

Behind the Mask:  
Functions of Blackface Minstrelsy in Caryl Phillips' *Dancing in the  
Dark*

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Tarkastelen pro gradu –tutkielmassani Blackface minstrel -shown funktioita ja rodullista esiintymistä Caryl Phillipsin teoksessa *Dancing in the Dark*. Kyseinen romaani on fiktionaalinen elämäkerta, joka kertoo todellisen Blackface taiteilijan, 1800 ja 1900 –lukujen taitteessa Yhdysvalloissa eläneen Bert Williamsin vaiheista ja urasta. Vaikka teos pohjautuu todelliseen henkilöön ja tapahtumien kulku perustuu historiallisiin faktoihin, tarkastelen teosta fiktiona, sillä Phillips on rakentanut romaaninsa pitkälti päähenkilön, Bertin, tunteiden ja ajatusten varaan.

Tutkin sitä, miksi minstrel show, jossa esiintyjät maalasivat kasvonsa mustaksi poltetun korkin avulla, oli niin suosittua viihdettä valkoisen valtaväestön keskuudessa ja mitä hyötyjä minstrelsillä oli sekä valkoisille että mustille. Tarkastelen minstrelsin funktioita sekä valkoisen että mustan väestön näkökulmista, käyttäen tulkinnassa apunani kriittistä rotuteoriaa (Critical Race Theory). Lisäksi valaisen blackface minstrel -shown perinteen taustaa ja sen tutkimuksen kehitystä viime vuosikymmenien aikana.

Pyrin tutkielmassani analysoimaan miten valkoinen valtaväestö pyrki minstrelsin avulla kontrolloimaan rodullisia stereotypioita ja rotukuvia ja sitä kautta ylläpitämään valkoista hegemoniaa. Tutkin myös miten mustat esiintyjät, jotka omaksuivat valkoisen väestön tuottamat keinotekoiset rotokuvat omaan esitykseensä omalta osaltaan vahvistivat eriarvoistavaa rodullista kategorisointia. Tuon myös esille, miten minstrelsin esittämät kuvat mustasta rodusta tuovat esille rodun konstruktivisuuden ja performatiivisuuden.

Avainsanat: rotu, rotokuvat, minstrel –show, Bert Williams, performatiivisuus

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## 1. Introduction

*Dancing in the Dark* (2006) by Caryl Phillips is a fictional biography that tells the story of a colored American performer Bert Williams. Williams was a Caribbean born entertainer who immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of eleven in 1885. Williams started his career on the stage by traveling around the United States with minstrel shows, but soon joined forces with an American born performer George Walker, and not before long, the performances of the two men became the favorite acts of the minstrelsy scene. What made Bert Williams such a controversial character was his use of blackface makeup, and the mask that Williams applied to his face in order to pass as a “real negro” becomes one of the most central issues of *Dancing in the Dark*. Initially, the mask is just a part of the role for Bert, something separate from himself and his identity, but as he continues to perform the role of a “dim-witted black coon”, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to separate himself from his character, and trust that his audience is able to do the same.

In my pro gradu thesis, I will study what functions blackface minstrelsy has in *Dancing in the Dark*, as well as what the use of blackface reveals about the nature of race. Race and its representations have always played an important role in North American history and racial studies have established their place in the discipline of literary studies in the United States, and the rest of the world. Even though race is obviously a global issue, I will concentrate on discussing race in the North American context because *Dancing in the Dark* is quintessentially an American novel and is mainly concerned with racial issues in the United States.

I will divide the theory section of my thesis into two chapters. I will begin with a short introduction of the development of racial thinking in Western culture and then move on to Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical field that emerged in the mid-1970's to “combat

the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground” (Delgado and Stefancic, 4). CRT has its roots in critical legal studies and radical feminism (*ibid.*) and has several tenets, of which I will concentrate on the ones most relevant to this project: race as a social construction and interest convergence. CRT, as many other modern disciplines, believes that race is not based on a natural or biological division of people but that racial categories are socially constructed. By interest convergence CRT critics mean that racial categorization and discrimination always have benefits for the dominant culture, predominantly the white culture. I will base my discussion on CRT mainly on the writings of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, because they are established critics of the movement. Delgado has written several articles within the movement and is, together with Stefancic, the author of *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2001). The pair has also edited a collection of key texts of the movement, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (2000).

The idea of race as a social construction can also be connected to the performative nature of race and through that to blackface minstrelsy. In the second subchapter of the theory section, I will focus on blackface minstrelsy studies, a field that has gained increasing interest recently. According to Robert Nowatzki, minstrelsy has not only gained interest among several scholars but has also made a comeback to American popular culture, for instance, in forms of television sitcoms and hip-hop (115). Blackface minstrelsy has its roots in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American theatre tradition, and the acts consisted mainly of song and dance performances by white men in blackface makeup, “caricaturing blacks for fun and profit” (Lott 1993, 3). Eric Lott and Robert Nowatzki are among the scholars who have created a new wave of interest towards blackface minstrelsy in the 1990s and 2000s and are well established within the field. Lott is the author of *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), one of the key works of blackface minstrelsy studies. He has also written several articles on the subject. Also Nowatzki has published

several literary works concerning minstrelsy and also analyzes *Dancing in the Dark* in his article “‘Blackin’ Up is Us Doin’ White Folk Doin’ Us’: Blackface Minstrelsy and Racial Performance in Contemporary American Fiction and Film” (2007). He is also the author of *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Minstrelsy* (2010). Therefore, Lott and Nowatzki are the main scholars I will be referring to in the section on blackface minstrelsy, but I will rely on various other sources as well when necessary.

I will divide my analysis section into two parts; the separate perspectives of white and black communities in the novel. This is because Bert is actually performing for two distinct audiences, the black and the white, both of which have conflicting opinions of how he should act and what role he should embrace as a colored man. In the first part of analysis I will focus on the white audience and white community, how they perceive Bert and his performances and what functions blackface minstrelsy serves for them; here I will be using CRT’s concept of interest convergence. The second part of the analysis will concentrate on Bert’s reasons for resorting to the use of blackface, his black audience and the black community, and their view of Bert, as well as the functions blackface has for the black population. I will consider the effect of blackface minstrelsy on Bert and the black community in *Dancing in the Dark* and discuss what it reveals about the nature of race, here using CRT’s idea of race as a social construction.

Critical Race Theory, among others, has established the idea of the constructedness of race, and it is widely accepted within the academic disciplines today. Blackface minstrelsy has also been reasonably widely studied in the past few decades, but the perspective is commonly on white blackface performances and often studies deal with racial passing. Black-on-black minstrelsy is a less studied area in the field of minstrelsy studies and the subject of blackface in fiction is a relatively recent phenomenon, and has, therefore, not been considerably widely studied yet. Blackface minstrelsy has gained increasing attention in

fiction and films in the 1990s and 2000s with, for example, works like Spike Lee's movie *Bamboozled* (2000), Wesley Brown's *Darktown Shuttlers* (1994) and, of course, *Dancing in the Dark* (2006). Even though research in the area of blackface in fiction is scarce, it is not completely nonexistent, as, for example, Nowatzki has studied blackface minstrelsy in contemporary fiction taking the perspective of racial performance. As mentioned above, one of the subjects in his study is *Dancing in the Dark*, but besides Nowatzki, the novel is not widely studied, other material to be found concerning the novel are mainly book reviews.

Research on Phillips's other fictional works, however, have gained more scholarly interest and he is usually studied in the context of Postcolonial studies, around the themes of otherness, home and belonging. *Dancing in the Dark*, however, is a slightly different novel in comparison with other works of Phillips because of its historical nature: the characters and events in the book are based on real people and their lives. That is why I will not be concentrating on Postcolonial studies, but have chosen CRT and blackface minstrelsy studies as my background theory instead. Even though the novel has historical roots, I will, nevertheless, be studying it as a piece of fiction, and this is because *Dancing in the Dark* is not written as a traditional biography but Phillips has constructed it as fiction. The Bert in the novel is a product of Phillips's imagination, for he concentrates mainly on the feelings and thoughts of his main character and his inner struggle, not just on historical facts. I feel it is justified to choose *Dancing in the Dark* as a subject of academic study, because there is room for further research on both the novel and black-on-black minstrelsy. Minstrelsy is not something that is really a visible part of American society or culture anymore, but it can still reveal something about race that is relevant today as well. The increasing interest in the subject, both academically and in fiction, goes to show that even though performers today have stripped off the blackface makeup, minstrelsy "never really went away" (Nowatzki, 115).

## 2. Studying Race through Critical Race Theory and Blackface Minstrelsy

As stated in the introduction, the theory section of this thesis is divided into two main parts; the first will concentrate on the critical movement called Critical Race Theory, and the second on blackface minstrelsy studies. The section on Critical Race Theory maps out the origins of the movement and introduces its basic tenets; the focus will be on the ideas most relevant to this study, namely the social construction of race and interest convergence or material determinism. The second section is concerned with blackface minstrelsy studies and the recent developments of the field. The interest will be on the functions of minstrelsy as well as its connection to the representation of race.

I will be concentrating on Critical Race Theory because of its interest in the reasons behind racial categorization and the artificial nature of race itself; also its basic tenets are useful in discussing the nature of blackface minstrelsy. Critical Race Theory is, of course, only one approach in a vast field of racial studies, and the issues of race it is concerned with have been discussed by other critical disciplines as well, such as, for example, African American Studies and Postcolonial Studies. Although these modern disciplines approach race from different vantage points, they all believe that race is a social construction rather than a biological fact. This, however, has not always been the case and that is why it is important to briefly look at how race has been defined and understood in Western culture in the past few centuries.

The idea of race in Western culture is often traced back to the Ancient Greeks. Niro, however, calls this the “false origin” of race, noting that the idea of race seems to stem from the Greeks only because the people who actually created the idea believed that it had its origins in the antiquity (15). Critics have also argued over when the word race entered the Western lexicon, although precise dates have not been, and most likely cannot be agreed upon, the sixteenth century appears to be the appropriate estimate (*ibid.*). Even though Niro

believes antiquity provides a false origin for race, racial stereotyping can be traced as far as the ancient Greeks and Romans. Loomba points out that the images they had of ‘barbarians’ and outsiders were later reworked in Europe in medieval and early modern discourse (105). Thus, Niro’s argument of ancient Greece as a ‘false origin’ for race should not be seen as a claim for lack of racial categorizing at that time, but the point is that Europeans falsely used images of ‘others’ from antiquity to justify their own interest in dividing people into racial groups. Niro further observes that it is widely accepted today that “race is a European construction. Likewise, this construction has been vehemently tied to several movements of European progress: the rise of rationalism, the Enlightenment, and the advent of imperialism and industrialization” (*ibid.*).

In medieval times, Christianity enters the field of racial discussion. Loomba points out that this complicated the questions of race, because ‘monsters’ and ‘savages’ were not easy to explain, since all people were supposed to have a common origin (105). According to Loomba, one explanation for this conundrum was to locate the ‘savages’ under God’s wrath (*ibid.*). Thus, even though Christianity was “the prism through which all knowledge of the world was refracted” (Miles, qtd in Loomba 105), and it preached for equality among men, racial inequality did not dissolve. The resistance towards the idea of a ‘common origin’ can, for example, be seen in aphorisms such as the impossibility of ‘washing the Ethiopie white’, which was common in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (*ibid.* 105-106). These kinds of images were “used to indicate the biological basis and hence the immutability of race and color” (*ibid.* 106).

The already existing ideologies of race were later intensified by the involvement of science (Loomba 115). Questions of race gained increasing interest in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment period with the desire to classify and organize the natural world in scientific terms (Niro 89). According to Niro, for the natural philosophers of the Enlightenment,

Voltaire, Bernier and Kant, among others, race was natural (90). Loomba elaborates that “science claimed to demonstrate that the biological features of each group determined its psychological and social attributes” (115). In other words,

scientific discussions of race, rather than challenging earlier negative stereotypes of savagery, barbarism and excessive sexuality, extended and developed these. By attributing racial characteristics to biological differences such as skull and brain sizes, of facial angles, or genes, and by insisting on the connection between these factors and social and cultural attributes, science turned ‘savagery’ and ‘civilization’ into fixed and permanent condition. (Loomba 177)

But for the scientists, race was not only about physical differences; it was used to explain why Europeans were able to dominate the rest of the world (Niro 90). People were not only divided into diverse racial categories based on their appearance, but some races were considered to be naturally subordinate to others. Race was therefore formed into the clearly recognizable condition it has today, both physically obvious and essential, by natural philosophers (Niro 181). This kind of racial thinking has, of course, been questioned today, but it still persists on many levels of society.

After the Enlightenment period, however, developing science was never able to successfully distinguish races as natural categories for different people. As Tyson points out, “the physical differences between light-skinned blacks and dark skinned whites [...] are much fewer than the physical differences we often see among members of each group” (372). McLeod elaborates that skin color has often been used as a “primary sign of racial difference” and as “evidence of some ‘natural’ difference between, say, white and black Africans” (110). But we do not consider, for example, difference in eye color to carry such a meaning, even though it is “just as much a biological ‘fact’ as skin color” (*ibid.*). Because no scientific proof for races could be found, science did not see race worthy of viable biological distinction and has therefore given up the idea of biological human races after the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Niro 181). But by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, race had become such an essential part of Western thinking that the

fact that it did not have a scientific foundation did not seem to matter (*ibid.*). Decades of racial discussion and categorization had made race into something real, but its foundation is cultural and historical rather than natural.

Today, very few people would openly admit to being racist; however, racial discrimination remains a problem and human beings are still judged by their looks and skin color. What is race then and how do we define it today? According to Ali Rattansi, race is essentially about drawing boundaries around what he calls “zones of *belonging* and *non-belonging*” (88, emphasis in the original). These zones include subjective elements of identity construction, responses to labels of identity, difference imposed from outside, as well as processes of identification with particular groups (Rattansi 89). This description of race is complex and multilayered, but as Rattansi points out, since it is accepted that there is no scientific proof for the existence of ‘race,’ it is crucial that its definition would be ambiguous (87). Brian Niro agrees that “race is a biologically unsound object” (6) and further observes that this being the case, race can be nothing more than a social construction (7).

While issues of race are a global topic, the United States in particular is responsible for a large part of literature and scholarly discussion concerning the subject. This is not surprising taking into consideration the complicated racial history of the country, starting the treatment of Native Americans and its history of immigration, moving on to slavery and its abolition, and continuing to the Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights Movement, and academic disciplines concerned with issues of race, for example, African American Studies and Critical Race Theory. With the help of Harlem Renaissance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the “emergence of black literary presence race enters the agenda of literary studies” (Bertens 81). In the mid-1960s, black studies emerged with the development of African American criticism (Bertens 84). Modern approaches to racial studies, African American and Postcolonial Studies among them, agree that race is a human invention that is

not based on biological facts. McLeod argues that “racial differences are best thought of as *political constructions* which serve the interests of certain groups of people” (110, emphasis in the original). This is something Critical Race Theory agrees with, and this idea of the constructed nature of race, along with Critical Race Theory in general, will be discussed further in the following section.

