

(Dis)membering & (Re)membering: Deconstructing White Supremacist Power, Performance,  
and Institutional Memory

Sarah Mellin

GSS 498 Senior Capstone and ANT 499 Senior Thesis

Dr. Katie Horowitz, Dr. Alison Bory, Dr. Laurian Bowles, & Dr. Fuji Lozada

## Setting the Stage

In the Fall of 2017, Tian Yi ('18) and I began discussing our knowledge of Davidson College's history - or rather, as we came to realize, our lack thereof. We reflected on what we had been taught about the school upon arrival, and how partial and selective this education had been. The college's age, location in the Southern United States, and general campus culture of White Presbyterianism indicated there were stories that needed to be uncovered and *recovered*; moreover, as Tian brought up in our early conversations, the fact that the school was not built for (and in fact predominantly by) people of color could be seen and sensed in the physical construction of campus - in other words, she (like many other students of color) could *feel* that they were not meant to belong.

At the time, Tian and I were co-leaders of a student organization known as Davidson Teach-Ins, which developed political education programs that were meant to disrupt public spaces on campus. Tian hoped we could use the group as a platform to interrogate and disrupt the facade that the school employs to attract minority students and demonstrate how the history of the school has been both thoroughly Whitewashed and stripped of appropriate context. In April of 2018, we unveiled the "Davidson Disorientation," an alternative campus tour that highlighted the college's history of White supremacy and anti-Blackness and traced how these legacies were institutionalized and embedded in the physical landscape of the school. We believe the tour sparked an important discourse about our college's origins, resources, and supposed heroes, and laid the groundwork for further inquiries into the school's past by writing and speaking against our own collective memory, and thus challenging an orientation that had been deeply embedded in our audience(s) and ourselves. In 2019 and 2020, I expanded on this project to collect more

information on the college and investigate how colonialism, slavery, and White supremacy were instrumental in its development.<sup>1</sup>

How we define and use a space is crucial in defining its significance within a community; the act of performing, producing, and enacting rituals within a space is in many ways what affords that space power.<sup>2</sup> Access to Davidson College campus spaces has been highly restricted along racial lines since the college's inception; for those who were granted access, Presbyterian tradition and its enforcement by the administration meant that most forms of dance, performance, and even sport on campus property were heavily controlled up until the last several decades.<sup>3</sup> The continued existence of performances that included dancing before the 1940s, however, demonstrates that such pieces were serving a clear social role; while forms like the waltz or lindy hop may have been restricted, those that integrated racist conventions and ideology into dance and music were not only allowed but often encouraged.

Here, I analyze four sets of such performances, treating them as case studies of the performance of racial power and identity at the college. These examples allow us to see that while performances (by design) disappear from physical space, they are a crucial part of constructing and maintaining Davidson's spatial and institutional memory. Although this analysis is restricted based on the materials available, it addresses highly significant pieces of the

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<sup>1</sup> The second version of this project includes a digital showcase of the college's history (organized thematically) and a virtual guided tour of significant landmarks on campus, available online at [disorientingdavidson.com](http://disorientingdavidson.com). It culminates in my Senior thesis, available on the Davidson College library website at [https://davidson.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01DCOLL\\_INST/1sbboe3/cdi\\_walterdegruyter\\_books\\_9780520948334-008\\_pdf](https://davidson.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01DCOLL_INST/1sbboe3/cdi_walterdegruyter_books_9780520948334-008_pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100–8.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelia Shaw, *Davidson College: Intimate Facts* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Press, 1923); Jan Blodgett and Ralph B. Levering, *One Town, Many Voices: a History of Davidson, North Carolina*. (Davidson, NC: Davidson Historical Society, 2012).

college's history that often remain undiscussed and seeks to contribute to a larger body of community work that explores race, labor, performance, and power at Davidson.<sup>4</sup>

As with any project, this investigation includes inherent limitations in approach and scope that are important to recognize. Most available accounts are filtered and distorted through a White Western gaze,<sup>5</sup> constituting the intentional choices of White curators (whether audience members, authors, or archivists) who sought to present and preserve a certain version of Blackness or Indigeneity, and in turn creating a significant ethnographic silence around the experiences and opinions of Black and Indigenous individuals (particularly women).<sup>6</sup> Partially due to this, my analysis is primarily a structural and systemic one focused on the violence inherent to such racialized appropriations and the culture of Whiteness (and by extension, White supremacy) that such performances replicate and produce.<sup>7</sup>

### **Case 1 - “Blacked’ Up:” Instances of Student Blackface for Crime and Violence**

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, the Davidson College Board of Trustees' meeting minutes constituted the main record of campus life. While there is no way to know how exhaustive these accounts were, issues of student behavior and conduct are mentioned

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<sup>4</sup> For other examples of this work, see Dr. Nneka Dennie's AFR 329 “Women & Slavery in the Black Atlantic” blog entries April 13th through May 30th, 2019 at <<https://davidsonarchivesandspecialcollections.org/aroundthed/>>, Dr. Amanda Martinez's “The Davidson Microaggressions Project” at <https://davidsonmicroaggressionsproject.org/>, and Jonathan Shepherd-Smith's 2018 Senior thesis “Beyond the Veil,” Makayla Binter's “Mural Panel Project” at <<http://www.davidsonian.com/the-mural-project/>> and <<https://davidsonjournal.davidson.edu/2019/10/introducing-makayla-binter-20/>>, and Maurice Norman's Project Token at <http://www.davidsonian.com/installation-depicts-marginalized-students-resilience/>.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978); Brenda Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> For more about the relationship between Blackness, anti-Blackness, and memory, see Harvey Young's *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> I would like to acknowledge and extend my heartfelt thanks to the following individuals for their support of me and Tian Yi in our original “Davidson Disorientation” project and its subsequent iterations: Jessica Cottle, Emily Privott, and Sharon Byrd (of the Davidson College Archives & Special Collections), Dr. Rebecca Ruhlen, Dr. Melissa González, Dr. Fuji Lozada, Dr. Laurian Bowles, Dr. Yurika Tamura, Dr. Katie Horowitz, Dr. Alison Bory, Dr. Helen Cho, Dr. Scott Branson, and Dr. Hilary N. Green.

frequently. I have identified four recorded examples of Blackface<sup>8</sup> ranging from 1849-63 that are discussed in the first volume of these minutes.<sup>9</sup> The first incident I consider occurred in May of 1849, when a student named James F. Bell was brought before the faculty for entering another student's room and "being intoxicated and disorderly on the following Sabbath day." He was suspended two days later for this behavior, but the fact that he was "in disguise, with his face blackened" was not taken into account and not the reason for his punishment.<sup>10</sup> The specific reference to the Sabbath is a clear invocation of Presbyterian morality, and also seems to imply that his inappropriate behavior would have been less serious if performed on another day of the week (i.e., one less directly connected to religious observance). In this situation, Blackness is being associated with immorality as defined by a particularly Christian ethic.

