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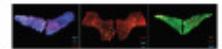
## **Black and White and Re(a)d All Over Again: Indigenous Minstrelsy in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Theatre**

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# Black and White and Re(a)d All Over Again: Indigenous Minstrelsy in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Theatre

Helen Gilbert

With white faces the whole affair [a minstrel show] would be intolerable. It is the ebony that gives the due and needful character to the monstrosities, the breaches of decorum, the exaggerations of feeling, and the "silly, sooth" character of the whole implied drama.

—*London Illustrated News*, 1858<sup>1</sup>

This essay takes up Susan Gubar's concept of racechange<sup>2</sup> in order to assess the various functions of whiteface performance as a strategic mode of representation in recent indigenous theatre. As well as examining possible uses of whiteface as a revisionist tactic designed to deflect—and reverse—the imperial gaze and critique the racist stereotypes it has circulated, I want to consider the ways in which indigenous whiteface acts contribute to current debates about racial representation more broadly, and about whiteness itself. This project, which aims to extend and complicate existing critical work on theatrical citations of blackface minstrelsy,<sup>3</sup> requires a historicized

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<sup>1</sup> Review of the Coloured Opera Troupe's performance at the Oxford Gallery, *Illustrated London News*, 13 November 1858, 455.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Gubar, *RaceChanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For extended analysis of the ways in which African Americans have engaged with blackface minstrelsy, see Gubar, *RaceChanges*, chapters 3 and 4; Annemarie Bean, "Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890," in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry J. Elam Jr and David Krasner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 171–91; and W. T. Lhamon Jr, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). For discussions of minstrelsy as cited by other cultural groups, see Catherine M. Cole, "Reading Blackface in West Africa: Wonders Taken for Signs," *Critical Inquiry* 23.1 (1996): 183–275; Alan Filewod, "Modernism and Genocide: Citing Minstrelsy in Postcolonial Agitprop," *Modern Drama* 44.1 (2001): 91–102; and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

reading of the theatrical matrix surrounding contemporary whiteface performance in particular locations and at specific moments. My case examples, drawn from Canada and Australia, illustrate not only the complexities of whiteface signification in postcolonial contexts but also the political and symbolic issues at stake in manipulations of this age-old theatrical mask. By stressing the performativity of race alongside the enormous power (still) invested in skin color as a categorizing and stratifying tool, indigenous whiteface acts directly address the racial hierarchies that have undergirded the settler/invasor cultures in which they are staged. Such acts also remind us of the historical role played by theatre in negotiating the suppressed fears and fantasies of colonizing nations, as the epigraph to this essay suggests in its metaphorical shudder at the mere thought of white faces (without masks) engaging in the monstrosities of a minstrel show.

Gubar defines racechange, in her chosen context of American culture, as encompassing a number of processes that test racially defined identities and race-based presuppositions; these include “the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability [and] white passing as black or black passing as white.”<sup>4</sup> Among these processes, I take the deliberately transparent mode of racial impersonation comprising whiteface (and blackface) minstrelsy to be an exemplary form of racechange in so far as it enacts the “extravagant aesthetic construction” central to Gubar’s concept and typically expressed via participation in “the illicit, the liminal, the transgressive, the outré, the comic, or the camp.”<sup>5</sup> Even in its most virulently racist forms, minstrelsy has been a vehicle for self-reflexive comment on representation, precisely because it stages the spectacle of not passing,<sup>6</sup> which is no small factor animating the recent resurgence of critical scholarship on nineteenth-century blackface entertainments.<sup>7</sup> In contemporary whiteface performance, the failure to pass constitutes a more complex—even if more conscious—political project, in part because perceptions of this highly theatricalized racechange are likely to be refracted through the historical mirror of blackface impersonation, with all its ambiguous, indeed scandalous,<sup>8</sup> associations. Whether or not whiteface is genuinely

<sup>4</sup> Gubar, *RaceChanges*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Here, I am following the widely accepted argument that minstrelsy’s racial portraits were presented, and generally understood, as counterfeits, that is, as highly transparent theatrical acts that revealed rather than concealed the cross-race masquerades staged. According to some critics, one of the central pleasures for spectators at blackface minstrel shows was the opportunity to identify with white men engaged in the illicit performance of codified blackness; see, for instance, Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). In a more complex way, it seems that the appropriation of blackface minstrelsy by blacks themselves towards the end of the nineteenth century depended in part on similarly transparent masquerades which stressed the artificiality of the minstrel mask even while adopting its conventions. For further analysis of this very specific kind of not passing, see Bean, “Black Minstrelsy.”

<sup>7</sup> Work in this field includes the following key book-length studies: Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*; and Lott, *Love and Theft*.

<sup>8</sup> This use of “scandalous” is designed to suggest something simultaneously pleasurable and repugnant.

transgressive in this context needs to be decided on a case by case basis, though there is little doubt that it affords indigenous performers a rare opportunity to burlesque white characters, white theatrical forms, and whiteness itself, for the (dis)pleasure of (mainly) white spectators.

While drawing on Gubar's work, I am mindful of its biases, particularly its tendency to present racechange as a utopian process that enhances cross-race dialogue and transcends racial differences. As Dorinne Kondo argues, Gubar seems insufficiently aware that racial impersonation is "systematically encoded and maintained in structures of white privilege that persist despite individual intentionality."<sup>9</sup> Several recent studies demonstrate precise ways in which such hegemonic power has historically permeated cross-race performance, among them Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian*, a detailed account of white Americans' uses of Indianness in processes of national and individual self-fashioning since the late 1700s;<sup>10</sup> and Katrin Sieg's *Ethnic Drag*, which reads racial masquerade in twentieth-century West German performance culture as part of a complex maneuver to purge white guilt for the holocaust.<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite the fact that racial impersonation often indexes white power, it can also set up opportunities to de-essentialize race while revealing its purchase in specific circumstances.<sup>12</sup> The indigenous theatre I examine here participates in this deconstructive project, not only because it tackles racial masquerade from a minoritarian perspective but also, and more centrally, because it makes visible forms of cultural power affecting the presentation and interpretation of race itself. In this respect, racechange remains a useful critical concept for my reading of indigenous whiteface minstrelsy since it engages overtly with issues of representation while also emphasizing the performative aspects of race.

Passing examples of whiteface can be found in a number of indigenous plays, including Jimmy Chi and Kuckles's Aboriginal musical *Bran Nue Dae* (1990),<sup>13</sup> which features a cake-walk routine, complete with a white-gloved wave by chorus members masked in sunglasses; and the Turtle Gals vaudevillian fantasia, *The Scrubbing Project* (2002),<sup>14</sup> which visually references whiteface at a number of points as part of an overall focus on the sometimes ludicrous, sometimes tragic implications of skin color for (part) Native women. Currently, the most direct and complex indigenous engagement

<sup>9</sup> Dorinne Kondo, "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 52.1 (2000): 100.

