the white working class, was backfiring. As certain traditions of racial exchange were “elevated” into an art of black humiliation, that art fed in turn off class energies which resisted containment—and which had the unintended effect of marking the public threat of black culture. There was no other conclusion, wrote an exasperated New York Herald in 1848: “There is a revolution going on in theatres. The legitimate drama is down for ever, buried and entombed twenty feet under ground” (January 3).

Culture was now politicized in the most spectacular ways. The class anger of the Astor Place riot was strangely confluent with the struggles over slavery that were coming, that same year, to characterize the state of the Union. And this twin threat was no mere satire of the Paris June days. It was, in a sense, our 1848. In just what sense, exactly, is the subject of the next chapter.

The Blackening of America:
Popular Culture and National Cultures

American opera—put three banjos (or more?) in the orchestra.

—Walt Whitman

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Jim Crow and Zip Coon seemed unlikely candidates for a national cultural form. And yet, as the Democratic Review admitted in 1845, the idea had a certain plausibility. “The lowest description of American farce,” to be sure, “still in its elements, not without originality, considerable invention, and a rich vein of burlesque humor, is the Ethiopian drama” (“American” 219). (Perhaps an orthographical adjustment would take care of everything.) In what possible way could a host of white men in blackface and motley rags, given to unvarnished obscenity and anticipating the phallic hucksters of Huckleberry Finn’s Royal Nonesuch, be considered representative of a national art form? This question was bound to be debated in the 1840s, the years of blackface minstrelsy’s greatest popularity as well as of an intense investment on the part of many Americans in the idea of cultural and political nationalism.

Unfortunately, the American theater was much slower than the country’s literature to develop what one might call a postcolonial sensibility. While Irving, Bryant, and Cooper could already be said to have given unique expression to America in the major literary genres, playwrights, as David Grimsted has emphasized, sustained themselves mainly through rewritings of August von Kotzebue and other European melodramatists. America had its players (Edwin Forrest, Charlotte Cushman) and its thematic and formal proclivities (Forrest’s Jacksonian stalwarts; antiarriviste comedies of manners such as Anna Cora Mowatt’s Fashion), but little that could stand as distinguished national drama. The appearance of Mose on the Bowery stage, as we have seen, was no consolation to anyone but the class of New Yorkers he purported to represent; and to parvenu Whig fashioners of bourgeois taste such as Nathaniel P. Willis, the whole Bowery scene was a bad dream the country might never shake off. The Whiggish preference for imported opera and the general influx of European talent, including Ole Bull and Jenny Lind, only reiterated the dearth—and were rivaled anyway by less respect-
able competition. "While even [the] attempt to establish an Italian Opera here, though originating with the wealthiest and best educated classes, has resulted in bankruptcy, the Ethiopian Opera has flourished like a green bay tree," Putnam's Monthly sardonically observed. "The only places of Amusement where the entertainments are indigenous are the African Opera Houses, where native American vocalists, with blackened faces, sing national songs, and utter none but native witticisms" (February 1854). The main misfortune was perhaps that the confirmed social divisions in American culture produced lively popular theatrical forms at the very moment when nationalist fervor was reaching its highest peak.

It appears rather self-evident to us, as it did to antebellum partisans of the slave narrative, that slavery and race were matters which particularly defined America, and which might have been expected to furnish it with politically expedient and emotionally charged cultural material. That the minstrel show took up these issues at all is perhaps more significant than that it did so in an objectionable way; yet the fact that it shoved racial matters to the fore made it even less palatable to elites than the usual run of "low" comedy. The legitimate stage's colonial hangover looks from this perspective like avoidance and suppression rather than inadequacy of talent or ambition, for it broached such matters only in minor or superficial ways until the 1850s. But it must also be said that this avoidance was part of a generalized inverse provincialism in midcentury American life, characterizing even those intellectuals most engaged in defending a new kind of national democratic culture. Andrew Ross observes that a major component of the national culture in the United States has in fact been its dependence for cultural authority on borrowed foreign capital, owing to the absence of intellectual "formations of prestige" relatively independent of the canons of European taste (No 62–63). This situation had more specific results than Emerson's failed "original relation with the universe," most notably an intelligentsia unable to address the elements of its own national-popular culture. Thus, in the battle between the Knickerbocker writers and the striplings of Young America over the definition of an "American" culture, the antagonists—excepting Melville—were united in looking to Europe for legitimation, whether the particular quest was for "Rabelaisian" wit or intellectual Teutonism.1 Melville was nearly the only elite cultural figure to recognize the centrality of racial conflict to whatever national culture might be on the horizon. For the most part, addressing the American dilemma was left to less legitimized cultural spheres, such as genteel women's fiction (Uncle Tom's Cabin) or popular entertainment forms (the minstrel show), themselves united in Uncle Tom's stage tenure. This is one context also for the brief engagement with race by that least respectable of now canonical writers, Walt Whitman. It seems to me no accident that the writer who took up literary nationalism just as Young America was abandoning it did so partly through an encounter with the cultural politics of race—helped, perhaps, by the fact that he would have been quite out of bounds in Evert Duyckinck's library in Clinton Place.

Indeed, the project of cultural nationalism was finally to be tripped up by the racial difference it had repressed, a difference registered most insistently and popularly in the minstrel show. But this issue was complicated even more by a brief flourishing of competing national cultures. With the massive swell of immigrants from famine-ridden Ireland in the mid-1840s, subcultural institutions set up to organize Irish concerns (among others the Catholic church), not to mention varieties of nativist resistance to them, gave new visibility to nationality and ethnicity. Later in the decade, Martin Delany and other black nationalists, in political tracts and projected African expeditions, began urgently moving toward some new sense of black nationhood. In a kind of postcolonial chain, "Anglo-Saxon" Americans distanced themselves from Britain as new ethnic formations combated one another in their turn. Far from being abstract inquiries, however, these movements were lived by working people who were bound up with the culture in which blackface moved and had its being. The point is that this jostle of cultures opened a national-popular space that was to be vigorously contested in the 1840s, quite fiercely as it turned out, and often in the arena of blackface minstrelsy. Ultimately, the measure of its cultural power in this period is the claim the minstrel show made, against all the odds, on the idea of a national culture.

