The Color Mystique:

Miscegenation, Marginalization, and the Stardom of Dorothy Dandridge

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Introduction

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In the May 1957 edition of *Confidential Magazine*, Academy Award-nominated African American actress Dorothy Dandridge found herself at the center of a smear campaign that seized upon and invigorated fears of interracial relations. The article, titled “What Dorothy Dandridge Did in the Woods,” elaborately discussed a casual encounter between the actress and a white bandleader. While the alleged dalliance had presumably occurred several years earlier on the California-Nevada border near Lake Tahoe, the magazine broke the scandal with a vigor that readily revealed a racially skewed perspective. The story asserted that “tan songstress” Dandridge was on a back-to-nature quest in the woods when she encountered a “pale” man, later identified as Daniel Terry. Dandridge supposedly seduced Terry driven by her natural sexual appetite. The tone of the writing is unmistakably sensationalist and sarcastic. The writer remarks that after some “very passionate preliminaries,” Terry must have wondered if Dandridge would be willing to engage in sexual relations in the woods. The question was wholly rhetorical. As oft throughout her career, the preceding paragraphs had already characterized Dandridge as promiscuous, immoral, and driven by natural impulse, i.e. the direct opposite of the idealized notion of the white female. The language left no doubt for the reader that Dandridge—a “suave siren,” “a sensuous singer,” “a glamorous chick” who asks for “nothing more than the open sky”—indeed consented to, and even initiated the encounter. All that remained to be absorbed from the story was that in the case of African American women, sexuality was an unavoidable function of nature; as the writer ended the story, “if the birds were doing it and the bees were doing it, shouldn’t they?” (*Confidential*, May 1957).

This concern with Dandridge’s personal life and her possible interracial love affairs was not limited to white publications. African American magazines were equally disapproving of the actress’ involvement with white men. Other articles published were titled “Dorothy Dandridge—
her 1,000 Lovers” in popular African American tabloid Hep and “Why Dorothy Dandridge is Afraid of Marriage” in photojournalistic magazine Sepia (answer: she does not want to marry a black man but fears a backlash against an interracial union). The articles did not come entirely out of the blue. It was commonly known, though not confirmed, that Dandridge had become involved with Otto Preminger, the Austro-Hungarian director of Carmen Jones who was twenty years her senior (Bogle 320). The magazine intimated that Dandridge would lose her career if she married Preminger, because her fan base consisted almost exclusively of African American viewers who would no longer find her a “suitable” representation of the problems facing the black community if she married outside of it. Dandridge was sensitive to these criticisms. In a letter in response to the article she lamented: “Why did I guard myself when I might have met the man I could have found happiness with? I’ve examined myself over and over on that question, and I think it’s always been largely a matter of a sense of responsibility to my own people […] Above all, I wanted to keep an unblemished reputation for the sake of the members of my race” (Letter to Sepia, 1957).

The letter invites a double interpretation and is emblematic of the imbrications of race, gender, and class concerns that prescribed the social movements of non-white, non-male, non-higher class Americans. First of all, it exemplifies the uneasy relationship between political affiliation and visibility. Accusations of socialism haunted Dandridge’s career due to her perceivedly subversive statements on race, which de facto meant that any statement on race, whether discursive—i.e. in the form of commentary or correspondence—or behavioral—i.e. in her on-screen and off-screen mingling with a set of people of diverse ethnoracial backgrounds—was suspect and subjected to scrutiny. While Dandridge explicitly denounced interest in any political involvement in her writings, the very fact that she was responding to articles written about her in the interest of her race or to “advance” her race are a clear political investment. The Federal Bureau of Investigation amassed a report on Dandridge after an anonymous source
provided them with a letter dated July 23, 1952, that evidenced her readership of the *People's World*, a communist newspaper (4). In it, Dandridge defends herself again against numerous accusations of affiliations with communism, and states that she has “at no time been active politically” and that her “sole interest is a successful career and aiding my people” (6). The comment is telling; while African American women emerged on the cultural scene, political engagement was a faux pas. The only way to carve out a space in the public realm was to present oneself as apolitical, an irony that is hard to ignore, as “aiding [her] people” is in itself a political commitment that was only attainable in a visible function.

Secondly, Dandridge’s final sentence gets at the core of the racial problematic of the 1950s, and at the heart of the complex I will examine in this thesis: miscegenation, even though widely prevalent in society as illustrated by the number of mixed-race people in the U.S., continued to be seen as undesirable and as a threat to the racial integrity of both parties. The “unblemished reputation” Dandridge speaks of belongs to the discourse of miscegenation as degeneration, a discourse that reified the belief in two biologically distinct and pure races that were tainted—i.e. “blemished”—through the mixing of blood, most often espoused by white opponents of intermarriage. That Dandridge, one of the foremost public figures and an advocate for equal opportunity, frames her response in such a way attests to the extent to which such discourses had become ingrained and internalized. This was all part of a 1950s climate that heavily relied on the policing of all subversion to reestablish American dominance in the face of changing global and domestic concerns. Visibility was logically one of the first categories that came under scrutiny. While Foucault uses the metaphor of the hospital and the prison to illustrate the effectiveness of the ocular in regulating social interactions, all concerns that necessitated the extreme surveillance at these institutions are also applicable to American society at large in this post-war period. I will argue that the architecture and infrastructure of society equally revolved around the objective “to avoid undue contact, contagion [and] physical proximity,” only in this
case, the two parties to be separated were white and non-white (Foucault 147). On-screen transgressions of these strict boundaries were less susceptible to government action, as it concerned a representation rather than a real life case, but this did not mean that the policing did not inscribe itself in the cultural scene: movie theatres were largely segregated, meaning that the movie going experience, even if it included on-screen interracial interactions, never threatened the black-white divide in real life. Furthermore, all-black films hardly ever reached a diverse audience, and several of Dandridge’s films with a mixed cast—most notably Tamango—were boycotted.

The fate of Dandridge by no means followed an unusual pattern. African-American performers, especially females, were heavily scrutinized by the dominant institutions, and concerns about their sexual mores often went hand in hand with allegations about their political affiliations. The triple bind that separated them from a dominant position (race, class, gender) made them almost inherently suspects of subversiveness. This thesis will take on the issue of race and visibility, with Dandridge’s career as a focal point in which concerns of gender, race, class, and nationality tie together into a discourse of miscegenation that I propose to call “essential voluntarism.” Neither liberal nor conservative, this discourse manifested itself in an obsession with the ocular, and was thus especially constraining for someone like Dandridge, who found herself a subject of the public gaze 24/7. However, its focus on the visual also inherently generated spaces of subversion. Dandridge’s career demonstrates at once the pervasive power of dominant discourses on miscegenation, as the confusion between her diegetic and non-diegetic persona limited her personally and professionally, and the modes available to challenge these discourses. There were spaces in which the dominant could be bypassed and even inversed. The fact that Dandridge was in the public eye was a blessing and a curse, as visibility has a double function: it limits and it enables at the same time. Dandridge’s visible status as non-white curtailed the palette of roles available to her, but the fact that she, in her public persona as
actress, became visible to a diverse audience gave her an extent of political agency that cannot be ignored. The writings of Hannah Arendt, who explicitly wrote on race in the 1950s, and Michel Foucault, who focused on “the ‘instrumentality’ of sexuality in the making of race” will serve as a starting point to explore the rigid lines of exclusion that marked the 1950s.

Little attention has been given to either Dandridge or African American female performers in the United States in the context of the global and domestic developments of the time. While the career of her contemporary Josephine Baker has been much discussed and continues to spark interest, Dandridge has been reduced to the margins, even in film anthologies. The international component that the two women share, and that has been the bane of much research into Baker, has remained uninvestigated for Dandridge. There has not been a single study of Dandridge’s venture into Europe and her place in the group of anti-colonial and anti-racist black intellectuals. Furthermore, media coverage has only been assessed in a piecemeal fashion, focusing on white publications exclusively. The life of Dandridge has captured the imagination of several biographers. Yet the biographies that have appeared are either motivated by personal gain—such as in the case of her former music manager Earl Mills—or adoration, such as Bogle, who writes that he was “in love with her” his entire life (4). While they are valuable descriptions of the events that characterized her life, they do not draw these events onto a larger map of social restriction (in the U.S.) and opportunity (in film and abroad), the navigation of which depended on categories of difference. Her life, then, is interpreted mostly in terms of her death; Dandridge died at the age of forty-one due to an accidental overdose of prescription drugs, an ending that mythologized her as a tragic victim of a weak mental health and societal pressure, and that characterizes all appraisals of her career.

This thesis will depart from these narrow and retrospective works by firmly restoring Dandridge to the context of a Janus-faced 1950s America. A large collection of personal

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1 At present, Matthew Guterl, Professor in American Civilization and Africana Studies at Brown University, is
correspondence, that no one besides Bogle has accessed, a sustained and targeted study of media coverage across national and racial lines, textual analyses of Dandridge’s on-screen work, and a theoretical investment in discourses of miscegenation will form the core of this study. The latter is necessary because existing theories of miscegenation do not adequately define or even describe the social realities of race and gender in the 1950s—or now. I will suggest possible new ways of understanding miscegenation that can accommodate the theoretical and the cultural, as even black-white miscegenation is far from a homogenous category and presents itself in various permutations. As a fortunate collateral, this study will also explore the writings of Michel Foucault on race, a part of his work that has remained underresearched. Foucault himself wrote that “no one wants to talk about the last part [of *A History of Sexuality*],” i.e. his engagement with race, while he deemed it the most crucial part of his work, and much remains to be gained from a profound analysis of it.

The first chapter will set up this work by investigating the centrality of race in the 1950s. It will do so in a global and political perspective, as race was both a category of social organization and a political instrument. The second chapter will look at the consequences of completing a comprehensive study on Baker, her life in France, and her rainbow family.

2 The reason for my focus on race is its persistent importance as a category of classification and domination in the U.S. The continuing existence of racio-ethnic hierarchies is obscured by claims that the U.S. has now entered an era of “color-blindness” or “postraciality,” both of which ignore the daily realities of racism, economic disenfranchisement, and political marginalization of people of color. In other words, while the discourses and implications of race have taken different forms throughout U.S. history, at the core the very same process of classification is still central to society. To understand this, it is important to show how the current situation stems directly from earlier conceptions of race. The beginning of the Cold War is a particularly fruitful period for this as it was the inception of one of the last major modifications in racial thinking that would produce the Civil Rights movement. It is key to grasp the discourses of race that prevailed in the 1950s on their own terms, and not via an anachronistic lens or by simply taking the concept for granted, as race was directly linked to the global dominance and thus well-being of the nation. The decade is also a contained period; as Dudziak concludes in the same vein as other authors, the “Cold War imperative for social change spanned a particular era” (249). As such, it is the perfect case study for how definitions of race have shifted and how this specific shift did not change the dominant constitution of U.S. society. Race became represented in another shape, but the initial challenge was quickly incorporated into dominant culture, abating the radical potential and maintaining race as a classificatory tool. Incorporating these changing definitions of race into scholarly works is key to understanding the 1950s and the climate within which performers such as Dandridge operated. Within a relatively short period of time, the U.S. ostensibly projected a 360 degree turn in its racial ideology to the larger world, impelled by global and domestic concerns. To take an example from Borstelmann, global developments profoundly influenced the Civil Rights Movement, which in turn accelerated anticolonialism (93). In short, Fredric Jameson’s mantra to “always historicize” informs this study, as this historicization can show how race is an historically changing category of
this redefinition for ideas about miscegenation, and provide a new definition of the term to adequately capture the entangled and conflicting forces operating along raced and gendered lines. 3 On-screen depictions of race and gender crystallize these myriad impetuses, and through readings of films such as Carmen Jones and Island in the Sun I will demonstrate how the visual register for discussing race mixing also opened up spaces of subversion. The third chapter will argue that these changing appraisals of race enabled racial fluidity as long as the central binary of white/non-white, dominant/subordinate, did not become endangered. Indian, Caribbean, or even Mediterranean roles were attainable for Dandridge, but whiteness remained a privileged category. The final chapter will then assess the international chapter of Dandridge’s career, both in terms of a comparison between American and European perspectives on race and an analysis of the political concerns this posed for anti-communist initiatives in the U.S..

