

Watching the Boa Constrictor Uncoil: Sexual Desire and *The Emperor Jones*

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“For a performance to work, then, means that a reading is no longer possible, or that a reading, an interpretation, appears to be a kind of transparent seeing, where what appears and what it means coincide.”

--Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*

In the spring of 2006, the Wooster Group re-staged its 1998 production of *The Emperor Jones* at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn. For the most part, the re-staging retained its original elements, most notably in the portrayal of Brutus Jones, a “tall, powerfully-built, full-blooded Negro of middle age,”ⁱ by Kate Valk, a forty-nine year-old white actress who performed the show in blackface. The embodiment, or lack thereof, of Valk as Jones acted as the Group’s most powerful distancing mechanism in a Brechtian sense, creating a critical distance between the audience and the performance. This distance acted as the antithesis of the visceral connection that audiences felt towards Charles Gilpin as Jones in the 1920s. In what follows, I will argue that Valk’s crossing of gender and race radically ghosted Gilpin’s performance.ⁱⁱ In its undermining of audience identification with and desire for Jones’s character, significant aspects of Gilpin’s performance, Valk’s portrayal of Jones potentially allowed audiences in 2006 to recognize their own complicity in the creation of racial stereotypes and fantasies. Valk’s body became a layered space of indeterminate signs, and spoke directly to the complicated (and fetishized) nature of the role once occupied by Gilpin.

Shannon Steen suggests that the play represents a “crucial example of racialized fantasies of identification grounded in a sense of social alienation and loss.”ⁱⁱⁱ Aoife Monks similarly reads the black body of Brutus Jones as “an object of desire, spectacle, and revulsion that still operated within the economy of representation constructed by white artists for white audiences.”^{iv} But more specifically, it was not only the body of Jones but of Charles Gilpin onto which these desires and anxieties were projected, as Gilpin’s performance gave white audiences in 1920 immediate contact with a black body onstage in a role that would have otherwise been occupied by a white actor in blackface. If Gilpin had control over his voice and the words that came out of his mouth, as reflected by his notorious changing of O’Neill’s script, his actions were still inscribed within the framework of a play that deals largely with the hyper-visceral and overly-embodied theme of primitivism. This use of primitivism both angered and humored black audiences of the period. Describing a performance of the play in Harlem in the 1920s, Langston Hughes tells of the audience “howl[ing] with laughter”^v at Jones’s escape into the jungle. He recalls audience members screaming, “Them ain’t no ghosts, fool!” and “Why don’t you come on out o’ that jungle back to Harlem where you belong?”^{vi} The use of primitivism, which “emerged as a reaction to an escalating alienation born of an industrialized

world,”^{vii} served as one of the central ironies of the period, in the coexistence of black rejection of and white interest in the trope.

After the first scene of the play (during which Jones learns of his incipient death at the hands of the natives) and lasting until the final curtain, Jones wanders through the “Great Forest” (O’Neill 15), presumably of his mind. Jones’s escape into the forest brings him into contact with the collective past of African Americans. Jones’s first memory is uniquely his own: the image of Jeff, the “colored man” who died from “dat razor cut I gives you” (20) in the States haunts him. Jones’s memories move from the individual to the communal realm. In scene four, Jones imagines the experience of getting whipped by a master; in scene five, Jones relives a slave auction; in scene six, he dreams of riding in the cargo of a slave ship. Here, O’Neill has problematically scripted the collective unconscious of black America. As Maya Koreneva notes, “the crimes, committed by whites against his people and kept alive for him by the memory of his ancestors, have become that social and psychological reality which determines the protagonist’s consciousness and behavior.”^{viii} Elizabeth LeCompte, the artistic director of the Wooster Group and director of *The Emperor Jones*, aesthetically handled the theme of primitivism through the use of televisions, an ironic move considering that primitivism reacted specifically against such mechanization. Each scene in the jungle found its reductive image in the television: images of trains appeared in scene three, alluding to the literal way that Jones escapes his fate; in scene five, the television presented distorted images of a slave-auction reenactment; and Jones’s traumatic memory of riding in the cargo of a slave ship became a child’s scribble of a toy ship framed by two large trees in scene six. The television, a trademark of the Group, acted as an alienating device and paralleled Brecht’s wish for a smoker’s theatre, one that resisted audience enrapture. The images on the televisions—though not of a textual nature—literated the performance and forced the audience to work, so that it had to read the image in the same manner that it would read the projection of words. The simultaneous actions of reading and watching undermined the audience’s ability to connect viscerally to the performance and to Jones’s character.

