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## Performing Race: Instances of Color Representation in American Culture

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PERFORMING RACE

Instances of Color Representation in American Culture

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A Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by


Katrin L. Adkins

2003

APPROVAL SHEET

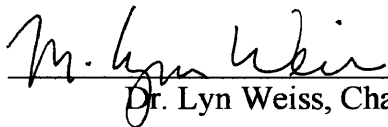
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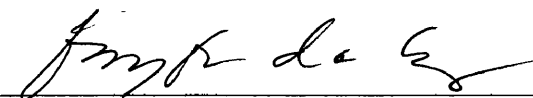
  
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## ABSTRACT

Simply put, throughout American history white people have continuously exploited black people. Caucasian Americans have profited from black labor, black music, black dance, black cuisine, black oral story-telling traditions, black attitudes of the “cool,” and the list continues. For a race that defines itself as superior, Caucasians have much of their own identity invested in the perceived “inferior” race. One of the great paradoxes in American society, white culture simultaneously separates itself from and builds itself upon black culture. What makes this paradox necessary to American culture?

First, one group must have another group against which to base feelings of superiority. White people could not feel superior if there were not non-white people to feel superior than. Secondly, one group must have a different group to compare and contrast itself with in order to learn more about itself. This step requires learning about the other group by experimenting with its cultural practices. Thus, by performing “blackness,” white people escape temporarily from their “whiteness,” allowing them distance for self-examination. Unfortunately, white performances of “blackness,” based on their own invented stereotypes, often have little to do with actual “black” experience. Out of this discrepancy between actual and imagined “blackness,” come gross stereotypes, misunderstandings, prejudices, and dichotomies between authentic and inauthentic experiences of “blackness” and “whiteness.” The end result of racial performances is the deconstruction of the value of “race” as a marker of identity, no matter “black” or “white.”

With an understanding of race as invented, social construction based on created hierarchies determined by a majority between itself and a projected “inferior” minority, the value of studying race is in examining its representation, performance, and enactment in society. How does the idea of race as a value-ridden category and marker of identity affect its realization in America? This paper examines three instances of color representation in American culture: the minstrel tradition of the nineteenth-century, the tragic mulatto figure in drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, and the creation of “wigger” identity of the twenty-first century. Minstrelsy, drama, and wiggerism exhibit the tension, conflict, and unease inherent in representing race.

By applying social theory to three concrete examples of racial representation in American history, one can hope to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships underpinning ideas of black and white in society. The social construction of “blackness” and “whiteness” as terms laden with the hegemonic beliefs of American culture renders unclear the value of race as an identity marker in society. If blackness is constantly being re-envisioned and reasserted, then it cannot be held up as a constant, fixed identity marker to which all African Americans can point to as their standard for judgment. Moreover, since the concept of race is based on the comparison of one race to the “other,” if blackness is not a stable “other,” then the stability of whiteness is also in jeopardy.

## PERFORMING RACE

Instances of Color Representation in American Culture

## INTRODUCTION

Who is black? Who is white? Is there a clear line of delineation between the two colors? Who defines color? What is race? And can race be a valid signifier? How is race represented? Is there such a thing as the “authentic” black or white experience? Does it even make sense to discuss an “authentic” experience? Who can discuss these questions? And who cannot?

Beginning in the middle of the race discussion with the hardest questions is the only way to enter. Starting at the beginning would require retracing the critical work scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Alain Locke, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., F. James Davis, Werner Sollors, and Toni Morrison have already contributed to the field of African American scholarship. Starting at the end is similarly out of the realm of possibility. There are no easy answers and, therefore, no end in sight from which to begin. Thus, I have chosen in the course of this paper to begin in the middle, in the midst of the hardest questions about race and its performance.

Simply put, throughout American history white people have continuously exploited black people. Caucasian Americans have profited from black labor, black music, black dance, black cuisine, black oral story-telling traditions, black attitudes of the “cool,” and the list continues. For a race that defines itself as superior, Caucasians have much of their own identity invested in the perceived “inferior” race. One of the great paradoxes in American society, white culture simultaneously separates itself from and builds itself upon black culture. What makes this paradox necessary to American culture? First, one group must have another group against which to base feelings of superiority.



White people could not feel superior if there were not non-white people to feel superior than. Secondly, one group must have a different group to compare and contrast itself with in order to learn more about itself. This step requires learning about the other group by experimenting with its cultural practices. Thus, by performing “blackness,” white people escape temporarily from their “whiteness,” allowing them distance for self-examination. Unfortunately, white performances of “blackness,” based on their own invented stereotypes, often have little to do with actual “black” experience. Out of this discrepancy between actual and imagined “blackness,” come gross stereotypes, misunderstandings, prejudices, and dichotomies between authentic and inauthentic experiences of “blackness” and “whiteness.” The end result of racial performances is the deconstruction of the value of “race” as a marker of identity, no matter “black” or “white.”

As J. Martin Favor argues in his *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (1999), blackness is an illusive marker of cultural identity. Looking at African American literature from the Harlem Renaissance, or New Negro Movement, Favor enters the discourse to challenge the idea that race is a constant, fixed category. Favor maintains that the definition of blackness is “constantly being invented, policed, transgressed, and contested.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, blackness is a constructed term of identification that reveals its own construction through the process of continual reinvention and redefinition. Blackness in the eighteenth-century was something different entirely by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Blackness as constructed around that “peculiar institution” of slavery is all but unrecognizable to the blackness lived by hip-hop stars and gangster rappers of the twenty-first century. Favor argues that even the

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<sup>1</sup> Favor, J. Martin. *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Movement*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 2.

name New Negro Movement for the period of African American literary achievement in the 1920's suggests fluidity. "The very idea of the 'New' Negro implies an 'Old' Negro who is somehow outdated, inadequate, or insufficient for the new cultural movement; the question of what constitutes blackness has to be rethought and reasserted."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if blackness is a perpetually changing concept of social identity, what does that mean for the categorical "race" marker? If as Anthony Appiah argues in "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race" (1986) that human genetic research at the chromosomal level must necessarily lead one to conclude, "race is relatively unimportant in exploring biological differences between people,"<sup>3</sup> then there is a scientific reason at the very least to undermine racial classification. However, social constructions of race are still important markers of identity discourse that allows insight into the political, social, cultural, economic, and historical motivations of creating the classification. Understanding race as a constructed category challenges the hegemonic power-structures informing its construction. In *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989) Werner Sollors maintains that the traditional view of race rests on the established idea that "ethnic groups are typically imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units. They seem to be always already in existence."<sup>4</sup> It makes sense that those in power, i.e. the white majority, would posit racial markers in fixed terms, as scientifically unquestionable, in order to establish their legitimacy. As Sollors states, "It is always the specificity of power relations at a given historical moment and in a particular place that triggers off a strategy of pseudo-historical explanations that camouflage the inventive act

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<sup>2</sup> Favor. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Appiah, Anthony. "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race." *Race, Writing, and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Sollors, Werner. "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity." *The Invention of Ethnicity*. Ed. Werner Sollors. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. xiii-xiv.

itself.”<sup>5</sup> So, in determining the significance of race, one cannot only look to blackness as an indicator but also to its oppositional counterpart whiteness. The very idea of race is invested in “otherness” and the creation of hierarchies regardless of their artificial nature. Not only then is blackness a constructed identity but whiteness is also. Favor remarks, “whiteness is not a nonracial normative condition but a highly constructed concept, another ‘race’ that is often dependent on blackness for its very existence.”<sup>6</sup>

With an understanding of race as invented, social construction based on created hierarchies determined by a majority between itself and a projected “inferior” minority, the value of studying race is in examining its representation, performance, and enactment in society. How does the idea of race as a value-ridden category and marker of identity affect its realization in America? One way in which race is articulated in society is in terms of authenticity. Markers, stereotypes, signifiers, and generalizations of race codify the authentic and posit it above the inauthentic “other.” As a process of differentiation, authenticity in America has historically determined whiteness as the authentic, central perspective of the American identity.<sup>7</sup> This hierarchy has led to the establishment of racism in American cultural identity. Embedded racism led to the thinking, “If I am not black, then I am white. If I am white, then I am superior,” so predominant in the antebellum South, in the Social Darwinism of the nineteenth century, in the civil rights violations of the 1960’s, and even in the racial discrimination occurring today. The authentic American experience has been a white experience, a white history beginning with the slave-owning Founding Fathers. Throughout this white history, African Americans have had to judge their identity by white standards. However, the process of

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<sup>5</sup> Sollors. xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Favor. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Favor. 23.

differentiation that authenticity entails has also affected hierarchies within African American culture. Talk of *the* authentic black experience relies on the existence of an “inauthentic” black experience. Dichotomies have emerged between real black and “black on the outside, white on the inside,” also known as the “Oreo” classification. African American rappers and hip-hop musicians address their audiences with claims of the authentic, such as “keep it real” and “stay black.”

