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## "Nightmare of the Uncoordinated White-Folk": Race, Psychoanalysis, and Borderline

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## **“Nightmare of the Uncoordinated White-Folk”: Race, Psychoanalysis, and *Borderline***

**Jean Walton**

Among Europe’s experimental films from the 1920s and 30s, perhaps none offers a more fascinating conjunction of psychoanalysis and representations of race than *Borderline*, the expressionist, interracial melodrama produced by the POOL group and directed by Kenneth Macpherson. The film starred Paul and Eslanda Robeson, imagist poet H. D., and her lesbian companion, Bryher.

The POOL group derived from an artistic and domestic ménage à trois among H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), and writer-photographer Macpherson, who married Bryher to conceal his romantic involvement with H. D. in the late 20s. This group published several books on cinema and the first English-language journal devoted to film as an art form, *Close-up* (1927–33); it also produced four experimental films, of which *Borderline* seems to have been the most ambitious. Much of the POOL group’s interest in film consisted in exploring its potential as a psychoanalytic apparatus for rendering unconscious processes.

Among the contributors to *Close-up* was analyst Hanns Sachs, who wrote regularly on psychoanalysis and film; the group was particularly excited by *Secrets of a Soul*, German director G. W. Pabst’s expressionistic attempt to translate the rudiments of Freud’s “talking cure” into visual narrative (See Konigsberg). All of the films the

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POOL group made explicitly concern psychoanalytic concepts (see Friedberg). Less consistently, the group preoccupied itself with the politics of racial representation in film, devoting at least one issue of *Close-up* to reviews and articles about problematic depictions of blacks in popular American and British cinema.<sup>1</sup> As Susan Stanford Friedman observes, Macpherson and Robert Herring (the latter another contributor to *Close-up*) were also “part of the white crowd for whom ‘the Negro was in vogue.’ They regularly visited Harlem on their trips to the States with Bryher and brought back to Europe all the latest in black writing and music” (“Modernism” 98).

Herring introduced Paul and Eslanda Robeson to H. D.’s circle in the late 20s, and eventually the POOL group persuaded the Robesons to take time from their hectic touring schedule to act in *Borderline* while it was shot in Switzerland. It was Paul Robeson’s second film role since he had appeared in Oscar Michaux’s *Body and Soul* in 1924. Though *Borderline* was not particularly well received when it was first released (owing as much to its psychoanalytic preoccupations as to its putative antiracism), the film has since drawn the attention of a number of scholars with divergent critical concerns. A brief synopsis of its diffuse yet significant plot, its explicit engagement with psychoanalysis, its avant-garde aesthetic, and its interracial content will clarify this interest.

*Borderline* is an expressionistic depiction of the sexual and racial tensions that develop in a small European village when two heterosexual couples—one white, one black—play out the interpersonal problems arising from the white man’s sexual involvement with the black woman. In the short “libretto,” passed out at the initial screenings of the film, we are told that

in a small “borderline” town, anywhere in Europe, Pete, a negro, is working in a cheap hotel café. His wife, Adah, who had left him some time previously, has arrived also in the same town, although neither is aware of the presence of the other.

Adah is staying in rooms with Thorne and Astrid. Thorne is a young man whose life with Astrid has become a torment to them both. Both highly strung, their nerves are tense with continuous hostility evoked by Thorne’s vague and destructive cravings. He has been involved in an affair with Adah, and the film opens with the quarrel which ends their relationship.<sup>2</sup>

As Pete (Paul Robeson) reconciles with Adah (Eslanda Robeson) in a series of outdoor scenes, Astrid (played by H. D., using the pseudonym “Helga Doorn”) and Thorne (Gavin Arthur) quarrel until Astrid is accidentally stabbed to death. The drama between the two couples is intercut with scenes from the hotel’s restaurant,

over which a lesbian couple seems to preside (a butch-looking, cigar-smoking Bryher plays the café's manageress, while Charlotte Arthur is the femme barmaid). In this interior setting, we see townspeople discussing the interracial affair while the barmaid encourages general drinking and merrymaking, the manageress soberly keeps the books, and a gay-coded piano player (Robert Herring), with a photo of Pete propped next to him, accompanies the action with what is doubtless jazz music. Before her death, Astrid jealously castigates Thorne in the café, stirring up the racist sentiments of the villagers by calling him a "Nigger Lover" and seeming to make a pact with a witchlike old lady, who later says that if she had her way, "not one negro would be allowed in this country." These scenes are intercut with exterior shots of the village and surrounding countryside, where the black couple reconciles in natural, rustic settings.

Astrid's death leads to further racial hatred by the townspeople until Adah voluntarily leaves and Pete is ordered to depart by a letter from the Mayor. Before leaving, Pete appears with Thorne in a scene of mutual forgiveness; they shake hands, and, as the libretto puts it, "they both realise that what has happened has been beyond them, and brought about by external circumstances—that enmity has been among others, and they themselves mere instruments for its consummation" (150). We next see Pete waiting alone at the train station. Final shots inside the café indicate that "order" is restored now that the black characters have been exiled from the white village. Overall, the film indicts the villagers' racist triumph; it also implies, however, that Thorne (unlike the other characters) has undergone a transformation as a result of these events and has worked through his inner conflicts. In this sense, the film privileges his subjectivity over that of the other characters.

