

# **Biraciality and Nationhood in Contemporary American Art**

**by KYMBERLY N. PINDER. 2000**

An article on work by artists responding to racial hybridity that features a discussion of O'Grady's diptych, *The Clearing*. Published in *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Art and Culture* 53, Winter 2000-01.

*For when we swallow Tiger Woods, the yellow-black-red-white man, we swallow something much more significant than Jordan or Charles Barkley. We swallow hope in the American experiment, in the pell-mell jumbling of genes. We swallow the belief that the face of the future is not necessarily a bitter or bewildered face, that it might even, one day, be something like Tiger Wood's face: handsome and smiling and ready to kick all comers' asses.*<sup>1</sup>

The hope in 'the yellow-black-red-white man', reflected in the Tigermania that swept the US in the mid-1990s, is indicative of the racial crossroads at which the US, as a nation, finds itself at the close of the twentieth century. As Stanley Crouch describes, 'We have been inside each other's bloodstreams, pockets, libraries, kitchens, schools, theatres, sports arenas, dance halls, and national boundaries for so long that our mixed-up and multi-ethnic identity extends from European colonial expansion and builds upon immigration.'<sup>2</sup> Where are we as a nation regarding race when Woods can consider himself 'Cablinasian' while some southern states are still officially ending their 'one-drop' rules and [taking] laws against mixed marriages off the books? How can we address the concerns of those who see Affirmative Action as all but dead?

Some contemporary artists in the US have been struggling with these issues during the 1980s and 1990s. Lorraine O'Grady is one of them. She originally titled her photomontage diptych *The Clearing* in 1991, however, later, she lengthened the title to *The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N and Me* to clarify the historical and personal relevance of the work. The left half of the piece presents the relationship between the black woman and white man as loving while the right as malevolent. The skeletal face of the man and the gun in the pile of clothing provide elements of violence and death. Yet O'Grady says, 'it isn't a "before/after" piece; it's a "both/and" piece. This couple is on the wall in the simultaneous extremes of ecstasy and exploitation.'<sup>3</sup> The complex relationship between exploitation and defiance for such 'women of color' as La Malinche and Sally Hemings has become a trope of American hybridity and assimilation.

Though anthropologists have established the mixed-race heritage of all humans with the discovery of 'missing link' hominids in Central and South Africa, racial purity, mixing and conflict are still hotly debated issues in American society. I am not contesting any scientific definitions of race and human origins in this essay, but I will focus on representations of multiraciality and their socio-political currency in American society, specifically contemporary popular culture. Throughout this article, I will use the terms biracial, mixed-race, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, racial hybridity and multicultural with the understanding that such terms are socially constructed and based on perceptions, either of oneself or by others in our society. These terms and their instability reflect the challenge we face to discuss meaningfully the reality of racial mixing, as well as to create the very language needed to do so. Of course, the reality of a nation of immigrants, the legacy of slavery, and the genocide of native populations prevents issues of race and difference from being resolved in the US. In the last decade or so, as the collapse of Affirmative Action initiatives and the rise of white supremacy groups attest, racial divides seem to be widening rather than narrowing. Some race scholars such as Crouch think otherwise and see the increased mixing of the races in the US as the 'end of race':

The international flow of images and information will continue to make for a greater and greater swirl of influences. It will increasingly change life on the globe and also change our American sense of race. . . In that future, definition by racial, ethnic and sexual groups will most probably have ceased to be the foundation of special-interest power. . . Americans of the future will find themselves surrounded in every direction by people who are part Asian, part Latin, part African, part European, part Indian.<sup>4</sup>

