

White Skins, Black Masks: Minstrelsy and White Working Class Formation before the Civil War

Mechanics Hall, New York City home to the celebrated Christy Minstrels, described in its name the social group that most influenced blackface entertainment's form and content. In other cities Mechanics Halls likewise hosted minstrel troupes.¹ Of the giants of the early minstrel stage, Billy Whitlock was a typesetter before blacking up and indeed set type by day and performed by night in the 1830s. Dan Emmett, composer of 'Dixie' and an early minstrel megastar, apprenticed as a printer. Thomas Dartmouth (Daddy) Rice, the first minstrel dancer to 'jump Jim Crow' on stage, had apprenticed as a woodworker.² Michael Hawkins, the composer of 'Back Side Albany', arguably the first important minstrel song, had trained as a coachmaker.³

However, to say that minstrel music was mechanics' music is to do more than illustrate the tendency for many of its leading lights to have been artisans or even to note that in many ways minstrelsy was itself a craft.⁴ It is likewise to do more than to observe that the placement of theaters, the structure of pricing, the connections between minstrelsy and volunteer firemen, and the complaints of the elite suggest that urban common people were filling minstrel audiences.⁵ It is to argue that the *content* of blackface performances identifies their particular appeals as expressions of the longings and fears and the hopes and prejudices of the Northern Jacksonian urban working class, especially the artisanate.⁶

In creating a new sense of whiteness by creating a new sense of blackness, minstrel entertainers fashioned a theater in which the rough, the

respectable and the rebellious among craft workers could together find solace and even joy. By so doing, the minstrel stage became a truly popular form of entertainment able to attract the immigrants, 'b'hoys' and unskilled of the city while also making special appeals to those in the West and some in the respectable middle classes and above. Minstrelsy was featured at President John Tyler's inauguration, and in performances before Queen Victoria. Abraham Lincoln stole away from the pressures of duty during the Civil War to see blackface shows.⁷ But the energy and complexity of the minstrel stage came largely from below, and specifically from the uses of racial disguise not only to mask tensions between classes but also to mask tensions within the working class.

The blackface whiteness that delighted and unified the increasingly wage-earning urban masses was empty of positive content. If languages of class hinged on the quite vague definition of white workers as 'not slaves', the hugely popular cult of blackface likewise developed by counterpoint. Whatever his attraction, the performers and audience knew that they were *not* the Black dandy personified by Zip Coon. Nor were they the sentimentalized and appealing preindustrial slave Jim Crow. Blackface could be everything – rowdy, rebellious and respectable – because it could be denied that it was anything.

Blackfaced Whiteness: Roughness and Respectability

Lewis Erenberg has described the appeal of post-Civil War 'coon songs' as deriving from their ability to project onto Blacks values and actions that aroused both fear and fascination among whites. Such actions, he argues, could thus be 'experienced and condemned at the same time.'⁸ This analysis also works well in considering antebellum minstrelsy, especially when combined with George Lipsitz's insight that 'the minstrel show "Negro" presented white society with a representation of the natural self at odds with the normative self of industrial culture.'⁹ Minstrelsy's genius was then to be able to both display and reject the 'natural self', to be able to take on blackness convincingly and to take off blackness convincingly.

In no sense was the racial masking on stage simple. Minstrel entertainers both claimed to be pupils, or even kin, of the Blacks they mocked and as passionately made clear that they were white. Although scholars sharply debate the extent to which antebellum minstrel songs actually drew on African-American music, it is clear that early minstrels delighted in claiming to be a 'student of the negro' and therefore 'authentic' per-

formers.¹⁰ Audiences were occasionally addressed as 'my broder [brother] niggers', and one inventive parody of Shakespearean characters was titled 'Black and White Niggers'.¹¹ In a few instances there seems to have been genuine confusion among viewers as to the racial identity of blackface performers, and on at least one occasion a church agreed to let a troupe perform only on the condition that they not come as Blacks.¹² Minstrelsy did not steal Black material stealthily. It did so brazenly, acknowledging and emphasizing its Black roots, insisting, for example, on the banjo's African origins.¹³

Nor was Black music necessarily seen as quaint and primitive in its appeal. As Du Bois observed, in his chapter on the 'Sorrow Songs' in *Souls of Black Folk*, 'away back in the [1830s] the melody of these slave songs stirred the nation.' Walt Whitman found Negro dialect music, which he considered slave-connected, the basis for a national 'grand opera', while the composer John Philip Sousa compared the music of America's cotton fields to the works of great European composers.¹⁴

At the same time, blackface minstrels were the first self-consciously *white* entertainers in the world. The simple physical disguise – and elaborate cultural disguise – of blacking up served to emphasize that those on stage were really white and that whiteness really mattered. One minstrel pioneer won fame by being able to change from black to white and back in seconds. Playbills continually featured paired pictures of the performers in blackface and without makeup – rough and respectable, black and white. One showed the troupe 'As Plantation Darkeys' and, significantly, 'As Citizens'. Novelty whiteface acts such as the Four White Negroes or the Albino Minstrels emphasized the importance of color.¹⁵ Songs repeatedly reminded the audience of its own whiteness by beginning 'Now, white folks ...'¹⁶ Minstrels sentimentally highlighted their positions as 'the whitest of white folks' in verses like:

