SIGNIFYING IN BLACKFACE: THE PURSUIT OF MINSTREL SIGNS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Én, Varró Gabriella, teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült.

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FOREWORD

My long journey undertaken to research and study the history, iconography, cultural and literary implications, interdisciplinary and intertextual problematics, and cultural survival of the minstrel phenomenon started a good decade back, sometime in 1992. The tradition of white entertainers' masking their faces with black cork, and acting in imitation (and surely also in parody) of black people in the framework of popular theatrics began around the 1830s in the American North. Researching the historiography and broader cultural contexts of *blackface minstrelsy*, as the phenomenon is popularly referred to, has grown on me, and come to mean more than an academic commitment: it became a fascination and an addiction. A strange fascination, to be sure, especially for someone situated outside of the culture of both the 19th century and that of the United States. Also, since the blackface tradition is tied so much to what could be broadly referenced as the culture and history of black America and the representation of these by whites, I was very much aware of my precarious position as an outsider to the field, being both white and European. Yet, after I became aware of the significant cultural, historical and social knowledge that this popular theatrical tradition had to offer pertaining to issues of race, class, society and literature, there evolved an ever greater urgency in me to learn—and hopefully discover—more about minstrelsy's specific cultural import and contexts.

In no age can the study of theater be separated from the history, societal structure and cultural contexts of the times, and this is true, in more senses than one, in the case of the popular theater. When one researches any particular facet of the 19th-century American popular stage in the United States, there is no escaping the assessment of the various elements that acted upon its shaping and shared in the creation of its formulas. Mine too was a work that involved constant learning about popular culture, the entertainment industry, audience behavior, ideological ramifications, ethnic and class conflict in the 19th century, the history of the rise of African American art and culture within the often alien context of mainstream American art, as well as about issues of cultural continuity and survival.

In a way, the present work will document how the thematically rather diverse criticism of blackface minstrelsy influenced my thinking about the minstrel phenomenon, and how by the end of this research I hope to have found an independent critical path distinct from contemporaneous critical debates. Back in 1993 I still hoped to get acquainted with the tradition of blackface mostly from critical works, and developed a focus of analysis largely based on the knowledge and personal comprehension of major critical writings pertaining to

the field. By 1998-99, besides absorbing the new critical works on minstrelsy, I also immersed myself in primary documents that helped me demythologize many of the legendary assumptions that still linger about minstrelsy. In brief, I gained a critical focus entirely my own.

The original impetus to start research in blackface minstrelsy was prompted by a book that—at that time my professor now a colleague—Zsolt Virágos published in 1975 in Hungarian about the heritage and representation of Afro-American culture in American literature, with the title *Négerség és az amerikai irodalom* ["Blacks and American Literature"]. In this book, the subchapter introducing the figure and stereotype of the Comic Negro caught my attention as having manifold connections to the American stage, popular culture as well as to American and especially African-American history (among other things), all aspects of culture that interested me greatly at the time. My professor's encouragement to initiate studies on this central stereotypical character of minstrelsy, the comic black, was just the incentive I needed. The research developed in phases, first I learned more and more about the social, historical, geographical contexts of the minstrel phenomenon—mostly from books by outstanding scholars in the field, such as Robert Toll, Carl Wittke, Hans Nathan, Eric Lott, etc.

In 1994 I managed to spend five months at Indiana University, where I studied materials on blackface's historical development in the theatrical world of the US. It was there that I developed a typology of those comic stereotypes that grew out of the minstrel show, and later invaded American culture. In 1995, summarizing my findings of typological analyses, I wrote my doctoral dissertation with the title *The "Comic Negro" in American Culture: A Study of a Popular Cultural Icon and Stereotype*. Having concluded my research, I kept contributing conference papers on meeting points between the minstrel phenomenon and contemporary trends in literary and cultural criticism. Although questions pertaining to the implied power struggles and the underlying postcolonial perspectives of minstrelsy kept the field open for novel interrogations and the discovery of novel insights, at one point I was quite certain that my studies in blackface minstrelsy were coming to an end. But they were not meant to be, as it later turned out.

In 1997, while I was teaching 19th- and 20th-century American literature to Hungarian undergraduates majoring in English, I kept coming across more and more links and references to minstrelsy in literary works. The references to these links I chanced upon multiplied to such a degree that I decided to keep a record of these literary minstrel references in a separate notebook. From the notes an obvious correlation between popular culture and literature

revealed itself and gave new impetus to my long-standing love affair with minstrelsy. The urgency to find out more about the apparent underlying literary significance of blackface, the fascinating migration and traffic of minstrel components between various cultural spaces, as well as the complex ideological ramifications involved in the institutional framework that made that traffic possible drove me back into the critical field. In 1998 I was once again back in the US—thanks to a Fulbright scholarship—, this time to develop a typology of minstrelsy's semiotic arsenal and also to investigate the correlation between literature and popular culture in the 19th century, and eager to unearth some substantial revelations about minstrelsy by looking at minstrel materials, mostly playbills.

Through that ten-month period I spent in the United States at the time, my understanding of blackface minstrelsy and the debates surrounding it widened and changed radically. This change was in great part due to the colleagues who worked with me and assisted my research at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and also at the Harvard Theatre Collection. I owe special thanks to Professor Rachel Rubin, who closely followed the progress of Chapter II of the present dissertation. In earnest, I share the credits of all my discoveries with those colleagues and librarians, who in one way or another supported the progress of this research, and I consider them as partners in this search for novel meanings in old texts.

The present work is to document the shifting paths, diverse influences, in a more general sense the learning process that led me toward this present point in time, where I am to investigate the semiotics of the minstrel phenomenon along with the relevance of this semiotic background for literary analysis.

In the ensuing study I am offering a new type of analytical tool for the study of minstrelsy—anatomizing its complex texture to the smallest of its constituent particles. I will also attempt to explain the institutional parameters that provided meaningful cultural, social and historical contexts for these minstrel components, and simultaneously contributed to their easy recognizability as well as cultural transfer that at the end of a long and complicated "migration" led to the surfacing of these self-same elements in the texts and contexts of literature. By looking at the various ways these minstrel components were elevated into the realm of formal literature and were granted important signifying functions therein, I will not only indicate the practical worth of the semiotics of minstrelsy for literary analysis, but also try to contribute to a better understanding of the mechanism of cultural continuities.

[1] Notes on Form and Style

As regards matters of manuscript style, in documenting sources the text largely conforms to the current MLA standard: parenthetical citations keyed to a Works Cited list at the end of the work. To ensure a better accessibility to the text, however, in a minor respect I chose to diverge from the MLA standard: instead of endnotes I am using footnoting throughout; the latter texts are given in small print.

My second note concerns style. This dissertation is closely tied up with issues related to African Americans, and therefore a brief note on the related terminology is due here. Historically shifting designations attached to the black minority in America reflect upon the changing ideological, political and cultural stance assumed in relation to the ethnic Other within the larger culture. Various identifying labels of the black ethnic group thus document and condense in themselves these historic evaluations and perceptions in connection with blacks. Contemporaneous terms like *nigger*, *Negro*, *coon*, *darky* will thus be preserved in the ensuing discussion in order to reflect upon historic usage. In general discussions of problems related to Afro-Americans in the 19th century I will use the more neutral term "black/s." Capitalization will be applied only to designate stereotypical categories (e. g. Comic Black Soldier). In the case of the term *Negro* I will preserve capitalization, because it is reflective of black usage. This designation was applied widely in black criticism from the end of the 19th century onward, and therefore I thought fit not to change its usual spelling.

Finally, a note on the spelling should also be included. Since the present work researches a topic from American cultural history and predominantly builds upon the resources of American literary and cultural criticism, its language is American English. Accordingly, I maintain the American spelling throughout, except when in titles, names or citations the sources apply alternative spellings (for instance in the case of the word "theater" I preserve the American spelling, but in references to institutions like the Harvard Theatre Collection I necessarily maintain the traditional spelling).

INTRODUCTION

[1] The Project

The title of the present dissertation, *Signifying in Blackface: The Pursuit of the Minstrel Signs in American Literature* has been inspired by Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs:*

Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction (2002; [1981]), a seminal work that investigates the different directions today's literary semiotics takes as well as the relevance of such theories for a more subtle understanding of literature. Among the varied insights that readers might gain from Culler's book one validates the age-old wisdom and recognition that theory should not be a wanton, arbitrary exercise, but indeed should be put to practical uses. The current undertaking, following the guidelines offered by Culler, also has two major objectives: (1) to supply the outlines of a new theory by producing the semiotics of blackface minstrelsy; and (2) to apply this semiotic framework as a critical tool in the analysis of selected texts from American literature.

According to Culler "[c]riticism occurs because the signs of literature are never simply given as such but must be pursued" (viii). Minstrel signification, similarly to other relevant cultural information hidden in literary texts should be teased out and pursued, and accordingly the present project also registers the story of a chase. It is the story of the pursuit of the signs of minstrelsy against the background of American culture and literature. The pursuit of or rather the quest for cultural signs in literature, if successful, should necessarily result in the discovery of new meanings and layers dormant in the works analyzed. The ensuing discussion was written in the hope that it could serve a better understanding of American cultural texts in a twofold manner. It shows that the methodology of semiotics can be fruitfully applied to the interpretation of certain cultural phenomena—see the development of the semiotic system of minstrelsy in the subsequent discussion—, and that the classification of cultural signs and their application to literary analysis might revitalize literary interpretations—illustrated through the pursuit of minstrel signification in American literature.

The present project was implemented in the hope of opening up new perspectives in literary criticism by pointing to ways in which formerly isolated discourses of criticism, cultural phenomena and literature can successfully be wedded. The notion that the real task of literary study should be "the production of new interpretations" (Culler ix) cannot possibly be questioned. With the present dissertation I seek to prove not only that theater and cultural semiotics are vital tools in decoding the cultural messages latent in literary works, but also that my own endeavor, highlighted here, is but a small segment of the vast possibilities out there awaiting scholars to assess. My project was to pursue the signs of blackface minstrelsy, but there are countless other cultural signs to pursue, discover, describe the operation of, still dormant on the pages of literary works, waiting to be resurrected.

[2] General Methodology

Minstrelsy's story is far from being linear. It is a conglomerate of diverse origins, thus a cluster of many influences from various cultures, ethnic groups, geographical regions, representatives of class, social interests and ideological priorities. Given this multiplicity of impulses within the phenomenon itself, it is easy to foretell that minstrelsy's metanarrative can be told in manners as diverse as there are identifiable thematic, generic, and aesthetic layers inherent in its practices and forms of objectification. Out of the repository of discourses that the minstrel stage encoded in its rituals, I will highlight the *semiotic* angle, and investigate what kind of novel insights, new perspectives this line of inquiry can bring to the understanding of the minstrel phenomenon itself, and what it has to offer in terms of a better understanding of American literature and culture as a whole.

The need to apply a semiotic approach emerged before I could concretize that it was indeed a semiotic methodology. The process started from the need to register and classify all the identifiable features and routines, the smallest recognizable elements of the original minstrel shows, in order to make these features distinguishable (i.e., translatable[1]) even in "alien" contexts. By the time I finished enumerating the elements of the minstrel repertoire, it became clear that what I was in fact after was a kind of typology of signifiers all designating in one way or another a distinctive collective signified, the 19th-century American minstrel show as such, i.e., a popular theatrical tradition. In other words, I produced what I only later came to call the semiotics of minstrelsy, a semiotic description of the signifying, or meaning-producing, elements of the classic minstrel phenomenon.

From this point on I did not have to go too far to find connections between my own endeavor and the general methodologies of theater and drama semiotics, indeed to realize that there was an entire "science" out there that shared in the objectives, dilemmas, and theoretical potholes very similar to my own.

But what is theater and drama semiotics, and what justifies its application to the context of blackface minstrelsy? Moreover, how can it be applied as a critical tool? The name of theater and drama semiotics clearly conjoins two large areas, the first being a field of artistic life and culture (theater and drama), the second being a theoretical or scientific area (semiotics). Therefore the interrogation the present discussion intends to undertake with respect to the minstrel phenomenon and indeed to American literature and culture makes use of those dialogues that are suggested in the designation *theater and drama semiotics*, i.e.,

[1] For elaboration on the related problem of the translatability of culture, see the closing chapter (Chapter VI) of this dissertation.

discourses between art, society, culture and science in general, theater and semiotics in particular.

While semiotics is often described by critics as a "science of signs" (Culler viii, for instance) which is, in the words of Keir Elam, "dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society (…) [and is] equally concerned with processes of *signification* and with those of *communication*" (1),[2] theater semiotics is looked upon as a methodological tool, rather than a scientific field, that is "a way of working, of approaching theatre in order to open up new practices and possibilities of 'seeing'" (Aston-Savona 1). Although in the past many have questioned the *raison d'être* of theater and drama semiotics, claiming that the field is hardly more than an artificial fabrication, "an academic job creation scheme" (Brean Hammond, qtd. in Aston-Savona 1), the field has managed to reaffirm and justify itself through a series of substantial scholarly works.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a definite upsurge in theoretical debates and brought to life those seminal critical writings which grounded theater semiotics as a valid research method. Such were, for instance, Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980), or Elaine Aston and George Savona's *Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (1991), and Fernando de Toro's *Theatre Semiotics: Text and Staging in Modern Theatre* (1995). These pioneering works also generated a greater awareness of the existence of the field in English (the third one obviously being a translation from Spanish), since the bulk of works related to theater semiotics had earlier been composed by European semioticians, such as the exemplary figures of the Prague School (Jan Mukařovskỳ, Jiři Veltruskỳ, Petr Bogatyrev) or some representatives of Russian Formalism (Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Victor Shklovsky and Boris Tomasjevsky), and still later in the 1970s by the Polish Tadeusz Kowzan, the French Michel Corvin, and the Italian Marco de Marinis, or the works of the French Annie Ubersfeld and Patrice Pavis, the German Erika Fischer-Lichte from the 1980s and 1990s (to mention but the most outstanding representatives), whose works remained largely inaccessible primarily because of the language barrier.[3]

It is clear to see that if semiotics treats the production of meaning in society, theater and drama semiotics fulfills the same function but concentrating on the world of the stage.

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[2] We should note here, however, that there are many theorists (for instance Terence Hawkes and A. Attila Kiss) who tend to perceive semiotics "only" as a *point of view*, rather than an entire scientific field, "its object being the meaning-producing mechanism of the respective culture, the nature of signs, signification, and the transfer of meanings" (A. Attila Kiss, *Betűrés* 32, Trans. Varró).

[3] The particular contributions some of these theoreticians made to the development of theater and drama semiotics will be detailed in Chapter I.

The very designation, theater and drama semiotics, indicates the often complicated distinction that is encoded in the term. Namely, that there are really two main textual areas combined and referenced under the dual designation, the *performance text* (theater) and the *dramatic text* (drama), which are not only very diverse, but also involve different issues and modes of inquiry. Keir Elam goes so far as to pose the question: "How many semiotics?" to indicate this division within the field (2). He asserts:

> "Theatre" is taken to refer here to the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it. By "drama," on the other hand, is meant that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ("dramatic") conventions. The epithet "theatrical," then, is limited to what takes place between and among performers and spectators, while the epithet "dramatic" indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction. (2)

As Attila Kiss has observed, there is a rivalry going on between two trends within theater semiotics, one of which considers the dramatic, the written text as its sole and reliable object, whereas the other "school" focuses on the performance text, claiming that the study of theatrical experience is possible only via the analysis of the actual performance (*Betűrés* 36).

Indeed this debate, if it may be termed so, is as old as theater and drama semiotics itself, since already the very first representatives of the field, the Prague School semioticians contributed writings focusing on both aspects. Jindřich Honzl, for instance, emphasized the centrality of acting to drama, thus giving priority to the performance in his "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater" in 1940. Yet, it was also he who in another article, "The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices" (1943) admitted that the essence of theatrical perception lies in the "synthesis of the opposition between the mental representation evoked by the word and the pragmatic reality projected on the stage via the actors' performance […]" (127). Others, such as Jiři Veltruskỳ, affirmed from the first that "the general function of drama in the shaping of the semiotics of theater can be brought out by means of confronting the two sign systems that are invariably present, that is, language and acting" (115). The two sign systems, as Veltruskỳ termed language and acting, or else drama and performance texts, in his words again, "not only check but also enrich each other" (115), thus their separation would bring about a misconceived view of dramatic art. Likewise, the present analysis, while acknowledging the obvious distinction between the written word of dramatic text and the actualized and predominantly momentary experience of the theatrical performance, aims to merge the semiotic analysis of the two textures, in the semiotization of the minstrel show. Especially

because, as Elam observes, these texts cannot and should not be perceived as "alien bodies," but more as various "levels of a unified cultural phenomenon" (2).

Since in the theater the generation and exchange of messages takes place through a rather heterogeneous series of signs and signals, involving the theater's multilevelled, "multi-channeled, multi-systemic communicational system" (Elam 39), it logically follows that the attempt to somehow systematize these signs and discursive systems is not the easiest task at hand. Yet, what might make this endeavor feasible still is the fact that the present dissertation links the semiotic approach to the analysis of a particular theatrical tradition. This sustained concretization will hopefully prevent the blurring which necessarily emerges should this method be applied generally. By cataloguing the specific underlying semiotic systems that made communication in the minstrel show possible, I wish to do more than creating a mechanical classification. Rather I seek to illustrate through the heterogeneity of signification the various levels of communication activated within the minstrel theater, point to subtleties in the way of generating and receiving messages, and demonstrate through my particular example of the minstrel stage how specific theatrical traditions survive in culture by spreading into and being absorbed by various cultural conveyors that maintain the semiotic functions even of fragmentary signifying units. Also by tracing the extensions of minstrel signification in the realm of literature I consistently mean to emphasize the importance of applying theory to interpretation, recognizing and also paying tribute to the practical worth of theory, as well as the cultural afterlife of minstrelsy's signifying arsenal.

[3] The Premise

The fundamental thesis of the present work is that certain building blocks of culture (be they the most simple cultural signs, more refined cultural phenomena or complex institutions) have larger life expectancy than others. Minstrelsy's heritage survived and outlived its immediate cultural context and, integrated into various cultural texts, lived on well into the 20th century. Its history of roughly 160 years is ample proof that there was from the outset an original and vital energizing momentum built into its practices that allowed it to flourish in American popular culture for such a long time. It was on account of this momentum (invisible and mostly indescribable) that the transmittal of minstrelsy's clichés into a large number of cultural conveyors: the literary text, film, cartoons, postcards, popular paraphernalia,[4] etc.,

[4] All these varied cultural extensions of minstrelsy are analyzed in depth in Virágos-Varró: *Jim Crow örökösei…*263-338.

was later rendered viable. Minstrelsy's survival through all these years tells the story of a unique manifestation of cultural continuity. Cultural continuity is a central aspect of any culture; it promotes and enables the general understanding of cultural practices, and facilitates our own participation in culture. Without cultural continuity our ability to decode signs, understand general codes, respect cultural rules would be impossible. It is, in other words, the underlying cohesive force and source of meaning that feeds conventions, traditions, the social consciousness, and what could be generally called cultural knowledge. It is quite surprising that minstrelsy, a cultural practice generally viewed to be of a harmful and racist tradition, shares in this relevant process of cultural survival, without which our cultural sense making could be seriously damaged. Minstrelsy's involvement in processes fundamental to our cultural literacy and vital to cultural functioning, itself is guarantee that rooted within minstrelsy there were mechanisms pointing towards cultural advancement (beneficial cultural processes, the historical importance of which can only be retrospectively acknowledged). Without taking up time to detail these positive aspects of the minstrel heritage I simply wish to affirm that minstrelsy partakes in fundamental processes of cultural continuity, and it is this premise of cultural survival that I wish to structure my thesis around.

[4] Structure of the Present Inquiry

Although the understanding and decoding of minstrelsy's (or minstrelsy-related) signifying practices was a commonplace in the 19th century, due to general familiarity of the public (regardless of class and race) with this popular cultural phenomenon, for current "readers" of culture this decoding process is not so self-evident. The central goal of this thesis is to re-establish this familiarity of the reader with the cultural codes and signs of minstrelsy, to make the cultural consumer ready and prepared to detect and intellectually absorb its signals in whatever cultural context.

Chapter I will review the theoretical backgrounds of the present research pointing to roots both in what I will label minstrelsy studies and in theater and drama semiotics, illustrating mainly some of the paths formerly taken within these critical fields. This chapter will also identify the novelty of the present thesis with respect to those literary and cultural theories it sprang from, and which I chose to apply as critical sources. In the subchapter on the "Semiotization of the Minstrel Theater" I contend that the systematic classification of minstrelsy's signifying levels contributes to the identification of the semiotic framework of

this historic popular theatrical institution, and thereby I proceed to isolate the individual semiotic units within each of these signifying levels. Accordingly, the chapter will present and define the category of the minstrel sign and will briefly introduce a related typology of the levels and internal divisions of minstrel signification (including both procedural and dramatic/literary signs in the analysis).

Chapter II will examine the signifying repertoire of minstrelsy (foregrounded in Chapter I) by enumerating the most essential minstrel signs associated with each signifying level (category). In order to enable readers to detect, recognize and understand minstrel signs in "foreign" cultural contexts, I will provide in chapter II a list of all those vital components that in one way or another reference the minstrel tradition. Through creating a typology of these minstrel signs I hope to supply readers with a readily identifiable cultural semiotic arsenal (evocative of the minstrel tradition) as well as with a useful cultural-critical tool, with the help of which reading cultural texts with minstrel references in them could be made easier. Besides attesting to the relevance of cultural continuity, another central aspect of this analysis is thus facilitating reading and cultural understanding with respect to cultural phenomena that historically have lost their active denotative (as well as connotative) sign functions.

Chapter III is designed to serve as a hypothetical bridge between Chapter II and Chapter IV. It will trace those crucial historical and ideological processes that explain the emergence and subsequent proliferation of minstrelsy's signifying units (signs)—detailed in Chapter II—and explore the ensuing processes of their commodification (the commercialization). It will introduce the abstract product (the ideological sum total of all minstrel signs) that resulted from minstrelsy's historical and cultural practice, and will briefly show those promotional tactics applied in the promulgation of this cultural commodity across various cultural fields—from among these, Chapter IV and V illustrating the dispersal of minstrel signs in the area of literature. Firstly, I will point to those factors that triggered the rise of minstrelsy as a cultural institution, and which in turn supplied minstrel signs with a more or less fixed cultural meaning, economic foundation, and historical relevance. The chapter will next highlight those more abstract ideologies and practices, the strategies of racial objectification, that prompted the emergence as well as supported and maintained the cultural relevance of minstrelsy's multifarious signifiers. It will show how these ideologies were influential in turning "blackness" itself, the ideological core of all of minstrelsy's signifiers, into a cultural commodity, making it readily available for cultural consumers. The chapter thus will investigate both the ideological backgrounds that historically fueled the emergence of minstrel signification (thus establishing the larger historical and ideological context to

Chapter II) and the subsequent cultural life of these signifying units (highlighting processes of commodification, mass production, marketing). Through the description of the institutionalization of minstrelsy, the development of its respective market and product I will explore how minstrel entertainment entered into historical and economic transactions with the market industry and processes of capitalization, and how these processes laid the ground for the consequent spread of minstrel signification across the various branches of American culture, especially in literature (to be explored in Chapters IV and V).

Among the many cultural conveyors through which minstrelsy's heritage (motifs, clichés, techniques, prefigurations, paradigms) survived was high literature that freely borrowed from minstrel practices both in the 19th and in the 20th centuries. The investigation of how text-making is "influenced by historicizable cultural practices among writers and anticipated readers," as Sarah Robbins correctly notes, might reflect upon larger processes of "individual and social *literacy* development" (563). Underlying the textual studies offered in Chapter IV are echoes of Robbins' thesis. In these textual analyses I will offer guidelines to a new mode of reading literature based upon cultural-semiotic contexts, revealing the formative influence of minstrelsy's specific semiotic framework on the texture of literature. Strictly speaking, this chapter presents for the purposes of literary analysis the application of minstrel signs as critical tools in the reading and interpretation of certain literary texts. I will demonstrate that much like writing reading is also a culturally and semiotically constructed procedure, informed by the mechanics of signification. Thus, Chapter IV illustrates the practical use of minstrel sign and signification in the context of cultural texts other than the popular stage, in my case selected literary materials.

Chapter V follows the analysis of minstrelsy's literary survival into the 20th century. It differentiates between basically two types of texts: (1) where minstrel signs are consistent textual building blocks (classified as substantial literary minstrel signs), and (2) where minstrel signification occurs only in dispersed forms (labeled as sporadic literary minstrel significations). The chapter is shaped in a way to suggest a variety of possible extensions of the present research by way of enumerating texts where the relevance of minstrel signification can be readily identified, but is only noted in the scope of the present analysis.

The dissertation concludes with Chapter VI, in which I will address some theoretical problems that relate to the all-encompassing questions to which this thesis seeks answers. These are, in broad terms, how we make sense of certain texts, "how works communicate to readers" (Culler viii), what conventions guard us in these processes of making sense, how cultural practices influence the making and reading of literature, "the ways and means of

literary signification" (Culler viii), and what sort of impacts follow from these with respect to developments in social/cultural understanding between different ethnic groups, classes, cultures, and in ourselves. The closing chapter thus ponders larger problems related to cultural translation, while outlining the ever-present threat of our continuous loss of and disregard for vital cultural information that the shapers of cultural messages bombard us with. Thus, the ending returns us to the notions of cultural literacy and cultural continuity, both of which are integrated in the critical focus and thematic underpinning of the present dissertation as a whole.

[5] The Relevant Terminology

In the subsequent discussion I will apply four terms interchangeably. These are: *blackface*, *minstrelsy*, *blackface minstrelsy*, and *minstrel phenomenon*. To avoid confusion, and to clarify some minor differences between these notions I will define each of these terms separately.

Blackface: It refers to a long tradition of theatrical masquerade in black (whether in the popular or legitimate theater), which started out from Europe well before the rise of minstrelsy in America. British critic George F. Rehin cites the example of mummers from 1377 who presumably were among the first to wear black guises in order to represent Africans. These mummers disguised as African princes in King Richard II's court, and the court masquerades of the 16th century (Rehin 686) were, however, not isolated instances of masking. There is ample evidence that folk festivities and popular theaters around Europe and even in Africa and Asia turned to the use of the blackface mask well before the dawn of American minstrelsy (consider the blackfaced harlequin of the Italian tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, the tradition of 17th-century Dutch farces [Dennison 4], or the African folk festivities listed in Cockrell 34-46). Since the application of blackface was part and parcel of folk and court festivities of all kinds, it easily brought up associations with carnival time, holiday season and laughter in the different periods of its use, and thus it originally signified humor and comic appeal above all. Blackface acquired a distinctly racial character only with the rise of the American version of minstrelsy—since in this tradition the black mask evoked direct associations with the African American population (whose troubled history in slavery gave a rather controversial twist to this longstanding and otherwise harmless theatrical tradition). The term is often used by itself in minstrel criticism,

metonymically referencing the whole phrase, blackface minstrelsy,[5] although many critics argue that blackface acts prior to 1843 in American theaters and circuses were vastly different from the minstrel theater that followed. (As regards specific differences between the two traditions, see below)

Minstrelsy: The term is handled as distinct from "blackface" in some critical evaluations (see Dale Cockrell, for instance). Those critics who deem blackface as distinct from minstrelsy emphasize that there is a clear-cut division between the blackface acts of the 1830s in America, and the minstrelsy that evolved in the 1840s. The distinction is mainly due to the fact that the blackface of the 1830s was reduced to solo acts, occasional appearances of performers in theaters and circuses, and it targeted mostly working class audiences, and was itself of working-class origins. As Dale Cockrell shows in his recent book on blackface, the tradition of American blackface in the 1830s displayed a louder, more freewheeling style of acting, singing and dancing, and it generally involved a greater amount of participation from the audience than the minstrel show version of blackface, which followed a decade later. Although the minstrelsy of the 1840s was also founded on principles similar to those of blackface, i.e., the imitation/parody of blacks by the application of black cork to the hands and the face (similarly to the solo acts of the 1830s), the rise of minstrelsy marked tendencies towards the industrialization, commercialization of the shows. In other words minstrelsy is often associated with larger processes of capitalization, such as mass production, middle-class appeal, the evolution of agency and financial concerns in the minstrel theater. To put it simply, while blackface signifies the status of free entertainment, minstrelsy denotes business for profit. Although Cockrell's analysis is mostly true, I wish to stress that the demarcation lines and continuities between blackface and minstrelsy are much more subtle than he allows. Quite obviously (to me at least) the shift away from unrestrained entertainment and the rise of a new and first native type of entertainment industry happened in a manner more gradual than Cockrell supposes.