Yet, if blackness as I have claimed is a constructed, fluid category, then there can be no “authentic” black experience. Kimberly Benston argues in *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (2000) that:

Blackness, in fact, emerges . . . as a term of multiple, often conflicting, implications which, taken together, signal black America’s effort to articulate its own conditions of possibility. At one moment, blackness may signify a reified essence posited as the end of a revolutionary ‘meta-language’ projecting the community toward ‘something not included here’; at another moment, blackness may indicate a self-interpreting process which simultaneously ‘makes and unmakes’ black identity in the ceaseless flux of historical change.<sup>8</sup>

Benston’s description of blackness as a term of identity inclusion and exclusion further illustrates the category classification as mutable. If blackness is a process of distinguishing itself as alike and apart from whiteness, and whiteness is in itself a fluid social construction, then the idea of race is built on an unfounded idea of an authentic

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<sup>8</sup> Benston, Kimberly. *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 3-4.

experience that does not exist. Favor concludes that authenticity thus becomes a doomed performance:

Performed authenticity carries its own destruction in its very makeup. Although center and margin may sanction specific discourses as authentic, the drive toward the depiction of racial difference actually, through its status as repetitious, discursive act, demonstrates the constructed nature of racial difference, thereby calling into question . . . notions of authenticity.<sup>9</sup>

Does it ever make sense then to talk of authenticity in terms of race? I think a clue can be found in Favor's terminology--"performed authenticity." Performed authenticity is at once oxymoronic and insightful. At first glance, performed authenticity seems to be a blatant contradiction. How can something be authentic if it is consciously performed, an act, a stage show of imitation? However, the term itself is exceedingly helpful in racial identity discourse. Seeing race as a performance allows one to locate the power structures and political, economic, and social factors informing racial representation. For example, Eric Lott argues in *Love and Theft* (1993) that minstrel performances of blackness came out of northern, working-class Caucasian fears of not being perceived as "white" enough.<sup>10</sup> By dressing up in blackface and acting out "blackness," white actors reasserted their own "whiteness." Michael North explains, "the grotesque exaggeration of blackface makeup had always been meant at least in part to emphasize the fact that the wearer was *not* black."<sup>11</sup> Race can be seen in this way as a concept invested with political meaning.

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<sup>9</sup> Favor. 142.

<sup>10</sup> Lott, Eric. "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture." *Love and Theft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> North, Michael. "Against the Standard: Linguistic Imitation, Racial Masquerade, and the Modernist Rebellion." *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 7.

As Favor has suggested, the value of seeing race as a performance is the ability of the performer to be at once “inside” and “outside” the racial discourse, therefore revealing the assumptions upon which racism is built.<sup>12</sup> Without being able to see race as a performance, one would not be able to see the construction upon which that performance is based. Moreover, performing race as a feature of identity allows for the corollary performance of alternative identities. Again, Favor states, “If racial-cultural identity is derivative of, or assimilable into, hegemonic conceptions of both blackness and whiteness, performative identity offers another option by postulating alternative identities.”<sup>13</sup> Racial performances allow for racial cross-identification; for example, minstrel performers can be both black and non-black, white and non-white on stage. “Blackface declares itself openly as a mask, unfixes identity, and frees the actor in a world of self-creation.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, performing “blackness” became an opportunity for white actors to re-fashion their own identity.

The purpose of this paper is to examine three instances of color representation in American culture: the minstrel tradition of the nineteenth-century, the tragic mulatto figure in drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, and the creation of “wigga” identity of the twenty-first century. Black minstrelsy serves as an important tool for measuring the power of white society in nineteenth-century America to dominate the creation of race and to delineate between “white” and “black.” In reexamining black minstrelsy, an increasing awareness emerges of the power behind the cultural mask. As in black minstrelsy, the struggle over authenticity in the representation of “blackness” intensifies in drama of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America. Examining

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<sup>12</sup> Favor. 151.

<sup>13</sup> Favor. 147.

<sup>14</sup> North, Michael. 7.

portrayals of the tragic mulatto figure in Boucicault's *The Octoroon* will place the playwright in a larger racial dialogue. Following in the tradition of minstrelsy and drama, "wiggism" subverts conventional racial boundaries, ultimately calling those very boundaries into question. By "acting" black, Caucasian teenagers simultaneously reify African-American stereotypes and undermine constructed dichotomies between "black" and "white." By applying social theory to three concrete examples of racial representation in American history, one can hope to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships underpinning ideas of black and white in society. The similarities in representation from three distinct periods in history may help to make explicit what is at stake in creating identities based on color; for, ultimately, performances of "blackness" deconstruct fixed ideas of "race" as an inherent component of identity in American culture.

## CHAPTER ONE

### MINSTRELSY AND THE “JIM CROW” PRECEDENT

The nineteenth century serves as an example of the interplay between black identity, performance, and cultural authenticity in America. A period of swift industrial growth, scientific rationalism, and realism, the end of the nineteenth century ushered in American Modernism. In response to new technological, industrial, and scientific advances and as a reaction against Victorian sentimentalism, American Modernism became in part a search for the authentic. As Daniel Singal observes in “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” (1987) in the “1890’s the desire for both scientific realism as well as the desire for the sensation of something more visceral than Victorian ‘sincerity’ led to an emphasis on ‘authenticity’ as the era’s central aesthetic pursuit.”<sup>15</sup> Fascination with the “real,” “natural,” “original,” and “bona fide” found its way into the artistic world. Facts became more important than emotions, sentiments, or intuitions. Caught up in the drive for authenticity, the African American minstrel theater evolved from a tradition of imitation toward a representation of the proposed “authentic.” What once had been a performance of “blackness” by a cast of all white actors in burnt-cork blackface became a performance of “blackness” by a cast of “genuine” African American actors. However, the replacement of white actors by black actors was not a real move towards the authentic. Black minstrelsy was still at best a performance of “blackness” which adhered to all the old white stereotypes about what “blackness” should be. Thus, the seeming shift towards the authentic in artistic expression, such as black minstrelsy and drama, was only a superficial change on the surface of racial representation. The

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<sup>15</sup> Singal, Daniel Joseph. “Towards a Definition of Modernism.” *American Quarterly*. 39.1 Spring 1987. 119.



authentic of white society was not based in reality but on a white constructed view of the “authentic” black.

The earliest forms of black minstrelsy were performances by white actors in black face, the illusion of dark skin created by burnt-cork makeup [See Figure 1]. It seems nonsensical that the question of authenticity would emerge as an issue concerning the racial identity of white actors. However, accounts exist of audiences actually believing that the white performers before them were African Americans. As Eric Lott points out, Mark Twain’s own mother, a woman raised in a small slaveholding household<sup>16</sup>, “at her first (and presumably only) minstrel show, believed she was watching black performers.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, the common occurrence of mistaking the white performers’ identity led advertisers to picture white performers both in and out of costume [See Figure 2] on flyers. The blurring of racial boundaries between white actors playing black characters illustrates the social construction of concepts such as “Blackness” and “Whiteness,” rendering them performable on stage. Creating a believable image of the “darky” as a form of entertainment commodified “blackness.” White audiences wanted minstrelsy to be a real portrayal of black life; in fact, their desire to believe led so far as actual belief in a white construction of black life. Whites knew what “black” was, for white actors were so good at its portrayal that they could even fool slave-holding audience members like Mark Twain’s mother.

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<sup>16</sup> Both Mark Twain’s Mother and Father came from families of mixed English and Irish heritage that owned slaves. Meltzer, Milton. *Mark Twain Himself*. New York: Wings Books, 1960. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Lott, Eric. 20.



Figure 1: On the left, illustration of blackface character “George Christy”  
 On the Right, illustration of actor Edwin P. Christy  
 Courtesy of [http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/who/who\\_pages/christy.htm](http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/who/who_pages/christy.htm)



Figure 2: Song Sheet of The Virginia Serenaders, dated 1844  
 The white actors appear below their black characters  
 Courtesy of <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstr13.html>

It is that much more ironic when white critics initially complained of the use of black actors in performances as being “unnatural.” When Williams and Walker hired female singers for their chorus based on vocal ability without regard to skin tone or hair type, a critic for *The Dramatic Mirror* complained of the chorus being allowed to wear

straight hair. The critic observed, “The types would be very much closer to natural if it were not for this point.”<sup>18</sup> The critic’s observation in what is natural and unnatural illustrates the existence of a white ideal of how black people should appear and act. Although the African American chorus girls were “real,” even with straight hair, they did not conform to the white critic’s idea of what they should look like. This incident illustrates the rigid preconceptions of white audiences. If the white critic faulted the black chorus for being “unnatural,” then what form of the “natural” were white audiences truly interested in?

White stereotypes of “blackness,” perceived by whites as genuine, converted the imagined into a false imposter of the genuine. It was not the “real” black person the white audience was after in the nineteenth century, but the accurate portrayal of what black was thought to represent; hence, the popularity of caricatures, exaggerated forms of black stereotypes. Scholar Susan Curtis describes black characters falling into four primary categories: “a buffoon introduced for comic relief but not essential to the drama, the faithful old gray-haired servant, the tragic mulatto ‘cursed’ with a ‘taint’ of black blood, or a monstrous, savage beast wreaking vengeance on innocent white victims.”<sup>19</sup> The four categories play off of old fears and prejudices of white audiences. The buffoonish figure of Jim Crow portrayed the slave as a harmless innocent, at times mischievous, but ultimately clownish in his ignorance and naiveté. The faithful servant type harkened to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), a tremendously popular novel and play in production at the end of the nineteenth century. The “Uncle Tom” figure reminded white audiences of the “good old days” when loyal slaves served as protectors

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<sup>18</sup> Excerpt from *Dramatic Mirror*. Recopied from Susan Curtis’s *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Curtis, Susan. 56.

and childhood friends. The mulatto image embodied an outward fear of miscegenation, heightened by “survival of the fittest” theories proposed by Social Darwinism. Lastly, the savage beast surfaced as the representation of white fear of black uprisings and as the perpetuation of the image of an inferior, primitive race.

