

**‘Call her Moonchild’: Christina Ricci’s enduring embodiment of impure youth and whiteness**

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## **‘Call her Moonchild’: Christina Ricci’s enduring embodiment of impure youth and whiteness**

With a focus on how Christina Ricci performs the ‘bad girl’ body, one that renegotiates idealised forms of whiteness and ventures into performances of ‘white trash’, this article demonstrates how the actress’s evolution from child to adult star was smoothed by a youthful physicality in adulthood, and a consistent performance of bodily taboos in both periods. By examining Ricci’s physical presentation and associations with transgressive girlhood across a range of film and media – including *The Addams Family* (1991), *Buffalo ’66* (1998), *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) and *Black Snake Moan* (2006) – I argue that her persona deconstructs notions of female white purity by portraying childlike innocence alongside adult knowingness and sexuality. In considering how Ricci’s distinct physicality relates to that of Shirley Temple, the quintessentially cute child star, Ricci’s body is revealed to playfully subvert idealised representations of the female child and child-like women. Ricci is shown to have made a career out of playing extreme variations of what Karen Lury (2010) terms the ‘dirty little white girl’, ones whose ‘dirtiness’ aligns her with various kinds of ‘Other’, but who are as likely to pose their own threat to others as to need saving. As such, and in an extension of a term used to describe one of her characters, Ricci is conceived of as a ‘moonchild’; a figure whose extreme external whiteness depends on physical and behavioural darkness for its effect.

Keywords:

Christina Ricci; child stars; girlhood; whiteness; ‘white trash’

Born in California in 1980 of Italian and Irish descent, Christina Ricci had appeared in twenty feature films by the time she turned eighteen. Yet, long before Ricci began to look like an adult, roles called on the actress to embody taboo topics in adult-oriented films. This article focuses on how Ricci performs the ‘bad girl’ body, one which often renegotiates what Richard Dyer (1997) terms ‘idealised’ forms of whiteness, but also includes several performances of ‘white trash’, the derogative term used to describe the white underclass in the United States. I demonstrate that Ricci’s evolution from child to adult star was smoothed by a youthful physicality in adulthood, and a consistent performance of bodily taboos in roles spanning both periods. Through a consideration of her physical presentation and enduring associations with transgressive youth and taboo, I argue that Ricci’s persona deconstructs certain notions of female white purity, with a symbolic ‘dirtiness’ instead aligning her with various kinds of ‘Other’. Ricci’s career thus suggests that she provides a liminal body in which the marginal figures of society can be explored, a liminality she shares with Gael Sweeney’s (2001) description of the Southern US in relation to ‘white trash’.

The contradictions inherent in Ricci’s performances and persona mean that, regardless of her age at the time of filming, she aligns with aspects of Kathleen Rowe’s (1995) concept of the ‘unruly woman’ and Barbara Creed’s ‘monstrous little women’ (1994). Both scholars have provided influential ways of conceptualising female characters who eschew certain social conventions for ‘acceptable’ gendered behaviour. With a focus on comedy, Rowe examines transgressive women in contemporary film and television who display themselves in ways that are considered excessive, threatening and grotesque. Rowe’s study ‘investigates the power of female grotesques and female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place’ (3). Although Ricci’s performances can, at times, be darkly comedic, I find that she is mostly marked out as ‘unruly’ through her characters’ wearing of grotesque masks, and violent and sexually assertive acts—ones which

align her with Rowe's description of the unruly woman as 'vaguely demonic and threatening' (p.3). Although Ricci has not played the kind of demonic horror roles that Creed focuses on, her early performances of sexual impurity defy the innocent behaviour expected of the girl and thus, for Creed, can also be considered 'monstrous'. She often aligns with Creed's description of 'the abject little woman [who] flaunts herself with such wicked style [that] she is perversely unforgettable.' Indeed, in Steffen Hantke's (2012) study of Ricci's stardom in relation to the horror genre, he argues that she has developed the screen persona of a 'strongly sexualized' little girl, occupying a space at 'the margins' of horror cinema.

Intersecting with and, I believe, elucidating, such discussions of youthful transgression is Ricci's relationship to broader cultural representations of whiteness. I draw in particular on scholarship on 'white trash', as well as Dyer's writing on glowing white women and 'white death' in *White* (1997). Dyer's work has been critiqued for paying relatively little attention to historical and contextual differences in how whiteness functions. By considering his analysis alongside subsequent scholarship on whiteness and class and in contemporary media, I argue that Ricci is used to signal both archetypal characteristics of whiteness – identified by Dyer – and those with more specific contextual qualities. Writing on the liminal spaces of the Southern US in relation to 'white trash', Sweeney contends that '[t]hese are places of our American darkneses, where our fears about ourselves emerge' (p.146).

Drawing on the racial metaphor of 'black and white' – one that, in relation to Ricci, I believe usefully captures what I term her 'moonchild' status – Sweeney describes how 'White Trash is not Dark or Foreign or any other demonized group, but our own pale and scary soul' (p.146-7). Ricci's career demonstrates a consistent performance of, and representation of, a particular kind of darkness infused whiteness, one that comes to symbolize not just fears about ourselves but also fears about the 'Othered' woman-child. I thus position Ricci as a 'moonchild' – a term taken from the song Ricci dances to in *Buffalo '66* (1998) – arguing that

her career has been inflected with various shades of darkness, including associations of paedophilia, the Gothic, the grotesque, as well as ‘white trash’. While somewhat diverse, these components of her persona are shown to be complementary: they all benefit from Ricci’s liminal status, one dependent on her sustained ability to be physically childlike and ‘pure’, but behaviourally adult and ‘dirty’. Drawing from this combination of critical theories, I aim to reveal how Ricci’s early role as a morbid child-goth in *The Addams Family* (1991) has informed a career of characters whose ‘whiteness [...] seems to have a special relation with death’ (Dyer 1997, p.208), but whose paleness is also used to undercut her characters’ overt sexuality. By considering how Ricci’s performances relate to those of Shirley Temple, the quintessentially cute child star – Ricci’s body is also revealed to both acknowledge and playfully subvert idealised representations of the female child and Temple’s associations with a paedophilic gaze.

