

# Sambos and Minstrels

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The incredible inventiveness of black culture is not to be understood outside the imperative task of transformation, of counterresistance to the resistance of the Real world, to the quest of the marked excluded blacks to affirm themselves. This culture, perceived as a threat by the dominant order, was marginalized and contained by the fabrication of the minstrel stereotype. The white caricature of the minstrel tradition expressed the bourgeois-eye-view of all popular culture. Just as cricket in England, once a popular game, was taken up by the middle class and coded as a middle class ritual, introjecting middle class values, so the minstrel tradition coming out of black culture was taken up by the white, bourgeois world to provide itself with “harmless entertainment,” and to keep up the social relation of serious responsible white agent to happy-go-lucky irresponsible Sambo. Whites laughed vicariously through Sambo.

Amidst the stagnation of all other areas of cultural activity, the bourgeois world found a source of cultural life on which to feed, if the barest minimum of an affective and emotional life were to be sustained in the wilderness of technological rationalization. Thus, the minstrel shows, like the rest of black culture—its spirituals, its blues, its jazz—were incorporated in a form that kept its relative exclusion intact. Black culture, black music in particular, became an original source of raw material to be exploited as the entertainment industry burgeoned. Once again blacks function as the plantation subproletariat hidden in the raw material.

The movement of Negritude, a movement which began with the revaluation of the popular culture of Haiti, followed on the movement of the Harlem Renaissance which also began with a return to the source even if this return took place in the context of the return to the *primitive* by the West. The West was now to become conscious of the cultural death it had inflicted on itself by channeling all libidinal energy to a productive finality. As the self-confidence of the axiomatic culture weakened, the stigmatized cultures began to counter-define themselves, in terms of the larger world, moving out from the underlife into the mainstream to extend the work of cultural transformation. The parallel movement of *indigenismo* did the same. That both movements were to become postulated Norms, incorporated by the dominant system, given a place of licensed heresy, would lead to the ambiguities of the Negritude of the later Senghor variety. The attacks by Marxist black leaders and by Fanon himself on Negritude would help to reveal the areas of fraudulence that had developed with Negritude’s institutionalization. Yet this does not gainsay the fact

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that Negritude drew attention to that implicit cultural blanchitude which had been central to the social machine of the world system. Blanchitude had been nothing else than the constituted NORM of culture in relation to which all other cultures had been made subservient. It was that normative culture of blanchitude that inscribed the globe, coding value and non-value, binding the structures of production under the hegemony of its imaginary social significations.

It was the pain, the angst of those posited as Non-Norms, that compelled examination of the functioning of the Symbolic Order itself. From the perspective of a painful self-knowledge—the Negro wants to be a master—Fanon began to provide answers and to give new dimensions to the question asked by Wilhelm Reich after the trauma of Nazism as a mass movement. How had the “revolutionary” people become a Nazi? How do the masses come to desire their own repression? The black experience held the answers.

The social construct of Sambo, like the opposing social construct of the rebellious Nat, was necessary to the self-conception not only of the master, but to that of all whites in the South who patterned their own self-conception on the master-model. The slaves’ testimony points to the way in which their claim to equality with the rich whites came to be based on their claim to equally exercise forms of mastery over the Black. We get an insight here as to the strategies by which the bourgeoisie projects its own bourgeois model as Norm, so that it can be internalized by the proletariat who then vindicate their claim to equality within the context of the bourgeois universe of signification.

The internalization of the master-model by poor whites who owned no slaves—and who had no material relation to the ownership of slaves—gives insights into the power that the bourgeois control of the means of socialization had in fashioning the attitudes and responses of the nonowning classes. It is here perhaps that we glimpse the mechanisms of the constitution of white racism, a pathology so deeply rooted and pervasive that Richard Wright defined the problem of the U.S.A. not as a Negro but as a White problem.

Yet almost no serious indepth studies have been carried out into the complex levels of this pathology; into the history of its social constitution. This is linked to the fact that *whiteness* is taken as a given, rather than as a striking phenomenon calling for extensive research. A related cause for the oversight of this area of study has to do with the academic refusal to question the presuppositions of the egalitarian creed of the United States. Yet any explanation of the need that whites had to project the two basic stereotypes of the black—Sambo and Nat—will have to begin with the contradictions of the egalitarian creed. The white master and the poor white each found himself in Bateson’s classic model of the double bind. On the one hand, the sacred injunction of the Constitution declaimed that all men were created equal. On the other, the mores and everyday conventions, ethics, values constituted him as a man, only as white and therefore only on condition that he distanced himself as far as possible from the symbolic negation of manhood and whiteness—the black.