social construction. This awareness can in turn serve as a stepping stone to re-envision race in non-hierarchical ways or to de-center race as the dominant mode of classification.
3 This is key to understanding the 1950s and the films that were its products, as it included elements from both constructivist and essentialist camps but was the only mode of thinking that adequately captured the political currency of race: anti-miscegenation initiatives served to reinscribe class and gender hierarchies as well. I propose that the word in its current usage is linked exclusively to race, while it is just as much an instrument of class, gender, and regional control, as my reading of Island will underline. Essential voluntarism is my own definition of a third discourse that permeated thinking about race in the 1950s, in addition to essentialism and constructivism that already vied for dominance. While incorporating significant elements from the essentialist camp—specifically in its focus on the ocular function of race as unalterable—there is one profound difference: race as a category of social classification would not disappear because skin color would remain visible, but the essentialist voluntarists did believe that the hierarchy and meanings attached to it could disappear. Because they equated race with skin color, it was never a social construction, but the meanings that it carried were. Therefore, their specific brand of race theory incorporated elements from both, acknowledging the pervasive nature of race while at the same time allowing thought about modes to go beyond its functioning in society. They view power as a structure that comes from everywhere, and “cannot and must not” be centralized, because if “the various sources from which it springs are dried up, the whole structure becomes impotent” (Arendt 54). This definition of power is crucial in understanding the essential voluntarists position on miscegenation, as it is only such a definition that enables a very personal,
I: The Black Chameleon: Re-racing the 1950s

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When Dorothy Dandridge landed her first starring role in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s *Bright Road*, a 1953 glimpse into the life of a black Alabama schoolboy, race was a hotly-debated political issue in the precursors to the Civil Rights Movement. The film’s reluctance to overtly tackle the realities of racial and economic disenfranchisement—and its neglect of capitalizing on its setting of an all-black school—was regarded as a missed opportunity for a nearly all-black production to firmly place the issue of racial equality on the agenda. I will argue that the decade’s racial impetus was one of integration—but not in the domestic way it is often supposed. The 1950s was not characterized by Brown v. the Board of Education or similar domestic initiatives, but stood in the function of U.S. global aspirations. The surge of interest in race was ironically accompanied by a heightened surveillance of interracial relations (hence the opposition to *de facto* integration), but was always first and foremost the result of initiatives to project an image of the U.S. as an egalitarian nation. An exhaustive body of literature was devoted to redefining race from biologically determined to socially constructed, but in the process reproduced the very category of race it was supposed to deconstruct. Recent literature on these initial stages of the Cold War nevertheless largely ignores the centrality of race and miscegenation, while they cannot be fully understood without grasping the contention over their definitions and implications. The anachronistic lens makes the 1950s redefinition of race as a social construct—a view almost universally accepted now—seem homogenous and universal, whereas it was far from being so. Race and its local incarnations and definitions have to be reintroduced to adequately capture the spirit of the era.

Only when the absolute infiltration of race into all categories of social life is acknowledged can criticisms by movie writers such as Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* regional appraisal of miscegenation; it is such a diverse term, with so many different meanings, that it can only be
on performers such as Dandridge be understood. He wrote that *Bright Road* is “a cozy detour around the fundamental issue [of racial discrimination] that is raised” and that its “caution and vagueness” result in a “pretty” Hollywood production rather than a realistic cry for action (A4). His comment did not come out of the blue; opposing school segregation had already been an integral pillar of African American civil rights initiatives since a series of court decisions in the early 1950s that upheld segregation, an investment that would eventually lead to the unprecedented ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* in May 1954. Dandridge frequently attempted to move beyond race and focus on other markers of difference, but her attempts at transcendence were read as a form of betrayal by the African American community and as an inherently political statement by those in charge. *Bright Road* never even alluded to this political climate, and consciously so. When Dandridge was asked to describe the script’s appeal for her, she noted that its transcendence of its immediate environment solidified its attraction. She was “profoundly fond of…a theme which showed that beneath any color skin, people were simply people. I had a feeling that themes like this might do more real good than the more hard-hitting protest pictures. I wanted any white girl in the audience to look at me performing in this film and be able to say to herself, 'Why, this schoolteacher could be me’” (qtd. in Conrad 26). Reviews such as Crowther’s demonstrate that even films that aspired to be non-political by focusing on the human aspect rather than on color were then read as a political statement in themselves. Refraining from comment was regarded as reactionary and stifling. The same fate befell Dandridge, who often bemoaned her public persona, which differed from her private one at crucial points, especially with regard to her political investments and sexual mores.

In the Cold War context, race thus continuously infiltrated discussions on a variety of social issues. Part of this resulted from the new international dimensions that now framed the debate, as the Cold War was never just a double act between the United States and the Soviet
Union. On the world stage, a group of more important actors stepped into the spotlight; people of color, from Asia but especially from Africa, formulated their own claims to freedom and as such came to define the Cold War. In this paradigm of what Christina Klein has termed “the triangulated politics” of the era, performers such as Dandridge were a risk factor to the U.S.’s ambitions to become leader of the free world, and therefore had to be integrated (ix). This triangulated structure directly affected the U.S, and it was mostly African American intellectuals or artists—those in the public eye—that keenly understood the opportunities afforded by such ambitions. Richard Wright wrote a well-publicized report about the Bandung Conference of 1954, a meeting of “the underdogs of the human race” who were united solely but firmly by “what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel” (12). Wright’s remark served as a reminder that the United States faced clear obstacles on the road to world leadership.

However, it is crucial to note that in the 1950s, these relationships were far from past, nor was there exclusively a relationship to the West, as many of those oppressed were in fact from there. The study of the intricate links between the Cold War and advancement in civil rights has attracted the attention of a select group of scholars during the past decade.\(^4\) However, the body of

\(^4\) I would like to devote a few sentences to the possible implications of this hegemony of the few. The field has been dominated by a core group of six scholars: Brenda Gayle Plummer, Penny von Eschen, Thomas Borstelmann, Alexander La Conde, Jeff Woods, and Mary Dudziak—of course there are others working in the field, but these six are responsible for the leading works on the Cold War and civil rights and, furthermore, have all reviewed at least the works of two of the others.

While they come from different scholarly backgrounds, the authors all employ similar interpretative frameworks that are methodologically far from perfect, as highlighted by their incomplete attention or limited sensitivity to the fluidity and malleability of race to serve both integrationist and segregationist agendas. Plummer adeptly explores ideological antagonisms among African Americans, but pays no attention to how this was seized upon by segregationists or how a similar fragmentation afflicted white Americans when formulating policy. Von Eschen repeats this oversight, whereas Woods presents the inverse of this problem, as he casts white southerners as a homogenous group while ignoring dissenting voices from within. Borstelmann and Dudziak are not so much concerned with ideological structures at all and rather focus on the domestic. In other words, there seems to be a lack of synthesis, as none of the five manages to truly span the full range of international/national or white/non-white concerns—admittedly, this would be very hard, but some acknowledgement or explanation of the gaps and silences in each work would render them more transparent and easier to contextualize.

This is related to the question of the possible negative effects of a limited number of scholars working in the same field; does the fact that all scholars enter into dialogue with one another lead to a culture of mutual quoting that impedes fresh approaches. Recent works such as Kate Baldwin’s Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963 evidences that the answer to that question is no. One of the new scholars in the field, her interdisciplinary background sets her apart from the previously mentioned core group.

Baldwin shows how ideas about race were popularly dispersed, and is the most appealing writer of the six.
literature devoted to the Cold War and the domestic racial politics of the United States says surprisingly little about race. The expansive and often volatile connections between African Americans and Africans, Asian Americans and Asians, are given little attention. Rather, the books are informed by a view of race as a fixed and unchanging category of subjectivity within this timeframe, as a stable factor in the investigation of transnational alliances and domestic anti-colonial initiatives. Yet, much like the Cold War, race was far from the neat category the authors made it out to be, and could serve many masters. After aligning themselves with Africa, African Americans started to distance themselves from the continent, even “trivializing and exoticizing a homogenized and remapped Africa” (Von Eschen 146). Radicalism had gone out of vogue, and patriotism became the new buzzword to claim equal representation. The way in which shifting definitions of race are incorporated—or more often, not incorporated—into existing historiography is disconcerting, as all statements about race, even those commonly seen as purely ‘historical,’ inevitably infer theories of race and racial difference that are grounded in other areas of social life, such as politics or culture. Especially in the 1950s, in which race became contested in all areas of public life, it is essential for scholars to clearly articulate which definition of race informs their analysis. I will therefore analyze and complicate discourses surrounding race in the 1950s, re-racing the decade in order to fully understand the intricacies that informed the debate on miscegenation.

The exigent problems that the U.S. had to tackle presented themselves on both a global and a national scale. The integration of the armed forces during the war had convinced many that the same privileges should extent to African Americans at home—after all, a significant number had made the ultimate sacrifice for the country. Competing discourses, mostly originating in the

Whereas the other six focus mainly on policy, Baldwin supplies the impact of Cold War concerns on culture, literature in this case. It is immediately clear that this cultural approach allows her to engage with popular ideas about race and other categories of difference in a way that the other five authors cannot; in studying the literary works, she meticulously traces how challenges to U.S. whiteness were carefully written into existence in dialogue with the Soviet situation, and how these written challenges reached a large audience.
southern states, still vehemently opposed integration on the basis of a fear of racial and thus national degeneration. On the other hand, it became a top priority of the United States to secure the allegiance of the continents of Africa and Asia to the western capitalist mode. As Thomas Borstelmann notes, “the strategy of preserving a unified Free World alliance of the First World and the Third World was integral, not peripheral” to containing communism (136). The Third World was gripped by liberation struggles and anti-colonialist desires, and the prospect of a power vacuum rendered these budding nations vulnerable to any country that promised them stability and a liberated future. The question was therefore whether the Soviet Union or the United States could outfit them with the most alluring commitment to self-determination.

Containment could paradoxically only be achieved through integration; the United States had to project itself as a morally sound nation to be able to justify its claim to world leadership, and segregation at home did nothing to persuade African or Asian peoples that the U.S. was capable of representing the interests of people of all colors. In order to integrate the nations of the world into its capitalist and democratic system, it first had to integrate African Americans at home.

What the existing literature does not adequately grasp is that this was as much a material process as an immaterial one, as it was only made possible through a redefinition of race. Challenges to white supremacy arose all over the world, from Asia to Africa to the U.S.’ imperialism at home, and Borstelmann traces the development of domestic policies to prevent global tensions from leading to uprisings “from below,” as Eisenhower called it, by appeasing minorities with gradual, non-structural change (97). Understandings about race were central to this question. In the 1950s, not coincidentally, a vast body of literature addressed “the race question.” UNESCO published statements in 1950 and a revised version in 1951 on what exactly race was. In 1950, a select group of scholars and scientists wrote that “for all social purposes, race is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth. The myth of ‘race’ has created an enormous amount of human and social damage…[T]o recognize [the unity of mankind] and to
act accordingly is the first requirement of the modern man” (UNESCO, 1950). The aftermath of World War II, the move towards decolonization in Africa and Asia, and especially the drive towards containment informed these new ideas about race. Particularly in the Cold War context, they served important policy objectives for the United States; race as a category of social analysis thus cannot be separated from other realms such as diplomacy, and the government devised a policy that still had to be written into popular cultural categories and representations rather than the other way around. To integrate, it was crucial that African Americans were no longer regarded as a separate race with biologically inferior constitutions, but as socially disadvantaged citizens who could become successful participants if given equal opportunity.

