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## Interlocking oppressions of sisterhood: (re) presenting the black woman in nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy

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Interlocking Oppressions of Sisterhood:

(Re) presenting the Black Woman in Nineteenth Century Blackface  
Minstrelsy

Catherine Downing

Senior Scholars Thesis, Interdisciplinary Project  
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## Project Advisors



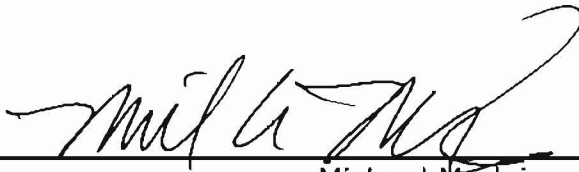
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## Interlocking Oppressions of Sisterhood:

### (Re) presenting the Black Woman in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy

#### **Abstract**

Blackface minstrelsy began as a racially derisive form of early nineteenth century white working class stage entertainment that essentialized blackness into an object of social ridicule. Racial burlesque coupled with gender performance stigmatized popular representations of black womanhood. Repetition of blackface minstrelsy's negative images solidified the black woman's stereotyped mainstream identity as a subordinate group with equally overlapping social forms of oppression. Within the first fifty years of repetitious blackface performance, the objectifying images of black female inferiority constructed a dominant American racist and sexist ideology. The black woman was either the Mammy or the Jezebel. For blacks, the only way to change the mainstream image was to join the ranks of the signifiers. I will employ Marxist theory of historical progression and adapt a theorized evolutionary process of racial, cultural, and social ideological building to serve as a model displaying how negative minstrel images of black women became dominant social ideology. I will then employ Henry Louis Gates theory of "The Signifying Monkey" to explain how African Americans on the minstrel stage (re) produced images of the black woman with powerful yet subtle subversions, and how these images saved mainstream black feminine representations from universal ridicule.

Interlocking Oppressions of Sisterhood:  
(Re) presenting the 'Black Woman' in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy.

Catherine Downing

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Dedicated to

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Sugar Mama

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## Minstrelsy Timeline

*1820s-1850s*      Antebellum minstrelsy: Formative period of racial ideology  
                              \*I will often refer to this period as early minstrelsy

*1855 - early 60s*    African American performers join white minstrelsy

*1860s*                Civil War Minstrelsy

*1870s-1890s*      Black Blackface Minstrelsy: Black men become sole performers of  
                              plantation subject matter.  
                              \* I refer to this period as late minstrelsy

## Interlocking Oppressions of Sisterhood:

### (Re) presenting the Black Woman in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy

#### **Introduction**

Blackface minstrelsy began as a racially derisive form of early nineteenth century white working class stage entertainment that essentialized blackness into an object of social ridicule. Racial burlesque coupled with gender performance stigmatized popular representations of black womanhood. Repetition of blackface minstrelsy's negative images solidified the black woman's stereotyped mainstream identity as a subordinate group with equally overlapping social forms of oppression. Within the first fifty years of repetitious blackface performance, the objectifying images of black female inferiority constructed a dominant American racist and sexist ideology of black feminine identity. The black woman was either the Mammy or the Jezebel. For blacks, the only way to change the mainstream image was to join the ranks of the signifiers. I will employ Marxist theory of historical progression and adapt a theorized evolutionary process of racial, cultural, and social ideological building to serve as a model displaying how negative minstrel images of black women became dominant social ideology. I will then employ Henry Louis Gates theory of "The Signifying Monkey" to explain how African Americans on the minstrel stage (re) produced images of the black woman with powerful yet subtle subversions, and how these images saved mainstream black feminine representations from universal ridicule.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates refers to minstrelsy as racist signifying parody. In terms of gender, white minstrelsy was essentially white men signifying black women. As Judith Butler theorizes, repetition of stylized gender acts

stigmatizes gender identity. White men dressed in blackface drag performed as black women and in our absence, constructed a derisive mainstream black feminine identity. By the mid nineteenth century African American men joined the minstrel stage and began to signify blackness for themselves. African American male performers jumped at the chance to change black public image as well as show off their fine performance talents. Blacks began integrating complex musical compositions into the minstrel show acts. However, whites did not want to see sophisticated talented unmasked African Americans and the minstrel show soon lost its audience base. Blacks would have to subvert the images in more subtle ways. Once blacks received a second chance at the minstrel stage they took on the role of Gates' signifying monkey, appropriating white images of blackness through repetition and yet simultaneously subverting them, bringing real blackness to the stage, and (re) presenting the black woman.

These subtle subversions were not directed to the white audience members who were probably unaware of their presence, but rather the subversions were aimed at the blacks in the audience. This did not subvert dominant ideology but rather allowed the black performer to connect with his black audience. A certain kind of shuffle dance, an improved, "Hallelujah!" or simply playing the role a 'little too good' would signal an inside joke to the black audience. The black audience was able to laugh together at a collective racialized existence. The laughter helped bind the group reinforcing a sense of community. As a group, black audience members laughed at the subverted material and the stereotype all at once. The black male still performed black femininity but this time the black woman's counterpart did the signifying. This was socially acceptable to the mixed gendered black audience who regularly supported black minstrels.

African Americans took black signifying power from whites and slowly began to transform the image into a counter narrative. Black blackface minstrelsy, although limited to racist images in many ways, was the first black counter narrative to white blackface. The repetition of minstrelsy acts with subtle subversions changed the meaning of the images for those members of the nineteenth century black audiences. Black minstrels subverted the image of the mammy and transformed her into a black mother, while the tragic mulatto was finally given a happy ending. Black minstrelsy also helped reinforce some of the negative stereotypes that carried through from white minstrelsy. These negative images of black women circulated as popular social ideology. However, black minstrelsy consciously created subversions to these images in a form that Eric Lott calls "dialectical flickering." Black men had to change the material in very discreet ways. These negative stereotypes however, existed long before black men joined the stage. The continuance of such images as they had become mainstream dominant ideology is therefore no surprise. The main difference from antebellum minstrel representations of blacks was the actual presence of black men, who then retained power to subvert the signifying images of black womanhood. The important conversation then focuses on the early blackface images in comparison to the black minstrel representations. Black minstrelsy material subversions did not change dominant social and racial ideology. It offered a dualistic social commentary. For one half of the audience it reinforced black stereotypes and satisfied white voyeuristic obsession with the black body. For the other half it offered racialized humor filled with double meaning and racial social commentary. For this black half, the minstrel comedy offered a comedic outlet to racial oppression and helped create a sense of black community through collective laughter.

The purpose of this project is to analyze the embedded social and racial ideologies of black womanhood in nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy by examining its many dimensional layers and comparatively analyzing them. Understanding the social framework that helped produce blackface minstrelsy is important for understanding the gender based stereotypes and stigmas attached to 'black femininity' that still pervades the collective consciousness of black and white Americans to this day. Black female archetypes that began in minstrelsy are images with continued presence throughout history. The blackfaced masculine Mammy shows up in the 1915 film *Birth of A Nation*. A blackfaced white male plays her role exerting masculine control over the lazy black male caricatures (who are also performed in blackface). The African American female and her controlling nature directly emasculate the black man as she represents the matriarch of the black family. The Mulatta female also shows up in this film as a white woman wannabe who is aware of her body as a sexual token, and represents a threat to white feminine purity. Even in the 1941 early animation series, *Scrub Me Mama With A Boogie Beat*, the image of the Mulatta girl appears in an episode called *Lazy Town*. She is a highly sexualized woman with curves for days, big lips, a large butt, and light skin. She is wearing a short skirt and high heel shoes. Until she arrives on the ferry, the town is almost dead, showing lazy black people, who look more like lounging monkeys. The mammy is represented as well. She is large and black, with a rag on her head. In fact she is the only one in the town working, although she moves at a snails pace. Everything changes when the Mulatta female steps off the boat. The town wakes up, black men chase after her and even the Mammy is inspired to work harder. She sings and dances, swinging

her large hips focusing attention onto body parts that have been compartmentalized and exaggerated. These are all examples of how minstrel archetypes of black femininity have remained in their position as dominant ideology and carried through popular media over time.

Studies in blackface minstrelsy have gone from uncritical thinking to interpretive analysis. However, black masculinity has often been the focus of such social, cultural and historical studies of minstrelsy. Much of the works done in analyzing the minstrel show's racial images are profound and insightful. These works have inspired me to continue the discussion of minstrelsy's pervasive images, only this time moving the discussion of the black woman from margin to center. She was present in minstrelsy as a symbol. The African American woman was a symbol signifying herself, a kind of absent feminine presence on the stage. Many of the stereotypes about black woman that exist today either come directly from blackface minstrelsy or have evolved from nineteenth century racist ideology.

There hasn't been much scholarship dedicated specifically to the minstrelsy representations of black women. This would make sense because the minstrel stage had no female presence; men played female roles in an elaborate kind of drag much like Shakespearean stage performances. However, these black drag shows were extremely important in structuring the institution of racialized gender. In early minstrelsy there were no white male stage characters. Essentially white men used the minstrel stage as a kind of social lab constructing white male identity. They did this by projecting a black male, black female, and white female identity (although this white female identity did not become part of the minstrel show until the civil war era). White male identity was defined

in opposition to the other three. White patriarchy was the central social ideology of the minstrel show and produced images that represented typified African American females. The point of this project was to reveal the negative stereotypes of minstrelsy's black woman and (re) present her to modern audiences as a social construction. This original public image of the black woman in popular culture comes to represent the beginning of a negative mainstream black feminine identity and serves as a starting point by which we can map our evolutionary process of changing representations.

## Chapter 1: When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong

*America is a land of masking jokers.  
We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense;  
when we are projecting the future and preserving the past.  
In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the  
mask conceals.*

—Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke”

Blackface minstrelsy was the first American popular culture. The nineteenth century minstrel show had nationwide appeal as a form of theater entertainment that produced racially hierarchical nuanced representations of the ‘Southern plantation Negro.’ Because of the minstrel show’s historical popularity it serves as a national source for our modern understanding of nineteenth century contemporary ideology. The social messages encoded within the show were a form of cultural production that informed racial ideology of the day as well as a tool being informed by nineteenth century cultural ideology. Robert Toll articulately describes minstrelsy as a cultural capital that one can use to span the distance between modern racial ideology and these earlier days of black stereotype formation. “Minstrelsy’s portrayals of slavery and blacks reveal the evolution and functioning of American racial stereotypes better than any other source.”<sup>1</sup> Marxist theory can both substantiate and explicate the role of blackface minstrelsy as a modern informant of nineteenth century ideology, an ideology filled with stereotypes that still pervade the collective consciousness of African Americans today.

Marxist theory suggests that a capitalist society depends on certain hierarchical class relations and the systematic reinforcement of those relations to maintain the power dynamic in place. In "Ideology," James Kavanagh explains how Marxist theory relates to plantation economies: "Production of goods and services in a plantation economy requires that there first of all be landowners and slaves" and that "members of all classes tend to accept the given structure of class relations."<sup>ii</sup> Kavanagh goes on to describe force as a tactic commonly used in this kind of "class- divided social situation." However, force alone cannot hold back the dams of rebellion and social uprising. As Kavanagh suggests, complete reliance on a government resource, such as police to insure a continuance of the social structure or class relations in place would be a financial drain on the government. Instead there must be a publicly accepted dominant ideology to catalyze a mutual understanding (between subordinate and dominant group members) of relative power roles to psychologically contain the subordinate group. This is where ideology must enter the paradigm. "Ideology, after all, is more influential than laws."<sup>iii</sup> In the following excerpt, Kavanagh eloquently describes the role of ideology as a kind of theoretical propaganda.

Any concrete society incorporates a spectrum of ideologies and social subjectivities, and this field tends to be worked into an asymmetrical whole that must be continually readjusted, a structure in which most ideological positions take up an unequal, subordinate relation to the dominant ideology. Influential ideological practices (literature, film, music, and so forth) in our society must therefore address this entire field of 'differences,' and usually do not explicitly emphasize questions of class (which is not to say they don't affect the reproduction of social class structures).<sup>iv</sup>

Ideology in the Marxist sense is a production or a social process whereby certain class relations are taught and then re-produced. As the aforementioned quotation suggests, the dominant ideology works to subdue any subordinate ideology through its production of dominant ideological propaganda and its subsequent presentation through popular media. This theory provides a framework to study and analyze blackface minstrelsy as a kind of production of social ideology.

In beginning to understand minstrelsy as a production of social or cultural ideology, it is important that we focus on the source itself and less on social intention. There is no way to prove intention, nor can it be discussed on any critical level. Stage minstrelsy demonstrates nineteenth century social ideology through examination of its form, method of presentation, viewer response, content...etc. The embedded ideological messages work themselves out in the art form. To summarize Kavanagh, as society changes so does the social ideology embedded in the art. Examining minstrelsy provides a way to find these kinds of ideological incongruities that serve to demonstrate how society is also changing and developing its social ideology. Social building of embedded consistent cultural ideology within an art form is a process just as much as the building of social ideology itself. This process is never static. Social ideology continues to change with the times, circumstances in society, critical events and so forth. My thesis stresses the importance of analyzing the form itself and creating a social backdrop or periphery to place the minstrel show in an American social context. Minstrelsy can be used to understand society and conversely, history contributes to understanding a changing multi-dimensional nineteenth century minstrel show.

Blackface minstrel characters were socially constructed as stupid, primitive, lazy, subservient, non-threatening, and most importantly, inferior. The minstrel show allowed a kind of cultural voyeurism by white audiences. Blacks were seen as a different cultural species all together. Robert Toll describes the attributes associated with minstrel blackness:

Minstrels used heavy dialect to portray Negroes as foolish, stupid, and compulsively musical. Minstrel blacks did not have hair, they had 'wool;' they were 'bleating black sheep,' and their children were 'darky cubs.' They had bulging eyeballs, flat, wide noses, gaping mouths with long, dangling lower lips, and gigantic feet with elongated, even flapping heels. At times, minstrels even claimed that Negroes had to have their hair filed, not cut; that when blacks got sick and pale, they drank ink to restore their color; and that people could grow 'niggas' by planting their toes in the ground. Besides picturing blacks as physically different and inferior, minstrels set them off culturally.<sup>v</sup>

The minstrel show justified slavery with these representations by showing the southern plantation black as a character greatly in need of white supremacy. When minstrelsy began in the early 1820s slavery had been underway for almost 300 years and the economy gained tremendous profit from this subordinate group labor force. This question of whether or not slavery was right or wrong would naturally bring about much debate and often-public debate leaned to the defense of slavery as an acceptable means of economic stability. This debate frequently took the form of a white male dressed in tattered clothing, burnt cork, and a wooly wig called blackface minstrelsy. The white male could then act out blackness and let the slave speak for him/ herself as a defendant of the slave life and tradition. "Blackness then is not innate but produced, a cultural construction."<sup>vi</sup> Eric Lott calls this racial commodification of black images, "cultural

expropriation.” “Cultural expropriation is the minstrel shows central fact.”<sup>vii</sup> The use of racist imagery to sustain patriarchal racial ideology and the exchange of falsified black images for money culminates this racial commodification.

In discussion of minstrelsy’s cultural expropriation it is important to understand the details through which black performance was adopted into blackface minstrelsy. Eric Lott and Robert Toll discuss the nature of black performance as purely “performative,” rejecting the concept that these performances came from some innate elemental spontaneity native to dark skin persons. Black performative creations of profitable cultural capital, as Lott says, “[were] often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world.”<sup>viii</sup> In *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave*, Bibb, who was continually trying to escape slavery, finds that “performing” the character expected of him (as in the stupid gullible ‘happy’ slave) gave him a tremendous amount of power and control, a kind of control that he could use to elude his master: “I knew then that the only alternative left for me to extricate myself was to use deception, which is the most effectual defense a slave can use.”<sup>ix</sup> Robert Toll explains this use of black performativity by suggesting, “like the black folk, minstrel slaves also used white stereotypes of blacks as weapons against their owners.”<sup>x</sup> Black performance was often mistaken as essentialized blackness by white viewers, which meant that the slave’s performances were in fact productive in achieving the goal of deception. However, although the point of black performance was to misdirect the white spectator, as in Bibb’s case, it also served as part of the foundation for the inferior black-faced minstrel character.

The co-opting of black performance is part of the minstrel roots, but alone it does not fully account for the blackface minstrel character in all its complexity. Often slaves were coerced into performances of the banjo playing, jive dancing minstrel that was commonly associated with people of African descent, who were often described as having a proclivity towards spontaneous performance. Bibb describes these coercive events:

The Sabbath is not regarded by a large number of the slaves as a day of rest. They have no schools to go to; no moral nor religious instruction at all in many localities where there are hundreds of slaves. Hence they resort to some kind of amusement. Those who make no profession of religion, resort to the woods in large numbers on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath. This is often encouraged by slaveholders. When they wish to have a little sport of that kind, they go among the slaves and give them whiskey, to see them dance, 'pat juber,' sing and play on the banjo.<sup>xi</sup>

As Bibb describes, the slaves were not allowed to attend church gatherings on the Sabbath. Denied religious instruction many slaves went to the woods in an attempt to enjoy a moment of freedom. However, often slaveholders forced slaves to perform, which no doubt, produced the kind of black performance that Lott calls black performativity.

Coercive black performance and self-commodification merely explain the roots of minstrelsy's black image. In fact, many of the minstrel caricatures were taken directly from song and dance of a shared interracial culture that included black performance as a comedic outlet. The North had a smaller proportion of blacks to whites than the South. Due to these disproportionate numbers in the North acculturation occurred more rapidly and to a greater extent. This process of assimilation brought about a kind of "common

culture” of dance and comedic entertainment within interracial working class communities. The use of black performance as part of this entertainment was filled with double meaning for both black and white working class onlookers and performers. Lott described the venues for such interracial common culture performances as carnivals and street festivals. The silly minstrel characters were popular among the interracial working class communities. As Lott explains this early minstrelsy first sprang up as a form of popular entertainment in these interracial southwestern frontier towns. This new form of comedic entertainment was then carried to the north “from frontier towns—not coincidentally the most important early centers of blackface innovation . . . whether in Louisville, Pittsburg, or Cincinnati, the first performances of blackface’s ‘originator,’ T.D. Rice, the musical education of minstrel-show innovator Dan Emmett, and the first attempts at composition by Stephen Foster all took place in these settings.”<sup>xii</sup> Such innovators marketed it to northern audiences as authentic black culture. Lott sums up the intricacies of the minstrel show’s beginnings:

The minstrel show is one instance in American commercial culture of an outland form exported to the northeastern city, rather than vice versa; and its cultural logic—its ‘mulatto’ character, its imitative thrust—owes much to the interracial embrace of the milieu from which it originally sprang<sup>xiii</sup>. . . We merely ought to be clear about the enormous complexity of this process, in which partly shared, partly black cultural practices were circulated as authentically black, with whites profiting outright to the extent that they were in fact black, while obstructing the visibility of black performers in any case.<sup>xiv</sup>

Why was it necessary to construct and market minstrelsy as authentic black culture? The fact is that minstrelsy was more economically profitable as a black form than any other. Northern white audiences were willing to support the minstrel show financially for over a

century, buttressing its ideological construction of blackness and encouraging its endeavors in cultural expropriation. However, blackface innovators, who co-opted this form of entertainment from interracial working class communities were often part of those communities, aware of its mulatto roots and, blithely aware of its misrepresentation of black people.

