WHITES IN BLACKFACE, BLACKS IN WHITEFACE: RACIAL FLUIDITIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2005
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by

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

WHITES IN BLACKFACE, BLACKS IN WHITEFACE:
RACIAL FLUIDITIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

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August 2005

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Major Department: English

This project examines how literary uses of blackface minstrelsy both stabilize and
destabilize raced and national identities by investigating texts that involve figurative and
literal representations of whites in blackface and blacks in whiteface. The narratives I
analyze employ minstrelsy not only to create and sustain raced identities, but also to
register slippages, overlaps, and inversions across the color line—paradoxically
reinforcing and subverting racial hierarchies. I am ultimately concerned with how this
paradox reveals the often contradictory nature of American selfhood. By drawing on
postcolonial theory to explore how minstrelsy shaped national identity, I have sought to
recontextualize blackface, which has remained largely outside discussions of
postcoloniality in American studies.

My first chapter recovers evidence of nascent blackface culture in the early texts of
Washington Irving, evidence that has been wholly overlooked, probably because Irving
began writing before minstrelsy formalized. I argue that by drawing on the local and
biracial complexities of blackface culture, Irving confronts post-colonial realities in the early national period. In the subsequent three chapters, I address blackface as a fully formed, national phenomenon. Chapter 3 illustrates how black characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* employ minstrelsy and colonial mimicry to resist and conform to aspects of American identity while testing racial barriers to self-making and achieving differing degrees of selfhood. Chapter 4, on Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” complicates the conventional reading of Babo as a slave in virtual blackface by arguing that he also performs a version of whiteface and that the captains Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno, who represent the North and South respectively, resemble blackface buffoons. Chapter 5 illustrates how Hannah Crafts, Frank Webb, and Martin Delany use blackface violence to challenge a hegemonic nationalism and emphasize the emotional, cultural, and historical violence committed against blacks through minstrelsy. Chapter 6 argues that the young bootblack and eponymous hero of Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* performs the popular minstrel roles of the ragged Jim Crow and the richly dressed Zip Coon, roles that allegorize class and sectional tensions. Dick distinguishes himself from these figures as he uncovers his whiteness and works to achieve middle-class respectability. The project ends with an afterword that addresses minstrelsy’s legacy by discussing two recent works, Wesley Brown’s *Darktown Strutters* and Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*. 
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: HISTORY AND THEORY

Blackface minstrelsy, a nineteenth-century staged entertainment form wherein whites “blacked up” and gave their impressions of blacks and black life, has had enormous consequences for American racial formation, national identity, American literature, music, and film. Combining comedy, dancing, music, singing, and acting, the minstrel show, and the various performance cultures from which it grew, helped lay the groundwork for much of American popular culture. While its most prominent feature was blackface makeup, minstrelsy was as much about burlesquing blacks as satirizing society, as much about fixing race as making race fluid and adaptable. Rooted in the anxieties and desires that erupted over blackness during the slave trade, minstrelsy’s more immediate origins are spread throughout the mid-Atlantic, particularly in New York, where the form boomed around the Civil War. Although it faded from the stage by the twentieth century, then reemerged in early American cinema, before receding again during Civil Rights, blackface minstrelsy colors our culture still, persisting in various, less recognizable forms. For instance, in 2004 a black comedy team from Hollywood known as the Wayans brothers “whited up,” donned blonde wigs, and impersonated two hotel heiresses (a scarcely masked parody of the Hilton sisters) in their film *White Chicks*, a “whiteface” comedy that was popular among white and black audiences. Today, white men struttings around in actual blackface is strictly taboo. But black men burlesquing white socialites is not. The mask has merely changed color, according to the social climate.
Wearing the mask, Ralph Ellison has argued, is largely what it means to be American. Remarking on the many historical figures who have used masking, Ellison notes that the revolutionaries attended the Boston Tea Party dressed as Indians; Hemingway posed as a non-bookish outdoorsman; Faulkner played a farmer; and Lincoln let people imagine he was an honest country lawyer. “America is a land of masking jokers” (109), concludes Ellison, a declaration that has weathered time, for the American desire to wear masks continues, and masking oneself remains a tool for celebrity and power. By successfully imitating black music and dialect—that is, by mining African American charisma—white rapper Eminem has risen to the top of the musical charts. By acquiring the accents of rural America—that is, by harnessing Texas cowboy cachet—a Connecticut-born, Yale-educated blue blood has risen to president. The mask, whether literal or figurative, remains a vital, lucrative, deceiving part of American culture.

The blackface mask itself, a mixture of mashed burnt cork and water, gave material expression to a mimetic American culture that emerged after the Revolution. In a postcolonial nation searching for an identity, imitating blackness and whiteness became central to American self-creation. Especially in northern marketplaces, but also in southern plantations, whites and blacks copied one another’s accents, moves, and cultures. The cultural and racial overlap resulting from such imitations, particularly in the urban North, eventually coalesced into the minstrel show. The biracial, crosscultural impulses of minstrelsy reflected the hybrid nature of America, yet whites drew racial boundaries to preserve their sense of homogenous space. Blackface embodied this paradox, for it registered racial fluidity and fixity, racial freedom and regulation, all at once.
Since minstrelsy embodied such intense contradictions, it is no wonder scholarship on the subject has traveled two paths. One avenue sees minstrel shows as a capitalist stereotyping machine that rigidly defined race, putting a positive spin on whiteness while debasing and stalling the development of black identity. The other celebrates minstrelsy’s subversive, interracial energies and vital contributions to American popular culture. Both tell two sides of a single story. Both are equally true, even though a critical debate, as old as minstrelsy itself, has tried proving one side over the other. Because the quarrel over minstrelsy has been long fought, I do not wish to argue whether blackface did more harm than good, whether we should condemn or celebrate it. Rather, I want to let the paradox of minstrelsy tell its own tale. I am particularly concerned with how this tale is told by American narratives that have been informed by minstrelsy. Ultimately, I am after how this paradox reflects the conflicted impulses of American selfhood, racial formation, and national identity.

**Blackface and the Minstrel Show**

Before defining major terms and outlining the direction of my study, I first want to elaborate the cultural and critical histories of minstrelsy in order to contextualize my project. With its roots deep in Anglo and African American folk forms and European music, drama, and literature, blackface performance underwent a long evolutionary process before adopting the name “minstrels” in 1842. Yet, because of its protracted and scattered history, isolating the precise origins of blackface is difficult; determining when enough elements gathered to make it a form is an easier but still slippery endeavor. We might begin by acknowledging that blackface theater was not always “minstrel” in the way we think of the term today. Emerging during the middle ages to describe a musician or singer, the word did not invoke the burlesque typical of blackface comedy. And as far
as blackface masking goes, people had been blacking up and imitating “Africans” since antiquity. But the most memorable instances of early blackface are found in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, both of which featured Moors as characters. The latter play made its blackface debut in the United States in 1751, but was performed as serious theater, as opposed to minstrel burlesque. Nevertheless, the “legitimate” American stage fostered some of the earliest elements of minstrelsy. For instance, in its first American production in 1769, the comic opera *The Padlock* featured a blackface servant named Mungo, who finds relief from his servitude by dancing and singing for whites. By the late eighteenth century, more minstrel ingredients emerged. In *The Irishman of London*, which made its American debut in 1793, the central character Cubba, who is infantile, cunning, and content in slavery, embodies features later emphasized by blackface burlesque. Then, in the 1795 version of *The Triumphs of Love; or, Happy Reconciliation*, the first full comic blackface character, Sambo, hits the stage. Although blackface characters from early American theater could perform non-comical roles, these early productions show how the legitimate stage helped birth racist stereotypes that would later find full expression in blackface minstrelsy.

While it cultivated racism on stage, on the streets blackface was something entirely different. In public gatherings in the early nineteenth century, blackface performance was not about race as much as it was about community, satire of authority, and joy under oppression. Folk rituals such as Carnival, callithumpian bands, and mumming plays, for instance, allowed people to mask themselves (usually with grease or soot) and critique dominant values while behaving in ways usually unacceptable to those in power. The color of the mask in these festivals was not as important as masking identity, losing the
self, and occupying Otherness. Further, the streets of lower Manhattan, which seem to have given birth to blackface dancing, were a place where interracial solidarity tended to eclipse racist attitudes.

During the same time racial stereotypes were forming on the legitimate stage and blackface dancing was developing on the Atlantic coast, elements of blackface racial burlesque were taking shape. Robert Winans suggests that as far back as the 1780s, “‘blackface’ skits and humor (in the form of anecdotes about blacks), black dialect songs, black dialect dialogues similar to stump speeches, and frequent on-stage blackface entr’acte music and dance routines” were developing in American popular culture (112). This historical moment certainly makes sense, since the nation at this time was searching for distinct cultural forms following its independence from England, and re-presenting American black life was one way to achieve this. During the second wave of postcolonial fervor after the War of 1812, blackface performers began emphasizing black life even more. Nothing illustrates this better than “Backside Albany” (1815), the first fully developed black dialect song, which tells the story of the American victory at the battle of Plattsburgh and which arguably marks the official beginning of blackface minstrelsy. By using black dialect to point up British incompetence during the battle, and simultaneously exalting American bravery, the song reflects a strong sense of national pride, while the black dialect gives it a distinctly American voice.\(^5\)

Although it could express postcolonial feelings of pride and independence, minstrelsy’s counterfeiting of black culture made it suspect as a national art form. Margaret Fuller was early to acknowledge this shortcoming. Writing in the *Dial* in 1842, she exposed the inauthenticity of blackface theater. “‘Jump Jim Crow,’” she quipped, “is
a dance native to this country, and one which we plead guilty to seeing with pleasure, not on the stage, where we have not seen it, but as danced by children of an ebon hue in the streets” (qtd. in Lott, *Love* 16). In 1845, James Kennard, Jr. followed suit in *Knickerbocker Magazine* with his sardonic response to America’s cry for national poets, where he wrote that the only true American poets were the “negro slaves” from the South, since they were “secluded” and thus free from “foreign influences” that might tarnish their native purity. “From that class,” he announced ironically, “come the Jim Crows, the Zip Coons, and the Dandy Jims, who have electrified the world. From them proceed our ONLY TRULY NATIONAL POETS” (52). So, while it used “native” black cultural forms to achieve something uniquely American, minstrelsy’s sheer imitativeness made it a dubious national art.

Even so, national concerns and postcolonial sentiment continually found expression on the minstrel stage. Blackface operatic burlesques, for instance, were extremely popular and were used to parody European theater in order to assuage feelings of cultural inferiority. Two of the form’s earliest and best known performers George Washington Dixon, who popularized Zip Coon, and Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who made Jim Crow a household name, also dealt with national concerns. After awing England with Jim Crow in 1837, Rice returned to the U.S. with a rewrite of *Othello*, in which he replaced original material with topical issues. *Otello* (1838), as he renamed it, was a fine example of how blackface could both absorb and criticize European art forms.\(^6\) Dixon also criticized the old world. Through the pretentious escapades of the would-be aristocrat Zip Coon, he mocked the aristocracy, which, like the opera burlesques, helped audiences alleviate their fears of European cultural influence threatening American identity.
In basic terms, Jim Crow represented the plantation slave, while Zip Coon parodied the urban black dandy. Both characters, as Barbara Lewis has shown, derived in large part from the figure Long Tail Blue, the debonair, black urban dandy. Dressed to the nines, distinguished, and steady, Blue represented the confidence of a growing population of free and successful northern blacks in the early nineteenth century. But after his debut in 1827, Blue’s pride and elegance quickly became a threat to the white and black public. Thus in 1829, the grotesque and impoverished slave Jim Crow emerged to offset Blue’s menacing dignity. Crow parodied Blue by being everything the latter was not: ragged, ridiculous, incapable, and common. But this was still not enough. So in 1834, Zip Coon emerged to finish what Jim Crow had started. Though Zip dressed well, he was neither as dignified nor as competent as Blue. A fatuous and less threatening aspirant, Zip claimed to be a “larned skoler” and boasted of running for president. Crow and Coon are among the most famous minstrel types, embodying the entire class spectrum, from the poor rural slave to the would-be aristocrat. Yet Jim Crow and Zip Coon meant different things at different times. For instance, they outlived their creators to become symbols of national conflict. As the Civil War approached, the “rustic” Jim Crow and the “urban” Zip Coon came to represent southern “preindustrialism” in conflict with northern capitalist industry. Doubling as sectional types, they became emblems of a nation in crisis.

Jim Crow and Zip Coon figured prominently in the late twenties and thirties when blackface performance was a dynamic, experimental, and even threatening medium. Prior to the 1840s, minstrelsy thrived on interaction between the audience and stage, provided common ground for interracial mixing, and expressed ideas that challenged middle- and upper-class America. But as the popularity of the form increased, it was incorporated by
entrepreneurs, and evidence suggests that the minstrel show was made increasingly racist by those who feared the insurrectionary potential of an interracially united working class. Also, as minstrelsy developed, it moved toward variety entertainment to keep audiences coming. In doing so, its satirical edge was dulled. As blackface moved from folk into popular culture, its social energies were more and more contained. Perhaps the strongest indication of this shift from folk to popular, from lower to middle class, can be found in the meaning of the word “minstrels,” which referred to white singing troupes who performed for respectable, middle-class audiences. When the word “minstrelsy” was attached to blackface, it arguably marked the point where the history of the form split into two distinct chapters—one called blackface performance, the other blackface minstrelsy. Blackface performance more accurately describes the socially energetic, class conscious theatricals before 1843. Blackface minstrelsy marks the turning point where the genre became a commodified, mass cultural, and even respectable entertainment form.

The Ethiopian (later renamed Virginia) Minstrels were one of the first to appropriate the name. As they took the stage in 1843, with banjo, tambourine, bones, and fiddle (the signature instruments of the minstrel show), the face of blackface performance was about to change dramatically. This new troupe differed from earlier performers, such as Jim Crow and Zip Coon, in that their burlesques of black life were more grotesque and extravagant. Claiming to be true delineators of black southern life, they offered exotic versions of slaves to curious, middle-class northerners. More than earlier performers, the troupe’s makeup made their eyes look bigger and whiter, their mouths larger and more gaping. They spoke in a heavier, exaggerated “black” dialect and put on a performance that was a frenzied mockery of black folk culture. The importance of the Virginia
Minstrels’ debut cannot be overstated, because it marked the time when minstrelsy started being packaged into a formulaic and racist enterprise—more debasing to those it mimicked and less threatening to those in power.

**The Critical Paradox**

As previously mentioned, minstrelsy criticism has generally traveled two paths. Early critics either exalted the form for its “authenticity” and nostalgic joys, or they indicted it for helping to create and sustain racial stereotypes. Some saw blackface as a benign form of comedy that allowed disparate, unstable communities to intermingle and bond. Others felt it was a debasing form of cultural theft. Recently, critics have expanded our understanding of blackface by exploring its many complexities. As we will see, the more ideologically driven critics such as David Roediger and Eric Lott, who implicate minstrelsy in the formation of the white working class, continue to view the form as intrinsically racist, although Lott complicates blackface racism by emphasizing its ambivalent nature. Dale Cockrell, W. T. Lhamon, Jr., and William Mahar, on the other hand, see blackface comedy as a more varied and class-critical medium. By exploring the pre-history of minstrelsy (Cockrell and Lhamon) and its less racially driven aspects (Mahar), they show that viewing the form as primarily racist involves dismissing a fuller understanding not only of minstrelsy, but of antebellum culture in general. Whereas Roediger and Lott offer provocative theories about racial and class formation, the latter group relies on context and evidence to present a more positive history of blackface performance.

But initial responses to minstrelsy were neither theoretical nor historical—they were visceral. Early adversaries of the form, such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, were outraged by what they saw as the continued degradation of blacks on the
minstrel stage. In an often-cited passage, which first appeared on October 27, 1848, in his newspaper the *North Star*, Douglass condemned blackface performers as “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from [blacks] a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens.” Delany, who worked with Douglass on his newspaper, channeled his disgust into *Blake* (1859-62), a novel written in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s minstrel-driven *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Delany’s counter-narrative dismantles racist stereotyping while exploring the possibility of the violent overthrow of slavery. Whereas Margaret Fuller and James Kennard had subtly criticized it, Douglass and Delany were outspoken critics of minstrelsy. In fact, Douglass’s attacks initiated the school of critical skepticism that enjoyed new life among scholars who, after a century of silence, returned to censuring the form in the late 1950s.

While it appalled Douglass and Delany, white writers and critics were applauding minstrelsy. Walt Whitman initially praised the shows as pure American opera, but later criticized them, not for their racial content, but because he found them too crass for national entertainment. Mark Twain, who might owe more to blackface than any other American writer, adored the minstrel show, but not without a racist slant to his affection. “If I could have the nigger show back again in its pristine purity and perfection,” he wrote in his autobiography, “I should have but little further use for the opera” (64). This appreciation resumed with the first modern scholarship on the subject, which treated minstrelsy as a source of national pride. In *Tambo and Bones*, written in 1930, Carl Wittke championed blackface as a homegrown treasure, “the only purely native form of entertainment and the only distinctively American contribution to the theatre” (3).
Constance Rourke followed with her groundbreaking *American Humor* in 1931, in which she claimed that minstrelsy’s immense popularity helped build America’s national character and that blackface humor served as a kind of community glue. “Laughter,” she wrote, “produced the illusion of leveling obstacles in a world which was full of unaccustomed obstacles, creat[ing] ease, and even more, a sense of unity, among a people who were not yet a nation and who were seldom joined in stable communities” (99). Minstrelsy for Rourke provided the space for various cultures, classes, and races to intermingle and negotiate a budding national identity. She anticipates the more recent, celebratory scholarship on the subject.

By the late 1950s, critical attitudes began shifting. With the exception of Hans Nathan’s *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (1962), a history of early minstrelsy that largely avoided race issues, positive or neutral scholarship did not last. In 1958, Ralph Ellison was the first since Douglass and Delany to overtly chastise the topic in his essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.” Arguing against notions of its authenticity, Ellison insisted minstrelsy was not “Negro American folklore,” but that it grew out of “the white American’s Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness” (101-02). Implicit in Ellison’s title is that if one changes the minstrel joke—that is, dismantles the stereotypes blackface comedy perpetuated—then racism’s yoke might be loosened, allowing blacks to free themselves from the minstrel legacy. Nathan Huggins extends Ellison’s sentiment in *Harlem Renaissance* in 1971 by exploring how hard it was for blacks to achieve a serious stage presence due to the minstrel inheritance. He argues that “the theatrical Negro” wore the chains of the minstrel tradition in drama and film through the 1920s: “The stereotype—the mask—defined the
Afro-American as white Americans chose to see him; outside the mask the black man was either invisible or threatening” (261). So blacks wore the mask in order to negotiate the white world safely and profitably. And though some black performers were able to expand the limitations of the stereotype, “the theatrical Negro,” Huggins laments, “improved only slightly” (276).

After Ellison, Civil Rights, and Huggins had their say, minstrelsy was no longer seen as a national treasure, but as a national sin. Robert Toll’s *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (1974) was the first comprehensive study to offer a sweeping indictment of minstrelsy, but it also explored the show’s social functions. Alexander Saxton followed suit in “Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology” (1975), where he exposed how major blackface performers had ties to the pro-slavery ideology of the Democratic party. Although these works appear monolithic next to recent studies, they raise questions about minstrelsy’s relation to homosexuality, pro- and anti-slavery sentiment, and class, ideas that later scholarship addresses more fully.

For instance, David Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) shows how working class whites used blackface to strengthen their white identity in opposition to blackness. Roediger is particularly tough on minstrelsy, claiming it “was empty of positive content” (116), and he sometimes seems ideologically simplistic. But I would place his work in the same category as Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992) since both are paradigm-changing studies that show how stereotypes of blackness and enslavement were used to contemplate, organize, and define aspects of white Americanness. Morrison explores how literary blackness helped white writers forge “literary whiteness,” while Roediger shows how blackface
whites “creat[ed] a new sense of whiteness by creating a new sense of blackness” (115). Like Morrison, who showed how an “Africanist presence” enabled writers to construct whiteness, Roediger helps us uncover the often covert “minstrel presence” that writers used to construct racial and class identities in American fiction.

Roediger helped lay the groundwork for looking at the connections between minstrelsy and the formation of working-class whiteness. Eric Lott’s Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (1993) continues in this line but goes much further by exposing the ambivalent and often contradictory nature of blackface culture. Arguing that minstrelsy was more than a white supremacist defense of slavery, or a way for whites to organize and structure their identities, Lott is concerned with the minstrel show’s dialectic of attraction/fear, guilt/disgust, envy/insult, liberation/domination. Although these contradictory responses could result in positive racial moments, he reminds us that they also registered “the two faces of racism” (18). Blackface ambivalence—its reliance upon mimicry and mockery, sympathy and ridicule—allowed white workers to both identify with and distinguish themselves from blacks and upper-class whites. In this way, minstrelsy reflected and informed the entire structure of racial and class feeling in antebellum culture.

Following in Lott’s wake, Dale Cockrell uncovers the theatrical and folk origins of blackface. His first chapter analyzes early blackface American theater, revealing that long before the advent of minstrelsy, minstrel-like humor and stereotypes were developed on the “legitimate” stage. His second chapter, on the other hand, argues that blacking up in various folk rituals—such as Carnival, charivari, and mumming plays—was less about racial derogation and more about common values and speaking out against authority,
serving as a way for people to discipline the community and also challenge the status quo. These early street performers are first among the “demons” in the book’s title who, through blackface inversion rituals, represent a threat to the hierarchy and the potential to structure it anew. Cockrell’s plunge into the folk politics of blackface festivals offers a greater understanding of the forces that led up to the 1840s minstrel shows. By exposing its common origins, he corrects the misconception that minstrelsy grew mainly out of the legitimate theater—a correction that helps explain why the form was so popular among the working class, who were the original folk festival participants.

By discussing one demon after another—from Jim Crow to Zip Coon to Dan Tucker—Cockrell’s study builds toward a kind of anti-climax, where the “demons” of blackface theatrics are rounded up and contained by the early 1840s. As the form became popular, Cockrell tells how it was forced to trade its “noise,” roughness, and social exuberance for melodious music. By controlling the crowd, bourgeois management ended the interaction between audience and stage, and the theater became a place for “reflection,” not participation. A clear sign of where minstrelsy was heading appears in a New York Herald advertisement for the Virginia Minstrels, assuring their show would be “entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features, which have hitherto characterized negro extravaganzas.” This new troupe sought to present the wealthier, whiter crowds with harmonious music, exotic images of plantation life, and racial burlesque. “With their name, concert format, and middle-class audiences,” Cockrell laments, “came representation instead of engagement, music instead of noise, and, ultimately, issues of race instead of class” (153-54).
W. T. Lhamon’s *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998) echoes Cockrell’s study at times, but emphasizes blackface’s emergence out of Catherine Market in lower Manhattan, where traffic and trade brought together various races, classes, and cultures. As his subtitle suggests, he then follows the transformations of blackface into the present. A more optimistic take than Cockrell’s, Lhamon’s work celebrates blackface’s “anti-racist dimensions.” After summarizing the arguments of Toll, Saxton, Roediger, and Lott, Lhamon asserts that the time has come “to notice how blackface performance can work also and simultaneously against racial stereotyping” (6; original emphasis). Lhamon supports his claim by arguing that blackface was a way to negotiate racial mixing among a lumpen proletariat that was growing up on the Atlantic coast; he suggests that before the entrepreneurs got their hands on it, minstrelsy was a kind of interracial glue. “Many of the workers in minstrelsy,” he argues, “most often early but also late, took the racism that was given of their days and raised it against its original wielders” (6). Although early blackface did offer the glue for collective resistance, the reality of white working-class racism and job competition seems to have prevented that glue from ever fully drying. And while his first chapter on the pre-history of blackface is brilliantly researched and contextualized, the latter part of the book tends to favor theory over history, ideas over evidence. *Raising Cain*, then, offers an exciting but sometimes incomplete picture of blackface. The next study, however, tries to complete the picture by hauling mountains of evidence to the table, offering the strongest historical analysis of minstrelsy so far.

By emphasizing the variety of influences and content that comprised the form, Mahar’s *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (1999) makes blackface racism a mere footnote in
This massive study that unmasks complexities of minstrelsy hitherto overlooked, or avoided, because they did not fit the agendas of some writers, particularly Toll, Roediger, and Lott. The book’s title is the key, implying that behind the burnt cork makeup—where most scholars have not gone—one finds myriad layers of meaning. By showing how “variety was the primary feature of the minstrel show’s organization” (332), Mahar insists that race, although the most visible aspect, was not the central focus of minstrelsy.

A musicologist, Mahar is one of the first to explore the linguistic, musical, and comic elements of minstrelsy. Blackface for him is “essentially a form of musical theater,” which should be analyzed in the wider context of American ethnic humor (5). He asserts that “racial and ethnic differences were defining features of American comedy” (329) and that people from all backgrounds were potential subjects for burlesque. His most significant point is that scholarship has disproportionately emphasized the African American presence in minstrelsy; and he reiterates that minstrel burlesques were more concerned with Anglo (not African) American life (335). “[T]he ‘non-plantation’ elements of the minstrel show,” he argues, “[were] often of greater consequence for understanding minstrelsy than [was] the exclusive investigation of its potential borrowings from African American culture” (11). Minstrelsy, he suggests, should be understood as a postcolonial form that used African and Anglo American material as much as it borrowed from French, British, and Italian culture. Minstrel burlesques of Italian opera and British theater, for instance, were used to assuage American feelings of cultural inferiority. But burnt-cork comedians also borrowed from African American culture to emphasize something distinctly American.
**Blackface and American Literature**

Although the above studies sometimes analyze minstrelsy’s relationship with literature, they are more concerned with the form’s cultural history. When they do examine texts—and this can be said of blackface literary criticism in general—they choose those that have been overtly influenced by minstrelsy. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) have attracted the most attention, since both are packed with minstrel stereotypes and attitudes. Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855) and Martin Delany’s *Blake* have also received attention, specifically from Lott and Lhamon, who show how these works rely heavily on blackface conventions. While I work with texts that are clearly indebted to the minstrel tradition, I believe that blackface’s influence on literature has been pervasive enough to open the field of analysis for discussing narratives that implicate the form less directly.

As a mass cultural industry with a long pre-history, the minstrel show played an enormous role in shaping how people across lines of race, class, and gender experienced themselves and formed their identities. Just as it overtly and covertly impacted its surrounding culture, minstrelsy both obviously and quietly helped organize and structure American writings. Therefore, my project often moves beyond the more conspicuous uses of blackface to reveal how the form has been absorbed less visibly in certain narratives. In other words, I illustrate how this diffuse and popular form embeds itself abstractly, unconsciously, even accidentally in the signifiers, plots, power dynamics, language, and psychology of American literature. For instance, although Horatio Alger’s novel *Ragged Dick* (1868) makes no explicit reference to minstrelsy, I argue that the novel’s young bootblack and eponymous hero performs the popular minstrel roles of the ragged Jim Crow and the richly dressed Zip Coon. Dick’s minstrel performances
represent class extremes, in racial guise, from which he distinguishes himself as he uncovers his whiteness and achieves middle-class respectability.

By investigating texts that involve figurative and literal representations of whites in blackface and blacks in whiteface, my study examines how literary uses of blackface minstrelsy both stabilize and destabilize raced and national identities. The narratives I analyze employ minstrelsy not only to create and sustain raced identities, but also to register slippages, overlaps, and inversions across the color line—paradoxically reinforcing and subverting racial hierarchies. I am ultimately concerned with how this paradox reveals the often contradictory nature of American selfhood. By drawing on postcolonial theory to explore how minstrelsy shaped national identity, I have sought to recontextualize blackface, which has remained largely outside discussions of postcoloniality in American studies. Before discussing the trajectory of this project, however, I want to define two major terms: American selfhood and national identity.

**Blackface and Making American Selfhood**

In *Making the American Self* (1997), Daniel Walker Howe writes, “The decades following the American Revolution and establishment of the Constitution witnessed an extraordinarily rich and varied experimentation by the people of the new nation with new, voluntarily chosen identities” (108). Blackface culture also emerged in the decades following the Revolution, and its development paralleled and reflected the identity experimentation Howe speaks of. As the nation moved through the antebellum period, market expansion and an increase in occupational options created a stronger sense of autonomy among many in the nation. Further, writers during the Romantic period ushered in a more intense reverence for individualism, fostering an environment conducive to cultivating selfhood and trying out new identities. No wonder Long Tail
Blue, that emblem of African American self-making and self-mastery, emerged in 1827, about the time Ralph Waldo Emerson was proclaiming, “It is the age of the first person singular” (qtd. in Howe 107). Blue demonstrated how blackface engaged issues of individualism, identity transformation, and self-fashioning. As a white actor playing the part of a black who was in some ways acting white, he illustrated early on how minstrelsy reflected and shaped racial selfhood during the nineteenth century.13

My notion of a racialized selfhood grows out of postcolonial and critical race theorists’ understanding of blackness and whiteness as mutually constituted categories that arise from Manichean racial distinctions. Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, Abdul JanMohamed, among others, have written on the white Manichean obsessions that shaped racial identities.14 To justify colonialism and slavery, whites equated natives and slaves with evil and savagery and associated whiteness with good and civilization. This color dichotomy also informs a great deal of American literature. Morrison, as we’ve seen, has argued that literary whiteness, and a particular “Americanness,” is consolidated against an “Africanist presence.” Just as “[t]he contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature” (Morrison 5), so the contemplation of blackness is central to our understanding of the development of American selfhood. Here is where minstrelsy comes in. As Roediger and Lott have emphasized, the minstrel show played an enormous role in shaping racial identity and fixing Manichean hierarchies. But minstrelsy also blurred Manichean distinctions. Sometimes, it mocked them. Propelled by the desire to both imitate and disavow, minstrel performers simultaneously fixed and mixed white and black identities.
Despite Emerson’s claim in “Self-Reliance” (1841) “that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide” (20), individual selfhood often develops through imitation; it can therefore be complexly hybrid. In the early American republic, Washington Irving emphasizes this complexity by showing how the young nation’s imitative impulses produced new, cross-racial selfhoods in the Atlantic world. His rare recordings of an emerging blackface culture suggest how whites and blacks experimented with identities and swapped cultural moves, revealing national culture and American selfhood to be intensely interracial.

Other authors in this study, those who were writing around the Civil War, contemplate mimetic American identity in terms of self-improvement and self-empowerment, which they often associate with whiteness, a color that symbolized upward mobility, freedom, and self-reliance. Whiteness also determined who was “fit” to participate in the national dialogue. As Matthew Frye Jacobson puts it, “The nation’s first naturalization law of 1790 (limiting naturalized citizenship to ‘free white persons’) demonstrates the republican convergence of race and ‘fitness for self-government’” (7). The association between whiteness and “self-government” unifies many of the texts at hand. For instance, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ragged Dick* characters strive for “self-government” by mimicking (and sometimes mocking) white power and privilege. Much as whites imitated blacks through minstrelsy, black characters from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* mimic aspects of the American government and of a hegemonic nationalism. In *Ragged Dick*, the novel’s protagonist begins as a racialized bootblack before he learns to imitate white middle-class selfhood and rise in the hierarchy. Any discussion of American
selfhood should acknowledge Alger, who is probably the most famous U.S. writer to champion the ideal of American self-making.

African American texts, such as Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (ca 1857) and Frank Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), also depict black characters imitating white conventions. At the beginning of *Bondwoman’s Narrative*, Crafts mimics the graces of a white family who cultivate her “moral nature” (10). In *Garies*, the African American family, the Ellises, attains prosperity by making the white capitalist system work for them. But not all African American texts define black selfhood through racial mimicry. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Douglass empowers himself, not by imitating white power, but by challenging it. His famous assertion, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (39), precedes his winning battle against Edward Covey, the slave tamer who has been hired to break him. By defeating Covey, Douglass transforms himself from brute chattel to a human being—not “in form,” Douglass tells us, but “in fact” (43)—cultivating a selfhood that is distinct from both slavery and whiteness. Douglass anticipates Delany’s novel *Blake*, in which whiteness is not to be imitated but opposed. The novel’s protagonist Henry Blake extends Douglass’ violent resistance to slavery by killing a number of plantation overseers as he travels through the South uniting slaves against the slave system. Blake arguably becomes the most powerful example of self-making and self-mastery in African American literature before the twentieth century.

**Blackface and National Identities**

When approaching the difficult task of defining national identity, we might benefit by first consulting Benedict Anderson. Anderson has famously argued that the nation originates as an “imagined community” (6), made possible through print-capitalism,
education, and mass media. Not everyone inside the nation’s boundaries, however, is imagined as part of the community. Those running the state decide who is and is not part of the national dialogue. In the United States, for instance, the early republican leaders consolidated power early on, creating a hegemonic nationalism that, as we’ve seen, excluded blacks from citizenship, a factor that determined who was included or excluded from the national discourse. Yet although blacks and other minority groups were located outside the nation, that did not preclude them from cultivating local nationalisms that resisted the larger national narrative. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, in the case of India, such excluded groups constructed community identities within the state that challenged the dominant nationalism (223-39). Local, hybrid identities that complicate and challenge the stable story of American nationhood are a vital concern of this project.

We also cannot elaborate American national identity without considering the sectional divisions leading to the Civil War—that is, the growing rift between the industrial free states in the North and the preindustrial slave states in the South. This national conflict registered the howling contradiction in American culture, i.e., that a country that championed radical ideas of freedom and democracy sustained itself in part through slave labor. Interestingly, America has had a conflicted independent streak since European settlers first established colonies along the mid-Atlantic. As Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts suggest, despite their conflict with the indigenous people in the new world, European immigrants “saw their settlement as a new start”; they imagined “the settlements as postcolonial, models of idealized decolonization and local self-determination” (3). The American Revolution only intensified (and nationalized) feelings of self-determination and independence. Benjamin Franklin famously personified this
spirit; Emerson and others elaborated it. Yet the glaring problem of slavery belied America’s exaltation of liberty. This problem prompted Frederick Douglass to famously ask, “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?” (“Meaning” 109).

The American South, ruled by a southern aristocracy that drew its strength from a slave economy, made a mockery of America’s claim to independence. Instead of fostering self-determination, an ethos widely embraced in the North, the South was more or less a hereditary culture, which rigorously adhered to racial rules of descent. In this project, the texts I analyze often allegorize the competing ideologies of the North and South. For instance, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the fiercely independent George Harris and the “aristocratic” Adolph, the southern dandy with a high sense of entitlement, exemplify “northern” self-determination (George) versus “southern” self-predetermination (Adolph). In *Ragged Dick*, Dick’s rejection of Zip Coon and Jim Crow implicitly celebrates aristocratic decline and an end to southern preindustrial drags on northern industry.

My study tries to create a continuous historical narrative, chronicling how American writers tapped blackface culture—during its pre-history, full-flowering, and just after the Civil War—to reflect the evolution of racial and national identities in the United States. I use the word “identities” here—and I use it in my title. Given the proliferation of local cultures that challenged the national narrative and how an abiding sectionalism virtually split the nation, the idea of a single national identity becomes farcical. Minstrelsy is ideally suited for contemplating America’s complex identities because of its mix of African, British, and Irish folk traditions; different dialects; regional humor, etc., all of which muddy the idea of national homogeneity and distinct cultural
origins. Blackface gave material expression to the tensions between the local and the national, Anglo and African Americans, the North and the South. It fused high with low culture and colored class conflict black and white. All told, it provided a forum where the nation’s cultures were contested and created.

