



Multiracial Bodies, Multiracial Reproduction

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ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cultural and social dynamics shaping the emergence of a developing phenomenon: the politics of desire shaping an emergent beauty standard appropriated from Blackness, and subsequent fetishization of mixed-race or ethnically ambiguous children. I engage Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes* extensively to theorize contemporary desirability politics which uphold anti-Blackness through promoting a standard of female beauty which is appropriated from but is fundamentally detached from Blackness, and in turn, develop an imaginary of the mixed-race family useful to reifying racial difference. I engage contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon across social media to investigate how the body, the family, desire, and race are constructed relative to the process of multiracial reproduction and the fantasy of multiracialism.

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In an era defined by the ubiquity of social media, I am intrigued by the process of commodification of the body relative to the notions of desirability, race, and reproduction. The body, undoubtedly, is a primary site for systems of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy to dictate lines of acceptability and deviance, desire and rejection, and of normativity. In conjunction with the body, the frontier of the family and reproduction remains a fascinating space through which to examine both dynamics of race and kinship relative to contemporary modes of social capital. Within this paper, I grapple with a developing phenomenon: the politics of desire shaping an emergent beauty standard appropriated from Blackness, and subsequent fetishization of mixed-race or ethnically ambiguous children. Across popular culture and social media, the appearance of multiracial children has come to serve as a shorthand for the social capital of a non-Black mother: she is culturally and sanguineously fluid enough to transgress racial lines and to reproduce with a Black man, framing her as “progressive” in many cases for diversifying the genetic composition of her family. As a white woman, I am invested in understanding how this non-Black mother/subject position is made, reproduced, and replicated relative to institutions of power. My interpretation and theorizing about these phenomena are rooted in a commitment to Black feminist liberation, and while I hope to honor such an approach, my scholarship is not designed to speak for or serve as a proxy to the voices and experiences of women of color. I am invested in understanding how racial patriarchy configures subjects and relationships: What does this allegedly progressive multiracialism mean in an era and country where anti-Blackness flourishes? How does the politics of desirability influence a desire for multiracial offspring? How do our constructions of cultural capital and progressivism shape our racial and sexual imaginaries?

This discussion does not take place in a vacuum – it is shaped by discourses on multiracialism and sexuality analyzed by Jared Sexton in his book *Amalgamation Schemes*, which grapples with modern constructions of race and reactionary anti-Blackness. Primarily, I attempt to disentangle Sexton’s analysis and discussion of amalgamation. Through this, I explore how the figure of the multicultural child is produced and how it shapes the formation of the interracial family to produce an un-Blackening of the family unit, in spite of the persistence and salience of the one-drop rule. In his exploration, Sexton characterizes his approach to amalgamation through his critique of multiracialism, most saliently that “multiracialism, as it is framed by such debates, suffers from an assumptive logic that diminishes or conceals altogether the historicity of race and sexuality.”¹ Within the schema of cultural capital, the “mulatto” is repurposed and repackaged as the interracial child, as a figure which ostensibly transgresses the racial hierarchy while implicitly reifying it. I am critically questioning how contemporary manifestations of amalgamation are (re)produced on social media within the context of beauty standards and multiracial families to better understand and operationalize Sexton’s framework. I explore how contemporary desirability politics uphold anti-Blackness through promoting a standard of female beauty which is appropriated from but is fundamentally detached from Blackness. Relative to the question of race and reproduction, I engage Sexton’s work to engage with dynamics of fetishization, sexuality, and reproduction through the image of the mixed-race baby as the ultimate desirable commodity in the era of multiracialism.

I begin my engagement with these questions through a brief detour into the politics of desirability in the era of digital media. I posit that these cultural discourses set an aesthetic ideal for female beauty which is reflective of what Sexton characterizes as a fantasy of multiracialism rooted in “the browning of America,” wherein a vision of any form of explicit racial identification becomes fraught.² As Jia Tolentino writes, the visual standard for beauty produced through social media networks produces a singular form of female beauty – the face of desire is “white but ambiguously ethnic—it suggests a National Geographic composite illustrating what Americans will look like in 2050.”³ Thus, while the beauty standard of social media is no longer explicitly white, it is also explicitly non-Black, wherein Blackness is positioned against everything else.⁴ This phenomenon is fascinating for two reasons: the dynamics of

1 Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiracism and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 3.

2 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 6.

3 Tolentino, Jia. “The Age of Instagram Face.” *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face>.

4 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 13.

communication and mimesis embedded in the promotion of this female beauty standard, and the racialized effort to fetishize this vision of womanhood of one which is distinctly non-Black.