The profit driven need to market minstrelsy as authentically black reveals a kind of white obsession with blackness as a cultural form under white control. In the early nineteenth century a comparatively small number of blacks lived in the North than the South. White middleclass northern society lacked mainstream cultural representations of blackness. Due to this lack of black visibility and white systematic control over the black body, the Negro was a highly exoticized, commodified, and profitable character. Beyond political discussions of slavery and scientific discussions of the races, and aside from interracial working class communities, middle and upper class northern whites were not familiar with the black, though the concept alone aroused much interest, so long as whites did not have to get too close to the black himself or the reality of his existence. It is black degradation and white control over black cultural images that makes white privilege a remote possibility. Out of white control over black icons, lack of mainstream representation and a desire for a more removed (non-threatening) kind of exhibition of black culture, the minstrel stage becomes a famous place for blackened entertainment. The minstrel stage offered controlled and safely removed cultural representations of blackness. The stage literally separates the audience from the performer making the audience member feel comfortable about his safe distance from the black performer and his superior critical position as a viewer. The stage also metaphorizes a kind of auction

block, where blackness was on sale in the form of exhibition and comedic entertainment. The black mask, shuffle dances, Negro dialect, and stage separation within the minstrel show satisfied the northern white audience's need to overcompensate for a lack of black representation in popular culture. It showed the kind of black image that whites wanted to see and permitted audiences to exoticize the black character and form. In essence, the social construction of blackness within blackface minstrelsy was a product of supply and demand, an instrument of white production and consumption. Whites consumed an essentialized concept of blackness and produced the image on the stage. What Toni Morrison says about the racially inflected voice of writers is also true of the complex relationship between white minstrel audience's and racialized minstrel stage performance:

For both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, *there is no escape from racially inflected language* [my emphasis], and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive.<sup>xv</sup>

Minstrelsy's white obsessed blackened culture not only produced economic profit and stereotypical icons of blackness but also helped unite and mold whiteness as a national standard. Yet it was an unstated standard; it existed beneath the black mask as its antipodal opposite. When minstrelsy was exported to the North from southwest frontier towns it began as a working class entertainment. Later, as class structures changed, it became more mainstream and primarily bourgeois entertainment. In the early nineteenth century, working class urbanity grew out of new capitalist endeavors in southwest frontier towns and small cities in the North. During this time working-class communities were largely interracial, filled with white immigrants (such as Jewish and Irish people)

and blacks. Because of the large number of blacks living in these neighborhoods, as Lott explains, working class identity was in part associated with blackness: "The rhetoric of race that was a specific product of Antebellum America's capitalist crisis thus equated workingclassness with blackness as often as it differentiated between them, an antimony with properly equivocal results."<sup>xvi</sup> The minstrel show, as a white working class form of entertainment, helped to shape and reinforce a superior status of whites to blacks. This was specifically important because many of the white residents in these interracial communities were Irish immigrants, a marginalized ethnic group within the U.S. In *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev discusses the social position of Irish immigrants in America: "In the early years Irish were frequently referred to as 'niggers turned inside out.'"<sup>xvii</sup> The minstrel stage brought together different ethnicities of whiteness and refocused national discussion onto issues of race and gender. In a sense, minstrelsy allowed Irishmen the chance at white membership blurring the lines of difference within the white race and placing its attention on further othering the other. Ignatiev discusses the role that Irishmen played in becoming white and thus distancing themselves from connotations of blackness:

While white skin made the Irish eligible for membership in the white race, it did not guarantee their admission, they had to earn it<sup>xviii</sup>. . . It is surely no coincidence that so many of the pioneers of blackface minstrelsy were of Irish descent, for the Irish came disproportionably into contact with the people whose speech, music, and dance furnished the basis, however distorted, for the minstrels arts.<sup>xix</sup>

Blackface minstrelsy aided in the unification of white society, while appropriating blackness as a mask representing the diametrical opposite of its many forms of whiteness worn underneath.

The uniformed whiteness beneath the minstrel mask represented white power to dispossess blackness but also reveals the obsessive nature hidden in its very act.

Nineteenth century minstrelsy was not the only venue by which whites expressed their obsessive investment in the black body. Although, the minstrel show popularized black cultural appropriation, it served as a respondent to this kind of physical obsession rather than its originator. Eric Lott discusses Mark Twain's infatuation with the black physique:

Twain's response marks a real (and perhaps typical) attraction to and celebration of black culture. Indeed, in *Following the Equator* (1897) he notes his love of beautiful black bodies and his disgust for white ones. But when such observations do not fall into derision, they are clearly the patronizing observe [*sic*] of it, and at the very least signify an unexamined investment in exoticism.<sup>xx</sup>

The economic support of the minstrel show reveals the nature of difference as a commodity that could be expropriated and sold for white profit. However the nineteenth century representations of blacks in Louis Agassiz's 1850 daguerreotypes were not made for profit and until recently were not in public circulation. These images represent an even more complex form of exoticism and objectification where the only viewer of this scientific data was in fact the scientist (keeping in mind that there was no scientific data found to even suggest that the photos were used in this manner). Agassiz's daguerreotypes exhibited male and female slaves' naked bodies, supposedly for scientific use, in different positions (frontal, rear, profile...etc). In "Black Bodies, White Science," Brian Wallace breaks down the representations by the manner and form of Agassiz's 'scientific' work, "The vaguely eroticized nature of the slave daguerreotypes derives

from the unwavering, voyeuristic manner with which they indiscriminately survey the bodies of the Africans, irrespective of the subjects' lives." The 'African slave' in terms of Agassiz's work was a specimen for examination. In mainstream society, nudity was shunned as pornography and would have been a highly unacceptable form of representation for any white middle class male or female. Agassiz's black subjects are powerless in the negotiations of ideology arranged in the photos. They aren't given a choice nor a voice by which they can assert their individuality and thus from the viewer perspective, their naked black bodies are objectified. Wallis addresses the issue that 'scientists' of the day were conducting studies in racial hierarchy and using the black body to represent a kind of opposition to whiteness, "Although these scientists argued that their studies were made without prejudice or without models, there is ample evidence that a standard was in place to characterize the Caucasian ideal." Louis Agassiz's Daguerreotypes demonstrate the dehumanizing of African Americans as well as white obsession, which translated into white investment in black cultural expropriation.

The slave body was compartmentalized and objectified for many reasons. Slave dealers sectionalized the value of slave's body parts. They focused primarily on the body parts by which slave-owners could most profit from, consume, and control. Particularly dealers showcased the grinning slave. As K. Sue Jewell has explained in *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, slaves good quality teeth were as a sign of good health.

First, during slavery, Europeans and Americans were impressed by the soundness of slaves teeth. The continuous displaying of teeth, in a grin or smile, suggests satisfaction or contentment, which was important to slave owners . . . Europeans expressed curiosity and amazement at the structure and over all good condition of

slaves teeth. This was extremely important to slave dealers and prospective buyers who reasoned that teeth were an indicator of the healthiness of a slave.<sup>xxi</sup>

The constructed minstrel image of blacks often displayed them smiling large enough to see all of their teeth. Grinning teeth justified slavery helping to construct the notion of the content, happy slave: "Oh! Miss Lucy's teeth is grinning, just like an ear ob corn."<sup>xxii</sup> Speaking in black dialect the minstrel character essentially was a blackened white man obsessively desiring to experience the auction block, but as a performance all in good fun: "De niggers day am grinning, An' dar teeth looks very white."<sup>xxiii</sup>

As racial hierarchy in science began to emerge, it added to the rhetoric on the nature of blackness that already existed as part of minstrelsy's contemporary social discourse. Antebellum America became interested in this subject of science as an explanation of black inferiority. There were constant debates over monogeny, the idea that all humans came from one set of parents or at least a single origin and polygeny, which promoted the idea that each race had several origins and were thus different species. Eric Lott describes the beginnings of this scientific institution:

With the emergence of the 'American school of ethnology' in the 1840s and 1850s, however, which argued the case for 'polygenesis' or the separate creation of the races as distinct species, both sides of the dialogue increasingly assumed the fundamental difference of the races. A new kind of theoretical fluidity now entered the picture. On the polygenetic view, blacks were intellectually inferior because in thrall to the emotions.<sup>xxiv</sup>

One particular racial scientific enterprise was called phrenology. In the *Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould explains phrenology as "the original 'science' of judging various mental capacities by the size of localized brain areas." Scientists compared

cranial size, cranial structures, and bumps on the head along with many other forms of measurement in an attempt to determine the most superior race. However, scientific endeavors of this kind were often filled with preconceptions and racist ideology. This ideology was then projected onto the procedure and results skewing the scientific conclusions in favor of the scientist's racial views. Gould quotes Paul Broca, a leading nineteenth century craniologist, as he discusses the racial hierarchy, which his science proved existed:

We surmount the problem easily by choosing, for our comparison of brains, races whose intellectual inequalities are completely clear. Thus, the superiority of Europeans compared with African Negroes, American Indians, Hottentots, Australians and the Negroes of Oceania, is sufficiently certain to serve as a point of departure for the comparison of brains.<sup>xxv</sup>

Broca begins this quotation by explaining how easily he chooses specimens for comparative examination. He chooses a brain of races already believed to be inferior to whites. This kind of racist ideology at the beginning of his scientific endeavor has already fixed his results. He was, in fact, looking to prove his racist ideology correct. One year later he printed his results and it is no surprise that he found a way to prove the superiority of the white race. Stephen Gould once again quotes Broca demonstrating the arbitrary nature by which he conducted his scientific experiments:

'The anterior cranial projection of whites . . . surpasses that of Negroes by 4.9 percent . . . Thus, while the foramen magnum of Negroes is further back with respect to their incisors, it is, on the contrary, further forward with respect to the anterior edge of their brain. To change the cranium of a white to that of a Negro, we would have not only to move the jaws forward, but also to reduce the front of the cranium . . . (1862c, p.18)' This was a small incident in Broca's career but I

can imagine no better illustration of his method- shifting criteria to work through good data toward desired conclusions.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Scientific endeavors of racial classification contemporaneous with minstrel shows were part of a national discourse. It is then not surprising that discussions of phrenology are absorbed into the minstrel show and become part of its dialogue. The minstrel stage was a setting used for discussions of social ideology as a respondent of white northern obsession with *blackness*. The inclusion of racialized scientific dialogue such as phrenology helped solidify a racist ideology within the show and maintain a current political and scientific discourse. In *De Susannah and Thick Lip Melodist*, a minstrel songster from 1850, a section of the minstrel show has been dedicated to the discussion of phrenology called “A Black Lecture on Phrenology:”

My frens, you dissemble here dis night, for to hear de leetar on 'nology. 'Nology my frens, is de art ob telling de tief niggas from he hones [?] niggas; de fool niggas from de wisdom niggas; de grog [meaning alcoholic] niggas from de water niggas; an how dat done, I wonder? Eh! Why I tell you: by de bumps on him 'dam tick' skull... 'Nology means, my frens (if it means any ting) bumps, an bumps mean 'nology, I tink dat berry clear... 'Nology treats ob de head, an is darfore [therefore] a *nobby* study; de head is diwided into different parts call'd 'organs'... dar am great many organ in de head, but I can't zackly [exactly] say how many, kaze [because] when people get into a fight, dey sometime get hit on de head, an dat knocks one organ into two or tree: so you see my frens dat de number of organs is berry unsartin [uncertain].<sup>xxvii</sup>

These moments in minstrelsy demonstrate just how connected this mainstream institution was to an American scientific social discourse. The blackened stage character performed this “lectar” in black dialect as part of the minstrel shows comedy section. Though by

presentation of phrenology, in this manner, the minstrel stage not only taught its audience about contemporary science (even while making fun of it) but also about the inferiority of the black-faced character man who was performing. Blackface minstrel presentations of the inferior black character point to the show's common discussions of slavery. The minstrel show was a popular venue by which whites could defend slavery. Sometimes this defense was unspoken. By simply representing the slave as an inferior character (one who is unable to care for himself or childlike) white supremacy was justified and thus slavery was defensible.

Discussions about the rightness of slavery and imaginary performances of blackness, were the result of a shifting social reality in mid nineteenth century America. Social changes in the mid nineteenth century such as the prohibition of the importation of slaves and the new scientific theories with regards to the origin of the races forced white Americans to resolve their opinions of race and slavery. The minstrel stage proved to be a popular venue where race and gender could be performed both carrying out social discourse as well as providing blackened entertainment. Attention to the periphery of Minstrel racial ideology by examination of American society and social occurrences help us to understand the necessity for minstrelsy as a national space for building social ideology. Discussions about slavery clearly relate to discussions about the black body, after all it is slaves bodies that produce labor, profit, and more slaves.

The methodical transport of African slaves to the America's had been in progress since the mid 1500's. However, in 1808 congress passed a law that would prohibit the legal transport of slaves to the United States, terminating the slave trade:

An Act to prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the

jurisdiction of the United States, from and after the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eight.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the first day of January, one thousand eight hundred and eight, it shall not be lawful to import or bring into the United States or the territories thereof from any foreign kingdom, place, or country, any negro, mulatto, or person of colour, with intent to hold, sell, or dispose of such negro, mulatto, or person of colour, as a slave, or to be held to service or labour.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Due to white control over black bodies, Blacks represented white economic profitability. Closing off the slave trade meant that in order to attain more slaves the country would have to depend on black-market slave importation and slaves born to already enslaved mothers. The slave trade itself was a source of profit that built the American economy. The prohibition of the importation of slaves threatened the very institution of slavery. After the passing of this 1808 law, there was suddenly a need for the discussion of slavery and its defense. Minstrelsy proved to be a popular setting where this process of resolving racial ideology could deal more thoroughly with political, scientific, and social theories of race and slavery.

The racial ideology encoded within early antebellum blackface minstrelsy between the 1830s and early 1850s was incongruent and represented a kind of inconsistency in racial social ideology. Antebellum minstrelsy provided a popular venue for white middle class northerners to negotiate the terms of racial ideology, and did so in the form of cultural commodification masquerading as comedic entertainment. Antebellum white investment in black culture became white control over black cultural

elements and the representations of these elements as popular culture. However, as Eric Lott argues, antebellum minstrelsy was far too underdeveloped to contain any congruent elements of racism. Rather, he expresses the dual-minded racial ideology reflected in early minstrelsy as, "The dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation."<sup>xxix</sup> The early minstrel show expresses a kind of ambivalence with regards to slavery. The minstrel show 'darkey' could be found singing about his love of plantation life and in the next song express the horrors of slavery, exposing its cruel nature. There was no concept of equality between the races but antebellum minstrel audiences and songwriters toiled with the concept that slavery may have been wrong. Lott discusses the ambiguity of the early minstrel show compared to its later more rigidly defined representations of developed social and scientific racist ideology:

To be sure, the ambiguity easily empties out of this perspective, and its later nineteenth-century instances represent little more than the ritual reactionary celebration of an ideologically rigidified minstrelsy meant to counter American antislavery practice. In the guise of what has come to be called "scientific racism"- a set of post-Darwinian explanations for the arrested development of blacks- this period's anthropology straitjacketed the relative fluctuations of earlier racial ideologies. Thus legitimized, white historians and memoirists in the nostalgic mood frequently recounted stories of the minstrel shows origins...assuming that minstrelsy's scurrilous representations of black people were scrupulously authentic.<sup>xxx</sup>

For later audiences of a more clearly delineated minstrel racial ideology, antebellum minstrelsy came to represent a hyper-nostalgic historical moment that introduced the role of the black character as a natural performer. Early minstrelsy stagnated mainstream black identity by confining blackness to a white controlled realm of entertainment and

performativity. However, the racial ideology encoded within antebellum minstrelsy was less defined. Minstrelsy's early years represented a period building mainstream social ideology. In essence, minstrelsy was a way for White Americans to work out their conflicted feelings of both guilt and humanity with the desire to rationalize slavery as necessary and right. Social attitudes towards race during the antebellum years can thus be described as a tension of racism and racial ambivalence, proslavery and abolitionism.

Between the 1830's and early 1850's after blackface minstrelsy was exported to the North, public demand increased its popularity and minstrel troupes began to spring up nationwide. The early minstrel shows throughout the country did not possess any static string of racial ideology; rather the form of the show was widely varied and often presented conflicting messages about the slave experience and institution. In the minstrel song "We'll all make a laugh" from *George Christy and Woods New Songbook* the two contradictory ideologies toward slavery are simultaneously expressed:

We'll all make a laugh

Now, darkies, sing and play, and make a little fun;  
We'll dance upon de green, and beat de Congo drum  
We' ere a happy set ob darkies, and were sembled here to play,  
So strike de bones and tamborine, and drive dull care away.  
Some massas love dar darkies well, and gib' em what dey want-  
Except it is dar freedom- and dat I know dey wont:  
Howeber, we am happy, and contented whar we am,  
As a serenading party, and a scientific band.  
Dar's Sam and Joe, and Uncle Ben, likewise, my sister Sally;  
Wheneber fun is in de wind, de darkies dey can rally;  
And if dancing is de order, or any other sport,  
Dese niggers dey am No. 1-and it ain't no use to talk.

Old massa feeds us bery well, and makes us work all day;  
 But after sun is set at night he lets us hab our way.  
 He often comes to our sports –a fine segar he quaffs-  
 Case de merriment ob niggers often make him laugh.  
 Now its growin' late- the moon is down- and we'll be getting home;  
 So put up de music, boys, and onward let us roam.  
 We'll say "Farewell" to ebery friend, and strive wid all our might,  
 To 'semble here on dis same spot again to-morrow.<sup>xxx</sup>

The beginning lines express a joyous, cheerful plantation life. The happy slaves are singing and playing music. There is also a clear reference to Africa in the discussion of the "Congo drum." This contented African 'darkey' is a common representation of the plantation slave within minstrel performance. The next line says, "Some masters love the darky, and give them what they want." This line justifies slavery as acceptable; in fact it makes slavery appear humane and even generous. However, in the next line a hint of reality peeks through. In summary what the slaves want is freedom, and yet the master, who supposedly loves them, will not grant this request. This line clearly stands out because it is one of the few that express truth amidst the minstrel fiction. It clearly states that the slaves want freedom. Even amidst the presentation of the 'happy' plantation slave, in antebellum minstrelsy, there is a contradictory message; the contented slave simultaneously has a desire for liberty. Here the slaves desire for freedom is almost wholly consumed by the minstrel fiction. The moment becomes an exception to the rule, rather than reality. Minstrelsy presented happy slaves for the most part. It would have been easy for audiences to ignore or possibly not even notice these moments as they were dispersed between minstrel fictions. This kind of antebellum contradiction is also found in the song "Julia Tanner." The song begins, "I wish I had my freedom, 'kase I lub a

yaller charmer; She's de prettiest ob wenchies, and her name is Julia Tanner."<sup>xxxii</sup> In this song, the reason the slave wants freedom is not because of hard labor or whipping overseers, but rather so that he can love (and marry) a light-skinned slave female. Whatever, the reason, though, his moment to cry out, "I wish I had my freedom," is a powerful moment in minstrelsy. It subjects its viewers, if for only a brief moment, to the painful cry of the slaves who had no control over their lives.

In this next minstrel song, "The Dinner Horn," the brutal reality of the slave experience is expressed with such poignancy that it actually goes beyond the realm of racial ambivalence into abolitionism:

#### The Dinner Horn

At early dawn de niggers wakes,  
Puts on his ole attire,  
An thro' de fields his way he takes, '  
To labor for no hire.

\*\*\*

All nature smiles to see him grin  
While hoeing ob de corn;  
Its only when he hears de sound,  
Ob dat ole dinner horn,  
De dinner horn, de dinner, dinner horn

\*\*\*

At noon, when no dark clouds obscure  
De sun dat shines so hot,  
De nigger den leans on his hoe,  
An cuss his tiresome lot.

\*\*\*

He tink ob frens he left behind,

When from dem he was torn;  
But pshaw—he soon forgets dem all  
When he hears de dinner horn.

\*\*\*

When evening shades are coming on,  
De sun sinks down de west;  
De niggers toil will soon be done,  
An den he'll had some rest.

\*\*\*

Tis den he hears dem witchin notes  
Dat on de breeze is borne,  
From de ole oberseer's throat  
Fro' dat ole dinner horn.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In antebellum minstrelsy one can find realistic discussions of the cruelty of slavery. These kinds of “dialectical flickering,” although incorporated into a show filled with racial carnivalesque paint a clear moral picture of slavery as a wrongful institution. In this minstrel song the only thing a slave can look forward to is mealtime. A powerful first stanza introduces the slaves’ morning at dawn. He puts on his tattered clothing and goes to the fields, “To labor for no hire.” This single instance within the song introduces the concept of work without wages. It expresses the often unspoken reality (within minstrelsy) of slavery as an economic institution that thrived on the backs of an enslaved stolen people. In many minstrel songs the hot sun under which slaves toiled is referred to as a source of their joy. It is not until these liberation moments that the hot sun is truthfully represented as a painful adversary of the field worker. These instances of social reflection are important because they too represent early blackface minstrelsy. Together, racial burlesque and domination combined with moments of liberation culminate a very

clear expression of an evolving racial ideology. In a *sic et non*<sup>xxxiv</sup> manner, early minstrelsy weighed out the positives, however fictitious, of slavery against the small instances of negative realistic images.

