

6-1-2002

"What Exactly Is a Black?": Interrogating the Reality of Race in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*

Debby Thompson
Colorado State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Debby (2002) "'What Exactly Is a Black?': Interrogating the Reality of Race in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 2, Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1539>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

"What Exactly Is a Black?": Interrogating the Reality of Race in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*

Abstract

On the dedication page of *The Blacks*, Genet writes "One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?" Prefiguring major issues and paradoxes of African American cultural studies today, *The Blacks* insists on the very real ways in which the black/white racial binary, like the very concept of race itself, is lived and socially enforced, and at the same time argues that the binary is ultimately a fiction, made real through performative reification. Genet's "clown show," ambiguously reversing the blackface minstrelsy tradition, dramatizes how racial identity can become internalized and naturalized through cultural myths of interracial rape and colonialist narratives of a "heart of darkness," an imaginary site from which "black essence" arises. These racist performance traditions and narratives are so powerful and resilient that attempts to protest them become subtle and unwitting ways of re-creating them. *The Blacks'* parody of the minstrel tradition to interrogate all racial identity is so permanently suspended in a dialectic of *both* reinforcing the black/white binary *and* invalidating it, that the play's strategies present vital paradigms for the study of other and diverse interrogations of racial ontologies.

Keywords

The Blacks, Jean Genet, all-black cast, what is black, The Blacks, African American cultural studies, black/white, socially enforced, racial binary, race, performative, fiction, clown show, blackface, racial identity, internalized, naturalized, culture, cultural myths, interracial rape, colonialist narratives, racist performance traditions, racial ontologies

"What Exactly Is a Black?": Interrogating the
Reality of Race in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*

Debby Thompson
Colorado State University

In Memory of Rajiv Bhadra

The Negro is not. Any more than the
white man.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Blackness exists, but "only" as a function
of its signifiers.

—Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying
Monkey*

To be inauthentic is sometimes the best
way to be real.

—Paul Gilroy, "... to be real": The Dissi-
dent Forms of Black Expressive Culture"

On the dedication page of the Grove Press, English translation of *The Blacks: A clown Show* Genet asks, "what exactly is a black?" This is a question which has been intensely engaged by African diasporic writers from Frantz Fanon to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to Paul Gilroy and by African diasporic cultures generally. Yet when asked by a white Frenchman, the question seems to serve different ends. Fanon's denial of the ontological grounds of racial identity comes in a cultural context where crude racial stereotypes are still very much in place. Gates's and Gilroy's statements about

the constructed or performative nature of racial identity are an attempt to retain the political power of black communal identity in an era of radical deconstruction of identity. All three writers are speaking primarily to black readerships. Genet's questioning, however, is directed first to white audiences in the presence of blacks, or perhaps, as Lorraine Hansberry claims, is "a conversation between white men about themselves"—and a conversation "haunted by guilt" and "steeped in the romance of racial exoticization" (Hansberry 42).

To some readers and audiences, the play *The Blacks*, Genet's incendiary satire on racism and colonialism, is itself innately racist and neo-colonialist. And yet, the question "What exactly is a black?" comes from a playwright who, around 1970, became involved with the Black Panthers, and later supported the Algerian revolution and the PLO. Genet's sympathy with the struggles of people of color against oppression led his translator to call Genet a "white Negro," and Genet himself to refer to himself as "a black man who happens to have white or pink skin."¹ Is Genet a "black" man in a "white" mask—an outsider to white culture even though he is himself white—or is he simply reviving American theater's horrendously racist tradition of blackface minstrelsy? Eric Lott, a cultural theorist of blackface minstrelsy, suggests a complication to my either/or question. Lott suggests that American blackface minstrelsy was itself a deeply ambivalent practice which reflected "a mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation" (or, more simply, "love and theft") of black culture by whites. That is, blackface minstrelsy presents "a dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than the two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger, and all constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling." It is this dialectical structure of American racial feeling, though in a more contemporary form than that of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy, which I want to explore through a reading of *The Blacks*. This play both studies and enacts the dialectical structure of the white gaze—a study and a performance, I

argue, that cannot, at least in the current and historical context of global politics, take place outside of white guilt.

The image of racial transvestism used to characterize Genet encapsulates a major ambivalence in his play: the phrase "white Negro" both essentializes the racial categories of "white" and "Negro" and shows them to be transgressable constructs. Combining incantations and demystifications of "blackness" (as well as of "whiteness"), Genet's play refuses to take "race" as a given, even as it dramatizes the impossibility of this refusal. At the same time, the politics of asking the question "what exactly is a black?" is complex, and it matters a great deal who is asking the question, and in what context. Who is empowered by the affirmation of racial authenticity? Who is empowered by its deconstruction? Do both racism and its overthrow hinge on beliefs in the reality or facticity of race? Does a derealizing of race throw racial politics into a crisis? Or can—and should—there be a racial politics divested of the reality of race? These are some of the questions Genet both poses and evades in *The Blacks*.

After *The Blacks*' successful run in Paris, it achieved a great deal of acclaim and popularity in its American run off-Broadway, and left a wave of dramatic responses to it, from playwrights as notable and diverse as Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Kennedy, ntozake shange, and George C. Wolfe.² *The Blacks*' setting was originally read as Africa or the West Indies; however, Genet's play, written in France by a Frenchman, has been a disturbing and provocative text for many African American dramatists, and these dramatic responses in turn create a context of *American* racial politics, philosophy, and history (particularly the historical phenomenon of minstrelsy, the first theatrical tradition to be developed by whites on American soil) from which to reevaluate the play. While *The Blacks* was written during the time of the American civil rights movement's struggle for equality between blacks and whites in the 1950s, the struggle that *The Blacks* reflects on is one of a real crisis over the authenticity of "black identity"—a struggle more characteristic of later decades. *The Blacks*' insistence on the very real ways in which the identities of "black" and "white" are lived and socially enforced, and the play's

simultaneous argument that these body-identities are ultimately fictional, prefigures major issues and paradoxes of current African American Cultural Studies and of the emerging field of Whiteness Studies. Hence the play has new relevance to us now. Both *The Blacks* and current African American cultural studies grapple with the paradox that racial identity is real in that it is *realized*—that the reality of racial identity exists through performative constitution, or what Paul Gilroy calls “black vernacular self-fashioning, culture-making, play and antiphonic communal conversation” (Gilroy 13). Equally paradoxical, both the position that black identity has real ontological status and the opposite position, that black identity is only a function of signifiers, can serve both racist and anti-racist ends, depending on the specific situation of the assertion. Genet’s play participates in current studies of the “technologies of race” operating in twentieth-century America. It looks not only at how race is made to be real, but also at how the deconstruction of racial constructions can still reinforce those constructions. Even more importantly, the play, in my reading of it, suggests that the assertion/deconstruction of the realness of racial identity is inherently a political and situational question. What I am arguing, then, is that Genet can never answer the question “what exactly is a black,” or even whether or not blackness *is*. Instead, he dramatizes whites’ investment in the question of racial ontology. Most radically, he offers up a form in which to entertain white guilt.