When critics speak of minstrelsy instead of blackface they tend to emphasize the fact that minstrelsy was a more organized and structured form of theatrical tradition, and thus they insinuate the **minstrel show**, with its quite explicit racial parody, systematic institutional framework, and generally higher class prestige than what was available in earlier blackface

[5] Given this metonymical interference between blackface and blackface minstrelsy, the former substitution will be applied in the present dissertation as well.

impersonations. I myself will apply the terms blackface and minstrelsy interchangeably, sometimes the two together. Not that I do not agree with Cockrell's division between the 1830s and 1840s in so far as blackface entertainment goes (with the above restrictions), but because my analysis will mainly center around the 1840s and after, thus this terminological distinction becomes largely meaningless. Whereas the application of the term minstrelsy might be questionable with respect to blackface acts prior to 1840 (on account of the lack of organizational framework, lack of industrial setting and the presence of groups or bands), "blackface" as a term was carried over to the period after the 1830s, and it was freely applied as a synonym of minstrelsy.

Blackface minstrelsy: Refers to the American version of blackface masking, which signifies the following:

(A) A version of popular theater, indeed *a cultural institution* with solid economic and ideological foundations and motivation. This cultural industry dominated American culture's national self-expression for over four decades. It survived even after the Civil War and into the 1880s, but its fundamental character was radically changed after the war with the appearance of bands with over fifty, and later over even a hundred performers. This popular form of entertainment presented a unique cultural mix, its articulation of the central political and historical dilemmas of larger American culture made blackface minstrelsy "a competitor for the control of the national popular" (93), as Eric Lott so persuasively argued in his seminal work *Love and Theft* (1993).

(B) In particular, the term denotes the minstrel show, a *popular theatrical genre*, the first institutionalized form of American popular theater, which evolved as America's first native entertainment. The beginnings of the minstrel show are tied to the year 1843 in the general criticism, the year when the first minstrel band, the Virginia Minstrels appeared on stage. Yet, like most dates, this too is up for debates and cannot be sustained as an absolute line of demarcation. The organization of the Christy's Minstrels, who are held to have been responsible for establishing the formal and structural characteristics of the minstrel show, might be more readily stated as signaling the rise of a new genre in the entertainment industry. Since the shows reached their formalized character between 1843 and 1860, but a radical shift in minstrelsy had not occurred till the 1880s, I will regard the period between 1843-1880 as the era of the **classic minstrel show.**

(C) The term might further be interpreted as a general grabbag for the actual performances, theatrical acts that took place under the auspices of the minstrel shows. In this respect one

strictly reads blackface minstrelsy as *performance text*. These theatrical acts generally involved the use of mask, singing, acting, burlesques of all kinds, dancing, the application of blackface dialect for purposes of entertainment, and also the representation of black culture on the legitimate stage in a controlled and contained manner under the careful supervision of white entertainers.

(D) Finally, the term can be interpreted as a sum total of all *dramatic or documentary texts* (written documents) that can be brought into direct relation with the minstrel performance: the sheet music, playbills, songsters, jokebooks, autobiographies, etc.), and which signify or reference the tradition of American minstrelsy.

It is clear to see from these sub-branches of blackface minstrelsy that the term cuts across four very distinct "versions" in the interpretation of minstrelsy: that of minstrelsy as an institution, minstrelsy as a cultural, dramatic and literary genre, minstrelsy as performance text, and minstrelsy as dramatic text. In the present work I will attempt to handle all of these facets of minstrelsy together. Thus, when I apply the term blackface minstrelsy, or **the minstrel phenomenon**, I basically make a wide reference across all four categories, unless otherwise indicated. There is, to be sure, a distinction to be made between the issues that come to the fore with each different manifestation.

The discussion of *minstrelsy* as an *institution* (see Chapter III for detailed analysis) necessitates considerations of ideologies, economic and political contexts that led to the emergence of a uniquely American popular cultural industry. *Minstrelsy* as *genre* emphasizes the fact that its texts, whether dramatic or of performance are governed by certain aesthetic rules and codes, and that it is part of system of conventions in the theater. *Minstrelsy* as *performance* (investigated in some detail in Chapter II) involves the study of performance texts: dance steps, music, acting, dialect (and therefore minstrelsy should be seen as an ever-changing cultural gesture or ritual). Unfortunately, since there are no records of original minstrel performances prior to the Civil War, much of the discussion on minstrelsy as performance text involves a great amount of guesswork. Inclusion of documents outside of minstrelsy might serve as supporting evidence in the reconstruction of original performances (e.g. biographies of minstrel entertainers or autobiography of eyewitnesses, court records, sociological data about contemporaneous audiences, etc.). *Minstrelsy* as *dramatic text* involves the textual ramifications of the minstrel phenomenon. The study of these resources is by far the most legitimate research objective today. Minstrelsy as dramatic text includes:

a) original minstrel materials incorporated in the shows, such as minstrel songs, jokes, dialogue routines;

b) original minstrel materials that served to popularize the shows, such as playbills, posters, minstrel songsters, joke-books, etc.;
c) secondary minstrel materials such as contemporaneous reviews and responses to the original performances, such as newspaper articles, biographies and autobiographies of minstrel performers and audience members;
d) minstrelsy's dramatic/literary texts infiltrated various other cultural texts, such as mainstream literature, popular magazine fiction, movies, cartoons, comic books, etc.

Many of the texts above listed will appear on the pages of the ensuing discussion, and will hopefully bring the minstrel phenomenon closer to the readers.

The time frame of the subsequent investigation will expand from the rise of minstrelsy in the 1840s roughly to the present moment in 2004, since in today's critical debates minstrelsy's presence is still strongly felt. Yet, I do not wish to promise a review of the past 164 years through the prism of minstrelsy's history. Instead, what I do propose is the incorporation of a semiotic twist in minstrelsy studies through which to supply a practical research and reading tool for future readers of cultural texts infiltrated by the influence of minstrelsy. The subsequent discussion is also meant to supply some practical examples illustrating the relevance of cultural literacy, translation theory and the survival of cultural signs. In its small way it wishes to recruit scholars to engage in similar exercises in eliminating cultural "blind spots" from literary texts.

CHAPTER I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

[1] Overview

In this chapter I will elaborate on two critical traditions that my dissertation is closely indebted to, (1) the critical debates surrounding the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy, and (2) theories of theater and drama semiotics, a recently revived critical approach. In what follows I will attempt to conjoin the two critical areas in the systematic semiotic analysis of the signifying system of the minstrel show, and later apply the semiotics of minstrelsy as a critical tool in the re-reading of selected 19th and 20th-century literary texts which document the survival of minstrelsy's signifying units. But first I will look at the two critical schools separately.

As is well known, there has developed an entire critical tradition around the phenomenon of the 19th-century minstrel stage ever since its first appearance in the 1840s.[6] Critical evaluations of blackface minstrelsy developed in successive waves, and these critical discourses always reflected existing mainstream political attitudes toward questions of race, class and even gender. Thus, the discourse on minstrelsy was often applied as a cover for the expression of certain ideological, political or social (sometimes cultural) tensions and priorities that lied at the heart of American society and politics. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of minstrelsy tended to function as an alibi for voicing political and social concerns, in the course of its long history minstrelsy criticism managed to establish itself as a distinct field of scholarship with its own respective problem areas, and with a methodology freely borrowing from the contemporaneous critical spectrum.

One of the most striking features of minstrelsy-related criticism in the present is the recent intensification of theoretical activity that has transpired in this area roughly over the past thirty years. One might be puzzled when confronted with the apparent prominence of this almost 200-year-old phenomenon in today's critical discourse, and justly so.

In the first part of the subsequent discussion therefore I will attempt to justify and explain the rising popularity of minstrelsy scholarship and reflect upon the currency of this research area. Next, I will provide an outline of the vital paradigm shifts the critical discourse on minstrelsy has gone through up to the present. Since blackface minstrelsy's scholarly

[6] The following analysis on the emergence of a distinct theoretical field I chose to label as Minstrelsy Criticism is largely built upon my article "The Changing Landscape of Minstrelsy Criticism." *British and American Studies* 8 (2002): 165-170.

research is almost as old as the genre itself this body of critical inquiry seeks to explain and interpret, it is necessary to devise a chronology-based categorization of this discourse—observing the historical turning points that affected its development. Closing the first part of analysis devoted to minstrelsy criticism I will argue that the quantity and quality of recent criticism on the minstrel phenomenon should be observed by acknowledging that this new field has assumed the status of a distinct critical discourse in its own right. Minstrelsy Studies, a term of my own making, will thus be regarded throughout the thesis as a sub-branch within the field of American Studies. In order to justify the validity of the field as a self-contained discipline, I will briefly enumerate the distinguishing features and innovative strategies that this novel body of inquiry tends to employ.

[2] Minstrelsy Studies

Blackface minstrelsy established itself as a popular theatrical tradition in the 1830s. The genre experienced its heyday between 1840-1880, and then it slowly vanished from the cultural scene. But the ultimate disappearance of minstrelsy was still long to come; with the emergence of the new mediums of mass culture (radio, television, the movies) the culturally relevant signifiers and gestures of the original shows seemed to regain their life force as they dispersed in the larger culture to survive till the present day. It should come as a bit of surprise that we can still detect occasional reincarnations of this tradition ranging from Ted Danson' masquerading as Al Jolson at a Friars Club meeting in 1993 (Gubar 38), through a brief appearance of blackfaced jazz musicians in the Hungarian István Szabó's film *Sunshine* (originally titled: *A napfény íze*), and the shocking yet authentic cataloguing of minstrel relics in Spike Lee's film, *Bamboozled* (1999), all the way to black author Wesley Brown's *Darktown Strutters* (a fictionalized account of T. D. Rice's career from 1994), or Robert Alexander's drama *I Ain't Yo Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1995). The list could be extended still further.

This amazing staying power of minstrel signification, the blackface gesture, and the critical interest in it in American culture—through roughly over two centuries—should call for an explanation. In 1994, when I did research at Indiana University, the popularity of blackface minstrelsy as a fertile research area was already in the air, but certainly not to the extent I experienced its prominence in critical discourse when I returned to the United States in 1998. Wherever I turned, I bumped into scholars who in one way or another were engaged

in research connected to specific aspects of minstrelsy (ranging all the way from transvestitism to acrobatics). The more I was convinced that it was mere coincidence that drove these people into my life, the more I had to realize that beyond coincidence it was minstrelsy's manifold cultural appeal, its still detectable currency that wove that web of connections around me and those doing similar research. It is thus natural to ask how come that blackface minstrelsy, this predominantly antebellum form of American popular theater still should stir wide interest; for what reasons it intrudes upon current forms of national self-expression (as diverse as hip hop or black situation comedy), and finally, what explains its continued life span in culture and scholarship alike. These are some of the questions I hope to explore here.

(A) Currency of Blackface Research

The present popularity of minstrelsy as a possible subject of critical analysis is largely due to the fact that it can so neatly tie with postmodern inquiries into matters of race, class and gender. Since minstrelsy itself is such a multivalent genre (combining music, dance, acting, etc.) it is obvious that the research reflecting upon it should also be interdisciplinary in character. I should add that this wide interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary appeal is also the preferred paradigm in today's American Studies scholarship.

Blackface minstrelsy moreover is closely linked to those cultural, social and political issues which manifest themselves as key aspects in today's Cultural Studies debates and, more specifically, within the field of American Studies. The hottest topics in current critical discourse include race relations, issues of the margin, ethnicity, postcolonial debates of "othering" and "otherness,"[7] the presentation and construction of gender, the psychology and politics of class interactions, etc. All of these readily surface in the problematics and critical debates related to blackface minstrelsy. Moreover, the scope of critical interrogations sometimes moves even beyond the boundaries of American Studies. As Howard L. Sacks has argued in a review, "[s]cholars […] have turned to the blackface show in recent years, enriching fields as diverse as musicology, theater history, sociology, folklore and English" (187).

[7] A detailed analysis of minstrelsy's interrelation with issues of "othering" and the ideological construction of power through the routines of the show can be found in my essay on "Blackface Minstrelsy: An Alternative Discourse on Dominance" (cited in the attached bibliography of this dissertation), and in the monograph I co-authored, *Jim Crow örökösei*.

The scale and relevance of minstrelsy-related research today are so overwhelming that to state it has become an independent area within Cultural Studies similarly to feminism, gender studies or ethnic studies is no exaggeration. In a way what I am proposing here is that minstrelsy has evolved in the past decades to coalesce as a unique and well-circumscribed area of critical discourse. Its respective criticism and specific terminological repertoire have become increasingly more sophisticated and recognizable enough to declare it a separate critical discourse in its own right. In what follows, I will apply the term "Minstrelsy Studies," and therein I will refer to the critical works of those scholars who have established themselves as central to the field.

(B) Chronological Classification

Cultural awareness, political conditions and critical tools have altered profoundly through minstrelsy's long history of almost two centuries. So have blackface's critical discourse shifted from time to time. I propose the identification of roughly three distinct periods in Minstrelsy Studies. The first or early period of criticism developed by such major critics of the field as Lawrence Hutton (1889), Edward LeRoy Rice (1911), Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth (1928), Carl Wittke (1930), Hans Nathan (1977), analyzed minstrelsy essentially as a monolithic construct serving as a popular mode of entertainment. This group of critics stressed the romantic appeal of the minstrel genre, emphasizing its cultural work as the first truly American contribution to the world of theater and drama.

Starting around the 1970s, Robert Toll (1974), Sam Dennison (1982), and a large international group of other critics (such as Joseph Boskin, George F. Rehin, Berndt Ostendorf, etc.) began to question the former interpretation of blackface as a harmless form of mass entertainment. These critics sought to dig at the heart of minstrelsy's racial content, identifying the racist stereotypes as well as the underlying psychological and symbolic "spirit murder" (a term from Susan Gubar, 53-94) the institution of the show effectively helped to promulgate. They argued that blackface minstrelsy was essentially a racialized mode of entertainment, where white working and middle-class people parodied and exploited blacks for material, political gains as well as psychological comfort. From black criticism some writings of James Weldon Johnson, Frederick Douglass—from the first half of the century—, and the theoretical contributions of Ralph Ellison or Nathan Irvin Huggins—from the 1960s on—, to mention just the most outstanding representatives were also effective in enhancing

awareness about the racist character inherent in this popular genre. These works have by today assumed historical relevance, and are quoted as the classics in Minstrelsy Studies.

The current critical discourse within Minstrelsy Studies is marked by an amazing profusion, represented in such works as Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the American Melting Pot* (1996), Dale Cockrell's *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (1997), Susan Gubar's *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (1997), W. T. Lhamon, Jr. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998), and William J. Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (1999). A shared element in this new group of scholarly writings is that they advance the so-called "postmodernist agenda of destabilizing meanings inherited from both public knowledge and the academy" (Sacks 187).

These new critics, in other words, seek to subvert received readings of minstrelsy as a racialized discourse, and instead propose to highlight what W. T. Lhamon terms as "the liberatory power" (93) within blackface discourse. While Lott, probably the best known authority in this new crop of critics in Minstrelsy Studies, focuses on the role and changing historical function of working classes in relation to matters of race within the popular theater of blackface; Cockrell places minstrelsy within the context of folk festivities around the world; and Lhamon is interested in blackface as an inherited gesture migrating from one cultural conveyor onto another. Williams Mahar brings into the analysis of the blackface phenomenon novel documental illustrations (similarly to Cockrell) through which he offers new insights into this complex world, again directing the focus away from the racial angle, addressing issues of minstrelsy's gender-based discourses and universal comic appeal. Michael Rogin's book intertwines issues of ethnicity and the racial masquerade by observing entanglements between the shifting historical role of Jewish people in the nation and on the blackface stage. The leitmotif of Susan Gubar's critical work as the title indicates is racechange. Gubar conscientiously follows the motif through instances of its appearance in the fine arts, literature, society, language, the commodity world, film, etc., arranging her analyses and documentation around catching watchwords.

The ensuing discussions will freely draw from all of these periods of Minstrelsy Criticism, but the guiding force of my arguments will be backed up by evidence gained from some of these recent critical assessments.

(C) An Introduction to Minstrelsy Studies as a New Filed of Inquiry

What is Minstrelsy Studies and what is the object of its analysis? Minstrelsy Studies primarily is devoted to the study of the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy, which includes minstrelsy as an institution, as a popular cultural, dramatic and theatrical genre, minstrelsy as performance, and as a series of texts, etc. The time frame Minstrelsy Studies hopes to grasp is ever widening, and indeed with the new branch of recent scholarship the period of inquiry ranges from Biblical times to the present (cf. Lhamon's *Raising Cain*).[8]

The causes that necessitate the formation of new demarcation lines around individual Cultural Studies disciplines such as Minstrelsy Studies are many. First of all the enormous grasp of Cultural Studies and American Studies, the vastness of the areas they seek to cover, have made the terms too vague and unspecific. Secondly, sub-branches within American Studies, such as ethnic studies, American folklore, Gender Studies, studies in American history, although all have contributed to Minstrelsy Studies, do not cover the whole scope of its premises. In today's world of specialization and multifarious discourses the significance of creating divisions and labels has grown tremendously. Minstrelsy Studies is one such label, which was thought of in the first place to help Cultural Studies students, readers identify and recognize certain cultural signs, particular cultural problems that have arisen from the tradition of minstrelsy. Such are, for instance, the paralysis suffered by African American culture and literature covertly due to blackface, or the positive influence blackface inserted on literary expressiveness in 19th-century America,[9] the cultural significance of a range of popular paraphernalia that carry the imprints of the minstrel tradition,[10] etc. In a way this new discourse undertakes a work of cultural mission, with the help of which certain cultural signs with meanings in-decodable to today's culture readers will once again become filled with meaning and significance. In reading literature or watching movies, for instance, Minstrelsy Studies provides an invaluable filter through which unearthing new levels of cultural knowledge might be rendered possible. Who could ever notice the energies of blackface behind the cadences of Ginsberg's poetry or in the fiction of Frank O'Hara if it hadn't been for Lhamon, and likewise who could read any piece of literature on the topic of racial crossing

[8] Lhamon extends the scope of minstrelsy-related research in his book to include in the "blackface lore cycle" (56-115) as diverse materials as Cain's story from the *Genesis* to the dance steps and lyrics of modern hip hop music.
[9] See Chapter IV of this dissertation for more detail.
[10] The afterlife of minstrelsy's signifying arsenal in the commodity world is closely analyzed in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* 278-284.

without the recognition of the psychological, cultural, historical turmoil involved in border-crossing rituals such as blackface also was, having studied Gubar?

Minstrelsy Studies frequently borrows techniques, strategies, even terminology from a mixture of familiar critical discourses. Its entanglement with questions of gender studies, history, popular culture, musicology, theater studies, social psychology, semiotics, post-structuralism has already been observed. The tools offered by these areas of scientific interrogation, however, are applied in Minstrelsy Studies to treat a long line of peculiar problems. At the beginning of the 21st century the issues that are involved in and give immediacy to the kind of scholarship Minstrelsy Studies is include: the interlocking of high and low cultures, cultural exchange and communication over borders, transgressing racial, cultural, gender and class demarcation lines, interrelations between social change, class and race divisions, questions of national identity, ideologies related to nationhood, dominance, power struggle, and many more. As can be seen, Minstrelsy Studies as a new field of research is justified, because the issues it seeks to penetrate were (and still are) vital to the social, cultural and political self-definition and self-expression of the American nation. In his seminal collection of essays entitled *Shadow and Act* Ralph Ellison wrote:

> Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word. And by this I mean the word in all its complex formulations, from the proverb to the novel and the stage play, the word with all its subtle power to suggest and foreshadow overt action while magically disguising the moral consequences of that action and providing it with symbolic and psychological justification. For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison and destroy. (42)

I believe that the cultural work of today's Minstrelsy Criticism is vital in executing what Ellison called for: the elimination of racial segregation through the power of the word. While the second group of minstrel critics sought to point out the ways in which blackface was instrumental in emphasizing difference between races and thus promoted the survival of race prejudice (by re- and overemphasizing minstrelsy's racist character), the new group of scholars gear their work towards undoing such psychological and symbolic forms of segregation. The uniqueness in today's research lies in its offering novel perspectives in the analysis of the minstrel phenomenon, thus moving away from the single-minded evaluation of minstrelsy as merely a racist tradition. The fundamental rebelliousness that these new critics also detect in blackface's character even marks a supra-racial layer, one that speaks to the political and social radicalism (anti-elitist, anti-urban, anti-industrial) inherent in the genre.

This aspect of blackface, as Howard Sacks argues, that fed minstrelsy's cultural critique, still "remains a wellspring for new expressions of liberated identity" (193).

[3] Theater and Drama Semiotics

Whereas in 1976 the Polish semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan still complained of the striking absence of theoretical attention devoted to the semiotics of various fields of art (53), by today there has occurred a proliferation of diverse approaches to and areas within the semiology of art ranging from studies of signification in music, dance, the fine arts, and literature through the semiotics of selves, customs and culture to the semiotic research conducted in various forms of the media, architecture, artistic styles, periods, as well as in diverse literary texts and genres. In his *The Pursuit of Signs* Culler contends that semiotics "moves in, imperialistically, on the territory of most disciplines of the humanities and social sciences," and he further asserts that basically "[a]ny sphere of human activity, from music to cooking to politics, can be an object of semiotic study; and it is precisely because any signifying activity calls for semiotic investigation" (38).

Out of this abundance of semiotic projects my dissertation aims to contribute to the research on the semiotics of theater and drama, a theoretical field (the second theoretical source of the present thesis) that seems to undergo in the present a phase of revival very similar to the renewed activity in Minstrelsy Studies. This fact can easily be demonstrated by the upsurge of critical activity in the field represented by writings in English such as Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (2002), and Elaine Aston and George Savona's *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (1991), whose works are pioneering in the sense that they make the former, predominantly European, theoretical interrogations and findings of theater semioticians more accessible in the English-speaking world, moreover they also introduce their individual systems of theatrical communication. Added to the publication and republication of relevant critical writings in English the translation of the works of key European drama semioticians from the 1970s on through the present such as, for instance, those of the Spanish Fernando de Toro, the French Roland Barthes, Patrice Pavis, Anne Ubersfeld, or the works of Eastern European scholars such as the Polish Tadeusz Kowzan, the German Erika Fischer-Lichte, also greatly contributed to the growing awareness of relevant critical inquiries undertaken.

(A) Historical Overview

However modern or post-modern these recent critical interrogations might seem to current readers, the sources and foundations of theater and drama semiotics lead back to ancient times, in fact to the beginnings of human communication. As Ladislav Matejka phrases it in his introduction to the book *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (1976): "Ever since man first became aware of the phenomenon of communication, he has recognized the fundamental role of the sign in human life. Throughout the ages his inquisitive mind has sought answers to the questions: What constitutes signs? What are the laws that govern signs?" (ix).

This fundamental urge to make sense of the world around us, to send, encode and decode messages, to identify those rules and laws that underlie this communicative activity, to describe, classify and follow the operation of the signs that make communication feasible are really the cornerstones of that vast scientific field that we call semiotics, and which shaped the ground-breaking works of scholars such as the Geneva linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the American Charles Sanders Peirce, as well as the key texts of Russian Formalism. Yet, the movement that was directly contributory to the rise of a new research area and methodology that has come to be identified as theater and drama semiotics, was "the extraordinary humanistic trend […] that has come to be known under the various titles of the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, the *Prague School*, or *Prague Structuralism*" (Matejka ix). There is no doubt, however, that the Prague School was greatly indebted to the early structuralists and formalists, so much so that Petr Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson, whose names often hallmark the entire Prague Linguistic Circle, had originally been members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, and had left the Soviet Union to live and work in Czechoslovakia only in the 1920s.

One of the central ideas that the Prague School popularized and that has grounded its long-lasting influence in the humanities, was its notion that a work of art is perceptible as a system of signs or, as Mukařovskỳ assumed, the entire work of art could be interpreted as a single and singular sign. Jan Mukařovskỳ's "Art As Semiotic Fact" from 1934 later came to be seen as the programmatic paper of the Pargue School movement, and its insights have ever since been applied to various areas of art criticism. Mukařovskỳ's great disclosure was that

"the results of linguistics need to be applied to other domains of sign usage and to be differentiated according to their characteristics" (3).[11] He further asserted that

> Every work of art is an autonomous sign composed of: (1) an artifact functioning as perceivable signifier; (2) an "aesthetic object" which is registered in the collective consciousness and which functions as "signification"; (3) a relationship to a thing signified […] to the total context of social phenomenon, science, philosophy, religion, politics, economics, and so on, of any given milieu. (9)

Each work of art, thus, following Mukařovskỳ's proposition, is perceivable as a semiotic fact; its entirety functioning as a *signum* (signifier), which evokes in the spectators/audience a *signatum* (signified) that primarily is of mental character, and also being expressive of a relationship with the larger cultural context, the *designatum*, which it is a product of. Without the proper recognition and acknowledgement of this semiotic character of art, Mukařovskỳ seems to argue, the real nature of art would necessarily be missed (Matejka 271).

The representatives of the Prague School followed close in Mukařovskỳ's footsteps, broadening the significance of his vision by applying it to the interpretation of (for instance) individual aspects/facets of artistic production (see Bogatyrev's "Costume as Sign"), in the analysis of particular artistic genres (for instance Petr Bogatyrev's "Semiotics in the Folk Theater"), in the classification of signifying systems within the theater (like in Karel Brušak's "Signs in the Chinese Theater") or in observing certain hierarchies within the sign systems of the theater (compare Jindřich Honzl's "The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices" and Jiři Veltruskỳ's "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theater"). As can be evident from the articles cited above, the Prague School representatives dealt with the semiotic implications of art through the application of a general methodology to specific literary systems, and thus they strongly opposed the kind of arbitrary, scholastic formalism that aimed at classification of formal elements without the "adequate study of the literary system and its specific structural laws from a functional point of view" (Matejka 269).

