

INTRODUCTION

# Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects

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BY GREG TATE

*"Ex Africa semper aliquid novi." (Out of Africa, always something new.) —PLINY THE ELDER*

*"... in memory they are equal to white; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, anomalous . . . never yet could I find a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain abstraction." —THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1803*

*"Have you forgotten that once we were brought here we were robbed of our name, robbed of our language. We lost our religion, our culture, our God. And many of us, by the way we act, even lost our minds." —MINISTER LOUIS FARRAKHAN*

*"The history of the world, my sweet, is who gets eaten and who gets to eat." —STEPHEN SONDHEIM, SWEENEY TODD*

*"After a dignified WASP medievalist from an Ivy League university confided in an airport bar that her eminent husband spoke 'black*



talk' to their dog, I began to expect white people to respond to a description of my project with some kind of confession about the prominence of racial parodies in their own lives. An Irish-Catholic college administrator exhibited his perfect Stepin Fetchit shuffle; an Italian physician whispered his secret black nickname, intoning it à la Kingfish; a Jewish friend from college expressed her delight that her complexion and kinky hair led Parisians to fete her (since her looks had only incited wary glances in the segregated neighborhood of her native Bronx) . . . After months spent writing about the centrality of cross-racial mimicry in twentieth-century culture, I found myself less shocked, more bemused, at a wedding reception when an ersatz 'Zulu Warrior Chant' presumably taught to the paterfamilias of a Southern family by General Patton during the Second World War, was performed, accompanied by rhythmic hand-clapping and foot-stomping, by all his sons, son-in-law, and grandsons."—SUSAN

GUBAR, RACE CHANGES: WHITE SKIN, BLACK FACE IN AMERICAN CULTURE

*"It's not good to stay in a white man's country too long."*

—MUTABARUKA

THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK IS a Florence Tate original. Mom once wrote a poem of the same name to decry the long-standing, ongoing, and unarrested theft of African-American cultural properties by thieving, flavorless whitefolk. A jeremiad against the ways Our music, Our fashion, Our hairstyles, Our dances, Our anatomical traits, Our bodies, Our Soul continue to be considered ever ripe for the plucking and the biting by the same crafty devils who brought you the African slave trade and the Middle Passage.

What has always struck Black observers of this phenomenon isn't just the irony of white America fiending for Blackness when it once debated whether Africans even had souls. It's also the way They have always tried to erase the



Black presence from whatever Black thing They took a shine to: jazz, blues, rock and roll, doo-wop, swingdancing, cornrowing, antidisimulation politics, attacking Dead Men, you name it.

Readers of Black music history are often struck by the egregious turns of public relations puffery that saw Paul Whiteman crowned the King of Swing in the 1920s, Benny Goodman anointed the King of Jazz in the 1930s, Elvis Presley propped up as the King of Rock and Roll in the 1950s, and Eric Clapton awarded the title of the world's greatest guitar player (ostensibly of the blues) in the 1960s. Whatever Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Chuck Berry, B. B. King, and other African-American pioneers thought about these coronations, they seem to have wisely kept between pursed lips—at least until Little Richard declared himself “the architect of rock and roll” rather than announce the winner at a late-eighties Grammy Awards ceremony. The same market forces that provided Caucasian imitators maximum access to American audiences through the most lucrative radio, concert, and recording contracts of the day also fed out whatever crumbs Black artists could hope for in the segregated American entertainment business.

For much of the last century the burden of being Black in America was the burden of a systemic denial of human and constitutional rights and equal economic opportunity. It was also a century in which much of what America sold to the world as uniquely American in character—music, dance, fashion, humor, spirituality, grassroots politics, slang, literature, and sports—was uniquely African-American in origin, conception, and inspiration. Only rarely could this imitation be enjoyed by African Americans as the sincerest form of flattery or as more than a Pyrrhic victory over racist devaluations of Black humanity. Yet today, counter to Thomas Jefferson's widely known notions of Black cognitive inferiority, the grandsons and daughters of antebellum America's slave commodities have become the masters of the nation's creative profile.

