FROM THE BIRTH OF A NATION TO HAVOC: THE EVOLUTION OF
TRADITIONAL BLACKFACE TO MODERN RACIAL PASSING IN U.S. CINEMA

A Thesis in
Media Studies
by
Dorian C. Randall

© 2009 Dorian C. Randall

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree

Master of Arts

August 2009
The thesis of Dorian C. Randall was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Matt Jordan
Associate Professor of Communications
Thesis Advisor

Jeanne Hall
Associate Professor of Communications

Thomas Benson
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Rhetoric

Anthony Olorunnisola
Associate Professor and Head of Department of Film-Video and Media Studies

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
ABSTRACT

Race is a complicated and debatable term in the United States today. Film is one venue in which the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of race is challenged, particularly with representations of minstrelsy and episodes of racial passing that also evolve into performance of class distinctions. Through textual and rhetorical analysis, I chronicled the evolution of minstrelsy as a form of racial passing through a cinematic lens and demonstrated how the racial/class performance creates multiracial identity in the films’ characters. The purpose of this research is to add to the continuing analysis and investigation of racial passing and minstrelsy by evaluating the construction of multiracial identity in monoracial characters that perform a race other than their own in the films under analysis. This study also reveals how the definition of race evolved through class performance as race and class are heavily related terms.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.................................................................1
2. Literature Review Part I: A Brief History of Slavery ..................5
3. Literature Review Part II: Minstrelsy and Racial Passing ..........17
4. Burnt Cork Cinema: From Black and White to Color ................33
5. Fade into White: Passing Films .........................................58
6. Class Act: Race/Class Films ............................................87
7. Conclusion.........................................................................109
   Bibliography.......................................................................111
1. Introduction

Race is an important category in the United States and “is usually applied to ‘nonwhite’ peoples” (Apple, 1998; Lucal 1996). A complex subject, race is arguably a social (and still legal) construction that has marked categories of difference (Apple, 1998; Barrett & Roediger, 1997; Campbell & Oaks, 1997; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Martinez, 1997; Sacks, 1997). These categories serve to create separation and racial purity. With the implementation of the multiracial category on the 2000 U.S. Census, what happens to “racial purity?” What about those crossing racial boundaries through racial “passing?” Racial passing is not just a matter of phenotype (or physical appearance), but also the symbolic act of deconstructing preconceived notions of race and its performance. In many ways it also calls attention to performances of race seen since the later 19th century. Minstrelsy, also referred to as blackface, is a historical theatrical tradition in U.S. popular culture. Although widely considered demeaning to blacks today, this infamous style of entertainment provides a historical context for the performance and creation of race and the boundaries between whiteness and blackness that still appear unresolved today (Strausbaugh, 2006). The questions of race, racial purity, and racial passing are important to media studies research because the media, especially film, help define race visually and helps (can be read as “forces”) audiences to accept/reify specific ideas about racial representation and the cultures that are associated with raced individuals.

With the history of negative representations of blacks in various media, the spirit of minstrelsy is still invoked today (Strausbaugh, 2006). These stereotypical images are still in effect, but the minstrel image is becoming more complex. Bogle (2007) states that because of the rigid character types performed by whites in blackface, black performers “found themselves wedged into these categories” (p. 4). This wedging only allowed for the continuation of negative
black stereotypes, making these image more durable. Thus minstrelsy has not left mainstream
media; it has evolved. The traditional coon has morphed into Flavor Flav who is constructed as a
jiving clown performing for laughs. Minstrelsy has also evolved into a contemporary blackface
for some whites. In other words, this new minstrelsy functions as a way for whites to racially
pass to nonwhite (black) culture. The new blackface requires a denial of whiteness and an
enmeshment into another nonwhite culture. An example is young whites appropriating
traditionally black or other nonwhite cultures through music, language, clothing, etc. to create
their own sense of identity. This new face embodies the notion of cultural appropriation
(Rodriquez, 2006), racial impersonation, and simulation. Implicit in these terms is the concept of
race as a performative (theatrical) construction reminiscent of popular minstrel acts of the mid-
1800s. This new form of minstrelsy (hyperbolic performance) is akin to racial passing in its
appropriation of visible racial markers that define blackness. But there is also another type of
theatrical “face” that is not discussed quite as extensively as blackface: whiteface.

Whiteface, akin to racial passing through light skin in the black community, can be
interpreted as a new form of minstrelsy as well in that it suppresses blackness. It requires images
of black success and an association/adoption of whiteness. Some examples can be found in such
successful blacks as Oprah Winfrey and Clarence Thomas whose blackness has been questioned
because of their expansive appeal to whites and their integration into dominant (white) society.
(It is important to note that the examples provided consist of monoracial people or those who
identify with only one racial group (Choi, Harachi, Gilmore, & Catalano, 2006)). This whiteface
is also linked to the DuBoisian double consciousness or the subject always looking at himself or
herself through the eyes of others. DuBois (2003) states that there is a “twoness—an American, a
Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body,
whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 9). Whiteface is much like minstrel performance and racial passing in its appropriation of whiteness, largely through class mobility and education (something that is arguably coded as white). This double consciousness is also important to understanding the masquerade of minstrelsy and racial passing in that they are much alike. They both require performance and a masquerade which is akin to Joan Riviere’s definition of the masquerade.

In “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1991), Riviere asserts that sexuality, particularly female sexuality, is a mask of defense for fear of invoking anxiety in heterosexual men who are framed as masculine. The female sexuality is characterized by expressly female criteria (e.g. mother, wife, attention to appearance, etc.). These criteria mask the overtly masculine characteristics (e.g. working in “masculine” professions). Riviere’s concept can also be associated with the masks that are used in minstrelsy and racial passing. These masks are used not only to either overexaggerate race or to deny it. In other words the mask of minstrelsy functions as a hyperbolic blackness while passing is a suppression of blackness. Blackface/whiteface is marked by a complexity that has been studied through various literature as racial performance has evolved. Images of blackface and whiteface are still present today and have undergone transformation without a mask of paint, but a mask of cultural assimilation and the blurring of racial boundaries, some of which are represented in film.

This study chronicles the evolution of minstrelsy as racial passing through a cinematic lens to demonstrate how the performance of race creates biracial identity in the films’ characters. The purpose of this research is to add to the continuing analysis and investigation of “the passing figure” (Bennett, 1996) and minstrelsy/passing by evaluating the construction of conflicted biracial identity in monoracial characters that perform a race other than their own. This approach
has not been utilized thoroughly. Most of the analysis of racial identity construction pertains to
the difficulties of developing racial identity in multiracial people but not in monoracial
individuals who participate in other raced cultures and activities. This is largely undeveloped in
film studies as well. What is at stake in this research is how film helps construct racial identities
in characters and also the racial identities of audiences, their perceptions of race, and the larger
discussion of race in our society. Also at stake are how minstrelsy/passing functions and how the
films in question challenge racial signification and the rhetoric of race. What counts as white
(e.g. class mobility, rationality, etc.) and what counts as black (e.g. poverty, ignorance, etc.) are
reinforced and questioned by filmmakers and audiences alike. This thesis mainly discusses films
featuring whites and blacks, a persistent racial binary in the United States.
2. Literature Review Part I: A Brief History of Slavery

To understand the issue of race and minstrelsy, one must investigate emerging definitions of race during the years of slavery in the United States and how slave emancipation helped define what it meant to be black (whether slave or free) or white. This is significant because slavery aided in defining whiteness and blackness through social and later legal terms. According to Strausbaugh (2006) the slave trade began in the early 1440s when Portuguese explorers brought shackled African peoples to Europe solely to be shown “‘to Prince Henry in the same way that rare plants, exotic butterflies or tropical birds might have been shown’” as noted by historian James Pope-Hennessy (p. 35). Strausbaugh (2006) also argues that the Portuguese instituted the practice of displaying “blackness” (as signified by physical appearance) as a form of entertainment for whites which operated for about 400 years and is arguably a precursor to minstrelsy. It is arguably true that the contact situation between black Africans and white Europeans was filled with awe and suspicion as the two groups had never encountered each other before. This also created the politics of difference that became evident to demarcate the in-group and out-group, the superior and the inferior, white and black. The enslavement process involved the kidnapping of Africans to be taken to Europe and the Americas. The implied action of kidnapping often invokes images of cruelty and degradation, but some of the kidnapped were pampered, educated, and became missionaries (Strausbaugh, 2006). Some were still treated as exotic pets, but this introduction into slavery began as a less harsh institution that evolved into one of destitute labor and the cultural/societal disenfranchisement of a new and dark people. Colonization of undiscovered territories continued and the increased need for labor was evident. This is how slavery became a social, racial, and economic force within itself. It was powerful because it further represented blacks as inferiors to be auctioned off to their white superiors. The
dichotomy aided in the construction of strict representations of the two groups as blacks became chattel and whites became the arbiters of destiny.

As European explorers settled during the 1500s, servitude began as indentured work but later evolved into hard, rigorous labor during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The U.S. slavery system began in 1619 in Jamestown when Dutch settlers forced twenty Africans to the burgeoning nation (Feagin, 2006). Slavery initially was intended to provide a sustainable unpaid labor force for white plantation families, but the voyage from the West Coast of Africa to the emerging American colonies left the enslaved weak and disheartened (Berlin, 2003). It was a “peculiar” institution that was marked by legislation and the understood superiority of whites as “masters.” Slavery began the systemic oppression of blacks in the United States.

Feagin (2006) argues that slavery in the United States caused the systematic oppression of blacks through a variety of means in the developing society:

Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Europeans and European Americans who controlled the development of the country that later became the United States positioned the oppression of Africans and African Americans at the center of the new society. Over the long history of the country, this oppression has included the exploitative and other oppressive practices of whites, the unjustly gained socioeconomic resources and assets of whites, and the long-term maintenance of major socioeconomic inequalities across what came to be defined as the color line. (p. 2)

As this rigid color line was defined, legislative matters were taken to permit the mistreatment of blacks whether slave or free. The legislation and social milieu ultimately resulted in the codification of racial signification (e.g. black inferiors vs. white superiors.) Black inferiority was
marked by lack of wealth, education, and freedom while whiteness was signified by power. Slavery initially was not a founded institution in the United States in the early years, but was instituted as law at various times by the European colonialists. All the European countries that colonized other territories including the institution of African slavery constructed many laws in governing the slaves and the masters who owned them. Blacks (slave or free) had very few rights, and if any protection was mandated by law, it was usually not enforced by the authorities (Rice, 1975). (For example, Spain established slave law but the implementation of “humanitarian” efforts to acknowledge slaves’ health and the like were not enforced (Rice, 1975)). Although European countries instituted various laws on how to constitute slavery for their colonies, the legislation overall advocated the domination of the slave master. Slavery as an institution spread across the colonies, particularly in the U.S. colonies, as the labor demand and financial profit of slavery increased.

As slavery continued from the 17th to the 19th century, the plantation became home to both masters and slaves and the generation of plantation slaves suffered as the conditions of labor and family relationships became more and more severe. Average slave conditions began to deteriorate (Berlin, 2003). Male slaves outnumbered female slaves which limited the ability to form families and when they were formed, they suffered the fear of separation (Berlin, 2003). As more Africans were brought to the U.S. colonies, their mortality rate increased as they did not have immunity to diseases that were often passed during the Middle Passage, the journey from the African West Coast to the United States (Berlin, 2003). Masters stripped their African names from them and their sense of racial and national identity was distorted as they had to learn to adapt to not only a new country, but a master as well. Raced and classed spaces were established as whites and blacks became more segregated.
Slavery also aided in creating conceptions of race and class. As whites were considered the superior race, they also inhabited the elite and working classes while blacks were primarily limited to the role of slave and inferior. It is true that some blacks developed their identities as elites and free people, but this largely occurred after the abolition of slavery in 1865 and the beginning of the Reconstruction. During this time, the separation of whites and blacks became more evident through developing definitions of race and class.

**Race and Class**

According to Martinot (2003), society is constructed largely by the ability to categorize, mark differences, and create meanings out of those categorizations and differences. These differences are often physical and become important signifiers that are “socially determined.” The constitution of differences creates social and cultural value that further grounds them to create a hierarchy of separation. This separation also makes the physical an object to be noticed with a given “social importance (through which the person noticed is disparaged), and the social importance given a physical characteristic determines what must be noticed (and noticed as a devaluation)” (Martinot, 2003, p. 75). Here, race is defined by physical characteristics, thus making it a phenotypic (or physical) term as well as a social/cultural construction. The black body was removed from its natural habitation and taken to other locations to be put on display whether as exotic findings in a museum, pet servants, or chattel. The latter most evidently contributes to Martinot’s argument that the physical body is granted its social importance because it is noticed for disparagement and valued as the inferior. It is also important to understand that this concession gave whites the power to define race and class, therefore making them the agents and creators of racial and class meanings.
To illustrate the above argument, Martinot (2003) cites the development of the racialization or racing of the slave state of Virginia. The categorizing and labeling of race emerged alongside the evolution of slavery. With this evolution came the understanding of “class” in Virginia (Martinot, 2003). The doubleness of white identity became more solidified as whiteness and class intertwined:

Alongside the plantation slavery as a form of profit-oriented, mass-production capitalist agriculture that had reduced its labor costs to absolute barest subsistence, free white wage workers lived a double existence. As workers they were outside and ancillary to the main modes of commodity (plantation) production. As whites, they formed the core of the intermediary control stratum, the policing apparatus upon which the plantation economy depended for its class stability to keep its black working class in place. (p. 76)

These working whites upheld the “control stratum” as they constructed class differences while also solidifying racial difference with blacks. The stratum allowed whites to benefit from the free labor of slavery which became a “means of production” predicated upon violence. Powered by violence, whiteness as a social structure maintained itself. The allegiance to this social and cultural construction was administered via the terrorizing of blacks (Martinot, 2003). Therefore, to be white meant not only to be fair-skinned, but to be the creator of meaning through class and physical characteristics that defined superiority or inferiority. To be white meant to subordinate; to be black meant to be subordinate. The basic foundation for whiteness, as argued by Martinot, is the white workers’ ability to create class while also maintaining superiority. This is significant because it frames a context for the construction of blackness later represented through minstrelsy. Whites would later use this power to perform what they defined as black on stage, simultaneously forming class and race. It began as the slave society of the United States
developed and delineated who was of what race and class. Race and class are highly correlated and could actually mean the same thing (e.g. white=rich, black=poor). Class was usually defined by race:

Three major strata emerged through the consolidation of the slave system: a working class of African and African American laborers held in permanent bondage; a class of plantation owners who formed the managerial stratum of the colony’s corporate structure...; and a middle class of white farmers, white tradesmen, and poor white laborers, who functioned as the intermediary control stratum—a police force ranging from patrols to sheriffs and bailiffs—between the white elite and the black bond-laborer class. (Martinot, 2003, p. 78)

As Martinot argues in the above quote, class was heavily regulated by race and even helped define it. This also included the politics of inclusion, exclusion, and overall disparity and inequality between whites and blacks under this racial and class hierarchy. The hierarchy was largely defined by social class, “a group of individuals or families who occupy a similar position in the economic system of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services in industrial societies” (Rothman, 2005). With these distinctions also developed legal definitions of race as blackness and whiteness became defined by each other as opposites.

According to Haney-Lopez (1996), Congress first institutionalized whiteness with a 1790 naturalization law that limited U.S. citizenship to “white persons” only. This was the beginning of whiteness and blackness as legal definitions that often times differed from state to state. Race moved from a physical and social construction to various legal definitions. Haney-Lopez (1996)
argues that law shapes physical appearances and helps to construct racial meaning (much like Martinot’s assessment above):

The prerequisite laws influenced the pool of physical features now present in this country through literal exclusion and through interference with marital choices. By shaping what we look like, the prerequisite cases, and immigration laws more generally, powerfully contributed to the racialization of the U.S. population. Such laws defined not only the racial status of the immigrant communities, but as the prerequisite cases demonstrate the racial identity of those already here as well. The United States is ideologically a White country not by accident, but by design at least in part affected through naturalization and immigration laws. (p. 116-117)

As Martinot argued, the legal construction and evaluation of physical appearance has aided in the accepted rigidity of racial boundaries. It has helped construct social beliefs about race, who can be of what racial group, and the authenticity of the claims. Race was defined by law and defined the separation between who was white or nonwhite. Yet according to Neri (2005), to be white depended on the amount of “white blood” or “black blood” that was amalgamated, as such went beyond physical attributes:

Thus individuals were often defined by the ‘percentage-of-black-blood’ test, ranging, for example, from ‘an ascertainable trace’ to ‘one-eighth or more’ of Negro blood. However, perhaps because of the obvious difficulties one would encounter in attempting to determine whether an individual had literally ‘white’ or ‘black’ blood, characterizations of race were usually made on the basis of physical appearance or genealogical research. (Neri, 2005, p. 7-8)
Whiteness and non-whiteness (or blackness) was largely determined by the genealogical research that was available to determine how much raced blood was in an individual. Ancestry would ultimately determine who was of what race. The validity of laws designating race was put to the test in the 1890s into the 1920s.

In 1892, Homer A. Plessy purchased a ticket on the East Louisiana Railway and was arrested for violating Louisiana’s railroad segregation law by not sitting in the train’s “colored” area. Plessy looked white (could pass for white), but was legally considered black because of his African heritage. The case was taken to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896, where the “separate-but-equal” doctrine was established that made racial segregation legal in the United States. The Court acknowledged Plessy’s one-eighth of black blood that was physically unnoticeable, and if he had not identified himself as a black man, he may not have had to leave the “white” area (Gould, 2005). It is the legacy of legal cases involving the definition of race and whiteness in particular that continued into the 20th century.

One of the first cases of the 20th century that demonstrated the court’s authority to define race was in Ozawa v. United States (1922). This case involved a young Japanese man who immigrated to the United States in the mid-1890s. He later relocated to Hawaii and applied for naturalization in 1914. His application was denied by the U.S. District Attorney in Honolulu on the grounds that Ozawa was Japanese and not of the “white race” (Haney-Lopez, 1996). Ozawa continued for eight years to fight for U.S. citizenship by taking his case to the U.S. Supreme Court and based his case for naturalization on his skin color by taking the white skin prerequisite literally. The Court ultimately ruled that skin color was not a valid correlation to racial identity. It eventually used the term “Caucasian” in place of white citing that skin color has no real bearing on racial identity because it varies in many racial groups (Haney-Lopez, 1996). With this
new definition, Ozawa could not possibly be white and was labeled “Mongolian,” one of the new racial categories developed by the Court at that time. The definition of whiteness again changed just three months later.

In *United States v. Thind* (1923), Indian immigrant Bhagat Singh Thind sought naturalization after living in the United States for about seven years. Thind argued he was Caucasian based on the classification that Asian Indians were anthropologically classified as “Caucasian.” The district court agreed with Thind and classified him as “white” based upon the concession in the case of *Najour* where darker skin color did not necessarily negate the possibility of being legally defined as “white” or “Caucasian” (Haney-Lopez, 1996). The federal government then took Thind’s case to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to define whether or not he could legally be defined as white citing his Hinduism. The government’s decision demonstrates how a legal racial identity could also call into question whether religion constitutes race (Haney-Lopez, 1996). This also demonstrates legislators’ confusion about what exactly constitutes race and how the criteria can either be strict or weak legal constructions. The court rejected the definition of “Caucasian” on the basis that science itself could not truly define whiteness and instead adopted “the common knowledge” definition of white. Thind, and any other Asian Indian, would not be legally classified as white now because they were physically distinguishable from those U.S. citizens who were physically categorized as “white” (Haney-Lopez, 1996). As one can see, whiteness was based on the common knowledge of the average U.S. citizen.

The cases above discuss naturalization, legal “whiteness,” and their importance in understanding how the higher courts understood whiteness. The higher courts were influenced by the social definition of race at the time, thus demonstrating how society and law are closely
linked in developing racial definitions and attitudes about race, particularly in Jim Crow America. The understanding of whiteness was not just about defining what counted as white, but also what was non-white. Haney-Lopez (1996) also discusses the prevalence and validity of anti-miscegenation laws, or laws that prohibited sexual intercourse between whites and non-whites, especially blacks. These laws were later outlawed in the 1967 case of *Loving v. Virginia*, but they were earlier implemented to prevent “race mixing” and to produce the most valuable and successful offspring.

Anti-miscegenation (coined by David Croly in 1864) originated in legislation in 1630 in the colony of Virginia. The law stated that “a white man was ‘to be soundly whipped before an assembly of Negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians by defiling his body in lying with a negro’” (Neri, 2005, p. 6). These laws went on to include other non-white groups such as the Chinese, Japanese, etc. Legislation stemmed from anxiety about racial (white) purity and the complexity in trying to define race through legal terms. The oversimplification of race by evaluating skin types not only reiterated the social definition of race through legal terms but it also revealed the complexity of racial identification as black/white offspring were sometimes as fair-skinned as “pure” whites. At this time, the definition of “white” varied by state, and anti-miscegenation law was primarily based on Christian ideals and scientific racism.