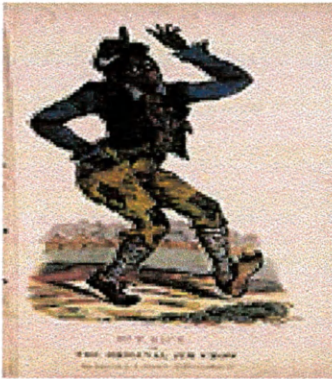


Figure 3: T. Rice as Jim Crow, Harvard Theater Collection

✓ The ambiguity present in the performance of a white actor playing a black character like “Jim Crow” further illustrates the performativity of race. The minstrel stage created an isolated world outside time and place in which racial identities could be experimented with, played out, and manipulated for an audience that was still curious about racial identity and its place in the social hierarchies of antebellum America. The fact that the white actor could step out from behind a colored mask at the end of the performance made black life “safe,” for it allowed the actor to enter into the world of the colored man for a brief time and then excuse himself or herself and return to “normalcy” after his or her experience. The white minstrel performer could participate in all the admirable qualities of black life—musical entertainment, dance, and folk humor—for a time without participating in the hardships of black life—slavery, lynch mobs, and humiliating subordination. In its enactment quality, minstrelsy dangerously transgressed the boundary between the black and white color divide. However, its consciously performative aspect and its perpetual attention to itself as conspicuous race humor

separated minstrelsy from its threatening potential to expose white hegemony. Moreover, entrusting the representation of race to white actors *seemed* to sidestep any question of authenticity for white audiences in the nineteenth century. However, as we have seen, mistakes like Twain's mother made and, as we shall see, competition from increasingly popular black minstrel performers, indeed brought the question of authenticity to the foreground of performing race.

At the end of the nineteenth century, white minstrels were increasingly replaced with troupes of black minstrels. As Krasner remarks, "The newly derived modernism promoted the idea of 'authentic' African Americans on stage as opposed to white minstrel imitations in black face."<sup>20</sup> Competing with white minstrel troupes, black performers advertised their race. Newspaper advertisements [See Figure 4] boasted, "Seven slaves just from Alabama, who are now Earning their freedom by giving concerts under the guidance of their Northern Friends," and "The Only Simon Pure Negro troupe in the World." Lew Johnson, a black businessman who owned a black minstrel troupe for more than twenty-five years, changed the name of his company several times to spotlight its "genuine," "pure," and "bona-fide" nature. The name of the troupe in 1871 "Lew Johnson's Plantation Minstrels" changed to "Plantation Minstrel Slave Troupe" in 1875, "Lew Johnson's Original Tennessee Jubilee Singers" in 1877, "Lew Johnson's Combination" in 1881, "The Black Baby Boy Minstrels" in 1886, and lastly "Refined Colored Minstrels and Electric Brass Band" in 1890<sup>21</sup>. Many of Johnson's names emphasize the minstrel singers' origins from the plantation setting and the slavery tradition, and all of the names suggest either explicitly or implicitly the attribute of

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<sup>20</sup> Krasner, David. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Toll, Robert. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974. 220.

“blackness.” Titles of minstrel shows such as Williams and Walker’s *Two Real Coons* (c. 1890s) and Bob Cole’s *A Trip to Coontown* (1898) capitalized on the modernist idea that African Americans could best portray the genuine black experience.

**CASTLE GARDEN**—Performance to commence at 8 o'clock. Admission 50 cents. Second Week of the Original ETHIOPIAN MELODISTS, Messrs. Cool White, R. Edwards, P. Rice, W. Howard, D. Leon, and S. Clarke, who will introduce the only acknowledged correct and graphic Selections of Ethiopian Melodies, Eccentricities, Melodies, Pastimes, giving a true representation of Negro Life. Every Night this Week.

**PROGRAMME.**

**PART I.**

Grand Overture..... Full Band.  
 Glee—Carry Me back to Old Virginia..... Company.  
 Song and Chorus—I See Her at the Window..... P. Rice.  
 Stop that Knocking, Let Me in..... D. Leon and Chorus.  
 Descriptive Song—Fire, Fire..... Cool White.  
 Love Ditty—My Sally I Shall See..... R. Edwards.  
 Glee—Clim to Old Gum Tree..... Company.  
 Burlesque Lecture on Phrenology..... Prof. Cool White.  
 In which he will give a dissertation upon all the principal Bumps laid down in the Chart, and on several others never before thought of.

**PART II.**

Locomotive Lecture..... R. Edwards.  
 With his celebrated imitations of Getting Up Stairs, Starting of Engine, Going at Full Speed, Story of his Runn Brothers.

Quick Step..... Full Band.  
 Glee—Happy Darkies..... Company.  
 Song—We Live on the Banks of the Ohio, D. Leon & Chorus.  
 Song—Give Me the Gal with the Blue Dress on..... P. Rice.  
 Parody—De Ole Jaw Bone..... Cool White.  
 Song—We'll have a Little Banjo Beat..... Edwards.  
 Song—Picayune Butler..... Cool White.  
 Sugar Cane Dance..... Edwards.  
 Doors open at 6½ o'clock. Performance will commence at 8 o'clock. Admission 25 cents.

Figure 4: Advertisement for “Original Ethiopian Minstrels” Appearing in *New York Tribune* 15 September 1847

A theater critic for the *New-York Clipper* magazine in 1858 speculated the new African American actors’ performances would add an element of reality to the minstrel tradition. In the article he states, “A company of real ‘cullud pussons’ are giving concerts in New Hampshire. We do not see why the genuine article should not succeed. Perhaps this is but the starting point for a new era in Ethiopian entertainment.”<sup>22</sup> The critic’s words reveal much about the attitudes of the minstrel show’s white audience. His use of the dialect “cullud pussons” exhibits a sense of superiority on the part of the white intellectual who has had better educational training and, therefore, a better command of proper English grammar. The critic envisions the success of the troupe, taking as his authority the “genuine” nature of the black performers. Lastly, the use of the term

<sup>22</sup> *Clipper*. November 6, 1858. Recopied from Toll. 195.

“Ethiopian” to characterize all African Americans appeals to a fascination with the exotic and the foreign and reveals an ignorance of the multitude of countries in Africa. The critic’s speculation proved true, and between 1858 and 1890 the *Clipper* printed several favorable reviews of African American minstrel shows. Critics praised black actors for “indulging in reality” and their “spontaneous outbursts of nature’s gifts.” In a review from 1880, one *Clipper* critic praises Haverly’s Colored Minstrels for depicting plantation life “with greater fidelity than any ‘poor white trash’ with corked faces can ever do.”<sup>23</sup> The *Clipper* critic’s words suggest a juxtaposition of white minstrelsy to black minstrelsy and imply a judgment based on authenticity as the sole criterion.

Yet, despite the demand for genuine black portrayal in minstrel shows by white audiences, minstrels were only realistic in so far as they met the standards of what white audiences thought “blackness” should be. A promotional interview of a Callender troupe black performer by a *Clipper* writer in 1882 illustrates the gulf between fantasy and reality in the white idea of plantation life.<sup>24</sup> The black performer stays in character throughout the interview in order to create an air of authenticity for the show. By not coming out of character, the black actor allows the white audience to pretend that the performance is the real thing. The actor describes growing up in Ethiopia on a plantation with coconut trees, bananas, snakes, and monkeys. He even adds a detail about cannibalism to thrill the exotic-seeking, savage-loving white audience. He goes on to recount his life on a “good old plantation” in Louisiana after being caught and sold into slavery. It is this plantation that the Callender troupe recreates in “de naturalist” way for its audience. The actor maintains that in the show “De darky will be hisself once more

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<sup>23</sup> *Clipper*. July 24, 1880. Recopied from Toll. 205.

<sup>24</sup> *Clipper*. March 4, 1882. Recopied from Toll. 209.

and forget that he eber had any trouble.” Lamenting a simpler lifestyle with the absence of troubles, the actor’s words invoke nostalgia for the “good old days” of the past before Emancipation and the troubles of modernity. Ironically, the words come from the mouth of a black actor, who speaks what the white audience itself feels, while he as a freeman most likely does not long for a return to the past and, by implication, to slavery. The interview continues with the actor as Ethiopian slave praising the show in which “the plantation scenes would be so realistic and so happy that old planters from Mississippi would cry for those bygone days, and Northern white men would wish the Almighty had painted them ‘brack as dese brack fellers up dere dat am making all dis music’ and having all that carefree fun.”<sup>25</sup> Here the actor’s words are replete with sentiments appealing to the white audience’s belief in the happiness of the plantation lifestyle and the desire for their version of the authentic past. The plantation past is merely mythic, for this view of the plantation ignores the brutality of the slavery system and the injustice of the established patriarchy. While it is clearly the farthest from reality, the plantation myth is held up by white audiences as the closest to the authentic in minstrel shows.

An understanding of the lifestyle of the black minstrel performer off the stage further illustrates the white audiences’ hypocrisy in its belief in the real African American. Despite highly popular and successful shows, black actors were discriminated against offstage. Company owners found it difficult to provide lodging for their entertainers on the road. Robert Toll recounts a story in which entertainers of the Fisk Jubilee Singers were turned away because of their genuine black skin. “In Newark, New Jersey, a tavern keeper had booked in advance, thinking they were a ‘company of nigger minstrels,’ by which he meant white minstrels. Even though he did not discover that they

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<sup>25</sup> *Clipper*. March 4, 1882. Recopied from Toll. 209.



were real Negroes until they were settled in their rooms, he still ordered them to leave.”<sup>26</sup>

In Texas, minstrel railcars were used as shooting targets if they outwardly advertised black performers. Moreover, the highest paid black performer, Billy Kersands [See Figure 5], was still only getting paid \$15 a week in 1879, compared to white minstrels who made on average \$80 to \$100 per week.

Figure 5: Billy Kersands, the highest paid black minstrel performer  
Courtesy of <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstr19.html>



① Despite the clamor of white audiences for the authentic, it is clear that the truth is not after all what they desired. However, out of the same culture of authenticity as white Americans, black Americans also desired authentic representation. How was the black actor to negotiate between the genuine as perceived by the white audience and the genuine as known by the black audience? Politically, socially, and economically it was far too risky to perform outright resistance on the minstrel stage. If a black actor offended a white audience, he could be prosecuted by Jim Crow laws or even lynched by an angry mob. Moreover, if the minstrel performance did not conform to the white audience's expectations, the show would not be a financial success. In troupes owned by white

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<sup>26</sup> Toll. 220.

business men, such as J. H. Haverly, black actors were under the direction of their white boss. At the same time, however, black actors felt a growing responsibility to their black community to represent a truer representation of “blackness.” For example, African America actor George Walker of Williams and Walker [See Figure 6] maintains in his autobiographical essay “Bert and Me and Them” that the team’s work was not for “the sake of the box office, but because over and above all the money and prestige which move Williams and Walker, is a love for the race. Because we felt that, in a degree, we represent the race and every hair’s breath of achievement we make is to its credit. For first, last and all the time, we are Negroes.”<sup>27</sup> Out of the cry for authenticity came a black voice, if not actual then symbolic, that challenged the accepted versions of blackness, whiteness, and race as a categorical marker of identity.