A brief plot outline of *The Blacks* will suggest some of the complexity and novelty of that form, and will make evident both Genet’s refusal to take race—any race—as a given, and his devious pleasure in ferreting out and displaying the inherent theatricality of racial identities. Onstage, *The Blacks* presents a play-within-a-play—or rather a play-within-a-play-within-a-play. In the play most within, the “Negroes”—Archibald, Village, Bobo, Snow, Felicity, Virtue, and Diouf—ritualistically re-enact, before a “white” “Court,” the rape and murder of a “white woman” by a “black” man. The “white Court” then travels to the “black jungle” to seek revenge. The “Court,” however, is played by “black actors” (or black actors playing black actors) in *White Masks*. Masking

goes beyond individual characters; the performance itself is a mask. The onstage "*divertissement*" diverts the audience from another act taking place beyond the wings, which is reported by Newport News: the Negroes' execution of a traitor and the simultaneous rise to power of a new leader. After this "offstage" drama is disclosed, the "Court"—the Governor, the Judge, the Missionary, the Valet, and the Queen—ceremoniously "die." The Court exits to Hell, stage right, while the Negroes exit stage left, leaving behind Village, who performed the rapist-murderer, and Virtue, a prostitute. The two are in love. Virtue challenges Village to invent new kinds of flirting, love-making, and love proper. The backdrop rises, and all the "Negroes" appear without their masks. Village and Virtue walk toward the "Negroes" and away from the audience as the curtain is drawn.

So to return to that seductive, promising yet withholding dedication page in the American Grove Press edition of *The Blacks*. Before readers encounter any characters or events, we read, under "To Abdallah": One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color? (3). Before Genet can "write a play for an all-black cast," he must ask what it means to be "a black," and what "black" means. Is "black" innate? Is it internal? Is it worn on the skin like a mask? Is it a made-up role? A biological fact? A symbol? A metaphor or metonym? Is one born black? Does one achieve blackness? Is a black actor an actor first, and does he or she enact blackness? Or is he or she black first, before the acting starts? Is the all-black cast to be a group of actors all of whom are black, or a group of black actors whose blackness is all-black, pure, untainted by whiteness? And what is "whiteness"? These questions, and the many more implied by Genet's two simple questions about the color of "a black," precede all racially-marked bodies involved in *The Blacks*: bodies of the playwright, of the actors, of the characters, of the spectators.

The White Gaze and Spectacles of Race

On the page directly following the dedication, Genet "repeat[s]" what he has not yet said: this play is "written . . . by a white man"

and “intended for a white audience” (4). Genet feels that these “white” specifications repeat the “black” specifications of the previous page; the recognition of the “black” race implies that of the “white” race simultaneously, in that one race is not recognized as such except in opposition to another. White producers and white spectatorship seem to be implicit in the idea of a black spectacle. Furthermore, the white audience—or rather, the whiteness of the audience—is as much a player in *The Blacks* as the black(ness of the) actors. So salient is the structure of white spectators gazing at the spectacle of black actors to this production of color, that Genet will go to all lengths to achieve it:

[I]f, which is unlikely, [*The Blacks*] is ever performed before a black audience, then a white person, male or female, should be invited every evening. The organizer of the show should welcome him formally, dress him in ceremonial costume and lead him to his seat, preferably in the front row of the orchestra. The actors will play for him. A spotlight should be focused upon this symbolic white throughout the performance. (4)

The symbolic presence of a white onlooker is more important than the presence of a real white person. (But what is a “real white person”? First of all, what is her or his color?) The staging of the “white gaze” here is a decade-before-the-fact parody of the trial of the “Soledad Brothers.” Speaking of this and other trials of Black men and women, Genet writes, “a minimum of courtesy toward justice would require that the majority of the jury be Black, whether they live in the ghetto or not, but that they had known at least once the humiliation of a white gaze” (“The Black and the Red”). Paralleling feminist film theory’s still inchoate (at the time) concept of the “male gaze,” Genet’s “white gaze” suggests not only a theatrical/judicial audience, but a more thoroughly surveillant white overseer built into the very ideological structure of American culture.

The literal foregrounding and spotlighting of the token white foreshadows a play which foregrounds and spotlights skin color. In doing so, Genet exaggerates the black-white dialectic into absurdity. After he specifies that at least one white spectator must be present, Genet continues: “But what if no white person accepted?”

Then let white masks be distributed to the black spectators as they enter the theater. And if the blacks refuse the masks, then let a dummy be used." Although Genet prefers and anticipates white spectators, he presents people with "black skin, white masks" or white mannequins to be viable substitutes. Much of *The Blacks* suggests that skin is itself a mask in two contradictory senses: it implies a preceding and controlling subject, and it precedes and controls the subject. The actor wears the mask, but the mask also wears the actor. Traditionally, of course, masks have been used in theater not only physically and ritually, but also rhetorically, as tropes of a false surface covering a true identity. Genet's masks at times work this way. Each actor playing a member of the Court is conspicuously black under the mask: "The mask is worn in such a way that the audience sees a black band all around it, and even the actor's kinky hair" (8). The image of white power is created and supported by black characters embodied by black actors (and prescribed by a white writer); whiteness is defined in opposition to blackness. The white skin or white mask covers over its own dependence on blackness (just as, on a social level, European and American monuments rarely acknowledge the black slave labor and disproportionately black minimum wage underclass that build and mop and polish those monuments). But the many masks of *The Blacks* also suggest that a mask need not hide a true identity behind it; instead, the mask may make the underlying identity recognizable to itself, even as it encourages that identity to claim its distinctness from the mask.

Genet's "Negroes" exaggerate the mask-ness of their black skin by making it even blacker. If members of "the Court" create whiteness, "the Negroes" make up their blackness both with soot mixed with saliva and with language games. They apply black makeup to perform before the white Court and the white spectators:

As you see, ladies and gentlemen, just as you have your lilies and roses, so we—in order to serve you—shall use our beautiful, shiny black makeup. It is Mr. Deodatus Village who gathers the smoke-black and Mrs. Felicity Trollop Pardon who thins it out in our saliva. These ladies help her. We embellish ourselves so as to

please you. You are white. And spectators. This evening we shall perform for you. . . . (10)

Even their method of making their makeup is part of the blackface. Their crude charcoal and spit, contrasting with whites' flowers, are organic properties which show the races they encode to be social and theatrical manufactures. Archibald's description of the application of blackface plays off of and ridicules the binarism of white civility vs. black primitivism. Archibald's ridicule goes further: white spectators are pleased by blacks, perhaps want to see blacks only when they are deep-black, soot-black. In fact, the whiteness of the whites is a product of the blacking-up of the blacks. The fact that "you are white" comes only after "the blacks" make themselves contrastingly black. ("The blacks" are likewise not "black" before they make themselves "black.") Throughout the play, as in this speech, almost every reference to blackness is immediately contiguous to a reference to whiteness, and vice versa. The references are tellingly asymmetrical. As whites adorn themselves with flowers, blacks adorn themselves with black makeup. As blacks make themselves black, whites are pleased—and are white. Furthermore, their characterization as white immediately produces their characterization as spectators, as if "spectators" is the next unit along a chain of connotations. As whites are spectators, blacks are performers. . . . And what blacks perform is blackness, which makes whites white. The classificatory system circles in a tautological loop which never centers on reality—or rather, the loop of tautological performance *becomes* reality. The black makeup becomes black skin, that which makes blacks up, and makes them up to be black. This is of course not to deny the organic reality of skin color, but to suggest how skin color becomes perceptible, and to suggest further that *to white audiences* blackness seems more produced than whiteness, the "null" race.

