BLACKING UP

The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America

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"Our best poets and authors contribute to the progress of this our only original American Institution," a performer in 1863 proudly boasted about his profession. "Its songs are sung by Fifth Avenue belles and are hummed by modest serving-girls. Brass bands march through streets playing songs the newsboys will soon be whistling." To some mid-nineteenth-century Americans, it was "The only true American drama" or an "American National Opera." But to most people it was simply "nigger minstrelsy." Performed by white men in blackface make-up, using what they claimed were Negro dialects, songs, dances, and jokes, minstrelsy literally swept the nation in the 1840's, from the White House to the California gold fields, from New Orleans to New England, from riverboats and saloons to 2500-seat theaters. For over half a century it remained the most popular entertainment form in the country.

With its images of Negroes shaped by white expectations
After the Civil War, the content of minstrelsy changed as pervasively and fundamentally as its form did. Faced with basic changes in American society as well as with increased entertainment competition that included large numbers of black minstrels who made the plantation their specialty, white minstrels devoted much less attention to Southern Negroes and much more to national developments.\(^1\) Minstrels had begun to look more critically at life in the Northern states during the sectional crisis of the late 1850's. But more than anything else it was the Civil War experience—the jarring contrasts between war profiteering and corruption and national idealism and sacrifice—that made white minstrels strikingly expand the range and depth of their social commentary. This became the primary concern of white minstrelsy in the late nineteenth century when immigration, urbanization, and modernization forced the American public to undergo fundamental institutional, social, and moral changes.

In their own informal, perhaps unconscious way, minstrels tried to help their audiences cope with their deepest concerns, anxieties, and needs. But since minstrels, like most other people, did not really understand the complex forces that were transforming their lives, they focused their criticism and explanations on only the most superficial features and the most striking evidence of these changes. In the short run, this oversimplification allowed minstrel audiences to feel that they understood what was happening to them and to their country. Minstrelsy’s simplified ethnic caricatures made the nation’s diverse immigrants seem comprehensible to native white Americans. Similarly, its attacks on cities as the causes, not the evidence, of social and moral decay gave audiences convenient, though inappropriate, targets for public dissatisfaction and anxiety. In the long run, minstrelsy implanted these stereotypes in American popular thought. As decades passed and conditions grew steadily worse and more uncontrollable, minstrels intensified their criticisms. They also became increasingly frustrated with their inability to offer any solutions. Ultimately, they took refuge in sentimental nostalgia.

When minstrels shifted away from Negro topics, they did not, however, automatically discard their blackface. From the beginning of minstrelsy, one of the functions of the blackface had been to give the minstrel a position similar to the classical fool. Set apart from the society, believed to be mentally inferior and immature, black characters could express serious criticism without compelling the listener to take them seriously. Through the antics and opinions of these characters, audiences could laugh at some of their own difficulties and anxieties while being assured that someone was more ignorant and worse off than they.\(^2\) The blackface that was originally such an eye-catching novelty became, after the war, little more in most cases than a familiar stage convention. The use of Negro dialect was what
indicated to the audience that minstrels were portraying Negroes, usually the ludicrous low-comedy types that peopled minstrel farces and provided both the targets and the vehicles for minstrelsy’s social criticism. The absence of dialect, on the other hand, permitted blackface characters to sing of their blue-eyed, blond-haired lovers without provoking any protests or to use Irish and German dialects to portray immigrant groups.

Before the Civil War, minstrels ranged widely in their social commentary. They lampooned other entertainment, from Barnum to Jennie “Leather-lungs” Lind, and joked about the telegraphic cable to England, the world’s fair in London, and country rubes falling in love with Hiram Powers’s nude sculpture “The Greek Slave.” Through their ignorant black characters, they “explained” natural phenomena like gravity and electricity. They sympathetically conveyed both the high hopes and the bitter disappointments produced by the California gold rush; and they made light of some of the cults and fads of the day—Millerites, spirit-rapping, “free-knowledgey” (Phrenology), and the Shakers.3

Aside from slavery and the abolitionists, however, the only serious subject they extensively treated before the war was the women’s rights movement, which they consistently ridiculed and condemned. Some performers, like Eph Horn, specialized in parodying women’s rights, and the “Women’s Rights Lecture” became one of the standard stump speeches. Besides the typical malaprops, non sequiturs, and convoluted verbiage, these stump speakers hammered at the same point:

When woman’s rights is stirred a bit
De first reform she bitches on
Is how she can wid least delay
Just draw a pair ob britches on.

The alleged desire of women to wear pants, and thereby symbolically reject their traditional subservient role, was the minstrels’ greatest concern. Predictably, they ridiculed bloomers and any suggestion of equality for women. Mocking women’s demand to participate in politics and to “direct the ship of state,” minstrels often punned about women loving “parties” and being “vessels.”

Jim, I tink de ladies oughter vote.

No, Mr. Johnson, ladies am supposed to care berry little about poltyick, and yet de majority ob em am strongly tached to parties.

If women had equal rights, minstrels argued, they would be “lowered” from their exalted moral position until they would lose their femininity and act like rowdy men.

I'll run and fight and gouge and bite and tumble in de mud
Till all de ground for miles around am kivered wid my blood.

Women, like Negroes, provided one of the few stable “inferiors” that assured white men of their status. Since women’s rights seemed to be challenging that, minstrels lashed out against the movement almost as strongly as they attacked Negroes who threatened white male superiority. After the war, when minstrels increasingly turned to social and moral problems, women’s challenge to men’s traditional role became part of a broader critique of the general decay of social values.4 Before the war it was a deeply disturbing topical issue, closely linked to the Negro’s threat to proper social order. But throughout the nineteenth century, minstrels never varied from their complete condemnation of women’s rights.
In the 1850’s minstrels began to take note of America’s human diversity, a subject that became a major post-Civil War theme. Besides making extensive use of the frontier lore and characters, they occasionally portrayed other native white American folk types: “Sam Simple” the Yankee, “Sam Patch the Jumpin’ Man,” and “Mose the B’howery B’boy.” But only Mose got more than slight coverage and that only in the mid-1850’s.\(^5\) After the mid-1850’s the grave questions about slavery and blacks that seriously threatened the nation dampened the buoyant optimism expressed in these white folk types. Furthermore, based as they were on regional folklore, they could not serve as unifying symbols that transcended sectionalism. Thus, they virtually disappeared from the popular stage before the Civil War.