Critical attention to *Borderline* has been diverse, characterizing the film as feminist, modernist, a psychoanalytic experiment, a lesbian or queer text, a white representation of blackness, and as a significant moment in Paul Robeson's film career (see, respectively, Friedberg; Friedman; Morris; Weiss; Cripps; Dyer). Yet in almost every case, emphasis on one aspect of the film's significance inevitably eclipses its other elements by downplaying their interdependency. For example, Anne Friedberg's discussions of the film, arguably the most detailed and exhaustive of sources on the POOL group's activities, focus on *Borderline*'s production, contexts, and troubled reception, but do not extensively interpret its racial diegesis. On the other hand, Richard Dyer's treatment of Paul Robeson's crossover star status in *Heavenly Bodies* provides perhaps the most astute, though brief, analysis of the film's racial politics, noting how "little

an active role the Paul Robeson character has in the narrative” and how the “highly complex use of montage only reinforces this inactivity” (132). While his treatment of the film focuses on its white construction of black masculinity, Dyer also notes in passing the presence of gay- or lesbian-coded characters in the film (“the dyke style of the innkeeper and her woman friend, for instance, and the piano player with the photo of Pete/Robeson on his piano” [132]) and suggests that there are homoerotic elements in the film’s resolution. Yet Dyer’s exhaustive coverage of Robeson’s career makes it impossible for him to explore in depth *Borderline*’s amalgamation of sexual and racial difference as both were imagined by its white modernist creators.

How do white fantasies of racial difference inform and underwrite *Borderline*’s psychoanalytically inflected modernist challenges to a conventionally gendered and sexed status quo? By interpreting *Borderline* and its accompanying texts, I shall modify the standard feminist question that many H. D. scholars ask: What difference do women writers and filmmakers make in the related projects of modernism, psychoanalysis, and cinematic representation? This essay extends that question by asking, In what way do these women’s fantasies of racial difference inflect their gendered differences in these projects?

We should note immediately that *Borderline*’s composition and structure already complicate these questions. For instance, although H. D. and Bryher portrayed Macpherson as *Borderline*’s artistic genius, the film was a collaborative effort insofar as the two women defined the characters they portrayed and took over the daunting job of editing the film when Macpherson became sick after the shooting. They also wrote interpretive and explanatory texts to accompany the film (thus influencing its reception) and doubtless contributed to the film’s artistic conception and sexual/racial politics, even though they downplayed these politics by highlighting the film’s formal properties. We know that in their personal lives, H. D. and Bryher challenged sexual, gender, and domestic conventions, and that H. D. habitually transposed her personal experiences into her literary projects, writing what critics and biographers call “romans à clef” that feature her lovers, friends, and closest associates. Yet as I suggested above, little has been written about *Borderline* as a type of “film à clef”: The film explores the preoccupations, desires, and interrelationships of white modernists that are “projected” onto their black acquaintances. The film also partly clarifies the forms of racial and sexual difference that surface in a cinematic venture designed to counter the blatantly racist productions of the American film industry.

This group's preoccupation with racial politics was concomitant with its intense interest in psychoanalysis for its affirmation of the role of the unconscious in creativity and its availability as a discourse of sexual difference. *Borderline* aids our interpretation of a racial account of psychoanalysis, modernity, and neurosis. In her introduction to H. D.'s *Borderline* pamphlet, for instance, Friedman notes that "H. D. wrote openly about her identification with Robeson as a fellow expatriate American in her privately printed sketch 'Two Americans' and covertly about her erotic attraction to him in the poem 'Red Roses for Bronze'" ("H. D." 89). We might wonder how such identification and desire—primary psychoanalytic constituents—relate to how H. D. incorporated Robeson into the film's expressionist text and used him, via formal techniques, as a "foil" to offset the psychic complexity of her own character.<sup>3</sup>

*"Into the Labyrinth of the (White) Human Mind"*

As scholars of the POOL group have observed, H. D., Bryher, and Macpherson greatly admired Pabst's psychoanalytic experiment *Secrets of a Soul*; they also worked closely with analyst Hanns Sachs, who contributed articles on film and psychology to *Close-up*. Bryher had been in analysis with Sachs since 1928 and H. D. would be analyzed by him in 1931, before starting analysis with Freud in 1933. Both women closely read the psychoanalytic journals to which Bryher had subscribed since the early 1920s (Friedman, *Penelope's* 287).

In an article entitled "Film Psychology," published in *Close-up* in 1928, Sachs analyzed scenes from Eisenstein to demonstrate how a film's diegesis "consists of closely interwoven psychological coherencies," which become visible only if a film "can externalise and make perceptible—if possible in movement—invisible inward events" (11). Sachs suggested that such "limited mimetics" as facial expressions might better be replaced by focusing the camera on evocative objects or the "small unnoticed ineptitudes of behaviour described by Freud as symptomatic actions" (11). Only in this way could film become "a kind of time microscope . . . [that] shows us clearly and unmistakably things that are to be found in life but that ordinarily escape our notice" (12). Accordingly, film functions as an analyst—as "a new way of driving mankind to conscious recognition" of those things that would otherwise remain unconscious (15). Like the POOL group's other film projects, *Borderline* was conceived in part to continue what Sachs argued was the intrinsically psychoanalytic nature of Eisenstein's films. *Borderline* (and certainly H. D.'s assessment of it in her pamphlet) was also greatly informed by Freud's observations on sexuality, repression, and neurosis. The



film accentuates Freud's ideas with a racialized white/black binary that places the black subject beyond the "civilized."

