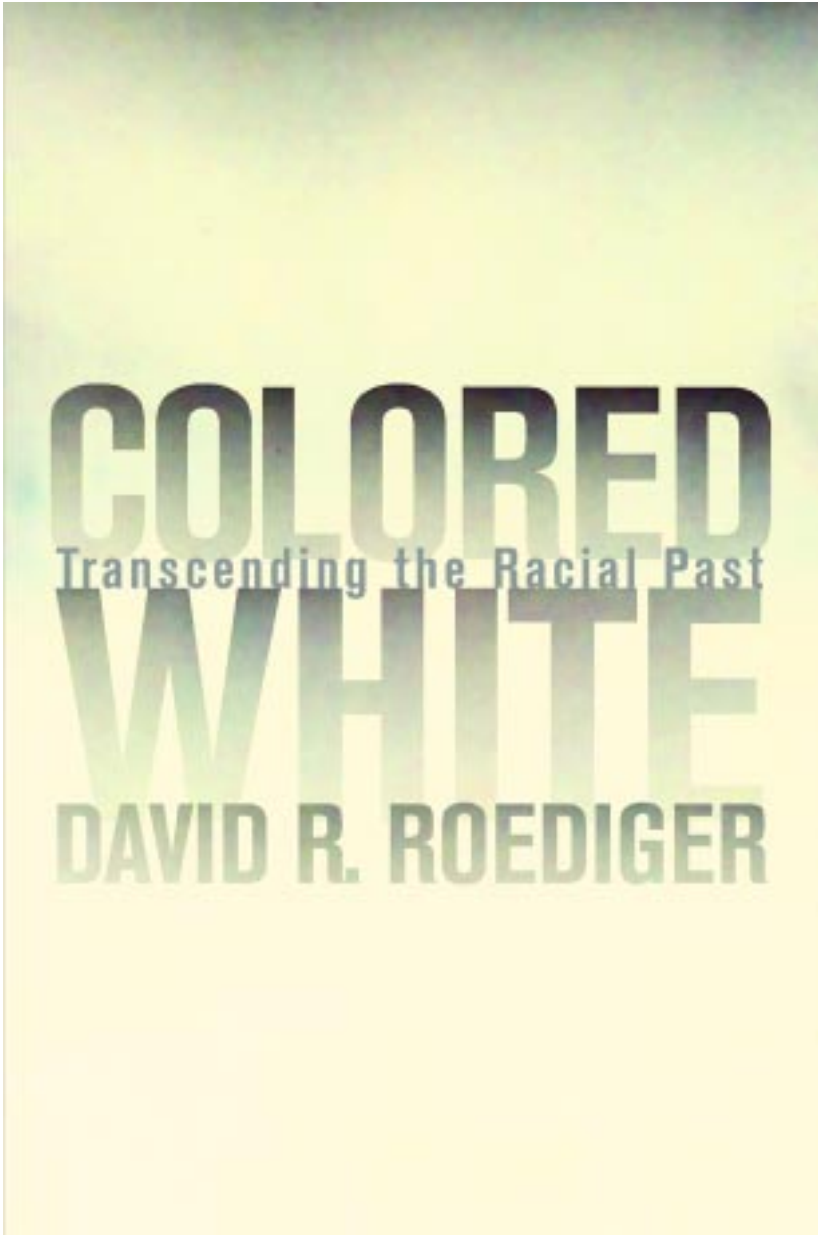


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## Smear Campaign

GIULIANI, THE *HOLY VIRGIN MARY*,  
AND THE CRITICAL STUDY OF WHITENESS

*The study of whiteness, both as a category into which some people are placed and as an identity that some people embrace, has gained considerable attention in academia and the popular press in the past decade. Alternately celebratory, dismissive, and bemused, this increased attention reflects the ways in which educational institutions, workplaces, and debates have grudgingly opened up to racial democracy, making the assumption that white privileges, presences, and viewpoints are “natural” more difficult to hold. With biologically based racism in retreat, it has become possible to ask bedrock questions such as “What makes some people think that they are white?” and “When did white people become white?” of a far broader audience. In making whiteness a moral, political, and historical problem, writers like Cheryl Harris, Toni Morrison, Philip Deloria, Cherrie Moraga, Thandeka, and bell hooks have powerfully connected with long-standing critical reflections on whiteness by such towering figures as W. E. B. Du Bois, Americo Paredes, James Baldwin, and Ida B. Wells, all of whom decidedly saw whiteness as a problem long ago.<sup>1</sup> These new and older studies have seldom been brought together, however, and have still less often been deployed in an attempt to illuminate a current political issue. This essay makes such an attempt, sampling an array of critical studies of whiteness with a view toward introducing them to readers and demonstrating their utility in addressing the controversy generated by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s attacks on Chris Ofili’s painting *Holy Virgin Mary* and on the Brooklyn Museum for displaying it. The article’s purpose is not to argue*

*that the museum controversy “was really about” race and whiteness but rather to show how powerfully white consciousness operates to shape debates that are also about religion, politics, and gender.*

