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Kinking the Stereotype: Barbers and Hairstyles as Signifiers of Authentic American Racial Performance

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KINKING THE STEREOTYPE: BARBERS AND HAIRSTYLES AS SIGNIFIERS OF
AUTHENTIC AMERICAN RACIAL PERFORMANCE

By

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ABSTRACT

When Sherman Dudley’s black barber character, Raspberry Snow, took to the stage in 1910, his pre-promoted “shiftless” personality fulfilled American audiences’ conditioned, pejorative expectations for blackness. A closer look at the storyline, however, suggests Dudley fashioned Snow’s predictability to be an example of the opportunity for subversion of power that exists for stereotyped individuals. Embodying the surface attributes of the stereotype designed to confine them, a number of American performing personae escape persecution, and even profit by lulling their “audiences” (read: adversaries) into believing all is well. Quite often, performing the stereotype is as simple as donning a notably “black” hairstyle, or presuming the supposedly docile attributes associated with black barbers.

Moreover, there is strong evidence to suggest that since at least the early nineteenth century, storytellers both black and white have contributed to the promotion of this powerful secret. Black hairstyles and barbers that subvert racist intentions are a recurring theme throughout American lore, and their inclusion in tales by Dan Emmett and Herman Melville resurface in later works by Charles Chesnutt and Sherman Dudley. This paper traces a lineage of characters who successfully subvert an imposed power structure, and whose messages continue to recycle themselves in modern-day performances that suggest black and white are not as far apart as conventional wisdom would have us believe.
KINKING THE STEREOTYPE: BARBERS AND HAIRSTYLES AS SIGNIFIERS OF AUTHENTIC AMERICAN RACIAL PERFORMANCE

Oh set me down on a television floor
I'll flip the channel to number four
Out of the shower comes a football man
With a bottle of oil in his hand
(Greasy kid stuff
What I want to know, Mr. Football Man, is
What do you do about Willy Mays
Martin Luther King
Olatunji)

--Bob Dylan, “I Shall Be Free” (1963)

You hab to get a woolly gal somewhere else, Mas’r Cute.
--Topsy, in George Aiken’s stage adaptation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852)

The Chicago Defender ran a front-page article in 1910 announcing the arrival of “His Honor the Barber,” a touring musical comedy in which S. H. Dudley plays Raspberry Snow, “a shiftless, good-natured Negro, who aspires to shave the President of the United States” (1). The promotion for a play starring a barber is one of countless references to hair that show up in the pages of the Chicago newspaper. Hair straightening (and skin lightening) products provided a steady, heavy flow of advertising revenue for The Defender, arguably the most widely circulated black newspaper in the United States. “Is Your Hair Beautiful[,] Soft, Silky and Long?” asks a January 22, 1910 advertisement for Nelson’s Hair Dressing, “the finest hair pomade on the face of the earth for colored people” (4). An ad for Ford’s Hair Pomade in the July 31, 1909 issue of The Defender begins with a letter from a satisfied customer who says, “I have used only one bottle of your pomade and now I would not be without it for it makes my hair soft and straight [as emphasized in copy] and easy to comb” (n.p.). A scan of turn of the century black newspapers, from Pensacola’s Florida Sentinel to The Topeka Plaindealer to Seattle’s The World reveals an astonishing preponderance of like ads. Not a single issue examined contains less than three ads, and in some instances there are three to a page. Before/after (kinky-haired/straight-haired) sketches accompanying ads for Nelson’s Straightine, Scott’s Magic Hair Straightener and Grower, and Oxonized Ox Marrow all compete for the reader’s attention on a single page of the January 26, 1900 Sentinel (4).

Given the financial reliance on hair products by the African American press at the turn of the century, it seems fitting that “His Honor the Barber” was the most popular vehicle of S. H. Dudley’s rich performing career—the only one, in fact, that played on Broadway (Riis 142). Though Raspberry Snow might seem a dubious role upon which to build an acting legacy, do not pity Mr. Dudley. True, one need only remember Buckwheat’s permanent shock wig to recognize that hair can reinforce stereotypes, and a shiftless barber seems to fall right in line with that tradition. Messy hair, shiftless barber—both indicate how black American stereotypes often are tonsorial. For one demographic hunk of their audience, shock wigs and lazy barbers confirm one-dimensional notions about African Americans.

But timeworn traditions in American performance also suggest hair-related themes are entryways, for all races of players, into representations of blackness that
undermine ignorant authority. “His Honor the Barber,” in which a barber who lazily dreams of shaving the President walks (not runs) his own road to fortune, is itself a product of miscegenation—(white) Edwin Hanaford authored the story, and (black) James T. Brymn wrote the music (Newman 472). American early tales about hair, and barbers, set the stereotypes about blackness in motion, permitting their intended targets enough flexibility to dodge the bullets from hostile camps, even fire them back. Stereotypes such as the subservient barber have a way of reinforcing the point for one part of the population, who couldn’t agree more that blacks, and especially black barbers, are a fearful race who “know their place.” Herman Melville, Dan Emmett, and Charles Chesnutt pen on to center stage barbers who seize the upper hand by feigning ignorance, obedience, and obsequiousness. Characters Babo, Pompey Smash and Tom Taylor effectively hypnotize their racist “patrons” by pretending to satisfy mistaken presumptions about black people. For better and worse, collaborative creations between blacks and whites have shaped Americans’ opinions about blackness since at least the early nineteenth century. These barbers are part of an impressive assembly of literary and stage performers who remind us that even the most biting stereotypes can empower those whom they threaten to disenfranchise. The challenge to traditional audiences is in reaching across cultural divides to ascertain what lies beneath the surface impression, which is merely the bait that fuels the cultural currency of any stereotype. Though racist intent no doubt drives the advancement of lasting stereotypes, alternate interpretations of the imagery thrive on that same momentum.

This work will trace an American performance history in which black barbers and hairstyles signify myriad interpretations of “authentic” blackness to the American public. The study has leaned conveniently on another cultural myth, the imaginary line dividing black and white that tends to disregard other races in its analysis. All too often, whiteness tends to absorb all Americans it deems not black, including everyone of Asian descent, implying a cultural majority opposed to blackness. Even college applications and census forms lump Middle Easterners into the category white. Perhaps in response to that perceived population disadvantage, stories of black perseverance are among the most enduring tales in American folklore, despite the on-going disagreement over who has the authority to generate whatever it is we take to be authentic blackness. Regardless of the shaky ground on which the premise may rest, the black/white dichotomy is entrenched in the present-day culture; it is how the American public prefers to perceive race, and this paper will analyze stereotypes in those admittedly reduced terms.

The shock wig, one of the many thriving icons of blackface lore, harkens white expectations of performed blackness that date back to early nineteenth-century minstrel shows, where white performers “blacked up” by applying burnt cork to their faces like makeup. Their faces darkened into such a powerful stereotype that when black performers finally joined them on stage, audiences weren’t satisfied unless the blacks “blacked up” as well. In her useful overview of American dance styles that arose from minstrelsy, Marian Hannah Winter writes: “In the last minstrel troupe of real darkies which went over the country the end men insisted on corking up as black as possible over their naturally dark skin, because, as they said, the public had gotten used to seeing the Negro minstrel as he is depicted by the whites and when the genuine article came along the public was a little disappointed to find that he was not so black as he was painted” (60). Novelist Wesley Brown exposes the ugly side of that disappointment in a passage
from his *Darktown Strutters* (1994), which follows blackface minstrelsy from the legend of T.D. Rice’s incorporation of Jim Crow’s dance to the formation of black owned and operated touring troupes. In one passage, Jim Crow’s son (Jim Too) pays for his refusal to perform in blackface, as white audience members from a recent show black up themselves in order to sneak up on him one night. “We wanna see darkies when we go to a show,” they tell him, smearing burnt cork on him and forcing a permanent grin into his face with a knife blade (66-7), a grim reminder that the stakes for stereotypes of blackness have been high for centuries. Aggressive expectations for black performance spread quickly, expanding across the Atlantic and into England, where the real T.D. Rice performed to packed houses in London. Andrea D. Barnwell notes that the entertainment form even crossed the Pacific, in her discovery of a group of U.S. sailors’ 1840 blackface performance, to an appreciative audience of Japanese commissioners, which “foreshadowed that minstrelsy would evolve into a comedic staple in Japan” (11).

Exaggerated darkness was not the only notably “black” characteristic of minstrel shows, which by the 1840s had crystallized into an expected combination of songs, dances, and jokes (Winter, 40). Jacqui Malone concurs that there was a template to which many minstrel shows adhered:

[D]ancing was prominently featured in each section. The first part began with the entire company seated in a semicircle, an interlocutor in the middle, and two comedians, Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, on the ends. Between songs and dances, the interlocutor engaged in banter with the tambourine and bones players (53).

In establishing a parallel between minstrel performers and the “toasts” he observed “deep down in the jungle” of Philadelphia’s inner city, Roger Abrahams notes that other members of the troupe broke into occasional verse as well. In other words, anyone on stage might have a voice.

Included in the entertainment formula were the minstrel songs, accompanied by banjos, tambourines, and bone clappers that backed several typical minstrel dances, and T.D. Rice’s spinning with jig and shuffle—his allegedly observed and borrowed “Jim Crow” dance which Brown breathes to life in *Darktown Strutters*—was among the most popular (Winter, 40). A characteristic finale to the minstrel show, Dan Emmett’s version of the “walk-around” dance involved multiple players who often improvised and goofed before settling together into an ensemble song-and-dance which according to Winter was powered by an “old-fashioned fiddle tune” (41), suggesting that the white performers were loyal to notably black musical instruments.

Near the turn of the century, a dance/exhibition known as the cakewalk, a black-inspired satire of the formal promenade that opens a ball, found its way into the walk-around, “with such superb theatrical potentialities that it served as a Negro re-entry permit to the stage” (Winter, 61). Surely the perpetual grinning of the cakewalk participants, present in all representations I have seen, contributed to the stereotype of the same happy Negro imagery painfully etched onto Jim Too’s face in *Darktown Strutters*.

The cakewalk’s theatrical appeal is especially visible in Mura Dehn’s film *The Spirit Moves* (1950), with Pepsi Bethel and other well-known social dancers who likely
learned the core moves from elders who had danced it during its heyday in the 1890s. Though layered in complex polyrhythmic movement, the performers’ constant, frenzied entrances and exits appear loose and easy to viewers, undoubtedly part of their joyous appeal. But Dehn’s helpful slow-motion sequences reveal what the unaided eye misses. Dancers often are balancing on the ball of a single foot, while simultaneously spinning the other leg around in circles at the knee, swiveling hips, pivoting torso, extending arms outward, and presenting oneself again and again with an exaggerated removal and replacement of the top hat—as if infinitely saying, “Here I am! Here I am! Here I am!”

