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# Fevered Desires and Interracial Intimacies in *Jungle Fever*

Ronald R. Sundstrom

Spike Lee's 1991 film *Jungle Fever* is one of several concerning American taboos against interracial intimacy and sex. The earliest film on the subject was D. W. Griffith's 1915 silent movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which condemns interracial sex or *miscegenation*, to use the term invented by opponents of black emancipation, as a threat to the nation. Every film on interracial intimacies since then has been a comment on Griffith's work, which also stands apart as a milestone of epic cinematography. Most of the subsequent films, such as Elia Kazan's 1949 film *Pinky* or Guy Green's 1965 film *A Patch of Blue*, deliver a contrasting antiracist message, but they focus on the tragedy of interracial romances and how social circumstances make them impossible. Stanley Kramer's 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is notable for pushing this genre forward by featuring a relationship that is allowed to blossom, despite social opposition. Among these films and others, Lee's *Jungle Fever* stands out by questioning their optimistic trajectory (from hateful opposition to gleeful acceptance) and by giving equal time to African American opposition to interracial romance and sex. *Jungle Fever* puts the brakes on the chummy optimism of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and turns up the volume on the black dissenting voices relegated to a supporting—and losing—role in these films. Moreover, Lee's films adds to this genre by portraying contemporary opposition to interracial intimacy in the context of other major American problems, such as sexism and domestic violence, residential segregation, police harassment and racial profiling, workplace discrimination, and notably the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s.

All the same, *Jungle Fever* has its shortcomings, such as Lee's pedantic style and, even more worrisome, Wesley Snipes's stiff acting and delivery as Flipper Purify.<sup>1</sup> *Jungle Fever*'s biggest flaw, however, is that it flinches in the face of honest and ordinary interracial intimacy. Lee does not shrink from

dealing out painful criticisms of interracial sexual desire, nor does he duck the turmoil such relationships can ignite in families. He even provides a close-up of the lustful passions of an interracial affair. But, when confronted with the possibility of an interracial romance between a black woman and a white man marked by actual caring and love, Lee adopts a safely conservative tone that caters to the ambivalent attitudes of the black middle class his film gives voice to. Lee reverts to a desexualized romance—à la *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Just as Kramer would not risk demonstrating passionate sexuality between a black man and a white woman on-screen, Lee similarly flinched in his film.

### **You Give Me Fever**

The taboo against interracial romance and sex portrayed in Lee's drama is derived from the history of race in the West in general and in America in particular and from the role of sex in that history.<sup>2</sup> He covers two interrelated versions of this taboo. First is the taboo among white Americans against a wide variety of intimacies with blacks. Interracial romance, sex, and marriage were judged particularly despicable, and the general prohibition against lesser interracial intimacies, such as friendship, was a prophylactic measure against the greater "sin" of miscegenation. Second is the taboo among blacks against interracial romance and sex, especially with whites—a protective and prideful reaction against the first taboo.

More will be said about the second taboo later, but first let us review the basic elements of the taboo against white intimacy with blacks. The idea of race, as it developed in the West, involved the opinion that there were distinct groups of humanity separated by biology, culture, or God and that these groups were somehow meant to retain their distinctiveness by staying separate. Thus, defenders of segregation in the United States claimed that this was why God put innumerable barriers between them. According to Leon Bazile, the trial judge who convicted Mildred Jeter and Richard Loving of breaking Virginia law by marrying across the color line, the fact that God "separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix."<sup>3</sup>

The individuals and groups who believed this also believed that, to ensure the health and well-being of the nation (as well as Western civilization), it was imperative that whites maintain their supremacy over the nation and their ethnic and racial purity. For example, in the years following the Civil War and the emancipation of blacks, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled in *Green v. The State* that the well-being and very existence of society depend on preventing racial mingling:

It is through the marriage relation that the homes of a people are created—those homes in which, ordinarily, all the members of all the families of the land are, during a part of every day, assembled together; where the elders of the household seek repose and cheer, and reparation of strength from the toils and cares of life; and where, in an affectionate intercourse and conversation with them, the young become imbued with the principles, and animated by the spirit and ideas, which in a great degree give shape to their characters and determine the manner of their future lives. These homes, in which the virtues are most cultivated and happiness most abounds, are the true *officinae gentium*—the nurseries of States.<sup>4</sup>

This view, that interracial sex and marriage are a threat to the nation and civilization, is captured in the very word *miscegenation*. It is an American neologism that speaks volumes about race in the United States; the supporters of the Confederacy and opponents of emancipation in the United States invented it to negatively denote interracial sex. The word is derived from the Latin terms *miscere* (“to mix”) and *genus* (as in the taxonomic category that ranks above species). Thus, for the opponents of interracial intimacy, sex between the races is as disordered as sex between different species—in fact, it may be worse because interracial sex involves mating between different genera. To add to the horrors of interracial sex, the mixed-race children “spawned” are monstrous and tragic. *Miscegenation*, then, delivers a theological, biological, and political threat in a clinical style.

