
BORDERLINE MODERNISM

Paul Robeson and the Femme Fatale

by Susan McCabe

The silent 1930 film *Borderline* has long attracted the archival interest of modernist scholars because it features Paul and Eslanda Robeson as well as the American expatriate poet Hilda Doolittle (or H.D. as she became known). However, the film has been largely sequestered in the vaults of the Museum of Modern Art, not available commercially and rarely screened. G.W. Pabst (the director H.D. most admired) called *Borderline* "the only real avant-garde film," yet its avant-gardism to some extent may have doomed it to obscurity (*Cinema and Modernism* 389). It recently surfaced as part of a Robeson retrospective on *American Movie Classics*, which suggests that perhaps the film is breaking out of the circumscribed locus of the archive into a wider cultural forum. As a result of the limited audiences for *Borderline*, Robeson's significant role in the film has been understated in the history of black cinema as well as in more general studies of early cinema and modernism. However, to assert that Robeson's contribution and the film's place in American film have been overlooked merely as a result of its limited distribution would be a tremendous oversimplification of a complicated intersection of cultural and aesthetic vectors.

The film's experimental methods draw into radical relief the very processes by which racist fantasies are installed. As Hazel Carby gages it, the film relies upon "an almost obsessive use of close-up, in which light and shadow from taut skin and flickering muscle are used to evoke mood and meaning" (67). She further asserts, singling out the white director, Kenneth Macpherson: "The subjectivity dissected and exposed by his camera work was in effect a product of his own modernist desires and anxieties surrounding the formation of masculinity in the modern world. Its racialization was a mediating device" (68). Indeed the filmmakers wield the "dissecting gaze," but I argue that the white protagonists and creators of the film also become dissected. Racialization becomes more than a mediating device; it is in fact how we become bodies, how we are defined as such.

In their rejection of high modernist values of impervious autonomy and transcendent disembodiment, the creators of *Borderline* were part of an avant-garde aesthetic movement that viewed film as conduit of social change. Film also acted as the medium par excellence to self-consciously manipulate (if often heavy-handedly) psychoanalytic tropes, such as Freud's proto-cinematic notion of the "bodily ego" as the "projection of a surface." The body from this perspective is the site and map, from the outset, of libidinal investment. With its focus upon the inscription upon bodily surfaces and through its heightened use of montage, *Borderline* vivifies how bodies are cut out and constructed along devastating racial and sexual lines.

The haunting scene of H.D. (as the character Astrid) cutting into the scriptable surface of her betraying husband (Thorne) coincides with the frenetic slashing and editing of celluloid. Cutting in this way is part of the plot, but it is also an aesthetic device with corporeal meaning. This self-conscious cutting highlights the film's obsession with racial and sexual body marking; by disrupting a seamless narrative, the act of montage reveals itself as capable of taking apart installed cultural fantasies and refashioning them.

Invoking a psychoanalytic model of the body as bearer of sexual and racial inscription, but with no *conventionally central* character, the film demonstrates how bodies are constructed by Oedipal desire, which as Teresa de Lauretis asserts, inexorably functions as "paradigmatic of all narratives." The film's montage, however, dislocates a phallic Oedipal narrative in its rescripting of the femme fatale. Robeson, I will argue, becomes the femme fatale, the bearer of disavowed desire, a figure appealing to modernists. As Mary Ann Doane explains, the femme fatale "is a clear indication of the extent of the fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century"; she embodies "an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the 'I,' the ego" (1-2). Even as this crisis seems particularly linked with masculinity after World War I, *Borderline* underscores how the crisis of masculinity is also a racial crisis (Doane 144). The film invokes the femme fatale as both a smokescreen for racial anxieties and as an index for how sexuality impinges upon race identity. By making "the centrality of the self" along with any single identification impossible, the film insists upon crossing thresholds and the breakdown of rigid ego boundaries.

In the seventy-five or so minutes of screening time, the film explores the dynamics at the marrow of Western civilization and the long shadow of its imperialistic reach. It accomplishes this feat, largely through Robeson, using him to turn cultural assumptions upside down or at least sideways, reversing the myth of black masculinity as predatory and instead portraying the white male's projection and displacement of desire upon the black body. In contrast to mainstream Hollywood film, white sexuality and desire have no glamour in *Borderline*. The camera caresses Robeson almost to the point of soft porn, building upon his cultural capital as sex symbol; at the same time, he is mythologized as transcendent and disembodied.

Without going any further, it is important to acknowledge *Borderline's* serious limitations in its representation of race. Eslanda writes in her diary that Paul and her "'ruined [their] make-up with tears of laughter'" over Macpherson and H.D.'s "'naïve ideas of Negroes'" (Duberman 131). The film engages in what Petrine Archer-Straw calls "negrophilia," the avant-garde's co-opting of blackness as site of transgression so that "'[b]lackness' was a sign of their modernity, reflected in the African sculptures scattered in their rooms . . ." (19). *Borderline* certainly participates in the "othering" Archer-Straw describes. H.D. writes, for instance, in her "Borderline Pamphlet" (written to explain and "defend" the film's innovative methods) that the film's black couple has more "integrity" than the neurotic whites: "they dwell on the cosmic racial borderline" (221). Carby asserts that "[t]o modernist imaginings, Paul Robeson offered the possibility of unity for a fractious age" (50); and more specifically, with *Borderline*, the "desire of white modernists for an unambiguous essential masculinity came to be located in the black body" (71). Thomas Cripps further argues that "'black purity stands against

European decadence” in the film, but he also offers the proviso that “what passed for racial liberalism was often no more than a worship of presumed primitiveness” (34). *Borderline*, however, should not be viewed simply as an expression of skewed worship; it simultaneously subverts the desire for wholeness or an essential identity.