The National Popular

In his great essay on the British music hall singer Marie Lloyd, T. S. Eliot raised certain issues vital to the notion of what Antonio Gramsci called a national-popular culture.2 Eliot refused to see her popularity as mere commercial success: "It is [rather] evidence of the extent to which she represented and expressed that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest" (172). Lamenting the "listless apathy" characteristic of viewers of the "rapid-breeding cinema," Eliot (in curiously Whitmanesque tones) argues that the "working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act," engaged as he was in "that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art" (174). Embedded in these already atypical reflections is a passage that is worth quoting at length:

It was her understanding of the people and sympathy with them, and the people's recognition of the fact that she embodied the virtues which they genuinely most respected in private life, that raised her to the position she occupied at her death. . . . I have called her the expressive figure of the lower classes. There is no such expressive figure for any other class. The middle classes have no such idol: the middle classes are morally corrupt. That is to say, their own life fails to find a Marie Lloyd to express it; nor have they any independent virtues which might give them as a conscious class any dignity. (173)
If there is here a certain degree of nostalgie de la boue, these remarks, venom and all, strike me as a largely persuasive formulation of the place of successful popular arts in the life of the popular classes and of the relation of both to "respectable" society. Although I have no impulse to champion the minstrel show in similar terms, Eliot's essay suggests at least two major emphases in regard to that phenomenon, emphases my whole study is concerned to investigate. First, blackface artists did give voice (if not in unitary or stable ways) to the most private "virtues" of the popular classes, regarding not only race but a wide range of meanings and values. This is the fairly straightforward sense in which minstrelies offered a national stage for conflicts and concerns peculiar to some of the people who suffered most immediately the effects of the industrializing metropolis in the earliest years of its development. Second, however, the minstrel show's adherents also occupied, culturally, something of the position of Eliot's middle classes, for their values were expressed through figures drawn not from their own lives but from another part of the social formation. The blackface performer is in effect a perfect metaphor for one culture's ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else's.

To say so seems merely to state the obvious. Perhaps the sheer strangeness of this predicament is—after the Jazz Age, after early rock 'n' roll—now lost to us. Some of its reasons, or at least some of its effects, will, I hope, eventually become clear. What I mean to suggest about the character of popular culture in America is how unstable an entity it has been—a site of conflicting interests, appropriations, impersonations, indeed "nationalities," even in its allegedly national forms. Little wonder, then, that the question of whose "national" culture best expressed American life emerged around the popularity of the minstrel show, or that one sees a constant struggle for control—encompassing black, white, immigrant Irish, and other cultures—within blackface forms themselves. The problem of minstrelsy and national cultures at midcentury, that is to say, comprised both a continual struggle over and an unceasing struggle within the popular. The contest between cultural forms for national hegemony was matched only by that among various "national" cultural elements for control of particular forms. If the issue of the national culture is, as I believe it should be, at the center of U.S. cultural studies, this volatile engagement and internal self-differentiation of cultures, rather than consensus models of cultural assimilation or unity-in-difference, must become our focus. Popular forms and popular audiences are less fixed referrants than sites of continual reconstitution, the popular less an object than a space: in the case of blackface acts the most accessible place of public interaction and conflict between and among dominant, subordinate, and enslaved "national" cultures at a crucial moment in our history. This tangle of involvement occurred at many levels: blackface performers' relations with the black artists from whom their material was "collected"; these (often Irish) performers' engagement with the material itself; the mix of white material and black material; the reception of this mixed material by variegated white audiences; those audiences' attitudes toward the small number of black performers; and finally, the struggle between minstrelsy and other contenders for the status of national art form. It is important to stress the conflictual nature of these relationships, which has for the most part been neglected. The complexity of the conflicts is evident above all in the way competing "national" vernaculars were housed within the minstrel show, around which certain lines of historical force begin to emerge.

One must beware the figurative status of national entities—those "imagined communities," in Benedict Anderson's phrase. This is not to say that they are "inauthentic," or always irredeemably hypostatized; any community whose members are not immediately present to one another is necessarily constituted by some idea of itself, indeed by elaborate performative strategies of rhetorical self-constitution. As Anderson puts it, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (15). In nineteenth-century post-Herderian vogue of the folk, this "style" most often included raising a "people's" vernacular to view, usually in print, but also in popular songs and theatrical forms. (The dubiousness of the claims for authentic "folk" culture need not detain us here; I will return to this question later in the chapter.) As has often been argued, the part played by the invention of "folk" cultures in the constitution of nationality cannot be overestimated, and is a chief means by which "indigeneity" may be constructed by postcolonial societies.

It was in the nineteenth century, as Hugh Seton-Watson shows, that the vernacularizing drive was linked to the florescence of European nationalisms; and it was in this period as well (not immediately after the 1776 Revolution) that the United States went through a peculiarly "European" phase of vernacular self-discovery. True to the nation's internally contradictory makeup, however—or to the contradictions of any national self-definition, as Homi Bhabha suggests ("DissemiNation" 299, 301)—America witnessed a simultaneous hybridization and proliferation of vernaculars, in which frontier lore, European elements, and various local or regional forms merged into an "American" vernacular even as the outlines of each of these elements sharpened—in, for instance, Major Jack Downing broadsides, the stage Yankee, southern Cavalier mythology, immigrant Irish and German stories and songs, Davy Crockett almanacs, and slave culture's oral and performance genres. Indeed, if the newspaper is a distinctive factor in the organization of national self-consciousness, the expansion of the penny press in America in the 1830s, with its broad emphasis on artisan concerns, as well as its splintering into ethnic, political, and racial publics, is another instance of this dual phenomenon. The minstrel show was a major exponent of such simultaneously creolizing and individuating developments. Based, however uneasily, on the blending of "national" cultures—offering indeed a primary channel for cultural interchange—minstrelsy, with its perceived "blackness," became a competitor for control of the national popular.

