

ONE

Origins of Black Body Politics

The notion that Black people are human beings is a relatively new discovery in the modern west.

—West, 1982

To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I seldom answer a word.

—DuBois, 1903

DuBois asks, “How does it feel to be a problem?” The question I will ask and answer in this chapter is, “How did Black bodies become a problem in the first place?” The social assignment of Black bodies to an underclass is a historical conundrum that has multiple origins, two of which are the institutions of slavery and the mass media. This chapter will explain how a set of racial projections became concretized in the American landscape via the development of meanings that were eventually fortified in many aspects of American life. In other words, Black bodies were inscribed with a set of meanings, which helped to perpetuate the scripter’s racial ideology. Through these scripts, race gradually became its own corporeal politics. Essentially, this book is an un-muting of DuBois’s reply to the question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Also, it inevitably offers a discussion of West’s assertion that Black people’s humanity is a fairly new discovery.

Although it is clear, as Foucault (1972) announces, “that everything is never said,” it is important to engage the historicity of the concept of Black body politics and the scripting of the Black body¹ for what they reveal about embedded racially xenophobic tendencies that are redistributed and recycled in mass-mediated cultural practices. The selected vehicle for doing so is critical-historical analysis, which recounts the genesis of a phenomenon while mapping contemporary parallels and grappling with age-old problems revisited. This

mode of inquiry has become valuable and transitive for its ability to support social reformulations and reconstructions of knowledge in addition to the sociopolitical machinery that functions to perpetuate historically concomitant ideologies. Critical-historical analysis is necessarily an emancipatory act of reasoning through historical problems while elevating an analysis that calls for an end to a kind of domination characteristic as evidenced in the Manichean dialectic of psyche (mind) and colonialism (coercive control). This social and philosophical dualism, as implied by the word “Manichean,” suggests an inescapable commitment to power relations. My lifelong concern for the liberation of Black bodies, and therefore Black people, is conspicuous and unapologetic. Black bodies are not discussed here as a way to objectify, reconfigure, or disfigure Blacks and Black lives. Instead, the aim is to theorize how race is currently enacted at the moment of the gaze, and how this spectatorial surveillance complicates social relations because of how it is historically and inextricably situated and lodged in the US collective consciousness and the American ethos via popular media.

The gaze, as Wiegman (1995) describes it, is a specular event, a tool for examining sites of obsessive desire that admit the visibility of difference, but remain troubled by it. The gaze can certainly be impartial or nonobligatory, but within the interplay of race relations, corporeal zones such as that of skin color and hair texture automatically evoke feelings, thoughts, perhaps anxieties, if they are already resident or dormant. The gaze suggests that there must be the presence of an Other. The Other can be a self-reflection, or it can be an unfamiliar or distanced Other. Either way, the Other functions to affirm the Self within this I–Other dialectical arrangement (Hitchcock, 1993). The Self is more than the “I” since the Self involves self-consciousness, self-esteem, and a personhood influenced by society and culture (Grosz, 1994; Hall, 1997). Anticolonialist Frantz Fanon (1967) was clear about this when he wrote, “To speak is to exist absolutely for the Other” (p. 17). Writer-scholar Ralph Ellison (1952) also lucidly addressed this matter when he asserted, “I am an invisible man . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (p. 3). It has become ordinary to talk about the I-versus-Other dialectic, but it is also possible to be Self *and* Other, though Homi Bhabha (1986) rearticulates this equation as follows: “[it is] not Self and Other, but the Otherness of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity” (p. xv). That is, the sickly nature of hegemonic inscriptions may influence an individual to begin to view the self as a stranger, as an obscure Otherized corporeal object, rather than as a familiar subject. So then, it is both the Other and the Other’s formulated inscription that are at work in Bhabha’s “Self and Other” equation. There is a matrix within the present investigation that involves three parts: personal perceptions that accompany the gaze, institutional inscriptions, and the social consequences of institutional inscriptions. I cannot emphasize enough, as film-

maker Isaac Julien puts it, “it’s the look—the act of looking—that we want to challenge” (p. 169). The act of looking involves the gaze, but is not restricted to or by it. The gaze, as Mercer (1999) allows, is spectatorial. It presumes there is a visually noticeable object that is dialectically connected to a codified and signified subject. Scripting, in this book, includes the gaze and also the social prescriptions that disprivilege racialized, politicized, and commodified Black bodies.

Blacks can endlessly participate in self-healing exercises in an effort to retrieve custody over the total inscription of their bodies and the debilitating social conditions that attempt redefinition and confinement of their corporeality, but this analysis will reveal that inscriptions of race and racism are not entirely a Black problem; hence, Blacks cannot expunge them alone. All North American cultural groups must participate in deconstructive processes, deciphering the origins and precincts of racist and socially corrupt images, and one way this can be initiated and achieved is by understanding the practice I call “scripting the Black body.” This must be done before racial healing may begin. One way this can be accomplished is via a critical-historical method.

Nietzsche’s version of genealogical criticism with emphasis on metaphor and metonymy is often credited as the progenitor of the genealogical method, one of the most frequently explored critical-historical approaches. I agree with West (1993) that Nietzsche demonstrated a symbol-driven, “deep historical consciousness” (p. 266) and pragmatism deserving of adoption in contemporary analyses of race; yet his perspective alone does not account for the confluence of power, discourse, and the body. Being equally impressed with Foucault’s historical-materialist refinement of this technique found within his genealogical criticism of institutional structures and power/knowledge formations, I recommend a merger of the two approaches. Foucault’s (1980) treatises on power/knowledge teach us that patriarchal and essentialist epistemologies and ideologies sometimes have ambiguities and contradictions that inhabit the logic of oppressive representational politics. Furthermore, we are informed by his later work that the body functions as a signifier of meanings imposed on them by subjectivities (Foucault, 1984). These subjectivities discipline the body by policing and regulating its ontological modalities, and then by reconstituting the body in conformity with institutionally derived regimes of truth.

I am aware of the dialectical tensions between Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s critical-historical perspectives, both of which were either–or perspectives. They suggested that bodies were burdened because of either themselves or institutions. In concert with McPhail’s complicity theory, I have adopted a “both–and” rather than an “either–or” perspective of body politics. Nietzsche, as Grosz (1994) explains, was most interested in proving that bodies are subjects rather than objects in their own scripture. On the other hand,

Foucault asserted a poststructuralist stance that suggested bodies are instruments of institutions that only want to propagate their ideological viewpoints. In an effort to explain Foucault's propositions, Grosz insightfully adds: "The body functions almost as a 'black box' in this account: it is acted upon, inscribed, peered into; information is extracted from it and disciplinary regimes are imposed on it; yet its materiality also entails a resilience, and thus also (potential) modes of resistance to power's capillary alignments" (p. 146).

I believe Black corporeal inscriptions are infused iterations of whiteness ideology embodied as Black corporeal objects, but complicated by the irregularities subsumed in a profound matrix of desire and control. So, it is not simply that there are personal and social influences on bodily inscriptions, but that the personal is the social. At first glance, this seems contradictory. Pinar (2001) points out that even when White supremacists appear singly interested in proclaiming the innate inferiority of Black bodies, it is possible that contradictory impulses of these Whites overwhelm the situation, as in the case of White slave owners' rapes of Black women. Hence, desire and repulsion operate on dialectic poles, accenting the complexity of politicizing racial bodies. Yet the most critical aspect of this is that the body is forced to hold the contradictions and anxieties laced within the inscribed meanings because it inescapably exists in a social habitat preoccupied with these meanings.

Together, the Nietzschean and Foucauldian versions of the critical method for accomplishing a genealogical criticism present an assistive model and conceptually undergird the analysis found in the following brief sketch of Black body politics in popular media, which is presented as contemporaneous with slavery. Part of what I intend to explore in this chapter appears as a rudimentary recounting of facts and ideas that have been presented in pieces throughout extant literature. The purpose of this re-presentation of ideas is to allow the reader to see how the politicization and scripting of Black bodies has been a common thread of American life since at least the seventeenth century forward. So, for advanced readers, this first chapter may seem elementary, but it provides a necessary foundation for the remainder of the book. It should also be understood that scripting, as a paradigm, is not just about stereotypes and negative images; it is about how the treatment of Black *bodies* as commodities has persisted for hundreds of years and continues today. Implicitly, this exploration of scripting suggests that bodies are canvases on which figurative scripts or writings are inscribed. Since the emergence of race as a social construct, Black bodies have become surfaces of racial representation. To say it bluntly, race is about bodies that have been assigned social meanings. So, it is only logical that any attempt to divorce the concept of race from body politics leaves the analysis incomplete. In order to demonstrate this, I present a two-fold mirror in which the horrid racial past is compared to the much-improved, but still debilitated, present conditions and the central focus is popular media.

Beginning with the jovial character Sambo in the late 1700s theatrical production *The Divorce*, the docile and obsequious film character Uncle Tom in Edwin Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the villainous bucks and mulattoes in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, I will generally trace the historical stock images of Black bodies throughout mass media until the present day while discussing how they are commodified. This genealogy is only a cursory glance at images in popular media with a particular emphasis on minstrelsy as one of the early popular cultural forms; hence, there will certainly be omissions. Several well-known volumes are much more explicative than I intend to be here.² The purpose of this critical-historical analysis is to pinpoint the origin of the debasement of Black bodies in U.S. popular media while examining the politics that accompanied it.

DEHUMANIZATION OF THE BLACK BODY

It is certainly imperative to contextualize the beginnings of Black racial representation,³ on stage and elsewhere, with the conterminous "peculiar institution" of slavery (Karenga, 2002) in the United States. Although I will neither specifically examine indentured servitude nor explore the system whereby Blacks became slave owners, I do acknowledge that such systems existed alongside the much more expansive system of slavery discussed here. American presidents such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson owned several slaves. Appiah and Gates (2003) maintain that "most of the founding fathers were large-scale slaveholders, as were eight of the first twelve presidents of the United States" (p. 850). In fact, the extended kin of Jefferson, beginning with his enslaved mistress Sallie Mae Hemings, remains a matter of public speculation (Khamit-Kush, 1999; Vivian, 2002). As Means-Coleman notes (2000), "the importation of foreign slaves," which began in 1517, "ended in 1807 with more than enough, approximately three million slaves [still] on American soil" (p. 37), but by that time estimates that suggest as many as twenty million slaves and perpetual indentured servants, foreign and domestic, existed throughout the period some euphemistically called "The Middle Passage" (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

The maafa or holocaust of enslavement was one of the most tragic events in the history of the world. Multiple historical accounts all agree on the atrocious details of the transportation of African slaves to the New World (Franklin & Moss, 1988; Karenga, 2002). A minimum of two slaves' hands and feet were chained together and fastened to the boat. Many of the three- or four-ton boats were packed with hundreds of auctionable slaves to the extent that bodies were sandwiched together with little interstices left open for breathing, disemboguing, and defecating. Slave auctioneers knew they could maximize profits if they brought as many Blacks as possible, risking the slaves' lives in the process for no other reason than the perception that Black bodies were dispensable. Naturally, before the vessel reached its destination, some dehydrated and starved slaves who were barely able to

move did not survive the pathogenic conditions that were unfit for any human. The deceased and diseased Black bodies were jettisoned. They were considered ruined, spoiled goods, and, since they were mere property, there was no need to hold a funeral or perform a ceremonial burial. This is among the most gruesome examples of gross maltreatment related to race and economy in the world. It could be argued that Western traders and slave owners did not have any sense of what race was at that time, and perhaps that is true, but the beginning of slavery was the direct and immediate antecedent to a concept said to have been conceptualized only decades later in 1684 by French physician Francois Bernier (West, 1993). He developed the term to classify dead bodies, and his catalogue of races inspired centuries of racial labeling and pseudoscience. At one point, the number of racial labels amounted to three to five races. Later, as many as three hundred races were counted. The term became diluted, but still was considered useful as a logical device. Seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century eugenicists, many of whom were esteemed intellectuals and founders of academic disciplines such as paleontology, astronomy, and anthropology, discovered that racial logic helped to demonstrate what would become uncontested truth claims: that Blacks were intellectually, behaviorally, interpersonally, and physically inferior and should be treated as objects (Jackson, 1999). This devaluation and objectification of Black bodies arrested any agency to define the Black self, but also intercepted any public valuation of Blacks as subject. Subjectivity was owned by Whites; they were self-authorized to see themselves as pure, good, competent, and deserving of privilege. They devised the essence of racial particularity by averting their gaze away from Blacks and applying injunctive pressure on them to behave in ways that complied with their own modernist obsessions. As Bhabha (1986) asserts, Otherness is an *episteme* in White colonialist discourses used to mark socioeconomic boundaries of racial difference and announce the superiority of the hegemonic subject—in this case, whiteness and White bodies.

