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BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY AND JACKSONIAN IDEOLOGY

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BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY, ACCORDING TO THE PREFACE TO ONE OF E. P. Christy's countless "plantation songsters," marked the advent of a national American music. "After our countrymen had . . . confuted the stale cant of our European detractors that nothing original could emanate from Americans—the next cry was, that we had no NATIVE MUSIC; . . . until our countrymen found a triumphant vindicating APOLLO in the genius of E. P. Christy, who . . . was the first to catch our *native airs* as they floated wildly, or hummed in the balmy breezes of the sunny south." The verbs *floated* and *hummed* referred of course to the fact that the original "native airs" had been appropriated from music and dance of African slaves by white professional entertainers, including (among many others) E. P. Christy. A more realistic account explained later in the same preface that the minstrels had possessed skills which enabled them "to harmonize and SCORE systematically the original NEGRO SOLOS." From these somewhat discordant beginnings, the preface rose to a crescendo of national triumph. "The air of our broad, blest land, and even that of Europe, became vocal with the thousand native melodies."¹

"If I could have the nigger show back," Mark Twain wrote in his autobiography, ". . . I should have but little further use for opera . . . I remember the first negro musical show I ever saw. It must have been in the early forties. It was a new institution. In our village of Hannibal . . . it burst upon us as a glad and stunning surprise."² During the decade recalled by Mark Twain, blackface minstrelsy became the most popular form of enter-

¹Edwin P. Christy, *Christy's Plantation Melodies No. 4* (Philadelphia: Fisher, 1854), pp. v–vii.

²Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Washington Square Press, 1961), p. 64.

tainment in the United States.³ Its spread coincided with the rise of mass political parties and mass circulation newspapers. All three manifested in part at least the urban culture of Jacksonian America. Hannibal, Missouri, for example, which in Mark Twain's childhood was a rural slaveholding community, could hardly have found fragments of African music or caricatures of black slaves particularly surprising. What made the first minstrel show a "glad surprise" was that it provided a window into the complex culture developing in the new cities. For approximately half a century after Mark Twain's experience at Hannibal, minstrel shows dominated the nation's public entertainment, and at their latter end merged through variety and vaudeville into the modern era of film.⁴ Clearly blackface minstrelsy has comprised an important element of the "American experience." What follows is an exploration of the ideological significance of that element.

Underlying the choice of the adjective *ideological* are several starting assumptions which can be set forth, hypothetically, as follows: Minstrel shows expressed class identification and hostility; they conveyed ethnic satire as well as social and political commentary of wide-ranging, sometimes radical character; they often contained explicitly sexual, homosexual and pornographic messages. Taken as a whole, the genre provided a kind of underground theater where the blackface "convention" rendered permissible topics which would have been taboo on the legitimate stage or in the press. Spontaneity and ad-libbing favored a flexible approach to different audiences and regions, changing moods and times. This combination of adaptiveness and liberty of subject matter explains in part the popularity and staying power of minstrelsy as mass entertainment. It was linked from its earliest beginnings to Jacksonian democracy. The rise of the first mass party in America and the dominance of the minstrel show as mass entertainment appear to have been interrelated and mutually reinforcing sequences. Finally, the "convention" of blackface was by no means separate from minstrelsy's social content or neutral in regard to it. On the contrary it saturated that content. For a study of the ideology of minstrel shows, the interpenetration of form and content is relentlessly at the crux of the matter.

³T. Allston Brown, "The Origins of Minstrelsy," in Charles H. Day, *Fun in Black or Sketches of Minstrel Life* (New York: DeWitt, 1874), pp. 5-10.

⁴Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Minstrelsy* (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 244-301; Robert G. Toll, "Behind the Grinning Mask: Blackface Minstrelsy in Nineteenth Century America," Diss. Univ. of California, Berkeley 1971. Toll's study, soon to be published, provides a nearly definitive survey. Two older but still useful works are: Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1930) and Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, "*Gentlemen Be Seated!*" *A Parade of the Old Time Minstrels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1928).

The discussion which follows will deal with the first three decades of minstrelsy, roughly 1845 to 1875. Its content will be treated as a matrix within which a dominant political line becomes discernible. Attention will then be concentrated upon that political line and its racial aspects. The final section will examine the ideological product which resulted from the infusion of social content into the specific form of blackface minstrelsy.

The social content of minstrelsy was shaped in part by the social experience of its founders and purveyors. Three men, Thomas Rice, Dan Emmett and E. P. Christy, are generally recognized as founders of blackface minstrelsy. To these should be added the name of Stephen Foster, the major white innovator of minstrel music. Where did these men come from and how did they happen to launch a new mode in mass entertainment? Rice, oldest of the four, was born in New York in 1808. He tried unsuccessfully to break into New York theater, then drifted west, working as stagehand and bit player through the Mississippi Valley. In 1831, imitating a shuffle he had seen performed by a black man on the Cincinnati levee, Rice for the first time "jumped Jim Crow." Jim Crow made Rice's fortune. Adapting it to various uses—including eventually a minstrel plagiarism of Uncle Tom—Rice was applauded in London and became a perennial favorite at New York's famous Bowery Theatre. The second founder, Dan Emmett, son of a village blacksmith of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, was born in 1815. He ran away to become a drummer in the army and served briefly at posts in Kentucky and Missouri. Dismissed for being under age, Emmett followed circuses and sideshows, occasionally singing comic songs in blackface. Early in 1843 he organized the first blackface quartet as a one night fill-in at New York's Chatham Theatre. Emmett devoted the rest of his long career to minstrelsy.⁵

Edwin P. Christy, also born in 1815, was the son of "respectable" Philadelphia parents who sought to launch him on a commercial career by arranging to place him in a New Orleans countinghouse. Christy rebelled and took to the road with traveling circuses. In 1843, he and several other young men were providing musical entertainment at a theater-saloon on the Buffalo waterfront. Apparently having heard of Emmett's success in New York, the Buffalo entertainers called themselves Christy's Plantation Minstrels; later, moving down to New York City, they became a permanent fixture at Mechanics' Hall on lower Broadway. It was through Christy's Minstrels that many of Stephen Foster's early songs reached the public (figure 1). Foster, eleven years younger than Christy or Emmett, was born in Pittsburgh in 1826. Like Christy, he came of parents with intimations of

⁵Nathan, pp. 98-120; Edward LeRoy Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy from Daddy Rice to Date* (New York: Kenny, 1911), pp. 7-8.