The dark side of this taboo is inseparable from the evils of Jim Crow segregation, and the fear of black male sexuality as aggressive and bestial and the prurient judgments of black female animalistic promiscuity served as ideological justification for de jure segregation in housing, education, public transportation, business, and so on. Indeed, the terror of interracial sex was used to justify the lynching of thousands of black men by white mobs and the indiscriminate sexual violence and harassment directed at black women during the darkest days of Jim Crow.<sup>5</sup>

The stubborn legacy of this taboo and the evils it engendered serve as a starting point for *Jungle Fever*. The film begins with a dedication to Yusef K. Hawkins, a sixteen-year-old boy who was murdered by a white mob in Bensonhurst in 1989. Hawkins was in the neighborhood shopping for a used car when he was beaten with baseball bats and shot to death by local boys who were hunting for black or Latino boys they suspected of dating an Italian American girl.<sup>6</sup> This murderous attitude, full of vitriol and revulsion, is displayed in the film by the New York police officers who confront

Flipper and Angie Tucci (Annabelle Sciorra), in the anger of Angie's father Mike (Frank Vincent), and in the attitudes of the Italian American men who populate Paulie Carboné's (John Turturro) store.

At the heart of this taboo is the view that interracial intimacy—or “jungle fever”—is hardly a form of intimacy at all. Intimacy involves gentle and refined passions. Jungle fever, in contrast, is a diseased sexual passion. Like all bodily fevers, it is characterized by an abnormally high body temperature, delirium, and nervous excitement, but in this case, it is caused by sexual desire for the forbidden fruit of the racial Other. It is a “tropical” disease—hot, steamy, and of foreign, equatorial origin.

That description of jungle fever brings to mind the words of the song “Fever,” popularized by Little Willie John and later by Peggy Lee:

Never know how much I love you  
 Never know how much I care  
 When you put your arms around me  
 I get a fever that's so hard to bear.<sup>7</sup>

The infectiousness of the original rhythm and blues song, which reached the impressionable ears of white youth through radio waves, was strong enough. Peggy Lee, however, added to its force when she, as a white woman, released her own sultry version, with added lyrics about the interracial romance between Captain Smith and Pocahontas.

Another aspect of the taboo is that jungle fever distorts the normal ordering of family, society, culture, and politics. Again, as observed in *Green v. The State*, interracial intimacy interferes with the *officinae gentium*, the nurseries of the state—namely, the white families that are the basis for other social institutions. For the segregationists and those invested in white racial supremacy, miscegenation is “hard to bear,” as the song says. Of course, what is hard to bear for a racial supremacist is very different from the mad passions Little Willie John and Peggy Lee sang about. For the racial supremacist, jungle fever is not just a momentary indiscretion, not merely a one-night stand. It assaults the family and, from there, the whole structure of society.

As we reflect on these taboos and Lee's cinematic rendering of them, it is important to keep in mind, especially at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that although Americans have inherited the elements of this complex history, there has also been a significant change in attitude toward all forms of interracial intimacy. Americans generally believe that individuals have a high degree of autonomy over their intimate lives, and an increasing number of Americans, especially the youth (91 percent), approve of inter-

racial intimacy. Yet taboos and informal family prohibitions against interracial intimacy remain: 77 percent of Americans report they do not have an immediate family member or close relative of a different race, and some 97 percent of marriages are monoracial.<sup>8</sup> American families and patterns of intimacy are changing and becoming more interracial, but old anxieties and fears persist.

*Jungle Fever* returns us to a time of anxiety and fear. Angie Tucci is Italian American and Flipper Purify is African American, and they meet at a firm beset by racial conflict and discrimination, where she works as a temporary secretary and he works as an architect. The friends and families of the couple are outraged over their relationship. On one side of the city are the families of Bensonhurst, a tough neighborhood in Brooklyn, and on the other side are the families of the Harlem neighborhood in Manhattan. Divided by ethnicity, race, and class, they are united in their turmoil over Flipper and Angie's affair and the havoc it unleashes in their lives.

## Purity

The intimacy that jungle fever interrupts and damages is the marriage of Drew (Lonette McKee) and Flipper. Their family name, Purify, is richly suggestive, and with it, Lee offers a pun about the aspirations, pretensions, and frustrations of that family. Drew and Flipper seemingly have a great relationship, and they enjoy all the trappings of black, upwardly mobile young professionals, or "buppies"—the black version of yuppies. This family is more than upwardly mobile; with their brownstone home in Harlem, subscription to the *New York Times*, degrees from respected historically black universities, and professional careers, they belong to the black elite. Their status, however, is threatened by a number of negative social ills, and Flipper's infidelity is yet another assault on the integrity of this family.

In *The Birth of a Nation*, interracial intimacy, and especially sex, is presented as a threat to the United States as a white, civilized nation. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, interracial intimacy is modern, progressive, and characteristic of a new, optimistic nation that has benefited from the corrections of the civil rights movement. In contrast to both those films, *Jungle Fever* represents interracial intimacy as a threat to the stability and status of the black middle-class family. Although the black parents in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* are not happy with their son's surprise announcement that he is affianced to a white woman, they slowly recognize the authenticity of the young couple's love and offer their blessings. Flipper's parents do not go down so easily.

The Good Reverend Doctor Purify (Ossie Davis) and his wife Lucinda (Ruby Dee) are concerned with purity—expressly the sexual sort. With Mahalia Jackson's gospel music playing softly in the background, the Good Reverend Doctor announces his general worldview with his reading of 1 Corinthians 7:1–2, that it is good for “a man not to touch a woman,” but to avoid “fornication,” each man ought to be married to a woman.

