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She Wears the Masks: Bluefacing in Nilaja Sun's Black and Blue and La Nubia Latina

Patricia Herrera
University of Richmond, pherrera@richmond.edu

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In *Black and Blue* (2001), Nilaja Sun chronicles her 1982 world premiere as Smurfette in the musical *The Smurfs Saved Their Village against the Evil Gargamel.* Her experience as a thirteen-year-old summer camper playing the role of Smurfette in blueface remains so vivid that she reenacts the moments before, during, and after her performance. In the final scene of *Black and Blue*, young Sun looks at the audience-as-mirror, anxiously puts on her bright blonde wig, and smears her face with blue paint. She nods with satisfaction and then attentively stands by for her entrance music to begin. The instant she hears the Smurf anthem, she merrily dances and lip-syncs:

La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, sing a happy song  
La, la, la, la, la, la, Smurf the whole day long  
(whistle) — Smurf along with me  
(whistle) — simple as can be  
Next time you’re feeling blue just let a smile begin  
Happy things will come to you so Smurf yourself a grin  
(spoken by Gargamel) “Oooo, I hate Smurfs! I’ll get you, I’ll get all of you, if it’s the last thing I ever do!”  
La, la, la, la, la, la, now you know the tune  
La, la, la, la, la, la, you’ll be Smurfing soon.  
("Smurfs [Main Title],” Joseph Barbera, William Hanna, and Hoyt Curtin  
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At the end of her Smurfette performance, Sun is both surprised and honored at the recorded cheers and applauses. She proudly yet humbly bows and returns to her dressing area. This lighthearted moment gradually becomes ironic, as Louis Armstrong melancholically sings "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?" in the background, and Sun rubs off the blue paint. She stares at the audience-as-mirror not in triumph, but in dismay. Her face, now "black and blue" as in the play and song title, brings to the surface a painful, lingering question about hybridity and racial consciousness—What did I do to get so black and blue?

This article examines how Nilaja Sun explicitly employs the minstrelsy traditions of blackface to push the conceptual limits of racial identity, and expand the nodes of intersection within diasporic identities. The act of bluefacing, as opposed to blacking up, is Sun's way of provoking her audience to think more expansively about the performance of racialized identity outside of black and Latino paradigms, and toward a more complicated and not-clearly discernible Afro-Latino hybrid subjectivity. Sun uses what I call bluefacing, a performance tactic that magnifies the constricitive and monolithic perceptions of blackness and Latinidad as a means of generating alternative ways of living inside and outside racial and ethnic social masks. In her earlier works, Black and Blue and La Nubia Latina (1999), Sun demonstrates how the act of putting on and taking off various social masks both affirms and troubles her engagement with Afro-Latina diasporic lineages. I explore the ways Sun's masking techniques are not simply about the mask itself, nor about what the mask conceals or reveals, but rather about bluefacing as a way to embody the lived experience of oppression across multiple and intersecting racial histories. What are the social and political implications rendered when Sun wears a blueface mask? What racial politics does Sun's strategy of bluefacing perform in concert with traditions of blackface by African Americans? How does Sun's creation of blueface masking embody and intervene in racial politics?

My goal is to open avenues for discussing the performative elements of blackness and Latinidad that Sun simultaneously produces and circulates. Turning our attention to the moments of bluefacing offers an alternative point of entry from which to understand diasporic identities. This article amplifies the intersecting social narratives and embodied practices of diasporic identity by engaging in three theoretical disciplines, namely, diaspora studies, theatre studies, and performance studies. This interdisciplinary approach situates Sun as a figure who contributes critically to the articulation and representation of identity in contemporary solo performance.

To understand how Sun generates a masking tactic of bluefacing, a theoretical framework that engages with diasporic identity, affect, and differential consciousness is useful here. These three lenses call attention to the embodied practices of identity, on how Sun's body remembers and renders her experiences of discrimination and alienation. As the daughter of an African American father and a Puerto Rican mother, the ethnoracial category of Afro-Latino shapes Sun's lived experiences. The term "Afro-Latino" may be used to refer both to Latinos in the United States and Latin Americans of African ancestry who choose to identify racially with blackness and ethnically with their Latino national origins. Latin American blacks today usually tend to identify themselves along regional or national lines, such as Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Dominican, or Afro-Latin American (Obober and Dzidzienyo 3-36).

Going beyond national and geographic specificity, "Afro-Latino" acknowledges the international and transnational relationships among Africa, Latin America, and Europe since the fifteenth century (McKnight and Garofalo ix-x). As noted by many scholars, the emphasis is on the intersections, interactions, and exchanges that exist among various diasporas. That is, this term takes into account how bodies, ideas, beliefs, practices, and artifacts both blend and separate as they travel across the Atlantic Ocean. Afro-Latino, then, encompasses the various "histories, memories, social locations, expressive cultures, social movements, political organization[s], and lived experiences of peoples of African descent in Latino/America" (Laó-Montes 320).
Approaching Afro-Latinos as complex interconnected diasporic identities reveals the significations, constructions, and circulation of blackness in the Americas.

Sun makes visible the entangled diasporic histories and formations of Afro-Latinos by masking her body with citations of “Africanity, Americanity, and Latinidad” (Laó-Montes 320). In so doing, Sun’s performances suggest that Afro-Latinidad is an embodied identity consciousness that resonates in the U.S., Latin America, and Africa. Understanding that she is the product of three communities with distinct but overlapping sensibilities, Sun’s performances create a hybrid translocal identity, one that erases the hyphenation that separates Afro from Latino and Latino from Afro, as well as one that links Africanity, Americanity, and Latinidad (Laó-Montes 310). The history of Africa in Latin America reminds us that this term Afro-Latino functions as an umbrella term to unite individuals with shared histories of displacement, migration, and exile. Like many labels of identification, Afro-Latino/o occupies shared and at times completely disparate histories, cultures, and traditions. Thus, recent scholarship strays from a conclusive definition for labels of identification and instead embraces the ambiguities and contradictions that further complicate, critique, and expand the meaning of terms like “Afro-Latino” and “Latino.” In emphasizing difference, the term has evolved from one that heavily relies on national and geographic boundaries to one that focuses on what individuals do and feel (Muñoz 70). In this vein, identity is a practice. It is not who we are, but what we do and how we experience the doing that largely defines our identity. Focusing on the doing centers the body and its affective impact, as integral components for understanding Latina/o identity.

