

Performing Miscegenation: Rescuing *The White Slave* from the Threat of Interracial Desire

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This examination of Bartley Campbell's 1882 play, *The White Slave*, emerges out of a comprehensive study of the way in which representations of black/white unions in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. drama and fiction invoke anxieties about the impact of interracial contact, while simultaneously rehearsing the multiple possibilities of these transgressive relationships. Because of the way in which black/white, or interracial, intimate alliances have symbolized both explicit acts of racial transgression in and of themselves and implicit threats to essentialized racial categories, their representation creates space for complex readings of these racial identities. In fact, the ambivalent and liminal space in which interracial desire is most frequently represented does not merely complicate race, it provides a place for more productive and multivalent articulations of black and white subjectivities. Campbell's play offers a useful site for exploring these issues because of the way in which it complicates black and white by "playing out" the possibility of an erotic cross-racial relationship. At the same time, through a multitude of complex plot twists and unexpected revelations, the logic of play's narrative undermines the legitimacy of interracial unions and, thereby, helps to minimize their disruptive potential. By using the explosive and contested space of the play's narrative, this reading helps to foreground moments in the past when blackness and whiteness are destabilized in a manner that reinforces current anti-essentialist debates about race and identity.

My reading of *The White Slave* suggests the way in which the play engages in multiple racial performances and depicts race in performative terms. That is to say that the play produces an interracial union that is part of a broader performance—a performance of multiple articulated racial subjectivities, of miscegenation,¹ of hierarchical power relations—that simultaneously challenges and reinforces what it attempts to represent. The contradictions produced by these cross purposes demonstrate the ambivalence that usually characterizes depictions of interracial unions. For, while most portrayals of cross-racial relationships

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indicate that they will fail, they also leave many of the conflicting issues and possibilities generated by the union unresolved and unexplored. This ambiguity not only complicates these representations of intimate black/white relations, it also provides a starting point for rearticulating the complexity of racial identities that are, more often than not, defined in opposition to each other.

For the purposes of this analysis, I draw from Judith Butler's formulation of performativity, which defines it as the "reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains," to describe the process of historical sedimentation that naturalizes and reinforces static definitions of black and white in the United States.² When representations of interracial contact articulate desire that disrupts established racial boundaries, then they directly challenge strict definitions of black and white. Although temporary, the potential explosion of the rigid categories of black and white threatens the discursive systems which constitute these identities as fixed. Thus, by identifying particular enactments of interracial desire as performative, readings such as this one interrupt the process of enunciation that attempts to reincorporate black and white subjectivities into the dominant and regulatory "norms" of racial identification.³

This examination links the disruptive impact of interracial unions on racial subjectivity with the contested space produced by performance. Here, my use of the term "performance" takes into account not only social performance, but also the particularities of organized and/or theatrical performance. Elin Diamond articulates the connection between theatrical performance and social performativity quite effectively in *Performance and Cultural Politics* while also explaining how their intersection creates space for productive analysis. In this discussion, she states that "[p]erformance. . . is precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated. When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of the norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique."⁴ Representations of interracial unions, like performance, allow for a playing out of the complexities of real life in a contained space. Similar to staged productions, which invite analyses of the subjects they portray because of the ways in which they frame "norms" that usually remain unmarked, my reading of this representation of black/white interracial desire reevaluates static definitions of black and white identities by foregrounding the conventions that constitute them.

Although dramatic depictions of lived experience and racial (black/white) identities cannot be collapsed into a catch-all category called the performative, particular representations of racial subjectivity can, and often do, demonstrate the different ways in which race is performed. The performative lens helps to focus

readings of racial subjectivity on the intersection of its (race's) staged portrayals and lived embodiments. The space in-between the constructedness and materiality of racial subjectivity functions as a site in which the symbolic and productive power of performance can be identified and interpreted. For performance, as Joseph Roach argues in "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons," provides a useful strategy for evaluating the "powerful way in which cultures set about the necessary business of remembering who and what they are . . . of making them into who and what they are, and even into who and what they might someday be."⁵ This articulation of performance is particularly useful for this analysis because it suggests that performed representations of interracial unions allow for a rehearsal of relations that are prohibited in other realms of society. Taboo subjects, like interracial alliances, are often perceived as safer or less threatening when they are performed or imagined in a staged arena because they can be dismissed as fictional and, therefore, less real. Still, each staged enactment of these historically embedded black/white unions provides space for new possibilities, or what Richard Schechner refers to as "virtual alternatives," that extend beyond the limits of the narratives in which they are produced.⁶