The slave tragedy was a common subject within blackface minstrelsy. Often, when the slaves met with tragic ends, their tragedy, in a minstrel sense, only served to justify their subordinate group position. The slave may die because he tried to escape or because he was greedy and ate himself to death. The blame of the tragedy is often placed directly on the slave. Many of the slave deaths are illogical and point to the very derisive nature of blackface minstrelsy. "Ada Day" is a tragic song about slave love but in this case, the institution of slavery is the culprit in which minstrel viewers could place blame:

#### Ada Day

She has left dear old Carolina,  
Because old massa died;  
They have sold her to another state,  
And I have lost my bride;  
They have sever'd all the tendrils,  
That lov'd the sunny ray—  
They have left all my hopes blighted,  
Bereft of Ada Day.

\*\*\*

Chorus: Cheer up, cheer up,  
Tho' she has gone away  
There's eyes as bright, and heart as light—  
Forget sweet Ada Day.

\*\*\*

When I met her in de corn-field,  
And wandered by her side,

She said she loved me dearly,

\*\*\*

And vowed to be my bride;  
We watched a star while shooting,  
Then named the happy day  
But ere the wish completed  
The star had died away.

\*\*\*

She's in a land of strangers,  
And I am left alone,  
There's naught remains to cheer me,  
Since Ada Day has gone;  
I'll seek some lonely prairie,  
And bear my grief away—  
You'll hear that I am dying  
For love of Ada Day. <sup>xxxv</sup>

In this minstrel song, the institution of slavery is to blame for separating the two lovers. At the end of the song, the slave dies of a broken heart after his love Ada Day has been sold to another plantation. The chanting chorus, "cheer up, cheer up," hardly erases the painful existence of his reality. This song also represents a self-reflective moment in early minstrelsy. The slave tradition is still being considered as inhumane in its ability to divide families. In early minstrelsy (1820s to 1850s) one may find that the breaking up of slave families was a discussion that often constituted an expression of racial ambivalence and sometimes abolition. In "The Fatal Separation," a lonely old slave man sits and thinks about his family members who were sold off to other plantations throughout his life:

Ah, yes how happy once was I,  
when my children gather'd round;

But alas! Dey parted us for gain,  
And dey now sleep in de ground...  
Dar mudder too, was sold from me,  
To labor far away;  
De seperation broke her heart,  
And now in death she lay.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The slave recalls the past when his children and wife constituted an actual family unit. He then says, “alas, they parted us for gain.” The beginning of this statement suggests that he expected his family to be sold for his master’s profit and alas it happened. This statement shows that slaves were aware of their condition and understood just how the institution worked. The discussion of the slaves as property directly resulting in economic gain was a compelling message to minstrel viewers. This message of financial profit is part of the “dialectical flickering” of reality about the institution of slavery. It presented a realistic discussion of the institutional slave condition, its main purpose and the method in which it was carried out. These instances were then interjected between common representations of the fictional singing and dancing happy plantation slave. It was through these moments, that some of the slave reality came through. However, these instances of abolition and liberation were quite problematic. On the one hand they indirectly helped fight for abolition but on the other they made the minstrel show seem even more authentic. The same abolition moments that might persuade an audience member to fight against slavery or realize the humanity of the black character were the same moments that would convince an audience member that the minstrel show was in fact an expression of real authentic blackness, further propagating black stereotypes. In Reconstructing Womanhood, Hazel Carby discusses abolition imagery and its connection to racist

imagery, “Those who attacked slavery in fiction portrayed the races in precisely the same terms as those who defended it.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Abolition was not about fighting racism (in fact many white abolitionists believed in the superiority of the white race) it was about fighting slavery. Even if those moments of liberation affected minstrel patrons, it would result in further patronage of the minstrel show. Although audience members may have unknowingly contributed to the support of minstrelsy’s racial burlesque and cultural expropriation, its derisive representation of real blackness helped further subordinate an already degraded people.

With regard to “the expropriation and cultural commodification of ‘blackness’”<sup>xxxviii</sup> in early blackface minstrelsy this concept of authenticity helped to popularize blackface performance. The racial escapade known as minstrelsy was in fact not authentic black culture (if there is such a thing) but rather racial burlesque masquerading as real blackness. Burlesque is a kind of theatricality, which derives from slapstick comedy. Essentially minstrelsy was a comedy variety show. For minstrel innovators, keeping it real was a profitable concept when it was applied to black culture. Minstrelsy thrived on selling black cultural representations that were systematically withheld from mainstream society. “Blackface performance [was] the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture.”<sup>xxxix</sup> White northern obsession with this dark skinned subordinated labor force popularized blackface minstrelsy and successfully sold this concept of authentic, genuine or real blackness as the new mainstream representation of black identity. Within the minstrel show and often in outside press, minstrelsy was described as being genuine representations of black music, song, dance,

and dialect. Eric Lott comments on minstrelsy as creator of black stereotypes in its supposed representations of authentic black culture, "the position favoring minstrelsy as a people's culture typically celebrates the minstrel show's folk authentic . . . the rather revealing problem inherent in the position, however, is that it regularly slips into an indulgence of racist typing."<sup>1</sup> Newspapers and show ads promoted the idea that a particular troupe were either black themselves, as in the Ethiopian troupes of the early 1830s-40s, or had spent an extensive amount of time learning black song and dance directly from observation of blacks. In the *Atlantic Monthly*, early minstrel legend T.D. Rice gave an account of his minstrel roots and its derivation from black culture:

There was a Negro in attendance at Griffith's Hotel, on Wood Street, named Cuff, - an exquisite specimen of his sort, - who won a precarious subsistence by letting his open mouth as a mark for boys to pitch pennies into, at three paces, and by carrying the trunks of passengers from the steamboats to the hotels. Slight persuasion induced him to accompany the actor to the theatre, where he was led through the private entrance, and quietly ensconced behind the scenes. After the play, Rice, having shaded his own countenance to the "contraband" hue ordered Cuff to disrobe, and proceeded to invest himself in the cast-off apparel. When the arrangements were complete, the bell rang, and Rice, habited in an old coat forlornly dilapidated, with a pair of shoes composed equally of patches and places for patches on his feet, and wearing a coarse straw hat in a melancholy condition of rent and collapse over a dense black wig of matted moss, waddled into view. The extraordinary apparition produced an instant effect . . . The orchestra opened with a short prelude, and to its accompaniment Rice began to sing, delivering the first line by way of introductory recitative:

Oh Jim Crow's come to town, as you all must know,  
An' he wheel about, he turn about, he do jis so,

An' ebery time he wheel about he jump Jim Crow.

The effect was electric. Such a thunder of applause that followed was never heard before within the shell of that old theater.<sup>xli</sup>

In this article Cuff is much like the minstrel stage characters. He is described as letting his mouth serve as a mark for boys to throw pennies into. This kind of story embellishment and carnivalesque is reminiscent of the minstrel characters that were often found engaging in illogical activities; such as the silly minstrel slave who swallowed 6 milk punches, half a dozen eggs, and six pies.<sup>xlii</sup> Even if there were any truth to this story, much of the article, like minstrel music and characters, was concocted from the white imagination. Rice becomes black simply by applying burnt cork, a matted black wig, and Cuff's "cast-off apparel." It is as if the costume alone has the mystical power to transform Rice into an authentic Negro. In another example of minstrelsy's 'authentic black roots,' Charles Matthews is described as closely studying black culture to create genuine Negro stage characters.

An Englishman, Charles Matthews, first built Negro stage characterizations on detailed observations of black Americans. While visiting America in 1822, he studied Negro dialect, transcribed songs, lore, speeches, and sermons, and eagerly collected 'scraps and malaprops.'<sup>xliii</sup>

Minstrel performers commonly discussed their black experience in outside press. Many minstrel entertainers reference a moment in their performance careers when they came into contact with real blacks and adopted (or rather co-opted) the true essence of black music. They would then use the experience to create a newfound performance style for the minstrel stage, as we saw with T.D. Rice and profit from it. Constructing a discourse

around minstrelsy as real blackness helped buttress, not only the show's popularity but the individual performers careers as well.

Minstrel discourse of authentic blackness went far beyond the music, dance, and dialect. In some cases, white audience members who were unfamiliar with black people, culture, and identity, mistook the blackface performers for actual blacks. This was one of the problematic complexities surrounding antebellum minstrel discourse of authentic blackness. Magazine articles would often blur the lines between minstrel performance and black people, making them sound one and the same. In *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art*, an unnamed writer discusses the minstrel show in the same terms presenting its authenticity in representing blackness:

The prevailing characteristics of the melodies which this period produced are their perfect and continual lightness, spirit, and good humor; but the true secret of their favor with the world is to be found in the fact that they are genuine and real. [emphasis added] They are no senseless and ridiculous imitations forged in the dull brain of some northern self-styled minstrel, but the veritable tunes and words, which have lightened the labor of some weary negro in the cotton fields, amused his moonlight hours as he fished, or waked the spirits of the woods as he followed in the track of the weary raccoon. It is impossible to counterfeit or successfully imitate one of these songs, as it would be for a modern poet to produce a border ballad like Chevy Chase or Lord Jamie Douglas. It is not alone the patient and laborious student of Negro minstrelsy that can detect the ring of the false metal.<sup>xliv</sup>

The article states that the music of the minstrel shows were "genuine and real." The whole article is centered on a discourse associating every minstrel image however fictitious, with some reality in the black identity. The article then claims that the music

did not come from northern minstrels but rather directly from the slaves. This sentence is a bit confusing in the context of the article. It surreptitiously alludes to the white minstrel performers who wore burnt cork to become black for the stage; but simultaneously denies the role of the white performer, claiming that no one could “successfully imitate” the songs. If one were trying to ascertain the race of the minstrel performers by reading this article, any reader would be led to believe that the performers might have actually been black. Later in the article the writer calls the show African Minstrelsy, alluding to the concept that the minstrel performers were black or African rather than black-faced whites. This lack of clarity surrounding blackface was in part what popularized the medium, but also represents the inconsistent state that early minstrelsy unconsciously resided. As Lott explains, Mark Twain’s mother is an example of someone confused by minstrelsy’s form and structure. After watching the show, she was very impressed by the performance of the black men on stage, not realizing that the men were in blackface. Eric Lott provides an example of *New York Tribune* writer Horace Greenly who is sympathetic to slavery and Black experience but simultaneously promotes minstrelsy as musical expression of slave culture. Lott says that this is an example of the many different responses to early minstrelsy and proves this kind of incongruity within the shows that would allow for such mis-interpretation.

The minstrel show is commonly known for its derisiveness in its presentation of black culture and even more for its seemingly racist audience. Eric Lott argues quite contrarily, that in fact there were varied responses to the early minstrel shows and that the audience opinions about the show were not universal. This variance reflects a certain incongruity or lack of rigidity in form, structure, and ideology within the minstrel shows.

In its early form, blackface performers were often mistaken as black performers, an ambiguity that proved to be extremely profitable in antebellum minstrelsy. However, minstrelsy's early moments of "domination and liberation" do not erase its derisive racial carnivalesque. In any sense blackface both commodified and expropriated blackness and simultaneously essentialized it into simple stereotypical caricatures.

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- <sup>i</sup> Robert Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 65.
- <sup>ii</sup> James Kavanagh, "Ideology," Critical Terms for Literary Study, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 308.
- <sup>iii</sup> Kavanagh, "Ideology," 309.
- <sup>iv</sup> Kavanagh, "Ideology," 311.
- <sup>v</sup> Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America, 67.
- <sup>vi</sup> Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 36.
- <sup>vii</sup> Lott, Love and theft, 19.
- <sup>viii</sup> Lott, Love and theft, 39.
- <sup>ix</sup> Henry Bibb, The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1849) 70.
- <sup>x</sup> Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America, 75.
- <sup>xi</sup> Bibb, The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, 23.
- <sup>xii</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 47.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 47.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 39.
- <sup>xv</sup> Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination. (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1992) 12-13.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 71.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York: Routledge, 1995) 41.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White, 59.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White, 41.
- <sup>xx</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 31.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Sue K. Jewell From Mammy to Miss America: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy (New York: Routledge, 1993) 41-42.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 160.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> "Have a Little Dance," Woods New Plantation Melodies (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1855) 25.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 32.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Stephen J. Gould, The Mismeasure of Man (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996) 120.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Gould, The Mismeasure of Man, 143.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> "A Black Lecture on Phrenology," De Susannah and Thick Lip Melodist (New York: 1850) 80-81.

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- xxviii "Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves," Teaching American History 8 Feb. 2007  
 <<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=179>>
- xxix Lott, Love and Theft, 18.
- xxx Lott, Love and Theft, 34.
- xxxi "We'll all make a laugh," Christy and White's Ethiopian Melodies  
 (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson & Bros., 1854) 43.
- xxxi "Julia Tanner," Christy and White, Christy and White's Ethiopian Melodies, 37.
- xxxii Charles White, Whites New Illustrated Melodeon songbook, (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson & Bros., 1854) 19.
- xxxiv *Sic et non* is a style of argumentation introduced by medieval philosopher, Peter Abelard in 12<sup>th</sup> century France. He argued that the only way to come to a resolution when faced with two opposing ideologies is to argue for both sides and let the strength of the arguments resolve themselves into one well-reasoned synthesized ideology. In a sense, this is how early minstrelsy presented ideologies of slavery. One song would have clear proslavery messages while the next would reveal the horrors of the slave experience working for the abolitionist cause. Early white minstrelsy presented two opposing ideologies as whites worked out their conflicted feelings about the slave institution.
- xxxv "Ada Day," and White's Ethiopian Melodies, 74.
- xxxvi "The Fatal Separation," Christy and White's Ethiopian Melodies, 26.
- xxxvii Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 33.
- xxxviii Lott, Love and Theft, 24.
- xxxix Lott, Love and Theft, 4.
- xl Lott, Love and Theft, 30.
- xli Robert P. Nevin, "Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy," Atlantic Monthly 20, No. 121 (1867): 609-610.
- xlii This reference is from the minstrel song "Now hold your horses, will you!" Christy and White, Christy and White's Ethiopian Melodies, 9.
- xliii Robert Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America, 26.
- xliv "Negro Minstrelsy—Ancient and Modern." Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art 5.25(1855): 72-73.

## Part I: Black Female Representations in Stage Minstrelsy (1820s-1850s)

### Chapter 2: Interlocking Oppressions of Black Womanhood

*Because there is neither an essence that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.*

*Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.*

—Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”

Blackface minstrelsy established negative stereotypes of African Americans by expropriating blackness and performing, for profit, an essentialized fictional representation of the black character. In its early years minstrelsy was replete with racial ideological ambiguity that helped propel its popularity but also allowed for abolitionist moments within the minstrel show. Such realistic instances or portrayals of the cruel nature of slavery only helped buttress minstrel publicity as a representation of authentic blackness. Robert Toll summarizes this early racial ambivalence within minstrelsy:

Most important of all, many minstrel troupes, before the mid 1850s, expressed fundamental ambivalence about slavery by portraying both positive images of happy plantation blacks and negative condemnations of the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery in the same shows.<sup>i</sup>

Minstrelsy promoted the concept of black inferiority. By constructing a social ideology of black subordination and inferiority with the black mask, the non-black under the mask existed as its antipodal opposite or hidden superior white race.

The minstrel show audiences were mainly composed of new northerners and city-dwellers; however, the minstrel show setting took place in the southern past. For many white northern urbanites the setting of the minstrel show had a nostalgic effect, allowing these new white urban northerners the opportunity to reminisce over the past southern plantation culture that had been lost to industrialization and development of cities. The minstrel show helped preserve a stable southern culture that new industrialized urban life left behind. In *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, Anne Marie Bean describes the unchanging nature of the Southern past: "The desired, mythologized Southern lifestyle was perceived as fixed and unmoving – home-based, passive- as can be evidenced by such minstrelsy favorites as 'My old Kentucky Home' and 'Old Folks at Home.'"ii Bean makes the claim that the Southern black family was seen in opposition to the white family. The white family had stability and so the black family was seen as lacking stability. A patriarch ran the white family and the black family in opposition was seen as a matriarchal family. This representation, she says, feminized the black family. Such feminization is expressed in the minstrel performances of femininity, known as the "female impersonator." She argues quite accurately that the minstrel performance was in part white male desire to create an identity. White blackface minstrelsy as a middle class popular culture re-established the "white male's position as enabler of his own gender and cultural politics."iii The displaced white male was on a quest for defined masculinity. Part of this white northern self-definition of masculinity necessitated imaginative performances of femininity. Whiteness and masculinity would be defined as an identity in opposition to blackness and femininity. It is important to analyze the encoded gender messages hidden within minstrel show stereotypes of women, specifically — black femininity.

Racial burlesque was not the only kind of derisive content within the minstrel show. Racial insult was also accompanied by contemptuous gender performance. Nineteenth century minstrel troupes were predominantly all male. These casts often performed scenes that included black women, who were played by white men. David Roediger comments on the minstrel show's gender exclusivity, "it included very considerable transvestism — with troupes being almost universally all-male and with early minstrel stars gaining fame for 'looking the wench.'"iv Women were not allowed on the minstrel stage. This was a well-established convention within the minstrel tradition. Such gender exclusivity was a direct response to mainstream discussions of women's rights, which the minstrel stage opposed. Robert Toll explains the minstrel mockery of women's rights and the subjugation of not just black men but all women:

Aside from slavery . . . the only serious subject they extensively treated before the war was the women's rights movement, which they consistently ridiculed and condemned . . . Women, like Negroes, provided one of the few stable "inferiors" that assured white men of their status. Since women's rights seemed to be challenging that, minstrels lashed out against the movement almost as strongly as they attacked negroes who threatened white male superiority.v

For the new Northern urban working-class male audience, a lack of female stage presence (related to social issues of control) associated minstrelsy with the nostalgic southern past; part of this nostalgic past was the social construction of white male supremacy and their systematic control over African Americans and women. This meant that minstrel performances of female slaves consisted of blackened white males masquerading as black women.

Gendered stage performances of black femininity made the African American woman appear characteristically unattractive. She had masculine features, a stylized way of walking, and a very manly stage presence that took away any sense of her womanhood. Her costume would have exaggerated the size of her buttocks. She had huge feet, so large in fact, that they flapped when she walked. Her manly disguise was intentionally exaggerated to produce a masculine black female character that opposed and defined, by contradistinction popular images of white delicate femininity. Even if there were any gender ambiguities within the minstrel performance, audience members could reference the playbill to learn the true gender of the black woman. Christy Minstrels<sup>1848</sup> Mechanic's Hall playbill states under Act I that, "Julius' Bride- *Parody* [was played by] George Christy" and under Act II, "Miss Lucy Long, originally represented by him [was also played by] George Christy."<sup>vi</sup> In the first act, the playbill clearly tells us that the female will be played as a caricature or parody of femininity. Even in its humorous form these images still impressed negative social and racial ideologies of black womanhood. The cross-gendered woman in the second act was Miss Lucy Long, George Christy's most famous female stage character. In some minstrel shows like the *Woods Late Fellow's Minstrels*, one could ascertain the gender of the performers from the troupe name alone. The *Woods Minstrels* was in fact an all-male troupe. Eric Lott quotes an 1853 *New York Tribune* article discussing the white male dressed in Mulatta drag: "Lucy Long' was sung by a white negro as a male female danced."<sup>vii</sup> The true gender of the cross-dressed performers would have been either clear or readily available in the playbill; the performative or creative nature of black female gender performance within minstrelsy was no secret. There was general agreement between audience members and stage

performers that the black woman was in fact a cross-dressed man performing a female role.