Figure 1. Title page, *Christy's Ram's Horn Nigga Songster* (New York: Marsh, n.d. [1852?]). Courtesy of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

upward mobility who tried to provide him with a proper education, then sent him off to work as a bookkeeper for an older brother in Cincinnati. Foster meanwhile was writing songs for minstrel shows for which he received ten or fifteen dollars apiece. His "Old Folks at Home," according to the publisher, sold 130,000 copies in three years.⁶

The careers of these four men show several similarities. All were Northerners (but none was born in New England) and all except Emmett were of urban origin. At least three came of old-stock American families and were clearly of middle-class background. They all rejected the straight ways of the Protestant ethic and sought escape into the bohemianism of the entertainment world. Three had direct contact through their wanderings in the lower Mississippi Valley with the music and dance of black slaves, and we know from their own accounts that they consciously exploited this resource. None had achieved success in theatrical or any other pursuit prior to the venture into blackface minstrelsy; and in each case that venture

⁶*Christy's No. 4*, pp. v-vii; John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour* (New York: Crowell, 1934), pp. 65-201, 372-77.

brought spectacular success.⁷ It seems likely that the pattern suggested by these summaries approximates the experiences of many professionals active during the first three decades of minstrelsy. A sampling group composed of 43 men born before 1838 who achieved prominence as blackface performers in large Northern cities or San Francisco yields the following information: five were born south of the Mason-Dixon line (including Baltimore); seven were of European birth (English five, Irish and French one each); all the rest (31) were born in the North, but of these only five were New Englanders. With respect to urban background, New York, Brooklyn, Rochester, Utica, Troy, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Providence, New Haven and Salem (Mass.) accounted for 24 of the 43 (with London and Paris probably claiming three or four more). Regionally, upstate New York matched New York City and Brooklyn with nine each; Philadelphia came next with six.⁸

Typical purveyors of minstrelsy, then, were Northern and urban; they were neither New Englanders nor Southerners (although their parents may have been); and if of rural or small-town origin, most were likely to have come from upper New York State. Eager to break into the exclusive but inhospitable precincts of big city theater, they needed new and exciting materials. These they found during their forced marches through the Mississippi Valley South in the music and dance of slaves and in the half-man, half-alligator braggadocio of the river and the frontier. The two separate lines had merged to some extent before the minstrels took them over.

My mammy was a wolf, my daddy was a tiger,
And I'm what you call de old Virginia nigger;
Half fire, half smoke, a little touch of thunder,
I'm what dey call de eighth wonder.⁹

Ambivalent especially toward the black component of their borrowings, the minstrels coveted the power and newness of the music, yet failed to recognize its Africanness, or to perceive in it segments of an idiom distinct and separate from the European idiom. They ascribed the impact of slave music to its being close to nature. It "floated wildly" or "hummed . . . in the breezes," to repeat the metaphor of E. P. Christy's preface, and its wildness could be taken simply as part of the general crudity of frontier style. In any

⁷Brown, pp. 5-10; *Christy's No. 4*, p. vii; Nathan, pp. 70-71, 116-22; Howard, pp. 202-14.

⁸The biographical data is from Rice, which is indexed. See also *Bryant's Essence of Old Virginia* (New York: DeWitt, 1857), pp. vii-viii and *Buckley's Melodies* (New York: Cozans, 1853), pp. v-vii.

⁹Charley White, *White's New Illustrated Melodeon Song Book* (New York: Long, 1848), pp. 51-52; *Christy's Ram's Horn Nigga Songster* (New York: Marsh, n.d.), pp. 99-100; "Twill Nebber Do to Gib it up so," *Old Dan Emmet's Original Banjo Melodies* (Boston: Keith, 1843), sheet music in "Dan Emmett" folder, Theater Collection, Harvard Library. See also Nathan, pp. 50-56 and Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), pp. 77-103.

case the work of white entertainers with such materials was to "turn them to shape," to Europeanize them sufficiently so that they would not offend refined ears. Thus the dual task of exploiting and suppressing African elements began from the first moments of minstrelsy. But these elements possessed great vitality. It was suggested earlier that a major factor in the popularity and staying power of minstrel entertainment was its freedom of subject matter; certainly another, perhaps *the* other, major factor was the persistence of African borrowings (especially in dance movement and sense of rhythm) throughout the entire half-century of blackface minstrelsy.¹⁰

Partial acceptance of these African musical elements was facilitated by the fact that they fitted logically into a portrayal of the Old South which took on a symbolic and powerful, although derivative, meaning for many white Americans during the 19th century. But before examining that somewhat removed aspect of minstrel content, it is necessary to turn to a set of meanings which were direct and immediate. For the minstrels, as for the new mass audience upon which they depended, the city was the focal experience of life. The city offered (or seemed to offer) new sorts of work, money, movement, excitement. It offered access to liquor and sex, to education, culture, progress. All this was ignored in the high culture of the established upper classes; Walt Whitman, almost alone among American 19th century poets, celebrated the city. The purveyors of minstrelsy shared in this celebration; but in order to do so, they had to impose some startling transformations upon materials whose primary reference was to frontier and plantation. Here is one of the early mutations:

I'm de sole delight of yaller gals,
De envy ob de men,
Observe this nigger when he turns,
And talk of dandies then.¹¹

The Broadway dandy was in one respect a transplant of the swaggering Southwest frontier hero, already widely rendered in blackface. But the dandy also caricatured a new social type in the United States—the urban free black.

Possible uses of this stereotype, which expressed an enthusiasm for city life uncloyed by nostalgia or regret, were limitless.¹² Early in 1852, one of

¹⁰*Christy's No. 4*, p. v; Nathan, pp. 70-97; Toll, pp. 1-19; Jean and Marshall Stearns, *Jazz Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 11-60; Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), pp. 3-33, 109-22; LeRoy Jones, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow, 1963), pp. 1-59, 82-86.

¹¹"The Dandy Broadway Swell," *Wood's New Plantation Melodies* (New York: Garrett, n.d.), pp. 50-51.

¹²See *Christy's Panorama Songster* (New York: Murphy, n.d. [1850?]), p. 93, for an example of ethnic satire in blackface.

New York's permanent minstrel companies began performing a number titled, "Wake Up, Mose." The hero appeared in the first verse as the already familiar urban free black. "He used to run de railroad—he was de bulgine tender"; and it was clear from the context that "bulgine tender" meant a railroad fireman. The chorus then made an abrupt switch, followed up in subsequent verses, to a fireman of a different sort, and presumably of a different race:

Wake up, Mose! Wake up, Mose!
 Wake up, Mose! De Fire am burning;
 Round de corner de smoke am curling.
 Wake up, Mose! the engine's coming;
 Take de rope and keep a running!¹³

So who was Mose?

Mose was an early hero of melodrama made famous through the United States by a New York actor named W. S. Chanfrau in a series of loosely structured scenes and spectacles gathered under titles such as *New York As It Is*, *Mose and Lize*, *Mose in California*. Probably a butcher by trade, or an apprentice carpenter or stonecutter, Mose was one of the city's famous "Bowery boys." After work he liked to dress up and go to the theater with an armful or two of his innumerable girl friends ("Bowery gals, will you come out tonight?").¹⁴ Gallant volunteer fireman, avid participant in New York City politics, an invincible pugilist, Mose was the urban culture hero, derived from, yet standing against, older rural heroes like the New England Yankee or the half-man, half-alligator of the Southwest. Mose cared nothing for Yankees or alligators either; he breathed the fire of burning buildings; and when it came to warfare, he could tell even an old frontier fighter like Zachary Taylor how to run his campaigns. Mose, however, transcended regionalism. Essentially he stood for the new urban mass culture as against the "high" culture of the old elite.