But the most exotic native American, the Indian, who also first came to minstrels’ attention in the antebellum years, interested them until about 1880. Over these decades, minstrelsy’s portrayals of Indians sharply changed, revealing the public’s fluctuating attitudes toward them. Traditionally, white attitudes toward Indians have been characterized by ambivalence. As natural products of America, Indians were viewed as a noble, honorable, fiercely independent people—traits white Americans liked to believe all native Americans had.\(^6\) But as occupants of the land “destined” for white Americans, they were viewed as barbaric pagans, blocking the fulfillment of the American mission. Vacillation between these views typified white attitudes during the nineteenth century.

Although minstrels treated Indians only sporadically before the Civil War, they consistently followed in the idealized footsteps of James Fenimore Cooper’s Red Noblemen of Nature and the heroic Sagamore in the popular play *Metamora*. Despite a few negative comments, such as “it was great fun when Tecumseh was shot,” \(^7\) minstrels usually presented Indians as innocents in any idyllic American setting that white men had destroyed. The “Indian Hunter,” for example, portrayed an Indian pleading with the white man to let him return to his Western home, to his valiant chiefrnan father, who had resisted the “insolent conquerors,” and to his dark-eyed maid whose “fawn’s heart was as pure as snow.” Again, minstrels invoked the familiar themes of the idealized home and family threatened by “progress.” Why had the white man come to take the Indian’s land, the hunter asked, when he had abundant riches of his own? “Why should he come to harm one who never harmed him?” Minstrels completed their tragic images by describing gallant warriors giving their lives to defend their wigwams and their way of life.\(^8\)

Caught up in the turbulence of modernization, antebellum white Americans grasped for symbols of an idealized, romantic past. Since Indians were not at that time a threat or an obstacle to whites, while plantation blacks (not yet fully romanticized) were, in fact, threatening the existence of the Union, the minstrels cast Indians as representatives of a more innocent time and place that had been destroyed by modernization. In mourning for them, the audiences could mourn for their own lost simplicity and for a heroic American past.

In 1865 Bryant’s Minstrels enjoyed great success with a long run of “The Live Injin,” a typical minstrel farce, except that it centered on an Indian. In the skit, a young lover hired a black servant, Pete, to smuggle notes past his girl friend’s interfering father. But when Pete tried it disguised as a woman, his skirt was pulled off and the father chased him away. Deciding that he needed a completely different approach, he masqueraded as an “injin.” After several comic Indian songs and dances, he was possessed by his role, went on a rampage, and scalped all the other cast members. This “innocent,” heavily slapstick farce signaled a striking change in minstrelsy’s por-
trayals of Indians. Even in lighthearted comedies like this one, the central minstrel image of the Indian shifted from the noble red man to the vicious scalper. Thus, in 1870, when Duprez and Benedict's Minstrels featured an account of their transcontinental railroad trip, they concluded with a railroad explosion after which the "fertile red man" rushed in and scalped his "pale (?) faced brother." 9

After the Civil War, Indians again stood in the way of American expansion. Throughout the 1870's Indian wars raged mercilessly as white Americans, again invoking their "manifest destiny," moved Westward, literally destroying the red man in the process. In this decade, minstrels devoted a good deal of attention to Indians by regularly portraying them in farces, the featured spot in the show. Performed around the nation by many troupes, these skits were consistently, even violently, anti-Indian. In 1872-73 "Life on the Indian Frontier, or The Comanches" had successful runs performed by different troupes in at least San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Set in a frontier town, the skit opened with Indians and whites eating and drinking together. But as the Indians drank more and more, they became increasingly belligerent and threatening, and the villagers retreated. Only the help of the army averted "the attempted Wholesale Murder" of the townspeople by the Indians. The skit concluded with the "downfall of the Savages," underscoring the message that whites should not mix with or trust Indians. 10

That same year, Schoolcraft and Coes, in a vicious skit, "The Three Chiefs," attacked Indian treaties as too lenient and generous. The minstrels' treaty with Chief Black Foot provided that the government supply every male Indian with rifles, revolvers, and 1,000 rounds of ammunition on the condition he agreed to kill no more than three white people a year or steal no more than two horses every six months. The whole tribe was to get roast beef, plum pudding, custard pie, and ice cream if they committed no more than one massacre and burned down no more than one town a week. Despite this generosity, Black Foot became a renegade, and a $3,000 reward was put on his head. When a Negro deputy, disguising himself as Black Foot, attempted to turn himself in to collect the reward, he was recognized, and the skit ended with people yelling "kill the nigger" and firing guns in a general chase scene. 11

"Warpath, Scalping Knives, Tomahawks, Or Adventures in the Black Hills," the San Francisco Minstrels titled their skit about General "Muster." The minstrels evidently portrayed all of the soldiers being killed, because the minstrel playing Muster later appeared as "Crawling Lizard," and other military men later played other roles. The synopsis, too, indicated that Muster and his men went to the Black Hills and unsuccessfully met the Sioux Nation. "Get your scalps insured," it warned. The Sioux were "a strange tribe. No mercy. Retreat cut off." The scene then shifted to a battle between Ned Buntline, a noted Indian slayer, and Crawling Lizard. With the woods burning and all seemingly lost, Pond Lilly, a lovely Indian maiden played by Ricardo the prima donna, emerged out of nowhere to lead the backwoodsman out of danger. Except for the happy ending, this was an unusually morose way for the San Francisco Minstrels to close a show. But once they had decided to do a skit about Custer, they really had no choice. In this period, nationalistic white Americans simply could not laugh about or romanticize Indians, who were the enemies in a bloody war. But they could still accept the convention of the Indian girl who aided and loved a white man. 12