This ambiguity gave minstrelsy much of its resonance. For the play of vernaculars within the form of the minstrel show helped make it a mediator of ethnic
conflict in the antebellum North, which in turn reinforced its formal polyphony. This, it seems to me, is the best way to map what is usually seen as its cultural "mix." The mix itself is genuine. As we know, some minstrel performers claimed they did "fieldwork" among southern blacks while on tour, though in fact this required at most a trip to the East River waterfront; it was to their professional advantage to make such claims. In any case, there was no reason for performers not to lift black material when they came across it. The constant public references to minstrel performances as "unique" can probably be accounted for by this blending of black and white elements (Toll 43-45). The researches of Hans Nathan, Robert Toll, and others suggest that the minstrel show's humor, songs, and dances were so culturally mixed as, in effect, to make their "racial" origins quite undecidable—black lore interspersed with southwestern humor (itself often an interracial creation); black banjo techniques and rhythms interrupting folk dance music of the British Isles (as it had been taken up by whites in the United States); the vigorous earth-slapping footwork of black dances warring with the Irish lineaments of blackface jigs and reels. The very instrumentation of minstrel bands followed this pattern: the banjo and jawbone were black, while the fiddle, bones, and tambourine (derived perhaps from an instrument called the bodhran) were Irish (Cantwell 258). Most critics, then and now, agree that a certain amount of mixing characterized the music and the dances, but much less the lyrics on which most of the burden of racial burlesque rested. In T. D. Rice's act alone one might have seen some version of a predominantly black dance style performed to manifestly European (often Irish) music, with lyrics of a more or less satirical and racist nature. The creolized character of black forms themselves, of course, not to mention their casual and undocumentable influence on white ones, muddies this whole question considerably and makes all cultural labeling a provisional matter. Indeed, the heated debate about black secular music's "origins" (as with minstrelsy) turns up highly speculative, straining, even bizarre arguments as to its definitive (white or black) "source," arguments that unmask nothing so much as the arguments themselves, self-evident plays for rhetorical (and racial) mastery over a very confused and confusing history of cultural intermixing.

As they became entrenched in a rough and rowdy urban sphere, particularly after the first halting decade of entr'acte performances and theatrical experiments, such miscegenated minstrel acts came to negotiate interethnic tensions among working-class Irish and blacks, the history of which could in part be written from the history of minstrelsy. This history incidentally displaces both the binary emphasis on "the" black-white relationship in America and romantic models of ethnic pluralism in favor of black-ethnic white relations, and highlights the necessarily exploitative making of the Irish as "white" even as that privileged category often oppressed the Irish themselves. These tensions, of course, would finally prove disastrous in the bloody 1863 draft riots, when Irish draftees, angry at a conscription law that allowed men of means to buy their way out of military service, unleashed their frustrations on New York City's blacks. But there was in fact a quite ambiguous history of Irish-black relations behind this violence. Indeed, evidence exists that in these years blackface provided a means of displaced immigrant self-expression; another strain of white ventriloquism through black art forms begins to make sense here.

Even before the vast waves of immigration (one came in the late 1820s, another in the mid-1840s), Irish and black tended to share the same class niche, resulting in conflicts of all kinds, but also in interracial friendships and even marriages. Robert Cantwell observes that "smoked Irishman" was nineteenth-century rural slang for "Nigger" (262)—a phrase that indicated the fundamental affinity in the popular mind between these groups. As this phrase also suggests, there were surely uncharitable equations of black and Irish: during her stay on a Georgia plantation, the actress Fanny Kemble wrote in her diary of the remarkable resemblance between the "low Irish" and southern slaves (105), an equation exploited, as Dale Knobel points out, in stage productions such as William Macready's Irishman in London (1853), in which Murtoch Delaney finds his perfect match in "grinning Cuba," the African (93). More sympathetically, however, Frederick Douglass once remarked that the only songs which came close to the pathos of slave songs were those he had heard in Ireland in 1845-46, during the famine. Some of these strains may have infected the work of the many Irish-American minstrel composers and performers—Stephen Foster, Dan Emmett, Dan Bryant, Joel Walker Sweeney, George Christy, and others—who were also on intimate terms with local black cultural forms. (To take but one example, Foster’s family’s consciousness of its heritage kept alive the poems and songs of Thomas Moore, whose sentiments would inform Foster songs such as "Old Folks at Home" [Hamm 214-15].) The Irish elements of blackface, including the fact that minstrel characters were surely influenced by Irish low-comedy types from the British stage, no doubt made possible the Irish ascendancy within the minstrel show, affording immigrants a means of cultural representation from behind the mask. They probably account as well for the ease with which blackface songs and skits incorporated Irish brogues and other ethnic dialects, with absolutely no sense of contradiction; blackface, bizarrely enough, was actually used to represent all ethnicities on the antebellum stage prior to the development of ethnic types (Flynn 426). The classic expression of this racial-ethnic overlap would come with the postwar skits of the Irish team Harrigan and Hart, but the frequency of titles such as "Tis Sad to Leave Our Tater Land" (early 1850s) and "Ireland and Virginia," or of blackface Irish nationalist tunes, attested to the potential embrace of Paddy and Jim Crow.