According to Neri (2005) anti-miscegenation laws were based on Christian theology that initially stated that all humans descended from one source (monogenism) that also influenced scientific studies. Adherents turned to an alternative explanation of the coexistence of whites and nonwhites and believed it to be the valid reason to sexually and socially separate the races:
Though adherents of monogenism thought of the theory as ‘scientific’, it was still clearly derivative of Christian theology. Another alternative account of racial variety eschewed purely scriptural explanations for perceived differences and more purposefully sought the imprimatur of science. Adherents of this theory, known as *polygenism*, believed that humans emerged in several places by several acts of creation not mentioned in scripture. Polygenists were confounded by their observations of perceived differences among races and thus concluded that different races actually represented separate species. This claim was thought to be substantiated by the widely held belief that racial mixing led to sterility or reduced fertility in subsequent generations. (p. 10)

Neri states pseudoscience is one of the basic foundations of the belief that race is solely a biological concept that allowed scientific inferiority or superiority of perceived racial groups. Anxiety increased as the offspring of miscegenation did not always have physical markers of blackness (e.g. darker skin). This dispelled the understood racial order with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. In not knowing who was of what race, scientific racism lost its validity as well as white purity. Scientific racism was also the basis for anti-miscegenation legislation so as to produce the “fittest” offspring,” based in Social Darwinism’s concept of the “survival of the fittest” (Neri, 2005). What is important to Neri’s statements is not just the discussion of scientific racism, but how this affected those individuals who were of slave and master bloodlines, particularly those who are considered black, the topic of the next chapter.

Within this dichotomy of race and class during slavery, white slave masters wielded an enormous amount of power over their slaves. This power was largely emitted with ferocity as slaves were beaten and degraded by violence, extreme work conditions, separation of families, and the foundation of black people as “human property.” Slavery had evolved from the
institution of visual exoticism and display to a system founded on the societal destruction of the humanity of enslaved people. Slaves were restricted to the place of the inferior while they struggled to maintain their individual and group identities and relationships. Through all of these experiences came the definitions of whiteness and blackness by law based on science and the genealogical research to determine ancestry. This also contributed to the separation of the races. Class definitions were born and the definitions of class and race became more intertwined as whites were on the top of the class/racial hierarchy while people of color, particularly blacks, were on the bottom. Individuals of these racial groups, particularly people of color, were limited to one class and racial identity that was defined by their white “superiors.” Amidst these developing class and racial constructions emerged an art form that played on the borders of racial/social covenants and gained popularity by projecting white representations of blacks in the United States.
3. Literature Review Part II: Minstrelsy and Racial Passing

While the origins of minstrelsy are clouded over, Strausbaugh (2006) states that the showcasing of slaves for white owners is arguably the context in which to view the development of blackface in the United States. Blackface minstrelsy is a theatrical tradition wherein white actors (and later black actors) darkened their faces with burnt cork or face paint to perform caricatured representations of blacks. It was first created in the urban North for profit (Lott, 1993). According to Strausbaugh (2006) minstrelsy garnered U.S. popularity in the 1830s, although the practice of Europeans darkening their skin for stage performances stretches back to the 17th century with the production of Shakespeare’s Othello. (According to Leonard (1986) blackface originated with Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus which tells the story of the darker skinned “satanic” Aaron who is a white queen’s lover. Othello became the best representation of blackface in its description of the love and trials of “the Moor” who was traditionally played by a white actor in black mask.) American performer T. D. Rice first made the genre famous when he created the minstrel character Jim Crow after observing an elderly black man dance (Strausbaugh, 2006). Yet beyond white caricatures of blackness, blacks themselves also took part in performance. According to Noble (1948), black performers became prominent in northern theater shortly after the Civil War. Noble also states that during slavery in the South, slaves performed minstrel shows in what were called “nigger shows.” Racial impersonators of blacks became prominent fixtures on British and later U. S. stages throughout the 18th century, but they are arguably not in the modern conceptualization of mid-19th century minstrelsy developed by T. D. Rice in which hyperbolic representations of blacks appeared. With the development of the theatrical practice, stock characters became the basis for the performance, such as Zip Coon (the black dandy) and Uncle Tom (the faithful black servant). These characters further reiterated
white perceptions of blacks as these white and black performers continued with the popular understanding of blackness as something to ridicule.

The darkened skin “served as a racial marker announcing that a single actor or an ensemble offered what were selected aspects of (arguably) African American culture to audiences interested in how racial differences and enslavement reinforced distinctions between black and white Americans” (Mahar, 1999, p. 1). Many white actors performed in blackface with the subsequent popularity and stock minstrel characters became symbols of white constructions of blackness. Not only were they temporarily freed from whiteness through a kind of racial “transvestism”, they also reiterated their whiteness through binaries. It seems these actors were momentarily freed from whiteness through a mask of blackness. Nowatzki (2007) argues that minstrelsy is not just a performance of blackness, but also a performance of whiteness. In a sense the actors were free from physical whiteness, but at the same time they maintained it. Notwatzki (2007) also states that the mask “emphasized the whiteness of skin underneath and allowed white performers to distinguish themselves from the people they mimicked and mocked” (p. 116). They maintained their whiteness by ridiculing blackness. This makes minstrelsy (and racial passing) all the more complicated. According to Mahar (1999) minstrelsy was a cheap source to fit the antebellum audience’s entertainment needs and provided a stage for performers to earn a modest living:

The powerful effects and market dominance of the minstrel show was based on the variety of entertainment blackface minstrelsy offered at a relatively low cost and resulted from the frequent content adjustments managers and performers made to meet the expectations of antebellum audiences. Minstrelsy was a commodity, a collection of loosely related genres addressed to the lowest common denominator audience (but not
always the lowest class) for the express purpose of providing at least a modest living for performers who seldom ‘crossed over’ to other musical venues. (p. 1)

Minstrelsy developed more out of the need for entertainment and market value then for the express function to misrepresent blacks with whites’ “accurate” depictions of black life and culture. The entertainment allowed whites to be confronted with their discomfort with the ambiguity about race through hyperbole. This comedy allowed for a more benign approach to dealing with questions of race while still maintaining the concept of black inferiority. These representations reinforced their own sense of racial superiority. Mahar (1999) also asserts that there are four main characteristics of minstrelsy: the racial marker (discussed previously), the disguise for white performers, the vehicle to construct “American” culture, and the masking device to prevent racial identification. The performances “borrowed” from black culture for the entertainment and education of whites by creating a visual discourse on race relations in the United States. This was largely developed from over-exaggerating the hilarity of the institution and presenting hyperbolic representations of blackness (particularly the black male body) (Lott, 1993).

Lott (1993) argues that there was no immediate context for blackface, but the establishment of slavery helped to develop the broad definitions of inferiority, race, and the like in that blacks were assumed to be inferior to their white counterparts. With this in mind, it appears that slavery facilitated the ascribed inferiority of blacks which may have directly contributed to the proliferation of minstrel acts in the U.S. in the 1830s. The rise of anti-miscegenation laws may be a direct response to the rise of minstrelsy as both contributed to the sustaining of non-whites in a lower social order and worked to prevent the threat of racial ambiguity, something that was ultimately fruitless as miscegenation continued. Social anxiety
rose as racial boundaries were biologically diminished through mixed-race offspring. By establishing anti-miscegenation laws, the concept of white purity was further recognized and maintained to continue white superiority although it was unwarranted and proven false. Lott (1993) also argues that minstrelsy, like other art forms have helped define race:

In many kinds of racially fraught cultural production—novels, cultural histories, and minstrel commentaries no less than antebellum blackface performance—minstrelsy has been a ground of American racial negotiation and contradiction based on the antebellum collision course of competing modes of production and the various historical transformations in its aftermath. From this perspective certain representative critical engagements with the minstrel tradition turn out to be little less than furtive serial positions in a debate on American racial politics. (p. 30)

Lott’s statement also lends itself to the discussion of who has the power to create blackness and whiteness and to determine its authenticity. How is “blackness” or “whiteness” conceptualized and who has the authority to create it? Legally, whites had the authority to determine what is “black” and what is “white.” This is especially true in the development of class and the origin and popularity of minstrelsy in the U.S. In popular culture, whites also were the first to perform their understanding of race in the form of minstrelsy. Yet over time, the form used to console anxiety about race often led to more ambiguity which led to questions of defining the term “race” and why it may or may not be an immutable term. These concerns are most likely why minstrelsy is considered a racial performance because it involves traversing racial boundaries and definitions.
Solidarity between whites of all classes became stronger as minstrelsy reinforced their construction of blacks as inferiority became the definition for blackness. Ridiculing blacks became a vehicle for structuring white identity and uniting whites despite class differences. Because of the prevalence of blackface and white dominance in the performing arts, black performers were ultimately limited to performing in blackface as well. Wallace (2000) asserts that blacks in blackface are not criticized at great lengths as whites in blackface, but she does acknowledge that many black performers began their careers performing in blackface in Tom Companies or theater companies that frequently performed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on stage. To some black intellectuals, this became a product shame “so much so that its history is often shrouded, from the point of view of research, in conspiracy of silence” (Wallace, 2000, p. 144). They were performing black identities that were not necessarily their own. Black performers in blackface still had a following with working black audiences which points to the ambiguous and complex process of self-identification and racial identity development among blacks (Wallace, 2000). This calls attention to how white society decreed how blacks could perform blackness. These performers were blacks performing as whites performing as blacks. Black actors ultimately reified white constructions of blackness. Thus, blackness and whiteness are both forms of racial performance. Blacks also participated in crossing racial boundaries, particularly as they became free citizens and began constructing their own racial, social, and class identities as U.S. citizens.

In the early 1820s, the African Company in New York City was established for black actors to perform traditionally white plays, such as the works of William Shakespeare (White, 2002). Although the performances did not require lightening their faces, the actors were allowed an avenue to portray constructions of whiteness. This new mode of self-expression also spread to
the streets as some blacks saw this theatrical freedom as a means to construct their own sense of race and identity in the United States. Blacks also partook in the “imitation” of whites. “With all this ‘imitation’ going on, it was probably inevitable that blacks would be mistaken for whites and vice versa. In the 1820s and 1830s, New York people had a fascination with ‘passing’ whether intentional or not, and a number of stories revealing much about race relations were freely circulating” (p. 211). The theatricality of race became something not just limited to stage performances, but spread as an act in normative 1830s life as racial boundaries blurred and mangled previous preconceptions about the immutable nature of racial boundaries. Nowatzki (2007) argues that race is a spectacle, therefore making it a theatrical performance. Race is then theatrical because the stereotypical images of blackness or whiteness are able to be performed. For example, in the 1830s blacks in the North began to act with an air of sophistication they commonly saw in whites (e.g. gentlemanly behavior, wearing fashionable clothing, speaking “proper” English, etc.). White (2002) argues that “whiteness” was invented “by various ethnic groups that sought to distinguish themselves from blacks” (p. 214). As stated earlier the definition of whiteness was determined by its juxtaposition to its opposite, blackness. Blacks began imitating whites and “worse, some blacks were clearly aspiring to behave in a fashion similar to that of the white upper class” (White, 2002, p. 189). Not only had whites traversed the racial lines, blacks were also becoming performers as they sought equality to whites. Whites also constructed their version of blackness through speech by developing “black dialect”:

The conventions of this white version of black speech—the inclusion of numerous malapropisms and the use of phonetic spellings, for example—were being worked out in the northern cities in the early decades of the nineteenth century, at the same time that large numbers of free blacks were becoming a highly visible presence. ‘Black dialect’
comprised a curious mixture: one ingredient was an occasional closely observed representation of the way in which some blacks did actually speak; the other ingredient was a complete invention of black speech forms. (White, 2002, p. 71)

Here, minstrelsy is comprised of not just burnt cork make-up but also the use of language to signify race, such as found in works by Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Speech (language) is a system that creates the complexity of meaning, especially as it pertains to race (Taylor, 2004). “Black dialect” helped distinguish between whiteness and blackness based on the systems of language constructed in both racial and cultural groups. This is significant to understanding the relationship between how blacks and whites can both pass through cultural and racial experiences. Minstrelsy then continued through episodes of racial passing.

**Racial Passing**

According to Bennett (1996) racial “passing” originated as a practice that allowed black slaves the ability to travel without being mistaken for runaways and it also became a loose term for the ability of some light-skinned blacks to intermingle in the “white” world. “The pass is a slip of paper that allows for free movement, but white skin is itself a ‘pass’ that allowed for some light-skinned slaves to escape their masters” (Bennett, 1996, p. 36). The pass is significant to understanding the performative nature of passing and its relationship to minstrelsy. Although minstrelsy was largely confined to white performances in its origins and transferred to black actors in blackface, the act of minstrel passing in this theatrical style lends itself to an equation with the racial passing of light-skinned blacks who were mistaken for whites. This was due to the miscegenation between black slave women and their white masters.
Yet one can see the social importance of keeping the performative boundaries solid as the legal definition of authentic blackness and whiteness were socially accepted. Miscegenation offspring were restricted to an inferior social status because of their slave mother no matter how light their skin. Pabst (2003) argues that “much has been made of the ‘one-drop rule,’ the law of hypodescent, which denies black/white interracial persons a legitimate claim to whiteness and assigns them to a purportedly lower rung on the heritage hierarchy. Through this practice, black/white mixed persons have generally come to be classified as black, legally and in popular imaginaries” (p. 179). There is apparently a limited amount of agency in developing an individual racial identity. Racial identity appears to be a social and cultural construction imposed upon the individual, but recent studies show that biracial individuals do have the ability to choose racial identities. Even so, this evidence further demonstrates that passing shows how those boundaries are performative and arbitrary rather than natural.

Leary (1999) states that passing “denotes ‘a cultural performance whereby one member of a defined social group masquerades as another’ in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group” (p. 85). This is not only establishes the performativity of race, but it also shows how passing connotes suppression and a desire to succeed. Leary (1999) also concludes that passing occurs in the context of relationships:

…it requires, on the one side, a subject who does not tell and, on the other, an audience who fails to ask. Passing occurs when there is perceived danger in disclosure. At its most extreme, it is a form of camouflage to sequester the self from expected drama. It represents a form of self-protection that nevertheless usually disables, and sometimes destroys, the self it means to safeguard. (p. 85)
Leary’s argument suggests that racial passing is seen as an act that is perceived as deceitful and voluntary, which may be true for some past and even present acts of racial passing. In comparison to the blackface of old, minstrel performance was not necessarily enacted to persuade the audience to believe the performers enactment as a black person, but more so to perform the visual discourse about blacks. Leary’s argument also relates to the ability to change race through constructing a new performative identity that may or may not match the physical body. Performing the new racial identity also connotes denial of phylogenetic identity.

Mullen (1994) argues that racial passing encapsulates the denial of black identity: “The usual mechanism of passing, which I take as a mode for the cultural production of whiteness, requires an active denial of black identity only by the individual who passes from black to white, while the chosen white identity is strengthened…” (p. 30). This denial is necessary in order to construct a more authentic “white” identity and to also prevent any avenue that would lead to the truth about an individual’s racial identity. Becoming more educated and ascending the class hierarchy under pretense of whiteness also blurred the distinction of racial identity. The DuBoisian double consciousness becomes more evident as the individual struggles to maintain Americanness or whiteness while still living in a black body. Questions of authenticity and the restrictions of racial boundaries and therefore identities become important to the ability to racially pass or “racechange.”

In Racechanges, Gubar (1997) asserts that the term “racechange” suggests “the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan racial mutuality” (p. 5). This is significant in considering the history of minstrelsy alongside historical episodes of racial passing. The performance lends itself to the idea that passing is not just limited to physical passing, but also
social, cultural, and class passing as whites and blacks move through all three sectors. Both
minstrelsy and racial passing are arguably synonymous with racechange in that both constitute a
crossing of racial boundaries, further proving that the term “race” is a mutable category without
rigid definitions but a concept that is malleable, even depending on locality. Minstrelsy and
racial passing are arguably synonymous in that they require performance and a transgression of
“strict” definitions of race and performance. Race is therefore more malleable than previously
thought and it is not limited to a single, universal definition. What this adds to the discourse is
the idea that race encompasses variant conceptualizations most likely based on cultural
geography. This concept is largely connected to the language used to denote and think about
race. “Race-thinking has been an essential part of human culture, at least since the 1600s. And it
has shifted as our cultures have shifted. Different cultures, in different places and times, have
different conceptions of race—which is to say that each may have its own complement of racial
groups” (Taylor, 2004, p. 13). Race is a social construction depending not only on geography,
but the cultures within a location. Racial passing extends to the conceptualization of class and its
markers.

Racial passing also extends to class performativity. Because privilege is largely conveyed
and recognized by way of markers of whiteness, Harper’s assertion of whiteness/blackness and
the masquerade of either also includes the masquerade of class mobility as blacks gain more
privilege and benefits of middle- and upper-class comforts. The reverse is arguably true as whites
can be marked “nonwhite” if they are associated with the lower or working class.

According to Harper (1998) the “racial masquerade” is not limited to light-skinned
blacks, but also reverse racial passing which “denotes any instance in which a person legally
recognized as white effectively functions as a non-white person in any quarter of the social
arena” (p. 382). Much like Rivière’s concept of female sexuality as a masquerade, Harper defines the masquerade as an action that is performed to thwart punishment for the transgression. The mask is a mechanism used to perform another identity so as not to threaten the accepted social norm. Just as the woman must present a hyperbolic femininity to uphold the masculine ideal, the one who passes must wear a mask of whiteness to maintain the privilege of whiteness.

Minstrelsy began as a white art form as a means for both races to imitate each other. It distorted naturalist ideas of race by over exaggerating blackness. Perceptions of race became more and more destabilized as evidence of passing grew. Minstrelsy was not the only performance to add to the discourse on race. Racial passing became a destabilizing force as it distorted social “truths” about race, further showing that race is performative and these “truths” are always socially contingent. In understanding that the definition of race is not a concrete one and that minstrelsy and racial passing are both visual examples of this notion, it is important to understand how all of this exemplifies some theories on simulation and performance as it pertains to race.

Theory: Baudrillard’s Simulation and Butler’s Performance

I argue that blackface minstrelsy and racial passing are both acts of performance that traverse racial boundaries and confuse the meaning of race. Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity are two theories in particular that are used to conceptualize and contextualize the function of minstrelsy and racial passing as twin performances that confuse the discourse on and rhetoric of race.

In Simulacra and Simulation (1994) Baudrillard defines simulation and how it contributes to the “reality” of culture. In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Baudrillard develops his
definition for simulation or “simulacra.” “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2). Therefore simulation is the production of the “hyperreal”, a reality without an origin or an over-exaggeration of the real. Simulacrum is a copy without a present original. How can there be a copy without an original? According to Baudrillard (1994) the real “is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, modes of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these” (p. 2). His assertion can be compared to minstrelsy and racial passing in that they are “reproduced” images/performances of racial transgression that is repeated numerous times as can be referenced in the history of minstrelsy and literature on racial passing. This is especially true in media representations as specific characteristics of certain races are overrepresented (e.g. black male thief, wealthy whites, etc.). These representations provide a distorted and essentialist image of one group by constructing the image as the representation of an entire group. The images become symbols that epitomize the culture, value, etc. of the group, lending itself to the performance of essentialist characteristics. It is true that these performances originated from preconceived notions of race and racial authenticity, but because they are often distorted representations of the truth, they become presentations whose origin is nonexistent because of the lack of founded truth about race. Thus, the performances are replacements for a perceived reality and become signs of a disconnection between the real and itself:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable,
perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2)

Simulation deviates from reality and becomes a machine within itself. The same can be said of representations of racial performance in the media, specifically in minstrelsy and racial passing, in that they often times become hyperbolic representations of race and thus continues to distort and create various meanings of the term. The original definition of the term is then lost as these images of performance constantly change. The real is no longer the real, but a substitution of the real. Judith Butler’s development of the theory of gender performativity also helps to conceptualize minstrelsy and racial passing as performance.

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Judith Butler illustrates her theory of gender performativity in stating that gender is a social construction that is enacted, not derived from biological definitions of sex. With this in mind, “‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls” (Butler, 1993, p. 1). Much like gender/sex, race is also a constructed through a system of normative perceptions of race and racial performance. This system functions to provide distinctions between the races and to mark racial difference. As such, race is more of a social construction in that the system is regulated by performative norms. With minstrelsy and racial passing, racial performance is “materialized” as the white or non-white bodies are reformulated to appear the opposite race. This reformulation constitutes the performance.

Butler (1993) also states that sex/gender is constructed through a binary, male and female. This construction is further materialized as “performativity must be understood not as a
single or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiteration of citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (p. 2). The same is true of race as normative performances of it are persistently reiterated in various cultural artifacts such as art, the media, and the culture in general. This reiteration takes place as perceived the difference in the races (particularly blacks and whites in this study) have passed down throughout the short history of this nation, particularly beginning with the institution of slavery in the colonies. As stated in the previous chapter, as white Europeans brought Africans to the United States colonies, their development of race and racial identity served to differentiate between themselves and their chattel. This differentiation has persisted even in this new millennium further illustrating the strength of assumptions about race. These assumptions now function as a legitimate system that continues to distinguish who can be of what race. The distinctions become visual representations as the human body is marked by race because of complexion, hair type, clothing, speech, etc. They continue throughout the media, particularly film and its representation of minstrelsy/racial passing or racial performance.