O’Neill’s script works towards establishing this visceral connection between actor and audience largely through the literal undressing of Jones. In the stage directions that signal Jones’s entrance into the play, O’Neill describes him as wearing

a light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc. His pants are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent-leather laced boots with brass spurs, and a belt with a long-barreled, pearl-handled revolver in a holster complete his make up (5).^{ix}

His body is over-costumed, literally weighed down by brass. By scene four, Jones’s uniform appears “ragged and torn” (21); by scene five, “his pants are in tatters” (25); and by scene six, “his pants have been so torn away that what is left of them is no better than a breech cloth” (29). Steen notes the “titillating visual pleasure of watching Jones’s striptease as he removes items of his clothing with

each phantasmatic confrontation,” and argues that the design of the play in 1920 “fetishize[ed] the contrast between the surface of [Gilpin’s] skin and the white cyclorama backdrop.”^x On the contrary, Valk underwent no such striptease: as Monks points out, Valk lost her Kabuki-inspired robe to a plaid shirt and African skirt.^{xi} Her white female body, as a potentially fetishized object, remained hidden, a complete inversion of Gilpin’s display of flesh. The covering of her body, then, spoke back to not only the nakedness scripted by the role, but also Gilpin’s complete embodiment of the part. Gilpin’s ghostly presence was felt with each layer of clothing that Valk failed to remove. If ghosting, as Marvin Carlson describes it, works by way of absent presence, conscious or unconscious intertextuality, and phenomenological responses to bodies onstage, I would argue that Valk’s body successfully ghosted Gilpin’s, and that despite the fact that audiences in 2006 had never “seen” Gilpin’s performance live, his presence was felt explicitly through Valk’s white, female body.

In examining the history of Gilpin as Jones, it becomes clear that his black body possessed a magnetic appeal even before he stepped into the role. The exact details concerning the locating and subsequent casting of Gilpin in the role of Jones in the 1920 Provincetown Players’ production of *The Emperor Jones* remain, to this day, entirely vague. O’Neill biographer Louis Sheaffer claims that the Provincetown Players were divided over whether or not to cast a black man as Jones, but that “at last the pro-Negro advocates prevailed.”^{xii} Ronald Wainscott is a bit more specific, citing Susan Glaspell’s claim that her husband (artistic director George Gram Cook) contended that “the Emperor has got to be a black man. A blacked up white is not in the spirit of this production,”^{xiii} as well as Jasper Deeter’s assertion that “[Deeter] was the one who insisted that a Negro play Jones.”^{xiv} The actual story of finding Gilpin is contradictory, with Wainscott insisting that “however it may have happened, Cook or someone with his approval ventured into Harlem and came back to Greenwich Village with Charles Gilpin.”^{xv} Sheaffer, on the other hand, writes that “after some queries in Harlem, [Gilpin] was tracked down to Macy’s, where he was running an elevator.”^{xvi} The language here is worth unpacking, and reveals a larger issue central to the performance history of Gilpin as Jones: the commodification of and desire to possess Gilpin’s body.