In his essay “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs),” José Esteban Muñoz coins the term “feeling brown” to discuss how Latino performance taps an emotional register for understanding racial and ethnic difference, and thus calls for the engagement of affective politics to understand the term Latino. He considers how multiracial and multigender characters in Bracho’s The Sweetest Hangover “[do] not cohere by identity, but by politics of affect” (Muñoz 75). Muñoz argues that within Bracho’s work, soundscapes, sexual encounters, and recreational drugs become integral parts of an affective archive of Latinidad. Since so much of what the body does is a response to feelings, plotting the materiality of the body can force key questions about race and shed light on the enactment and reading of identity performance.

In order for Sun to “feel brown,” she literally mutates her body blue. The act of bluing up is a way of performing her diasporic identity, which interconnects with her experiences of alienation and desires of belonging. Rather than splintering her racial identity from her ethnic roots, she layers her blueface with meanings of exile and belonging from African American and Latino communities. That is, more than painting and putting on, or smearing and lifting off a blue mask, Sun reveals the various social masks individuals create and wear to belong in a specific community. Sun employs the strategy of bluefacing to imbue Latino body citations. These citations allow Sun to enact brownness despite her peer’s essentialist notions of identity.

Sun moves across multiple axes of identification—African American, Latino, and American. This kinetic motion “between and among” various identity-based affinity groups is what Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval refers to as “differential oppositional consciousness.” In Methodology of the Oppressed, she uses this term in discussing 1970s' and '80s’ third-wave feminists, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Audre Lorde, and their navigation of various feminist modes of resistance. Sandoval delineates a history of feminist political strategies that integrates how feminists of color practiced differential oppositional consciousness. They created alliances with other feminist schools of thought concerned with issues of marginality, namely equality, revolution, supremacy, and separatism. Oppositional consciousness engages in a dialectical relation between and among the four ideological strands elucidating
the "affinities inside of difference" (Sandoval 63). As this study builds on Sandoval's differential oppositional consciousness, it focuses on the embodied processes enacted by Sun to make sense of her "historical, subjective, and political dislocation" (Sandoval 78). Aware that ethnoracial subjects are webbed in visual and social encryptions, Nilaja Sun wears different social masks to hurdle across the various ethnic, racial, and cultural divides. Sun creates bluefacing, a tactic of differential oppositional consciousness, to destabilize and erode essentialist binaries of ethnicity, race, gender, and socioeconomic status.7

Sun's performances suggest that Afro-Latinidad is an embodied identity consciousness that resonates in the U. S., Latin America, and Africa.

It is within intricate diasporic histories and embodied practices of differential oppositional consciousness that I examine bluefacing in Nilaja Sun's Black and Blue and La Nubia Latina. While Sun utilizes masking techniques akin to commedia and other world theatre traditions, minstrelsy provides a vocabulary to read masking in relationship with troubling representations of race. Sun engages with a historically racist theatrical practice to explore racial constructs in America. In the 1890s, the demographic shift of black performers in blackface generated layered meanings and significations of blackness. At a time when whites assumed that black performers had the ability to "incorporate a discourse of authenticity" into their performances, colored minstrelsy troupes became widely popular (Nathans 75; Brooks 63). For the first time, black performers benefited from this economy of appropriating black cultural forms as it directly improved their professional trajectory. Bert Williams and George Walker won much acclaim for performing in burnt-cork blackface. They first billed themselves as "Two Real Coons" in the 1896 New York production called The Gold Bug at the Casino Theatre and continued to do so until 1909, when Walker fell ill. Houston Baker explains that they were successful because they skillfully imbued the minstrel mask with black oratory and kinesthetic excess. That is, they enacted what Baker refers to as the "sounds" of the minstrel mask to distinguish their acts from the many white minstrels also performing in blackface. Baker argues that, like Williams and Walker, Booker T Washington in his autobiography Up from Slavery (1901) takes up the "types and tones" of minstrel practices to allure both white and black audiences, thus earning a national reputation (Baker 33). If, as Baker suggests, mastering the minstrel form is a "strategy of attraction" that speaks "back and black," then what kinds of representations do black minstrel practitioners create when, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild claims, it is "a white-constructed mirror" that distorts the reflection of blacks (Baker 24-29; Gottschild 83)?

To understand the practices of minstrelsy, we must proceed with caution, looking outside as well as inside the minstrel mask to humanize what was perceived as mere signs of blackness on stage. In his renowned poem "We Wear the Mask," Paul Laurence Dunbar writes about how blacks frequently concealed their pain, frustrations, and anger from whites as a means of survival. His poem reveals the psychological and emotional toll that comes with wearing a mask, whether literally or metaphorically. Similarly, Ralph Ellison, in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," further expands this idea by showing how these feelings are entangled with joy and humor as well as aggression:

Very often, however, the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by
race manners, to know his identity... We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense, when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals. (109)

Both Dunbar and Ellison reveal that the public significations of blackness are mere masks concealing the feelings and experiences of blacks. For black minstrel performers, the medium of masking became a tactic of resistance that was contingent to multiple other circumstances. Williams and Walker, for instance, were at once pulled by the economic demands of the theatre market, racial ideologies, and the politics of representation. While Williams and Walker masquerade the rhetoric of authenticity, the black performing body transforms and reappropriates the exploited cultural forms in order to deride whites. As such, the minstrel tradition of black-on-blackface, as Brooks proposes in *Bodies of Dissent*, simultaneously serves as a device for authenticating the master/slave power relation, itself a mode of subversion, and a mechanism of degradation.