Historicizing Miscegenation

The word miscegenation—a derogatory term for cross-racial sexual relations—was popularized in the United States by pro-slavery journalist David Croly in 1863. His inflammatory pamphlet, "Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the White Man and the Negro," intentionally played on the fears of many white Americans by disingenuously advocating interracial marriage and by suggesting that mixed races were superior to "pure" ones.⁷ Although cross-racial unions were not new and sexual relations between white planters and their black slaves were tenuously accepted as one of the unfortunate evils of slavery, this sensational document stirred up many anxieties about the negative effects of black and white sexual contact.⁸

Immediately following Emancipation in the United States (1863) and continuing well into the twentieth-century, contradictory and competing discourses about miscegenation and "the Negro problem" circulated in almost every realm of society—politics, media, academia, popular culture, science, etc. White supremacists suggested that the innate inferiority of blacks not only caused the failure of Reconstruction, but also reinforced the need for segregation and white domination.⁹ These racist theories were supported and "documented" in a variety of texts, such as John H. Van Evrie's 1863 propagandistic pamphlet, "Subgenation: The Theory of the Normal Relation of the Races; An Answer to 'Miscegenation'" and Alfred P. Schultz's 1908 reactionary study, *Race or Mongrel*, which argued "that the fall of the nations is due to intermarriage with

alien stock.”¹⁰ Advocates of these racially prejudiced ideologies also supported the notion that sustained contact between whites and blacks would continue to contaminate white society and that their (whites) only hope for survival was the eventual “extinction” of the “weaker,” in the Darwinian sense, black population.¹¹ Sympathetic whites supported paternalistic policies toward blacks but were quick to disassociate themselves from charges that they were promoting social equality and intimate relations between blacks and whites.¹² Although both theories supported racial segregation explicitly or implicitly, neither could erase the fact that a significant portion of the population lived in bodies that contained “evidence” of miscegenation. Both literally and symbolically, these mixed-race bodies—usually depicted as “tragic” mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons—represented interracial sexual unions. Despite increased numbers of lynchings and heightened animosity of whites towards any person who contained even “one-drop” of black blood, black/white sexual relations continued to disrupt dominant discourse that argued for racial purity and white supremacy.¹³

Inter (Racial) Performance in *The White Slave*¹⁴

Bartley Campbell’s 1882 play, *The White Slave*, can be understood as demonstrative of the relationship between racial identity and performance, as well as of many of the anxieties that black/white interracial transgressions generate(d). My investigation identifies those moments in the play when race and interracial unions emerge as both performative and embodied representations of the complex and, sometimes, contradictory articulations of the tense racial, gender, class, and sexual politics of the late nineteenth-century United States.

The following description of *The White Slave* from the *St. Louis Republican* summarizes the play’s elaborate plot and provides some insight as to how the play was received and understood when it opened in 1882:

An interesting girl in a Southern home grows up in the belief that she is an octoroon. Under the conditions of this supposed taint of blood she falls as a slave into the hands of a man who would betray her. She has a lover who aids her escape, and the business of the play is chiefly concerned with her perils undergone to avoid degraded bondage and pollution and incidents which uncover facts that finally prove her to be a white woman.¹⁵

This melodramatic piece set on Big Bend Plantation, somewhere in Kentucky, opens with plantation owner Judge Hardin lying on his deathbed saying his last goodbyes to his family, friends, and slaves. We quickly discover that his

unmarried daughter, Grace, died in Italy just after giving birth to her “illegitimate” daughter named Lisa. We also learn that Lisa’s biological father, Marquis De Bernaigre, fled from Italy, abandoning both mother and daughter. Because Judge Hardin does not want to sully his family name by admitting that his daughter had a child out of wedlock (and to a “foreigner,” no less), he and his quadroon slave, Nance, bring Lisa back to Big Bend plantation and pass her off as Nance’s octoroon daughter. Despite Nance’s pleas for the judge to tell Lisa that she is “[a] free born white woman” (209), he remains silent and threatens to haunt her from the grave if she does not keep his secret.