There is not a man in the whole Minstrel Band,
Who would ever go back on a friend;
Tho' dark be his face, yet the black can't efface
The kind deeds which through life him attend.¹⁷

Snappy jokes carried the point less laboriously, with performers proclaiming that they were 'like widows' in that they wore black only for a short time.¹⁸

The importance of a common whiteness under the blackface gave the minstrel stage the ability to foster astonishing ethnic diversity even during periods of anti-immigrant hysteria. As the African-American choreographer Leni Sloan has noted, many Irish immigrants performed brilliantly

beneath black makeup.¹⁹ Songs of Ireland, including Irish nationalist songs, took their places alongside Tyrolean warbling, yodelling, and Italian and Bohemian opera.²⁰ Among the many featured polkas were the 'African Polka' and one named for Jim Crow.²¹ Songs of the western United States mixed with chorale harmonizing influenced by the abolitionist Hutchinson Family singers.²²

This extreme cultural pluralism was at the same time a liquidation of ethnic and regional cultures into blackface and, ultimately, into a largely empty whiteness. Alan W.C. Green's study of minstrelsy argues that 'as various other types – particularly the Irishman and German – fused with native-born Americans, the Negro moved into a solo spot centerstage, providing a relational model in contrast to which masses of Americans could establish a positive and superior sense of identity.' Superior certainly, but it is difficult to see how the identity was positive, given that it was established by an infinitely manipulable negation comparing whites with a construct of a socially defenseless group. Like the doomed master in Hegel's celebrated essay 'Lordship and Bondage', blackfaced whites derived their consciousness by measuring themselves against a group they defined as largely worthless and ineffectual. Indeed, as Green himself shows, the trajectory of minstrelsy was to create an ersatz whiteness and then to succumb to a mere emphasis on the 'vulgarity, grotesqueness and stupidity' of the black characters it created.²³

Blackface whiteness was not without its ethnic tensions, stereotypes and contradictions. Irish drinking and 'thickness' drew mockery from the minstrels, as did German speech. Ethnic types were recognizable under blackface. European music was burlesqued even as it was played. Some minstrel songsters end the blackface at a certain point and turn to mockeries of the Irish or even of rural whites. But in the main, all whites could easily participate in minstrelsy's central joke, the point of which remained a common, respectable and increasingly smug whiteness under the makeup.²⁴

Just as the minstrel stage held out the possibility that whites could be 'black' for awhile but nonetheless white, it offered the possibilities that, via blackface, preindustrial joys could survive amidst industrial discipline. Even the 'rough' culture of young, rowdy traditionalist artisans and unskilled workers could lie down with the 'respectable' norms of striving, upwardly mobile skilled workers.

To black up was an act of wildness in the antebellum US. Psychoanalytically, the smearing of soot or blacking over the body represents the height of polymorphous perversity, an infantile playing with excrement or dirt. It is the polar opposite of the anal retentiveness usually

associated with accumulating capitalist and Protestant cultures. Painting oneself hearkened back to traditional popular celebrations and to paint oneself as a Black person, given American realities at the time, was to throw reason to the winds. It is no accident that the early minstrel show was sometimes called a 'nigger festival'.²⁵

But performers on the minstrel stage were also often said to have been in the 'Negro business'.²⁶ The irrational bacchanalian act of blacking up was, as Melville makes clear at the beginning of *The Confidence-Man*, also an enterprise and even a scam.²⁷ The substantial salaries of minstrel entertainers engaged popular attention, as did the tendency of some highly successful performers and promoters (including P.T. Barnum) to do blackface for a time as prelude to fame and fortune elsewhere.²⁸ In a real sense, then, rubbing on blacking was an accumulating capitalist behavior. It may stretch a point to note that one of the first great minstrel hits bore the title 'Analisation',²⁹ but minstrels certainly did claim respectability off stage and did draw attention to the relationship between racial disguise and making money. 'Why is we niggas like a slave ship on de Coast of Africa?' one joke asked. 'Because', came the reply, 'we both make money by taking off the negroes.'³⁰

Similarly assuaged was the tension between a longing for a rural past and the need to adapt to the urban present. The blackface wore rather thin when, for example, Irish minstrels sang laments by 'slaves' involuntarily removed from home and family. Other immigrants, migrants from rural to urban areas in the United States and migrants to the frontier, could likewise identify with the sentiments in 'Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny' or 'Dixie'.³¹ So could almost any American involved in what Alexander Saxton has called the nation's 'endless outward journey' of expansion. Minstrelsy likewise idealized the preindustrial pastimes familiar to its white and often formerly rural audience. Hunting, especially of coons and possums, was a recurring delight during blackface performances, which also featured the joys of crabbing, eel catching, eating yellow corn, fishing and contact with animals not about to be killed. 'Niggas', one song had it, 'live on clover'.³²

