

CONFRONTING SCHUSTER RACE-TO-FACE: POST-APARTHEID BLACKFACE IN *MAMA JACK*

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ABSTRACT

In blackface colonial history, “amusing” white blackface performances that depicted black people as the “natural born fool” were popular with white audiences during a time when whites perceived their racial superiority to be threatened. In Post-1994 South Africa, white supremacy is no longer an uncontested “fact”. As a result, white identities that are premised on “old” legislated notions of racial superiority are made insecure by perceived threats posed against whiteness. The previously disenfranchised and excluded black is now the central focus of South African power and politics and the loss of white centrality creates the “victim” perception that all post-apartheid societal pressures and changes are put on, and against whites. Their power has been “confiscated” and thereby no longer unique to white identity. Blackface is utilised by Leon Schuster in the post-apartheid film, *Mama Jack* (2005) to reproduce old ideologies of whiteness that remind viewers of its presence, privilege and power. As in the colonial past, it is through the principle white character Jack Theron and his mobilisation of blackface that white supremacy remains intact throughout the film.

Key words: Leon Schuster, blackface, whiteness studies, post-apartheid.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report/mini-dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of the Master of Arts in the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Obakeng Kgongoane.

15 March 2017

DEDICATION

Gloria in excelsis Deo

To God.

My key consultant, collaborator and creative.

Your love has never failed.

What would I have done with You?

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I would like to thank the woman who has thrown me into the fiery furnace a couple of times, my brilliant and worthy supervisor – Nobunye Levin. Because of you, today I come out like gold.

I also want to thank my family. Mom. Dad. Your example has inspired me countless times. A big shout out to me lovely sisters, Didintle and Reabetswe. Your love, support and care have ensured that I was able to complete my research. Your intelligence, tenacity and focus assure me that I can go even further. Thank you.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The arguments I present in this research report problematise a present over-arching socio-political issue in South Africa: Even in the current post-apartheid era, ideologies that make white supremacy legitimate are still being reproduced. A critical examination into systems of power, representation and the maintenance of white racial and cultural hegemony at play in post-apartheid cinema is therefore integral in revealing the extent to which white supremacy is allowed to function in South African world views. Damaging representations of blacks that depict them as inferior beings to whites are not being met with critical engagement or resistance by those whites who feel threatened by the loss of their white privilege in a 'black' South Africa (Kevin Durrheim & John Dixon 2010).

With the end of apartheid in 1994 old "historical assumptions about white male authority and dominance" that were naturalised during apartheid are being challenged (Liese van der Watt 2005: 119). White perceptions of the loss of power and privilege heightened white panic and fears of a new South Africa. The "fact" of whiteness is no longer absolute and as a result, white supremacy is illegitimate (Melissa Steyn 2001b). Having white skin in the new South Africa is therefore not enough to ascertain the power and privilege that having white skin used to wield. The increasing demand for social and economic justice in South Africa jeopardises white privilege and makes it increasingly hypervisible – even to whites themselves who are being made aware of their white skin privilege (van der Watt 2005 & Sarit Swisa 2010).

In fact, non-reflexive whites believe that they are being punished for having white skin because democratic efforts at political, social and economic redistribution across social groups who were disadvantaged by white apartheid privilege often exclude them (Steyn 2001b). Whites who feel this way more often than not do not realise that their opportunities to access wealth and upper/middle-class positions in society come from the deliberate dispossession of black economies exercised during colonialism and apartheid (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 39). Non-reflexive whites in particular therefore experience redistribution as the unforeseen and unfair "confiscation" of the privilege they deny having ever inherited (Steyn 2001b). For those whites who remain in denial of the current economic comforts of being white in South Africa, perceptions that having white skin is a burden in South Africa continue to run in the white imaginary.

However it is important to note that these white subjectivities are characterised by selfish and unjustified¹ fears of the loss of their wealth, privilege and political control that have been historically believed to be at the root of white identity. Whites in a changing South Africa are therefore anxious (Steyn 2001a & 2001b). Without the backing and comfort of apartheid legislature that worked ceaselessly to secure white identity, white identity is now destabilised (Steyn 2001b: 41). Under new democratic legislature, whites are asked to renegotiate their identity in order to find a new place and relevance in a South Africa under black rule (Steyn 2001). Whites feel pressured to re-create a “new” definition of whiteness that no longer includes notions of privilege and racial supremacy in order to fit into the now “not-so-new”, South Africa.

However, only in theory is the formation of white identity built on white supremacy being dislodged (Saks 2010 & Steyn 2001). Racism, apartheid and white supremacy are at the core of white identity in South African apartheid racial history and continue to outlast into the end of its regime (Willboughy-Herard 2015: xiv). Eradicating white supremacy proves to be a difficult feat as whiteness shows to still want to “cling” onto the power it perceives to have lost. This is witnessed particularly in representations of blackness found in current South African cultural forms of entertainment.

Jeanne van Eeden (2004 :18) notes that cultural products of entertainment in South Africa illustrate that contemporary South African visual culture is still “invariably ideologically inflected” with what I argue to be a white supremacist belief system. Ideologies are a body of ideas that are taken as either self-evidently true or false (Duncan Reyburn 2013: 68). In other words, ideologies ‘naturalise’ constructed ideas as a way of life. Because white supremacy in *Mama Jack* (2005) is presented as a naturalised way of seeing the world, critical engagement with the film’s persistent racism is muted. It is when the content of our local post-apartheid films are critically unpacked that white supremacy in a democratic South Africa is shown to be entrenched into our world views.

In the *Mama Jack* (2005) that I will be critically analysing, evidence that white identity still seeks to be centred on white supremacy in a “post-apartheid” South Africa is made apparent. My choice to analyse *Mama Jack* (2005) is guided by an awareness that films play a crucial ideological function in that they are made up of signs that produce meanings reflective of “the

¹ Van der Watt (2005: 119) explains that white threat is only a “perception” and cannot be grounded on fact. White men still hold majority economic power and privilege in post-apartheid South Africa. Black poverty implemented under apartheid still persists.

beliefs of a particular society at a particular time” (David Wigston 2009: 266). Through analysing the film’s visualisation, character and characterisation of blackness, insights into powerful ideological systems at play, like white supremacy will be unveiled so as to challenge the hidden racism that lies beneath many post-apartheid films.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that when analysing the meanings embedded within a film, “meaning does not reside only in texts, but in text-context relations” (Keyan Tomaselli & Vanessa McLennon-Dodd 2005). It is within this context of a perceived loss of white superiority onto which old ideas of whiteness were built in South Africa (and globally) that inform my critical reading of how whiteness presently operates in Schuster’s post-apartheid blackface film, *Mama Jack* (2005). By using racist blackface, and derisive black character and characterisation in white performances of blackness, I make the argument that *Mama Jack* (2005) seems to illustrate the “white” desire to restore the white supremacy that is felt to be lost in order to re-stabilise whiteness in a “new” South Africa. This is because white supremacy is no longer an invisible, uncontested “fact”.

Blackface in this film is seen to perform the same function as blackface minstrelsy during the abolition of black slavery that was a threat to white colonial identity. For whites at the time, giving blacks freedom meant that whiteness could no longer be superior and in power (Verney 2003). In South Africa too, whiteness has a history of assumed endogenous power and privilege over oppressed blacks (Steyn 2003: 235). The Afrikaner settlers, although not initially wanting to enslave blacks, wanted to maintain unequal race relations that would support and sustain the supremacy of white Afrikaner identity (Steyn 2001b). The abolitionist movement soon spread globally and the assumptive fears of the equality between blacks and whites that ensued were a threat against the supremacy of South African whiteness. Reminding blacks of their inferior “place” despite their freedom was beneficial for greedy and capitalistic whites who sought to maintain the privileges of their superiority which included assuming power and control over the land and its resources.

Blacks had to be reiterated as inferior in order for the white superiority found at the core of white identity to remain legitimate. Blackface minstrel entertainment was a successful way to reproduce and disseminate ideologies of white supremacy across European colonised nations as “fact”. The coming of Christy’s minstrels into South Africa served an almost similar function during the European abolition period. By using blackface minstrelsy, the so-called black “others” were represented by whites in demeaning ways.

Performed by whites for white (and black) audiences, blackface minstrelsy was not just harmless entertainment. White performers and audiences would learn of their represented “innate” superiority through these performances (Dyer 1997). Maximising negative stereotypes helped to embellish representations of blacks as inherently degenerate beings as well as making them the centre of comedic ridicule. Gross visual representations of African blacks exaggerating their physiognomies described them as exotic, degenerate and inferior beings which helped to make blackness comedic and *hypervisible*. The hypervisibility and hilarity of blackness as inferior became crucial in re-stabilising the white identity that was built on the tenets of liberty and wealth; core aspects of whiteness that were now being “threatened” by black liberty. The comedic representations of blackness found in blackface minstrelsy were vital in helping to establish white identity as superior by making blackness non-threatening. The construction of whiteness is therefore at the core of blackface (Moscowitz 2009).

In the comedic film Schuster plays a poor, white Afrikaner male, Jack Theron, who performs humorously in “blackface” as a black domestic worker. A racist performance that I argue reinstates his “lost” whiteness. As a poor white, Theron does not seem to be “white enough”. Why I label Theron “not-white-enough” is because Theron, unlike the white identity constructed during apartheid colonialism, has little economic power and, as a poor white, belonged to a “despised” social group even though he has so-called “white” skin. Theron’s poverty, under Afrikaner nationalism, would have placed his identity close to the “degenerative” blacks. Dissecting the meanings of whiteness found in the film is a pertinent step to understanding the racist deployment of blackface in constructing whiteness while also, within the context of this paper’s argument, restoring it.

My critical examination into how whiteness is defined in the film begins with an analysis of the character and characterisation of the white man beneath the blackface mask: main character, Jack Theron and his blackface relation to white female lead character, Angela. Theron’s blackface performance of black domestic worker, Mama Bolo, positions blackness as inferior. His oppressive image of the black domestic worker as happy in servility to her white employers, worse while performed in blackface, implies that Theron still bears a white subjectivity that has him believe in the superiority of his whiteness despite the poverty that would class him as ‘black’.

In this research report, Theron constitutes a representation of what whiteness has become in the new South Africa. Theron’s poor white identity reflects white fears of a whiteness that has

become degenerate and abject. This fear is alleviated through the transformation that Theron undergoes: from being a poor white, to becoming a “better” white. One who grows into a higher financial position (albeit not high enough to categorise him as rich), and who wins the heart of the white, genteel and fragile object of desire – Angela. It is through using blackface that Theron’s white identity is redeemed, restored and fixed. His comical blackface transition into a black domestic worker, Mama Bolo helps Theron to make him a “better” white man.

Even in the archetypal relationship dynamic of black maid/white madam shared between dark skinned blackface Mama Bolo and the fair skinned genteel Angela, *Mama Jack* (2005) further problematically naturalises racial hierarchy by highlighting the racial differences and power-relations between the black and white characters in the film. Whites are depicted in positions of superiority over their black counterparts who are positioned as inferior. Taking place in “naturalised” settings, white roles keep whiteness as figures of power and authority, while black roles keep blackness in positions of servility. The overt racist deployment of “blackface” in order to maintain white supremacy is at issue here, but also how Schuster and director, Gray Hofmeyer, make covert the racism found beneath the racial hierarchy present in the film by naturalising white racial superiority.

Representations of blackness, especially when present in the form of racist blackface, require constant critical deconstruction to reveal how white supremacist and patriarchal epithets, sentiments and views are being distributed in our current post-apartheid context. Particularly old ideologies of whiteness as superior exemplified in *Mama Jack* (2005). It is crucial to awaken the critical eye and the thinking necessary to challenge the racism found beneath post-apartheid comedic films especially those employing the overt use of blackface and references to blackface minstrel characters. The continued use of blackface purports that non-reflexive engagement takes place with the very real presence of white supremacist ideologies in post-apartheid visual culture, particularly film. Blackface minstrelsy has deep deposits of racial and racist colonial history and ideologies that cannot be removed from its use even in its contemporary appropriation.

PART I

BLACKFACE WHITENESS

2. WHITE SOUTH AFRICA

White supremacy in South Africa has a long history in the makeup of white identity formation. Steyn (2001b: 34) notes that white supremacy was institutionalised economically and politically in 1910 when the two main “white” settler groups, the Afrikaners and the British, joined in union. The Union created a South Africa that was for whites only. Differences between the British and the Afrikaner were deliberately made less intense to prioritise a “solid unity of interest and intention” – to colonise the land and its resources (Steyn 2001b). Freedom for the Afrikaner meant they could practise the white racial hegemony that would efface blacks from South Africa’s construction by implementing anti-black structures (Steyn 2001b: 34). A new country was reconstructed that developed new laws that ensured an environment that would advance and privilege whites at the expense of the exclusion and oppression of a majority black nation (Steyn 2001b).

The Natives Land Act of 1913 would ensure that whites who felt entitled to their settler land would be given ninety three percent of the land, while only seven percent is given to blacks (Willboughy-Herard 2015). For the Afrikaner, dominating the land was a righteous cause; something that God had willed for them to do and therefore felt entitled to it (June Goodwin & Ben Schiff 1995). By the year 1920, the once independent black majority would be under the domination of the minority white settler nation. Many blacks were left unemployed migrant wage labourers and landless as a result (Goodwin & Schiff 1995: 56). Racist policies such as these were beneficial to whites who sought cheap labour to produce capital wealth, and to legitimise their superiority (Steyn 2001b). Being white was predicated on the legislative denial and denigration of black natives. The more discrimination against blacks was heightened, the further white identity could be protected, hence the development of the apartheid regime (Steyn 2001b).

In the year 1948, Afrikaner nationalism, through the infamous victory of the Nationalist Party, took over the country and was institutionalised by apartheid policy. According to Steyn (2001b: 36), apartheid is the “rigorous system of laws that was designed to guard white supremacy.” The Nationalist Party’s mission was to “protect white ‘civilization’ by controlling every aspect of life for non-whites, especially African populations” (Goodwin & Schiff 1995: 56). The Nationalist Party preserved and maintained white identity through controlling and restricting the social positioning of blackness. By constructing laws that restricted the mobilisation of blacks in areas labelled “white”, racial mixing was further prevented by “dumping” blacks into homeland areas.

By giving blacks little to no representation in parliament and denying blacks the rights to universal suffrage automatically given to whites, white supremacy was reproduced and ingrained in the identity formation and the racial belief system of white South Africans. This was a white South Africa that permanently positioned whites as entitled, privileged and powerful. This was the logic of apartheid. Apartheid produced a state-enforced whiteness that reproduced and sustained Eurocentric ideologies that made up three hundred years of colonial history. The Apartheid government was to continue to “ensure, absolutely, white privilege.” (Steyn 2001b: 36)

Liz Johanson Botha (2008: 463) states that during apartheid, colonial worldviews were heavily practised. Apartheid produced a world that confirmed that whites were indeed superior and all of its institutions and operations normalised this notion (Steyn 2001a: 87). The apartheid worldview “defined one’s life and identity according to whether one was saliently ‘white’, ‘black’ or some ‘colour’ in between” (Botha 2008: 463). Whiteness in South Africa at the time was upheld and given preference. To be white in South Africa during apartheid meant that you were socially, economically and politically privileged due to the authority granted to you by your believed-to-be “intrinsic” superiority.

Apartheid rationalised that whites were given inherent qualities that made them better leaders and managers, and therefore power was to be held in only their hands (Steyn 2001a: 87). This rationalisation of the superiority of whites was supported by edited realities of whites by the apartheid government that naturalised the meniality of blacks (Steyn 2001a: 87). Blacks were perceived by whites as “far behind, often innately and irredeemably so” (Steyn 2001b: 42). The manner in which blacks and whites interacted proved this to whites. The only inter-racial interaction was based off of unequal power relations. The master-slave dynamic came to identify the asymmetrical structure of the relationship between whites and blacks which was naturalised (Steyn 2001a & 2001b). Without challenge, whites could dominate in their interaction with blacks and were given the power to define themselves and others (Steyn 2001b: 59). The white man comfortably positioned himself as the *baaskap* who legitimately could subordinate blacks.