In an article written after the first public screenings of *Borderline*, Macpherson explained that the POOL group had contributed a technical innovation to the project of "driving mankind to conscious recognition" of the unconscious:

I decided to make *Borderline* with a "subjective use of inference." By this I meant that instead of the method of externalised observation, dealing with objects [as in Sachs's discussion of Eisenstein], I was going to take my film into the minds of the people in it. . . . To take the action, the observation, the deduction, the reference, into the labyrinth of the human mind, with its queer impulses and tricks, its unreliability, its stresses and obsessions, its half-formed deductions, its glibness, its occasional amnesia, its fantasy, suppressions and desires. (294)

Like much contemporaneous psychoanalytic discourse, Macpherson posited a universal "human mind" whose essential labyrinthine nature is shared by male and female, black and white. The film, we are told, gives the effect of entering "into the minds of the people in it"; thus we would expect to know much about the consciousness of each protagonist. In practice, however, the film distinguishes greatly among the minds it "probes"; it deploys montage techniques to enter repeatedly (if somewhat mechanically) into certain minds (Astrid's and Thorne's) but not others. In this way, the film aims to give Astrid and Thorne the type of complexity that Macpherson described in his article. We enter Pete's mind less frequently, and often then only because its "placidity" (the way in which it is "conversant with nature") contrasts with the turbulence of both white protagonists. Adah remains very much a cipher, functioning as an external stimulant who triggers the psychic responses of others (Thorne's conflicted desire, Astrid's jealousy, Pete's overflowing joy); she is never rendered as a subject herself.

This asymmetry between "white" and "black" emerges from the POOL group's racial understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis. H. D. and Bryher doubtless were familiar with the thesis linking neurosis to repressed sexuality in Freud's 1908 paper "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness." After summarizing Erb, Binswanger, and Krafft-Ebing on the deleterious effects of modernization on the "nervous system," Freud argues in this essay that such claims "prove insufficient to explain the details in the picture of nervous disturbances": "They leave out of account precisely the most important of the aetiological factors involved." "If we disregard the vaguer ways of being 'nervous' and consider the specific forms of nervous illness," Freud adds, "we shall find that the injurious

influence of civilization reduces itself in the main to the harmful suppression of the sexual life of civilized peoples (or classes) through the ‘civilized’ sexual morality prevalent in them” (185).

Freud begins this article by invoking Ehrenfels, who “dwells on the difference between ‘natural’ and ‘civilized’ sexual morality. By natural sexual morality we are to understand, according to him, a sexual morality under whose dominance a human stock is able to remain in lasting possession of health and efficiency, while civilized sexual morality is a sexual morality obedience to which, on the other hand, spurs men on to intense and productive cultural activity” (181). Unlike the authors Freud later cites, Ehrenfels apparently correctly attributes “damaging effects” to “civilized sexual morality,” though he misses a “particular one whose significance [Freud] will . . . discuss in detail in the present paper . . . [:] the increase traceable to it of modern nervous illness—of the nervous illness, that is, which is rapidly spreading in our present-day society” (182). Freud then questions the distinction between “natural” and “civilized” desire, in which the former appears “unrepressed” such that “a human stock is able to remain in lasting possession of health and efficiency” through “selection by virility” (181, 182), while the latter is a compulsory monogamous heterosexuality that can lead to both “productive cultural activity” and neurosis (181). Considering how race and sexuality intersect in *Borderline*, H. D. and the POOL group frequently and unthinkingly reproduce this distinction between the “natural” and “civilized,” with its apparently explanatory account of cultural attainment and neurosis, as a white/black binary: The film’s black characters connote a “natural” sexual morality that largely evades the repressive influence of “civilized” (read “white”) moral codes.

*“Dark Daemon” and “Uncoordinated White-Folk”*

In her pamphlet on *Borderline*, H. D. makes racial distinctions among the characters to which the film seems largely impervious; she does so while trying to downplay the film’s racial politics:

Macpherson . . . is, in no way whatever, concerned personally with the black-white political problem . . . he says, “here is a man, he is black,” he says, “here is a woman also of partial African abstraction.” He says, not “here is a black man, here is a mulatto woman,” but “here is a *man*, here is a *woman*.” He says, “look, sympathize with them and love them” not because they are black but because they are man, because they are woman. (112)

The text is contradictory here: If racial distinctions are not important components of the characters’ constructions, why specify that Adah is “of partial African abstraction”? H. D.’s insistence on Adah’s

“mixed” race seems to correlate closely to Adah’s position between two racially coded extremes: At one pole we see what H. D. calls “the half world mondaine, Astrid with Thorne, her lover” (110). Here whiteness connotes “overcivilized.” At the other pole, we watch Pete, the “very earth giant,” the “earth-god,” the “great river,” the “ground under all their feet” (111–12); his blackness apparently precedes civilization. Further, Pete’s designation as “earth” and “god” removes him from the category that dwells between: the human. His precivilized nature renders him prehuman.

