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## **Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy**

### **I**

THE BOUNDARIES SEPARATING black and white American cultures in the nineteenth century were marked most vividly along the lines of property and sexuality. Traffic in slave commodities was as defining a racial practice as the preservation of white racial purity. The blackface minstrel show, we now commonly believe, dedicated itself to staging or constructing these boundaries. Eclectic in origin, primitive in execution, and raucous in effect, a theatrical affair principally of the urban North, minstrelsy has been summed up as, in Alexander Saxton's words, "half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy."<sup>1</sup> While it was organized around the quite explicit "borrowing" of black cultural materials for white dissemination (and profit), a borrowing that ultimately depended upon the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural. Though it arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies that underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshly investments through ridicule and racist lampoon. Yet I am not so sure that this is the end of the story. In light of recent work on race that proceeds from postmodern accounts of subjectivity, we probably ought to take these facts and processes as merely a starting orientation for inquiry into the great complexities of racism and raced subjects in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In the following pages, I want to put some of this work to use in the area of blackface, the first, formative public or institutional acknowledgment by whites of black culture. In doing so I hope to show that blackface performance arose from and embodied what we might call a mid-nineteenth-century "racial unconscious"—a structured formation, combining thought and feeling, tone and impulse, and at the very edge of semantic availability, whose symptoms and anxieties make it just legible.<sup>3</sup> A reading of these symptoms and anxieties suggests, contrary to current wisdom, that blackface minstrelsy was based on small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation, which indeed appear to be inevitable when white Americans enter the haunted realm of racial fantasy. Ultimately I am after some sense of how

precariously nineteenth-century white people lived their own whiteness. This will later involve an argument about the uses of ethnography in the historical study of readers and audiences.

Of course there is no doubt that blackface witnessed the efficient expropriation of the cultural commodity “blackness”—a fact well demonstrated in an 1867 *Atlantic Monthly* article rather hypothetically recounting blackface “originator” T. D. Rice’s first blackface performance, in Pittsburgh in around 1830.<sup>4</sup> Confronted one day with the dazzling spectacle of black singing, the story goes, Rice saw his “opportunity” and determined to take advantage of his talent for mimicry. Fortunately, intones *Atlantic* writer Robert P. Nevin, “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.” After some persuasion, “Cuff” agrees to accompany the actor to the theater. There Rice blacks his face, orders Cuff to disrobe, and “invest[s] himself in the cast-off apparel.” As Nevin puts it, on stage “the extraordinary apparition produced an instant effect.”

At this point something very curious happens, and it bears quoting at length. A steamer appears on the Monongahela Wharf, and Cuff—“who meanwhile was crouching in dishabille under concealment of a projecting *flat* behind the performer”—begins to think of his livelihood:

Between himself and others of his color in the same line of business, and especially as regarded a certain formidable competitor called Ginger, there existed an active rivalry in the baggage-carrying business. For Cuff to allow Ginger the advantage of an undisputed descent upon the luggage of the approaching vessel would be not only to forget all “considerations” from the passengers, but, by proving him a laggard in his calling, to cast a damaging blemish upon his reputation. Liberally as he might lend himself to a friend, it could not be done at that sacrifice. After a minute or two of fidgety waiting for [Rice’s] song to end, Cuff’s patience could endure no longer, and, cautiously hazarding a glimpse of his profile beyond the edge of the flat, he called in a hurried whisper: “Massa Rice, Massa Rice, must have my clo’sel! Massa Griffif wants me,—steamboat’s comin’!”

The appeal was fruitless. Massa Rice did not hear it, for a happy hit at an unpopular city functionary had set the audience in a roar in which all other sounds were lost. . . . [Another appeal went unheeded, when,] driven to desperation, and forgetful in the emergency of every sense of propriety, Cuff, in ludicrous undress as he was, started from his place, rushed upon the stage, and, laying his hand upon the performer’s shoulder, called out excitedly: “Massa Rice, Massa Rice, gi’ me nigga’s hat,—nigga’s coat,—nigga’s shoes,—gi’ me nigga’s t’ings! Massa Griffif wants ‘im,—STEAMBOAT’S COMIN’!!”

The incident was the touch, in the mirthful experience of that night, that passed endurance. (609–10)

This passage, in all its woozy syntax and headlong rush, is probably the least trustworthy and most accurate account of American minstrelsy’s appropriation of black culture. Indeed it reads something like a master text of the racial

economy encoded in blackface performance. For one thing, it calls on minstrel devices (ventriloquized dialect, racial burlesque) to narrate the origins of minstrelsy, as if this particular narratable event generated or secreted “naturally” the formal means appropriate to it; its multiple frames (minstrelsy within minstrelsy) amount to so many techniques of black subordination. True to form, a diminished, not to say “blackfaced” Cuff has replaced Rice as this account’s center of attention. And its talk of opportunity and investment, lending and ownership, subsistence and competition is more preoccupied with cultural value than we might have expected. Its racial unconscious, we might say, reveals a great deal of anxiety about the “primitive accumulation” it ostensibly celebrates.<sup>5</sup> The fascination with Cuff’s nakedness, moreover, highlights this as an affair of male bodies, where racial conflict and cultural exchange are negotiated between men. Cuff’s stripping, a theft that silences and embarrasses him on stage but which nevertheless entails both his bodily presence in the show and the titillating threat that he may return to demand his stolen capital, is a neat allegory for the most prominent commercial collision of black and white cultures in the nineteenth century. The cultural expropriation that formed one central drama of the boundary-staging minstrel show was already an unsettled matter of racial intercourse and an injection of “blackness” into the public sphere. But this simultaneous construction and transgression of racial boundaries is something that itself needs explaining, as one performer’s enthusiasm for his blackface act suggests: “I shall be rich in black fun.”<sup>6</sup>

A strong white fascination with black men and black culture, that is to say, underwrote this popular expropriation. Blackface performers were conspicuously intrigued with the street singers and obscure characters from whom they allegedly took the material that was later fashioned to racist ends. There are several accounts of these men’s attraction to their “donors,” and it is no wonder that an aura of illicit sexuality—nineteenth-century observers called it “vulgarity”—shadowed the most chaste of minstrel shows.<sup>7</sup> From the start it appeared that a sort of generalized illicitness was indeed one of minstrelsy’s main objectives. So much is suggested, at least, by the lengths to which reviews and playbills typically went to downplay (even as they intimated) its licentious atmosphere:

First Night of the novel, grotesque, original, and surpassingly melodious ethiopian band, entitled the VIRGINIA MINSTRELS. Being an exclusively musical entertainment, combining the banjo, violin, bone castanetts, and tambourine; and entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features, which have hitherto characterized negro extravaganzas.<sup>8</sup>

One wants to know more about those other objectionable features. Whatever they were, no one took very seriously their alleged absence from the minstrel show, as an 1843 songsheet illustration of the Virginia Minstrels only begins to suggest (fig. 1). Frank Brower the bone player with legs splayed wide; Dick Pelham on the