In this way, many of both her childhood and adult roles can be seen to fit with Lury’s (2010) conception of cinema’s ‘dirty little white girls’. Through a series of case studies spanning from Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) to Dakota Fanning in *Man on Fire* (2004), Lury explores ‘the narrative motif of the little white girl being lost and found, or stolen, repossessed and revenged’ (p.53), with a focus on heterosexual romances between such girls and an adult male, particularly the ‘racial and frequently racist aspects of that narrative’ (p.57). Such analysis will be used to help illuminate aspects of Ricci’s career, particularly her role in *Black Snake Moan* (2006), in which she plays a ‘white trash nymphomaniac’ (The Guardian 2007) who is saved and restrained by an African American man (Samuel L. Jackson). Lury’s focus is on narrative, with the term ‘dirty’ implied to be a subversion of the white girl’s perceived innocence (p.70). My focus on Ricci as a performer, and her related physical presentation instead aims to demonstrate how the specific physiognomy of her face and body has enabled her to make a career out of playing variations

of the ‘dirty little white girl’. Unlike Lury’s examples, Ricci’s characters are likely to pose their own threat to others as much as to need saving. At the same time, for Ricci herself, this dynamic can result in a degree of exploitation by directors, marketers and even other actors.

### **Visualising the moonchild**

Given the importance to Ricci’s career of her enduringly youthful and sexualised body, it is necessary to start by examining the specifics of her appearance. The distinctiveness and youthfulness of Ricci’s face is a frequent point of discussion in media profiles on the actress and in interviews with directors who have cast her.<sup>1</sup> Hantke (2012) notes how Ricci retained her ‘round face, large eyes, and prominent forehead’ into adulthood, and rightly suggests that such features continue to associate her with girlishness instead of a mature femininity. The remarkability of Ricci’s appearance largely results from a combination of the shape of her face, the size of her dark hazel eyes, and their contrast with her pale skin: a moon-like face, emphasized by the contrasting dark eyes. If Ricci’s eyes were combined with a larger nose or mouth, or situated on a longer or less translucent face, then they would be less prominent and her face would likely seem less childlike, less distinctive (fig. 1). It is common for performers to play younger than their age, but this typically requires audiences to accept the conceit. With Ricci the norm could be employed without it seeming obvious, something that was particularly important in her various 1998 performances: the actress was no longer a minor but continued to look like one. As a result, directors could credibly cast her as a child in risqué roles without risking critical backlash for exploiting a young girl. Indeed, the credits for *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) include a disclaimer (‘No minor was used to portray any sexually explicit content’), clearly anticipating backlash related to Ricci’s perceived youth. Ricci’s height, like her facial features, strongly contributes to her enduring ability to play girls – ones who are both ‘bad’ and in need of protection – well into adulthood. At a height of

5'1'' in adulthood (and presumably slightly shorter in earlier roles) Ricci tends to look up at her co-stars. When this upward gaze is coupled with a camera positioned above her, Ricci's eyes thus appear magnified.

The expressiveness of Ricci's eyes can be distilled into seven trademarks which, together, reveal her ability to simultaneously embody adult and girlish qualities, as well as darkness and light of the moonchild: (1) the wide-eyed ingénue; (2) the cynical squint with a raised eyebrow; (3) the bored or frustrated eye-roll; (4) the closed eyes of sexual pleasure; (5) the threatening glare; (6) the otherworldly stare; (7) the hurt, crying child. Only the first and last of these trademarks conveys childlike innocence and, even when Ricci is in wide-eyed ingénue mode, the look tends to be used to feign innocence when Ricci's characters are anything but. Such doe-eyed expressions, sometimes accompanied with disingenuous crocodile tears, tend to be book-ended by the 'true' mental states and facial expressions of Ricci's characters: boredom, frustration and cynicism. These more adult interiorities are important to establishing her as less vulnerable than her childish physicality may suggest.

Ricci tends to alternate through these trademarks in quick succession, as in *The Opposite of Sex*, in which Dede deceives and manipulates characters with superficial charm, but also squints cynically at her own baby. In the film she uses both the squint and the eye-roll to signal frustration with her step-brother's dim boyfriend (fig. 2), and with her father in *The Ice Storm* (1997). Additionally, at various points in the former – and in *Black Snake Moan* – Ricci closes her eyes and extends her chin upwards to signal sensual pleasure. Ricci mastered the threatening glare much earlier when she played Wednesday Addams, as when she glares at the man she rightly intuits is masquerading as her uncle (fig. 3). The other trademark eye expressions are equally enduring. Writing on Ricci at eighteen, journalist Thomas Beller (1998, p.80) describes how the actress can still look like a hurt and angry child. This is particularly evident in the vulnerable, crying child expression that Ricci

employs either to get what she wants, as in *The Opposite of Sex*, or to signal earnest helplessness in adult roles, such as with *Black Snake Moan*.

Just as Ricci's eyes convey both innocence and cynicism, her body cannot easily be contained by the categories of child or adult, either before or after Ricci turned eighteen. This lends her performances the same kind of 'symbolically loaded' dimension that Gaylyn Studlar (2013, p.54) notes of Shirley Temple, and to which I will return. Because Ricci typically appears in adult oriented independent cinema, rather than the kind of studio produced family films in which Temple became a star, the overt sexuality of her childlike body is presented in much more explicit ways. At fifteen, Ricci appeared as Roberta in the coming-of-age film *Now and Then* (1995). Roberta's practice of binding her chest is a significant early moment in terms of Ricci's continuous embodiment of innocence and hypersexuality. Roberta/Ricci is shown in the mirror wrapping her breasts with tape in an effort to minimise them (fig. 4). Ricci scrunches up her face in distaste as she observes her chest from the front and in profile, and then nimbly wraps layers of tape around her bra. Roberta complains that 'no matter what I do they won't stop growing'. By establishing Ricci's body as a sexualised one that she herself cannot contain, the scene is a fitting precursor for later Ricci roles, including those from 1997 and 1998—when Ricci can was on the cusp of adulthood.

