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Real Blackness is Played Out: Blackness and the Politics of Performance

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Afro-American Studies

by

Brian Curry Stephens

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Real Blackness is Played Out:

Blackness and the Politics of Performance

by

Brian Curry Stephens

Master of Arts in Afro-American Studies

Professor Aisha Finch, Chair

The eighteenth century American popular art-form known as blackface minstrelsy was an often severely reductive or wholly fabricated rendering of black American life. The absence of representational complexity in the related blackface visual iconography was also appalling. Many black cultural workers or "black uplift" advocates countered the discursive violence of blackface minstrelsy through producing "positive" representations of black people. In the post-civil rights era the archetypes of blackface minstrelsy continue to implicitly shape perceptions of black people despite the significant cultural and political gains of the recent past. However, the politics of black uplift and the racist imaginary have been unlikely partners in attempting to

permanently fix the meanings and representations of blackness. Counter to anti-racist

commonsense, I argue that black performances of minstrel iconography might present a sardonic

challenge to both hermeneutic projects. Specifically, this study examines the art of Kara Walker

and the literature of Darius James as two examples of black cultural workers that utilize

performance as an analytic vehicle to challenge the essentialist politics of black uplift and the

racist/racialist imaginary.

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Aisha Finch Chair

Uri McMillan

Arthur Little

2012

Dedicated to

The late Anna Rosalie Ferguson

And

Reverend Norman Dean Copeland

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Acknowledgments

When I was an undergraduate at Humboldt State University Eric Lott came to speak about his pioneering work on the sociology and history of blackface minstrelsy. Lott's work has sometimes been mischaracterized as an apologia for blackface minstrelsy, and the Humboldt Black Student Union accepted this view and showed up to protest. I joined the BSU in solidarity, and do not regret participating in the protest as an act of community bonding. I did eventually take the time to read Eric Lott's work when I began my graduate career, and of course did not anticipate his clearly positive impact on the intellectual contours of my own project. I hope he can appreciate the irony. I want to also thank Manuel Callahan, Christina Accomando, Barbara Curiel, Joseph Dieme, Maxwell Schnurer, and Tim'm West for their mentorship while I was a student at HSU.

Introduction

For the project of racial slavery to be effective it was necessary to ideologically reinforce the status of the New World African as commodity and property. Western literature, art, science, religion, and entertainment, constituted the discursive formation that rationalized African-Diaspora abjectness. However, at least since the eighteenth century, African-Diaspora subjects have sought to redefine and reconstitute our debased image. In other words, representation has consistently been a beleaguered vehicle for achieving first class citizenship for Africans in the New World. The need for an alternative persona to challenge the blackface minstrel image that emerged from American slavery was, and remains, an African-Diaspora vindication imperative.

Interestingly, in a contemporary moment where the logic of American exceptionalism obscures the history of anti-black racism, but where multi-cultural politics of inclusion have made significant headway in expanding American discourse; a post-black political project is emerging. Popularized by black art critic Thelma Golden and artist Glen Ligon, "post-black" should be distinguished from the term "post-racial." Indeed, "Post-racial" discourse is a shrewd attempt by conservative intelligentsia to conceal American racism. On the other hand, "post-

black" acknowledges the continuing significance of anti-black racism and yet, post-black cultural workers wish to be unencumbered by the signifier "black" in determining the type of work, politics, or lifestyle they adopt. Generally, my project is an investigation into the post-black redefinition of blackness. To be sure, my project pays attention to the way race remains a significant organizing principle in America. And yet, a related purpose of this project is to enlarge the category "black" to reflect the enormous experiential diversity of the people the term is often inadequately designated to represent.

And although egregious insult and economic exploitation are the most salient properties of blackface minstrelsy, the intimation that minstrelsy may have alternative meanings, although against dominant black studies readings, is worth considering. Accordingly, my study analyzes the work of two practitioners of a post-black political and cultural aesthetic. The art of Kara Walker and the work of novelist Darius James exhibit the ways in which absurdist black performances of blackface minstrel stereotypes may paradoxically help destabilize hegemonic understandings of blackness. Their artistic productions coincide with the work of other post-black cultural workers who are opposed to all forms of restrictions on their respective humanities.[1] In other words, Kara Walker and Darius James explore concepts of blackness while refusing to be limited by traditional or myopic articulations of "blackness." As such, I argue that their performances of racist iconography can be, though apparently against anti-racist common sense, effective in presenting a sardonic challenge to the essentialism of black uplift and the white racist imaginary.

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[1] For example, comedian Kamau Bell, and music artists Santogold and The Moonblazers

The history of blackface minstrelsy must be discussed in this study because it helps contextualize the work of Kara Walker and Darius James. To be sure, the politics of representation inform many inquiries into African-American experience, and such investigations dutifully include a consideration of blackface minstrelsy. My study is predicated on the deep and abiding significance of the racial archetypes that emerged from the blackface tradition while also respecting the observable moral progress in American social and political culture.

Indeed, beginning in the nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy was the largely defamatory discourse that circulated popular conceptions of American blackness. However, the history of blackface minstrelsy must be reassessed and complicated to better understand an important claim this study seeks to support and further develop: Racial blackness, like everything else within the discursive, is a social practice; a performance. I do not mean to suggest that much of blackface minstrelsy and the interrelated iconography were not shockingly offensive and pernicious. Certainly, black intellectuals of the mid twentieth century have done exemplary work producing counter-hegemonic narratives regarding blackface minstrelsy. However, recent cultural studies scholarship has daringly proposed that blackface minstrelsy was a performance of constructed identity that had a multiplicity of political considerations and consequences.

What I wish to emphasize is that neither the stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy nor the discourse of African-American respectability express an inalterable biological disposition called "blackness". On the other hand, blackface minstrelsy—along with minstrelsy's representational inverse—has long been a performance practice. To be sure, performance can be subtle, generous, crude, malicious, and many other things. The motives and meanings of a performance are as

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numerous and complex as the subjects the performance attempts to account for. In other words, performance is a mediated social practice employed to represent phenomena, however; performance does not constitute phenomena. As such, the exaggerated performances of blackness as performed by the black subjects surveyed in this study work to destabilize the category of "blackness" itself. It would be helpful to contextualize my argument by briefly rehearsing an overview of blackface minstrelsy and the performance legacies of several 20th century predecessors of Kara Walker and Darius James. This will, in part, illustrate the significance of blackface minstrelsy to this study.

After the war of 1812, minstrelsy emerged as a distinct American popular art form that revealed white America's deeply ambivalent relationship with black America. White stage performers—and after the civil war some black performers—applied shoe polish or burnt cork to their faces and produced stage entertainment that mostly presented black Americans as grotesque social inferiors. Concomitantly, white minstrel performers and audiences received genuine aesthetic pleasure from participating in putatively authentic racial entertainment. Minstrel show imagery extended into all aspects of American consumer culture and was the hegemonic representation of African-Americans well into the 20th century. Indeed, the preponderant minstrel motif was the supposed inferiority of African-Americans. Historian Robert Toll writes,

> From the outset, minstrelsy unequivocally branded Negroes as inferiors […] Even sympathetic black characters were cast as inferiors. Minstrels used heavy dialect to portray Negroes as foolish, stupid, and compulsively musical. Minstrel blacks did not have hair, they had "wool"; they were bleating black sheep," and their children were "darky cubs." They had bulging eyeballs, flat wide noses, gaping mouths with long, dangling lower lips, and gigantic feet with elongated, even flapping heels. At times, minstrels even claimed that Negroes had to have their hair filed, not cut; that when blacks got sick and pale, they drank ink to restore their color; and that people could grow "niggas" by planting their toes in the ground. Besides picturing blacks as physically different and inferior, minstrels set them off culturally. Minstrel blacks would rather eat possum and coon than

anything else; after working all day, they could sing and dance all night without rest; and they had different standards of beauty. Male minstrel characters described ideal women with feet so big they "covered up de whole sidewalk" or lips as "large as all out doors," or so large a lover could not kiss them all at once. In every way, minstrels emphasized, blacks fell far short of white standards (67).

In other words, the conception of African-Americans as hopelessly pathetic yet entertaining monstrosities began to coalesce with the minstrel tradition. However, white minstrels frequently interspersed white frontier culture with what they took to be distinctly black cultural traits and traditions. Therefore, the Negroes' unbridgeable "difference" was not as stable as white minstrels claimed it to be. Robert Toll notes, "what was so striking about early minstrelsy was that it seemed unique. Although minstrels strange and exaggerated gestures and makeup account for part of this appearance of distinctiveness, strong evidence exists that as part of their effort to capture the native vitality of America and to establish themselves as authentic delineators of Negroes, white minstrels selectively adapted elements of black as well as white folk culture"(42). Possibly, the simultaneous defamation and perverse celebration of ostensible black culture that was blackface minstrelsy may have also been an unwitting mockery of frontier whiteness. That blackface minstrelsy may have shared some of the cultural tropes of southern and mid-western white folklore and tradition demonstrates how cultural pluralism can complicate traditional black studies analysis of blackface. Indeed, through such intermixture white minstrels unknowingly contradicted the argument that blackface implicitly makes: There are pure racial and cultural essences.

Nevertheless, the amalgamation that Toll describes as partly informing blackface minstrelsy had to be elided in order to rationalize black subordination. In this way, blackface helped construct hegemonic whiteness as surely as it created hegemonic blackness. In other

words, blackface contributed to the elision of European- American ethnic diversity through the representational production of a stable African- American peasantry.

Cultural critic Eric Lott affirms Toll's suggestion that blackface minstrelsy has a somewhat hybridized racial character. However, Lott also suggest that anti-racist scholarship has possibly obscured other potential ancillary meanings of the minstrel form. This intervention will be discussed more fully later in the essay. To be sure, Eric Lott notes the confluence of white folk culture and black folk culture in shaping the popular art of minstrelsy and recognizes this uneven intermingling without losing track of the racist economic exploitation that characterized the form. According to Lott,

> Practices taken as black were occasionally interracial creations whose commodification on white stages attested only to whites' greater access to public distribution (and profit). At the same time, of course, there is no question that the white commodification of black bodies structured all of this activity, or that the cultural forms of the black dispossessed in the United States have been appropriated and circulated as stand-ins for a supposedly national folk tradition. We merely ought to be clear about the enormous complexity of this process, in which partly shared, partly black cultural practices were circulated as authentically black, with whites profiting outright to the extent that they were in fact black, while obstructing the visibility of black performers in any case (39).

To be sure, the minstrel gestural vocabulary that whites invoked as authentic were macabre permutations of black (and arguably white frontier) performance rituals. The coal black, giant lipped, malaproping, wiggling monstrosities of blackface were dehumanizing fabrications and exaggerations, and this particular aspect of the blackface tradition should be thoroughly rejected. But the subsequent variations on the formal performative attributes of minstrelsy that found their way into the cabaret, chittlin' circuit and the hip-hop club should not be uncritically dismissed. Neither should black reconsideration of minstrelsy as something other than racial mockery be viewed as inevitably self-denigrating. Unfortunately, the politics of black uplift

strongly rebukes scholarship that suggests the form was/is unstable enough to generate alternative anti-racist meanings.

Indeed, black uplift ideology is subjected to interrogation in this study because it is invested in an unfruitful binary understanding of historical and lived blackness. Historian Kevin Gaines thoughtfully examines this often-overlooked yet crucial element of black identity formation. Gaines describes black uplift ethos as a specifically African-American attempt to represent black life within a culturally conservative framework. Indeed, Gaines is "interested in how the black intelligentsia sought to promote itself as a "better class" in a society that relentlessly denied black Americans both the material and ideological markers of bourgeois status"(14).

The historical representational erasure of the African-American middle class has caused significant psychic and social harm to black identity. Indeed, the gross mischaracterizations and caricatures of blackness disseminated by blackface minstrelsy simply did not allow that there could be class distinctions within African-America. In fact, blackface minstrelsy frequently ridiculed African-American attempts to claim some of the accoutrements of middle-class identity. According to Gaines, "perhaps the most insidious aspect of minstrelsy, well into the twentieth century, was its mockery of African-Americans aspiration to equal status, its accusation that such aspiration meant a futile desire to be white"(67). The vicious and condescending derision of African-American claims on the intellectual and social heritage of the west only exacerbated tensions within a fragile black social nexus. As a result, middle class blacks—and those that aspired to be middle class—developed a heightened sense of personal decorum that denigrated black cultural productions that might be linked to blackface minstrelsy. Kevin Gaines writes,

The exaltation of domestic virtue, symbolized by home, family, chastity, and respectability all infused with an ethic of religious piety, provided the moral criteria for uplift's cultural aesthetic. Although outraged at white's lucrative expropriations of black culture, virtually all but the most unchurched and bohemian black elites were unable to distinguish the aesthetically ambitious ragtime piano compositions of, for example, Scott Joplin, from coon songs. They would have nothing of the racial content of popular culture, judged guilty by their sinful "low-life" settings and minstrel associations (76).

In other words, the onslaught of racist iconography deployed to rationalize black second-class citizenship prompted "elite" blacks to create arbitrary intra-racial distinctions (sexuality, colorism, religion and education) to distance them from these representations. Gaines argues, "black elites tried to gain recognition of their humanity by ranking themselves at the top of an evolutionary hierarchy within the race based on bourgeois morality. That many African-Americans had internalized these hierarchies testifies to their hegemonic character in a society so deeply racist that few were able to escape its impress"(75). Indeed, uplift ethos attempted to salvage fragile black self-worth by projecting the minstrel stereotypes onto the "immoral" black underclass instead of viewing (most) characterizations as a representational assault on collective black humanity. Moreover, uplift advocates roundly dismissed the possibility that there could be any artistry or alternative meaning within minstrelsy. As such, uplift preoccupation with "proper" comportment elides some of the unique power of black cultural productions that may share some of the formal attributes of blackface minstrelsy. Indeed, Kevin Gains notes "the sheer popularity of black musical comedy (derived from minstrelsy), and the success of some of its stars, such as blackface comedian Bert Williams, challenged uplift's refined aesthetic ideals"(77). Certainly, the righteous indignation of black uplift is commendable and also occasionally necessary because the racist archetypes that inform blackface minstrelsy still have currency in contemporary "post-racial" America. However, black uplift epistemology must not unwittingly participate in essentialism through positing an authentic black subject that is representative vis-à-vis his or her socioeconomic proximity to a particular class or cultural politics.

Stepin Fetchit, Josephine Baker, and Bert Williams demonstrated that blackface minstrelsy could be re-appropriated to challenge white supremacist narratives and black uplift epistemology. Indeed, these figures made use of the degraded role of minstrel stereotypes to caustically question intraracial and interracial hierarchies. Cultural critic Louis Chude-Sokei writes,

> Keeping in mind the still socioeconmic and juridicopolitical fixity of white elite power which functions despite its own fetish for masquerade, when the oppressed play with dominant categories, their seeming liberation through performance may be the product of their sudden access to another role—the role of the master without the full power of the master; this while simultaneously performing the role of the slave without the historical innocence of the pure victim (113).

To put it another way, these performers knew that black appropriation of minstrelsy would be considered taboo by black cultural elites, and I argue that they received a kind of paradoxical freedom from adopting slave archetypes. Thus, their acerbic mockery of white expectations of blackness could be viewed as an act of subversion that paradoxically situates Fetchit, Baker, and Williams within the ongoing black vindication project. And though these performers wore the racial mask for personal benefit they also deceptively helped unsettle the racial meanings white racists and black elites attempted to permanently attach to blackness. What follows is a brief overview (and reconsideration) of their individual performance histories.

Mel Watkin's portrait of infamous early 20th century performer Lincoln Perry, who is more widely known as Stepin Fetchit, offers a candid and informed reading of one of the most misunderstood black performance artists in American history. Perry was a first generation American citizen, his father was from Jamaica and his mother was born in the Bahamas. Watkins shows us an actor who skillfully created a caricature of a habitually confused, slow

witted, yet deft malingerer. The Stepin Fetchit character spoke in a slow incoherent southern

murmur while scratching his head, ostensibly baffled by the intricacies of his surrounding

environment. Indeed, Stepin Fetchit was a stereotyped blackness that Jim Crow America relied

upon to rationalize and enforce racial hierarchy. But, according to Watkins, "Despite the solace

that Fetchit's screen character may have provided the mainstream, the actor's lavish lifestyle,

decidedly uppity attitude with studio executives, and demands for what was previously 'white

only' star treatment forged an ambivalent love-hate relationship with both whites and blacks and

kept him at the center of a media firestorm"(98).

Watkins points to the many ways in which Lincoln Perry's off-screen persona contrasted

sharply with Perry's performance of the clueless black country-bumpkin, Stepin Fetchit. For

example, Lincoln Perry often assumed a sententious and critical pose during his stint on the

editorial staff of influential African-American newspaper, The Chicago Defender. Indeed, the

very fact that Perry had the proclivity and aptitude to write for a news publication such as this

contradicts his stage and screen persona. Nevertheless, in his Defender editorials Perry counseled

his readership and the black professional acting community to behave with a sense of decorum in

public spaces (Watkins, 94). But, Perry was known as "an aggressive, wily, if somewhat moody

and enigmatic hell-raiser who frequently haunted-after hours joints until dawn"(Watkins, 94).

Moreover, Perry's confrontational and obstreperous insistence that white producers, directors,

staff, and co-stars give him the same treatment they reserved for white actors earned him the

reputation of being difficult. A story in the Pittsburgh Courier reported that Fetchit, "is hard to

handle. He has ideas of his own and despite his droll mimicry, has defied producers who attempt

to ridicule his race"(my emphasis, qtd. In Stepin Fetchit). Furthermore, Watkins argues that

contemporary assessments of the Stepin Fetchit persona ignore the formal mastery of Perry's

presentation of reified blackness. Watkins describes Perry as a "master pantomimist" whose "every movement was meticulously controlled"(62). It is certainly true that Perry's Fetchit persona did not emerge from a vacuum. Lincoln confessed that Fetchit "was based on the "rhythm" of regional southern Negro speech and mannerisms" yet, the extremely exaggerated movements of his body and the cadence of his speech were much too stylized to be a complex portrait of an unlettered black southerner (63). As such, the Fetchit persona is a burlesque of white supremacist expectations of blackness.

