



What Teacher Education Can Learn From Blackface Minstrelsy

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Research on the racial identities of White future teachers has assumed and circulated an overly simplified, and ultimately unhelpful, conception of White racial identity. An alternative is needed, which the authors develop with reference to scholarship that explores White people's participation in blackface minstrelsy. They argue that at the core of White racial selves is a profound ambivalence that must be accounted for if future research is to better illuminate what the racial identities of White future teachers mean for their development as educators.

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An odd juxtaposition: What can teacher education, an activity pursuing a better, brighter future through the education of future teachers, learn from blackface minstrelsy, something so old, so dirty?

Our argument is straightforward. Research on the racial identities of White¹ future teachers has assumed and circulated an overly simplified, and ultimately unhelpful, conception of White racial identity. An alternative is needed, which we develop here with reference to scholarship that explores White people's participation in blackface minstrelsy.

Teacher education programs are expected to attend to racial issues in pedagogy and to inequalities in school and society. Increasingly, researchers of teacher education are trying to understand what the White racial identities of most of our society's future teachers mean for their learning and development as educators. Unfortunately, this research has tended to draw on and repeat conceptions of Whiteness and White racial identity that are static and that ignore history and social context. A growing number of researchers and theorists have begun to worry that prevailing characterizations of White future teachers are undermining, rather than enabling, efforts to imagine and live out a vigorous and effective multicultural and antiracist teacher education.

Our primary purpose and focus, then, is to provide an alternative account of White racial identity, one that includes attention to its complex social and historical production. To do this, we turn to scholarship in cultural studies, and especially to historical research on blackface minstrelsy and its progeny. For us, the

significance of this work lies in its ability to help us understand the historical fabrication, changeability, and contingencies of Whiteness, even as it keeps a steady eye on the power relations of Whiteness and the social devastation these power relations have generated (Jacobson, 1998).

In what follows, we first provide some background on blackface minstrelsy. We sketch its typical form and content, as well as note the contradictory stances taken toward blackface minstrelsy by writers and scholars who have tried to make sense of what one New York journalist in 1855 called this "pleasing insanity" (cited in Lott, 1995, p. 5). Then, we examine how White future teachers have been portrayed, in relation to multicultural teacher education, as a homogenous group of mostly deficient learners. This problem is related to a hazard in Whiteness studies, where the concept of Whiteness (which makes possible critical insight into the workings of White power and privilege) sometimes overwhelms our attempts to understand how White racial identities are produced and lived on the moving ground of culture, history, and society.

The guts of our work is an alternative account of White racial identity. We begin with historian David Roediger's (1991) description of how, starting in the early 1800s and in response to workplace demands that changed what it meant to be a good worker, White working people projected onto Black people qualities or characteristics of themselves that they were being forced to give up. In this process of projection, a Black Other was created who commanded center stage in blackface minstrelsy. We then develop four crucial insights into White racial identity provided by scholarship on blackface minstrelsy and its history:

1. This racial history is still with us, in us.
2. A pattern of White attraction to, and appropriation of, Black cultural forms has been vital to the production of White racial identity in the United States.
3. Conflict, *a profound ambivalence*, sits at the core of White selves.
4. Our racial history includes moments when White racial identities might have developed in the direction of cross-racial solidarity, instead of toward a hardening of racial stereotype and division.

Because we believe that beginnings are important, that they open up and foreclose various paths for our discourses and

projects, we are interested in the possibilities that attend imagining White future teachers and their racial identities differently. We conclude our article with three suggestions for future research and teacher education efforts rooted in the alternative account of White racial identity that we develop here.

Background

Blackface Minstrelsy

Blackface minstrelsy emerged in the early 1830s and became the most popular form of entertainment in the United States in the 19th century. Eric Lott (1995), whose *Love and Theft* explores the relation of minstrelsy to the White American working class, notes that blackface minstrelsy was centered in the urban North and was a theatrical practice “organized around the quite explicit ‘borrowing’ of black cultural materials . . . in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit” (p. 3). Although its form and content underwent revision over time, performances generally began with five White men on stage, arranged in a semicircle. The men had burnt cork or grease paint applied as “blackface” and were dressed in “outrageously oversized and/or ragged ‘Negro’ costumes” (p. 5). In the middle of the semicircle was Mr. Interlocutor, a sort of master of ceremonies, who used a less exaggerated version of counterfeited “black dialect” and dressed more formally than his fellow performers. On either side of Mr. Interlocutor were musicians, most often banjo and violin players. On the ends of the semicircle were Mr. Tambo, the tambourine player, and Mr. Bones, with his bone castanets.