Contemporary black female playwrights such as Ntozake Shange and Suzan-Lori Parks master and deform minstrel traditions to unveil multiply conflicting circumstances within the black community, as well as expose the constructions of race in the United States. In Shange's *Spell #7*, a huge blackface mask literally hangs from the ceiling of the theater to foreground the painful experiences of racism faced by a group of African American actors. Similarly, in *The Death of the Last Black Man in America*, Parks brings to life a series of stereotypical African American figures, such as the Black Man with Watermelon, and the Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, to comment on slavery, racial violence, and the impact it has on the black experience. In her own work, Sun further complicates minstrel traditions of black-on-blackface by donning a blueface mask to explore her diasporic identity. She works against the racial binaries while deploying performance motifs associated with minstrelsy *a la* Smurffette, in order to display the multiple axes of oppression working concurrently.

Sun, Shange, and Parks are contemporary black female playwrights reworking minstrel discourses. Their works are akin to variety shows that interweave dance, song, comedy, and painted faces. Yet what is distinct about Sun's work is that she is hybridic in her strategies. Working within the genre of solo performance, she plays with minstrelsy traditions and a hip hop aesthetic. As is the case for most solo works, in *Black and Blue* and *La Nubia Latina*, Sun moves across and between complex identities, reenacting a variety of ethnic and racial characters. By using minstrel traditions in her solo works, she engages with questions about the racialized bodies and the troubling of expectations for the identitarian performance of race and gender as well as for issues of cultural hybridity.

In addition to bringing into dialogue minstrel traditions and solo performances, she layers her work with a hip hop aesthetic that is similar to the styles of Sara Jones, La Bruja (whose given name is Caridad de la Luz), Aya de Leon, Danny Hoch, Jonzi D, Indio Melendez, and John Leguizamo. As Sun grew up during the 1980s on the Lower East Side, a multicultural community of immigrants located at the center of the hip hop genesis, her experiences and the characters she portrays were indelibly shaped by the same sociohistorical context from which hip hop emerged. Though Sun does not explicitly employ hip hop's elements (such as deejaying, emceeing, break-dancing, and graffiti art) in her solo works, she addresses specific issues that affect the hip hop generation, such as poverty, drugs, Reaganomics, displacement, gentrification, and other racial and class inequities of the postindustrial era. A brief summary of *Black and Blue* is in order at this point to analyze the ways in which Sun engages with minstrelsy and hip hop in her solo work to link African American and Latino cultural and performance traditions. The performance strategy of bluefacing, and the masking and unmasking that Sun enacts help audiences reflect and critically analyze the racial politics in the U. S., her intertwined diasporic identity, and the performative nature of ethnicity, race, and gender. *Black and Blue* is...
a recollection of Nilaja Sun's first theatre appearance as Smurfette, the lead role in a summer camp production. This solo work centers on both the preparation and the creation of her blueface performance. She specifically uses her childhood memories to demonstrate her process of racial consciousness. The opening scene begins with Sun dancing in a slow, calculated manner to the instrumental reprise of “(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?” Sun can't quite remember the choreography, but continues to practice. As she begins to recall the movements, her pace gradually increases, and her body flows from one sequence to another. This dance sparks her memory, and she describes the year and setting of this piece. She recalls that “[i]t was the summer of 1982 [and she] was attending the Henry Street Settlement Summer Day Camp.” She then juxtaposes the harsh reality of street life with the magical world of theatre. She reminds us that the Lower East Side was infested with drugs, and that attending summer camp at the community center was a safe haven for many young children. Sun continues the scene by portraying the character of Señora Rivera Libertad, a retired mambo dancer who walks with a limp. Señora Rivera Libertad, who has directed the summer camp theatre productions at Henry Street Settlement for many years, decides to produce The Smurfs Saved Their Village against the Evil Gargamel, a musical performance. Sun then introduces the various campers and their roles in the musical. Señora Rivera Libertad initially casts Yolanda, the most popular girl in school who, coincidently, has the lightest complexion, as does Smurfette. Thirteen-year-old Sun, a dark-skinned girl who is often ostracized from the group, recalls that she is not officially given a role so she creates one for herself; Nobody Smurf.

The rehearsal process follows in the piece, and Señora Rivera Libertad claps and, without words, uses random vocables and syllables to create a rhythm and beat for the dancers. She congratulates the group for keeping time together and remembering their movements. She is, however, quick to highlight the weakest link: Yolanda. Señora Rivera Libertad reprimands Yolanda and accuses her of depending on her good looks and her cinnamon complexion for success. Embarrassed, Yolanda begins to cry, but Señora Rivera Libertad pays little attention to her outburst, and scolds at her, “If that is all you ride on in this life you better pray for a miracle because this world will eat you alive, especially if you want to dance” (Black and Blue). These words transport Señora Rivera Libertad back to her days as a dancer and she suddenly goes into a trance moving her arms in slow motion, sensuously rotating her wrists, hands, and fingers, and extending them above her head.

When she breaks out of this trance of the dance, she asks if there is anyone in the class who would be willing to teach Yolanda the dance. Eager to befriend Yolanda, Sun volunteers her expertise. But in a desperate need to recoup her power among the campers, Yolanda arrogantly refuses to work with her, and instead of calling her Nilaja, she deliberately calls her “Nigeria” and “nostalgia.” Yolanda pompously asks: “How can an African booty-scratcher teach me how to dance? I got to see this.” Despite Yolanda's racial derision, thirteen-year-old Sun dances passionately. Marveled by Sun's execution, Señora Rivera Libertad immediately re-casts the show, giving the role of Smurfette to Sun. The group is appalled by her decision. They do not understand how Sun could play the role of Smurfette if she is black. Señora Rivera Libertad abates the racial bickering by reminding the group that “Smurfette is blue, not black.”