But the identification with tradition and with preindustrial joy could never be complete. It was, after all, 'niggers' who personified and longed for the past. Contradictions abounded. Even as they deplored American rootlessness, minstrels solidly supported American expansion. They strongly backed conquering Mexican areas occupied by 'yellow skins', for example.³³ Shows commonly switched abruptly from blackface paeans to pastoral life to having the entertainers perform, oddly enough, extended imitations of train sounds. Some minstrel venues even came to feature

mechanized blackface automatons.³⁴ A mythical Black South came to fill the role of an imagined haven standing against the deadening aspects of progress for popular Northern minstrel audiences, just as did a romanticized white South for the more solidly middle class readers of cavalier fiction. But the distance from full identification with those seen as resisting progress was greater on the minstrel stage because of their blackness.³⁵

Most tellingly, lyrics in antebellum minstrel songs generally did not reflect the real success of Southern slaves at keeping preindustrial rhythms of work – indeed at uniting song and labor and using the former to pace the latter.³⁶ Instead, they assumed that the slave, except when ‘given’ a holiday by the master, worked all day in a manner not only hard but disciplined. The famous ‘A Nigger’s Life Is Always Gay’ held that its title character ‘work in field till set ob sun,/And den his work am always done.’³⁷ The songs seldom treated any preindustrial resistance to work, though they were perhaps somewhat more ready to broach the subject when discussing behavior clearly imputed to white workers than to slaves. Thus, the blackface ‘History of the World’, as distinctive as it was fanciful, revealed:

De world was made in six days, and finished on de seventh
Kord in to de contract, it should a bin de lebenth
But de carpenters got drunk, and de masons couldn’t work,
So de cheapest way to do it was to fill it in with dirt.³⁸

Similarly, although blackface provided a mask behind which erotic longings could find expression, the break from the repressiveness of early Victorian America was far from complete. Not only did the racial form of the shows make it uncertain how far the audience was meant to empathize with – and how far it was meant to recoil from – the sexual freedoms portrayed, but the content of the shows also often bowed far in the direction of respectability and sentimentality.

Minstrelsy was a way for men to carouse after work in largely sexually segregated audiences. The theater’s ‘pits’ were especially male preserves. Minstrelsy’s popularity reflected the challenges to traditional plebeian concepts of maleness in the face of the declining household economy, of revivalist and reformist sexual purity drives, of the increase of women’s paid labor, and of the rising uncertainty of ever attaining economic independence. For a young, single male to go out with the boys to see a minstrel show on a Saturday night meant foregoing courting that night.³⁹ It may have reflected the worries found in some minstrel shows over the expense of courtship or a fear of what Christine Stansell has called the ‘expansive heterosexuality’ between increasingly assertive single working

women, living outside of households, and ‘b’hoys’ of antebellum cities. Stansell mentions a ‘masculinism’ that placed ‘women on the sidelines’ as a brake on heterosexual mingling. In minstrel theaters, women were usually not even on the sidelines. Given all this, as well as the antebellum cultural expectation that males would be sexually aggressive, the minstrel crowd seems to have combined hormones and anxiety in proportions conducive to appreciating entertainment based on sex and violence.⁴⁰

The shows would not have wholly disappointed those seeking titillation. They of course transcended the bonds of decorum set by revivalists and propriety reformers, not to mention the male artisan-based Graham Society, whose devotees ate bland food to curb the flow of sexual juices and harness their energies for productive purposes.⁴¹ Minstrelsy contained its full share of sexual puns, including homoerotic ones. It included very considerable transvestism – with troupes being almost universally all-male and with early minstrel stars gaining fame for ‘looking the wench’. The content of the shows called gender identity into further question, as in the conundrum ‘If a woman changes her sex what religion would she be?’ – a line to which an end-man answered, ‘A he-then.’ Mild sexual bragging and references to promiscuity ran through songs of ‘dandy coons’ and ‘lubly gals’. Some tunes, such as ‘The Nigger Wench Fight’, gloried in immorality: ‘When de whites dey do go to bed,/The devil is working in de nigger’s head.’ A few were sexually graphic, such as ‘Juliana Phebiana Constantiana Brown’, whose title was paired in the chorus with ‘Den up and down my darkies, oh! gently up and down.’ On balance, songs showing promiscuous Black women were probably more popular than those emphasizing the sexuality of Black men, with the fairly ribald ‘wench’ song ‘Lucy Long’ being among the most performed antebellum minstrel tunes.⁴²

But surviving antebellum minstrel lyrics and jokes certainly did not rival the sexuality and erotic punning in the works of contemporary literature by Melville or in the pulp fiction of the immensely popular George Lippard. Indeed, minstrelsy was probably not as sexually charged as most abolitionist writing.⁴³ Most blackface contact between men and women occurred in happy, but decorous, love songs or in sentimental laments for loves lost. The violent and sexually menacing black male of the post-Civil War ‘coon song’ is largely absent from early minstrelsy.⁴⁴

As the music historian Robert Winans⁴⁵ has remarked, antebellum minstrelsy provided at best a short ‘respite’ from the prevailing sentimentality of the period. Marian Mair’s comments on ‘black’ sexuality in British blackface shows of the 1850s in the main apply equally well to the United States. Such sexuality, she argues, was ‘over-enthusiastic, undig-

nified and misguided but ultimately safe.⁴⁵ When it was not safe, as when the Temple of Muses theater in New York City brought in minstrels who were actually female and 'indecent' to boot, 'a furious melee developed between offended customers and offending [performers].'⁴⁶