## 2.1 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) started in the United States in the 1970’s as a response to what a number of activists, lawyers and legal scholars felt was the regression of the advancements of the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement (Delgado and Stefancic 3-4). CRT can be described as a radical movement, and Niro argues that, actually, a large part of the American race discourse is failing to be as ambitious as it could be, but he feels that Critical Race Theory can be seen as an exception to this (182). CRT started as a movement of law, but has since spread beyond this discipline and “considers many of the same issues as conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourse takes up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious” (Delgado and Stefancic 3). Academically, the theory builds rather heavily on critical legal studies but also on radical feminism (*ibid.* 4). CRT used the feminists’ insights of the relationship between the construction of social roles and power and “took a concern of readdressing historical wrongs” (*ibid.* 5). As Niro points out, CRT recognized the failures of “official” (i.e. state) American discourses of race and was “acutely aware” of the difference between the academic contemplating on the artificial construction of race and everyday racism people on the streets had to face (183).

As mentioned before, CRT was a reaction against what it felt were slow and ineffective developments of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's as well as the racial discourse of African American studies. In spite of the criticism from CRT, critics in the field of African American studies had already accomplished groundbreaking work in bringing the African American history and culture forward. In the late 1960's, we begin to see American history and culture treated as something more than white man's history. African American criticism raised awareness of matters such as slave rebellions and "black" culture, such as what is seen with the Harlem Renaissance, and it also helped broaden the literary canon, which at this time was even more Eurocentric and dominated by white upper-class male writers than today. (Tyson 360-361)

Thus, even though CRT is critical towards the advancements of previous achievements of the Civil Rights Movement and African American Studies, advancements towards racial equality had been made by the late 1960's. Discrimination against African Americans was against the law, and visible violence, such as lynching and mob attacks towards black people, seemed to be a thing of the past; in the eyes of law, everyone was supposed to be equal (Tyson 367). However, racism had not disappeared. By the 1970's, the Civil Rights Movement ceased to be a social and political power, and this is where CRT emerges (*ibid.* 368). Therefore, Tyson argues that it would be "useful to think of critical race theory as a new approach to civil rights" (368). The principal figure of the movement was Derrick A. Bell Jr., a law professor at New York University, which explains why CRT started as a critique of constitutional law, although it quickly extended its concern to "every topic relevant to race" (*ibid.*).

Delgado and Stefancic (6-9) identify six major tenets that CRT is concerned with that most critics of the field agree upon. Firstly, CRT argues that racism is ordinary and common, something people of color face everyday. Secondly, racism is a result of interest

convergence or material determinism, meaning that racism serves a purpose for the white population, as it advances the interests of the white elite materially and those of the working class psychically. Another tenet is that race is a social construction rather than something biological. Fourthly, critical race theorists are interested in differential racialization or how various minority groups are racialized differently in different times, based on the shifting needs of the dominant culture. CRT also argues that identity is a product of intersectionality and there is no such thing as a single unitary identity. Finally, many critical race theorists believe in “voice of colour”, that minority status brings with it a competence to speak about race and racism. This last tenet is, of course, debatable, and I do believe that one does not have to be black, or from another ethnic minority group in order to talk about race and racial matters.

Although all of the points above are useful tools for studying race, the most important ideas to this thesis are the ideas that race is a social construction and the concept of interest convergence. I have chosen to concentrate on these two tenets because my thesis is concerned with the functions of blackface minstrelsy in *Dancing in the Dark* as well as with how the nature of race is revealed through Bert Williams’ blackface. The idea of interest converge will be useful in studying the functions blackface minstrelsy has for Bert’s white audience, and the black community as well. Also, the constructed nature of race is something that can be studied through minstrelsy, because it reveals rather clearly how races and racial stereotypes are “manufactured”. I will therefore concentrate on these two tenets in more detail.

CRT, along with many other modern approaches to race, believes that race is a social construction which is not based on any natural division of people. As Haney Lopez argues, “human interaction rather than natural differentiation must be seen as the source and continued basis for racial categorization” (27). He elaborates that racial meanings arise

through a process called racial formation which includes “both the rise of racial groups and their constant reification in social thought” (*ibid.* 28). He (28) also lists four facets behind the social construction of race. First, he states that races are produced by humans rather than abstract social forces. Second, since races are human constructs, they constitute an integral part of the whole social fabric along with gender and class. Thirdly he notes that the meanings concerning race can change quickly and finally that races are not constructed in isolation but relationally, against each other. Thus, for Haney Lopez race is a complicated fabrication that includes different aspects. The construction of races and formation of new racial groups always has human forces behind them and these racial processes are affected by other aspects of the society as well, namely class and gender (*ibid.* 30). Also the fact that racial categories can change quickly indicates that race is constructed socially rather than based on biology (*ibid.* 33).

Modern science already accepts that race has no biological foundation, but the society as a whole continues to resist acknowledging that racial categories are artificial. CRT critics point out that the fact that certain groups of people share common physical features does not constitute race, but that race is a result of social thought and relations. Indeed,

People with common origin share certain physical traits, of course, such as skin color, physique, and hair texture. But these constitute only an extremely small portion of their genetic endowment, are dwarfed by that which we have in common, and have little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order traits, such as personality, intelligence and behavior. That society frequently chooses to ignore these scientific facts, creates races, and endows them with pseudo-permanent characteristics is of great interest to critical race theory. (Delgado and Stefancic 7-8)

It further seems somewhat contradictory that “races” are differentiated by physical traits such as skin color, when there is often more variation inside a group than between groups. Yet these racial categories are being maintained and as Tyson notes (372), for example, the U.S. Congress historically restricted the acquisition of U.S. citizenship to white males, a racial restriction that remained in effect with only minor modifications from 1790 until as late as

1952. Tyson continues that this meant that for well over hundred years the U.S. government had to decide between the many different people applying for citizenship, which of them were white and which were not (*ibid.*).

To make the division between “whites” and “non-whites” easier for the government, the U.S. Census Bureau used different racial categories to determine the race and through that the status of different people (Tyson 372). If race was something determined by nature, one could assume that these categories would remain stable; however, this was not the case. The racial categories of the Census Bureau have changed during the years and certain groups, such as the Jewish and Irish, have “become” white, when earlier in American history, at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they shared practically the same status as non-white as African Americans did (*ibid.*). If race was something natural and essential, then it should not be possible to make changes to racial categories. Nevertheless, when the society begins to organize people into groups according to its own shifting needs, it leads to changes in these categories over time. As Tyson notes, for CRT “racial categorization doesn’t reflect biological reality but rather the current beliefs about race at different times” (*ibid.*).

As discussed earlier, also Tyson explains that the concept of race was originally introduced in the field of natural science to refer to groups of people in different geographical locations, but originally there was no intention of separating people into physiologically distinct groups (374). The fixing of these groups into permanent categories took place later, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scientists claimed that “physical differences correspond to a cultural hierarchy based on biology: human beings, they asserted, belong to different races, and some races -in particular, the white race- are superior to others” (*ibid.*). This idea was adopted at the time when racial issues and superiority were problems the U.S. citizens were struggling with and when many believed that, indeed, black racial inferiority justified racial segregation or even slavery (*ibid.*). Scholars of natural sciences have since eliminated the concept of race as

a biological category from their discipline, because the idea is no longer seen as valid. However, a problem remains because, as CRT points out, no one has made any “organized effort[t] to bring this rejection to the attention of schools, government, general public, or even related disciplines” (Muir qtd. in Tyson, 376). Thus, even though it is accepted today that there is no scientific justification to divide people into groups based on “race”, let alone claim that some groups are naturally inferior to others, this division is something that survives on the level of society.

Since the artificial nature of race is widely accepted today in academic disciplines and its earlier justification by science has crumbled, why is it then that society does not seem to be able to let go of the concept of race? CRT critics explain this by what they call interest convergence or material determinism, which means that there are benefits for the dominant white community with maintaining these categories. As an American movement, CRT generally focuses on the racial situation in the United States, but the general idea that racial discrimination works for the advantage of the dominant group can certainly be applied globally as well.

As mentioned before, CRT believes that the white-over-black ascendancy has a material interest for the white elite, who exploits black labor by paying them less, and a psychological interest for the white working class, whose own experiences of exploitation create a need for them to feel superior to someone else, in this case, to black people (Tyson 371). Therefore, there is little interest for the majority of society to eradicate the system of racial inequality (Delgado and Stefancic 7). Wald agrees that “arbitrarily ascribing race in accordance with the changing needs and interest of the supremacy, the color line has long served a variety of specific ‘territorializing’ functions through its ability to impose and regulate social inequality” (5). CRT also questions whether civil rights advances actually

benefit the black community very much, or whether they as well serve the interest of the white community rather than the black one.

This question has divided critics within the movement, and Delgado and Stefancic identify two separate camps of critics, the idealists and realists. The idealists believe that

Racism and discrimination are matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude and discourse. Race is a social construction, not a biological reality. Hence we may unmake it and deprive it from much of its sting by changing the system of images, words, attitudes, unconscious feelings, scripts and social teachings by which we convey to one another that certain people are less intelligent, reliable, hardworking, virtuous, and American than others. (Delgado and Stefancic, 17)

While the idealists think that by revealing the artificial nature of race we could change the racial dialogue and help erase inequality, the realists take a more pessimistic view. For the realists, race has made it possible for the society to “allocate privilege and status” and “determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs [and] best schools [...]” (*ibid.*). The realists believe that even the gains of the Civil Rights Movement coincide with white self-interest (*ibid.* 18). In other words, all the advances that seemingly were for the benefit of minorities would not have taken place, if the white dominant society had not gained something from these changes as well.

Derrick Bell addresses the matter in an article in the *Harvard Law Review* in 1980 and takes one of the greatest advances of the Civil Rights Movement, the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* as an example (Delgado and Stefancic 18). In his article, Bell introduces the concept of interest convergence stating that “[t]he interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interest of whites” (22). He continues that no juridical remedy that would provide effective racial equality for blacks will be authorized “where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle- and upper-class whites” (22). Bell argues that the reasons behind the

Supreme Courts decision to desegregate the school system in 1954 had less to do with the desire for equality and more with interest convergence. Bell (23) lists that the real reasons behind this decision were the fact that for the first time in decades, there was a possibility of mass domestic unrest with the return of black soldiers from the Korean War, who were unlikely to willingly return to the system of racial discrimination. Also, with the Cold War in progress, United States was competing of the loyalties of the Third World countries with the Communist forces in Europe. As the inhabitants of these countries were mainly black and brown, it was in the interest of the U.S. government to soften its attitudes towards its domestic minorities in order to improve its image in the eyes of the Third World. Finally, segregation was seen by some whites as an obstacle for further industrialization in the South. Therefore, the real reason behind the desegregation of the American school system was white political self-interest rather than pure desire for racial equality.

Bell's hypothesis was met with outrage at the time, but ten years later an archival research of the files of U.S. government recovered records and letters from foreign ambassadors that proved Bell's reasoning to be correct (Delgado and Stefancic, 19). Bell certainly belonged to the realist camp of the movement, as did most of the early critics of CRT, and his idea of interest convergence is helpful in understanding why the Western society has not been able or willing to let go of the concept of race, and with it racial discrimination. According to CRT, race is a product of the white Western culture; a social construction that has been shaped and formed through history to serve the needs of the dominant culture. Even though the existence of different races cannot be justified, classification and discrimination based on the imagined racial groups remains because it supports the privileged status of certain groups over others.

Even though CRT took a more critical approach towards the race discussion, many concepts they used already existed. As mentioned earlier, CRT has drawn inspiration

from various fields of study, including radical feminism. Feminist critics believe that gender is socially constructed, an idea CRT applied to race as well. One can further connect the feminist concept of gender as performative to race. Just as we learn to act as men and women according to the expectations of the surrounding society, one can think of race as performative as well. Nadine Ehlers draws inspiration from Judith Butler and extends Butler's work on the performative nature of gender to race. She argues that the necessity to continually "patrol racial borders and identities exemplifies that race operates as, and *is*, a performative practice" (Ehlers 150, emphasis in the original). This brings us to blackface minstrelsy, an area where, as Robert Nowatzki observes, the performative nature of race is more clearly visible than anywhere else (116).

## 2.2 The Tradition of Blackface Minstrelsy

Even though the events of *Dancing in the Dark* are mostly set during the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a little after the heydays of traditional blackface minstrelsy, it is still important to introduce the history and origins of the minstrelsy show. This is because despite of the fact that some of the most popular acts of the duo Williams and Walker were musicals rather than traditional minstrelsy sketches, and that most of the cast performed without blackface makeup, the elements of blackface are still present. The Williams and Walker show was the largest and best known all black musical theatre troupes of its time, and originally the two main stars, along with the rest of the group, refused to wear blackface makeup because of its racist connotations (Chude-Sokei 2, 25). However, when Bert tries the makeup for the first time in 1890, his audience seems to love it so much that the mask remains (*ibid.* 25). Thus, mainly because of Bert's blackface, the characters of their shows remained stereotypical and

by adopting the makeup Bert Williams brings the minstrelsy tropes with him to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre.

Blackface minstrelsy is a theatrical tradition originating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the urban North (Lott 1995, 3). Blackface minstrelsy performances of that time consisted mainly of dance and song numbers; they took influences from immigrant cultures, for example, traditional Anglo-Celtic tunes and also borrowed from black slave culture (Pickering 1). The exact time for the emergence of blackface minstrelsy is difficult to locate, but one suggested starting point is the year 1843, when four white men stepped on stage for the first time in blackface makeup (Bean, Vernon Hatch and McNamara xi). Although the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the time minstrelsy truly began to gain popularity, performances containing racial stereotypes already existed as, for example, T.D Rice had launched his “Jim Crow” approximately ten years earlier (Lott 1995, 111). Eileen Southern further states that minstrelsy began to emerge as early as the 1820’s (45). Nonetheless, it is from the early 1840’s onwards that minstrelsy begins its sixty year domination of the field of American entertainment, and is now recognized as “America’s first original contribution to world theatre” as well as the first form of American mass entertainment (Bean, Vernon Hatch and McNamara xi).

