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Melancholy Bodies: Racial Subjectivity and Whiteness in O’Neill’s \textit{The Emperor Jones} \\

Shannon Steen \\

Immobility \\

In the opening pages of \textit{White}, Richard Dyer relates an embarrassing episode from his early adulthood. Recognizing the problems in drawing analogies between racial and sexual oppression, he tries to explain his persistent feelings of both kinship with and distance from the experience of black men. As an example, he offers his encounter as a white gay man dancing at a mixed-race social event organized by a multicultural gay rights group in the early 1980s, and describes one particular dance, copied from \textit{Soul Train}, in which the dancers formed two lines facing each other and individuals took turns dancing down between the lines from one end to the other. For Dyer, his turn down the aisle was excruciating:

For all my love of dancing and funk, I have never felt more white than when I danced down between those lines. I know it was stereotypes in my head; I know plenty of black people who can’t dance; I know perceptions of looseness and tightness of the body are dubious. All I can say is that at that moment, the black guys all looked loose and I felt tight . . . I felt it, and hated it, dancing between the lines—and hated it not for itself, but because it brought home to me that, \textit{in my very limbs}, I had not the kinship with black people that I wanted to have.\footnote{Richard Dyer, \textit{White} (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6, emphasis added.}

Dyer, submerged in an experience that he feels ought to be suffused with the joy of communal feeling, instead feels deeply estranged from his fellow dancers. His alienation is prompted here not by his social position as a gay man, but rather by his separation from those with whom he wants kinship, intimacy, meaningful interaction.

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Earlier versions of this essay were presented at Jill Dolan and Stacy Wolf’s “Bodily Geographies” seminar at the American Society for Theatre Research conference in Minneapolis in 1999, and at the St. Clair Drake Forum at the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University in February 2000. I would like to thank the participants at these events for their invaluable comments. Special thanks to Harry Elam for his unstinting efforts in working through several incarnations of this article, and to David Román for helping to focus and clarify the current version.
Tellingly, he figures that alienation corporeally. It is in his “very limbs” that he is distinct, separate, alien, and it is in the “very limbs” of his dancing black friends that he sees and seeks “looseness” or freedom. He simply cannot suppress either the mournful “all black men can dance” cry, or the fantasy of hips, torsos, and shoulders throwing off the bonds of physical constraint demanded by a world hostile to both gay sexual orientation and black masculine presence; nor can he suppress hope for the exhilaration of the body in movement leading to the freedom of the body politic. In a moment of uncharacteristic paranoia, Dyer conflates this fantasy with sexual attraction to black men and scrupulously attempts to temper his attraction to men of color with an acknowledgment of the privileges of being white. But he cannot escape his own longing for an essentialized sense of corporeal freedom and fulfillment that he ascribes to black bodies. Politically sensitive and culturally savvy as he is, he is unable to dislodge either his own fantasy of the ostensible freedom of the black body or his desire for consummation with that body.

I must confess to my own discomfort with this passage in Dyer’s excellent study, a study that I use here as the basis for my own conception of whiteness. I cringe every time I read this passage—partially out of sympathy with Dyer’s feelings of making himself a spectacle of physical ineptitude, but also because I am embarrassed that he feels compelled to confess publicly to a set of feelings that he knows are problematic. When Dyer promotes an equation between bodily and sexual freedom that he locates specifically on a black body, he participates in a tradition that is usually said to function in either a socially benighted past or in the popular cultural practices of the present. But as he also tries to explain in this passage, scholars are not immune to the very dynamics they critique—indeed, this is the point of his confession. I want to examine Dyer’s anecdote for what it reveals about a poetic psychic landscape that is persistently mapped onto black bodies. I want to use this story to launch an exploration of the sensuous, liberatory qualities attributed to black corporeality, the public display of remorse for that desire, and the convergence of these two phenomena in the experience of melancholia in *The Emperor Jones*—the first play to put a black actor on the Broadway stage in a major role. I want to use O’Neill’s play, a crucial example of racialized fantasies of identification grounded in a sense of social alienation and loss, to explore how the modernist stage constructed racialized subjects of both its performers and its spectators. Using Judith Butler’s reading of Freud’s conception of melancholia in *The Psychic Life of Power*, I offer here a consideration of how O’Neill plays out his feelings of freedom and loss on the body of Brutus Jones, how those feelings depict a racialized vision of O’Neill’s own psychic and social alienation, and how the construction of blackness in the play actively constitutes qualities of white subjectivity in the spectator.2

Dyer’s *Soul Train* experience might seem like an odd place from which to launch a discussion of subject formation and race in *The Emperor Jones*, and even more strange...
as a way in which to explore the connection between that process and melancholia. However, as Dyer’s “white man dancing” account illustrates, the sense of loss precipitated by social alienation can sometimes take on the guise of racialized fantasies of identification. To put it more accurately, it is through a failed identification—the impossibility of “being like” those from whom he is fundamentally, corporeally different—that Dyer recognizes his whiteness in his “very limbs” and registers this whiteness as loss, as lack. O’Neill staged a parallel sense of loss registered in the body in his 1920 play, and it is the racialization of this loss that I want to open up through Freud’s conception of a specific enactment of loss that he defined as melancholia.