Brought here in chains, Blacks and particularly Black bodies, in what we now know as the United States, never had the chance to be valued, celebrated, or even considered a citizen until 1863, well over 300 years after the first African slaves arrived in the New World. They were property or possessions whose foreign and physical bodies were literally considered tools for labor and procreation that were evacuated of thought and culture. It was practically unimportant whether they could think beyond accomplishing a series of menial tasks demanded of them.

Of course, the literature is replete with examples of how their cogent and strategic thinking led to insurgencies, the most well known of which were those of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. For example, the discursive strategies of indirection and signifying assisted escapees. These techniques were laced in the lyrics of plantation songs such as “Steal Away Jesus” and “Wade in the Water.”

When the slaves at the plantation sang the first song, for example, that meant the master was not around and now was the appropriate time to attempt escape. If the master discovered a slave was missing, he would get his bloodhounds, his rifles, and his entourage and hunt for the slave. Then, they would sing the second song, "Wade in the Water," in order to warn the escapees that the master was in pursuit with dogs who could not detect the slaves' presence when in the water. The use of these lyrics demonstrated cunning and adroit planning. Rarely acknowledged for their intellect, slaves were purposefully dejected and dehumanized in an effort to preserve control over their minds, bodies, and spirits. If the slave was not found immediately, the slave owner would post an advertisement in the runaway listings with painstaking details about the missing slave such as personal habits, musical skills, behavioral inclinations, and physical characteristics, often including a notation that the slave's cheeks had been branded with the master's initials (Southern, 1983).

Psychically, slave owners fostered a climate of separation that would not allow communion of slave and slave master as human beings. The civilized-savage and human-inhuman dichotomies were intentionally arranged by the owner to maintain distance and disdain, to prove to his self that Black bodies were devoid of interiority or basic thinking and reasoning skills. Though illogical, it seemed the slave's exteriority was all that was of concern. It was that which facilitated the slave master's detachment from seeing the Black body as human. The body was legibly encoded and scripted as an object of specularly and, consequently, became its own discursively bound identity politic. This politic is embedded in white supremacist ideology and Black corporeal inscription. That is, ideology, as Gray (1989) and Althusser (1994) suggest, becomes a concrete, taken-for-granted fact, moving from ideology to axiology in sometimes unnoticeable ways. If properly designed, social participants, in this case White social participants, see ideology not as a version of truth, but *the* only truth worth knowing. The body can be said to be political because it, as an immediately identifiable and visible marker of difference, accounted for the distribution of material, spatial, temporal resources Black bodies were not allowed to share. It was discursively bound because, although it was polysemic, the primary meaning the Black body conveyed was its correspondence to an object believed to be a subhuman, heathenish utility. The body was needed to perform labor and generate revenue; therefore, as long as the slave appeared happy-go-lucky, his or her physicality and physical readiness were of the utmost importance. It is no mistake that most of the literature examining social reproductions and proscriptions of the body speak primarily of visual interpretations of exteriority (Johnson, 1994; Levinas, 1969; Pinar, 2001; Wiegman, 1993, 1995). The epistemic violence that augments and is concomitant with the social construction of race and racism is shuttled principally by the recognition of visible racial markers or corporeal zones rather than by its interiority composed of organs, glands, bones, and so on.

In imagining difference between himself as human and the slave as equivalent to cattle, the slave master was able to convince himself of the slaves' alterity, the foreignness of their Black bodies. However, even though he wanted Black bodies that were large, strong brutes to toil the land and plant crops and wanted slaves who could resist all kinds of inclement weather, those individuals were the ones he feared the most, insofar as they were potentially more dangerous. All the evidence concerning the maltreatment and exploitation of Black bodies points to an undeniable conclusion: it was during the period of enslavement that Whites developed many of their greatest fears and anxieties toward Blacks, particularly toward Black males, and established safeguards for rationalizing their vulnerability and unacceptable activities as slave owners. Whites' patriarchal domination and racial supremacist ideology were publicly unquestioned. Although it began with anxiety generally associated with Black men's bodies, Black preverbal communicative aspects such as darker-than-White skin color, wide noses, and thick lips, or what I call corporeal zones,⁴ were eventually enough to trigger xenophobic reactions and remain sufficient cause for chronic racist behaviors among Whites and non-Whites today. Later, in chapter 3, I will briefly explain how police brutality is inextricably linked to racial xenophobia. Present-day racism evolves from systemically validated demoralized practices and crude conventions begun during slavery.

STRANGE FRUIT: LYNCHINGS OF THE BLACK BODY

The public trading, auctioning, and ownership of slaves was commonplace and well documented. Every area of the mass media has commented on it, and when slaves allegedly became disobedient, they were penalized severely, often times lynched. Gaines (2001), in her critique of lynching narratives, opines that "the act of lynching . . . is a classic displacement, that highly charged adjustment in which something of peripheral importance comes to occupy a central position" (p. 167). In the vein of Cornel West (1993), bell hooks (1995), and others' perennial arguments about the juxtaposition of market and nonmarket values, economy and love, commodified and consumerist representation versus privatized and relational looking, Gaines assigns herself a task she leaves incomplete. Mentioning but not addressing the critical cultural issues surrounding class, race, and sexuality as well as corporeal and specular politics can lead one to dismiss her assertions as merely elliptical. Gaines is correct to suggest that lynching was foundationally tied to economics, but not necessarily more so than desire, sexual, racial, or otherwise. Despite its legalistic subterfuge, lynching was about Black prohibition and White privilege. It was a "looking exercise" articulated and captured within the framework of dominance (Allen, Als, Lewis, & Litwack, 2000). It seems to me what is critical about analyzing the act of lynching is

not its displacement, but rather its historical contiguity with present-day epistemic violence inflicted via inscription of the Black body in popular media. Equally significant is the conspicuous dialectic between White xenophobia and voyeurism.

In fact, the lynched victims came to be known as “strange fruit,” later the title of one of Billie Holiday’s most popular songs, written by White poet Lewis Allan (a pseudonym of Abel Meeropol) (Katz, 2002). Allan accented the paradoxical nature of lynching with the metaphor “strange fruit,” which refers to a foreign Black body. Immediately, without knowing the reference, one is inclined to think that fruit is healthy, beautiful, tasty, and sweet, but then this image is juxtaposed to the adjectival signifier “strange,” which implies something that is foreign, weird, out of the ordinary, and unpredictable. Besides the fact that the Black body is starkly contrasted to that of Whites, you cannot trust the fruit to be what you expect it to be or to function as you may anticipate it will. As the strange fruit hangs from the poplar tree, its Southern surroundings are comfortable, pleasant, and utopic, yet the fruit is being burned and mangled. Even though it is almost ripe, almost perfect, its possibilities are interrupted, and it is no one’s fault, but the elements’. The fruit just could not bear the conditions and so now it is ready to be plucked and dissolved. The Black body as “fruit,” shackled and hoisted in the air, was not seen as being complicitous with White supremacist laws forbidding the body to move freely. Stifled by the conditions, the abnormal Black body becomes a detestable symbol of deviance, a brute that must be tamed, an inscriptive surface that signifies one who is bereft of loyalty to whiteness and, therefore, any ability to behave appropriately. The terrorization of the body in the form of lynching became an act of deterrence and, for Whites, a source of voyeuristic entertainment (Allen, Als, Lewis, & Litwack, 2000).

Pinar (2001) estimates that nearly 4,900 lynchings occurred in the United States between 1882 and 1927. Blacks were lynched for charges that were very minute such as acting suspicious, being obnoxious, unpopularity, frightening a White woman, and arguing with a White man. As many as 15,000 people attended these lynchings; however, quite often attendance was much lower. Black bodies were hung as objects of the White voyeuristic gaze. Many pictures were taken and families were gathered. This was an event celebrated like a carnival. Families would even bring food for a picnic. One nine-year-old boy enjoyed himself so much that he remarked, “I have seen a man hanged,” he told his mother, “now I wish I could see one burned” (Allen, Als, Lewis, & Litwack, 2000, p. 14). Many of the photographs of lynching ceremonies picture some White audience members with snapshot cameras, with others posing for the picture next to the hanging, lifeless body. Other photographs became postcards sent to relatives. It was a public spectacle, horrific and violent (Marriott, 2000). Perhaps, as Marriott opines, the most fascinating part of this “racial

scopophilia" (p. 32), as he calls it, was the bizarre self-inverted gaze that occurred as a result of being able to view photographs in which Whites were both spectators and participants.

Essentially, they were enwrapped in a performance of race as both audience and actors, repulsed and attracted, all of which orbited around the inscribed surface—the Black body. Marriott intuits a perverted matrix of desire, disassociation, and narcissism confounded within the act of lynching and its photographic capture as Whites in attendance marveled at the product of their inscription. With this, I am reminded of Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the vulgar because of how it resonates with this grotesque hypervigilant fascination with Black bodies, even as corpses. In explaining the subject/object duality inherent in discursive utterances, Bakhtin suggests that there are definable moments during which the speech act becomes dialogized, situated between I and Other, center and periphery, as well as subject and object. In this case, the "speech act" or utterance is the inscription on the Black body. The inscribed body serves as its own discursive set that can be read—if the body remains agent or subject—or written on—if the body becomes Otherized or object. The relationship between the lynch mob and the Black body is a power-infused dialogic. The racially encoded inscription of the Black body, especially during lynching, represents a refereed boundary between Blacks and Whites, a prohibition that annuls any possibility of the Black body becoming subject (Harris, 1993).

If not lynched, some Black males were castrated for having an association with White women, whether simply greeting them or having intimate relations. Without the possibility for reproduction, the slave likely would be killed or auctioned as damaged goods, since he would no longer be useful for siring more children (Pinar, 2001). This heinous act of castration also has been argued as an act of emasculation, a way of attempting to strip the slave completely of his dignity and pride beyond the limitations placed on him to be a fully attentive father and husband (Staples, 1982). Naturally, this reduced, if not totally eliminated, his ability to experience sexual pleasure. This was unquestionably the master's notice that the castrated man be perpetually reminded that his was a life of misery, not happiness. Dyson (2001) also contends that castration served the purpose of expelling any threat that Black men would retaliate against White men's raping of Black women by raping *his* women—White women. The castrato fantasy signifies a powerful and profound set of White male fears, ones that would symbolically and literally jettison Black male bodies into an ectopic sphere, a foreign location in which they would be asked to live on the periphery of their own existence.