The opening sequence of *The Opposite of Sex* also involves Ricci adjusting her breasts in her bedroom mirror, but with a very different intent. Dede/Ricci pulls at the material of her low-cut, lingerie-style dress in order to display her assets to full effect. With her peroxide blonde hair and crimson lips, Dede/Ricci looks like a little girl dressing up as Marilyn Monroe using her mother's clothes. Aside from the clothes and make-up, Dede/Ricci looks no more than fourteen (Dede tells us she is sixteen, while Ricci was eighteen when the film was released). As Dede adjusts herself in the mirror, the tension I identify for Ricci to



embody both youthful innocence and the sexually assertive woman is supported by the *mise-en-scène*: not only is half of Ricci's face in a dark shadow, but a large diagonal crack splits the mirror itself (fig. 5). This polarised lighting of her face recalls Dyer's discussion of how, when presented in photography, 'White subjects may have the soft and the sharp, the light and the dark, the translucent and the palpable warring *within* them' (1997, p.113). And yet, Dyer provides a series of examples to show how it is men who tend to be portrayed 'with greater contrasts of dark and light', with women 'more liable to be overall translucent, but in ways that may deny their fleshiness altogether' (p.113). This connection between female translucence and denied fleshiness seems particularly pertinent to Ricci in this scene and film more generally; her breasts, like her face, are divided by shadow; with the lighting and *mise-en-scène* serving to emphasise, rather the deny, the 'fleshiness' of Ricci's chest.

This moment signals Dede's status as 'white trash', in keeping with Imogen Tyler's identification of 'a perceived excess of (bodily) materiality' as central to depictions of the white working class (2008, p.22). Ricci's ability to make Dede *appear* younger, even when she is *acting* older, is central to the plot in which she pretends to be pregnant by her step-brother's boyfriend in order to extort money from the pair. Dede is actually pregnant by a proclaimed 'redneck' whom she later shoots dead in an act of self-defence. Dede's suggested fertility further connects her to what 'white trash' scholars like Tyler refers to the as 'excessively reproductive body' of the young white working class woman (p.26). Again, the perception of this is heightened by Ricci's particularly youthful face, which creates an unnerving impression that she is too childlike to have a child of her own.<sup>2</sup> Ricci's more extreme performance of what Sweeney terms cinema's 'white trash aesthetic' – one characterised by factors like the grotesque, violence and excess (p.144) – will be considered later in relation to *Black Snake Moan*.

## **Reworking the paedophilic gaze and (im)pure white girlhood : Ricci's relationship to Shirley Temple**

The defining image of Ricci in *The Opposite of Sex* (and the one chosen for the promotional poster) is of Dede reclining in a black bikini, her arm raised to reveal her red nails as she holds her neck and pushes out her chest. The position recalls Ricci's appearance, aged eleven, in a *Premiere* article on child actors. Photographer Mary Ellen Mark took shots of Ricci in a bikini, this time with both arms raised and held behind her head, and describes Ricci as having an 'almost sensual quality' (Carter 1991). One could criticise these shots as exploitative, or encouraging what Gaylyn Studlar (2001) terms a 'pedophilic gaze,'<sup>3</sup> but eleven-year-old Ricci wore a more modest bikini than Dede and confidently scowls at the camera. In other words, her pose is not overtly suggestive, nor does she welcome 'the male gaze' (Mulvey 1975) through a pleasant, inviting expression. Nonetheless, the photos foreshadow the frequency with which Ricci would reveal her chest in adulthood when the 'sensual quality' Mark identifies in a prepubescent Ricci comes more fully to bear.

In the period of 1997-1998 Ricci appeared in a further three films that characterize her smooth transition from playing darkly precocious girls to sexually-charged young women: *The Ice Storm*, *Buffalo '66* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Ricci was seventeen when Ang Lee's sombre melodrama *The Ice Storm* was released. In it, she plays Wendy, a politically-engaged fourteen-year-old whose transgressive behaviour ranges from petty crime to the soliciting of sexual favours from both her friend and his younger brother. Wendy is sexually assertive, but through various choices of costume and cinematography, Ricci's body is less overtly sexualised. Again, this maintains the ambiguous nature of her body as both girlish and womanly. Wendy's clothing, particularly a red poncho that she wears for much of the film, undercuts her assertive sexual behaviour. The item aligns her with the innocent Little Red Riding Hood of the children's story.<sup>4</sup> More generally, the over-sized poncho is at

odds with the kind of revealing attire one might expect of a sexually-experimental teenager. Wendy is wearing it when her father (Kevin Kline) walks her home after catching Wendy and Mikey (Elijah Wood) on top of one another. Both his anger and Wendy's give way to tenderness when she agrees to being carried the rest of the way home. Nowhere is the tension between Wendy's/Ricci's youth and maturity more evident than in shots of her small body, swathed in red material, in her father's arms. This is the same body which, save for her father's coincidental intrusion, would have been 'corrupting' the body of a more naïve fourteen-year-old.

By the time Ricci appears as Layla in *Buffalo '66*, the portrayal of her body is more explicitly sexualised, albeit with the 'little girl' qualities still intact. Ricci is introduced in the middle of a tap dancing class, her breasts jiggling due to the poor support of another lingerie-like dress. Her 'white trash' style of 'fleshiness' is again highlighted rather than downplayed. Like in *The Opposite of Sex*, Ricci subsequently pulls at the chest of her dress when she prepares to meet the parents of Billy (Vincent Gallo), who has kidnapped her in order to have someone to bring home to his uncaring parents, directly invoking one of the 'dirty little white girl' narrative tropes that Lury identifies (2010, p.53). Although Layla tells Billy's parents that she is in her late twenties, his mother (Anjelica Huston) exclaims that she looks like a baby (and Ricci was seventeen during shooting). Thus the film openly problematizes a later scene in which Billy's father (Ben Gazzara) grabs Layla and buries his face in her breasts.