For Wainscott, someone’s “venture” into Harlem becomes a metaphysical search for the black body of Gilpin. The idea of “coming back with Charles Gilpin” as a pseudo-prisoner robs the actor of any agency whatsoever. The report is not that Gilpin came on his own accord, but rather that his body was hunted down and transported downtown, to be viewed and judged by the white Players. In this sense, the stage became a sort of auction block, a site onto which Gilpin’s black flesh was analyzed for consumption. Sheaffer’s statement is more transparently problematic. Gilpin was “tracked down,” as one might track down a criminal. Immediately after this assertion, Sheaffer scripts a conversation between an unnamed Player and Gilpin in the elevator of Macy’s: (The conversation is uncited, its source remains unclear, and it may very well be entirely fictitious.)

‘Are you Charles Gilpin?’ a *deputized* Provincetowner inquired as he got on the elevator. ‘Yes. Corsets, ladies’ underthings – second floor.’ ‘Are you an

experienced actor?’ ‘Yes. Glassware, silverware, household furnishings.’ ‘We have a good part for you in a play by Eugene O’Neill.’ ‘How good? Draperies, upholsteries, linens.’ ‘The leading part. Would you like to act again?’ ‘Yes, what’s the pay? Furniture, bedclothing, bathroom supplies – fifth floor.’ ‘The best we can pay is fifty dollars.’ ‘It’s a deal. Going down. Where do I go?’^{xvii}

Sheaffer clearly understands the resonance of this conversation by calling the Provincetown Player “deputized.” The scene not only acts as an interrogation of Gilpin, but also implicitly transcribes his body within a capitalist, consumerist world, one in which Gilpin’s body is always on display and always performing. Even within the cramped space of an elevator, Gilpin must recite to an audience of other shoppers the goods on each floor. Ultimately, Gilpin’s “going down” becomes metaphorical of his journey downtown to the Players, where a battle would ensue over the ownership of both his body and the role of Brutus Jones.

Gilpin’s body, therefore, always stood at the nexus of his engagement with the part. In a review that appeared in *Weekly Review* on December 8, 1920, O.W. Firkins wrote explicitly of Gilpin’s body:

Mr. Gilpin is an actor of extraordinary alacrity, versatility, and resilience. We watched him lazily and gloatingly uncoil his sinuosities in the first scene with the stupefied recoil with which we might have watched the same process in the nodes of a boa-constrictor...Mr. Gilpin can harmonize, can attemper, a transition; he imparts to an angle the delicacy of a curve.^{xviii}

This overly sensuous—even phallic—imagery of Gilpin’s performance points to the “thinly veiled, eroticized quality of the play,”^{xix} a quality that the Wooster Group’s production of *The Emperor Jones* successfully subverted. After all, at the end of the play Valk’s costume appeared intact, while Gilpin’s psychological journey stripped him both mentally and physically, forcing him to sport a bathrobe during the curtain call to shield his nakedness.^{xx}

The discussion outlined above regarding the casting of Gilpin (the first play to star a black actor in the title role of a black character) highlights the vexed search for “authenticity” and “accuracy” on the stage. Burns Mantle, an early twentieth-century drama critic, wrote that the Provincetown Players looked for a black actor when “none of the white actors who were given a chance at it could read convincingly.”^{xxi} The word “convincingly” is particularly striking here. The statement questions whether one can perform blackness, and if so, what exactly constitutes a “convincing” portrait of blackness. Non-whiteness is defined through a set of coded performative acts, whereas whiteness is the point of reference from which variance is identifiable and significant.

In addition to the contradictory accounts of his casting, perhaps the greatest contradiction surrounding Gilpin as Jones arose in Gilpin’s re-writing of O’Neill’s text. According to David Krasner, Gilpin “balked at what appeared to him to be an excessive and repetitive use of the term *nigger*, preferring instead to use the less offensive terms *black-baby*, *Negro*, or *colored man*.”^{xxii} Gilpin’s need

to change O'Neill's language was itself a contradictory move, as Gilpin felt that "the story of Brutus Jones was not racial, but *universal*."^{xxiii} Gilpin summed up the message of the play by arguing that "this is not a racial play; it is universal in its application...Don't imagine for one moment that I, a Negro, would hold one type of our race up to ridicule."^{xxiv} Similarly, Gilpin defended charges of racism from black audiences by saying:

