

Concepts of Race in American Musicals

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Popular cultural texts serve as a collective memory bank for the society that produces and consumes them. Over time, with each generation, the ‘truths’ expressed in these texts become a shared way of relating to and understanding the past. Through electronic mass media texts (one of the dominant commercial leisure forms in the West), for example, viewers “can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have not geographic or biological connection”.¹ However, often the ‘metadata’ of the text is obscured and the conditions of its production become subordinated in the light of the overarching narrative.² The biases are forgotten as the ‘truths’ of the text are accepted by society as a valid telling of their past. The portrayal of self and other in popular cultural texts, as a ‘truth’ to be assimilated into the collective memory, exposes the values and ideas of the society at the time of the text’s production as well as the history of narrative structure.

This essay will focus on how concepts of race have been portrayed in American musicals. It will investigate the portrayal of the ‘white’ self and the ‘coloured’ other and how this portrayal reflects conflicts in American society of the time, culture being “one of the main terrains where the white order is alternately supported and contested”.³ This essay will be concerned with the representation of the coloured other as being in opposition to the white society of the self in both the public and private spheres. Race relations have been, and still are, one of the major sites of conflict in American society during the twentieth century. Musicals, like other popular cultural texts, “resonate with the tensions of the time”⁴, particularly as the construction of the coloured other traditionally represented great humour and mirth in the musical’s generic forerunners, such as black and white minstrel shows. A selection of musicals produced between *Show Boat* (1927) and *Westside Story* (1957)

¹ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 5.

² For instance, the profiles of the ‘who’s who’ of older texts have become obscured compared with the ‘blow by blow’ factual hype surrounding newly released productions.

³ Daniel Bernardi, “Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema,” in Daniel Bernardi (ed.), *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 4.

⁴ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, x.

will be examined. This selection covers the 'Broadway Canon' - the period from the musical's generic maturity through to its decline as a major popular cultural event.⁵

The notion of racial identity is a constant theme in the history of American society. It filters into the schoolroom, spreading through to academic institutions and the generation of 'valuable' information. It affects domestic and international policy making and, in the past, has produced institutionalised racism in the legal system. Popular cultural texts have tended to both reflect and reinforce the portrayal of race, making it an important theme in a white dominated national community. The class division and struggle "over competing senses of justice and right"⁶ experienced by other nations have been overshadowed by the battle of race relations in the United States. The dichotomy of established white immigrants versus black Americans, non-white newcomers and (to a lesser extent) newly-arrived whites, has ragged the social fabric of America⁷ deeply affecting how Americans have constructed pluralistic memories of their history.

Modern musical theatre is primarily an American creation incorporating American musical form (jazz) with American dance form (tap).⁸ Indeed the most famous musical texts have been created and produced in America, with the London musical scene a distant second. The genre in some sense 'venerates' the cultural amalgamation of American society, drawing on both white American and Afro-American artistic traditions to present a telling of the past. Musical theatre deals with the romantic narrative and its emotionally powerful performances give the genre a sense of hyper-reality. Life is presented as how it should be in musical theatre.⁹ It was the ideal form of commercialised leisure in the early part of the twentieth century: a quickly created and produced commodity that could be sold immediately to a mass audience.

The serious academic examination of musical theatre was not considered until the 1950s.¹⁰ The notion of fair representation of Afro-Americans and other racially

⁵ Joseph Peter Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8. For a detailed examination see also Geoffrey Block, "The Broadway Canon from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* and the European Operatic Ideal," *The Journal of Musicology* 11.4 (Fall 1993): 525-544.

⁶ Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (eds), *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143.

⁷ Amy Henderson and Dwight Blocker Bowers, *Red Hot and Blue: A Smithsonian Salute to the American Musical* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 190.

⁸ Harriet Deer and Irving Deer in Lynne Emery, "Black Dance and the American Musical Theatre to 1930," in Glenn Loney (ed.), *Musical Theatre in America: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the Musical Theatre in America* (Westport, CONN: Greenwood, 1984), 305.

⁹ Richard Kislán, *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre* (New York: Applause, 1995), 2.

¹⁰ Miles Kreuger, "The Institute of the American Musical, and How It Got That Way!" *Literature Film Quarterly* 23.2 (1995), 116..

subordinated groups in American society has been the topic of numerous studies since then. Musical theatre (1920s to 1950s) was a creation of the white self, the shows being created with the demands of white audiences in mind.¹¹ Burdine emphasises that “with but a handful of exceptions, the black characters in them were uneducated, dirt-poor, dialect-spouting Negroes not far removed from the minstrel shows”.¹² These negative stereotypes can be extended to the portrayal of all racial groupings that comprise the coloured other. A feature of the coloured other in musicals was the development of white interpretations of Afro-American dialect and music, for example. Afro-American characters, regardless of their education or status, were represented as having profound difficulty with English language expression hence necessitating numerous ‘dere’s, ‘dat’s and ‘de’s in the dialogue.¹³

The huge bulk and variety of musical theatre texts created during the first half of this century necessitates the careful selection of primary texts.¹⁴ The majority of texts chosen are from the Broadway Canon. *Show Boat*, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951) and *Westside Story* feature in the Canonic Twelve and demonstrate significant developments in the genre.¹⁵ With the exception of *Porgy and Bess*,¹⁶ all texts ran successfully on Broadway during their premiere seasons.¹⁷ In later years the texts have been revived both on stage and in film. *Porgy and Bess* being the most successful, touring widely both domestically and internationally.¹⁸ Three less well remembered musicals – *Hallelujah* (1929), *Cabin in the Sky* (1940) and *Carmen Jones* (1943) – have also been selected for their portrayal of the coloured other.