For Reverend and Mrs. Purify, Flipper's wrong is not just fornication but fornication across racial lines, and it repeats a pattern of distorted racial-sexual relationships rooted in white supremacy. According to the Good Reverend Doctor, Flipper and Angie's tryst has a negative historical resonance; their fevered desire is due to racial, gender, and sexual ideals produced by the ideology of white supremacy and formed during the period of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Roughly, these ideals impart an elevated and idealized status to white women (of the right class, of course), allow white men access to illicit and exploitative sex with black women, and deny black men access to white women. Thus, the Good Reverend Doctor reduces their relationship to this distorted pattern; he accuses Angie of “black adultery” and his son of being a “whoremonger” and “fishing in the white man's cesspool.”

Of course, all is not well with the Good Reverend Doctor's self-righteousness purity. He is a preacher rejected by his congregation, and he has his own cesspools to deal with. Spike Lee is lampooning the figure of the African American preacher with the exaggerated portrayal of the Good Reverend Doctor, but he also makes him one of the mouthpieces—along with the so-called War Council and a waitress (Queen Latifah)—of one strain of African American opinion about jungle fever that perceives it as another threat to black family and community.

The Good Reverend Doctor's rebuke of Flipper is completed by the criticisms articulated by the women in the excellent War Council scene. It is tempting to see that council as offering a homogeneous condemnation of sexually stray black men, but that is not true. Some of the women enthusiastically support interracial romance and the broader benefits and opportunities it can offer black women. Other voices defend the principle of sexual autonomy for individuals, including black men and women, permitting them to date anyone they please whenever they please. This council reflects the heteronomy of African American communities on interracial intimacy. Despite the general anxiety and skepticism toward jungle fever in this film, the diverse voices of the council demonstrate that there is no clear consensus on this matter.<sup>9</sup>

That said, the War Council suspects that fever and distortion are at the

heart of the trouble with Flipper. Their objections, however, are not driven by typical racist motives of inferiorization or antipathy. The women of the War Council do not express ill will toward whites in general; instead, their objections are informed by popular standards of black solidarity and roughly correspond to the themes of valuing black women, loyalty, and self-respect.<sup>10</sup> First, in a society that devalues African Americans in general and black looks in particular, loving and marrying black expresses care and respect for other blacks. When black men choose to love black women, they repudiate the devaluation of black looks and affirm the value of black women and black feminine beauty. Second, when black men choose white women, they appear to be acting opportunistically. Such men are engaged in racial-social climbing and are willing to cut ties with their families or communities for the sake of expedience. Third, when good black men marry black women, they demonstrate not only care for and loyalty to black women but also a healthy self-respect for themselves as black persons, because the standards that devalue black beauty derive from the general devaluation of blackness. By choosing to love black women, black men effectively demonstrate that they are comfortable with their identities and their communities. They exhibit healthy signs of pride despite living in a society that gives them every reason not to. In contrast, when black men—or, for that matter, black women—engage in interracial intimacy, they may be in the grips of self-hatred or self-loathing about their racial identity. Thus, for some African Americans, interracial intimacy, especially romance, is an outward display of a racial pathology.<sup>11</sup> Interracial love, according to this view, is pathological because it is the result of a “color” complex or, rather, an “inferiority” complex about skin color. White love for black, according to this view, is an expression of sexual adventurism and domination—an intimate version of colonialism. Black love for white is an attempt to escape blackness—the result of internalized racism. These three objections are closely interrelated and reflect the Good Reverend Doctor’s stinging rebuke of Flipper.

A fourth objection is offered by Flipper, inspired by his anguish over how his affair has affected his family. He claims that interracial romances are confused and produce confused mixed-race children who are necessarily caught up with color complexes. Both Flipper and Drew see Drew’s own multiracial status (her father is white) and Flipper’s initial attraction to her, as a light-skinned woman, in this light; a color complex exists right below the surface of their healthy relationship, and Flipper worries that this complex will infect his daughter. The confrontation between Flipper and Vivien (Halle Berry), a light-skinned crack whore, dramatizes this fear. She

calls him “Daddy” and offers to perform oral sex on him for a couple of dollars, an absurdly small amount of money. Although “Daddy” is a common sexually flirtatious name, in this context, its incestuous connotations are accentuated. For Flipper, the crack whore is an incarnation of the distorting forces of the fevers brought on by the color complex and the crack cocaine epidemic, both of which threaten his daughter.

## Duty

The interracial intimacy between Angie and Flipper also disrupts Angie’s home, which ignites and reveals further troubles within her network of friends and associates. In contrast to Flipper and Drew’s world, Angie’s is a working-class Italian American neighborhood. Searching for relief from that world, and needing to earn a living, Angie seeks employment in a Manhattan architecture firm.

Angie’s existence in Bensonhurst is bound by the demands of her home life. Since her mother’s death, she has inherited the duty of caring for the household, her father, and her two quarrelsome brothers. In addition to these ties, she has a relationship with Paulie Carbone, who runs a combination malt, candy, and newspaper store for his demanding and dependent father Lou (Anthony Quinn). Paulie’s mother, like Angie’s, is deceased, and the demands of their widowed fathers and the limited horizons of the neighborhood weigh them both down. They seek something bigger than their restricted lives in Bensonhurst, and as it turns out, their search for that something bigger inexorably tears them apart.