### **Seeing Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary***

The soundbite was consistent if odd. Every time I returned to the hotel between meetings in New York City in late September 1999, the radio news echoed Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's charges: An artist had constructed a work by “throwing elephant dung at a picture of the Virgin Mary,” and now the Brooklyn Museum was about to display it, using public money. Giuliani promised to punish this “hate crime” by withdrawing museum funds. Sometimes the verbs changed. The dung was “smeared” or “splattered” on what the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights called a religious painting. But the logic was the same. As Cardinal O'Connor put it, an “attack on our Blessed Mother” had occurred and demanded a response.” “You don't have a right,” Giuliani added, “to government subsidy for desecrating somebody else's religion.”<sup>2</sup>

Because my Catholic upbringing and the time I had spent in West Africa had given me a clear idea of what both religious paintings of Mary and elephant dung looked like, it was not hard to generate images of the offending work. (I did have some doubts about whether thrown elephant dung would stick to a painting, but I took Giuliani's word for it.) The controversy held some interest, in terms of the mayor's senatorial aspirations, censorship, and arts funding, but those remained far from the research concerns that brought me to New York City—investigations of race and white identity. Although I leaned toward the cynical opinion that politics, and not purely religion, entered into Giuliani's aggressive raising of this issue, I had no reason to challenge the views of the radio commentators who argued for or against one or the other of those.

On leaving for the airport, I finally saw a newspaper reproduction of the offending work, Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*. The Virgin gazing from the newspaper page deflated any conviction that this was a simple controversy, divorced from the study of race and whiteness. This was certainly not the “religious painting” of Mary I knew from Missouri and Illinois churches. Why did no one initially mention that she was Black and that Ofili was Afro-British? And where was the elephant dung? No thrown, smeared, or splattered excrement was anywhere in sight.

When I later saw a larger, full-color reproduction in the catalog from Ofili's major exhibition in Great Britain, the mystery of the dung was solved. The Virgin's bare breast was made of the stuff, shaped and processed to a sheen.<sup>3</sup> The painting also sat—unlike what Ofili calls “crucified” paintings hanging from museum walls—on two balls of dung, one labeled “Virgin” and the other “Mary.” A catalog described, in a much fuller way than the insidious David Bowie voiceover on the website displaying the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition, why the dung appeared.<sup>4</sup> Ofili had, since a 1992 visit to Zimbabwe, incorporated it into much of his work. Partly a sendup of the British arts establishment's glib, commodified evocations of multiculturalism and “roots” (Ofili took out large ads in trendy arts publications saying simply “Elephant Shit”), the use of dung also reflected an engagement with cosmologies that revere dung as a symbol of regeneration.<sup>5</sup>

The catalog's reproductions and critical works on Ofili also gave form to a vaguer suspicion I had had since I first saw the newspaper reproduction of *Holy Virgin Mary*: the painting somehow seemed admiring, warm toward its subject, and in the end reverent and even Catholic. The draping of Mary, described by one writer as “petal-like,” echoed much of Catholic art and doubled the breast's regenerative symbolism. Ofili, himself Catholic, claimed inspiration from the masters of Madonna painting, especially Van Eyck, and alluded to the sensuality of their Virgins. His studio features a sign over the door: “This area is constantly watched and patrolled by the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

The objects surrounding Mary in Ofili's portrayal emerge, on close inspection, as relatively tiny cutouts—one critic calls them butterflies—of buttocks and genitalia from pornographic magazines. The images, largely of Black women, place Ofili's Virgin in a world of racism, misogyny, commodified sex, and dismemberment and they gesture provocatively toward Catholic paintings in which scenes illustrating Mary's “attributes” hover around her. (The artist both critiques and participates in that world.) The sacred and the secular, as Godfrey Worsdale puts it, are thus juxtaposed “in their extremes.”<sup>7</sup> A goal of the project, according to Ofili, was to create a hip-hop Madonna, reflecting on the sexism of rap but also on the self-assertion—Ofili is specifically fascinated by Lil' Kim—of some women in it.<sup>8</sup> Thus Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, surrounded by the peril of the floating buttocks/balloons/butterflies of pornography and subject to ridicule because of her overdrawn, even minstrelized, African features, is nonetheless neither ethereal nor downcast but self-possessed and sensual.

Having seen, as opposed to merely hearing about, this complex work, I returned to Giuliani's decision to single the painting out for attack much less certain that we could do without a discussion of race in understanding his motivations. The "Sensation" exhibition that brought the *Holy Virgin Mary* to Brooklyn was, after all, designed and endlessly marketed by its entrepreneur/owner Charles Saatchi as "shocking," "offensive," and even vomit-inducing. The works on display included one that brutalized animals and another that seemed to British viewers an homage to a child-murderer.<sup>9</sup> Certainly there was ample room to criticize postmodern art as amoral without singling out Ofili. That the museum was caught in a series of tawdry financial arrangements with Saatchi underlines how effortless it could be to mount such criticisms. To understand why Giuliani zeroed in on Ofili's supposed offenses, why the mayor conjured up the "uncivilized" throwing of elephant dung where none existed, why he regarded the Catholic-inspired painting as an attack by the artist on "somebody else's" religion, why he let dung and not pornography be emphasized, and how he rested assured that even as the painting, with no splattered dung, was reproduced in the press, his know-nothing stance would still work politically, takes us to the heart of whiteness.<sup>10</sup> Although religious faith and gender-inflected political opportunism remain central to explanations of Giuliani's choice of targets, these motivations are themselves so fully tied to white racial consciousness that understanding the *Holy Virgin Mary* affair offers an opportunity to reprise most of the key insights of critical studies of whiteness.