After the judge’s death, his adopted son, Clay Britton, almost loses the plantation because of his gambling debts. In order to save the land, he sells all of the slaves to his devious “friend” Bill Lacy. Clay tries to negotiate to keep the slaves but Lacy refuses to compromise. It turns out that Bill Lacy has engineered a scheme wherein he encourages Clay to risk all of his money so that Clay must sell most of his grandfather’s property in order to avoid bankruptcy. Bill Lacy’s underlying motive for befriending and manipulating Clay is his desire to purchase the prized octoroon Lisa and force her to become his concubine on his own plantation in Mississippi. Clay, who loves Lisa despite her slave status, tries to stop Lacy from buying her and gets arrested for interfering with the legal transaction. Clay then escapes from jail, locates Lisa and helps her run away from Lacy’s plantation. At the climax of the play, Lacy discovers Lisa and Clay fleeing and tries to recapture her just as the steamer on which they are escaping mysteriously catches fire. Miraculously, Clay and Lisa avoid harm by floating off on a burning piece of the ship. In the final scene, a lawyer hired by the deceased judge’s sister-in-law (Mrs. Lee) reveals the truth about Lisa’s identity, that she is really white, so that she and Clay can get married, repossess their slaves, and return to Big Bend plantation.

In addition to the intricate plot and the unlikely coincidences, this piece relies on several of the conventional “tragic octoroon” tropes that were well-established by 1882. The most common characteristics of the “tragic” octoroon/mulatto narratives were that s/he was handsome and admired by many but alienated from both white and black communities because of her/his tragic difference. Usually, her/his young life ends in an untimely death caused by suicide, murder, or some incurable disease.¹⁶ Besides the obvious similarity to Dion Boucicault’s 1859 piece, *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*, Campbell’s play invokes and then transforms many of the conventions associated with this type of “racial melodrama.”¹⁷ In fact, Lisa’s role as the tragic octoroon doomed to death not only recalls this tradition, it also pre-dates twentieth-century redeployments of a similar figure in plays by black writers, such as Langston Hughes’ 1928/35 play, *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South*, Nella Larsen’s

1929 novel, *Passing*, Adrienne Kennedy's 1964 play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and Rita Dove's 1994 verse play, *Darker Faces of the Earth: A Verse Play in Fourteen Scenes*.¹⁸

Like these writers, Campbell reshapes tragic octoroon/mulatto conventions so that they address the specificities of his contemporary context. His postbellum articulation of miscegenation and reformulation of its conventions enables him to produce a text that engages with contemporary social, political, juridical, and even scientific discourses that informed readings of his play. Rather than presenting a clearly identifiable stance on current debates, such as racial purity and the future of the United States after "failed" Reconstruction, Campbell's play entices its audiences with references to these explosive issues and reproduces them within the imaginative and, somewhat, distanced space of the stage.

The most evident transformation that Campbell presents in *The White Slave* is his use of a white character to play the role of the vulnerable octoroon. Not only does this use of the traditional "tragic" octoroon character transform that convention, it also indicates that both whiteness and blackness are positions that can be inhabited temporarily and performed in certain situations. Rather than introduce the miscegenated or octoroon body of typical narratives about interracial transgressions, Campbell invokes "pure" white womanhood as the underlying "appeal" that generates Clay Britton's and Bill Lacy's attraction to Lisa. For she looks like a white woman and performs like an educated elite white lady. Her speech is highly standardized if not excessively formal. Moreover, both black and white characters respond to her as if she is white, indicating that her almost white appearance and behavior diminishes any characteristics that other characters or white audience members would associate with the black blood that her octoroon body also represents.

It is only through other characters' words and gestures, as well as the racial hierarchy that the play establishes, that Lisa's "non-white" status is fully recognizable. For example, Mrs. Lee, a white woman of an older generation and a relative of the late judge, consistently reminds her that her drop of black blood marks her as inferior: "You forget who you are," Mrs. Lee reminds Lisa. "Your white skin and dainty rearing cannot obliterate the fact that you belong to a race of slaves."¹⁹ However, the fact Mrs. Lee must reiterate Lisa's subordinate position indicates that Lisa's liminal position poses a threat that must be consistently identified and policed in order to maintain the racist hierarchy of the old South. In contrast, Letty, Mrs. Lee's daughter, suggests that the racist ideas expressed by her mother are no longer acceptable, at least not in those explicit terms, when she scolds her mother for making this type of derogatory remark and consoles Lisa, stating: "She will be sorry some day. Please forget it."²⁰ Here, Letty acknowledges

that her mother's position is inappropriate but relegates any possible reformation to the distant future of "some day."

