An Introduction to Visual Culture
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Chapter 5

SEEING SEX

SEXUALITY DISRUPTS. If culture is often presented as a discrete object, a seamless web of social relations, sexuality is the loose end that undoes the garment. The coexistence of culture with power necessarily evokes the modern preoccupation with gender, sexuality and "race." Rather than seeing sexuality as a means of constituting identity, it can instead now be described, in Kobena Mercer's phrase, "as that which constantly worries and troubles anything as supposedly fixed as an identity" (Mercer 1996: 119). While the categories of gender and sexuality were enormously creative ways to conduct new cultural research in the 1970s and 1980s, their continued instability is leading towards new definitions of culture itself. For the personal and cultural functions of gender and sexuality do not cohere into a stable pattern. Indeed, given that these categories mark some of the most fundamental distinctions within humanity, it is remarkable how often their definitions have changed in the modern period. In this chapter, I shall look at ways in which Western culture has sought to visualize gender and sexual distinctions, while at the same time creating phantasmatic ways of looking that are in themselves constructed by gender and sexuality. In what I call the fetishism of the gaze, what is perceived is never exactly the same as what is there in a material sense. Nowhere is this failure of the classificatory gaze more apparent than where it matters most in this field, the sight of the sex organs themselves, of reproduction and its offspring.

Fetishizing the gaze

It is a curious fact that the two most important psychoanalytic theories of looking, namely fetishism and the gaze rely on the viewer's misrecognition of what he or she sees (especially he). In his 1927 essay on "Fetishism," Sigmund Freud sought to account for the fact that numerous men could only achieve sexual gratification via a specific material object that he called the fetish object, such as fur or velvet. By using the colonial term "fetish," created by Europeans to (mis)describe African ritual objects such as the *minkisi* described in the previous chapter, Freud immediately created an overlap between race and sexuality to which we will return later. In Freud's view, the fetish is always a penis-substitute: "To put it plainly: the fetish is the substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego." The little boy had believed that his mother possessed a phallus just as he did, until at some point he becomes aware that her genitals are different from his, that she lacks a penis. There is an obvious threat: "if a woman can be castrated then his own penis is in danger." The boy is both aware of what he has seen and denies it: "He retains this belief but he also gives it up." The fetishist displaces his belief in the female phallus onto the fetish object, "possibly the last impression received before the uncanny traumatic one." While relatively few men actually become clinical fetishists, this trauma is universal: "Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals. We cannot explain why it is that some of them become homosexual in consequence of this experience, others ward it off by creating a fetish and the great majority overcome it" (Freud 1959). There are then three possible outcomes from the moment of (mis)recognition: heterosexuality, homosexuality or fetishism.

Fetishistic viewing is not limited to the neurotic fetishist but can be said to be a critical part of everyday visual consumption. The disavowal of the fetishist is not absolute. As phrased by Octave Mannoni, it is better expressed as "I know . . . but nonetheless" [Je sais . . . mais quand même]. In the fetishistic gaze, reality exists but has the viewer's desire superimposed over it. It is in this way that we casually accept film and photography as "realistic," while being fully aware of their conventionality. For example, in the opening sequence of a film, we scan the crowd of figures seeking the "star," so that we know where to concentrate our attention. That search does not disrupt the film's illusion but rather is part of our active suspension of disbelief. A key part of everyday looking consists in this ability to keep two incompatible approaches in play at once. The recent hit horror films *Scream* and *Scream II* have made subverting our expectations in the

horror genre central to their enjoyment. In *Scream*, for example, the most famous actress in the cast, Drew Barrymore, is killed in the opening minutes of the film (Figure 5.1). As the serial killers go on the rampage, the characters joke that leaving the room alone would lead to their death in a horror film – only to be killed leaving the room alone.

In later Freudian analysis, looking has been reconceptualized as the gaze, taking a still more central position in the formation of gender identity. The gaze is not just a look or a glance. It is a means of constituting the identity of the gazer by distinguishing her or him from that which is gazed at. At the same time, the gaze makes us aware that we may be looked at, so that this awareness becomes a part of identity in itself. In Jean-Paul Sartre's example, one may look through a keyhole without any awareness of self, but if footsteps are heard in the hall: "I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me." Sartre's existential theory involving a Self and an Other was internalized in Freudian terms by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: "the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture." Lacan placed the gaze at the center of the formation of the ego in his famed mirror stage. In the mirror stage, the infant learns to distinguish between itself and the (mother's) image by becoming aware of sexual difference. As a result the subject is split, as Carole-Anne Tyler explains: "The subject can never reconcile the split between itself and its mirror imago, the eye which sees and the eye which

Figure 5.1 Drew Barrymore in *Scream*

is seen, the I who speaks and the I who is spoken, the subject of desire and the subject of demand, who must pass through the defiles of the Other's signifiers" (Tyler 1994: 218). When I see myself in the mirror, I can never see the Ideal "I" of the imaginary but only the Symbolic "I."

The infant becomes able to visualize its body as being separate from that of the mother because it becomes aware of the mother's desire for something else. This something is lacking in both mother and child. Lacan calls it the Name of the Father, insisting that it is a linguistic and legal function rather than the real father – who may be absent or otherwise implicated in the child's primary identification – that is meant. Thus, the gaze brings into being that which says "I" and names itself as either male or female, that is to say, the subject or self. These subjects – the gaze and the subject of representation – exist only in relation to each other and combine to form the image/screen, or what is perceived. In this split field of vision, the phallus comes to represent that which divides and orders the field of signification, or the gaze. For Lacan the phallus is a phantasm that the penis comes to represent "because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic." As Lacan himself pointed out, the penis itself becomes a fetish in this conveniently circular argument, in which the penis is the phallus because of its apparent capacity to be all things at once. In Lacan's analysis, there is no existence that is not fetishistic.

Lacan's scheme was highly controversial in clinical psychoanalysis but has become widely adopted in visual culture studies, especially film criticism. This mode of interpretation was especially associated with the British film journal *Screen* that published a now celebrated essay theorizing visual experience in Lacanian terms by film critic Laura Mulvey in 1975 (Mulvey 1989). She analyzed the operations of visual pleasure in classic Hollywood cinema, arguing that the "paradox of phallocentrism . . . is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world." It is the woman's lack of the phallus, or symbolic castration, that initiates the formation of the ego and a signifying system that nonetheless excludes women. While the male hero initiates action, "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." Nonetheless, female characters still evoked the specter of castration that needed to be controlled. The woman may be punished in the film to overcome the threat in a sadistic form of voyeurism, or it may be disavowed by fetishism. Just as Mulvey sees castration anxiety as being at the heart of cinematic pleasure, Freud regarded fetishism as clear proof of his theory that men are haunted by the fear of castration, while women are marked by their lack of the phallus. Both formations derive from early visual experience that

causes the infant to adopt a specific view of what she or he has seen, whether of denial, assimilation or displacement. Fetishism led Freud to conclude that even when a "very important part of reality had been denied by the ego," the result was not necessarily psychosis but merely everyday neurosis. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, reality is in the eye of the beholder.