Racial Performance in Film

Images of minstrelsy continued successfully into the 20th century and became a common image in film. Birth of a Nation, released in 1915, chronicles the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and features whites in blackface performing stereotypical incarnations of blackness such as the character Gus, the lascivious buck who lusts after white women. Even for the growing Jewish population, minstrelsy became a form of “racial masquerade” for assimilation into white American culture (Rogin, 1996). One of these individuals was Al Jolson, a Jewish actor who performed in blackface and rose to fame in The Jazz Singer, released in 1927. Minstrelsy’s popularity eventually waned and died as more black actors and actresses garnered roles on stage.
and in films, but films that featured the ambiguity of racial performance and signification continued into the 1940s and 1950s.

Other films such as the 1934 and 1959 versions of *Imitation of Life* are visual discourses on the nature of racial passing, the success achieved by eluding racial markers, and the struggles to cultivate a healthy racial identity. Both versions of the film, adapted from Fannie Hurst’s novel of the same name, are discussions of race relations in the United States in their perspective decades and the ability of a light-skinned black teenager to perform “whiteness.” Other such films that discuss racial passing and minstrelsy are Oscar Micheaux’s *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), Elia Kazan’s *Pinky* (1949), and Alfred Werker’s *Lost Boundaries* (1949). All of these films share a discourse on racial performance that is central to the purpose of minstrelsy, and also inadvertently significant to the success and failure of racial passing. These films founded the rhetoric of passing in their featuring of the repression of blackness within the passing figures or tragic mulattos. Passing then connotes a suppression of blackness. Later in the century, as more blacks garnered roles in Hollywood, some of these representations have been argued to be a revival of the buffoonery of minstrelsy today (Strausbaugh, 2006).

Strausbaugh (2006) states that blacks in popular media today still carry the stigma of minstrelsy through stereotypical roles. He cites rap music videos to be one of the biggest perpetrators of minstrelsy today. This brings into question “authentic blackness” because these images often display essentialist perceptions of what black is. Blaxploitation films of the 1970s were first made to empower blacks, but resulted in glorifying modernized stereotypes of old such as the sexually aggressive black male and the buffoonery of blacks in general (Strausbaugh, 2006). These types of films seemed to invoke the old minstrels of the 1800s and can arguably be viewed as black performers performing in a new type of blackface. But one film from the 1970s
that discusses minstrelsy and black identity is Melvin Van Peebles’s *Watermelon Man* about a white bigot who learns what it is like to be a black man. The 1980s was also a time when film presented questions of racial identification and race as class in such films as *Trading Places* (1985) and *Soul Man* (1986). Even into the 1990s, discussions of racial passing/minstrelsy were still evident in such films as *True Identity* (1991) and *Livin’ Large* (1991). Such films as *Bamboozled* (2000), *White Chicks* (2004) and *Havoc* (2005) provide a modern minstrelsy/racial passing that question racial construction and the legitimacy of visual racial markers as the characters in each film work to deceive others while also working to obtain some level of success. These films illustrate how the malleability of the definition of race affects identity construction and demonstrates the durability of stereotypical images of race. They also demonstrate a shift in Hollywood’s representation of whiteness and blackness throughout the particular eras in which the films were produced as social sentiments about race altered. The films also contribute to an underlying shift in the discourse on race, particularly in who is cast as the individual who can pass and within the generic conventions of these films.

*Film Groups*

From my textual and rhetorical analysis of 11 films that feature blackface minstrelsy and racial passing, I have constructed three film categories that add to the discourse on race and developed functions of racial performance. The analysis has lead to a categorization of three film groups discussing racial performance: Burnt Cork Cinema: From Black and White to Color, Fade into White: Passing Films, and Class Act: Race/Class Films. Each of these categories consists of a few films that demonstrate the evolution of blackface minstrelsy as white-to-black passing to visual representations of black-to-white passing to class as a performance of race.
4. Burnt Cork Cinema: From Black and White to Color

This chapter specifically analyzes films that feature actors in blackface. It begins with an analysis of *Birth of a Nation* released in 1915 and ends with an analysis of Spike Lee’s 2000 film *Bamboozled*. Although many films were produced featuring characters in traditional blackface, this category will cover four: one from the 1910s, another right after the introduction of talking films, one from the 1980s which is specifically influenced by the Reagan era and the fight for and against affirmative action, and one from the new millennium. This approach was chosen to show how traditional blackface has morphed largely due to the film industry, the conventions of film types, and the social, political, and cultural influences at the time each film was made and finally released. This category also symbolizes the evolution of minstrelsy as white actors were replaced by black actors who still donned the burnt cork. The main purpose for this chapter is to discuss the development of racial identity and whether the films question the function of blackface, perpetuates it, or both.

*The Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Arguably the first full-length silent feature and epic melodrama, *The Birth of a Nation* was directed by D. W. Griffith and released in 1915 in Jim Crow Era America. The film is an adaptation of Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* which chronicles the origins of the Ku Klux Klan. The story follows the occurrences in two wealthy families during the Civil War, its immediate aftermath, and the Reconstruction. The Stonemans of the North and the Camerons of the South are intertwined as their children fall in love and the Civil War ensues. During the film, both families face turmoil as the Stonemans believe in racial equality between whites and blacks while the Camerons work to maintain their status as the superiors of the South. The Stoneman
and Cameron sons eventually enlist in the army and fight, some even dying, during the Civil War. After the war ends, the Camerons are left nearly destitute as free slaves take offices and ransack white homes. They garner the vote and try to prevent whites there rights as U.S. citizens. Colonel Ben Cameron is disgusted with the reversal of positions between whites and blacks. He contemplates what he can do to return order to the South. He sits in a field and watches white children play under a white sheet while they scare black children. This inspires Cameron to create the Ku Klux Klan and their infamous white sheets. In the meantime, mulattos Lydia Brown and Silas Lunch play upon patriarch Austin Stoneman’s liberal ideas of equality for all. They try to garner the social status of their white counterparts. Lynch falls in love with Stoneman’s daughter Elsie who is actually Ben Cameron’s sweetheart. Then enters Gus who is the foaming black man who lusts after Flora Ben’s younger sister Flora. In a climactic scene, Flora jumps off a cliff to avoid capture by Gus. Ultimately Cameron leads the Klan to murder Gus. They leave Gus at Lynch’s door and go and save the Camerons from black troops. The film ends with the marriage of the two families that “reunifies South with North to deliver the birth of one nation under God, indivisible” (Gubar, 1997, p. 63).

In the formulaic style of the epic, the film is expansive in featuring larger-than-life depictions of its characters, especially the three main black characters. All three are framed as warnings of the results of equality and miscegenation which leads to social anxiety about diminished white purity and the loss of political power. The most significant feature of this film is its conventional use of blackface and its reiteration of negative black stereotypes. Walter Long plays Gus, the lustful black who is depicted as demeaning pure white womanhood. Gubar (1997) states that Long was advised to walk in a hunched-over manner and gargle peroxide so his mouth would foam. George Siegman plays Silas Lynch, Austin Stoneman’s ambitious
mulatto protégé who wants white power and the power to marry white women, a sign of pride. (Austin Stoneman is also framed as the crippled Northerner with a lack of stability who lets blacks take advantage of him. This was primarily a Southern sentiment during the Reconstruction.) The last blackface figure, Lydia Brown, played by Mary Alden, is Austin Stoneman’s servant/mistress who desires to be treated as the mistress of Stoneman’s estate. She is framed as cunning and power hungry. These characters are obviously played by white actors in blackface. Although many were not satisfied with the representation of blacks in various media of that time, the film and the skewed history of politics and Emancipation lay the blame for white destitution during the Reconstruction on blacks. Griffith’s framing of blacks and white Northerners asks (if not forces) the viewer to dislike them and to empathize with the South. Black advocate groups and liberals were outraged with the film’s release. The film ultimately reinforced white ideas about blacks, which lead to increased lynchings.

Lynching was a major event during the Jim Crow period and the status of blacks began to deteriorate after emancipation and some success of the reconstruction (Cripps, 1977). Particularly in the South, blacks suffered violence and political discrimination as their rights during the Reconstruction were taken away and the Ku Klux Klan rose as the protector of whiteness (Litwack, 1998). The film was thought to be so effective at invoking racist propaganda that it was used frequently to recruit for the Ku Klux Klan (Bernhoff & Griffin, 2004). The racial climate highly influenced the impact of the film as its racial ideologies further perpetuated negative stereotypes about blacks. These negative stereotypes are exemplified in the three minstrel figures discussed above: Lydia Brown, Silas Lynch, and Gus who are stereotyped blacks/mulattos who do not know their place and are a threat to the racial order.
When we first see Lydia, she is cleaning in Austin Stoneman’s home and is described as “The mulatto aroused from ambitious dreaming by Sumner’s curt orders.” She moves as if she is the mistress of the home and is upset at Stoneman’s associate’s order for her to fetch his hat. She playfully drops it so Sumner can pick it up, a gesture that is the mark of a gentleman. Lydia evidently wants to be treated with respect like white women, but her anger takes over as she spits at Sumner as he walks out the door without obliging her with respect. The danger is that social laws disrupt natural laws. Lydia writhes on the floor and tears her clothing in mourning then she licks her hand in a cat-like manner as she concocts a devious plan to accuse Sumner of an attack. She garners Stoneman’s attention as he tries to console her. Here, the mulatto female is constructed as a deceiving figure who uses her sexuality to garner the attention of respectable white men who have the power to elevate her to the status of a white woman. Her image also alludes to her desire to pass as a white woman, something Griffith deems impossible as she is not accepted by the whites around her (with the exception of Stoneman). She teasingly leans her shoulder away as her master tries to touch it. She is the temptress who has Austin under her spell as he hugs her in consolation. Writhing on the floor and licking her hand marks her as an oversexed individual who should be controlled. She is the “ambitious mulatto trying to rise above her place” (Cripps, 1977, p. 47). Her ambition suggests excessive pride in that she sees herself as a white woman. She can not be trusted because she wants the same status as a white woman. Lydia is a far cry from the Camerons’ mammy (also in blackface) who seeks to protect her masters from the freed blacks who have stepped out of their “place” into one of power through the abolition of slavery. She lacks any sexuality and is marked by her maternal nature toward her white family. She is one of the “good” blacks content with her position as servant and guardian of white superiority. Lydia Brown is a “bad” black because of her ambitions for
superiority. Silas Lynch is also framed as untrustworthy as he is a threat to white maleness and white womanhood.

Silas Lynch (“mulatto leader of the blacks”) is Austin Stoneman’s protégé and is also portrayed as villainous in his lust for young Elsie Stoneman. His eyes are heavily hooded and his brow is always furrowed. He appears stately but slightly hunched over as he concocts approaches to obtaining white power. He later becomes a Lieutenant Governor and ejects all the white politicians out of their governmental positions and places ill-mannered blacks in caricatured political office. This subsequently causes havoc within the government, suggesting that blacks are not intelligent and well-mannered enough to be in office. He ultimately lets his lust for power evolve into his desire for Elsie. Near the end of the film, Lynch locks Elsie in a room so he can have his way with her and proposes marriage. He appears a burley bear hunched over as he grabs at Elsie and looks upon her with maniacal lust in his eyes. Then he proposes: “See! My people fill the streets. With them I will build a Black Empire and you as a Queen shall sit by my side.”

Lynch has his place as a politician and now wants a white wife to solidify his status as a respectable gentleman, a white gentleman, an extremely ambitions dream (and even misguided). Lynch’s desire for a risen status for his people is admirable, but his character’s construction frames him more as a beast hungry for the dissolution of white womanhood and power. He is not only a threat to white masculinity (power), he is a threat to pure white womanhood, especially when he sends his henchmen to prepare a forced marriage to Elsie. Lynch is a beast that cannot be reasoned with. Gus is also a beastly figure that lusts for white women.

Gus is constructed as a renegade a black buck whose sexual desire overrides any intellectual ability. As stated earlier, Gus is an animalistic figure with bugged eyes and lusts after Flora Cameron. He hides behind bushes and stalks toward her as ominous music plays at his
every move. He is a “hypermasculine African American man who threatened white establishment because of his alleged sexual prowess” (Bernshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 76). He stalks after Flora and proceeds to chase her as she runs away, ultimately launching herself off a cliff to be free from Gus’s insatiable desire for white femaleness, as one can expect in the melodramatic world of Griffith’s film. Gus’s desire ends in his death, but the cinematic representation of his life limits him as an oversexualized black male that hungers for young white women. Gus is then the reason for anti-miscegenation law. He is an allegory to the problems of Reconstruction. Both Silas and Gus are skewed presentations of the black man. In contrast to their framing, the Camerons’ male slaves are constructed as harmless creatures that are not a threat to whites. They are content in their positions as servants and are obliged to be in the Cameron home. They are the epitome of what the Southern black should be, and the distance themselves from the progressive ideas of the Northern blacks that accompany Stoneman. They are a testament to the benefits of segregation and slavery, unlike their black Northern counterparts.

Lydia, Silas, and Gus are walking allegories of the dangers of social integration and are also threats to white purity even as they sick to “pass” into dominant white society by scheming or lusting their way into the lives of their white love interests. Who they love is significant to their success as blacks/whites. They are unlikeable (at least by Jim Crow standards) as they try to infringe upon the natural rights afforded to whites only, as Griffith frames it. While none of these characters are light enough to pass for white, the use of the white actors speaks to the definition of blackness that is constructed by whiteness. In their performance of stereotypical images of blacks, the white actors reiterate the essential definition of blacks as lying, oversexed, cunning, and suspicious figures. Blackface in this film functions to demonstrate the abomination of the
miscegenation and declares blacks a threat to proper white society. The next film employs a more benign approach as blackface is used to demonstrate Jewish assimilation into normative white American culture.

**The Jazz Singer (1927)**

*The Jazz Singer*, the melodrama that marked the end of the silent film era, stars Al Jolson as a young Jewish man from a New York ghetto who struggles between using his voice for religious purposes and singing jazz music. According to the structure of the melodrama, the film begins with the young Jakie Rabinowitz singing in a jazz bar when he is supposed to be following his father’s footsteps as a cantor in their neighborhood synagogue. After a family friend tells the elder Rabinowitz what his son has done, Jakie runs away from home. He then changes his name to Jack Robin to appear marketable and goes on to sing in jazz clubs. Jack later returns home to share his success as a jazz singer with his parents, but his father throws him out. After the family split, Jack’s opportunity to perform in blackface on Broadway is thrown in peril when his father becomes seriously ill. Jack is caught between his desire to perform and his mother’s wish for him to sing for his father. Jack ultimately abandons the show to return home to his dying father. Jack takes his father’s place chanting the Kol Nidre at Yom Kippur as his father dies. Jack finally ends the film singing in blackface.

Gubar (1997) demonstrates that *Birth of a Nation* and *The Jazz Singer* both contribute to the rhetoric on race and racial performance. Gubar (1997) asserts:

> If *Birth of a Nation* impersonates black men so as to justify their lynching, *The Jazz Singer* represents black masculinity also to unman, in this case by substituting infantilized ‘boy’ for aggressive ‘buck’ and thereby reenacting spirit-murder in its own,
albeit different register. Yet if *The Birth of a Nation* uses blackface to effect a kind of spiritual assassination, *The Jazz Singer* remains haunted by the need to atone for that crime. Together, both films explain the popularity of the blackface performer who could dramatize for white audiences contradictory responses to the shame of a supremacist society. (p. 66).

*The Jazz Singer*’s use of blackface functions more so to construct an image of an infantilized black man much like Uncle Tom, who is content with living under his “mammy’s” and his masters wings. Although the film does not necessarily use blackface to construct the black male as an aggressive threat, it presents the image of blackness as a comical construction to create a more authentic whiteness of its performer.

This film’s underlying focus is the Jewish immigrant’s capacity to fuse his old identity and assimilate American ideals and culture. Within this acculturation comes an adoption of the construction, acceptance, and performance of blackness in the United States. This “blackness” is also a part of what it means to be American as Jack Robin sings jazz and performs in blackface. Jack Robin’s donning of blackface allows him to simultaneously perform onstage as a black man and white man in everyday life. In blackface, Jack Robin becomes a normative white man who momentarily masquerades as a black man to further solidify his citizenship as an American. He covers his Jewishness with this mask. This is possible because of the tradition of minstrelsy and Robin’s appropriation of black musical culture. According to Rogin (1996), “As immigrants and technological innovations were creating American mass culture, the film announced old World patriarchal defeat to obfuscate New World power. It appropriated an imaginary blackness to Americanize the immigrant son” (p. 80). That being said, *The Jazz Singer* and Jack Robin’s character serve as mechanisms of white assimilation as immigrants learned to be “American.” To
be “American” he must change his name and perform secular music that is an offense to his Orthodox Jewish upbringing. Thus, Jack Robin’s Jewish identity is suppressed because it may be a hindrance to his success, an idea akin to Riviere’s masquerade. He is the image of a post-racial/-ethnic ideal characterized by the diminution of ethnic characteristics (e.g. singing in the Kol Nidre). He also lives with his own double consciousness as he is black/white on the stage while being Jewish at home. To be American also meant to take part in the social and cultural hierarchy among racial and ethnic groups, such as the class system and creation of stereotypes of black people. Also, this film is important because of the cultural and racial sentiments regarding Southern and Eastern European immigrants. Sacks (1997) states that anti-Semitism was a widely held sentiment during the early part of the twentieth century and justified anti-immigration legislation. It was not until after World War II that Jews became the “model middle-class white suburban citizens” (Sacks, 1997, p. 395). This also contributes to how Jews, particularly Jakie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin, became white. There are some significant moments in the film that contribute to the rhetoric of racial performance and racial duality within Jakie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin. When Jakie leaves home, changes his name, and performs in blackface, he not only racially passes through a sort of kabuki mask as a black man for entertainment, but also a native U.S. citizen as he tries to become normatively American. These three instances contribute to his racial passing.

In the beginning of the film, young Jakie Rabinowitz sings in a saloon without his parents’ permission. The film begins with shots of the New York ghetto and the bustling Jewish community. The shot then cuts to the Rabinowitz family home where the father and mother converse about their son young Jakie and his future as a cantor for his faith. The shot then cuts to “Ragtime Jakie” as he performs alongside piano accompaniment in a local saloon. A fellow Jew
spots Jakie and rushes to the Rabinowitz home to notify his parents. Meanwhile, Jakie continues to perform and his parents still wonder where he is. Finally, Jakie’s secret performance is revealed by the elder Jew that spotted him in the saloon. The elder Rabinowitz rushes to the saloon and drags his son out by his collar. When they return home, Jakie clings to his mother for protection and affection. His father whips him and Jakie threatens to run away if he touches him again. Jakie then decides to run away while his parents are at the synagogue. This is the first instance when the young boy begins to become more Western and seeks ways to mask his Jewish heritage. The viewer is drawn to the familial connection between mother and son and also understands Jakie’s wish to fulfill his dreams. He is an Everyman that symbolizes the human need to achieve and be true to himself all at the same time. This begins his performance both as a “black” man and as a “white” man. This is the beginning of a traverse identity as Jakie leaves his home where is Jewish culture and identity are maintained. In leaving his cultural and identity birthplace, Jakie distances himself from his Jewish roots in order to not only follow his dreams, but also to become more marketable in the entertainment industry as is seen when he changes his name to something more “American.”

When Jakie changes his name to Jack Robin, he allows himself to become more marketable and more Americanized. A title card opens the scene: “Jakie Rabinowitz had become Jack Robin—the Cantor’s son, a jazz singer. But fame was still an uncaptured bubble.” Jakie finds success as a jazz singer three thousand miles away from home and enjoys fulfilling his dream, but he knows the circumstances he may face as a self-avowed Jew. He sings and dances and eventually stumbles upon an opportunity to perform on Broadway. Rogin (1996) states that during the early 1920s many films and white supremacist groups attacked the growing Jewish control of the motion picture industry. Considering the racial tension of the time, Jakie’s decision
to change his name is largely a defense mechanism so that he will not suffer discrimination because of his Jewish heritage. His name change also contributes to the discourse on the dissolving of racial and ethnic ties in order to become more like the ideal or more invisible. Patterson (1998) states that the “ideology of whiteness” has been constructed as the norm therefore making it the invisible doctrine of dominance in the United States. Jakie/Jack’s decision to become more normative aids in his ability to pass as a white man at a time when anti-Semitism was commonplace. He is becoming more “white,” and as he does so, he participates in some American pastimes, including minstrelsy. Next, Jack’s decision to perform in blackface further completes his racial portrayal of both a white and black performer. This raises the question of whether Jack is passing as a white non-Jew passing for black. It appears that by performing in blackface, he is temporarily released from a Jewish identity. He still maintains the whiteness underneath. Even then, he cannot completely mask his Jewishness as he is drawn back to his place of birth. This is a complicated question to answer, but raising it reveals the complexity of race, its performativity, and its effects on identity.