It is the educated black that criticizes me most harshly. They ask why I should take the role of a thief, murderer, and ignoramus. Of course, Brutus Jones isn't much of a criminal...But I tell my friends who protest against Brutus Jones that stage characters are mere stage characters. You take them as you find them. I ask them to consider that the worthy presentation of a character by a negro actor is a credit to our race, even though the character itself is unworthy.^{xxv}

In this short passage, Gilpin circuitously defended his position in O'Neill's play, but *not* O'Neill himself. In fact, despite asserting in 1922 that "my understanding of the character has developed as I have worked with it and new meanings are constantly unfolding," and that "Mr. O'Neill has been very kind in this respect, giving me the liberty of changing the lines to suit the characterization,"^{xxvi} Gilpin gave himself the credit of making Jones "presentable" and "worthy."

It is this reclaiming of authority, beyond Gilpin's growing alcoholism, that perhaps angered O'Neill the most, prompting O'Neill to write sometime in May of 1923 to Michael Gold, a novelist, playwright, and journalist whom he had met in Greenwich Village between 1917-1918, that: "[Gilpin] played Emperor with author, play and everyone concerned...Gilpin lived under the assumption that no one could be got to play his part and took advantage accordingly."^{xxvii} The letter details O'Neill's acquisition of "another Negro to do it over there," a "young fellow with considerable experience, wonderful presence and voice, full of ambition and a damn fine man personally with real brains—not a 'ham.'"^{xxviii} Of course, O'Neill was describing Paul Robeson, who would go on to play the part in the 1924 Provincetown Players revival, as well as in London and the 1933 film version of the play.

In 1946, however, in an article appearing in the New York Times, O'Neill sentimentally remarked: "As I look back now on all my work, I can honestly say there was only one actor who carried out every notion of a character I had in mind. That actor was Charles Gilpin as the Pullman porter in *The Emperor Jones*."^{xxix} O'Neill's revisionist comment was an attempt to regain ownership over Gilpin—to fix and re-inscribe him once again within the confines of O'Neill's text, and to rob him of autonomy and voice. Gilpin sat in the audience and watched Robeson's debut performance at the Provincetown Playhouse, after which he famously told Player James J. ("Slim") Martin that "I created the role of the Emperor. That role belongs to me. That Irishman, he just wrote the play."^{xxx} An ongoing debate raged between O'Neill and Gilpin over the ownership of the play itself, and this debate goes to the heart of the tension between the written versus the embodied text. The winner of the debate is unclear: Monks argues that "the struggle between O'Neill and Gilpin over authorship can...be seen as a struggle

over the power to represent colour on the stage, a struggle that Gilpin ostensibly lost^{xxxii} in that “O’Neill’s text became canonized”^{xxxii}; however, Monks sees a renewed “interest in Gilpin and Robeson’s roles in the production of the play [as vindication of] Gilpin’s contestation of O’Neill’s authorial right to represent blackness on the stage.”^{xxxiii} Perhaps the Wooster Group’s production of the play, which neither condemned nor praised O’Neill, but rather initiated a deeply political reading of his work, served as an arbitrator of this debate. In this sense, both Gilpin and O’Neill emerged victorious: on the one hand, O’Neill was acquitted because the play was revealed to contain the seeds of radical politics; on the other hand, a reading like the one performed by the Wooster Group was only possible because of the contentious history of the play, initiated by Gilpin in the role and seen to fruition in Valk’s performance.