Although the main initiatives and achievements of the Prague School could be summarized in a handful of tenets, their work proved to be a relevant inspiration for scholars for several decades to come. Firstly, the movement emphasized the centrality of semiotics in and for "the intellectual and cultural resurgence of modern times" (Matejka 273). Furthermore, they asserted that the sign and its usage formed the basis of human interaction,

[11] Culler notes that prior to the Pargue School semioticians Saussure already implied that linguistics had to be "part of a larger science of signs" and that its basic concepts would necessarily serve as models for studying the mechanisms of society and culture (25).

and thus "[…] verbal communication appeared not only as the analytical focus of attention but also served as model for other types of sign systems […]" (Matejka 273). The arts came to be viewed as the most fertile ground for semiotic investigation, since they manifested a combination of "the normal referential usage of language and the manipulation of sign structures" (Matejka 273), which could provide a

wide spectrum for semiotic interrogations.[12] Among the various forms of the art world the Prague School semioticians put great emphasis on dramatic art, which of all the arts seemed to offer the largest potential for semiotic investigations given the diversity of semiotic systems which appear therein in "mutual interrelationship" (Matejka 280). The realization that the theater was a very unique semiotic system representing a "real informational polyphony" and thus should be given priority in the semiotic investigations was a point also stressed by Roland Barthes later in the 1960s, although, as is known, Barthes never followed up on "his own provocation" (Elam 17).

The discovery of theater and drama as a most fertile field for semiotic inquiries, in the words of Matejka, it being a "semiotic suprasystem involving both verbal and nonverbal subsystems" (282), therefore, originates from the Prague Linguistic Circle, and some of their analyses really articulated the core dilemmas of today's theater and drama semiotics. Veltruskỳ and Honzl's debate about the priority of drama text over performance text and vice versa led to Keir Elam's notion that there are indeed "two potential focuses of semiotic attention" (3) in the theater, i.e., the drama text and the performance text; Karel Brušak's "Signs in the Chinese Theater" and Petr Bogatyrev "Semiotics in the Folk Theater" paved the way for theoretical debates in the 1970s and 1980s on the "segmentation" of theatrical discourse unfolding in the writings of Michel Corvin, Franco Ruffini, Marco de Marinis, as well as for typological investigations into the world of theatrical signs (to which the present dissertation also wishes to contribute). Brušak and Bogatyrev have also proved influential in widening Mukařovskỳ's core metaphor of the art work as sign into the art work as a network of signs. Jindřich Honzl's assertion that the "dramatic performance is a set of signs" and "everything that makes up reality on the stage—the playwright's text, the actor's acting, the stage lighting—all these things in any case stand for other things" (74), founded the modern theoretical concept of the "semiotization of the object" (Elam 6). This approach stresses the

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[12] A very similar proposition surfaces in the writings of the Belgian Eric Buyssens, who also considered the "work of art as a semiological unit", and assigns to it the role of a distinct semie. Yet, Buyssens' typology of semie is rather arbitrary as Kowzan notes (54-55), his differentiation between systematic and asystematic semie is not only self-evident but also quite rudimentary.

ideological nature or else "symbolic or signifying role" (Elam 6) of all theatrical stage objects, in addition to the obvious denotational, or practical functions that stage objects also tend to retain. Bogatyrev's observation about the theatrical performance being a complex structure composed of "elements from various arts: from poetry, the plastic arts, music, choreography, and so on" (43), finds continuation in Elam's contention about the theater perceived as a "multi-channeled, multi-systemic communicational system" (39). This web of interferences could endlessly be cited.

(B) "Hunt for the Sign"

Of the various possible theoretical angles which present themselves as suitable and to be sure fascinating areas of theater and drama semiotics I first became interested in a general descriptive analysis of the theater as a semiotic system, prior to the adaptation of theater semiotics to particular instances of dramatic performance. As Keir Elam also asserts the analysis of "the individual performance in its 'horizontal' unfolding and in its 'vertical' semantic relations" (41) is to be sure the most appealing object for theater semioticians. Also within this still very large field of research I initially concentrated on what might be termed as the search for the *core unit* of theatrical signification.

The segmentation of theatrical discourse is a challenging dilemma that has attracted many scholars to the field especially from the 1970s on, and one that has also brought the most abortive attempts in the area. Ladislav Matejka already in the 1970s warned that "the search for the underlying systems of art, viewed as special types of semiotic communication, may find the evaluative interpretations of concrete works of art too eclectic, unsystematic, and likely to lapse into unchecked optimism" (286). Later in 1980 Keir Elam articulates basically the same problem but this time specifically with respect to theatrical discourse asserting that theater "[…] is not […] a single-leveled and homogeneous series of signs or signals that emerges, but rather a weave of radically differentiated modes of expression each governed by its own selection and combination rules" (39). Elam's question whether it is possible "to define specifically theatrical semiotic units bringing together the elements of all simultaneously operative messages, so as to allow a coherent segmentation of theatrical discourse" (42) already expressed the scholar's strong disbelief in his own proposition. Given the obvious eclecticism and heterogeneity within theatrical signification it seems apparent that semioticians of theater and drama have been drawn to solving the problem of segmentation,

and attempted to identify for themselves the smallest/core signifying units within the multifarious discourses of the theater.

The semioticians of the Prague School all used the term "sign" to denote the core unit. Mukařovskỳ, the propagandist of the movement, defined the sign as "a reality perceivable by sense perception that has a relationship with another reality which the first reality is meant to evoke" (5). In a slightly different manner Petr Bogatyrev claims that material objects turn to signs in the theater, and describes the process of transition as "a phenomenon of material reality" becoming "a phenomenon of ideological reality" (13). Both Mukařovskỳ and Bogatyrev then emphasize the mental and ideological character within the concept of the sign, the latter even introducing the notion of "a sign of a sign" ("Semiotics" 34) to denote the fact that stage objects tend to lose or rather supersede their concrete materiality or their practical function on the stage, and stand as "a sign of a sign of a material object" and not as "a sign of the material object itself" (34). Almost sixty years later the Spanish semiotician Fernando de Toro in *Theatre Semiotics* (1995) will expand Bogatyrev's distinction between theatrical signs being "signs of signs" and "signs of objects" stating that it is important to underline the particular function the specific theatrical sign is to fulfill in a given dramatic context "from a triadic perspective" (69).[13] Karel Brušak's "Signs in the Chinese Theater" and Jiři Veltruskỳ's "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theater," both of the Prague Linguistic Circle, also talk of sign systems in connection with the theater although looking at considerably diverse traditions, and the former even devises a rather complex systematization of theatrical signs, which will be detailed in the review of those attempts that targeted the classification of semiotic units within the theater.

After the contributions of the Prague School structuralists to the semiotics of the theater, as Keir Elam writes, "little work of note dedicated to the problems of theatrical semiosis was produced for two decades" (17). It was only in 1964 that Roland Barthes in an essay entitled "Literature and Signification" came forth with his famed contention that theatrical communication whether verbal or nonverbal can be characterized by the "density of signs" and "semiotic thickness" (262), and consequently it represents one of the most fertile grounds for semiotic interrogations. Unfortunately, as is well known, Barthes never developed a systematic analysis of theatrical signs, and his own challenging observation pertaining to the density of theatrical semiosis remained but an encouraging exclamation mark. After Barthes'

[13] Using Eco's famous example of the drunkard and the drunkard on stage, de Toro contends that the "drunkard on stage" might be simply an iconic sign of an object (a drunkard), while the same might be a sign that calls attention to the significance of moderation (applied by the Salvation Army to teach a lesson), thus a symbolic sign, in other words the sign of another sign (70).

noteworthy remark another four years had passed before anyone ventured into the field of theater semiotics in order to address the problem of segmentation.

The year 1968 is often cited as a milestone in the history of theater semiotics, since it was then that the Polish Tadeusz Kowzan came forth with his article entitled "The Sign in the Theater" in the journal *Diogenes*. In the article Kowzan undertakes the task of classification of the sign systems of the theater (to be discussed separately), and also defines the significative unit that could function as a methodological tool for the comprehensive discussion of "every system of signs" (79) in the spectacle. As Kowzan asserts, once this significative unit is sufficiently determined, "the common denominator of all the signs, emitted together" would necessarily be identified (79). He then proceeds to show that this ideal "semiological unit of the spectacle is *a slice* containing all the signs emitted simultaneously, a slice the duration of which is equal to the sign that lasts the least" (79, emphasis added). Kowzan's concept of the "slice," however, was not the ground-breaking invention theater semioticians anticipated. The term indeed meant the freezing of subsequent stage moments into stills, therefore it contributed more to the horizontal than to the vertical or semiotic sectioning of theatrical communication.

In my perception, then, Kowzan's search for a distinct theatrical signifying unit led not so much to the solution of the debate but more to the introduction of an additional category in the descriptive analysis of the temporal unfolding of the performance. The problem with Kowzan's scheme, to my mind, is not "that the duration of a given signal is often difficult to determine" and that "the discrete units of each message […] are not easily defined in themselves," as Elam contends (42), but rather that although Kowzan once again returns to the well-known sign as a core unit concept, yet he attempts to superimpose on it a unit that is essentially of temporal character and that lumps together instead of classifying the various elements of signification. Kowzan's "slice" then contributes to the horizontal partitioning of the spectacle text, and thus ultimately evades the task of vertical segmentation. Although he himself proposes that the idea of the slice "could lead to an excessive atomisation of the units of the spectacle and might demand the introduction of a distinction between the small and large units" (79), he leaves the task of this "atomisation" or segmentation within the horizontal units of the slice for future theoreticians.

The search for the "theatrical 'discrete unit'" (Elam 43) continued after Kowzan, yet his propositions with respect to "the slice" or the idea of atomisation have not been developed further, and these aspects of his theory have not since been put to practice in the analysis of concrete theatrical performances. In 1980 in his *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* Keir

Elam still regards the attempts "to slice up the performance across its various levels […] theoretically premature" and he further presumes that "[u]ntil we know more of the levels and rules of theatrical communication, the theatrical 'discrete unit' remains a semiotic philosopher's stone" (43).

While I am perfectly in agreement with Elam regarding the need for a descriptive analysis of the levels and rules within theatrical discourse, I firmly believe that the sign can indeed be applied as a core unit in the segmentation of theatrical discourse. Though it is not, as Elam labels it, a theatrically "discrete unit," since the term "sign" has been as good as overused, still it is perfectly suitable for the semiotic description of specific theatrical systems of communication. The feasibility of this proposition is further strengthened by the tendency of theater semioticians to recourse to the notion of sign to denote the smallest signifying units of the performance (see Kowzan, Elam, Aston-Savona, De Toro, etc.), and it is also clear that suggestions regarding the application of other typically theatrical semiotic units (such as Michel Corvin's "semes" described in Elam [42]; or Kowzan's evasive horizontal partitioning into "slices") have been scarce and abortive.

As Tadeusz Kowzan aptly perceives: "[…] several theatrical theoreticians as well as people in the trade, use the term "sign" when they speak of artistic elements or means of theoretical expression, which proves that semiological consciousness or subconsciousness is something real among those who deal with the spectacle" (56). Ever since the emergence of the Prague Linguistic Circle scholars tended to emphasize this semiological character of the art of the theater and stressed the fact that everything appearing on the stage "is a sign in the theatrical presentation" (57). Although it is true that the term "sign" is not exclusively the property of theatrical communication (it is clearly a borrowing from the realm of linguistics), and the variety of forms and the complexity of messages operative in the theater make the identification of the various classes of signs associated with the diverse communicative levels difficult, still I would suggest that through the identification of the levels of theatrical discourse, as is also suggested by Elam, we can arrive at the classification of the types and functions of theatrical signs.

(C) Typologies of Theatrical Signs

One of the earliest taxonomies of theatrical signs comes from the Prague School theoretician Petr

Bogatyrev, whose "Semiotics in the Folk Theatre" from 1938 distinguishes between six major semiotic systems in the performance: (1) theatrical objects, (2) theatrical language, (3) costume, (4) mime and gestures, (5) posture, (6) movement-space. Most of these systems of signs belong to the body of the actor with the exception of theatrical objects. Bogatyrev's contention that "[t]he actor's role is a structure of the most diverse signs: signs expressed by speech, gestures, movements, posture, miming, costume […]" (44) recurs in a somewhat modified form in Veltruskỳ, who regarded the actor's physical presence as the ultimate focal point of attention in the performance, whose body "in the most general sense—absolutely predominates over the immaterial meaning" (115).

Following Bogatyrev, Karel Brušak devised a more refined systematization of the signs of the Chinese theater in 1939, which, nonetheless can easily be adapted as a general typology of theatrical productions independent of cultural limitations. Brušak begins by asserting that the "Chinese theater has devised a complicated and precise system of signs carrying a large and categorically diverse range of meaning" (59), and hastens to add that although "[t]he components of the structure appear simple enough […], individual elements within the structure carry numerous obligatory signs standing for referents that are often very complex" (59). There are, as Brušak argues, fundamentally two interrelated series of signs to be differentiated (as building blocks of virtually any performance), the *acoustic* and the *visual*. "The visual side of any dramatic performance apprehended by the spectator can be termed dramatic space" (59), which is made up of *static* and *kinetic* qualities. The static qualities are represented through elements of the **scene,** such as the scenic articles, scenic contrivances, costumes and masks, which can be further divided, based on whether they are put to active use by the actor's performance, or not. The kinetic aspects, on the other hand, are associated with the so-called **"fictitious space"** or **"action space,"** which is comprised of the movements of the actors (their gestures, facial expressions, and movements), the movement and color changes of lights, or the moving images of a film (Brušak 60, 67, emphasis added). Since the Chinese theater is less significant from a literary point of view than from its visual and representative qualities, Brušak dwells very little on the analysis of the acoustic angle. He simply notes that language and music belong to the acoustic signs but omits their detailed introduction. Brušak's division of the signs of theatrical communication into visual and acoustic signs became the basis for subsequent taxonomies, his perceptions about the all-important kinetic factors of theatrical signification have been developed further by the theater semioticians of the 1980s.

The systematization of theatrical discourse remained an important challenge for theoreticians even after the eclipse of the Prague School. The already mentioned Tadeusz Kowzan, for instance, initiated the identification of 13 sign systems in the spectacle. Kowzan's list included: the word (language), tone, facial mime, gesture, the actor's movement, make-up, hair-style, costume, accessories, decor, lighting, music and sound effects (60-72). He also classified the cited systemic labels, according to four main criteria: (A) the relation of the given system to various discursive levels of the stage (subdivided in his terminology into: spoken text, expression of the body, actor's external appearance, appearance of the stage, inarticulate sounds [73]); (B) the system's relation or independence from the actor (systems associated with, and outside of the actor [73]); (C) auditive and visual signs; (D) the dependence of the systemic category on time and space. Although Kowzan himself noted the superficiality and rudimentary character of his taxonomy, admitting that it was meant only as a "a temporary tool for scientific analysis of the theatrical spectacle" (61) and as an invitation for the development of "more profound semiological research" (61), as well as systematization, still his typology was not been surpassed for a long time. (For the complex interrelations laid out by Kowzan consult Chart I in the Appendix).

Besides Kowzan's multi-faceted classification of theatrical sign systems Patrice Pavis' questionnaire prepared initially for students of the theater also proved influential among theoreticians of the stage. Pavis' typology was put forth in the form of an article entitled: "Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire" in 1985, and it proposed the consideration of 13 aspects of the performance: the general discussion of the performance, scenography, lighting system, stage properties, costumes, actors' performances, function of music and sound effects, pace of performance, interpretation of story-line in performance, text in performance, audience, how to notate the production and what cannot be put into signs (Theatre Analysis 209-210). If we compare the two typologies, those of Kowzan and Pavis, the emphases in the individual classifications become more striking. Kowzan's taxonomy is clearly structured around the figure of the actor, thus the visual and auditive signs, as well as the various levels of theatrical discourse are all enumerated as they relate to or as they tend to emerge outside of the actor. Pavis' typology, on the other hand, makes use of three additional extremely significant factors/systems that Kowzan fails to include. These are scenography (which surpasses Kowzan's "decor" and "accessories" to further include architectural and spatial forms, as well as the "relationship between audience space and acting space, systems of color and their connotations, principles of organization of space, relationship between on-stage and off-stage, links between stage utilised and fiction of the staged dramatic text"

[209]); pace of performance (which slightly relates to the evaluation of the distinct systems to time and space in Kowzan) that in Pavis connects to the overall pace of the performance as well as to the "pace of certain signifying systems" (Theatre Analysis 209); and audience, whose role regarding the shaping of the performance is beginning to be emphasized again only recently.[14]

The real advantage of the Pavis questionnaire, however, as opposed to Kowzan's taxonomy, is that, as Aston and Savona observe, he guides the student "from identification to an analysis of signification by virtue of the sub-questioning/discussion points offered within the categories" (109). The urge for an analytical attitude with respect to performance texts is the very point that has been so long missed in theater semiotics, and which the merely descriptive typologies regularly tended to omit (see Chart II in the Appendix).[15] The great challenge of the Pavis questionnaire is that from that point on the purely descriptive typologies might easily be regarded as superficial without their concrete practical application to the interpretation of specific stage productions.

Another area that theoreticians of the stage have frequently been avoiding besides concrete performance analysis was the definition of "the signifying units of each system [and the explication of their respective] syntactic and code rules with any degree of vigour" (Elam 45). Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* from 1980 is, among other things, aiming at providing exactly this missing link. As he asserts, first we have to "endeavour to understand better each of the systems at work and to define its rules and units and make explicit the complex of dramatic, theatrical and cultural codes which permit a range of diverse messages to be brought together to the united end of producing a performance text" (43). In order to achieve this objective, Elam introduces two categories central to his undertaking, **system** and **code**. System, in Elam's definition is to be interpreted as "a repertory of signs or signals and the internal syntactic rules governing their selection and combination" (44), whereas a code is "an ensemble of *correlational* rules governing the formation of sign-relationships" (44). Since the theater makes use of a large number of codes that are relevant to our cultural, social, ideological, ethical, etc. navigation in the world, the codes or rules that are restricted to drama and the theater should be termed subcodes, he argues (47). The point where Elam clearly breaks away from the former theater semioticians is that he looks into the rules which seem to govern theatrical systems. Instead of creating a classification of

[14] See for instance Carlson Marvin's related book entitled, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (1990).

[15] The present thesis, among other things, also aims to respond to Pavis' call to combine theory with practice by adapting my own specific typology (developed under the inspiration of previous taxonomies) to the reading of concrete performance texts as well as other cultural texts.

signifying systems, like his predecessors used to, Elam chooses to enlist the subcodes or rules which are responsible for the creation of sign relations within the various thematic components of performance and drama. He does not say, for instance, that costume is a specific theatrical system, but that there are certain theatrical subcodes or rules for costume and its connotation, and that these rules all belong to the systemic principle. Thus, Elam's systemic categories—i.e., the various layers or else levels of the performance text—are deducible from the theatrical subcodes which are enlisted with the systemic thematic category. The enumerated subcodes coincide with Kowzan's thirteen systems almost to the letter, with only two significant deviations. One, Kowzan's systems regarding the spoken text, i.e., "word" and "tone" fall under Elam's linguistic (and not the systemic) principle of theatrical subcodes, where a more refined classification of the prevalent syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, rhetorical, paralinguistic, dialectal, idiolectal, etc. rules is devised than the one in Kowzan. Two, Kowzan's systemic labels regarding the appearance of the stage (i.e., accessory, decor, lighting) are merged under two systemic theatrical subcodes in Elam, the so-called scenic subcodes and the stage and playhouse norms, thus more precisely distinguishing the pictorial elements that contribute to the appearance of the stage and those architectural consideration that define the stage or the theater at large (consult Chart III in Appendix).

Of all the typologies thus far designed (and briefly described here) for purposes of performance analysis Elam's is, to be sure, the most elaborate. He envisions 12 major categories or principles which accommodate the thematic clustering of the three main classes of rule (the theatrical, and dramatic subcodes, and cultural codes). These are the systemic, linguistic, generic intertextual, textual structural, formal presentational, epistemic, aesthetic, logical, behavioral ethical, ideological, psychological and historical principles (51-56). Although Elam's chart of theatrical communication/the theater as signifying system is most complex and multifaceted, considering discursive layers that have never been drawn into the analysis before, such as intertextual, ethical, and even ideological aspects, his systematization still remains too general without the specification of individual semiotic units within the subcodes defined.

(D) Semiotization of the Minstrel Theater

The currency and importance of blackface minstrelsy for the present have long been proven by the ways its cultural messages have been transported, modified and suited to the demands of new times, new cultural contexts. Plenty of historical evidence attest to the fact that

minstrelsy's routines, and the images therein, spread into various other forms of mass entertainment, such as 19th-century mainstream literature, popular magazine fiction, turn-of-the-century vaudeville stages, 20th-century cartoons, radio-shows, movies and television entertainment. Even present-day sitcoms and contemporary American fiction bear traces of the old-time classic minstrelsy. The question that evidently presents itself witnessing this spectacular cultural survival is this: what enabled this wide-spread migration and textual incorporation of minstrel icons and imagery into an exceedingly large number of cultural texts; how and when did this sign-migration begin; how can we describe this process of cultural survival, promulgation and borrowing?

The spreading influence of minstrelsy started shortly after its unique formula—the classic minstrel show—was standardized. Traces of the almost two-century-old minstrel show are everywhere around us, dispersed and still signaling, still ready for cultural consumers to recognize, decode and fill up with meaning the controversial messages of its signs. As Eric Lott, one of the new-school theoreticians of minstrelsy elaborates this troubling contemporary presence of minstrel signification: "From 'Oh! Susanna' to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts and words have figured significantly in the white Imaginary of the United States" (4-5). And he adds:

> The early history of motion pictures was bound up with blackface—witness its importance in such major cinematic developments as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and *The Jazz Singer* (1927)—and the movies have regularly returned to it since then, whether in Fred Astaire's blackface tribute to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in *Swing Time* (1936), Melvin Van Peebles's ironic *Watermelon Man* (1970), or the egregious post-affirmative action *Soul Man* (1985). Bill Monroe, Jimmie Rodgers, and other early country music stars routinely 'blacked up,' as did ethnic vaudevillians such as Sophie Tucker. (*Love* 5)

As minstrelsy's messages, images and icons have been constantly updated in order to be fitted to ever-renewing cultural contexts, so have novel research methodologies been applied and sought for to provide proper scientific explanations for these cultural transmittals and fresh cultural meanings (which, however, tended to be overlooked in much of the minstrel criticism of the past). The present inquiry, however, does not follow either the widely applied historical and geographical interrogations into the backgrounds of blackface minstrelsy, or chart the racial, gender or class issues veiled behind its practices (which nevertheless will surface prominently throughout the concrete analysis of the discursive levels, the particular signifying units, and the literary ramifications of minstrelsy) or its fascinating psychological or

sociological strategies, aspects which have all been addressed in the relevant criticism already.[16] Instead, in a quite unorthodox manner, I propose here a rather modern re-contextualization of minstrelsy as a semiotic system, a tradition in theater and drama with unique and specific signifying levels that each encode a variety of signifying units. In order to understand phenomena (whether cultural, social, political, etc.), Culler stresses, one has "to reconstruct the system of which they are manifestations" (31). Semiotics and the related structural explanations make this glance behind the operation of the phenomenal world possible, revealing those units/structures, their interrelations and functioning, which keep systems going.

Although the tools for describing the discursive levels, semiotic systems or else subcodes (Elam 47) of dramatic performances have received a great deal of scholarly attention, to my knowledge thus far nobody has taken the self-evident leap from semiotic theory to analytical practice, at least not within the context of minstrelsy. This missing link is all the more surprising since theater semiotics is particularly the kind of theory that simply cries out for specific analytical adaptation in particular dramatic contexts. The proposition I wish to advance thus is to consider minstrelsy as a semiotic system, and see whether the tools of theater and drama semiotics can prove useful in revealing, highlighting and in the better understanding of the complexities of its operation. The semiotician works like a zoologist according to Culler, s/he "wants to discover what are the species of signs, how they differ from one another, how they function in their native habitat […]" (viii). Likewise my research was also geared towards the identification of the structural units of the system and the description of their operation. For that I had to unearth from the minstrel show those signifying units that were responsible for the show's functioning as a semiotic "enterprise," and later prove that these were the self-same components detected as migrating from the originating popular theatrical context via other forms of popular theater through movies, radio and TV all the way to literature.

Although Elam has used the term "semiotization" to denote the process through which theatrical stage objects tend to lose their practical functions and give way to a symbolic or signifying role as soon as they appear on the scene (6), I adapted Elam's term in a somewhat altered manner. If semiotization means that a certain entity is imbued with a signifying function in a performance context, then semiotization of the minstrel theater, in my

[16] The above outlined problem areas have all been treated in depth in my doctoral thesis, *The "Comic Negro" in American Culture: A Study of a Popular Cultural Icon and Stereotype*, and will readily surface in the semiotic investigations where necessary.

interpretation, could be applied to designate the scientific methodology through which the semiotic structure of the given theatrical tradition might be highlighted. The conclusions drawn from the academic achievements of theater and drama semioticians have prompted me to devise a taxonomy for the signifying systems and the semiotic units of the minstrel theater similar to those general classifications of theatrical communication. Mine was, however, a task somewhat different since this time the semiotic framework of a specific theatrical tradition had to be outlined along with the precise identification and description of the diverse discursive units of blackface minstrelsy. The urgency to systematize and differentiate between the multilevelled discourses of the minstrel stage, however, has also been induced by certain cultural factors (that have triggered the need to investigate minstrelsy's codes, clichés or paradigms through a more systematic and scholarly approach).

These cultural stimuli towards the systematization of minstrelsy's semiotic system have been manifold. Most evident within these is the ever-present cultural pressure for the isolation of socially and culturally relevant signs. As cultural consumers, we are continually bombarded by a multitude of culture-specific signs every single minute, and only few of these are we alert enough to consciously register, and even fewer that we are subsequently able to identify not to mention decode. It is plain to see that in our postmodern age when this plenitude of signification is projected upon us, contesting for our recognition each and every day, the layperson needs an impetus to be stimulated, to be sufficiently alert for one particular sort of sign. There literally is a sign war out there, as Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson chose to identify this almost uncontrollable competition, fought between the manufacturers or designers of signs—and eventually between the signs themselves—for ever more readily decipherable meanings, for the favors of the culturally situated perceiver, the potential buyers and "readers" of consumer messages. "We decipher ads routinely, automatically, even absent-mindedly […]" (1), it should thus come as no surprise that there is an increasingly greater demand for signs to stand out and call attention to their uniqueness, otherwise they would simply go unnoticed, and cease to function as signs, remaining dormant.

This is all very well, but one might ask: how does minstrelsy enter into this picture, what is its relation to the sign wars in the 21st century? The connection is simple if not evident. Those surviving elements of the minstrel show that are still around battle for our (the cultural consumers', the readers') recognition in much the same way as competing signs in today's sign wars do. If we go without noticing them, we rid ourselves of important cultural messages which could be just as important today, however different they might be in content from the original 19th-century minstrel images, as they were nearly two hundred years ago. By

identifying these largely forgotten systems and blocks of signification—that rest encoded and largely un-decoded in several cultural texts at our disposal—I ultimately wish to provide that earlier-mentioned impetus for the uninitiated cultural consumers to recognize and make sense of minstrelsy's messages whatever context they might appear in. Specifying and classifying the various discourse levels of minstrelsy and identifying within these signifying layers the smallest message-bearing units—which are fragmentary building blocks of a variety of contemporary cultural imagery/texts—for better and readier notice for today's culture-readers have thus been goals prompted by evident cultural motivations.

Problems engendered by the tasks related to semiotic systematization are whether and how cultural consumers can be brought to a condition of alertness and reception, how they can understand and make sense of these and similar signs; why this cultural preparation of recipients is important; and how, if at all, we can explain the survival of these seemingly outdated systems of signification. These latter questions will demand further investigation—to be addressed in Chapters III and VI.

To prepare cultural consumers for the reception of minstrel clichés and icons we should first attempt to define and then enumerate the distinctive minstrel-derived expressive units to facilitate their recognition, and in order to observe their cultural, historical development. For the time being let us turn to the more immediate questions of what exactly these identifiable constituent elements of the minstrel show are, which carry the whole weight of its ideological burdens, readily transportable across apparently impermeable generic, cultural and historical borderlines.