I first wish to disentangle the dynamics of desirability and beauty within the site of the body as expressed and mediated through the digital realm. The face presented as sexually desirable across social media is one which is instantly read as feminine: it possesses large, doe-lashed eyes, full, pillowy lips, and a ski-slope nose framed by a pointed chin and carved cheekbones. It often sits atop a body which is both small and voluptuous, instantly read as a site of sexuality: one with large breasts, a small waist, wide hips and a “thick” butt. There is an infinitude of images of women fitting this description, of beauty and sexuality, in any given choice of clothing and setting across social media. While their faces are “cyborgian,” effectively replicated and frozen, the body presented (whether naturally occurring or digitally/surgically altered) distinctly mimics Black women’s bodies.⁵ Historically, racialization produced a vision of Black female bodies that were feared and desired because of their perceived deviance and hypersexuality.⁶ As the fetishization of elements of the body constructed beyond the frame of white acceptability became mainstream in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the hypersexualized elements of Black women’s bodies have become mainstream components of desirability rather than a purely taboo fetish.⁷ For Black women, this takes the form of colorism, which prioritizes lighter skin tones and more ethnically ambiguous (i.e., not observably/ phenotypically Black features) over darker skin. Major non-Black female figures in popular culture, (regrettably, I must note the Kardashian-Jenner empire amongst swaths of copycat influencers, as their impact cannot be overstated) have made careers in appropriating and commodifying an image of sexual desire built on natural features of Black women. Blackness is thus abstracted and flattened from a spectrum of human expressions into the features of “Instagram Face,” made more desirable and easily accessible to non-Black women through digital or cosmetic enhancement.⁸

The replicability of this face as a marker of cultural capital becomes useful when framed in conversation with the process of self-commodification prompted by social media networks. Given the large user audience on any platform, this promotes a cultural discourse wherein the model of an idealized digital self is elevated to the de facto expectation for any user within a given social media landscape. The user of social media is expected to produce a vision of themselves as content for others, predicated on their ability to excel in the regulation and optimization of their bodies and identities as consumable products. By internalizing and curating one’s digital presence in this way, a self-commodification process occurs in which a user contorts to appease legible norms of desirability. In the process of cultivating an image of the self which conforms to these guidelines of beauty, a new narrative around desire is produced: rather than the previously exclusive culturally-sanctioned permission of sexual attraction to white women, non-White women who appropriate or embody perceived inherent elements of Blackness are now principal sites of sexual desire. Interestingly, this reduces Blackness to a set of phenotypically identifiable features, which the agenda of multiracialism seeks to amalgamate. However, race transcends such a reductive identifier. Thus, simply appropriating the aesthetic of Blackness into a non-Black body is not a substitute or proxy for living the Black experience, but such traits serve as a social heuristic for race itself.

The fetishization of certain “core” traits of Blackness without Blackness (or Black women) itself is central to both questions of cultural capital of desirability and reproduction. Elements of this new standard of desirability are, as bell hooks identifies, a “commodification of Otherness” which serves the interest of a taboo sexual encounter.⁹ By abstracting and commodifying these elements as something to be mimicked or purchased by non-Black women in the interest of generating social capital through being sexually desirable, multiracialism, or even the appearance of multiracialism “becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. Cultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressed

5 Tolentino, “The Age of Instagram Face.”

6 Strings, Sabrina. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019.

7 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 178.

8 Tolentino, “The Age of Instagram Face.”

9 hooks, bell. “Eating the Other,” (1992) Quoted in Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 163.

and made explicit.”¹⁰ Naming, pursuing, and validating these cultural narratives around white desire for the sexual viability of multiracial women within and beyond the digital landscape upholds racial hierarchization by framing such sexuality as alternative to or deviated from whiteness, therefore positioning white heterosexuality as the de facto arrangement of the sexual economy. As Sexton writes, “drawing attention to the permeability of racial borders or rendering visible the embodiment of ‘racial liminality’ does not necessarily render racial categories suspect, but rather it is structurally required by the process of racial suture.”¹¹

Thus, in the production of the non-Black, non-White female body as a site of desirability, there is an inherent processual ordering of her proximity to each of these racial poles. When this body is understood to not fully embody Blackness (perhaps she is *partially* Black, but not recognizably so), she is able to be evaluated relative to the fixed classifications of whiteness and Blackness, “rendering visible the embodiment of ‘racial liminality’ does not necessarily render racial categories suspect, but rather it is structurally required by the process of racial suture.”¹² As such, cultural capital is produced through appropriating or abstracting elements of Black women’s bodies that are fetishized in the process of ascertaining racial ambiguity, but such ambiguity itself is still predicated on the conceptual framing of discrete racial categories. Rather than heralding a “progressive” change in beauty ideals from white supremacy, the desirability politics produced and mimicked throughout social media instead reify racial difference.