The application of Freud’s theories is generally met with a healthy dose of skepticism—particularly with respect to the analysis of racial categories—and I want to take a moment to outline Freud’s relevance to a critique of the embodiment of whiteness. The profound influence of psychoanalysis on the play itself and on O’Neill marks it as a central conceptual tool here, but more urgently, the phantasmatic representation of race in The Emperor Jones requires an exploration of identity and consciousness, desire and lack, of the kind that psychoanalytic critics have skillfully and consistently undertaken. Moreover, as Dyer’s anecdote clearly illustrates, conceptions of racial categories and cross-racial identification are often predicated on desire, on fantasies that positively beg for a psychoanalytic critique. While the most successful and most celebrated application of psychoanalysis to social identity has been made with respect to gender, more recently it has been usefully applied to the formation of racial identity as well. In The Psychoanalysis of Race, Christopher Lane forcefully contends that racial categories are irrational, often persisting in the popular imagination beyond their discrediting in the scientific circles that once (or still) perpetuated them. As such, the kind of empirical or material analyses carried out in the social sciences cannot always tell the whole story. Lane asserts that scholars need to engage additionally with the “fantasies organizing the meaning of racial and ethnic identities,” a project I undertake here.3

In another vein, contemporary uses of psychoanalytic theory resonate with theatre studies in their reliance on a dramaturgical vocabulary that makes Freud and his descendents particularly effective for the analysis of performance. Beyond the notion of the performative often associated with Judith Butler’s psychoanalytic models, Adam Phillips, a respondent to her book The Psychic Life of Power, writes of the “characters” that the ego assumes and the “repertoire” of gender identities it inhabits.4 For Butler herself, the ongoing process of subject formation requires a “scene” in which that process can be narrated and re-watched by the forming subject which can then “refer to its own genesis only by taking a third-person perspective on itself, that is, by dispossessing its own perspective in the act of narrating its own genesis.”5 In other words, Butler’s conception of subject formation relies on an ekphrastic model of mimesis in which the subject retroactively narrates its own formation through a visual

field. This ekphrasis occurs not only in clinical psychoanalytic practice (as in the “talking cure”), but within other forms of representation as well.

While racial and sexual subject formation are not identical, in the case of The Emperor Jones, Butler’s “scene” takes place in a fairly classic melancholic narrative that O’Neill maps onto a black body desperately trying to flee the phantoms of its personal and racial past. I want to explore here why the sense of loss narrated through that story requires the presence of a black actor and to speculate on the relationship among that fleeing body, the author generating it, and the spectator watching it.

**Everyman Jones?**

that an ordinary American could become a subject of pathetic concern and on occasion could rise to the height of a tragic figure was abundantly demonstrated in the account of the rise and fall of Brutus Jones.

—Travis Bogard, *A Contour in Time*

In The Emperor Jones, the former American Pullman worker Brutus Jones has become the dictator of a small Caribbean island. In the opening scene, the Cockney trader Smithers comes to the Emperor to report gloatingly that the locals, frustrated by Jones’s tyrannical leadership, are planning a coup against him. As a set of tom-toms begins to throb menacingly in the distance, Jones escapes to the forest to hide for the night, planning to make his way back to the United States by means of a boat he has hidden for just such an emergency. However, his plans are thwarted as he loses his way in the forest. He becomes convinced that his ever-encroaching, ever-darkening environment is haunting him. As he tries to make his way, he is pursued by “little formless fears”: small, dark, worm-like objects that grow over the course of the play into his worst memories (his murder of a friend over a craps game and the killing of a chain-gang foreman). Each scene stages a confrontation between Jones and one of these formless fears, to trace retrospectively the most horrifying moments of African American collective history: from his sale into slavery on an auction block, back through the Middle Passage, and finally to his “sacrifice” at the alter of a Crocodile God in an ancient African ritual. As he flees from these phantasms, the locals continue their coup, unceasingly playing the tom-tom whose slow and inexorable throbbing drives the action of the play; as its tempo quickens, the rhythm of the drums builds the emotional tension that undergirds Jones’s conflict with the demons of his personal and collective past. The coup members, driven by a rumor put out by Jones himself that only a silver bullet can break through a powerful charm to kill him, obligingly destroy him in a hail of the magic projectiles. When he is shot the tom-toms finally cease, and his corpse is brought out of the jungle. As his body is dragged into a clearing, Smithers, who has gleefully followed the progress of the coup, closes the play with the rueful remark, “he died in the ‘eight o’ style, any’ow.”

This narrative occupies a unique and often forgotten place in the American theatrical canon. Opening at the Provincetown Players on 1 November 1920, the play

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went on to provide several “firsts” in American theatre history: the Provincetown Players’ first major hit, the first major role for an African American actor on the “legitimate” Broadway stage (in houses where the audience was still racially segregated), and the play that secured O’Neill’s place as a writer for the high-art, experimental theatre worthy of international attention. O’Neill scholar Travis Bogard claimed of the piece: “Not only the literate American drama, but the American theatre came of age with this play.”

Bogard’s claim that The Emperor Jones makes American drama “literate” parallels similar claims regarding the use of African “primitive” art by other high modernists like Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso. Michael North has argued that Stein’s claim that African art made Picasso’s Les Desmoiselles d’Avignon (1907) “calligraphic,” or Picasso’s dealer’s assertion that the painting had revealed art’s true nature as “that of handwriting,” both position African art as “convention embodied, the sign of signs.” North goes on to point out the irony that “a continent widely perceived in Europe to be analphabetic and illiterate should have helped transform European art into calligraphy. . . . how could African art teach European art how to write?” In a similar vein, The Emperor Jones taught Americans to read cross-racial borrowings within the context of the “legitimate” stage. Ironically, given the associations of blackness with lack of mental acuity and with lewd sexuality, high-art experimental drama became “legitimate” using the highly illegitimate spectacle of the black body. The patina of legitimacy granted through literacy nevertheless promised the vulgar titillation of the already sexualized black body that had characterized racial borrowings by white stage practices in America from minstrelsy onwards.

The acknowledgment of the thinly veiled, eroticized quality of the play in combination with the overdetermined racial qualities of Brutus Jones (the patois with which he speaks, the conflation of his personal history with that of a primitive, collective past, the seemingly inevitable and inescapable influence of ritual on Jones’s internal trajectory over the course of the play) have led to a profound discomfort towards O’Neill’s piece. Credited by some black artists for providing rich dramatic material for black actors on the white stage, the play has not enjoyed universal praise. Widely anthologized, the play is no longer frequently taught.