### Somebody Else's Madonna

In his certainty that *Holy Virgin Mary* attacked "somebody else's religion," Giuliani turned a phrase significantly. The mayor instantly became the other, the somebody else, the hate crime victim. Ostensibly he did so as a Catholic. The irreligious artist and what Giuliani called the "elite" arts establishment presumably attacked faith in general but Catholicism in particular, as Cardinal O'Connor put it.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Katha Pollitt's fine *Nation* column on the controversy noted the ease with which it was forgotten that "the Virgin Mary was not Catholic" and nicely quoted the antifeminist Camille Paglia's hints that a "Jewish collector" and a "Jewish museum director" were conspiring to promote "anti-Catholic art."<sup>12</sup> As the stormy debates over Mary in my own Irish Catholic/German Lutheran childhood should have prepared me to know—my parents did not speak for weeks after a Lutheran Sunday School let me color Mary's clothing green rather than the proper blue—religion provides its own sets

of significant “others” against which identity forms.<sup>13</sup> But in this case, whiteness overrode internal divisions among Christians.

As Giuliani and his advisers had to know, the stories the mayor orchestrated about Ofili’s painting would appear alongside small reproductions of the 6- by 8-foot work. Indeed, *Holy Virgin Mary* was probably the planet’s most often reproduced work of art at the millennium’s end. The unfamiliar other in those reproductions is not a Protestant Mary but specifically a Black Virgin. Nor, as it turns out, was the artist “somebody else” to the Catholic faith. What then, we ought to ask, was the relationship between the Blackness of Ofili’s Mary and Giuliani’s ability to assume that she was somebody else’s production and to avoid having to defend that assumption even when Ofili’s Catholicism was reported in the press?

Critical studies of whiteness help to answer these important questions. In her seminal 1988 article on “white privilege and male privilege,” the feminist philosopher Peggy McIntosh set about listing the perks of whiteness that often seem so natural to their owners as to require no second thought. McIntosh described white privilege as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, coda books, passports, visas, . . . emergency gear, and blank checks.” Its contents, which may or may not be acknowledged consciously, include assumptions that range from the most practical and concrete to the abstract:

- “I can choose blemish cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my skin.”
- “I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to the experiences of my race.”

In convening a recent workshop on race for several hundred Minneapolis social workers, I asked participants to jot down additions to McIntosh’s list. The first three volunteers to read their responses were people of color, and they all made the same point: Whites in the United States get to see the central symbols of holiness in the culture almost uniformly portrayed as white. One particularly full response suggested that breaking the commandments against making “graven images” of God had opened the door to white domination. Occasionally, as in the Milwaukee marches against open housing of 1967, when segregationists paraded behind the slogan “God Is White,” the assumption of a white deity has been put to explicitly political use. Even in a New York City in which Latino, Asian, and Haitian Catholic populations are significant, and in a world in which Brazil is the nation with the most

Catholics, the image of a white Holy Family survives intact. Listeners at several talks I gave on this subject reported thinking (on the basis of Giuliani's words, poor television and newspaper reproductions of the work, and reigning assumptions) that the painting was a white Virgin made black by smearings of dung on her otherwise white face. Giuliani's "smear campaign" worked because a Black Virgin is somebody else, in a nation in which, as Barbara Reynolds recently pointed out, the government's Postal Service churns out one billion (!) white-Madonna stamps per year. The Harlem-based *Amsterdam News* was almost alone in making this point, headlining a September 30, 1999 editorial "A Black Madonna! Giuliani's Worst Nightmare."<sup>14</sup>

The film scholar and cultural historian Richard Dyer deepens this discussion in his critical 1997 study *White*. Dyer notes that Christianity developed out of a Jewish/Middle Eastern/North African milieu and that its images of holiness did not uniformly privilege whiteness for many centuries. From the Crusades through the Renaissance and European expansion to the Americas, however, Christian symbolism made "national/geographic" others and then racial others into the "enemies of Christ" and/or potential converts.<sup>15</sup> In Renaissance art, Dyer argues, Christ and the Virgin Mary not only are white but also are "increasingly . . . rendered as paler, whiter, than everyone else." They give off light and their hair flows. Their images are both in some ways more physically realistic (Christ's maleness becomes clearer and renderings of his genitals appear) and more preternatural and implausible examples of what Dyer calls "extreme whiteness." Also preternaturally white in some portrayals was the breast milk so frequently associated with Catholic portraits and accounts of Mary—an image in sharp contrast to Ofili's insistence on symbolizing the nurturing and regenerative powers of the Virgin by constructing her bare breast out of a dung both dark and African. Dyer adds that Christianity emerges as a singularly "embodied" religion, obsessed with picturing the holy in human form, and yet "anti-body" in its commitment to the superiority of the spiritual within a cosmology that posits a sharp dichotomy between body and spirit. The wholeness and white body of Mary then powerfully symbolize the ideal and the distance of all women from that ideal. Dyer also observes that in museum-featured religious art, Mary exists at a certain remove from the violence surrounding her life. She is typically not tear-stained, wounded, scarred, shadowed, or seen as aging. This image, implausible at once for Mary and for women of the world generally, calls to mind Saidiya Hartman's prescient comments on the impact of seeing the category "woman" as white and privileged: "By assuming