The fact that “Instagram face/body” is vaguely exoticized speaks directly to this phenomenon – despite being observably different from the standard of whiteness, it is still understood in proximity to it, implicitly stabilizing the racial order. Multiracialism is commodified and desired as a differentiated form of beauty relative to the implied standard of whiteness. The ambiguity of its ethnic construction is precisely what necessitates a racial order to regulate it – the sexual economy, the sexual encounter, and the sexual politics of desiring (or becoming) this woman frame her in opposition to the fixity of whiteness. As a result, presenting a vision of oneself for consumption in this way both commodifies the elements of Blackness deemed to be sexual and reinforces the association of such an aesthetic with an imaginary of cultural progressiveness through mainstreaming such desire in opposition to a hegemonic narrative of white desirability.

The promotion of a fetishized, ethnically ambiguous womanhood is coupled with the promotion of multiracial babies as desirable to the multicultural project. Here, it is important to return to Sexton again. The politics of interracial sexual desirability and reproduction are entangled in their mutual effort to stabilize and reinforce existing racial categorizations. Before extending this argument relative to the cultural narratives surrounding the desirability of mixed-race children, it is important to consider Sexton’s claim about the desexualization of an interracial relationship relative to the highly sexualized site of the female body. Sexton highlights that in order for an interracial relationship to be culturally legible, it must be necessarily de-sexualized and framed relative to a bourgeoisie, nuclear family order.¹³ However, when an interracial relationship is sexualized, it must align with a “sexuality of the heights,” which “aims to re-create the moral ideals of the oedipal family or the subjectified couple, founded on promises, principles, and mutual expectations,” in contrast to a “sexuality of the depths” which emphasizes bodily-focused carnal pleasure.¹⁴ The fixation on the form of the body, the hypersexualization of the flesh is much more reflective of the early fetishization of Black bodies stands in stark opposition to the moralizing rhetoric promoted through the commodification and promotion of mixed-race children as embodying “the internal ‘defeat of racism’ that interracial couples practice and multiracial people embody in their everyday lives.”¹⁵

This becomes evident in the transition of many interracial family figures across social media. Mixed race children are touted as accessories or markers of having “transcended” race by their parents, while simultaneously curating an image of “wholesome” family content – for

10 Ibid., 164.

11 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 156.

12 Ibid.

13 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 38.

14 Goodchild, Philip, *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire*, Sage Publications, (1996), quoted in Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 160.

15 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 158.

example, countless YouTube videos of white mothers styling Black children's hair have garnered millions of views. The interracial family is commodified as a moral, orderly institution, ripe for consumption as an easily accessible commodity. Such content is emblematic of this idealized family which has "defeated" racism, yet fails to interrogate the pivotal logic underscoring such a defeat: "the desire to counteract racial oppression is desultory, for the coveted racial harmony does not become possible, on the ground, except through the displacement of the 'domestic' antagonism to another level of social organization, in this case, through the spurious incorporation of black Americans into the structure of U.S. imperialism."¹⁶ In such a way, the digital commodification and fetishization of the harmonious multiracial family requires a fantasy of itself as existing outside or being impervious to the racial order, and in doing so, reifies it.

Across social media, like the ubiquity of "Instagram Face," multi-racial children are idealized including by specific accounts dedicated to producing content around interracial families through highlighting their children. Consistent across these accounts are the glamorization of ethnically ambiguous children who embody largely Eurocentric features or have mid-to-light range skin tones, often naturally exhibiting the features deemed desirable within the new digital beauty standard. Through the proliferation of content highlighting their beauty, mixed-race children are commodified as progressive, indicative of whiteness-but-not, valued through the lens of exoticism, symbolic of a transgressive border crossing in the interest of progress towards a racially homogenous America. Multiracial children embody the same cultural capital as ethnically ambiguous sexuality, repackaged as a matured, wholesome version of the forbidden desire for sexual otherness. As a result, the image of the mixed-race child must be abstracted from both the sexualized site of the mother's body and the perceived sexual salience of a Black father, undermining the sanctity of the "one-drop rule" in the interest of an imagined racial liminality. These histories of Blackness must be erased and mitigated in the interest of the family – Sexton highlights "a constant line of denunciation functions as the proof of its [the interracial relationship's] respectability, its maturity, and its confidence in defending true love against corruption, successfully warding off perversion and pathology."¹⁷