<sup>10</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Katrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Kondo herself demonstrates this, particularly in her analysis of Anna Deavere Smith's solo work; see "(Re)Visions of Race," 96–100.

<sup>13</sup> This play, initially directed by Andrew Ross for Bran Nue Dae Productions, toured urban and regional Australia to great critical and popular acclaim in 1990 and was remounted for an additional tour by Black Swan Theatre Company in 1993. It was seen as something of a landmark in Australian theatre, opening up the possible genres through which to express Aboriginal concerns and experiences. For further discussion, see Helen Gilbert, *Sightlines: Race, Gender and Nation in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 77–81.

<sup>14</sup> The premiere of *The Scrubbing Project*, co-written by Turtle Gals members Jani Lauzon, Monique Mojica, and Michelle St. John, was directed by Muriel Miguel and staged with the support of Native Earth Performing Arts at the Factory Studio Theatre in Toronto in November 2002.

with whiteface performance occurs in Daniel David Moses's *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, first directed by Lib Spry for the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa in 1991, then remounted by Marrie Mumford the following year for Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto. This widely discussed play, my focus text in the ensuing analysis, utilizes, parodies, and directly interrogates minstrel show conventions in a theatrical tour-de-force about the ways in which Native identities are forged in the crucible of white historical representation. Moses's bitter but lyrical drama seems to be unique in its extended citation of minstrelsy as a way of critiquing stereotypes of indigenous peoples; yet the play's treatment of whiteface finds transnational echoes in sometimes surprising places, among them the conservative bastions of state-subsidized mainstream theatres. A case in point is the Queensland Theatre Company production of George Landen Dann's dated 1942 script, *Fountains Beyond*, which was adapted by Murri writer-director Wesley Enoch and performed by an all-Aboriginal cast<sup>15</sup> at the QUT Gardens Theatre in Brisbane in 2000. To the extent that this production used whiteface ironically and self-reflexively in the realization of its three non-Aboriginal roles, thereby reversing blackface minstrel traditions, it can be brought into dialogue with Moses's more ambitious project.

At first glance, the recourse to whiteface as a way of exposing and inverting damaging stereotypes seems a problematic strategy for indigenous theatre, given that the tradition it most readily evokes—the blackface minstrel show—immediately cites racist caricatures of African Americans as the target of reform, apparently erasing the specific kinds of semiotization that have produced the stage Indian or Aborigine.<sup>16</sup> The slippages between blackface, blackness, and indigeneity within indigenous minstrelsy can be clarified by a brief look at the genealogy of the blackface minstrel show and its particular currency among colonial audiences in Australia and Canada. Although the minstrel show has been seen, quite rightly, as the theatrical form that “captured an antebellum structure of racial feeling” in the American North,<sup>17</sup> and as “the ground of American racial negotiation and contradiction”<sup>18</sup> for much of the nineteenth century, Dale Cockrell, among others, reminds us that blackface has much earlier origins in folk theatricals where masking by mummers, callithumpians, and morris dancers, for instance, formed part of a carnivalesque inversion ritual that allowed various forms of license not specifically connected to race or racial impersonation.<sup>19</sup> To adopt a blackface mask in such rituals was essentially to assume that which you were not, to

<sup>15</sup> Although *Fountains Beyond* was originally written by a non-Aboriginal playwright, I am categorizing Enoch's production as Aboriginal theatre for the following reasons: the play was chosen, adapted, directed, scored, and performed by indigenous theatre practitioners who retained artistic control of the product; it was marketed and generally received as Aboriginal theatre; and, in its adapted form, it expressed contemporary Aboriginal views of the ways in which white Australian theatre has represented Aboriginality.

<sup>16</sup> The specific features of the stage Indian and Aborigine are discussed at length in Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures* (Kingston: Queens University Press, 1989), 170–90.

<sup>17</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Lott, “Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, ed. Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 52–53.

present yourself as a non-specific Other. With these practices in mind, Cockrell argues that the American minstrel show, at least in its early incarnations,<sup>20</sup> was less fixated on race than is normally supposed: "on one important level, blackface minstrelsy took as its signature characteristic the representation of black people, but in the ritual background loomed more profoundly Otherness, the accumulation of centuries of metaphorical use."<sup>21</sup> The idea that blackface in the minstrel show functioned as a more generalized index of Otherness is borne out by the fact that it was also used to represent Irish and Jewish characters, as well as Native Americans. In these instances, the burnt cork mask signaled that what followed was to be taken as burlesque, not at face value.<sup>22</sup>

Because of its power to signify different kinds of Otherness, blackface minstrelsy might be seen as the symptomatic nineteenth-century stage form for an era of territorial expansion, not just in the United States but also in other settler colonies with growing non-indigenous populations. Critics note the immense popularity of minstrel shows in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, as well as in Britain, where a somewhat more refined version of the form was practiced. In today's cant, what we might call the transnational flows of minstrelsy were complex and extensive. From the 1850s, Australia was featured on the touring circuits of companies from both Britain and the United States, later exporting locally developed blackface shows back to these centers.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, American minstrel shows had begun to figure prominently on the popular stage in Canada West, particularly during the period of the fugitive slave law when, as Stephen Johnson notes, blackface entertainment seemed to capture Canadian ambivalence towards runaway slaves seeking refuge across the border.<sup>24</sup> That minstrel shows also found a colonial audience in India, Jamaica, Nigeria, and South Africa suggests the geographical reach of this theatrical form—one that, as John Blair notes, "validated racism at home and Western imperialism around the world."<sup>25</sup>

If many of the performance practices of American minstrelsy were taken up in different parts of the world, they were not always adapted in ways that attached particular ideas about race to blackface, as Catherine Cole's work on the genesis of the Ghanaian concert party demonstrates.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, local theatre in a number of places, including Canada and Australia, readily incorporated blackface entertainments

<sup>20</sup> Cockrell makes a distinction between early and late minstrelsy, drawing the demarcation line in the early 1840s when blackface entertainment became more commercialized as many troupes began to secure agents and perform in concert halls to middle-class audiences rather than on the street or in makeshift venues where working-class spectators often shared some of the privations of the black characters represented. See *Demons of Disorder*, 149–57.

<sup>21</sup> Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788–1914* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> See Stephen Johnson, "Uncle Tom and the Minstrels: Seeing Black and White on Stage in Canada West prior to the American Civil War," in *(Post)Colonial Stages: Critical and Creative Views on Drama, Theatre and Performance*, ed. Helen Gilbert (Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire: Dangaroo, 1999), 55–63.

<sup>25</sup> John Blair, "Blackface Minstrels in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *American Studies International* 28.2 (1990): 61.