Lacan's reading of psychoanalysis, which privileges the gaze, has obvious affinities with a reading of cinema as an apparatus for the control of the look. In Mulvey's analysis, the visual pleasure of cinema became a suspect category open by definition only to men. It was to be challenged by the deliberately difficult work of avant-garde cinema, whose goal was "to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment." This austere prescription has failed to win over mass audiences who have continued to prefer the stylized cinematic styles of Hollywood, Bombay and Hong Kong over alternative cinema. Looking back on her essay in 1989, Mulvey herself now felt that: "The polarisation only allows an 'either/or.' As the two terms (masculine/feminine, voyeuristic/exhibitionist, active/passive) remain dependent on each other for meaning, their only possible movement is inversion. They cannot be shifted easily into a new phase or new significance. There can be no space in between or outside such a pairing" (Mulvey 1989: 162).

Indeed, perhaps the most striking aspect of both fetishism and the gaze as systems of analysis is the way in which women are systematically excluded. Both Freud and his French disciple Lacan agreed that there was no such thing as female fetishism (Apter 1991: 103), for the entire psychic mechanism revolved around the real penis and the fear of castration. As part of becoming a woman in the Freudian scheme was abandoning the infant desire to possess the phallus or to be the phallic mother in favor of a passive femininity, marked by the switch from clitoral to vaginal sexuality, there was no corresponding system for women. In the Lacanian system, woman is similarly defined by lack, by her inability to possess the phallus, inevitably excluding her from the signifying system. Feminists have taken this elision of women to indicate that the psychoanalytic binary opposition between male and female was in fact no more than a recasting of sex as being always and already masculine. In this view, there is no such thing as the female sex because the entire system is devised around and for men. In Luce Irigaray's celebrated essay "This sex which is not one," she declares that: "Female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters. Thus the opposition between 'virile' clitoral activity/ 'feminine' vaginal passivity which Freud – and many others – claims are alternative behaviors or steps in the process of becoming a sexually normal woman, seems prescribed more by the practice of masculine sexuality than by anything else" (Irigaray 1985: 99).

From inversion to opposites and ambiguity

Both Freud's theory of fetishism and Lacan's account of the mirror stage take as their origin the primal male moment of recognition that the female genitalia are different. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Lacan owned Gustave Courbet's scandalous oil painting of the female sex, entitled *The Origin of the World*, which hung in his consulting room as if in testament to the centrality of this visual experience. Although the biological difference between men and women might appear "obvious," there have been and continue to be sharp changes in the way the human reproductive system is believed to operate. These changes in the interpretation of biological sex have extended repercussions. In the first instance, they challenge the assumption that sex is natural, while gender is a social construction. The modern logic of sex, gender and sexuality – that biological sex predicates gender which in turn dictates the choice of the opposite gender as a sexual partner – turns out to be a castle built on sand. However, taking sex to be a cultural category poses as many questions as it answers.

Early modern Western medicine had interpreted classical theories of reproduction to generate a one-sex model of the human species. In this view, the sexual organs were essentially the same in men and women, only inverted so that what was inside the woman was outside the man. Yet in Thomas Lacquer's account "[b]y around 1800, writers of all sorts were determined to base what they insisted were fundamental differences between the male and female sexes, and thus between men and women, on discoverable biological distinctions" (Lacquer 1990: 5). The evident biological inaccuracies in the ancient account led to a total transformation, not only of biological interpretations of physiology, but of the social roles accorded to each gender, as stated baldly by the French biologist Isidore Geoffroy Sainte-Hilaire in 1836: "The laws of all nations admit, among the members of the society they rule, two great classes of individuals based on the difference of the sexes. On one of these classes are imposed duties of which the other is exempt, but also accorded rights of which the other is deprived" (Epstein 1990: 128). This shift to what Lacquer calls a "biology of incommensurability" had profound implications for sexual practice as well as classification. Early modern society held that unless they experienced orgasm, in the words of one popular text, "the fair sex [would] neither desire nuptial embraces, nor have pleasure in them, nor conceive by them" (Lacquer 1990: 3). Here the last is perhaps the most important: if it was believed that female orgasm was an indispensable condition to conception, then no man could afford to ignore it. Nineteenth-century medicine observed that female pleasure was not in fact essential to reproduction

and the disciplinary society was free to regulate feminine sexuality as being deviant if it centered on clitoral rather than vaginal pleasure.

In the new two-sex system, it was obviously of the greatest importance that men and women form clearly distinguishable categories. Lesbians and gay men, transvestites, and persons of indeterminate sex challenge the absolute nature of the binary opposition. It was therefore no coincidence that an intense investigation of all these people began in the mid-nineteenth century. Although people of intersex– so-called hermaphrodites–have been recognized since antiquity, this period saw a determined social and medical effort to eliminate all such ambiguity. One remarkable case was that of Herculine Barbin who was raised as a girl in convent schools. However, once she began a romantic liaison with another woman, she was determined to be legally male in 1860. After a few years living in Paris during which time s/he wrote an autobiography, s/he committed suicide in 1868. This text was rediscovered and published by Michel Foucault in 1978, and has been the subject of a remarkable number of competing interpretations, seeming to confirm Barbin's gloomy anticipation of her death: "When that day comes a few doctors will make a little stir around my corpse; they will shatter all the extinct mechanisms of its impulses, will draw new information from it, will analyze all the mysterious sufferings that were heaped up on a single human being; O princes of science, enlightened chemists . . . analyze then if that is possible, all the sorrows that have burned and devoured this heart down to its last fibers" (Barbin 1980: 103). Barbin asserts that the policy of making the absolute division between the sexes visible and open to medical analysis is doomed to failure.

A famous painting of the period seems to bear out her case. In 1875 the American painter Thomas Eakins depicted a well-known surgeon called Samuel D. Gross at work in Philadelphia (see Figure 5.2). Known as *The Gross Clinic*, the canvas shows Gross directing an operation while lecturing to students studying his methods. At first sight the painting is a display of the heroic mastery of modern medicine over the weaknesses of the human body. It depicts a treatment for osteomyelitis, or infection of the bone, a condition that is now manageable with antibiotics but was life-threatening in Gross' day. Eakins was himself well-informed about modern medicine, having studied with Gross himself and at the École de Medicine, Paris (Johns 1983: 48–68). It is then all the more surprising that there is no way of determining whether the patient is male or female. As Marcia Pointon argues, this "indeterminate gender is part of the condition in which this figure functions in the image as a fetish" (Pointon 1990: 50). The fetish here is the modern belief that the human body is absolutely legible and subject to one of two primary classifications by sex. Yet at the very heart of his homage