that [the term] woman designates a known referent, an *a priori* unity . . . we fail to attend to the contingent and disjunctive production of the category.” Hartman adds that in assuming that the violence committed against women of color is attached to slavery or race alone and not also to womanhood, we avoid the “work of feminist criticism . . . the interrogation and deconstruction of this [white] normativity.”<sup>16</sup>

A final point concerning the easy pairing of white and Madonna also grows out of the literature critically studying whiteness. At its most healthy, that literature refuses to see itself as the latest hot thing in academia. Instead it roots itself in a long tradition of critical thought about whiteness by people of color. Ofili’s work, and Giuliani’s reaction to it, may profitably be placed in a long tradition of artistic challenges to the idea of an “extreme white” Holy Family. In very different ways, such resistance appears in the worship of Our Lady of Guadalupe and other saintly images in Asia, Latin America, and Africa; the depictions of Mary as olive-colored by Henry Tanner in *Virgin* a century ago, as brown in William H. Johnson’s haunting *Mount Calvary*, and as Black in Romare Bearden’s *Come Sunday* (Ofili-like with bare breast and a Christ-child who flies); and the political activism of Albert Cleage’s Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit. In New York City itself, violence in the bloody white-on-Black race riots of 1834 was sparked in part by the African American preacher Samuel Cox’s contention that Christ was dark-skinned. Alain Locke’s pathbreaking *The New Negro* (1925) had Winold Reiss’s enigmatic “The Brown Madonna” as its frontispiece.<sup>17</sup> Jorge Amado’s great Brazilian novel *Tent of Miracles* dramatizes the worship of dark deities and the white-supremacist dread of such worship. Langston Hughes’s “Christ in Alabama” (1931) perhaps most closely approximates Ofili’s portrayal of Mary as imperiled for her race and her gender:

Christ is a nigger,  
 Beaten and black:  
 Oh, bare your back!  
 Mary is His mother  
 Mammy of the South,  
 Silence your mouth.<sup>18</sup>

### **Italian American Whiteness and Troubles with Madonnas**

A second large area in which recent critical studies of whiteness illuminate the position from which Giuliani attacked *Holy Virgin Mary* concerns the mayor’s particular experiences as an Italian American New

Yorker. Giuliani's website has him as the grandson of immigrants from Italy, born into a "working-class" family in Brooklyn in 1944. *The Village Voice* contests much of this biography in the noteworthy article "Rudy's White World," which has him growing up in a "blanched Nassau suburb."<sup>19</sup> Wayne Barrett's excellent recent biography of Giuliani clarifies matters. The mayor's father, after serving a term for armed robbery, utilized family connections to get a job tending bar in a Brooklyn restaurant that doubled as a base for loansharking and gambling operations. The family moved from Brooklyn to Garden City, Long Island, which still lacked a single Black family among its residents as late as 1968. In any case a New Yorker, Giuliani grew up in an area in which the racial identity of Italian Americans had been very much at issue in the early twentieth century and beyond. Indeed, in *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee's characters roundly questioned Italian whiteness, and in 1999 Lee could cleverly cast the Latino actor John Leguizamo as the leading character in his searching inquiry into working-class Italian American identity, *Summer of Sam*.<sup>20</sup> Giuliani's grandparents came to a nation in which immigrants from Italy were lynched, excluded, and called "guineas" (a slur directly borrowed from earlier usages in reference to African Americans) or "greasers" (a slur directly borrowed from earlier usages in reference to Latinos). They came from a country that had its own sense of racial divisions along a north-south axis. "Africa," lore had it, "begins at Naples." Giuliani was heir to both halves of this division: his father's side came from Tuscany in the north and his mother's from the Naples area in the south.<sup>21</sup>

Recent scholarship on whiteness has looked closely at the process by which immigrant groups regarded as less-than-white upon their arrival in the United States—"inbetween people," as James Barrett and I termed them in a recent article—encountered race and appropriated whiteness. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* and Karen Brodtkin's *How Jews Became White Folks* are the best examples of a literature largely inspired by the pioneering essays of James Baldwin. Other accounts make the racialization of Italians central to the racial dramas that unfolded during and after the 1890-to-1920 "new immigration" from eastern and southern Europe. The particular association of "inbetween" status with the poorest immigrant workers and with those doing the dirtiest jobs runs through this literature. So does the frank admission that being victimized as "inbetween" could lead to alliances with people of color (especially, in New York City, among Italian Americans supporting Vito Marcantonio) or, more commonly,

to an anxious refusal to avow affinities across racial lines and a desperate desire to achieve a white identity, a desire that was often underwritten by a government-subsidized move to “blanched” suburbs.<sup>22</sup>