<sup>26</sup> Cole, "Reading Blackface."

into its repertoire without significantly changing their existing racist structures.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to determine what specific images of local indigenous peoples were included in minstrel shows in each country,<sup>28</sup> though there is little doubt that the form was “particularly susceptible to temporal and geographical variations.”<sup>29</sup> A telling example of this versatility is the violently racist turn in minstrel skits about Native Americans after the Civil War. Robert Toll notes that earlier stereotypes of Indians had clustered around the image of the noble red man and his dark-eyed maid in an idyllic setting threatened by the march of modernization. As Indian wars raged through the 1870s, this fiercely independent but essentially honorable warrior quickly changed into a scheming, murderous barbarian in minstrel farces designed to lampoon the romanticized image.<sup>30</sup> What intrigues me most about several of the farces Toll describes is that they seem to have meshed together the perceived threats (to whites) posed by Black and Native populations in plots that involve a Negro (presumably played by a white actor in blackface) masquerading as an Indian, often at the behest of one of the white characters—for example, a lover attempting to smuggle notes to his girlfriend under the watchful eye of a disapproving father. At the narrative level, mayhem is the inevitable result of these racial masquerades: one skit, for example, ends in gunfire and shouts of “Kill the nigger!” when a Negro deputy is discovered impersonating a renegade Indian chief in order to collect a reward for himself; in two others, the Negro-cum-Indian, carried away by his role, goes on a scalping binge and annihilates the rest of the characters.<sup>31</sup> At the performative level, we might speculate that the composite red, black, and (underlying) white face/mask of the actor presented the audience with an equally anarchic vision. The racechanges performed in such skits can be understood in terms of Joseph Roach’s concept of surrogation, “the theatrical principle of substitution of one persona for another,” which requires that the surrogated original be either ventriloquized or erased.<sup>32</sup> In Roach’s formulation, the “triangular relationship of white, red, and black peoples” in North America since the early period of European settlement has both threatened and accelerated this complex process of performative self-definition.<sup>33</sup>

If blackface minstrelsy instituted an “iconography of cultural difference”<sup>34</sup> that could flexibly encompass indigenous groups, it also offered a model of racial

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted here that race-inflected blackface performance traditions developed in some places quite independently of American minstrel imports. See, for instance, Jill Lane, “Blackface Nationalism, Cuba 1840–1868,” *Theatre Journal* 50.1 (1998): 21–38.

<sup>28</sup> Waterhouse mentions in passing that Aboriginal characters were featured by some putatively Australian (but possibly bogus) troupes playing in the United States in the late nineteenth century (see *From Minstrel Show*, 112), but he gives little precise detail about representations of Aborigines within Australia. Even less is known about the extent of indigenous content in Canadian minstrel shows since an extensive history of the nation’s blackface entertainments is yet to be written.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, “Uncle Tom,” 58.

<sup>30</sup> Robert C. Toll, “Social Commentary in Late Nineteenth-Century White Minstrelsy,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, ed. Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, 89–91.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–91.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Roach, “Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World,” in *Performance Studies*, ed. Erin Striff (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 130.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Lott’s term, *Love and Theft*, 101.

impersonation that begged subversion. Annemarie Bean (along with Gubar) identifies such subversion as beginning with the blacks-in-blackface minstrel shows that appeared on American stages from the mid-1880s, noting the irony of this development: "at the same time that . . . amateur minstrel guides were defining for readers how to 'be black' by speaking in a nonsensical dialect and by wearing fright wigs and burnt cork make-up, African American minstrels were showing audiences that minstrelsy was just a show, a pretence, a *performance* of color and gender rather than the presence of African culture."<sup>35</sup> While it is difficult to refute Bean's argument that African American blackface entertainment thus thwarted the constricting images of blackness circulated by whites performing as coons or niggers, the perils of this reinscriptive strategy, should it fail to be read as critical mimicry, seem clear.<sup>36</sup> Whiteface, on the other hand, offered a more flexible theatrical mask through which to critique minstrelsy's racism. African Americans periodically used it for this precise purpose in black vaudeville from at least the early 1900s, as well as in later comedy routines by Eddie Murphy and Dick Gregory, among numerous others. Politicized whiteface<sup>37</sup> also features in more literary forms of African American theatre, where plays with specific whiteface roles have been widely performed; Jean Genet's *The Blacks* (1959) is a notable example and suggests just one of the means by which whiteface, like blackface, has circulated across cultures and nations.<sup>38</sup> The burlesque racechanges often featured in carnival and Mardi Gras performances (in both the west and the non-West) suggest another.

I offer these brief historical vignettes as a way of connecting contemporary indigenous minstrelsy to performance traditions and cultural contexts beyond the worlds dramatized in *Fountains Beyond* and *Almighty Voice and his Wife*, though not incidental to their conception. In each text, the metatheatrics of whiteface are used to historicize a narrative about colonization and displacement while presenting the audience with familiar yet refracted images of Otherness that speak not only to local circumstances but also to a mode of representation linking diverse colonial projects across space and time. The different approaches Wesley Enoch and Daniel David

<sup>35</sup> Bean, "Black Minstrelsy," 187.

<sup>36</sup> Spike Lee's 2000 film, *Bamboozled*, dramatizes precisely this danger through its story about an African American-devised television minstrel show that gets unexpected (and unwanted) acclaim when audiences fail to read it as a response to white racism.

<sup>37</sup> As distinguished from the supposedly neutral whiteface mask associated with twentieth-century Western mime and circus.

<sup>38</sup> For further information about productions of *The Blacks* at various venues in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, see Jeannette L. Savona, *Jean Genet* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 99–100. Savona notes that Genet's play, and the opportunities it created for black performers, greatly influenced subsequent African American theatre. Another influential play featuring whiteface roles was Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, which helped launch the Negro Ensemble Company in 1966. For an analysis of this text, see Howard J. Faulkner, "A Vanishing Race," *CLA Journal* 37.1 (1993): 274–92. Notwithstanding these and other diverse instances of black parody and inversion, whiteface has sometimes met with hostile criticism from African Americans themselves, which suggests both the rawness of the historical wound inflicted by minstrelsy and the difficulty of recoding its racism in a benign way. The controversy surrounding television personality Chris Rock's 1998 appearance in whiteface on the cover of *Vanity Fair* is a reminder of the thorny ground that this particular kind of racechange often treads. See Justin Driver, "The Mirth of a Nation: Black Comedy's Reactionary Hipness," *The New Republic*, 11 June 2001, [http://www.tnr.com/061101/driver061101\\_print.html](http://www.tnr.com/061101/driver061101_print.html) (accessed 20 February 2003).