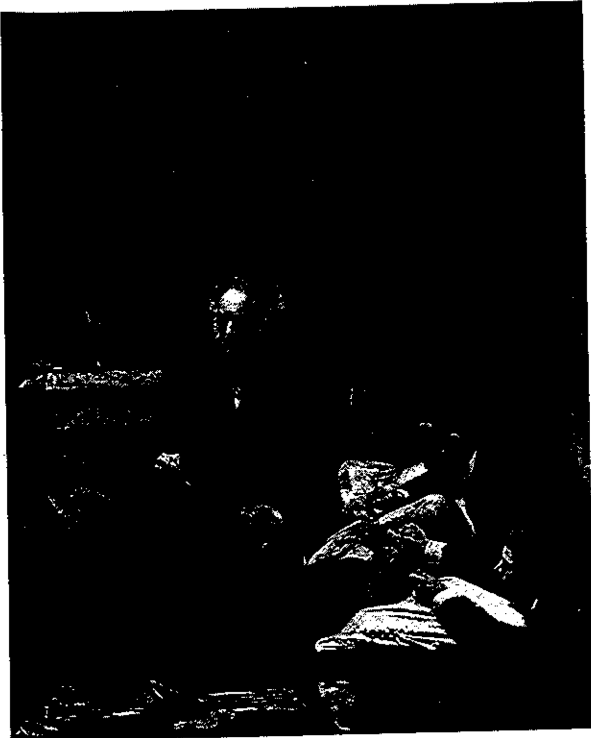

Figure 5.2 Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic*

to modern medicine, Eakins, like the fetishist, admits to ambiguity even as he denies it. For all his attempts to be as realistic as possible, the artist opens up an ambiguity that undercuts one of the most fundamental notions of the real in the period. Nor could this ambivalence be more inappropriate than in a portrait of Dr Gross. In 1849 he had operated to castrate a child "regarded as a girl" who was found to have testicles. In an article on this procedure, Gross commented:

> A defective organization of the external genitals is one of the most dreadful misfortunes that can possibly befall any human being. There is nothing that exerts so baneful an influence over his moral and social feelings, which carries with it such a sense of self-abasement and mental degradation, . . . as the conviction of such an individual that he is forever debarred from the joys and pleasures of married life, an outcast from

> society, hated and despised, and reviled and persecuted by the world.
>
> (Epstein 1990: 121)

Such intensity of feeling created a (male) gender identity for Gross' patient in Eakins' painting for the alternative would have been to question the realistic mode of representation itself. Despite the lack of visual evidence, the fetishistic gaze was able to "see" gender in the patient where it was in fact ambiguous.

The very creation of a standardized notion of the human implies the elision of many individual cases in order to sustain the overarching categories. In her historical survey of attitudes to people of indeterminate gender, Julia Epstein concluded:

> Gender is a historically and culturally relative category, and medical science has recognized the enormous plasticity of both sexuality and gender. Anatomical markers are not always determining. While medicine recognizes the flexibility of the continuum along which sexual differentiation occurs, that recognition has not resulted, as one might have postulated, in a necessary juridical accommodation of those who occupy minority spaces (which are, ironically, its midpoints) on the continuum.
>
> (Epstein 1990: 128)

Thus the clarity of the classificatory principle overrides the existence of specific real people. Indeed, advances in surgery and medical diagnosis, such as genetic testing, now make it possible for "indeterminately gendered individuals" to be simply eliminated either by termination of such fetuses or by early surgical intervention.

Seeing female sex

The right of the medical profession to determine gender, and to restrict that choice to two possibilities, is now being challenged and is receiving a hearing. Since 1996 a group known as the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) has received favorable media coverage in the United States for their campaign against such surgery. In Britain, questions were asked in the House of Commons of the new Labour government in 1997 over government policy concerning people of intersex. ISNA has entered into dialogue with the medical profession in an attempt to persuade practitioners that surgical intervention should not be used automatically, while recognizing that it may

be appropriate in individual cases. INSA defines intersex as "individuals born with anatomy or physiology which differs from cultural ideals of male and female." This formula regards a purely biological definition of sex as impossible. At the same time, it challenges ideas of culture as a received tradition that shapes identity. The cultural ideal of the perfect human body denies people of intersex the very right to exist. With one in a thousand live births being a person of intersex, this exception is far from insignificant. In pursuit of the cultural ideal of sex, roughly 2,000 girls a year in the United States have unusually large clitorises surgically removed, often causing loss of sexual feeling and psychological disorientation. The rule of thumb appears to be that any sexual organ longer than 2.5cm is retained and called a penis, while anything shorter is excised and rendered into a clitoris. Hormones and additional surgery are often used to finish the task. The fact that INSA refer to this practice as Intersex Genital Mutilation (IGM) shows that the issue touches a faultline in contemporary global cultural politics. Female genital mutilation (FGM) – sometimes incorrectly called female circumcision – is a practice that affects as many as 130 million women in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, although eight African nations have now banned the practice. Women are subjected to the excision of the clitoris and labia and even a practice known as infibulation in which the vaginal opening is sewn shut apart from a small opening. FGM has come to be a *cause célèbre* in Western media, bringing together an unusual alliance of feminists, religious organizations, and medical practitioners. These groups reject the defense of FGM as being the cultural norm in Africa on the grounds of human rights, just as people of intersex have claimed their right to indeterminate gender. As Prathibha Parmar cogently argues: "The expression 'Torture is not culture' tells us quite clearly that we cannot accept ritualized violence as an intrinsic part of any culture" (Parmar and Walker 1993: 95). The success of this campaign in raising public awareness of the issue has made it possible for groups such as the Intersex Society to make their similar case heard against medical interventions in the West. For as Cheryl Chase, a founder of INSA, says: "Africans have their cultural reasons for trimming girls' clitorises and we have our cultural reasons for trimming girls' clitorises. It's a lot easier to see what's irrational in another culture than it is to see it in our own" (Angier 1997).

For if culture is defined as inherited tradition, the practitioners of FGM have history on their side. It was known to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and has been widely used in the modern era (Klein 1989: 28). Campaigners like the novelist Alice Walker have recast the issue as centering on the woman's right to see herself as a whole person: "Without the clitoris and other sexual organs, a woman can never see herself reflected in the healthy, intact organs of another. Her sexual vision

is impaired and only the most devoted lover will be sexually 'seen'" (Parmar and Walker 1993: 19). The visual perception of the female body is indeed central to the question of FGM, whose defenders assert that female genitalia in the natural state are ugly or unclean. Similar motives lead surgeons in the United States to undertake operations on persons of intersex because, in the words of one doctor, "I don't think parents can be told this is a normal girl, and then have to be faced with what looks like an enlarged clitoris, or a penis, every time they change the diaper" (Angier 1997). One subject of a surgical clitoridectomy in the United States was told: "We had to take it off because you want to look like the other little girls in your class." Suddenly the issue in both FGM and intersex is not what the body essentially is, whether it is male or female, but how it appears.

Walker's sense of the visual impairment resulting from FGM must be contrasted with the local situation where most women are subject to these procedures. Hanny Lightfoot Klein reports that: "Historically speaking, uncircumcised women in Sudan have generally been slaves, and the epithet implies illegitimacy and a non-Arabic origin." Intact women are criticized by other women for "'that thing dangling between [their] legs'"(Klein 1989: 72). In Mali, the Bambara believe that what they call *Wanzo*, or evil power, inhabits a child either in the foreskin or clitoris and that these must be excised in order to maintain social order. At the same time, the maleness of the female and the femaleness of the male are also located in these organs. Thus both FGM and male circumcision are seen as essential to the maintenance of social order and sexual difference. The repugnance felt at the sight of intact sexual organs is in turn motivated by the realization that these distinctions may not be natural at all but rather cultural. Here there is an echo of Freud's theory of sexual difference in which the possession or lack of a phallus defines the nature of a person. This apparently natural distinction nonetheless revolves around a non-existent organ, the maternal phallus. In these terms, FGM could be seen as an exaggerated attempt to insist on essential male/female sexual difference by excising the clitoris, the female organ that might be taken for the phallus. Thus it appears that the culture that is invoked to defend FGM is not culture in the sense of human knowledge and practices but culture used to create "natural" differences between men and women that are validated by their antiquity. The idealization of a phantasmic perfect body – a fetish body, one might say – allows only one means of representation. If we are to take the coercion out of culture, it will be necessary to realign the gaze to allow for multiple viewpoints and for it to look forward rather than back.

