Popular Culture on Stage in 19th Century America Blacks: The Outcasts of American Society

By Diane Cammarata

The Mask

Always appears to be in good humor, laughs a good deal, and runs on with a good deal of foolishness.

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Addresses whites humbly and respectfully, (19th century advertisements describing runaway slaves)

This period saw the complete consolidation of the "white point of view" which declared "white is right." There existed, therefore the silly songs of Stephen Foster, glorifying his old Kentucky home, his old Black Joe and his Swanee River from which Negroes ran as though it were the plague. There existed, too, Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, which echoed America's prevailing attitudes toward the Negro.

Loften Mitchell. *Black Drama*.

In every century Americans have always chosen the vulgar, the profane, the insipid, the disreputable over that which is supposed to be good for them, by way of asserting their independence from social superiors. For Americans, it is a way of saying they are masters of their own culture. It is a way of saying they are Americans. It is a way of distinguishing themselves from those things others would like them to be.[1] This was not always the case. Some students of American literature will protest that the culture of the 19th century was certainly highlighted by gentility and virtue, reading from Thomas Jefferson through Nathanial Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Emily Dickinson to affirm their position. Most history books paint eloquent pictures of Americans as hardworking, religious, moral folk pulling together to hack a nation and a culture out of wilderness. While not exactly a fallacy, this romanticized image presents but one part of the whole picture of nineteenth century America. Another part looms darkly in the background. Little is recorded about this America in books of historical culture largely because, like any popular structure, its art forms were not meant to endure. These art forms were fruit of the working class, ordinary citizens whose family names were not Jefferson, nor Hawthome, nor Emerson, nor Dickinson. The artists were not descended from "landed gentry," but from the "middling" classes. They were the common people, and theirs was the realm of popular culture, that which spawned the phenomenon of blackface performance in the 19th century.[2]

The choice place to begin a study of the workings and fantasies of

1 Neal Gabler, *Los Angeles Times*, quoted in *The Japan Times*, Friday, June 9, 1995, p.11.

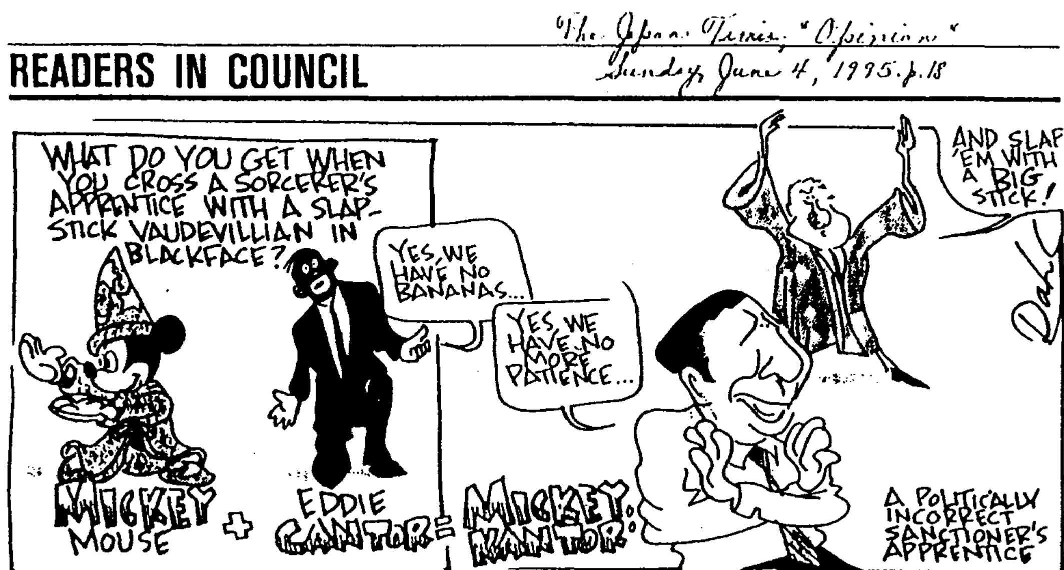
2 Much is owed to Loften Mitchell for the direction of this paper.

any society is on the popular stage. Numerous genres have explored the interracial situation in 19th century America, but no one literary device better shows the workings of race than that called minstrelsy. Popular culture begins here where white perceptions of black identity created a false stereotype, a monstrous black mask, on which the curtains have never closed. Basically blackface is characterized by a set of humiliating rules designed to deprive the black of any sense of human identity. Under the guise of "funning," white men, principally in large northern cities, darkened their faces and imitated black men onstage for economic gain and also for the amusement of others. Minstrel actors attempted to repress in ridicule of black cultural practices, the real interest they revealed unwittingly by their exploitation. Playbills described the role play as "authentic Ethiopian (sometimes African) delineators." What was imitated onstage in fact had nothing to do with Africa, but everything to do with American blacks whose culture was an incorporation of white Anglo-Saxon derivation. That white men created the black theatrical tradition made the genre formidable.