The costumes used in minstrelsy were generally a collection of ill-assorted and ill-fitting garments that were intended to represent the “plantation Negro” and the aim was to be “both laughable and characteristically Negrolike at the same time” (Nathan 35). In addition to the clothing, the burned cork makeup was the primary convention that identified the minstrel show (Mahar 1). The makeup consisted of burned cork that was mixed with water and then smeared on the faces of the performers, and the look was finished with big red lips. The performers also adopted a “Negro dialect” in their acts, or at least their own interpretation of it. This interpretation was usually less than flattering, as Nathan notes about a script for a

performance by Emmet and Brower, which “if taken literally, amounts to no more than foolish babbling in the manner of circus clowns”, although he elaborates that the scripts for scenes were usually just used as basis for improvisation (Nathan 38).

The makeup, clothes and dialect used by the performers produced the stereotype of the black man in the minstrelsy show. The usual characters were the slow-witted but still irrepressible “plantation darky” (also referred to as ‘coon’) and the foppish “northern dandy negro” (Lott 1995, 15). These stereotypes represented the white man’s image of a black man in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. When someone is “stereotyped” it means, in short, that someone is “reduced to few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics” (Hall 249). African Americans have long been subjected to various racial caricatures, depicting them as either lazy or dangerous, but also happy and content servants, and minstrelsy had a part in producing these stereotypes. Hall notes that during slavery, “stereotyping of blacks in popular representation was so common that cartoonists, illustrators and caricaturists could summon up a whole gallery of ‘black types’ with a few, essentialized strokes of the pen. Black people were reduced to the signifiers of their physical difference” (249).

After the Civil War and abolition, however, the stereotypes that were created during slavery did not disappear. In fact, it has been argued that stereotypes can remain relatively stable for considerable periods of time and might even become stronger when social tensions between ethnic groups arise (Pickering 2001, 12). During slavery the stereotypes of a black person usually concentrated on laziness and unwillingness to work on one hand, and primitive nature on the other. These are features that have survived beyond slavery and exist in, for example, blackface minstrelsy.

Bogle lists five stereotypical caricatures of blacks that have survived after slavery: the Tom; the Coon; the Tragic Mulatta; the Mammy and the Buck. The Uncle Tom caricature is a “good Negro”; submissive and selfless servant who would never betray his

beloved masters (Bogle 6). The racial caricature most prevalent in minstrelsy was the coon. Bogle sees the coon as the most degrading of all black stereotypes: he was lazy and unreliable, a “subhuman creature, good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap or butchering the English language” (8). The coon is an object of amusement and quite simply a “black buffoon” (*ibid.* 7), and this caricature shows black men in a way that justifies their inferior status in comparison to the whites, after all, they cannot even speak proper English. This was the black man most prevalent on the minstrelsy stage, and also Bert Williams’ character was influenced by the Southern plantation coon, whereas the role of his partner was a more flamboyant Northern “zip coon” or “dandy”. The Tragic Mulatta is a female character, a fair woman with mixed racial background usually passing for white. This caricature is normally made sympathetic and likable and her dreams of happiness are always ruined by the discovery of her black ancestry (*ibid.* 9). The Mammy caricature can be seen as a female counterpart to Uncle Tom in the sense that, she too was a happy and loyal servant, usually presented as an obese, maternal type (*ibid.* 9). The Bad Bucks are the evil and dangerous black males “out on a rampage of black rage” (*ibid.* 13), they are physically strong, big and “over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (*ibid.* 14).

These are the stereotypes that, according to Bogle, have remained as a part of how blacks were and still are represented in Western culture, particularly in entertainment. Out of these five caricatures, the coon was the type that was prevalent in blackface minstrelsy. The traditional minstrelsy show in the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century consisted of a group of white men dressed in a “Negro” costume of ragged and/or oversized clothes (Lott 1995, 5). The show was normally divided into three parts; the first consisted of songs including what was thought of as “black wit and japery”; the second part contained novelty performances, for example comic dialogue and malapropistic speech; and the third part a narrative skit that included “dancing, music and burlesque” (Lott 1995, 5-6). Early blackface performances could be seen

in travelling medicine shows, in vaudeville theatres, and, as Lott adds, working-class leisure sites, such as “sporting saloons” and even circuses. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, minstrelsy spread to more prestigious theatres and even Broadway, with the help of Bert Williams’ blackface act.

Originally, the minstrels were white males in blackface makeup pretending to be genuine blacks; after all in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, actual people of color had no place on the theatre stage. Interestingly enough though, part of the audience of minstrelsy seems to have been unable to recognize the fact that they were not watching blacks, but white people pretending to be black. As Lott points out, “in the eyes of many, blackface singers and dancers became, simply, ‘negroes’” (1995, 20). Thus, a great part of the audiences of early minstrelsy were not able to recognize the difference between the stereotype they were presented on stage and a genuine black person, but the image they saw in the show was completely believable to them.

Actually, this misconception that the performers were actually black was so common that a habit of presenting the performers in both with and without the blackface costume on advertisements of the shows was introduced (Lott 1995, 20). However, regardless of the fact that part of the audience believed in the authenticity of the minstrelsy shows, the idea of a black man performing on stage for white audiences was still seen as a problem. To illustrate this, Lott refers to the writings of Thomas Low Nichols from 1864, who tells the story of a blackface dancer John Diamond, who quits his career at P. T. Barnum’s organization in the early 1840’s, leaving him without a leading star (1991, 227). As Barnum goes searching for a replacement to his show, he finds a boy who can dance even better than Diamond did, but the only problem is that the boy is black; as Nichols writes, “there was not an audience in America that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro” (qtd in Lott 1991, 227-228). Barnum then

solves this problem by disguising his new find under blackface makeup, for “had it been suspected that the seeming counterfeit was the genuine article, the New York Vauxhall would have blazed with indignation” (qtd in Lott, 1991, 228).

This shows that the minstrelsy scene was complicated by the emergence of actual black performers from quite early on, although the early years of minstrelsy were predominantly “white”. Eileen Southern limits the most important years of minstrelsy to the period 1840-80 and states that the first half was dominated by whites in blackface impersonating the rural slave (the coon) and the urban black (the dandy) (45). According to Southern, the first permanent all-black minstrel troupe was formed in 1867, and from this time onwards black minstrels became a common sight on the minstrelsy scene (*ibid.*). However, these black performers maintained the same traditions of blackface makeup and racial stereotypes the white minstrels had developed (*ibid.*).

Why, then, did blackface minstrelsy gain the popularity it did and why was it necessary for black performers to resort to the makeup as well, instead of providing the audience with a genuine image of a black man? Traditionally, blackface minstrelsy and the reasons behind its popularity have been regarded as simple racism. For example, Frederick Douglass stated already in 1848 that blackface imitators were “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens” (qtd in Lott 1995, 15). Lott, however, sees more complicated attitudes behind minstrelsy, and argues that there was a variety of responses towards the minstrelsy show that can tell us something of the “racial politics and culture in the years before the Civil War” (1995, 15).

Although the understanding of minstrelsy today has moved from simple racism to a more complex entity of racial attitudes of the society, it can still be seen as a performance that is both ethically and ethnically mixed and serves to reproduce white supremacy (DeVere

Brody 737). But as stated before, behind the surface of simple racism, diverse themes can be found. For example, Nowatzki has studied the connection between the representation of African Americans in minstrelsy and the abolition movement, Lhamon takes minstrelsy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in his study *Racing Cane: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998), Lott approaches it through the American working class (one of the most significant audiences of minstrelsy) and discusses the complicated nature of attitudes towards the black community that are revealed through minstrelsy. Therefore, the minstrelsy tradition is a much more complex entity than many realize and also an important area of study even today, almost two centuries later. Although there is no denying the racist nature of blackface minstrelsy, it actually served several functions for all the people involved, both the audience and the performers themselves.

As CRT's idea of interest convergence suggests, racial categorizing always has benefits for the dominant culture. This idea can also be applied to blackface minstrelsy and its various functions. The most overt function of minstrelsy was entertainment; after all, it was one of the most popular forms of theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But, moreover, minstrelsy was used to maintain racial categories and define "blackness" and "whiteness". It also had a political function in justifying racial oppression, and it can be seen as a form of cultural exploitation. Through cultural exploitations minstrelsy also reveals the interest of the white community towards black culture. Blackface minstrelsy can further be connected to representations of race and its performative nature.

Besides being a form of popular entertainment, which is the most obvious function of minstrelsy, it was used to maintain racial categories. The aspect of power and control is closely intertwined with race and some critics believe that the only function of race is to maintain the existing power structures of the society. For example, Seshadri-Crooks argues that "race identity can have only one function – it establishes differential relations

among the races in order to constitute the logic of domination. Groups must be differentiated and related in order to make possible the claim to power and domination” (7). As discussed previously, CRT agrees with this notion of racial categorizing as a justification for domination, but it calls this phenomenon interest convergence. The reluctance to admit black performers on stage, at least not without being disguised under blackface makeup, was a way to withhold power. By reserving the stage only to white performers, they (the whites) had the control over how the black population and their assumed culture was represented, and this helped to sustain their power over black culture and black people.

However, the fact that a part of the white audience actually believed in the authenticity of white blackface performers complicates the matter. If some already believed they were watching actual blacks onstage, why would making this belief a reality be a problem? It seems that there was a division within the audience of blackface minstrelsy, and this is something the scholars studying blackface today want us to recognize. But as Lott also points out, the fact that some part of the audience did not realize that the characters they were presented with were counterfeit, does not rule out racial ridicule (1995, 20). That merely showed that they believed the portrait of a black man the white society had manufactured. Lott continues to argue that

although minstrelsy was indeed in the business of staging or producing “race”, that very enterprise also involved it in a carnivalizing of race, as the range of critical response has begun to suggest, such that the minstrel show’s ideological production become more contradictory, its consumption more indeterminate, its political effects more plural than many have assumed. (1995, 20)

This carnivalizing of race, the black race in particular, helped to further distance the white audience from the black “coon” on stage and define their own “whiteness” as something superior.

Therefore, blackface minstrelsy had many aspects that worked for the benefit of its white audiences, not just on the level of society but on a more personal level as well. Just

as CRT suggests, racial categorizing always has benefits for the dominant culture, and this is the reason these categories remain: blackface emphasized the differences between black and white and therefore helped to draw racial boundaries. Roedigar argues that blacking up was actually a way for white men to define their whiteness (117) and Nowatzki agrees with him, further suggesting that in blackface minstrelsy, the performances of blackness were in fact performances of whiteness (2007, 116). The black cork emphasised the white skin underneath and it thus distinguished the white performers from the “people they mimicked and mocked” (Nowatzki 2007, 116). Also, a great part of the audiences of early minstrelsy were white working-class males, and again, CRT believes that they had a psychological gain in racial differentiation. By laughing at a white man dressed as a black man acting the part of a fool, they were able to raise themselves above these “coons” and feel superior to them. In other words, they would put someone else down in order to uplift themselves, and this would also make it essential that they believed in the authenticity of the act.

In addition, early minstrelsy had connections to American politics as well; Nowatzki has found similarities between minstrelsy and the abolition movement in his recent study on the subject. He argues that, first of all, minstrelsy frequently “borrowed the antislavery tropes of the separated slave family and the overworked slave”; further, both white abolitionists and the minstrelsy show had a near pornographic fascination with black bodies; and thirdly, both white abolitionists and minstrelsy performers “implied that their representations of African Americans were genuine” (Nowatzki, 2010, 10-11). Minstrelsy songs did use many antislavery tropes; nevertheless, they cannot be seen as promoting antislavery, because while they did show hardships of slavery, “the slave patiently endures the suffering or resists it with deception. These songs rarely hint at a possibility of slave revolt; no doubt, white audiences would not find such a subject to be funny” (*ibid.* 17). Consequently, minstrelsy functioned as a way to reassure the white population of how, in fact,

black people were content with being subordinate to their “masters” or if they were not, their resistance consisted of harmless schemes and tricks rather than rebellion.

Besides the various functions blackface minstrelsy had for its audiences and performers, it also reveals something about the white community’s attitudes towards the “black race”. Lott argues that white performers of minstrelsy “often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices” (1995, 6). The heavy borrowing from black culture shows that cultural exploitation can be found at the centre of minstrelsy, “the principal site of struggle in and over the culture of black people” that “finally divested black people of control over elements of their culture and over their own cultural representation generally” (*ibid.* 18). However, it has been assumed by some that blackface minstrelsy could somehow be regarded as African American “people’s culture”: for example, Lott refers to Margaret Fuller who reflected that the only American music and dance that was not false could be found in blackface minstrelsy (Lott 1991, 225). Nevertheless, blackface minstrelsy can hardly be regarded as original black culture, because, even though some of the material for the songs, for instance, might be borrowed from real plantation songs, it was still shaped by the white performers to fit their purposes. Further, Lott argues that, even though the idea of the “originality” of blackface minstrelsy still forms one side of debate over early minstrelsy, this notion seems extremely misguided, for “blackface minstrelsy’s century-long commercial regulation of black cultural practices stalled the development of Negro public arts and generated an enduring narrative of racist ideology – a historical process by which an entire people has been made the bearer of another people’s ‘folk’ culture” (*ibid.*).

Thus, the reasons behind white people’s interest in black culture are more complicated than entertainment and racial ridicule. Lott points out that “the minstrel show indeed was based on a profound white investment in black culture which occasionally surfaced in certain less malign ways” (1991, 227). For Lott blackface is among the best places

for studying the contradictions of popular racial feeling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because of the doubleness of the apparently opposite feelings white people seemed to have towards black culture, which were reflected in blackface minstrelsy (*ibid.*). He elaborates that the racial feeling reflected in blackface

begun to take the form of a complex dialectic: an unsteady but continual oscillation between fascination between ‘blackness’ and fearful ridicule of it, underscored but not necessarily determined by an oscillation between sympathetic belief in blackface’s authenticity and ironic distance from its counterfeit representation. (Lott, 277)

Minstrelsy, for Lott, was “a popular form in which racial insult was twinned with racial envy” (*ibid.*). This ambivalence is what Lott calls “love and theft”, or what could also be perceived as loving the culture and loathing the people. Thus, in blackface minstrelsy racial ridicule was used to disguise the interest white community had towards black culture as well as their envy of it. The conclusion can be drawn that one of the reasons blackface minstrelsy was so popular was because the white audience was drawn to the idea of exotic Africa, and the carefree attitude of the minstrelsy coons. These were features a white person could never possess, but perhaps still wanted. This seems to be something Lott, at least, believes. Since it is not likely that a white man would admit in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that he wants to be more like a black man, the solution was to dress up as one and make a joke out of the situation. These are themes that Bert also ponders over in *Dancing in the Dark* and the subject will be dealt with more in the analysis section.