Along with the minstrel show, American literature also crucially shaped and reflected national culture. As Timothy Brennan suggests, literature—particularly the novel—has “historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life, and by mimicking the structure of nation” (49). But literature didn’t just mimic national form—it also helped form the nation. The way *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* nudged America toward civil war is merely one example of literature’s cultural power. Given their influence, it goes without saying that imaginative literature and blackface minstrelsy had a profound effect on the country’s destiny. Exactly how these two influential forms intersect and reveal the complexity of raced and national identities in the United States is the central concern of this study.

Remarking on the fact that early and antebellum America had little it could call a national theater before the advent of minstrelsy, Lott writes that “the American theater was much slower than the country’s literature to develop what one might call a postcolonial sensibility” (*Love* 89). Lott cites Washington Irving as an example of an early national writer who “gave unique expression to America” (*Love* 89). But he doesn’t mention how Irving was engaged with blackface culture or how this engagement sometimes enabled his unique American expression. Because Lott’s study focuses on minstrelsy after 1830, he doesn’t account for the fact that following the Revolution, blackface street theatrics were also cultivating a postcolonial sensibility—right alongside
America’s new national literature—and that the earliest instances of blackface’s white and black folk amalgamations were producing something distinctly indigenous.

Yet a study centered on blackface, American literature, and national identity formation must begin earlier than 1830. It must begin with the early republic, when American national culture and blackface were first taking shape. It must also begin with Washington Irving, who was the first U.S. writer to record blackface culture as it appeared in various forms throughout New York. In chapter 2, I show how Irving uses the indigenous materials of incipient blackface to decolonize his writing. By drawing on the local and biracial complexities of blackface culture, Irving challenges the republican narrative of a coherent and homogenous nation, while recording the emergence of postcolonial identities in the early national era.

Chapter 3 illustrates how black characters in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* employ minstrel conventions and colonial mimicry to resist and conform to aspects of American identity, while they test racial barriers to self-making and achieve differing degrees of selfhood. To leap from Irving to Stowe means jumping forward some thirty years—years in which minstrelsy formalized and burgeoned into a massive commercial enterprise. While Irving’s writing reflects blackface’s early appearance in an incipient national culture, Stowe writes at a time when the minstrel show was entrenched in the national consciousness, much as Hollywood would entrench itself in the twentieth-century imagination. By the time *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* emerged, national culture had become more consolidated, established, and defined, partly due to the growth of national literature, but also because of blackface minstrelsy. In fact, it was blackface that paved the way for Stowe, who drew from minstrelsy to create black characters, and whose work became the
If Irving registers how black folk emergence begins to make American culture distinctive, Stowe shows just how much “blackness” has become part of the national discourse. Ironically, while she taps “black” culture to create black characters, those same characters enact a reverse thievery by imitating whiteness and asserting themselves in the national dialogue whenever possible. We see this most vividly with George Harris, the light complected, rebellious slave, who mimics aspects of the dominant nationalism, while he both subverts and affirms the nation’s ideals of independence. Through what I call “rebellious mimicry,” George becomes a hybrid of African and American nationalism, simultaneously performing his own versions of blackface and whiteface.

Ironically, as the national culture was beginning to cohere, the nation was dividing along sectional lines over the issue of slavery. Blackface performance had been staging sectional conflict for some time. Stowe’s novel intensified this drama, while it helped move the abolitionist movement from the shadows into the mainstream. Stowe also changed the way Americans thought about race and slavery. As Joan D. Hedrick puts it, “Instead of exalting the Anglo-Saxons as conquerors and beacons of light, Stowe’s heroes are Africans. In inverting the racial expectations of her white audience but employing a romantic genre in which they were heavily invested, Stowe effected a revolution in consciousness” (“Commerce” 175). George Harris is Stowe’s best example of black revolution, and he sets the stage for subsequent black revolutionaries in this study. In chapters 4 and 5, I illustrate how, in “Benito Cereno,” The Bondwoman’s Narrative, The Garies and Their Friends, and Blake, black characters grow bolder and more radical as they draw on the revolutionary energies of minstrelsy.
For instance, George’s racial performance anticipates the fiercely rebellious Babo, the Senegalese slave who, in “Benito Cereno,” leads an insurrection aboard the Spanish slave ship the *San Dominick*. Much as George performs a version of whiteface by reproducing an aggressive Euro-American imperialism, in chapter 4 I argue that Babo appropriates Captain Benito Cereno’s white body and uses it as a medium through which to enjoy the power and privileges of colonial authority—a subterfuge I read as a version of whiteface. By ventriloquizing through Cereno’s imperial body, Babo is able to articulate his slave insurrection. Babo’s reliance on minstrelsy to achieve revolution is appropriate. After all, blackface was, in a sense, born in revolutionary gesture. Jim Crow, the most popular minstrel figure ever, was identified by a song that was all about *revolving*: “I wheel about an’ turn about/And do jis’ so,/And ebry time I wheel about,/I jump Jim Crow.” Certainly an entertainment form in which people could so fully transform themselves lends itself to revolution, which means a sudden radical or complete change. Melville clearly understood minstrelsy’s wheeling, revolutionary potential, for not only does Babo whiten by wearing Cereno as a mask, but Cereno himself, and the slow-witted Captain Amasa Delano, end up looking like blackface buffoons.

Melville’s story is a horrifying satire of an event that took place in 1805, where real slaves commandeered an actual slave vessel. Melville, however, changes the date of his tale from 1805 to 1799. This alteration, as Eric Sundquist has suggested, “accentuates the fact that [Melville’s] tale belonged to the Age of Revolution” (140). Sundquist is referencing the Haitian Revolution, the bloody uprising in St. Domingue (Haiti) that led to Haitian independence and became a powerful new world symbol for the potentialities
of slave rebellion. By modifying the date, Melville is clearly suggesting that slaves might soon revolt in the American South, a possibility that Delany will explore more aggressively in *Blake*. Melville is also tapping the widespread anxiety that slaveholding southerners were experiencing as a result of the horrors of St. Domingue. But “Benito Cereno” does not only look to the past. This volatile tale also allegorizes sectional discontent, reflecting the precariousness of a nation that was marching toward civil war: a march that Stowe had accelerated.

The African American novels in chapter 5—*The Bondwoman’s Narrative, The Garies and Their Friends*, and *Blake*—were all written as the country inched closer to war. They were also written after the Dred Scott decision had compounded the rage and indignation of slaves and abolitionists. Perhaps that explains why the violent, revolutionary energies we see in “Benito Cereno” persist in these novels. Crafts and Webb use minstrelsy in subversive ways by coloring members of the white ruling class black. Crafts retaliates against her demanding mistress, Mrs. Wheeler, by tricking her into blackface before she solicits a political position for her husband in Washington, D.C. The public humiliation leads to their expulsion from the capital—an outcome that is a minor *coup d’état* for Crafts. Webb turns up the racial humiliation by violently turning an avaricious lawyer, George Stevens, into a blackface clown before turning him white again with a piece of lime. This turning suggests a kind of racial “ revolution,” one that will interrogate standards of citizenship and race’s role in determining who participates in the national dialogue. The chapter ends with *Blake*, Delany’s fiercely political, black nationalist novel.
Of the three African American writers, Delany is by far the most radical, since he unabashedly advocates a series of violent slave revolts: first in the South, later in Cuba. Blazoning black pride, Delany’s novel imagines a black nationalism within the United States, looking forward some hundred years to the black nationalist movements of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. Delany also revises *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Henry Blake is himself a revision of George Harris, or rather a revision of Stowe’s notion of a black rebel. Unlike George, who performs whiteface, Blake is unambiguously black and is committed to slave rebellion, which he first organizes at home, not on the distant shores of Liberia, where George imagines his revolution.

Chapter 6 returns us to Irving’s stomping grounds in Manhattan, some sixty years after he produced his first blackface productions there. Here I argue that the blackened bootblack and eponymous hero of Alger’s *Ragged Dick* is defined through the roles of the impoverished slave Jim Crow and the richly dressed dandy Zip Coon. Dick’s blackface theatrics represent the extremes of slavery and empty aristocracy, extremes he ultimately distinguishes himself from as he capitalizes on his whiteness and attains middle-class respectability. If Blake fashions himself against minstrelsy, Dick fashions himself through minstrelsy, but then sheds his minstrel signifiers to become a proper white citizen.

But Dick’s rising signifies more than race and class. He can also be seen as a national allegory in the postbellum moment. By moving from the bottom up, from black to white, slave to free, from Jim Crow and Zip Coon to an enterprising young clerk named Richard Hunter, Esq., Dick embodies the preindustrial South’s decline and the rise of the modern industrial North. Dick’s minstrel metamorphosis—his morphing from a
slavish bootblack into a middle-class capitalist—looks toward a national future without slavery. But where, we should ask, are the blacks in this future? Just as there were no blacks on the minstrel stage, there are no black characters in *Ragged Dick*. Like minstrelsy, the novel uses blackness as a foil against which to stabilize whiteness and contemplate freedom. *Ragged Dick* illustrates how the white self-made man emerges from the shadow of slavery, while it continues to relegate African Americans to the shadows.

**Notes**

1. By emphasizing black and white mimicries, I’m not denying other racial mimicries that were important to American self-creation. The revolutionaries dressing as Indians during the Boston Tea Party, for instance, is a powerful example of how whites used what might be called “redface” to distinguish themselves from the British.

2. See Nathan, who discusses how the Greek *phallophoroi* used soot to blacken his face (3). This early example of blackface, however, has no direct connection with American minstrelsy.

3. See Leonard 159-61 and Cockrell 13-29 for similar remarks. I discuss Cockrell’s work in depth in my critical history.

4. For similar ideas, see Cockrell 53.

5. For a revealing analysis of this song, see Mahar “‘Backside Albany’ and Early Blackface Minstrelsy.”

6. Mahar makes a similar argument about the play in *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (2). I discuss Mahar’s study later in the critical history.

7. For a discussion of the origins of Daddy Blue, Jim Crow, and Zip Coon, see Lewis 257-72.

8. On Jim Crow and Zip Coon as sectional types, see Lott, *Love* 107.

9. See Cockrell 152.

10. See Toll 36.


13 I call Blue an “emblem” of African American self-making because he was a white representation of successful urban blacks. Nevertheless, Blue was a potent depiction of blacks who were finding freedom, employment, and individuality in the North. Remarkting on how Blue enjoyed opportunities in northern society, Lewis writes, “Symbolically, he has absolved himself of the past, and is ready and willing to assume a place in step with others in the teeming metropolis, eager to share in the privilege and prosperity of citizenship” (258).

14 For their remarks on Manicheanism, see Ellison 102; Fanon, *Wretched* 41-106; JanMohamed 78-106.

15 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was both a national and international success. As Joan D. Hedrick puts it, Stowe’s novel “sold 300,000 copies in the first year of publication, was translated into sixty-three languages, and generated an industry of Uncle Tom plates, spoons, candlesticks, games, wallpapers, songs, and stage spin-offs that ran continuously for the next ninety years” (“Commerce” 168-69).

16 Lott describes how the minstrel show in the 1840s gave expression to sectional tensions leading to war. The South, as Lott puts it, “became the chief ‘preindustrial’ foe, and blackface performers found themselves invoking a national controversy—on behalf of the North—which they had always intended to elide. The urban dandy Zip Coon and the rustic slave Jim Crow now doubled as sectional types” (*Love* 107). In my final chapter, I return to this idea with Ragged Dick, who allegorizes sectional conflict through Jim Crow and Zip Coon. I, however, read Zip Coon as representative of both northern and southern ideologies.

17 On how the Haitian Revolution terrorized the imaginations of southern slaveholders, see Hunt.
CHAPTER 2
LOCALIZING THE EARLY REPUBLIC: WASHINGTON IRVING AND BLACKFACE CULTURE

The process of decolonization in the early American republic was a struggle whereby the former colonies gradually asserted political, cultural, and artistic independence from England in particular and Europe in general. Yet, as the early republicans attempted to stabilize the new nation and create a cohesive national identity, they relied on colonial models of social stratification and centralized power, while ignoring the realities of the postcolonial condition. Part of this condition was the proliferation of diverse cultures at the local level, what Partha Chatterjee has, in another context, called “communities,” that is, fuzzy, democratic entities that resist the national narrative (223-39). In the western mid-Atlantic, the racially mixed festival and market cultures that would eventually coalesce into blackface minstrelsy functioned as such communities. Alive with local energy and hybrid diversity, the communities of nascent blackface belied republican notions of a culturally stable, homogenous nation, while evincing the emergence of postcolonial identity in the early national period.

Americanists have acknowledged how the interplay between the local and the (inter)national helps explain formations of early American selfhood. Dana D. Nelson argues that in the post-Constitutional era, white men identified with a sense of “national manhood” that abstracted them from locally created identities (National 6-7), while Edward Watts reveals how early republicans used imperial paradigms to create a facade of national coherence that American authors exposed by exploring the diversity of post-
Independence communities (9-26). More recently, Malini Johar Schueller and Watts suggest that early America consisted of multiple, often contradictory, narratives wherein the imperial and the local interacted and overlapped. American identities, they argue, were “constantly negotiated through strategic identification and disidentification with Europeans, on the one hand, and American Indians, African Americans, and other nonwhite populations, on the other” (2). These scholars all address how (inter)national and local cultural assertions shape and destabilize early American selfhood.

Building on these insights into the postcolonial nature of the early republic, this essay demonstrates how Washington Irving, who witnessed the emergence of blackface culture in New York, produced “blackface” texts that negotiate the cultural complexities of the new nation. Critics have noted that Irving decolonizes his writing with Native American and Dutch materials, through which he invokes America’s past and asserts a non-English identity, but they have missed how blacks and blackface culture enable him to confront postcolonial realities within the republic. Incipient blackface provides Irving not only with non-European material, but also with a biracial folk form whose cultural fluidity underlies and sometimes undermines national cohesion. Seen from a postcolonial perspective, the interplay between local white and black American cultures helps us better understand the unstable nature of the new republic. Yet, while Irving’s blackface texts expose cultural and racial instabilities, they do not necessarily break down racial hierarchies. Here Eric Lott’s notion of minstrelsy as a dialectic of “love and theft” is useful. Lott argues that the desires and fears, envy and guilt, awe and abhorrence that drove blackface mimicry led to the “simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries” (Love 6). In Irving’s writings, blackface desire drives characters across the
color line, where they try on their version of blackness, implicitly disrupting ideas of
cultural homogeneity. But by stereotyping and debasing blacks, an act rooted in dread
and anxiety, his writing preserves racial hegemony. As such, Irving’s blackface
productions embody the complexities and conflicting impulses of decolonization.

**Storytelling, Cultural Hybridity, and Blackface Desire**

I first want to turn to Irving’s treatment of black storytellers to demonstrate how it
exposes cultural hybridity within New York’s local communities and reveals the kind of
racial desire that motivated blackface performance. In the prelude to “Dolph Heyliger”
titled “The Haunted House” from *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), Diedrich Knickerbocker,
Washington Irving’s Dutch historian persona, recalls his boyhood encounters with a
black farmer named Pompey, who would mesmerize him with tales of an old haunted
house. When Pompey dies, he is buried in a field, only to be unearthed years later by a
plowshare. His rediscovery excites the curiosity of some townsfolk, but Knickerbocker is
interested only in finding his friend a new grave. While overseeing the reburial, he meets
a gentleman named John Josse Vandermoere, a storyteller from the neighborhood
specializing in Dutch lore, who offers to tell a haunted-house tale stranger than any of
Pompey’s. Always eager to hear a new story, Knickerbocker welcomes the offer. As both
men sit and watch the black farmer’s interment, Vandermoere tells his tale, which later
finds its way into Knickerbocker’s “manuscripts” as “Dolph Heyliger.”

Through Knickerbocker’s appropriation of Dutch lore from characters like
Vandermoere, Irving sought to construct a portrait of America’s past at a time when the
nation was calling for an indigenous literature. Whereas Irving’s other major persona,
Geoffrey Crayon, turns mainly to the old world for inspiration, Knickerbocker stays
home, conferring with the new-world Dutch, from whom he ostensibly learns such
enduring tales as “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1819-20). But as much as the Dutch excite Knickerbocker, the above example suggests he is also inspired by black storytellers. Yet, while black storytellers play a significant part in his tales, they are often diminished by his fixation on the Dutch. In fact, burying Pompey to the tune of Vandermoere’s story captures how Knickerbocker’s role as the zealous Dutch historian overshadows his investment in black oral culture. The example of Pompey, then, shows the need to “unearth” the African American influence in Washington Irving.

Because of their conservative and insular ways, Knickerbocker idealizes the Dutch as symbols of a simple American past, uncorrupted by the encroaching modern world. Although they were sheltered from outside influence, being inveterate slave owners, their life and lore were intimately bound with black culture. Irving’s *A History of New York* (1809) offers an example of this relationship when Knickerbocker places a black storyteller at the heart of an old Dutch family. He describes a scene where “the whole family, old and young, master and servant, black and white” would gather at the fireside (479). There an old patriarch would smoke his pipe, his wife would work the spinning wheel, and

> [t]he young folks would crowd around the hearth, listening with breathless attention to some old crone of a negro, who was the oracle of the family,—and who, perched like a raven in a corner of the chimney, would croak forth for a long winter afternoon, a string of incredible stories about New England witches—grisly ghosts—horses without heads—and hairbreadth scapes and bloody encounters among the Indians. (479)

This passage intimates that the tales Knickerbocker culls from the Dutch have some of their roots in black oral culture. Certainly, the oracle’s stories of “horses without heads” anticipate the headless horseman from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”
That Irving’s celebrated legend may have an African American influence is all but confirmed years later. For although Knickerbocker claims in the story’s postscript that a shabby gentleman in “pepper and salt clothes” first tells the tale (8: 296), Crayon later suggests that it derives from a Dutch housewife and a black miller. In a scarcely noted reminiscence titled “Sleepy Hollow” (1839), Crayon recalls a time when he takes a tour of Sleepy Hollow with Knickerbocker. There the historian meets a woman at her spinning wheel who tells him ghost tales. Later, he confers with a black miller in the region’s backwoods, who proves to be his “greatest treasure of historic lore” yet (433). Consider Crayon’s description of the exchange between Knickerbocker and the black miller:

[Knickerbocker] beckoned him from his nest, sat with him by the hour on a broken mill-stone, by the side of the water-fall, heedless of the noise of the water and the clatter of the mill; and I verily believe it was to his conference with this African sage, and the precious revelations of the good dame of the spinning-wheel, that we are indebted for the surprising though true history of “Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman.” (434)

We might read this racial encounter as a figurative resurrection of Pompey, who now sits where Vandemoere sat, bonding with Knickerbocker and receiving recognition for his stories. In a revision of the account titled “Wolfert’s Roost” (1855), another neglected text, an unnamed narrator glorifies the miller even more, calling him “the great historic genius of the Hollow” (27: 15)—a startling statement, since Knickerbocker turns to the Hollow for many of his tales.

Given his persistent interest in black storytellers, one might assume that Irving’s fictitious Dutch historian spends as much time conferring with African sages as with those Dutch wives who spin tales as prolifically as they spin clothes. As the above examples suggest, the stories these women weave are neither wholly Dutch nor entirely their own. Like the piebald “pepper and salt clothes” worn by the shabby gentleman, they
are products of a black and white, cross-cultural fabric. Each example shows how cultural exchange at the local level produces fluid communities that can disrupt the national narrative. The various contradictory voices telling the legend challenge notions of cultural stability and seem to ask a crucial question: who actually narrates the national myths? These instances of cultural overlap and interracial bonding are also a useful way to begin discussing Washington Irving’s relationship to incipient blackface.

Like Knickerbocker’s tales, blackface was a hybrid production, rooted in the cross-pollination between European and African American cultural forms. While it began benignly enough—in New York, around the time Irving was born—as a more or less shared interracial experience, blackface eventually became the almost exclusive domain of whites, who interpreted black material, such as dancing, music, dialect, and folklore, for a white mainstream audience. As such, Knickerbocker’s translation of black folklore for a mostly white readership reveals a basic blackface impulse. His encounters with black storytellers even resemble accounts of minstrels who bonded with and learned from black people. Just as Knickerbocker sits with the miller sharing stories, performer Ben Cotton would “sit with [blacks] in front of their cabins,” swapping songs and becoming “brothers for the time being and . . . perfectly happy,” and Billy Whitlock, a Virginia Minstrel, would “quietly steal off to some negro hut to hear the darkies sing and see them dance, taking with him a jug of whiskey to make them all the merrier” (qtd. in Lott, Love 50). Of course, Knickerbocker—as Mark Twain and others do later—draws from black storytellers, whereas these minstrels court black musicians, but the motivation here is basically the same: each example illustrates white desire to absorb and translate black cultural forms, a fundamental impulse in minstrelsy as well as in Washington Irving,
whose fascination with black folk culture did not stop with the black storyteller. Like many minstrel performers, Irving also adored black music and dance, which he reproduced in his early writings.

Written during what is now seen as minstrelsy’s prehistory, Irving’s blackface writings precede the acts of celebrities George Washington Dixon and T. D. Rice, who electrified audiences with Long Tail Blue, Jim Crow, and Zip Coon. They are composed well before E. P. Christy inaugurated the formalized minstrel show in 1842.² And while later writers such as Stowe, Melville, and Twain would draw on a more organized, commercialized, and racist form of minstrelsy, Irving was positioned to tap blackface culture when it was more about negotiating racial difference than enforcing it; more about communal values than business; more about, as W. T. Lhamon suggests, “an eagerness to combine, share, join, draw from opposites, [and] play on opposition” (Cain 3) than to ridicule blacks. This is not to say that Irving’s work is free from blackface stereotypes. As intimated earlier, it is rife with them. But Irving’s use of nascent blackface also reflects a period when white American culture was opening itself to black influence, doing so when the nation was in its most formative years, assembling an identity out of the cultural confusion resulting from its break with England.

In spite of North America’s political separation from the old world, Irving’s initial blackface productions are riddled with foreign allusions, evincing a cultural dependence typical of decolonizing nations.³ Eventually, however, his blackface writings shed foreign influence and fuse local cultures, resulting in a more culturally independent, post-colonial product. I am not suggesting that local cultures did not mix in the colonial period. But in the post-Revolutionary era, we can read Irving’s local cultural fusions as post-colonial
because they mark the emergence of a more distinctive American identity. When Irving begins to tap local cultures, and ceases filling his blackface texts with foreign allusions, his work moves beyond foreign ontology. By the time he writes “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” his blackface writing largely overcomes foreign dependence to assert a more evolved postcolonial identity through local hybridity: the intermingling of indigenous cultural forms.

In what follows, I trace Irving’s relationship to three areas where cultures coalesced and minstrelsy developed. I first explore Manhattan’s interracial marketplaces, from which blackface emerged at the turn of the century. A passage in A History of New York illustrates that Irving knew this market culture well, and what he encountered there seems to have formed the foundation of his blackface productions. Next, I discuss the black transformation of the Dutch Pentecost known as Pinkster, which occurred throughout the Hudson Valley, an area Irving knew intimately. Third, I turn to the early American theater, which controlled racial signification via blackface makeup long before minstrelsy formalized. A casual remark about a blackface performance of Othello in Irving’s Salmagundi (1807-08) opens a window onto this important period in minstrelsy’s prehistory. Drawing on these minstrel breeding grounds, I analyze a black performance from Salmagundi that combines blackface desire with republican colonial insecurities. Finally, I examine “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” which appears to contain the first white blackface dance in the American literary canon. Overall, these intersections between Irving, incipient blackface, and the changing republic help us better understand the role nascent blackface plays in shaping postcolonial selfhood and a distinctly hybridized American literature.
Washington Irving in the Blackface Breeding Grounds

Born in 1783 in New York City, Irving was no stranger to African American culture, since his city was at the core of the largest slaveholding region above the Mason-Dixon line. Along with high slave numbers, the city also had a large free black population, which increased dramatically following the Revolution, making New York, in Shane White’s words, “the most important urban black center” in the country (Somewhat 153). Irving scoured the city as a boy, attentive to the black street theatrics that were a regular part of life and a vital means of expression for everyday blacks. Growing up on William Street, which cut through lower Manhattan, Irving was just blocks from Broadway, where blacks routinely held music and dance celebrations. West of Broadway were the markets along the Hudson River. Slaves from Jersey ritually crossed the river in skiffs freighted with produce for the marketplace. In A History of New York, Knickerbocker describes such a scene, telling how the “dutch negroes” from a small Jersey village called Communipaw would bring their goods to Manhattan, probably either to Bear or Buttermilk Market:

These negroes, . . . like the monks in the dark ages, engross all the knowledge of the place, and being infinitely more adventurous and more knowing than their masters, carry on all the foreign trade; making frequent voyages to town in canoes loaded with oysters, buttermilk and cabbages. They are great astrologers, predicting the different changes of weather almost as accurately as an almanak—they are moreover exquisite performers on three stringed fiddles: in whistling they almost boast the farfamed powers of Orpheus. (437)

Fiddling and whistling provided the soundtrack at these markets. Dancing provided the spectacle. The Jersey slaves sold their goods at the Hudson markets, whereas at Catherine Market, on the East River, they sold their talents. According to New York historian Thomas De Voe, “After the Jersey negroes had disposed of their masters’ produce at the ‘Bear Market,’ . . . they would ‘shin it’ for the Catherine Market to enter the lists with the
Long Islanders” (137). At Catherine Market the black body went up on display, as blacks engaged in competitive dance contests for money, eels, fish, and applause.

“From its earliest instances,” Lhamon suggests, “this dancing for eels at Catherine Market addressed the issue of overlap” (Cain 2). Part of this overlap derived from white fascination with black bodies, a desire that later helped motorize minstrelsy. Whites gathered at the market to watch blacks dance, and eventually to imitate what they saw: “They wanted to overlay this black cachet on their own identities—even as their own identities” (Lhamon, Cain 3; original emphasis). In the developing republic, the desire to try on other cultures—and fuse them into something new—was strong. Everyone was assembling an identity from new-world cultural confusion and seeming deficiency.

Whites sought to enhance themselves with black accents, suggesting not only racial desire but also a cultural lack. And Knickerbocker suggests a different desire and deficit when he enhances black charisma with the cachet of medieval monks and ancient Orpheus. Though awed by their command and appeal, he relies on imported figures to affirm the “dutch negroes,” a clear symptom of cultural insecurity. These blacks are exquisite musicians, writes Knickerbocker; they are “almost” as powerful as Orpheus. In the young republic, the best way to test quality was by holding it to ancient and old-world standards, a habit Irving’s earliest blackface texts cannot seem to get beyond.

What Irving encountered in the markets were contact zones where cultures collided, coalesced, and mutated. What he would have seen in the Hudson Valley was the Pinkster festival, which involved another kind of cultural mixing. In his youth, Irving escaped city life by rambling north along the Hudson River. In 1798 he wandered as far as Sleepy Hollow. In 1800 he took the first of many trips up river to see his two sisters near Albany.
The Hudson River was a major part of Irving’s youth, and later his old age, when he settled at Sunnyside. This river was also the spine around which blackface minstrelsy began fleshing itself out. By following it backward from its mouth at Manhattan’s tip, where blacks danced and whites copied their moves, we eventually get to Albany, where blacks were transforming a white festival called Pinkster into their own. Originally a Dutch holiday named after the Pentecost, Pinkster was practiced by slaves and Dutch alike during the late colonial period. But after the Revolution, blacks increasingly infused the festival with their own music and dance. Though it appeared throughout the valley, Pinkster was closely associated with Albany, which cultivated dance styles that found their way down river to New York City and later into minstrelsy.4

Irving’s ritual excursions in the Hudson Valley, his interest in Dutch and black culture, and his love of pageantry make it hard to imagine he missed Pinkster, which even the unadventurous were aware of.5 Had he not seen it in Albany, or along the river, Pinkster was available at Long Island, New Jersey, and Catherine Market. Born when he was, Irving would have seen Pinkster’s cultural colors change, turning from a Dutch and black ritual into a festival of mostly African American expression. Between Albany and the waterfront markets, he doubtless experienced a world marked by fluid, almost dizzying, cross-cultural exchanges. Albany slaves overlaid Pentecost with African forms. Pinkster dance styles rode the river down to Manhattan, where they were absorbed by black dancers. White appropriations of these black moves then danced their way into minstrelsy.

While these cross-pollinations were occurring, cultural overlap of a different nature was finding material expression in the legitimate theater via the blackface mask, which
referenced racial fluidity, while simultaneously fixing race in its tracks with the blackface stereotype. Irving himself adored the theater. As a boy he would crawl through his window at night, drop to the ground, and head for the playhouse, pursuing a passion that informed such early work as *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle* (1802-03) and *Salmagundi*. In the latter, theatergoer Will Wizard exposes a pivotal moment in minstrelsy’s prehistory when he mocks his friend “Snivers the cockney” for criticizing the white actor Thomas Cooper “for,” as Wizard puts it, “not having made himself as black as a negro” (6: 137) while playing the title role in an American production of *Othello*. Because Othello is said to have “thick lips” and a “sooty bosom,” Snivers insists he “‘was an arrant black’” and should have been represented as such (6: 137). Wizard finds Snivers’ complaint trivial, but it reveals how *Othello* was then being revised for public consumption. While whites had traditionally played Othello in straightforward blackface, in the nineteenth century he received two major makeovers. Due to increasing fears of miscegenation, actors began whitening Othello early in the century by lightening his makeup and portraying him as civil, temperate, and reasoned. By mid-century, minstrel parodies lessened the threat even more by making him a ludicrous figure.⁶

What Snivers’ carping reveals is how whites controlled racial signification on the stage. While blackface was initially utilized for serious representations of black characters—as with early versions of *Othello*—it was increasingly used to produce and control images of blacks. This production of black images, of course, thrived most on the minstrel stage, where racial stereotypes were solidified. But Irving did not have to wait for minstrelsy to see staged stereotypes. Dale Cockrell has analyzed several “legitimate” blackface plays to show that the early American stage abounded with comic, happy,
musical black characters, and “that much of our conventional understanding of the relationship between blackface and race was a fixture of, if not fixed in, the legitimate theatre” (29). As a denizen of the Park Theater—a hot spot for legitimate blackface—Irving would have seen blackface plays fostering racial stereotypes, and that might explain why they appear in his texts. In fact, he becomes the first major American writer whose work is shot through with blackface stereotypes, especially the large-lipped, eye-rolling, loud-laughing, compulsively musical Negroes that became the most recognized feature of the minstrel show.

**Dislocating Local Identity**

In *Salmagundi*, Irving taps theater and Manhattan market culture to create an astonishing blackface production, which scholars have virtually ignored, probably because it is set in Haiti and written before minstrelsy formalized. Irving composed the *Salmagundi* essays with his brother William and friend James Kirke Paulding between 1807-08. Although their combined work raises authorship questions, the passage at hand is almost certainly Irving’s. Like most of his work, it involves multiple narrators. The text opens with Anthony Evergreen, who recounts Will Wizard’s anecdote about a Haitian black dancer named Tucky Squash. The anecdote is triggered when Wizard asks Evergreen about a “‘pretty young gentleman’” (6: 125) named Billy Dimple, who is dancing at a ball they are attending. Evergreen mentions that Dimple is popular with the ladies and unrivaled on the dance floor, instantly reminding Wizard of Tucky Squash, whom he supposedly encountered at Dessalines’ ball in Haiti.

Written between the Revolution and the War of 1812, the passage clearly reflects the decolonizing mind-set of the early republic. Here one sees the messy struggle between foreign ontology and local legitimacy. Overlaid with the “cachet” of exotic
forms, this Haitian-set description first appears wholly non-American, but I would argue that it derives mainly from local feeling and blackface culture. “Hayti” becomes a displaced site where American racial, sexual, and political concerns lurk: it is a space where Irving indulges and hides some of the fears and desires that haunt himself and the nation. More intimately, by writing the black body Irving engages in a blackface performance, replete with the desires, fears, disguises, and racial burlesque that crystallize in the minstrel show. Wizard’s description of the Haitian ball is worth quoting and discussing at length:

“Such a display of black and yellow beauties! such a show of madras handkerchiefs, red beads, cocks tails and pea-cocks feathers!—it was, as here, who should wear the highest top-knot, drag the longest tails, or exhibit the greatest variety of combs, colors and gew-gaws. In the middle of the rout, when all was buzz, slip-slop, clack and perfume, who should enter but TUCKY SQUASH! The yellow beauties blushed blue, and the black ones blushed as red as they could, with pleasure; and there was a universal agitation of fans—every eye brightened and whitened to see Tucky, for he was the pride of the court, the pink of courtesy, the mirror of fashion, the adoration of all the sable fair ones of Hayti. Such breadth of nose, such exuberance of lip! his shins had the true cucumber curve—his face in dancing shone like a kettle; and, provided you kept windward of him in summer, I do not know a sweeter youth in all Hayti than Tucky Squash. When he laughed, there appeared from ear to ear a chevaux-de-frize of teeth, that rivalled the shark’s in whiteness; he could whistle like a northwester—play on a three-stringed fiddle like Apollo;—and as to dancing, no Long-Island negro could shuffle you ‘double trouble,’ or ‘hoe corn and dig potatoes’ more scientifically—in short, he was a second Lothario, and the dusky nymphs of Hayti, one and all, declared him a perpetual Adonis. Tucky walked about, whistling to himself, without regarding any body; and his nonchalance was irresistible.” (6: 125)

The above passage contains the primary elements of blackface minstrelsy. Just as minstrels could escape the strictures of Anglo-Protestant propriety by projecting excesses onto the black bodies they “inhabited,” through Tucky Squash Irving enjoys sexual and cultural freedoms denied by respectable society. Displacement facilitates fantasy here, both concealing and revealing attraction for Tucky. By writing through Wizard, who transfers desire for Tucky to the black women, and by channeling the anecdote through
Evergreen, Irving can disguise and indulge his fascination for the phallic dancer—long tails, cucumber curved shins, and all. Both narrators function like the blackface mask in a sense, allowing Irving to fantasize black masculinity while shielding him from direct identification with it.

Tucky clearly embodies the fetishizing of black masculinity, a major impetus of minstrel-show mimicry, rooted in ambivalent responses to the black male body. For participants in minstrelsy, as Lott suggests, “[t]o wear or even enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black, to inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon . . . that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood” (Love 52). This goes for Irving too. By writing the black body, he tries on his version of black masculinity. Yet, while black fetishes derive from white fascination, they more covertly arise from feelings of white inadequacy. The moment Evergreen extols Dimple’s talents, Tucky is brought in. His brilliant performance eclipses Dimple’s and asks a basic blackface question: can the white body do what the black body can? Given the power Wizard bestows on Tucky, the answer seems to be “no.” Nevertheless, Wizard wants to try. He wants to enjoy the cool, virility, and abandon that Tucky embodies. While he is “neck and heels” into his story—into his black male fantasy—a ballroom band starts playing, sending him into a dance so explosive he crushes the toes and tears the dresses of fellow party guests. His anecdote, in other words, inspires an act of blackface mimicry. If the “black and yellow beauties” can blush red and blue, Wizard can try to blush black.

