

Color (Un)conscious: Psychoanalysis, Resistance, and the Specter/Spectacle of Race*

Li-Chun Hsiao

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures
National Taiwan University, Taiwan

Abstract

As visible as racial differences were, why did they appear *invisible* in the dawning moments of modern (western) democracy, invisible in the sense that the enslaved race was not even considered part of the socio-political order premised on equalitarianism? In light of psychoanalytic theory, this paper explores the curious phenomenon of the ostensible invisibility of race in historical junctures in which glaring racial difference was in various ways rendered a spectacle and proposes a Lacanian reading of the workings of race and of the modes and strategies of resistance organized around the category of race. Taking as my point of departure Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' conception of race as a "regime of visibility," I seek to engage psychoanalysis with other discourses on race, thereby addressing my aforementioned question and reflecting on the theoretical and political implications of each conceivable answer. Power which relies on the regime of visibility, I argue, can nevertheless be predicated on the invisibility of race even in those instances when it manifests itself through the staging of racial elements and/or the figurations of race.

By means of discussion of a series of social, historical, and political examples that bring to the fore a problematic functioning of race and focusing particularly on the case of the blackface performances of the Caribbean-born black performer Bert Williams, I would point to and examine the propinquity of the specter and the spectacle of race—that is, how its visibility hinges on or is intertwined with, and might result in its invisibility. The highly incalculable cultural form of blackface masking emerges as a racial spectacle par excellence, yet it is also undergirded by a certain invisibility of race that results in the indistinguishable zone between strategies of resistance and forms of collaboration in wildly imbalanced power relations. The specter of race is

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conceived here as the traumatic kernel which is characterized by its resistance to becoming-conscious despite the efforts of “raising consciousness” by the official ideology and despite also the staging of racial difference as spectacle, as in blackface minstrelsy. The traumatic effects of such a specter can be instantiated by its persistent and recurrent haunting, even in the displaced and disguised form of spectacle.

Keywords

Lacanian psychoanalysis, racial difference, spectacle/specter of race, the gaze, visibility/invisibility of race, resistance, blackface performance,

Bert Williams, blackness, trauma

As visible as racial differences—or physical characteristics of a certain race in the eye of another—were, why did they appear *invisible* in the dawning moments of modern (western) democracy, invisible in the sense that the enslaved race was not even considered part of the socio-political order premised on equalitarianism? In light of psychoanalytic theory, this paper explores the curious phenomenon of the ostensible invisibility of race in historical junctures in which glaring racial difference was in various ways rendered a spectacle,¹ and propose a Lacanian reading of the workings of race and of the modes and strategies of resistance organized around the category of race. Taking as my point of departure Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' conception of race as a "regime of visibility,"² I seek to engage psychoanalysis with other discourses on race in particular and on the political in general, thereby addressing my aforementioned question and reflecting on the theoretical and political implications of each conceivable answer. Power which relies on the regime of visibility, I argue, can nevertheless be predicated on the invisibility of race even in those instances when it manifests itself through the staging of racial elements and/or the figurations of race. By means of discussion of a series of social, historical, and political examples that bring to the fore a problematic functioning of race and focusing particularly on the case of the blackface performances of the Caribbean-born black performer Bert Williams, I would point to and examine the propinquity of the specter and the spectacle of race—that is, how its visibility hinges on or is intertwined with, and might result in its invisibility. The highly incalculable cultural form of blackface masking emerges as a racial spectacle par excellence, yet it is also undergirded by a certain invisibility of race that results in the indistinguishable zone between strategies of resistance and forms of collaboration in wildly imbalanced power relations. The specter of race is conceived here as the traumatic kernel which is characterized by its resistance to becoming-conscious despite the efforts of "raising consciousness"

¹ The flip side of this is the contemporary phenomenon of the spectacle of increasingly frequent, and seemingly spontaneous outbursts of racial violence amidst an official ideology of tolerance and a multiculturalist political milieu bent on the neutralization or even effacement of racial difference—that which Balibar designates as "neo-racism" in Europe, a "*spontaneous racism*" as opposed to "*theoretical* (or doctrinal) racism" (22, 38).

² As Lacanian scholars might be able to tell, this project is indebted a great deal to Seshadri-Crooks' pioneering and seminal work, *Desiring Whiteness*, one of the few book-length Lacanian studies of race. The designation of race as a "regime of visibility" certainly permeates the book (e.g. pages 2, 21, 36), sometimes phrased as "regime of looking." Her conception of race as a "regime of visibility" structured around Whiteness as a master signifier in the Lacanian sense goes beyond the conventional critique of ideology as "false consciousness" or the (de)constructionist view of race as an "illusory construct" in the discourse of social construction.

by the official ideology and despite also the staging of racial difference as spectacle, as in blackface minstrelsy. The traumatic effects of such a specter can be instantiated by its persistent and recurrent haunting, even in the displaced and disguised form of spectacle.

I. Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Race

In attempting a Lacanian theoretical investigation of race, I would like to begin with a reading of Frantz Fanon's reading of Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, which I think underlies the painstaking, ambivalent vacillations in Fanon's reflections on "the fact of blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon's mention and application of the mirror stage in the colonial situation also exemplify an early encounter, or missed encounter, between Lacanian psychoanalysis and decolonization or postcolonial theory. In a long footnote in this book, Fanon observes that:

It would indeed be interesting, on the basis of Lacan's theory of the *mirror period*, to investigate the extent to which the *imago* of his fellow built up in the young white at the usual age would undergo an imaginary aggression with the appearance of the Negro. When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man the Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self—that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable. (161; original italics)

By contrast, when Antilleans are asked to recall their mirror image, their answers are always the same: "I had no color" (162). Ultimately, for Fanon, it was "the ideological power of French cultural imperialism" that resulted in the rather peculiar and "misplaced" identifications on both sides of the racial divide—namely, disavowal for the black child and phobia for the white child—when this theory is taken out of the secure confines of its Eurocentric origin and applied to the Antillean context (Seshadri-Crooks 31).

Fanon's reading here seems to resonate with a long line of appropriations of the concept of the mirror stage, a common culturalist or constructionist approach to ideology analysis that counts on the exorcising of the demon once the illusory

construct is deconstructed and the well-wrought lie is undone. History and numerous current events seem to tell otherwise. Furthermore, to conceive of the mirror stage and identification exclusively in bilateral, specular relations is to overlook the pivotal role the symbolic plays in the very existence of the mirror stage as well as the distinction Lacan makes between imaginary identification and symbolic identification, by which he reminds us that Freud's conception of identification, most notably in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (46-61), isn't limited to specular, immediate identification. It is the intervention of the signifier, from outside this bilateral, specular relation, that recognizes or ratifies the mirror image and makes possible the introjection of the image. Furthermore, since Lacan reworks from Freud's essay on narcissism the term "aggressivity" and identifies a certain aggressivity as lurking in the subject's viewing of his/her own image, it is integral to Lacan's conception of the mirror stage; however, "aggressivity" is now paraphrased and appropriated by Fanon on the level of the imaginary and in strictly specular and bilateral terms in the quoted passage.³ As Lacan himself makes clear, the "phenomenon of aggressivity isn't to be explained simply on the level of imaginary identification" (*Seminar II* 232). I analyze Fanon's reading of the mirror stage not to highlight his misreading, but to bring up and explore what he says—in a manner that is less likely to characterize the discourse of the analyst than that of the analysand—in other parts of the book. For Fanon's difficulty seems to lie precisely in the obvious fact of his blackness; as he puts it: "I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (116).