But Mose in blackface is something else. There was of course a historical logic in rendering the Broadway dandy as Mose in blackface, since both had reached the city by different routes from a common ancestry in frontier folklore. But this hardly explains *why* it was done. The value of such a characterization was that it extended minstrel show content to include class satire. As minstrelsy became more formalized, it moved from separate

¹³M. Campbell, *Wood's Minstrels' Songs* (New York: Garrett, 1852), p. 25.

¹⁴*Christy's Plantation Melodies No. 1* (Philadelphia: Fisher, 1851), pp. 45–46. Playbills, Theater Collection, Harvard Library: Chatham Theatre (New York, 1848), Jenny Lind (San Francisco, 1851), St. Charles (New Orleans, 1857). See also David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800–1850* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 65–75; and Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days: Chronicles of a Famous Street* (New York: Appleton, 1931), p. 264.

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SANFORD'S PLANTATION MELODIES.



E. S. SANFORD, DIXEY, AND VONBONHORST, AS THE CONGO MINSTRELS, IN JOHNNY HOMIO IN DE HIGH GRASS.

Figure 2. Tambo, Bones and Interlocutor, late 1850s. *Sanford's Plantation Melodies* (Philadelphia: Robert F. Simpson, 1860), 16. Courtesy of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

song-dance numbers to routines including spoken repartee, and finally to elaborate composites of song, dance and drama. The original foursome of undifferentiated musicians expanded into a line in which customary position corresponded roughly to class identification. The end men, who always played tambourine and bones, were lower class. By costume and vernacular they were "plantation nigger," or "Broadway dandy,"—often one of each. The middleman, or interlocutor, served as bogus mouthpiece for the high culture.¹⁵ His dress and speech were upper class, sometimes straight, more often burlesqued; and the plot was usually the putting down of the interlocutor by the end men. Even after the ad-lib repartee of the original line had evolved into more formal presentations, the class character and plot remained substantially the same. Blackface could thus serve to enhance the ridicule directed against upper-class pretensions.¹⁶ More important, it had the effect of preserving the comic mood, since otherwise the role of Mose tended toward serious drama or even tragedy. The careers of real "Bowery boys" in politics, of John Morrissey, the prizefighter, or the proletarian congressman, Michael Walsh, and especially of David Broderick, were acting out of tragic conflict between the new urban culture and the cultures of older elites.¹⁷ This was too serious to be fun. Blackface defused such meanings without denying them. It did so by placing social content in the background of a conventional proscenium which permitted instantaneous escape through shifts of scene and mood and which constantly intervened to discredit serious implications.

Part of the entertainment lay in skating on thin ice. Temperance, a topic taken very seriously by many mid-19th century Americans, was nearly always an object of ridicule in minstrel songs.

Nigger, put down dat jug,
 Touch not a single drop,
 I hab gin him many a hug
 And dar you luff him stop.

Parodying the sentimental ballad, "Woodman Spare That Tree," this song, published about 1850, seemed to hint (especially in the third line) at more than the simple pleasures of alcohol. Subsequent verses elaborated in graphic detail:

¹⁵Mark Twain, pp. 65–66.

¹⁶"Mose he went to college, he said he was a poet . . ." in *Wood's Minstrels*, p. 25. Minstrel burlesques of tragedy and grand opera exemplified this usage. See Harlow, p. 265, for an account of T. D. Rice in a burlesque of *Othello*.

¹⁷"Michael Walsh," *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribners, 1936), 19: 390–91; Jack Kofoed, *Brandy for Heroes: a Biography of the Honorable John Morrissey, Champion Heavyweight of America and State Senator* (New York: Dutton, 1938); David A. Williams, *David C. Broderick, a Political Portrait* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1969).

I kiss him two three time,
 And den I suck him dry
 Dat jug, he's none but mine
 So dar you luff him lie.¹⁸

The primary effect of these lines, rendered in blackface, would have been to attribute masturbation or homosexuality to black males. However, the prevailing stereotype of blacks (already well established in minstrelsy by the 1850s) was of unflagging heterosexuality. This apparent contradiction suggests that the song contained several layers of meaning and conveyed different messages to different listeners.

Minstrelsy had become mass entertainment in the decade of war against Mexico and the California gold rush. Until well after the Civil War minstrel shows were performed exclusively by males, before largely male audiences. Both in the East and West, the male population was concentrated in factories, boardinghouses, construction and mining camps. Frontier settlements had few women, and contemporary accounts tell of men dancing in saloons and hotel dining rooms dressed as women. Given this context, the song quoted above appears as a permissive reference to homosexuality and masturbation, veiled but not negated by the blackface "convention." The point here is not the prevalence of homosexuality, but the tolerance of sexuality in general, the realism and the flexibility of standards which flourished behind the false façade of blackface presentation. A more typical sort of minstrel pornography would be a duet titled, "Cuffee's Do-it," in which Cuffee was obviously typed as a Broadway dandy:

He. Oh, Miss Fanny, let me in,
 For de way I lub you is a sin . . .
She. (spoken) Oh no I cannot let you in . . .
He. Oh, when I set up an oyster cellar,
 You shall wait upon de feller,
 Sell hot corn and ginger pop,
 You be de lady ob de shop.
She. Oh, Sam, if dat's de trufe you tell . . .
 Oh, Sam Slufheel, you may come in.
He. Oh, Miss Fanny, I'se a comin' in . . .¹⁹

Moral permissiveness was not accidental or idiosyncratic. It was an aspect of life-style. The life-style expressed in minstrelsy could appropriately be called "urbanity" since it had developed in middle Atlantic cities, moved west with the Erie Canal and urbanization of the Mississippi and its tribu-

¹⁸*Christy's Ram's Horn*, pp. 76-77.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 109-10. Many male performers built reputations playing "wench parts." Rice, pp. 71, 86-87. And see Frank C. Davidson, "The Rise, Development, Decline and Influence of the American Minstrel Show," Diss. New York Univ. 1952, pp. 130-31.

taries, and west again with the acquisition of California. It was both urban and frontier. During the last two major frontier decades, the 1850s and 1860s, even the frontier had become urbanized: its new cities were garrison towns and mine camps which sprang into existence before much in the way of rural hinterland had developed around them. When Charles De Long made the following entry in his diary for Christmas Eve, 1859—