The show had three parts:

The first part offered up a random selection of songs interspersed with what passed for black wit and japey; the second part (or “olio”) featured a group of novelty performances (comic dialogues, malapropistic “stump speeches,” cross-dressed “wench” performances, and the like); and the third part was a narrative skit, usually set in the South, containing dancing, music, and burlesque. (Lott, 1995, pp. 5–6)

As professional theater, blackface minstrelsy had largely disappeared by the 1920s. However, it lived on in countless amateur productions well into the 1960s. (One of the authors learned recently that in the mid-1940s, in a farming community in Wisconsin, his aunt had performed in blackface when her senior class put on a minstrelsy show at the local high school.) Of course, even as minstrelsy-as-theater dwindled, performers and others continued to “black up”: In film, Al Jolson, Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby, and Betty Grable, among others, performed blackface numbers; in country music and vaudeville, blackface performers included Bill Monroe, Jimmie Rodgers, and Sophie Tucker; Ted Danson, in 1993, caused a minor scandal when he appeared at a Friar’s Club roast (in honor of his then-girlfriend, Whoopie Goldberg) in blackface; and college fraternities seem especially fond of blackface for talent shows and Halloween parties.²

This quick sketch of blackface minstrelsy might suggest that it is easily captured and rendered by scholars as a theatrical and cultural practice. But this is not true. Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996) reports that it was “an appalling experience” to pursue her research on blackface minstrelsy and “encounter the brute force of nineteenth-century antiblack sentiment” (p. 82). However,

Gotschild knew that minstrelsy took up some sort of relationship with Black culture; given her interest in the “Africanist presence” in American dance and other performance, she had to ask and attempt to answer the question: “Beneath its layers of mockery and distortion, what in minstrelsy was really Africanist?” (p. 82).

Since its inception, commentators and scholars have been responding, on the one hand, to the “mockery and distortion” aspect of blackface minstrelsy, and on the other, to its connections to Black culture. Writing in 1848, Frederick Douglass called minstrelsy performers “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and to pander to the corrupt taste of their fellow citizens” (cited in Lott, 1995, p. 15). Conversely, 50 years later, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1997) saw fit to include minstrel songs written by the White Stephen Foster—“Swanee River” and “Old Black Joe”—in his narration of the ongoing historical development of the slave song. While Du Bois was certainly mindful of what he called the “debasements” of Black music found in many minstrelsy performances, he argued that, in compositions such as Foster’s, the “songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody” (p. 189). Foster, who is sometimes called the father of American music for writing songs such as “Oh, Susanna” and “Camptown Races,” performed in blackface minstrelsy shows as a youth; and he sold some of his most famous songs, including “Swanee River,” to E. P. Christy, leader of the popular Christy Minstrels (Toll, 1974).

Contemporary scholars often attempt to take up and account for both of these aspects of blackface minstrelsy in their work. Gottschild (1996) articulates this doubled, contradictory stance:

Those who read and write about it today need to regard minstrelsy as, on the one hand, a white conceit having little to do with African American anything and, on the other hand, a genre that expropriated and imitated bona fide Africanist expressive forms. The fantasy parts included the claims of “real” plantation life as played by “real darkies.” . . . The genuine article included the widespread dissemination and use of the banjo, an instrument of African origin; Africanist musical invention centering around rhythm and syncopation; and the presence of plantation-derived dances such as the walkaround, the “Virginia Essence” and . . . the “Cakewalk”—all stylized and refashioned as stage forms but nevertheless, rooted in Africanist origins. (p. 83)

Blackface minstrelsy emerged out of and reproduced social relations that White people have taken up with Black people and Black cultural products—relations characterized not just by mockery and fear and theft, but also by attraction and desire. These relations, as we argue later in this article, produce and express an ambivalent White racial identity that, unfortunately, is ignored in the research on the racial identities of White future teachers.

White Future Teachers

In her recent article in *Review of Educational Research*, Karen Lowenstein (2009) provides a careful, exhaustive review of how White future teachers have been represented in research on teacher education with multicultural and antiracist goals. For Lowenstein, this research draws on and repeats continuously an

“often unexamined conceptualization of White teacher candidates as deficient learners about issues of diversity” (p. 163). This conceptualization features both (a) a homogenizing tendency in which White future teachers are assumed to all be the same and (b) an assumption of “deficit” on the part of these future teachers, in which they “bring little or nothing to learning about diversity” (p. 167), or worse, bring exactly the wrong stuff (racist stereotypes, a willful ignorance of societal inequality, the belief that racism is personal/sporadic rather than institutional/systematic, etc.). As one of many examples of this conceptualization at work in the teacher education literature (also called a “caricature” later in the article), Lowenstein points to a statement by Mary Louise Gomez (1996) about the difficulty of assuring that White future teachers will take up a respectful, educative stance in relation to students who are marginalized in our schools:

As a teacher educator engaged in challenging—and attempting to change—the perspectives on “Others” of *young, White, monolingual-in-English, heterosexual females from suburbia*, I am keenly aware of the difficulties and ironies of the tasks I and my colleagues have set for ourselves. I recognize that it is unlikely that a few semesters in a teacher education program can turn *racists or homophobes* into teachers who carefully and joyfully educate the children of “Others.” (all italics added; p. 126)

Lowenstein (2009) is worried that conceiving of White future teachers this way may “lead to pedagogies that deaden their engagement in teacher education classrooms” (p. 163) and contribute to a form of self-fulfilling prophecy in which the assumption of deficit and racism produces just such deficits and racism in future teachers. And she notes this irony: One of the goals of multicultural teacher education is to help White teachers conceive of their students, especially students of color, as active learners who bring rich, diverse meanings and values to the classroom that can be built upon and extended in a dignified, culturally responsive pedagogy; yet future White teachers are to learn such a stance toward their own students while being positioned as a homogenous group of deficient learners in their teacher education classes and programs.