Minstrel shows were organized around abundant use of black cultural materials "borrowed" from blacks, though stolen is a more appropriate word since acknowledgement and permission for its use was never granted. The "nigger shows," as they were called, evidenced the appropriation of everything black—dialect, music and dance, sexuality—ironically establishing the worst fear of white men. History books refer to this appropriation as the "blackening of America." Without a sense of morality, and filled with a wild abandon peculiar to its racial consciousness, minstrelsy provided the outlet for an uninhibited articulation of white racial fantasy. Despite the fact that other ethnic groups (Germans, Italians, Jews, Irish, Asians) later came in for their share of

dramatic lampooning, it was blacks who suffered more and longer from the white entertainers in black face paint.

Minstrel performance was unlike any theatre found elsewhere in the world, with the possible exception of the ltalian commedia dell'arte. Its effects are obvious even today in black-white racial relations where this peculiar tradition has penetrated all avenues of everyday American life. *Uncle Ben's Rice* and *Aunt Jemima Pancakes* have stocked supermarket shelves for decades. One of the greatest 20th century film hits was D. W. Griffin's *Birth of a Nation*, which is no more than a minstrelized inversion of the South Carolina legislature where Negroes are presented as the brutal ruling class.[3] Modern television shows like *The Jeffersons* capitalize on the minstrel stereotype. The novel *Gone With The Wind* builds strength from the false blackface image. The following political cartoon appearing recently on the editorial page of a Japanese newspaper gains its bite from minstrelsy.



3 Ostendorf, Berndt. *Black Literature In White America*. Totowa, New Jersey, 1982. 65-94. The film *Birth of a Nation* is based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansmen*.

Although the racial exchange probably began in the 18th century, historical records for the following century better document this mutation from about 1830 when the American vernacular began to openly imitate, incorporate, and admit the black dialect onstage.[4] The development of the black idiom is fascinating. Because tribal languages in Africa are multiple, African slaves brought to America were unable to communicate with each other, let alone with their white masters. Consequently they needed to learn the language of their oppressor. Their English language skills grew in the South from what they heard, and which was not always pristine English. Into this was poured the rhythms, images and native languages of Africa developing into an entirely new language peculiar to black Americans. It was spoken in a slow drawl, but with a definite rhythmic pattern. Their language was scorned by white masters. In fact there was little communication between master and slave on a human plane. The relationship was rather that of owner to a piece of property which had neither brain nor voice. Ancient civilizations that reduced slaves to the level of unfortunates, nonetheless regarded them as human beings despite their condition. The black American's role was nothing like that of the slave role within ancient civilizations. Instead he was reduced to being a cheap agricultural laborer, with no regard for the abundance of his skills or intelligence.

In the West Indies, where African slave chattel had also been

4 For a comprehensive development read Robert Toll. *Blacking Up, The Minstrel Show in the 19th Century*. New York, 1974; the last chapter in Nathan Huggins. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York, 1971; the brilliant if controversial study of minstrelsy and the American working class by Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*. New York, 1994; and LeRoi Jones' comments on minstrelsy in *Blues People*. New York, 1963. p. 82-94.

imported, lrish and Scotch brogues joined the English cockney and African tongues to blend into a "signifying"[5] speech, one less bawdy and boisterous than that of the American Negro, but equally sly and derogatory in speaking of the oppressor. These speech patterns and usages from the Southern Negro and the West Indian merged and followed the migratory patterns of blacks into Harlem in the late nineteenth century, developing into a new language that would impact the entire American speech pattern and affect the stage "darkey."