Director Vincent Gallo describes being shocked by the 'ratio' of Ricci's breasts to the rest of her body when she showed up to set (Beller 1998, p.82), a physical trait he subsequently exploited through choices of costume and framing. An extreme close-up of Layla's chest, for example, recalls a similar shot of Ricci measuring her chest in *Now and Then*. Production anecdotes from the filming of *Buffalo '66* suggest this is one instance from Ricci's career in which a director and, in this case, a fellow performer, objectified her body in

a way that might be seem particularly exploitative: casting her to look relatively child-like, but knowing that because she is of legal age, any sexually inappropriate behaviour toward her, and her characters, will be less strictly monitored. Not only did Ben Gazarra grab Layla and bury his face in her breasts, but this moment was improvised without Ricci's consent (Beller 1998, p.82). Ricci has discussed her troubling experiences working with Gallo, whom, for years afterward, would continue to deride her for her weight in the film (Buxton 2015), perhaps contributing to Ricci's battles with anorexia and self-harm.<sup>5</sup> Ricci's own experience of an eating disorder would later be channelled into the role of the malnourished Rae in *Black Snake Moan*, suggesting one way in which Ricci's professional life seems to have influenced her personal life, in turn leading to further roles as disturbed young women with complex relationships to their body and men's attempts to control it.

Although Ricci is not required to appear nude or in underwear in *Buffalo '66*, she performs an erotically-charged dance sequence that equally positions her as a Lolita-like child-woman, one who seems to invite a paedophilic gaze. Billy takes Layla to a bowling alley and, rather than taking her turn to bowl, she initially uses the space in front of the lane to perform a slow tap-dance routine. Layla/Ricci's dance sequence is accompanied by an eerie lullaby entitled 'Moonchild,' written and performed by Chrome (a San Francisco band active in the 1970s and 1980s). Through the lullaby melody and the lyrics ('call her moonchild [...] lonely moonchild; dreaming in the shadows of a willow'), Layla/Ricci's glowing body (bleached hair, translucent skin and equally pale dress, tights and shoes) is tied to a natural light source, the moon, but one which is always accompanied by darkness and shadow. As with Ricci's presentation in a number of films, including *The Addams Family* and *Sleepy Hollow*, the performer's extreme whiteness is highlighted as one that depends on darkness for its impact.<sup>6</sup> Performing the 'Moonchild' pole dance in a darkened bowling alley, the stark paleness of Ricci's flesh-coloured costume seems to be intentionally provocative.

Several factors lend the performance a paedophilic dimension, beginning with the way Ricci playfully sticks her tongue out at Billy before beginning. Although Ricci's execution – she scrunches up her face as she does it – channels that of a rebellious child, within seconds she is dancing around a conveniently-placed pole, thus calling into question the innocence of what her tongue was being used to convey. It seems fitting that Layla's dance of choice is tap, recalling the tap dancing of Shirley Temple, the eponymous sexualised child star. Ricci's embodiment of both physical childishness and womanly sexuality can be usefully compared to analyses of Temple, such as Studlar's (2013, p.54), which identifies Temple as 'a symbolically loaded figure' who excites audiences through an unsettling of age and sexual boundaries. Ara Osterweil (2009, p.1) also contends that Temple's body was 'constructed as an intensely erotic spectacle,' but one that could not survive Temple's inevitable ageing; having become famous by the age of four, Temple's popularity began to decline by the time she was ten. Osterweil (2009, p.6) attributes this to Temple's appeal resting on an ability 'to disavow the threat of adult female sexuality without relinquishing the erotic appeal of her innocence.' Although Ricci's appeal can be seen to rest on a similar (albeit weaker) ability to disavow the threat of adult female sexuality since her size and facial features align her with youth, Ricci's childhood performances highlight the ways in which she is *less* innocent than little girls are expected to be. For instance, in contrast to the 'exuberant optimism' that Studlar (2013, p.57) attributes Temple, in her early roles Ricci exudes pessimism and cynicism by speaking sarcastically, glaring and rolling her eyes at other characters, and playing dead. Ricci continues to channel the problematic erotic spectacle of Temple in her late teens, however, as when she performs Layla's 'Moonchild' dance routine. Given that Ricci uses the pole as a prop and reveals her cleavage, the erotic charge is not disavowed as it was during Temple's dance sequences. This is not particularly surprising given the very different time periods and production contexts, with Ricci working

outside of the mainstream, in an independent film that – as with director Gallo’s other films – pushes the boundaries of popular taste.

Ricci continues to channel and complicate Temple’s brand of female cuteness as Lucy, a teenage ‘religious freak’ and accidental L.S.D. user, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Duke (Johnny Depp), also tripping on the psychedelic, imagines that he and Gonzo (Benicio del Toro) will be imprisoned when Lucy testifies that they gave her drugs. In his subsequent hallucination, Lucy’s/Ricci’s childlike appearance is magnified using a caricaturised little girl outfit (fig. 6); with her flouncy pale pink dress, hair bows and teddy bear, Ricci channels Temple as she did in *Buffalo ‘66*. Furthermore, like in *Buffalo ‘66*’s ‘Moonchild’ dance, the paleness of her figure (her skin and dress colour blend almost seamlessly) is again presented in high contrast to a black background. Ricci’s articulate adult voice confuses the childlike image when she knowingly enunciates for the judge that Duke and Gonzo gave her L.S.D. The judge in the hallucination sentences the men to castration and Lucy/Ricci smiles serenely at the verdict. In this and other roles, Ricci’s ability to credibly look like an innocent child while displaying adult knowledge is central to the effectiveness of her performance style and representation of girls who look helpless but – in keeping with Creed’s (1994) conception of the monstrous little woman – actually pose a threat to the men who find them irresistible.