The men that populate Angie’s and Paulie’s lives are argumentative, explicitly bigoted, and unstable. The guys who while away their time in Paulie’s store read the tabloid *New York Post* instead of the *New York Times*. They are scornful about blacks and are willfully ignorant of individuality among African Americans. For them, any individual black man is no better than the worst among them; Mayor David Dinkins of New York is no different from the notorious Mayor Marion Berry of Washington, D.C., or the “Central Park Five,” the five black teenagers who were wrongly accused of beating and raping a female jogger.<sup>12</sup> Their antipathy toward blacks; the abruptness with which they turn on one another, screaming and punching; and the particular disdain they have for Italian American girls who date white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) and, worse, blacks evokes the kind of paroxysm of violence that claimed Yusef Hawkins’s life.

Regardless of their explicit prejudices, the lives of these guys are in-

tertwined with African Americans. A central character in Paulie's store is Vinny (Nicholas Turturro), and he shows up blaring rap music from his car, wearing a jumpsuit and a gold chain, and sporting a high-and-tight haircut that evokes a high-top-fade—in another setting, he might pass as black. He and the other guys in the shop declare they would like to have sex with—but would never publicly date—the black woman Orin Goode (Tyra Ferrell), who lives in the neighborhood and stops by on weekdays to buy a paper. To top it off, his music of choice is Public Enemy's album *Fear of a Black Planet*. He seems completely unaware of the irony of enjoying the message and music of that album while expressing the racism it condemns. His contradictions are outrageous, but they are also indicative of America's ambivalence toward its interracial culture.<sup>13</sup>

What is more, Vinny's attitude toward Orin is not that far from his attitude toward all women and his treatment of his girlfriend. He and the guys have a double image of the women among them. Although they revere their dead mothers, they make use of the flesh-and-blood women around them and regard them with a degree of suspicion. Thus, when Angie's relationship with Flipper is revealed, she is mocked by the guys in Paulie's store, beaten by her father, and condemned all around for failing in her duties. She has failed in her obligations to her father and brothers, and she has failed to honor the values and taboos of her community. For this transgression, she, like Flipper, is rebuked by her father, who brutally beats her, calls her a disgrace to the memory of her mother, and proclaims that he would rather she be a murderer or a child molester rather than a good Catholic girl who goes bad by marrying a "nigger."

Mike Tucci's paroxysm recalls the brutal death of Hawkins, and it forcefully portrays the power of the American taboo against interracial romance and sex, especially between black men and white women. Although the toughs in Paulie's store can joke about their desire to fuck Orin, Angie is forbidden to make love to Flipper. At the heart of this injunction against Angie's miscegenation is sexism and racism. She is expected to express her sexuality in a manner consistent with her duties as a daughter, which includes abiding by her community's commonsense racial rules. Many in her neighborhood think blacks are inferior, and intermingling with them—Vinny's outrageous contradictions notwithstanding—is a target of antipathy. As one of Angie's friends puts it, echoing Mike Tucci's condemnation, "Personally, I think it's disgusting." The same forces confront Paulie. He falls for Orin, seeing in her a reflection of his own aspirations and open-mindedness, and he deliberately, instead of feverishly, asks her out on a date. With that, Paulie crosses a line and is assaulted by the guys from his shop.

## Taj Mahal

Flipper and Angie's affair collapses under the weight of their guilt and isolation and the disapproval of their friends and families. It was a thin relationship to begin with, since it was hastily constructed from their dissatisfaction with their lives and built on the ruins of his marriage. Such materials do not make for a sturdy relationship, and theirs cannot withstand assault and rebuke. This is their fundamental problem, yet for the Good Reverend Doctor, Mike Tucci, the guys in Paulie's shop, and some of the War Council, the affair between Flipper and Angie is a token, a prime example of the fever and distortion of miscegenation.

Their fear of a mixed-up, mixed-blood world is brought to life in the fantastic scene in which Flipper searches for his brother, Gator, and ends up confronting him in the grandest of Harlem crack houses, the Taj Mahal. Gator Purify (Samuel L. Jackson) is a homeless crackhead and represents the devastating results of the crack epidemic that plagued U.S. cities, and in particular poor, urban African American communities, in the late 1980s. Flipper's procession through the Taj Mahal, accompanied by Stevie Wonder's affective sound track, becomes progressively more bizarre as he stumbles onto tableaux of interracial crack-addled fever and distortion: black hustlers and hookers, white businessmen and laborers, black and white couples, all in the grips of crack fever.

Those who agree with the Good Reverend Doctor, Mike Tucci, and the rest may see Flipper's procession through the Taj Mahal, with its racial and class commingling among squalor and addiction, as a depiction of the nightmare brought on by miscegenation. Lee, however, wants to show his audience that the place where dreams come to die is racially mixed. The worst corner of the dark ghetto is not just black; it is a black and white place. Just as *Taj Mahal* means "the abode of the chosen one," so we have built our own mausoleum and abode for the living dead. The Taj Mahal scene, filled with the sliding dance of crack zombies sucking on their pipes, is stunning.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Flipper's corporate office, the crack den is happily integrated, and it is here, in their desperation, that the denizens have realized a dystopia of interracial intimacy.