The central claim that the Watkins biography makes about Lincoln Perry is that he was an extremely talented performer working within the restrictions of a minstrelsy formula, and that he was "far deeper and much more volatile and complicated than the portrait of a shallow, ingratiating buffoon drawn by many historians and critics"(10). Watkins claims, "when the character he created on stage and in pictures is considered as a carefully molded caricature that burlesqued mainstream America's contemptuous vision of Negroes, Perry also emerges as a cagey self-publicist and brilliant comic actor"(10). In other words, Lincoln Perry's story is an excellent example of the performative and indeterminate nature of identity, particularly as it pertains to new understandings of black identity. Perry is one of the earliest 20th century examples of the way in which black performers used parody and irony to signify on the arbitrary racial order. Through the appropriation and re-coding of racial stereotype, Perry expressed an intelligence and autonomy that is often overlooked.

Josephine Baker also employed irony in her performances of blackness. Baker knowingly performed a raw and primitive sensuality supposedly endemic to African and African diaspora peoples. Bennetta Jules-Rosette's study "Josephine Baker: The Icon and the Image" positions Baker as a fully aware and autonomous author of her persona. Indeed, Rosette's study argues

Baker was not an innocent black object at the mercy of European prejudices and perversities. Of course, like Bert Williams and Lincoln Perry, Baker was working within the parameters of the minstrel tradition that eschewed black complexity. Yet, Baker willfully contributed to the stereotypes of black primitivism and animal sexuality and enjoyed such performances. Baker describes opening night of "La Revue negre" in Paris in 1925: "Driven by dark forces I didn't recognize, I improvised, crazed by the music, the overheated theater filled to the bursting point, the scorching eye of the spotlights. Even my teeth and eyes burned with fever. Each time I leaped I seemed to touch the sky and when I regained earth it seemed to be mine alone. I felt intoxicated"(qtd. In Josephine Baker: In Art and Life pg. 48). Such self-reflectivity belies the popular image of Baker as an enduring example of ostensible sensual African savagery. What is more, Baker improvises her routine. As a native of St. Louis, Baker's knowledge of the dance rituals of the boundless ethnic tribes of Africa was as mediated as the "knowledge" of her European audience. Indeed, the "dark forces" impelling her may have been the very expectations of the European imaginary. It seems that Baker took pleasure in playing a character; and possibly pandering to the fantasies of such an imaginary. In other words, it may be a matter of conjecture determining the depth of the satire within her performance, but it is more difficult to dispute that the St. Louis native was playing the role of an African seductress.

Rosette also comments on the progression of Baker's input and control over her image. Jules-Rosette claims that Baker's infamous banana skirt began as an idea inspired by her white management and sketches drawn by Covarrubias, but then quickly evolved into "skirt modifications [that] reflect the evolution of artistic agency within a framework of social control"(50). According to Jules-Rosette, the banana skirt initially closely resembled actual bananas but with Baker's artistic input subsequent variations became more elongated and

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became "a parody of the original skirt and a humorous design innovation"(50). It may be said that Josephine Baker understood that her public presentation of blackness was a charade that she ambivalently performed. Baker, like Perry, was working within the restrictive minstrel tradition but attempting to redefine its conventions through a satiric mockery of white assumptions.

Bert Williams is perhaps the early twentieth century's best example of a black public figure that artfully utilized minstrel trappings for poetic double coding. Indeed, Williams had a more nuanced and poignant relationship with minstrelsy than Lincoln Perry and Josephine Baker. Observers have noted his cunning tribute to the more subtle and humane performance rituals of rural and underclass African-Americans while working within the constraints of blackface. [2]

Camille F. Forbes' biography does an excellent job of historicizing Bert Williams career so that the reader is better able to understand this controversial figure. Williams was born in Nassau and moved to Riverside California with his parents when he was ten years old. The biography recounts William's childhood experiences working as a "barker" (someone who entertainingly delineates the show for potential spectators) for a traveling medicine show. It was during this time that Williams would catch the performing bug.

The biography goes on to describe the fortuitous first meeting of Bert Williams and his talented and business-minded partner George Walker. From there, Williams would eventually gain great fame and personal wealth through his comedic performances that drew from the tradition of minstrelsy. Forbes writes about William's first time in blackface and how he was plagued by stage fright, but then later became comfortable with donning a mask and performing a caricature. Forbes writes: "As he stepped into the role, Bert tucked himself away […] Bert

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[2] See Stephens, Ann Michelle, "The Comic Side of Gender Trouble and Bert Williams' Signature Act." *Feminist Review* 90, 2008.

created a dichotomy between Williams in performance and Williams in life. He further protected

himself, literally hiding himself from the attention and assumptions of an audience that would

believe he was the simple, slow moving, pathetic character he played onstage"(35).

Fascinatingly, Bert Williams would admit that when he re-tried performing in blackface "I began

to find myself"(qtd. In Introducing Bert Williams, 34). Williams was able to see a paradoxical

freedom within the restriction of minstrelsy. Bert Williams never saw his performance as

authentic blackness, but rather as a slyly mocking yet genuinely inspired revision of historically

over-determined blackness. His thinking about his performance of blackness was contingent

upon a separation between himself and the character he was portraying. Forbes writes, "the

character became a protection rather than a prison—a persona behind which the performer could

hide. As Bert tucked away his sensitive, intellectual self, he became another—vastly different—

self"(35). Interestingly, Williams would say about his blackface performance that "it was not

until I was able to see myself as another person that my sense of humor developed"(35).

However, because Bert Williams worked in blackface he received criticism from many black

uplift critics of his day and remains an object of derision in the contemporary moment.[3] Forbes

writes,

> As the time since Williams's death lengthened further, however, the mask he wore began
> to endanger his place in history. Following the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement as
> well as the Black Arts Movement's drive to seek positive and, more importantly,
> politically proactive role models, more than ever Williams became displaced. Blackface,
> a disturbing image, became a reminder of a shameful past that whites and blacks alike
> wished to forget. Increasingly, Williams's genius as he worked against the mask got lost
> as the public only saw his work within it. The artistry of his work—and the manner in
> which he had taken a stereotype and transformed it—took a backseat to the means by
> which he was compelled to present it. The mask that had been both freedom and fixity in
> his own lifetime threatened to imprison him eternally(334).

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[3] Booker T. Washington was a notable exception to the objections of black-uplift critics. See Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*

The same might be said for the prevailing black uplift response to the work of Kara Walker and Darius James. Sadly, Bert Williams, Josephine Baker, and Lincoln Perry were all mostly rebuked in a similar way by a conservative black intelligentsia.   However, there is much to be gained from a careful reconsideration of their complicated art. Part of the subversive appeal of black performances (from Bert Williams to Kara Walker) of stereotype is the implicit contention that blackness is not a stable category. Eric Lott has fruitfully suggested, "Black performance itself, first of all, was precisely "performative," a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world. Black people, that is to say, not only exercised a certain amount of control over such practices but perforce sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators"(39). Indeed, Bert Williams, Stepin Fetchit, and Josephine Baker appeared to understand that their performances did not reflect an ahistorical African essence. The overlooked instability within their performances was a challenge to essentialism; and a cultural antecedent to Kara Walker and Darius James's termination of a stable black or white subject. The performances of the subjects of this study are predicated on the absence of this essential black subject.

Kara Walker and Darius James

Visual artist Kara Walker's sprawling vignettes of antebellum American culture have provoked both condemnation and praise within the art world. A sampling of Walker's oeuvre is a subject of this study because some of Walker's work quite daringly employs minstrel motifs to comment on the ongoing racial debasement of black people in general, and black women in particular. One need only look at the recent examples of the slander directed at young black women by radio disk jockey Don Imus or observe that black female actresses continue to be

nominated for academy awards for performing the roles of maids. And performance is precisely the theoretical tool that Walker exploits in some of her notorious imagery. In fact, scholars of Kara Walker's work have noted the performative dimension of her images. Anne Wagner astutely observes, "Black Skin turns to blackface, in other words: blackface as the hyperbolic performance of scripted identity. Walker, we might say, is "corking up"[…] For Walker this masquerade is a means her art uses to address "blackness" as construct, as an idea or sign asserted rhetorically, in disembodied, almost spectral guise"(95).

Moreover, the lamentably obscure novel *Negrophobia* by Darius James is also a subject of this study because like Kara Walker, Darius James takes the familiar assortment of racist and racial representations of blackness and makes them strange through parodic performance. The figures of *Negrophobia* are obscene distortions of blackness that expose the way racist archetypes have the lingering power to shape contemporary commonsense perceptions of black humanity. It seems that both misunderstood artists are trying to understand the relationship between their experiential selves and the tangled discourse of pathology and desire that have come to be associated with their bodies. Speaking of Walker's work, but easily applying to Darius James's novel, Anne Wagner notes, "Each figure, that is to say, epitomizes and conforms to some generally legible, culturally available formula for black identity…"(95). In other words, these images and the meanings that are attached to them enjoy de-facto circulation even when countenanced with de-jure censure. Therefore, Walker and James knowingly participate in scripted blackness while also slyly highlighting the script's spuriousness. The artists of this study are curiously watching their "Otherness" through bricolage; a recoding and re-contextualizing, and at once playing in the strangeness while attempting to deflate the power of the racial archetypes rooted in the blackface minstrel tradition.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

In his influential essay "Change the Joke, and Slip the Yoke" Ralph Ellison criticizes white engagement with minstrelsy and views the 19th century popular tradition as a violation against black humanity. Ellison states, "It is not at all odd that the black- faced figure of white fun is for Negroes a symbol of everything they rejected in the white man's thinking about race, in themselves and in their own group"(65). Moreover, Ellison perceived white blackface minstrelsy to be a public outlet for whites to consume what was socially anathema. In other words, white performances of ostensible blackness permitted whites to safely consume, experience, and embody "blackness" under the auspices of theatrical spectacle. Ellison continues,

> This mask, this willful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the "thing" in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of the Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask (64).

Ellison suggests that for the white consumer of minstrelsy "the racial identity was unimportant." Blackface did not lose any of its symbolic power for white audiences if the performer was revealed to be black for blackface and black humanity were often indistinguishable for the white spectator. Indeed, whites took the minstrel form—in all of its outrageous absurdity—to be a paragon of racial authenticity.

Ellison is decidedly circumspect about black engagement with minstrel forms and grants African-American performers of blackface more creative and political space. According to Ellison, considerations of black blackface that reduce the practice to either naked opportunism or desperate defense posture; does not reflect the range of motivations behind this sort of engagement. Ellison writes, "the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity […] in short, the motives behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals"(70). Indeed, to limit the potential reasons for black masquerade would be to limit black humanity in general. In other words, Ellison considered black masking an interesting, if overlooked, anti-racist strategy and an activity pourus enough to accommodate a variety of motives.

While Ellison viewed white blackface minstrelsy as strictly slanderous, and conversely saw African-American blackface minstrelsy (and masking) as a potential mode of contestation, cultural critic Eric Lott suggests that "audiences involved in early minstrelsy were not universally derisive of African-Americans or their culture, and that there was a range of responses to the minstrel show which points to an instability or contradiction in the form itself"(3). In other words, according to Lott, whites that performed in blackface did not always do so in order to ridicule black people. A kind of troubling flattery was allegedly an element of some incipient antebellum minstrel shows. To be sure, Lott is clearly critical of the racism that informed the minstrel show stating, "the black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male— Other at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them"(13). However, Lott also laments that black vindication analysis has

understandably omitted the possibility of white blackface minstrelsy as something other than

racial mockery. Lott writes,

> In their indispensable focus on minstrelsy's oppressive dimension, revisionist accounts leave perfectly intact the cultural dualism—wholly authentic or wholly hegemonic?—that I want to complicate. Outmoded antiracist strategies of reversal and inversion, of simply turning the polarities of racist discourse around, must give way to a wider recognition of the complexities of white subject formation and subjectivity, and of the multiple determinations that make race such a complex lived social reality (24).

Lott's suggestion that white performances of blackface minstrelsy were not always demeaning is

undoubtedly controversial. However, Lott's insistence that "blackness, then, is not innate but

produced, a cultural construction" coincides with a Cultural Studies tradition that has become

critical of essentialism (25). It seems Lott is attempting to unfix the strict meanings of white

identity using black interventions into cultural studies. Lott respectfully acknowledges the

importance of traditional black vindication condemnation of blackface. However, Lott

persuasively employs an anti-essentialist discourse to complicate white engagement with

minstrelsy.

Louis Chude-Sokei follows Eric Lott by suggesting that the meanings of blackface

minstrelsy need to be re-examined, but like Ellison stops short of granting white performances of

blackface the same range of possible meanings that black blackface performance is (sometimes)

afforded. Sokei uses early twentieth century Caribbean blackface performer Bert Williams as his

central cultural example of the productive implications of black blackface performance. Sokei

arguably expands Ellison's consideration of the subversive appeal of black masking through

Sokei's engagement with the life and work of Williams. If minstrelsy was a dubious American art

form dominated by whites, Sokei argues Williams and his partner George Walker, " knew that

'the Negro' being performed and constructed via white blackface minstrelsy was an explicitly

racist and politically unnatural fiction and so they engaged the form primarily to erase the fiction

from within."(6). In other words, African-American and Caribbean American re-appropriation of

the minstrel form was a mode of expression intended to mock white supremacist narratives of the

apparently innate qualities of black people.

However, the subversive aspects of black performances of blackface are continually

overlooked by the logic of black uplift rhetoric. Sokei considers the power of this cultural

policing and the subsequent erasure of William's subversive politics from black public memory.

Sokei notes, that in the immediate aftermath of Williams death, a black cultural politics of uplift

and respectability (which would extend into the militancy of the Black Arts Movement)

understandably viewed minstrelsy of any form as a scourge. To counter the pervasive and ugly

racism that informed popular representations of blackness "minstrelsy needed to be rejected in

toto so as to clear the way for a more self-motivated if not more 'authentic' cultural politics that

would increasingly focus on 'representation' as a primary site of anti-racist engagement"

(Sokei,7). This black politics of reinvention and renovation is so firmly embedded in African-

American culture that any reconsideration of black performance styles that ironically make use

of caricature continues to be viewed as irresponsible at best, and a form of racial betrayal at

worst. Sokei writes,

> much of the ambivalence or antipathy toward Bert Williams and a specifically black
> minstrelsy has not changed even in today's intellectual and cultural climate. Despite a
> thriving industry of research, theorizing, and commentary, on white minstrelsy and the
> complex discourses of race, gender, and performativity, the presence and possibilities of
> blacks in blackface are generally undocumented. In fact, black minstrelsy is most often
> dismissed as either pathological or an unfortunate and pitiable sideline in the transition
> from a more passive political era into a much more self-assertive and militant one (7).

In other words, black blackface performances can be a mode of political contestation despite the

reasonable objections of black uplift commentators. The black uplift insistence that

representations of blackness follow a "positive" and formulaic conceptual map encounters a strong and necessary challenge through the work of the artist surveyed in this study.

CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical Framework

Anti-Essentialism

Sokei's theorizing on the subversive potential of blackface minstrelsy and his contention that such engagement should be viewed, as "racial masquerade" is the point of departure for my study of Kara Walker and Darius James. However, Sokei's fascinating treatise on Bert Williams, and indeed, the existence of post-black scholarship, would be unimaginable without the work of cultural studies pioneer Stuart Hall.

Stuart Hall's groundbreaking work on racial identity is the theoretical fulcrum of this study. To be sure, Stuart Hall has been the most convincing intellectual advocate for ending essentialist conceptions of blackness. Essentialism—the idea that identity is apriori determined and eternally fixed—is viewed as an empirical fact by racialists/racists and anti-racists alike. However, in his influential essay "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" Hall argues,

> The essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and de-historicizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic. The moment the 'signifier' black is torn from it's historical, cultural, and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct. In addition, as always happens when we naturalize historical categories (think about gender and sexuality), we fix that

signifier outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention. And once it is fixed, we are tempted to use 'black' as sufficient in itself to guarantee the progressive character of the politics we fight under the banner-as if we don't have any other politics to argue about except whether something's black or not. We are tempted to display the signifier as a device which can purify the impure, bring the straying brothers and sisters who don't know what they ought to be doing in line, and police the boundaries—which are of course political, symbolic and positional boundaries—as if they were genetic (472)."

Indeed, Stuart Hall is making at least two theoretical interventions. First, Hall thinks that black expressions of essentialism are dubious because they accept the terms of a racialists/racists (essentialist) epistemic frame. In other words, when blacks explain racial differences as biologically determined they unwittingly participate in a schema that rationalizes social stratification as a logical consequence of these supposedly biologically determined differences. For example, black acceptance of musicality as a positive and specifically "black" genetic predisposition might correspond with white acceptance of such a quality as apriori determined and thus indicative of congenital irrationality. The problem with this epistemology is that such a putative genetic difference may be employed to explain complex social phenomena like black joblessness. Conversely, white acceptance of rationality as the genetic property of "whiteness" may work to explain and reinforce discursive white power. To put it crudely, essentialism, within this example, claims blacks naturally keep a beat better than white people, but then again whites are naturally able to turn a profit on black "rhythm" because of white people's genetic access to rationality. Stuart Hall's cultural politics are devoted to debunking this unfortunately commonsense understanding of identity and the power that it supports.

Second, Hall is critical of a black essentialism because such an epistemic framework implies that there is an authentic way to be black, and "brothers and sisters" that depart from this authenticity should be shamed into enacting the appropriate racial identity. Such essentialism obscures the profound complexity of black expressive and experiential diversity. In other words,

black essentialist politics punishes and excludes "straying" blacks from a tenuous community whose only abiding commonality is the encounter with anti-black racism.

Literary and cultural critic E. Patrick Johnson follows Stuart Hall's call for an end to the essential black subject. However, Johnson explicitly incorporates the angle of performance into his analysis and therefore expands Hall's insights. Indeed, viewing "blackness" as a social construction and a performance is very important for understanding Walker and James' post-civil rights cultural politics.