Under this regime, white South Africans were made legitimate and, economically and politically powerful by producing a culture of white entitlement (Steyn 2001a). According to Steyn (2001b: 43), whites retained the right to control the political, material and symbolic resources of the country for three centuries. For three centuries, whites were used to getting their own way

(Steyn 2001b: 53). But, on 2 February 1990, then president of the National Party, F.W. de Klerk, announces the end of the *baaskap* apartheid regime after a failure to maintain the taxing energy and resource heavy apartheid project that worked to preserve white racial purity and privilege (Steyn 2001b: 41). And in the year 1994 politically, according to Liezel Korf and Johan Malan (2002: 149), whites moved from being a majority power to a minority under majority black rule.

Whites could not believe that they would no longer be in their position of status and power², and they would no longer feel separated from the blacks they believed were deservingly powerless (Botha 2008: 151-152). Steyn (2001a: 89) states that generally, whites do not experience the equalisation of power between themselves and blacks as “social justice”; instead whites perceive it as the deliberate “*confiscation* of privilege and entitlement [emphasis added]” against whites. Old constructions of whiteness legitimised by the old apartheid regime, no longer stood thus. The movement into the new South Africa takes into perspective the practise of the much needed renegotiation and transferral of power (Steyn 2001a: 85). Whites no longer take the centre stage in the social and political arena (Steyn 2001 a: 85). Whiteness is now positioned as a relativised group amongst other social groups (Steyn 2001a: 85). Most important to the changing definition of post-apartheid whiteness is that the privilege that is central to their identity is now being dismantled and removed (Steyn 2001a: 85).

With the birth of any social change, comes the threat to old identity constructions prior to it. Post-1994 South Africa introduced new “ideology, rhetoric, and propaganda” that was reiterated within the public milieu (Botha 2002: 151). The new socio-political changes being implemented gave whites the impression of the loss of white power. Power is no longer exclusively white and therefore no longer unique to white identity (Steyn 2001a: 86). Without institutionalised racism, that differentiated and segregated blacks as inferior to their white counterparts, white supremacy lost its credibility. The previously disenfranchised and excluded black is now central focus in South African power and politics and the loss of white centrality creates the “victim” perception that all post-apartheid societal pressures and changes are put on, and against whites (Steyn 2001a: 89). Discrimination against blacks done in obvious ways is now prohibited, and subtle forms of persistent white privilege are now frustrated by democratic policies that aim to deconstruct white supremacy (Steyn 2001a:89). Whiteness, that has based its identity on the oppression of blacks for three centuries, loses its social identity and must reconfigure and

²However these are only **perceived** threats against white power as whiteness does continue to retain its supremacy in a post-apartheid South Africa, especially in the South African economy (Melanie Walker 2005).

reposition itself in an environment that no longer out rightly prioritises and safeguards white advancement (Steyn 2001a). Old racist ideas of whiteness are being challenged (Dolby 2002: 11, Botha 2002 & Julie Reid 2012). White supremacy is no longer an uncontested “fact” and this destabilises the position of whiteness in the new South Africa (Dolby 2001: 6)

The meaning of whiteness has had to change as whites perceive themselves to be pushed into the peripheries by black government (Dolby 2001). Although whites have disparate experiences and hold multiple ideas on the on-going transition into post-apartheid, Steyn (2001b) argues that most whites feel disorientated and displaced, and also experience a sense of loss in the new South Africa (even if this is expressed and dealt with differently). With new confrontations and interactions with black Africans whom they were previously secluded from, many whites have had to lose the certainty offered to them by the old (mis)construction of self and their “reality” (although edited) (Steyn 2001a: 90). Whites have also had to deal with the “loss of the familiar” (Steyn 2001a).

South Africa is no longer an exclusively “white space” that caters to whiteness psychologically and culturally; a debilitating fact for whites that causes them to feel “out of place” (Steyn 2001a: 92). White change into democracy was experienced to be an abrupt change in South African white world views. White fears about coming to terms with a whiteness identified as a “*formerly privileged, presently endangered position*” were increased with the entrance of democracy (Steyn 2001a: 70) Whites have lost their role as the dominating sole decision-makers in a now reclaimed African politics that they once held complete autonomy over (Steyn 2001a: 93-94). Whites, who are “accustomed to power and influence”, now have had to take the supporting role; a role which has made whites feel themselves to be insignificant (Steyn 2001a: 94). A position that when combined with loss of control over the definition of their white identity and their future in a black majority rule country, makes many whites feel that they are “oppressed victims” in a supposedly “anti-white” new South Africa (Steyn 2001a: 94).

Many whites seek to re-establish themselves and cling onto the comfort of the old *values* of whiteness (Dolby 2001: 10). Steyn (2001b: 50) postulates that this is because whites, consciously or unconsciously, are aware that in the old order, their white skins accessed them to privilege (Steyn 2001b: 50). And whites were comforted by the fact that in the old order, this privilege would remain imperceptible (Steyn 2001b: 50). Steyn (2001a: 97) states that although most whites would not admit this, the old order even though it promoted the undignified treatment of blacks, made more sense to them. However in the new South Africa, whiteness, its

white supremacy and privilege are sharply visible, even if it is not so to those whites who choose to remain in denial and are unreflexive about the inherited benefits of simply being white (Steyn 2001a: 69).

Whites' substantially have a higher economic and social status in present day South Africa, and this acts as proof of the maintenance of white privilege well into the so-called "new" South Africa (Steyn 2001b). This is something that democracy, in theory, tries to arrest. But, to be white, as Tim Wise (2008: x) maintains, is to be "born into a system that has been set up for [their] benefit" which continues to act as a fundamental basis for white identity (Miller 2007: 148 & Painter 2010: 388). Rather than choosing to treat, and to believe that whiteness is just a biological "happenstance", whiteness must be understood as a social categorisation that determines how much more better one is "received and treated" in a white supremacist society (Richard Dyer 1997: 50, John Hartigan 1997 & Wise 2008: ix). From this, we can learn of the fears and anxieties that whites suffer from that cause the conscious and unconscious reproduction of white supremacy in what is formally identified as "post-apartheid" South Africa.

When whites feel that the privilege that they feel entitled to is being "unfairly" taken and given to "undeserving blacks", whites begin to question whether or not they "really still are intellectually and morally superior to blacks" (Nadine Dolby 2001 & Steyn 2001b). Their feelings of displacement bring about fear and anxiety over the protection of white privilege and the identification of their white identity (Dolby 2001: 10). In order to calm their fears, whiteness requires continuous re-articulation and re-identification in order for its privilege to survive under changing circumstances (Dolby 2001: 6).

In the colonial past in order to preserve white identity as power and privilege, Hook (2007: 7) argues that visual culture and its racist black stereotypes were anxiously repeated. The re-stabilisation of the fast erasure of white identity was therefore done through the power affected by racist colonial stereotypes that are still found presently repeated in local post-apartheid cinema (Reid 2012). Tracing its history from colonial minstrel stages, the blackface mask and blackface performance that encompassed the racist performances of black stereotypes found in present-day cinemas are also still being mobilised in contemporary post-apartheid South African cinema.

Leon Schuster's post-apartheid use of blackface in *Mama Jack* (2005) references a racist South African colonial history used in order to restore whiteness. By reinstating the supremacy that whites perceived to have lost, the film paradoxically makes use of images of a "new" South

Africa that hold onto old apartheid ideas and values of whiteness. By mobilising racist representations of blacks as inferior, particularly through blackface minstrel caricatures, Schuster explicitly validates that whiteness is *still* superior. Through the critical analysis of the construction of the blackface representations of the main character Mama Bolo, it is interesting to see how white South African storytellers, i.e. screenwriter Schuster, and the director Gray Hofmeyer , interpret and represent meanings of whiteness in a post-apartheid South African context (Steyn 2003: 236). The critical examination of the operation of blackface in the film and what it means for whiteness in current day South Africa will be unpacked later in my research.

I begin however with a socio-historical background of the origins of white identity that precedes the constructions and meanings of white identity in South Africa accounted for earlier in this section. Whiteness has its origins in Europe and has travelled globally as a powerful ideological construct that secures white superiority, privilege and power. The centrality of white supremacy in the identity construction of whiteness will be further unpacked. I also examine the origins and functions of blackface minstrelsy in upholding and sustaining white supremacy by permanently positioning blacks as inferior non-threatening “half-beings” and how all of this is perpetuated in post-apartheid mobilisation of blackface found later in chapter five of this report where the blackface film *Mama Jack* (2005) will be critically analysed.

3. BEHIND EVERY BLACKFACE IS WHITENESS

3.1 Introduction

The abolition of black slavery in America was seen as a threat against the foundation of whiteness by Europeans who feared that the loss of their privilege and power would ensue from giving blacks their freedom (Frederickson 1981, Steyn 2001 & Pickering 2008). Even though there were Europeans who supported the emancipation of black slavery, most whites did not agree that blacks were equal to themselves (Steyn 2001). Fears of the “removal” of white supremacy were a threat against white identity that has throughout history premised itself on its thought-to-be “inherent” superiority (Dyer 1997). During a time of heightened fears of the destabilisation of white hegemony, whites in power felt the need to maintain their superiority, and to do this they had to reiterate the inferiority of blackness in the face of black freedom. Relying on visual representations to do so, images of blacks were reproduced that classed them as the inferior race in opposition to the “perfection” of the superior white race. Racist entertainment such as blackface minstrelsy was therefore popular during the abolitionist movement (Verney 2003). The racist stereotypical representations of blacks used in blackface minstrelsy were mobilised as a platform to confer onto, and confirm Europeans’ “endogenous” supremacy.

White performers established blackness as inferior through imposing demeaning qualities onto blacks in their performances as unintelligent, infantile and servile buffoons. Via white minstrel performances of blackness, Europeans could establish their identification as the physically beautiful, cultivated, intelligent being made to be the rightful inborn masters of the colonised body and territory (Steyn 2001: 5 & 7).

The focus of blackface minstrel performance was on the features of the **blackface** mask and the characteristics of blackness that helped to mark whiteness. Identified as “grotesque” by white skinned Europeans, the salient features of the “dark” blackface mask perpetuated colonial ideas of Africans as ‘grotesque creatures, with grotesque features, grotesque mentalities, [with] grotesque habits’ (Steyn 2001b:7). Blackface minstrelsy therefore constructed blacks as endogenously perverted beings – the opposite of European whiteness. Establishing racial difference, blackface minstrelsy could be used to defend and protect white coloniser’s power and wealth, privilege and supremacy as the unquestionable “natural order” because, as depicted by white minstrel performers, blacks were “naturally” dissipated and incapable of

holding power (Miller 2007 & Moscovitz 2009). Unpacking the construction of the white race therefore becomes important. Understanding how whiteness began is a crucial aspect in analysing how blackface minstrelsy has been mobilised throughout colonial history and as it unfolds in later chapters, how it has survived into postcoloniality.

In this section I offer just that: a socio-historical background of the origins of whiteness that include a history of the formation of whiteness in specifically in South Africa where blackface minstrel tropes are still published and practised as a form of entertainment. Whiteness is seen to be an ideological construct that is founded on the premise of white supremacy and in turn, creates a supranational white identity that connects all disparate Europeans of white skin not just in Europe, but across the globe. The history of whiteness leads to the unfolding of the rise and popularity of blackface minstrelsy across the Pan-Atlantic and finally its introduction into South Africa where whiteness as superior is being established. Blackface in this section is argued to be the outward expression of the white racial superiority often kept concealed in the construction of post-apartheid whiteness.

3.2 Returning to the Roots of Race: The Origins of White Identity.

Race was developed by early Europeans in the late eighteenth century, and was used throughout the nineteenth century as a way to label the “difference and deviance from the [white] social norm” (Hartigan 1997: 495-496). Considered an “objective” science of the human biology, race was treated as a factual and powerful social construct used to divide and categorise different ‘types’ of human bodies based on “shared” biological and genealogical characteristics (Dyer 1997: 19 & Hartigan 1997: 497). In order to establish white supremacy, racial discourse mobilised physiognomic characteristics and ancestry in determining the racial superiority of whites. Race was therefore a ideologically inflected pseudo-science that fixated on the features of the human body such as the “shape of the nose, eyes and lips, the colour and set of hair, even body shape” to order and control difference and identity (Dyer 1997: 22). Using what seemed to be “scientific” and “logical” tools such as craniotomy, anthropometry and phrenology, distinctions between differences found in body shape, skull size, posture, facial features and genitals were made in order to “factually” prove that whites were endogenously superior to their sub-standard counter-parts – non-whites.

Ideas of white superiority seen to be linked to white physiognomy actually finds its roots in European “Caucasian” lines of ancestry (Dyer 1997 & Painter 2010: 80). Named “Caucasian” by the German physician and anthropologist Johann Blumenbach (Painter 2010), Caucasians/Aryans lived in the high mountains of Caucasus, an area characterised by its close reach to the heavens. Because Caucasians resided there, ascendant Europeans saw themselves as the “pure race” whose racial features were closest to the origin of the human race (Dyer 1997: 22). A detailed description of what facial features made the Caucasian’s features the “pure racial face” was disseminated across Europe by scientists like Blumenbach. Blumenbach (cited in Painter 2010: 80) identifies the Caucasian’s ‘pure’ facial features as possessing:

[The] [c]olour white, cheeks rosy; hair brown or chestnut-colored; head subglobular; face oval, straight, its parts moderately defined, forehead smooth, nose narrow, slightly hooked, mouth small. The primary teeth placed perpendicularly to each jaw; the lips (especially the lower one) moderately open, the chin full and rounded. In general, that kind of appearance which according to our opinion of symmetry, we consider most handsome and becoming.

Europeans scientists characterised the Caucasian as “handsome and becoming”; possessing “perfect” physiognomic features that closely link being white to being virtuous and beautiful, and ultimately better than any other race. The Caucasian was placed at the highest point of early human creation because they were “linked via the angels to God” (Dyer 1997). The highly placed virtuous white-skinned and rosy cheeked European was always positioned as the normative standard against which other non-white objects of study were to be compared (Dyer 1998: 23). Racist epistemologies concluded that universally, whiteness was endowed with superiority and this narrative would dominate white racial thinking throughout colonialism even bleeding into current postcolonial states (Steyn 2001b). Steyn (2005: 121) quotes Dyer’s idea that “whiteness is a category itself” that is not just constructed through non-white frameworks (Steyn 2005: 121).

Even without the presence of non-whites, Caucasians saw themselves as the normative. Being confronted by non-Europeans and the wealth of their lands, race became an important construct in white colonial history. By establishing and identifying white racial identity, European accumulation of the land and wealth found in native states could be ascertained. The construction of “race” is therefore vital in understanding the roots of whiteness because through

race, white supremacy (established by European colonisers as the reason why they were entitled to native land and wealth) could be more fully developed.

3.3 White Face: The Supreme Race

Sylva Wynter (Walter Mignolo 2015: 109-110) concludes that the construction of whiteness began in the year 1642 with the landing of Christopher Columbus in the Americas. Confronted with rich lands that would provide wealth, Columbus and his compatriots had interest in “land speculation and the control of natural resources” that would gain them economic accumulation (George Frederickson 1981: 7). Seeking to exploit the wealth of resources found in the land for their own selfish economic gain, European settlers sought to remove the native who inhabited the land. But, there were two main constrictions that prevented the vigorous implementation of European domination and expansionism: the natives who already occupied and owned the land were autonomous and often strong, and the state governments from which European invaders came from (Frederickson 1981: 6). The political rules from their government presided over European businesses (and even their own imperial rule) to ensure that there would be civil and peaceful relations between European settlers and the natives. Therefore making European expansionism and their selfish desire to own the land more difficult to execute (Frederickson 1981).

Europeans had to rely on a more “palatable” way that would enable them to assert full control over the new territories that they were settlers in order to be able to make free claim to it (Steyn 2001b: 6). Europeans thought that this would be possible if they fashioned together an identity that could be imposed, and one that would place them at a “natural” advantage over the natives who, otherwise indisputably, owned the land (Frederickson 1981). The identity they would forge was to be strategic, functional and most importantly, powerful. It would have to ascertain the European coloniser’s privilege, dominance and control over the land’s resources, wealth and the natives. The key to establishing this identity would be built on the perceived differences between the coloniser and the colonised.