The sexual tameness of the minstrel stage resulted in part from its accommodation of both the roughness and the respectability within male working class culture. The pre-Civil War 'coon song' guides for amateur minstrels so stressed decorum and cleanliness that they left little doubt that many who appreciated the shows wished to be respectable.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the limited sexual adventuresomeness of antebellum minstrels also derived in part from the fact that their audiences were sufficiently close to a preindustrial past to long for a range of broadly *erotic* pleasures – such as laughter, unfettered movement and contact with nature – rather than narrowly defined *sexual* fulfillment. But in blackface it was easy for erotic desire to find its way into becoming what bourgeois culture tended to make it – first, mere sentimentalism and, later, sentiment plus mere carnality.⁴⁸

The desires animating the minstrel stage – however much they were originally more playfully erotic than nakedly pornographic – could find full expression only beneath a racial disguise. That disguise homogenized cultural oppositions so facily that it could express the ethos of both respectable and rowdy working class culture at once, or perhaps so facily that it could fully express the ethos of neither. A marvelous description of a minstrel performance from the *London Illustrated News* caught the power and limits of blackface whiteness perfectly in this connection:

Yet out of all of this nonsense, ... there somehow arises a humanizing influence which gives an innocent recreation a positive philanthropic sentiment. This sentiment connects itself with them as a colored troupe. With white face the whole affair would be intolerable. It is the ebony that gives the due and needful color to the monstrosities [and] the breaches of decorum.⁴⁹

Militant Minstrels? The Fate of Oppositional Culture in Blackface

Some intriguing recent studies have focused less on the issue of whether the early minstrel show was rowdy or respectable and more on the extent to which it was a *rebellious* cultural form that subverted class and even racial hierarchies. Sean Wilentz has found minstrelsy in the capital of blackface, New York City, to have expressed plebeian, even working class, culture. But he cautions against seeing only white supremacy as the

message of blackface. 'The shows', Wilentz has written, 'took racism for granted. As the form developed, the real object of scorn ... was less Jim Crow than the would-be aristo[crat] – either the white interlocutor or the dandified black.' Wilentz further suggests that minstrelsy historically moved from anti-Black caricature to subtle class criticism, describing the turn 'from racist humor to mocking the arrogance, imitativeness and dim-wittedness of the upper class in "permissible" ways.' Wilentz concludes that the blackface stage produced social criticism in the atmosphere of a 'kind of carnival' – an image used by nineteenth-century observers and one picked up by modern historians of blacking up to point out the ways in which blackface humor had the same tendency to level social distinctions and to deflate social pretensions that Mikhail Bakhtin so brilliantly described in precapitalist carnivals.⁵⁰

Wilentz's analysis suffers from the obvious drawback that it is difficult to identify a time when minstrel entertainments moved away from 'racist humor'. Most scholars have in fact found that blackface stereotyping became more crude and vicious between 1830 and 1900.⁵¹ Another line of argument, most clearly developed by William F. Stowe and David Grimsted, attempts to circumvent this objection. Stowe and Grimsted contend that blackface entertainments, though they reflected the racist culture from which they grew, subverted *both* racism and social hierarchies among whites. Minstrelsy thus featured 'complexity in comic portrayal' of Blacks and 'questioned, teased and contradicted, as well as confirmed' white supremacist attitudes. Moreover, according to Stowe and Grimsted, the black mask helped allow 'deep expressions of emotions of loss and longing, as well as ridicule of social and intellectual platitudes and the discrepancies between American dreams and American realities' *among whites*.⁵²

The cases made by Wilentz and by Stowe and Grimsted for viewing minstrelsy as a kind of oppositional, contestatory culture ultimately fail, but in such a broadly revealing way as to make this brief excursion into historiography worthwhile. Both approaches stand out because they rightly acknowledge that blackface entertainment was not merely about race relations but also about social relations among whites. Both interpretations fail in large part because they depend on the assumption that the racial content and the class content of minstrelsy can be neatly separated. Wilentz takes this position straightforwardly in arguing for a 'turn' away from humor based on race. Stowe and Grimsted reproduce this illusion at another level. When arguing that racism was subverted by the variety of images of minstrel entertainers – the beautiful, graceful, the ignorant, the savvy, the lonely, the wronged and the villain – they put aside the extent

to which audiences knew that these were white entertainers, playing thinly blacked-up white stock characters. When arguing that blackface was a slight veneer providing the 'distance' necessary to do effective social satire, they minimize the extent to which the mask seemed real to the audience and subverted the social criticism being expressed.⁵³

Any rounded analysis of the minstrel mask would have to admit and even emphasize considerable ambiguity, including the presence of subtexts and the simultaneous identification with, and repulsion from, the blackfaced character. But if there is reason to suspect that the identification mitigated the repulsion toward the stage character in blackface, there is little evidence that it mitigated white hostility toward real Blacks. Just as calling oneself a white slave did not necessarily imply sympathy with the Black slave, watching comedians in blackface did not imply solidarity with Black Americans. And blackface-on-Black violence suggests that just the opposite logic – one of hatred toward the object of desire – could prevail.