In Studlar’s (2013) book *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, she uses the concept of ‘juvenation’ to interrogate the relationship between youthful signs of femininity (including the masquerade of girlishness by adult actresses such as Mary Pickford and Audrey Hepburn) and eroticization.<sup>7</sup> Studlar (2013, p.2) finds that representations of girlhood in the studio era can also be seen to propagate ‘fantasies of girlhood with idealized or even utopian components’. Yet if, as Studlar argues, actresses

such as Temple, Deanna Durbin and Elizabeth Taylor negotiate the ambiguous boundaries between childhood and adulthood by acting out idealized behaviour, then Ricci negotiates the same boundary through an emphasis on 'Otherness' and the taboo.

Ricci's consistent portrayal of morbid characters, as well as her tendency to feign death (one which can be tied to her corpse-like whiteness) is another way in which her career can be seen to be founded on portrayals of her petite, youthful body as an unexpected threat. The dangerous, potentially deathlike, associations of Ricci's pallor lent themselves well to her role as an angel of death in the music video for Moby's 'Natural Blues' (2000). This small part seems to consolidate her various physical and behavioural trademarks. When Ricci initially appears to the dying man in the hospital, she is dancing on a television, with her arms spread wide, emulating wings. Indeed, Ricci employs a similar position while tap dancing in *Buffalo '66*, with angelic innocence also suggested by the aforementioned off-white outfit. But, in both cases, the connotations of the wing gesture are undercut by a less innocent component of Ricci's bodily performance. In *Buffalo '66* her wide arms further expose her cleavage, already highlighted in a low-cut dress, while in 'Natural Blues' there is a certain inappropriateness to her slow, sensual dancing, given that it is directed at an elderly man whom she subsequently escorts to his death.

In both sequences, and particularly in the music video, the presentation of Ricci's (im)pure body seems loaded with ambiguity when related to Dyer's (1997, p122) discussions of 'idealised white women [who] are bathed in and permeated by light'. He notes how, aside from pale skin's reflecting of light, such a glow can be enhanced by blonde hair and white clothing, 'no more so than in bridal wear'; as exemplified in Ricci's wedding gown like dress in the music video. Although her hair here is dark, it serves to highlight the whiteness of her skin (as in *The Addams Family*), as well as her glowing halo. Discussing the white woman as angel, in particular, Dyer (1997, p.125) notes how she serves as 'the symbol for white

virtuousness', tracing the representation of glowing halos of light (such as the one seen emerging from Ricci's dark hair) to the Renaissance period. Indeed one could argue that Ricci's suitability for such a role is tied not just to her physicality, but to her Italian and Irish ancestry, which the actress has discussed in interviews, and which positions her, through religious and cultural associations, as a relatively 'pure' Catholic hybrid (and, in relation to Italy, to the Renaissance-style presentation of angels). With Ricci, the postmodern twist, in both cases, is that Ricci's characters are less angelic than they appear; their unexpected sexuality is belied by their exaggerated glow.

### **Dirty little 'white trash' girl**

Paedophilia is far from the only taboo with which Ricci is associated. The role of Wednesday Addams required Ricci to perform cannibalism, with her character eating 'live' meat both at home and at school. Encouraged by her mother (Anjelica Huston) to play with her food, Ricci prods the moving mass on her plate and willingly accepts a moving brown bag lunch. Later roles also require her to put 'dirty' things in her mouth. In *The Opposite of Sex*, Ricci conveys Dede's nonchalance with committing the physical taboos of pregnancy. Not only does she smoke while pregnant, but she chain smokes while drinking Long Island iced teas. A propensity for Ricci's characters to smoke was established by 1994 in *Now and Then*. When Roberta and her friends engage with an older man who offers them cigarettes, Roberta is both the most eager to smoke and the only of the three not to cough. Aged fourteen, Roberta/Ricci thus signals her past experiences with cigarettes and foregrounds a propensity to smoke that becomes a Ricci trademark.

In 2006, over two decades later, Ricci took her embodiment of taboo to two very different extremes; playing what was termed a 'white trash nymphomaniac' (The Guardian 2007) in *Black Snake Moan* and a part-woman, part-beast in the modern-day fairy tale,



*Penelope* (2006). Although *Penelope*, a family-friendly film, notably departs from most of the other, more overtly dark films considered here, it nonetheless positions Ricci as the ‘grotesque’ character in ways that underscore her career’s dependence on embodying characters who are ‘Othered’, in one way or another.

*Black Snake Moan* returns Ricci to the performance of the kind of excessive bodily ‘white trash’ that she portrayed in *The Opposite of Sex*, becoming another way in which she plays more extreme ‘dirty little white girls’ than those on which Lury focuses. As Tyler explains in her discussion of ‘dirty white chavs’ (a term she uses to describe the British white underclass), ‘the chav foregrounds a dirty whiteness—a whiteness contaminated with poverty’ in a way that is strikingly similar to the US form of ‘white trash’ (2008, p.25). Both films thus suggest that Ricci’s dark and dirty version of whiteness is established in relation to her characters’ class as well as their sexuality. The film opens explicitly, with close-ups of Ricci’s character Rae having naked sex with her boyfriend before he leaves for the army. Within minutes, Rae’s uncontrollable urges lead to sex with various men, with one attacking her in his car and leaving her unconscious in the middle of the road. Rae is subsequently chained up by Lazarus (Samuel L. Jackson), a much older Black man, supposedly for her own protection. After finding her on the road, he considers it his God-given duty to cure Rae of what he refers to as ‘her wickedness’ – and so directly recalling Barbara Creed’s description of the monstrous little woman’s ‘wicked style’. Rae refuses to accept the constraints placed on her movement, leading to a scene in which she is thrown in the air like a rag doll when she tries to escape and the chains (attached to a radiator) pull her back. Rae’s imprisonment and exploitation would be difficult to watch no matter who was playing her, but, as critics were keen to point out, the scenes are particularly problematic given how childlike Ricci – who was twenty-six when the film was released – looks.

