Introduction

It was at this epoch that Mr. T. D. Rice made his debut in a dramatic sketch entitled "Jim Crow," and from that moment everybody was "doing just so," and continued "doing just so" for months, and even years afterward. Never was there such an excitement in the musical or dramatic world; nothing was talked of, nothing written of, and nothing dreamed of, but "Jim Crow." The most sober citizens began to "wheel about, and turn about, and jump Jim Crow." It seemed as though the entire population had been bitten by the tarantula; in the parlor, in the kitchen, in the shop and in the street, Jim Crow monopolized public attention. It must have been a species of insanity, though of a gentle and pleasing kind. . . .

—New York Tribune (1855)

Despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of fiction are counterfeits. They are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role.

—Ralph Ellison

The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.

—C. L. R. James

Blackface minstrelsy was an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit. It has therefore been summed up by one observer as "half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy." While it was organized around the quite explicit "borrowing" of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural. Although it arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshly investments through ridicule and racist lampoon. Yet I am not so sure
that this is the end of the story. In light of recent discussions of race and subjectivity, we probably ought to take these facts and processes as merely a starting orientation for inquiry into the complexities of racism and raced subjects in the United States. In doing so we shall find that blackface performance, the first formal public acknowledgment by whites of black culture, was based on small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation, which indeed appear to be inevitable when white Americans enter the haunted realm of racial fantasy. Ultimately I am after some sense of how precariously nineteenth-century white working people lived their whiteness—a matter of the greatest consequence in the history of America’s racial cultures and their material or institutional transactions.

This study grew out of a dissatisfaction with erstwhile modes of racial critique, which in their political disapprobation, dovetailing with aesthetic disdain, were unwilling to engage with the artifacts and social realities of popular life, too ready to dismiss the mentalité of the popular classes, finally impatient with politics itself. Cultural critics have recently become more aware of the uneven and contradictory character of popular life and culture, the ambiguities or contradictions that may characterize the pleasures of the masses. It is one of the arguments of this book that in blackface minstrelsy’s audiences there were in fact contradictory racial impulses at work, impulses based in the everyday lives and racial negotiations of the minstrel show’s working-class partisans. Indeed, there are reasons for thinking of blackface in the years prior to the Civil War as a far more unsettled phenomenon than has been supposed; critics of minstrelsy have too often dismissed working-class racial feeling as uncomplicated and monolithic, and historians of working-class culture have usually concurred—or made apologies. It seems particularly clear that in the pages of recent social history the antebellum potential for a labor abolitionism has not been adequately explored nor its failure accounted for, and that the minstrel show crucially helps address this question.

This agenda may seem an undue burden to place on a “counterfeit” cultural phenomenon such as the minstrel show. One ought, though, to take seriously Ralph Ellison’s ironic image of whites racially girding themselves by way of rituals that mirror rather than distance the Other, in which whites are touched by the blacks they would lampoon and are in the process told on, revealed. Studying the most popular entertainment form of the nineteenth century together with its characteristic audience is perhaps the best way to understand the affective life of race in that time and in ours. The minstrel show has been ubiquitous, cultural common coin; it has been so central to the lives of North Americans that we are hardly aware of its extraordinary influence. Minstrel troupes entertained presidents (including Lincoln), and disdainful high-minded quarterlies and rakish sporting journals alike followed its course. Figures such as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Bayard Taylor were as attracted to blackface performance as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany were repelled by it. From “Oh! Susanna” to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts and words have figured significantly in the white Imaginary of the United States. Without the minstrel show there would have been no Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), no Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884); investments as various as Norman Mailer’s “White Negro” (1957), John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me (1961), or certain of John Berryman’s Dream Songs (1955–69) would likewise have been impossible. Leslie Fiedler’s thesis in Love and Death in the American Novel (1960) that our white male writers have been obsessed with white male—dark male dyads (Huck and Jim, Ishmael and Queequeg) finds intimate material expression in the blackface performer’s assumption of familiarity with “blackness.”

