Class and Culture in Interwar Miami, 1919-1941

Thomas A. Castillo
tcastill@umd.edu
tcasti02@yahoo.com

Presented at How Class Works 2012
A Conference at SUNY Stony Brooks
Center for the Study of Working Class Life
June 6-9, 2012

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Good afternoon. My presentation, “Class and Culture in Interwar Miami,” is based on a section of my book manuscript, which is a revision of my dissertation “Laboring in the Magic City: Workers in Miami, 1914-1941.” I analyze the nature of capitalism as it developed in Miami, Florida in the first half of the 20th century and more specifically, on how class and race relations reflected and reinforced the nature of power there and the nation at large. I want to complicate the whiteness narrative by infusing class and the complex dynamics of capitalism into the story. (The presentation given here is a revised and shortened version of a longer paper. Some of the omitted sections appear in the endnotes. This presentation represents a work in progress.)

Founded at the turn of the century, south Florida grew exponentially over the first several decades of the twentieth century. In my research of Miami’s archival sources and the city’s newspapers I discovered the phenomenon of performance, specifically, that of minstrel shows, parades, nationally and historically themed parties, the singing of gospel spirituals, and other similar constructions of class, race, and gender. The evidence grew over time as I researched the labor and unemployment movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

It became apparent that it told an important story about the history of the culture of class. Miami was first and foremost a resort town. Tourism was central to its economic vitality meaning that service sector jobs, including construction,
would dominate the job market. Except for the agriculture production in south Dade, the rest of the economy was local: construction, real estate, and all types of retail kept the economy running. With no natural resources to exploit except for the beach and sun and the absence of any significant manufacturing (still less than 2% in 1940), the attraction of tourists remained the lifeblood for a while.

Miamians and tourists enjoyed throughout the interwar era an array of public and private, and formal and informal entertainment that reconciled with the reality of class hierarchy. Humor was a common element that united these events but if that was lacking, then romantic sentimentalism for the Old South or Uncle Sam paternalism toward Latin America defined the moment. Encoded in the racial stereotypes used in these cultural performances was a sensibility that class hierarchy was normal and thus natural. The black body represented the “sacrificial” figure (to borrow Ralph Ellison’s phrase) of a failed economic and social system that had long accepted that some would labor for others and that defined inequality as natural despite equal opportunity rhetoric.²

I approach blackface minstrels, Black spirituals, and other forms of entertainment with the focus on how the cultural stereotypes reinforced the denigration of the lower classes, regardless of color or culture.³ The humorous use of stereotypes represented a class harmonizing project where ridicule, admiration, and curiousness merged. I want to suggest that the performance of servility and
other ideals of class hierarchy that often occurred in tourist work mirrored the formal performances of stereotypes that occurred on the stage. Sometimes it was difficult to see where imagination ended and reality began. Through the scope of voyeuristic condescension, audiences and customers could unite in their appreciation of the musical, dramatic, or servile job performance while maintaining the class and race status quo. A mythology of class hierarchy unfolded on the formal stage and in the daily experiences of leisure-tourist work: contempt for and the fear of abject poverty and loss of social status helped foster hope and appreciation for the leisure life. The performance of servility whether in entertainment or the execution of service work and the playing out of fantasies of the exotic and historical represented expressions of class hierarchy that naturalized the reality of such a state of conditions.  

I discovered this dynamic of performance in several places. Take for example the Carl Fisher papers. Carl Fisher was the important leisure entrepreneur who played a key role in financing the construction of Miami Beach. His papers demonstrate how he was attempting to create a specific tourist experience for wealthy white Americans. One letter, though incomplete, details how he and his fellow Miami Beach investors pushed out African American visitors from the Beach. The papers as a whole make clear that the only acceptable appearance of African Americans on Miami Beach were as workers, particularly as servants or
day laborers. It is quite astonishing to read the scheming behind the directive excluding Blacks from the beach. I won’t get into those details here, as rich and perverse as they are.

Counter to keeping out African Americans from leisure acts was how Blacks remained a vital workforce and sometimes in exoticized ways as when Fisher hired black Bahamians to work as gondoliers at one of his hotels. Writing to his hotel manager in 1920 that, “They are all going to be stripped to the waist and wear big brass rings. And possibly necklaces of live crabs or crawfish.” The papers also have a sprinkling of other forms of manipulations perhaps none as striking as the call to pay “attractive women” to lie by the pools and cabanas to lure guests to these areas of the hotels.