The history of Italian and Italian American whiteness was bound up with the images of Madonnas in fascinating ways, some of which could not have been lost on Giuliani. In Italy, and especially in Sicily, depictions of the Madonna and other saints were, and to some extent still are, black. These figures, as Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum’s excellent *Black Madonnas* argues, grew out of a social history replete with African, Middle Eastern, and wider Mediterranean contacts. Marina Warner’s insightful study of myths and cults that revolve around Mary tellingly explores links of Italian black Madonnas to the sea. Such Madonnas also reflected pre-Christian associations of blackness with strong, mystically powerful women. Leonard Covello, the great student of southern Italian immigration to New York City, wrote 50 years ago of Madonnas as the “chief deity” in the south of Italy, as symbolically more important than Jesus there, and as an index of female power in society. To the extent that they mobilized both pre-Christian and Christian symbolism, black Madonnas represented a particular vulnerability in patriarchal authority. Ofili’s *Holy Virgin Mary* captures the spirit of such black Madonnas, and Pollitt not implausibly sees in it “the cheerful mother goddess of an imaginary folk religion.” The Church rarely smiled on these images. Attempts to explain away their existence—as, for example, in the contention that fire changed their color—or to hide, marginalize, or repaint them, were rife. Nonetheless, the Black Virgin at Tindari remains one of the most revered Sicilian icons.<sup>23</sup>

In 1952, when Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari dispassionately presented their research on scores of images of “dark brown or black madonnas,” some of them Italian, to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, “every priest and nun walked out.” The next year, when *Scientific Monthly* published Moss and Cappannari’s article and ran a picture of a black Madonna on its cover, the chaplain of the Newman Club at Wayne State University denounced them as “campus atheists.”<sup>24</sup> This extremely hostile U.S. reaction may reflect what the sociologist Sal Salerno has characterized as a much more thoroughgoing “loss of the symbol” of the Black Madonna among Italian Americans than among Italians. Covello, for example, quotes at length from the reminiscences of an immigrant from Calabria, who made two attempts to enlist the aid of saints to get money for passage to the United States just after the beginning of the twentieth

century. He first asked the black San Filippo to intervene and, that failing, appealed to the black Madonna of Seminara. Nonetheless, in the United States, shrines to black Madonnas appear to be absent. Salerno provocatively links this loss to an “assimilation” into U.S.-style whiteness. It is probably a sign of both the strength and the weakness of such assimilation that the most popular United States Italian American entertainer of our time constantly plays across the color line, while billing herself as Madonna. A decade before the *Holy Virgin Mary* controversy, Pepsi pulled a big-budget Madonna ad campaign and withdrew sponsorship of her concert tour in the context of boycott threats from a far-right media watchdog group. At issue was Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” video, in which she kissed the feet of a Black saint who then came to life and romantically embraced her. In reporting Pepsi’s decision, and elsewhere, the *New York Times* characteristically made the embrace raceless,” saying that what was at issue was the video’s portrayal of “romantic love with a priest or saint.”<sup>25</sup>

Whether Giuliani was denied an experience with black Madonnas in New York’s Catholic churches and schools or heard dark rumors of their existence, he clearly would have known about New York City’s most celebrated Italian American shrine, the Madonna of 115th Street in East Harlem. The *fiesta* surrounding the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel there had its roots in devotions begun by immigrants from Pollo, near Naples, in the 1880s. The celebrations in the Virgin’s honor, so brilliantly described in the work of Robert Orsi, became the “central communal event” in Italian Harlem, “drawing immigrants from all over southern Italy.” As Italian Americans (like Giuliani’s own family) who were “finally well-off enough to get out” left the neighborhood (and often their parents) after World War II, ties of ethnicity and family became still more bound up with rituals of return to the *fiesta*.<sup>26</sup> According to Orsi, the Puerto Ricans who transformed the area into Spanish Harlem had to be imagined as pushing out the Italians who left. Because of their “proximity” to Italian Americans in color, language, and (for a time, around Marcantonio) politics, Puerto Ricans represented a particular threat to the security of Italian American whiteness. One strategy in policing the line between Italian Americans and Puerto Ricans was to keep the latter unwelcome at the *fiesta* to the Madonna of 115th Street. Indeed, Orsi adds, this racial imperative was so strong that the darker, but less “proximate” and therefore less threatening, Haitians could be included in the *fiesta* and could even be considered not so “black” as the Puerto Ricans. St. Ann’s Parish in East Harlem featured, in the image of

San Benedetto (or “Il Moro,” as he was known in southern Italy), perhaps the most dramatic statue of a Black Italian saint in the United States. The son of slaves brought to Sicily from Ethiopia in the sixteenth century, Benedetto’s feast day was marked early in the century with some African Americans included in the Harlem festivities. Indeed, his transplantation to New York City suggests the possibility of a road not taken, toward an egalitarian pan-Latin challenge to the hyper-whiteness of holiness. Italian Americans more typically took a road to white identity, and in many cases, to the suburbs. Puerto Rican worshippers inherited the statue, although a few Italian Americans persist in the parish. Elsewhere, San Benedetto became known as St. Benedict the Black, the patron saint of African Americans. An Italian American politician in New York City, especially one as successful and well connected as Giuliani, could not help but be aware of the celebrations on 115th Street—Giuliani’s father had grown up on 123rd Street in East Harlem—and of the striking racial and neighborhood politics they enacted. Thus, although he was unprepared to see a Black Madonna as holy, Giuliani’s ethnicity and location prepared him well to see the need to draw tight the racial boundaries surrounding Mary.<sup>27</sup>