Towards the end of the film and in its final scene, the viewer finally sees Jack painted with blackface and wearing minstrel white gloves to perform before an audience. The first scene begins when Jack prepares to go on stage in “April Follies.” As he talks with his friend Mary, he proceeds to darken his face in preparation for his performance. The fairness of his skin slowly fades as he rubs the dark paint over his face, neck, and ears. Then a title card appears: “I’m going to put everything I’ve got into my songs.” The scene cuts to Jack putting a cropped wig on and bugging his eyes with a wide smile for Mary. This image invokes the stock minstrel character the coon who is a wide-eyed buffoon. The comic figure became a staple in minstrel performances and reinforced the perception that blacks were dimwitted and comical people (Bogle, 2007).
Jack’s performance as this figure aids in his becoming a part of whiteness. As stated earlier by Martinot (2003), the cohesiveness of white solidarity also meant to collectively demean blacks. Jack’s participation in this performance pulls him into the white collective, whether he means to degrade blacks or not. The final scene of the film features Jack singing to his “mammy” or his mother. Jack obviously has a strong connection to his mother as he sings to her with warmth in his eyes. By singing about “mammy,” Jack also invokes the stereotype of the black female figure commonly seen in minstrel performances and later a popular figure in films. Mammy was a fiercely independent black woman that was often bossy. She was the black mother figure that was caretaker to her master’s white family. While this seems benign, Jack’s performance continues with racial performance as he participates in blackface and casts his mother as the mammy, further complicating stereotypes about the black mother. Is Robin now a black man singing to his mother or a white man in blackface singing to the ideal black nurturer? Again, the question complicates raced stereotypes and their relationship to blackness and whiteness. He aids in conjuring up these popular minstrel figures that helped shape U.S. perception of blacks. He also aids in creating these stereotypical figures in order to gain acceptance from his white audience and appear as one of them. What is also important is Jack’s conversion into a mainstream white male while performing in blackface: “Uncannily, though, in blackface Jolson looks like he is doing penance for the fact that ethnic acceptance and integration into American society are attained by stereotyping or scapegoating black people” (Gubar, 1997, p. 73). Jack does not appear to prescribe to racism against blacks, but his performances in the latter part of the film appear very repentant toward his Jewish identity and specifically his parents. Thus, his blackface performance is more in an effort to adopt mainstream white American entertainment, but at the risk of being “less” Jewish and a disgrace to his parents. But in order for him to be
white, he must participate in the dominant white culture which functioned to dominate blacks in every way possible. To become a subordinator, he must learn to subordinate.

While this film may be more concerned with connection to racial and ethnic roots, the proliferation of jazz, and Western assimilation, it also adds to the discourse on the duality of racial performance or “his divided loyalties.” Jack Robin is a dual figure in that within him inhabits the white/black part of himself that is a (racial) performer and his Jewish self his father wants him to adhere to. The film also invokes questions of passing (which will be discussed in the next chapter) as Jack Robin performs whiteness. He “has to change his name, his clothes, his hair, his accent so as to distinguish himself from his paternal roots” (Gubar, 1997, p. 72). He must also participate in white cultural performances, particularly minstrelsy. American, as a performative type, is here related to knowledge of socially constructed conceptions of race. This racial performance ultimately works to make him more normative. Racial performance in film continued into the 1980s as blackface became a means to gain personal advantage over those who actually were disadvantaged because of their race.

**Soul Man (1986)**

*Soul Man* (1986) is screwball comedy positioned during the era of Reaganomics and the political debate over race-conscious admissions policies at colleges and universities around the nation. Affirmative action policy in higher education began during the late 1960s and progressed into the 1980s and 1990s to alleviate the disparity between white and non-white students (Orlans, 1992). The limits on white privilege generally led to a backlash as more whites felt barred from success. Reaganomics was an economic system developed by the Reagan administration to reduce government spending and control the U.S. money supply (Nikansen, 2002). But
according to St. Pierre (1991), the system was not beneficial for blacks as they were disproportionately more powerless than whites and the funding for programs benefitting the lower classes (usually blacks) were dramatically decreased. The politics and social tension was made up of the increasing disadvantages of blacks. White backlash ensued as media images of nonwhites were offered “privileges” through such government programs as affirmative action and financial assistance. According to Faludi (1991) feminism was framed as a detriment to women as they advanced up the corporate ladder, leaving traditionally privileged white males to claim lack of opportunities. The same is true as claims of reverse racism increased as white males claimed disadvantage as minorities gained more opportunities. This provides the social/political context of the film. The film is a comedy that functions as a remedy for the uncomfortable nature of discussions on race and privilege in the United States. Russell (1998) states that the film is a “fantasy about the dangerous possibilities of affirmative action, minority scholarships, and other race-conscious remedies” (p. 269). Because it is constructed as the formulaic structure of a romantic-screwball comedy, its use of race and questions of privilege does not necessarily function to indict popular culture’s treatment of minorities and their disadvantages in the media. Russell (1998) also contends that blackface is used to show the function of race and racial discrimination as comical tactics that lessen the blows of discrimination that actual blacks face. Either way, the film does invoke discourse on race and the function of blackface in a decade when the performance would be considered taboo.

It tells the story of Mark Watson, an over-privileged white senior in high school who has been admitted to Harvard Law School, but he has one problem. Mark’s father will not pay for his college education to teach him independence. Mark searches for scholarships and bank loans, but his efforts fail. In a wave of desperation, Mark decides to take an over-dosage of tanning pills to
darken his skin. He “becomes black” in order to receive a Harvard scholarship that is awarded to
a qualified black applicant. Mark actually convinces the scholarship committee that he is black
(but not the film’s audience), enrolls in class, and develops a relationship with a black student,
Sarah, who was actually to be awarded the same scholarship the committee gave Mark. Stressing
from the guilt, Mark takes off the “blackface”, asks the committee to award Sarah the
scholarship, offers to do community service, and pays back the scholarship funds he has already
used. Even with his privilege as a young white man he has to resort to affirmative action policy
to get the admission he desires. Mark ultimately learns that although affirmative action affords
blacks some opportunities, it does not cure discrimination as he sees after experiencing anti-
black sentiments. The viewer learns that even through blackface, whites still maintain privilege.
Even as a young white man, Mark is still able to retain a certain amount of privilege he is
accustomed to. What is particularly interesting about this film besides its throwback to
nineteenth century minstrel performance is Mark’s ability to exploit affirmative action policy.

What is important is Mark’s reenactment of traditional blackface to become a part of the
black community to receive benefits as a racial minority. Although Mark’s character may not
have been specifically indulging in the buffoonery of minstrels or personally making a visual
statement about the negative images of blacks, his performance is crucial to understanding how
minstrelsy and racial passing are equated. Several scenes showcase Mark living and “acting” as a
black man although he is white and successfully fooling those around him, even Sarah who is the
black student he is interested in. Although audiences may have been able to distinguish Mark
from an actual black man, throughout the film, others (other than his white best friend who is
also his classmate) are unaware that Mark is actually a young white man. There are some
characteristics of the film besides blackface that makes Mark as a racial impersonator who eventually appropriates blackness as a part of his personality and identity.

The film opens with Mark Watson (C. Thomas Howell) awakening to the sound of blues music which can also be read as “soul music,” a marker of black culture. This also speaks to the authenticity of “black culture” as it appears limited to producing enjoyable music. Later Mark takes an enormous amount of tanning pills and his racial identity is stated by his white best friend Gordo: “You’re not tan, you’re black.” Here, Mark’s new racial identity is ascribed by his best friend. This is also important in considering the question of who is allowed to ascribe or avow racial identity. Considering the racial history of the United States, whites have primarily defined race and labeled those who are “nonwhite,” something that was discussed in the previous chapters. Mark’s decision to become “black” is chiefly to gain privilege he would have already been afforded as a white man. He eventually dupes the all white scholarship committee into giving him the Henry Q. Bouchard Memorial Scholarship because he constructs himself as “the best black applicant in Los Angeles.” Mark is initially a villain as he is a white man still managing to maintain his privilege. He is spoiled and lives with a sense of entitlement and expectancy. His experiences eventually have an interesting affect on his racial identity.

Mark eventually comes to see the discrimination that blacks face and becomes increasingly uncomfortable with constant black jokes and prejudice he faces as a young “black” man. Even more interestingly, he goes from “I love being black” as he sees the academic benefits he gains to “You have no idea what my people have been through!” when he breaks up with his white girlfriend who exoticizes men of color. As the film continues, Mark dresses “black” by dressing like a black panther while the theme song to *Shaft* plays non-diegetically, a Blaxploitation cliché. Mark thinks this is the only image of what being black means. This is
Mark’s feeling and understanding of what it means to be black at the beginning of the film, which is an essentialist perception. But as the film continues, he sheds the stereotypical black image for a more normative wardrobe, and he changes his attitude about his exploitation of privilege. Mark did not consider the consequences of being a young black man as he is later bombarded with black jokes by two fellow classmates, is pulled for DWB or “driving while black,” and is beaten in jail by a racist white athletic team. As these circumstances continue to occur, Mark begins to see the continued discrimination blacks suffer. Mark’s blackface is not only a performance, but it almost becomes a part of his racial identity as he begins to build solidarity with blacks. This is also interesting because the only black person Mark has as a friend is Sarah, the young black single mother whom he falls in love with. Her position as his love interest further signifies his acceptance of multifaceted blackness. He comes to understand that blacks are not one monolithic group of people who are all the same. In becoming more educated about race, Mark is framed a more relatable and likeable, further reiterating the film’s rhetoric that stereotypes are ignorant and that everyone is similar, even if divided by race. His blackness is built upon his experiences in blackface and the struggles Sarah goes through as a young black law student. As he comes to understand parts of the black experience and their history of discrimination, Mark begins to see the black man within. McPherson and Shelby (2004) state that social group identity is largely based on the behaviors of the group’s members. The African American and White groups are racial groups that are largely defined by a collective membership. The black experience is constructed by disparity in economic, social, and educational opportunities (McPherson & Shelby, 2004). Black identity is multidimensional and complex with many criteria (racial, ethnic, cultural, national, and political) (McPherson & Shelby, 2004). Asumah (2004) argues that the basic difference between whites and blacks is that
black racial identity development is learned and defined by an understanding of “blackness” and whites generally “resist an association with ‘Whiteness,’ especially when they are cognizant of the fact that there is a correlation between ‘Whiteness’ and privilege” (p. 505). Whiteness is defined by privilege and class, while blackness is defined by disadvantage. Mark comes to recognize all of this. In the scene when he reveals to his parents and Sarah that that he has been masquerading as a black student, he says: “But now a part of me’s black on the inside even though I’m white on the outside.” Mark thinks he understands the black condition, but he does not entirely as he discusses his masquerade with his black law professor played by James Earl Jones, who appears to stand for a successful black man who pulled himself up by his bootstraps. “I don’t really know how it feels sir,” he says about understanding what it means to be black.

What is important about this film’s portrayal of minstrelsy is that blacks and whites will not entirely understand each others’ experiences in their raced environments. The racial masquerade here functions as a mechanism to possibly teach whites a lesson about the black experience and the prejudice that accompanies it through this romantic comedy. The audience knows Mark cannot pass for black. He is easily identifiable as a white man much like white minstrels in the 19th century. The film also illustrates how whites are still able to maintain their sense of privilege even when they do not appear to be white. It is not necessarily an indictment on white people, but the film’s illustration of blackness and whiteness does demonstrate how privilege is overwhelmingly afforded to whites and racial masquerade is in itself also a privilege-seeking function, an aspect that is a major feature of the passing films that will be discussed later. The film also departs from previous films that use blackface to make a social statement about the disadvantages of blacks and what that means to whites. Russell (1998) cites such films as Black Like Me (1965) and Watermelon Man (1971) that showcase white male’s experiences as
black man on a more serious and social level. These films function to indict American society and its treatment of black males. *Soul Man* departs from these social messages only to show that even as a black man, Mark is still able to maintain the privilege he is accustomed to. It may not dwell on or even try to respond to the privilege gap between whites and blacks but it does demonstrate the performativity of race (even if it is framed as a “gag” as is fitting for comedies) and how it influences Mark’s perspective of race and privilege (even if mildly so). Racial masquerade is also important to how blackface affects the identity of its black performers.

**Bamboozled (2000)**

Directed by Spike Lee, *Bamboozled* is a searing indictment of popular culture and its acceptance of racial buffoonery on television. This tragic drama tells the story of Peerless Dothan (Damon Wayans) who adopts the name Pierre Delacroix (the same as the renowned French composer). He is a black Harvard educated television writer who is struggling to keep high ratings for his network. He is pressured by his boss white Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport) to come up with a television show that speaks to not only white audiences, but also blacks because Delacroix’s shows about middle-class blacks are “too white.”

Upset with his boss’s assessment, Delacroix enlists his assistant Sloan (Jada Pinkett-Smith) to help him create a show so offensive she will be fired because he is unhappy at the television network. He decides to create a variety show that is the new millennium version of minstrelsy with black performers Manray (Savion Glover) and Womack (Tommy Davidson) performing in blackface. The show is called “Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show.” The show subsequently becomes a success with audiences of all racial and ethnic groups in the United States, leaving Delacroix bewildered but also enjoying his success.
Things take a dangerous turn when Sloan’s radical, brother Big Blak Africa (Mos Def) and his rap group the Mau-Maus decide to kidnap and kill Manray for perpetuating negative black stereotypes. Womack decides to leave the show because he no longer wants to play the buffoon and advises Manray to quit with him, but he does not. The Mau-Maus finally kidnap and murder Manray on a live telecast and they themselves are killed by the police. The shootings are significant in that the Mau-Maus are also stereotypes of hyper-blackness that threatens white stability. In killing Manray, they think they have abolished minstrelsy when they themselves are minstrels framed as “gangstas” and “ghetto.” The minstrel torch has been passed to them for the new millennium. Sloan kills Delacroix for her brother’s death and leaves the office. Delacroix’s death is also a symbolic murder of the executive minstrel, Zip Coon, who passes himself off as a respectable gentleman to gain white respect. His death demonstrates that although he is educated and well-versed, he is still not as accepted supposedly like the middle-class shows he produces. The film ends with stereotypical images of blacks in television.

The portrayal of minstrelsy and its problematization of authentic black identity is significant to the discourse on racial identity and racial masquerade. The earlier films discussed in the section illustrate how whites utilized blackface to construct representations of blackness and how this affected their sense of racial identity, but Bamboozled features the identity construction and disintegration of the black identity within blacks who chose to perform in blackface, a choice not necessarily afforded to 19th and early 20th century black minstrels. The rhetoric of this film suggests that minstrelsy/racial passing/masquerade is not really beneficial because of the adverse affects on the racial identity. It also suggests that minstrelsy, as a social construction is not about durable categories, but contingent perceptions. The parallel of 19th and 21st century minstrel figures sets the stage for an unraveling of racial identity and the symbolic
murder of these characters by the film’s end. The scenes when Manray and Womack first appear on the minstrel show, Womack’s eventual departure, and Delacroix’s final scene as the minstrel himself demonstrate some of these adverse affects on the men’s racial identity.

In the early scenes of the film, Manray and Womack use the old-fashioned means of darkening their faces: burning alcohol-covered corks and mashing them into a smooth paste to cover their faces. The two performers enter the stage dressed in nineteenth century-style clothing as they appear from the painted watermelon and cotton backdrop and proclaim they are “two real coons.” They appear comfortable performing in front of the obviously uncomfortable audience as they tell their story of returning to their previous Alabama plantation. The audience (both in the film and in real life) is at first uncomfortable as the taboo images of blackface resurface in traditional dress/speech/movement in modern-day entertainment. But as the film continues, Lee demonstrates that blackface never actually left and audiences are more accepting of these images. They proceed to tell the story of a “simpler time” when “nigras knew they place” as Mantan tap dances for the crowd. Mantan proceeds to tell how he is tired of poverty and disgrace of blacks while at the same time suggesting that plantation life would be better and still perpetuating the myth of black buffoonery. The audience sits in awe as the two perform traditional stereotypes of blacks (particularly men) as comic figures whose sole position is to entertain. The question of offense is apparently not relevant to them as they perform although it was a topic of concern in an earlier scene, but the two men see television as their opportunity to gain success and a decent meal, something they are not used to. In this instance, Manray and

---

1 Manray is that he shares the same name with a modernist artist. Lee’s choice to do this further complicates race language in that Manray is a tap dancer, but also identified with a white modernist artist. To superimpose this name on a black artist invokes the complexity of racial identification. Manray’s television character is named Mantan, paying homage to Mantan Moreland, a black minstrel performer. This too complicates racial identification as Manray is marked by both a white modernist artist and a black minstrel performer. Lee’s name choice functions to illustrate the problem of racial stereotypes and the evolving existence of minstrelsy.
Womack are just performers who are trying to make a living, much like some white and black minstrel performers. The two are initially relatable artists and people trying to survive poverty. Their positioning as minstrel performers then seems to call into question their integrity as black men. The film’s viewer is left in a state of ambivalence as the two gain success but at the cost of their souls. As the story continues, the show begins to take a toll on Womack and the show’s creator Delacroix.

Towards the end of the film, Womack decides that he can longer play the fool for the audience. Various scenes show Womack becoming more and more discontent with blackening up. Womack begins to understand that he is helping perpetuate myths about blacks and is unhappy with not only the show’s creators but also himself for sacrificing his identity as a black man with integrity. Considering both he and Manray were doing almost the same performances in a courtyard for passers-by, Womack’s discontent is questionable until we understand that performing in blackface is the cause of his sorrow. The two did not go to the extent of calling themselves coons or reminiscing about plantation life, but their positioning as entertainers (especially in front of an office dominated by whites) frames them in an essentialist construction. Womack understands the cultural heritage of blackface and its function to demean blacks. He can no longer be the one who demeans his people. Finally, Womack decides he must leave and in a pivotal discussion with Manray, the weight of blackface is made problematic for Womack and for blackness. Womack enters after Manray’s dance rehearsal and says he “will not drink the Kool Aid.” Manray does not understand. “This pickanniny, watermelon bullshit!” Womack says. They proceed to argue about their friendship and why Womack should leave. Then Womack goes into character as a minstrel figure. He passes a hand over his otherwise blank face that becomes a bug-eyed canvas for a stock minstrel figure:

Womack’s performance illustrates his discontent with playing the “coon” for the network which most likely represents “massa.” Womack is disgusted with playing the subservient “negro” and decides to leave. He can no longer play the coon for the network or the audience because it is stripping away his identity as a dignified black man. This also affects Delacroix’s identity and his role as creator of the new millennial minstrelsy.

The final scene of the film illustrates how Delacroix himself has played the coon buffoon for the network and his audience as he finally dons blackface and becomes the puppet. Delacroix tried various times to frame himself as an educated black man by adopting a feigned normative American dialect and changing his name to Pierre Delacroix. The viewer finds him a ridiculous figure who is trying too hard to be respected: in other words, he is trying to be/pass for white. After the Mau-Maus kidnap and kill Manray, Delacroix becomes the minstrel as he sits with the burnt cork and red lipstick on his face. Lee’s choice to name a black man after a French composer complicates the racial identification, especially as Delacroix is framed as an “uppity negro” who wants whites to take him seriously. He is the T.V. show’s composer. Lee’s construction of him reinforces Delacroix’s muddied identity as he realizes that all the while he is the millennial reincarnation of Zip Coon, a classic minstrel figure who is a dandy who wants to be a gentleman. Delacroix raises his head from his desk and we see his face blackened as he screams at a mechanical minstrel statue dancing across his table. “Stop it. Stop it. Stop it! Leave me alone!” he shouts repeatedly as he throws the many minstrel paraphernalia he has on his office bookshelves. Delacroix appears disturbed and frightened by his own culpability with the creation of the minstrel show, the perpetuation of negative black stereotypes, and the death of
Manray. He attempted to dupe his boss Dunwitty and maintain his control of the “idiot box” (as he refers to television), but in his quest to make a social and political statement, he ends up perpetuating the myth of the black buffoon while dreaming of his own slice of the American pie. Delcaroix goes on a journey of self-identification that ends with the realization of his own minstrelsy. He goes from a proud black man relishing his success as a purveyor of black success to an irate black man frustrated with society’s acceptance of negative stereotypes of blacks. Delacroix then becomes a manipulator of the audience and also an audience member who is desensitized to stereotypical images of blacks as he tries to defend his show. He later becomes a depressed figure with a distorted identity and finally a pitiful character the viewer empathizes with, is disgusted by, or feels altogether ambivalent towards. In his efforts to pass as a colorless show writer, he further cements himself as a minstrel figure. At the beginning and throughout the film, Delacroix appears to be a black manifestation of whiteness as he changed his name from Peerless Dothan, is upset with his father’s use of the word “nigger,” and speaks in a forced normative dialect. He appears to be a black man in power, which he is, but this power is wielded in a destructive manner which not only ends in Manray’s death, but his as well. Their deaths are symbolic in their efforts to show that stereotypes are destructive and are also difficult to be rid of.