The local newspapers offered scattered but similar fascinating evidence, though rarely does one come across pictures of African Americans. In the thousands of pages I have reviewed in the interwar period, I have just come across a few. The most startling of these includes a January 1931 photo of a Black “waiters’ derby” on the sands of a beach in Miami Beach. [Blacks = horses = symbol of worker.] Apparently this “annual steeplechase” had Black waiters racing in their work clothes, carrying trays filled with dish and glass china, around beach umbrellas toward a finish line. In a small inset, a waiter named “Admiral Robley Evans Peruna Johnson” was shown diving forward in an apparent attempt
to save the contents of the tray from falling off “at the risk of several inches of
skin.” The fact that African Americans were forcibly disallowed from visiting the
Beach but were nonetheless tapped as a labor source but in degrading terms
suggests the class expectations defining Miami’s tourist landscape. Any
appearance of harmonious class relations was merely a front for mechanisms of
social control and rigid class hierarchy.

The significant dynamic in these performances remained the various ways
narratives of servility and hierarchy manifested in workplaces and social contexts.
Navigating through Miami’s social landscape entailed, to some degree, donning
masks signifying clear and distinct class and racial hierarchies. The business of a
resort town in segregationist America reflected the cultural expectations and
predilections of a predominately white clientele in a capitalist nation. The effect of
these performances was to silence class conflict with the appearance of class
harmony. The collective result of these cultural moments was to naturalize class
hierarchy.5

Ralph Ellison reminds us in his essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,”
that “the continuous debasement” of the Black image in the period of segregation
was worse than what had occurred during slavery, according to Ellison. This
reminder is historical and has class significance. An anecdote Ellison relates
illustrates how this is so. He writes, “Said a dark Southern friend of mine in
laughing reply to a white businessman who complained of his recalcitrance in a bargaining situation, ‘I know, you thought I was colored, didn’t you.’ It is across this joke that Negro and white Americans regard one another’ (emphasis added). 6 While the trickster trope and Black folk tradition offered Blacks cultural tools to survive and endure “the insecurity and blues-like absurdity” of the real world, the debased images were signifiers of the reality of existing in a lower, degraded class position to be exploited and used for profit by others—hence, the joke “you thought I was colored, didn’t you.” All those who resided in a lower class position symbolically rescinded a right to their humanity but in reality the struggle for meaning was continuous and relentless. In other words, apparent acceptance of the status quo, of the inequity of class hierarchy, did not concede one’s oppositional position to that power structure. 7

The cultural dynamic in humor of playing around the status quo but eventually not challenging it in significant ways or simply embracing it contributed to an appearance of class harmony common in tourist settings. Blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville shows were performed throughout the interwar period, both on a professional and amateur level. Despite the national dwindling popularity and diminishing economic returns resulting from various factors, 1920s Miami and other tourist venues like Atlantic City continued to host various traveling blackface minstrel and vaudeville shows. We know that they contained
dancing routines, the use of “Negro dialect,” comedy that varied with stand-up and skits that likely contained jokes about Black stereotypes (laziness, gambling, immorality, ignorance, etc.) and singing performances.⁸

The 1920s, and especially the 1930s when fewer and fewer minstrel shows circulated through the country, witnessed a flourishing of amateur productions. Organized by the city government, churches, schools, girl and boy scouts, the Mickey Mouse club, the Elks Club, American Legion, the wealthy elite Committee of One Hundred, Improvement Associations, a few unions such as the Typographical Workers Union, and other groups, these events often set out to raise funds for some cause usually for charity purposes. I suspect that this was not necessarily unique to Miami. Historians have neglected the extent of this form of entertainment in the twentieth century, noting of course the prevalence of racial stereotypes in film, radio, and other cultural products such as cartoons, postcards and various collectibles.⁹

The local production of minstrels represented a mainstay in the entertainment culture of Miami’s citizens. At times the shows were advertised through the traditional minstrel parade. In 1922 the Elks club conducted a for-charity amateur show coached by New York professional Harry Miller and it advertised the event with the “niftiest minstrel parade ever on the streets of Miami.” Borrowing from this well-worn strategy, Miami High promoted its 1924
school carnival with “a colored clown minstrel” going “all around town on a truck” for several days before the scheduled event. As late as 1939, Coral Way’s Daddies Association organized a minstrel parade to march down Flagler Street to Bayfront Park. Advertised as a playful walk down nostalgic memory lane, the news story reporting it wrote that “Miamians will remember the days of darkies in the old deep South when they watch an old-time minstrel parade” and witness in Bayfront Park “buck and wing dancing, minstrel jokes and a male chorus of 75 voices accompanied by Caesar La Monaca’s band.”