Hilary Conklin (2008) explores this irony in relation to her own and others’ work as teacher educators, against the backdrop of feminist and Buddhist notions of caring and compassion. Conklin finds that, as a White teacher educator, her very commitment to “helping mostly white, monolingual, middle-class prospective teachers become compassionate, successful teachers for racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students” (p. 654) seems to lead her to treat White future teachers with little respect and compassion. She theorizes that the “passion and commitment” of teacher educators who are dedicated to a critical and justice-oriented teacher education come into conflict with

the very real challenge of helping prospective teachers understand and enact such a vision. While many teacher educators have found skillful strategies to help prospective teachers grow and learn to become effective teachers for diverse learners, other teacher educators struggle to find compassion for prospective teachers who appear to lack compassion for the students they teach. (p. 654)

Conklin and Lowenstein are careful not to caricature teacher educators and researchers of teacher education in ways that parallel the caricature of teacher candidates. Similarly, our reuse, above, of this quote from Gomez (1996) is not meant to suggest that it somehow exhausts what she and others think and write about White future teachers. For example, in a recent article on the “ideological becoming” of a White future teacher referred to as Alison, Gomez and her coauthors, Rebecca Black and Anna-Ruth Allen (2007), assert that

many prospective teachers, like Alison, are ready to learn about issues of equality and social justice, how these come into play in their teaching, and what they need to push them toward an articulated vision of what their teaching might look like and how it will benefit students. (p. 2131)

Thus, our own reading of the Gomez (1996) quote is that although it does indeed express a conceptualization of White future teachers that is widespread and a serious problem, it also expresses (a) Gomez’s justified moral outrage at how students of color and other Others are routinely treated in school and (b) a deep, lived recognition of the difficulty (even the seeming impossibility and absurdity, at times) of the task we set for ourselves in multicultural and antiracist teacher education.

Still, it matters how we conceptualize, how we imagine, White future teachers in our teacher education programs and research. Cameron McCarthy (2003) criticized a similar tendency toward overly simplified portraits in his response to a 2003 special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies of Education* that was devoted to Whiteness issues in teacher education. For McCarthy, Whiteness is too often imagined as a sort of “deposit, a stable cultural and biological sediment that separates whites from blacks and other minorities” (p. 131). Maurice Berger (1999) suggests that the temptation to essentialize White racial identities is not just a problem in research on teacher education but an ever-present danger in the larger field of Whiteness studies. For Berger, the challenge is “how to advocate the idea of whiteness as a useful classification for examining white power and prestige without ignoring its limitation in defining and describing its subjects” (p. 206).

More than 15 years ago, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) warned against imagining Whiteness as “emptied of any content other than that which is associated with racism and capitalism” (p. 232), for at least two reasons. First, she thought such a conception inaccurate, and reminded us that

a range of practices, symbols, and icons have been drawn from elsewhere into the cultural practices of white people. Nor is white culture (in fact, culture in general) a material and discursive space produced and reproduced in a vacuum. Whiteness is inflected by nationhood . . . [and] whiteness, masculinity, and femininity are coproducers of one another, in ways that are, in their turn, crosscut by class and by the histories of racism and colonialism. (p. 233)

Second, Frankenberg predicted that a flattened-out and reduced conception of Whiteness would result in theoretical and political paralysis. If Whiteness was imagined as “inherent or timeless,” then there was nothing with which to work, nothing to do.

Frankenberg urged us to conceive of Whiteness as “contingent, historically produced, and transformable through collective and individual human endeavor” (p. 233).

We turn now to our reconceptualization of White racial identity, with sustained attention to how it is contingent, historically produced, and transformable through human endeavor.

Desire, Ambivalence, and Blackface Minstrelsy

In his book on White teachers and multiracial schools, Gary Howard (1999) begins with a personal story about being a young White man going on a date with a young Black woman. He asserts that this “one connection I made in high school with a person outside my own race symbolizes an essential step for any dominant culture person who wishes to grow beyond the limits of encapsulation” (p. 12). This “one connection” led Howard to work with and then live in predominantly African American communities, and to pursue studies related to social justice and antiracism. One moral of this story, for us, is that our theorizing about White racial identity and the move to antiracist stances will be inadequate as long as we ignore attraction, desire, and *positive* valuation.

Of course, in the context of White privilege and a White supremacist society, such desire is also dangerous—dangerous in its potential to lead to what bell hooks (1992) calls “eating the Other”:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, and sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (p. 23)

Thus, White desire may manifest itself as a colonizing form of cultural appropriation. However, if such attraction can be maintained in tension with the hard work of examining personal and societal investments in racism and White privilege, a potentially antiracist commitment might emerge.

This is precisely the historical problem that work on blackface minstrelsy has been exploring—how the obvious attraction to Black cultural forms, evident in minstrel shows, led not to reliable cross-racial alliances between working and poor Blacks and Whites but instead to a hardening of racial divisions and racial stereotypes of Black people.

Roediger (1991) argues that, in the antebellum United States, Whiteness developed as “a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline” (p. 13). If White workers wished to adhere to new definitions of what it meant to be “good workers,” then certain ways of being, certain desires and pleasures, could not be a part of themselves anymore. But those desires and pleasures were not completely abandoned—instead, they were projected onto Black people through mechanisms such as blackface minstrelsy. That is, Black people, especially Black men, were assumed to embody the desires and pleasures that White workers were giving up under the pressure of capitalist work discipline. Out of this process of projection there emerged “an image of the Black population as ‘other’—as embodying the preindustrial,

erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for” (p. 14).