Based on European perceptions of difference , the differences established were informed by the perceptions only of the European coloniser who would go on to establish an identity opposite to the colonised, and therefore would frame themselves as better than the group that he would benefit from colonising (Steyn 2001b: 6). The difference between coloniser and colonised were fixated on external physiognomic features, particularly skin complexion (Steyn 2001b: 6). Possessing light skin would come to identify who would be the coloniser (the light skinned

European), and possessing darker skin would come to identify the colonised (the dark skinned native) (Steyn 2001: 6). European privilege, dominance and power resided in, and was guaranteed by, their skin colour and would be used as the basis for the justification as to why Europeans were entitled to the land that they forcefully repossessed. Their “white” skin was mobilised to create an identity that would position themselves as superior over the “black” skinned colonised natives (Steyn 2001). This new identity that was based on the lightness of their skin would be named *white*.

Whiteness within this context, as Steyn (2001b: 5) postulates, can therefore be defined as “a natural grouping of people [by way of their shared light skin], who through a superiority endogenously determined, occupied a dominant relationship to the darker skinned people”. Whiteness is therefore born out of a process of differentiation between self and other that functions to benefit the European coloniser. Successfully framed as being superior to others by greedy European colonisers, being “white” meant that they could now freely dominate and steal native land and its wealthy resources because of their white skin colour (Frederickson 1981). Ideas of “whiteness” spread across colonised territories. The wider their expansion in other territories, the more lucrative it became for European colonisers to baptise themselves as “white” (Steyn 2001b: 5). Being “white” officially meant that, then and now, you are automatically born into privilege, power and domination (Tim Wise 2008).

White colonial dominance handed white Europeans the power to create and disseminate epistemologies that would rule all colonial worlds (Wynter in Mignolo 2015: 110). Whites alone as the rulers of knowledge and power could wield definitions of the Self and the “Other” (Steyn 2001: 8). Their white identity, which began as a constructed tool used to gain power, would now be established as a widely known uncontested “fact”. Sylva Wynter (Mignolo 2015: 110) states that whiteness established itself as the norm because through the European’s eyes, the coloniser became the standard measurement of what it meant to be *human*. Because whiteness developed relationally, European colonisers painted a picture of blacks as the half-human, “primitive, disordered savage” ‘Other’ so as to establish their own humanness (Steyn 2001: 5 & 8). This “knowledge” was used to set themselves apart from the non-white who was declared to be *less-than-human* (Mignolo 2015). Unlike them, blacks were perceived as immoral, primitive and therefore in need of Europe’s civilisation (Steyn 2001: 8 & Mignolo 2015).

Europe was seen by colonisers as the centre of the world (Steyn 2001). European colonisers who did not hold similar worldviews to the natives misinterpreted native culture as strange in

comparison to European world views of their modernity and cultivation. Even if European domination was painted as a rescue mission to save and civilise the native from savagery (Frederickson 1989), the establishment of the black identity of the colonised is distinctly a European misperception that was created only to ensure the success of European imperialism. Europeans began to produce denigrated imageries of blackness in order to support their accumulation of the wealth of the world. In doing so, European colonisers were able to justify their superiority and their exploitation of the “Other”.

White supremacy therefore is a powerful ideology intrinsic in the construction of whiteness. With the landing of Columbus, white supremacy would be established and would remain the dominant ideology pervading all colonised worlds (Sylva Wynter in Mignolo 2015). Defined as the “attitudes, ideologies and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of white or European dominance over ‘non-whites’ populations” (Frederickson 1981: xi), white supremacy across all colonised lands would help establish the world view that Europeans were endogenously superior to the natives that they encountered during colonial conquest due to their “whiteness”

3.4 Establishing a White South Africa

Studies in whiteness have no borders. Widely developed in the 19th century in the USA in order to establish an American identity, the whiteness did not remain an American construct alone³ (Dyer 1997: 19 & Steyn 2001b: xxii). Steyn (2001: xxii) reiterates that histories of white supremacy are a *global* reality found across the world in countries once colonized. The status and function of whiteness, even though nuanced, share applicable themes across postcolonial countries (Frederickson 1981). Columbus had contemporaries who landed in various parts of the world including Africa. European colonisers established similar concepts of whiteness and fixed white supremacy into their colonisation of the lands they forcefully held dominion over.

White domination, particularly in South Africa, has a long colonial history. The arrival of the Dutch began paving the way for a white supremacist South Africa. Jan Van Riebeeck’s infamous pit stop onto Cape shores offloaded onto South Africa the “emergence and expansion of a white-dominated society” (Frederickson 1981: 4). The arrival of the Dutch in the Cape of Good Hope forty five years after the English invasion of North America brought European

³Because America comprised of different European nationalities, the notion of a “white” race was used as a blanket cover for all disparate Europeans (and different European ancestries) that made up America to make them common against “reds and blacks”. For more on this read Painter, 2010.

narratives of white entitlement “with a particular strength and tenacity” into South Africa (Frederickson 1981: 3 & Steyn 2001: 24). But, they were not the only white European nation interested in dominating South African land. The British followed thereafter and found South Africa to be a land “temperate in climate” and this made South Africa a “potentially attractive” land to settle in (Frederickson 1981:4).

Rich in natural resources, Europeans settled in South Africa while accumulating wealth for their European countries of origin (Frederickson 1981:4). However, European settlers sought not only to live on the land, but to also possess and extract from lands already owned by the natives. European invaders thus had to put new strategies in place that would allow them to forcefully possess it. To have territorial supremacy, European colonisers changed their relation to the natives they wished to displace (Frederickson 1981: 4). This was easy for the European settlers who “held onto European assumptions of racial and cultural superiority of entitlement to political control and land ownership” in the first place (Steyn 2001b: xxiii). Whiteness was mobilised to gain them rights to exercise control over the land they did not own.

South African European settlers drew from white supremacist beliefs exercised by other colonised lands and utilised physiognomic differences as a key factor in the construction of South African white identity as superior. Although South African whiteness was made up of disparate cultural groups, the Dutch Afrikaners and British, both settler groups joined in unison through their shared white identity (Steyn 2001b). For the British being “white” meant that they could hold onto their rights to maintain a European frame of reference while they were in Africa. Because British epistemologies esteemed whiteness as the universal standard measurement of all human development, the “white” European settlers both positioned themselves as superior (Steyn 2001b: 18 & 26). All other races would therefore be pitted against whiteness and the native African whom they perceived to be different from themselves would be identified as the inferior colonised “Other” (Steyn 2001b: 18 & 26).

During the nineteenth century in South Africa these primary races “Othered” against whiteness were the Khoikhoi, the San and the Nguni who were derogatorily referred to as the Hottentot, Bushmen and Kaffir. With the notions of white racial superiority and black racial inferiority circulating the international colonial modern world, hatred against the Hottentot and black African Nguni aroused. Perceived as vice-ridden and non-human races worthy of extermination, Scottish-born doctor, Robert Knox (Steyn 2001: 30) writes of “Other” races stating:

Who cares particularly for the Negro or Hottentot, or the Kaffir...The latter...destined by the nature of their race to run, like other animals, a certain limited course of existence.

Khoikhoi, San and Nguni were represented across Europe as “dim-witted, naïve, emotional undisciplined, uncultured, in short – children of nature that needed to be civilized and domesticated.” Africans in short were seen as the ‘lowest grade of humanity’ worthy of extermination (Comer 1972: 126).

Bernth Lindfors (1996: 1) states that throughout Europe, the black African was viewed as half-animal and half-human.. The “Hottentots” in particular were seen by the British as being “closely akin to apes and chimpanzees than to human beings” (Lindfors 1996: 4 & 7). British anthropologists like, Francis Galton (cited in Steyn 2001: 30) described the Khoi San as dirty squalid natives who “clicked and howled, and chattered, and behaved like baboons.” White South Africans drew the legitimacy of their superiority from the racist and hateful ideologies all in the name of science. The hatred for the “Other” went as far as constructing illegitimate racist studies on the “Hottentot” and black African which were all done through European frameworks of white racial superiority.

Although science was supposedly performed “objectively” by European scientists, results often came to the same bias conclusions affirming the ideologies of the superiority of the Europeans across colonial nations (Lindfors 1996: 2). Anti-black European anthropologies measured the skulls of Africans which were determined to be “smaller” in shape and size than that of the European’s. In South Africa, craniometrical measurements of the “Hottentot” and African skull were used to “prove” to European settlers that they were indeed of higher intelligence and of a superior nature because they possessed a “significantly larger skull than that of African blacks” (Comer 1972: 126). White supremacist inflected sciences were used to support the European ideologies already in place that endowed Europeans as superior (Comer 1972: 126). Racist science was tainted by the popular *perceptions* and ideologies held by avaricious European colonisers (Lindfors 1996).

Colonisers knew that they could gain their capital wealth without guilt of embezzlement if the entire modern world saw and treated Africans as “less-than-human”. The coloniser’s racist impressions of the native as inferior would therefore be mobilized as “fact” (Sylva Wynter in Mignolo 2015). If the white coloniser could factually present his superiority as endogenous, then no policies or governments protecting the land and resources belonging to the native would stand. Through the ideological and epistemological doctrine of race, science would be used to

“objectively” reinforce white subjective ideologies that would affirm the white coloniser’s entitlement to own and control colonised lands and peoples.

3.5 White Anxiety, Black Freedom

Colonialism naturalised and secured the supremacy of the white individual through putting in place laws that ensured the “restriction of citizenship rights to a privileged group characterised by its light pigmentation” (Frederickson 1981: xi). Slavery was one such means of ensuring white mastery over, not only native lands, but native black bodies. In the eyes of the European coloniser, slavery was the marker of black African identity, and freedom and authority became fundamental in marking white identity (Steyn 2001). A dichotomy was established. Whiteness meant freedom, and blackness meant slavery.

Slavery, although, began as a pragmatic decision to increase production power at extremely exorbitant rates. Blacks were exploited by European colonisers who paid them bare minimum to nothing for their hard labour. In order for European invaders to keep ownership over the economic wealth extracted from colonised lands, slavery quickly provided a model that could institutionalise white supremacy and acted as “a seed bed for attitudes and doctrines associated with racial inequality” purported by whites (Frederickson 1981: 54). Therefore slavery played a crucial ideological function in upholding white supremacy, too. Institutionalised slavery, now emerging in the American South and the Cape colony, came through the white supremacist belief that slavery was reserved for non-whites, and not European whites (Frederickson 1981: 70). Racial inequality between coloured and black South Africans and the superior whites was uncontested therefore naturalising blatant racism as “the way things are” (Steyn 2001: 21). Black slavery and white freedom was therefore normalised due to institutionalising slavery as an accepted law. Through black slavery, power and privilege were synonymous with white freedom. Steyn (2001) identifies this as the “master narrative of whiteness.”

The master narrative of whiteness, according to Steyn (2001b), is the largely uncontested acceptance of discourses on the naturalisation of white supremacy. White supremacist discourses were developed and disseminated in the interests and favour of the dominant group labelled “white”. Globally across European colonies, whiteness became the dominant way of viewing and interacting with the world (Dyer 1997). Even in South Africa, whites who are a minority in the country remained privileged and powerful (Steyn 2001 & Frederickson 1981).

However, with the introduction of the 1833 Emancipation of Slavery Act, privileged Europeans would perceive their white supremacy to be threatened.

The Emancipation Act instituted that all enslaved Africans in America were now entitled to their freedom. American abolitionism became a movement that spread across the modern colonial scene which heightened perceptions of threat against colonial white power globally (Frederickson 1981: 163). Because British colonisers held an international frame of reference, British colonisers were influenced by American abolitionism and allowed British humanitarianism to invade the Cape colony (Steyn 2001: 32). After pushing forward anti-slavery campaigns, in 1834 slavery was abolished in South Africa and all African slaves under the British colony were now given their legislated freedom (Steyn 2001: 32). Steyn (2001: 32) states that this move caused the white Afrikaner group great anxiety because white freedom, for the Afrikaner, meant their white domination (Steyn 2001: 35). Being white, for the outraged Afrikaner group, meant that all other racial groups must remain “rightless” whilst only they retain all rights (Steyn 2001: 35).

The freedom of the black slave was therefore perceived as a great threat against the establishment of whiteness. Because white supremacy was developed relationally to black enslavement, the freedom of blacks did not distinguish whiteness to be any different. If anything, for whites, the abolition of slavery meant that blacks would be placed on equal footing with them and this contributed to white fears of an “African” future without their white freedom (Steyn 2001: 35). Furthermore, white land owners were fearful that they would suffer financial loss because the production power needed to help sustain colonial commerce would be stunted without black slaves (Lindfors 1996: 1 & Steyn 2001: 35). The British colony shared the same fears as the Afrikaners. Without the exploitation of black labour, the British colony would lose economic wealth and social power (Lindfors 1996). Although initially pushing for the freedom of black slaves, the British government was guilty of not supporting the British colony’s decision to eradicate the exploitation of black labour. Blacks, even though free, were still caged to their “proper biological niche at the bottom of the natural human ladder” (Lindfors 1996: 2).

Images depicting the black African as the racial underclass were disseminated during their law instated emancipation. The British still saw the African as ‘mentally, morally and physically’ enslaved and this bigoted attitude was reflected in the derogatory images of the African reproduced in popular colonial visual culture at that time (Lindfors 1996). Representations of blacks circulating during black slave emancipation grossly exaggerated the African as a half

human who deserved to be enslaved and thus ensured that white supremacy and entitlement, even in the face of black freedom, was kept secure (Lindfors 1996: 1 & Thelwell 2013).

3.6 Conclusion

The victory for blacks over the abolition of their slavery did not mean that racism in Europe and European colonies would be so easily eradicated (Lindfors 1996). During the abolition of slavery, black freedom “threatened” constructions of whiteness that were premised on liberty, supremacy and power over the “Other”. For the white coloniser to justify and preserve his privilege and power, it was necessary for him to establish the identity of the colonised as degenerate and therefore lower to himself (Hook 2007: 3). Motivated by establishing ideas of white racial superiority globally, colonised Africans were singled out by European colonisers for their “sheer difference from Europeans – in their physiognomy, gestures, languages, dress and behaviour” (Kenneth Morgan 2007: 22). In the process, blackness and whiteness become essentialised and homogenised meaning that *all* whites were naturally positioned highly above *all* “underdeveloped” and menial “ape-like” blacks (Byrne 2016: 672).

One such way of securing white racial superiority was through the iconographies published. The encyclopaedic ‘scientific’ sketches of “dark Africa” found in books, scientific journals and world fair exhibitions⁴ highlighted the African’s body and nature as a “deviant” divergence from the perfect physiognomy to that of white Europeans (Lindfors 1996: 10). These were not the only ways. Whiteness was also being effectively communicated and re-stabilised through Pan-Atlantic stage entertainment. Namely, white supremacy was re-stabilised through the racist song and dance recitals found in blackface minstrelsy.

⁴Khoikhoi, San and Zulu groups were placed on exhibition to perform their ‘traditional’ dance, culture and language for curious European masses to view race marked as ‘Other’ by European scientists. Read Lindfors, 1996.

4. BLACKFACE: THE WHITEST OF THEM ALL

4.1 Introduction

To identify whiteness, blacks and whites were placed in binary opposition to one another in blackface racial fictions. Blackface minstrelsy developed in order to further emphasise these racial differences, and to illustrate to white audiences what these differences meant for white racial superiority (Thelwell 2013: 68). By placing black and white characters in binary opposition to one another, there was a clear difference being performed between blacks and whites in their physiognomic construction and in the performances of their character. In performing blackness, white performers exaggerated the physiognomies of black Africans which described them as being exotic, degenerate and inferior in comparison to their refined and intelligent white counterparts.

These differences however were not perceived as fictional, but as closely resembling racial realities. Blackface performance was seen to accurately represent the meaning of black identity thereby helping to legitimate myths of superiority involved in the identity construction of whiteness as accurate (Pickering 2008). Without such clear identification and differentiation, supremacy, power and privilege so closely associated with having white identity would be easily lost. Without the introduction of blackface minstrel entertainment in such a time of heightened white anxiety, white identity and its colonial powers would seem to fall apart. The introduction of blackface is therefore revealed to be the result of white anxiety produced by fears of the loss of power. It is thus further revealed that blackface plays a central ideological function in the reproduction and preservation of white supremacy during times of perceived duress against whiteness.