Whereas the urge to occupy black bodies derived from feelings of awe and inadequacy, blackface whites could compensate for these emotions, and strengthen their white identities, by burlesquing blackness. Tucky Squash is black cachet personified, yet
his big grin, shiny face, strong scent, risibility, and compulsive musicality belong to racist caricature, enabling Wizard to disassociate from him. Tucky is the type of comical, ridiculous, musical blackface character Irving would have seen on the legitimate stage. His name may have even come from the blackface opera *Obi, or Three-Fingered Jack*, which featured a blackface slave named “Tuckey” from a Jamaican sugar plantation. Yet, while racist lampoon helps Wizard disidentify with what he idealizes, Tucky still threatens to consume Wizard. That is, his “chevaux-de-frize” grin describes a mouth of razor sharp teeth—a *chevaux-de-frize* being a contraption of timber and iron spikes used in battle to thwart or impale horses—which, in this case, evokes cannibalism. With this fearful image, Irving is likely responding to the post-Haitian Revolutionary myth that Haiti abounded with savage black cannibals.

Irving’s use of Haitian material brings me to my next point, which I begin with a question. Are we to believe the passage truly derives from Dessalines’ court in Haiti? I would suggest instead that it is largely constructed from local materials, masquerading as a Haitian ball. By looking beyond the guests’ perfume, feathers, and fine clothing, we find elements of a Manhattan market scene, blackface action and all. The crowd watching Tucky Squash resembles the spectators Irving would have seen surrounding black dancers along the waterfront. More important, the Haitian Tucky dances “double trouble” and “hoe corn and dig potatoes,” which were both North American dances, routinely performed at Catherine Market. Also, the scene’s colorful chaos reflects motley marketplace energy; as mentioned earlier, these markets were contact zones, where class and cultural diversity reigned: “a universal agitation of fans,” as Wizard puts it. Finally,
the description evokes Knickerbocker’s passage on the “dutch negroes,” who whistle, fiddle, and are elevated by ancient and old-world analogies, as is Tucky Squash.

The notion that the scene evolves more from local market culture than from Haiti is strengthened by the fact that Irving never set foot in “Hayti.” And Wizard would not have been “cronies” with “Dessy,” as he puts it (6: 125). Dessalines was a courageous leader of the Haitian Revolution and a notoriously brutal despot, who was bitterly anti-white due to his struggles with colonialism. After achieving its bloody independence, Haiti filled the white American imaginary with fears of violent black revolt. Dessalines, who will be echoed by the sadistic Babo in “Benito Cereno,” embodied these fears. North American newspapers, as Bruce Dain notes, portrayed Dessalines “as a bestial Negro madman, bloodthirsty and out of control” (90). To Irving’s audience, Wizard’s visit to Dessalines’ court would have been too bold to be taken seriously. But Irving’s impressions of Haiti may not have been only media driven. Along with press coverage, he could have seen black Haitians in his city, where several of them were brought just before the Revolution. The “French Negroes,” as they were called, were a prominent ethnic group who likely added their own dance styles to the market mix. Irving may have even found his Haitian muse at home in New York City, dancing for eels at Catherine Market.

As a quasi-mythical setting, Haiti suggests another imaginary buffer, a geographical mask of sorts, enabling Irving to indulge the black body at a distance. It also adds one more culture to what is a stunning collage of foreign allusions. On the one hand, Irving’s reliance on French, British, Greek, and Haitian references reflects new-world cultural deficiency. On the other, it suggests the unstable cultural identity that characterized the new republic. Written when the national identity was in fact
fragmented, displaced, and confused, Irving’s blackface collage becomes a metaphor for how hard it was to locate “America” in the decolonizing moment.

The scene clearly privileges the foreign over the local. For instance, the Haitian Tucky Squash—suave as Adonis, talented as Apollo—dances better than the “Long-Island negro.” His superiority makes sense too, for as Watts suggests, “a sense of colonial marginality pervaded republicanism; products of local origin were never privileged the way imported ideas and objects were” (13). Therefore, instead of letting it stand naked, Irving dresses up this very American scene in foreign cultural capital. While it resists the artificial coherence promoted by republicanism, it is still bound up in colonial insecurities, which appear to inhibit its local expression. Irving’s blackface production in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” written when America was further along in the decolonizing process, is less beholden to standards of foreign cultural legitimacy.

Before analyzing “Legend,” I want to turn to *Salmagundi*’s influence on Charles Dickens, who, in *American Notes* (1842), describes a black dancer named Juba in a style that echoes Irving’s. Dickens was a self-proclaimed disciple of Irving. He eagerly sought Irving’s approval and claimed to have virtually memorized his works. As such, the likeness between their blackface productions might be expected. Yet critics have missed the connection, probably because Irving stages his scene in Haiti, whereas Dickens sets his in an underground Manhattan tavern. Like Irving’s, Dickens’ production first describes several colorfully dressed blacks—a mulatto landlady wearing “a handkerchief of many colors”; a landlord in a “blue jacket”; and “two young mulatto girls,” also in colorful handkerchiefs (90)—who gather around Juba, evoking the audience that surrounds Tucky Squash. The description of Juba extends the parallel. Just as Tucky
personifies charisma and talent, Juba is “the wit of the assembly, and the greatest dancer known” (90). But while Tucky enters when the party is on high, Juba enters once the scene begins to slow:

[S]uddenly the lively hero dashes in to the rescue. Instantly the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is new energy in the tambourine; new laughter in the dancers; new smiles in the landlady; new confidence in the landlord; new brightness in the very candles. Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man’s fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs. . . . [H]e finishes . . . with the chuckle of a million counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound. (90-91)

While Irving’s passage is riddled with foreign analogies, Dickens’ description focuses almost exclusively on the African American Juba—a cultural gem within the belly of Manhattan—and on the “new” life he brings to the tavern. The repetition of the word “new” here has particular resonance, suggesting Juba represents not only something new but something distinctly American. Dickens wrote the passage shortly after T. D. Rice had awed Britain with his Jim Crow act, which was relished as an American treasure. Apparently trying to go a step further, Dickens provides his own readers with a real, “inimitable” black dancer: the source of the counterfeit Jim Crow. Yet, while he strikes (African) American cultural gold here, we should not lose sight that Dickens’ description echoes Irving’s, even though he emphasizes new-world culture more confidently than Irving himself. In the spirit of blackface competition, we can see Dickens squaring off against his mentor. And he appears to win the contest—at least minstrelsy scholars seem to think so. After all, his passage is the most analyzed example of black dance in the minstrel canon. Irving’s is little more than a footnote. But I would argue that Irving’s production excels his competitor’s since it engages the psychology, conflicted impulses,
and origins of blackface more complexly. Irving grew up in and absorbed blackface culture. Dickens was only visiting, and he was writing when minstrelsy was already a recognizable form, whereas Irving opens a rare window onto blackface prehistory. Irving pioneers blackface writing. Dickens and others extend the tradition.

**Localizing National Identity**

Ironically, Irving’s next blackface production appears in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, which was written on Dickens’ home turf. After the War of 1812, Irving left for England, where he began writing the sketches and tales that would win him fame at home and abroad. But because most of the collection is narrated in an elevated British style, and given the text’s interest in English scenes, culture, and history, *The Sketch Book* was long regarded as little more than proof that an American could write as well as an English author, and it obtained only minor status in the American canon. Recent scholarship, however, emphasizes the text’s engagement with national issues. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky sees it as a working-through of America’s post-Revolutionary “crisis of identity” via the Crayon persona, while Laura Murray suggests the sketches romanticize the loss of British inheritance and the life and culture of American Indians. And Watts, after illustrating how Irving’s *A History of New York* works within but subverts old literary paradigms, argues that *The Sketch Book* breaks free from inherited modes of writing to become a viable postcolonial text. He suggests that, because they strive to become indigenous, “Rip Van Winkle” and “Legend” best exemplify this transition.

Although they derive from German folklore, “Rip” and “Legend” are Irving’s way of asserting an American identity in a text preoccupied with Britain. Both tales are told by Knickerbocker and draw on Irving’s boyhood in the Dutch communities along the
Hudson Valley. While “Rip” addresses national issues more overtly than “Legend,” I want to show how the latter uses native materials to confront racial realities of the republic, a topic Irving’s critics have avoided. I take my cue from Lewis Leary, who observes that while “Legend” is an imported story, “Irving’s skill in caricature” and “of dance and frolic and rich tomfoolery is genuinely his own” (202). The vivid caricatures, description of dance, and tomfoolery, I argue, provide the text’s most distinctly American moments, not just because they are Irving’s invention, but because they tap African American and nascent blackface culture. By doing so, they weave local materials into a markedly indigenous expression. Instead of merging foreign and native materials, the scenes I focus on involve the fusion of local forms through various acts of racial appropriation.

If we accept that Knickerbocker draws from black oral culture and, more specifically, that he encounters a black miller—“the great historic genius of the Hollow,” as he calls him—who inspires “Legend,” it seems logical that the text would have an African American influence. It has become cliché that the rivalry between the Connecticut-born Ichabod Crane and the rural Brom Bones in “Legend” dramatizes the Yankee versus the Backwoodsman, a coupling that became a fixture of American literature and folklore. But this pairing, I suggest, also evokes aspects of African American tricksterism, with Bones playing trickster to Crane’s slavemaster. The rhetoric of slavery surrounds the schoolmaster Crane. Often called “master,” he routinely beats his students with the birch, his “scepter of despotic power,” which he uses to dominate his “little empire, the school” (8: 283, 275), from which his students, when dismissed, receive “emancipation” (8: 284). Crane’s rival Bones, with “short curly black hair” (8:
53

281), is a trickster par excellence. Through his wit and cunning, he will rid the community of the imperious, but gullible, Crane. He begins by making a mockery of the pedant and his little empire, turning it “topsy-turvy” each night, until “the poor schoolmaster began to think all the witches in the country held their meetings there” (8: 283). Then, much like the shape-shifting trickster, he transforms himself into the headless horseman, presumably by covering his head with a black cloak. His various tricks, which play on superstitious fears, have the earmarks of conjuring associated with African American trickster tales.¹³

Bones’ trickster ties are reinforced by his connection to blackness, a color the text also uses to connote phallic potency. When he plays his final trick by routing Crane with a pumpkin, he appears near the road as “something huge, misshapen, black and towering” (8: 292). After Bones ascend the path, Crane perceives him as “a horseman of large dimensions, and mounted on a black horse of powerful frame” (8: 293). As he chases Crane through the woods, the homoerotic energy intensifies, approaching climax as Bones bares down on the pedant. “[Crane] heard the black steed panting and blowing close behind him,” writes Knickerbocker; “he even fancied that he felt his hot breath” (8: 294). While elements of African American tricksterism expand the tale’s indigenous dimensions, blackening Bones to suggest sexual potency extends the fetishizing of blackness we see in Salmagundi.

But Crane, too, is blackened. Just before Bones drives him from town, the pedagogue attends a party, where he performs a blackface shuffle that wins the admiration of the town’s blacks, and impresses his dance partner Katrina, the Dutch
heiress he hopes to marry, who is also the source of his rivalry with Bones. I quote the passage at length:

And now the sound of the music from the common room or hall summoned to the dance. The musician was an old grey headed negro, who had been the itinerant orchestra of the neighbourhood for more than half a century. His instrument was as old and battered as himself. The greater part of the time he scraped away on two or three strings, accompanying every movement of the bow with a motion of the head; bowing almost to the ground, and stamping his foot whenever a fresh couple were to start.

Ichabod prided himself upon his dancing as much as upon his vocal powers. Not a limb, not a fibre about him was idle, and to have seen his loosely hung frame in full motion, and clattering about the room, you would have thought Saint Vitus himself, that blessed patron of the dance, was figuring before you in person. He was the admiration of all the negroes, who, having gathered, of all ages and sizes, from the farm and neighbourhood, stood forming a pyramid of shining black faces at every door and window, gazing with delight at the scene, rolling their white eyeballs, and showing grinning rows of ivory from ear to ear. (8: 287-88)

Here Crane enjoys his best moment in the text. Katrina is “smiling graciously” at him, while the crowd of approving blacks, like the fans around Tucky, suggests he is really turning it on. This is the only time the gangly pedant seems to physically outman the strong and dexterous Bones, who, “sorely smitten with love and jealousy, s[its] brooding by himself in one corner” (8: 288). By dancing to black music and delighting black spectators, Crane seems to overlay black cachet on his own identity—perhaps something he must do to win the girl. Interestingly, the rivalry between Crane and Bones resembles later blackface romance parodies, where two “darkeys” vied for the affections of a beautiful wench.14

But the scene does more than enhance Crane through ostensible black approval: it virtually embodies everything blackface stood for then and would come to stand for later. On the one hand, it evokes the mutual interest and cultural exchange prevalent among blacks and whites in such blackface breeding grounds as Catherine Market and Pinkster,
where blacks reveled in white translations of their moves and vice versa. Just as blacks appreciated their white imitators, Crane becomes “the admiration of all the negroes,” possibly because they recognize aspects of their dancing in his gestures. We know that African American dancing at Pinkster was characterized by extravagant movements that suggested the loss of bodily control.\textsuperscript{15} Being from the Hudson Valley, Crane’s spectators likely would have been Pinkster participants; that might explain why they are drawn to the schoolmaster’s clattering frenzy.

Irving’s racist caricature, on the other hand, disrupts any interracial reciprocity, anticipating disasters on the minstrel horizon. The black spectators’ shiny faces, rolling white eyes, and enormous grinning mouths emphasize the features blackface makeup would exaggerate in order to ridicule and stereotype blacks. Irving’s caricature, like early staged blackface, presages what minstrelsy would become some twenty years later. Although nascent blackface provided common ground for cultural exchange, the minstrel show became a massive racist enterprise where whites controlled black representation, while keeping blacks outside their profitable circle. Like Irving’s characters who stand at every door and window watching Crane dance in the blackface tradition, black Americans eventually became spectators to the white counterfeiting of their culture. Situated as it is between blackface folk emergence and the dawn of the minstrel show, the above passage virtually synthesizes the conflicted history of blackface.

Irving’s text also reveals how black and white cultural forms, when merged, produce something uniquely American. With its overlap of Anglo and African American folklore and dance, “Legend” can be read as a more confident postcolonial assertion than Irving’s earlier blackface productions. Using Saint Vitus as its only old-world allusion,
the description of Ichabod, for the most part, moves beyond foreign ontology. We see Irving embrace, rather than displace, the complexities of local identity. But the passage not only achieves local legitimacy; its racial fluidity also serves as a kind of adversary to the republican myth of coherent national identity. Crane’s hybrid frenzy taps the cultural confusion from which the country was emerging and reflects the precarious nature of racial and cultural categories. However, while the schoolmaster embodies fluidity, the exclusion of his black audience from the “white” festivities reminds us that cultural fusion does not necessarily melt away hierarchies of race.

Notes

1 Several critics have remarked on Irving’s use of Native American and Dutch materials. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky asserts that The Sketch Book’s “Traits of Indian Character” and “Philip of Pokanoket” exemplify Irving’s “conception of the core of the national character” (95), and Laura Murray sees the Indian tales as Irving’s “troubled attempt to make his book American” (214). William Hedges writes that Irving idealized the Dutch past because of his “dissatisfaction with the present” (66), and Richard McLamore suggests that Knickerbocker’s Dutch stories, in tune as they are with the culture along the Hudson River, “refute English assertions of American cultural inadequacy” (46). Finally, Watts argues that Knickerbocker’s Dutch tales “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” both strive to become indigenous.

2 The formulaic minstrel show is usually said to begin in 1843 in New York City, when Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels took the stage at the Chatham theater. However, W. T. Lhamon has exposed this historical inaccuracy. “[T]he first minstrel show,” he explains, “was not in New York City but in provincial Buffalo. That’s where E. P. Christy formed his band and gave his first concert in June 1842” (Cain 59).

3 Irving’s multicultural collages resemble what Lawrence Buell calls “cultural hybridization” (209), one of six traits, he suggests, that reveal postcolonial anxiety in American texts.

4 See Stuckey, who suggests that King Charley, the black dancer who presided over Pinkster in the eighteenth century, taught Albany slaves his dance styles, which were carried into the nineteenth century, and down river to New York City. He suggests that Charley helped pioneer the double shuffle (46). The double shuffle, of course, became popular on the minstrel stage.

5 For brief remarks on Irving’s love of pageants, see Williams 8.
Snivers’ remark is especially significant because it deflates the conventional thesis that the British actor Edmund Kean inaugurated the “tawny” Othello in 1814. Cooper’s “browning up” on the American stage as far back as 1807 suggests that recoloring Othello might have been an American idea; that may explain why Snivers resists the light Othello. For more information on the whitening of Othello, see Collins and MacDonald.

The editors in the “Assignments of Authorship” section of the Twayne edition of Salmagundi provide a chart detailing those who have weighed in on the who-wrote-what question, 327-328. The most weight is given to James Kirke Paulding and then Robert Stevens Osborne, who both believe Washington Irving wrote the passage. Paulding’s notes of authorship assignment in the 1814 presentation copy of Salmagundi credit Irving as author, making it fairly certain that he wrote the passage.

For the theorization of how minstrelsy helped whites construct their racial identities in relation to blackness, see Roediger 95-131 and Lott 63-88.

See Nathan 126n.6. He notes that Obi, or Three-Fingered Jack was an English opera. I have found no evidence as to whether or not the play was produced in America, although several English blackface plays were. Still, Irving could have seen it in Britain, where he visited before writing Salmagundi and fell in love with the English stage.

For stories about Haitian “cannibals” and atrocities, see Hunt 37-83.

See Shane White’s Somewhat More Independent for further remarks on black Haitians in New York City 31-32.

See Letters III Vol. 25, from The Complete Works of Washington Irving (100-01), where Dickens explains how thoroughly Irving influenced him.

For more on the slave trickster versus the slavemaster, see Roberts 17-64.

For a popular example of such male rivalry, see Oh, Hush! Or, The Virginny Cupids in Engle 1-12.

See Shane White’s “‘It Was a Proud Day’” 29-31.
Irving’s writings record the emergence of blackface in a postcolonial nation searching for self-definition. By the time Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, national culture, though unsettled by sectional discord, had nevertheless become more defined and coherent. As mentioned earlier, this development was partly due to the explosion of a national literature, but it was also attributable to minstrelsy, which entered its boom years as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* swept the nation. Curiously, both of these hugely successful cultural productions were mutually constitutive phenomena. Despite Stowe’s Puritan resistance to the theater, her novel borrowed lavishly from blackface, then settled its debt by recycling minstrel types to the stage, and later to early American cinema.¹ *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and blackface both relied on impressions of slave culture that profoundly shaped black and white American identities; both were invested in the national tensions that led to the Civil War; and both were having liberatory effects, even as they seeded American culture with racist stereotypes. I draw these comparisons to suggest that minstrelsy and Stowe’s novel were, in many ways, conjoined cultural twins. Much of what we say about the racial aspects of one can be said about the other. It is not surprising, then, that the racial controversy surrounding the novel, as Lhamon has suggested, resembles the polarizing history of blackface scholarship (*Cain* 140-41). Like the quarrel over minstrelsy, the debate over whether the text is antiracist or racist, beneficial or harmful, has been hard fought. This essay, however, parts company with
such polar assessments, proposing instead that we consider the novel as a product of the racially ambivalent antebellum moment. Specifically, it examines how four black characters, Uncle Tom, Black Sam, Adolph, and George Harris, employ blackface conventions and colonial mimicry to simultaneously resist and conform to various aspects of national identity, while they test racial barriers to self-making and actualize differing degrees of selfhood.

When Stowe’s black cast stepped into the national imaginary, it sparked fierce divisions along racial, national, and critical lines. The novel provoked a harsh epistolary dispute between Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, former coeditors of the *North Star*. Douglass endorsed Stowe and her work, but a white woman posing as a champion for blacks vexed Delany. The text proved even more divisive for Lincoln. Greeting Stowe at the White House in 1862, he reportedly said, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!” While nineteenth-century reactions to the text were deeply divided, twentieth-century responses further widened the rift. Constance Rourke and Langston Hughes extolled Stowe’s racial work, but the more memorable appraisals came from James Baldwin, J. C. Furnas, and Richard Yarborough, who indicted Stowe’s racialism and the problems it bequeathed blacks.

More recently, scholars have returned to defending the novel’s antislavery impulse, despite its racial travesties. Arguing against Baldwin, Furnas, and Yarborough, Michael Meyer claims that the characters in the text support rather than subvert Stowe’s abolitionist stance, and Arthur Riss maintains the novel’s racialism drives its “progressive” politics. Analyzing the text through the lens of blackface subversion, Lhamon also sees it achieving liberatory reform through, and despite, its racialism. But
Lhamon’s work is then savaged by Lott, who boldly asserts that “Lhamon’s sympathetic readings of blackface’s racial work ring hollow” (Review 146). While Lott fully appreciates minstrelsy’s insurrectionary energies, he ultimately rebukes the form, and his views push toward the critical camp that has denounced Stowe. I could join Lott and criticize Lhamon’s approach to minstrelsy, or do the reverse, but taking sides over such conflicted cultural phenomena as minstrelsy or Uncle Tom’s Cabin eventually runs its course. Stowe’s book, it seems to me, virtually balances racialism and antiracism, negative stereotypes and abolitionist virtues. Her racial ambivalence, along with what biographer Joan Hedrick calls her “inchoate politics” (Life 216), yields a text that speaks with a forked tongue, much like minstrelsy, leaving ample room for praise and condemnation.

To investigate the novel’s conflicted impulses, this essay draws on Homi Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry, which he describes as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite” (86; original emphasis). Mimicry urges the colonized to imitate the colonizer, yet the outcome of such imitation is never an exact copy, because mimicry can easily turn to mockery or menace, enabling the colonized to subvert the master narrative. Using the tools of minstrelsy, Tom, Sam, Adolph, and George all remake themselves by mimicking national icons, attitudes, and ideals. Since they operate within the conflicted economy of minstrelsy, however, their imitations complicate Bhabha’s notion of mimicry. Rather than being only subversive, these characters both undermine and reinforce racial hegemony, menace and maintain the national narrative, disrupt and preserve homogenous space. Imitating blackness and whiteness was crucial to American self-creation, and
while it resulted in a de facto hybridity, whites drew racial lines to protect their sense of cultural homogeneity. Blackface embodied this contradiction by registering racial fluidity and fixity in one breath. Just as minstrelsy articulated “a simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries” (Lott, Love 6), Stowe’s black characters engage in acts of mimicry whereby they both hybridize cultural purity and reinforce homogeneity, revealing how racial and national identity is paradoxically both a shifting and stable phenomenon.

Red, White, Blue, and Blackface

In order to emphasize a convergence between minstrelsy, national identity, and Stowe, I want to describe a celebrated tale from blackface history. In 1832, an unmarried Harriet Beecher virtually crossed paths with Jim Crow innovator T. D. Rice—a prelude, it would seem, to Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s intersecting with minstrelsy some twenty years later. Having just left the Ohio valley, Rice was taking his new Jim Crow act east, while the Beechers were in Hartford, readying their wagon for Cincinnati, a city Rice had recently set ablaze with Jim Crow fever. The Beechers passed through New York and Philadelphia just as Rice was rolling up the Atlantic coast, heading for his explosive reception at the Bowery Theater. In those days, Rice would emerge behind a mask of burnt cork, sporting red-and-white stripes for pants and a long blue coat that boasted a star-spangled collar. On one occasion he improvised an act that became a national legend. In a gunny sack slung over his shoulder, he carried on stage four-year-old Joseph Jefferson III, likewise arrayed in the colors of Old Glory. After a song-and-dance routine, Rice rolled his mini mimic from the sack, and Joe danced and sang an imitation of Jim Crow. Stowe had to have known this story. Lhamon has spotted breathtaking parallels between Joe’s performance and the blackface impressions four-year-old Harry does early
in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, when Mr. Shelby calls him “Jim Crow” and urges him to sing and dance (*Cain* 97-98). Lhamon, however, omits crucial details of Rice and Jefferson’s matching attire. But since Stowe taps this duo’s spectacle, we assume she knew that blackface could come dressed in the American flag.

Rice was referencing Uncle Sam, who was then appearing in political cartoons, decorated in red, white, and blue. A progeny of the War of 1812, Uncle Sam iconized the government, as well as national unity, liberty, and patriotism. However, the majority of blacks—enslaved, dependent, denied citizenship, and excluded from politics—experienced the virtual opposite of what Uncle Sam stood for. Thus it is easy to see how Rice’s blackface masquerade synthesized the conflict between national ideals and slavery, igniting as many contradictions as Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson’s children in the process. Rice’s ensemble mocked cultural purity, suggesting that black culture was very much a part of, though de jure excluded from, the national culture. By giving expression to concerns that blacks might someday join the body politic, Rice was enacting on stage what many Americans dreaded—what Berndt Ostendorf has aptly called “the blackening of America” (67). Finally, if we read the gunny sack as womb, Rice’s giving birth to a replicate red, white, and blue self punned brilliantly on American self-making through blackface, illustrating how self-creation was paradoxically an imitative process.⁶

**Blackface George Washington**

I use Rice’s blackface Uncle Sam to segue into one of the novel’s more striking images, which we see shortly after entering Uncle Tom’s cabin, where we glimpse a virtual minstrel show. There is Aunt Chloe, whose risibility, plump contour, and “black, shining face” (17) make her the essential mammy. There is Uncle Tom, “a full glossy
black” (18), who humbly learns his lessons from young Mas’r George. Tom is minstrelsy’s sentimental slave. There are Mose and Pete, two bumptious children who, after playing with their dinner under the table, emerge in a version of blackface, “with hands and faces well plastered with molasses” (22). Like the novel’s unruly Topsy, these boys represent the irrepressible, disorderly minstrel slave. At one point Stowe tells a chicken joke, describing how Chloe intimidates the barnyard fowl with her culinary designs. At another, the actors erupt in compulsive merriment, “till every one had roared and tumbled and danced themselves down to a state of composure” (23). The scene is so meticulously minstrel it draws attention to an image that hangs above the cabin hearth: “a portrait of General Washington, drawn and colored in a manner which would certainly have astonished that hero, if ever he had happened to meet with its like” (18). The word “colored,” of course, like the portrait itself, is ambiguous. But since it commonly described blacks at this time, it would seem to connote “black.” Further, the portrait is not just colored, but “drawn” in a way that would surprise the president, implying that Washington has been given black characteristics, evoking minstrelsy’s use of costumes and burnt-cork makeup to exaggerate African features. All told, Tom’s portrait of Washington appears to be in blackface.

In her feminist reading of the novel, Christina Zwarg sees the portrait as a “a parody of origins” (573) that subverts traditional notions of white patriarchy. Julia Stern, on the other hand, calls it simple fantasy, a “burlesque mimicry of ideals for which African Americans have no natural affinity”; therefore, “such an icon can only be comical” (121; original emphasis). Riss suggests the portrait “exemplifies Stowe’s belief that racial homogeneity can provide the only secure foundation for either a familial or a
political community” and that “[i]f Washington is to be Tom’s hero, he must be black like Tom” (514). While these arguments all have merit, they only tell half the story. By viewing it as simply subversive, comical, or homogenous, these readings miss the portrait’s ambivalent energy: how it is simultaneously subversive and conformist, comical and menacing, homogenous and hybrid, and how these oppositional meanings reflect conflicted processes of colonial mimicry and blackface self-making. Further, these readings ignore how thoroughly the portrait ties minstrelsy to the national narrative. A blackface George Washington joins minstrelsy to national identity much as Rice’s Uncle Sam had, triggering similar paradoxes. In the same way that it sits above the cabin hearth, the portrait hovers as a blackface ur-symbol over *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, embodying the novel’s, and the nation’s, most potent contradictions.

Stowe is drawing from the minstrel pantheon here. By blackening George Washington, she invokes blackface pioneer George Washington Dixon. The only other founding father of minstrelsy to rival Rice in fame and talent, Dixon achieved East-coast acclaim as the dignified dandy Long Tail Blue while Stowe was still in Hartford. He later became virtually synonymous with the more popular Zip Coon. Both of Dixon’s dandies addressed the public’s fear of black ambition and drive toward selfhood. In Dixon’s famous song “Zip Coon,” Coon went so far as to boast of becoming president:

Dare General Jackson, will him lampoon,
An de bery nex President, will be Zip Coon.  

George Washington in blackface plays the same joke on national politics that George Washington Dixon played whenever he blacked up and sang “Zip Coon.” Like Zip Coon, the portrait satirizes African American self-making while at the same time threatening white cultural purity.
The picture is also an ambivalent act of mimicry, which is illuminated when we read the portrait through a subsequent description of Tom, who sits at a table below the drawing, working his lessons:

He was very busily intent at this moment on the slate lying before him, on which he was carefully and slowly endeavoring to accomplish a copy of some letters, in which operation he was overlooked by young Mas’r George, a smart, bright boy of thirteen, who appeared fully to realize the dignity of his position as instructor.

“Not that way, Uncle Tom,—not that way,” said he, briskly, as Uncle Tom laboriously brought up the tail of his g the wrong side out; “that makes a q, you see.” (18)

Tom’s endeavor to copy the letter g, which is, significantly, the first letter of “George,” gestures to the blackface portrait that overlooks the cabin, and to George Shelby, who imperiously oversees Tom. It is hard not to link George Washington with young George, whose age evokes the thirteen colonies, and who becomes a new leader in his own right by the end of the novel. Whereas Tom had produced a distorted version of Washington with the portrait, here he produces an imprecise g, despite George’s efforts to have him copy the letter exactly. In other words, the letter g and the blackface portrait are “almost the same but not quite.” Both are acts of mimicry, suggesting that Tom complies with as well as resists the dominant culture, reflecting the ambivalent relationship between master and slave.

The portrait itself is especially ambivalent, since it is part slave, part master. As such, the blackened president both destabilizes and reinforces the concept of American identity. Like Uncle Sam, Washington is an icon for national stability, homogeneity, and independence. But his being “colored” unfixes him, hybridizes him, exposes the contradiction between slavery and freedom. Like minstrelsy, the portrait suggests that “white” America is politically, historically, and culturally bound with black culture and
vice versa. Yet, while the blackened president destabilizes national identity, he can also be read as Tom’s desire to identify with the national mythos, as an attempt to make himself over in the image of the president. From this perspective, Tom is not only subverting but coloring himself into the national narrative. As such, we can read the portrait as a sincere act of patriotism that reinforces national ideals. So, while it is subversive on one hand, the portrait is as conformist as Tom’s emulation of Jesus on the other. Ironically, whereas whites imitated blacks by wearing blackface, Tom is imitating white culture by blackening George Washington.

But if the portrait represents hybridity, it can also suggest Stowe’s belief that racial homogeneity creates stable political communities. Riss and other scholars contend that Stowe desires a racialized nationalism because she sends several black characters to Liberia at the end of the novel. No characters better symbolize Stowe’s push for homogeneity than George Harris and George Shelby, who both resemble the first president. George Harris evokes Washington in his use of Revolutionary rhetoric and new-world vision of freedom and empire in Liberia, whereas George Shelby, by emancipating his slaves, becomes a purified version of Washington, a true embodiment of democratic ideals. Stowe makes the two Georges over in the image of Washington, then separates them by nationality in order to suggest a solution to America’s race problem and to the national contradictions that the blackened president embodies.

**Black Sam, Uncle Sam**

By articulating hybridity and homogeneity in the same breath, the blackface portrait reflects Lott’s observation that minstrelsy was a “simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries” (*Love* 6). One of the strongest racial boundaries at the time was the one excluding blacks from national politics. Tom never actually crosses this
political boundary, but his imitation of Washington, who epitomizes American politics, is a political act, one which sets the stage for Black Sam, Mr. Shelby’s field slave, who mimics American politics in order to realize a new selfhood.

We meet Sam as word of Eliza’s escape and Tom’s sale circulates among the slaves on the Shelby plantation. He is the one most intrigued by the news, because he sees Tom’s fate, which Stowe compares to the “fall of [a] prime minister” (37), as a chance to raise himself in the plantation hierarchy, a political ambition the novel colors white:

Black Sam, as he was commonly called, from his being about three shades blacker than any other son of ebony on the place, was revolving the matter profoundly in all its phases and bearings, with a comprehensiveness of vision and a strict look-out to his own personal well-being, that would have done credit to any white patriot in Washington. (37)

Sam is truly minstrel, for he hides “white” motives behind a figurative black mask. He is also linked to patriotism and the American government as he maneuvers between his low slave status and will to political power. Stowe politicizes Sam the moment she calls him a “son of ebony,” wryly invoking the Sons of Liberty, a group of early American radicals who opposed British rule, led by another Sam—Sam Adams, American patriot, political dynamo, and revolutionary hero. Being the mock revolutionary hero, political animal, and patriot that he is, Sam is Adams’ comic parallel. While Adams defended American liberty against British rule, Sam promises to defend his fellow slaves from traders like Haley. “‘I’ll stand up for yer rights,‘” he says, “‘I’ll fend ’em to the last breath!’” (65). As a slave, or “son of ebony,” Sam is a black replica of the Sons of Liberty, who used slave metaphors to describe America’s relationship with Britain, perceiving themselves politically enslaved by their colonial parent. Stowe’s text often compares American slavery to British oppression of early America, an analogy that culminates in George Harris, who will model his struggle for liberty after America’s fight against British rule.
Besides Adams, Sam evokes another national icon. When he realizes that helping Eliza escape will please Mrs. Shelby, Sam approaches her “with as good a determination to pay court as did ever a suitor after a vacant place at St. James’ or Washington” (39). In other words, Tom’s absence has created a “political” opening on the plantation, and Sam thinks that, by helping Mrs. Shelby, he can fill that vacancy. His instincts are correct, because after he helps Eliza escape, Mrs. Shelby sends him to Tom’s cabin for a victory feast, at which time he awes an audience with an account of the day’s adventures, followed by a burlesque of political rhetoric, commanding as much attention as Tom had when he once ministered prayers in the cabin. Critics, however, have missed the extraordinary implication of Sam’s usurpation: by replacing Uncle Tom, Sam in effect becomes “Uncle Sam.” That Sam becomes “nationalized” during the meal is, of course, fortified by Tom’s absence being likened to a vacant seat in Washington; by Sam’s cajoling his way into the cabin with the suavity of “an electioneering politician”; and by the blackface portrait, which makes the cabin a symbol of American government. Sam, in other words, has made it to the plantation equivalent of Washington, D.C. No wonder he delivers oratory at this time, the kind of stump speech delivered at political events, sometimes by citizens dressed as Uncle Sam.

The disparities and ironic similarities between the lowly slave and the lofty government fascinated Stowe, who later acknowledged the contradictory link between the Sambo figure and Uncle Sam. In 1845, she had published a sketch titled “Immediate Emancipation,” a story about freeing a slave named Sam. A year or so after publishing _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_, she reissued the story as “Uncle Sam’s Emancipation.” Stowe apparently recognized that slaves were a crucial part of the national character and that
emancipation not only meant freeing them but also the United States from the sins and contradictions hobbling its ideals.