Next, in December of 1856, a student named Wiley<sup>11</sup> ran from the campus patrol and "attempted to deceive" them by "pretending to be a [Black man] until he was overtaken," after which he repeatedly insulted the members of the patrol. Wiley was later asked to "leave college premises permanently" for other charges of drinking and disorderly conduct, but it seems that he was eventually pardoned in January and did not receive any significant punishment afterwards.<sup>12</sup> While there is no further information about this patrol in the trustees' meeting minutes, it is likely the same patrol that was authorized by the Board of Trustees a year earlier to handle cases of "errant livestock" and "any negroes who may collect about the college on Sundays."<sup>13</sup> The association between Blackness and animality is clear in the patrol's description, as Black people

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<sup>8</sup> While the second incident describes a student "pretending to be a [Black man]" and does not explicitly mention Blackface, the language used to describe the situation combined with the context of the college and the other examples implies that Blackface would have been used, either alone or in combination with clothes, speech, etc. that were intended to denote Blackness.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson College Board of Trustees, "Notes of the Board of Trustees," Vol. 1 of the Board of Trustees Minutes (Davidson, NC: Davidson College, 1842-73).

<sup>10</sup> (Ibid., 37)

<sup>11</sup> This student's first name is not included in the description.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 140-41.

<sup>13</sup> Shepherd-Smith 2018.

are being equated with non-human interlopers and framed as a direct threat to campus and therefore unwelcome.

The remaining two instances were part of an ongoing feud between several students in the Spring of 1863. In February, a student named W. H. Scott was attacked by a group of other students (five in total) who “blackened his face with soot and tallow” and tried to “make a [Black] boy kiss him;” afterwards, W. H. Scott’s brother H. W. Scott confronted the group and engaged them in a fistfight. When the students were called before the faculty, the apparent leader of the offending group, Troy<sup>14</sup> claimed that the “blacking was intended to drive [the Scotts] out of the West Wing” of their shared dorm and deter them from stealing. Although all of the students were admonished, none of them received any formal sanctions.<sup>15</sup> Then, in March, Troy and several of the other students involved in the first incident were called to a faculty meeting for being “caught...with their faces blacked, and otherwise disguised, engaged in disorderly conduct in the campus and village.” Troy was dismissed from the college, and the other men were “publicly reprimanded”; however, following this, the faculty resolved that “any student who disguises himself by blacking his face, altering his dress, or by any other means, shall be held guilty of a serious offence, and shall be liable to immediate dismissal from College.”<sup>16</sup>

This is a critical example of Blackface being applied as a punishment by a group of students wishing to police another’s behavior. Here, Blackface becomes something that is violently employed against others, marking it as shameful. The use of shame is not restricted to the Blacking, however, as this is the same situation in which the recipient of Blackface is pressured to kiss a young Black boy. Within a homosocial environment such as Davidson, the threat of male homosexuality (real or perceived) must either be countered or, as it is here,

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<sup>14</sup> This student’s first name is not included in the description.

<sup>15</sup> DC Board of Trustees, “Notes of the Board of Trustees,” 234-36.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-7.

projected onto others as a form of violence. In this situation, the threat of abnormality is both racialized and sexualized - the implied homosexuality feminizes and queers the Black boy in ways that are deeply rooted in both racism and homophobia.<sup>17</sup> Here, this intimate, physical association with Blackness is what is intended to shame W. H. Scott, and it is notable that the Black boy is neither named nor contextualized - his Blackness and maleness are his defining characteristics because that is what constitutes the threat.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout all of these scenarios, direct references to Blackface are evident through the language that was used at the time, which focused on the action of “Blacking” and the materials (primarily soot and tallow) that were used to perform it.<sup>19</sup> While any number of other materials could have been used to cover themselves and obscure their identities (clothes, masks, etc.), the very fact that these students chose Blackface specifically indicates that the practice is operating on multiple levels. Here, Blackface is being used as a mediator for one’s behavior in several ways; first, because White culture already views Blackness as deviant and immoral, adopting Blackness provides an excuse or justification for deviant and immoral behavior.<sup>20</sup> As already discussed, the White male students of Davidson were held to strict, Presbyterian moral standards that they rarely lived up to, and it seems that Blackface became a way to mediate the strong Presbyterian ethic that undergirds the college by separating themselves from those expectations

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<sup>17</sup> E. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 52-3.

<sup>18</sup> E. P. Johnson argues that “the black homosexual represents sexuality run amuck - a perversion that threatens the very essence of black heteronormative masculinity” (2003, 36); in this case, *White* heteronormative masculinity is also threatened, and the threat is so strong that (just like in the un-naming of the Black boy), the homosexuality does not have to be “real;” the constructed (specifically, forced) nature is enough to prompt a destabilization of racial, sexual, and gendered norms.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> Eric Lott, “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,” *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992): 23-50; D. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (3rd ed. New York, NY: Continuum, 1994).

while simultaneously exploring their personal fascination with Blackness.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, engaging “successfully” in Blackface could allow an individual to avoid accountability for exactly that immoral behavior they were engaging in. The examples discussed here show that drunkenness, disorderly conduct, loitering, and similar behaviors were what students were ultimately punished for when their impersonations proved unconvincing. In this way, the original (physical and symbolic) theft upon which Blackface and minstrelsy more generally are based is intentionally repeated and employed to commit other forms of theft and violence.<sup>22,23</sup>

Whether Blackface was being adopted as a preemptive excuse, a protective disguise, or some combination of the two, its use by these students perfectly exemplifies E. P. Johnson’s theory of a fetishistic escape that mitigates “the rigidity of their own whiteness”.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the United States, Blackface has become a liminal space in which White individuals can indulge their interest in the “other” without having to come in contact with actual Black people.<sup>25</sup> This use of Blackface furthers existing associations of Blackness with criminality, while at the same time reiterating the separation of Whiteness from Blackness.<sup>26</sup> As Blackface comes to stand *for* Blackness (particularly for students who are so carefully distinguished from Black individuals in their daily lives), Blackness becomes something that can be put on and taken off at one’s

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 until 1937* (Davidson, NC: Briarpatch Press, 1979), 46; Lott, “Love and Theft,” 23.

<sup>22</sup> Lott, “Love and Theft.”; Thomas King, “Performing Jim Crow: Blackface Performance and Emancipation,” *Revista de Humanidades* 23 (Trans. 2013): 75-94.

<sup>23</sup> There is certainly precedent for Blackface being used as a disguise in this way; Patricia Bater’s (2013) ethnographic study of Blackface performers in Britain (conducted between 2008 and 2012) reveals disguise as both a goal and effect of Blackface, with one White participant in Bater’s study argued that performing in Blackface allowed him to “behave in ways that [he] probably wouldn’t have without the Blacking,” noting that “Being in Blackface can release inhibitions” (Ibid., 246-7). While this example is not taken from a United States context, Bater outlines how the development of Blackface in Britain impacted its North American counterpart (Ibid., 54-73), as well as how the two serve similar social functions and promote the same stereotypes and caricatures (Ibid., 77-83), making it highly relevant here.

<sup>24</sup>E. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Bater, “Blacking Up:” English Folk Traditions and Changing Perceptions about Black People in England” (Thesis, National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, 2013), 247-8.

<sup>26</sup> Marlon Riggs (dir.), *Ethnic Notions* (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 1987).

convenience. Blackface becomes a costume, but also a commodity and form of capital, as it becomes usable by White individuals who believe themselves to be the owners of such representations.