One way to understand the popularity of blackface minstrelsy in 19th-century America, then, is that it provided a screen for the projection of White people’s fantasies. These fantasies, although certainly racist, were anything but simple. For Thandeka (2001), who draws on Roediger’s historical account of the development of White racial identity and extends it with a more thoroughgoing psychoanalytic treatment, White people’s “attachment to the black image” of the minstrelsy stage represented a desire to “recover feelings that for themselves as ‘whites’ were intolerable, but as prewhites were the hallmarks of their humanity: sensuality, sexuality, free play, the premodern home, whimsy, strutting, zipping, dashing, clowning, cooing, cooning” (p. 70). Here, Thandeka is distinguishing between prewhite/premodern ways of feeling and moving in the world and those that accompany capitalist work discipline and its factory time, bells, and whistles. White workers mourned the loss of these prewhite (and often rural) ways of being, but also found them “intolerable” because they were incompatible with being “good workers.” White workers invested Black people with what they simultaneously longed for and despised. Thus, blackface minstrelsy, for Lott (1995), combined a

nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, [making] blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure. (all italics added; p. 6)

Blackface minstrelsy had a central role to play in the social construction of Whiteness as a racial identity, a process that was inseparable from the emergence of industrial capitalism and the subject positions it offered working people. White working people were defining themselves, in complex ways, in relation to Black people and Black cultural forms. At the same time, they also used blackface minstrelsy to define themselves in relation to, and against, White elites. For Robert Toll (1974), after the War of 1812, Americans expressed a “need for native forms, symbols, and institutions that would assert the nation’s cultural distinctiveness as clearly and emphatically as the war had reaffirmed its political independence” (p. 3). However, there were profound differences in how American elites and common people wanted this need to be addressed. Elite groups hoped for a “cultural renaissance in which American artists and subjects would bring European forms and concepts to new heights of achievement,” while “middling” Americans attacked and rejected this direction (p. 3). Instead, they wanted cultural forms that

reflected the average man’s nationalism and egalitarianism, glorified “plain people,” were aggressively antiaristocratic and anti-European, and could replace rural folk culture with symbols that white “common men” could all unite around. (p. 5)

Enter blackface minstrelsy.

Its performances put White workers in the audience in relation to a degraded Black Other created on stage, but these performances were also part of White working people’s efforts to figure

out who they were in relation to White elites. These workers knew that they did not move with the power and independence of upper-class Whites, and they knew that they would continue to confront alienating work. But they were consoled by the fact that they were not enslaved, not Black (Du Bois, 1935/1992, called this the “psychic wage” paid, by Whiteness, to White working people). Rather than think of blackface minstrelsy as a form of entertainment removed from the demands of the working day (a form of escape), we would do well to read it as very much a part of and a response to the economic, social, political, and cultural issues confronting White folk at the time.

We turn, now, to the four aspects of White racial identity and its production that are illuminated by the scholarship on blackface minstrelsy.

Blackface Minstrelsy Endures

First, the scholarship on blackface minstrelsy emphasizes that this racial history is still with us, in us. As Lott (1995) states: “Studying the most popular entertainment form of the nineteenth century together with its characteristic audience is perhaps the best way to understand the affective life of the race in that time and in ours” (p. 4). Scholars need book-length treatments to redeem a claim such as this, but we can at least point to the sorts of evidence and arguments that Lott and others muster by sketching just how profligate and promiscuous blackface minstrelsy was (and is).

For Gottschild (1996), what has “proven to be the most insidious level of minstrelization, from the Africanist perspective, is the way in which [its] influence has persisted in nonminstrel cultural forms”—specifically, how minstrelsy served to solidify and propagate the “minstrel stereotype as the true picture of black offstage life” (p. 124). Ralph Ellison (1953/1995) named this stereotype the “black mask.” In his study of the prevalence and history of the stereotype in American literature, Sterling A. Brown (1933) identified seven primary forms: Contented Slave, Wretched Freeman, Comic Negro, Brute Negro, Tragic Mulatto, Local Color Negro, and Exotic Primitive. Patricia Hill Collins (1991), in her analysis of the “controlling images of Black womanhood,” pointed to Mammy, Matriarch, Welfare Mother, and Jezebel stereotypes (p. 167). Joseph Boskin (1986) called the whole mess “Sambo”; and he documented in numbing detail this minstrel stereotype, which continues to manifest, in changing forms, everywhere in North American popular and material culture. We quote Boskin at length, below, to emphasize the breadth and pervasiveness of the minstrel stereotype in American life:

In journals, weeklies, newspapers, magazines, travel reports, diaries, brochures, and broadsides, there was Sambo, cited for his antics. His style filled the literary field in novels, short stories, children’s tales, dime novels, essays, pamphlets, and leaflets. Visually, Sambo appeared in posters, on sheet music covers, postcards, wooden pegboards, in illustrations, paintings, cartoons, comic strips, children’s games, on postage stamps, in advertisements, on magazine covers, playing cards, stereoscopic slides—the last of which were enlarged by the electrical and electronic media, including the projector and nickelodeon, movies, and television. On stages, in skits, marches, musicals, in street theater, circuses, plays, radio shows, and at impromptu gatherings, at least

one Sambo figure pranced across the lights before audiences cued to his actions. Dressed half in yellow, half in blue, Sambo mascots paraded before cheering crowds at college football games. In public schools, teachers reserved a “nigger seat” for white students, to punish them for stupidity. Sambo posed as ceramic figurines on dining-room tables or in living rooms, stood elegantly on front lawns as iron jockeys, was a backdrop for food and kitchen products, appeared attired in service-oriented dress on posters and wooden figures, and raised his smiling head atop men’s canes. The material culture was full of him: trays, shoehorns, belt buckles, tea sets, goblets, pillows, and countless bric-a-brac. Sambo’s happy, grinning countenance lit up restaurants, stores, hotels, businesses, universities, and even churches. (p. 11)

Certainly, as Boskin (1986) notes, the image of Sambo changed over time: The “gross caricature of the nineteenth century” gave way to a more natural look in the 20th, and the “buffoonish names and funny dialect mostly disappeared because of sensitivity brought about by Afro-American pressure and the generational revolt of the 1960s” (p. 15). Still, Boskin has little doubt that “aspects of Sambo live on in the white mind and show through the crevices of American culture in subtle and sophisticated ways” (p. 15).

If blackface minstrelsy bequeathed a variable but sturdy stereotype down through U.S. history, it was also ancestor to multiple forms of popular entertainment, many of which continue. W. T. Lhamon Jr. (1998) is not even sure that it makes sense to believe that blackface minstrelsy ever came to an end:

Given that the minstrel show has seeped well beyond its masked variants into vaudeville, thence in sitcoms; into jazz and rhythm ’n’ blues quartets, thence into rock ’n’ roll and hip hop dance; into the musical and the novel, thence into radio and film; into the Grand Old Opry, thence into every roadhouse and the cab of every longhaul truck beyond the Appalachians—why, then, is the minstrel show said to be over? (p. 56)

One contemporary example of blackface minstrelsy’s endurance will suffice for now.

On Rush Limbaugh’s radio show in March of 2007, a White comic named Paul Shanklin “blacked up” his voice, impersonated Al Sharpton, and performed a song called “Barack the Magic Negro.” Shanklin had his counterfeit Sharpton creation sing and complain, to the tune of “Puff the Magic Dragon,” that Obama was “black, but not authentic-ly” (see Associated Content, 2008, for full lyrics). The song began this way:

Barack the Magic Negro lives in D.C.
The L.A. Times, they called him that
'Cause he’s not authentic like me.
Yeah, the guy from the L.A. paper
Said he makes guilty whites feel good
They’ll vote for him, and not for me
'Cause he’s not from the hood.

As has usually been the case with race and blackface minstrelsy in the United States, the twists and turns, the appropriations and history, here, are breathtaking. Limbaugh’s introduction to the song and the song’s lyrics made reference to a *Los Angeles Times* editorial by David Ehrenstein (2007). Ehrenstein, in turn, had

cited past commentators on popular culture and film who had criticized what they saw as an update of the Sambo stereotype in the figure of the “Magic Negro”—Black characters who exist only, it seems, to help White people and make them feel better (think Sidney Poitier in *Lilies of the Field* or Michael Clarke Duncan in *The Green Mile*, says Ehrenstein). Thus, a phrase first used to criticize White representations of Black people in film—“Magic Negro”—is then used by Ehrenstein to raise questions about both (a) potential White voters who project their “fantasies of curative black benevolence” onto Obama and (b) Obama himself, who “lends himself” to the role of “white America’s idealized, less-than-real black man.” And then in their blackface minstrelsy number, Limbaugh and Shanklin appropriated the phrase and Ehrenstein’s editorial for their own purposes.

These purposes were multiple, and as we noted in relation to 19th-century blackface minstrelsy, the targets of abuse were not only Black people. Even as Limbaugh and Shanklin appropriated Sharpton’s “voice” and mocked him, even as they disparaged Ehrenstein (who self-identifies as Black, Jewish, and gay), even as they raised doubts about Obama’s legitimacy as a presidential candidate, Limbaugh was at some pains in his commentary before and after the performance to explain that his main target for abuse was *other White people*. We admit that we cannot always follow Limbaugh’s logic, that we do not always believe what he says, and that we do not think he necessarily has much insight into himself or access to the reasons for his own actions. But one of the reasons he aired this performance and called Obama “the Magic Negro” (repeatedly), Limbaugh insisted (repeatedly), was to help White people understand that “supporting Obama is worthless because you’re just, you’re just exhibiting racism because you know he’s not a real black.” And besides, Limbaugh reminded us, “that’s what we always do here—we do parodies and satires on the idiocy and phoniness of the left” (Media Matters, 2007). In other words, Limbaugh used a blackface performance to assert that Obama himself was a blackface performer, and that White voters’ support for him was evidence, therefore, of racism. (Ergo, in Limbaugh’s view, we have elected our first blackface president.)

Attraction and Appropriation

The second crucial insight that the scholarship on blackface minstrelsy provides is access to a pattern of White attraction to Black people and Black cultural forms, followed by White people’s appropriation of those forms for their own purposes and profit. This pattern is what Lott (1995) was signaling with his book title—*Love and Theft*—and he wants us to take both halves of the title seriously, both the stealing and the powerful attraction to and fascination with Black ways of moving in the world. This pattern plays out over and over (and over) in American history, as well as in the lives of individual White Americans who are making themselves up with cultural materials at hand.