Black Sam’s becoming “Uncle Sam” releases the kind of ambivalent energies we see in both Rice’s blackface Uncle Sam and the blackface portrait of Washington. As Sambo and Uncle Sam, Sam is a highly contradictory character, who exemplifies the best and worst in political self-making. With a “talent that might, undoubtedly, have raised him to eminence in political life,—a talent of making capital out of everything that turned up” (64), Sam exploits low resources to the fullest: using a nail to replace a suspender button, placing a beech nut under Haley’s saddle that throws the pursuit of Eliza into chaos, making a palm-leaf into a hat. His resourcefulness takes him from rags to the slave equivalent of riches by the end of the day. His self-serving motives, obsequies, and gross opportunism, however, make him as odious as he is admirable.

Like Topsy, another paradoxical figure, Sam wears a carefully contrived mask, disguising compulsive cunning with affected solemnity. But whereas Christian grace and Ophelia’s discipline eventually subdue Topsy’s conflicted nature, Sam only grows in contradictions. He is subversive, as many critics have noted, but he also complies with the hierarchy for self-elevation. Stowe winks at us as we follow Sam, because she sees in the Sambo trickster an analogue to the scheming Washington statesman. Through Sam, she both closes and exposes the gap between the blackest slave and the white world of politics. Black Sam subverts the system, while “Uncle Sam” reproduces political and racial hierarchies. As a tidy contradiction, the two Sams join the liberatory and racist energies of blackface in perfect balance.
But while he is both subversive and conformist, Sam will become menacing through his political mimicry, which, we later learn, derives from attending political gatherings with Mr. Shelby, where he observes and then enacts “ludicrous burlesques and imitations” (64) of political rhetoric. True to his dual nature, Sam both satirizes and plays politics, becoming what he mocks. And what he mocks is political domination. His talents and ambitions are nowhere more evident than when he begins to “speechify” his fellow slaves in Tom’s cabin. While he boasts about protecting his brethren against slave traders, his sidekick Andy points out that he originally meant to capture Eliza, when doing so seemed the way to win his Master’s graces. By employing his rhetorical skill, Sam is able to convert his hypocrisy into a defense of persistence:

“Here! I’m tryin’ to get top o’ der hay. Wal, I puts up my larder dis yer side; ’tain’t no go;—den, cause I don’t try dere no more, but puts my larder right de contrar side, an’t I persistent? I’m persistent in wantin’ to get up which ary side my larder is; don’t yer see, all on yer?” (66)

What Sam really persists in is self-elevation at the expense of consistency. By eyeing politicians, he has learned to get to the “top o’ der hay” by doing or saying whatever necessary. During the meal, over which he presides as “monarch of all he surveyed” (65), Sam declares he has principles, and that, if necessary, he would go to the stake saying, “I comes to shed my last blood fur my principles” (66). As “Uncle Sam,” he has reached the top of the slave political system, but now he goes so far as to promote himself as a martyr. His victory feast even parodies the last supper, with Sam “rising, full of supper and glory” (66). By the end of his speech, Sam has become a self-enthroned amalgam of ambiguous powers. He is both a spiritual and secular icon: a mock Jesus, a mock Uncle Sam, a threatening hybrid. With an air of racial superiority, he dismisses his audience:

“Niggers! all on yer, said Sam, waving his palm-leaf with benignity, ‘I give yer my
blessin’; go to bed now, and be good boys” (67). By imitating his way to the top of the slave hierarchy, he resembles the traitorous black dandy, whose mimicry of white power duplicates white racism. Sam reproduces the racial hierarchy even as he subverts it.

Adolph and George Harris: (Un)making African American Selfhood

Throughout the novel, Stowe treats the slave-holding South, especially the Deep South, as a corrupting place. Simon Legree’s sadism, Prue’s alcoholism, Augustine St. Clare’s extravagance, and his brother Alfred’s despotism all grow from the South’s pernicious sway. What the South cannot corrupt, it kills. Disease takes the saintly Eva. Legree slays the incorruptible Tom. Below the Mason-Dixon line selfhood is either badly made or easily unmade. By depicting it as a regressive region, Stowe makes the South a foil to the more progressive North, where industrial discipline prevails. St. Clare’s estate, characterized as it is by laxity and indolence, typifies degenerating southern culture, for which St. Clare himself is the spokesperson. Remarking on what would happen if blacks were ever emancipated, he says to his cousin Ophelia, “[W]e are too lazy and unpractical . . . to give them much of an idea of that industry and energy which is necessary to form them into men. They will have to go north, where labor is the fashion” (273). With slavery and an informal aristocracy the South has, to borrow Werner Sollors’ terminology, a more descent-oriented culture than the North, which fosters a more consent-based environment of self-determination.10

Adolph, St. Clare’s dandyish valet, and George Harris, Mr. Harris’ rebellious slave, dramatize the differences between the South and the North. Adolph, who mimics his master’s graces, reflects elite southern society, whereas George embodies a more northern ethos, before he becomes a conflicted hybrid of Euro-American imperialism and African nationalism. Like the southern aristocrat, Adolph believes in privilege and
entitlement, reflecting the descent-based customs of the South, whereas George, through industry and self-determination, adheres to a consent-oriented ethos. Adolph strives to whiten his identity by parroting nobility. George blackens his identity to distinguish it from his aristocratic father. Adolph and St. Clare maintain a kind of child/father relationship: Adolph emulates his master and fancies himself heir to his property. George seeks self-mastery, in order to differentiate himself from his owner, Mr. Harris. Adolph is highly dependent on St. Clare. George exudes independence from every pore. Despite their opposing traits, they have one crucial thing in common: both utilize blackface conventions and mimicry to reject their slave identities.

When St. Clare brings home Topsy, the mischievous slave girl Ophelia will reform, he introduces her with the language of ancestry. Topsy is “a funny specimen in the Jim Crow line” (207). In other words, she descends from the trickster lineage of Jim Crow. She also descends from slavery, dragging its baggage of “welts and calloused spots” with her (209). Yet in Ophelia’s northern hands, Topsy is “virgin soil” (210). She will be retrained by Ophelia and overcome her slave inheritance. Adolph, who also has blackface ancestry, will not be so lucky. We might call him a funny specimen in the Zip Coon line. Though typically described as a northern dandy, Coon’s plantation ties have often gone unnoticed. He was the “aristocratic negro” who caricatured “uppity” blacks as well as the attitudes of northern elites and southern aristocrats. By adopting the clothing, airs, and opinions of the nobility, Coon staged a multilayered satire of privilege and entitlement. He was the same character who earlier saw himself entitled to the presidency. In his imaginary leap from slavery to the aristocracy, Coon burlesqued the ease of inheriting
selfhood, as opposed to the difficulty of forging a self. If the trickster Topsy is Crow’s female equivalent, the mock aristocrat Adolph is Coon’s virtual double.

Adolph is also St. Clare’s comic doppelganger. We meet him when St. Clare returns to his mansion with Ophelia, Eva, and Tom. He is foremost among the slaves gathered to receive the travelers and is introduced as “a highly-dressed young mulatto man, evidently a very distingue personage, attired in the ultra extreme of the mode” (142). While Adolph stands out among the other servants, as St. Clare’s mock twin he is hardly distingue. Because he so thoroughly puppets his master, he has little identity apart from St. Clare. Nevertheless, his slave status is always visible beneath his aristocratic exterior. For instance, when St. Clare accuses him of wearing one of his vests, Adolph’s defense slides between black and genteel speech: “‘O! Master, this vest all stained with wine; of course, a gentleman in Master’s standing never wears a vest like this. I understood I was to take it. It does for a poor nigger-fellow, like me’” (143). His hybrid response is typical of the Zip Coon dandy, whose dialect exposed how the “aristocrat” on stage was “black.” The wine-stained vest is one of many instances where Adolph mocks his master through mimicry, because it parodies St. Clare’s vice and folly. The vest also reveals Adolph’s sense of entitlement. As he puts it, “I understood I was to take it.”

We later learn that “among other appropriations from his master’s stock, Adolph was in the habit of adopting his name and address; and that the style under which he moved, among the colored circles of New Orleans, was that of Mr. St. Clare” (187; original emphasis). By taking St. Clare’s property and using his name, Adolph acts like St. Clare’s heir. His position as such is reinforced when St. Clare first greets Adolph, asking, “‘[H]ow are you, boy?’” (142). While “boy” was a patronizing way of addressing
a servant, it was also an affectionate way of saying “son.” In support of the latter connotation, St. Clare will later say about Adolph, “‘I had to talk to him like a father’” (152). Since St. Clare has no son of his own to parent or to inherit the estate, Adolph functions as a kind of mock surrogate successor.

St. Clare’s unexpected death ends the illusion of entitlemen, and Adolph is marched, with the other servants, to a slave warehouse for auction. There he is brought low when another Sambo enters the story and mocks Adolph’s aristocratic mimicry and racially superior airs, revealing just how ridiculous his charade has been: “‘Lor, now, how touchy we is,—we white niggers! Look at us, now!’ and Sambo gave a ludicrous imitation of Adolph’s manner; ‘here’s de airs and graces. We’s been in a good family, I spects’” (284). When Adolph responds by saying that he “‘belonged to the St. Clare family,’” Sambo inflames him by suggesting that he is now only mere chattel: “‘Spects they’s gwine to trade ye off with a lot o’ cracked tea-pots and sich like’” (284). Instead of inheriting property, Adolph will be sold off with it. He will follow the descent pattern of slavery, not of aristocracy.

Like the blackface Washington and Black Sam, Adolph simultaneously subverts and complies with racial hierarchies. He challenges the color line through mimicry, yet he is highly conformist in his reproduction of genteel attitudes. We realize how completely he has absorbed aristocratic thinking when, offended by an abused, alcoholic slave named Prue, he remarks, “‘If I were her master, I’d cut her up worse than she is’” (187). But like Prue, Adolph will soon find himself on the slave side of the whip. His tale is ultimately one of unmaking: a riches-to-rags story. He is bought by a man named “Alf,” who vows to have him “dressed down” at the calaboose should he put on any airs
We assume Adolph will suffer unspeakable horrors at the hands of his new owner, whose name evokes St. Clare’s brother Alfred, a stern aristocrat who enforces the color line on his plantation with an iron fist. While St. Clare’s laxity permitted Adolph to experiment with his identity and cross racial boundaries, Adolph’s ending up with a master named Alfred implies that the racial hierarchy has the last word with the proud valet. Adolph’s subversive hybridity will be “dressed down.” He will no longer be a threat to cultural purity.

Being little more than an foppish imitation of St. Clare’s graces and southern aristocracy, Adolph has little actual selfhood to fall back on after his master dies. The story of George Harris is different. Driven inexorably toward self-actualization, he embodies such putative qualities of American self-making as ingenuity, industriousness, and self-reliance. In this respect, he resembles Black Sam, only he is more effective in subverting and manipulating racial hegemony. We meet George working in a factory, not a field, and learn that he has achieved acclaim for inventing a machine that cleans hemp. His owner Mr. Harris, who has hired George out, visits the factory to inquire after his slave’s invention. Harris is instantly jealous of George, who along with being inventive and articulate, holds “himself so erect” and looks so “handsome and manly, that his master beg[ins] to feel an uneasy consciousness of inferiority” (10). So he removes George from the factory, putting him to work at “the meanest drudgery on the farm” (11). But brute labor and the protocols of slavery cannot contain George. So he flees north.

Stowe models George after Frederick Douglass, who was to African American self-mastery what Ben Franklin’s autobiographical narrative and Horatio Alger’s novels were to Anglo American self-making. A very light mulatto, George moves toward
independent selfhood first by using blackface to paradoxically pass as a “white”
ge gentleman through the North, then by employing American Revolutionary ideology to
mobilize his rebellion against America. In the process, George exemplifies what Eric
Sundquist writes about the insurgent slave: “In his rhetorical crusade against slavery . . .
the slave rebel, one could say, became most American. To watch the spread of black
rebellion in the New World, or to observe its potential in the United States, was to
witness not necessarily the erosion of the ideology of the American Revolution, but rather
its transfer across the color line” (36). George takes America’s Revolutionary ethos and
turns it against the United States. Through his complex form of anti-Americanism, what I
call rebellious mimicry, George becomes arguably the most “American” figure in the
book. Unlike Sam, Tom, and Adolph, who identify with aspects of white culture, George
ultimately desires to emphasize his African identity and emigrate to Liberia. Yet, as he
blackens his identity and articulates a vision of Liberian colonization, he conforms to
definitions of Euro-American selfhood.

His rebellious mimicry begins when he rolls up to a Kentucky tavern, disguised as
a distinguished gentleman, accompanied by a black servant. George’s masquerade is the
most conscious minstrel act in the novel, since he is the only character who blacks up for
a racial performance. His blackface deception is anticipated by an ad offering a reward
for his capture that ironically evokes the minstrel-show handbill. It warns that George
may try passing as white, but a little blacking up gives him a “Spanish-looking”
complexion, enabling him to slip through Kentucky unnoticed. In a wonderful stroke of
irony, George goes darker to liberate himself, echoing how Tom blackens Washington to
express desire for freedom.
Stern, who rigorously reads the passage, calls George’s performance a “Spanish masquerade” that challenges “the binary terms of the color line that organizes antebellum society” (103). But she ignores how blackface motivates the performance. To my knowledge, Lhamon is the only one to remark on the scene’s minstrel affiliations. He suggests that George’s costume is “lifted from the Jim Crow plays of T. D. Rice” and that Stowe “confirms the allusion by giving George a servant named Jim” (Cain 96). While “Jim” certainly invokes Jim Crow, George’s blackface act more readily recalls George Washington Dixon, especially since he is playing the dandy role Dixon was first associated with. Unlike Adolph, the funny and unfortunate specimen in the Zip Coon line, George’s cool charade conjures the potent energies of Long Tail Blue, the more serious representation of free and enterprising blacks, who, as we know, later morphed into the laughable Zip Coon in response to fears of black ambition. In her iconographic look at the dark dandy’s evolution, Barbara Lewis has described how a lithograph of Blue “shows an erect, refined, and respectable figure. He strikes the eye as a man of substance and perhaps even property. What’s more, he appears the epitome of propriety, with his formal dress and restrained mannerisms” (258-59). Well attired, insouciant, and dignified, George Harris in blackface epitomizes the kind of self-mastery Blue embodied. Because George exemplifies self-achievement, Blue is his logical minstrel equivalent. And, in keeping with George’s northern character, Blue is wholly urban, the embodiment of free blacks succeeding up north.13

Whereas Blue was a white blackface embodiment of ambitious blacks, George is a black in blackface passing as “white.” He inverts Blue’s color, but leaves his meaning intact. By using blackface to pass as white, George not only lampoons color-line logic but
works against the stereotyping machinery of blackface. While minstrelsy notoriously produced and controlled black representation, George makes blackface conventions serve his self-determination, as opposed to letting them determine who he is. His minstrel mastery is affirmed when he refers to himself as “Jim’s master” (99), suggesting that he has mastered Jim Crow, a kind of metonym for minstrelsy. George’s act is less of an inversion fantasy than Tom, Sam, and Adolph put on, because blackface will offer George a sustained victory, enabling him to “travel by daylight, stop at the best hotels, go to the dinner-tables with the lords of the land” (99). He uses minstrelsy to slip slavery’s yoke and to deceive, through mimicry, his adversaries. Unlike Sam, who ascends only in the slave hierarchy, and Adolph who falls from his fantasy perch, blackface literally assists George across racial lines. By slipping on the minstrel dandy gloves, he conceals the branded H (for Harris) on his hand, changing from a marked slave into a free and easy gentleman. Blackface gives George more agency than any other black in the novel. He takes blackface conventions—and later conventional Revolutionary rhetoric—and uses them to free himself within the dominant culture.

But the masquerade also reflects George’s wish to blacken his identity and to free himself from the dominant culture. By blackening his light skin, George anticipates his eventual desire to go to Liberia to achieve “an African nationality” (374; original emphasis). Critics often stress that George’s desire for freedom derives from his white blood, that he, like other white-blooded blacks in the text, hungers for freedom more than the full blacks. St. Clare, through whom Stowe expresses many of her own beliefs about race and slavery, also supports this notion, contending that if black revolt ever occurs, “Anglo Saxon blood will lead on the day. Sons of white fathers with all our haughty
feelings burning in their veins, will not always be bought and sold and traded”’’ (234).

While the book’s white-blooded blacks do fight harder for freedom, in George’s case evidence suggests that it is black not white blood that fuels his quest for liberty. Take, for instance, the description of his heritage:

George was, by his father’s side, of white descent. His mother was one of the unfortunates of her race, marked out by personal beauty to be the slave of the passions of her possessor. . . . From one of the proudest families in Kentucky he had inherited a set of fine European features, and a high, indomitable spirit. From his mother he had received only a slight mulatto tinge, amply compensated by its accompanying rich, dark eye. (94)

While George inherits a strong spirit from his father, his receiving “only a slight mulatto tinge” from his mother suggests he has been deprived of blackness, a deprivation, however, that is compensated by his “rich, dark eye.” George’s compensatory dark “eye,” which can be read as its homonym “I” to suggest the black self, is where his vision of freedom and righteous indignation reside. When Mr. Harris decides to remove him from the factory, George’s “large dark eyes flash[] like live coals” (11). During his “declaration of independence,” which he delivers while fending off his would-be captors, “bitter indignation and despair g[i]ve fire to his dark eye” (172). And then this passage on the meaning of freedom: “What is freedom to that young man, who sits there, with his arms folded over his chest, the tint of African blood in his cheek, its dark fires in his eye,—what is freedom to George Harris?” (332).

Stowe’s emphasizing George’s dark eye at such moments suggests that his fiery passion for freedom rises from black blood. Further, the fact that his dark eye must compensate for his light skin implies George’s shame over not being darker, anticipating his desire to smother his aristocratic heritage: “‘My sympathies are not for my father’s race,’” he declares, “‘but for my mother’s’” (374). Although George’s father bequeaths
him an “indomitable spirit,” his mother’s blood, reflected in his dark eye, seems to fuel his audacity most. George is the opposite of Adolph, who strives to whiten himself by embracing aristocratic lineage, for he wants to blacken himself by identifying with his mother. And the “blackér” he becomes the bolder he gets. After all, it is while wearing blackface that he first turns Revolutionary rhetoric to his advantage, telling his former factory boss Mr. Wilson: “‘I’ll fight for my liberty to the last breath I breathe. You say your fathers did it; if it was right for them, it is right for me!’” (97).

Blacking up sheds light on George’s statement: “‘I have no wish to pass for an American, or to identify myself with them. It is with the oppressed, enslaved African race that I cast in my lot; and, if I wished anything, I would wish myself two shades darker, rather than one lighter’” (374). Ironically, George’s wish to become darker echoes the kind of racial envy that propelled minstrelsy. By blackening his light skin, he resembles the white minstrel who, as Lott argues, applied burnt-cork in order “to try on the accents of ‘blackness’” (Love 6). Announcing that he will move to Liberia is how he next compensates for his lightness. But the more George blackens his identity and resists the United States, the more he replicates aspects of the Revolution and Euro-American imperialism. Because he uses Revolutionary ideology to drive his revolt, George’s rebellion against America begins to mirror America’s rebellion against England, while his vision of Liberia reflects how European settlers once perceived their mission in the Americas. “‘Our Nation,’” he writes, “‘shall roll the tide of civilization and Christianity along its shores, and plant there mighty republics, that, growing with the rapidity of tropical vegetation, shall be for all coming ages’” (375; original emphasis). George’s mimetic ambitions surpass those of Tom, Sam, and Adolph, suggesting a more ominous
threat to the dominant culture. “‘I think that the African race has peculiarities, yet to be unfolded in the light of civilization and Christianity,’” he writes, “‘which, if not the same with those of the Anglo-Saxon, may prove to be, morally, of even a higher type’” (375-76). While Sam and Adolph imitate white racism, George cultivates black supremacy by thinking and acting like America’s forebears.

In “Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Empire, and Africa,” Elizabeth Ammons discusses startling parallels between America and black emigrants in Liberia. Americo-Liberians, she notes, drafted a Declaration of Independence similar to America’s; adopted “a red, white, and blue starred-and-striped flag” (71); and set “themselves up as a ruling elite and maintain[ed] that the native population would benefit because of the exposure to western civilization and Christianity” (73). Not surprisingly, native Liberians resisted being colonized, often through violent means, thereby echoing the conflict between early American settlers and American Indians. Perhaps the most provocative parallel is found in J. Gus Liebenow’s remark on the native appellation for black colonizers. “It was not unusual,” he writes, “to hear tribal people refer to Americo-Liberians as Kwee, or ‘white’ people” (23). Given how the natives viewed black Americans, one wonders if George becomes blacker or whiter by going to Liberia. He so thoroughly uses American Revolutionary and Euro-American imperial ideology to realize “an African nationality” that he replicates white American selfhood as much as he forges a new nationalism.

George’s mimicry also reflects how America was founded on imitation. After declaring independence from England, early republican leaders adopted colonial models of social stratification and centralized power as they tried to stabilize the new nation and create a coherent national identity. As Edward Watts puts it, “In the efforts to identify
and stabilize both nation and identity, colonialism survived in the early republic” (9). George Harris echoes the mimetic, conflicting, imperialist impulses of the early republicans. Much as the Founding Fathers rebelled against and imitated England, he rebels against America and duplicates its organizing principles to establish a seemingly independent selfhood. He also dramatizes how racial imitation was crucial to American self-creation. While white minstrels mimicked blackness to construct a purer, more defined whiteness, George imitates white ideologies to create a stronger, superior blackness. Yet like the blackface performer, George’s homogenous identity is belied by a de facto hybridity that invariably results from such imitation. By blackening himself he seeks a homogenous nationalism, but his mimicry renders him intensely contradictory. On one hand, he personifies Stowe’s desire for cultural homogeneity through the removal of blacks to Liberia. On the other, he is a complex hybrid of American and African nationalism.

Finally, like Tom, Sam, and Adolph, George subverts while he conforms, menaces while he maintains. By using Revolutionary ideology against the United States, he undermines the national narrative, yet because Revolutionary tenets help him energize his rebellion, he also reinforces the national narrative, becoming, as Sundquist would say, “most American,” but not without being burdened with America’s contradictory cultural baggage. Given his mixed heritage, it is perhaps fitting that George is such a paradox: that the blacker he becomes the whiter he gets, that he becomes an imperialist in his quest for equality and freedom. His rebellious mimicry seems an apt conclusion to a text loaded with ambivalent blackface figures who simultaneously mimic and menace white
American selfhood. George, of course, is Stowe’s finest contradiction: for he is both a white performing blackface and a black performing whiteface.

Notes

1 On Stowe’s opposition to the theater, see Gossett 261-62 and Birdoff 23-24.

2 For a detailed account of the Douglass-Delany debate, see chapter two in Levine.

3 Although historians disagree over Lincoln’s exact words, they agree on his basic sentiment. I use Joan Hedrick’s version from *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* vii.

4 On Stowe’s journey from Hartford to Cincinnati, see Hedrick 68-69. On Rice’s tour of the East, see Cockrell 65.

5 For more on Rice and Jefferson’s performance, see Rourke 80-81 and Jefferson 9-10.

6 Rice’s blackface act also shows how minstrelsy controlled black representation, something we see when little Harry is made to conform to blackface roles early in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and when the gruesome Simon Legree commands his slaves into stereotypical acts, making them sing, dance, and be merry for his amusement.

7 On how Dixon’s life parallels the content of the song “Zip Coon,” see chapter 4 in Cockrell.

8 On Sam Adams and the Sons of Liberty, see Alexander 25, 30, 33-37.

9 David Leverenz makes a similar remark, suggesting that Sam’s “‘air of doleful gravity’ resembles Topsy’s” (“Alive” 123).

10 Sollors argues that the tension between consent and descent relations structures American identity. He sees “the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral, definitions of American identity—between consent and descent—as the central drama in American culture” (6; original emphasis). His terminology provides a useful tool to describe the cultural and sectional tensions between the North and South.

11 Borgstrom offers a fine discussion of how Adolph’s mimicry challenges racial and gender hierarchies. I depart from Borgstrom, who sees Adolph’s mimicry as only menacing, by arguing that Adolph both subverts and reinforces southern aristocratic ideology.

12 On Frederick Douglass as a paragon of antebellum self-making, see Howe 149-156.
For more on Blue’s urban ties and Coon’s rural associations, see Lewis 270.
In his *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* (1817), Amasa Delano, the good-natured and affable captain from Massachusetts, recalls being an unknowing witness to a slave rebellion aboard the Spanish slaver *Tryal*, which he encounters off the coast of Chile one morning. Delano takes his whaleboat to meet the vessel after it enters the bay where his ship is anchored. He learns the crew has suffered trials at sea, orders supplies to restore them, and then returns to his boat later that day, all the while vexed by the suspicious behavior of the ship’s slaves and ostensible captain, Benito Cereno. Amazingly, Delano fails to grasp that the blacks aboard the *Tryal* have seized power and, by acting as slaves and making it seem as though Cereno still runs the ship, staged an elaborate charade to fool him—a ruse that ends only after Cereno springs into Delano’s boat and frantically explains the masquerade. That Delano could spend almost all day on the slaver, oblivious to the rebellion, must have tickled Herman Melville, who produced a horrific burlesque of the account in 1855 called “Benito Cereno.” In his version, Melville renames Cereno’s ship the *San Dominick*, evoking, as many critics have noted, the island of San Domingo, where slaves rose and began seizing power in 1799, the year he sets his revolutionary tale. He depicts Cereno as a mercurial and afflicted aristocrat, attended by his fawning servant Babo, who actually leads the revolt and polices his master with a hidden dagger. He portrays Delano as a dumb-founded and good-natured Yankee, whose affection for “Negroes” blinds him to the rebellion and to Babo’s atrocities.
Traditionally, critics have read Delano’s blind complacency as an indictment of what George Frederickson would later term “romantic racialism,” the largely northern, sentimental belief that blacks were childlike and good-natured. More recently, scholarship has linked Delano’s blindness to blackface minstrelsy. Lott and Sundquist suggest that Delano’s prejudice derives from stereotypes fostered by minstrelsy, and that Babo, in his role as a devoted servant, dons a figurative blackface mask by playing to the Yankee’s racial fantasies. Lhamon complicates this basic reading by emphasizing Babo’s aggression, which he says comes from the minstrel stage, where black-on-white aggression was routine. Similarly, Justin Edwards argues that Babo’s rebellion echoes minstrel songs that sang of slave uprisings. He too reiterates the prevailing thesis that Babo’s performance as a devoted slave “is a form of minstrelsy that is staged to deceive Delano” (28). While these scholars provide compelling insights into Melville’s uses of minstrelsy, they offer a fairly limited reading of Babo, insofar as they argue that he masks his rebellion by playing the familiar role of the blackface slave.

Anyone acquainted with “Benito Cereno,” however, knows that the story simultaneously sustains and inverts familiar roles. When Delano boards the San Dominick, the racial hierarchy appears to be in order, but in actuality the slaves have become masters, the masters slaves. Like the opening description of the sea, which, “though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface” (239), the hierarchy seems fixed. But it is also fluid. The roles of the shipmates seem familiar. But they are also inverted. Given how “Benito Cereno” sustains this paradoxical structure, I would argue that besides staging a surface spectacle of blackface, Babo also and simultaneously performs a version of “whiteface.” Whereas George Harris
performs “whiteface” by replicating Euro-American imperialism, Babo will wear Cereno’s imperial white body as a kind of mask, which allows him to figuratively and temporarily whiten as he enjoys the power and dominance that go hand in hand with white skin. Much as minstrel performers “inhabited” black bodies to indulge racial fantasy and to burlesque blacks, Babo uses Cereno as a surrogate body, through which he occupies, burlesques, and menaces colonial authority.

Since the text sustains and inverts traditional roles, it is only logical that Babo’s implicit act of whiteface is balanced by Delano and Cereno, who are sea captains on one level, yet, given Delano’s stupidity and Babo’s mockery of Cereno, resemble blackface buffoons on another. Melville clearly found Delano’s Narrative tragic. He also found the tale of “inferior” blacks bamboozling powerful captains quite laughable, amusing enough to convert their missteps and foibles into a dark satire of white authority, one that both fulfills and undermines the logic of minstrelsy. As several scholars have already noted, the Yankee Delano and the aristocrat Cereno function as allegories of the American North and South and, more broadly, of America and Spain. Because the captains represent local and international geographies, their being minstrelized has national and global implications. If the San Dominick functions as the national stage as well as the world stage, then in “Benito Cereno” minstrelsy collides with the theater of colonialism. This collision is especially worth exploring, since blackface has remained largely outside discussions of postcoloniality in American studies.

**Babo’s White Mask**

In Black Skin, White Masks (1967), the groundbreaking diagnosis of colonialism’s impact on the black psyche, Frantz Fanon laments how the colonial condition fosters black desire for white culture and power. “The Negro,” he suggests, “wants to be like the
master” (221). Fanon’s analysis of black desire is useful for understanding Babo’s performance of whiteface, which is a form of mimicry that turns the economy of minstrelsy on its head. Lott has described blackface as the confiscation of black culture by whites for sport and profit. “Cultural expropriation,” he explains, “is the minstrel show’s central fact” (19). Yet by capturing the San Dominick and controlling Cereno, Babo reverses such expropriation, and by doing so reverses the order of minstrelsy, even while he performs as a blackface slave. To sustain his heist, he executes two kinds of mimicry. On the one hand, as Michael Rogin puts it, Babo and the other blacks “destroy their captain by mimicking their obedience to him” (212), although they really demand obedience from their captain. On the other hand, Babo adheres to Homi Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry, which differs from Fanonian mimicry, insofar as it functions subversively.

For Bhabha, when colonial discourse urges the colonized to imitate the colonizer, the outcome can be hazardous, since mimicry can turn to mockery or menace, parodying or threatening what it copies, thereby undercutting authority. Babo mocks and menaces colonial hegemony not only by playing the obedient slave but by imitating colonial command. His mimicry is writ large in the ominous and mocking comment “Follow your leader,” which he scrawls in chalky white letters on the San Dominick’s prow, where he has substituted the skeleton of his former master, Alexandro Aranda, in place of the ship’s original figurehead, an image of Columbus. Most critics suggest that the “leader” is either Aranda or Babo—or both. But “Follow your leader” might also be read as Babo’s personal mantra, since he follows, or rather mimics, colonial authority by replacing Cereno as master in command. Much as Babo substitutes Aranda’s bones for
the image of Columbus, he substitutes himself for Cereno, whose power he usurps and whose costume-like body he virtually inhabits to perform what I am calling whiteface masquerade. If white minstrels preyed upon and dressed themselves in black life, Babo hijacks and inhabits imperial might.

Signs of this hijacking, of this counter-theft, surface before Babo emerges. We see them when the *San Dominick* appears to Delano as “a whitewashed monastery,” seemingly occupied by “a shipload of monks” or “Black Friars pacing the cloisters.” What Delano really sees is a Spanish slaver “carrying negro slaves” (240). Yet his hallucination paradoxically unmasks the story’s dominant reality, namely that free roaming blacks control the ship. Seen as Black Friars, they evoke the famous Blackfriars Theatre, two separate London playhouses that were converted from an old Dominican monastery, the second of which was home to the King’s Men, a talented acting troupe Shakespeare wrote for. The friar-like slaves also evoke Spain’s mighty Catholic empire. As Bruce Franklin notes, “The Black Friars were the Dominicans, who, operating directly under the orders of Charles V, became the main executors of the Spanish inquisition, a key instrument of imperialism and racism.” He adds that the ship’s name, *San Dominick*, belonged to the “patron saint of the Dominican order” (148). All told, the slaves becoming Black Friars on the *San Dominick* cleverly combines European theater, Christendom, and empire in one stroke, suggesting that aboard this theatrical-monastic vessel the slaves are highly capable actors who now occupy and administer colonial power.

The notion of blacks occupying imperial power is also intimated by Babo’s trousers, which are “made out of some old top-sail” and make him look “like a begging
friar of St. Francis” (251). Along with hijacking Christian authority, Babo dresses himself in a potent symbol of colonial conquest—the white sail. By inhabiting the “whitewashed” ship and its topsail, Babo reverses cultural expropriation and whitens himself—something Melville plays on with the word “whitewashed.” Originally a liquid preparation used for whitening skin, “whitewash” doubtless gave rise to the nineteenth-century label “white-washer,” which referred to any black person who acted white or tried to join white society. The word “whitewashed,” then, becomes a racial signifier, an obvious counterpart of blackface makeup, inferring that the slaves have become whitened by seizing colonial power.

But how exactly does Cereno serve as Babo’s white mask? Let us first consider Babo’s situation. He is forced to play the humble servant, but he wholly contradicts minstrel stereotypes, for behind his meek exterior lies ruthless ambition. Babo has a Napoleonic capacity to achieve revolution, but he does not have Napoleon’s imperial skin. So he must masquerade as a slave to cozen white authority. Besides his blackface mask, he needs another disguise, without which Delano or any white authority he meets would spot him as a rebel. So he wheels Cereno forth as a prop, a mask, or as Delano suspects, “one of those paper captains” (253). Consider an early description of master and slave, wherein Cereno appears as a kind of empty hull:

His voice was like that of one with lungs half gone—hoarsely suppressed, a husky whisper. No wonder that, as in this state he tottered about, his private servant apprehensively followed him. Sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing these and similar offices with that affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial [sic]; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body-servant in the world. (245)

Tottering about as he does, Cereno must be supported by Babo, who not only sustains the captain but moves his limbs for him, giving “his master his arm,” as if he were a
puppeteer. Cereno is often figured as puppet-like or dummy-like. Delano, for instance, observes “the black upholding the white” (250) and that the captain’s “knees shook [while] his servant supported him” (254); and Babo worries that prolonged contact between Delano and Cereno might “unstring his master” (293). More important, Babo tells his captain what to say and, like a ventriloquist’s dummy, he says it. Blackface minstrelsy, of course, resembled ventriloquism and puppetry. Lott has even called blackface “a perfect metaphor for one culture’s ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else’s” (Love 92)—a “white ventriloquism through black art forms” (Love 95). By speaking his desires through Cereno, Babo turns Lott’s blackface metaphor upside down. By practicing a “black ventriloquism” through Cereno’s white body, he performs a version of whiteface. In an added ironic twist, Babo mimics colonial authority, and then forces that authority, which he effectively colonizes, to imitate him.

Delano sees the “Negro” as “the most pleasing body-servant in the world.” But isn’t Babo really making his master’s body serve him? When the mercurial captain advances to bid Delano a final farewell, Melville tells how his “nervous eagerness increased, but his vital energy failed; so that, the better to support him, the servant, placing his master’s hand on his naked shoulder, and gently holding it there, formed himself into a sort of crutch” (293). It is easy to see how Babo as a human-crutch becomes an allegory for slave labor and that Cereno embodies Spanish imperialism and southern aristocracy resting on the black crutch of human toil. But what about how Cereno serves as Babo’s crutch? Babo could not move his revolution forward without his master. Without Cereno, he could not navigate back to Senegal nor pass the reefs of Delano’s slow suspicion. Babo accumulates power and erects a virtual empire by leaning
on Cereno, who ironically labors for his “body-servant.” His exploitation of Cereno’s white body mimics colonial and slave domination. He leans on the extreme methods of imperialism and slavery in order to undercut—to de-crutch—colonial authority.