The first half of the twentieth century saw many political, ideological and socio-cultural changes, all of which impacted on American society. The period after World War I and, to some extent, into the 1930s, saw the transformation of Western society on many levels, and specifically in terms of the growth of commercialisation.

¹¹ An Afro-American musical theatre created and produced by Afro-American artists existed with the dominant white industry, and it played an important role in publicising positive images of the Afro-American community. However this theatre was not easily accepted by the white press and very few of these musicals were successful outside the Afro-American community. See, for example, Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980).

¹² Warren Burdine, “Let the Theatre Say ‘Amen’,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25.1 (Spring 1991), 74.

¹³ Kislán, *The Musical*, 124.

¹⁴ As some primary sources were unavailable for viewing, I have relied on secondary sources for interpretation of race portrayal in these texts.

¹⁵ See Block, “The Broadway Canon,” 532-535 for elaboration.

¹⁶ *Porgy and Bess*’s premiere season was financially a dismal failure of only 124 performances in New York [“Porgy and Bess,” *Opera News* 54.9 (20 Jan 1990), 29].

¹⁷ *South Pacific* 1 925 performances, *The King and I* 1 246, *Westside Story* 732 and *Show Boat* 572 [Block, “The Broadway Canon,” 531].

¹⁸ See Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of An American Classic* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

Warren Susman points to a conflict between two cultures, that of “an older culture, often loosely labelled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture, and a new emerging culture of abundance”.¹⁹ Each culture’s moral code gives rise to a way of encoding and decoding representations of society, the former heralding the promises of an earlier American dream, the latter revelling in the plenty of today. For the first time the public was offered a mass media in the form of tabloids and newspapers. A certain interpretation of what constituted the ‘news’ product was offered to a hungry audience, and the new service industry of advertising made every effort to create a market for a whole new set of products.²⁰ Advertising profoundly influenced the tastes and desires of the American public, and the exploitation of stereotypical blackface characters, such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, not only sold products but served to reinforce the black iconography of the time.²¹

The depression era and the advent of World War II saw a sharp decline in the abundance readily available, including that available for the production and mass consumption of the entertainment industry.²² A succession of societal changes ensued as America plunged into the Second World War. Notably previously non-working women moved out of the home into the workplace en masse to support the war effort, and the belated Executive Order 8802 in which Roosevelt stipulated an end to “discrimination in the employment of workers in the defence industries”.²³ During the war period, poignant inter-racial themes of bravery and camaraderie in popular cultural texts were more acceptable to (often tense) audiences.²⁴ The 1950s were witness to the post-World War II boom and mass migration from Europe and, to a lesser extent, from other parts of the American continent such as Mexico and Puerto Rico to the United States. The demarcation between white immigrant workers from non-white labour continued well after the race-based slavery era into the post-World War II period and popular cultural texts “were venues for that sorting-out procedure”.²⁵ Successive immigration waves and the domestic problems American society faced, such as unemployment, are reflected in texts such as *Westside Story*.

¹⁹ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), xx.

²⁰ Susman, *Culture as History*, 111-112.

²¹ Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland, 1982), 425.

²² Gerald Martin Bordman, *American Musical Comedy: From Adonis to Dreamgirls* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 136-137.

²³ Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 475. Official integration of the armed forces did not come until after the end of WWII under Truman.

²⁴ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking, 1973), 20.

²⁵ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 13.

The 1950s also gave birth to post-war youth generation who are perpetually encapsulated by the ‘rebels without a cause’ myth in the collective memory, reinforced through the repeated selling of that image through film and popular music produced during the period. In actuality, American society was tumultuously coping with immigration, a conspicuous ‘gender issue’ as society once again attempted to closet women in the home as servicemen returned to the workforce, and the rising tide of race relations in the infant Civil Rights Movement. In particular, the questioning of notions of racial categorisation and racial identification.

The notion of racial categorisation and racial identity has been well expressed by Ian Jarvie:

The long history of our ways of categorizing fellow humans – into barbarian and civilized, into races, by cultures – is a melancholy one, for the categories were usually normative. ... Ethnic self-identity claims to employ a diverse criteria: general appearance (WASP), surname (Hispanic), religion (Jewish), skin color (black), nationality (Italian-American), hemisphere (Oriental), and language (Creole).²⁶

This categorisation of humans has given rise to justification for horrific incidences of discrimination, oppression and even genocide on the basis of identification and identity. The notion of race as a definer of identity stems from nineteenth century developments in Darwinism and its offspring Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism and eugenics paradigms “dominated the meaning of race, promoting the notion of a natural hierarchy of human cultures and histories” during the early part of this century.²⁷ Indeed these theories have been used as a rationalising ideology,²⁸ giving ‘scientific’ backbone to divisive and subjugating policies and institutions from colonisation through to segregation.

In the United States, the emerging mass media and mass culture capitalised on racial and ethnic difference, particularly that of Afro-American group difference.²⁹ For example, blackface minstrelsy, and its later appearances in vaudeville and musical shows, developed a white American reality of the coloured other “on the basis of selective perception, second-hand information” along with the popular race ideas of

²⁶ Ian C. Jarvie, “Stars and Ethnicity: Hollywood and the United States, 1932-51,” in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 83.

²⁷ Bernardi, “Race and the Emergence,” 4.

²⁸ Shifra M. Goldman, “The Iconography of Chicano Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class,” *Art Journal* 49.2 (Summer 1990), 167.