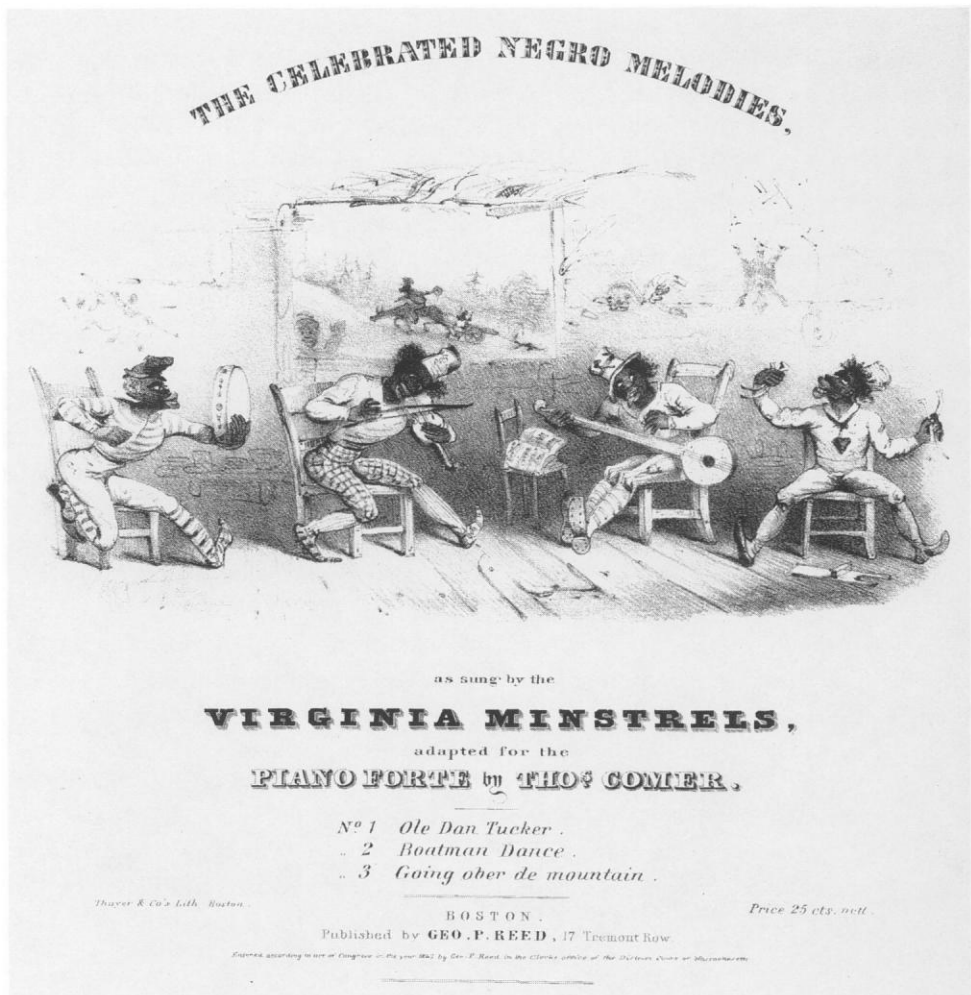


FIGURE 1. Sheet music cover, *The Celebrated Negro Melodies*, 1843.  
Photo: Harvard Theater Collection, Cambridge, Mass.

verge of forced entry of the tambourine; Billy Whitlock in ecstasy behind a phallic banjo: there is no attempt at realism here. The whole scene has rather the air of a collective masturbation fantasy—true enough, we might guess, in capturing the overall spirit of the show. That spirit depended at the very least on the suggestion of black male sexual misdemeanor, and the character of white men's involvement in this institutional Other of genteel culture will bear some scrutiny. While in Rice's act alone one might have seen predominantly black dancing set to music of the British Isles (often Irish jigs) with lyrics of a more or less racist nature, audiences appear to have believed the counterfeit (as we shall see), often so as to border on sexual fervor or, alternately, distaste.<sup>9</sup>

We ought to make some sense of these obfuscations, the hints and denials of vulgarity, the uneasy affirmations of cultural exchange. This language was aimed at a racial structure whose ideological and psychological instability required its boundaries continually to be staged, and which regularly exceeded the dominant culture's capacity to fix such boundaries. Indeed the very notion of secure racial markers, Stuart Hall has argued, is displaced when one acknowledges the constitution of white subjectivity by the constant coupling or complex play of racial fear and desire, "othering" and identification, ambivalence and attraction; at any moment, as in the examples above, the "surreptitious return" of desire or guilt may unsettle the whole business.<sup>10</sup> In blackface minstrelsy this dynamic often tilted toward transgression. Of course I take for granted the casual and undocumented racial intercourse that creolized black cultural forms as it "blackened" the dominant culture, a process that in one sense makes it difficult to talk about racial transgression at all. Yet in the antebellum years a kind of raw commodification was the economic context out of which blackface display emerged, and this display, in turn, depended upon the dangerous, imaginary proximity of "raced" bodies. My subject here is the affective consequences of that proximity—an affair of dollars and desire, theft and love.

## II

The form of the early minstrel show (1843 to the 1860s) underscores the white fascination with commodified "black" bodies. What minstrelsy was not is as important as what it was. Narrative, for instance, seems only to have been a secondary impulse, even though T. D. Rice's blackface burlesque afterpieces were tremendous successes in the 1830s. In their first performances, the Virginia Minstrels gave what they termed "Negro Concerts," containing certain burlesque skits, to be sure, but emphasizing wit and melody; the skits themselves, like Dan Emmett's "Dan Tucker on Horseback," seemed little more than overgrown circus acts.<sup>11</sup> An 1844 playbill publicizing a "Vocal, Local, Joke-all, and Instrumental Concert" conveys both the tenor and the substance of early minstrel shows.<sup>12</sup> In

“sporting saloons” and indeed circuses, among other New York working-class leisure sites, the Virginia Minstrels featured burlesque lectures, conundrums, equestrian scenes, and comic songs, finally settling into an early version of the show form that would become standard minstrel procedure. The evening was divided in two; both parts consisted mainly of ensemble songs interspersed with solo banjo songs, and were strung together with witticisms, ripostes, shouts, puns, and other attempts at Negro impersonation. There was as yet no high-minded “interlocutor” at whom some of the jokes were later directed.<sup>13</sup> Very soon the program’s first part came to center on the “northern dandy negro,” while its second put the “plantation ducky” at center stage. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, as the first part began to be devoted to more sentimental music (sometimes performed without blackface), Emmett’s and other companies added a stirring middle or “olio” section containing a variety of acts (among them a “stump speech”), the third part then often comprised of a skit situated in the South. Seated in a semi-circle, the Emmett troupe placed the bone and tambourine players at either end of the band, and though originally all were comic performers, these two “endmen” began to assume chief importance in most minstrel companies, particularly after the addition of the interlocutor—genteel in comportment and, popular myth notwithstanding, in blackface.<sup>14</sup>

The early emphasis was on what film theorists have called “spectacle” rather than narrative. The first minstrel shows put narrative to a variety of *uses*, but it relied first and foremost on the objectification of black characters in comic set pieces, repartee, physical burlesque. The primary purpose of early blackface performance was to display the “black” male body, to fetishize it in a spectacle that worked against the forward motion of the show and froze “the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation,” as Laura Mulvey has written of women in cinema.<sup>15</sup> With all their riot and commotion, contortion and pungency, performers in these shows exhibited a static, functional unruliness that, in one commentator’s words, “seemed animated by a savage energy,” nearly wringing minstrel men off their seats—their “white eyes roll[ing] in a curious frenzy” and their “hiccupping chuckles” punctuating the proceedings.<sup>16</sup> Here was an art of performative irruption, of acrobatics and comedy, ostensibly dependable mechanisms of humorous pleasure.<sup>17</sup> “Black” figures were there *to be looked at*, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, securing white spectators’ position as superior, controlling, not to say owning, figures. Behind all of the circumlocution going on in descriptions of blackface performance, then, we must begin to glimpse the white male traffic in racial degradation whose cardinal principle was yet a supreme disorderly conduct—a revealingly equivocal means of racial containment.

In this affair, “blackness” provided the inspiration as well as the occasion for preposterously violent, sexual, or otherwise prohibited theatrical material that evinced how unsettling was the black power white performers intended to sub-

jugate. Even the ugly vein of hostile wish-fulfillment in blackface songs reads as a sort of racial panic rather than confident racial power (though, to be sure, the result was hegemonic enough). One notes in particular the relentless transformation of black characters into things, as though to clinch the property relations these songs fear are too fluid. The sheer overkill of songs in which black men are roasted, fished for, smoked like tobacco, peeled like potatoes, planted in the soil, or dried and hung up as advertisements is surely suspicious; these murderous fantasies barely conceal the vulnerability they mask, are refined down to perfect examples of protesting far too much. Here is “Gib Us Chaw Tobacco” (early 1850s):

Natur planted a black baby,  
To grow dis weed divine,  
Dat’s de reason why de niggers  
Am made a ’baccy sign.<sup>18</sup>

Although this verse comes on in the mimed accents of a cut-rate Aesop, self-buttressing fairy tales like the above are so baroque that one imagines their concoction requiring a considerable amount of anxious attention. They are not unlike the “atrocious misrepresentations” (as John Quincy Adams called them) in the infamously rigged 1840 U.S. Census, its imagined North populated with frightful hordes of black lunatics and idiots.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in “My Ole Dad” (early 1850s), the ridiculous titular figure mistakenly throws his washing in the river and hangs himself on the line; he goes in after his clothes but drowns. His son subsequently uses fishing line to catch him, a bloated ghost who returns at song’s end, interestingly enough, to haunt his mistress.<sup>20</sup> In the realm of blackface impersonation, one might say, the house was always haunted, the disavowals never enough to halt the enslaved Other’s encroachment upon white self-identity; the continual turn to the mask itself, its obvious usefulness, suggests as much.