This generational difference among southern white women of the landed class suggests that a shift in thinking has occurred and that compassionate white women are replacing reactionary, hypocritical, southern mistresses of the past. In fact, both Letty and her lover, Jack, function as "liberated" members of the South. Despite the fact that Letty is aristocratic and Jack is working-class, they plan to get married and fend for themselves rather than relying on inheriting the legacy of the old plantation. Both feel that they can overcome their class differences and that Jack should be treated as Letty's social equal. Jack reiterates this point and confronts Mrs. Lee, Letty's mother, when he declares: "You object to my suit because I am poor; but poverty is not perpetual, and with her love to fight for, I am certain to make my way."²¹ This claim to self-sufficiency suggests that now that slavery is a relic, all capable men will be able to reap the benefits of hard work and the democratic vision can be recuperated. In the post-Reconstruction era, this philosophy would have been particularly significant since many racists argued that blacks failed to prosper not because of the system but because of their innate inferiority. This unapologetic assertion of the supremacy of white-male potential and free-market individualism also distinguishes "honorable" white men from "guilty" predatory degenerate white male figures, represented by fictional characters such as Simon Legree from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whose status and power relied on the racial hierarchy established by the southern plantation economy. It also elevates the former group of white men by suggesting that all blame for the unspeakable practices of slavery, such as unwanted sexual liaisons with blacks which produced a large percentage of mixed-raced slaves, should be attributed to this morally deficient group of white men. This differentiation between "good" and "bad" white people redeems the virtue of whiteness and landed class aspirations, while simultaneously rejecting the corruption associated with the history of slaveholding.

Although Campbell's focus on the restoration of white virtue seems to displace anxiety about black contamination, Lisa's multivalent role refuses easy categorization. On the one hand, Lisa could be characterized as a surrogate for both black and white womanhood because she takes on the position of property usually assigned to black slaves. At the same time, she demonstrates the "delicacy" assigned to upper-class white women of the nineteenth-century by such ideological directives as the "Cult of True Womanhood."²² Her character moves in-between these polarized definitions of womanhood. She also invokes some of the nineteenth-century proto-feminist discourse which frequently conflated the position of white women with the position of slaves.²³ Contemporary white women may have identified with a character like Lisa more readily because she looks and

acts like a free-born white aristocratic woman but gets treated more like a piece of property than a person. She literally embodies the slave status that white women often used to describe their limited rights and second class citizenship, metaphorically. On the other hand, Lisa's mobility and her reenactment of these historical representations of feminized whiteness and blackness, challenge these positions altogether.

Lisa embodies the role of the tragic octoroon temporarily, only to emerge as something else at the end of the play when her "authentic" whiteness is unveiled. However, far from establishing the certainty of her white racial ancestry, her misidentification as an octoroon places both her blackness and her whiteness into the realm of the performative. If her owners and peers construct her as octoroon without any "evidence" of black blood, it seems logical that she can also take on the position of a white woman just as easily even if she does possess "one-drop" of black blood; there is no "proof" that she is *really* white either.²⁴ In both cases, she performs the role that is assigned to her rather than producing some authenticating documentation of her racial ancestry. Neither categorization of black nor white fully contains or confirms Lisa's race.

Whether Lisa is placed into the position of slavery by her grandfather because, for him, blackness masks or incorporates her illegitimacy or whether she is reclassified as white because of her mother's white status, her ability to pass in both situations provides a subtle critique of biologically based racial definitions. However, the fact that she is bought and sold also provides a powerful reminder of the material impact of the role that she has been assigned. Lisa's successful performance of her role as octoroon is buttressed by Judge Hardin's power to place Lisa into that category rather than by any genetically-determined proof. Additionally, since Judge Hardin is dead and Nance has been terrorized into remaining silent, Lisa has neither the knowledge nor the authority to contest her slave status. Other members of Big Bend plantation also reinforce Lisa's convincing enactment of this ambiguous role by treating her as though she is extraordinary; at the same time, they resist the urge to elevate her to the status of white until it is authorized by her racial unveiling at the play's conclusion.

What complicates this performance even further is the fact that the actress who plays the role of the white looking and acting octoroon is actually white. Thus, it is only through the roles established within the framework of the performance, as well as the audience's familiarity with the racial hierarchy that informs the play's characterizations, that her racial differences can be expressed. Moreover, audiences, despite their knowledge of her undiscovered whiteness, would have had to engage in Lisa's temporary status as octoroon, as well as in her eventual emergence as white. These multiple layers of performance help to produce complex readings of race represented by the character Lisa and by the

actress who plays her; for audiences would be compelled to read and to recognize different signs and markers of blackness and whiteness at different points throughout the performance. It is not until the final scene of *The White Slave* that whiteness and blackness no longer function as liminal and performable parts of Lisa's identity.