At least two other farces in this period attacked the notion that Indians were anything other than terrifying. In one, Mr. Bones, wearing warpaint, feathers, and a ring in his nose, was adopted into a tribe, which he persuaded to give up fighting in
favor of show business. The Indians hired members of the Nebraska legislature and the governor to appear with them in “Wild Bullalum ob de Wilderness,” the governor acting as one chief and Bones as the other. They may not have made money, the skit reported, but they did get “lots of scalps worth $100 a piece on the reservation.” “Noble Savage,” first performed by Duprez and Benedict in 1874 in Providence, Rhode Island, lampooned a tenderfoot writer’s romanticized image of Indians. In the skit, a suitor had to bring a real Indian to his prospective father-in-law in order to win his daughter’s hand. Rather than actually go West, the suitor hired a black man to impersonate an Indian. When the bogus Indian appeared before the father-in-law, who had been writing romantic novels about the Indian as a noble savage, the father-in-law took one look at him, was terrified, and fled in panic, screaming for someone to “shoot the savage.” Like Dan Bryant’s “Injin,” this black imitator got carried away with the role and went on a scalping binge. This skit explicitly stated minstrelsy’s message about Indians in the 1870’s: only from the secure armchair did the Indian seem to be a nobleman of nature; in the real world, he was a frightening, vicious enemy.

Minstrels had come full circle from their views of only twenty years before. By the 1870’s, caricatures of darkies, in their idyllic plantation homes, served minstrels as romantic symbols of stability, simplicity, and order. Furthermore, minstrel darkies were contented subordinates. Even on stage, minstrels could not portray Indians as content to be the white man’s subordinates, either because they in fact violently resisted subordination or because white Americans wanted to believe their country produced only brave, independent people who would rather die than become anyone’s subordinates. To fulfill their roles, Indians had to die, either as cruel enemies or as tragic victims—there was literally no “place” for them within white American society.

In 1877, Bret Harte and Mark Twain wrote a play based on Harte’s poem about the “heathen chinee.” On opening night in New York, Twain explained their purpose to the audience. “The Chinaman is getting to be a pretty frequent figure in the United States,” Twain observed, “and is going to be a great political problem and we thought it well for you to see him on the stage before you had to deal with that problem.” Although he was wrong about the scope of the “Chinese problem,” Twain explicitly stated one of the most important functions of minstrelsy’s presentations of ethnic characters. Although on the surface they just sang songs and told jokes about peculiar people, minstrels actually provided their audiences with one of the only bases that many of them had for understanding America’s increasing ethnic diversity.

Minstrels delighted in the strange-looking and -sounding immigrants who arrived in America in the mid-nineteenth century and provided unusual material for their shows. As entertainers, minstrels tried to create vivid stage characters, recognizable and amusing types. To do this, they used the technique of the caricaturing cartoonist. That is, they selected highly visible traits unique to a group and then constructed their characterization, really caricatures, around them. Asians had odd-sounding languages, bizarre diets, and wore pigtails; Germans spoke “Dutch,” drank lager beer, and ate sauerkraut and sausage; and Irishmen had brogues, drank whisky, partied, and fought. Exaggerating these ethnic “peculiarities” and minimizing or ignoring their commonplace features, minstrels and their vaudeville successors molded distinct ethnic caricatures, each of which sharply contrasted to all the others. Furthermore, since minstrels presented them as if they were adequate representations of these groups, these caricatures made America’s human heterogeneity and complexity seem comprehensible and psychologically manageable to members of the audience. Although the minstrels only intended to entertain their public and
to increase their own popularity, what they did in the process was to embed ethnic stereotypes in their audiences' minds.

Minstrelsy's most exotic foreigners were the Asians. Although they were rarely seen in most of the country in the mid-nineteenth century, the California gold rush brought white Americans, including minstrels, in contact with the Chinese. Different from Americans in race, language, and culture, the Chinese quickly became a part of the minstrel's array of minor curiosities. Although they referred to the Chinese only occasionally, minstrels consistently presented them as totally alien. They concentrated on the strange sound of their language, their odd clothing, and their reported preference for exotic foods: "Ching ring, chow wow, ricken chicken, a chew/Chinaman loves big bow wow and little puppies too." They did "Burlesque Chinese Dances," mocked the sounds of the language with their "Ching, chang, chung," and were obsessed with the notion that Chinese ate cats and "Bow-wow soup, roasted bow-wow, and bow-wow pie." In the 1870's, Bret Harte's popular poem "The Heathen Chinee," and Dennis Kearny's vehemently anti-Chinese political campaigns in California produced a mild revival of minstrel interest. But except for the ethnic slur, probably inspired by Kearny, "He's no more suited to it [the job] than a chinaman for the Presidency," minstrelsy's portrayals remained unchanged. Even though minstrels never devoted much attention to the Chinese, the way they caricatured them reveals how this process worked at its simplest level. As a new and different group caught the public's eye, minstrels selected a few of their most visible and distinctive features for inclusion in the shows, and when interest in them did not develop further, minstrelsy's treatment remained superficial and laughable.

The dramatic news of Commodore Perry opening up Japan to the United States, coupled with the establishment of a Japanese Embassy in America in 1860, made the Japanese greater public sensations in the Northeast, where minstrelsy was concentrated, than the Chinese ever were. In fact, minstrelsy figured in the initial contacts between the United States and Japan. After the Japanese had entertained Perry and his crew with a Kabuki performance, members of the American crew staged a minstrel show for their Japanese hosts. If this was the end of Japanese interest in minstrelsy, it was just the beginning of minstrelsy's involvement with the Japanese.