Walker further parallels the contemporary Western preoccupation with modifying the body with FGM: "In the 'enlightened' West, it is as if genital mutilation has been spread over then entire body as women (primarily) rush to change their breasts, their noses, their weight and shape" (Parmar and Walker 1993: 9). The parallel is intriguing, although it is important to note that FGM is usually forced onto young women with or without their consent, whereas Westerners choose to undergo cosmetic surgery, albeit under strong social pressure to conform to the ideal of the "hard body." It is now even possible to have a labiaplasty, a procedure designed "to improve the appearance of female genitalia . . . the ultimate way for women to be gorgeous absolutely everywhere" (Kamps 1998). Although very few women have yet actually had such operations, at least one former patient asserts that the procedure has made her "a lot happier." As such modifications become available for every imaginable aspect of the body, our very notion of the physical body is changing. In Anne Balsamo's striking phrase, the computer-generated visualization of the body used by cosmetic surgeons "transform[s] the material body into a visual medium" (Balsamo 1992). For rather than trying to delve deeper into the body, these procedures can make individual bodies conform to an aesthetic norm: "In this way cosmetic surgery *literally* transforms the material body into a sign of culture." Of course, for those considered racially different, the body has always been such a sign. As in the case of FGM, cosmetic surgeons now seek to apply these cultural definitions of the how a body should signify its gender directly onto that body based, in the words of a standard text on the subject, on a "scale of harmony and balance . . . The harmony and symmetry are compared to a mental, almost magical, ideal subject, which is our base concept of beauty." Unsurprisingly, the "ideal face" turns out to be white, Northern European. Although many more men are now having these procedures, they are primarily aimed at women who are held to be responsible for the various "defects" of their bodies. So strong is the pressure to "get fixed" that some women have procedures over and again, becoming "scalpel slaves" in their late thirties or forties.

However, looking at the widespread fashion for body-piercing, tattooing and cyberpunk fantasies about technological prosthesis, Balsamo suggests that we may need to move beyond a "neoromantic wistfulness about the natural, unmarked body." The natural, unmarked body is exactly what is being defended by campaigners against FGM, revealing a First World/Third World divide as to the uses of the human body. While Western theorists proclaim the end of the body, Third and Fourth World women are claiming, as it were, the right to begin to have their own bodies. How can we get past this impasse? The first move is to abandon these binary oppositions that insist on placing the natural/non-Western in opposition to the cultural/Western. Identity is neither cultural nor natural in terms of the binary opposition but

is a formation in constant flux, drawing on physical, psychical and creative resources to create a sense of self or selves from a range of possibilities that are fractal rather than linear. There cannot be an opposition between a "Western" and "non-Western" body. The case of intersex children shows that even the most fundamental markers of identity are open to question in all locations. Nor does the opposition between Western plastic surgery and non-Western FGM hold up on closer examination. Venezuelan women who want to become part of the phenomenally successful Miss Venezuela organization have to undergo a routine of dieting, liposuction and plastic surgery in order to achieve the desired look. Coco Fusco reports that "birthmarks are removed, noses are narrowed, eyebrows are raised to lend a wide-eyed look, and flat chests receive breast implants" (Fusco 1997: 69). In a different register, it appears to have become common for drug barons to have plastic surgery in order to escape detection, a practice that led to the death of the Mexican godfather Amado Carrillo Fuentes in July 1997 after a drastic 8-hour operation. At the same time, Western nations are having to confront the practice of FGM within their own borders, as global migration brings Africans and Asians into all Western societies. A transcultural approach needs to find ways to see across these divides in a transitive way, rather than perpetuate unproductive divisions. Crossing disciplinary boundaries is not, then, something that is done for intellectual pleasure alone but because it is the only way to move beyond such dilemmas. However, such transformations are far easier claimed than performed. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall sketch one possible route to a transcultural gaze.

Mixing: the cultural politics of race and reproduction

In order to negotiate such a revaluation of the gaze, it is essential to incorporate the question of "race" and its representations. Fetishism is a term that inevitably has connotations of race and colonialism, being derived from the European belief that African religions centered on fetish objects. The production of a "biology of incommensurability" was both challenged by and dependent on the question of miscegenation, where discourses of race and sexuality literally engender reality. The highly-charged term miscegenation refers to the "mixing" of different "races" in sexual reproduction, leading to the generation of a new hybrid. The linguistic difficulties one encounters in trying to refer to this subject without using racialized terminology are indicative of the persistence of racialized notions in Western everyday life. In the colonial period, the Spanish devised an extremely complicated vocabulary for designating such offspring, measured by degrees

of white, black and Indian ancestry. Some of these terms have survived into current usage such as mulatto/a, the child of one white and one African parent. A mestizo/a was originally the offspring of an Indian with a mulatto/a but the term has come to apply to the web of cross-cultural ancestry that has generated the contemporary populations of the Caribbean and Latin America. As this language has its origin in theories of racial purity, these issues remain extremely charged, as has recently been shown over the controversial proposal to include a "mixed-race" category in the next United States census. Ironically, the simple fact that people of different ethnicities can and do have children with each other, even though it has consistently been either denied or termed morally wrong, gives the lie to the notion of distinct human races. This mixture of affirmation and denial is typical of the fetishistic gaze. Fetishism allowed Western men to disavow what must have been the direct experience of their senses in the long history of miscegenation in Africa, the slave plantations of the Americas, and the Caribbean. Yet, as we shall see, it should also not be forgotten that homosexuality is one possible outcome of the visual experience that leads to fetishism.

It is hard to find rational historical explanations for such an over-determined area as racial categorization of humans. For example, in colonial Jamaica, the British operated a relatively relaxed regime under which anyone who was three generations or more from entirely African ancestry was to be considered white. Yet Edward Long, a passionate British defender of slavery in the eighteenth-century Caribbean, could insist that mulattos were infertile with each other. Following the doctrine of the naturalist Buffon who held that like could only breed with like, he argued that mulattos "bear no resemblance to anything fixed, and consequently cannot produce anything resembling themselves, because all that is requisite in this production is a certain degree of conformity between the form of the body and the genital organs" (Long 1774, vol. II: 335). In other words, the genitalia of the mulatto/a were inevitably deformed due to their mixed origin. Working from this fantastical theory, Long then sought to prove that "the White and the Negro had not one common origin." This was of course his initial premise, which served to justify slavery and colonialism. It had to be upheld even in the face of daily evidence to the contrary.