The film, in the process of giving Robeson a body, idealizes and objectifies him, associating him with the femme fatale. Thus, as film theorist, Kaja Silverman emphasizes, the intractable cultural gaze fixes Robeson: “We cannot simply ‘choose’ how we are seen.” In her reading, the cultural “screen” functions as a mirror, as the “repertoire of representations by means of which our culture figures all those many varieties of difference,” images that “do not always facilitate the production of a lovable body” (19). I aim to show that the same camera which objectifies Robeson also opens up a space from which he “looks back” (to use Silverman’s phrase) at the white gaze. Silverman suggests that “the look,” unlike the gaze (the phallogocentric camera eye that constructs and privileges the white male body as “ideal”), can undermine the dominant processes of fabrication. Robeson “looks back” at white audiences through an avant-garde montage, and particularly within a space mapped and freighted with “gesticulatory gesture” that makes it impossible to maintain essentialized race identities (Eisenstein, “Dialectic Approach” 53). Pure racial or sexual identity is precluded or foreclosed, as we will see, by the film’s aesthetics. The film questions and displaces the authority of the gaze, its own misguided liberalism and enmeshment within dominant ideologies. Ultimately, cutting (figurative and literal) functions as the central character of this film.

The first section of this essay establishes how *Borderline* fits in Robeson’s career as well as within H.D.’s circle as part of the continental avant-garde. I consider the multiplicity of influences upon *Borderline*, including Eisenstein’s montage theories, to underscore its imperative to alter cultural fantasy. I then explore the film as the avant-garde’s answer to D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, the blockbuster of its day. In a very tangible way, through cutting and close-up, *Borderline* exposes the white desire for the black body as well as the disavowal of this desire. The next section shows how this disavowal of miscegenation along with other sexual transgressions manifests itself in the conflation of the black body with the elevated and disparaged femme fatale. *Borderline* confronts *Birth of a Nation* by drawing upon G.W. Pabst’s expressionist film *Pandora’s Box*, the story of Lulu, a femme fatale who meets her death as a sexual commodity. At this juncture, I will closely examine how specific scenes in the film foreground the cutting out and constructing of sexual and racial bodies to deflect the Oedipal mandate privileging white heterosexual identity. I conclude with an analysis of significant threshold scenes that render Robeson as both the excised bearer of disavowed desires and as capable of reconfiguring cultural borderlines

The Cultural Geography

By the time Paul and Eslanda Robeson acted in *Borderline*, Paul had already made significant inroads into celebrity and American theatre. Needless to say, the scarcity

of roles for any black actor, particularly male leads, was a major impediment for Robeson. This was the product of a widespread cultural misapprehension that whites could play blacks better than they themselves could. The tradition of “minstrelsy claimed to speak for both races through the blacking up of one” (Michael Rogin 4).

When Robeson was cast in the lead in Eugene O’Neill’s non-Afro-American productions, he was criticized on both sides of the color line for his roles in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* and *Emperor Jones* in the Provincetown Playhouse 1923–1924 season. The portrait of interracial relations (revisited in *Borderline*) in *God’s Chillun* alienated white audiences because of its representation of black desirability; for black critics the play presented “a case against racial mixing” because of the play’s tragic outcome (Martin Duberman 65). One critic’s complement for Robeson’s enactment of “the childlike volatility of his race” in *Emperor Jones* exemplifies the condescension characteristic of white reception to black performances. O’Neill’s work, groundbreaking in its subject matter, was nevertheless cut to fit white assumptions and expectations about black male identity.

Robeson’s role in the popular *Show Boat* (1928) further forced him to “crossdress” as the simple-minded, good-natured “darkey,” the metaphoric eunuch or slave prominent in the landscape of the white imagination, particularly from the time of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Thus, in white spatiality, if blacks were allowed to perform, they must reinforce the comfortable fantasies of white superiority.

Robeson’s appearance in film marked a turning point in terms of the representation of black embodiment. Oscar Micheaux’s uncompromising all-black film company produced more than 56 films between 1918 and 1948. In 1924, Robeson starred in Micheaux’s *Body and Soul*, evocatively playing the roles of two brothers: the evil minister (who eventually commits rape) and the truly spiritual man-of-science Sylvester. Micheaux’s film reveals body and soul as split, yet in tenuous union through Robeson. This binary of body and soul (and the mistaking of the one for the other) comments upon the dualism prevalent in modernist discourse which situates the “black body” and “white soul” as polarized (Carby 47). This dichotomy becomes further suspect in *Borderline*.

While Robeson is given a body, he functions here as an object of “negrophilia,” associated with the lofty and distinguished from the white characters, whose bodies are obsessively fragmented through close-ups of immobilized body parts and catatonic gesture. Psychic states of dissociation are somatized through Eisensteinian montage which involves “[p]rojection of the conflict onto the whole expressive bodily system” (“A Dialectic” 53). Disavowal of the body and desire, paradoxically, manifests itself in bodily symptom.