The characteristic ambivalence and vacillations of much of *Black Skin, White Masks* signals a tormented state that belies any simple acceptance or affirmation of "the fact of blackness" after the author himself exposes the illusory nature of white supremacy and the devastating effects of racism on blacks. It appears to me that the anxiety revealed in Fanon's self-analysis can serve as an instantiation par excellence of what Seshadri-Crooks conceives as racial anxiety emerging as a result of a "lack of a lack," since the arbitrary marks of the body are taken to be "simply there," neutralized as a plain fact, confirmed by their visibility, as the historicity of race and its contingent foundations undergo a transmutation into a "biological necessity" (21). Working on a set of Lacanian concepts, Seshadri-Crooks argues that "racial anxiety, the unconscious anxiety that is entailed by the sight of racial difference, has

³ The Lacanian scholar Joan Copjec points out this commonplace negligence or misreading of such aggressivity, underscoring that "what one loves in one's image is something more than the image." It is this "in-you-more-than-you" aspect of narcissism that constitutes "the source of the malevolence with which the subject regards its image, the aggressivity it unleashes to all its own representations" (37; original italics).

its cause not in ideology, but in the structure of race itself, and in the functioning of whiteness as its master signifier” (32). The structure of race, or the “racial symbolic” is not lacking because race is “a regime of visibility that secures our investment in racial identity” by recourse to certain privileged marks of the body, which appear to be pre-discursive. “What guarantees Whiteness its place of a master signifier,” according to Seshadri-Crooks, is the “phenotype [which] secures our belief in racial difference, thereby perpetuating our desire for Whiteness” (21). To be sure, desiring whiteness here doesn’t mean desiring to become Caucasian, for whiteness, as a master signifier, does not enter into the play of signification to represent one of the terms of racial difference in relation to another or the others, but instead signifies the very impossibility of signification, or in Seshadri-Crooks’ words, “an ‘insatiable desire’ on the part of all raced subjects to overcome difference” (21).

Consistent with the Lacanian theoretical framework, Seshadri-Crooks’ formulation of race underlines the dimension of the *real*, together with its instantiation via the *objet a*, in the structured way of seeing racial difference:

Whiteness, by attempting to signify that which is excluded in subject constitution, the more than symbolic aspect of the subject—the fact that he/she is not entirely determined by the symbolic or the imaginary—produces anxiety. There is a lack of a lack as it appears in that place that should have remained empty. It is a false door opening *not* onto a nowhere, but to an all-too-concrete wall. This anxiety then produces the uncanny object of race, the arbitrary marks of the body, namely hair, skin, and bone. These marks then are properly the desiderata of race; they serve the function of the *objet a*. (38; original italics)

I would like to highlight this uncanny and phobic object of race, which is “localized as the pre-discursive marks on the surface of the body,” in order to explore the invisibility necessarily entailed in the racial visibility foregrounded by such an object. The invisibility of race, as I conceive of it, is manifold and in multilayered senses: *First*, it signifies, at the most literal level, *the invisibility of whiteness*, both as a color and as a master signifier. White, as a color, stands in place of the presumed neutrality that occupies the other end of the supposed duality from which the opposite of the term “colored” is absent. As a master signifier, it by definition functions as a signifier of the lack of signifier, of the impossibility of signification

(representation); it remains outside the signifying chain but at the same time is what enables signification by virtue of the unconscious reference of each term of the differential relations of race—black, brown, yellow, etc.—to whiteness.⁴ *Second*, the invisibility of race also refers to *the invisibility of its own lacking* (lack of a lack) which produces racial anxiety. What undergirds the functioning of race, as a regime of visibility, is a pivotal object cause of desire (objet a) which makes possible the raced subject's investment in a series of bodily marks that constitute racial differences, yet which is not reducible to, nor objectifiable as, one specific physical trait—the gaze. For, as Lacan points out in *Seminar XI*, “[t]he objet a in the filed of the visible is the gaze” (105; original italics). The object of race, if conceived as the object of the scopoc drive, theoretically will then entail the dual, paradoxical character of objet a, emerging at once as that which opens up the lack in the Other (as cause of the subject's desire) and what can fill or conceal it. In other words, the function of objet a in Lacan is, as Charles Shepherdson puts it, “a localization of lack, a ‘particularization’ which allows the lack in the Other to be veiled at the very moment of its manifestation” (“Pound” 84; emphasis added). It appears, however, that the objet a of race, as localized on the bodily marks, has emanated an effect of nature or has been elevated to a biological fact which produces so much veiling or filling that there seems to be no lacking, no fissure opened up in the regime of visibility—hence the anxiety of the raced subject. *Finally*, the invisibility of race involves *the invisibility or submergence of something foreclosed* and resisting to becoming conscious in spite of, or perhaps as a result of, a staging of racial difference as spectacle—which is *the specter of race* that I shall reflect on not only through theoretical speculations but also concrete socio-historical examples.

In the pages that follow, I shall then elaborate on my last two points on the visibility/invisibility of race. In so doing I will bring the Lacanian notion of the gaze to bear on the subject of race, examine the “effect of nature” in the conceptions of racial difference along with, or in light of, sexual difference, and reflect on the specter of race through my readings of the figure and figurations of race in certain

⁴ This invisibility of whiteness does not entail, by extension, an invisibility of blackness. Rather, as the examples in this essay will illustrate, such invisibility of whiteness is intertwined with the visibility of blackness at the phenotypic level. What becomes invisible about blackness is that it never maintains an isomorphic relation with whiteness, as two equal terms in a representational system of racial difference, even when it is conceived as “biological facts” or “effects of nature.” In an effective symbolic universe of a racial regime such as the one Fanon faced, the only race that wasn't always conscious of its own skin color or other visible characteristics defining its own race was the whites, who, by virtue of his status of “non-colored,” naturally didn't experience the kind of qualm Fanon experienced, although they were also interpellated by such a regime of visibility.

literary and cultural texts.