### **Black Virgin, White Politics**

It is in the realm of politics that making the argument that whiteness was a central element in Giuliani’s attack on the *Holy Virgin Mary* is most intricate, but also most critical. The politics of religion and gender go so far toward explaining his electoral opportunism that reference to the growing literature on appeals to the “white vote” can seem almost superfluous. As *Time* put it in commenting on the Brooklyn Museum controversy in early October, “To subject this move by Giuliani to crass political analysis is to see brilliance.” The votes of “artsy” types were, according to *Time*, lost to the Republicans anyway, but more conservative upstate voters and Catholics statewide would presumably rally to Giuliani’s defense of “basic values.”<sup>28</sup> *The Village Voice* analysis of “Papal Pandering” similarly found Giuliani to be prospecting for votes outside of the city and appealing to a voting electorate estimated to be 44 percent Catholic statewide. The *Voice* added its opinion that Giuliani was also specifically angling for the support of Michael Long, the Catholic leader of the Conservative Party (CP) of New York. In that state, whose electoral system allows candidates to run on the ballot lines of multiple parties, absence of a CP endorsement has been the kiss of death for statewide Republican candidates for decades. Better relations

with Cardinal O'Connor, whose response to the museum controversy eerily echoed Giuliani's, were likely to result from the mayor's stance.<sup>29</sup>

This positioning within Catholic/CP politics came at a time when Giuliani was having serious problems with both groups. Running in New York City, Giuliani had consistently taken a firm prochoice position on abortion and had been a fixture at the gay rights parades that so antagonized the Catholic hierarchy. To the extent that the mayor anticipated his own marriage falling apart and his infidelity being revealed, his Catholic image was further imperiled. (The longer-term political calculations had to be tricky here, however. In early 2001, when Giuliani attacked a work depicting a female and nude Black Christ, as conservative a paper as the *Chicago Tribune* editorialized, “. . . a married man whose mistress receives city police protection is not in the best position to preach against public subsidies to immorality.”) Long and the CP, which had not endorsed Giuliani in three previous citywide races, insisted on a reversal in the mayor's position on abortion as a precondition to any possible endorsement. Such a reversal would have carried the large risk of allowing Hillary Clinton to portray Giuliani as without convictions and as beholden to right-wing fringe politics.<sup>30</sup> Moving to the sort of categorical antichoice position that the CP supported both was unpopular with many voters and threatened to galvanize some activist groups, such as the National Abortion Rights Action League, from a neutral position into anti-Giuliani campaigning. The great success of Giuliani's Senate campaign, before it imploded in the context of health problems and scandal, lay in keeping Clinton from opening a “gender gap” among voters. That success was squarely under threat if a sharp shift on the abortion issue were to occur. Even so, appeals to Conservative, Catholic, and Christian-right voters mattered so much that Giuliani's staff apparently sent out test signals regarding a possible move away from a prochoice position six weeks before the museum controversy. He quickly clarified that no change would occur.<sup>31</sup>

With very rare exceptions, commentators did not link the Brooklyn Museum and the abortion issues directly, although the two were repeatedly discussed in proximity to each other. Nonetheless, the ways in which attacking Ofili enabled the mayor to shore up Catholic and Conservative support are striking. By late September, Giuliani had managed to situate himself at the head of a movement in which the Church, the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic League, and the Conservative Party turned out hundreds of demonstrators. For good measure, some orthodox Jewish and Hispanic Christian groups, also courted by Giuliani,

likewise mobilized modestly on his side. The “pro-Catholic” quotes coming from city hall and those emanating from the Catholic League were indistinguishable. In defending against a black Madonna and (in somewhat muted tones) decrying the pornographic butterflies surrounding her, Giuliani’s words resonated with the attacks on promiscuity and with the endorsements of virginity sometimes made by antiabortion activists. Appearing on “Evans, Novak, Shields and Hunt” on October 10, Giuliani forcefully attacked the museum and *Holy Virgin Mary*. The very next question concerned abortion rights and found Giuliani reaffirming his prochoice stance.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, CP leader Long, personally quite estranged from the mayor, had to offer praise: “Of course his actions enhance his plusses with Conservative Party voters. What he did [regarding the Brooklyn Museum] was correct.”<sup>33</sup> For a time anyway, the subject was changed, and without shifting his position on abortion, Giuliani shored up support among key constituencies.