When the faculty and trustees eventually prohibited Blackface in 1863, they did so because of its continuing links to disruptive behavior that required intervention by the administration rather than its racist ideology.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, it was not the student's ability to imitate and distort Blackness that the administration was interested in restricting, but their capacity for actions that were seen as harmful to the college and its reputation; because this activity had been repeatedly associated with Blackness through student behavior, Blackface (and by extension Blackness) was perceived and treated as the source of rather than the medium for such disruption. Despite the lack of centralization and coordination among the students involved, these examples were significant in establishing a campus culture in which Blackface was further normalized as the college sought to control not only Black individuals but also their representations. These instances also indicate how the imitation of Blackness was not a moralized behavior or punishable offense in and of itself, and only became so after it had been repeatedly related to indecent behavior. This sent a clear message to the campus community: while Blackness (or more accurately, its distortions) might not be tolerable when employed by students as an antagonistic force, it could be accepted within a controlled environment. This implicit understanding - that Blackface would be most palatable for the institution when curated and performed under certain conditions that served the school's interests - set the stage for the development of the college's minstrel show in the early 20th century.

## **Case 2 - "In the Most Fitting Place": The Wildcat Minstrels**

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<sup>27</sup> DC Board of Trustees, "Notes of the Board of Trustees," 237.

In 1920, Davidson alum Edward Jones Erwin (Class of 1906) returned to the college as a professor of English and created a drama club that sought to bring student-based entertainment to the community.<sup>28</sup> Erwin and his drama troupe developed the “Wildcat Minstrels,” and although the exact number of performances is unclear, the college archivists collected and shared with me three programs and brochures ranging from 1920 to 1922 and nine newspaper articles ranging from 1920 to 1925 that acknowledge and discuss the group’s shows.<sup>29</sup> During this period, there was at least one performance per year (excepting 1924), and the 1923 show was offered in at least three different cities on consecutive days in February.<sup>30</sup>

The use of Blackface and anti-Black caricatures are foundational to minstrelsy, and the Wildcat Minstrels were no exception.<sup>31</sup> Blackface is explicitly mentioned or described in each performance, and multiple male characters are represented by and named as the “Coon” or the “Sambo.”<sup>32</sup> There are also variations on existing anti-Black stereotypes, such as “Jazzbo,” “Tarzan the Missing Link,” and “Ignoramus.”<sup>33</sup> Among at least fifty characters, only four women appear. Madame Jo-Jo, a psychic medium described as a “dusty beauty,” seems to be a visiting performer, but is listed in the brochure as portrayed by a Mr. Woolfolk, implying that the character is likely played by a White male performer in some combination of Blackface and drag.<sup>34</sup> The same seems to be true of the other women characters, including the “Oriental dancer”

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<sup>28</sup> Doug Swink (ed.), “Red and Black History.” *The Mask: Published by the Red and Black Masquers* 1, no. 1 (Publication date unknown. ): 1-3.

<sup>29</sup> These pieces are all cited and included in the Bibliography, and the original articles are available at the Davidson College Archives & Special Collections.

<sup>30</sup> Based on the repeating themes within and similar discourse around these performances, I analyze them in aggregate, noting distinct performances when appropriate.

<sup>31</sup> For a full literature review of Blackface and Blackface Minstrelsy’s development in the United States, see Appendix II of my Senior thesis.

<sup>32</sup> Davidsonian writer (unnamed), “Wit and Humor Galore in Old-Time Minstrel: Saturday Night Entertainment Featured by Junior Speaking Play,” *Davidsonian*, April 16, 1925; Wildcat Minstrels, “Program” (November 26, 1921).

<sup>33</sup> Wildcat Minstrels, “The Sultan of Sarawak: A Blackface Extravaganza in Four Acts” (December 2, 1922).

<sup>34</sup> Davidsonian writer (unnamed), “Madame Jo-Jo, The Medium,” *Davidsonian*, 26 November 26, 1920; Wildcat Minstrels, “Program” (November 27, 1920).

Madame X in the 1920 shows, the Princess in the 1922 brochure, and Fatima in the “Sultan of Sarawak” shows. While these roles are sexualized in a way that treats Black womanhood as a prop (the Princess unsurprisingly requires a savior and Fatima is connected to the Sultan’s harem), the fact that the characters are represented by men prevents them from being seen as fully sexual subjects; the recognition of the Black female characters’ innate masculinity through the repetition of the (White male) actors’ names in their respective programs perpetuates White supremacist stereotypes of Black femininity and aids in the emasculation of the Black male characters who interact with them in a sexual or romantic way.<sup>35</sup> Here, gender and race are being distorted for entertainment value, but are still carefully essentialized in order to maintain a clear division between Black and White men.

Similarly, most of the performances are broken down by scenes that seek to imitate some aspect of Black culture as understood by White creators, including clog dancing, jazz, and “spirituals” or “plantation ballads.”<sup>36</sup> While there are distinct African and African-American musical and dance styles that can be traced through the African diaspora, the versions presented in these minstrel shows are distorted and re-performed through a White lens, thus making any claims of authenticity complex.<sup>37</sup> This extraction was also a staple of minstrelsy, as many White performers in the early 19th century infiltrated Black communities and tried to “copy” dances and music they observed.<sup>38, 39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> E. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*.

<sup>36</sup> Davidsonian writer, “Initial Presentation of Wildcat Minstrels a Marked Success,” *Davidsonian*, December 3, 1920; Davidson College, “Wildcats’ Wild Minstrels,” *Quips & Cranks* 24 (Nashville, TN: Benson Printing Company, 1921).

<sup>37</sup> Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*.

<sup>38</sup> Toll, *Blackening Up*, 45-8.

<sup>39</sup> Several of these anti-Black aspects of traditional minstrelsy are also intertwined with blatant Orientalism (Said 1978) in the “Sultan of Sarawak” performances. While the rhetoric, characters, and musical numbers of this show indicate another type of fetishizing escapism via the incorporation of a distinct but (in the White, Western view) a similarly savage, Eastern “other,” the role of such Orientalism in bolstering anti-Blackness is beyond the scope of this analysis. This topic is explored further in my GSS 341 final paper entitled “Bringing the Orient Home: Investigating Orientalism in 20th century Davidson College Theatre.” For more about orientalism in performance more generally, see Dorinne K. Kondo (1997).

This focus on the Black male body and its capacity for labor reveals a clear contradiction in White culture (and among White Davidson men specifically) of relying on able-bodied Black men<sup>40</sup> for certain types of labor while simultaneously seeing that able-bodiedness as a threat.<sup>41</sup> However, this tension can (at least partially) be resolved by drawing a mind-body split along racialized and gendered lines; because race and gender are tied to the body, the White (male) mind must control all aspects of the Black (male) body. This was especially true during the early 20th century at Davidson, which specifically sought to socialize White men into an institution of higher learning that focused on shaping and developing their intellect (and to a lesser extent bodies) within physical spaces that were constructed, cleaned, and cared for through the labor of Black men.<sup>42</sup> The reliance upon the division between self and other is always “implicit in the white male gaze,” and only becomes more urgent in the case of White men gazing at White men who are pretending to be Black men<sup>43</sup>; in other words, the White audience (as well as White performers) must distinguish themselves as *using* Black men and Black bodies rather than *wanting* them.