Already blackened onstage once, Village is blackened even further in order to perform the "rape" and "murder" of a "white woman" before "the Court." Archibald directs Village to play blackness itself: "I order you to be black to your very veins. Pump black blood through them. Let Africa circulate in them. Let Negroes negrify themselves" (52). Both scenes of "blacking up" in-

volve the application of both external and internal masks—masks which will then be worn as innate, bodily realities. “Let Negroes negrify themselves” (“Que les Nègres se nègrent,” 66); this self-contradiction and/or tautological order encapsulates and generates a whole complex of questions about race. If “negrify” means “to make (into a) Negro,” then what are “Negroes” before they “negrify themselves”? Can these pre-“Negroes” ever resist “negrifying” themselves—and if so, what are they then? Maybe the “negrification” is unavoidable (as is “caucasification”). Maybe the pre-“Negro” can only be posited in retrospect after the “negrification” has occurred. The construction of the sentence implies that Negroes pre-exist and are agents of their own negrifying. Which comes first, the Negroes or the negrification? Or is such a causal structure even relevant to racial identity?

Village, under Archibald’s direction, will “negrify” himself into stereotype:

Let Negroes negrify themselves. Let them persist to the point of madness in what they’re condemned to be, in their ebony, in their odor, in their yellow eyes, in their cannibal tastes. Let them not be content with eating Whites, but let them cook each other as well. Let them invent recipes for shin-bones, knee-caps, calves, thick lips, everything. Let them invent unknown sauces. Let them invent hiccoughs, belches and farts that’ll give out a deleterious jazz. Let them invent a criminal painting and dancing. Negroes, if they change toward us, let it not be out of indulgence, but terror. (52)

Negroes will “invent” and stage a primitivism and savagery which comes after and is already created by and demanded by whiteness and civility. Invention is offered up as a last-ditch form of agency within a hopelessly prescribed discourse. Archibald’s description plays off the stereotype of primitive jungle-dwellers as creatures of the body prior to social codes. But the seemingly artless bodily primitivism—the black body untainted by civilization—the cannibalism, the odor, hiccoughs, belching, farting, dancing/l are invented in the society of “white” spectatorship according to the highly theatrical codes of colonialism, racism and artistic representation. This notion of Blackness Itself—the ebony black African savage, one with nature, endowed with animal instincts un-

fettered by conscience or reason—s created belatedly by a nostalgic civilization. The (white) Valet finds the Negroes “exquisitely spontaneous. They have a strange beauty. Their flesh is weightier . . .” (19). We know from Village’s comments on his performance just before the Valet’s intrusion that Village is carefully pacing his performance, is modulating when “to speed up or draw out [his] recital and [his] performance” (18), and is adjusting his sighs for the greatest effect. The appearance of spontaneity is craftily cultivated. The Valet, speaking “very affectedly,” makes the unspontaneous (indeed highly prescribed) observation that Negroes are spontaneous. The observation, as well as the pronouncing of it, is affected by a tradition of negrification so pervasive that “blacks” and “whites” can no longer see each other outside of its codes. In other words, colonial discourse is not simply dominating, but hegemonic. It does not simply repress individuals; it enables and creates identities.

Hegemonic structures, further, operate most effectively through the production of desires and pleasures. In this way, the stereotype of “darkness itself” is not always expressly derogatory (at least not “intentionally” derogatory). The black male body of the white cultural imaginary can signify an intense physicality which is erotic and exotic as well as dangerous and terrifying. Eric Lott reads this phenomenon in blackface minstrelsy, whose performers and audiences may have found in blackface an erotic charge:

[The] common white associations of black maleness with the onset of pubescent sexuality indicate that the assumption of dominant codes of masculinity in the United States was (and still is) partly negotiated through an imaginary black interlocutor . . . [W]hite male fantasies of black men undergird the subject positions white men grow up to occupy. This dynamic is, further, one whose results are far from given; its appropriations of “black” masculinity may or may not have racist results. But in thus mediating white men’s relations with other white men, minstrel acts certainly made currency out of the black man himself, that obscure object of exchangeable desire. The stock in trade of the exchange so central to minstrelsy . . . was black culture in the guise of an attractive masculinity. (53)

Technologies of race—combined inextricably with technologies of gender—produce a desired fantasy of “darkness itself.” The desire for imaginary “darkness itself” becomes very difficult to classify as either racist or non-racist.

Furthermore, the stereotype of “darkness itself” is not always propagated by whites (or by blacks in the service of supreme white pleasure). It is also an ideal which “blacks” create for themselves, not necessarily out of “false consciousness,” but perhaps necessarily in deeply ambivalent and problematic forms. The search of contemporary African Americans for their African roots, for example, can be a powerful source of pride, connectedness, and liberation from white ideology—when the Africanness sought is truly other to, not merely the opposite of, “the White Man” or “the Man” (to use the African American synecdoche). But when African primitivism is affected in order to shake off the “American” half of “African American” (a method hopelessly counterproductive to its aim), when African traditions are exoticized and performed as *refutations* or even *negations* of white cultural forms, then the reconstructed Africanism is complicit in the very white mythology it is talking back to. Similarly the performance of savagery in some forms of black militancy, while it threatens individual white people, actually serves and justifies white supremacy.

Felicity performs similar self-Africanizing rituals when she plays a jungle dweller whom the Court must punish for Village’s crime:

Beyond that shattered darkness, which was splintered into millions of Blacks who dropped to the jungle, we were Darkness in person. Not the darkness which is absence of light, but the kindly and terrible Mother who contains light and deeds. (105)

Felicity’s desire to incarnate Mother Africa residing in an unshattered darkness, to be not only dark but “Darkness in person,” to embody an abstract and disembodied essence, demands that she put on a mask, an African mask, not take one off.