²⁹ Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 252.

the time.³⁰ These stereotypical images were in turn exploited for the mass entertainment of white audiences and were popularly imagined to represent the ‘truths’ of life for the coloured other.³¹ Sambo was one of the most enduring comic images, and as the perfect stereotype, he was simultaneously the producer and object of humour.³² At once recognisable as a disruptive element in an order white society, the coloured other “would always be stopped by the brute force of white authority”.³³ Such representation of the coloured other is juxtaposed with positive stereotyping of the white self as the epitome of all that is perceived as ‘good’. The practice of such racial masquerade has been interpreted as a tragic-comic, guilt-laden expression of the advantage white society secured through the slaughter, enslavement, exploitation and exclusion of the coloured other.³⁴ It also functions to concurrently exonerate the subordination of these oppressed groups for the moral relief of the respectable white self.³⁵

The notion of what is constituted by racial identity can be viewed as a socio-historical formation devoid of biological determination that changes with time and space. Racial category is unrelated to physical type, language, region of origin, or culture, it is a purely ideological notion.³⁶ Early slave traders, for instance, regarded their African cargoes as a multitude of separate groups distinguishable by language and sight.³⁷ Since this time, the exotic similarities of Afro-Americans have dominated white perceptions of the ‘monolithic’ coloured other, creating a division of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’. During this creation of the coloured other, the dominant white American culture persistently considered “cultural traits differing from its own to be

³⁰ Pieterse, *White on Black*, 10.

³¹ Lawrence Reddick has compiled a comprehensive list of stereotypes: the savage African, the happy slave, the devoted servant, the corrupt politician, the irresponsible citizen, the petty thief, the social delinquent, the vicious criminal, the sexual superman, the superior athlete, the unhappy non-white, the natural-born cook, the natural-born musician, the perfect entertainer, the superstitious churchgoer, the chicken and watermelon eater, the razor and knife ‘toter’, the uninhibited expressionist, and the mental inferior [cited in Edward Mapp, *Blacks in American Films: Today and Yesterday* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972), 30-31]. See also Reddick “Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures,” in Richard A. Maynard (ed.), *The Black Man on Film: Racial Stereotyping* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1974), 5; Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theatre* (np: CBS, 1967), 4; and Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 7-8.

³² Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10.

³³ Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 42.

³⁴ Michael Rogin, “Making America Home: Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Pictures,” *The Journal of American History* 79 (Dec 1992), 1053.

³⁵ Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54-55.

³⁶ For elaboration see Fields, “Ideology and Race,” 150-153.

³⁷ Fields, “Ideology and Race,” 145.

deficiencies; the [producing] cultures being declared deficient,”³⁸ somewhat justifying the inequality between the two cultures in the psyche of the authoritative white self. This in turn reinforced and perpetuated the negative portrayal of the coloured other in popular cultural texts. Race and racial formation have always impacted upon the collective memory of the white self in American society when searching for a valid representation of the past – a historically durable “determination to keep the United States a white man’s country”³⁹ – a tragic flaw in the great American dream. The entertainment industry encapsulates that dream via the biases and discriminatory practices of the time, but, “stereotyped and degrading as the minstrel image might be, minstrelsy provided an avenue for blacks to enter the [white dominated] ... industry” and thus was taken by many black American actors.⁴⁰

In order to explicate the concept of race in American musicals themes of race portrayal dealing with the construction of the coloured other in opposition to the positively stereotyped white self (in both the private and public spheres) will be examined. Themes common to American musicals created during the 1920s to the 1950s period include issues of work and the coloured other as natural entertainer, notions of sexuality and femininity, societal divisions and cultures of violence. These themes are also presented in the secondary material consulted for this essay. The first theme sees the coloured other constructed in terms of the worker and/or entertainer, in opposition to the comparatively leisured white self. In the private sphere, the sexuality of the coloured other is portrayed as negatively different from the ideals of the middle-class white family and respective notions of sexuality. Aspects of family and sexuality will be dealt with in terms of the construction of characters as sexual beings, and secondly the complication of miscegenation and mulatto children. Specifically, non-white female sexuality is constructed as threatening to not only male sensibilities, but to the moral standards of white femininity.

Ideas of societal division are well represented in all the texts analysed in this essay. In each the viewer is made aware of the various groupings of characters, and often the tensions between these groups lead to a destructive and self-perpetuating culture of violence. While such themes of race portrayal are by no means exhaustive or unique to musicals, the (Broadway) musical portrayal of concepts of race was, for the most part, a uniquely white American creation of non-white life.⁴¹ Indeed it was

³⁸ Goldman, “The Iconography of Chicano,” 170.

³⁹ Fields, “Ideology and Race,” 143.

⁴⁰ Emery, “Black Dance,” 303. See also Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*, xiv; and Sheryl Flatow, “Risky Business,” *Opera News* 51.16 (May 1987), 18.

⁴¹ Interestingly a large proportion of musical composers and lyricists, similarly to Hollywood creators, were of Jewish immigrant origin. See Rogin’s study *Blackface, White Noise* for details of the contribution of Jewish immigrants to the development of this quintessential American industry.

often the product of detailed ethnomusicological research, and authors claimed to be presenting the ‘real life’ culture of the coloured other.⁴² However, the coloured other was more often than not shown in terms of opposition to the white self, albeit in a less degrading light than that of musical theatre’s generic predecessors.