The race of the minstrel performers was not always clear to early antebellum white audiences. Many early patrons were fooled by troupe titles such as, Ethiopian Minstrels or Ethiopian Serenaders, assuming that the strange new dark men in front of them were legitimate Negroes. Gender performance did not have the same kind of visual ambiguity as race nor was its popularity dependent on mainstream belief in its authenticity. When newspaper articles and show ads promoted the genuine stage Negro, as a marketable ideology surrounding the minstrel characters, gender was quite appositionally part of the discussion. Instead of marketing the authentic black woman, minstrel promoters publicized the masculine nature of the all-male minstrel troupe. This constructed notion of the minstrel show as masculine and authentically black made the show a contemporary representation of the nostalgic southern past. Patriarchy was in fact a central part of this southern plantation past with white men directly controlling popular images of blackness and femininity. The 1848 playbill proudly expresses the satirical nature of the female role and clearly states that a male will be playing the part. Eric Lott summarizes Marjorie Garber's position on gender performance and its resistance to ambiguity:

Transvestism, of course, is subject to similar instabilities, though, as Marjorie Garber has powerfully argued, male cross-dressing can resist the stasis of ambiguity and thoroughly undermine traditional gender categories.<sup>viii</sup>

Female representations were less ambiguous because minstrel publicity proudly promoted its lack of female stage presence and use of male cross-dressing. There was less

visual ambiguity because performers did not showcase positive black female femininity but rather presented derisive black feminine masculinity. Within minstrelsy there was a twenty-five to thirty year period of racial ambivalence from around 1812 (with informal blackface) to the early 1850s (with established blackface). During these years there was less visual and publicized gender ambivalence and therefore an earlier more stigmatized racial stereotype of the black woman emerged. Minstrel content made the black man a main focus. The black woman was mostly a side character, which meant that she had less time to shine on the minstrel stage. Due to her diminished importance, her stage character had less depth, leaving decidedly limited portrayals of the black female identity and fewer chances for her to break out of these character constraints. She was either represented as a de-sexualized dark-skinned black woman or a highly sexualized bi-racial, Mulatta, or “yaller gal.”

Minstrel show transvestism was partially about building identity. White male and female identity were presented as the opposite of black male and female identity respectively. Garber explains the role of transvestism in building gendered identity, “Cross-dressing is clearly related to its status as a sign of the constructedness of gender categories.”<sup>ix</sup> Minstrelsy created a new mainstream stereotyped identity for the black woman. It was in fact her first formal public acknowledgement. In *Gender in Performance*, Laurence Senelick discusses the creative license involved in the construction of gender through gender performance and its process of typifying identity representations into mainstream symbols:

Consequently, gender roles performed by 'performers' never merely replicate those in everyday life; they are more sharply defined and more emphatically presented, the inherent iconicity offering both an ideal and a critique. Cross-dressing, for instance, is a basic technique in this procedure. As Judith Butler points out, 'An imitating gender drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency'.<sup>x</sup>

Minstrelsy's gender performances were exaggerations of a white imagined black female identity. Performative deviations from realistic diverse images of black woman create this kind of "inherent iconicity" that Senelick discusses. An essentialized black female social identity emerges as a result of this kind of comedic critique on black femininity.

However, it is not the presentation of such icons alone that creates stereotyped images.

As Judith Butler explains, gendered stereotypes become 'types' through repetitive performance of a repeated stylized image:

In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.<sup>xi</sup>

The stereotype begins as comedy and continues (re)producing, giving the black woman little chances to escape her typified representation. The image is repeated over time and both audience members and performers come to believe in their stylized image as it stigmatizes the social ideological identity associated with black women. Judith Butler discusses the persuasive nature of repetition in gender performance:

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief.<sup>xiii</sup>

Repetition over time solidifies the stereotype of the black woman. The images soon create a very specific racial ideological discourse around black femininity on and off the minstrel stage. Through minstrelsy's gender performance Black female masculinity becomes a common social ideology.

Gender performance set stereotypes and caricatures of the black woman in her absence. Audience members knew that the performances of black women were cross-dressed imaginary representations; which meant that there were less serious or dramatic moments for her to escape the shackles of her typified existence. Moments for liberation of the black man in the early minstrelsy were common. He was the focus of the minstrel show and thus had more air time to show a varied early minstrel racial ideology. There were not as many liberating moments or chances for antislavery discourse in representations of the black woman in the way that it existed for the minstrel black man. Her role was supportive and her character was not constructed around a discourse of black female *authenticity*, her character was a parody, a symbol of herself. Essentially, the black woman in minstrelsy was a caricature of her unrepresented absent self. Through this repetitive form of (re) presenting a masculine and exoticized iconic black woman on the minstrel stage her character became stigmatized into mainstream definitions of black femininity.

Cross-dressing isn't only about the construction of femininity as a gender category, but it also deals intensely with issues of masculinity. The setting of the minstrel theater was filled with male assertions of masculinity. Eric Lott describes the theater atmosphere, "First this was indeed a 'manly' preserve, a sphere of traditional male prowess and bravado whose turf loyalties were as likely to result in individual or gang violence as in the camaraderie of the saloon."<sup>xiii</sup> The transvestite performances, especially of the sexualized masculine Mulatta female, combined with the predominantly male audience, leads one to assume that there was a certain amount of homoeroticism within the show setting. Lott explains this homoerotic atmosphere between performers and male audiences:

Garber herself admits, however, that women often become the target of such humorous disguises. This is certainly the case with minstrelsy's many 'wench' characters (played by men at a time when women regularly appeared on the legitimate stage), which offer one of the most revealing discourses on male sexuality in America at mid-century... These 'female' bodies, it is true, were 'also' male, and minstrel performers did not hesitate to flirt with the homosexual content of blackface transvestism.<sup>xiv</sup>

Minstrel shows produced white male gender just as they performed black femininity. In *Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger calls this kind of gender performance, sexual play in homoeroticism. Minstrel resistance to gender binaries through cross-dressing and the very act of female exclusion does allude to a kind of masculine camaraderie and building of masculine identity. An all white, mostly male audience watched a blackened and sometimes cross-dressed white all-male troupe. The flirtatious transvestism within the performances allowed white male audience members to live out their homosexual fantasies while still structuring mainstream black female identity. It is important to

discuss the erotic longings that inhabited the minstrel theater but this discussion would be lacking if it did not also include engaging dialogue interpreting the racialized gendered representations of the black woman on stage.

Before one can begin analyzing the minstrel images of black femininity it is important first to interpret and discuss the parameters by which nineteenth century black female identity was defined. The dominant social ideology of femininity in general had to do with a woman's biological duties. Motherhood was constructed as the most important demonstration of her sexual and feminine existence. Hazel Carby quotes Catherine Clinton as they discuss this institutional reinforcement of such racialized gender roles;

'Without the oppression of all women, the planter class could not be assured of absolute authority. In a biracial slave society where "racial purity" was a defining characteristic of the master class, total control of the reproductive females was of paramount concern for elite males. Patriarchy was the bedrock upon which the slave society was founded...' What I would add to this general observation is that planters' control over reproduction had entirely different consequences for white women and for black women.<sup>xv</sup>

For white upper class southern women, marriage and childbirth were expectations influenced by dominant social ideology. She was expected to give birth to sons who would inherit land. Confined to the home, and reduced to her value solely as a mother, the white mistress was a victim of patriarchal control. However, for black female slaves, childbirth directly resulted in economic profit for the white master. The female slave was not a mother but rather a breeder, "The black slave woman gave birth to property, and directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from

their mothers.”<sup>xvi</sup> Patriarchy and racial supremacy together confined the black woman. Her burden represents two forms of interlocking oppressions simultaneously defining her identity, experience, and character. Hazel Carby says that the image of the white woman was the reciprocal to the image of the black woman. The two identities were interrelated as they oppositely constructed one another:

The sexual ideology of the period thus confirmed the differing material circumstances of these two groups of women and resolved the contradiction between the two reproductive positions by balancing opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood, each dependent on the other for its existence.<sup>xvii</sup>

In a reciprocal relationship black womanhood was presented as the opposite of white femininity. Social ideology defined white femininity, and the minstrel stage provided a venue for presenting and constructing its opposite, black womanhood.

The dominant domestic ideology that defined white femininity was known as, the “Cult of True Womanhood”. The cult was a sentimental female culture that impressed a standard of feminineness, against which all the standards of black womanhood were measured. Carby discusses the pervasive nature of this female standard:

In any assessment of the power of this image of ‘true womanhood’ it is important to consider two aspects of its cultural effect: it was dominant, in the sense of being the most subscribed to convention governing female behavior, but it was also clearly recognizable as a dominating image, describing the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women.<sup>xviii</sup>

The cult of true womanhood was the dominant social ideology that delimited the boundaries of feminine conduct beginning in the 1820s and continuing through to the Civil War. As Hazel Carby has explicated there were four fundamental qualities

associated with true womanhood; domesticity, piety, purity, and submissiveness. A true woman was expected to be fragile, gentle, and passive. Black woman did not fit into these categories, and decidedly so. Female slaves were already defiled by their pigmented skin color but as well, their very slave condition went against the virtues of femininity. Hazel Carby quotes John Blassingame from *The Slave Community*; she explains that through these dominant patriarchal domestic ideologies, black women were excluded from the very definition of woman.

A slave woman...could be 'neither pure nor virtuous'; existing in circumstances of sexual subordination, 'women were literally forced to offer themselves willingly' to their masters. The interpretive ambivalence evident in the juxtaposition of 'forced' and 'willingly' indicates the spectrum of representation of the female slave from victim to active collaborator and a historical reluctance to condemn as an act of rape what was conceived in patriarchal terms to be sexual compliance.<sup>xix</sup>

The black woman's need to defend her sexual purity places her outside of the cult definition. However, even as a willing participant in sexual intercourse with her master, the black female slave is sexually defiled, impure or deviant. Black womanhood existed as a diametrical opposite or a perversion of the cult of true womanhood. By affirmation this white patriarchal idealization defined white femininity, but also defined black womanhood by negation.

Black female sexuality defined white female sexuality, as it was separated outside the framework of true womanhood and was used to set those sexual boundaries. Her sexuality was deviant simply because the black woman was considered to have sexuality. She, unlike the white woman, had sexual desire and this construction placed her outside

definitions of white feminine purity. When the female slave complied with the master's sexual desires, her image was painted as a temptress. Black women were considered promiscuous, because of their sexual experiences, although their promiscuity had nothing to do with choice or free will; most often they were forced to have sex with their masters. In the *Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the uninhibited sexual control for the white male over the black female body, "Fear and fascination of the female body was projected onto the black woman."<sup>xx</sup> Her identity was associated with sex, so that her illicit sexuality would justify white slave-owners sexual abuse of their female slaves.

Black women were othered on the minstrel stage. They were rigidly defined and reduced to two basic archetypes: the asexual dark-skinned woman and the sexualized light-skinned woman. The minstrel African American female was a character for white consumption, quenching white sexual appetite or supporting the white family yet she was simultaneously rejected and set apart. Eric Lott describes the typical female minstrel song as it was presented on the stage:

This portrait is fairly typical of the representation of black women on the minstrel stage, whether simply narrated or fully acted out; the two modes occurred simultaneously as often as not, the narrative detailing the jokey blazon, the oblivious 'wench' ridiculed in person on another part of the stage.<sup>xxi</sup>

Illicit sexuality that lured white men was a characteristic mainly ascribed to one of the two black female archetypes in stage minstrelsy, the biracial woman. The other black female character was highly de-sexualized as the old auntie or colored gal. There are

moments in early minstrelsy when the dark complexioned woman (performed in blackface) is sexualized on the minstrel stage, but this developed as a subordinate ideology with the dominant ideology sexualizing the mixed race, Mulatta, or light-skinned woman. This does not mean that white men weren't attracted to dark complexioned black women (on the contrary, history shows that black women of every shade and complexion have been sexually exoticized, placed outside the framework of white femininity and repressed under a white slave owner's uninhibited sexual control over her body), but rather that there was a dominant sexual discourse around the biracial near white woman. She was demonized as a sexual aggressor so that white men could justify their rape of black women. Discussion of black female sexuality found its dominant voice in contemporary minstrel discourse through the light-skinned black female figure. However, discussion of her sexuality opened a discourse for all black female sexuality. The light-skinned woman was merely the common example. Her whiteness lured white men and consumption of her body directly translated into a sexual expedition of her blackness. The older darker complexioned women, or Old Auntie was often de-sexualized based on her timeless old age and large size. Therefore, she was also assigned differing beauty ideals from whites, as Robert Toll expresses:

They [minstrel blacks] had different standards of beauty. Male minstrel characters described ideal women with feet so big they 'covered up de whole sidewalk' or lips 'as large as all out doors,' or so large a lover could not kiss them all at once. In every way, minstrels emphasized, blacks fell far short of white standards.<sup>xxii</sup>

The differing beauty ideal associated with the darker female set her apart from whiteness. She was considered highly unattractive by white standards of beauty but was often the

love interest of a black male in the minstrel show. In order to explain to a white audience just how any black man could love her, she was assigned different beauty ideals. The constructed minstrel black man was fixated on the white women and a white standard of beauty so often he is represented as desiring a near-white woman. However, in her absence he would settle for his natural attraction to the black woman's separate sphere of beauty. The light complexioned black woman is not assigned the same kind of separate beauty ideal. Her light skin and mixed features moderately conformed to a white beauty standard. She may have been considered highly attractive but this was in the form of exoticism; her body was constructed as a delectable sexual object.

Although the light complexioned black woman was highly sexualized this did not save her from patriarchal control nor her status as property under ownership. Both light and dark, sexualized and un-sexualized, black women were subject to objectification. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Jean-Paul Sartre defines sadism as a person's desire to treat another as an object. For Sartre sadism is the root of objectification. The black woman lived under sadistic patriarchal control. Her fictional plantation story was often told from the perspective of a blackened white male. In the minstrel shows, the black woman was always subject to a man, whether it was her black husband, love interest, or a white master, the minstrel black woman was given a supportive role. For the most part a representative patriarch including black and white men owned her femininity and sexuality. The antebellum minstrel songs, "Gal Wid de Blue Dress On," "Gentle Jenny Gray," and "Mary Blane" are all examples of blackened white men expressing their love of a black female slave:

Gal Wid de Blue Dress On

Now, white folks I'll sing to you,  
About my dearest Dina;  
Oh, she's de gal dat stole my heart,  
Way down in Alabama.  
She was tall an slender 'bout de waist,  
An beautiful as Wenus; Ob all de gals I eber did see,  
She was de greatest genius.

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Den give me de gal wid da blue dress on,  
Dat da white folks call Susanna,  
She stole my heart and away she's gone,  
Way down to Alabama.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Gentle Jenny Gray

My heart is sad, I'll tell you why,  
If you'll listen to my lay;  
Which makes me weep when I sing,  
Of my gentle Jenny Gray . . .<sup>xxiv</sup>

Mary Blane

Once on a time I lov'd a gal,  
I'll tell you all her name;  
She never caused me pain;  
But on one dark and stormy night,  
I lost my Mary Blane . . .<sup>xxv</sup>

In the beginning of each song the speaker tells his audience about the woman he loved and that the song will be tragic in one form or another. This tragic ending is common in representations of black slave love. Just one song of this kind may not have been threatening but its common repetition within minstrelsy typifies and objectifies the black woman. Over and over again the black woman is an object of the black man's song. Before all three men say their lovers name it is preceded by the pronoun my, implying ownership: "my dearest Dina," "my gentle Jenny Gray," and "my Mary Blane." In the first song, the speaker describes her physique, beauty and genius in a way that sounds more like an auction block sale description than a song about a lover. Her tall and slender waist is a body part that whites commonly focused on within minstrelsy. This is a reference to her role as a sexual object and social breeder. Her small waist exhibited her post pubescent stage and readiness for childbearing. It also conformed to a white beauty ideal of thinness, as largeness was associated with black woman. In *Gone With the Wind*, Clark Gable's character clearly states that he would divorce Scarlet if she ever became as fat as Mammy.

Eric Lott discusses the minstrel black woman's lack of the power to represent herself. The song was about her, and yet even as main character of the song performed by a blackened white male, she is still not allowed to have a voice:

The 'wench' role was made famous in the 1840s by performers such as Barney Williams and George Christy, who vied for the title of originator; . . . As best one can tell, the 'wench' (despite a 'hair-trigger' voice) usually did not sing the song she starred in; the songbook headnote to Charley White's version, 'The Dancing Lucy Long,' for instance, says that the piece was danced by Master Marks and

sung by the band, and Ralph Keeler remembered dancing rather than singing  
Lucy Long.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The black woman is so commonly spoken of by the blackened white male that her character becomes inseparable from his. The black woman's subordinated role to black men in minstrelsy mirrors the white women's subordination to white men. The black woman's subordination is problematic simply because the white family structure did not apply to slaves. Slaves legally could not marry, and the institution of slavery always threatened the relational bonds formed between slaves. A fixed generalized representation of the black woman as the love interest or spouse of a black man is not historical. But this is a small clue into the social ideology of the minstrel show. White patriarchy is the root of this kind of representation that, through repetition, reinforces these images as dominant ideology. The "Virginia Bride" is another song in which, a blackfaced man tells the black woman's story for her.

#### Virginia Bride

Take her her earliest love was thine,  
And all the unchang'd still clings to thee,  
Twining around thee like the vine  
Around its chosen forest tree.  
Take her, a frail but lovely flow'r.  
And next thy heart the bright thing wear  
Nor let her e'er regret the hour  
That placed her young hop blushing there . . .  
Take her, when in after years  
The storms of life blow loud and chill,  
Be thine the hand to dry her tears,  
And thine the voice to comfort still.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The song begins with the command “take her.” The speaker is commanding the newlywed man to take his bride’s virginity. He says that her earliest love was thine, telling the groom that he will be her first lover. The song uses several metaphors to describe her virginity. The unchanging nature of her body that clings to her, the vine that twines around her, and the chosen forest tree are sexual references to her untouched vagina. The song then compares the black woman to a frail flower. The man is not only to take her virginity but he should also wipe her tears and comfort her. These descriptions fall closely in relation to terms that would define the cult image of white femininity. Although one should keep in mind that if there was a woman on stage, for this song, her role would have been a parody as a cross-dressed man played the role. Her femininity would not have appeared like a flower but rather a blackfaced masculine transvestite in a dress fanning her/himself and giggling. The term “frail flower” would have normally been used as a reference to white femininity, however through the command ‘take her,’ the black woman’s role as a sexual object lacking personal agency is upheld. Although minstrel constructions of the black woman denied her femininity, her character was still placed in the subordinated role that confined all women. This presented a dualistic representation of the black woman. On the one hand she was a woman subject to male patriarchy. Only through patriarchal control over her body and sexuality is the black woman given a hint of femininity. Even then, with the accompanied visual homoerotic parody, hers would have represented a deviant sexual femininity. There is a controlling nature to the sexual play in this song. The strength of the command “take her,” leads the viewer to wonder how much of a willing participant this fictional character would have

been in any sexual escapade? Black women in slavery were sometimes paired up with black men and forced to procreate. Minstrel subordination of the black woman enacts patriarchy that ultimately controlled the dissemination of racist sexist stereotypes where black women were merely objects for white male satisfaction.

Neither dark nor light complexioned woman could escape her role as property under white ownership. Julius's Bride, the character that George Christy played as a parody, was meant to represent a dark complexioned bride, meaning the performance of her song included a caricature of black femininity in blackfaced drag.

#### Julius's Bride

When I liv'd way down in ole Virginny,  
I bought a colored gal for a guinea;  
By de rollin' ob her eye, if you chance to pass her by,  
It would cause your heart to palpitate—gib up de ghóst—an' die!<sup>xxviii</sup>

From the very beginning of the song, the audience is aware that the colored gal is an object that has been purchased. She is traded for a guinea and the viewer is led to believe that her worth equals that of swine. The dark woman represented property ownership just as much as the light woman. In this song however, it is not the slave-owner speaking but rather a black slave who has no problem buying a black woman. Even to him she represents property. In "Dancing Lucy Long" a patriarchal blackened male threatens the fair complexioned black woman with what would happen to a wife, hypothetically, that couldn't make him happy. Lucy Long was one of the most famous antebellum yaller gal minstrel songs.