Spent the day in the office hunting up authorities . . . in the evening went to the gymnasium, and the sparring school, and then called on Elida . . . saw the Christmas tree and then went in and celebrated Christmas with Lide. Came downtown went to Nigger Festival [a minstrel show] and got supper and then went to the Catholic Church to high mass, and then down and got on a little burden and went to bed late, raining some. . . .

he might have been describing a day in the life of a moderately successful Bowery politician. Actually De Long was working out of Marysville, some fifty miles northeast of Sacramento. A political henchman of Stephen Douglas, De Long earned his living at the time by collecting the California foreign miners' tax from Chinese laborers. "Started with Dick Wade and Bob Moulthrop collecting," he wrote for October 23, 1855, ". . . supper at Hesse's Crossing went down the river in the night collected all the way had a great time, Chinamen tails cut off."²⁰ De Long attended performances of many of the same minstrel troupes he would have seen had he lived in New York, because minstrelsy was invading the towns and camps of the Pacific slope. So prominent was San Francisco as a minstrel city that for several years one of New York's leading companies styled itself the "San Francisco Minstrels."²¹

The dual relationship of city and frontier profoundly affected the social content of minstrelsy. Blackface singers (again like Walt Whitman) were protagonists of Manifest Destiny.

Mose he went to Mexico, and dar he saw Santa Anna;
He sent a message to de camp, telling Zack not to surrender.
Says Santa Anna, "Who are you—you seem to be so witty?"
Says Mose, "Go 'long—I'm one of de boys—I'm from de Empire City."²²

Always the West and the westward movement were focal:

Den I step on board de *Oregon*
For de gemman say who bought her
Dat she for sure's de fastest crab
What lives upon de water.²³

²⁰Carl I. Wheat, ed., "'California's Bantam Cock': The Journals of Charles E. De Long," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 10 (June 1931), 185, and 8 (Dec. 1929), 346.

²¹Rice, pp. 27, 68-70.

²²*Wood's Minstrels*, p. 25.

²³*George Christy and Wood's Melodies* (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1854), pp. 39-40.

Stephen Foster's "Oh! Susanna" (of which the verse above was a topical variation) was first performed in the year of Scott's conquest of Mexico City and reached the height of its popularity during the California gold rush. A later cliché, perpetuated by Hollywood and television, has associated the song with westering pioneers from rural regions such as Kansas and Missouri. Kansas wagonmasters may certainly have sung "Oh! Susanna"; but its origin was at Pittsburgh and it was first popularized in New York City's minstrel halls.²⁴ Underlying the sociological congruency between city and frontier was a psychological identity between traveling to the city and traveling west. Each, for the individual who undertook such a transition, was a journey involving a traumatic break with a previous situation. In minstrelsy's complex matrix of social content, the *journey* became the central theme. It stood in contrast to the celebration of urban opportunity and permissiveness as a lament for what had been left behind and lost. This theme, I believe, entered minstrelsy at its earliest beginnings, not in any sense as a reflection of journeys made by black slaves, but as a projection by the white performers of their own experience. The projection was then magnified because it also expressed the psychic experience of urban audiences. The notion of a symbolic journey suggests the power of minstrelsy's impact upon white viewers. At the same time it helps to place in perspective one of the most puzzling aspects of minstrel repertory: the endless evocation of the Old South.

Early minstrels (as represented by the sampling group discussed above) had understood slave music not as African but as close to nature. Correspondingly they perceived slaves as *part* of nature, part of the nature of the South, and from this curiously ahistorical viewpoint undertook to "delineate" plantation culture. City dwellers by birth or adoption, they were strangers and interlopers in the plantation society. While they might observe and borrow from slave music, their social contacts were with whites, and it is scarcely surprising that their depiction of the South overlapped and duplicated the plantation myth which white Southerners were then bringing to perfection as part of their defense of slavery. That myth was also ahistorical because its germinating inspiration was to fix the black slave as an everlasting part of nature rather than as a figure in history. When the wandering minstrels carried their fragments of African music back to Northern and Western cities, they took them encased in a mythology of the South as a region fascinatingly different, closely wedded to nature, and above all, timeless. The word "timeless" defines the relationship which would develop between the image of the South and the anomie experienced by men and women of rural, Eastern background who lived in cities or who moved out west. The South became symbolically their old home: the place where simplicity, happiness, all the things we have left behind, exist outside of time.

²⁴Howard, pp. 119, 136-39, 144-45.

Down by the river our log hut stands
 Where father and mother once dwelt
 And the old door latch that was worn by our hands
 And the church where in prayer we knelt.²⁵

What has been left behind collectively may be a rural past, but individually it is childhood. New cities and new frontiers, attractive to conspiring and perspiring adults, have little room for children; and the South, in the legend of blackface minstrelsy, became the antithesis to both.²⁶

When E. P. Christy organized his first entertainments at Buffalo in 1842, he brought in a younger man, George Harrington, who adopted the name Christy and eventually became more famous than his mentor. The senior Christy retired in the mid-1850s; George Christy went into partnership with a New York theatrical promoter, Henry Wood. Under their joint direction Christy and Wood's became a metropolitan establishment and one of the best-known companies of the prewar era. Henry Wood belonged to a remarkable family. His brother Benjamin served three terms as a Democratic Congressman from the city and one term as state senator for almost half a century he presided over the aggressively Democratic New York *Daily News*. A second brother was Fernando Wood, Copperheadish mayor of New York, fighter for control of Tammany Hall, several times Congressman.²⁷

George Christy went to San Francisco in 1857. There he performed under the sponsorship of Tom Maguire, West Coast tycoon of minstrelsy, opera and varied theatricals. Maguire had spent his younger days on New York's Bowery as a saloon keeper, hack driver, fight promoter, volunteer fireman and Tammany stalwart. When David Broderick, the New York stonemason of background substantially similar to Maguire's, abandoned the Bowery for the Golden Gate in 1849, he lived for several years as a boarder at Maguire's house, and apparently helped Maguire to escape bankruptcy by arranging the sale of his Jenny Lind Theatre for \$200,000 to an obliging (Democratic) city administration of San Francisco. Maguire was soon back in business with other theaters.²⁸

Dan Emmett, after launching the nation's first minstrel quartet on the New York stage, toured England with middling success, then returned to

²⁵Christy's *Plantation Melodies No. 2* (Philadelphia: Fisher, 1853), p. 35.

²⁶Mark Twain repeatedly makes these connections. For example, *Autobiography*, pp. 5-6.

²⁷Rice, p. 20; Samuel A. Pleasants, *Fernando Wood of New York* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1948); Leonard Chalmers, "Fernando Wood and Tammany Hall: The First Phase," *New York Historical Society Quarterly*, 52 (Oct. 1968), 379-402. On Henry Wood, see Paskman and Spaeth, pp. 155-56.