Duberman records that the Robesons regarded their week-long shoot in Territet, Switzerland for the filming of *Borderline* as a “lark” and “diversion,” “time out from the hectic pace of touring” (130). In fact Robeson was on his way from Territet to Berlin to perform in a production of *Emperor Jones* (132). (Just a year later when Eslanda and Paul are considering divorce, Eslanda would return to this location in the Alps with their son as a kind of safe haven, confirming that their experience in this “white” location was not entirely dissatisfactory.)

H.D.'s interest in film art was at its height when she lived in Territet, with Bryher (her lifelong companion and same-sex lover) and director Macpherson (in a marriage of convenience with Bryher). The complex erotics of this close-knit triangle become further complicated with the inclusion of the Robesons in the film. Apparently, Macpherson (bisexual like H.D.) had a number of relationships with black men in the late twenties. Susan Stanford Friedman speculates: "Robeson himself may have been the object of Macpherson's attraction for black men. Macpherson's fascination with Robeson's beauty as a body to film is evident in his stills, sketches, and montage for *Borderline*" ("Scattered Remnant" 214). H.D. herself continued after the film to memorialize her sexual feelings towards Robeson in several poems, including "Red Roses for Bronze," where she imagines him as a "bronze god" (1931).

In Territet, the menage (Macpherson, Bryher and H.D.) edited *Close Up* (1927–33), the first journal in English exclusively devoted to film. The arrival and departure of *Close Up* signaled both the crystallization and the climax of film's volatile impact upon modernists. Friedberg sums up the dynamic politics of *Close Up*: it "transformed the very fabric of psychic, gendered and racialized experience, and explored—against cinema's commercial domination—the radical possibilities of film as a new medium of aesthetic expression" (*Cinema and Modernism* 7). The fact that the journal's demise coincided with Hitler's rise to power seems no accident. By the time of *Borderline*, the Nazis already had a presence, and this repressive presence haunts the film's racializing of sexuality.

The short-lived journal did not reflect all of the contemporary perspectives on film (it featured eleven film reviews by H.D.), but it defined itself in diametric opposition to the Hollywood mainstream and sought to foster the most innovative ideas percolating about "experimental" cinema. Even as its views remained "trapped within a racialized discourse characteristic of the time," it nevertheless brought to the surface issues of appropriation and fetishism (James Donald; *Cinema and Modernism* 33). Eisenstein's ideals of a "collective" in part fuelled the journal's progressive agenda. (Robeson, increasingly aligned with Soviet politics, would later visit Eisenstein who considered making a film with the actor.) Bryher's articles against war, promoting education and dismantling censorship emerged from her deep engagement with the Soviet (she writes a book in 1929 entitled *Soviet Film Problems* to chronicle how filmmakers seek social change through film). *Close Up* also devoted a special issue to black cinema in August 1929. In this issue, Robert Herring argues for a "pure" Afroamerican cinema, protesting: "Not black films passing for white, and not, please, white passing for black" (*Close Up* Vol. 5, no. 2). Herring, a queer who played a queer in *Borderline*, was instrumental in bringing the Robesons into the H.D. circle.

It was out of the ferment of producing *Close Up* that H.D. collaborated upon and acted in several POOL films (set up through Bryher's funding), including *Wing Beat* (1927), *Foothills* (1928) and *Borderline*. The latter film, Friedberg assesses, emerged "out of an unprecedented liaison between cinematic and psychoanalytic theory: the alliance of Sach's Freud-driven theories of the figurational processes of the unconscious and Eisenstein's theories of intellectual montage" (*Cinema and Modernism* 218). Drawing upon multiple theories and aesthetic influences, *Borderline* operates with the guiding premise that cinema shapes cultural fantasy, producing and altering ideolo-

gies. Hans Sachs, (published in *Close Up* and Bryher's psychoanalyst during the run of the journal), advances the notion of "daydreams in common" to suggest how cinema shapes collective fantasy (Laura Marcus, *Cinema and Modernism* 244).

This collective realm becomes intrasubjective for Eisenstein with the "creating spectator" actively engaged in the piecing together shots in intellectual montage. Derived from Hegel's dialectical materialism, his montage theory hinges upon conflict, "the process of opposition between thesis and anti-thesis" ("A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" 45). Montage emerges through "[c]onflict within a thesis . . . forms itself spatially in the conflict within the shot—and *explodes* with increasing intensity in montage-conflict among the separate shots" (53). The spectator becomes part of the process of conflict, interpolated within the editing of shots. *Borderline*, I argue, makes joltingly vivid the fact of racial and sexual division, yet insists that predictable metonymies can be shifted and realigned from a visceral vantage.

Pabst's aesthetics, along with Eisenstein's, figured prominently in the making of *Borderline*. H.D. deeply impressed with Pabst, called his *Joyless Street* her "never-to-be-forgotten premiere to the whole art of the screen" (*Close Up* Vol. 4, no. 4; April 1929). The group's proximity to Berlin and its cinematic sexual tropes (including Pabst's femme fatale) also significantly shaped the film. Bryher and Macpherson made frequent trips to Berlin in the late 1920s, acting as liaisons between German culture and the Swiss border town they occupied. Weimar culture of the 1920s became associated for these modernists with the progressive film agenda to represent how embodiment might not only be configured but also *reconfigured* through the spectator. This "unprecedented liaison" (to re-quote Friedberg) of forms and methods distinctly makes race and the sexing of raciality the film's central obsessions.

