WHITE ON BLACK REVISITED

A response to Sieglinde Lemke

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I would like to respond, briefly, to Sieglinde Lemke's review of my book *White on Black: Images of Africans and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (Yale University Press, 1992) in *Transition* 60. The review reproduces attractive illustrations from the book while taking the author to task on a number of points. Of course, criticism, as such, does not warrant a response: reviewers are simply entitled to their opinion, and in this case the opinion of the reviewer contrasts with a copious run of superlative reviews in journals in England and the United States. What is baffling in this case, however, is that I am criticized for failing to address questions which are precisely the aims and strengths of the book; I am accused of ignoring ideas in terms that might well have been taken from the book itself.

Because *Transition* is a significant forum and the impresssion created of the book is so beside the mark I find it impossible not to respond to this perplexing mode of criticism. While the obligatory exchange between author and critic may wear on the patience of readers who may be unfamiliar with both the book and its criticism, I will contextualize the discussion by teasing out some of the arguments involved.

Lemke is perturbed by the book's focus on representations of Africa and blacks in popular culture; she observes, "an eclecticism that ranges from the Bible to beer mats leaves Pieterse without any criteria for selection, save that all depictions are negative ones." Western popular culture, which includes the Bible and beer mats, as well as advertisements, comics, toys, etc., may be a wide angle but that does not mean that there are no criteria of selection. Thus, excluded are representations of Africa and blacks in Western high art.

Are all depictions negative ones? The oft-expressed view that Africans and blacks have "always" been depicted negatively is attacked repeatedly in my book. The first chapter makes a point of documenting various highly positive treatments of Africans, ranging from ancient Egypt and

the "Ethiopianism" of the ancient Greeks, to Christian Ethiopianism from the early centuries A.D., to the legend of Prester John and the immense popularity of the King of the Moors in the late Middle Ages. These "positive" views correlated with specific patterns of intercultural contact and cooperation, notably in the context of the Crusades.

On a more serious level, however, categorizing images as positive/negative is not really helpful. Enlightenment images of Noble Savages and Christian and romantic Abolitionist propaganda were not "negative" but they were distorting. The zigzag pattern of evolution of European images of "savages, and their sociopolitical implications are discussed in detail, from the Middle Ages onward. As I argue in the context of Abolitionism, "positive" images of pious and meek slaves were not "emancipated" images. The Abolitionist iconography of slaves of bent knees with hands folded, deserving of emancipation because they were Christian, shows how emancipation was conditional on submissiveness, in contrast to black self-emancipation. Lemke is simply wrong when she claims that the book deals only with "obviously prejudiced representations of blacks," "ignoring subtler forms of stereotyping." Her announcement that the author "does not take any interest in how stereotypes operate" is an unlikely criticism of a 259-page book about how stereotypes operate.

Other boldly misinformed pronouncements litter Lemke's review. She faults me for failing to recognize that "there is a vast difference between European and American perceptions of their respective Others"; despite my stated aim to analyze white-on-black images in a comparative framework, highlighting the differences between European and American imagery. This concern runs throughout the book and is taken up expressly in two chapters: chapter ten, on "popular" images of blacks in the United States and in different European countries; and chapter twelve which discusses these differences in the context of sexuality. In addition, the book takes issue with homogenized notions of "European" and "American," foregrounding differences between England and France, Catholic and Protestant, Southern and Northern Europe, countries with colonies in Africa versus those without, as well as the differences between South and North in the United States.

Lemke notes quite rightly that in recent decades we have witnessed increasing instances of "the objects of stereotyping talking back"; she goes on to claim that "Pieterse's *tour d'horizon* takes little interest in these acts of resistance . . . In a sense, then, Pieterse's book involves its own kind of appropriation: he employs blacks as vehicles for his cultural criticism, without allowing them a voice in it."

Several lines of thought are mixed up in this observation. In point of fact, *White on Black* makes ample use of black criticisms of white stereotyping—there's no chapter without it, and the title itself refers to Winthrop Jordan's study *White over Black.* The very entrée to the question of stereotyping is through black eyes; as I explain in the Introduction, the book is based on a collection of items, the Negrophilia collection, which began on this note: "What does Europe look like if seen through the eyes of American civil rights activists?" (*White on Black,* hereafter WB). The collection started when an African-

American theater maker, astonished to find many derogatory images of blacks that would no longer be acceptable in the United States casually on display in Europe, began to collect these popular items as a means of consciousness raising for the actors he was working with. The collection was subsequently adopted and expanded by film makers from the Dutch Antilles, who still own the collection, which now includes over 4000 items. They approached the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam about organizing an exhibition, and I was brought in to research and arrange the material. The report, which served as the blueprint for the exhibition, also resulted in *White on Black.* (The exhibition took place in 1990; the collection has subsequently been on display in Brussels and is now at the National Museum in Copenhagen.)