In the final chapter of his insightful book *Appropriating Blackness*; Johnson recounts an experience of teaching his students about the constructed and performative nature of blackness. to a diverse group of undergraduate students. Students were assigned to perform scenes from selected African-American texts. A white female student Johnson calls "Sally" was viewed with derision by the black female students because she dated black men. Sally decided to perform a character from an Alice Walker short story called "Everyday Use", and assumed the identity of a southern black mother for the performance. Johnson says Sally, "characterized the mother's speech by affecting what she believed to be a black southern dialect, speaking slowly, deliberately"(237). The black students in the class did not respond favorably to Sally's performance. They accused her of being stereotypical and inauthentic. Johnson understood the discomfort of the black students and was of course extremely mindful of the tradition of white mockery of supposed black identity through minstrelsy and other forms of American entertainment. Johnson felt these black reactions were reasonable but he also wanted to explore the contradictions and complexities of black student response to Sally's performance. (237-238). When the black students complained about Sally's performance—complaints that were colored by Sally's personal life—Johnson asked the black members of the class how they would give a

more authentic performance. Initially, the black students were silent which revealed something that Johnson thoughtfully explains:

> The students' accusations of racist stereotyping, while legitimate, also obscured the more circuitous avenues they took to secure their own black authenticity. In other words, many of the students who criticized Sally's performance on the grounds of inauthenticity had no clearer frame of reference for the mother character than did Sally. As products of middle-to upper-class homes, it is most likely that these kids had never experienced killing hogs, working outside all day, or, for that matter, speaking with a southern accent, given that none of these students were raised in the South. Nonetheless, these behaviors, at least in some of their minds, are linked to authentic blackness. Sally's performance, then, drew attention to their own "distance" from the very black authenticity they accused her of not having (239).

Indeed, the black students in the class were relying on the same stereotyped blackness to measure Sally's "inauthentic" performance. The possibility that the black students could not have done a better job of credibly assuming the identity of a poor black southern mother demonstrates how blackness lives as an abstract and disembodied signifier in the cultural consciousness of most Americans irrespective of race and class. The black student's idea that there is some "real" way to be black is expressed in their commitment to "downplay their middle-and upper-class status by wearing poor-fitting or well-worn clothes, dreading their hair or wearing it in "natural" hairstyles"(238). Johnson observes that his middle class black students "had bought into the rhetoric espoused by Langston Hughes and other middle-class blacks whose angst about their own status encouraged them to associate authentic blackness with the working class"(240). In other words, Johnson's black students probably wear blackness as self-consciously and awkwardly as Sally, his white student. Nevertheless, those that are able to perform reified blackness convincingly use it as capital that excludes blacks with alternative self-presentations from making a claim on mediated cultural resources. As Johnson argues, "Because the concept of blackness has no essence, 'black authenticity' is overdetermined—contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of its production[…] authenticity, then is yet another trope

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manipulated for cultural capital"(3). What should be considered from Johnson's field experience as a teacher is how identity is often misrepresented as fixed, when it would be more profitable to view identity as fluid and performative.

Indeed, philosopher Judith Butler has written extensively on the subject of performativity and is important to this study for her bold re-organization of identity categories. To be sure, Butler's focus has been on the relationship between gender and performance yet Butler's work is relevant to this study because race, like gender, may also be an identity category that is performed. As such, Butler argues that the term woman does not adequately encompass the range of persons who may or may not fit such a category. Moreover, the philosopher contends that 'woman' has not been able to address the divergences that exist between persons that may find themselves labeled as women. Moreover, feminist politics of representation have utilized the word to conceal disagreements within the politicized community in order to foster the appearance of unity.

What is more important for my purpose is not whether sex is a cultural construction, but Butler's idea that the familiar tropes associated with the term woman cannot fully accommodate the differences of the persons the term is employed to represent, nor can these tropes satisfactorily speak to a "common" female experience. One of the key claims of Butler's classic Gender Trouble is that gender is performative. Butler describes gender performance as

> acts, gestures, and desire [that] produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality (185).

In other words, the sex of a person cannot successfully or fully explain the cause of gendered behavior. Gender is therefore a social performance, not a biological essence. The same may be said about the racialized body. The attributes of blackness that appear to be inherently produced are socially contingent responses and revisions (acts and gestures) that cannot be permanently linked to a mythical internal or geographical space. In other words, the "essence" of blackness is an act that any person can play out; persuasively, unconvincingly, or pejoratively depending on audience, context, skill, and expectations. Performances of gender and race are not coterminous per se, but Butler's insights can tell us a good deal about the way identity is externally imposed.

Performance Studies

Richard Schechner is perhaps the most widely known theorist within the field of Performance Studies, and his insights laid some of the groundwork for further discussion about blackness and performance. Schechner is most closely associated with the shift from the traditional conception of Performance Studies (dance, theater) to the more expansive and theoretical approach, which is popular within the academy. Schechner envisions Performance Studies as interdisciplinary; incorporating "studies specialists not only in theater and dance departments but in history, English, women's studies, communications, anthropology, sociology, area studies, popular culture, and ethnomusicology departments"(9). Schechner believes in a "broad spectrum approach—treating performative behavior, not just the performing arts, as a subject for serious scholarly study"(8). Schechner's approach is an intriguing way to conceive of

performance and it seems to be aligned with the way in which Stuart Hall discusses representation.

Hall, drawing on the work of semiotics innovator Saussure, argues, "Language […] operates as a representational system. In language, we use signs and symbols—whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects—to stand for and represent to other people our concepts"[4]. If, like Schechner suggests, we view performance in the broadest and most inclusive sense, then it is not difficult to understand performance as language (signs and symbols) and language as performance. Therefore, performance cannot be limited to the stage, and does not always have to be an articulation of the body. Performance can be textual. Moreover, performance can be viewed as a representation of phenomena that may or may not exist in the empirical world. However, in his essay "New Ethnicities" Stuart Hall reminds us "that events, relations, structures, do have conditions of existence and real effects outside the sphere of the discursive, but that it is only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning"(224). In other words, performances refer to a material world but "performance" cannot be understood outside of language. Specifically, discourse is where performance becomes intelligible. This is because performance—like much of everything else—is immersed in power relations and the performer and audience are part of what Foucault calls a discursive formation. Performance, when understood as a language, is a way to exchange and produce meaning within the discursive, however, performance, like representation, cannot be reduced to one particular meaning. As tightly controlled as a performance may be, there are slippages that reveal its

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[4] See *"Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices", Sage Publications & Open University 1997*

socially generative meaning, and keep the notion of performance available to interpretive

contestation. This makes performance a necessarily indeterminate social practice.

As such, ironic performances of blackness are deliberate fabrications and exaggerations

of lived black experience. And yet because such presentations can be misinterpreted as authentic,

black cultural protectionists are reluctant to find any redeeming political or artistic value in such

satirical performances. This is unfortunate because as I demonstrate 'black' blackface

performances may be potentially subversive challenges to racist iconography. Butler's

contention that gender is something that is dramatized, both "intentional and performative" and

Schechner's view that performance is registered in the hues of the "imaginative" may cause a

certain degree of anxiety for those critiquing such displays. However, this anxiety will be most

strongly felt for those members of the sub-altern that adhere to performance as only mimetic and

race (and gender) as something crudely biological. My study offers a renewed sensitivity to the

employment of caricature as tool of subversion through its double-voiced styling. Black intra-

racial engagement with parodic performance references W.E.B. Du Bois's double-consciousness

as "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"(9). Performance Studies

scholar Henry Bial writes,

> Double Consciousness meant that African-American performers were caught between
> loyalty to the black community and the compromises necessary to succeed in a white
> dominated society. To speak simultaneously to white and black audiences, African-
> American minstrels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century often used parody
> and "signifying" as encoded forms of resistance, frequently co-opting racist terms and
> stereotypes in the service of a race conscious agenda. The white audience laughed at the
> Negro's antics without realizing that whites were the butt of the joke (17).

In other words, black awareness of the white gaze does not necessarily have to be a psychological hindrance for the black subject. As Bial demonstrates there is a certain power that can be derived from double-consciousness, particularly if a black subject understands identity as situational and performative. Indeed, the adoption of this version of identity produces the opportunity for caustic critiques of essentialism.

Daphne Brooks is a performance studies scholar that has attentively explored the nuances of this tricky political position. Brooks' *Bodies in Dissent* discusses the way in which "odd" performances of blackness worked to liberate black subjects from racist and limiting conceptions of blackness in late 19th and early 20th century United States and Great Britain. Brooks uses the term "Afro-alienation" to describe these liberating performances of blackness. These are performances that are not intended to be representational, but instead make use of the surreal, the peculiar, and the abstract as ways to challenge dominant conceptions of blackness. Considering the black performers of her study, including Bert Williams and celebrated cakewalk dancer Aida Overton Walker, Brooks writes, "rather than depending on conventional realist methods to convey the humanity and value of black subjectivity, Afro-alienation opens up a field where black cultural producers might perform narratives of black culture that resist narrow constraints of realist representation"(6).

Brooks seems to be arguing that irrespective of ethnic identity those that strictly adhere to realist representational practices may attempt to restrict the possibilities of black performance. Brooks suggests that figures like Bert Williams and Aida Overton Walker, "channeled varying forms of alienation and dissonant identity politics into his or her performances and, in doing so, stylized alternative forms of cultural expression that cut against the grain of conventional social and political ideologies […] they seized on the potential of unruly performance to articulate

heterogeneous identities"(4). In other words, Afro-alienation performances of blackness are critical of what Foucault refers to as the gaze that "hierarchizies, homogenizes, excludes"(183). Brooks' conception of black performance strategy objects to any cultural politics that would try to impede and or dismiss black "alienating" cultural expressions that resist convention.

Performance Studies scholar Jayna Brown also sees the value of performances of blackness that undermine and play with "appropriate" expectations of blackness. Specifically, Brown's study *Babylon Girls* explores black female performance strategy as dancers on the American variety stage in the early 20th century and the way these performances re-contextualize stereotypes of black femininity. Brown asserts, "Their artistic efforts were multi-signifying practices of dissemblance. Their performances must be understood as a "double operation," exploiting the spurious racialisms of their time as well as enabling a space for satirical comment on the absurdity of such depictions"(6). Thus, Brown argues that race is a performance, a construction with multiple meanings depending on context and Brown's subjects manipulated audience expectation for what Ralph Ellison would call "the sheer joy of the joke," and perhaps also for the illicit pleasure that emanates from the movement of a racial body frequently reduced to "body."

Moreover, like Brown's intellectual peer Paul Gilroy, Brown is interested in black Atlantic mobility and accepts that:

> Expressive forms are inherently promiscuous, absorbing everything in their wake. They are contaminated from the minute they hit the air and they refuse to be contained. With regard to dance and other expressive forms, gazing backward for originary moments of inception is a misguided project; with gestural vocabularies there are no beginnings, only continuations (7).

In other words, Brown calls attention to the permeable nature of identity by emphasizing the way in which supposedly fixed expressions rapidly disseminate, and thus trouble pronouncements of

biological fixity and geographical encasement. As Brooks and Brown both suggest, performance can be a pliable bridge to other worlds but no one has discursive control of either the performance or the subject/object the performance signifies. Indeed, the messiness of cross-racial and cross-cultural exchange makes much of black performative and expressive culture a sly undermining of the supposed stability of identity. Some black performance forms consciously mock those "who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners to know his identity"(Ellison,55). Brown reinforces this insight when she argues, "black farce and satire, often smuggled in behind the wide white mouth, shine light on the fissures in hegemonic claims, revealing the ways hierarchies breed their own instabilities"(5).

Camp

The white racist imaginary has been a traditional target of black "signifying." In his essay "The Spectacle of the Other" Stuart Hall notes, "slaves often deliberately parodied their master's behavior by their exaggerated imitations, laughing at white folks behind their backs and 'sending them up.' The practice—called signifying—is now recognized as a well-established part of the black vernacular literary tradition"(244). But not only have blacks signified by parodying the mannerisms of the master class, blacks have historically parodied hegemonic representations of blackness. Indeed, black awareness of the white gaze and the many meanings assigned to blackness can be paralyzing for the black subject. However, as seen in the analysis of Daphne Brooks and Jayna Brown, carefully crafted over-the-top performance of the mythic persona may be a way for the socially vulnerable to shift the relations of power. In other words, the black

performing subject, particularly in a post-civil rights milieu, is able to disclose white and black investment in race as a biological truth rather than a socially located historical practice. However, are these kinds of black performances only signifying? Could they also be considered part of the frequently white and queer identified discourse of "camp"?

Camp is a term that resists easy definition. Indeed, some of the political power of camp is derived from a deliberate instability within the category. Nevertheless, for the purpose of having a discussion, "camp" shall be defined in this study as a queer informed social practice that utilizes theatrical absurdity to undermine hegemonic social categories. Camp came into prominence through Susan Sontag's influential 1964 essay "Notes on Camp." Sontag suggests, "the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization"(54). Artifice and "its metaphor of life as theater" underscore the performative nature of camp, and camp is often considered to be those that are wildly theatrical (Sontag, 64). Sontag then goes on to describe camp as "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical"(54).

Some contemporary critics of camp have rightly decried Sontag's description of camp as apolitical. These critics view Sontag's essay as the beginning of a mainstreaming of camp that ignored the category's history within the queer community. To be fair, Sontag does extend credit to queer creative energy in the development of the category of camp asserting, "homosexuals by and large constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp"(64). However, Sontag importantly contends, "while it's not true that camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap. Not all liberals are Jews, but Jews have shown a peculiar affinity for liberal and reformist causes. So, not all homosexuals have Camp taste"(64). Sontag, however, is incorrect about the supposed apolitical quality of camp. Camp as a vehicle for queer

social visibility, and camp, more generally, as a tool to challenge the received meanings of any number of hegemonic social categories makes camp political.

Indeed, cultural critic Moe Meyers has been perhaps the most outspoken critic of Sontag's influential assessment of camp. Meyers places much of the blame for the hetero appropriation of the apparently queer identified hermeneutic on Sontag's benchmark essay. Meyers finds the trend disconcerting in part because Sontag only passively addresses camp's queer dimension and history. Nevertheless, Meyer's rather propietorial consideration of camp is ill considered. Meyers argues, "Because the process of camp has for its purpose the production of queer social visibility, the same performative gestures executed independently of queer self-reflexivity are unavoidably transformed and no longer qualify as Camp"(5). However, even Meyers suggest that queer—and possibly by extension camp—is not always synonymous with LGBT community and politics. According to Meyers "What 'queer' signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts"(3). Many types of marginalized identities can and have expressed the power of "queerness" by adopting such a self-conception.

Indeed, "camp" as a theoretical tool employed by a queer subjectivity may be analogous to "Signifying" as a theoretical tool utilized by a racially black subjectivity. Henry Louis Gates argues that the political dimension of signifying "at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning"(47). Queer identified camp aims to question and dismantle heterosexist meaning(s) using similar strategic devices. According to Henry Louis Gates, "Signifyin(g), of course, is a principle of language use and is not in any way the exclusive province of black

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people, although black people named the term and invented its rituals"(90). In fact, signifying and camp do not belong to any one group. Certainly, signifyings' use of parody, pastiche, and performance make it very similar to camp, which utilizes the same qualities in different contexts yet for remarkably similar goals. For example, Fabio Cleto is interested in camp's political utility as an inversion of hegemonic meaning. Cleto values, "the broader, complex relation of camp with power and its social devices, its hierarchy of dominant and deviant, which made it a survivalist strategy (working through a reinscription of stigma) for the subordinated, the excluded, the unnatural, the fake or, in Andrew Ross's phrase, "history's waste"(8). Blacks, along with gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities, have also been considered part of 'history's waste', and of course this stigma of dispensability has not been entirely erased.

Nevertheless, there has been scant conversation on the progressive political potential of black cultural workers appropriating and redeploying racist iconography as an example of camp. And yet the overlap between queer camp and black signifying is too striking to ignore. Pamela Robertson writes, "Acknowledging the links between camp's sexual politics and race discourse may enable us to consider non-queer forms of racial masquerade—such as the over the top sensationalist stereotyping of Blaxpoitation, or the Auntie Tom performances of Mae West's maids—as forms of camp; to rethink what it means for camp to be a 'Stepin Fetchit' or 'Auntie Tom' and whether Stepin Fetchit and Auntie Tom were camp all along"(407). Indeed, racial camp and queer camp are both highly theatrical performances of putatively stable categories (race and gender). However, racial camp and queer camp challenge the presumed stability of these categories through the very idea that they are performances. For example, when camp is employed by gay men to mock the supposed stability of gender Richard Dyer writes,

> What camp can do is to demystify the images and world-view of art and the media. We are encouraged by schooling to be very solemn in the presence of art; and we are tempted by film and television to be drawn into the worlds they present as if they were real. Camp can make us see that what art and the media give us are not the Truth or Reality but fabrications, particular ways of talking about the world, particular understandings and feelings of the way life is … Camp, by drawing attention to the artifices employed by artists, can constantly remind us that what we are seeing is only a view of life. This doesn't stop us enjoying it, but it does stop us believing what we are shown to readily (110).

In other words, camp is a performance strategy that uncloaks identity. Gay men that "camp it up" demonstrate the disruptive and healing energy that challenges heterosexist ways of doing masculinity. Racial camping, although not co-extensive with the camp that Dyer describes, can possibly accomplish a similar feat by disrobing hegemonic black identity as a dubious fiction or flexible social practice rather than enduring essence. What is more, camp seems like an innovative, and *possibly* even a fun way, to continue the crucial project of challenging anti-black racism.