The Gaze and the Other

As mentioned above, Fanon's excruciating self-analysis of the racial drama played out throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*, particularly in the chapter titled "The Fact of Blackness," reveals that the radical intellectual and revolutionary is more profoundly petrified by the biological fact of his blackness, as an immutable work of nature, upon finding himself rendered a spectacle of blackness under the white gaze, than he is by "the 'idea' that others have of me," which is to say those myths of white supremacy and black inferiority that he may judge to have been sufficiently challenged and debunked through his work and actions. It is an impasse that extends well beyond the sight of his immediate presence under white eyes and leaves virtually no sign of escaping, as Fanon recounts: "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle" (116). Without trivializing the anguish Fanon and any black person of his time (or even in our time) must have experienced under a racist gaze, nor taking lightly the extreme difficulty in coping with such a visual violence, I would nonetheless elaborate on the theoretical implications of psychoanalysis that have been misrecognized by Fanon or might not have been available to him in his efforts of understanding race and racism in psychoanalytical terms. In the long footnote quoted earlier, Fanon derives from Lacan's notion of the mirror stage an image of the Other which is caught up in the Manichean black/white opposition. If the Other for the white has to be the black, and vice versa, and if otherness is to be perceived and accentuated "on the level of the body image" which demonstrates the absolute incommensurability and unassimilability of the terms of the duality (black vs. white), then this conception of the Other can be faulted, on Lacanian grounds, by its positing an all-too-concrete Other, one that lacks the "enigma of the Other," namely, the lack in the Other which is the necessary precondition for the constitution of the subject.⁵

⁵ See, for example, Žižek's explications of the Lacanian conception of the Other in terms of "the three stages of the Symbolic" in Lacan's oeuvre (*Interrogating* 30-32). Due to such a lack, a crack or fracture in the Other, there is a remainder stuck in the subject's accession to the Other that prevents the subject from being coextensive with, or completely alienated from, the Other. The subject therefore neither becomes the misrecognized image of the Other as the Imaginary ego, nor would it be totally subsumed into a structural functioning of the signifier (exclusively governed by the symbolic). Though psychoanalysis didn't dwell extensively on the issues around race in its earlier developments, despite Freud's efforts in his thought-provoking last work, *Moses*

Pervasive in the racial drama depicted by Fanon is the omnipresent gaze of the Other, understandably conceived as white, from whose confirmation of the fact of blackness Fanon suffers. Yet in Lacanian theory, the gaze of the Other is not the all-seeing, panoptical perspective that film theory, as Joan Copjec points out, misrecognizes and appropriates by reading Foucault into Lacan (see Chapters 1 and 2 of *Read My Desire*). The gaze, as established earlier, is the problematic object of race (*objet a*) that enables the regime of visibility by its localization in a series of bodily marks. If the gaze is cast by the omniscient, panoptical Other, forestalling every sign of resistance and defining the meaning of the subject's each move, then the fate of the raced subject is *either* to identify with and thus "coincide with" the gaze, *or* to assume a total alienation of the raced subject from its Other. The theoretical consequence of both scenarios is the annihilation of the subject. Based on Lacan's well-known formulations in the second section of *Seminar XI* (entitled "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*"), Copjec elucidates that the Lacanian gaze is the point (in the field of vision) "at which something appears to be *invisible* . . . something appears to be missing from representation." This point of the gaze "marks the *absence* of a signified; it is an *unoccupiable* point, not . . . because it figures an unrealizable ideal but because it indicates an impossible real" (*Read* 34-35; original italics). Not only can the subject not occupy nor be located at the point of the gaze—which would spell "its very annihilation" (*Read* 35)—but the Other does not possess the gaze either. For the horrible truth revealed in Lacan's anecdotal telling of his personal encounter with a character named "Petit-Jean" (*Seminar XI* 95), as well as his theoretical speculations on the gaze, is that "the gaze does not see you" (Copjec 36).

Contrary to the panoptical gaze of the Other who "is supposed to know," who is posited by the subject as consisting in certainties, determinants, and sources of confirmation, the gaze of the Other in the Lacanian sense is characterized by the impossibility of "any ultimate confirmation from the Other," which, however, is crucial to subject constitution (Copjec 36). Owing to such a constitutive impossibility, the reticence of the Other, asking a final confirmation from the Other is essentially impossible, because it is something the Other cannot give. The trap of race as a regime of visibility is that this impossibility is now "visualized" and localized on the body image, as *an effect of nature*, thereby promising to fulfill the raced subject's ultimately unrealizable desire for race—which is to say, for the

and Monotheism, Christopher Lane contends that Lacan's conception of the Other "has no obvious relation to color" (14), and Tim Dean goes as far as saying that "the Other has no color" (qtd. in Lane, 14).

erasure of race, since whiteness functions as a signifier without signified, as a result of its disavowal of being one term of the signifying chain, a disavowal correlative to whiteness' disavowing of its own historicity that Seshadri-Crooks points out (21, 45). Under a racist regime where the raced subject perceives itself to be in antagonistic relation with the Other, to demand recognition from the gaze of the Other as the precondition for the subject's subjectivity is already to presuppose that the Other takes up the point of the gaze it cannot occupy. Furthermore, recognizing the Other's confirmation of racial difference by accepting, even if in protest and with reluctance, the taxonomy of race (black, colored, etc.) as *biological fact* is to tantamount to conceding to the Other something it does not have, hence something it cannot grant: It is an impossibility the raced subject is doomed to seek after in its enterprise of desiring whiteness. Its secret lure lies precisely in the fact that the prospect of accessing the "*jouissance* of the Other" is "within reach," as it were, due to the visibility of racial difference as given, pre-discursive; the catch, however, is that the moment the raced subject encounters the *objet a* of race (as bodily marks) is also the moment it is to experience the case of racial anxiety, as discussed earlier, because the hole in the Other (constitutive impossibility) is now filled and the lack is lacking.

Race, Sex, and the Effect of Nature

We have mentioned that the efficacy and tenacity of the regime of visibility of race hinge on the effect of nature it produces by recourse to the bodily marks that define racial difference. But are these physical traits to be regarded as merely an "effect" of culture or discourse, with no substance attached to the flesh of which they are integral parts? How does one argue against the biological truism that humans are born into different skin colors and various types or characteristics of the body? It is such questions and the "effect of nature," which seems inextricable to biological necessity and scientific truth, that can establish the similarity between racial and sexual differences as distinct from other categories of difference, such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc.⁶ Based on psychoanalytic theorists' critiques of, or at

⁶ To answer these questions is to enter into the old Nature/Culture debate. For the purpose and scope of this essay, I will focus on those aspects of the debate that specifically concern psychoanalysis. In the context of critical theory in recent decades, the Nature/Culture debate turns on the reconsiderations of existing categories of difference and identity and results in the demystification—rightfully so—of many presuppositions of these categories: class, ethnicity, gender, nation, etc. are nothing more than the effects of discourse, traps of essentialism to be wary of, and illusory constructs to be deconstructed. The distinction between sex and gender, for

least, reservations toward, the sweeping reach of the discourse of social construction in general, and based, in particular, on the Lacanian insistence that sexual difference is a “real and not a symbolic difference” (Copjec 207), can one assign psychoanalysis to the Nature side of the debate, reducing it to “a form of disguised naturalism”? Framing psychoanalysis in the Nature/Culture dyad, however, doesn’t do justice to its theoretical insights; in fact, this dualistic framing constitutes a negligence to its basic assumptions, since psychoanalysis is then “forced to coincide with a conceptual alternative that effaces its most elementary terms from the outset” (Shepherdson, “Human” 45). For example, the ego in psychoanalysis is not a biological entity or phenomenon, nor an anatomical part of the living body. On the other hand, the ego, for Freud, is not a “human invention,” either, a culturally specific institution or category like caste, language, law, etc., even though “each culture may provide different rituals or symbolic props to regulate the ego in distinctive ways” (51). Furthermore, in conceiving of terms that appear to involve organisms or have biological basis in organs (sex, the drive, the phallus, etc.), Lacanian psychoanalysis envisages neither organisms nor human inventions. Rebutting biological presuppositions, Lacan asserts that although the somatic and the psychic are continuous (yet never identical), the organism and the subject are not coextensive, given the division or split that constitutes the subject (“Guiding Remarks” 88).