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8 Ibid., 134.
10 Ibid.
12 See, for example, Paul Robeson’s “Reflections on O’Neill’s Plays,” Opportunity (December 1924); and Alain Locke, The New Negro: An Interpretation, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925).
13 Although the play is widely anthologized, including in the recent Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader, there has been recent resistance to teaching the play. The desire to erase the play from the American classroom canon came to my attention through a publication snafu—the first edition of the HBJ Anthology of Drama edited by W. B. Worthen included The Emperor Jones in its unit on American drama. However, when the anthology’s publisher Harcourt Brace Javanovitch conducted research for the second edition, it was discovered that many instructors would not teach the play, either because it
struggled to make sense of the racial construction of the title character, of the relationship between that construction and formal modernist themes, and of the play’s relationship to the history of colonization. However, many of these critics have either completely rejected the play for its racist qualities, or have unaccountably attempted to redeem it from being an exercise in racist exploitation.¹⁴

Despite (or perhaps because of) its changing fortunes, the play deserves another look from the standpoint of the production of racial categories. The popularity of The Emperor Jones at its Greenwich Village opening initially suggests that white audiences identified with Jones and defined themselves in sympathy with his depicted plight. However, this act of identification, a claim of likeness that subordinates or denies all kinds of difference, would be extremely complex in a culture that still segregated public spaces—white audience members attending performances of The Emperor Jones in the 1920s probably did not desire actually to be black. The play instead produces a complex process of affinity and distance for white audience members, the ability to see Jones as both like and unlike, self and other, at the same time. The presence of a black man in a major role on the “legitimate” stage was sensational precisely because he wasn’t “an ordinary American,” as Travis Bogard refers to him. Brutus Jones’s primitive presence, predicated on his ostensible corporeal difference, was fascinating as a reflection of white subjectivity—a structure to which Bogard inadvertently refers in his allusion to Brutus Jones as a kind of Everyman.

While one could easily assume that the sense of alienation O’Neill produces in the play has racial boundaries, the reception of the play by black audiences and actors has been uneven. Even though a whole lineage of black actors has seen Brutus Jones as an

was too overtly racist or because the play did not show O’Neill “at his best.” Consequently, the publishers dropped the play from the second edition of the anthology. I am grateful to Worthen for supplying me with this information and for providing me with copies of the instructor-response research conducted by Harcourt Brace Javanovitch.


While Gabriele Poole identifies “the metatextual relationship between black discourse and the play’s expressionistic form,” she also erases the racist implications of the play: “Although Jones’s ostentatious apparel and the grandeur with which he plays his Emperor role may doubtless appear ridiculous, I do not feel that this reflects of the character” (23); “in many ways, Jones is less a primitive at heart . . . than a successful embodiment of that contemporary civilization’s ideology.” Poole, “‘Blarsted Nigger!’,” 23. In contextualizing the play within the American invasion of Haiti following the downfall of dictator Guillaume Vilbrun Sam—acknowledged by O’Neill as one of the sources for Jones—Phillip Hanson treats the play as O’Neill’s criticism of contemporary American racism (and as itself standing apart from such problematic ideology): “Ironically, Jones, a product of Jim Crow and circumscribed opportunity, practices the methods of his own oppressors upon his fellow blacks on the island”; “but the play argues his crimes cannot be separated from his racially based experience—and his race’s history—in America.” Hanson, “The Emperor Jones,” 28–29. Both scholars demonstrate an unwillingness to confront the possibility that O’Neill may have deliberately created a character that paradoxically participates in the very practices he putatively wished to decry.
opportunity to perform a serious, tragic role of a kind usually denied them, black audiences have not always read the character as sympathetically. When Jules Bledsoe revived *Jones* in Harlem in the 1930s, the play was not highly regarded by its audience. Audience members called out to Jones “Them ain’t no ghosts, fool!” and advised him to “come on out o’ that jungle—back to Harlem where you belong” when he complained of the nightmares induced by the isolation and darkness of his enforced, overnight environment.\(^{15}\) Although playwright Randolph Edmunds was furious over the reception of the play at the Lincoln Theater (“This audience howled, whistled, and hissed actors until the acting of the play was impossible. The whole scene was disgusting as well as pitiable’’), Langston Hughes was less sympathetic with Bledsoe, who stopped the performance “in the manner of Stokowski” to lecture the audience on proper behavior at a serious dramatic performance. Hughes argued that the Lincoln Theater had traditionally housed “ribald, but highly entertaining vaudeville” and that audience members were simply performing their own role, one perfectly in keeping with the rules of attendance they commonly followed.\(^{16}\) Far from being impatient with this behavior, Hughes dryly remarked of the audience response, “and that was the end of *The Emperor Jones* on 135th Street.”\(^{17}\) Hughes may well have been right when he speculated that “the audience simply did not know what to make of *The Emperor Jones* on a stage where ‘Shake That Thing’ was formerly the rage.”\(^{18}\) But the reaction of the Harlem audience also indicates a reasonable outrage over seeing a black actor reduced to a blackface caricature. The patois, the rolling eyes, the desperate prayer to “Lord Jesus” to save him from the Crocodile God combine to render Brutus Jones an outrageous vision of blackness that lays to waste the retrospective insistence of O’Neill biographers and scholars that to cast a black actor in the role of Brutus Jones required an unshakable commitment to realism. In a theatrical universe in which *Othello* was regularly played by white actors in blackface, O’Neill courageously insisted that only a black actor could enact the experiences of this black Everyman.