While public officials knew that the image of the U.S. in the global imagination depended on the way it dealt with its non-white citizens, American society was far from united on the “race question,” and the Cold War context only complicated matters further. As Jeff Woods demonstrates, the rhetoric of anticommunism was used by both segregationists and integrationists to further their goals, and both groups achieved relative success—respectively in the southern states and in the federal government—by playing on the fear of communist infiltration in American society and the world at large. Race was not simply a category of social organization, but seen as central to the wellbeing of the nation as a whole. The internal imperialism of the U.S. undermined its desire to serve as the leader of the free world. The non-white population of the U.S. and its allies used the nation’s geopolitical ambitions to its advantage by actively seeking publicity. African Americans used negative publicity of American racism to carve out a space of their own, for example by emphasizing that “one dark face from the U.S. [as a foreign representative] is of as much value as millions of dollars in economic aid” (qtd. in Von Eschen 132). In the most notorious case of diplomatic embarrassment, an ambassador from Chad on his way to meet President Kennedy was refused service in a diner in Maryland because the waitress could not tell if “he was an ordinary run-of-the-mill nigger or an
ambassador” (qtd. in Dudziak 153). The ambassador spoke for all newly independent nations when he remarked that it was incidents such as these that “make normal relations between the United States and African nations very strained” (ibid). Change in the U.S. was a slow and contentious process, but significant change needed to happen almost overnight in order to secure the U.S. international hegemony. The solution was a change in appearance rather than content. White supremacy remained at the core of the American project, it just had to be couched in different terms to assume world leadership.

The redefinition of race as a construct led to attempts to integrate in public life, a move that was accompanied by an even more feverish drive to separate white and non-white privately. Miscegenation became a focal point for competing perspectives, at once the ultimate proof of social integration and the harbinger of degeneration, which makes the oversight in secondary literature even more surprising. Harry Shapiro, Director of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, wrote a volume for UNESCO’s series *Race and Science: The Race Question in Modern Science* titled “Race Mixture.” The fifty-six page booklet, printed in 1951, placed the mixing of races in a global and historical context, but adhered to idea of an origin in pure racial identities that later intermingled. Shapiro writes that “race mixture must be coeval with race differentiation” (7). The origin of much of the UNESCO documents could be directly traced to a study that appeared six years earlier, Gunnar Myrdal’s groundbreaking but contested *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal was commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation in 1944 to provide an unbiased report on race relations in the U.S., supposedly facilitated by his Swedish nationality and thus lack of socialization to American discourses on race. While Myrdal does not employ the word ‘miscegenation,’ he argues that it is the “anti-amalgamation doctrine” that sets the U.S. apart from other countries in its treatment of its black citizens. The ideologies of race, Myrdal suggests, were not local, but national: “On the inherited inferiority of the Negro people there exists among white Americans a whole folklore, which is remarkably similar throughout
the nation,” he wrote (54).

Ascribing the pervasiveness of anti-miscegenation sentiments to an “American creed,” Myrdal effectively removed responsibility from the individuals engaging in racial violence, such as lynchings. Race might be a social construction, but, if his reasoning was extended, so were racists. While attempting to remove the cloak of biological determinism from race, he then unintentionally reinscribed the category with a kind of social fatality. The biological emphasis of amalgamation discourses was replaced by a theory of acculturation, but this did not abate the social realities of racism—rather the opposite; race was such an integral part of the American imagination and identity that removing it would equal undermining one of the country’s core foundations. It was to retain these foundational privileges of whiteness that “interracial sexual relations are more closely guarded than ever,” and not, as Myrdal suggested, to release “thwarted sexual urges” on the part of white southerners (127). It was not the relations per se, but the possible offspring from them that the fears of whites centered on. As color was immediately visible, and inextricably linked to the distribution of participatory rights and privilege, any confusion had to be prevented. It was passing that anti-miscegenation laws were designed to protect, and Myrdal was quick to reassure his commissioners that full amalgamation remained a “distant possibility,” especially with the new contraceptive options (155). However, even Myrdal never questioned the perceived existence of two separate races—it was clear to him that black and white were separate, even if he advocated no legal sanctions be attached to this visual discrepancy. The monolithic and homogenous black identity was externally imposed and only reified the artificial categories of race. Black Marxists such as Oliver Cox in his 1948 *Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* consequently criticized Myrdal and other race researchers for their “tendency to proletarianize a whole people,” as blacks were regarded as a single, wholly disenfranchised entity (344). As Cox continued, the “whole racial atmosphere tends to be

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5 To be sure, sex played a key role in lynchings, but was never the decisive factor. Race, and the privileges
determined by whites,” as they set the terms and hierarchy upon which other races encounter each other (356).

The 1950s was the extension of this multifaceted debate on race and its implications, and a twilight zone between competing discourses of biology, sociology, and variations and combinations of the two. The racial politics of Dandridge’s films equally have to be located as being in a liminal state, produced in a time when “social constructivism” was dictated to become en vogue but essentialism still reigned supreme. In a time of social change and upheaval, it is telling of the times that exponents of several perspectives on race found their way into film productions. Whereas Bright Road formally abstained from comment, its emphases do suggest its stance on the contemporary social state. Hence my suggestion that Dandridge’s work can be investigated, in contrast to historical works, as an emblem of the structure of feeling of the early Cold War period. The structure of feeling, theorized by Raymond Williams, is the segment of thinking that combines the objective and the affective, a response to the material that holds immaterial significance and rallies perceptions before it can be coherently articulated (131-132). The visual is therefore always key in this process. As such the structure of feeling is delicate and barely tangible as it is forming, but artistic productions can capture some of this spirit and reveal it to later generations. Her oeuvre and personal position exactly capture what Williams coined the “undeniable experience of the present,” the “specificity of the present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining product” (128). In other words, a shift in power balances was brewing beneath the surface, and changing ideas about race exerted their influence long before they would anachronistically be graced with the names “essentialism” or “social constructivism.” Dandridge is therefore the ideal figure to gain an entry into 1950s culture and hierarchies, and the next chapter will analyze her place in its raced and gendered confines. While

associated with it, invested all categories of difference.
she is an exceptional figure, in that she had an extraordinary artistic talent and the possibility to travel the world, her status as a liminal figure—between the U.S. and Europe, between black and white—renders her a woman of her times.
On August 17, 1957, *The New York Times* ran a photo of dozens of Ku Klux Klan members picketing a movie theatre in Jacksonville, Florida. Dressed in hoods and robes, and with the bright neon lights illuminating their white costumes in the dark night, they marched by the popular downtown theatre unmasked. The reason for their gathering was the premiere of *Island in the Sun*, a film by Robert Rossen that had attracted significant media attention even before its release due to its depiction of interracial romance. While *The New York Times* refrained from directly stating that racial tensions were at the heart of the southern opposition, its one-line summary of the plot was telling. Writer Thomas Hardy characterized *Island in the Sun* as featuring a “cast [that] includes two Negroes, Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge, and part of the plot concerns them in romantic involvements with white persons” (7). When the film reached North Carolina several weeks later, any trace of ambiguity had faded. A group of Klansmen paraded in front of the Visulite Theatre in Charlotte in broad daylight, carrying signs that read: “We protest the showing of this integrated film ‘Island in the Sun’ in N.C.” (photo front page). In North Carolina too, the Klansmen went unmasked. The picket line had been announced publicly by William Somerset, national organizer for the pro-segregation labor union United Southern Employees Association (USEA). The USEA announced actions against any theatre that would screen the “interracial film.” The *Rock Hill Herald* quotes Somerset as stating that they would picket “in an orderly fashion” and refrain from speaking with anyone who approached them (August 30, 1957). However, the newspaper makes no mention of the fact that the six pickets, two from Charlotte and four from Rock Hill, were in any way affiliated with the KKK or would don its characteristic costume. The visibility of the Klan members is at the other end of the spectrum of privilege that marginalized African Americans. Their social standing and role had educated them that they could march without hiding their identity, as there would be no
(serious) repercussions for claiming and explicitly performing whiteness.

Performing miscegenation was an entirely different story, as the commotion surrounding *Island in the Sun* reveals. As the film industry distilled the most potent concerns into filmable form, carefully deciding what could and could not be shown, 1950s movies are an especially fruitful object of study to discern the dominant tensions and contradictions that shaped debates in the decade. *Island in the Sun* clearly demonstrates that what exactly counts as miscegenation, i.e. what becomes the object of action, is socially produced, both in society at large and internalized in the minds of its individual inhabitants. That miscegenation had become the locus of this double production, socially and individually, is not surprising, as “sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species,” as Foucault wrote at the end of his *History of Sexuality* (146). It was a site where race, class, and gender privilege could all be regulated simultaneously, rendering it of prime importance to the dominant group. This chapter will offer a critique of existing miscegenation theory and argue that a more pluralistic, individualistic, and regional understanding of miscegenation more adequately typifies the 1950s, and will offer a detailed analysis of *Island* to demonstrates how these theories crystallized in cinematic form.

*Theories of Miscegenation*

As drama critic and professor Henry Popkin observed in his “On the Horizon: Hollywood Tackles the Race Issue” for *Commentary Magazine* in 1957, the fifties had seen the emergence of a “genuine interest in the dramatic possibilities of miscegenation” (354). His piece provides an overview of Hollywood initiatives to incorporate the pressing social issue into its productions. The cinematic genre presented a relatively liberal arena for such attempts, as on-screen depictions could serve as both a culmination and provocation of existing social tensions, but his turn-of-phrase “dramatic possibilities” is crucial; not so much the social implications or realities
of miscegenation, but its potential for box office success was at the heart of the film industry’s interest. However, miscegenation is first of all not an abstract process, or a “dramatic” device, but a real social process that produces realities that circumscribe the movement of individuals at a certain place and at a certain time. The direct and tangible effects of miscegenation discourses are therefore always regionally specific. Furthermore, it is a social script, performed by actors who perceive it as anchored in biological genetics and who discursively and behaviorally reproduce it. Dandridge’s films, of which I will analyze Island in the Sun (1957) in detail, all reflect the shift in race thinking that defined the 1950s, as discussed in chapter I. The producers of Island in the Sun made concessions to the film’s content so as to “not lose the South” (qtd. in Popkin 355). The prospective revenue of ticket sales in the southern states preempted any definitive or bold statement concerning miscegenation or intermarriage. The political, in other words, remained firmly subsumed to the economic, but the silences that Hollywood implemented—even in films directly concerning miscegenation—were as telling as its emphases, and tie into a discourse of miscegenation as historically and regionally produced and performed. What counted as miscegenation in some states, was completely acceptable in others.