Besides a lust for domination, Babo’s use of Cereno’s body reveals cross-racial desire, the same desire that formed at least one piston in the motor of blackface minstrelsy. When the white performer smeared himself with burnt cork, he could symbolically inhabit the fetishized black body and all that it signified. As Lott puts it, “To wear or even enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black, to inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon . . . that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood” (Love 52). Babo reverses this concept of masculine mimicry, whitening himself by enjoying through Cereno’s body the dominance, violence, and control that were the prime components of white authority. He further exhibits racial desire by removing Cereno’s sword—we are told later that Cereno’s “scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty” (315)—thereby laying claim to the white phallus. By holding on to his master’s sword, Babo reverses blackface desire, an attraction that Lott suggests was rooted in an obsession over the black penis. If, by blacking up, the white performer penetrated the black body and temporarily laid claim to the black phallus, Babo will whiten himself by penetrating Don Cereno and laying claim to a powerful white masculinity.

Babo’s penetration is suggested by the following example, in which Delano, quite ironically, believes that Cereno is too imperious to assign errands to his crew:

Proud as he was moody, he condescended to no personal mandate. Whatever special orders were necessary, their delivery was delegated to his body-servant, who in turn transferred them to their final destination, through runners, alert Spanish boys or slave boys, like pages or pilot-fish within easy call continually
hovering round Don Benito. So that to have beheld this undemonstrative invalid gliding about, apathetic and mute, no landsman could have dreamed that in him was lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal. (246)

By hiding behind Cereno, Babo gets his “boys,” which was then racist lingo for black men, to execute for him. He bosses them as a plantation master might, delegates like an emperor dispensing authority in his empire. That Babo fully occupies white power is inferred by Delano’s musing that inside Cereno there “was lodged a dictatorship.” Despite Cereno’s apparent impotence, Delano believes the captain is still a colossal dictator. But the phrase “undemonstrative invalid” better describes the Spaniard, who has clearly become invalid. Cereno is merely imperial decor, inhabited by Babo, the real dictatorship “lodged” within the captain. By lodging himself inside, that is, by penetrating Cereno, Babo virtually dresses in white flesh. The limp and empty Spaniard, like his empty scabbard, is “artificially stiffened” by his servant. Babo’s virtual occupation of Cereno is more than a blackface inversion; it represents the colonized moving from the margins of power to the very center of empire. We learn in the end that Babo’s “brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt” (315). Perhaps it is more accurate to say that with his brain, and Cereno’s body, Babo plots and pushes his revolution forward. In a white world, Babo is forced to use a powerful white body as a medium for his black brain power.

Babo never dislodges himself from Cereno, who is consumed to death by the memory of his tormentor. But the curtain does fall on Babo’s masquerade. It falls when Cereno unstrings himself from his captor by leaping into Delano’s boat. As if springing from a stage, Cereno’s jump ends the illusion. His action marks the point when the blacks fall out of character, and Delano finally sees them not as dutiful slaves, “but with mask
torn away, flourishing hatchets, and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt” (295). The mask removed is blackface, with which the slaves have disguised themselves. Removing this mask reveals how revenge can lurk behind the smile of any contented slave. The mask removed is also whiteface: it is Don Céreno himself. By escaping his master, he exposes Babo as an insurgent slave, his white “mask torn away.” Once Céreno jumps ship, Babo becomes powerless again. He becomes black again, crushed to the ground by Delano and effectively reenslaved.

**Blackface Delano**

No one, not even Delano, is immune from identity inversion in “Benito Céreno.” If the blacks are whitened and the whites blackened, it figures that he too is racialized. Along these lines, Carolyn Karcher notes that Babo’s intellect and Delano’s brawn reverse “the conventional appraisal of the black and white races’ respective fortes” (130). David Leverenz suggests this inversion by invoking Shakespeare. “If Babo is Iago,” he writes, “Delano becomes an unwitting parody of Othello, prevailing through the brute strength he attributes to blacks only after he has been manipulated nearly out of his wits” (*Manhood* 94). If Delano is a comic Othello, this would link him to the minstrel stage. After all, Othello was, in most cases, a white actor in blackface, and American productions of *Othello*, which began in 1751, were an important source of minstrelsy. Early versions of the play were performed in straight blackface, but around Melville’s time burlesques of *Othello*—or *Otello*, as the legendary blackface pioneer T. D. Rice renamed his parody—were becoming fixtures of the minstrel stage, wherein Othello was portrayed as a slowwitted clown, not unlike Delano. But my intention is not to focus on parallels between Delano and the duped Othello. Instead, it is to explore how the
simpleminded, good-natured, and ridiculously complacent captain resembles minstrelsy’s blackface slave.

It is tempting to isolate Delano from the drama aboard the *San Dominick*, to see him as a spectator, a “visitor.” Until he quashes the rebellion, he is primarily an observer, who blindly watches the masquerade Babo arranges for him. Given the pleasure he draws from seeing the servant coddle his master and the slaves hard at work, Delano clearly resembles a minstrel-show audience, marveling at the reenactment of southern slavery. Minstrelsy was notorious for serving up sentimental plantation scenes to indulge northern curiosity about slavery, which it represented as comical, natural, and inevitable as a way to help black out white anxieties over black discontent and lurking slave revolts. Babo, of course, turns these minstrel conventions to his advantage. By playing to Delano’s racialist sensibilities, he eases the captain’s suspicion that the blacks are part of a coup. In other words, and exactly as Lott, Sundquist, Lhamon, and Edwards have suggested, he stages blackface to dupe Delano. But we know that “Benito Cereno” inverts the rules of minstrelsy, even as it keeps those rules in place. Thus, in this section I argue that it is the sentimental, dull-witted Captain Delano who wears the *real* blackface mask. As the Yankee delights in Babo’s ironic recreation of slavery, he is simultaneously dragged into the play, removed from his strictly spectatorial position, and made to look like a blackface slave on this floating minstrel stage.

Inside the *San Dominick* theater actors and audience are basically one. Delano is described as a spectator observing the shipmates, “his eye falling continually, as from a stage-box into the pit, upon the strange crowd before and below him” (273); yet, as Rogin suggests, he “cannot tell if the common sailors are part of the audience or dangerous
actors in the play” (214). In Babo’s complex masquerade—partly rehearsed, partly improvised—everyone plays a role while they watch and play off each other. Thus, while approaching the ship early on, Delano observes “tenantless balconies” (241)—which evoke the theater—tenantless because the acting audience is confined mainly to the ship’s deck: the stage. When Delano eventually ascends one of the balconies—which “retreats cut off from the deck”—he is not there long when the balustrade he leans on crumbles, almost tossing him into the sea before forcing him back to the deck (268-69). Though he may want to, Delano cannot escape the play. Like the entire San Dominick crew, he cannot escape the (inter)national crisis that “Benito Cereno” is all about. As a representative northerner, he may fancy himself distant from slavery. As a representative American, he may fancy himself distinct from a decadent imperial Europe. But like the notorious Gordian knot he observes a sailor weaving—a knot that can suggest the twining together of North and South as well as of America, Africa, and Spain—he is inextricably woven into the local and global dramas of colonialism and slavery. That he will act in this play is anticipated by the ship’s stern-piece, which contains a “dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked” (241). The engraving prefigures how Delano crushes Babo after he is bamboozled. The satyr itself, being masked, suggests Delano wears a disguise. Being “dark,” it implies that he is blackened.

But how does Delano resemble the blackface slave? We might start looking for an answer in Moby Dick (1851), where Ishmael asks early on, “‘Who aint a slave?’” (6), a rhetorical question that resounds in “Benito Cereno,” where everyone is some kind of slave. We already know Babo enslaves Cereno and his crew. But he also masters
Delano, who serves his design unknowingly. After consulting Cereno, whom Babo has carefully rehearsed for the initial encounter, Delano has his men return to ship to “fetch back” water and supplies for the scorched crew. The returning vessel, which Delano had arrived in and will be identified with, is significantly named Rover, a name that puns on Babo’s getting the captain to, in a sense, step-and-fetch-it for him, making Delano another of Babo’s errand “boys.” Delano likes to believe the slaves are “stupidly intent on their work” (252), but in reality they intently watch as he stupidly works for them. Dispensing water, the northerner fancies himself an impartial republican, “serving the oldest white no better than the youngest black” (275), unaware that he also plays the part of water boy. When Delano first serves Cereno, the Spaniard bows excessively before drinking, a spectacle that “the sight-loving Africans hail[] with clapping of hands” (275). In Melville’s burlesque of minstrelsy, a black audience applauds white servitude and humility.

Whatever Delano attributes to blacks boomerangs back on him, so that he quickly resembles the stereotypes that inform his racist ideology. Wondering whether the slaves are co-conspirators in the mutiny, he concludes no, because “they were too stupid” (270), a notion that ricochets and makes him look ludicrous. While he calls blacks “sight-loving,” he delights in Babo’s “spectacle of fidelity” and ogles a “slumbering negress” (250, 267). For Delano, Babo’s using the Spanish flag as a barber’s apron reveals “the African love of bright colors,” but he himself is dazzled by the hues, giddily remarking, “so the colors be gay” (279, 280). Delano believes in the quintessential “good-natured qualities of the negroes” (244), yet those qualities rebound on the seven occasions where Melville describes the captain as “good-natured.” Delano characterizes a group of blacks
as “droning and drooling,” then chides himself for “beginning to dote and drool” (243, 272). Not long before he thinks “God has set the whole negro to some pleasant tune” (279), we catch the contented captain “lightly humming a tune” (259).

The similarities intensify during the infamous shave that Babo gives Cereno. The shaving occurs in a cuddy filled with various weapons, a room Melville compares to a hall where a country-squire might hang his hunting gear. To this analogy he adds, “The similitude was heightened, if not originally suggested, by glimpses of the surrounding sea; since, in one aspect, the country and the ocean seem cousins-german” (277). This heightening of similitude prepares us for a scene where the likeness between Delano and his clichéd view of blacks crescendos. Watching Babo prepare for the shave, Delano muses:

There is something in the Negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good-humor. . . . a certain easy cheerfulness. . . . [T]o this is added the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors. (278-79)

Although Delano observes the shave from an audience position, he unwittingly resembles almost everything he perceives. He envies Cereno—“the manipulated subject of” Babo’s technique—but fails to grasp that he too is Babo’s manipulated subject, whom the slave controls by playing to his minstrel fantasies.

Sundquist suggests the text, and especially this scene, “merges and separates the captains by bringing them into a mirroring or tautological relationship, locked in a stance of communion and isolation that mimics the respective histories they represent” (158).
would add that Delano is also brought into a mirroring relationship with Babo, particularly here, since Delano’s description of the servant really describes himself. His notion that Babo, like all blacks, has a lazy, limited mind reflects his own captive thinking, which blinds him to the servant’s game, while his belief in the slave’s “blind attachment” to Cereno more accurately depicts his own blind attachment to Babo, whom he offered to buy earlier. Given how Babo manipulates Delano’s stupidity and racial desires, it is the captain, not the servant, who becomes the “indisputable inferior,” a wicked irony indeed, because when Melville wrote his story, blackface minstrelsy, which had often worked against racism in its earliest stages, was now part of the white American cultural agenda, focused on reinforcing white supremacy via racist caricature.10 But “Benito Cereno” we know undermines the logic of minstrel-show racism. If blackface injected images of contented and “unaspiring” blacks into the cultural mainstream in order to strengthen white supremacy, the strategy backfires here, making the captain look like a minstrel stereotype, not a superior white male.

It is fitting that Delano resembles a blackface buffoon. After all, he personifies the basic impulses that drove minstrelsy. Thrilled as he is by Babo’s talents, the captain of The Bachelor’s Delight resembles minstrel performers who were obsessed with black culture and black bodies, actors who sought out and bonded with black men, before they corked-up and mimicked them on stage. Like Billy Whitlock, who would “‘quietly steal off to some negro hut to hear the darkeys sing and see them dance,’” and Ben Cotton, who would “‘sit with [blacks] in front of their cabins,’” becoming “‘brothers for the time being and . . . perfectly happy’” (qtd. in Lott, Love 50), Captain Delano when at home “had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color
at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was
on chatty and half-gamesome terms with him” (279). Whereas minstrel performers
applied burnt-cork to become black, Delano figuratively blackens through racial fantasy
and desire. If Babo whitens through colonial mimicry, mimicry reverses itself in Delano’s
case, as the gamesome captain eases into a mirroring relationship with the “Negro” he
fantasizes. Ultimately, Captain Delano ends up with black on his own face. And
Melville’s white readers, should they view blacks as Delano does—and many likely did,
given the racialist thinking of the day—end up with black on their faces.

Thus Delano burlesques how blackface stereotypes were, in many ways, an
extension of the white American psyche. He embodies how minstrelsy’s “accurate”
delineations of black life were often white cultural assumptions masquerading in black
makeup. By portraying Delano, the representative American, as a blackface fool,
Melville lambastes minstrelsy, exposing how its racist caricature can bounce back,
mirroring and mocking those American audiences who consumed such caricature. As
such, “Benito Cereno” becomes the most complex and rigorous indictment of blackface
in all antebellum literature. Further, that Delano blackens while Babo turns wickedly
white challenges popular nineteenth-century beliefs in racial fixity and racial
essentialism, suggesting instead that black and white identities are mutually constitutive,
mutually destructive, and constantly in flux.

As Melville finishes describing Delano’s affection for black men, he notes that the
captain “took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to
Newfoundland dogs” (279). While blacks remind Delano of the faithful black
Newfoundland, here they are actually the opposite, which is to say catlike, even “sphynx-
like” (243). And Melville will use much feline imagery to contrast Babo’s catty cunning with Delano’s dogged faithfulness. When the captain is watching his trusty boat Rover return with provisions, his cheek is fanned by a “cats-paw” (268), a soft breeze that ripples the sea in a dead calm. But a cats-paw is also a person used by another: a tool, a dupe. These latter meanings obviously describe Delano and Cereno, who function as Babo’s cats-paws. When Rover draws nearer, Delano reminisces how his faithful vessel, when it used to lay anchored near his childhood beach home, always reminded him of “a Newfoundland dog.” And now “the sight of that household boat evoke[s] a thousand trustful associations” (271). Trustful to a fault, faithful and eager to retrieve supplies for the crew, it is Delano, and not the “Negro,” who becomes the real Newfoundland—a name that invokes the new founded land of America, especially since the Newfoundland-like Delano represents the new nation. Given his extreme “native simplicity” and the fact that he is “incapable of satire or irony” (257), the doglike Delano becomes, on the one hand, a parody of white American innocence. On the other hand, the captain, like Stowe’s good-natured Uncle Tom, reflects how the myth of American innocence and the myth of African American innocence existed in an intimate mirroring relationship—a relationship that suggests, once again, how black stereotypes could reflect the white American self. While romantic racialism and minstrelsy argued for natural distinctions between the white and black races, Delano and Babo show how ridiculous and arbitrary those distinctions actually were.

Cereno, the Dark Dandy

Before Delano boards the ship, Babo makes Cereno don his old captain’s apparel, forcing the Spaniard to imitate his former aristocratic self in order to deceive Delano, who nevertheless finds Cereno’s costume incompatible with his sickly and suspect
behavior. As mentioned earlier, several critics have read the well-dressed, ailing captain as emblematic of an exhausted Spanish empire and decadent aristocratic South. Nicola Nixon, however, argues “that what Delano recognizes in Cereno is not the features of the southern gentleman but the aristocratic gentility that institutions like Harvard prided themselves in instilling in sons of the northern elite” (366). As Melville was growing up, schools such as Harvard were urging their students to refine themselves through attention to etiquette and dress and by looking to Spain as a model of high civilization. By mid-century, Nixon notes, “the romantic, aristocratic culture of colonial Spain and the Europeanized (or Harvardized) figure of the gentlemanly, aristocratic American dandy” were “two faces of cultivation that constituted a cultural currency of the northern elite” (367). Cereno’s dandification, she concludes, synthesizes these northern trends, “highlight[ing] the degree to which the North, even if it appeared to concern itself with the issue of slavery, was really consumed with its own social distinctions” (370). Nixon’s reading of Cereno as a white northern dandy is compelling and convincing. Yet she never considers the overdressed captain in relation to the minstrel show, a mostly northern phenomenon, which was famous for its extravagant dandies. Because the ship functions as a virtual minstrel stage, I would suggest that any dandyism on board inevitably reflects the fashion and politics of minstrel theater. As such, the final sections argue that Cereno becomes reminiscent of minstrelsy’s dark dandy and that Babo dandifies and minstrelizes Cereno through a series of elaborate costumes and humiliations, burlesquing the once powerful captain and everything he stands for.

To appreciate how Cereno resembles the minstrel dandy, we must first understand his racial inversion. While Babo whitens by enjoying authority through Cereno, and
Delano blackens through his rebounding racialism, Cereno is darkened by racial signifiers. For instance, when Delano first greets the captain, he finds “his national formality dUSked”; he then later observes the Spaniard’s “pale face twitching and overcast” (244, 259; original emphasis). When Delano becomes suspicious of Cereno, the “pale invalid” turns into a “dark Spaniard” (258, 263). And we ultimately learn that Cereno dies blackened. When Delano puts his famous question to the expiring aristocrat—“‘what has cast such a shadow upon you?’”—Cereno’s gloomy response, “‘The negro’” (314), suggests he wears a black shadow to the grave.

Cereno is blackened because he has been thoroughly enslaved, so much so that he becomes a kind of allegory for slavery. Much as unsuspecting Africans were seized and shipped to America, Cereno is captured and—in a reversal of the slave’s journey—is on his way to Africa when we meet him. Thus, Delano’s early impression of the Spaniard evokes how slaves were bound and shipped across the Atlantic Middle Passage: “Shut up in these oaken walls, chained to one dull round of command” (245). Cereno’s command, of course, is no longer his but belongs to Babo, who completely dominates him. After being brutalized and controlled, Cereno escapes his master and subsequently produces a deposition, a document that bears an astonishing likeness to the slave narrative, a genre in full bloom when “Benito Cereno” was written.

Like the ex-slave author, Cereno is testifying as one freed from enslavement, his purpose being to detail his slave experience. He reclaims his voice and subjectivity through his testimony, much as ex-slaves did through their stories of bondage and freedom. Contrary to Delano, who paints a vexed but rosy enough picture of slavery, Cereno’s deposition, like the slave narrative, reveals the abominations of the institution—
only his testimony describes a hierarchy turned upside down. The brilliant irony is that Babo, like the white master, has tried to make slavery appear good and natural, but Cereno intervenes to expose the evils of the institution. Whereas slave narratives ritually described white-on-black violence to stress the horrors of slavery, Cereno gives a detailed account of blacks terrorizing whites aboard the Spanish slaver. Much as powerful masters became corrupt tormentors in slave narratives, Babo’s authority makes him one stereotypically wicked master. Thus the deposition, like the slave narrative, reveals how slavery dehumanizes slaves and masters alike. Because the authenticity of slave narratives was often called into question, it became necessary that a respected citizen vouch for the ex-slave’s authorship. As a parallel, the Majesty’s notary, a man named Don Jose, declares that Cereno is, in fact, the deponent. The writer of the slave narrative was often assisted to freedom by a northern abolitionist. Cereno is saved and freed by the liberal northerner, Amasa Delano. If ex-slaves were forever haunted by their experience in slavery, so too is Cereno. He dies under Babo’s shadow—the shadow of slavery—which indelibly marks him.13

Cereno is so much a slave that he becomes minstrelized the moment he is dressed up and paraded as a high-born aristocrat. As a virtual slave playing the part of gentility, Cereno becomes reminiscent of the blackface dandy, one of two major types that dominated the minstrel stage. We know that around 1830, the blackface dandy—who manifested variously as Long Tail Blue, Dandy Jim, and Zip Coon—emerged alongside the ragged trickster Jim Crow. Also known as the “aristocratic Negro,” the minstrel dandy was a white performer who, extravagantly dressed and smeared with burnt cork, impersonated a black impersonating the aristocracy: the same series of symbolic
transformations Cereno has undergone. The dark dandy was often derided as a “white nigger,” a term that has ironic resonance for the enslaved white captain. Usually seen as an urban upstart, the minstrel dandy mainly burlesqued ambitious or ostentatious blacks in the North. But to see him as exclusively northern is limiting, for the dandy could cut across sectional lines. Barbara Lewis, as we’ve seen, deflates the conventional thesis that the blackface dandy was entirely northern, locating the “urban” Zip Coon in “the nostalgic plantation genre” (270).

The geographical complexities of the dandy are couched in Delano’s fullest description of the dandified Benito Cereno:

The Spaniard wore a loose Chile jacket of dark velvet; white small clothes and stockings, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high-crowned sombrero, of fine grass; a slender sword, silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash—the last being an almost invariable adjunct, more for utility than ornament, of a South American gentleman’s dress to this hour. Excepting when his occasional nervous contortions brought about disarray, there was a certain precision in his attire curiously at a variance with the unsightly disorder around; especially in the belittered Ghetto, forward of the mainmast, wholly occupied by the blacks. (250-51)

The passage is riddled with sectional signifiers. The word Ghetto, for instance, heavy with urban connotation, conjures an image of blacks crammed into a city ghetto. Add the mechanized work of the slaves—that is, the monotony of the oakum pickers and “the industrious hum of the hatchet polishers” (292)—to the capitalized word Ghetto, and we have a gritty portrait of northern capitalist industry. Whereas the dandy paraded through city streets, opulently attired and distinguished from everyday blacks, Cereno is figured in a city-like setting, sartorially distinguished from the black Ghetto.

But Cereno is also unmistakably southern. And so is his ship, given its pervading decay, garden imagery, mossy exterior, and slavery. Further, Don Cereno’s “South American gentleman’s dress,” while it literally ties him to South America, figuratively
situates him in the American South. From this angle, Cereno’s dandyism clearly signifies southward. The dark dandy, as mentioned earlier, chiefly reflected northern social concerns, but he also satirized the landed gentry. The best example of the black southern dandy is found in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with Adolph, the effeminate and preening dandy who mimics and mocks the lazy Augustine St. Clare and, by extension, the vice and pretensions of the southern elite. Paul Johnson has astutely observed that Cereno’s “aristocratic origins, his gloomy-passionate temperament, his indolent manner, his erratically tyrannic behavior, his attention to dress and concern with decorum suggest in abundance a sort of Augustine St. Clare who has suffered a sea change” (429). If, as Johnson suggests, Cereno parallels St. Clare, then he has to resemble St. Clare’s notorious black echo, Adolph. Like Adolph, who strives to sartorially disguise his slave status, Cereno’s decadent costume conceals his actual slave position. Thus, in one of Delano’s suspicious moments, Cereno becomes an “imposter . . . masquerading as an oceanic grandee . . . playing a part above his real level” (258). The reason we laugh at Adolph is the same reason we laugh at Delano’s observation. For, like Adolph, Cereno is really a servant, playing the role of a southern gentleman. As a kind of synthesis of St. Clare and Adolph, Cereno is both a white southern patrician and a slave pretending to be an aristocrat.

Cereno, of course, is not the only one to signify across sectional lines. All the major characters have northern and southern traits. Delano embodies Yankee liberalism in the same instant that he resembles the comic plantation slave. Babo has all the earmarks of the southern Sambo trickster, but he also evinces such mythic northern qualities as ingenuity, industry, self-reliance, and leadership. Like the infamous Black Sam, another
minstrel type from Stowe’s text, Babo has “a talent of making capital out of everything that turn[s] up” (Uncle 64). Viewed in a northern urban context, Babo becomes a sort of industry boss overseeing a factory of deception. But it is Cereno, “the central hobgoblin of all” (263), who signifies across boundaries in the most extraordinary ways. No wonder Melville named his elaborate tale after this kaleidoscopic figure. The slow and sullen commander is everywhere and everything at once. He is a Harvardized dandy, a sickly southern cavalier, a mighty Spanish imperialist, a humiliated slave, and a minstrel dandy all rolled into one.

That each character embodies sectional overlap is consistent with the minstrel tradition, wherein whites crossed racial lines and where northern politics lurked behind staged plantation facades. Like the minstrel stage, the San Dominick stage is where white and black, North and South, Africa, Europe, and America are overlaid and become hybridized. The ship’s stage, which is on one level the American national stage, collides with the colonial stage, the international theater, revealing the permeability of not just sectional lines but of global lines as well. Melville’s minstrel ship, floating as it does between Africa, Europe, and America, doubles as what Mary Louise Pratt would call the “contact zone,” that is, a “social space[] where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (4). That identities are so easily crossed and combined in “Benito Cereno” speaks to the intensely hybrid nature of national and global identities, a hybridity that disrupts fictions of cultural and racial purity that were central to preserving colonial hegemony. Like the minstrel stage, the ship’s theater collapses cultural and racial divisions while at the same time it endeavors to uphold those selfsame distinctions.
The Menacing Shave

Babo’s extravagant sadism, Delano’s astonishing stupidity, and Cereno’s excessive apparel—all of which belong to the over-the-top energy of minstrel burlesque—are brought to a head during the horrific shaving ritual. We have already seen how Delano is most like a blackface fool during the scene. We have not seen what happens to Cereno, whom Babo bloodies and humiliates with a razor. I know of two readings that relate this scene, what many call the “play of the barber,” to minstrelsy. Lhamon contends that the violent ceremony upsets minstrel clichés of happy black servility, and that it does so “without ever ‘transcending’ minstrelsy” (Cain 84). He explores how the shave parallels Dan Emmett’s minstrel play, “German Farmer, or, Barber Shop in an Uproar,” wherein a slave named Pompey terrorizes a German immigrant during a gory act of shaving, an act of black-on-white aggression that, he argues, working-class audiences would have sympathized with (Cain 84-85). In an equally absorbing analysis, Jennifer Gordon Baker argues that the shave invokes Beaumarchais’s The Barber of Seville, becoming “reminiscent of a blackface parody of elite theater” (103). These readings handily explore how the episode reflects minstrelsy’s ability to stage class resistance; yet they overlook the scene’s greatest minstrel irony, namely that during the ritual, Cereno, like Delano, is mocked as a minstrel clown.

After Babo parades Cereno about as a sham aristocrat, he escorts him into the cuddy for his daily grooming. The servant prepares for the shave by “taking from the [ship’s] flag-locker a great piece of bunting of all hues, and lavishly tucking it under his master’s chin for an apron.” The improvised barber’s apron, which affirms Delano’s racialist belief in “the African love of bright colors and fine shows” (279), is actually the flag of the Spanish empire. Babo’s audacious decision to use it indicates how confidently
he commands both captains. When Cerenó’s nervous shuddering causes it to unfurl, spreading across his body, the flag becomes reminiscent of the brightly colored, oversize outfits worn by blackface comedians on the minstrel stage. Further, as we’ve already seen, using a flag as a costume was nothing new to blackface performance; in fact, Babo’s doing so evokes how T. D. Rice dressed in the American flag when he played Jim Crow. With his black face and national colors, Rice was burlesquing how a country founded on radical principles of freedom and democracy sustained itself in part with slavery. Moreover, and more than he probably knew, Rice was predicting that minstrelsy would become part of the national fabric. By having Babo dress Cerenó in the Spanish flag, Melville, in a sense, revises Rice’s blackface national burlesque to make a mockery of Spain’s slave empire.

The flag also suggests how minstrelsy was patched together from a larger, international fabric. When Delano mentally notes “the theatrical aspect of Don Benito in his harlequin ensign” (282), he evokes the relationship between minstrelsy and European theater. His observation likens Cerenó to Harlequin, the clownish, motley colored servant from Italian commedia dell’arte and English harlequinade. In his article “Harlequin Jim Crow,” George Rehin has called Harlequin a “kindred spirit” of Jim Crow (696). With his black half mask and his role as a comic servant, the rustic and varicolored Harlequin is a perfect counterpart for the raucous Crow; and Melville, who in 1849 visited Europe and toured its theaters, may have noticed Harlequin’s similitude to minstrelsy’s most recognized personality. By dressing Cerenó in a “harlequin ensign,” Babo intensifies his minstrelization. In the cuddy, which Philip Fisher suggests “suffers from simultaneity” (97), European clowning and American minstrelsy collide and overlap, displaying the
postcolonial intermix of blackface minstrelsy. But Delano misses his own clue. En-
tranced as he is by Babo’s performance as hairdresser, he fails to see how Cereno really is Harlequin and minstrelsy’s buffoon. Ironically, when Babo is at the top of his blackface game, adroitly playing the faithful, fawning, and amusing servant, it is Cereno and Delano who become the real objects of minstrel burlesque. When Delano suddenly realizes the apron is Spain’s flag, he says, “‘It’s well it’s only I, and not the King, that sees this,’” then adds, “‘it’s all one I suppose, so the colors be gay,’ which playful remark did not fail to somewhat tickle the negro” (280). In this satirical inversion of minstrelsy, the black servant chuckles at white buffoonery.

In yet another inversion, Babo parodies the blackface makeup ritual, and by doing so unmasksthe slippery and constructed nature of race. After tucking the flag under Cereno’s chin, Babo lathers the Spaniard with a soap and salt-water mix, which is, as Melville suggestively notes, “rubbed on the face” (279). The soap is white, yet its racial significance is complicated by the salt-water Babo uses. In Melville’s day “salt-water” colloquially described black immigrants, and a sailor like Melville would have been quite familiar with the term. The soap and salt-water concoction strikes at the heart of the text’s racial ambivalence. It whitens literally while it blackens figuratively, washing away Cereno’s racial signifiers as it puts them back on. Racial identities appear stable on the ship, but below the surface those identities overlap and are interchangeable. Delano’s observation that the soap is “intensified in its hue by the contrasting sootiness of the negro’s body” (280) might seem to solidify Cereno’s whiteness and Babo’s blackness, yet it only heightens the racial ironies. As external compounds, soap and soot function as racial markers. Like minstrel makeup, they can be put on and taken off at will.
slave’s “sootiness” is washed away, we see him performing whiteness below his blackface exterior. If we look past the white in Cereno’s shaving lather, we find a blackened captain beneath.

Delano, although he fails to grasp his own inversion, is vaguely aware that Babo and Cereno are not what they seem. In another suspicious moment, he wonders whether the two are performing for him, “acting out, both in word and deed, nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito’s limbs, some juggling play before him” (282). Actually, Babo and Cereno are both juggling and being juggled. They deceive Delano and they circulate through moments of blackface and whiteface much as props would wheel through the hands of a juggler. This wheeling, this juggling, is the stuff of revolution. The blacks have rolled to the top, the whites to the bottom. The wheel will turn again when Delano crushes the rebellion. But for now Babo, as he puts the final touches on Cereno with comb, brush, and scissors, is the revolutionary. He revolves about Cereno, “going round and round . . . evincing the hand of a master” (282), running circles around his captain, punning on and performing revolution. On the text’s surface, everyone appears stuck in their familiar roles: revolution seems stalled and hidden behind masks. But beneath those masks, racial identities are turning: revolution is really happening, and we can see it.

The ferocious shave is a textbook example of mimicry slipping into excess and mockery. If Delano suffers from a blind stupidity that mirrors blackface stereotypes, Babo enjoys a blind ambition that burlesques colonial authority. It is axiomatic that during the colonial encounter the colonizer risks “going native,” meaning he risks being absorbed into the lifeways of the Other. Here, however, the colonized “goes colonizer,” which is to say that Babo becomes polluted and depraved through his recent acquisition
of power. As William Bartley puts it, Melville’s text is “a study in tyranny . . . in which the slave, now master, is susceptible to all the temptations and corruptions of having absolute dominion over another human being” (450). As evidence of Babo’s corruption, Bartley suggests that “Cereno is helpless and Babo mocks this helplessness in numerous ways with an intense preoccupation irrelevant to the practicalities of rebellion” (460). Babo’s mockery may be impractical for serious rebellion, but it is ideal for satirizing colonial authority. And “Benito Cereno” is all about Babo’s assuming such authority, not just to undercut it, but to ridicule it for sport and revenge. Whereas minstrelsy often mocked black dispossession, Babo derides and abuses white hegemony.

A brilliant example of Babo’s mockery is suggested by an image on the Spanish flag. After the standard loosens, it unfurls to the floor, “revealing . . . a closed castle in a blood red-field diagonal with a lion rampant in a white” (280). The design is indeed “revealing,” for it symbolically reveals the reality of power relations on the ship. If the independent and stealthy Babo is a catlike counterpart of the doglike Delano, here the sly servant is represented as a cat in its mightiest form: the lion. While the lion, which on the flag of Spain is crowned, suggests Spanish imperial might, in the context of the humiliating shave it stands not for Spanish but for African power, becoming a displaced emblem of Babo’s kingly authority. The word “rampant” is a humanizing term, describing a lion standing on its hind legs, its front paws extended, an image that might remind us of Delano and Cereno: Babo’s catspaws, his tools and fools. The word “rampant” also means menacing wildness, extravagance, or absence of restraint. Such reckless extravagance speaks to Babo’s impractical burlesque of Cereno and his lavish abuse of power. If Delano’s earlier hallucination of the “whitewashed monastery” filled
with Black Friars suggests how the slaves run the ship, the flag exposes how the faithful servant Babo is really a lion running rampant in a field of white authority. He occupies this white field just as he symbolically occupies Cereno by performing whiteface through the captain’s white body.

While Babo represents the corrupting nature of colonial authority, Cereno embodies the devastating effects of colonialism and slavery. As Leela Ghandi puts it, “Colonialism does not end with occupation” (17). Nor does slavery, for that matter, end with emancipation; and Cereno, it would seem, allegorizes the aftermath of both forms of dominance. Once he frees himself from Babo—once the slave no longer occupies his master—Cereno, like the ex-slave or ex-colonial, faces the difficult task of postcolonial self-recovery. The captain, however, is unable to reclaim who or what he originally was. And Delano, not surprisingly, fails to grasp that Cereno’s absolute degradation makes self-recovery impossible. When the American urges Cereno not to dwell on what has happened—“‘the past is passed,’” he says, “‘why moralize on it. Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves’”—Cereno mournfully replies, “‘Because they have no memory,’” a remark that reflects how the colonial past relentlessly, psychologically hounds the postcolonial present. “‘You are saved,’” Delano cries, “‘you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?’” Cereno’s answer, “‘The negro’” (314), implies that Babo overshadows the captain’s attempt to recover his previous condition. If, as Fanon suggests, colonization destroys the colonized’s sense of self, Babo’s acquisition of subjectivity through Cereno, his menacing whiteface masquerade, annihilates Cereno’s subjectivity. By the end, Cereno becomes synonymous with his fake sword, that “apparent symbol of despotic
command, [which] was not indeed, a sword, but a ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty” (315). Once the phallic, violent, creative force of Babo physically withdraws from Cereno, the captain is little more than a ghost—a shadowy white mask.

Notes

1 For more on this concept, see chapter four in Frederickson.

2 For more regarding their views on minstrelsy in “Benito Cereno,” see Sundquist 152-54, Lott 234-35, and Lhamon 82-85.

3 Jean Fagan Yellin and Carolyn Karcher discuss Cereno as the stock southern cavalier figure from plantation fiction. Franklin reads him as emblematic of Spain’s imperial decline while calling Delano “a representative American of his own time” (150). Sundquist reads Cereno as “a symbol of American paranoia about Spanish, Catholic, slaveholding despotism” and as “the southern planter, the dissipated cavalier spiritually wasted by his own terrifying enslavement” (148). He also suggests that “Delano is an American in relation to Cereno’s European colonial rule, and a northerner in relation to Cereno’s southern planter rule” (157).