²⁸Rice, p. 20; "De Long Journals," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 9 (Dec. 1930), 385; "Continuation of the Annals of San Francisco," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 15 (June 1936), 178-80, 184; *New York Clipper*, May 23, 1868; Kofoed, pp. 69-86; Williams, pp. 29-31.

White's Minstrel Melodeon on lower Broadway. By the late 1850s, Emmett had worked out a lasting connection with Bryants' Minstrels of New York, next to Christy's the most enduring of the prewar troupes. Composer of dozens of songs and musical farces, Emmett was especially noted for his walkarounds or group finales. One of these, titled for its New York première, "Dixie's Land," became popular in the South, where it was taken by itinerant minstrels and emerged during the war as "Dixie," the *de facto* Confederate national anthem. In postwar years, the Bryants, following the trend of theater and fashion, moved uptown to East Fourteenth Street. Emmett by this time had drifted back to the Midwest, but the Bryants commissioned a special walkaround in honor of their uptown location and Emmett obliged with a piece called "The Wigwam." In May of 1868, "The Wigwam" climaxed the Bryants' opening in their new theater at Tammany Hall's recently constructed Fourteenth Street headquarters.²⁹

Stephen Foster, drinking himself to death in New York during the Civil War, sometimes peddled his handwritten songs along Broadway, and at least one of the buyers was Henry Wood of Wood's Minstrels. In happier days, Foster had helped to organize the Allegheny City Buchanan-for-President Club. All ardent Democrats, the Fosters were related by marriage to President Buchanan's brother, an Episcopal minister. In 1856 Stephen Foster contributed two songs to the Buchanan Glee Club. One was a lampoon of Abolitionism; the other was a paean to the unifying spirit of the South:

We'll not outlaw the land that holds
The bones of Washington,
Where Jackson fought and Marion bled
And the battles of the brave were won.³⁰

From such fragments of evidence, several "founding" minstrels as well as two or three of the nation's best-known minstrel companies can be placed in a scattered but consistent pattern of pro-Southern expression and intimate contact with Democratic Party leaders in New York and San Francisco. The pattern points to a more general typicality when considered against the background of minstrelsy's political orientation, which has already been defined—in a negative sense—by its social content. Temperance, hostility to recent European immigration and lack of enthusiasm for, or direct opposition to, territorial expansion were frequently (not always) characteristic of the Whig, Liberty, Free-Soil, Native American and Republican parties. Regardless of mutual antagonisms, these parties always opposed the

²⁹*Clipper*, Apr. 25, May 30, 1868; Nathan, pp. 135–42, 214–75.

³⁰Howard, pp. 27–28, 43–45, 256–64.

Democratic Party, which, in turn, was nearly always hostile to temperance, receptive to recent European immigration and strenuously in favor of territorial expansion. The positions of the Democratic Party on these issues were congruent to the outlook expressed by blackface minstrelsy; the positions of anti-Democratic parties generally were not. Minstrelsy, then, appears to have been oriented toward the Democratic Party. Since minstrels were generally Northern, as was most of their mass audience, it would seem reasonable to pursue an inquiry into the political line of minstrelsy by investigating its responses to major problems confronting the Northern wing of the Democratic Party.

The Democracy was probably the world's first mass political party. It seems to have been a loose amalgam of class and interest groups in which the new urban working class played a significant but not dominant role. Common goals, antipathies and aspirations which held this amalgam together found expression through an ideology then crystallizing around the "Jacksonian" concept of the individual producer in an expanding society. Emerging cadres of professional leadership became expert at formulating political principles and programs. For the Jacksonian party the three basic principles of its period of ascendancy were: expansion (nationalism), antimonopoly (egalitarianism) and white supremacy. Without venturing further into a theory of American parties and party systems, it may be assumed that Northern Democratic leaders during the 30 years under consideration were endeavoring to perpetuate, or regain, control over the Federal government. Pursuit of this goal presented different problems before, during and after the war.³¹

Before the Civil War, the Democratic Party was dominant nationally, having controlled the Federal government without major interruption since the first election of Andrew Jackson in 1828. Continuance of such control depended upon unity among the party's regional branches. But the price of unity, as set by Southern Democrats, was that the national party must defend the institution of slavery. Consequently a major task of Northern leaders was to resist criticisms of slavery from outside the party and to prevent antislavery sentiment from infiltrating party ranks. This was no

³¹The literature on parties and party systems during the Jacksonian period is extensive. Two recent essay collections with convenient bibliographies are Edward Pessen, ed., *New Perspectives on Jacksonian Parties and Politics* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969) and Joel H. Silbey, *Political Ideology and Voting Behavior in the Age of Jackson* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973). With respect to the "three basic principles" of the Democratic Party, see Thurman Williams, *Cherokee Tragedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); Richard H. Brown, "The Missouri Crisis, Slavery and the Politics of Jacksonianism," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 65 (Winter 1966), 55-72; and James K. Paulding, *Slavery* (New York: Harpers, 1836). My own interpretation will be found in greater detail in Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971).

easy task as views hostile to slavery gained widening acceptance in the North and West.³²

For blackface minstrelsy, given its Southern origins, slavery was an inescapable topic. Minstrelsy's political stance was a defense of slavery. That this should seem a statement of the obvious is in itself a revealing commentary. In a broader frame of reference, artistic endeavors aimed at "delineating" the cultural traditions of oppressed or enslaved peoples would more commonly be associated, I think, with ideologies of liberation than of oppression. Minstrelsy, however, faithfully reproduced the white slaveowners' viewpoint.

Old Massa to us darkies am good
Tra la la, tra la la
For he gibs us our clothes and he gibs us our food³³

Slaves loved the master. They dreaded freedom because, presumably, they were incapable of *self*-possession. When forced to leave the plantation they longed only to return. These themes in minstrelsy worked at several levels. On the one hand, propagating the plantation myth, they portrayed slavery as benign and desirable. On the other hand they reinforced the image of the South as symbol of the collective rural past and of individual childhood, thus acquiring an emotional impact logically unrelated to their content. At the same time, the docility attributed to slaves, commendable as this might seem to a Southern planter, was certain to strike Northern audiences imbued with Jacksonian principles of upward mobility as ridiculous and contemptible.

Was minstrelsy monolithic in its justification of slavery? Almost, but not quite. There appeared a scattering of antislavery expressions which entered in two different ways. First, the early borrowings of Afro-American music and dance carried antislavery connotations which sometimes persisted subliminally in traditional verses like this from "The Raccoon Hunt":

My ole massa dead and gone,
A dose of poison help him on
De debil say he funeral song³⁴

Subversive sentiments might be negated in chorus or verses, perhaps added later. This seems to have been the case with the ballad, "De Nigga General," which referred to Nat Turner's rebellion, although parts of the song were

³²Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

³³*Christy's Panorama Songster*, p. 79; see also Toll, pp. 70-99.