Gilpin’s portrayal of Jones embodied the paradoxical acting styles of distance and complete immersion. A white critic at the time, Kenneth Macgowan, called the performance “a magnificent piece of acting,” and went on to write of Gilpin’s performance that, “It is a genuine *impersonation*, a being of *flesh and blood and brain*, utterly different from the actor’s other work.”^{xxxiv} Additionally, a review from the 1926 revival of the play, in which Gilpin starred, articulates similar tensions: “Gilpin again uncannily conceives and *lives* the part...A *deep rich voice* has always been Gilpin’s chief asset in his portrayal of the terrorizing Brutus Jones.”^{xxxv} Other reviews similarly disembodied and then reify Gilpin’s voice from the rest of his performance, highlighting not the visceral embodiment of Gilpin as Jones but rather the stylized nature of his performance—a style that Gilpin controlled entirely. In a review entitled “The Most Thrilling Play of the Season,” critic Heywood Brown focused specifically on Gilpin’s voice, calling it “one of a gorgeous natural quality,” and adding that Gilpin “knows just what to do with it,”^{xxxvi} pointing to Gilpin’s mastery over his voice. Other adjectives used to describe Gilpin’s voice include: “rich,” “musical,” “beautiful, so beautiful,” “deeply modulated,” “mellifluous,” “vibrant,” “controlled.”^{xxxvii} In Valk’s performance, however, Gilpin’s melodious voice became cacophonous. She rushed through text, never relishing in the dialect or attempting to locate the musicality within the lines. In her vocal emphasis on Jones’s “sho’s,” “does’s,” and “dere’s,” Valk’s voice parodied O’Neill’s use of dialect, transforming the character into an impersonation of a minstrel stereotype.

While it may be easy to dismiss the criticism from white reviewers regarding Gilpin’s voice as thinly veiled racism, as unconscious exotification, fetishization, and reification, it is precisely Gilpin’s voice that “created a mosaic of language cognizant of ‘signifyin(g),’”^{xxxviii} and “diversif[ied] meaning and undermine[d] singular, fixed definitions”^{xxxix} within the play. Valk’s voice, on the contrary, largely upheld “singular, fixed definitions” of blackness by alluding to the stereotypical use of dialect by O’Neill. Perhaps the most tragic part of Gilpin’s life story is the fact that he lost his voice after a nervous breakdown in Woodstock, New York at the age of fifty; it “mysteriously returned just before he died.”^{xl} After all, it was his voice that gave him agency within *The Emperor Jones*—to have died without it would have surely signaled a loss far greater than the inability to speak.

If Gilpin's performance blended the acting techniques of impersonation and inhabitation, Valk's performance worked entirely by way of impersonation, specifically (and perhaps obviously) through the use of blackface. The Group has worked in complicated and controversial ways with blackface since its 1981 production of *Route 1&9*, for which the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) cut the Group's funding by forty percent.^{xli} Regarding *The Emperor Jones*, Monks questions

why it had become not only acceptable, but *preferable*, to use blackface in a contemporary production of the play and...why O'Neill's representation of race, which had once been seen as radically progressive, was now deemed unacceptably racist.^{xlii}

For Monks, blackface in the performance served to de-privilege whiteness as the de facto color in the black/white racial binary. As a racist sign, modern uses of blackface must work to subvert minstrel stereotypes. Because the Wooster Group did not choose to cast a white man in blackface to play Jones but rather a woman, it is important to examine the sexual politics of minstrelsy embedded within Valk's performance. Historically, blackface minstrelsy worked towards forming and mediating desire from its spectators. Eric Lott argues that in its compulsive focus on the body, minstrelsy negotiated a "white working-class masculinity."^{xliii} According to Lott, the rampant misogyny of the minstrel show provided "solace" for men threatened by a fragmentation of "patriarchal control."^{xliv} In many ways, then, the sexual politics of minstrelsy parallel the racial politics of O'Neill's play: *The Emperor Jones* provided a vehicle for "safe" exploration of "the collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other."^{xlv} Regarding Valk's performance, her "putting on" of blackness and maleness in a reversal of historical blackface transvestitism did not create a neutralization that permitted audiences to feel attraction for her character; instead, the constant layering of signs produced a distance that allowed for critical insight into the racialized and essentialized nature of desire.