As panaceas or true saviors, historical figures, like Hemings, and contemporary celebrities, like Woods, have become national touchstones for unity. These biracial or multiracial individuals who were once outcast traces of taboo sexual transgressions, the stereotypical 'tragic mulattos', are now signifiers of a future of racial harmony. In February 1995, *Newsweek* devoted an entire issue to the 'New Race' in America and though its surveys showed some significant pessimism among blacks and whites regarding our nation's race relations, the magazine presented the nation's growing mixed-race population as a future remedy for current racial conflicts.<sup>5</sup> As one biracial writer responded, the magazine declared it 'hip to be mixed'.<sup>6</sup> Another article, with a markedly flippant tone, in *Harper's Magazine* in 1993, even recommended a more practical 'need' for racial mixing: melanin-rich skin for the survival of future generations as our ozone layer erodes.<sup>7</sup> Popular movies such as *Bulworth* (1998), written and directed by Warren Beatty, present a jaded white politician who, after living a few days with a black family in South Central Los Angeles, makes 'procreative, racial deconstruction' his political platform, his remedy for racial discrimination and the economic disparities it has caused in this country.

Historical figures, such as Malinche and Pocahontas, have also gained political significance as they are seen to offer hopeful moments of cross-cultural co-operation in our racially divided pasts. For example, the 1995 Disney film about the latter presents the saga as a love story in which Pocahontas risks her own life to save that of John Smith. This narrative, based upon Smith's account and revised for a young audience, excludes

Matoaka's (Pocahontas's real name) later kidnapping and forced conversion. Many applauded Disney's politically correct inclusion of Native American history into its repertoire, however, the effects of the distortion of 'Distory'<sup>8</sup> on our children's understanding of national history and race relations are questionable. The scale of this type of nationalistic desire for harmony, past and present, through these icons, is summed up in the words of Woods's father, Earl:

Tiger will do more than any other man in history to change the course of humanity. . . . Because he's qualified through his ethnicity to accomplish miracles. He's a bridge between East and West. There is no limit because he has the guidance. . . . He is the Chosen One. He'll have the power to impact nations. Not people. Nations.<sup>9</sup>

O'Grady's photomontage parallels the relationships of La Malinche and Sally Hemings. La Malinche's facility at languages made her translator for the Spanish conqueror Hernan Cortez; then she gave birth to a racial bridge, their son, the original mestizo. La Malinche's other name was La Lengua, the language, and the transformation from 'race traitor', La Malinche is a slur in some Mexican dialects, to the status of the great communicator and reconciler, as she has been recently reclaimed, namely by feminists, is a leitmotif in the biographies of such historical figures. No matter her intentions, La Lengua brought together Europeans and Indians; Hemings united, inside and outside of herself, Africans and Europeans; and Woods, the 'yellow-red-black-white man' brings together all of the 'primary races' in one body. As his mother Tida says, 'Tiger has Thai, African, Chinese, American Indian and European blood; he can hold everyone together; he is the Universal Child.'<sup>10</sup>

The artist, O'Grady considers this mixing to be a great strength of multi-ethnic people. She uses the diptych format symbolically in *The Clearing*, and in other works, such as the *Miscegenated Family Album* series (1994), which explores her own family history and most recently, in *Studies for Flowers of Evil and Good* (1996), which addresses the relationship between

Charles Baudelaire and his black common-law wife, Jeanne Duval. O'Grady feels that the diptych reflects her 'cultural situation' as an artist of bicultural identity (the artist's family were originally from the Caribbean and of mixed-race ancestry). These works explore interracial relationships both personally and historically:

I think that the biggest problem that those of us have who are bi- or even tricultural and are trying to interpolate our positions with those of the West. . . is the way in which, both philosophically and practically, the West divides its ability to comprehend good/evil and black/white, the way in which it makes oppositions of everything. Not just simple oppositions, but hierarchical, superior/inferior oppositions, so that male/female, black/white, good/evil, body/mind, nature/culture are not just different, one is always better than. . . <sup>11</sup>