A similar contradiction arises in a predominantly White male audience looking at (and, based on *The Davidsonian*'s accounts, enjoying) other male bodies on the stage. Burt argues that homophobia allows men to “be as close as possible - to work powerfully together in the interests of men- without ever being too (sexually) close to one another,” and discusses how the act of men looking at other men must be carefully stylized and justified to mitigate the threat of actual

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<sup>40</sup> As discussed previously, although this performance and its analysis deals with Black masculinity specifically, it is not intended to diminish the physical and psychological violence that Black women were subjected to within the same systems of exploitation. For more discussion of this, see Lisa Cardyn (2002), Fuentes (2016), or Thavolia Glymph (2016).

<sup>41</sup> Dea Boster, “Unfit For Bondage: Disability and African American Slavery in the United States, 1800-1860,” (Doctorate Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> For more on these specific spaces, see Chapter 3 of my Senior thesis available.

<sup>43</sup> Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, 81.

homosexuality.<sup>44</sup> In the Wildcat Minstrels, this fear is further complicated by race, because although the men performing are *White* men who are known to most in the audience and named in programs, their representational power is rooted in their performance of *Black* men and *Black* maleness. Therefore, this alleged threat of the able-bodied Black man must be confronted in order to maintain clear racial and sexual boundaries. Here, such fear is mediated primarily through violence and humor. Building on a long history of anti-Black violence as amusement and entertainment, the physical harm performed on stage is intended to solicit a (positive) response from the audience.<sup>45</sup> Because the vast majority of characters involved are male, the violence is masculinized and focuses heavily on the body. One man in a 1921 performance tells the audience “how a bulldog nipped him and took the most responsible part of his breeches out,” while another in the same year fears drowning at sea, much to the pleasure of the spectators.<sup>46</sup> Injury against Black bodies has historically been connected to disabling them, which is often employed as a containment strategy against Black people who might otherwise pose a threat to White power.<sup>47</sup>

Next, the use of humor in the articles functions to remind White readers exactly what they should take away from each performance (whether or not they were in attendance). Attempts to imitate and mock Black dialect are deliberately employed by the actor who reads the “Class ‘Pome’” or another who claims to be “the bestest” in his profession.<sup>48</sup> These examples reiterate the idea of the mind-body split by presenting Black speech as a signifier of lower

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<sup>44</sup> Burt, Ramsey. 1995. *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 1995), 22-4; 49-56.

<sup>45</sup> Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*.

<sup>46</sup> Davidson College, “Wildcats’ Wild Minstrels”; *Davidsonian* writer (unnamed), “Minstrel Show Promises Number of Real Thrills,” *The Davidsonian*, October 20, 1921.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Bell, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> *Davidsonian* writer (unnamed), “Wit and Humor Galore in Old-Time Minstrel; *Davidsonian* writer, “Wildcat Minstrel Worthy Dramatic Club Offering: Medians, Dancers and Pantomime Performers Good,” *The Davidsonian*, December 2, 1921.

intelligence, using humor as an indirect mode of critique. Other humorous language is common throughout the articles, whether to emphasize the role of the “persecuted audience” that “suffers” in response to poor acting or musical numbers or to describe the characters’ success in captivating the audience with jokes and other shenanigans.<sup>49</sup> The clear mockery of musical and dance styles that are being associated (however inaccurately) with Black culture, as well as the repetition of the performers’ actual names rather than those of their characters, serve to reify the distinction of these forms of entertainment from White cultural products and their creators. Here, humor is helping to create a specific type of authenticity by separating White culture from Black culture, dividing White men from Black men, and reminding the audience of the performativity inherent in the show, reiterating that Blackness is primarily something to be acted out and consumed, to imitate but not to actually *do* or *be*.

The willingness of these students to imitate Black people on stage demonstrates an increasing ability to separate Blackness from Black male subjects and willingness to use and objectify their bodies. This abstraction, as well as the forms of violence and disabling discussed above, all work to remove agency from Black individuals while still making *use* of them; in other words, it exemplifies the alleged need of the White mind to mold and control the Black body. This is a primary way in which performance is used to cope with the fear of Blackness that Lott discusses extensively - to address the potential threat of shifting power structures, White culture must reiterate its control over Blackness through both symbolic and physical violence.<sup>50</sup> The minstrel show manages to achieve both; the entire performance is a form of symbolic violence, and specific examples of physical and bodily violence (like those mentioned above) are

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<sup>49</sup> Davidson College, “Wildcats’ Wild Minstrels”; *Davidsonian* writer (unnamed), “Minstrel Show Promises Number of Real Thrills”; *Davidsonian* writer (unnamed), “Roaring Extravaganza of Real Minstrelsy to be Feature Attraction of Senior Week,” *The Davidsonian*, November 23, 1922; *Davidsonian* writer (unnamed), “Wit and Humor Galore in Old-Time Minstrel.”

<sup>50</sup>Lott, “Love and Theft.”

performed symbolically on the stage. All of these serve to put Blackness, as one article quite seriously puts it, “in the most fitting place, at the feet of” the Davidson student body.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the popularity of the performances and their ability to incorporate multiple aspects and arenas of campus life is crucial, and demonstrates significant expansion from the individualized performances of Blackface in the 19th century. Seven of the nine article headlines regarding the minstrels specifically speak to either the high attendance at the show or the audience’s overwhelmingly positive response to it (or both).<sup>52</sup> The inclusion of an awards ceremony during intermission, repetition of the school song, and reliance upon the college’s band throughout the shows demonstrate that these performances are pulling and relying upon specific parts of Davidson campus culture in order to expand their reach beyond that specific physical stage.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, positioning the “Sultan of Sarawak” performance as the “feature attraction of Senior Week” and sending the minstrels on a tour through North and South Carolina reveals that these shows are part of what Davidson was becoming as an institution *and* how it sought to present that image to the outside world.<sup>54</sup> This “becoming” was achieved by learning, enacting, and re-enacting racial hierarchies, and practicing (and internalizing) anti-Black tropes so that they could then be relayed to the audience in the most appealing fashion.

Inheriting traditions of Blackface established in the 19th century, Erwin and his men were able to instrumentalize representations of Blackness on a larger scale, incorporating them into popular entertainment and relying on the repetition of performance to confirm what the audience already believed about Black people and culture and what the campus community was already

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<sup>51</sup>Davidson College, “Wildcats’ Wild Minstrels.”

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.; *Davidsonian* writer, “Wildcat Minstrel Worthy Dramatic Club Offering.”

<sup>54</sup>*Davidsonian* writer (unnamed), “Roaring Extravaganza of Real Minstrelsy to be Feature Attraction of Senior Week”; *Davidsonian* writer (unnamed), “Davidson Minstrels Slated for Trip Through Carolinas,” *The Davidsonian*, February 8, 1923.

primed to think about Blackness and Black men specifically.<sup>55</sup> The centralized, controlled, and systematic nature of the shows helped the Wildcat Minstrels to grow in range and scope, firmly reiterating racial hierarchies at Davidson and eventually projecting them beyond the campus. While the group had become the “Red and Black Masquers” theatre group by the late 1920s (and explicit mentions of Blackface faded from their records), the original group’s work remained embedded in campus culture, preparing the community for these representations to shift into yet another forum of college life.<sup>56</sup>

### **Case 3 - “Extra Baggage”: The Playful Pickaninnies Halftime Show**

As the college sought to increase its popularity and prestige in the South and beyond during the early 20th century, it looked for ways to highlight the special qualities that would distinguish Davidson from its peer institutions, and saw that athletics (specifically their football team and its band) presented the perfect opportunity.<sup>57</sup> In the mid-1930s, band director James Christian Pfohl created a halftime attraction called the “Playful Pickaninnies,” in which two Black boys from the town of Davidson, “Sleepy” (age 15) and Jack (age 11), spread cotton across the football field and then hurried to collect it all before the second half of the game began. I identified four distinct articles and two photos that address these shows; although they were performed at both home and away games intermittently until the 1950s, the majority of articles about and references to specific performances come from 1937, which is where this analysis will focus.