Some songs came even closer to the heart of the matter. More successfully prophylactic than “My Ole Dad” is “Ole Tater Peelin” (early 1850s):

Oh, yaller Sam, turn’d a nigger hater,  
Ah, oo! ah, oo!  
An’ his skin peeled off like boiled potatoe,  
Ah, oo! ah, oo!<sup>21</sup>

The protagonist of this little rhyme is called “tater peelin”; blacks snub him because he becomes colorless, neither “yellow, blue, nor black.” Finally hogs eat him, and plant his bones. It is difficult to say whether one’s speechlessness before this sort of thing owes more to its merciless brutality or its perverse inventiveness. In any case, the concern with fluid, not to say skinless, ego boundaries, together with the imagined introjection of objectified black people, acknowledges precisely the fragility of the racial boundaries the song attempts to police. Obviously the



dilemma of “race” is a matter of the marking not of white people themselves but only, in particular, of the liminal “yaller” produced by intermixture, signifier of the crossed line, of racial trespass. In such songs it is as though whites were at a loss for language to embody the anxiety that in effect constituted the color line, and this indicates how extreme the consequent defensiveness must have been.

Often this essentially reifying effort in the minstrel show ran up against more intimate dangers. To get the force of those charges of “vulgarity,” one must attend to the way certain material—and, we should recall, performers themselves—pressed home a sort of violent corporeal reality, as in the following stump speech (1849):

Den I ’gin to sweat so . . . I sweat half de clothes off my back—tumbled ober a sweat-cloth—took a bite ob dar steaks in de bottom ob my pocket—and absquatulated, just for all de world like a California feverite when he’s bound for de gold region!<sup>22</sup>

Or consider this white man’s bad (if not wet) dream, “Astonishing Nose” (1859):

Like an elephant’s trunk it reached to his toes,  
 An wid it he would gib some most astonishing blows  
 . . . . .  
 No one dare come near, so great was his might  
 . . . . .  
 He used to lie in his bed, wid his nose on de floor,  
 An when he slept sound his nose it would snore,  
 Lik a dog in a fight—’twas a wonderful nose,  
 An it follows him about wherever he goes.  
  
 De police arrested him one morning in May,  
 For obstructing de sidewalk, having his nose in de way.  
 Dey took him to de court house, dis member to fine;  
 When dey got dere de nose hung on a tavern sign.<sup>23</sup>

The immediacy of the object supervising a loss of the spectatorial subject—the anointing of an unsettled spectator with mud and manure, the blows of disembodied phalluses directed against the Law—seems immanent in the “objectionable features” (to recall the first shows of the Virginia Minstrels) of blackface representation. Why indeed might this have been pleasurable at all? Fredric Jameson has noted that fear, “the aesthetic reception of fear . . . the enjoyment of the shock and commotion fear brings to the human organism,” is well-nigh central to the experience of pleasure.<sup>24</sup> From eighteenth-century notions of the sublime to Roland Barthes’s *jouissance*, Jameson argues, the dissolution of the subject in a paroxysm of threatened menace constitutes one way of transforming “sheer horror” into “libidinal gratification.” How much more must this have been the case when, as in minstrelsy, the horror itself was based on a libidinal economy; when precisely the threat of blackface acts was their promised undoing of white male sexual sanctity. If all the hilarity here seems suspicious, it is perhaps because

it was both a denial and a pleasurable conversion of a hysterical set of racial fears. Images of the body may be of particular help in this project, offering a symbolic map of psychic, spatial, and social relationships, or a site for the particular concerns of these realms to be secured or dissolved.<sup>25</sup> By way of the protuberant, “grotesque” blackface body, which, in the words of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, denied “with a laugh the ludicrous pose of autonomy adopted by the subject at the same moment as it re-open[ed]” the normally repressive boundaries of bodily orifices (183–84), the white subject could transform fantasies of racial assault and subversion into riotous pleasure, turn insurrection and intermixture into harmless fun—though the outlines of the fun disclose its troubled sources.<sup>26</sup> Minstrelsy’s joking focus on disruptions and infractions of the flesh amounted to a kind of theatrical dream-work, displacing and condensing those fears, imaged in the “black” body, that could neither be forgotten nor fully acknowledged.<sup>27</sup>

The overdetermined nature of these fears comes through in Mark Twain’s reminiscences of blackface. For the way in which he chooses to celebrate the “genuine nigger show”—he devotes an entire chapter in his autobiography to it—is through a complicated narrative that involves escorting his mother to a Christy’s Minstrels performance in St. Louis. This doubled comic situation, in which Twain pays tribute to the fun of blackface acts by a dose of superadded humor at his mother’s expense, not only places Twain himself in the position of son but evokes from him a certain amount of oedipal hostility. His mother is a woman of the church, and while she delights in all sorts of novelties she must also square these with her religious proclivities. She was, writes Twain, “always ready for Fourth of July processions, Sunday-school processions, lectures, conventions, camp meetings, revivals in the church—in fact, for any and every kind of dissipation that could not be proven to have anything irreligious about it.”<sup>28</sup> Twain means to immerse his mother in some real dissipation—a desacralizing impulse on the part of the son inspired by the unease minstrelsy has provoked in the writer.

Twain gets his mother and one Aunt Betsey Smith to go to the minstrel show by telling them it is an exhibition of African music by some lately returned missionaries:

When the grotesque negroes [Twain here gets carried away with his own conceit] came filing out on the stage in their extravagant costumes, the old ladies were almost speechless with astonishment. I explained to them that the missionaries always dressed like that in Africa.

But Aunt Betsey said, reproachfully, “But they’re niggers.” (62)

Of course the novices are soon merrily enjoying themselves, “their consciences . . . quiet now, quiet enough to be dead,” Twain writes. They gaze on “that long curved line of artistic mountebanks with devouring eyes” (63), finally reinvigorating with their laughter the whole house’s response to a stale joke from the endmen. As is so often the case in accounts of the minstrel show, Twain’s actually

reproduces standard elements of blackface joking, here at the expense of blacks and women both. Indeed the linking of these humorous objects is registered in the syntactical ambiguity as to who possesses the devouring eyes, and this double threat, along with the aggression Twain aims at his mother, points toward the sources of pleasure involved. Twain's enjoyment of blackface fooling and funning arises from a source of humor Freud calls "degradation to being a child."<sup>29</sup> This, of course, was neither the first nor the last time an ambivalent white male attraction to blacks, (self-) degradation, and infantile pleasure were conjoined by way of an imaginary racial Other.

One might speculate with Melanie Klein that Twain's infant sadism owed to blackface's engendering of a longing for oral bliss whose absence he felt was his mother's fault and the "devouring" privilege of which was hers alone.<sup>30</sup> The black and female goads to such extreme ambivalence naturally came together in blackface representations of black women, who generally fared far worse than Twain's mother. "Lubly Fan" (1844) offers one of the most famous examples. (Twain has Jim sing "Lubly Fan" in chapter 2 of *Tom Sawyer*—a scene that again conjoins the naked powers of blackness and femaleness: Jim sings the song as he discovers Tom painting his aunt's fence in punishment for his truancy.) The reader will recognize "Lubly Fan" as "Buffalo Gals," though not, perhaps, its original lyrics:

Den lubly Fan will you cum out to night,  
                     Will you cum out to night,  
                     Will you cum out to night,  
 Den lubly Fan will you cum out to night,  
 An dance by de lite ob de moon.  
  
 I stopt her an I had some talk,  
                     Had some talk,  
                     Had some talk,  
 But her foot covered up de whole side-walk  
 An left no room for me. . . .  
  
 Her lips are like de oyster plant,  
                     De oyster plant,  
                     De oyster plant,  
 I try to kiss dem but I cant,  
 Dey am so berry large.<sup>31</sup>

The singer on the Smithsonian Institution's collection of popular American music gets the ambiguous, almost uncontainable edge of that rising last phrase exactly right.<sup>32</sup> "Dey am so berry large": allusive promise and exaggerated threat; desire so deep and consequential that it scarcely bears uttering, revulsion so necessary that utterance is ineludible.