Plays performed before large audiences demand “quick reads” to distinguish characters, so that someone sitting in the back row might draw the same conclusions as one who sat up front. Minstrel skits thus were replete with recognizable, popularized images of blacks. The marvelous watercolor *Cakewalk* (1890), which introduces Winter’s “Juba and American Minstrelsy” article (38) in Paul Magriel’s *Chronicles of American Dance*, offers an example of the over-the-top dress and mannerisms associated with the cakewalk. As the four participants puff out their chests, one man in tails displays his top hat in his right hand and his cane in his left; all don accoutrements that denote the higher classes. Garnishing the detail that frames the scene are reminders of the down-home instruments that clash but somehow fit in with this bizarre scene: banjo, fiddle, and tambourines. In another quick take, a “Zip Coon” lithograph (42) mocks the “dandy” Negro--blackface-darkened and dressed in tights, spats, top hat and tails and dangling a chainwatch from a finger—who puts on airs from having moved up from the plantation to the big city.

These imagery relics form lasting impressions, and thus have staying power throughout the churnings of America’s malleable collective consciousness, piggybacking their way from one entertainment trend to the next with ease. According to Richard Newman, the 1890s through World War I was a golden era for music and dance due to the on-stage melding of the cakewalk, an old minstrelsy mainstay whose practice dates at least back to plantation times, and ragtime, the emerging musical form that was so integral in the shaping of jazz near the turn of the century (465). To this merger Newman attributes the ensuing wide acceptance of distinctly black art forms during the Harlem Renaissance, or Jazz Age.

Though “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” toured successfully as a stage musical as early as 1852, history appears to confirm Newman’s premise that the hybrid (cakewalk + ragtime) boosted an already burgeoning business opportunity, as black-owned performing acts tapped into the white consumer market in the 1890s, paving the way to an escalating demand for African American folk art during the ensuing decades. LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) wrote about the era that followed as a time when “a great mass of white Americans were dancing a West African (Ashanti) ancestor dance they knew as the “Charleston” (17). In fact, a dance craze took hold of white America in the early 20th century, as the Charleston, the Black Bottom, the Shimmy, and the Lindy hop (which evolved into the jitterbug) all grew out of black dances (Stearns, 110, 114), though the dancers rarely knew it. Carl Van Vechten wrote that nearly “all the dancing now to be seen in our musical shows is of Negro origin, but both critics and public are so ignorant of this fact that the production of a new Negro revue is an excuse for the revival of the hoary old lament that it is pity the Negro can’t create anything for himself, that he is obliged to imitate the white man’s revues” (qtd. in Padgette, 39). White actresses like
Mae West, Gilda Gray, and Ann Pennington “created a sensation” when they mastered the hip movements in these dances, and enhanced their careers (Stearns, 114). While it is true that many who danced the Charleston didn’t realize whose dance they were enjoying, it is equally true that some had to know. Whites who noticed and admired the black dances early led to their mass adaptation, just as impressed white Americans had begun to adopt jazz, “the secular instrumental music of black Americans” (Hansen, 12).

In 1925, the same year he was the first American jazz musician to appear on Time magazine’s cover, George Gershwin completed work on his Concerto in F, and said this about the “Americanism” of the work: “The first movement employs the Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young enthusiastic spirit of American life” (Kendall, 56-7). That same year, Gershwin read Dubose Heyward’s novel Porgy, and was so inspired by it that in composing his own Porgy and Bess, he stayed in South Carolina to experience black vernacular culture firsthand. As Heyward wrote, “[t]he quality in him that had produced Rhapsody in Blue in the most sophisticated city found its counterpart in an impulse behind the music and bodily rhythms of the simple Negro peasant of the South” (qtd. in Alpert, 88). Gershwin participated in ring shout rituals on James Island, just outside of Charleston, with the Gullah blacks “who had maintained their customs and preserved their traditional songs” (88). Heyward explained the shout as “a complicated rhythmic pattern beaten out by feet and hands as an accompaniment to the spirituals,” and wrote, probably romantically, that Gershwin’s performance “to their delight stole the show from their champion ‘shouter.’ I think he is the only white man in America who could have done it” (88-89).

Whether or not George Gershwin was the best white shouter in America, his eagerness to participate illustrates yet again that matters are rarely as simple as the binary between polar opposites such as black and white. Notwithstanding, as white audiences’ demand for black folk art grew, so too did the tendency to perform quick-read stereotypes. Only now, for the first time, many blacks were in control of how they presented that stereotype to the public. Newman writes,

> For African Americans, the most important benefit of the Ragtime Age was that they themselves had access to the stage in significant numbers. They could earn money, perform unique aspects of their own culture, and begin to counter the crude racism of minstrelsy (465).

Heading into the twentieth century, the shock wig, with its electrocuted-looking hair standing on end, must have seemed destined only to confer the perpetually “spooked” condition of blacks forever stamped in our memories by Buckwheat. But as wealthy boxing promoter Don King has demonstrated by styling his hair into a “shock” for the scads of press conferences he has conducted over the years, these super-charged images have currency, as well as longevity. Due to their value as entertainment commodities, multiple claims of authorship and ownership spring from both sides of the mythical black/white color line. Since their introduction to American popular culture by the 1830s and continuing into the twenty-first century, there always has been evidence to suggest that despite the bickering between special interest groups and the like, a collaborative, inter-racial understanding has served generations of performers and audiences who were
willing to ferret out the double-entendres in the script. One’s hair may signify lowliness, but a keen awareness of that reality alters the power structure between observer and observed.

White author Harriet Beecher Stowe demonstrated that awareness in her landmark novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), for which the author clearly recognized the symbolic worth of hair to a country infatuated by minstrelsy. Straight-haired servants construct a hierarchy that distinguishes them from their “woolly-headed” counterparts, in effect mirroring the surrounding plantation society, which “instituted a ‘pigmentocracy’; that is, a division of labour based on ‘racial’ hierarchy where one’s socio-economic position could be signified by one’s skin colour” (Mercer 36). The incorrigibly restless Topsy belongs among the woolly-headed in the hair hierarchy, but the servants learn quickly that this child does not contain so easily, as Topsy’s self-proclaimed “wicked” pranks establish a safety zone in which she operates as she pleases. The confident girl steals from Ophelia in her very presence, and stuns her mistress declaring “I’s so wicked . . . you must whip me . . . I’s used to whippin’; I spects it’s good for me,” then brags to the other servants, “Law, Miss Feely whip!—wouldn’t kill a skeeter, her whippins” (367). Ophelia (nee Miss Feely) is baffled to learn that countless beatings won’t influence the child’s behavior, despite Augustine’s having witnessed Topsy’s toughness at the hands of her former master. “I’ve seen this child whipped with a poker, knocked down with the shovel or tongs, whichever came handiest” (363), he tells Ophelia. Topsy celebrates an invincibility she enjoys not only with Ophelia, but also with all the other servants at the St. Clare estate (and especially those who try to enforce the hierarchy), who have learned that Topsy’s revenges might take the form of stolen goods or unwitnessed dumpings of slop on the head. “In short,” Stowe writes, “Topsy soon made the household understand the propriety of letting her alone; and she was let alone, accordingly” (366).

In fact, Topsy makes a splash the moment she enters the novel. When Augustine St. Clare orders the girl to dance for her new master, the pious Miss Ophelia is “silent, perfectly paralyzed with amazement” by what she witnesses:

The black glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery, and the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, and odd Negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race; and finally, turning a summerset or two, and giving a prolonged closing note, as odd and unearthly as that of a steam-whistle, she came suddenly down on the carpet, and stood with her hands folded, and a most sanctimonious expression of meekness and solemnity over her face, only broken by the cunning glances which she shot askance from the corners of her eyes (352).

This uncharacteristically Faulknerian sentence from Stowe reads like a magic carpet ride, in which Topsy’s dance flaunts the instability that distinguishes her. The minstrel-like
performance also helps to distinguish Topsy as a character groomed for stage appeal. Evidently there was quite a market for the replication of a rambunctious slavegirl whom no amount of beatings could dissuade, as following the circulation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, more and more minstrel shows began featuring a “Topsy” of their own, to the degree that her appearance was not only expected, but heavily promoted by touring companies.

In another moment from Stowe’s novel, Topsy punctuates a soliloquy with uncanny flair:

‘Law, you niggers!…[D]oes you know you’s all sinners? Well, you is—everybody is. White folks is sinners too,—Miss Feely says so; but I spects niggers is the biggest ones; but lor! Ye an’t any on ye up to me. I’s so awful wicked there can’t nobody do nothin’ with me…I spects I’s the wickedest critter in the world,’ and Topsy would cut a summerset, and come up brisk and shining on to a higher perch, and evidently plume herself in the distinction (367).

Topsy knows how to command center stage with her entrance, announcing “here I am” as effectively as Pepsi Bethel would nearly 100 years later in his cakewalk dance, or Savion Glover does today with his furious, aggressive tap style that both confronts and confounds audiences who even struggle to follow it visually. Playwright George Aiken was the first to realize the market value of Topsy’s theatrical lure by inflating her minor role in the novel into one of the four main characters (alongside Tom, Eva, and St. Clare) for his stage version of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (also 1852).

In his Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theatre introduction to the original stage version, Thomas Riis reveals that the first touring “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was a family affair. Aiken’s cousin Caroline Fox Howard, the first person to play Topsy on stage, floated the family business and rode out her career on the success of the role. Until her retirement from the stage in 1887, she appeared in various “Tom shows” that toured the country on the coattails of the novel’s popularity, in turn fueling minstrelsy’s staying power through the era of slavery and into emancipation. The play itself borrowed heavily from minstrelsy, and probably did little to dissuade comparisons to the predominant entertainment genre of the time. In fact, a song sheet from the show indicates the well-known troupe Christy’s Minstrels performed their hit “Old Folks at Home” (“Way down upon the Suwanee River” . . .) as part of the original production (Riis xx). Three years later, audiences welcomed the debut of Charles Hicks’ Georgia Minstrels, the first all black minstrel show (George-Graves 35). The performers took Irish names, perpetuating the cycle of performers who impersonate the impersonator. Caroline’s husband George C. Howard financed Aiken’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” tour, and co-starred as St. Clare. Reportedly, Aiken wrote George and Caroline’s four-year-old daughter Cordelia’s talents into her role as St. Clare’s daughter, Eva (Riis xiii-xv). George also wrote the solo numbers, and the song sheet cover for Topsy’s crowd-pleasing opening rag, “Oh! I’se So Wicked” includes the printed plea, “Little Cordelia Howard has an interest in the Sale of this Song” (Riis 63). Incidentally, so did Ada Walker, who sang Brymn’s similarly-titled “Golly Ain’t I Wicked” during her performance in “His Honor the Barber” (Newman 472).
Riis notes that Topsy’s “Oh! I’se So Wicked” is a marked contrast from the solos Howard penned for St. Clare, Tom, and Eva, in that “its poetic structure is less regular, its intended effect is clearly comic, and it seems to require a dance accompaniment” (xv). If Caroline’s rendition of Topsy’s self-introduction is anything like Stowe’s showstopper, audiences—and especially children—must have delighted in the outlandishness of the dance. Naturally, “I’se So Wicked” remains the character Topsy’s catchphrase throughout the play, and she treats the audience to elaborations of her mischief in a conversation with Eva, whose role Aiken severely reduced to that of Topsy’s “straight man.”