³⁴*Christy's Ram's Horn*, p. 102.

apparently of older origin. Here the antislavery thesis represented by a black general, "chief of the insurgents," is carefully set at rest by antithetical verses telling of his defeat, repudiation by his own followers, and execution.

O, Johnson Ben he drove de waggon
Ho, boys yere most done . . .
And dey hung him and dey swung him
Ho, boys, yere most done.³⁵

A second and later means of entry of antislavery content was through the essentially white identity of romantic and nostalgic songs, European in tradition and style, which quickly became a staple of minstrel repertory (figure 3). Performed in blackface, yet dealing seriously with themes of parted lovers, lost children and so forth, these songs both invited identification with the situation of the slave and suggested that slavery might have been the cause of separation or loss. But to admit such a possibility was to contradict the myth of the benign plantation and yield ground to antislavery propagandists. Thus, even when given in "darkey" vernacular, sentimental minstrel songs seldom made direct mention of slavery. Occasional references did nonetheless break through. They were then usually softened or disguised by shifting specific griefs to the generalized sorrows of time and distance, or by emphasizing the troubles blacks were likely to encounter in the North.³⁶

The two sorts of expressions described above represented the only penetration into minstrelsy of antislavery views. By contrast, a major trend through the 1850s and into the war years consisted of attacks against Abolitionists, who were portrayed as stupid, hypocritical, cowardly, subservient to England and practitioners of miscegenation. Minstrelsy not only conveyed explicit proslavery and anti-Abolitionist propaganda; it was in and of itself a defense of slavery because its main content stemmed from the myth of the benign plantation. Critics of slavery were well aware that the incompatibility between that myth and romantic concepts of love and family constituted a weak point in slavery's defense; and against this point was directed one of their main attacks—that slavery prevented marriage and broke up families. This was the central message of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and antislavery singers (never minstrels) like the Hutchinson Family of New Hampshire had been developing similar criticisms long before Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. The counter to this attack, in which minstrelsy led the field, took the form of ridiculing the very notion of love, or any other

³⁵Ibid., p. 200; *Christy's No. 2*, pp. 44–45.

³⁶Mark Twain, p. 66; Howard, pp. 210–11, 246; *White's Serenaders' Song Book: No. 4* (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1851), p. 40.



Figure 3 (above left). Shakespeare in blackface. Illustration in *Bryant's Essence of Old Virginny* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1857), 50. Courtesy of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Figure 4 (above right). Topsy in a minstrel show poster, about 1870. Ledger Job Printing Office, *Specimens of Show Printing* (Philadelphia, 1869 and 1872), cut no. 494. Reproduced by Cherokee Books (Los Angeles, 1972?). Courtesy of Mr. Lee Freeson.

human or humane emotion, among blacks. Within a few months after the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, minstrels had co-opted the title and main characters, while reversing the message (figure 4). The famous T. D. Rice "jumped Jim Crow" in the role of Uncle Tom.³⁷ Indeed all that was needed to render a serious theme ludicrous in blackface minstrelsy was to permit its dehumanizing form to overbalance the content. In an age of romantic sentiment, minstrels sang love songs like this one:

³⁷ *Christy's Panorama Songster*, p. 85; *Christy's Plantation Melodies No. 3* (Philadelphia: Fisher, 1853), pp. 10–11, 40–41; *Hooley's Opera House Songster* (New York: Dick, 1864), p. 5; "Joshua" [Hutchinson], *A Brief Narrative of the Hutchinson Family: Sixteen Sons and Daughters of the "Tribe of Jesse"* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, n.d.); A. B. Hutchinson, *The Granite Songster* (Boston: Holt, 1847); George W. Clark, *The Liberty Minstrel* (New York: Saxton and Miles, 1845). On the permutations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit* (New York: Vanni, 1947); M. B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years of Theatrical Management* (New York: Broadway, 1912), p. 6; and Toll, pp. 104–7.

My Susy she is handsome
 My Susy she is young . . .
 My Susy looms it bery tall
 Wid udder like a cow
 She'd give nine quarts easy
 But white gals don't know how.³⁸

By 1860 the infiltration of antislavery sentiments into Northern party ranks combined with the mounting anxiety and aggressiveness of Southern Democrats had made further compromise impossible. The party split; Lincoln was elected; secession and civil war followed. Although virtually impotent at the national level, the Democracy in the North remained locally powerful in many regions. The task now facing its activists was to hold together their potentially large constituency by loyal Unionism while at the same time seeking to discredit Republican leadership. Once again slavery was at the heart of the matter. The South, Democrats argued, would fight to the bitter end, convinced that the Republicans intended to destroy slavery. But the war could be settled and the Union preserved, if, through ouster of the Republicans from control of the federal apparatus, the slavery issue were fully set at rest. This line was vigorously pushed in media of mass communication accessible to Democratic leadership; and these primarily were newspapers and blackface minstrelsy.

Minstrels re-adapted the plantation myth to wartime purposes, their message being that a struggle against slavery was neither necessary to save the Union nor desirable. Traditional blackface caricatures were politicized. The "plantation nigger" now lamented the inexplicable "white folks'" war which was causing everyone so much trouble; while up North the Broadway dandy thrived like the green bay tree. He conspired with Republican leaders, rejoiced in the war but dodged the draft; paraded in fancy uniform but took to his heels at the first whiff of gunpowder.

Niggers dey can pick de cotton—dey'll do it very freely
 But when dey smell de bullets, how dey'll run for Horace Greely!³⁹

To their basic paradox of lauding the plantation system in the midst of a war against the plantation South, the minstrels added a satirical and sometimes brilliant critique of Republican war policy. They questioned the competence of particular leaders (including Lincoln). They attacked political generals, profiteers and shoddy contractors. Songs like Dan Emmett's "How Are You, Greenbacks?" provided a framework for variations upon the class and ethnic sequences worked out during the 1850s.

³⁸Christy's Ram's Horn, pp. 46–47.

³⁹Frank Converse, "Old Cremona" Songster (New York: Dick, 1863), pp. 9–10.

We're coming, Father Abram, one hundred thousand more.
 Five hundred presses printing us from morn till night is o'er . . .
 To line the fat contractor's purse, or purchase transport craft
 Whose rotten hulks shall sink before the winds begin to waft.

The bearers of true patriotism, according to minstrel repertory, were honest workingmen who battled to save the Union. Outstanding among these were regiments raised from New York's volunteer fire companies ("For I belong to the Fire Zouaves that started from New York . . ."); and the Irish ("Meagher is leading the Irish Brigade"); and, nearly always treated comically, the lager-drinking Germans ("I'm Going to Fight Mit Sigel"). General McClellan became a symbol of the straightforward Union-loving soldier as opposed to the profiteering, Abolition-tainted Republican politician. Minstrelsy in 1864 mounted an extensive campaign for McClellan, whose platform as Democratic presidential candidate called for peace on any terms of reunion acceptable to the South.