She reenacts her first rehearsal experience in the production of “The Smurfs” to demonstrate how Sun, as a young child, wore a variety of masks to integrate into the Latino community. However, Sun reenacts this memory to highlight how she came to critically analyze her intertwined diasporic identity. Now, as an adult, Sun endows the character of Smurfette with bodily citations of Africanity, Americanity, and Latinidad to articulate her diasporic identity. She transforms this moment of blueface into an embodied strategy of survival and resistance. Behind the blueface stands a racially conscious Afro-Latina who resents putting on the various social
masks and now confronts the psychological and emotional battering that comes with wearing these masks.

For many children, television was an escape from the harsh realities of drugs and violence in the Lower East Side. By 1982, the year the musical *The Smurfs Saved Their Village against the Evil Gargamel* was performed, the Saturday-morning Smurfs cartoon had gained national popularity. For eight years, Hanna-Barbera Productions aired it on NBC. The Smurfs captivated children and young teenagers, myself included. These fantastical small blue creatures live deep in the forest, in a village filled with mushroom-shaped cottages. They essentially look the same, dressed in white trousers and a cap, with the exception of Smurfette, who wears a white dress. Much like the Seven Dwarfs in *Snow White*, each Smurf serves an allegorical function. There is Lazy Smurf, Grouchy Smurf, Brainy Smurf, Jokey Smurf, and Farmer Smurf, to name a few. As the original story goes, Gargamel, an evil human wizard, decides to take revenge on the Smurfs by creating Smurfette, a female brunette Smurf with straight, stringy hair, ugly eyelashes, a big nose, who wears a plain white dress with white shoes. Gargamel plans to use Smurfette as a decoy to find the Smurf village since it is nearly impossible for humans to find. Lost in the forest lamenting her life, Smurfette convinces the Smurfs that she needs to be rescued, or else she will perish. Papa Smurf, with his alchemy and knowledge, saves her. He transforms the “ugly” Smurfette into the charming blonde bombshell that the Smurfs admire. The basic storyline of each cartoon episode hinges on the Smurfs’ adventures of saving their village from their nemesis Gargamel, who spends his days planning how to capture and destroy the Smurfs.

While young audiences were mesmerized by this cartoon show, it takes on a social meaning when youth from the Henry Street Settlement’s Summer Camp adapt it into a musical. For Sun and other campers, the stage becomes a space where they see themselves, perhaps for the first time, as racialized bodies. Identifying the layered metaperformance moments in *Black and Blue* elucidates Sun’s journey as a thirteen-year-old who learns to live in her skin, and who now as an adult reflects upon the moments in which she must negotiate the multiple parts of her diasporic identity. With the exception of the Smurf anthem and choreography, Sun does not enact specific scenes from the cartoon or the musical. Instead, she focuses on the rehearsal process, which she now dramatizes as an extremely traumatic experience, because the campers unconsciously practiced a discourse of racial and gender discrimination. While the Smurfs resembled a socialist commune equally contributing their skills to maintain their village, the campers could not easily translate the collective qualities of the Smurfs into their world. The enthusiasm of performing such a popular cartoon gradually turned into a power game of representation and visibility.

The campers came up with their own Smurf names. But it was the camper’s given name that determined the roles they would play in the production. Sun, for example, played the part of Nobody Smurf because as she recalls, she did not appear like the many Jennifer Lopez-looking campers, and was, therefore, often forgotten. Tyrrell, the thuggish boy, played Niga Smurf. Keeshaw Black, the notoriously asthmatic boy, played the part of Evil Gargamel. Notice that the given names of each camper function as racial holders. “Keeshaw,” and “Tyrrell,” as well as Sun’s first name, “Nilaja,” are often perceived as African or African American names, and in this case are also correlated with the “bad” or less-important characters. Angel José Rivera and Yolanda Maria Yvette Rey the Third, the most popular children in the class, whose names ethically mark them as Latinos or of Latin American descent, played the lead roles of Papa Smurf and Smurfette, respectively. Even the name of the director, Señora Rivera Libertad, is quite fitting, as her name in English means “Lady Liberty.” She happens to be the only adult the campers interact with, and plays the voice of reason in trying to “free” them from the racial stratification they have replicated from the outside/adult world around them.
Unable to transfer the same sense of equality maintained among the Smurfs, the campers automatically imposed a racial order to their character names, in part because this reflected the power relations they experienced and practiced in everyday life. Sun’s peers often excluded her from the Latino community because her dark skin visually marked her as African American. “Race, unlike ethnicity,” as feminist philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff asserts, “has historically worked through visible markers on the body, which trumps dress, speech, and cultural practices” (242). Despite her many attempts to perform Latinidad, by speaking Spanish and performing the role of Smurfette, Sun remains invisible to the Latino community precisely because her visible racial identity masks her ethnic identity. The blue cartoon characters allow the Latino campers to embody the existing racial order and division among them, without directly implicating themselves in the racist discourse of pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy. Although the shared histories of oppression among Latinos and blacks can potentially incite alliances, there exists a growing divide between these two communities of color. This divide stems from the dichotomous function of race.

Harry Elam reminds us in his introduction to African American Performance and Theater History that theater and performance are potent sites used to complicate notions of race. Race, as Elam posits, is “inherently theatrical” and it functions similar to the processes of theatre in that “it relies on the relationship between the seen and unseen” (4). In Black and Blue, the blue of Sun’s blueface, of her differential masking takes on multiple social meanings in this solo work. For instance, the term “blue-collar worker” resonates multiply as Sun aligns the experience with manual labor and the predominant socioeconomic status of the people living on the Lower East Side. The color blue can also signify an individual’s gender, as it is a social norm to shower a male baby with blue clothing and essential items. The color blue as a gender signifier carries over into the world of the Smurfs, who are all male, until Gargamel creates Smurfette, the only female with whom they ever interact. Smurfette’s existence relies on how the male gaze still compulsively dictates the construction of womanhood. Black and Blue probably presents the most nuanced representation of the color blue as a racial signifier. While the Blue Man Group, a dynamic multimedia theatre company, uses the color blue to create abstract nonhuman and nonracial characters, Sun deploys the color blue to interrupt the racial dichotomy of black and white and show how race, class, and gender intersect.