EVA: Why did you spoil Jane’s earrings?
TOPSY: ’Cause she’s so proud. She called me a little black imp, and turned up her pretty nose at me ’cause she is whiter than I am. I was gwine by her room, and I seed her coral earrings lying on de table, so I threw dem on de floor, and put my foot on ’em, and scrunched ’em all to little bits—he! he! he! I’s so wicked.

EVA: Don’t you know that was very wrong?
TOPSY: I don’t car’. I despises dem what sets up for fine ladies, when dey ain’t nothin’ but cream-colored niggers! Ders’s Miss Rosa—she gives me lots of ’pertinent remarks. T’other night she was gwine to ball. She put on a beautiful dress that missis give her—wid her har curled, all nice and pretty. She hab to go down de back stairs—day am dark—and I puts a pail of hot water on dem, and she put her foot into it, and den she go tumblin’ to de bottom of de stairs, and de water go all ober her, and spile her dress, and scald her dreadful bad! He! he! he! I’s so wicked! (399-400)

Gumption Cute, a character Aiken invented for the stage, mirrors the playwright’s own fascination with the child. Cute is a white man who instantly recognizes the child’s potential worth to a white audience, proposing to exhibit her as “the woolly gal” in P.T. Barnum’s freak show. He, too, is foiled by Topsy, who after exhausting the man with evasive questions, finally tells him “you hab to get a woolly gal somewhere else, Mas’r Cute” (426) and runs off on her own trail unharmed. The girl is quick to dodge this fate, as with any fate that is not her own choosing. Her perpetual motion, even from one medium (the novel) to next (the stage), blurs her identity, impossible to catch long enough to imprison her within a stereotype. Aiken’s “Oh! I’se So Wicked” lyrics further smear her identity, suggesting Topsy’s origin is a mystery even to her:

Oh, white folks I was never born
Aunt Sue, raised me on de corn,
Send me errands night and morn,
Ching a ring a ring a ricked.

She used to knock me on de floor,
Den bang my head agin de door,
And tare my hair out by de core,
Oh! Cause I was so wicked (Riis 64-5).

Within the context of Aiken’s play, then, one might deduce that an abusive aunt devalued Topsy’s hair during a crucial time in the child’s development, “taring” it from its core. Had she come on stage in the spectacle of the “Woolly Gal,” Topsy would be subjecting herself to ridicule by spotlighting a supposedly worthless feature, to the profit of Cute. This is quite a contrast to Stowe’s tragic young Eva St. Clare, who on her deathbed cuts locks from her golden hair and distributes them to all of the adoring servants of the St. Clare estate.

As befits Topsy’s character, she also punishes Cute for threatening to impose his will upon her, ultimately hastening his exit by chasing him around the stage and beating him with a broom (Aiken 433). Though he failed to cash in on his “wooly gal” product, Gumption’s recognition of Topsy’s stage value is important. It reminds us that often, even stereotypes of little perceived value convert readily into marketable commodities. While Stowe’s Topsy refuses to let the image imprison her, Aiken’s Topsy refuses to let another cash in on it. Other characters in Stowe’s version likewise understand the importance of their hair relative to the white marketplace. Together on the auction block, a mother and daughter who until now were fortunate enough to live as “personal attendants of an amiable and pious lady,” who even taught them to read and write (471), discuss their strategy for presenting themselves to prospective buyers.

“I want you to brush your hair all back straight, tomorrow,” said Susan.
“What for, mother? I don’t look near so well, that way.”
“Yes, but you’ll sell better so.”
“I don’t see why!” said the child.
“Respectable families would be more apt to buy you, if they saw you looked plain and decent, as if you wasn’t trying to look handsome. I know their ways better ‘n you do,” said Susan (473).

In the preceding passage, the mother and daughter recognize a malleability of their characters, as perceived by whites, dependent upon a performance variable as simple as a hairstyle. “As theatrical spectacle,” writes Joseph Roach, slave auctions “materialize the most intense of symbolic transactions in circum-Atlantic culture: money transforms flesh into property; property transforms flesh into money; flesh transforms money into property” (215). In his *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Roach notes an 1854 engraving of a slave auction in the rotunda of New Orleans’ St. Louis Hotel, the design of which supports the staging of spectacles. In the engraving, sunbeams smile through the center window of the immaculately detailed dome ceiling, shining their blessing all the way down to the slaves, buyers, and auctioneers who occupy the building. The hotel’s architecture forces co-mingling between the groups, as the rounded room’s forced stage permits no hiding places.

Eyewitness accounts describe the St. Louis hotel during the middle nineteenth century as a pleasure palace where powerful men gathered to drink, and auction slaves,
stocks, and real estate. According to Roach, good “performances” by slaves up for auction indicated both liveliness and docility, subsequently raising the performer’s value and lessening likelihood on the part of the incumbent master to inflict violence on his pricey new commodity. Roach identifies the opening “promenades”—in which colorfully costumed slaves marched/danced in musical parade toward the auction block—among the “slave auction performance art” elements that clearly borrowed from minstrelsy, and likely played a vital role in the development of the American musical comedy (214-15).

As Stowe chronicled in the brief conversation between Susan and her daughter in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, hair styling was a crucial component in auction block performances by women. John Theophilus Kramer, another of Roach’s eyewitnesses at the hotel St. Louis, describes the erotic appeal of one “nearly white” woman on the block whose “hair is black and silky, and falling down in ringlets upon her full shoulders” (qtd. 216). Shane White and Graham White write in their book *Stylin’* about a “white aesthetic that had long made curly and kinky hair a symbol of inferiority” (42), and recalling the relentless ads for hair straightening products in turn of the century black newspapers, it is tempting to label the practice of hair straightening as an attempt to approximate whiteness.

Following the same trail as the newspapers that ran these ads from coast to coast, undergraduate students at both Florida State University in Tallahassee and the University of Washington in Seattle who read Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* had similar reactions to the character Clare Kendry, whose light skin and absence of “wool” permit her to pass as a white woman. Students predominantly condemned Clare for her supposed dishonesty, selfishness, and betrayal to her race, even accusing her of self-hatred.

More sympathetic readings of Clare are available, if not readily recognizable to modern readers. For starters, her ability to change her identity arguably provides sanctuary in a world hostile to blacks. *Passing* is set in 1927, which means black characters in the novel undoubtedly had exposure during their lifetimes to the previously referenced black newspapers, replete with advertisements for products that could straighten kinky hair and lighten dark skin. The second most dominant form of advertisements that run in *The Defender* at the turn of the century are for black undertakers, who also appear to be the only other businesses who could afford to pay the enhanced fee for graphics, thus enabling their ads to stand out among the others. Just as they do for hair straightening ads, multiple ads for undertakers often appear together on single pages of *The Defender*, a harsh backdrop for much of the paper’s consistently chilling news content. A front page article titled “325 Negro Men and Women Lynched and Shot for Fun” rings in the new year in a January 1, 1910 edition (1), and stories of violence against blacks dominate surrounding issues of *The Defender* as ominously as the undertaker ads which shadow them. This was a nation much safer for white people, notwithstanding the access to luxury Clare also enjoys.

There is an even more appealing defense of Clare’s decision to “pass,” though, that involves further consideration of the issues of identity hinted at in examining Stowe’s mother and daughter characters at the auction block. Stereotypes about blackness tend to fix their intended targets into a designated role, but Clare lives between the worlds of black and white. At the point in the novel that the reader meets Clare, she has lived as a white person, and now seeks to rejoin the black community as well. She will remain “white” to her husband and a mystery to other whites, such as the transfixed
Hugh Wentworth (Larsen’s thinly veiled Carl Van Vechten likeness), as she now hopes to navigate a bridge between the two worlds. Shane White and Graham White likewise agree “it is possible to see other meanings in the early twentieth-century vogue for hair straightening” (171), reminding that Africans straightened their hair long before white people were introduced into their lives. Rather than suggesting that removing the kinks also removes the blackness in favor of whiteness, they allow that the practice simply “broadened the opportunities for creative display” (172). In this light, Clare is no longer simply passing, but rather refusing to fall prey to a definition not of her own choosing, much as rapper Schoolly D does in naming his album *Am I Black Enough for You?* (1989). Each of them can play out roles of blackness, but do so on their own terms and to their own benefits.

As if to illustrate the point, even on book covers in the three most recent paperback editions of the novel, Clare swaps her identity between black and white. On the 1997 Penguin edition, Clare’s complexion is as light as any white person’s is today, and her having to “pass” as black seems ridiculous until one recalls the 19th century laws about fractions of black blood in determining race, so that even so-called quadroons and octoroons were considered legally black. On the 2002 Modern Library version, Clare’s book cover likeness is in a blurred black and white (as opposed to the in-color version on the 1997 edition) allowing her a more feasibly “black” appearance in the eyes of the modern viewer. In this edition, a dark backdrop silhouettes her hair, leaving only a descending ringlet across the forehead to suggest Clare’s ability to pass for white. The 1997 version likewise hides much of her hair, but what we can see poking down from Clare’s bonnet is thin and reveals a touch of light brown at one point where the light seems to catch it. In a 2003 Simon & Schuster version, a hat covers Clare’s head, and a newspaper hides half of her face, leaving a bright blue eye to beam from the center of the cover art. Three renditions of Clare reveal three completely different interpretations of her likeness, as her blurred identity continues to confound even the editors who choose to represent her at the turn of a new century.

Returning now to “His Honor the Barber,” perhaps it is equally possible to view S. H. Dudley and his character Raspberry Snow in a new light. Topsy and Clare refuse to let stereotypes about blackness contain them, while Dudley seems to wallow in his acceptance of another one. The elaborate stage production boasted “sixty people all told in the cast” (*Defender* Vol. 5, No. 8, p. 1), this a legacy of the crowded stage spectacles that minstrel shows became in the latter half of the 19th century, when shows like Haverly’s Mastodons Minstrels bragged, “40. Count Them. 40.” (Matthews 758). Another legacy of minstrel shows is a predictable representation of blackness, as evidenced in *Defender* by-lines that promote the musical by promising “Fine Costumes and A New Plantation Step” and “His Buck and Wing Dancing Will Be Seen During His Stay” (1). Add to all of this one of Dudley’s most popular cast members, a mule named Pat who appeared on stage in overalls (and possibly inspired Al Jolson’s “Going to Heaven on a Mule” sequence for the film *Wonder Bar*), and “His Honor the Barber” certainly appears to have met the “black enough for you” prerequisites Schoolly D mockingly hopes to achieve. But *The New York Times* didn’t see it that way. The unidentified reviewer of the show’s opening night at the Majestic Theatre on Broadway complained that despite rousing applause from the audience and numerous curtain calls for the renowned Ada Overton Walker, “the same fault is to be found with this entertainment that has been
found with numerous other Negro shows,” in that “[t]here is too much effort to imitate white performers and very little attempt at showing the racial cleverness of the performers” (May 9, 1911, 11).