Reinscribing the Birthmark

The reconfiguring of cultural fantasy in *Borderline* is accomplished through the invocation of the familiar and conventional narrative of sexual jealousy. The short "libretto" outlining the plot, passed out at initial screenings of the film, belies the film's experimental method:

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 the white couple Thorne and Astrid. Thorne is a young man whose life with Astrid has become a torment to them both. Both are highly strung, and 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 that ends their relationship.

At the “climax” of this film in a prolonged argument between the white couple, Thorne stabs Astrid in “self-defense.” The programme notes read: ‘The negro woman is blamed . . . Thorne is acquitted . . . the mayor, acting for the populace . . . ordered Pete . . . to leave town. Pete goes . . . a scapegoat for the unresolved problems, evasions and neuroses for which the racial ‘borderline’ has served justification’” (*Cinema and Modernism* 218).

Astrid (played by H.D. with the stage name Helga Doorne) perversely assumes the unlikable role of a racist neurasthenic. We learn Astrid has actually called Pete (Robeson) to the town, motivated by her jealousy of Thorne’s biracial relationship with Adah (Eslanda Robeson). Personal pathology operates as cultural pathology; what is irrational in H.D.’s character becomes metonymic with a rising fascism and a racist ideology, cinematically legitimated by the most popular and arguably the most influential silent film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). *Borderline* reverses Griffith’s myth of inaugural identity as the virulent protection of white womanhood from “primitive” black sexuality; it exposes the white desire for the black body as well as the disavowal of this desire. The birthmark of white identity is the pathological refusal to recognize its “border” existence, its permeability and contiguity with other bodies.

Immediately the film acknowledges the “lie” of *Birth of a Nation*, de-legitimizing the claim of white “purity” with its opening sequence of Thorne’s violent gesture of pushing Adah away from him and against a wall with a shot of Adah’s “look” at Thorne (and at us). The plot strategically hinges upon Thorne’s initial revoking of the biracial relationship. Rather than showing the black male as succumbing to uncontrollable impulses of sexual desire and violence, *Borderline* inverts this mythology promulgated by *Birth of a Nation*.

When Astrid reveals in the café that she has drawn Pete into a vortex of emotional entanglements, an intertitle in large letters, the only shot in the film of its kind, reads: “PETE?” This draws attention to Pete’s disruptive function within the narrative. H.D.’s role as Astrid, disfigured through jealousy, is among the least ideal identificatory possibilities. Close-ups of her staring, tormented Medusa gaze signify her attempt to mark Adah and Pete as undesirable objects of sexual attention and as threats to white integrity. Perhaps the only character more reprehensible than Astrid (and not mentioned in the libretto) is an old woman, garbed in Victorian clothing and contorted with hatred, who is instrumental in Pete’s removal; allied with Astrid, she unabashedly asserts through intertitle: “If I had my way not one negro would be in the community.” Instead of presenting an idealized version of white women, the film shows their implication in the hatred of the “other.” Such hatred arises in part from the loss and scarcity created by an economic depression that twists and turns both the individual body and the body politic of the era.

Astrid draws Pete into conflict not only to circumvent Thorne’s already-terminated affair with Adah, but also perhaps to call upon his expected jealousy. Based on her stereotypes, Astrid seeks out Pete for what she fantasizes will be his violently jealous reaction to Thorne’s affair with Adah. Contrary to her expectations, we trace the couple’s non-recriminatory reunion in shots of Adah walking to meet Pete through the town’s liminal archways.

Later we see Adah look at herself and us through her compact; the mirror isolates her eye, which stares back at us. She is throughout accentuated as small in stature as she rests her head against Pete's chest to manifest hierarchies in gender, yet her "indirect" look interrupts our identification with the white gaze. She sports a hat with thin black lines, an image that reverberates with almost every image in the film; Adah's fashion acts as microcosmic sign of racial borders and her disruption of them. Adah's mulatto skin, her indirect gaze and her hat are all signs that we are in a liminal universe. The borders are skewed, changing and unknowable.

The permeability of boundary lines and identities is further underscored by another liminal character played by H.D.'s partner, Bryher, an androgynous figure, who dresses in a man's suit and smokes a cigar. Like Adah, who clearly is a cross between races, Bryher represents a cross-pollination of the sexes. When she reads the notice from the mayor ordering Pete to leave town, we are given her reaction in an intertitle: "What makes it worse is that they think they are doing the right thing. We're like that." "They" shifts to "we" as Bryher recognizes her complicity with racism (like Frau Bernberg in the anti-fascist 1931 *Maedchen in Uniform*, she and the film's barmaid enact a form of what Ruby Rich calls "repressive tolerance.") Notably, Pete has the film's last words, as he sardonically mirrors hers, repeating with a difference, and looking at Bryher and then at us: "Yes. We're like that."

In this society, unlike that of *Birth of Nation*, there is a recognition of both racism and the community of the races. Furthermore, the white characters carry with them their fragmented lives and racist predilections to the unpopulated Swiss village, a landscape that refuses to glamorize their instability. (The camera looks down upon Thorne in one dislocated shot, for example, as he lies wriggling on the floor, laughing uncontrollably while a bottle of liquor is spilled on his face and on to his clothes by an unidentifiable hand). At the same time, Pete is not figured as wholly idealized or one-dimensional. Later in the film, he reacts to a café patron's evident ostracism of Adah by committing the "unpardonable" act of hitting a white man (more will be said of this later). When he fights, it is not to protect the ideal "purity" of womanhood like the white protagonists in *Birth of a Nation*, but to protect Adah's dignity and his own.