This category of films contributes to the discourse on racial definition and the construction of blackness through blackface. Each illustrates some of the stereotypes of blacks and how these images are constructed and accepted through the U.S. mainstream. They also address how these constructions of blackness speak to their audiences. Considering the era and genre in which each film was produced, the genre conventions and social concerns all work together to progress the rhetoric of the films. *The Birth of a Nation*’s rhetoric portrays
blackface’s function as an assertion of the results of racial and social amalgamation between whites and blacks. Mixing races would lead to the contamination of the white race and the misguided ambitions of blacks who are not fit to be in power. Viewers are expected to want to maintain the segregation of the races. *The Jazz Singer* constructs an image of blackface as a passing mechanism and solidifies normative whiteness/Americanness. Its rhetoric is complex in its maintenance of blackface as profitable entertainment and the struggle to maintain a cultural identity. In order to become more American, one must adhere to popular culture, namely participating in blackface. *Soul Man*’s usage of blackface as comedic racial passing reinforces the film’s rhetoric that states race does not matter in personal relationships while still maintaining white male privilege. With that in mind, does race still matter in the context of social power? *Bamboozled* also continues to reiterate the complex nature of minstrelsy and passing as complex mechanisms that contribute to the complication of racial identity. The viewers are left with no solution to the race problem as the film states that minstrelsy has not disappeared over time, but has only evolved due in part to black performers and network executives, but also by the audience who does not necessarily recognize modernized minstrelsy and rejects it. The next chapter attempts to understand the function of racial passing by blacks into white normativity and how this affects their racial identities.
5. Fade into White: Passing Films

The second category, Fade into White, consists of five films that specifically invoke discourse about light-skinned blacks who pass for white. This section begins with Oscar Micheaux’s *Veiled Aristocrats* and John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life*, which were released during the Great Depression and featured light-skinned black actors, moves into post-World War II America when Hollywood sought white actors to tell black stories, and then ends with 2004’s millennial telling of the tragic mulatto. This section also highlights how the ways in which the shift in visual performance as minstrelsy evolves from whites darkening their faces to appear black into a performance whereby light complexioned blacks pass for white. Passing is similar to blackface in reiterating that race is a performance. It simulates whiteness and although different from traditional blackface in regards to face paint to exaggerate blackness, it is a suppression of blackness. The discussion of these films specifically during the 1930s and 1950s lays the foundation for the discourse on race during their cultural and societal periods which then becomes a comparison and extension for the film discussed in 2004. This section analyzes the function of passing and its performative nature while also discussing the social, cultural, and political concerns of the time. (It is also important to recognize that these films are all adaptations from novels. This illustrates that the passing figure is an important feature in U.S. literature.) It also contextualizes the racial shift in Hollywood as “black-light” faces were replaced with “pure white” faces to display how Hollywood literally *passed* for white. Another key factor that links these films is that the masquerade is a silent denial of blackness that requires social recognition of the act of whiteness.
Veiled Aristocrats (1932)

Directed by Oscar Micheaux, *Veiled Aristocrats* is the film adaptation of Charles W. Chestnutt’s 1900 novel *The House Behind the Cedars*. The realist drama is the story of the Waldens’ and their attempt to pass for white. John Walden, a lawyer, returns home to Fayetteville, North Carolina after a twenty year absence. John is self-assured as a white man and bears no personal recognition of his blackness except when he returns to gather his sister for the North. Walden is disappointed after he learns his younger sister, Rena, is in love with a “coal black negro” businessman named Frank. Frank is a threat to John’s wish to maintain whiteness, and it would solidify Rena’s association with blackness. The disappointment is even more severe in that John wants Rena to live as a white man and marry a white man in the North. A white love interest is more beneficial for not only Rena’s success as a white woman, but John’s success as a white man. He concocts a plan to bring Rena to the North to live as a white woman and garner the affections of George Tryon, John’s white friend. With their mother’s blessing and Rena’s hesitation, John and Rena go back to the North where they live as white brother and sister with. As John alludes to in the film, if they remain in the South, they will not receive as many opportunities. The North is framed as a place that necessitates passing. It is positioned as a place of freedom, but in choosing to pass, John (even Micheaux) frames the North as another place limited by the accepted racial hierarchy of whites at the apex and blacks at the bottom. John would probably not succeed as a man in the North. Thus, the North is not as free as thought to be. Rena is forced to pass and abandon her black heritage. John wants to keep their heritage secret and tries to convince his sister to do the same. The Walden’s black servants are suspicious of her and later confirm that she and her brother are black. Rena states her comfort in her black identity while John sees the benefits of whiteness. In the end, Rena runs away with Frank. In
rejecting John’s selected white suitor, Rena is rejecting interracial union and white privilege. 
Rena’s rejection is Micheaux’s displeasure with miscegenation is debatable, but her main concern is that she remains true to herself (connected to blackness and authenticity).

This film is one of Oscar Micheaux’s triumphs in depicting the controversial notion of racial passing and the color divide apparent in the black community. It is also important in understanding the power of black filmmakers during the 1930s when there was a great demand for black actors and actresses to star in “race movies,” or films about black life in the United States. Micheaux was one of the few black independent filmmakers to survive the financial strain and the glass ceiling in the film industry (Bogle, 2007). According to Diawara (1993), Micheaux’s films often featured the DuBoisian “twoness” within blacks in the United States. Twoness was the possibility of a black identity and an assimilated identity that adapted to mainstream society. “Twoness recognizes a need to retain Black ethnic identity in the face of assimilation. Assimilation seemed necessary for survival in America, but it represented a problem for the retention of African identity” (Diawara, 1993, p. 27). The sense of “twoness” is exactly the duality that is represented in Veiled Aristocrats as the struggle to retain black identity battles with the conformity to the U.S. white ideal.

Two particular scenes are analyzed to demonstrate the meaning of racial passing. The scenes involve a long discussion between John and Rena Walden about their heritage, their present, and what passing for white means to them. The performance of whiteness is juxtaposed to their past lives as blacks and the effect it has on their relationship as siblings. Unlike the other films in this section, this one features a light-skinned black who feels a certain responsibility to her people and herself. For her, whiteness cannot be a performance because it is a lie against her blackness, something Micheaux frames as a misguided attempt to succeed.
The scene opens with a title that reads:

When Rena went to live with her brother, John, it was silently understood that she as had he, was to forget that she had a mother—or had ever belonged to the Negro Race at all.

John is further signified as an unlikeable traitor to his people. He abandons his blackness and expects his sister to do the same. Although there is no physical action in this scene, these words speak volumes about passing for white. Being that it is “silently understood” that the Waldens must forget they belong “to the Negro Race at all”, there is a certain element of expectation that nothing will be said to invoke language (racial markers) of blackness. This invokes silence as a denial of blackness. Although Rena and John are black, their skin is physically deceiving to the eye. This illustrates that skin color is not always a pertinent or valid designation to the race of an individual. It also creates white doubleness as illustrated by Richard Dyer. “Moreover, to apply the colour white to people is to ascribe a visible property to a group that thrives also on invisibility” (Dyer, 1997, p. 42). In racial passing, whiteness then becomes a visible marker of invisibility that masks blackness. This “white invisibility” interacts with memory as well. The title states that Rena was to forget she was ever a part of the black race. Apparently, in order for pass successfully, there must not only be silence or denial of blackness, but also a repression of memory that accompanies the silence/denial. This is much like Jack Robin’s struggle to maintain his Jewishness in *The Jazz Singer*. To forget is virtually impossible because the white and black identities are in constant conflict. But according to John’s plan, the memory loss of blackness is possible because in his white space, he does not appear to consider his blackness. But heritage is hard to fully forget. This appears to be a personal tool of convincing and conviction as remembering the group one has forsaken can cause stress and suspicion. To thwart either of
these, an individual must altogether forget the past and be mentally aware in the present. But as Rena illustrates, she cannot forget who she really is or her past as her brother apparently has.

Rena is learning to pass as her brother does. John is comfortable with the lifestyle, while Rena is not. Their relationship appears strained. It began as a more loving connection at the beginning of the film when John returned home. In a slow cut from the title, John and Rena are seated next to each other eating at a round table. Rena tells her brother she has had a terrible dream the night before about their mother. John tries to reassure her that their mother is safe and healthy, but Rena is distraught from the disconnection to her mother. She pressures John to call Fayetteville to check on their mother, but John sees no point. “I’m miserable, John,” she says, revealing her stress as a life without her mother and as a white woman is challenging. She even suggests that he bring their mother to their home and call her their maid so as not to give away their true identity as blacks. “Rena, hush. The servants might hear,” John replies. This short exchange reveals Rena’s discomfort with her new lifestyle and the secrecy that is required for the fulfillment of passing. Not only are whites not to detect blackness, but the Waldens’ servants should not suspect anything. Passing is not just to avoid discrimination from whites, but to also elude the suspicion of other blacks. John makes a stern and important speech (as he stands over Rena’s seated and sulking figure) that speaks to his own need for protection of passing:

Yes, bring her here. Call her what you like. And how long would it be before some relative from Fayetteville or Samson County met her on the street? Wrote her a letter, done something to expose us all; spread the news throughout the whole county that John Walden and his beautiful sister engaged to marry George Tryon, wealthy son of the old South, had negro blood in their veins? Great heavens woman, do you want to lead us to an arsenal?

John is a leering dominant figure who wants to be obeyed. He evidently chooses his success and future over his true identity. He is more concerned with is career than his blackness, an approach
that works to create an acceptable white identity. Within this speech, the viewer also comes to understand John’s misguided efforts to succeed. He is then constructed as a not entirely bad figure, but one who wants the same privileges as whites and sees passing as a means to further his career. Here, Rena is also framed as a sad figure that captures the viewer’s sympathy as someone who struggles to maintain a healthy identity. We feel connected to her. She is relatable and a reflection of the need to be honest and authentic. John’s statements make it clear that their performance of whiteness must also exclude any black relatives or knowledge. Relatives link them to blackness in a different way than the servants. A black relative links them to “the one-drop rule” which links them to black (“negro”) blood. John understands the danger of this revelation and would prefer if it were left hidden. This also places a considerable amount of pressure on Rena as John implies it would be her fault if they are rejected.

In wanting to quiet her brother, Rena considers his choice as she stands close to him and his face softens: “I must forget about mama, myself. And think of you and your career. Oh, I’m so sorry brother.” Then, she restates her conviction: “I only know I am not a white girl, but a Negress.” Rena chooses to accept her blackness instead of continuing to negate it. She is willing to allow her brother to make his choice, but she does not want him to make her choice of identity and lifestyle for her. She is desperate for John to understand her tenderness for him and her desire for authenticity as she wears a soft look of determination and conflict in the furrow of her brow. The viewer feels and understands her restrained place and wants her to be free. Rena is willing to be done with her performance and live as a black woman. Rena is “tired of being a liar and a cheat.” The racial passing is then an act of lying, which is also the performance that solidifies the whiteness her brother chooses to perpetuate. Micheaux seems to argue that passing
involves deception and living with a lie can prove to be destructive. This is a dynamic echoed in

*Imitation of Life*.  

**Imitation of Life (1934)**

*Imitation of Life* is a melodrama about two widowed single mothers, Delilah (Louise Beavers) and Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert), who randomly meet when Delilah asks for work at Bea’s home. Delilah, the black widow, has a light-skinned daughter named Peola who can pass for white. Bea and Delilah strike a bargain that Delilah will work for Bea for room and board. They eventually make a deal that they will open a pancake shop by selling Delilah’s homemade pancakes. The heart of the story centers on Bea and her success as an entrepreneur with the issue of racially passing as a secondary storyline. Throughout the film Peola is constantly faced with the adversity of being a black woman who can pass for white. Although it is perhaps a side storyline, Peola’s predicament is significant to realizing and understanding the malleable nature of race and the meaning of racial passing. Peola understands that she is black, but desperately wants to know the comfort of being white.

Fredi Washington, a black starlet of the 1930s race films, plays Peola. Her hire is in contrast to later films that featured whites playing blacks that can pass for white. This is important as some films in the 1940s and 1950s that feature questions of race hire white actors over blacks to cater to a prejudiced audience. Washington’s casting is significant in that she virtually disappears in a crowd of whiteness and the viewer only knows she is black when her character is juxtaposed to Delilah, making Washington a more believable passing figure. Later, the demand for black actors decreased. This is taken into consideration of the “Black Hollywood” that emerged and diminished in the decades to come. The scenes discussed feature
times when Peola considers her blackness and her desire for whiteness. The rhetoric of this
dichotomy speaks to the racial binary in the United States and how it can inhabit one individual.
The binary here appears to provoke Peola’s decision to pass. It also reiterates the representation
of blackness as something undesirable and whiteness as a desirable. Peola does not want to be a
 stereotype of black femaleness (subservience) like her mother.

The first scene under analysis takes place after Bea and Delilah started Aunt Delilah’s
Pancake Shop and their daughters are a few years older. The two little girls, Jessie and Peola,
gather their books and test each other on the capitals of many European countries. After the girls
leave, Delilah and Bea discuss their dreams of comfort for themselves and their children.
Suddenly, Peola storms in crying and walks to the back room. Delilah goes to console her
daughter and the truth of her tears is revealed. “I’m not black. I’m not black. I won’t be black,”
Peola cries. This is a mature statement even in her young years because she understands the
difference between white and black. Even at her tender age, Peola has already learned to
associate blackness with undesirability by watching Delilah cater to the white Pullmans and her
content as the black servant. Delilah is the good-natured mammy figure that Peola finds
embarrassing. “She called me that. Jessie called me black,” Peola says pointing to Jessie. Bea
reprimand’s her daughter. Bea’s response appears to allude to the negativity associated with
blacks. To be called black is an insult and therefore unwanted. Delilah takes Peola in her arms
and rocks her with soft hushes as if she is calming a newborn. “You! It’s ‘cause you’re black.
You make me black. I won’t. I won’t. I won’t be black!” Peola responds to her mother’s
consoling. Constructed as a melodrama, the film and this scene are hyperemotional and use that
emotion to frame the viewer’s understanding of Peola’s relationship with Delilah and her
rejection of blackness. The viewer sympathizes with her struggle to be more than a stereotype, but the viewer also is disgusted by Peola’s rejection of her mother and blackness.

Here is the evident denial of blackness represented through words, not just a lifestyle. Young Peola’s statements that she “won’t be black” implies not just an appreciation for whiteness, but also that her blackness cannot (will not) be performed as well. Her subsequent decision to pass as an adult is also a matter of the personal choice of racial identity. When viewers first see Peola as a young adult, she and Delilah stand on Bea’s balcony during the 10th anniversary celebration of Aunt Delilah’s Pancake Flour. Peola is a striking fair figure as she stands across from Delilah who is slightly indistinguishable from the night sky. This evening shot magnifies Peola’s whiteness by drawing the eye’s attention directly to her as she is set against the dark backdrop. She is a sullen ghostly figure who saunters and is at the same time acerbic when her blackness is discussed. She is annoyed and quick-tempered at the idea of remaining in her “place.” For Peola, not wanting to be black encompasses the rejection of the stereotypical black woman of the 1930s. Peola only sees Delilah as Bea’s servant and this becomes her idea (as many whites thought) of who a black woman is. Delilah is framed as “mammy,” the stereotypical image of the matronly black woman that takes care of the white family, usually without concern for her own (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Peola does not want to be designated to this constricted category that places boundaries around her identity, aspirations, and social position in her world. She also blames her mother for both of their conditions as black people in a world constructed by whites as superiors. If her mother was not black (maybe not even as dark), then maybe Peola would succeed. Although there are no examples of overt racism in the film, the main white characters are positioned as wealthier and more cultured considering their dress, occupations, and advantages (e.g. Bea is an entrepreneur, Stephen (Bea’s beau) is a
scientist, Jessie wants to study in Switzerland, etc.). Peola later observes these advantages afforded to her white counterparts and recognizes she cannot have the same opportunities because her mother looks/is black. This blackness blocks Peola’s desired advantages, and Delilah is therefore to blame. Peola understands that she should not have to play the role of subservient and limited black, but the white girl with her life ahead of her. (“Look at me. Am I not white? Isn’t that a white girl there,” she asks Delilah as she points to a mirror.) This is signified when Peola passes for white at school. She already knows that her whiteness is beneficial and knows if she were to say she is black, she will be forced to leave the school. As she grows older, she decides she must leave her mother’s presence to ensure that she can be white.

After finding out Peola left college and disappeared, Delilah and Bea go looking for her and find her working as a cashier in a whites-only restaurant. The scene opens with Peola standing behind a counter smiling as white patrons are escorted to their seats. She is calm and at ease, the most tranquil the viewer has seen her. The camera pans past her to Bea and Delilah who have just arrived outside. The camera zooms out to show Peola smiling as a customer pays for his meal and asks for a cigar. Peola reaches for the cigar box in the glass case and turns to see Delilah. Instantly, her face stiffens with a shocked look. Her passing is characterized by her emotions and behavior: when she is white, she is content; when she is black, she is in mourning. Delilah tries to convince her to come home, but Peola acts as if she does not know she is. “There must be some mistake. My name isn’t Peola,” she responds, trying to thwart any recognition of her blackness. “This woman doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Do I look her daughter? Do I look like I could be her daughter?” Peola says when a male voice off screen, presumably the manager, asks what is going on. Her whiteness is further illuminated as she poses this question. Because she does not look black, therefore she is not black. This speaks to the complexity of
racial definition and identity as skin color is not a good indicator of race, as stated in the second chapter. Peola’s denial of blackness also comes in the form of rejecting her mother. To deny her maternal link is to deny relation to her cultural heritage. Again, the denial of blackness is required so one can be white. Just then, Bea enters the scene asking Peola how she could do this to her mother who is crying at the counter. Bea’s presence confirms Peola is passing.

In this scene, what counts as white is skin color. Because Peola is very fair-skinned and exhibits Anglo features, her blackness is not clearly evident. Her masquerade is facilitated by her physical appearance and her ability to disappear in a crowd of whites. Her fair skin allows her to become a part of the invisible nature of whiteness. This allows her to dodge differentiation from normativity. Her masquerade is more so in her decision to let whites assume she is one of them. Then social recognition works to her advantage. This scene demonstrates how the function of passing (racial performance in general) requires not only denial, but also the construction of a raced space, particularly a white space (meaning Bea Pullman’s home and the restaurant where Peola works). For Peola to pass, she must also integrate into a white space for whites to not suspect her. It is important to note that the whites she surrounds herself with are strangers and not those that frequent Bea’s home. If these strangers where to know she is black, she would most likely be rejected, especially considering the racial climate of the 1930s. Later in the scene, Peola returns home to confront her mother. She apologizes and explains her case as she stands over her mother, a scene reminiscent of John and Rena Walden in *Veiled Aristocrats*. She loves her mother, but she cannot bear to be with her. Peola later tells Beas she does not “know what it’s like to look white and be black.” Does Peola even know how to be black? Because she will not accept her mother’s blackness she is seemingly left raceless, lost, and misguided in her attempts to find and maintain success. And because she has a limited perception with blackness,
she does not understand that blackness can be more than subservient. They both cry and Peola leaves. Her blackness will be preserved if she remains near her. This moment leaves the audience with ambiguous emotions mainly because it is dreadful that she denies her heritage and her mother but we also understand her need to succeed. It is not until the end of the film when she returns to attend Delilah’s funeral. Her torment about race momentarily subsides as she grieves. Peola runs to her mother’s casket and begs forgiveness. She is still the sad passing figure that finds no resolution or happiness by the film’s end. In acknowledging her mother (blackness), she returns to sadness. The film suggests passing is unfulfilling and does not automatically result in wholeness, much like the next melodrama.

**Pinky (1949)**

*Pinky* (1949) was released during the time when black participation in World War II and the shift in racial tensions made acceptable the production of films discussing black life in the United States. “The culmination of the trend toward black realism in the American cinema of the forties awaited the year 1949, with its unique cycle of pictures that tackled the race problem of America” (Jones, 1981, p. 110). There was evidently an increasing demand for stories about blacks and the film industry moved to meet that need. But *Pinky* also faced a battle with Georgia censors for its discussion of racial passing (McGehee, 2006). The film was able to get around The Production Code (formed in 1930) requirement that miscegenation not be represented in film by only discussing racial passing which implied miscegenation and showing how the covenant still intact. Because Pinky was played by a white actress, her choice was acceptable to the Production Code Administration (PCA), reiterating the discomfort with the presence of
miscegenation on screen. A black actress would be threatening. Considering this context, the film may also be an admonition against miscegenation. But racial passing was still a major issue.