The strained and inconsistent quality of the relationship between O’Neill and Charles Gilpin, the original Brutus Jones, has not made it easy for biographers and historians to determine O’Neill’s racial attitudes. While Gilpin claimed that his performance drove the phenomenal success that prompted the eventual transfer of the play from the Provincetown Players’ small Greenwich Village house to Broadway, O’Neill regarded Gilpin as a ham-fisted drunkard ruining the nuances of the role, to whom he nonetheless had to defer for the sake of racial harmony: “Gilpin is all ‘ham’ and a yard wide! Honestly, I’ve stood for more from him than from all the white actors I’ve ever known—simply because he was colored! He played Emperor with author, play & everyone concerned.”\(^{19}\) To complicate this picture of O’Neill’s racial attitudes, O’Neill personally visited all the members of the Drama League he could contact when the League rescinded an invitation to Gilpin on the basis of his race to an awards


\(^{17}\) Pfister, *Staging Depth*, 131–32.


ceremony at which he was to be honored for the performance that was the talk of the town and the hit of the season. He urged them to threaten the League with a boycott of the ceremony unless Gilpin’s invitation was renewed. Gilpin was eventually invited again, and he attended the banquet with O’Neill. However, this same O’Neill had terrific fights with Gilpin over the scripted requirement of the word “nigger.” After the successful transfer of the play to Broadway, Gilpin began to change the epithet to less racially charged phrases such as “black baby.” O’Neill, furious over the substitution, went to Gilpin backstage after a performance and threatened the actor, “if I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I’m going to beat you up.” While this history has been catalogued, O’Neill scholars have been loath to discuss the ambivalence, revealed through these inconsistencies, with which O’Neill regarded his black colleagues.

When O’Neill replaced Gilpin with Paul Robeson for the 1924 revival and subsequent European tour, putatively because Gilpin’s drinking habits made him untrustworthy, Robeson was thrilled to play the role. Joining in the chorus who saw the Emperor as a kind of Everyman, he wrote:

And what a great part is “Brutus Jones.” His is the exultant tragedy of the disintegration of a human soul. How we suffer as we see him in the depths of the forest re-living all the sins of his past—experiencing all the woes and wrongs of his people—throwing off one by one the layers of civilization until he returns to the primitive soil from which he (racially) came. And yet we exult when we realize that here was a man who in the midst of all his trouble fought to the end and finally died in the “eighth of style anyway.”

The euphoria over finding a major role for black actors to play on the Broadway stage was marred for several black cultural leaders of the time by the construction of the role of Brutus Jones itself. The role became a sore point for Alain Locke, who questioned whether The Emperor Jones continued the tradition wherein black men were seen “more as a formula than a human being.” In the Caedmon Productions audio recording of 1970, James Earl Jones similarly scrutinized O’Neill’s character descriptions in the stage directions. He drew particular attention to O’Neill’s description of Jones’s features as “typically negroid, yet there is something decidedly distinctive about his face.” James Earl Jones questioned O’Neill’s use of the conjunction “yet” in this description, asking how our conceptions of this character would be different if O’Neill had instead used the conjunction “and”: “as if ordinarily there is not dignity in the negroid face . . . as if there is something keen and unnegroid about him.”

James Earl Jones’s objections to O’Neill’s character description call to mind Homi Bhabha’s formulation of the “almost, but not quite” structure of the colonized

21 Robeson, “Reflections,” 58.
22 Locke, The New Negro, 3.
24 James Earl Jones, The Emperor Jones (Caedmon Productions, LP, 1970). Jones, somewhat paradoxically, went on to argue that this description was absolutely required by the audience for whom O’Neill wrote the play and that the character depicted a study of black power. He claimed that objections to Brutus Jones were raised by middle-class African Americans who objected to the “crudeness” of the character. For the actor Jones, the character Jones instead constituted a “full-out” figure of black masculinity to be celebrated for his complex power.
subject.25 In “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha argues that colonial mimicry is a strategy characterized by a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other that resembles citizens of the home nation, but that inevitably reveals its true, uncivilized origins. O’Neill’s depiction of the black man in the masquerade of colonial power evokes Bhabha’s “almost the same, but not quite” formulation: the powerful man who speaks English, but an English distinctive for its rolling patois; the local tyrant who sits on a “dazzling, eye-smiting scarlet” throne, but in a room with white-washed walls; the rich man who wears clothes that signify power, but in a grotesque parody of that sign. O’Neill describes the grandeur of his “light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons . . . patent leather laced boots with brass spurs, and a belt with a long-barreled, pearl-handled revolver in a holster” that nevertheless render him “not altogether ridiculous. . . He has a way of carrying it off.”26 Jones’s mastery of English is almost complete, but not quite, just as his strength and power are almost complete, but not quite, just as his power is almost ridiculous, but not quite. Even the use of Brutus Jones’s surname in the title of the play has come to denote the blackening of white narratives (as in, for example, the swing adaptation of Bizet in Carmen Jones). The tension between like and unlike created by the “almost the same, but not quite” formulation becomes a primary site for white identification with Jones. Just as the “almost the same, but not quite” formulation of mimicry is created in the process of colonization to create docile, domestic subjects of the Empire, this same formulation in Jones creates a figure that appears to undergo white experience, but that is sufficiently different from the experience of the white spectator-subject to suggest a sense of distance from and control over the experience of that figure.