The ejection of the black couple becomes an absurd claim for either the pristine or of the primitive, and in fact reveals both to be compensatory myths for a lack of bodily coherence. Pete and Adah act as the repositories for the disowned desires of the white characters; and in this way, the film verges on reinscribing the very "birthmark" it criticizes. Yet the film reveals this act of disowning as the attempt to uphold only an illusory stable identity and nationhood.

Femme Fatale: Mediating Race / Mediating Sex

The makers of *Borderline* were familiar with the cultural volatility of the classic femme fatale from Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929). Macpherson writes to H.D. about several meetings with Pabst, one from Hotel Adlon in Berlin after seeing photos with the director: "one of Pabst himself, young, very very very very Lesbian, and he is

DeeeeelIIIIghted to mit (sic) you" (10/27/1927; Beinecke). Bryher likewise writes to H.D. that she and Macpherson "are both in love with Pabst" (Oct 29 1927). (Later Bryher meets Hans Sachs at Pabst's house in 1928.) Macpherson also reports to H.D. Pabst's reaction to his earlier film, *Wingbeat*: "what he reeeeeeally liked about the film was that YOU showed up the utter futility of the Hollywood tradition, and that beauty was something quite different. And I am wondering if he still wants Louisa Brooks for Lulu." Even as Macpherson's playful speculation about Pabst's considering H.D. for the role of Lulu is far afield, *Borderline* reanimates this figure of the femme fatale by self-consciously shifting the film's erotic locus from H.D. to Robeson.

The femme fatale motif perseverates upon the feminine as castration threat and dangerous other, and as such belongs to an expressionist legacy that both transgresses "the normative" in its concentration upon the sexual *and* perpetuates an Oedipal model of desire. In rescripting this figure, *Borderline* foregrounds subversive desires even as it reveals the cultural suppression of them. The emphasis upon outlaw sexuality has been associated with the aesthetics of the Weimar Republic: "Modernity in the Berlin of the mid-1920's entails a sexual expressivity outside the constraints of law or convention" (Mary Ann Doane 143). As such, Weimar aesthetics reflect the symptomatic dialectic between authoritarianism and transgressiveness that Seigfried Kracauer identifies as distinctive of this period in his *Caligari to Hitler*.

Pabst's film is part of this double weave of expression and repression, and "puts into play the signifiers of sexual transgression—incest, androgyny, lesbianism, prostitution" and so "partakes of the pervasive sexual cynicism of the Weimar period" (Doane 144). Signifiers of sexual transgression likewise proliferate in *Borderline*. The café manageress Bryher, frequently seen arm-in-arm with the barmaid, presides as lesbian sign, for instance. At the film's end, the queer piano player (Herring) tips his hat in sad farewell to Pete who he has desired throughout, keeping a picture of Pete on his piano ledge; removing the sign of his desire, he places the photo under his jacket near his heart, a gesture that signals the repressive shutting-down of alternate modes of desire and affiliation. Adah has already left the town, leaving a note for Pete in which she blames herself, illustrating her internalization of white disavowal.

The multiple desires circulating in the film function in concert with and against the transgressive biracial relation between Thorne and Adah. What catapults Astrid into a jealous frenzy is, we recall, ostensibly her husband's biracial affair with Adah. Macpherson attributes *Borderline's* lack of popularity with British audiences to "its unexplainedness—like something seen through a window or key-hole" (*Close Up* Nov 1930, 381). This "key-hole" quality emerges from the film's volatile sexual energies. *Borderline* further reveals how racial hatred directly emerges from the sexual fear of losing racial purity. This fear of "impurity" increases with the rise of fascism and its anti-miscegenation laws to protect the Aryan race. Laws against miscegenation become, furthermore, contiguous with laws against other sexualities, and the anxiety over diluting patriarchal law.

Race becomes a vehicle, as Carby suggests, for mediating the sexual transgressions of the white characters. Indeed, the erotics between the participants of *Borderline* were as complicated as those figured forth in the film. Yet as *Borderline* undercuts the heterosexual imperative from multiple directions, it also suggests how these trans-

gressions converge *to mediate race*. The borders of sex and race overlap. The femme fatale, empty in herself and completely fabricated, becomes here the prototypic gender and racial scapegoat.

Unlike the effervescent, acrobatic Lulu of *Pandora's Box*, Astrid is crimped and pinched, her exaggerated movements and facial expressions signaling intense bodily discomfort and angst. Just a year before the making of *Borderline*, H.D. criticizes Carl Dryer's heroine from *Joan of Arc* because of sadism to the female spectator: "we are left pinned like some senseless animal, impaled as she is impaled by agony" (*Cinema and Modernism* 132). Significantly she feels "cut up" by Falconetti's Joan: "Do I have to be cut into slices by this inevitable pan-movement of the camera, these suave lines to left, up, to the right, back, all rhythmical with the remorseless rhythm of a scimitar?" (132).

Ironically, H.D. wields the scimitar in her role as Astrid. Both destructive and potentially liberating, the act of cutting literalizes a means of reconstituting embodiment. If Astrid dissects with her gaze (mirroring the filmmaker's camera eye), she is dissected and exposed in her attempts to resolve her psychological problems by enacting the cultural screen that displaces its disavowed desires upon blackness. By *not* embodying the glamorous femme, fabricated to cater to delusive fantasies, Astrid deflects the "negation of the feminine" implicit in phallogocentric desire (Doane of *Pandora's Box* 155).