Minstrelsy had cross class support and represented a legitimate mainstream form of entertainment. The wealthy elite club, Committee of One Hundred, had its hand in various amateur minstrel shows held in February 1936 and 1938 in the exclusive Coco Lobo Club located on Adams Key, an island south of Key Biscayne. The Typographical Union held annual minstrel shows through at least 1938. The Florida, Power and Light Company sponsored the Sunshine Minstrels, an annual all employee production, casting as many as 120 workers. Its 1939 show held in the Miami Edison high school auditorium turned away more than 1,000 leading to a second show being added. H. H. Hyman, the southern division manager of the company, invited “1,500 officials and employees of other businesses as “special guests.” They included the Chamber of Commerce, City
Hall, Burdines, Marks department store, Sears Roebuck, Walgreens, Red Cross Drugs, Miami Laundry, Eastern Air Lines, and Pan American Way.  

Class hierarchy appeared in other performances of the quaint and exotica. Held throughout the 1930s in the beginning of spring, the yearly Pan American parade featured the city’s school children participating in costume of historical figures such as Simon de Bolivar or school contingents representing different Latin American countries dressed in the imagined cultural attire of their assigned country. Quite common occurrences during the winter season were the elaborate themed parties held by wealthy winter residents and tourists.  

In the February 1929 inaugural Committee of One Hundred costume party, some of the world’s wealthiest individuals attired in 18th century French, Spanish, English, and American colonial wear and as particular historical characters. “No expense was spared... by the hosts in elevating this affair to the highest pinnacle in social excellence,” wrote the news article reporting the event. With yachts docked at the Nautilus hotel, musicians provided music for the guests. Some of the musicians played on a gondola and others at the tea garden. Guests at the party included personal representatives of President-elect Hoover, Florida Governor Doyle E. Carlton, President Machado of Cuba, Governor Orr of Nassau, national and local capitalists, and other well know individuals. This became an annual
event but the theme of each year’s party changed. Other social clubs held similar yearly costume parties.

The exotic, minstrel and servile job could easily mesh together in a smooth transition from formal performances on the stage to the platform of leisure social exchange. After the Kanoe Klub held its minstrel in 1921, five blackface minstrels served refreshments during the reception after the show. The entire membership of the Junior League (made up of women) received the guests to their January 1928 Gypsy Ball in gypsy costumes: “these charming young women will be here and there about the arched balconies and rooms of the club and on the terrace.” Held in the exclusive Coral Gables Biltmore Hotel, guests were also treated to Mrs. Ralph Buss and the Junior League chorus’ singing of the prelude to “Habanera” and “Carmen.” The quest for legitimacy, authority, and status that accompanied these classical songs may have been undermined by the humor of the gypsy costumes and the “strolling minstrels and cigarette girls”—“expected to add charm to the evening’s entertainment.” A who’s who of Miami high society were guests to this kitschy event. From the real world to the imagined, the movement was apparently seamless in the Winter Playground. A Miami Daily News 1934 cartoon depicted Mayor Frank Kazentine being served by a blackfaced waiter saying, “A mint julep, Kunnel, Suh?” The opening of the Miami Beach restaurant, the Roadside Rest, in
January 1937 included singing minstrels strolling from table to table. If it was good for high society it was also good for the rest.¹⁴

The Committee of One Hundred, in their yearly outing to the Cocolobo Cay Club, assembled in 1934 a group of African American adolescents for the entertainment of its white wealthy members. Half of the 60-acre island that the Club was located consisted of grassy lawn and was only reachable by boat or plane. A Miami Herald article reminded its readers that the location had once been terrorized by the 18th century African pirate Black Caesar. The chairman of the entertainment committee, C. W. Chase Jr., had the Black boys fight off a raft, walk and wrestle on a grease pole, box each other, and finish the deprecating day with a battle royal. Chase had programs made for the day for the 350 male guests. Cartoons showed a blackface music band performing on a dock, the grease pole climb, blackface waiters serving members of the Committee, and two blackface individuals boxing on a small platform on the water with one receiving a blow and about to fall in the water. There was also a flour diving contest. Even in cartoons the black body could only be depicted in the humorous blackface minstrel form. To make matters even more perverse, the day’s events were filmed (over two hours of footage) and later shown to the wives of the Committee members in their newly constructed clubhouse on Michigan Avenue, Miami Beach. It represented an amazing production in which the degradation of human dignity was neatly
packaged for voyeuristic adventure. A short one-minute clip of a similar 1931 event emerged on the internet in 2011 and was entitled “Dusky Entertainers, A Feature of Annual Millionaires’ Outing.” The clip showed Black boys pushing each other off a small raft and into the water as male spectators donned in white suits and hats watched. The Miami Daily News reported that “a water tournament in which dusky participants tumbled each other from rafts, boats, and greasy poles for prizes and chased ducks around the improvised pools entertained the guests until luncheon.” The Committee’s millionaires treated these African American youth as animals to be exploited and used for their enjoyment through sporty burlesque. The connection between work and leisure, tourist economics and hierarchy, and class and race could not have been more direct. No records have been uncovered to indicate if this kind of event occurred every year, but it is not unlikely given the parallels of the 1931 and 1934 outings.15