"Everybody expects to make a pile by the advent of the 'outside barbarians,'" the editor of the New York Clipper observed after the arrival of the Japanese diplomats in June 1860. By that time, George Christy already had incorporated the "Japanese Treaty" into his show with a skit featuring characters like "Sinnobudgenokamia," "More Hoeckakeawe Moonshee," and "Princess Ko-ket." As a further enticement for audiences, Christy boasted that several members of the Japanese Embassy would attend the "Grand Japanese Matinee" to be held every Saturday afternoon "for the accommodation of ladies and children." Following their familiar pattern, minstrels capitalized on an eye-catching group, treated them humorously, and even offered them as curiosities for the audience to gawk at.

Minstrel portrayals of the "jap-oh-knees" peaked between 1865 and 1867 when a troupe of Imperial Japanese Acrobats toured in America. Billing themselves as "The Flying Black Japs," at least eight major minstrel companies performed take-offs on this new sensation.

BALANCING, JUGGLING, TOP SPINNING, AND ENCHANTED LADDERS, HAM-SANDWICH-CELLAR-KITCHEN and his beautiful son
ALL WRONG . . .

"will appear assisted by eleven or eight other 'japs'," Carncross and Dixey boasted in typical fashion in 1865. Although they
did not use real Japanese in their shows, minstrels actually attempted spectacular acrobatics. Several, in fact, injured themselves when they fell over thirty feet while performing these gyrations. Yet, the principal attraction remained racial, not gymnastic. Kelly and Leon’s large advertisement in the Clipper simply announced:

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The original burst of interest in these exotics of the Orient subsided until Gilbert and Sullivan’s Mikado again brought the Japanese into public attention. In the mid-1880’s J. H. Haverly presented a “Colossal Japanese Show” including jugglers, tumblers, necromancers, from “the court theatre of his Imperial Majesty the Mikado of Japan.” Haverly evidently had hired an actual Japanese troupe. The playbills and posters advertised what appeared to be authentic Japanese names and showed pictures of Oriental acrobats. Other than this extravaganza, minstrelsy limited its treatments of the Japanese in the 1880’s to their extremely popular burlesques of the Mikado. In 1885, for example, Thatcher, Primrose, and West advertised the 138th consecutive performance of the Black Mikado, which ran well into 1886. The political commentary at the heart of some of these burlesques was revealed by the cast that Carncross’s Minstrels used: “Alvin Blackberry,” a “smart Coon, chairman of the Ward Committee”; “Whatdoyousay,” a Japanese “Black and Tan”; “Grover Tycoon Cleveland,” the big Fly Coon from Washington”; a Japanese “no account”; and “as a special curiosity,” a few honest New York Aldermen. Another company added “Boodle Taker,” a Japanese alderman, to the same political cast.23

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By the 1880’s minstrels were not really interested in the Japanese themselves. They were just burlesquing a popular musical and condemning political corruption in America. As they had with the Chinese, minstrels presented the Japanese only as a curiosity and only when some unusual event focused public attention on them. Minstrels never pretended to portray Asians’ feelings, attitudes, or motives. For minstrels, Asians were just strange, passing fancies, like Barnum’s curiosities. Contrary to Twain’s prediction, nineteenth-century white Americans did not have to come to grips with the nature of Asians and their place in America.

Since both the Irish and the Germans made a permanent place for themselves in America, they earned a similar position in the minstrel show. Minstrelsy’s treatment of the Germans, which became frequent only after 1860, was consistently more favorable than that it accorded any other group. Although minstrels created comic characterizations of them, they portrayed Germans as practical, hard-working people. Usually played for good-natured comedy, robust German women and burly men, speaking “Dutch” dialects, indulged their immense appetites for sauerkraut, sausage, cheese, pretzels, and beer. Although men frequented lager beer saloons, sometimes drank too much, or ran up tabs they could not pay, they were never rowdy or obnoxious as the minstrel Irish often were. German women were usually built like the “Radish Girl,” who was “butty as a shuck horse,” but, despite their tendency to overeat, they were good, solid, practical women. Minstrels joked about German courtship only because of the characters’ hefty physiques and even heftier appetites:

Vonce dere lifed a sailor’s darter
Und a vellar vot loofed her very much;
Dat vellar used to take her up to Shon’s Woods
Und dreat her do everding fine,
Lager bier, und pretzels, blenty of Limburger Cheese, 
Good bologny sausage and Rhine Wine.

Except for the abundance of odd foods, minstrels presented German courting as very proper, indeed almost a model. Unlike many of the frivolous fashion butterflies whom minstrels condemned, German women did not waste their money on senseless fads or flirt their lives away. They always demanded that suitors ask their fathers for permission to court and to marry them; they did not make expensive demands on their wooers; they got married after a proper, if somewhat comical, courtship; and they were efficient homemakers. Even when poor and living in a shanty, a German would always "give you shelter mit something to eat, or not from his door turn you into de street." 26

Minstrels also testified that Germans had earned themselves a place in America by valiantly fighting for the Union. One such character, a shoemaker, enlisted with General "Sigel's" forces to "slauch dem tam Secession volks," even though he did not want to give up his sauerkraut, "switzer kase," and beer for army salt pork. And, minstrels asserted, Germans also paid the brutal costs of the war along with the native Americans. Many died, and others like "Shonny" had his legs blown off. But despite such sacrifices and the good lives they led, Germans still suffered discrimination. Know-Nothing who attacked Germans, Frank Converse charged in 1863, did not even know the difference between good and bad people. And thirteen years later, Sam Devere, a German minstrel who, like Luke Schoolcraft and other Germans, performed a good deal of German material, had one of his characters say he hated to complain about America, but he had been harassed wherever he went and whatever he did by "loafers" who should "be dead for making fun of the Dutchman." 27

Reflecting their bias in favor of the industrious Germans, minstrels contrasted German successes in America to Irish failures. One song, for example, compared a German to an Irish woman. Although Biddy, who had been in America for five years, was still a complete failure, Hans, who had come to America without a cent only two years before, already owned his own home, a sausage and bakery shop, and was worth $2,000. Hard work and a keen business sense had paid off for him. But Biddy, with her lackadaisical manner, did not realize that she could not succeed selling flat beer and stale food. After he purchased her business, Hans quickly converted Biddy's failure into another of his successes. 28 To minstrels, as to many other Americans, all Germans were like Hans. Because they fit so well into white American values and world-view, Germans seemed model immigrants. Thus, from the beginning, minstrels portrayed them as positively as they could any group while still playing for laughs and emphasizing group peculiarities.