Amidst great complexity, two facts about the racial politics of the minstrel stage before 1870 stand out. First, with very minor exceptions coming mainly in the realm of dance, white entertainers never crossed the color line on stage.⁵⁴ Second, blackface performances tended to support proslavery and white supremacist politics. Certainly some songs evoked the horrors of slavery, especially of being sold and taken away from home. But countless others painted a paternal plantation and contented slaves. What varied far less was that when political chips were down, minstrelsy could speak directly for specific anti-Black policies in a way that it could not for egalitarian ones. Minstrels ridiculed 'bobolashun', joined Southern expansionist elements in supporting the war against Mexico, argued that escaped slaves wanted to go back to slavery, and dismissed British anti-slavery appeals by observing, 'They had better look at home, to their own white slaves.'⁵⁵ When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* proved an antislavery popular success, minstrels replied with proslavery versions, featuring tunes like 'Happy Are We, Darkies So Gay', and performances by such major stars as T.D. Rice.⁵⁶ The Civil War brought an outpouring of minstrelsy, most of whose political content was given over to attacking emancipation, the use of Blacks as troops, taxation to pay for Freedmen's Bureau activities, Black civil rights, and alleged favoritism toward 'the nigger'.⁵⁷

All these specifically reactionary racial references should not surprise us. They took place within the context of a form that implicitly rested on the idea that Black culture and Black people existed only insofar as they were edifying for whites and that claims to 'authentic' blackness could be put on and washed off at will. Thus it was possible to sing heart-rending

songs of slave children sold away from their parents and to draw no, or even proslavery, political conclusions. As Alexander Saxton has written:

The ideological impact of minstrelsy was programmed by its conventional black-face form. There is no possibility of escaping this relationship because the greater the interest, talent, complexity and humanity embodied in its content, the more irresistible was the racist message of its form.⁵⁸

When we turn to discussing whether minstrelsy, whatever its racism, was nonetheless a form of oppositional culture *among whites*, we cannot entirely put its anti-Black form and proslavery content aside. After all, race and slavery were tremendously important antebellum political issues and were the ones to which minstrelsy spoke most consistently. In the minstrel mecca of New York City, it should be added, the proslavery cultural politics of the minstrel stage was not in opposition to, but in rough congruence with, the stance taken by the city's mercantile elite.⁵⁹

Moreover, the racial logic of minstrelsy was replicated in framing discussions of the second most commonly addressed issue, women's rights. Minstrels claimed the right to turn Black for as long as they desired and to reappear as white. They forcefully denied Blacks that right, parodying fancy dress, 'l'arned' speech, temperance and religion among Blacks as ridiculous attempts to 'act white'. Mockeries of Black political activity and claims to civil rights sometimes literally turned on the impossible vision of activist Blacks wishing to turn literally white.⁶⁰ Similarly, minstrels claimed the right to be female for as long as they liked and then to reappear as male. But they necessarily denied women the same right to cross gender boundaries. Blacked-up whites appeared in drag on stages where 'bloomerism' – the wearing of trousers by women – was, Robert Toll argues, 'the minstrels' greatest concern'. The standard minstrel 'Women's Rights Lectures' denounced political rights for women, but a more immediate fear was that white male control over masks and symbols might be breached by 'Bloomerizical' women:

When women's rights is stirred a bit
De first reform she bitches on
Is how she can wid least delay
Just draw a pair ob britches on.⁶¹

In addressing divisions among white males, blackface entertainers did not speak to any political question with the regularity with which they addressed racial and gender issues. They sometimes did take strong populist stances, as in 'Dat Gits Ahead of Me', which asks

How is it banks suspend and break
and cause such awful times?
The [bank] President's allowed to take
And pocket all the dimes.⁶¹

Similar scattered protests against politicians generally, profiteering merchants, sexually predatory gentlemen, taxes, corruption and hypocritical, fashion-conscious religion found a voice. However, the shows seldom spoke even obliquely to conflicts between labor and capital, though after the Civil War siding with 'the poor' against 'the rich' and even against 'blood-sucking, thieving employers' found some expression.⁶³

By far the most common rebellious feature of antebellum minstrelsy was a partly cultural and partly political air of defiance toward authorities, snobs and condescending moralists. The extent to which this stance, or posture, was compromised by its blackface form has already been discussed in considering the rowdiness and respectability of the minstrel stage. Worth adding here is that, although white leaders of organized religion did have some reason for their dislike of minstrels, most satire of authority figures was doubly distanced from 'seriousness' by race.⁶⁴ The ridiculous and comically named politician, preacher or temperance advocate was of course in blackface. Beyond that convention, the minstrel stage offered a choice as to whether the character would speak in a 'Black' accent – that is, in an extravagant dialect – or in an 'American' or immigrant accent, indicating that he was on some level white. The moralist or politician of the minstrel stage generally had his blackface identity reinforced by his being 'Brudder Bones' or 'Jacobus Snowball' and by his outlandish speech, which was capable of describing Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden with 'so de Lor' catch 'em boff and he throw dem over de fence, an' he tole 'em, "Go work for your libin!"⁶⁵ Stowe and Grimsted have commented that the 'distance' provided by blackface made for social and cultural criticism able to present 'truths ... which would have been profoundly troubling or socially dangerous if presented or taken in serious form.' Sometimes the distancing was very elaborate indeed.⁶⁶