Other forms of class and racial hierarchy were more paternalistic and benevolent and thus apparently less demeaning. In contrast to the Cocolobo Cay outings, the Committee of One Hundred in January 1931 witnessed the singing from a group of “10 negro singers” from Howard C. Coffin’s “Sapelo Island plantation.” Born in Ohio, an engineer, and the president of the car company, Hudson-Essex, Coffin had bought the Georgia sea island in 1910 and built his home in the refurbished antebellum house of the planter and slave owner, Thomas
Spalding. Coffin took time before introducing the singers to urge the gathering’s businessmen to advertise the south Atlantic coast’s colonial past and thereby help develop the region’s economy. According to the newspaper story reporting the event, “he then recounted a short history of slavery and told of [the] origin of [the] songs sang. The negroes serenaded amid the flickering light and smoke of campfires, forming a picturesque scene with the palms of Mr. [Gar] Wood’s estate in the background.” A photo that accompanied the story suggests that the “negro harmonizers” likely sang folk, blues, and possibly gospel songs. The picture showed nine singers sitting on chairs in a rowing motion—indicating a folk work song—with a guitarist off to the side and all wearing long sleeve shirts and large handkerchiefs, suggesting the formal quality of the entertainment. These singers were only the opening act of the night’s many festivities. Any subversive politics inherent in the African American performances, in their expressions of stories of perseverance amid hardship, were subsumed in this context of wealthy white men leisurely tackling the problems of the day. The memory of slavery and the persistent prevalent rate of African American poverty stood in stark contrast to the enormous riches of their audience. Reference to simpler times calmed the spirits of these wealthy men who were now facing economic turbulence and the prospect of working class upheaval. Such casual juxtapositions of the tamed, civilized
laborer and the self-important stock holders of society justified the moral rightness and intelligence of class hierarchy.\textsuperscript{16}

African Americans and white singers sang spirituals for white audiences. On some occasions, a few African American churches invited white guests to observe their choir’s gospel singing. Though other times, African Americans held outdoor events where they served “real southern barbecue” and provided gospel music with the clear intention of raising needed funds. Segregationist America forced African Americans to walk a cultural tightrope.

These irregular and mostly amateur attempts at profiting from stereotypes pale in comparison to the successes of black entertainment-boxing promoter Willie “Lavender Duke” Slater. While other entertainment promoters appear occasionally in the local newspapers, Slater remained a persistent and consistent presence in the white newspapers. Not much is known about Slater.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, no historian has ever written anything about him. Each year starting as early as 1928 and continuing through World War II and after, Slater promoted weekly boxing fights in Miami during the winter season, drawing talent from the African American boxing circuit. These boxers traveled throughout the country including the South. The fights occurred in various places over the years, apparently changing as a result of the lack of good enough spaces in the African American section of the city known as “Colored” Town.
Slater was well-known among sports enthusiasts including *Miami Daily News* sports writer Jack Bell who called him “my old friend” and who also organized one event with him in the 1936-1937 tourist season. Bell’s respect for Slater’s promotion of good boxing cards and his general love of boxing likely landed him space in the sports page as did the general popularity of the sport among white fans. Seats were reserved for white fans who seem to have consistently appeared at the weekly fights.18 Local newspaper coverage did not indicate who exactly made up the white audience—that is, if it consisted of tourists or local residents but it is more than likely that both appeared at the shows. The segregated seating and that the event occurred in “Colored” Town safeguarded racial customs. The steady announcements of the fights in the sports page indicate that white fans wanted to know when and where the boxing matches were occurring. Later in 1947, Slater succeeded in booking an “all negro card” in the Orange Bowl, the first time African Americans were allowed to enter the acclaimed sports stadium as customers.19