Scientists sought to confirm these stories with dissections and examinations of the female genitalia, looking for a visible difference that would confirm the deviancy of the African woman. A woman whom we know only as Saartje Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, became the "missing link." In 1810, Baartman was brought to London from South Africa where she had grown up as one of the Khoikhoi or Khoisan peoples. She was

exhibited onstage at the Egyptian Hall of the period, a key London venue for the display of new visual phenomena, later to be the site for both the exhibition of Theodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* in 1824 and the first British commercial film showing in 1896. Early nineteenth-century visitors were above all fascinated by what they saw as her pronounced buttocks that they took as the sign of African deviance. The shape of her buttocks was diagnosed as a medical condition named steatopygia, rendering her body the site of a symptom. However a surgical dissection of her genitalia by the French biologist Georges Cuvier after her death at the age of 26 in 1815 found these to be the true site of deviance, available to the medical gaze but not the casual glance (Fausto-Sterling 1995). Like the contemporary person of indeterminate gender, Baartman was held to have an unusually large clitoris, the sign of her supposed sexual lasciviousness. Such clitoral hypertrophy is still used as a justification for FGM around the world. As a testament to their key importance as a sign of deviance, Baartman's genitalia have been preserved by the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. It might seem bizarre that one example could serve as the means to classify such an enormous group of people as African women – but such extrapolation was entirely typical of nineteenth-century anthropology. Race, sexuality and gender were inextricably linked in a classificatory system that insisted that these categories be visible on Baartman's body, which was seen as that of a specimen rather than an individual. Baartman's genitalia became a fetish testifying to the existence of a fundamental racial and gender difference that was known at some level to be false but was nonetheless dogmatically defended. She thus established a typology for modern visual classification – the fetishism of the gaze – accounting for the continued fascination with her case from Steampunk novelist Paul Di Filippo to playwright Suzan-Lori Parks and artists such as Frida High Tesfagiorgis in the United States, Ike Udé in Britain and Penny Siopis in South Africa.

In the mid-nineteenth century, racial and sexual classifications were a key subject for artists in the Americas, still grappling with the existence of slavery, which was gradually being abolished by most European countries. One of the most celebrated of these works was a play called *The Octoroon* (1859), adapted from Mayne Reid's novel *The Quadroon* by the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault. Boucicault had lived in New Orleans during the 1850s, where he would have observed women who were a quarter (quadroon) or one-eighth African (octoroon) being sold as "Fancy Girls" for five to ten times the price of a field hand. One such woman, Louisa Picquet, recalled being sold in Mobile for $1,500, a substantial sum in the period (Picquet 1988: 17). The reason for this high price was the sexual frisson generated by such women in white men who found exciting what theater

historian Joseph Roach calls "the duality of the subject – white and black, child and woman, angel and wench" (Roach 1992: 180). Here the fetishistic (male) gaze could have it both ways with the liminal woman. It became commonplace to refer to such women as tragic, caught between two worlds. In Boucicault's play, an Englishman named George Peyton finds himself the heir to a Louisiana plantation. On arrival in the South, he falls in love with the octoroon of the title named Zoe. When he proposes marriage to her, she tells him to look at her hands: "Do you see the nails of a bluish tinge?" This mark is also apparent in her eyes and hair: "That is the ineffaceable curse of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black–bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood" (Boucicault 1987: 154). Inevitably Zoe dies at the curtain, whereupon her eyes mysteriously change color and lose the stain of Africanness.

Mixing was thus seen in strikingly literal terms – one black drop in eight – that would inevitably leave a visual mark. In his novel *The Mulatto* (1881), the anti-slavery Brazilian writer Aluíso Azevedo continued to subscribe to this belief in the visibility of miscegenation. His hero Dr Raimundo José da Silva, a blue-eyed light-skinned man, seeks the hand of Ana Rosa but is refused because it transpires that he was the son of a slave woman: "[Raimundo] stopped in front of the mirror and studied himself closely, attempting to discover in his pale face some thing, some sign, that might give away his Negro blood. He looked carefully, pushing back the hair at his temples, pulling the skin taut on his cheeks, examining his nostrils, and inspecting his teeth. He ended up slamming the mirror down on the dresser, possessed by an immense cavernous melancholy" (Azvedo 1990: 211). Needless to say, Raimundo dies and his intended recovers to marry an appropriate suitor. The visible mark of race indicates that the bearer is not a full member of society and is hence not entitled to contract marriages or have children. This exclusion was dramatically visualized by the Kentucky painter Thomas Satterwhite Noble in his canvas *The Price of Blood* (1868, Augusta, Morris Museum of Art). It shows a white patriarchal figure, who has just sold his mulatto son into slavery. A seemingly Jewish slave trader reviews the contract of sale while standing over the pile of gold that has been agreed as the asking price. The son looks away with a frown while the father looks out of the frame at the spectator. Noble would have presumed his audience to be white, with the implication that the mixed-race child is not fit to be looked at (Boime 1990: 83–84). To put it in psychoanalytic terms, the mulatto cannot possess the gaze/phallus any more than women. His racial Otherness excludes him from the ranks of patriarchy, especially the key transactions of marriage and childbirth. He is fit only to die or be sold.

If biology did not always provide secure arguments against miscegenation,

morality could always be relied upon to fill the gap. In 1860, the Southern sociologist Henry Hughes proclaimed that: "Impurity of races is against the law of nature. Mulattoes are monsters. The law of nature is the law of God. The same law which forbids consanginous amalgamation forbids ethnical amalgamation. Both are incestuous. Amalgamation is incest" (Rogers 1994: 166). Hughes conceded that sexual reproduction between races was biologically possible but asserted that it was as morally intolerable as incest. The parallel seems odd. Incest is forbidden because of the closeness of the potential partners, while race theory argued that Africans and Europeans were fundamentally different races. If the law of incest was really to be applied in conjunction with the dictates of race science, then miscegenation ought to have been the rule not the exception. The willful defiance of reality in such pro-slavery/anti-miscegenation arguments can be deduced from photographs taken around the time of the abolition of slavery in the United States. A typical group photograph entitled "Emancipated Slaves" from 1863 deliberately placed several light-skinned children in the front row of the photograph in the expectation that this sight would provoke more abolitionist outrage (see Figure 5.3). Abolitionists would use racial prejudice to their advantage in publishing photographs of "white" slave children such as that of "Charles Taylor [who] is eight years old. His complexion is very

Figure 5.3 Emancipated slaves from Louisiana

fair, his hair light and silky." If slavery was defended as the logical extension of the "inferiority" of Africans, such arguments dissolved in the face of the obvious hybridity of the actual slave population in mid-nineteenth century America.

After the abolition of slavery in the United States, the possibilities for white men to have coerced relationships with black women diminished, although they certainly did not disappear, especially in the world of commercial sex. However, in the new African colonies it was almost universal practice for European men to maintain African women as concubines. As ever, European writers claimed to be shocked when they encountered them. Here, for example, is the British naturalist Wollaston describing the situation in the Congo:

> Almost every European official supports a black mistress. The right or wrong of it need not be discussed here, but the conspicuous position which the women occupy is quite inexcusable. It is not an uncommon thing to see a group of these women walking about a post shrieking and laughing, and carrying on bantering conversations with the Europeans whose houses they pass; or, very likely, the Europeans will come out and joke with them *coram populo* [in view of the people]. . . . It is impossible that natives, when they see women of their own race being treated openly and wantonly with familiarity, should feel any great degree of respect for their European masters, and when that is the case, discipline and obedience to authority are quickly lost.
>
> (Wollaston 1908: 182)

It seems that like Conrad's fictional character Kurtz, most colonial officials went "native" in at least this regard. What Wollaston objected to was not the sexual relationships in themselves but the breakdown of respect between Africans and Europeans that they caused. Furthermore, this scandal was fully visible to the Africans, challenging the colonial fantasy that the European was "monarch-of-all-I-survey," to use Mary-Louise Pratt's phrase.