Another passage in H. D.’s pamphlet suggests that these extremes confirm a susceptibility to moral corruption among whites and a premoral, primordial, godlike innocence among blacks, with Adah occupying an ambiguous and unstable relation to both extremes:

Pete and Adah escape from their little room and stand on a hill slope. Like a dream, the great negro head looms disproportionate, and water and cloud and rock and sky are all subsidiary to its being. Like a personal dream, gone further into the race dream, we see (with Pete) hill and cloud as, on that first day, created. Dream merges with myth and Pete, regarding a fair heaven far from the uncreated turmoil of that small-town café, says quite logically, “let there be light.” *Light has been, it is obvious, created by that dark daemon, conversant with all nature since before the time of white man’s beginning.*

His small sweetheart in her little shop-bought, pull-on soft hat is complement to this radiant figure. *She has sinned, she is not altogether god-like, but she is created on the hill slope with him, apart from the nightmare of the uncoordinated white-folk.* (122; my emphases)

The “shop-bought” hat (a product of white civilization) seems to encode Adah’s “white” blood: In the film’s logic, this “white” blood renders her capable of sinning, which is to say, of making decisions in a moral realm. Conversely, Pete’s “godlike” blackness exempts him from this “moral realm”; apparently, his mind is prehuman and does not correspond to Macpherson’s “human labyrinth.” Adah is thus an unrepresentable link between white and black, civilization and nature, moral and premoral; her mixed blood seemingly overdetermines her sexual liaison with a white man. If in this film her whiteness makes her capable of sin, her sin is paradoxically to desire whiteness. The film cannot fully represent this paradox. While Adah therefore signifies a structural and thematic link between black and white, her interiority is not adequately explored. She becomes the untheorized ground, or excluded middle, on which the black/white opposition of *Borderline* is predicated.

Given this unintelligible middle ground, the film cannot represent Adah’s psyche via its experimental montage techniques. What the film *does* represent are the interior states of mind at either

end of this white/black, moral/premoral spectrum: those of Astrid and Pete. These characters structurally resonate with each other insofar as the technique of “clatter montage” constructs them more insistently than it does the other characters (see Friedberg, “Approaching”). Indeed, H. D. draws attention to how this technique (used to reveal or externalize each character’s mind) makes visible the essential differences that mark their psyches. In the first section of her pamphlet, H. D. remarks: “The giant negro is in the high clouds, white cumulus cloud banks in a higher heaven. Conversely, his white fellow-men are the shadows of white, are dark, neurotic; storm brews; there is that runic fate that ‘they that live by the sword shall perish by the sword.’ Or as here applied, ‘they that live by neurotic-erotic suppression shall perish by the same’ ” (112).

Linking racial types metaphorically with clouds, H. D. portrays Pete as “white cumulus” and the *white* characters as “dark, neurotic” by virtue of their behaving like storm clouds. Later, referring to the rapid montage sequences, she explains how the film’s white/black binary recurs, juxtaposing Pete with a waterfall (akin to the white clouds) and Astrid with the “knife” or neurotic sword by which she perishes:

The minute and meticulous effect for instance that Mr. Macpherson achieves with Pete, the negro and the waterfall, or the woman Astrid with the knife, are so naturalistic, I should say so “natural” that they seem to the uninitiate, sheer “tricks” or accidents. The effect of the negro, Pete, against the waterfall is achieved by a meticulous and painstaking effort on the part of the director, who alone with the giants of German and Russian production is his own cutter and will not trust his “montage” to a mere technician, however sympathetic. . . . The same sort of jagged lightning effect is given with Astrid with her dagger. The white woman is here, there, everywhere, the dagger is above, beneath, is all but in her heart or in the heart of her meretricious lover. (118–19)

As H. D. implies, the “clatter montage” technique—“achieved by the meticulous cutting of three and four and five inch lengths of film and pasting these tiny strips together” to suggest a flickering double exposure (119)—links the two “opposite” characters on whom it is used most frequently: Astrid and Pete. That these two characters never appear in the same frame or, indeed, in the same scene, heightens their status as contraries: Their positions on the continuum of “civilized” and “natural” apparently are so far apart that it is impossible to imagine them occupying the same cinematic space. As Astrid’s “opposite,” however, Pete is indissolubly tied to her as the blackness that the film objects to confirm her “purity.”

The two scenes H. D. describes represent peaks of erotic intensity: in Pete’s case, a “natural” eroticism conveyed by his joyful

merging with the elements (waterfall, sky, rocks, and trees; see fig. 1); in Astrid's case, a "repressed" eroticism that results in the frenzied, neurotic manipulation of the knife leading to her death scene (see fig. 2). Pete reunites with Adah in a series of shots that track them wandering through the village's quaint cobblestoned lanes and into the countryside. We see several picturesque shots of this countryside—trees, buildings nestled in the mountainside, a horse and cart. We then see Pete reaching down to pull Adah up to the "hill side" H. D. celebrated in her pamphlet. Presently, the film gives us several panning shots of a waterfall, rushing river, and trees; the frequency of the cuts increases until the montage reaches "clatter" speed. At this point, the waterfall is juxtaposed with Pete's profile set against a bank of clouds, which exteriorizes his "overflowing joy" at being with his "sweetheart" again. The rapid montage sequence ends with several longer shots of his beaming face against the sky; toward the end of one of these shots, the camera pans down from his face to Adah's, which rests on his breast (see fig. 3).

