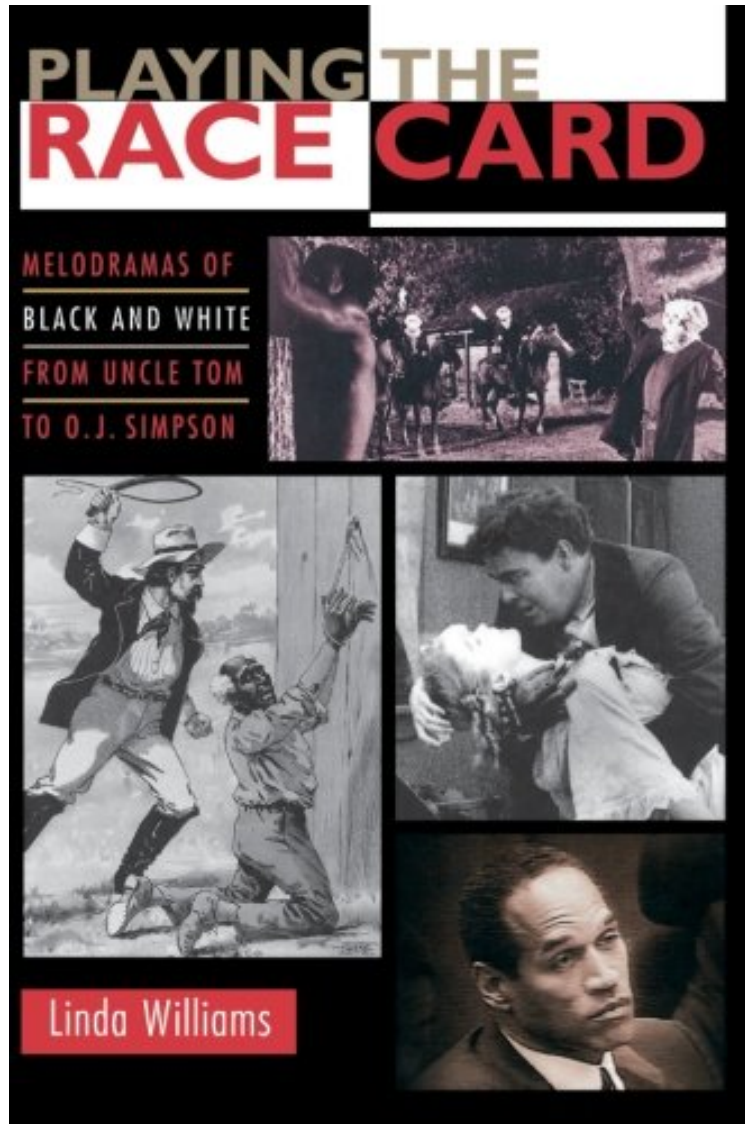


# Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson

Linda Williams

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**Linda Williams : Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson**  
before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Playing the Race Card:  
Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Every American Should Read This Book! By The Moviegoer This is  
one of the greatest books I have ever read. I'm somewhat interested in film studies but more so interested in race and I