4.2 Blackface Whiteness

The rise and popularity of blackface minstrel entertainment was accompanied by socio-political circumstances that threatened the assurance of white power. In the 1840's, discourses on the abolition of slavery meant that blacks who were seen to project "inherent" inferiority, and were believed to be born for slavery due to the nature of their black skin, would now be set free. But the British heralded freedom as the height of *their* identity. In fear that freedom was no longer a

“white British thing” thereby blurring racial lines, Europeans could not cope with the racial, social and political effects on their white identity as a result of the abolition of black slavery (Stanley Lemons 1997: 140). Morgan (2007: 23) reiterates that “Englishmen prided themselves on the fact that they were free-born people with legal rights and common law.”

Throughout colonialism, white identity was formulated through “face-to-face contact with people of colour” as well as through their contrast against them (David Roediger 1999: 589). Colonial logic dictated that whites were entitled to freedom because blacks were born for detainment. With the freedom of blacks they deemed as inferior, the colonial perception that white identity could not out rightly be protected and maintained as superior and privileged was a pervasive fear. Black freedom was perceived as a threat to the purity, integrity and privilege that encompasses the white “spirit”. White masters no longer had control over a black body that they constructed as subordinate and in need of white paternalism (Dyer 1997).

According to white reasoning, if blacks and whites were to be seen as equal, then whiteness would no longer be superior to blackness. To maintain white supremacy in the face of slavery’s end, it was therefore necessary to reproduce depictions of blacks as the non-threatening and still, inferior race. Making blacks the “principle comical character” of entertainment aided in alleviating the putative danger that black freedom and equality was perceived to put against whiteness (Lemons 1997: 140). Blackface minstrelsy, and its birth and naturalisation of the “black fool”, are a consequence of white anxieties over the loss of their “innate” supremacy and power.

4.2.1 The History of Blackface Minstrelsy

Pickering (2008) traces the history of blackface minstrel performance as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century⁵. Blackface minstrelsy began in America and spread into Britain quickly growing as one of the earliest and most popular forms of pan-Atlantic entertainment. Pickering (2008: 2 & 14) states that blackface minstrelsy began as an alluring cultural commodity; as an avenue for rapid commercial wealth that was quickly adopted into American and British commercial popular culture. Popular white minstrel figures that capitalised on blackface caricature made problematic claims about the accuracy of their performance of the dialects, songs and mannerisms of blacks based on their “observations” of black slaves (Thelwell 2013). Coupled by their “black” theatrical performance and racial ventriloquism, minstrelsy was a favourable form of entertainment for white audiences who experienced minstrel shows as an environment in which European “settlers of all classes [could] come together and laugh at what they considered to be the ‘exotic’ and ‘natural’ characteristics of black people” (Pickering 2008: 2 & Thelwell 2013: 74).

However, blackface representations that purported to be close to black reality were superficially engaged with by white colonial audiences as “real” when they were not. Firstly, producers of blackface knew that they would benefit commercial success from white colonial audiences who enjoyed seeing the blackface performers prance on stage if their performance was framed as a depiction of “true blacks” (Pickering 2008: 2). Secondly, despite the efforts of white performers to give an “accurate” imitation of blackness, the “racial impersonation [in blackface] cannot escape a legacy of racist deployments” (Cole and Davis 2013: 11). Rather than being “accurate” depictions of blacks, minstrel representations of blackness were based off popular colonial imaginaries and racist myths about blackness that already preceded blackface minstrel entertainment (Pickering 2008 & Thelwell 2013). The intention to accumulate wealth at the expense of humiliating the black figure coloured how blackness was to be represented and performed. Therefore, any hope at achieving mimetic representation of blackness was inaccessible.

Minstrelsy’s “realistic” features of blackness were always ideologically inflected by racist colonial ideas that placed white supremacy at the centre of meanings of whiteness. Racist ideologies of blackness framed white performers’ choices on how to represent blacks on stage. Blackface

⁵Blackface tradition began as early as the fifteenth century in English Elizabethan portrayals of blackness on stages. Read Robert Hornback (2007) for further detail.

minstrel representation cannot be dissociated from this racist thinking. White minstrel actors were actually performing mediated impressions of blackness polluted by racist ideas of blackness already held them and their white compatriots. These racist ideas manifested themselves through the racist black stereotypes performed on minstrel stages that aimed to “pin down” black and white racial identity. Thelwell (2013) reiterates that white audiences used minstrel shows as a forum wherein disparate and desperate white European settlers could form a community based on a shared and fixed white identity. The production of fixed racial identities, according to Hook (2004: 5), was a prominent feature in colonial discourses of race and ideological constructions of “otherness” that was more achievable using blackface.

White colonisers in particular, had anxieties over establishing the identification of racial identity and culture because otherwise, differences between the European coloniser and African colonised remain unclear (Hook 2004: 5). The notion of a fixed identity was an attempt at achieving “a kind of buttoning-down of [the non-western other], a normalisation of difference” that served to enforce distinct categories between coloniser/colonised and master/slave (Hook 2004: 5). The unclear hierarchical difference between the European coloniser and black colonised was quelled through the comical and derogatory “realistic” imagery of blackness constructed by blackface minstrel shows (Hook 2004).

Blackface minstrel performance displayed the ‘negro’ identity to be a buffoonish, dishonest, thieving, slow-witted, irrational, habitually infantile, indolent and idle object (Essena O’Neill cited in Pickering 2008: 113). Making the black individual the buffoonish “principle comic character”, an imagined homogenous derided fixed black racial identity was created. This sense of universal black identity stood opposite to an imagined homogenous fixed white identity that was positioned as superior. Through blackface minstrelsy, an effective channel to articulate and reinforce racial hierarchy through representations of a “buttoned-down” and thus permanent derogatory black identity was found and exercised by European colonisers who sought to re-establish themselves as superior (Thelwell 2013: 67).

The demarcation of racial difference endorsed by blackface reiterated and stressed imperialist notions of racial difference and racial hierarchy (Julie Codell 2014: 33). Pan-Atlantic racial discourses offered essentialist notions of difference that were based on biological features used to explain the ‘indubitable’ difference between Africans and Europeans (Thelwell 2013: 74). “Black” physiognomic features stereotyped by white impressions of “blackness” were purposively exaggerated to make clear this racial distinction (Dyer 1997: 51). The blackface

mask functioned to objectify the abstract concept of race and its racism by fixing physiognomic features of the black body and differentiating it as “black” and therefore deviant to the “white” European body (Byrne 2016).

The blackface mask focused on the “objective” mannerisms, phenotypic and physiognomic external features of the black body in order to differentiate it from the European race (Byrne 2016: 666). In view of it being a representational function of an established idea of blackness, blackface comprised of the exaggeration and emphasis of black facial features. The darkness of black skin exaggerated through applying burnt-cork make-up, drawing protuberant white eyes, donning exaggerated red or white wide-mouth grins, wearing woolly “kinky” wigs and over-sized “passed down” clothes (Jewell 1993 & Pickering 2008: 98). Blackface would represent the blackface body (and implicitly the black body) to be what European colonisers described as “grotesque” (Eric Loft 1992: 31 & Pickering 2008: 98).

The hyperbolised physical features worn by blackface minstrels described above were used to explain and justify the racist behavioural and psychological characteristics attributed to blackness as possessing “dull-witted oafishness and childish simplicity” (Pickering 2008:98). The blackface mask and performance acted as a material reminder of white supremacy because it functioned as a way that white ideologies of black inferiority would appear as the reality of race; the reality of blackness (Byrne 2016: 664-665). The physical attributes of the blackface mask associated blackness with mental deficiency, deformity, irrationality, squalor, and transgression (Hornback 2007: 47). Hornback (2007) concludes that these physical attributes were made official iconographies of blackness and were synonymous to a “natural” folly assumed to be the essence of blackness. The assumed folly perceived by racist Europeans to be at the heart of blackness, according to Hornback (2007: 68), is what gave blackface tradition its “spirit”. Blackface entertainment was therefore marked and coded to represent black people as comical natural born fools. These were already existing ideas that further essentialised blacks as inherent fools.

The fictional accounts of race depicted on blackface minstrel performances of the foolish black were so powerful that they contributed to the further development of eurocentric sciences on race. According to Hornback (2007: 67), ideologies present in blackface tradition paved the way even further for the “scientific” grounding of racial difference utilised by Europeans to rationalise black slavery and denigration in the nineteenth century. Coinciding with the popularity of

blackface, scientific racism had also brought about “new terminology, but not fundamentally new ideas” (Hornback 2007: 67).

Public mythic discourses on race were transferred into a scientific mode of race discourse that deemed the existence of the black fool more legitimate, irrefutable and therefore natural. Reason was naturalised to exclusively belong to whites as their expected inheritance. In contrast, blacks were “born” foolish. Through pseudo-scientific theories that qualified the black man as beneath the white man by way of his biological features, the association between blackface and the “natural” comical buffoon that preceded any grounding in scientific racism, was now appropriated, entrenched and apprehended as “scientific truth” (Hornback 2007). The defectively represented blackface body was used to characterise ‘real life’ whiteness as a superiorly intelligent, (morally) refined and rational being with the power and the right to effect mastery over blacks (Dyer 1997: 23-24 & Stephen Whitfield 1987: 626).

The on-stage use of racist visual tropes such as the thick lipped, wide-eyed and grinning black man was used to affirm and confirm the black man in the street as the inherent perpetual fool (Hornback 2007). Blacks, through blackface, were therefore intentionally constructed and represented as the eternal comical and dim-witted clown to ease white anxiety and to naturalise white superiority. This in effect, caused the black figure to be rationalised as the rightful object of comedy and ridicule in the white imagination (Hornback 2007). The black figure who was and understood as jester functioned to infantilise the black man who at once no longer posed a threat to the footing of white supremacy. Through the laughter caused by the comic association with blackface and the ideas of blackness it represented, white audiences could buffer their anxieties by viewing black individuals as inferior objects of white entertainment (Whitfield 1987 & Hornback 2007).

The assumptions of a “fixed” blackness produced by blackface minstrelsy verified that the actual false ideas of a “rigid and unchanging order of being” are indeed true (Hook 2004: 5). Racial identity was assumed to be an unchanging fact. Fixed black racial identity “[that] evokes a sense of degeneracy and a kind of repetitive, perpetual moral disorder” on the black other was seen as black people’s true and invariable nature (Hook 2004: 5). Under fixed black identity, there was very little to no accommodation for heterogeneous and nuanced black identities that differed from one another. The derogatory and seemingly “natural” racist characteristics attached to blackness that were illustrated and upheld by American (and British) blackface minstrelsy, were not only applicable to African Americans (pre- and post-slavery). The black as

the natural born fool was applicable to *all* Africans, including South Africans, who were also included and homogenised within the white European racial canon as “black” (Pickering 2008).

4.3 The white man’s Precious Cargo: The Arrival of Blackface in South Africa

Blackface minstrelsy continues to flourish in places that are racially “destabilised and highly stratified” because of their shared colonial history (Cole cited in Pettersen 2016: 56). It is because of colonialism that blackface was easily circulated outside of America – its place of origin (Pettersen 2016: 56). Because South Africa also carries within it a deep colonial history, blackface minstrel culture, its ideological meanings and influences could easily cross the Atlantic and translate its way into nineteenth century South African popular culture (Thelwell 2013: 69). It was during the 1860’s through popular British blackface minstrel troupe ‘Christy’s Plantation Minstrels’, that American and British minstrelsy was introduced and appropriated into a South African minstrel “tradition” that catered to the racial politics of its time (Verney 2003: 2, Cole & Davis 2013: 9 & Thelwell 2013).

Thelwell (2013: 68) explains that in colonial South Africa, similar to Pan-Atlantic minstrel tradition, blackface minstrel figures were “employed primarily as a discursive mechanism for marking racial difference.” The stereotypes used in presumed realistic portrayals of the Khoi San and *amaXhosa* as thieving, indolent, disorganised, “rebellious” and hypersexual (Cole & Davis 2013: 10), were used by blackface performers as an ideological means to portray and educate on the “facticity” of the inferiority of the colonised Black Africans in relation to their white British coloniser’s culture and race (Thelwell 2013).

Similar to American minstrel culture, blackface minstrel teachings on racial difference in South Africa mobilised expressions of the ideologies of white superiority that were the product of the white colonial imagination. Under a European colony facing the abolition of black slavery, blackface minstrelsy in South Africa also functioned to ensure the maintenance of black individuals as the racial underclass. According to Thelwell (2013: 70) it was during the abolition of slavery in South Africa in 1834, that *amaXhosa* were introduced to racist black servant character types on the stages of blackface minstrel shows. The British endeavoured to teach free black Africans of their “true” racial identity from blackface performances that reproduced white supremacist ideas of the inherent position of black people as servile and inferior. The British imagined a happy, contented and servile black labourer portrayed by minstrel

representations of the African American “nigger” as how free black South Africans should continue to behave. The African-American “nigger slave” was a childish, happy-go-lucky, infectiously high-spirited and docile slave (Thelwell 2013: 68).

The on-stage representations of blackness on blackface minstrel stages were one of the ways that assisted South African racial discourses to construct ideas of a ‘fixed’ blackness that was only efficient when in servility (Jo-Anne Morgan 1995). Placed oppositionally, South African White British racial and cultural identity was ‘fixed’ and reinforced as superior (Thelwell 2013: 74). I will refer to two popular blackface minstrel archetypes used often in minstrel representations of blackness to illustrate the effective mobilisation of blackface minstrelsy in the perpetuation of white supremacy in more detail. The first being Sambo who is first and most enduring blackface minstrel stereotype from which other blackface archetypes derive. The other being the Mammy, who encompasses colonial impressions of the meaning of black femininity.

4.4 Big Mama & Black Papa: Blackface Archetypes

4.4.1 *Daddy Sambo*

Minstrel tradition is the product of white bourgeoisie entertainment showcasing white racial ideas, ideologies and ideals (Winter 1979:149). By performing a caricature of blackness as infantilised, mentally deficient and buffoonish, white fears and anxieties of black retaliation against white dominance could be deterred (Green 1979 & Whitfield 1986: 625-626). Minstrel stages created a platform of justifications for whites to “effect mastery” over the black individual whose essence was showcased as infantile and comical (Whitfield 1986: 625). Whites expected to be feared by the blacks whom they patronisingly viewed as mere enchanting entertainment.

Derogatory representations of the black male were, according to Whitfield (1986: 625), a method of social control. Blackface iconography was designed to disseminate and popularise the idea of the amusing black who possesses the “perpetual good humour...of an everlasting childhood” (Stampp 1971: 375, Whitfield 1986 & Hornback 2007). By virtue of possessing a black face, humorous effects were evoked. The minstrel representation of the black male, by marking stupidity as the essence of his blackness, ideas of the black man as the “threatening brute” were muted (Green 1976). Whatever qualities that were thought to be “menacing or subversive” about the black man were derided by the on-stage stereotypes displaying his

childish simplicity (Whitfield 1986: 626). Black 'brute' masculinity feared by whites was therefore non-threatening.

Blackface minstrelsy turned the black man into the object of laughter, and this removed him of his "masculinity, dignity and self-possession" (Whitfield 1986: 625). By convincing both whites and blacks alike that blacks were indeed degradable inferiors incapable of intelligence and self-sufficiency, white supremacy could take full flight without any disturbance (Hornback 2007: 71). Thus the painful birth of Sambo – the representational "evidence" that the black man is born the white man's comical fool.

As the first and most enduring blackface stereotype in American blackface history, Sambo is an unrivalled icon in blackface minstrelsy (Whitfield 1986: 625 & Green 1999). The origin of Sambo is thought to be traced back to the fifteenth and early sixteenth century in slave-trade culture between Western Europeans and Africans (Hornback 2007). As a European conception, Hornback (2007: 71) argues that the name Sambo derives from the Spanish, "zambo" taken from West African culture⁶ meaning "to disgrace". Also possibly influenced to mean an unintelligent 'bowlegged person resembling a monkey', *zambo* was used by Spanish and Portuguese slavers to ridicule African slaves (Hornback 2007: 65 & 71). As a result, the black slave was represented as savage- the threatening brute from the "Dark continent" (Green 1999).