Later, after several shots establishing the white couple's fretful ennui in their rooms (Astrid endlessly adjusting a Victorian shawl; Thorne lying on his bed in the next room; Astrid sitting motionlessly next to a record she has put on the Victrola, feeling neglected no doubt while Thorne strokes and nuzzles the cat), Thorne prepares to leave, carrying a suitcase. Astrid clutches her shawl tighter and stares at him from across the room, her eyes glistening with frustrated tears. Here we get a shot, from her perspective, of the suitcase: The camera zooms in on this object; then, in a brief clatter montage sequence, the film intercuts shots of the suitcase with barely discernible frames of Adah's face. This indicates either that the suitcase belongs to Adah or that Thorne is going to her. Interestingly, although this montage sequence also involves a character's face, this technique does not give us the character's psyche, but rather that of the montage's presumed "viewer": Astrid. Adah's face functions as the index for the "labyrinth" of a white woman's mind, but never as the threshold of Adah's own psyche.

At this point, Astrid enters into what we might call a "masquerade" of femininity, following Joan Rivière's essay of the previous year, "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929). According to Rivière, women who engage in public displays of competence in a professional arena reserved for men may follow that display with flirtatious behavior toward men they perceive as hostile to their proficiency. By seducing "father figures" in their male audience, these women, according to Rivière, hope to ward off retaliation for "stealing" the penis that is rightfully a man's. In this context, "womanliness" is a compensatory—not essential—behavior; the masquerade offers

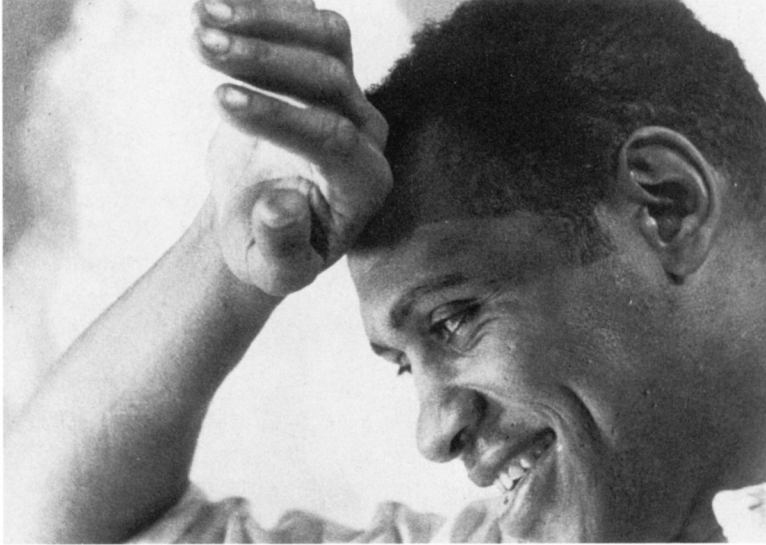


Fig. 1. Pete (Paul Robeson) photographed against the “natural” backdrop of cumulous clouds. Reproduced with permission by the Beinecke Library, Yale University.



Fig. 2. Astrid (H. D.) clenches her hands in “neurotic-erotic suppression.” Reproduced with permission by the Beinecke Library, Yale University.



Fig. 3. Pete (Paul Robeson) reconciles with Adah (Eslanda Robeson), in her “shop-bought hat.” Reproduced with permission by the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

self-protection in a patriarchal social sphere. Yet the analysis that most preoccupies Rivière has fantasies of being attacked by a “negro” whom she would seduce and then hand over to the “authorities”: “This phantasy . . . had been very common in her childhood and youth, which had been spent in the Southern States of America; if a negro came to attack her, she planned to defend herself by making him kiss her and make love to her (ultimately so that she could then deliver him over to justice)” (37). The true “father figures” in this imagined scenario set in the “Southern States of America” would not be the attacking “negro,” but rather the white male authorities representing “justice.” To propitiate the (white) fathers, the white woman fantasizes that she can substitute the black male body for her own. This suggests that the “masquerade” involves a degree of identification and desire across imagined racially defined differences—indeed, a trafficking in the eroticized black male body (see Rivière, and Walton, “Re-Placing”).

In a bid to prevent Thorne from reuniting with Adah (whose face, juxtaposed on the suitcase, indicates that Thorne prefers another “womanliness” to Astrid’s), Astrid flies across the room in her “feminine” shawl, clutches Thorne, and hangs from his neck. She then collapses to the floor and lies there in stricken contortion,

her eyes staring lifelessly. Dropping the suitcase, Thorne kneels at her side, obviously frightened that she has somehow died as a result of her nervous crisis (see fig. 4). When she mockingly snaps back to life, he deliberately walks around the table, sharpening a pencil with a knife at crotch level, as if to assert once and for all that he does indeed have the phallus. A little later, Astrid picks up the same knife and jabs it into the air very close to Thorne. Here the “clatter montage” technique recurs to imply an intrinsic link between Astrid and the knife. That Astrid threatens Thorne with the knife signifies that she has relinquished her (unsuccessful) masquerade of death and is now desperately plying the phallus. The rapid montage sequence juxtaposes the knife with Astrid, some daffodils on the table, and glimpses of Thorne’s face and hand as the knife cuts him. The sequence continues until Thorne wrestles the knife from Astrid’s hand; the two of them collapse once more onto the floor.

As H. D. suggested, this scene is meant to convey a cause-and-effect relation between “living” and “dying” by the sword. From this, we understand that these “uncoordinated white-folk” live and die by “neurotic-erotic suppression”: The erotic *is* the phallus for which “civilized” white protagonists compete against a background of “natural,” black supporting characters.