The early history of motion pictures was bound up with blackface—witness its importance to such major cinematic developments as Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1903), Birth of a Nation (1915), and The Jazz Singer (1927)—and the movies have regularly returned to it since then, whether in Fred Astaire’s blackface tribute to Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in Swing Time (1936), Melvin Van Peebles’s ironic Watermelon Man (1970), or the egregious post–affirmative action Soul Man (1986). Bill Monroe, Jimmie Rodgers, and other early country music stars routinely “blackened up,” as did ethnic vaudevilleans such as Sophie Tucker; as Armond White has written, “some form of darkie mimicking has been the strongest musical tradition in pluralized American culture.” Indeed, in minstrelsy’s cultural force, its racial crossings, and what the New York Tribune called its pleasing “insanity” (June 30, 1855), its emergence resembled that of early rock ‘n’ roll. Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return.

For an index of popular white racial feeling in the United States, one could do worse than minstrelsy. I am concerned in this book with its shape and resonance in the decades before the Civil War. The tone and format of the early minstrel show, with its knee-slapping musical numbers punctuated by comic dialogues, bad puns, and petit-bourgeois ribaldry, should seem familiar to anyone who has seen American television’s “Hee Haw.” (The resemblance is apparently not coincidental, for one scholar has speculated that the rural white tradition, and its commercial issue in modern bluegrass music, inherited much from the minstrel show—not least the black style of banjo playing on which minstrelsy partly traded.) Although the makeup of minstrelsy changed continually after its emergence at the beginning of the 1830s, it was configured at the height of its popularity as a semicircle of four or five or sometimes more white male performers (there were very rarely female performers in the antebellum minstrel show) made up with facial blacking of greasepaint or burnt cork and adorned in outrageously oversized and/or ragged “Negro” costumes. Armed with an array of instruments, usually banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, and tambourine, the performers would stage a tripartite show. The first part offered up a random selection of songs interspersed with what passed for black wit and jape; the second part (or “olio”) featured a group of novelty performances (comic dialogues, malapropistic “stump speeches,” cross-dressed “wench” performances, and the like); and the third
part was a narrative skit, usually set in the South, containing dancing, music, and burlesque.

This "ethnographic miniature," in Clifford Geertz's phrase, jumbled together a dramatic spectacle based on an overriding investment in the body, a figural content preoccupied with racial marking and racial transmutation, and a social context of white working-class proximity to blacks (21, 444). We might almost call it a precognitive form: not, as in Geertz's study of the Balinese cockfight, a story one people told themselves about themselves, but an encapsulation of the affective order of things in a society that racially ranked human beings. What the minstrel show did was capture an antebellum structure of racial feeling, in Raymond Williams's phrase, "social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available." Minstrelsy brought to public form racialized elements of thought and feeling, tone and impulse, residing at the very edge of semantic availability, which Americans only dimly realized they felt, let alone understood.11 The minstrel show was less the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences.12 By looking at the formal aspects of minstrelsy in the context of its time, we may see its historically new articulation of racial difference.

This articulation took the form of a simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries. Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed—minstrelsy's mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation, what Homi Bhabha would call its "ambivalence" ("Other" 18) and what my title loosely terms "love and theft.") The very form of blackface acts—an investiture in black bodies—seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of "blackness" and demonstrates the permeability of the color line. I depart from most other writers on minstrelsy, who have based their analyses on racial aversion, in seeing the vagaries of racial desire as fundamental to minstrel-show mimicry. It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure. As it turned out, the minstrel show worked for over a hundred years to facilitate safely an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures, a shape-shifting middle term in racial conflict which began to disappear (in the 1920s) once its historical function had been performed.13 It appears that during this stretch of American cultural history the intercourse between racial cultures was at once so attractive and so threatening as to require a cultural marker or visible sign of cultural interaction. This requirement would eventually wither away, or in any case transmogrify, not least because of the minstrel show's success in introducing the cultures to each other. The blackface mechanism of cultural control, as John Szwed has suggested, also provided a channel for the black cultural "contamination" of the dominant culture: "The fact that, say, a Mick Jagger can today perform in the same tradition without blackface simply marks the detachment of culture from race and the almost full absorption of a black tradition into white culture" (27). In the mid-nineteenth century, however, culture was "attached" to race with some tenacity; blackface acts both enforced and, in the end, remapped this regime.