The huge numbers of blackface 'hashes' of Shakespeare present the issue of cultural rebellion in great complexity and sharp relief. These parodies have been portrayed as egalitarian attacks on pretentious, elitist and European culture, much like the burlesques of opera by 'niggeretto' songs.⁶⁷ However, as Lawrence Levine has shown, Shakespeare was a *mass* favorite in the early nineteenth century, and the idea that his plays were 'high culture' developed only slowly and unevenly.⁶⁸ The role of minstrelsy in the development of a split between high and low culture remains to be studied, with the questions of race and the treatment of Shakespeare

being central. The very fact of parody implied a certain familiarity with the originals, and just as certainly, as one cultural historian has written, Shakespeare 'could take such ribbing.' The parodies often did display a decidedly anarchical spirit and, as in the story of Hamlet and Egglest, considerable inventiveness.⁶⁹

But they were also highly racialized and featured extremely thick 'Black' accents. *Othello* predictably presented particular opportunities to place sexuality, violence and high art within the nonthreatening confines of sentiment and of a hyper-emphasized blackface mask. As the Black American actor Ira Aldridge gained fame for his performances of *Othello* in exile, blacked-up performers in the US sometimes 'jumped Jim Crow' after doing the play. One plot summary referred to 'thick-lip Othello, that magur-faced fellow.' His tragic romantic affair with Desdemona – focused squarely enough on race in the original – was transformed, minstrel-style: 'He didn't lub her very long bekase she wasn't yaller.' A conundrum pointed out that Desdemona was 'like a ship ... when she was Moored.'⁷⁰ Who was humbled? Cultural snobs? Black Americans? Or the popular masses themselves, who were heirs to a far richer tradition of appreciating both the humor and the artistry of Shakespeare? The questions admit more than one answer.

Minstrelsy made a contribution to a sense of popular whiteness among workers across lines of ethnicity, religion and skill. It achieved a common symbolic language – a unity – that could not be realized by racist crowds, by political parties or by labor unions. Blackface whiteness meant respectable rowdiness and safe rebellion. It powerfully addressed the broadest tensions generated by the creation of the first American working class. By and large, it did so by racializing conflict more than by directly articulating class grievances. The 'Knights of the Burnt Cork' were far more compelling when they attacked aristocrats than employers and were still more so when they attacked Blacks. Calvin C. Hernton's comment that 'the racist visits his own essence upon the Negro – but it is not a way that leads out', applies in a sad and double sense to antebellum minstrelsy, which 'led out' neither to antiracism nor to a tenable assertiveness among white workers.⁷¹ To ask whether it might have been different is surely to run the risk of being branded a utopian. It is frankly in that spirit that this chapter closes by counterfactually wondering how America, for African-Americans and for working class whites, might have turned out differently if the same social energies and creativity poured into blackface entertainments had somehow gone instead into the preservation and elaboration of Negro Election Day?