The success of Willie Slater’s weekly boxing fights highlight an important point about how class and race worked together. The Committee of One Hundred’s degradation of the black body and condescending and romantic nods to the Old South revealed a larger class dynamic of mocking the lower classes which here was signified as dark skin. Captured in minstrel performances, comedy,
dance, and sentimental popular music, the cultural currents helped reinforce the status quo. Slater’s boxing events had a similar class dynamic. His boxing cards seldom only had boxing matches. He continued a tradition likely started by another boxing promoter in 1930 of holding a yearly “beauty contest” during a given boxing fight night. By the mid-1930s Slater expanded on this idea by holding an annual Black “bathing beauty contest.” Besides holding several fights including a main event during any one boxing card, Slater often also included a battle royal, “buck dancing,” and singing groups to help entertain the audience. Newspaper accounts do not comment on how these events unfolded; they usually only listed the winner of bouts. A “born showman,” according to Jack Bell, Slater clearly attempted to profit from the sports entertainment business, adding his own twists of showmanship by tacking on music and sporty burlesque. While the performances of the African American and African Cuban boxers were certainly testaments to their humanity and expert skill, as was the beauty of the women contestants, the promotion nonetheless did contribute to a potentially degrading affair. The brutal nature of the boxing events, at the very least, could justify white spectators since the bashing of the black body, whether by blacks or whites, was an unfortunate but acceptable practice in segregated America.²⁰

Jack Bell the sports writer admired Slater because he was an optimist and a showman. The boxing promoter embodied the American Dream, a person rising
up despite the odds against him. While he seemed to mock Slater at times for the stutter he had, Bell wrote about it in an affectionate and respectful way saying in effect that this guy was a success despite his various flaws. Bell wrote that African American heavyweight Bearcat Obie was a “black giant” from the cotton fields who he had seen “in the best fight your correspondent ever saw between heavyweights.” Many other Black boxers also embodied for Bell the American Dream, of small town individuals working hard to make it in the world. Perhaps that was why white and black fans showed up to these fights, even if the brutality of the fighting suggested insanity and the burlesque equally dehumanized its participants. Much of the economic system seemed similarly insane or at least justified the class hierarchy that defined the great disparity between the haves and have-nots.21

Miami’s cultural landscape embraced class hierarchy and thus helped reinforce existing power relations. Despite this cultural hegemony, workers confronted the hardship of getting by occasionally bursting through these narratives of harmony. They too sought class harmony along moral economy lines: each person had a right to a competency. But the lure of instant riches, of the easy life promised in fun and leisure, often helped to blur the similarities between white and black workers.
Reverend Robert Newton Ward’s June 1923 sermon in Miami’s First Congregational Church suggested the absurdity of class hierarchy. Ward pointed out that the Christian call to love thy neighbor rested on the fact that all were children of God. However, he argued that “so long as God has made human-kind as he has, there will always naturally be what is called classes.” Educated men naturally seek the companionship of other educated men, Ward pointed out, as do mechanics other mechanics and Blacks other Blacks. His logic derived from his divine insight: “Christ does not expect me to make a companion of an animal or to carry myself to the level of one.” Ward highlighted how a community was held together through faith, that all should remember to keep their place, and that “the poor stand no more chance of getting into Heaven than do the rich.” Ward’s amazing defense of paternalism and hierarchy speaks volumes about the resonance of class harmony as an idea with conservative tendencies as well as a potential rallying point for progressive change.22

Ward’s sermon stood in stark contrast to the various calls for social equality. Reverend Philip Irwin, a white Episcopalian preacher giving a sermon in a black church, was tarred and feathered by a “band of ruffians” in 1921 for preaching social equality between the races, for even advocating intermarriage. Irwin denied these charges though he admitted to teaching a more hopeful message from the New Testament than Ward had and he highlighted the powerful potential of the
Declaration of Independence. The juxtaposition of the social equality advocated in both texts and the alleged preaching of racial equality has important significance. Whenever African Americans challenged the status quo, they represented such a threat to capitalist power relations as to disrupt the social order even if they adopted the egalitarian mythology of the American nation-state. The social control that segregation represented affected both white and black citizens, silently binding both to the class hierarchy apparently endemic to capitalism. Three years later, an ominous marble monument was placed near where Irwin had been attacked. One side told how a person teaching racial equality had been tarred and feathered; the other side wrote, “If you are a reckless negro or a white man who believes in social equality, be advised that Dade County don’t need you.”\textsuperscript{23} Racism enabled the most perverse contortions of the human spirit. In the context of a tourist economy, the effect was to justify and bolster the logic of class hierarchy. Social movements of the period may have been limited by such cultural notions but they did at times break free from such restraints. I explore these movements in my book manuscript.