As Fanny Kemble herself remarked, however, the closer the affinity, the greater the hostility between Irish and black. The violent confrontations of these years point to less chery interpretations of Irishmen’s involvement in minstrelsy. An English observer noted in 1833 that "nearly all [of the Boston Irish], who have resided there any length of time, are more bitter and severe against the blacks than the native whites themselves. It seems as if the disease were more virulent
when taken by inoculation than in the natural way” (quoted in Runcie 198). Many antiabolitionist and anti-black temperance riots in the 1830s and 1840s (particularly in Philadelphia) have been seen as angry correctives on the part of Irish and other workingmen to their own sense of political powerlessness and economic disenfranchisement—their resemblance, in both class and ethnic terms, to “blackness.” At the polls the Irish typically resisted this resemblance by voting for proslavery Democrats and decrying abolition as “niggerology.” This evidence would appear to support Robert Cantwell’s notion that blackface acts had the effect of promoting socially insecure Irishmen (actors as well as audiences), an “Americanizing” ritual by which they distanced themselves from the people they parodied (265). Yet I have shown that the class aura of minstrel shows was scarcely elevating; and performers’ contradictory relations with those from whom they appropriated black arts, and their social proximity to black culture, considerably complicate Cantwell’s idea.

As with their relationship to American blacks generally, a social antinomy characterized Irish immigrants’ involvement in minstrelsy. Its clearest political analogue was the equivocation of Irish nationalists in regard to antislavery. In the 1840s the Garrisonians, on the basis of the nationalist and antislavery prestige of Daniel O’Connell’s anticolonial Repeal movement, tried to forge an alliance that would garner immigrant Irish support for abolitionism. In the mouth of Wendell Phillips, the equation of the sorry conditions of Irish peasants and southern blacks became an emancipatory strategy. While this effort was briefly successful (with Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society enthusiasm riding high), the Garrisonians’ entrepreneurial outlook, and what Gilbert Ososky terms the “dilemmas of romantic nationalism,” finally alienated immigrant workers necessarily more attuned to the wage envelope and (for all their sympathy with Ireland) their own position within the American nation—hardly a concern of the Garrisonians. As Irish miners in Pennsylvania put it: “We do not form a distinct class of the community, but consider ourselves in every respect as citizens of this great and glorious republic.” The immigrant Irish identification with both marginal and “native” Americans epitomized by this episode was institutionalized in, for example, the Catholic church, which, as Mike Davis argues, joined plebeian ethno-religious commitments to a liberal republican nationalism so as to acculturate “millions of Catholic immigrants to American liberal-capitalist society while simultaneously carving out its own sphere of sub-cultural hegemony” (24). Minstrelsy’s mix of “national” vernaculars was situated at the precise juncture of these conflicts; it resolved the contradictory “national” impulses into a popular art form. Blackface was at one and the same time a displaced mapping of ethnic Others and an early agent of acculturation. A song such as “Ireland and Virginia” depended on an expression of Irishness through the medium of “blackness,” itself also an institution of “Americanizing” whitening.

The irony, however, is that this conflictual sphere was so often taken as the

domain of a newly fascinating “nigger” or “African” culture, and in this guise blackface minstrelsy threatened to lay claim to the title of native American genius.

Oh, white folks, I’ll revile to you,
Dem good old songs dat once was new;
De fust I’ll name, was all de go,
’Bout de dancing nigger dey call Jim Crow

But de greatest one in de sable crowd,
Was a rich old man dey called him proud;
He made great Norway Ole Bull stutter,
For a champion ob de string, was ole Dan Tucker

With its cool inscriptions of racial difference (“Oh, white folks”) and national chauvinism (against Ole Bull), such material launched “black” culture into the nationalist fray. No matter how distorted or weak this material may appear, one must take seriously the frequent public perception of the minstrel show as black. For it was in this way that it became not just an ethnic mediator but a civic presence—to some a foretaste of revolution. (“The basic paradox” of people’s attachment to a nation, writes Slavoj Žižek, is that it is “conceived as something inaccessible to the other, and at the same time threatened by it” [54].) Notwithstanding the sometimes withering irony of the blackface counterfeit, its troubling, or just as often attractive, “black” aspects competed for public attention. We have already seen several accounts of the minstrel show as a black “people’s culture,” as in Margaret Fuller’s “African” melodies; German observer Moritz Busch similarly took certain blackface songs for a genuine black Volkslied, capable, moreover, of culturally representing America as a whole.

It is further striking that blackface performers became “niggers” in the playbills, daily newspapers, and song sheets that registered their careers. In all but the most self-conscious of discourses, it was always implied that black men now nightly purveyed black dialect, dance, music, and humor in a theatrical form invariably called “nigger minstrelsy.” It must have been these tropes that accounted for the belief of many early observers that they were in fact watching blacks onstage. The power of blackface, indeed, must be understood as in part a media creation:

The performances at the New York Museum are unparalleled in the annals of exhibition. For the sum of one shilling you see Master Frank Diamond [white dancer Francis Lynch], the great negro dancer, Mr. Alden, the unrivaled Ethiopian melodist and banjo player, Mr. Nellis, the wonder of the world, born without arms, Miss Rosalie, the lovely songstress, Mr. Delarne, the much admired mimic, and Mr. Collins, the popular comic singer.

We must ask why in the world a culture so fearful of “blacks on top” would indulge that very fantasy in reports of the stage. The phenomenon of minstrelsy itself was an admission of fascination with blacks and black culture. Why then rub
it in with this suspension of disbelief? From the beginning there seems to have been a general forgetting of the fact of white impersonation, a thrilling pretense of breaking the taboo against black performers on the popular musical stage which prevailed into the 1850s. In effect, this meant trading one equivocal cultural relationship for another: momentarily preserving the idea of blacks onstage as the price of denying one’s own mimicry of them. This was hardly a satisfactory trade; if it was mesmerizing, it was also perilous, as we shall see. But it was compelling in any case, or this fiction of black performers would not have been extended into the daily papers, effectively creating for the first time a sense of popular black cultural representation.