Accordingly, I suggest that racial camp can be seen as an aesthetic alternative for black artists seeking to enjoy the protean character of identity, even as the white gaze and uplift ethos attempts to circumscribe black meaning making. Susan Gubar, perhaps the first to use the term "racial camp", describes it as "the survival of stigmatized minorities by means of an outlandish theatricalizing of race"(26). The following chapters extend Gubar's definition by suggesting racial camp, in addition to being an outlandish theatricalizing of race, is also an oppositional practice that is related to the larger "post-black" cultural politics; at once deeply interested in questions of blackness but not restricted by traditional (uplift) articulations of blackness. Moreover, what distinguishes racial camp from the black expressive form known as signifying is that racial camp not only repeats and revises imposed social meaning through mimicry, parody, and double meaning; racial camp also powerfully exceeds the borders of complex representation

to the point of outré absurdity. In other words, though signifying and racial camp are close relatives, they are not interchangeable for racial camp is more inclined to utilize the bizarre, grotesque, and the abject. Furthermore, it must be understood that merely because a cultural production is visibly "black" and also campy does not automatically make it racial camp. Instead, racial camp is an oppositional practice employed to critique the racist imaginary and black uplift.

CHAPTER THREE

To be in Kara Walker's Queer Camp

African-American artist Kara Walker's large-scale silhouette depictions of slavery and colonial narratives have provoked outrage and encomiums within the art-world since the mid-nineties. This is in part because Walker's silhouettes are not the comforting or didactic historical dramas of her talented forbearers such as Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglass. Nor is her artwork a continuation of the politicized sloganeering of the Black Arts Movement. Walker makes satirical, ambiguous and angry post-modern art that is uninterested in grand-narratives, or in positing a heroic and innocent black subject. Rather, Walker makes use of the painful white supremacist minstrel caricatures popularized in the nineteenth century and places them in perverse, macabre, and often sexually charged scenarios with white masters and mistresses. Moreover, Walker takes characters and themes from popular fiction and American folklore of the previous two centuries and troubles the iconic narratives through a hyperbolic yet censorious

visual reimagining. For example, characters like Breer rabbit and novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are caustically re-conceptualized to disrupt the conservative meanings of such narratives.

Through a close reading of Kara Walker's first silhouette installment—the cheekily titled "Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart,"—I will explain how Walker's use of racial camp undermines both post-racial and restrictive black uplift discourse. According to cultural critic Susan Gubar, "Racial camp makes a mockery of romantic nationalism, religious grandiosity and folk sentimentalism" and these are all defining characteristics of Walker's *Gone* (27). And although black uplift discourse and white supremacist narratives seem to be in direct confrontation over the meaning of blackness, the two interpretive frameworks actually do the same harmful work: they are both invested in essentialist understandings of blackness. In other words, both theoretical projects attempt to circumscribe the possibilities of blackness and Walker's artwork fiercely resists the stifling hermeneutics of both political projects.

The piece that launched Kara Walker into art world notoriety Kara Walker's *Gone*, is a bravura first work from the then 24-year-old artist and is an excellent example of racial camp. The events depicted in her installation presumably unfold under the moonlit tranquility of woodlands near or at an antebellum southern plantation. At the far left are silhouettes of a young apparently white couple; a woman and a man, on the verge of a romantic kiss. They both look to be dressed in the fashionable clothing of 19th century Southern American aristocrats. There is a pair of legs other than the woman's own underneath her dress. The man is wearing a sword that—possibly inadvertently, possibly intentionally—extends out to nearly poke a pre-pubescent black girl's bottom. The black child that is in danger of being poked is crouched and holding a dead swan by its neck. The black child is showing the swan to a sitting black woman that may or

may not be disapprovingly gesticulating to the child. Behind the supine black woman's back is the severed head of a man with Caucasian features. The woman appears to be sitting in a pool of the man's blood. Beyond this woman and the severed head are a young white boy and a young black girl on a hilltop. The young girl is on her knees performing oral sex on the young boy as he extends his hands to the sky toward a thin figure floating in the air. His/her wildly cartoonish inflated penis propels the figure. On the ground and to the right a thin black woman joyously lifts her leg to discharge two infants from her uterus. To the right of the woman giving birth is a woman, ostensibly black, with handkerchief adorning her head. She is holding a broom and being carried by a man in formal attire; his head cannot be seen because it is buried underneath her skirt. Needless to say, this is a very charged scene that, like many camp artifacts, is designed to provoke.

Herman Gray is among the astute critics that have recognized the subversive parody that informs Walker's artistic technique. Gray writes,

> On the terrain of stereotypes […] black expressive forms operate using the tactical maneuvers of irreverence and spectacle—inhabiting and combining the most shocking, outrageous, and carnivalesque. These forms and tactics through which they are deployed produce for many a dangerous cultural politics, one that teeters on the divide between the pleasures and fun of subversion and the real politics of control, regulation, and reproduction. The political and aesthetic burden of proof faced by black artists and culture workers who draw on such tactics is decided in the end on the basis of self-reflexivity, location, and level of engagement. The artist is neither neutral nor absent, but always present and engaged. Indeed, for many artists (and the audience) this politics of self reflection and irony is part of the fun, the point, if you will (5).

Gray is arguing that Kara Walker's art is very aware of the historical misrepresentation of blackness and moreover her art is too pointedly bizarre and impudent for it to be misconstrued as a factual remembrance of antebellum culture. Indeed, Gray speaks of a black cultural politics interested in manipulating the racial stereotypes that emerged from this American historical

period in irreverent and outlandish fashion, and indeed this is a strong element of the "fun" of camp. Gray seems to understand that Walker is using this type of cultural strategy and recognizes it as being informed by an awareness of the self as largely constructed and performative. And although Gray admits that such manipulation risks reinforcing hegemonic narratives of blackness, he argues that black post-modern artistic practice has reached a level of sophistication in which such an aesthetic style may be responsibly employed. However, this artistic and political practice should engender at least a modicum of anxiety in a world where a person's racial identity still affects everything from life chances to self-image. Cultural critic Robert Storr addresses this deeply felt anxiety and the way it relates to Walker's work:

> In life, as distinct from grammar, double negatives do not produce positives, and further denaturing the denatured, defacing the defaced, disfiguring the disfigured is a dangerous game that does not by itself banish contempt and in clumsy hands may even aggravate it. Which is why those most likely to be offended have good reason to be wary of compound caricature, and why those who trifle with such material have no excuses when they carelessly add injury to insult—especially at a time such as the present when tongue-in-cheek forms of neo-racism are given the green light by "well meaning" public figures who pretend that in post-civil-rights-movement America, the virulence of old-style racism is totally behind us. However, in adroit hands, such as Walker's, deforming the deformed and burlesquing the burlesque can reveal the rhetoric of "humorous" condescension and contempt for what it is and make its toxic absurdity obvious beyond alibis; it can inflate a joke until it explodes not like a raisin in the sun but like a booby-trapped cigar in the mug of a blackfaced white comedian (67).

In other words, Walker's decision to lampoon racist perceptions of black people through outlandish performance should be alarming; however, the elegant dexterity of Walker's engagement with such loaded material should be acknowledged. Indeed, Walker's work enables the spectator to recognize the lingering power of racist/racialist mythos in American life. Storr suggest a lesser artist interested in re-coding stereotypes would not be able to convey the dark comedy, terror, shame, and ambivalence of a shared past that reverberates into the present so-called post-racial moment.

However, this study suggests that Walker's work isn't merely parodic or satirical. The "carnivalesque" and the undermining of power relations through self-reflexivity and performance that Herman Gray observes in Kara Walker's work are also part of the political progressiveness of camp. Fabio Cleto writes,

It has in fact been possible to trace a convergence between the camp scene and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, for the two share hierarchy inversion, mocking paradoxicality, sexual punning and innuendos, and—most significantly—a complex and multilayered power relationship between dominant and the subordinate (or deviant) and finally the whole problem of how far a 'licensed' release can effectively be transgressive or subversive). Just like the carnivalesque scene, while inverting the principle of normality, camp invokes it, for camp presupposes the 'straight' sense that has to be crossed, twisted, queered (Cleto, 32).

One dimension of Cleto's "straight" sense is the increasingly common sense acceptance of racism as something that the nation has moved beyond. Walker "crosses" this assumption through a re-examination of the "multilayered power relationship between dominant and the subordinate." The master/slave hierarchy created in antebellum America that continues to impact the present is the most prominent and consistent power relationship explored in Kara Walker's work. Moreover, Kara Walker queers the straight (black uplift) approach to challenging and exposing this lingering imbalance of power. Indeed, *Gone* and much of Walker's oeuvre moves beyond mere parody and satire because of the highly stylized and absurdly artificial imagery; it's "carnivalesque". Indeed, my study emphasizes the aspects of camp within Walker's *Gone* that are interested in the "mocking parodoxicality", "hierarchy inversion" and "sexual punning" that Cleto describes as strong elements of camp. However, in this chapter I argue that in Kara Walker's *Gone* such qualities should be viewed as a critique of the racist and black uplift perspectives that would take Walker's imagery at face value.

It would be helpful to begin by briefly rehearsing black uplift rejection of Kara Walker's art. Black uplift discourse represents the "straight" and favored method within black studies of

confronting questions of blackness. In relation to the work of Kara Walker, the Black Arts

Movement legend Betye Saar has been the most visible advocate of the black uplift artistic

position. Saar, who is roughly thirty years Walker's senior, initiated a well recorded letter writing

campaign aimed at stopping Kara Walker's work from being exhibited in museums across

America. Saar claimed that Walker was providing the white art-world with stereotypical images

of blacks in order to feed their lascivious appetites. Saar complained, "I have nothing against

Kara except that I think she is young and foolish" and also claimed that Walker's work was "very

sexist and derogatory"(4, qtd. In "Extreme Times Call For Extreme Heroes").

In addition, artist Howardena Pindell edited a book *Kara Walker No, Kara Walker Yes*

that collects some of the writing of Kara Walker's African-American dissenters. In 2009 Pindell

also organized a public event that allowed these critics to speak out. The tone of this event was

mostly accusatory. Artist Theodore Harris accused Kara Walker of portraying slaves as,

"enthusiastically submissive." Harris also denounced Walker's art for allegedly "mocking artists

in the emergency cultural coalition who in an ironic twist made it possible for Kara Walker to

exhibit her work in museums." Harris's estimation of Walker's work is that it is "pro-mammy

art" and "a move to degrade the potency of revolutionary art." Journalist Gloria Dulan-Wilson

claimed Walker has "deep psychological problems […] and for all of us that have been

traumatized we say to you sweetie seek professional help." Wilson is convinced of Walker's

sickness and wonders "what can we do to help the sister get whole again? Because she is not

whole."

The logic of black uplift discourse informs these statements. Much of the criticism that is

coming from African-American artists and observers of Walker's ascendancy in the

predominantly white art-world is based on the expectation that black representations need to be

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unambiguously positive. Such logic contends that black artistic representations should be noble, heroic, revolutionary, and uplifting as part of a struggle against anti-black racism. This respectable blackness struggles against anti-black racism with the assortment of cultural tropes that have helped blackness achieve a kind of moral cogency and authority in the face of erasure and debasement. Moreover, black uplift aims to speak to an imagined collective that everywhere experiences such struggle in the same way. Indeed, the art that these critics demand is art that carefully selects the appropriate responses to that shared experience. Walker's critics demonstrate there is a real investment in the idea that black people, with a few minor differences, are generally the same and those that depart from a cultural politics that is not obviously about uplift, revolution, or even religion need to be monitored, corrected, and even excluded. In his essay "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" Stuart Hall calls this the "first moment" of black cultural politics when, "the 'black experience', as a singular unifying framework […] became hegemonic over other ethnic/racial identities"(443). Here Stuart Hall is critiquing the dominance of a spurious monolithic blackness that pretends to speak for every person within the imagined community. However, Walker's artwork upends the authority of black cultural protectionists who either implicitly or explicitly defend the sustaining sameness of the so-called black experience. Walker's decision to make work that is intentionally disturbing and sometimes morally ambiguous is a decision to advance a project that shares the intellectual objective of what Stuart Hall calls the "new" or "second moment" of black cultural politics. It is a moment that ushers in what Hall describes as the end of the innocent and essential black subject. Stuart Hall writes,

> Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged
> headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political
> argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct
> black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the

bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction. Namely, either that all black people are good or indeed that all black people are the same (444).

Thus, Walker's visual art is a reflection and continuation of this new cultural politics that is possible when we question binaries and grand narratives as the only legitimate way of articulating the complexities of being black. Indeed, Kara Walker's very personal way of deconstructing what is arbitrarily designated "collective black experience" is perhaps a visual compliment to Stuart Hall's critical intervention.

Moreover, black and white traditionalists are actually unlikely bed partners in their insistence that Walker's work is in the words of white art critic Donald Kuspit "an ideological failure." Donald Kuspit's assessment of Walker's work is perhaps emblematic of the new post-racial politics for it represents white resistance to being considered inextricably linked to American racial mythology. Donald Kuspit, like Saar, contends that "the means she [Walker] uses to subvert the representation of blacks seems to reify it"(2). In other words, Kuspit understands that Walker's images are intended to be satirical but he does not consider the practice successful. However, unlike Saar, Kuspit doesn't view Walker's images as a betrayal to black people. Indeed, Kuspit places Walker's images in the polemicist tradition of African-American agitprop. In other words, Kuspit doesn't notice anything different from Walker's art and the aggressively preachy nationalism that characterized the black arts movement. One can hear the trace of irritation in Kuspit's voice as he describes Walker's work:

The installation as a whole is a kind of pastiche spectacle—a theater of the absurd, in which the spectator, standing in the center, is assaulted by a buckshot of texts and overwhelmed by the big screen-size image. The change in scale, medium, and import is disorienting, adding to the sense

of victimization: one is forced to identify with blacks—forced into their position […] the installation as a whole is moralizing, and meant to instruct us in the social truth by provoking painful emotions. But I have to say I experienced no pity and terror—no catharsis despite the stressful drama—nor did I feel particularly enlightened (2).

Unlike Walker's African-American detractors, Kuspit views her images as tiresomely didactic. In Kuspit's words Walker's work promotes a, "regressive, obsolete ideology" and is "intellectually inadequate"(2). That is to say, Walker's art manipulates white viewers into feeling unfairly implicated in the historical trauma of slavery and racism. Kuspit seems to be suggesting that Walker is working in the tradition of hackneyed black protest art, "that is hardly as subversive as it pretends to be"(2). Kuspit is "stressed" by the images but he doesn't seem to view himself as part of the historical narrative of American racism. However, Kara Walker's work is a powerful critique of ideologues like Donald Kuspit and the previously mentioned uplift commentators.

Post-Black is Queer

In one of Walker's text cards, she uses her biting wit to point out the performative nature of black identity. But just beneath the wit is the anguish she feels from being misunderstood by her most strident black critics. She writes,

> "My issues with the proverbial Ancestors goes something like this: Thanks for the gestures, the songs and the secret tongues—Thanks for the performance—the great spectacle of Blackness is re-presented so art fully by you (Y'all) but I sit, and try to paint, to use massa's visual language to carry on that project. And you Don't give me Shit…or rather, you give me shit and leave me stumbling to the light with little more than an easel and some canvas and wad of red clay" [5]

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[5] *Narratives of a Negress* pg. 47

Indeed, through calling attention to the performative nature of blackness Walker places a wedge between her and black uplift cultural workers invested in an essential blackness that is always "good" and "respectable." In fact, Walker's rejection of authenticity and respectability are hallmarks of camp, and perhaps place her within a tradition of queer intellectuals.

In this study queer is employed to describe a self-conception that is fluid, performative, situational, and unconventional. Queer is certainly not used to denigrate the community the term has been traditionally linked with. Rather, the term is employed in the spirit of empowerment that informs the LGBT intervention challenging homophobic and heterosexist abuse/exclusion. This study adopts the positive and subversive interpretation of queer to comment on the potential of "queerness" to enrich lived identity. Indeed, Kara Walker's engagement with instability and ambiguity might be considered queer because it is an affirmation of the sustaining power of non-conventional ways of being in the face of public censure and erasure. Some of Walker's work revels in qualities (ambiguity, instability) frequently challenged by the bourgeois demand for clarity and cultural permanence. In this way, queer is a source of strength both in an LGBT context and also in some of Kara Walker's complicated art.

In fact, contemporary articulations of queer are remarkably similar to post- black understandings of self. The term "post-black" is intended to express an end to essentialist conceptions of blackness. Art critic Thelma Golden describes post-black as being "characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."[6] Walker's work may fall under the umbrella of "post-black' but additionally it may be considered "queer" and "camp" for its social departure from conventional conceptions of identity that promote unity and

[6] Golden, Thelma. "Free Style: The Studio Museum in Harlem." Exhibit Catalog

stability. According to Cleto, "camp and queer, in fact, share in their clandestine, substantial inauthenticity, and their unstable and elusive status, a common investment in 'hetero-doxia' and 'para- doxia' as puzzling, questioning deviations from (and of) the straightness of orthodoxy…"(16). Indeed, Arlene Keizer writes, "Walker's primary audience is herself and, by extension, others who perceive their own subject positions as similarly complex and are willing to acknowledge the contradictions built into multiple subjectivity and limitations, in terms of art and lived experience, of traditional constructions of identity"(1669). What this means is that Kara Walker's work may be considered queer and camp not only within the discourse of LGBT theorizing. Rather, the definition of queer may be extended to include many persons and cultural productions that are maligned by mainstream culture for being what Cleto describes as "strange', slippery and undecidable, 'troubling' because failing ontological and hermeneutical categories, and condemnable for being so"(14). Again, Fabio Cleto argues that perhaps, "queer should be taken as a term operative with different ends at different times and for different groups, not all of them having the same access to that nexus of strategy and label"(15). As such, though camp's cultural richness is strongly informed by its LGBT theorists, fans, and practitioners, it is not the exclusive intellectual property of the LGBT community any more than signifying is the exclusive intellectual property of black people. Kara Walker's *Gone* is both a camp and queer object because it seems to value indeterminacy and has a brassy and absurdist way of communicating the paradoxical power of the marginal.