In *The Clearing*, O'Grady addresses this dualism in a number of ways. Besides the diptych format that presents a 'good'/'bad' dichotomy, she presents compelling details such as the lush landscape and happy children on the left in opposition to the spectre of death on the right. This figure on the right wears armour (chainmail) which, juxtaposed with his actions, rape, subverts all ideas of European chivalry. This photomontage is also a montage of ideas concerning the complexity of crossracial unions, either through love or violence. In earlier American representations of the 'bicultural condition', we can find little of this nuanced treatment. Images such as Thomas Noble's *The Price of Blood* (1867) shows a white slave owner selling his own biracial son who stands sullenly in the background. The representation of the 'tragic mulatto' continued almost unchanged into the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

The African American painter Archibald Motley, Jr. created a series of portraits of mixed-race women in the 1920s whose solemn faces against dark backgrounds also convey some of these tragic qualities. Motley considered this series to be both an artistic and scientific experiment. Writing about one of the portraits, he commented, 'In this painting I have tried to show

that delicate one-eighth strain of Negro blood. Therefore, I would say that this painting was not only an artistic venture but also a scientific problem.<sup>13</sup>

Motley's interest in pigment as a painter resonates in the recent work of a number of contemporary artists. The Korean American artist Byron Kim's 'skin' paintings are abstract musings on the visual reality of a multicultural society. Some of these pigment paintings, such as *Cosmetic Portrait Series* (1992) are rows of ovals reminiscent of cosmetic products. Usually, Kim arranges groups of them in grids that suggest a pseudo-scientific project similar to Motley's. In *Synecdoche* (1991), for example, the key on the work's label identifies each panel as the skin tone of a family member or friend which makes these panels function as racial indices. As Kim alludes to cosmetics, Gabrielle Varella uses paint colour sample strips as her referent to address the loaded function of skin tone in our society in her *Untitled* series (1999).

In the fragile, mundane gradations of beiges and browns that run the spectrum from café au lait to deep mahogany, Varella has printed phrases, such as 'The color of my skin makes you think I can't be lucky' or 'My name is not Spanish enough for you to know what I am.' These 'skin samples' address a multiracial audience with the visual realities regarding the daily assessments and assumptions that are made and internalized about race. Each one of us is embraced, dismissed, respected or ignored in every encounter. In a series of altered photographs by Paul Solomon entitled *Biracial Portraits*, his sitters appear to be literally half one race and half another. The literal halving of an individual questions the validity and potential absurdity of racial labels if indeed these racial markers were so clearly visible on each biracial body.

Robert Colescott, who has made a career out of confronting racism and racial taboos in his art, approaches the same themes of racial labels and self-identification in *Soy Latina* (1997). Like Varella, Colescott addresses the conflict for dark-skinned Latinos who are Latino-identified, meaning, they derive their identity from their specific geographical roots, i.e. Mexico or Puerto Rico, but they are seen as black, 'negrito', by others, especially, North

Americans. In *Grandma and the Frenchman: Identity Crisis* (1991) the 'tragic mulatto' rears her misshapen head. Not only does this woman have all of the colours of many races, but all of their hair, eyes, mouths, and noses! Colescott says this work is 'all about identity — this woman cannot have just a two-faced Picasso head, she must be even more fragmented because her identity is so screwed up. Mixed-race people are all around us, we all are and have been for centuries.'<sup>14</sup> Standing in stark contrast to the happy mixed-race children in O'Grady's *The Clearing*, Colescott's image speaks to both white and non-white fears of racial mixing and the hegemonic collapse it signals. One could see the distorted head as a metaphor for the social and political morass that occurs when physical, racial marking is obscured. For the dominant, European power structure, this ambiguity subverts exclusion, the bedrock of their oppression, and for non-whites, it betrays any solidarity against this very exclusion.