This constitution of Brutus Jones highlights the misconceptions of blackness inherent in the character as a damaging caricature of black masculinity. While I do not deny in any way the negative impact of the characterization of Brutus Jones, I would like to approach this construction from a different angle: how does The Emperor Jones prompt and reflect a desire for control and mastery on the part of white spectators? More importantly, for what conception of self does this depiction compensate? At its heart The Emperor Jones, as Eric Lott argues regarding blackface minstrelsy, does not demonstrate only an aversion to black Americans, but rather instantiates an ambivalent erotic economy: the “love and theft,” in his trenchant phrase, of blackness. In The Emperor Jones, just as in nineteenth-century minstrelsy, cross-racial desire is deployed less as “a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure.”27 For O’Neill, just as for Dyer, the black body becomes a site on which the sense of alienation characteristic of modern experience is projected. It is a body through whose physical abandon and unrestraint a putative healing of the schism between psychic and social, corporeal and spiritual occurs, meted out through the simultaneous “terror and pleasure” that Lott describes as the fundamental mediation of white masculine identities through trying on the “accents of blackness.”28

27 Lott, Love and Theft, 6.
28 Ibid.
The Emperor Jones distributes terror and pleasure for the spectator in quite visceral ways. Most obviously, the play produces the titillating visual pleasure of watching Jones’s striptease as he removes items of his clothing with each phantasmatic confrontation. The design for the 1920 production of Jones focused on the exposure of Gilpin’s skin, fetishizing the contrast between the surface of his skin and the white cyclorama backdrop with which the Provincetown Players experimented to great success (see fig. 1). The 1920 Emperor Jones, among the other “firsts” that the performance included, inaugurated the use of the tabula rasa white cyclorama in the United States. A staple of experimental stage design in Europe by 1920, the plain white backdrop was incorporated into the American visual imagination for the first time as Brutus Jones battled his formless fears in his Caribbean forest. The exposure of black skin has become virtually indissociable from the visual imaginary of the play; the striptease convention is so fundamental to its performance that even the Caedmon audio production of 1970 features pictures of James Earl Jones in an unbuttoned military jacket in its sleeve notes in order to display the body recently celebrated in Jones’s tour de force The Great White Hope, despite the fact that the record is meant to be a purely auditory performance.

The visual pleasure produced through Jones’s stripping down over the course of the play performs a slightly different task than Mulveyan scopophilia vis-à-vis spectatorial identification. Unlike the classic scopophilic relationship, in which the masculine spectator is positioned to identify with a masculine subject in the film and then takes

Figure 1. The Emperor Jones. Charles Gilpin as Brutus Jones. November 1920. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
the female performer as an object of visual pleasure to be possessed vicariously through the action of the male protagonist, O’Neill uses Brutus Jones as a vehicle for both identification and voyeuristic pleasure within the same figure. As Mulvey’s conception, the spectator takes Brutus Jones as a figure of masculine beauty to be possessed, but here that figure of possession is also the protagonist with whom the spectator is meant to identify. As Paul Robeson argued, this overlapping of voyeuristic pleasure and identification allows spectators to step into the flesh of Brutus Jones, to enjoy his physical prowess and his beauty (both highlighted by the display of black skin against the white cyclorama), at the same time that they also experience the “disintegration of the human soul” as Jones experiences “the woes and wrongs of his people.”

The spectator not only takes pleasure in seeing Jones, in taking him as an object of visual beauty, but also in vicariously being Jones, in living out the disintegration of his psyche that O’Neill staged through the terrifying flight from his formless fears.

The slippery quality of spectatorial identification in the play unites terror and pleasure, or at least proves terror as a form of pleasure. O’Neill produces this conflation through means other than solely visual ones. The drums that undergird the action and produce the aural tension of the piece also serve to conjoin physiologically the experience of the spectator watching the play with that of Jones racing to escape his spectral tormentors. O’Neill describes the drumming, which begins right after Smithers cheerfully announces Lem’s coup, as starting “at a rate exactly corresponding to the normal pulse beat—72 to the minute—and continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point.”

The drums, ritually coupling the spectator to Jones, provide a kind of mimetic matrix that projects the subject of the “civilized” spectator through the representation of the “primitive” self of Jones: to make two hearts—Jones’s and the spectator’s—hear as one in terror.

The terror of imminent death signaled through the acceleration of the drums (the drums cease as soon as Jones is killed) allows the spectator to participate in the entrapment of Jones from a pleasurable distance. It is precisely the desire for the vivifying, indeed exhilarating, capacity of terror that also produces a melancholic relationship of the white spectator to Jones. The spectators desire the animating force that drives Jones in the clash with his formless fears at the same time they are placed in a position of distance from and mastery over it. This space of doubled spectatorship—in which the spectators occupy a position of terror at the same time that they control the circumstances of that terror—fuels Smithers’s rueful comment that Jones “died in the ‘eight of style any’ ow.” Smithers’s remark ironically disavows the horror of Jones’s death, and redeems the violent nature of his demise by redefining it as “style” while

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29 Robeson, “Reflections,” 58.
30 Tania Modleski has argued that horror films provide a unique pleasurable rupture in narrative fabric, particularly in disrupting closure (prompted often by the reemergence of the presumed-dead killer) or in providing a space in which the spectator identifies with the killer himself. But The Emperor Jones actually produces horror of a slightly different order; here the spectator identifies with a more classically tragic protagonist, one who undergoes suffering until his death. See Modleski, “The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory,” in Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Pleasure, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 155–66.
31 O’Neill, The Emperor Jones, 298.
coveting such a fashionable death. Smithers, the single white character in the play (albeit one, given his heavy Cockney accent, almost as much of a mimicry of whiteness as Jones himself), articulates a “white” point of view. With classically Freudian logic, Smithers both longs for and disavows, desires and denies, the horror of Brutus Jones’s tragic life and death.

**Come to Me, My Melancholy Body**

In his comparison of the twin processes of mourning and melancholia, Freud makes two distinctions between these methods of subject formation: whereas the mourning patient presents private feelings of self-hatred and shame that are the result of the loss of a clearly identified object (the loss of a spouse, parent, or sibling, for example), the melancholic patient displays a self-abasement that appears not to have an object of loss. Moreover, the melancholic differs from the mourning patient in that he requires public exposure of his inadequacies; he engages in public, almost theatrical self-destruction: “he debases himself constantly to his family and associates.” According to Freud, these self-accusations are not instances of ordinary shame, but rather the “almost opposite trait of insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure.”