In addition, minstrelsy can also be used to study representation of race through the racial caricatures prevalent in the minstrelsy show. It also reveals the performative nature of race rather clearly. Nowatzki has studied contemporary fiction, including *Dancing in the Dark*, that has taken blackface minstrelsy as a subject, and argues that even though blackface minstrelsy is represented differently in different works, they all “use minstrelsy to demonstrate how racial boundaries are drawn, shifted, and rubbed out and to emphasize the

performative nature of race and the multiple layers of many racial performances” (2007, 117). He elaborates that the “use of minstrelsy to represent blackness and whiteness as identities that are constructed through performance” is the most important cultural work the texts he has studied perform (*ibid.*).

The fascination of the white population with black culture has continued ever since the first minstrelsy shows. Some critics have actually drawn connections between minstrelsy and modern day hip hop and rap artists. Lhamon is among these critics, but also Caryl Phillips himself reveals that he has always had an interest in the “minstrelsy” of some modern hip hop artists. Even though gaining success as a rap artist seems to be something to aspire to today, Phillips compares taking the role of a rapper to performative bondage, something that restricts the artist to a single stereotype (Foot, 2005). According to Phillips, this degrades the performers instead of enriching them (Foot). This type of performative bondage is also evident in *Dancing in the Dark*, where Bert creates his character with the use of blackface makeup and after this is unable to develop his performances beyond the mask.

The blackface mask is something both Phillips’s Bert and the real Bert Williams struggled with. Since *Dancing in the Dark* is based on the life of a historical character, it is important not to lose sight of the “real Bert”. Bert Williams (1874-1922) was a West Indian comedian with a successful and versatile career. He started touring with traveling medicine shows when he was only sixteen (Forbes 3), but his career also covers minstrelsy, black musical theatre, vaudeville and motion pictures (*ibid.* xi). He also recorded several popular hits, including his most famous number “Nobody” from 1905 (Chude-Sokei 35). Although the name of Bert Williams has faded into history, at the height of his career in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was recognized as the greatest stage comedian in America at the time (Chude-Sokei 1). Williams is best known for his work in black musical theatre with his partner

George Walker and after that as the only black performer in Florenz Ziegfield's Broadway show *Ziegfield Follies* (*ibid.* 2).

After his death in 1922, despite of his popularity during his lifetime, Bert Williams has been largely forgotten. Only in recent decades scholarly interest towards him as well as blackface minstrelsy has begun to increase. Now he is often depicted as a pioneer of African-American entertainment business and the first black "international pop star" (Chude-Sokei 1). However, it is Williams' insistent use of blackface makeup, which created indignation among many African Americans at the time, that makes him such an interesting and controversial character even today. On one hand, through the use of blackface Williams "appropriated from whites the right to command and symbolically possess the 'Negro'" (*ibid.* 5) and this showed that "black performer could *outperform* a white performer in a white form such as minstrelsy" (*ibid.* 5, emphasis in the original). On the other hand, as Chude-Sokei notes, the characters of Williams and Walker were still representative of the stereotypical "coons" and "darkies" (32) and this reluctance to reject conventions was met with disapproval by a part of the black public (Forbes xii).

Bert Williams first tried the blackface makeup in the 1890s "just for a lark" and was shocked to discover "his performance suddenly struck a chord" (Chude-Sokei 25). After that he always performed with the mask that granted him his success. However, there was a sadness in Bert Williams and a fellow comedian, W.C. Fields, has famously described him as the "funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew". By taking the role of a stereotypical "American Negro" or "darker" the West Indian performer aimed to distance himself from his stage character (*ibid.* 30-31), but eventually, for the subsequent generations, he became indistinguishable from the mask he himself hated (*ibid.* 43). It is this troubled and tormented Bert that Phillips concentrates on in *Dancing in the Dark*. Phillips imagines Bert behind his stage character and concentrates on his feelings and reasons for his choice to use

blackface makeup. The following sections will discuss how Bert was perceived by his white and black audience and what kind of functions blackface carries for different racial groups in *Dancing in the Dark*. I will also consider what blackface reveals about the nature of race itself.

### **3. Bert Williams and Blackface through the Eyes of the White Community**

As stated previously, I will divide my analysis into two chapters; firstly, I will examine the character of Bert Williams through the eyes of the white community, and secondly, the black society's perception of Bert. I will begin here with the white community, first mapping out Bert's performance and role and how it changed with the adoption of blackface. I will then move on to how Bert is perceived by the whites and finally analyze the different functions blackface had for them. Why was blackface minstrelsy so popular and why were black performers pressured to disguise their true selves under the make up as well? What was it that white people gained from this racial masquerade? These are some of the questions I aim to answer in the following chapter.

One thing to bear in mind in regards to the white audience is the fact that Phillips has constructed his novel mainly on the thoughts and feelings of Bert, therefore the descriptions of white people's attitudes and expectations are mainly described through Bert's eyes. He himself believes that there is a certain way the white audience sees him and expects him to behave. There are instances where the reader hears the voice of the white audience as well though; this is mainly through newspaper reviews of shows Bert performs in. Since Phillips has chosen the life of a real historical person as his topic and uses many references to actual historical events and persons, it is implied that these extracts are not fictitious. However, Phillips does not include any references to his sources, so the truth value of these extracts has to be questioned. Nevertheless, they reveal the attitudes of the white audience, and since I am examining *Dancing in the Dark* as a piece of fiction, I do not feel that the truth value of these passages is a problem.

### 3.1 The Role and Performance of Bert

Phillips's novel *Dancing in the Dark* presents us with the troubled life of a Caribbean-born performer. Phillips describes how Bert Williams immigrates to America as an 11-year-old boy with his parents, and is drawn to life on stage from a young age. He abandons his prospective university studies for a career on stage, and to his father's disappointment, joins a traveling medicine show at the age of sixteen (25). At the centre of the novel are Bert's performances and the role he takes on stage. He feels this role is imposed on him from outside, for Bert realizes quickly that in America "blackness" is defined by the white community: after arriving in the United States from the Caribbean, Bert and his family realize that "[in] this new place they are simply Negroes" and they "begin to learn how to be coloreds *and* niggers, foreigners *and* the most despised of homegrown sons" (24-25, emphasis in the original). This also is when young Bert "begins to learn the role America has set aside for him to play" (25) onstage and off.

For Bert, the stage is the place where he wants to be, but the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century America has only one role to offer to a colored performer, that of the lazy, simpleminded minstrelsy coon. He travels with medicine shows "where buffoonery and desperate clowning were the mask behind which he continued to hide" (25). He also works as a singing waiter, but the abuse he faces and the demeaning roles that he has to take, finally make him "retire" the medicine show circuit. Bert soon realizes, however, that he is expected to perform a certain role offstage as well. In his job as a hotel bell boy he has to play the part of a servant, "but to receive neither laughter nor applause in return seemed to him to defeat the whole purpose of the exercise" (26) and he returns to his life as a traveling performer. Bert feels that if he is to be treated as someone inferior to the dominant white majority, as a simpleton and a fool, he might as well do it on the stage and make people laugh.

The first turning point in Bert's career is when he meets his future partner George Walker in 1893 in San Francisco and the two join forces, performing in various saloons and variety halls of the city. At this point the duo eschews blackface make up, angering many theatre owners, but for Walker and Williams, who dream of becoming famous one day, "there will be no blackface makeup" (30). Even though the duo attempts to resist the stereotypical minstrelsy image by refusing to wear blackface, they still have to perform on the terms of the white audience. For example, they "masquerad[e] as southern 'plantation darkies' or northern 'zip coons' and "are expected to perfect clumsy, foolish gestures, and then retire to the wings and silently endure the discourtesy of people mimicking them" (29).

Even though it was possible for blacks like George and Bert to work as performers in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, it was practically impossible for them to develop their stage characters in any creative way. The stereotypes of blacks that derived from the time of slavery still persisted, and the only possibility offered for black performers was to act within the conventions of these caricatures. The "coon" was the character which white performers in blackface minstrelsy had chosen, and that was what a "black man" was expected to be like on stage, whether the performers were genuine blacks or not. Many real life black blackface minstrels chose to use blackface makeup as well, as the example from P.T. Barnum's show that was discussed earlier shows. Since the "coon" caricature depicted black people as "no-good niggers" that were lazy, childlike and stupid, by adopting this stereotype, the black performers using blackface strengthened the stereotypes that white society had produced of them. Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that the options for black performers were limited; the directors of theatres and traveling shows were white men, who had the power to decide the kind of roles their employees performed.

The stereotypes of black people that minstrelsy uses derive from the time of slavery, when black people were controlled through physical punishments, hard work and

malnutrition, but after the end of the Civil war in 1865 and the emancipation of slavery, “other, more subtle ways of controlling and containing blacks arose” (Tucker 4). These included, for example, the Black Codes that “circumscribed the mobility of black people in literal and economic terms, and spectacularly violent lynchings of black men” (*ibid.*). In theory, the emancipation was supposed to grant equal rights to blacks and whites, but in practice, as W.D Wright describes, many of the civil rights black people had gained in the 1860s and 1870s were taken away only a few decades later by “Supreme Court decisions, national governmental enforcement of decisions, state statutes, and by national and local racist practices” (1). thus, by the time Bert and George begin performing, civil rights have taken a step back and therefore resisting white racial ideals is increasingly difficult and dangerous. For example, “in the years 1895-1900, an average of 101 blacks were lynched every year – mostly in the South” (Klarman 3), and this is the time Bert and George attempt to build up their career.

As Pickering suggests, racial stereotyping “tend[s] to become more pronounced and hostile when social tension between different ethnic groups or other groupings arise” (12). The post-Reconstruction era of the turn of the century was one such time, and black performers such as Bert were among those who were caught in the middle. With increasing racism and violence, alternative imagery to the racist stereotyping is not easily accepted. George actually has to face the wrath of an angry white mob, when the Williams and Walker duo is at the height of their fame, because he refuses to be cautious and stay inside when there is turmoil on the streets of New York. He is on his way home when a group of white men “recognized his *immodest* clothes, and then his well-groomed face” (67, emphasis in the original) and resume beating him senseless.

Therefore, due to the difficult times, even though Bert and George attempt to resist the demeaning part they are set out to play by rejecting blackface, they still have to meet

the expectations of their paying audience in order to be recognized. Their performance is a balancing act between trying not to let down their own "race" with their buffoonery on stage and living up to the expectations of their white audience. They are "trying to be something other than the colored monkeys that the audience in the orchestra stalls assume they are paying to see" (29-30), but doing this without causing conflict is a difficult task. In the early part of their career, rejecting the blackface makeup is the way the duo tries to resist the control white society has over the representation of black people. This is, however, not enough to change their image and the way the audience sees them, and they soon have to accept the fact that at the saloons they were performing in, they were, at best, "either tolerated or ignored" (31).

When performing in the minstrelsy circuit and traveling around the country in the early part of their career, the performances of the duo are always dictated by the white minstrelsy tradition. The majority of their audience is white from the beginning, and even after Bert and George settle in New York around the turn of the century, their audience is predominantly white. In the theatres of New York black people are admitted in, but their place is in the cheap seats on the balcony, while the better and more expensive seats are reserved to the white audience. Therefore, the money comes from the pockets of whites even if part of the audience is black; as Bert's wife Lottie observes, they expect to see a "shuffling, dull-witted, watermelon-eating Negro of questionable intelligence" (35), so this is what Bert and George have to give them.

Regardless of the fact that they try to meet the white audiences' expectations with their coon caricatures at the beginning of their career, Walker and Williams struggle to support themselves, and the racism they have to counter in the medicine shows begins to become overwhelming. This is when Bert makes the decision that becomes the second changing point in his career after meeting George: in Detroit in 1896, Bert tries on blackface

makeup for the first time, regardless of his partner's objections. They also reverse the roles around and Bert becomes the clown and George the "straight man", Walker and Williams becomes Williams and Walker and "right away the laughs came more easily" (35).

The reformed act of the duo, with Bert now in blackface, becomes an immediate success, and they make their way to New York and enter vaudeville as the "Two Real Coons" (36). Where in the early days of Williams and Walker, the two were merely tolerated, now Bert's blackface and his "own interpretation of a Negro" and George's "new dandified character" (36) pleases the white audience and the duo begins gathering success. Bert tries to justify his use of blackface with the fictionality of his coon character, but for the white audience, the adoption of blackface means that the image of the black man they want to see on stage is complete. Now that they have fully adopted the conventions of blackface minstrelsy in Bert's character including blackface makeup, they are greeted with applause and laughter instead of flying chairs. Since the theatre world and show business in Bert's America are controlled by the white community, they are not recognized until they meet their expectations.

The novel suggests that the whites are not concerned by the emotional burden that acting as a crude stereotype is causing the black performers, but are more interested in the comic relief of the act. They have created this white man's image of a lazy, dull-witted coon, and have no trouble recognizing him, so Bert's character is greeted with a mass reaction of shouts: "That's him! That's the Nigger! He looks like that. And that's just how he talks. And he walks just like that. I know him! I know him!" (57-58). With the racial unrest and increasing racism of the turn of the century, Bert's blackface act comes at an optimal time when the white society is eager to receive negative depictions of black people. Bert's performance not only amuses the white audience but justifies the increasing violence and

control towards black people because it presents the black race as a group of “coons” that do not know what is best for them.

### 3.2. White Community’s perception of Bert

Bert’s decision to begin performing in blackface brings with it unexpected popularity from the white community, and this popularity leads to new doors being opened for the duo, and they are able to leave the medicine show circuit for New York. Also, Bert as the comic coon and George as the more flamboyant dandy seems to be a more natural division of roles, because the role of the comedian and fool appears to be easier for Bert to sustain, and suddenly, the “Two Real Coon” are famous. From New York’s vaudeville they are quickly able to move on to Broadway and their musical *In Dahomey* (1903), set in exotic Africa, is the “first all-Negro production on Broadway [...] and everybody is talking about it” (66).

However, the fact that Williams and Walker do not gain popularity before the blackface mask, reveals as much of the racial attitudes of the time as it does of the actual talent of the duo. It is true that “play[ing] the simpleton” (59) seems easier for Bert than it had been for his partner, because he has a natural talent for comedic acting, and therefore changing the roles improved their act, but their talent as performers alone did not allow them their sudden success. As discussed in section 2.2, from the early days of blackface minstrelsy, the only black characters seen on a stage, be it in a medicine show or theatre, were created by white men. Even when actual people of color begun appearing in minstrelsy shows, they had on the same blackface makeup the white performers had had. When Williams and Walker start their career without blackface, even though their characters are the kind of slow-witted and clowning coons seen in minstrelsy, without the burned cork makeup, part of the comic effect of their show seems to be lost for the white audience. Therefore, a large part of their

success is due to the fact that now they were presenting the white audience with the familiar stereotype of a coon in blackface they had become used to seeing in traditional minstrelsy.