Through racist pseudo-scientific irrationalisation framed as "scientific", the "thicke lippes, the upper hanging over the neather [sic]" of the black man were identified to be like those of the "Asses or Apes" (Edward Topsell cited in Hornback 2007: 65). Because the ape was seen as lacking in logic and associated with "the irrational natural fool type", black representations began to follow this form (Hornback 2007: 66). It is from this bigoted imagery that the black man as the foolish ape was established and rationalised (Hornback 2007). The connection between black men as apes was painted in the European imagination of blackness.

Sambo was conceived in the European imaginary as a concept long before he was given any established identity (Hornback 2007: 71). It was only during the eighteenth century that Sambo began his infamous career as America's jester on the blackface minstrel stages spreading into the nineteenth century. It was from the widespread idea of the savage appearance of the African American's "short flat snub nose, thick epidermis, thick protruding lips and short black woolly hair" as resembling that of a monkey (Green 1999), that Sambo's physical and mental deficiency originated.

⁶According to Hornback (2007: 71) these were the Mende and Vai communities in West Africa.

Not far from the adjoining of black man as the foolish ape, Sambo was characterised as the “slow-witted, loosely shuffling, buttock-scratching, benignly-optimistic, superstitiously frightened, childishly lazy and irresponsibly carefree” black man (Hornback 2007: 70). And, he was further made inferior by the “amusing” physical characteristics given to him. Blackface Sambo was represented as the defective and empty-headed wide-eyed, slack-jaw, grinning black man made popular on commercial items such as place mats, tea sets, belt buckles and electronic media (Whitfield 1986: 624-625 & Hornback 2007: 70).

Bearing in mind that slavery is central to the establishment of the white identity, Sambo’s silly grinning countenance, natural dim-wittedness and lack of agency supported by his oafish appearance, became the ideological justification for black slavery and white supremacy because of his qualities packaged and perceived as inferior (Green 1999 & Painter 2010: 388). But it is his representation as the content plantation “darky” that fooled other whites into believing that slavery was enjoyable to the blacks they enslaved (Green 1999 & Hornback 2007). Sambo was constructed to bring white audiences false entertaining and romanticised ideas of black slaves as a “happy race of beings” (Green 1999). Also seen in colonial recordings, the episcopal missionary Henry Benjamin Whipple (cited in Green 1999) observed black slaves as knowing of no pain and strife in their daily workings by writing:

... if you did not know it you would never imagine they were slaves. The loud laugh, the clear dancing eye, the cheerful face show that in this sad world of sin and sorrow they know but very few.”

Whites could therefore enjoy demeaning and indignant blackface representations of Sambo as the delightful black foolish slave because it allowed them to continue the racist, violent and humiliating practise of slavery without guilt. Sambo is the poorly spoken “jolly, overgrown child who [is] happy to serve his master” after all, and was thought to reflect black slave reality (Whitfield 1986: 626 & Green 1999).

Remembering that the premise of white racial ideology is the idea of the white reasonable and responsible agent, Sambo was carefully constructed to “inherently” reflect as the opposite (Winter 1979: 151). Blackface paraded the natural born foolish, lazy, stupid and comical black as authentic in order to realise a superior, intelligent and accomplished whiteness. As the ‘degraded man-child’ without any sense of direction caused by his mental deficiency and dependency, condescending white paternalism was therefore deemed necessary for the emasculated black man (Whitfield 1986). This idea was an

'ideological imperative of all slavery systems' (Orlando Patterson cited in Hornback 2007: 71).

Byrne (2016: 672) continues that the racist stereotypes characterised by blackface characters such as Sambo, painted blacks with one irremovable and homogenising stroke and were seen by white audiences to encompass so-called "blackness" (Miller 2007 & Moscovitz 2009). Sambo is the black fool happily sharing his stupidity with white audiences on stage. His blackface iconography established buffoonery as the main representation of blacks still present in television. His sullied image and presence on minstrel stages, souvenirs, and even film/television comedy screens produced a depraved humour incited by what was seen as the essence of his black soul – his natural black hilarity.

Whitfield (1986: 625) contends that although Sambo was created a buffoon, his representation of blacks as possessing "infantile and comic" souls is not amusing in any way. I agree with Whitfield. Blackface minstrelsy, although framed as harmless entertainment, was used as a means to achieve white egocentric gain through promoting white supremacy and entitlement to wealth. The white sense of humour produced by the blackface mask and performance is used as a tool of oppression against blacks and a technique used to emasculate black men. Blackface minstrelsy is a mechanism to help name blacks as deficient and further ensconced the incapability of black individuals to enter into white societies not as slaves, but as equals (Stampp 1971: 389 & Whitfield 1986).

The jocular Sambo was the "black faced" figure used to do this. He is the ignorant, docile, humble and happy slave. He is characterised as the vacuous and infantile jester naively following his master for direction and instruction. Blackface minstrelsy functions to identify, naturalise and protect whiteness as valuable and superior as opposed to inferiorly depicted blackness (Miller 2007 & Moscovitz 2009). Sambo served the purpose of his creation: that of verifying the racist ideologies of the supreme white master and the lowly black slave as accurate and desirable.

4.4.2 Mammy Jemima

Characterisation of the blackface Mammy figure grew from blackface representations of black masculinity figured through Sambo. Verney (2003: 2) draws out the changes to blackface minstrelsy in the 1840's. He states that blackface minstrel entertainment grew from being solo performances of novel characters like "Sambo", into a three part entertainment show. The shows now included an array of 'entertaining' segments which included opening song and dance performances by "the urban black dandie"⁷, comedic monologues, concluding song and dances from "happy black slaves" on plantation farms and blackface drag.

White male performances of blackface drag coincided with the 1848 women's suffrage movement (Verney 2003: 3). White men who felt threatened by women's rights campaigners fighting for their equal rights to vote, would perform comical caricatures of black women in order to calm down white male anxieties over perceived threats posed against established patriarchal gender roles (Verney 2003: 3). Blackface therefore was not only a mechanism used to enforce white supremacy, but also used to establish a **patriarchal** white supremacy. Although the women's suffrage movement marginalised and excluded the involvement of black women, white men were not able to "lampoon [white] politicians and other [white] authority figures without fear of retribution" without using blackface (Verney 2003: 2). Blackface drag performances around the time of women's suffrage were a target to the white women who were perceived to be a threat to the institution of white patriarchy disguised through the use of blackface and ultimately black women.

Verney (2003: 3-4) argues that by creating subordinated blackface drag characters, the unconvinced white male working class could critique and confirm that women were not equal to men and that abolitionist arguments were in fact wrong to believe that blacks should be given their freedom. White males were still "convinced of the racial inferiority of [all] African Americans" and the status of women that generalised them as beneath the "male" order in white society (Verney 2003: 3). Through blackface minstrelsy, insecure white male performers could establish "proper racial, gender and labour order" that preserved the authority given to their masculinity and whiteness (Harry Levenstein 2000: 321).

⁷ The urban black dandy, known as the Zip Coon, is another blackface stereotype/archetype. Opposite to the "slow-witted rural slave", he has a "hopelessly inflated sense of self-importance" that is quickly proved wrong with his ignorance, frequent use of malapropisms, stutter, ill-fitting suits and exaggerated facial features which made him humorous to white audiences (Verney 2003 & Codell 2015)

A strong part of American blackface minstrel culture was not only the dissemination of disparaging images of black masculinity as characterised through Sambo in order to secure whiteness, but also that of black femininity. Black femininity was seen as a threat against white superiority because, according to Jewell (1993: 36), African American women refused to accept the traditional gender roles that classified all females as inferior and submissive. Defying conformity to such gender positions jeopardised the white male order and authority over the black female slave body that white Masters believed they could control. Black female sexuality was another perceived threat posed by the black female slaves against whiteness.

Rumours that male slave owners had more interest in their black female slave than just their “ability to reproduce labour” wrought fears and jealousies within white women who believed that white male slave owners had sexual desires for their black female slaves (Jewell 1993: 36). To aid in the alleviation of overall white anxiety across genders over the taming of the black female body, cultural images of black femininity that emerged during slavery typically represented aggressive and ‘masculine’ black women embellished with exaggerated bodily features that were comedic in quality (Jewell 1993: 36).

The African American woman was represented as the “antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity and womanhood” and therefore challenged any ideas of white male slave owner’s sexual attraction towards her (Jewell 1993: 36). Also, depictions of the black female as masculine positioned African American womanhood as equal to manhood, but opposite to Euro-American femininity (Jewell 1993: 35). By producing demeaning and masculinising representations of black female identity, rumours of male slave owner’s sexual attraction towards their female slaves would be discredited (Jewell 1993: 36). White superiority would be validated, too. In blackface minstrel culture, the masculine, robust and obedient black female slave took on the role of the blackface archetype: the “Mammy”.

Also identified as the most pervasive image symbolising African American womanhood, the Mammy figure originated in the Antebellum South during slavery (Jewell 1993: 37).

Representations of the Mammy’s appearance and emotional make-up acted as the “yard stick” used to evaluate and measure the behaviour, and expectations, of all black women (Woodard & Mastin 2005: 271). The Mammy was portrayed as an overweight, dark skinned female house slave with unusually large breasts and buttocks (Jewell 1993: 39). Characterised as the “loyal” and submissive domestic servant who loves and takes care of her white slave owner family, Mammy took special care of the “socialisation and emotional needs of children and adult family

members” of her white slave owner family above even her own (Jewell 1993: 37 & 43, Woodard & Mastin 2005). Mammy although “fiercely independent, aggressive and powerful”, would, without complaint, happily perform arduous domestic tasks for the family of slave owners (Jewel 1993: 37 & 42). The ‘power’ of her independence was weakened while she lovingly served her white family. The message communicated by this depiction of Mammy was that the assertive behaviour displayed by black slaves at the time would be managed and tamed when under service to whites (Jewell 1993:42).

Colonial imaginations of black slaves painted a picture of black women as being “happy and content with their duties” (Jewell 1993). The Mammy figure was no different. Even after the abolition of slavery, scenes of Mammy working in domestic kitchens flooded the white cultural images found on their products and souvenirs. Mammy was depicted as always presenting a grinning countenance which indicated to others her contentment with her servility to whites (Jewell 1993). The Mammy figure’s contentment under subservience to her white “Missus” and “Massa” was used to justify the oppression of black women as a “favour” in white supremacist patriarchal society which reserved menial roles of domestic service for them; roles that white women themselves did not want to endure (Morgan 1995, Levenstein 2000: 321 & Woodard & Mastin 2005: 271). Mammy’s submissive demeanour connoted “satisfaction with her status in life, wherein she is consigned to performing domestic duties” (Jewel 1993: 38). Ideas of Mammy’s voluntary submission to her white family despite her freedom from slavery created the impression that slavery and the slave owners were not “villainous” in white society (Morgan 1995: 94). The impression was created that blacks in fact wanted to be servile. In a nutshell, the Mammy’s primary role was to reinforce stereotypes that *all* black women are “[submissive] towards [their] owner (during slavery), or...employer (following emancipation)” and, are sexually undesirable (Jewell 1993: 37 & 39).

The mammy figure is often shown wearing dull unappealing uniforms typically worn by domestic servants (Jewel 1993). Initially, slave owners wanted to minimise slave labour costs and this included saving on slaves’ boarding, food and clothing (Jewell 1993: 39). ‘Negro clothes’ were “unpretentious”, plain and met the minimal needs of the slave. Later, female slaves were in particular given drab dresses and a head scarf to wear in order to lessen “the extent to which she was perceived as a threat to her mistress” (Jewell 1993: 39). The perceived threat of black femininity was also lessened through Mammy’s exaggerated features which were viewed as an anomaly rather than signifying any sense of beauty and/or sexual desirability (Jewel 1993: 41).

Her “unusually large buttocks and embellished breasts place Mammy outside the sphere of sexual desirability” (Jewel 1993: 40).

Her obese frame and her disproportionately oversized breasts and buttocks in a white “culture that devalues women of large stature”, made the Mammy a comical matronly figure instead – full of maternal nurturing and moreso comedic in appearance (Jewell 1993: 39-40). Her robust physique was not just perceived as humorous, but because of it she was expected to humour others. The Mammy’s exaggerated breast size and buttocks are what made the nature of her character so comedic (Jewell 1993: 39). The humorous depiction and effect produced by the mammy’s disproportionate body on white audiences links her to colonial European fascination with the black feminine body represented by South Africa’s “Hottentot Venus”, Saartjie Baartman (Jewell 1993: 41).

Jewell (1993: 41) explains that Baartman’s body stirred “a preoccupation with the large buttocks and breasts of the African females” in modern European culture. Her body was perceived by white colonisers to be unusual and fascinating. Due to her “projecting” buttocks and large breasts, Baartman was brought from South Africa in the early nineteenth century to be exhibited nude throughout the British Isles and the rest of Europe where she was to be ‘humorously’ named by the Europeans as the “Hottentot Venus”. Lindfors (1996: 3-4) explains that nineteenth century encounters with the black female, “saw her in terms of her buttocks.” Baartman’s buttocks did not only make her appear “sexually different” from white women, but “were an outward sign of her primitive nature as well as an emblem of her unbridled lust” (Lindfors 1996: 4). This was opposite to black female sexuality as represented by the mammy who had the same features but was used to position black women as sexually undesirable.

Sold as “part freak, part savage, part cooch dancer” to European audiences, Baartman’s large buttocks were a sign of the African woman’s “savage” deformity and hypersexuality (Lindfors 1993: 3). In the sight of the Europeans, Baartman was dehumanised; according to them her appearance was closely associated with apes and chimpanzees (Lindfors 1996: 3-4). And, myths of her hypersexuality circulated European racial discourses which raised further fascination with her “primitive” genitalia”⁸ (Lindfors 1996: 4). Colonial cultural images of

⁸ Early European travelers’ embellished recordings of the native South African women’s genitalia described it as being an “‘apron’ of tissues that dangled between their legs to extraordinary lengths.” This excited curiosity within European scientists who used this as evidence of Baartman’s primitive origins (Lindfors 1996)

Baartman's supposed genitalia intensified European imagination of her primitive origins (Lindfors 1996: 7).

By placing embellished representations of Baartman's biological make-up next to that of idealised icons of European beauty such as the white bodied *Venus de Milo*, these stark contrasts left European readers to come to their own conclusions (Lindfors 1996: 7). It was concluded that Baartman and the European male and female were biologically incompatible (Lindfors 1993: 9). Therefore Baartman could be used as credible evidence that the African woman and the European cannot be placed on equal footing, never mind the European male being her compatible suitor; "the very idea was comical" (Lindfors 1996: 9-10). Baartman was not only the object of curiosity and fascination for Europeans, but also the object of white laughter.

European representations of Baartman are the origin of racist blackface minstrel representations that aimed to humiliate black femininity. Baartman's buttocks was seen as the quintessential buttocks that would frame European imageries of the black female body, which were further punted by stereotypes of the Mammy, as grotesque, undesirable, humorous and therefore unthreatening to white "perfection". The Mammy and Baartman, although representing different forms of black female sexuality, share representations of oversized breasts and buttocks that classified them as anomalies unworthy of "amorous attention" from European whites (Lindfors 1996: 10). The Mammy was constructed as asexual and sexually undesirable whereas Baartman was represented as hypersexual and somewhat sexually enticing, and repulsive in the same breath, to white imagination. However, both of these colonial cultural images were used to justify black women's positioning as the lower caste in white society either way (Jewell 1993). From Baartman to Mammy to another blackface drag minstrel favourite, Old Aunt Jemima, the blackface discrimination against black women as a result of white supremacist imagination continued.