Figure 6: Photograph of minstrel duo Bert Williams and George Walker  
Courtesy of <http://www.biographcompany.com/williams/>

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✓ Not only unifying the black community, the African American minstrel show offered a second form of black resistance by affording black actors opportunity. While

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<sup>27</sup> Walker, George. “Bert and Me and Them.” *New York Age*. 24 December 1908. 4.

the content of the minstrel show by economic and political necessity had to perpetuate white stereotypical views of “blackness,” the opportunity of the minstrel show to the actor was unprecedented in American history. The actor on the stage has a platform from which to address a white audience. Even if resistance cannot be explicit on the stage, the mere fact that the black man is on the stage is progress. Moreover, the minstrel vocation enabled African American actors a paying job, an outlet for cultural expression of music and dance, and a mode of transportation both around the country and internationally. Minstrel performer W. C. Handy commented on his experience that “it had taken me from Cuba to California, from Canada to Mexico . . . It had thrown me into contact with a wistful but aspiring generation of dusky singers and musicians. It has taught me a way of life I still consider the only one for me.”<sup>28</sup> Far from the confining boundaries of the plantation, the minstrel lifestyle allowed black actors a mobile existence. Furthermore, as a means of cultural expression, in the use of black song and dance, despite comic exaggeration, the minstrel tradition allowed an outlet for what W. E. B. Du Bois referred to in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as “the greatest gift of the Negro People.” By exposing white audiences to black folk culture, African American minstrelsy worked to subversively educate its audiences about the construction of “blackness” and racial identity. Thus, the impact of black minstrelsy on American culture was numerous and, like the minstrel tradition, well masked.

White understandings of “blackness” in the nineteenth century, as represented by African American minstrelsy, established an unreal state of authenticity. It was not the authentic truth that the white audiences of minstrel shows were after, but a vision of nostalgia and melodramatic sentimentalism that harkened back to the “good old days” of

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<sup>28</sup> Toll. 220.

antebellum Southern plantation life. For white Southerners, these reenactments awakened welcomed ghosts of the past. For Northerners, minstrel and drama shows were a glimpse into the incomprehensible fantasy that had led the South to take up arms in succession, which involved mystery, intrigue, and a forbidden attraction. White audiences' insistence on "authentic" blackness as being based in a mythic dream of the antebellum plantation South in which slaves were "happy darkies" and loyal servants created more than an ironic unreal state of authenticity; the insistence on a false authenticity illustrates the power of the dominant white social class to create and perpetuate their own versions of *both* authenticity and "blackness." For nineteenth century audiences, reality was formed by the power of the white population in charge of the political, economical, and social situation. Thus, what comes out of black minstrelsy of the period reflects white society's effectiveness in defining "blackness" in a very stylized and specific way. Black minstrel performances serve as concrete repercussions of the dialogue between domination and resistance.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE TRAGIC MULATTO FIGURE IN DRAMA

As drama replaced minstrelsy as the popular form of entertainment around the turn of the century, African American playwrights began to enter the racial discourse by reshaping a new definition of “blackness” on the stage. Primarily as a reaction against new “scientific” discoveries of the period, African American playwrights discussed race in the context of American society’s preoccupation with miscegenation and the growing hysteria over racial mixing. The worsening of race relations under the guise of “scientific” data supporting white superiority and cementing racial hierarchy reinforced the “authentic” black image in America according to white society. Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) introduced the idea of natural selection in evolution, explaining the process of “survival of the fittest” as a way of weeding out inferior species in nature. When applied to society, “survival of the fittest” suggested to white racists a rational explanation for the purported superiority of the white race and the inferiority of the black race. Social Darwinism made scientific the claim of the stronger civilization over the weaker, primitive savages. The belief in the advancement of the superior race led to violence against any form of racial mixing; therefore, white legislatures enacted Jim Crow laws and vigilante groups lynched black men to enforce segregation and further the gulf between the perceived superior and the inferior in society. Both Caucasian and African American playwrights addressed aversion to racial mixing occurring in society on the stage through the popular trope of the tragic mulatto.

Abolitionist dramas used the mulatto figure to show that the gulf between the races was minuscule and in order to invoke sympathy by creating a safe balance between distance and similitude. Like minstrel performers, the mulatto blended black and white in one figure on the stage. However, unlike the comedy of minstrelsy, the mulatto explored the intrinsic tragedy of black life. Sterling Brown summarizes the conflicting tensions inherent in the tragic mulatto figure:

[The problem of miscegenation] generally stated romantically, was stressed above all other problems which were of graver moment to the Negro. The chief reasons for this should be fairly obvious. The audience was readier to sympathize with heroes and heroines nearer to themselves in appearance. The superiority wished upon the octoroons was easily attributed to the white blood coursing in their veins, and the white audience was thereby flattered. On the other hand, the unflinching tragic outcomes supported the belief that mixture of the races was a curse. Problems such as segregation, exploitation, and the other denials of democracy, all uncomfortable theater fare, were shelved, whereas the perplexities of a handful of fair mulattoes were misconceived, and exaggerated beyond recognition.<sup>29</sup>

The vulnerability of the mulatto heroine played out racial tensions in American society—both the unease of a white audience in a time of social mobility and the unease of a black audience in a time of heated racial conflicts. The mulatto trope represented the precariousness of the boundary between black and white. As Frederick Douglass astutely observed, the mulatto figure embodies “the imminent collapse of the dichotomous racial

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<sup>29</sup> Brown, Sterling. “Negro Poetry and Drama.” New York: Antheneum, 1969. 304.

categories of black and white.”<sup>30</sup> Because late nineteenth and early twentieth century American society was so invested in a fortified division between the “superior” white race and the “inferior” black race, the presence of a mixed figure like the mulatto challenged the foundational understandings of race, blackness, whiteness, identity, and authenticity around which society was constructed. The mulatto’s very existence instigated a series of charged questions: What was black? Who could be classified as black? What was white? Who could be classified as white? How is race used to signify identity? Can there be an authentic black or white experience? The persona of the mulatto figure on the stage was a performance of race, just as the stock, one-dimensional characters of the minstrel tradition were before her. Now, however, more was at stake. Unlike the minstrel characters, the mulatto could not be compartmentalized to fit neatly into a racial category—being neither all (authentically) black nor all (authentically) white. Collapsing fixed ideas of racial separation, the mulatto was condemned not for her difference as a black person but for her likeness to a white person. Therefore, with the foundations of American society jeopardized, the mulatto slave was doomed to death on the stage. Suicide was the only option available to the mulatto in a society where interracial marriage was unthinkable. Presupposing a tragic outcome for the mulatto figure is an American necessity, or as Werner Sollors states, “the mulatto suicide is the cultural given in American settings.”<sup>31</sup>

Borrowing from the minstrel tradition, Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859) is an example of a performance of race through the tragic mulatto trope. In addition, Boucicault adopts traditional stereotypes, thereby depicting black characters as no more

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<sup>30</sup> Brennan, Jonathan. *Mixed Race Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Sollors, Werner. “‘Never Was Born’: The Mulatto, An American Tragedy?” *The Massachusetts Review*. Summer 1986. 300.

than caricatures of “blackness” according to the white perspective. Sentimentalism exaggerates the benevolence of the white slave owners, the slaves accept their lot in life passively, and Zoe commits suicide almost happily in order to protect her white family. By conforming to racist ideology, Boucicault settled for an “authenticity” dictated by white expectations. In an essay for *Arena* in 1890, Boucicault insisted on the artistic freedom and creativity of drama. He stated, “I deny that the drama is, or ever was intended to be, a copy of Nature.” Clearly, Boucicault denied the role of drama to reflect reality and, thus, denied any responsibility to African American authenticity when portraying black characters. Moreover, he went on to say, “Public opinion is the highest and sole court of jurisdiction in literary and artistic matters . . . and the drama is, therefore, made by the collaboration of the people and the poet.”<sup>32</sup> Instead of striving for a realist portrayal in his drama, Boucicault was unabashed in his pursuit of commercial popularity and economic success. Knowing well what white audiences expected from black stage characters, Boucicault created black characters in his play that met the demand of his white audiences purely for financial prosperity. One further example of the corruption of authenticity in the performance of *The Octoroon* was its use of an all white cast. Despite having black central characters such as slaves Pete and Paul, Boucicault cast white actors, including himself as Wahnotee the Indian, and his wife Agnes Robertson as the mulatto Zoe. Scholar Allen Woll comments in his *Black Musical Theater* (1989) that “even plays such as *The Octoroon* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, whose plots featured Negro characters in major roles, managed to avoid casting black performers for most of the

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<sup>32</sup> Boucicault, Dion. *Arena* 1890. Recopied from Jeffrey Richards. “Introduction to *The Octoroon*.” *Early American Drama*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. 444.



Nineteenth Century.”<sup>33</sup> The history of the black performer upon the stage follows the familiar pattern of white repression and discrimination of other careers pursued by African Americans. Especially ironic on the stage, however, is the fact that whites were representing black characters, who were presumed to be subordinates to their white counterparts but not low enough to permit black actors to perform the roles. Although authenticity was sought after in an age of scientific discovery and technological advancement, the pursuit of the “real” still could not justify the use of black actors. Woll states, “In this fashion ‘real’ blacks with dramatic aspirations found all hopes of a stage career thwarted.”<sup>34</sup> The nineteenth century audience saw more authenticity in their stereotypical Jim Crows and Zip Coons than they did in black actors, which makes white notions of authenticity dubious.