And yet these well-tuned and highly gendered appeals *by themselves* take us only so far in understanding either the form or the content of Giuliani’s campaign against Ofili’s work. With regard to both form and content, recent works in critical race theory and in the critical study of whiteness again provide vital insights. In terms of form, anti-*Holy Virgin Mary* rhetoric consistently strayed toward appeals evoking race as well as religion. This was certainly true at the fringes of the campaign. A minister in Indianapolis, for example, electronically circulated a sermon that eagerly asked, “Should we form a mob and go lynch the ‘artist’ Chris Ofili?” while a protester at the Brooklyn Museum sported a sign reading “Hitler Was Right When He Got Rid of ‘Degenerate Art.’”<sup>34</sup> A vandal desecrated the painting by smearing white paint over much of it.<sup>35</sup>

Giuliani himself put his criticisms of Ofili squarely in the context of culture wars and other defenses of “civilization,” which, he added wonderfully, “has been about trying to find the right place for excrement.” Such a philosophical gem reminds us that the state-sponsored effort to stigmatize Ofili’s work as “shit” and “trash” brought in by outsiders was embedded in Giuliani’s larger and long-standing campaigns to “clean up” the city by removing its homeless and its sex workers from sight, by decimating affordable housing, and by massively incarcerating people of color. These campaigns are the centerpieces of the mayor’s efforts to build cross-class alliances as he makes the city ever safer for capital and ever more perilous for Black and immigrant victims of police violence. In the context of continuing police brutality, especially

killings in custody by the city's police, along with impressive demonstrations against such violence, Giuliani's long-standing strategy of campaigning as anticrime and propolice was compromised. His pro-"civilization" offensives against Ofili and other putative impurities in the city evoke rich connections among excrement, smearing, savagery, blackness, and white (self)images regarding control, anality, and capital accumulation; they could themselves be the subject of a psychoanalytically informed essay. Any such essay would be much in the debt of the groundbreaking psychoanalytical work on race by Joel Kovel, Sandor Ferenczi, Otto Fenichel, and others.<sup>36</sup>

Just as interesting as his remarks on civilization was Giuliani's insistence that "if the painting attacked a 'race,'" it could not have been displayed. This stance, also a staple of talk radio whitelore, ignored the fact that other Ofili works do combine dung with images of his Black heroes, including Muhammad Ali and Miles Davis.<sup>37</sup> The outlandish idea that only the rights of racial minorities, and not those of the white mainstream, are respected today is searchingly analyzed in fine recent work on "racial formation" by Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Omi and Winant argue that in the 1960s, the moral high ground of discourse on race and rights was so successfully captured by the civil rights movement that subsequent racial politics have both marginalized direct appeals to white supremacy and ensured that defenses of the interests of whites were couched in the language of colorblindness, equal treatment, and civil rights.<sup>38</sup> Giuliani's rhetoric regarding "hate speech" against the Virgin Mary and the Catholic League's insistent billing of itself as a civil rights organization further underscore how the (ostensibly post-)racial logic identified by Omi and Winant gave form to Giuliani's campaign.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of the content of Giuliani's vote-catching appeals, race generally and whiteness specifically also greatly matter. In this regard, it is again important not to lose sight of the fact that *Holy Virgin Mary* was massively reproduced even as it was denounced with wild inaccuracy by the mayor. In the absence of the promised splatterings of dung, the work was arresting primarily for the blackness of its subject. Without mentioning race—indeed precisely by not mentioning race when it was patently obvious—Giuliani placed himself in a growing line of politicians who mobilize white votes with ostensibly raceless words. Discussions of this phenomenon place it in a post-civil-rights period in which open appeals to racism are beyond the pale of respectable politics but in which issues such as crime, neighborhood schools, and welfare are

powerful in their own right and so saturated with racial assumptions that it is possible to appeal to white voters in what have been called “coded” ways.<sup>40</sup> Many of the most successful and notorious of such appeals have been visual. In perhaps the finest study to date of the political manipulation of racial codes, Doug Hartmann and Darren Wheelock analyze the conservative, talk-radio-fueled effort to stigmatize the meager social spending proposed by the Clinton administration as part of the 1994 crime bill. They show how this campaign used “midnight basketball” as a wedge to call such spending into question as frivolous. Hartmann and Wheelock chart press mentions of midnight basketball, a Jack Kemp brainchild initiated by Republicans. They show how press coverage astronomically increased, became decidedly more negative, and came to identify the program as “liberal.” Most important, they show the alarming consistency with which such coverage featured pictures of young African American men, driving home the assumption that midnight basketball was a Black thing.<sup>41</sup>

Such wordless racial appeals stand in a long tradition. Martin Gilens’s important study *Why Americans Hate Welfare* quantifies how thoroughly and pictorially the media embraced and fueled right-wing efforts to racialize opposition to the 1960s War on Poverty. At the outset of the War on Poverty in 1964, 27 percent of those pictured in news-magazine photographs illustrating articles on poverty were Black. By 1967 that figure had reached 72 percent. In Mississippi in 1991, Kirk Fordice’s successful gubernatorial campaign featured an advertisement that complained racelessly about welfare liberalism and closed by lingering on a still photograph of a Black mother and her baby. Jesse Helms’s ads in the 1990 North Carolina Senate race showed white hands holding a job rejection letter in a largely visual attack on his African American opponent’s support of affirmative action. Annenberg School of Communications Dean Kathleen Hall Jamieson has recently conducted focus group research the results of which suggest that the Helms ad carried its racial point by placing a black mark, which interviewees saw as a black hand, in the letter’s margin. The celebrated 1988 “Willie Horton” ad from the Bush presidential campaign likewise talked colorblindly about crime as it used Horton’s image to racialize the point.<sup>42</sup>