The black man was not always socially set apart from his white brothers. In 1634 when New York City was a Dutch settlement, African slaves brought there by the Dutch were given freedom and built a prosperous community for themselves in the area which today is called Greenwich Village. Color discrimination was practically nonexistent then. Blacks in Greenwich Village were in fact not above enslaving others. When the British seized the colony from the Dutch, they renamed it New York and reinstituted slave codes denying the rights of man. Slaves retaliated by setting fire to any and every place occupied by free men. It was during this period, and out of necessity, that the New York City Fire Department was born. Despite severe punishment, (burning at the stake was not an uncommon punishment), slaves persisted in firing New York until the entire city was actually burned to the ground. The British learned from this that Africans were neither submissive nor ignorant, nor were they the savage beasts whites so often labeled them.

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5 In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates defines signifying as a social and political language game, African in derivation and independent of white racism with a multiplicity of meaning. The definition most appropriate in this case seems to be "To berate, degrade."

Poor whites increasingly supported and sympathized with blacks until finally, those in power realized that the only solution was—as British have always done in their colonies—to educate and "christianize" the Africans. What an irony considering the word "christianize" definitively!

White America learned from the American Revolution. It recognized its dependency upon blacks, and saw too that black soldiers had helped rescue the nation for all time. But it also realized that blacks were a powerful force to contend with, and that this force had to be vitiated at any cost. What happened in the eighteenth century and continued for the next two centuries is that white men had a twofold mission: a moral justification for continuing to enslave Negroes; and the destruction of a proud race by making them beggars both inside and outside the American scene. It is the results of these infamous deeds with which America struggles today. By the nineteenth century the black man was no newcomer to America. Despite the fact that the first Africans were brought in bondage in 1619, by the nineteenth century they were Americans. And most important, they were no longer slaves. Regardless, the founding fathers had no intention of extending the rights of man to blacks.

Underscored by paradoxes of envy and repulsion, sympathy and fear, definitely a love/hate relationship, the minstrel show crossed the color line and at the same time empowered the formation of a self-consciously white working class. Eric Lott calls this "the commodification of the dispossessed by the empowered," a "fatal" attraction mixed with the guilt of white men caught in the act of cultural stealing. As early as 1786 the play, *Robinson Crusoe and Harlequin Friday*[6] was

6 The reference to Harlequin in the title suggests an attempt, conscious or otherwise, to make a connection with the commedia dell'arte of Italy

produced in American theaters. The speech of a dehumanized Friday was more an imitation of Daniel Defoe's pidgin English than the Negro dialect it professed to be.[7] In 1795 another play called *Triumph of Love*, introduced the national caricature of the shuffling, idiotic, cackling, supposedly comic Negro servant to the stage where he would remain for over a century. The die was cast. Ever after black men would be represented on the popular stage as something to be ridiculed, and their humanity to be denied.

In 1766 "equality for all" was the rallying cry of the American Revolution until peace became a reality. After that it was "equality for all except blacks." A rising tide of racism in America gradually built up through the contradiction between slave reality and ideology, until it detonated in the twentieth century with the bloody Civil Rights Movement. The War of 1812 established America's political independence. Now Americans reached out for a traditional common man's culture that would affirm the nation's unique identity just as clearly as the war established its political freedom. In existence were two opposing groups of society engaged in a political, social and economic struggle which directly infuenced the appearance of minstrelsy. On one side of the confict stood the elite, the ruling class, who recognized only European ideals and models, undeniably a part of their cultural heritage, but thereby closing the door on a new national identity. Frantz Fanon defines this rigidity to progress and change a closed society, and those who stand

7 Scholars like Ralph Ellison, Eric Lott and Loften Mitchell call this "borrowing" of the Negro dialect and folklore, outright robbery. See *Massachusetts Review*. vol. XVIII, 3. Interview with Ralph Ellison; Eric Lott. *Love and Theft. Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York. 1993. 3-16; Loften Mitchell. *Black Drama. The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre*. New York. 1993. 13.

opposed to it, revolutionaries.[8] Revolutinaries indeed stood on the other side in the struggle for singular identity. These were the middling majority of ordinary citizens, demanding a culture which glorified American democracy and the common man. They were anti-aristocratic, and emphatically anti-European. Underneath these two castes was another large mass of society, some of them immigrants and many of them former Negro slaves bound now to a classless status by law which permitted only property owners the right to vote. Since neither poor whites nor poor blacks could afford ownership, power rested in the hands of the upper class facing the threat of a burgeoning middle folk. Poor whites were identified in the ballooning lower strata with former slaves.