Figure 7: Dion Boucicault—Playwright and Actor

Moreover, it appears Boucicault himself [See Figure 7] bought into the white vision of “blackness.” In a letter to the *London Times*, Boucicault claimed, “the delineations in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the conditions of the slaves, their lives, and feelings

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<sup>33</sup> Woll, Allen. *Black Musical Theater: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Woll. 1.

were not faithful. I found the slaves, as a race, a happy, gentle kindly treated population.”<sup>35</sup> Disagreeing with the abolitionist argument in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Boucicault maintains that the reality of slavery was less harmful than Stowe’s depiction. He claims he found the slaves a “kindly treated population,” denying the brutality and cruelty of slavery in the authentic South. The comments of Joseph Jefferson, a white actor who portrayed Salem Scudder in the original performance of *The Octoroon*, are revealing: “the dialogue and characters of the play made one feel for the South.”<sup>36</sup> Engaging the audience to feel sorry for the South’s downfall after the Civil War and the collapse of the paternalistic plantation system, the play functions as an apologist piece for slavery. As a genre, apologist pieces rely on replacing an authentic reading of the injustice of the old South with a nostalgic rendering of the past as “the good old days.” Playing down the realities of grueling labor, separation from family, merciless beatings, and loss of personal freedoms, apologist drama builds an alternate reality, one that becomes “authentic” only as much as it conforms to white ideology. Thus, in his intent as a playwright to be economically successful and his use of apologist themes, Boucicault chose to portray white, corrupted visions of black “authenticity.”

The plot of *The Octoroon* revolves around the dispersal and auction of the Peyton family’s plantation, Terrebonne. Causing the family grief, the auction does not, however, cause grief to Mrs. Peyton and her nephew George for expected reasons, such as the loss of home, economic stability, social status, and independence. Instead, Mrs. Peyton grieves for the *slaves*, a fact that places the play in the sentimental genre of apologist drama. On first discovering that her husband’s plantation must be sold to cover the cost

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<sup>35</sup> Recopied from Richards. 446.

<sup>36</sup> Richards. 445.

of his debts, Mrs. Peyton claims to grieve more for the slaves than for herself. She explains to Jacob M'Closky:

O, sir, I don't value the place for its price, but for the many happy days I've spent here: that landscape, flat and uninteresting though it may be, is full of charm for me; those poor people, born around me, growing up about my heart, have bounded my view of life; and now to lose that homely scene, lose their black, ungainly faces: O, sir, perhaps you should be as old as I am, to feel as I do, when my past life is torn away from me.<sup>37</sup>

Mrs. Peyton's words appear draped in sentimentalism, her "happy days" full of "charm" have been shaped by the black slaves who have "grown about her heart." However, at the same time, Mrs. Peyton's words reveal a feeling of superiority to those same black slaves around her heart. She identifies them as poor, a "homely" scene with "black, ungainly faces" and as living in an "uninteresting" landscape. It is difficult to believe Mrs. Peyton's sincerity when she masks her feelings in terms of paternalism. Thus, it is also hard to divine Mrs. Peyton's true motivation when she urges her nephew George to marry Dora Sunnyside, a white heiress, instead of his lover Zoe, an octoroon. Mrs. Peyton begs:

O, George,--my son, let me call you,--I do not speak for my own sake, nor for the loss of the estate, but for the poor people here: they will be sold, divided, and taken away—they have been born here. Heaven has denied me children; so all the strings of my heart have grown around and amongst

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<sup>37</sup> Boucicault, Dion. "The Octoroon." *Early American Drama*. Ed. Jeffrey H. Richards. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. 458-59.

them, like the fibres and roots of an old tree in its native earth. O, let all go, but save them!<sup>38</sup>

However, can one trust Mrs. Peyton's words? A widowed woman in the South without money, land, children, a home, Mrs. Peyton is unquestionably in a precarious social and economic position. Yet, she claims to have in mind no selfish interest other than the best interest of her slaves, who by definition are considered less than human in antebellum Southern culture. The modern reader wonders why, if Mrs. Peyton and her husband were so benevolent, did they not free their slave children. Moreover, by saving the slaves through a union with Dora Sunnyside, George inevitably saves his aunt Mrs. Peyton as well. Thus, in arguing for the well-being of the slaves, Mrs. Peyton is simultaneously arguing for her own salvation from poverty and social destitution. One must ask the question, then, is Mrs. Peyton begging for the slaves or for herself? Functioning on an additional level, Mrs. Peyton's words suggest that her slaves are her children. Denied children of her own, Mrs. Peyton maintains that her heart strings have embraced the "childlike" slaves heaven has sent her. Taking this statement literally, one thinks of Zoe, the octoroon daughter of Judge Peyton, who has all but been adopted and raised by Mrs. Peyton as her own child. By pressuring George to marry Dora against his feelings for Zoe, Mrs. Peyton essentially argues against her own child. Thus, it is not maternalism which drives Mrs. Peyton, but paternalism. She cannot even entertain the idea of union between her white nephew and her black "child."

The figure of Zoe, the octoroon child of Judge Peyton, challenges Mrs. Peyton's belief in the intrinsic superiority of the white race. By the law's one-drop rule, Zoe is black. However, Zoe's outward physical appearance and "civilized" behavior suggest

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<sup>38</sup> Boucicault. 472.

“whiteness.” Throughout the play, white male characters, such as Salem Scudder, Jacob M’Closky, and George Peyton, describe Zoe’s beauty in terms of fairness of skin, delicate features, and mesmerizing eyes. As an octoroon, Zoe is paler in skin color than other black slaves on the Peyton plantation. Moreover, Zoe’s dialogue models the play’s white characters instead of the dialogue of black slave characters, which is written in dialect. A telling characteristic, Zoe’s speech patterns place her closer to the play’s white characters. Even the small detail that the family is waiting to eat breakfast with Zoe at the beginning of the play is revealing. Southern culture strictly forbid mixed racial meals as a social taboo that was not broken under any circumstances, making de-segregation of lunch counters in the early 1960’s extremely difficult. Having Zoe eat breakfast with the family illustrates her symbolic acceptance as one of the white family members. Thus, it is not so much in her difference as a black woman, but her likeness to a white woman that makes Zoe a dangerous, potentially subversive character to American ideas of race.

Zoe’s similarity to “whiteness” extends to the description of her emotions. Zoe’s love for George Peyton, a universal sentiment and experience that transcends the color divide, further allows a white audience to identify with her. However, Zoe’s likeness ensures her death, for a legally black figure’s similarity to whiteness challenges white ideas of superiority. When George first reveals his love for her, Zoe states, “George, you cannot marry me; the law forbids it! . . . There is a gulf between us, as wide as your love, as deep as my despair.”<sup>39</sup> Zoe’s words reveal her situation—caught between the cold, unyielding law and her deep felt emotions. As a person of mixed blood, the law forbids a marriage between Zoe and any white man. Zoe’s description of the law forbidding their union as a gulf, as wide as George’s love and as deep as her despair, couches the factual

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<sup>39</sup> Boucicault. 466.

law in emotion. The law is no longer just a practicality but an insurmountable barrier between two feeling people. When George does not understand Zoe's objections, she brings attention to her defining physical features: "George, do you see that hand you hold? look at these fingers; do you see the nails are of a bluish tinge?"<sup>40</sup> Calling attention to the tint of her fingers, a slight physical characteristic, Zoe acknowledges the minuteness of the law and at the same time her inability to escape it due to scarcely noticeable physical properties. However, in her discussion of the law, Zoe never complains of its injustice or its triviality. She resigns herself to the law, a passive victim under its authoritative control, a trope for the paternalism of the plantation system in general. In his representation of Zoe, Boucicault never entertains the possibility of resistance or change; instead, Zoe maintains that the law's attitude toward her is natural. She describes her physical differences as:

the ineffaceable curse of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood; those seven bright drops give me love like yours—hope like yours—ambition like yours—life hung with passions like dew-drops on the morning flowers; but the one black drop gives me despair, for I'm an unclean thing—forbidden by the laws—I'm an Octoroon!<sup>41</sup>

Zoe sees her black ancestry as a curse, her black blood a poison, and her ethnicity a mark of uncleanness. The sentiments which could be revolutionary—the acknowledged similarity between the love, hope, ambition, and life of a person of white skin and a

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<sup>40</sup> Boucicault. 466.

<sup>41</sup> Boucicault. 467.

person of black skin—are abandoned as inconsequential in comparison to the pervasiveness of Zoe’s black blood and of the law.

Inevitably, Zoe’s love of George Peyton leads to her tragic suicide. Preferring death to a life in bondage to M’Closky, Zoe poisons herself. She explains, “You see how easily I have become reconciled to my fate—so it will be with you. You will not forget poor Zoe! but her image will pass away like a little cloud that obscured your happiness a while.”<sup>42</sup> Zoe’s resignation to her fate as an octoroon reveals both her acceptance of the established Southern laws and her belief in her own position as a second-class human being. The simile of Zoe as a “little cloud” which blots George’s happiness like a single rain cloud on a blue sky is trivializing in its comparison of a complex, living human being to an inanimate object. She maintains that like a cloud she will fade away from George’s memory as time passes; in other words, she infers that she is not important enough, because she is an octoroon, to remember long after her death. Zoe’s last words echo her subordinate status, “O! George, you may, without a blush, confess your love for the Octoroon!”<sup>43</sup> The fact that her position as an octoroon gives reason for embarrassment, revealed in George’s blush, solidifies the aversion to racial mixing in Southern culture. Moreover, because Zoe’s “condition” is natural, she cannot escape her fate as it is a part of her, not imposed upon her. Zoe’s willingness to accept her position in Southern society and her fate as suicide posits Southern law and racist ideology, no matter how corrupt both may be, as the highest authority. Thus, Zoe’s death does not contribute resistance elements to the play but reinforces the “natural” authenticity of the Southern situation. For Boucicault’s white audience, an octoroon, the interracial product

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<sup>42</sup> Boucicault. 492.

