer). Gender encoding in fluid mechanics: Masculine channels and feminine flows. *Differences, 4,* 16-44.

hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics.* Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b., & West, C. (1991). *Breaking bread: Insurgent black intellectual life.* Boston: MA: South End Press.

Irigaray, L. (1985). *This sex which is not one* (C. Porter, Trans.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jameson, F. (1990). Reification and utopia in mass culture. In *Signatures of the visible* (pp. 9-34). New York: Routledge.

Jones, J. (1991, July-October). The new ghetto aesthetic. *Wide Angle, 13,* 32-43.

Leland, J. (1991a, March 25). Night of the living crackheads; violence on and off-screen at "New Jack City." *Newsweek, 52.*

Leland, J. (1991b, July 29). A bad omen for black movies? Fears of audience violence could threaten the creative boom among young directors. *Newsweek, 48.*

Lubiano, W. (1992). Black ladies, welfare queens, and state minstrels: Ideological war by narrative means. In T. Morrison (Ed.), *Race-ing justice, en-gendering power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the construction of social reality* (pp. 323-363). New York: Pantheon.

Morrison, T. (Ed.) (1992). *Race-ing justice, en-gendering power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the construction of social reality.* New York: Pantheon.

Mulvey, L. (1989). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In *Visual and other pleasures* (pp. 14-26). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

The negro family: The case for national action (1965). Washington, D. C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor.

Pemberton, G. (1992). A sentimental journey: James Baldwin and the Thomas-Hill hearings. In T. Morrison (Ed.), *Race-ing justice, en-gendering power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the construction of social reality* (pp. 172-199). New York: Pantheon.

Saussure, F. (1959). *Course in general linguistics* (W. Baskin, Trans.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Scholes, R. (1989). *Protocols of reading.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Schott, R. M. (1988). *Eros and cognition: A critique of the kantian paradigm.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Shohat, E. (1991). Ethnicities-in-relation: Toward a multicultural reading of American cinema. In L. D. Friedman (Ed.), *Unspeakable images: Ethnicity and the American cinema* (pp. 215-250). Urbana: Illinois University Press.

Thomas, C. (1992). Second statement from Judge Clarence Thomas October 11, 1991. In R. Chrisman & R. L. Allen (Eds.), *Court of appeal: The black community speaks out on the racial and sexual politics of Thomas vs. Hill* (p. 22). New York: Ballantine. (Original statement published 1991)

Torgovnick, M. (1990). *Gone primitive: Savage intellects, modern lives.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Van Peebles, M. (Director). (1991). *New jack city* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Walker, R. (1992). Becoming the third wave. In R. Chrisman & R. L. Allen (Eds.), *Court of appeal: The black community speaks out on the racial and sexual politics of Thomas vs. Hill* (pp. 211-214). New York: Ballantine.

Wallace, M. (1978). *Black macho and the myth of the superwoman.* New York: Verso.

Wallace, M. (1990). *Invisibility blues: From pop to theory.* New York: Verso.

Wiegman, R. (1991). Black bodies/American commodities: Gender, race, and the bourgeois ideal in contemporary film. In L. D. Friedman (Ed.), *Unspeakable images: Ethnicity and the American cinema* (pp. 308-328). Urbana: Illinois University Press.