In Lacanian theory, sex is “neither nature nor culture . . . neither pre-discursive nor symbolic” (Seshadri-Crooks 39). Sexual difference is therefore irreducible to the anatomical difference between female and male bodies, but it cannot be accounted for solely in language, as merely effects of a given socio-symbolic field, either, nor as another symbolic difference. In fact, sexual difference is a more radical difference, one which signals the inherent impossibility of subject constitution and points to the subject of the unconscious or the “more than symbolic” aspect of the subject. To the extent that racial difference is not reducible to the anatomical differences between different races (which, as elaborated above, are what veil the inherent lacking of race, and what trap the raced subject into racial anxiety, into resigning itself to the effect of nature in which it is a “slave” to its “own appearance”), it bears striking resemblance to sexual difference.

instance, is often construed, perhaps fittingly in the context of the greater debate, along the line of the Nature/Culture opposition, thanks to the seemingly irrefutable “biological facts” and “effect of nature.” However, one term of difference that is acutely contested by psychoanalytic theorists and that stands out for many as an indication of the limit of culturalist or (de)constructionist views of difference happens to be the category of sex, as distinct from gender, but not exactly in terms of this Nature/Culture duality.

Moreover, unlike other categories of difference (class, gender, etc.), race is not a “human invention,” just as sexual difference is not (Shepherdson, “Human” 45). To bestow such a privileged status on racial difference, one that is almost equivalent to sexual difference, is by no means to overlook their nuances. Where sexual difference results in a constitutive incalculability of the subject (who is necessarily sexed), racial difference neutralizes that constitutive indeterminacy by filling the gaping hole in the Other with the visibility of bodily marks as the “effect of nature.” The “peculiarity of race,” contends Seshadri-Crooks, is that it is “neither in the Real, like sex, nor wholly discursive, like class or ethnicity” (46).⁷ Nonetheless, the affinity of racial difference to sexual difference might have been accountable for the phenomenon that in “a few recent exceptions to the silence on race in psychoanalysis” which are noted by Jean Walton (197-98), race is often examined alongside questions of sexual difference, gender or sexuality, and feminism.⁸

Another analogy between sexual difference and racial difference that this essay wishes to underline and draw on in the remaining arguments is the figure and figuration of “the real thing” (as the anatomical fact or the work of nature, for example) in sexual as well as racial differences. What is foregrounded in both cases is an inherent impossibility or internal limit of representation, or a problematic representation that tends to render “the real thing” invisible. As the chapter entitled “The Subjective Import of the Castration Complex” in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose’s seminal book, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, points out, “there is no psychic representative of the opposition masculine-feminine” (120). Sexual difference therefore cannot be adequately inscribed in language (only this impossibility is registered in the symbolic). Furthermore, contrary to the commonsensical understanding that sexual difference somehow figures the biological facts of sex, it is rather that, as Rose writes, “anatomical difference comes to *figure* sexual difference,” which always exceeds what the symbolic can capture—that is, anatomical difference “becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be” (42, original italics). On the other hand, race as a regime of visibility cannot be exempt from the logic and

⁷ This does not mean that social or political antagonism based on race cannot be registered in the *real* in Lacanian sense. What Laclau and Mouffe conceive as “social antagonism,” which is not to be conflated with the existing antagonistic relations within a given socio-political order, is *real*, according to Žižek (“Discourse” 249-54, 259-60; *Sublime* 126-27). Lacanian scholars such as Žižek, Stavrakakis, and Zupančič have in various ways envisioned a politics of the real, or theorized the political as real, where the real is conceived as being irreducible to political reality, in the same way that the real is not reducible to reality in Lacan’s work.

⁸ See the list of publications (before 2001) in Walton’s long endnote (197-98).

problematic of the signifier, either. As Copjec says of the subject's field of vision and the gaze, "there is no brute vision, no vision totally independent of language" (*Read* 34). The gaze under the racial regime certainly does not merely conform to the optical laws, but also follows those of the symbolic, the structured ways of seeing racial difference. In both cases, what appears as the effect of nature does not reveal "the real thing" itself but emerges as the figure and figuring of something that is impossible to represent in the symbolic; such problematic representation or representative points to the real thing of the body (the biological basis of sexual and racial differences) yet constitutes a certain *veiling* that blocks the immediacy of the real thing—a certain (degree) of *invisibility* which is endemic to its representation, i.e., to its *visibility*. In the next section of the essay, I would like to explore the figure and figurations of race, as allegedly the "real thing," in historical instances in which the spectacle of racial difference was tied in problematic ways to the invisibility of race and its haunting specter.

II. The Figure and Figurations of Race

What does the regime of visibility of race represent, if not the "real" racial difference in the order of the visible? How did race become invisible when racial difference was not only represented but staged as spectacle in certain historical junctures, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay? How does race function strictly as a figure—and a figure for what? Rather than continuing my theoretical speculations on the issues raised by these questions, I would like to, at this moment, approach them by examining historical examples where the figure and figurations of race were highlighted to the point of being rendered a spectacle, especially the case of blackface performance, where racial difference is literally "showcased" and where a certain form of resistance, it is said, has been envisioned. To better illustrate my theoretical points as well as the case of blackface minstrelsy, I will first review briefly a few historical antecedents to the staging of racial difference in blackface performance, where the spectacle of race also entailed a certain racial invisibility. For the staging of racial characteristics (e.g. blackness) in these cases, I want to suggest, functioned as a figure of imagined radical otherness or subalternity, which is not yet represented or not yet representable in a given socio-symbolic edifice.

What seems to be an intriguing similarity in the social and cultural discourses in Euro-America in the Age of Revolution, around late 18th century and early 19th century, is the phenomenon that the curious invisibility of race was accompanied by

the proliferation or popularization of the term slavery or slave as trope. It was not unusual to find that “revolutionary pamphlets often cast Americans as slaves of king and parliament, suggesting at times that chattel slavery was but an extreme form of a more pervasive political oppression” (Sundquist 141). In a period when slavery came to signify the antithesis to the most cherished political value of the day—freedom—racial slavery expanded at unprecedented scales around the globe, supporting old regimes and new democracies alike. Yet political theorists and philosophers of the time (Hegel, Locke, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, etc.) seemed oblivious to such a glaring discrepancy between the founding principles and practices of the emerging body politic. Hegel, for instance, was either deliberately silent on the Haitian Revolution, brought about by slaves themselves, or unwittingly failed to take into account its significance while conceiving of his well-known master-slave dialectic (Buck-Morss; Fischer 24-33).⁹ Furthermore, their writings were sometimes characterized at once by explicit uses of slavery as a tropological figure *and* their knowing or unwitting forgetting of the “really existing” slaves and racial slavery. A prime example is George Sand’s novel *Indiana* (1832), a story about a young woman who suffers both from her unhappy marriage to a much older husband and her love affair with an unfaithful man. In this novel, and by extension in post-Bastille social discourse, the suffering of the slaves themselves has been relegated to oblivion not only because it is merely a vehicle through which the heroine Indiana expresses her own sense of oppression and suffering, but also because Indiana apparently *forgets* and in effect *obliterates* the fact that she still maintains a master/slave relationship with her own slaves even while bemoaning her fate in front of them (Hsiao 7-8; cf. Jenson 195-209).