The particular image of *Holy Virgin Mary* opens further fertile ground for such appeals. Although Peter Schjeldahl in the *New Yorker* and Pollitt in the *Nation* both find her “sweet,” Ofili’s “hiphop” Mary also looks strong, young, and sensual. Breast exposed and surrounded

by nudity and danger, she remains unblinking.<sup>43</sup> Reproduction and sexuality coexist in her in a way that they have not been allowed to come together either in plaster representations of Mary or in contemporary popular cultural images of young Black women. Ofili bills her as “simply a hip-hop version of highly sexualized old-master paintings” of the Virgin, but representing Black female sexuality popularly is anything but simple. If, as Hortense Spillers observes, Black women are “the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb,” the problem is even more acute in representations of young Black women. As Tricia Rose’s excellent recent work on the hip-hop group TLC and on Black female virginity and sexuality shows, young Black women’s alternating appearances in the popular culture as hip-hop “hotties” and welfare mothers work dialectically to make both their sexuality and their motherhood seem more and more beset with problems.<sup>44</sup>

Rose argues that efforts by TLC and others to embrace sexuality artistically are, however fraught with difficulty, supremely significant. She adds that all such efforts stand in danger of being manipulated.<sup>45</sup> The racial fears on which Giuliani’s attack on *Holy Virgin Mary* traded represent just such manipulation. His strategy courted not just a Catholic vote, an upstate vote, a suburban vote, and a conservative endorsement. It also mobilized a white vote. In so doing, it specifically used (just as Fordice’s Mississippi ad and Clinton’s 1992 diatribes against Sister Souljah had) the image of Black woman to make its “raceless” point.<sup>46</sup>

### **(How) Does Whiteness Win? A Postscript**

In May of 2000, with questions about his health, his infidelities, and his marriage much in the news, Giuliani withdrew from the Senate race. Even before then, it was clear that not even deftly playing to whiteness could solve every personal and political problem. The Conservative Party had denied him an endorsement. Polls showed that his effort to withhold funding from the Brooklyn Museum was unpopular not only in New York City but also in upstate areas. Probably no more than a third of New Yorkers backed Giuliani when the issue was posed on free-speech grounds. The museum easily and predictably prevailed in court, arguing that Giuliani’s efforts to withdraw funds amounted to censorship.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, Giuliani for a time probably solidified his base among white conservatives. In professing calm over the lack of a Conservative Party endorsement, he emphasized direct appeals to conservative

voters rather than to parties. The *Holy Virgin Mary* case was perhaps his most dramatic such appeal.<sup>48</sup> When insider deals accompanying the financing of the exhibition came to light, Giuliani could smile. His actions also forced opponents decidedly onto the defensive. Hillary Clinton's position, summarized by Kira Brunner as "pro-museum, anti-elephant dung," hardly looked decisive. U.S. Senate Democrats meanwhile quickly joined Republicans in supporting a symbolic resolution calling for defunding the museum.<sup>49</sup>

All such outcomes pale, however, before the larger victory for whiteness in this case. What ended up being censored was not the Brooklyn Museum but any serious discussion of religion, gender, race, and power that might have grown out of the art and the controversy. The "color-blind" critical work that emerged did not seriously bring together race and censorship even to the extent that it had, for example, in the recent controversies surrounding Robert Mapplethorpe's photography and 2 Live Crew's lyrics. The views of African American intellectuals were neither featured nor even sought. That African artists and critics had a large stake in the debate was completely ignored by mainstream media. (Indeed, as superb coverage in *Nigeria World News* showed, African critics brought whole new questions to Ofili's work, including searching ones about the ease of his appropriation of elephant dung and bead work). The Clinton camp was eager to see the issues in terms of state policy and censorship, and not of race, just as Giuliani was.<sup>50</sup> With the noteworthy exception of an April 2001 statement of protest against Giuliani's formation of a "decency commission" by the New York local of the Black Radical Congress, the racism of Giuliani's efforts to restrict free expression has gone largely unremarked.<sup>51</sup> Naturalized pictures of white holiness drawn against highly gendered images of "somebody [racially] else," white control of the commanding heights of the media and arts establishments, and the pretense of colorblindness all survived the *Holy Virgin Mary* controversy unscathed and largely undebated. As long as these images and assumptions survive intact, appeals like Giuliani's will have ample time to triumph in the long run if not the short.

P.P.S.

*The next burst of Giulianiana in the national media, after his forays into arts criticism, came with his crackdowns on the homeless in New York City in late 1999. At the start of December, homeless-rights supporters mounted a sizeable, integrated demonstration. In it was a large reproduction of Holy Virgin Mary with the mayor's face standing in for the Madonna's. At this image, protesters threw what looked very much like, but probably wasn't, elephant dung.<sup>52</sup>*