As I point out in chapter 1, writing on the minstrel show has been inordinately partial. Minstrelsy, of course, was long enveloped in a reactionary nostalgia that desperately needed debunking; partisans of blackface have always longed for the imaginary day of the strumming Sambo.14 A superficially similar (and still very questionable) tradition, however, has celebrated minstrelsy for its "blackness," seeing the phenomenon as a public forum for slave culture which might have liberating effects. Constance Rourke's chapter on minstrelsy in American Humor (1931), for example, gave modern force to what might be termed a "people's culture" position—one whose sources, as I show, can be found in the writings of Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, and others. The revival of this impulse had everything to do with a 1930s reclamation of the "folk," if not, as Warren Susman has suggested, with a new definition of "culture" itself (150–210): the extraordinary success of Marc Connelly's near-minstrel show The Green Pastures (1929), the anthropology of Franz Boaz, Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture (1934), the novels of John Steinbeck, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), James Agee and Walker Evans's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), and so on. Rourke's generic view is a relatively benign, and to that extent unhistorical, one, though it has the virtue of acknowledging both the extensive effect of black cultural practices on blackface performance and the public effects of blackface itself. This position, in fact, was partially defended in Robert Toll's Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America (1974), and some have ventured it in refurbished form, but it has not been a position to which scholars regularly recur.15

Harking back to a tradition of minstrel-show criticism that began with Frederick Douglass's articles in the North Star, scholars and writers initiated a long-awaited political revisionism in regard to minstrelsy beginning in 1958 with Ralph Ellison's "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" and crystallized—with attitude—in LeRoi Jones's brief remarks in Blues People (1963). The most notable instances of this revisionism include Nathan Huggins's powerful chapter on minstrelsy in Harlem Renaissance (1971) and Toll's Blacking Up. These works can indeed be taken as representative of the reigning view of minstrelsy as racial domination. James Dorman, for instance, writes: "The arrival of Jim Crow was to provide the final ingredient in the total pattern of antiblack prejudice" ("Strange" 118). In retrospect this necessary critique seems somewhat crude and idealist; in reading off from a text the stereotypes that a historical moment is presumed to have
The interpretation is partially suggested by the readings of blackface minstrelsy forms. The association of blackface minstrelsy with social and political situations of the time is recognized, as are the representations of black culture that are often stereotypical and demeaning. The minstrel show, as many contemporaries recognized, was little more than a form of entertainment for whites, who were so attracted to the culture that it was plundered. Indeed, many of the worst aspects of minstrelsy became a part of the culture, and it is in these ways that the minstrel show continually transgressed the color line, as well as the boundaries of attainability.

In contrast to both the social and political situations of the time, the minstrel show opened up. It must be noted that the earliest minstrelsy forms did not only affect the cultural, but also the political, repertoire. The minstrel show was often seen as a place where cultures of the dispossessed were appropriated and commodified, and the minstrel show was a reflection of this.

The heads of blackface minstrelsy, as many contemporaries recognized, were little more than blackface masks, which were used to reduce people to the status of objects. This is a form of power relations, as it is a form of domination in which the dominant group reduces the subjugated group to the status of objects. This is seen in the minstrel show, where blackface masks are used to reduce black people to the status of objects.

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academic territory in which I can claim at best amateur competence. Writing this book has convinced me, however, that such an interdisciplinary attempt is worth the gamble and, especially given the habits of specialists and sub-specialists, is an opportunity rather than an embarrassment. In addressing my study to a variety of fields and disciplines, I mean not only to properly portray a complex phenomenon but to help solidify the claims of cultural studies as a practice.