This contextual meaning has its roots in the fact that race, and by extension miscegenation, unlike economic status or legal status, is both ocular and discursive. It is continuously inscribed into social space by what Michel Foucault called “the visibility of bodies” and by the excision of power that inherently classifies this body. This classification establishes a distinct and constrained social paradigm based on the body’s color (147). However, this was at once an individual and a social issue, as attempts to counter miscegenation required both “disciplines of the body” and the “regulation of populations” (145). It was precisely in this former category that the U.S. fell short; it could institute legal restrictions and enforcements, but the existence of mixed-race individuals demonstrated that it could not penetrate into the private sphere of individual behavior. The regulation of “sex as a political issue” assumed key
importance in the U.S. during the 1950s, when miscegenation in itself was a dangerous testimony to governmental inadequacy, and connotations of a weak nation immediately opened up concerns about a communist takeover. Sexuality, as Foucault wrote, became “an object and a target” in “mythical concern with the purity of blood” (143-149). This was tied to notions of class—as skin color served as a visual marker of social status and privilege—and gender, as whiteness was a form of property that could only be protected by policing the sexuality of the white female.\(^6\) Again, individual practice and social ideology were not effortlessly congruent, but due to the combination of the “fantasies of blood and the paroxysms of disciplinary power” the individual ‘deviant’ practices could not be discursively expressed. This is where the ocular comes in; actresses such as Dandridge, through their very appearance on screen, visually expressed what could not be expressed discursively; while the state disavowed it, race mixing was a \textit{fait accompli}. The interracial pairings of \textit{Island} similarly challenged the status quo, but could also never explicitly do this from an American context or on a general level, and rather played out the question on the micro-scale of one couple safely contained on a fictional Caribbean island. Miscegenation is thus revealed as a construct that served political motives, as there was clearly no biological reason for restricting it, but at the same time, society did regulate the reception/social status of these mixed race individuals from a biological perspective. As Elise Lemire writes in her book-length historical study of the term, “we hold on to biology when faced with the issue of race and sex” in order to sustain white privilege in the social sphere (145).

While the state could not prevent the act of miscegenation in the private realm, it could sanction its consequences for the involved individuals in the political realm.

Arendt similarly alternates between an essentialist and constructivist view of race depending on context. She observes in her “Reflections on Little Rock” that “in all parts of the

\(^6\) Illicit relations between white men and non-white women were condoned, as the possible offspring from these relationships was automatically coded as non-white. White women were the white males’ only option for
country, the Negroes stand out; because of their “visibility” (47). This state is “unalterable and permanent,” which is what separates African Americans from other immigrants; a foreign accent, an issue of “audibility,” disappears after a few generations, whereas the visibility is passed down indefinitely (ibid). Her analysis that visibility is of prime importance because it is “precisely appearances that ‘appear’ in public” is apt, and even made more poignant by the legal statutes that Browning summarized. It was not a belief in inferior qualities that initially prevented the free movements and equality of African Americans, but their color. Society in the 1950s was not colorblind, but blinded by color. Arendt continued to state that even the principle of equality “cannot equalize natural, physical characteristics,” and it is precisely the connotations of the physical that divided society along class, race, and gender lines (48). Dorothy Dandridge was labeled a “suave siren” because she was visibly African American and female, and a long tradition of perceptions had trained the dominant group to ascribe these qualities to her. The problem was therefore not that skin color was biologically determined, but that certain traits were linked to it as if biologically determined as well. As Arendt predicted, once socioeconomic differences were eradicated by legal action, Americans would focus even more on visible differences, those that were “by nature unlike the others” (ibid). Her form of essentialism is thus only concerned with the physical and visible.

The fact that race is determined by the ocular, on an individual basis, also ensures that Arendt too regarded race and miscegenation as a psychological, and therefore individual, process rather than a mere physical one. This founded the belief that miscegenation and intermarriage should be at the discretion of individuals. It is here that Arendt wrote the line that caused so much controversy: “what equality is to the body politic, discrimination is to society” (50). Social custom can be against integration and miscegenation, and society can discriminate against mixed race couples, as long as there is no legal enforcement of this segregation. Miscegenation is not a reproducing white social privilege, and in a patriarchal society it thus was the women who were seen as central to
social matter, but an individual, psychological one that eludes any legal measures:

The third realm [after the social and the political], in which we move and live together with other people—the realm of privacy—is ruled neither by equality nor by discrimination, but by exclusiveness. Here we choose with whom we wish to spend our lives, our personal friends and those we love; and our choice is not guided by likeness or qualities shared by a group of people—it is not guided, indeed, by any objective standards or rules—but strikes inexplicably and unerringly, at one person in his uniqueness, his unlikeness to all other people we know. (52-53)

Both Arendt and Foucault thus pay specific attention to miscegenation in their discussion of the construction of race. Through a reading of Island it becomes clear that this dichotomy of race as at once constructed and at the same time permanent means that in the diegetic world, it is this very visibility that constrained minorities in the non-diegetic world that generated possibilities of subversion. Actresses like Dandridge, by reaching a large audience through their work, constituted a challenge to the hegemony both in content and through their mere presence. This meant that when miscegenation was finally brought to the screen in 1957’s Island in the Sun, it contained not only the dominant ideas about interracial mixing, but also several counter-narratives that ensured that the film did not fit into traditional characterizations of either essentialist or constructivist. By 1957, thinking about race and miscegenation had evolved into a debate over the nature of democracy and the efficacy of the state, investing all representations of it with great significance.

*The First Interracial Kiss: Breaking Boundaries in Island in the Sun (1957)*

While the issue of miscegenation on screen was new to Dorothy Dandridge as well, as Island the American project of continued superiority.
was her first production that allowed her to play opposite white actors, her previous oeuvre already demonstrated her potential to challenge existing race, class, and gender arrangements. *Carmen Jones* (1954), an all-black adaptation of Bizet’s opera, had cemented Dandridge’s place in Hollywood, with an Academy Award nomination as its culmination. *Carmen*, while not explicitly dealing with miscegenation, had contained several spaces in which dominant race, class, and gender conventions were rewritten; it expressed a hierarchy of color within the black community (with “Lieutenant Caspar Milquetoast” as the clearest example of intra-racial discrimination) and chronicles the main character’s refusal to be “cooped up” by patriarchy. It is the role of Carmen that would define Dandridge’s further career, as the sexual agency, exoticism, and confidence of Carmen characterized all roles she was consequently asked to play. *Island* was no different, as it cast Dandridge in the role of a West Indian native who becomes the object of desire of a wealthy Englishman. It marked Dandridge’s return to the screen after her

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7 Whereas most readings have either typified Dandridge’s sexually liberated Carmen as a “sex goddess” set up solely for the pleasure of the male viewer (Rippy, Lightning) or a victim of male violence (Gilbert, Rippy), the role provides an ultimate challenge to patriarchy by demanding it to substitute violence for silent rule, and Carmen—though she meets an untimely end at the hands of her former lover—stands out throughout the movie for her articulation of female agency (“I can’t stand being cooped up”) and a disregard for classic markers of social status (“One man gives me a diamond stud/and I won’t give him a cigarette/one man treats me like I was mud/and all I got that man can get”). The line that “only Carmen owns Carmen” perfectly captures the film’s gender politics (as explored in-depth by Marguerite Rippy). This self-valuation, a definition of self that is not relational but determined only by one’s sense of self-worth, is the ultimate subversion; that a woman is not defined by her relation to a man, but by her relation to herself might not be revolutionary now, in the conservative and patriarchal 1950s it was groundbreaking. The role transformed Dandridge’s image from the shy nightclub singer into a “sex goddess” (Rippy 142).

In 1955, Dandridge was offered the lead role in *The King and I* as part of a five-year contract with Twentieth Century Fox, an unprecedented deal for an African American actress, or any actress for that matter. There were few studios that contracted actors for such an extended period of time—only Sandy Deschel had received a similar contract the year before—and Dandridge’s appointment demonstrates that studios were confident that she could garner box office success (November 3, 1954, *Chicago Tribune*). However, the selection of roles was less groundbreaking. The roles placed her in the position of the exotic woman, often for the pleasure of the white male. What is notable about them is that they allowed her to portray a wide variety of ethnicities and races, but that the white/black divide never became endangered. Racial fluidity had become more accepted now that the latest scholarship dismissed race as artificial, but the commodity of whiteness remained reified, an instrument of social and class control that had become too ingrained to explode. Even in the *King and I*, Dandridge would play an exotic character, a Burmese girl named Tuptim who is brough to Siam as a slave to marry the king. Journalists called it “a honey of a role” and remarked that there were “many people here [Hollywood] who hope she gets the Oscar” for *Carmen Jones* (Hopper 14). Dandridge ended up losing to Grace Kelly and would not take another role until 1957, but the tabloids continued to report on her whereabouts throughout her years of absence from the screen. Specifically her relationship with Austrian-Hungarian director Preminger, twenty years her senior, was well-documented, as were alleged dalliances with other white men. This focus on interracial relationships in her private life helps to explain some of the controversy that struck *Island* even before its release.
triumphant breakthrough in Carmen, after she had declined several lucrative offers for more film work in the three years before Daryl F. Zanuck approached her, including a starring role in The King and I.

Set on the fictional island of Santa Marta in the Caribbean, a British crown colony, Island opens with a dialogue that states that 9/10 of its inhabitants are of colored or of mixed blood (4). While it is thus unsurprising that interracial relationships should occur in the film, the plot is groundbreaking in its representation of miscegenation; it explores a wide plurality of relationships that cross or complicate racial lines. It pairs a mulatto woman with a white man, exposes one of the foremost families in its plantocracy as possessing black ancestry, and, most scandalously for the time, focused on the love affair between a white woman and a mulatto man. It demonstrates at once the importance of the ocular in determining racial hierarchies as it does race’s imbrications with “political power,” which leads to “infinitesimal surveillances” (Foucault 145-147). Island reveals race as a construct by suggesting that the idea of class and cultural whiteness complicates a strictly racial hierarchy, as the wealthy and influential Fleury-family is allowed to continue a comfortable existence even after a newspaper ‘outs’ them as mixed-race, but it simultaneously reinforces essentialist understandings of the category in its treatment of the black male-white female pairing and by presenting class as inherently raced.

The film was the first in American history to feature a kiss—be it a very quick and innocent one—between characters of two different races, a fact that is emblematic of changing attitudes about race. The U.S. film industry was strictly regulated, and all scripts had to conform to the Motion Picture Production Code, which was established to respond to the “high principles of public responsibility” of the medium, as film was believed to hold a “significant influence on the life of a nation” (1-3). It was furthermore believed that the motion picture “may be directly responsible for spiritual and moral progress, for higher types of social life, and much of correct thinking” (4). Film was seen not only as a “medium for the expression” of the zeitgeist and
social impulses of the time, but simultaneously as a medium that determined it (“Preamble” 1-3).
The cause-effect reasoning that is now dismissed as too simplistic in favor of more audience-centered theories of reception thus still held sway in the 1950s; the belief that people would act on what was communicated to them via motion pictures was widely influential in the decision to restrict behavior that was deemed socially undesirable, such as miscegenation or working class revolts, on screen. From March 31, 1930 until December 1956, the PCA explicitly stated that “miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden” (6). This was one of only two instances in which the Code explicitly used the word ‘forbidden;’ even for rape, abortion, and blasphemy there were special provisions that could justify their presence on-screen. The fact that the PCA defines miscegenation also reveals that not race mixing as such, but white dominance was at the heart of its project; the degeneration theory, that held mixing of black and whites as destructive to the white race, had ingrained the idea that black and white were and should be incompatible by nature. Only by keeping the economic and social imperatives for segregation obscured, and focusing on a biological necessity, could the current American situation be justified. The anti-miscegenation rule is a direct result of the objective to constantly reproduce this color mystique. As Foucault wrote, sexuality was thus “instrument[al] in the making of race.” Relationships between white individuals and Indians, or white individuals and Asians, were not prohibited, as the same stigma—i.e. the same economic and social objectives—was not attached to such liaisons. As Harry Popkin writes, “Negro miscegenation was the last to appear on the screen because it is the real issue, the most meaningful to Americans” (355). It was the locus of true racial difference, whereas Indians and Asians were seen as assimilable.\(^8\) When the PCA, under pressure from civil rights organizations, reworded its provision to “sex perversion or any inference to it is prohibited,” the way was free for Robert Rossen and his

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\(^8\) A myriad of contemporary films featured miscegenation with Indians or Asians, such as *The King and I, Broken Arrow, The Vanishing American, Love is a Many-Splendored Thing, Bhowani Junction, Never the Twain Shall Meet*, etc.
production team to adapt Alec Waugh’s eponymous 1954 novel and to trample this last bastion of racial taboo. However, rather than exploring miscegenation in the United States directly, the plot was transported to a Caribbean island, with different social codes and norms, isolated from the still too sensitive American situation. The film, while critically panned, was an enormous success. Newspaper headlines report that the film was extended into weeks-long runs (“Island in Sun in Fourth Week,” “Island In The Sun Reaches the Local Screen”).