The projection of the Sambo stereotype with its Janus face, Nat, responds to the need of the dual psyche of the white—as settler and as the bearer of the egalitarian creed—to resolve the contradiction. The relatively milder treatment of the black in Latin America is due far more to the fact that with the minimal development of capitalism the traditional hierarchies—rather than the indirect capitalist principle of hierarchy—made it unnecessary for white Latin Americans to project the Sambo stereotype; and to find themselves in as conflictual a psychic situation. As Latin American countries became more capitalistically developed, however, racism tended to increase.

In the United States, the slave masters needed most of all to find a solution to this contradiction. The solution was the construction of the ideology of paternalism, which called imperatively for the Sambo/Nat stereotype. Central to the bourgeois ideology is the idea of the atomistic individual as a responsible agent. By constructing Sambo as the negation of responsibility, the slave master legitimated his own role as the *responsible* agent acting on behalf of the *irresponsible* minstrel. By making sure that the social process and legal structures deprived the slave of any decision-making power over his environment, the slave master created as far as possible a dependency complex in the slave, needing this opposed complex to constitute his own autonomous and responsible role. By representing the identity of Sambo as childlike, by instituting processes of infantilization, the slave master constituted himself as *Paternal Father*. The ideology of paternalism could then seem to be grounded on empirical fact.

The stereotype of the Southern slaveholder as the paternal master would underlie the entire mythology of the Southern aristocracy. Yet the myth interacted in everyday life, patterning social relations between black and white, between whites, and influencing the structure of the white and black family. The heavy paternalism of the Southern paterfamilia, the gallantry of the Southern male to the helpless "infantile" female, and the authoritarian responses of fathers to sons were all conditioned by this necessary structure of paternalism in the larger social order of the plantation.

As the Christian paternalist ethic of precapitalist Europe, which had modelled the nation on the model of family, was gradually superseded, the model of the family became privatized. That is to say, the social whole was atomized, but each head of a private family, whether in the factory, the plantation, or the household, assimilated to himself the absolute paternalism formerly associated with the King. The house indeed became a castle. The Lord of the manor alternated between a heavy hand and paternal indulgence. Thus Sambo became the model of the black who behaved in the prescribed manner, who "freely" infeodated himself, thereby communicating to the master that he was indeed a feudal lord of the baronial manor. Indeed it was Sambo who made possible the mirrors of aristocracy in which Southern planters preened and their wives coquetted and were courted. But it was a rococo aristocracy and the gilt could suddenly crack if Sambo turned the Janus face of Nat. He was malicious enough to do so with some frequency.

It is fair to say that, as Blassingame pointed out, Sambo and Nat were two constructs in the ideological arsenal of the slave owner/bourgeois master, by which he constructed his own self-conception. Sambo was the obedient slave who did his work, bowed and scraped, was submissive or, as J.A. Froude puts it, faithful and affectionate TO THOSE WHO ARE JUST AND KIND TO HIM. The ethics of being just and kind were the ethics born out of this relation. The "rebellious" stereotype of Nat Turner legitimated the use of force as a necessary mechanism for ensuring regular steady labor. As the Benthamite ideology of inert matter legitimated the use of hunger to compel wage labor to work, so was, to use Froude's terms, the "mangy cur" to which the black relapses, drifts back, without a firm hand. Stern punishment is then called for on the part of the "father," and the dual approaches of kindness and force are thereby sanctioned by and through the construction of the master-slave as father-child simulation.

The construct of the "person" of the master as "responsible agent" is confirmed by the slave who acts like Sambo. Indeed the slave-acting-out Sambo drew from the master-model impulses of benevolence, thus intensifying the experience of the latter as being the paternal father. For mastership here is not an intrinsic characteristic. It is not the blue-blood category of the feudal order which existed as an index, as an unquestioned attribute. Rather there is a

place of the NORM, the *Norm of mastery*, of which the white skin is merely a sign. Thus mastery, the experiencing of the identity of being master can be lost. If one fails by one's action to act so as to occupy the Place of the Norm, one can be displaced from the Norm, can fall into being the Non-Norm, in this case, Sambo. Any subversive desire which moves outside the Norm is repressed freely by the self which "recognizes" this desire as stigmatized by and through the symbol/stereotype, Sambo.