Though racial oppression and annihilation are alive and well, they are difficult and complicated by this very issue of the physicality of difference and an intersection with personal relationships, such as intermarriage. Michael Lind addresses the statistical reality of this breakdown in his essay, 'The Beige and The Black.' He examines the many statistical predictions of racial demographics for the next century and notes that interracial unions are not included in these projections, therefore, skewing the numbers and our ideas of our multiracial future. His most compelling observation, which simultaneously dampens and bolsters the optimistic rhetoric regarding the future of racial blurring and erasure is that blacks are intermarrying at a fraction of the rate of Asians, Native Americans and Latinos:

In the twenty-first century, then, the U.S. population is not likely to be crisply divided among whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians and American Indians. Nor is it likely to be split two ways, between whites and nonwhites. Rather, we are most likely to see something more complicated: a white-Asian-Hispanic melting-pot majority — a hard-to-differentiate group of beige Americans — offset by a minority consisting of blacks who have been left out of the melting pot once again.<sup>15</sup>

Lind goes on to articulate the socio-economic fall-out of this shift in the racial power structure, which would, on one hand end balkanization, but, on the other, it would significantly weaken what few political alliances that current 'rainbow coalitions' have against discriminatory treatment. The dissolution of identity politics will also affect representation.

Another artist from the first half of this century helps us frame this contemporary work: William H. Johnson's painting of 1941 entitled *Mom and Dad* shows his other with a photograph of his father on the back wall. Johnson sometimes said his father was Native American and other times, white. This father's powerful presence of absence, if you will, in the hanging portrait reflected the importance of Johnson's mixed heritage to his identity as both a black man and an artist in the 1930s and 1940s. He considered himself 'both a cultured painter and a primitive man'.<sup>16</sup> He frequently used his ambiguous racial lineage as proof of his natural, artistic hybridity that made him an 'authentic' modern primitive, the fusion of European and 'primitive', that was by blood. Like Woods who 'can bring everyone together', Johnson too felt his heritage made him superior to the 'purer' races — and to such wannabe primitives, such as Pablo Picasso and Paul Gauguin.

In Johnson's case, we see the colonial catch-22 of racial purity. Johnson was essentially defining himself within a discourse created by others. As all non-white 'primitives', he was trying to win in a game whose rules are ever shifting. It is similar to the uneasy alliances such political leaders as Marcus Garvey made with segregationists and other whites against racial mixing. As O'Grady expands:

My own feeling is that the only thing that will ultimately work is if we can somehow find a way to use the 'mixed product' to negate not just the idea of 'purity' but the idea of 'superiority' itself. In racial code, 'purity' is a cover for what is really meant, [the hierarchical binary of] 'superiority/inferiority.' Those who espoused 'purity' certainly didn't mean that 'pure' blackness was



superior. . . . Seducing blacks into accepting that form of discourse was a way of gaining their collaboration in the maintenance of their own inferiority, under the false guise of preserving their own purity.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, the rhetoric of 'the new and improved' prevails in some sectors, and I would suggest rules at the current time. Racial hybrids become evolutionary cultural products. Their strength lies in their ability to genetically unify two or more oppositional forces. Johnson became the perfect Modernist while La Malinche and Hemings have become the perfect postcolonial beings — and feminists. Their acts of racial and cultural mixing are seen today as subversive, transcending their victimization. Though artists like O'Grady and Colescott question this transcendence, they would agree that though these interracial unions are exploitative, their very existence and their resulting offspring weaken the very hegemonic structure that enables such exploitation. O'Grady has said, 'Interracial sex, and the fear surrounding it, seems to me to be at the nexus of the country's social forces.'<sup>18</sup> Hence, the creation of elaborate miscegenation laws to control the potential of interracial sex to degrade the white, European, patriarchal structures in the Americas (and elsewhere). As the controversy over the descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings attests, much can be at stake when these biracial offspring are allowed to be heard. In the movie *Bulworth*, the love affair between Halle Berry's 'ghetto girl' and Warren Beatty's racist politician is such a bridging of disparate sectors of the American population that it is presented as socially, politically and personally altering; here, the interracial relationship serves as a moral corrective of sorts for the white oppressor who empathizes so much with blacks that Berry even refers to Beatty as 'my nigger.' The Jefferson-Hemings union is the best example of this type of nationalistic racial 'spin' placed on such relationships. Some of those who have acknowledged their relationship and its longevity have reread Jefferson's more tempered statements regarding blacks as a reflection of the humanity he witnessed in his relationship with Hemings. As many have been quick to point out, however, he still allowed politics to silence his abolitionist feelings and no matter how much he may or may not have cared for Hemings, he still *owned* her as a slave until his death.