#### *Black Screens, White Filmmaker*

The film’s phallic symbolism does not properly acknowledge that *Borderline*’s white male filmmaker flourishes by the sword; H. D. presents Macpherson in her pamphlet as the film’s consummate editor. H. D.’s pamphlet also reiterates over and over again that Macpherson has mastered film directing. According to H. D., his expertise derives from being a master with the “sword”—as the splicer and editor of film. However, since Macpherson became sick after shooting the film, H. D. and Bryher, the film’s lesbian collaborators, did much of its remaining editing. They were also largely responsible for what they felt was its most innovative aspect—its clatter montage. H. D. nonetheless claimed that Macpherson “is his own cutter and will not trust his ‘montage’ to a mere technician, however sympathetic” (119). Considering the film’s imaginary in tandem with H. D.’s commentary, we find that the category of those who “die by the sword” is palpably a gendered *and* raced category: If it is the white man’s prerogative to be the sword’s master, the white woman takes the fall for this “mastery.” In this respect, it is not entirely true that “he who lives by the sword must die by it,” for in this film women and blacks die or disappear by the sword: Astrid is literally killed by the





Fig. 4. Thorne (Gavin Arthur) and Astrid (H. D.) in their room, after Astrid's "masquerade" of death. Reproduced with permission by the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

knife over which she and her male counterpart struggle; Pete and Adah are subsequently exiled from the community. Only Thorne regains some tranquillity from these violent abjections. At no point does the film allow us to imagine that Pete and Adah (or, indeed, Paul and Eslanda Robeson) "liv[e] by the sword." The result of the POOL group's racial application of the primitive/civilized binary explored in Freud's essay: While the black characters seem "immune" to neurosis, they are also barred from creative achievement, for this is reserved for the "civilized" genius that H. D.'s pamphlet extols (see fig. 5).

Beyond this structural exclusion, by the 20s and 30s filmmaking's apparatus was thoroughly raced, as a passing reference to lighting techniques in independent filmmaking, published in *Close-up*, attests. In a 1930 article in *Close-up* entitled "This Year's Sowing," Oswald Blakeston quotes Basil Emmott on how to handle lighting situations. When it comes to the question of close-ups, Emmott says, "to get any god-damned effect that has some vitality you must shoot through the cracks of two niggers. This ensures the lens being in shadow and allows you to turn lamps where you will" (483). The footnote to an asterisk in the text after the word "niggers" shows no more understanding of this term's racist meaning than does the passage itself. The note simply informs us that "a 'nigger' is a



Fig. 5. Kenneth Macpherson (behind camera) shoots a scene with Paul Robeson (right), assisted by *Borderline* cast and crew. Reproduced with permission by the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

black screen, used to shield the camera from rays of light" (483n.). Accompanying this article, in typical *Close-up* fashion, are stills of the faces of Paul Robeson, Eslanda Robeson, and H. D.; the Robeson shots are labeled: "Two characteristic studies of Paul Robeson, famous negro singer and actor, in *Borderline*, a POOL Film, directed by Kenneth Macpherson." Considered with the photos, the racist term for the black screens is both a personal insult to the Robesons

and a structural problem for the POOL group's racial dynamics. Moreover, although film stills in *Close-up* are often juxtaposed with unrelated articles, these stills function as examples of close-up lighting, illustrating Emmot's remark that "lighting should alter for each face."

This remark implies that "Negro" faces require different lighting conditions than do "white" faces. I suggest however that lighting does not simply *respond* to differently raced faces, but greatly assists in the *construction* of this difference's meaning. If "lighting should alter for each face" so that our racial understanding of each face alters, the apparatus itself offers a racial account of its elements' division of labor. A beam of light is thus directed "through the cracks of two niggers" onto the face in question. Syntactically, this sentence reads as if the "cracks" *belong* to the "niggers," rather than referring to the space between them. In this way, the screens are not merely personified; they are also racialized, perhaps even sexualized (they have "cracks"). *Close-up*, which Macpherson edited, seemed unaware that contemporaneous film discourse harbored the racism that he wanted his film to combat. Moreover, H. D.'s suggestion that Pete is a "daemon" creator of "light" can be understood as an ideological inversion of cinema's racial apparatus: "Dream merges with myth and Pete, regarding a fair heaven far from the uncreated turmoil of that small-town café, says quite logically, 'let there be light.' Light has been, it is obvious, created by that dark daemon, conversant with all nature since before the time of white man's beginning" (122).

In this depiction, Pete's blackness removes him from the world of light only to present him as the creator of light: In a system determined by light, the center is imagined as the blackness that makes light possible. In this ideological figure, an unilluminated "dark daemon" precedes the "white man's beginning" in light; alternately, the "daemon" is ludicrously praised as a creator. Meanwhile, Macpherson—who places his lights between the black screens that his colleagues (and perhaps he himself) call "niggers"—"creates" the light illuminating Pete's "mythic" appearance on the hillside.

In the character of Pete, racial blackness combines, via clatter montage, with the waterfall to suggest a gushing that the film does not suppress—a naturalness that somehow escapes neurosis. He and Adah do not, like Astrid and Thorne, "liv[e] by the sword" or by "neurotic-erotic suppression," for their sex lives apparently are uncomplicated, untainted by civilization and its discontents. By corollary, unlike the white male filmmaker and his white collaborators, Pete and Adah do not consciously determine the images they present.