Considering the inherent minstrel aspect of the production, Monks reads the Wooster Group's project as "do[ing] important work with *white* identity in performance, and that their racialization of whiteness offered a critical response to race, even as they could both be critiqued for their treatment of blackness."^{xlvi} Highlighting the problems of a white theatre company using blackface for a predominantly white audience, Monks draws on Steen's reminder of the "privilege of the self-possessed, white, and wealthy" to "take on the expressive, plaintive quality of the dispossessed,"^{xlvii} and argues that the real work of the production is to "[deconstruct] white identity for their white audience, this time through the consciously inauthentic and destabilized bodies of their blackfaced and whitefaced performers."^{xlviii} Monks reads Defoe's "whiteface" (in Kabuki-style makeup) as similar mask-wearing to Valk, "positioning minstrelsy as a theatre form equivalent to Japanese Kabuki."^{xlix}

As a distancing device, masking is crucial to the aesthetics of the Wooster Group's *Emperor Jones*. Interestingly, O'Neill realized in 1932 that *The Emperor Jones* "should have been staged in masks...[arguing that] masks could more

honestly reflect the state of man's social interactions,"¹ and that the inner self is nothing but a mask.^{li} O'Neill's epiphany is particularly curious considering the essentialist quality of the play that made the visceral responses to Gilpin's body possible in the first place. Gilpin's stripping may have removed his clothing piece by piece, but it did nothing to reveal his race as a mask. For Valk, however, the blackface was very much a mask, a façade; her arms, hands, and neck remained white. In an interview with David Savran regarding blackface in *Route 1&9*, LeCompte described her use of blackface as a "wonderful visual thing,"^{liii} calling it "an exercise in performance, a device to give the performance distance," as well as a "physical mask."^{liiii} In order to prevent an audience from comfortably settling in to watching the mask, the mask must be coupled with another sign to maintain its alienation from spectators. While an audience may at first feel startled to see a woman onstage in blackface, a possibility exists that the mask will become rigid, and that the audience will become complacent spectators. LeCompte worked through this possibility in two ways: first she reversed the image of the mask on televisions, thereby subverting its rigidity,^{liv} and second, she linked the mask to the alienation of Valk as a woman.

Valk's performance of blackness and maleness thwarted an audience's attempt to "see" and "be" Jones,^{lv} significant aspects of audience reception to Gilpin. Whereas desire for Gilpin as Jones occurred as a result of the essentialized quality of a "real" black—and nearly naked—body onstage, desire for Valk was complicated by the fact that she was *both* black and white: her arms, hands, and legs remained white, while blackness remained very much a distinct mask. She was *both* male and female: Valk kept her long hair down and slicked back, her breasts were not taped down, and her legs remained hairless. The double race and gender signifiers complicated an audience member's ability to identify with and desire her. Valk performed maleness, femaleness, whiteness, and blackness: these four overlapping points of reference had the potential effect of re-orienting themselves and privileging whiteness over blackness, maleness over femaleness. In this sense, one may argue that the Wooster Group's production of the play worked towards reinforcing white heteronormativity, in the same vein as traditional minstrelsy. Here, it is worth quoting Judith Butler's interrogation of drag and heteronormativity at length. She asks:

whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms...I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes...drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality.^{lvi}

It should be noted that this analysis deals explicitly with male drag, and so the issue of how female transvestitism works within this matrix of normative desire must be questioned. It is similarly important to insert the construction of race alongside the construction of gender. In this sense, one can view Gilpin's performance as Jones as a sort of racial drag; this is perhaps why black audiences in the Harlem in the 1920s "howled with laughter" at his "putting on" of primitiveness.