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<sup>55</sup> Schneider, “Performance Remains.”

<sup>56</sup> Doug Swink, “Red and Black Masquers.”

<sup>57</sup> While I have not found official administrative documentation that argues this, the prevalence of materials in the archive demonstrating the college’s interest in building relationships with other schools and presenting themselves in various venues in the South and on the East Coast indicates that increasing Davidson College’s regional influence and bolstering its national reputation were institutional priorities during the mid-twentieth century.

The explicit invocation of the Pickaninny stereotype alone is enough to establish the show as anti-Black at its core.<sup>58</sup> The fact that these characters are being played out by young Black boys rather than White students in Blackface, however, further complicates the situation. While the act of “Blacking” and the costuming of White performers have been central practices of minstrelsy, the presence of Black performers in minstrelsy’s history show that racist patterns and images can and have been reiterated by Black performers.<sup>59</sup> Because of this, I argue the “Playful Pickaninnies” can be read as pseudo-minstrelsy, as the bodies, labor, and images of Black minors are being distorted and presented for entertainment by a White authority that seeks to control representations of Blackness more broadly. Here, the manipulation of Blackness by White creators like Pfohl imbues the resulting piece with the goals, values, and violence of White supremacy, even when it is performed by Black people; essentially, it is presented *through* but not *from* Black bodies.<sup>60</sup>

This appropriation of “Sleepy” and Jack’s experiences is further justified by the rhetoric of the longest and most in-depth article, “Train Whut Runs Up in Air, Umpire State Thrills Boys,” which focuses on how lucky and privileged the boys are to be included in the college’s productions. The piece describes how the boys “gazed with astonishment” at New York City during a Band trip, noting that they had “never been more than a mile or two from [Davidson] before” and were grateful to have “their first taste of deviled crab” in the resplendent metropolis. This narrative of benevolence positions Pfohl and Davidson College in general as saviors rather than as exploiters, as they are offering these boys an escape from their provincial lives. One

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<sup>58</sup> In Riggs’ (1987) film, narrator Esther Rolle explains that this caricature was developed to portray Black children as “victims who evoked not sympathy, but the feeling that blacks were subhuman,” and argues that such representations “did as much harm as any lynch mob.”

<sup>59</sup> Lott, “Love and Theft”; King, “Performing Jim Crow”; Henry Sampson, Henry, *Blacks in Blackface: a Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2014, 2nd ed.).

<sup>60</sup> I do not suggest that “Sleepy” and Jack were devoid of agency within this situation, but the various interpersonal and structural power dynamics (which are discussed further here) that existed between them and agents of the college surely made the relationship an unequal and abusive one.

phrase in particular seems to highlight the emancipatory potential of Davidson: upon their arrival in New York, the author claims that “‘Sleepy,’ who got his name from the way he peers lazily about from half-closed eyelids, is sleepy no more”.<sup>61</sup> Here, exposure to this cosmopolitan arena is so energizing to “Sleepy” that he can overcome the peculiarity (indicative of disability) that is his defining characteristic in the public’s eye - and Davidson College is what made it all possible.<sup>62</sup>

This narrative of generosity is an important part of justifying the boys’ presence on campus, an inclusion which can quite accurately be described as violent and predatory. While the halftime show does not seem to have literally generated revenue (beyond the cost of attending a football game), it certainly helped strengthen an established social economy in which representations of Blackness were a valuable resource. The process of controlling and circulating these representations is essential in assigning them cultural capital and turning them into commodities.<sup>63</sup> Such an approach is evidently applied to “Sleepy” and Jack, who are repeatedly framed as objects (specifically props) and dehumanized. The two are described as “taken along” and in one case explicitly called “extra baggage”,<sup>64</sup> they are also labeled the team’s mascots, which not only dehumanizes but also potentially animalizes them, an approach closely aligned with the Pickaninny caricature.<sup>65</sup>

The boys’ images and identities were also controlled in other ways; the unnamed author of *The Davidsonian* article “College Girls” mentions four boys being involved in the show, but no others beside Jack and “Sleepy” are named or mentioned in archival materials.<sup>66</sup> The use and

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<sup>61</sup> Unnamed author, “Train Whut Runs Up in Air, Umpire State Thrills Boys: Negro Mascots See Big Town; Still Talking!,” *Charlotte Observer*, November 18, 1937.

<sup>62</sup> Bell, *Blackness and Disability*.

<sup>63</sup> Lott, “Love and Theft,” 39-42.

<sup>64</sup> Unnamed author, “Davidson College Band Making Record Trip,” *Greensborough Daily News*, November 12, 1937; Unnamed author, “Train Whut Runs Up in Air.”

<sup>65</sup> Unnamed author, “Pickaninnies to Dance with Davidson Band,” 1937; Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*.

<sup>66</sup> Unnamed author, “College Girls to be Guests,” October 27, 1937.

subsequent erasure of other boys within the show is most clearly symbolized in a set of photographs from 1937. The original photograph depicts Jack and “Sleepy,” as well as a third boy who is not identified and whose face is turned down and away from the camera; this version was included in the 1937 band program and Blodgett and Levering’s (2012) book, but a second version (used in a 1937 article in *The Davidsonian*) shows the third boy has been edited out, leaving only a pale outline and the cotton bag that had been held in his right hand.<sup>67</sup> In the context of an already carefully-curated and distorted performance, the symbolic and bodily erasure of this boy indicates the violent dedication of White creators to their narrative and provides a tangible representation of the loss of numerous other Black bodies and voices who are, in turn, their own form of narrative and literal “remains.”<sup>68</sup>

In fact, only the “Train Whut Runs Up in Air” article names and discusses Jack and “Sleepy” as people, and it is hardly a coincidence that the piece which most directly includes their voices is also the one which most distorts them. Like in the minstrel show, words are purposely misspelled to imitate the boy’s speech, or more accurately, to represent how the authors of the piece would like that speech to be heard and remembered by the audience. This is clearest in the boys’ alleged responses when asked “what [they] enjoyed most on the trip”: “Sleepy” is quoted as saying “Ah reckons Ah likes dat train whut runs up in de air,” and Jack as saying “Ah believes Ah liked de Umpire State Buildin’ bestest... one man tole me dat you could see all over de world frum de top. Ah wish Ah could’ve gone up deah and looked at China. Ahs always wanted to see Africa, too.”<sup>69</sup> Besides reiterating the boys’ rural origins and associating their Blackness with a lack of high (read: White) culture and intelligence, this White version of

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<sup>67</sup> Blodgett and Levering, *One Town, Many Voices*; Unnamed author, “Train Whut Runs Up in Air.”

<sup>68</sup> Young, *Embodying Black Experience*.

<sup>69</sup> Unnamed author, “Train Whut Runs Up.”