The African women involved were thus in a curious position. On the one hand, they were forced to have sexual relations with the colonial officials but as a result they acquired a form of authority. As Jenny Sharpe has argued in the case of the Caribbean, "slave women used their relationships with free men to challenge their masters' right of ownership." In so doing, they gained what Harriet Jacobs called in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) "something akin to freedom" (Sharpe 1996: 32, 46). In Mexico, this ambivalent figure was symbolized by Malinche, the Aztec woman who

became an interpreter for Herman Cortez. Her gain in personal power has to be offset against the damage done by her work to her own people that led her to be long portrayed as a traitor, until her recent adoption as a symbol by Chicana lesbian feminists (Goldberg 1992: 204).

The choices available to these women were, of course, anything but free. At this point, we find ourselves at the intersection of one of the most enduring myths of colonialism and one of the most difficult problems for postcolonial studies. Colonialism's myth was that the African woman was so sexually lascivious that she would even have relations with primates. The obsession with Bartmann and other African women stemmed from what Robert Young has called "an ambivalent driving desire at the heart of racialism: a compulsive libidinal attraction, disavowed by an equal insistence on repulsion" (Young 1995: 149). This connection became so well-established that when Sigmund Freud was forced to admit his ignorance of female sexuality, he described it as the "dark continent." Africa as a whole had come to symbolize the mysterious forces of female sexuality for European men.

One way to counter this myth has been to try to find out what the women themselves thought of their lives but this has proved difficult, due to the problematic sources. An important historiographical debate on this topic has centered around the experience of *sati*, the practice whereby Hindu women immolated themselves on their husband's funeral pyres. In 1829 the British authorities banned *sati*, thus allowing them to present themselves as the defenders of Indian women. Gayatri Spivak summarizes the debates on *sati* as a discussion between men: "The abolition of this rite by the British has generally been understood as as case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men.' White women – from the nineteenth-century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly – have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: 'The women actually wanted to die'" (Spivak 1994: 93). The obvious alternative would be to try and understand the motives of the women involved, but Spivak denies that the texts available, whether by British or Indian men, allow the women to be heard and concludes simply "the subaltern cannot speak." While other scholars have sought to mitigate the absoluteness of this pronouncement, the extreme difficulty of retrieving women's experience under colonialism remains, a direct result of their triple oppression by race, class and gender.

One way out of the dilemma can be to try not just to hear the subaltern woman but to see her. While the evidence for the *sati* comes mostly from written texts, it is visual material that supplies what knowledge we have of the Kongo women who became the "mistresses" of the Europeans. For

amongst the piles of ethnographic and landscape photographs of the Congo are to be found many photographs of African women, which often had rather coy titles or included small children in the shot. It seems that without being able to say so, many European men wanted souvenirs of the women they became attached to and the children they had by them. Here we see the women as the colonizers wanted to see them. At the same time, we can see the mixture of self-presentation, adornment and resistance created by Kongo women to win "something akin to freedom." Given the widespread European ignorance of African languages, these relationships, if one can call them that, were unlikely to have been centered around language, whether written or spoken. They were visual encounters in which African women presented themselves in ways that both allowed Europeans to take them for sexually promiscuous "natives" and gave the women themselves a persona that might offer some escape from the harshness of colonial life.

Take Albert Lloyd's 1899 photograph "Bishop Tucker and Pygmy Lady" (see Figure 5.4) It shows Tucker clad in requisite colonial gear, complete with pith helmet, standing in front of his tent. On his right is a young Mbuti (Pygmy) woman and he has his arm around a small child on his left. Given that Lloyd titled his book *In Dwarf Land and Cannibal Country*, it was unusual for him to refer to any African as a "lady." Certainly there is some unpleasant sarcasm here, but its source may well be the unease felt by the

Figure 5.4 Bishop Tucker and Pygmy Lady

traveler at this transgressive relationship. Were Tucker and the Mbuti woman the father and mother of the child? Are they both his children? The facts of this case are now unknowable, but visually this is a family group, carefully posed in front of Tucker's tent to suggest a curious version of Victorian domesticity. By contrast, Herbert Lang, who was both anthropologist and reporter, frequently photographed a woman he titled "A 'Parisienne' of the Mangbetu tribe" during his five-year stay in the Mangbetu region of the Congo from 1910–15 (see Figure 5.5). The term "Parisienne" refers in part to the striking rafia head-dress worn by the woman, as if to suggest she is dressed fashionably. But, as Lang must have known, this head-dress was not a fashion item but a signifier of social rank, to be worn only by the élite. "Parisienne" would have also suggested to Europeans a woman whose sexuality was so marked as to be almost deviant. The Mangbetu woman colluded in Lang's fantasy, at least to the extent of being photographed as the "Parisienne." At the same time, her image resists this characterization because the woman's pose and bearing give her an unmistakeable dignity and pride, despite her subaltern status in relation to the photographer. It is through this self-presentation and demonstration of the ambivalence of the colonial subject that the Kongo women can still "speak" to us, despite the fact that we do not even know their names.

If these pictures do not seem legible in the literary or semiotic sense, it is because these women were deliberately trying to be unproductive. Both slave-owners and colonial administrators alike were constantly complaining that their charges were lazy and work-shy. Marx cited what he called "an utterly delightful cry of outrage" from a Jamican plantation owner in 1857 that the "free blacks . . . regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good" (Gilroy 1991: 153). With hindsight, it is easy to see how such slow-going was an indirect form of resistance to the force of slavery and colonialism. This type of resistance always ran the risk of violent reprisals from overseers and managers. Kongo women managed to be unproductive in ways that the Europeans could not punish so easily. Gossip and chatter, as noted by Wollaston, is by definition unproductive in the economic sense but can often be the "site of defiance or resistance" (Rogoff 1996: 59). The elaborate head-dresses and body-painting that led Lang to think of Mangbetu women as Parisiennes were very time-consuming activities but ones that Europeans considered appropriate for women and thus had to permit. For Europeans avid to deny the reality of cross-cultural relationships, even the children that they fathered with African women were unproductive. They could not be acknowledged as legitimate children but nor could they be treated as badly as "real" Africans. Unproductive is not the same as meaningless. By being unproductive, these women created an image that

Figure 5.5 A "Parisienne" of the Mangbetu tribe

was fascinating to Europeans precisely because they could not define it. This visual culture of self-presentation and adornment constituted a mode of everyday resistance to colonial power that was necessarily "weak" but nonetheless effective.