If Germans were the favorite immigrants in the minstrel show, the Irish were the most numerous. In the 1840's prejudice and discrimination against the Irish in America were rampant, principally because the Irish were a rapidly growing cheap labor force that drove wages down, but also because they were Catholics, who natives feared were Papal agents sent to corrupt the American democratic experiment. Although the earliest minstrel portrayals of the Irish were less vitriolic than most of the anti-Irish rhetoric, they reflected some of these feelings. As early as 1843, minstrels attacked "Paddy" as "de biggest fool dat eber walk" because he did not know how to do anything right. When he got political rights, minstrels charged, he just sold his vote to the highest bidder. In 1848, they condemned the Irish for rioting in Philadelphia and killing both blacks and "natives" in violent raids supposedly led by priests.
Minstrels also complained that the city officials offered a reward to find the people who had burned a Catholic church: “But to catch dem [Irishmen] dat killed freedom’s sons,/De state couldn’t find no law nor funds.” In the 1840’s minstrels also began to describe the Irish as heavy-drinking, free-swinging brawlers. But minstrelsy’s tone in much of this was light, not sinister or threatening. Even the fights were brotherly brawls gleefully enjoyed by all, much like the last dance at a party—a happy, if violent, closing formula. This light tone made these songs the antithesis of the somber temperance songs on the same theme and of the menacing “razor-toting nigger” songs of later years. But they still presented unfavorable, stereotyped images of Irish men and of nagging and/or brawling Irish women.

But in subsequent years, the large number of Irishmen who became minstrel stars, including Dan Bryant, George Christy, Matt Campbell, Billy Emerson, and a host of others, broadened and softened these negative images of the Irish. Beginning in the 1850’s, when minstrelsy was still concentrated in the Eastern cities where the heavy proportions of Irish population must have comprised part of the minstrel audience, minstrels began to portray more favorable images of the Irish. A collection of the Sable Harmonists’ songs published in about 1850, for example, contained six Irish songs by John Collins. Except that he used Irish names like “Molly Malone” and “Katy O’Conner” and referred to St. Patrick’s birthday, his songs were indistinguishable from typical romantic and sentimental ballads of the period. Later in the decade, Collins sang of the beauties of Ireland and his sorrow at leaving it, concluding with a prayer that Erin become a free nation. The Irish, Collins asserted in song, differed only in name; they too were romantic lovers and freedom-loving patriots. In 1859, Matt Peel, also an Irish minstrel, added another favorable dimension by singing that although Paddy was poor and had only a small shabby house, “no king in his palace” was prouder than he was when at home with the family he loved “more than gold.”

Complexity and humanity in portraying the Irish became common only in the 1870’s, when an Irishman, Edward Harrigan, left minstrelsy for the variety theater and traded his blackface for his more natural Irish brogue. Called both the “American Dickens” and the “American Gilbert and Sullivan,” Harrigan and his partner, Tony Hart, began with a short Irish skit in 1873. Within five years they had developed a series of full-length plays portraying ethnic life in New York City. Concentrating on common people and on the vitality of their cultures, the team won unprecedented success by weaving an intricate web of ethnic life and conflict with the Irish at the center and blacks, Germans, and Italians intertwined around them.

Although his German and black characters were important, Harrigan’s greatest achievement was his presentation of the Irish point of view. Through his major character Dan Muligan, who came to America in 1848, fought in the Civil War, bought a grocery store, and became a successful local politician, Harrigan portrayed the complexity of the Irish—and their humanity. His Irishmen were laughed at, but they were also laughed with; they were drinkers and brawlers, but they were also hard workers; they engaged in political graft, but at the same time worked for their people. Harrigan also praised the strong Irish sense of group identity and their flourishing social organizations; he applauded their bravery during the Civil War, lamented the human anthills they had to live in, and denounced the discrimination they had to endure. In short, he presented a full panorama of Irish life.

Although greatly influenced by Harrigan and Hart’s portrayal of the Irish, minstrels could never present characters with the complexity, depth, and humanity that Harrigan achieved.
The forms they worked in differed too greatly. Harrigan and Hart had a resident theatrical company in New York that presented full-length plays to a heavily ethnic, working-class audience. Although not strictly speaking an exclusively ethnic theater, like Yiddish theater that was meaningless to people who did not understand Yiddish, Harrigan and Hart's shows were in-group experiences. Because of this and because full-length plays allowed, almost required, depth of characterization, they presented relatively complex, multifaceted characters and plots that unfolded throughout the series of plays. Since minstrels, on the other hand, traveled extensively to the heartland of white America, they did not usually have an ethnic audience and could not build up a consistent clientele with whom they could develop continuities. Furthermore, minstrels, as a form had its roots in caricature, not characterization, and it required diversity: short, self-contained acts, lavish production numbers, and slapstick farces. None of these allowed the in-depth characterization or the presentation of different perspectives on the same subject that were necessary to capture humanity. Minstrels could easily diversify their portrayals of groups but could not easily capture human complexity. Consequently, when they borrowed from Harrigan and Hart, they took individual pieces, not the complex network of interrelated characters and events.