References to black criticisms of stereotyping, from African decolonization to the civil rights movement, are so extensive that they are impossible for a reviewer to overlook. More importantly, *White on Black* is *not* a book about African decolonization or black emancipation movements and their attendent iconographies: that would be well worth another book, using very different materials and modes of analysis. (I have treated some of these issues in a previous book, *Empire and Emancipation: Power and Liberation on World Scale,* published by Praeger in 1989. A book which I am now co-editing with Bhikhu Parekh addresses *The Decolonization of Imagination,* forthcoming with Zed Books in 1995.) In the Introduction I have noted the particularity of such analytic frameworks, distinguishing "White on Black" from "Black on White" and "Black on Black" (and, I suppose, "Black on White on Black"), in light of the different historical relationships these frames presuppose. Power and asymmetry, issues crucial to white on black representation, play out quite differently in other representational modes. While these adjacent frames are not central to the book, sources are provided in which they are.

Several of Lemke's criticisms deal with the subject of sexuality; e.g., "while Americans were preoccupied with the sexuality of the black male and depicted him as rapist, Europeans were preoccupied with the sexuality of the black woman, whom they saw as a black Venus. What accounts for this difference? For Pieterse, the question never arises." In fact, establishing this difference is the theme of an entire chapter, which includes five pages on European views of black women ranging from the medical perspective ("Hottentot Venus") to the lyrical view of the black Venus. In European representations, black women, often rendered in the background of Orientalist harem scenes where they served as contrasts to white odalisques, gradually came to occupy the foreground. During the nineteenth century European painters made several notable black female nudes, but there was no market for them in America. I argue that this may be a function of distance:

> *The black women who were being cultivated in this way in Europe were scarce and rarely available as partners. . . . In European culture the appeal of African and black females could be acknowledged because there were few of them, they posed no threat to the social structure. The sexual gains of colonialism could find cultural expression in metropolitan Europe, while the sexual gains accruing from domestic ethnic*

stratification in the United States had to remain hidden.

This resonates with a more general point about different imaginaries in Europe and America: European colonialism in Africa took place at a remove, while slavery and racial stratification in America were intrinsic to economy and society, on display in the home and in the public square.

Lemke maintains that my analysis privileges sexuality as "the determining factor," at the expense of other types of explanation; she accuses me of "vulgarized psychoanalysis," and observes that:

to depict the unleashing of repressed sexual drives as the primary cause for racism is to deny its complexity. The surge in violence against black Americans at the end of the nineteenth century was a reaction to Plessy v. Ferguson *and has to be analyzed in the context of the transformation from a plantation economy to an industrial society. The political and economic insecurities of the South and the anxieties of white men in peril of losing their social status are crucial elements of these racist attacks.*

Contrast this with the relevant section from *White on Black*:

White males in the South identified with the Victorian code of morality which dictated that they had to be breadwinners, but the economic depression of the 1890s, the vulnerability of the Southern plantation economy and the advance of industrialization, coupled with their losing the Civil War, undermined their position. The politcal and economic insecurities of the South found a psychic outlet in the inflammable combination of "race" and sexuality, the myth of the black rapist and the collective ritual of lynching.

The reviewer reproaches the author for not addressing a certain complexity while formulating that complexity in terms that could have come straight out of the book. The reviewer reproaches the author for over-emphasizing sexuality, but the sole chapter that deals with this subject, out of fifteen chapters, is virtually the only one she refers to. The idea that sexuality would be the all-determining factor is too simplistic even to refute. That violence against Black men should be explained in terms of socio-economic factors is precisely the line of thinking pursued in the chapter and throughout the book.

Lemke quotes my statement "a comparison with the American lynch and castration complex can deepen our insight in European relations. After all, Africa is the 'South' of Europe." She comments, "No, even if Africa is south of Europe, it is not the 'South' of Europe." Again, this could have been interesting had she engaged the actual points made in this connection: of course the text details both similiarities and differences between Europe/Africa and United States North/South.

Lemke, finally, rebukes the author for "his propensity for reductive dichotomies." Stereotypes, in her words, "are, rather, the result of a complex dynamic of historical antagonisms, whose critical examination requires that we attend to the differences among them." Again, the critic echoes the view developed in the book and presents it as a criticism of the book. Throughout the book I argue against reductive dichotomies and in favor of a historical approach. The theo-

retical underpinnings of this approach—including a critique of structuralist analyses—are given in the last chapter on "Image and Power."

Should I venture an interpretation of this mode of criticism? Is it a matter of someone who does not have much to say but believes that in giving it a polemical cast it will stand out better? Is it a matter of superficial reading—of forgetting at page 50 what one has read at page 20? On a certain level, I think that many of the points advanced by Lemke are quite correct. It's just a little odd that she should make them as criticisms of a book that makes the same points.