Urban growth increased the population in large northern cities until, by 1850, eight American cities had more than 100,000 residents, all of them rural migrants and mainly Negroes. An agricultural country in the past, the United States was fast becoming the largest industrial nation in the world. Economically the South was lagging behind in the move toward industrialization. Southern blacks suffered either from unemployment or low wages. Many went North in droves in quest of the American Dream (Toll 4) finding instead a nightmare of social and cultural despair. Dual dangers of urban growth and industrial expansion haunted their dreams. Whites, fearful for their own jobs and terrified at the possibilty of a black uprising, restrained the blacks in impoverished conditions by withholding employment. This conflict found expression in the minstrel show where an interlocutor, representing the oppressor, interacted with the black, urban Zip Coon, and the black, rural Tambo

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8 Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), tr. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967.

and Bones, the oppressed.

Southern Negroes found life in the North rife with hardship and poverty. City life was bewildering. Their dreams dimmed as they watched the rich grow richer and the poor increase in number. Despite industrial development, the few jobs available were not enough to accommodate Southern blacks as well as European immigrants who were also beginning to swell North American cities. Negroes lived in cramped quarters with strangers, many of whom did not even share their language. Along with culture shock they experienced the loss of rich oral traditions. In the past the art of telling stories, singing songs and exchanging jokes with neighbors provided vehicles for fantasy and outlets for social criticism. Now new definitions were necessary to explain their changed status as a classless body of society and give blacks a sense of worth. Out of this urban chaos various ethnic folk arts began to emerge and overlap. For example, Negroes learned the jig and step dance from their Irish neighbors which they soon incorporated into their own slide and shuffle. In an attempt to meet the needs of the new community, popular entertainments emerged.

Cheap books appeared first. These presented larger-than-life rough-hewn folk heroes, like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and Mike Fink, the quintessence of frontier culture and down-home lore. Oh, the other heroes were there, carved with a more delicate hand than were those that wielded an ax. James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving and Herman Melville created romantic, refined, often effeminate men, aristocrats of the European mold contrasting sharply with the unwashed supermen of folk culture. It became obvious that popular literature and formal literature each addressed a different kind of American. However written literature could not salve the psyche of the underprivileged

masses, most of whom were illiterate. Consequently other media forms attempted to address their needs by turning to regional folk culture and informal idiom, challenging the upper class who dreamed of a national European identity.

"Daddy" Rice as Jim Crow. English copperplate engraving after original American lithograph. Ca. 1830.

Stage entertainment grew more slowly than literature. There had never been an American theatre. The minstrel show was the most important art form to develop from the fragmented demands of the lower class. Common folk flocked to theaters because the new stage entertainments were cheap, but more important, they resembled the verbal art of

rural communities. Led by P. T. Barnum, entertainment entrepreneurs sensed a financial opportunity in audiences that sought shows they could afford, understand and enjoy. Formal theatre was produced as well, but appealed only to the elite. After 1830, stage entertainment in America was dominated by popular taste rather than artistic elitism. Theaters catered to the masses with animal acts, freak shows, acrobats and circuses until the day when white entertainers applied burnt cork to their faces to do "imitations of Negro life."

Originally minstrelsy grew out of circus performances by white men who painted their faces with burnt cork. Legend has it (legend must be accepted because no historical records exist) that Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a blackface performer with a circus, observed a crippled stablehand dressed in ragged clothes who worked to a strange song punctuated by a peculiar dance step."Weel about and turn about and do jus so; Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow." Rice, a skillful performer, embellished what he saw and presented the lame man's routine onstage. The song and dance swept the nation and Europe. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Minstrelsy was here to stay (Toll 28).

Actually blackface performance was no more bizarre than the Bearded Lady or the Two-Headed Boy in a circus side show. Nonetheless blackface became phenomenally successful and a uniquely American institution lasting well into the 20th century. The folk-based songs, dances and humor were a favorite with the inhabitants of the White House; leading troupes performed there regularly. Critic Dean Howeels and novelist Mark Twain delighted in what Twain called "the pristine quality of the nigger shows," and applied the principles of black masking to their writing. A new national character was added to American history, the Black Man. But, where Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone and

Mike Fink were heroes, The Black Man, the outcast of society, was an anti-hero, a clown, comic relief, the butt of all jokes, a freak.