There are huge similarities between the Mammy and Aunt Jemima. Aunt Jemima is also a self-sacrificing, loyal, faithful and obedient servant whose primary responsibility it is to perform domestic duties and to take care of those around her, particularly the white woman and children of the white family she worked under (Dobbs, Thomas & Harrison 2008: 137). As the maternal ideal in colonial American popular culture, Aunt Jemima was characterised as the devotional black woman endowed with qualities of "love, doting, advice, correction and supervision". These qualities she preserved exclusively for the selfless use of the white family's needs left under her

care (Melissa Harris-Perry 2011). Only different to the Mammy in the sense that Aunt Jemima's added main responsibility was to cook for her family of employers, she still continues to make sure that the women and children of her white family are well taken care of; a role she was seen by her white employers to best be suited for (Jewell 1993: 44). Aunt Jemima, like the mammy figure, remains in a position of servility and support to the white family who employ her.

All in all, Aunt Jemima is an invented mythical figure and ideological tool utilised by white minstrel performers who dressed in blackface and drag to represent and encourage racist ideas of the "happy life" of the plantation slave (Levenstein 2000: 321-322). Aunt Jemima moved from the minstrel stages, into advertising campaigns where her image was used to naturalise and perpetuate white images of the South as a leisurely place of fecund agriculture where white land owners had minimum labour leaving most of the work to be happily performed by their devoted black labourers (Levenstein 2000: 322). Aunt Jemima's constant smile was a way to signify that black slaves were happy to be subservient to their white masters (Jewell 1993: 41). Anti-abolitionists mobilised images of a pleased Aunt Jemima as a way to prove that slavery was a harmless institution that was benevolent to blacks who required the material and spiritual needs that only slavery could allegedly provide (Jewell 1993: 41). Pro-slavery's main argument was that without slavery, blacks would remain "uncivilised" (Jewell 1993: 41).

Black women's domestic labour, subservient behaviour, hyperbolised comical appearance and low intellectual ability functioned to "elevate the status of [white] individuals in society" (Jewell 1993: 58). Positioned as the object of white ridicule and laughter, the exaggerated images and Mammy's black body signalled to whites that being a black woman meant that you were a dark skinned, grotesque, undesirable and servile jester. Aunt Jemima's blackness was also used as a way to remind white audiences and consumers that it was *good* to be white. Blackface minstrel representations of Aunt Jemima (and other images of her outside of minstrelsy) "urg[ed] white women to *have* an Aunt Jemima," but never to have the desire to be her (Levenstein 2000: 322).

4.5 Conclusion

Blackface always involves "the conscious declaration of whiteness and white supremacy" (Eric Lott cited in Stratton 2011: 28). White men and women were made to feel superior to modest and tame representations of Aunt Jemima who was merely seen and used as an icon and symbol of content black inferiority (Levenstein 2000). Without contesting her position as inferior

to the white family she lived to serve, Aunt Jemima represented the natural order of benign black subservience to whiteness on minstrel stages (Levenstein 2000: 322). Through Sambo's performance as the comical jester in appearance and behaviour, white blackface minstrels could create a less threatening impression of the black man as the "inherent black fool" (Hornback 2007). By positioning the black male as the happy, slow-witted, infantile and naïve slave, white male fears of the brutish, cunning and discontented slaves "longing for revenge against their oppressors" would seem farcical (Verney 2003: 7).

The development of race by Europeans meant that whites and blacks would be identified relationally, therefore in minstrelsy, "[b]lackface, [is only a] *mirror of whiteness* [emphasis found in original]" (Miller 2007: 148). What was witnessed during blackface performance was whiteness being projected onto the blackface body in what David Roediger (cited in Miller 2007: 147) calls, "blackface whiteness". If blackface was understood by white audiences to represent authentic blackness, then it also reflected true what there was mere perception of "authentic whiteness" (Miller 2007: 148). Whiteness was privilege, power and superiority and blackface minstrelsy was a successful vehicle for the circulation of such white ideological hegemony (Jewel 1993: xi).

However it is important to note why blackface minstrelsy came about. Pertinent to the history of the construction of whiteness is the fact that the rise and popularity of blackface minstrelsy coincided with a time when white supremacy was perceived by whites who enjoyed the benefits of its privilege to be threatened (Verney 2003 & Dyer 1997). Through blackface minstrelsy, representations of inferior blacks would be reproduced to help retain white supremacy that was perceived to be lost during moments of contestation against white privilege and power. It was also used to justify why unjust systems that enriched and upheld whiteness were correct to upkeep.

During the struggle for black slave abolition and women suffrage, white male society suffered mass anxiety (Verney 2003, Steyn 2001). Whites identified freedom as a central part of white identity because it secured their superiority, power and domination over enslaved non-whites and their property (Steyn 2001 & Thelwel 2013). For whites, black freedom meant that blackness, denigrated as inferior throughout colonial history, would now be placed on equal footing with whiteness (Steyn 2001 & Verney 2003). This idea would jeopardise the wealth, power and privilege given to whiteness and encouraged many whites – even those who supported the abolition theoretically – to remain "convinced of the racial inferiority" of Africans

(Verney 2003: 3). The fight for the equal rights of women to vote on the other hand also posed an 'equal' threat against "sensitive male egos" who believed in male domination (Verney 2003: 3). Blackface minstrel performances of white men in blackface drag was an avenue for patriarchal whiteness to re-establish gender roles that relegated women, specifically black women, into submissive roles (Jewell 1993 & Verney 2003).

Blackface minstrel's version of "blackness" was created with the intention to establish and maintain what it meant to be white and, to be a white male. If colonial meanings of what it means to be white were identified as freedom, privilege, superiority and power, then it is through naturalised demeaning characterisations of blacks as the submissive, infantile and unintelligent slaves, that meanings of whiteness were uncritically accepted and made secure as 'the way things are' (Byrne 2016: 666). Blackface minstrel narratives created "tenable belief systems" that would maintain "a system of inequality through the consensus of the masses" (Jewell 1993: ix & 9). Under colonialism, white identity defined as superior was institutionalised and, without challenge, was treated as 'natural' (Steyn 2001b). In South Africa, blackface had the same effect on the construction of whiteness. Blackface minstrelsy is still found post-1994 cinema as the next section draws out. In the film *Mama Jack* (2005), the deployment of racist blackface minstrel caricatures perpetuate and maintain old colonial legacies of white racial superiority in post-colonial (and post-apartheid) South African settings.

PART II

RACE-TO-FACE CONFRONTATIONS IN
MAMA JACK

5. THE “INSIDE” JOKE: THE WHITE MAN INSIDE

5.1 Introduction

Blackface was used to establish and emphasise racial difference and it has always functioned as a conduit to establish and naturalise ideologies of white racial superiority (Nadine Rosset 2005: 418). Byrne (2016: 665) further states that blackface depictions of blacks as inferior and in bondage to whiteness functions as permanent reminder of white superiority. Therefore blackface minstrelsy verified white beliefs in their racial superiority through its intentionally oppressive depiction of blacks. A strong parallel can be made between the colonial function of on-stage blackface minstrelsy in sustaining white supremacy (including for South African white supremacy as drawn out in chapter 4 of this paper), and the role that the millennial blackface film, *Mama Jack* (2005) plays in doing the same for whiteness in present-day, post-apartheid South Africa.

Through the literal application of blackface, the film places blacks and whites as binary opposites. The binary opposition being punted throughout the film, although covertly, allows audiences “to intuit the cultural [and racial] differences at play” that are ultimately necessary for sustaining white power in post-1994 South Africa; an era wherein white supremacy is assumed to be “lost” (Pettersen 2016: 56 & Steyn 2001a & 2001b). Important in my analysis of the function of blackface in this film is take a particular look at how blackface minstrelsy throughout the history of whiteness has become popular during moments of perceived duress against white supremacy (Verney 2003).

As illustrated in chapter 2, in South Africa currently, whiteness is perceived to be threatened by democratic post-1994 policies that constrict practises of white supremacy and white privilege by placing black Africans at the centre of politics and the economy (Steyn 2001a & 2001b). Also, during the emancipation of slavery, white authority and freedom was perceived to be threatened by the existence of free blacks (Verney 2003). Blackface minstrelsy was used as a solution to reinforce and reproduce white racial superiority at that time by reiterating representations of blacks that constructed all blacks to be the inferior “natural born fools”. This process of demeaning the freedom of blacks jeopardise it such that it did not mean their equality to whites (Hornback 2007). By making blacks the object of white comedic ridicule, whiteness was no longer threatened by blackness and could re-position white identity back to being the superior, not equal, race. In this chapter, I make the argument that *Mama Jack* (2005) problematically

reproduces the racist use of blackface minstrelsy in order to do the same; to re-identify a whiteness de-centred in post-1994 South Africa as racially superior to blacks.

5.2 Summary of the film



Figure 1: Theron working, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screenshot by author

“apartheid” film, “Sweet Bird of Freedom”, the quick, smart-mouthed, witty and intelligent Theron quickly makes an enemy out of the arrogant and chauvinist American director, John Daragon (Lionel Newton) who is often the target of Theron’s criticism and pranks. Although he is a grip, Theron’s knowledge of, specifically, South African storytelling is a threat to John D who wants to see Theron fired off of the set.



Figure 2: Daragon conniving to spike Theron’s drink, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

On the arrival of popular American actress Rivonia Ryder (Laura Caitlin) who is set to play a main character in the apartheid film, the City of Cape Town hosts a welcoming event that John D and Theron attend. John D takes this opportunity to sabotage Theron’s career by spiking his drink with a potent hallucinogen truth serum drug (figure 2). While under hallucination, Theron assaults the mayor of Cape Town and vomits on the beloved Rivonia Ryder in front of the press and media who capture the “controversy”. Theron manages to slip away from the event and while outside,

Mama Jack (2005) follows the narrative of a falsely accused fugitive on the run, Jack Theron (Leon Schuster). Theron is a low-income-earning, white Afrikaner male who has the dreams of becoming a rich movie star. However, Theron faces the reality of remaining a grip (figure 1).

While on the set of a Mandela

“apartheid” film, “Sweet Bird of Freedom”, the quick, smart-mouthed, witty and intelligent Theron quickly makes an enemy out of the arrogant and chauvinist American director, John Daragon (Lionel Newton) who is often the target of Theron’s criticism and pranks. Although he is a grip, Theron’s knowledge of, specifically, South African storytelling is a threat to John D who wants to see Theron fired off of the set.

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sees a police car that he hallucinates to be a spaceship. Theron climbs into the police car and rides off with the vehicle. Theron at this point is labelled a run-away fugitive and is sought after by the police who wish to charge him for theft of the police car and assault. Waking up from his hallucination, Theron is confused to find himself in a “random” police car and quickly makes his way home afraid (figure 3).



Figure 3: Theron returns home, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Theron lives in a Cape Town township with his accomplice and good friend, Shorty (Alfred Ntombela) and Shorty's traditional healer sister, uSis Dladla (Andrea Dondolo). After careful inspection, Sis Dladla discovers that Theron was drugged by an “ancient *muti*” drug named “Mama Africa”. Sis Dladla goes on to interpret the visions Theron had

while under hallucination and it is discovered that Theron is not bold enough to pursue his true dreams and women, causing him to remain single for years. As a result of both things, Theron has remained in his childhood and must therefore “change to become a *man*.” This brings Shorty to an idea on how to save Theron from police arrest. As a talented make-up artist, Shorty decides to transform Theron's physical identity. Overnight, Theron thus emerges as an overweight, middle-aged black woman named “Mama Afrika”.



Figure 4: Theron taking wrong taxi, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Shorty instructs Theron to catch a taxi to Beaufort where Theron is set to meet Shorty's Uncle who can help him out of his situation. Tricked by young, xenophobic street vendors at the taxi rank, non-vernacular speaking Theron takes a taxi that takes him to Waterfront instead (figure 4). While riding to Waterfront, Theron is introduced to the

loud and attitudinal, Gladys, a domestic worker in the Waterfront area who becomes his new friend and accomplice. The police stop the taxi that Theron and Gladys are in, and out of fear

that his true identity might be revealed; Theron uses the stop as an opportunity to escape from the police.



Figure 5: Angela meets “Mama Bolo”, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Theron pretends that he is meant to exit the taxi along with Gladys and enters into the gates of an upper-middle class suburban home in which the home owner, Angela (Mary-Anne Barlow), is coincidentally expecting to meet their new domestic worker named “Mama Bolo” (figure 5). Theron pretends that he is “Mama Bolo” and has come to begin his domestic

work. Without suspicion of Theron’s true identity as a white man, Angela welcomes “Mama Bolo” into her home and employs her as the family’s new ‘stay-in’ maid. “Mama Bolo” instantly bonds with Angela and her young daughter, Ricky and earns Angela’s trust. The intimacy of her and “Mama Bolo’s” relationship eventually leads Theron to fall in love with Angela whom he finds attractive. But, Theron cannot reveal his true identity and therefore keeps his affections a secret.

Later finding out that Angela is engaged to John D who lives there too, Theron seizes the opportunity to get back at John D for ruining his reputation. Incorporating the use of slapstick and “naughty” humour common in his films (Govender 2005: 2), Schuster stages a series of practical jokes that interrupt, inconvenience and frustrate John D who is revealed to be a cheating husband, absent father and thus undeserving of the good family he has. John D is also seen to be a racist bigot who ill-treats the loving Angela as well as the seemingly devotional and benevolent “Mama Bolo” with unwarranted hostility; making John D even more villainous.



Figure 6: Theron's fit for the part, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author

Mama Bolo's disguise helps Theron to realise his dreams of becoming a high-earning film actor. Film producer, Stanley (Jerry Mofokeng) and John D are desperately looking for an actress to replace Rivonia Ryder. As they brainstorm possible actresses in John D's home, Theron takes this opportunity to earn \$20 000 to play the angel that helps Mandela escape prison, as "Mama

Bolo" because, as argued by Theron, the angel who saves Mandela would not be white. After showcasing "her" talent through a song and dance ensemble, "Mama Bolo" is seen to fit the part (figure 6), and becomes the object of Stanley's desire. Using Stanley's lust after "Mama Bolo" to his advantage, Theron is given the opportunity to audition and eventually gets the part.

On the night of the film premier, "Mama Bolo" receives a standing ovation for "her" performance and is encouraged by the audience to give a speech. During "her" speech on stage, John D (who drugged back with "Mama Africa" by Theron as an act of revenge), is in a drunken rage at the sight of "Mama Bolo's" achievement. Theron takes advantage of John D's "truthful" state of mind and asks him to reveal the truth about his sabotage against the 'innocent' Theron thereby acquitting Theron of his shame and criminal charges. John D confesses to having drugged Theron to get him fired and is immediately jailed. Theron and his friends dance and celebrate the justice of Theron's freedom. While moving closer to the audience to join in celebration, Theron's dress gets caught beneath Stanley's feet who stands beside him on stage, and his dress is ripped open (figure 22). Theron's true identity is shockingly revealed. The upset Stanley asks Theron to remove his mask. Ashamed, Theron slowly removes his mask. In shock and disappointment, Theron's new friends, Angela and Stanley are left hurt at his deceit. Mama Bolo is actually a white man (figure 23).

Now settled in the truth of his identity by “accepting who he is truly is”, Theron tries to get Angela’s love back and publicly professes his sincere love for her (figure 7). Angela is encouraged by the other domestic workers (who were also shocked by news of Mama Bolo’s true identity) with her to forgive him for deceiving her, and to accept him back. Angela believes Theron to be the good man she fell in love with, and accepts him back. Angela and Theron get married at the end of the film starting a new life together.



Figure 7: Theron pleads for Angela’s love back, *Mama Jack*, 2005. Screenshot by author

5.3 Blackface: The white man beneath

Dissecting the meanings of whiteness found in the film is a pertinent step to understanding the racist deployment of blackface in constructing its whiteness and also, within the context of this paper’s argument, in restoring it. Before moving on to the mobilisation of blackface in *Mama Jack* (2005) in any further detail, my critical examination into how whiteness is defined in the film begins with an analysis of the character and characterisation of the white man beneath the blackface mask: main character, Jack Theron.

Blackface minstrel representations of blackness have been the direct opposite reflection of what whiteness assumes itself to be. Similar to racial representations in blackface minstrelsy, *Mama Jack* (2005) problematically naturalises racial hierarchy by highlighting the racial differences and power-relations between the black and white characters in the film. Whites are depicted in positions of superiority over their black counterparts who are positioned as inferior. Taking place in “naturalised” settings, white roles keep whiteness as figures of power and authority, while black roles keep blackness in positions of servility.