We're willing, Father Abram, ten hundred thousand more
 Should help our Uncle Samuel to prosecute the war;
 But then we want a chieftain true, one who can lead the van,
 George B. McClellan you all know, he is the very man . . .⁴⁰

Thus it was loyal workingmen and soldiers who were saving the Union; but their efforts were sabotaged by profiteers and politicians, and worst of all, their lives were needlessly expended for the benefit of the "niggers."

Abram Linkum said to me—
 Send de sojers down!
 He's gwine to make de niggers free—
 Send de sojers down!

At this level the entire spectrum of minstrelsy from the plantation myth through its urban repertory of ethnic humor and class satire was permeated by the blackface form:

I wish I was a blinkin' [Abe Lincoln], a blinkin', a blinkin'
 I wish I was a blinkin'
 I'll tell you what I'd do . . .
 Oh, if I was much bigger—some bigger—great bigger,
 Oh, if I was some bigger I tell you what I'd do:
 I'd buy up all de niggers—de niggers—de colored African-American citizens,
 I'd buy up all de niggers, and—sell 'em, wouldn't you?⁴¹

⁴⁰Dan Bryant, *How Are You, Greenbacks* (New York: Pond, 1863), sheet music, "Bryant's Minstrels" folder, Theater Collection, Harvard Library. *Hooley's Opera House*, pp. 16-17; *The Little Mac Songster* (New York: Dick, 1863), pp. 11-13, and 29, 42-43, 53.

⁴¹Converse, "Old Cremona," pp. 47-48 and 44-45.

This "comic-banjo" piece, as it was described, appeared in a songster published in New York in 1863. Geographically and emotionally, it was only a block or two from a song such as this to the maiming and lynching of blacks on the sidewalks of New York during the draft riots of the same year.⁴²

After the war, Democratic strategy was based upon the conviction that the old national majority could be re-created through judicious use of Jacksonian slogans adapted to fit the new situation. Moreover it was soon obvious that the party could count on a massive accession of strength when (or if) the Democratic South was restored to the Union. The three basic appeals of Jacksonianism—nationalism, egalitarianism and white supremacy—assumed the postwar form of demands for immediate readmission of the South, criticism of profiteering and monopoly, and struggle against "black" Reconstruction. The plantation myth, always central to minstrelsy, continued to serve Democratic needs since it softened wartime hostilities and tended to favor rapid restoration of the seceded states.⁴³ As during the war period, however, the minstrels' political line defined itself most sharply in caricatures based on the Northern, urban partner of the Tambo and Bones pair—the Broadway dandy (figure 5). "Urban" blacks were portrayed as pickpockets, crooked politicians, carpetbaggers and "colored senators"; the wartime formulae of blacks as draft dodgers and deserters were endlessly repeated. Skits and farces came increasingly into use, and the extent to which blackface "convention" permeated their content is indicated by the cast of characters in a farce published in the last year of Reconstruction: "IKEY PIKE (a gentleman of dark complexion, sometimes called an unbleached American citizen) . . . TOM (who blacks boots, still darker) . . . DINAH (the dark daughter of a dark sire . . .) . . . The rest of the characters are all so dark that they cannot be seen."⁴⁴ Ridicule continued to be the basic resource of minstrelsy's political line. Similar treatment was now extended to other minority groups which came into the focus of national hostility. As might be expected from previous orientations of minstrelsy, the extension was not to ethnic or religious minorities, but to racial minorities.

⁴²James B. Fry, *New York and the Conscription Act of 1863: A Chapter in the History of the Civil War* (New York: Putnam, 1885); A Volunteer Special [William Osborn Stoddard], *The Volcano Under the City* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1887).

⁴³For example, Franck Dumont, *Birch and Backus' Songs of the San Francisco Minstrels* (New York: DeWitt, 1881), pp. 9, 23, 53, 56, 68, 103, 105, 114, 144. And see Toll, pp. 150–51.

⁴⁴Harry McCarthy, *Deeds of Darkness* (New York: DeWitt, 1876), p. 2. For a few other examples among hundreds, *Dick's Ethiopian Scenes, Variety Sketches and Stump Speeches* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1879), esp. pp. 151–53; Bert Richards, *Colored Senators, an Ethiopian Burlesque* (Clyde, Ohio: Ames, 1887); Charles White, *The Recruiting Office, an Ethiopian Sketch in Two Scenes* (New York: DeWitt, 1874).



Figure 5. Minstrel show poster, about 1870. Ledger Job Printing Office, *Specimens of Show Printing* (Philadelphia, 1869 and 1872), cut no. 561. Reproduced by Cherokee Books (Los Angeles, 1972?). Courtesy of Mr. Lee Freeson.

Warfare against Indians in the West intensified after Appomattox. Veterans of the Blue and Gray armies joined hands to extirpate the last independent Indian tribes from the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. Minstrelsy supported this long-delayed opening up of the Western territories by blackface portrayals of Indians as drunken scalpers, and of those who supported the Indian cause as misguided, corrupt, effete, upper class and miscegenationist. "Oh, dear me," sighed Miss Matilda Livingston ("a young lady of society" in *The Bogus Injun*), "I never do get tired of reading about the noble braves in their forest homes of the far West." Duped by a couple of con men, one of whom impersonates a visiting Indian chief, Miss Livingston donates money to the tribal fund and arranges to have one of her friends, Miss Millefleurs, dress up as an Indian "squaw" to make the chief feel at home. "That really is a good idea," Miss Millefleurs enthusiastically agrees, "as it will allow me to be present at all events, and no doubt prove very interesting to me." The bogus Indian, stimulated by so much hospitality, draws out his tomahawk. The ladies, terrified, run away, while: "The INDIAN . . . chases PETE [Miss Livingston's black footman] around the stage once or twice, and finally catches him in the centre and scalps him while PETE is on his knees."⁴⁵

On the Pacific Coast during these same years, Chinese immigration had been steadily increasing since the gold rush. California's Democratic Party, heavily discredited by the secessionist proclivities of its prewar leaders, focused after the war upon the Chinese menace as a means of rehabilitating the organization. Democratic platforms and oratory linked the Chinese issue directly to the party's national stance against Radical Reconstruction and black suffrage. Government of, by and for white men, on the Pacific Coast as in the South, was the gist of the party's program. San Francisco, one of the nation's leading minstrel cities since before the war, became the gateway through which stereotypes of Chinese, performed in blackface, first reached national audiences. As early as 1856 (twenty years before Bret Harte's "Heathen Chinees") "The Chinese Washerman" was performed in New York by Eph Horn, a minstrel recently returned from the Golden State. Charles Backus, who had once been Horn's partner in San Francisco, joined Billy Birch, of like background, in the 1870s to organize the San Francisco Minstrels in New York. Part of their regular repertory was "The Chinees Laundryman."