The kind of visibility and invisibility of race that I explore is thus tied to the phenomena of “speaking of the slaves without really speaking for the slaves” in the socio-political discourses of the revolutions. As I have argued elsewhere on *Indiana* and post-Bastille socio-political discourses, “the literality of the word ‘slave’ as well as the antagonism it invokes is *concealed precisely by means of exposing itself in full view*, as a tropological spectacle”: “It was as if the slave figure emerged as an *other-worldly spectacle*” in a great deal of revolutionary discourse (9; emphasis added). I argue that it was through such figuring or figuration that race found its expression in the political reality of the time, where racial difference was not yet a

⁹ The first part of Susan Buck-Morss’ book was originally published as a journal article titled “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 821-65. Though in a similar vein of thought, Nick Nesbitt, focusing especially on his *Philosophy of Right*, argues for the radical potentialities of Hegel’s political thought, which the master-slave dialectic touches on but stops short of pursuing.

viable category for political representation and mobilization, and the physical presence of black slaves didn't amount to its place in the socio-political order. The enslaved race didn't constitute a differential relation with other social actors, each of whom was a differential term in a given socio-symbolic field, nor did it figure in the antagonistic relations in the political arena, though the figure or figuration of race, in the form of spectacle, could make a difference.¹⁰ In spite of the spectacle of race that tends to render the "real thing" (the enslaved race) invisible, the specter of race lurks in the backdrop of the spectacle, as an indissoluble remainder in the wake of a certain political mobilization. Insofar as the slaves could not be counted as part of the citizenry (that is, they remained slaves), they were unrepresentable in post-Bastille socio-symbolic order. Nevertheless, the spectral existence of racial slavery could be articulated through its figurations, which, despite the obfuscation of the foreclosed race (slaves), could signal the crisis in the *means of representation* on the flip side of the spectacle. In his reading of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Peter Stallybrass comments that the term "lumpenproletariat," which, as a departure from the classical Marxian conception of class, is highlighted in this work to designate "an unstable yoking together . . . of heterogeneous groups," indeed represents more of an "unnameability" or "the unnameable thing . . . that defied all boundaries" than a particular stratum of society that can be clearly specified (70; 72). "For Marx," Stallybrass contends, "the distinctions between classes are obscured by 'this scum, offal, refuse of all classes'" (72). Incidentally, as he points out, "Marx and Engels . . . sometimes used *lumpenproletariat* as a racial category" (70), which is quite consistent with the scores of nineteenth century writings that depict the most disempowered and dispossessed strata in European metropolises (Paris, London) in racial terms even when those thus represented are in fact of the same race as the representers.

Race in these historical instances was therefore deployed as a figure for some other categories of difference, a figure for causes that foregrounded race as trope yet obliterated the "real thing" of racial difference, i.e., causes that were advanced perhaps at the expense of the foreclosed elements, regardless of the physical presence or absence of the subjugated race in those societies. Though displaced by its figurations, the spectral emergence of race can be *real* in the Lacanian sense because the underlying issue of race would come back to haunt the political realities which were founded on its constitutive exclusion, via the symptomatic

¹⁰ Here I am drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's conceptions of "social antagonism," the logic of difference, and the logic of equivalence. See particularly Chapter 3 (entitled "Beyond the Positivity of the Social: Antagonism and Hegemony") of their book.

manifestations in the latter day scenarios of racial conflicts. The specter of race can thus be conceived as the traumatic kernel which is characterized by its resistance to becoming-conscious despite the efforts of “raising consciousness” by the official ideology, or the staging of racial difference as spectacle, as in blackface minstrelsy.

It is in light of these historical contexts and theoretical parameters that I would like to present the thought-provoking case of Bert Williams, a black blackface performer who was born and raised in the Bahamas, learned to play stereotypical blacks in minstrel shows, made his name as the first black performer on a Broadway stage with sustained popularity in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, and yet has been virtually obliterated in both white and African American cultural memories. To many on both sides of the racial divide today, blackface performance is a forgotten, or forgettable historical reminder of racist pasts, an archaic cultural form they wish to do away with. The type of performance Williams perfected, however, happened to have its roots in this largely forgotten blackface tradition, which deserves some historical contextualization here. Blackface performance emerged as a popular mode of entertainment that was featured in minstrel shows or vaudeville circuits which toured the country with considerable commercial success in the nineteenth century (hence was alternatively called travelling shows, tent shows, or medicine shows). The minstrel show, or blackface minstrelsy, typically consisted in singing, dancing, and skits that showcased black characters who were traditionally played by white performers blackening their faces to mimic African-Americans—or blacks in their imagination. Up until the early decades of the twentieth century, minstrel shows served as a significant venue of entertainment for the masses (regardless of their races) when a large-scale entertainment industry and popular culture were still unavailable (or, at best, still in the making), and, unsurprisingly, they were generally considered a vulgar form of entertainment for the rowdy crowds, mostly from the lower classes.

Bert Williams’ performance of blackness behind a burn cork mask—that of a real “coon” who apparently didn’t need the make-up white performers used to look “real”—may be viewed as the spectacle of race par excellence, an extremely complicated figure of race fraught with variegated figurations of racial difference: the masking is double or multiple-faceted, marking the differences between Williams, his fellow performers (both black and white), and his mostly white audiences. Yet the staging of racial difference was not new in Williams’ time, nor was the functioning of race as a figure for some other differences. Scholars of blackface minstrelsy have pointed out that it emerged among the lower classes who were not (yet) completely segregated along racial lines in the early years of

minstrelsy (Cockrell 84-86), or they have considered antebellum blackface minstrelsy a sort of working-class phenomenon among white ethnic minorities (Lhamon, Lott, Roediger).¹¹ In fact, before the late nineteenth century, blackface vaudevilles had been predominantly performed by white minstrels who acted out white racial fantasies with the mask of exaggerated physical traits, besides the body language and patterns of speech that reflected entrenched and demeaning images and stereotypes of “happy slaves,” for example. The minstrel mask had become such a mainstay of the blackface tradition and garnered such ritualistic significance that before the 1930s it was “required of anyone who would act the role,” even those black performers whose “natural coloration” would have rendered it unnecessary (Ellison 47). What was extraordinary about the case of Bert Williams was that he wore the blackface makeup throughout his career, even though his longtime partner George Walker and other fellow African American performers did not. Louis Chude-Sokei argues that by wearing the mask that conveyed the familiar blackface meanings and expectations to the white audience, Williams maintained an “epistemological balance, a social contract” (35). On their end of the deal, Williams and Walker “were able to sneak a legitimate and innovative black musical theater into popular culture under Williams’ mask, complete with complex, original, and progressive (for the most part and by the standard of their time) depictions of African American men and women” (32).