Though it appears no version of the script has survived, the Harvard Theatre Collection maintains a modest folder of press clippings following at least one Broadway performance of “His Honor the Barber.” As with the *New York Times* review, each of the articles is anonymous, so that no authorial presence claims “Lively Comedy and Plenty of Catchy Songs and Choruses Win Plaudits at the South End Theatre” or “Uproarious Fun by ‘Smart Set’ in ‘His Honor the Barber’.” Though nearly every anonymous author notes early on that the Smart Set is a “colored” company, the range of responses from that point branches into a variety of interpretations about blackness. In some cases the assessed performance is too black, and in others, not black enough. In all of these cases, blackness intrigues to the degree that authoritative knowledge of its authentic forms is a valuable commodity, as the following instances illustrate. “Since the members of the Smart Set are of dusky hue by nature as well as by make-up, the ragtime songs and plantation dialect were doubly effective,” reads one article. “[T]he music of rag-time is one thing when the youngsters of Broadway scream it, and another when Negro voices croon it or give it really the rhythm its name implies,” gushes another. Time and again, the writers—even those who pan “His Honor the Barber”—champion black expression over white in assessing the performance.

A section of still another review acknowledges that in the marketplace, blackness achieves value in its opposition to whiteness:

> Colored companies, like Mr. Dudley and his ‘Smart Set,’ that returned to the Grand Opera House Monday evening, have virtues that their white rivals might now then wisely consider.

The term “rivals” likely intends a business connotation, as in black and white performing troupes as part of a competitive marketplace, though one can’t help but wonder whether belief in this rivalry extends to offstage domains as well. We know that black financial progress in America has not gone unnoticed. By a mere decade, the Broadway debut of “His Honor the Barber” precedes an era when Bessie Smith and other performers’ “race” records claimed a significant portion of the market share in the previously white-dominated music industry. Prior to Smith’s success, numerous popular “coon songs” mocked blackness with a hostile humor that Richard Newman suggests was a side effect of the violent response in the 1880s and 1890s to the black gains of Reconstruction (475).

It is not difficult to locate similar germs of separatism in earlier critical responses to black performance. Another reviewer of “His Honor the Barber” states that the black performers “seemed to be having a ‘good time’ in their own way,” locking the expression “good time” into quotation marks that brand it as separate, the product of “their own way.” The same writer employs a backhanded compliment to suggest whites are better qualified to judge the performed blackness in “His Honor the Barber,” suggesting that the paucity of blacks in the audience reveals that “their own race seems to appreciate them less than do admiring whites.” Regardless, for the writer’s purposes, white and black
serve as opposed forces—one generally appreciative, the other indifferent to its ostensibly elite members’ accomplishments.

If Dudley’s on-stage failed fulfillment of black stereotypes disappointed discerning white experts on blackness, then his off-stage activities must have confounded them thoroughly. Hardly the shiftless barber he portrayed in “His Honor the Barber,” which, incidentally, toured successfully for several seasons (Riis 144), Dudley was a savvy businessman. Among the most famous of the Smart Set headliners, Dudley’s combined dancing and comedy talents had helped the group evolve the formulaic variety show into more of a musical comedy, one that wove performances together into successive scenes that could support a plotline. According to Jacqui Malone, such “[b]lack theatrical experimentation […] led straight to those black musicals of the twenties that left an indelible imprint on American musical theatre” (62, 75). But in 1913, in response to the growing tendency to schedule black touring shows only in second-rate theatres, Dudley organized a group of investors to operate a chain of theatres that supported touring black acts. His column “What’s What on the SH Dudley Circuit” ran weekly in black newspapers (80), and he ultimately grew the investment into the Theatre Owners’ Booking Association (T. O. B. A., aka “Toby”), a network that penetrated most of the south and reached many northern cities as well (Stearns 78). The legend of Robin Hood, who donated to the poor what he robbed from the rich, realized itself in the not-black-enough figure of Raspberry Snow, the backbone of Dudley’s cash cow musical that played to (and took money from) mostly white audiences. Hundreds of black theatre workers owed their careers to an imaginary “shiftless” barber who realized his ambition to shave the President only in a dream, after falling asleep on the front steps of the White House (Riis 142).

Raspberry Snow’s inversion of the barber stereotype is hardly an isolated case. Blacks as barbers comprise a recurrent motif in American fiction, leaving a lineage through time of blurring stereotypes that empower even as they cut. Lulled by the notion that blacks are natural barbers, Amasa Delano in Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (serialized 1855, set in 1799) miscalculates Babo the slave’s revolutionary capacity. In the blackface play “The Barber Shop in an Uproar” (1850s), Dan Emmett’s Pompey Smash instructs his apprentice in hacking a racist patron with a straight razor. Within a year of opening night on Broadway for Dudley’s “His Honor the Barber,” Charles Chesnutt published his story “The Doll” (1912), in which another racist patron escapes the razor only when the presence of a doll reminds the barber of the daughter waiting at home for him. Spike Lee cut his teeth as a student at NYU in 1989 with his first film, Joe’s Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads. More recently, in 2002, Ice Cube pays homage to the tradition in his surprisingly controversial film Barbershop. Here I have named but a few examples that seem to travel together in couplets, appearing within a decade or so of one another. Still more barbers will introduce themselves in conjunction with the stories of these few.

In Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” set during the same year as a factual bloody slave revolt in Haiti, an African named Babo has led a mutiny on board a Spanish slave ship. The rebels spare captain Cereno, and force him into compliance with a ruse intended to trick the American captain of another ship into giving them provisions without discovering the new power shift. Success for this elaborate masquerade relies on the American captain, Amasa Delano’s commitments to certain stereotypes about black
people. Babo’s “dutifully remaining within call of a whisper” (60) to Cereno never betrays its true cause of allowing the African to monitor, and thus dictate, the Spaniard’s every move. Beholden to his image of the faithful servant, Delano is so convinced by Babo’s subservient shtick that he offers to purchase the slave. In one passage, sensing a need to remind Cereno who his leader is, Babo compounds the stereotype. Playing to Delano’s belief that “most Negroes are natural valets and hairdressers” (73), Babo invents a midday shaving appointment for Cereno, suggesting, “why not let Don Amasa sit by master in the cuddy, and master can talk, and Don Amasa can listen, while Babo here leathers and strops” (71).

Several Florida State University undergraduates, from the same classroom that was unsympathetic to Clare Kendry, referenced the ensuing “shaving” passage as their first notion of something fishy taking place in the story. Others mention this passage as the only one where they clearly visualized the action as they read the otherwise murky Melville prose. Readers will recall that having draped the terrified Cereno in the Spanish flag, Babo “accidentally” draws blood during the shave as the numbed Delano placidly looks on, fancifully daydreaming of his geniality to Negroes, “just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (73-5). Babo’s ominous leathering and stropping are visible cues to readers (and tangible reminders to Cereno) that in these moments, the true power structure is not as it outwardly appears. The image of the threatening barber was provocative to students because it signaled danger, but it is also familiar because of its pervasiveness in American lore.

It is conceivable that the ready visualization of Melville’s shaving passage owes itself to a borrowed stage representation of another dangerous shaving scene. Emmett’s Pompey Smash absorbs insults from his patron, the condescending German farmer, only to ricochet them back brutally with the help of his “beardum pullum out by de rootum” razor (Emmett 4). Smash comically butchers the powerful yet powerless patron who, like Delano, is immune to the reckoning that the violence is purposeful. Meanwhile “Slippery” Joe, the young apprentice to Smash, acts on orders from Pompey to observe in silence and practice every move he sees (2). Babo has no parallel pupil, no Slippery Joe of his own, with whom he might impart these coded, loaded shaving strategies—or so it seems. W. T. Lhamon believes “it is not sensible to complain that ‘Benito Cereno’ is the story of an uncompleted [and unwitnessed] revolution,” because “Melville’s ironies float those actions out into the bullrushes of another era, perhaps to be unpacked anew” (86).

Today, the suitcase is already open, or perhaps more accurately stated, reopened. Challenged in class to determine whether Babo is a failure for his inability, in the end, to pull off the coup, one FSU undergrad suggests not at all, and trumps his teacher before ever hearing Lhamon’s passage on the subject. Babo is a success, the student offers, because others may now learn from his tricks that did work, and carry on where he left off. It is perhaps fittingly ironic that like the successful (non-fiction) revolutionary predecessors before him in 1799, this optimistic student is of Haitian ancestry. His words breathe life back into Babo, further perpetuating the assured recurrence of empowered barbers who will join Slippery Joe in future generations. The observation is especially impressive, considering the ease with which the student delivered it. Consider another example where, again, audience size determines delivery of the message. Immediately preceding Melville’s less commonly accessible tale in which a barber is more than he seems, “The German Farmer” offered a blazing quick-read (the skit must have played out
in no more than several minutes) of the same premise. The American Studies student likewise synthesized (read: recycled) an academic argument into a couple of sentences that each of his peers could follow. Did he “stereotype” the argument for them? Regardless, cultural signifiers indeed unpack themselves for future generations. In the 1850s, George Howard, a white man, profited enormously by ushering Uncle Tom’s Cabin onto the stage, presumably against the wishes of the novel’s (also white) author—two whites, debating at least in part over ownership of blackness. By the end of the decade, black entrepreneurs had long grasped the business model, and ran successful touring shows of their own. Dudley’s generation built on that success, elevating the commercial value of the black musical to “Broadway” status, and ushering the mainstream marketplace for “blackness” into the Harlem Renaissance.

Other twentieth century stories about barbers cut quickly across different forms and eras. Follow the lineage now into the twentieth century, where black barbers still reckon with racist, antagonizing patrons. In Chesnutt’s story “The Doll,” Colonel Forsyth, representing a contingency of Democratic leaders, visits an unnamed northern city for a conference where he will lobby to allow the southern states to settle “the Negro question” on its own. Through a conversation with a northern judge in the lobby of the Wyandot Hotel, the author also establishes the colonel’s belief that northerners pamper blacks, rather than enforcing their inherent subservience. To prove his point that blacks “have no proper self-respect; they will neither resent an insult, nor defend a right, nor avenge a wrong,” the colonel invites the judge to the hotel barbershop, where he instructs the black proprietor, Tom Taylor, “I want a close shave” (248). As the colonel recounts to the judge his story of having long ago “killed a nigger to teach him his place,” Tom keeps his poise, despite needling reminders from the colonel that he wants a close shave, and even despite his knowledge that it “was the barber’s father who had died at the colonel’s hand, and for many long years the son had dreamed of this meeting” (249). As revealed earlier, it is not Tom’s incapacity to commit murder, rather noticing his daughter’s doll hanging on a peg, that saves the colonel’s life. Tom chooses to survive and raise his daughter rather than sacrifice his own life as punishment for ending the colonel’s.