Legal and economic inequality between the races, though diminished to varying degrees by the advances of the civil rights and black power movements, still defines the quality of alienation which afflicts Black/white relations. The history of racism is more alive than dead for many African Americans—much of our public policy around crime, public housing, health



care, and education continues to reflect a belief in second-class status for African Americans born in slavery.

The African-American presence in this country has produced a fearsome, seductive, and circumspect body of myths about Black intellectual capacity, athletic ability, sexual appetite, work ethic, family values, and propensity for violence and drug addiction. From these myths have evolved much of the paranoia, pathology, absurdity, awkwardness, alienation, and anomie which continue to define the American racial scene.

This book is an interrogation of those myths and the ways they have become intertwined with the popular culture of the country, and the world, since before the First World War. This is admittedly a peculiar book about a peculiar fascination: our peculiarly American notions of racial difference and the forms of pleasure, sometimes sadomasochistic in nature, that have sprung from the national id because of them. It features a peculiarly African-American twist on Marx's and Engels's observations about capitalism's commodity-fetish effect—the transformation of a marketable object into a magical thing of desire. It is my belief that capitalism's original commodity fetish was the Africans auctioned here as slaves, whose reduction from subjects to abstracted objects has made them seem larger than life and less than human at the same time. It is for this reason that the Black body, and subsequently Black culture, has become a hungered-after taboo item and a nightmarish bugbear in the badlands of the American racial imagination. Something to be possessed and something to be erased—an operation that explains not only the ceaseless parade of troublesome Black stereotypes still preferred and preferred by Hollywood (toms, coons, mammies, mulattoes, and bucks, in Donald Bogle's coinage), but the American music industry's never-ending quest for a white artist who can competently perform a Black musical impersonation: Paul Whiteman, Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, Sting, Britney Spears, 'N Sync, Pink, Eminem—all of those contrived and promoted to do away with bodily reminders of the Black origins of American pop pleasure.

It is with this history in mind that African-American performance artist



Roger Guenveur Smith once posed the question: Why does everyone love Black music but nobody loves Black people? Readers will find that politics (the power to address who gets eaten and who gets to eat) matters in this book's discussion of the Black American Burden, but so does Eminem. This latest pure product of white and crazy America, here to claim his fifteen minutes of MTV-generated fame as a Black male impersonator, and who has his gangsta-rap records routinely played by rock stations that consider Black rappers anathema.

This book, then, is about Black resentment and discontent to no small extent, but be reminded that Black irony and contrariness are never far away. Because while *Everything but the Burden* is largely devoted to scrutinizing the need by white Americans to acquire Blackness by any means necessary, it is also about the fascination that desire has provoked in a contemporary generation of African-American artists and intellectuals who hold complicated ideas about "Whose Black culture is it anyway?"

There is a panopticon effect being generated here. Just imagine a nest of Black scribes secretly, sometimes surgically, observing white people parading around as imitation Negroes. Now imagine those same scribes measuring the distance between the simplicity of white mimesis and the complexity of Black expression, and wondering where they fit into the equation. And the joke.

In this sense, *Everything but the Burden* is also about what white people can't see when they see Black—the sight of a Black imagination "playing in the dark," to use Toni Morrison's apt description, making hay out of what happens in the wily and wounded African-American psyche when it goes messing about, marketing, and sometimes making sense of race in these United States and abroad.

Given that most of these writers are, like the editor, civil rights- and black power-era babies, our take on the Burden differs from that of my very hip septuagenarian Southern-born mother. Our take on white appropriation has been colored, when not softened, by the socioeconomic gains, opportunities, and legal protections the struggles of earlier generations have provided for Black thinkers and cultural entrepreneurs today. Note that those two categories, thinker and huckster, are no longer, if they ever were, separate.