Felicity’s proud image of “Darkness in person” is, as she goes on to tell the Queen, created as a negation—almost a photographic negative—of white ideals:

Look, Madam. Here it comes, the darkness you were clamoring for, and her sons as well. They're her escort of crimes. To you, black was the color of priests and undertakers and orphans. But everything is changing. Whatever is gentle and kind and good and tender will be black. Milk will be black, sugar, rice, the sky, doves, hope, will be black. So will the opera to which we shall go, blacks that we are, in black Rolls Royces to hail black kings, to hear brass bands beneath chandeliers of black crystal. . . . (105-06)

While this vision of black supremacy reverses and parodies white supremacist values, it fails to change—indeed it reinforces, albeit paradoxically—the reduction of identity and of heritage to skin colors, the reduction of skin colors to black and white (and the blindness to all those races for whom both of these two categories are inapplicable), the assignment of values to these colors, and the pervasion of these racialized values into all aspects of life. (Not to mention its conservation of the class system.) To say that in a system of black supremacy milk will be black is to reinforce a link between white milk (a nutritive good) and white supremacy. Earlier, Felicity summons up a similar personification of Africa:

Are you there, Africa with the bulging chest and oblong thigh? Sulking Africa, wrought of iron, in the fire, Africa of the millions of royal slaves, deported Africa, drifting continent, are you there? Slowly you vanish, you withdraw into the past, into the tales of castaways, colonial museums, the works of scholars, but I call you back this evening to attend a secret revel. (77)

This embodying of Africa on the one hand offers a liberation from being a display for the white colonialist gaze, but on the other hand can only be accessed through such a gaze. It is a primitivism constructed belatedly, a conception of Africa as a unified whole which black Africans have possessed only in the contrasting presence of white non-Africans.

Cultural Scripts on Rape

Clearly, the play can be characterized as metadrama; but for Genet, the tools and terms of theater proper (scripts, acts and actors, costumes, makeup, productions, gazing spectators) are

far more than metaphors for racial identities; in studying the play, theater criticism and cultural criticism become one. Many characters overtly construct their identities and actions out of remnants of old plots, stock characters, clichés, and scripts lying around. In doing so, they call attention to the role-ness of their roles rather than simply to those roles themselves. Intentionally breaking the illusion of presence created by dramatic realism, Genet's characters present the construction of characterization prior to the actors' embodiments of characters. For example, the conspicuous display of props for "Marie"—the blond wig, carnival mask, pink wool and knitting needles, and white gloves, all of which, in Roger Blin's production, were visible from the start of the play (53-54)—together metonymize the virgin white woman without even her bodily presence. The actor comes to embody a conspicuously prior role. While the presence of her *body* is crucial to the rape-and-murder ritual, this bodily presence is symbolic only, eerily disembodied, the crime impersonal and prescribed.

Some forms of the prescribedness of the various roles and plays within *The Blacks* are obvious, literal, and repeatedly spotlighted: the stilted, dispassionate acting style and the conspicuous writtenness and predominance of the script(s), the artificial framing by the Mozart minuet, the many metadramatic comments. But other forms of prescribedness are less obvious. Genet's overt, metadramatically marked scripts embody less tangible social scripts. Within the first few minutes of the play, the Governor rehearses his death speech by conspicuously holding a physical script in his hand (13). What is being performed here and throughout the play is not, as many critics would have it, mere metadramatic trickery, but complex social theory about the representational foundations of "the real." Later, when Diouf tries to effect a non-violent reconciliation between blacks and whites, Archibald repeats "violently" that Diouf is wasting his time "since our speeches are set down in the script" (29). The establishment of the predominance of scripts—both literal and social—and the recognition of theatrical conventions—enacted both onstage and offstage, consciously and unconsciously—are vital to the rape-

and-murder ritual enacted upon compulsion in the play-within-the-play. The audience sees both the ritual's artifice and its frightening reality, both its prescribedness and its present power, both the subjection of the actors to an always already written script and their agency, their potential *to some extent* to change the script or at least to differ with/from it. Genet's naming of cultural scripts as scripts and myths as myths (or, to cast it in Judith Butler's terms, of the performativity of the racial performance) is what I find so powerful and destabilizing in this play.

The *central myth* is one Eldridge Cleaver figured as an "allegory of black eunuchs" or a "primeval mitosis." Genet poses this myth in the interaction between the blackened Village and the whitened and feminized Diouf. I'm referring to the "interracial" rape-and-murder ritual enacted upon compulsion in the play-within-the-play. Valerie Smith succinctly describes this central myth or prescribed plot as

a cultural narrative in which the rape of a frail white victim by a savage black male must be avenged by the chivalry of her white male protectors. . . . instances of interracial rape constitute sites of struggle between black and white men that allow privileged white men to exercise their property rights over the bodies of white women . . . [while] black women represent the most vulnerable and least visible victims of rape. . . . (Smith 272, 273, 275)

Such cultural narratives and myths have been used to justify lynchings and police beatings of black men. But if these myths empower white men, their appropriation in the spirit of reversal and revenge may empower some black male playwrights and political action groups such as the Black Panthers. A few years after *The Blacks* appeared in New York in 1961,³ a plethora of plays, largely by male African American playwrights, began to recommend and/or re-enact the rape of white women by black men as a symbolic gesture. This symbolic rape ritual, and caustic reversals and deviations of it, in such plays as LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*, *The Slave*, and *The Toilet* and Ed Bullins's *The Taking of Miss Janie*, aimed for a symbolic reversal of the lynchings of black men still being enacted offstage and in the flesh. These KKK-style hate-crimes enacted on black men were often not only ignored but also perpe-

trated by law enforcers (as they still are today—for example in the recent New York police beating and sexual assault of Haitian-born Abner Louima). Sometimes the lynchings involved actual castrations as well as other kinds of dismemberment. At any rate, actual lynchings as well as the implied threat of future lynching effected a symbolic disempowerment, emasculation, and castration of black men. In this context, the need for black men to symbolically reclaim their virility, and to reverse the roles of the metaphor of sado-masochistic sex, makes a kind of “sense.” But by failing to refute abusive heterosexual intercourse as an appropriate metaphor for racial domination, by leaving intact the equations of masculinity with domination and of femininity with submission, rather than interrogating and *historicizing* such equations, these retaliatory plays empower the objectionable sexual metaphor and serve white supremacy as well as white patriarchy. The white woman as symbol of a sublime transcendent white culture is strengthened, an actual white woman is brutally victimized in the transaction between white men and black men, actual white women are further disempowered by their own fears of being raped and their dependence on men for protection, and black women are once again left out, unseen, in this ritual which forces racial conflict into visibility.⁴

Genet, who was later to support the Black Panthers, nevertheless already suggests in *The Blacks* that black men raping white women actually serve and are underwritten (and pre-written) by white patriarchal supremacy. *The Blacks* avers that the rape-and-murder ritual *pleases* the white spectators (ostensibly the Court). Blacks playing out ritual hate rapes and/or murders of white women may very well be venting and ventriloquizing white fantasies, fantasies which spring from and assuage white guilt. The white Court of institutionalized racism in *The Blacks*, however, is not merely pleased by, but depends on, highly visible and visceral forms of black criminality. When it appears that the “catafalque” is fake and contains no corpse, the Judge pleads for any corpse by any means: “one corpse, two, a battalion, a drove of corpses, we’ll pile them on high if that’s what we need to avenge ourselves. But no corpse at all—why that could kill us” (99). All the Judge and