### The Dancing Lucy Long

Oh, if I had a scolding wife, I'd whip her sure your born,  
I'd take her down to New Orleans, and trade her off for corn.<sup>xxix</sup>

When the black woman belongs to a man there is never any hesitation to compare her to property and completely undermine her strength and humanity. He threatens to whip this light-skinned woman and trade her for corn. The speaker reminds Miss Lucy Long and the audience that a black woman has no worth. If she cannot perform the duties required of her (whatever they may be), he could and would trade her for something as cheap as corn. The speaker of the song was a blackfaced man, but the language reducing her to property shows that the song was written from a white patriarchal perspective. Owning slaves was a badge of high social and economic class. Plantation owners were not just white men exacting control over the black woman as part of a cruel system of human betrayal, they, were also rich men who wanted to prove their high economic status. A black woman was worth more than corn to any slave owner. She produced more slaves and directly performed labor. For her worth to be diminished to corn is a statement about the slave's worthlessness in comparison to the slave owner's accumulation of property, valuable assets, and overall economic fecundity.

Minstrelsy's (mis) representations of the black woman contained encoded messages with complex racial and sexual ideology. White male audience's enjoyed the mockery of the black woman as she represented, 'the quintessential mother/whore.' Anne Marie Bean eloquently discusses the "rejection of the mother" as a framework to describe white male social psychology where the "other is to be first loved, then hated."<sup>xxx</sup> In the next two chapters I will describe in great detail the two dominant images of the black

woman in minstrelsy, how they are deeply connected, and what constitutes the different kinds of black femininity on the antebellum minstrel stage.

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- <sup>i</sup> Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America, 66.
- <sup>ii</sup> Anne Marie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," Inside the Minstrel Mask (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 245.
- <sup>iii</sup> Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," 248.
- <sup>iv</sup> David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness (New York: Verso, 1991) 121.
- <sup>v</sup> Robert Toll, "Social Commentary in White Minstrelsy," Inside the Minstrel Mask (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 88-89.
- <sup>vi</sup> Christy Minstrels performing at the Mechanics' Hall, No. 472 Broadway, [Between Grand and Broome St.], Wednesday Evening, Oct. 18, 1848.  
<<http://www.iath.Virginia.edu/utc/minstrel/mibillshp.html>>
- <sup>vii</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 49.
- <sup>viii</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 26.
- <sup>ix</sup> Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1992) 9.
- <sup>x</sup> Laurence Senelick, ed., "Introduction," Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference (London: University Press of New England, 1992) xi.
- <sup>xi</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Theatre Journal 40, no. 4 (1988) 519.
- <sup>xii</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 520
- <sup>xiii</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 86.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 26 – 27.
- <sup>xv</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 24.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 25.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 25.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 23.
- <sup>xix</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 22.
- <sup>xx</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood," Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000) 344.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 26.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Robert Toll, Blacking Up, 76.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> "Gal Wid de Blue Dress on," Woods New Plantation Melodies, 53.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> "Gentle Jenny Gray," Old Plantation Songster, (New York: Fisher & Brother, 1850) 188.
- <sup>xxv</sup> "Mary Blane," Woods New Plantation Melodies, 59.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 160.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> "The Virginia Bride," Old Plantation Songster, 174.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> "Julius' Bride," Woods Minstrel Songs (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1855) 43.
- <sup>xxix</sup> "Dancing Lucy Long," Whites new Illustrated Melodeon Songbook, (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1855) 46.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," 250.

### Chapter 3: The Sexualized Black Woman

The sexualized black female minstrel character is commonly represented in the image of an almost white, biracial, octoroon, or Mulatta woman played by a white male. She is often called “the wench”, “Prima Donna”, or “Yaller gal”. Her character is not performed in blackface. The role is actually performed in white face, using powder to enhance the appearance of her whitened skin. The antebellum minstrel stage displayed a visual and racial bifurcation, where black and white were the only possible categories. There were white masters or slave-owners, blackfaced men and women, and the white faced black woman. There were no visual shades in between. There were also no white or Mulatta black men. In performance of the yaller gal, although the powder was white, the performance of white blackness came through use of dialect, her proclivity toward dance and musical performance, her simple-mindedness, and her role as sexual property. The Mulatta female was often referred to as the ‘tragic Mulatta.’ In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, Donald Bogle elucidates the common representations of the biracial female, “Usually the mulatto is made likeable—even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt)—and the audience believes that the girl’s life could have been productive and happy had she not been a ‘victim of divided racial inheritance.’”<sup>i</sup>

There are certain character traits traditionally associated with the biracial female character. She has a very fair complexion with European facial features. She is flirtatious and aware of her sexuality often using it to gain masculine attention and allure unsuspecting white men. The fact that she is denied entrance into the white community

and family structure is what makes her story a tragedy. She must marry a black man, and even then it is likely that she'll die young or get sold away from her family. The minstrel song "Dinah Clare" represents the typical minstrel yaller gal:

### Dinah Clare

When I was in Virginny land, I lub'd one Dinah Clare;  
Indeed she was most beautiful, de fairest of de fair;  
And all who saw her liquid eye soon fell into her snare,  
And praised and called her beautiful, de lubly Dinah Clare.  
By brooks and streams we wandered, we had no doubts or fears;  
I sang to her my sweetest song, she gave to me her tears;  
And when at night we looked alone in de bright starlight air,  
The luster of dem stars was dimm'd by de eyes of Dinah Clare

\*\*\*

Oh, sweet Dinah Clare  
Oh, sweet Dinah Clare,  
Lubly, lubly Dinah Clare.

\*\*\*

Sweet Dinah Clare I lubb'd her, and she I know lubb'd me,  
I thought my bride de beautiful Miss Dinah she would be;  
But oh! Not so; ah, cruel fate! it drives me to despair,  
Whene'er I think of dat sweet one, ill-fated Dinah Clare.  
Der was one cruel white man, rich, he saw, den lubb'd her, too,  
And tried to gain her gentle heart from her lubb'd Ginger blue.  
And when he found 'twas all in vain, he dreadful den doth swear,  
In spite of all tears, he'd have de gentle Dinah Clare."<sup>ii</sup>

The song presents Dinah Clare in a subordinated role. Once again, the black woman is the object of the black man's song and is contained within white patriarchy. This song is particularly interesting because it includes both forms of patriarchy. The black man wants

to marry her but she can only be his wife once the white man rejects her. When the white man tries to win her heart he realizes that she is black and that his attentions have been wasted in vain. The black woman has no choice or opinion over whom she will marry. The minstrel show mocked freethinking women as blackened white men played with their patriarchal control over the black woman.

The biracial yaller gal represented the seductive and sexually arousing black woman because she was the product of a sexual mixture between a white man and black woman (commonly associated with the slave-owner and the black slave). Her complexion was a reminder to any white male that she was the product of a black and white taboo sexual encounter, however coercive it may have been. Therefore, her character was a gateway opening up mainstream public discussion of black female sexuality, in general. The minstrel image of black femininity “reinforces cultural stereotypes regarding hyper sexuality of the African American female, who yearns for sexual encounters.”<sup>iii</sup> The minstrel yaller gal is the original Jezebel. She looks almost white and often attracts white male suitors. However, because she is black she is not entitled to a fairy tale happy ending. Her drop of black blood negates her whiteness and prevents her from having a family or marriage with a white man. The octoroon female was the Jezebel of the early nineteenth century minstrel show, and was sometimes labeled the, “Tragic Octoroons— [who were] light-skinned ‘mixed blood’ characters with the feelings and sensitivities of whites who were condemned to live as blacks.”<sup>iv</sup>

The fair complexioned black woman was held up against a white beauty standard yet she existed outside the cult definition of white femininity. Because she was rejected

from the cult definitions of white purity and virtuousness, her character was constructed as a sexual being or body for white male consumption. The constructed notion of her light skin as somehow separate but equal to dark black femininity set the seeds for an intra-racial color division. This color division has permeated our black feminine communal cultural bonds since the plantation. This dissension heightens after repetitious popular cultural performance on the minstrel stage creates dominant ideology publicly favoring the light skinned black woman's body while rejecting her womanhood. Dominant ideology promotes one or two main conceptual identities for black women but does not eliminate the many other existing realities; rather, dominant ideology typifies the black female identity, producing a public image that assigns certain characteristics to a person by skin color or in this case—complexion. In the song "Lilly May," the title character is one of the examples of a black woman that is held up to a white standard of beauty:

Lilly May

The fairest of our village maids,  
Was blue eyed Lilly May;  
Her brow was decked with golden curls,  
Her laugh was mild and gay;  
And spotless as a ray of heaven,  
Young love within her lay; . . .  
Showed not a deeper tint of blood  
Than dyed her cheeks of down,  
And innocent like that of heaven  
Her fair young head did crown;  
Oh! Lilly May! I curse the day  
That tempted me to part!

And ever haunting strange regret  
To my sad soul thou art;  
I fear that I have deeply sinned  
And broken thy true heart.<sup>v</sup>

Lilly May is described as having fair skin and blue eyes. Later on in the song the speaker claims that she “showed not a deeper tint of blood,” which means that she appeared white or could ‘pass’. The virtue of innocence is associated with white skin and so the light black woman is described in the same terms. However, later on she has her heart broken when her lover leaves. He gives no explanation for why he left. The speaker, who is telling the story as entertainment, only says that he curses the day he departed in regret. Because Lilly May has black blood, even though it can’t be visually detected, she is doomed to live a tragedy. The terms describing her are closely related to cult descriptions. This is to enhance the audience understanding of her whiteness and to heighten the emotional tragic nature of her story. Hidden within this tragedy of the Mulatta existence is an anti-miscegenation ideology. In “De Pretty Yaller Gal Am a Warning” the minstrel black man is a tool creating dissent among black women as dark feminine complexions of blackness are devalued in comparison to light complexions:

De Pretty Yaller Gal Am a Warning  
Come darkies, all both great and small,  
I hope you will excuse me;  
And de reason why I sing dis song  
Is only to amuse you.  
Some loves white and some loves black,  
In spite of nature’s scorning,  
But of all de gals I eber did see,

Dat little yaller gal was a warning.

\*\*\*

De nice yaller gal de pretty yaller gal,

Dar faces always adorning;

But of all de gals I eber did see,

De pretty yaller gal was a warning

\*\*\*

Dar am a gal in New Orleans

Dat loves me to distraction,

And de reason I don't lub dat gal

Am' case of her complexion.

She tried in vain to win my heart,

And now Ill give her caution,

And dat from me she'd better start,

For de little yaller gal am a warning

De nice yaller gal.

\*\*\*

I went to a Fancy Ball one night,

I am so fond of dancing,

De gals came around me prancing.

We danced all night till de moon went down,

And when de day was dawning

De banjo struck dat good old tune,

'Go home wid de gals in de morning'

De nice yaller gals.<sup>vi</sup>

At the beginning of the song the blackfaced white speaker says that some people love whites and some people love blacks. The next line undermines this comment that for a moment appeared a bit like rhetoric of equality. The line, "In spite of natures scorning," refers to the people loving someone with black skin. This side comment ridicules any

person who chooses to love blacks. If a man loves a black woman first he must get beyond her black skin as it represents a shortcoming. What makes this statement problematic is that the speaker is represented as a black man. We know this because there were no Mulatta men on the minstrel stage and the song is written and performed in black dialect. The black man on stage told a white audience that black men choose light women. In all actuality it was white men performing as black men choosing light black woman over dark women as sexual objects. The light-skinned woman's whiteness gave white men common ground to consume her blackness. However, these instances on the minstrel stage helped promote the concept that the black man really wanted white women and were thus a threat to her purity.

The speaker sings about the yaller gal as though she is somehow different from the white or black woman. She is a temptress that not only white men but every man should beware of; "de yaller gal is a warning." In New Orleans there is a black woman that loves the speaker so much that he is annoyed. His reasoning for not loving the colored gal is her complexion. She is too dark for him to accept. He cannot see past her skin color, even though it is the same as his, and for this reason he rejects her. He actually seems upset that she tries to gain his love. The dark black woman receives a clear warning and is forced to leave his presence. In performance of this song, the speaker represents a black man with an internalized color complex. Later when the speaker attends a ball, the yaller gals come around him prancing. They are flirtatious and desirous of masculine attention, which he is more than happy to oblige. This song is encoded with clear, sexual, dominant ideology. The beautiful dark complexioned black woman is

diminished to “sun-scorch” while the light-skinned female is highly sexualized as an object for men to go home with in the morning.

Some minstrel songs contained metaphorical references to black female sexuality, whereas others were more overt. In *Susy Brown*, the leading character tells the story of a yaller gal that is held to a white standard of beauty but also represents a source of controlled sexuality and surrogate motherhood to white babies:

Susy Brown

I once did court a yaller gal—  
Her name was Susy Brown;  
De white folks said my Susy  
War de belle ob Lynchburg town.

\*\*\*

Den tune up dat old fiddle,  
An let de banjo sound,  
An' I will sing dat good ole song  
About my Susy Brown.  
Susy went to a ball one night  
Along wid Sally Russell;  
She wore her alligator shoes,  
But den forgot her— bussel!

\*\*\*

My Susy she is handsome,  
My Susie she is young;  
I neber seed a yaller gal  
Wid such a flattering tongue . . .  
My Susy looms it berry tall,  
Wid utter like a cow!  
She'd gib nine quarts easy—

But white gal don't know how!<sup>vii</sup>

The blackened man begins the song introducing his audience to Susy Brown. In fact, his first introduction labels her as a yaller gal before her name is even mentioned. Her racial type is the primary piece of information by which all other elements of her humanity take a subordinate position, including her name. Susy goes to the ball wearing her nice shoes but forgets her bussel. She is silly and absent-minded. The yaller gal is an object for sex, labor, and breeding. Intelligence is not part of her constructed black female identity. Even when she is the main character of a song, she is rarely the speaker, unless she is performing as part of a duet.

Susy is described as being handsome and young. She is tall and her breasts are large. They fill with so much milk that they are compared to cow utters. Once again the black woman's body is compartmentalized into profit bearing parts. The speaker then says that white women don't produce as much breast milk. This discussion of black breast milk alludes to the common slave duty of breastfeeding white babies as well as their own. This song suggests that the reason white woman cannot suckle their own babies is because they don't know how to. The black woman, both in sexualized and de-sexualized images, represented surrogate mothers to white children. Her large breasts not only represent sustenance for the white baby, but also sexual intrigue for white men.

The light-skinned black woman was associated with sex. As Carby explains "The figure of the 'beautiful mulatress' and the slave's response to her white mistress embody the contradictory position of black and white women in the sexual dynamics."<sup>viii</sup> It is impossible to divorce the image of black sexuality from the image of white femininity as

the two simultaneously construct one another. The white woman was associated with purity and a lack of sexual prowess. These characteristics evolved in direct opposition to the image of illicit black sexuality.

The cult of purity denied that white women had natural sex drives," for the dominant view was that 'the best mothers, wives, and managers of households know little or nothing of sexual indulgence. Love of the home, children and domestic duties are the only passions they feel.'<sup>ix</sup>

Bean says that through the blackface minstrel female impersonator, "sexuality was saved from disappearance and contained by the white male body."<sup>x</sup> Through female impersonation in minstrel performance the white male body in fact contained sexuality. However, it is not sexuality itself that was in jeopardy of disappearance. White male control over black female sexuality and sexual icons was in jeopardy of disappearance and the female impersonator recreated this kind of sexual control through patriarchy for its Northern urban audiences.

The image of the black woman's overt sexuality coupled with the slave owners ability to own her body, constructed a mainstream discourse around the relationship between slave owners and their female slaves. The black woman was blamed for white male sexual desire over her body. Hazel Carby discusses the intricacies of this relationship as it was socially constructed into mainstream ideology:

Overt sexuality, on the other hand, emerges in images of the black woman, where 'charm' revealed its relation to dark forces of evil magic . . . The white male, in fact, was represented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves . . . Thus the white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his actions toward his black female slaves. On the contrary, it was the female

slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress.<sup>xi</sup>

The discourse around the black woman's illicit sexuality and relationship to her master is quite contradictory. She is sexually alluring and blamed for enchanting the white man under her spell. However, she is simultaneously spoken of as an object under white sexual control and patriarchy. Black women did not have the freedom to be alluring sexual temptresses. The reality that many black mothers cried over the birth of a fair-skinned female represents her role as a powerless sexual object that would most likely have been raped. In an article by Vivien Green, she quotes the Christian Inquirer's response to this kind of treatment of black woman:

Let no one keep down the natural promptings of his indignation by the notion of wooly heads and black skins. Let him rather read the advertisements of these sales . . . Let him not shut his eyes and his heart to the fact, that many who meet this fate are the daughters of white men, daughters brought up in luxury, and taught to expect fortune. Let him not ignore the fact the white skins, fair hair, delicate beauty, often enhance the market value of his country-women thus exposed for sale . . .<sup>xii</sup>

There was also considerable social discourse on the relationship between the fair skinned black woman and the mistress. Hazel Carby summarizes the dynamics of this social mainstream ideology: "The figure of the 'beautiful mulatress' and the slave's response to her white mistress embody the contradictory position of black and white women in the sexual dynamics of the slave system."<sup>xiii</sup> The white woman who was constructed as "The queen of the home," was often given the duty to look after slaves. In *The Southern Lady*, Ann Firor Scott says that the mistress hated her job as a slave

overseer and often her repressed feelings of animosity were enacted not against the white patriarchy upholding the system, but rather on the female slaves that represented a direct threat to her social position. The reproduction of this image only serves to reinforce the already enacted supremacy of white men over black woman. In *Black Bodies, White Bodies*, Sander Gilman expresses the fortified image of the inferior sexual black woman: "Overt sexuality of the black child indicates the covert sexuality of the white woman . . . the black female thus comes to serve as an icon for black sexuality in general."<sup>xiv</sup> White men are able to enact control over the black icon through use of a grotesque image within minstrelsy's imaginary stage performances.

One of the most famous antebellum minstrel characters was Miss Lucy Long. George Christy performed this role as a white (very light-skinned octoroon) black woman. "The 'wench' became the lyric and theatrical object of the song, exhibiting himself in time with the grotesque descriptions."<sup>xv</sup>:

Miss Lucy Long

I jist come out afore you,  
To sing a little song,  
I plays it on the banjo,  
And dey calls it Lucy Long.

\*\*\*

Oh take your time Miss Lucy,  
Take your time Miss Lucy Long.  
Oh take your time Miss Lucy  
Take your time Miss Lucy Long.

\*\*\*

Miss Lucy she is handsome,  
And Miss Lucy she is tall,

To see her dance Cachucha  
Is death to niggers all.

\*\*\*

Oh! Miss Lucy's teeth is grinning  
Just like an ear ob corn,  
And her eyes dey look so winning!  
Oh would I'd ne'er been born.

\*\*\*

I axed her for to marry  
Myself de toder day,  
She said she'd rather tarry  
So I let her habe her way.

\*\*\*

If she makes a scolding wife  
As sure as she was born  
I'll tote her down to Georgia  
And trade her off for Corn.<sup>xvi</sup>

Miss Lucy Long is a character desired by white and black men. However, the speaker is not a white man but rather a blackened white man speaking in dialect with a patriarchal color complex. She is described as attractive and tall. The body type of the sexualized black woman is always closely examined and compartmentalized, whether it is her buttocks, breast, waist, hair, teeth, or complexion. Her sexualized body is part of the minstrel discourse of light-skinned femininity and reinforces a dominant sexual ideology of social repression and objectification through repetitious performance of this black female sexual discourse. Also, we should keep in mind that this discourse was happening around the African American who had no power or control over these representations. The black woman is not seen as a whole person but rather as a body. Her physicality is

also compartmentalized in the 1848 version of the song that gives the yaller gal a differing beauty ideal in an additional stanza:

Miss Lucy, when she trabels,  
She always leaves de mark  
Ob her footsteps in de gravel,  
You can see dem in de dark.<sup>xvii</sup>

In this removed stanza, the light-skinned woman is described as having noticeable footprints in the gravel. Her feet are either very large or she is very heavy, the image may in fact be a combination of both. It is uncommon, in minstrelsy, that the yaller gal would have been physically associated with this differing or inferior standard of beauty, particularly large feet. However, these moments of unclear or evolving racial ideology and the decision to exclude this stanza in later performances of the song represent the rise of the sexualized yaller gal as dominant ideology creating a subordinate ideology of the de-sexualized light-skinned minstrel gal.