Nelson George once correctly identified the African-American equivalent of postmodernism as post-Soul culture. Soul music, widely understood as the classic sound Black gospel vocalists like Sam Cooke made as they turned away from praising Jesus and toward the more lucrative romantic pop market, subsequently produced a secular faith of sorts—one built around the verities of working-class African-American life. Soul culture succinctly describes the folkways African Americans concocted in the desegregating America of the fifties and sixties as the civil rights movement was on the ascendancy. Post-Soul is how George describes the African-American culture that emerged out of the novel social, economic, and political circumstances the sixties Black movements produced in their wake. Post-Soul would include the plays of Ntozake Shange, the novels of Gayl Jones, the films of Spike Lee, the music of Fishbone, Tracy Chapman, and Living Colour, the presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson, the songs and the cosmetic surgery of Michael Jackson, the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, and of course that post-modern expression par excellence, hip-hop. All this work managed the feat of being successful in the American mainstream in a language that was as easily referenced to white cultural models as to African-American ones. Its signature was not its smooth Blackness but its self-conscious hybridity of Black and white cultural signifiers. Hence, Basquiat referenced Rauschenberg and Dubuffet before Bearden, as the members of Living Colour and Fishbone found Led Zeppelin and the Sex Pistols as praiseworthy as James Brown and George Clinton. By the same token, all of these artists left an African-American critique of racism visible in the foreground—a recognition that Black discontent was as alive as white supremacy in the land of the hybridizing freakyfree.

Yet with post-Soul's new forms came new psychological relationships to older (and arguably, perhaps, even outdated) takes on such platitudinous topics as Black oppression, Black propriety, Black identity, Black community, Black family, Black femininity and feminism, and, most of all, Black marketability. For the first time in history, mainstream success became a defining



factor in the cultural value of an African-American arts movement—primarily because it would be through the country's major channels of mass communication and mass marketing that debates about these figures moved from margin to center, from the hood to the floors of Congress.

The seventies, eighties, and nineties saw lively and sometimes bitter debate arising in Black America over whose idea of African-American culture would prevail in the public imagination. The Black feminist writers who emerged in the seventies—Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Michelle Wallace—may be said to have kicked off the aspect of post-Soul that critiqued Black cultural nationalism, and particularly the patriarchal strain of the same. Camps and divisions within Black culture became more pronounced and hysterical as time went on: old-guard Afrocentrists versus freakydeke bohemians and newly minted Ivy League buppies, all of the above thrown in relief by those gauche ghettocentrics who would come to be known as the hip-hop nation.

The omnipresence and omnipotence of hip-hop, artistically, economically, and socially, have forced all within Black America and beyond to find a rapprochement with at least some aspect of its essence. Within hip-hop, however, as in American entrepreneurship generally, competing ideologies exist to be exploited rather than expunged and expelled—if only because hip-hop culture and the hip-hop marketplace, like a quantum paradox, provide space to all Black ideologies, from the most antiwhite to the most pro-capitalist, without ever having to account for the contradiction. The aura and global appeal of hip-hop lie in both its perceived Blackness (hip, stylish, youthful, alienated, rebellious, sensual) and its perceived fast access to global markets through digital technology. The way hip-hop collapsed art, commerce, and interactive technology into one mutant animal from its inception seems to have almost predicted the forms culture would have to take to prosper in the digital age.

By now the basic history of hip-hop will read as holy writ or apocryphal horror story, depending on where you're standing. From the predominantly African-American and Puerto Rican South Bronx (and Jamaican DJ Kool Herc's sound system), it came in the mid/late 1970s, a cultural revolution



whose first shots were hardly intended to raze Babylon. Reflecting the age-old desire of underprivileged teenagers everywhere to invent their own entertainment, hip-hop expressed the zeitgeist of your average South Bronx youth of the day in music, dance, fashion, and visual art. That the music was made by turntables, the dance made by whirling the top of the head on the floor like a helicopter, and the visuals murals painted sometimes overnight on ten New York subway cars from “top to bottom,” are what caught the rest of the planet’s attention.

Twenty-five years on, this thing we call hip-hop is not only a billion-dollar subset of the music industry but one whose taste-making influence makes billions more for every other lifestyle-and-entertainment business under the sun: from soft drinks, liquor, leisure wear, haute couture, automobiles, to sports events, electronics, shoes, cigars, jewelry, homes. With this affluence and newly minted mass cultural clout have come debates that have divided the U.S. Senate, incited police organizations and political opportunists of every ideological stripe, cleaved generations, genders, and classes among every ethnicity in America.