*Pinky* is another melodrama about a young nurse who is educated in the North, passes for white, and is in love with a white man. When she returns home to the South to say her last goodbyes to her black grandmother, Aunt Dicey, she is pulled back into the racist atmosphere of the times as she is harassed by the white police and almost raped by to other white men. This sets off a conflict in her self-image. She is even more affected by Southern racism as she fights the court to keep the house and land her white patient (Ms. Em) leaves her in her will. In the end, the court awards Pinky the house and she turns it into a hospital for black children but at the expense of a romantic relationship with a man that still wants her (even if he advocates her passing). The director Elia Kazan forms a rhetoric that argues that whereas passing may rarely be successful may not be completely successful and honesty is always rewarded. This film is akin to 1959’s *Imitation of Life* (discussed later) in that Pinky is played by Jeanne Crain, a white actress (who is unbelievable as a black woman passing for white). This also brings into question Hollywood’s preference to tell black stories through the lens of whiteness during the 1940s and 1950s to adhere to the Production Code. Jeanne Crain plays Pinky “thereby making the suggestion of potential relationships between the white and ‘black’ characters more acceptable to the PCA” (McGehee, 2006, p. 25). It is significant in considering how blackface minstrelsy involved white performers telling of the black experience. In telling the black story through a white actress and leaving the actual black actors secondary roles in this film (and many others), Hollywood catered to its prejudiced audience (Bernshoff & Griffin, 2004). *Pinky* seems to reaffirm the power of

---

2 The Production Code was established by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers Association According to McGehee (2006), the Production Code Administration (PCA) created this list of unacceptable features in a wide array of categories, including miscegenation.
physical whiteness. Pinky’s near arrest and her arrival at her grandmother’s home help frame the film’s discourse on black/white relationships, the cultural shifts in Pinky’s racial identity, and the purpose for her passing.

The film opens as Pinky walks down a dirt road next to a picket fence as a man on a buggy and a barking dog passes by. The scene cuts to her walking through a heavily wooded area and to a small shack where she sets her coat and suitcase. Her grandmother talks and hangs laundry without ever turning to see Pinky. When she does, they hug. Pinky plans to stay in the North and has not told her grandmother she is passing and in love with a white man, another technique to solidify her white identification (and also a forbidden love). “And I know what you done. And you know I never told you to pretend you is what you ain’t,” Aunt Dicey says. The mood visibly changes as Pinky looks out of a window with a forlorn expression on her face. She has not told her grandmother she has been passing, but from Aunt Dicey’s statement, she already knows. Here again lies the silence/denial/dissociation from blackness that is apparent in the performance of whiteness. In not speaking of her blackness, and not even of her whiteness because it is “normative”/“invisible”, Pinky reaffirms her performance and transgression of “the color line.” Pinky tries to explain: “It was a conductor on the train. He put me back in another car—the white one.” In putting the blame on someone else, Pinky forfeits her responsibility to her racial heritage and present racial identity. The conductor’s social recognition is the first building block to forming Pinky’s white identity. Aunt Dicey asks her why she didn’t tell the conductor she is black to which she responds, “I don’t know.” This is interesting as Pinky is positioned closer to the camera whereas /Aunt Dicey sits behind her. Aunt Dicey is just a bit blurry while Pinky is in clear focus. This arguably represents the visible blurring of Pinky’s “past” blackness while founding her “present” whiteness as her new identity. The technique also
implies the visualization of the racial hierarchy with whiteness represented at the top (the forefront) and blackness positioned beneath it (in the background). This new identity becomes the denial of the old one. “Denying yourself like Peter denied the good Lord Jesus,” Aunt Dicey responds. Denial is important to the success of passing. Pinky hugs her grandmother’s waist in repentance as she forces Pinky to pray for forgiveness. Pinky sobs and beats her fist on the bed. This scene illustrates Pinky carries a double consciousness as she understands the weight and consequences of her decision to pass. She is remorseful as she cannot look her grandmother in the eyes when disappointing her yet at the same time, she never verbally apologizes for passing. This implies passing shameful, but Pinky is unapologetic. Her passing causes rifts within her personality and her relationship with her grandmother. This also adds to the film’s rhetoric that our feelings about passing are tied to relationships that collapse when passing not only becomes an option but also a visible act. The act continues during Pinky’s near arrest.

Pinky goes to Jake and Rozelia Waters’ home to receive the money he owes her grandmother. After an upheaval that ensues, the police show up ready to harass them, particularly Rozelia and Jake. “They been botherin’ you, ma’am?” the captain asks Pinky, assuming she is white. This shows extent in which the racial profiling was a feature of the later 1940s, as the other two black characters are assumed to be causing the poor “white” woman some distress. They proceed to call her “ma’am.” “Excuse me, sir, but why are you two white men ‘ma’am-ing’ her? She’s nothin’ but a low-down colored gal,” Rozelia says in disgust. She is subsequently slapped by one of the officers. “Yes, it’s true. I’m colored.” Pinky finally acknowledges she is black, but it is only because she is outed by another black person and sees the abuse Southern blacks endure. Again, social recognition is important to the masquerade, begging the question would Pinky be white if the police officers had not assumed she was. She
initially tries to leave the scene without pressing charges, but is blocked by the officers as they
appear to want her to press charges. It appears noble, but at the same time, Pinky performs her
whiteness in her acceptance of the officers’ assumption that she is white. She is a defiant figure
that does not appear to emote when she is faced with her own blackness. This is in sharp contrast
to when her white fiancé Tom appears later in the film. Her connection whiteness and privilege
softens her disposition. When she faces racism, she is stoic and builds an invisible barrier
between herself and the Southern whites who demean her. It is not until the end of the film that
she is content and proud to be with her own people. Pinky apparently knows Southern racial
politics and is happy walking away from the officers before her truth is revealed. The officers
then force the three to get in the police car. Pinky is not necessarily interested in revealing that
she is black, but only does so when it is revealed by another black person. Pinky remembers her
blackness as she still feels attached to it, but at the same time, she understands that never
revealing she is black will keep her protected from the racial tension that she would have to
suffer. Kazan implies that memory is important to racial construction and signification because it
reiterates our ideas about race. Pinky knows that as a white woman, she can walk freely and
never have her credibility as a human being questioned.

Still, Pinky is connected to her blackness and is now willing to admit her heritage. She is
a chameleon as she slips in and out of blackness and whiteness. This film demonstrates the
contradiction within Pinky’s identity. She is not willing to disclose her heritage in the North, but
will do so when she visits her grandmother in the South. The split identity leaves the viewer
feeling ambivalent in that we want her to appreciate her heritage, but we also understand why
she chooses to pass. Pinky’s dilemma demonstrates the complexity of passing as it pertains to
regional experience. Passing is not just one monolithic activity or a one-dimensional action that
applies to those who decide to pass. Pinky ultimately moves back to the South to be a testimony to the goodness of her race. She is a strong and radical figure, although stiff and standoffish. But even in her guarded nature, she does not fully abandon her blackness and is a woman who will fight for what she wants and even what Aunt Dicey deserves. She is not as relatable as the characters discussed earlier (not sure if it is the character or the actress that plays her that hinders connection with the viewer), but her unapologetic nature shows her determination to be treated with equality. She returns back to her “true” racial identity, the blackness she could never run away from. Pinky breaks-up Tom and recognizes the possible destruction of living a lie. “I am a negro. I can’t forget it, and I can’t deny it. I can’t pretend to be anything else, I don’t want to be anything else,” she tells Tom. She finally accepts her blackness and finds a way to give back to her community in turning her inherited house into a hospital for children. Much like Rena’s rejection of John’s choice suitor in Veiled Aristocrats, Pinky’s rejection of Tom is also a rejection of an interracial union. Whether to achieve authenticity or not, this sends a message that their union is not acceptable. She appears happy and finds solidarity with her fellow black nurses. Pinky is full of pride as she embraces her blackness. According to Marcus (2007), the film “accepts racial divisions within American society and the inappropriateness of a black/white liaison” (p. 17). Her change in attitude highlights the film’s rhetoric that argues that honesty is always better. The cost of her authenticity is to loser her white lover interest, and the only way she can be successful is to be with her own people. This is far different than the 1950s adaptation of Imitation of Life when the young black woman who passes is determined to never verbally identify herself as black.
**Imitation of Life (1959)**

*Imitation of Life* is the second remake of the 1933 Fannie Hurst novel. It differs from the 1934 adaptation in that it was constructed to fit the glamour prevalent in 1950s cinema. The melodrama continues with the story of a young black woman, Sarah Jane Johnson, who passes for white in her young adulthood and her struggle to come to terms with her biological blackness while also distancing herself from her darker-skinned mother. The film is also heavily dominated by the complex mother-daughter relationships. This remake is also interesting in that the young woman who plays Sarah Jane was Jewish instead of a self-identifying black actress like the previous Fredi Washington who tackled the same role in the 1934 film adaptation. Casting is important because it shows the shift from the casting of black actors in these roles to appeal to a wider (white) audience. The film also invokes Christianity for its appeal to tolerance during the Civil Rights Movement (Bernshoff & Griffin, 2004). The film is important in understanding the performance of passing and how it relates to race change discussed in the previous chapter. The passing film reiterates the difference in “white passing” as signified by *The Jazz Singer* and “black passing.” Wald (2000) asserts that “white passing” functions to “embrace the efficacy of passing” to alleviate racial prejudice, while “black passing” draws on images of the deception inherent in the disguise (p. 16). This is significant because the films in this category demonstrate that passing can be successful and also dangerous for blacks because of the inherent deception, thus making blacks who can pass a threat to racial purity. All of this combines to sometimes develop a troubled racial identity that is never resolved. Three important scenes in the film illustrate the troubled identity developed because of the performance of race.

The first scene under analysis is when Annie brings Sarah Jane home after school after finding out her daughter has been passing. The scene opens with Lora taking Susie’s temperature...
when Annie and Sarah Jane enter the flat. Lora makes tea and asks what happened. “Sarah Jane’s been passing at school, pretending she’s white,” Annie says. The key term in this passage is “pretending,” a common childhood game. Pretending connotes a certain performance that operates to deceive the viewer (audience), in this case, the whites in Sarah Jane’s world. The viewer of this film is not necessarily deceived, but the inhabitants of Sarah Jane’s world assume she is white. This is not to demonize the passing performance, but to link it to its results which are often harmful. In her efforts to “pretend”/pass, Sarah Jane performs her denial of her black heritage and takes her frustration out on the black person in her life: her mother. Sarah Jane responds, turning toward Lora, “But I am white. I’m as white as Susie.” Sarah Jane’s argument to her white counterpart appears to be directed at whites in general and also herself. This is an attempt to prove not only her equality with her white friend Susie, but also to reaffirm that she does not see herself as black because strangers, particularly whites, see her as white. She is white by the recognition of whites around her. “They didn’t ask me. Why should I tell them?” Sarah Jane asks her mother when they left the school. Lora attempts to console the girl by telling her she is loved and it does not matter to her, Susie, and Annie. What Lora does not say is that it does matter to the outside world. Sarah Jane is defiant in maintaining the idea that she really is white and does not just want to be. Earlier in the scene, Sarah Jane confesses she did not tell her classmates or teacher she is black. This is a voluntary act of passing in that she has the knowledge of her racial heritage, but she does not disclose this information. Lora concludes that Annie should not worry because children are always pretending thus framing passing as childish behavior. “No. It’s a sin to be ashamed of what you are. And it’s even worse to pretend, to lie,” Annie says. All this has specific affects on Sarah Jane’s identity as she never refers to herself as black during the course of the film. She cannot relate to blackness because she ignores it entirely.
This scene is highly emotional as we see a little girl struggle with her identity. The viewer is able to sympathize and want her to succeed. Yet, we are saddened as we watch her detach herself from her mother and her heritage. Sarah Jane’s actions block her acceptance with the black community (e.g. in a later scene, she tells Lora she does not know what it is like to be “different”, meaning black but she does not say it). Her performance of whiteness constitutes an unspoken denial whenever is discussed. Sarah Jane never admits that she is biologically and culturally black. She looks white, therefore she is, much like Peola in the 1934 adaptation. She does not want to be associated with blackness because she sees the limits it has for her (e.g. school, romantic relationships, employment, etc.). This also links to a previous scene when Lora shows Sarah Jane and her mother their room which is at the rear of the kitchen. “I don’t want to live in the back. Why do we always have to live in the back?” Sarah Jane asks. She obviously understands that living in the back implies inferiority and something that should be hidden. Her performance of whiteness also implies a sense of normalcy and universality in that whiteness is seemingly “invisible” and “ordinary” (Apple, 1997). Sarah Jane experiences the segregation and understands that “the act of discrimination itself constructs categories of difference that hierarchically locate people as ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’ and then universalizes and naturalizes such differences” (McLaren, 1997, p. 64). This is apparent throughout the entire film and specifically when Sarah Jane falls in love.

As a teenager, Sarah Jane falls in love with a white boy, showing her symbolic identification with whiteness. This stirs some controversy with her friendship with Susie and with herself. After learning Sarah Jane has a boyfriend, Susie asks if he is black (“Is he a colored boy?”). Suzie’s question is interesting because it seems to assume the possibility that the boyfriend is white. Sarah Jane says he is white and will kill herself (a melodramatic trope) if he
ever found out she is not. “And if I have to be colored, I want to die.” Here, blackness is a sort of
death in that it confines one to an essentialist and restrained space. Also, Sarah Jane’s connection
to the white world is further signified with a white love interest, much like the female leads in
Veiled Aristocrats and Pinky. Without those white love interests, they would be “nothing”
(black). Her black identity limits her possibilities, but if she is white, she can be anything. Yet,
Sarah Jane’s whiteness confines her as well; it represents a symbolic freedom predicated upon a
lie. She is never seen with blacks and is enmeshed in a world of whiteness she can only be a part
of as long as she remains on the outskirts (e.g. particularly when Steve Archer, the photographer,
returns to see Lora and they and Susie go to the cocktail party at home; Sarah Jane realizes she
cannot go with them) much like the Griffiths tragic mulattos Lydia and Silas in The Birth of a
Nation. “I want to have a chance in life,” Sarah Jane says and intends to use her whiteness to her
advantage. “I’m going to be everything he thinks I am. I look it and that’s all that matters.” Her
statement is also important to racial identity in that she is willing to be what someone else thinks
she is. If her boyfriend thinks she is white, then she is white. She looks white but that does not
mean she is according to social standards of race. Although Sarah Jane has become more
unlikeable, her complexity of character raises complex emotions within the audience,
particularly in this scene. Her attempt to pass successfully is thwarted after her boyfriend beats
her for lying to him. The break-up and the beating itself, seems to suggest not only the results of
lying, but also the possible outcome of an interracial relationship. Again, miscegenation is
framed as taboo, especially considering anti-miscegenation laws were still in effect during the
film’s release. Through its structuring of feeling, the film’s rhetoric reiterates the rhetoric that
passing is not really beneficial. This is also important to the scene when she serves Lora’s guests.
In this scene, which marks a kind of emotional climax in the film, Sarah Jane performs for Lora’s white guests what they presumably know is “black.” She walks with a dish of food on her head and uses the dialect of an uneducated slave implying Lora is master and Sarah Jane is a slave. She resurrects old images of the plantation as she carries food on her head:

Sarah Jane: Fetched you all a mess of crawdads, Miss Lora, for you and your friends.

Lora: Well that’s quite a trick Sarah Jane. (She is visibly displeased as she slams her glass on the table). Where did you learn it?

Sarah Jane: No trick to totin’ Miss Lora. I learned it from my mammy, and she learned it from ole massa ‘fore she belong to you. (She smiles sarcastically and leaves the room.

This is Sarah Jane’s limited idea of being “colored”: self-loathing through the master’s mirror. Both Lora’s guests and the film audience are both stunned and uncomfortable to see an old slave image resurrected. It is not clear whether the guests know Sarah Jane is black, but they are mildly taken aback with slight looks of shock and discomfort. After Lora confronts her, Sarah Jane says she was doing what she was expected to. “My mother is so anxious for me to be colored. I was going to show you I could be.” Even then her blackness is a performance in that it provides an essentialist view of black servitude much like the minstrel figure Uncle Tom who is gladly/comfortably subservient to his white master. The scene sparks even more of Sarah Jane’s identification as a white woman because she dissociates from blackness and the only time she acknowledges it is when she mocks it. Her mocking further complicates the rhetoric of race as a multilayered concept that does not have a universal definition or mode of identification. It is similar to the white solidarity both Mahar (1999) and Lott (1993) discuss as the white working class of the Jim Crow Era used minstrelsy as not only a way to degrade blacks, but in so doing, cultivate a stronger sense of white identity and unity. To become even whiter, she must mock
and disavow blackness. Like Peola in the 1934 adaptation, Sarah Jane mourns for the whiteness she does not possess and is content becoming invisible in a white world. Even so, she too returns to sadness at her mother’s funeral, an image implying returning to blackness (“truth”) is a return to sadness. This is also related to the film adaptation of Philip Roth’s novel _The Human Stain_ which is associated with the passing novels and films of the past, particularly between the 1930s and 1950s.


_The Human Stain_ is the adaptation of Philip Roth’s novel of the same name. It is the tragic story of Coleman Silk, a classics professor who quits after being accused of racism by two absent students who happen to be black (he called them “spooks” in referring to the absence of their physical being as ghosts; the term was often used as a racial slur for blacks). What no one knows is that Silk is actually a black man passing for Jewish. The film is compelling in its discussion of voluntary passing and the construction of a new racial identity as white, particularly Jewish. This is also a discourse on Jewish identity and acculturation of white mainstream culture and ideals, in that some U.S. Jews today consider themselves white. Silk’s decision to pass for Jewish hearkens back to Jack Robin’s experience in _The Jazz Singer_. Robin’s technique for passing in the early twentieth century are some of the same mechanisms Silk uses during the 1950s when anti-Semitism was not as overt. Although he does not necessarily change his name, Silk’s choice to disconnect from his family and disavow his racial heritage to become a part of a socially accepted group demonstrates the cultural and racial shifts that took place in the United States. Although they suffered racism and discrimination, Jews advanced in various industries and entered the middle-class (Sacks, 1997). Jews became highly successfully by the mid-twentieth century and Silk’s decision to self-ascribe to this group makes him unnoticeable as
the “Other.” Also important in the film is that it features an actor who is of some black heritage to play the young Silk—Wentworth Miller. It is also interesting that Anthony Hopkins plays the older Silk. Perhaps his casting was done so to further illuminate his “whiteness” and therefore is a person who can go unnoticed as a white man. To illustrate the films discourse on race, passing, and performance I analyzed three scenes that speak to the film’s argument about racial performance: silence is key to successful passing because it allows others to project their vision of whiteness.

We first see Silk As a young boxer when his coach advises him to tell everyone that he is Jewish. At first he appears uncomfortable with the suggestion. It is not until his father dies, with whom he had a strained relationship, that Silk considers passing as a means achieving social mobility. The first scene that dramatizes the complex strategies of passing shows Silk’s struggle with is black vs. white (Jewish) identity. Though he passes, it weakens his relationship with his mother. This is when Silk decides that passing may be the best option. The scene opens with Silk sitting in his bedroom in dimmed lighting when his mother enters the room. They discuss his father’s death and Silk realizes he never understood his father’s dream of him enrolling in Howard University rather than a boxer. The elder Silk himself worked in a dining car on a train. Silk says, “The point is, if you’re colored, it doesn’t matter how much you know. You work in the dining car.” This is probably the first indicator that Silk recognizes his limitations as a self-avowed black man and the viewer sees the recognition of the sandiness in this realization as the conversation continues. This is a tense moment as the severance of a familial relationship is revealed.. He and his mother discuss a social and cultural unity of blacks and racial uplift, but Silk does not know “who this we is.” “Coleman, who do you think you are?” Mrs. Silk asks as she sits forward in both concern and almost judgment, as if she expects her son to say he is not
black. Her question becomes the crucial question posed by the film. This question does not necessarily allow an easy answer. The viewer is not only left feeling ambivalent about the tension between mother and son, but also conflicted in wondering who Silk really is. Does he know who he is? Silk says he knows who he is to his mother’s (the viewer’s) disbelief when she says he must be proud of his race. “And what about me? What about just being proud of being me? It’s my life. Or don’t I get any say in the matter,” Silk responds. The scene ends with Silk enlisting in the Navy and checking “white” as his racial marker. The viewer is made to feel judgmental and sympathetic as the question of Silk’s identity lingers. Much like Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life*, he is a sad character who knows that in order to be white, he must “mark” whiteness to convince even himself that he is white. Whiteness is something to be documented to prove its reality and credibility for these passing figures, especially considering whiteness is labeled invisible. He must deny his connection to blackness Silk illustrates that what is invisible can be signified and recognized for it to exist. It even exists in words.