The simplest explanation for the transfer, or rather transportability, of minstrel clichés might only partly be related to the historical, political and psychological relevance of minstrelsy's interrogation of race relations in America—an issue that was overburdened by longstanding anxieties. The power and significance of minstrel imagery with respect to race relations, not to mention the popularity and later-developed familiarity with typical minstrel images among the masses, surely contributed to the cultural transfer of these images from one genre to another. Yet, these factors were more likely to be the motivations (whether cultural, social, political or historical) for transfer, than explanations for the logistics of the carry-over process. What I am after, in other words, is not so much the causes for or the results of these cultural transfers—problems which, however, will be readily addressed in the coming chapter—but more the technicalities of what made the transport possible.

Cultural continuity constantly triggers carry-over transactions. For the easy transferability of minstrel ideologies and imagery, to enable ready textual transplantation in a

wide variety of cultural texts, minstrelsy needed to have identifiable constructive units, which could be pointed to—even outside of the context of an entire show—as evoking the whole cultural, ideological, political and psychological baggage of connotations that have been unmistakably linked to minstrelsy's institution ever since its creation. Thus, it is relevant to observe and acknowledge the existence of these constituent elements within the larger minstrel formula without which minstrel coding and decoding would not have been possible; these units made traveling across genres and the incorporation of varied texts feasible.

1. The Problem of Naming

Pinning identifying tags on the smallest recognizable and irreducible unit of the minstrel show was the first challenge I had to deal with, a dilemma shared by theater semioticians who have also wished to define the smallest identifiable semiotic units of the performance from time to time. This search for the smallest distinctive theatrical unit brought about many futile attempts in the past, mostly, I believe, because they were largely concerned with theoretical applications instead of practical or else particular adaptation. Nevertheless the semiotic description of a specific theatrical tradition (in my case, blackfaced minstrelsy) also presented complexities and anxieties that could not be easily resolved. The task of creating a term for a phenomenon hitherto unidentified and unlabeled (i.e., the smallest signifying unit of the minstrel show) was, however, only one facet of my dilemmas. Added difficulties were triggered by the fact that the unit I wished to separate was not homogeneous in character, or in magnitude, a problem also often highlighted by scholars who tackle matters related to the segmentation of theatrical communication. Since minstrel shows incorporated elements as distinctly diverse as dance steps, particular dialect traits, physical markers, aesthetic markers and specific generic markers, to list just a few of the most obvious ones, identification of a semiotic unit common to these heterogeneous components, made the problem appear almost insoluble. How can one designation encompass and denote such heterogeneous clusters, and is it possible to come up with a functional label that would evoke direct links with the whole minstrel tradition, which we know was as diverse in character as the very textual units it incorporated?

The terms I have hitherto applied to identify the smallest irreducible building block of the minstrel performance in my previous discussions were "element," "cliché," "prefiguration," "unit," "particle," "icon," "image," "imagery" and "segment." These are, to be sure, all adequate categories, yet all missing an added connotation I wanted the designation

to carry: a level of energy I hoped to incorporate into my own labels of designation. Before introducing the term I finally settled on using, for convenience's sake, I will apply the term "unit" to denote this atomic concept I seek to name and later define here. The cluster of connotations I wanted the term to carry were these:

[1] First of all, the aspect of **textual heterogeneity** resulting from the generic (music, dance, drama, prose), linguistic (verbal, non-verbal and melodic) "characterological" or typological multiplicity innate in the minstrel phenomenon.

[2] Secondly, I hoped to find a term that conveyed a sense of **abstractness** and **easy recognizability**, namely, that is both concrete and general enough to be detached from the specific contexts and connotations of the minstrel show.

[3] It had to be considered that many of the composing units of the actual minstrel performance failed to carry over in their totality. Thus, we have to deal with semiotic components which, however fragmentary, have been capable of conveying, through a special kind of metonymy, connotative force and cultural charge, the totality of what we mean by the minstrel tradition. Put differently, the term I was looking for had to possess the power of invoking this metonymical relationship, denoting **fragment and whole** simultaneously. For example, the dance step of the minstrel show survived, among other things, in M. C. Hammer's hip hop dance; the dance popularized by Hammer built on the isolation of a fragmentary unit from a range of other gestures appearing simultaneously in the original minstrel dance, yet it was capable of evoking the complexity of the minstrel tradition as a whole; see Lhamon [220-226].

[4] The term I was seeking had to be expressive of **high energy**, which could thus account for the fact that a particular irreducible component—as a high-energy construct—of the routinized minstrel performance was capable of surviving, together with the abundance of its connotations. This viability, concentrated in the connotational value of the term, was to explain not only the fact that the unit survived through the centuries (with only little modifications), but also that its cultural recognizability is as evident today as it was almost two centuries ago.

2. Terminological Alternatives

I found a potentially applicable designation in a category introduced by Stephen Henderson in the preface of the anthology entitled, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References.* The term Henderson had come up with to denote a

"*massive concentration of Black experimental energy*" (44), abbreviated as "mascon," could be easily transferred onto the minstrel context to denote the high potency atomic minstrel unit, which triggers unmistakable associations to various aspects of the minstrel tradition. Henderson's category appeared just about as good as innovative naming can get, yet the thought of minstrel theory's borrowing from black sources (thus reiterating blackface's exploitiveness of and uncontrolled borrowing from black materials once again), appeared somewhat inadequate. Henderson in turn admits to having borrowed the term from the language of NASA, the real originator of the term. NASA, Henderson argues, "invented the acronym to mean a 'massive concentration' of matter below the lunar surface after it was observed that the gravitational pull on a satellite was stronger in some places than in others" (44). With this, it seemed, I was off the hook and free from the trap of my own making. "Mascon" was the perfect word for it reflected high energy with complex associations, except for the fact that it did not evoke heterogeneity and the concrete plus general, part and whole relations I also meant to incorporate in the term I sought.

I also contemplated the options of applying two other designations to suit my context, following hints from colleagues I involved in my naming dilemma. These were: "prefiguration," and "paradigm." The terms also possess the kind of triggering effect and metonymical referentiality inherent in the minstrel component, while also emphasizing the fragmentary nature of the isolated and signifying structural unit. The problem with these terms is primarily conceptual in that not all of the minor yet unmistakable features of the minstrel tradition could be fitted into these categories. Such typical structural elements as the semicircular stage arrangement; the tripartite format; standardized elements such as puns, malapropisms could not be labeled as either prefigurations or paradigms.

In pondering this terminological dilemma, after a long mental tug-of-war, I decided on using the considerably simpler but certainly multipurpose umbrella term, the "**minstrel sign**." The choice of this term also draws on insights gained from theater semioticians (reviewed earlier), who almost unanimously settled on the term "sign" as the smallest semiotic unit in their general typologies of theatrical communication. On the pages that follow I will use the terms "sign" and "marker" interchangeably (as dictated by the context), yet because "sign" has such a universal appeal I decided on using it consistently in my general classification.

3. Defining the Minstrel Sign

In the most general sense signs "all necessarily refer us to a relation between two *relata*," Roland Barthes explains (*Elements* 35). This relational aspect incorporated in the sign has been articulated by the forefathers of semiotics in slightly diverse ways. Ferninand de Saussure conceived of the sign as a "twofold entity (signifier and signified or *sign vehicle* and *meaning*)" thus anticipating all subsequent correlational definitions of sign-function (Eco, *Theory* 14). While Saussure connected the sign exclusively to communication, thus shrinking its operational field to human discourse, Charles Sanders Peirce, the American semiotician, extended the functional scope of the sign defining it as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respects or capacity" (228). The Peircian triad of sign, object, interpretant, as Eco clearly emphasizes "can be also applied to phenomena that do not have a human emitter, provided that they do have a human receiver […]" (*Theory* 14). On the basis of the work of early semioticians Umberto Eco defines the sign in his *A Theory of Semiotics* (1979) as "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else" (16). Eco further stresses that his definition has been greatly influenced by Charles Morris, who in turn provides an even more generally applicable interpretation, when claiming that "something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter […]. Semiotics, then, is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of object, but with ordinary objects insofar (and only insofar) as they participate in semiosis" (qtd. in Eco, *Theory* 16).

It is quite clear then that the interpretations offered by these key theoreticians with respect to the sign, emphasizing (1) the correlational connection (2) between at least two separate entities (3) as perceived by the receiver or interpreter, make my category of the minstrel sign perfectly adaptable to these core criteria. Moving further in the analysis of the second criterion we could state with Thomas A. Sebeok that "the sign is constituted of two indispensable moeities, one *aistheton*, perceptible (or sensible), the other *noeton*, intelligible (or rational): the *signifier*, an appreciable impact on at least one of the interpreter's sense organs, and the content *signified*" (17). These two poles of the signifying formation have been diversely named in the criticism, as Sebeok notes, "[i]n medieval Latin, the corresponding pair of terms for the Stoic *semainon*, 'signifier,' and *semainomenon*, 'signified,' was "*signans* and *signatum*, rendered by Saussure as *signifiant* and *signifié*, in German usually as *das Signifikat* and *der Signifikant*, by Morris as *sign vehicle* and *designatum*, by some Soviet scholars […] as 'thing' and 'concept,' etc." (17-8).

The minstrel sign, as I will define it in the present context, incorporates the insights gained from semiotics as well as broadens the scope of interpretation by those culturally

relevant aspects incorporated within this special phenomenon. It is thus first of all a formal abstraction. It establishes a correlation between a multivalent signifier on the one hand, and the minstrel tradition (both as an institution and narrative, performance and drama text), on the other. The perceivable signifier of the minstrel sign encodes the idea of cultural continuity while condensing the essential ideological, historical and textual properties of the 19th-century minstrel show into a single, semiotically charged unit (see, for instance, the minstrel dance, the minstrel dialogue, the minstrel mask, etc.). The phenomenon evoked by this multivalent signifier is the mental concept of the minstrel show, an idea overburdened by certain historical, moral, social, ideological, etc. residues, which shaped as well as contributed to its essence throughout the centuries. The signifiers of the minstrel heritage are fragmentary manifestations, and ideally irreducible components of this larger concept they reference. Minstrel signs embody this play between the concrete and abstract, specific and mental, perceivable and conceptual, where the specific, objectified minstrel signifiers are indices (indexical signs) invoking metonymical associations to the signified, the minstrel tradition. Metonymy, as Kaja Silverman argues, "exploits relationships of contiguity between things, not words: between a thing and its attributes, its environment and its adjuncts" (111). Individual minstrel signs thus can be perceived as metonymic signifiers for the entire minstrel tradition, where individual sign formations serve as substitutes for the more complex phenomenon of the specific theatrical tradition. We could also claim then that the minstrel theater (denoting a long range of stage practices and discourses, along with an intricate web of social, psychological, ideological, etc. relations) is contiguous to its attributes, or adjuncts, i.e., its respective signifiers, or visa versa. Since it is the nature of metonymy that it is a kind of signifying formation which facilitates "a movement back and forth […] between the two elements" conjoined by it (Silverman 110), so both the minstrel signifiers and their signified, the minstrel tradition, are involved in a signifying transaction built on a metonymic comparison that maintains this continuous referentiality. The system of minstrel signs thus connects the self-same (or at least very slightly changing) referent/signified (the texts, institution, tradition and ideology of the minstrel show) to a large number of signifiers, which although are very heterogeneous in character could be all grouped around a single term, i.e., the minstrel sign.

The historically situated minstrel sign possesses a particular social and cultural value, it is imbued with historical currency and a certain psychological appeal, which various decoders or readers of the selfsame sign might interpret in various ways, depending on cultural knowledge and origins. With the ever-changing historical contexts the ideological

messages that infiltrate minstrelsy's signifiers shift and readjust themselves to these novel contexts. As Eco phrases it in an article, "[a] semiotics of the mise-en-scène is constitutively a semiotics of the production of ideologies" ("Semiotics" 117). There is, to put it differently, no signification without an attached ideological message involved.

Each viable minstrel sign, moreover, encodes a particular commodified narrative (thus it is more of a complex system of signs than comprising a singular entity) which contributes to its immediate sign currency, an aspect to be dealt with later when I address the problem of the commodification of the minstrel sign in Chapter III. Whereas 19th-century audiences were naturally sensitized to recognizing minstrel signs, today's "readers" of minstrel signs and signification need to be sensitized to the various embodiments and the content of the minstrel sign. While today the recognizability and ready identifiability of the minstrel sign is clearly in decline, 19th-century audiences were apparently less aware of the multiply coded significations, with particular emphasis on the ideological complexities behind and within minstrel signs. As Kaja Silverman asserts "[t]he secondary process [of signification] not inherent in objects but in our perception of them […], [establishing similarities or contiguities, the ability to think relationally] is one of the most important agencies for the transmission of cultural information" (121). This capacity to observe differences, to relate part and whole, to establish similarities and contiguities, enables, among other things, the complex reading (decoding) of literary texts as well. The identification of minstrelsy's metonymic signifiers documents as well as inspires the process of cultural translation through which relevant cultural messages might be decoded.

Each minstrel sign is a potent and discrete semiotic entity which readily evokes its referent. While present-day advertisers strive to find and hit upon a differentiated formula, and to devise cunning frameworks for conjoining unique signs with a shifting set of meanings, the minstrel show and its satellites of semiotically charged signs bore the aspect of unique imagery and meaning combination from the outset. Instead of gradually losing their signifying or commodity value, with the passing of years minstrel signs and their meanings underwent further multiplication regarding both form and context.

4. Classification of the Minstrel Sign: A Proposed Model

The most refined, yet far from complete, taxonomy of theatrical signification has been prepared by Keir Elam, thus it appears evident to compare and contrast my model of theatrical communication with that of Elam's. Elam describes altogether 29 theatrical subcodes and

arranges them thematically along twelve major thematic categories, thus his systematization is based on the combination of selected thematic categories and the theatrical subcodes or rules specific to the performance context. In my own model I take some of Elam's thematic labels and adapt them as systemic categories which serve to denote the vertical levels of theatrical discourse in my own interpretation. This re-structuration of Elam's system is all the more justified given that thus the vertical sectioning of theatrical communication becomes truly more general and universal than the systemic categories listed in Elam (such as the subcodes of movement, gesture, space, costume, etc).

Whereas earlier taxonomies of theatrical communication stressed divisions based on (1) a distinction between signs attached or detached from the actor in the theater or (2) the separation of audible and visual signs or, as was the case with Pavis, (3) the interrelation of signs of the stage, the actor and the audience; for my own purposes I find Elam's categorization of theatrical discourse more helpful, because he stresses a certain thematic arrangement of theatrical codes that supersedes these earlier—mostly artificial—disconnections of obviously closely interrelated discourses. Hence in constructing my model I was not interested in whether, for instance, the actor's words belonged to the signs linked to the performer, or the fact that they form the audible layer of theatrical discourse, more that they could be associated with the linguistic level of signs, and that they also shape character types (hence contributive to certain aesthetic considerations), as well as central to the shaping of the generic arsenal of the minstrel show. The semiotic model I devised, therefore, underlines the need to perceive theatrical communication as a complex and layered semiotic framework, where the signs of each separate semiotic level interrelate, influence and shape one another every minute of their horizontal unfolding. Accordingly each minstrel sign has a bearing on the rest of the semiotic layers, and it was this complex interrelationality that I aimed to pin-point with my semiotic model.

The universal systemic labels in my model denote the vertical levels of theatrical discourse which might surface parallel in each given moment of the performance. Thus, the main thematic principles in Elam are translated into semiotic layers within my system. Elam's systemic subcodes of stage and playhouse norms surface as my systemic category of the **structure**, denoting signs tied to both the external as well as internal structural principles of the show. Elam's thematic principle of generic intertextual subcodes (which in his interpretation designate the influence of other aesthetic texts and cultural typologies [53]) is refashioned in my model as the **literary and generic** levels of the minstrel performance denoting the signs (or sign combinations) responsible for the generic varieties involved in the

minstrel performance. The rules or subcodes regarding the formal and aesthetic aspects of presentation in Elam are translated into my category of the **aesthetic** level, which summarizes all the aesthetic trademarks/signs unmistakably associated with the minstrel show (such as the minstrel mimicry, the minstrel grotesque, minstrel stereotypes, etc.). These procedural signifiers of the minstrel tradition are necessarily the most complex and confluent units of all the minstrel signs, consequently their order of magnitude is much larger than of any of the other signs. The linguistic theatrical subcodes of Elam's system resurface as the **linguistic** level in my system, which is more restrictive than Elam's principle, concentrating mostly on the dialectal and idiolectal markers, and finally the systemic subcodes regarding gesture and movement are generalized in my model as the level of **the bodily or physical**.[17]

Most elements listed as systemic theatrical subcodes in Elam, on the other hand, tend to reappear as specific semiotic units—indeed individual signs—in my semiotization of the minstrel stage.[18] Thus, while Elam seems to argue that the heterogeneity of semiotic units of the performance leads to conclusions that formalization of stage communication is close to impossible, I contend that the repertory of theatrical subcodes is easily translatable into manifest signifiers of a given level of theatrical discourse, and therefore we can interpret them as signs (while correlating an objectified rule or device with a particular vertical layer, or a set of signs in the theater), irrespective of the heterogeneous nature of their substance. The fact that certain compounds or complexes of signs, which are not only heterogeneous in character but represent very different orders of magnitude (compare for instance the minstrel mimicry to a minstrel song, both taken as signs), are interpreted here as individual signs, indicates that the designation "sign" is far from being perfect and that these units could certainly be dissected further into yet smaller semiotic entities. The justification for applying a seemingly homogeneous yet multifaceted category to describe very different levels of discourse can be found in Eco, who asserts in his "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance," that "[s]emiotics can be conceived […] as a unified theoretical approach to the great variety of systems of signification and communication [which in the case of the theater might range] from verbal language to gestures, from visual images to body positions, from musical sound to fashions" (108).

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[17] Elam's further principles of the "epistemic," "behavioural/ethical," ideological," "psychological," and "historical" all of which he translates into matching theatrical and dramatic subcodes and cultural codes, are interspersed in my own systematization to highlight particular facets of the specific sign analyzed.

[18] For instance the discussion of "gesture and movement" is represented through individual minstrel signs allocated to various levels of minstrel signification surfacing scattered in the analysis of the generic level (minstrel dance); the aesthetic level (minstrel grotesque and the minstrel clichés) or the physical or bodily level (e.g. physical features).

The various vertical semiotic levels or systems of signification identified represent generalized and abstract category labels, of which I have isolated the structural, literary, aesthetic, linguistic, and bodily as the most crucial ones. Individual sign formations allocated to each of these abstract signifying levels represent and thus might be equated with the abstract vertical semiotic function. In my systematization therefore the terms "structural level" and "structural signs," for instance, are interchangeable. Thus I have identified the following semiotic blocks or classes of minstrel signs and isolated the enumerated individual minstrel signs within:

(1) structural minstrel signs: the minstrel parade, the tripartite structuration and the typical semicircular minstrel stage format of the shows;
(2) literary or generic minstrel signs: exemplified by minstrel songs, stump speeches, minstrel jokes, puns, conundrums, riddles; the minstrel shingle, shuffle-dance, the cakewalk;
(3) aesthetic minstrel signs: demonstrated through the minstrel mimicry, the minstrel grotesque, and various minstrel character clichés and stereotypes;
(4) linguistic minstrel signs: the minstrel dialect, malapropism and homonyms; and finally,
(5) bodily or physical minstrel signs: the minstrel mask, minstrel attire, ersatz black bodily features: grimace and facial gestures; and practices of minstrel cross-dressing.

In *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (1998), M. M. Manring tackles the very problem in connection with the Aunt Jemima myth which we necessary have to face when pondering the significance of minstrel signs. Speaking of the gradually dissolving cultural currency of the Aunt Jemima image, Manring observes, "[s]he does not have to speak or move in the television or print advertisements; nowadays she is simply a label, not meaning anything other than to identify a particular brand, and kept because the customers recognize the name and symbol the same way they recognize Coca-Cola's "Dynamic Ribbon" typeface […]" (2). A label drained off of its immediate history, cultural context, significance as well as signifying value, is roughly analogous with the story of the reduced semiotic potential of the minstrel sign as well. Having outlived its prime, having been diluted within alien contexts of magazine fiction, dime novels, vaudeville stages, radio and television shows and, last but not least, in mainstream literature, the minstrel sign, although it has lost its immediacy as part of a familiar cultural repertoire, its life-cords are still not cut for good. Whereas Manring sets out to recreate, if not restore, the sign content and cultural-historical route of a single iconic minstrel relic, the primary objective of the coming discussion is the isolation and brief

description of nearly all the available minstrel signs which have shared in a history very similar to that of Aunt Jemima's. It should be emphasized, however, that it is not the purpose of the coming chapter to provide full-blown introductions to and in-depth studies of every single minstrel sign, but rather to supply a descriptive analysis of the underlying signifying units of the minstrel phenomenon. And that to enhance their easier identification in "foreign" cultural contexts.

CHAPTER II:

THE SEMIOTIC SYSTEM OF MINSTRELSY

Theatrical signification is one of the most complex fields of semiotic research, since in it, as Umberto Eco aptly perceived, "the whole of human experience is so involved" ("Semiotics" 108). Consequently, the systematic semiotic description of any particular theatrical tradition should bring to the fore the varied levels of signification in the spectacle, where "human bodies, artifacts, music, literary expressions […] are [all] in play at the same moment" ("Semiotics" 108). The semiotic description of minstrelsy's signifying systems entails the identification of the diverse general theatrical discursive layers referenced, and even more, the individual signs typical of the specific theatrical tradition analyzed, i.e., those of the classic minstrel show.

The semiotics of minstrelsy, that is, the identification and description of the heterogeneous signifiers of minstrelsy is intended to serve the purpose of a kind of preliminary sorting out, stabilizing intelligibility, and ensuring familiarity with the most commonly occurring minstrel signs. In other words, the present chapter sets out to provide an initial semiotic classification of minstrelsy's signifying units for the benefit of the would-be and current cultural consumers/readers in order to facilitate the translation and decoding of these units in almost any cultural context that they might occur in. Therefore in what follows I will present the previously identified signifying levels of minstrelsy and describe the various individual minstrel signs that belong to each. In every case, I will supply a definition of the respective sign listed, explain the relevance of the particular marker, and sometimes detail its historical development. Occasionally I will also reflect on current debates as to the cultural impact of a particular minstrel component, at times also engaging in controversial questions which pertain to the political, racial, ideological, ethical or the psychological aspects of minstrel signification. The goal, however, is primarily to provide an easily manageable typology of minstrelsy's semiotic arsenal, and thus equip cultural consumers with sufficient tools to enable the identification of minstrel signs in whatever foreign context they might surface in. The relevance of the following chapter is thus essentially cultural (as well as historical), and the method is that of semiotic typologization.

[1] Structural Minstrel Signs

Readily identifiable structural signs, such as the minstrel parade, the device of semicircular stage arrangement or the tripartite format of the show itself are staple external and internal structural and compositional features—in my system: signs—of minstrel shows.[19] These constitutive elements, however, have not spread over to other cultural media within the larger culture to the extent other minstrel signs have. Generally speaking, structural signs have not been extensively caught up in the cultural sign transfers over the years. This might be accounted for by the consideration of structural arrangements of this sort as culturally, historically and ideologically value-neutral traits. Still there are some examples illustrating the relevance and cultural continuity even of structural minstrel signs. If we consider, for instance, the tripartite arrangement in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* the inner division of the first part, olio and plantation skit attests to the unmistakable influence of structural minstrel signs therein. A vaudeville show called "The Plantation Revue" titled its grand finale "Minstrels on Parade" even as late as the 1920s (Smith 38), which serves as yet another illustration that structural minstrel signs did survive and did not cease to function as relevant cultural signifiers even after the vogue of minstrelsy had long been over. During the heyday of minstrelsy though, structural signs helped identify the shows as carefully organized units having a special choreography and design. Of the most significant structural minstrel signs three selected items, the minstrel parade, the tripartite arrangement and the semi-circular stage design will be discussed here.

(A) The Street Parade

> He decided to send an actor to whatever city they were supposed to be in next. When he got there he spread the word about this colored dancer with magic in his feet. (*Darktown Strutters*)

[19] I have to note here that most taxonomies tend to group the signs discussed here under a single heading "structure," in at least two diverse system categories: such as systems outside/inside the dramatic world. Martin Esslin in his *Fields of Drama*, for instance assigns a different label for sign systems outside the drama (where my sign, the street parade would fall), visual signs (where minstrelsy's semicircular stage format would belong), and textual signs (my category of the tripartite structure could be incorporated here).

The street parade announced the minstrels' coming to town, and therefore this practice emerged as an essential part of the show's publicity "campaign." The parade, like the newspaper ads, posters, sheet music—not dealt with in depth here—all belonged to the so-called advertising stage of the show, which then functioned as some kind of a frame to the actual theatrical performance.[20] Carl Wittke recalls the minstrel parade in the following manner:

> Whenever the minstrels came to town, their arrival was heralded by a street parade, in which the "silver" or "gold cornet band," gorgeously attired in colorful coats and trousers, big brass buttons and striking hats, led the procession through the streets of the town to the theater, followed by the entire company, perhaps in long Prince Albert coats or swallow-tails, with fancy vests or colored lapels, and high silk "plug" hats. (145)

The drum major marched in front of the whole company in the parade, "wearing a short red coat liberally encrusted with gold braid, and crowned by a towering shako of imitation bearskin" (Paskman 24). The march ended at the Mansion House, theater or the city hall, where the band usually performed a brief program, and then the parade dispersed. The rest of the afternoon for the town folk was spent, as Paskman notes, by trying to find ways and means to attend the night's performance, "usually the most effective method was the straightforward, 'Gimme a quarter, Pa, to see the minstrels […]'" (25). This episode should also sound familiar to those acquainted with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, where throughout the Benjy section Luster, one of the black servants in the Compson household, is preoccupied by the search for a quarter to be able to go to the show. He even insists that the show is worth going since they "[g]ot a man in it can play a tune on a saw. Play it like a banjo" (16).

As several critics have remarked (Wittke 146, Paskman 24), the street parade, like many other central features of the minstrel show, was an outgrowth of the circus routines. Circuses also paraded (and they still do, at least in Europe) around the town to publicize their program before the shows. As another form of publicity generation, minstrels also sent ahead the sheet-music of their program for town-dwellers to study before the performance. The parade was a long-lasting marker of the show, and it was retained as a typical characteristic up until the time when the minstrel bands grew into uncontrollably large units towards the end of the 19th century.

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[20] Esslin views publicity materials as framing signs belonging to the signifying system of the theater, and so does

(B) The Semicircular Stage Format

Besides the street parade, which contributed to the larger external choreography of the show, the semicircular stage format was a staple external marker of the stage arrangement, but one intrinsic to the show. The semicircular stage immediately signified the positions (both actual and symbolic) minstrel performers assumed on the stage, whereas the street parade created an external frame around the entire show. I am including the semicircular stage arrangement as a separate structural marker essentially because in several portrayals of various minstrel troupes the reader might frequently come across this typical figural or structural item representing the most frequently used stage arrangement of the group (see Figure I in Appendix).

The semicircular format gave spectators a chance to witness the routines and movements of each character on the stage as a unity, it gave a symmetrical representation of the musicians, the tambourine player and the boneman appearing at either end of the semicircle, while the fiddle and the banjo were taking central positions. The semicircular arrangement also created a latent ideological divide between the seated darkies and the standing Interlocutor, the master of ceremonies. This positioning was pre-calculated and served to represent in a symbolical manner the racial and cultural, even class, divisions (the darkies embodying the lower-classes vs. the middle/upper-class Interlocutor) within the larger culture that the shows covertly implied and interrogated. The semicircular format was cancelled from the shows when the growth of minstrel bands (to forty participants and even beyond) made this well-thought-out positioning impossible.

