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# THE EFFECTS OF MINSTRELSY IN RACE THEORY

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# Introduction

- What is critical race theory
- History of Minstrelsy
- What is blackface
- How race theory and minstrelsy tie together
- "Body Impossible" choreographic analysis of *Othello*



# Critical Race Theory: Origins, Importance, and application

- Definition: the view that race is socially constructed and functions to maintain the interests of the white population that constructed it.
- CRT goes back much further, however the movement officially organized itself in July 1989
- A valuable perspective on race and racism in America.
- Inspired by the American civil rights tradition through figures such as M.L.K, Jr. and W.E.B. Du Bois.
- Advanced theoretical understandings



# History of Minstrelsy

- Concept of Minstrelsy started in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Early minstrelsy shared three primary characteristics: “invocation of the ethnically and racially exotic/primitive”; absurdity, irreverence, and recklessness, and longing for an ideal rural paradise.
- 1843 – Blackface performers came together in a single troupe and called themselves, Minstrels.
- Officially started in the abolitionist movement which turned the attention to free blacks
- Most Minstrels were Irishman performing black characters



# Blackface

- Primary function was to act as a mask and invoke the *other*.
- Allowed actors and artists to hide behind a caricature while protesting and mocking the powerful without fear of retaliation.
- Performers could safely question authority while claiming to be acting out authentic African American expressions.
- Some white performers augmented their noses and other features when performing to look more stereotypically “black.”
- Would always be Janus-faced, allowing performers to speak freely against the interests of the powerful.
- Dangerously dehumanized blacks by introducing and reinforcing racial stereotypes.
- Prevented blacks from representing themselves.



# Race theory and Minstrelsy

- Slavery was commodification of black labor; minstrelsy was the commodification of black culture.
- Depictions of blacks in minstrel performances were exaggerated, dehumanizing, and inaccurate.
- Blackface minstrel performers reflected and reinforced white supremacy.
- "It's an assertion of power and control and allows a society to routinely and historically imagine African Americans as not fully human. It serves to rationalize violence and Jim Crow segregation." – David Leonard
- Portrayed negative stereotypes about African Americans
- Blackface was in theaters and film industry.
  - *The Birth of a Nation*, characters were unscrupulous and rapists
  - Stereotypes became so powerful they became a recruiting tool for the Ku Klux Klan

# Documentary video: Historical Reflections of Bias

- [Ethnic Notions Documentary](#)
- 44:25 – 45:25

# “Body Impossible”: Chapter three

- American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet’s *Othello*:
- Lar Lubovitch choreographed ABT and SFB’s co-production of *Othello* in 1997, where there was an absence of black male dancers in ABT.
  - Desmond Richardson would perform the part of *Othello* and when he wasn’t, alternate casts were painted in bronze face and body makeup.
- *Othello* compels a consideration of the haunted and unexamined relationship between blackface, virtuosity, and racial melodrama in ballet.
- In Richardson’s absence, the casts are painted in blackface to supplement an attempt to affectively recover his virtuosity.
- Blackface functions as one of several intertwined elements in the attempt to embody the Other.
- Richardson’s performance of *Othello* is an instantiation of “black-on-black minstrelsy.”



# Choreographic Analysis of *Othello*

- Background about the piece
- Abrupt
- Percussive
- Strong
- Quick
- Silly / Showing off
- Sustained
- Tapestries
- Anger
- Bound
- Controlled
- Sadness



# Conclusion – Why it is important

- Blackface is still being portrayed today
- The appeal of blackface was declined after the 1930s and continued into the Civil Rights Movement.
- Example of blackface today: in 2012 at the Oscars ceremony, blackface appeared on television skits, and wearing blackface to dress up as famous African Americans during Halloween.
- David Leonard says, “Blackface is part of the toxic culture of racism.”
- Stereotyping is representational violence

# Citations

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