Stemming from the minstrel tradition, the coloured other continued to be portrayed as a worker and entertainer in American musical theatre. This is a trend that was reflected in other visual arts forms of the time, especially in film. A *Variety* survey reveals that between 1915 and 1950 “over 50% of black characters were maids, stableboys, and the like”.⁴³ In the 1920s (when the mature musical theatre has its roots) more than eighty percent of non-white characters “were some kind of subordinate help”.⁴⁴ There are two interconnected varieties of this representation – the coloured other as worker and entertainer either as background to the narrative structure, or as part of the narrative structure. It is worth noting that in texts with substantial non-white characterisation, the coloured other is presented as worker and entertainer to a lesser degree than in musicals with minimal non-white characterisation. One reason for this may be it is the notion of the coloured other as worker underpins the narrative and does not have to be developed in contrast to the white self. For example, *Hallelujah*, *Carmen Jones*, *Porgy and Bess* and *Cabin in the Sky* specifically deal with themes of morality and struggle in Afro-American culture. *Porgy* (*Porgy and Bess*) has the air of an Uncle Tommish ‘happy darkie’ singing “I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin” as he watches others fix fishing nets.⁴⁵ It is an assumption of the text that the representation here is one of the ‘real’ culture of the coloured other. Also these texts were created and produced during a period of great interest in Afro-American music, particularly the development of Jazz and other arts during the Harlem Renaissance, by white artists who then attempted to merge the so-called Afro-American forms of music and art into musicals as proof of the text’s closeness to the real character of true Afro-American culture. With regard to musicals set in exotic locales, the coloured other as worker and entertainer takes on the added element of being ‘native’ complete with the full set stereotyped qualities.

⁴² For example, George Gershwin spent two months during 1934 on Folly Island (off Charleston, South Carolina where DuBose Heyward’s original novel *Porgy* was set) travelling around the region to James Island to observe the Gullah Negro population. He desired to depict the coloured other of the black American as realistically as possible and chose the Gullah Negro population for his study: “I want the pure Negro of South Carolina. They’re beautiful. They’re not educated, but they have such virtues” [Gershwin quoted in Sheryl Flatow, “Premiere *Porgy*,” *Opera News* 49.13 (16 March 1985), 35]. See also Frances Altman, *George Gershwin: Master Composer* (Minneapolis: Denison, 1968), 209-210; Stanley Green, *Broadway Musicals of the 30s* (New York: Da Capo, 1971), 116; and Charles Schwartz, *Gershwin: His Life and Music* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), 258-262.

⁴³ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 42.

⁴⁴ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 42.

⁴⁵ David Horn, “Who Loves You *Porgy*? The Debates Surrounding Gershwin’s Musical,” in Robert Lawson-Peebles (ed.), *Approaches to the American Musical* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 116.

In *Show Boat*, the drama of the coloured other rarely appears as an imperative part of the narrative structure except for the brief concern of miscegenation. One of the most remembered segments of *Show Boat* is the song “Ol’ Man River”, sung by Joe, an Afro-American worker on the Cotton Blossom. While this song depicts the strenuous life river workers’, especially Afro-American workers’, experience, it in fact reinforces the notion of the coloured other as merely workers and entertainers. Even the singing of “Ol’ Man River” is incidental to the plot itself. Throughout *Show Boat* scenes are filled with shots of nameless Afro-American workers who provide a background of toil and sweat to the drama of the white characters. The original opening line of the musical was “Niggers all work on de Mississippi”, in later years changing to ‘darkies’ and ‘coloured folk’ before the contemporary “Here we all work on de Mississippi”.⁴⁶ Non-white characters excel in the performance of physical feats to aid white authority figures,⁴⁷ in this case Captain Andy and the theatre troupe. When required by the narrative, these workers drop their tools and hastily pick up a medley of instruments (which of course they just happen to have with them!) to orchestrate the songs of white characters. For example, groups of Afro-American workers can be observed at the side of the Cotton Blossom before the beginning of the song “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” in the 1951 film version. During Julie’s song and Magnolia’s response orchestration is heard, and the audience is later informed (through a character point of view shot) that a group of Afro-American workers near the Cotton Blossom is now playing the accompanying music.

The white characters of *Show Boat* are also portrayed as working as entertainers themselves. For example, the white theatre troupe sings in anticipation of the night’s performance. They are accompanied by a chorus of Afro-American workers singing a work call.⁴⁸ The distinction between the white self and coloured other in this sense is that the work of the white characters is of a professional nature and one of rare skill. Their entertainment value during scheduled paid performances is the result of years of observation and careful study. In opposition to this, the work of the coloured other is of physical labour to support the lifestyle white characters – the “eternally smiling servant, living sacrifice to white ambitions”⁴⁹ – and are spontaneously entertaining by the very nature of their racial identity.

Whilst culturally removed from the Deep South of the Mississippi, similar characteristics of the coloured other as worker and entertainer are depicted in *The*

⁴⁶ Flinn, *Musical!*, 307.

⁴⁷ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 43-44.

⁴⁸ Swain, *The Broadway Musical*, 26.

⁴⁹ Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: the Negro in American Film 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113.

King and I. Anna and her son are the sole representatives of white morality and the Western way of doing things “in a country like Siam”.⁵⁰ They are surrounded by masses of workers, especially in the early establishing shots, and glimpse into the lives of Siamese in the streets en route to the royal palace. Treatment of these native labourers is depicted from the first scene as one white patriarchy and dominance. In fact the first scene begins with directives from the Captain to the Asian workers in the foreground: “come on lads, hurry it up, we haven’t got all day!” In the background white men in uniforms can be observed organising more Asian labourers. This serves to indicate not only that labour is carried out by the coloured other under the vigilant supervision of the white self, but that non-white labour itself is not reliable and requires the strong hand of white patriarchy to make it effective. From royal servants to faceless peasants, the coloured other is seen to be physically working, in this case, for the modernisation and ultimately the Westernisation of Siam. In opposition to this, the white self is in the position of boss, even Anna refuses to be organised by the constraints of palace tradition.