According to Andrew Ross "Unlike the traditional intellectual, whose function is to legitimize the cultural power of a ruling group, or the organic intellectual, who promotes the interests of a rising class, the marginal (or camp) intellectual expresses his impotence as the dominated fraction of a ruling bloc in order to remain there (i.e., as a non threatening presence)

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while he distances himself from the conventional morality and taste of the growing middle class (my emphasis 317). To be sure, Kara Walker does distance herself from the "conventional morality and taste of the growing middle class," but it is not her intention to remain marginal or politically impotent. Walker is instead employing a camp sensibility to do what Christopher Isherwood has described as "expressing what is basically serious […] in terms of fun and artifice and elegance." Perhaps fun is not the word that should be conjoined to Walker's art however; there is complicated pleasure that may be derived from Walker's gallows humor. Of course such "fun" doesn't diminish the profound social significance of Walker's treatment of slavery. I suggest Walker's use of camp (in some of her work) presents an overlooked and misunderstood entry point into the continuously significant consequences of American slavery. Indeed, it is worth repeating that her work does not trivialize the shame and horror of slavery, but rather offers a possibly new and admittedly controversial way of talking about slavery.

Before any further discussion of Kara Walker's work as an example of racial camp, it must be clarified that black artists have been historically marginalized within the largely white art world. Indeed, Walker may be viewed as a token within the European mainstream art world. For a black female artist to have the kind of success that Walker has had over the past two decades makes Walker understandably leery of being "a pet project." But part of what makes much of Walker's material camp—and it is worth clarifying that her work is not reducible to camp, it is far too complex for it to be shrilly considered "one thing"—is her comfort with marginalia. To be sure, this comfort is not to be understood as acceptance. However, partly because of the disapprobation from traditional segments of the black population concerning her work "Walker remains a woman at the fringes, one who must find her own community"(Duboise –Shaw,123). And as Mark Booth suggests, "all camp people are to be found in the margins of

society, and the richest vein of camp is generally to be found in the margins of the margins"(76). Indeed, camp artists are marginal because dominant culture still questions the integrity and legitimacy of queer identity. What is more, queer cultural productions—alternately mocked and commoditized—thrive on the periphery. Similarly, Walker's art expresses counterintuitive power through comically inflating her racial and gendered marginality.

It may be interesting to note that Kara Walker's *Gone* and some of her other work, adopts the same marginal aesthetic sensibility as openly gay cult film legend John Waters. Waters is known for his grotesque, outlandish gender bending, and sexually provocative films that continue to gleefully polarize the film community. Like Waters, Kara Walker's queerness and marginality is informed by what Gwendolyn Du bois Shaw describes as an engagement with, "the grotesque, the carnivalesque, the transgressive, and the abject"(14). But Waters and Walker do not simply engage with the transgressive for the sake of apolitical frivolity. John Waters has stated, "The look, and the fact that these were brave actors who couldn't go out in real life when we made these movies […] these people were brave. They gave up their lives to make these movies. These movies were done like a political action, almost like a cell who made an action against taste"(1). Indeed, Waters and Walker make political interventions through rebelling against the debased identities foisted on them from majoritarian culture. However, Walker wants the viewer to feel the racial shame of such debasement. According to Walker, "Shame is, I think the most interesting state because it's so transgressive, so pervasive. It can occupy all your other, more familiar states: happiness, anger, rage, fear… It's interesting to put that out on the table, to elicit feelings of shame from others—"Come and join me in my shame!" It is a little peculiar" (Bomb the Root, 3). Mark Booth claims "camp is embarrassment without cowardice" and Walker's willingness to articulate the shame of the past and the present in such shocking ways is

at least as brave as the work of camp auteur John Waters (81). Indeed, Walker's work attempts to disgust, challenge, and arguably amuse spectators—through a sustained questioning of propriety and convention—is a highly risky and potentially alienating endeavor. The vociferous criticism of Bettye Saar and Howardina Pindell illustrate this point.

As a result of Walker's queerness, her art is generally perceived as out of sync with vindication aims. However, Toni Morrison's brilliant literary criticism *Playing in the Dark* may be a useful entry point for discussing the manner in which Kara Walkers' work sardonically challenges the white racist imaginary. Morrison provides an extended discussion on the "Africanist presence" within early American literature. Indeed, Morrison interrogates the ways in which white American writers like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe used blackness as a trope to articulate their fears, desires, and anxieties about the new world. Blackness was a sort of rubric employed to demarcate the unknown from what was presumed to be knowable: the European Immigrant Self. However, there was a creeping fear that the stability of whiteness was illusive. Morrison writes, "the ways in which artists—and the societies that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a "blank darkness" to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies, is a major theme in American literature"(38). In other words, the use of black bodies to represent complicated and potentially dangerous emotions and situations (a blank darkness) is a pronounced feature of not only early American literature but also the construction of white American identity. Morrison suggests it is through the debasement of black bodies that whiteness is corralled into stability.

Kara Walker, like Toni Morrison, recognizes the imaginative dimension that is at play in constructions of blackness and how white supremacists perceptions utilize blackness to create immutable categories of racial distinction. Moreover, embodied blackness becomes a physical space for white racialists/racists to explore anti-social impulses because of the debased position of blackness within the imaginative framework. Toni Morrison writes,

Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the

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dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American (38).

Morrison's insights are important to this discussion because the imaginative is exactly what Kara Walker performs within a racial camp aesthetic. Indeed, Walker's work coincides with Morrisson's critique of the white imaginary representing as it does the site where white viewers continue to project their fears and desires. Specifically, Walker's characters burlesque white supremacist imaginings of black people. In other words, the logic that supports Kara Walker's art is very similar to Toni Morrison's exploration of the white racial imaginary. For instance, in public conversation Walker has stated some of the motives and intentions of her art:

> The question was how could I turn this feeling that I had become a blank space into which people projected their fantasies into something concrete? What about the possibility that I might reflect those fantasies back into the projector's unsuspecting eyes, and cause them to want to face the shame of (our) collective psyche? And how could I do it politely and seductively? Would it be possible to fill in the silences in Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl? Would it be possible to give structure to the lives of the cardboard Nigger Wenches who populate pornographic racial fiction? The Tawny Negress of white supremacist lore? What would I project into the imagination of a coon-show Rastus or the "wicked" pickaninny Topsy? (emphasis mine 3).

Walker discusses blackness in the white imaginative frame as a "blank space" while Morrison very similarly describes this kind of blackness as a "blank darkness." Walker's aim is not to reify these distortions, but to encourage conversation on the American psyche through the very difficult and painful re-articulations of blackness that happen when she assumes the identity of characters like "Nigger Wench." Kara Walker's project, if it could be said to have a definable goal, is to confront American slavery and expose how it continues to shape contemporary understandings of blackness. By performing absurdist caricatures of blackness, caricacatures that I suggest be examined through a racial camp lens, Walker caustically undermines colorblind political logic that studiously ignores the many racist meanings we still imbue to blackness.

However, many supporters of Walker's work understand that the racist imaginary her figures refer to is real whether a viewer cares to admit it or not. These critics understand that Walker's figures are deliberately distorted phantasms of blackness that are meant to show the viewer how the language of racist iconography is shared across ethnic, gendered, and racial borders. Scholar of the visual representation of Jews, Sander Gilman writes,

> But, of course, the imaginary is where the real risk, the real danger, lies. Making concrete our cultural vocabulary of frightening images in art, as Goya knew well, means ripping them from our private dreams and displaying them for all to see. And for all to recognize how much we share in them. Racism and its imaginary are no exception—and are not merely a problem for the "white" racist (whether Irish or Jewish or Korean). In our world of images, we all share in the subliminal horrors of imagining individuals as different […] Walker's images are indeed sexualized, confrontational, and racist, because the entire Western world shares these images in our waking dreams and nightmares (31).

In other words, these racist images are too deeply embedded in western history to not have a lingering power on people of all different ethnic, racial, sexual, class, and gendered backgrounds.

Walker's Camp Humor

Indeed, previous critics have noted the parody within Walker's work. As Sander Gilman observes, "parody can do more than merely highlight; it can provide an alternative reading of those persistent cultural images that float about in our unconscious and that, for good or for ill, as subject or as object, constitute our construction of our world"(30). However, no critic has ventured to describe Walker's work as an example of camp. Fabio Cleto argues, "camp … can be queered, reoriented, and transformed into a powerful progressive tool, once we point out its reactionary implications"(35). The "reactionary" that Cleto speaks about would be the uncritical hetero adoption of camp aesthetics for decidedly conservative ends. However, Walker's work is a clear departure from anything remotely conservative. As previously mentioned Walker's work

may be read as a "queered" progressive intervention in the struggle to contain the meaning of blackness.

Nevertheless, Walker's detractors do not respond favorably to the arguably "camp" humor that is only one element that makes her art fascinating to some observers. Phillip Vergne has noted, "Walker's sin is her humor, which she uses to tear holes in our cognitive understanding of the world (24). When an interviewer asked Walker if her humor was tragic she replied,

> [Its] Giddy humor. Giddy. I think I described this kind of turbulence that drives most of the work, and it's a turbulence that's not unlike melodrama, or the kind of dredging up of every feeling one could possibly have about a situation which is all about feeling. And it's difficult not to laugh off that behavior, that sense of being overloaded, out of control, unable to contain even the horror of being able to think about something that you know you shouldn't be thinking about, or that you know isn't going to resolve itself by talking about it. It might night resolve by talking about it. It might not resolve itself by enacting laws about it. Or writing about it. And it's that feeling of needing to make this offering as a form of truthtelling, no matter how awful it is then, ugh you know, being flabbergasted at even having to do that! Why should that even have to be done? And then sometimes the work is just ridiculous and silly and weird"(PBS interview).

Walker feels she must deflate the power of the white racist imaginary in her own decidedly outrageous fashion. And in Kara Walker's *Gone* her eccentric humor is often addressing secondary and multiple meanings inside the image. According to Susan Sontag,

> the camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice"(64).

In fact, the entire setting of *Gone* is artificial. The double sense that Sontag speaks about is an integral part of *Gone's* argument. *Gone* uses racial camp to expose white southern artifice through illustrating the secondary meanings that the romance conceals.

The Myth of Southern Purity

Gone with the Wind is a well-known American cultural object/phenomenon that allows Walker to reintroduce and deflate southern plantation mythology. Philip Core described camp as "the lie that tells the truth" and Kara Walker's *Gone* uses the lie of racist iconography to expose the truth of antebellum moral corruption. Indeed, the lie that is foremost in Walker's acerbic radar is the lie of southern romantic purity. In *Gone with the Wind* this lie is magnified for weepy melodramatic affect. The man and the woman that begin the scene on the far left might be Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler from the novel *Gone with the Wind*. But more importantly they are figures of white southern power, prestige, and glamour.

Initial criticisms of both the novel and film mostly avoided any sustained inquiry into the glorification of plantation culture. Literary critic Malcolm Cowley was one of the few dissenting voices that criticized *Gone with Wind's* apologia for racial slavery. Cowley writes, "*Gone with the Wind* is an encyclopedia of the plantation legend…false in part and silly in part and vicious in its general effect on southern life today"(211). On the other hand, as recently as 1983 critic Richard Harwell wrote without any apparent irony, "If it does not fit the history of the Civil War as revisionists since her time have seen it, Margaret Mitchell's view does fit the view that was the Southern view for many years and itself has a validity as history. To put it another way, it is that great desideratum of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an unbiased history of the war from the Southern point of view"(xvii). Moreover, Harwell doesn't include a critical African-American perspective of *Gone with the Wind* in his compilation of criticism on the text and the film. Such a glaring omission can only express his accord with Mitchell's project of plantation glorification and a very troubling disregard for the descendants of slaves. In this way, *Gone with the Wind* still lives in the American imaginary as a tragically beautiful statement on the loss of white Southern grandeur as it existed in antebellum America. Indeed, the myth of

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white southern grandeur continues to circulate through the sweeping romantic images of the popular film version of the novel.

Walker's version of *Gone with the Wind* takes a decidedly campy and acerbic knife to this American myth. The swooning southerners are adorned in the symbols of their wealth. The woman wears a billowing and fashionable dress. The man leaning in to kiss the young woman appears to be in a uniform that suggests he is in a position of military authority. Perhaps he is a high-ranking confederate officer off to command his troops to protect the southern way of life. The idyllic intimacy between the man and woman is thrown into harsh and satiric relief by the chaos unfolding right behind their backs. Of course, the enraptured couple remains oblivious to the surrounding degradation. It is their idealized romance that Walker uses to address the contiguous counter-universe that props up the couple's lifestyle and ability to 'act' in-love. The figure beneath the Southern Belle's dress could be a young slave child literally lifting his/her mistress up in order for her to perform the romantic act. In other words, the child underneath the Belle's dress is the physical/psychological support on which the southern couple depends upon to enact their corrupt fantasy. The couple, in order to preserve their fantasy, chooses to turn away from the exploitation that creates the psychological and material conditions for their desire and status. In this way, *Gone* reveals more about the construction of white American identity than the caricatured blackness that constitutes the remainder of the scene. In Walker's words, "whiteness is just as artificial a construct as blackness is"(Kara Walker Speaks, 3).

The Vagaries of Indeterminacy

During an interview that focused on *Gone*, Walker was asked how much of Mitchell's novel influenced her first silhouette. Walker talked about her preconceived notions about *Gone*

with the Wind and how some of her suspicions about the novels racism were confirmed after reading it. However, she also admitted something else:

> My expectation, as I said, was to go in and be sort of horrified and disgusted with representations of happy slaves or ignorant slaves. The Mammy figure is both soothsayer and does everything to please her white folks. And I went into my reading of the book with a clear eye towards inserting myself in the text somehow. And the distressing part was always being caught up in the voice of the heroine, Scarlet O'Hara. Now, I guess a lot of what I was wanting to do in my work, and what I have been doing, has been about the unexpected. You know, that unexpected situation of kind of wanting to be the heroine and yet wanting to kill the heroine at the same time. And, that kind of dilemma, that push and pull, is sort of the basis, the underlying turbulence that I bring to each of the pieces that I make (2).

Critic Mark Reinhardt has suggested that the Southern Belle on the verge of kissing the soldier, "could just as well be the Negress named by Walker's title"(113). The southern belle's profile is ambiguous enough to make this speculation. Her hair seems to tighten and curl toward the back and though her features appear Anglo in profile (along with being much too well dressed to be a slave or servant) people designated black can sometimes appear to look white. However, it is not necessary that the spectator be convinced that the southern belle is biracial because the camp inversions of the "historical romance" seen in the relationships between other figures in the tableaux still mock the supposed purity of the southern belle and her gent. However, if the belle is bi-racial it gives that primary relationship and subject of Walker's sharp ridicule unexpected pathos. Indeed, if we entertain such a possibility it would be an artistic gesture in the spirit of Cleto's reading of queer. What this means is that identity is seldom an either/or ontological certainty. Rather, a queer conception of identity leaves space for contradictory, ambiguous, and indeterminate expressions of self. The connection of this queerness to Walker's *Gone* may be illustrated through a quote from Harriet Jacob's slave narrative. Walker places these lines from *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* on one of her artistic

text cards to comment on black women using their sexuality in extremely coercive conditions: "The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowind, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation."[7] In other words, Harriet Jacobs was a real life historical subject that, under powerfully coercive conditions, consciously used her body to escape the more intolerable cruelties of slavery. The assumption that is being queered through Walker's representation of the belle is that she is *only* a victim. Specifically, Kara Walker may be linking Harriet Jacob's reality with the Southern Belle/Negress of *Gone* to argue for the queer indeterminacy that characterizes post-modern conceptions of identity.

The pre-pubescent black girl performing fellatio on the pre-pubescent white child is yet another provocative and initially startling scene from *Gone*, however when viewed as a camp inversion of the meanings accorded to the couple at the beginning of the vignette one can see the satirical humor once the shock subsides. I suggested above that the Southern belle on the verge of a kiss with the Southern gentleman might be bi-racial. If we follow this conjecture we might see the young children engaged in sex acts upon the hill as funhouse distortions of the polite southern romance that sets *Gone* in motion. The children offer a comically vulgar contrast to the regality of the older couple's moment of intimacy. In other words, the children could represent the older couple at some earlier stage in the tainted southern courtship. Is it a moment of innocent childhood sexuality or the incipient stage of the malevolence undergirding the adult sexual situation? Once again, resorting to binaries to understand Walker's work is inadequate because human complexity is seldom a matter of either/or. New understandings of black identity

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[7] This is a quote from a Kara Walker text card borrowing language from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacob

should attempt to account for this complexity. In other words, Walker is bravely asserting there is

no such thing as an "innocent" black or white subject.

The black female figure raising her leg to give birth is probably *Gone's* most divisive

camp performance of blackness. Here, Walker presents an image of a young, thin, visibly black

woman cheerfully raising her leg to allow two babies to comically drop from her uterus. The

charged image is meant to sardonically comment on the supposed extreme fertility of black slave

women, while never losing sight of the dehumanizing historical institution where the stereotype

emerged. If camp has been employed as a strategic maneuver by LGBT community that

embraces stereotype in order to demystify assigned identity through humor, then Walker seems

to be doing something remarkably similar in this image. However, Walker's detractors too often

overlook the satirical humor. Nevertheless, Walker's absurdist version of black parturition

appears to be a mode of self-defense and self-distancing from the malicious stereotype of black

hyper-fertility. The image is an intentionally ludicrous depiction of black femininity designed to

caustically foreground a stereotype that has not yet vanished despite the cultural gains of the civil

rights movement. In Walker's typically brazen fashion, she unearths what has been politely but

insincerely buried. Indeed, in the image of the birthing woman Walker is mordantly camping one

of the prevailing archetypes of black womanhood. Esther Newton writes,

> "Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make
> it laughable. Not all references to the stigma are campy, however. Only if it is
> pointed out as a joke is it camp, although there is no requirement that the jokes be
> gentle or friendly. A lot of camping is extremely hostile; it is almost always
> sarcastic. But its intent is humorous as well"(107).

In other words, Walker's birthing woman uses sarcastic humor to express Walker's hostility for

the white supremacist imaginary, just as African-American comedians like Richard Pryor and

Chris Rock have always done. But Kara Walker is not a comedian, she is a visual artist and she

means for the character to be such a grotesquely absurd departure from a complex rendering of a black female subject that the distance is laughable. It is indeed a racial camp of black femininity.