The confirmation of Lisa's whiteness at the end of the play is what allows her to transcend the boundaries of the traditional tragic narrative that she inhabits. Unlike the tragic octoroon who dies at the end of the story, Lisa is allowed to live. By characterizing her role as naturally superior to more conventional representations of fragile octoroons, Campbell pre-figures her transcendent whiteness. In contrast to quadroon, Nance, and octoroon, Daphne, who are abused and condescended to by white men, Lisa remains defiant and self-assured in her interactions with whites and blacks. Her assertiveness differs from the required subservience of other slave women in the play, who are expected to submit to advances from and attacks by white owners and overseers. Even Lisa's romantic advances toward her lover, Clay, are presented as signs of her independence and strength. This noble characterization of Lisa's actions differs from more conventional and stereotypical representations of black women. If the same behavior was attributed to an identifiably black woman at all, it would most likely be represented as comic or even brutish. Lisa also refuses to become the concubine of a man she does not love, distinguishing herself from many black women who were forced into sexually exploitative relationships with white men in the slave system. She states: "A woman cannot fall lower than to live with a man she does not love—cannot even respect."²⁵ Here, she establishes a high moral standard which many black woman were not in a position to meet. This assertion points directly to the vulnerability of the real octoroon character in the play, Daphne. In contrast to Lisa, Daphne is compelled to serve as Bill Lacy's mistress, to endure his constant abuse and to bear his child.

Unlike her subjugated "sisters," who are forced to inhabit the inferior status assigned to them permanently because they are black, Lisa's temporary and liminal status enables Campbell to characterize her differently. Lisa functions as an effective surrogate for black and white women's bodies because she possesses mobility that they will never obtain. She can present the tragedy of black women's lives at the same time that her whiteness radically transforms her position. Still, her body functions as a site for all of the transgressive desires that white audiences identified with black bodies. In a sense, what makes Lisa's apparent whiteness more tantalizing is the unknown and unseen part of her that has been named black. The invisible part of Lisa represents the status of both Daphne and Nance—the actual mixed-race female slaves in the play—along with that of the other slaves invoked by her role. But, despite the multiple significations that

Lisa's symbolic blackness produces, in the end, they all get displaced by her "legitimate" whiteness.

Other black characters also respond to Lisa as if she is their superior and are more concerned with her suffering than their own. Time after time, slaves break into song and dance or engage in comic dialogues, providing a backdrop similar to the minstrel show that would have been familiar to contemporary audiences. This indirect invocation of stereotypes popularized by the blackface minstrel tradition would conflate representations of black conduct and mannerisms with essentialized formulations of blackness, reinforcing the notion that "authentic" blackness is inextricably linked to performance and entertainment. Reiterating the frequency with which blacks were placed in the role of objectified spectacle, one nineteenth-century reviewer includes the play's representations of black bodies as one of the many common props and trappings characteristic of this type of melodramatic production. He recalls: "the action, plots, and counterplots, characters, serious and humorous passages, crowd the scenes of the play . . . There are plantation scenes and songs, and banjo-playing and dances and the African of every age and shade. . . ." ²⁶ Black characters are conflated into flat stereotypes so that they remain part of the scenery. Lisa distinguishes herself from this type of black-identified behavior by maintaining her refined persona, which places her into a transcendent role. In effect the "blackface" chorus provides the spectacular entertainment and emotional background for Lisa's drama.

This minstrelization of the "real" black characters deemphasizes increasing anxiety about the contaminating impact of free blacks by reducing them to comic and subordinate backdrops. Moreover, none of the black male characters (black men were the main objects of alarmist anti-miscegenation attack) ever express any desire for Lisa and are safely paired off with other black female characters in the play. ²⁷ Their subservient roles indicate that ordinary blacks were eager to maintain their servant status and would not overstep the established racial boundaries. Even the music—sad spirituals or happy banjo strumming—that frames the narrative and interrupts the dialogue helps to widen the gap between the comic entertaining role of the "happy darkies" and the tragic drama of "almost" white Lisa. And, Lisa's "blackface" (or should I say whiteface?) is so muted that her characterization invokes its proximity to whiteness more than anything else.