(C) The Tripartite Arrangement

> There were other skits like the one on Daniel Bones and short plays where actors in black face combed their hair with a wagon wheel and washed up in a skillet that made them white again. (*Darktown Strutters*)

The tripartite format of the minstrel show was an internal textual structural sign. It is said to have been established by the Christy Minstrels, who were the fifth band in line to be established shortly after the success of the first minstrel groups, the Virginia Minstrels and the

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Carlson Marvin.

Virginia Serenaders, swept the country as well as Europe. The Christy Minstrels troupe was founded either late in 1844 or early 1845[21], and is claimed to have contributed to the standardization of the minstrel format (see Wittke 52, Paskman, Toll and especially Mahar for further details and evidence), thus, among other devices, to the tripartite sectioning of the shows. The three-part arrangement: the first part, the olio, or second part and the plantation skit format became a well-known tradition between 1849 and 1854 (Mahar 27), but also one that cannot be generalized. It is true that the main characters, the darkies and the Interlocutor were part and parcel of most performances,[22] and that there were generalized patterns that were followed. Yet, each section of the tripartite act may have contained song and dance numbers, instrument solos, and thus separation between the parts was not so clear-cut (and was not so strictly applied) as some of the early critical evaluations seem to suggest.[23] Each show had its unique formula, its outstanding star performer around whom the performance was arranged, even if certain instruments, roles, dance and song numbers seem to have recurred from time to time (on the detailed discussion of numbers in the early shows consult Mahar's richly documented book). The inner divisions of the shows outlined below were partially recurring in the individual concerts, but certainly cannot be idealized as ingredients of each minstrel performance.

The first part opened with the marching of the whole troupe onto the stage. After the call, "Gentlemen, Be Seated!", usually shouted out by the Interlocutor, the band was seated, and the dialogue routines, interspersed by minstrel songs started, with the Interlocutor and the Endmen dominating the stage taking turns. The first part also contained rapid-fire jokes, and sometimes dance routines were introduced to break up the repartee between the master of

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[21] The Christys liked to claim on their posters and playbills that their band was formed in 1842, and sometimes even challenged other bands to produce evidence that they had been originators of the popular style of minstrelsy prior to their group. Yet, in the Harvard Theatre Collection and in Bloomington's Lilly Library I found no evidence that could prove the above date of origin right. In accordance with my findings Mahar dates the earliest *Christy Minstrels* troupe from 1845. For a detailed list of the early minstrel companies and personnel between 1843 and 1860 consult Appendix A in Mahar (355-363)

[22] Although Mahar brings substantial evidence proving that the end-men did not routinely perform in the early shows (25).

[23] Carl Wittke, for instance, in 1930 (reissued in 1971!!!) is still talking about an idealized "stereotyped form which it [the minstrel show] kept to the present time [?], with its semi-circular arrangement of the performers in the 'first part,' the interlocutor in the center and the endmen with bones and tambourines at the extremes […] and the variety acts of the olio, or second part" (52). Similarly, Paskman observes that although it is hard to say just exactly when the "Minstrel Show crystallized into its accepted form…, [yet] it is certain that the first part of the programme, with the intermediate 'olio,' became a set tradition quite early" (23). On the contrary, William J. Mahar argues in his book of 1999, that the "structure of the early shows [from 1843 to 1848] was not fixed" at all, and he further contends that the existence of the olio or the set role of the end-men can likewise be questioned (25).

ceremony and the darkies.[24] The latter were seated on the stage in a semicircular stage arrangement. The first part of the show usually concluded with a musical finale and a walk-around that the whole group engaged in. Then the curtain was lowered and the after-piece or olio section—a type of intermission began, this part was later separated as the second part of the show and took place in front of the curtain.

The olio has been interchangeably considered as part of the first act, or as a separate entity in the respective criticism. The term indeed denotes the minstrel second part (on this latter view see Lott 5). According to Redd Foxx, the olio often contained a series of variety acts which later formed the basis of vaudeville entertainment. Among the specialty acts that constituted this part we find "playing the comb," acrobatics, juggling and magician numbers (19).[25] The major attraction of the olio, was the stump speech or stump sermon, a monologue on a topic chosen to match the particular demands of local audiences. The thematic scope of the stump speech ranged from phrenology, women's rights through temperance to the political issues of the day. This was the part that really reflected the talents and special capabilities of the minstrel troupe, in other terms, which determined the quality and originality of the performance, and in which the "artists" or talented "orators" of the show could excel. Musical acts also fitted well into the hodge-podge character of the minstrel second part, particularly, as Paskman describes, "the kind that displayed unusual versatility, with one performer exhibiting his skills on ten or twelve different instruments" (91).

It is very likely that different minstrel troupes applied the tripartite division differently; in some the olio grew and was elaborated as a separate routine, while in others it merely formed a sort of extension of the first act with variety acts, merely acknowledged as a lead-in into the second part.

From the late 1840s onwards, with the standardization of the minstrel format, the shows contained a third part, or plantation skit, as it was often termed. The members of the troupe dressed as mammies, plantation darkies and pickaninnies (all derogatory terms applied to black women, men and kids, respectively), performed allegedly "authentic" scenes of plantation life. The skit was set in the South and usually contained "dancing, music, and burlesque" (Lott 6). Early in the 1850s, however, with the anti-slavery movement gaining

[24] As has already been stated, Mahar argues that the repartee and the role of end-men were not standardized elements in the early shows (25) as many critics supposed formerly, and they only evolved as such during and after 1849.

[25] There is a slight mix-up in the criticism concerning the actual contents and character of the "olio" and or the second part. Paskman considers the olio a component of the first part of the shows, and applies it to denote the interval between the first and second part when the stage was set for the second part (23), others, like Redd Foxx, or Eric Lott assign a distinct function to this part, see above.

ground, skit-writers began to move away from plantation skits to a thematically safer, less controversial terrain. Lampooning contemporary events and famous entertainment hits mostly from popular dramas, were among the most fashionable numbers (Toll 56). Most blackface versions of Shakespeare were also produced at this time. The familiarity of the general public with Shakespeare in the mid-nineteenth century indicates only one facet of the large scale intermingling observable between high-brow and low-brow texts on the minstrel stage, also present in 19th-century American culture at large. A central study in the area was developed by Lawrence Levine, who historically proves that Shakespeare was indeed an "author for millions" (Lott 73)[26] in 19th-century America, just as he was during the English Renaissance.

Other non-plantation skit third parts included "slapstick comedies, featuring Negro low-comedy types with their malaprop-laden dialect, and nearly always ending in a flurry of inflated bladders, bombardment of cream pies, or fireworks explosions that literally closed the show with a bang" (Toll 56-7). Hare's *Minstrel Encyclopedia* (1926) suggests the following short plays to be included as the "afterpiece" in amateur minstrel performances: "Gimme Them Peanuts," "Way Down in Dixie," "The Coontown Millionaire," and "Zanzibar." This proves well that the popularity of minstrelsy was far from declining in the early decades of the 20th century, as well as illustrates the substandard quality of the comedy generally applied in the minstrel third parts.

[2] Literary and Generic Minstrel Signs

On first analysis, the separation of the literary from the aesthetic minstrel signs might seem artificial, yet it is prompted by a division within the minstrel repertoire, namely the one between the concrete, textual and the more abstract, procedural literary markers. In this section therefore I will concentrate on the particular generic varieties of minstrelsy's signifiers, in other words the diverse textual forms: literary, musical and dance numbers/genres that minstrelsy incorporated; whereas in subchapter [3] (p. 72) I will enumerate minstrelsy's more abstract procedural aesthetic arsenal, and strategies.

Minstrelsy, from its outset, absorbed and operated with a great variety of literary, musical and dance sub-genres, numbers, which guaranteed the pleasure of audiences with

[26] Again Mahar includes a significant addition remarking that although Shakespeare was indeed an "author for millions," in America he was predominantly read in abbreviated editions. The preference of the minstrels to include only short Shakespearean scenes "rather than extended burlesques," the general tendency to acquire knowledge of dramas from highlights instead of the originals reflect the use of "comedy to critique the 'foreign' element in American popular culture" (38).

very mixed tastes. To illustrate the generic range that was accommodated in minstrel routines one only has to consult Mahar's research on minstrel concluding numbers, which lists 19 different "genres" that were frequently applied (364-366). Since providing an exhaustive list of all literary, musical sub-genres and dance numbers that minstrelsy accommodated is next to impossible, I will select only the most dominant subgenres for introduction here.

(A) Minstrel Songs[27]

> At different points in the show, actors broke into song and dance and played bone clappers, tambourines, and banjos. (*Darktown Strutters*)

One of the conventional categories of minstrel routines, minstrel songs and minstrel music flourished and comprised a familiar as well as a significant portion of the show ever since its beginnings. Without them, as Carl Wittke remembers, "the atmosphere of minstrelsy would be lost" (172) surely. Although upper- and middle-class blacks usually despised minstrels, even the erudite James Monroe Trotter, author of *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, admitted that the music of minstrelsy was "worthy of praise" (qtd. in Riis 32). Minstrel songs constitute the most popular as well as oldest of literary minstrel genres. They date back to the time of individual pre-minstrel performances, when, inserted between the acts of plays, they were usually performed in the intervals. Although different sources name different performers and songs as the first individual blackface performer and performance, among them Gottlieb Graupner's rendition of "The Gay Negro Boy," in the interval of Thomas Southern's *Oroonoko* in 1799, John Taylor (song and play unspecified), and Charles Dibdin, who sang many famous songs (such as "Kickabaroo," "The Negro and His Banjer," "Negro Philosophy," etc.) are apparently the top contenders for the title.[28] Among the very first minstrel hits Micah Hawkins' "Backside Albany" (1815) and T. D. Rice's infamous "Jim Crow" number from 1829 (first presented in the intermission of Solon Robinson's *The Rifle*) should definitely be included. Popular minstrel airs, such as "Lucy Long," "Clar de Kitchen," "Such a Gittin Up Stairs," "Who Dat Nigga," "Zip Coon," "Ole Dan Tucker," "Possum Up a Gum Tree," or "Coal Black Rose," dominated minstrel first parts almost throughout the 19th century. If one takes any minstrel sheet music in hand, with a list of songs in the given show

[27] For a comprehensive bibliography of antebellum songsters with minstrel song lyrics and music consult William J. Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (xvii-xix).
[28] For references to these performers and songs see Hutton 133, Leonard 387, Damon 138, Nathan 27-8.

on their covers, it becomes apparent that these songs were regularly recurring inserts in the show.

Minstrel directors made it a point to incorporate the most recent popular hits of the day in the repertoire, but they also freely involved the "heart songs inspired by the old-time show" (Wittke 172), a fact reflective of the generic and modal mixtures so typical of minstrelsy. Besides the modal (comic and sentimental) varieties, minstrel songs displayed a range of thematic as well as cultural and ethnic influences. Minstrel songs were inspired by the themes of war and love, humorous situations and tragedies just the same as by any number of religious themes. The songs were often reminiscent of "the southern camp meetings, or had their origin in the melodies sung by wagoners, cattle-drivers, and itinerants of the middle nineteenth century" (Wittke 172). Ethnic and cultural influences ranged anywhere from Irish, Scottish and British influences through the distinct impact of frontier cultures to a difficult to outline and rather controversial theme of black cultural influence.[29] Minstrel songs were thus basically the miniature versions of the minstrel shows, the very essence of which was (especially in the beginning) to provide a universal meeting ground for various cultures and ethnic groups, thus stimulating a previously unseen trade of motifs and cultural materials between very distant cultures.[30]

During the early history of minstrel criticism many argued that minstrel songs indeed had formulated a culturally valuable segment of American musical history, and that these songs should have been acknowledged and cherished as mementos of a time gone by but not to be forgotten. Carl Sandburg, for instance in his *The American Song Bag* (1927) lists the minstrel song genre as a distinct chapter in the folk music history of the country; itself a perfect illustration of how the perception, reception and worth of cultural artifacts changes in popular consciousness over the years. Although today very few would include minstrel songs in American folk collections, primarily because of their distinct racialized contexts—gradually identified by critics—, nobody would deny the role minstrel songs played in American cultural history either. We could mention numerous encyclopedias and dictionaries even of Afro-American culture which have a tendency to look at the minstrel heritage as a significant milestone in American cultural history. The recent *The Encyclopedia of African-*

[29] For a summary of the varied cultural and ethnic sources of minstrel materials see Chapter III of this thesis; see also Chapter I of my former doctoral dissertation, *The Comic Negro* (24-29) for a detailed summary.

[30] Reading the minstrel show as a site where diverse and often opposing cultural and ethnic persuasions were negotiated is yet another confirmation of my conception of minstrelsy originally being a liberal and liberating democratic field for cultural exchange in Jacksonian America.

American Culture and History (1996) could be one specific, although far from isolated case in point.[31]

While the cultural position and evaluation of minstrel songs may have changed over the years, there are some objective questions concerning the genre which are no longer in doubt, such as the question of authorship. We know today that the authors of minstrel lyrics were predominantly northern white people (mostly with backgrounds in the entertainment industry such as circuses) who had come from middle-class families. Among the most famous minstrel song writers we should make mention of Dan Emmett, Stephen Foster, A. T. Bryant, Will S. Hays, L. V. T. Crosby, Charles A. White, Henry C. Work, and S. S. Steele.

The early popularity of the minstrel song genre can hardly be doubted, and is easily observable if we only consider the abundant surviving textual illustrations in the field. Almost every music library across America would have a substantial collection of minstrel songs. The most sizable minstrel song archives are located at the Music Library of the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., the Music Library of the Boston Public Library and the Harvard Theater Collection; Indiana University's Lilly Library, Duke and Brown University's Music Libraries, and the Schonburg Collection can also boast substantial textual resources in the field. Besides these library archives nearly all major universities across the United States have begun to put out internet web sites listing the popular music texts extant in their vicinity.

Thus far the most comprehensive minstrel song collection and criticism in a book format comes from Sam Dennison, whose *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* was published in 1982. Since in my former doctoral thesis I followed the guidelines of Dennison's classificatory system, here I will merely enumerate the various thematic categories I have developed mostly based on Dennison's book, but without supplying further textual illustrations here.

Generic varieties within the minstrel songs have grown around the gradually emerging comic type characters who surface in the lyrics, thus the sub-genres of the (1) Plantation Darky Songs, (2) Dandy Darky Songs, (3) Songs about the Ugly Black Female, (4) Songs about the Negro Bully, (5) The Comic Black Soldier songs (Contraband Songs, Skedaddle songs) have been established. Since the sentimental mode of minstrelsy will not concern me, I am going to forego classifying the songs devoted to the field. Songs of the "coon song" era of the late 1880s incorporated topics about the gambling, water-melon-eating, chicken-stealing,

[31] In encyclopedias, like the one listed above, it is naturally the Afro-American contribution to minstrelsy that gets emphasis, be it the black roots of certain minstrel songs, or the formation of black minstrel bands from the 1880s.

ultimately suspicious and generally ridiculous lowdown darkey type remembered in hundreds of thousands of songs.

(B) The Stump Speech

> The first minstrel show in 1843 included the "Locomotive Lecture" delivered in dialect and recalling a young man's fanciful history of his social escapades. Within the year the Ethiopian Serenaders were offering burlesque lectures on phrenology, and by 1846 other companies regularly scheduled similar comic presentations dealing with the new popular "sciences" of biology, mesmerism, and psychology. (Mahar, *Behind* 59)

The stump speech, as it is also revealed in the above citation, was one of the oldest and most popular minstrel routines, a favorite standard item for entertainment for contemporary audiences. It was a humorous monologue, frequently bordering on nonsense and grotesque, on a topic identified in the title, but which the monologist often diverted from as soon as he was given a chance to do so. Going on freely basically on any subject of the day in a humorous and often nonsensical manner, the stump speaker could say anything that came to his mind as long as it was an occasion for laughter. "Minstrelsy's stump speech reached back to long-prohibited pleasure in nonlogical modes of thinking and speaking," Eric Lott observes, mostly because this gave an occasion for white parody or racial satire to be "passed off as 'naïve' black comedy" (143). In fact, the appeal of this humorous routine largely depended on its infantilizing effect that could be conveniently combined with the idea of blackness. Yet, surpassing this subtle and also problematic psychological appeal suggested by Lott, the stump speech first and foremost appealed to a common comical sensibility that the speech's extravagant topical hodge-podge could easily satisfy.

The stump speech was a perennial and crucial element of the olio or second part, where, as noted earlier, the most outstanding stand-up comedians of the show could excel. The stump speech built much on talents in free improvisation and rhetorical skills. Minstrel bands usually engaged the director of their company to do these routines, as the success of the whole show largely depended on the monologue "artists" (Paskman's term, [90]). Among the most famous monologists we find Dan Emmett, Lew Dockstader, Hughey Dougherty,[32] Billy Rice and Bert Swor, who were all leaders in their respective troupes. With the oration and

[32] Paskman quotes Dougherty's book of stump speech without specific bibliographical notes (90). The existence of Dougherty's stump speech collection, however, attests to the tradition of stump speakers also being fervent collectors of their routines.

lecture being two of the most respected and favored genres of the mid-19th century, it is no surprise that the stump speech genre, which was basically a burlesque variant of these popular forms, also excelled in popularity among the other minstrel genres.[33]

Stump speeches ranged in topic from politics through national affairs, public affairs and local events to religious themes.[34] A local topic was almost always a hit with audiences, and minstrel troupes frequently sent forth members of the band to find out about the hottest actualities of the next town. From the highly "scientific" type: "Are Women more Beautiful than Men," through topics reflective of strange fascinations: "Women's Tongue," to explicit thematic hodge-podge, such as illustrated in the title: "A Sermon on Keards, Hosses, Fiddlers and Foolin' with the Gals" (all listed in Wittke 170), anything and everything could be material for a stump speech. The pseudo-scientific stance of minstrel stump speeches are likened by Lott to the "inflated Barnum-speak," since both forms of mass entertainment parodied practices "devoted to the fixing and classifying of racial boundaries […]" (77). Both Barnum's museum and minstrelsy thus shared in the attempt to question and at least reinvestigate the certainties provided by science as to the differentiation between people based on ethnic belonging, and so tried to overturn the discourse of "learned authority" once again (Lott 78). A brief sample of a stump speech is offered here by way of illustration. The segment is a pseudo-black sermon entitled "How Adam and Eve turned White," from Frank Dumon't *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (subsequently *Witmark*):

> My beloved sistern and breddering. I'm a man what reads a great deal, and I'm going to 'splain to you how Adam and Eve turned white, for dey was originally black as you am, or I am. Well, it 'pears dat de Lawd, after he done made Adam and Eve, sot'em in de Garden ob Edem, dat de Lawd he tol' em bofe dat dar was a sartin tree dar and dat dey musn't eat none of eet's fruit. Dis tree, it 'pears to me, if I don't disremember, eet bared a *kind* 'er apple. You know same as me, dat a woman's powerful curus pusson. She allus like to be a-peekin' and a pryin' into something or other—no matter whether it consarns her or not. Ole Miss Eve—dat dar was ole man Adam's wife—she warnt to be stopped for nothin'. (80)

[33] Mahar notes that burlesque lectures and orations did not originate with the minstrel show, but like many of the minstrel genres they built on European models. The sources of burlesque lectures or stump speeches were conventions established by English stage comedy (59).

[34] William J. Mahar provides an illustrative sample of the burlesque lectures included in minstrel shows between 1843-1860 (arranged by dates and performing groups). Mahar's summary proves that lectures parodied topics as diverse as "magnetism, phrenology, women's rights, and the typical commemorative addresses delivered on social and historical occasions" (59).

The next sample from Hans Nathan might illustrate the typical thematic rambling of the stump speech. This stump sermon was entitled "Bressed am Dem Dat 'Spects Nuttin,' Kaze Dey Aint a Gwine to Git Nuttin'!, and it was delivered by the famous minstrel entertainer, Dan Emmett in New York in 1873.

> What's gwine to 'come ob ye on de great gittin'-up-day? Maby yoa tink you hold on to my coat-tail; but I'm gwine to fool yoa bad on dat 'casion, kaze I'm gwine to wear my coon-skin jacket! Yoa crawl, up de hill on yoa han's an 'nees, you fall down agin, wallup! Den yoa's call'd a backslider. Dar's de brimstone, de grindstone, de millstone, de blue stone, an eb'ry udder kind o'stone de debble's got to tie 'roun' yoa neck, to sink ye in de nebberlastin' gulf ob bottomless ruin. Yoa call for a cup ob cold water an de debble say: "No! I sees yoa drown'd fust!" Den yoa weep an 'wail an smash out yoa teef out. Den wake up, sinners, an' let de daybroke in on ye! (412)

(C) Minstrel Jokes: Puns and Conundrums

> He then soaped up his wet hands and said to Mister Tambo: "I don't know bout you, but I'm washin my hands of this whole show!" (*Darktown Strutters*)

In our time minstrel jokes, puns and conundrums are not only outdated and obscure representations of a time gone by but are also flat, rather disappointing attempts at humor bereft of the immediacy of the cultural context they were originally born into. In fact, having once gained an insight into the quite overt racism contained in the jokes, one finds them repugnant or outrageous at worst, or entirely humorless at best. "While it is true," Lott argues that "audiences in the mid-1840s appear to have been drawn principally to the scabrous fun, it is also true that a special kind of racial pleasure has proven so irresistible to minstrel show audiences" (142). Without going into the details of this problematic area of racist subtext in minstrel joking (a topic far more complex than could be indicated briefly), I wish to offer here merely a generic enumeration of the types of jokes which were in fashion on the minstrel stage.

The term "minstrel joke" is an umbrella phrase for the many various types of humorous anecdotes, shorter routines applied on stage to arouse laughter. Minstrel jokes, just like any of the traditional or old-time minstrel routines, were all founded on improvisation, and although we can get a good sense of what these jokes were all about from numerous joke-

books,[35] the "best bits of buffoonery," as Wittke chooses to evaluate minstrel jokes, "never were reduced to the printed page" (159). If one only as much as opens up a collection like *The Witmark Guide,* one finds ample illustrations of the gags, cross-fire routines that were in vogue even at the turn of the 20th century, in fact very similar to the one cited here:

> MIDDLE: By the way, what is your brother doing at present?
> END: Oh, he is doing a *corking* good business. He's working in a bottling establishment and he's *corking* bottles. He fell in love with the cruelest girl in the city. When she refused him and he said he couldn't live without her, she handed him the card of the *undertaker* she is engaged to. Wasn't that mean? (45)

One reason for the obvious abundance of minstrel jokes is that in their own time, as Wittke recollects, "'joke books' were printed year after year," and "these collections were available to the public at the modest price of ten to twenty-five cents a copy" (167).

Among the sub-genres that minstrel jokes as a grab-bag referred to **puns** represented one typical kind of joke. The term pun denotes a supposedly witty and cunning word-play (or so it was perceived at the time). In fact the word "pun" equals the Greek term, *parasomasia*, which, according to Cuddon, is "one of the earliest types of word-play" and in a special dialogue format the pun "involves a reply to earlier words used in a different sense" (541).

The minstrel pun, as Paskman observes, probably originated from English comic writers of extravaganzas who in the critic's description had a "terrible punning habit" (80). Puns were written on any variety of topics, but among the most favored ones were sports and wars, whether of the less serious domestic or the more real Civil-War type. Minstrel endmen often entertained their audiences with recitations of poems which used as their recurrent figure of speech nothing but puns, thus enhancing the nonsensical aspect of the whole piece, like in the following example found in Wittke:

> I've seen the *rope-walk* down the lane,
> The *sheep-run* in the vale;
> I've seen the *dog-watch* on the ship,
> The *cow-slip* in the dale;
> I've seen the *sea-foam* at the mouth,
> The *horse-fly* in the air;

[35] From among the numerous minstrel jokesters, Wittke lists *Black Wit and Darkey Conversations, Charley Fox' Ethiopian Comicalities*, and *Laughing Gas or Wit, Wisdom and Wind*, but without further bibliographical

I know the *bul-warks* on the deck,
And the *fire-works* many a scare; etc. (164)

Puns also appear as part of a joke, where the punchline usually falls on the pun, like in this example from Frank Dumont in the *Witmark*: "Something funny happened to me. I was standing on the corner and along came a policeman, and he says: 'Do you play *checkers*?' I say 'Yes.' 'Well,' says the cop, it's *your* move!'" (18).

If we consider this very basic, intellectually uncouth type of humor, we would unquestionably agree with Lott, who states that "a good deal of the minstrel show's 'vulgarity' approximated life in the nursery, whether it was the nonsense in songs and puns or tirelessly absurd physical antics" (143).

To draw a line between the genre of pun and that of the **conundrum** is extremely difficult. Cuddon simply states as the definition of conundrum that it is "[a] word of very obscure origin, it denotes a form of riddle whose answer involves a pun" (155). In this logic, the difference between puns and conundrums lies merely in the form and the presentation of a pun. Generally speaking, we can observe that the borderline between the humorous genres applied in the shows is very subtle, jokes and gags can hardly be defined from one another just the same as riddles, puns and conundrum are hard to distinguish.

Regarding thematic choices, conundrums often incorporated animal jokes as the following example from Paskman will show:

Q.: Why do hens lay in the daytime?
A.: Because at night they *become* roosters. (80)

The following conundrum very likely originated with Eddie Foy in "Piff, Paff, Pouf," and has often been repeated on minstrel stages:

Q.: Why was Eve made?
A.: For Adam's *Express* Company. (Paskman 80)

Jokes, gags, puns and conundrums often depended for their impact on the rendering of the minstrel performer, the tempo, the timing, the manner of their rapid-fire delivery. A famous minstrel performer, Frank Dumont, in 1899 explained the tricks of how to relate a joke to a

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references. The most significant minstrel jokebooks I have researched are Dumont's *Witmark Guide*, Hare's *The Minstrel Encyclopedia* and Day's *Fun in Black*, see 'Works Cited' for details.

newspaperman. The methodology, Dumont details, bears striking similarities to Twain's "How to Tell a Story," but with completely opposing instructions on manner:

> Everything depends upon his [the comedian's] jolly manner (unless he assumes a sorrowful or sarcastic manner, which is necessary in telling some gags), the quick reply of the middle man, and the emphasis here and there upon certain words, especially when he plays upon words. Don't rattle your story like a poll parrot, not smother your voice when coming to a point. Keep the voice up. Don't let it drop in concluding your words, wherein lies the point of your joke or story. That is natural elocution. (17)

(D) Dance

> Then his legs started getting a life of their own. He turned his knees in, toe-stumped one foot and then the other into the floor, jumped straight up, and came down rocking back on his heels before realizing he was doing the first dance his father ever taught him. […]
>
> Wheel about
> Turn about
> Do just so
> And every time I wheel about
> I jump Jim Crow. (*Darktown Strutters*)

By far the most fascinating and thoroughly documented account of the origin of minstrel dance steps comes from a recently published book by W. T. Lhamon, Jr., whose *Raising Cain: Black Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998) sets out to revise and altogether reform earlier minstrel criticism. Although I am not certain that Lhamon does indeed manage to accomplish this second goal, his delineation of the origination of minstrel dance steps is highly persuasive. Lhamon argues for the existence of a specific and unique culture mixture in New York's Catherine Slip or Catherine Market, where the blending of cultures, mostly black and white, created a genuine and theretofore unseen "eagerness to combine, share, join, draw from opposites, play on opposition" (3).