In *Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger describes the popularity of this particular sexualized minstrel character: "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."<sup>xviii</sup>

Part of sexualizing the black woman includes control over her black body. The sexualized woman must be psychologically reduced to her status as property so that the man seeking control over her body could attain it. As Anne Marie Bean explains:

It is likely that George Christy was the first female impersonator when he acted the part of Miss Lucy Long in the 1840's . . . Lucy Long and characters like her were assured in their value as sexual objects and they occasionally needed to be reminded that they had the status of property, not personhood.<sup>xix</sup>

Moments that reinforce the black woman's role as property within blackface minstrelsy are strange because the words to the song suggest that the speaker would have been a slave-owner or white male. He threatens to trade her for corn if she gets out of line. Black men did not possess any more power than black women in this patriarchal slave society. Both were living under multiple systems of oppression. The threat to sell his black light-skinned wife is obviously a reference to her role as a slave and not a conversation between one slave and another. Although the song is performed in blackface, the racial patriarchal language of the music is a clear reference to the relationship between the white man and his female slave.

In minstrelsy, there is one song in particular that stands separate from the common images of the black woman. This image is a highly sexualized dark complexioned black woman, yet she is placed in a separate sphere of beauty, hers is the grotesque image. She also wins at the end of the song, making this an uncommon moment of liberation for the sexualized dark-skinned black woman. The song is called "Gal from the South":

#### Gal from the South

Ole massa bought a colored gal,  
He bought her at the South;  
Her hair it curled so very tight  
She could not shut her mouth.  
Her eyes they were so berry small,

They both ran into one,  
And when a fly light in her eye,  
Like a June bug in de sun.

\*\*\*

Her nose it was so berry long,  
It turned up like a squash,  
And when she got her dander up  
She made me laugh, by gosh;  
Old massa had no hooks or nails,  
Or nothin' else like that,  
So on his darkie's nose he used  
To hang his coat and hat.

\*\*\*

One morning massa goin' away,  
He went to git his coat,  
But neither hat nor coat was there,,  
For she had swallowed both;  
He took her to a tailor shop,  
To have her mouth made small,  
The lady took in one long breath  
And swallowed tailor and all.<sup>xx</sup>

First of all, the song begins with the typical statement of ownership establishing the black woman's role as property. Later on it goes into descriptions of her physique, as though the minstrel stage were her auction block. This song is about a slave owner and would have been performed in blackface. The grotesque black body is exaggerated within minstrelsy. The gal's nose is long and her mouth is wide. Bakhtin explains how significant both body parts are in caricature performance: "The nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body."<sup>xxi</sup> Her long nose represents a

compartmentalized object with which the master has found a function. Bakhtin summarizes the exaggerated nose as part of the grotesque image, an image that Scheegans has apparently misunderstood:

Scheegans correctly points out that the grotesque character of the transformation of the human element into an animal one; the combination of human and animal traits is, as we know one of the most ancient grotesque forms. But the author does not grasp the meaning of the grotesque image of the nose: that it always symbolizes the phallus.<sup>xxii</sup>

The phallic nose drives the idea of homoeroticism within the minstrel theater, however it does not explain the image of the vaginal mouth.

The colored gal swallowed the coat and hat that the master hung on her nose. As Bakhtin put it, this is a common representation of the grotesque mouth: "But the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; . . . Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth through which enters the world to be swallowed."<sup>xxiii</sup>

Swallowing the master's things is her only power to renegotiate the terms, assigned by the master, of her body's function. The master is trying to contain her sexuality and her gaping mouth symbolizes rebellion from his control. In the last stanza, the master takes her to the tailor to have her mouth made small. This metaphorizes his desire for sexual control over her vagina, which Gilman explains: "The 'white *mans* burden' thus becomes his sexuality and its control, and it is this which is transferred into the need to control the sexuality of the other, the other as sexualized female."<sup>xxiv</sup> When the black woman swallows up the tailor and all, this is a rare moment to be celebrated. The black woman remains in control over her body and sexuality. The grotesque image here, although still a

caricature offered a rare moment of liberation to the bought and sold, objectified black woman.

The black woman was grotesquely defined by her image as a sexual being. The worth assigned to her body was measured against her worth as a sexual object and professional baby-maker. Sadly, this image summarizes much of the popular representations of light-skinned black women.

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- <sup>i</sup> Bogle, Donald, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, New York: Continuum, 2001.
  - <sup>ii</sup> "Dinah Clare," De Susannah and Thick Lip Melodist, 33-34.
  - <sup>iii</sup> Sue K. Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America, 46.
  - <sup>iv</sup> Toll, Blackening Up, 29.
  - <sup>v</sup> "Lilly May," Old Plantation Songster, (New York: Fisher & Brother, 1850) 153
  - <sup>vi</sup> "De Pretty Yaller Gal am a Warning," Woods New Plantation Melodies (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1855), 48.
  - <sup>vii</sup> "Susy Brown," Woods Minstrel Songs, 53-54.
  - <sup>viii</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 32.
  - <sup>ix</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 26.
  - <sup>x</sup> Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," 246.
  - <sup>xi</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 27.
  - <sup>xii</sup> *Christian Inquirer* quote from Vivien Green, "Hiram Powers's 'Greek Slave:' Emblem of Freedom," American Art Journal 14. 4 (1982) 38.
  - <sup>xiii</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 32.
  - <sup>xiv</sup> Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed. Race, Writing, and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 231.
  - <sup>xv</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 160.
  - <sup>xvi</sup> "Miss Lucy Long," Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture 24 April 2007  
<<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/minstrel/lucylongfr.html>>
  - <sup>xvii</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 160.
  - <sup>xviii</sup> Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 121.
  - <sup>xix</sup> Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," 247.
  - <sup>xx</sup> "Gal from de South," Woods Minstrel Songs, 26.
  - <sup>xxi</sup> Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, 316.
  - <sup>xxii</sup> Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, 316.
  - <sup>xxiii</sup> Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, 317.
  - <sup>xxiv</sup> Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," 256.

## Chapter 4: The De-sexualized Black Woman

The blackfaced woman on the minstrel stage was meant to represent the dark complexioned black woman. Her role was played as a parody or caricature of minstrel burlesque. Names commonly associated with the blackfaced minstrel black woman were Auntie or Old Auntie, colored gal or darkie. The darkie or colored gal was a young girl past her pubescent developmental stage but not quite matured. In some strains of subordinate minstrel ideology she too is sexualized however, dominant representations mostly de-sexualized her. The Auntie, which is antebellum minstrelsy's Mammy, is "a symbol of African American womanhood."<sup>i</sup> She represents black female mature adulthood. However, her image is timeless. The black woman is mature but has no age. She is simply old. Her body is often presented as masculine and cantankerous.

The old auntie is a docile and submissive character who is always willing to acquiesce to the needs and wants of her master. Her subservient loyalty is only characteristic of her interactions with whites. Although her "verbal assertiveness is tolerated when she is giving advice to her mistress or employer. In such instances she assumes a caring and nurturing role."<sup>ii</sup> Her interactions with her fellow African Americans are much different. She is bossy, controlling and strict. It is in these interactions that she is still constructed as unattractive and given masculine characteristics. Although the female slave performed many plantation duties she is unanimously represented as a house domestic on the minstrel stage. "Good Old Dinah" is the common minstrel auntie and the precursor to Aunt Jemima:

### Good Old Dinah

Old Dinah, she is dead and gone,  
Old Massa's kitchen slave;  
The darkies all their work have done  
And followed to her grave;  
For Dinah was as good a girl  
As ever boiled corn,  
And from the hut each day she came  
To blow the dinner horn.<sup>iii</sup>

Good Old Dinah was confined to the kitchen as the cook not only for the white family and their guests but also for the plantation as a whole, including all the other slaves.

Blackface performances helped construct this social notion that black women were inherently good domestics because of their matriarchal family status. The black woman ran the black home and the white home. The only difference was that the black woman had no power in the white home. She is even called girl. "Old Dinah" has aged with wisdom and life experience as the foundation for the white families basic needs and yet she is still reduced to her slave status as a child needing white parental supremacy.

"She is the antithesis of the American conception of womanhood,"<sup>iv</sup> a woman who was far too delicate to perform duties at all. Auntie is commonly represented as a large dark woman with large breasts and buttocks wearing a scarf or rag on her head. In *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, K. Sue Jewell described the large bosom as a place of comfort that can be compared to apple pie in its American-ness.

Binary representations of the black woman produced complex racial ideology. The black woman is represented as the opposite of white femininity. Within minstrelsy

the African American female was represented as a masculine character. K. Sue Jewell explains how the Auntie, “resembles traditional roles associated with masculinity.”<sup>v</sup> While the blackened woman is represented as a manly minstrel character she also plays a supportive role as the domesticated wife or aunt. The only time she has a verse is during a duet. However, most of the time she is the object of the blackened males song. Her story is universally told from a racist patriarchal perspective. Old Auntie is a strong black woman that can handle working in the fields, and most likely has in the past. Though her minstrel character is confined to the home and domestic responsibilities much like white women who lived under systems of patriarchy. She can cook, clean, and care for the white children, as well as her own. Old Auntie is the perfect mother. These conflicted dualistic representations of the black women confined black femininity, but simultaneously rejected or denied the notion that the black woman was feminine. Her stagnated domestic role was seemingly connected to her social biological role as a breeder. Mammy or the old auntie was the old darky’s counterpart. “She often went by the name of Dinah Roh after that song title. Mammy (an evolved version of Aunt Dinah Roh’s character) was lovable to both blacks and whites, matronly, but hearkening to European peasant woman sensibilities.”<sup>vi</sup> Here is the famous song, “Aunt Dinah Roh”:

#### Aunt Dinah Roe

O, well I remembered old Aunt Dina Roe—  
Her eye dim with age, and her wool like the snow—  
She lived in a hut near the river Pee Dee,  
And more than a mother was Dinah to me;

\*\*\*

For she was the first one to learn me a tune

The first one that taught me to trap the old coon—  
And long as the blood in this body shall flow,  
I'll remember with gratitude Aunt Dina Roh

\*\*\*

She was good the poor darkey—loving and mild—  
She'd joke with the old folks or play with a child—  
She'd frown at the wrong act, but smile at the right,  
And everyone loved her, the black and the white;

\*\*\*

And often when smoking her pipe at the door,  
The birds would fly in and hop over the floor,  
For they knew, though they saw the old cat on the chair,  
That puss couldn't hurt them, for Dinah was there.

\*\*\*

She'd sigh with sorrowing—laugh with the gay—  
Tend on the sick-bed, or join in the play—  
The first at a funeral, wedding, or birth—  
The killer of trouble, or maker of mirth.

\*\*\*

She spoke her mind freely—was plain as the day—  
But never hurt any by what she might say.  
If once she made a promise, it never was broke.  
And her friends would all swear to what Dinah had spoke.

\*\*\*

One beautiful morning, at break of the day,  
I stopped at the old hut, when passing that way—  
I opened the door— what an object was there!—  
My dear Old Aunt Dinah was dead in her chair!

\*\*\*

We buried her under an old willow tree,  
Where many a time she had frolicked with me.

Even Massa wept for her, though she was his slave;  
And Towser, her faithful dog, died o her grave.<sup>vii</sup>

In the first stanza the Old Aunts hair is called wool. This is a common reference to thick black hair. It stands in opposition to the image of the yaller gals brown curls and essentially upper class white women's decorated smooth coils. The image of kinky black hair was assigned negative social connotations as it represented blackness. Every difference of the black body was exaggerated to further distinguish whiteness from blackness. The black body came to represent white abhorrence, consumption, control and profitability.

A blackened white male performed this minstrel song. Aunt Dinah Roh would have been present on the stage acting out her role as a supportive character. The speaker tells his audience about Dinah's motherly influence on his life. She has in fact been a mother to him. The next stanza says that both blacks and whites loved her. She was non-threatening and loyal to whites. Yet her character was more strict and bossy with her black family. The black family was socially constructed as a matriarchal system; the black woman represented the head of the household feminizing the black family and subordinating black culture to white patriarchal society. She even smoked a pipe at the door to her hut. This was a masculine and savage act. Nineteenth century white women did not smoke and if they did it would have been kept in secret. Aunt Dinah's smoking by the door represents a fearless public display, demonstrating minstrel constructedness of her inherent yet deviant masculine femininity. This act also displays her inferior primal African-ness; pipe smoking was acceptable when performed by white men but characterized as closer to nature when done by black women.

Aunt Dinah speaks her mind but she is unable to say anything hurtful. Although this line seems to reference some inherent niceness, it also references the Masters power over her. Aunt Dinah Roh was not courteous and amiable because it was natural. There were dire consequences for female household slaves who upset the mistress. Aunt Dinah Roh literally never hurts anybody by what she says. She voices her opinion but in a diplomatic way. Speaking her mind is a form of rebellion from the feminine identity. This image masculinized her because the white cult image shunned freethinking women. Along with her loquaciousness, the text says, she is plain as day, which means that she is ugly. This is important because it serves as an example of minstrelsy's social construction of un-attractive blackness in opposition to white beauty.

When the speaker looks for Dinah he finds an object, and the object turns out to be Dinah dead in her chair. The speaker clearly objectifies Dinah. Even in death she cannot escape ownership as property. The last stanza says that the master wept over her death in spite of her slave status. This statement focused more on her role as a slave than anything else. First she is described as an object and later she is clearly presented as property owned by a master. The song then goes on to further explicate her lack of human worth by stating that she was his slave. This kind of repetitious identity description reinforces the concept that black woman were objects for white ownership. Even when the master weeps over her, the constant references to her as property implicate his feelings of loss over her as a free labor employee or financial investment, rather than a dear friend.

The only time the black female minstrel character has a solo is in a duet. In the song "Aunt Cloe and Uncle Tom," Aunt Cloe (the mature black woman) is finally given a

solo. Even when she is granted a speaking role, her voice must be equal to her male counterpart who will almost always have the first stanza:

Aunt Cloe and Uncle Tom

(Solo, Tom)

Don't you remember, Cloe, dear, when you and I were young,  
Sometimes about the old door-steps, with tales of fear and fun,  
We'd sit and talk of ghosts, and oft imagine they were so,  
Till when the time of parting came.

\*\*\*

(Duet)

Ah, yes do I remember, the stars that shone above,  
That twinkled in our childhood, shines bright upon our love.

\*\*\*

(Solo, Cloe)

Ah, yes, do I remember still, the tales you told to me,  
And how I'd long for evening, that I might listen to thee:  
The frightful tales I loved the most, and in the chilly weather,  
For trembling then with fear and fright, so close we got together.

\*\*\*

(Duet)

Ah, yes do I remember, the stars that shone above,  
That twinkled in our childhood, shines bright upon our love.<sup>viii</sup>

This minstrel song is constructed differently than most. The black woman has a speaking role. Regularly this lack of blackened female voice symbolizes a strict subordinate role for black women. The black woman is performed by a white male, and yet she is still too unimportant to have a whole song to herself. However, she is important enough to be the subject of most minstrel songs. In the duet above, once the black woman has a verse, she

describes the black man as holding her close when she trembled with fear. The black woman is still contained by definitions of femininity in her need for masculine support. She is also visually presented as a masculine woman that exists outside the frameworks of femininity and white womanhood. This is one example of how minstrelsy's constructed gender antinomy and visual binary representation was upheld through conflicting messages in the music.

The minstrel show's derisive repetitious performance of black feminine burlesque constructed a negative connotation of black skin as unattractive, socially unacceptable and morally reprehensible. Black was inferior to white in all ways that it represented its diametric opposite. The dark-skinned black woman's beauty was constructed in a mainstream discourse that boosted the social image of the de-sexualized and unattractive black woman to dominant ideology, subordinating the sexualized representations of the dark-complexioned woman. "The dark physical presence of the black woman who lacked these two essential qualities was constructed in opposition to the heroine . . . 'The idea of modesty and virtue in a Louisiana colored-girl might well be ridiculed; as a general thing, she has neither.'"<sup>ix</sup> All features associated with the black image were ridiculed as well as the black characters themselves. Common features of the grotesque black minstrel image were: exaggerated big lips that protrude, thick hair often compared to wool, gigantic feet, big bright eyes, and pearly white teeth. These images were examples of the black standard of beauty. Some characteristics were generally associated with the image of the black woman, such as large feet and big hips. The minstrel stage constructed blackness in a realm of otherness. In distancing blackness minstrel whites created a separate standard

of beauty or black ideal that ideologically paled in comparison to whiteness. There were plenty of moments in minstrelsy that featured a blackened minstrel man who falls in love with a dark-complexioned female slave. Because the construction of white beauty was in part based on the opposition of black difference, the black inferior difference was used to represent this black ideal beauty. Minstrel men could be found praising their black women's big feet or large bright eyes. The minstrel woman on stage was most likely proud to show off her big feet. However, white men in minstrel music, for the most part, would not have been attracted to her, and only some minstrel black men would have. She was the antithesis of beauty and these negative references constructed the black woman as unattractive.

"Rosa Lee" is a minstrel song about a blackfaced woman who is praised for having physical characteristics solely attributed to the black body as an inferior standard:

Rosa Lee

When I libd in Tennessee,  
U li a li o la e,  
I went courting Rosa Lee,  
U li a li o la e,  
Eyes as dark as winter night,  
Lips as red as berry bright,  
When first I did her wooing go,  
She said, 'now don't be foolish, Joe!'  
U li a li o la e,  
'Neath the wild banana tree,  
I said you lubly gal, dats plain,  
U li a li o la e,  
Feet as large and comely too,

Might make a cradle of each shoe,  
Rosa take me for your beau,  
She said 'Now don't be foolish, Joe!'  
U li a li o la e . . .<sup>x</sup>

Rosa Lee's physique is described in detail. Her masculine feminine body is set on an auction block called the minstrel stage and presented by a black male. She is described as having dark eyes and lips as bright as berries. Her lips are a sexualized part of her body. The mouth represents the vagina. Just as big lips are associated with unattractiveness they are also a highly sexualized body part. She is described as a lovely plain gal, in other words she is pretty for the black standard but unattractive when held up against a white beauty standard. Her feet are so large they could each be used as a cradle. The grotesque exaggerations of her black body separate the black woman from any association with white beauty.

Another antebellum minstrel song that illustrates this black beauty ideal is, "Sally White." The dark complexioned woman is described as having a flat nose and big lips:

#### Sally White

Oh, Sally White, dark Venus bright,  
For half an hour we've sung beneath thy bower!  
Thy coal-black eyes are closed in bed;  
Oh show us, do they wooly head!  
Mosquitoes humming, humming,  
And banjos tumming, tumming.  
Snore on, till broad daylight . . .

Oh, Sally White, be mine dis night!  
Oh, leave dat bower!

I've meal for thee, my flower;  
'Possum pies and hoe-cake bread;  
Wild honey, too, when we are wed!  
Bless thy proboscis! — how flat thy nose is!  
Thy lips are red and round,  
And weighs most half a pound!  
Thy teeth are white!— this heart doth bite!<sup>xi</sup>

Sally White has coal black eyes, a color that undoubtedly represents the color of her skin. She has a wooly head. This image is in direct opposition to the white beauty ideal of long flowing hair. Therefore the minstrel black woman's thick natural hair becomes another source of her unattractiveness. Minstrel characterizations completely other blackness; blacks even eat different foods from whites. Minstrel blacks ate possum pies and hoe cake with wild honey. The use of the word, "wild," represents African Americans as somehow closer to nature and less civilized than whites. The speaker describes Sally as having a flat nose and red large plump lips that weigh a half a pound. Once again a black woman's large lips are sexualized. They are not just exaggerated; they are also juicy, red and plump. This assigns sexual standards to grotesque images of the black female vagina.

The discourse around the black woman as unattractive, continues into issues of complexion, creating a hierarchy of socially acceptable blackness:

#### Cuffees Do-it

(A duet)

He. Oh, Miss Fanny, let me in,  
For de way I lub you is a sin;  
Oh, lubly Fanny, let me in,  
To Toast my feet and warm my shin

Oh, lubly, let me in?

She. Oh, no I cannot let you in.

Both. To toast your/my feet and warm your/my shin.

She. Sam Slufheel when last we parted,  
You to me did prove false hearted.  
Whitewash Sal you went to see,  
And she aint one bit better dan me.