Reviews for the film were predominantly negative, but all focused exclusively on the racial element of the film, extrapolating and magnifying the miscegenation scenes until they occupied a much larger part than the actual film, or the source material by Alec Waugh gave them. All coded Belafonte and Dandridge as black, a “Negro” and a “Negress” as Mae Tinee wrote for the Chicago Tribune. In keeping with the one-drop mentality, their white heritage was ignored. While the Los Angeles Times’ Edwin Schallert asserts that the problematic explored involves “peculiar complexes on the part of the people in this part of the globe [the West Indies],” the controversy regarding the miscegenation plots thus tells a different story (B1); Island held up a mirror to the American viewer, who recognized himself in tension between interracial desire and societal prohibition of it, and who feared a similar mass organization of working class minorities. In fact, Island was more an American projection than a realistic depiction of West Indian reality. As Grenada native Nellie Dusauzay wrote to The New York Times shortly after the film’s release, “only a white American with a fertile imagination and a background of race relations in the United States could write about the West Indies in terms of racial conflict” (112). The true issue on the island was class according to Ms. Dusauzay, and Rossen’s attention to race thus betrayed his socialization in a context that placed race at the

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9 When interviewed by The New York Times’ Stephen Watts, producer Darryl F. Zanuck also tried to preempt controversy by stressing that the West Indian context differed from the American one: “It is not basically a picture about the color problem, but it would not be possible to make a film about the West Indies without dealing with the color question. It is the essence of the life of the place. You can make a story about the Southern states without dealing with color and yet be true to an aspect of life there. But not so with the West Indies” (101).
center of social classification. Class was also central to Mr. Waugh’s novel, and David Boyeur’s role as labor agitator is significantly downplayed in the film. Where the book centers on his objective to effect an island-wide labor strike, the film sees him focusing on the issue of equal rights for the island’s colored population. This too, can be read as a result of the American lens; with McCarthyism and the red scare rendering all labor organizations suspect, Boyeur’s radicalism had too many communist connotations to allow inclusion in the production.

The first interracial pairing is blissfully unaware of all class issues, and sees the governor’s secretary, Denis Archer, develop an infatuation with Dandridge’s character, a young native drugstore clerk named Margot Seaton. Her exotic appeal leads Denis to pursue her, give her a job in the governor’s office, and to eventually marry her and whisk her off to London. The film never questions the pairing, and posits Margot as a trophy for the white man; “When men see Dennis with her [Margot], their own lives would seem boring and dull,” Boyeur tells Mavis (1:52). The exoticized female as an object of desire was key to the promotion of the film, as the poster featured a bikini-clad tan woman stretching her arm to the sun while ostensibly dancing wildly. The primitivism and rhythm code her as black and sexually available, further emphasized by her spread legs between which a multi-colored palette of actors is introduced. The Los Angeles Times furthermore devoted an entire article (“Actress Dances in New Feature”) to Dandridge’s limbo dance scene a week prior to the film’s release, excitedly reporting that “Dorothy Dandridge dances on the screen for the first time” (B3). The New York Times ran a picture of Dandridge with the subscript “a sultry typist” in a page-wide picture promotion two days before its release (June 9, 1957). That same newspaper essentialized the ability to dance as a black trait by remarking that Joan Collins became “much more proficient than is usual for Europeans in the Limbo” in an article published in January of that year (101). This focus on the physical in the film’s marketing shows a fascination with Dandridge as the exotic, sexually
challenging woman, a male gaze that was socially acceptable and historically precedent by illicit relations—forced and consented—between white men and colored women. Denis can give Margot a ring and encourage her to publicly display it, as he does not have to worry about repercussions for their affair (1:12). His demand that she should “wear it” in the governor’s office marks her as his property, not available to other men. However, Dandridge’s characters and her very presence on-screen challenged this male gaze; not only was her appearance in the movie consciously calculated, after three years of declining film roles that did not live up to her social or moral philosophy (e.g. she refused to play a slave or parts that involved explicit sexuality), the fact that a black American actress could portray characters that did not face the same social limitations as black American women did in real life is in itself a form of empowerment and bypassing of the dominant codes. The opportunity afforded to non-white women outside of the U.S. is further underlined when Margot and Denis eventually marry and move to London, where a comfortable life awaits them.

The second pairing was the most controversial, with a white upper-class woman (Joan Fontaine) taking a romantic interest in labor agitator David Boyeur (Belafonte), but its subversive potential was mitigated by the ultimate failure of the relationship in the end through Boyeur’s internalized sense of racial incompatibility. Mavis Norman strikes up an interest in Boyeur at the governor’s party that opens the film, and much of the film traces Boyeur’s internal debate on whether to reciprocate or not. The viewer first sees them alone when the other interlocutors leave them at the party, and it becomes clear that they have known each other since their childhood. They reminisce about the past, but when a journalist comes up to ask Boyeur what the main problem on the island is, he responds “color,” and consequently excuses himself with Mavis. His pensive looks indicates that he just realized that talking to a white woman is not within the realm of possibilities on this island marked by “color” strife. However, they meet
again a few days later, and Boyeur brings Mavis into the black part of the island’s segregated world. Racism, the film suggests, is a white construction: they are stared at in the city, but in the all-black village no one casts a second look. However, when Mavis tries on a carnival mask of a stereotypical mammy figure, David’s moods turns. He angrily pulls the mask from her face. Her playful appropriation of the black woman’s face ties in with tensions over minstrelsy, parody, and racial superiority—she has no right to don the mask of a black woman, as she “never had to fight stupidity and prejudice,” as David tells her later in the film, and as such cannot see through the eyes of the other (1:54). He is the one who ultimately ends their relationship, by telling Mavis that a white woman and a black man can never marry: “If I were to walk into a room with you or a girl like you as my wife…[shakes head]. Do you care what stupid and prejudiced people think? You never had to fight stupidity or prejudice. Besides I’d be a fool, because it would be inevitable” (1.53). When Mavis asks for clarification, he responds, “that night when she’d forget herself and call me a nigger” (ibid). David essentializes the white gaze, ascribing an inherent tendency to Mavis and all women “like” her, i.e. white, to dismiss him because of his visible difference from them. “My skin is my country,” he furthermore tells her, positing his race as an unchangeable and unalterable state that aligns him with non-white people of all nationalities, a shared subjectivity based on the ocular (1.54). The archetype of the black aggressor chasing the virtuous white woman is imploded, and the threat of miscegenation negated. The film’s ending thus eradicated the subversiveness of the storyline, resolving the potential transgression and restoring the ‘normal’ social order.

The film’s focus on the individual psychology of miscegenation, which, as I proposed, was part of the 1950s discourse, allows this differentiation between the white woman/black man and black woman/white man scenarios. It is expressed in Island by the internalization of taboo, i.e. a sense of self derived from one’s relation to an other. To use Frantz Fanon’s much-cited
example from *Black Skin White Mask*, it is the reactions of others to one’s dark skin that lead to a realization of difference. When a young boy sees Fanon on a train, he says “Look, a Negro,” to which Fanon thinks, “yes it’s true.” It is only when the boy says “Mom, I’m scared” that he once again realizes how visual perceptions are tied up with other assumed characteristics (90).

Boyeur’s conviction that any white woman would “forget herself and call me a nigger” underlines this perception of the self through the other (1:54) It is only when race evolves from an observation of physical difference—with no hierarchy assumed in these, just as a marker of difference—into race as inscribed with meanings, characteristics, and ideas of superiority and inferiority that bear no relation to mere physical difference, that race becomes racism. What all colonized Africans share is that they define themselves in relation to whites (153). For Fanon, the continental logic is thus the internalization of the imperial logic, another way in which Europe tries to establish itself as the ultimate universal marker against which all others should be measured. Even the term “negro” is such an imperial construct, as there exists no such thing except for in comparison to the white, and Boyeur is thus a classic example (*Wretched* 153). It means that the black subject comes to see himself through the eyes of the white: “I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features,” Fanon writes (92). From a black subject, he becomes a white-defined black other. Color is visual, but the meanings attached to it are an ideological construct, meaning that the non-dominant groups in society are not only at war with the ruling group, but also with themselves.

However, the fact that Fontaine and Belafonte were paired in the first place was a clear break with tradition, be it a rather innocuous one. As Bosley Crowther wrote for *The New York Times*, “[Island] pretends to be scanning racial conflict, but its viewpoint is vague, its observations are fuzzy and no conclusions are reached” (37). While the film indeed does not explicitly align itself with either a pro-segregationist or anti-segregationist camp in the diegetic
world, the very inclusion of miscegenation, less than a year after the PCA was amended, gave it a clear political currency in the non-diegetic realm. However, not all decoded the film as such. When a Ku Klux Klan protestors asked a southern moviegoer whether the picture was detrimental to the region’s social constitution, he responded; “I think it is a pro-segregation picture” (qtd. in Popkin 354). The producers, after proclaiming that the content would risk the “loss of the South,” delivered a film that was not blatantly offensive (ibid). Boyeur’s decision to end his relationship with Mavis was acceptable to northern and southern audiences alike. Schallert is the only reviewer who questions this “strange, abrupt, decisive farewell,” observing that it lends the film an air of hopelessness (B26). However, even he accepts that the “two entirely separate modes of life” ensure that the pair “cannot be happy in the same realm” (ibid). He too is invested in a discourse that is predicated on the existence of two separate races, with the question only being if these biologically divergent groups can ever meet. Encouraged by the narrative itself, the American reception of David and Mavis’ love affair was thus marked by a profound belief that black and white remained incompatible (as Mavis asks David, “do you still see anyone with a skin different than yours as an enemy?”), once again mystifying the economic and social gain that this ideology entailed for the already dominant white group (1:22).

This internal struggle is also apparent in the plot of class and cultural whiteness that informs the third possible instance of miscegenation, and the fact that it is contradictory to the Boyeur/Mavis story line does expose race as a social construct. The Fleury family, part of the island’s plantocracy, is shocked by a newspaper article that alleges that the patriarch’s mother was a woman of partly colored Jamaican descent. All cultural privileges that the family accrued through their status as white, including an engagement between their daughter and the governor’s son, become endangered. In a soap opera twist, daughter Jocelyn finds out that she is pregnant, and is scared that her prospective father-in-law will never accept “a grandson, an eventual heir,
with part negro blood” (1:25). Her fear is exacerbated by the fact that the governor has an aristocratic title, and a non-white heir could never inherit his seat in the House of Lords. However, due to the status of the Fleury’s and their cultural whiteness, the governor consents to the marriage. Their place in the island’s social hierarchy, i.e. their class and wealth, is enough to mark them as white and negate any discriminatory measures that applied to other non-white islanders. But even this semblance of miscegenation is quickly erased, as Ms. Fleury confides in her daughter that she is not Mr. Fleury’s daughter, and thus one-hundred percent white. The political prodigy of the family, son Maxwell, also quickly turns the setback into an advantage by positing himself as a liminal figure in the elections: “I combine black and white, the old and the new. I’ve got a foot in both camps…I can look at those [the native population’s] faces and say my grandmother was of African ancestry, she came over in a slave trader just as yours did. Yes, I can say, I’m one of you now” (1:02). However, he internally struggles to reconcile his idea that black equates inferior with his own heritage, leading him to consider suicide and to flee the island. Fanon has described this reaction to one’s own color as “a feeling of nonexistence” (139), while Ngugi wa Thion’o calls it “the cultural bomb” that annihilates all trust in one’s own capacities and leads to a profound desire to move as far away from oneself as possible (3). Like Boyeur, he suddenly regards himself as other through the eyes of the white majority. Boyeur confronts him with this dishonesty: “Is it not true that the only reason you want to be black is that you’re afraid the white world won’t let you be white anymore?” (1:37). Race in this subplot is a cultural classification based on visual perception, rather than an unchanging category—it is not blood, but skin color that determines it and all social privileges depend on it. Maxwell and his family were automatically assumed to be white, and only when this certainty is challenged do they have to confirm and explicitly perform their whiteness. The film in this respect is a time capsule of the 1950s, with discourses of essentialism and constructivism that battled for
dominance both making their way into the film. It is the invocation of the racial other that
emerges within the self that profoundly challenges ideas of inherent racial difference, which
occurs quite literally with the Fleury family and on a more remote level for the viewer,
complicating seemingly clear-cut color lines. As Archer sums up, “Well, it’s hard to pick one’s
ancestors, isn’t it?” (1:12).