In spite, that is, of the greater or lesser hegemonic intentions of the types, and in spite of audience awareness of the counterfeit, the advent of minstrelsy was still read as a new infusion of “blackness” and black cultural practices into American life. Perhaps the journalistic convention of referring to blackface “negroes” merely paid conflicted tribute to that infusion. As for the types, they probably could not have taken a very different shape. I have noted the ideological ferment around racial theories in this period (perhaps more complex than “scientific racism” later in the century); nevertheless, a set pattern of racial traits tended to be present in representations of black people. The traits themselves were hardly open to question. What were debated were the kinds of explanation (religious, metaphysical, anthropological, and so on), and indeed valuation, given those traits.20

As for the counterfeit, it is clear enough from the evidence that consciousness of the copy did not foreclose on a variety of responses to its “blackness.”

Indeed, if by the mid-1840s it was generally held true, as Whitman wrote in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, that “the subtlest spirit of a nation is expressed through its music—and the music acts reciprocally upon the nation’s very soul” (“Thought” 345), then a minstrel-loving America was caught in something of a cultural hailstorm. As we have seen, part of the tony disgust that grew up around minstrelsy was simply a reulsion against the popular, the vulgar and sentimental tastes of what J. S. Dwight rather typically referred to as the ‘clapping classes’ (‘Music’ 94). In his journal of Music, Dwight on one occasion tried to deflect his critics (accurate) charges of Europhilia: “Why assume that the term ‘German’ was applied to [a piece of music under review] by way of praise?” he feinted. His logic is somewhat tortuous:

To have said nothing would have left the door open to the inference that the piece had a style new and original, peculiarly its author’s, or peculiarly American; which would have been true only in a limited degree. Indeed the motive of the term “German” partly was to save it from the questionable praise of classification with what are commonly understood to be songs of the American stamp, that is to say “nigger melodies,” or namby-pamby sentimental ditties. . . . (“Complaint” 94)

Apparently the demotic “American” came inevitably to mind as the inverse of European; though Dwight had high hopes for a national music, he was no Young American. On the contrary, there is an interesting set of equations here, of American music with “negr0” music, and of “American” with debased art forms generally, as if minstrelsy were the most natural example of both.21 Many commentators implicitly relied on this kind of equation in lamentations to the effect that American culture was turning out to be not only “questionable” but black.

“The Jim Crows, the Zip Coons, and the Dandy Jims, who have electrified the world,” trumpeted Knickerbocker writer J. K. Kennard in 1845, “from them proceed our only truly national poets” (332). Kennard, like many Anglophiles, was less than sanguine about the prospects of a national culture. By seizing on the newly available “black” idioms of the minstrel show as the most typically national cultural form, he intended to lampoon Young America’s quest for a national art with what he (probably correctly) assumed was its logical consequence. By their logic, Kennard implies, a truly national culture—in his terms provincial, untutored, and close to the soil, after the manner of Robert Burns—would be made by slaves. The article’s mismanaged reactionary irony reaches straight to the heart of the problem, fueled inexorably by cultural anxiety and dread. For the outcome of such a national culture, as Kennard demonstrates, would amount to little less than insurrection. Finally mastered by his own irony, Kennard echoes Shelley:

The popular song-maker sways the souls of men; the legislator rules only their bodies. The song-maker reigns through love and spiritual affinity; the legislator by brute force. Apply this principle to the American people. Who are our true rulers? The negro poets, to be sure! Do they not set the fashion, and give laws to the public taste? Let one of them, in the swamps of Carolina, compose a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white amateur, than it is written down, amended, (that is, almost spoilt,) printed, and then put upon a course of rapid dissemination, to cease only with the utmost bounds of Anglo-Saxondom, perhaps of the world. (340)

This strange piece is absolutely unflinching: it imagines, negatively and somewhat convolutedly, the very end of antebellum America’s attraction to black culture as it was presented in the minstrel show—a national culture owing to “Ethiopia,” not Europe.22

Kennard was only the most hysterical observer of this “blackening of America.”23 Dwight notably reprinted an article from London (no doubt echoing American concerns) citing “the great grievance of the metropolis—it is inundated by the ‘blacks.’” Part of the article’s interest is its utter confusion of blackface and blackness in describing the great grievance—an indication itself of national blackening. While “‘blacks’” probably referred only to blackface performers, it is not clear whether actual black people are being invoked. The reference to an increase of “nigger minstrels” and “sable musicians from America” (as indeed in the newspapers’ “negroes”) thus functioned as a dominant-cultural figuration of black people that covered up the people themselves; it collapsed blacks into itself and held them captive, both suggesting and withholding their presence. This
doubleness indeed seems pretty much to have been the mode of the inundation. Cities experienced cultural blackening as a vast profusion of ambiguous signs that, like the minstrel mask itself, offered the experience of “blackness” even as they absented it.

They [the referent is unclear] infest our promenades and our concert halls like a colony of beetles. If we avoid their presence in street or music-room, their names and designations stare us out from countenance from dead walls, boards, lamp posts, and the interior of omnibuses. If we read the advertising columns in the journals, our eye is arrested by a long list of musical performances to be given, after the most approved fashion, by these ebony artists from the regions of the sun. . . . The great Derby race is run amid a salvo of bones and banjos, and the Surrey and Middlesex Stakes are contested to the accompaniment of “Dandy Jim from Caroline,” or “My old massa tol’ me so.”

Blacks were suddenly everywhere—captive countenances paradoxically on the loose, bringing dead walls to life and crowding the omnibuses. It is no wonder that in these years Whitman the budding poet speculated in his notebooks on the ideal number of banjos to be included in an American opera orchestra, or felt compelled to sketch a modification of English pronunciation, suitable for a “native grand opera in America,” to be based on what he called “nigger dialect.”

Sometimes it was remarked with hysteria, sometimes with interest, but it was always remarked: “blackness,” despite the extremely compromised form in which it was represented, had made inroads into the national culture. The poet Bayard Taylor caught the mood:

The Ethiopian melodies well deserve to be called, as they are in fact, the national airs of America. Their quaint, mock-sentimental cadences, so well suited to the broad absurdity of the words—their reckless gaiety and irreverent familiarity with serious subjects—and their spirit of antagonism and perseverance—are true expressions of the more popular sides of the national character. They follow the American race in all its emigrations, colonizations and conquests, as certainly as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day.