For Tom Taylor, though, the assured orphaning of his daughter is but one cause for cool, the determining factor that caps a flood of prevailing reasoning. His situation is different from that of Babo and Pompey, as by 1912 the strength of the barber position has compounded with the legacy, and he now has more to lose. Tom runs the “handsomest barber shop in the city” (248), and is even in a position to influence the opinions of the wealthy patrons to his shop, “a medium of friendly contact with white men” where at any given time he “literally had the ear…of some influential citizen, or held some aspirant for public office by the throat” (251). What’s more, he employs ten more black men, nine of them with families. As with the Wyandot Native Americans after whom Chesnutt names the hotel, Tom has a second chance at sustaining a new community of displaced Americans—freed southern blacks who have migrated north. His restraint is less a sign of weakness than a show of strength, as he has built too much now to sacrifice it all to murderous vengeance in broad daylight. Better still to let the colonel bask in his pretentious glory, and uphold Delano’s stereotype—which also has survived into the new century—that blacks, at best, are great barbers. “I never had a better shave in my life,” gloats Forsyth. “And I proved my theory” (252). The colonel
also has revealed his hand, like Captain Delano before him, and leaves himself open to the backlash from the stereotype he continues to perpetuate, but no longer controls. The colonel and captain are officers by rank. But they are pawns in reality, done in by their obviousness, easily manipulated and unwittingly capitulated.

Taylor’s restraint echoes in more twentieth century shaving scenes. In the South American folktale “The Razor at His Throat,” which Brazilian native Mila de la Hunt estimates to be some fifty to seventy-five years old, a similarly despised general survives another close shave at the hands of a barber/revolutionary. In Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1985), Celie, tempted in her newfound strength to slice Albert’s throat, abandons the notion along with the abusive legacy he has taught her. Zachariah in Spike Lee’s *Joe’s Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983) likewise resists the temptation to cut Nicholas the loan shark, when the latter briefly submits himself in the barber’s chair for a shave. It is important to note that the restraint practiced by all three of the preceding razor wielders is not the only choice available to them, but rather an option each of them chooses. As with the multiple hairstyles from which blacks are free to choose in the face of the stereotypes each style might represent, so are the barbers now free to embrace or imperil their stereotype as it suits them.

Chesnutt’s Taylor chose to embody the “good barber,” stereotype, putting it to work for him. So did Sherman Dudley’s “good-natured” Raspberry Snow, just a couple of years before him, in “His Honor the Barber.” In other stories, the hairstylist is not so restrained. Jealous Ruby in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* braids deadly poison into unsuspecting Cocoa’s hair. Pompey Smash and Babo chose violent means as well. The more acquainted one grows with the life-and-death scenarios these barbers control, the more one wonders also whether the supposedly shiftless Snow’s ambition ends, or begins, with simply *shaving* the President of the United States.

Introducing photos of David Levinthal’s collection of blackface memorabilia, Manthia Diawara pays tribute to “[y]oung black artists, actors, and rappers [who] embrace the [blackface] stereotype as a source of artistic inspiration and self-expression.” He points to the works of those who “stereotype the stereotype”—Kara Walker, Quentin Tarantino, and Chris Rock, to name a few—as examples of how, “[t]rue to the function of every stereotype, stereotyping a Blackface stereotype corrupts it by giving it a new, reified content” (n.p.). In other words, each time the stereotype resurfaces, it re-acclimates by compounding its identity, assuming new characteristics that further confound the chances of anyone who seek to freeze it in place.

*Deep Down in the Jungle* author Roger Abrahams observed a similar pattern while recording rhymed stories, or “toasts,” the early formations of spontaneous hip hop language, among black males in Philadelphia’s Camingerly neighborhood in the 1960s. “The improvisational nature of the toast makes any one text simply a chance rendering of a story highly transitional by nature—a rendering that will probably never be reproduced exactly, even by the same informant,” says Abrahams. “Variation is the essence of the toast’s character” (100). Fitting, then, that Abrahams acknowledges Shine, a recurring figure in the toasts he documents in *Deep Down in the Jungle*, as the character responsible for luring him to record the performances. Shine consistently endures the “punishment of living dangerously under the threat of death” (79), outwitting sea captains and sea creatures in multiple retellings of his legendary survival of the *Titanic* sinking.
To illustrate the “transitional nature” of the toasts, consider two Abrahams recordings of his “good talking” (7) friend Kid. Kid embellished the following depictions of Shine’s encounter with a shark during consecutive-day performances. The following is from the first day’s recording:

Shine kept a-swimming. Come past a shark’s den.
Shark looked at Shine and invited him on in.
Shine said, I heard about you, you the king of the ocean,
    the king of the sea,
But you got to be a stroking mutherfucker to outstroke me (101-102).

“The primary purpose of the toast teller [ . . . ] is to tell the story as quickly, fluidly, and dramatically as possible” (7), according to Abrahams. For the storytellers/performers there is no single, authentic version of Shine’s tale, because they’ve “learned it by heart.” Stylistically, then, narrators instead remain true to the spirit of the story by relying on “commonplaces,” and take liberty in embellishing the details. Some of those commonplaces date back to the minstrel stage. In Kid’s next-day version, the shark has a speaking role as well:

Shark said Shine, Shine, can’t you see,
When you jump in these waters you belongs to me.
Shine said, I know you outswim the barracuda,
    outsmart every fish in the sea,
But you gotta be a stroking mutherfucker to outswim me (108).

Only in Kid’s second-day version does the shark enjoy a speaking role. Abrahams points out that Shine’s banter with the shark, whose lines set up the former to deliver a timely punchline, resembles the pre-existing roles of “Mr. Interlocutor” and “Mr. Endman” of the minstrel show template. “It is not being argued that the minstrel show is the point of origin of the toast but rather that it exhibits, in some of its facets, similar tendencies and may have affected the early history of the toast,” writes Abrahams, hinting at both the malleability and the staying power of oral forms of expression. The stereotype lurks even in the apparently free rhetoric of hip hop.

Another link to the “transitional nature” of Shine delivers us, once again, to the barbershop. Abrahams identifies the barbershop as a primary “center of male talking activity” (31), which suggests several incarnations of Shine might have been born in early 1960s Philadelphia salons. Many others were born from an even earlier surfacing of Shine, by way of the barber Raspberry Snow. Ford Dabney and Cecil Mack penned the rag “That’s Why They Call Me Shine” for “His Honor the Barber” in 1910, two years before the Titanic sank. In singing the tune, Ada Overton Walker personified the term “shine” as though it were a proper name. Presumably she sang the song either, a) as a folk character whom Snow encounters along his journey, offering subtle hints at wisdom per Mary Rambo and Peetie Wheatstraw, two characters who have secret messages of their own for the impressionable narrator in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, or b) as an
aside, serving a narrative function, while a spotlight followed the character—most likely Raspberry Snow—the song means to personify. Besides launching a hit that would recurrently serve musicians of subsequent generations, the success of the song challenged the arbitrary meaning of a derogatory term for blackness. Note that the first line in the chorus is a reference to Shine’s hair:

‘Cause my hair is curly
‘Cause my teeth are pearly,
Just because I always wear a smile,
Like to dress up in the latest style,
‘Cause I’m glad I’m living
Take troubles smiling, never whine,
Just because my color’s shady, slightly different maybe,
That’s why they call me “Shine” (Jasen 139-40).

The first listed among Shine’s most emblemizing features is his “curly” hair, which, as with Topsy, exposes his blackness, appearing to devalue his status and render him subject to ridicule. He also recalls Topsy in his public embracing of that supposedly wretched status, and repackaging it for entertainment value.

Richard Newman, who believes “That’s Why They Call Me Shine” is “almost a song of social protest in its antiracism,” nevertheless references blatantly insensitive song titles such as “Koonville Koonlets” and “When They Straighten All the Colored People’s Hair” to illustrate the clear evidence of racist humor inherent in the “coon songs” genre. The so-called coon songs left an indelible impression on American culture, and, according to Newman, those tunes associated with Ada Overton Walker are akin to spirituals and slave songs, especially rife with double entendres. “That’s Why They Call Me Shine,” while simultaneously pandering to simplified versions of blackness, also contains a “secret message to those who have ears to hear,” according to Newman (479). One message apparently available to those who listen is that it behooves one to avoid the temptation to swim against the current in combating racial slurs, especially when it’s more profitable to mine opportunity from them, instead. Like martial arts programs that dictate the recycling and redirecting of opposing force back toward the aggressor, Shine not only deflects the insults, but makes use of them as well:

A rose, they say, by any other name would smell as sweet,
So if that’s right why should a nickname take me off my feet.
Why ev’ry thing that’s precious from a gold piece to a dime
And diamonds, pearls and rubies ain’t no good unless they shine.
So when these clever people call me shine or coon or smoke,
I simply smile then smile some more and vote them all a joke.

In these lyrics, Shine seems to know already that the joke will be on the racist who hurled the epithets. His “secret” messages have since whispered their way into the American mainstream, as Dabney and Mack’s “That’s Why They Call Me Shine” quickly
splintered into alternate versions. In fact, musicians appear to have mined it almost as thoroughly as nineteenth-century playwrights did Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Louis Armstrong recorded a hit version of “That’s Why They Call Me Shine,” as have an array of artists as diverse as The California Ramblers, Ry Cooder, Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Frankie Laine, and Django Reinhardt. According to David A. Jasen, the song grew into a Dixieland standard (iii), and a later orchestral version simply dubbed “Shine” made its way onto the *Casablanca* soundtrack. Today, HBO’s wildly popular mobster character Tony Soprano claims to have been “jumped by a couple of shines” in order to cover up for a panic attack that caused him to miss a meeting. But despite Shine’s lasting prime-time stature, any fame Dabney and Mack enjoyed was brief, as the inevitable over-saturation of airtime from the song’s own success has rendered its history obsolete. Cooder credits Armstrong with authorship, and several other sources date it 1924, some years beyond its actual debut in “His Honor the Barber.” The play toured before Walker joined in 1911, but in a reference to the play, David Krasner refers to “That’s Why They Call Me Shine” as “a tune Walker created” for the production of “His Honor the Barber” (321).

We know that the entity “Shine” traces back at least as far as 1910, shortly before Ada Overton Walker’s voice ushered Dabney and Mack’s song into the mainstream, but as mentioned earlier, Abrahams gives us reason to believe that curly-haired Shine, like the shock wig, is a surviving relic of the minstrel stage, if not some earlier performance platform. Moreover, there is a suggestion in his writing that Shine’s adopted performers might not always have been black.

“It is impossible to say . . . whether such narrative recitations existed among the Negro before the beginning of the minstrel shows and were borrowed by white performers for the minstrel stage, or whether they were an invention of the whites, later borrowed by the Negro and recast” (107-8).

The possibility that Shine once existed as a white man in blackface, or perhaps as a figure of white-generated lore, is an intriguing reminder that racial categories do not divide as conveniently as entrenched stereotypes would have us believe. Shine’s racial status plays a pivotal role, of course, in the documented versions of his tale discussed here, as evidenced by this passage from one of Kid’s Camingerly renditions:

Captain came up on the deck. He said, “Shine, Shine, save poor me. I’ll give you more money than any black man want to see.” Shine said, “You know my color and you guessed my race. Come in here and give these sharks a chase” (102).

Of the two lines in Shine’s response, it might appear as though Kid embellished the first line only as filler, to rhyme with the sexier, more dangerous line about sharks. But the wording in that set-up line is curious, given Newman’s encouragement to modify our ears to listen for alternative messaging. Why does Shine insist that the captain knows his
color, but can only guess his race? For one, as the previous analysis of Clare Kendry in Larsen’s *Passing* attests, race and skin color do not travel hand in hand. Perhaps Kid was of mixed origin himself, and knew firsthand the frustrations and advantages of playing to expectations.