The revolutionary potential of the film in its depiction of class tensions further constitutes
a challenge to the dominant forces in American society. The specter of a working class
revolution looms large over the island after Boyeur (Belafonte) runs for the legislature against
Maxwell Fleury and beats him with a vast majority. In the U.S., the film’s release coincided with
existing fears that miscegenation, integration and communism formed an inextricably bound
trifecta, and that the acceptance of one would automatically mean the institution of the others.
The southern states dominated this mode of thinking, and, as Jeff Woods skillfully outlined,
white southerners believed that “the forces of Communism and integration had signed a devil’s
pact to destroy the region’s way of life” (2). Any mass organization of African Americans was
suspect, exacerbated by the fact that most belonged to the working class, which gave every
meeting the potential for undesirable schemes concerning race and class. Boyeur’s warning at
the end of the film that his efforts to organize the working class against the white ruling class
will not remain confined to the island tied in with the doctrine of the domino-effect, the idea that
once states had converted to communism, the surrounding states would quickly follow. “When
I’m done with St. Marta I will go to St. Kitts, Barbados, the whole archipelago,” he tells Mavis
(1:56).

The international reception reveals that existing imbrications of race, class, and gender
determined the emphases given to the plot. Not only the United States thought the film’s
combustible mix of race and class content too daring; in Rhodesia, twenty-five minutes of the
film were censored, as British Central Africa instituted a full-time board of censors in Cape Town (Rhodesian Herald, August 2nd, 1958). Scenes containing Boyeur’s incendiary remarks for colored equal rights were cut, as was the kissing scene between Margot and Denis. The cuts reduced Dandridge’s appearance to a “fleeting moment” and left the story “as likely to stir up racial ill feeling as an Enid Blyton bedtime fairy tale” according to the newspaper’s reviewer (11). The British regime in Rhodesia often made adjustments to films that could cast its rule in a negative light, and as Santa Martha was a crown colony in Island’s fictional milieu, Boyeur’s rounding up of laborers against the government was a direct challenge to British white dominance. Nevertheless, the film was tremendously popular in Britain; Princess Margaret attended the London premiere on July 25, 1957, and Island came in on number eight on the list of most popular films of the year (British Film Institute). The New York Times nevertheless reported that critics were less charmed by the “story of interracial love,” and dismissed it as “dying duck,” “cliché-ridden” and “stagy” (24). They did not remark, however, on the miscegenation plot as such. Criticisms focused on the over-the-top performances by Dandridge and James Mason and on the unbelievable murder plot. This shows that within the United Kingdom, where the percentage of black subjects was relatively small, the racial and classed components of the film were not a sufficient enough threat to white dominance to generate concern, unlike in its predominantly black territory of Rhodesia. In the U.K, miscegenation was not part of the cultural and social fabric, and not invested with the same meanings as in its colonies or in the U.S.
III: Subversive At First Sight: The U.S. Lens on Dandridge’s European Ventures

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On January 2, 3, and 6, 1958, the Los Angeles department of the Federal Bureau of Investigation prepared a twelve page rapport on “Dorothy Dandridge, also known as Dorothy D. Nicholas” (1). Listing her as a professional actress and entertainer, the report compiled fragments from her personal correspondence, information about social organizations she held membership in, and all police reports in which her name had been mentioned. While it by no means exclusively concerned her political affiliations—about half explicitly describes incidents from her private life, all information furnished by informants—its main objective was clear: the case was a “Security Matter- C,” a letter that indicated an investigation into Dandridge’s possible Communist allegiances. While Dandridge states in the report that “had I known that any of the above organizations would be later cited as Communistic and or subversive, I would never have participated,” her actions in the years following this initial suspicion prove that she never refrained from participating in projects that she deemed interesting professionally or socially (2). Dandridge refused to be restricted by the threat of blacklisting, and I will argue that while she frequently publicly denounced any political affiliations, her professional and private decisions challenged dominant ideologies and make her exemplary of a type of nonconformity and resistance to the restrictive 1950s race, class, and gender ideologies that remained within the limits of the law. As the American reception of her films _Tamango_ (1958) and _The Decks Ran Red_ (1958) demonstrates, Dandridge’s selection of films was daring in a climate that already marked her as suspect due to her color.

The fact that performers such as Dandridge—female and non-white—rose to prominence was in itself a threat to the patriarchal and racial politics of the 1950s, and even denouncing political motives was not sufficient. The F.B.I. first took interest in Dandridge in the early 1950s,
even before her breakthrough in *Carmen Jones*. Under pressure from agencies such as *Red Channels* and the House Un-American Activities Committee, Nicholas M. Schenck, the president of Loew’s Incorporated—that owned Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios for which Dandridge was set to start production on *Bright Road* in 1952—asked Dandridge to answer a list of questions in response to certain newspaper articles that had been published about her in communist publications such as the “Daily People’s World.” While this allegedly seemed innocuous and standard M.G.M. practice, Dandridge realized that she was at risk to be blacklisted, and her manager Earl Mills wrote that the actress was utterly shocked as “she was never involved in politics” (118). The entire letter that she wrote to Schenck is included in the F.B.I. report, and is Dandridge’s most direct comment on affairs relating to communism.

The position of non-white actors and actresses in the 1950s was a lose-lose situation, as Dandridge’s story accurately underlines. Hollywood was still a pinnacle of whiteness, and most formal training was reserved for white actors, and to a lesser extent for white actresses. Dandridge thus faced a Solomon’s choice: forego any opportunities for professional development, or risk stigmatization as a socialist or even communist for joining organizations that did allow actors of all races to hone their skills together. An ambitious young woman, Dandridge decided in favor of the latter. She joined several actors’ organizations and professionalization workshops, and it is this that the F.B.I report marks as betraying possible communist sympathies. The Hollywood Actors Laboratory was founded on the premise that acting “rejects typecasting,” and was thus especially of interest to actors from minority groups (Rippy 186). Nevertheless, the group formed an eclectic company, with director John Berry—who would direct Dandridge in 1958’s *Tamango*—in its executive board and actors like Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe also joining the ranks. However, when State Senator Jack Tenney’s “Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities,” published in 1948
and widely spread, marked the Actor’s Lab as a “red front,” Dandridge and other African American members were the only ones that faced police investigations. Tenney’s report asserted that it was the Lab’s primary function to draw “ambitious young actors and actresses” into the communist orbit; “Ostensibly the Actor’s Laboratory is a combination training school and experimental theatre, but in fact it has always been more political than artistic” (92). Dandridge’s association with the Lab, or any organization on the left end of the political spectrum, immediately rendered her suspect, but the irony was that it was only socially progressive organizations that allowed her membership. As Dandridge wrote herself, the Lab was “one of the few outlets available to a young actress of my race seeking actual workshop training” (2). The same was true for the Hollywood Arts, Sciences and Professions Council. An integrated organization, Dandridge enlisted because she believed it would further her “career and that it would help members of my race” (2). Dandridge consistently referred to herself as an African-American woman, using terms such as “we Negroes” and “my race” when she talked about her desire to serve as a role model. Dandridge wanted to ameliorate the position of African Americans by serving as an impeccable example of what African Americans could be if given the correct opportunities, and the very possibility to be such a visible presence on screen ensured that she succeeded.

However, this public function did come at a cost: the information about Dandridge’s private life reveals the rigorous surveillance that she was subjected to, as individuals unknown to her contacted the F.B.I. to disclose information about chance encounters with the actress. In a climate that read the personal as political, all private behavior was seen as a reflection and extension of social allegiances. Dandridge, known in the media as a serial dater of white men, walked the line of acceptability by her refusal to remain confined to one specific milieu, i.e.

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10 The name for an organization that presented itself to the outside world as a regular social or artistic club but that
racial milieu. A Louis Kerr, arrested in New Orleans, Louisiana on May 10, 1955, “volunteered” information to the police that he was a homosexual and that he was a close friend of Dandridge. Even this bit of information, irrelevant to his case—he was caught transporting stolen property across state lines—was included in the report by the F.B.I, with the sentence “he added that she was in no way a sex deviate” underlined (4). Homosexuality was a felony in Louisiana and California in 1955 under the states’ sodomy laws, the latter state even having lifted the maximum sentence on it the year before (California Executive Order). Furthermore, President Eisenhower amended federal employment legislation in 1953 to include homosexuality as a legal ground for immediate dismissal of a federal employee. Society was staunchly heteronormative, and any association with homosexuality was deemed subversive. To make matters worse, while the F.B.I. report makes no mention of it, Kerr was associated with the Mattachine Society, founded in Los Angeles in the early 1950s as the first gay rights organization by leaders who had also served in the Communist Party (Kerr Records). Dandridge’s association with Kerr, be it for his homosexuality or links to a communist-influenced organization, will have reinforced beliefs that she leaned towards the unacceptable in her social viewpoints.

By associating with someone whose sexual orientation rendered him incompatible with the prevailing ideology of American-ness, Dandridge was increasingly regarded as uncommitted to the American cause, the compatibility with which was already uneasy because of the color of her skin. As Matthew Frye Jacobson argues in his Whiteness of a Different Color, whiteness was at the heart of the American project. While a historically specific and highly fluid term, it reached its nexus in the 1950s, when the concept of the Caucasian became determined by visibility. In Dandridge’s case, the color of one’s skin was employed to classify one as either American or un-American, and the paranoia over communist infiltration ensured that only white

actually served as a façade for an alliance to foster communist sympathies.
remained non-suspect *ab initio* through the perceived safety in homogeneity society could continue to function. Racism and exclusion were thus central to the development of American democracy, which entailed that the public sphere excluded all non-white individuals in its protection of “whiteness as property” (237). However, Jacobson never zooms in on the crucial role of miscegenation in this, while it seems to me that the cultural construction of whiteness inherently involves looking at the binary oppositional structure that sustained that whiteness. People like Dandridge, of mixed race, were a more profound threat to the societal order than individuals regarded as fully black, because they were living proof that the boundaries that existed *in theory*, boundaries on which the very existence of this ideology of American-ness was predicated, were not effective *in practice*. The dictates of anti-miscegenation ideology might have dominated public life, but its control did not extend to all individual lives, and private individuals could deem it acceptable to socialize with other races. Dandridge herself had married Jack Denison, a white restaurant owner in 1959, after highly publicized romances with director Otto Preminger and actor Curd Jürgens prior to that. She never mentioned race once in interviews about the marriage, rather focusing on the prospect of combining marriage and her career (*Jet* April 9, 1959). Denison, on the other hand, mentioned the interracial nature of their romance in every interview. When *Jet* asked him to comment on their engagement, he said that he did not think of “Dorothy as a Negro, but as a woman” and that he hoped that “her race will accept me” (January 22, 1959). While acknowledging race as unimportant and the divisions between the races as a construct, he nevertheless inflated the artificial categories by distinguishing between her race and, implicitly, his. Mixed-race people were visible reminders of the inadequacy of the state to circumscribe individuals’ lives, i.e. that the policing of sexuality it mandated had failed. Therefore, Dandridge was always already subversive on account of the color of her skin, and her tendency to socialize with individuals of all races and backgrounds
only served to underline her incompatibility with dominant ideologies. The fact that many high-profile African American artists besides Dandridge, including Josephine, Baker, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison had expatriated to Europe specifically to the cultural hub Paris—or had even travelled to the Soviet Union, like Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois, furthermore did nothing to appease the stereotype of black as subversive.