III. Resistance and the Real Thing of Race

If blackness had been appropriated by white minstrels and race had been deployed as a figure for class or ethnic antagonism, the coming of age of Bert Williams brought up an interesting question: *What happened when the “real thing” itself came on stage, and got behind the mask too?* That is, what happened when “the real thing” represented itself, in a social context of “wildly unbalanced power relationships?” (Chude-Sokei 37) Likening Booker T. Washington’s oratorical mastery through his “appropriation of the minstrel image” to Bert Williams’ blackface performance, Houston Baker comments that such a move of “stepping inside” the white man’s black mask was a “successful black excess” (25, 33). Yet

¹¹ In the US context, it is commonplace to find that early representations of ethnic minorities such as Italians and Irish were often cast in racial terms, sometimes associated with blackness. In nineteenth-century London and Paris, as Stallybrass observes, the city’s poor were often envisioned by the bourgeois subject as “a distinct race,” the viewing of whom constitutes for the bourgeois spectator “the conjunction of theatricality and racial fear” (75).

this kind of celebration of black minstrels hasn't always been common among African American commentators of black cultural history, nor has it been the case among twentieth-century minstrel theorists. After a generation of largely uncritical historical accounts of blackface minstrelsy that regarded it as little more than simple cultural borrowing, the 1960s saw the first wave of "strongly negative appraisals of blackface comedy" (Mahar 180) which was heralded by Ralph Ellison's seminal essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke."¹² It wasn't until recent decades, mostly in the 1990s that a new generation of revisionist readings of nineteenth-century blackface performance began to entertain the idea (and in some cases to affirm the status) of blackface minstrelsy as the venue of cross-racial identification. Though careful not to neglect the presence of racism in blackface, these readings emphasize the liberating or progressive potentiality in the hybrid or creolized nature of this cultural form. It is fair, then, to argue that as creolized, minstrelsy is a highly unstable cultural form that stems from a traumatic encounter whose consequences "may not be calculable from or contained within the existing horizon of possibilities" (Tuhkanen 14). In the case of Bert Williams, who had been well informed of the distinctive creolization of culture in the Caribbean, his blackface masking even more acutely exemplifies the kind of "strategies of resistance that are never clearly distinguished from forms of collaboration" or means of survival in creolization (Tuhkanen 14). As the dialect poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's presence in the minstrel market suggests, there was a keen (self-)awareness of the liberating possibilities that black participants like Dunbar and Williams faced as well as an acknowledgement of the traps they had to negotiate (Chude-Sokei 65). Besides the evident trap of being co-opted into perpetuating racist stereotyping in a white-dominated theater, Williams and Dunbar were also trapped by what helped them gain great recognition as they both "felt rejected by the subsequent generations of African American literature and performance," dubbed as "the last darky" and a symbol of the end of the regime of dialect lyrics, respectively (70).

Examining and assessing Bert Williams' modes and strategies of resistance in the dangerous game of black masking, one cannot simply disregard the little known or often ignored Afro-Caribbean dimension of his performance. Masking has been a central cultural practice in the Afro-diasporic experiences of Carnival. Caribbean

¹² It is noteworthy that although Ellison is unequivocal in identifying the origin of blackface performance as white rather than African American, he is somewhat more "ambivalent" in assessing black minstrelsy than the usually wholesale rejection of this cultural form by the civil rights generation. For Ellison not only affirms the likely motivation of "the Negro's masking" by "a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity," but also claims that "the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals" (55).

studies scholars have highlighted the liberating or subversive potentialities of carnival masking in colonial and postcolonial contexts—as camouflage, for example. It is in this context that Chude-Sokei characterizes Williams’ blackface performance as a strategy of “self-evaporation” by “hiding in the light” or “hiding in plain sight” (68, 69). In light of this strategy or mode of resistance, Williams and Walker “erase the mask from behind it” through “plural masking,” stretching its meanings to the point “where no one mask could contain or represent what the audience expected” (69, 71). Such masking strategy also opens up the possibility of empowering the blacks with the insider’s knowledge of the insider’s joke that exploits a naïve “white commitment to the play as the thing itself” (69, 71). Although their performances can be said to have achieved an initial success, in terms of black usurpation under a white gaze, the spectacle of racial difference, again, seemed to fail to invoke the specter of race in ways that would dismantle the racial fantasy and cause more fundamental change in the bigger picture of political representation. In the heyday of his career, George Walker, the far more outspoken of the two, published an open plea for the recognition of his race that was directed against a civil effort of “raising consciousness” for racial equality. Referring to a dinner at which “representatives of the Hebrew race, the Japanese race, the Italian race, and the Irish race will speak on the subject, ‘Is Race Prejudice a Form of Superstition?’” Walker called into question their utter disregard of his race and undermined the legitimacy of the occasion with his searing words:

Gentlemen, please explain how it came to pass that your learned society failed to invite a representative of my race to speak at your dinner. Is it possible that you have members who are seeking to emancipate themselves from superstition and yet they fail to be broad[-minded] enough to ask a man of African blood in his veins to be present and to take part in your deliberations? (Smith 101)

Here once more we witness how the specter of race persisted at a historical juncture when conscious efforts were made to exorcise it, by groups who had, historically, endured racial prejudice against themselves and for whom a certain manifestation of racism and race alliance remained invisible. What some contemporary theorists of blackface minstrelsy highlight and celebrate in earlier white minstrel shows as a form of resistance to class and ethnic discriminations and dominant bourgeois values (Lhamon, Lott), the release of subversive energies against a backdrop of essentially Victorian morals, and the potentials for cross-racial identification and

alliance (Lhamon, Lott, and, to a lesser degree, Gubar) deserve more reconsiderations with caveats, in terms of how race, especially blackness, was constructed, performed, and figured. For instance, the staging of racial difference, or what Gubar calls “race change” in individual cases might have been on voluntary basis and without a collective initiative and political calculation, as Gubar suggests (12, 43-44). Yet, historically and collectively speaking, cross-racial identification may not have originated on voluntary basis—that is to say, working-class ethnic minorities such as Irish and Italians would not have to some extent identified with blackness had they not been denigrated (by Anglo-Americans or earlier immigrants) on racial grounds associated with blackness, backwardness, licentiousness, etc. Nor would such identification necessarily result in class alliance that would cross the racial line, as testified by ethnic minorities’ persistent negligence toward and complicity with the racial injustice perpetrated to the detriment of the black race. On the other hand, the visibility of the public display of “genuine” black music, dance, and vaudeville shows on Broadway by Williams and Walker did not lead to a broader recognition of black presence in other facets of the public sphere, let alone their acceptance in these venues, nor the acknowledgement of race as a problem—especially those concerned with blacks. Even after Walker died and Williams became the first black performer on an integrated Broadway stage by joining the all-white Ziegfeld Follies in 1910, and received top billing later, his unprecedented popularity and iconic status as a pioneering black celebrity among his wider audiences (both black and white) did little to make the white spectator realize the artifice of the burnt cork mask in a way that might have diminished age-old stereotypes; nor did it prevent him from personally and routinely encountering discrimination off stage in those public places where his performances took him (hotels, restaurants, bars, etc.). In the end, blacks still were not counted as “players”—that is, they remained invisible—in the politics of race, even though a few of them became players on stage, playing the roles of “the real thing” of race and starring in the most visible spectacle of the time—the vaudeville shows on Broadway.