<sup>43</sup> Boucicault. 494.

of miscegenation, represents a reality that jeopardizes the clear boundary between black and white and the sanctity of pure, white supremacy. Zoe is too close to white in skin tone, speech pattern, behavior, and emotion. Thus, Zoe's suicide and resignation to the law as a higher authority than her own desire could be the only "solution" to her presence in the play. This particularly American perspective on the ultimate tragedy of the octoroon can be seen in Boucicault's decision to change the ending of his play for a British audience. According to Jeffrey Richards, when *The Octoroon* played in London in 1861, Boucicault rewrote the ending so that, "in the final tableau, George enters carrying Zoe in his arms—alive and presumably his future bride."<sup>44</sup> The happy ending of the British version was simply unthinkable in America, where the white audience was after an "authenticity" that complied with its own racist vision of the past.

Perhaps the play's moment of acute sentimentalism comes when the slave Pete rallies his fellow slaves before their pending auction. Despite the prospect of inevitable separation, possible ownership by a crueler owner, and reminder of humility that the slave auction entails, Pete demands the courage of his fellow slaves, not to assert their human dignity, but as an act of appreciation for the Peyton's considerate ownership. Pete bullies his peers with the following speech:

Will you hush? She will hear you. Yes! I listen dar jess now—dar was ole lady cryin'—Mas'r George—ah! you seen dem big tears in his eyes. O, Mas'r Scudder, he didn't cry zackly; both ob his eyes and cheek look like de bad Bayou in low season—so dry dat I cry for him. [*Raising his voice*] den say de missus, 'Tain't for de land I keer, but for dem poor niggers—

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<sup>44</sup> Richards, Jeffrey. 447.



dey'll be sold—dat wot stagger me.' 'No,' say Mas'r George, 'I'd rather sell myself fuss; but dey shan't suffer, nohow,--I see 'em dam fuss.'<sup>45</sup>

The sheer absurdity of a slave cajoling his fellow slaves to enter a slave auction proudly as a tribute to the white oppressors who had enslaved them and kept them in bondage reveals the fantastical nature of the white audience's vision or at least of Boucicault's vision of what was possible. Pete describes the tears and benevolent words of Mrs. Peyton, George, and Scudder as incentive for the slaves to put aside their personal fears and misgivings for a higher cause—the feelings of the white people. The loyalty and unselfishness of what Pete is asking his fellow slaves to do conforms perfectly to the projected view of the white audience that slaves were innocent, childlike, loyal, and more or less content. To a modern audience, this mode of thinking is preposterous. Why would any white owner, who represented not only enslavement but also emasculation and subjugation, deserve any consideration from a slave? Pete goes on to rationalize his request:

Cum, for de pride of de family, let every darky look his best for the judge's sake—dat ole man so good to us, and dat ole woman—so dem strangers from New Orleans shall sey, Dem's happy darkies, dem's a fine set of niggers; every one say when he's sold, 'Lor' bless dis yer family I'm gwine out, and send me as good a home.'<sup>46</sup>

Again, Pete's words are reminiscent of white misconceptions, during the antebellum period and in the nineteenth-century, surrounding the reality of slavery. The idea of “happy darkies” that Pete wants his fellow slaves to help him exhibit to the New Orleans

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<sup>45</sup> Boucicault. 477.

<sup>46</sup> Boucicault. 477.

slave owners is also the image desired by a white audience in the nineteenth century. Just as Zoe should be content and resigned in her fate as an octoroon, the slaves should be happy in their roles on the plantation. A “fine set of niggers” is one that is content and loyal to their master and mistress, an image counterintuitive to modern sensibilities. Therefore, Boucicault’s sentimental image of slaves happily going off to the auction block conforms to his audience’s expectations of the authentic, even though that “authenticity” is corrupt.

In response to the nineteenth-century desire for authenticity, Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* conforms to a white audience’s collective vision and expectation of the authentic in the antebellum South. Boucicault’s admitted desire for economic success and willingness to write in order to gain the public’s favor serve as evidence for his compliance to predominant racist ideology. Moreover, contemporary performances of the drama with all white casts revealed a corrupted sense of the authentic and a propensity for that corrupted vision as a substitute for reality. Boucicault uses elements of sentimentalism—exaggeration, nostalgia, and metaphoric language—to conform to apologist visions of the slavery system. How can one condemn slavery when Mrs. Peyton’s version of slavery is family-oriented, lovingly paternalistic, and comforting to the slaves themselves? Slavery does not look that bad in comparison to Zoe’s tragic suicide—at least slavery means life. Because Zoe was too close to “whiteness” for the comfort of a white audience, she had to die. Ironically, Zoe’s name means life, but because of her status as a mulatto, she must give up that life on the American stage. With Pete giving words of encouragement, slavery seems like a noble occupation. *The Octoroon*, like other pieces in the apologist genre, portrays slavery as a positive

economic system, which, unfortunately, temporarily went wrong in the South. However, the central idea remains that the system itself could work as long as the South was left to its experiment without interference from its northern neighbors. The apologist perspective allowed for a double-reconciliation: on one hand, the South could feel as though it was not losing its established lifestyle before the Civil War, and, on the other hand, the North could distance itself from the “Southern problem.” In the late nineteenth century, with the problems of reconstruction resurfacing in heightened tensions between race relations, the aftermath of the Civil War was still a critical issue. Thus, Boucicault’s treatment of slavery and of the potential for miscegenation in his play embraces a white vision of the authentic, with the intent to appease rather than resist predominant white hegemony.

## CHAPTER THREE

### WIGGA-ISM AND THE BLACK CAUCASIAN RACE

For a growing percentage of America's Caucasian youth in the twenty-first century there is a profound difference between white and *too* white. Self-proclaimed "Wiggas" are, as the name suggests, a new race of "white niggers," biologically white but shaping their identity around traditionally African-American cultural style. The idea of a "White Negro" was first used by Surrealist Verlaine when describing Rimbaud as "the splendidly civilized, carelessly civilizing savage."<sup>47</sup> Appeal of African culture and desire to copy it has long preoccupied artistic circles such as the Surrealists--Dumas, Verlaine, and Rimbaud--the European Bohemians--Hugo Ball and Alfred Jarry--and the Beat Generation--Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Neal Cassidy. However, no previous movement has extended to the size and scope of the modern Wigga subculture. Teenage wiggas are white but not *too* white, drawing a distinction between themselves and all other Caucasians who do not adopt the dress, speech patterns, music, and social posture of being "black." Wigga-ism is the twenty-first century's performance of race, for much like prior minstrelsy and dramatic entertainment, it blurs the social boundaries between black and white. The performance of "blackness" by white teenagers points to race's construction around a set of characteristics ascribed to African Americans. The website WiggaWorld ([opax.swin.edu.au/~22\\_3577/wiggaworld.html](http://opax.swin.edu.au/~22_3577/wiggaworld.html)) advertises that if you "wanna be a wigga but don't know where to start," they have a "definition of a wigga so u know what you are representing." The existence of a website that can teach someone how to be a wigga on the computer confirms wigga-ism's constructed nature.

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<sup>47</sup> Rux, Carl Hancock. "Eminem: The New White Negro." *Everything But the Burden*. 29.

As little as five years ago, the wigga social identity did not exist. Now to be a wigga is synonymous with “cool” in American high schools. For evidence, one has only to conduct a simple experiment of observation. First, watch an interview on MTV of an African American gangster rapper or hip-hop celebrity. Note the characteristics of the persona. What are they wearing? How are they talking? How does their body language reflect their attitude? Second, enter a local shopping mall. Observe. What are white teenagers wearing? How are they talking? What does their body language suggest about their attitude? Lastly, make the connection. I think you will observe a striking similarity between conscious choices of the material world creating black gangster and white wigga identities. Both are defined by others and define themselves by their baggy pants, exposed boxer shorts, cocked hats, and apparel boasting name-brand logos such as FUBU, Phat Farm, and various rappers’ symbolism. Who is emulating whom? I think it pretty safe to say that popular gangster rappers such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Ice Cube, DMX, Outcast, Jay Z, and the late Tupac Shakur are not “pimpin off” (to use a gangster vernacular) the white teenagers of America. Instead, a subculture of white teenagers in America has appropriated the thuggish image of a gangster rapper as its model of “cool.”

But what makes African Americans cool? Historically, Caucasians of European descent have commodified African Americans, making a group of people into a desirable good. African Americans were brought to England as a spectacle of the exotic and the savage, in much the same way Native Americans were collected from the colonies. The traditional tribal dress, practices, and speech of the Africans helped to solidify their standing as a savage “other,” a group of people at which to stare in astonishment and to fear for their difference. The fascination with the African transferred to the American

colonies with the middle passage of the slave trade. As scholar Greg Tate states, “capitalism’s original commodity fetish was the Africans auctioned here [United States] as slaves, whose reduction from subjects to abstracted objects has made them seem larger than life and less than human at the same time. It is for this reason that the Black body, and subsequently Black culture, has become a hungered-after taboo item and a nightmarish bugbear in the badlands of American racial imagination.”<sup>48</sup> Reduced to object status, African Americans function much the same way, say, a pet snake does in American society. A snake represents a danger, a potential threat, but it is just enough to be exciting, so Americans buy snakes as pets to keep around the house and to bring out every once in awhile to assert bravado and virility. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, slaves were purchased not only because they provided a free work force, but also because their nature represented the exotic faraway land—an idea at once intriguing and horrifying to white plantation owners, who probably had never traveled, who believed in the pioneer West to such a degree that reveals an always already fascination with the unknown, and who had been tutored by their religion to loathe any religious practices but their own. In the twentieth century, African Americans evolved from slaves to colorful minstrel caricatures, jazz musicians, blues singers, rock and rollers, comedians, promoters of civil rights, hip hop artists, and gangster rappers. The common denominator of these new Black personas is difference. Thus, white Americans have and continue to be pulled into a dilemma of fascination and disgust, love and hate, admiration and fear of the different, the black American.