Black speech works to create a false sense of authenticity for White audience members.<sup>70</sup> The text quoted above is one of the most tangible remains of the performance, so its representation of “Sleepy” and Jack is significant; because this presentation is mediated through multiple White lenses (the college, Pfohl, and the article’s author), the multiple levels of distortion at work indicate that the boys’ real experiences are being deliberately altered for public consumption. What we can see is that they were strategically invited to perform a version of Blackness that was both palatable and useful to White spectators - and then repeatedly told it was a gift to be grateful for.

The resulting show provided a powerful outlet for White fascination with Black culture. Lott argues that, when Black and White culture come up against each other, “fascination may be permitted so long as actual contact is avoided.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, a successful show lets the White audience observe Blackness from a social (as well as literal) distance, a phenomenon which was certainly achieved here. The reliance upon plantation nostalgia was vital in accomplishing this, as it harkens back to a past where the divisions between White and Black were even more clearly drawn. The cotton-picking theme, while blurring the line(s) between entertainment and work, nonetheless presents Black male labor as something that is always intended for White consumption.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 14-5.

<sup>71</sup> Lott, “Love and Theft,” 39.

<sup>72</sup> The same is true of the “Big Apple” dance, which was performed by “Sleepy” and Jack during at least two away games (Unnamed author 1937 “Pickaninnies to Dance”; Unnamed author 1937 “Train Whut Runs Up”). The “Big Apple” was a partner and group dance created in Black communities in the South (Pritchett 2009); only after it had been systematically extracted from those communities by White people did the dance make its way North and become common in places like New York City and Harvard University. Thus, the popular form of the dance in the United States is exemplary of White appropriation of Black culture - something that was authentically and originally traced to Black Americans (Ibid.; Gottschild 1998) was consciously twisted and disfigured, leaving the remains a Whitewashed copy of the original. Nonetheless, the “craze” that erupted around the new dance exemplifies Lott’s (1992) arguments about White obsession with Blackness. The discourse surrounding the dance at the time also conjured up language of threat (a “wildfire” that was “seeping” into White America) and illness - one account from the 1930s describes how the “Big Apple” had “escaped the quarantine of the Carolinas and infected the entire South” (Pritchett 2009).

Even the choice of two relatively young Black boys as opposed to Black men can be read as a way to infantilize Blackness and remove some of its masculine power and ability while more generally controlling the conditions of its inclusion on campus; these boys proved to be ideal figures because they could provide the entertainment and labor of Black men without constituting the same degree of racial and sexual threat. At the same time, the juxtaposition on the field of the small Black boys and the large White football players indicates that their respective forms of entertainment (and by extension, masculinities) serve very different purposes. While the White Davidson *men* are sculpting their bodies to supplement their intellectual accomplishments and achieve success for their institution, the Black *boys* (outsiders who have been invited “in”) provide a reminder of everything that the college is not and does not want to be, but can still instrumentalize and make use of when convenient. As shown through these examples, the association of Blackness with disabling and disempowering forces is even clearer here than in the Wildcat Minstrels’ shows, and the importance and popularity of these performances on a local and national level indicate that the strategy was at least to some degree successful.<sup>73</sup> These are only some of the key ways in which White curators and audiences at Davidson yearned to know about and experience Blackness, while at the same time revealing (through their own actions and language) the deep-seated fear and revulsion they felt toward Black individuals.<sup>74</sup>

The halftime shows taken together demonstrated the college’s continued willingness to manipulate Black individuals and their bodies. While the imagery is grounded in and reflects many aspects of its minstrelsy predecessor, it took this manipulation to another, arguably more

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<sup>73</sup> Boster, “Unfit for Bondage.”

<sup>74</sup> Lott, “Love and Theft,” 38-9.

pernicious level and maintained it through at least the 1950s.<sup>75</sup> The presentation of actual Black people in a still highly-controlled setting lent the performance a new sense of authenticity for White audiences, which seems to have contributed heavily to its high popularity at, around, and outside of Davidson. Like the incidents of student Blackface and the Wildcat Minstrels, the halftime show incorporated details that were local and specific to Davidson; however, the image that the college curated of itself based on that was then more directly projected outwards, increasing in scale and scope. As the 20th century progressed and the college sought to compete intellectually on the national stage, the impact of these three sets of performances remained, saturating all aspects of campus life and compounding each other to create a culture of anti-Blackness that was repeatedly re-established on campus and beyond.

#### **Case 4 - 100 Years of Cruelty: The Centennial Celebration**

In 1937, Davidson College unveiled its public pageant to celebrate the school's one-hundred-year anniversary. The performance included a series of scenes highlighting notable people, events, and themes of college life since 1837, and was organized by the prominent theatrical director Theodore Viehman.<sup>76</sup> He made use of at least seven hundred characters played by men and women associated with the college, particularly (but not exclusively) students.<sup>77</sup> William P. Cumming (a professor at the time and prominent North Carolina mapmaker) organized a series of eight theatrical scenes to be broadcast on the WEBT Charlotte radio

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<sup>75</sup> During our original research, Tian and I noted that the show only ended when visiting Princeton students took issue with it in the 1950s, further demonstrating the college's concern for its reputation and prioritization of White opinion; however, we have since lost the citation for this information, and as such I consider this an important example of archival remains (Schneider 2001) that must be further uncovered and emphasized in our institutional memory.

<sup>76</sup> While the official performance was ultimately canceled due to inclement weather, the rehearsals, radio broadcasts, and local involvement in the show had a social effect comparable to a final performance - it effectively communicated the school's self-aggrandizing narrative and made the event and its subjects a topic of public interest and discussion for years to come.

<sup>77</sup> Tyler Port, "Interviews for Pageant," *Dramatic Episodes in Davidson College History: Broadcast over Stations WSOC and WBT as part of her Centennial Celebration*, 1937.

stations in order to publicize the college's centennial celebration; these pieces include selections from the pageant, context for the characters, and preludes to the narrative that unfolded on the stage, and because of this deal with many of the same subjects.<sup>78</sup> The central theme of the show is that a young man is considering attending Davidson, and consults a professor (who serves as the narrator) about the school and its history so he can decide whether to enroll. Due to the number of episodes, I focus on those that most directly and explicitly exhibit anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and White supremacist sentiments.<sup>79</sup>

As previously mentioned, Lott discusses how one's performance of the "other" can become an outlet for both fear of and obsession with that "othered" identity, a dynamic which is evident in the celebration's portrayal of Native subjects.<sup>80</sup> During these pieces, students repeatedly dress in makeup and costumes to denote Native identity, wear face paint, and wield props such as corn, animal skins, feathers, and pipes.<sup>81</sup> P. J. Deloria discusses how such acts of "playing Indian" draw on a (United States-specific) historical interest in accessing and controlling the desirable aspects of freedom and incorporating them into colonial structures.<sup>82</sup> He argues that this "need to idealize and desire Indians" prompts a complementary need to "despise and dispossess them," and that the process of doing this in textual and physical representation allows White colonial subjects to explore concepts of revolution, identity, and modernity through the *body* of the Native American without actually acknowledging Native peoples as full

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<sup>78</sup> The scripts for the radio shows and pageant are compiled and stored in the college's Special Collections and available to the public in the library's Davidsoniana room. While the episodes are written by a variety of White Davidson men, Viehman and Cumming had significant influence over the inclusion of certain subjects and their curation.