To justify the production of the mixed-race child in a sense, the non-Black mother must sacrifice her sexual legibility; the taboo of her eroticism must be shorn to justify the taboo of her miscegenation and the decision to forsake racial purity. This act requires a sort of doubling of the public consciousness, to reframe the female body from a site of sexualization to a site of romance, of familial contentment rather than carnal intimacy, mimicking the heteropatriarchal nuclear formation. Just as with ethnically ambiguous beauty, the mixed-race child becomes positioned vis-a-vis Blackness as tangential to it, rather than constructed by it, marked by the drop of Black blood but existing in a familial formation outside of it. Despite the historical fascination with tracking and codifying racial purity, the multiracial child's ambiguity becomes a marker of the social capital of progressivism – how can one be racist, for example, if they have a (partially) Black child? Many social media figures follow this trajectory, even identifying their Black child offered a gateway into the "reality" of racism previously inaccessible to them. Sexton offers a rebuttal in the question of the true romantic encounter relative to the drive to transcend race: "surely, interracial sexual relations are structured fantastically at the intersubjective scale, but what do we make of the political claims that multiracialism can bridge the racial divide by removing limits," to ask "Are we not here facing a desire for real encounter with the other that produces relations of social harmony, the aim of the sexual relationship elevated to the national scale, perhaps even a fantasy of planetary love?"¹⁸ It is this framing that seems most salient across the digital shrines to multiethnic children – just as with the politics of desire present in the new beauty standard, these children too are a commodity of otherness, their very being a testimony to the rigidity of the racial order.

Inherently, however, in the contemporary popularization of multiethnic babies by non-Black individuals as principally desirable is an implicit agenda of anti-Blackness, predicated upon un-Blackening such subjects. Sexton writes "in order for interracial relationships to be 'valued in this culture and society' and 'triumph over prejudice and taboo,' the relationship itself must be

16 Ibid., 172.

17 Ibid., 170.

18 Ibid., 185.

desexualized and, in a precise way, deracialized, which, as we have seen, requires a distance toward and denigration of blackness.”¹⁹ By reconfiguring Blackness into a legible subjectivity by fitting it within the aforementioned bounds of acceptable bourgeois family structure of the heights, it is distilled by the presence of a non-Black partner. The fetishization of the multiethnic child as commodity, as the ultimate expression of transgressive cultural capital is living proof of the ability of the parents to embody a post-racial world. Yet, as Sexton points out, desexualizing the interracial relationship is integral to its cultural legibility, which exists in tension with the fetishization of the body of the mother and the act of miscegenation itself. For the child to be fetishized and commodified as an indicator of postraciality, they must be made un-Black, just as the act of reproduction is de-sexualized.

The desire for mixed-race children is one which is, in many ways, tied to anti-Blackness. By erasing the actual Blackness of these children (just like the erasure of Blackness from the production and commodification of a new beauty standard), white supremacy continues to benefit from the promotion of the sexual border crossing and act of miscegenation as revolutionary. Through Sexton’s engagement with Lacan and Žižek, it is clear that the most progressive visions of multiracialism require the fantasy of multiracial America to be inherently and necessarily impossible. Sexton argues “were multiracialism to relinquish the negative ideal of freedom from blackness, it could proceed only through a divestment of the fantasy of social harmony qua racial fusion.”²⁰ For Sexton, amalgamation as multiracialism is impossible due to the constructed fantasy of race itself – it cannot be confronted with its own Lack in the realm of the Real, whereas the ideal of a racialized, sexualized body can only exist as a symbolic projection, produced through racial patriarchy and reliant upon ideas of transgression to produce bodies which are both fractures to the racial order and necessary to upholding it.²¹

In conclusion, the politics of sexuality and reproduction remain highly racialized, despite the ostensibly progressive desires to transcend racial boundaries through embodying, desiring, or (re)producing multiracialism. Social media has commodified, fetishized, and (re)produced both a vision of sexual desirability and of idealized reproduction born from and reliant on the abandonment of Blackness. In this sense, we can understand the digital popularization of abstracted Blackness as a form of cultural capital relative to the veneer of false progressivism produced through the mainstreaming of a once-taboo sexual desire for women of color and the idealized postracialism imagined through interracial reproduction. However, both of these dynamics reinforce Blackness as only valued in contexts of immediate proximity to whiteness, due to its ability to relationally reify and stabilize the existing racial order. Given the ubiquity of the desire for a racially ambiguous sexualized femininity and mode of reproduction across social media in contemporary popular culture, there is not a clear way to disentangle this chimera of a fetishized racial imaginary, both sexual and reproductive. While Sexton calls us to transcend the fallacy of multiracialism by acknowledging the racialized/sexualized bodies in question “do not exist as such,” I am left to wonder if it is possible to do so in a digital landscape governed by and dependent upon (re)producing the social capital of the body itself.²² Bodies as commodified aesthetics become valuable in their proximity to and distinguishability from Blackness – is there a way to imagine a world beyond the multiracial project when participating in the project is a form of social capital? Ultimately, we are left to grapple with the fact that the very fantasy of the stability of the racial-sexual order is fundamentally a fantasy of bodily stability.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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19 Ibid., 175.

20 Ibid., 187.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 188.

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