What Mikhail Bakhtin called "grotesque realism," which in *Rabelais and His World* provides the occasion for so much antibourgeois celebration, here offers up

its less than liberatory effects.<sup>33</sup> This is, to be sure, antibourgeois, but it is black people, black *women*, as the world's body. While minstrel grotesquerie surely had some hand in constructing a raceless popular community-ideal of the "low" and vulgar, it was in this sense more historically useful to some of the people than to all of them. Whether because images of black women abetted the return of rowdy audiences to the pleasures of childhood—to the totalizing, and thus terrorizing, connectedness of pre-oedipal bliss—or because their excess, troubling enough in itself, seemed additionally activated by black male potency, blackface performers tilted their staves at the black female power they simultaneously indulged:

The other day while riding  
 With two ladies by my side,  
 I hardly knew which one to chose [*sic*]  
 To make my happy bride;  
 .....  
 I took them into Taylor's shop  
 To get some ginger beer—  
 They flirted up and down the room—  
 The white folks they looked queer.  
 One swallow'd six milk punches,  
 Half a dozen eggs as well;  
 But fore de bill was brought to pay  
 This darkey thought he'd shell.  
 The other ate six mince pies,  
 Twelve juleps quickly sped;  
 And when dey axed me for de tin,  
 Now what do you think I said?<sup>34</sup>

The minstrel show's "black" female body clinched the horror of engulfing womanhood, gorging women depleting the bankbook. Here, it seems, the extraordinary energy of antebellum misogyny, perhaps even that contempt for white women intermittently repressed through men's "protection" of them from savage black manhood, was displaced or surcharged onto the "grotesque" black woman. These images indeed make Klein's point that the child's longing for union with the absent mother—a longing both precipitated and symbolized by some blackface images; witness, indeed, the lingering resonance of the black mammy figure—is inextricable from its primitive desire for vengeance against her. In this case it is the black woman as the *world's mother*.<sup>35</sup>

Black women apparently called up related fears of castration, about which there was in blackface minstrelsy an inordinate amount of anxiety and fantasy. Blackface fetish-images substituted in complex ways for the terror of the (b)lack.<sup>36</sup> For example, a great deal of disguise tends to be put in play around this fear (as perhaps when Jim sings "Lubly Fan"). Here is "Gal from the South" (1854), which attempts to meet the threat with the white male prerogative of ownership:

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 bery 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 this 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>37</sup>

By now this is pretty familiar stuff. The anxieties here aroused are also familiar: the empowering insistence of the two “boughts” attempts to cancel the threatening open mouth (later to be “made small”) while the phallic nose and the engulfing, vaginal throat finally wreak revenge on the master. As we have seen, white men’s fear of female power was dramatized with a suspiciously draconian punitiveness in early minstrelsy, usually in the grotesque transmutations of its female figures. It is as if that fear were so fundamental that only a major effort of surveillance—again, like a dream, revealing its anxieties even as it devises its censors—would do. This song’s wish to buy women seems an especially suspicious compensatory demand, a commodification that the unruliness of these figures both rationalizes and requires (one doubts that such figures themselves contained the castration threat). Yet the vehemence of this wish, together with the “gal’s” hermaphroditic shape, may also point us in the direction of omnipresent nineteenth-century fears of the black penis.<sup>38</sup>

Especially instructive examples in this regard are the many songs in which black women get their eyes put out, as in “Old Blind Josey” (1854), whose violent protagonist is already (perhaps revealingly) blind:

But den one night he [Josey] danced so high,  
He run his heel in a black gal's eye—  
Oh! Golly me, but didn't she cry!  
Unlucky Old Blind Josey.<sup>39</sup>

Repeated *ad infinitum* such representations signify, if we are to take seriously Freud's connection of Oedipus' blinding and castration. It is perfectly clear, moreover, that this fantasy resonated against the erotic white male looking inherent in "black" theatrical display. So variable are the possibilities of spectator identification in the theater, however, that we might inquire as to just whose castration was being constantly bandied about. On the most immediate level, collective white male violence toward black women in minstrelsy not only tamed an evidently too-powerful object of interest, but contributed (in nineteenth-century white men's terms) to a masculinist enforcement of white male power over the black men to whom the women were supposed to have "belonged." Indeed the recurrence of this primal scene, in which beheeled black men blind black women, certainly attests to the power of the black penis in American psychic life, perhaps pointing up the primary reason for the represented violence in the first place. Yet it is still puzzling that black *women* were so often "castrated"—even if, to follow the metaphor, they were allegorical stand-ins for white men whose erotic looking was undone by the black men they portrayed as objects of their gaze (no doubt this racial undoing, phallic competition and imagined homosexual threat both, was the fear that underlay the minstrel show *tout court*). Or perhaps, extrapolating from Lacan, to castrate the already "castrated" woman was to master the horrifying lack she stood for.

The elastic nature of spectator identifications, I would argue, suggests another possibility, one that does not contradict the general air of male vulnerability being managed or handled here. The blackface image, I have suggested, constituted black people as the focus of the white political Imaginary. Black figures (male and female) became erotic objects both for other characters on stage and for spectators in the theater—with a constant slippage between these two looks. It follows that white men found themselves personified by "black" agents of desire on stage; and this was of course an equivocal ideological effect because, in allowing white men to assume imaginary positions of black male mastery, it threatened an identification between black and white men that the blackface act was supposed to have rendered null. "Old Blind Josey," conversely, uses white men's imaginary "blackness" to *defend them* against black male power. The song calls on tricks of (cross-racial) disguise that Michael Denning has shown to be endemic to working-class cultural production, and it does so in order to make the black male figure of "Old Blind Josey" a representative of white men—already unfortunately castrated, as I have noted—striking out at a black woman who

seems not only female but also a cover for black maleness.<sup>40</sup> Her typically jutting protuberances and general phallic suggestiveness (recall the master's hat on the black "woman's" nose) bear all the marks of the white-fantasized black men who loomed so large in racialized phallic scenarios. It makes perfect sense that castration anxieties in blackface would twin the black penis and the woman, as not only in "Old Blind Josey" but "Gal from the South" and other representations. Another referent for whites of Lacan's threatening (m)other, Frantz Fanon argued, is precisely the black male—an overlap too pressing to ignore in songs such as these.<sup>41</sup>

Thus the "castration" scene played out so often in minstrel songs was an iterative, revealingly compulsive rebutting of black men by momentarily empowered white men. Such dream-work disguises are telling proof of minstrelsy's need to figure black sexual power and white male supremacy at one and the same time. In fact their imaginary resolutions speak perfectly to the structure of feeling behind them: the violence against black women vicariously experienced but also summarily performed; the spectacle of black male power hugely portrayed but also ridiculed, and finally appropriated. Just as attacker and victim are expressions of the same psyche in nightmares, so they were expressions of the same spectator in minstrelsy. This dynamic of mastery was both the genesis and the very name of pleasure in the minstrel show.<sup>42</sup>

We might, after Laura Mulvey, call this dynamic the "pale gaze"—a ferocious investment in demystifying and domesticating black power in white fantasy by projecting vulgar black types as spectacular objects of white men's looking. This looking always took place in relation to an objectified and sexualized black body, and it was often conjoined to a sense of terror. This may recall the common charge, leveled most compellingly by Nathan Huggins in *Harlem Renaissance*, that minstrel characters were simply trash-bin projections of white fantasy, vague fleshly signifiers that allowed whites to indulge at a distance all that they found repulsive and fearsome. I would take this line of thinking much further; for, as Stallybrass and White argue, "disgust bears the impress of desire," and, I might add, desire of disgust.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the repellent elements repressed from white consciousness and projected onto black people were far from securely alienated—they are always already "inside," part of "us." Hence the threat of this projected material, and the occasional pleasure of its threat. (I do not assume that black people escape such splits, only that these occur by different means.) It is important to grasp that for white Americans the racial repressed is by definition retained as a (usually eroticized) component of fantasy. Since the racial partitioning so necessary to white self-presence opens up the white Imaginary in the first place, the latter's store of images and fantasies is virtually constituted by the elements it has attempted to throw off. Which is to say that white subjectivity, *founded* on this splitting, was and is (in the words of Stallybrass and White) a "mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire" (5), absolutely dependent

upon the otherness it seeks to exclude and constantly open to transgression—although, in wonderfully adaptive fashion, even the transgression may in certain cases be pleasurable.<sup>44</sup> And if only to guarantee the harmlessness of such transgression, racist “othering” and similar defenses must be under continual manufacture. *This* is the color line W. E. B. Du Bois was to speak of a half century later, more porous and intimate than his graphic metaphor allowed, and it is the roiling jumble of need, guilt, and disgust that powered blackface acts. It should therefore come as no surprise that minstrel comedy went great strides to tame the “black” threat through laughter or ridicule, or that, on the contrary, the threat itself could sometimes escape complete neutralization. Blackface representations were something like compromise formations of white self-policing, opening the lines of property and sexuality to effacement in the very moment of their cultural construction.