The figure with the ridiculously enlarged penis propelling him—or her—through the air as if he/she were a float is the other parody (racial camping) of blackness in *Gone* that deals directly with stereotyped black sexuality, however the image also explores the power of queer indeterminacy. Perhaps the gender indeterminacy of this figure is the most traditionally queer element of Walker's camp vignette. The slender figure with hips suggesting a female physiology also appears to be pregnant with the protruding phallus. Therefore, the androgyny of the floating figure is a dual critique of both traditional southern/antebellum gender roles and the sexual stereotypes affixed to black bodies. Accordingly, Judith Butler writes in her essay "From Interiority to Gender Performatives", "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity"(363). Indeed, the gender ambiguity of the figure is part of Walker's general effort to destabilize bourgeois southern social order through the theatrical undermining of the 'straight' meaning that the couple at the far left of the vignette attempt to enact. In other words, Kara Walker exacts revenge on multiple oppressive hegemonic categories through the enigmatic gender identity of the floating figure by aestheticizing gender and sexual indeterminacy. As seen in the writing of Judith Butler such a refashioning of gender identity is in strong contradistinction to the way gender is frequently positioned as something inherently stable within heterosexist culture.

Moreover, the giant penis attached to the floating figure camps white racialist imaginings of black male sexuality. Again, Walker's use of "sexual punning and innuendo" along with the

extreme artifice of this particular representation connect her vignette to camp discourse. Frantz

Fanon has written extensively about the white racialist/racist imaginary. Fanon writes,

> No longer do we see the black man; we see a penis: the black man has been occulted. He
> has been turned into a penis. He is a penis […] So what is the truth? The average length
> of the African's penis, according to Dr. Pales, is seldom greater than 120 millimeters
> (4.68 inches). Testut in his Traite' d'anatomie humaine gives the same figure for a
> European. But nobody is convinced by these facts. The white man is convinced the black
> man is an animal; if it is not the length of his penis, it's his sexual power that impresses
> the white man. Confronted with this alterity, the white man needs to defend himself, i.e.,
> to characterize "the other," who will become the mainstay of his preoccupations and his
> desires (147-148).

Kara Walker caustically takes aim at this stereotype. Obviously the myth of large black

male genitalia is crudely reductive, yet it is also a stereotype that black men receive as a

compliment. The crude flattery offered to black men is interestingly not the case with the other

caricature in *Gone*, the birthing black woman. There are no social prizes or psychic benefits

attached to the stereotype of black female hyper-fertility. Such hyper-fertility, like that of the

comically tumescent black penis, suggests a hyper-sexuality and all of the carnal delights that the

white gaze attaches to such sexuality. But in a patriarchal and sexist context where black women

have been sexually victimized as a result of this dangerous misconception, it is more physically

and emotionally detrimental for black women to live with the image of hyper-sexuality. Because

of the privileges of patriarchy and the ways that gender could sometimes work to the benefit of

black men; the ostensible big black penis, though threatening to the white racist imaginary, also

enjoys a kind of contemptuous renown that black men would exercise to claim symbolic weight

in a gendered world. In other words, the myth of black male hyper-sexuality could be used as

capital, while the myth of black female sexuality is often a liability in a patriarchal setting.

Hence, the positioning of the black male(?) figure with the grotesquely engorged penis above the

grounded, comically birthing black woman underscores the constructed social distance between

the two figures. However, the key argument within racist/racialist conceptualizations of black sexuality is that black sexuality is animalistic, and a gross departure from what is traditionally human. The sexual stereotypes affixed to black bodies, stereotypes that continue to circulate, made it easier for antebellum whites to rationalize social and sexual exploitation of their property. However, Walker seems to be suggesting that there is also a complicated value within these sexual stereotypes; there is perhaps a queer indeterminacy. Kara Walker is of course aware of the way stereotypes of black sexuality can be ambivalent and ambiguous sites of pleasure for black people who play out the discussed social/sexual roles. The protest against Kara's own work speaks to the sensitivity of this issue.

It may be too speculative to propose the depth of Walker's personal pain, but she is clearly troubled by racist mythology. In an interview discussing *Gone* Walker is asked whether she is "questioning the underlying structure or racist thinking in an epic as quintessential as *Gone with the Wind* (3). Walker replies,

> Well, people try to question it. Let's say. It get's questioned…but more poetic gestures happen in the real world, like the Margaret Mitchell house burning to the ground. [LAUGHS] By no fault of its own, I'm sure. I want to bring this conversation into the now with, you know, Trent Lott, or whomever, or just the idea that somebody like Strom Thurman can be in office for an eternity and bring views from another era into the 21st century. But it gets ploughed under and ploughed under to such a degree that we assume, or the public assumes, that it's not so important […] The gross, brutal manhandling of one group of people, dominant with one kind of skin color and one kind of perception of themselves, versus another group of people with a different kind of skin color and a different social standing. And the assumption would be that, well, times have changed and we've moved on. But this is the underlying mythology of the American project. The history of America is built on this inequality, this foundation of a racial inequality and a social inequality. And we buy into it"(Kara Walker, Interview PBS).

Walker is clearly troubled by the social structure that the imagery still does the work of supporting. However, Kara Walker chooses to do battle with it through ironic parodies of the mythology. Walker is cynical, sarcastic, and not especially beholden to black conservative

communal standards. The big black penis and the hyper fertile black woman are tropes that cannot be contained, and really I argue they shouldn't try to be contained. This is because containment paradoxically gives the image more power. When an audience member in a public discussion with Walker questioned the value of using racist imagery in her work she responded, "Because I don't fear them; they have an impact, but I don't fear them the way that I used to"(13). Walker is attempting to show the instability within these stereotypes by defiantly flinging the imagery back into the open. Counter to mainstream thinking about race, when racist mythology remains hidden, dangerous color-blind discourse can deny the persistent significance of race as a discursive organizing principle. What is more, a sort of queer power can be derived from playful and ironic engagement with the sexual stereotypes.

Walker is without a doubt aware of the deeply contested site of stereotyped black sexuality. Indeed, I think that in her imagery in *Gone* and in her subsequent work, Walker pays excruciatingly close attention to the ambivalence inside of such performances. For what if the black female subject is sensual, seductive, and fecund? Although the birthing woman in *Gone* is an exceedingly outrageous (anti-racist) stereotype of the stereotype of black female sexuality, what if a particular black woman enjoys her body and the slippery, messy power that comes from an extravagant performance of the constructed identity ?[8] What of the black male that lacks sexual prowess or can't claim to possess huge genitalia? Does he live with a secret shame? What if he does live up to these expectations and performs such an identity? Walker seems to suggest in the world of desire these things matter even when we wish them not to and may vex even the most sophisticated students of sexual and racial politics. The question that some of Kara Walker's art may aim to answer is "what does the desiring black subject do with the imagery if

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[8] For example, R&B and hip-hop performers Rihanna, Lil' Kim, and Nicki Minaj

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he or she takes pleasure and pain from them?" The answer could lie in African-American experimentation with queerness and camp as theoretical tools that may alleviate at least some of the psychic burden of these stereotypes in a way that doesn't diminish the inherent pleasure of sexuality.

Rashidah Ismaili-Abubakr is an example of an African American critic gingerly embracing a similar perspective. What begins as firm criticism evolves into a complex meditation on pleasure, pain, sexuality and blackness. Abubakr states,

> Kara Walker doesn't take responsibility for what happens on the other side of the canvas, nor does it move us in a humane way towards recognizing the humanity of all people [her art] insulates an image that is already imposed on all of us, black, white, Asian, Jewish…we all have these images deeply ingrained in our psyches. Where does she take it? She could challenge us but she adds to it the element of sex and she adds to it a psychosexual dimension that triggers sado-masochistic responses in us. Some people are aroused by that. I do not condemn it or condone it. That's just a reality. And she understands it and that is the power of art. If it is erotic, if it's powerful, if it's focused, it makes us feel."

Abubakr is not fully committed to her view that Walker is irresponsible. In fact, everything that Abubakr says after the accusation of irresponsibility seems to betray her critique of Walker. When Abukakr says, "she [Walker] adds to it a psycho-sexual dimension that triggers sado-masochistic responses in us […] I do not condemn it or condone it", it seems that Abubakr is in the process of trying to formulate a stable and coherent assessment of Walker's work. However, much of Walker's work is a deliberate undermining of these modernist categories. At least a portion of Walker's work, and *Gone* in particular, seems to be suggesting that identity is queer in the post-modern sense that Fabio Cleto has discussed (performative, situational, multifaceted). The racial and situational indeterminacy of Kara Walker's southern belle figure attest to this.

Abubakr might be innocently accepting a queer conception of identity. To put it another way, Abubakr is suggesting that it is permissible to simply observe an emotion or situation without attaching a permanent moral judgment to the emotion/situation. Indeed, this could be a psychologically profitable exercise. Certainly such a view declines to accept nihilism or moral relativism as an ethical formula. Rather, as Abubakr might be suggesting, a queer conception of identity might offer an opportunity to seriously engage with the unconventional. Perhaps there is an unexamined dimension of our humanity that begs exploration instead of denial or reactionary judgment. Kara Walker seems to be engaged in this type of psychic work, and her art labors with and through the rawness of the legacy of racial slavery in an arguably queer and camp fashion to explore the contradictions that make humanity so complex.

Moreover, Abubakr seems to understand that a potential consequence of art is that it can elicit feeling. However, she seems to unintentionally suggest that it is not a requirement that black art has to elicit unambiguously *positive* feeling. Abubakr appears to believe it is unfortunate black artists are held to a different standard than their white peers. Indeed, to expect all black art to conform to such a formula once again strips us of our complexity. It may be true that a respectable black artist would want to put such images to bed, but maybe Kara Walker doesn't think such issues can rest since we all know the bed isn't only for sleeping. Nevertheless, one can't miss the angry mocking tone of her caricatures. It's angry because Walker has recognized that her racial body was a blank space for other people's fantasies and fears. In a Museum of Modern Art interview Walker admits, "I got interested in the ways that I almost wanted to aim to please… and fulfill these assumptions and associations with blackness. I became very submissive and subservient to myths about blackness, the [kind of] blackness that's exotic, animalistic, or savage; or noble and strong and forceful—worth putting on display,

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something grander than grand"(1). This culpability doesn't sacrifice the anger. They, in fact, comingle and complicate black humanity. Walker doesn't ignore the disease of white supremacy or the reality of black complicity. Indeed, she sarcastically highlights the continuing significance of race, as it exists in our most private interactions. Walker brazenly examines the taboo and, what is more; refuses to shy away from the troubling and fascinating power of indeterminacy.

Indeed, this chapter might serve as an interesting contribution to the ever-expanding scholarship on the controversial art of Kara Walker for at least two reasons. First, undoubtedly, Kara Walker's *Gone*, *a Historical Romance as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and her Heart*, is an anti-racist artistic statement. However, Kara Walker's *Gone* also served as an informal visual inauguration of what Stuart Halls has called "the end of the innocent black subject." Second, and moreover, this study would like to consider *Gone* both a hallmark of a post-black cultural aesthetic and of racial camp. Indeed, I hope this chapter has expanded and complicated the potential meanings, implications, and interrelatedness of queer, camp, and race discourse. Most importantly, it is my hope that this chapter has contributed to honoring the complexity of black humanity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Recycling blackness in Negrophobia

The following chapter is devoted to Darius James's underappreciated and misunderstood novel *Negrophobia*. In this chapter I analyze several examples of racial camp. First, I consider James's defiantly risky use of the image of Malcolm X as a critique of the pitfalls of Black Nationalism. Then, I analyze James's critique of the white racist imaginary and its relationship to alleged black masculine pathology. Finally, I analyze the apparent main character of the novel,

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white teen-age protagonist Bubbles Brazil. I use Jose Munoz' performance theory "Disidentification" to explore the way racial stereotypes are recycled for alternative and progressive use as an example of racial camp. These examples of racial camp from "*Negrophobia*" demonstrate that the category is not the exclusive property of a white and queer post-modernity. Broadly, this chapter is an interrogation of white racist and black uplift essentialist conceptions of black humanity. Specifically, I argue James employs racial camp not as a tool to disseminate racist "darky" iconography, but to diminish the power the images have in shaping common sense understandings of blackness.

Darius James is a hidden literary talent that has, like his famous and justly revered literary forbearer Ralph Ellison, only produced one outstanding novel. James's novel *Negrophobia* follows the adventures of blonde "sex bomb" teenager Bubbles Brazil as she encounters an assortment of wildly grotesque, theatrical, absurdist versions of black people after being expelled from her all-white private school and re-locating to an entirely black place of learning (5). Some of the characters Bubbles meets are 'Aunt Jemima's Flapjack Ninjas from Hell', 'Uncle H. Rap Remus', and 'Talking Dreads.' Bubbles, who is herself a deliberately reductive expression of white femininity, is both fascinated and repulsed by these caricatures. Darius James presents Bubbles with a seemingly endless menagerie of black stereotypes that attempt to assault, censure, or subdue Bubbles throughout *Negrophobia's* narrative.

Roland Murray notes that the recent crop of post-black literary texts like Negrophobia,

> reveal a blackness that because of its interdependence with commodification is not the authentic ground for communion, but rather a product of mass-culture industries such as cinema, television, and recorded music […] They trade in the surprising aesthetic and political potential made available by racial identities that are more malleable and

recombinant precisely because they have been so thoroughly abstracted from any social context but that of the commodity. What one witnesses in this abstraction is an aesthetic that asks readers to derive pleasure from the disintegration of racial difference as it has been constituted in both popular culture and in such conventional mass political modes as nationalism and pan-Africanism (215).

In other words the realm of representation is so deeply mediated that few, if any, can make the claim of racial purity. Hence, Murray's reading, along with other black post-modern commentators, opens up political space for alternative articulations of blackness. Racial camp emerges from this intervention.

According to Susan Sontag, "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration"(54). The racist iconography that James engages with and redeploys in Negrophobia is indeed "unnatural" and "exaggerated." It is imagery that in the words of Sontag "effaces nature, or else contradicts it outright"(64). In fact, I suggest James' work is consciously positioned within a tradition of African-Diaspora camp. And although I have shown that black re-appropriation of racist iconography is frequently viewed as participating in self-derision, it can also be reasonably viewed as a celebration of black performance culture, and as a satiric critique of the apparent veracity of such iconography. Indeed, black re-articulation of "darky" iconography may be viewed as camp in capable black artistic hands.

Darius James, like his contemporary Kara Walker, accomplishes the incredibly difficult feat of camp infused racial masquerade. Susan Gubar argues "Racial camp deflates what had been magnified, mocking the so-called master race"(36). Darius James wants readers to understand that Negrophobia "has nothing to do with the real lives of black people. It has to do with mapping out the terrain of a racist psychology and making fun of that"(2).

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Moreover, this chapter argues that *Negrophobia* is also about mapping the terrain of a narrow black uplift epistemology and challenging it as the only viable way of articulating an anti-racist politics. As seen in the previous chapter racial uplift mentality seeks to elide racist visual iconography but a post-black epistemic frame may engage the iconography to re-contextualize the meaning of these images. In other words, James' literary performance of racist iconography is part of the larger cultural project challenging essentialism. However, the manner in which Darius James chooses to challenge essentialism is deliberately counter-intuitive. Part of a post-black re-imagining of blackness is considering fresh ways to explicitly or implicitly articulate disapprobation of anti-black discourse without being hampered by the politics of black uplift. Similar to the performances of the unfairly maligned pre-civil rights racial icons Bert Williams and Lincoln Perry, Darius James uses racial camp to paradoxically undermine the deleterious impact of a minstrel inspired visual repertoire.

However, as previously mentioned, for James, and for other black artists that make use of racial camp, the essentialism of black uplift is also a political target. Discussing the enthusiastic response of black cabaret audiences to ribald black performers in the early 20th century Kevin Gaines notes, " quite possibly the audience reveled in the display of black performance styles; moreover, in such a setting, their minstrel trappings may have been appealing partly by virtue of their parodic tweaking of black bourgeois pretensions"(190). Indeed, Darius James novel is, apart from a stinging rebuke of the racist imaginary, a late 20th century satirical revision of black performed "minstrel trappings" designed to provoke uplift advocates wishing to distinguish themselves as a "better class" or as authentic delineators of black experience.

Before continuing any further it is necessary to consider that the iconography that James "scripted" characters evoke is as painful as it is tragic. The iconography was largely

created to rationalize the violent subjugation of black people. And though Eric Lott has convincingly argued for alternative understandings of blackface, the auxiliary visual iconography is still egregious. However, like Kara Walker's *Gone*, *Negrophobia* is an attempt to release at least part of the hold that these images have on the American collective psyche. James does this by inhabiting the stereotypes like a bad costume and re-appropriating the iconography through a racial camp sensibility. To put it another way, James wants the reader to pay attention to the extreme artifice of his costume through direct and admittedly playful confrontation with the iconography. James is arguing that the performances of blackness in *Negrophobia* are too obscenely absurd for them to be anything close to a complex articulation of what it means to be black. In fact, the performances are so absurd that they are profoundly risible.

To emphasize the scripted nature of identity in *Negrophobia*, James employs the screenplay as an artistic device to demonstrate the unreality of his setting and characters. It is a gesture that is stylistically distinct from Kara Walker's use of the silhouette, and yet it is conceptually analogous. Indeed, on top of fabricating identity Kara Walker's silhouettes also purposely flatten, and reduce human complexity in the same way that stereotypes reduce. In a similar fashion, James' screenplay format asks readers to view performances of caricatured blackness as filmic reductions and fabrications. In response to an interview question on the way racial archetypes infiltrate cultural consciousness Darius James explains, "but I think one of the keys is being aware of the insidious power of archetypes. I mean, television isn't real. Movies aren't real. Books aren't real. But people behave on the basis of this cultural mythology as if it were real"(2). In other words, if blackness as it is constituted in popular culture is not real, then it must be what Stuart Hall has claimed "essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial

categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature"(443). Through Darius James' re-claiming and recycling of an iconography created by whites to express the alleged truth of blackness, he creates an alternative use of such iconography via his differently positioned and constituted subjectivity to comment on this lack of a guarantee.