It must have been all these small puzzle pieces that put Dandridge on the radar of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, especially because she was a ‘risk’ for miscegenation on- and off screen. This would also explain why, unlike Monroe or other members of the Lab, she was the one who ended up on the F.B.I.’s “C’-list. Thus, even though she was not a “sex deviate,” her romantic relations were cause for suspicion for other reasons. Another informant reported on February 21, 1955, that he had found Dorothy Dandridge and Nat King Cole in a Las Vegas hotel room together. However, the reason that this information did not end up with the tabloids but with the F.B.I. was that hotel owner Jack Entratter had become incensed when he saw the twosome together and threatened to harm Cole. According to the informant, Dandridge pleaded with Entratter “to forget the whole matter as she was Cole’s color too” (3-4). The implied suggestion is that intraracial relationships, even illicit ones, did not warrant any specific form of policing, whereas interracial relationships were in this realm of political and social restriction and Dandridge would have expected action were she caught with a white male. The inclusion of this episode in the report confirms her expectations. It states that the reason for Entratter’s outraged reaction was that he “considered [Dandridge] his girlfriend,” and it is most likely this suggestion of a relationship between the white hotel owner and Dandridge that was considered significantly unusual or subversive to merit a call to the F.B.I. (4). That Dandridge asserted that she was “Cole’s color” also reveals to what extent the supposed binary construction of race had become ingrained; after all, Dandridge was of mixed blood, black and white (both her father and
mother were of mixed heritage), yet society had taught her to regard herself as non-white. Her “liminal status” was thus only liminal on paper, as she was identified by both herself and others as an African-American woman and the privileges associated with the white part of her heritage remained inaccessible.

Finally, Dandridge’s foreign travel and work abroad was a reason for concern, as it was precisely these projects abroad that illuminate that constraints of race, class, and gender were specific to the American context.11 While filming Island in the Sun, she and co-star John Justin suggested that Rossen film two versions of their love scene, one without a kiss for American audiences and “the other for Europe where people are not concerned or upset about the problem of interracial love” (University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives). Within the U.S., race, class, and gender were presented as unchangeable and permanent features of one’s life that automatically brought along certain restrictions on mobility, literally and figuratively. Outside of the United States, where Dandridge worked with blacklisted director John Berry on Tamango and formerly blacklisted director Robert Rossen on Island in the Sun, interracial relationships were no anomaly on screen, but the U.S. reception continued to rehash its familiar objections by assessing the European productions wholly in terms of race. The former was Dandridge’s first European performance, and her choice of film revealed that she was not intimidated by possible blacklisting. Directed by exiled director John Berry—he was accused of communist sympathies by the House Un-American Activities Committee—and featuring Curd Jürgens as male lead, Tamango was a French/Italian production. Its tagline, “love and adventure as bold and daring as the casting,” suggested that the pairing of Dandridge with Jurgens was unusual, presumably for several reasons: both were not French, while the film was French-spoken, he was white and she

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11 The F.B.I report contained two pages on Dandridge’s foreign travel, the majority of which is blacked out in the release of the report; only a visit of the actress to the French Riviera remains indirectly inferable, as the report states that a Leo Branton “left Los Angeles via TWA for Paris, France, arriving on June 5, 1957” to visit her (3).
was perceived as not-white, and there was a significant age-difference between the two. The film opened to mediocre reviews, all of which mention the miscegenation subplot that sees the captain of a slave ship (Jürgens) in a relationship with one of the slaves (Dandridge) he was to transport a few trips earlier. Richard Nason for *The New York Times* starts his review by blatantly acknowledging that it is this miscegenation plot that will draw the viewer and writes that “polemicists for racial equality on the screen and the simply curious may find something enticing about the prospect of a Teuton-like Jurgens making intense love to Dorothy Dandridge, a Negro, in ‘Tamango’” (48). The addition “a Negro” is crucial in this sentence, as “intense” love scenes were no novelty in American cinemas, but intense interracial love scenes were. Descriptions of the miscegenation scenes form the red thread to the article, as the illicit “fitful embraces of its racially opposite principals” and the “passionate master” represented a sexual frankness that in an American context would never have been allowed. Nason is quick to share that the appearance of the scene can be ascribed to “cultural” differences, as the melodrama is “French-made,” an expression synonymous to “culturally far removed” for the American reader. It is this different context that leads him to dismiss the film as superficial, as “the racial question” that he would have liked to see investigated more in-depth was specific to the United States (even the very term), not to France or even the Netherlands, from which Jurgens hails in the plot. Miscegenation was not invested with the same connotations or importance in countries outside of the U.S., that did not share its history of slavery and sexual transgressions. These different contexts are underlined by the fact that race is scarcely mentioned in the French reviews, which rather focus on the power relation between the film’s leads and the unequal balance that gives their amorous relationship. Dandridge is referred to as “slave woman” and Jurgens as “the captain,” but it is not specified once that they are “racially opposite” or that Dandridge is “a Negro.”
Geoffrey Warren’s review for *The Los Angeles Times* further supports the argument that the film did not thrive in the U.S. as opposed to Europe because of the different decoding of the film’s main plot. He wrote that the film opened for what “may safely be assumed a short run,” whereas that very same newspaper had announced an English-spoken version of the film—the original was wholly in French, a language Dandridge mastered in her earlier visits to the country—nine months before by writing that it “proved such a blockbuster they’re now planning an American release” (B8). Like the French reviews, he also took issue with Dandridge’s submissive role, sarcastically remarking that “Miss Dandridge has a good thing going” with the owner-object relation between Jurgens and her, but never acknowledges that this was an accurate portrayal of the master/slave dynamic (23). His review is also noteworthy for his politically insensitive quip that “if the Civil War hadn’t put an end to slavery, this picture might have” because “after people saw what happened to a good part of the crew, it would have been difficult to recruit sailors” (ibid). While it is intended to convey his impression that the film was of a rather violent nature for a 1950s production, is highly offensive in its suggestion that slavery would not have ended by an acknowledgement of the humanity of African Americans and the worth of their lives, but only out of self-interest and a concern for white lives. It is another instance in which the dominant perspective is reflected in print culture, an unquestioned and unchallenged perspective rooted in a pedigree of white privilege.

After these two films, Dandridge landed more roles across the racial spectrum: from a high-caste Indian woman to a Maori princess to an Italian woman in *Marco Polo* opposite Alain Delon. It had been a bold move to put her name on the credits of Berry’s first movie after his forced flight to France, especially as her name already carried communist connotations and she had almost been blacklisted five years before. However, as Dandridge said in an interview with *Ebony* magazine, it was not wholly by personal choice that she started to star in an increasing
number of European productions. “There seems to be more enthusiasm for me in Europe,” she told Louie Robinson, indirectly meaning that American directors did not offer her many roles anymore. Whether this was a result of her image as subversive or of the few roles available to non-white actors is not clear. What is clear is that European directors cast her in a variety of roles that by far transcended the opportunities the U.S. had afforded her. Foreign newspapers discussed Dandridge in wholly other terms than American ones; whereas in the U.S. she was known as a “Negro performer” or “Dorothy Dandridge, Negro actress” in reports about the film, European newspapers did not mention her race. A Yugoslavian article titled “Dot Dandridge Scores Hit, May Make Yugoslavian Movie” was reprinted in the Washington Afro-American of April 3, 1962, and only refers to her as “the attractive star” and the woman who had the “female starring role” in Carmen Jones. It is not even specified that the latter was an all-black production. The article opened cleverly by mocking the U.S. government’s rigorous anti-communism measures; “If the United States continues to have difficulty in dealing with the Yugoslavian Government with its special brand of Communism, singer-actress Dorothy Dandridge could well play an important role in helping to shore up relations between the two,” the newspaper reported. By colloquially referring to her as “Dot,” it became clear that Dandridge had risen to significant celebrity status abroad to be recognized even by this nickname. Her popularity stretched to such an extent that the country’s main film production company, Slavica Film, invited her to star in a film with the Yugoslavian opera basso Miroslav Congalivic. As opposed to Carmen Jones, the article mentioned that Dandridge would be able to sing her own opera songs. The whiteness that was inextricably attached to the operatic genre in the U.S. apparently did not apply in Yugoslavia. In fact, the writer remarked that there was “a feeling that she [Dandridge] has helped to improve the image of the Americans with the Yugoslavians” (3). Far from being cast away to the margins of society, Dorothy Dandridge was regarded as an exemplary American abroad. The
irony is hard to escape: she now “improved” conceptions of the very society that she was denied full and unlimited participation in, and had become an ambassador for a country that refused to see her “as a performer first, and Negro second” as she said in an interview (qtd. in Humphrey C15). The second irony was that the very occasion of Dandridge’s visit to Yugoslavia, the filming of *Marco Polo* in Belgrade, would end in a complete failure. The production ultimately faltered for financial reasons and would be rebooted with American money and a white actress in Dandridge’s place, once again reaffirming the limitations to racial fluidity that applied in the American context.

In an interview with Hal Humphrey of the *Los Angeles Times* in the same year, it became clear that the comparative differences between Europe and the U.S. also puzzled Dandridge. She recounted that many European viewers had asked her during a recent press tour why there were not more African Americans on TV, or why she did not have her own show. “It’s difficult to know quite what to say. I’m not sure I really understand it myself,” she said (C15). The determinate absence in this text is that Dandridge understood very well what was keeping her from a television career, but that she could not articulate it in a context that policed and punished all explicit denunciations of the white male hegemony. Pierre Macherey theorized that it is in this “articulation of a silence” that the meaning and ideological circumscriptions of a text can be fully understood, and stating that she “did not understand” the American situation was as close as Dandridge could get to disavowing it. At several points in the interview, it is a lack of understanding that functions as a euphemism for an exposure of the racism in Hollywood. “I’ve often wondered why it is that Negroes can’t play other roles if they look right for the part,” she continued. “Whites play Negroes. I’ll never forget when MGM had Ava Gardner do Julie in *Showboat* and the studio had Lena Horne under contract at the time. Ava couldn’t understand it either” (ibid). This insightful dissection of the hierarchies in Hollywood made clear that it was
white privilege that reigned supreme, as only white actors had an unlimited selection of roles to select from. While she could not articulate the realities of racism and sexism herself, her questions and remarks did invite the reader to ponder these very issues. As such, Dandridge craftily ensured that she could not be accused of inciting any type of subversive thinking, while at the same time contributing to a challenge of the existing situation. Censorship and fear of blacklisting may have muted her comments, they did not muzzle her, nor did they permanently attach her to Europe. Unlike other African American public figures, Dandridge returned to the U.S. to tackle inequality from within. Perhaps she was thinking of Harry Belafonte’s line in *Island in the Sun* that stressed the necessity of being on the scene if one wanted to encourage social change. “If I went to England who would I be? What would I be? I’d be an exile in a bowler hat, sipping tea and carrying an umbrella, talking with all of the other exiles about how much we could do if we were only there,” Belafonte’s character says at the end of the film (1:52). The intellectual communities of Europe, specifically Paris, did not escape this characterization completely, as Richard Wright and others spent their time conversing in salons about the evils of segregation and colonialism and advocated for change from a distance. Dandridge, too, could have chosen to lead a less restricted life in Europe, but instead chose to keep Los Angeles her home base.