Still, the threat of blackness and its slave status does not disappear. Because of her invisible drop of black blood, Lisa gets sold to Bill Lacy and Clay Britton is imprisoned for trying to help her. In fact, once Clay helps Lisa to escape from Bill Lacy's plantation, he becomes a fugitive like her. He loses the rights and mobility afforded white people and enters the realm of slave status, temporarily. This placement of Clay and Lisa into a subjugated position, displaces

blackness, erases the issue of slavery and enables white figures to appropriate the burdens of blacks. First, they take on the role of fugitives and then they re-occupy their positions as sanctioned white people. Or, as the steamboat's Captain asserts after a quick appraisal of Lisa's appearance and behavior: "This lady is a genuine white woman!"²⁸ With the legitimacy of their alliance restored, the moral outrage of Lisa's unjust treatment is foregrounded rather than the racist ideology that endorses slavery and prohibits cross-racial unions.

The authentication of Lisa's "genuine whiteness" at the end of the play and the restoration of her family property provides a conciliatory resolution that conventional "tragic octoroon" narratives did not produce. The symbolic removal of the contaminating drop of black blood from her body enables Lisa to reenter the "safe" realm of whiteness legitimately. And, she and Clay reoccupy their positions as the benevolent masters of the idyllic plantation of the past almost effortlessly. Their newly acquired roles represent a restoration of pre-Reconstruction racial, gender, and class order in the South. Moreover, Campbell's play conflates Lisa's miraculous shift from being owned (property) to owning (property holder) with her reclassification as white so that the conclusion supports the notion that all possessions, which were confiscated from white landowners during and after the war, should be returned to their "rightful" owners. It also suggests that only a select group of whites, those who've demonstrated their legitimacy, deserve the rights associated with the position of property holder. The other implication is that blacks, so recently emancipated from the status of chattel, are not yet ready to assume the responsibility of ownership, especially self-governance. Rather than challenging the inherent racism of these patronizing justifications for slavery, this ending reestablishes the legitimacy of the slave system's racial hierarchy and idealizes the benevolent masters of the not-so-distant past. In a sense, blackness is the foil against which whiteness is reasserted. It serves as the literal and symbolic justification for maintaining white hegemony.

Responses, such as the following excerpt from the previously quoted nineteenth-century review, reemphasize the romanticizing effect and "collective amnesia" that Campbell's play produces by claiming: "Campbell has gathered up and put in its construction all that is worth saving of the old Southern society and the conditions of plantation life and property in the past and gone slavery system."²⁹

All that is **not** worth saving—the actual octoroon character, Daphne, the threat of interracial desire, the lecherous white male, the immorality of slavery—seems to fade into the background of the play and into the irretrievable memory of the reviewer. In fact, Daphne's and Bill's fates represent the typical punishment for carrying out interracial relations—they both die. Daphne is murdered by her white master, Bill Lacy, because she stops him from preventing

Lisa's escape from his plantation. And, Bill Lacy gets killed for interfering with Lisa's rescue and for attempting to defile Lisa when she was held captive on his plantation. Lacy's punishment punctuates the force behind racial categorization by demonstrating the material impact of Lisa's shift from octoroon to white. When she occupies the position of octoroon, the law supports Lacy's exploitation of her but when she moves into the category of white, his sexual advances are criminalized. Still, Lisa's status depends on her classification whereas Lacy's is "always already" tainted by his alliance with a black woman and his overall characterization as morally weak. Unlike Lisa, Bill and Daphne represent contaminated bodies that cannot be cleansed nor recuperated. In fact, they function as foils to Lisa and Clay because they engage and fulfill the desires that Lisa and Clay merely act out. Bill's ability to express his white male desire for Daphne, the exoticized octoroon, contrasts with the denial and unfulfilled fantasy that his attempted sexual liaison with Lisa represents. Bill and Daphne's bodies are contaminated irreversibly because they have engaged in interracial sex and have produced a "miscegenated" child. Their literal and symbolic deaths in the play help to maintain Lisa's purity and eliminate the cross-racial desire that their presence invokes.