Simultaneously the coloured other is a source of entertainment and constant surprise for the beleaguered Britishers in *The King and I* who are shocked yet intrigued by their nakedness, barefootedness, cruelty,⁵¹ poor grammar, sensuality⁵² and exotic mannerisms. Even the King and his family are positioned as entertainers. The ‘quaint’ presentation of the royal family by the King to Anna is a scene filled with humour derived from the mockery of the childlike behaviour of a royal court, perhaps harking back to the Sambo tradition of the “overgrown child at heart”.⁵³ The combination of the King’s diplomatic awkwardness with superstitious tradition is repeatedly reinforced through the continued scenario of his insistence that Anna keep her head lower than his. While Anna may be in Siam on a professional basis, her work is shown as intellectual pursuit. She is drawn emotionally (as opposed to the necessity of her work) to the King’s children as they stumble along the path of Western knowledge, even though they are apt to break into dance or other ‘Asian’ forms of merriment along the way.

When the deprived marines serving in *South Pacific* finally reach the sensual delights of Bali Hai, they are greeted by scenes of young ‘islander’ women and

⁵⁰ The Captain to Mrs Anna on her arrival in Siam, *The King and I*.

⁵¹ While white supervisors verbally harass their charges, the Siamese opt for physical chastisement.

⁵² The royal bodyguards’ nakedness that frightened Anna’s son is quite an ‘piquant’ representation of cultural eroticism. The guards are played by men with completely hairless, well-defined bodies and muscles that ripple and gleam in the light. Many of their poses, such as the ‘arms akimbo legs astride’ for instance, could be interpreted as positions of sexual power.

⁵³ Boskin, *Sambo*, 13.

'native' men. In the 1958 film version, the Tonkinese⁵⁴ are frequently portrayed as Pacific islanders wearing archetypal grass skirts and boar's tooth nose rings. Even the shrewd Bloody Mary is shown palming off shrunken human skulls to Lieutenant Cable as a mainstay of her business.⁵⁵ As Turner highlights, "gender, status, and occupational roles are clearly established by the finery ascribed" to non-white characters.⁵⁶ The marines' night out to Bali Hai is clearly indicated to be one seeking entertainment which the boar's tooth ceremony and hospitality of the local girls amply provide. The childlike innocence (or perhaps just kind politeness?) demonstrated by the women is a source of delight and humour for the marines.

South Pacific was created at a time when the American public's interests in the exoticness of the Pacific region was intensifying. Both Philip Beidler and Michael Sturma document the fascination of Americans that juxtaposed images of a bitter war against the Japanese imperial force on the one hand with a lush tropical holiday destination on the other.⁵⁷ The juxtapositioning of the work of war with holiday entertainment is reflected in *South Pacific*. The Tonkinese society is represented as one of comparative leisure and ceremony to the work of the predominantly white⁵⁸ American military presence. Bloody Mary, the most developed non-white character, serves as both producer and subject of humour in many scenes. While her antics with "you sexy man"⁵⁹ Lieutenant Cable supplies many laughs for the marines, for example, she also teases and taunts them with tales of Bali Hai. Bloody Mary's gender and motherhood softens the insulting stereotype as white audiences "were unwilling to totally negate ...[a mother's] role as the matrix of family structure".⁶⁰ In contrast to the coloured other in *Show Boat*, the Tonkinese are generally shown to be at leisure, despite their participation in 'traditional' work such as fishing off Maria-Louise Island.

The sexuality of the coloured other can be explored through its notable difference to white sexuality. With regards to male sexuality, while a white character's sexual deviance is attributed to personality or even circumstance, that of

⁵⁴ The Tonkinese "are Indochinese, most likely brought to the island ... by migrating French colonialists. To be exact, this also makes them North Vietnamese, from 'Tonkin' China, the region of Hanoi and the Chinese border" [Philip D. Beidler, "South Pacific and American Remembering; or, 'Josh, We're Going to Buy This Son of a Bitch!'," *Journal of American Studies* 27.2 (Aug 1993), 214]. The representation of the Tokinese as Pacific islanders in the 1958 film version (for a text that pivots around the meanings of racial identity) is likely to be for the purpose of fulfilling the expectations of a 'touristy' American audience.

⁵⁵ Michael Sturma, "South Pacific," *History Today* 47.8 (Aug 1997), 30.

⁵⁶ Turner, *Ceramic Uncles*, 7.

⁵⁷ See Beidler, "South Pacific," 208-210; and Sturma, "South Pacific," 25-26.

⁵⁸ A token Afro-American marine is conspicuous during the "There's Nothing Like a Dame" segment.

⁵⁹ During her first meeting with Lieutenant Cable, Bloody Mary blurts out her appraisal of him and quizzes him about his 'Philadelphia girl'.

⁶⁰ Boskin, *Sambo*, 15.

the coloured other is seen as representational of the sexual weakness and moral disruption of his whole race. Male sexuality is connected to issues of power and violence and will be discussed with these themes later in this essay. This section will focus on the construction of the coloured other's femininity as defined through sexuality. At a time when the sexuality of white women had recently escaped from the closet of Victorian morality, that of the non-white woman was shifting from that of the desexualised mammy⁶¹ to one of open, publicly acknowledged sensuality. Indeed it was this seductiveness that led to the downfall of many male characters and the eventual misery of the non-white woman.