Moreover, although the melancholic appears to engage in self-abasement, his self-hatred is really the transference of these feelings from another loved object: “the most violent are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but [to] . . . someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love.” In other words, the melancholic has transferred his frustrations from the external object onto himself. Melancholia occurs when a real slight from a loved one shatters the object relationship, and instead of the libido being focused properly onto another object, the ego identifies with the original object lost: “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.” Freud goes on to argue that melancholia, then, is actually the loss of the ego itself, and that this loss is manifested in the creation of the superego: “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object.” This new object relationship of the superego towards the ego actually forms the ways in which the ego conceives of itself.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler locates melancholia as a crucial site of identity formation for subjects socially excluded through the operation of power. She aligns Freud’s notion of subject formation with conceptions of corporeality and the melancholia that characterizes social marginalization. Butler then recasts Freud’s vision of the interior alienation of the ego by the ever-judgmental ego ideal as the social alienation of oppressed subjects, observing that the ego is really formed by the “sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archeological remainder, as it were, of

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33 Ibid., 585–86.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
unresolved grief,"36 and points out that this process of sedimentation functions literally as the "incorporation" of loved objects into the ego.

As in Dyer’s “white man dancing” account, loss is registered for Butler through metaphors of corporeality: grief is resolved by the ego, not by “letting go” of the loved and lost object but through “incorporation,” by phantasmatically making it part of the ego’s body. All subjects, she contends, in taking on what she refers to as the “morphology” of gender, experience a “passionate attachment” through the process of identification with another of their gender. As this attachment is taboo, the subject must repress it. The subject experiences this repression as a double negation: it must both repress the original attachment and disavow the grief that this repression causes: “it seems clear that the positions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ . . . are established in part through prohibitions which demand the loss of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that those losses not be avowed, and not be grieved.”37 She goes on to claim that gender is always a melancholic formation because it is consistently structured by this double negation.

While racial subject formation is by no means identical to gender subject formation, I’d like to explore how this melancholic process of double negation can also function in the formation of racial subjects. Could the phantasmatic identification with other racialized bodies be the result of the melancholia that enables all subject formation? Or, more narrowly, for the formation of socially oppressed subjects? Certainly for Dyer, his public grieving over his failure to “be like” his dancing black friends could be read as an attempt to render those loved and lost objects (however animated those objects might appear to him) into his ego’s body. Conversely, Jones’s forested confrontation with his formless fears seems a special case of the return of the repressed: his digging into the “archeological remainder” that constitutes both his personal history and his rejected collective, racial identity: in the climactic scene of the play, Jones is haunted by precisely the kind of ritual—that of the blood sacrifice to the Crocodile God—that he ascribes to “them low flung bush niggers” whom he subjects to torturous rule on his Caribbean island. These barely repressed primitive specters haunt the edges of his consciousness, despite the demand carried by the dictatorship over his fellow black citizens on the island that, as Butler describes, they remain disavowed and ungrieved. In other words, his success as a dictator requires the same kind of prohibitions against identification with the other black men over whom he rules and against taking pleasure in their primitive ritual beliefs. These prohibitions result in a loss of community; a kind of loss paralleled in Butler’s description and Dyer’s anecdote.

The Tragic Mulatto—Phantasmatic Drag

What would it mean to have a “melancholy body” within the logic of The Emperor Jones? And how would that body provide a site of identification for a white spectator or even for O’Neill himself? O’Neill’s own identification with blackness occupies a curious place within the melancholic process of disavowed and ungrieved attachment that Brutus Jones enacts. His phantasmatic identification with black men, like Dyer’s,

36 Butler, The Psychic Life of Power, 133.
37 Ibid., 135.
turns on his status as a socially marginalized figure. While O’Neill may not look like a victim of social oppression at first glance, his status as an Irishman in early twentieth-century America was extremely ambiguous—though scant attention has been brought to the fact of O’Neill’s own Irishness in regards to the racial construction of characters in his plays.38

In his exploration of the shifting semiotics of whiteness, Dyer illustrates how the Irish were contradictorily positioned as both white (in relation to non-European peoples) and black (in relation to the British and Anglo-Americans), a practice that continued into the 1920s. During this time, the Irish were frequently literally depicted as black. Dyer writes of the “index of nigrescence” used by mid-nineteenth-century doctors to trace African blood in the Irish as proof of Celtic inferiority (see fig. 2). As the “Irish Problem” came to a head in Britain and Irish immigration to the United States increased, satirical depictions of the Irish with simianized features mushroomed in both countries (see figs. 3–4). This set of “Celtic Calibans,” as Anne McClintock has dubbed them, disrupts the notion of race as marked solely by skin color. She argues that this iconography “was widely used to mediate the manifold contradictions in imperial hierarchy . . . where skin color as a marker of power was imprecise and inadequate.”39

O’Neill may well have internalized the comparison between African and Irish Americans in a similar manner to the way in which Dyer feels kinship with black men on the basis of his own discrimination. O’Neill’s father James certainly identified with black men in his own curious way. In 1874, just before the outburst of black-Irish satire, James O’Neill achieved what he later conceived of as the pinnacle of his career: playing Othello (in the requisite blackface) opposite Edwin Booth’s Iago. Later in his life, James would directly compare his own marriage to Mary “Ella” Quinlan to that of Othello and Desdemona. Conceiving of himself as the lowly outsider marrying into beauty, money, and elite (read: white) power, James frequently launched into Othello’s defense of his “seduction” of Desdemona when in the later stages of a drinking bout.40

In his own writings, O’Neill literally cast himself in the role of the tragic mulatto figure: in All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1924), the first play with an interracial couple on the Broadway stage, O’Neill named the interracial couple after his parents Jim and Ella.