Thus, before Bert disguises his true complexion underneath the black cork, he is not black enough for the white audience; he is not a true “nigger”. It is only after the makeup comes on that the white audience recognizes him, or rather, their own fantasy of what a black man is truly like. The rest of the cast of the Williams and Walker show still perform without blackface, but, as Chude-Sokei points out of the real Bert Williams and his performance, “it was the presence of Williams’s blackface that anchored the performance for the white audience” (32). This is something Phillips brings to his novel as well, and as Bert himself contemplates, his character “was not a man he recognized. This was somebody else’s fantasy” (58). The only image of a black man that the white community accepted on stage was their own creation, the hopeless and helpless coon that could not threaten white supremacy.

Now that Bert has externally embraced the stage Negro his audience is so familiar with, he is more popular than ever and Williams and Walker are “making more coin than they ever did” (60). Even though Bert is struggling with his new character, the white audience eagerly accepts his new blackfaced character without question or critique. It becomes apparent that for a black performer to succeed in show business, he has to abide to the roles that have been given to him by the dominant white culture or it is practically impossible for him to succeed in his career. Whether these roles are accurate or not is not a concern for the whites, as long as they serve their purposes and fantasies; for as CRT theorists argue, white control over the representation of black always benefits the dominant group.

This point that white society constructs roles for black people they themselves believe to be true, is further illuminated by an incident in the early part of Williams and Walker’s career, when they act as “anthropological specimens at Golden Gate Park” (31). There, an exhibition of an African Dahomean village is supposed to present “real savages” to

the public, but when the arrival of the Dahomeans is delayed, Bert and George are among those who “donned animal skins” and are “instructed to impersonate ‘natives’ streaming with perspiration and [...] obliged to kneel before [their] masters with the clumsy devotion of camels” (31). For the organizers of the exhibition, the skin color of the performers is enough to make them suitable for the role. However, for Bert and George “it soon became apparent, that neither of us could successfully play *primitive*, for there was absolutely nothing in our lives that could prepare us for this demeaning role” (31, emphasis in the original). But the Americanized interpretation of the African “savage” is accepted by the spectators without critique, because, when the real Dahomeans finally arrive, the manager of the exhibition makes the decision to send them back home and keep his “imposters”, since they are the ones the public is “able to relate to” (32); in other words, they present the right kind of image of wild Africa that the white American spectators expect.

The encounter between the real Dahomeans and their impersonators reveals the extent of the American fantasy of wild Africa. When the leader of the group of Africans sees Bert in his costume, he is confused by what he is witnessing, thinking

So this is America standing tall and proud before him. It never crosses his mind that this bizarre-looking man could possibly be representing Africa, let alone Dahomey, and against his better judgment he begins to feel sorry for Bert. The man from Dahomey stands in front of Bert and stares in disbelief at this pitiful apparition and he worries about this strange land called America. (69)

This passage shows that the only ones that are able to recognize the savage African, dressed in animal skins with bells around his ankles and Chinese lettering painted on his face (69) are white Americans. Here, Phillips contrasts white America that is defining blacks with the African, who now, in turn is looking at America and is confused about what he sees and actually feels sorry for them. Of course, when the real Africans arrive and the possibility of shattering that image given by the exhibition is presented, the matter is quickly resolved by

sending the Africans back home and keeping the performers that can be styled and instructed to represent the kind of African the white public expects to see.

The image of the black man, whether it is the image of an exotic African savage or African American coon, is deeply embedded in the hearts of white Americans, partly because that is what people wanted to see, but also because those were among the only images of blacks presented in the public sphere. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a lack of black produced cultural text, and the few texts that existed were not visible in white mainstream society. This only begun to change during the Harlem Renaissance in 1920s, shortly after the career of Bert. Before that, even though some cultural texts written by blacks did exist, for example slave narratives, blacks were practically always presented through stereotypes in mainstream white culture. This can be seen in the rejection of real Africans in favor of their “counterfeit” representations, but also in Bert’s blackface performance. Before he embraces the stereotype, he is never accepted completely as a performer by the white community. He is not enough as himself, he is not close enough to a “white man’s nigger”, just as the Dahomeans are not close enough to the wild and exotic Africa, envisioned in white fantasy.

It is the white community that dictates the terms for a black performer who wants to enter the stage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Williams and Walker make the transition to Broadway and to success. But these terms seem extremely restricting and Bert feels constant pressure, trying to meet the expectations of the white audience, who in the end can make or break him, at the same time trying not to “bring down the race” (41). Restricting himself to a stereotype is the price Bert has to pay for his fame and it is all the white audience wants to see. Towards the end of his career, in the 1910s, when moving pictures were a novel invention, Bert finally attempts to leave his darky character behind and removes his blackface makeup. He performs in a silent film without the mask, but against his expectations, people

“are angry because he has chosen not to cork his face” (191). Phillips refers to a review of the motion picture *Darktown Jubilee* (1914) that goes on to say that “gone was the familiar ‘darky humor’ heavily laden with pathos, and in its place [Mr. Williams] gave us an uncorked colored person of cunning and resourcefulness that left a sour taste in the mouth for all who had paid money to see this presentation” (192).

Thus, even after working as an entertainer for several decades, Bert, the most successful black performer of his time, is pressured to return to blackface by the white public. Defeated, Bert makes two more films in blackface, they are not “a happy experience” but receive more accepting reviews, for example, a review of *A Natural Born Gambler* (1916) states that “Williams gives his watermelon grin most satisfyingly” (192). The white audience is still not ready to be challenged in their ideas of black men and the black “race”. If they accepted Bert’s performance without the familiar makeup, they would have to recognize the fact that the “darky” they loved was just a role, a fictional character created for the sole purpose of entertaining them. They would then have to accept that the role was separate from the performer, which would further reveal the artificial nature of that role. Separating the role from the performer would then open discussions of the origin of that role and welcome critique of its acceptability (something the black community was already doing). By refusing to separate Bert from his coon character created by the burned cork mask, the white audience is able to continue to believe in the “naturalness” of his act.

The words used to relate to Bert further illustrate his position, and this is something Bert himself does not fail to notice. He is always referred to as a “colored performer” and this choice of words bothers him, for “actor” is a term that suggests a certain dignity, and it implies a necessary distance between the performer and the character to be interpreted” (199). However “he understands that nobody [...] considers him to be an actor” (199). Bert is never offered the dignity of the word “actor” and he has to settle for the label of

performer that does not clearly indicate that when on stage, he is playing a role. By looking at a “performer” instead of an “actor” the white audience does not have to challenge their perceptions of the black race and think about the actor behind the mask; as long as Bert Williams is a performer, for the white audience he is the same as his mask. They do not see the process of transformation that happens in Bert’s dressing room before the show.

For Bert the distinction is obvious, but he can only hope that the audience will see it as well. In his dressing room, Bert watches as his skin turns from his own “light ebony” to “black velvet” and he looks at himself thinking “But this is not me. Surely the audience understands this. This is simply a person I have discovered, a person the audience claims to recognize” (123). Bert’s sometimes even naïve hope that his audience will recognize the artificial nature of his character is contradicted by the eager shouts from the orchestra pits: “That’s him! That’s the nigger!” (57). For his white audience, Bert is always the simple and clumsy coon, and they accept him because in his character they see the stereotype of the black man they themselves have created and want to be true. All incidents that threaten the picture the white community has created of their blackfaced star are met with disapproval. Again, a connection to CRT’s interest convergence can be drawn here, because the white audience attempts to sustain the imagery used in blackface minstrelsy and resist changing this image, because that would threaten white supremacy. As long as black people are restricted to simple negative stereotypes the whites can feel like the superior group; therefore, they have no interest in accepting Bert without his blackface mask.

When the crew of the Williams and Walker show is sailing towards England to take their show overseas, the presence of Bert as himself begins to make the white passengers uncomfortable: “they stare hard at Bert, disturbed by the fact that his dignified presence among them is beginning to challenge their sense of who he is. Coon. The Novelty is becoming tedious. Without his disguise their ability to trust him is being seriously

undermined” (94). They do not want to see that the man behind the character they claim to recognize as a real “nigger” can be just as sophisticated as they are. The attitudes of the white community make Bert wonder whether a colored American can “ever be free to entertain beyond the evidence of his dark skin?” (100) and be “nothing more than an exuberant, childish fool named Aunt Jemina, Uncle Rufus, or simply Plantation Darcy, who must be neither unique nor individual?” (100).

For Bert, escaping the stereotype of the coon seems to be impossible; he is afraid that radical challenging of the role would not be accepted by the white audience. His fears are realized when he attempts to leave the cork behind in his few short films, and has to face rejection by viewers who want to see the darky they are used to. Bert realizes that “they require both the cork and the movement, the broad nigger smile and the shuffle, and only then do they know me. Only then am I welcome in their house” (94). The white society is only willing to accept Bert on their terms, but by degrading himself to meet the low expectations of the white audience he makes it possible for them to believe in their own superiority. The fact that black performers feel that they have to agree to the stereotypes created by whites in order to gain access to show business, helps to sustain racial inequality. This is an important function that blackface has for the white community, which, along with other functions of blackface, will be discussed in the following section.

### 3.3 Functions of Blackface for the White Community

When considering the reasons behind the popularity of blackface minstrelsy, CRT’s concept for interest convergence is a helpful tool. If racial categorization and the discourse around race exist partly because they work in favor of the white dominant society, then blackface minstrelsy must have functions that benefited the whites as well. First of all, CRT believes

that racial inequality advances material interests of the white upper class. Money certainly plays its role in *Dancing in the Dark* as well, because success in the entertainment business also leads to high profits. When the largest amount of seats, and the most expensive ones, in the theatres are occupied by white people, the surest way to make money is to give them what they want to see. As seen by the rapid boost of Williams and Walker's career, which is brought by Bert's blackface, the duo has found what was required for the audience to accept them.

Furthermore, the theatre managers and producers who decided which shows were performed in these venues were white. As pointed out above, Bert and George's decision to eschew blackface makeup earlier in their career angered many theatre managers, and the options for places they could perform in were limited. However, when Bert hides his true complexion under the burned cork makeup, suddenly the doors to New York's theatre world open up. His new face is familiar to the audience, because this is how black men have been presented for them for decades. By the time Williams and Walker take over Broadway in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, blackface minstrelsy had been popular entertainment for over fifty years. Bert's version of the dim-witted coon still amuses the white public and fills the theatres with spectators bringing more money to the stars of the show, and ultimately to the theatres as well. Also, indirectly the blacks are "kept in their place" through minstrelsy, and this helps to maintain a particular social order, where blacks are assigned a lower class status and have low paid jobs. Therefore, they remain a cheap labor force that can be exploited by the white upper class, and as CRT suggest, benefit them financially.

Supporting an all black theatre troupe, such as the crew of the Williams and Walker show, would have been a financial risk for a theatre without Bert's blackface. The mask ensures that the show does not stretch the boundaries of the white audience too far, as there is something familiar in the performance that they can concentrate on, without having

their views on racial representations challenged. As long as the shows of Williams and Walker were profitable, they had the support of the theatre world. In *Dancing in the Dark*, the white audience responds to the unintelligent coon character they find hilarious by opening their wallets. Therefore, it is beneficial for the theater world that is largely in the hands of white men to support this kind of blackface performance by, for example, allowing the show to more prestigious theatres, because they could rely on the fact that Bert's coon would draw an audience.

Another function blackface has for the white audience that can be seen in *Dancing in the Dark* is its entertainment value. Why would people pay to see a man dressed in shabby clothes, speaking broken English, acting like a fool with his face painted black? The simple answer is that white people found this extremely funny. Bert knows how to play this part and please the white audience; he knows how to give them what they want. Bert and George are, first and foremost, entertainers, and as George argues, at the turn of the century America, "all that was expected of a colored performer was singing and dancing and a little storytelling" (119), in other words, a simple act from simple people. When white performers were portraying "darky" characters "they made themselves look as ridiculous as they could" (119) and, according to George, "the one fatal result of this to the colored performers was that they imitated the white performers in their make-up as 'darkies'" (119).

Thus, in George's opinion, all the white audience wanted was to be entertained; the blackface makeup was not necessary, but was taken from the white blackface minstrelsy tradition by the initiative of black performers themselves. George believes that blackface and stereotypical characters are not what granted the duo their success, and he repeatedly urges Bert to "put the cork aside" and "cut that colored fool loose" (123). His partner, however, feels differently, because, as noted earlier, when Bert adopted the part of the clown and put on the blackface mask for the first time, with George acting as the "straight man", "right away

the laughs came more easily” (35). The white audience is not looking just for any type of entertainment when they come to see such shows as *In Dahomey* - they are drawn in by the old-fashioned blackface antics of Bert.

Money and entertainment are the overt, more visible functions that blackface has for the white community, but the most interesting ones are the covert functions, one of which is maintaining racial superiority. In blackface minstrelsy, African Americans were restricted to simple stereotypes, generally all negative. Therefore, blackface functions as a way to maintain white superiority over the black population. As mentioned before, when white performers portrayed black characters, the aim was to appear as stupid and ridiculous as possible, for that is how black people were seen in the eyes of the white community. Duplicating the stereotypes on stage helped to reinforce them and assure the audience of the authenticity of their negative image of a black man.

This issue is complicated when black performers continue to represent the same stereotypical images as their white colleagues. When a colored performer accepts the same imagery that the white society uses of him, it strengthens the imagery even further and helps convince the white public that the stereotypes they have created are correct. This is an ongoing problem discussed in *Dancing in the Dark*, since Bert is one of those black performers who perpetuate the stereotype. Bert himself claims that his character “does not exist except in my imagination” (179) but his opinion is challenged, for example, by one Mr. Nail, who points out that Bert’s coon also exists in the imagination of whites, arguing that “we exist in *their* imagination as you present us, and you reinforce their low judgment of us as dull and pitiable” (179, emphasis in the original).

Even though Bert wants to believe in the fictional nature of his character, as well as his audience’s ability to recognize that fictionality, he continues to support negative imagery of the black race, whether he intends it or not. Consequently, he enables feelings for

white superiority, when his white audience can only see him as a Negro who is happy just eating watermelon, falling over on his face and mispronouncing the English language (123). When they see this pitiable character on stage and recognize him to be what they have always believed black people to be truly like, they are able to raise themselves above this creature and feel superior to him. What Phillips does in his novel, is to reveal what the black man behind the novel is like through his struggles with his character – he is a human being who can make mistakes.