In *Pandora's Box*, Lulu embodies errant and absent sexuality: all trajectories of desire point towards her yet she herself has none (Doane 152). As with Lulu, the camera gives Pete a body but also deprives him of the agency of desire. Rather than H.D. (the liminal or almost-Lulu) occupying the role of the vehicle invested with desire, Robeson becomes the provisional focus of erotic attention, a body to be inscribed upon with convergent multiple desires. The piano player cherishes a picture of him; the barmaid courts him; and even Thorne tries to possess him through a symbolic handshake in two important doorway scenes; but especially the camera's gaze, which pans lovingly across his skin, providing multiple close-ups of his hands and upward-gazing face. The compelling figure of the femme fatale, both desired and undesired (Lulu meets her death because she acts as a reservoir for unwanted desires), slides into connection with the eschewed sexuality of biracial desire.

Like the figuring of Lulu as Dionysian, expressive sexual force, Pete becomes both transcendent (ironically Olympian) and bodily. But it is in the realm of embodiment that he is banished from the small-town café existence. Lulu is similarly in excess of her surroundings even as she is the fulcrum of erotic energy. Astrid dies as a result of her "excess" (like Lulu she is stabbed), but she is not the film's femme fatale; instead, the film makes this trope more problematic, and through Robeson, marks culture's expulsion of a feminized racial other. Unlike Lulu, Robeson suffers banishment, a form of legal death. The feminizing of his character emerges in part from the cultural conflation of the abject and disavowed with the feminine, a conflation that serves to reify racial boundaries.

Cutting Out the Body

Unlikable as Astrid is, she emblematically severs the mandates of whiteness and heterosexuality; the film's cutting heightens our awareness of the way our bodies are mapped and cut out by social construction. A pivotal scene shows Astrid aggressively wielding a knife (implicitly also the phallus) as she cavorts about a claustrophobic interior, replete with objects endowed with symbolic freight (a stuffed gull, for instance, with its beak holding the ace of spades). Even as Thorne finally turns the knife upon her, Astrid's activity protests against the film's "negation of the feminine." Astrid is visibly contorted; her body speaks dis-ease. Contrastingly, Lulu's status as immobile icon makes her untenable, beheld rather than beholding. Doane theorizes: "Through their structuration as *sight*, the woman, illicit sexuality, and death display an affinity and the woman is guaranteed her position as the very figure of catastrophe" (148).

Significantly, Astrid plays dead before she is actually killed, as if alerting us to the convention of catastrophe and fatality associated with the *femme fatale*. But in *Borderline*, the catastrophe located in the Feminine through an expressionist aesthetic, the *sight*, the to-be-looked-at-ness, shifts between female and male, black and white bodies. The camera, significantly, focuses on Astrid's eyes as piercingly tortured in "seeing," yet the "to-be-looked-at-ness" shifts to Robeson's body. He is the surface exalted and then expunged; figured as the bearer of chaos and the female "dark continent," he must be strategically revoked in order to maintain borders of racial and sexual identity. The two interrelated scenes I here examine disclose the performance of this triple action of cutting, marking and "purging."

Early on, we see Thorne with a knife (what also stands in for a page cutter or a letter-opener). Initially, he points it towards his hand. The close-ups of hands throughout highlight how hysteria somatizes psychic trauma, painstakingly reinforced through meticulous attention to the fragmented body. The wielding of the knife, however, also draws attention to filmic cutting as bodily inscription and dissection. One of the film's most unusual and self-conscious devices is the use of clatter montage, what H.D. describes in her pamphlet as the elaborate, quick splicing between multiple small segments of film.

As Jean Walton argues, the oppositional uses of this form of montage (shots of Pete rapidly intercut with the waterfall, and H.D. with the knife) gives Astrid access to creative power while naturalizing Pete, yet the technique in itself reveals bodies (white and black) as de-naturalized and in bits and pieces. This strategy pointedly interrupts a smooth viewing of the film. H.D.'s wielding of the knife is not an easy assumption of creative power. The film, as Friedberg tells us, was cut and edited largely by Bryher and H.D. while Macpherson was ill. Like the film's disruption of a fixed center of desire, so too the film disturbs notions of single clear-cut auteurship.

However, H.D. never acknowledges her own and Bryher's extensive work on the film. In fact, her pamphlet (as a kind of film manifesto) elevates Macpherson as sole heroic maker of *Borderline*, reauthorizing the modernist myth of autonomous achievement. Most notably she describes Macpherson as a Perseus slaying the gorgons (presumably those who interfere or miscomprehend his creative action) and stealing

their shared "eye." In her Medusan role, H.D. claims the opportunity to slash away at the fabric of phallic self-importance within the film, yet she is slain by an inevitable triumph over the feminine, the threat to masculine inviolability.

After teasingly impinging the knife upon his hand, Thorne rests it against his visage as a dividing line, an act which reveals his self-destructive impulses at the same time as it stakes out the limits of his body. In between shots of Thorne with the knife, we intercut to a panning of Robeson's body; the deployment of the knife then is also here an act of violent impingement upon an(other's) body. This sequence shifts to a shot of the café barmaid using a pair of scissors to gleefully fashion some kind of costume. Bodies, this film emphasizes, are "cut out," both in the sense of formation and exclusion, the one depending upon the other.