Black men were not treated as men. As Staples (2001) explains, and I paraphrase, Black male slavehands had no formal or legal linkage to their

families. Family members could not adopt the native surname of the male and enslaved women were not legally married to the enslaved men. They performed a ritualistic practice known as “jumping the broom” in order to signify a formal nuptial arrangement. This was one of the earliest examples of structural prohibition of Black bodies. These concerns for convention were far outweighed by the slave master’s well-known tendency to rape Black female slavehands. His corruptive debauchery, though seemingly contraposed to his beliefs about the natural inferiority of “negroes,” was rationalized as all of his repugnantly hateful acts were. He claimed, in order to exculpate his self, that the Black woman was sexually charged and seductive, and that she, of course, needed the slavemaster to tame her animalistic and savage sexual urges and desires. So, while the White male had full access to Black female bodies, despite her nonconsensuality, Black males could be killed for appearing too friendly with a White woman (even if the attraction was mutual) or saying anything to her that could be interpreted as negative.

This was merely one among many types of regulative governance that facilitated a climate of overt tempered servility and an implosive private hostility. The slaves, who were not formally trained and educated, were taught what they knew within their community enclaves. The primary predominant public displays of Black cultural expression were minstrel show songs and religious services. Virtually every other area of cultural expression was privately practiced outside of the master’s presence. Naturally, this led to the slave master’s very limited view of the behaviors of Blacks. They were considered chattel, movable property likened to cattle, and, as mere apparatus, were constitutionally considered three-fifths of a human (Franklin & Moss, 1988; Karenga, 2002; Pinar, 2001). Slaves were trained like the chattel they were thought to be: to be obedient, servile, and docile, or else be penalized. Furthermore, Black males were restricted from being fathers constantly attendant to the needs of the family, since he had to accommodate the slave master first. Out of necessity for the survival of the family, Black females became the matriarchs of the household. They were mostly field workers like men and shared the same horrors of enslavement. They were even lynched like the men were. Davis (1983) reminds us that the most popular accounts of slave women’s roles suggest they were house servants such as cooks, maids, and mammies who reared the master’s children. The narrative is told that after the White child was asleep, she was allowed to go home to spend time with her husband and tend to her own children, which is why younger kin and extended kinship networks were critical for family survival. While this was true for some Black female slavehands in border states, this was a limited and romanticized purview of the harsh reality of the majority of female slaves who resided in the deep south. The slave with a family did what the master required of him in order to survive, though some of them plotted to escape in order to avoid further misery of enslavement (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

EMANCIPATED BODIES, SHACKLED MINDS

Lynchings and overall enslaved conditions were very prominent until the late 1800s. Some scholars would like to believe that all slaves were set free January 1, 1863, with President Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, but history teaches us that Lincoln only freed three-fourths of the slaves, while another one-quarter were retained as a gesture of sensitivity to soldiers of the Civil War. This is not to mention the fact that some slaves in the District of Columbia were set free earlier as part of an 1862 emancipation law President Lincoln signed, a precursor to the Emancipation Proclamation. Those slave owners who did surrender their slaves were compensated no more than \$300 per slave by the federal government (Franklin & Moss, 1988). A few confederate states, including parts of Virginia, Louisiana, and West Virginia, were allowed to keep their slave laborers. Franklin and Moss (1988) estimate that over a million slaves were unaffected by the Emancipation Proclamation. The government even used the possibility of emancipation to entice slaves to enlist in the Union army and fight in the war. Although not paid the same remuneration as Whites, thousands took advantage of this offer to be full-fledged citizens rather than chattel, and eventually the Confederate army surrendered. It was not until 1865, two years later, that Confederate slave owners conceded their slaves. Even after slavery officially ended and reconstruction began, very little initial support was given to support these neophyte citizens. Slaves who found work earned a modest living, and still were not treated as equal.

Contemporaneous with the last 100 years of slavery was theatrical representations of Black bodies. As early as 1769 in *The Padlock*, Mungo, a Black character, was introduced as a loud, buffoonish character who would spew off a series of quick, yet non-witty one-liners. Mungo was a flop and did not receive much attention, except as a precursor to a more perfected minstrel character, Sambo, who was White. The irony in that is thick—Whites were convinced that Blacks could not adequately depict Blacks, only Whites could. One can only speculate the reasons for this shift. Perhaps Mungo was not exaggerated enough. Nonetheless, in 1781 and 1795, respectively, plays such as *The Divorce* and *Triumph of Love* emerged, and the jovial, though shiftless, gibberish-talking, huge red-lipped caricature Sambo dressed in rags, played by white actors in blackface, became a prominent and well-liked stage figure. This was the beginning of the success of minstrelsy and the character Sambo was a live image of how whites perceived Blacks. Though his facial features were exaggerated by black makeup all over the face with red paint orbiting around the lips, extending inches beyond the mouth, he was not seen by Whites as a caricature as much as a true depiction of the obedient, servile, and docile slaves they owned (Pinar, 2001).

Slavery would not be over for another eighty-plus years, even though around the late 1700s prominent clergy and antislavery advocates like Richard

Allen, Benjamin Banneker, and Prince Hall actively and publicly denounced slavery, and other Black men began asking, "Am I not a man and a brother," while Black women, particularly Sojourner Truth, would ask, "Aren't I a woman" (hooks, 1981). Slave insurrections were increasing with the advent of the fugitive-assisting "underground railroad" around 1815. Meanwhile, the abolitionist discourse produced by slaves was mounting, and appeared in leaflets like David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored People of the World* (1829) and in newspapers like Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm's *Freedom's Journal* (1829), and, eventually, Frederick Douglass' *North Star* (1847).

So, despite revolts and political upheaval among slaves during the time the Sambo character was introduced, they were not nearly enough to stave off denigrating stage depictions of Black bodies. Sambo was one, among few, of the most wicked, scornful, and psychically injurious representations of blackness, one from which Blacks are still recovering even today as those comedic images of inadequacy, nonintellectuality, and incompetence are deeply lodged in the American psyche. One simply needs to take note of the only recent surge of noncomedic popular cultural representations of Black life to understand that producers of American mass media either lack imagination or do not want to see positive, healthy, complete, and salvatory images of blackness presented frequently and dramatically. Instead, current films and television situation-comedies, especially with predominately Black casts, often portray Blacks as fragmented, aloof humorists, sometimes even as buffoons. Perhaps *Bernie Mac* and *Cedric the Entertainer Presents* are among the few that do not revert to the minstrel formula. Spike Lee's inflammatory cinematic parody of this phenomenon entitled *Bamboozled* was executed with powerful resonance to what is uncovered in the present analysis of minstrelsy.

Over the course of 150 years from 1769 to about 1927, minstrelsy would become an institution, revered by Whites for its dehumanizing yet somehow entertaining characterization of Blacks as darkies and Whites as ordinary, normal, and cultured ladies and gentlemen. This was not strange to Whites; it was indicative of both their attitudes about Blacks and their own self-perceptions. During the early 1800s, slaves such as Caesar Thompson Wharton would appear in novels like James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy*, yet minstrelsy would dominate the growing entertainment industry. Minstrel shows would become detailed stage and even cinematic performances that would pack theater houses, by sticking to a formula proven to evoke laughter (Means-Coleman, 2000). For over half of that huge time span from 1781 to 1927, Blacks were still enslaved; this may have been another reason, besides the perception that Whites were more competent thespians, that Blacks were seldom stage actors. Blacks also made great strides toward civil rights with the work of outspoken activists and organizers.

As mentioned previously, in 1863, most slaves were freed and entered a time in which their citizenship and concomitant constitutional rights were

questioned on a daily basis. President Lincoln reasoned that both Whites and Blacks were the bane of one another's existence, so they should be segregated (Franklin & Moss, 1988). Therefore, although Blacks could now be formally educated, they had to attend segregated schools and use segregated facilities, thereby keeping Whites' racial xenophobia intact via limited contact with Blacks. Blacks-only schools were initiated and established by the Freedmen's Bureau in the 1870s.

By 1900, many Black universities such as Cheyney, Howard, Tuskegee, and Fisk, were in full operation. Fisk established a traveling entourage of singers in the 1870s and the group had become rather famous as the "Fisk Jubilee Singers" well into the 1900s. They performed spirituals and slave songs for Black and White audiences. Many Blacks much preferred this group instead of watching minstrel shows; later, ragtime would be added in the 1890s as an entertainment alternative. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company became one of many independent film production companies that championed comparably more positive representations of Blacks, although larger companies, of course, had bigger budgets and more resources to reach larger audiences.

In 1927, one such major company, Universal Pictures finally brought *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to cinema. The cinematic version of Harriett Beecher Stowe's famous novel was adapted and directed by former mechanic Edwin Porter, with the lead acting role given to a Black man by the name of Charles Gilpin, who had won acclaim for his role in Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*. Gilpin refused to play a completely obsequious and placated stock Uncle Tom character and was soon replaced by James Lowe, another Black actor. Gilpin's defiance marked his association with a period of conscious resistance by Black actors to negative representation. I will discuss the character of Uncle Tom later in this chapter.

Gradual change of attitudes toward segregation came after years of protesting and, when brave organizers, protestors of segregation, and advocates of civil rights like James Meredith attempted to actually enter segregated schools despite laws prohibiting it, the U.S. federal government became interested in changing the legislation. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision legalized the desegregation of schools, a joyous moment of victory, especially since Blacks-only schools were known for being dilapidated and poorly funded. In 1955, James Meredith stood at the door of University of Mississippi and attempted admittance and was met with violent protests by Whites. Almost a year later, in 1956, Autherine Lucy attempted to enter the University of Alabama after the state of Alabama ordered the University to admit her, and she was met with an equal if not more harsh resistance and rioting, which caused her to be expelled by the board of regents for disruption. By denying Meredith and Lucy admittance, due to no fault of their own, the university was saying to them that their black bodies were despicable and disturbing, that the mere fact of their racial existence

was reason enough to justify horrid treatment. It is important to remember that these White protestors and administrators were the children and grandchildren of slave owners. They were only a generation or two removed from slavery and so it was still commonplace to behave this way toward Blacks, without liberal guilt, because the protestors were not liberal and did not come from liberalist backgrounds. That is, their reactions to desegregation were sickening, though not completely surprising, given their family histories.

FROM MINSTREL PARAPHERNALIA AND GAMES TO MINSTREL SHOWS

The paraphernalia of the late 1800s and early 1900s did not just reinforce an orthodoxy infused with negative stereotypes of Blacks, but also accented Whites' sentiments that the entire existence of Blacks was dissimilar to Whites. Turner (2002) in her insightful book *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies* discusses the various exoticized collectible items that were available during this period to signify the attitudes toward and imagistic representations of Black bodies. One such item worth noting is a game introduced in 1890 by Milton Bradley Company called "Jolly Darkie Target Game," in which the object was to "score bulls-eyes by throwing a ball into the gaping mouth of a Black male figure" (p. 11). In fact, Turner (2002) reports having heard about a fairly regular recurrence of a Black male sitting outside a theater house immediately before the showing, with his mouth open, orally receiving balls thrown by little kids who decided to make this an entertaining activity. Perhaps this was the inspiration for the "Jolly Darkie Target Game." Assuming this was true, it was apparently either not seen as inhumane, or simply acceptable behavior even among adult onlookers; after all, this type of denigrated blackness was the point of the minstrel show they were headed to see inside the theater.