\textsuperscript{1} Miami’s continuous growth, changing population, and having an economy rooted mainly in low wage, service oriented jobs (and often seasonal), represents a challenge to understanding class and race relations because of the constant change and persistent obstacles that workers faced both in living their lives in low wage work and organizing collective responses to ameliorate those problems. My work adds to the vibrant and penetrating work of
historians who have worked on the central importance of class in shaping labor and civil rights struggles, and who remain careful not to write about race and racism in isolation or to elevate whiteness as the key shaping force defining race relations. For starters, the Miami of which I write about was a wholly different Miami than what most people will likely imagine. It is not even the Magic City that is being depicted in the new STARZ television series… though I have not had a chance to view this 1950s era drama. I am dealing with earlier days, a foundational period when the Miami area became widely known as a tourist and leisure destination. The interwar period (1919–1941), while written about by a few local historians, has not gotten as much attention as the apparent racier eras and locations such as Miami Beach. Steven Gaines, Fool’s Paradise: Players, Poseurs, and the Culture of Excess in South Beach (New York: Crown, 2009); Gerald Posner, Miami Babylon: Crime, Wealth, and Power—A Dispatch from the Beach (New York: Simon Schuster, 2009); Ron Chepesiuk, Gangsters of Miami: True Tales of Mobsters, Gamblers, Hit Men, Con Men and Gang Bangers from the Magic City (Fort Lee, N.J.: Barricade Books, 2010); the film, Cocaine Cowboys (2006).


4 Omitted material: historical as in the singing of “plantation melodies,” “negro spirituals,” the comedy and varied musical acts of blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville, and the execution of service work; similarly, costume balls and themed parties of the wealthy flaunted their ability to play and act out their fantasies of the exotic and historical.

5 Omitted material from paragraph: One should not, however, view the segregation policy of keeping Blacks from using the beaches of Miami Beach as simply the practice of protecting white privilege. The segregation that defined leisure and recreation reflected the general tendencies to include and exclude by class. Often framed in narratives of the nostalgic Old South or U.S. Empire, from Manifest Destiny to rising world force, these stories were acted out in numerous social settings and events. embracing and adopting the new developing mass forms of entertainment as well as older ones

6 Film scholar Gilberto Perez offered important insight into these connections. He has argued in his analysis of John Ford’s 1934 film Judge Priest that humor has limits as a device to challenge social hierarchy. While humor may at times identify the injustice of a situation—that is, to “bring down the high and give play to the low”—ultimately “comedy says that society admits improvement only up to a point, and that beyond that its wrongs are to be lived with. The endings of comedy may be happy, but part of the reconciliation they bring about is reconciliation to injustice.” I believe that the “comedy of rhetoric” has relevance in real places like Miami. The judge in the film, played by Will Rogers, and Stepin Fetchit’s character Jeff are easygoing Southern types who manipulate others by using “the rhetoric of a trickster”: the former by representing and resisting the law and the latter by using dumbness as a mask. William J. Mahar, “Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840-1890,” in Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy, edited by Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1996), 179-186; Michael Regin, Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 49-50; Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of National Character (reprint, 1931; New York: Doubladay & Company, 1953), 70-90; Ellison, “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke,” p. 54. Ellison commented: “It is not at all odd that this black-faced figure of white fun is for Negroes a symbol of everything they rejected in the white man’s thinking about race, in themselves and in their own group.” It is not difficult, viewed from the scope of the early twentieth-century, to sympathize and agree with the outrage of such images as blackface and to understand why anyone would despise such cultural caricatures of themselves.

7 Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” 54 & 58-59;

8 Competition with new forms of mass entertainment such as films, the large size of the minstrel companies and small profit margins, and then the Great Depression helped to kill or at least limit the number of regionally circulating shows. MDN, 18 Jan 1922, p. 3, 2nd section (J. A. Colburn); MDN, 14 Dec 1922, p. 2 & 3 Jan 1923, p. 2 (Murphy); MDN, 11 Nov 1927, p. 7 (Lasses White); Miami Tribune 7 Jan 1927, p. 14 and MDN 6 July 1928, p. 14 (Al G. Fields); MDN, 23 April 1929, p. 13 (Christie). In July 1926, January 1927 and March 1928, Emmett Miller appeared in Miami. Writer Nick Tosche devoted an entire book searching for this elusive but important blues and country singer. Where Dead Voices Gather (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 67-70 (for the July 1926 date). John F. Murphy’s Minstrels, “Lasses” White Minstrels, J. A. Coburn Minstrels, Al G. Fields Minstrels, and
Christie’s Minstrels, the few I have identified, were regular features during the tourist season in 1920s Miami. The newspaper records often did not write much about these shows. The Lasses White Minstrels in November 1927 was divided into seven scenes and provided “a good two hours of amusement for those who liked the burnt cork type of entertainment, and who doesn’t?” While this seemed like a more traditional show, other performances included modern music. Emmett Miller, the influential blues singer, sang his hit “Any Time” in January 1927 and was recalled to the stage four times. Before the song started, the blackfaced Miller began with dialogue in dialect, and then transitioned into “Any Time” which had a common blues theme about loneliness and a broken heart. Omitted

Section: while African Americans also engaged in minstrelsy and likely performed in front of Black audiences given the strict segregation laws, all the newspaper reports I uncovered were of whites in blackface. It continued a tradition that had occurred regularly in Miami and elsewhere prior to the period.