Court “need is two arms, two legs to break, a neck to put into the noose, and [their] justice is satisfied” for “[i]f a man’s a man, a Negro’s a Negro” (109). Village corroborates: “it doesn’t much matter who [plays out the ritual]. As everyone knows, the Whites can hardly distinguish one Negro from another” (53). (Likewise, the Negroes hardly distinguish one white from another; indeed the ritual effects the subordination of all other differences into a dominant black/white racial opposition.) Genet’s characters, true to his anti-realist aesthetic, overtly state motivations which are generally subtextual and unstated. Indeed, the enactors of a racial and racializing ritual may sincerely believe themselves to be acting in good faith according to the laws of an objective universal justice. Concepts of justice often appear to the individuals practicing them (within given specific judicial and penal systems) to be absolutely self-evident and natural. Furthermore, individuals enacting a given ritual may not see it as a ritual at all, and may see none of the symbolic significance to the act which Genet has his characters articulate, often in spite of themselves. In a passage which sounds to my ears uncannily close to the artfully ingenuous tone of a David Duke campaign speech, Genet caricatures the Judge’s belief that he practices a disinterested, apolitical system of justice:

No, one can’t hold all of Africa responsible for the death of a white woman. Nevertheless, there’s no denying the fact that one of you is guilty, and we’ve made the journey for the purpose of bringing him to trial. According to our statutes—naturally. (98)

That “naturally” both signals most sarcastically the Judge’s bad faith and suggests that someone in the position of a Judge may indeed feel himself acting in good faith, according to the laws of nature. Institutionalized racism erases its own institutionalization to appear as nature, as justice. But Genet won’t let such blindness off the hook. In the next few lines he goes in for the kill as he has the Judge say: “He killed out of hatred. Hatred of the color white. That was tantamount to killing our entire race and killing us till doomsday” (98). So much for not holding all of Africa responsible

Eroticization and Exoticization of the Other

Within *The Blacks* (as within the U.S. court system), the Court, "in exchange for a crime . . . bring[s] the criminal pardon and absolution" (102). But the absolution to the Blacks comes not from pardon but from the purity of hate which they play out. This pure hate is crucial to the ritual. Repeatedly Snow and Felicity worry that Village loved the woman he bumped off, or that there was a touch of desire in his hatred. But on the other side of hatred is fascination, the seduction of the forbidden, or, in Spike Lee's term, "jungle fever." The Queen, too, has the fever; at her end, she says "(to Archibald, admiringly): How well you hate! (A pause.) How I have loved! And now, I die—I must confess—choked by my desire for a Big Black Buck" (124). The statement "How well you hate!" seems to bring forth its opposite, "How I have loved!," to fill the void of the pause. Consummate hate provokes awe and desire.⁵

It is here that Genet's anti-racist racism, his anti-colonial neo-colonizing of people of color, becomes most complicated for me. He seems to be speaking through the Queen, to become the ultimate Queen, and to satirize his own masochistic pleasure in white guilt, and masochistic eroticization of mythic black savagery. In a vituperative editorial footnote against *The Blacks*, playwright Ed Bullins wrote in *Black Theatre*, "Jean Genet is a white, self-confessed homosexual with dead, white Western ideas—faggoty ideas about Black Art, Revolution, and people. His empty masochistic activities and platitudes on behalf of the Black Panthers should not confuse Black people. . . . Black people cannot allow white perversion to enter their communities and consciousness. . . . Beware of whites who plead the Black cause" (qtd. in Webb 268-69). Bullins's comment illustrates the tendency, in critiques of Genet, to conflate white guilt with a sadomasochistic homoeroticism. I find that Genet, himself, at times coyly encourages this conflation, and that his play is perhaps at its most raw and honest in its acknowledgment of the masochistic pleasures of white guilt. While I take strong exception to Bullins's homophobic condemnation of Genet's pleasure in so-called alternative sexualities, including homosexuality and masochism, I find his

caution against whites who languish in white guilt—and the pleasure and desire aroused within white guilt—extremely important. Bullins's comment seems to insist that playwriting, and indeed all creative and critical activity, is embodied even when it is written, and that the racialized bodies of writers matter a great deal to the meaning of the writing. *The Blacks* is making a similar argument, I believe, when it shows similar lines—about the beauty of black bodies, for example, or the darkness of Africa—to mean very different things when spoken by white characters than by black characters. In our culture, white guilt—a term I am using for the recognition by whites of the ways they participate in and benefit from white supremacy—is *systemic*, even as we experience it individually. For both Bullins and Genet, white critics of white supremacy must confront their own white guilt; no critique of white supremacy can be honest or productive without the critic's self-recognition of his/her embodied investment in the system. But taking white guilt seriously also has its dangers. Indeed, in a culture of advanced and sophisticated racialism, white guilt is perhaps the most effective mode of race-reification—a mode practiced not so much by the characters within *The Blacks* as by the play itself, and perhaps by white audiences and critics of it. But even as *The Blacks* itself warns "Beware of whites who plead the Black cause," it evokes—and then cruelly revokes—a yearning desire to imagine alternatives to racial polarization, to blame and guilt. Or at least a desire to make that guilt productive.

Village, in protesting too much at the accusations made by Felicity and Snow that he desires the woman he rapes, thereby confesses to his own "jungle fever," a tangled knot of fascination and hatred, of eroticization and rape of the other. A long line of narratives before and after *The Blacks*, from *Othello* to *Native Son* to the media hyper-coverage of the Central Park Jogger incident, bear witness to the phenomenon that, culturally, racial differences are repeatedly sexualized in an image of violent copulation between a black male and white female. Such works and events, like *The Blacks*, suggest that fear of the racial other is inextricable from delight, and that eroticization and exoticization of that other are as complicit in the reproduction of racism (and sexism) as is

hatred of the other. Far from allowing the possibility of "white Negroes" or of white sympathizers of black oppression, *The Blacks* ultimately frustrates all hopes that love can develop out of a mutual recognition of differences which are not oppositions. There can be no innocently beneficent "white Negroes." I would like to think that the eroticism and exoticism of the other, while they may inevitably reproduce gendered racism, also hold within their fantasies the possibility for moving beyond racial roles as they are currently enacted. I would like to think that an attraction to someone of another race and/or ethnicity can stimulate such questions as: What is black or white, or any "race"? What are their (skin) colors, first of all? What do these complexions signify? And *how* do they signify? What are the links between signs and referents of race? Is skin color a fact, a metonym, a metaphor, a mask? I like to think, further, that these questions begin to demystify racial oppositions into more complicated differences, and that one can conceive of differences without resorting ultimately to oppositional structures. *The Blacks*, however, parodies my hopes in the figure of Diouf (possibly a Genet self-parody), who pleads the Blacks for a more harmonious interaction with the whites:

DIOUF. . . . I'd like the ceremony to involve us, not in hatred . . .
THE NEGROES (ironically, and in a dismal voice). . . . but in
love!
DIOUF. If it's possible, ladies and gentlemen.
THE MISSIONARY. . . . to involve you, above all, in your love of
us. (31)

The Missionary's response undercuts Diouf's humanistic idealism by equating harmony between blacks and whites with black submission to white domination.