If, as Lury (2010, p.55) describes in relation to ‘dirty little white girls’, the ‘handling’ of children is due to their status ‘as an object, a not-yet-subject that must sometimes be physically constrained,’ then it is also no surprise that the chained-up Rae was played by someone as youthful as Ricci. Indeed, Ricci employs her hurt, crying child expression both when chained up and when her boyfriend leaves her for the army (fig. 7). However, given that Rae is unwilling to accept the physical constraints of the chains, the performance equally benefits from the contrasting, feisty dimension of Ricci’s persona. Though Rae is unable to break free from the chains, Ricci powerfully depicts her character’s unwillingness to be held against her will; Rae lets out blood-curdling screams as she runs from the house looking for help and manoeuvres the heavy metal with masterful ease. Like in *The Opposite of Sex*, Ricci also takes advantage of her surroundings when in violent battle with a man far exceeding her in size.

Ricci was required to bleach her dark hair ‘dirty blonde’ for the role, recalling her appearance in *Buffalo ‘66* and *The Opposite of Sex*.<sup>8</sup> It is significant that, of the roles under discussion, the ones in which she has blonde hair are also the ones in which Ricci’s body is most overtly-eroticised (with the exception of *Sleepy Hollow*): since blonde hair is genetically tied to whiteness, such presentations can be seen to highlight her characters’ impurity by contrasting the lightness of her hair with the expected purity associated with white girlhood. In sharp contrast to her rounded limbs in the earlier films, Ricci lost significant weight for the role of Rae. Hantke (2012) considers this to be a strategy for infantilizing her further, and thus encouraging the kind of ‘pedophilic gaze’ that Studlar (2001) identifies. I would add that this is particularly troubling in light of the film’s racial dynamics: despite Lazarus/Jackson’s initial attempt to help Rae, he is positioned as a threat to the white girl; one that is magnified in the *mise-en-scene* by a number of contrasts; in terms of skin and hair colour, but also

height and weight; something further emphasized by Rae/Ricci's tendency to sit or lie on the floor.

Ricci saw the role of Rae as an opportunity to represent rape trauma syndrome, an issue in which she had long been invested. In 1995, she began fundraising for RAINN (the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), and she became a national spokesperson for the organisation following *Black Snake Moan* (Yager 2009). Furthermore, while Ricci's weight loss for the film *MAY* infantilize her further, in interviews Ricci explains why it was necessary to lose weight in order to convey Rae's history of addiction, abuse, and poor nutrition. Yet the sensationalized final product suggests director Craig Brewer was much less concerned than Ricci with using the film to depict the trauma of sexual violence. Ricci openly criticised the film poster, in which she is positioned on the ground, visibly chained to Lazarus, in a pose that implies BDSM:

The way that movie was marketed was probably one of the most disappointing and upsetting things that's ever happened to me in my career. [...] I have no interest in exploiting women any further than they've already been exploited. [...] The whole reason I made that movie was to say, 'Oh yeah, that girl you called a slut probably went through this, so you might not want to use her and throw her away or judge her' [...] All they [the marketing people] cared about was college-age boys going to see it. (Cosmopolitan 2008)

Like the production anecdotes from *Buffalo '66*, this scenario suggests that Ricci's liminal child-woman body has been exploited for sensationalist effect. Like Sweeney's discussion of representations of 'white trash' in contemporary cinema more generally, which she notes is loaded with the 'fantasies of the grotesque, of violence and excess' (p.144), the presentation of Ricci in the promotional materials suggests her body in the film is subject to such

fantasies. Indeed, as Ricci ASTUTELY suggests, such fantasies are potentially most appealing to teenage boys.

The relationship between Rae and Lazarus also recalls, but reworks, a number of Lury's examples of narratives that pair up white girls with non-white men, such as *Broken Blossoms* in which Lucy's (Lillian Gish) intimacy with the 'Yellow Man' (Richard Barthelmess) 'sets up a deliberately racially inflected tension around this non-white male's threatening position in relation to her' (Lury 2010, p.61). Although Lazarus's decision to chain Rae up is clearly abusive, it is presented as a potentially justifiable act, in that he finds himself physically unable to quell Rae's unsolicited sexual advances. Her urges are so strong that she forces herself on him, a situation that he seems to realise would not be accepted by others; who will more likely assume that he is taking advantage of her. Their relationship thus plays out, and renegotiates, racial symbolism and stereotypes: the Black man as sexual abuser (Lazarus is not), and the Black man as a slave—Lazarus instead enchains the most vulnerable kind of white person; a childlike girl. However, he only resorts to this after trying to help her, before realising she is a nymphomaniac, one whom he believes God will help him to cure.

Ricci's performance of 'white trash' in *Black Snake Moan* can be usefully contrasted with Shirley Temple's role as Virgie in *The Littlest Rebel* (1935). As Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon note in their analysis of the film as part of a study of white screen saviours, Temple plays the 'only child of a perfect Southern family, lords of a plantation and slaveholders' (2003, p21), with the film pairing her opposite a black male adult (Bill Robinson) in order to 'defuse the tensions between [the] rigid social categories' of race, gender and age. At one point, Temple appears in blackface. In a similarly problematic way, *Black Snake Moan* contrasts the child(like) white female with an older black male. What has changed, however, is the kind of white girl Ricci performs—one who is markedly 'dirtier' than Temple's Virgie, and who is symbolically closer to the Southern black man given that,

as Sweeney notes, the ‘white trash’ population tends to coexist ‘beside other marginalized groups, such as poor Blacks’ (Vera and Gordon p.147). Temple stands for Southern white privilege, while Ricci is Southern ‘white trash’. Similar to how the pole-dancing sequence in *Buffalo 66*, makes an overt spectacle of Ricci’s performance of childish sexuality – rather than subtly disavowing it as did the Shirley Temple films – *Black Snake Moan* more forcefully bonds the bodies of the black man and the white girl. In *The Littlest Rebel*, Temple dresses up as her black male companion, while Ricci tries to have sex with him and is eventually chained to him. The shift is indicative of Ricci’s function as a subversive figure who fits with American independent cinema’s interest in subculture, but it is also suggestive of the film’s desire to shock audiences by presenting them with such exploitative images of the ‘dirty little white girl’.