10 “Elks’ Big Fun Frolic and Minstrels Begin,” MDN, 27 Jan 1922, p. 2; “Pupils Ready for Carnival,” MDN, 25 April 1924, p. 11; “Minstrel Parade Set for Tonight,” MDN, 24 April 1939, p. 2A. A minstrel parade was to march down Flagler Street before the start of the carnival, with all the members of the high school band participating. The carnival was to include “minstrels, plays, Hawaiian dances, acrobatic stunts, and any number of things.” Minstrel parades continued to appear throughout the interwar period; though it is unclear the frequency of such events given the likely countless private unreported affairs.

11 MDN, 28 Feb 1936 and MDN, 20 Feb 1938, p. 1B (Committee of 100). The Committee planned in December 1933 on organizing their own minstrel show in 1934 with its millionaire members donning blackface but it is unclear if they ever did have that show, “Millionaires to Go Blackface,” MDN, 13 Dec 1933, p. 9; MDN, 12 June 1938, p. 4B (Typographical union); “Power Firm Cast Repeats Minstrel,” MDN, 6 May 1939, p. 6; Cecil Warren, “Numerous Distinctions Boasted by Young City,” MDN, 20 June 1941, p. 1D. For employer support of employee attendance of minstrel shows in another city and state, see Jerome P. Bjelopera, “White Collars and Blackface: Race and Leisure among Clerical and Sales Workers in Early Twentieth-Century Philadelphia,” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 126, no. 3 (July 2002): 471-490. Residential organizations followed the practice of using the minstrel show for fun and humor. The North Miami Beach Improvement Association, for example, held an annual minstrel show from the 1930s through at least 1941.

12 MDN, 15 March 1931, p. 1; “Colorful Park Pageant Marks Pan-Am Events,” 18 Nov 1933, p. 14; Barbara Ann Thomas, “Riverside Visits Seminole Village,” MDN, 23 Nov 1941, p. 2B; “Surf Club Plans Gala Series of Winter Events,” MDN, 11 Jan 1931, p. 2, Section 2; “Surf Club Presents Exotic Setting for Cambodia Evening,” MDN, 4 March 1934, p. 1, Society Section; “Surf Club Fete Attended by Atlantans,” Atlantic Constitution, 4 March 1934. The exclusive Surf Club on Miami Beach, in its 1931 Gala series, had parties arranged with a Spanish-Andalusia theme and another featuring a “Samarkand fete on the Persian-Chinese border.” Three years later, party planners for the Club designed “an elaborate spectacle of the exotic architecture of Indo-China with its pagan temples, fantastic gods and goddesses, gilded pagodas and temple dancers” that allegedly surpassed any past endeavor. Orchestras were placed at various points of the elaborate space of the Club. Situated in a large garden, the night’s coordinator, Mrs. Weller, had the party start at “twilight so the guests can wander in the jungle” surrounding the Club. The invitations were written in blue and gold paper so as to further express “the oriental influence.”

13 “Costume Party is Brilliant Beach Affair,” MDN, 16 Feb 1929, p. 16. Frank Seiberling and Harvey Firestone, rubber manufacturers; J. C. Penney; local entrepreneur and multi-term Miami mayor, E. G. Sewell; a vice president of Standard Oil Company; the architect Addison Mizner; C. F. Kettering, A. J. Trumball, and De Witt Page, vice presidents of General Motors and their wives; and Philo Gelatt of Northern Engraving Company, to name just a few.
“Kanoe Club Minstrels,” *MDN*, 5 Aug 1921, p. 7; *MDN*, 29 Jan 1928, p. 1, Society Section; *MDN*, 18 Jan 1934, p. 10; “New Restaurant Opens at Beach,” *MDN*, 20 Jan 1937, p. 9. Mr. and Mrs. Sedgwick Cooper (president of the Committee of 100), E. G. Sewell and his wife (founder of the Miami Chamber of Commerce and multi-term mayor), the Pancocots, the Firestones, the Coxes (1920 Democratic presidential candidate and owner of the Miami Daily News), the Shotts (owner of the Miami Herald), and several others.