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<sup>48</sup> Tate, Greg. “Introduction: Nigs R US, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects.” *Everything But the Burden*. New York: Broadway Books, 2003. 4.

African Americans are cool in part because they are “not us.” However, there is an equally important second factor in the equation. A street interview with Michael Adkins, Robbie Pachoe, and Tim Haas, all eighteen year old male Caucasians from Hampton, Virginia, suggested that black people are inherently “cool” because, in the words of Adkins, “they don’t put up with no shit.” The word that continued to be used in the discussion was “attitude.” Collectively, the boys agreed that “cool” was a state of mind that reflected in attitude and action. “Being cool,” explained Haas, “is about respect. Respect for yourself and respect for your hommies. It’s about being a good friend. Having your buddy’s back at all times.” Adkins agreed, “White people are more tolerant. Black people are just cool because they respect themselves and their group enough not to put up with shit.” The attitude of intolerance the boys described is far from being a new appeal and is a quality not exclusive to African Americans. Every youth generation has its heroes of male virility, who define the essence of manhood for that generation. Carl Hancock Rux argues in “Eminem: The New White Negro” that “if there are non-black, economically privileged teenagers who wear their oversized jeans pulled down around their knees and sleep beneath posters of self-proclaimed rapists, gang members, and murderers with record deals, it is because every generation of youth culture since Socrates has identified with outsider/outcast/radicalism, and typically pursued some kind of participation in it.”<sup>49</sup> Popular modes of heroes such as cowboys, rebels, gangsters, spies, superheroes, and rappers are heroes because of their outsider status. For teenagers going through a transition between childhood and adulthood, the outsider/outcast type most appeals to their current situation, allowing them to identify and relate to someone who is also outside of conventional society. Rux argues that black

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<sup>49</sup> Rux. 24.

Americans grew up with hero archetypes such as John Wayne on television and then transferred them into a contemporary myth set in the housing projects of America, making a black outlaw identity open to any and all who wants to perform it.<sup>50</sup> In turn, the heroes of white Americans also evolved. Tate suggests that symbols of manhood “began to be defined less by the heroic individualism of a John Wayne and more the ineffable hipness, coolness, antiheroic, antiauthoritarian stances of bona fide-genius Black musicians.”<sup>51</sup> Both the interview and the critical scholarship suggest that the new black hero is “cool” by virtue of his cool indifference, his anti-authoritarian attitude that aligns him, just like the adolescent/teenage experience, against white convention.

Thus, at its heart, Wiggism is most about rebelling against the “norm” with the unconventional. White teenagers in America are seduced by the “otherness” and the cool indifferent attitude represented by their perceived black character. Clearly, not all African Americans are coolly indifferent, gangster thugs, pimpin rappers, and hip antiheroes. I hardly think Colin Powell would identify himself as a coolly indifferent, gangster thug. However, teenage white Americans are invested in the myth that is race-accessible and “dangerous enough to pose an idealistic threat to a conservative society.”<sup>52</sup> The outward material signifiers of Wigga culture are diametrically opposed to conservative society. Wigga language is infused with curse words, street slang, and non-standard usage of English grammar. Wigga dress style, large baggy pants (reflective of prison inmates who are not allowed to wear belts<sup>53</sup>), exposed boxer shorts, and lose-fitting shirts marked with rappers’ logos, contrasts the crisp, neat, tucked-in look of traditional Puritan descendants.

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<sup>50</sup> Rux. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Tate. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Rux. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Gibbs, Melvin. “ThugGods: Spiritual Darkness and Hip-Hop.” *Everything But the Burden*. 82.



Even the angling of the baseball hat to the side instead of the front sets Wiggas apart from the “normal” Caucasian way of doing things. By placing the hat at an angle, Wiggas are calling attention to their conscious effort to be apart. Moreover, Wigga association with drugs, alcohol, gangs, guns, piercings, and tattoos—all social taboos—assert their position as outsiders. Ironically, wiggas feel more like insiders in black culture. Today it is estimated that 70% of hip-hop music sales are to white teenagers.<sup>54</sup> In 1999 FUBU (“For Us, By Us”), an African American clothing company marketing to African Americans, reported an annual sales volume of \$200 million from its menswear, a number that led to the realization that its attraction had spread to non-black consumers as well.<sup>55</sup> Cataloguing their closets, Adkins, Pachoe, and Haas estimated that as much as 80% of their clothing included FUBU, Phat Farm, Outcast, or other miscellaneous Rappers’ logos—all commercially marketed and known on the street as African American brands [See Figure 8]. Yet, even within African American culture, wiggas do not fit in. Comparable to the ostracism of the tragic mulatto figure in twentieth century drama, the wigga teenager perceives his “white” blood as a taint excluding him from both black and white cultures. Tate explains that while “some in the African American community see the appearance of the wigga mutant as a comical form of flattery, others [see it] as an up-to-date form of minstrelsy.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, much like white minstrel actors of the nineteenth century, wiggas can always return to being white at the end of the performance. As Tate’s title *Everything But the Burden* (2003) suggests, Wiggas can perform a version of “blackness” which conveniently excludes the real burden of being black in racial America.

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<sup>54</sup> Gibbs. 93.

<sup>55</sup> [www.fubu.com](http://www.fubu.com). Viewed March 12, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Tate. 8.

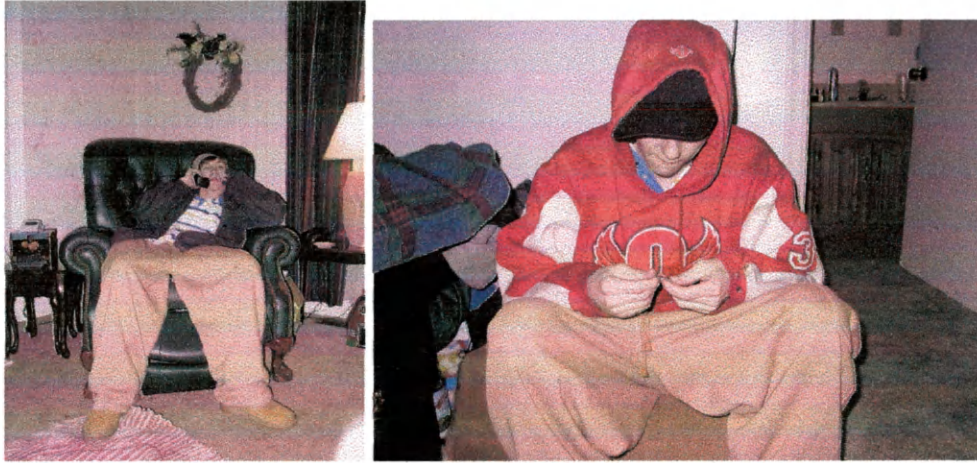


Figure 8: Michael Adkins dressed in Wigga style

Nonetheless, the mass exodus of white teenagers away from Caucasian conventional society towards African American culture induces a whole set of identity problems. Who is black? Who is white? Is there an impassable barrier between the two colors? What is race? How is race performed? Is there such a thing as the “authentic” black or white experience? Can race be defined without reference to skin color? Does the wigga’s presence in American culture forecast an end to black and white racial classification?

The Wigga phenomenon serves as an example of the interplay between black identity, performance, and cultural authenticity in America. Wiggism is a performance of “blackness” by white teenagers. It is a representation of a perceived type of hero, with a prescribed set of characteristics that appeal to the teenage position as outsider, which ultimately links the Caucasian teenager and the African American in a common social experience. As Rux argues, “Identity is an invented thing. Race is an invented thing. They are not real, but they are *actual*. Race and identity are based on perception and performance and are relative only to the perceptions and performances of the individual and the collective understanding of existence and the activity of being within the context

of the dream.”<sup>57</sup> Race, “blackness” and “whiteness” as category markers, is not a true signifier of identity. Ultimately, race is about power. Michael Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993) equates the “mimetic faculty,” or human desire to copy, with the pursuit of power. When one copies something, one symbolically masters that thing which he or she has copied. Wiggas, white teenagers who feel out-of-control in conventional white culture, ape black culture as a means of gaining control through power. By asserting themselves on black culture, wiggas gain a sense of self, creating identity in a tangle of power relations and outsider ideology. Performing blackness allows wiggas the opportunity to simultaneously mimic black antiauthoritarian figures, rebel against conventions of white society, and correct their sense of self as submissive outsider by redefining themselves in a position of power. In an age of wiggism in America, the signs and signifiers of racial identity are being challenged by teenage identity workers. In search of self, wiggas have undermined traditional definitions of black and white, exposing the faulty construction of racial categorization.

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<sup>57</sup> Rux. 36.

## CONCLUSION

As representations of African American culture, minstrelsy, drama, and wiggism provide a practical application for race theory. Literally a performance to entertain a paying audience, minstrelsy was also a performance of race. Audiences expected to see black characters on the stage, no matter if they were performed by white actors in makeup or genuine black actors. The audience's expectations reveal the social construction inherent in the popular idea of race and racial representation. However, the white audience's idea of what blackness was differed dramatically from what a black audience's idea would be, thus illustrating the patriarchal power structures informing race identity. In the context of minstrelsy, the pursuit for authenticity is a doomed activity. Authenticity, like race and the identity signifiers "black" and "white," is a fluid concept, determined by those in power and opposed by those without power. Yet, the performance of race, especially blackness in minstrelsy, was not without value. Benston describes black artists soon recognized that "the very essence of theater is its immanently collective experience, and in very practical terms, its affirmation or challenge of the audience's codes of conduct, their mechanisms of survival, their shared necessity, outrage, and vision. Theater can tap and redistribute custom and ceremony."<sup>58</sup> The stage has power. By performing race, black actors could offer alternative identities and by doing so challenge the accepted stereotypes. By insisting on the performance of race as a performance, African American actors further challenged "the assumptions of stability of both whiteness and blackness."<sup>59</sup> And by questioning the differentiation between

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<sup>58</sup> Benston. 26.