Queering the gaze: Roger Casement's eyes

At this point I need to stop the narrative and ask myself: how can I see this scene? Whose eyes am I looking through? In the case of the Congo, the answer is clear: Roger Casement's eyes supplement Langston Hughes' look to allow the late twentieth-century gaze to focus on the Congo. Casement was the British consul to the Congo Free State whose 1904 report to

Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey led to international action to reform the Congo. His report dispelled years of dissembling by Belgian officials and European travelers and has remained the "authentic" way for historians to look at the Congo. It is as if we place his eye into the opening of the camera obscura, as recommended by Descartes, in order to see colonial reality. Yet Casement's gaze needs to be understood not as the truth but as a queering of the colonial gaze. Like Hughes, Casement was gay in a culture that had just determined the "homosexual" to be a distinct but inferior species. The Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 made all sexual contact between men a criminal offence in Britain (Weeks 1989: 102). The statute held gay men to be marked with "the hallmark of a specialised and extraordinary class as much as if they had carried on their bodies some physical peculiarities" (Weeks 1989: 100). In his 1903 diary, Casement seemed to accept the diagnosis while rejecting the cure. He noted the suicide of the soldier Sir Hector MacDonald, accused of being a homosexual: "The most distressing case this surely of its kind and one that may awake the national mind to saner methods of curing a terrible disease than by criminal legislation" (Girodias and Singleton-Gates 1959: 123).

Casement further transgressed the sexual norm by having relations with African men on a regular basis. His diaries, the basis of his later report, occasionally record attractive or well-endowed men alongside the atrocities with no sense of incongruity. In another moment of colonial surrealism, Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement met in the Congo in 1897, where the writer observed the diplomat depart into the forest with only one Loanda man for company with a "touch of the Conquistador in him. . . . A few months later it so happened that I saw him come out again, a little leaner, a little browner, with his sticks, dogs and Loanda boy [sic], and quietly serene as though he had been for a walk in the park"(Girodias and Singleton-Gates 1959: 93). Casement's sexual experience thus takes place offstage, literally obscene. The same-sex cross-cultural encounter that could not be named nonetheless left its physical mark on Casement, as predicted by medical science, producing a darker skin and more effete body.

While Casement retained his colonial privilege, this relationship appears markedly less forced than was usual in colonial society. Indeed, that constituted the real scandal of Casement's later life, for while many Europeans went to Africa to have same-sex relations, they would usually do so with male prostitutes or coercively. Any degree of consent from the African man was to give him a degree of equality unthinkable in the colonial sexual order. Unsurprisingly, Conrad adds of Casement as if he were Kurtz: "He could tell

you things! Things I have tried to forget, things I never did know." But when Casement was later on trial for his life, due to his involvement with the Irish Republican cause, Conrad would not intercede on his behalf, as if his transgression made it impossible to speak for him, or even of him. At the same time, Casement's experience challenges the idea that Europeans introduced homosexuality to Africa. Ifi Amadiume's work on gender in Nnobi society shows that woman-to-woman marriages were common in precolonial society, loosening ties of gender to biological sex so that a woman could be the "husband" of a family. However, she argues that any suggestion of lesbianism would be "shocking and offensive to Nnobi women" (Amadiume 1987: 7), motivated only by the "wishes and fantasies" of the interpreter. In truth we cannot be sure either way. Yet many have jumped to her standard claiming that Amadiume's work proves the resolute heterosexuality of Africans. Sometimes the protesting may be too much, as in Frantz Fanon's assertion that there was no homosexuality in Martinique, even though some men dressed and lived as women. As Gaurav Desai says, "at least in some African contexts, it was not *homosexuality* that was inherited from the West but rather a more regulatory *homophobia*" (Desai 1997: 128).

Casement was aware that he saw things differently from his European colleagues, as he wrote to his friend Alice Green: "I knew the Foreign Office would not understand the thing, for I realized that I was looking at this tragedy with the eyes of another race of people once hunted themselves, whose hearts were based on affection as the root principle of contact with their fellow men, and whose estimate of life was not something to be appraised at its market price." He has been taken to refer to the Irish here but his words might equally apply to gay men, whom British law certainly held to be from "another race of people." The 1895 conviction of his fellow Irishman Oscar Wilde for sodomy must have made Casement realize the precariousness of his position as a British diplomat. One can compare Conrad's description of Casement as a Conquistador to Freud's famous letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess in 1900, in which he too claimed the Conquistador's gaze for psychoanalysis. The difference is in the affect of the two descriptions. Freud sees himself uncritically as opening up a new intellectual continent for knowledge (a metaphor later adopted by the philosopher Louis Althusser), while Conrad adopts the British view that held the Spanish to be cruel and immoral colonists in order to confirm Casement's homosexuality. Casement refused both categories to claim a subaltern point of view, a mixture of his Irish background and gay sexuality.

Indeed, when Casement himself was sentenced to death for his support of

the Irish republican movement in 1916, the legal adviser to the Home Office resisted appeals for clemency on the grounds that "of later years he seems to have completed the full cycle of sexual degeneracy and from a pervert has become an invert–a woman, or a pathic, who derives his satisfaction from attracting men and inducing them to use him" (Girodias and Singleton-Gates 1959: 27). That is to say, Casement was alleged to have shifted his tastes from penetrating men – perversion – to the inversion of being penetrated by other men and thus becoming in effect a woman. His look at the colonial scene was in a sense almost the same as that of the Congo women – but not quite. Unable to claim his own sexuality, he instead "outed" the Congo Free State. Casement's look was multiply displaced: for the British but not of them, from the point of view of subalterns but not of them either. Such displacement is the effect of the queering of the gaze, that which Lee Edelman describes as: "the undoing of the logic of positionality effected by the sodomitical spectacle" (Edelman 1991: 103). To re-examine the colonial Congo requires exactly such a displaced and displacing vision.

For Freud's third option after the primal scene was homosexuality. Rather than see sexuality as identity, forming a neat unit, "queer" turns towards what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 1993: 18). That is not to say that the issues we have discussed so far are "really" about homosexuality but that considering how lesbian and gay sexuality might fit into the intellectual picture changes the entire approach. The queer viewpoint does not create a "true" point of view but the very exclusion of queer identity from the normative discourses of sexuality reveals the contradictions and faultlines in those discourses. From this perspective, sexual and gender identity are seen to overlap with race, ethnicity and nationality in ways that question how identity itself, a very privileged term in the last decade, should be conceived. If, as Judith Butler puts it, gender is a "normative institution which seeks to regulate those expressions of sexuality that contest the normative boundaries of gender, then gender is one of the normative means by which the regulation of sexuality takes place. The threat of homosexuality thus takes the form of a threat to established masculinity or established femininity" (Butler 1994: 24). In short, any corporal identity that falls outside the established parameters for personal identity will encounter disciplinary force, the same disciplinary force that produces heterosexual men and women. In the phallocentric system, there are no outlaws, only deviants.

This displaced queer vision produced what Michael Taussig has called a

"cool realism" in Casement's account of the region as opposed to the fevered hallucinations of accounts like that of Joseph Conrad. At the end of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow has to tell Kurtz's Intended of his death. Here the Victorian myth of the woman as angel by the hearth was threatened by her Other, the "primitive" sexualized African woman by whom Kurtz had had children. Equally present was the homoerotic relationship between Marlow and Kurtz, the love that dare not speak its name. Marlow seems to hear the room echo with Kurtz's famous phrase "The horror! The horror!" He restores order at the expense of the truth by telling the Intended that Kurtz's last words were her name. "I knew it" she exclaims. The horrors of modernity were constantly displaced into a phantasmic, hence sexualized, colonial order that produced the unquestionable knowledge of the fetishist. Alan Sinfield has recently argued that queer culture can be thought of as a diaspora (Sinfield 1996). Using the Congo experience, I should like to suggest that the formula can be reversed so that diaspora can be thought of as deviant sexuality. That is not to say that Africans were in some sense deviant but that the European sense of order depended on a normative heterosexuality that was always already racialized. The Congo river is a place where the boundaries between subject and object seem to dissolve into identities that we once called postmodern but we can now see to have been modern all along. That seeing is not a matter of Cartesian observation but of viewing from the "perverse angle" (Sedgwick) with the "parallax vision" (Mayne) of "(be)hindsight" (Edelman) that once seemed the marginal viewpoint but increasingly seems the only available place from which to look at the colonial spectacle, which, as the Situationists pithily observed, came home to the colonizing nations creating what they called "the colonization of everyday life."