The performance theory that best compliments racial camp in *Negrophobia* is Jose Munoz' "disidentification." Munoz describes disidentification as a tool minority subjects use to transform the meaning of the stereotypes affixed to their identities. Munoz writes, "disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy" (39). Indeed, instead of disowning the stereotypes inscribed upon marginalized people, Munoz suggests racial and sexual minorities transform what the stereotypes can mean. Indeed, disowning the stereotypes and thus attempting to erase them from public consciousness may contribute to the color-blind and heterosexist politics that would ignore race and sexual identity rather than acknowledge them as persistent cultural and political realities. Further, the practice of disowning implicitly contends that no alternative meaning can be found within racist and sexual stereotypes. However, according to Munoz, disidentification is a "reworking of those energies that do not elide the harmful or contradictory components of any identity."(6).

Darius James is also reworking the meaning(s) of blackness through a counter intuitive recycling of racial stereotypes. James seems to understand that erasure of racist iconography is probably not possible, and maybe not entirely desirable, but Munoz argues, "As a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life"(12). In an interview Darius James has articulated a similar

idea. James explains, "I do believe that so-called racist stereotypes in American culture are actually images from African art. But they've been corrupted and diseased by a white racist imagination. And my thought was that I would simply take back those images—those are…my images—and redefine them"(2). James may be investing those images, the lost objects, with new meaning through racial camp, his chosen method of disidentification.

Darius James also uses racial camp to critique the white monopoly of camp as intellectual intervention and site of cultural pleasure. For example, one of the most recent cultural examples of a camp artifact is Paul Verhoeven's infamous mainstream soft-core sex film Showgirls. Media Studies scholar I.Q. Hunter enjoys the movie for what he believes to be its intentional flaws. However, I.Q. Hunter paints the pleasures of this kind of irony as something endemic to a particular class of people; namely white heterosexual males. Hunter speaks of his enjoyment of "the elitist thrill of secretly shared irony, of exclusive access to double coding"(196). He writes,

> "the point of identification in Showgirls was not with any of the characters but rather with the director himself: the unapologetic 'bad boy' of flash-trash cinema, the intellectual Dutchman who frolics among the clichés of Hollywood blockbusters. A bewitched tourist in American excess, Verhoeven embodies an ideal of aroused, vicarious but wholly optional cultural slumming. Since I am captivated not only by Hollywood movies but also by the easy cultural capital I can make by 'seeing through' them, I recognize in Verhoeven my own (European?) ambivalence towards disreputable material which I both love and am culturally obliged to rise above. This kind of postmodern irony can be seen as the 'habitus', the last refuge of middle-class white male intellectuals"(197).

Hunter makes the dubious claim that "this kind of postmodern irony" is a haven for middle-class white males from the strictures of tradition and respectability, which James is ultimately critiquing.

However, as camp was becoming part of the American cultural lexicon in the sixties and seventies, black audiences were taking pleasure in camp versions of themselves in blaxpoitation cinema and the signifying practices that have been part of the African-Diaspora cultural repertoire for ages. Pamela Robertson has noted, "most discussions of camp, whether about gay men, lesbians, or heterosexuals, assume the adjective 'white' (394). Darius James is deeply conscious of a black tradition of self- parody that may be considered camp due to its stylized artifice; it's apparent affection for and pragmatic use of theatrical absurdity.

Darius James' novel offers racial camp versions of blackness to, as Pamela Robertson asserts, "create distance from oppressive stereotype"(406-497). However, racial camp is only effective however, if Stuart Hall's treatment of black identity (and identity more broadly) is utilized as an intellectual beacon. According to Hall, "if the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically…"(446). To reiterate, Darius James' "black people" are obscenely and paradoxically essentialized to illustrate Hall's argument.

To be sure, there are black bodies, bodies with visible physiological distinction and often an accompanying cultural distinctiveness. Though highly supportive of the idea of blackness as a performance, E. Patrick Johnson also carefully discusses the limits to performance. He writes,

> Blackness is not always facilitated by performance. […] In other words, blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the "living of blackness" becomes a material way of knowing (8)

However, Johnson is unclear about what the material way of knowing is based upon. My project chooses to interpret this "material way of knowing" as something not embodied or

biologically determined. Rather, in *Negrophobia* the act of blackness is culturally negotiated and policed both intra-racially and interracially. What this means is that the "undeniable racial experience" of blackness for Darius James is not the blues, athleticism, or any of the other sliding signifiers that supposedly speak blackness. This material way of conceiving black reality is predicated on black bodies encountering anti-black racism.

Indeed, to fully appreciate *Negrophobia* the lens of performance must be utilized for reading race throughout the novel. Eric Lott suggests,

> Black performance itself, first of all, was precisely "per formative," a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world. Black people, that is to say, not only exercised a certain amount of control over such practices but perforce sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators (39).

Lott, along with Stuart Hall's insights into identity construction should inform the examples of racial camp surveyed in this chapter.

Resurrecting Malcolm X

The minstrel performance on display in the Malcolm X vignette of *Negrophobia* is a racial camping of uplift epistemology as represented in Black Nationalist discourse. It is important to understand that in the novel, Black Nationalist icon and beloved civil rights leader Malcolm X is not an object of derision. On the other hand, the uncritical and increasingly chauvinist cult of Malcolm X is James' satirical target. Of course Malcolm X is one of the most revered icons of black history. Malcolm was one of the most militant voices of black America in the early 60's and the leaders of the Black Power Movement adopted his fiery rhetoric after his assassination. For many black Americans he is an enduring symbol of black rage and defiance

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against white supremacy. To be sure, Malcolm X's commitment to advocacy on behalf of black America is not under question in this segment of *Negrophobia.*

Nevertheless, black hagiography of Malcolm X obscures the complexity of the historical figure. The image of unflinching confrontation with the white power structure should be valorized, but James seems to implicitly suggest such valorization should not deny his many layers. As Michael Eric Dyson has argued, Malcolm can be honored for his commitment to black advancement without turning him into a sacrosanct symbol of black moral outrage. Dyson writes, "the overwhelming weakness of hero worship, often, is the belief that the community of hero worshipers possesses the definitive understanding of the subject […] and that critical dissenters from the received view of Malcolm are traitors to black unity, inauthentic heirs to his political legacy, or misguided interpreters of his ideas"(35). Darius James questions this hagiographic narrative of Malcolm X and therefore disrupts essentialist notions of Malcolm X and the authentic politicized blackness that he supposedly continues to represent. Malcolm X's brief appearance as a rhyming and dancing corpse caustically illustrates this point. A zombie Malcolm appears on the stage of a multiplex theater in soft shoes and performs this song/speech:

> Its astounding/Time is fleeting/Ideas are getting old. So Listen closely/ We haven't got very much longer. Fictions have taken hold. You think/ "Consciousness rising!"/ But I say—/ "Worms are writhing"/Eating your very soul! /Now I remember, /Eatin' that swine pork, /When blackness hit me/And a voice called—/ Never mo'!"/ No mo' pig tails/From another/Dimension. / Or eatin' ham hocks with mystical pretensions./ Pork is/A Whyte Devil God's/Invention/To hinder/The Black Man's Ascension! […] You feel a sensation. / It's Black Frustration. And you/ Cop another bag of sedation. / Then you realize its just/Another form of castration. / But after losing the coke dip, /Or slipping the duji chip, and getting/Out of the swine trip, you will never be the same. /I speak to you from another dimension/Addressing/Your Afrocentric intentions. Well-secluded/I see all. (89).[9]

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[9] Interestingly, Darius James cleverly borrows the first few lines of Zombie Malcolm's performance from the seventies cult film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to help underscore the link between *Negrophobia* and the history of camp.

The corpse appears to be criticizing black secular understandings of American social reality, such as believing the white supremacist narrative of inherent black inferiority. Apparently, the Malcolm corpse is also exposing the folly of dominant culture values. The "fiction" that the corpse of Malcolm X is presumably speaking about, at least on the surface, is the fiction of Malcolm's sense of black identity prior to a conversion to the Nation of Islam (NOI). The "fiction" includes drug use, pork, and other malicious instruments of a "Whyte Devil God's." The corpse may also be questioning the ostensible fiction of Christianity that has been of great historical and social significance for blacks in North America.

Perhaps the principles of the NOI as articulated by founder Elijah Muhammad is the "Consciousness rising" the corpse speaks about in his performance. Indeed, the formal initiation into the social, religious, and political culture of the NOI is presented as the authentic "blackness" that rescued the corpse from the trappings of the corrupt hegemonic culture. The "voice" that called to the corpse insisting that he depart with the vices supposedly afflicting the black underclass may be the very voice of blackness itself; a disembodiment promising an atavistic return to African authenticity.

However, Manning Marable writes,

> Malcolm's strength was his ability to reinvent himself, in order to function and even thrive in a wide variety of environments. He carefully crafted his physical presentation, the manner in which he approached others, drawing upon the past experiences from his own life as well as from African American folklore and culture…He was consciously a performer, who presented himself as the vessel for conveying the anger and impatience the black masses felt (479-481).

The corpse, maybe obliquely, points to the "consciousness rising" as just one performative stage of Malcolm's complex lived experience.

Again, James presents his suspicion of and hostility towards a presumptive racial essence through the sardonic presentation of the deified slain civil rights leader as a dancing and rhyming cadaver. The "fictions" that have "taken hold" are possibly the prescriptive blackness that NOI leadership promoted as salvific for the "untutored" black masses. In other words, the "consciousness rising" that the cadaver prescribes as solutions to the conditions of supposed pre-blackness are possibly circumscriptions placed upon black identity. To be sure, such prescriptions are meant to sustain the appearance of a cohesive and foundational black persona in a hostile white environment. However, it is important to note that if Malcolm X ever was the mouthpiece for NOI dogma, he did not remain within such a framework. The historical Malcolm X presented himself in many different ways throughout his short life: criminal and bon vivant, virulently separatist and anti-white, multicultural progressive, and so on. Manning Marable asserts,

> these layers of personality were even expressed as a series of different names, some of which he created, while others were bestowed upon him: Malcolm Little, Homeboy, Jack Carlton, Detroit Red, Big Red, Satan, Malachi Shabazz, Malik Shabaz, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. No single personality ever captured him fully. In this sense, his narrative is a brilliant series of reinventions, "Malcolm X" being just the best known (10).

Indeed, James emphasizes the extemporaneous and dynamic inventiveness that characterized Malcolm's many performances. Moreover, it may be argued that James is disidentifying with the brand of Black Nationalism that is still equated with Malcolm X; putting the image to alternative use to critique what the Malcolm X cadaver calls, "your afrocentric intentions." In fact, for Darius James the fiction that the corpse warns the audience about is the cult of Malcolm (along with Malcolm's uncharitable white readers) that disregards the slain leader's deep political and performative complexity. The Malcolm X corpse speaks from another "dimension", some other place in time that may address the psychic needs of a contemporary disempowered black

underclass, however, the fact that James presents Malcolm X as a corpse is meant to suggest that the increasingly commodified persona of Malcolm X is not automatically transposable to the current historical moment.

Which Malcolm X is the real Malcolm? Both Marable and James seem to be suggesting that any vision of Malcolm X that delimits the spectrum of the historical Malcolm's humanity is a moribund political endeavor. James underscores this idea by humorously situating Malcolm along with the other fabrications and reductions scattered throughout the novel. Indeed, the Malcolm cadaver in *Negrophobia* is just as fictitious as the other caricatures of blackness populating the novel. Roland Murray notes, "there is no reality to race in *Negrophobia* outside the mass production of racial signifiers"(219). Thus the resurgent mythical Malcolm X that has claimed the imagination of black youth over the past 40 years is yet another signifier; a network of media saturated signs referring to an unstable historical subject. To be sure, this does not mean that the historical Malcolm X is not a fascinating figure that may be used for practical progressive objectives.

Admittedly, the Malcolm cadaver is an obvious sign of bad taste . And although James is implicitly challenging the view that the enjoyers of camp are always "knowing" white sophisticates, capable of distinguishing between supposedly high, low, and middle brow culture the ridiculousness of James' representation of the iconic civil rights leader is also a sardonic critique of black intra-racial hegemony that seeks to enclose the boundaries of discussion about what "black" may appropriately constitute. It bears repeating that Malcolm X is not an object of derision in Negrophobia, and really, the protectors of Malcolm's legacy are not being ridiculed either. However, the uplift/nationalist attempt to fix the meaning(s) of Malcolm X in particular, and blackness more generally is being provocatively questioned in *Negrophobia*. The cadaver

and its attendant campiness do not dishonor Malcolm's memory as much as they question the staid convictions of cultural protectionists detrimentally invested in cultural closure. In other words, blackness, and Malcolm X as social constructs are much too slippery for them to be definitively one thing and no political group has the authority to proclaim that blackness or the historical Malcolm X are only heroic, debauched, sophisticated, serious, silly etc . Moreover, James is suggesting through the cadaver, and through numerous other caricatures featured in Negrophobia, that enjoyment of the instability of meaning is not the exclusive intellectual property of a white post-modernity.

Caricatured Black Masculinity

Negrophobia offers another provocative example of racial camp via creatures James calls "buppets." Buppets is of course a signifying play on the timeless children toy "puppets" and the signifier "black." In *Negrophobia* they are cotton stuffed synthetic creations with "painted Ping-Pong-ball eyes […] pink pincushion brain(s)" and "crumbling papier mache skull(s)"(116). This part of the *Negrophobia* narrative fittingly takes place at a Grindhouse. In the 1970's Grindhouse movie spaces offered low- budget exploitation cinema. The Grindhouses' were also home to the emerging genre of films catering to black moviegoers called "blaxpoitation." Some of these movies constituted subversive challenges to white supremacy such as, *The Spook Who Sat Behind the Door, Sweet Sweetback's Baddass Song*, but many of them were oversimplified sensationalist renderings of black urban life. The Buppets are meant to reference the shallow depictions of ghetto blackness as popularized through the blaxpoitation genre. However, James is also offering a sly tribute to the appeal of camp within black cultural productions. The buppets are mockeries of racialist and racist imaginings of black male youth culture, but they are also

affectionate celebrations of black capacity for self-parody through performance.[10] Through the Buppets, James is also joyously performing blackness with the understanding that the buppets do not refer to an essential black subject. Indeed, this may sound like a contradiction. Surely there are young black men that adopt the stylized swagger and speech of the Buppets. However, these young men reflexively practice such mass-produced blackness. Darius James is disidentifying the tropes to expose their performative center while also paying tribute to the underappreciated complexity of "doing" blackness.

This *Negrophobia* segment begins when two buppets saunter down the grindhouse movie theater aisle in an exaggerated and buffoonish display of archetypal black masculinity. James, again, emphasizes the artificiality of the buppets by assigning them "cotton stuffed arms" that move "in stylized arrogance"(113). They wear ball caps and untied sneakers and share a "plaid cardboard boat of fried chicken wings slathered in hotsauce"(113). The buppets discuss their plans to visit Central Park "an rape us some whyte women!" (113). As their conversation continues it is revealed that the buppets plan to organize a media campaign utilizing music and film to chronicle and flagrantly celebrate their heinous intentions. The buppets decide to compose a rap song and film the assault, "as it happens! Cinema Verite. Claim th'shit was a revolutionary act jus' like that brutha wrote back in th'sixties" in reference to Black Power icon Eldrigde Cleaver (115). The buppets plot to take the film to the Cannes film festival and win the Palm D'Or. The last step would be to establish a retail store and sell "ball caps an' T-shirts with actual photos of us bangin' th' bitches in the bushes!"(115).

When the buppets decide to rape white women in Central Park, James is obviously signifying on the entrenched American narrative of black men as the sexual victimizers of white

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[10] Eddie Murphy and Michael Jai White affectionately mock masculine African-American performance styles

women. James is specifically alluding to the 1989 Central Park rape of Trisha Meili who misidentified her attackers as four black teenagers and one Latino teenager. NYPD detectives coerced the teenagers into confessing to the attack and they languished in prison for a decade, despite the lack of DNA or any other evidence linking them to the crime. Eventually they were exonerated when the real assaulter came forward and admitted he acted alone. Journalist Glyn Vincent deplores the lack of judicial and public interest in a wrongful accusation suit. Vincent believes that this is because "many people still think they're guilty." Vincent laments,

> how at the time of the trial they were vilified by the media, which depicted them as inchoate, predatory animals. It didn't matter that there was no physical evidence—not a drop of blood or a speck of mud—linking them to the bludgeoned rape victim. Four of the defendants had confessed. That their confessions were wildly inconsistent and inaccurate didn't sway the court. They were out there in the park doing bad things (as if it were pointless differentiating shoplifting from holding a gun to a cashiers head and shooting) "Lock them up!" the media ranted. "Execute them!" people demanded. Donald Trump took out full-page newspaper ads advocating reinstatement of the death penalty"[11]

The sexual violence that was perpetrated against Meili is inexcusable. However, the discourse of black masculinity is predicated on the logic that even though the defendants were belatedly cleared of raping Trisha Meili, they are still de-facto criminals that deserve state sanctioned surveillance and punishment because of their race and youth. The defendant's lives and ambitions do not matter in a discursive formation that has already narrated them as criminal because of the meanings attached to blackness in conjunction with masculinity. Their individual histories are viewed as indistinguishable and interchangeable and with a white racialist/racist logic that concludes that although the young men could not be successfully connected to the rape of Trisha Meili, then the four young men— Yusef Salaam, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, and Kharey Wise—could still be successfully linked to a multitude of other

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[11] Huffington Post

crimes. Such logic imposes upon the falsely accused an anonymity that erases the particularity of

their stories and makes them tangible repositories for white sexual anxiety about racialized

Others. In other words, in the racist imaginary the Central Park teenagers are not human, but

"prefabricated Negroes […] sketched on sheets of paper and superimposed upon the Negro

Community"(Ellison,72). Darius James uses humor to underscore Ellison's view, and parodies

this infamous story of the Central Park jogger through the clearly fabricated buppets in

Negrophobia.