Although showmen in the 1840's, Rice and Daniel Decatur Emmett among them, claimed to mimic southern plantation Negroes, close study of minstrel material reveals almost no Negro influence in dance, music, dialect or even inspiration. The two principal character roles that emerge from this theatre, Jim Crow and Zip Coon (Jim Dandy), are clearly unrelated to any concept of the plantation Black Sambo stereotpe. Jim Crow bears an obvious identification to the backwoods, riverboat tradition of Davy Crockett and Mike Fink; Jim Dandy is the urban, dandified and almost effeminate reincarnation of Yankee Doodle in blackface. The white theatrical tradition used blacks to feed the white psyche and in the process created a counterfeit stage darkey who was more like the folk heroes of the Southwest in blackface.

What occurred on the minstrel stage reflected the era ushered in by Andrew Jackson in 1830, one marked by an unruly democratic spirit in which the elite ruling class were viewed with distrust and resentment by the masses who were spoiling for a fight. The issue of racism became enmeshed with political, class and gender issues. Following Jackson's presidential inauguration, an irate mob actually took possession of the White House for several days until being forcibly ejected. Riots and scuffles often took place within Northern theaters between the elite and the common folk. In short, popular culture, an expression of the raucous spirit of democracy, declared war on genteel culture. Theater audiences were diverse groups and various seating sections attracted different social and economic groups. Costly box seats offered prestige and privacy to the privileged, in attendance as much to be seen as to see. Down front in the pit below the stage sat the midding class who offered

loud and sometimes vulgar responses to the entertainments, and intermittently attended to the performance between contests involving the spittoon. The gallery was occupied by the lowest of low society, the Negroes and the rowdies. The latter weren't beyond pelting actors with missiles in response to unpopular material, and participating loudly in the performances with crude and demanding expressions. Often they caused a perfomer to change his routine midway in the performance.

When conflicts exploded into violence, aristocrats eagerly put aside upper class refinement to confront their social adversaries. These physical conflicts were generally instigated by the rowdies who resented the "arrogant" presence of British actors on American stages and the support given them by the upper class. The British presence was viewed as an insult to American nationalism. In 1849, Edmund Kean and Charles Macready, prominent British actors, had already been assaulted on stage with rotten eggs, vegetables and chairs, when open warfare occurred at the Astor Place Theater in New York where Macready was playing Hamlet. Across the street Edwin Forrest, an American tragedian, was performing the same role and battling his British counterpart for audiences. After some rowdy demonstrators were arrested, a brutal battle broke out, outside on the street and inside the Astor as well. Military troops called in to halt the bloody fighting were finally forced to fire on the mob, grown out of control. In the melee, 31 rioters and spectators were killed, and 150 people injured. The attitudes expressed in the riot were elemental to the struggle between aristocrats and the common people over defining the nation and its values. What is most significant is that the encounter broke on the ground of popular culture and exposed the gap between the two social classes in America. Not long after the Astor Place riot, class struggle was reflected in the productions offered

by the theaters hoping to maintain peace and their box office attendance: one night an opera or Shakespearean drama; the next night trained animals and novelty acts. Popular theatre had become politicized in the struggle for class and nation.[9]

At the crest of minstrelsy's popularity from 1846 to 1854, America staggered with political controversy. There was labor strife in the major Northern cities; debates over the continuation of slavery; the Women's Rights Conference at Seneca Falls, New York; the Astor Place Theater riot; and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Stephen Foster's *Plantation Melodies* embraced all these conflicts suggesting that white America would rather see old Black Joe hoeing cotton at his old Kentuck-y Home on the Swanee River than pounding the pavement up North. *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* a prelude to the Civil War, presented minstrelized politics in crisis despite an abolitionist point of view. Uncle Tom was no more than a white man in blackface and in drag (Lott 8-9).

By the end of the Civil War the minstrel show had become a familiar form. Although the style of minstrelsy continually eddied after its beginnings in the 1830's, this is what it looked like at the peak of popularity. Curtains opened on a riotous musical number by white male actors[10] wearing burnt cork on their faces and facing the audience in a semicircle. When the center man, Mr. Interlocutor, issued the command, "Gentlemen, be seated," the performers scrambled for seats in an insane version of mucical chairs. That anyone should address such a ragtag

9 Read Nathan Huggins' final chapter in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) and Robert Toll's *Blacking Up*.