While O’Neill’s biographical profile does not definitively explain his fascination with blackness, it does strongly suggest O’Neill’s identification with the social position of black Americans. O’Neill experienced this identification so strongly that in The Emperor Jones he used the black body as a surface on which to project his own

38 While several scholars have analyzed O’Neill as an Irish writer, with the exception of Joel Pfister none have considered the racial significance of Irishness in the early twentieth century. Pfister, however, considers the Irish as constituting a class of immigrants in the United States who experienced tremendous discrimination on that basis, but neglects the positioning of the Irish within systems of racial classification. For an excellent essay that analyzes the whiteness of Irishness in O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape, see David R. Roediger, “White Looks: Hairy Apes, True Stories, and Limbaugh’s Laughs,” in Whiteness: A Critical Reader, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 35–46.
alienation and melancholia. In disavowing his own primitive past, Brutus Jones foreshadows similar behavior in other characters more closely tied to O’Neill’s biography. Edmund Tyrone, O’Neill’s dark and brooding double in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (O’Neill’s great autobiographical treatment of the tragic dynamics of his own family) constantly ridicules his father for waxing sentimental about his boyhood rituals back on the “Old Sod” in Ireland.41

However, the kind of social alienation O’Neill experiences as the “black” Irish results from being confined to a politically and culturally marginalized group, which is distinct from the kind of internal, psychological alienation that Freud describes in his treatise on melancholia. O’Neill not only conflates both forms of alienation, but also projects the experience of both forms onto the character of Brutus Jones. Jones becomes the melancholy embodiment of O’Neill’s dual alienation: the black Brutus Jones is a projection of the white O’Neill in racial drag, a fantasy of both his own blackness and his own whiteness.

I would like to ask here whether drag actually requires the cross-borrowing of either gender or race by the performer, or if drag can also be enacted phantasmatically from authorial or spectatorial distance through the act of identification. Racial drag has typically been located by scholars in the act of white people dressing up as black, as discussed incisively by Marjorie Garber in *Vested Interests*.42 But the act of cross-dressing produced through writers and spectators who project themselves into another body through the desire to “be like” their onstage black counterpart enacts a

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similar kind of “blacking up.” If Lott is correct in assuming that blackface minstrelsy began to die out when no longer useful in mediating racial identities (beginning roughly at the same time as the premiere of *The Emperor Jones*), O’Neill’s play can be seen in a replacement tradition of black actors performing in roles written by white authors, devised in order to express white anxieties. Lott claims that “the historical fact

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43 Minstrelsy continued into the 1940s onstage and was taken up quite vigorously in early Hollywood film. See Michael Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice,” in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 417–53. Moreover, as Lott argues following John Szwed, the minstrelsy performance tradition continues today within comedy and popular music, although without the burnt
of white men literally assuming a ‘black’ self continues to occur when the lines of ‘race’ appear both intractable and obstructive, when there emerges a collective desire (conscious or not) to bridge a gulf that is, however, perceived to separate the races absolutely.” Moreover, he adds that in the United States, the construction of whiteness depends on “the necessary internalization of the cultural practices of the dispossessed.” This critique depends on the presence of the desire to be the dispossessed, or at least on the freedom to take on the expressive, plaintive quality of the dispossessed and to drop it at will—surely a privilege of the self-possessed, white, and wealthy.


45 Ibid., 476.
But what of the possibility that such lowly status might be taken up by the differently dispossessed? As I have labored to show here, the gulf separating black and Irish within the Anglo-American imagination was already traversed by the protean alignment of the two marginalized groups. While I have no doubt that O’Neill’s inhabitation of blackness provided an opportunity to live out pleasures similar to those he found during his stint in the merchant navy (the opportunity to indulge in racial slurs, if nothing else), surely *The Emperor Jones* articulates a critique of the marginalized position of both black and Irish as well. Brutus Jones’s real tragedy is the liminal social position he inhabits—too black to succeed in America and too white (in terms of his oppressive policies as Emperor) to sustain his regime on the island, he is forced to confront the phantasmatic oppression of both cultures in the forest of his formless fears.

Ironically, O’Neill exploited this protean quality of Irish racial identity as a vehicle for his own success. As Garber points out, cross-dressing allows crossover, or as in this case it allows the popularity of an otherwise marginalized cultural expression like avant-garde drama in the United States. It is no coincidence that the play that made O’Neill famous and also put the United States on the high-art drama map in Europe was also the first play to cast a black actor in a major role on the legitimate stage. While the traditional historical account of the play has highlighted O’Neill’s courageous part in making it possible to put a black man on the Broadway stage, I would like to claim precisely the reverse: the presence of a terrific black actor like Charles Gilpin made it possible for O’Neill to play Broadway. Like Gertrude Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* nearly twenty years later, the presence of black performers gave the play a widespread appeal—not least because it exploited a performance genre (minstrelsy) already massively popular in venues less “legitimate” than Broadway. Furthermore, the consequences of playing Brutus Jones were profound: Paul Robeson’s career was transformed by being cast in the title role. His other famous roles were made possible by the European tour of *Jones* (1924), 46 and his very name became synonymous with the character: eleven years after his death, Robeson was honored with a career retrospective in *The New York Times* titled “The Emperor Jones.” 47

The mimicry involved in the depiction of Brutus Jones relies on a topsy-turvy hall of mirrors—but what precisely is the original substance imitated by the actor playing Jones? The actor imitates O’Neill’s fantasy of blackness, which in turn is based on O’Neill’s own feelings of exclusion and alienation produced by his ambiguously positioned Irishness. Brutus Jones, then, is an imitation of blackness that is itself really an imitation of whiteness. If we accept Dyer’s claim that whiteness is invisible and can never itself be represented, so Brutus Jones is an imitation of an imitation of something invisible. In order to dramatize the problem of whiteness, or at least of Irishness, O’Neill turned to blackness to represent his own crisis of psychic and social alienation. He constructs a blackness in the play that is similar to the construction of gender in drag performances. As Judith Butler has argued, gender identities and the drag

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46 The European tour of *Jones* produced other famous opportunities for Robeson: his stint as Othello, for example (1930), or his appearance in the European avant-garde films *Borderline* (1929) by H. D. and the POOL group and *Body and Soul* (1924) by Oscar Micheaux.

performances that parody them are phantasmatic projections of desire devoid of ontological substance: “gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real.” A similar process functions in *The Emperor Jones*. Ultimately, the play posits an entirely hyperbolic vision of blackness, one impossible to realize precisely because it is fully phantasmatic. Brutus Jones is not, nor does he represent, a “real” black body, but rather the projected fantasy of blackness onto the visually blank space of the stage, even though his narrative is enacted by a very real black body, one that would have been segregated in American public space in general. O’Neill uses this segregated body to represent his own frustrations with the social status quo.