Colonel Forsyth in “The Doll” and Captain Delano in “Benito Cereno” share the same misconceptions about race that Shine exploits. Tom Taylor and Babo’s subservient performances lull their respective dupes into presuming there is only limited cognitive capability among these appropriately docile (devalued?) black men. On board the *Titanic* in 1912, two years after Ada Overton Walker first sang “That’s Why They Call Me Shine,” a folk figure also named Shine allegedly shoveled coal. His social status again befits that of his literary predecessors, as does his self-reliance. The fairytale component of Shine’s legacy magnifies the appeal of the fractious stories dedicated to his resilience.

According to Abrahams, the doomed captain of the myth had argued with Shine’s insistence that the ship is sinking (Abrahams 120), and dies for his refusal to heed the advice of a lowly shoveler of coal. Consistently in the Camingerly toasts, the captain and his daughter offer Shine two previously unattainable commodities—“more money” and “more white pussy” than “any black man seen,”—if only he’ll save them from the sinking ship. Rather than wait around to verify the sincerity of the offers, Shine rewards himself instead with his own survival, and the opportunity to mock his less fortunate former superiors, whom he verbally reduces to shark chum. Abrahams believes Kid and others who perform the Camingerly toasts view the “perpetual adventure” of life in “hustle” terms that necessitate multiple performance roles. Some buckle from the pressure of the demanding peer group/audience, but high community standing awaits those who weather the danger and deliver a well-received performance (33).

Fictional characters like Jim Too, who performed to mixed crowds during the peak of America’s racial crisis, reflect that reality. *Darktown Strutters* reminds that the violence backgrounding Shine’s and the other preceding hair-related stories has precedence in minstrelsy as well—the stakes for performative blackness were always high. As with Cute’s speculation of Topsy’s worth, or the captain and his daughter’s beliefs that only Shine can save them, whites are quick to recognize Jim’s value as an entertainment commodity, and he ends up following in the footsteps of Juba by dancing in T.D. Rice’s (previously all white) Non-Pareil Minstrel Show. When scheduled to dance competitively with a white man in the minstrel show, Jim quickly learns about the expectations that whites audiences will place on him. Rice tells him, “Remember in the finale, you and Jack face off for a dance to the finish. The idea is not to show him up cause these backwoods rednecks ain’t gonna appreciate nobody colored bein that full a himself. But if you show off what you can do and then let Jack and everybody else join in, folks’ll go home feeling they got their money’s worth” (44). As the country speeds toward Civil War, Rice’s warning fulfills itself in the behavior of the crowd, who react with violence when the competitive dance doesn’t build quickly enough toward the outcome they expect. “Come on you fuckin mick!” yells one. “Jig that nigger off the stage!” (81). Moments later, audience members riot and one shoots Rice’s character dead. A speaker at the funeral remembers Rice as someone who “hid behind disguises so we could see ourselves through his effort to find himself” (89), and the lesson is not lost on Jim, who learns to exploit the expectations that shadow his performing ability.
Brown’s novel culminates around 1875, where Jim Too happens upon one of P.T. Barnum’s freak shows. The stage show promising “the Southland as it really is!” and “[n]egroes as they really are!” features black men and women wearing tags that identify them: THE CONTENTED SLAVE, THE LOCAL COLOR NEGRO, THE TRAGIC MULATTO, THE EXOTIC PRIMITIVE, and so on. Crow, passing time while on a train layover in East St. Louis, is in the wrong place at the wrong time when one of the “freaks” refuses to wear the badge that says THE NEGRO BRUTE, and finds himself arrested along with every other black in sight. The authorities muscle Jim to a tent where a police photographer is shooting a “Rogue’s Gallery,” which will enable police nationwide to identify the types of criminal elements described by the tags they wear. They are enforcing stereotypes, the same kinds Crow has fought all his life due to his dancing fame and “uppity” reputation for not wearing blackface on stage. By now, though, Crow is familiar with what is expected of him, and, like Shine and Topsy before him, knows how to play the game just enough to escape without compromising his dignity.

Crow, wearing a tag that reads THE CONNIVING UNCLE TOM, finds himself the first black pushed in front of the camera, following only behind THE (literally) DEAD INDIAN in line. As the photographer tells him what an honor it is to be the “first image of your race captured for posterity” (223), Jim launches into a new dance step, one he’s never tried. Just as the camera flashes, he breaks into the move faster than anyone can see it--blurring both the photograph and the stereotype it intends to reinforce. Brown writes,

> When Jim was let go by the police, he started whistling and making a big fuss with his feet. Strong [the Ironically named photographer] smiled as he watched Jim hoofing his way out of sight. He was glad that Crow was in such good spirits over being picked as the first Negro to be in the ‘Rogue Gallery’ (224).

In their attempt to freeze P.T. Barnum-sketched representations of blackness into a criminal persona, Strong and the other authority figures in Darktown Strutters demonstrate how groups of power seek to manipulate public will through popular media. The practice also alludes to the scientific work of Samuel Morton, who passed off his abnormally large personal collection of more than 900 skulls as the authoritative source for what National Manhood author Dana Nelson terms “polygenesis” theories that insisted upon a predictable hierarchy of races:

> From his examination of ancient crania of Egyptians and “negroids,” Morton argued that not only were there different cranial capacities in the ancient “white” and “black” races, but that these significantly corresponded with contemporary differences. Thus he was able scientifically to corroborate his suggestion that the ‘races’ had been ‘separate’ from the start, firmly seizing the achievements of ancient Egyptian culture for the category of “white,” and discrediting abolitionists like Child, who
argued against notions of African inferiority partially on the basis of the achievements of Egyptian civilization (110).

Morton’s work gained wide accreditation with the help of a fraternity of powerful cronies with whom he allied himself, a carefully crafted support network whose sole function was to agree publicly with their leader’s otherwise groundless credentials. Though personal letters between the men reveal that they jokingly referred to themselves as “niggerologists,” by 1844 Morton’s validated work came directly to influence public policy on race (113). Designed to justify pejorative interpretations of black stereotypes, Morton’s bogus theory might also have fueled the boom blackface minstrelsy enjoyed for the half century that followed.

But his edicts never solidified, and in the new millennium, barbers yet run free within the flexible borders of their own malleable stereotype. Ice Cube’s recent film Barbershop (2002) recalls the same values dear to Tom Taylor in “The Doll.” His character Calvin Palmer employs a significant number of dependents, and though Palmer’s barbershop is no interface to the white world (no longer reliant, in yet another new age, on that prestige), it is, according to one of the elders, a cornerstone of the black community. Cedric the Entertainer’s character Eddie is proud that a man can say anything he wants to in the barbershop, and no one takes more advantage than Eddie himself, whose comments like “All Rosa Parks did was sit her ass down” and “Martin Luther King was a ho” infuriated the Reverend Al Sharpton and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. “Jackson argues that the brief riff about King, which satirizes his extramarital affairs, is offensive and should have been edited out of the film because it tramples on sacred territory,” writes Brent Staples. By setting themselves in opposition to the film, however, the two “heightened the movie’s appeal, helping to make it a box office hit and the cross-over film of the season” (1). Diawara posits, “insistence on positive images only strengthens the negative stereotypes in both the white and black imagination” (n.p.). In the case of Sharpton and Jackson’s reactions to Barbershop, that insistence also invited thousands of new interpretations of the stereotype, be they positive or negative.

Staples recalls past encounters with Jackson in Chicago barbershops, suggesting the reverend knows as well as anyone that anything goes in that environment, including references to hypocrisy among men of high positions. “Many of us came as much for the spectacle as for the haircut,” continues Staples. “The barbers were showmen who moved easily from subject to subject, pulling the conversation back from the clubhouse vulgarity that was all too likely when men gathered without women” (1). The barber as performer is familiar, from the stage presences of Pompey Smash and S.H. Dudley to Babo’s invented caricature of himself to Cube’s on-screen persona, but this is also where comparisons to Ice Cube’s Barbershop end and new possibilities begin. No longer the spot where men gather without women, Cube’s setting includes space for a female barber, a barber from Africa, and even a white (male) barber. Diawara opens the door to blackface stereotypes to white artists like Quentin Tarantino, and Ice Cube has further multiplied the options, exploding the barriers of gender and race in his chosen lore cycle—but hardly at the expense of his predecessors. In one of the most powerful scenes in the film, Cube observes with tenderness as Eddie the elder gathers the young barbers around for a lesson in old-fashioned leather and strop shaving. Slippery Joe, originally a white man in blackface, persists, ever uncontrollable as he embodies an even more
culturally diverse new generation of barbers who soon enough will leave their own imprint on the barber persona.

By now the terrain is wide open, as embracing tonsorial stereotypes has fed the growing global fascination with blackness. No image appeared on Madonna’s 1983 debut album because her publicists didn’t want to lose sales from the substantial portion of her fan base who believed she was black (*Rock & Roll*, 10). At the beginning of the century, the Whitman Sisters broke into the touring entertainment marketplace on the strength of audiences who thought they were white. But by its end, Madonna finds her break through an affinity to blackness. And in the new millennium, a more loosely defined “authentic” blackness holds greater cultural currency than at any time in the country’s history. In tune, barbershops abound in the pop landscape, and now network television executives are wise to its value. The National Basketball Association (NBA) promotes itself with an ad in which superstar Ben Wallace, who is 6’ 9” but easily stands 7’ 3” due to his shock-styled afro, sits in a barbershop chair and laments his thus far unrequited romantic love for what turns out to be the NBA championship trophy. ESPN frequently airs a tribute to its “All-Hair” team, a bit that over the years clearly has shown recyclable value for its flagship “SportsCenter” program, and several other shock-wigged athletes perennially make the list. Athlete Michael Vick found his way onto the program by announcing he’s not going to cut his ascending afro until he plays in the SuperBowl (Prisco). Comedian and seasoned exploiter of stereotypes Dave Chappelle stages a black barbershop as the supposed control group for his tongue-in-cheek experimental premise that white people can’t help but dance to electric guitar music. In the sketch, whites in a corporate boardroom and an upscale restaurant dance promptly to the cue of the unexpected guitar, but the visibly annoyed populace at the barbershop/control group does not follow suit. What gives the premise wheels, of course, is the pretend catering to notions of authenticity that dictate whites respond to treble, and blacks to bass. At the end of the skit, however, Chappelle assures the audience that he does, in fact, recognize the tendency toward blur. The supposed conclusions from the experiment wilt when a black policeman sings along and sways to a guitar performance of a Bon Jovi song, explaining, “I’m from the suburbs. I can’t help it.”