He. Oh, Miss Fanny, how I prizes,  
Lubly teeth and lubly eyes,  
Your handsome Fanny Elssler feet—  
Growling music, also sweet.<sup>xii</sup>

In this minstrel song, there are two important relationships being represented. The first is the relationship between Fanny and the black man who wants to win her heart. Here she has an equal status to him as she voices her opinion through solo verses. This is an uncommon characteristic in early minstrelsy but is nevertheless welcomed whenever it appears. Even to have the black woman represent herself though white gender performance is better than a blackened voiceless side object, always represented and never representing. The nineteenth century popular images of black femininity contained encoded racist ideology whether she speaks or not, however her speech allows for slow but significant changes in her representations through stylized repetition and subversions of minstrel song material in later black blackface and beyond. In the last stanza the male speaker calls attention to the black woman's body. In order for minstrel performers to explain how the dark black man could love the dark black woman, they were held up to a

different physical standard. The speaker describes Miss fanny's lovely teeth and eyes, as good teeth represented overall healthiness. Her feet are mentioned as being handsome. The song does not say if they were small or large but even so, a white beauty standard would not have paid much attention to the feet at all unless they were exceptionally small.

The relationship in the song between Miss Fanny (a dark complexioned woman) and Whitewash Sal (presumably a light skinned woman) is represented as a competition. The dark woman feels threatened by the light woman saying, "you to me did prove false-hearted, [when] Whitewash Sal you went to see, and she aint one bit better dan me." Skin color is a source of conflict between these two women, who seem to be pegged against one another in the minstrel show. The white beauty ideal is just as much a construction as black unattractiveness. No image is set, rather because race and gender are social constructions, the two overlapping images of black womanhood continue to change as social ideology progresses responding to repetition of popular stylized acts.

Characterizations of the strong black woman existed outside the cult framework. The black woman was strong and her might is what masculinized her, setting her apart from white femininity. "While the portrayal of black women as defiant, refusing to be brutalized by slavery, countered their representation as victims, it also militated against the requirements of the convention of true womanhood."<sup>xiii</sup> The black woman gains the title as head of the household because her strength masculinized her. Hazel Carby discusses the typified image of the black woman as a source of oppression, essentializing black female strength:

The image of the strong, nonsubmissive black female head of a household did not become a positive image, but on the contrary . . . It became a figure of oppressive proportions with unnatural attributes of masculine power. Independent black woman were destined to become labeled black matriarchs <sup>xiv</sup> . . . Men associated 'the idea of female softness and delicacy with a correspondent delicacy of constitution' and recoiled if a woman spoke of 'her great strength, her extraordinary appetite,' or 'her ability to bear excessive fatigue.' While fragility was valorized as the ideal state of woman, heavy labor required other physical attributes. <sup>xv</sup>

As the black woman is masculinized the black man is pushed to the side and comes to represent deviant or weak masculinity. His character represents the opposite of patriarchal cultural constructions of masculinity. The minstrel stage feminized the black man and masculinized the black woman, reversing the roles of social gender norms. Her strength directly emasculated him and she was at fault for stripping him of his manhood. However the blame never fell where it truly belonged, on the slave institution and racist social ideologies. In *Double Burden*, Yanick St. Jean and Joe Feagin discuss a typical representation of the black woman on the minstrel stage: "One common portrayal is that of the domineering matriarch, an emasculator who is strong, unfeminine and rebellious."<sup>xvi</sup> This image comes from an ideology of the black woman as a survivor. Unfortunately, this image was not positively represented. Rather, the black woman is further scrutinized for her deviant strength. Because she has had to protect herself, historically the black man's role as protector of his family was diminished and his character was greatly feminized. "The victim [slave mothers, daughters, and sisters as victims of sexual abuse or cruel beatings] appeared not just in her own right as a figure of oppression but was linked to a threat to, or denial of, the manhood of the male slave."<sup>xvii</sup>

Slave children are represented within minstrelsy as well. They are often referred to as Picaninny's. However, the picaninny is a specific image of a dark-skinned child with thick hair. Slave children within minstrelsy appeared much like the black woman, genderless and unattractive. The male children are feminized and female children are masculinized. They are minstrel images are also set in opposition to white children's innocence. The black child cannot be considered wholesome because dark skin is naturally polluted representing the opposite of white purity. "Topsey" is one particular character within minstrelsy that is often referred to as a picaninny. The song "Bekase my name am Topsey," was performed by George Christy in blackfaced drag:

I can play the banjo, yes, indeed I can!  
I can play a tune upon the frying pan;  
I hollow like a steamboat fore she's gwan to stop;  
I can sweep a chimney, and sing out at the top.

\*\*\*

Oh, I can jump and I can hop,  
And take a little snopsey;  
Oh, I can sleep just like a top,  
Bekase my name am Topsey.<sup>xviii</sup>

In a small minstrel scene in the film "The Great White Hope" Topsey's character is a little black girl, who is played by a large man. This gives her character a masculine appearance. Her hair is usually represented as an unruly mess with fat braids sticking out all over her head. She is represented as a banjo playing character who loves to jump and hop, reminiscent of the male minstrel character Jim Crow; "every time I wheel about I do just so, every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow."<sup>xix</sup> Within minstrelsy, any black child could be called a picaninny. In "Yaller Busha Belle," the main speaker has a child with a

woman who was “so dark you could barely see her face”. Her child would naturally fall under the minstrel title of picaninny: “Good-bye black man, I’m going away, from you now, Mind de picaninny if you lub me true.”<sup>xx</sup> Although the term is extremely derogatory, it is indicative of the complexity within minstrel racial ideology. Even black children were reduced to essentialized images of underdeveloped humanity. The playful black child was innately musical while the playful white child would have been acting on innocence.

The same activities for blacks and whites were assigned different values. In fact blackness was socially constructed by minstrel performers and helped to further contain white femininity. Naturally, all white characteristics, social attributes, and physicality were considered superior to that of African Americans. The masculine black woman’s strength is equally related to the black man’s emasculation and in minstrel representations she is considered to be unattractive existing in a separate sphere if beauty.

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<sup>i</sup> K. Sue Jewel, From Mammy Miss American and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy (New York: Routledge, 1993) 37.

<sup>ii</sup> Jewel, From Mammy Miss American and Beyond, 42.

<sup>iii</sup> “Good Old Dinah,” Old Uncle Ned Songster (Philadelphia: Fischer and Bros., 1852) 98.

<sup>iv</sup> Jewel, From Mammy Miss American and Beyond, 39.

<sup>v</sup> Jewel, From Mammy Miss American and Beyond, 42.

<sup>vi</sup> “Minstrel Show,” Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, 2007

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/minstrel\\_show](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/minstrel_show)> (21 February 2007), Characters.

<sup>vii</sup> “Aunt Dinah Roh,” Old Uncle Ned Songster, 117.

<sup>viii</sup> “Aunt Cloe and Uncle Tom,” Christy’s and White’s Ethiopian Melodies, 61.

<sup>ix</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 26.

<sup>x</sup> “Rosa Lee,” Whites new Illustrated Melodeon Songbook, 15.

<sup>xi</sup> “Sally White,” Woods Minstrel Songs, 42.

<sup>xii</sup> “Cuffees do it,” De Susannah and Thick Lip Melodist, 30.

<sup>xiii</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 38.

<sup>xiv</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 38.

<sup>xv</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 25.

<sup>xvi</sup> Yanick St. Jean, and Joe Feagin, Double Burden (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998) 7.

<sup>xvii</sup> Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 35.

<sup>xviii</sup> “Bekase My Name am Topsey,” Christy and White’s Ethiopian Melodies, 17

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<sup>xix</sup> Lott, Love and Theft, 23.

<sup>xx</sup> "The Yaller Busha Belle," De Susannah and Thick Lip Melodist, 43.

## **Part II: Blacks in Blackface (1870s – 1890s)**

### **Chapter 5: Taking Black Back**

From around 1855 to the early 1860s, African American men were included in the white minstrel show as blackfaced performers. There were also all-black minstrel troupes. This gave talented African American jazz musicians, composers, singers, and performers the opportunity to showcase their performance skills. As the concept of authenticity was used to market antebellum minstrelsy it was again employed to raise ticket sales of black minstrel shows. Only this time, racially speaking, the troupes were, in fact, “authentic blacks”. As Robert Toll has explained, black blackface became popular because it was thought that blacks could portray the plantation slave with much more realism than white performers. This kind of marketing popularized the black minstrel troupe but also helped to reinforce racist stereotypes that exhibited black inferiority. However, this newfound social position would allow African Americans to take some control over popular representations of themselves as signifiers. Putting a black man behind the minstrel mask gave blackness, however constructed, back to blacks. African American minstrel performers took the opportunity to showcase their talent and ran with it.

Many of these early African American minstrel troupes were black owned and produced. Black minstrel troupes continued to spring up during the early 1860’s. Black minstrel troupes began performing without blackened faces: “Most early black minstrels did not use burnt cork.”<sup>1</sup> For white audiences, this was the first clarification that blackfaced minstrel troupes were, in fact, wearing black makeup. As Robert Toll explains

whites were surprised by the variance in color, shade, and hues of black skin complexion. Until this point, minstrelsy delineated only two polar complexions of blackness, light and dark. African Americans also began incorporating serious musical compositions into the performances, and soon nineteenth century white Americans were not interested in black blackface. "Most white Americans were simply unwilling to accept Negroes as creators and performers of cultivated, classical music." "Many of the shows were phased out. Contemporary white Americans did not want to see gifted blacks with artistic brilliance on the minstrel stage. Part of minstrel's popularity relied on its white patriarchal control over representations of black cultural icons as an inferior social subordinate group. Black men had either to play the stereotypical role or not at all. They had to act like white men imitating black men. Which meant that African Americans had to subvert representations of blackness more discreetly.

Just as the black minstrel show's popularity began to die down, the war ended and slavery was abolished. Whites took over black-owned minstrel troupes and suddenly there was a rekindling of white interest in black minstrelsy. "The northern public, curious about the newly emancipated slaves, flocked to see and learn about them. They had such great impact that 'Georgia Minstrels' became synonymous with 'colored minstrels' (whites called themselves Negro or Nigger minstrels)."<sup>iii</sup>

Stereotypes of blacks as being a musical people helped buttress the popularity of the black minstrel show. However, African American performers were not recognized as talented artists. Rather, the performance was enjoyable because blacks were thought of as childlike or whimsical characters who were closer to nature. The shows were constructed

around this notion that blacks did not need to act or perform. They were mentally inferior and thus could not possess talent as performers. Late nineteenth century white audiences viewed the black minstrel show as a kind of reality television where whites felt that they were experiencing authentic blackness. Blacks were considered to be naturally entertaining and whites voyeuristically consumed the image. The 1855 “Negro Minstrelsy” article from *Putnam’s monthly magazine* reads:

In speaking of this kind of literature the improvisations of the negroes must not be forgotten, but as they are usually but a running commentary on matters passing under the immediate notice of the minstrel, they possess but a local and transitory interest, and a single stanza taken at random will suffice.<sup>iv</sup>

Black performance was misconstrued as innate spontaneity, just as it had been during antebellum minstrelsy. Many troupes were forced to go back under the burnt cork mask simply because white audience members demanded it. Supply and demand was the business of the minstrel show; it ultimately controlled the images on the minstrel stage. Blackface minstrelsy was the only well-paid job in which talented African American musicians and performers could travel and perform. Fortunately though, blacks had the chance to subvert the images even from beneath the white constructed black mask.

Because of this new minstrel form, whites no longer had credibility as blackfaced performers. This is part of what Robert Toll calls the “Grand Transformation” for the white minstrel show. The white show left behind much of its plantation roots in exchange for a larger more diversified show. By the early 1870s blacks universally took over plantation representations of the Southern Negro. The performers were marketed as real emancipated southern plantation slaves. Blackface minstrelsy remained famous through

the 1870s to the 1890s. And “by 1890, because of [black] minstrelsy, blacks had established themselves in American show business.”<sup>v</sup>

For the most part minstrel characters were still rolling watermelons on stage while Aunt Jemima was confined to the kitchen. However, national minstrel audience's were changing. There were many black male and female patrons of the black minstrel show. Robert Toll explains that theater owners were forced to de-segregate show houses to accommodate the masses of black viewers that came regularly to support the minstrel shows: “Black minstrels were so popular with Negroes that some theater owners even deviated from their usual practice of restricting blacks to the ‘Nigger Heaven’ section gallery.”<sup>vi</sup>

Prior to the mid 1870s the black minstrel show was identical in form and content to that of white minstrels. Toll says that once the form and content of white minstrelsy changed so did black minstrelsy, focusing wholly on the plantation and Negro life. This further proved that blacks had “established their primacy as plantation delineators.”<sup>vii</sup> Black minstrelsy was influenced by the white minstrelsy's transformation as well as changing public attitudes about slavery. Then at around 1875 the Fisk Jubilee singers began performing the southern Negro spirituals and white mainstream society discovered real slave music. This boosted northern public interest in the past southern plantation life and slave experience. Up until this point the only mainstream representations of slave life and the southern plantation was the minstrel show. Therefore, many white northerners assumed that the jubilee singers were a minstrel troupe. Although the Fisk singers continued to perform serious black slave spirituals, many minstrel show's began adopting the slave spiritual as part of the minstrel music. “The introduction of African American

religious music [as a representation of] black culture, revitalized minstrelsy. But unlike the early years, Negroes now interpreted it.”<sup>viii</sup> This addition to minstrelsy was incorporated by blacks and therefore gave them the power to transform or at the very least modify the minstrel images of the African American.

Black performers were restricted in their cultural stage representations. They had to work within the confines of the racist minstrel image. Toll discusses the kind of racist imagery that remained within the form:

In the plantation material they themselves wrote, the black minstrels, like their white counterparts, featured the Old Darky nostalgically recalling the happy days of his youth, the flocking children, the tasty possum, the bright cotton fields. The perfume of magnolia blossoms, the lively banjo music, and the comforting warmth of his family.<sup>ix</sup>

Blacks re-wrote the plantation melodies adopting white minstrelsy’s racist images and black dialect, appropriating the image of the plantation black that white minstrel audiences wanted to see while they slightly changed minstrel material. Religious references were taken directly from black slave spirituals, which frequently applied biblical metaphors to everyday life experiences. Robert Toll argues that whites had a more restricted religious belief system and saw black religious references as unnecessary and unimportant. African Americans included obscure biblical references throughout minstrel songs to insert encoded ideology subverting the black minstrel image. These religious images would have had cultural meaning for the black audience but not necessarily for the white. One example of a black minstrel song with religious subverted imagery is, “Whar You Going, Susie? ”:

Whar You Going, Susie?

Boy— Oh! Susie, my darling!

I came here for to see—

Girl—Pompey, stop your fooling;

Why don't you let me be?

Boy—I love you too distraction.

Girl—And I love you de same . . .

Girl—And when we are married,

And free from dis strife—

Boy—Dar is Susy Bryson,

She will be my wife.

Girl—And when de weddin over—

Boy—You can bet we'll never mourn.

Both—We'll jump into de cotton field,

'Til Gabriel blows his horn!<sup>x</sup>

In "Whar You Going, Susie," the boy and girl characters sing about when they are married and free from strife. Strife represents slavery. The couple says that they will work in the cotton fields until Gabriel blows his horn. The reference to Gabriel is biblical.

He is the archangel messenger of God. He will sound his alarms to signal the end of days, which would bring freedom to all people entering the kingdom of heaven. This statement coupled with, “freedom from strife,” suggests that Gabriel’s horn symbolizes the emancipation of slavery. This subverted religious reference brings us to the antislavery discourse within black minstrelsy.

African Americans expressed feelings of antislavery and almost completely excluded whites from their newly created minstrel world. One minstrel song quoted by Robert Toll describes heaven as a place with no overseer. The black audience members who had personal experience with the slave spirituals and their references would most likely have understood these covert messages of freedom. Toll says that most whites were probably unaware of these counter current moments. If whites were aware of these instances, they were not threatened because slavery was already abolished. However, it is important to mention, as Toll says, “protests that challenged white discrimination would not have been [tolerated].”<sup>xi</sup> Overt celebrations of freedom combined with covert religious ones made the minstrel show more interesting to both black and white audiences. In “Since Master Set Us Free,” the message of freedom is combined with racist images of singing, dancing, musical blacks:

Since Master Set Us Free  
De moon am shining bright to-night,  
De little stars do peep  
Down on us darkeys dancing here,  
While massa am asleep.  
We’ll cut the pigeon wing for you,  
And have a jubilee.  
For we got nothing else to do

Since massa set us free.

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Oh, we are free,

We'er happy as can be,

We are always jolly, full of fun,

We're happy as can be;

They call us reckless Sall and Clem,

Since massa set us free.

\*\*\*

We love to sing, or have a dance,

It is our hearts delight,

Especially when we feel so good

As we both feel to-night.

Oh, Sally, say you'll have me;

Oh, Clem, say you'll have me,

Of course I will because you knows

Ole massa set me free.<sup>xii</sup>

This song contains stereotypical representations of the African American. The ex-slaves have nothing to do but dance and sing all day long. In antebellum minstrelsy, slaves could also be found singing and dancing, but never because they were free. In fact, the freed or escaped slave in antebellum minstrelsy wanted to return to slavery:

I've left Alabama a long way behind me,

I've left my old massa and wooly headed Ben;

Dey both have gone crazy, 'kase dey cannot find me,

And I must go back to Alabama again.<sup>xiii</sup>

The saying that “you can’t dismantle the masters house with the masters tools” does not apply to black blackface. The fact that black men performed the stereotype as they sang freedom praises was an example of African Americans dismantling the master’s house by using the master’s tools. Although slavery was abolished, overt freedom references performed by overjoyed African Americans was still a large break away from antebellum representations of blacks. Many southern whites felt threatened by this recently freed black population. Emancipation left a void in the plantation labor force that threatened southern economic stability, dominant cultural ideology and in general the American social system. Also, many whites feared black insurrection. Late nineteenth century whites wanted to see nostalgic antebellum images of the plantation darky, which presented non-threatening subservient blacks. In this song, African Americans performed this kind of black character while gloating over their recent emancipation, mocking the very racial system that had enslaved blacks in the first place. Freedom praises completely undermined the image of the happy plantation slave demonstrating black longing to escape this oppressive system. These minstrel performers walked a fine line reappropriating black stereotypes, but using them to undermine the very system that created it.

The subversions made by the new minstrel writers and performers represent a large turning point for racialized imagery. However, women were still not included on the minstrel stage. There were a couple of female minstrel troupes during the 1870s, but they didn’t last long and were composed of all white casts. For the most part, minstrelsy continued as a primarily masculine endeavor. This does not mean, that the subordinated black woman didn’t also have subversions in their minstrel song material, but rather that

the subversions in her songs would have to coexist with the double oppression of her negative black female minstrel image.

The black woman's role in black minstrelsy was still subordinated. Like white minstrels, the only time she had a voice was in a duet, which was mostly performed with her lover or husband. Patriarchy through gender performance is one primary convention of the minstrel show and along with racial derision would take more time to change. Instead of blackened white men in drag, the colored girl was a blackfaced black male dressed as a female performing black femininity. Although the individual images of the light and dark skinned woman experience subtle changes, their relationship to one another remains the same as it was in white minstrelsy. In late nineteenth century black minstrelsy the competition between the light and dark complexioned woman is sustained. In chapter three's the antebellum minstrel song "De Pretty Yaller Gal Am a Warning"<sup>xiv</sup>, the speaker chooses the light skinned woman over the dark skinned woman, building a divided social ideology into the discourse of black womanhood. Within this song the fair skinned woman is chosen over the dark skinned woman. Not only is the black woman rejected, she is also cautioned and reminded of her place. Although the leading stage character portrayed a blackfaced male as the judge of beauty, it was really a white male constructing this ideology and superficially comparing every measure of blackness against whiteness. Unfortunately in black minstrelsy the fair woman is still represented as the sexual adversary of the dark skinned woman. "Flora Anna Bell" is the yaller gal that the black male performer desire's:

Flora Anna Bell

Oh, dear I feel so happy,

That I could fly away;  
But a yellow gal has told me  
For her dear sake to stay;  
She's pretty and she's handsome;  
In love with her I fell,  
And my pretty charmers cognomen  
Is Flora Anna Bell!