The invocation of minstrelsy together with American national expansion amid the cataclysms of 1850 was no idle conceit; as we shall see, the two were unexpected intimates.

**Popular Counterfeits**

In the preceding chapters we have seen how minstrelsy’s crude racial appropriations entered a conflictual male class arena and almost became shorthand for a national-popular culture. Let me briefly review what I think was going on here, and then gesture toward the historical and political shape of part II.

It is insufficient, I have been arguing, merely to read off racial oppression from minstrelsy’s inauthenticity. As with all popular forms, I am concerned with what is best thought of as a realm of counterfeits—contradictory popular constructions that were not so much true or false as more or less pleasurable or politically efficacious in the culture that embraced them. Popular culture, as Gramsci once remarked, “takes the place of (and at the same time favors) the fantasizing of the common people”: a realm neither of populist desire nor of commercially imposed distraction, but a stage on which appropriated goods and manufactured daydreams are transformed into culture. It is true that, while blackface sometimes seemed an authentic instance of black culture, its “black” simulations were even less a populist product than popular arts usually are. Yet we have also seen that its dominative intentions were continually compromised by the return of unwanted meanings, gestures, and relationships. Indeed, according to Gramsci’s formulation, this will always be the case with the “popular”; in steering us away from its status either as failed “folk” art or as “mass” cultural manipulation, he suggests we focus on the social fantasies and historical conflicts that the minstrel show inspired and to which it gave a temporary home.

The minstrel show was a signal instance of the popular because its black materials, or at least its black models, were worked over, transformed, reinvented, and re-presented by its white practitioners and adopted by white, mostly male and working-class audiences with some familiarity with the culture being represented. What was on display in minstrelsy was less black culture than a structured set of white responses to it which had grown out of northern and frontier social rituals and were passed through an inevitable filter of racist presupposition. What is vitally important is that minstrel performers reproduced not only what they supposed were the racial characteristics of black Americans (minstrelsy’s content) but also what they supposed were their principal cultural forms: dance, music, verbal play. In their rise to popularity, blackface actors let loose an iconography of racial difference, clearly graphing difference as inferiority, but at a time when difference itself could be a dangerous fact, particularly when set down in a class-inflected sphere of belly laughs and brawling. The social complexities of this counterfeiting, however, only rate minstrelsy among many other forms of the popular. Where critics have gone wrong is in assuming that the political designs so apparent in the minstrel show were unique to it. It is no doubt astonishing that for a period of more than one hundred years white people were so politically, historically, emotionally, and sexually bound up with black culture that they directly mimicked and displayed it for their own enjoyment (and, in various ways, still do). But popular culture in capitalist societies is always so “produced.” It begins in the reprocessing and containment from above of traditional, oral, or “folk” cultures, but at certain historical conjunctures it can have untoward effects. Stuart Hall puts the matter this way:

There is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganise and re organise popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive
range of dominant forms. There are points of resistance; there are also
moments of supersession. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. ("Notes"
233)

The minstrel show’s commercial prominence gave it the widest possible berth for
doing its work. Born of social conflict, blackface sometimes usefully intensified it;
based on the social violence of cultural caricature, it paradoxically resulted in the
blackening of America.

I hasten to add that it is obviously in the interest of the dominant classes to
have a measure of control over the culture of those they dominate, especially
when other forms of control threaten to evaporate, as seemed to be happening in
these years. And here, whatever the short-term effects, the minstrel show had
disastrous consequences—particularly since black people had little room to con-
test publicly the social meanings generated out of their culture. Yet we might as
well acknowledge the peculiarly unstable way in which these meanings were
generated. The process of counterfeiting can never be a simple matter of bread
and circuses, activities dreamed up by state functionaries to ensure that sub-
alterns stay in their places. Varieties of appealing ventriloquism are most effective;
indeed, had the minstrel show not pleased, it could not have achieved even its
worst effects. An instance in white culture of this ventriloquism was the popular
Davy Crockett almanac, in which, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has dem-
strated, Whig publicists used frontier dialects to tell lurid tales underwritten by
bourgeois mythologies for “vernacular” readers (108), and which, it is pertinent
to note, also gave authentic headaches to many an earnest moral reformer.29 I
would define the minstrel show precisely as a case of popular racial ventriloquism,
which, because it was spoken in vernacular accents, could never be counted on to
stifle undesirable responses. Despite the often hegemonic intentions or begin-
nings of popular forms, they can occasionally retain subversive dimensions, or for
a time be invested with them. That is why the hegemony of what Gramsci termed
the historical bloc is never secure, has constantly to be reconquered, and why
there is a continual state of play in and over the popular sphere. Blackface
performers, voices of the dominant racial culture, had to take care in these volatile
years to check the subversive elements of their art—the mischief or ire that
inherited in an appropriated black song or set of images; the wayward, often
disturbing fantasies that clung to many attempts at black caricature—even as they
amused the million. Nevertheless, there were excesses, overflows, resistances to
the intended containment of the form, both in the material it reworked and in the
responses of its popular audiences.30