What is more interesting to analyse is how the “not-white-enough” poor white, Theron, chooses to portray blackness through his racist blackface rendition of a black domestic maid in order to re-establish his white identity. Why I label Theron as a “not-white-enough-poor-white” is because Theron, unlike the white identity constructed during apartheid colonialism, has little economic power and, as a poor white, belongs to a “despised” social group even though he has

so-called “white” skin. Theron’s poverty, under Afrikaner nationalism, would have placed his identity close to the “degenerative” blacks. Even so, Theron’s blackface performance of black domestic worker, Mama Bolo, positions blackness as inferior. His oppressive image of black domestic workers, worse performed in blackface, implies that Theron still bears a white subjectivity that has him believe in the superiority of his whiteness at least above blackness.

Theron’s white performance of Mama Bolo is reflective of white racialised thinking that supports unequal structures based purely on race; the colour of one’s skin (Steyn 2003: 235). Through Angela’s relationship with domestic worker “Mama Bolo”, ideologies of whiteness in the new South Africa continues to reign as one of superiority. Using the racial differences and the madam/maid power dynamic between the white, genteel and fragile employer, Angela and her black servile and benevolent maid, Mama Bolo, blackness is placed oppositionally to whiteness and is naturalised to be inferior throughout the film. As much as black/white, inferior/superior, poor/rich dichotomies are created by the film, white identity complicates itself through the character Theron who is white but not influential, educated and rich, and therefore holds little power.

Theron is representational of what whiteness has become in the new South Africa. Theron’s poor white identity reflects white fears of a whiteness that has become the degenerate and abject. This fear is alleviated through the transformation that Theron undergoes into from being a poor white, to becoming a “better” white. One who grows into a higher financial position (albeit not high enough to categorise him as rich), and who wins the heart of the white, genteel and fragile object of desire – Angela. It is through using blackface that Theron’s white identity is redeemed, restored and fixed. His comical blackface transition into a black domestic worker, Mama Bolo helps Theron to make him a “better” white man.

5.3.1 Blackface Drag, White Skin Women



Figure 8: Angela welcoming 'Mama Bolo', *Mama Jack*, 2005.

Screen shot by author

In *Mama Jack* (, 2005), white supremacy is a central ideology and its function in the film plays out in the relational positioning between Mama Bolo and Angela (figure 9). Mama Bolo's dark skin, masculinised and disproportionate body emphasises Angela as the idealised fair skinned, slender and fragile white beauty who is the perfect and ultimate 'white' prize (figure 8). In comparison to Mama Bolo's "inferior" appearance, Angela's Euro-American

whiteness is desirable. She is an upper middle-class, self-employed working professional. She is youthful in appearance, gracious in gesture and a caring mother to her young daughter,

Ricky. She has a high self-esteem that does not allow her to tolerate John D's philandering ways and is able to stand firm against John D's bigotry even while she is depicted as a fragile woman who suffers from migraines. Her fragility often leaves her in positions of needing care, doting advice and saving. Angela is also often the victim of circumstance. She has lost one child, is engaged to a man who disrespects her and



Figure 9: Angela and Mama Bolo, *Mama Jack*, 2005.

Screen shot by the author

at the end, she is a victim to Theron's lies made through his many disguises. Angela (figure 9) is therefore often depicted wearing light pastel and white colours to accentuate her innocence, purity and beauty; even more important to emphasise her whiteness. Mama Bolo's physiognomy and character contrasts that of Angela's.



Figure 10: Theron emerging as Mama Bolo, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Jack Theron dons blackface make-up in order to transform his fugitive identity into that of an unsuspecting black woman (figure 10). Theron's blackface portrayal of the black woman is strikingly similar to the archetypal blackface minstrel representation of the Mammy and of colonial historical representations of Saartjie Baartman. The Mammy's full breasts and her robust and protruding buttocks mimic exaggerated representations of South Africa's own Saartjie Baartman that circulated Europe

during white imperialism (Jewell 1993). Theron's portrayal of an "African woman" borrows both from Euro-American blackface minstrel culture whilst also tracing its origins to racist white impressions of the black female body in colonial Africa envisaged through Baartman. Through Mama Bolo, Schuster problematically directly references blackface's white colonising function through reproducing blackface minstrel representations of black femininity characterised through the Mammy and Old Aunt Jemima.



Figure 11: Theron's first day at work as Mama Bolo, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Mama Bolo (figure 11) has an overweight frame, dark skin, thick lips, broad nose, bright white teeth, and is of middle-age. She has wide hips, full breasts, and an even fuller, robust and "projecting" behind (Figure 11). Like the Mammy figure, Mama Bolo has a masculine demeanour, too. She is physically stout with stocky legs and large arms. "Her" masculinity is proven by the fact that "she" effortlessly skates

with Ricky for long periods of time, "she" carries a bucket of water over "her" head in the taxi rank without showing any signs of physical strain, and defends "herself" against the violent and abusive John D, by striking back a slap across John D's face that leaves him completely debilitated. Her disproportionate body and masculinised behaviour also produce humour which "tranquilises" Mama Bolo's 'strength' and character.



Figure 12: Angela dropping more laundry, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author

As a white Afrikaner male, Theron performs his impressions of what it means to be a black maid working for an upper middle-class white American family in post-apartheid South Africa. A striking feature in Theron's blackface drag performance as Mama Bolo is his uncompromising and willing servility towards Angela and her family (figure 12). Under the authority of "Mama Bolo's" white employers, Theron's performance is of a benevolent, gentle and sweet-toned voiced black domestic worker who willingly positions herself as servant, by referring to Angela as her "Madam" (even though

Angela insists that she should not do this) and John D as her "Master". Theron's obedience and submission to the emotional and physical needs of her white caretakers, Angela and child .Ricky make "Mama Bolo" non-threatening to the superior positioning of whiteness in the film (Woodard & Mastin 2005).



Figure 13: 'Mama Bolo' comforting Angela, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Like blackface character, Aunt Jemima who performs domestic duties whilst looking after the well-being of her white family, blackface Theron is a source of comfort to Angela (figure 13) and her young daughter, Ricky. Still unaware of Mama Bolo's fake identity, Angela easily confides in Mama Bolo about her difficult and abusive relationship with the absent, cheating and ruthless John D and often

seeks advice from her mythic "African" wisdom.

In Angela's difficult times, Theron draws from his "wealth" of "African" proverbs that he uses to advise Angela, such as: "*Life is not the rock that you must break. Life is like the river. You must flow with it. Gently. Gently* [sic]." By constantly doing this, Theron perpetuates the stereotype of the emotionally available and present black female servant who is effective only when playing the supportive role to her delicate and distressed white Madam (Woodard & Mastin 2005).

There is a racial hierarchy of power that is communicated in the relationship between 'Madam'

Angela and 'maid' "Mama Bolo". The master/slave; employer/domestic relationship between white family and black maid formed are uncritically accepted by both parties, especially Theron.

According to Codell (2014: 33), the silence of the oppressed black characters in imperialist films



Figure 14: Mama Bolo offering to make Angela food, *Mama Jack*, 2005.

Screen shot by author.

naturalised racial hierarchy and therefore endorsed imperialist ideologies of white racial superiority that were embedded in these films. Like the on-stage representations of slavery found even on South African blackface minstrel stages, white filmic and stage performances of the Mammy do not represent her in a position of defence against her inferior positioning by her white

family. Theron accepts that in this situation, he must play the inferior black servant type. Mama Bolo's grinning countenance (figure 14) reflects that of the Mammy's whose smile signalled acceptance of their position as the lower-Other servant. Theron's blackface, constant benevolence, warm hugs and kind smile, do not reject the anti-black oppressive statements made by Angela (conscious and unconscious) which are further implicated by her whiteness⁹ and white skin.

Upon "Mama Bolo's" arrival into their home, Angela shares tea with "Mama Bolo" as they discuss "her" job description. In the beginning of their meeting, Angela seems uneasy about being the "white" employer of a "black" domestic worker. Angela often excuses her discomfort by making excuses that there are no black domestic workers in America, and this kind of dynamic is unusual for her. Angela often slips words out of her mouth that position Mama Bolo as "servant" and not worker. Angela stutters and stammers through naming her domestic work as "chores", after realising the 'slave' implication of the word "chores", she corrects it to another 'politically incorrect' term, "duties" and eventually settles for "tasks".

⁹Whiteness in this definition is taken from Sarit Suisa (2010: 13) as the "production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage."



Figure 15: Angela showing 'Mama Bolo' her room, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Angela later leads "Mama Bolo" to the domestic worker's outside room where Theron is given a tour of his new room (figure 15). Angela is embarrassed about the quality of the room set up for "Mama Bolo". This is shown by her constant apologies as she presents to "Mama Bolo" a mattress supported onto paint cans, her bathroom without a door, and specially

bought groceries that include stereotypical "African" foods like mielie pap.

Eventually, Angela hands "Mama Bolo" drab domestic uniforms for her to wear. Although she professes that she does not like domestic uniforms, she insists Theron wear these because her fiancé, John D prefers it that way. Theron reassures Angela not to be humiliated for providing their store room as Mama Bolo's sleeping quarters. In addition to that, Theron expresses his appreciation for the domestic uniforms provided. He comforts the worried Angela (figure 16) that she will eventually get used to the hierarchical nature of their black maid/white madam relationship. By remaining under the constant act of servility when doting after Angela's needs, Theron naturalises Mama Bolo's subservience. By doing so, Theron treats Mama Bolo's substandard relation to "her" white family as "the way things are". Schuster thus perpetuates and normalises the inferiority assigned to the black domestic worker in white households during apartheid through Theron's blackface drag relation to Angela.



Figure 16: 'Mama Bolo' comforting "embarrassed" Angela, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Schuster, within the post-apartheid context of his film, continues the oppressive apartheid legacies and stereotypes of the inferior black maid and her superior white employer. Domestic workers are, according to Jacklyn Cock (1980: 122), "a deeply entrenched part of the *white* South African life-style

[emphasis added].” The maid/Madam relationship is not a contemporary dynamic but rooted within the oppressive structures of South African apartheid history. The maid/Madam relationship is a dynamic that is witnessed, experienced and derives from within many white South African homes (Gail Smith & Swisa2010). The domestic worker’s position in their white families often still remains a lowly one (Gordon 1980: 104-105 & Swisa2010: 4). Often identified as “the ‘last bastion of apartheid’”, Swisa(2010: 4) argues that domestic work reveals the structures of inequality in terms of gender, class and race that still persist in a post-apartheid and democratic South Africa. Domestic work and its dynamic of the oppressed black maid and her superior white madam continue to be framed within the master-slave paradigm founded on a white racial apartheid history (Swisa2010: 16).

Angela’s portrayal as being naïve and ignorant to issues or unequal structures within the maid/madam dynamic is another point that needs to be problematised. The word “ignorance” implies “involuntary lack of knowledge, a purity, an innocence of sorts that lets [white] people off the hook” (Wise 2008: xi). Her “ignorance” seems to absolve her from taking the responsibility to consciously prevent the racial inequality perpetuated by her treatment of “Mama Bolo”. Angela’s choice not to critically engage with issues of her privilege against Mama Bolo’s assumed to be “inherent” submission to her white authority is not due to ignorance. It is due to “a *willed* ignorance, a voluntary evasion of reality [emphasis added]” (Wise 2008: xi) further supported by white Theron’s assurance. What Angela’s supposed “ignorance” does is it positions her as only a “victim” implicated by whiteness; a race that she did not choose to be born into.

Like in post-1994 South Africa, Angela does not acknowledge the privileges and advantages of her upper-middle class whiteness as the result of keeping blacks, particularly black women, in servile domestic positions even well after apartheid (Steyn 2001b & Willboughy-Herard 2015). To be white, according to Wise (2008: xi), is “typically to be in profound denial about the existence of these advantages and their consequences.” By remaining non-reflexive about the benefits of her position as a white woman, her superiority over “Mama Bolo” is normalised and continues to persist ‘invisibly’ playing throughout the entire narrative. That is how whiteness is upheld in this film: through coveting white privilege and superiority as normal. Hidden whiteness enables particularly white, viewers to remain unaware of how white supremacy is problematically naturalised and maintained by this film. Through positioning white racial superiority, white authority and white beauty above the inferior, “naturally” submissive and undesirable black identity, the invisibility of whiteness enables the naturalisation of white

supremacy that is still prevalent in post-apartheid South African white subjectivity (Steyn 2003: 244).

5.3.2 *Blackface & the Poor White Race*

A character analysis of Theron is important because blackface is about the whiteness beneath it. Theron mobilises blackface within the film not only to escape getting his true identity caught, but as the film progresses, a means to redeem his old 'lowly' self and come out as "the man [he] must become" (Sis Dladla in *Mama Jack* 2005). In my reading of whiteness in post-apartheid blackface films, white characters function as signifiers of meaning that are mobilised as "discursive constructs embodying ideological positions and values" reflective of a broader social context (Park *et al* 2006:161 & Wigston 2009). The examination of how he (and previously, Angela) portrays whiteness in this film is suggestive of how whiteness, within the broader social context, continues to see itself and function in post-apartheid South Africa.



Figure 17: Theron suspects Daragon drugged him, *Mama Jack*, 2005.

Screen shot by author.

Jack Theron is an unaccomplished, middle-aged, low-income-earning and white Afrikaner who lives in a black township with his black friend and accomplice, Shorty (figure 18). Theron has a goatee moustache, mid-long, straw-like blonde hair, and dresses in "young", informal clothing. His low class status is shown through his unkempt, oversized and worn out clothing and his "unrefined" behaviour. He often slouches, swears and has a thick Afrikaner accent that is emphasised especially when using toilet humour. Although he displays sharp "street smarts", his language use is simple due to his incompleteness of high school after getting expelled for getting drunk and "pissing" in his music teacher's tuba.

A troubled child in his youth, Theron is characterised as coming from the "gutters" and was raised in a dysfunctional home. His father was an abusive alcoholic who later committed suicide when Theron was age sixteen. He had high aspirations of becoming an actor, but is 'reduced' to being a grip. Theron can be classified in the context of this story world as a "poor white". Born

into poverty, Theron has not achieved radical upward mobility as he still belongs to the “low class” strata.

Thus far we have, in summary, defined as whiteness as an on-going colonial ideological construct that is centred on privilege and power and conferred onto those with light white skin (Steyn 2001b & Wise 2008). We have also identified that for most whites, white supremacy is an endogenous and fundamental characteristic of their white identity (Steyn 2001b). While not destabilising this definition of whiteness, my reading of Theron will both support and complicate it even further. Theron is a poor, white-skinned, Afrikaner male. According to Willboughy-Herard (2015: 30), in the past Afrikaner nationalism relied on class, profession and gender to become a “potent political force.” Race was used as a determinant for the rights and quality of living that one could wield and white racial discourse party lined that “all whites should flourish economically” (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 10 & 32). Whites who did not fit this criteria, namely poor whites, were a “despised social group in South Africa” because white poverty opposed narratives of white racial superiority (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 10 & 32).

Although the apartheid government worked tirelessly to prevent these, so-called “vulnerable” white people from “slipping into the category of a [inherently economically incapacitated and defective] blackness”, the existence of poor whites forced white South Africans to confront the fact that “white supremacy could not guarantee white success” and therefore could fail whites (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 10, 32 & 34).

Confronting white poverty exposed the farce of white supremacy because, if all whites are premised to be superior and better than blacks, whites who do economically worse than blacks still manage to exist. The presence of white poverty therefore signalled that white fears of white racial degeneration were a reality (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 10). In fact, poor and unskilled whites were dependent on the skilled black working

class for the wealth and status given to them by apartheid because of their white skin (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 39). Poor whites gained status through the economic dispossession of the black working class labourer (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 39).