Monks similarly takes up the issue of "crossing" in her article and deals explicitly with the Wooster Group and their constructions of identity, arguing that the Group "produces subversive and interrogative forms of identity in performance which challenge the normative approach to gender, race, and an imagined Orient" (551). Regarding gender, Monks examines the trope of primitivism as a feminizing device within the play, arguing that "Jones' journey from whiteness to blackness, civilization to the jungle, is also a journey from masculinity to feminization, which can be seen in the coyly erotic striptease he undergoes from scene to scene" (547). Monks problematically aligns Jones's "parodic whiteness" with his "parodic masculinity," arguing that Jones's loss of the "stereotypical trappings of masculinity" leaves him "irrational, fearful, and servile" (548). Monks takes for granted the fact of gender difference, which is based on falsely constructed and overdetermined binaries such as "masculine" strength and "feminine" weakness.^{lvii} She also problematically aligns whiteness with masculinity. Jones may try on whiteness in the play (Monks reads this both in the character's costume and tyrannical, learned behavior as the once-oppressed, now-oppressor [546-7]), but the elision of this parody and the parody of masculinity foregrounds sexuality as existing before race as opposed to constructed simultaneously.

Monks's reading of the performance of race is compelling, specifically her argument that the Wooster Group's *Emperor Jones* "dislocated colour from race, showing it to be constructed from a series of gestural and vocal signs rather than innate to the coloured body" (555). It is this very "innateness" of Gilpin's embodiment of Jones that Valk's performance speaks against; to evoke Firkins's boa constrictor metaphor, Gilpin's performance appeared as natural as a snake shedding its skin. On the contrary, there was nothing inherent or innate to Valk's body. Regarding costuming and masking, Monks notes:

Unlike Jones' body in the text, Valk's body was never fully revealed on the stage. Instead of revealing a 'real' body in contrast to a falsely 'masked' body, as O'Neill did, the Wooster Group suggested that the 'real' body was a construction *through* its masking, that in fact, the mask *constituted* the real (557, emphasis original).

To extend this argument, one can locate in the need for the "real" black body of Gilpin, as opposed to a white man in blackface, further proof of this desire for and belief in racial authenticity.

The truly subversive nature of Valk's performance, then, occurred in its *relation to* and ghosting of Gilpin as Jones. In looking at Valk as Jones, audiences were (either consciously or unconsciously) reminded that a black fetishized body

once occupied that role. If Valk's performance existed alone, outside the performance history of the play, it would be entirely possible to read her sexual and racial transvestitism as a "denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms." In this sense, we can only read the radical nature of the Wooster Group's production if we place it in dialogue with the original. Audiences watched Gilpin as Jones at the same time that they watched Valk as Jones. Furthermore, her performance disrupted the heteronormative reading of race that was scripted by both O'Neill and the white, male critics of the period. To return to the epigraph that opens this paper, what appeared transparently onstage was Valk—the female, white body of Valk; what it meant, however, hid historically beneath her performance in the performance of Gilpin. The "delicate curve" of Gilpin's body became a rough, layered body of multiple and often contradictory signs. But more than anything, Valk's was a body that spoke—not through its voice—but in its dialogue with that which came before.

Notes

ⁱ Eugene O'Neill, *Three Great Plays* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2005) 5.

ⁱⁱ See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ Shannon Steen, "Melancholy Bodies: Racial Subjectivity and Whiteness in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*," *Theatre Journal* 52.3 (2000) 340.

^{iv} Aoife Monks, "'Genuine Negroes and Real Bloodhounds': Cross-Dressing, Eugene O'Neill, the Wooster Group, and *The Emperor Jones*," *Modern Drama* 48.3 (2005) 548.

^v Susan Curtis, *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998) 219.

^{vi} *Ibid.* 219.

^{vii} David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 59.

^{viii} Maya Koreneva, "One Hundred Percent American Tragedy: A Soviet View," *Eugene O'Neill: A World View*, ed. Virginia Floyd (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1979) 159.

^{ix} See Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 338, which points out that the costume designer for the 1920 production, Blanche Hays, chose to dress Jones as a "parody" of Marcus Garvey. The iconicity seems implicit, and I have always wondered if O'Neill intended for audiences to see the connection between the two figures, and what the implications and stakes of this connection might be.

^x Steen 348.