H. D. extended this white fantasy of the black mind's pre-moral, natural, "sexual" quality from Pete to Robeson himself, as her fictional account of him in "Two Americans" attests:

His least movement was so gracious, he didn't have to think things out. Nevertheless with an astonishing analytical power, he did think. That was the odd thing about Saul Howard, he did think. He had a mind, a steadfast sort of burning, a thing that glowed like a whole red sunset or like a coal mine, it was steady, a steady sort of warmth and heat, yet all the time intellectual; *he thought not as a man thinks*. Paula Howard, his wife, thought more as white folks, consistently, being more than half white . . . (H. D., qtd. in Guest 199; my emphasis)

In this thinly veiled fictional portrait, the narrator gives Robeson (as Saul Howard) an ability to "think," but only if his mind resembles a "thing" that glows like a "sunset"—a natural, nonhuman element. Interestingly, H. D. does not write, "he thought not as a white man thinks," but simply, "he thought not as a man thinks." This implies that the standard for human thinking is a tradition of white thinking, from which Robeson's blackness necessarily excludes him. H. D.'s next sentence reinforces this suggestion: She tells us that Paula Howard, standing in for Eslanda Robeson, "thought more as white folks, consistently, being more than half white." Like Adah in *Borderline*, Paula in "Two Americans" occupies a middle position between black and white, the human and nonhuman, the civilized and precivilized.<sup>4</sup>

*Borderline* and H. D.'s accompanying pamphlet consistently conflate actors with the characters they play; we see this when Barbara Guest, H. D.'s biographer, describes the film as

a mêlée of emotional difficulties, threats of departure, false loves, exaggerated despair. The comic relief is supplied by Bryher, who is quite at home with a fat black cigar in her mouth, going about the business of adding up the cash, while the others seek to destroy themselves. Through it all stalk the sincere and loving couple, Robeson and his Essie. The Robesons finally get out of the film by walking off into the mountain while H. D. writhes upon the floor in a death agony in imitation of the final act of *Jeanne Ney*. (197)

Guest describes the film almost entirely in terms of whether various actors/characters are "at home" or "outsiders" in its realm:

Robeson does not fit in. He is too much himself. He is not a "borderline" person, even if it is rationalized that being black makes him so. He is very much a part of the world. His personal beauty and the strength of his character tend to dominate the film, mostly because Robeson seems unaware of the psychological overtones of the film. He must have been a

great admirer of Eisenstein, and may have been suggested by that director for the role, but he has no concept of the scenario of the film, nebulous as it was. (196–97)

Since Guest never explains how she knows that Robeson has “no concept of the scenario of the film,” we must conclude that she derives this impression from his performance. She takes her cue from H. D.’s pamphlet in assuming that the Robesons are not “borderline,” like the white characters, insofar as Thorne’s “perverse” sexual drives (which his excessive drinking and interracial desire signify) and Astrid’s sexual jealousy both denote their borderline status. This denotation represents the Robesons as “standouts or outsiders among a group of borderliners” precisely because they are not marked by “perverse” or “unwholesome” sexuality: They represent a healthy, heterosexual couple untainted by the neuroses that inform (white) civilization.

Guest’s remarks suggest that the cinematic effect of “natural” sexuality derives from the Robesons “naturally” exuding this phenomenon while the film was shot. She also implies that Robeson does not “act,” since he is “too much himself”; allegedly, his “personal beauty and the strength of his character” dominate the film, not his conscious method of playing a part. How indeed could he act when he is “unaware of the psychological overtones of the film” and “has no concept of the scenario of the film”? Guest refers to “Robeson and his Essie” as a “sincere and loving couple” stalking through a film full of self-destructive white people. This suggests not that Pete and Adah are “sincere and loving” characters in *Borderline*, but rather that what Guest presumes is the Robesons’ “sincere and loving” marriage contrasts radically with the white couple’s tormented relationship.

Considering biographical accounts of the Robesons’ life at the time, we cannot maintain this fantasy of them as an “unaware” but “sincere and loving” presence in the film (see Duberman). A diary entry by Eslanda Robeson clarifies that the Robesons knew enough about *Borderline*’s scenario to find its racial dichotomy between white and black psyches ridiculous and offensive: “Kenneth and H. D. used to make us so shriek with laughter with their naive ideas of Negroes that Paul and I often completely ruined our make-up with tears of laughter, and had to make up all over again. We never once felt we were colored with them” (qtd. in Duberman 131).

From the Robesons’ perspective, that “Negroes” are naïve is a preposterous white fantasy; the white filmmakers “make up” these black actors’ faces so that their blackness contrasts sufficiently with their counterparts’ whiteness. Robeson’s “natural” presence in the

film obviously is due to the filmmaker's calculated techniques. When the Robesons realized what Macpherson and H. D. wanted them to portray, however, their laughter ruined this construction's make up so that it had to be reapplied. Clearly, Macpherson and H. D. received their laughter good-naturedly, for Eslanda adds that "we never once felt we were colored with them"—that is, that Paul and Eslanda's puncturing of white naïveté never induced hostility or resistance. However, the Robesons' implicit critique of the POOL group's racial fantasies ultimately went unheeded in *Borderline*, since this group's "naive ideas of Negroes" remained part of the film's fabric and white reception.