The market place, as Lhamon asserts, based on data supplied by historical and folklore sources,[36] developed as a site for cultural exchanges, because from the beginnings of the 19th

[36] Two of Lhamon's most significant sources for his first chapter are 1. Thomas F. De Voe's *The Market Book* and 2. Shane White's *Somewhat More Independent* from 1991. De Voe supplies ample evidence as to the existence of a distinct slave culture and its contribution to white-black cultural intermixture in Catherine Slip,

century the market provided "contact zones" for diverse cultures, and it gradually evolved as a distinct space for dramatic performances, mostly dances—where enactment of one's identity and culture was rendered possible. These mostly slave dances stimulated familiarization with and cultural exchange between opposing cultural codes. Lhamon lays out these instances of cultural transfer, and documents the blending especially between white and black working class cultures at the marketplace. He emphasizes the class character of market performances early in his book: "I want to bring out the broad interracial refusal of middle-class channeling that working men and women of all hues mounted using the corrupt tools bequeathed them by the marketplace and other locations where they could make spectacles of themselves" (6).

It is clear from the outset then that Lhamon's analysis is class-based (a new focus that has developed in minstrelsy criticism from Eric Lott onward), folkloric (involving aspects of history of space), historical (tied to ethnic conflicts and general politics) as well as sociological (founded on demographic data from the 19th century). It is the first chapter in Lhamon's book that is significant for our purposes, where under the title "Dancing for Eels at Catherine Market" the critic researches the amazing intercultural, interracial cultural transmittals that took place at the market. He selects and pinpoints one single element, the dance step, which he then fully researches in its widest socio-cultural, folkloric and historical contexts.

At Catherine Slip slaves "on leave of their masters for certain holidays" (Voe qtd. in Lhamon 7), came over to the market mostly from Long Island and New Jersey, they danced for eels, and were paid for their acts by the butchers at the market. It was this free marketing of a dance step, derived from an apparently black cultural source that contributed later to the rise of a central marker in blackface minstrelsy, the crucial element of dance (Lhamon 7). The dance that developed there on Catherine Market is commonly known as the "shingle" which Lhamon explains thus:

> The shingle is one real connection among these northern, urban, breakdowns in the early years of the century, the cornshucking dances that Abrahams [that is Roger Abrahams, folklorist] authenticates on southern plantation, and the minstrel stage. The word, *shingle* […] may well be African retention. […] Abrahams describes the dancing of the slaves on the shingle as their preference rather than confinement. Their feet dance the board the way hands play the drum. It is what Abrahams calls *apart-playing*. The board sets the dancer apart from his colleagues, but unites him with them, too, because

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whereas Shane White's thorough demographic analysis of New York's population leaves no doubt that these cultural as well as social mixings did indeed occur.

> they keep his time by patting juba for him; they hold the board down; and they jive with him as he performs. (9)

What happens at the marketplace in the slave dance is basically identical with what happens later in large on the minstrel stage, i.e., there is a coded parody going on, where those paying for the dance fail to notice that the joke is on them. Instead of exercising control, the patrons of the dance (the butchers) or their later incarnations the middle-class patrons of minstrel shows are in fact paying to see African-American traditional practices reinforced. "This shingle was a briar patch," Lhamon writes, clearly referring to the Uncle Remus tales, that was "brought into the market not by the confining butchers but by the performers finding their identity on it" (12). In minstrelsy the parody latent in the original dance is complicated one step further, masking as blacks to act out their parody, white minstrels often imitated dances of black origin (like the shingle, or the cake walk), which sometimes depicted in their initial forms parodies of whites. A large portion of the grotesque character of minstrel imitation concentrated in the dance step, where a white man parodying blacks applied a dance that turned the parody right back on him.

The wheel-about, the shingle, the cake walk, are all dances derivative of black cultural materials; after Lhamon's analysis we can no longer think about them the same way as we did before. These dances gave rise to a particular culture that the critic identifies as "a fetishized mark of genuineness—a hub for street culture" (16); bringing together people of various hues along the common lines of class persuasions. Another important ingredient of minstrel dances Lhamon describes through the phrase: "runaway freedom within confinement" (16). This freedom that allowed black cultural motifs to break through the often racist routines of minstrel stages, subsequently gave way to minstrelsy's self-defeating oppositional signification. Questioning minstrelsy's indebtedness to black cultural practices is no longer possible if once we consider evidences brought about by Lhamon.

The cataloguing of minstrelsy's semiotic arsenal would certainly be incomplete without the mention of T. D. Rice's famous Jim Crow dance, which, however,—as it has been revealed in recent critical narratives—is part of a falsified legend from beginning to end. This and similar legends, Lhamon, for instance, contends "hide whence blackface derived and how blackface tried to gird itself against its antagonists" (153). Yet, the legend that undid both the original sources (black lore and black dance steps), and the contents (the urge in white underclass youths to borrow from and intermingle with blacks [Lhamon 153]) of the Jim Crow dance, proved not only viable but powerful enough to survive through centuries. The

force in the myth of the grotesque dance step of the black Kentucky stable hand is attested to by its dissemination in criticism, literary adaptations, and in diverse cultural merchandise alike.[37]

While Lhamon is an excellent authority on the origins of minstrel dance steps and the social, cultural messages as well as the politics coded therein, Nathan Irvin Huggins is just as important to refer to when it comes to discussing minstrel dances from the end of the 19th century. Huggins brings the analysis of minstrelsy into close contact with larger cultural processes regarding each aspect of the performance. The minstrel dance, or Cakewalk is considered in relation to the travesty and excess that was to be witnessed in American society at the time. Huggins contends that the megalomania of American society towards the end of the 19th century was mirrored through various cultural practices as well. The big balls, labeled as the Four Hundreds, which served to imitate as well as to live up to European society standards, illustrate the excess in taste, manners, costume, style that also spilled over to the minstrel stages. The Cakewalk like the shingle was originally part of slave culture, and its name derived from the practice of the slaves "prancing before the "big house" at Christmas or on similar holidays to win the prize—a cake" (Huggins 273). By the end of the 1880s, however, the dance took up a significantly altered meaning as a parody of the "*quadrille d'honneur* that climaxed the fancy dressed balls of the Four Hundred, as the Cakewalk climaxed the minstrel show" (Huggins 273-4). American society and culture, and blackface minstrelsy signified upon as well as parodied each other in turn.

[3] Aesthetic Minstrel Signs

The analysis of minstrelsy's aesthetic signs brings us to a realm which is not so easy to outline as any of the former sign systems. Minstrel routines embedded complex and abstract aesthetic qualities (such as the grotesque, for instance) and were tied to varied aesthetic procedures (like mimicry or stereotyping), which all demand thorough theoretical and conceptual investigation and elaboration. Since these inquiries are closely tied to theoretical debates that point beyond the scope of the present discussion, I will problematize in my analysis only those areas which are vital to the comprehension of the minstrel phenomenon. This is also intended to serve as a theoretical foregrounding for the related cultural and

[37] For details of the legendary origins of Rice's Jim Crow hit see my former dissertation, *The "Comic Negro"* (11) and the book, *Jim Crow örökösei*.

literary development to be addressed in the chapters to come. Therefore, without attempting to give the reader a full spectrum of the competing critical discourses on selected aesthetic dilemmas, I will reflect upon a restricted number of critical views that are instrumental in highlighting various aspects of minstrelsy's aesthetics. This subchapter will thus undertake the theoretical introduction of minstrelsy's three most typical aesthetic signs: the minstrel mimicry, the minstrel grotesque and character clichés, without any pretence at the coverage being an exhaustive one.

(A) The Minstrel Mimicry

> "So you think I'm copying you?"
> "Mister Rice, you white. You don't need me to tell you what you doin." (*Darktown Strutters*)

First in the line of aesthetic minstrel signs, **minstrel mimicry** should be given proper priority. In a number of critical evaluations minstrelsy's controversial cultural heritage is associated with a single factor, the practice of minstrel imitation. In blackface minstrelsy white delineators attempted to and consequently did forge a system of symbolic enslavement of a people whom they already exploited economically, culturally and historically in real life. In his famous outcry against minstrelsy, Frederick Douglass wrote that blackface imitators are "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens" ("Gavitt's" 141). It is clear that the exponents of the antislavery cause like Douglass questioned and were opposed to the dubious practices of racial imitation that minstrelsy upheld. Others, however, like mixed audiences, similar to the ones at Catherine Market, unquestioningly shared in the entertainment offered by the traveling minstrel show. Since the ethical contours of minstrel mimicry are almost as blurry as the psychological processes of both its initiators and audiences, it is hard to arrive at a definitive evaluation of this aesthetic marker. Trying to avoid being caught up in an essentialized reading of the racial contents of minstrel mimicry, I will proceed to outline the basic choreography of blackface mimicry, while also pointing to the complexities of the related psychological, racial and ethical discourses.

In order to highlight some of the strategies latent in minstrelsy's practice of mimicry, it is helpful to consider the relevance of the pertinent views of Homi Bhabha, perhaps the

ultimate authority on conceptualizing racial mimicry. In "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" Bhabha quotes Lacan for the epigraph of his article, a quote that foreshadows the conceptual logic of the article: "Mimicry," Lacan asserts, "reveals something in so far as it is *distinct* from what might be called an itself that is behind. It is *not a question of* harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like a technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare" (qtd. in Bhabha 125). Bhabha's focus, to be sure, is on *colonial* mimicry, with the aim of theoretically circumscribing the political and cultural attitude of colonizers in relation to the colonized. Mimicry, in this context then simply denotes representation or rewriting of the colonial subject by the colonizer, a case scenario utterly similar to blackface delineation, where the white delineator (or "colonizer") represents as well as rewrites the black subject (i.e., the colonized).[38]

According to Bhabha, colonial mimicry is basically "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is *almost the same, but not quite*" (126). The essence of colonial mimicry—like that of minstrel mimicry—is the continuous production and reproduction of this slippage between imitator and imitated, colonizer and colonized, blackfaced delineator and the African-American subject. It is through this slippage, described as "almost the same but not quite," that the distance between imitator and imitated becomes discernible. Mimicry thus, contrary to expectations, is creating difference as opposed to likeness. Imitation is by nature incomplete on account of this slippage. The imitator can never *become* the imitated, but is suspended amidst the process of *becoming*.

Representation necessarily produces ambivalence—the result of appropriation is a two-faced monster, neither black, nor entirely white. "[I]n order to be successful, " Bhabha contends, "mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (126). Mimicry thus contains the very elements which undermine its authority, and simultaneously the subject of imitation also becomes deprived of its authority degraded as and identified with a falsified representation. The aesthetic essence of minstrel mimicry lies in the ambivalence of the representational process, where denying authority from the subject the representative discourse undermines its own as well as the represented discourse's authority by the imperfection and "unfinalizability" (a term by Bakhtin) built into the process. The result is the

[38] For a summary of the interrelation of postcolonial discourse and minstrel discourse see Varró's "Deconstructing the Myth of the Other: Blackface Minstrelsy as a Postmodern Discourse on Race," listed in the Works Cited.

emptiness of the signified, or as Bhabha explains, the threat of representation conjoined by the problem of authority "comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'" (131).

The approximation of the black subject can never be complete, there is always a tear on the mask, from behind which we can witness (quite paradoxically) not only the futility of the attempt at becoming that which one is not, but also, surprisingly, the ingenuity of imitation (i.e., the degree by which the approximation succeeds to hide its slippage). Blackface mimicry is a white attempt to murder, yet always re-produce, consume and digest, yet never entirely annihilate, symbolically enslave yet somehow free the subject. It denotes hunger and desire for the other, indeed simultaneously containing love and theft, as Eric Lott brilliantly grasped the dynamics of minstrel mimicry in these two seemingly alien terms. Should we condone this attempt or hail it for some of the good it has brought about is not a question to be answered here yet.

(B) The Minstrel Grotesque[39]

> In this life, laughin at somethin terrible is sometimes the difference between livin and dyin. (*Darktown Strutters*)

The heart and soul of the **grotesque** as a universal aesthetic quality are ambivalence, ambiguity, incongruity and paradox which mostly result from the distortion of or deviance from the normal, "a want of accordance with what is fitting or reasonable" (O'Brien Johnson 131). This aesthetic quality cuts right to the heart of minstrelsy's essence, since the blackface show is indeed all about incongruity, disfigurement, ambivalence and ambiguity, whichever of its aspects we might consider: be it the complex and often contradictory psychological motivations of the minstrel performer, minstrelsy's inherently ambivalent, always pulsating imagery, its incongruous, exaggerated, strangely distorted characters, the absurdness of its style and diction, or the paradoxicality of its reception.

Grotesque quality in general can be most helpfully approached as a sub-branch of the comic (and as such it borders on categories such as the burlesque, parody, satire and farce) applicable to characters, situations, themes or even gestures. It can denote a certain technique

or style of writing or artistic representation, but it is also a mirror of attitudes, thus it can also be associated with a larger world view, a philosophical and ideological stance. Minstrelsy's grotesque quality absorbs meanings from various levels of signification: the aesthetic, the ideological, the social and the psychological, and in turn almost every aspect of minstrel signification can be brought into contact with the grotesque. The minstrel grotesque, while loaded with all of the above conceptual and contextual implications, is acted out in a particularized realm, i.e., the historical and cultural contexts of the 19th-century American popular stage. There are grotesque features in every literary minstrel genre, from minstrel songs through jokes to the famous deformed dance step; the various character clichés of the minstrel stage are imbued with the grotesque; the type of speech applied in the routines is also distorted, grotesque. There are grotesque minstrel props, and grotesque minstrel scenarios as there also is what we could call a lopsided, topsy-turvy grotesque world view and ideology behind minstrelsy, which celebrates the confused, the paradoxical and the disjunctive.

Since the minstrel grotesque is present in all these various layers of the show, influencing almost its entire set-up, here I wish to discuss three selected areas of the minstrel grotesque which will not be detailed through the rest of dissertation to the extent other minstrel features will, but which nonetheless are crucial in the overall understanding of the minstrel phenomenon. Thus I will briefly describe what we generally mean by the grotesque elements in minstrel props, and enumerate a couple of grotesque plot scenarios, while also pointing to the inherent presence of the grotesque in minstrelsy's world view.

1. Grotesque Elements in Minstrel Props

Although some aspects of the vicariously acquired physical appearance (such as the mask, the clothes, the wig, etc.) of the blackface performer could be viewed as part of what is identified here as grotesque minstrel props, these facets of the physical appearance will be dealt with separately in subchapter [5] (p. 95). Here I will treat only the objects attached to the characters but which were not part of the physical body of the performer.

As stated earlier, minstrel props or accessories might have had their roots in the Italian *commedia dell' arte*, where players "wore demonic, bestial, leering masks; [and] […] leather phalluses that might be stuffed full for the Zani or hang limp for the Pantalone; later ones

[39] For an in-depth analysis of the minstrel grotesque, as well as general theoretical discourses on the grotesque as a universal aesthetic quality, consult Varró's "The Theme of Comic Love in Blackface Minstrelsy: The Anatomy of the Grotesque."

carried a sword and pouch in place of genitalia, and the Bawd carried a purse as a sign of her business or a rosary when she played the hypocrite" (Barach 564). Clearly these accessories from the *commedia* show striking similarities with the classic paraphernalia of minstrelsy, where the Comic Black Soldier or the Comic Darky is almost always portrayed with weapons or instruments (especially the banjo) which functioned as a symbolic extension of sexual prowess. Yet, whereas in the *commedia* comic or grotesque props served as triggers of innocent laughter, in minstrelsy the comic appeal was always linked to a highly specific racialized subtext.

Eric Lott vividly describes this grotesque and weird sexual connotation of minstrel props through the analysis of a well-known representation of the first minstrel band ever, the Virginia Minstrels (confer Figure II in Appendix). "Brower the bone player with legs splayed wide; Pelham on the verge of forced entry of the tambourine; Whitlock in ecstasy behind the phallic banjo: […] there is no attempt at realism here. The whole scene has rather the air of a collective masturbation fantasy—accurate enough, one might guess, in capturing the overall spirit of the show" (138). This explicitly vulgar imagery on sheet music covers as well as in minstrel lyrics served, on the one hand, to strengthen, and conversely to undermine, the black man's sexuality.

The accessories of the Black Soldier as portrayed in minstrelsy almost always carried grotesque sexual connotations, "coattails hanging prominently between the character's legs […], sticks or poles strategically placed near the loin with the appendages occasionally hanging near or between the legs" (Lott 120), all sent out quite clear messages to audiences about the feared sexual power of the black man. The grotesque quality emerged partly as a result of the substitution of the male sexual organs with objects, which by itself was a bizarre practice. The application of these objects was supposed to transfer the otherwise threatening aspect of black sexuality into the realm of the comic, where the threat could be undermined through ridicule. The bizarre, the highly exaggerated, the ambivalently attractive and repulsive, yet always perversely distorted was everywhere in the props of minstrelsy.

2. Grotesque Minstrel Scenarios[40]

[40] Part of the subsequent discussion on grotesque minstrel scenarios have already been published in *EJAS* (1996): 8.; and also in *Jim Crow örökösei*.

Instead of providing documentation for grotesque minstrel scenarios from every thematic realm and genre that occurred on minstrel stages, I will include here, by way of illustration, some frequently recurring scenarios from the theme of comic love as it appeared in selected minstrel songs. Of all the themes that circulated on minstrel stages, it was undoubtedly the theme of comic love that survived the longest. The very first blackface song of comic love, "Coal Black Rose," is seen by many critics as also marking the beginning of the minstrel theater as such (see, for instance, Boskin, *Rise* 74).

The song rehearsed and popularized several grotesque scenarios: jealousy, love triangle, fights between suitors, etc., which later were widely imitated by songsmiths when the popularity of the theme among minstrel audiences became evident. Jealousy as a central comic love theme was certainly not a new topic in drama, but blackface minstrelsy added to the comedy by putting the Unlucky Comic Black Suitor in the role of the jealous lover. Not only did the song fix the stereotype of the Jealous Black Lover, it also provided a standard script for songs of this kind. The outline of the plot was quite simple, and thus blackface audiences grew familiar with it quite easily, predictability and familiarity with the script even adding to the attraction and entertainment value of the act.

The recipe for the incomparable success of this song and of a whole spate of related versions inheriting its script was this. Take a charming, but somewhat mischievous black female, add the desperate and Jealous Black Lover who comes courting right to her door. Let the woman tease her suitor for some time before allowing him inside. Have another black male hiding somewhere in the house, and once these three meet, the suitors go for each other's throat until one of them gets the better of the other. The comic love triangle portrayed in the song, besides offering sheer situation comedy, put blacks into the awkward position of the irresponsible lover, who did not regard honesty and faithfulness in marriage or in courtship as important or necessary. The song emphasized that blacks generally were "incapable of adopting white cultural values" (Dennison 38) regarding even the most basic social interactions. Although minstrel make-believe stages could engage audiences in good laughs at the expense of the Cheated Black Lover, the reality of slavery was quite another thing. Marriage, or even a love relationship for the slave was a rather uncertain business, since the selling and trading of slaves, property rights and changing business interests of the owners made the fate of those slaves united in "marriage" completely unpredictable for the future. The Negro was considered a tradable property, and only very rarely was he regarded as a human being with feelings and true attachments to other humans. The simple fact was that slave marriages had no legal standing.

The minstrel show, however, had no interest in reality or the actual reasons for historical conditioning. It wanted to entertain successfully, and to reach that goal the first thing it had to do was to turn its back on reality. The shows to a degree justified the atrocities of slavery (breaking up of families, selling married slaves to different owners, divorcing the child from the parents, etc.) by picturing blacks as perfectly unfit for marriage. Slave marriages were pictured on the stage either as absolutely ridiculous, or disrupted by some grotesque disaster. In "The Yaller Gal With a Josey On," for instance, the songwriter expressed the black man's happiness over the elopement of his wife with a cattle driver. "Lucy Long," a popular minstrel song, remembered by Edward LeRoy Rice in 1911 as a tune "still is to be heard in remote hill-billy regions" (12), represented the black male as joyously expressing his willingness to get rid of his would-be wife:

If I had a scolding wife,
As sure as she was born,
I'd tote her down to New Orleans,
And trade her off for corn.
/Starr/

The pseudo-black male of minstrelsy did not take his relationships seriously, nor did he regard those of others as sacred or something to be respected. The stereotype of the Black Seducer and that of the Jealous Black Lover appeared together in most songs. The black male was pictured as at once careless and jealous in love. This discrepancy, however, did not seem to worry songsmiths who produced hundreds and hundreds of songs to fit both patterns. Although the script of the love-triangle theme did not show much diversity in songs, the reaction of the cheated lover to the treachery of his sweetheart varied from song to song. Some, like the cheated suitor of "Dearest Belinda" by S. A. Wells, portrayed the black man as a coward and depicted his inability to take revenge on his rivals. The song in question showed the black suitor as unlearned in chivalrous matters, and a coward in the rivalry for the favors of the woman ("Belinda made me feel so bad,/I wished my rival dead,/My feelings got de best of me,/And so I went to bed."). This attitude prefigures a twentieth-century version of the Southern grotesque, most conspicuously Erskine Caldwell's treatment of callousness in the face of love betrayal in poor white communities, as, for instance, in the short story entitled “August Afternoon.”

To illustrate that the black male did not take his love affairs too much to heart, the Cheated Black Lover went on singing after the previous night's rebuff:

In de morning when dis nigger wake,
I tink ob all dat past,
Belinda treat me very bad,
But I found her out at last,
I go and bid her den farewell!
I'll see her not again;
I since have found another gal,
And loved her not in vain.
/Starr/

Considering the extent of minstrel materials on the comic love theme, it is no exaggeration to claim that this topic provided the most fruitful subject of all the various themes held up for comedy on the minstrel stages. It was, however, not only a fertile topical source but also a bountiful site where the minstrel grotesque could and did flourish in a variety of configurations. Situation comedy, playing on the absurd and bizarre confrontations between lovers, thematic preoccupations such as grotesque deaths and fights, drowning lovers, unrequited love were widely exploited grotesque schemes in minstrel scenarios. The themes mentioned here, however, are but a small segment of the varied minstrel scenarios which gradually seeped into cultural circulation, to be recovered and indeed rediscovered by literature, the movies and eventually by TV.

3. The Ideological Sources of Minstrelsy's Lopsided World View

The drift of what has been so far discussed should make it clear that minstrelsy as a popular cultural institution was a product of as well as a producer of ideological priorities and imperatives. Moreover, the ideological underpinnings of minstrelsy can be connected on several levels with Bakhtin's idea of carnival. Without attempting to rehearse here Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization, I will arbitrarily select those facets of the Bakhtinian theory that underscore minstrelsy's indebtedness to carnivalesque ideologies, and the latent grotesque *Weltanschauung* behind these. This grotesque world view operative behind each selected incarnation of carnival sentiment, I regard as a complex aesthetic signifier of minstrelsy.

In what follows I will select five of the central notions discussed in depth in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, which I view as highly instructive as to the understanding of minstrelsy's overall ideological priorities. I wish to stress, however, that the subsequent analysis reflects only an initial phase of studies in combining Bakhtin's concept of the carnival and minstrelsy scholarship; the potential in such comparative studies is clearly much wider than the present discussion might reveal.

The selected notions are all related to what Bakhtin labels as the "*carnival sense of the world*" (107), and highlight the carnivalesque *weltanschauung*. These notions are: (a) ambivalence or joyful relativity (b) liminality (in Bakhtin's phrasing: the concept of the borderline), (c) the idea of utopian communality—the destruction of hierarchical oppositions, (d) scandal and (e) parody.

(a) Ambivalence or Joyful Relativity

As Bakhtin asserts, there are certain "carnival-folkloric genres" which from top to bottom are permeated by "the carnival sense of the world" (107), and consequently their serious rhetorical initiatives tend to be undermined by "the atmosphere of *joyful* ***relativity***" (107, emphasis added). It is then partly this serio-comic generic bent within minstrelsy itself—its belonging to "carnival-folkloric genres"—that makes it susceptible to relativistic ideologies and thus to imagery. This same "joyful relativity," as Bakhtin chooses to label it,—typical of minstrelsy as a genre—was detectable in the cultural attitudes of minstrel entertainers toward their subjects (i.e., black people) through the symbolic rituals enacted on the stage. Hesitating between the embracement and denigration of black cultural materials, symbolically recognizing and in the same breath debasing the Negro as subhuman, are only few of the ambivalent gestures built into minstrelsy's antagonistic signifying arsenal. The ambivalences behind minstrelsy's cultural give-and-take were also perceptible in the contradictory social, political and ideological messages blackface entertainment sent out as well as promoted through the vehicles of the existing media.

The images of, as well as the ideologies behind the carnival are also built around structural dichotomies. Bakhtin elaborates the carnival image as one striving

> to encompass and unite within itself both poles of becoming or both members of an antithesis: birth-death, youth-old age, top-bottom, face-backside, praise-abuse, affirmation-repudiation, tragic-comic, and so forth, while the upper pole of a two-in-one image is reflected in the lower, after the manner of

> the figures on playing cards. It could be expressed this way: opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand one another. (176)

Carnival and minstrelsy then both incorporate and radiate ambivalent discourses and gestures (on the generic, the socio-cultural, the individual and ideological levels), thus rejecting the possibility for absolutistic or essentializing evaluations in processes of reception or in the metanarratives as well. Moreover, the seriousness of these contradictory propositions is also put to question, is always subverted by the prevalent "joyful relativity" of the embedding context both in carnival and in minstrelsy.

(b) Liminality

Another important aspect of carnival existence closely linked to the former feature, is **liminality**. Since images, cultural messages, ideologies are all kept pulsating between extreme opposites (both in minstrelsy and in carnival), yet not being allowed to transgress their limits and indeed turn into the "other" (be it the literal Other, the black man in the case of minstrelsy, or the positive or negative other pole of human experience, sensation, existence, or the official culture in the case of carnival fun), everything lingers "on the borderline between existence and nonexistence, reality and phantasmagoria […] devoid, as it were, of any internal grounds for justifiable stabilization" (Bakhtin 167). As the minstrel performer is suspended in his mimicry—as we saw before—between becoming and being, so is carnival existence a borderline experience, measuring the capacities of extreme human conditions but never getting fully involved in the possibilities of either world.

Acting and being, lower class and also middle, black as well as white, female and male, laughed at and laughing, the blackface delineator dwells in the "mid-kingdom" of liminality, a grotesque place inhabited by and generating ambivalent ideologies.[41]

(c) Utopia

Given the relativity, ambivalence and liminality ingrained in carnival experience (as well as minstrelsy's rituals), conventional divisions between insiders and outsiders, performers and audiences, dominant and dominated seem to vanish, or at least are temporarily suspended

[41] The liminality and grotesque quality involved in minstrel representations will be further detailed in Chapter III.

during carnival time. Bakhtin's carnival suggests acculturation, assimilation, and intermixture between all walks of life. "All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect […]. People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square" (Bakhtin 123). This temporary suspension of antagonisms between various classes, ethnic groups, envisions through the carnival a kind of utopistic world view. As Umberto Eco contends, "Bakhtin was right in seeing the manifestation of a profound drive towards liberation and subversion in medieval carnival" (qtd. in Lacombe 517).