Accordingly, this book has been oriented by several specific debates. One of these is, of course, the discussion of blackface minstrelsy, in particular its political status and effectivity as public performance. Also important are theoretical questions regarding the (post-Freudian) study of humor, the political interpretation of commercial popular music, the uses of folklore, the cultural exhibition of the body, and the political efficacy of melodrama. A related debate concerns the usefulness of film theory in the study of theater, a highly problematic but potentially generative development. Recent theoretical and political investigations of race, especially those oriented by psychoanalysis, are fundamental concerns, as are questions about the place of race in working-class culture and in the development of American nationhood.

Implicit in any work of this kind is also the question of American Studies as a field in (perhaps perennial) crisis and its relationship to cultural studies. The American Studies of a generation ago cast its vision over a wider expanse of American culture than is now sometimes recognized; and it often functioned as a left-liberal “culturalist” alternative to American New Criticism, however much it may now seem like the literary equivalent of the Truman administration. In fact there was a great deal of interchange between the British New Left and certain American Studies scholars, whether in the interested stateside reception of Raymond Williams’s and Richard Hoggart’s early work or the impact of Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden* (1964) on the early figures of British cultural studies. Of course, the older American Studies emphasis on “representative” texts and problems is out of date, while E. P. Thompson’s (contemporaneous) definition of culture “as a whole way of conflict” (“Long” 33) has offered a decisive reorientation to a generation of cultural studies practitioners, including myself. Indeed, my focus on a highly elaborated if crudely executed popular stage form has arisen from the immense importance, in such a definition of culture, of cultural texts requiring relatively few “inherent resources” such as literacy or education and therefore offering relatively unmediated access to those whose struggles make history. Sorely neglected in the academic study of cultures until very recently, such forms have usually been central to their time—certainly more influential than the great literature so often taken as culturally representative. Although American Studies has in some sense been a pioneer (e.g., Constance Rourke’s *American Humor*, Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*), it has restricted itself to addressing what is “most American” and exceptional about such forms rather than the richer questions of how cultures work, are contested, divide and cohere, or how transpersonal historical structures consort with human activity to produce social and political change.

I try in these pages to help reorient the traditions of American Studies by asking questions about the role of culture in the political development of a specific national entity. The challenge here is to resist the tendency in American versions of cultural studies to examine culture apart from political structures and movements—an airless “politics” of the cultural rather than social and political cultures. To this end the significance of current work in cultural studies lies in making it possible to situate the analysis of cultural forms, the various sorts of textuality and subjectivity most closely related to human agency, with regard to the analysis of social and cultural formations, the organizations, processes, and overdetermined conjunctures that bear most significantly on political life. The greatest yield of this work is an understanding of “historical forms of consciousness and subjectivity,” in Richard Johnson’s words (43)—as I see it, the chief concern and special ability of cultural studies.

If at this juncture we are to understand anything more about popular racial feeling in the United States, we must no longer be satisfied merely to condemn the terrible pleasures of cultural material such as minstrelsy, for their legacy is all around us. As Antonio Gramsci once remarked, the “starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (*Prison* 324). Only by beginning to inventory the deposits of feeling for which blackface performance has been responsible can we hope to acknowledge the social origins and psychological motives of “racial” impulses, reckonings, and unconscious reactions that lie so deep in most Caucasians as to feel inevitable and indeed natural. An equally urgent outcome of this undertaking will be to make ourselves aware of the resistant, oppositional, or emancipatory accents of the racial bad attitudes residing in American working-class culture today.