Although some minstrels did not acknowledge their debt to him, Harrigan's presence overshadowed minstrelsy's portrayals of the Irish after the mid-1870's. While continuing to sing of Irishmen drinking and fighting, as Harrigan himself did, minstrels greatly diversified their images of the Irish. Drawing on both Harrigan's description of Irish problems and on the vogue for temperance songs, several minstrels sang of Irish parents lamenting the ill effects of drinking and city life on their children. “Since Terry First Joined the Gang” and “Since Dennis Took to Drink,” Irish parents complained, they both used slang, had no jobs, got into trouble, talked back to their parents, and even ended up in jail. Like so many other parents, minstrels pointed out, the Irish too worried about their children facing the city's many temptations and vices. Such concerns were never expressed by minstrelsy's Northern Negro characters, who were living embodiments of vice and folly at their most absurd. In great contrast to their diverse portrayals of both the Germans and the Irish, minstrels presented blacks in only a few stereotyped roles: as contented subordinates on the plantation, as ignorant low-comedy fools, and as ludicrous, pretentious incompetents. Whites needed these fixed images of blacks to reassure them about their own positions. Since they did not use the Irish in this way, minstrels had much greater flexibility in portraying them.

Again following Harrigan, minstrels praised Irish social clubs, policemen, and politicians as representatives of their community. The politicians threw parties for the people, held office in their name, and gave everyone a “fair shake.” When there were no jobs, they properly “made them up.” Minstrel characters also rejoiced in the dignity all Irishmen gained when John L. Sullivan became heavyweight boxing champion. Irishmen of all sorts worshiped him, minstrels sang, and even lined up to shake the “hand that shook the hand of Sullivan.” Minstrels also protested the discrimination the Irish suffered despite their commitment to America. “No Irish Need Apply,” minstrels complained, was what honest Irishmen heard when they looked for work. But when America wanted soldiers, it “never said no Irish need apply.” The Irish, moreover, had contributed generals, soldiers, statesman, and poets to America. Although minstrel Irish expressed the hope that Ireland would be
free, they did not reject America. They merely longed for their homeland to be free from British tyranny, a desire Americans fully understood.35

By the 1880’s, minstrelsy’s images of the Irish had become quite varied and diverse. Unlike the Germans, who had gotten favorable treatment from the beginning, the minstrel Irish went from simple, negative caricatures to a more diversified treatment than that given any other group, even the Germans. Since this so sharply contrasted to their treatment of blacks, it is important to understand why it happened. Certainly Harrigan’s great success, which caused minstrels to incorporate some of his features, was a major factor. But this is an insufficient explanation. Minstrels, after all, could have borrowed selectively and maintained their simple negative images. To be sure, the substantial numbers of Irishmen who became minstrels played an important part in humanizing minstrel portrayals. But when blacks became minstrels, they could make only minor changes in minstrel stereotypes of Negroes. The critical point was that native, white Americans had no deep-seated need to keep the Irish in “their place” or to justify the place they were kept in as they did with blacks. Furthermore, a great many Americans probably had no preconceived image of the Irish, which meant that Harrigan and the Irish minstrels’ diverse, humane ideas about the Irish could have great impact. Probably most important of all, the Irish and the Germans were fellow white men, whom white Americans could much more easily accept than they could native-born blacks.

Besides ethnic diversity, minstrels were deeply concerned about the social and moral decay that they saw taking place. To them, cities, where these developments were most obvious, seemed the problem. Although some minstrel songs neutrally described cities, minstrels, like most Americans were over-

whelmingly negative toward cities from the time they first noticed them.36 The only substantial changes in their treatment over time were in the breadth of charges they leveled and in the growing importance urban topics assumed in the shows. As their audience changed, so did their emphasis. In the 1850’s, while still based in cities, minstrels limited themselves to attacking the dire living conditions and to lambasting the unproductive and often immoral lives of urban dilettantes; in the 1860’s, as they traveled more, they added warnings about “city slickers” preying on new arrivals; and in the financially rocky 1870’s and 1880’s they also attacked inequities in wealth, which they associated with cities.

Beginning in the 1850’s minstrels, speaking to urban audiences, protested a wide range of urban problems: stage coaches that drove too fast and knocked women and babies down, filthy streets that were never cleaned, policemen who demanded bribes, people selling votes and buying wives, manipulating politicians, high taxes, and continual robberies. They frequently complained about the atrociously high rents people had to pay, but what they got for these high prices was even worse—or at least funnier. When moving into a new place, Charlie Fox complained, he and an old lady were asked by the cigar-smoking landlord whether smoke bothered them. Both said it did not, paid their money, and then were told that it was a good thing smoke did not disturb them because the fireplaces smoked so badly that they would be smoked beef in less than two weeks. Fox also said he was changing boardinghouses because the food, which consisted of stewed cat, raw crocodile, monkey’s feet, broiled flunkies, and arsenical soups, had hair in it. But at least, he concluded, there was not a single bug in the house. All of them were married and had children.37

Minstrels were very seriously disturbed by what seemed a
shocking deterioration of moral values in the city. But they attacked only symptoms, not causes. People no longer attended churches, they lamented.

Pompey, does you eber attend church?

Why yes, I go a good deal—considerable—almost every Sunday—occasionally—once in a while—a little—not much if any.

And when the city dwellers did go, minstrels complained, "churches built for prayer are where people show off their fashions." Everywhere they looked they saw conventional morality being ignored and families disintegrating. Men put ads in newspapers to meet pretty girls and, what was worse, got answers. Divorce and infidelity seemed to be sharply increasing. One minstrel character's wife "fell to temptation" and deserted him to "live in luxury with her lover." Many husbands became drunkards and adulterers. One drunken man even tried to pick up his own wife on the street, while a number of others boasted of their nightly sexual exploits.

To minstrels, the city's most pernicious effect was its corruption of the young. In Central Park, minstrels complained, there were many wayward young people, often mere boys, who:

Instead of being home with their mamas
Are running round smoking penny cigars
And girls scarcely sixteen years old
Laughing and chatting with them so bold
And doing the thing that is not right
On Central Park on a Sunday night.