The authenticity debate grows louder as people strive for identities that include some measure of blackness, and cultures continue to blur. Juliet McMains has written “Brownface: A New Performance of Minstrelsy in Competitive Latin American Dancing?” She chronicles the act of white participants in ballroom dance contests browning themselves in order to impress presumably biased judges who seek to crown “authentic” Latinos. In Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Cocoa, a black woman hoping to accentuate her Africanness, also “browns up” to compensate for her light complexion. Another Naylor character, Kiswana Browne, likewise blinded by her pursuit of authenticity, admonishes her brother for not donning an afro. In the film version of *Brewster*, Kiswana’s own hairstyle changes little, but for the different brightly-patterned bandanas she wears in each separate scene. The wraps evoke the minstrel show’s plantation mammy, a stereotype that survives today as the weathered image of the like-shrouded Aunt Jemima. Eager detractors of Kiswana might pounce here, for her pointing a finger to implicate a brother who refuses to adopt an artifice designed to uplift, while she readily incorporates a style that allegedly degrades. But Kiswana’s constant recycling of her coiffe also flaunts the flexibility of the mammy stereotype, brilliantly
reinventing her image again and again to suit her own style, as well as supply variety to a less patient (television) audience than the earlier stage performances of the role.

Don Letts, manager of the 1970s German band The Slits, recalls his own discomfort concerning the chosen hairstyle of the band’s lead vocalist. Slits singer Ariane, or Ari Up, claims she was immediately drawn to the Caribbean from the moment she heard reggae, so long ago now that her accent is thick from having lived in Jamaica all this time. “In ’76 I hear reggae and I was interested thorough da music, not because of Jamaicans, cause I didn’t really know Jamaicans—I haven’t seen any—but I hear da music first and it hit, it hit a heart, core, ting in me, right? So from that I just make my way to Jamaica.” Letts, of Jamaican descent but himself an Englishman born and raised in London, is perhaps better suited to claim reggae “authenticity” per his ancestry, his dreadlocks, and his previous job spinning reggae tunes at London’s The Roxy. He recalls his discomfort with Ariane’s more overt posturing: “Ariane became so engrossed in it (reggae) that she had longer dreadlocks than me, and spoke Jamaican heavier than me, and it became quite disconcerting. She was from Germany!”

Clearly Ariane’s accent and dreadlocks are not intended to fool anyone into believing she is Jamaican; nor does she boast of any unique familiarity with Jamaican culture. Dreadlocks, the afro (a.k.a. “the natural”), and Kiswana’s myriad bandana wrappings all promote a political ideology “in the way they valorize the very materiality of black hair texture” as uniquely African, and therefore, linked more closely with nature,” writes Kobena Mercer (108), who recognizes “two logics of black [hair] stylization—one emphasizing natural looks, the other involving straightening to emphasize artifice” (105). From the radical 1960s to their incorporation into mainstream style, both dreadlocks and afros “championed an aesthetic of nature that opposed itself to any artifice as a sign of corrupting Eurocentric influence” according to Mercer. “But nature had nothing to do with it! Both these hairstyles were never just natural, waiting to be found: they were stylistically cultivated and politically constructed in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness” (108). By flaunting her own artifice in presuming the characteristics of a Jamaican man, Ariane places herself on par with blacks who straighten their hair, flaunting her homage rather than manufacturing a look that fits her approved, German predetermined identity. She also exposes Letts’s implicit claiming of his dreadlocks as natural, and threatens his tenuous authenticity.

Thankfully, the brief identity crisis didn’t move Letts to abandon his ties to Jamaica, because some twenty years after managing the Slits, he treated audiences to his clever 1997 film, Dancehall Queen, which celebrates resistance and rebellion through the rough and tumble “slackness” that Carolyn Cooper outlines in her own analysis of dancehall culture. Cooper writes about blurred meanings in Jamaican DJ song lyrics that broadcast multiple messages to dancehall audiences. “Slackness’s multiple entry visa allows easy access in and out; it means temporary displacement, not total banishment” (16), she writes, referring to a proud rudeness that offends the sensibilities of the ruling class in its supposed vulgarity.

To the uninitiated much of the noise that emanates from the DJs is absolutely unintelligible. The insistent sing-song of fixed rhythmic structures conspires to obscure meaning;
individual words become submerged in a wash of sound. But if you permit your ears to become attuned to this borderline sound and allow for the free play of the intellect then patterns of meaning cohere (12).

Cooper’s description implies a fluidity of meaning in dancehall music that extends to fluid identities for the participants. As opposed to Ari Up’s feminine-to-masculine posturing, Marcia in Dancehall Queen gains power by occasionally substituting a highly feminized persona for her “natural” masculinized self. Once again, a change in hairstyle is key to the transformation. During the first half of Dancehall Queen, Marcia’s look reflects her lifestyle choice, hanging out with blue-collar Jamaican men, drinking beer and playing dominoes, ordering her favorite food, Kentucky Fried Chicken. She regularly wears a sideways baseball caps over her unkempt hair, alternates her clothing among flannel shirts, overalls, and tank tops, and is visibly annoyed by the vacant dancehall divas outside the dance club who patronize her pushcart.

But everything changes when creepy “Uncle” Larry, the family benefactor, forces himself on Marcia’s daughter Tanya. The mother invents a dancehall persona designed to trick the pedophile into believing she’s another “sexy bitch” at the club, ripe for his plucking. In its first public appearance, her new persona relies on costume nearly as much as it does her new phone-sex voice and dancing prowess. Her tomboy ensemble gives way to strappy stiletto heels, gold-chained bustier top, dangling gold jewelry, and glitter on her exposed belly. But the most striking change is the one that renders her unrecognizable to Larry and others. Marcia now wears a glimmering, straight-haired purple wig, styled up-do and cresting in a blonde wrap-around bun. She oozes sexuality, and men once capable of killing others melt at her feet as she glides into the role of a self-reliant dancehall queen.

In cyberspace, the options for such “artificialized” identity shifts abound (to borrow again Mercer’s useful term). The satirical web site blackpeopleloveus.com, created by two white people, has inspired hate mail from both “neo-Nazis and black extremists” (Ogunnaike) for its “testimonials from our real life [black] friends,” the first of which displays a woman with braided hair who says, “Sally loves to touch my hair! She always asks me how I got my hair to do this. That makes me feel special. Like I have magical powers!” (Peretti). Almost as rich as the inventive content itself is the section creators Chelsea and Jonah Peretti reserve for responses, which range from lavish praise to the above-referenced hate mail. The criticism from otherwise oppositional camps recalls Diawara’s suggestion in In Search of Africa that hip-hop music rises above the same condemnation from multiple angles (238). Clearly, in both instances, those under attack have tapped into something powerful enough to elicit all flavors of response from all flavors of people. As expected whenever cultural boundaries blur, the positive responses balance out the negative ones, and a lush new eco-system grows between the two extremes. In 2002, a Japanese woman named Eriko Nishizaki tells New York Times Magazine interviewer Yasuko Kamiizumi,

I was in a beauty parlor named Happy. They specialize in dreads and cornrows. I live near a U.S. naval base, so I often see foreign people with black hairstyles. I
always thought they were really cool. I wanted cornrows, but my parents and grandparents were against it. My father said: ‘Why do you have to wear such a hairstyle? You’re Japanese.’ I pleaded and pleaded; finally, they agreed. Japanese copy black fashion out of adoration. I was into hip-hop dancing in high school. And I watch videos with rappers and R&B singers. They are proud of their culture, and they’ve got firm opinions. Many Japanese can’t say what they think. I want soft dreads next, because my friend wore them and they looked cute (14).

As with the U.S. sailors’ 1840 blackface performance, this charged imagery still has the power to captivate willing audiences overseas, fostering visions of racial collaboration that tap into the global marketplace. But not everybody sees it that way. The political left in America, per Diawara, associates consumption with guilt. In his economic argument, America needs to embrace (and admit to) its switch from producing to consuming nation. “A genuinely transnational Left, instead of always equating consumption with alienation,” he writes, ought to “include the new societies structured through consumption as an essential part of its understanding globalization” (275).

Perhaps it’s true that guilt-ridden whites will feel better about themselves when they acknowledge and celebrate their consumptive lust for “black” culture, as served up by blacks, whites, and others. Recently, I watched for the first time Vincente Minnelli and Busby Berkeley’s *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), in which Louis Armstrong, Rex Ingram and others style their hair so that two triangular horns point out of the tops of their heads, emblemizing them as minions of Lucifer. Not long ago, I would have condemned the look as racist and demeaning, but now I’m just jealous I lack the option to style my hair the same way, should I want.

If the political left will not embrace the marketing opportunities of black stereotypes, there are more conservative outfits that will, and do. Media outlets for the established hoarders of capital demonstrate their own understanding of the globalization of commodities with regularity. In 2004, AT&T Wireless pitches its product in a TV ad that depicts a black family at a dinner table. The smaller boy means to tattle when he asks his older brother why he was out so late the previous night without calling. But when their father presents the teenager with a new cell phone (equipped with the AT&T Wireless plan), he waves the phone in his little brother’s face and taunts, “Call me some time—oh wait, you can’t!” The ad intends to scan the American public and capture parents with disposable income by means of their teenaged children. As Mom smiles sweetly and says not a word, one might notice that the father and his two sons all have closely cropped hair, military style, as current corporate conformity dictates they should. In playing it safe, AT&T presents the prescribed, sanitized version of blackness, predictable in its hair styling and eager, apparently, to communicate via cell phone. Though it might not have been true in the early days of the company, today there is less chance of encountering a shock wig in an AT&T ad then there is at a skinhead rally.

Alongside the hairstyles, today’s barber plays an ever-compounding role in big media, as well. On ESPN Radio, a demonstratively black voice introduces himself as Jermaine Dupri, “host of ‘Cuttin Up’, part of ESPN’s Block Party.” Despite Dupri’s
cool delivery, it is clear the advertising copywriter’s task included carefully manipulated phrasing so as to pack three layers of brands—ESPN, Block Party and “Cuttin Up”—into a single sentence without disturbing the flow of speech. “Cuttin Up,” it turns out, is a television show set in a barbershop. Consistently present among the various episodic guests are sports figures, and the ensemble sits in barber chairs throughout the program. In some segments, conversation continues as barbers work on the participants’ hair. Prior to each airing, “Cuttin Up” announces its pending irreverence with an animated electric razor that mows in half an all-white television screen, obliterating the ESPN logo that lies in its path.

In one episode, Dupri masks himself beneath sunglasses and a baseball cap, from which his braids hang like gummi worms. The power of the barbershop setting reveals itself when he asks NFL running back Eddie George, locked in a salary negotiations stalemate with his current team, whether he’ll be returning to the Titans next season. It’s exactly the sort of question that athletes of George’s stature seek to avoid at all costs, because of fans’ perceptions of loyalty to the team. As George sputters uncomfortably, looking for the perfect string of non-incriminating words, Dupri reminds him of the holy setting in which the running back is about to speak:

I’m gonna cut you off. Let me explain to everybody what’s going on in this show. We’re in the barbershop. This is where you let it all out, you don’t hold nothing back. So, all the barbers, when somebody get knocked out, they come straight here and tell it like it is . . . you’ve got to tell me the BARBERSHOP answer.

George’s answer is respectful to the premise, cautiously worded: “As of today . . . as of today . . . right now at this very moment I’m a Tennessee Titan.” He is visibly relieved to have found the right words. Within a few weeks George had turned down Tennessee’s last contract proposal, ending his eight-year tenure as the team’s most popular player.