However, post-colonial theorists have continued to argue that the very core of white, European identity was indeed shaped by such transgressions, especially those of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin point out that,

Africa is the source for the most significant and catalytic images of the first two decades of the twentieth century. In one very significant way the 'discovery' of Africa was the dominant paradigm for the self-discovery of the twentieth-century European world in all its self-contradiction, self-doubt, and self-destruction, for the European journey out of the light of Reason into the Heart of Darkness. As such, the more extreme forms of the self-critical and anarchic ushered in can be seen to depend on the existence of a post-colonial [sic] Other which provides its condition of formation.<sup>19</sup>

In this millenium, the cultural syncretisms of European encounters with, not only Africa but, Asia and Latin America will redefine, and possibly extinguish, European hegemony in some parts of the world where it exists. The numbers tell the future. Within a few decades, people of non-European ancestry or mixed ancestry will dominate certain populations in America and Europe.

Christian Walker alludes to the sexual dimension of these encounters in his *Miscegenation Series* (1985-8). It consists of sepia-tone photographs which depict close-up views of interacting body parts whose blurred and grainy surface simultaneously allude to old daguerreotypes and contemporary pornography. The nudity and overlapping suggest sexual encounters, yet gender is often unclear. The murkiness of the sepia tone forces the viewer to stare and probe for more information. Walker makes us conscious of looking. This consciousness makes the viewer aware of the exotic and verboten aspects of the social attitudes towards interracial sex.

Adrian Piper's *Vanilla Nightmares* series (1986-7) also uses ambiguity to address societal fears of racial mixing and conflict beneath the surface of everyday life. She literally brings these hidden terrors to the surface in her drawings of blacks, some sexually menacing to whites, drawn over pages of the *New York Times*. Similarly, her video installation, *Cornered* (1988) presents a view of being a light-skinned black woman whose very existence, poignantly documented with her father's 'conflicting' birth certificates, one declaring him white, the other 'coloured', makes whites and blacks confront the distorted race relations of the U.S.

The frenzy over Tiger Woods and the anticipation of Colin Powell's bid for the presidency in the mid-1990s were desperate, national scrambles for racial reconciliation. Both a recent advertisement for a clothing company called NuSouth and the work of Kara Walker struggle to simultaneously confront and market slavery's past, the crux of the nation's racial woes. Yet, is the nation ready to 'sell' slavery? The Africanized red, black, and green Confederate flag is NuSouth's logo and the ad's text identifies its buyers as the sons and daughters of former slaves and former slave owners, a line lifted from Martin Luther King's 'I Have A Dream' speech. A final line presents the sportswear as conciliatory: 'Threads that connect us. Words that free us.' The controversy over Walker's representations of our slave past, whose blending of humour, brutality and racial stereotypes are considered by some to be offensive and dangerous, and the dismal failure of Oprah Winfrey's project, the movie *Beloved*, may indicate that we are not quite ready to confront this history.<sup>20</sup>

Are multi-racial icons the answers to national harmony? Can they really transcend centuries of conflict as revisions of the past and hopes for the future? Despite his symbolism, Tiger Woods was never announced as the first multiracial person to win this or that PGA tournament. Blacks claim him in the US; Asians in Asia. And despite the multiracial rhetoric his proclivity towards telling racist jokes about big black penises has been disappointing to some and dampened many multiracialist hopes. A 'multiracial' choice on the 2000 census will not erase the 'us/them' (and now more often, 'us/them/them and them')

mentalities that the artists are dealing with. Their reflections on these multicultural realities resist current trends in the mainstream media to simplify our increasingly complex populations through a nationalistic lens. O'Grady, Kim and others encourage us to scrutinize and problematize the idea of a 'raceless', 'colour-blind' world. As O'Grady honestly writes, "With the diptych [both real and symbolic], there's no being saved, no before and after, no either/or; it's both/and, at the same time. With no resolution, you just have to stand there and deal."<sup>21</sup> These artists present the complexities of our society. The coexistence of beauty, horror, love, death, happiness and even rape does not shy away from the history that shapes our present.