The exaggerated physiognomic features of minstrel figures and their collectible counterparts speak volumes about the nature of early racial scripting processes developed in the interests of the polity. Billboards, theatrical performance announcements, and posters, as well as sheet music displayed huge facial images of minstrel figures, usually "darkies," a label that accurately described the blackened faces of even dark-skinned Black actors. The faces were with bulging eyes, and cosmetically altered huge red lips accented on a completely blackened facial surface. I agree with Means-Coleman's (2000) assertion, "blackface was about much more than the degradation of African Americans; it too was a mask for Whites' obsessive curiosity and envy over blackness" (p. 41) and I would add that blackface was a public spectacle that displayed the deeply entrenched subconscious iterations of a malicious whiteness ideology trying to justify its immoral posture. Mapp (1972, pp. 30–31) recalls and enumerates nineteen stereotypes about Blacks that could be found within stage and film performances:

1. The savage African
2. The happy slave
3. The devoted servant
4. The corrupt politician
5. The irresponsible citizen
6. The petty thief
7. The social delinquent
8. The vicious criminal
9. The sexual superman
10. The superior athlete
11. The unhappy non-White
12. The natural-born cook
13. The natural-born musician
14. The perfect entertainer
15. The superstitious churchgoer
16. The chicken and watermelon eater
17. The razor and knife “toter”
18. The uninhibited expressionist
19. The mental inferior

Given that slave masters were rarely an integral part of the slaves' private lives, much of the dialogue and interactional behaviors involving two Blacks was a fictive part of the White playwright's imagination, yet the important task of the playwright was always to depict White characters as righteous, honest Christians who innocently possessed slaves as property in order to make money to support their families. During and perhaps even after slavery, White theatergoers could leave the stage play feeling assured that they were behaving respectably in the eyes of God and that the playwright was simply portraying Black and White lives exactly as they existed with a slight exaggeration of Black facial features just for fun (Bogle, 1996). The darkened face, created from the moistened debris of burnt and crushed champagne corks, insolently signified that Whites did not want to see Blacks for who they really were culturally, but, instead, as an altercast, an iconographic image, a scripted racial body inscribed with meanings and messages Whites enjoyed seeing, ones that were self-affirming and insular.

In the post-emancipation period, Blacks could also attend minstrel shows, but tended not to do so. If they did elect to attend, they had to sit in the balcony during the show and wait for White theatergoers to exit before walking down from the balcony and leaving the building. Until the early 1900s, White stage actors like Christians Ben Cotton, George Nichols, and the most-favored Jewish actor Al Jolson often played White and Black characters, with few exceptions, like Mungo. As an aside, each blackface musical included a very significant segment showing the minstrel blacking up for the

part by applying burnt cork to the face. This process heightened the xenophobic effect of the film or show (Cripps, 1977, 1993; Rogin, 1996). It was not until 1903 (with the emergence of the Uncle Tom character) that five major stereotypical Black minstrel figures (played by Blacks) began to be introduced, starting with Sambo, the coon stock character. Bogle (1996) identifies this five-part stock minstrel character as the pantheon: coon, Uncle Tom, tragic mulatto, mammy, and buck. Although it was evident that these characters were stereotypical and degrading depictions of Blacks designed to make a mockery of Black life, there were many Blacks who were proud to play the roles and use the wages to support their families. It is also important to recognize, as Rogin (1996) reminds us, that blackface marked the entrée of Black actors in the entertainment industry, particularly in the early days of filmmaking. So, this analysis does not seek to devalue their presence, but rather to point out how their presence *in blackface* created long-lasting effects on Black identities in the United States and served as a visual foundation for the present perpetuation of Black corporeal inscription. I, along with many others, would like to be able to say that we have completely exerted the imagery associated with minstrelsy from our filmic repertoire, but the reality is we are continually plagued by this character even today. The five characters of the pantheon currently exist in varying forms, still with condescending effects, although so suppressed and implicit that many television viewers and moviegoers (Black and White) would argue they do not exist. Few would argue that the social construction of race has been purged from the American ethos, but how it is presently manifested in popular culture is still ambiguous in the minds of some American citizens. In the next section, I will explain the original characters and also their present-day manifestations.

COONS, UNCLE TOMS, TRAGIC MULATTOES, MAMMIES, AND BUCKS

The five pantheon stock characters were introduced during the era of silent filmmaking. With no sound and a burgeoning motion picture industry, films were exciting because they were new and innovative. Bogle (1989) says it best:

In its initial stages, during the period of silent films, from the early 1900s to the late 1920s, from the days of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) through *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and afterwards, black film history looks simply like a study in stereotypes: a crew of gentle Toms, doomed mulattoes, comic coons, overstuffed mammies, and mean, menacing violent black bucks. (p. 1)

The resemblance of Bogle's character descriptions to the present-day stereotypes of African American males as lazy, comical, non-intellectual, promiscuous, violent, and deviant, alongside stereotypes of African American

females as stoic and overweight or highly sexualized with pronounced gluteal features (like Hottentot Venus, otherwise known as Sarah Bartmann)⁵ is frightening when we consider many of these images created over a century ago still haunt us. We still find images of Black women who are presented as sexually charged, sometimes-uppity automatons (like the strong-willed, domineering-wife, *Amos n Andy* radio show character Sapphire). I will discuss this further in chapter 4.

In this long line of caricature images, the Mungo character can be considered the first portrayal of Blacks by Blacks in a stage play. Remember that the film industry did not begin until the 1900s, and Blacks were among the first to be represented cinematically. They were mostly depicted as foot-shuffling, wide-smiling idiots who had a propensity for malapropisms. There were certainly distinctions among the coon, Uncle Tom, mulatto, mammy, and buck, yet they are all a part of the pantheon, insofar as they are each sophisticated scripts of the Black body that have transcended time.

COONS

The terms coon and Sambo are often used interchangeably. The Sambo character was introduced first in the late 1700s in the stage play *The Divorce* (1781). He was a cheerful and contented individual who was loved by Whites for his complacent faithfulness and unquestionable loyalty to Whites. Later, he would be depicted prominently in minstrel shows as well as aurally via radio and songs. For example, by 1900, over 600 coon songs had been written and performed, the most popular of which are probably “All Coons Look Alike to Me” and “Mammy’s Little Pickaninny” (Toll, 1974).

There were many names for the coon stock character. He has been referred to as the urban zip coon, dancing dandy, and, most notably, Sambo, the happy slave. Bogle (1996) points to four famous coon characters: the pickaninny, Rastus, Stepin Fetchit, and Uncle Remus. Each protagonist manifesting these types played the coon character differently. As the pickaninny, adolescent actors played the coon role; he or she was silly and aloof. As Rastus and Stepin Fetchit, he was known as a jovial sluggard and raconteur who kept the audience “in stitches” because of his perpetual antics. As Uncle Remus, he was Tom’s cousin, and he shared Tom’s heightened modesty and complacent spirit.

The Pickaninny as Coon. The pickaninny, which came to be defined in the dictionary as a negative label for a young Black child, was indeed played by Black children, as in the case of the literary figure *Little Black Sambo*. At the time, the idea of including them was thought to be innovative, since they had not been used before and it seemed to offer a much more complete and compelling portrait of the pathologized composite Black fam-

ily. Dispersed throughout various films, the family was never presented as aunts, uncles, and children in a happy community setting. Bogle explains, "The pickaninny was the first of the coon types to make its screen debut. It gave the Negro child actor his place in the black pantheon. Generally, he was a harmless little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting" (p. 7). The Pickaninny, like all coon stock types, could be seen on posters, sheet music, cigarette lighters, clothes patches, and other memorabilia. In movies and memorabilia related to Thomas A. Edison's *Pickaninnies* (1894), the title character was often shown gaping while holding a watermelon, and looking around with overdilated pupils. Subsequent to the emergence of the pickaninny in nineteenth-century advertisements and early 1900s movies was one of the most popular pickaninny motion pictures—Hal Roach's *Our Gang* (1938). Produced by Metro-Goldwyn Pictures, this is the film that later evolved and became known as *The Little Rascals*. *Our Gang* had one Black character—Farina, played by Ernie Morrison, who was a cute little boy with twisted ponytails that would stand straight in the air at any moment of surprise. Farina was unwittingly the butt of all the kids' jokes, so he would simply laugh when they laughed. *The Little Rascals*, the televisual progeny of *Our Gang*, had reruns that were still being shown into the 1970s and 1980s, and were clearly a carryover on television from the minstrel period and early days of cinema and sound.

Initially, pickaninnies were rarely given speaking parts; they were just shown acting silly. In *The Little Rascals*, the Black characters Farina, Stymie, and Buckwheat were generously allowed an occasional line or two as part of a group of mischievous schoolchildren. Bogle (1996) describes the characters as follows:

While Farina was given to heroics (except when there were ghosts about—at which time he was quick to head for the hills), Stymie was noted for his nonchalance and detached shrewdness. Usually he saw straight through any sham . . . Little Buckwheat was the last but certainly not the least of the important Black children appearing in the series. With a round chocolate moon face and enormous eyes, Buckwheat always came across as a quiet, odd-ball type, the perfect little dum-dum tag-along. (p. 23)

At first sight, it seems laudatory that at least the group was integrated, but, on closer examination, one finds that the personality profiles of the Black characters were far from desirable. Among most Americans today, Buckwheat is probably the most well known, among the three Little Rascals, because of Eddie Murphy's enlivened portrayal of the character on *Saturday Night Live* in the 1980s and in syndicated reruns played in the early 1990s. Murphy's tragicomical mockery of the character was actually true to form. Murphy's Buckwheat wore an Afro, talked loudly, and spoke in Black dialect. It was clear that the full-grown Buckwheat was still puerile and ignorant.

Perhaps the most obvious examples of coon pickaninnies still on the air are the cacophonous title characters of Nickelodeon's show *Keenan & Kel* directed by Howard Storm. After viewing one episode of this *Teen Nick Series* show, it is easy to be convinced that these slapstick comedic characters, presented often in close-up camera shots that zoom in on their wide grins and bulging eyes, do not know what to do with themselves. They are objects of hysteria; they sporadically speak nonsensical lines, apparently in homage to *Abbott & Costello* routines (but without the impeccable timing and formula), which are indicative of ignorance; however, to their credit, it is clear they are intelligent youngsters who are scripted to do nothing more than embody extreme buffoonish hilarity. Despite what I can observe as intelligence, they often do behave as though they are stupid. For example, in one episode, Kel was enticed to participate in a grocery-bagging contest with orange soda as his end reward. He refused more conventional payoffs like money or certain privileges to have a supply of carbonated orange drink. This is reminiscent of the classic pickaninny's unexplainable preference for and symbolic attachment to watermelon, and the more contemporary stereotypical association of Blacks with red Kool-Aid.

Keenan and Kel do not appear docile, yet, given their scripted Black bodies, if they were to genuflect, it would not be surprising. Keenan is an overweight Black male actor who often dons an Afro or some semblance of one, while Kel is a thin Black male actor with a close fade haircut who acts as Keenan's sidekick. They appear as coons without blackface and it is a shame to see them scripted this way. Unlike early minstrel show actors like Stepin Fetchit, who was a pathbreaker and a pioneer, although considered one of the most apparent culturally disloyal "sell-outs" of his time, they seem to have no excuse for their damaging caricatures recapitulating the 1900s pickaninny. I am not sure they are aware of this scripted correlation, but I can only hope they are ignorant of how deleterious this cartoon can be to young viewers whose popular cultural images of themselves are diverse, but still limited. I am inclined to agree with hooks, who declares, "Any African American who watches television for more than a few hours a week is daily ingesting toxic representations and poisonous pedagogy. Yet the ingestion of constant propaganda that teaches Black people self-hate has become so much the norm that it is rarely questioned" (p. 221).