According to CRT, material benefits are the main advances that the white upper class gains from racial inequality (and in the context of *Dancing in the Dark*, blackface) but for the white working class, the greatest benefits are psychological. As pointed out in the theory section, the white working class was traditionally the main audience of blackface minstrelsy, but the same principle can surely be applied to the more varied audience of Williams and Walker's show in the New York theatre world. Thus, when a white person, regardless of his class background, watches a black performer act like a fool on stage, he is able to feel superior to him, but also to justify his feeling of racial superiority. That is because when he sees a blackface performance, he receives proof that, indeed, blacks are no more than simpleminded "coons" and, therefore, should be inferior to whites. Bert understands that his white audience needs to feel these feelings of superiority in order to accept him, even though at the same time he claims that his "nigger" does not represent any "real" black people. When he retires from his career on stage after taking a part in Zigfield's Follies he ponders that now "there will be no colored fool who is so stupid that even the most ignorant among the audience seated in the orchestra stalls will not be able to both pity him and feel superior to him" (172).

The fourth function of blackface minstrelsy, and the racial stereotyping it uses, is that it works as a way for the white community to control racial representation. Since the

theatre world was mainly in the hands of whites and the white audience was responsible for the main cash flow to the theaters, it was relatively easy to direct Bert, as well as other black performers, towards the type of roles that suited the white community best. By restricting blacks to stereotypes in the public sphere, the white community was able to control how race was represented in America and maintain the racial status quo. In blackface minstrelsy, the black race was always represented through the eyes of whites and the images of blacks were figments of the white imagination that had little or nothing to do with reality. Since it was not easy for colored people to gain access to the stage or other public forums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when minstrelsy was born, it was nearly impossible for them to present an alternative image of themselves. The representation of blacks was dominated by the white community, so it was possible for the majority to define the minority on their own terms. When it became possible for people of color to work as performers, the control that the white community had over the image of blacks was suddenly jeopardized. By awarding black performers who used blackface with fame and money, it was possible for whites to maintain control over the representation of race and reinforce their own superior status.

The control that the white community has over the representation of black race in *Dancing in the Dark* can be seen in the way Bert and his company is treated. Because Bert does not attempt to challenge white ideals in any radical way, but is willing to abide to their rules and restrictions, he is, for example referred to as a “good nigger” who “knows his place” (92) by a stagehand working in the theatre where *In Dahomey* is performed. Even though there is friction between Bert and George about Bert’s blackface and the image he is sending to the world by using it, Bert will not abandon blackface because he feels it would provoke the white audience. This careful approach earns them success, and, of course, there is no denying that being a part of the first all black musical on Broadway is an achievement. However, Bert’s and George’s black colleagues are worried, “for success for one does not

mean a success for all” because “the New York theatrical produces are notoriously fickle in their tastes, and they generally like to *pocket* just one colored man at a time, a man who they believe they can safely rely upon and promote” (79, emphasis in the original). In other words, the theatre world only gives their support to a colored performer if they trust him not to rebel against the conventions created by the white community. They also tend to allow only one colored performer to enjoy success at a time, while others have to wait on the sidelines. This makes following their rules more appealing to Bert as well, for crossing the line might have meant an abrupt end to his career.

The way the white community “plays favorites” with the black performers can further be seen as a way to control a minority group. By preferring some black performers or theatre troupes over others, the white community is able to pick the performer that is willing to work within the confinements they have set, and furthermore, create jealousy and friction between the black performers all striving towards success. This again hindered the possible collaboration between black performers, because when one black performer or a group gained success, it did not automatically open doors for others but often rather shut those doors from them.

In addition to the functions of control and racial ridicule, blackface minstrelsy also had, in Lott’s words, some less malign functions. Blackface minstrelsy can also be seen as a way for the white public to disguise their interest and fascination towards “blackness” and the black “race”. When minstrelsy was at its most popular during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the status of black people was unquestionably lower than that of white people, still, white minstrelsy performers chose to dress as “Negroes” and act like they imagined black people to act in order to be more like them. This is a conundrum Bert also struggles with and after one meeting with the theatre company, he asks his partners’ opinion on something that has been puzzling him. He asks,

George, you ever ask yourself why a white man would want to blacken his face with cork, dress down a point of two beneath the lowest of his race, and jig and dance around and pretend he is a colored man? I mean, try and walk like him, talk like him, make gestures, laugh, strike poses, behave just how he thinks a colored person does. The fact is they do not like us, George, and they choose not to eat, drink, or live with colored folks, yet they must have some part of themselves that *wants* to be like us. But not like us truly, but some approximation of us; a strange creature of boundless appetite that they imagine us to be. Tell me, George, why do they want to be like us? (122, emphasis in the original)

Bert never receives an answer from George, but as Lott sees the issue, the use of blackface minstrelsy was a way for the white to show their interest towards black culture in a safe way: disguised under racial ridicule.

As Bert notes, the white people do not like the blacks, and seem to want nothing to do with them, nonetheless, they choose to imitate what they believe to be black “culture”. Some explanation to this can perhaps be found in the character of the coon that is, of course, moronic and shabby, but also carefree and childlike, happy with just eating watermelon and stealing chickens. Maybe it was this idea of carefree lifestyle with no responsibilities that the white people imagined the black population to possess that drove whites to blackface minstrelsy. Lott calls this “love and theft”, meaning that the white population “loved” black culture and on some level wanted to be like blacks, but, as Bert adds, “not like us truly, but some approximation of us” (122). The white population has created an image of the black man that they can despise, but that still, at the same time, possesses some qualities that the white population secretly envies; therefore, through blackface minstrelsy, they can “steal” a part of the what they imagine to be black culture and become a part of it and, hence Lott chooses to use the expression “love and theft”.

In the light of these points, blackface minstrelsy was popular among the white community, because it had many functions that benefited the whites and these functions are visible in *Dancing in the Dark* as well. Blackface was a form of popular entertainment, and as Bert’s father tries to tell himself, “all the boy is trying to do is to entertain people; he is trying

to make them happy and make them laugh” (137). Because of its popularity, blackface minstrelsy had financial benefits for, for instance, the white theatre managers. With the power they had through their financial success, as well as their already existing privileged white status, the white community is able to control how race is represented in blackface minstrelsy and through that in the American culture. This control is used in the theatre world by only encouraging negative stereotyping, because it further strengthened white supremacy. The fact that white society was able to control how race was represented in minstrelsy and further enhance their superiority again made minstrelsy even more popular. This creates a circle of negative representations of African Americans that is hard to break.

#### **4. Friend of Foe? – Bert through the Eyes of the Black Community**

As we have seen, the reasons behind white interest towards blackface minstrelsy are numerous, but blackface obviously has an impact on the black community as well. In this section, I will first discuss the reasons behind Bert's decision to perform in blackface in more detail, why he made the controversial decision to blacken his face in order to portray an essentially white man's image of a black person. I will then move on to how Bert is perceived by the black community and what they felt about the "Real Coon" that had become so popular among the white part of society. Thirdly, I will analyze the functions blackface minstrelsy has for the black community and also discuss the consequences blackface has for both Bert and the black community as a whole. Blackface minstrelsy is a curious phenomenon: white men try to act like people that they consider somehow inferior to them, and black men follow this tradition, ridiculing themselves for the amusement of the white population. These artificial manifestations of race reveal the constructiveness and performativeness that lies at the root of race, and that is something I will also discuss in the following section.

##### **4.1 Why Blackface? – Bert's Reasons for the Mask**

One thing to bear in mind when discussing Bert's performance and the way he himself feels about his "nigger coon" character, is his Caribbean background. When Bert and his family arrive in America, the first thing they realize is that here they will be automatically defined by their race and restricted to a lower status than the dominant white majority. Bert's parents soon notice that "in this new place they are now encouraged to see themselves as inferior and they are to be paid less than others for picking oranges" (23). In America, they are not treated as West Indians "who are keen to work" (23), but instead, "in this new place they are simply

Negroes” (24). Bert’s African American wife Lottie observes that her husband appears to be “pained by his profession” (42) as a performer, and connects this to his being from the Caribbean, because “[t]hey are different people [...] and for them the problem of being colored in America appears to engender a special kind of hurt” (42). Bert is drawn to performing from a young age, but being defined by his skin color alone and having to deal with abuse and demeaning roles takes its toll on his spirit. Despite the fact that in the early part of his career he performs without blackface, he is still expected to embrace the coon stereotype that is so prominent in blackface minstrelsy and act within its conventions. Without the disguise of blackface makeup, however, Bert is exposed and all the abuse he experiences is directed towards his own persona.

When Bert joins his forces with George, the duo still refuses to perform in blackface, but they are able to gain neither respect nor fame. Bert in particular struggles with the demeaning role of the coon that white America has set aside for him to play and finally, regardless of George’s objection, he tries on the cork. This decision, albeit a difficult one, changes something in Bert’s performance: he “tried the makeup and become somebody else” (35). The makeup provides the distance between the part and the performer Bert has been longing for, and he is now able to embrace the role easier. When before he feels he is expected to *be* the coon, now “He is *playing* a shuffling, dull-witted, clumsy, watermelon-eating Negro of questionable intelligence. He is playing a *character*. He is a performer who applies makeup in order to play a part” (35, emphasis mine). As long as Bert has to put on makeup to become this man he is able to keep himself separate from his role: he is only a coon on stage, but not when the makeup comes off. He is able to preserve his sense of self and his own identity regardless of his role on the stage.

Still, the decision to adopt blackface with all its crudeness is not easy for Bert. The first time he watches himself in the mirror with the mask on, his heart sinks and he feels

ashamed because “[h]ow could a West Indian do such a thing to himself?”, announce himself a clown (57). Bert attempts to reassure himself that he has made the right decision by telling himself that

his job was to make people laugh so they did not have time to ridicule or hurt him. And so he made the people of Detroit laugh. No longer Egbert Austin Williams. He kept telling himself, I am no longer Egbert Austin Williams. As I apply the burned cork to my face, as I smear the black to my already sable skin, as I put on my lips, I am leaving behind Egbert Austin Williams. However, I can, at any time reclaim this man with soap and water and the rugged application of a course towel. I reclaim him, but only after the laughter. As he looked at himself in the mirror he knew that he had disappeared, and he understood that every night he would have to rediscover himself before he left the theatre. (57)

Therefore, the blackface mask is an essential tool Bert uses to discover the coon character that makes him famous. In addition to that, the mask is also a defense strategy Bert uses to protect himself from the ridicule of his character. Bert is restricted to the stereotype of a black man manufactured by white America, and by applying the burned cork to his face in order to be that stereotype, Bert feels that he is transformed into someone else, and the coon he plays on the stage can no longer touch him. Whether the white audience is able to see the difference between the part and performer, however, is a different matter, and even though Bert wants to believe that they do, he seems to be the only one who thinks so.

When Bert puts on the makeup for the first time he can no longer recognize himself; “just who was this new man and what was his name? Was this actually a man with his soon-to-be-shuffling feet, and his slurred half speech, and his childish gestures, and his infantile reactions?” (57). Because this man with burned cork on his face is a new invention for Bert, someone he does not know and does not relate to, he is able to separate himself from this creature and manage the humiliation of his inferior status. Without blackface makeup, there is nothing that distinctly separates Bert from the coon he is nonetheless expected to be on stage. With the blackface makeup on, the man looking back from the mirror “was not a man that he recognized. This was somebody else’s fantasy, and unless he could make this

nobody into somebody, then he knew that eventually his eardrums would burst with pain of the audience's laughter" (58). Thus, Bert is able to hide behind the mask and feel that the people are no longer laughing at him but at the character he has created to meet the audience's expectations: the makeup is a shield that protects Bert against the laughter and prejudice of the white audience.

It is important for Bert to keep himself as separate from his character as possible; hence, he revises his transformation into his character into a delicate routine. This process is a very private matter for Bert, and it always takes place in his dressing room behind a locked door. Bert never looks at himself while applying the makeup; "[o]nly when he was sure that it [the makeup] was spread evenly across his face did he dare to look up and stare into the mirror" (58). By not looking at himself while applying the makeup, Bert attempts to eliminate all connections between himself and his character, and when he finally looks up, he is "staring back at a stranger" (58). It then becomes evident for the reader that Bert is using the blackface makeup as a defense strategy, a barrier he can hide behind and conceal his true self from criticism and ridicule. When he attempts to pursue different careers beyond entertainment as a young man, he always feels he is expected to play a certain role; he is treated as a servant, someone inferior to the white majority when he is working in hotels and restaurants. But then his inferiority is a direct consequence of who he is, a black man, and not a result of a character he plays onstage. As a performer he can at least feel that the people are laughing at his character and not him, benefit from this "masquerade" financially, and "make people laugh so they have no time to hurt or ridicule him" (57).

Another reason for Bert to perform in blackface is his tendency to avoid conflict. Bert seems to be very aware of the reality of his and his partner's possibilities as black performers. He sees that their success or failure is ultimately in the hands of the white audience, and he feels they have to respect the wishes of that audience. He believes that "if

both he and George stepped *cautiously*, and kept moving forward, then the theatre might well be kind to them” (19, emphasis mine). For Bert this means that in order to succeed, they have to be careful not to upset the white audience by radically challenging their racial beliefs and instead take small cautious steps towards chance, operate under the radar so to speak. His cautious nature finally begins to drain the relationship between himself and George, because George is “growing increasingly impatient” (19) and is “beginning to act as though he doesn’t give a damn about white folks” (11). He does not want to act carefully, but Bert, on the other hand, feels that “going gently with an audience and learning how to seduce them” (11) is the right way to proceed.

Bert sees the difference his blackface act causes to the popularity of Williams and Walker, and he knows blackface is what the white audience wants and expects; therefore, he believes they have to give the paying customers what they came to see. His partner, however, feels that now that they have entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *In Dahomey* has been such a success and they have established their place in show business, they should use that success to their advantage. He “insists that *In Dahomey* carried them far beyond tambourines and banjos” and that they should carry themselves as artists and “behave with the dignity that is their calling at this point in their history. George insists that America expects” (120). Bert, on the other hand, does not believe that they should become involved in “agitation and revolution for the colored race” but that “Mr. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois exist for [those] purposes” (120). By alluding to some of the most famous intellectuals in African American history, Phillips ties the events of his story into the social context of the turn of the century America. DuBois published his famous *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903 and it has been “commonly interpreted as an articulate and profound exposition of the nature of racial identity in America” (Fong 661). The struggles of black intellectuals such as DuBois “remak[e] the nation” (Fong 662) and are in stark contrast with Bert and his blackface act,

and George feels that Bert has not “noticed that they have entered the twentieth century” (110). But Bert does not seem to be concerned with the fact that others feel he is stalling progress with donning blackface, because he sees the situation from a financial point of view, and goes on to explain to George that “it is the paying audience and not George’s mythical America that expects” (120).