Her gradual steps towards explicit expression reached their culmination a little over a year later, when Dorothy Dandridge at last took to the public stage to speak her mind on the inequality that characterized American society. The final amendment to the F.B.I. report is dated May 27, 1963, when L.A.P.D. requested the report on the occasion of a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People rally that took place the day before. Dandridge attended, together with 30,000 other people, to hear Martin Luther King Jr. deliver a speech in support of the Birmingham, Alabama movement (Pacifica Radio Archive). Dandridge herself also took to
the stage. Her remarks titled “We Want To Be Free” have never been published, and even Bogle does not include them in his book, merely remarking that Dandridge attended the event, seemed “spacey” and was sat next to Rita Moreno (507). While Dandridge indeed made a few gaffes during her speech, her comments were far from “spacey.” She was not used to speaking in public—logically, as this was an opportunity that had previously been denied to actors of color—and admitted to being nervous at the beginning of her speech due to the large crowd, which seems a more accurate explanation for the few small stammers at the beginning. The remarks represent the first public comment of Dandridge on any political or social issue, and are worth quoting at length:

I feel just a little bit inadequate in making my little speech, but I must say I have never spoken for such a worthy cause before such a large audience. As you remember, it was a long time ago, and uhm, no it really wasn’t very long ago that it was considered dangerous for the people in show business to endorse anything more controversial than toothpaste. I don’t know how dangerous it is today, but I do know that more and more of us are glad for the opportunity to stand up and be counted. We as actors and actresses should take part in the most important drama that our country has seen. And again, the name of the drama is freedom. A drama that every American should take part in, and one of our leading men is Reverend Martin Luther King. And with this the theme should be ‘free in 1963.’ I just thought I should throw that in, right? [laughs]. (Pacifica Radio Archive)

Dandridge finally publically committed to a social cause, and at the end of the fragment can be heard laughing when King tells her it was “a beautiful speech.” Her toothpaste-anecdote is a clear reference to the red baiting of the 1950s, as all of those working in Hollywood—white or
black—had to refrain from staking any political claim to avoid accusations of subversiveness. Actresses like Lena Horne and Josephine Baker had appeared on the blacklists, but Dandridge had managed to partake in this “most important drama” of the country without facing official repercussions. In a climate more hospitable to a rhetoric of equal rights, after the excesses of communist persecution had threatened the nation’s premises of equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and had thrown it into a state of self-reflection, Dandridge was able to say the words that had been on her mind for “a very long time,” as she said at the beginning of the speech. In the interview with the Los Angeles Times in 1962, Dandridge already foreshadowed her comments at Wrigley Field by condemning the fact that she “wasn’t counted” (Humphrey C15).

But times were slowly changing, and after 1963, with the Civil Rights Movement crystallizing into a nationwide, grassroots initiative, and with red baiting no longer at the heart of foreign and domestic policy, minorities were afforded more opportunities to fight for inclusion in public life, including political life. The F.B.I. still recorded Dandridge’s presence at the Los Angeles meeting, but when she attended another NAACP event in July of that year, the F.B.I. no longer took note and the investigation concluded. While this meeting represented the first time that Dandridge publicly and visibly made any comments on social or political issues, her behavior throughout the 1950s had already firmly placed her at the forefront of the strife for equality.
Conclusion

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Dorothy Jean Dandridge died on September 8, 1965 in her apartment on the Sunset Strip, at the age of forty-one. Her manager Earl Mills, who would release a sensationalist book about his time with Dandridge, later told the press that she “was only wearing a blue scarf around her neck” when he found her and that her will requested that she be buried in the cheapest casket available (October 11, Chicago Tribune, “Note Serves As Last Will of Actress”). The details marked the final revelations about the private life of an actress whose career had been marked by a fascination for her off screen behavior. In 1958, Dandridge ascribed the focus on her private relationships to her image as an animalistic and exotic woman, an image that had been fostered by the press because of her color and her on-screen roles. She described this typecasting as a “real handicap” and stated that it “bother[ed] her terribly” (Racon 4). Nationwide, the presses mourned the untimely passing of the “Negro entertainer,” as she was consistently referred to (ibid). However, once it became clear that not an embolism, but an overdose of Tofranil, a drug prescribed for patients battling depression, was the cause of her death, the rumor mill relentlessly started. Was it a suicide, or was it an accident? Some newspapers speculated that Dandridge had gone bankrupt which had catapulted her further into depression, whereas others wrote that she, contrarily, had been upbeat about the future and her finances after signing a deal to write her autobiography with publisher Bernard Geiss (ibid). In the absence of a note, and with a “psychological autopsy” that was deemed inconclusive, the question remains unanswered (Getze B8). Like other superstars that have passed away, Dorothy Dandridge’s death mythologized her memory—all writing about her life now became filtered through the lens of her death. However, unlike with other celebrity deaths, her memory did not prove timeless; Dandridge never achieved the status that other female stars of the 1950s did. A look at her fellow nominees for Best Actress
at the 1954 Academy Awards shows that all four other—white—actresses, Grace Kelly, Judy Garland, Audrey Hepburn, and Jane Wyman, would become household names, and remain so even fifty years after their peaks. Judy Garland even died under similar circumstances to Dandridge, five years after the latter, as the result of a barbiturates overdose. Nevertheless, when the American Film Institute selected its ten greatest stars of the twentieth century, Garland made the list, whereas Dandridge did not even receive an honorable mention. She is relegated to a marginal status, to footnotes in general film encyclopedias and mere columns in African American survey works. It is ironic that only the archetypical male gaze, that she helped to challenge throughout her oeuvre, sustained her memory in two book-length works. Only self-alleged former lover Earl Mills, and scholar Donald Bogle, who professed to be “in love with her,” have devoted book-length works to her (xi).

It is an unceremonious ending for a woman whose life is deserving of further study for more reasons than her own personal merit. A renegade in 1950s Hollywood, Dandridge had three strikes against her: her color, her gender, and her alleged political affiliations. She did not elect to be regarded as a subversive outsider in Los Angeles, but automatically became one based on these unchangeable characteristics. While Dandridge’s early career was in all-black productions—even in nationwide hit *Carmen Jones* white actors were absent—and the films were thus informed by a narrative of segregation, its visuals of mixed-race characters, products of miscegenation, hint at a social history that did revolve around integration and mixing. The images of these early films then contradicted the intentions of the filmmakers, and miscegenation came to occupy a key role; even within the group marked as “non-white” by the dominant institutions in society, there was a significant amount of white ancestry, and miscegenation thus occurred on an intra-racial as well as an interracial level. Simply by being visible on screen, Dandridge challenged notions of racial incompatibility, rewrote the rules of gender interactions,
and served as a role model for hundreds of minority women trying to carve out a space for themselves in the public sphere. James Baldwin’s observation that Dandridge starred in films in which “the spectacle of color is divested of its danger” is thus profoundly untrue (48). Gradually evolving into roles that were of ethnicities other than her own, the role as an Italian woman in *Marco Polo* could have meant her vindication over all racial constrictions of the U.S. film industry—it was only when American money became involved that she was once again victimized by the ideology of American-ness as whiteness. But even with her acting career waning, Dorothy Dandridge was the face of a generation: not the depressed, disenfranchised woman that her death has led many to believe she was, but an articulate activist for African American rights, in- and outside of Hollywood, using her fame to effect change for many.

A further study of Dandridge and her career could yield an understanding of society in both the postwar decades and now, as race factored into political, economic, and social decisions and alliances. The imbrications of race and sexuality also deserve further attention, as Dandridge continued to star in a host of smaller productions that all articulated these in various ways. The visual presence of miscegenation on screen both enabled more open discussions of it and constricted individuals—in the South, the Ku Klux Klan demonstrations undoubtedly deterred some people from frequenting the movie theatre, or from openly expressing interracial affection. Understanding these limitations and subversions via essential voluntarism can open a window onto a society that was willing to accept exceptions to dominant norms, but only if the ocular allowed one to. The paranoia that characterized society certainly contributed to excessive actions against miscegenation, or fabricated stories such as the *Confidential* article that served to provide a sense of control in a society that had surrendered itself to witch hunts. It did not matter that “there were as many Communists in the Civil Rights Movement as Eskimos in Florida” as Martin Luther King said, what mattered was that the fear of U.S. absorption by Russia made
people believe that there were thousands (qtd. in Woods 9). Similarly, current statements of
color-blindness or postraciality—a concept heralded after the ascendancy of Obama—do not
 corresponde to the daily realities of racism and disadvantaging. Churches in Alabama and
Kentucky have recently denied mixed-race couples the right to marry, and while a New York
Times survey indicated that there are more mixed-race couples than ever, the number of
white/non-white couples is still extremely low relatively speaking: of every 1000 married people,
only 53 white men and 44 white women are married to someone from a different race or
ethnicity (Saulny). In comparison, the number is 129 men and 58 women among African
Americans, 193 men and 224 women among white Hispanics, and 522 men and 524 women
among black Hispanics. The white/non-white binary remains firmly entrenched in society, in
both the minds of white Americans and non-white Americans alike. This is also apparent in
writings about Dandridge. The lack of progression in thinking about miscegenation and
intermarriage ensures remarkable similarities between commentaries on Dandridge’s misfortune.
In 1961, Olga James—Dandridge’s co-star in Carmen Jones—responded to reports of
Dandridge’s bankruptcy by saying that “it was sad that there was no suitable Black man for her.
That she had been exploited by this White man” (qtd. in Bogle 308). In his own book, published
in 1997, Bogle also lamented that the actress’ fame had the collateral that the more successful
she became, “the more difficult it was to find, even meet, successful, acceptable Black males,”
eventually causing her downfall (355). While almost forty years apart, separated by the Civil
Rights Movement, the statements both essentialize white and black as incompatible, as
destructive of each other.

This is why the oversight of race in secondary historiography is inexcusable. Ignoring
race in historical analysis makes it harder to recognize the logical ways in which today’s society
is a product of earlier policies in which race was a factor. The link between an ideology of
American-ness and race, and the way they went hand in hand in the postwar decades, thus needs to be retraced. The script writers, actors, and directors were products of their place and time, the spawn of an ideology specific to the postwar decades in which communism and racial progressivism were conflated. Questions of segregation and the U.S.’ role in the world were not separate issues, but pertained to, as Woods said, “a dream of what America should be” (9). In the words of senator James Eastland, the essence of Americanism could only be protected through “race consciousness,” by which he meant the white southern countermeasures against the leftist plot “designed to mongrelize the Anglo-Saxon race” (qtd. in Woods 58). As I have proposed, however, race consciousness was at the core of all articulations and meant a concern with race as an essential category that crossed race, class, gender, and sectional lines. As such, it cannot be disentangled from other societal concerns. The nation was not merely divided along color lines, but a site at which numerous competing discourses vied for the right to define what the U.S. should be. Race was impacted by communism from the top-down, as white southerners tried to equate color with communism, and from the bottom-up, as civil rights organizers battled over who could lay claim to the title of true representative of African American interests. It was these competing discourses that made their way into Dandridge’s films, and that made her a political figure as much as an actress.
Works Cited

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