Rastus as Coon. Like all the other coon types, Rastus was a cipher. He first was shown in Sigmund "Pop" Lubin's short *How Rastus Got His Pork Chops* (1908). Later, this character emerged in silent films like *How Rastus Gets His Turkey* (1910), *Rastus and Chicken* (1911), *Chicken Thief* (1911), *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), and *Pickaninnies and Watermelon* (1912), all of which stereotyped him as a foolish gambler as well as a chicken and watermelon-loving delinquent. In *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), Rastus daydreams about being deserted in Zululand, Africa. As Nestey (1982) explains, the storyline

adopts the Pocahontas/John Smith myth, but instead the princess Pocahontas is portrayed by an obese “pre-mammy” figure (p. 21). The Pathé Company and Sigmund “Pop” Lubin released separate and competing Rastus series, which were thematically consistent with the shiftless, ignorant Sambo caricature that had become so familiar. He was perhaps only distinguished, among the coon types, by his occasional interaction with and filmic transplantation to Africa.

He was not the first character to go to Africa or portray an African. One of the earliest films depicting such a character was D. W. Griffith’s *The Zulu’s Heart* (1908), a film short, which involved an African who turns against his tribesmen to help and to exemplify loyalty toward a White man. Nестеby (1982) claims this was the first American film to use Zulus. Rastus, though, was used to make the point that it was not just Black slaves who were savage, intellectually inferior, violent, and sexual derelicts, but that this began before their entry in the New World when they were in their indigenous context of Africa—essentially suggesting a helplessly inherent inferiority.

This was the beginning of a whole racist genre of blackface comedies that would later be followed by jungle movies like the 1920s Tarzan series that began with *The Adventures of Tarzan* (Cripps, 1977) and extended into the late 1950s with movies like *Tarzan and the Planet of the Apes*. The genre persisted into the early 1990s, with the movie *The Air Up There*, which subjugated “underdeveloped” Africa to the industrialized and powerful Western nations by misdirecting the audience’s attention to a White basketball coach’s desperate attempt to find an ideal basketball player. Naturally, since Blacks are imagined to be inherently more skilled athletes, he goes directly to the source of their ancestral skills—Africa. This racist depiction is characteristic of and recapitulates early 1900s scripting of the Black body.

According to Means-Coleman (2000), another representation of Rastus that has extended into the twenty-first century was his role as Chef Rastus, a Black cook who used a barely intelligible dialect to narrate stories, in a 1930s children’s show titled *The Cream of Wheat Menagerie*. It takes no stroke of genius to realize this filmic presentation led to the now-sanitized image of Uncle Remus on the Cream of Wheat boxes existing on grocery shelves even today.

Stepin Fetchit as Coon. Certainly the most popular of all coon characters and the most noted Black Hollywood actor of the period, Stepin Fetchit, a former film porter, debuted in 1927 in *Old Kentucky* and played in nearly thirty films before 1935, many of which were part of a contract with Fox Pictures—a rarity for Black actors in Hollywood at the time. Stepin Fetchit, born Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry, rehearsed blackface minstrelsy before he became an on-screen icon. Initially, he and a friend did a traveling plantation show routine that they billed as *Skeeter and Rastus: The two dancing crows from Dixie*,

which they later changed to *Stepin Fetchit: The two dancing fools from Dixie*. Stepin Fetchit, the actor, became a Broadway favorite who also played a role alongside Moms Mabley in the 1974 hit *Amazing Grace*. His stardom and millionaire status came with a hefty price—his dignity. Even when it became evident via protests that his character was condescending and not respectful of true Black cultural expression, he was said to have defensively responded, “I was a 100% Black accomplishment” (Nestey, 1982, p. 177). Stepin Fetchit has often been presented as a mumbling, one-dimensional character who wears mismatched colored britches and suits.

Mantan Moreland, one among several emulators of Stepin Fetchit, played the Stepin Fetchit role-type for over 40 years from the late 1920s to the early 1970s. He acted in more than 300 movies, becoming the most prolific actor of the twentieth century (Watkins, 1994). He was especially known for his ability to dilate his pupils widely, heightening his coon image. In several of these films, he was a servant, such as the chauffeur Birmingham Brown in a series of Charlie Chan movies beginning with *Charlie Chan in Egypt* (1935). He has been described as a highly energetic and prodigious actor who could improvise and develop his own lines very well. In fact, he became known for his self-created popular line, “Feets don’t fail me now!” Incidentally, Mantan was the name of a protagonist in *Bamboozled*, Spike Lee’s filmic satire of minstrelsy. The plot was driven by Mantan, who is hired off the streets for his dancing and blackface stage-acting abilities to appear in a brand new television series. Blacking up before each show, Mantan became a beloved caricature who boosted network television ratings. Later, he experienced an identity crisis, but the idea was that it took him a long time after making money “hand over fist” before he was able to notice that his identity was at stake. Director Spike Lee, known for making politically charged and contemplative movies, released this cinematic appeal for American citizens to acknowledge the ontological injustice inherent in scripting the Black body as a utility, a self-hating instrument for espousing racist ideology.

Uncle Remus as Coon. Uncle Remus was another white supremacist inscription on the Black body. According to Bogle (1996), Uncle Remus was Uncle Tom’s first cousin. His character was said to evolve from Joel Chandler Harris’s reworking of fables told to Aesop by a Black slave and published as a collection entitled *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* in 1881 (Spaulding, 1990). So he, like Uncle Tom, was initially introduced as a fictive literary character who was also a narrator, and 55 years later he appeared in cinematic form as a coon in movies like *The Green Pastures* (1936) and Walt Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946). While his cousin Tom would come to be known as a consciously obedient character who was attempting to be Christlike in his merciful understanding and tolerance of his oppressor’s condescending and malicious behaviors, Remus was docile simply for no other reason than it was what Whites

expected. His character expressed disdain for the newly freed Blacks and noted that they were lazy, shiftless Negroes who deserved slavery. Essentially, he was angry at freedom and in love with captivity (Silk & Silk, 1990).

There are many ways to describe Uncle Remus. Both in literary and theatrical form, he was a sometimes toothless, gray-haired, modestly dressed raconteur who would, in Black dialect, tell many trickster tales involving the now-famous mythical characters Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox,⁶ among other animals. The story, in all its variations, pitted weak animals like the terrapin and rabbit against bigger animals like the fox, bear, and wolf. The smaller animal would always outwit the larger animal, with the moral being that brains will always reign victorious over brawn, and that the seemingly less advantaged always have an opportunity to rise up and overcome any obstacles so that they, too, could live somewhat successfully. This message, narrated by Uncle Remus via many different folktales, was a discursive strategy inscribed on the Black body by Whites to convince themselves that their stolen privilege and corruptive colonialist power did not prevent Blacks from enjoying some measure of success if they were docile. This figurative inscription of the Black body as being needful of subdual was meant to stymie insurrections and instill a message foretelling the possibilities of end rewards for those who remained honorably committed to their servile roles. If Black slaves or ex-slaves could just remain helpless and loyal to whiteness, then they would be okay. White slave owners' less than exegetical interpretations of religious text, particularly the Bible, led them to rationalize the slaves' intractable obligation to serve (Spaulding, 1990).

Summary of Coon Stock Types. No matter whether one is referring to the youthful and unaware pickaninny, the irregular and displaced Rastus, the happy-go-lucky and artistically talented Stepin Fetchit, or the complacent storytelling Uncle Remus, coons dominated early minstrel show business. They, more strongly than any other character type with the exception of mammy and Uncle Tom, were the most inexcusable, protested, and despised by Blacks because they arguably embodied the most overtly hurtful stereotypes of Blacks as innately inferior, lazy, shiftless, illiterate fools (Bogle, 1996; Cripps, 1977; Means-Coleman, 2001). These four stock coon types—the pickaninny, Rastus, Stepin Fetchit, and Uncle Remus—were well-known, perennially funny, and docile protagonists. The coon, in all manifestations, had a personality that was distinguished from, but closely related to, the remainder of the stock characters in the pantheon—Uncle Tom, mulatto, mammy, and buck.

UNCLE TOMS

Uncle Tom was monotypic as an accommodating, loyal, and faithful servant, who wanted nothing more than to exhibit Christian brotherly love and mercy toward others. Bogle (1996) describes him as follows:

[Edwin] Porter's tom was the first in a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters. Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n'er turn against their White massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless and oh-so-very-kind. Thus, they endear themselves to White audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts. (p. 6)

The Uncle Tom character was introduced cinematically first in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), a 12-minute short adapted from Harriett Beecher Stowe's 1852 book of the same title that now has been translated into 58 languages and dialects. Sole mention of Porter's motion picture adaptation is not to slight the more than 500 stage play productions that preceded the film's 1903 release (Euell, 1997). After Porter, there were four other motion picture versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* released in 1909, 1914, 1918, and 1927. Porter's version of the film was innovative for its time, but later technologically dwarfed by D. W. Griffith's much-protested blockbuster film *Birth of a Nation*, which lasted three hours, still with no sound, but with advanced lighting and use of title cards as scenic frontispieces. A White actor initially portrayed Uncle Tom, but the 1914 and 1927 versions of the film included Black actors Sam Lucas and James B. Lowe, respectively, as the title character. Uncle Tom was the first among several stock minstrel figures to be played by Blacks, although the term, even in contemporary parlance, carries very negative connotations.

"Uncle Tom" is used to refer to a culturally unconscious, submissive individual who does not identify with any Black community, but instead prefers to see himself as a White-identified, cultureless, raceless, independent American citizen who can achieve the American dream without attaching himself to a Black community as long as he has God. He gullibly presumes the goodness of everyone, even when they have proven otherwise. Although somewhat disputed, some of our conservative political servants as well as scholars such as Clarence Thomas, Armstrong Williams, Shelby Steele, and John McWhorter have been typified this way because of their resistance to seeking a type of liberation that permits everyday marginalized group citizens to protest injustice that stifles their sense of liberty, especially in cases involving clear racial implications. Typically, what one is saying when claiming someone is an Uncle Tom is that the person has forsaken any real sense of community, that he cares more about individual achievement than sociopolitical forces that limit collective progress. In this way, the Uncle Tom character is somewhat of an anomaly because he is not viewed merely as an entertainment-related derivative, but also as one related to public servants gone astray.

Wilson Moses's (1993) interpretation of the Uncle Tom character is quite different. He contends that Uncle Tom has been vastly misunderstood and mythologized. Uncle Tom, according to Moses, did identify with Blacks,

but was first and foremost a “Christ-like martyr” (p. 50) who bravely resisted any sort of dehumanization, especially of his own fellow Blacks. Moses recounts a story from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which Uncle Tom refused to whip the “hapless Casey,” whom the master has ordered him to punish. He also “acknowledges Eliza’s right to flee with little Harry and does not betray her trust” (p. 56). Uncle Tom is explained as a messianic individual who makes the difficult choice of humbling himself as Christ would. Nonetheless, as Moses (1993) recognizes, Black slaves and present-day Blacks have great contempt for any characterization of complacency and deferential servility. Moses’s point is well taken; there is a complexity to the Uncle Tom character that seldom is explored. It could be argued that his faithfulness is mistaken for a tragically uninformed complacency and devitalized dissonance; his Christian spirit is dismissed as a brand of undignified passivity; and his unselfish loyalty is deemed a nearly masochistic self-torture.

On the other hand, it is critical that we remember the cinematic portrayals of Uncle Tom that launched a broad-based indictment of Black male loyalists as servile and stupid. In retrospect, a blackfaced Uncle Tom character that accepted an inordinate amount of violent physical, psychological, and emotional abuse at the hands of his master can only incense Black audiences. Sometimes slaves were coaxed to accept this abuse as obedience to God, and the Bible would be used to support this (Baker-Fletcher, 1996). This accent on abuse rather than a loving disposition is much more a commentary of Edwin Porter’s 1903 cinematic interpretation of Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* than anything else. Porter’s film set the precedent for a series of motion pictures that would continue to miss the point Stowe may have been trying to convey—that Uncle Tom was a Christian, morally strengthened family man whose obedience was truly guided by God rather than White men’s social conventions and rules (Turner, 2002).