In another scene, Silk reveals his inner racism and self hatred during a boxing match shortly after his white girlfriend leaves him after he introduced her to his mother. This self-hatred and racism are also a part of the act of founding white solidarity. The scene begins with Silk starring down his black opponent in the boxing ring. Silk is told to “go easy” on him and to wait to knock him out in the third or fourth round. Silk stares viciously at his opponent and then proceeds to knock him out in the first round. After the fight, Silk is reprimanded by his manager. “I ain’t holdin’ up no nigger,” Silk spits as he leaves the scene. The camera then zooms in on the black attendant standing behind him. The director’s choice to use this technique alludes to the black man present within Silk. He becomes transparent as he leaves the camera frame and leaves his true blackness behind. This also implies that silk will not only not “hold up no nigger,” but he
will not hold up his own blackness. Even then, the “nigger” is framed by the negative images of blacks in genera. So Silk will not hold up a black man or the negative image of a black man? These are difficult questions to answer as the viewer is still left wondering if Silk really knows who he is. The black man now becomes Silk’s enemy. He becomes his own enemy. This scene exemplifies Silk’s adherence to notions of white identity and unity as he takes part in the historical racism that whites performed against blacks in the 1950s (and even today). By calling his opponent a “nigger,” Silk is participating in whiteness in that he becomes a part of a stereotypical mode of solidarity by performing racism as explained by Mahar (1999) and Lott (1993). In the struggle between black and white, he wants to chastise the black. This also represents the splitting and further denial of his black identity as the enacted white identity takes over. This choice to subordinate blackness is apparent in a conversation he has with his mother later in the film.

Silk shows her a picture of his fiancée Iris, another young white woman. Mrs. Silk already knows he has not told Iris he is black and questions her son’s planning for the future. Silk tells her he told Iris his parents are dead. “I don’t want to be Coleman Silk, the Negro classics professor. And that’s how it will always come out, Mom. You know it and I know it,” Silk says. In stating that he does not want to be “Coleman Silk, the Negro classics professor,” he not only states that he does not accept the verbal marker of his race, but that he does not accept who he truly is. Herein lays the suppression of not just race, but a stable personal identity. He also “forfeits” his blackness as he continues to fall in love with white women. It is arguable that he finds black women attractive, but the audience never sees this interest in the film. In only choosing white women, Silk is reaffirming his identity as a “white man” because to be seen with a black wife will associate him with blackness and therefore inferiority. The white love interest is
a prop in his performance of his white identity. Here, whiteness is not only defined by its opposite in blackness, but also a kind of “supporting whiteness.” The “supporting whiteness” reaffirms his identity as a white man because it is the supporting evidence he needs to prove that he is a citizen of white America. Still, miscegenation is taboo. To accept a white wife is to reject his black heritage. Even then, his marriage is a performance of whiteness and beneficial.

This is also akin to Sarah Jane’s choice to date a white boy in *Imitation of Life*. These two characters must adhere to whiteness in their personal lives for it to be credible in the public.

Mrs. Silk asks if her son will have children because she knows he will not bring them to visit. “Suppose they don’t pop out as white as you?” Silk is evidently uncomfortable with the question and decides he wants to leave. “Coleman, you think like a prisoner. You’re as white as snow, and you think like a slave.” This is an insightful comment because it speaks to the problematic duality Silk feels within himself. Coleman Silk is “lily white” and yet “thinks like a slave.” These words signify and magnify Silk’s association with blackness no matter how hard he tries to dissociate himself from it. This also speaks to the ambivalent nature of passing. Should he remain “in his place” and accept the marker of a black man? Or should he use his appearance to his advantage even if it puts him at odds with his own past? Silk does not want to be limited by his race and therefore denies it. Silk’s blackness appears to dissolve over the years because he is silent about his heritage. He is reaffirmed as white man and even after he is accused of racism against black students, he still cannot refer to his blackness. It is seemingly gone, but it is only just as “invisible” as his whiteness it is. Though he achieves social recognition, revisiting his past is unfulfilling. After telling his young white lover of his past in his old age, the two die in a car accident. Again, returning to blackness is framed as a life of mourning.
Like *The Human Stain*, the films in this category demonstrate the complexity of the racial performance of blacks who pass. Inherent within each of these films is the silent denial of blackness that further reiterates whiteness. Some characters still feel some connection to their black roots in that they are willing at some time to state their blackness. Others never verbally confirm their racial heritage and rely on physical whiteness to confirm their place in white society. Within each film’s discourse on race, whiteness is constructed as a performance. According to Nowatzki (2007), “…whiteness is not achieved simply by having a certain ancestry, skin tone, hair and texture, or facial features, rather, it is constitute by performing what others consider to be ‘white’” (p. 116). These characters’ performances are signified by their masquerade of invisibility and molding themselves into what others (particularly whites) label as white. This masquerade also includes the suppression of blackness. To be white is to be defined by the opposition of blackness. Although none of the characters specifically change their ways of speaking, dressing, or general manner, their ability to blend in with whiteness and therefore become the invisible majority largely constitutes their performance/masquerade. Although the central theme of all these films is the suppression of blackness, they are differentiated by their rhetoric. Micheaux’s discourse on passing in *Veiled Aristocrats* states that passing is a misguided technique to succeed and authenticity can only lead to true happiness. To be who one truly is marks success and happiness, but it may not result in equality. The 1934 adaptation of *Imitation of Life* reiterates that passing is deceitful and misguided, but it also maintains that passing severs family connections and results in a greater loss. *Pinky*’s rhetoric provides a utopian ideal that remaining in one’s place will lead to success at the expense of a true love. The 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life* continues with the argument that passing is not entirely beneficial and is a misguided attempt to garner equal rights. *The Human Stain* is a story with the only successful
image of passing in which the main character is able to let the social recognition of his whiteness maintains his success. All this is at the price of a stable racial identity. Together, these films speak to a greater meaning: to be black is to remain in one’s place while being white implies mobility (the ability to not be restrained by stereotypes). Even then, the passing figures are so constrained by their masquerade of whiteness that they are not truly free at all. Within in all of the discourse is also an underlying rejection of the taboo nature of miscegenation. A white love interest negates blackness while also serving as a benefit. Even then, these films demonstrate the negative results associated with the benefit. All of these films do not provide a solution to racial prejudice and even uphold the idea of a strict racial identity, but they also reiterate the complexity of race, identity, and social recognition. They demonstrate that race itself is entirely a masquerade and simulation of commonly held images of what black and white is. The next chapter discusses racial performance and how class performance is a reincarnation of it.
6. Class Act: Race/Class Films

The final category of films, Class Act: Race/Class Films, features three films from the 1980s and the new millennium that follow in the racial performance of passing and minstrelsy, but they also continue the discourse on the correlation between race and class. The first film *Trading Places* (1983) discusses issues of race and class in Reagan Era America, a time many blacks feel is associated with being economically cheated by the government. This film showcases protagonists who cross the borders of class status through racial performance by switching class identities that are closely linked to racial identity. The final two films open a window of discussions on race and class in the new millennium. *White Chicks* (2004) follows the racial, class, and gender transformation of two black FBI agents working undercover to foil a scheme to kidnap wealthy white heiresses. In this film, racial and gender constructions are influenced by class performance as the two black men experience life as two wealthy white women. The last film, *Havoc* (2005), chronicles the experiences of affluent white teens who partake in black/Latino culture, but as they do so, they literally cross over from the Palisades to the ghettos of East L.A. and appropriate some cultural aspects of their lower class counterparts. In this film, race and class are intertwined as the white teenagers leave their normative white neighborhoods and listen to the music and wear the clothes of the lower class blacks and Latinos in L.A. They also identify themselves with the class experiences of their poorer counterparts. For them, their “racial” transformation is more about rebelling against universal white culture, but they also take on the role of the poor as they culturally appropriate their cultural artifacts. This section explores how class performance is also tied to racial performance.
Trading Places (1983)

Starring comedian/actors Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd, Trading Places is a comedy about class impersonation in Reagan Era America. Louis Winthorpe (Dan Aykroyd) is a wealthy white Wall Street tycoon who is pampered by his butler Coleman, the loved by his heiress fiancée Penelope, and benefits from the job security provided by Penelope’s rich uncles Mortimer and Randolph Duke. He lives in a palatial and affluent brownstone with his personal chauffer and an expensive limousine always parked out front. Opposite the class and racial divide is Billy Ray Valentine is an underclass black conman who wears tattered clothing and pretends he is blind and crippled to receive money from passersby on the street. Valentine has a history with the authorities and no home to speak of. The two literally collide as Valentine runs from the police and Winthorpe leaves work. When Valentine tries to return Winthorpe’s briefcase to him, Winthorpe immediately assumes he is trying to rob him and presses charges against Valentine, invoking white criminalization of blacks. As if affirming the arbitrariness of class and racial signification and affiliation, the Duke brothers make a bet that Valentine and Winthorpe’s lives could be easily traded a means to test the nature vs. nurture debate. They strip Winthorpe of his home and job and replace him with Valentine. Both men’s environments seemingly take a toll on them as Valentine realizes the responsibility of his new upper class comforts and job on Wall Street. He essentially turns into a respectable gentleman by masking his blackness. Winthorpe on the other hand, becomes a lowly unemployed man with no money or home. He becomes much like the former Valentine as he begs for help from prostitute Ophelia (Jamie Lee Curtis). Social success, it would seem, is more tied to class than race. The two men eventually meet again and uncover the Duke Brothers’ experiment and their insider trading. The
Dukes lose their assets and Valentine, Winthorpe, Ophelia, and Coleman go on a tropical vacation.

This particular film connotes a correlation between race and class and the notion that the two terms are interrelated and arbitrary. As the black con artist and the white Wall Street broker literally trade places, the racial and class status and identity traverse the common standards of who can be of what race and class. The film also shows the tradition of minstrelsy and racial passing as the two perform markers that signify race (e.g. clothing, economic status, environment, etc.). Although the two do not necessarily don blackface or whiteface (with the exception of Winthorpe dressing as a Caribbean man in a bad rendition of blackface), they participate in the mechanisms of racial performance as their identities are influenced by their class environments.

As stated in the synopsis, Valentine and Winthorpe are framed by their perspective environments. Valentine pretends to be blind and crippled as he begs people for money. From the beginning, the viewer is made to dislike Valentine because of his antics, but to also laugh at him because of his antics. It is also interesting that Valentine is reminiscent of the minstrel figure coon in his silliness. Bogle (2007) argues Eddie Murphy, much like Valentine, “represents the loose, jivey, close to vulgar black man who does not threaten the white audience’s feelings of superiority,” (p. 281). Bogle demonstrates that Valentine’s position in the film as a stereotype does not threaten white authority. Valentine is not a threat because he is in his “place.” Considering Murphy’s persona as a comedian, it appears acceptable to laugh at Valentine’s/Murphy’s comedic charm. He is already framed as the comic relief. This is quite different from Aykroyd’s Winthorpe who is framed as more unlikeable than comedic. Winthorpe is smugly comfortable in his expensive clothes and career as a commodities trader.
He also garners displeasure for his ignorance of poverty and his assumption that Valentine wants to hurt him. All that changes when the Duke Brothers create their own “scientific experiment” to prove whether or not each man is a product of his environment.

The brothers act as white paternalists as they “help” Valentine get off the streets. The Dukes literally trade each man’s social experience: Billy Ray Valentine becomes “William” and is given Winthorpe’s job and home. Valentine’s class identity changes as this transformation takes place. “William” Valentine wears a tailored gray suit and tie and enjoys the finer things in life, but that all changes after he goes to a bar he regularly attends. Valentine enters a bar and brags to his lower class friends of his new high class status. Valentine buys drinks for everyone and invites them all to his fancy brownstone. Once there, Valentine’s old friends begin to trash the place with cigarettes and alcohol. A few of the women dance topless. Valentine is suddenly disgusted with everyone because they show a lack of respect for his material riches and his new status. Showing his new class affiliation, hee kicks them out of his new home. These boisterous low-class party-goers are easily dismissed because they do not fit into high society. Although not all the guests are black (racially mixed group), Valentines rejection of them is a rejection of the lower class clack identity. This act mirrors Winthorpe’s first interaction with Valentine when he is arrested for “attacking” Winthorpe at the beginning of the film. Winthorpe’s decision to press charges and have Valentine jailed is a symbolic dismissal of poverty that mars comfortable white society. Coleman says that the party was a success for Valentine’s friends. “They wasn’t no friends of mine, Coleman. It was a bunch of freeloaders treating my house like it was a goddamn zoo,” Valentine responds. This is interesting because Valentine arguably would have behaved as his “friends” had if he were not the new owner of the riches. His identity slowly shifts to that of an upper class man. Although he does still carry some sense of humanity in that he befriends
Coleman (unlike Winthorpe who is rather snobbish), Valentine now understands the responsibilities and expectations that accompany a wealthy status. He can no longer entertain lower class friends and he must maintain his new role as a dominant figure over them. This denial of poor blacks is how Valentine passes in a wealthy white man’s world.

In his new life as a wealthy white man, Valentine practices enterprise. Dyer (1997) defines enterprise by the energy and ambition it requires and “the ability to think and see things through—and of its effect—discovery, science, business, wealth creation, the building of notions, the organization of labour (carried out by racially lesser humans)” (p. 31). Although Valentine does not necessarily govern over “racially lesser humans,” he does grow more and more financially savvy as the film continues. Also, judging from his choice to kick out his lower-class guests, Valentine is able to separate his new affluent life from the old poor one and arguably does not want the lower class ruining his new position in life. Dyer (1997) also argues that enterprise encompasses the idea of “self-control and control of others.” Valentine’s disgust with his former friends can be attributed to their trashing his home as any other person would not want that to happen either. But considering the context of Valentine’s experience, Dyer’s assessment can also align with his situation. His new role as a white man means that he must exercise (simulate white) self-control and also control others. This is how he performs his new race and class. His new race and class are also performed through his language.

When Valentine recognizes Winthorpe in a taxi next to his limousine, his speech changes: “Hey. That looks just like the dude that had me busted…Right there. He look just like the motherfu—I mean, he looks just like the gentleman that had me busted.” Here, Valentine’s speech pattern changes as his upper class identity takes shape. He replaced the profanity and “improper” English he used as a poor conman for more “respectable” language that demonstrates
he is well bred, demonstrating the masquerade. According to Taylor (2004) language is significant to the conceptualization of race: “Languages are an ambient feature of our social environments in part because they are also interpretive device; they shape our experiences of the world…” (p. 5). Valentine’s choice to change his language pattern is indicative of how much language and race are so closely related. Valentine code switches from urban slang to normative English to illustrate his racial and class transformation. The code switch functions as a technique to masquerade (pass for a white gentleman). The viewer is made to feel happy that Valentine takes responsibility for his actions and through his education his stereotypical black male role is eliminated for a more cultured businessman. Winthorpe also undergoes a transformation.

Winthorpe learns about the arbitrariness between race and classy by experiencing life as a poor black man. The Dukes have money planted in his coat pocket and then accuse him of stealing from their firm. He is subsequently arrested and is stripped of his tailored suit and dignity as he proclaims his innocence to the police. Winthorpe’s sense of self-entitlement as he demands respect from the police officers is ignored and he is thrown into a jail cell. This is a character flaw that is overcome as Winthorpe is humbled by his new status as a poor man. He is later beaten and dressed in clothing reminiscent of Valentine’s tattered and mismatched outfit presented at the beginning of the film. His hair is unkempt and his clothes are cheap. Winthorpe sheds his former identity as a well-groomed and well-styled businessman. He is now one of the poor who live on the streets and sometimes in jailhouses. Winthorpe no longer looks the part and the rejection by the rich white world leaves him only able to operate in Valentine’s world as a street hustler.

After Winthorpe emerges from his jailhouse in cheap mismatched clothing, Penelope says, “I’m so ashamed. You look awful. Those clothes… and those shoes… and you’ve been
fighting… and that smell!” Penelope, it seems, only recognizes the marks of class, not the person. Winthorpe’s time in jail has helped alter his self-presentation from a member of the upper echelons of society to a member of the lowest. Penelope’s superficial assessment confirms this high class distaste for the lower class and through this confirmation, Winthorpe becomes racialized and framed as a member of the lower classes and therefore the “Other.” He becomes a part of the working class in that he now represents that which is constructed “as excess, as waste, as entertainment, as authenticating, lacking taste, as un-modern, backward, as escapist, as dangerous, unruly and without shame and always spatialised” (Skeggs, 2005, p. 49). Skeggs’ assertion is confirmed by Penelope’s assessment of her fiancé. He is now associated with the “shame” of the lower working class and she cannot be associated with him as she is an heiress to the Duke fortune. She subsequently dumps Winthorpe because he is associated with “excess” and “waste.” Again, he tries to maintain his innocence, but to no avail. He later begs Ophelia for help on his knees as Valentine did in the beginning of the film when he posed as a blind crippled man. He literally takes on the position of Valentine as he becomes a lowly man begging for help. Winthorpe is now defined as a low class black man and the antithesis to white privilege. Through the elimination of his high social and economic status, Winthorpe becomes more educated about the lower class experience. Although the viewer delights in his humiliation at first, he ultimately becomes a more likeable character.

Winthorpe continues in his oppositional identity as a member of the lower classes. After traveling through Ophelia’s neighborhood of dilapidated buildings and trash-covered streets, dressing up as Santa Claus at the Dukes’ Christmas party to steal food and plant drugs on Valentine, Winthorpe identifies even more with the stereotype of the poor con artist that is willing to do anything to get a piece of the American pie, much like Valentine in the beginning.
of the film. Winthorpe’s new social status appears to provoke him to take on Valentine’s former behavior to clear his name and to at least have a meal for the night. He is dirty and “dangerous” in his efforts and exemplifies the plight of the poorer class. Although Winthorpe eventually does become rich again, his experience on the streets demonstrates how he appropriates an identity of extreme poverty that subsequently influences his actions and identity as a poor black man. Valentine’s experience also allows him to become a “gentleman” and reject the qualities he once carried as a poor black man. He becomes a well-respected broker and takes on the role of the dominant figure, or a white man. The viewer learns to accept these characters as the Dukes lose their power and we see how the education Winthorpe and Valentine receive transforms their experiences with race and class performance. Their trading of places demonstrates not only the performance of class, but also that of race as the film uses comedy to soften the tension within discussions of race and class. While the film does not provide a solution to racism and classism, the comedy does create a more benign atmosphere to view race and class. Racial boundaries are also blurred in the form of class and gender performativity in the next film.

White Chicks (2004)

White Chicks, written by the Wayans Brothers and directed by Keenan Ivory Wayans, is another screwball comedy about two black FBI partners Marcus (Marlon Wayans) and Kevin (Shawn Wayans) who volunteer to escort two possible kidnappees, Brittany and Tiffany Wilson, in order to get back in their chief’s good graces. The case involves the kidnapping of heiresses by an unknown perpetrator and the Wilson Sisters are expected to be the next targets. They pick the two sisters up from the airport, but get in a little car accident on the way to the hotel that leaves mild scars on the sisters’ faces. They refuse to go to the Hamptons as planned and Marcus and Kevin call the make-up and undercover division for help so they can pass as/simulate the Wilson
Sisters. They pass successfully (obviously not for the film’s viewers) as they try to figure out who is the possible kidnapper of many heiresses and save the sisters from the perpetrator. The partners indulge in the comfort of class status as they go shopping with the Wilson Sisters’ friends, attend a high stakes charity auction, and appear as the sisters in a high-end fashion show. They are eventually fired for posing as the sisters, but then decide to take matters in their own hands when they find significant clues to the kidnappers’ identities. The film ends with the real Wilson Sisters appearance at the fashion show, the attempted kidnapping by their father’s associates, the unveiling of Marcus and Kevin’s true identity, and their jobs reinstated.

This film features two prominent aspects of passing in a contemporary media culture: the performance of gender and race through prosthetics. Although this is significant to the film’s discussion of gender and race, it is also important to understand that class is important to racial and gender performance. In the age of celebrity heiresses such as Paris and Nikki Hilton, Marcus and Kevin’s impersonation of wealthy white women not only parodies the excess of celebrity, but also blurs the definition of race and class while confirming gender performativity. The partners start out as young working black men who morph into over-privileged white women who then return to their original race and gender. Although they do not permanently alter their gender, race, or class, the racial performance correlates with the portrayed class, further solidifying the malleability of class and racial distinctions. Considering the film’s genre and the Wayans family’s success in comedy, the film frames the performance of race and class in an acceptable mold without actually challenging the viewers’ perceptions. In the context of comedy, the discomfort of these tense subjects is alleviated.

The film opens with the two career-minded FBI agents passing as two Spanish convenient store owners who are waiting for a drug exchange with an ice cream salesman who
stores his drugs in ice cream bins. This scene introduces the performativity of racial stereotypes as the two men wear tan colored prosthetic and speak in Spanish song lyrics while dancing and shaking moroccos. This performance alludes to the minstrel-like image of lower-class Latinos as rhythmically inclined and speaking broken English, an image often represented in film. Although the film is chiefly about their ability to pass as wealthy white women, this scene is significant to the discussion of race and it establishes a way through which to view the partners’ later performance. Marcus and Kevin’s ability to take off the make up and the Spanish accents is important to understanding how they will later pass as white women.