<sup>79</sup> Because both the radio previews and the pageant episodes were created under the same conditions and for the same purpose (and were merely presented through different mediums), I selected the most relevant examples analyze them together in order to establish a clear pattern of treatment towards subjects Black individuals, the Indigenous peoples of North Carolina, and the campus history more broadly.

<sup>80</sup> Lott, "Love and Theft."

<sup>81</sup> Theodore Viehman (ed.), *Scripts from "The Centennial Pageant and Masque of Davidson College,"* 1937.

<sup>82</sup> Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

subjects.<sup>83</sup> Much like the implementation of Blackface, this phenomenon was brought to the local level through these shows, where the representation and treatment of Native Americans serves to justify not only the college's presence but also the genocidal process that its establishment depended upon.

This is evident first in the language used by Viehman to discuss Native Americans. While the focus of the episode "A Sioux Indian Village in the Carolina Piedmont" is technically the Sioux, their name is being abstracted to stand for all "Indians" as multiple other tribes are mentioned, including the "Waxhaws, Catawbias, Saponis, and Toteros."<sup>84</sup> Two Catawba men appear as intermediaries between tribes, as do several Totero messengers.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, these groups are reified as "savages" through their exoticization and animalization. One of Port's interviews mentions the "animal dances" of the Native Americans, and their names and customs are consistently framed as wild and uncivilized.<sup>86</sup> There are constant references to "Indian magic," and much of the Sioux episode focuses on funerary rites, including "a powerful potion of Polecats brains and vulture's claws," warriors dancing, unruly music, and more.<sup>87</sup> Here, the ultimate solution for peace between warring tribes is presented by John Lawson;<sup>88</sup> essentially, the Native Americans become a homogenous group, marked primarily by their non-White "otherness" who must be saved and guided by civilized White men.<sup>89</sup>

Another key aspect of these pieces' symbolic genocide is how the blame for violence directed at Native Americans is deflected onto them or otherwise justified. Although it was the White colonists who gave the Sioux rum (both in the play and in historical accounts), the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 4; 7.

<sup>84</sup> Viehman, "The Centennial Pageant," 11.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>86</sup> Port, "Interviews for Pageant," 2.

<sup>87</sup> Viehman, "The Centennial Pageant," 6; 4-7.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>89</sup> Said, *Orientalism*; Deloria, *Playing Indian*.

narrator places the blame for the tribe's declining population on their supposedly insatiable thirst, saying that they had "no religion to uphold them in their fight for rum" and lamenting that they "didn't have much backbone."<sup>90</sup> The same characters are also described as violent, capturing individuals from other Indigenous tribes and burning them.<sup>91</sup> Diseases that decimated Indigenous populations are referred to as "plagues brought to them inadvertently from over the seas," and the passive voice focuses on the fault of the Natives Americans in contracting such diseases rather than drawing attention to who brought them; Lawson's character claims the Sioux were "too ignorant to know anything about fighting the Plague."<sup>92</sup>

Surprisingly, Port's piece gives us the most explicit acknowledgment yet found in Davidson College material of the school's presence on Indigenous land: he states in his interview that "no Indians ever went to Davidson; but, you see, this land we go to school on once belonged to the Saponi nation."<sup>93, 94</sup> The emphasis here is on the "once," indicating that the creators of the play (like most others at the college) believed the land to now be the rightful property of the institution and its Board. This dispossession of the Native Americans from their homelands translates to a removal from the social as well as physical landscape, which in turn allows them to be further abstracted and reinscribed as figures of the past.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, Indigenous customs are evidently not treated as actual culture, lacking both "adequate religion" and "strong marriage customs," and thus not worth preserving or protecting.<sup>96</sup> Here, Native Americans are interesting for a White audience to "learn" about, but are not important enough to *care* about,

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<sup>90</sup> Viehman, "The Centennial Pageant," 9-10.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 3; 10.

<sup>93</sup> Port, "Interviews for Pageant," 1.

<sup>94</sup> The Saponi were a tribe of the Carolina Piedmont, and likely overlapped with and were connected to the Catawba (Speck 1934).

<sup>95</sup> For more on the historical erasure of the Catawba and other Native groups within the Davidson popular archive, see Chapter 3 of my Senior thesis.

<sup>96</sup> Viehman, "The Centennial Pageant," 3.

and indeed are not even fully human, let alone contemporary subjects; this narrative naturally helps to justify the colonization that is being celebrated and contributes to the erasure of contemporary Indigenous people by portraying them as relics of history rather than actors in the present day.

The final description of the Native Americans in Viehman's piece cements this treatment: after narrating the scene described above, the professor says of the Sioux and other tribes: "Beautiful bodies they had like most children of nature. Ignorance, childish superstition, laziness were their weaknesses, diametrically opposite qualities from those traits that inspired their successors...these white settlers." In this narrative, it is clear that the savage Indians must eventually fall to their "new neighbors, a stronger, smarter white race," invoking a clear and deliberate diatribe of White supremacy and eugenics.<sup>97</sup> Although there is no direct connection made to the Davidson family, their complicity in the colonization of North Carolina is known,<sup>98</sup> and referencing this history in the centennial celebration re-asserts the ideas of tradition and rurality that helps the boy at the center of the pageant feel comfortable and invested in Davidson. Thus, the boy feels gratitude for the positive, civilized presence of Davidson College - no matter its cost.

Although Blackface was used frequently at Davidson College in the 1920s and versions of Redface were employed in the pageant (as discussed previously), Blackface was not used to portray the majority of Black people in the Pageant. Instead, enslaved characters were played by Black employees of the college (both men and women) and their children. This decision is

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 11; 3.

<sup>98</sup> Members of the Davidson family first arrived in the Eastern United States in the 1690s or early 1700s, and men like John Davidson and Samuel Davidson were instrumental in the establishment of Davidson's Fort as a colonial outpost (currently located in present day Old Fort, NC) and the Westward expansion that followed the exploration of Carolina territories (Davidson and Sondley 1911, 15-23). In addition, the college itself is located on land that traditionally belonged to the Catawba nation, which is also true of the land and resources claimed by the school's benefactors (Moore 2002, 11; Bauer 2016, 2-3).

particularly pernicious, as it compels Black people to participate both ideologically and bodily in an anti-Black narrative, much like the case of “Sleepy” and Jack; additionally, it is unclear what say (if any) these men and women would have had in their participation.<sup>99</sup> The categorization of Black songs and spirituals as a “sound effect” in the script and racist attempts to imitate Black dialect represent similarly violent structural choices.<sup>100</sup> A student named Sam Ryburn answers his name on a radio interview with “Yas sah, Marse Port, Yoo sah.” Ryburn goes on to answer several questions about his character with “Yas suh” and reveals that his character “was just an assistant to Dr. Williamson (the college’s president from 1841 until 1854) when he worked on Chemistry experiments.”<sup>101</sup> This indicates Ryburn is playing a specific Black man who worked at the college, but that man is unsurprisingly not named or otherwise identified.