Moses take to whiteface as a recuperative strategy reflect the specific ways in which images of Aborigines and Native Canadians have been constructed for their local audiences. In Australia, where Aboriginal characters in popular theatre were styled after the stage Negro for decades after minstrel shows first began touring,<sup>39</sup> and where the terms nigger and coon still linger in some circles as derogatory epithets for Aboriginal people, theatre practitioners approach minstrelsy with understandable caution and tend not to employ the tactic of direct reinscription—of replaying the racist tropes of the minstrel show on the assumption that modern-day spectators will process them critically in relation to the given context. Enoch thus reserves the minstrel mask for the white characters in *Fountains Beyond*, transferring its stereotyping functions, but not its more grotesque features, to the settlers who are forcing Aboriginal fringe-dwellers from their ancestral lands. Moses, by contrast, masks his *Native* characters, positioning them as comic adversaries (to each other and to the audience) in an extended masquerade that parodies the racist stereotypes through which Indianness has been circulated in Western popular culture. These stereotypes, historically inflected by ethnological spectacles of frontier American life and by almost a century of Hollywood clichés, draw less directly than do Australian Aboriginal stereotypes from the minstrel show's repertoire of stock characters. Arguably, it is this semiotic distance between blackface and redface that allows Moses to engage more fully with the raw content of minstrelsy in *Almighty Voice and His Wife*.

Enoch and Moses each offer precise reasons for putting their indigenous actors/characters in whiteface. Enoch, whose pivotal work as former artistic director of Kooemba Jdarra<sup>40</sup> is well known in Australia, sees his choice of an all-Aboriginal cast for *Fountains Beyond* as a way of redressing both the conventions employed when whites "browned up" to play indigenous characters and the resulting lack of opportunities available to Aboriginal actors until just a few decades ago.<sup>41</sup> By the time of the QTC production, Aboriginal theatre, having grown rapidly since its initial flowering in the 1970s, had confidently asserted itself as a vital part of Australia's performing arts and was widely acknowledged as both a laboratory for indigenous cultural expression and a vehicle for engagement with continuing structural racism in Australian society.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, there was (and still is) something of a lull in Aboriginal writing for the stage, which left indigenous actors and directors to devise their own work (as Enoch and others have done) or look for alternative scripts. Enoch's decision to adapt/direct a largely forgotten melodrama penned almost sixty years earlier by a white Australian dramatist whose (sympathetic) characterization of

<sup>39</sup> See Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show*, 100–103.

<sup>40</sup> Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts is one of Australia's most prominent Aboriginal theatre companies. Based in Brisbane, it was incorporated in 1993 and maintains an active performance program as well as doing arts development work with Aboriginal youth.

<sup>41</sup> See Enoch's interview with Phil Brown, "Reconciling the Past," *Brisbane News*, 20 September 2000, 24–25.

<sup>42</sup> For further information on the development and positioning of Australian Aboriginal theatre, see Katharine Brisbane, "The Future in Black and White: Aboriginality in Recent Australian Drama," <[http://www.currency.com.au/preview/b\\_and\\_w.htm](http://www.currency.com.au/preview/b_and_w.htm)> (accessed 20 August 2003); Helen Gilbert, "Reconciliation? Aboriginality and Australian Theatre in the 1990s," in *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*, ed. Veronica Kelly (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 71–88; and chapter 3 of Gilbert's *Sightlines*, 51–95.

Aborigines falls into all the traps of Western liberal humanism is a significant one. It allowed him to investigate historical aspects of racial representation in ways that would not have been possible had he chosen one of the recent, more politically current, white-authored texts featuring Aboriginal roles.<sup>43</sup> As Enoch sees it, his choice of play also spoke uncannily to very local race conflicts, since at the time some white residents in Brisbane were urging the resettlement of homeless Aborigines from a council-sponsored park camp in their neighborhood.<sup>44</sup>

*Fountains Beyond* dramatizes the efforts of an Aboriginal man, Vic Filmer, to keep his people's traditions respected and their land from being appropriated by the expanding white community of the small Australian town in which they live. He is pressured to stage a corroboree for the benefit of a visiting "lady" travel writer and a white-run town council that plans to use the proceeds of the event to build a playground on the site of an Aboriginal shanty settlement. He refuses and won't be bribed but is undermined by his wife's opportunistic lover, whose hastily arranged corroboree descends into drunken mayhem, violating the ritual. In the aftermath, Vic accidentally shoots his wife during an argument and is forced to flee his community. Dann's play was controversial in its time, precisely because it focused on Aboriginal issues and critiqued white racism; nevertheless, it received productions in a number of (mainly fringe) venues across the country, as well as in England and Wales.

In his director's notes for the QTC production's program, Enoch presents his version of Dann's play, originally set in the 1930s, as a rather conciliatory renovation of history—both political and theatrical—that uses whiteface in an ironic register.<sup>45</sup> This theme is taken up in another program feature titled "Pentimento on Stage," which sketches the connections between minstrelsy and early representations of Aborigines on Australian stages, then gives a potted history of recent Aboriginal theatre, before ending with suggestions about ways to interpret the production's use of whiteface:

Placed within the continuum of minstrelsy and blackface entertainment, of well-intentioned drama, of the absolute right to cultural ownership, the use of white faces in *Fountains Beyond* offers the chance to play with representations. In some respects, the result is similar to a *pentimento*, the phenomenon wherein the image of an earlier painting shows through the old layers of paint on a canvas.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Enoch had previously directed some such plays, notably Louis Nowra's *Radiance* in 1997; he was also associate director for QTC's 1999 production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which featured a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors in order to reference Australia's colonial history.

<sup>44</sup> See Enoch's comments in Debra Aldred, "Fountains Play Offers New Outpouring of Race Insight," *The Courier Mail*, 29 September 2000, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Drawing from Enoch's own comments and QTC's marketing of *Fountains Beyond* as a "heritage work," advance media coverage and most reviews similarly positioned the production as a conciliatory gesture. See Brown, "Reconciling the Past," 24–25; Paul Galloway, "Social Revival," *Brisbane News*, 25 October 2000, 10; and Martin Buzacott, "Fountains of Importance," *The Australian*, 9 October 2000, 16. This is not to argue, however, that performance labeled as "heritage work" cannot be transgressive.

<sup>46</sup> This mini-essay was likely written by the QTC's education officer, though no authorship is attributed.

This respectful approach to historical revisionism meshes well with the broader national agenda of reconciliation<sup>47</sup> that seemed to animate the Australian performing arts industry that year—generated in part by the utopian imperatives of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. The Games' opening ceremony, which took place just a few weeks before the new-look *Fountains Beyond*, featured a massive Aboriginal performance segment along with other gestures towards reconciliation and indigenous multiculturalism, as local variations of the perennial Olympic theme of cultural harmony in diversity.