Many of the younger generation even showed complete disregard for their aging parents. One old minstrel character, for example, who had loved and cared for his children, found them sending him off to the poorhouse to die alone. "God knows how their father loved them," he lamented, "but they've driven him out into the street."

Perhaps worst of all, young people were obsessed with frivolous and self-indulgent dilettantism like the decadent European aristocrats whom Americans so often condemned.

Our dandies now have lots of brass, But very little brains, Their pants are made to fit so tight, Their legs are like a crane's. Our ladies too are like the men, They've got to wearing boots, With dresses made of costly silk, Spread out with barrel hoops.

Calculated dishonesty, expensive clothing, lives spent in trivial flirtations, a complete rejection of useful work, a tendency to "obey society not himself": all the best American traits inverted. The very heart of the egalitarian experiment seemed lost. Minstrels continually hammered at these changes by ridiculing the "dandies" and "swells" who epitomized them. Again, ludicrous black characters carried these trends to ridiculous extremes, providing audiences with models of this social inversion at its worst. But minstrels had long presented ludicrous blacks "out of their places." Now they added nondialect characters—their own children. Senseless young women wore hoop skirts, hair pieces, bustles, extravagant silks and satins, and "palpitators to swell their bosoms"; they showed their legs, painted their faces, and shamelessly flirted with strangers; they shirked all work, but read every new romance and sonnet and flocked to lavish balls and parties; and, fancying themselves better than poor people, they forced their parents deeply into debt to maintain their position in the "better set." Minstrels also satirized male dandies, but more often, they portrayed men, even dandies, as victims of demanding females who forced them to live beyond their means. One such "Modern Fast
Young Gentleman” gave lavish parties, had fast horses, several yachts, and many servants to turn poor people away from his gates. Finally, his creditors caught up with him and sent him to prison.  

Although minstrels attacked both male and female dilettantes, they placed much more blame on the women, who minstrels felt should have forced men to settle down and raise families.

Beginning in the 1860's, as minstrels traveled more widely, they warned their new audiences about the hazards awaiting urban visitors. Again, they commonly blamed women and pictured men as victims. Although they occasionally ridiculed the visitors as “gawks” or “countrymen green as peas” who foolishly squandered their money on women, fashions, drinking, and gambling, they usually pictured them as naïve prey for professional thieves and extortionists. One young farm boy from New Jersey learned of the hardships of the city while he was still on the train. After a young widow asked him to hold her baby and then disappeared, he discovered a note from her telling him that the baby was dead and that she could not afford to bury it. Others were bilked on the train, but most fell victim when they went looking for recreation in the cities. Women picked men up, got them drunk, drugged their wine, and robbed them; some even had male accomplices who “rolled” the victims. One woman, for example, allowed herself to be picked up and then started screaming that she was being molested. After her “date” was arrested, she wrote him a note saying that if he paid her, she would drop the charges and her friends at the police station would release him. Women, too, fell victim to city slickers, especially “old maids” all too willing to trade money for companionship. Rural visitors, minstrels asserted, simply did not know how to cope with the new urban morality, which stressed that the only way to survive was “to be stronger than everybody else—lie, cheat, and steal if necessary.” And lest these examples were not enough, minstrels preached directly to their audiences: “Whoever you meet,” George Christy warned, “look for their little game.”

Besides condemning the living conditions, the social and moral changes, and the hazards of city life, minstrels also associated with extreme inequities of wealth. During the economically disastrous 1870's and 1880's some minstrels became overtly “antirich man.” The wealthy complained of hard times, minstrels claimed, only because they could not get even more money than they already had. “De poor man and his family do all de sufferin.” a minstrel charged, “and de rich all de jawin.” The rich, another minstrel alleged, “own all the railroads and all of the land, and tell all the people to go and be d——.” Employers callously disregarded the welfare of their workers as long as they stayed on the job. Although coal miners labored hard at their dangerous jobs, the “great ones,” secure in the warmth of their homes, cared nothing about the danger of the mines even though:

The very fires their mansions boast
To cheer themselves and wives
Mayhap were kindled at the cost
Of jovial colliers lives.

In 1884, a minstrel complained that businessmen, taking advantage of the economic difficulties, lowered wages and left the workingman's children crying for bread. Another referred to “blood-sucking, thieving employers,” while arguing for fair wages. Minstrels also strikingly contrasted the luxurious lives of the rich and the dire fate of orphan children freezing to death in the street while begging for pennies. These songs and speeches constituted a strong indictment of the insensitivity and social irresponsibility of the wealthy.

But like many other Americans in the late nineteenth cen-
Blacking Up

Consistently sympathetic to the poor, who probably sat in their audiences, minstrels still thought only in terms of conventional morality. They reminded their audiences that even thieves and “nymphs of the pave” could mend their ways and urged everyone to “offer a helping hand” to the less fortunate. They incessantly intoned familiar aphorisms extolling nineteenth-century American values: “Always Be Ready When Your Chance Comes,” “Pull Hard Against The Stream,” “Slow and Steady Wins The Race,” “Where There’s A Will There’s A Way,” and many others. They also offered lessons in interpersonal relations and personal morals: “Forgive and Forget, But If You Can’t Do Both, At Least Forgive,” “Never Hit a Man When He’s Down, Boys,” “Always Do to Others As You’d Wish to Be Done By,” “Put the Brake on When You’re Going Down the Hill.”

Confronted with what they saw as fundamental decay of their world, minstrels were unable to offer any solution. They made the nation’s growing ethnic diversity seem comprehensible by adding more caricatures to the show. They lashed out at the effects of urbanization and industrialism, but they had only moralisms for remedies. Consequently, they became increasingly escapist, wallowing in sentimentalism and nostalgia.

Social Commentary in White Minstrelsy

Longing for a simple, secure time when there were no problems, they looked back to an idealized past. In grandfather’s day, one minstrel recalled, men were judged by merit, not money; styles were sensible; young men did not ogle girls; married men were faithful; politicians were honest; and there was no war. Ope hundred years ago, another intoned, farmers did not cut their legs off with mowing machines; there were few divorces; lamps did not explode and kill people; there were no “Turkish harems at Salt Lake”; young women did not lose status if they did a little work; everyone made his own clothes; and everybody was honest.