### Conclusion

I have argued that the POOL group adapted Freud's gendered (and implicitly raced) accounts of sexual repression, neurosis, and cultural achievement, inserting them into a cinematic machine that reproduced an already established racial binary. This binary resonates with a problematic Freudian account of female sexuality and subjectivity that many feminists have critiqued. Excluded from (or, in Adah's case, misguidedly covetous of) the "moral" realm of whiteness, Paul and Adah (and for their white observers, the Robesons too) occupy a terrain that Freud, in his account of the superego, largely reserved for women and girls. Freud claimed that "the level of what is ethically normal [in women] is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men" ("Some" 257). In Freudian terms, that Paul and Adah occupy a precivilized and premoral realm correlates with their "underdeveloped" superegos, for they are not fully initiated into the symbolic order, which is determined as much by whiteness as by the phallus. Paul and Adah's absence of neurosis, and their resultant inability to achieve culturally, endorses this reading.

I haven't sufficient space to explore how the film's distinctions between hetero- and homoeroticism complicate these racial and cultural metaphors. As *Borderline*'s precivilized characters, Pete and Adah (and, by extension, the Robesons themselves) seem to display a natural heterosexuality that requires no repression; conversely, Astrid and Thorne appear neurotic precisely because, as products of modernization, their (problematic) heterosexuality is achieved only by repressing underlying homoerotic impulses. The butch/femme lesbian couple and gay-coded pianist who preside over the café's public space reinforce this reading of white heterosexuality. Like Pete and Adah, these characters seem decidedly less neurotic than the white heterosexual couple; their emotional

health is predicated on their *unrepressed*—or perhaps successfully sublimated—homoerotic desire. As I argue elsewhere, the queer matrix that these characters represent ensures a homoerotic subtext that complicates *Borderline*'s "straight" account of interracial desire (see Walton, "White"). One might say that the queer-delineated space of the café "hosts" the "straight" plot, and that the white couple is "queered" by its trajectory through that space. The black couple remains unproblematically heterosexual throughout the film, however, though Robeson's body seems to function as the "natural" black flesh precipitating the white characters' "perverse" desires. While the black characters are "available" to the white characters and filmmakers as catalysts for sexual, psychological, and aesthetic transformation, the reverse is not true.

By linking neurosis, racism, and a form of perverse heterosexuality, H. D. and her collaborators arguably intended *Borderline* to illustrate the limits of white civilization-as-modernity. Insofar as the film primitivizes black characters, living "by the sword" or by "neurotic-erotic suppression" is the sad fate of whites only. It is also their privilege, however: According to the Freudian model that the POOL group adapted, when the "erotic" is *sublimated* and not "suppressed," the white subject can become an exceptional artist, writer, or filmmaker. Cultural achievement is thus the alternative—perhaps even the solution—to white neurosis. Moreover, in the POOL group's imaginary, only white subjects have homoerotic impulses that *need* repression or sublimation; since blacks are statically heterosexual in this film, they have no need to sublimate or suppress their impulses. In this respect, *Borderline* gives us the impression that modernism—or, perhaps more specifically, the "gendering" and "queering" of modernism—was an exclusively white prerogative.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Introducing *Close-up* 5.2 in "As Is," Macpherson calls for "The negro documentaire of the negro. . . . The negro as an observer of himself. As his

own historian. As his own agitator" (90). Arguing that "international film" is most authentic when the director is indigenous to the country or "race" he is trying to depict (only a Pabst can accurately depict Austria, for example), Macpherson asks us to consider the "negro film" and "decide whether you think international cinema is here going to mean a thing when a white man directs, no matter how charmingly, blacks so that they must always seem to be direfully dependent on white man's wisdom" (87). At the same time, Macpherson (soon to be a "white man" director) claims to be able to discern superior race traits in the "loose racial hands" of black actor Stepin Fetchit: "These so utterly not incantationish gestures are unself-consciousness, perfectly inherited greatness of race and of race mind. . . . We can scrap every trained toe waggle of a ballerina for the very least of these movements. Making this greatness articulate for the cinema is the fascinating pioneer work of somebody" (88). As we shall see, the *Borderline* project was Macpherson's attempt to avoid, as a "white man" director, the pitfalls he anticipated in this editorial; Robeson was to become the vehicle for expressing what he took to be the inherent "unselfconsciousness" of the black race, in contrast to the overconsciousness of the white.

<sup>2</sup> At the first screenings of *Borderline*, the POOL group handed out a one-page plot synopsis, calling it the film's "libretto," which suggests that the group wanted the film to appear in part as a visual (but silent) operatic performance, built around a bare narrative outline (Friedberg reproduces the libretto in full; see "Writing" 150). One should not confuse this libretto with the longer interpretive pamphlet that H. D. published after the film's release, entitled simply "Borderline."

<sup>3</sup> In "Modernism" Friedman takes up the question of H. D.'s erotic attraction to Paul Robeson, but focuses exclusively on her short story, "Two Americans," her poem, "Red Roses for Bronze," and the interpretive pamphlet she wrote on *Borderline*. While drawing on H. D.'s pamphlet, my discussion concerns more directly her role in the eroticized racial representation in the film proper.

<sup>4</sup> See Friedman, "Modernism," for a more sympathetic reading of "Two Americans."

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