One of the more peculiar outgrowths of hip-hop’s popularity has been the birth of the “wigger”—the so-called white nigger who apes Blackness by “acting hip-hop” in dress, speech, body language, and, in some cases, even gang affiliation. Some in the African-American community see the appearance of the wigger mutant as a comical form of flattery, others as an up-to-date form of minstrelsy.

Minstrelsy, or “Blacking up”—the application of burnt cork grease to a white or Black performer’s face—became a staple of American entertainment in the nineteenth century, when our homegrown vaudeville circuit turned this crude and mocking form of maskery into a means of making a living wage. Though the cork-grease appliqué has faded away, the sight of white performers attempting to replicate Black features still generates among African-American spectators a host of responses—from joy to horror to sarcasm to indifference. There seem, for example, to be as many African Americans of the hip-hop persuasion who embrace Eminem as reject him. For some a white rapper will always be an oxymoron; others, like retired basketball star Charles



Barkley, find great humor in the irony of living in a time when the best rapper (his words, not mine) is white and the best golfer is Black.

What has changed since the days of Elvis is the degree to which Black American hip-hop producers function as arbiters of who is and who is not a legitimate white purveyor of hip-hop. In part, this is because hip-hop remains as much defined by the representation of Black machismo as by Black aesthetics. The impact of African-American music and musical culture on white British and American notions of masculinity and style plays no small role in accounting for the largely white male and Japanese fandoms of jazz, blues, rock and roll, soul, funk, reggae, and now hip-hop. Once the music of marginalized minorities, they have become the theme musics of a young, white, middle-class male majority—due largely to that demographic's investment in the tragic-magical displays of virility exhibited by America's ultimate outsider, the Black male. This attraction became inevitable once popular notions of American manhood began to be defined less by the heroic individualism of a John Wayne and more by the ineffable hipness, coolness, antiheroic, antiauthoritarian stances of bona fide—genius Black musicians like Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk—African-American rebel icons whose existential glare at white-bread America now seems to be what Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Montgomery Clift, James Dean, Frank Sinatra, and Steve McQueen were trying to project in their influential film portrayals of American male discontent.

There is equally a case to be made for the deep impact of African sculpture and dance and jazz on what we call European modernism in art. For some, merely bearing witness to these forms of Black expressivity, or even learning to replicate them, would not adequately satisfy their desire to become intimate with Africa. The desire to vicariously rebel against European culture from within an imaginary Black body took on a philosophical dimension in this century as the conceit inspired the cosmopolitan inventors of Cubism and Dadaism to defy European conventions in the name of going



native. To no small degree the African-American emphasis on improvisation, performance, and cast-off materials could be said to have influenced much of what has occurred in American poetry and fine arts since the Second World War. More on these subjects than I'm allowing for here is touched on in the *Burden* by Carl Hancock-Rux and Arthur Jafa in their scintillating deconstructions of modernism's hidden Black faces. (Interestingly, both writers, our opening and closing acts, as it were, also intimate that divestment in the performance of "Blackness" is where true Black liberation must begin.)

Though the much-maligned "wigger" figure mimics the surface forms of African-American culture (i.e., the songs, the speech, the dress codes, and the bad attitude of hip-hop), his more sophisticated brethren have spent most of the last century trying to translate their Black/white baggage into remedies for Western culture's spiritual malaise. In popular music since the sixties, complicated characters like Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan, Johnny Rotten, (and now Eminem) complicated the question of how race mythology can be creatively exploited. They have also made us understand how influence and appropriation can cut both ways across the racial divide. These are white artists who found ways to express the complexity of American whiteness inside Black musical forms. In turn, these artists came to appeal to many among the post-Soul-generation African Americans who have no problem, as their forebears Lester Young, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker didn't, in claiming a white artistic ancestor. It is for this reason that Vernon Reid and I decided a dissection of Steely Dan's nappy roots was required for the *Burden*.