The non-white woman is portrayed as an independent entity in the narrative who tempts, taunts and seduces her male target, but eventually loses him to white middle class morality. She is represented "as a vamp – a supercharged sex symbol – [and this] was delineated in the manner that was to become the norm".⁶² Early texts with substantial characterisation of the coloured other, such as *Hallelujah*, set the tone for the treatment of Afro-American casts and themes.⁶³ Common to most narratives was the stereotype of the "amoral Negro woman".⁶⁴ The characterisation of Chick in *Hallelujah*, Georgia in *Cabin in the Sky*, and Carmen in *Carmen Jones* for instance, sells the stories to audiences through exploitation of the Afro-American woman as vamp. In each, the good man (that is, being god-fearing, hard-working and in a stable relationship whether one is white or Afro-American) is led astray by the fleshiness of the attractive sexualised (read 'available') Afro-American woman.⁶⁵ A softer, more 'innocent', example of the non-white woman as vamp can be found in the character of Liat in *South Pacific*. Under the influence of the enterprising Bloody Mary and her own fleshy charms,⁶⁶ Lieutenant Cable is lured from his 'Philadelphia girl' back home.⁶⁷ Generally a struggle in the man's psyche ensues between sexual freedom (represented by the coloured other) versus morality (symbolised by the white self). The non-white woman is constructed as a femme fatale, in the musical theatre context, a morally 'dangerous' woman who profits by seducing, either intentionally or

⁶¹ An exception to this is the sexually unappealing character of Bloody Mary in *South Pacific* who is "more interested in making money than love" [Sturma, "*South Pacific*," 27].

⁶² Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 428.

⁶³ Bogle, *Toms*, 30).

⁶⁴ James Baldwin, "Life Straight in de Eye," in Maynard (ed.), *The Black Man on Film*, 66. In the context of this essay this is extended to generally include non-white female characters.

⁶⁵ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 90-91; Ewen, *Complete Book*, 80-81, 125; and Bogle, *Toms*, 29-35.

⁶⁶ Just how much communication can Lieutenant Cable and Liat actually have when he stares dumb-struck into her adoring eyes? Also the text indicates that they have a substantial language barrier necessitating the mediation of Bloody Mary.

⁶⁷ It is worth noting that although Liat's role is similar to that of Chick, Carmen or Georgia, the text's message about racism positions her as a victim of white patriarchy. This is achieved through Lieutenant Cable's solo "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" which comments on both his and Nellie's racism.

unintentionally, her victim (the man) into moral degradation and sexual tragedy.⁶⁸ Ironically, narrative closure is generally preceded by the eventual killing of the Afro-American vamp by the man she seduced, who is hence free to return to the simplicity and spirituality of the ‘good life’.⁶⁹

The non-white woman as vamp is an image that sold to mainstream audiences. It reinforced the stereotype that the coloured other is a desired although unmanageable sex object.⁷⁰ Non-white women in musicals are depicted as “young and lascivious”,⁷¹ and more captivating than their staid white counterparts. Julie is the diva of the *Show Boat* and not the bubbly Elly or the sugar-coated Magnolia. Anita, the leader of the Sharks’ girl in *Westside Story*, reveals a cruder side to love when she “excitedly looks forward to sex with Bernardo, triggered by the frenzy of war” in the “Tonight” song.⁷² In *South Pacific*, Bali Hai is romanticised in the song “Bali Hai” by Bloody Mary as a sensual paradise for the American marines. Also the ease Liat’s relationship with Lieutenant Cable is in strong contrast to the relationship between the white nurse from Little Rock, Nellie, and French planter, Emile. (While there is no doubt that Nellie’s relationship is constructed as being one of mature love and companionship, the tortuous difficulty of her decision to accept Emile as her partner seems frigid in comparison.)

The desirability of women as partners and confidants (as was the case with white female characters) was not successfully extended to the non-white woman – the threat of miscegenation and mixed children served to dampen sexual feelings. Julie’s moral downfall in *Show Boat* occurs significantly after the wrath of white authority upon her mixed marriage to Steve and the dissolution of her respectability as a married white woman. The hyper-love of the Lieutenant Cable and Liat collapses when Bloody Mary mentions marriage and ‘special good babies’ for her daughter and the ‘sexy’ American.⁷³ Similarly, Maria is warned by Anita in *Westside Story* to ‘stick to her own kind’ rather than chance forbidden love with Tony whose parents are Polish. The risks of mixed relationships in terms of miscegenated marriage and mulatto children are constructed as being too high to be accepted as a viable life choice.

⁶⁸ Bogle, *Toms*, 29.

⁶⁹ Bogle, *Toms*, 29-30.

⁷⁰ Denison, *Scandalize My Name*, 443-444.

⁷¹ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 121.

⁷² Wilfred Mellers, “West Side Story Revisited,” in Lawson-Peebles (ed.), *Approaches to the American Musical*, 132.

⁷³ Sturma, “*South Pacific*”, 28.

Another angle on the sexuality of the Afro-American woman is that of the ‘fallen woman’ or professional sex-worker. In contrast to Chick, Carmen or Georgia, for example, Bess (*Porgy and Bess*) and Julie (post-*Show Boat*) are floundering, direction-less entities who are dependent on the mercy of others for protection. Bess is saved by Porgy after her lover murders a crap partner⁷⁴ and it is her relationship with him that, momentarily, defines her as ‘woman’.⁷⁵ Nevertheless the package offered by Sporting Life, one of drugs and life in the city fast lane, is ultimately a more appealing option for Bess than life with the good but poverty stricken, socially outcast, goat-cart cripple Porgy.⁷⁶ The narrative goes on to conclude that Bess has chosen the wrong option, and this necessitates Porgy ‘going on his way’ to the New York to once again ‘save’ her.⁷⁷ Similarly, in *Show Boat* Julie eventually chooses (albeit as a devoted servant-like sacrifice to the well-being of Magnolia, the daughter of her former employers) a life of moral decay. Her now ill-starred existence is one of drunken prostitution and she is also dependent on others to save her from the violence in her life.⁷⁸