But since the certainty of occupying the Place of the Norm can only be confirmed through the recognition of his mastership by the Non-Norm, the only action open to the master is to compel this recognition from the Other. The certainty of the self as master can only be obtained by and through a constant cultural and emotional terrorism directed at the Non-Norm. This terrorism directed at the non-norm is only the extension of the internal terrorism directed at the self, of its psychic repression.

As Deleuze and Guattari point out in their *Anti-Oedipus*, "there is no fixed subject unless there is repression." The strategies of capitalism as a mode of domination depends on the modes of social repression which assigns standardized prescribed ego identities to their assigned places, for the functioning of the social machine. The social machine homogenizes—as in its constitution of the "negro," a process during which it homogenized multiple cultures, multiple genetic strains into one entity—as in its "blanchification" of the "white" American in which it homogenizes multiple cultures, ethnicities, genetic strains into one entity. But once it has homogenized it needs to differentiate, to demarcate, to inscribe, so as to produce the multi-layered levels necessary to the hierarchical structures of production.

To achieve this, the central strategy of the system is the colonization of desire. How does this strategy function? First of all the system produces the imaginary social signification of the Place of the Norm. The Place of the NORM is constituted by and through the definition of certain desired attributes. The most desired attribute was the "intellectual faculty." The sign that pointed to one's possession of this attribute was whiteness of skin. The sign that pointed to its nonpossession was blackness of skin, which revealed non-human being. The black exists as the Symbolic Object constituting the Lack, the Void of these qualities that have been postulated as the absolute sign of the certainty of being human. That a man or almost a man can exist, lacking these things, sets into play the terror that these attributes can be lost.

The plantation order which made it illegal for a slave to learn to read and become educated, which exhausted the black with relentless work, then produced empirical evidence of the Negro's "lack of intellectual faculties." The Negro then becomes the SYMBOLIC OBJECT OF THIS LACK WHICH IS DESIGNATED AS THE LACK OF THE HUMAN. The category and quality Lack is then constituted by the "negro" in his Sambo stereotype. The self, to constitute itself as human in the normative conception, must then conceptualize the possibility of lack, the lack of the intellectual faculties, of being the non-human, of being Sambo. This representation of a possibility engenders the anxiety of falling into the socially stigmatized. This anxiety engenders the prescribed, the colonized desire. This then becomes the mechanism which instills the imitation of the master-model, the imitative quest to occupy the Place and the Norm, acting in fear and trembling that one may not fall off. To occupy the place of the Norm one must inscribe on one's psyche the marks of repression, repress all that the place of the Norm stigmatizes as its non-negation.

The social machine of the plantation system, a machine whose marks and inscriptions are so well described by Edward Long, colonized, above all, Desire. The colonization of desires once carried out and effected by and through the social interrelationships of the different parts of the system, then leaves this colonized desire to work "freely." Thus the

system apparently gives absolute freedom of choice on the parts of those legitimated as free in the plantation system. These are the Pure White of whatever class. Although they are Pure White, they must act in order to legitimate the privilege of being Pure White. This privilege is absolute in relation to the Non-Norm. In relation to other Whites, the category of the intellectual faculty and the degrees of its lack comes into play to assign each white his proper place, his class position. But his caste position is interdependent with his class position. The absolute privilege of the caste position compensates for the relative non-privilege of the class position. The lower the class position, the more absolute is the anxiety that the caste position should be retained and recognized as absolute.

The terror of lack, a terror ceaselessly produced by the social and cultural machine of the system, is put into play. Sambo is produced as the symbol of the Negative Other, the very principle of Lack. One must strive to attain to the Pure White as Full Being, without any security that this cannot be lost, that one cannot fall off into the dark. This terror then reactivates the Lack. As Deleuze and Guattari write:

Lack (manque) is created, planned and organized in and through social production. . . . It is never primary; production is never organized on the basis of a preexisting need or lack. . . . The deliberate creation of lack as a function of the market economy is the art of the dominant class.

Its central strategy, in the case of plantation relations, was the creation of a lack of being by and through its imposition of the structural law of value of being. Thus the value of white being needs to be constantly realized, recognized, attained by the social act of exchange with the relative non-value of black being, a non-value represented by the Symbolic Negro/Sambo. It is this social act of exchange that communicates to the white about his own autonomy, an autonomy which as in the case of the white workers, Pease and Reynolds, the white does not *experience* in other aspects of his life.