found this analysis of the melodramatic depictions of race across the mediums of stage, film, and trials to be very enlightening. One of the greatest things about Linda Williams is that she does not condemn or overpraise. She analyzes everything dialectically. While one might abhor, for instance, blackface minstrelsy that denigrated African Americans, Linda Williams makes the point that it was first through blackface that whites gained a sense of the humanity of blacks, all the while making fun of them. The style of the book is readable. Linda Williams is an intellectual but she manages to make her work accessible to those who have not studied film academically. Familiarity with the concept of modernism would help with the first chapter, but is not necessary. If you have studied Morrison, Fanon, Nietzsche, Benjamin and the other thinkers Linda Williams makes brief references to, you will probably get a richer understanding of this book. However, speaking for someone who is only moderately familiar with those intellectuals, I nevertheless gained a deep understanding of the book. Linda Williams is a very competent writer. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Poignant - now more so than ever! By FredNeeded this for a class on race and diversity. Interesting, extremely poignant, even more so now than when I took the class. 22 of 25 people found the following review helpful. Written on the Body By Futoshi J. Tomori This is Film Studies of the first order. Williams takes the idea of melodrama as a mode and intersects it with issues of race and its representation. According to her, in conjunction with the popularity or in the legitimization of a particular medium in American society, the representations of the black male and female bodies take on center stage and gain new significations. The book starts out with Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and shows how it stays and strays away from the conventions of the Victorian novel. It then focuses on the Stowe's characterization of the black bodies and how they elicited the sympathy of the readers. Next, it shows how Dixon, with his novel "The Clansmen," either changes or reverses Stowe's characterizations and themes to elicit another kind of response. However, it is D.W. Griffith's adaptation of the novel, "Birth of the Nation" that had a powerful influence in the society's imagination. Not only did the film legitimize the medium as an art form, it also gave the public a new way of understanding race relations in America. The book covers both the novel and the movie adaptation of "Gone With the Wind" and other cultural texts and ends with the televised trial of O.J. Simpson while keeping on the other eye issues of representation. Linda Williams' project is both multi-disciplinary and multi-media and she weaves them together in a rich study of melodrama as a cultural mode and the ever evolving nature of race relations and representations in our society. She wittily uses Henry James' imagery of the 'leaping fish' to show how melodrama dynamically moves from one medium to the next. Each time it makes an appearance in a big way, it also entails a recasting of black and white or racial representations. Williams' achievement lies in her ability to pull together a variety of texts and approaches to engage upon the central issue of race. And she does this in clear, well-written prose. Although this is more like a work of cultural criticism, the book also opens up the possibilities of film studies as a powerful lens or a way of approaching cinema-related queries and dealing with socio-historical matters.

The black man suffering at the hands of whites, the white woman sexually threatened by the black man. Both images have long been burned into the American conscience through popular entertainment, and today they exert a powerful and disturbing influence on Americans' understanding of race. So argues Linda Williams in this boldly inquisitive book, where she probes the bitterly divisive racial sentiments aroused by such recent events as O. J. Simpson's criminal trial. Williams, the author of *Hard Core*, explores how these images took root, beginning with melodramatic theater, where suffering characters acquire virtue through victimization. The racial sympathies and hostilities that surfaced during the trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King and in the O. J. Simpson murder trial are grounded in the melodramatic forms of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Birth of a Nation*. Williams finds that Stowe's beaten black man and Griffith's endangered white woman appear repeatedly throughout popular entertainment, promoting interracial understanding at one moment, interracial hate at another. The black and white racial melodrama has galvanized emotions and fueled the importance of new media forms, such as serious, "integrated" musicals of stage and film, including *The Jazz Singer* and *Show Boat*. It also helped create a major event out of the movie *Gone With the Wind*, while enabling television to assume new moral purpose with the broadcast of *Roots*. Williams demonstrates how such developments converged to make the televised race trial a form of national entertainment. When prosecutor Christopher Darden accused Simpson's defense team of "playing the race card," which ultimately trumped his own team's gender card, he feared that the jury's sympathy for a targeted black man would be at the expense of the abused white wife. The jury's verdict, Williams concludes, was determined not so much by facts as by the cultural forces of racial melodrama long in the making. Revealing melodrama to be a key element in American culture, Williams argues that the race images it has promoted are deeply ingrained in our minds and that there can be no honest discussion about race until Americans recognize this predicament.

From Publishers Weekly It seems like a long leap "from Lillian Gish to... Leonardo DiCaprio and from Uncle Tom to Rodney King," but in this dazzling, benchmark work, noted cultural historian and critic Williams makes it with panache and enormous insight. Investigating contemporary racial strife embodied in the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials, Williams (*Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*) argues that centuries-old racial and sexual myths and representations are central to U.S. culture and politics. Exploring with acuity and empathy the