This instability has been obscured by a refusal to recognize in the minstrel
show the sort of cultural mediations with which we are very familiar. For one
thing, cultures of the people, even “folk” cultures, are always constructed, in this
particular case by a postromantic ideology of the folk—hence the characteristic
comparison in nineteenth-century discourse of minstrelsy and black secular song
to the English ballad tradition.31 It is of course essentialist to ignore the extent to
which our understanding of any culture is determined in the first place by a
particular ideology of culture. Just such an ideology worked to make the elements
of black culture purveyed in minstrelsy—watered down, humiliated, but unmis-
takably present—seem all the more naturally elements of a national “folk.” More-
over, ideologies of culture have most often been produced by those who do not
belong to the culture that is defined, variously, as folk, traditional, popular, or
oral. Which is to say that cultures of the dispossessed usually, for better or worse,
come to us mediated through dominant-cultural filters, whether it is Thomas
Percy’s compilation of Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765), Henry Rowe
Schoolcraft’s renderings of Chipewa poetry in his influential history Indian
Tribes of the United States (1851–57), or even Carlo Ginzburg’s resurrection of a
sixteenth-century miller, “Menochio,” in The Cheese and the Worms (1976),
distanced once by the court records of the Inquisitors who finally put him to death
and then again, as Stanley Aronowitz has suggested, by Ginzburg’s bourgeois
novelistic devices.32 As with these efficacious documents, minstrelsy mediated
elements of a vernacular tradition, bringing to the surface, like some nonscientific
anthropology, the culture of black people. Given this period’s scientific anthropol-
ogy, one is hard-pressed to choose the lesser medium. That this is so indicates the
counterfeit’s potential to have disturbed when it most sought to soothe.

My assumption that the new centrality of “black” forms and representations
in American culture precipitated a corresponding instability in American racial
feeling might seem somewhat dubious. For the dominant culture today is quite at
home with the visibility of certain forms of black culture, in athletics and entre-
tainment, for example, or in advertising. The ways in which envy, affection, and
sentiment are folded into racist modes of feeling are of course prominent; ne-
grophobia and negrophilia, as Berndt Ostendorf has remarked, are not at all
contradictory (81). By the same token, however, it is clear that certain kinds of
cultural conquest—Jackie Robinson’s entrance into major league baseball,
Elvis Presley’s explicit dismantling of “rational” music—are far from harmless
allowances on the part of white-supremacist capital.33 They amount to cultural
struggle, and one must be wary of foreclosing on them, for the spectacle of
revolution, as T. J. Clark has observed, does occasionally lead to revolution
proper: “[T]he circuitry of popular art in capitalist society does appear to be
delicate, and therefore to stand in need of fairly constant overhaul if it is not to
produce undesirable effects. . . . What begins as a process of control and con-
tainment is too often liable to end in mob rule” (Painting 227, 229, 236).

In the long run, of course, black repossession of the means of cultural represen-
tation was a tragically halting affair. The historical evolution of the contexts in
which blackface did its work unquestionably diffused the struggle to redeem black
cultural forms. Yet this matter is a complicated one, shot through with fakery and
organized around reappropriation rather than redemption. Particularly after min-
istry, but also because of the nature of the national popular in America, there
could be no simple restoration of black authenticity. Such were the circumstances
of nineteenth-century racial ideology that even when black performers took the stage after the Civil War, black representation was not immediately returned to self-present fullness. Robert Toll makes it clear that blacks in blackface, far from providing an immediate corrective to minstrel types, actually reinforced them, lent them credibility, no doubt because the newcomers had to fit the ideological forms the minstrel show had itself helped to generate, but also because of the impact of racial ideology on even black performers (196, 228). One thinks again of the black shingle dancers in lower Manhattan; and nothing in Frederick Douglass’s account of black performers in 1849 suggests that “inauthenticity” was merely white men’s share. We lose no quotient of historical outrage in recognizing these conditions of popular counterfeiting, which in the case of blackface depended as much on American racial ideologies as on the political tendencies of popular culture. Such a recognition does require us finally to see the fallen character of culture—culture as agonistic, not a preserve of purity—in which political outcomes are by no means guaranteed in the forms of popular culture or in their historical conditions.

This recognition might also help us resist the widespread tendency to project white racial hostility onto the working class, the duped “masses.” Hence the thre-obvious conclusion that, as a counterfeit popular form indulged by the vulgar mind, blackface stroke their audiences’ racist common sense. Consider, as an extreme case, the words of an Irish-American leader of the interracial New Orleans longshoremen’s strikes of 1907:

I wasn’t always a negro-lover. I fought in every strike to keep Black labor off the dock. I fought until in the white-supremacy strike your white-supremacy governor sent his white-supremacy militia and shut us white-supremacy strikers full of holes. . . . [T]here was a time when I wouldn’t even work beside a negro. . . . You made work with negroes, eat with negroes, sleep with negroes, drink out of the same water bucket with negroes, and finally got me to the point where if one of them . . . blabbers something about more pay, I say, “Come on, neger, let’s go after the white bastards.”

Allowing for regional and historical differences, this statement captures something of the racial complexity we find in the antebellum United States. Presenting sequentially what was probably a simultaneous and overlapping set of responses, it clarifies white workers’ privileged and yet disenfranchised relation to capital, and the racial perspectives that followed from it. The displacement of solidarity from white, cross-class alliances to interracial ones was a tortuous affair, continually made and then unmade, replete with unevenness and scarcely limited to concerted activity such as strikes. It was complicated by workingmen’s perceived position in the sex/gender system as wage-earning patriarchs whose “manliness” was perpetually at stake, and in terms of which racial conflicts were usually fought out. This variable compromise formation, involving masculinity, class, and racial feeling, was responsible for the initial potential and ultimate failure of an interracial labor radicalism in Jacksonian America, and its contours are still virtually unexamined. Alongside casual working-class racism, in other words, one must insist on the complex racial negotiations that took place in the everyday lives of working people, negotiations foreign to denizens of the counting room, the study, and the front office. The minstrel show is one legacy of those negotiations.

Minstrelsy therefore briefly became an object of “live social intelligibility,” to borrow V. N. Volosinov’s notion of the ideological sign, an internally riven form whose “inner dialectic quality” bursts fully into the open “only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes” (23; emphasis in original). America’s crisis came in the form of what I call (after Michael Rabin) the American 1848. The minstrel show had no little part in the crisis.