In *Black Boy* Richard Wright tells of an incident with his fellow workers Pease and Reynolds:

The climax came at noon one summer day. Pease called me to his workbench; to get to him I had to go between two narrow benches and stand with my back against a wall.

"Richard, I want to ask you something," Pease began pleasantly, not looking up from his work.

"Yes sir."

Reynolds came over and stood blocking the narrow passage between the benches; he folded his arms and stared at me solemnly. I looked from one to the other, sensing trouble. Pease looked up and spoke slowly, so there would be no possibility of my not understanding.

"Richard, Reynolds tells me that you called me Pease," he said.

I stiffened. A void opened in me. I knew that this was the showdown.

He meant that I had failed to call him Mr. Pease. I looked at Reynolds; he was gripping a steel bar in his hand. I opened my mouth to speak, to protest, to assure Pease that I had never called him simply *Pease*, and that I had never had any intention of doing so, when Reynolds grabbed me by the collar, ramming my head against a wall.

"Now, be careful, nigger," snarled Reynolds, baring his teeth. "I heard you call 'im *Pease*. And if you say you didn't, you're calling me a liar, see?" He waved the steel bar threateningly.

If I had said: No, sir, Mr. Pease, I never called you *Pease*, I would by inference have been calling Reynolds a liar; and if I had said: Yes, sir, Mr. Pease, I called you *Pease*, I would have been pleading guilty to the worst insult that a Negro can offer to a southern white man. I stood trying to think of a neutral course that would resolve this quickly risen nightmare, but my tongue would not move.

"Richard, I asked you a question!" Pease said. Anger was creeping into his voice.

"I don't remember calling you *Pease*, Mr. Pease," I said cautiously. "And if I did, I sure didn't mean . . ."

"You black sonofabitch! You called me *Pease*, then!" he spat, rising and slapping me till I bent sideways over a bench.

Reynolds was up on top of me demanding:

"Didn't you call him *Pease*? If you say you didn't, I'll rip your gut string loose with this f--k--g bar, you black granny dodger! You can't call a white man a liar and get away with it!"

I wilted. I begged them not to hit me. I knew what they wanted. They wanted me to leave the job.

"I'll leave," I promised. "I'll leave right now!"

Pease and Reynolds want, above all, recognition of their absolute and unquestioned mastery. The emotional terrorism that they display towards Wright is matched by their subservience to the Yankee employer who, however, recognizes that in their claim to dominance over Wright, he has found one point where they are prepared to challenge him. His own attitude to Wright is partly based on the fact that as a Northerner he comes from a society in which the rationality of production has penetrated and therefore in which the imperative of the skilled worker takes precedence over the white/black division. His own mastery comes from his unquestioned right to the organization of production, his mastery is expressed in his productive activity. In the relation of Manager-Worker, his privilege of the self is not only unquestioned but rationally legitimated.

What we note in the interaction between Wright, Pease, and Reynolds is the pathology of "whiteness" put into play, and this pathology is the conjoined variant of the pathology of the colonizer that Fanon and Memmi analyze; the pathology of the middle class, of the bourgeoisie, that is yet insufficiently explored. What we note in the interaction is the fact that Pease and Reynolds act so as to compel Wright to behave like Sambo. What, we must ask ourselves, underlies this compelling need of Pease and Reynolds to produce Sambo-like behavior on the part of Wright?

Deleuze and Guattari give an insight into the processes that are at work here:

Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire; they are counter-products within the real that desire produces. Lack is a counter-effect of desire; it is deposited, distributed, vacuolized, within a seal that is natural and social. . . . Desire then becomes this abject fear of lacking something.

Being in the Southern experience had come to be formulated by and through the master-model. All could not be equal masters, but one could be a small master, or as Memmi argues, one could be a small colonizer. The colonized desire itself produces the need based on the sense of lack, the need to be master in order to *experience* oneself as the Norm, as human.