The nightmare summoned by the Taj Mahal scene is brought to a horrible end when the Good Reverend Doctor shoots Gator after he tries to wrangle yet more money from his elderly parents. The Good Reverend Doctor's despair is complete; he has been rejected by his congregation, and his sons are disobedient and godless—the successful son is a whoremonger, and his other son, possessed by the demon of crack, lies bleeding to death on his

living room floor, shot by the Good Reverend Doctor out of an ambiguous mixture of self-defense and disgust. All he has left is his antiquated image of Jesus. And with that, Lee has made the backdrop of his film not only the frustration of racial discrimination and the damage of the crack epidemic but also the generational disappointment of the fathers, the men of the civil rights movement, as they confront old age and reconsider the goals for which they fought.

### **Love's Revolution**

The negative emotions of the Good Reverend Doctor, Mike Tucci, and Lou Carbone are, paradoxically, a sign of hope. Their angry reactions stem from their fear and anxiety over generational shifts in behavior and customs. They see the social networks that give meaning to their existence fracturing as their children search for love and opportunity outside their neighborhoods. The cliché that there are no bloodless revolutions could be applied here. If interracial romance and other intimacies are “love’s revolution,” as Maria P. P. Root puts it, then the blood spilled is that of the fathers.<sup>15</sup>

To expect these men not to cry and scream or lash out at their children is plain silly. Their legacy, their hope that their children will carry on the family tradition, is dissolving. Therefore, whatever response can be given to the disapproving in Harlem and Bensonhurst, one should not pretend that all can or will be repaired. On the contrary, the feelings of betrayal that result from this or any form of elopement (leaping over family rules that govern romance) may be permanent. We should not expect love’s warriors to be invited over for dinner as they busy themselves with the slow fracturing of their fathers’ racially segregated social networks and heterosexist assumptions. These fathers are well within their rights to retort, “Well, guess who’s *not* coming to dinner.” That is the cost of cleaving from one’s parents and community in the pursuit of romantic love, and it is sometimes the cost of pursuing same-sex or interracial love in our society.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind, especially when getting away from the narrative of *Jungle Fever* and thinking about the dynamics of particular families, that not every parental circumscription of an offspring’s romantic choice is racist. That is, parental demands that children marry within some group may not be due to racial antipathy or a belief that outsiders are racially inferior. Certainly, such demands frequently have ethnic and racial overtones and may seem racist, especially in our society, where every racial incident, insensitivity, or conflict is quickly judged as an instance of racism. To make that leap, to assume that opposition to interracial romance,

as a form of exogamy, is in every instance racist is a mistake that does not take many other relevant concerns seriously. For example, Paulie's father is upset at the news that his son is romantically interested in Orin, but what Lou really fears, as a lonely widower, is being left alone and suffering the consequences of Paulie's break with communal taboos.

Due to fears like Lou's, as well as long-term intergenerational goals, families put a significant amount of pressure on individuals to engage in homophily—that is, to select partners from within their familiar social network and hence those who reflect their own characteristics.<sup>17</sup> In the United States, homophily typically involves religion, class, and education, as well as the more controversial distinctions of ethnicity and race. Families that expect homophily in their children may be seeking assurance that the child's mate will fit in with, invest in, and otherwise cooperate with the family. They seek the security and pleasure of familiarity—a happiness and ease they may get from grandchildren that look like them and whom they assume will carry on their traditions and values.

This is not to say that such family demands must be obeyed. Individuals have the legal right to love and to marry whomever they please as part of their right to shape their own life plans. The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, established this liberty. The Court held that denying interracial couples the right to marry or to engage in romance was unconstitutional, and that the freedom of individuals to marry whomever they please is “one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.”<sup>18</sup> The Court's legal position coincided with, and was clearly influenced by, standards of ethical and personal autonomy, which are deeply rooted in Western political and ethical traditions. To pursue happiness, we need the liberty to construct and follow our own life plans. As John Stuart Mill argues, individuals should be sovereign over their minds and bodies.<sup>19</sup> As long as we do not infringe on the rights of others, we do not have a duty to sacrifice our personal autonomy for sake of others.

Moreover, even when such legal restrictions are not in place, and only social ones are in effect—what Mill calls the “tyranny of public opinion”—absurdities and tyrannies abound. Consider the extent of the naysayers' demands. For example, running through their objections to interracial intimacy is an assumption of mandatory heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is expected of the loyal member of the race, and no other possibility is even considered. This highlights how far the demands for ethnoracial sexual solidarity go. If we can be good members of the race only by dating and marrying opposite-sex members of that race, such visions of solidarity automatically cast gays and lesbians as disloyal to the community. One wonders as well

about reproductive rights. Do we have an equal obligation to procreate? The end of such racial-sexual logic is an absurd and terrifying place.

In addition to the absurdity of the demand for racial-sexual loyalty, there is a problem with the assumption that loving or marrying someone outside of one's race or ethnicity is indicative of a lack of political or cultural solidarity or of internalized self-loathing. Just as it is a mistake to think that opposition to every instance of exogamy is racist, it is also incorrect to assume that endogamy is a clear and distinct sign of ethnic or racial loyalty and exogamy a sign of disloyalty.