10 Females almost never performed in the minstrel shows of the antebellum period. All the female roles were performed by cross-dressed men.

group as "gentlemen," was a racist travesty. The overall stage effect was that of a wild party. The makeup was grotesque with huge red lips painted on black faces and wide white openings around the eyes. Costumes were oversize, ridiculous, and garish with wooly black wigs worn on the heads. Often Mr. Interlocutor alone remained in whiteface which served to emphasize the reality of the black/white relationship. As the minstrels sang and played, their bodies contorted grossly in oral, anal and genital exaggeration suggesting a defiance of all rules of decorum and physicality (Ostendorf 88). Elvis Presley's gyrating pelvis would have melded comfortably in the scene. All the actors played various country musical instruments including the banjo, fiddle, bone castanets and tambourine. The end men were identified by the instruments they played as Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones.

Immediately, the patter began. Mr. Interlocutor engaged the end men in dialogue that depended upon twists of meaning and crudeness falling on the pompous interlocutor.

"Say, Pomp, you nigger, where you get dat new hat?"

"Why, at de shop, ob course."

"What is de price ob such a hat as dat?"

"I don't know, nigga, I don't know—de shopkeeper warn't dar."[11]

Audiences learned from these exchanges that firemen wore red suspenders to hold up their pants; and that chickens crossed the road to get to the other side. Following the routine of malapropisms and conundrums, a variety of songs and dances about Southern Negroes in what passed as black wit was presented.

The show was in three parts. The second part, called the "olio,"

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11 Mel Watkins. *On The Real Side.* New York. 1994. 89-90.

featured novelty acts like "serious" sermons or "stump speeches" as they were called, laden with malapropisms and delivered in the exaggerated fashion of current political and religious rhetoric. One such bit ridicules an "expert" on phrenology, Samuel Morton, who wrote a book (*Crania Americana* 1839) that claimed the mental capacity of the races was determined by the size of the skull.

> On dis side ob me, you may obserb, I hab a cast ob de head ob gemmen ob colr; on de udder side, I hab a cast ob de head ob a common white feller……(Lott 77)

After the Civil War minstrelsy evidenced a shift from comedy to the grotesque. Racism now appeared to be occupied as much with sexuality as with political and racial issues. "Wench" acts hinted at a misogynistic element. The "wenches," beautiful women dressed in the height of fashion, flirted with audiences and their male dancing partners. It was difficult to believe they were illusions created by cross-dressed males. The female impersonators were important specialty acts drawing crowds, many of whom refused to believe that the titilating and fascinating creatures were not women (Tolls 140). The last part of the show was the grand finale consisting of a narrative skit, usually set in a pastoral South, with music, dance and burlesque (cream pies in the face), It ended in a "walkaround," a kind of strutting dance in pairs, not unlike the cakewalk. Fireworks punctuated the end of the show (Tolls 57).

Audiences had an ingrained image of the Negro that was both comic and pathetic. Therefore the stage black was childike. He was often tricked into idiotic and foolish schemes but, like a child, would innocently turn the tables on the bullies. The songs of the show darkey were vulgar, as were his stories and jokes. Lazy and slow, the only time he showed speed was in flight from work or ghosts. "Feets, don't fail me

now."[12] His enthusiasm for music and rhythmical movement, as unrestrained as his bodily appetites, was embellished by song and narrative. The stage Negro experienced ecstasy over chicken, pork, watermelon and gin, these more often that not purloined from the white master. Jim Crow or Zip Coon, the Negro stereotype, never deviated from these undisciplined appetites. The minstrel mix celebrated and exploited on stage that very black culture it attempted to repress. Consequently, an indulgence in pleasures forbidden by white cultural mores, was permitted onstage.[13] By the end of the Civil War the minstrel show was accepted in an elaborate form which lasted through the twentieth century.

The question arises regarding the unique popularity of black entertainment. Several reasons can be presented. After emancipation, whites feared a black insurrection. There had already been minor eruptions, like the Nat Turner revolt. Added to this, whites had always to maintain their own social superiority and racial esteem, possessed as they were with a deep-seated need to believe that blacks were their inferiors. To see the race that had served them in bondage, debased again onstage, assuaged the overwhelming guilt whites stifled for their participation in slavery. That they possessed no culture of their own was a constant reminder from Europeans who regarded Americans as common oddities.[14] Outcast as they were from the refinements of European society, white America needed reassurance that they were not

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12 This is the famous line of Stepin' Fetchit, a black actor in early films who epitomized the stereotypical slow-moving and frightened darkey.