The campers are quick to practice the racial dichotomy. After Señora Rivera Libertad announces that Sun will be the new Smurfette, the campers protest. Keeshaw asks: “How is she [Sun] going to be Smurfette when she is black? Smurfette ain’t black, am I right?” Keeshaw’s comment inflects both a racial hierarchy and a patriarchal order; both Keeshaw and Tyrell actively repudiate Nilaja’s right to perform Smurfette. They decide that Yolanda is the best candidate to play the lead role of Smurfette because her light-brown complexion is deserving of this position. According to them, only a cinnamon-skinned Latina, and not Sun, a black-skinned Latina, can embody Smurfette. They make Yolanda’s cinnamon skin tone analogous to Smurfette’s blueness and transform the role of Smurfette into a Latino icon.

Although the campers imbue the color blue with Latino significations, the color blue also renders other racial meanings. When Yolanda scornfully mistakes Sun’s first name Nilaja for Nigeria, she denigrates and alienates Sun for her blackness. This slippage reveals how Yolanda locates her Latina identity by disassociating herself from blackness. In performing Yolanda, Sun juxtaposes the embrace of Latinidad and the withdrawal of blackness to emphasize the tensions that she experiences as a person with a diasporic identity. In the palette of colors, blue is neither too light nor too dark, which is similar to the way brownness functions in this scene. Yolanda, given her cinnamon complexion, has the ability to pass not only as Smurfette, but can
also easily costume herself with markers of whiteness: a blonde wig, a white dress, and white heels.

As they reflect Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, Sun's reenactments reveal the performativity of diasporic identities. In color-coding her body blue, Sun gestures at the ability (or inability) to translate notions of identity into performance. She uses the color blue not only to personify Smurfette, but also to consider how the materiality of performance functions when she sets on the stage ideological notions of Latinidad and blackness. When Señora Rivera Libertad remarks to the campers that "Smurfette is not black, she is blue," she points out that their complexion is irrelevant to the production. It is Sun's virtuosity that brings Smurfette to life; this does not, however, change the camper's perceptions. The campers are unable to decouple race from Smurfette; they believe that because of Sun's dark-skinned complexion, she can never embody Latinidad or whiteness, and thus only Yolanda (the cinnamon-skinned Latina) can play the role of Smurfette.

Plotting the materiality of the body, as Muñoz reminds us, brings the affective performances of race and ethnicity into sharper focus. Sun utilizes the medium of dance to powerfully assert her identity, evoking the feeling of alienation and intensifying her desires to be accepted as a Latina by her peers. Conversely, in the opening scene of Black and Blue, the adult Sun moves constrictedly, trying to remember the movement to the instrumental reprise of the song "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?" When she performs the dance in the musical production for her peers, she is not concerned about the specific technicalities (Black and Blue). Instead, she freely accents her arms and hips, and energizes Smurfette's movement with such splendor that even she takes a moment to revel at the virtuosity of her performing body. Sun articulates this moment of amazement; she may not look like the Jennifer Lopez-looking campers, but she has the ability to perform Smurfette.

The different kinesthetic dancing dynamic reveals Sun as a young child learning to live in her skin, and Sun as an adult, raising consciousness about the Latino community's internal racial inequities. As an adult, Sun enacts her childhood experience to reveal the multiple significations of Latinidad and blackness. Dancing the choreography of Smurfette before her peers brings Sun's young female body to the center of the racial conflict. Given that the campers collectively agree that Yolanda is a better fit for the role of Smurfette, this cartoon character becomes a medium through which Sun contests and reclaims her Afro-Latinidad. Sun masters the movements that Yolanda should "innately" know as the quintessential Latina bombshell playing Smurfette. Sun imbues Smurfette with social and political value as her dance represents her initiation not only into the world of the theatre, but also into the Latino community. Dancing in blueface becomes the way she overcomes the social conditions of racial alienation.

After her dancing extravaganza, Sun returns to the dressing room to unmask her blueface and "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?" plays in the background. Just as this song captures in music and words the trauma of racial oppression, the scene reveals how colorism inflicts black-and-blue bruises on Sun's psyche when she attempts to mold her identity to fit perfectly the campers' perceptions of blackness and Latinidad. When Sun witnesses her black and blue reflection in the mirror, the post-performance celebration turns into a daunting moment. Her bruised black-and-blue face, rather than the blue mask of Smurfette, tempers her celebratory finale as she realizes how tired she is of creating, putting on, and taking off masks that force individuals to fit into ethnoracial paradigms.

This moment calls attention to how the visual effect of appearing like a Smurfette only competes with Sun's talent of dancing and singing. Although she is able to execute the movements and lines with passion, she still cannot fully embody Smurfette. Young Sun believed that with the proper makeup and costume, she would easily become Smurfette. As an adult, Sun reveals that this theatrical illusion fails to suspend
our imagination. When Sun applies blue paint onto her black body, the audience witnesses her trying to embody a character to which the other Latino campers originally denied her access. Painting her face blue allows the audience to see Sun navigating between the fractures of two communities: African American and Latino. Her blueface also makes visible the social bruising that young Sun had to undergo to assimilate the role of Smurfette. In order to play Smurfette, young Sun undergoes the violent acts of internal racism that, though not physical, have bruised her psyche.17

As an adult, Sun uses the differential masking strategy of bluefacing to embody the familiar American icon Smurfette, subvert it, and then inscribe it with new meaning. Since Sun's black racial traits upstage her status as a Latina, her peers perceive her as other in the Latino community. Similarly, since Sun aligns herself with Latinos vis-à-vis Smurfette, her African American peers Tyrell and Keeshaw alienate her for choosing Latinidad over blackness. This otherness is a byproduct of the racialization process that Latinos and African Americans internalize, which, as this performance makes visible, also reproduces additional scenarios of racial discrimination within already marginalized communities.