4 The first of these private theaters opened in 1576. The second opened in 1597 and eventually became the winter quarters of the King’s Men. Interestingly, in 1606 the Whitefriars theatre, located in the priory of the London Whitefriars monastery, was also opened. For more information on the Blackfriars, see McDonald 17, 20, 50.

5 For more on the term “white-washer,” see Collins 96.

6 If Babo and his ilk are whitened, the reverse must be true for their foes. This reversal, as we will see, manifests in various ways, but it is most visible when Delano spies one of Cereno’s white crew members, whose hand is black from “thrusting it into a tar-pot held for him by a negro” (266).

7 In 1837 Rice took his act to England where he obtained a copy of Maurice Dowling’s Othello Travestie (1813), which he adapted as the blackface parody Otello in 1838. For more on Rice, see Lhamon’s introduction to Jump Jim Crow and chapter 3 in Cockrell. For two excellent discussions of Othello burlesques, see MacDonald and Collins. Also see Cockrell 27-28.

8 Ishmael’s question rhetorically compares the hard life of the sailor to slave labor. Before asking the question, he suggests that transitioning from a land occupation to the world of the common sailor is like “putting [one’s] hand into the tar-pot” (6).

9 Delano is described as “good-natured” on pages 239, 258, 273, 274, 291, 292, 314.
Prior to the inauguration of the more commercial, formalized minstrel “show” in the early 1840s, blackface was quite political and subversive. But after the early 1840s, minstrelsy focused less on political and social issues and more on racist stereotyping.

While Delano is fatuous, gullible, and innocent, he also embodies America’s imperial ambitions. See Franklin for a nuanced reading of Delano as a pirate-like, greedy, self-serving imperialist.

Dana D. Nelson suggests that for early Americans “‘Spanish’ was an unstable marker, semiotically balancing between light/fellow Westerner and dark/Other” (Word 112). She reads Delano’s perception of Cereno as sometimes “pale” and other times “dark” in terms of American ambivalence toward the Spanish. See Nelson 112.

Much of my information on slave narratives comes from Frances Smith Foster’s excellent study of the slave narrative, especially chapters 1, 3, and 5.

Lewis’s essay is, to date, the most comprehensive and insightful study of the blackface dandy. For another thorough assessment of the dark dandy, particularly of Dandy Jim, see Mahar, Behind 202-28.

Fisher’s observation that the cuddy “suffers from simultaneity” is in response to Delano’s observation that the room “seems a sort of dormitory, sitting-room, sail-loft, chapel, armory, and private closet all together” (278). For Fisher, the room contains “too many overlapping facts” (107), mixing aspects of the land and sea, and of the old world and the new.

For numerous examples of how “salt-water” was used to designate black immigrants, see second edition of the OED, 1989.
“‘Violin! You do violense to my feelings, sah!’”
—*Cream Ob Tenors*

Babo’s violence in “Benito Cereno” reproduces the kind of black-on-white violence working-class crowds witnessed in minstrel shows performed at Manhattan’s rowdiest theaters. In keeping with his emphasis on minstrelsy’s anti-racist energies, Lhamon has argued that Babo’s violence echoes the “aggression [that] had been playing to mechanics at Chatham Square and along the Bowery for years” (84). The same sympathy one might feel for Babo, Lhamon suggests, was felt by low audiences who watched whites in blackface commit acts of violence against unsympathetic, upper-class whites. Yet, whereas black-on-white violence offered the occasional catharsis for lower-class spectators, violence on the minstrel stage was more often directed toward black characters, who were routinely beaten with violins, punched, tortured, shot at, and run over by trolley cars. Further, although working-class whites appreciated blackface attacks on the white ruling class (mainly because they associated blackness with their own under-class status), they themselves employed the blackface mask outside the minstrel theater to perpetrate real atrocities against African Americans.

For instance, in Philadelphia between 1837 and 1848, it was not uncommon for mobs of working-class whites, disguised in blackface, to roam the city streets, brutalizing free blacks. David Roediger, who discusses this phenomenon in some detail, labels these masked mob beatings “blackface-on-Black violence” (106). His coinage strikes robustly
at the heart of minstrelsy’s racial ambivalence: the fact that lower-class whites identified with blackness as they simultaneously, and brutally, disavowed it. It is this brutal disavowal, manifested as both figurative and real violence, that concerns me in this chapter. That is to say, I want to notice not only blackface’s physical abuses, but also how its distortion of blacks and black life enacted a broader, more lasting, representational violence against African Americans. Specifically, I want to examine how black writers resist, revise, and retaliate against minstrelsy’s various aggressions and how their reprisals register the emotional, cultural, and historical damage wrought by minstrelsy. I will also explore how these writers tap minstrelsy’s revolutionary energies to challenge a white, hegemonic nationalism.

Since blackface had cruel consequences for African Americans, it is not surprising that a train of violence rolls through black literary responses to the form. Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, Frank Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends*, and Martin Delany’s *Blake* all contain instances of minstrelsy that are riddled with violence. These early African American novels—written just prior to the Civil War, when America was witnessing a dramatic escalation of violence, from race riots to Bleeding Kansas to John Brown and Harpers Ferry—resist minstrelsy in radical ways and broaden our understanding of blackface violence.

Much as Melville’s (in)version of blackface can be said to avenge blacks for minstrelsy’s depredations, Crafts and Webb seek racial revenge through a counter-minstrel violence inflicted on white characters. Hannah Crafts reveals minstrelsy’s ability to commit emotional and representational violence by tricking her imperious white mistress, Mrs. Wheeler, into the blackface mask before she unwittingly ventures into
public humiliation—an embarrassment that results in her and her husband (both proslavery Democrats) being expelled from Washington, D.C. For Crafts, blackface enables an important intervention into national politics. Frank Webb, by transforming a racist white lawyer, George Stevens, into a dancing black buffoon and then back into a white man, retaliates against the physical and comic violence minstrelsy executed against blacks. Stevens’ racial transformations also explore the boundaries of citizenship and how race decides who can and cannot engage in the national discourse. In *Blake*, Martin Delany allegorizes the traumatic effects of being forced to conform to limited black stereotypes by detailing the horrific whipping of a sickly black child, who is called on by a group of white, mainly southern, gentlemen to act out a catalogue of black roles. But Delany does not allow this whipping to go unpunished. Like Crafts and Webb, he will hijack the minstrel tradition and turn it against the ruling powers. Delany also explores the possibility of consolidating a black nation within the South that will rise and defeat the slave system.

All of these writers are, to a greater or lesser extent, influenced by the slave narrative, the establishing genre of African American literature that repeatedly told tales of racial violence. But they are also mimicking the American novel, a genre that had been the domain of whites up to the 1850s. The American novel as well as blackface minstrelsy played crucial roles in the formation of American national culture. And by imitating and revising these forms, Crafts, Webb, and Delany become the earliest blacks to (re)shape the national culture, using the novel to express minority experience. By appropriating a typically white genre, these black authors write whites out of power and blacks into power, echoing and reversing how minstrelsy appropriated blackness and
used it to further marginalize blacks. Each of these writers uses the tools of minstrelsy to challenge a hegemonic nationalism by retaliating against the white ruling classes. Moreover, they demonstrate how blacks seeking literary (and literal) revenge on whites was becoming part of American national culture.

That these novels are all concerned with violence is not surprising, since violence, in the form of extreme toil, whippings, torture, race riots—and in more abstract terms, minstrelsy—was an all too common part of black experience in America. As such, it is not surprising that violent black retaliation was part of the political impulse of the day. Robert Levine has noted that, in response to the Dred Scott decision of 1857, “Delany and other blacks, including [Frederick] Douglass, renewed their calls for violent black resistance to slavery” (Politics 178). In other words, as the earliest African American novels were being written, revolution was in the air, retributive violence was being encouraged by African American leaders. In their own ways, the writers here answer that call.

Though I don’t deal with it specifically, Douglass’ hugely popular Narrative, which itself drips with racial violence, ghosts around scenes of minstrel violence I analyze in this chapter. Much as Douglass is able to renew himself, and by extension the slave community, when he retaliates against the cruel Edward Covey, these writers regenerate the black community by inflicting counter-violence on a minstrel tradition that brutalizes them and their culture.

The OED defines violence as “[t]he exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; . . . treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.” By thinking of violence as
enforced interference with personal freedom, we might begin to understand it in more abstract terms. Force haunts most of the scenes I analyze. Just as minstrelsy created roles that blacks were expected to occupy, the moments I address reflect the violence of forced conformity to such roles and the loss of freedom attending this conformity. The abolitionist Theodore Parker once said, “‘The relation of master and slave begins in violence; it must be sustained by violence—the systematic violence of general laws, or the irregular violence of individual caprice. There is no other mode of conquering and subjugating a man’” (qtd. in Bryant, Victims 9). Whites first subjugated black slaves with physical violence. Then they subjugated black identity with cultural violence. Comparing slavery to the long-term consequences of black stereotypes, Ralph Ellison said that “[t]he physical hardships and indignities of slavery were benign compared with this continuing debasement of our image” (102). Ellison’s suggestion that racist caricature has caused blacks more harm than slavery is startling, yet when considering how the ghost of minstrelsy still plagues black identity, it seems less so. My epigraph, where one blackface actor says to another, “’You do violense to my feelings, sah!,'” implies minstrelsy’s ability to commit emotional violence. But blackface left more than emotional scars. The symbolic abuse and distortion of black bodies via minstrelsy operated by a more insidious logic, one which seemed to say: if you *distort* the image, then the emotions, the culture, even the history will follow.

*Distortion* is tied to violence; it derives from the word *torture*. To distort is to twist out of true meaning. Blackface caricature distorted images of blacks into new, grotesque definitions, and in this way inflicted its multivalent violence. Yet, while minstrelsy twisted and fixed black identity, it also revealed race as fluid, simultaneously freezing
and melting racial constructs. The paradox that structures minstrelsy resembles the conflicted economy of national identity. Partha Chatterjee, as we saw earlier, suggests that the stable narrative of nation is belied by fluid communities that resist it. Chatterjee’s theory for national formation parallels the tension between minstrel stasis and fluidity. It also resembles the title of Ellison’s critique of blackface, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.” Changing the joke, which alludes to the joke minstrelsy played on blacks, can imply rewriting any hegemonic narrative. Change speaks to freedom, a certain sliding away from stasis, slipping the yoke. Stasis means “stable state,” and in the nineteenth century, stabilizing race meant stabilizing the national narrative, which relied on rigid divisions between the races. But just as fluid communities, as Chatterjee observes, have the capacity to disrupt the stable story of nation, so minstrelsy’s racial fluidity belies the stability of racial constructs. In what follows, racial stasis and racial fluidity are both linked to violence. Racial stasis is tied to the violence of being forced to conform to fixed, black minstrel roles. Racial fluidity, on the other hand, is linked to a subversive violence, which undercuts and mocks fixed racial categories.

“A Turn of the Wheel”: Blackface Revolution in The Bondwoman’s Narrative

Hannah Crafts’ The Bondwoman’s Narrative is the first extant novel written by an African American female. Rediscovered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. at an auction in 2001, and first published in 2002 by Warner Books, the text itself was most likely composed around 1857, making it roughly two years older than Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig (1859), which is generally considered the first novel published by an African American woman. Part slave narrative, part sentimental novel, The Bondwoman’s Narrative was composed in the North and recounts the author’s life as a slave and her ultimate escape to freedom. The story begins on a North Carolina plantation, where the young, light complected
Hannah lives a relatively easy life as a house slave. But when the novel’s villain, Mr. Trappe, threatens to expose Hannah’s benevolent mistress, who is a mulatto passing as white, the two escape, hiding for months in a shack before they are discovered and imprisoned. Hannah is ultimately separated from her mistress (who goes insane) and is almost sold on the New Orleans slavemarket before she ends up as a housemaid to the exacting Mrs. Wheeler who, along with her politically ambitious husband, has relocated from the South to Washington, D.C.

A vain and odious aristocrat, Mrs. Wheeler becomes the deserving victim of a prank that makes her face temporarily black. The instance of blackface occurs after Hannah procures for Mrs. Wheeler a white powder that is supposed to whiten and rejuvenate her appearance, but which instead turns her face “black as Tophet” (166). Wheeler applies the powder before begging an important political office for her husband (who has recently lost favor in Washington) from a powerful statesman. Her kneeling and pleading for the high political post, while unwittingly disguised as a slave, delights in the ironies and hijinks of minstrelsy, which often played with race and power reversals. The white powder humiliation is the pivot around which the plot turns, because it leads to Hannah moving back down south, losing favor with her mistress, and ultimately escaping to freedom.

The chapter where the blackening takes place is appropriately called “A Turn of the Wheel.” While this title overtly anticipates Mrs. Wheeler’s turning into a seeming slave, it less obviously alludes to what was then Jim Crow’s resounding refrain: “I wheel about, I turn about, I do just so./And ebery time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow.” Indeed, it is with a Jim Crow trickster zeal that Hannah slyly sabotages her mistress. After retrieving
the powder, she is called upon to bring Wheeler her smelling salts, which she secretly
knows will turn the powder black. Blackfacing Mrs. Wheeler is not so much about forced
performance as about the haughty mistress’ being tricked into blackface, a prank that has
disastrous consequences for her and her husband, since the humiliating event forces them
to return to their southern plantation. Unlike the extreme physical violence we will see in
Webb’s and Delany’s novels, Wheeler’s blackfacing records the emotional violence of
being made to look and feel like a black buffoon.

The chapter opens on a damp winter day in Washington, D.C. Mud and slush fill
the streets, and pedestrians, including Hannah herself, are slipping and falling all over.
The Washington climate is, in other words, one of general instability. This slippery
atmosphere not only foreshadows racial instability demonstrated by blackening Wheeler,
but it also suggests how the nation had become increasingly destabilized by the crisis of
slavery. Hannah, while making her way home after securing the powder from an Italian
chemist’s shop on Pennsylvania Avenue, imagines what the President is thinking inside
the White House. She speculates how he “looks perhaps from the windows of his
drawing room, and wonders at the mud and slush precisely as an ordinary mortal would.
Perhaps he remarks to the nearest secretary that the roads are dreadful” (157). That the
“roads are dreadful” implies the roads of state are troubled, while the word dreadful
evokes Dred Scott and the vexed issue of slavery, which Crafts later refers to as “dreadful
traffic” (170). She imagines that the President “notices the mud—mud so deep and dark”
(156) and describes “[c]arriages dragging through mire; horses splashed to their manes.
Congress men jostling each other at the street crossings, or perhaps losing their foothold,
where a negro slave was seen slipping and sliding but a moment before. Alas; that mud
and wet weather should have so little respect for aristocracy” (156-57). The emphasis on mud implies a nation mired in slavery. It also suggests the abiding “Africanist presence,” as Morrison calls it, which structures white identity in relation to blackness and slavery. That congressmen might lose their “foothold,” “slipping and sliding” where a black recently was, suggests how white politics, power, and identity are precariously built on slave labor. That the mud has “little respect for aristocracy” anticipates the blackfacing of Mrs. Wheeler.

After being reduced to a blackface buffoon, Mrs. Wheeler becomes the laughingstock of Washington. Throughout the city, people speculate and gossip about how she might have become blackened. But as Crafts puts it, “Very few regarded it as it really was, the deserved punishment of an act of vanity” (169). Wheeler’s vanity is, of course, aristocratic white pride, which is fittingly punished through a medium that helped whites bolster their sense of a superior whiteness. What happens to Wheeler is what was happening to blacks through the stereotyping mechanisms of minstrelsy. That is, a kind of violence is committed against her image. Her reputation is distorted, maimed, her racial identity shaped and shattered by mockery. She is seen as a mere clown.

The episode indeed witnesses “a turn of the wheel,” since the light skinned Hannah is, for a time, whiter than her mistress. Like Babo, who, by running circles around Cereno, puns on and performs revolution, Hannah’s “turn of the wheel” is a sly, revolutionary gesture that temporarily reverses the hierarchy. But while Wheeler spins to the bottom and is emotionally damaged, her being white gives her options. Just as minstrelsy could invert racial hierarchies, it also powerfully reinforced them.
Since they were originally white southern slaveholders, the Wheelers easily regain their foothold in the hierarchy once they return to their plantation. When Wheeler suspects that Hannah has gossiped about the episode, which she wanted repressed, she condemns Hannah to the slave huts, saying, “‘With all your pretty airs and your white face, you are nothing but a slave after all, and no better than the blackest wench’” (205). So the wheel turns again. What was fluid becomes fixed. Sort of. Bemoaning her fate, Crafts writes, “[M]y reputation with my Mistress [was] blackened, and most horrible of all doomed to association with the vile, foul, filthy inhabitants of the huts, and condemned to receive one of them for my husband” (205). Minstrel conventions allow Hannah to temporarily blacken the aristocracy, but she is in turn “blackened” by her mistress as the hierarchy is restored. Wheeler wheels back to the top, Hannah to the bottom.

Nevertheless, that Hannah prompts the Wheelers’ exile from Washington has enormous political implications. When Crafts wrote her novel, the slave South, in the form of southern planters like the Wheelers, had a powerful grip on the nation’s capital. According to the theory of Slave Power—a notion that had considerable currency from 1780-1860—the slave South had a stranglehold on national politics and wielded its power over the free states. Therefore, driving southern aristocracy, in the form of the Wheelers, out of Washington, is a forceful political move. After all, the Wheelers were the kind of people fighting for the expansion of slavery.

**Blackface Revenge in The Garies and Their Friends**

Frank Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends*, which was published in London in 1857, four years after William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), is the second novel to be published by an African American. Like Crafts, Webb is interested in making fixed
hierarchies fluid. He does this by portraying industrious blacks who have risen in the rigid class system and by using minstrel conventions to degrade a powerful white lawyer named George Stevens, who is brought low when a group of firefighters attack and force him into the role of a blackface buffoon. While Melville figuratively transforms Delano and Cereno into minstrel clowns, Webb uses blackface more conspicuously. Like Crafts, but in a more elaborate and violent way, he employs literal blackface to humiliate and punish his villain.

The novel is set in the turbulent 1840s, a decade that witnessed explosive race riots as well as blackface’s transformation into the full-blown, hugely popular minstrel show. The 1840s was also a time when “blackface-on-Black violence,” as Roediger has described it, was rocking sections of Philadelphia. Situated in the context of mass-marketed blackface stereotypes and masked mob beatings, *Garies* responds to minstrelsy’s physical and representational violence by staging an (in)version of minstrelsy—in this case, one of white-on-blackface violence—against the lawyer Stevens. Since laws at the time, such as the Dred Scott decision, were notoriously fixing racial lines and helping to legitimate slavery, it seems fitting that Stevens goes from being a prosperous white lawyer to a humiliated blackface victim.

Webb’s novel tells the story of two families: the Garies and the Ellises. The Garies comprise of Mr. Garie, a benevolent white patriarch, his new wife Emily (a former mulatto slave he purchased at an auction), and her children, all of whom Garie emancipates and moves from Savannah to Philadelphia. The Ellises, an African American family living in Philadelphia, are friends of the Garies. They are industrious, successful, black bourgeois capitalists. Because the novel tells the tale of a black family
occupying traditionally white, middle-class positions, it suffered negative criticism early on. Scholars chastised it much as critics would later chastise *The Cosby Show* for its exclusive focus on middle-class black life. Addison Gayle, Jr., for instance, classified *Garies* as a conventional success story, written in the spirit of Benjamin Franklin’s and Booker T. Washington’s works. More recently, however, critics have defended the novel for its progressive politics and subversion of the power structure. Levine argues that “Webb challenges hierarchical and racialist models of exclusion by depicting blacks pragmatically making use of the master’s tools in order to assert their claims to equal rights and opportunities in America” (*Disturbing* 351). Anna Engle suggests that Webb works against racial stereotypes, negating “any equation between blackness and subordination throughout the novel.” “Most of his African American characters,” she notes, “are middle or upper class, while most of his working-class characters are white” (3). Webb’s text, it seems to me, deserves both the criticism and the celebration. While it paints an ambitious portrait of blacks using an oppressive system to their advantage, it focuses on a relatively small portion of African Americans. The rest of Philadelphia’s blacks—the majority—lived among the lower classes.

Whether wealthy or poor, Philadelphia’s free African Americans—whom whites either envy or perceive as working-class competition—are the primary reason for the race riot, which forms the novel’s central scene. Another reason is George Stevens, who abhors Philadelphia’s free blacks, especially those who are achieving prosperity in the metropolis. These are blacks who, although affluent, still rent much of their housing from white landholders. Propelled by his avarice and hate, Stevens endeavors to ignite the riot by turning to the Irish (whose nineteenth-century anti-black sentiment is well
documented), hoping they will attack the city’s blacks and create a panic that will lower property values in Philadelphia. He then plans to purchase the real estate at a base price. To make sure the riot is coming off as planned, Stevens dresses down as a member of the working class in order to spy on the Irishmen he is inciting to violence. After leaving the bar where the Irish congregate, Stevens is mistaken by a group of firefighters as a member of a rival fire company. They beat him severely, cover his face and hands with tar, and then send him on his way.

That Stevens’ humiliation derives from minstrelsy is unmistakable. He purchases his working-class duds at a second-hand store, which, stocked with patched and ragged clothing, resembles a veritable minstrel costume closet. Part of his attire is a rowdy coat once worn by “a member of a notorious fire company” (186). It is this coat that causes the rival company to mistake him as their enemy. When besieged by these men, Stevens responds: “‘Oh, it is not my coat—I only put it on for a joke” (188; original emphasis). The “joke,” of course, is literally on the lawyer, and it anticipates Ellison’s appeal to “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.” Webb changes the joke by placing a figurative yoke around Stevens’ neck. After swelling his lips with a punch, the men gag and drag him to a “wheelwright’s shop,” where they cover his face and hands with tar. The wheel image is crucial, because Stevens will wheel through a series of racial transformations, first becoming a “dancing darkey,” then being turned artificially “white” by a gentleman who colors his face with lime. The wheel, as mentioned before, suggests revolution—like Crafts, Webb uses minstrelsy to subvert the power structure.

The whole humiliation answers the comic violence committed against blacks on the minstrel stage, where “blackface-on-blackface” violence was routine. It also responds to
how blacks were forced to perform particular roles for white amusement, something we will see in *Blake*, when, for sport, a group of whites watch the whipping of a small performing black boy. Like Crafts, Webb understands how minstrelsy commits violence against black identity. By turning the racist Stevens into a dancing “darkey,” he parodies how blacks were expected to perform on command, compensating for African Americans who struggle with minstrel stereotypes. After Stevens is beaten and tarred, Webb notes, “His lips were swelled to a size that would have been regarded as large even on the face of a Congo negro, and one eye was puffed out to an alarming extent; whilst the coating of tar he had received rendered him such an object as the reader can faintly picture to himself” (189). Stevens is violently transformed into a blackface clown, with blackened face and hands, inflated lips, and a puffed eye that suggests the bulging eyeballs of minstrel players. In the spirit of minstrelsy, one of the men tells Stevens to “‘run for it—cut the quickest kind of time’”; he then kicks him, “to add impetus to his forward movement” (189), all of which evokes the cowardly “black” running about the minstrel stage in fear.

The rival company that attacks Stevens becomes a white medium for Webb, through which he achieves racial retaliation. Much as Babo, in “Benito Cereno,” uses Don Cereno’s white body as a symbolic mask, behind which he hides and through which he enacts his rebellion while enjoying the privileges of colonial authority, Webb uses working-class firemen to abuse Stevens. No nineteenth-century African American text could get away with having a group of blacks treat a white man so violently, so Webb has white men do the work for him. Moreover, Webb’s racial retaliation is a kind of reverse thievery. Writing in the *North Star* on October 27, 1848, Frederick Douglass called
minstrel performers “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a
complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt
taste of their white fellow citizens.” As Douglass’ words suggest, identity theft was
nothing new. If minstrelsy stole and revised black identity, Webb reverses the process by
stealing and revising Stevens’ identity.

After fleeing his tormentors, Stevens tries to collect himself on the steps of a
mansion. That Webb’s instance of minstrel violence occurs in front of a mansion echoes
how such buildings loomed large on minstrel stage backdrops. Whereas rough men
forcibly minstrelize Stevens, here inebriated gentlemen emerge from the mansion and
force him to dance like a black buffoon. Whereas minstrelsy made blacks conform to
hideous stereotypes, Webb turns the tables by forcing Stevens to play the darkey. Much
like Harry Harris’ performance in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, he is made to do foolish tricks for
the pleasure of white men.

It has become almost cliché that nineteenth-century class hierarchy was
racialized—that the higher one went the “whiter” they were, that the lower one was the
“blacker” they became. So it is appropriate that white working men blacken the lawyer
Stevens, while one of the gentlemen can make him “white” again—in this case by taking
a chip of lime and coloring Stevens’ face white, saying, “‘I’m making a fellow white man
of him, I’m going to make him a glorious fellow-citizen, and have him run for
Congress’” (191). If, as Engle has argued, blackening Stevens “parodies the blackening
of the Irish working class occurring throughout mid-nineteenth-century literature and
culture” (160-61), the lime used to make Stevens white enough to run for Congress
suggests an Anglicizing of the lawyer. Lime implies “limey,” and the standard of
whiteness at the time was, of course, British whiteness. By having Stevens endure such transformations, Webb undercuts racial stasis, revealing race as a fluid, adaptable construct.

That Stevens can be made both “black” and “white” speaks to the arbitrariness of racial categories as well as to how race was assigned in the nineteenth century. That an upper-class gentleman has the power to make Stevens a white “fellow-citizen, and have him run for Congress” illustrates how elite white males decided who was (and was not) allowed to take part in the American political system. The series of racial transformations also allegorize a process that Noel Ignatiev’s study calls “how the Irish became white.” Stevens, moving from white, to black, to white again, mirrors how the Irish in America were originally white non-citizens who became blackened by their low status before becoming “white” again or, rather, assimilated by the white republic. Stevens’ violent racial transformations also enable Webb to expose how the national culture was racially exclusive. Mrs. Wheeler’s foray into blackness is enough to arouse the antipathy of Washington and get her expelled from the capital. A piece of white lime is enough to make a blackened Stevens part of the nation again, a “glorious fellow-citizen,” who is eligible to run for Congress.

**Whipping up Minstrel Types in Blake**

Counter-minstrel violence enables Crafts and Webb to avenge the black community for minstrelsy’s depredations. Blackface conventions, ironically, furnish them with the power to disempower whites. Martin Delany, on the other hand, dramatizes blackface violence through the whipping of a black slave child, but then later responds to such violence by revising minstrel songs for insurrectionary purposes. Of the three black writers in this chapter, Delany was the most revolutionary. A political firebrand,
notorious for espousing black separatism, Delany was a black nationalist who, as Levine
puts it, “ultimately sought to lead blacks back to their ‘native’ Africa” (*Politics* 2).

Delany’s only novel *Blake* chronicles Henry Blake’s guerrilla escapades throughout the
South’s slave plantations, where he whispers plans of revolution to those in bondage. In
the book’s second section, we follow Blake on his subsequent journey to Cuba, where,
employed as a sailing master, he goes to rescue his wife, Maggie, who has been sold
there. He also goes to spur a violent insurrection, the effects of which will hopefully
ripple north and spark the demise of southern slavery. Blake is a violent man; he is the
“bad nigger,” or the Uncle Tom opposite, who, like Babo in “Benito Cereno,” devotes
himself to a brilliantly conceived slave rebellion. 9 Sweeping through the South, Blake
kills a number of white overseers as he moves toward his revolution, which we never see,
since the final chapters where it would occur were either never written or have been lost.
Blake’s murdering seems justified in light of the South’s extreme racial aggression,
which the novel graphically records.

Critics have noted that *Blake* resists, revises, and even parodies *Uncle Tom’s
Cabin*. Stowe’s prodigiously influential novel, rich in sentiment and packed with racial
stereotypes, would not have been possible without the equally influential minstrel show.
Delany bristled at Stowe’s distinction as a supposed translator of African American life
and feeling. He was, we imagine, no happier with minstrelsy’s white rendering of black
culture. By mimicking Stowe, Delany tried to correct her sometimes saccharine vision of
slavery. We know Stowe’s minstrel-driven novel helped plant African American
stereotypes in American culture. In a subversive mimetic gesture, *Blake* does the
important work of undoing stereotypes that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and by extension minstrelsy, circulated.

At the beginning of the story we meet Daddy Joe and Mammy Judy, two older slaves similar to Stowe’s Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe, who represent tradition, excessive piety, ignorance and, above all else, racial stasis. When Daddy Joe recommends that Blake not try to escape from slavery—“stan still an’ see de salbation” is his mantra—Blake responds, “I’ve been standing still long enough—I’ll stand still no longer” (21). Daddy Joe is bound to the typically sentimental, and therefore static, role of pious black elder. And though Blake will ultimately help Daddy Joe and Mammy Judy escape to Canada, their original desire to “stan still an’ see de salbation” is a political gesture, insofar as it represents the passive acceptance of their slave condition. Through Joe and Judy, Delany critiques how black adherence to the white version of Christianity—to the promise that obedience in slavery will be rewarded by heaven—reinforces the slave system. Blake, on the other hand, whom Levine compares to the mobile Moses (*Politics* 191), eludes such passive piety, and by doing so eludes the roles designed for him by slavery and blackface. Joe and Judy are defined by minstrelsy—Blake defines himself against it.

Blake will only “stan still” when he refuses to perform for his auctioneer: “‘Come, my boy, bestir yourself an’ don’t stan’ there like a statue; can’t you give us a jig? Whistle us a song!’” (26). But Blake won’t dance. And Blake won’t whistle. His refusal of such roles is nowhere more evident than when a man named Richard Crow buys him. Crow, of course, evokes Jim Crow, towing along the minstrel show that followed in his wake. Richard Crow—or “Rich” Crow—suggests how slavery and minstrelsy purchased and
profited from black labor as well as black performance. When Blake learns he has been
sold to Crow, he makes his escape, literally and figuratively. He slips from his master’s
yoke and begins his freedom mission in the South.

Whereas Blake slips loose from racial stasis, Rube, a sickly black boy virtually
beaten to death later in the novel, does not. If Blake breaks the stereotypical minstrel
mold, Rube reveals how that mold is whipped into shape. The crawl toward the child’s
horrific beating begins when Judge Ballard, “an eminent jurist of one of the Northern
States” (4), comes to Mississippi scouting for “a Mississippi cotton place” (59). Stephen
Franks, Blake’s legal owner, receives Ballard but remains suspicious of his motives,
since the judge hails from the North. Thus the whipping of Rube is mainly meant to test
Ballard’s stomach for racial violence—which is so applauded in the South that it can be
staged as “entertainment”—and to initiate him into the lifeways of slaves and southern
gentlemen.

After dinner and brandy at the estate of Rube’s fateful owner, Captain Grason, the
elite crowd saunters behind the mansion to watch this “rare sport.” What happens there
has enormous pathos and effect. A single scene captures the complexities of minstrel
violence, so I quote the passage at length:

Shortly there came forward, a small black boy about eleven years of age, thin
visage, projecting upper teeth, rather ghastly consumptive look, and emaciated
condition. The child trembled with fear as he approached the group.

“Now gentlemen,” said Grason, “I’m going to show you a sight!” having in his
hand a long whip, the cracking of which he commenced, as a ringmaster in the
circus.

The child gave him a look never to be forgotten; a look beseeching mercy and
compassion. But the decree was made, and though humanity quailed in dejected
supplication before him, the command was imperative, with no living hand to stay
the pending consequences. He must submit to his fate, and pass through the ordeal
of training.
“Wat maus gwine do wid me now. I know what maus gwine do,” said this miserable child, “he gwine make me see sights!” when going down on his hands and feet, he commenced trotting around like an animal.

“Now gentlemen, look!” said Grason. “He’ll whistle, sing songs, hymns, pray, swear like a trooper, laugh, cry, all under the same state of feelings.”

With a peculiar swing of the whip, bringing the lash down upon a certain spot on the exposed skin, the whole person being prepared for the purpose, the boy commenced to whistle almost like a thrush; another cut changed it to a song, another to a hymn, then a pitiful prayer, when he gave utterance to oaths which would make a Christian shudder, after which he laughed outright; then from the fullness of his soul he cried:

“O maussa I’s sick! Please stop little!” Casting up gobs of hemorrhage.

Franks stood looking on with unmoved muscles. Armsted stood aside whittling a stick; but when Ballard saw, at every cut the flesh turn open in gashes streaming down with gore, till at last in agony he appealed for mercy, he involuntarily found his hand with a grasp on the whip, arresting its further application.

“Not quite a Southerner yet Judge, if you can’t stand that!” said Franks on seeing him wiping away the tears.

“Gentleman, help yourself to brandy and water. The little Negro don’t stand it nigh so well as formerly. He used to be a trump!” (67-68)

The episode reproduces one of minstrelsy’s basic impulses, insofar as the whipping is an attempt to master the black body. When white minstrels “inhabited” black bodies on stage, they took control of black representation, fashioning it after their own fantasies and ideologies. Here Grason manipulates the black body through force, much as Babo made Cereno echo his will in “Benito Cereno.”

White masculinity and fraternity are stabilized in this scene through racial domination. If the notorious black penis haunted the white male imagination, Grason exorcises this haunting with his “long whip.” He is both “ringmaster” and phallic superior; Rube is the rustic clown. There is no mistaking the sexual gratification achieved through violence in this scene, which appropriately takes place in “the pleasure grounds, in the rear of the mansion” (66; emphasis added). The spectacle suggests a kind of group raping. Rube, down on his hands and feet, playing the sacrificial animal, scurries about like Ned Beatty in that terrible moment from Deliverance. But in that movie a poor white
woodsman rapes a white working-class outdoorsman, whom he forces to trot about like a pig, effectively undercutting hierarchies within whiteness. Here the biracial hierarchy is hardened—the same hierarchy that is begun and sustained, as Theodore Parker insists, by violence.

The scene also ponders the range of meanings in “consumption,” dramatized only obviously by the tubercular victim. The whipping at first causes Rube to heave “gobs of hemorrhage” (67). Later that night he dies from “hemorrhage of the lungs” (68). He dies, that is, from consumption, not from being beaten, as we might expect. How can we read Rube’s pulmonary demise? He is consumed from inside, we know. He is also consumed from outside by a consuming audience that, like minstrel spectators, devours black character types. This notion, of course, belies the notorious white anxiety that ominous black men were out to devour innocent whites. Frantz Fanon, who was intensely concerned with the corrosive effects of racism, famously renders this white anxiety in Black Skin, White Masks, when a little French boy perceives him as a man-eating savage—“Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up” (114). The white fear of being gormandized by blacks was also staged by minstrelsy. Mark Twain, who adored blackface, once remarked on minstrel performers’ exaggerated lips, which were “thickened and lengthened with bright red paint to such a degree that their mouths resemble[d] slices cut in a ripe watermelon” (qtd. in Gubar 82). While the red minstrel mouth evokes watermelon consumption, it also suggests the bloody mouth of the mythic black cannibal. But the story of Rube reverses this myth. We see it not only with Rube, whose name suggests a rustic, unsophisticated black, a type embodied by Jim Crow, but with the myriad black bodies and images that were prepared for white consumption. Rube
yokes the horrors of slavery to black performance, insofar as blacks were consumed as laborers and performers. The irony is that Rube, in this bloody ritual, is cannibalized by his audience.