### III

Is there any way to know whether our surmises about such representations bear a relation to the way they were perceived in the nineteenth century? While the attractiveness of an “ethnographic” reception study has recently grown, few have had the temerity to attempt it in any but the present moment; what Janice Radway has called the “dispersed, anonymous, unpredictable nature of the use of mass-produced, mass-mediated cultural forms” has perhaps seemed an insuperable barrier to the reconstruction of a cultural form’s public even in earlier formations of the culture industry.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, a series of questions immediately arises: How construct a public? If one uses blackface reviews, fictionalizations, mentions-in-passing, and other such responses, what is the relation of critical discourse to audience response? How gauge such response? I would like here to attempt one sort of approach to these problems. To begin with, we might observe the practice of Marxist art historian T. J. Clark. Clark has read mid-nineteenth-century French painting through “symptomatic” analyses of its contemporaneous critics, and in this way—by a kind of historical ethnography—produced what are arguably some of the most materialist readings of historical texts in recent criticism. Clark makes an analogy with Freudian theory: if the unconscious is visible only in slips, silences, and (in)admissions in conscious life, so the political unconscious of the public, though usually hidden by official representations that are made of it in the discourse of the critic, can erupt out of gaps in this discourse:

Like the analyst listening to his patient, what interests us, if we want to discover the [public], are the points at which the rational monotone of the critic breaks, fails, falters; we are interested in the phenomena of obsessive repetition, repeated irrelevance, anger suddenly discharged—the points where the criticism is incomprehensible are the keys to its com-



prehension. The public, like the unconscious, is present only where it ceases; yet it determines the structure of private discourse; it is the key to what cannot be said, and no subject is more important.<sup>46</sup>

The nineteenth-century written response to blackface minstrelsy cries out for such analysis. For the relationships of property and sexuality we have seen to be crucial to minstrel representations of black people tended, somewhat surprisingly, to disrupt many accounts of blackface. Most commentators believed minstrelsy to have derived at least in part from slave culture, and found affinities between the two that effectively displaced the differences. Given this perception of origins, anxieties arose about the precise nature of the cultural relationships encoded in minstrelsy, a problem that was fleeting and murky but unmistakably present to most of those who wrote about the minstrel show. It was in the rather obsessive accounts of minstrelsy's origins that these anxieties were most extreme. In what follows, I want to look at how even offhand contemporaneous narratives of the minstrel show's origins attempted to legitimate or resolve pressing ideological questions raised by their subject. For all positions on the origins and make-up of blackface minstrelsy implicitly or explicitly rely on a theory of the racial politics of American culture.<sup>47</sup>

In these tales of minstrelsy's "ancestry," the moment of "racial" exchange between white and black men returns with a vengeance. We should understand this as the desire to fix the object of study in the moment of its emergence, as if to uncover the pure thing (unadulterated by later, superfluous changes or events) were finally to grasp its essence. One notes in this project the development of a discourse on cultural "blackness," narratives of cultural acknowledgment by one race of another, accounts of a relatively trivial cultural form that find themselves worrying the minstrel show's racial economy. They reveal how white performers and audiences conceived of what they were doing in minstrelsy, and the extent to which ventriloquized cultural forms confronted them with a rather more troubling prospect than has been recognized. The moment that interests me in these narratives is the one in which black sounds fill the air and fascinated white men understand for the first time that there are fame and money to be made. We have already seen an account of Rice's first performance; the same *Atlantic Monthly* writer, Robert P. Nevin, fixes this earlier moment as well:

As [Rice] sauntered along one of the main thoroughfares of Cincinnati, as has been written, his attention was suddenly arrested by a voice ringing clear and full above the noises of the street, and giving utterance, in an unmistakable dialect, to the refrain of a song to this effect:—"Turn about an' wheel about an' do jis so, / An' ebery time I turn about I jump Jim Crow." Struck by the peculiarities of the performance, so unique in style, matter, and "character" of delivery, the player listened on. Were not these elements—was the suggestion of the instant—which might admit of higher than mere street or stable-yard development? As a national or "race" illustration, behind the footlights, might not "Jim Crow" and a black face tickle the fancy of pit and circle, as well as the "Sprig of Shillalah" and a red nose? Out of the suggestion leaped the determination; and so it chanced that

the casual hearing of a song trolled by a negro stage-driver, lolling lazily on the box of his vehicle, gave origin to a school of music destined to excel in popularity all others. (608–9)

Rice is credited here with the higher development or logical conclusion of the culture of the street and stable yard. Minstrelsy is claimed as the *completion* of black culture, its professional emergence. For all the belief in the minstrel show as authentic “national illustration,” then, there is also in this account a submerged melting-pot version of American culture *avant la lettre*—cultural mixing almost unconsciously acknowledged, and hastily forgotten. These narratives, in other words, are riveted by the moment of cultural expropriation, and we should look to them, as Pierre Macherey’s work suggests, as much for what they do not say as for what they do—the way they construct, and then sometimes blur, racial boundaries.<sup>48</sup>

The cultural mixing in these narratives, however, usually takes place as it were *en l’air*; there is rarely any actual meeting between racial representatives (unlike the exceptional, harrowing, and probably fanciful account of Rice and “Cuff”). When there is such a meeting, the issues of ownership, cultural capital, and economics arise (as in the Rice and “Cuff” account). These are the two narrative paradigms of minstrelsy’s origins: one in which mixing takes place by an elision of expropriation, through absorption (in both senses), the other in which it takes place by a transfer of ownership, through theft (or occasionally payment). In the accounts I have come across it is nearly always one or the other—obvious attempts to master the fears and anxieties I discussed in the last section. Both, it is safe to say, share an anxiety over the fact of cultural “borrowing.” And both, I would like to suggest, have as their purpose the resolution of some intractable social contradiction or problem that the issue of expropriation represents. That of the first, I would argue, is miscegenation; that of the second, slavery itself. If, as Joseph Litvak has suggested, “anxiety itself has a narrative (i.e., implicitly history-making) structure,” both anticipating and deferring the “deconstructive cancellation of its sustaining techniques,” these narratives of love and theft are manipulations of historical anxiety meant to overcome the threatening implications of their primary concerns.<sup>49</sup>

It should hardly seem strange that miscegenation be suggested (if in oblique and displaced form) in accounts of white men’s fascination with and attraction to black men and their culture, accounts in which the cultures merge. And the logic of such accounts is that fascination may be permitted so long as actual contact is avoided; that is the way the passage above works. The white man is “arrested” and “struck” by a voice only. At the passage’s end, when we do finally see the black man “lolling lazily on the box of his vehicle”—by what means, through whose eyes, where was he before?—this suggestive appearance indicates the reason for his absence throughout: black male sexuality is one component of his arresting voice. In accounts like this there is a relatively transparent white male attraction to and

repulsion from the black penis, for which, as in minstrel songs themselves, the preoccupation with miscegenation serves as a kind of shorthand. These two concerns—a jealous guarding of the prized white female body and a fascination with black male sexual potency that either precedes or follows it—amount in any case to the same thing: the twitchy “love” of my title. James Kennard, Jr.’s discussion (in an 1845 *Knickerbocker*) of the racial mixing attendant upon minstrelsy—he is careful to say that it happens “by proxy” (i.e., in blackface performance)—clarifies the nature of the threat. A brief account of the beginnings of T. D. Rice’s “imitative powers” is given, and then whimsy turns to distressed irony:

From the nobility and gentry, down to the lowest chimney sweep in Great Britain, and from the member of Congress, down to the youngest apprentice or school-boy in America, it was all: “Turn about and wheel about, and do just so, / And every time I turn about I jump Jim Crow.”