One should make a distinction borrowed from Lacan—who distinguishes between the Symbolic Father in the Symbolic Order of each society and the real father—between the Symbolic White and the Symbolic Negro, either in his Sambo stereotype, submissive, or in his Nat Turner phase, rebellious, and the real white and real black. What Pease and Reynolds as real whites do in their interaction with Wright is to compel him as real black to occupy the Symbolic place of Sambo so that they can activate the experience of participating in Symbolic Whiteness, of privilege and relative power. To attain this privilege they are prepared to socially and psychologically repress Wright just as they repress within themselves any subversive desire which flows outside the prescribed and regulated desires of the social order.

It is in this sense that we should view the Sambo stereotype as the scapegoat-carrier of all alternative potentialities that are repressed in the system. Sambo becomes the represen-

tation of all desire that flows outside the normal order. The attachment to his stigmatized figure of other desires, other possibilities, causes these to be then proscribed along with his Symbolic being.

This is the link that exists between Sambo the docile submissive stereotype and the problem of the minstrel stereotype, the song and dance man. When Sambo and the minstrel are conjoined it becomes clear that the stereotype is the carrier not only of all that must be repressed if one wants to aspire to the white master MODEL, but also of all that must be repressed if one wants to aspire to the Middle Class Master-model. Harold Cruse has recently extended Nathan Huggins' earlier discussion of the white American variant of the Minstrel Show, arguing for the complex nature of the minstrel show, its central role in the development of the American musical form.

The American Minstrel show is a direct development out of the popular folk cultures of Africa, with possibly, as the Jonkunnu plays show, contributions from the parallel folk cultures of precapitalist Europe. The point to note here is the word *popular*. What is being stigmatized in the stereotypical treatment of the minstrel is at once *black* culture and *popular* culture, both opposed to the middle class worldview. Hence the middle class worldview draws in what it needs from the popular cultures, transforming the complex popular tradition of satire into harmless entertainment.

But as Cruse observes, the fact that *black* entertainers who came out of the popular culture moved to take over and give life to the forms, led to a revitalization of the forms. Because of this, even under the stereotyping, the force and power of the dynamic black popular culture came to fill a lack that by filling it created and began the cultural subversion of the normative bourgeois American reality.

Why was it that it would be the culture, stigmatized as black, as of African origin, and as of the popular forces, that would provide the counterculture and the counter signification system in the American reality? I think the reason can be found in the plantation model, in the interrelation of the "white" master and the "negro" Sambo. It is here that Hegel's analysis of the master-slave relationship, as well as Fanon's development of it, can perhaps give us insights.

First however, we must note that it is not only the popular black culture that is being stigmatized by the Sambo stereotype, the minstrel stereotype. Far more importantly, in a system that produces the economic as its reality principle, it is *all cultural activity* that is stigmatized. Popular creativity that could draw energy away from the productive goal, that could liberate repressed subversive desire was stigmatized. Middle class cultural activity would be spiritualized, attached to the figure of the marginal artist, himself postulated as the Bohemian, the licensed heretic allowed to dabble in the non-real things of the world. As such he produced artistic commodities that the real men, captains of industry, could purchase for their wives. Spiritualized art, like the home, then became the domain of Women or of marginalized humanists. The devaluation of its activity was carried out by and through this association with the feminine as the devaluation of theoretical activity would be stigmatized by the stereotypes of eggheads, pointy-heads.

The marginalization of creative cultural activity was therefore carried out through parallel strategies; and one of these strategies was the Sambo/minstrel stereotype. The marginalization of culture which was carried out through the privileging of the economic, the autonomization of the economic, drew attention away from the fact that the capitalist mode of domination works mainly through its cultural apparatus—and that the mode of production constitutes one of its central cultural mechanisms. Stanley Aronowitz argues

that the workplace is the very site of the ideological domination of the worker. Jean Baudrillard discusses, too, the industrial colonization of the worker carried out on the site of the factory. The plantation-model was, I am suggesting, the source and origin.

In this overall context, the process that I have tried to define as the cultural process of INDIGENIZATION takes on varied dimensions. In constituting another self, another collective identity whose coding and signification moved outside the framework of the dominant ideology, the slaves were involved in a long and sustained counterstruggle. Slave revolts were the punctuations of this struggle, the violent strategies carrying on the struggle by other means. What I am arguing is that what Elkins defines as the mechanism of rebellion was to be found in this constitution of an alternative culture. The constitution of this culture has all along been a sustained act of cultural subversion, a subversion of the dominant system as axiomatic. This counterculture provides the basis for the theoretical formulations of the forms of social revolution needed in American today.