*Love and Theft* is thus perhaps a product of its political times in investigating the ironies of cultural reaction, the potential reversals in a context of defeat. Like much of the recent cultural theory on which it draws, it has been marked by our age of “authoritarian populism,” as Stuart Hall has termed it, in its tea leaf-reading documentation of culture-industry contradictions and subversions in the face of overwhelming odds. There is, I would rush to add, justification for this anxious attention: not only was blackface minstrelsy a peculiarly unstable form, but the social realities to which it in part contributed demand careful sorting out. The left has too often construed black Americans as saboteurs of class-based politics, their presence acting as an impediment to “real” social change. No less than writing off white working-class racial feeling, blaming black people themselves for being obstacles in the path of the American experiment has been a nasty habit. The story has usually taken the form of an imagined conspiracy of white liberals and black “extremists” who have foisted civil rights demands on to left
initiatives and in the process affronted working-class whites. But, as Adolph Reed and Julian Bond observe, this tale presumes a prior equality between black and white, and consequently "denies the reality of explicitly racial stratification within the working class and a history of white working-class antagonism toward blacks—coexisting, certainly, with many exemplary instances of interracial solidarity—that stretches back through the 1863 New York draft riot" (733–34). This gnarled history stretches back indeed into the antebellum decades I consider here, and I advance a revivifying attention to its contradictions: the competing but sometimes collateral claims of black and white labor. The source of post–World War II conflicts in those of white workers versus black slaves and their abolitionist allies indicates the need to study carefully a moment when a possible interracial labor alliance went awry. Any vision of a renewed socialism demands that we consider race as more than merely "incidental" (as C. L. R. James urges) to the motors of political change. And if it is culture rather than shared work experience that primarily creates the conditions for social movements, one critical task is to achieve a renovated public culture through inquiries into popular forms such as the minstrel show.25
I have located contradictions in blackface performance and in nineteenth-century racial ideologies that combined to produce a variety of unsuspected political effects. What I have called the social unconscious of blackface suggests that the whites involved in minstrelsy were far from unenthusiastic about black cultural practices or, conversely, untroubled by them, continuous though the economic logic of blackface was with slavery. As often as not, this involvement depended on an intersection of racial and class languages that occasionally became confused with one another, reinforcing the general air of political jeopardy in minstrel acts. The vernacular rowdiness of such acts helped turn them into acknowledged, if unlikely, representatives of a peculiarly American culture. At every turn blackface minstrelsy has seemed a form in which transgression and containment coexisted, in which improbably threatening or startingly sympathetic racial meanings were simultaneously produced and dissolved. Neither the social relations on which blackface delineations depended, the delineations themselves, their commercial setting, nor their ideological effects were monolithic or simply hegemonic. The question then arises: what were the immediate cultural and historical results of this “seeming counterfeit”?  

As the nation edged toward civil war, Herman Melville issued a meditation on this subject in the June 1855 Putnam’s Monthly, a journal founded two years earlier out of the collapse of Young America’s literary nationalism. Where Young America had paid remarkably superficial attention to race— The Neddy Mellish—Pompey Smith subplot in Cornelius Mathew’s Big Abel and the Little Manhattan (1843) is a perfect example—Melville had from his earliest work highlighted the victims of slavery and Manifest Destiny, and in “Benito Cereno” foregrounded the problem of racial representation itself. We might indeed see the story as Melville’s version of the minstrel show, in which he ingeniously brings together the narrative paradigm of slave insurrection with the ironies and conundrums of minstrel acts. The slaves-turned-mutineers disguised as slaves aboard the San Domnick are in virtual blackface, performing for the liberal northern visitor too blinkered to know better. The implication is that Captain Delano’s inadequate responses to the slaves in secret revolt have been so conditioned by forms such as minstrelsy that the blacks are reduced to instances of white fantasy about them, a fact the insurrectionaries use to their advantage. Yet Melville’s pessimism about the effects of white racial discourse is revealed in the way the rebelling slaves are, for most of the story, stuck in mid-drama, frozen in the midst of revolutionary activity. In Melville’s view there is apparently no possible emergence from behind the minstrel mask even in the act of revolt, which is to say that the mask itself interrupts the attempt to throw it off. “Benito Cereno” implicates the minstrel show in what it sees as the grim course of racial politics and indeed of American history in the 1850s.