For Bert, the right way to proceed is cautious, because he realizes how the business works, and knows that “there are many others who are eager to take their place” (120), if they are not careful. The white audience holds the money so they also hold the reins for they can easily take their money someplace else, if they are not satisfied. Bert knows that they are “entertainers and they have to respect the conventions of the time or face the consequences” (120). If they push the boundaries too far, they risk the white audience lashing out against them; therefore, for Bert, the key is to “*slowly* cakewalk their way into history with talent that has been seared and trained for the stage” (121, emphasis mine). When the audience expects a stereotypical coon to entertain them, that is what a professional entertainer should give them in Bert’s view. He believes the only way to change the system is to do it from the inside, within the restrictions of blackface minstrelsy convention, and that takes a long time, because challenging white expectations too far might end their career.

Bert’s perception of American culture is bleak, but he believes he is only being realistic, stating that “In time an alternative to the counterfeit colored culture that besmirches our stage will emerge, but only in time, right now nobody will pay to see a colored man be himself, so we must tread carefully” (121). Bert feels that challenging the white society’s perception of the black race by abandoning blackface and the coon character would only create conflict he does not want to face: he does not think they would win that conflict. Bert tries to convince his partner that as entertainers, they “must understand how to make them [the white audience] feel safe, George. We must see the line. We cross that line, George, then

who is going to pay to see us?” (121). For Bert, the only option for a colored performer in America is to accept the racist conventions of the theatre and try to work within them. His blackface mask makes it possible for him to manage these restrictions, because he comforts himself with the idea that “the audience may think they are watching a powerless man, but they are, in fact, watching art” (121).

#### 4.2 The Black Community’s Perception of Bert

Bert’s decision to perform in blackface raises conflicting feelings in the black community. Here is a black performer who has taken black theatre to another level with his shows scheduled on Broadway for the first time with an all black crew. Nevertheless, his mask bothers them. Bert’s wife has to deal with these conflicting feelings as well when the couple first begins to date. When she sees him on stage, “a river of pride runs through her body. [...] They laugh at him, and they feel sorry for him, but *she* understands that they are laughing at somebody else. This is not the dignified man she knows, and so she too is permitted to laugh. However, the sight of her suitor in corkface disturbs something in her soul” (18, emphasis in the original). Bert’s wife Lottie is not the only colored person in the theatre watching the shows of William and Walker, and the others must have been having similar feelings, excitement to be witnessing the success of black performers on one hand, and resentment over the crude stereotyping on the stage on the other.

Resentment towards Bert and his act is a feeling that increases within the black community alongside with the increase of his fame. Here, a connection to CRT can be drawn again, for blackface functioned as a way to control the representation of black race for the white community, and this could be done by favoring one suitable person over others. Bert was lifted to the limelight because, as he himself understands the situation, he makes the

white audience feel safe, and he does not provoke them or challenge their prejudices. Therefore, some African Americans begin to view him as a puppet of the white society and start resenting him because of this. Ada, the future wife of George, for example, warns Lottie not to grow too close with Mr. Williams, because “[t]his white man’s fool acts like he is better than us but you and me both know that he ain’t no better than any of us, even if people *do* know how to call out his name” (37, emphasis in the original). This choice of words “white man’s fool” is quite revealing of the feelings of some black people towards Bert because, for them, Bert does not improve the position of black performers or black people in general with his blackface act, but rather stalls any possible improvement.

One reason behind this resentment can also be interpreted as jealousy. As said, white producers had the tendency to “pocket” one black performer at a time and Bert’s colleagues were very aware of this fact. When Bert begins to gather fame, his name is on everybody’s lips, and fellow black performers “Bob Cole and Ernest Hogan are jealous, but even *they* are talking. Everybody is talking” (65, emphasis in the original). This jealousy works for the benefit of white supremacy, because this “divide and rule” strategy makes it harder for the black performers to support each other. Therefore, as CRT suggests, even though the white society is seemingly taking steps towards racial equality by supporting a black performer, the reality is that they are tightening their grasp on the power over racial representation by choosing just this man to support. The fact that this causes friction in the black community only works for further benefit of the whites.

Another reason behind the negative feelings of the blacks towards Bert is of course what his black cork mask represents. He has chosen to behave in a way that portrays black people as mere coons and imbeciles, and even if he himself feels this is the only way to keep his place in the spotlight, it understandably makes some black people uncomfortable. Phillips uses Bert’s father to channel the disappointment of the black community towards the

blackface coon character. Bert's family first traveled to America in a hope of a better life and possibility of a higher education for Bert, but instead, he chooses life on the stage. The first time Bert's father sees him perform in New York is also his last, because he cannot bear to watch his son behave in the way he does:

He sits in nigger heaven and looks down at his West Indian son. At first he does not recognize him, and then, when he does, his stomach moves. This bewildered creature with a kinky wig, long ill-fitting white gloves, a shabby dress suit, oversized shoes, a battered top hat, sleeves and trousers that are too short, a mouth exaggerated with paint, this real funny nigger is his son? This coon with big eyeball-poppin' eyes is his child? [...] But this is not his son. This Shylock. This grotesque simpleton shuffling about on the stage who seems to be forever trapped in foolish predicaments. This buffoon. This nigger. (83-84)

Bert's father is ashamed to see that his son has surrendered to the stereotype and degraded himself to this level in order to amuse his white audience. He never returns to the theatre to see another show, and Bert knows that "his father has no desire to return and witness his son transforming himself into a nigger fool" (13).

The feelings of Bert's father reflect the feelings of many other black people, as is seen by George's comment to his partner that the "white people are laughing at you, and colored folks in the audience are only laughing to keep from crying" (123). George feels that since they have entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is time to move forward and leave the colored coon "behind where he belongs" (123). Bert is then faced with increasing pressure from George and the black community to change his act while feeling pressure from the white audience not to do so. This conflict burdens the increasingly melancholy Bert who begins to spend an increasing amount of time in Metheney's bar, staring at the bottom of a whiskey glass and longing to a "time when he was not yet two people. The one pitying the other" (127).

The disappointment of his father and George's resistance have bothered Bert ever since he began to perform in blackface, but as time goes by, he has to face increasing criticism from the black audience. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Harlem renaissance was fast approaching and "back uptown in Harlem, few residents have actually seen him

perform, but everybody is full aware of his stellar reputation. However, there are some Harlemites who have sat upstairs in the balcony and looked down on the senior partner in the Williams and Walker comedy duo, who are unsure what to make of his foolish blackface antics. These days Mr. Williams seldom looks up at the parcel of dark faces that stare down at him from nigger heaven” (9-10). Even though Bert attempts to avoid these people, he is later in his career confronted, shortly after he has begun to perform with the Zigfield Follies in 1910, by a “group of affluent colored men” who request an audience with him to talk about his character. They ask Bert why he chooses to play the idiotic coon and suggest that he should instead use his fame and success to promote a different image. The men do not think he should abandon the stage altogether but instead, as one of the men proposes,

I would have you perform in a guise of somebody whose persona and demeanor is closer to that of the new, twentieth-century Negro, as opposed to a low type who is a deliberate travesty to our race. We do not know, and have never known, this *man* who you impersonate. Right now we need colored thespians who are prepared to drag your troubled profession toward dignity, for it would appear that the Negro is only acceptable on the American stage as long as he is singing idle coon songs and dancing foolishly. In other words, as long as he is a close approximation to a white man’s *idea* of a nigger. Players who indulge in this so-called art are wounding the race, and we are here today to implore you to risk offending your white admirers by simply casting aside this nigger coon for such an impersonation has long been out of respectable commission. (180, emphasis in the original)

Bert might have understood that he has to be able to please the white audience in order to make his way to the top, and open the doors to prestigious theatres for himself. Nonetheless, he does not seem to realize that now that he has danced his way to fame it could be possible for him to at least attempt to pursue a different direction, and that by not doing so, he is reinforcing the negative imagery of a black man that white men have created. Instead of changing, Bert continues to resist the pressure to change his act that is directed towards him from his partner George, his father, whom he knows to be disappointed in him, and the black community as a whole.

Bert justifies his decision by telling himself and his critics that his character is mere fiction and that if he did not act carefully around his white audience, no one would come to see him perform. To him, “his coon was a very particular American coon as seen by a man from the outside” (180), and he feels that he has taken a fictional character and created his own version of it, and if someone in the audience does not realize this, he himself should not be the one to blame. He asks his critics: “Am I responsible for the course imagination of some few among my audience? Am I responsible of how the Negro is viewed in America?” (179). Bert cannot see how his actions could change the cultural representations of race and neither does he feel that he has any obligation to attempt to do that. The black community, however, feels differently, and so does his partner George, to whom fame was a way to change the world.

#### 4.3 Functions of Blackface for the Black Community

It might seem peculiar that a black man would put on makeup in order to portray blackness, but blackface minstrelsy has some functions for the black people, as well as it does for the white community. Some of the functions overlap, for instance, the idea of using blackface for financial benefits. For Williams and Walker, Bert’s blackface and their musicals deriving from the minstrelsy tradition of stereotypical portrayals of black people, and Africans in particular, bring them the kind of financial security any performer would strive for. Thus, money is not a benefit of blackface only for white theatre owners, as black performers earned their share of the profits as well.

Also, as mentioned before, for many black performers, accepting blackface was the only way to be recognized as a performer. If a person of color aspired to become a performer and succeed in one’s profession, the options were limited. Blackface was often the

only way a black person would even be admitted to the stage, and this was the case particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the heyday of blackface minstrelsy. As discussed in the section on the tradition of minstrelsy studies, in the period of early minstrelsy, having black people on stage was unacceptable. As the example on B.T. Barnum's theatrical company illustrates, theatre managers actually "disguised" black performers underneath blackface makeup, because they would not be accepted by the white audience as themselves. The situation for Bert and George in *Dancing in the Dark* is slightly different, for the timeframe of the novel is the turn of the century. To be sure, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the duo begins their career, possibilities for black performers are more limited, and even though the men attempt to resist the use of blackface, they nevertheless have to subdue to the stereotype in the end, for the sake of their career. However, when they enter the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the times are changing, the Harlem Renaissance (origins in the late 1910s) is around the corner and with the shows of the Williams and Walker Company already in prestigious theatres, the society could have been more receptive towards less racist interpretations of black men.

Still, Bert in particular is reluctant to abandon his coon character. He feels that America is not ready for the change, at least not a drastic one that would challenge their perception of the black man completely. But also, it seems that Bert himself needs the character he has created. As discussed above, the blackface mask can be seen as a defense strategy for Bert, a facade he can hide his true self behind and thus withstand the humiliation and lack of respect he feels he has to face as a black performer. The lack of respect is something both Bert and George have to deal with throughout their entire career. Phillips illustrates this in Bert's ponderings about the fact that he is denied the use of the word "actor", and the partners also discuss the matter on their way to England. George wonders if "maybe the English will treat us with a little more respect" (91) to which Bert answers laughing: "George, do you think they could treat us with less?" (91).

When Bert puts on the mask he turns into someone else, and the humiliation is easier to face. This was one of the reasons Bert adopted the makeup in the first place, but its continuous use turns it into a function. Blackface makeup functions as a defense strategy for Bert: underneath the makeup he is still himself and he has to transform himself to become “the coon”. Without the makeup he would be vulnerable to the laughter and insults. Therefore, he keeps the mask on and continues to give the white audience what they expect to see. The only thing he feels he can do with the constrictions of the time is attempt to give his character more depth. He attempts to explain his character to the group of black men who try to convince him to abandon blackface, saying that “My colored man may be interpreted by some as a gin-guzzling, crap-shooting, chicken-stealing, no-good nigger, but there is more to him than this. He suffers. Our compassion goes to him. [...] The essence of my performance is that we know and sympathize with this unfortunate creature” (180-181). Whether evoking pity is a desirable way to improve the way black people were perceived is another question, but this is Bert’s way to forward change and bring more levels to the simple “coon”.

By using blackface makeup, a traditional convention of white blackface minstrelsy, Bert is able to make his way to fame and recognition, and in this way, even if slowly, he can try to change the stereotypes white men have created from the inside. Therefore, the use of blackface minstrelsy by Bert can be seen to function as a way to gain back control over the cultural representation of black people, and to take control of the stereotype. Bert believes that they have to advance slowly and carefully, because “he understands that one false step and he risks toppling over into the musician’s pit and being replaced by Bob Cole or Earnest Hogan or one of the scores of other colored performers who are keen to usurp him without fully understanding that they do have a choice of offering these white faces in the orchestra stalls some artistic drollery and little repose instead of clownish roughness and loud vulgarity” (10).

Thus, despite the critique towards him from a part of the black community, Bert is in his own way trying to change the attitude of the white audience. Bert is skilled in reading his audience and therefore “he knows when to go gently with them, and he carefully observes their mood; he knows not to strain the color line for he respects their violence. At other times, when he can sense something close to warmth, he might push and cajole a little, and try to show them something they had not thought of before; he might try to introduce them to the notion that music and wit are the colored man’s gift to America” (10). All the while Bert tries to introduce minor changes to his act, he observes his audience and “listens closely for a single dull note, and should he detect it he will proceed with caution and neither irritate nor provoke. He is keen that at the end of the evening, they should all leave safely and without either party having broken the unwritten contract that exists between the Negro performer and his white audience” (10). Bert believes that it is vital for him not to anger the audience, because if he manages to keep them satisfied “then it will be possible for them to come together again in good faith” (10). If Bert went too far with the audience and did not give them a positive experience, they would not come back and all his efforts and the whole blackface act would have been in vain.

Thus, for Bert, small changes are better than no changes at all, but his partner feels differently and wants more drastic action. Phillips describes that “before *In Dahomey* neither Williams or Walker objected being presented as ‘The Two Real Coons’ on the New York stage” (11). However, at this point they were young men just starting their career but, later when they are successful, George grows “increasingly impatient” and “is always pushing and demanding more” (11). He does not care about trying to be gentle with the white audience; in fact, his position is quite the opposite. As Bert observes his partner, he sees that George has no interest in learning how to “seduce” the audience and is “beginning to act as if he doesn’t give a damn about white folks” (11). Phillips is using Bert and George to contrast

the opposite approaches to bring about change that have existed in black society through times. Bert represents the non-violent, more pacifistic approach whereas George has more confrontational ideas.