Observations of the coloured other reveal the development of sexuality to be one encapsulated in exoticness and sensuality. These stereotypes are reinforced through the dress and context of the King’s wives in *The King and I* and the Tonkinese women on Bali Hai in *South Pacific*, or by the characterisation of Chick (*Hallelujah*) and Georgia (*Cabin in the Sky*). The stereotyping of the sexuality of the coloured other must be viewed in comparison with that of the white self. Christian Mendenhall indicates that musical theatre of the period served the ritual function of the ‘liminal journey’ of female leads from the worker to homemaker.⁷⁹ These texts “sought to heal a perceived breach in the social contract caused by the ending of World War II, the problem of integrating the working woman back into the home”.⁸⁰ A flood of white female characters followed this journey, in particular, Nellie (*South Pacific*) and Maria (*Westside Story*).⁸¹ Magnolia’s (*Show Boat*) transition from

⁷⁴ Shooting craps was a popular form of gambling involving the throwing of dice.

⁷⁵ Symbolised through Porgy’s song “Bess you is my woman now”.

⁷⁶ Ewen, *Complete Book*, 117-118; and Altman, *George Gershwin*, 215.

⁷⁷ An interesting point is that the real ‘Porgy’ DuBose Heyward based his original novel on was a public nuisance, charmless beggar Samuel Smalls who had a substantial criminal record with the local police for beating and assaulting women. For more information see Ethan C. Mordden, “Along Pull,” *Opera News*, 49.13 (16 March 1985), 30; and Schwartz, *Gershwin*, 244.

⁷⁸ She is saved by Gaylord (Magnolia’s gambling husband) who is morally resolved from the vicissitudes of his gambling life through the act.

⁷⁹ Christian Mendenhall, “American Musical Comedy as a Liminal Ritual of Woman as Homemaker,” *Journal of American Culture* (13.4 (Winter 1990), 57.

⁸⁰ Mendenhall, “American Musical Comedy,” 57.

⁸¹ It may be interpreted that Maria is somewhat neutralised or ‘whitened’ through her relationship with Tony, and once married it is envisaged that she will leave the workforce and enter private sphere in the role of the homemaker.

riverboat actor to wife and mother could also be interpreted as following this pattern, but in terms of middle-class respectability. These characters are in direct opposition to the stereotype of the coloured other who remained located outside the home in the public sphere. In musicals without substantial white female characterisation, a submissive and god-fearing coloured moral guardian (perhaps a descendent of the mammy stereotype!) fulfils this role by promoting the virtues of wifely duties and respect.⁸²

Thomas Cripps refers to the ‘twoness’ or double consciousness of American life⁸³ as “the history of a racial relationship marked by antipathy, antagonistic cooperation and conflicting loyalties”.⁸⁴ This ‘twoness’ is strongly reflected in musical theatre texts in which narrative structure capitalises on societal divisions and conflicts of racial identity. Tied to societal division are notions of violence and the struggle for power (in some instances, the expression of male sexuality). Separate groupings within a community reverberate social organisation in terms of dominance and subordination. In musical texts the coloured other is constructed as being subordinate to the white self. Working with themes of work/entertainment and sexuality is the coupling of societal division with a culture of violence.

Westside Story can be regarded as a classic scenario of the tragedy of inter-racial love. One of the poignant aspects of this text is the framing of inter-racial love in the paradigm of violence and eventual death. Issues like inter-racial love are commonly resolved through narrative closure involving death or permanent separation. For example, in *South Pacific*, Lieutenant Cable dies ‘on duty’ during a special operation. In a sense he is also a victim of inter-racial violence as World War II in the Pacific was fought between a Western America and an Eastern Japan. Of the texts surveyed for this essay, the societal division depicted in *Westside Story* is the most potent, all-pervading case. It closely follows the history of inter-racial relations in the 1950s, focusing on the struggle of newly arrived immigrants to be accepted by the dominant white community at a time when American society “was beginning to rumble with dissonance”.⁸⁵

Both sides of the conflict in *Westside Story*, represented by the European Jets⁸⁶ and Puerto Rican Sharks, are fighting for ‘gang’ survival. The Jets view the Sharks in

⁸² For example, Zeke’s mother Missy Rose (*Hallelujah*), Cindy Lou (*Carmen Jones*) and Petunia in (*Cabin in the Sky*).

⁸³ From the writings of W. E. B. DuBois [David Krasner, “Parody and Double Consciousness in the Language of Early Black Musical Theatre,” *African American Review* 29.2 (Summer 1995), 317-318].

⁸⁴ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, vii.

⁸⁵ Henderson and Bowers, *Red Hot and Blue*, 4.

⁸⁶ The Jets, although the dominant social group in the narrative, are themselves subordinate in the wider white society as working-class juvenile delinquents, the ‘social disease’ of 1950s’ America. Further subordination in

a continuum of ‘others’ who have challenged their dominance on the block. But the Sharks are different because “they keep comin’, like cockroaches ... they’ve eaten all the food, they’ve eaten all the air”.⁸⁷ For the Jets there is no foreseeable end to the Puerto Rican influx, and they are determined to destroy the growth of the coloured other’s population and influence in their neighbourhood.⁸⁸ A similar view was held by segments of white American society towards waves of post-World War II immigrants. On the other side, the Shark’s survival in the new society depends on their ability to find a space on the block for the Puerto Rican community. The Jets have the advantage in this conflict. They are supported by the white authority figures in the narrative, the incompetent but power-wielding police who order the Puerto Ricans to ‘get out and stay out’. Antagonistic relations develop into a culture of violence as each group battles for domination. However the nature of the violence is complicated by the miscegenated relationship between Tony (a Jet veteran) and Maria (Bernardo’s virginal sister). While their love gives them some insight into the narrow-mindedness of the conflict, the intolerance of their peers flourishes. The teenagers rumble to decide who can command the most respect on the local playground, and attention from girls, ending in harassment and murder. The primary difference between the two groups is that the Jets envisage a fair fight to uphold white American dominance, the Sharks are constructed as the disruptive element who conceal weapons⁸⁹ and plan revenge.