Even the fair sex did not escape the contagion: the tunes were set to music for the piano-forte, and nearly every young lady in the Union, and the United Kingdom, played and sang, if she did not *jump*, “Jim Crow”. . . . [Negroes themselves] were not permitted to appear in the theatres, and the houses of the fashionable, but their songs are in the mouths and ears of all. . . . (332–33)

“Contagion” indeed. Later in the article the author tries unsuccessfully to wish away the miscegenating music (personified as “Dan Tucker”):

Depend upon it, he will do no such thing, so long as the young ladies speak to him in such fascinating tones, and accompany their sweet voices with the only less sweet music of the piano. Dan takes it as an invitation to stay; and doubtless many a lover would like to receive a similar rejection from his lady-love; a fashion, by the way, like that in which the country lass reproved her lover for kissing her: “Be done, Nat!” said she, “and (*soto voce* [*sic*]) begin again!” (335)

No wonder, then, that in this first paradigm minstrelsy’s “origins” are ordinarily so displaced and disembodied; talk of cultural merging is too dangerously close to a discourse of “amalgamation.” A bizarre amalgaphobia infects even the briefest of accounts: “These songs, spawned in the very lowest puddles of society, at length found their way, like the frogs of Egypt, into places of admitted respectability. On so *dark* a subject it can hardly be expected that we should be quite precise in reference to dates.”<sup>50</sup> The repetitive, even obsessive insistence on black sexuality in these encounters and in descriptions of their “offspring” has a vaguely unconscious or unmotivated quality; it is less a rhetorical tic or standard reference than something that has slipped by. In an article sympathetic to minstrelsy, one writer imagines “the hum of the plantation”:

I listen with attentive ears—for I know by experience the gratification in store for me—and soon catch the distant tones of the human voice—now more faintly heard, and now entirely lost. . . . Now, anew, I hear the sound of those manly negro voices swelling up upon the evening gale. Nearer and nearer comes the boat, higher and higher rises the

melody, till it overpowers and subdues the noise of the oars, which in their turn become subservient to the song, and mark its time with harmonious beating.<sup>51</sup>

If black men could do this with their voices, imagine what they could do in the flesh! But they remain voices, without presence, imaginative projections: these accounts seem to require that they remain so, even as the black male is compulsively referred to. The accounts all suggest fears and desires that come in the shape of a social narrative involving overpowering black men. That narrative surfaces in many contexts, but refers us in the end to the unresolved—and to these writers fascinating—threat of intermixture suffusing the minstrel phenomenon. Emblems of a relationship between the races that has been culturally repressed, minstrel songs, like the mulatto child of Thomas Jefferson in William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), returned to haunt the most respectable of places.

But miscegenation/homoerotic desire is not the only kind of relationship whites would rather have forgotten, and the other narrative paradigm that organizes tales of minstrelsy's origins expresses an overriding concern with exchange value, the economics of race—slavery itself. Recall that in the *Atlantic Monthly* account above Rice gets the minstrel idea without meeting the black man; it is only later that "Cuff's" clothes come in handy, and the issue of ownership, and value generally, emerges. (This is the only account containing both paradigms.) The central issue of the second paradigm is so pressing that a later writer, in retelling Nevin's *Atlantic* account nearly word for word, nevertheless amends it in a striking way. Nevin writes that "Cuff was precisely the subject for Rice's purpose. *Slight persuasion* induced him to accompany the actor to the theatre" (609, my italics). Amidst an almost verbatim account, H. P. Phelps writes that "a darkey . . . was induced, *for a slight consideration*, to go with the actor to the theatre" (166, my italics). Given the monotony, the happy plagiarism of the general run of these accounts, such minute shifts are quite revealing, slips of the tongue in a "public" discourse. And what they disclose is white guilt or anxiety around minstrelsy as a figure for the plundering of black culture. Generally the intention of this second paradigm is a denial or forgetting of slavery's unremunerated labor—often difficult to sustain as repressed economic facts return.

In the most benign of these accounts, there can be no meeting between racial representatives without some kind of reparation made by whites to blacks—as in the following:

One spring season of the Louisville Theatre, on a clear, bright morning, during the rehearsal of some play in which Mr. Rice had but little to do, as he was standing on the stage, at a back door that looked out upon the rear of a stable-yard, where a very black, clumsy negro used to clean and rub down horses, he was attracted by the clearness and melody of this negro's voice, and he caught the words, the subject of his song; it was the negro version of "Jump, Jim Crow." He listened with delight to the negro's singing for several days, and finally went to him and paid him to sing the song over to him until he had learned it.<sup>52</sup>

This is obviously the legitimating story of cultural “borrowing”: all accounts have been paid in full. The mention of a “negro version” of “Jim Crow” is no doubt a nice touch, implying as it does the neutrality and simple difference of versions; but it reveals, even as it attempts to disguise, precisely the *difference* of versions, the implied inaccuracy of blackface minstrelsy’s appropriating “delineations.” Even in accounts that would deny the notion of imbalance—in the evaluation of cultures or in cultural indebtedness—that imbalance, perhaps inevitably, returns.

It does so most forthrightly in references to the monetary or commodity status of minstrel songs, as well as that of their black “inventors.” Most accounts at some point take up the issue of minstrelsy’s authenticity, and are therefore littered with defenses against or assertions of its “counterfeit” nature: “Base counterfeits as they are, they pass current with most people as genuine negro songs.”<sup>53</sup> Hence the false currency implied in the same writer’s quip that “white men have blacked their faces to represent [Negroes], [and] made their fortune by the speculation” (333). The disapproval of this practice suggests an uneasiness with the surplus value thus generated; its falseness seems to stem from the fact that its black “owners” are not equal buyers and sellers on the market but are “represented,” bought and sold, by brokers. On the other hand, the disapproval may not have directly to do with slavery; a distrust of the “speculation” of minstrelsy may only be a cautious approach to the main chance—made risky in the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, perhaps. But though the “blackness” minstrelsy peddles may be a commodity like any other, it ultimately derives, as these references continually remind us, from a certain southern commodity: “Those of us who have for so many years been looking anxiously forward to the advent of the coming poet who is to take away from America the sin and the shame of never having produced an epic, or a lyric, commensurate with Niagara and the Rocky Mountains, will do well to get up a subscription and buy the author of [these songs], if his owner can be persuaded to part with him.”<sup>54</sup> The claims of Young America notwithstanding, one wants to reply that the sin and shame lie somewhere else. What all this suggests, in any case, is that blackface minstrelsy figured less as a palliative to the economics of slavery than as an uncomfortable reminder of it.

In this context we should recall the most horrific of the accounts organized by this second paradigm. It is Nevin’s narrative in which outright theft and public embarrassment are indulged; but here too, as I have suggested, simply narrating the “primal scene” introduces issues of economy, value, and ownership almost behind the author’s back. A great deal of space is allotted to Cuff’s mode of subsistence, too much in fact for the part he plays as the lender of his “blackness” to Rice. He carries passengers’ trunks from steamers to shore; he is, moreover, in active competition with another black man, “Ginger,” for business. Revealingly, it is midway through Rice’s performance in Cuff’s clothes that the “near approach of a steamer”—Cuff’s livelihood—intrudes, and requires the song somehow to

end. And it must end because, as Nevin writes, “liberally as [Cuff] might lend himself to a friend, it could not be done at that sacrifice” (609). This allegorically suggestive scene—suggestive against the grain of what its author wants to convey—is yet marked by certain complex displacements. The first is the odd overemphasis on Cuff’s free labor—here located not in slave-holding Louisville but in Pittsburgh, a swerve away from most other accounts, such as those of Noah Ludlow, T. Allston Brown, and Edmon S. Conner, which make the cultural “donor” a Louisville slave. It is as if, in this first displacement, the fact of slavery will be jettisoned in favor of industrious black men “liberal” enough to “lend themselves” to white friends. But the shape of that last phrase, in which black people offer up their selves like the talking commodities in *Capital* or in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, already suggests the slave economy that “lending” is there to cover over.<sup>55</sup> And indeed the scene as a whole, with its successive subordinations of Cuff in Rice’s minstrel performance and in Nevin’s use of dialect, enacts a second displacement, this time from the free labor by which the passage initially sought to distance itself from slavery. It narratologically reenslaves a black man who has evidently turned out to be more competitive and enterprising than he should be. This rather desperate shifting indicates the ambivalence that minstrelsy’s debt to black cultural production called forth—and which this origin-narrative paradigm, I believe, was invented to mediate or “manage.”

But we have yet to deal with the most curious detail of this scene, that in which Cuff “let[s] his open mouth as a mark for boys to pitch pennies into”—suspiciously close to white fantasy, but possibly observed. Then again, perhaps Nevin had read Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (1857). In the third chapter, Black Guinea, a “grotesque negro cripple, in tow-cloth attire and an old coal-sifter of a tambourine in his hand,” makes his appearance:

Shuffling among the crowd, now and then he would pause, throwing back his head and opening his mouth like an elephant for tossed apples at a menagerie when, making a space before him, people would have a bout at a strange sort of pitch-penny game, the cripple’s mouth being at once target and purse, and he hailing each expertly-caught copper with a cracked bravura from his tambourine. To be the subject of alms-giving is trying, and to feel in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial, must be still more so; but whatever his secret emotions, he swallowed them, while still retaining each copper this side the oesophagus. And nearly always he grinned, and only once or twice did he wince, which was when certain coins, tossed by more playful almoners, came inconveniently nigh to his teeth, an accident whose unwelcomeness was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons.