Figure 18: Jack Theron is wanted by the police, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author

As a poor white Afrikaner, Theron's narrative takes place within rich white spaces. Although he is "white", he is not quite "white" enough: He is not rich enough to sit amongst the American celebrities and rich white elite. He is not educated enough to be recognised as a professional. He is not eligible enough to be desired by white women thereby compromising his white masculinity. After throwing up on Ryder and attacking the Mayoress of Cape Town, Theron's white face (figure 18) becomes the face of public shame and disgrace; he is hated by the public. In his life, Theron suffers from multiple forms of rejection and as a result, Theron resigns himself to being an "unwanted" low-life.

Chiao-I Tseng (2013: 588) argues that how a character behaves, acts and interacts "significantly determine how characters are understood, engaged with and interpreted". Characterisation is therefore established as a mode of enunciation; a way that producers of meaning communicate their message to audiences. Theron's character and characterisation acts as the metonym for the failure of apartheid in guaranteeing South Africa as a white man's country; a disillusion made more obvious with the end of the apartheid regime. In the new South Africa under black rule, white nationalism is no longer powerful enough to protect white subjectivity which Willboughy-Herard (2015: 7) lists as white "freedom, selfhood, humanity, desires, forged memory, authority, legitimacy, production, sociality, reproduction space and representativeness." Whiteness is no longer the sole subject-beneficiary of socio-political and economic advancement anymore, hence white poverty can be no longer be represented as anachronistic (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 31). As the abject poor white, Theron constitutes as representative of the white fears and anxieties. Fears of the result of whiteness when overrun and dominated by blacks, fears of white cultural genocide and the degeneration of the white race due to post-1994 interaction with blacks (Steyn 2001b: 25).

Theron's inferior status as a white Afrikaner makes him representative of the "tenuousness" of white identity. His masculinity is "weak", he is uneducated and belongs to the low class. His character subverts the idea that whites are "natural heirs to a superior quality of life" as held by other white characters in the film for example, Angela (Steyn 2001b: 53). As a failure to embody whiteness and its privilege, Theron's lack and impoverishment is the result of what whiteness is once it has lost its supremacy in a black South Africa.

5.3.3 Reinstating whiteness in *Mama Jack*

Currently, most whites feel powerless because white supremacy is not legitimate, and old white identity cannot operate effectively in a post-1994 South Africa that is perceived to displace and reject whiteness (Steyn 2001b). Despite being in the “face of white anxieties about what the [post-apartheid] future can hold”, films like *Mama Jack* (, 2005) function to open up, but also alleviate, white fears of the loss of their “endogenous” superiority in a new South Africa by reclaiming and reinstating old ideas of whiteness.

Mama Jack (2005) “affirm[s] the ideological underpinnings of white South Africa, carried in the ‘dominant memory’ of whiteness” (Steyn 2003: 238). Old ideologies of whiteness as racially superior and therefore entitled to wealth and privilege operate in the film connotatively and symbolically. Schuster draws from Sambo’s blackface function to convince whites of their racial superiority through reproducing comedic images of Sambo as the inherent black fool. The film positions Mama Bolo as the centre of white comedic ridicule. Theron keeps whiteness as superior through his blackface performance of Mama Bolo as the inferior, servile and hilarious black maid. Theron therefore becomes the comical racial “gate keeper” of whiteness (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 38). I say this because Theron blackface performance clearly emphasises the differences between being black and being white. Theron’s comedic ridicule of black femininity also makes blackness less threatening. By presenting to viewers a South African world in which white supremacy is still “natural” in the story environment and intact, Theron protects whiteness as superior in the post-apartheid context.

Steyn (2001b: 61) states that white emphasis on things like “intelligence” and “civilization” are qualities that have always been equated to whiteness. Schuster and Hofmeyer present black people as unintelligible in order to produce hilarity in *Mama Jack* (2005). Despite Theron speaking fluent English, he problematically has the film’s principle comedienne, Mama Bolo, communicating in English malapropisms. Theron’s performance of Mama Bolo is similar to those of the blackface minstrel figures who were scripted to “hash” up the English language through mispronunciations of English words and “fractured, illogical prose” in order to produce laughter from white audiences (Pickering 2008: 130 & Morgan 1995: 103). “Mama Bolo’s” clumsy and poor command of English has “her” referring to an inanimate pot as “she” and asking “her” frantic domestic worker friends to speak “once upon a time”. Her poor attempts at speaking English and inappropriate use of English phrases produce hilarity in the film.



Figure 19: Theron on phone with Shorty, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author

When Theron speaks to Shorty (his “black” friend) over the phone (figure 19), he uses a bastardised mixture of words in isiZulu and Afrikaans in front of an “ignorant” English-speaking American Angela. Theron sets the impression that to whites, all non-white languages sound like “gibberish” speeches that infantilise the blacks who communicate using them (Mamatu

2006). By communicating to Shorty in this way, Theron further reduces blackness to unintelligent, child-like simplicity. By reducing particularly black domestic maids as the unintelligible, inferior objects of ridiculing laughter, Theron not only emphasises his whiteness and masculinity more, but he also retains cultural boundaries between whites and blacks. Making black vernacular language humorous implies that his whiteness exempts him from knowing and engaging with any non-white vernacular language. This attitude plays a part in white privilege: the illusion that blacks benefit more from adopting white language and culture, than vice versa (Steyn 2001b). Therefore, being a poor white does not exclude Theron from possessing a white subjectivity that insists on the ‘truth’ of his white racial superiority (Willboughy-Herard 2015).



Figure 20: Theron’s film debut as Mandela’s Angel, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Another way that whiteness in this film emerges as a triumphant ideological construct is through Theron’s victorious win over Angela’s heart at the end of the film (figure 21). The film makes the implicit statement that it is only through his performance in blackface drag that Theron can emerge as the man “he must become”.



Figure 21: Married to Angela, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

As a “black woman”, Theron is able to accomplish all the goals that as a poor white man, he could have never achieved. In blackface, Theron could achieve the goals that restored his masculinity and whiteness. Blackface made Theron become a “better white”.

Mama Bolo gives Theron the opportunity to make \$20 000 as the star leading actor in an American blockbuster hit (Figure 20). In blackface, Theron also falls in love with Angela. And through the lessons he learned while donning blackface, Theron learns to muster up the courage and the ability to win Angela’s heart thus redeeming his “manhood”. Theron’s character matures from his “boyhood” into a sophisticated, eligible man who deserves to marry the ideal fair beauty and live a happy, financially secure life (figure 22). Things that his whiteness in a new South Africa politically ruled by black Africans, cannot guarantee him. Theron’s narrative displays Schuster’s “close identification with [South African] ‘white talk’” (Steyn 2003: 244).



Figure 22: Theron’s true identity is revealed, *Mama Jack*, 2005.
Screen shot by author.

Through Theron, “white talk” about the irrelevance of whiteness in a country in which blacks now take centre stage are communicated to the film’s audience. Theron’s white poverty and hardships incite sympathy in the film.

Theron’s poverty and his white identity, appears to be

a burden that hinders him from upward mobilisation and accomplishment. In the new South Africa, it is no longer being white, but being black that “is the colo[u]r to be”. Through blackface, Schuster transforms “deserving impoverished whites into deserving white middle class” by appropriating black identity in order to attain what the film seems to purport as the “entitlement” of white (Afrikaner) men (Willboughy-Herard 2015: 31). My reading of Theron’s use of blackface

identity to get ahead is thus justified in the film because had he remained the childish, low class white male that he was before his blackface transformation, Theron would not have 'grown' and achieved upward mobility.

Although towards the end of the film Theron is exposed and shamed for lying about his true identity, he is not scorned for using blackface to deceive others into getting what he wants. Theron is left bare on stage (figure 22). His white skin emphasised by the dark patches of blackface make up that cover some parts of it, and his masculinity is emphasised by the large prosthetic breasts and the lingerie he wears that cover his white, hairy, defined legs (figure 18). What exposes Theron's white male identity even further is when he is asked to remove his blackface mask (figure 23).



Figure 23: Theron removes the blackface mask, *Mama Jack*, 2005. Screen shot by author.

The death of Mama Bolo's black face brings his whiteness back to "life". Theron's blonde hair, blue eyes and pale white face are emphasised and so blackface exposes his whiteness. Through blackface drag, Theron's physical and ideological white identity is highlighted and in this moment, Theron signifies the deep-seated

ambivalence and inner conflict in white society.

Whites who still feel that entitlement and privilege are at the core of their white identity are being asked to adjust to a new setting in which that is no longer an uncontested fact (Steyn 2001b & 2003). Although having white skin makes one hypervisible, it is not enough in this country to guarantee whites their racial superiority and a resultant superior quality of life (Steyn 2001b & Willboughy-Herard 2015). If anything, hypervisible whiteness makes white privilege hypervisible, too. The hypervisibility of white privilege makes it easier to identify and stop its perpetuation (van der Watt 2005).

Through Theron, Schuster reveals the disillusionment experienced by whites in this country. Steyn (2003: 245) reveals that white South Africans secretly fantasise about a future in which white supremacy would endure in a "black" South Africa. The film ushers this white colonial "fantasy" into a present reality by presenting an unreflexive post-apartheid story world in which

white supremacy is legitimate. At the end of the film, Theron wins for “whiteness”. His masculinity, eligibility and financial security belong to the (white) identity that he openly reclaims and accepts at the end of the film. In this film, blackface is used as a means for whiteness to get ahead, and to reinstate white supremacy as it has always functioned to do in white colonial history.

6. CONCLUSION

In colonial history, false ideas of ‘blackness’ were fixed as accepted natural “truths” through cultural forms such as the images of blacks circulated by racist European “science” and blackface minstrelsy. The blackface mask, according to Byrne (2016), has the uncanny ability to solidify and materialise racist thought. Through racist blackface performances of black people as infantile, naïve, brut, indolent and foolish, representations of the blackface mask were perceived as “true” lived black identity (Byrne 2016). In order to master this effect, the white blackface performer presents racial difference and hierarchy as “natural, essential and ahistorical¹⁰” (Byrne 2016: 664). Witnessing contemporary performances of blackface indicates how whiteness has, since colonial history, constructed stories that belittled blacks in order to naturalise, advance and support white power and privilege (Miller 2007: 149).

Whiteness is a tenuous identity that depends on the debasement of blackness for it to possess supremacy. White superiority is not ontological. White supremacy is the result of imagined differences between Europeans and those labeled “Other” (that were deliberately constructed by the Europeans themselves) to justify white privilege and the acquisition of stolen resources. Currently in South Africa, whiteness, its privilege and power are no longer normalised because the redistribution of social, political and economic power to social groups previously disadvantaged by apartheid white privilege constrict white supremacist systems of operation. Instead of naturalising racist ideologies of whiteness, whiteness and white privilege has become hypervisible.

Post-apartheid films like *Mama Jack* (2005) continue to reproduce and naturalise ideologies of the supremacy of whiteness. The incorporation of blackface in the film acts as a way to ridicule and demean the black characters and, in effect, black people. As a result, the racial superiority of whiteness in the film is upheld. In the past, and even in the present, blackface minstrel entertainment made blackness the butt of its humour through racist stereotypical depictions of blacks on-stage that infantilised blackness (Pickering 2008 & Thelwell 2013). Blackface minstrelsy depicted story worlds that used derogatory performances of blacks as the “simultaneously stupid, easy-going, rapacious and nurturing, loyal and conniving, brutish and comical” black in order to identify whiteness as superior (Byrne 2016: 672). As shown by this

¹⁰ Race was seen as endogenous and not the outcome of histories of the social construction of whiteness (Dyer 1997, Byrne 2016, Wise 2008)

research report, the reduction of blackness to hilarity was done particularly through the currently reproduced iconic images of the blackface characters Sambo and Mammy.

The main character in the film *Mama Jack* (2005) is a poor, white Afrikaner male, Jack Theron. Within the narrative he is transformed into a black woman using blackface to escape arrest. I have made the argument that Theron's new blackface identity directly references blackface archetypes, the Mammy and Aunt Jemima who collectively have been constructed to resemble the voluptuous, big-breasted and protruding figure of Saartjie Baartman. Baartman's frame was pitted against the white female body and white femininity. Because white femininity was the standard of white beauty and perfection, Baartman was exoticised and ridiculed by white Europeans who humorously labelled her the "Hottentot Venus". Colonial contrasts made between white femininity and defamed ideas of black femininity function to verify the superiority of whiteness are also the same racist contrasts that are deployed in the film. Mama Bolo acts as a support to the needs and concerns faced by the fair skinned white beauty, Angela. As the desire of Theron's heart, Angela is positioned as the ideal beauty. Her beauty is often heightened through her placement against the dark-skinned, large breasted and overweight middle-aged Mama Bolo.

The construction of the blackface female body also functioned to asexualise black femininity by framing it as humorous and therefore unattractive and non-threatening. This was so done to alleviate the fears held by white men and women of the black female body and spirit. The comical presentation of the Mammy figure and the jovial subservience of Old Aunt Jemima "urg[ed] white women to *have* an Aunt Jemima," but never to have the desire to be her (Levenstein 2000: 322). It is through blackface performance that whiteness is naturalised as the racial ideal and, a relationship between black maid and her white madam is a "normal" occurrence. The idea that white people have a 'natural' authority over blacks is reproduced and in turn, white supremacy in this film is kept intact.

Furthermore, white supremacy is restored in the film through Theron's triumphant win at the end of the film. Theron is no longer an economically suffering, infantile, single and therefore weakened white male. Through his blackface drag performance as Mama Bolo, Theron learns to accept himself for "who he is", achieves his dream of starring in a blockbuster film, earns a handsome sum of money as a result and wins the girl of his dreams. In fact, his blackface performance "improves" his identity as it baptises him into old colonial meanings and ideas of what it means to be white: privileged, powerful, masculine and rich. Through blackface

performances, whites learned of their white identity (Pickering 2008). Similarly, through Theron's blackface performance as Mama Bolo, he learns of and is ushered more strongly into his whiteness.

White supremacist films such as *Mama Jack* (2005) employ racist blackface stereotypes in order to maintain whiteness. Racist and comical black stereotypes are important in establishing white supremacy. The presence of the blackface mask also verifies it. Schuster uses both these angles to "amuse" and remind his audiences of the innate superiority of whites even in a post-apartheid South Africa wherein white supremacy is no longer an uncontested "fact". Schuster's post-apartheid films problematically maintain blackface minstrel cultural values by reproducing humour solicited through blackface and, other general representations of blackness that rely on exaggerated racist stereotypes.

Blackface minstrelsy may not take place through live stage performance like in the nineteenth century anymore. Anyhow, where it is performed is irrelevant. Regardless of the form of media it may occur in, the blackface mask still functions to demonstrate and convey constructed and essentialised racist perspectives well into the twenty first century (Byrne 2016: 669). These functions of blackface simply do not change (Byrne 2016). Blackface and blackface minstrelsy were mobilised to alleviate white fears of their loss of separation, power and control by legitimising blackness as, in essence, inferior through the presence of the mask (Byrne 2016). The blackface mask (apart from blackface performance) alone is against the changing time, and is always a glyph of racial hierarchy that works to position and verify whiteness as superior by concretising notions that blacks are indeed inferior (Byrne 2016 665).

By continuing a legacy of blackface representations of blacks as the inferior born fools, Schuster makes powerful statements about post-apartheid whiteness. Whiteness still remains seductive as old legacies of white racial superiority are still put in place and continue to define whiteness today (Steyn 2003: 245). Blackface closes the boundary between nineteenth century slavery and new millennium freedom (Laski 2010: 1094). Post-apartheid blackface brings the history of anti-black racial violence and slavery that necessary in the making of whiteness as a history that is still applicable in the present time (Laski 2010: 1095). Whiteness still feels the need and, as seen by the white producers of meaning in this film, still has the power to advance white privilege and power at the expense of reproducing derogatory images of black people in a democratic country. Because it is an integral part of white identity, white supremacy is felt to be in need of protection by anxious whites who fear loss in a changing South Africa (Steyn 2001b &

Willboughy-Herard 2015). Using blackface caricatures in the new millennium is not anachronistic (Laski 2010 & Byrne 2016). Blackface is still an effective means to calm anxious whites who are afraid of white racial degeneration in the contemporary white imaginary. White supremacy, although contested against for centuries, within the post-apartheid context is still pervasive and prevalent (van der Watt 2005).

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