When not passing, Marcus and Kevin are presented as average black professionals in gray suits. This blackness and maleness also includes a connection to working-class status. They may have a job with “good benefits” as FBI agents, but they are far from privilege in comparison to the Wilson heiresses they will later impersonate. When the partners volunteer to work on the case to prevent the kidnapping of Brittany and Tiffany Wilson, they pose as escorts for the young women. This is where the racial and class distinctions first come into view as they meet the two sisters at the airport.

The scene opens with Marcus and Kevin discussing the case and the possibility of moving up in the bureau when the sisters arrive. The sisters arrive on a private jet. The shot opens with a close-up of the airport runway and two clearly white female feet in silver strappy, expensive stilettos stepping from the airplane steps. The camera pans upward and out as the two sisters come into view. Their framing is a cliché cinema shot that visually objectifies the female body and makes visible all the markers of class distinction. Both are wearing short skirts and showing their midriffs and carry expensive-looking purses and a designer dog carrier with a little accessorized dog inside. They swing their hair backward and forward and one pushes up her
obviously augmented breasts. The two are clearly feminized (as male fetishes to be gazed upon) and classed as they strut in their high heels and swing their accessories. Kevin and Marcus approach them, framing the sisters in the middle of the screen. They are dressed in black suits and ties with crisp white shirts and vaguely resemble chauffeurs. In a situation that hearkens back to old cinematic representations of black servants with white employers, following conversation ensues:

Kevin: Hi, I’m Kevin Copeland. This is—

Tiffany: We already gave to the United Negro Fund (nonchalantly and mildly annoyed).

Brittany: Yeah.

Marcus: What?

(The sisters proceed to walk away.)

Kevin: Wait. Hold on.

Marcus: Excuse us.

Kevin: We’re actually here to escort you ladies to the Hamptons.

(The sisters sigh in relief.)

Tiffany: The bags are on the plane. (She shoves her pink case into Kevin’s arms.)

Brittany: Take Baby and clean out his bag. (She shoves the dog bag into Marcus’s arms.) Oh my god. He didn’t have his colonic and he like pooped everywhere.

(The sisters walk out of the shot and the camera zooms into Marcus and Kevin staring in a confused daze.)

This particular interaction is critical in understanding how the role of race and class affect the relationship of these two groups. Apparently shaped by prior experience with blacks and the lower classes, the sisters carry stereotypes about these groups. Historically, images of blacks have been negative and provide essentialist framing. The media has largely framed blacks, especially men, as lazy or criminals. Blacks have largely been dehumanized and framed as
threats more than whites (Greenberg & Brand, 1998). The sisters believe the partners are representatives for the United Negro College Fund, thus framing the agents as servile panhandlers looking for handouts. Their framing of lower class minorities is interesting because although the two men appear respectful in their suits and demeanor, they are still looked upon as racial inferiors. According to Shapiro (2004), there is a significant wealth gap between blacks and whites. Shapiro (2004) argues there are three factors that may reveal why racial inequality pertaining to wealth is so wide between blacks and whites: inheritance, transformative assets (finances that can lift families to a higher economic and social status), and head start assets. All these factors combine to determine why whites control most of the wealth in the United States. Because the statistics have remain largely intact, these whites understand their place as class superiors and the agents role as class inferiors. The Wilson sisters are conscious of their higher status but equally as unconscious about the lower-class experience. As such, they misrecognize Marcus and Kevin.

Rothman (2005) states that legitimized values about race, class, and gender often mask the disadvantages of minority groups: “It has many manifestations—stereotypes that emphasize a lack of motivation and effort as the cause of lack of success, institutional mechanisms that channel some groups into substandard schools that foreshadow restriction to lower-paying and lower status work, and subtle or open discrimination that proclaim that they are obviously not social equals” (p. 129). With this in mind, the Wilson sisters’ evident annoyance with their lower class black counterparts is further solidified by their position as the privileged. Yet within the world and the film which is more working-class identified, their attitude towards their counterparts marks them as unlikeable superficial white women who live with an air of expectancy. The film reiterates the distasteful model of white entitlement through the sisters’
presence. The viewer is made to enjoy their plight when scarred (although the viewer does not take their superficiality seriously). Once again, race is defined by opposites. Here, class is defined by opposites as well, as can be scene in the U.S. class hierarchy. This aids in creating meaning and also solidifying it. Kevin and Marcus eventually switch roles with the Wilson sisters, much like Valentine and Winthorpe in Trading Places.

We witness another view of white classed status through the screwball comedy when Marcus and Kevin morph into the Wilson Sisters who previously treated them as socially unequal. The two men must simulate/perform the sisters’ sense of entitlement, physical augmentation, and personalities to pass/masquerade so they will gain respect from their boss. The two men dress in skimpy clothing, wear whiteface, don blond wigs, and act the hyperbolic representation of over-privileged socialites. Their masquerade as the Wilson sisters is akin to Mark Watson’s performance of blackness in Soul Man in that they all perform stereotypes of race, class, and gender for comedic pleasure. The first task is to degrade lower class minorities. This occurs when they first arrive to the hotel in the Hamptons. Just as the real heiresses in the scene previously discussed, the two agents become feminized objects of the gaze as the camera pans up their bodies. When one of Marcus and Kevin’s Hispanic associates, Gomez, arrive acting as a bellhop, the following exchange takes place:

Gomez: Welcome to the Royal Hamptons Hotel.

Kevin as Tiffany: The bags are in the car, Jose.

Gomez: The name is Gomez.

K/T: Whatever.

K/T: Thanks, Julio.

Here, Kevin and Marcus performance as the Wilson sisters also entails their performance as racial and class superiors. Their comments about Taco Bell and the constant referring of Gomez by stereotypical Latin names not only reveal the racist attitudes that frame the sisters’ treatment of minorities, but also their class relationship and the meaning of their social status. Treating Gomez as a stereotypical Latin servant is akin to the way the Wilsons’ first treated Marcus and Kevin. The partners are ultimately successful in tricking those around them. They rely on persistent stereotypes about Latinos to maintain their position as the over-privileged white women they learned their actions from. Although their performance is ultimately to protect the sisters, Marcus and Kevin have to adopt the markers of privilege, whiteness, and wealth to make their operation a success. This class, gender, and racial swap, much like that in *Trading Places* reveals the arbitrary performative nature of each category and shows the construction of new identities as something comic. The film constructs the masquerade as a benign performance worthy of laughs.

Although Marcus and Kevin pass through prosthetics and appropriating stereotypes of wealthy white women to ultimately save them, their decision to “pass” and play the “minstrels” (that ultimately proves to be very funny) also demonstrates how class performance is intricately ties to racial performance. They sound like the sisters (nasal-infused “white” phrases), look like the sisters (white female prosthetics, blue contacts, clothing), and spend like the sisters (shopping in the Hamptons). All of these are mass-media reified signifying practices of whiteness and, by framing them as comic, the film econstructs them. They have to remain in the Wilson façade to not only protect the sisters, but to protect themselves because if they are revealed as lower class black men, their operation is shut down and they just may lose their jobs. Without the
masquerade, the partners will surely fail. They are lose their jobs because of their deception and are reinstated when they capture the kidnappers at the end of the film. This class/racial performance is not limited to seeking white opportunities as in the passing films, but also about maintaining the comfort of their black lives. Their performance is successful. Although this has no real baring on their racial identities, the partners traversing of racial and class boundaries destabilize the myth of the permanence of these boundaries. The traversing of racial/class lines continues in the new millennium as the stories of teens traveling to the dark side of Los Angeles invokes the discourse on class performance/passing/masquerade.

*Havoc (2005)*

Directed by acclaimed filmmaker Barbara Kopple, *Havoc* is not the typical screwball comedy like *White Chicks*. It is a drama about the cultural transgression and in-group/out-group dynamics that fuels the class/racial hierarchy in Los Angeles. The film is about suburban white teenagers who enjoy living the life of underclass blacks and Latinos as a way to transgress the traditions of white American culture. Friends Allison (Anne Hathaway), Emily (Bijou Phillips), Toby (Mike Vogel), and others cross over into East L.A.’s gang culture where they try to buy drugs from Hector (Freddy Rodriguez) and that is when the “rich-ass white culture” and gang culture collide as Allison and her friends delve too deep into a world they pretend to be a part of, but know nothing about. After Emily is caught in a compromising position with Hector and his friend, the war between white America and urban L.A. erupts as Emily’s parents want to press charges. The film ends with Toby and his friends in gun war with Hector and his gang.

This film revisits many themes surrounding the performance of race and class in the United States. One of the prominent features of the film is it shows how racial performance also
includes class performance. The characters’ performances are like minstrels in that they perform stereotypical images of poor nonwhites. Their performances are also like passing in that they try to suppress their whiteness in an effort to be a part of the in-group. The white teenagers’ use of black and Latino urban culture serves as a cultural appropriation as they seek other identities outside of normative whiteness. They listen to rap music, create their own “gang”, wear urban clothing, and incorporate urban slang into their speech and dialect. All are aspects within cultural appropriation. Rodriguez (2006) states that whites who participate in the cultural appropriation of black art forms “do not simply consume African American art forms. They also appropriate those forms for their own purposes” (p. 648). This is especially true as Allison and her friends listen to rap and try to become a part of the black/Latino scene in East L.A. In their appropriation and choice to geographically abandon their white lives, they seek to racially pass and construct a minority identity that is “cool” because the best things in America “came from black people.” They construct themselves as “wiggers” (a combination of white and nigger) or “a male caucasian, usually born and raised in the suburbs that displays a strong desire to emulate African American culture and style” (http://www.urbandictionary.com), a performance that invokes discourse on stereotypical images of black and Latinos and an authentic blackness the teenagers believe they understand. The film discusses how all of these cultural experiences interact to reify racial passing and multiracial identity that is constructed as the white characters are normative when they are in the suburbs and “othered” when they associate with hip-hop culture. The film invokes discourse on racial identity and its connection to class performance in order to render both problematic.

It begins with a teenager interviewing Allison and her friends about black culture as they are framed by the interviewer’s camera. Ubiquitous rap music plays non-diegetically and is a
prominent feature within the film. The use of rap music not only cues the entrance later into urban culture, but it also invokes tension against whiteness (e.g. Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” and Ice T’s “Cop Killer” demonstrate black distrust of white authority) and speaks to the characters’ home lives. To externalize their internal self-image, the teenagers wear urban clothing such as oversized clothing and gold chains for the boys, while the girls wear heavy make up and big hoop earrings reminiscent of fashion in the 1970s Blaxploitation films. They are in a parking lot sitting on top of car hoods and walking around talking. Allison’s face is framed in a close-up as she gives her monologue that is broken by rap music which implies her reasons for appropriating black culture:

So you want to know about us. ‘Bout kids from the Palisades? That’s easy, right? Our parents moved to the ocean and built walls facing the other way. They send us to private school. They hire rent-a-cops with uniforms and make them drive around in little Ford Escorts, see? This sends a powerful message. There’s us and there’s them, inside the circle and out. We live very sheltered lives.

(Rap music blasts as credit begin to roll.)

…So we dress gangsta. We talk shit. So what? It’s our thing. See, basically, the thing to remember is that…well, none of it really matters. We’re just teenagers, and we’re bored.

Allison’s monologue exemplifies the developing “multiracial” identity she and her friends culturally cross over from their suburban environment to that of urban America to cure their boredom. They use cultural appropriation to escape normative whiteness and enter a fantasy of “otherness.” They “dress gangsta” apparently out of boredom, but as the film continues, boredom signifies (particularly for Allison) isolated whiteness that is constructed in the suburban landscape. According to Scanlon (2006) the suburbs is largely constructed as a sight of racial homogeneity. This prevalence of whiteness aids in developing white solidarity, collective white identity, and white exclusivity. Yet this sameness “bores” Allison and her friends as they seek an
urban identity that is constructed by exoticizing poor blacks and Latinos. What is interesting is that they choose these particular groups who live on the outskirts of mainstream white society. They also end up accepting the stereotypical representations of blacks and Latinos as poor people who listen to one type of music and live in the same neighborhood, a one-dimensional construction. They accept these images because they believe them to be cool. It appears that because black people created “all the good shit,” they are the people to aspire to be like.

The interviewer continues with his video project and asks Toby, Allison’s boyfriend, how he identifies with gangsta culture to which Toby responds: “I mean, I hate fucking rich-ass white culture.” The teenagers are comical figures of exaggerated blackness that is inauthentic although they seek authenticity. The film does not expect the viewer to take these teenagers seriously especially because they are privileged. Toby’s explanation for performing “gangsta” style implies the only way to reject white culture is to become a part of another. He and his friends develop black/Latino identity by becoming race traitors. Ignatiev (1998) defines a race traitor as someone who is “nominally classified as white, but who defies the rules of whiteness so flagrantly as to jeopardize his or her ability to draw upon the privileges of the white skin” (p. 607). Toby and his friends are rejecting their privileges as whites as they immerse themselves in “raced” (urban) spaces, listen to urban music, speak urban slang, and wear urban clothing. They perform opposition to the white system as a part of enacting blackness (Ignatiev, 1998). Ignatiev (1998) also argues that in order for this opposition to be successful, the white individual must be willing to genuinely forget the advantages of whiteness for the expression to be authentic. This is not particularly true for these teenagers as they appear uncomfortable when faced with the reality of poverty and violence prominent in East L.A. They only pass for black/Latino as a form of teen rebellion, but not a true lifestyle in being willing to experience the life of blacks and Latinos.
Their cultural appropriation functions as a misguided effort to find what is and “keep it real,” much like the passing figures in the previous categories who sought privilege through performing whiteness. This also suggests that to be white is to be out of touch with reality and to be nonwhite implies authenticity. Whiteness is a manufactured façade the teenagers rebel against with what they perceive to be authenticity. This is true particularly as Allison and Emily return to their mainstream white lives.

After the teenagers get in a scuffle with others, we see Allison sleeping over at Emily’s home, an affluent Spanish-style house with three expensive-looking cars in the driveway. The shot then cuts to the kitchen/dining area when Allison and Emily enter behind Emily’s laughing father. In this space, the two girls drop their urban clothing and speech and appear to be a part of a normative white family that has no connection with the environment or culture of ghetto America. They appear naked and “unadulterated” with make-up free skin and pajamas. They look innocent in their nakedness which implies that looking urban is dangerous. Because they appear this way, Emily’s parents suspect nothing and continue in their universal image of a normal (white) American family. The scene continues as Allison leaves Emily’s home and returns to her own. She too lives in an opulent home that looks as if it would be featured in Architectural Digest. The camera cuts to Allison entering the kitchen and calling for her absent parents as she gets a soda from the refrigerator. The camera cuts to close-ups of three notes posted on the refrigerator door. They are “promises” Allison’s parents have made to themselves and each other (e.g. “continue therapy and “make love at least once a week”). Allison’s family is characterized by distance implying that closeness is the “other.” The camera cuts to a close up of the last post that is a note stating that Allison’s father wants her to come to his office. Allison reads the note and sits on the kitchen island while sipping her soda. The camera cuts to a close-
up of her face which bears a look of loneliness. A wider shot of her sitting with her soda held in her hands that are between her knees frames the viewer’s recognition of Allison’s emotional abandonment. She is slumped over and looks to the floor. This is her world as an affluent white teenager. The viewer is made to move from judgment to pity at Allison’s suggested abandonment.

What is so significant about this scene in the Palisades (among many others) is the dichotomy of race and class and how these influence racial performance. Allison’s world in particular is marked by absence, loneliness, and therapy sessions. She is a privileged young woman who rebels from her normative white surroundings marked by isolation. Whiteness is then marked as banal and homogenous. Black/Latino culture provides a vibrant landscape for authenticity and rebellion. She is well off because she is centered in a spacious industrial style kitchen with polished floors and counters. Her parents can afford therapy as their relationship with each and their daughter is tested. Here, Allison blends in with the beige and hardwood floor world of her suburban kitchen, but in the previous parking lot/interview scene with her friends, she is a vibrant rebel who speaks her mind. She is “cool” in that she participates in black and Latino cultures. Here is the dichotomy of her racial/class identity that is akin to multiracial identity.

Shih and Sanchez (2005) argue that the implementation of the multiracial category on the 2000 U.S. Census challenges traditionally held views about the limited definition of race and racial categories. Their argument primarily applies to biracial individuals and how open racial categories affect their racial identity development. Although Allison and her friends are children of white parents, their appropriation of black and Latino culture creates a “bi-class” identity as they associate with those of the lower classes. Shih and Sanchez (2005) also argue that
multiracial individuals are often in a position to choose between racial identities. This is evidently true of Allison and her friend Emily as they go from white to black/Latino as they traverse raced environments. They also traverse class boundaries. Mills (2003) states that the under classes are overwhelmingly black and Latino in the United States. As discussed in chapter one, class and race are heavily intertwined as whites are categorized as wealthy while people of color are usually designated as the underclass. As Allison and her friends cross racial boundaries, their racial identities also became entrenched with the lower-classes as they literally crossover into the ghettos of East L.A. Their race and class both become performances as they go back and forth between their perspective raced spaces. They become the underclass as they shift from palatial homes to small overcrowded apartments, from well structured homes to old and dilapidating buildings, from a care free space to the streets where the police are always present. This is their racial and class performance.

Within this category of films, race and class performance are intertwined as stereotypical images of race and class are used to illustrate the maintenance and crossing of these boundaries. They reiterate the concept that race and class are performances that influence identity construction. Trading Places and White Chicks demonstrate that racial/class performance is comical particularly when these categories are traversed. The rhetoric of these films states that with proper education, the in-group and out-group can understand each others’ experiences and learn to transcend the narrow confines of both. While White Chicks does not address transcending race and class identity, it does demonstrate that race and class are malleable terms with equally malleable images. Racial performance in Havoc is much like that in Veiled Aristocrats in that it demonstrates that racial/class performance is misguided and unfruitful. This reveals that racial performance is not as beneficial as thought. The teens in the film still do not
come to know who they are, although they do understand that the lives they desire are more dangerous than they thought. All these films reiterate that privilege and the lack thereof is as much a performance as blackness and whiteness. They do not solve the problem of race and class distinction, but they do allow the viewer to question them.
7. Conclusion

Racial categories are significant to distinguish one group from another. The problem with the term “race” is that it is not a stagnant term that embodies one universal definition. The definition and construction of race has changed dramatically and is largely based on socially-confirmed attitudes. The process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing racial meanings has evolved as slavery was conceived and fell, class was constructed and blurred, and racial presentations have morphed over time. Various media have been a significant aid in developing perceptions of race and how these meanings/perceptions are created. Film is one medium that has a major influence on audience perception of racial categories and whether those categories are as restricted. Film’s use of signifying practices illustrate the popularly accepted image (definition) of race. The films under analysis use raced space (proximity to blackness or whiteness), music, stereotypical images of whites and blacks, dress, speech, camera angles, behavior, etc. to visually mark the existence of race. Within each of these categories, race is signified by the juxtaposition and reification of opposites. These films also reiterate that minstrelsy and racial passing are both racial performances. Blackface and racial passing are interchangeable terms in that they are both performances of race, but they differ in their construction of blackness and whiteness. If minstrelsy is signified by its overexaggeration of blackness, passing is the negation of it and the recognition of whiteness.

Within each of the film categories discussed, the function of the racial performance varies as much as the genres of the films. Blackface in film began as a white interpretation of blackness and ultimately evolved into a mechanism to satirize America’s relationship to race. Although used in a comedic manner, misrepresentation of blacks is still a topic of debate and may never be resolved completely. Minstrelsy further evolved as represented in passing films where light-
skinned blacks chose to pass for white and accept the benefits thereof. In order to maintain white invisibility, blackness is silently denied and whiteness is performed/reinforced. This racial performance also includes performance of class as whites and blacks in the films discussed were framed by their respective classes. With this in mind, racial performance and “race” are mutable terms that are constantly changing. This further founds racial performance as limitless. Although these films do not solve racism and classism, they do invite the audience to reify and deconstruct their perceived notions about race and class and to consider their role as spectators. The first category of films uses minstrelsy to illustrate white solidarity and to question social acceptance of essentialist images of blacks. They invite viewers to consider their construction of race and if they deconstruct them. The second category frames passing as a deceptive and misguided act of silence to gain privilege that usually ends in loss of authenticity. Viewers are allowed to consider the impact of traversing socially accepted definitions of race. The last film category invites the audience to laugh at the oversimplified representations of race and class while also considering the severity that may accompany crossing racial boundaries. Considering the rhetoric of these films, the medium both reifies and deconstructs ideas about race and class representation/performance. They reinforce racial/class stereotypes or invite audiences to reject them by questioning their validity. Either way, films do not solve racism and classism; sometimes they challenge them. Sometimes they reiterate them.
Works Cited


Carilli (Eds.), *Cultural diversity and the U.S. media* (pp. 3-22). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.


115