The production's reinscription of blackface minstrelsy was achieved primarily through visual and kinetic means, the actors' verbal delivery being only lightly laced with the rhythms and inflections of this theatrical form. By introducing the Aboriginal actors as a rag-tag bunch of wandering vaudevillians who stumble across the fictional world/script of Dann's play and decide to animate its characters, Enoch dramatized the historicity of the original roles from a contemporary perspective. An opening mime sequence showed some actors somberly taking up the costumes of their Aboriginal ancestors, sensing the tragedy of the script they were about to enact. The suggestion of a squabble followed, apparently over who would (not) play the remaining characters. Then, in a suspended moment, three actors whitened their faces and donned the jaunty hats, white gloves, and various other bits of apparel that marked their transformation into caricatures of the play's white antagonists: Mr. Watson, the huckster councilor; Miss Harnett, the prissy English travel-writer-cum-



Queensland Theatre Company's production of *Fountains Beyond* (2000), by George Landen Dann.  
Photo: Rob Maccoll.

<sup>47</sup> While the official reconciliation process initiated by a Commonwealth Government Act in 1991 was widely perceived to have been abandoned by this time, many Australians, particularly those with leftist political tendencies, continued to work for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. Arts organizations were especially active in this movement, as were prominent actors, writers, and directors on both sides of the cultural fence.

amateur-anthropologist; and Miss Matthews, town busy-body. These characters were originally written as broadly representative types whose greed and paternalism drive a wedge in the Aboriginal community, causing tensions between the pragmatists willing to exhibit their culture in exchange for white money and the idealists trying to preserve indigenous traditions already weakened by European imperialism. What Enoch's minstrel concept added to this representation was a powerful notion of whitefellas repositioned as objects of the anthropological gaze thematized by the play. With their whiteface looks, their signature props—Miss Harnett, for example, always carried an umbrella—and their stylized movements augmented by some subtle chorus work, the trio presented as cultural artifacts: relics of a past reclassified according to an Aboriginal epistemology that both incorporated and critiqued white cultural forms. The spectacle of risible whiteness overlaid on Aboriginal bodies also presented a literal, playful, and sometimes uncanny rendition of Frantz Fanon's "black skins, white masks" model of colonial subjectivity, thereby unsettling the comfortable certainties maintained by ongoing racist divisions in Australian society.

The racechanges enacted in *Almighty Voice and His Wife* address a similar hierarchization of skin color, and its consequences in Canadian culture. In an essay titled "How My Ghosts Got Pale Faces," Moses explains his dramaturgical habit of creating trickster-like ghost figures whose function is to challenge race-based thinking, notably the valorization of whiteness:

White as a color exists only because some of us get told that we're black or yellow or Indians. I think my ghosts exist to probe the white problem, this tonal confusion, to spook its metaphors. Maybe my ghosts are like mirrors but from a fun house.<sup>48</sup>

The idea of putting such ghosts in whiteface originated from Moses's dissatisfaction with the facts given in various accounts of *Almighty Voice*, the fugitive Cree warrior whose flight from colonial authorities in the 1890s the play dramatizes. Moses initially thought of focusing part of his version of the story on the Mounties, soldiers, and settlers who had contributed to *Almighty Voice's* senseless death, and he imagined these roles could be played in whiteface by the Native actors with whom he usually worked. As his script developed, however, he found the many possible implications of whiteface (as a potential mirror to blackface) much more interesting than the white characters he had planned to create, so he scripted just two Native characters who would tell the *Almighty Voice* story in very different ways: first, as a quasi-realist lyrical drama, then, in the second act, as a variety performance using the non-narrative conventions of the minstrel show, including song, jokes, satire, and dance all played in whiteface, to re-examine the events just staged.<sup>49</sup> The provocative twist in Moses's whiteface concept—and what makes it more transgressive than Enoch's experiment—is that this parodic minstrel mask signals not white character *types* played by Native actors but highly complex Native characters whose experiences within white culture have led them to internalize its racism against themselves. In this context, whiteness marks the externalized faces that the characters need to discard to recuperate their identities.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel David Moses, "How My Ghosts Got Pale Faces," in *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, ed. Simon J. Ortiz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 147.

<sup>49</sup> These details are summarized from Moses's account of the play's genesis in "How My Ghosts," 139–40.

Moses's experiment with minstrelsy came at a time when indigenous theatre in Canada was rapidly expanding its national profile following the mainstream successes of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), and the concerted efforts of a number of indigenous practitioners and companies around the country. Some of Moses's contemporaries during that period were writing semi-realist plays about modern-day Native life on the reservations or in the urban fringes, though there was also a robust tradition of non-naturalistic Native theatre drawing from indigenous dance and masking practices and trickster aesthetics.<sup>50</sup> *Almighty Voice and His Wife* was the first of Moses's historical dramas and stands quite distinct from his cycle of "city plays"—comprised of *Coyote City* (1988), *Big Buck City* (1991), *Kyotopolis* (1993), and *City of Shadows* (1995)—though he later returned to the subject of history in *Brébeuf's Ghost* (1996) and two one-act pieces staged together as *The Indian Medicine Shows* (1996). Among his plays, Moses's iconoclastic version of the Almighty Voice legend has attracted the most critical attention,<sup>51</sup> though it has never gained the popular exposure it would seem to deserve.

The play's first act dramatizes in condensed form Almighty Voice's courtship of his Native wife, named White Girl because of her time spent in a Christian residential school, and their attempts to evade the manhunt sparked by his killing of a Mountie who had hounded him for stealing one of the settler's cows. The act ends in a ritualized moment as Almighty Voice dies under a hail of bullets, leaving White Girl with their newborn child. The second act shifts abruptly to a minstrel show staged by the same two actors who just animated the historical drama. This show features the hapless Ghost of Almighty Voice bullied into performing an extended double act with an aggressive Interlocutor, the (male) persona of White Girl, now barely cognizant of his/her past identity. These two impersonators are deliberately set up to produce a flawed imitation of minstrelsy, not only because their red skins and white faces are historically wrong for the blackface parts they appropriate but also because the troupe is missing its key comedians, Tambo and Bones, the endmen whose jokes and puns functioned to integrate the various musical and dramatic elements of the traditional minstrel shows. Moses stresses this incompleteness by positioning his minstrels in a Beckettian limbo constantly having to improvise while they wait, in vain, for the rest of their band members to arrive. As the Interlocutor and the Ghost take on varied roles to present the stock minstrel repertoire—moving from the overture, through a baritone solo, a stump speech, the walkaround, a tenor solo, the playlet, a duet, and a standup comedy routine, to the finale—their metatheatrical improvisations alternately unveil,

<sup>50</sup> Examples include Tomson Highway's *New Song . . . New Dance* (1988); his subsequent work, *The Sage, The Dancer and the Fool* (1989), written with Billy Merasty; and Monique Mojica's *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1990).

<sup>51</sup> The following all treat *Almighty Voice and His Wife* in some depth, though none fully elaborate upon the minstrel concept central to the play: Rob Appleford, "The Desire to Crunch Bone: Daniel David Moses and the True Real Indian," *Canadian Theatre Review* 77 (1993): 21–26; Barbara Godard, "Writing Between Cultures," *Translation, Terminology, Reading* 10.1 (1997): 53–97; Ric Knowles, "'Look. Look again.' Daniel David Moses' Decolonizing Optics," in *Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, ed. Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002), 187–98; and Marc Maufort, *Transgressive Itineraries: Postcolonial Hybridizations of Dramatic Realism* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2003), 157–63.

critique, and modify the performance styles and conventions invoked until, finally, the Interlocutor, having gradually expunged her whiteness by “acting it out,” wipes off her mask to reassume a Native identity.