And, although the other black characters do not die, they do disappear by returning to their prescribed roles as slaves on Big Bend plantation. One could also argue that the more explosive form of interracial relations—between black men and white women—remains invisible and unspeakable. In fact, this extremely transgressive form of interracial union is arguably what this post-Reconstruction narrative is really displacing. For, most white male/black female relationships were not considered all bad by slave owners because they reproduced the slave population, according to the law which states that the condition of the child follows the condition of the mother; however, white female/black male relations were viewed as a direct threat to white southern patriarchal authority, since, technically, those children could share the free status of their white mothers.³⁰ Rather than addressing this issue, the narrative circumvents black male/white female desire by focusing on the way in which the "crisis" of Lisa's misclassification as octoroon gets played out as a competition between the two central white male characters, Bill Lacy and Clay Britton, for ownership of her body. Unlike the slaves and most antebellum white women, Bill and Clay are authorized to navigate the "marketplace," and all that it represents in U.S. culture, from positions of power. As legitimate property-holders, their actions, intentions and right to possess Lisa are never challenged. By emphasizing the destabilizing impact of Lisa's counterfeit octoroon status on these main white male characters, the narrative formulates the question of Lisa's liminal racial status in terms of

white male identity and desire, while it also precludes any articulation of desire between black men and white women.

Even Lisa and Clay's mimetic cross-racial relationship is "whitened" and forced into the background by Lisa's transformation from octoroon to white. The legal status of their union changes along with Lisa's racial classification because she is now permitted to marry Clay legally. This difference from the slaves, whose unions were unauthorized by the state, reinforces both the forbidden nature of their earlier alliance and the legitimacy of their current relationship.

Lisa's racial transmogrification from black to white also indicates that the desirability of octoroon women is fueled by a desire for both pure whiteness and exotic blackness. Lisa's character represents this multi-faceted appeal for she occupies a different, or even "interesting" as she's referred to in the *St. Louis Republican* review, category at the same time that she embodies an idealized model of whiteness. She and Clay enter into a transgressive relationship because she has the status of octoroon but, eventually, she emerges as white which simultaneously permits and sanitizes the mythos of their cross racial desire. In fact, Lisa and Clay's counterfeit interracial relationship replicates and replaces Bill and Daphne's genuine interracial union, suggesting that Lisa and Clay's enactment of cross-racial love was a performance rather than an actualization of transgressive desire. Moreover, Lisa's role as a tragic octoroon and the desire that she invokes is eventually defused when her contaminated status is removed by the official exorcism of any blackness associated with her body. This symbolic purification of Lisa's body affirms her whiteness and eradicates the threat of the mixed-raced body, the miscegenated body.

Conclusion

This depiction of the tragic octoroon and the destructive effects of cross-racial relations remains part of the performance and, therefore, indicates that none of the characters necessarily represent reality beyond the stage. However, the performance intersects with lived experiences and provides a powerful reminder that these transgressive interracial unions and mixed-race bodies exist and create similar disruptions in real life.

Despite the triumph of white racial supremacy at the end of the play, the ambiguous performances of miscegenation represented in *The White Slave* attest to the unresolved anxieties that interracial unions and miscegenated bodies generate(d). Even within the context of Campbell's conciliatory play, conventional tropes about transgressive miscegenation emerge in relation to a broad matrix of historically-grounded racial discourse that informs representations and resists reductive readings. One might also argue that it is only because white male/black female relations were institutionalized and reproduced through the

institution of slavery that Campbell's representation is recognizable, imaginable, or even acceptable to its viewers.

The ambiguous space between Campbell's safe solution to transgressive interracial desire and the explosive responses surrounding the issue of miscegenation indicate that these formulations of cross-racial unions should be read as performative, rather than as accurate depictions of reality. Therefore, it is possible to re-view them in order to better understand the cultural and historical conditions that informed them. As I have attempted to demonstrate with this reading of *The White Slave*, it is possible to trace current complexities of racial identity back to historical articulations of interracial desire. By examining the way in which black/white boundaries were never firmly in place in the nineteenth-century and were always already contested, it becomes clearer how attempts to fix race were and continue to be strategic methods of policing individual lives. In fact, this analysis makes more visible the way in which Campbell's representation reconstructs the tragic mulatto and the black/white-love-as-impossible conventions in order to reinforce particular ideological impulses, such as white hegemony and black inferiority. Reevaluating this representation in terms of its performance and reformulation of those limited narratives is useful in that it offers alternative possibilities that disrupt reductive notions of race and articulations of interracial desire. Rather than arguing that these historical enunciations of racial complexity merely reiterate contemporary discussions, my interpretation demonstrates how these debates were already being theorized and tested in late nineteenth-century narratives and takes into account the intersecting lives and competing histories of those implicated in and by those representations.