Notes

1. E.L. Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy: From 'Daddy' Rice to Date*, New York 1911, 17; Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage*, Durham, N.C. 1930, 50–51; Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1983, 217.
2. Rice, *Monarchs*, 12; James H. Dorman, 'The Strange Career of Jim Crow Rice', *Journal of Social History* 3 (Winter 1970): 109; Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Negro Minstrelsy*, Norman, Okla. 1962, 104.
3. William J. Mahar, "'Backside Albany' and Early Blackface Minstrelsy: A Contextual Study of America's First Blackface Song', *American Music* 6 (Spring 1988): 2–3; Russel Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years*, New York 1988, 2:161.
4. See Rice, *Monarchs*, and, for a sense of lineage, Olive Logan, 'The Ancestry of Brud-der Bones', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 58 (1879): 687–98.
5. Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 58–65; Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York 1974, 10–13; Vera B. Lawrence, ed., *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong, 1836–1875*, New York 1988, 2:372.
6. Alexander Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology', *American Quarterly* 27 (March 1975): 9–11, and *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, London 1990. Saxton regards the most important early minstrel innovators as of middle class background, however. See 'Blackface Minstrelsy', 6.
7. William F. Stowe and David Grimsted, 'White-Black Humor', *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 3 (Summer 1975): 81; Sanjek, *Popular Music*, 172; John Lair, *Songs Lincoln Loved*, New York 1954, 39–52; Daily Paskman, 'Gentlemen, Be Seated!': *A Parade of the American Minstrel*, New York 1976, 14.
8. Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930*, Chicago 1981, 73.
9. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, Minneapolis, Minn. 1990, 64.
10. For the debate on whether African-American influence on minstrels was pronounced, see Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester*, New York 1986, 80–81; Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*, New York 1961, 263–69; Mahar, "'Backside Albany'", esp. 10–13; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 40–51; Sanjek, *Popular Music*, 173; Howard L. Sacks and Judith R. Sacks, 'Way Up North in Dixie: Black-White Musical Entertainment in Knox County, Ohio', *American Music* 6 (Winter 1988): 418–27; Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music*, New York 1982; Alan W.C. Green, "'Jim Crow", "'Zip Coon": The Northern Origins of Negro Minstrelsy', *Massachusetts Review* 11 (1970): 385–97. With the exception of Dennison, most recent accounts tend to credit to at least some degree Rourke's contention that interaction with Blacks shaped minstrel music. The most extreme recent statement of this viewpoint is Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound*, Urbana, Ill. 1984, 259–64. Clearly, 'authenticity' was claimed and prized by minstrels. See Rice, *Monarchs*, 87; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 42, 46 and 50.
11. *Christy's New Songster*, New York 1863?, 75; *Nigger Melodies*, St. Louis n.d., 113–14. See also Frank Dumont, *Burnt Cork; or, The Amateur Minstrel*, New York 1881, 15–16.
12. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 555; Robert B. Winans, 'Early Minstrel Show Music, 1843–1852', in Glenn Loney, ed., *Music Theatre in America*, Westport, Conn. 1984, 80; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 32.
13. Paskman, 'Gentlemen, Be Seated!' 28–30; 'Jordan Is a Hard Road to Travel', New York 1854, sheet music. It is worth noting that several minstrel songs directly burlesque spirituals.
14. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago 1903, 251; Rourke, *American Humor*, 273; Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, Mass. 1988, 237.
15. Rice, *Monarchs*, 115; Winans 'Minstrel Show Music', 80; Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 344–492, esp. 345; for typical playbills and sheet music covers, see *Christy's Melodies as Composed and Sung by Them*, New York n.d., in Newberry Library; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 39.
16. *Christy's New Songster*, 95; Nelse Seymour, ed., *Nelse Seymour's Big Shoe Songster*, New York 1863, 61–62; *The Negro Singer's Own Book*, Philadelphia and New York n.d., 132; Elias Howe, ed., *Howe's 100 Ethiopian Songs*, Boston and Chicago 1877, 222–23; *The Ethiopian Serenader's Own Book*, Philadelphia 1857, 107.
17. Rice, *Monarchs*, 185; see also Logan, 'Brudder Bones', 688.
18. Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 219.
19. See 'Irish Mornings and African Days on the Old Minstrel Stage: An Interview with Leni Sloan', *Callahan's Irish Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1982): 49–53. See also Rice, *Monarchs*, 38, 39, 54, 79, 123, 131, 144, 151 on Irish stars.
20. Paskman, 'Gentlemen, Be Seated!', 16; Winans, 'Minstrel Show Music', 72 and 95; *Christy's Bones and Banjo Melodist*, New York 1864, 57; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 121 and 200; Rice, *Monarchs*, 23.
21. Rice, *Monarchs*, 185; *The Ethiopian Glee Book*, Boston 1849, 89.
22. Winans, 'Minstrel Show Music', 228; Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 228.
23. Green, 'Northern Origins', 395; G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, J.B. Bailie trans., London 1910, 1:175–88.
24. Dumont, *Burnt Cork*, 55–59 and the advertisement for *Bones* in back; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 121; Rice, *Monarchs*, 185; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 173–80; Gary D. Engle, ed., *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the Minstrel Stage*, Baton Rouge, La. 1978, xxvii; Lair, *Songs Lincoln Loved*, 44; *Handy Andy's Budget of Songs*, n.p. n.d., 67; Winans, 'Minstrel Show Music', 95 and the shrewd comments on minstrelsy in Amiri Baraka [Leroi Jones], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, New York 1970, 83–84.
25. Sandor Ferenczi, 'The Origins of Interest in Money', in Richard C. Badger, ed., *Contributions to Psychoanalysis*, Boston 1916; Otto Fenichel, 'The Drive to Amass Wealth', *Psychoanalytical Quarterly* 7 (1938).
26. Rice, *Monarchs*, 23; *DA*, 2:1120; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 60.
27. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, New York 1971 (1857), 7–14.
28. Paskman, 'Gentlemen, Be Seated!', 17–18; Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 554; Ralph Keeler, 'Three Years as a Negro Minstrel', *Atlantic Monthly* 24 (July 1869): 75.
29. Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 19.
30. *Negro Singer's Own Book*, 196, with a similar joke on p. 197. See also Keeler, 'Three Years', 76, on respectability. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 18–20, presents a similar analysis.
31. 'Interview with Leni Sloan', 49–53.
32. Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy', 28 and 12; *The Ethiopian Glee Book: Containing the Songs Sung by the New Orleans Serenaders*, Boston 1850, 182.
33. Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy', 13–14; Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination*, New York 1985, 230; Rourke, *American Humor*, 272.
34. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 232–33 and 286.
35. William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*, New York 1961.
36. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*, New York 1970, 29–30; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, New York 1975, 285–324.
37. Seymour, *Big Shoe Songster*, 8; *Christy's Negro Songster*, 10–11; Dumont, *Burnt Cork*, 7; *Christy's Bones and Banjo Melodist*, 28–29; *Nigger Melodies*, 34; *Ethiopian Glee Book: Containing the Songs Sung by the New Orleans Serenaders*, 198; *Buckley's Song Book for the Parlor*, New York 1855, 25. For an important exception, see *Ethiopian Glee Book* (1849 version), 119.
38. *Handy Andy's Budget of Songs*, 29.
39. It is worth noting in this connection that just after the Civil War popular use of the term *nigger night* to mean Saturday night is recorded, and that the term was said in the North to have been connected with the custom of courting on Saturday evenings. See John S.