In contrast to the conflict in *Westside Story*, a culture of violence in Afro-American musicals is represented as an inherent racial characteristic rather than a necessity of circumstance. Life for male characters in *Porgy and Bess* is governed by violence signified by drunkenness, shooting craps and physical conflict. The struggle between Crown, Porgy and Sporting Life is defined by the expression of male sexuality through the possession of Bess. Porgy defends the fleeing Bess, removing her from Crown’s sphere of influence. Antagonism between the two men culminates in the stabbing and strangulation of Crown by Porgy.⁹⁰ However the struggle for Bess continues in their absence as she is wooed and won by Sporting Life. Porgy, his manhood slighted, vows revenge, continuing the cycle of violence.

mainstream white society is suffered as being the children of immigrant parents who arrived in America during earlier waves of immigration.

⁸⁷ Jet song, *Westside Story*.

⁸⁸ Ewen, *Complete Book*, 38.

⁸⁹ It should be noted that the Sharks’ decision to conceal weapons was based on mistrust of the Jets’ intentions.

⁹⁰ For a detailed plot outline see “Porgy and Bess,” 49.13 ,26-28; and “Porgy and Bess,” 54.9, 26-29. The acting of this violent murder on stage shocked white audiences during performances of *Porgy and Bess* [Bordman, *American Musical Comedy*, 161]. This shock was further intensified as “Porgy-as-murder goes unpunished, and is ... condoned by his peers” [Ned Rorem, “Living With Gershwin,” *Opera News* 49.13 (16 March 1985),18].

In *Hallelujah*, *Carmen Jones* and *Cabin in the Sky*, the fulfilment of male desire results in antagonism between good and bad, “between callings of the spirit and temptations of the flesh”.⁹¹ In each case, negative racial stereotypes of Afro-American men are reinforced when conflict ends in violence and the murder of a dominant female character. Zeke secures his salvation in *Hallelujah* through the murder of Chick who has comprised his masculinity by seducing him at the crap table.⁹² In *Carmen Jones* Joe, Carmen’s slighted ex-lover, takes revenge and murders Carmen for leaving him for Husky.⁹³ A variation on the theme is presented in *Cabin in the Sky*. The troubled Joe shoots his all-forgiving wife Petunia when her morality threatens his relationship, and expression of his sexuality, with the lustful Georgia.⁹⁴ Racial division and negative stereotyping of the coloured other as violent in popular cultural texts mirrors the development of “a black foundation held down by the white success it support[s]” in the history of American society.⁹⁵

Strong opposition to the negative stereotyping of people from non-white racial backgrounds in popular cultural commodifications of history has been mounted by members of the Afro-American, Asian, Hispanic, and white communities. The most influential occurrence of unwavering criticism has been directed at *Porgy and Bess* for its representation of lampblack Negroism as ‘real’ Afro-American culture.⁹⁶ Objection to “the bourgeois ‘look’, with its capacity for racial differentiation and sexual objectification” (serving to humiliate and oppress other racial groups),⁹⁷ has promoted the need for a reevaluation of the meanings produced by the texts.

In conclusion, the portrayal of the white self and coloured other in American musical theatre supported and circulated notions of the white community’s cultural dominance over other racial formations. This is done, for example, by portraying the coloured other as worker and entertainer juxtaposed to the power-holding, leisured white self. Similarly the representation of the non-white woman as vamp locates her on the peripheries of a society that views women as the moral guardians of the family matrix. Working with these themes is the coupling of societal division with a culture of violence. Analysis of these themes in musical texts reveals how concepts of the

⁹¹ Bogle, *Toms*, 29.

⁹² Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 90-92.

⁹³ Ewen, *Complete Book*, 125; and Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*, 186.

⁹⁴ Ewen, *Complete Book*, 80-81; and Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*, 193-195.

⁹⁵ Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 49.

⁹⁶ Schwartz, *Gershwin*, 245.

⁹⁷ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 28.

coloured other are defined in opposition to the white self, and that this construction is not a fair representation⁹⁸ of other racial identities.

The acceptance of such representations as cultural ‘truths’, as a valid telling of the past, is part of process through which the white community has propagated a form of cultural imperialism. This ideology positively stereotypes the white self and concurrently defines other groups as deficient, and thus on a lower rung of the ‘natural’ racial hierarchy. In this sense cultural decolonisation still needs to be addressed.⁹⁹ What may be acceptable artistically, despite the best of author intentions, can still “give offence socially and politically unless the specifics of th[e] particular society, its time and place are acknowledged”.¹⁰⁰ The textual legacy of a long history of Western cultural hegemony needs to be repositioned as reflections of the historical categorisation of human beings in opposition to one another on the basis ‘race’.

⁹⁸ The depiction of the coloured other as workers holding menial positions, for instance, is not a historical reflection of employment trends at the time; in the United States by 1940, “40 percent of black men had secured white collar jobs [Thomas H. Pauly, “Black Images and White Culture During the Decade before the Civil Rights Movement,” *American Studies* 31.2 (Fall 1990), 102].

⁹⁹ Pieterse, *White on Black*, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Horn, “Who Loves You Porgy?” 117.

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