Me workee all day in Chinees laundry
 For "Ching Chow," dat's his name;
 Me catchee all de rats in de market
 Makee pot-pie all-a-same (gong)
 All-a-same (gong) all-a-same (gong).

⁴⁵Charles White, *The Bogus Injun: A Very Laughable Sketch in Four Scenes* (New York: DeWitt, 1875).

Me soon become a cit'zen
 And votee just likee me please
 By'm by me gettee a good jobbee
 To workee on de police! (gong)
 Police! (gong) Muchee clubbee! (gong)⁴⁶

From the outbreak of the Mexican War to the closing years of Reconstruction, blackface minstrelsy had consistently reinforced the politics of Jacksonian and neo-Jacksonian Democracy. Civil war, the industrial depression of 1873 and the final phasing out of Reconstruction altered the social and political environment in which the alliance of minstrelsy and Democracy had originally taken shape. Elements of Jacksonian ideology now filtered through both members of a changed party system. With respect to the racial components of Jacksonian ideology, what this meant may be epitomized by noting that three great Jacksonian issues—Indian removal, white supremacy in the South, and Chinese exclusion—had by the 1880s become matters of bipartisan agreement. After 1877 it would no longer be surprising to encounter a professional minstrel who was not also a Democrat. Meanwhile minstrelsy itself was changing. This was not so much a decline as a spreading out into other forms of mass entertainment. Minstrelsy bequeathed its cast of racial caricatures, along with the dehumanizing ridicule which had literally *informed* them, to the nation's popular culture. As early as 1870 a melodrama celebrating the transcontinental railroad predicted uses to be made of those caricatures in ten thousand westerns which would march across the landscape of dime novels, stage plays, and ultimately of films, radio and television. In *Across the Continent; or, Scenes from New York Life and the Pacific Railroad*, the minstrel roles of Tambo and Bones were filled by a black servant, "Caesar Augustus, called Coon because he is one," and "Very Tart, a Chinaman." The California-bound party, barricaded in a railroad station, is expecting attack from Indians led by the ferocious chief, Black Cloud. Very Tart, never having seen a black man before, mistakes Caesar Augustus for the chief. "Oh, Black Cloud—Black Cloud!" he cries in terror. But John (the hero) reassures him, "That ain't an injun—it's only a nigger." To which Caesar Augustus agrees: "Well, thank the Lord I'se only a nigger." The climax of course will be the arrival of a trainload of soldiers to annihilate Black Cloud and his horde. Just before the shooting starts, Very Tart finds a large empty

⁴⁶Dumont, *Birch and Backus' Songs*, p. 57. George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1931), 6:585; Stuart W. Hyde, "The Chinese Stereotype in American Melodrama," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 34 (Dec. 1955), 357-65.

packing crate on the station platform, and as he crawls inside informs the audience: "Melican man like figh tee. Chinaman like sleepee in a box."⁴⁷

The ideological impact of minstrelsy was programmed by its conventional blackface form. There is no possibility of escaping this relationship because the greater the interest, talent, complexity and *humanity* embodied in its content, the more irresistible was the racist message of the form. One is tempted to borrow McLuhan's phrase: the medium was the message. Yet that would miss the point since without its content, the form would have been inconsequential. As noted earlier, the matrix of social content contained, among other elements, a style of moral permissiveness. Horizontally this style was linked to the cosmopolitanism of new urban environments and the open opportunity of the frontier. There was also a vertical linkage which went straight down under to a permissiveness to demean, ridicule and destroy all those outside the fraternity of white egalitarianism. The meaning did not reside solely in negative or ridiculous portrayals of nonwhites; it resided in the "convention" itself. Blackface performers were like puppets operated by a white puppet-master. Their physical appearance proclaimed their non-humanity; yet they could be manipulated not only to mock themselves, but also to act like human beings. They expressed human emotions such as joy and grief, love, fear, longing. The white audience then identified with the emotions, admired the skill of the puppeteer, even sympathized laughingly with the hopeless aspiration of the puppets to become human, and at the same time feasted on the assurance that they could not do so. Blackface minstrelsy's dominance of popular entertainment amounted to half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy.

American historians have traditionally attached a major importance to the Jacksonian era. The effects of that era have been interpreted variously in terms of nationalism, politics, social status, population movement, technological and economic growth. Each of these interpretations assumes diffusion of new ideas and attitudes through a population which, during the period under consideration, was moving from the Mississippi Valley to the Pacific Coast and increasing numerically from seventeen to fifty millions. No doubt diffusion of ideas and attitudes occurred in such old-fashioned ways as by word of mouth and written correspondence; but it occurred also by new methods including steam-powered presses and popular entertainment which brought mass audiences into the tents, town halls and theaters of new population centers. Thus gathered together, they could rejoice in what Mark Twain had described as a "glad and stunning surprise."

⁴⁷James J. McCloskey, *Across the Continent: or, Scenes from New York Life and the Pacific Railroad*, in Isaac Goldberg and Hubert Hefner, eds., *Davy Crockett and Other Plays* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1940), pp. 110-12.

At other times a vitriolic critic of American society, Mark Twain's uncritical approval of minstrelsy is testimony to the pervasiveness of its influence. He seems simply to have taken the blackface "convention" for granted and probably had no perception of the African elements in the music and dance. Minstrel songs, he wrote, "were a delight to me as long as the Negro show continued in existence. In the beginning the songs were rudely comic . . . but a little later sentimental songs were introduced, such as 'The Blue Juniata,' 'Sweet Ellen Bayne,' 'Nelly Bly,' 'A Life on the Ocean Wave,' 'The Larboard Watch,' etc."⁴⁸ Two of the five songs mentioned were Stephen Foster's. Clearly what Mark Twain preferred was the nostalgic, "white" voice of minstrelsy which had already attained full expression ten years before the Civil War.

Way down on the Swanee ribber
Far, far away,
Dere's wha my heart is turning ebber . . .⁴⁹

The "darkey" dialect is transparent. The black puppets are striving to be white, singing in white voice, while the white audience in the new city or the new West lingers through a moment of self-pity and regret for things past, before the rattle of tambourine and bones calls up the clowns again. It would be a mistake to underestimate these tearjerkers. Whatever they may or may not say to anyone in the mid-20th century, it is clear that to the author of *Huckleberry Finn* they said a great deal. For Mark Twain, as for many of his contemporaries, they touched the central chords of white consciousness—the place left behind and the endless outward journey. By setting a heroic, tragic concept of human destiny in a conventional form which denied human status to nonwhites, blackface minstrelsy acted out the most appalling aspect of Jacksonian ideology. It is useless to debate whether the minstrels created or merely reflected this ideology; mass entertainment necessarily transmits as it creates and creates in transmitting.

⁴⁸Mark Twain, p. 66.

⁴⁹[Stephen Foster], "Old Folks at Home," in *Christy's No. 1*, p. 7.