For Genet, my desire to go from ritual to romance is yet one more absurd romanticization. The interaction between the symbolic black man (Village) and the symbolic white woman ("Diouf") is both a rape and not a rape, both a violation and a consensual, mutually pleasurable seduction. (Indeed *The Blacks* sees the desire for a purely political act of transgression as yet another absurd romanticization. In the world of *The Blacks*, there

can be no interracial romance without rape, no rape without also romance.) The Mask boasts that Village's thighs fascinate "her," offers him rum and invites him into "her" bedroom. But Village then abstracts himself from "a Negro" into "a marketful of slaves, all sticking out their tongues" (74). Pluralizing himself in this image, he figures his act as not just rape, but gang rape. It is even more a gang rape in that Archibald, Bobo and Snow follow Village into the bedroom "in a procession, softly clapping their hands and stamping their feet" (74-75). Village even pauses to make sure the onlookers in the auditorium are following him. And of course we are—and are not; because we do not see the act in the bedroom, it becomes all the more colorful to the mind's eye. The ambiguity of the "rape" ritual as both rape and not-rape (and both murder and not-murder) can be read at least doubly: It blames the female victim for her own rape-victimization by representing her as a seductress who really wanted it anyway; and at the same time, it erases the possibility of any kind of "authentic" interracial love or attraction. Rape and murder, these most personal and impersonal (and political) of crimes, are, Genet suggests, the only see-able interactions between blacks and whites. While "black" and "white" are not ontological absolutes, they have become sociocultural absolutes.

Re-Inventing the Real

Yet if *The Blacks* is skeptical about reconfiguring black-white interactions, it more sanguinely gestures towards alternate scenarios for all-black casts. While the play-within-the-play theatricalizes the role-ness of all racial roles and the predominance of a prior script to which there is no outside-script, the presence of a play ontologically outside the play-within, and of blatant references to an audience and actors ontologically outside of the "outer" play, suggest (but also suspend) the possibility of alternatives to the ritual enacted. Perhaps even more importantly, I think, the play ultimately displaces the question of whether a real exists outside of representation to the question of who has power over representations of the real. The ultimate political power is the power to invent new ontologies, new realities.

If rituals and theatricality seem to engulf every attempt to subvert them, if all relationships between and within races, and indeed the very notion of "race," seem to be always already prescribed and staged, is there any outside-theater? Can we go beyond the Big Black Buck, the white princess, the Sambo, the Queen, the Judge, and the lot? While there is an outside (of sorts) to the individual play *The Blacks*, there may be no outside to theatrical phenomena such as acting, making-up, building a character, learning how to be authentic. So the references to the real lives of characters may ring false. Archibald, for example, tells white viewers that "when we leave this stage, we are involved in your life. I am a cook, this lady is a sewing-maid, this gentleman is a medical student, this gentleman is a curate at St. Anne's . . ." (14). White viewers "know" that the black actors are, in "real life," no more a cook, sewing-maid, medical student, curate, etc. than the catafalque is occupied by a "real" corpse of a white woman. (In fact, as viewers learn, the catafalque is empty.) White viewers of the American production "knew" that James Earl Jones, Roscoe Lee Browne, Louis Gossett, Cicely Tyson, and the rest of the cast were not cooks and sewing ladies playing black actors playing Negro savages, but black actors playing cooks and sewing-maids playing black actors playing Negro savages (in a kind of metastasized A-effect).

Nevertheless, the continuous references to many simultaneous ontological levels suggests that ontology itself is theatrically constituted, that "reality" is recognizable as such only in opposition to "fiction" or "performance." But even if all reality-effects are theatrically constituted, there still remain incontrovertible differences between theatrically-constituted realities and bald-faced lies. In *The Blacks*, Newport News's news of the "off-stage" execution of a Negro traitor provides such an ontological critique of the onstage ritual. All the other "Negroes" wear evening clothes except for Newport News, the emissary from the "real" drama, who is barefooted and wears a woolen sweater. The woolen sweater and even the bare feet are as much costumes bearing encoded meanings as are the evening suits and dresses. The bare feet, for example, signify or represent an intimacy with nature

untainted by civilization: the noble savage, or the savage down-right, once again. Then again (especially if the sweater is a color other than black or white), Newport News's costume breaks out of the exaggerated black-and-white motif which is artificially maintained on so many levels in this play, and to which the "black tie" dress of the other black men visually contribute, albeit satirically. Newport News's costume, then, gestures toward a less artificially black-and-white political struggle. This struggle is over both visual images and the bodies which embody these images—both over the images of white power and over the whites in power. Newport News explains that the blacks aim "not only to corrode and dissolve the idea they'd like us to have of them" but also to "fight them in their actual persons, in their flesh and blood" (112). The other onstage blacks have been "present only for display" (112). The real struggle of blacks against white supremacy entails *both* physical bodies *and* the representation of racial identities.

When Archibald interrogates Newport News on the traitor's guilt, Archibald explains,

[I]t's a matter of judging and probably sentencing and executing a Negro. That's a serious affair. It's no longer a matter of staging a performance. The man we're holding and for whom we're responsible is a real man. He moves, he chews, he coughs, he trembles. In a little while, he'll be killed. . . . it's a matter of living blood, hot, supple, reeking blood, of blood that bleeds. . . . (82)

The "real man" offstage has both more and less physical presence than the onstage characters performed by real actors. The audience "knows" that there is no traitor in the wings who is "really" executed offstage simultaneous to Diouf's symbolic execution onstage, nor is there a revolution geared for execution in the wings. The effect of an absolutely real act devoid of play-acting is a product of play-acting; in this case, "reality" is dramatically constituted. At the same time, however, the on-stage gesture toward an offstage reality within the theater also gestures toward yet another offstage reality outside of the theater, where killings mirror the onstage caricatured rituals but are performed on real people of flesh and hot, supple blood. This real revolution both re-enacts the ritual scripts and roles of racial relations and is no longer only a matter of staging a performance."

Yet other theatrical gestures toward other actual acts occur which do not re-enact the same racially-cast rape-and-murder scenario as that represented onstage. For example we learn that "in real life" Virtue is a black "whore" for "[w]hite customers." Virtue reminds us that "[e]very brothel has its negress" and that "this evening's ceremony will affect [her] far less than the one [she] perform[s] ten times a day" (38). Whereas black women are left out of the onstage ritual in which white women figure as signifiers (or dead metaphors) in the establishment of power relationships between white men and black men, black women "in real life" are exploited and humiliated "ten times a day." The (white, male) customer—(black, female) prostitute relationship, so prevalent offstage and unrepresented onstage as well as in other media (including TV and newspapers), metonymizes colonialist and phallographic relationships invisible to the "white gaze." (Even less visible and/or representable may be intra-racial rape.)