Disturbed by internalized racism, Sun displaces the physical attributes conventionally signifying ethnic and racial categories of Latinidad and blackness onto the cartoon character Smurfette. In using the performance strategy of bluefacing, Sun reveals that both the limitations of the white and black binary and the desire to create a heterogeneous notion of Latinidad. Race, as Juan Perea states, is conceived by Americans as consisting “either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the black and white” (361). It is often the case that other racial identities are understood from this limiting binary, which does not adequately work for Latinos or other immigrant and migrant communities in the same way that it does for African Americans and Caucasians (Alcoff 245). In other words, the black-and-white paradigm does not reflect the diverse, ever-growing number of racial identities in the United States. In doing so, Sun produces a theatrical experience that brings into dialogue Africanity, Latinidad, and Americanity.

Throughout her various solo works, Sun engenders moments of reflexivity for which audience members from different backgrounds and experiences can come to realize their roles and participation within the hegemony of the black-and-white binary paradigm. The press photograph used for La Nubia Latina, a solo work produced in 1997, four years before the premiere of Black and Blue, depicts Sun leaning into a blue mask with a teardrop on the cheek (Fig. 2). This image vividly captures Sun in the process of embodying her identity as “black and blue,” constantly negotiating between her African American and Latino identity. So as not to fully conceal her face, Sun stares out peeking through only one eyehole while partially revealing the other half of her face. Sun’s racial visibility and ethnic ambiguity create unrecognizable moments, as the viewer cannot easily decipher her cultural background. The visual materiality and embodiment of the blue mask breaks away from a white-and-black paradigm to reveal the complexities of race and racism.

While Sun states that there is not a relationship between the blue masks in La Nubia Latina and Black and Blue, reading these two performances in tandem calls attention to the ways Sun uses bluefacing to critically challenge her audience to think more about the performance of racialized identity outside of black and Latino paradigms (Sun 2007). While in Black and Blue Sun dons the blueface to perform her diasporic identity and reveal the sometimes tense interrelationships between and among diasporic communities, in La Nubia Latina she wears the blue mask to narrate the story of a young, nameless woman who learns to live in her own skin as she heals from a heart-rending breakup.

In ways similar to Black and Blue, Sun weaves together moments of her life in La Nubia Latina to show how she continuously bridges that gap between her African American and Latino heritages. The title of the work is the most explicit indication
of how Sun attempts to seamlessly bring together her black and Latina identity. The title stresses her hybridity, ushering her audience into a Spanish/English world-view. Though some non-Spanish speakers in the audience may feel uncomfortable or even alienated because Sun speaks in Spanish, she quickly makes them feel at ease when she turns to them to ask if she is using the correct Spanish verb tense. In so doing, she positions herself as a non-Spanish speaker to make audience members feel included, even though she is fluent in Spanish. Others, however, are not sure if her uncertainty with the Spanish language means that she is an African American woman learning to speak Spanish or if she is a code-switching Latina. By speaking in both Spanish and English, she reveals the complexities of her hybridity. In *Black and Blue*, Sun demonstrates how her blackness at times upstages her Latina ethnic markers. The campers never want to accept her as a Latina. However, in *La Nubia Latina*, the audience can't easily place Sun in one specific racial or ethnic category because her linguistic maneuvering produces an ambiguous self-imagining. In so doing, Sun challenges "authentic" notions of both Africanity and Latinidad.

In addition to creating an ambiguous self-imagining through language, she further maps this uncertainty onto her body when she plays the role of the hyper-Latina blonde bombshell and a migrant roach asserting her everlasting presence on earth to address issues of authenticity. Sun continues this ambiguity of self-imagining in the final scene of *La Nubia* where we meet a nameless young woman who intermittently dances with a blue mask to emphasize her emotional state. Unlike the other characters she enacts, there is no indication of the young women's ethnic or racial identity. However, Sun's racialized body reminds spectators that the nameless young woman's gender experience is not devoid from her racial or ethnic identity. This young woman has recently lost her virginity to her first love. Like many young adults, she considers sexual intercourse as a rite of passage into womanhood. Despite confessing to the excruciating pain of her first sexual encounter, she romanticizes the whole experience and convinces herself that she is in love. The audience witnesses this young woman's compulsive behavior over her first love, as she incessantly inquires about his lack of communication and his whereabouts. The greater her obsession with
him, the more unresponsive he is. While this dysfunctional relationship continues, the young woman loses her sense of self.

In telling her story, the audience witnesses the young woman reconciling with who she has become; she feels powerless. Sun intensifies the emotional toll the relationship has on her by intermittently dancing with a blue mask to the song “Strength” by Patricia Cathcart Andress. This song narrates the hardship of a woman who waits for the father of her children to return, though he never does. The interplay of the blue mask and the dancing body is a central component in Sun’s work. In *Black and Blue*, she masters the kinetic dynamism of Smurfette to embody Latinidad, and in *La Nubia Latina*, her dancing body materializes the feelings of love, loss, birth, and rebirth. When Sun dances with the blue mask, she does not speak; silence here is not passive, but rather fully engaged with the body. The tension between the rigid blue mask and the flowing body on stage calls attention to how ethnic, racial, or gendered identities necessitate the work of the body in motion to trouble social constructions of identity. The blueface performance in *Black and Blue* as well as in *La Nubia Latina* is symbolic of the various masks Sun must wear to transcend various ethnic, racial, gender, and social divides. As in *Black and Blue*, the young woman takes off the blue mask. There is a sense of empowerment as the young woman gently places it on the floor and walks away. When she discards the blue mask, she metaphorically sets aside the imposed racial, ethnic, and gender constructions that have consumed her nearly to the exhaustion of her freedom. The spotlight focuses on the blue mask and gradually dims to black. Andress’s song remains in the background, making note of how women, despite the hardships they face, turn to their inner spirit to give them the “strength and courage to dry [their] own tears.”