In the scene between Thorne and Astrid that follows, every bodily gesture establishes the tensions of this *mise-en-scène*: Thorne curled up on the bed; Astrid putting a record on the gramophone, her shawl extending before her as link with the wing of the stuffed gull by her window, an image of impending death. After Thorne threatens to leave, she "hallucinates" the flashing face of Adah on his departing suitcase and becomes "hysterical"; she collapses to the floor and plays dead, provoking Thorne to return and examine her still figure. Her eyes pop open and, in cobra position, she arises to claim a violent agency usually reserved for masculinity.

When Astrid suddenly rises from "death," the knife reappears. This time Thorne is using it to sharpen a pencil, making this gesture at phallus level. The camera then cuts to the old woman outside looking up at their window and carrying a basket of leeks, phallic-shaped, the very woman who has told Bryher, the café owner, that blacks should not be allowed in the community. In this scene, we are also given a glimpse of a vase of Narcissus and an open book. The choice of flowers pointedly comments upon the scripted, self-centered destructive relationship of the white couple as well as upon the thwarted desire to keep one's ego image intact.

Seizing the knife from Thorne, Astrid darts towards his body, making little cuts in his face and the flowers. The film reveals that the body is a screen, a scriptable surface. To see Astrid with "his" phallus raises his castration anxiety (along with her own difficulties of female creativity), cutting into his sense of bodily omnipotence. In an effort to erase these anxieties, Thorne wrests the knife from Astrid and stabs her, perpetuating the narrative that usually accompanies the *femme fatale*. Her choreographed incursions upon the surface of his skin are sufficient to drive him to penetrate her body. The knife has been somatized as a prosthesis of male hysteria. Astrid doubles for Thorne, revealing his castration as well as the detachability of the phallus from "symbolic" function. As viewers, we experience the *deja vu* of her prone, passive body.

The cutting, however, is not over. We crosscut to a sequence of shots with the barmaid flirting with Pete. She cuts him a white rose to put behind his ear, and then places the knife between her lips. The pair performs a transgendered courtship scene: she bows to the feminized Pete, flower in his ear and a reflective serving-tray behind his head as though he were a gypsy dancer. (The gypsy is another non-Aryan terrorized by the Nazis.) As the barmaid takes the knife from between her lips, the scene dislocatingly shifts to an image of Thorne's bloody knife being dipped into a basin, blood discoloring the water. The scene shows the sexing of Robeson (even if from the sympathetic point-of-view of the barmaid) as linked to Thorne's "crime of

passion," and suggests the sacrificial status of the black body. The white man preserves his sexual power by erasing the other. After Thorne murders Astrid, he bandages himself, goes to the police, and successfully pleads "self-defense." In order to preserve, or rather in another attempt to preserve a phallic presence, he has killed Astrid. This is visibly indeed an act of self-defense. Yet Thorne's desire to preserve his phallic privilege, and the Oedipal narrative that comes with this, become vividly exposed within the "cutting" scene. His disavowed vulnerability notably leads not only to Astrid's death, but also to the destruction he wreaks upon Pete and Adah's relationship.

The avant-garde use of clatter montage, the rapid cutting between shots, in particular, gives the film its "jagged" quality along with the dwelling upon the gestural body to reveal that body "falling to pieces." We cannot as spectators uncritically accept Thorne's point-of-view. Quick cuts purposefully disrupt a continuous narrative, while the use of the shifting, unstable frame reveals the potentially horrific effects of the imprisoning gaze. In particular, the old woman as she intrudes upon the potentially liberated café scene wields such a gaze. The café functions as border space for sexual liberty and repression (probably inspired partly by Bryher's observations in Weimar Berlin). A group of men playing cards in the café glare at Pete after insulting Adah, ostracizing and provoking him into a struggle. Thus while Astrid as "castration threat" dies in the previous cutting scene, the apposite café montage confirms the slippage between the borders of sex and race. After Pete hits one of the jeering men, the other men in the café rise, lifting their fists in racist coalition. The fallen man, after wiping a drop of blood from his nose, smirks and smugly nods his head in chorus with the community of white men with their raised fists. The café scene is spliced with a discontinuous image (it has no coherent place in the narrative scheme and repeats several times) of the old woman gesticulating behind a fire and indeed, foresees, the emergent Nazi regime's malevolent cleansing of all "border" figures in order to constitute the rigid boundaries of a phantasmic unity and national corpus.

Use of self-conscious montage not only foregrounds the *cutting out* of Pete and Adah from the white world but also enacts anxieties regarding bodily and psychic integrity, anxieties associated with notions of racial "purity." This film explicitly concerns itself with gender divisions as they install the phallus or the lack of the phallus as organizing construct. Thorne's anxiety over his masculinity, however, meshes with his uneasiness about race, a feature that underpins Macpherson's position, as Carby suggests. The only depiction of Thorne's affair with Adah, as I have said, shows him at the beginning: towering above a disheveled Adah who has fallen towards the floor. Thorne's biracial relationship reinforces his assertion of dominance and power, and rests on the necessary disowning of his desire, and the expulsion of those figures who apparently illicit it and threaten his bodily stability. It is the disowning of sexual transgression that leads to the violent reinstatement of racial borders. Adah and Pete function not only as receptacles for the disowned, but also as the meeting place for multiple, conflicting desires. The body then, this avant-garde film demonstrates, is not closed off, but visibly made up of boundaries that can be remapped *as they are mapped*.