The black blackface performance such as the one practiced by Williams can be considered a tactical mimicry of the other’s mimicry of the mimicked subject’s misrecognized and fantasized image, which is a practice that has its origin or at least counterpart in the Caribbean. When one examines the outcome of Williams’ engagement with the US minstrel tradition alongside the cultural significance of Afro-Caribbean carnival masking, the incalculability of this cultural form appears even more pronounced. According to some nineteenth-century travel writers’ accounts of Caribbean carnival festivities, blacks blackened their faces and bodies

on various locales of the region and to nuanced effects and purposes. As Gerard Aching recapitulates from one of such travel writings, “the blackened black masquerader mimics members of the white French Creole elite who masquerade as their black gardeners and servants” (17). Besides such a “strategic ‘reappropriation’ of blackness,” Gerard Aching notes that the application of soot and molasses to the black bodies on carnival occasions can also be viewed as a move (or counter-move) that “publicly exposes and denounces the objectification of blacks in the agricultural and industrial production of sugar that dominant social classes normally ignored during the rest of the year” (17). Masking and mimicry in this context therefore can barely be equated with concealment and imitation, respectively, but foreground an over-valuation vis-à-vis the appearance and its replication through masking—that is, a masking practice intended to be seen, to become visible by effacing the subject’s original aspect. Blackness thus “exists as both a visible and an ‘invisible’ presence” (18). Drawing on Lacan’s well-known and often cited passages on mimicry as camouflage in Seminar XI, Aching argues that these cases of carnival masking by Afro-Caribbeans exemplified an “active engagement” by the native colonial subjects who opened up a critical room for native agency under a similarly oppressive and racist regime (33, 38).¹³

Furthermore, such black masking also unsettled the ideological universe and the racial gaze of a Western travel writer (Walter Goodman) who sighted “a negro painted himself black” in a carnival pageant, as he reflects: “This piece of flesh and miserable humanity is worthy of attention, because he has come to prove to us that the despised negro is not, in the final analysis, as black as he is painted” (qtd. in Aching 18). Aching treats this subtle yet sudden realization on the part of the spectator as a “demasking” amounting to “an unexpected and undesirable ideological self-recognition (the shock of self-recognition) that is brought on by contact with a masked subject” (6). The unexpectedness and undesirability here are crucial, for it signals the *uncalculated* cracks opened up by such a “demasking” encounter within the colonial symbolic edifice in which blackness used to function as no more than a *figure* for the departure from norms and the repressed energies and desires, which were then momentarily released in the staging of carnival spectacle, a staging that entailed orchestrating and calculating such figurations. Unlike Williams’ white audiences in the US, these European travelers in the New

¹³ In Lacan’s elaborations on this issue, the most relevant statement here is as follows: “Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind” (*Seminar XI* 99). Based on this notion of mimicry, Aching further underscores the colonial subject’s agency, which, though by no means unproblematic and autonomous, “is dispersed between ‘something’ and the ‘itself’ behind it” (37).

World were moved to confront the phantasmatic structure of the prevailing regime of visibility of race, since they beheld “bodies that, because of their accentuated or hyperreal blackness, oblige these travelers to recognize, acknowledge, and record their participation in and attitude toward social and intellectual acts of exclusion” (Aching 19). The element of surprise notwithstanding, masking and mimicry as a strategy of resistance in the Caribbean is not immune to the disavowal and neutralization of the spectacle, as evidenced in latter-day examples, yet this further testifies to the incalculability of blackface performance.¹⁴

Such incalculability entails not only what appears to be uncalculated by or incalculable to the regime of racial visibility, but also that which is incalculable to the raced subject who stages blackface masking under a postulated gaze of the Other. What often go unnoticed are the elaborate calculations, on the part of the masked performer, of each move of the spectator, who posits and embodies the panoptical gaze that subjects the observed to its visual violence. Although a black performer such as Williams anticipates and exploits the presumed blind spots of the white gaze, what tends to elude him, paradoxically, is his own unwitting postulation of an omnipresent gaze, on the basis of which he calculates his next (counter-)move. However, the gaze in the Lacanian sense, as elaborated earlier, “does not see you,” and if there is a lack in the Other (which is the precondition of subject constitution), the impossibility of its ultimate confirmation would work against both sides of the bilateral relations seeking to pin down each other’s maneuvers—hence the incalculability. Williams knew only too well the expectations of the audience, which led to his immense popularity but also to an insurmountable limit inherent to his performance. A fleeting moment of suspending this constant positing of the gaze, thereby experiencing an unprecedented measure of freedom in performance, can be exemplified by Williams’ short-lived experiment with film-making in 1914 (when the silent film was still a new medium in show business), which is dramatized in Caryl Phillips’ fictional account of Bert Williams’ life.¹⁵ I would like to quote the

¹⁴ It is noteworthy, however, that Afro-Caribbean practices of carnival masking have since also been susceptible to the appropriation, neutralization, and co-option by the ideological forces and political order that once rendered them invisible and still thrive on their irrelevance and a certain form of exclusion. For, as Aching points out in numerous parts of his book (especially Chapter 2), carnival processions have been staged by the ruling class in post-independence era as a manifestation of nationalist discourse, or touted as mere touristic commodity in a globalized economy by the middle class entrepreneurs in collaboration with foreign capital.

¹⁵ Phillips’ *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) is marketed as a “novel” based on Bert Williams’ life and work, though some passages feature pastiches of genres, including playbills, scripts, news clips, etc. The characters’ lines are often without quotation marks, especially in the latter part. In actuality, there is relatively little biographical information about the off-stage Williams, and

description of the shooting process, in which Williams stands before a camera (the “black box”) and attempts, for the first time in his career, to rid himself of every presumed expectation the audience may have of him, thanks in part to the absence of a live audience:

[T]he black box promises him nothing and it stares back as though daring him to perform. And so this is now his audience? The instrument gives him no clue as to what is expected and it has occurred to him that he is therefore free to do whatever he pleases. . . . He stares at the black box and a sharp surge of excitement rushes through his body. . . .

For eleven minutes he sees himself performing an act that he never before witnessed, moving easily, the hand gestures perfect, the timing flawless. He watches himself and in the darkness he is quietly moved. (190-91)¹⁶

Unfortunately, it turned out that the audience was not ready for a Bert Williams who didn’t take their expectations into consideration and performed without donning the familiar mask. The uncalculated outcry among the audience of the film eventually prompted Williams, after less than two years, to abandon completely his project of making silent films. Here Williams’ bold move of unmasking—literally—has a certain radical potentiality which is similar to the carnival unmasking practice mentioned in Aching’s Afro-Caribbean case, since both seek to undermine and overturn the ideological underpinnings of the regime of visibility of race, to lay bare the status of racial difference as spectacle or trope. Unlike the strategy of foregrounding the artifice of racial spectacle by means of countering with or restaging the spectacle of blackness, which is adopted in Afro-Caribbean carnival masking as well as in most of Williams’ stage performances, Williams attempts to show in this film production “the real thing of race”—not just as a trope, but what is behind the trope of the minstrel mask, which proves to be too much to take for the white audience who, ironically, come to “the real coon.”

Seeming to illustrate a different consequence of blackface masking in the US context, Bert Williams’ strategy of hiding in the light or hiding in plain sight, in an

Chude-Sokei fittingly decides that “there is no sense of Bert Williams existing off stage” (76).