^{xi} Monks 557.

^{xii} Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1973) 32.

^{xiii} qtd. in Ronald Wainscott, *Staging O'Neill: The Experimental Years, 1920-1934* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988) 55.

^{xiv} *Ibid.* 56.

^{xv} *Ibid.* 56.

^{xvi} Sheaffer 32.

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- xvii qtd. in Sheaffer 32, my emphasis.
- xviii qtd. in Wainscott 56-57.
- xix Steen 343.
- xx See Yvonne Shafer, *Performing O'Neill: Conversations with Actors and Directors* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 11: "Each evening after the performance cheers and shouts greeted Gilpin as he took his bows wearing a bathrobe to cover his minimal costume."
- xxi qtd. in Wainscott 55.
- xxii David Krasner, "Whose Role is it Anyway?: Charles Gilpin and the Harlem Renaissance," *African American Review* 29.3 (1995) 484, emphasis original.
- xxiii Ibid. 489, emphasis original.
- xxiv qtd. in Krasner, *ibid.* 489-490.
- xxv qtd. in Krasner, *ibid.* 486.
- xxvi qtd. in Krasner, *ibid.* 484.
- xxvii Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer, trans., *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988) 177.
- xxviii Ibid. 177.
- xxix Mark Estrin, ed., *Conversations with Eugene O'Neill* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990) 172.
- xxx Sheaffer 37.
- xxxi Monks 549.
- xxxii Ibid. 561, n.6.
- xxxiii Ibid. 562, n.6.
- xxxiv qtd. in Sheaffer 11, my emphasis.
- xxxv Krasner, "Whose Role is it Anyway?," 485, my emphasis.
- xxxvi Sheaffer 11.
- xxxvii Krasner, "Whose Role is it Anyway?," 491.
- xxxviii Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant*, 201-202.
- xxxix Ibid. 202.
- xl Sheaffer 13.
- xli David Savran, *Breaking the Rules* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986) 10.
- xlii Monks 541.
- xliii Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 86.
- xliv Ibid. 159-160.
- xlvi Eric Lott, "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 13.
- xlvi Monks 543.
- xlvi qtd. in Monks 558.
- xlvi Ibid. 559.
- xlvi Ibid. 555.
- l Steen 357-358.
- li Ibid. 359.
- lii Savran 11.
- liii Ibid. 26-27.
- liv Monks and Roger Bechtel similarly note the destabilizing effect of television use on race in the performance. See Bechtel, "Brutus Jones 'n the Hood: The Wooster Group,

the Provincetown Players, and *The Emperor Jones*,” in *The Wooster Group and its Traditions*, ed. Johan Callens (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2004) 157-166. In the first scene of the play, O’Neill’s dialogue between an Old Native Woman and Smithers became a monologue by the Native Woman produced live offstage by Valk and projected negatively onto a television center-stage (so that the Native Woman appeared as a white painted face with black lips). Regarding this negation of blackface, Bechtel notes that it created a “complex matrix” in which the “nodal points have doubled from two to at least four” (160-161). Drawing on Bechtel’s assertion that the audience was aware simultaneously of Valk as “white,” Valk in blackface, Valk in whiteface, and the “imaginary, pre-processed blackface video image” (160) (which we would expect considering the use of dialect in the scene [“Me no steal,” “You no hit,” “No tell him”]), Monks argues that through the use of the television “race became a mask without an origin, materializing the actor’s body through the mask rather [sic] assuming a stable authentic body *beneath* the mask” (556, emphasis original).

^{lv} Ibid. 349.

^{lvi} Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 85.

^{lvii} See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, in which she argues that psychoanalytic feminists have claimed that sexual difference exists a priori to “other kinds of differences, including racial difference,” and that “this assertion of the priority of sexual difference over racial difference...has marked so much psychoanalytic feminism as white, for the assumption here is not only that sexual difference is more fundamental, but that there is a relationship called ‘sexual difference’ that is itself unmarked by race” (134-135).

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