Melville’s peers among the northern liberal bourgeoisie were more sanguine if less thoughtful about the representation of black people and black culture. Following upon the romantic-racist vogue of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Stephen Foster’s songs, and celebrated by Harriet Beecher Stowe herself, a black singer named Elizabeth Greenfield enjoyed a brief renown in the 1850s. Greenfield, known as the “Black Swan” (no doubt in mimicry of Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale”), seemed to Stowe and others to capture the promise of blackface minstrelsy’s cultural “blackening.” Though noted particularly for her classical repertoire (Handel, Bellini, Donizetti), Greenfield was known to sing not only “Home! Sweet Home!” but also Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.” Stowe’s memory of one Greenfield concert indicates the uncertainties surrounding this attempt to turn Stephen Foster to the account of a black people’s tradition. For the “choicest of the elite” of London, surrounded by other singers bent on national illustration, Greenfield sings as a representative of her race:

Miss Greenfield’s turn for singing now came, and there was profound attention. Her voice, with its keen, searching fire, its penetrating vibrant quality, its “timbre,” as the French have it, cut its way like a Damascus blade to the heart. It was the more touching from occasional rusticities and artistic defects, which showed that she had received no culture from art.

She sang the ballad, “Old folks at home,” giving one verse in the tenor, and another in the soprano.

One enraptured English lord, according to Stowe, declared the “use of these halls for the encouragement of an outcast race, a consecration.” The reverent response to Greenfield pressed upon Stowe the realization that “there really is no natural prejudice against colour in the human mind.”

But the fascination with the “Black Swan’s” artless and pitiably persona, not to mention her proximity to blackface, sounded a distinct note of condescension, and easily flipped over into contempt. One spectator at a New York performance, Alfred Bunn, heaped derision on Greenfield, and, turning to a discussion of a women’s rights advocate, he ventured to describe “Miss Lucy Neale (Stone, we beg the lady’s pardon),” invoking the minstrel “wench” character (Lucy Neale) the “Black Swan” had suggested to him (61). Indeed, the immediately ensuing history of black stage representation indicates the highly problematic status of such performances. Black organizations such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers took the stage in the 1870s to perform black “sorrow songs,” or spirituals, to astonished ears; but, like Elizabeth Greenfield, they included Foster songs in their reper-
toire, confounding the notion of a distinctive African-American people’s tradition. In fact the group had already been mistaken for minstrel performers and had taken the name Jubilee Singers to differentiate themselves from such acts. Soon after, both black and white blackface minstrel troupes began assuming the rubric of “Jubilee” singing groups, mixing minstrel songs with spirituals and effectively muddying the traditions. The people’s-culture gambit, once infected by the minstrel tradition, would remain a highly ambiguous one into the twentieth century (Toll 236–37).

Perhaps sensing this impure confluence of traditions, Martin Delany’s black-nationalist novel Blake or, The Huts of America (1859–61) devises a complex reinvention of the minstrel tradition. Delany refuses to settle for Melville’s liberal despair. Similar to “Benito Cereno,” Blake narrates a planned slave uprising, and here, too, insurrectionary energies intersect with minstrel forms. But Delany makes guerrilla appropriations of Stephen Foster plantation melodies, gives them new and often parodic lyrics, and in this way furnishes his rebels with songs of revolution. Foster’s pathetic “Old Uncle Ned” (1848), for example, which mourns the passing of the slave Old Ned, arms Delany with a song that wishes good riddance upon the master:

Hang up the shovel and the hoe-o-o-o-o!
I don’t care whether I work or no!
Old master’s gone to the slaveholders rest—
He’s gone where they all ought to go

(105–6)

Blake writes black agency back into history through blackface songs taken “back” from those who had plundered black cultural practices. Rather than reject the cultural territory whites had occupied by way of minstrelsy, Delany recognizes that occupation as fact and occupies it in turn. In Delany’s novel, black claims on the national culture, given distorted but influential shape in the minstrel show, come home to roost. Through a vivifying irony, Blake transforms the impact of black cultural practices on American culture into the political movement they had augured—anticipating with relish the imminent conflict so many northern white intellectuals would mourn.