Farmer, *Americanisms – Old and New*, London 1889, 391; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 124; John B. Jentz, 'Artisans, Evangelicals and the City: A Social History of Abolition and Labor Reform in New York City' (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1977), 248; Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 18; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860*, New York 1986, 1–62 and 76–102.

40. Buckley's *Parlor Songster*, 58; Stansell, *City of Women*, esp. 96–97 and 83–86 and n41 below.

41. Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform*, Chicago 1980, 143–45 and passim. Generally, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, New York 1988, 39–170.

42. Keeler, 'Three Years', 77; Paskman, 'Gentlemen, Be Seated!', 85; Dumont, *Burnt Cork*, 63; *Ethiopian Glee Book*, 184–85; Howe, *100 Ethiopian Songs*, 201; Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy', 12; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 180; Newinan I. White, 'The White Man in the Woodpile', *American Speech* 4 (February 1929): 212; *Ethiopian Glee Book* (1849 version), 34; Winans, 'Minstrel Show Music', 91. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 286, gives an account of an odd 1844 performance using women, noting it as the first to do so.

43. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*, New York 1967 (1851), and George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monks Hall*, New York 1970 (1845). See also David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, New York 1988, 216–22. On the sexual content of abolitionist literature, see Ronald Walters, 'The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism', *American Quarterly* 25 (May 1973): 177–201.

44. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 18–20; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 124–25; Dorman, 'Shaping the Popular Image', 455; Paskman, 'Gentlemen, Be Seated!', 85.

45. Winans, 'Minstrel Show Music', 93; Marian Mair, 'Black Rhythm and British Reserve: Interpretations of Black Musicality in Racist Thought since 1750' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1987), 134.

46. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 556, n38.

47. Dumont, *Burnt Cork*, 6.

48. Dorman, 'Shaping the Popular Image', 455; Nancy M. Goslee, 'Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake's *Daughters of Albion*', *ELH* 57 (Spring 1990): 123. On eros and sexuality, see Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston 1954, 197–237, and *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston 1964, 71–79.

49. Quoted in Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 54.

50. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 259. See also Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Cambridge, Mass. 1968.

51. Dorman, 'Shaping the Popular Image', 455 and passim; Green, 'Northern Origins', 395.

52. Stowe and Grimsted, 'White-Black Humor', 80–81 and 83; Boskin, *Sambo*, 81.

53. Stowe and Grimsted, 'White-Black Humor', 78–96, esp. 89; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 259.

54. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 195; Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 218. For exceptions, see Toll, *Blacking Up*, 195; Rice, *Monarchs*, 42 and 48; Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 555.

55. *The Negro Forget-Me-Not Songster*, Baltimore n.d., 11–12. For the range of portrayals of slavery, see Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy', 18–21; William L. Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture*, Madison, Wis. 1984, 39–48; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 73–97; Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 229–31; Stowe and Grimsted, 'White-Black Humor', 89–96. See also *Negro's Own Book*, 336, and Gumbo Chaff, ed., *The Ethiopian Glee Book: A Collection of Popular Negro Melodies*, Boston 1848, 2, on 'bobulashun'. On returning to slavery, see J. Wade, ed., *Christy's Minstrel's New Songs with Choruses*, London n.d., 17; *Christy's Negro Songster*, New York 1855, 15.

56. Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race*, 46–48.

57. See Chapter 8 and Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 231–38; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 104–28; Saxton,

'Blackface Minstrelsy', 22; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 191–92; Seymour, *Big Shoe Songster*, 27–28.

58. Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy', 27; *Ethiopian Glee Book*, 186; Anna C. Mowatt, 'Fashion; or, Life in New York,' in David Grimsted, ed., *Notions of the Americans, 1820–1860*, New York 1970, 171–72; *Handy Andy's Budget of Songs*, 5.

59. Philip S. Foner, *Business and Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict*, Chapel Hill, N.C. 1941.

60. Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 251 and 258; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 162; Howe, *100 Ethiopian Songs*, 222; *Minstrel Gags and End Men's Handbook*, Upper Saddle River, N.J. 1969 reprint, 18 and 102; Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 168–71.

61. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 162–63; Dumont, *Burnt Cork*, 46–49; Stowe and Grimsted, 'White-Black Humor', 89.

62. Seymour, *Big Shoe Songster*, 20–21.

63. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 185 and 180–87 passim; Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 234; Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy', 21.

64. Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 22; Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, 555.

65. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 162 and 182; *Minstrel Gags*, 18 and 102.

66. Stowe and Grimsted, 'White-Black Humor', 83.

67. Engle, *This Grotesque Essence*, xxvii; *Negro Singer's Own Book*, 63. The fullest study remains Ray B. Browne, 'Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy', *American Quarterly* 12 (Fall 1960): 374–91, esp. 376. See also Charles Haywood, 'Negro Minstrelsy and Shakespearean Burlesque', in Bruce Jackson, ed., *Folklore and Society*, Hatboro, Penn. 1966, 77–92.

68. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 1988, 4, 15 and passim.

69. David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800–1850*, Chicago 1968, 239–40; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 15.

70. Browne, 'Shakespeare', 377 and 380–81; Seymour, *Big Shoe Songster*, 41–42; Christy, *Christy's Bones and Banjo Melodist*, 7; Marshall and Stock, *Aldridge*, 164, 167 and 258–59.

71. Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 210; Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America*, New York 1965, 112.