Delany understands how stereotypical black roles take shape through cultural violence. His description of Rube, who “must submit to his fate, and pass through the ordeal of training,” allegorizes the process by which blacks are muscled into performance roles, the larger suggestion being that cultural productions like minstrelsy and Mrs. Stowe’s novel hammer out the template that blacks must twist themselves into. Just as minstrelsy helped whites take control of black representation, here white authority does the same. Rube acts out what Lhamon, who has also analyzed this passage, astutely identifies as “the narrowly permitted performance of the black repertoire” (100). Lhamon’s focus though is not on the scenario’s violence but on Rube as another example of performers who circulate through various black characters—e.g., Harry Harris and Topsy from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—but who are nevertheless “crucially limited” in their ranging. What fascinates me is how the moment epitomizes the trauma of enforced performance. I would argue that the thrashing gives tangible expression to the larger, abstract suffering and humiliation such confining roles heaped on blacks. Rube’s compulsory groveling and his physical disfigurement under the lash suggest minstrelsy’s power to distort and regulate black images. The intimation here is that minstrelsy commits identity violence by creating roles that blacks must occupy for white pleasure. When Grason says, “‘The little Negro don’t stand it nigh so well as formerly. He used to be a trump!’” (68), we understand that Rube can endure prescribed roles only so long before he comes apart. Forced to play preordained, restricted types, his identity unravels.
Although Rube plays different characters, they are limited, static, and stereotypical. His performance may seem varied, but he is made to play the darkey, simply.

Rube is a powerful example of blackface’s real and figurative violence. Delany, however, does not end his critique of minstrelsy on this defeated note. His novel is not about being whipped into submission; it is instead about retaliation, revolution, and reinvention. Just as Crafts and Webb achieve racial revenge against blackface, Blake will ultimately turn the tables on the minstrel tradition.

Before elaborating Blake’s challenge to minstrelsy, I want to address the novel’s literary nemesis: the influential *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Because Delany wrote to oppose Stowe, whose novel profoundly shaped national culture, it is not surprising that Blake echoes, and acts as a corrective to, Stowe’s radical black hero, George Harris. Like George, Blake is inexorably driven toward freedom. Like George, he is also militant, mobile, and a fierce revolutionary. Much as George imitates America’s Revolutionary ethos to energize his rebellion, Blake’s rush through the South, where he unites slaves against the system, distantly echoes the colonies’ unified rebellion against England. Both men, furthermore, reject the white man’s version of Christianity (which taught slaves to accept their low condition), advocating, instead, action over religiosity. Given these similarities, it makes sense that Stowe’s description of George, who “talked so fluently, held himself so erect, looked so handsome and manly, that his master began to feel an uneasy consciousness of inferiority” (10), is echoed by Delany’s description of Blake, who is “a black—a pure Negro—handsome, manly and intelligent, in size comparing well with his master” (16-17). Both men are strong, bright, and masculine; they dwarf
their white owners, implying that they are really their own masters. But the similarities between Blake and George only go so far.

What distinguishes Blake from George is that he lacks ambivalence. And Blake itself, on the whole, lacks the ambivalence of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. George, we know, has mixed heritage and a paradoxical vision of black nationhood, which he articulates as a hybrid of Euro-American and African nationalism. Blake, on the other hand, is unambiguously black. He is “a pure Negro” whose vision for freedom derives not so much from Euro-American ideologies as from his revision of Christianity, that is, from “the black nationalist and messianic implications of the Moses analogy” (Levine, *Politics* 180). George reproduces and relocates an aggressive Euro-American imperialism, whereas Blake conceives a revolution on American soil. As Sundquist observes, “Henry Blake spreads among the slave population of the South the simple belief that revolution is possible, that slave culture can nurture an African American identity invisible to the masters, and that organized insurrection is not unthinkable” (199). Stowe sends George away to forge a black nationalism—this is her way of solving the race problem, of purifying culture. Blake, on the other hand, by uniting a community of slaves against slavery, begins forging a black nationalism *within* the United States.11 As we saw with Chatterjee, communities at the local level have the ability to resist the larger narrative of nation. Such localized communities in the United States reveal how America is not so much a cohesive, homogenous entity but a place of competing national narratives. By having Blake consolidate a black nation within slave culture, Delany creates local resistance to hegemonic nationalism.
He also creatively revises the blackface legacy. We have seen how George Harris turned the conventions of minstrelsy to his advantage by disguising himself as a dandy and passing through Kentucky. And we have watched Babo satirize and exploit the nineteenth-century racist thinking that minstrelsy helped cultivate. In Blake, Delany retaliates against minstrelsy by rewriting blackface songs so that they serve as an impetus for rebellion. Before doing so, however, he first writes harsh reality into minstrel fantasy.

We saw the brutal side of minstrelsy with Rube, who is forced to play the musical slave. We see a different brutality when Blake comments on black slaves toiling on the Mississippi river:

> [T]he glee of these men of sorrow was touchingly appropriate and impressive. Men of sorrow they are in reality; for if there be a class of men anywhere to be found, whose sentiments of song and words of lament are made to reach the sympathies of others, the black slave-boatmen of the Mississippi river is that class.

> Fastened by the unyielding links of the iron cable of despotism, reconciling themselves to a lifelong misery, they are seemingly contented by soothing their sorrows with songs and sentiments of apparently cheerful but in reality wailing lamentations. (100)

Here Delany explodes the myth of the contented slave, a stereotype that minstrelsy helped develop. But he does more than expose the anguish behind “apparently cheerful” slave songs. As Lott observes, he takes the plantation melodies of Stephen Foster and turns them into songs of insurrection. For instance, Delany will later revise the song “Old Uncle Ned” (1848), a sentimental blackface standard that mourns the death of a slave named Ned, into a melody that suggests killing the master and attaining freedom:

> Old master’s dead and lying in his grave;  
> And our blood will cease to flow;  
> He will no more tramp on the neck of the slave,  
> For he’s gone where slaveholders go!  
> Hang up the shovel and the hoe-o-o-o!  
> I don’t care whether I work or no! (105)
“Blake writes black agency,” Lott argues, “back into history through blackface songs taken ‘back’ from those who had plundered black cultural practices” (Love 236). Instead of conforming to the stereotypes generated by minstrelsy, Delany converts Foster’s complacent melody into a hymn of violent revenge. After using Rube’s horrific lashing to expose not only the physical violence but also the cultural pressures that blackface applied on African Americans, Delany seizes control of minstrelsy much as Babo takes control of the San Dominick. Both of them take vehicles of black oppression—the minstrel show, the slave ship—and make them fit their own agendas.

Although the nation claimed a commitment to human equality, race was an important factor in deciding to what extent a person could participate in shaping the nation’s culture, identity, and destiny. Blackface, which was about whites becoming temporarily black, equips Crafts and Webb with the power to make their white villains powerless within this uneven system. Their blackface revenge meshes neatly with Lhamon’s thesis that minstrelsy’s black-on-white violence ritually embarrassed the white ruling class in order to please its audience. But Crafts and Webb also demonstrate an abiding resistance to minstrelsy. By deploying blackface to violently demean Wheeler and Stevens, they demonstrate how minstrelsy was used to debase and humiliate blacks. Whereas white minstrels blacked up for fun, Crafts and Webb show their villains what it feels like to be black in a country that excludes African Americans from the national discourse. Wheeler and Stevens lose power; their identities are shattered; they are laughed at, shamed, and beaten down. On a slightly different note, with the lashing of Rube, Delany dramatizes the brutal effects of white demand for black performance, a demand that minstrelsy extended and intensified. Rube’s beating exemplifies the kind of
violence that justifies Blake’s mobilizing a sub-nation that is united against slavery.

Much as violence was used to enforce slavery and black performance, it is also needed to change the slave system.

Notes

1 Crafts’ narrative, recovered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 2001 at the Swann Galeries auction, has not been dated definitively. In his introduction to the novel, Gates details his attempt to establish a date for the text. After consulting several sources, he concludes that Dr. Joe Nickell, a self-described “‘investigator and historical document examiner’” (xxx), offers the best justification for the text’s composition. Nickell believes the novel was written between 1853-61, because Crafts mentions Washington, D.C.’s equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson (first erected in 1853) but does not mention secession or the Civil War. More recent critics place the novel’s date closer to 1857. My own justification for this date appears below, in note 4.

2 For a different kind of irony, we might consult John Bloom, who has argued that The Bondwoman’s Narrative was not written by a black woman but was instead an act of “literary blackface,” that is, a work by a white abolitionist masquerading as a black woman. While Bloom rigorously challenges Gates’ thesis that The Bondwoman’s Narrative was written by a black woman, Gates, in my opinion, has recovered enough evidence to establish Hannah Crafts’ identity as a black woman who lived as a slave in the South, moved to Washington, D.C., and then eventually escaped to New Jersey.

3 For a catalogue of Jim Crow minstrels songs, as well as plays, see Lhamon’s Jump Jim Crow.

4 If Crafts is using the word “dreadful” to evoke the Dred Scott decision, it would reinforce the likelihood that her book was written just before the Civil War, since the Supreme Court made the Dred Scott decision in 1857.

5 For more on the “Africanist presence,” see Morrison 1-28.

6 While the Slave Power thesis, which was often seen as conspiratorial, fell out of favor among historians in the 1920s, two recent books reopen the discussion about the influence that southern planters and politicians had on national politics. See Richards’ The Slave Power and Wills’ “Negro President.”

7 It is worth noting that for her racial revenge, Crafts uses a product of science; the powder, remember, is a chemist’s invention. We might read the powder as a critique of how science was defining race at the time. In the nineteenth century, racial science notoriously posited that blacks were inferior to whites in order to justify slavery and to keep blacks out of the national dialogue. Scientific racism, like minstrelsy, committed a long ranging, representational violence against blacks. So by chemically black-facing Mrs. Wheeler, Crafts not only makes a crucial intervention into national politics. Using a
scientific product to invert the racial hierarchy, she also implicitly retaliates against racial
science. Through the blackface prank, then, Crafts undermines the many forces that
shaped national culture to the advantage of whites, that encouraged anti-black sentiment,
and that worked to sustain slavery. For a thorough discussion of how scientific theories
were used to construct racial categories, see Stepan.

8 Gayle calls Garies “the Poor Richard’s Almanac of the black middle class” (13)
and argues that Webb articulates Booker T. Washington’s agenda “more articulately than
[Washington] did himself” (14).

9 For a description of the “bad nigger,” see Bryant, “Born in a Mighty Bad Land,”
especially 1-24.

10 Although Blake rejects the white American version of Christianity, especially
as it is practiced in the South, he is not anti-Christian. Instead, he revises Christianity for
his own political purpose. Delany himself was not anti-Christian either. But he did
criticize Christianity for pacifying slaves: “Their hope is largely developed, and
consequently, they usually stand still—hope in God, and really expect Him to do that for
them, which it is necessary they should do themselves” (qtd. in Bryant, Politics 41-42).

11 Blake’s revolution, of course, is not limited to American soil. As I said earlier, in
the second part of the novel, he sails to Cuba, where he hopes to foment a violent
insurrection. Further, while Blake is after an indigenous black nationalism, he also
espouses Pan-Africanism.
CHAPTER 6
WORKING IN THE WHITE WAY: HORATIO ALGER’S RAGGED DICK AND BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY

The revolutionary Blake takes us into the second year of the Civil War. By 1862, Delany had either finished the novel or abandoned it because the war demanded new priorities. This chapter focuses on a very different text, Ragged Dick, written by a decidedly different writer, Horatio Alger, Jr., who mainly wrote adolescent fiction. Curiously, Delany and Alger attended Harvard together in the late 1840s. But the similarities stop there. Delany was kicked out because of his race. Alger graduated eighth in his class. Delany was dark black, broad-shouldered, formidable, and defiant. Alger, as Alan Trachtenberg puts it, was “mild-tempered, bookish, pink-skinned, and very petite” (vi). While Major Martin R. Delany was actively recruiting black troops for the Union, Alger was serving as a minister in Brewster, Massachusetts, where he was accused of committing “unnatural” acts with boys. Delany’s Blake advocates black insurrection and chronicles the adventures of a warrior-hero. Ragged Dick, a novel about a young New York City bootblack who rises from homelessness to respectability, advocates middle-class values and chronicles a white boy “making it” in America. Delany and Alger seem worlds apart, yet their novels both employ blackface conventions to contemplate American self-making. Blake, we know, constructs himself against minstrel stereotypes, whereas Dick defines himself through and ultimately against minstrelsy. That these two sharply contrasting writers use blackface to think about self-making testifies to
minstrelsy’s centrality in American national culture as well as to how the medium powerfully lends itself to self-fashioning.

While it is arguably the most simple and conventional text in this study, *Ragged Dick* nevertheless deeply engages competing narratives of national identity. As Dick moves through his various minstrel guises, he reflects the friction between slavery and freedom, aristocracy and democracy, South and North. Serialized in 1867 and published as a book in 1868, the novel suggests via its protagonist the ideological conflict between northern capitalist industry and southern preindustrialism, a friction that led to civil war—a friction the minstrel show had been staging for some time. But Dick doesn’t merely stage sectional tensions. Through him the Civil War is, in a sense, replayed, insofar as he represents the triumph of capitalism and democracy over preindustrialism and aristocratic values. Whereas previous texts in this study often help us explore contexts leading to war, *Ragged Dick* enables us to assess national identity in the post-Civil War moment.

After graduating from Harvard, Alger worked as a writer, editor, and teacher for several years and then served briefly as a minister before moving in 1866 to New York City, where he began writing juvenile fiction full time. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, Alger produced some one-hundred novels, which were mostly about boys becoming men and achieving economic prosperity in America. As such, the name Horatio Alger has become synonymous with capitalist success and the ideal of the self-made man: a misapprehension, really, since his works—famously known as “rags-to-riches” tales—are more about rising to respectability than to wealth. Another aspect missing from the Alger myth is his apparent pederasty, which is why he fled the ministry
and ended up in New York City, where he immersed himself in his writing, and where he took an immediate interest in the city’s homeless children: the bootblacks, newsboys, and match sellers who would people his books.

When Alger published *Ragged Dick*, blackface minstrelsy was still enormously popular, although it would soon find itself in fierce competition with variety shows and vaudeville. By the end of the century, the minstrel show, as we understand it, would vanish from the stage. But just after the war, advertisements for minstrel troupes covered the city, and blackface could be seen at such theaters as the Old Bowery, Barnum’s Museum, and the Fifth Avenue Opera House, establishments Dick either frequents, mentions, or works near that form an appropriate backdrop for his own minstrel-like performances in the text. Scholarship on *Ragged Dick* has focused mostly on aspects of capitalism and class, morality and respectability, individualism, sexuality and gender. The issue of race has been virtually ignored, in spite of the novel’s copious black and white imagery and powerful evocations of blackface minstrelsy. Alger’s use of minstrelsy has been noted, but only where he has tapped blackface to create black characters in other texts.¹

This chapter attempts something different by arguing that Alger models his white hero, the poor and grimy Ragged Dick, after minstrel stereotypes. Such an argument may seem brassy since *Ragged Dick* makes no explicit reference to minstrelsy. Yet when Alger wrote his novel, the minstrel show had become so ingrained in national culture, had so thoroughly shaped how people lived their raced identities, and had become so much a part of the American vernacular, that its influence could be felt in less conspicuous ways. Thus I argue in this chapter that minstrelsy organizes *Ragged Dick* through a more subtle,
symbolic presence. I take my cue from Morrison, who has argued that “a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to [American writers’] sense of Americanness” (6). What Morrison calls a “fabricated Africanist presence” appears in the shoe blacking and dirt that racially mark Dick. The blacking itself evokes blackface makeup. Much as blackface performers could return to the white middle class after washing the burnt-cork from their bodies, Dick’s rise in the racial and class hierarchies corresponds to his removal of blacking from his hands. My argument also follows Roediger and Lott, who have shown how blackface helped working-class whites organize their identities in opposition to blackness, but I complicate their arguments by showing how *Ragged Dick* uses minstrel types to construct Dick’s white middle-class identity.

Dick resembles two major minstrel figures: the impoverished slave, Jim Crow, and the well-dressed dandy, Zip Coon. As a bootblack, Dick first appears as a Jim Crow type, occupying a preindustrial, slave-like position that keeps him outside white capitalist culture. Later, he acts like Zip Coon, insofar as he both mocks and mimics the wealth and status of the elite. But although Dick fantasizes and jokes about the aristocracy, as he rises in the world, his banter gives way to the sober pursuit and ultimate attainment of a middle-class social position. Roughly half way through the narrative, it becomes clear that Dick does not desire the wealth and reputation of the aristocrat; he only acts like he does. But he doesn’t want to continue in the underclass as a servile bootblack either. As an exemplar of a growing middle-class ethos, he wants to earn his position and reputation. The poor and ragged Jim Crow and the richly attired Zip Coon represent the two class extremes (in racial guise) that Dick temporarily occupies, but then distinguishes himself from, as he gradually uncovers his whiteness and works to achieve middle-class
respectability. As suggested earlier, disavowing Jim Crow and Zip Coon also reflects national conflict. Rejecting these minstrel figures recapitulates the North’s victory over the South; it suggests an end to preindustrial drags on northern industry; it implicitly celebrates aristocratic decline; and it revels in the triumph of capitalist enterprise.²

Along with allegorizing sectional tensions, Dick embodies an urban youth culture that used blackface to defy authority. As Lhamon puts it, “Minstrelsy was a popular form that at its outset played . . . to the vast and rapidly changing population of working-class youths swarming through the American cities from the 1830s until well after the Civil War.” He adds that “the minstrel show was the first among many later manifestations, nearly always allied with images of black culture, that allowed youths to resist merchant-defined external impostures” (“Cycles” 276-77). Dick is linked with blackness most heavily early on when he insouciantly resists merchant authority and gathers with other low youths who, like himself, thrive on rebellious forms such as minstrelsy. But Dick is low only for so long before he follows the same direction that the minstrel show eventually took: “As blackface minstrelsy gathered momentum in the 1850s and afterward, gathered stereotypes and gathered power, it expanded its public beyond the culture of rogue working youths. Entrepreneurial control absorbed and damped the implicit critique youths in blackface were making of upright mercantile style” (Lhamon, Cain 45). In one sense, Ragged Dick—who will sign his name Richard Hunter, Esq. at the end of the novel—allegorizes the transformation of minstrelsy from a rebellious expression of youth culture into a more sanitary, middle-class entertainment, one attuned to propriety, reform, and social conformity.
Jim Crow and the Preindustrial Presence

Before Dick undergoes his transformation, he is linked to the minstrel stage. In fact, aspects of minstrelsy emerge in the very first lines of *Ragged Dick*, when a porter tells Dick, who has passed the night on the street in a wooden box, to wake up:

“Wake up there, youngster,” said a rough voice.
Ragged Dick opened his eyes slowly, and stared stupidly in the face of the speaker, but did not offer to get up.
“Wake up, you young vagabond!” said the man a little impatiently; “I suppose you’d lay there all day, if I hadn’t called you.” (3)

Our first impression of Dick is not flattering. Although later characterized by his strong work ethic, intelligence, and desire to rise, he is introduced as lazy, ignorant, and unambitious. He opens his eyes “slowly,” stares “stupidly” at the porter, and is initially unwilling to rise. He resembles stereotypes minstrel performers used to ridicule blacks, such as laziness, mindlessness, and irresponsibility. He is also called a “vagabond,” which was a popular minstrel type who represented an undisciplined, rootless existence. With no home, no rent, and no reason to save, Dick is presented as a fugitive from the investment culture of capitalism and from a more respectable and responsible work ethic.³

Dick’s proximity to the minstrel stage is reinforced when he says he stayed past midnight at the Old Bowery theater, where he often spends his evenings and squanders his earnings, and where he would have, undoubtedly, seen minstrel shows. For Alger’s nineteenth-century audience, Dick’s reference to the Old Bowery, coupled with his age and occupation, would have invoked the minstrel stage and set the tone for his minstrel-like performances in the text. Lott has even argued that “[b]y 1853 the signifying chain linking workingmen to Bowery amusements and through these to blackface performance was little more than a cliché of social observation” (*Love* 74). When asked how he paid
for the Old Bowery, Dick’s response brings him closer to the minstrel stage: “‘Made it by shines’” (3), he says, referring, of course, to bootblacking. A rough and competitive occupation, usually performed by white and black youths in northern American cities, bootblacking served as a model for minstrelsy, which featured a long line of bootblack characters, such as Mose, Sambo, and also Jim Crow. Minstrel plays are rife with puns linking bootblacking to blackface, and Lhamon has even noted that “[t]he joke in Rice’s blackface theatre was that the black effect was produced by shoe polish” (Jump 22n427). Also, Dick’s age and his low, dirty occupation lumps him with the city’s blackened, rebellious youths, who, as I’ve said, used minstrelsy to resist merchant authority.

When we meet Dick he is indeed a rebel, a “vagabond.” Alger admits up front that Dick is not “a model boy” (6), that he smokes, drinks, swears, spends wastefully, and plays tricks on authority. But he won’t act that way for long because the novel is all about Dick’s relinquishing youthful rebellion and conforming to adult, merchant expectations. As such, we might read the opening passage as a “wake-up” call to Dick, who is literally caught dozing. He is roused by a porter, a doorkeeper at a local business firm on Spruce street, who symbolically links street life to respectable business. The encounter foreshadows Dick’s “waking up” and discovering that he needs to give up his unskilled profession, nocturnal follies, the wagons and wooden boxes he sleeps in, and join the more respectable world of capitalist discipline; for it is on this day that Dick decides to quit his vagabonding, invest in himself, and rise. Although Alger suggests that there is honor in bootblacking, the narrative often links it with shame and servility, revealing how it is not as reputable as white middle-class or skilled working-class occupations. Although Dick “kn[ows] there [is] nothing dishonorable in the occupation” (119), he still
blushes violently when admitting he is a bootblack. And Frank, the genteel friend who encourages Dick to improve himself, implies that the young bootblack cannot become truly respectable until he begins working in the “right way”:

“There’ve been a great many boys begin as low down as you, Dick, that have grown up respectable and honored. But they had to work pretty hard for it.”
“I’m willing to work hard,” said Dick.
“And you must not only work hard, but work in the right way.” (55)

Frank’s admonishment strikes at the heart of the novel’s ideology, for *Ragged Dick*’s central thesis is that Dick must learn to work in the right way, which translates as working in the “white way,” that is, working toward a respectable, white-collar position and away from the blackened labor force.

Alger emphasizes how Dick works in the “black way” by modeling him after Jim Crow, the impoverished rural slave from the minstrel stage. He begins by describing how Dick spent the night on the street in “a wooden box half full of straw,” adding that Dick simply “dumped down into the straw without taking the trouble of undressing.” Getting up is also an “equally short process,” as it only involves that Dick jump out of the box, shake the “straws” from his clothes, pull a cap over his disheveled locks, and go about his day (4). Alger’s description suggests that the young bootblack lives an uncomplicated and undisciplined life, one seemingly exempt from the pressures exerted by the emerging modern metropolis. He has no rent to pay, no cleansing to attend to, no studying to think about, no money to guard, no appearances to maintain. He simply dumps down and sleeps, jumps up and goes about his day. Moreover, Alger’s myriad references to straw lend a rustic flavor to the scene. The emphasis on straw helps link Dick’s “simple” lifestyle to a rural, preindustrial past, something Jim Crow embodied on the minstrel stage.
Dick’s association with an “easier,” rural, and pre-modern period is reinforced by his clothing:

His pants were torn in several places, and apparently belonged in the first instance to a boy two sizes larger than himself. He wore a vest, all the buttons of which were gone except two, out of which peaked a shirt which looked as if it had been worn a month. To complete his costume he wore a coat too long for him, dating back, if one might judge from its general appearance, to a remote antiquity. (4)

His ragged, oversize “costume” clearly recalls the exaggerated outfits worn by minstrel performers who burlesqued the plantation slave. On the one hand, such clothing suggests that Dick is acting like a black slave, since the white working class at the time regarded bootblacking as taboo and dismissed it as the work of slaves. As a bootblack, Dick would have been looked upon as one of New York’s “white niggers,” that is “white workers in arduous unskilled jobs or in subservient positions” (Roediger 145). That his straw-speckled costume relies on rusticity to emphasize his slave-like position is also in line with a recurrent minstrel theme, since blackface performers often used raced and southern guises to mask northern concerns about wage slavery and servile labor (Lott, Love 199).

On the other hand, Dick’s ragged clothing, his connection to the past, to a “remote antiquity,” his rowdy excesses and carefree living, link him to the kind of “simple” lifestyle fantasized about on the minstrel stage through the preindustrial Jim Crow, who was constructed in opposition to the dandy and who embodied everything non-threatening to the white worker. During Reconstruction, when emancipated blacks threatened to compete with white laborers, minstrel burlesques of the ragged and ridiculous Jim Crow allayed these fears; they also allowed feelings of white superiority to thrive as slavery was recreated on stage. Further, as Roediger asserts, parodies of the rustic slave allowed “preindustrial joys [to] survive amidst industrial discipline.” Such
nostalgic parodies allowed whites, who had recently arrived from the country, to assuage “the tension between a longing for a rural past, and the need to adapt to the urban present” (118-19). Through Jim Crow, then, a pre-modern fantasy was staged nightly, allowing white audiences to feel better about themselves, while offering them an escape from the stresses and concerns of industrialization.

Dick initially seeks the same type of escape. His late nights at the Bowery, his tricksterism, vagabonding, vices, and profligacy are precisely the kinds of joys and follies that run counter to the discipline and respectability of capitalist industry. Although he is a white urban character, Dick is initially racialized and rusticized in the spirit of Jim Crow to show how he occupies a pre-modern space outside of white capitalist culture, something that was apparent earlier when he was caught sleeping just outside a business firm on Spruce street.

But there is a seeming contradiction here. For though he acts like a slave, he also embodies romantic freedom. The same contradiction, of course, appears in minstrelsy’s plantation nostalgia, which made the happy, irrepressible black slave its subject. But by combining servility and freedom in Dick, Alger is not expressing nostalgia so much as he is saying that Dick is working in the “black way,” that his daily drudgery and extravagant evenings, added to his failure to invest in himself, keep him enslaved to an unskilled, preindustrial occupation where his life is less complicated, but more laborious and unrewarding.

Alger will emphasize that Dick needs to work in the “white way” in order to occupy a better position. Dick’s innate whiteness, of course, facilitates this process. For although Dick is racialized, it is his whiteness that rescues him from the fate that might
befall a black character. After describing Dick’s clothing, Alger further minstrelizes his hero through the dirt that racially marks him. Then he draws the reader’s attention to the boy’s hidden potential:

Washing the face and hands is usually considered proper in commencing the day, but Dick was above such refinement. He had no particular dislike to dirt, and did not think it necessary to remove several dark streaks on his face and hands. But in spite of his dirt and rags, there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking. (4)

The dark streaks on Dick’s face and hands recall the body parts blackened for the minstrel show. With his oversize and exaggerated “costume,” and his dirty face and dirty hands, Dick now fully resembles the blackface slave from the minstrel stage. It is worth noticing, however, that Alger is most interested in what lies beneath Dick’s racial markers and minstrel rags. And since his whole purpose is to make Dick a member of the white middle class, the “something about Dick” that makes him attractive besides his good looks includes the cultural capital of whiteness, both of which surface after a good wash. Yet while Dick’s whiteness resurfaces, he is not, as Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales have suggested, “a natural aristocrat whose innate nobility could not be hidden by dirt.” Instead, Dick will become a representative of democratic middle-class, not aristocratic, values. Of course, his “innate” and “natural” whiteness—his “fresh color,” as Alger says about him in *Fame and Fortune* (1868)—makes him an attractive candidate for, and gives him easier access to, middle-class America (qtd. in Moon 94).

Dick’s ascent to the middle class occurs through the erasure of his blackface signifiers, which represents his conformity to capitalist discipline. While discussing the psychoanalytic implications of blacking up, Roediger says that “the smearing of soot or blacking over the body represents the height of polymorphous perversity, an infantile
playing with excrement or dirt. It is the polar opposite of the anal retentiveness usually associated with accumulating capitalist and Protestant cultures” (118-19). *Ragged Dick* clearly reinforces these racial stereotypes—blackness signifies wildness, waste, and irrepressibility, whereas whiteness represents restraint and repression. Just as the mask of blackface enabled white performers to act unrepressed and irresponsible for a time, Alger puts Dick in blackface early on to emphasize how his lifestyle is unrestrained and lacking the Protestant ethos central to American middle-class formation. Clearly, Dick’s childish dirtiness represents a lack of anal-retentiveness, which corresponds to the fact that he does not yet participate in the investment-based culture of capitalism. But as he denies himself pleasures, accumulates money, cleans himself up—as he becomes more anal retentive—he sheds his stereotypical blackness, while becoming increasingly and stereotypically white.

**Zip Coon and Aristocratic Decline**

However, before he begins to uncover his whiteness and pursue a middle-class position, Dick pretends to be a member of the upper crust by drolly mocking aristocratic behavior. While burlesquing elite conventions, Dick steps out of his rustic slave role and into the role of the aristocratic dandy. The blackface dandy, most popularly represented by Zip Coon, usually parodied the former slave who had come to the city eager to acquire wealth and refinement. When discussing the earliest representation of the minstrel dandy, Long Tail Blue—who, as we know, will eventually morph into Zip Coon—Lewis notes how he “has cleaned himself up, and is immensely pleased with his stylish new clothes. Symbolically, he has absolved himself of the past, and is ready and willing to assume a place in step with the others in the teeming metropolis, eager to share in the privilege and prosperity of citizenship” (258). Similarly, when Dick dons a nice suit and ventures out
with Frank, he enjoys temporary freedom from his slavish profession, quickly acquires a
taste for high society, and then realizes that he must sever his ties with the preindustrial
past in order to join modern metropolitan life. But the jocular Dick differs from the
serious, sober Blue in that he playfully mocks aristocratic culture. In that sense, Dick
more closely resembles Zip Coon.

As discussed in my chapters on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and “Benito Cereno,” Zip
Coon mainly derided the northern elite, but he also mocked the southern aristocracy. We
know that Adolph, who descends from the Zip Coon line, mimics and mocks his lavish
master, St. Clare, and by doing so mirrors and satirizes the vices of the aristocratic South.
Don Cereno also echoes Zip Coon, insofar as he is a de facto slave playing the part of an
aristocrat. It is no coincidence that Adolph, St. Clare, and Cereno all meet with an
unhappy destiny. St. Clare is murdered; Adolph is sold to a fierce master; and Cereno
dies, haunted by the memory of Babo, who represents the corruption of slavery. Their
deaths would seem to reflect an intensifying northern nationalism that identified itself as
truly democratic. During the 1850s, as Susan-Mary Grant observes, “In the image of an
aristocratic South, a growing number of northerners detected a challenge to the
democratic ideology on which the nation had been founded. Increasingly, American
national ideals were perceived as existing only in the northern states” (109). The fate of
these three “southern” dandies—Adolph, St. Clare, and Cereno—seems to respond to the
North’s growing negative opinion of a southern slave-based, antidemocratic aristocracy.
*Ragged Dick*, which espouses a northern nationalist ideology, also promotes democracy
over aristocracy. Dick’s “Zip Coon” performance cuts both ways, championing
democratic ideals by mocking northern elites and southern aristocracy.
Before suiting up for his dandified performance with Frank, Dick debuts with tall tales of aristocratic fantasy in front of his first customer, Mr. Greyson. While he kneels and labors on the pavement, Dick ironically begins performing wealth, gentility, and power. When asked why he charges a high price for blacking shoes, he jests, “‘I have to pay such a big rent for my manshun up on Fifth Avenoo’” (5). When queried about his clothing, he says his coat “‘belonged to General Washington’” and his pants “‘was a gift from Lewis Napoleon’” (5, 6). When asked if he has change, he jokes, “‘All my money’s invested in the Erie Railroad’” (6). Dick’s responses are typical of the blackface dandy, who acted rich, refined, and powerful (although the audience always saw through the charade). According to Sean Wilentz, the dandy also allowed blackface whites to mock “the arrogance, imitativeness, and dim-wittedness of the upper classes” (259). Dick does this as well. When he identifies with Napoleon—who, like the dandy, represents exaggerated ambitions—he also mocks elite Americans, especially those southern aristocrats who imitated European aristocracy. His joke about having a “Fifth Avenoo” mansion makes fun of those who brag about their wealth, while his jest about the Erie Railroad winks at those who had dim-wittedly invested in bad stock—as Leverenz puts it, Erie stock was “the Enron scandal of the 1860s” (*Paternalism* 108). Dick’s mimicry and mockery anticipate his ultimate disavowal of both the aristocracy and the underclass. He mimics the white elite so as to distance himself from his subservient condition, but he also mocks their pretense, pride, and folly. Finally, by serving and entertaining Greyson, Dick becomes “minstrel” in the most literal, indeed medieval, sense of the word. Like the medieval minstrel, he is both a servant and a wise fool, amusing an authority figure while exposing the pretensions of society.
Dick begins to further distance himself from his raced position when Mr. Whitney advises him to wash up before putting on a nice suit. “‘Clean clothes and dirty skin,’” he says “‘don’t go very well together’” (23). The rigorous cleansing ritual that follows represents Dick’s first step toward whitening himself. Although he cleans up nicely, however, he still wears the markings of his profession: “He now looked quite handsome, and might readily have been taken for a young gentleman, except that his hands were red and grimy” (24). The dirt and blacking that remain on Dick’s hands suggest his transformation is superficial, keeping him racially marked and disqualifying him from genuine white gentlemanhood—a status he cannot fully attain until he quits bootblacking at the end of the novel.

Presently, Dick is like the blackface dandy. He can move about the city acting high class, but only a short distance exists between him and the raced underclass from which he is trying to emerge. An example of this emergence appears when Frank and Dick leave the hotel where Dick has changed clothes. At the bottom of the stairs, the servant who had previously barred Dick from going upstairs, now fails to recognize him—something that emphasizes the bootblack’s deceptive transformation:

“He don’t know me,” said Dick. “He thinks I’m a young swell like you.”
“What’s a swell?”
“Oh, a feller that wears nobby clothes like you.”
“And you too, Dick.”
“Yes,” said Dick, “who’d ever have thought as I should have turned into a swell?”

They had now got out on Broadway. (26)

Dick’s entrance onto “Broadway,” added to his self-recognition as a “swell,” likely would have reminded Alger’s audience of the Broadway dandy swell, another variation of the dark dandy, who had grown immensely popular during the Civil War. While on Broadway, Dick puts on a huge comic showing of importance, wealth, and power. When
his fellow bootblack Johnny Nolan asks him where he got his clothes, Dick says he lent out his previous outfit and is now wearing his “second-best for a change” (27). While imitating a tax collector, he jokingly tries to swindle an old lady at her apple stand. He then tells her that Frank, whom he airily calls his friend and “President of the Common Council,” will pay for the apples (28). Moving briefly onto Chatham street, Dick points to a “white” office, which he says is the mayor’s: “‘Him and me are very good friends. I once blacked his boots by particular appointment’” (29). They then move back to Broadway and see another “white” building belonging to A. T. Stewart: “‘That belongs to my friend A. T. Stewart,’ said Dick. ‘It’s the biggest store on Broadway. If I ever retire from boot-blackin’, and go into mercantile pursuits, I may buy him out’” (33). By identifying with New York’s important figures, Dick is now fully absorbed in playing the role of the dandy. Like the dark dandy who imitated upper-class whiteness, Dick identifies with figures who occupy positions of white power, illustrated by the “white” buildings of the mayor and Stewart. Yet, even during his tales of upper-class fantasy, he continually reminds the reader of his position as a servile bootblack—just as the minstrel audience was always reminded that the “aristocrat” on stage was “black.”