African-American admirers of white artists have historically transcended the picayune boundaries that define the world's race-obsessed ideas about skin and cultural identity, drawing freely from the world's storehouse of artists for models. Ellington loved Debussy and Stravinsky, Jimi Hendrix had a special thing for Bach, Bob Dylan, and Handel. Jean-Michel Basquiat held special fondness for Dubuffet, Twombly, Rauschenberg, Warhol, and *Gray's Anatomy*. Charlie Parker embraced country-and-western music, much to



some of his idolaters' chagrin. Ralph Ellison credited T. S. Eliot with inspiring him to study the craft of writing as assiduously as he already had that of European concert music. Toni Morrison speaks of García Márquez, Fuentes, and Cortázar as if they were blood relations, and so on. There should be no revelation in this, but the sad truth about the dehumanization of Black people is that it can strap blinders on us all regarding the complexity of human desire within the divided racial camps. When reading Beth Coleman's marvelous exposé of pimp culture as a demoralized attempt to recreate the master-slave dynamic, we are reminded of how distorted one's self-image can become in a morally deformed culture.

During the high period of Black cultural nationalism, when Amiri Baraka was out to purge himself of all his past associations with white people and white art movements, a certain anxiety over influence, plus anti-intellectualism and countersupremacy, surged up in ways that made white influences nearly taboo. Those days are long behind us, but one effect of that movement has been the emergence of a separate-but-equal America where even middle-class Black people make literature, music, film, television, and theater for other Blacks' consumption and rarely socialize outside of a work context with their white counterparts. The increased opportunities for Black ownership and profiting from Black entertainment have largely made moot the once vociferous arguments against white profiting from Black culture. The doors to Black entrepreneurship within corporate America have been swung wide open.

To the degree that the sixties movements changed anything about race in America, they began to sweep away the denial of economic opportunity that had kept African-American entrepreneurs off the playing fields where the big bucks were being made from Black talent. The advent in hip-hop of multi-millionaire Black moguls like Russell Simmons, Andre Harrell, and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs has largely made the question of white co-optation of Black culture more a joke among younger African Americans than a gibe. They've seen hip-hop topple "white rock" as the most influential and lucrative form of pop music among middle-class youth in America. They've watched with amusement and admiration as Black star-grooming firms concoct the hip-



hop Soul-flavored songs and dance moves of 'N Sync and the Backstreet Boys. Savored the victory in every other nu-metal band on MTV throwing up a rapping singer and a lead guitarist who's ceded his once-exalted sex-symbol position to the band's resident "turntableist."

If hip-hop had done nothing but put more money in the hands of Black artists and business managers than ever before, it would mark a milestone in American cultural history. What that wealth has not been able to transform, however, is the social reality of substandard housing, medical care, and education that afflicts over half of all African-American children and accounts for as many as one out of three (and in my hometown of Washington, D.C., our nation's capital, one out of two) African-American males being under the control of the criminal justice system. (Projections by African-American genocide theorist Jawanza Kunjufu indicate that the numbers may swell to two out of three by the year 2020.) Nor have the gains made in the corporate suite fully dismantled the prevalent, delimiting mythologies about Black intelligence, morality, and hierarchical place in America.

The instruction given to all the *Burden's* writers was to tackle the all-American fascination with Blackness in the realms of music, literature, sports, fashion and beauty, comedy, political activism, modern art, science-fiction cinema, hero worship, machismo. Some approached the assignment through an iconic figure whose life and work seemed to embody the history of shame, blame, idolatry, denial, stalwart bravery, tomfoolishness, and misapprehension that marks the subject. It is a history that mocks us all as we attempt to reduce the world's possibilities to its racial inequities.

Warning: A specific emphasis has been placed on key figures and movements whose lives and work have inadvertently made race in America a subject as demanding of complex reasoning and ethical inquiry as genetically modified organisms. In "The New White Negro," Carl Hancock Rux takes on the Eminem phenomenon, hitting it right between the eyes and finding a self-made cipher wrapped in a hard nigga dreamcoat. In Melvin Gibbs's "Thug-Gods: Spiritual Darkness and Hip-Hop," the long history of criminalizing and mythifying Black culture is detailed from ancient India to the Wu-Tang Clan, finally resting on a powerful reading of white American Taliban follower John



Walker Lindh. Gibbs sympathetically reflects on Lindh's search for a way out of America's spiritual darkness through the dark spirituality of hip-hop and fundamentalist Islam.