Phillips is further juxtaposing Bert's careful approach and even skepticism to George's impatience and rush to change. When George addresses their theatre company, Bert sees that his partner is "committed to every word he is saying. George believes that they are about to change American theatre" (119) and that "the day has come for the Negro to storm the American stage and stake his claim to a position of equality alongside his fellow white performers" (119). For George, blackface and the coon songs served their purpose when they helped Williams and Walker to advance in their career, but now he feels that they should move on. Bert, on the other hand, believes that his blackface act has not yet completed its function to help them infiltrate the white theatre world, and abandoning it drastically would be a mistake that could lead to their demise.

For Bert, blackface functions as a way to affect the perceptions white people have of blacks from the inside. By taking over the stereotype the white society has manufactured, he is now the one in control of how this character is interpreted and presented to the audience. However, his subtle approach demands that his audience is sophisticated enough to understand what he attempts to do. Whenever confronted by George or other African Americans about his blackface, Bert pleads to the fact that he must believe that the audience understands that he is not representing reality, but a fictional character. Yet, privately he worries and wonders, "Do the audience understand that this character, this Shylock Homestead [Bert's character in *In Dahomey*] whose dull-witted antics amuse them bears no relationship to the real Egbert Austin Williams?" (12).

It is questionable, whether Bert actually succeeds in his efforts to bring more depth to the coon character the white audience is so familiar with, and through that affect their

perception of blacks in a positive way. Nevertheless, Bert's blackface act has benefits for many black performers who now have access to the stage of American theatre. As stated before, Williams and Walker launched the first all Negro theatre production on Broadway, which would not have been likely if it had not been for the blackface that drew in the white audience. Also, after the death of George Walker, Bert is unable to manage their company alone, and is invited to join the Follies of 1910, by Mr. Zigfield. Bert then becomes "the first colored man to appear onstage with the most important performers in the country" (174), he is the only black man in an otherwise all white cast. Even though there are initially some objections to his joining, "all the members of the Follies company promptly discovered that they did not, after all, have any difficulty playing alongside a colored man" (174). Thus, it can be argued that with the help of blackface, Bert, at least to some extent, managed to pave way for other black performers and show that it was possible for a man of color to go places he had not been accepted to go before. He also made his white colleagues in the Follies realize that they had no reason to object to working with a black man.

Another function of blackface minstrelsy that can be drawn from *Dancing in the Dark* is how it reveals the nature of race as a social construction and as a performance. Race is seen as a social construction in African American studies as well as CRT, and this is a widely accepted idea in academic circles today. Blackface minstrelsy can be used to demonstrate this fact further, because when a black man is not seen as an authentic enough representative for his "race" without blackface make up, but has to add something on to become black enough, it becomes rather clear that race is not something natural. The way the white society constructs roles and images for black people that are beneficial for them, and expects everyone to follow these roles, shows how race does not actually result from any natural division of people but is a manmade system of hierarchy. If someone does not fit a category assigned for them, they are made to fit it. With blackface, the whites attempt to reinforce the

negative stereotypes of black people to justify their unequal treatment, because, in blackface minstrelsy blacks are reduced to mere coons with inferior intelligence. This applies to both white people in blackface and black people who are pressured to perform these same stereotypes with the threat of exclusion from the theatre. However, by doing this and by trying to force black people to change themselves in order to represent the kind of image white community wants to see, it becomes clear that the image of a black man seen in minstrelsy is a figment of the white imagination.

The idea of race as something other than a natural division of people into groups is, of course, a reasonably new phenomenon, and it certainly was not recognized at the time of the events of *Dancing in the Dark*. Nevertheless, it is an issue discussed today, and by taking a blackface performer as a topic for his work, and showing his problems with trying to fit into predetermined racial roles, Phillips is showing the modern reader how artificial racialization can be. The pressure to be the right kind of black man slowly breaks Bert, for it becomes increasingly difficult for him to, in a manner of speaking, choose a side. Should he be the kind of black man the white society expects him to be and continue with the buffoonery of the “real coon”, or should he be the black man the black society expects him to be and take a stand for the black race and shed the makeup? Amid this all, however, nobody seems concerned with what kind of a man Bert is as himself and he begins to lose sight of himself, worrying if he has chosen the right side. Also Nowatzki has paid attention to this and describes in his study on minstrelsy in contemporary fiction, how the novel “emphasizes the crippling impact of blackface performance on Williams’s self-image” (Nowatzki, 125).

Nowatzki agrees with J. Martin Favor that blackface minstrelsy shows very clearly how at its root race is always performative and he elaborates that Phillips uses minstrelsy in *Dancing in the Dark* to “represent blackness and whiteness as identities that are constructed through performance” (Nowatzki 2007, 117). Phillips does this by repeatedly

juxtaposing “the performative, counterfeit nature of Williams’s and Walker’s stage personae with the white audience’s belief that they are simply being themselves” (*ibid.* 126). Phillips also contrasts the failure of black people to recognize Bert’s performance with the white audience’s acceptance of it on several occasions, all of which have been discussed above. Nowatzki also pays attention to those instances where Bert’s “clownish stage persona is recognizable only to racist white audiences” (*ibid.* 128), namely the encounter with the genuine Dahomeyan man at the exposition in San Francisco, Bert’s father’s reaction to his performance, the visit Bert receives from the group of black men, and George’s resistance toward the mask. All these instances when Bert’s coon is recognizable only to the white part of the population while the black spectators reject its authenticity, illustrate the performative nature of racial stereotypes and through that race itself.

The white population that is willing to accept the image Bert is projecting, according to CRT, benefit from the negative imagery of black people since it sustains white racial superiority. Williams is therefore blamed for “perpetuating a stereotype that his white audience views as authentic and for encouraging the audience to see all black people as ‘coons’” (Nowatzki, 128) by the black public. Perhaps this reinforcing of negative stereotypes by black performers themselves is something Phillips wants to draw attention to by choosing blackface minstrelsy to a topic. He mentions in a review of the novel by Tom Foot that black actors of today still have to face expectations of what a black man is like and how he should be presented in film. Phillips mentions that “My brother is an actor. When he is typecast as a black man and he has to say what someone else sees as black man’s lines, he is performing” (Foot). The point here is that black people, and other minorities as well, still have to perform roles assigned to them by someone else, and when they perform negative roles that may be artificial but are viewed as genuine by some, they harm not only their own “racial group” but themselves as well.

As Nowatzki observes, in *Dancing in the Dark*, Bert's performances are "detrimental to all black people, [and] they also damage his sense of identity" (Nowatzki, 128). Bert strives to keep his own identity separate from his character, but this becomes increasingly difficult with time. He becomes more and more depressed and grows distant from his wife and friends and "seldom leaves his home unless he is going to the theatre or he is visiting Metheney's [bar]" (141). George notes that "Sometimes Bert behaves as though his makeup is an extra layer of skin that he cannot rub off, and George worries that perhaps both Bert's unfortunate blackface *and* his disturbingly accommodating personality are becoming somewhat confused in his partner's mind" (110, emphasis in the original). Bert himself becomes acutely aware of this only on his deathbed, when he contemplates that "I can no longer even see myself, but I truly lost sight of myself many years ago when my tightly sought young feet touched the shore of the powerful country to the north" (208). Bert had to face very little racism as a child in the Bahamas, but as soon as he lands to America he is robbed of his identity and reduced to a "Nigger" that has a fixed place in society regardless of his efforts. Even though he tries to keep himself separate from the role he is expected to perform, it finally defeats him. His wife observes him tormenting himself on his deathbed by staring at himself in the mirror: "I watch as he is shaken into panic by the puzzled face in the glass. [...] I know that my husband will spend the whole day staring into the mirror, at first tormenting himself and then comforting his spirit with happier memories" (207).

As Bert lies dying he imagines he is talking with his father and contemplating the role America has set aside for him and others like him. He asks his father, "do you really understand what they want from us in this American world? Do you? We are being held hostages as performers, and those who imagine that they are engaged in something other than entertainment should ask my wife to pass them the handheld mirror" (208). He still believes his blackface performances have been only entertainment, but he finally admits what kind of

devastating impact those performances have had on him, and that maybe he has made the wrong choices in his life. He now regrets his unfortunate blackface performances, and when he is still a part of Zigfield's Follies, he realizes that "he has foolishly spilled his life and there is nobody he can blame beyond himself" (183). He finally finds release in his death because now he is free: "Here in the darkness, beyond my wife my journey is over and I shall perform no more. I will no longer be tormented with the anxiety of being the sole representative in the room. Never again will I be the only one onstage wondering what they see when they look at me. I will never again be frightened to look too closely at myself" (208).

However, Bert also realizes that this is not the end of the black man's masquerade as an image created by white imagination. He points out that

Others will come after me to entertain you, and they will happily change their name and put on whatever clownish costume you wish them to wear, and dance, and sing, and perform in a manner that will amuse you, and you *will* mimic them and you *will* make your money, but know that in the darkest point of night, when no eyes are upon them, these people's souls will be heavy, and eventually some of them will say no, and you will see their sadness, and then you will turn from them and choose somebody else to place in the empty room, or nudge on your empty stage, but it will not be me [...]. (208-209, emphasis in the original)

With this rather pessimistic passage Phillips alerts the reader and takes him back from the world of Bert and George to today. We still perform racial roles today, and for minority groups the roles they are expected to perform are often created by the dominant groups. If a black man wants to be recognized as an actor, he still has to "perform in a manner that will amuse you [the white viewer]". And there are always people that are ready to do this. But as with Bert, the fame and fortune may come with a high price. By falling back on restricting racist roles performers like Bert stall progress and help in sustaining white hegemony, but one also risks losing one's own identity behind the racist stereotype if it is not challenged.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to analyze the various functions of blackface minstrelsy and through that to discuss race as a concept; how race is constructed and why. CRT with its tenets has been a useful tool in approaching minstrelsy, because minstrelsy has many features that support these tenets, namely, the interest converge dilemma and social construction of race. The many functions blackface minstrelsy has not only for the white society but also to the black one as well can be used as evidence for these tenets.

First of all, the many functions of blackface discussed above show that the white community did, in fact, benefit from the racial inferiority of blacks that blackface minstrelsy promoted. That is why they would have no interest in deconstructing the structure of racial hierarchy dominant at the time of minstrelsy. According to CRT, this is still a problem today: even though the ways of control might be more subtle, and crude stereotypes, such as the coon Bert depicted in his performances, seem to be a thing of the past and progress towards equality has been made, ideas of racial inequality remain. CRT concentrates only on the white community when discussing the interest convergence dilemma; however, *Dancing in the Dark* offers another side to this story. The novel can be seen as a comment that it is not only the white society that is sustaining race and racial categorizing that is negative more often than not. The blacks are also partly responsible for maintaining race when they accept the racial roles prepared for them, even though they themselves do not agree with them. As discussed in the previous chapter, blackface also had functions that benefited the blacks, both individually and communally; therefore, fault for racial stereotyping can be found from all “racial” groups.

I argue that Phillips is using blackface minstrelsy in *Dancing in the Dark* as a metaphor to all kind of racial performing that still exists even today. After all, Phillips himself

argues that he feels that rappers today are “modern minstrels” because they adopt the racialized image of the black rapper, in the hope of financial success (Foot). However, by showing the reader how Bert suffers because of his decision to accept a role that is imposed on him from the outside, and how he finally seems to lose himself completely behind the mask, Phillips succeeds in revealing the danger in racial performing. In that light, the novel can be seen as a comment on the need to resist the roles imposed on the black performers, as well as people from racial minorities, even though they might have positive effects, such as financial success. *Dancing in the Dark* shows that there are always reasons behind white people’s promotion of a certain kind of racial imagery, as well as there are reasons for some black people to accept that imagery -there are beneficial functions, but they always come with a price. Despite the fact that adopting a racial role that is expected from a black performer might come with benefits, if it projects a negative image of the race it can eventually break a person. If one agrees with a stereotype that seems artificial and even demeaning, one risks losing oneself behind the façade and end up as nothing but an empty shell, as is the case with Bert. In the end, the tragic comedian feels that he has “foolishly spilled his life” (183) and towards the end of his life he often spends his whole day staring at the mirror trying to find the man he has lost behind the mask (207-208). Thus, racial stereotypes do work for the benefit of the white community, and sometimes also for the benefit of blacks, but nevertheless, this stereotyping always has negative consequences in the long run, and that is why it is important to resist those stereotypes.

Second of all, the way blackface minstrelsy is used in *Dancing in the Dark*, and how Bert attempts to create a black character that the white audience would accept, is yet another nail in the coffin of the natural origin of race. As Nowatzki notes, the performativity of race is at its most prominent in blackface minstrelsy, and Favor agrees observing that “Minstrelsy suggests at its root that ‘race’ is performable, if not always already performed”

(2007, 123). If race is merely a performance it must also be a construction rather than something natural, just as CRT suggests. Even though this concept is widely accepted today, *Dancing in the Dark* works as a reminder for the reader of the artificiality of race. Bert Williams himself, the sophisticated, well-mannered West Indian is in such a stark contrast with his onstage coon character that it becomes obvious that the negative image white people have of the black community is merely a construct of their own imagination. Therefore, the novel clearly reveals the artificial nature of race and shows that it is a social construction.

*Dancing in the Dark* is a rich novel for research, and even though themes of race and racial performance are the most evident themes in the book, other topics for discussion can be found. Race is often discussed together with gender and class, but for the sake of clarity and space I have chosen to concentrate solely on racial issues. However, gender in particular, in the context of masculinity, would have been an interesting topic to analyze. One could observe the novel from an angle that suggests that blackface minstrelsy emasculates the black performer by reducing him to a childlike character, that is, the ‘coon’. This kind of emasculation is present in *Dancing in the Dark* as well and is reflected in Bert’s relationship to his wife Lottie, whom he is never intimate with and whom he begins to call “mother” as soon as they are married, despite the fact that the couple is under thirty years of old and childless. This is an interesting aspect of the novel that reveals another level of minstrelsy, but that would be a topic for a different thesis.

All in all, Bert as a character and his insistence on the use of the demeaning blackface mask, despite of objections from the black community, can be frustrating. However, Phillips has managed to craft his Bert into such a multilayered figure that the reader is able to sympathize with him and understand his reasoning behind his decisions. Phillips shows the reader how difficult it is to be a black man and a performer in America and how restricting racial roles can be. When Bert chooses a way of acting that brings him fame, he is never again

able to divert from this one single role, and he has to live with the performative bondage of his act the rest of his life. Even though *Dancing in the Dark* is set in time a hundred years ago, its themes are relevant today as well, because colored people, and more visibly, colored performers are still expected to act in a certain way. As with the case of Bert, pretending to be something less can have a devastating influence on a person's identity.

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