<sup>59</sup> Favor. 147-48.

blackness and whiteness, African American actors were ultimately questioning the value of race.

By looking at the shift in minstrel actors from predominantly white troupes to predominantly black troupes and the conventional rendering of the tragic mulatto trope in Boucicault's *The Octoroon* one can begin to see race emerge as a performative element of identity making. The performance of race is seen in both genres, minstrelsy and drama, through the loss of meaning in any concept of authenticity held by society. The dichotomy between the representation of "blackness" proposed by whites and the representation of "blackness" proposed by blacks rendered the race for authenticity a futile pursuit, for the definition of authenticity was in dispute from the beginning. The authentic from "scientific" claims such as Social Darwinism and stereotypical truths such as the "happy slave" was in corrupt form, only serving as a justification for reinvesting white audiences in the myth of the past. American society at the end of the nineteenth century was only the illusion of what Krasner has described as a "culture of authenticity." Like the black-face mask of the white minstrel performer, the quest for the authentic disguised the true identity of the social preoccupation at the end of the century. While American society wanted to be in line with its ideals of progress, modernity, and scientific rationalism, in truth it was harboring the same old racial prejudices of the past in a new disguise. The conflicts and tensions of the minstrel tradition stress the concept of "blackness" as a cultural construct, a performance to be manipulated according to the audience's desires, and reveal blackness's ability to be manipulated as a proof against authenticity. Because "blackness" in the minstrel tradition and the figure of the tragic mulatto function in the mode of double-consciousness, ever changing between two poles,

the authentic fails to exist as a fixed, single constant to be “discovered” by society. Thus, African American entertainment forms such as minstrelsy and drama serve to refute a larger cultural misconception in America at the end of the nineteenth century: a persisting view of white superiority as *the* ultimate, authoritative truth. For, if “blackness” is not an authentic constant to be agreed upon by society, neither is “whiteness.” For the ever-increasing precarious social position of white Americans of the period, to relinquish their version of “blackness” would be to put their creation of “whiteness” in direct peril, a situation unbearable to white Northerners and Southerners alike. White society had more invested in the plantation myth than just their vision of “blackness;” they had invested themselves.

The tension between imitation and authenticity in late nineteenth century America plays out in the representation of “blackness” in African American cultural performances such as minstrelsy and drama. White minstrel performers enacted racial stereotypes on the stage and then stepped back from those identities of “blackness” into their safe “whiteness.” Minstrelsy was charged with questions of authenticity--who could perform the “authentic” experience, who was qualified to recognize the “authentic” experience, and who felt the most threatened by the “authentic” experience. Black minstrel performers were caught between the demand for a corrupted view of authenticity by white audiences and a duty to portray multiple, varying representations of “blackness.” In conforming to white stereotypes of black caricatures such as Jim Crow and Zip Coon, black minstrel performers perpetuated images of black inferiority and white superiority. However, it was to their economic, social, and political advantage to compromise their own representation of self on stage. Moreover, the black minstrel show afforded black

performers moments of resistance in the disguise of subversive messages in Jim Crow lyrics, in the creation of a unified African American cultural consciousness, and in the opportunities for economic prosperity, travel, and cultural expression of black actors. As Krasner observes, “the tension between accommodating the needs of the public and a desire to transform the image of blacks was never quite resolved. Hence, the vision of early black musical theater incorporated double consciousness in black performance style: attempting to please different segments of the audience, and different aspects of one’s self.”<sup>60</sup> The black minstrel tradition is not a stagnant form of cultural racism, but a dynamic duality of African American assimilation and resistance. Applying W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness to the minstrel show is especially fitting. According to Du Bois, “Double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro.”<sup>61</sup> On the stage, black performers felt their “twoness” acutely.

Racial discourse in drama, like minstrelsy, addressed issues of identity, authenticity, and color representation. Depicting the tragic mulatto figure, Dion Boucicault adopts white nineteenth and what would become twentieth century constructs of authenticity. Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* embraces the tradition of apologist literature, justifying the past and the slavery system. Boucicault’s personal beliefs, seen by his view of the play as purely a means of pleasing public opinion and his comments on his own experience of the pleasantness of plantation life, align him with the hegemonic, white patriarchy, which shapes his rendering of the tragic mulatto figure. Moreover, the

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<sup>60</sup> Krasner. 159.

<sup>61</sup> Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994. 2.

characteristics of the actual performance, especially the use of a standard all white cast, reveal the extent and type of “authenticity” desired by white Americans. *The Octoroon* conforms to established race normatives—Boucicault’s slaves are loyal, content, and, most importantly, passive; Mrs. Peyton and her nephew George express appropriate sentimentalism over their slaves; and Zoe, the octoroon, accepts her suicide as her fate as a “tainted” person. The tragic mulatto figure, embodying both “blackness” and too much “whiteness,” challenges the creation of irrevocable social boundaries between the two races, the accepted superiority of the white race, and the idea of an authentic race representation.

Addressing similar issues of racial performance and identity explored by minstrelsy and drama, wiggerism questions any rigid delineation between black and white. Wiggers are, like the tragic mulatto figure, caught between two worlds neither fully accepted nor fully rejected by either. However, unlike the mulatto figure but more similar to the white minstrel actor, the wigger is only a pretending member of black culture and can embrace the perceived “coolness” of black life without accepting the “uncool” elements of being black in America—discrimination and subjugation. Thus, the wigger becomes a quasi tragic minstrel of the twenty-first century. A blend between the minstrel and the mulatto, the wigger suggests that, on their own, performances of black and white and classifications of black and white no longer work to explain the complex relationships of race occurring in America. Minstrel actors are not black or white. Tragic mulattos are not black or white. Wiggers are not black or white. Performances of race from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries clearly refute race as an identity signifier. Yet, the white patriarchy has refused to listen, choosing instead to cling to old



stereotypes of the “authentic” in a social battle for control. At the core of each cultural performance—minstrelsy, drama, and wigga-ism, is the desire for power.

Minstrelsy, drama, and wigga-ism exhibit the tension, conflict, and unease inherent in representing race. The social construction of “blackness” and “whiteness” as terms laden with the hegemonic beliefs of American culture renders unclear the value of race as an identity marker in society. If blackness is constantly being re-envisioned and reasserted, then it cannot be held up as a constant, fixed identity marker to which all African Americans can point to as their standard for judgment. Moreover, since the concept of race is based on the comparison of one race to the “other,” if blackness is not a stable “other,” then the stability of whiteness is also in jeopardy. Building a racial identity in opposition to a concept of blackness always in constant flux, white Americans undermined their own understanding of themselves. Therefore, as a constructed category, race suggests the hegemonic power-structures informing its definition and role in society. The contrived master-slave relationship upon which the concept of race is built as a way of distinguishing between “self” and the “other” in society legitimates itself through the “authentic” experience. The white population as the agents of authenticity in American society demand an authentic experience, one that reinforces its view as a superior “self,” that does not exist. Thus, J. Martin Favor concludes that the pursuit for authenticity becomes a doomed performance. Minstrelsy, drama, and wigga-ism show both the attempts at conforming to white authenticity and the imminent questions about blackness and whiteness that follow in doing so.

The performativity of race continues to assert itself in modern society. Popular films and television programs play with racial stereotypes left over from the minstrel

tradition. Steve Martin's latest film "Bringing Down the House" subverts racial boundaries for comic effect, depicting Martin as black in baggy clothes, mannerisms, and dialect of African American culture. African American comedians like Kris Rock and Eddie Murphy construct their standup acts around forced dichotomies between "black" and "white." Hip-hop stars and gangster rappers carefully construct racial identities through stylized dress, mannerisms, and song lyrics. Authenticity emerges as a matter for debate. Who is really black? Who is white? Where do teenage Caucasian boys who ape African American mannerisms and style of dress fit into the racial categorization? Like the tragic mulatto figure of drama, so-called wiggas disrupt the neat categorical divisions upon which race is built. Are the boys white, as their biology suggests, or black, as their construction of identity suggests? Questions of race continue to reveal its constructed nature and undermine any claims of authenticity based upon it. Minstrelsy, drama, and most recently wigga-ism have set the precedent for thinking about the constructed relationship between black and white and the power at stake in deconstructing that relationship. As long as race continues to be held up as a standard of social delineation in America, racial performances will pose as resistance. The only question that remains is what will the next performance of race look like?

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Illustrations:

Figure 1: Edwin P. Christy as "George Christy."  
[http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/who/who\\_pages/christy.htm](http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/who/who_pages/christy.htm)

Figure 2: Song Sheet of The Virginia Serenaders, dated 1844

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstrl3.html>

Figure 3: T. Rice as Jim Crow  
Harvard Theater Collection, The Houghton Library

Figure 4: Advertisement for “Original Ethiopian Minstrels”  
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Figure 6: Bert Williams and George Walker  
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Figure 7: Dion Boucicault  
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Figure 8: Michael Adkins  
Photograph taken by Katrin Adkins, March 2003

VITA

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Katrin L. Adkins was born in Jacksonville, Florida on March 4, 1980. She graduated from St. Margaret's high school in Tappahannock, Virginia in May of 1998. She attended Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degrees in philosophy and in English Literature with honors. She graduated Summa Cum Laude in May of 2002.

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