Robin Kelley presents the bizarre world of white activists who seek to overcome the race problem by browbeating African-American militants about their fixation on race, and Black radicals who struggle to get white-run leftist organizations to understand that the race problem deserves more than a footnote in the war on capitalism. In my dialogue with Vernon Reid, we present the ways Steely Dan ran away with Black cool and disguised it in their own critique of the American dream. In Beth Coleman's "Pimp Notes on Autonomy," we are made to see the pimp figure as an appropriator of the master-slave dynamic that has programmed the psyches of Black and white American men for centuries. Novelist Jonathan Lethem provides a clue as to how a guilty liberal who's been mugged can find his muse riled to action by the event rather than by his kneejerk conservatism.

With Michael C. Ladd's poem "The New Mythology Began Without Me," we get the buying and selling of the Black American dream rendered as a cultural nightmare. The two scenes from Eisa Davis's play *Umkovu* use dark wit to make light of a white businessman and a Japanese deejay who live to reduce Black culture to its most marketable clichés. From Hilton Als comes a study of the career of Richard Pryor, who more than any other American performer of the past century exemplified the promise and the compromises expected of angry Black performers who long for white love and mainstream success. Further expanding our vista of Black America's impact on the world, we offer Manthia Diawara's account of how James Brown fomented a social and stylistic rebellion among young people in sixties and seventies Mali. Meri Danquah details how hair-straightening and skin-bleaching, à la Michael Jackson, has run amok in Ghana.

In Latasha Natasha Diggs's "The Black Asianphile in Me," we are given a near-parodic view of the fetishism that fetishism beget: Her exotification of Asian penises and fighting techniques offers an inverted Afrocentric image of white appropriation at its worst. In Tony Green's personal writing on larger-than-life subjects Muhammad Ali, Norman Mailer, and George Fore-



man, one is allowed to see how ineptly the Black Superman model favored by Black mythifiers like Mailer fit on an average Joe like Green's younger athletic self. Professional fashion and beauty stylist Michaela Angela Davis delves even deeper under the skin to point up how the country's obsession with Hollywood and Condé Nast's prescriptions of beauty has wounded young Black women unaware that their style innovations feed the beauty industry that denies them affirmation. Cassandra Lane's "Skinned" opens up more than skin-deep woundedness, depicting the whyfores of her anxieties about imaginary white women showing up as sexual threats in her marriage bed.

The essays of Danzy Senna, Renée Green, and Arthur Jafa form an Afro-futurist troika: Senna looks back on ghetto-centricity from 2037 in her parody of Harvard-trained literary anthropology, Green delves into space, race, and injustice as they have been conjoined in Hollywood potboilers and the work of Octavia Butler, while Jafa provides a reading of Stanley Kubrick's *2001* that would startle even Sun Ra. Jafa also takes on Picasso, Duchamp, Pollock, and Kubrick, whose visual critiques of whiteness through Africanist myths he sees as having led them to formal breakthroughs and conceptual cul-de-sacs.

Taken in total, these essays present the myriad ways African Americans grapple with feelings of political inferiority, creative superiority, and ironic distance in a market-driven world where we continue to find ourselves being sold as hunted outsiders and privileged insiders in the same breath. In a world where we're seen as both the most loathed and the most alluring of creatures, we remain the most co-optable and erasable of cultures too. It is the singular, historic power of this chilling, maddening, schizophrenia-inducing paradox that it has always called some of the country's more exceptional, daring, and fecund literary minds to order—Twain, Douglass, Melville, Crane, Faulkner, Du Bois, Robeson, Hughes, Hurston, Baldwin, Morrison, West all come to mind. It is the deepest wish of this editor that the *Burden* honors and serves this quintessentially American theme as well as its predecessors have—complicating and elevating our "Cipher" in the process.