Interestingly, the buppets demonstrate a self-reflexive knowledge about the market value

of alleged black masculine pathology. Roland Murray notes, "throughout the cinematic text, the

characters that appear are never presented as if they were actual subjects. The scenes are instead

populated by figures drawn from the archive of preexisting mass productions: the white

temptress, the Sambo, the Mammy, the Pickaninny, and so forth"(219). Indeed, Darius James'

buppets seem to be aware of themselves as characters that may successfully participate in a

commodity- oriented culture through acting out and then packaging the sexualized and violent

stereotypes associated with black masculinity. On the one hand, they are grotesque racial camp

caricatures: "With splintered chicken bones scattering in all directions, the two buppets jump up

and down like a pair of caged rhesus monkeys on crack. Swelling to monstrous proportions, they

then roll on the floor, hammering hambone rhythms on their heads; each looks like two large

Easter eggs with enormous erections"(115). On the other hand, the buppets articulate an

awareness of the market value of such offensively caricatured black masculinity. They plan to

screen the rape at "Cannes, win us a Palm D'Or, and get our dicks sucked by a bevy of flybabes

in bikinis on th' Riviera!"(114). The buppets understand that there is monetary and physical

reward if their anti-social behavior can be validated through European artistic institutions

invested in notions of African primitivism, what Edward Said calls the "European Imaginative Geography." The buppets know that they can peddle this blackness in a retail store they call a "joint" in reference to Spike Lee's retail store from the early 90's. The ultimate goal is to be on television selling sneakers. The buppets willingness to carry through their "stupid fresh concept" with the expectation that their behavior will produce lucrative white spectatorship shows us some of the cynicism and interdependent exploitation present in both public and private interracial interaction. Moreover, the political work of camp calls attention to black male vilification.

Camp and the White Temptress

The plotline of Darius James' buppets also invokes the most infamous 20th century example of "creating" black criminals: the Scottsboro Case. The Scottsboro Boys were nine black adolescents accused of raping two white women on a train in Scottsboro Alabama in 1931. Initially, a mob gathered outside the Scottsboro prison housing the boys to implement that peculiarly southern brand of extralegal "justice": lynching. However, the courts gave the accused boys a protracted trial that resulted in life sentences for most of the accused.

The incident started as a skirmish between young impoverished white male adolescents and the Scottsboro children on board the train. The white adolescents resented the presence of the black youths—who became known as the Scottsboro boys—for racial reasons and attempted to forcibly remove them from the train. The Scottsboro boys fought back and removed their attackers from the train. The white adolescents reported that the black teenagers had assaulted them and the town sheriff organized local men to seize the accused. However, the Scottsboro youths didn't realize that two young white-women were also onboard the train. Victoria Price and Ruby Bates feared that they would be punished or scorned for being stowaways in close

proximity with black passengers, so they invented a story of being raped by them. In reality, they had never even come into contact with the Scottsboro youths and Ruby Bates later recanted her story (Weiner, 247-249).

It is interesting to note however, that Victoria Price and Ruby Bates grew up with and lived amongst black people. As historian Mark Weiner claims, Price and Bates were "poor millworkers (and sometimes prostitutes)"(246). They allegedly had consensual sexual relationships with black men. In fact, according to Douglas Linder, "she [Price] was fearful of being arrested for a Mann Act Violation (crossing state lines for immoral purposes) when she met the posse in Paint Rock, so she and Bates made groundless accusations of rape to deflect attention from their own sins"(Linder, 1). Indeed, Price and Bates were on the most intimate terms with black people, and black men in particular, but in order to avoid public humiliation and legal action they (or at least Victoria Price) claimed to be victims of black male sexual aggression. However, what links Bates and Price to the fictional Bubbles Brazil of *Negrophobia*, is that all three could privately enjoy blackness, and when it was convenient demonize and discard blackness. This ambivalent and hypocritical mentality can be seen in this provocative passage from *Negrophobia*. Bubbles Brazil confides,

> "We smoked up my parents' expensive Hawaiian reefer, stole booze from their liquor cabinet, listened to James Brown at chandelier-shaking volume, finger-fucked in my bedroom, and laughed at Richard Pryor on the VCR […] But, in our minds, we weren't the culprits. How could we be? Those weren't our bodies. We would never put our mouths down there! We were white and well- bred. It was those black children from the welfare projects! They did it! Those moon-headed, Kool-Aid-drinking, doo-doo-colored Tar Babies in ragamuffin hand-me-downs! They smoked the reefer! They stole the booze! It was niggers! Not us! Niggers! It was niggers poking their greasy, fried-chicken-pickin' fingers into our wet, underaged pussies! Not us! Niggers!"(157).

Bubble's mentality, and the mentality of the Scottsboro accusers, represents the dominant attitude

that informed white blackface minstrelsy. Indeed, the concomitant desire for and strong

dissociation with blackness in both reified and embodied forms shapes much of the interest and

performances of blackness in the white minstrel tradition. Speaking about the American literary

tradition, but with of course wider societal implications, Toni Morrison writes, "In minstrelsy a

layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law"(66). The Scottsboro accusers and

Bubbles Brazil also use blackness for this "release." Within a dubious Manichean framework,

blackness, in the white racialist imaginary, comes to represent the pleasure and the horror of

things "dark." Thus racial blackness is a sort of fetish object that frees whites from the strictures

of a rigid morality that supposedly defines them. Bubbles' denial of culpability is a white

blackface minstrel shuffle that lets her play. Bubbles says she "took the Coon Game and turned

it into a masturbating minstrel show. That's how my friends and I learned life's funky

facts"(Negrophobia, 155).

Indeed, Bubble's psyche reflects a racist imaginary at its most offensively grotesque, yet

she also desires the very blackness she fears and deplores. In the novel Bubbles moves from a

white identified persona to a black one. In Bubbles' hip- hop tinged words,

> "I improved m'moves, switched m'grooves, an' sleazed into a pair of snakeskinned
> voodoo hooves. I got the drop on bop. I let my fingas' pop. I became th' girl th' worl'
> couldn't stop. I was the baby blon' the boys couldn't con. I was th' one everybody tried to
> hit on. I was wicked white heat from cheek to feet. I'd throw you in a state of agitated
> doggie heat. I'd make you dream 'n' steam then cream 'n' y'jeans 'cause I was the
> reigning queen supreme of the cover-girl wet dream"(7).

Indeed, Bubbles employs a stereotyped black female sexuality to express the white

temptress image. Born from the illicit sexual relationships between white women and black men

in antebellum and reconstruction era America, the white temptress image is informed by private intimacy and public denunciation.

Moreover, contemporary expressions of the temptress image, most notably from Malcolm X's description of his white lover Sophia from his Autobiography, delineate a white woman that is also interested in what Daphne Brooks calls "racial mimicry." Brooks describes racial mimicry as "forms of race delineation, with and without cork, as enacted by white women. It includes the seventy or so years of women performing in blackface as Topsies; "shimmy" dancing of the 1910's; and the Charleston craze of the 1920's"(3). In other words, racial mimicry allows Bubbles to use blackness without carrying the stigma of a hyper-sexuality inscribed upon the black female body. She maintains an exaggerated "edgy" white temptress identity but this identity is contingent on the commodified cultural cues that supposedly authenticate blackness.

Certainly, Bubbles has no problem appropriating black tropes to establish her encoded "difference" within whiteness, but she does so without recognizing the humanity of the people she purports to emulate. For instance, Bubbles doesn't see the moral incongruity of verbally assaulting her black female classmates calling them "cornbread crunching coons"(32), yet using hip-hop inflected vernacular. Indeed,"Aunt Jemima's Flapjack Ninja Killers from Hell" are black female figures that are (satirically) denied access to even Bubble's problematic femininity. James doesn't spend much time describing the physicality of the Aunt Jemimah flapjack ninjas from Hell (the name of the roller derby team), but has them speak in a ridiculous "black" dialect, carry straight razors, and behave as hostile instigators to highlight how "different" they are to Bubble's soft "white" femininity. These figures embody bell hooks contention that black women are perceived as "undesirable in the conventional sense […] the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant"(66). For

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the purpose of satirical interrogation in *Negrophobia*, an apparently desirable and elevated white femininity—desirable precisely because it is white—is placed in contrast with a black femininity that is presented as prima facie undesirable because it is black.

Hence, Bubbles uses the tropes of a dejected female blackness to symbolically invest in blackness yet maintain the privileges of whiteness. Indeed, an abject female blackness worked to underscore the exaggerated femininity of camp icon Mae West. Interestingly, Bubbles Brazil strongly evokes the figure of this American cultural icon. According to Pamela Robertson, "West's affiliation with African American culture serves in part to underscore her identification with the marginal and her status as a transgressive woman within mainstream representations of sexuality"(402). Indeed, West and Bubbles Brazil use black women as props to achieve this transgressive yet desirable camp femininity. Robertson writes,

> West uses camp to theatricalize sex and gender roles to point up their constructedness, yet she depends on her maids' identities being stable to do so, underlining Hortense Spillers' suggestion that there are at least two female genders, one white and one black. Because the racial difference ultimately remains in place, the viewer is reminded that although West is like a black woman, she is not one. Her transracial mobility merely reaffirms her whiteness. This whiteness, constituted through its appropriation of and difference from blackness, is neither a color nor the absence of color, both impervious to racial markers and able to absorb them"(400).

To reiterate, the figure of Bubbles strongly evokes the figure of Mae West because Bubbles uses the tropes of blackness to alternately become black yet maintain the privileges of whiteness. Bubbles can be like what Darius James sarcastically describes as "the harlem harlot! She baad! She black! She beat much butt! Her name is Bubbles Brazil!"(152). However, she can also debase black women without a trace of cognitive dissonance. Such debasement not only secures Bubbles' and West's whiteness but it also works to make white women more "feminine" within a racist patriarchal context.

To be sure, the racist psyche of Bubbles Brazil is a major target of Darius James but as previously mentioned, it is also important to consider that she is herself a parody of a particular brand of white femininity—that of the temptress—and thus an object of camp. For most of the novel Bubbles Brazil is "one very intense thing" and thus pointedly and comically underdeveloped. I mentioned earlier that the image of the white temptress has its historical roots in the taboo interracial desire between black male slaves and their white mistresses. Much like the Scottsboro accusers, the white temptress alternately loves and loathes blackness, and may covertly seek liaisons with black men while repudiating such dalliances publically. Indeed, white female fear of patriarchal violence and social ostracism contribute to and complicate such hypocrisy. Thus, for much of the novel, Bubbles Brazil is a racial camp of this historical figure because James deliberately downplays the entrenched white patriarchal social control that produces the temptress mentality. Not until Bubbles begins a sort of psychic transformation at the end of the novel does Bubbles acknowledge the white feminine discourse that makes her simultaneously attracted to and repelled by "blackness." Bubbles explains "As a child, my parents treated me like a glorified house pet. I was their golden flower, their blossom of blonde innocence. In their eyes, I embodied the very essence of uncorrupted purity […] I resented this. And took it out on my dolls. I would pluck out their eyes, shove their faces on the stove, and watch their hair flare in a sparkle of pungent flame (149)."

Much like the Buppets are ludicrous racial camps of black masculinity yet also reflections of black cynicism, Bubbles Brazil is an absurdist rendering of white femininity yet also a critique of the white racist imaginary. In an interview Darius James makes it a point to stress,

"Bubbles isn't any female you know. She's a cartoon character like the rest of them—the characters in the book, I mean—but she's a special kind of female formula. Because Bubbles actually confronts her own racism. I mean before you banish a demon, you have to confront it. She had to confront the contents of her own mind. So it wasn't like she was a racist and was going to remain that way. She was actually engaged in this process of transformation"(5).

The "contents of Bubbles own mind"—the grotesque, disfigured, and exaggerated blackness on display throughout much of the novel—can be viewed as the incipient stage of a disidentification, a transformation of the meaning of whiteness through a confrontation with what dominant culture has taught her to think about blackness. To be sure, Bubbles is a minority subject, simultaneously privileged and oppressed. Although Munoz emphasizes disidentification as a libratory practice for racial minoritarian subjects it could be possible for a white subjectivity to work with and through the stereotypes of a racialized whiteness to undo some of the harmful illusionary stability of the category. Munoz writes,

> the fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self. This is not to say that majoritarian subjects have no recourse to disidentification or that their own formation as subjects is not structured through sometimes conflicting sites of identification (5).

That Bubbles identity intersects at "majoritarian" and "minoritarian" makes her racial camp oversimplification all the more pointedly absurd and illustrates a paradoxical complexity.

Indeed, any consideration of hegemonic blackness necessitates a consideration of hegemonic whiteness. Bubbles tries to undermine such symbolic whiteness through appropriating blackness, but she relies on a meaning of blackness that is defined as the dramatic and debased inverse of her assigned white female persona. Bubbles and her white friends would "get low down—woblin' our knees in a bowlegged chicken dance, shakin' an twitchin' an rollin' our hands all over our young behinds real nasty"(156). Such an uncritical appropriation of

blackness as it is constituted in popular culture is for Bubbles Brazil only the callow beginning of

a more sophisticated and progressive disidentification with the practice of whiteness.

To reiterate, the racial logic of Bubbles Brazil is clearly a target of Darius James' wit,

however, such strong and necessary criticism does not mean that Bubbles Brazil is an attempt to

create a nuanced and complicated study of white female subjectivity. It is the "practice of

whiteness" that James is questioning through his send-up of the white temptress. Ruth

Frankenberg neatly summarizes the practice of whiteness:

> Whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially,
> politically, and culturally produced and, moreover are intrinsically linked
> to unfolding relations of domination. Naming "whiteness" displaces it
> from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its
> dominance. Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and
> of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their
> structured invisibility (6).

In other words, whiteness is as much a social construction as blackness, and the whiteness of

Bubbles Brazil is a conditioned performance that may be destabilized. Frankenberg argues, "to

name whiteness … allows me to view certain practices and subject positions as racialized (that

is, structured by relations of race, usually alongside other structuring principles) rather than

necessarily racist—although whiteness is for the most part racialized in the context of

racism"(7). To be sure, to understand Bubbles Brazil outrageous racism as a practice of

hegemonic whiteness, and not an inherently meaningful position, is not an attempt to release the

character from culpability. However, if whiteness and blackness are revealed to be tenuous,

provisional, and mediated social performances then Bubbles Brazil's search for meaning through

unreflective appropriation of blackness may be critiqued. But Bubbles' unreflective appropriation

can also be viewed with some sympathy. Because if blackness is fraught with a dubious

blankness that can be colored in by the structurally powerful white imaginary, then American

whiteness has come to represent something also strangely monolithic (and tragic), a complimentary tabula rasa; an identity severed from ethnic particularity in a bargain for the privileges of a non-ethnic universal identity: whiteness. Thus, Bubbles Brazil is not only a burlesque; a racial camp of the white temptress, but also a measured interrogation of white hunger for identity through the adoption of commodified blackness.

Indeed, Darius James seems to think it is possible for whiteness as practice to be unlearned through a questioning of assumptions about identity, and also by disidentifying with hegemonic whiteness and making whiteness mean something else. But, as James noted, Bubbles must first realize that she has a historically informed psychological impediment before she can recycle whiteness (James leaves it deliberately unclear what such recycled/re-formed whiteness would be like). However, Bubbles understands "there was no way to calculate the dimensions of my disease, the degree of my negrophobia"(165). James employs racial camp to demonstrate this possibility, showing the reader Bubble's mental journey through an absurd blackness passively accepted as "real". As mentioned earlier, Bubbles naively attempts to disidentify with whiteness by shifting to a commodified black social persona, however, by the end of the novel Bubbles begins to learn that she is not the concrete subject that she initially imagined herself to be. Bubbles finds, "without the vampiric beauty of my whiteness, without the definition of my skin, without my emblematic significance, I was presence without appearance, a being without basis, a creature without context—an invisible—a colorless network of organs and entrails in translucent casing"(168). Indeed, by the novel's end Bubbles is learning a more sophisticated disidentification strategy realizing that "not only was I thought, I'd become the very process of that thought—an idea permutating in the web of my own capricious thinking"(168). Bubble's seeming realization that her whiteness is "thought"—and thus protean—may make it possible for

her to learn that whiteness, apart from being socially constructed, can be a progressive lived identity interested in the Other, but in Toni Morrison's words "without the mandate for conquest"(3). Bubble's disidentification process—her potential transformation of the meaning of whiteness through confrontation with the racist meanings of blackness—is meant to mitigate ideological interference on humane interpersonal interracial relationships. In other words, the novel does not end on a pessimistic racial note, but rather a strident cord tempered by hope.

This brief essay has attempted to show the productive and progressive potential of racial camp as a political strategy for the marginalized. Moreover, it is my hope that it will instigate a re-appraisal of the innovative literary style of one America's best-kept secrets: Darius James. There is always risk involved when black artists suggests that there are new ways to express identity, and James should be respected for his attempt to challenge anti-black racism while also honoring his intensely personal vision of what it means to be black in America for him.

Conclusion

It would be inaccurate to deny American progress in rehabilitating the representation of black identity and also extending de-jure civil rights to African-Americans and other marginalized American identities. What is more, to promulgate a conception of American moral stasis trivializes the lives and work of generations of social activists and cultural workers. However, it would be deeply disingenuous to negate America's tragic racial history; a history

that impacts the contemporary American moment in often subtle, sometimes dramatic, but always troubling ways.

Accordingly racial camp might be a meaningful and interesting performance strategy for challenging the legacy of this history in the twenty first century. Racial camp, as an anti-racist oppositional practice, outlandishly magnifies the archetypes that emerge from this shared history to illustrate how such archetypes might impact contemporary perceptions of African-diaspora people. This is especially true in a post-Obama social and political culture where politically conservative resistance to the continuing significance of race is remarkably strong.

Moreover, my study acknowledges and appreciates the intellectual interventions of black uplift advocates. During a time in American history when the prevailing conception of black people was crudely reductive and maliciously fabricated the representational labor of black uplift was not only laudable but necessary. However, I have tried to show that black uplift has also unwittingly restricted black performative complexity. Indeed black uplift ethos has, and sometimes continues, to silence and castigate black artists that recognize the alternative meanings within black cultural productions that draw from the same murky pool that blackface minstrelsy emerged from.

Ultimately, racial camp is a satirical, yet painful reminder that a group of people were told they were not part of the human family, had limited or no access to the conditions that produce success, and despite all of this—though badly damaged—found a way to retain the very humanity they were told they did not possess.

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