### **An animalistic, less than human, body**

In Lury’s (2010, 66-67) discussion of Shirley Temple’s on-screen relations with ‘other “less than human” bodies (midgets, black bodies, dogs)’ she notes that ‘the little white girl’s appeal has its origins in the uncanny manipulation and fascination with other bodies; that is, little bodies, raced bodies and animals’. Such an uncanny manipulation is also observable in relation to Rae/Ricci in *Black Snake Moan*, whose racial dynamic with Lazarus is further complicated by her own animalistic qualities. Like a feral child or, rather, like a dog on a lead, Ricci crawls around on all fours, both within Lazarus’s house and in the forest outside. While Temple may have engaged with ‘less than human’ bodies, Ricci is here reduced to one. Again, we see how, as a figure, she is held in less reverence than Temple because Ricci’s body has so consistently been used to portray transgressive forms of girlhood and whiteness. Temple befriends the black man, while Ricci is chained up by one. Temple is presented with animal bodies, while Ricci’s is required to emulate one herself.

An animalistic portrayal of Ricci as not quite human is continued in *Penelope*, in which she plays the titular character, a young woman born with a pig snout and subsequently hidden away from the world by her family. Like with *Black Snake Moan*, the role takes elements of Ricci's performance style to a knowing extreme; since Ricci spend much of the film hiding the bottom half of her face, the onus is on Ricci to express everything through her distinctive eyes. While the film is a somewhat clichéd fable about love being blind, for its impact the narrative assumes that humans fear hybrid half-man, half-animal creatures as beasts, even when packaged in the form of Ricci's unassuming body. Although Penelope's prosthetic snout is relatively small and inoffensive (fig. 8), potential suitors run screaming from her house upon seeing her. While, in terms of tone and genre, the film seems notably different from the others under focus, Ricci's role is again in alignment with her symbolic otherness and with Rowe's conception of the unruly woman. In particular, Penelope/Ricci almost uncannily embodies the figure of the 'pig lady', whom Rowe (1995, p.25-49) considers to be a particularly unruly female.

For Rowe it is no accident that the animal of choice for Miss Piggy, the famous Jim Henson 'Muppet,' is a pig. She details the various historical associations between women and pigs, dating back to ancient Greece, with the pig itself coded as unclean in Judaism and sinful in Christianity, as well as being socially associated with bad manners and all things distasteful (Rowe 1995, p39-41). Ricci performs Penelope as a sympathetic, sheltered ingénue, yet there are notable overlaps between Rowe's analysis of Miss Piggy and Ricci's broader performance style. Firstly, for Rowe (1995, p.30), Miss Piggy wears femininity as a masquerade that she relishes but also discards: 'Feminine passivity and weakness are artificial ploys, tools to utilize toward her own ends.' The same can be said of Ricci when she feigns hurt or weakness as Dede in *The Opposite of Sex* or Rae in *Black Snake Moan*, only to physically overwhelm the men around her when they least suspect. More generally, Ricci's

casting as a 'pig lady' can be seen as an accumulation of previous performances that associate her with the 'proverbial dirtiness' and symbolic liminality that Rowe (1995, p.41) attaches to the 'pig lady'. Indeed, this 'dirtiness' was noted above as central to Tyler's conception of the white underclass: the 'dirty white chavs' or US 'white trash'. Furthermore, as Penelope, Ricci channels the 'ultra-feminine' aspects of Miss Piggy's physicality; aside from their pig features, both have a conventionally feminine appearance that is 'designed to appeal to males' (Rowe, p.27). As a result, Ricci as Penelope is both attractive and repulsive, in keeping with Rowe's (1995, p11) argument that the unruly woman is both beautiful and monstrous, thus dwelling 'close to the grotesque'. Indeed, far prior to donning these pig prosthetics, Ricci hid her otherworldly beauty behind an uncanny Richard Nixon mask in *The Ice Storm*.

As the sexually assertive Wendy, Ricci wears the rubbery Nixon mask while fooling around with Mikey. The camera privileges Wendy/Ricci and shows Mikey from behind as he lies on her. Their bodies, appearing to be two male bodies, merge (fig. 9). Given that Mikey – like Wendy – is only fourteen, the mask gives the impression that Nixon is engaging in paedophilic relations with a minor. The toothy grin of the Nixon mask is in sharp contrast with Wendy's/Ricci's sombre expressions throughout *The Ice Storm*. Given Wendy's contempt for Nixon – established in one of the film's opening scenes – there is thus a fitting irony to the way that Ricci appears to smile only when sexually incriminating the man she intensely dislikes. By briefly revisiting this much earlier role we can see the degree to which *Penelope's* prosthetics closely links this part to Ricci's broader embodiment of taboos and the grotesque, as well as her ongoing association with paedophilic forms of looking. In *The Ice Storm*, she briefly performs the role of a male paedophile, precisely the kind of viewer who might be imagined to take erotic pleasure in her various other roles that require her to perform as a strongly sexualized girl.

## **Conclusion: Ricci's internal darkness and natural white light**

To date, Ricci has appeared in over sixty film and television productions, and not all of these can be encompassed by the identified focus on her white 'bad girl' body. Yet even Ricci's more recent roles, such as the titular character of *Lizzie Borden Took an Ax* (2014), rely on a similar tension. In the made-for-television feature, Ricci plays the infamous religious woman accused and eventually acquitted of murdering her father and stepmother in Massachusetts in 1892. The part requires Ricci to encompass the conflicting traits of darkness and light, innocent victim and axe-wielding potential killer. Like cinema's earlier incarnations of girlish women or womanly girls, Ricci's appeal can be seen to rest on her ability to disavow the threat of adult female sexuality since her size and facial features align her with youth. However, since her early childhood performances, Ricci has played characters who are *less* innocent than little girls, especially little white girls, are expected to be. Rather than being a so-called 'good girl gone bad,' Ricci's career trajectory could be described as a bad girl who has gotten worse. If, at times, it is difficult to determine whether Ricci is performing Creed's (1994) 'monstrous little woman,' Rowe's (1995) 'unruly woman' or Lury's (2010) 'dirty little white girl,' it is because it is difficult to determine whether Ricci is playing a child or an adult, let alone to accurately gauge Ricci's own age. Lury's 'dirty little white girls' are conceived of in relation to narrative rather than the actresses who play them – the fact that they are generally lost, stolen or revenged. By contrast, Ricci brings exaggerated forms of same individual qualities – proverbial dirtiness, littleness, whiteness – to each of the films considered here. Her ability to do so is due both to the specifics of her face and body and to the cumulative effect of playing so many 'Othered' girls and young women.