## 2. *Scenes from Umkovu*, a play

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BY EISA DAVIS

BLACKNESS IS CONSTANTLY REPRODUCING itself, like a mint releasing new currency as old bills age. When the blues got locked up in real estate, jazz kept its assets liquid; if rock and roll floated a bond, it had to mature into hip hop. New editions of the same funky beat printed to stave off inevitable mergers and acquisitions. But this drum won't stop, even when whiteness is defined as the performance of an ignorance of blackness, or when blackness refuses to teach whiteness its kitchen secrets—and sometimes no words come when these two forces meet. By representing these irreducible moments—one in which a black woman in a relationship with a white man may have less money but perhaps more power because she is ultimately *not* consumable, and another in which the white/black deadlock is exploded by an Asian voice—can we begin to develop a new language beyond economics or identity politics that reflects the contradictions we live?

### SCENE TWO

JEFF, executive VP, Pacific Entertainment Group. 30s. He is white, short.

MAYA, A&R, Represent Records. A black woman in her 20s.  
*Pink's Hot Dogs, Melrose and La Brea. 2 a.m. Los Angeles.*

JEFF: You know it's just terrible, terrible. Not O.J., no, I'm glad he got off. It's not O.J., it's not Osama bin Laden or Saddam or whoever, it's not



about enemies, it's about whom you choose to love. That's why we get in all our troubles. We're in love with Israel, we're in love with—well, I guess that's it—besides black people, and the British, and Japanese—I mean, we don't create enemies from some plutonium uranium spark and poof diaphragm in the sky, no. We make our hate from our love. And this hot dog is absolutely delicious, absolutely no contest yes yummy do it to me. Hot dog at 2 a.m. Do you mind my philosophizing at such a late hour? I am an alien. I live in this acidic town damned by every Native American deity we know and I try to protect myself with turquoise amulets and pork between two pieces of bread. Why don't they serve drinks here?

MAYA: Because we've already had so many.

JEFF: I know I'm really chewin' your earlobe here, but earlobes, your earlobes, oh, they are meant for chewing, and earrings, and keloids. Now why can't I develop a keloid. I'm white, that's why. I'm not guilty, I'm just white, and it's sickening. Here I am, a mutant. I have mutated from the original Asiatic Black Man into this alien! Now you, you may have some slave master in there, but you are so very lucky to have been born at the source.

MAYA: Baldwin Hills?

JEFF: You think I'm garrulous. I am. I love my mouth. Only thing about me that gives me any pleasure. The rest is a big recycling bin of terror and reason. So blackness. Where can I get some. I want to ingest it. I want to exchange my transparent papery luftwaffe body for purification. It's not a secret. I have no wife. Just divorce, just kids. I'm not talking lust here. I don't wanna screw you, I mean I love screwing you, but—I wanna *be* you, a black woman, sitting there, quiet, munching on your hot dog, eyes gently patronizing, laughing at the appropriate moments. I want to wear your lovely face when I look into the mirror. Not minstrelsy, just getting rid of the enemy in my body that feeds on love.

MAYA: Jeff, we are too fucking drunk. I can't get offended when I'm like this.

JEFF: But can you help me out. Because I don't want any charity Salvation



Army bell blackness in tiny portions at holidays. I want something I can drown in.

MAYA: You too? You are pure arrogance. You're disgusting.

JEFF: Thank you. Beautiful.

MAYA: I know what you need. I know. This artist I've been working on—

JEFF: Violator. Rule number one is we don't talk shop. Wrecked my marriage.

MAYA: Your total inability to listen wrecked your marriage. You erase everything you touch.

JEFF: Not you. You are my inflatable emergency ramp. Plane went down—

MAYA: No more metaphors, okay?

JEFF: You got me drunk. You take me to Pink's, I spill my racial transvestitism on you and now you want me to—

MAYA: Buy Swive out of his contract at Represent.

JEFF: You want me to lay down, what, a mil to move someone named Swive over to us? We're not just a treehouse, Maya, we do have shareholders. So (A), no, and (B), who is he?