### **Answers to the War Council**

Given the preceding considerations, we're now in a position to provide answers to the War Council's objections to relationships between black men and white women. Their first objection—that successful black men who are intimate with white women fail to care for black women—is not a charitable or even a reasonable view of the intentions of black men involved in interracial relationships. Political or cultural solidarity is a poor basis for any romantic relationship; it is a form of objectification, reducing the partner to a prop or a tool for a personal political-cultural narrative. Second, plenty of the black men (and black women) who are involved in interracial relationships, whether gay or straight, care about their communities and the issues that affect them.<sup>20</sup>

This response goes right to the heart of the War's Council's second objection that interracial romance is a sign of disloyalty to the group. Interracial love and other forms of interracial intimacy are poor indicators of attitudes of solidarity or even a history of personal commitment and action on behalf of the group (this is also the case for those who choose endogamous relationships). Interracial intimacy can be perfectly compatible with group solidarity.

Moreover, one should be cautious about assuming whether and to what degree interracial intimacy is an issue for "the black community." Interracial intimacy may not be important, or it may be less of an issue, to different segments of the various African American communities. Like other issues concerning class, gender, and sexuality differences, interracial intimacy cuts across African American communities.<sup>21</sup> It matters a lot to the black middle-class and white working-class characters in Lee's film; indeed, Lee places it next to the crack cocaine epidemic in importance. But notice what is missing. In the late 1980s HIV and AIDS reached epidemic levels in the United States and other parts of the world, and an increasing number of African Americans had contracted HIV, were living with AIDS, and were

dying of AIDS-related diseases. By 1991—Lee released *Jungle Fever* in June of that year—HIV/AIDS disproportionately affected African Americans.<sup>22</sup> Magic Johnson's public announcement of his HIV infection on November 7, 1991, helped bring much-needed public attention to the HIV/AIDS crisis and to the spread of HIV/AIDS among African Americans. *Jungle Fever*, even though it includes a depiction of the devastating effects of drugs on black urban communities, is absolutely silent about HIV/AIDS, right in the heart of that crisis. Why is heterosexual interracial intimacy a black "issue" that raises concerns about solidarity, while HIV/AIDS care and prevention are not?

The War Council's third objection—that blacks involved in interracial romance harbor an ethnic or racial self-loathing or self-hatred—reflects the Good Reverend Doctor's view that black and white romance is fevered and the result of racist, distorted patterns of behavior. Certainly, some segments of the American population have pursued interracial relationships based on questionable motivations, such as a belief in racial-sexual stereotypes or a desire for sexual experimentation. Likewise, some individuals use interracial relationships to escape their social conditions or rebel against an ethnic or racial identity. But to indiscriminately lay these charges at the foot of every man and woman involved in an interracial romance is ludicrous. These claims reduce the behavior of hundreds of thousands of couples to a single psychological explanation that has less to do with their actual motivations and feelings than with some politically convenient ideology. To make matters worse, this ideology that interracial relations are inherently distorted by the history of race and racism is based on spurious psychoanalytic theories of desire and identity. Such views are just as baseless as classically racist notions that miscegenation is theologically, naturally, and politically disordered. In contrast to all such speculation fueled by one or another ideology, actual evidence-based psychological research provides multiple ordinary motivations behind romantic attractions, including interracial ones.<sup>23</sup>

As for the concern about mixed-race children, it too is weak. Children face all sorts of claims on their identities, and all sorts of unions potentially have this problem. And as it turns out, there is ample evidence that multiracial children do just fine.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as is evident in *Jungle Fever*, Flipper's concern about "mixed up" children is replete with contradictions. Flipper's wife is multiracial, and both Flipper and Drew avoid critiquing the morality or propriety of her parents' relationship or of their child's identity. After the trauma of Flipper's affair, it seems that Drew and Flipper try to manage the social and personal implications of their family's interracial history by defending racial purity as a bulwark against confusion and dissolution,

even though their family is in no sense racially pure (which is an idea that makes no sense in the first place) or, for that matter, immune from social and personal confusion and crises.

### **Ordinary Love**

Individuals who are intimate across the color line are not necessarily “fevered,” nor are they “distorting” the basic elements of society. They are not sully racial purity, nor do they have a perfect duty to obey family or community demands for homophily. Interracial relations, in this way, are just like every other relationship: they are subject to the desires and compromises of the couple and external pressures from friends and family. Interracial couples, and those involved in other intimate interracial relationships, may join with other families to serve, as Edmund Burke puts it, as the “ballast of society.”<sup>25</sup>

The overwhelming ordinariness of interracial relationships is the best answer to the fantasies and fears of so-called jungle fever. The idea that interracial romantic attraction or lust is peculiarly feverish or outside the ken of normal human desire and experience is just wrong. The erotic passions of our species are biochemically, psychologically, and sociologically complex. It is absurd to think that the surprisingly wide range of normal human romantic feelings is bounded by race and ethnicity (and the very localized patterns of race and ethnicity in the United States, too!). Granted, there are social and cultural determinants involved, but those determinants do not absolutely control the chemical and psychological processes behind erotic attraction. Although we are not “color blind,” or completely oblivious to the ethnoracial divisions in our society, the psychological, neurological, and biochemical processes of lust, attraction, and attachment are not at the absolute command of our racial rules.<sup>26</sup>

Just as interracial intimacies are not especially feverish, neither are they revolutionary. Claims to the contrary are hyperbolic. Take, for instance, Root’s view that interracial marriages represent “love’s revolution”: “While hate, fear, and anger are common responses to interracial marriage and have powerful short-term effects, love has proved a formidable opponent. With stealth, persistence, and a few legal twists, love carves a more hopeful path for future race relations through the sacrifices of many who have made and make their commitments to love for better or worse.”<sup>27</sup> This vision of love and reconciliation is sweet but false. Interracial relationships by themselves do not close racial disparities, resolve racial injustices, or banish racism. To

think otherwise is to conflate instances of personal romance with vast social and political changes.