The minstrel stage likewise makes pretences at utopia by symbolically allowing the free mixing between various groups of people: black and white, slaves and masters, aristocrats and peasants, male and female. Bakhtin's claim that the carnival "is the place for working out in a […] half real, half-play-acted form, *a new mode of interrelationship* between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (123), could also be applied to minstrelsy's latent subversive ideologies. These new facets of minstrelsy's underlying interaction rituals and liberating ideals are just being discovered in the relevant criticism (see Lhamon, Ostendorf and Lott for more). Yet, minstrelsy's ideological make-up also differed from the freewheeling carnival fun. The communal utopia laid out in minstrelsy replaces the hedonistic pleasure principle of carnival with collective debasement and ridicule (of the highbrow just the same as the lowbrow).

Under the guise of utopistic cultural principles, however, the blackface actor was given sufficient freedom to do whatever he pleased with the pseudo-black stage image, or the pseudo-cultural baggage he carried with his impersonation. Blackface was in many respects a folk carnival where liberal and liberating tendencies of the carnival were simultaneously—and teasingly—shown and carefully undermined, thus reiterating the double bind that was reflected all through its paradoxical practices. In minstrelsy's symbolic ritual attraction and rejection, liberation and confinement were constantly played out against each another in reference to all levels of human experience.

(d) Scandal

"[C]arnival life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut" (122), says Bakhtin. In carnival everything is turned upside down, and it is the time for people to engage in festivities not allowed to them during the everydays. In carnival laughter, the body and language are all put to a subversive use. As Lacombe explains, "[t]he body, […] reveals a universal levelling tendency, eradicating distinctions not only between classes but also between actor and spectator. […] Linguistically, carnival also resists order, closure and the sacrosanct; by its […] heteroglossia of the marketplace. Bawdy parodies of sacred words, texts, rituals, and narratives mark the temporary suspension of all other prohibitions and hypocrisies" (517).

Just as carnival upholds this "*life of the carnival square*" (129), tearing down hierarchies, dogmas, prescribed rules of behavior and social positions, so does blackface entertainment probe the social norms of achievement ethic, racial, class and gender demarcations. The symbolic subversion of rule results in the creation of space for scandal both in carnival and on the minstrel stage. The darkies of minstrelsy are allowed to trick the Interlocutor, they overturn the customary routines of plantation life, and generally speaking abuse the system by turning the rules that make the controlling mechanism function against itself. The minstrel entertainers engage in fantasies of a life without the compulsion and the stress of having to achieve and prove their worth. And finally, audiences laugh down at both. The mischief of the pseudo-black trickster, the unbridled behavior of the middle-class white entertainer, and the mocking laughter of minstrel audiences, are all instances of the scandal that blackface arose, and which all evoke the Bakhtinian concept of "life drawn out of its *usual* rut."

(e) Parody

The concept of parody is probably the most complex of all the Bakhtinian notions of the carnival, and also one that subsequent criticism of Bakhtin especially liked to explicate. Parody in Bakhtin is closely tied to crisis time, in which ambivalent "readings" of the universe are rendered possible. "Parody," writes Bakhtin," is the creation of a *decrowning double*; it is that same "world turned inside out" (127). In parody then one is creating one's exact opposite, thus it might return us to the beginning, that ambivalent world view I started out with. Yet, parody in Bakhtin's understanding is more that just a topsy-turvy look at the world around us, for according to him "parody [is] not a naked rejection of the parodied

object" (127), but rather the simultaneous presentation of the norm and the deviance, the matrix of expectation and its subversion, the the rule-governed standard and its anomaly. Linda Hutcheon states the same with a slight modification: "Even in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence" (100).

Parody works by and is translatable as paradox. "To some critics," writes Hutcheon, "parody makes the original lose in power, appear less commanding; to others the parody is the superior form because it does everything the original does—and more" (Hutcheon 101). Parody as *Weltanschauung* might, in the words of Hutcheon, "suggest a complicity with high culture" (101) by revealing through parody that which it is the subversion of, be it the underlying system, the social norm, the discourse of the dominant, etc. In this first reading both minstrelsy and carnival then operate centripetally as "homogenizing, hierarchizing influence" (Hutcheon 102) between the ambivalent, alternative discourses. But parody's "authorized transgression" might also move centrifugally, revealing, recognizing as well as authorizing the dominated, the alternative, the marginal, the muted, etc. The contradiction latent in parody as imitation and authorial procedure, it being "both a law and its transgression" (Hutcheon 101), pervades parody as a world view as well. The parody that energized minstrelsy's lopsided world view also followed this contradictory modus operandi, feeding on antagonistic cultural ideologies. Blackface minstrelsy like carnival uses parody as technique and also as philosophical and ideological stance, hence their simultaneous identification with and contesting of the Other.

(C) Minstrel Character Clichés, Stereotypes

> You know, we'd make a great Mister Tambo and Mister Bones. I'd set you up with the lines and you could come back at me like you just did. (*Darktown Strutters*)

Within minstrelsy's aesthetic system I have selected and identified stereotypes as the third large category of signs. In this discussion stereotypes will be conceived primarily as semiotic units (as functional building blocks of minstrelsy's signifying system—denoting both the minstrel tradition and particular types of character clichés), and secondly, as ideological constructs (imbued with specific ideological messages, connoting latent ideological contents).

Although almost all units of minstrel signification are ideologically charged, it is tempting to hypothesize that stereotypes are intertwined with ideology the most intricately.

The introduction of general theories on stereotyping is not my task here,[42] yet, before outlining some core stereotypes of the minstrel stage I will make some general observations on stereotypes and stereotyping here. In what follows I will predominantly deal with stereotypes that are reflective of some sort of prejudicial perception of blacks (i.e., fall into the category of the "ST2-type of stereotypes").[43] Derogatory stereotypes can invariably be viewed as misrepresentations or simplifications, where the distortion of the "real" appears in "an arrested, fixated form of representation" (Bhabha, *Location* 75).[44] Stereotypes are usually the projections of an "in-group" (the socially or culturally and politically dominant) to the "out-group" (the socially or culturally marginal), with the explicit desire to debase and exclude them from the in-group. Stereotypes are intricately related to ideologies in that they uphold on the one hand a theory of race thus validating "a metaphysical concept of identity by 'scientific' means and ultimately by its vulgarisation into easily accessed images" (Lorcin 143), two, they tend to reaffirm dominant discourses by (a) excluding the stereotyped Other from "a unified collective identity" (Pickering 49), and (b) relegating the members of the out-group into the marked position of the Other, stigmatizing it as different.

In the twentieth century many scholars, both black and white, attempted to design systematic typologies for white-created black stereotypes mainly in literature, as well as in other fields of culture, especially film, and thus classifications such as those of Sterling A. Brown (1933), Nancy Tischler's (1969), Catherine Juanita Starke's (1971), Jean Fagan Yellin's (1972), John R. Cooley's (1982), or Donald Bogle's (2000), to mention just the most outstanding ones, came about.[45] Some of the findings and categorizations invented by these authors have already been listed in my earlier dissertation, therefore I will forego detailing the contributions the above scholars made to the classification of black stereotypes.[46]

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[42] An in-depth discussion on the subject is offered in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei*, where interrelations between stereotype, myth and ideology are further highlighted (20-48).

[43] Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* differentiates between two classes of stereotypes, ST1: value-neutral formal conventions and ST2: derogatory—as well as self-aggrandizing—stereotypes, which are fundamentally different in character. For more on the internal properties of these two stereotypical formations see the chapter on the "Anatomy of Stereotypes" therein.

[44] A comprehensive list of definitions on stereotypes is offered in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* 59.

[45] For a more detailed list of further sources on classifications of black stereotypes in culture see Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* (83).

[46] The introduction of the theoretical scope of the listed works related to stereotyping would certainly lead far from my immediate concern here, which is the indication of how stereotypes functioned as signifiers of the minstrel tradition.

The stereotypes born on the minstrel stage border on those categories these authorities suggested for consideration, but are hardly identical with any of them. There has been no definitive treatment of the character types blackface minstrelsy developed to the present (with the possible exception of Dennison, who, however, concentrates only on the typologization of black stereotypes in popular songs, and does not consider literary extensions of the clichés he identifies).[47]

The most substantial resource of the terms I will introduce here is Sam Dennison's groundbreaking work, quoted earlier, which suggested most of the categories I will apply. Yet, Dennison's focal interest was a primarily chronological arrangement of 19th-century popular song materials with black imagery, and thus the readily identifiable stereotypes had to be reconstructed from this context. I also wish to remark that since this section on minstrel stereotypes is but a portion of the larger systematization of minstrelsy's semiotic arsenal I cannot possibly supply an in-depth analysis of each character cliché or explain their historical, cultural, mythicized and ideological underpinnings. Therefore the subsequent section provides a brief overview of the most frequently recurring minstrel stereotypes, with an equally brief reference to their larger cultural contexts.

Anyone even vaguely familiar with the tradition of blackface minstrelsy would surely recognize the names of Tambo and Bones, and Mr. Interlocutor. These character clichés were not derogatory stereotypes but formal conventions (ST1-type of stereotypes, stock characters) widely circulated on the minstrel stage, without whom the basic structure of the show cannot be imagined. Before the introduction of the stereotypes that carried negative or harmful knowledge to blackface audiences I will briefly touch upon these core character types that belonged to the permanent cast of the shows.

The most evident and well-known stock character clichés of minstrelsy were the **Interlocutor** and the **Endmen**. There is no description of the minstrel stage and its practices that would not mention them. The Interlocutor played in white-face, and usually represented the pomposity, studied eloquence and arrogance of the upper classes, which of course were good enough targets for the Endmen—**Tambo** and **Bones**—to aim at. The Interlocutor, the master of ceremonies stood apart from the darkies not only because of his manners, style and diction; his clothes were also naturally more stylish than the ill-fitting attire of the darkies.

[47] My former dissertation did not give a full picture of minstrelsy-related black stereotypes either, because it only focused on the comic black cliché, and did not treat the sentimental black character types at all. A much broader picture of white- and black-generated stereotypes is offered in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei*, yet that book is predominantly concerned with the larger cultural relevance of black stereotypes, thus moves beyond the exclusive examination of the minstrel stage.

The Endmen, dressed in rags or patched clothes, were seated at both ends of the semicircle. They bore the names of their respective instruments, the tambourine and the bones (i.e., trimmed bones or wood used as castanets;), two other darky characters in the middle of the original semicircle had the fiddle and the banjo.[48]

"The Interlocutor," Paskman states, "is the eternal buffer for the jocosities of his end men, the necessary 'feeder' to their running stream of ribald clowning" (26). The Interlocutor, similarly to the Endmen, came out of the tradition of the circus, where rapid-fire exchanges between the ringmaster and the clowns were age-old practices. Other critics, for instance Brandner Matthews, traced the tradition of the Interlocutor contra Endmen dialogues to the 16th century quack doctor and jack pudding routines (Paskman 27). Since the characters of the Interlocutor and the Endmen developed from a universal comic tradition they were associated predominantly with harmless stereotyped roles (stock parts), although in their routines they too represented ideological positions, and through their mere appearance carried racially charged messages.[49] These stock character types eventually also leaped into literary fame in the writings of John Berryman or in novels as current as black novelist, Wesley Brown's *Darktown Strutters* (I have been using sections of this novel as epigraphs for the individual subchapters of the present chapter).

Ideologically tainted discourses reflective of highbrow↔lowbrow, superior↔inferior, intellect↔underdog, white↔black, etc. oppositions although frequently recurred in the Interlocutor-Endmen routines, minstrel songs and minstrel third parts made the racial underpinnings of the shows even more evident by crystallizing the contours of specific thematized character types. The repetitive nature of the songs, and the practice of recycling minstrel songs (from show to show, and between diverse bands) made black character clichés more and more recognizable. Whereas the dialogue routines of the minstrel first part popularized the roles of Mr. Interlocutor and Mr. Tambo and Bones, minstrel song lyrics brought about many further, thematically organized "darky clichés" which were later freely applied in both skits and dialogues. Classic minstrelsy (1843-1880) and the coon-song era contributed to the evolution of a long line of character types, each enclosing within itself the historical development, the ideological, cultural, social foundations, the political justification

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[48] This was the original formation in the classic minstrel show that the Virginia Minstrels popularized, but deviations from this set-up occurred from the beginning.

[49] The Interlocutor and the Endmen are then stereotypes of the "ST1" type, routinely applied formal clichés, conventions that assist a better understanding of the world. They should be divorced from the second larger group of stereotypes that disperse wrong knowledge. For more on the two classes of stereotypes see Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei.*

as well as the implied intellectual/ideological message of the particular type.[50] Minstrel stereotypes thus encoded a variety of discourses informative of their origins as well as of their hidden contents.

Probably the best known darky-clichés in minstrelsy, besides Tambo and Bones were the **Happy Plantation Darky** and the **Dandy Darky.**[51] Since a detailed introduction to these two type characters would be impossible here, I will merely supply a sketchy outline at this place. The Happy Plantation Darky, also referred to as "Comic Plantation Darky" or "Plantation Rustic" in other sources, mreged two disparate components into his character: the contented, loyal servant, often faultily identified as the Uncle Tom type;[52] and that of the care-free, happy-go-lucky, naïve slave, the irresponsible entertainer of white folks. The first type gave way to the sentimental line of minstrelsy, whereas the second type became the foundation for the character of Jim Crow, the prototypical Comic Negro stereotype.

The Happy Plantation Darky developed as a central character in what Dennison termed the Cavalier myth. The Cavalier myth grew out of the image of the South as an earthly Eden "populated by a contented servant class at one end of the scale, and a genteel, landed aristocracy at the other" (90). The essential function of the myth was, obviously to prove the plantation not only a safe but also desirable place to accommodate the black slave. The Happy Darky in both of his incarnations supported this myth. Through the image of the contented slave the myth suggested that the slaves were so perfectly satisfied with their lives on the plantation that they would never even dream of freedom. This aspect of the myth "placed the slave in the incredible position of desiring bondage over freedom" (Dennison 92). The slave as entertainer and jester further underlined these peculiarly "benevolent" effects of life on the plantation.[53]

The Happy Plantation Darky was often represented through poor and scrappy outfit as well as a rather explicit physical caricature, evidenced in his grotesque dance steps or his naïve, contented grimace. Lightheartedness and irresponsibility were standard markers of the Plantation Rustic, and these features were often paired with childish naivete. Blackface

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[50] Charts representing the various incarnations of Sambo and Jim Crow developed during the above historical periods of blackface entertainment are offered in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* (101, 202)

[51] For an in-depth study of the above character-types see Varró's *The Comic Negro* (unpublished dissertation). I also have to add here that the stock figures of Tambo and Bones often appeared in the role of concrete topical clichés, therefore the distinction between Tambo and Bones and the topical stereotypes in a way represent the distinction that should be made between stock roles and derogatory stereotypes hinted at before.

[52] On the erroneous identification of the contended slave stereotype with Uncle Tom, see Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* 96.

[53] The ideological underpinnings of this type figure are elaborated in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* 93-111. The Elkins versus Blassingame debate (also outlined in the book cited above) highlights contradictory readings of the actualities that lay behind such popular mythologies.

minstrels liked to portray blacks as infantile, not only because audiences could get a good laugh at the expense of the naive character, but also because thus they themselves (and their audiences) were allowed to indulge in these childish games for the duration of the performance. "[O]ne attraction of such joking," Lott claims, "seems to have been its ability to reduce not only the black people but white spectators themselves to children" (144).

Perceiving the darky as infantile was also an ideological and political imperative essential for the maintenance of slavery, especially after 1830. The alleged intellectual inferiority of the slave provided an apology for southern paternalism to continue the subjugation of blacks, and guaranteed in the person of the submissive, ignorant fool a vision of the unthreatening Negro—which especially in the light of the then current slave uprisings was an ideological imperative. Minstrel shows although covertly supporting these ideologies (targeting the symbolic debasement of Negroes), attempted to hide politically or ideologically sensitive issues to maintain the support of mixed audiences. While establishing the darky as existing in the state of perpetual childhood, blackface audiences could simultaneously "participate in and feel superior to" the frolicking and endless buffoonery of the Negro (Toll 86), so that even the lowest member in the audience could laugh down at him. Thus minstrelsy stressed the comic aspect of the minstrel darky, and de-emphasized the factual dimensions of the character as best as it could.[54]

The infantilism of the Comic Plantation Negro was extended and embodied through several semiotic levels. His oversized clothes and shoes, grammatical lapses or lexical "mistakes," as well as his strange "habits" (like thievery, watermelon eating, idle singing and dancing) could all conveniently be blamed on his fundamentally childish character, in turn, they all underlined the non-threatening aspect of the type. The most famous Plantation Darky was probably Thomas Dartmouth Rice's "Jim Crow," which later multiplied and recurred in several varieties across the minstrel stages of America.

The Dandy Darky, or Northern Dandy followed his Southern counterpart fairly close in time on minstrel stages. The character of the Northern Darky, though comprised of a different set of physical and inner attributes from that of the Happy Plantation Hand, was invented fundamentally to justify the same pro-slavery arguments. Urban free blacks, needless to say, were much more of a threat to white society than plantation slaves were, therefore the ridicule

[54] William J. Mahar argues that racial characteristics were "among the basic ingredients of popular entertainment since the late eighteenth century" (331), therefore they should be recognized primarily as "an essential field of humor" (331), and as such familiar to contemporaneous audiences as part of humorous routines. Yet, this level of the show's meanings, Mahar contends, should not be overemphasized at the expense of other similarly relevant issues/themes incorporated in minstrel programs, such as the issue of gender or character and opera burlesques.

aimed at Northern Negroes in the shows was more explicit and harsher even than in the case of the Happy Plantation Darky. The two basic types of the northern darky to appear in the blackface minstrel show were these: the Dandy Darky and the Darky Professional. The comic appeal of the two types was achieved through different sets of humorous devices for the two characters. The Dandy Darky was caricatured through a fixed set of physical attributes and inner traits attached to him by the blackface minstrel; he was ridiculed because of his aristocratic, pretentious manners and dress, as well as his laughable ventures in the city; the Darky Professional, on the other hand was by itself such a ridiculous and altogether incomprehensible notion to white audiences of the day that the very thought of his existence provoked laughter. As indicated before, much of the humor of character in blackface minstrelsy is lost upon present students of the genre. The discrepancy between the Negro and many of the roles primarily associated with urban America, was real and obvious for audiences of the 1840s. Spectators literally rolled with laughter at the mere sight of, say, a black doctor. The most famous minstrel numbers on the Dandy Darky stereotype came from George Washington Dixon ("My Long Tail Blue"), A. F. Winnemore ("Dandy Jim of Caroline"), and Bob Farrell ("Zip Coon") (see Dennison for further details on these songs).

Several other stereotypical configurations developed as a result of the obvious popularity of the comic love theme in minstrelsy. The topic, as I indicated earlier, gave rise to such types as the **Jealous/Cheated Black Lover**, the **Comic Black Suitor** and the **Ugly Black Female** stereotypes. These stock figures were made to serve as butts of humor essentially on account of their grotesque physical features, and the hilarious comicalities they have gotten themselves into. With the coming of the Civil War other early comic black stereotypes came back to vogue, such as the cliché of the **Comic Black Soldier**, and still further in time the 1880s developed their own comic darky cliché, that of the **Comic Coon**. The coon-song era marked the rise of explicitly vulgar and outrageously demeaning imagery of blacks both on minstrel stages and in other widely promulgated popular representations from sheet music covers through postcards to newspaper and book illustrations, popular magazine fiction, high and popular literature, and also gradually in the movies.

[4] Linguistic Markers as Minstrel Signs

(A) The Minstrel Dialect

Perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of the minstrel tradition was its linguistic marker, the imitation black dialect, or minstrel dialect. What is minstrel dialect, and how did minstrelsy's modern critics react to this linguistic marker, which has come to be so inextricably connected to minstrelsy's core signifiers? Probably the easiest way to paraphrase what coalesced into the minstrel dialect is to say that the minstrel dialect was an artificial black speech invented by white minstrel entertainers for the purposes of the dramatic representation of blacks. Most critics would argue that this was a kind of literary dialect, since it wanted to represent the markers of black English vernacular, whereas others insist that the minstrel dialect was probably the most harmful and racist invention of the minstrel stage, which left a heritage totally disastrous for both black literature specifically and black culture in general. Of course these two views are not mutually exclusive.

Dialect representation had been an established tradition in legitimate theaters long before minstrelsy emerged on the dramatic scene. Native figures such as the stage Yankee and the backwoodsman, not to forget about immigrant Irish, Scandinavian, German, etc. types, had conventionally been represented on stage through distinct linguistic markers. The representation of black speech was not a novelty that minstrelsy introduced either. Negro dialect stories and British stage representations of the Negro had been in vogue centuries before minstrelsy came to the fore. The novelty in the minstrel dialect was that it created an obvious and heretofore unseen correlation between blackness, humor, and the concrete political and historical realities of slavery. In brief, in minstrelsy generating an ostensible black dialect was an ideological investment.

The minstrel dialect was characterized by grammatical and phonetic lapses, a general exaggeration of existing or alleged features of black vernacular. The most common grammatical misrepresentations occurred, as collected by William J. Mahar, along the following lines: (1) Use of the nominative pronoun instead of the possessive; (2) repetition of sentence subject; (3) past aspect of present tense; and (4) Frequent deletion of the copula "to be" ("Backside" 11-12). Minstrels also forged black English by adding fake lexical items to the entertainers' dictionary. Thus a whole line of made-up words occurred in the routines, among them: malapropisms, the misusage of common words, and the use of nonsense was another favorite element (the lexical aspects of minstrel dialect will be taken up separately).

Once again we are confronted with the problem of imitation without authenticity. How beneficial is a representation which is more of a misrepresentation than a faithful portraiture? This is a question probably none would ever ask in earnest related to minstrel dialect, unless one attempts to reveal the ideological intentions behind the falsification. The essentially

comic overtones of minstrel dialect were grounded firmly in parody and burlesque, which today we regard as disturbing. Disturbing primarily in the sense that dialect, especially imitated dialect of black people equals the humorous. Although literary dialect had been a well-rehearsed practice in dealing with other non-Anglo-Saxon minorities (the case of the Irish was especially revealing), in the case of blacks the results were devastating. Eric Lott renders the story of blackface entertainer, G. C. German who, immediately elicited laughter from the audience when he made his entrance in the role of Uncle Tom, since: "he had that accent which, in the theater, is associated always with the comic" (*Love* 216-7). What really happened was best described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his *Figures in Black*. "Form had come to determine sense, or worse, […] to delimit sense, to mold it into a too familiar stock response" (179).

It is therefore no surprise that in 1922, James Weldon Johnson in his first preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* advised against the use of dialect saying, "there are phases of Negro life in the United States which cannot be treated in the dialect either adequately or artistically" (qtd. in Gates 179). The unreality, artificiality and stereotypical usage of ersatz black dialect tied real black vernacular down to an image, that of the "head-scratching, foot-shuffling, happy-go-lucky fool" (Gates 179), which it was not. Minstrel dialect, in other words, crippled real black language. This brought about what Gates terms "the entrapment of usage" (179). The thought that language was taken away from black people, was twisted then was filled up with a sense totally alien to it, so that black poets themselves were unable to conceive their language as their own, although bizarre, was true. That dialect disappeared from general usage during the Harlem Renaissance, as Gates notes, was no incident. Although some writers such as Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and especially Sterling Brown and Zora Neale Hurston did "move against the grain," the abandonment of dialect was "of paramount importance to that literary movement's life blood" (180). Yet, as Gates later contends:

> Because the black poets saw their obligation to something called art, they abnegated their responsibility to their language. Most were destined to remain minor poets because they could not master their own distinctive poetic diction. Only Jean Toomer's *Cane,* Langston Hughes's first two volumes of poetry, and Sterling Brown's *Southern Road* demonstrated the use of this black poetic diction, precisely because these poets were the point of consciousness of their language. (187)

Susan Gubar, writing about the widespread practice among white writers of the early twentieth century (especially Vachel Lindsay, Nancy Cunard and Carl Van Vechten) of imitating black vernacular, describes this process of linguistic mimicry as "crossing over racially ghettoized material" (156). It is apparent then that the minstrelization of language survived into the 20th century "with its grammatical and spelling mistakes—its double negatives, loss of final letters, appropriation of ghetto lingo, and give-and-take backchat" (156). This process attests not only to the survival of minstrel influence through the linguistic sign as well, but also to a kind of nostalgia toward the oral that white writers associated with, and thought to have rediscovered in black English. White writers believed that by copying the techniques and features of black English, it would in turn energize their language.

The "minstrel-speak," cross-racial (white on black) ventriloquist version of black talk, linguistic race-change (144), these are only some of the phrases Gubar chooses through which to denote minstrel dialect. In the chapter, "De Modern Do Mr. Bones," she further affirms that minstrel dialect was founded on the melting of "the genuine to the ersatz, generating a spurious speech to which white imagination will perpetually be condemned" (139). This is an evaluation which we should probably not only accept, but also take as warning against the racialized potentials latent in "recycled" language practices. The question, however, still remains, whether it is ideologically possible at all for a white writer to represent black speech without constantly evoking minstrelsy's cruel laughter at blacks.

B) Malapropism

The minstrel dialect's favorite lexical marker, malapropism denotes the practice of applying pompous but lexically incorrect words in the routines. As proof that the misconception of associating the use of malapropism with black culture in general was widespread as late as the 1960s, here is a surprising quote from Carl Wittke:

> Although there were many conundrums, puns, and humorous situations depending for their comic success on the *Negro's love for big words*, his clumsy mispronunciations, and his obtuseness, the jokesters of minstrelsy, like the comedians of the present day, claimed the whole world for their province. (166, emphasis added)

The use of malapropism, in spite of misconceptions very similar to the one above, however, was originally not restricted to the portrayal of blacks on minstrel stages. According to Cuddon, the first appearance of the term was a literary one. Mrs Malaprop surfaced in Sheridan's *The Rivals* in 1775, and she had "a habit of using polysyllabic words incorrectly" (380). But earlier Shakespeare and later Fielding or Smollett also used the technique to depict the backwardness of their characters. Minstrelsy's use of this linguistic marker goes back to its general rejection and frequent attacks on higher classes, therefore malapropisms often appeared in the diction of the Interlocutor as well, who had to be dragged down from his pretentious ways by the darkies.

By way of illustration, here follows a short segment of a popular minstrel afterpiece, entitled "The Coontown Millionaire," in which Lady Queena Sheeba Previous, "a social leader" and Teddy Highbrown, "a highbrown aviator" exchange thoughts about a coming flower-show that Ted invites the lady to:

> LADY: I'd be most contaminated to accept your kind invitation, Mistah Highbrown. Prefumery, please have the consumption to put on your new peach-brown hat. I'm delighted to go to the flower-show, Mistah Highbrown, kase I hears de flowers am the most odious dat was ever growd.
> TED. That might be for this country, Lady Queenie Sheeba, but they ain't one, two, three with the flowers of France.
> LADY. How come dey ain't?
> TED. Dey don't grow as fast. Why, over there I went to a flower show and it was such a big affair that when we entered the flowers were in bud and when we came around to the entrance again the flowers were in bloom. (Hare 198)

(C) Homonyms and Homophones

The practices of exchanging similarly sounding but differently spelled words, or similarly spelled words with those of different meaning were both very common in minstrel song lyrics (both on page and in the routines, respectively). Minstrel puns, conundrums and riddles basically all used this technique, which further served the comicalities, heightening the nonsense appeal of the shows. Here are a few examples for this practice from the *Witmark Guide*:

> When is an old maid like a segar?
> When you have no *match* for it.

Why is the letter "P" like a sympathizing friend?
Because it's the *first* in pity, but the *last* in help.

What's the hardest thing to *beat*?
A hard-boiled egg.

Why are apples the enemies of pears?
Because it was an apple that drove a *pair* out of the Garden of *Eden*.