MAYA: I can't even pitch him to you. He's just one of those MCs that converts you. He's some kind of portal. I'm serious!

JEFF: In love with him?

MAYA: His music.

JEFF: Just checking. Black guy, huh?

MAYA: Yeah.

JEFF: Why aren't you with a black guy?

MAYA: Magic Shave powder. Swive's not the best in the world or anything, I just feel like he gives a real purpose to my life. That I'm giving myself to something bigger.

JEFF: Hm. And why buy now?

MAYA: Darryl doesn't know how to handle him. I thought working at a black label would give me room to grow the artists, but Darryl's a coward. Swive has like four albums' worth of material none of which is "radio" enough for Darryl—I've got the singles, videos, magazines all prepped to sear Swive's face on every state in the union and what. Dar-



ryl's pulling out the cookie-cutter. He also said he was gonna kill Swive, but that was a joke.

JEFF: Murder. That's a good way to make money. So naturally you wanna come over to Pacific with Swive.

MAYA: As long as you and I never work together. Your executive-VP day look is really ugly.

JEFF: Oh I know. Is Swive a Scientologist?

MAYA: No.

JEFF: I'm still not black.

MAYA: Isolate some DNA. Maybe you had black folk in your family passing long enough to make you.

JEFF: When am I gonna hear this artist of yours.

MAYA: Wrap party after the video shoot. You'll want him.

JEFF: No guarantees. I hate being The Man. So lonely. You give eloquence, they give mustard. I had so many words to caress you with tonight and I spouted them and now I have no more ballast to hold me down. I'm actually feeling nauseous from the height. Guess we're not having sex tonight.

MAYA: You'd be impotent anyway. The drinks.

JEFF: Or the Pink's. Why do I have to be so pink? What'd I do to be so pink and blue?

*from* SCENE FIVE

SHMOOVE, veejay and host of *Dead Homiez*, a biography show about deceased hip-hop icons. 20s, Asian, and a ladies' man.

DARRYL, president, Represent Records. 30s. He is tall, impeccably dressed.

*Shmoove enters the lobby of Represent, doing a live video shot.*

SHMOOVE: We're here at Represent Records, this once sleepy R&B label that has the music industry's attention in its grip. Ouch. Represent artist



Swive Jabal, whose video "Huh?" is in heavy rotation, is ready to giz-o. After busting an unorthodox freestyle and Darryl Jackson's face at his own wrap party, Swive may break completely from his label and move to Pacific Entertainment. [to Darryl] Now Darryl, president of Represent, your man is bizarre. I heard he just gave his Lexus to a homeless man on an offramp. What the dealy, yo?

DARRYL: Well, first of all, that Lexus is not his to give away. But besides the criminal charges and my civil suit, Swive will not be released from his contract with us. He is our investment, however risky, and we are going to profit from his success period point blank end of story.

SHMOOVE: When's the album gonna drop? Advance orders say it'll go double platinum. At least.

DARRYL: The album will be released once we handle the poachers over at Pacific. Swive may have assaulted my person, ruptured my septum, but this has not at all changed his status as an artist here.

SHMOOVE: Well good luck on that face, man. Swive, also known as the silent monk of hip hop, had no comment. I'm Shmoovy Shmoove with the news that shows and proves. Let's pay those bills, BAYbay. [Live shot ends.] And we out.

DARRYL: Get everything you need?

SHMOOVE: Always. Wish I could stay and parlay but I'm goin' east side for a little sushi with this new group. Rock band. Bunjee jump while they play guitar. They're each like seven years old. Hot. Ah-ight, nigga, check you later.

DARRYL: I don't think I heard you correctly.

SHMOOVE: Nigga, please.

DARRYL: That word is not yours.

SHMOOVE: Nigga, I'm the only Asian man on TV! So forget you. You burned down my parents' store in '92 so I'm a loot all your language and all your gear and your hair and I'm a work it. Who the hell is buying your daddy's jazz record anyway? Better recognize. Coltrane? Wu-Tang? Y'all as bad as white folks.