One version of the "parallax vision" that brings together race, class and sexuality in order to look towards the future, rather than resuscitate the past can be seen in the photography of Samuel Fosso (b. 1962). Fosso was born in Cameroon but lives and works in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. He began work as a photographer's assistant at the age of 13 and began his remarkable series of self-portraits in 1976, which have recently attracted international attention from Mali to Paris and New York. He chose the backgrounds, costumes and accessories, sometimes adding captions with Letraset. In one shot he appears in white singlet and briefs, standing in front of a fabric curtain with a clothes-line hanging above his head. Around the curtain are festooned numerous examples of standard portrait photography. He looks away to his left, one foot posed on the other, seeming both assured and nervous at once. The photograph as a whole is disquieting. It is as if we see a film still from a movie whose plot we do not know. In other images he

seems more assured. He stands in front of what seems to be a theatrical curtain, in a suitably dramatic pose, hands on hips and one foot arched above the other, showing the whiteness of his soles (Figure 5.6). He wears only swimming trunks, striped with white, giving a suggestive air to the image that is disrupted by the fact that he is wearing large white gloves. There is a rhythm between the black and white tiled floor and the alternating white and black skin and clothing. We rarely meet Fosso's gaze. In one shot he faces the camera directly, only for heart shaped patches on his large sunglasses to obscure his eyes altogether. From reflections in the lenses we can deduce that he seems to be looking at an array of newspapers, magazines or photographs. Again, he wears a bright white shirt, open at the neck. These photographs place the (black and white) photographic print in tension with the sexualized European/African divide quite literally across the body of a young African man exploring his identity. As a citizen of postcolonial Africa, he refuses to appear in the guise of the "native" or any of the other received photographic clichés of Africans. His work was amongst the first to use photography to challenge received notions of identity that has since become famous as the postmodern photographic style associated with Cindy Sherman and other American artists.

Figure 5.6 Samuel Fosso in front of the camera

An interesting complement to Fosso's work can be found in the powerful photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989), born in Lagos, Nigeria but resident in England from 1966 after his family fled a military coup. He described how his sense of being an outsider stemmed from issues of race, class and sexuality in diaspora:

> On three counts, I am an outsider: in matters of sexuality; in terms of geographical and cultural dislocation; and in the sense of not having become the sort of respectably married professional my parents might have hoped for. . . . [M]y identity has been constructed from my own sense of otherness, whether cultural, racial, or sexual. The three aspects are not separate within me. . . . It is photography, therefore – Black, African, homosexual photography – which I must use not just as an instrument, but as a weapon if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and indeed my existence on my own terms.
>
> (*In/sight* 1996: 263)

In his photograph *White Feet* (c. 1987), Fani-Kayode shows that his vision is elegiac and graceful, despite the aggressive tone of his words (see Figure 5.7). A naked black man reclines on a chaise-longue, a "feminine" piece of furniture associated in European art with languorous female nudes. Although we cannot see his face, he turns the soles of his feet toward the camera, in an echo of Fosso's self-portrait. Alex Hirst, Fani-Kayode's co-artist, explains that: "Europe is a chaise-longue on which a naked black male sprawls defiantly, showing off the white loveliness of the soles of his feet" (Fani-Kayode 1988: 3). The print is lit so as to accentuate the contrasts between the white and black skin and between the dark mass of the body and the white recliner. There are both similarities and differences with the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe similarly aestheticized and eroticized the black male body but claimed only to be a witness of the gay subculture. Fani-Kayode seeks to bring out the political dimension to the representation of "Black, African homosexual photography," taking his testimony to another level in which it becomes an intervention. In his photograph *Union Jack*, Fani-Kayode depicted a nude black figure carrying the Union Jack, the British flag. The picture serves as a retort to the old racist cry "Ain't no black in the Union Jack," while also imagining the black Briton, a category for which there is no image in official British culture.

Yet away from the enclosed space of the art world, the fascination with viewing the Other remains very much alive. In Kagga Kamma Game Park in South Africa, a group of about forty so-called Bushmen, the Khoi Khoi, have

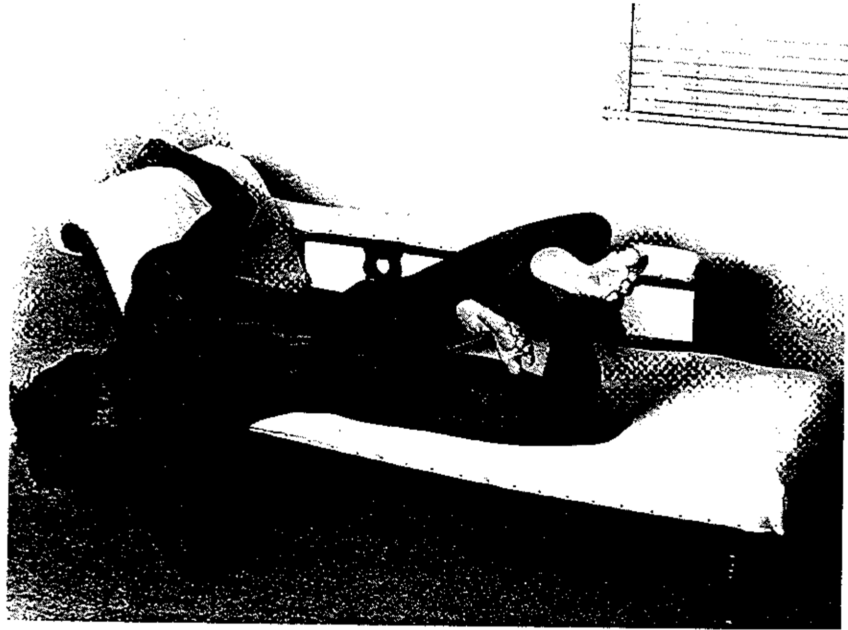

Figure 5.7 White Feet

become a tourist attraction. Visitors pay about $125 to stay the night and then $7 to see the Khoi Khoi who are rewarded with a tiny portion of the profits (Daley 1996). Saartje Bartmann, the "Hottentot Venus," was of course also from this people. While contemporary South African artists and intellectuals have made the recovery of Bartmann's remains from Paris a *cause célèbre*, others are still queuing to see her descendants enact the native for their pleasure. Here culture remains the past, a spectacle for modern enjoyment. Throughout the world, such cultural spectacle is a key part of the vast tourist industry making fake sites like Colonial Williamsburg indistinguishable from the commodified spectacle that historical venues like Versailles and the Tower of London have become. The collective task of postdisciplinary studies in the liberal arts is now to create a forward looking, transitive, transcultural gaze that moves beyond the now sterile opposition between nature and culture.

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