¹⁶ This second paragraph of the quote is about Williams’ reactions during the preview of the first edit of the film.

ironically diametrical way, mirrors the functioning of the spectacle of race, whereby the spectral existence of racial trauma is occluded or concealed precisely by means of exposing racial difference in full view—a staging of racial fantasy that features “the real thing” yet safeguards the spectators from encountering the *real*, the specter of race, the historical trauma of a nation split by slavery. The move of foregrounding the fictive nature of the images of blackness in the white imagination has to be “smuggled in” under the cover of the familiar minstrel mask and amidst the glaring limelight, which, if read from a different angle, can foil or render invisible the original attempt, exposing, on the flip side, nothing more than the familiar meanings and expectations of minstrel spectacle. It has to be pointed out, however, that such a spectacle of racial difference does not amount to the impervious prevalence of racial fantasy, nor does it preclude a certain form of articulation of the specter of race. Whether this masking strategy works, whether it is perceived in the way the black performer has intended it to be perceived, is hardly calculable, and it is an incalculability that turns on the internal limit of the regime of visibility, namely, the *real*—and not “the real thing”—of race that exceeds the capture of available means of symbolization. For seeing in terms of race hinges on that which is largely symbolic, whose success in turn relies, as mentioned earlier, on the effect of nature taken to be the real thing of race. In this light, Williams’ strategy of “denaturing,” (Chude-Sokei 31), of highlighting the distinction between the mask and “an itself that is behind” is on the right track by pointing to the artifice of the “real thing” of race as emphatically acquired rather than natural, performed instead of innate,¹⁷ even though the outcome seems to suggest that the white racist gaze, though duped in this sense, could afford not to see its radical potentials.

IV. Concluding Notes: Trauma and the Specter of Race

There is, however, another sense of denaturing in Bert Williams’ blackface performance that is tied to another subtler invisibility of race, a difference that remained submerged in the wake of the spectacular display of blackness in the public sphere—i.e. the invisibility of Williams’ West Indian “excess of blackness,” if I may paraphrase Houston Baker. Williams’ performance of self-erasure, as

¹⁷ This certainly does not mean that racial difference can be freely constructed, performed, and imagined, as a free play of the signifier—in which case racial identity would be registered solely in the imaginary. Williams had to study and acquire not only the “stage Negro,” but also real-life American blacks.

Chude-Sokei argues, is in this sense trapped by the US “logic of race,” one in which “race is necessarily visible, so impelled by a scopic drive that his West Indian disappearance could only be read as an African American presence, or a fiction of it” (36). Reflecting on mimicry and masking as camouflage, the Caribbean writer George Lamming says of “a camouflage of self-evaporation,” which “contains *an incalculable secret whose meaning stays absent until time and its needs order an emergence*” (166; emphasis added). It is a strategy or mode of resistance that evolves from the history of colonial slavery as trauma, for the response to the traumatic event “occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance” of symptoms in the psychoanalytic sense (Caruth 11), and, as Cathy Caruth explains, the “inherent latency of the [traumatic] event” becomes “fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (17). The political efficacy of Williams and Walker’s performance, as well as the social consequence of Williams’ unprecedented popularity in his solo career, might not have been visible within that social and political context in which a rumor about racial conflict could spark a race riot by the whites,¹⁸ let alone a performance that would defy or blatantly challenge the expectations of a predominantly white audience (Williams’ integration of Broadway productions by Ziegfeld Follies was met with strong oppositions from both the general public and fellow white performers). The imperative of survival under a racist regime might have neutralized the strategies of resistance in blackface masking, rendering them speciously close to forms of collaboration, but the reclamation of the mask or the means of representation by blacks was significant and a necessary step forward. What became “fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” on this side of the racial divide was the subtle transformation or awakening of black (self-)consciousness that was enhanced and accentuated by the visibility of Williams’ black presence in prominent public spaces, despite criticisms from within black elites and activists during his performing career¹⁹ (Booker T. Washington was a notable absence amid the chorus of criticism) and after his death and in spite of the invisibility of race problems to the majority of US audience.

I propose that the oblivion of Bert Williams’ legacy, as pointed out earlier, and the mixed and sometimes fluctuating reception of Williams through the years be

¹⁸ For instance, Walker was once physically attacked by a white mob looking for any black person in public places in New York.

¹⁹ Camille F. Forbes offers a detailed account of Williams’ self-conscious resistance to both white and black expectations—the latter demanding a certain “racial uplift” (607) in representations of blackness, with which blackface minstrelsy certainly is incompatible. Forbes’ article is one of latest examples of positive assessment and affirmation of Bert Williams’ legacy.

examined in light of trauma and his Afro-Caribbean experience or disappearance, since the minstrel mask, along with the man who evaporates behind it, still haunts generations of African Americans. Through Williams' treatment of blackface masking, the recurring images of racial pasts and the collective trauma dating back to slavery were invoked, deployed, confronted, subtly reconfigured, and eventually revised by the new found black presence in the public sphere—one that was ushered in by Bert Williams yet consists in reconfigured social relevance which requires the effacement of blackface along with Williams' own image in the subsequent African American cultural surge and political activism in Harlem that had to disavow or disown him. The New Negro Movement or the Harlem Renaissance has, as Chude-Sokei contends, an obscure, often ignored or disavowed beginning in blackface minstrelsy, a cultural form Williams mastered and in which he undoubtedly took central stage. It appears that the erasure of Williams' pivotal role in such a transformation of African American cultural visibility served as the precondition of the emergence of a new collective African-American identity. Ironically, in his life he had become somebody by becoming "nobody" (not only because of his effacing of natural physical appearance, but also due to his most famous hit song—"Nobody"); after his death he had to become nobody again precisely because he had been a "somebody"—a foreclosed figure that is nevertheless the precondition of the opening up of black presence in the public sphere and entertainment industry, however constrained or fetishistic such staging might be.

What can be extrapolated from the case of Bert Williams and its aforementioned historical antecedents is that the workings of race often operate at the level of the unconscious, as evinced in the spectacle of racial difference that brings to the fore the constitutive inconsistency of the socio-symbolic order—the unspeakable about race which somehow is lost in the spotlight. Such a specter of race, as illuminated in these historical instances, appears to be intertwined with the spectacle of race, most notably in Williams' blackface performance. I have explored both the radical potentialities and (inherent) limits of blackface masking, whose concurrence to some extent instantiates the propinquity of the specter and the spectacle of race. As is indicated in the case of Williams, a certain invisibility of race always seems to lurk behind the most visible manifestations of racial spectacle. To remember Bert Williams is in a sense to confront the collective memory of a traumatic past and articulate the real, rather than the real thing of race, through the tantalizing potentiality of claiming black presence in unprecedented, previously inconceivable social spaces, even if such articulations would arrive "only in

connection with another place, and in another time.”

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About the Author

Li-Chun Hsiao is Assistant Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. Hsiao edits, introduces, and contributes a chapter to the book *"This Shipwreck of Fragments": Historical Memory, Imaginary Identities, and Postcolonial Geography in Caribbean Culture and Literature* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2009), and has an essay to appear in the book *Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror* (forthcoming, Purdue UP 2010). He has published articles in *M/MLA Journal*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, and *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, on topics ranging across psychoanalysis, race, the Caribbean, postcolonialism, and the (in)human.

Email: lichunhsiao@ntu.edu.tw

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