These three moments from the tail end of my history capture the range of minstrelsy’s cultural results. The conflicts they signify, like most cultural conflicts, held a tenuous relation to concrete social turbulence, but they were ultimately those of a social order in the midst of a great renegotiation of the character and color of labor. The overwhelming working-class white (and, when legalized, black) enlistment in the Union cause was one worldly outcome of these cultural ideas, feelings, and acts, which blackface tunes sometimes acknowledged by putting the Union in blackface: “For soon we’ll stop each rebel raid/When I march along wid de Black Brigade” (Brower 9). But there were other, bleaker responses, as is suggested by the northern popularity of Dan Emmett’s famous “Dixie” (1859), a blackface plantation melody in the traditional mold adopted by the Confederacy as its theme song. As the Civil War entered its third year, New York was beset by racial rioting on a scale hitherto unequaled in American history. In response to an 1863 federal conscription act intended to bolster flagging volunteer Union armies, unskilled Irish workers revolted, dealing death and destruction to blacks and black property throughout the city. Draftees included all men aged twenty to thirty-five (if unmarried twenty to forty-five). Those able to hire a substitute or pay a $300 fee could be legally exempted from service; poorer men perceiving themselves to be fighting someone else’s war rebelled against the Republican law with arson, looting, machine-breaking, sabotage of railroad and telegraph lines, and murder and public sexual mutilation of blacks. The cost was at least one hundred and five lives and over $1 million in property.

This violence, too, was part of the cultural milieu that nurtured blackface performance. One blackface song, “The Bonny Green Flag,” expressed the rioters’ sentiments outright: “They say that the Irish need not apply./But when soldiers they want, in the front Pat is seen.” At the same time, I have hoped to emphasize the terrific variability in class and racial feeling surrounding such events. As W. E. B. Du Bois perceived, the racial violence of the draft riots was inseparable from a class context that was manipulated to serve the ruling elites, and in which pinched class circumstances forestalled interracial recognitions and solidarity. Capitalism was ultimately the enemy, but racial feeling the immediate obstacle; energies directed against the state apparatus might too easily join those focused on black people. This dialectic has provided the principal themes of my study. Class straits may energize interracial cooperation, but they are also often likely to close down the possibility of interracial embrace. In the 1830s upper-class reformers alien to the proletarian public sphere were apt to interrupt the incipient solidarity marked by the radical slogan wage slavery. When the existence of any wages at all became an open question in the depression years, a racial scapegoat was quite convenient to a white-egalitarian alliance of workers and employers. The variability of white racial feeling reemerged in the years of America’s 1848, though the North largely backed by way of class-based struggles into the conflicts over slavery that were to produce the Civil War. The social contradictions issuing from a national entity based on competing modes of economic production, together with labor’s conflicts over whether to oppose wage slavery or chattel slavery, confirm that the question of American labor in the broadest sense could be addressed only after the demise of slavery.

The charge has been leveled by some historians that the antislavery movement deflected attention from northern working conditions and forestalled a rigorous critique of capitalist wage relations—precisely the charge of some workers in the antebellum North. But, as David Roediger has observed, it is more accurate to say that slavery, not antislavery, prevented the full-circle critique of capitalism on behalf of all workers which could emerge (if in intermittent fashion) only after the war. Neither the abolitionists, the labor movement, nor even the Republicans
fully developed the interracial prolabor argument that the Civil War for the first time made available, if not exactly inevitable (Wages 87, 174). Shortly after the war, in 1867, Karl Marx wrote that in the “United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” How could any but these words from Capital form the appropriate ending to my story? Marx’s image of labor as a great Blakean body, with certain of its parts immobilized owing to the shackling of others, gestures to the immensity of the “emancipation” these words invoke: not mere trade union unity—even less bourgeois “tolerance”—but a visionary conception of human collectivity.

Notes

Introduction


3. I am thinking here of Stuart Hall, “The Meaning of New Times” and “New Ethnicities”; Dick Hebdige, Hiding in the Light; Andrew Ross, No Respect; Mary Childers and bell hooks, “A Conversation about Race and Class”; and others.

4. This point is made forcefully in David Roediger, “Labor in White Skin,” and Stanley Aronowitz, “Writing Labor’s History.”

5. For some acute remarks on this missed chance, see Mike Davis, Prisoners of the American Dream 18–29.


7. For a reading of Black Like Me, see Eric Lott, “White Like Me.”


11. Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature 133–34, emphasis in original. I use