Juxtaposing *Black and Blue* and *La Nubia Latina* reveals how the differential masking tactic of bluefacing resonates throughout Sun’s performance pieces. Reading these two performances together demonstrates how bluefacing is representative not solely of emotional state or social identity, but of both in tandem. Often Sun deals with her racial differences, as in the case of *Black and Blue*, when she feels alienated from the Latino community because of her blackness. At other times her accounts privilege her ethnic identity, especially when Yolanda adamantly refuses to embrace any ancestral connection to Africa. And yet there are also moments when she emphasizes gender, as in *La Nubia Latina*, when Sun centers the final scene on the experience of a nameless young woman. Sun bluefaces her Afro-Latina body to link affective and experiential registers to the ethnic, racial, and gender subject. She maps the ebbs and flows of her diasporic identity to address the feelings of alienation and desires of belonging that an individual encounters when caught in the social web of identity categorization.

Along with the moments that render bluefacing an integral part of this analysis are the public spaces that bluefacing inhabits, and the social structures in which it operates. Inspired by the work of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Pierre Bourdieu, David Savran urges theatre and performance studies scholars to pay attention to the “social relations, fields of cultural production, and forms of capital” accrued or expended by a given performance. Following David Savran’s call for the sociology of theatre, I turn to the social relations and formations generated by *Black and Blue* and *La Nubia Latina* to better understand the production and circulation of bluefacing (96).

*La Nubia Latina*, Sun’s first one-woman show, was created in a senior-year playwriting class at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and produced on April 25 and 26, 1996, at the college’s Other Room Theatre. The challenge in performing *La Nubia* at Franklin and Marshall was that, though Sun received mentoring along the way, the audience was mostly white and often unaware of Sun’s experiences. As a result, many would approach her after the show to say that they did not know she was so confused; others confessed feeling sorry for her and apologized (Sun). Like most artists, Sun wanted people to attend her performances,
but it was also “important for [her] to perform to an audience that would at least have some level of understanding of her experience” of a diasporic identity, “rather than having to explain or worry about whether audiences understand” (Sun).

The following year, *La Nubia Latina* was featured in Duo Theater and then produced in the spring of 1999 at the Henry Street Settlement’s Experimental Theater as part of the Women of Color Arts Festival, the same place where she attended summer camp. For over forty years, Duo Theater, now a component of the larger Duo Multicultural Arts Center, has developed and produced theatre works by Latino playwrights. Similarly, since 1892, the Henry Street Settlement has provided support services and programs to residents of the Lower East Side. Today the Settlement continues to offer art classes for children and adults, shelter services, health services, senior services, a work force development center, day-care centers, and after-school and summer youth programs. Sun develops her theatrical circuit in her cultural home because these venues were, and continue to be, invested in nurturing young artists who engage with issues of diversity, and whose work challenges the boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

Similar to *La Nubia Latina*, *Black and Blue* also circulated in theatre events or venues serving communities of color. *Black and Blue* was first performed in 2001 at Performance Space 122 as part of the Second NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival. The Hip-Hop Theater Festival, founded by Danny Hoch, KamUah Forbes, and Clyde Valentin in 2000, showcases solo and ensemble performances, including dance, performance poetry, and live-music sampling that implements a hip hop aesthetic. In addition to producing performance pieces, the festival also holds workshops that experiment with the various forms of hip hop and panels discussing the history, evolution, and future development of hip hop. Two years after its premiere at the NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival, *Black and Blue* was produced by INTAR, an organization dedicated to nurturing the professional development of Latino theater and actively cultivating a Latino audience. Michael Garces, then artistic director of INTAR’s New Works Lab, nominated Sun for the Princess Grace Foundation in 2004, in support of her artistic work and also produced *Gray Sun*, another Nilaja Sun work, that year.  

Both *La Nubia Latina* and *Black and Blue* were performed in intimate black-box theatres located in the heart of the Lower East Side, a neighborhood renowned for its multicultural population in spite of the growing displacement caused by gentrification. Additionally, the Henry Street Settlement, the NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival, and INTAR reduced general admission ticket prices and provided discounted tickets for students, fulfilling their respective commitments to making theatre economically accessible to underrepresented communities. These production spaces attract drastically different audience demographics than other off-Broadway venues; they serve a younger and more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse audience.

Considering the circulation and production of Sun’s early work further reveals how Sun builds diasporic coalitions across ethnic, racial, age, and class boundaries. Sun practices bluefacing in this neighborhood network to disrupt fixed categories of identification that stymie political and communal efficacy. While many solo performers reenact ethnic and racial experiences to mark their Latinidad or blackness, Sun focuses on the embodied practices of bluefacing to move between and among various national and racialized categories in the U. S., Latin America, and Africa. In this essay I plot the moments of bluefacing to focus on what solo performers like Sun do to practice their diasporic identity. Sun creates, wears, and removes a variety of masks to simultaneously belong as a woman, an African American, and a Latina. Spectators bear witness to Sun’s performances and negotiations of ethnicity, race, and gender. She stages scenarios that show how marginalized individuals represent themselves, and how they are represented by a culture that has popularized physical attributes of hybridity. From this optic, we can examine how Sun uses bluefacing in her other
works to tackle conceptions and perceptions of Latina, African American, and American. There is much to explore in her recent acclaimed one-woman show No Child . . . (2006), in which she takes on the roles of teacher, parent, administrator, janitor, security guard, and most important, the students with whom she worked as a drama instructor, to address the lack of resources available to New York City's public education system.22 Using the masking tactic of bluefacing as a tool for analyzing Sun's works makes visible the circulation and production as well as the consumption and recovery of a diasporic identity that navigates between notions of Latinidad and blackness.