Notes

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1. Throughout this paper, the term "miscegenation" should be understood, not as a generic term for black/white unions, but as a historically and ideologically informed label coined to mark these relationships as transgressive.

2. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.

3. My use of the regulatory norms that get reproduced in mainstream discourse is informed by Butler's discussion of performativity in *Bodies That Matter*, especially in her introduction and in her chapter on Nella Larsen's *Passing*. Butler 1-23, 167-85.

4. Elin Diamond, ed., *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Introduction. (New York: Routledge, 1996) 5.

5. Joseph Roach, "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons: A Cultural Genealogy of Antebellum Performance," *Theatre Survey* 33.2 (November 1992): 168.

6. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 184.
7. David G. Croly, *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro* (London: Trubner & Co., 1864).
8. George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1987) 171-2, and Eva Saks, "Miscegenation Law," *Raritan* 8.2 (Fall 1988): 42.
9. See George Fredrickson, *Black Image* 228-55.
10. See Alfred P. Schultz's *Race or Mongrel* (Boston: L.C. Page & Company, 1908) title page, and John H. Van Evrie, *Subgenation: The Theory of the Normal Relation of the Races; An Answer to Miscegenation* (New York: J. Bradburn, 1864).
11. Fredrickson suggests that social Darwinism solidified racist claims that blacks were inferior and would eventually disappear as a species because of physical and intellectual inferiority. *Black Image* 228-55.
12. See George Washington Cable, "The Negro Question," 1890. *The Negro Question: A Selection of Writings on Civil Rights in the South by George Washington Cable*, ed. Arlin Turner (New York: Norton, 1968) 119-54.
13. For examples of anti-miscegenation rhetoric and attacks on blacks, see Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rules in New Orleans*, ed. William Loren Katz (Salem: Ayer, 1987).
14. Bartley Campbell, *The White Slave*. 1882. *The White Slave and Other Plays*. 1882/1909. *America's Lost Plays* 19, ed. Napier Wilt (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941) 199-248.
15. Review of *White Slave*. *St. Louis Republican* (24 October 1882): 9.
16. Some examples of these texts include William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*, 1853, in *Three Classic African-American Novels*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Random House Vintage Classics, 1990) 3-224; Gertrude Stein, "Melenctha" in *Three Lives*, 1909 (New York: Signet-New American Library, 1985) 81-238; Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, 1899. The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford UP, 1988); William Faulkner, *Light in August*, 1932 (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1990). For more examples, consult James Kinney's *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel*. Contributions in Afro-American Studies 90 (Westport: Greenwood P, 1985); Judith R. Berzon, *Neither White or Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: NYU P, 1978); Werner Sollors's *Neither Black or White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).
17. Susan Gillman defines "race melodrama" as those texts that use the excesses of melodrama to "express and explore the ideologies of race and race analysis," which connects the world of facts and fiction, imagination and politics in *The American Race Melodramas, 1877-1915*. Forthcoming, 3. See also Susan Gillman, "The Mulatto, Tragic or Triumphant? The Nineteenth-Century American Race Melodrama" in *Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 221-43.
18. Rita Dove, *The Darker Faces of the Earth: A Verse Play in Fourteen Scenes* (Brownsville: Story Line Press, 1994); Langston Hughes, *Mulatto*, 1935, in *Black Theatre U.S.A.: Plays by African Americans, The Recent Period: 1935-Today*, (revised and expanded edition.) eds. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 4-23; Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* in Hatch and Shine 333-43.
19. Campbell, *White Slave* 206.
20. 207.
21. 218.
22. For a useful explanation of this nineteenth-century position assigned to elite white women by the Cult of True Womanhood, as well as a thoughtful critique of its claims and contradictions, especially in relation to black women, see Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist* (London: Oxford UP, 1987).

23. See Karen Sanchez-Eppler's chapter, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition" in *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993).

24. The "one-drop" rule stated that a person was considered black as long as s/he contained any percentage of black blood, even one drop.

25. Campbell, *White Slave* 228.

26. Review of *White Slave*. *St. Louis Republican* (24 October 1882): 9.

27. Marriage was not a legal option for slaves which meant that blacks had no legal recourse for transferring property to their children or to their wives.

28. Campbell 236.

29. Review of *White Slave*. *St. Louis Republican* (24 October 1882): 9.

30. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (Summer 1987): 65-82. In this article describing the impact of slavery on black families and bodies, Spillers cites the law, *partus sequitur ventrum*, which states that the condition of the child follows the condition of the mother.