13 Homi Bhabha writes at length about this cultural ambivalence in "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse." *Screen* 24. 6. 1983. 13-36.

14 Read, for example, Charles Dickens. *American Notes for General Circulation.* John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman eds. England, 1842. re. 1985.

human freaks. Since they could no longer participate in the dehumanizing practices perpetrated on slaves, minstrel audiences took reassurance from the stage creations of the emancipated darkey that he, rather than they, was the monstrous freak of American society.[15]

Modern critic Eric Lott goes farther with the daring premise that a lustful fascination with the black body, suppressed by the code of white society, could be exploited on stage as Love and Theft. Clearly it is difficult for a modern point of view, colored by Civil Rights awareness, to understand an age which believed in cultural inequality. Modern critics recognize nothing in blackface shows except racism. Minstrelsy presented onstage that which Americans most feared, the intermingling of the races. By blacking up their faces with burnt cork, white minstrel men assumed the mask of black culture, creating in parody what was in actuality repressed, crossracial desire, less a sign of white power than of anxiety, fear and pleasure. In effect they drew the role and designated the space which they wanted blacks to occcupy in white America to "keep them in their place." In reality the black existed as a symbolic substitute for the bloody and phallic whip of the white plantation master. The white imitation fell short of the mark because it existed solely in the white imagination (Tolls 28).

White minstrels weren't the first to appropriate caricature in America. On the other side of the color line African Americans learned long before 1830 to improvise and make themselves into the white-drawn minstrel figure as a survival technique. To keep "massa" in a good humor guaranteed their safety, which is why they complied with the

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15 Leslie Fiedler. *Freaks, Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. New York: Doubleday, 1978, reprinted 1993, p. 31.

foolishness. The language native to America was appropriated out of necessity and adapted to their needs until, by 1800, dialect, music, songs and dances were neither African nor Anglo-Saxon, but an acculturation of the oppressor's European traditions. White dances which slaves observed at plantation balls were unnaturally stiff compared with the free moving dance of blacks. So they caricatured what they saw in the plantation "great house." Eventually this caricature, borrowed back by the white minstrels, became known as the Cakewalk, a fad dance which swept both parts of the Atlantic and was generally acknowledged as a "darkey" dance. Despite the cruelty of black appropriation, minstrels gradually transfused black music, song, dance, jokes, idiom and story-telling into mainstream American poular culture.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the childlike qualities in the blacks amused white men, particularly the supernatural and religious fervor of Negro life. Furthermore, they allied the dark color of their black brother's skin with evil and something demonic in western culture. Exposing the black man's "weaknesses" became a kind of witch hunt in antebellum America. In 1839 the British actress, Frances Anne Kemble wrote these deprecating remarks following her first encounter with African Americans. She compiled the *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation* while on tour in the colonies. On one occasion Kemble was a passenger on a river boat manned by black slaves who rowed the boat to the rhythm of their songs. She wrote,

> The only exception that I have met with yet among our boat voices to the high tenor which they all seem to possess is in the person of an individual named Isaac, a basso profundo of the deepest dye, who nevertheless never attempts to produce with his different register...

> but sings like the rest in unison. By the by, this individual does speak, and therefore I presume he is not an ape, orangoutang, chimpanzee, or gorilla; but I could not, I confess, have conceived it possible that the presence of articulate sounds, and the absence of an articulate tail, should make, externally at least, so completely the only appreciable difference between a man and a monkey, as they appear to do in this individual 'black brother.' Such stupendous long thin hands, and long flat feet, I never did see off a large quadruped of the ape species.
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> But, as I said before, (the black boatman) lsaac speaks, and I am much comforted thereby.[16]

Kemble was not alone in her conception of the black man as a savage beast she found both fascinating and dreadful. Edward Long, a Jamaican planter, remarked,"When we reflect on the nature of these men, and their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind, must we not conclude that they are of a different species *(History of Jamaica)*?" Later, a governor of Martinique wrote, "I have reached the stage of believing firmly that one must treat the Negroes as one treats beasts." The nineteenth century was an era of brutality, bad manners and little respect for the rights of man, black or white. Negroes were placed in the position of fighting for their humanity, forced into proving themselves to themselves and to the entire world.