In a move that expands and complicates his exposé of racial mimicry, Moses overlays the minstrel show template with traces of other nineteenth-century mass entertainment forms that have shaped representations of Native peoples in the Canadian imaginary. The initial segment, the overture, serves both as a transition from the play’s first act and as a way of situating the minstrel routine to follow within a broader performance culture enthralled by the erotics of alterity. As the Ghost attempts to piece together his fragmented memories of the moments leading up to Almighty Voice’s death, the Interlocutor’s sarcastic quips and puns recast his story—a (hi)story of cultural genocide—as a sensationalized tale of frontier life staged for the benefit of spectators who have a historical investment, albeit perhaps subconscious, in maintaining the ontological boundaries between the (white) Self and a Native Other. Titled “The Red and White Victoria Regina Spirit Revival Show,” this burlesque performance draws on the representational codes of the Medicine Show, a popular form of entertainment developed by itinerant quacks as part of a lucrative trade in native remedies that flourished across North America at the time of the play’s setting. Like his (human) counterparts in the Medicine Shows, the Ghost is pressured to dance for his keep,<sup>52</sup> to display his culture through the expected theatrical forms, which, in this case, can only yield yet another clichéd image of “Redcoats and wild Indians,”<sup>53</sup> as the Interlocutor so spitefully reminds us. This particular trope also evokes Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West exhibitions, a form of spectacle that gained prominence in the mid-1880s just as blackface minstrelsy began to recede from the popular stages of the newly unified American nation. Cody’s epic pageants likewise featured “real live Indians” engaging in quasi-ethnological performances of war-dancing, wild riding, and fighting but on a much grander scale and in ways that positioned Indians as “richly polysemic” in a “symbolic economy” of frontier violence.<sup>54</sup> They were staged for mass audiences across Europe as well as in North America and spawned a legion of imitations.<sup>55</sup> Some Wild West shows even traveled to distant reaches of the colonial theatre circuit, including Australia,<sup>56</sup> where their popularity suggests they spoke to common anxieties among white settlers constructing their own frontiers with indigenous cultures.

By interspersing visual and verbal references to such ethnological spectacles throughout the minstrel routine in *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, Moses anchors the generic Otherness enacted in minstrelsy’s blackface portraits to the particular signs of Indianness that have circumscribed Native identities. This overt double coding

<sup>52</sup> Moses’s *Angel of the Medicine Show* features a similar Indian character coerced into entertaining his colonizers. See Knowles, “Daniel David Moses’ Decolonizing Optics,” 196–97.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel David Moses, *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (Stratford, Ontario: Williams Wallace, 1992), 60.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 205.

<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, some of these shows seemed to include Australian Aborigines. See Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 154.

<sup>56</sup> Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show*, 111.

extends the counter-discursive strategy of “Indians playing Indian”<sup>57</sup>—of “acting out” hegemonically defined Indian stereotypes in order to critique them—which is evident in a number of Native North American plays, including Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1990), Leanne Howe and Roxy Gordon’s *Indian Radio Days* (1993), and Hanay Geigomah’s *Body Indian* (1972). (It is important to note here that whereas white instances of “playing Indian” have seemed to ground a number of significant searches for individual and national identity/authenticity in North America,<sup>58</sup> indigenes have played Indian to signal the *inauthenticity* of white-defined images of their culture.) The whiteface minstrel mask in Moses’s text instigates an insistently visible gap between performer and role, which prevents the two from being sutured together to form a composite, embodied image of Indianness. This gap becomes critical at a number of points, notably in the play’s reworking of the transvestite sketch, a standard item in the minstrel show. In the infelicitous absence of the troupe’s other thespians, the sketch’s mandatory wench impersonation, which was often styled as a burlesque of melodrama, is foisted upon the Interlocutor. A Native performer thus plays the heroine, a beleaguered Indian maiden named Sweet Sioux, but without fitting seamlessly into the role since this actor is first impersonating the white-faced male Interlocutor who is cross-dressed (under protest) as the Indian wench. Meanwhile, the Ghost takes the part of the lecherous Chief Magistrate whose unwanted advances eventually force the Interlocutor to cast off his female disguise to avoid rape. The race and gender (ex)changes enacted here through the highly theatricalized tropes of the minstrel show clarify the operations of power involved in creating (and consuming) racial stereotypes, a process not always apparent when Native performers simply play Indians.

Likewise, the minstrel mask allows Moses to stage racist invective as the ventriloquized discourse of the implicitly white audiences for whom his characters perform.<sup>59</sup> Some such speeches are addressed directly to the spectators, who thus become no longer anonymous consumers but objects against which the play is enacted.<sup>60</sup> In the stump speech, a segment of the minstrel show traditionally reserved for oration that parodied political homilies on concerns of the day (for example, slavery, women’s rights or temperance), the Interlocutor harangues the audience about malicious, petted, treaty Indians who, failing to appreciate the privileges extended to them, turn against their benefactors and threaten the whole society’s livelihood with their idleness and mischief. This clichéd theme, designed to lampoon present-day complaints about welfare payments to Native Canadians, incidentally references nineteenth-century American concerns that Indian treaties were too lenient, a sentiment suggested in one 1872 minstrel skit in which a tribe violated a treaty giving them large supplies of guns and ammunition plus “roast beef, plum pudding, custard pie, and ice

<sup>57</sup> For further information on plays adopting this strategy, see Kenneth Lincoln, “Indians Playing Indians,” *Melus* 16.3 (1989–90): 91–98; and Ric Knowles, *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1999), 138–50.

<sup>58</sup> See Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 183.