For example, Gottschild (1999) points to what happened with both swing music and dance in the 1930s and ’40s as instances of love and theft. (And she notes yet another repetition of this pattern in the revival of swing dance in the late 1990s, in which, as Gottschild argues, the earlier Lindy dance is forgotten and “deracinated from its Africanist origins by a generation of young people who are notoriously ahistorical” [p. 8]). Gottschild

reminds us that the original Lindy, as dance, was the “perfect evocation” of the swing music of the time, and that this “African American swing music sound was being commercialized, commodified, and sold to a mass white market, often with white musicians ‘covering’ this originally African American style” (p. 8). But at the center of Gottschild’s concern is what happened to the Lindy as it moved from Black to White communities, and this includes not just a criticism of White appropriation but also sadness over a missed opportunity for a different sort of influence and mixing:

In the Lindy’s journey from black to white communities, we can track patterns of appropriation, integration, and segregation in swing-era America. We see whites coming to the Savoy ballroom in Harlem to dance in one of the first integrated venues in the USA. We actually see a dance form breaking down generations-old racial barriers, albeit temporarily. Then, as the Lindy becomes gen-
trified, “whitened,” and renamed the Jitterbug, we see an important example of the appropriation and commodification of black cultural property by the dominant culture. At that point, the Lindy is taught at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio and at similar white institutions as a set, codified means of expression, largely devoid of improvisation and other Africanist attributes. (pp. 8–9)

Thus, we should not be surprised that hip hop culture has become the privileged cultural form for adolescents in North America (Yon, 2000). Instead, we should see it as only the most recent example of White fascination with Black people and Black ways of being, stretching back through rock and roll, jazz, and the blues, to blackface minstrelsy (Jones, 1963).

Ambivalence at the Core of White Racial Identity

Our discussion of the enduring legacies of blackface minstrelsy and of White attraction to Black people and Black cultural forms suggests just how important the “Africanist presence” has been for the meaning-making and self-making of White people throughout U.S. history (Morrison, 1992). Indeed, Ellison (1953/1995) proposed that we

view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and scene upon which and within which the action unfolds. If we examine the beginning of the Colonies, the application of this view is not, in its economic connotation at least, too far-fetched or too difficult to see. For then the Negro’s body was exploited as amorally as the soil and climate. It was later, when men drew up a plan for a democratic way of life, that the Negro began to exert an influence upon America’s moral consciousness. Gradually he was recognized as the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human natural resource who, so that the white man could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization. (pp. 28–29)

In other words, White people have *used* Black people not only for their labor and economic gain, “exploited as amorally as the soil and climate,” but also have used them as a “human natural resource” to work out who they are as White people. Earlier, we drew on Roediger (1991) to introduce this idea of White people projecting onto Black people qualities of themselves that they simultaneously desired and rejected, using Black people as

symbolic resources to create White racial selves in relation not only to Black selves but also to other White selves from different social classes and ethnicities. Ellison (1953/1995) thought that this economic and symbolic exploitation of Black people had consequences for White racial identity and led to a profound ambivalence at the core of White racial selves. He thought of this ambivalence in terms of a conflict between democratic ideals and the obvious betrayal of those ideals, evident at every moment in U.S. history and society. For Ellison, the White American's self is grounded on a

dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain anti-democratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. (p. 28)

In a recent study with White people living in a rural community in Wisconsin, a similar ambivalence was discovered in interviews with an elementary school teacher referred to in the article as Delores (Lensmire, 2010). For Delores, it was not so much a sacred democratic belief but a religious belief that animated her dilemma. She was a devout Catholic, and for her that meant that every person was to be treated with dignity. But she also knew that our society did not treat everyone with dignity. Furthermore, Delores knew, given her experiences during the civil rights and antiwar movements of the late 1960s, that our society was willing to punish those who attempted to witness, to tell about and protest, injustice. As Delores said, "Well if it harms somebody else you should tell." But then she continued: "What's going to happen to me if I tell? You know, what's going to happen to me if I protest?" (p. 165).

Scholars of blackface minstrelsy assume that profound ambivalence—desire and shame, envy and repulsion, sympathy and fear—sits at the center of White racial identities. This assumption contrasts sharply with how White future teachers are imagined in research on Whiteness and White racial identity in teacher education.

Ellison (1953/1995) thought that this ambivalence helped explain the pervasiveness and longevity of the minstrel stereotype. He granted that stereotypes functioned as a "social instrumentality" that could be wielded by "a ruling class to control political and economic realities" (p. 28). But for Ellison, stereotypes were much more than "simple racial clichés" used to repress and control. He thought that their true significance was to be found in their mediation of conflict, of ambivalence, within the White self:

Color prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe. . . . Hence, whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. . . . Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (pp. 28, 41)

As White people, we need stereotypes of people of color to give us relief from the strain of participating in and benefiting from a

society that at every moment disregards a founding principle—that all people are created equal. Stated differently, racial stereotypes enable White people to continue believing in democracy even as they betray it. At the core of White racial identities, then, is a dilemma, a conflict, an ambivalence—a belief in, and desire for, equality in America, poised against the evidence, all around us, of massive inequality.