Notes

This paper was presented at the American Society for Theatre Research's Diasporic Imagination Research Group in 2007. I am grateful for the careful reading and invaluable comments received by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Heather S. Nathans, Adrienne Macki, Lourdes Gutiérrez-Nájera, Tiffany Ana López, the anonymous readers, and the editors. Research for this article was enabled by the institutional support of the University of Richmond's Faculty Research Grant 2010-2011.

1. The title of this article, “She Wears the Mask,” is inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem “We Wear the Mask.” While Dunbar's title describes a collective experience of African Americans, the title of this essay first takes into consideration Sun's individual diasporic experience and then extends it to the ways diasporic communities use masking strategies to negotiate issues of race, ethnicity, and gender.

2. This analysis of Black and Blue is based on the performance at the Second NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival at PS 122 during the summer of 2001 and the video recording at Center Stage in 2001. A complete manuscript of Black and Blue is not available. Sun reported that the original manuscript was lost in a computer malfunction. Quotations were transcribed from the video recording provided by Sun.

3. The Smurfs, Web, 15 Jan. 2009. Pierre Culliford, who was also known as Peyo, officially created the Smurfs in Brussels, Belgium. There is only one female Smurf and her name is Smurfette. The Smurfs' debut was in 1958 as part of the comic series “Johan et Pirouit” in the magazine Le Journal de Spirou.

4. For a more in-depth understanding of the diasporic histories of “Afro-Latinos,” see The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States, Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, eds. (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Laó-Montes; McKnight and Garofalo.


6. Practitioners of equal rights oppositional consciousness maintain the philosophy that despite social, cultural, racial, sexual, or gendered difference, all humans are created equally and must be acknowledged and treated as the same under the law. Whereas this strategy of resistance is about political integration, the revolutionary form believes that difference cannot easily assimilate into the social order; thus the goal is to dismantle structures of domination and subordination. Within the supremacist form, participants claim that their difference allows them to access higher ethical and moral visions of the social order, and thus makes them more effective leaders. Under the separatist form, practitioners do not want to integrate in, dismantle, or hold the social order; instead they seek to protect and nurture difference by completely distancing themselves from the dominant social order (Sandoval 54-57).

7. For the purposes of this article, I focus on “blueface” masking tactics, but in my book-length project tentatively titled Staging Nuyorican Belonging: From Feminist Cultural Production to Hip Hop Theater, I identify several modes of masking that Sun implements to mediate and negotiate her diasporic identity.

8. Other useful resources that examine the history and layered conflicting narratives of minstrelsy in the United States are Eileen Southern, “The Georgia Minstrels: The Early Years,” in Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy, Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1996), 163-78, and Gottschild.

9. For a discussion on the social and political implications of Walker and Williams’s use of burnt-cork, see Brooks 212-26; Sandra Richards, “Bert Williams: The Man and the Mask,” Mime, Mask & Marionette 1.1 (Spring 1978): 7-24; David Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American
Gary Okihiro, Elizabeth Martinez, Richard Delgado, and Juan Perea. the essay "Letter to a Friend" to share her experiences of alienation as an Afro-Latina. She writes: 

Sun's work has not been the subject of scholarship on solo performance. Perhaps this is the case because performance and theatre studies relegate hip hop to other areas of study.


In her essay "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall recalls fondly the memory of his son learning to come into an identification. As a way to begin discussing race with his child, Hall told his son that he was black, but his son innocently corrected him and told him he was brown. The anecdote he uses shows readers how his son learns to live in his skin and how the process of identification is mutable depending on where the eye/I stands. While his son identified himself in relation to Crayola colors, Hall placed him in the system of Othering, whereby the visual markers of an individual are automatically inscribed with social meanings and histories of discrimination and alienation. See Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities” (1989), in Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity, Anthony D. King, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1997), 41-68.


Nick Corona Vaca examines the tensions between blacks and Latinos by using case studies from New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington, D.C., Compton, and Houston (2004). He argues that language barriers, competition over affirmative action, and the overlooked contributions of Hispanics during the American civil rights movement are factors that have aggravated the relationship between blacks and Latinos.

Keeshaw and Tyrell’s comment also suggests that in addition to hierarchies of race and colorism, there exists a gendered structure at work here. Among all the Smurfs, Smurfette is the sole female in the village magically transformed from a “bad” brunette to a “good” blonde. Furthermore, she is the only Smurf defined not by her occupation or personality, but by her gender. Although she is attentive to solving many of the community’s crises, it often appears that her occupation is to be the object of the male gaze, a woman just standing around and looking pretty. Just as the male gaze objectifies Smurfette, Keeshaw and Tyrell objectify Sun and Yolanda.

In a personal interview Sun notes that in the opening scene she intended to show how she, as an adult, was remembering the dance movement. This choreography was intended to signal to the audience a distinction between Sun as a racially conscious adult, and young Sun trying to understand who she is. (Román and Flores 296)
19. This analysis of La Nubia Latina is based on the performance at the 1999 Women of Color Arts Festival at Henry Street Settlement’s Experimental Theater and recorded at Duo Theater in 1997. A complete manuscript of La Nubia Latina is not available. Sun reported that the original manuscript was lost in a computer malfunction. Quotations were transcribed from the video recording provided by Sun.


21. This work was originally titled Gray Sun, but at the request of Eduardo Machado, who at the time was INTAR’s artistic director, Sun changed the title to Blues for Gray Sun.

22. No Child . . . is by far one of Sun’s most renowned solo works. She received several prestigious accolades, such as the 2007 Obie Award and 2007 Lucullu Lortel Award. No Child . . . ran on May 10 through June 18, 2006 at Theatre Row’s Beckett Theatre. It later played at the Barrow Street Theatre on July 8, 2006 with an extended run and toured throughout the nation to venues such as the Lookingglass Theatre Company and the American Repertory Theater Company, among others.

Works Cited


—. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2007.