This is not to say that interracial relationships are socially meaningless. They are the results of changing laws, social trends, and the bold acts of individuals seeking love and friendship across the color line. Increased liberties have brought more contact and greater opportunity for interracial intimacies to form.<sup>28</sup> Friendships and relations from the casual to the professional have led to shifts in social networks and corresponding sexual markets. With integrated schools and other social spaces come more mixed marriages. Interracial relationships may actively contribute to this change as well. They provide examples to others and become the basis of new and growing multiracial social networks. Further, when and if these relationships become part of larger trends and are supported by institutions, laws, and customs, the reduction of stereotypes and discrimination is possible. All these developments may lead, in fact, to greater interaction, cooperation, and mutual trust among groups of people and dissolve the animosity and anxiety that sometimes result from ethnic and racial divisions.<sup>29</sup> The change that interracial intimacies may inspire, however, is incremental and localized. These marriages and relationships are ordinary things, caught up in the cycles of everyday life. We should not expect miracles, or revolutions, from them.

It is with a note of banality, rather than the ordinary, that *Jungle Fever* closes. Angie is silently admitted back into her father's home. Paulie, after being assaulted by the guys at his shop, goes to Orin, and the door closes on our vision of them. Flipper returns to Drew, and we witness them making love. The contrast between the final scenes with Drew and Flipper and with Orin and Paulie, in their respective homes, is interesting, and not just because the possibility of a successful interracial relationship—between a white man and a black woman, no less—is quietly slipped in at the end. The contrast comes from the respective visibility and public display of each couple. Drew and Flipper are seen half naked while making love, but the door closes on Orin and Paulie. We are not allowed to see into their home, much less their bedroom. For all the heat Drew and Flipper give off, there is something prudish about Spike Lee's view of interracial sexuality. We witness Drew and Flipper being passionate and having sex, but not Orin and Paulie; what happens with them will remain private. Lee seems to be communicating that a successful interracial relationship must not be public or fevered. Any signs of passion, like that displayed between Flipper and Angie, would bring about suspicions of jungle fever. Thus, on the topic of

interracial intimacy, Lee's movie is oddly puritanical. On this point, *Jungle Fever* is more timorous than *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Unlike the interracial couple in the latter film, Paulie and Orin have to be private and hidden. Lee has stuck close to the script of racial pieties and fails to provide an alternative artistic vision of interracial intimacy.

To break jungle fever, interracial intimacy must be exposed as ordinary. Interracial intimacies are imagined as fevered, distorted relationships, so displaying their ordinariness is absolutely not banal and may in fact offend and challenge those who perceive them as especially threatening. Moreover, one part of the wonderful ordinariness of our lives is passion. This of all things should not be hidden. Who does not want passion? It is, as Peggy Lee so wonderfully put it, "a lovely way to burn."

## Notes

1. The names of the Purify brothers are an idiosyncratic feature of this film. Both names are suggestive of fictional animals that were main characters of popular television shows of the mid-1960s. "Flipper," of course, was the name of the heroic dolphin on *Flipper*, which ran on NBC from 1964 to 1967. "Gator" was a character on the Hanna-Barbera cartoon *Wally Gator*, which ran from 1962 to 1963.

2. For surveys of the social and legal history of interracial intimacy, see Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Rachel F. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Renee Christine Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003). I provide an analysis of interracial intimacy and related mixed-race issues in Ronald R. Sundstrom, "Being and Being Mixed Race," *Social Theory and Practice* 27 (2001); *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); and "Mixed-Race Looks," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 2 (2009), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=540> (accessed November 5, 2009). For a helpful and broad view of the diversity of the family across societies, see Gwen J. Broude, *Marriage, Family, and Relationships: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1994).

3. *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

4. *Green v. The State*, 58 Ala. 190 (1877).

5. For a general history of the era of Jim Crow, lynching, and antiblack terror campaigns, see Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

6. See Susan Sachs, "Recalling Yusef Hawkins and Hate that Killed Him," *New York Times*, August, 22, 1999, [http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/h/yusef\\_k\\_hawkins/index.html?offset=0&s=newest](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/h/yusef_k_hawkins/index.html?offset=0&s=newest) (accessed November 3, 2009).

7. From the original version of the song "Fever," or, as it is sometimes called, "You

Give Me Fever.” Otis Blackwell and Eddie Cooley wrote the song, and it was a rhythm and blues hit in 1956 for Little Willie John. Peggy Lee’s version, with altered and additional lyrics, became a hit in 1958. Compare “Fever” to the 1972 hit song “Jungle Fever” by the Chakachas.