While this game of charity was yet at its height, a limping, gimlet-eyed, sour-faced person . . . began to croak out something about his deformity being a sham, got up for financial purposes, which immediately threw a damp upon the frolic benignities of the pitch-penny players.<sup>56</sup>

By the end of the scene, we realize with a jolt that this is probably a blackface performance;<sup>57</sup> the attentive reader recognizes another of the confidence man’s

disguises. This is more than the *Fidèle's* passengers do, hence the dramatic irony here—Melville lifts the mask for the reader only. Indeed, a “purple-faced drover,” by implication a slave trader, actually hints at capturing what he takes to be this black man (which casually links minstrelsy with the human traffic of slavery); the accusation of fraud only extends to Black Guinea’s lameness. Melville thus exposes the minstrelization of Cuff in Nevin’s account: what these passengers and Nevin himself take as “blackness,” Melville reveals to be part of a white discourse undergirding the minstrel phenomenon.

However, this turn only takes place when the limping man levels his accusation. Before that the reader sees a pitiable cripple doing his best amid a brutal “game of charity,” though Ann Douglas has rightly noted that our sentimentalized pity is itself being savaged here.<sup>58</sup> We soon pay the price in embarrassment, but Melville briefly tries to make us as sympathetic as he possibly can; for all its fakery, the passage above is mightily effective. We have no way of knowing that Black Guinea’s “secret emotions” are probably those of a white man pretending to be a black man, and so we are shocked, drawn in. It is an act of blackness as “target and purse,” object of derision and repository of market value. Only then does the accusation break up the illusion, “got up for financial purposes.” But that, of course, is what Melville has himself been so careful to construct—a sham that works, if only to embarrass—and he has done it by commodifying the blazes out of Black Guinea. The consciousness of black commodification that the writing forces upon us works all the more to make “blackness” into a marketable thing of white interest, this time for the reader. In order for the passage to possess any kick, the racial economy so bitterly exposed here must arouse before it exposes. Commodification is, in a sense, its *attraction*; it is what seems “blackest” about it. It is precisely what is calculated to evoke the foolish pleasure of our pity, and Melville’s grim irony only confirms that the attempt to reveal minstrelsy’s financial purposes has itself proved to be an act of minstrelization.

Blackface here is one more con game. But Melville’s rejection of it accords in striking ways with the thing itself. Far from a happily secured distribution of cultural needs and desires, racial counterfeiting in Jacksonian America appears actually to have defeated the efforts to master it—whether the mastery was attempted by mystification or exposure—no less than it haunted its partisans. The writings I have surveyed were ineffectual, if various, plays for control of the questions minstrelsy apparently raised and tried to resolve. What these narratives seem to have realized is that the minstrel show flaunted as much as hid the fact of expropriation and its subtexts, enslavement and intermixture. Such seemingly coherent and purposive accounts, in short, constituted part of a volatile discourse on “blackness”—examples in themselves of blackface minstrelsy’s racial unconscious.

## Notes

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My deepest thanks to Michael Rogin and Carol Clover for their acute and sympathetic editorial advice.

1. Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1975): 27. For similar emphases see Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958), in his *Shadow and Act* (1964; New York, 1972), 45–59; LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1963), 82–86; James H. Dorman, "The Strange Career of Jim Crow Rice," *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 2 (1969–70): 109–22; Alan W. C. Green, "'Jim Crow,' 'Zip Coon': The Northern Origins of Negro Minstrelsy," *Massachusetts Review* 11, no. 2 (1970): 385–97; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971), 244–301; Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974); Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," *Social Text* 1 (1979): 149–56; Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York, 1986), 65–94; and Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, 1987), 17–24. This work revises more genial (and often complacent) earlier work such as Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, N.C., 1930); and Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the American National Character* (New York, 1931), 77–104.
2. Since this work is still in the process of formation, any listing of it must be eclectic and inexhaustive: John F. Szwed, "Race and the Embodiment of Culture," *Ethnicity* 2, no. 1 (1975): 19–33; Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, eds. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 143–77; Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, 1984); Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18–36; and Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 125–33; Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1984), 205–19; the essays in Gates, ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago, 1986); Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5–27; Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, 1987); Paul Gilroy, *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London, 1987); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York, 1988); Philip Cohen, "Tarzan and the Jungle Bunnies: Race, Class, and Sex in Popular Culture," *New Formations* 5 (Summer 1988): 25–30; the essays in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Black Film/ British Cinema* (London, 1988); Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988): 44–64; the essays in Cheryl Wall, ed., *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989); and Andrew Ross, "Ballots, Bullets, or Batman: Can Cultural Studies Do the Right Thing?," *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 26–44.
3. Here I am calling on Raymond Williams's definition of "structures of feeling," certainly an apposite conception to that of a racial or political unconscious. See *Marxism and Literature* (New York, 1977), 132–34; as well as Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981).



4. Robert P. Nevin, "Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy," *Atlantic Monthly* 20, no. 121 (1867): 608–16.
5. As does the minstrel "conundrum": "Why are minstrel companies like midnight robbers? Because they live by their deeds of darkness"; *White's New Book of Plantation Melodies* (Philadelphia, 1849), 31.
6. See Mrs. Anne Mathews, *A Continuation of the Memoirs of Charles Mathews, Comedian*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1839), 1:239.
7. See, for instance, the "Interview with Ben Cotton" in the *New York Mirror* (1897, clipping in New York Public Library Theatre Collection):  

I used to sit with [blacks on Mississippi riverboats] in front of their cabins, and we would start the banjo twanging, and their voices would ring out in the quiet night air in their weird melodies. They did not quite understand me. I was the first white man they had seen who sang as they did; but we were brothers for the time being and were perfectly happy.
8. *New York Herald*, 6 February 1843.
9. For his part, Mark Twain (like Margaret Fuller and Walt Whitman) was intrigued by what he called the "happy and accurate" representations of the minstrel show. See *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (1924; New York, 1959), 60; and Eric Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991): 223–54.
10. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Black Film/British Cinema*, 28–29. This is suggested also by the historical coexistence in the mid nineteenth century of white supremacy and what George Fredrickson has called "romantic racialism"; see *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York, 1971), chap. 4.
11. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (1962; Norman, Okla., 1977), 118.
12. Quoted in George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 12 vols. (New York, 1928–31), 5:33.
13. Hans Nathan is very precise about the make-up of the first minstrel shows; see *Dan Emmett*, 118–34, 143–53.
14. On the basis of late-nineteenth-century performer Lew Dockstader's recollection that the early interlocutor's lack of "darky dialect" contrasted with his black make-up, Robert Toll concludes that interlocutors generally appeared in blackface; see *Blackening Up*, 63, n. 63.
15. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), now in her *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), 19.
16. See the pamphlet collecting English reviews of the 1846 British tour of the Ethiopian Serenaders, *Ethiopian Serenaders*, 22. The pamphlet is located in the Harvard Theater Collection.
17. In this the minstrel show is not unrelated to television situation comedy. I am indebted here to Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 80–95.
18. *The Negro Forget-Me-Not Songster* (Philadelphia, early 1850s), 90.
19. See Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago, 1961), 45.
20. *Negro Forget-Me-Not Songster*, 30.
21. *Ibid.*, 102.
22. "Peabody's Lecture, On the Great Soger Camp-Meeting," *White's New Book*, 79.