Dick continues to perform his fantasy of wealth and power when he and Frank go into Taylor’s saloon, which is bright with gilding and filled with mirrors, adding to the growing mood of imitation in the text. Like Dick’s suit, the gilding offers a deceptive appearance, while the expensive mirrors reflect his attempt to mirror the wealthy classes. Dick’s conversion from bootblack to aristocratic swell is completed when Frank tells him about Aladdin’s lamp. When Dick hears that the lamp contains a “slave” that would do whatever Aladdin wanted, he expresses a desire to own it, and in effect to possess a slave.
Such an expression suggests that Dick is acting well above his class level. In just one day he has gone from being a servile bootblack to relaxing at a high-class establishment, where he jokes about buying a slave.

**Deminstrelization and Working in the White Way**

The scene, however, is ironic because Dick is not really the type of person who would own a slave. But after his day with Frank—who, as he later admits, made him feel “‘ashamed of being so ignorant and dirty’” (165)—he no longer wants to act like a slave either. Having performed the low and high roles of “the slave” and then “the aristocrat,” he is now ready to find the middle ground. Dick is too self-reliant to want a servant, but he is not a “natural aristocrat” either, as Scharnhorst and Bales assert. He is, instead, hardworking, unpretentious, and democratic—more suited to the middle class than to a life of servitude or being served.

Dick’s democratic character is best exemplified by his going up against Micky Maguire and Roswell Crawford, who, when taken together, represent the worst in lower- and upper-class culture respectively. By defeating Micky, who “had a jealous hatred of those who wore good clothes and kept their faces clean” (91), Dick defeats the kind of lower-class ignorance that would try to hold him back from advancement. By defeating Roswell, the “young aristocrat,” a “rather supercilious-looking young gentleman, genteely dressed, [with] a very high opinion of his dress and himself” (129-30), Dick defeats upper-class arrogance and aristocratic advantage, while standing up for a more democratic and capitalist ethos, one which held that people should work for, not inherit, their positions in society.

Before going up against Micky and Roswell, however, Dick begins to triumph over ignorance and arrogance by committing to the path of self-improvement. His day of
aristocratic fantasy ends on a sober note when Mr. Whitney advises him to “‘determine to be somebody’” (78). With this advice, and five dollars given him by Whitney, Dick decides to “hire” a room for himself—his first step toward entering the more legitimate world of investment discipline. The word “hire,” from the chapter “Dick Hires a Room on Mott Street,” connotes that Dick is now hiring and not just serving, while it homonymically implies that he is beginning to rise “higher.” Hiring a room is the first time he invests money in something semi-permanent, signaling the start of a genuine class and racial transformation. He also resolves to save his money and not to attend the Bowery theater that night. As Dick begins investing less in fantasy and more in reality, he eventually swears off the “Old” Bowery theater entirely—and by extension blackface performance culture—and his behavior gradually becomes less and less minstrel-like.

As will be clear in the final section, although Dick will still joke about wealth and power, his performance of race and class adopts a more serious tone as he earnestly begins imitating white middle-class behavior. After he awakens the next morning in his new room, Dick’s first order is to continue the self-whitening process by “indulg[ing] himself in the rather unusual ceremony of a good wash” (88), which from this point forward becomes a usual, if not obsessive, procedure. That morning marks another significant change in Dick when he admits that he no longer wants to shine shoes for a living. “‘I wish I wasn’t a boot-black,’” he says, but then concedes, “‘It ain’t easy to get out of it, as the prisoner remarked, when he was asked how he liked his residence’” (96). After Dick opens a savings account, however, he feels “independent . . . whenever he reflect[s] on the contents” (99). He now recognizes that he is enslaved or a “prisoner” to bootblacking, but he begins to gain “independence” through investment. Furthermore, as
he gazes at his new bank-book, his zeal for joking is replaced by the satisfaction of saving: “He had been accustomed to joke about Erie shares, but now, for the first time, he felt himself a capitalist” (98-99). With this new feeling, Dick begins conforming more and more to the Protestant ethic, while his behavior becomes increasingly anal retentive and stereotypically “white.” He replaces his wasteful evenings and dirty appearance with cleansing and saving and eventually makes an appearance at church.

His deministrelization continues as he fastidiously tries to remove each day’s shoe blacking from his hands. And while Dick continues to dress above his station, his outfit comes to symbolize his ambition, not his wild performance:

Dick’s change of costume was liable to lead to one result of which he had not thought. His brother boot-blacks might think he had grown aristocratic, and was putting on airs,—that, in fact, he was getting above his business, and desirous to outshine his associates. Dick had not dreamed of this, because in fact, in spite of his new-born ambition, he entertained no such feelings. There was nothing of what boys call “big-feeling” about him. He was a thorough democrat. (90)

After the previous day of big performances and of putting on mock airs, Dick is now ready to actually grow into his new clothes. But to do this, he must learn how to work in the “white way.”

As Alger pushes his young hero toward achieving respectability and realizing his inherent whiteness, he more conspicuously racializes bootblacking and places it in opposition to Dick and his friend and tutor Fosdick. The boys become thoroughly vexed over the “stain[s] of blacking” on Fosdick’s suit which signify his slave-like position and discourage him from seeking respectable employment (124). When preparing for church, Dick continues his anal retentiveness at the washstand, while revealing more racial anxiety: “[he] endeavored to clean his hands thoroughly; but, in spite of all he could do, they were not so white as if his business had been of a different character” (112). Later
on, Dick is again “busy at the washstand, endeavoring to efface the marks which his
day’s work had left upon his hands” (164). As long as Dick is a bootblack, he performs
and wears the markers of blackness; but he continues the deministrelization process by
visiting the washstand each day and effacing, as best he can, the blacking from his hands.

Dick’s most serious imitation of middle-class whiteness occurs on the day he meets
Mr. Greyson at church, where he must first perform religion, the “right” aspiration of the
Protestant middle class. When Greyson’s daughter Ida hands Dick a hymn-book, Alger
points out, “Dick took it awkwardly, but his studies had not yet been pursued far enough
for him to read the words readily. However, he resolved to keep up appearances, and kept
his eyes fixed steadily on the hymn-book” (114). Although a good student of refined
behavior, Dick falters a few times before fully adjusting to white middle-class society.
When Ida asks him if he likes her name, he responds, “‘Yes. . . . It’s a bully name’”
(116). Of course, “Dick turned red as soon as he had said it, for he felt he had not used
the right expression” (116). In other words, he had not used the “white” expression, so his
white face is colored red with shame. But later, at dinner, “Dick got along pretty well at
the table by dint of noticing how the rest acted” (119; emphasis added). By carefully
observing and imitating middle-class behavior, Dick slowly begins the process of
assimilation.

As part of the assimilative process, he must get an education, something Alger
associated with becoming white in his first novel Frank’s Campaign (1864). In that text,
whiteness and education are linked when a white boy named Frank, while tutoring his
young black slave named Pomp, admonishes Pomp to take his studying seriously.
“‘You’ll grow up a ‘poor ignorant nigger,’” he says, ‘if you don’t study.’” Pomp in turn
asks, “‘Shall I get white, Mass’ Frank, if I study?’” Although Pomp will not become white through studying, an education clearly enables Dick to whiten his behavior and speech, allowing him to better imitate middle-class culture, which we see when Dick interviews for a position as a clerk. When asked if he would like to fill a position in a counting room, “Dick was about to say ‘Bully,’ when he recollected himself, and answered, ‘Very much’” (183)—he is careful, this time, to use the “white” expression. Education also aids his assimilation insofar as it is his ability to read and write, and his knowledge of arithmetic, that qualify Dick for the occupation.

But in order for Dick to get an interview for the clerkship, he must undergo a final whitening process. While journeying with Fosdick on a ferry to Brooklyn, Dick hears the cry of the distressed Mr. Rockwell, whose son has fallen overboard: “‘My child!’ he exclaimed in anguish,—‘who will save my child? A thousand—ten thousand dollars to anyone who will save him’” (177). Dick dives in after the boy and saves him, which becomes the ultimate act of “saving” in the narrative, as it leads to Dick’s interview for the clerkship that pays ten dollars a week, half of which he determines to save. Dick’s descent into and reemergence from the water also serves as his final cleansing ritual. Following his heroic plunge, he will never have to scrub shoe blacking from his hands again. He descends into the water as a racialized boot-black. When he reemerges, Rockwell offers him the clerkship—which is, by no accident, located on a whitened “Pearl Street.”

Shortly after securing respectable employment, Dick returns to his room on Mott Street and discovers his minstrel rags have been stolen:
“By gracious!” he exclaimed; “Somebody’s stole my Washington coat and Napoleon pants. Maybe it’s an agent of Barnum’s, who expects to make a fortune by exhibitin’ the valuable wardrobe of a gentleman of fashion.”

Dick did not shed many tears over his loss, as, in his present circumstances, he never expected to have any use for the well-worn garments. (184)

The notion of losing his costume to P. T. Barnum—the purveyor of freaks, clowns, and minstrelsy—suggests that Dick has shed the last of his blackface signifiers and severed ties with the preindustrial past: “Dick was rather pleased [the theft] had occurred. It seemed to cut him off from the old vagabond life which he hoped never to resume” (184-85). He is no longer the clownish bootblack in oversize rags, nor is he dressed high above his station, joking about the wealth and power he does not have. He now wears a suit, provided by his new employer, which “fit[s] him as well as if it had been made expressly for him” (182). Like his newly uncovered whiteness, Dick’s new suit fits perfectly, suggesting that he has found a suitable position within the middle class.

As Grant has emphasized, “National construction requires some kind of negative reference point against which to define the nation” (154). For Grant, the South was the negative reference point against which the North defined a more democratic and progressive nationalism. In Ragged Dick, by breaking from the preindustrial past and distinguishing himself as a democrat and not an aristocrat, Dick conforms to the northern nationalist agenda—which, following the Civil War, was becoming more of the national agenda. By defining himself against slavery and the aristocracy, Dick allegorizes the attempt to live up to the principles of democracy upon which America was founded. However, the novel does not achieve Dick’s democratization and middle-class ascent without constructing him against another negative reference point—which is, of course, blackness. Roediger has argued that “blackfaced whites derived their consciousness by measuring themselves against a group they defined as largely worthless and ineffectual”
Ragged Dick shares this attitude. Although Alger acknowledges some dignity in the profession, he racializes boot-blacking and uses it mostly as a repository for shame, worthlessness, and ineffectuality. Ultimately, the “black” in boot-blacking becomes synonymous with servility, ignorance, and dishonor—while the shedding of that blackness corresponds to becoming a better, civilized, and more respectable modern capitalist. Only by working away from blackness can Dick begin working in the right way. Only by uncovering his whiteness can he be fully assimilated by the white middle class.

Notes

1 See Bales 14-15. Bales offers a brief but insightful discussion of racial stereotypes in Alger’s texts. See also Kanar 36-40. Kanar discusses Alger’s familiarity with the minstrel tradition and shows how he drew from minstrelsy to create black characters in his first novel Frank’s Campaign (1864).

2 A slave-based southern aristocracy in conflict with northern capitalist industry was what plunged America into civil war. These sectional tensions were played out on the minstrel stage leading up to war, and they were played out during the conflict. In fact, the Civil War was the topic on the minstrel stage in the 1860s. “Between 1861-1865,” Toll writes, “the war completely dominated the minstrel show” (105). Just as Alger unmistakably champions northern values, there was no mistaking what side the minstrels were on. “As dedicated nationalists,” Toll suggests, “minstrels and their audiences unequivocally supported the Union” (105).

3 An echo from minstrelsy can be heard in the porter’s two wake-up calls to Dick: “Wake up there, youngster” and “Wake up, you young vagabond!” A popular minstrel song of the day, “Wake up, Mose,” told the story of a well-known stage figure named Mose, whose racial identity changed back and forth from verse to verse. Dick’s racial identity will prove almost as flexible as Mose’s. Roediger argues that Mose had a complicated history: “Mose was, in the late antebellum period synonymous with the character of the ‘B’hoy, the Irish and urban street pronunciation of boy, and one that denoted a particular type of tough, rowdy, and often dandified urban white youth” (99). But Roediger adds that a blackface Mose began appearing on the American stage in 1852, something that demonstrates Mose’s racial instability (100). Interestingly, the character Mose plays a bootblack in Rice’s play Bone Squash. Whenever he speaks, he usually says something about bootblacking. See 179, 180, 188 in Lhamon’s Jump Jim Crow.
See Scharnhorst and Bales 81. Also see Moon 87-110. Moon analyzes this passage in terms of its homoeroticism. He also discusses Dick as a hybrid character who is both dangerous (underclass) and gentle (genteel), saying, “The boy’s initially mixed appearance, the good looks revealing themselves despite the physical evidence of poverty—dirt and rags—is the infallible sign that one of Alger’s boy characters is likely to emerge from his outcast condition to become a ‘gentle/dangerous’ boy” (94). Like Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales, Moon sees the dirt and rags as signs of poverty that hide natural gentility. I would, of course, add that the dirt also functions as a racial signifier that initially conceals Dick’s whiteness.

Minstrelsy notoriously derided those who imitated aristocratic pretension. More than once the dandy met with failure on the minstrel stage for his arrogance. For instance, in the enormously popular and frequently revived minstrel show, *Oh, Hush! or, The Virginny Cupids*, a black bootblack named Sambo Johnson wins a lottery and begins putting on airs and acting aristocratic, something that invites the disdain of his fellow bootblacks. Sambo’s lottery win, of course, signifies coming into wealth by accident not accomplishment. *Ragged Dick* parallels *Oh, Hush!* in that Dick is also a fortunate bootblack, whose luck—getting a free suit from Frank and five dollars from Frank’s uncle, Mr. Whitney—allows him to appear aristocratic, something that later invites the scorn of his rival bootblack, Micky Maguire, who thinks Dick has “‘come into a fortune’” (92). But ultimately Dick is not like the dandified Sambo Johnson, who fails to ascend due to his “real” blackness and arrogance. At the end of *Oh, Hush!* a fellow bootblack covered in white flour breaks a fiddle over Johnson’s head and stands triumphant, a scene that would have assuaged white working-class fears of the rising dandy. Dick, on the other hand, overcomes his rival bootblack and, because of his innate whiteness and democratic ethos, avoids the fate of the blackface dandy, and is gradually welcomed into the middle class.

See Saxton 178.

Qtd. in Kanar 38. Kanar says the obvious answer to Pomp’s question is “‘No.’”
CHAPTER 7
AFTERWORD; OR, THE AFTERMATH: DARKTOWN STRUTTERS AND BAMBOOZLED

This study has emphasized how white and black writers used minstrelsy to explore issues of national identity, self-making, and racial formation in nineteenth-century America. More than a century has passed since it evaporated from the stage, yet minstrelsy still influences American culture, with whites and blacks continuing to weigh in on the subject. In an age where scholarship on minstrelsy has been overwhelmingly white—Lott, Gubar, Rogin, Cockrell, Lhamon, and Mahar have all published substantial theses on blackface, marking a virtual renaissance in minstrelsy studies—recent African American assessments of blackface have been “fictional,” not scholarly. Wesley Brown’s novel Darktown Strutters (1994) and Spike Lee’s film Bamboozled (2001), two works devoted to the subject of minstrelsy, both reimagine blackface performance at different moments in American history. Darktown Strutters, a novel about the evolution of the minstrel show, is an often shocking meditation on racial conflict and racial formation in the American nineteenth century. Bamboozled, the story of an all-black, televised minstrel show that sweeps the nation at the new millennium, explores minstrelsy’s dangerous persistence in popular culture. By reappropriating and restaging blackface, Brown and Lee help us better understand the emotional, cultural, and historical economy of minstrelsy and its aftermath. Much like their African American predecessors—Crafts, Webb, and Delany—Brown and Lee see minstrelsy as a brutal, scarring cultural force. However, writing some hundred and forty years later, Brown and Lee are positioned to
offer a more complex and comprehensive appraisal of minstrelsy’s role in a country that cannot seem to free itself from the vexed issue of race.

**Fixing and Mixing Race in *Darktown Strutters***

*Darktown Strutters* chronicles the development of minstrelsy, from its formal emergence in the 1830s, through the crisis of the Civil War, to the time when African Americans took the minstrel stage after the war. The novel is steeped in both the history and mythology of minstrelsy, yet Brown willfully rearranges these traditions, joyfully playing with the facts and legends as we know them. Lott has called Brown’s text “an historical novel” (*Review* 169), but I think it is better described as a postmodern historical novel. Remarking on the latter form, author T. Coraghessan Boyle has suggested that “if the traditional historical novel attempts to replicate a way of life, speech, and costume, the post-modernist version seeks only to be that, a version” (qtd. in Murfin and Ray 299). Brown’s novel is exactly that: a version of blackface history—or, more precisely, a subversion of that history. If minstrelsy distorted black life and froze black stereotypes in the national imaginary, Brown retaliates by distorting and making very slippery the tale of minstrelsy—a fine way to reckon with a disfiguring past. What is satisfying about Brown’s approach is that it remakes and reclaims racial history while using postmodern storytelling to reflect the fragmentation of racial identity that minstrelsy articulated so well. Brown also wrestles with the minstrel show’s ability to stabilize and destabilize race through violence. Minstrelsy, as we’ve seen, was obsessed with fixing and mixing race. Brown takes this paradox and pushes it to its postmodern extreme.

The novel’s postmodern impulse is most evident in something Jack Diamond, who echoes the blackface performer John Diamond, says to T. D. Rice, who is a character in the story. “*Once you allow somebody to be more than one thing at a time,*” he tells
Rice, “‘ain’t nothin nailed down no more, includin you!’” (23). Brown’s method flows from this idea of proliferating identity, mirroring the slipperiness of minstrelsy and of American racial formation. Nothing, really, is nailed down in this text: characters slip and slide in and out of other characters, converging, overlapping, and disappearing. Jim Crow, who was originally an African American folk dance that T. D. Rice popularized and personified on stage, is an actual character. He adopts little Jim, a black child separated from his family, who becomes Jim Too. When Jim Crow is lynched, Jim Too becomes Jim Crow, and his illustrious dancing career parallels that of Henry “Juba” Lane, the greatest black dancer before the Civil War. By modeling Jim Crow after Juba, Brown returns the folk tradition of Jim Crow to its black roots. By pulling Jim Crow through so many complex, historical figures, Brown reveals the instability of history, race, and culture.

Part two of *Darktown Strutters* narrates the adventures of the Featherstone Sisters, a traveling black entertainment company that Jim Crow eventually joins. Here the novel is tapping the fact that, following the Civil War, black performers donned blackface and ascended the stage, distorting themselves for money and fame, conforming to types created by white minstrelsy. But these black minstrels also tested minstrel stereotypes. Sometimes, they subverted them. Minstrelsy, as such, was a phenomenon that both limited and facilitated the growth of black identity, a contradiction that is embodied most forcefully by the first Jim Crow, whose body is frozen on one side, while his other side ripples with muscularity: “His right side from the chest into the shoulder, down past the ribs through the hips and legs, was bulging with muscles. But his left shoulder and leg were drawn up and stiff looking” (1). There is something heartening about Crow’s
muscular side, which suggests endurance through, and despite, bodily (as well as emotional, cultural, and historical) injury. Although “drawn up and stiff,” much as stereotypes were drawn and fixed, he is also strong, mobile, and limber. Indeed, the whole novel emphasizes a fluid and mobile black endurance through nineteenth-century racial stasis.

Although blacks entered American entertainment through blackface, the second Jim Crow boldly refuses the burnt-cork mask. His refusal is, predictably, met by an effort to fix his racial identity—an effort that involves violence. For even though Jim refuses self-masking, he is ultimately, and forcibly, masked and disfigured, and his being so suggests the inescapability of racial stereotypes. His disfigurement is reminiscent of the minstrel violence we see in Webb and Delany. One even gets the feeling that Brown draws on these writers when he tells the story of Jim’s maiming. The scene begins when Jim and his new lover Bernadine are awakened in a barn by a mob of blackface whites:

Jim and Bernadine were asleep on the straw when they woke up to men all around them with blackened faces and the color of milk around the mouth. The men grabbed them, stood them up and put knives to their throats.
“We was wondering if you was ever gonna show up, nigger! But it looks like our wait paid off like yours.”
Bernadine didn’t move an inch. Her eyes seemed like they were looking at something far away.
“We ain’t done nothing,” Jim said.
“It ain’t what you done. It’s what you didn’t do,” said one of the milk-mouth faces.
“Yes,” another said. “We wanna see darkies when we go to a show, not some uppity nigger who think he too good to act the coon like he supposed to!”
“Look at my face,” a milk-mouth said. “This is how you supposed to look!”
A hand smeared cork on Jim’s cheeks and forehead.
“That’s better,” the mouth said. “Now all we gotta do is make it so you keep a grin on your face!”
Bernadine screamed just before the blade jerked the corner of Jim’s mouth and ripped open his cheek. He cried out as the knife set fire to his face. (62-63)
Mugging Jim Crow is wickedly comic, a pun on the day’s popular refrain: “Jump Jim Crow.” Jim is indeed jumped, for these men not only beat him, they try to steal his identity. The scene powerfully allegorizes how minstrelsy sought to put a smile on slavery. Further, it is “blackface-on-Black violence” all over again. The scar carved into Jim’s face is a physical, emotional, and historical scar; but it also represents white attempts to fix race according to white will. Thus Brown repeatedly emphasizes that the mob’s lips are colored white, suggesting how blackface was a medium through which white desire and agendas were articulated.

We have seen how violence attends endeavors to package and freeze race in the novel. But violence also attends the quest for racial freedom, chiefly when it is related to dance. While blackface racist imagery belongs to white creation, black dancing has roots beyond the minstrel show. Lhamon, we know, has identified black performance in lower Manhattan’s markets—where a black dance culture emerged that morphed into minstrelsy—as liberating. In Manhattan’s Catherine Market especially, there was a lumpen resistance to bourgeois dominance and demand—“there was,” as Lhamon puts it, “dancing among the memory of the chains” (Cain 22). Dancing represents movement, not stasis, not restriction, incarceration, or immobility; it contains precisely those energies that can slip free from hegemonic forces. Jim learns of the liberatory effects of dancing early on. Indeed, he bodies forth this liberation: “he started hearing the same word—FREE—used whenever he danced” (12). Although black dancing is ultimately modified, commodified, and absorbed into minstrel stereotypes—we will see this powerfully in Bamboozled—such dancing also contains insurrectionary energies, just as drumming did.
when slaves used it as coded language on plantations, and much as Blake does when he dances his way through the South, endeavoring to organize a slave rebellion.

The salutary and dangerous powers of dance manifest early in *Darktown Strutters*. Upon taking the stage for the first time, Jim Crow (Jim Too at this point) awes his audience by swapping dance moves with Diamond: “They swapped moves like they were stories, telling each other things with their bodies that they couldn’t put into words” (32), a moment that captures how blacks and whites communed through dance in the nineteenth century. But then Jim begins to move with a fierce and frightening rapidity.

What happens next is incredible:

> [I]n the middle of a quick stomping jig, he started clapping his hands against his arms, chest, thighs, and each other. People who’d been whooping it up got quiet and looked like they were watching someone having a breakdown. . . . And then it happened. Blacks were the first to move as though they’d been given a signal from Jim Too. Women yanked at the arms of their children, pulling them away from the platform, and running into the darkness of the night. White men who tried to stop them were beaten back by rocks and sticks. Other black women and men didn’t run but attacked whites and blacks who’d done them wrong in the past. Some white women were strangled with their own hair. Picks and shovels that had been used earlier in the day to dig up the earth were now cutting into flesh. It was like the world had been turned inside out and the bones were a cage around the meat inside. (32-33)

Jim’s dance represents a kind of willful deconstruction, a “breakdown,” as Brown puts it. Breakdown is the operative word here, suggesting a fast dance shuffle, a quitting or a refusal, a breaking down of hierarchies. So much turns on motion here. Brown writes, “Blacks were the first to move.” This moving implies several things: change, a liberation movement, violent rebellion. Where there isn’t movement, there is often resignation and despair. Remember, when Jim was being fixed by the knife, “Bernadine didn’t move an inch.” The dynamic between racial stasis and the slipping from stereotypes mirrors the relation between being stuck in slavery and being free from it. The dichotomy of stasis
and movement that structures Brown’s text expresses the difficulty of being forced to perform a set role versus trying to assert an independent, individual selfhood.

The end of the novel emphasizes fixity versus fluidity and force versus freedom. Here Hamilton Strong, a photographer for Barnum’s “Rogue’s Gallery,” photographs Jim with the assistance of the police. Strong and the cops hope to freeze Jim in history as “The Conniving Uncle Tom,” words that hang on a cardboard strip tied around his neck.1 In other words, the muscle of the media and of the law, forces that have regulated race from the beginning, try to capture and redefine Jim: the character and the concept. Jim Crow, however, moves. He does a quick, impromptu dance step as the photo is shot. Thus, the picture records motion, instead of freezing it. In the last line of the novel, Strong realizes the photo “didn’t come out the way he wanted because Jim Crow had moved” (220). The white attempt to copy blackness, according to white rules, results in an inevitably blurred copy.

Brown is referencing Rogue’s Galleries, which emerged as a surveillance project in the late nineteenth century. Jim Crow is doing something similar to what prisoners in these galleries did to prevent their identities from becoming fixed in the public imagination, that is, distorting their faces to escape easy recognition.2 To this day, Jim Crow, an African American dance tradition, a popular minstrel character, an emblem of slavery, of working-class rebellion, and a label for southern segregationist laws, remains just as hard to recognize.

_Bamboozled_ and the Dance of Death

_Bamboozled_ is Spike Lee’s ambitious endeavor to expose and condemn racist stereotypes spread through mass media. Black stereotypes, as we’ve seen, began wide circulation with minstrelsy in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, early
American cinema helped to scatter and freeze these stereotypes in the American imaginary. So it is not surprising that the “germ” for *Bamboozled* was Lee’s early NYU film *The Answer*, a short feature “‘about a young African-American screenwriter,’” as Lee puts it, “‘who’s hired to direct a big, multimillion-dollar Hollywood remake of *Birth of a Nation’” (qtd. in Crowdus and Georgakas 4). *Birth* is an ideal catalyst for *Bamboozled*, since it was the first full-scale film production that used blackface to reinforce popular conceptions of the rapacious black male out to despoil white womanhood, a myth that took flight after the Civil War to justify the continued policing of blacks. Blackface minstrelsy, which seemed to fade away at the end of the nineteenth century, was reborn and reworked by Hollywood. Lee’s film is an end-of-the-millennium assessment of how far American culture has come with mass-media, mass-marketed, still very lucrative black stereotypes.

When pressed by his white boss, Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport), to come up with a new black TV show, writer Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) dreams up *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, which stars two previously impoverished black street performers, Manray (Savion Glover), renamed Mantan, and Womack (Tommy Davidson), renamed Sleep ‘n’ Eat. Delacroix figures the show will be so offensive that it will get him fired, but it instead becomes a phenomenon, much as the minstrel show did in the 1840s. By taking Manray and Womack from the street to the mass media spotlight, Lee compresses the whole history of blackface. The film’s core meditation is on how blacks have been, and still are, compelled to inhabit fixed performance roles.

Early in the film we see Manray “hoofing” just outside the towering media corporation that will soon consume him. He and Womack are performing for spare
change on a portable pallet they have hauled from their decaying tenement. The
moveable pallet is a clear nod to the “shingles” blacks danced on in Manhattan’s
marketplaces, where, as Lhamon has suggested, blacks and whites showed off their
talents, negotiated racial difference, and shared cultural moves. Soon Manray and
Womack are invited into the media building, where they are pitched Dela’s idea for the
“coon show,” given a substantial advance, and asked to change their names, i.e., to turn
in their identities. The jump from the sidewalk to the corporation allegorizes blackface
folk culture’s mutation into the wildly popular and profitable minstrel show. On the
streets, although they are poor, Manray and Womack at least have the dignity of their
natural appearances; they own their own moves. But they are quickly transformed by the
blackface mask, and their pre-show, burnt-cork rituals become increasingly violent. That
is, they start punching the black makeup onto their faces, a self-maiming that expands the
connotative range of “blackface-on-Black violence” I discussed in chapter 5.

The show, while eliciting uncomfortable responses initially, becomes a sweeping
success. The film even compares Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show to other
pop culture phenomena, such as the hula hoop, yoyos, pet rocks, and Pokemon—fads that
suggest how Americans will swallow almost anything. We even see a bemused President
Clinton watching the show, which is superimposed onto a TV screen in the White House.
But Lee’s criticism is not only pointed at white America. Blacks, Asians, Hispanics
routinely appear in the audience of the live show. Half way through the film, we realize
that all sorts of Americans still enjoy, pay for, and profit from racial stereotypes.

The film even criticizes rap music for circulating such stereotypes. While it targets
the kind of rap that embraces crass materialism, hypersexuality, and even buffoonery, the
film’s over-riding criticism is that forms like minstrelsy fostered the environment for such entertainment. Lee’s critique crystallizes with the Mau Maus, a rap group that seeks revenge on Mantan for becoming, as they see it, a buffoon and a sellout. Ironically, however, the Mau Maus themselves often behave as buffoons, getting drunk, spouting pseudo revolutionary rhetoric, and acting like fools. Their leader, Julius, a once popular minstrel name, has renamed himself “Big Black Africa,” which is as hyperbolic as names of popular blackface characters such as Pompey and Caesar. Big Black Africa prides himself on being antimaterialism, anticorporation, pure street, and fiercely militant. But his radicalism is exposed by his sister Sloan, who tells him: “Ya’ll embarrassing, period. Ya’ll ignorant, ignant.” Big Black Africa dramatizes how easy it is to fall into racial stereotypes from either direction.

The name Mau Maus is ironic—and it is not. “Maus,” as we have seen, was one way slaves pronounced “master” in the nineteenth century. Remember Rube’s pitiful words, “Wat maus gwine do wid me now. I know what maus gwine do.” The group’s name would seem to pose the following question: Have the Mau Maus mastered self-representation, or have they been mastered by the legacy of minstrelsy? For an answer we might consider Lee’s commentary in the DVD release of the movie, where he argues that “gangsta rap is a twenty-first century version of minstrel shows.” The Mau Maus’ actions support this comment when they capture Mantan and, disguised in blackface masks, make him dance to a hail of gunfire before killing him—a murder that they televise. Following the minstrel snuff film, the Mau Maus are rushed upon and massacred by the police; following the black-on-black violence, white authority reasserts itself. Mantan’s “Dance of Death,” when contrasted with Jim Crow’s subversive dance step in Darktown
Strutters, is a much bleaker assessment of minstrel dancing. Lee, in fact, sees little subversive potential in minstrelsy. No matter how much blackface offered hope for racial mixing, in *Bamboozled* it ultimately ends in death.

Critics have roundly attacked *Bamboozled*'s violent ending. Greg Tate, for instance, laments the “badly contrived murder scenes which conclude the film” (15). Saul Landau says, “I felt that Lee got tired at the end and just let violence happen, an easy way out of fatigue” (12). But such responses, I insist, miss the point. Why resist a violent ending to a film that centers on the cultural, emotional, and historical violence inflicted by minstrelsy? The ending must be violent—this so-called comedy must end tragically, because, as Lee emphasizes throughout the film, blackface continues to have tragic consequences for blacks.

The violence can also be explained by considering the film’s inspiration. As mentioned earlier, *Bamboozled* grew from Lee’s first film *The Answer*, which is about a black filmmaker hired to remake *Birth of a Nation*, a film that also ends in an orgy of violence. In *Birth*, the predatory Gus (played by Walter Long in blackface), chases Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh) off a cliff. He is then captured and lynched by the Klan. Gus’ murder is echoed by Mantan, who is captured and executed by the Mau Maus. The twist Lee provides is that the police, in a moment also reminiscent of the lynching in *Birth*, rush in and kill the Mau Maus. So, *Bamboozled*’s ending is neither “badly contrived” nor “an easy way out of fatigue.” Instead, it forges a bridge between *Birth* and *Bamboozled* to suggest that, by generating negative images of blacks, blackface, in its various manifestations, continues to contribute to racial violence in the United States.
The last shot of the film, which follows a documentary montage of filmed black caricatures, is a haunting image of Mantan. With sweat beaded on his face, bulging eyeballs, and a smile fixed, frozen, and forced, he is a menacing reminder that racist caricature does not die easily. You can kill the minstrel performer but you cannot bury the mask. Mantan’s forced smile evokes the grin cut into Jim Crow’s mouth. He mechanically shifts positions, much as Rube shifts limited performance roles, but his frozen expression captures how racist stereotypes are fixed in the American imaginary. The sweat evokes tears, turning this grinning face tragic. It also evokes hard work, drudgery, and labor—laboring under slavery first, and later under racist caricature, or, as Ellison would say, under “the continuing debasement of our image.”

Resurrecting Mantan also suggests how the ghost of blackface continues to bedevil American culture. Lee knows that minstrelsy still works its magic through modern media, and as evidence he mentions such films as The Green Mile (1999), The Family Man (2000), and The Legend of Bagger Vance (2000), all of which contain “‘magical, mystical Negroes who show up as some sort of spirit or angel but only to benefit white characters’” (qtd. in Crowdus and Georgakas 5). Such films, wherein blacks wear versions of the minstrel mask, help explain why Lee finds it necessary to return to minstrelsy at the present time. Brown also taps the issue of blacks wearing blackface when Jim Crow confronts Jubilee, a character based on the black minstrel star Billy Kersands, about wearing the mask:

“What I don’t understand,” Jim said, “is why anybody colored would start blackin-up now after all these years of seeing white folks doin it?”

“When I black-up,” Jubilee said, “I ain’t gotta follow in behind what no white man did who put it on before me.” (89)
The riotous Jubilee mimics blackface stereotypes with a vengeance, anticipating black entertainers, such as standup comedian Dave Chappelle or rapper Ludacris, who use blackface exaggeration subversively. Between Lee and Brown, we see the two faces of blackface that continue to influence the formation of raced identities in American culture. On one hand, minstrelsy fixes rigid stereotypes that blacks must still contend with. On the other, by reappropriating minstrelsy, black performers can reclaim and reshape the legacy of blackface.

Notes

1 Brown is clearly referencing how Rice, who started his career as Jim Crow, ended it playing Uncle Tom.

2 For more on Rogue’s Galleries, see Gunning 24-29.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Borgstrom, Michael. “Passing Over: Setting the Record Straight in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” 


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jason Richards received his bachelor’s degree in comparative literature and his master’s degree in English at California State University, Long Beach. He earned his doctorate at the University of Florida.