Most of the pageant’s commentary on slavery is presented through the case of Maxwell Chambers.<sup>102</sup> Here, Black people are portrayed not only as without agency, but specifically in need of White direction and control. When Chambers’ character introduces the idea of releasing those he enslaved, the other White characters (his wife, uncle, and a Reverend Baker) question him, asking: “who will look after our slaves? What do they know about farming?”<sup>103</sup> Besides erasing the fact that enslaved people did the vast majority of labor (including farming) on plantations, this rhetoric implies that Black people require the oversight of White masters to succeed. The “Slave” characters in one episode actually protest and are “bewildered” when

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<sup>99</sup> Racist terms for Black people are repeatedly used in the pageant, and reflect a larger climate of racism and hostility directed towards them by White community members in day-to-day life. However, unlike most college documents, the episodes include a variety of such words rather than just one. Additionally, I find it important to note that this college-sponsored document is the only piece I have found in the archive that uses the n-word to refer to Black men and women. In Viehman’s piece, Chambers refers to the people he has enslaved as “too many n\*ggers for an old man to handle,” and repeats it again on the next page.

<sup>100</sup> Linwood Brown, “Maxwell Chambers,” *Dramatic Episodes in Davidson College History: Broadcast over Stations WSOC and WBT as part of her Centennial Celebration*, 1937.

<sup>101</sup> Port, “Interviews for Pageant,” 4.

<sup>102</sup> For more discussion of Chambers and the ways in which Davidson has consciously manipulated his legacy to the school’s advantage, see Chapter 3 of my thesis.

<sup>103</sup> Brown, “Maxwell Chambers,” 2.

Chambers grants them freedom, asking “what’ll we do?” and “how’ll we live?” Even in this speech freeing them, Chambers accuses the men and women “[getting] drunk a-plenty and [messing] around a lot” and praises himself for taking such good care of them despite this, saying “you’re lucky to have a master that appreciated you all.”<sup>104</sup>

This is only some of the dialogue that sets up Chambers to be their savior - the other characters are continually skeptical of his supposedly-positive treatment of the enslaved, calling him a “dreamer” and framing Chambers not only as morally superior but also as an outlier among his peers.<sup>105</sup> The narrator reminds the audience that “while Maxwell Chambers dreamed of the future a new, greater South, his fellow-southerners were raising cotton and still more cotton.”<sup>106</sup> This presents Chambers as someone who turned away from slavery and cotton at the end of his life, which directly contradicts the historical record. As previously discussed, his bequeathed money to the college came directly from his reliance on enslaved labor and the cotton market, and he kept many Black people enslaved and treated them (in discourse and practice) as a form of property up until his death.

Thus, in addition to repeating common lies about Chambers, these pieces also reiterate the idea of a benevolent master and the importance of the “loyalty” of enslaved people. In 1930s Davidson, freedom was clearly still not understood as a right, but a privilege to be granted only to those select few Black people who had *earned* it. This discourse, especially when attached to Chambers’ name, was highly impactful, as the constant invocation of his name and reiteration of the same stories about him transforms him into a symbol that comes to stand *for* Davidson.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Viehman, “The Centennial Pageant,” 2.

<sup>105</sup> Brown, “Maxwell Chambers,” 2-3.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>107</sup> Shaw, *Davidson College*; Walter Lingle, *Memories of Davidson College* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1947); Chalmers Davidson, *The Plantation World around Davidson* (Davidson, NC: Briarpatch Press, revised ed., 1973).

These selections from the Centennial pageant solidify the image of Chambers (and by extension, the college) as a progressive figure ahead of the times, nobly battling against the forces of an unequal world; meanwhile, the real similarities between the two as beneficiaries and enactors of colonial and White supremacist violence, are conveniently erased.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout these performances, Black, White, and Indigenous people (men in particular) were carefully and intentionally defined by and against each other and through images of the “other.” The institutions’ rules and social conventions ensured that these racialized and gendered norms were constantly performed, thus blurring the lines between the performers of such behavior and their audience. This interest in reifying anti-Blackness and anti-Native sentiment was particularly relevant and effective because the college was and is explicitly constructed as a site of knowledge production, and as such socializes its members into a stratified racial system; within this context, White students and faculty at the school were socialized into this behavior so that they could repeat it - in other words, they simultaneously *learned* and *taught* it. The scope of these performances shows that although the process of reproducing and circulating these ideals was grounded in college life, it soon extended beyond the campus, as members of the school community became increasingly invested in projecting their perceptions of Blackness and Indigeneity outwards to the town of Davidson, the South, and beyond.

Of course, expressions of White supremacy and anti-Blackness did not stop there, and continued to be played out at and around the college - cross burnings in 1956 following an interracial conference, the college’s involvement in incorporating the homes of Black residents against their will in the 1980s, and KKK graffiti on campus in 2003 are just a few examples of the many ways racism continued to manifest at the school in the following decades.<sup>108</sup> The racial

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<sup>108</sup> For more on these events and the historical context surrounding them, see my Senior thesis.

and gender integration of the school through the 1960s and 1970s<sup>109</sup> brought new issues of representation to the surface, as the college was forced to adjust its treatment of Black people (especially men) to reposition them as (at least in the official sense) welcome and desired insiders. Against this backdrop, many new questions arise: what does it mean that the college relies upon the intellectual labor of Black students and the performance of Black student athletes in order to curate its increasingly-consumed image on the national stage? How does the school's history enable us to contend with issues of White supremacist behavior and the constant association of Blackness and criminality within the college community? What would it look like to value community memory (such as oral histories, interviews, etc.) as a source of knowledge and truth? The contemporary reflections of the representational violence discussed here must be explored, in everything from the college website and brochures to its sports teams and admissions programs; investigating how the college continues to make use of representations that support its reputation while simultaneously enabling and refusing to interrogate ones that harm Black students is crucial to understanding the toxic anti-Blackness that defines our campus.

There are many limitations and obstacles to responsibly investigating White cultural curations of Blackness and Indigeneity; however, interrogating examples like these performances can also tell us a great deal about White supremacist culture and how White individuals are socialized into anti-Blackness as a way of life. The control of Black imagery and Blackness as a concept necessarily draws from and further justifies the control of and violence towards Black bodies and individuals on an international, national, and local scale;<sup>110</sup> this pattern is more than

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<sup>109</sup> Responding to social pressure to integrate from some students and faculty, the Board of Trustees narrowly passed a measure to “integrate” Davidson College in 1961 (Davidson College 1990, 8); however, only foreign-born African men were accepted for the next three years, as they were apparently seen as “less threatening” and less political than African-Americans (Kelley 1991). Black American men were not admitted as students until 1964, and Black and White women were not accepted as full students until 1973 respectively (Davidson College 1990).

<sup>110</sup> Young (2010) draws critical connections between the appropriation of Blackness and Black bodies and the physical violence enacted upon Black people in the “real” world, specifically how Blackness has been

evident at Davidson College, and directly contradicts the school's discourses of progress and constant assertions that the school is always moving "forward" and becoming better than it was before. Whether through the language of diversity and inclusion, the creation of new staff positions, or the curation of contemporary art pieces regarding the campus's history, we at Davidson are all too willing to discuss how we have improved - but rarely do we spend enough time investigating what we have to improve *upon*. Anti-Blackness has been taught, learned, and enacted as part of the conscious construction of campus culture since the school's founding, and until it is untaught, unlearned, and ceases to be enacted, it will remain - and continue to be weaponized by White bodies, White minds, and our Whitewashed collective memory.

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constructed, controlled, appropriated, and embedded in the physical body by focusing on that body as a site of enactment.

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