What made minstrelsy work was not only racism, but also a reaction against the Protestant work ethic, and against the Victorian

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16 Leroi Jones, *Blues People*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963, p. 2-3, citing Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation* in 1838-1839. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961, p. 260.

guilt complex, fortified by the strength of individualism. That Twain and others of the elite preferred minstrel shows to grand opera characterizes a rejection of European cultural pretense. In minstrelsy Americans could be as uncivilized as they pleased, and blame it on the black scapegoats."The devil made me do it."[17] Minstrelsy also served a critical function addressed to important social and psychological values, and routing their messages implicitly to a receptive audience. By lampooning the upper class, blackface actors established the dignity of the white common man. The creation of ridiculous Negro characters assured audiences that, desipte their own condition, others were worse off than they. Without threats or insults minstrels satisfied audiences' need for information on modern living and relationships. Broad jokes about such issues as women's rights made the problems of urban living less frightening by permitting people to laugh at them. Sentimental musical ditties provided emotional release while reaffirming traditional values. The patriotism of minstrel shows gave all citizens a sense of national pride.

Most important, minstrelsy comforted white America about race at a time when this issue was critical. Citizens looked upon race as fulfillment of the American ideology. If Negroes were to share in the bounties of America, minstrels suggested, they needed to be cared for by whites. To affirm this notion, minstrels presented blacks as inept, childlike and contented down on the Swanee. The minstrel plantation idyll romanticized a time when society was happy and secure within the bonds of a "loving family" structure. Minstrels also succeeded in revitalizing American popular culture with a transfusion of black culture for the

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17 Flip Wilson's standard excuse for "Geraldine's" lapses of etiquette, a standup comedy routine lampooning the white stereotype minstrel mask.

first time in history. After the Civil War, when Negroes themselves entered the stage set so deliberately by white minstrels, black performers began to modify the plantation caricatures, and attracted large black audiences to American popular entertainments.

The first attraction of blacks to minstrelsy was economic. When upward mobility was withheld from them in the ordinary workforce, they moved into the only door open to them, the stage door. Ironically they had to black their already black faces to play themselves. Audiences did not want to see authentic blacks. They wanted Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Tambo and Bones. Once P. T. Barnum sought a white blackface minstrel, but found only a black boy who could sing and dance well. Barnum dressed him in minstrel clothes complete with wig and facial makeup so he could pass onstage as a make-believe black, lest an angry audience drive him from the stage because of his authenticity. Many blacks submitted to the humlilating mask because it was the only way for them to penetrate the white marketplace.

Nonetheless the black minstrel faced competition from the white minstrels and the white audiences whom he had to beat at their own game. As a black in the white man's world he wore the survival mask thrust on the plantation slave, that of the shuffling, stupid Black Sambo. Onstage he donned another mask, that of the stage darkey created by the minstrels. Atop this he wore his own trickster mask which clearly said, "I'll beat you at your racist game, white man." Despite the weight of racism and strengthened by his own tradition rich in the rituals of insults and one-upsmanship (signifying), he outmaneuvered his opponents. Some black minstrels so absurdly and grotesquely exaggerated the minstrel characteristics, that they unwittingly set the stage for surrealism, the birthing room of modern Black minstrel, Ishmael Reed, whose *Flight to*

Canada signifies brilliantly on American slavery.[18] Billy Kersand dancing and singing with three billiard balls in his mouth told his 19th century competitors that, as an "authentic black," he wrote the book on grotesqueness. His hat trick of billiard balls asserted artistic superiority by subtly employing a double conscious awareness with a poker face.

The irony is that the game designed to "keep niggers in their place," opened them up to advancement. The black minstrels perfected, enlarged and popularized the body of all previous popular culture forms —burlesque, standup comedy, ragtime and blues, surrealist nonsense, coon songs and minstrel tunes—building an inheritance which became the foundation for jazz. There is a behavioral inheritance as well. Minstrel shows honed the talent of improvisation, the mainstay as well of the commedia dell'arte. As in the Italian counterpart, anything is acceptable so long as it keeps the audience entertained. What began in America as the imitation dance step, Jim Crow, became the tagline for racism. Minstrelsy was a carnival of black American culture, adapted to the white vernacular of disrespect thumbing its nose at European conventions and propriety, a regular circus of black culture (Ostendorf 79-90). By the end of the 19th century, minstrelsy became a signifying counter culture soothing the cruel cuts of white racism.

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18 See Ishmael Reed. *Flight To Canada.* New York: Macmillan. 1989.

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