Thresholds and "Looking Back"

Thresholds, metaphoric and literal, are prominent throughout *Borderline* and underscore the fact that we are in a border town, a liminal society. There are two threshold scenes featuring Thorne and Pete. The first one occurs early in the film, after Adah has returned to Pete. Thorne, sweating and "falling apart," confronts Pete across the threshold. He has cast Adah from him, but now must assert his imaginary "possession" of her through racial dominance. Thorne looks as if he is about to spring upon Pete, while Pete looks back at him with cool equipoise. Bryher (who has followed Thorne to Pete's room) manages to wrest him away apparently "to protect" Pete from some impending violence. After casting Thorne from the scene, Bryher ritualistically extends her arms into space (revealing the lines that mark her sweater) to establish a boundary between the "rivals."

In *Borderline's* undoing the cultural fantasy of black predatory sexuality and violence, Thorne becomes the bodily signifier of these fantasies. After Thorne is acquitted for killing Astrid, he and Pete reenact this threshold scene. Once more he makes eye contact with Pete (but this time the camera lingers upon their exchange) in the purposefully liminal space; Pete returns his gaze. In this shot-reverse-shot, when Pete gazes back at Thorne, the camera gives us a close-up of Pete looking at us. In both scenes, he not only stares Thorne down, but us as well. This is not typical. As Carby remarks of another scenario: "the black subject is not allowed to look back at the viewer" (56). While this scene (as the earlier one) accents the distribution of power over racial lines, here the camera dwells on Pete's gaze which interrupts the narrative's flow; he smiles sardonically at Thorne, with a gaze suffused with the knowledge of a systematic racism which has marked his body as the tomb of white desires.

Why does he shake hands with Thorne? In a biblical context, the handshake is an abbreviation for the touching of loins, which memorialized a promise or contract. In a medieval context, the handshake was the polite way of determining that the stranger was not armed with a concealed dagger. In either context, the handshake has clear homoerotic overtones. Of course, the handshake is also interracial. In the south, such touching between races was prohibited.

Thus, the handshake in *Borderline* reinforces the lack of legal rights available for blacks, but also the taboo against miscegenation is linked in this moment with this erotically charged gesture and forbidden contract/contact. As the camera reveals the white hand on the outside of the black one, we have no emblematic unity with difference, but the sealing of the Oedipal law, confirming for Thorne his sense of having had "Adah" as well as indirectly expunging Pete from the community. The threshold scene is a microcosm of racial difference; moreover, it underscores the act of framing so persistent throughout. In a sense, Pete has been "framed" by Thorne. Yet the doorway is visibly double, and this doubleness opens up the possibility of a reframing (Robeson's dual role in *Body and Soul* comes to mind, here visualized as unresolved tension.) The film does not allow for a single point of view, and the déjà vu of this scene makes Thorne's "triumph" more suspect. After the previous cutting scene, the body, as Grosz pertinently articulates in another context, functions "as the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undecidedly at the pivotal

point of binary pairs" (23). Like the body, montage sequences function as a series of thresholds, joining as they separate.

Borderline exposes the slippage between race and gender, and reveals the cultural hatred of otherness; we need the other in order to maintain our binaries, to keep our identity positions clearly defined. For Walton, the "psychoanalysis of race" that structures the film through Sachs and Freud constructs blacks as immune to neurosis, but therefore, also to creative achievement. "Freud's gendered (and implicitly raced) accounts of sexual repression" exclude blacks from the symbolic order which presumes both the phallus and whiteness as designating features: "The erotic *is* the phallus for which 'civilized' white protagonists compete against a background of 'natural,' black supporting characters" (407). Pete does not, however, recede to a background. Furthermore, the competition for the phallus does not take place only between whites, and unravels with Thorne's symbolic castration in the cutting scene. This second threshold sequence reveals a complex, layered power struggle in which the "silent" display of difference interrogates Thorne's phallic impermeability.

The femme fatale (both elevated and abject) represents a perfect gage of the double process of repression and expression prominent in Weimar film. *Borderline*, like *Pandora's Box*, obsesses over cultural repression as the means of constituting sexual and racial borders. But *Borderline* reframes this figure through Robeson by releasing multiple trajectories of desire and abandoning the focus upon a singular, bounded ego. The intersection and multiplicity of desiring subjects makes a strictly Oedipal narrative in *Borderline* purposefully slippery to locate. The barmaid and manageress are coupled as 'lesbian' alternative, Herring looks longingly at Pete, Thorne shakes hands with Pete in a protracted sequence: all intimate that alternative desires function against the Oedipal structure. Yet the white transgression of racial and sexual boundaries, made clear in the final threshold scene, is what promotes the reinvigoration of borders.

The film engages the spectator in the very process of cutting out borders and the necessary reconfiguration of them. H.D.'s pamphlet represents the film's aesthetics—its deployment of discontinuous images and montage—as part of Macpherson's (therefore also her own) radical strategy to question the cultural mechanics of fixing identity borders when she writes: "When is an African not an African? When obviously he is an earth-god. When is a woman not a woman? When obviously she is sleet and hail and a stuffed sea-gull. He says when is white not white and when is black white and when is white black? You may or may not like this sort of cinematography" (111). The film fetishizes Robeson, yet also engages in an activist exposure of racism, and implicitly of a rising fascism, both in the way bodies are literally cut out in this sense of expulsion and in the way they are constructed by the gaze of dominant culture. The trope of cutting is both imprisoning and potentially radical. This little-known film importantly contributes to the historical shaping and reshaping of cultural fantasies through cinematic modernism.