By the time Ricci played Wednesday Addams, at eleven years of age, she had already begun to embody taboo behaviour and a transgressive femininity, as well as being presented, visually, as uncommonly white: translucent skin set in contrast to dark hair, clothes and eyes.



In the twenty-plus years since then, Ricci's *physical* characteristics have remained youthful while, for the most part, her *behaviour* has been prematurely adult in nature. This puts her in stark contrast to child stars like Shirley Temple whose appeal lessens as they lose their innocence and youthful appearance. As such, and as the lyrics to her pole-dance in *Buffalo '66* implore us to consider, Ricci is a 'moonchild'; a figure whose extreme whiteness depends on darkness, both literally and figuratively, for its effect. None of the other critical concepts – the unruly woman, the monstrous little woman, the dirty little white girl – independently capture the specifics of Ricci's career. The moonchild partly emerges from her physical traits – contrasts between pale skin and dark eyes, and sometimes clothes and hair – as well as from the ways Ricci is presented in terms of *mise-en-scene* and lighting. Ricci's characters are often 'dirty', in the sense that Lury uses the word to suggest a subversion of the white girl's perceived innocence, but also through her associations with 'white trash'. Crucially, however, Ricci's characters tend to come with an internal darkness that sets them apart as 'Other'. This differs from the corrupted white girl, who is drawn into bad behaviour by others. Ricci's characters have their own source of darkness as well as their natural white light.

Writing on 'white trash', Sweeney asserts that the Southern US is a liminal place where mainstream culture locates the marginal elements of society: 'where people are strange or in-bred or homicidal maniacs, where the veils between reality and the Other are thin' (146). And while I discuss Ricci's relationship to 'white trash' primarily in terms of *Black Snake Moan* and *The Opposite of Sex*, Ricci's career thus far suggests that, much like Sweeney's description of the South, she herself provides a liminal space (her *body*) through which the marginal figures of society can be explored. That is, producers and directors – predominantly those trading in American independent cinema's foregrounding of non-mainstream figures – have used her overtly liminal body (precariously balancing elements of child and woman, purity and darkness) as an evocative tool within narratives concerned with

various kinds of Other. She has played a cannibal; an angel of death; a nymphomaniac; a chain-smoking pregnant killer; a part-woman, part-pig, and a paedophilic Richard Nixon. Few performers, and no other white actress of her generation, have embodied such a diverse range of physical transgressions.

Ricci's career indicates the double-edged sword that can result from such a persona. On the one hand, she has carved out a niche that has allowed her career longevity. Other actresses with similarly transgressive personas in their youth – such as Natasha Lyonne or Fairuza Balk – lack Ricci's otherworldly and childlike physicality. On the other hand, Ricci's tendency to play overtly sexualised characters has led to various instances in which her own body has been objectified, exploited and even harassed. Through no fault of her own, Ricci can thus be forced to share in her characters' vulnerabilities: for example, when marketers imply that *Black Snake Moan* is a titillating BDSM film, or when director Vincent Gallo mocks her weight but also fixates on it in close-ups of her breasts, or chooses to include a moment when an older male actor non-consensually buries his face in Ricci's chest.

Overall, Ricci's career reveals the enduring potential of the symbolically loaded figure of the impure white girl or childish woman. When appearing in adult-oriented independent films, her appearance can have problematic connotations of paedophilia. Yet even in more family-friendly films – she functions as a vague threat to those who underestimate her based on a small stature and innocent face. These physical features are undercut by what Ricci conveys expresses, with her vocal tone and facial expressions signifying adult knowingness and a potential to be corrupted, or to corrupt others.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Tim Burton (who cast Ricci in the role of Katrina van Tassel in *Sleepy Hollow*), imagines the actress as the lovechild of Peter Lorre and Bette Davis (Salisbury 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Tyler is focused on working class British women, commonly derided as ‘chavs’ or ‘chavettes,’ however she relates her discussion to ‘white trash’ more broadly.

<sup>3</sup> Studlar uses the term in relation to Mary Pickford to describe an obsessive looking at, eroticizing, and idealizing of a child’s body.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Ricci played this role in a short black comedy also released in 1997: *Little Red Riding Hood and Other Stories* (1997). Promotional descriptions of the film describe Ricci as ‘a not-so-innocent Red Riding Hood’.

<sup>5</sup> Ricci’s teenage struggles with anorexia and self-harm are frequently noted or discussed in profiles of the actress in the popular media. For example, see Gill Pringle’s (2008) ‘Christina Ricci thinks she got off easy’ in *The Sunday Times*.

<sup>6</sup> As Hantke (2012) describes in relation to *Sleepy Hollow*, ‘actors’ faces are invariably covered in whitish make-up, photographed in an [sic] desaturated palette that elides grey tones in favour of differentiating blacks and whites more starkly’.

<sup>7</sup> Studlar borrows the term ‘juvenation’ from contemporary media scholar, John Hartley (1998), but reconfigures it for cinema and for an earlier historical period. Hartley coined the term to discuss a preoccupation with the boundaries of age in the media, particularly a preoccupation with young girls. According to Hartley, in an effort to define the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, media images tend to emphasize the taboo aspects of displays of children, such as their victimization through sexual abuse.

<sup>8</sup> Ricci also has blonde hair in other roles, not focused on here, such as *Prozac Nation* (2001), and *Pumpkin* (2002).