<sup>59</sup> I wish to make a distinction here between the implied audience for the minstrel show, which is indicated as white on a number of occasions, and the audiences for the play as a whole, which seemed to have included a wide variety of groups, including many indigenous people.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Webb identifies this strategy in his article “Ritual, Theatre, and Jean Genet’s *The Blacks*,” *Theatre Journal* 31.4 (1979): 458.

cream" on the condition that they limit their massacres and town-burning episodes to no more than one per week.<sup>61</sup>

Ventriloquism works elsewhere in *Almighty Voice and His Wife* to suggest the ways in which Native Canadians have been interpellated by the dominant culture, and to link the demeaning stereotypes resulting from this epistemic violence with a long history of malignant representation that has denied them autonomy and dignity. The standup section, just before the finale, stages such a history in telescoped form as the Interlocutor's taunts reach a crescendo:

You're that redskin! You're that wagon burner! That feather head, Chief Bullshit. No, Chief Shitting Bull! Oh, no, no. Blood thirsty savage. Yes, you're primitive, uncivilized, a cantankerous cannibal! Unruly redman, you lack human intelligence! Stupidly stoic, sick, demented, foaming at the maws! Weirdly mad and dangerous, alcoholic, diseased, dirty, filthy, stinking, ill fated degenerate race, vanishing, dying, lazy, mortifying . . .<sup>62</sup>

This is potentially uncomfortable fare if spectators see themselves mirrored/parodied in the whiteface minstrel mask, hurling insults at the very characters with whom they were invited to empathize in the first act of the play. In this respect, the mask refracts the viewer's gaze, complicating what Robert Appleford has identified as the main dramatic function of Moses's grotesquely ironic show: to stage "the spectacle of Native performers enacting their own objectification" in order to "emphasise the means of cultural production of Native images."<sup>63</sup> In an age of political correctness, such performance techniques also invoke spectator guilt for those who experience the racist pleasure identified by Lott as part of the attraction of the original minstrel show. This kind of pleasure is resistant to analysis, in his view, since it often goes against the grain of social practice and suggests the "scandal of pleasure itself";<sup>64</sup> the anxiety attached here to the simultaneous thrill and stench of racial difference.

The two Canadian productions of *Almighty Voice and His Wife* presented, through their costuming codes and kinetics, somewhat different directorial visions about the ways in which blackface minstrel conventions inform Moses's text.<sup>65</sup> In the Ottawa premiere, Lib Spry seems to have stressed the disjunction between the minstrel persona and the Native identities it paradoxically reveals and occludes. The Interlocutor, dressed in top-hat and tails, black trousers, tie, white gloves, and studded white boots, played her/his master-of-ceremonies role in a style that constantly evoked blackface entertainments, albeit with some inversions, notably the whiteface mask.<sup>66</sup> The various set pieces were punctuated with familiar stunts, including a cake walk,

<sup>61</sup> Toll, "Social Commentary," 90.

<sup>62</sup> Moses, *Almighty Voice*, 94–95.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Appleford, "Making Relations Visible in Native Canadian Performance," in *Siting the Other: Re-visions of Marginality in Australian and English-Canadian Drama*, ed. Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2001), 240.

<sup>64</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 142.

<sup>65</sup> This analysis is based on video recordings of both productions, held at the McLaughlin Library at the University of Guelph.

<sup>66</sup> There is some debate among theatre historians concerning whether the interlocutor wore blackface or whiteface in traditional minstrel shows. Lott argues that blackface was the convention in early minstrelsy though the whitefaced interlocutor came into fashion later in urban centres. See *Love and Theft*, 264.

scissors jumps, cane twirling, false dives, and a hat-swapping routine as the duo argued over who would (not) play the parts of Tambo and Bones. These stylistic choices served to emphasize the Interlocutor's unmasking in the finale, his/her transformation from generic minstrel back into the specific character of White Girl. By contrast, the Toronto production coded the Interlocutor as a much more ambiguous figure, something of a hybrid between a minstrel and a Mountie, in a red jacket, gloves, and whiteface makeup that only thinly disguised the Native woman (actor and character) beneath the mask. Mumford's choreography incorporated elements of the standard minstrel fare—e.g., a white-gloved wave and a roving spot gag—but also featured atypical motifs, notably a parodic sign of the cross and a human puppet routine in which the Interlocutor first animated the Ghost and then vice versa. In this version of the play, White Girl's final transformation from ventriloquist's doll (her position as minstrel) to Native woman seemed more gradual, marked in part by the process of finding a Native voice through which to express her acceptance of her husband's death: "Patima, Kisse-Manitou-Wayou" (*Goodbye, Almighty Voice*).<sup>67</sup>

Video records of both productions suggest that some audiences were slow to laugh at the puns and jokes included in Moses's minstrel show, much of which met with stony silence or the odd tight chuckle. Critical responses were mixed, each production eliciting reviews with titles as polarized as "Powerful tale ruined by ending"<sup>68</sup> and "Brilliant second act redeems *Almighty Voice*."<sup>69</sup> Several non-indigenous commentators seemed irritated, or at best baffled, by the switch in performative modes, unable to link the play's two acts or read its racial mimicry in terms that implicated white spectators. Liam Lacey, for instance, argued in a review for the *Globe and Mail* that Moses's message remained unclear because the minstrel show was less about hegemonic racism than "about Native attitudes to their own history."<sup>70</sup> Other critics expressed disappointment that the lyrical poetry of the first act had given way to the mayhem of the second, a sentiment that hints at their discomfort with what Ric Knowles terms the play's "decolonizing optics": its deconstruction of imperial and patriarchal modes of spectatorship.<sup>71</sup> Such responses may also speak to a perceived loss of Native authenticity with the shift from heightened realism to caustic satire as the dominant mode of representation.

Moses's stated practice of using virtual ghosts—or "theatrical spooks"—as "directions" or "probes"<sup>72</sup> provides a clue for understanding the performative dynamics of the second act in terms that recognize its indigenous elements. That the minstrel show is introduced by a placard on which is written "Act Two: Ghost Dance,"<sup>73</sup> suggests two quite different frames for interpreting the action to follow. On one level, the placard,

<sup>67</sup> Moses, *Almighty Voice*, 96.

<sup>68</sup> Geoff Chapman, "Powerful Tale Ruined by Ending," *The Toronto Star*, 16 February 1992, C7.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Czarnecki, "Don't Leave at Intermission! Brilliant Second Act Redeems *Almighty Voice*," *Eye*, 20 February 1992, 30. See also Michael Groberman, "Potent Attack Falls Short: Native's Story Unsettling, but Marred by Tiresome First Act," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 23 September 1991.

<sup>70</sup> Liam Lacey, "Two Plays under One Title," *Globe and Mail*, 15 February 1992.

<sup>71</sup> Knowles, "Daniel David Moses' Decolonizing Optics," 187.

<sup>72</sup> Moses, "How My Ghosts," 126.

<sup>73</sup> Moses, *Almighty Voice*, 53.



Great Canadian Theatre Company's production of *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (1991).  
Photo: Fred Catrall.

styled as a tombstone in the Mumford production, evokes the Ghost Dance religion that swept across the Great Plains of North America in the early 1890s. Advocates of this messianic religion, banned in the United States in 1890 and in Canada in 1906, believed that the dance would protect them from white men's weapons and restore the pre-colonial world in which Indians had comfortably subsisted. Cast as a Ghost Dance with Almighty Voice as chief revenant, the play's minstrel show functions symbolically to neutralize white power and fortify the Native characters against their invaders' poison, which here includes both the literal poison of death and the metaphorical barbs of racist representation. At the same time, this dance evokes historical echoes of the massacre of Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee in December of 1890, an event remembered in the gallows humor of the first skit.<sup>74</sup> The minstrel show

<sup>74</sup> Godard, "Writing Between Cultures," 87.