And it is this burden of history that prevents a multiracial person to be devoid of race; widespread ethnic 'cancellation' will not 'end race' as writers like Crouch predict. It will be the challenge for us and following generations to cope, articulate and understand the conundrum of a multiethnic nation, the polyptych of cultures in which we live. I am not arguing for ignoring our post-colonial hybridity, for as Ashcroft and his colleagues so eloquently note, 'it is arguable that to move towards a genuine affirmation of multiple forms of native "difference", we must recognize that hybridity will inevitably continue. . . . [and through it] a genuinely transformative and interventionist criticism of contemporary post-colonial reality' can be achieved.<sup>22</sup> Through creating new critical linguistic, socio-political and economic models that are inclusive and not dismissive of the lingering effects of our new societies' historical foundations, we can address many of the complexities and challenges of our multiracial 'conditions'.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Smith, 'Sportsman of the Year: The Chosen One' in *Sports Illustrated*, vol 85:26, December 23, 1996, 55.

<sup>2</sup> *The All-American Skin Game: Or, The Decpu pf Race*, Vintage Books, London, 1997, p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> Cottingham, Laura, 'Lorraine O'Grady. Artist and Art Critic. An Interview' in *Artist and Influences* 1996, vol XV, ed James V. Hatch, et al, Hatch-Billops Collection, Inc., New York, 1996, p. 214.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Crouch, 'Race Is Over: Black, White, Red, Yellow — Same Difference,' in *New York Times Magazine*, September 29, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Newsweek*, vol. 125.7, February 13, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Danzy Senna, ;Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride' in *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire*, vol 2.1, Fall/Winter, 1998, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> David A. bush, 'Ozone Anxiety: It's a White Thing', in *Harper's*, vol 287.1723, December 1993, p. s8. Bush actually recommends the government encourage racial mixing. In reading through the populaar press and its take on the new multiethnic nation, I found it to be overwhelmingly contradictory with much statistical manipulastion. Which races and ethnicities were consdiered also varied. A survey of this literature is evidence enough that we are plunging ahead in our analyses yet incredibly bereft of the tools to do so.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen M. Fjellan coined this phrase in his *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney and America*. Westview Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Theo Davis, 'Artist as Critic, An Interview with Conceptualist Lorraine O'Grady,' in *Sojourner: The Womens Forum*, November 1996, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> For more on nineteenth-century images of miscegenation, see Judith Wilson's seminal article, 'Optical Illusions. Images of Miscegenation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Art' in *American Art* vol 5.3, Summer 1991, 88 1-7. I am indebted to this essay and subseque3nt discussions with Professor Wilson. It is my hope that my essay successful continues the dialogue she began in 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Greenhouse, Wendy and Joyntyle Robinson, *The Art and Life of Archibald Motley, Jr.* Chicago Historical Society, Chicago 1991, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Conversation with author, November 6, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times Magazine*, August 16, 1998, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. Powell, *The Homecoming: The Art of William H. Johnson*, Smithsonian, Washington, DC, 1991, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Email letter to author, February 5, 1999.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Laura Cottingham, 'Lorraine O'Grady, Artist and Art Critic. An Interview' in *Artist and Influences*, Hatch-Billops Collection, 1996, p 213.

<sup>19</sup> *The Empire Strikes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*, Routledge, New York, 1989, p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the Walker controversy see *International Review of African-American Art* (December 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in 'The Diptych vs. The Triptych, an Excerpt from a Conversation between Lorraine O'Grady and a Studio Visitor,' (unpublished, undated and unpaginated), courtesy of the artist.

<sup>22</sup> *Empire Writes Back*, op. cit., p. 180.