8. Paul Taylor, Cary Funk, and Peyton Craighill, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner: 22% of Americans Have a Relative in a Mixed-Race Marriage,” *Social and Demographic Trends* (2006), <http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/304/guess-whos-coming-to-dinner> (accessed November 6, 2009). For an analysis of current trends of interracial marriage, see Roland G. Fryer Jr., “Guess Who’s Been Coming to Dinner? Trends in Interracial Marriage over the 20th Century,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, 2 (2007). See also the U.S. Census Bureau’s “Interracial Tables,” <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/interrace.html> (accessed November 6, 2009).

9. For a fairly comprehensive review of African American objections to interracial romance, marriage, and sex, see Anita L. Allen, “Interracial Marriage: Folk Ethics in Contemporary Philosophy,” in *Women of Color and Philosophy*, ed. Naomi Zack (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000); Charles W. Mills, “Do Black Men Have a Moral Duty to Marry Black Women?” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 25 (1994); Sundstrom, *The Browning of America*, 93–107; and Romano, *Race Mixing*.

10. The objections aired during the War Council are informed by the traditions of Black Nationalism and solidarity. For a philosophical analysis of Black Nationalism and group solidarity, see Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

11. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1st ed. (1952; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 2008). Fanon’s analysis of interracial romance, which was informed by psychoanalytic theory, existentialism, and phenomenology, influenced the development of this view. For an account of how this view functions among African Americans, see Romano, *Race Mixing*, chap. 3.

12. Timothy Sullivan, *Unequal Verdicts: The Central Park Jogger Trials* (New York: American Lawyer Books/Simon and Schuster, 1992). The attitudes and beliefs of the guys in Paulie’s store are indicative of classic racism. They have an essentialist view of black bodies, society, and culture as being undifferentiated and distinctly inferior. Moreover, their feelings and beliefs match up with what current philosophical theories of racism identify as being racist. See Lawrence A. Blum, *I’m Not a Racist, But . . . : The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002). They display what Blum identifies as the “core” of racism—namely, attitudes of “inferiorization”; the idea that some race is in some way inferior; and “antipathy,” an attitude or feeling that some group, because of its race, is the proper subject of disgust. The guys also display many of the psychological features of implicit bias, stereotyping, and discrimination. See Scott Plous, “The Psychology of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination: An Overview,” in *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*, ed. Scott Plous (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003).

13. For accounts of America’s interracial cultural and social history, see Stephan Talty, *Mulatto America: At the Crossroads of Black and White Culture, a Social History*

(New York: HarperCollins, 2003), and Gregory Rodriguez, *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds: Mexican Immigration and the Future of Race in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007). Lee's depiction of the inconsistency of racist attitudes is accurate. This phenomenon is called "selectivity." Racist attitudes or beliefs tend to be selective and inconsistent in terms of which groups, subparts of groups, or aspects of groups are targeted for disdain. See the discussion of selectivity in Blum, "I'm Not a Racist." Likewise, psychological research demonstrates that prejudicial attitudes are complex and selective. For a technical discussion of this phenomenon, see Catherine A. Cottrell and Steven L. Neuberg, "Different Emotional Reactions to Different Groups: A Sociofunctional Threat-Based Approach to 'Prejudice,'" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88, 5 (2005).

14. The idea of Lee's Taj Mahal as a view of hell comes from Peter Traver's review in *Rolling Stone*; see [http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/5947337/review/5947338/jungle\\_fever](http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/5947337/review/5947338/jungle_fever) (accessed December 15, 2009).

15. Maria P. P. Root, *Love's Revolution: Interracial Marriage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

16. Compare the stories of family ostracism in James McBride's and Barack Obama's autobiographies. James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996); Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 1995).

17. Edward O. Laumann et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). The findings of Laumann's sociological survey are presented for general consumption in Robert T. Michael et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994). An updated presentation of the theory of sexual markets is provided in Edward O. Laumann et al., eds., *The Sexual Organization of the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

18. *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia*. Compare the language of privacy in *Loving* to that in the decision of *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003). Just as *Loving* decriminalized interracial sex, *Lawrence* struck down so-called anti-sodomy laws.

19. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

20. Romano, *Race Mixing*.

21. Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

22. Ibid. See also the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's fact sheet on HIV/AIDS among African Americans: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/resources/factsheets/aa.htm#3> (accessed February 22, 2010).

23. Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Weis, eds., *The New Psychology of Love* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006); Root, *Love's Revolution*.

24. Kerry Rockquemore and David L. Brunson, *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

25. Edmund Burke and L. G. Mitchell, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 138–41.

26. For an accessible discussion of the science of romantic love, see Helen E. Fisher, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*, 1st ed. (New York: Holt, 2004). For a technical account, see her paper “The Drive to Love: The Neural Mechanism for Mate Selection,” in *The New Psychology of Love*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Weis (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).

27. Root, *Love's Revolution*, 1.

28. This account draws on intergroup contact theory in psychology. For an accessible review of contact theory, see Plous, “The Psychology of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination.” For a technical review of current research on contact theory, see the papers in John F. Dovidio, Peter Samuel Glick, and Laurie A. Rudman, eds., *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

29. Robert D. Putnam, “*E Pluribus Unum*: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, 2 (2007).