Jesse Palmer, the former Florida Gator and over-night celebrity, occupies one of the four guest barber chairs in this same episode, and Dupri introduces him as “the first white guy” to appear on the show. Read: crossover audience. Palmer is steering his fame as “The Bachelor” from the like-named reality series in an interesting direction. Framed by the Barbershop 2 promotional poster behind him, Palmer exchanges admiration with Eddie George, each praising the other for his ability to attract women. It’s a start, anyway, this inter-racial social comfort that can be so effortless for millionaire athletes, but so difficult for society at large. This reality TV vignette of mutual black-white admiration will air several times throughout the year, in various time slots, and Palmer’s product placement will promote Barbershop 2 (especially to white males ages 18-34) through its international chain of remaining distribution lives—video rental, sale, and pay-per-view, followed by premium cable, then network and/or cable, and the Internet. Create a cross-over entertainment product today, and the global marketplace is your oyster.

Tom’s submissiveness, Topsy’s turbulence, and other stereotyped imagery from Uncle Tom’s Cabin likewise ushered in successive waves of popular media performance platforms—from the romance novel, to theatre, to minstrelsy, to the musical stage, and
finally, to film, television, and the Internet. Like Ada Walker and Kid’s versions of Shine, the cultural signifiers from the novel continually adjust to present conditions, so that public reception for a given performance identity might change drastically with the times. Stowe and Aiken clearly intended reader sympathy for Tom, who patiently awaited justice and refused to meet violence with violence. But as Philip Fisher suggests, Uncle Tom is among a number of cultural relics that were so effective in capturing the collective conscience of Americans, they have since frozen into stereotypes that now seem offensive to modern audiences. Today, the label “Tom” is an insult. When New Jersey poet laureate Amiri Baraka lampoons Clarence Thomas as “Tom Ass Clarence,” most readers understand he means to paint the Supreme Court justice as someone who panders to white supremacy. Ironically, so successful was Tom’s radical infusion into the cultural landscape that current audiences consider the all-too-familiar caricature trite, if not altogether taboo.

But Uncle Tom, in spite of his passivity, has managed to penetrate white America’s hitherto ignorant consciousness concerning the brutality of slavery. Only a few years after Stowe published her novel, author Herman Melville scripted a black character named Babo who plays the “Tom” role to his own advantage. As detailed earlier, the convincing performance effectively anesthetizes Babo’s would-be enemy, and his puppetry of the unsuspecting Delano is masterful up until the moment of crisis, when Cereno exposes the ruse.

Because the public at large does not consider it racist to ridicule a persistent folly of whiteness, it is easy here to overlook another unflattering, yet ostensibly authentic stereotype. Delano’s overconfidence in the supposed serenity of the moment places him in line with fellow oblivious white dupes—Gumption Cute, the German Farmer, Colonel Forsyth, the captain of the Titanic, the police photographer who couldn’t quite capture Jim Too’s image. These are the men whose Vaudevillean descendants endured seltzer sprayings in the face, the dupes who represent a stereotype about white people that has reappeared alongside the shock wig and other quick reads of blackness since at least the 1830s. The dupes’ creators—authors who, in these same stories, also perpetuated stereotypes about blackness—are of differing origins themselves. Emmett, Melville, and Aiken are white; Chesnutt, Kid, and Brown are black. As Kid suggested earlier, though, the captain of the Titanic can only guess at Shine’s racial ancestry, regardless of complexion. Perhaps several, or all, of the authors in that list are the products of race mixing. Regardless, in inventing their characters, they all draw from the same stream of familiar icons representing both white and black, often swirling the two together in complicated patterns so that one’s interpretation compounds with each reading of the story. Also with each impression, then, lurks the possibility that Newman’s “secret message to those who have ears to hear” might penetrate the consciousness of reader, audience member, performer, or critic.

For instance, Dana Nelson confesses to having once presumed (and published) that Melville celebrated, or at least failed to condemn, the white fraternal order to which Delano clings in his breezy chatter with Cereno. After further readings of the story, it is Delano’s misconceptions about blackness that ultimately sway Nelson’s opinion to the belief that, in fact, Melville employs that overconfident swagger in order to expose it as the captain’s weakness (197). In catering to another stereotype about whiteness, not only is Melville not siding with Delano’s privileged pride; he is presenting information on how to defeat him. Nelson’s snap judgment concerning Melville’s Caucasian maleness is
a result of the same quick-read racial presumptions one makes about people wearing shock wigs, or that someone like Delano might make about slaves.

The Quakers in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, who challenge the law by defending Eliza from the bounty hunters intent on seizing her, likewise problematize the stereotype of ruthless white men. According to Fisher, Quaker values in the novel represent both “the moral worth of the enclaves of all right-thinking energy,” and “the ultimate powerlessness of those enclaves within the overall society” (113). It follows then that Tom, for whom no Quakers stepped forward, stood for helplessness in the face of entrenched racist injustice. Stowe deserves her place in the American literature canon for exposing that injustice by introducing it into an American popular culture that until then lacked imagery around which the populace might identify collectively.

In his time, Tom was a hero, dying in the same martyr fashion as Catholic saints, but who needs that today? As Diawara observes, black youths today are less concerned with bowing to their historically accomplished elders, and more inclined to spend their energy building upon the foundation the previous generations have left to them. Performance-oriented youths, whom Diawara alternately labels as “homeboys,” or simply the hip hop generation, “refuse to be restricted to black enclaves or to be defined by racial stereotypes. Instead, they put those very stereotypes of blackness in the marketplace, and obtain the highest prices for them” (274).

Witness Miles Davis’s complicated respect for Louis Armstrong. Even though he was critical of the trumpeter’s “Tomming” for his audiences, Davis understood that Armstrong came from a different era, when wresting money from white pockets meant embodying a non-threatening, contented Negro persona. Elaborating on his dislike for appearing on Merv Griffin and Johnny Carson’s shows, Davis explains in his autobiography:

> Those talk shows would take a black man on television back then only if he grinned, became a clown, like Louis Armstrong did. They could dig that. I loved the way Louis played trumpet, man, but I hated the way he had to grin in order to get over with some tired white folks. Man, I just hated when I saw him doing that, because Louis was hip, had a consciousness about black people, was a real nice man. But the only image people have of him is that grinning image off TV (313).

This is not the only recorded moment in which Davis was critical of Armstrong’s seeming to pander to audience expectations, and one is tempted to conclude from these morsels of evidence that Davis disliked Armstrong. But Davis suggests otherwise, recognizing, “I know why they (both Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie) did it—to make money and because they were entertainers as well as trumpet players. They had families to feed.” One could even read Davis’s disdain for what the senior musicians had to endure (although he also suggests both Armstrong and Gillespie truly enjoyed playing the clown, and forgives them on that level as well) as a celebration of his *not* having to “perform” for audiences while playing. He adds, “Also I was younger than them and didn’t have to go through the shit they had to go through to get accepted in the music industry. They had already opened up a whole lot of doors for people like me to go
through, and I felt that I could be about just playing my horn—the only thing I wanted to do” (83). Davis’s comments here are far from scornful; grateful is more like it.

Louis Armstrong probably knew it was beneficial to his career to keep grinning, and if that’s the case then he also did a hell of a job making us believe he meant it. Whether he “Tommed” or not, Armstrong’s bank account likely provided some additional incentive for the trumpeter to smile. But no wonder that today, “Uncle Tom” is a label to which no one aspires. Since his martyrdom, the cultural currency of blackness has increased a thousand fold, and obedient blacks no longer satisfy the global entertainment appetite. The stereotyped imagery has survived, but even by the early nineteenth century, constructions like the barbers Babo and Pompey Smash had refracted that once demeaning material through prisms of alternative meaning. Much of the pejorative context of the stereotypes has faded, and modern audiences expect blackness, a rehearsed, fraught issue since at least the 1830s, to stand for the same strength and cunning those two barbers once dared to exhibit.

Melville and Emmett, whites who authored stories about black barbers who challenged racial supremacy, are evidence of an ongoing mutual investment in blackness, by both blacks and whites, that continues into the modern era. In the early twentieth century, Chesnutt and Dudley recycled the empowered barber, just as black minstrels in the latter half of the nineteenth century had adopted the stereotyped, double entendre-layered format Thomas Dartmouth Rice and other whites had popularized in the 1830s. By the early twentieth century, gentrified entertainment creations like “His Honor the Barber” flourished. Zulu Nation founder Afrika Bambaataa credits the “rapping and rhyming” of William Shakespeare, along with the “funky white boys” in synth-pop band Kraftwerk, as shades of white in the formation of his own “electro-funk” music that introduced hip hop to the digital age. The pity, in realms both corporate and academic, is that incessant battles contesting ownership of what we take to be authentic blackness distract the public focus from figuring out ways to build on that ongoing mutuality. If anything, the fight for ownership discourages collaboration, encouraging instead the formation of politically polarized camps that vilify one another.

Like Jim Too’s evasion of the camera’s eye, limited constructions of race and gender won’t stand still long enough to freeze into place. Their magnetism inevitably attracts alternate meanings, as different people and later generations pick them up and plug them into the immediate reality of the present tense. I believe that Dana Nelson’s about-face concerning Delano, and by association, Melville, is an indication that the politics of essentialism in academia are eroding. The current global marketplace demands it. By now, we are products of an age in which the representations have mixed together, gestated, and reformed many times over, rendering arguments of essentialism and authenticity impossible to maintain. Diawara even asserts that Americans are mistaken if they believe African Americans are an authoritative representation of blackness:

Caribbean and African immigrants are black, but they do not share all of the values of African Americans, who came out of the civil rights movement. Unlike African Americans, they arrived in this country as individuals searching for freedom and the American dream.
Africans and Caribbeans may build coalitions with African Americans around certain issues such as racism and discrimination, but they may also differ on issues such as the meaning of history, social justice, moral authority, nationalism, and black people’s relation to mainstream culture in America (274).

Mutuality need not exclude itself to black plus white. The world is fractioned enough that divisions exist within groupings of blacks, as among whites. Diawara suggests a common mentality exists between black immigrants in America and black American youths of the hip hop generation, in their shrugging off history in favor of an eagerness to secure profit in the wide open market economy. One vision of that fusion forms in Barbershop, when the African immigrant barber at the shop defends a woman’s honor by means of what his co-workers celebrate as a “safari” punch. The violent act wins the group’s approval for its appropriateness of moment, as well as effectiveness of motion. No hesitation—has to be done and best done quickly, and that’s that. The quick response performance also establishes the similar values that Diawara might have predicted the African and his African American peers would share. Prior to the punch, his co-workers didn’t have their ears tuned to hear beyond the funny accent and curious garb. He wins their acceptance and admiration with the act, participating as an equal member of the barbershop’s ensemble from that moment forward.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Scott Freeland lives with his wife, son, and dog in Atlanta, Georgia. Born in Kansas and raised in Florida, he graduated from Florida State University in 1990 with a degree in English and an interest in African American literature. After spending a long hiatus from academia in the online industry during the 1990s tech boom, he returned to his alma mater to continue his pursuit of knowledge in the field of American Studies, which permitted him to expand his scope to the studies of American dance and jazz history.

He now is obsessed with understanding why groups of people build barriers between one another, and identifying new and existing opportunities for flow.