O’Neill was hardly alone in the practice of using the black body as a figure through which to articulate social frustrations. Within the primitivistic practices that characterized high modernism, blackness was consistently invoked to represent a sense of physical vitality and corporeal freedom from the restraints placed on white bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jean Walton has argued that, particularly in early experimental European film, the atavistic quality of the primitive became the trope through which modernist artists attempted to resist bourgeois moral and sexual codes. The primitive is seen to precede civilization and the false, constricting codes of self-expression attendant on it. Primitive beings can therefore inhabit a “natural” corporeal state untainted by the sexual constraints enforced by middle-class culture. O’Neill, ironically, used Brutus Jones to undo the utopic primitivism that situates the black body as a repository of freedom and liberation. It is not through his body that Jones escapes his “formless fears”; on the contrary, his body functions as the register of his psychic slavery to the powerful, irresistible force of his formless fears. As the play progresses, Jones becomes increasingly, irrevocably “linked” to his collective racial past, and O’Neill uses Jones’s body as the surface on which to project this irresistible psychic collapse. In scene 4, Jones is physically unable to resist the phantom auctioneer luring him to the block from which he is sold into slavery. In scene 5, his body begins to undulate to the rhythmic, keening wail of his fellow slaves on the ship of the Middle Passage, indicating Jones’s total surrender to his racial past. In a similar manner, the climactic scene of the play depicts Jones’s trance under the influence of the witch doctor through the swaying of his body in time to the chant of the Crocodile God’s minion. Jones can only overcome these primitive, racial influences by the destruction of his own body. Were he not killed by Lem and the other members of the coup, he would still be running in circles; he would be trapped eternally in the forest of his “formless fears.” Jones ultimately triumphs over the summons to his primitive, collective past, although this triumph rests paradoxically in his own demise.

**Postscript—The Masks of Solitude**

O’Neill suffused his writings with conflicting feelings of inward frustrations externally projected. In 1932, in his belated realization that *The Emperor Jones* should have been staged in masks, he argued that masks could more honestly reflect the state

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of man’s social interactions: “One’s outer life passes in a solitude haunted by the masks of others; one’s inner life passes in a solitude hounded by the masks of oneself.”50 Here, the outward mask that O’Neill claims individuals wear to avoid meaningful social interaction is not exposed through the discovery of an authentic, inner self. Rather, just as Freud insists regarding the ego ideal, internal alienation is

produced by being chased or “hounded” by the masks one wears to hide the self from one’s own consciousness. *The Emperor Jones* dramatizes precisely this internal conflict. In the flight from his “formless fears,” Brutus Jones literally passes from being “haunted” by external cultural forces (the chain gang, the auction block) to being “hounded” by the desperate need to differentiate his self from the primitivist being called to self-sacrifice at the altar of the Crocodile God. But in the attempt to strip away his outer masks, he learns that his inner being itself is nothing but a mask.

After writing *The Emperor Jones*, masks became something of a preoccupation for O’Neill. Joel Pfister recounts how O’Neill began to collect African masks after writing the play, and includes in his discussion of the play a photo of O’Neill from 1946 that pictures the playwright sitting among the pieces of his collection (see fig. 5).\(^51\) The photo depicts the older O’Neill foregrounded by an African column with maskwork carved into it, sitting with one leg elegantly crossed over the other, his head surrounded by masks that seem to float about him with a disembodied, almost mocking force more powerful than the grim determination on the face of the aging writer. O’Neill’s own face, frozen in a black-and-white photo in quite harsh lighting that darkens the eyesockets and left side of his face, itself appears almost mask-like, blending into the masks behind him on the wall, and transforming O’Neill’s own visage into just one more mask worn for the camera. Pfister ironically notes that the photo “positions O’Neill as the Great White Hunter of the self.”\(^52\) Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe the O’Neill of this photo as using the masks as an apparatus to transform the viewer of the photo into an anonymous Hunter of the Great White Self, looking at O’Neill as another mask on the wall that occludes the knowledge of the “self,” or that occludes the viewer’s access to O’Neill’s impossible-to-discover interiority.

This photo was taken, not incidentally, as O’Neill was slowly falling prey to the debilitating neurological and motor disorder that was initially to prevent his participation in the extremely active physical life that he loved and that was eventually to kill him. The irony of his confinement, the fact that the physically aggressive man who daily swam several miles in the freezing Atlantic waters off the coast of his summer home could no longer even pick up a pen to write, was surely not lost on him as he posed among the collection of objects that mocked his immobility at the same time that they also signified white desire for physically vital expression. Like Dyer, O’Neill must have ruefully wished for a moment of escape from his “tight” limbs, must have longed to move in joyful unison with bodies that were forever lost to him, and, perhaps, just for the moment frozen in this photo, must have thought of the tragic and charmed life of Brutus Jones, who, vainly racing to escape his bodiless, formless fears, died in the height of style anyhow.

\(^{51}\) Every effort has been made by the author to contact the holder of the rights for this photograph. The photo is from the Yale University Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

\(^{52}\) Pfister, *Staging Depth*, 131.