Possibilities Lost

Finally, we value how scholarship on blackface minstrelsy makes explicit that this all could have gone differently, and better—and that it did, sometimes (even if, tragically, only for limited periods). Building on and responding to Lott's work, Lhamon (1998, 2003) and Dale Cockrell (1997) argue forcefully that early (before the mid-1840s) and late blackface minstrelsy were very different. Lhamon (2003), for example, has uncovered and collected early minstrel plays that Lott did not have access to—and these early plays display not a hatred for Black people but a consistent solidarity with them. They display "how politically disenfranchised and economically excluded Americans have long felt attraction for black ways of moving through trouble" (p. x).

In another study, Lhamon (1998) traced the idea of Jim Crow back through time and discovered that before Jim Crow gave his name to our system of apartheid in the South, he was a Black trickster figure. To "jump Jim Crow" was to summon this trickster, this disrupter of the system. Thus, in the beginning of blackface minstrelsy, when White working youth—new to the city from rural areas in Europe and America, disconnected from family and traditional ways of organizing life—when these young White workers blacked up and jumped Jim Crow, they were not engaged in a project of mocking Black people. From behind the mask, they insulted White elites, mocked their White bosses and White society's leaders. Indeed, Lhamon documents how in the earliest blackface performances, in the roughest bars in the poorest neighborhoods of New York, Whites in blackface were joined on stage by fellow Black and Chinese performers; and they performed for audiences who were also racially mixed.

These young White workers were attracted to people of color and their ways of being. There was a nascent, fragile, cross-racial solidarity there. Thus, for Lhamon, early blackface performers were

not so much racist as something like its opposite, or something besides. Well before abolitionism in the United States had gathered steam . . . these white working youths in the west Atlantic were choosing to join with perceived blackness. The reasons and functions of this choice were not simple. But it was this choosing among themselves to delineate their cross-racial mutuality, and to organize it into coalignment, that angered the magazine writers and prominent politicians. . . . Minstrelsy certainly accompanied cruel domination, but it did not start that way. Rather, it began in order to work out, and express, mixed feelings of identification and fascination through a growing grammar of charismatic gestures. (pp. 187–188)

We have no interest (and neither do Lhamon and Cockrell) in denying the viciousness of what blackface minstrelsy eventually became—after hopeful and expansive beginnings, blackface minstrelsy went the way of, and propped up, the larger White

supremacist society. Lott (1995) reminds us that, when all is said and done, “cultural expropriation is the minstrel show’s central fact, and we should not lose sight of it” (p. 19).

The point (and the pedagogical and political problem), then, is how to direct the obvious attraction White people have for Black people and their cultural forms toward robust cross-racial alliances. A small step is recognizing that White people’s relations to people of color and their cultures are seldom simple and usually are characterized by attraction, envy, and desire, as well as fear and rejection. The account of White racial identity that emerges from the research on blackface minstrelsy allows us to recognize the profound ambivalence that has organized White thinking and feeling in relation to Black people in the United States, at least since the early 1800s. We, as White people, may be doomed to repeat ourselves, repeat our racial failures, if we don’t understand the origins of our racial identities. As Lhamon (2003) puts it (with reference to Ellison’s [1953/1995] famous essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke”), “There is no way to slip the blackface yoke when the acknowledged history of the process lacks its hopeful early moves” (p. x).

Conclusion

Individual White racism flourishes, whatever the new, color-blind race talk that grew up in response to the civil rights movement (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). U.S. society remains White supremacist in its structures and practices, notwithstanding the election of our first Black president. Our emphasis on the complexity and ambivalence at the core of White racial selves is not meant to distract from these realities.

Instead, our work is motivated by the demands of pedagogy, by the press of the question of what is to be done to better educate White future teachers so that they take up humane and effective teaching relations with their students of color. But before pedagogy (or always along with it, a part of it) are ways of perceiving, reading, imagining, researching the meanings, values, and selves of White future teachers. Our worry, similar to concerns articulated by Conklin (2008) and Lowenstein (2009), is that too often White future teachers have been positioned, have been addressed—in Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (1997) sense of “Who does this pedagogy think you are?”—as nothing but the smooth embodiment of racism and White privilege. And that this address, in turn, leads to more resistance by White prospective teachers to our multicultural and antiracist efforts. In other words, our research and teacher education pedagogies have tapped into, called out, documented, the racist (and fear-full, shame-full, and repulsed) side of White ambivalence, and attempted to answer the question of what is to be done with reference to only half of White racial identity.

Three Suggestions

Our first suggestion, then, for teacher educators and researchers of White future teachers is that we *assume (or at least entertain the notion of) an ambivalent White self*. People, including White people, are not simple, and our research and pedagogy suffer when we assume otherwise. Simplified portraits of White racial identity are encouraged by the assumption of a *unified self*. The unified self is, of course, an Enlightenment hangover—much criticized,

but much assumed by social science and educational research (Carspecken, 2003; Flax, 1990; Scott & Usher, 1996; Willinsky, 1990). When researchers who assume a unified self are confronted with seemingly contradictory data from research participants (as is often the case in work on race), they assume either (a) that participants are lying about or hiding something or (b) that as researchers they have not yet dug down deep enough to discover what unifies it all (Quantz & O’Connor, 1988).