TRAGIC MULATTOES

Not surprising was the fact that Blacks were experiencing identity crises (Bogle, 1996; Cripps, 1977; Means-Coleman, 2001). This was depicted most evidently as a concern of White filmmakers in the embodiment of a character known as the tragic mulatto, a light-skinned female character who was tragically caught between right and wrong, good and bad, and, most important, Black and White. A mulatto is a person of mixed parentage, particularly Black and White parents, and, therefore, usually light-skinned. The tragedy that overcomes her is her predicament as a person considered Black, yet often light-skinned enough to “pass” for White. The dilemma is whether she should accept her socially ascribed blackness or reject it in favor of a more privileged whiteness. Her identity is always held in mind, as she negotiates these two cosmologies, knowing she is not fully accepted in either world

because of her skin color (Bell, 1999). Her skin color is its own body politic that referees what is essentially a tug of war between intimacy and distance, desire and control, myth and truth. These themes emerged in the films *The Debt* (1912) and Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1913),⁷ in which a White man has a White wife and mulatto mistress, both of whom bear his children. The two children, George and Zoë, grow up apart from one another, later fall in love, and eventually discover they cannot get lawfully married because they are siblings and she is partly Black, which means she is considered property. When her blackness is exposed, she finds out she is no longer free. The plot thickens when it becomes clear that Zoë will have to be auctioned off with the rest of the property due to legal debts and tax liens owed by the White proprietor. She is dreadfully attached to the misery her skin color brings her. In the 1859 play, Zoë exclaims:

Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is Black—bright red as the rest may be that one drop poisons all the flood; those seven bright drops give me love like yours—hope like yours—ambition like yours . . . but the one drop gives me despair, for I'm an unclean thing—forbidden by the laws—I'm an Octoroon! (as quoted in Anderson, 1997, p. 51)

The scripted message is clear that her body is inexcusably marked with a despicable blackness, thus she can do nothing but live a damnable existence.

The tragic mulatto was introduced in the cinematic role of Chick, played by 17-year-old Nina Mae McKinney, in White director King Vidor's first-of-its-kind talking-pictures movie *Hallelujah* (1929), a film that featured an all-Black cast singing, dancing, and representing utopic Black life. Bogle (1996) calls McKinney's mulatto character, Chick, "the movies' first Black whore" (p. 31). Years later, there was some speculation that actresses, especially light-skinned ones, if they wanted to be employed, had to play these roles and were offered small parts because of the limited White public interest in seeing sassy Black women characters on stage. Regardless of the reason, the actress who portrayed the tragic mulatto helped to introduce a most interesting persona, one who was problematized by Black ancestry, yet was halfway salvageable because of her White ancestry. The White audience sympathized with her plight, but the mandates of their negative whiteness ideology necessitated that they see her as having contaminated her whiteness. The mulatto is almost always referred to as the *tragic* mulatto, because her skin color automatically presumes that her identity must be negotiated. She simply cannot be happy being who she is because there is no ontological space for folks who fall in the middle of a Black–White polarity.

Naturally, this has changed over the years; although as Spike Lee's 1980s movie *School Daze* illustrates, there is some emotional residue that remains among Blacks as it relates to skin color politics and privilege. For example, in *School Daze*, Spike Lee pits the "jigaboos" (dark-skinned Blacks) against the

“wanna-bes” (light-skinned Blacks) and suggests that the jigaboos are those who feel the strongest connection to African ancestral roots or at least a strong Black cultural consciousness, while the wanna-bes just want to be White. Of course, this is a false dichotomy of personalities, but one that has been the catalyst for a lot of ingroup dissension among some Blacks. It does have some historical credence in places like Louisiana where some Creole and Cajun people still are divided along racial lines.⁸ This residue is still implicated in ingroup discussions of race and racism among Blacks (Gaines, 2001; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992).

Nonetheless, there have emerged, as Anderson (1997) explains, three types of mulattos: “one who is a divided soul character who desires a White lover/husband and suffers a tragic fate as a result; another [sic] is the unhappy passing mulattos who denies her race and dies; the [sic] third is the exotic, restless, and mysterious mulattoes, who is inherently a sexual character” (p. 53). These three types correspond to three character types I call the *prototypical mulatto*, *passing mulatto*, and the *jezebel*. We have already discussed the *prototypical mulatto* character Zoë in *The Octoroon*, so I will now explain the other two.

Passing Mulatto. One passing mulatto character was that of Fredi Washington, a gorgeous light-skinned actress from Savannah, Georgia, who was probably best remembered as Pecola in the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life*. In that role, she was a gender and race-coded female tragic mulatto who attempts to “pass” for White.⁹ According to Orbe and Strother (1996), “passing [sic] refers to the process by which bi-ethnic people conceal their African heritage and assimilate totally into the European American community” (p. 119). The fascinating thing about the character development of Pecola—which is typical of the passing mulatto—is that as Anderson (1997) evinces, the audience is led to believe she is White until that climactic and shocking moment when her blackness is confirmed, then her deception and, hence, her ethos is seen as vile. Within one cinematic glance, she undergoes a metamorphosis from God-blessed aristocrat and good citizen to a morally enfeebled plebeian—indeed—an impostor who deserves nothing less than damnation or death. The inscribed messages are as follows: Pecola can never be White, so she might as well get used to being Black and a part of everything Black, which is to be deprived of any admirable human qualities. Furthermore, passing will not be tolerated or justifiable; it must be treated as a form of treason, a felonious crime, rather than a minor infraction that comes with a light-weight penalty. Anderson (1997) suggests the penalty for passing, throughout many films involving the mulatto character, is typically exile or death.

A contemporary example of the passing mulatto, besides Alex Haley’s title character *Queen* (Orbe & Strother, 1996), is Jennifer Beals as Daphne Monet, a protagonist in director Carl Franklin’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995).

This film was adapted from Walter Mosley's novel of the same title and set in the mid- to late 1940s. Monet plays opposite undercover detective Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, a character portrayed by Denzel Washington. Throughout this film, she is a phantom-like character Easy has been trying to find. One of the downplayed, yet very significant constituent parts of the film is the discovery that Daphne Monet is not White; she is really a mulatto New Orleans native named Ruby Charles. When her wealthy fiancé and mayoral candidate Todd Carter finds out her race, there is havoc because now his political career is in shambles and her presumed rags-to-riches lifestyle is terminated. The only one able to rescue her, and get her out of town, is detective Easy Rawlins and his sidekick Raymond "Mouse" Alexander. Initially, it may appear that this film does not fit among *contemporary* depictions of the passing mulatto because it is set in the 1940s, but it was produced in the mid-1990s when skin color politics were still quite relevant, as they are now. In keeping with the chiasmic mulatto themes of power and privilege as well as race and gender, *Devil in a Blue Dress* consistently reminds us of Hollywood's seeming inability to efface the monolithic and pathologized representation of Black bodies. Although the passing mulatto is exemplary of this, it is never more evident than with the jezebel.

The Jezebel. First introduced in Bertram Bracken's *Jezebel's Daughter* (1918) [a.k.a. *The Moral Law*], the jezebel character did not become popular until the release of William Wyler's *Jezebel* (1938), a film that received eight academy-award nominations and for which White actress Bette Davis received an Oscar for Best Actress. In Davis's role as Miss Julie Marsden in *Jezebel*, she is a nonracialized jezebel who is a strong-willed southern belle. Her significance, among the mulattoes discussed here, is that the jezebel character later became associated with stubborn, manipulative, lascivious Black women (Snead, MacCabe, & West, 1994). Naturally, the jezebel's character profile is well-aligned with the mulatto's sexually charged and devious nature, and later films like Kwyn Bade's *Loving Jezebel* (1999), a depiction of a clearly racialized jezebel, would draw this connection just as critical theorists and feminists have been doing for years. In each on-screen portrayal of jezebel, she is always at fault for her sexual splurges. Bade's rendition is no different. As film critic Roger Ebert (2000) discovers,

the title of "Loving Jezebel" puts the blame on the women: a jezebel, we learn from a definition on the screen, is a woman who fools around with lots of men. Either definition would set up a sex romp, I suppose, but this movie is not quite what you'd expect. Within its romantic comedy we find a character that is articulate and a little poignant, and we realize Theodurus doesn't so much seek out other men's women as have them, so to speak, thrust upon him. (http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/2000/10/102705.html)

The same basic storyline emerges in the film *Jezebel*, which is set in 1852 New Orleans. Julie Marsden is engaged, but, as the film opens, we find her ex-boyfriend in a bar talking to her fiancé's relative. The ex-boyfriend was quickly dumped near the beginning of her engagement, but still loves her, so much so that when someone else in the bar speaks ill of Julie a fight erupts.

Meanwhile, Miss Julie, as she is affectionately called, gets upset with her fiancé, Preston Dillard, and tries to retaliate by publicly humiliating him. Although unmarried women usually wear white gowns to formal affairs, she decides to attend the prestigious Olympus Ball wearing a red dress and stubbornly insists that Preston escort her, prodding his masculinity by telling him he is probably afraid he will have to duel to save her dignity if a man says something scornful to her. He shamefully agrees to be her escort and discovers she is the one embarrassed more than he, so he makes her suffer by dancing in the middle of the floor after the awe-stricken guests have cleared the dance floor. When the ball is over, to her shocking disbelief, he ends the engagement and asks her to leave. She slaps him and stomps off to her home. She is melancholy, but occupies her time as a nurse assisting patients during an outbreak of yellow fever.

Three years later, the already-married character Pres arrives at one of Julie's two grandiose plantation mansions equipped with Black servants (which automatically suggests she has passed as White), and asks her to nurse him to health because he has contracted yellow fever. She immediately apologizes for her stubbornness and tries to win him back, but, unbeknownst to her, he brought along his newlywed wife, New York native Amy Bradford. Julie begins to scheme how to reinvigorate his affection for her, despite knowing he is married. Under those conditions, she agrees to care for him. Meanwhile, under her breath, she says, "I've gotta think, to plan, to fight." The storyline develops and we find Julie has incited a duel between two other characters, Buck and Ted. Her evil, contemptuous nature accompanied by an often malicious and seductive instinct is her trademark throughout the film. Just as with all stereotypical mulattoes, she becomes the object of gendered tension as the storyline progresses.

Rebelliousness and being a "bad girl" are only part of the jezebel personality profile. Physically, the jezebel as an archetype shares the physical attributes of the passing mulatto. She usually has long, thin, straight Black hair, thin lips, and a light-skinned almost-White or identifiably White complexion as she did in the character of Miss Julie. The personality of the jezebel has been described as "destructive(ly) animalistic" (Anderson, 1997, p. 118), "sexually aggressive" (Collins, 1991, p. 77), and a seductress akin to the title character in *Carmen Jones*. Jasmine Guy in television's *A Different World*, the character Nola Darling in Spike Lee's film *She's Gotta Have It* (1984), and Lisa Rae in *Players Club* are each jezebels. None of them attempts to pass; they are just scripted as beautiful, sexy, wanton bodies audiences crave to see.