<sup>75</sup> Moses's own term; see "How My Ghosts," 145.

<sup>76</sup> Godard, "Writing Between Cultures," 91.

is thus framed as an exorcism<sup>75</sup> and a rite of memory, which, according to Barbara Godard, is facilitated by the ambiguities of the Ghost as both “sacrificial victim in Eurocanadian narrative and figure of spiritual renewal in aboriginal culture.”<sup>76</sup> On another level, the placard positions the second act as a dance from the colonial past designed to “spook” whiteness (in Moses’s sense of challenging its power to position non-whites as Others) by inverting the color codes of blackface minstrelsy. Hence, the black and white of the minstrel show is re(a)d all over—that is, nativized and re-read—to take up the familiar riddle about the newspaper cited towards the end of the walkaround section.<sup>77</sup> Trickster logic informs this second frame so that the Ghost is eventually able to turn tables on the Interlocutor,<sup>78</sup> forcing him to recognize, and then peel off, the layers of whiteness he/she has accreted.

Moses’s use of ghosting, like Enoch’s pentimento concept, points to the ways in which whiteface minstrelsy functions in *Almighty Voice and His Wife* and the QTC production of *Fountains Beyond* to suggest “genealogies of performance”<sup>79</sup> informed by contemporary indigenous perspectives. Such genealogies document—and question—the historical dissemination of particular performance practices across space and time. Whiteface techniques in these plays may initially appear as grounded in generic versions of Black comedy, but the white mask quickly accretes markers of indigeneity specific to its new performative context. Enoch’s presentation of Aboriginal Australians in whiteface, for instance, was deliberately designed as an elliptical reference to the colonial habit of poisoning Aborigines with flour,<sup>80</sup> an echo that would have been registered by at least some of the audience members. Similarly, Moses’s references to the Ghost Dance religion and the Massacre at Wounded Knee (re)code whiteface as something much more than a comic mask. In this way, whiteface is continually subjected to processes of citation and appropriation that triangulate white, black, and indigenous performance traditions in complex ways. According to Roach, such triangulations make visible those obscured as colonialism’s racial and cultural Others because they “tak[e] into account the give and take of transmission, posted in the past, arriving in the present, delivered by living messengers, speaking in tongues not entirely their own.”<sup>81</sup> Both texts analyzed here engage in this kind of critical historiography, excavating aspects of the minstrel show to ask how we came to be where we are and to imagine other trajectories.

Whereas the erasure of indigenous subjectivity has been a major historical effect of racial masquerades in settler theatre in Australia and Canada, indigenous whiteface acts bring the surrogated Other back into visibility. This recuperation of the marginalized subject has been one of the common and consistent aims of indigenous theatre transnationally. What whiteface offers to this project is the opportunity for indigenes themselves to speak as inauthentic interlocutors, as flexible subjects-in-formation

<sup>77</sup> Moses, *Almighty Voice*, 71.

<sup>78</sup> This is also consistent with the conventions of the traditional minstrel show, where the endmen eventually got the best of the interlocutor.

<sup>79</sup> Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 25–26.

<sup>80</sup> Enoch, email correspondence to the author, 5 July 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Roach, “Culture and Performance,” 136.

constantly shaped by matrices of (racist) power. Such speaking positions do not displace identity-based notions of indigeneity, which remain necessary to cultural praxis, but add to the arsenal of minority representation. This itself is a strategic move when indigenous theatre in each country is sometimes expected to supply an archive of so-called traditional forms that might extend the Eurocentric repertoire of the mainstream performing arts industries.

The triangulation of racial signifiers enacted through whiteface minstrelsy in *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, and to a lesser extent in *Fountains Beyond*, seems to me to avoid the pitfalls of the black–white binary logic that Kondo discerns as weakening Gubar’s notion of racechange.<sup>82</sup> As these texts register and display multiple inscriptions of race via the complex instances of racechange I have discussed, they suggest that racial identities are made over and over again in the processes of dialogue, imagination, representation, and interpretation. This is activist work that participates in a wider deconstructive project—undertaken largely but not exclusively by oppressed peoples of color—to destabilize the fixity of race and elicit its malleability while still exposing the very real consequences of racism. De-essentializing race in this way also reminds us of its performative aspects. In Diana Paulin’s terms, it is “the space in between the constructedness and materiality of racial subjectivity [that] functions as a site in which the symbolic and productive power of performance can be identified and interpreted.”<sup>83</sup>

At the same time as whiteface minstrelsy offers indigenous actors/characters alternative speaking positions, it enacts its own form of surrogation, abjecting white subjects even while emphasizing whiteness, with its associated prejudices and privileges. In assessing the political effects of this emphasis, I want to conclude by turning briefly to recent critical theories about whiteness and its increasing visibility as a racial category.<sup>84</sup> For me, the *white* minstrel mask so artfully used by Enoch and Moses provides an instance of what Richard Dyer has called “extreme whiteness,” a color distinct from the unmarked whiteness that has underpinned the hegemony of Anglo-Celtic cultures across much of the world. Dyer postulates that the whiteness of most people is ordinary, unspectacular or plain and this is what allows whiteness to imagine it can speak on everyone’s behalf—to be broadly representative. “Extreme whiteness” in his formulation “coexists with ordinary whiteness [but] it is exceptional, excessive, marked,”<sup>85</sup> leaving a residue through which whiteness becomes visible as a

<sup>82</sup> Kondo, “(Re)Visions of Race,” 100–101.

<sup>83</sup> Diana R. Paulin, “Acting Out Miscegenation,” in *African American Performance and Theater History*, ed. Elam and Krasner, 252.

<sup>84</sup> Viewed through the lens of critical whiteness studies as this field has developed since the mid-1990s, Moses’s 1991 text seems to break more new ground than Enoch’s production almost a decade later, though both usefully inform the field with their indigenous perspectives. Key scholarly texts in the field of critical whiteness include Ruth Frankenberg, ed., *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and, in the Australian context, Peta Stephenson, “‘Race,’ ‘Whiteness’ and the Australian Context,” *Mots Pluriels* 1.2 (1997) <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP297ps.html> (accessed 4 June 2003).

<sup>85</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 222.

racial sign rather than simply passing as an invisible, disinterested, and normative category. To make whiteness show its colors in this way is to begin to dismantle its representational power, a process enacted to varying extents in the productions of *Fountains Beyond* and *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. To simultaneously use whiteface as the theatrical mask through which race can be changed, exchanged, and thereby (re)imagined as at least partly performative, is to envisage an aesthetic (and political) bridge between so-called white and non-white cultures, not one that erases cultural difference but one that refuses to valorize specific skin pigmentations. As Daniel David Moses says, "Once white itself is a ghost, color will be just a too simple beginning of rich and strange complexities."<sup>86</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Moses, "How My Ghosts," 147.