For example, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003), who has done some of the most important empirical work we have on White racism and color-blind discourse, interprets “incoherent talk,” long pauses, contradictions, digressions, as evidence of an underlying racism. Such an interpretation seems, at times, quite reasonable. At other times, his questions seem to have tapped into a deeper ambivalence that needs to be studied and understood. Surface contradictions and ambiguity might be less a weak cover for an underlying, straightforward racism in need of hiding, and more the expression of a deeply conflicted, ambivalent White racial self. In other words, what if for White racial selves—as writers and scholars from Ellison to Lott to Morrison to Roediger demonstrate—it is contradiction all the way down?

Our second suggestion asks teacher educators and researchers to explore and theorize how *White ambivalence both endangers and enables* a multicultural and antiracist teacher education. This is not to deny the ugliness that our White students (and we) bring to work on race in classrooms. It is to propose that there might be resources available in this work that we have so far ignored. When Amy Winans (2005), for example, listened carefully to the color-blind discourse of her White students, she discovered, as have others, a disturbing desire by these students to avoid any possible implication in racism. But Winans also uncovered a desire to act ethically, to not injure others, in their taking up of this troublesome sort of talk. Winans remained attentive to the possibilities of ambivalence. She went to work, took the ethical goals of her students seriously, and used them as a resource for examining and criticizing a color-blind stance.

Our third suggestion takes its cue from the fact that White people, in their pursuit of blackface minstrelsy, were not just defining themselves in relation to Black people; they were also taking up, forming, and contesting relations with White elites. Research on the racial identities of White future teachers has proceeded as if the only social relation at stake in teacher education is the future one between students of color and their White teacher. This is an important focus—indeed, it is and should be, ultimately, the relationship about which we are most concerned.

But what if our efforts to assure educative and human relations between White teachers and students of color are being waylaid by unexamined struggles among White people? Our final suggestion, then, is that we assume that *teacher education is, among other things, a site of hegemonic struggle among White people*. As Lowenstein (2009) reminds us, teacher education in the United States is characterized not just by the fact that most future teachers are White: Most teacher educators are White as well. Whatever is currently happening in teacher education has much to do with social relations among White people.

At least two struggles need to be given more attention. First, there are local classroom struggles arising from the authority and power relations between particular teacher educators and their

students of education. It is surprising how the research literature on White future teachers so seldom asks about the teaching these students encountered or wonders if the authority and power relations of the classroom had anything to do with students' words and actions. Student resistance to multicultural and antiracist teacher education is often used as evidence of these students' racism, and this is perhaps many times the case. Other times, however, students may be resisting not so much in defense of their White privilege as in defense of their self-respect in the face of ineffective or insulting pedagogy.³

Second, more attention must be paid to the potential conflicts between, on the one hand, White teacher educators bent on upholding and instilling the White, middle-class, heteronormative meanings and values that dominate teacher education programs and public schools (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2004; Murrell, 2002) and, on the other hand, White future teachers who are themselves diverse by social class, sexuality, and region (and who are, as we argued above, diverse within themselves, i.e., ambivalent). This conflict exceeds those inherent in the relationship of teacher and student. The demand to be a certain sort of White person confronts future teachers, whatever their race, and is a potential incitement to conflict and resistance.

A New Reading

Our three suggestions call on researchers and teacher educators to begin to read the words and actions of White future teachers differently. Perhaps Toni Morrison (1992) provides the best demonstration of this different sort of reading in her William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization, later published as *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison notes that, for a writer, the activities of reading and writing are quite similar:

Both exercises require being alert and reading for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer's imagination, for the world that imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. (p. xi)

Teacher education is unavoidably oriented toward the future. Teacher educators and researchers are worried about the worlds imagined by White future teachers, worried about how racism will pollute and sabotage the creation of better schools for students of color. These worries are well founded.

Morrison is certainly not interested in ignoring those places where the White imagination sabotages and pollutes its vision because of racist meanings and values. But she also knows that there is always more going on, more that must be attended to and interpreted. The complex social and historical production of White racial identity includes desire for, attraction to, and fascination with Black people and their cultures. It includes the creation of blackface minstrelsy, Sambo, and their violent living heirs—all used by White people to work out who they are, who the Others are.

If we are to understand and influence White future teachers, understand and influence their dreams and future actions, we must orient ourselves toward them as Morrison oriented herself toward the White authors of the American literary canon:

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. (p. 17)

Future teacher education efforts and research studies that address the racial identities of White future teachers should be conceptualized in these terms: longing, terror, perplexity, shame, and magnanimity.

NOTES

¹The APA style adhered to in *Educational Researcher* requires that "Black" and "White" be capitalized. This is not our usual practice as authors.

²Our concern, here and throughout, is with White people engaged in blackface. See Gottschild (1996) for an account of how, after the Civil War, Black entertainers began performing in minstrel shows, "blackened up," and how they slowly began humanizing and complicating the minstrel stereotype, as well as infusing more authentic Africanist practices into the shows.

³Gloria Ladson-Billings (1996) is a model for the sort of work that is needed. She examines the use of silence by her White students as weapon or resistance but also explores other meanings that student silence might have, including its being an "indication of feelings of oppression (real or perceived)" (p. 85). She also asks teachers to interrogate their own power and methods, to better understand "what complicity [teachers] have in creating student silences" (p. 85).

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