Meyers (2004) contends, "The Jezebels' lewd conduct links them to the bad behavior and moral lapses associated with Black women and poverty" (p. 112). The latter two characters are certainly more characteristic of the jezebel as sex object. Anderson (1997) deconstructs the character of Nola Darling and suggests that she is never given the chance to appear unsullied, but is quintessentially aggressive in bed. Nola narrates her story, as the audience is permitted access to her sex life. In placing aside her privacy, Nola becomes exposed as a lustful woman with an insatiable sexual appetite. She is not satisfied with one man, and sometimes not even one per day. As voyeur, the audience plays witness to her sexual fantasies and rationalizations of her relational choices. In this film, director Spike Lee updated the images of Chick and Zoë, and offered a level of consciousness and self-reflection virtually missing from earlier dramatic portrayals of jezebel. Yet, he allowed the odorous residue dormant in patriarchal, popular cultural representations of Black women to remain. She is still a sex-crazed creature, a jezebel who never escapes from this cell. In fact, when I first viewed the movie, I thought Lee was trying to show us via a documentary how sex-related psychosis develops and unfolds. The mulatto, like the coon, mammy, and buck, is an intricate character with varied manifestations. No matter whether she is presented as a prototypical mulatto, passing mulatto, or a jezebel, she is a pariah to the upper class, caught in an epic struggle for her identity.

MAMMIES

The mammy is another figure in the pantheon that is confounded by a scripted identity matrix. Contrary to the popular image of a middle-aged, dark-skinned, overweight mammy, Turner (2002) maintains that "actual" mammies or house servants were typically young, light-skinned or mixed-race, thin women. In fact, according to Turner, "Household jobs were frequently assigned to mixed-race women. They were unlikely to be old because nineteenth century Black women just did not live very long; fewer than ten percent of Black women lived beyond their fiftieth birthday" (p. 44).

The mammies were introduced cinematically, opines Turner, as a way to lessen their appeal to White audiences and recreate nostalgia for the antebellum south. Unfortunately, many overweight Black women on television and in film have been and continue to play the role of a middle-aged, dark-skinned, overweight mammy (Collins, 1991; Dates & Barlow, 1993; Means-Coleman, 2000). So, according to early films, a mammy, by definition, was a heavy-set complacent Black woman servant, who often was a maid or cook in addition to a surrogate mother of a White family's kids. She usually wore an apron and a cotton dress that came down to her ankles, and her hair was always pulled back and tied. Present-day depictions of mammies continue the image of an overweight Black woman as a stay-at-home or working mother

who cooks, cleans, and takes care of her own kids. In both instances, she is most noted for being an advisor, comforter, and primarily headstrong motherly figure who holds the household together. In the early days of filmmaking, her character could often be seen embracing next to her bosom a weeping individual who had expressed some tribulation (Bogle, 1989, 1996). One never got the sense the mammy had any problems of her own, but only ones inherited from others toward whom she was helplessly empathetic.

Two of the earliest depictions of the mammy, consonant with this description, included the roles of Gertrude Howard as Beulah in *I'm No Angel* (1933); the Beulah character eventually became the protagonist and title character of an ephemeral network television comedy called *Beulah*. The other popular mammy was Louise Beavers, as Aunt Delilah in *Imitation of Life* (1934), whose Aunt Jemima character seemingly desired nothing more than seeing her White boss create a lucrative enterprise from her secret recipe for pancakes. *Imitation of Life*, based on Fannie Hurst's novel of the same name, became the springboard for the establishment of Quaker Oats Company's Aunt Jemima pancake products and later, to a lesser extent, Aurora Foods' Mrs. Butterworth's syrup, both of which can still be bought at your local grocer. Certainly Aunt Jemima pancake products are much older, more popular, and more aligned with Black body politics, but even Mrs. Butterworth is presented as an overweight woman wearing an apron and a homely dress with her hair pulled back and bandana tied to hold her hair in place.

One of the most celebrated mammy characters was Hattie McDaniel (a nursemaid to Scarlet O'Hara) in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), a role for which McDaniel won an Oscar, for Best Supporting Actress, a feat not to be repeated next until Sidney Poitier's receipt of an Honorary Oscar for his role in *Lilies of the Field* (1963). McDaniel was scripted as the unattractive and asexualized mammy who was quite straightforward about her opinions on race, relationships, and her supposed inferiority (Cripps, 1993; Watkins, 1994). As the character named Mammy she portrayed in *Gone with the Wind*, she was more assertive than her character portrayal of Aunt Delilah in *Imitation of Life*. If asked her opinion, she would give it, in her own signifying way.

Personally, the earliest remembrance I have of the mammy was her role in cartoons like *Tom & Jerry*. While the animated cat and mouse were running and tearing up the house, the director took time occasionally to show an often-headless animated mammy cleaning up and apparently cooking, since she always wore a cooking apron and seemed to be exiting from the kitchen. The camera focused on her large bosom, overweight thighs and calves, and her apron. Every now and then, the camera would get a shot of her from behind so that the viewer could be assured it was a mammy, since she would be wearing the characteristic cloth covering her head and tied in the back. She rarely had any speaking parts, and, as I recall, if she did, she would talk

under her breath to express her dismay or disbelief of their playful antics. It seems, given her extremely limited role, she could have been left out of the cartoon, so it is even more peculiar why the director chose to maintain her presence. She became a symbolic backdrop that signified the show's attachment to a patriarchal and hegemonic legacy. That show, in retrospect, may seem subtly bigoted at first glance, but it was clearly and conspicuously racist.

Later depictions of mammy figures became even more sophisticated and somewhat difficult to detect because they were sometimes not cooks and maids in White families' houses. For example, Nell Carter in *Gimme a Break* (1981) was a classic mammy character, while the title character in *Thea* (1980s), a prequel to *Moesha* that somehow has outlasted *Moesha*, and remains in syndication on UPN, is a more contemporary mammy figure and a hair stylist. Other shows featuring contemporary mammy figures were *What's Happening?*, *What's Happening Now?*, *Family Matters*, and *Amen*.

Carter's role as Nell in *Gimme a Break* (a situation comedy that began in 1981) was as a housekeeper and nurturer of a White household that included a widowed police chief and his three daughters. She vowed to her terminally ill friend that she would take care of her family if she died. It is suspected Nell cared for these children as she did her own, but we never saw her children, if she even had any. Turner (2002) reminds us Nell had a Black boyfriend and Black professional girlfriend who appeared in only a few episodes. She was not extremely deferential, given the impetus for her character, but she fit the mammy profile, even down to the loud, raspy, but in her case high-pitched voice. Audiences seemed willing to excuse the inherent negativity of her mammy role because her White employer behaved much more like her friend than a mean, nasty tyrant. He had a pleasant disposition and seemed to recognize her as another human being worthy of respect; after all, she was doing the family a favor and could leave at any time. Of course, the show was only a couple decades removed from a time when Black women's cinematic and televisual roles were sparse, so any activism would have had to demonstrate a conspicuous producer intentionality to present demeaning and racist images. For those who were aware of minstrelsy, the deprecatory images did not need to be explained. Incidentally, Nell Carter's role is the most discussed post-1970s mammy depiction in modern academic literature (Bogle, 2001; Cummings, 1988; Dates & Pease, 1997; Means-Coleman, 2001).

The mammy is perhaps the most obvious modern-day minstrel figure to identify, initially because of her overweight physique, but also because of how she is portrayed as a husbandless, strong-willed matriarch principally preoccupied with domestic responsibilities. A contemporary example of a mammy still on television in 2004 is the cathectic character named Mamie, the maid in *Young & the Restless*. She is a barely recognizable variation of the mammy discussed so far. She is not obese, and, admittedly, her character has been trans-

formed since her initial appearance on the show. She was first introduced as a short, average-sized woman played by an actress with the last name of Rodriguez, apparently Latina. Rodriguez was not only a maid in the Abbot family household, but was also considered part of the family, a surrogate mother who offered advice when asked, and who essentially took care of the family. After the Abbot's divorce, she was reintroduced and played by a new actress, about the same size. She and Mr. Abbot begin, in one episode, a post-divorce romantic fling, but just as television's Ethel Waters's 1950s title character Beulah, Mamie could not get her beau to marry her. So, on the next episode, the viewing audience is told the affair must have been simply a figment of her imagination, a reverie. Somehow, she is paid a lump sum of money to leave the Abbott home, and her character is now a well-off independent woman who plays the aunt of two other Black female characters, but still keeps in touch with the Abbott family and is considered, even in her emancipated role, a member of the family.

The mammy figure, in almost all her cinematic and televisual manifestations, was somewhat complex in that she was scripted in accordance with the age-old racial body politic; she was generally considered to have a physically and sexually undesirable Black female body with highly desirable and comforting personality traits. She was a two-dimensional character who was an honest, yet humble and servile, friend whom Whites could confide in; she had "mother wit" that translated into sound advice; and she was a respectable matriarch who represented wholesome family values. The two major characteristics she was missing were agency to define her self as she pleased and a dignified life of her own, something separate from other people's issues.

BUCKS

Another figure in Bogle's (1996) pantheon is the brute who was almost always a tall, dark-skinned muscular, athletically built character and often either bald or with a short haircut. The brute or buck's primary objective was raping White women. He, essentially, refused to even attempt to control his insatiable sexual desires and urges; hence, the Black body of the brute was scripted to be nothing less than an indiscreet, devious, irresponsible, and sexually pernicious beast. This character explicitly showcased two major fears or anxieties of White men: first, theft of *his* woman by a maniacal, heathenish, and inherently violent Black male body, and, second, the possibility that she might be masochistically excited by his sexual nature and accept him despite his flaws, which might lead eventually to miscegenated offspring, hence defying the code of White racial purity. Some go so far as to suggest that White men's real fear, in the United States, was racial annihilation, since the de facto one-drop rule (Davis, 1996) indicated that if a human being had one drop of Black blood, the person would be considered Black (Welsing, 1991). Despite the

rationale, this character embodied and was the projected vision of both the brutality of Whites who barbarically enforced whiteness ideology during slavery and thereafter, and the brutality of a Black man forced to a point of retaliation; however, the storyline almost always suggests the Black man's natural proclivity to commit violent acts without provocation (Pinar, 2001).

One notable example of a brute was Gus in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), who is described as a "Black renegade rapist" (Turner, p. 22), although Bogle (1996) implies he was actually an "attempted rapist" who, before assaulting the White female character Cameron, watches her run from him, fall off a cliff, and plummet to her death. His penalty was served when an entourage of White Confederate army men, whose bodies were covered by white sheets, met him. This one segment evoked mayhem among activists and slaves alike. The whole imagery of a virgin White woman, an uncontrollable Black brute, and an otherwise civilized society points to the Black brute as society's only poison. Though ridden with sundry problems, it was also cathartic for Whites, since the brute's capture and punishment (only after a trial with evidence presented) represented a measure of true justice and alleviation of one of Whites greatest fears: that Black men would retaliate against White rapists of Black women by surreptitiously taking his God-given White female companion from him (Rocchio, 2000). Luckily, she came to her senses and sacrificed her life instead of debasing herself by sleeping with her property, which would be equivalent in their minds to bestiality.

Bogle believes *Birth of a Nation* marked the beginning of the Ku Klux Klan; however, this was the second genesis of the KKK. The first one failed after its members realized the cause for which they were fighting—the Confederate casualties—was antiquated. Historian C. Eric Lincoln claims Confederate General Nathan B. Forrest initially organized the KKK in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee. Pinar (2001) agrees and argues that the KKK were not the majority of southerners, but this group of angry Civil War veterans were White men who sought revenge on Blacks for assisting the North in their defeat. Again, there were still a few Confederate states allowed to retain slaves for a couple years past the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 until the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was signed in 1865. Even after this, mobs of White men wreaked havoc on these newly freed individuals, letting them know they would not be accepted as the full American citizens they had become. From 1865 well into the early 1900s, thousands of ex-slaves were brutally punished at the hands of White men by maiming, castrating, shooting, raping, and killing their Black bodies. As many as 120 Black men and women were lynched between 1900 and 1901. *Birth of a Nation* (1915) gave Whites a new reason to fight—everything they held dear—their White supremacy and their families, and probably in that order.