many permutations of racial stereotypes (e.g., the black sexual predator and the white female victim in *Birth of a Nation* and elsewhere, and their social and political meanings over the past 150 years), Williams navigates a maze of American popular culture from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Jazz Singer* and *Show Boat* to *Roots* and *Bill T. Jones's Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Always provocative, Williams eschews simple explanations and easy liberal or conservative platitudes as in her complicated analysis of the relationship between Jewish assimilation and blackface in *The Jazz Singer* and of the marketing for *Gone with the Wind* in Southern states (at age 10, Martin Luther King Jr. performed as a "slave" at a gala celebration of the film). Williams's astounding range of sources and attendant critical literature (she is professor of film studies at UC-Berkeley) is as impressive as her ability to synthesize and interpret so much information without undermining its emotional and artistic impact. This is a vital contribution to American studies as well as film and race studies. Photos and illus. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From *Library Journal* Williams (film studies, Univ. of California, Berkeley Hard Core) attempts to understand the racial sympathies and hostilities that surfaced during the "trials in black and white" (i.e., the police beating of Rodney King and O.J. Simpson's murder trial) by analyzing the mass culture genealogy of racial melodramas since the mid-19th century. She defines melodrama as "the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has 'talked to itself' about the enduring moral dilemma of race." By examining a variety of melodramas, including novels (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), films (*The Birth of a Nation*), plays (*Tommy Shows*), Broadway musicals (*The Jazz Singer*), and TV dramas (*Roots*), Williams unfolds the "Tom/anti-Tom" dialectic, exposes the logic of race- and gender-based victimization, and shows how both white and black have maneuvered the race card to great moral advantages. "Playing the race card" is simply part and parcel of the racial power games in U.S. culture. For any honest discussion about race relations in America, she argues, we must first acknowledge the indeterminate influence of melodrama. Conscientiously researched, with extensive notes and bibliography, this insightful book is essential for academic libraries and students in film studies. Edward G. McCormack, Univ. of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Lib., Long Beach Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. Finalist for the Theatre Library Association Award for Outstanding Book in Recorded or Broadcast Performance "Williams makes the best theoretical case for descriptive representation for marginalized groups to achieve democratic equality. Her review of democratic theory is both exhaustive and masterful."--Katherine Tate, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* "It seems like a long leap to make 'from Lillian Gish to . . . Leonardo Dicaprio and from Uncle Tom to Rodney King,' but in this dazzling, benchmark work . . . Williams does it with panache and enormous insight. . . . This is a vital contribution to American studies as well as film and race studies."--*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) "But the real elegance is in her thinking. . . . [Williams's writing impresses] wherever melodrama lands, it brings the same set of concerns, an *Playing the Race Card* is at its protean best when it is tracing these from medium to medium."--Lisa Kennedy, *Village Voice* "For any honest discussion about race relations in America, [Williams] argues, we must first acknowledge the indeterminate influence of melodrama. Conscientiously researched . . . this insightful book is essential for academic libraries and students in film studies."--*Library Journal* "In her intellectually rousing book, *Playing the Race Card*, Williams find the root of [melodramatic] characterizations throughout American popular culture. . . . Such images, she argues, continue to feed attitudes of racial empathy and enmity. . . . With its thought-provoking analysis and textbook scholarship, *Playing the Race Card* is a . . . passionately crafted book. But Williams greatest contribution may be liberating a discussion of race from the incendiary rhetoric and polemics that accompany such a discourse. She creates a new dialogue about how popular entertainment has fostered racial sympathy as well as mistrust, and how those images still shape us today."--Renee Graham, *The Boston Globe* "[Williams] dispenses with the cant and silliness that tangles much academic talk about racial matters. . . . Steeped in the details of text and context, she invites the reader to see familiar works in fresh ways. Williams's achievement is to recapture the complexity of our tangled racial history without sanitizing racism."--Jonathan Rieder, *New York Times Book* "Williams offers a fresh and insightful exploration of some of the roots of the American racial dilemma. . . . Well written and persuasively argued."--*Choice* "A work that is extremely valuable to historians who wish to enhance the sophistication of their own thinking about teaching with film and other visual media. . . . I believe the author succeeds at what she sets out to do. In such a large, sweeping, and ambitious book as this, that is high praise indeed."--Alecia P. Long, *H-Net* "This book would be valuable just for its scholarly insights, sharp contextual readings, well-selected illustrations, and imaginative genealogy of melodramatic practices across various eras. What gives it special urgency is that by locating those moments when new media (print, film, TV, video) were shaping new ways of conceiving race, Williams creates a moving picture of racial melodrama in the United States that manages to connect the polemic of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the . . . televised O. J. Simpson murder trial"--Kurt Eisen, *American Literature* "Broad and brilliant, a combination rare in serious books these days, *Playing the Race Card* argues persuasively that melodrama has profoundly affected American attitudes toward race over the last century and a half. . . . Williams's success is to spell out exactly how the melodramatic imagination of our popular culture shapes how we live and understand race in America and how these stories make as well as narrative history."--Grace Elizabeth Hale, *The Historian*