\*\*\*

For all of the girls that e'er wore curls—  
And some cut quite a swell—  
She has pierced more hearts than cupid's darts,  
Has Flora Anna Bell.

\*\*\*

First time that I met her,  
'Twas at a Matinee,  
she tossed her curls so bewitchingly  
And whispered follow me!  
I thought her only joking,  
But how my heart did swell,  
As arm in arm I wandered on,  
With Flora Anna Bell.

\*\*\*

The happy time I coming  
When we will married be;  
The darkies all shall have a ball,  
And they will envy me;  
Until the morning we will dance,  
All sorrow to dispel;  
Then let us hope I'll soon be wed  
With Flora Anna Bell.<sup>xv</sup>

The Mulatta woman in black blackface is still highly sexualized in black minstrelsy. She is a concupiscent female who throws herself at men, using her looks to get what she wants. In the matinee with the speaker, she whispers, "follow me." Flora Anna Bell is a sexual temptress. Her escort to the ball objectifies her skin color proudly displaying her as a piece of arm candy. He shows her off at the ball to make his "darky" friends jealous. Black minstrelsy continues this objectifying social ideology and standard of beauty. The black female complexion comparison was carried through the minstrel medium. This is one image that black minstrels did not subvert. Actually, because black men performed these roles to a partially black audience the stereotypes were reinforced. What began as an arbitrary superficial social construction when performed by whites became a color complex as the images were performed, consumed, and subconsciously internalized by African Americans. These kinds of color valuations construct this notion that one complexion is more attractive than another, when in reality all black women are beautiful.

Generally in antebellum minstrelsy the mature domesticated black woman was represented as an ugly masculine woman. The black mammy was neither attractive nor feminine. Antebellum minstrel discourse around her character glorified her role as the perfect mother raising white children but denied her feminine self-confidence. In the "Gray hairs of My Mother," black minstrel writers and performers powerfully subvert this negative image by calling the mammy "mother," and equating her looks with beauty:

The Gray hairs of My Mother

The gray hairs of my mother,  
This tress, this tress recalls them now,

Again I see them cluster,  
In beauty, in beauty around her brow;  
Oh, then tender are the mem'ries  
That wake from out the past,  
I live again life mourning,  
Too beautiful, too beautiful to last.

Oh, the gray hairs of my mother!  
This tress, this tress recalls them now,  
Again I see them cluster,  
In beauty, in beauty around her brow;  
this tress recalls them now,  
Again I see them cluster,  
In beauty, in beauty 'round her brow, 'round her brow;

Once more I kneel at twilight,  
In childhoods simple, earnest pray'r,  
Once more I see the homestead,  
And all, and all the blessings there!  
Oh lovely tress of silver,  
Whatever cares may be,  
My heart, in all its trials,  
In nearer heaven, is nearer Heaven for thee.<sup>xvi</sup>

The black mother is not confined to her usual role as the caretaker for white children. The Mammy is no longer a slave owned by white men, and neither is she a wife needing the mere mention of a husband. Rather, she is a mother. The very use of the word mother instead of mammy feminizes her character. Her body is not compartmentalized like the black women on the white minstrel auction block. The compliment that Mother's silver hair is beautiful reflects on her overall exquisiteness. This counters the image of mammy

as unattractive. The speaker pays homage to his black mother who has gray hair from life's trials. This helps to combat the image of the masculine mammy. Her wisdom and age are held up with pride. It is rare for minstrel songs to reference black women's hair and not call it wool. Despite the pervasiveness of the white beauty ideal, mothers gray hair represents beauty. In black minstrelsy one can still find racist images passed down from white minstrelsy, but this song shows that black writers and performers helped save the black woman's mainstream identity from universal derision.

Through subverted images of the biracial woman, black minstrels rescued the Mulatta from her tragedy. "Pretty Black-Eyed Flo" is once again objectified by this patriarchal notion of hierarchical color complexion but this time she gets to live happily in the end:

Pretty Black Eyed Flo

My song is of a darling sweet one,  
With pretty, large black eyes,  
And teeth of pearly whiteness,  
To me she is a prize ;  
Her face and form is beautiful,  
And such a graceful air,  
In all this world you'll never find  
Another girl so fair.

She is lithesome and so airy,  
Is this darling little fairy,  
She asked me if I loved her,  
I really couldn't say no;  
She is my only happiness,  
My pretty black eyed Flo.

She is the idol of my heart,  
Is this darling little creature,  
She dresses in the fashion,  
She's a beauty in form and feature;  
We are going to be married soon,  
And what a happy time,  
The day is not far off,  
When Flora will be mine.<sup>xvii</sup>

Flo is a light-skinned woman whose character is constructed around men's responses to her complexion and European features. Not only does she conform to a white beauty ideal, but she also yearns for male attention. Just as Flora Anna Bell whispered in her date's ear, Flo asks her escort if he loves her. She relies on masculine reinforcement of her self-worth or importance as a sexualized object to build her self-image. However, the yaller gal no longer lives a tragic life by antebellum standards. Her body is still objectified but she is actually given a happy ending that doesn't include death or broken hearts. Black love is allowed to bloom, with the song ending on a hopeful positive note.

During Civil War minstrelsy, gender performance of white womanhood replaced some common black characters. The white woman was often found crying over her children killed in battle. The war tore white families apart and this became a central part of the civil war minstrel show. Black minstrelsy focused on the destruction of the black family under slavery, which humanized the black mother. She could be found crying over her lost children sold to distant plantations. The black woman was given back some power, as black minstrels humanized her much in the same fashion that white women were presented during the war. Along with humanizing the black woman, "black

minstrels focused on the threatened black family.”<sup>xviii</sup> In “Old Folks at Home,” the speaker sings of his nostalgic longings for his old plantation cabin with the elderly couple that most likely raised him:

Old Folks at Home

Way down on the Swanee ribber,  
Far, far away;  
Dere’s wha my heart is turning ebber,  
Der’s whar de old folks stay  
And up and down: the whole creation,  
Sadly I roam;  
Still longing for the old plantation,  
And for de old folks at home.<sup>xix</sup>

Slavery threatened the black family. When slaves were emancipated black families began walking in the name of love across state lines trying to find their relatives. Black minstrelsy focused on giving power back to the black woman by recognizing the systematic dissolution of the black family in slavery. There was also considerable focus placed on the old auntie and the old folks at home. The auntie image showed up in black blackface as a recurring theme that is given more emphasis than it was in the past. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass tells his reader about the old woman’s role on many plantations. “Frequently, before the child has reached his twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor.”<sup>xx</sup> Although the old auntie stood as an independent figure in many young slaves lives, minstrelsy patriarchy requires the subordination of the female role to that of

the male. In this case the old auntie's role in slaves' lives could explain the common black minstrelsy image of the old aunt and uncle. Within black minstrelsy the heightened importance of this old couple seems to be a site of cultural transmission.

Late Nineteenth century minstrel shows were humorous to both black and white audiences. The shows consisted of slapstick comedy, irony, silly characters, and not to mention, an all-black cast. Toll says that many of the black audience members belonged to the common working class rather than the bourgeois middle class. African Americans who performed in minstrelsy engaged in very subtle subversions of minstrel lyrics and imagery. These subversions, for the most part, did not affect white audience members who had plenty of overt racist images on the stage with which to focus, rather they were for the blacks in the audience. A wink or a smile coupled with extra emphasis on a word could signal a material subversion to the black audience. Black men had to act like white men imitating blacks. Sometimes just in the way a black minstrel performed this role a little too well, could indicate a comedic reference to black performativity itself. In one stanza of the minstrel song "Slim and Slippery Southern Nig," black minstrel writers mock white viewership of black performativity:

See me dance and slide about,  
I turn myself near wrong side out,  
I hope that you are satisfied,  
For I'm the ladies man,  
This Slim and Slippery southern nig,  
From sunny Alabam.<sup>xxi</sup>

The speaker focuses audience attention on his song and dance. He openly says to his white audience, "I hope you are satisfied," mocking white fixation with stereotypical black images. The speaker discreetly subverts his social commentary through performance. While pretending to be the stereotype for white viewers, the black minstrel performer is actually questioning its existence. This is a material subversion that would have been presented to the black audience as a kind of group inside joke.

Black audience collective laughter served as a catharsis for nineteenth century African Americans to deal with their socially oppressive past and present. They could laugh at the stupidity of the constructed stereotypes and enjoy a moment, for once, where whites were left out of the joke. They could laugh at the silly characters while enjoying middle class entertainment and supporting their friends, family or community members on the stage. Black minstrel patrons were probably the most meaningful fans to black performers: "Their [black minstrel's] greatest source of status and gratification probably came from their black fans."<sup>xxii</sup>

The difference between whites laughing at minstrelsy's racist representations and blacks laughing at the minstrel stage was separated not by intention but rather through the presence of an unspoken inside joke between the black audience and the black performer. This social self-affirmation helped build community membership among African American minstrel patrons. Blacks knew that whites didn't get the inside jokes and that was part of the humor involved in black minstrelsy's subtle subversions. Robert Toll explains the importance of these subverted images:

Perhaps their modifications are of greater historical significance than they were of contemporary impact. But many of the black people in the audience probably

heard and understood this undercurrent of protest and independence. Had they realized that black minstrels, like folk tricksters, had taken white stereotypes of blacks and refashioned them into jibes at whites, they would have appreciated them even more. It is also possible that whites wanting to confirm their caricatures of blacks overlooked this strain. In any case it is clear that black minstrels themselves did not deal the devotion and subservience to white foils that whites chose to believe they did.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Black culture had been stereotyped and the mere absurdity of the typified representations could be seen for their humor. The black audience laughed at the bizarre representations of blackness and the joy in laughing together as a group legitimized their experience, forming a group bond of a separate and unique culture. For the most part, blacks laughed at the jokes for different reasons than white audiences. This demonstrates the dualistic nature of black minstrel humor but also reveals the way in which laughter was used as a social catharsis. Mikko Tuhkanen quotes Charles Baudelaire on the essence of laughter as a tool, granting one the ability to separate from negative stereotypical images:

It is not the victim of a fall who laughs at his own misfortune, unless, that is, he happens to be a philosopher, in other words a being who, as the result of long habit, has acquired the power rapidly to become two persons at one and the same time, and can bring to bear on what happens to himself the disinterested curiosity of a spectator, but that is a rare gift.<sup>xxiv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 200.

<sup>ii</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 197.

<sup>iii</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 199.

<sup>iv</sup> "Negro Minstrelsy—Ancient and Modern." 78.

<sup>v</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 228.

<sup>vi</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 227.

<sup>vii</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 234.

<sup>viii</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 238.

<sup>ix</sup> Toll, *Blacking-Up*, 245.

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- <sup>x</sup> "Whar You Going, Susie?" Foley and Scheffers Big Pound Cake Songster (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1878) 21.
- <sup>xi</sup> Toll, Blacking-Up, 245
- <sup>xii</sup> "Since Master Set us Free" Foley and Scheffers Big Pound Cake Songster, 24.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Christy and White, "Alabama Again," Christy and White's Ethiopian Melodies, 50.
- <sup>xiv</sup> "De Pretty Yaller Gal Am A Warning," full song can be found in Chapter 3 on pages 63-64.
- <sup>xv</sup> "Flora Anna Bell," Foley and Scheffers Big Pound Cake Songster, 52.
- <sup>xvi</sup> "The Gray Hairs of My Mother," Foley and Scheffers Big Pound Cake Songster, 51.
- <sup>xvii</sup> "Pretty Black-Eyed Flo" Foley and Scheffers Big Pound Cake Songster, 27.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Toll, Blacking-Up, 246.
- <sup>xix</sup> Old Folks at Home," Foley and Scheffers Big Pound Cake Songster, 18.
- <sup>xx</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Barnes & Noble classics, 1845) 17.
- <sup>xxi</sup> "Slim and Slippery Southern Nig," Foley and Scheffers Big Pound Cake Songster, 25.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Toll, Blacking-Up, 226.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Toll, Blacking-Up, 248.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Essence of Laughter," quote from Mikko Tuhkanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jaques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy." Diametrics 31.2 (2001): 24.

Afterword: From blackface to black faces

As a form of white working class entertainment blackface minstrelsy narrowly defined black womanhood as a social identity. Nothing about her minstrel image was black or feminine, but rather a constructed identity in direct opposition to the hidden white masculinity beneath. When African American men joined minstrelsy they began to subvert the racist images of the black woman bringing blackness, for the first time, to the minstrel stage and (re) presenting the black woman to an African American and white audience with subtle subversions. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Judith Butler theorizes the use of subversive repetitious acts as a process to change social gender constructions:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.<sup>1</sup>

Black men were forced to perform white imagined overt racist stereotypes. When blacks attempted to modify the public black image by presenting their more talented sophisticated artistic abilities they lost much of their white audience along with their minstrel patronage. Once black men attained a second chance on the stage after slavery was abolished, they surreptitiously worked to undermine the stereotype at the same time that they presented it. African American men used this subversive repetitious style as a beginning process to change the dominant ideology and mainstream image of the black woman. It seemed that black performers of the time understood this process of building social ideology. They understood that images could not and would not change overnight due to white systematic control over popular cultural icons. Black men had learned their

lesson once before and now sought a different method of image subversion. Instead of attempting to change white images of blackness for white audiences, African American stage performers modified the black image for its black audience. Mikko Tuhkanen explains the re-appropriation of negative minstrel images: "The abusiveness of minstrel images can under certain circumstances be turned around and mobilized for self-affirmative purposes by African Americans."<sup>ii</sup>

Although Tuhkanen presents the positive side of subtle image subversion he also perceptively explains re-appropriation's complexity and uncertain outcome. Tuhkanen uses the controversy over the 1998 children's book titled *Nappy Hair* by Carolivia Herron as an example of problematic reappropriation. The book re-appropriated stereotypes of black woman's hair as nappy or wool-like through positive re-affirmation and (re) presentation of this common negative image representing a black girl who is proud of her unique ethnic hair texture:

However, as the 'nappy' hair controversy suggests, the outcome of these strategic reappropriations is never guaranteed . . . We should bear in mind the reappropriability of demeaning representations as well as the unpredictability of the effects of those reappropriations . . . there are dangers in such strategies of resistance.<sup>iii</sup>

Discourse on the problematic nature of re-appropriation is important and necessary. Tuhkanen's intelligent position on re-appropriation does explicate the dualistic representation that can result from racist material subversions. In re-fashioning the stereotype one is still (re) presenting it. However, this was the aim in black minstrelsy. Black men had to perform minstrel material that represented nostalgic racist ideology for contemporary whites and resonated with white minstrelsy's demeaning images. They also

somehow had to change the material to communicate with black audiences and begin an evolutionary process of image transformation.

This process is not without multidimensional layers of complexity. As we saw in chapter 5, black minstrelsy subverted the white images of black femininity, making them more positive and self-affirming to black woman individually. However, the relationship between these black women on the minstrel stage continued to represent social dissent. White minstrelsy created a competition or dividing representation of black woman. The dark-skinned black woman was constantly compared to the light-skinned black woman, while both fell short of the white feminine ideal. These arbitrary feminine complexion comparisons of light and dark have permeated our community enforcing a color hierarchy throughout history since minstrelsy. Within the black community women have fought over the degrees of negative slave experience, social acceptance, body image, hair textures, and sexuality. This feminine intraracial color division should not be essentialized but rather recognized as problematic and disuniting. Antebellum white minstrel images show us that these early representations put black women up against each another. This is not to blame black minstrelsy for its shortcomings. On the contrary, understanding this reality should place blame on nineteenth century white racial ideology that produced it and help us to understand that our intraracial feminine division was all part of blackface minstrelsy's social construction.

In Marlon Riggs, *Black is Black Ain't*, African Americans discuss the re-appropriation of the term black, which had a negative historical connotation. Using statements like 'Black is beautiful,' African American community members were able to change the social construction of the word, "black," and give to it new meaning, one that

could be used for group and individual self-affirmation. Truth be told, negative images of blackness existed outside of blackness. Black men used signifying power to begin a process of change that otherwise would not have been possible.

Black men fought to change representations of their black sisters in a time when we were not allowed to represent ourselves. By (re) presenting the black woman, the negative stereotypes that were not subverted were simply reproduced for the black audience to consume. This subconsciously drove a wedge between sisters in the black community. But in fact, this is part of a reappropriative evolutionary process. It takes time to phase in and out new conceptions of race and gender. Unfortunately, black men had no other publicly accepted popular images to work with. Therein lies the complexity of reappropriation; we must adapt the racist images that already exist. Understanding this reality, it is now our job to diversify popular representations of black woman. The bonds of sisterhood that join black women are critical in building community solidarity for our social movement forward.

The collective laughter of the black audience to the inside jokes or subtle subversions from the black minstrel stage is, on the one hand, partly responsible for reinforcing the divide among black woman and on the other hand partly responsible for building a black community membership. Tuhkanen quotes Francois Roustang who explained the role of laughter as therapy: “[T]his possibility [of laughing at oneself] indicates the possibility of a therapy. It serves as a criterion for beginning therapy, because the possibility of laughing at oneself is the minimum distance from oneself required at the beginning of a cure.”<sup>iv</sup> Black audiences could dispel their social frustrations through laughter. Their anger and aggression towards America’s socially

oppressive racial system was able to express itself as a separate entity from the black person experiencing the laughter. As Charles Baudelaire has explained, laughter represents the becoming of two separate identities; the laugher “has acquired the power rapidly to become two persons at one and the same time.”<sup>v</sup>

Expressing laughter at the stereotype serves as a catharsis to cope with the stereotype. It also functions as an inside joke binding the community through a shared negative social experience. This is what makes black minstrelsy so powerful. The audience and performer connect in a way that was never possible for African Americans. They are able to enjoy the mockery of their oppressive world and in doing so make it easier to live in such a world. The signification of black femininity by black men is still a welcomed form of comedic representation even in today’s world. Modern films such as *Juwanne Mann*, *Nutty Professor*, *Norbit*, and *Big Momma’s house* all contain elements of humorous black male transvestism. Such modern racialized gender performances resonate with the humor and community bonding of black minstrelsy as they adopted the stereotype of the large black woman while subverting the image with humor. In fact, modern black comedy shows such as *In Living Color* and *Dave Chappelle Show* often re-appropriate black stereotypes. Even animated series such as *South Park* and *The Family Guy* appropriate stereotypes that serve as a self-aware satirical social commentary. The satirical humor ranges from silly to socially profound. Such images can be problematic when they are misunderstood but quite powerful for group members who feel social affirmation of their struggle towards their group membership.

In order to continue changing these images we must be aware of where they came from. We also have to develop a more critical eye for modern image analysis of popular

representations of black women in mainstream culture. Many of us have grown up with so many racist popular representations that we, as a people, have become de-sensitized and uncritical. As unthinking consumers we unwittingly become reproducers of negative stereotypical images. Educating ourselves about where popular images of us began is an important step in continuing to subvert these images. This thesis is meant as a source helping us to become more socially aware of negative images of black woman.

Understanding where current images came from helps is to understand how the images have evolved. We can then place ourselves on this evolutionary timeline, mapping our progress to proactively change and diversify popular representations of ourselves. By battling these images we also combat racist typified dominant ideology.

I charge all black woman today to attempt a reconciliation of our community bonds of sisterhood in recognition that our racially oppressive social experiences of black womanhood included the systematic fragmentation of black feminine unity. I charge our black community as a whole to continue (re) presenting ourselves as we diversify mainstream images of black femininity in popular culture. It is our job to change negative popular representations through repetitious subversion and evolutionary modification of popular images in the same way that black men in the late nineteenth century subverted the image of the black woman and helped build a sense of social community. We have come a long way, but the journey is not over yet.

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<sup>i</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 520

<sup>ii</sup> Tuhkanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jaques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy,"<sup>12</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> Tuhkanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jaques Lacan, and the

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Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy," 12

<sup>iv</sup> Francois Roustang, "How Do You Make a Paranoiac Laugh?" quote from Mikko Tuhkanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jaques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy," 24.

<sup>v</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Essence of Laughter," quote from Mikko Tuhkanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jaques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy," 24

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