Paul Robeson's role as Brutus Jones in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1933), a role repeated from Eugene O'Neill's stage play, was quite a

twist from the denigrative images discussed so far. Though Brutus is still stereotypically a violent, murderous brute, as his name implies, he is depicted as a stalwart hero, a pre-Stagolee badman and ladies' man who has self-pride and is intolerant of foul treatment. An international concert artist, Robeson had a deep baritone voice commanding of respect. Indeed, his character can be interpreted as a far-from-capricious angry Black male, and rightfully so due to his endurance of harsh and servile conditions. His murderous proclivity is inexcusable, so, as viewers, we are forced to reject his unethical behavior, yet we cheer his courage and steadfastness. Of course, this need not be celebrated too quickly. We must be mindful of Robeson's role as Bosambo in Alexander Korda's 1935 British film *Sanders of the River*. He was reported to have been ashamed of the film on viewing it in toto, and asserted that his character was a "smirking and indolent" Black man whose obsequiousness was evidenced by his deferential singing of *Sandy the Strong*, *Sandy the Wise*, *Hater of Wrongs*, *Hater of Lies* and his constant reference to the title character as "Lord Sandy" in addition to his genuflecting and/or sitting at the mere presence of Lord Sandy (Cameron, 1990). The flip side of this description is that Bosambo was appointed to be a king within Africa by Lord Sandy at the end of the film. Many of Robeson's roles were counterhegemonic, and he has been hailed for a body of work that bespeaks resistance to negative scripting of the Black body (Cripps, 1977).

A more contemporary exemplar of the brute can be found in *Shaft* (Gordon Parks's 1971 original and John Singleton's 2000 remake). In both films, there is the subtext of sexuality and violence. Shaft, played first by Richard Roundtree and later by Samuel L. Jackson, was a macho-rigid Black detective who magnetized and mesmerized beautiful women by his evident strength, unquestionable fortitude, and role as hero and savior of the community. This brute role of Detective John Shaft is justified, not only by his state authority, but also by the kidnapping of his daughter, which would make any father very upset. It is a variation of the family-in-distress formula that worked well for Charles Bronson, Clint Eastwood, and other badmen in cinematic history. Let there be no mistake: *Shaft* was a blaxploitation film that only reinvented and rearticulated the misogynistic hypermasculine hero who absolutely must satisfy his sexual urges, thereby hierarchizing the representational gaze. Both versions of the movie did this with the second version's highly advertised trailer with Samuel L. Jackson coolly explaining to a sexually interested woman, "It's my duty to please that booty." The sexist cinematic representations of women in general, but specifically Black women in the present example, are often ignored while the audience is led to concentrate on more visible and heightened aspects of the protagonist Brute's bravery, courage, and heroicism. Bates and Garner (2001) claim that Shaft is a paladin warrior known for his state-authorized, and therefore justifiable, violence and also for being a true champion of justice. Perhaps the most significant and resonating characteristic of

the paladin warrior is his interest in always prioritizing the interests and safety of his community. His function is to secure his people from external harm. So, we come to admire him for this role. I am convinced this is why hip-hop music's discursive construction of the thug and ruffneck (discussed in chapter 4) is so compelling and well embraced. From the days of minstrelsy to the present, the brute or buck image is still intact. It has invaded public life so much that it has become ingrained in the social consciousness, psychologically imprinted as a vivid picture of the typical Black man in the United States (Blount & Cunningham, 1996).

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The reservoir of negative inscriptions of the Black body is very extensive. No one book can claim to catalogue all the examples of racially inscribed bodies. From early Black corporeal inscriptions established during slavery and minstrelsy to more contemporary inscriptions within cinema, television, and music, at least one aspect is common to all—Black bodies have been thingified, socially rejected, and treated as foreign to the American ethos (Diawartha, 1993).

I never had much interest in minstrelsy prior to writing this book. I understood its fundamental importance and relevance to mass media and popular culture, but minstrelsy evoked hurtful emotions within me and symbolized a retrogressive body politic. So, I perceived even the conversation of it as toxic and stayed away from it. I imagined I would have to contend with those feelings as I wrote this chapter, and, shockingly, it was a revelatory and cleansing process. It reminded me just how much representations and gazes of Black bodies have progressed and just how far we have left to go. The argument I constructed in this chapter, using a critical-historical approach, is that slavery and early racial depictions of the Black body have directly influenced the coherent scripting of Black bodies in contemporary cinema and television, but, more important, they have had deleterious effects on the psyche of African Americans. Slavery, lynching, Jim Crowism, and minstrelsy were not communicative events isolated to the Confederate South. These same racial attitudes existed among northern Whites and are pervasive, though to a presumably lesser degree, throughout the United States. These systematically and epistemically violent transgressions were systematically linked and enacted on Black bodies and, hence, African American identities. The period subsequent to the holocaust of enslavement was an unhealthy one according to Asante (1999). Asante asks, and I paraphrase, how does one endure a psychologically, physically, and spiritually devastating tragedy and not come out unscathed? He reminds us that no one offered Blacks psychological treatment or reparations; instead, they were left to fend for themselves in a society that kept them from the resources (e.g., employment, education,

etc.) to do so. In outlining the origins of Black body politics, we are introduced to ways in which Black bodies are represented, rendered invisible, commodified, and made a spectacle. We also become cognizant of the historical contexts for the politicization that accompanied inscriptions of Black bodies. One such context was enslavement.

Since the slave trade began in the New World in 1517 (Franklin & Moss, 1988), Black people have endured centuries of oppression. Even after they were free, they would spend the next 40 years undergoing major adjustments into the 1900s and beyond. Major epochs and movements such as the Niagara movement that led to the founding of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations, the Harlem Renaissance, Back-to-Africa movement, Civil Rights Movement, feminist movement, and Black Power movement all contributed to the advancement in civil rights we experience today. Yet, there is still much work to do. For example, Cameron (1990) offered a historically rooted critique of contemporary Black film beginning with *Birth of a Nation*. He observed less than fifteen years ago:

Birth of a Nation set out the racial imagery of the first fifty years of movies. Blacks were to be mostly invisible; when seen, they would perform for Whites. If they made themselves visible, they would become immediately threatening, sexually so if they were male. They were then “primitives.” God and the angels would come down on the side of whiteness. In such an agenda, an “acceptance of servility” became characteristic of the Black race as it was seen on film. (p. 283)

Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Blacks are still fighting against civil injustice on an almost daily basis, especially in film and other popular media, and for many of the same reasons stemming from the genealogical origins of the scripting of the Black body. As chapters 2 and 4 indicate, Black women are just as likely, if not more so, to be scripted as sexual, yet the fantasia implicit in many popular films still suggests “God and the angels would come down on the side of whiteness,” and this is evidenced in part by the pervasiveness of positive White images on film and television, compared to the fairly small number of positive images and representations of Blacks and other non-Whites (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Black independent filmmakers of the 1920s through 1940s, such as Oscar Micheaux, Bert Williams, Ebony Pictures, The Birth of a Race company, and even the White-owned Lincoln Motion Picture Company, launched an often reactive counterhegemonic set of films that Mercer (1988) suggested was reiterative of the same strategies and tools of Black corporeal representation and inscription used by White filmmakers initially, but their rhetorical resistance strategies were highly effective. They were revolutionary for their time if, for nothing else, as motion picture companies whose principal interest was in trying to present more positive Black themes and characters. Certainly, several of

the more avant-garde contemporary filmmakers like Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*) and Haile Guerima (*Sankofa*) have been successful in producing a more diverse, expressive, culturally conscious, and complex inscription of Black bodies, but then they have been beneficiaries of those earlier Black filmmakers who refused to quiesce. Even still, progress toward broad-based emancipatory filmmaking is slow.

I agree with Dates and Pease's (1997) assessment, even several years later in the twenty-first century, that we still have present-day imagery reminiscent and perpetuating of stock minstrel figures. They posited:

Some African Americans, along with the White decision-makers who control the media industries, are making money—and a lot of it—in a widespread use of television and motion pictures that defines Black people in ways that are more destructive than ever seen. What we see in the media of the 1990s are modern-era minstrel shows (sitcoms), movie thrillers, rap music and music videos that celebrate misogyny and violence, and that communicate parodied images of Black men, shucking and jiving con artists who joke about pathological behaviors and criminality, while playing the role of Black “bucks” to a White America. In the end, such images and attitudes diminish Black and White Americans alike. (pp. 81–82)

These linkages between past and present portrayals are not drawn to erect a nihilistic prophecy that Black bodies are trapped irreversibly and deterministically in a web of ontological despair. I believe the point being made is much more sophisticated and interesting. I contend that Black bodies must be aware of their historical and contemporary habitat in order to understand how they actively participate in or resist scripting. I am aware that by saying Black bodies can participate in their own scripting that inscription is not just an external activity robbing Black bodies of their agency, but that Black bodies may also rob themselves of agency using patriarchal inscriptions as the platform for alienating or detaching themselves from their natural and beautiful indigenous identities. They once were coercively scripted by a White male patriarchy and now some of them, despite being descendants who can only vicariously experience the horrors of slavery and early minstrelsy, disturbingly continue to carry out negative and racist representations, to their own detriment.

For example, Chris Rock thought it was humorous to pose for the front cover of the August 1998 issue of the popular magazine *Vanity Fair* as a coon in blackface with white makeup around his eyes and mouth to exaggerate his facial features. Many of his Black fans were appalled, but reasoned that because he is known to do politically charged standup comedy, perhaps he was trying to make a political statement. Black audiences waited for Rock to cogently articulate a justifiable rationale and, to their chagrin, he never offered one. Nonetheless, somehow he remains one of the most respected

comedic entertainers in the United States. Indeed, he was not posing in blackface to entertain Black audiences. Certainly, one could argue that this was nothing different from what Dave Chappelle does in his show—offensive antics done to make a point. I would maintain that this was not a “sketch” or sitcom episode, but instead a public display of retrogressive thinking clothed as brilliant comedy. It is precisely this kind of complicity with White patriarchal inscriptions that leads to the negotiation of the palimpsest Black body, which paradoxically pays dividends (as exemplified by the continued success of Rock’s career) while paying debts, although the latter far outweigh the former. Some would suggest that his wildly successful hosting of the 2005 Academy Awards Ceremony offers some redemption or that his politically savvy commentary elsewhere redeems him. Nonetheless, this only sharpens the confusion about why he posed in blackface for *Vanity Fair*.

With few exceptions, twenty-first century American popular culture—its producers and audiences—has rarely presented a straight-no-chaser, non-stereotypical approach to difficult themes like race, class, gender, and sexuality. Neal (2002) reminds us of this in his description of unappreciative student responses to coon-like televisual images on situation comedies like *In Living Color*, *Martin*, *The Jamie Foxx Show*, and *The Wayans Brothers*, all of which are either completely cancelled or in syndication. Unfortunately in film, for example, we have come to rely on signifying parodies, satires, and comedies like Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000) and Malcolm Lee’s *Undercover Brother* (2002) to inform and demonstrate to us the ridiculous racial conundrum with which we find ourselves being preoccupied. It is absolutely amazing that a physically coded, socially ascribed, and psychologically devastating Black body politic originating in the 1600s can still be so vivid today within virtually every confine of American life, and we not only live with it, but we participate in promoting it in a bevy of every day mass-mediated and popular cultural practices. The ideologically driven and institutionally sanctioned minstrelsy pantheon composed of denigrated Black bodies is still alive and well, and it is our obligation to change the narratives or not support these structured discourses of negative representation to which we have all become subjected and debilitated. DuBois (1903) asked, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Sadly, the inscription of Black bodies as pathological preserves the query.