Perhaps even more unrepresentable yet to a white gaze is a *love* between two black people, especially a love that is not prescribed and formulaic. In what some have called uncharacteristic sentimentality, Genet ends the play with the fragile possibility of authentic love between Virtue and Village. The very possibility of this love is extremely threatening to the Court. When Village declares to Virtue: "Our color isn't a wine stain that blotches a face, our face isn't a jackal that devours those it looks at. . . . I'm handsome, you're beautiful, and we love each other!" (pre-wording the "Black is Beautiful" slogans soon to resonate in African American pop counter-culture), the Governor says "We've got to stop them. Right away" (43-44). Their creation of love is neither an escape from racial body-politics nor a liberatory return to the natural body. At first they can conceive of a "love" between them only as the opposite of the white heterosexual "love" typified by the idealization of a woman in white (such as the woman played by Diouf). Archibald tells Village that Negroes and performers can't "know love" (39), therefore Village must hate Virtue. As abstract absolutes, hate and love, fear and delight, black and white, spectacle and spectator, are mutually constitutive. When Village and Virtue want to live outside the "clown

show," Archibald sends the lovers "out" into "the audience." Actually, "Archibald, Bobo, Diouf, Snow and Felicity turn away and, holding their faces in their hands, move off, when suddenly nine or ten white masks suddenly appear about the Court" (41). If Village and Virtue won't play black roles of hatred, if they insist on playing lovers, then, Archibald commands, they must "dis-color [them]selves" and "be spectators"—that is, "if they'll [the white spectators, will] have you" (40). Virtue and Village can never be absolutely alone as two people who love each other. For love is a political matter; it is always under surveillance, if not external then internalized. The white masks which appear, representations of a panopticon-like white gaze, are empty; the white gaze is always present for Virtue and Village, even when individual white onlookers aren't. The Benthemite Panopticon functions even when no one is in the tower; the structure of surveillance remains intact, as Genet, who inhabited a literal Benthemite panopticon in his youth, must have well understood (White 55). Like the mannequin to be seated in the audience if no white spectators attend, the empty white masks are symbolic presences. Masks are generally used by *performers*, not spectators. The onstage appearance of white masks which mirror the offstage audience suggests that white spectatorship is always a player in the performance whether or not it is embodied.

Village and Virtue, however, want to live outside of this performance. They attempt to break out of dead white expressions of love. But to exactly reverse a white mythology into a black one is also to ventriloquize white discourse:

VIRTUE. . . . I was already in bed, with your image. Other girls may guard the image of their beloved in their heart or eyes. Yours was between my teeth. I would bite into it . . .

VILLAGE. In the morning, I would proudly display the marks of your bites. (120)

Are Virtue and Village breaking out of white love clichés? Virtue's violent biting certainly does violence to the ideal of virtuous, lily-white, gentle femininity. But it may perpetuate white myths of black primitivism. Furthermore, the ontological level of this

simultaneous with—the assassination of “the Court.” Are Village and Virtue performing for an onstage audience? If so, is this audience black or white (or outside of this dialectic)? Are they performing for themselves, out of the pleasure of improvisation? Is this performance solely for the white offstage audience? Are Village and Virtue masking themselves? With the removal of white spectators from the stage, can Virtue and Village improvise a way to love which neither invokes ideals of white femininity and masculinity (as well as heterosexuality) nor sets itself in opposition to these ideals? A love which stands outside of binary racial and gender roles? Perhaps a more immediate question is, can a white playwright invent and represent such a relationship? And if so, given a theater with black actors and white spectators, can these spectators *see* such a love, or will their own racial and gender assumptions always engulf the stage?

The Blacks presents powerful jolts to existing body-politics, but is (necessarily) much weaker in presenting alternatives. Genet leaves us not with a vision of black love outside of a white gaze (impossible for him to do so), but only a skeptical hope for such a loving relationship:

VILLAGE. But if I take your hands in mine? If I put my arms around your shoulders—let me—if I hug you?

VIRTUE. All men are like you: they imitate. Can't you invent something else?

VILLAGE. For you I could invent anything: fruits, brighter words, a two-wheeled wheelbarrow, cherries without pits, a bed for three, a needle that doesn't prick. But gestures of love, that's harder . . . still, if you really want me to . . .

VIRTUE. I'll help you. At least, there's one sure thing: you won't be able to wind your fingers in my long golden hair . . .

(The black backdrop rises. All the Negroes—including those who constituted the Court and who are without their masks—are standing about a white-draped catafalque like the one seen at the beginning of the play. Opening measures of the minuet from *Don Giovanni*. Hand in hand, Village and Virtue walk toward them, thus turning their backs to the audience. The curtain is drawn.)

THE END

This closing dialogue may not denaturalize the use of heterosexual coupling as a figure for other political set-ups; rather, it potentially denaturalizes the classic choreography within this gesture of the man putting his arms around the woman. Furthermore, this closing dialogue exploits the traditional figurative use of heterosexual romance to suggest once again the co-imbrication of gender and racial systems of power and to suggest the immensity of the task of reinventing love, given how tightly and surreptitiously old political systems cling to rhetorical figures, and through them to emotions and objects (fruits, words, wheelbarrows, cherries, beds, needles, love). Virtue does not suggest that there is a real (hetero)sexuality prior to false choreography; she does not ask that Village step out of the cliché-ridden choreography to return to real-and-natural love-making movements. She asks, rather, that Village “invent something else.” The solution to imitation is not “truth” but invention—invention which denaturalizes prior truths and indeed the notion of “truth” itself. *Invention* is the appropriate (and appropriating) form of *agency* for a (post)colonial subject whose very subjectivity is realized within colonial discourse. If colonial discourse defines the very categories of authenticity (black and white, male and female, primitive and civilized) within which the (post)colonial subject’s subjectivity is born, then the seizing of agency by the (post)colonial subject must be a discursive event, one which involves not the reclaiming of authenticity but the invention of new identity categories.

Village’s list of inventions suggests a general sense that things can be very different than they are. The specific images that he uses (all steeped in well-worn codes of sexual connotations), however, do not radically depart from the rhetorical figures of the old regime, but rather decenter these figures, most obviously in the pitless cherries. The two-wheeled wheelbarrow visualizes a shifting of the center of gravity and a redistribution of weight. The final two images decenter heterosexuality even within their context in a heterosexual courtship (in which the man brings gifts to the woman). The extra room in “a bed for three” would be superfluous for a man-woman binary coupling. The needle that pricks

is a well-worn cliché for sexual penetration and embodies a phallogentric sex/gender system in which a man leaves a mark on the woman and in which the sexual act involves pain and violence. "Needles that don't prick" might metonymize a love-making without pain and violence, even if this figure does continue to metonymize the sexual acts of men and women in the pointed instrument of the men. These rhetorical figures suggest how deeply entwined sex/gender and race systems are, as well as how resistant they are to change. (As in the "Fuck Racism" T-shirts I recently saw, worn by an all-male black rap group.) Gestures of love may be so deeply naturalized as to be impossible either to purge, alienate, or disempower, even when the physical objects, such as needles, beds for two, and long golden hair are altered.