Even the plantation was not immune from the destructive forces of “progress.” After the Civil War, white minstrels concentrated their portrayals of Southern Negroses, a minor but significant portion of the show, on the nostalgic Old Darky. Whether these characters had gone North and then returned or had never left, they found their old plantation gone, destroyed by the war. Aged, weak, and alone, they recalled the happy, carefree prewar days, which further underscored the tragedy of the destruction of the plantation. Since it was gone, however, audiences did not have to hear protests against the more unfortunate aspects of the plantation—like slavery. Yet they could still bask in its warmth through the memories of the Old Darky. They could envy his carefree life of perpetual childhood—singing, dancing, and frolicking. They could even momentarily share his simple world, free of the worries, insecurities, and responsibilities that they had to face. At the same time, they could feel comfortably superior to him and certain that, whatever else changed in their lives, he would always be their subordinate. Through him they could also mourn for lost simplicity, order, and control. Although he certainly did not offer an antidote for their problems, the Old Darky provided a temporary diversion, a reassuring certainty that whites desperately needed and clung to.
NOTES

1 For a comparison of the ways in which white and black minstrels presented the plantation after the war, see Chapter 8.


8 "Indian Hunter," New Negro Forget Me Not Songster (Cincinnati, 1848), pp. 128-29; and Harry Pell's Ebony Songster (New York, 1864), p. 61; Harmonious, "Indian Warrior's Grave," Boston, 1850, sheet music, HTC.

9 Dan Bryant, The Live Injun (Chicago, 1874); see Bryant's Minstrels, New York, 1865, programs, HTC; New York Clipper, Nov. 5, 1870.

10 Clipper, Sept. 14, 1872; Sept. 21, 1872, Oct. 4, 1873; Simmons, Scoum, and Sweatnam's Minstrels, Philadelphia, 1873, playbill, HTC.

11 J. C. Stewart, The Three Chiefs (New York, 1876).

12 San Francisco Minstrels, New York City, n.d., program, HTC.

13 Minstrels Gags and End Men's Hand-Book (New York, 1875), pp. 35-36.

14 Frank Dumont, Noble Savage (New York, 1880), first performed Aug. 21, 1874.


16 Robert Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (Glencoe, Ill., 1957), pp. 19-84, clearly distinguishes between manifest and latent functions, basically the difference between stated purposes and practical or objective results.

17 Milton Gordon, Assimilation in American Life (New York, 1964, paperback ed.), pp. 79-81, argues that highly visible (extrinsic)
traits are often more important in perpetuating stereotypes than internal traits. Minstrelsy certainly supports this view.


20 Clipper, June 16, 1860; advertisement for George Christy's Minstrels, n.p.; June 21, 1860, clipping, NYLC.

21 Carncross and Dixey's Minstrels, Campbell's Minstrels, Hooley's Minstrels, Kelly and Leon's Minstrels, Arlington Minstrels, San Francisco Minstrels, George Christy's Minstrels, and La Rue's Minstrels, programs and playbills, HTC, NYLC.

22 Carncross and Dixey's Minstrels, Philadelphia, 1865, playbill, HTC.


24 Haverly's American European Original Mastadons, n.p., n.d. [1882], poster and playbills, NYLC.

25 Done frequently by Haverly's, McIntyre and Heath's, Carncross', Thatcher, Primrose, and West's Minstrels in 1886, see programs and playbills in HTC and NYLC; Biemiller's Opera House, Sandusky, Ohio, Feb. 4, 1887, program, HTC.


27 "I'm Going To Fight Mit Siegal," Pell's Ebony, pp. 14-15; "Cruelty to Shonny," Bob Hart's, p. 22, and Bryant's Shoo Fly, p. 29; "The Difference," Frank Converse's Old Cremona Songster (New York, 1863), p. 35; "Look at De Dutchman," Sam Devere's Combination Songster (New York, 1876), n.p. This songster had fifteen songs in German dialect, an unusually large number but typical of Devere and Luke Schoolcraft, both Germans. See also Sam Devere's Burnt Cork (New York, 1877), Schoolcraft, Shine On.

28 "Ireland versus Germany," Cool Burgess' Oh Don't Get Weary Children Songster (New York, 1877), pp. 16-17.


32 E. J. Kahn, Jr., The Merry Partners: The Age and Stage of Harrigan and Hart (New York, 1955), chapters 3-6 discuss the content of their shows in some detail.

33 Johnson and Bruno's Mania Monia Nigs Songster (New York, 1875), pp. 34, 36; William Delehaney, I Hope I Don't Intrude (New York, 1877), n.p.


35 "No Irish Need Apply," People's, pp. 13-14, and Gems of Minstrelsy (New York, 1867), pp. 44-45; "Bad Luck to Ould Jefferson
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47 For an analysis of the ways diverse Americans attempted to use traditional terms and concepts to cope with the qualitative changes

48 “Oh, Don’t Put the Poor Workingman Down,” *Newcomb’s Love Letters*, pp. 48–49.


“A company of real ‘cullud pussons’ are giving concerts in New Hampshire,” the editor of the *Clipper* observed in November 1858, “we do not see why the genuine article should not succeed. Perhaps this is but the starting point for a new era in Ethiopian entertainments.” 1 However it was intended, this observation proved prophetic. Although troupes of black minstrels appeared as early as 1855, it was a decade before blacks had established themselves in minstrelsy, their first large-scale entrance into American show business. “The minstrel show at that time was one of the greatest outlets for talented [Negro] musicians and artists,” recalled W. C. Handy, who began his own career as a black minstrel in the 1890’s. “All the best [black] talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers—the minstrel show got them all.” 2

Emphasizing their authenticity as Negroes and claiming to