**The American 1848**

It is worth pondering to what extent the national-popular conflicts in and around the minstrel show—above all its creation of a sense of popular “black” cultural representation—helped foster the struggles of America’s midcentury “revolutionary turn” (in Karl Marx’s phrase): the Wilmot Proviso debates, the 1850 Compromise, Bleeding Kansas, the Civil War. Certainly this situation was worthy of the name 1848. Michael Rabin has demonstrated the similarity the Compromise of 1850 bore to the class struggles in Europe, particularly France. As Marx wrote that history, the “beautiful revolution” of February, when the monarch was deposited in the interests of political equality, was shattered during the “ugly revolution” of the June days, when the working class took the rhetoric of equality seriously and went to the barricades to fight for it. In June, as “the fireworks of Lamartine . . . turned into the war rockets of Cavaignac” (Class 57), the interests of civil society were definitively revealed to underlie the “imagined content” of the political sphere (39); the proletariat was challenging the class character of “political equality” and demanding that it extend beyond the confines of the bourgeoisie. That challenge, of course, was finally stifled and social order restored in 1851, when the accession of Louis Bonaparte solidified the interests of the middle class, still in the guise of political equality.

In America a similar struggle took place, and the similarity did not go unremarked. “[S]et off the names of Cavaignac and Cass, of Ledru-Rollin and Van Buren . . . [of] Napoleon . . . [and] Webster,” wrote the Democratic Review in 1852, “and the histories of the French and American republics for these four years . . . have been identical.” In the political arena, the expansionism of the Polk administration embroiled the United States in the Mexican War in 1846, a war meant to conquer territory for an enlarged national entity. Manifest Destiny, it appeared, was egalitarian ideology gone west. As in France, however, this “beautiful” evasion of both wage labor in the North and slavery in the South, a political solution to conflicts in civil society, only served to open those conflicts all the more, for it posed in ever starker form the question of whether the new
territories would be slave or free. In a telling irony, the myth of potentially endless frontier expansion actually exposed rather than disguised patterns of class conflict and racial oppression which American democracy was supposed to have done away with. Civil war loomed: with slavery an issue even in the masterless West, the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and California gold was every bit as ominous as that of secession.32

The crisis began with the 1846–47 debates around the Wilmot Proviso, Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot’s bill urging that all land newly acquired from Mexico—namely California and much of the Southwest—be considered territory for nonslaveholding white men. Sectional tensions immediately ran high, opposing Wilmot supporters and Young Americans expansionists against southern secessionists and conservative, proslavery Unionists, while various strained cross-sectional coalitions rushed to counter them. In 1848 a group of radical Democrats and antislavery Whigs bolted their respective parties and formed the Free-Soil party, based largely on Wilmot’s proposals; Martin Van Buren was their (unsuccessful) presidential nominee. Hardly the antiracist vanguard, the Free-Soilers at the very least threatened the stability of the party system. Certainly there was room in the Free-Soil party for dangerously radical sentiments. Wrote one Barnburner Democrat, “Shall we, in view of these struggles of all Europe, with our model before them, renounce the doctrine of our fathers, and the sentiment of the civilized world, that slavery is an evil?” (quoted in Schlesinger 462; emphasis in original). This moment witnessed the greatest threat to social order the United States had ever experienced, analogous to the turmoil in France but centered on the politics of slavery, as well as class struggles such as the 1849 Astor Place riot and the 1850 New York tailors’ strike. Whitman split several differences at one stroke in language that clinched the interpenetration of race and class—“the grand body of white workingmen, the millions of mechanics, farmers, and operatives of our country, with their interests on the one side—and the interests of the few thousand rich, ‘polished,’ and aristocratic owners of slaves at the South, on the other side” (Gathering 1:208; emphasis in original). Very shortly, of course, America had its own Louis Bonaparte. The Compromise of 1850 (passionately advocated by Daniel Webster) and the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1851 (tantamount to the federal sanction of slavery) temporarily preserved the social order of the Union. But disorder would continue to erupt, in 1854 with the Kansas-Nebraska Act (the fight over the right to take slaves west), in 1857 with the Dred Scott decision (which ruled that blacks were not to be considered U.S. citizens), and finally in 1861 over the future of the Union.

In the broadest political sense we might say that blackface artists all at once found themselves staging a sort of unintended play about the slavery crisis, a play that pointed up rather than papered over cracks in the historical bloc of midcentury America. The ground beneath the minstrel show shifted quickly. From the beginning minstrelsy was an arena in which class conflict and racial strife continually intersected and contradicted each other. In a variety of clashes in the 1830s and early 1840s—pervasive rioting, abolitionism and its counterresponses, labor strikes—class resistance and racial feeling were imbricated in displaced and distorted ways that the minstrel show duly registered. The depression following the 1837 panic, however, deflected these complex energies into more “cultural” responses: temperance, evangelicalism, nativism. The “industrial” character of 1830s class conflict was increasingly displaced in the 1840s onto struggles against “preindustrial” foes, in Paul Facer and Alan Dawley’s terms, whereby workers who had fought their masters now allied with them against backsliders and foreigners (477). As a result, the minstrel show abutted and addressed what had become, by the mid-1840s, a somewhat more racially hardened audience of “white egalitarians,” journeymen and small masters both, who sought to preserve the republic against preindustrial incursions of all kinds. As we have seen, class antagonisms that persisted could now be mapped as ethnic, moral, or indeed racial matters, and it was here that minstrelsy found one of its major historical uses.

Yet with the crises of 1848 this racially homogeneous cross-class alliance produced as it were its opposite. The most visible cultural signaler of northern white egalitarianism, the rush to California, suddenly signified a sectional breach that pitted northern capitalists and western farmers against southern slaveholding landowners. In the partial transformation of class conflict into racial and ethnic struggles against preindustrial drags on capital formation, the South 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, not the kindest fate for an art form that had sought to stifle such matters. The centrality of “black” arts to the national culture had a political referent after all. The minstrel show’s intimations of American expansion were no longer innocent celebrations of Manifest Destiny; they were a portent of the war to come. This was only the largest of the authenticating ironies that attended the blackface counterfeit.