The promise that Virtue will help Village to re-choreograph love, and their departure hand-in-hand, present an almost Utopian image of mutuality and rebirth; that they turn their backs to the audience suggests, finally, a turn away from a performance before a white audience and toward one before a black audience, or perhaps even toward non-performance (is there such a thing?). The actors playing "the Court" have removed their masks; have they also removed the external and internalized white gazes from their self-presentations? Such a hoped-for performance, it seems, can only occur offstage, outside of a play written by a white man and intended for a white audience.

Perhaps *The Blacks* ultimately fails to imagine racial identities outside of white hegemony and white mythology. Certainly, Genet's *The Blacks* does not present "real" blacks, or even the possibility of "real" blacks, but rather presents, in all its ludicrousness and with relish, white mythologizing and eroticizing of "the Negro," and the mechanisms which encourage "blacks" to perform this role before a white gaze. To paraphrase Gilroy, sometimes to be grossly inauthentic is the best way to be honest. *The Blacks* candidly examines white mythology, and how this mythology may mask its whiteness and its mythological character both to "blacks" and to "whites."

In the end, Jean Genet is no "white Negro" or black man with pink skin (however much you complicate these terms, and however desirable such an identity might seem). Genet speaks "as a

white” playwright. Ultimately, *The Blacks* participates not so much in Black or African American Studies as in Whiteness Studies. Or perhaps, while it may desire to question the boundaries between the two, *The Blacks* succeeds best in prefiguring the way that Black Studies would inevitably, necessarily, lead to Whiteness Studies as both its backlash and progressive complement. In asking “what exactly is a black?” and in examining white fears and resistances to asking, much less answering, such a question honestly, Genet is inevitably asking simultaneously “what is a white?”—and discovering only overdetermined and at the same time tautological answers to this question: a white is someone who plays the role of a white. *The Blacks*’ satiric interrogation of all racial identities is so painfully ambiguous because it is permanently suspended not only in a dialectic of racism and anti-racism, but also and more importantly in a dialectic of both reinforcing the black/white binary and invalidating it. *The Blacks* both asserts that “a black”—or “a white”—is, and simultaneously retorts that “a black”—or “a white”—is not.

Painful ambiguity, though, gave Genet immense pleasure. As a final statement on the play, I want to return to Ed Bullins’s comment that “Jean Genet is a white, self-confessed homosexual with dead, white Western ideas—faggoty ideas about Black Art, Revolution, and people.” Offensive as this comment is, it is insightful in that it suggests that Genet draws fundamentally on a gay sensibility and aesthetic in his treatment of racial relations. Genet is, I feel, drawing on a long tradition of gay camp, which uses radical laughter in questioning oppressive social structures and their imbrications in questions of ontology about gender and sexual identity. While the parallel is inexact, I suggest that Genet’s theatrically self-conscious cross-racial casting in *The Blacks* is in the mode of gay camp’s drag. Queer Theory has revalidated camp as a means of granting creative agency to subjects within a discourse that denies their subjectivity, and does so through the power of pleasure and laughter at the discourse itself. Perhaps what’s most truly productive about *The Blacks* is that it offers a pleasurable (if painful and dangerous) form for blacks and whites in the same audience to take on the toughest issues of

black-white relations through the use of radical laughter. Genet offers white spectators a mode of embracing the radical inauthenticity of race as a way to "get real" about race relations.

Notes

1. In an interview with Hubert Fichte in 1976, Genet stated, "I learned very young that I am not a Frenchman, that I don't belong to the village. . . . Subsequently I could only join all those suppressed colored peoples who revolted against the whites. Against all whites. Perhaps I am a black man who happens to have white or pink skin. I don't know my family" (Fichte 180).

2. Hansberry's 1970 play *Les Blancs* suggests by its very title a sarcastic reversal of *The Blacks*. Hansberry is highly critical of Genet for not representing "real" blacks or real revolt. LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka's 1966 *Great Goodness of Life*, subtitled "A Coon Show" in semi-sarcastic allusion to *The Blacks*' subtitle "A Clown Show," balances a sense of the absurdity of racism with a sense of its injustice, and implies that decentering parodies must be accompanied by militant action within the black-white binarism. Other plays seem to me to be indirect responses to *The Blacks*. See Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*; ntozake shange's *spell #7* ; and George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*.

3. Directed by Gene Frankel, produced by Sidney Bernstein, George Edgar, and André Gregory, with Roscoe Lee Browne, James Earl Jones, Cynthia Belgrave, Louis Gossett, Ethel Aylor, Cicely Tyson, Maya Angelou, and Charles Gordone, St. Mark's Playhouse, New York, May 4, 1961.

4. I would suggest that one of the reasons that the trial of O.J. Simpson for the slayings of Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman captured so much media attention is that it tapped into the very deeply enmeshed cultural myths around which Genet focuses the play-within-the-play. And once again, the legal trial of a black man is also the cultural trial of a racist and sexist society.

5. Critics of Spike Lee's film contest that it upholds the mythology of the Big Black Buck and White Princess, and that it finds curiosity about these myths to be the only reason blacks and whites may be

attracted to each other—in short, that it reduces all interracial love to “jungle fever.” Whether or not this is a just charge in the film’s case, *The Blacks* certainly presents the “jungle fever” mythology to be so imposing as to preclude any other kinds of loving across race.

Works Cited

- Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1968, 1992.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967.
- Fichte, Hubert. “‘I Allow Myself to Revolt’: Jean Genet Interviewed by Hubert Fichte.” *Genet: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Peter Brooks and Joseph Halpern. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979.
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Genet, Jean. “The Black and the Red.” *The Black Panther*. Saturday, September 11, 1971: 14.
- . *The Blacks: A Clown Show*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Grove Press, 1960.
- Gilroy, Paul. “‘. . . to be real’: The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture.” *Let’s Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*. Ed. Catherine Ugwu. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 12-33.
- Hansberry, Lorraine. *Les Blancs. Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*. Ed. Robert Nemiroff. New York: Random House, 1972. 35-188.
- Jones, LeRoi. “Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show.” *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*. Ed. LeRoi Jones. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969. 41-64.
- Kennedy, Adrienne. “Funnyhouse of a Negro.” *In One Act*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988. 1-23.
- shange, ntozake. *spell #7. Three Pieces*. New York: Penguin, 1982. 1-52.
- Smith, Valerie. “Split Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape.” *Conflicts in Feminism*. Ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller. New York: Routledge, 1990. 271-87.

Thompson: "What Exactly Is a Black?": Interrogating the Reality of Race 425

Webb, Richard C. *Jean Genet and his Critics: An Annotated Bibliography, 1943-80*. London: Scarecrow Press, 1982.

White, Edmund. *Genet: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1993.

Wolfe, George C. *The Colored Museum*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.