23. Charles H. Fox, *Charley Fox's Sable Songster* (New York, 1859), 74–75.
24. Fredric Jameson, "Pleasure: A Political Issue," in his *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–86*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, 1988), 2:72.
25. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York, 1986), 192. This argument refines ideas drawn from symbolic anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, who have written of the body as a symbolic representation of the social forces that produced it—bodily functions and boundaries, points of entry and of exit signifying societal relations and values, in this case racial ones; see Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York, 1970), esp. 65–81.
26. In the realm of fantasy, blackface degraded also the white men who made use of it—including, I would guess, spectators themselves. The material capacity of burnt cork or greasepaint, mixed with sweat and smearing under the flickering gaslights, to invoke coal, dirt, or their excremental analogues was often acknowledged—Tom's humiliating escape in the "Whelp-hunting" chapter of Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), for instance, a blacking-up that is a not-quite tarring-and-feathering. Likewise, it was said of T. D. Rice that his reputation depended "upon his blackface; and how he contrives to keep it white, might be matter of grave debate, begrimed as it has been for the last ten years, at least three hours in each of the twenty-four"; F. C. Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography; or, The Life of an Actor and Manager* (Glasgow, 1848), 179.
27. For the notion of popular fiction's plots, types, and disguises as a kind of "dream-work of the social," see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1987), 81.
28. Twain, *Autobiography*, 62.
29. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (1905; New York, 1960), 227.
30. Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-analysis, 1921–1945* (London, 1948), 267–77, 282–338.
31. S. Foster Damon, comp., *Series of Old American Songs* (Providence, R.I., 1936), no. 39.
32. *The Smithsonian Collection of American Popular Music* (CBS).
33. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1965; Bloomington, Ind., 1984).
34. "Now Hold Your Horses, Will You!," *Christy and Wood's New Song Book* (Philadelphia, 1854), 9.
35. Another possibility is that audiences experienced a marginally more positive nostalgia for nurture rather than infant rage; this was true of the wave of sentimental black images that also ruled the minstrel stage.  
I have been influenced here by Michael Rogin's psychohistorical interpretation of white attitudes toward Native Americans in the antebellum period; see *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York, 1975), 3–15, 114–25.
36. See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (1977; Bloomington, Ind., 1982), for an account of how the castration threat is managed by replacing it with a fetish-substitute: "The fixation on [the fetish's] 'just before' [castration] is thus another form of disavowal. . . . The fetish signifies the penis as absent, it is its negative signifier; supplementing it, it puts a 'fullness' in place of a lack, but in doing so it also affirms that lack" (70–71).
37. *Christy and Wood's New Song Book*, 85–86.
38. In a talk entitled "Mirror Stages: Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon" (University of Virginia, 30 October 1991), Barbara Johnson remarks that if the phallus is almost by

definition white, the penis must be black—which accounts here for its unruly and threatening potential. Thanks to Michael Rogin for a similar point in regard to my essay.

39. *Christy and Wood's New Song Book*, 30.
40. Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 146–48.
41. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York, 1967), 161.
42. In thinking about racial and gender disguise, and about theater-spectators' varying identifications with blackface characters, I am indebted to Mark Nash, "Vampyr and the Fantastic," *Screen* 17, no. 3 (1976): 29–67; and to Carol J. Clover's brilliant "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations* 20 (1987): 187–228.
43. Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, 77.
44. Stallybrass and White have an excellent statement of how this formation comes about in *ibid.*, 193–94.
45. Janice Radway, "Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1988): 361; in the same issue see Lawrence Grossberg's "Wandering Audiences, Nomadic Critics." More generally see, for example, Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (1976; Baltimore, 1980); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, eds. Stuart Hall et al. (London, 1980), 128–38; Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984); Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Cooling (New York, 1985); the essays in James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986); David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience* (London, 1980); and Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London, 1986); the essays in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1987); especially Allen's own essay, "Reader-Oriented Criticism and Television"; James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," in his *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 21–54; Tania Modleski, "Some Functions of Feminist Criticism; or, The Scandal of the Mute Body," *October* 49 (1989): 3–24; and Guenter H. Lenz, "'Ethnographies': American Culture Studies and Postmodern Anthropology," *Prospects* 16 (1991): 1–40.
46. T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (1973; Princeton, N.J., 1982), 12. Clark's remarks are evidently (although not explicitly) based on Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (1966; London, 1978). One ought to note that Clark makes a distinction between the actual audience of art and a generalized or postulated "public," which, because they are more continuous in the case of popular culture, I conflate in my account of audience response. See also Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York, 1986) for a related practice of reconstructing the racial and sexual discourses in which, for example, movie stars become intelligible.
47. This section owes much to Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975), chap. 2; and to J. F. Lyotard's reflections on the function of "legitimizing narratives" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), 18–20.

The many accounts of the rise of minstrelsy, some briefer than others, include "Origins of Jim Crow," *Boston Transcript* 27 May 1841; James Kennard, "Who Are Our

Negro Poets?," *Knickerbocker* 26, no. 4 (1845): 332; F. C. Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography*, 178–79; and Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography of Eminent Actors and Authors* (New York, 1852), 122; G. W. Curtis, "Editorial Notes—Music," *Putnam's Monthly* 2, no. 11 (1853): 572; "Letter from a Teacher at the South," *Journal of Music* 2, no. 21 (1853): 164; Sol Smith, *The Theatrical Journey* (Philadelphia, 1854), 53; "Obituary, Not Eulogistic: Negro Minstrelsy Is Dead," *Journal of Music* 13, no. 18 (1858): 118; Nevin, "Stephen C. Foster," 608–9; T. A. Brown, *History of the American Stage* (1870; New York, 1969), 310; and "The Origin of Negro Minstrelsy," in *Fun in Black; or, Sketches of Minstrel Life*, ed. Charles H. Day (New York, 1874), 5–10; H. D. Stone, *Personal Recollections of the Drama* (1873; New York, 1969), 240–41; Olive Logan, "The Ancestry of Brudder Bones," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 58, no. 347 (1879): 687–98; H. P. Phelps, *Players of a Century: A Record of the Albany Stage* (1880; New York, 1972), 166–67; Noah M. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life As I Found It* (1880; New York, 1966), 392–93; E. S. Conner, "An Old Actor's Memories" (1881), in Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York, 1956), 111–12; J. J. Jennings, *Theatrical and Circus Life* (St. Louis, 1882), 368; Walter Leman, *Memories of an Old Actor* (San Francisco, 1886), 92; Laurence Hutton, "The Negro on the Stage," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 79, no. 469 (1889): 131–45; E. L. Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy from "Daddy" Rice to Date* (New York, 1911), 7–10; M. B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management* (New York, 1912), 23–24; and Brander Matthews, "The Rise and Fall of Negro Minstrelsy," *Scribner's Magazine* 57, no. 6 (1915): 755.

48. Macherey, *Theory of Literary Production*.

49. Joseph Litvak, "Back to the Future: A Review-Article on the New Historicism, Deconstruction, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 30, no. 1 (1988): 127. On cultural texts as symbolic or "magical" resolutions to lived social contradictions, see, for instance, Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London, 1976), 9–74; and Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979): 130–48; and *Political Unconscious*, 77–80.

50. "Obituary, Not Eulogistic," 118.

51. "Negro Minstrelsy—Ancient and Modern," *Putnam's Monthly* 5, no. 25 (1855): 76–77.

52. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 392.

53. Kennard, "Who Are Our National Poets?," 336.

54. "Negro Minstrelsy—Ancient and Modern," 73–74.

55. Here is Marx:

Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: "Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange-values."

*Capital*, Vol. I, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels (1867; New York, 1967), 83. Here is Dreiser:

Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. The voice of the so-called inanimate! Who shall translate for us the language of the stones?

"My dear," said the lace collar she secured from Partridge's, "I fit you beautifully; don't give me up."

"Ah, such little feet," said the leather of the soft new shoes; "how effectively I cover them. What a pity they should ever want my aid."

- Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer (1900; New York, 1970), 75. What allows commodities to talk is precisely their exchange-value; it is this that masks their social character as labor and gives them a life of their own. Under slavery the opposite happens; self-owning human beings become voiceless things, pure socio-economic values. "Lending oneself" occupies a strange middle ground between the two, suggesting both self-ownership and an invitation to self-enslavement, particularly given the uses to which Cuff's loan is put. It is in any case *Nevin's ambivalence* toward black labor that is represented here, comfortable with neither slavery nor free labor; this ambivalence accounts for the shifting displacements going on in his narrative.
56. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857; New York, 1954), 17–18.
  57. Carolyn Karcher has argued forcefully that the confidence man's race is finally a riddle, that Melville's manipulations leave us no way of knowing whether he is "really" white (here in blackface) or black. While this is generally persuasive, and while I agree with Karcher's important argument that the issue of slavery is at the heart of *The Confidence-Man*, the specific implications of blackface are central to Black Guinea's first appearance; in the sixth chapter, Melville himself invokes the minstrel show, and it is only later that race is successively destabilized. This hardly calls Karcher's point into question—indeed it is probably central to it. See Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge, La., 1980), 186–257.
  58. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977; New York, 1978), 361.