Newspaper clipping from the *Miami Herald* entitled “Cocolobo Cay Outing Features Yacht Race, Black Boys Not So Gently Treated in Royal Battle Wind Up,” undated (likely Feb 11, 1934), “Committee of One Hundred Records, South Florida Historical Museum, Box 7; *Miami Herald* (hereafter MH), 10 Feb 1934; *MDN*, 11 Feb 1934, p. 4; “Masses Lead Prosperity,” *MDN*, 28 Feb 1934, p. 11; “Pictures of Cocolobo Cay Picnic Shown Feminine Admirers,” *MDN*, 8 March 1934; “25 Yachts, With 100 Committee Go to Cocolobo,” *MDN*, 29 Jan 1931, p. 1; “Cocolobo Cay Outing Routs Business Care: Captains of Industry Play Like Kids at Their Annual Picnic,” *MDN*, 31 Jan 1931, p. 2. (Newsreel cameramen joined the party in this outing. In addition to the use of yachts, “several prominent guests were taken down in Gar Wood’s plane, the Kinjockey, which made two trips to the key…”) Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (reprint, 1947; New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 17-33. The Critical Past website clip described the Black youth as “natives of the island”:

http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675055150_wrestling_eating-hotdogs_natives-of-island-wrestling_yachts-and-boats (last viewed on 3/12/2011). Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man’s protagonist’s harrowing, demeaning, and alienating experience fighting in a battle royal in front of the “the most important men of the town…the bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants” was certainly no exaggeration.

“New Ideas Said Business Need by Kettering,” *MDN*, 28 January 1931, p. 14. Maxwell Taylor Courson, “Howard Earl Coffin, King of the Coast,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 83, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 322-341; William S. McFeely, *Sapelo’s People: A Long Walk into Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 146-148. It is likely that these singers were a forerunner to the Georgia Sea Island singers of later years led by Bessie Jones and others and recorded by Alan Lomax. See the indispensable book by Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Fold Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (reprint, 1977; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Harvey Firestone gave a short pep talk about the imminent economic recovery and the benefits of that on tourist Miami; Cyrus Curtis of Curtis Publishing provided jokes for the evening; Clayton Sedgwick Cooper offered general comments and introduced the host of the evening Gar Wood who then displayed his new racing boat, Miss America IX; opera singers Miss Irma Debaun and V. Y. Kallini individually sang several songs; and the main speaker of the night, Charles Kettering of General Motors, spoke on the need to produce new things to essentially create demand and thereby end the economic depression.

According to WWI Registration Records, a Willie Slater was born in 1897 in Boston, Georgia and lived in Miami. Slater listed himself as a “mulatto.” The 1920 Federal Census records list a Willie Slater who fit this profile. He listed himself as a grocery store merchant. I have yet to locate him in the 1930 census but he does appear in the 1945 Florida State Census (from Georgia, age 47). “Florida Preps for Ring Bouts,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 Oct 1932, p. 8 announced to traveling boxers “contemplating spending the winter months in Florida” to contact Slater, “matchmaker,” at the “the World War Veterans Association,” 122 N.W. 14th St., Miami.”

“Negro Fighters in Bout Tonight,” *MDN*, 9 Oct 1928, p. 9; *MH*, 11 Oct 1928, p. 8; *MDN*, 19 Dec 1928, p. 13; *MDN*, 18 Dec 1929, p. 14; *MDN*, 10 Dec 1930, p. 14; *MDN*, 17 Jan 1934, p. 13; *MDN*, 15 Feb 1934, p. 14; Jack Bell, O’er the Sports Desk,” *MDN*, 4 Aug 1936, p. 10 (Bell commenting on Slater and winter boxing promotion); *MDN*, 18 Jan 1940, p. 1C. African American boxing later extended to the Liberty City Park Arena (N.W. 17th Ave and 70th St.) in 1939; “Negro Boxers Meet Tonight,” *MDN*, 30 Nov 1939 but it is unclear if Slater promoted this or subsequent fights there.


“Negro Fighters Share Card with ‘Beauties,’ Singers,” *MDN*, 29 Jan 1930, p. 15 (Mears show); “Negro Boxers Clash Tonight,” *MDN*, 15 Feb 1934, p. 14 (Slater has beauty contest); “Buck Dancing, Boxing Bouts on Negro Card,” *MDN*, 20 March 1935, p. 17; *MDN*, 3 March 1937, p. 1B; *MDN*, 2 March 1939, 1C (showman); This tendency was not unlike the performance of Miami’s famous Black baseball team, the Ethiopian Clowns. According to historian Raymond Mohl, their show consisted of “on-field clowning antics, which included at various times wearing grass skirts, wigs, or clown suits; slapstick comedy, flashy practice routines and baseball trickery; and even wearing “whiteface” make-up, the team came to be known as the Harlem Globetrotters of baseball.” These

21 *MDN*, 28 March 1934, p. 13; *MDN*, 3 Feb 1937, p. 21; *MDN*, 2 March 1939, p. 1C.

22 “Impossible to Get Away from Caste,” *MDN (Miami Metropolis)*, 16 June 1923, p. 4.