Why did Eve swear when Adam asked to kiss her?
Because she replied, I don't care *A-dam* if I do. (81)

[5] Bodily or Physical Minstrel Signs

> Excuse me, mister, but I think your color is quitting on you. (*Darktown Strutters*)

On the closing page of the *Witmark Guide* (1899),—quoted earlier as an important rare text-book for amateur minstrels—,a series of items are advertised that were probably perceived as absolutely vital by the composers of the collection to put on a successful show. Among these paraphernalia we find "minstrel and other wigs" sold for $15 per dozen, advertised as easily fitting and giving absolute satisfaction (the latter being a somewhat disturbing credential); "Crest" burnt cork "perfectly harmless," applying easily, available in three sizes costing anywhere from c35 to c75; and quite naturally, ads for a wash-up soap also of the "Crest" brand, described as being a "quick change cleanse from black to white instantly." All of these items are proof that there existed a broad market for similar minstrel requisites, and also that physical transformation constituted a central part of the show. Physical change, racial transgression involved a masquerade in which wigs and burnt cork were only some of the most crucial vehicles through which the transfer could be executed. Clothes, shoes, minstrel ties and collars, as well as specific facial and bodily transformations (such as the grotesque grimace and movement) were also ingredients in the great act of racial "reincarnation" that I would generally refer to as cross-dressing.

The practice of minstrel cross-dressing grasped the most universal as well as most overtly racist facade of the show's content. It allowed transgression of racial, gender, social,

class and cultural boundaries, suggesting the feasibility of an almost utopian intermingling along these lines, and that it did in a persuasive and libertarian spirit.[55] Yet, at the same time, minstrelsy also constantly reminded spectators that such intermixtures were entirely unimaginable in real life. Think of, for instance, sheet music covers that made it a point to picture minstrel performers both with and without their masks.

The term "cross-dressing" itself is suggestive of a peculiar duality. It can be applied as a general concept which denotes almost every aspect of the minstrel show listed up to this point, since it alludes to the complicated and complex processes of mimicry, parody, the grotesque, as well as the power-plays involved there. The liminality and ambivalence incorporated in cross-dressing as a general strategy simultaneously infers the generic, aesthetic, political, ideological and even pyschological plays as well as the central techniques in the show. Susan Gubar spells out these multivalent meanings involved in racial cross-dressing like this:

> The "trick" of racial metamorphosis participates in the illicit, the liminal, the transgressive, the outré, the comic, or the camp. Not simply mimetic, race-change is an extravagant aesthetic construction that functions self-reflexively to comment on representation in general, racial representation in particular. To the extent that racechange engages issues of representation, it illuminates the power issues at stake in the representation of race. (10)

Closely interpreted, however, "cross-dressing" refers only to one specific practice in the line of a wide variety of techniques included in the show, i.e. the minstrel performer's cross-dressing as a woman.

This sub-chapter will briefly summarize the histories and uses of four important areas of primarily external, bodily or physical cross-dressing applied in minstrelsy: (A) the mask, (B) the attire, (C) the facial gestures, and (D) the practice of sexual cross-dressing of the minstrel performer.

(A) The Mask

> Rice needs to be on a stage in black face. Cause if he ain't, he don't have no idea who he is or what he is doin. (*Darktown Strutters*)

[55] See more on this utopian aspect in the minstrel shows in subchapter II.[3]/B/3/(c).

Blackface minstrelsy received its name after the practice of the minstrel entertainer that involved the application of burnt cork to the face and hands, originally simply to imitate and represent the black man[56]. The practice of blacking itself does not come from minstrelsy, however. It was used long before minstrelsy evolved, starting with the Greeks through the Italian *commedia*'s Harlequin, to the representation of Negro characters in English Renaissance drama, and it was out of this last tradition that minstrelsy's stage Negro and its practice of blacking directly emerged.

The most striking (almost shocking) feature of the blackface minstrel was undoubtedly his blackened face, and this blackface mask was also the longest living and culturally most influential of all the minstrel signs. Although the device of blacking looks back on a long history, the blackface of the American minstrel was unique and specific to American culture because of its direct reference to the black slave. George Rehin defines this immediacy in the American blackface: "racial caricature gave minstrelsy a local identity at a time when Americans required cultural institutions of their own to match the new political institutions of an urbanizing and industrializing democracy" (696).

The racial context was unmistakably incorporated in the minstrel mask from the beginning, since there was no going around the historical fact of slavery and the association of the black mask with the Negro. The guise in its purest form, however, was attached to the white face for the purpose of entertainment mainly. Although, as I have stated earlier, the reconstruction of the original contents of the black mask would be a largely hypothetical exercise, it can be ascertained at this point that the role of the black mask was, in its original form, very close to the make-up of the clown. The best way to consider the blackfaced minstrel therefore, is to picture him as a clown in reverse. The blackface mask in this early form also shows similarity to the contents of the European masquerades, mummings and disguising in medieval times, the primary function of which was game-playing and presenting spectacles to the masses.

The legendary, yet made-up, story of how Rice borrowed a whole outfit from a darky named Cuff at Pittsburgh, "who earned a precarious subsistence by allowing boys to pitch pennies into his mouth [...] also in carrying trunks for passengers from the steamboats..."

[56]Although I will forego analysis of the original contents of the show, which would mostly lead to hypothetical guesswork anyway, at this point I am quite sure that indeed minstrelsy was a free entertainment in the beginning mostly serving the enjoyment of the masses, and even expressive of certain radical class and race alliances. Minstrelsy's entanglement with issues of race will be discussed separately in the context of racial objectification in chapter III.

(*Clipper*, Dec 9, 1871);[57] or the story of entertainer J. W. McAndrews, who bought the entire outfit of a street vendor (Toll 45) to make his act more authentic, also prove that early minstrels consciously attempted to authenticate the sources of their Negro imitations, especially at the beginning.

Whether presenting travesties or attempts at "faithful" imitation, the blackface actor was always in the safe position of the "outsider," who never had to fear to share in the troubles and hardships of slavery in real life. The function of the black mask, as the most striking feature of the minstrel's appearance, was perceived by the contemporaries of the early minstrels in very different ways. A report of a performance by the Virginia Minstrels in London on the pages of *The London Illustrated Press* read:

> Yet, out of all this nonsense, modulated as it is by the cunning of these minstrels' art, there somehow rises *a humanizing influence* which gives to an innocent recreation a *positive philanthropic sentiment.* This sentiment connects itself with them as a colored troupe. With white faces the whole affair would be intolerable. It is the ebony that gives the due and needful color of the monstrosities, the breaches of decorum, the exaggerations of feeling, and the "silly, sooth" character of the whole implied drama (qtd. in Wittke 54; italics added).

Yet others argued that to appear in black faces gave no additional charm to the performance, and asked traveling troupes to "give *white* entertainment" and assured them that they "can 'draw a house' if they appear *like men*."[58] The racial overtones incorporated in the black face were perceived and increasingly reacted to towards the 1850s. The complex meanings that the mask hid became gradually apparent.

The mask first and foremost signified identification, and that without the threat of turning irrevocably into the imitated other. Masking for the blackface performer simply meant the "assumption through disguise of a new or inverted identity" (Lott 28), which at the same time allowed him to express himself through the applied self. As Eric Lott conceives it, this function of the mask made the blackface performer the perfect metaphor "for one culture's ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else's" (92). The mask in this sense is thought to have been a convenient device which allowed the blackface performer to put words in the Negro's mouth. Since the designed figure itself was constructed to appear

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[57] See later in this dissertation the interrelation between Melville's *The Confidence-Man* and the above cited sources of Rice's blackface representations (Chapter IV).

[58] *The Memphis Daily Appeal* Dec. 2, 1850.

non-threatening (innocent, submissive, contented, naive, etc.) and the entertainment format assured that nothing was to be taken seriously, the blackface Comic Negro served not only as a mouth-piece for social criticism, but the minstrel could also manipulate the image and common perception that he intended for the Negro in real life. Both Lott and Toll, therefore, say that a basic manipulative

function is inherent in the mask, through which social criticism could conveniently be expressed without the risk of taking the blame for it.

The German critic Berndt Ostendorf goes further in stating that the blackface minstrels were literally in the position to circumscribe "the symbolic space which they wanted blacks to occupy" (70). Several relevant documents of the time prove Ostendorf right in the sense that blackface performers did in fact greatly benefit from the fact that a large percentage of Northern audiences were not familiar with the Negro and came to know them only from minstrel performances. Partly because minstrel performers tried to make their portraiture faithful, partly because of Northern ignorance of Negroes, a "substantial number of the gullible public [...] mistook minstrels for real Negroes" (Toll 38). The minstrels themselves often advertised themselves as "The Original" or "The Only Real Ethiopian Band," which also generated confusing messages. Feelings about blackface performers were in fact so mixed that when the Virginia Minstrels were performing in England, British audiences started to collect money to express their sympathy for the oppressed slaves, extending their feelings for the slaves to "the black-face impersonators who were, as white Americans, more likely to be representative of the oppressors" (Bratton 133).

Later, however, to escape charges of not being real Negroes, the bands started to incorporate jokes into the minstrel material to stress the distinctness of the performer from his masked self. The following joke from the collection by Lew Dockstader is quoted in Toll: "Why am I like a young widow? Because I don't stay long in black" (40).

The ostensibly real and the blatantly fictional appeared side by side on the minstrel stage. As both Ostendorf and Lott seem to believe, identification with the Negro during the minstrel act could shape the audience's ideas about blacks in ways that matched white needs and expectations. Hence arises minstrelsy’s powerful ideological charge. Beyond the manipulation of the popular black image, however, the mask was also frequently used for the projection of the suppressed alter-ego, through which to materialize tabooed roles and prohibited fascinations. Contradictory gestures of identification and manipulation, love and

theft, fascination and exploitation occurred simultaneously in the blackface mask. The mask, as seen by the above critics, thus served the double functions of acceptance and circumscription of another people's culture. At the price of bringing blacks to the foreground of the national stage, white performers maintained the right to manipulate the image of the Negro as well as their cultural heritage, whichever way they thought fit.

Underlying the above complex functions of the mask (those of identification, manipulation, justification of racial cast, circumscription of cultural materials, etc.) were two fundamental functional elements. These core functions of the black mask were captured by Ralph Ellison in the simplicity and condensity of two terms: willful stylization and comic catharsis. Ellison grasped the essence of the device when he emphasized partly the abstraction and partly the comic appeal that blackface masking entailed (whether in its burlesque, parodic or grotesque mold). The mask, Ellison wrote, "this willful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved" (64).

Ellison believed that one of the central functions of the mask was to veil white fears. Fear that the mask the role-player attached to himself would suddenly become irrevocable. A similar fear is expressed in dramas dealing with the use and different functions of the mask such as O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* (1926). Closely attached to the minstrel mask, Ellison explained, was the deep-seated fear of the white minstrel man that the figure impersonated in the act would become the real self. Ellison pictured this hypothetical psychological process involved in blackface masking with great expressive power: "When the white man steps behind the mask of the trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell [...]" (67).

(B) The Minstrel's Attire

> Before the show that night, Jim found Rice in his dressing room picking through rag-tail pieces of clothes that he wore in the act. (*Darktown Strutters*)

The character of the blackface performer was made complete with an outfit which was made to suit a particular character type. The head of the blackface performer was almost always adorned by a wig, an important piece of the outfit of the Comic Black. Wigs were in fact so

much part of the standard outfit of the blackface entertainer that even Amos ‘n Andy (Gosden and Correll), the radio stars of blackface entertainment, applied them in their acts when they finally went on TV. The interest in Negroid bodily characteristics frequently came to be represented through the exaggeration of particular physical features that whites perceived were fundamentally different between them and the blacks. The wig overemphasized the thick and wooly hair of the Negro, an element which was often incorporated in minstrel routines as a good enough cause for laughter. Toll lists as example a common minstrel joke about the hair, which asserted that "Negroes had to have their hair filed, not cut (Toll 67)"; because their hair was so dense.

Since the facial mask was always the same for each "Negro" character in the show, the development of various minstrel types was made possible through the dress. The first specific minstrel stereotype historically was the "Comic Darky." His outfit, as mentioned earlier, comprised ragged clothes, pants stitched together from patches, an "eccentric hat, be it as small as an egg, or as big as a bushel basket" (Logan 693), and shoes usually twice the size of his feet. The first really famous Comic Darky was Rice's Jim Crow, whose attire Nathan described in the following manner: “His costume was picturesquely dilapidated, wrinkled all over, and ill-fitting; there were large patches on his breeches and gaping holes in his shoes. A broad-brimmed hat perched rakishly on his wooly head; a grin illuminated his face” (50-51).

The external appearance of the Comic Darky, his oversized, ill-fitting clothes projected a basically childish character to blackface audiences. Eric Lott perceives this feature of the physical burlesque as having a certain "infantilizing effect of arresting 'black' people in the early stages of childhood development" (Lott 143). Physical burlesque was thus shifted to insinuate certain alleged inner traits of the Darky.[59]

The second minstrel type, born soon after Jim Crow, was the "Dandy Darky," who first appeared in George Washington Dixon's famous song hit, "Long Tail Blue." The outfit of the citified dandy comprised "ultramodish clothes, tightly fitting pantaloons, a lacy jabot, a silk hat, baubles dangling from his waistband, a lorgnon which he held up with an effeminate gesture, and occasionally a walking cane" (Nathan 57). The citified darky lampooned the pretentious manners of the urban darkies, who were pictured on the stage as unfit to adopt to city ways. Although the figures of Jim Crow and Dandy Jim/Zip Coon (the Dandy Darky) were sufficiently individualized, there was a striking similarity in the two character types.[60]

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[59] For the ideological underpinnings of the type see pages 89-90 of the present discussion.
[60] The details of this innate similarity are highlighted in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* 216-7.

The manifold aspects of the minstrel mask were often reduced to pure burlesque in the outfit of the minstrel clown. The dress simplified the complex meanings that the blackened face incorporated. It either limited the Negro to a naive childlike creature (Plantation Darky), or to a good-for-nothing buffoon, imitating white manners and ways (Dandy Darky). The physical ridicule of both minstrel types was widely imitated and popularized, and in the course of minstrelsy's spreading influence and development further minstrel types were invented and added to these two, as listed earlier. Sheet music covers and minstrel posters, later lithographs and postcards in hundreds and thousands of copies delivered these caricatured images to white audiences. Physical satire and the burlesque of inner traits attached to it confirmed white beliefs that the darkies had to be kept in their place, in the guarding hands of their white owners.

(C) Physical Features

> People were all inside and beside themselves with laughter as Bones's mouth curled up in a grin from ear to ear. (*Darktown Strutters*)

Blackface minstrels emphasized but also exaggerated peculiarities specific to the Negro. The physical traits of blacks were portrayed on minstrel stages as elements of a grotesque portrait. Eyes were made huge and bulging (sometimes with the addition of white contours around them), the mouth was enlarged by red or white rouge almost reaching the line of the nose, resembling the masque of the circus clown, except that this mouth was always and endlessly grinning. This ever-present grin was supposed to signify the contentedness of the Negro as the white minstrel wanted to project and preserve him. Bernard Wolfe in an essay wrote about this peculiar grin of the Comic Black: "We like to picture the Negro as grinning at us. And his grin—as we create it—always signifies a gift" (qtd. in Boskin, "Life" 651). The smile was planned to suggest that the symbolic space that the white man created for the Negro on the stage was satisfactory to both parties (see Figure III in Appendix).

The mouth was not only pictured grinning, but it was also grotesquely oversized. Billy Kersands, a black entertainer in the early decades of the 20th century took up this aspect of the original caricature initiated by whites, and turned it into the main spectacle of his own routine—a fact indeed hard to explain or bring logical reasons to. Kersands could put a whole mug into his mouth, and he was often portrayed as nothing but a huge mouth, certainly a

bizarre form of self-parody that minstrelsy triggered. Blackface songs turned to the motifs of the grin and the large mouth by the hundreds. An early blackface song, "Lubly Fan Will You Come Out to Night?" published in 1844, exposes a black female as the butt of joke, who has an extraordinarily large mouth. The fifth stanza of the song read:

Her lips are like de oyster plant,
De oyster plant,
De oyster plant,
I try to kiss dem but I can't,
Dey am so berry large.[61]

Many minstrel songs, especially those of the "Ugly Female" type (earlier dealt with in subchapter II.[3]/B/2 in detail), ridiculed facial characteristics, portraying blacks not only as different but also grotesque and laughable. The songs that provided a catalogue of the external features of the Ugly Female were "Gal From The South" by L. V. H. Crosby and the song entitled “Mrs. Tucker.” The latter was the female variant of the popular minstrel air, “Ole Dan Tucker.” The first two stanzas of the song went like this:[62]

Mrs. Tucker is big and fat,
Her face is black as my old cat,
Her eyes stick out, her nose sticks in,
Her under lip hang ober her chin.

Mrs. Tucker is juss eighty-nine,
Her hair hangs down like oakum twine,
Her face so black, it shines in de dark,
Her eyes shine like charcoal spark

The essence of burlesque is to make someone or something ridiculous through the exaggeration of already existing inner or outer traits. What the minstrel show did in burlesquing physical features and external appearance was taking up real characteristics of the Negro, and then exaggerating them to the utmost limits.

(D) Minstrel Cross-Dressing; or, the Wench Role

[61] Listed in The Starr Sheet Music Collection, Lilly Library, Bloomington, IN.
[62] For the full text of the song see Dennison 123-4.

> But don't it bother you sometimes that most of the times you make believe you somebody else? (*Darktown Strutters*)

Minstrelsy's gender cross-dressing goes back to a long tradition in the theater that denied women the opportunity to appear on the stage. Thus it was a kind of historical necessity for men to represent femininity in the theater. The "wench role" authorized minstrels to draw up further power-lines, this time confirming and confining women to a symbolic space that suited men best. The role also provided a convenient means for the free flow of otherwise secretive homosexual practices.[63]

Wench performances, as Lott describes, based on contemporary accounts, "featured fiendish dances, much show of leg, and silly confidences uttered in parody of womanhood, extending to imitations of popping corks, descriptions of the size of 'her' last meal, and tales involving hapless boyfriends who must pawn their clothes" (159).

One of the most famous cross-dressers was Francis Leon of the Kelly and Leon Minstrels, who was often mistaken for a woman, because of "her" beautiful costumes, and a high pitch of voice that was generally characteristic of minstrel transvestites. Paskman lists some other famous wench impersonators, such as Lew Dockstader, Willis P. Sweatnam, and the great Ricardo. About the latter the Berlin theater-goers insisted "that Eugene was actually a woman" (Paskman 93).

In Paskman's evaluation, minstrelsy's gender-crossings involved hardly more than a frank burlesque (91), in which comicalities arose mostly from the revelation of the real character of the impersonator: "The traditional climax of the mirth has always come when the simpering 'lady' suddenly displayed a pair of huge feet, emerging from dainty skirts, and preferably topped by unmistakable masculine trousers" (91). Yet, it is quite telling that even Paskman, who was utterly enamored of the whole tradition of minstrelsy, entitled the chapter where he analyses the wench roles as "The Dark Triangle."

In reality blackface's gender cross-dressing only brought to a full circle all the illicit and shameful practices of the show, starting from a wide range of psychological games with and around blackness, concluding with the difficult to veil homosexual desires (which involved the attraction of white males to black males, and the envy of their sexual prowess).

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[63] For more on the interrelation of homosexuality and the minstrel stage, and the wench role in particular see Lott 159-168.

Minstrelsy had gradually grown to be a popular theatrical form where wide-ranging emotions, cultural, historical, sexual and social tensions, secrets and desires, overt and covert motivations and drives were staged, addressed and contemplated. Minstrelsy did all this through the involvement of a very heterogeneous audience, and its influence had covered the entire area of the US by the 1880s.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE MINSTREL SIGN

As long as there are new products, there will always be consumers to "buy," interpret, and promote (whether directly or indirectly; consciously or subconsciously) the ideologies that are ingrained within these consumer goods. Cultural signs and even more abstract cultural images are also easily conceivable as commodities, since they also partake in commercial processes traditionally associated exclusively with real, material consumer products. The manufacturing, dissemination and consumption of cultural icons and imagery are just as prominent and endlessly occurring, self-renewing processes, as the everyday rituals of selling and buying. Such mechanisms, whether of a more everyday or of a more abstract cultural character, naturally demand the presence and support of an entire industrial base, most commonly a specific cultural institution, which supplies the ideologies, backgrounds, and creates purchasing power for the products marketed. The processes of production, marketing and consumption would certainly become meaningless without a supporting system of ideologies, values, traditions and meanings that specific cultural institutions provide. "Institutions," Hortense Spillers notes, are "specific sum of practices that so configure our sense of 'public' and 'private'" (25), moreover they are responsible for imbuing signs—generated as a result of their operation—with specific, controlled meanings and significance. These meanings, beliefs and values which ultimately coalesce as ideologies, are present not only in the production but also in the dissemination of signs that cultural institutions generate.

Cultural institutions thus partake both of significant ideological and economic processes, which are modeled after those of the larger culture. The processes of sign manufacturing and the related reception, decoding, reinforcement or neglect of certain signs, for instance, are in fact very close to those market rituals which are widely treated by economists as exclusively associated with the rise of industrialism and capitalism throughout the 19th century. This, however, does not mean that similar market rituals of selling and buying, commodification and consumption did not occur in culture apart from those emerging in the economic scenery during the rise of consumerism.

In fact the manufacturing, reception and recycling of minstrel signs also involved certain market procedures, and these processes took place under the auspices of a particular cultural industry and its institutional representation, the blackface minstrel show. The present chapter will firstly trace the steps of how 19th-century minstrel shows arose from the cultural setting as institutions, indeed sort of commercial enterprises (markets in the sociological

sense), mass producing, marketing and disseminating their imagery. By explaining the institutionalization of the minstrel show I seek to document those social and economic factors that led to the commodification of minstrel imagery, providing the larger cultural and social contexts in which those cultural signs evolved and operated. The first subchapter will highlight those predominantly cultural and economic background mechanisms that rendered the massive production and transfer of the minstrel iconography possible and consequently effected the wide-scale spread of minstrel signs in various cultural media.

Minstrelsy created an elaborate system of signs which gradually evolved in the cultural scenery as deliberately distorted—hence mythicized—cultural products. Behind the mythicized facade lurked clearly identifiable ideological interests. This ideological force behind the minstrel signs, to simplify matters, promoted them into salable commodities. While the processes of industrialization and institutionalization created the firm economic basis for the dissemination of minstrelsy's cultural imagery and their subsequent commercialization, larger cultural and ideological strategies were instrumental in generating interest in the product created and were vital towards the prospective mass-production of minstrel signs. The second subchapter will therefore comment on those strategies of Othering or means of objectification of blackness which contributed to and refined the ideological and cultural messages which came to be built into minstrelsy's signifying arsenal, and transformed them into the commodity worth buying. By outlining these cultural—ultimately ideological—strategies influential in the manufacturing of minstrel signs I hope to pinpoint not simply the ideologies operative in the transactions of creation, commodification and promulgation of specific minstrel signs (enumerated in Chapter II), but also in the justifications American society at large generated in order to objectify its black population.

The third subchapter looks at the product—or rather those abstract contents built into the individual minstrel signs—that resulted, and investigates the rhetorical, marketing and promotional strategies that contributed to the popularization of this new "produce" as well as assisted the promulgation of minstrel signs in the larger culture.

This, in many senses "intermediary," chapter will thus address the economic as well as ideological backgrounds latent within and reflected through 19th-century blackface minstrelsy's imagery. In this sense it extends the cultural context of the minstrel signs classified and enumerated in Chapter II. Whereas Chapter II evaluated minstrel signs primarily as functional units within minstrelsy's semiotic system imbued with certain denotative and connotative meanings, the present analysis sets out to contemplate the actual cultural life: the sociological, cultural, ideological sources, backgrounds, contents and appeal

of the same signs. All through the subsequent analysis I will try to find answer to the simple questions of how and why did minstrel signs got into the extensive cultural circulation, which ultimately enabled them to disperse in all the dominant cultural media. I will argue that the economic and ideological mechanisms that triggered the proliferation of minstrel signs directly contributed to their subsequent cultural dynamic: circulation, promulgation, dissemination, indeed their economic and cultural traffic. Given that the processes instrumental in the manufacturing and dissemination of minstrel iconography were also vital towards the subsequent commodification of minstrel signs in culture, with the present chapter I also hope to provide a theoretical link with Chapters IV and V, where the survival of minstrel signification in literary texts will be demonstrated.

I wish to stress that although the previously catalogued minstrel signs will not surface as central in the subsequent analyses, the cultural, economic processes outlined here were vital in the emergence and cultural traffic of these signs, while the ideological and market mechanisms and strategies detailed contribute to the better understanding of their underlying contents and gradually assumed cultural significance. With this intermediary chapter then the interpretation of minstrelsy's —and the minstrel signs'—larger cultural context is rendered possible, the logistics of their cultural transfer is explicated.

[1] The Institution

The institutionalization of a system of signs can be interpreted as the evolution of a tradition and of a structured meaning that conjoins and codifies diverse signs as belonging to a unifying set of values, rules, and codes. Any institution, Hortense J. Spillers notes, is "upheld by an elaborate system of codes [and is] subject to conditions of market" (25). Institutions, whether cultural, political, religious or familial, are all part of economic regimes, and as such integrate and reflect market mechanisms. The first step towards blackface minstrelsy's commodification was its formulation as an economic system, thus an institution.

The institutionalization of the minstrel show started parallel with the continued existence of solo and duo blackface performances, not long after the first minstrel band, the Virginia Minstrels had been formed. The concrete processes of standardization and industrialization of blackface theater began to occur due to four major factors: choreography, concertization, representation, and agency (the latter three of which are notions I am borrowing from Dale Cockrell 150).

Choreography and structure were necessary ingredients to systematically organize blackface performances, which up to 1843 mostly took the form of scattered, occasional appearances either between the acts of dramas on the legitimate stage, or occurred as brief scenes and happenings performed in circuses or in the streets. The introduction of choreography in the blackface minstrel shows is generally attributed in the related criticism to the Christy's Minstrels, who introduced and began to standardize the tripartite structure of the shows towards the end of the 1840s (see more on this in Chapter II/1/B). The very fact that the minstrel show began to follow a prescribed pattern with a limited number of characters, set roles and stock parts, as seen before, contributed to its acceptance as not only a novel popular theatrical genre, but also as one with a recognizable and reproducible—thus imitable––format. Along with the purification of form the haphazard character of blackface acts slowly disappeared—although these did not altogether vanish from the cultural scene—and the former loudness, direct appeal, the wildness ingrained in early blackface acts were simultaneously also gone.

Despite these losses the set choreography established minstrelsy as a unique entertainment genre with a formula that could not be mistaken for anything else. Minstrelsy gradually came to be perceived also as the very first indigenous genre that America contributed to the theatrical world, and this is a point which cannot be emphasized enough. The minstrel show from the outset then was associated with a concrete cultural mission, that is, to be a truly national entertainment for the common people of America. The standardization and institutionalization of the minstrels show, however, was not only a practical step dictated partly by cultural, nationalistic principles and by aesthetic considerations for easy identifiability.

There were, to be sure, strictly economic reasons behind the sudden modifications in the minstrel format in the 1840s: the hope that an altogether more profitable entertainment could be established from the particles of scattered blackface productions. Besides the structural developments, certain modifications of content were necessitated to make the blackface act altogether more profitable and prestigious.

The second, and equally significant development motivating the evolution of blackface minstrelsy as a cultural industry, was the appearance of a new "performance paradigm" (Cockrell 150) within blackface theatrical acts, the *concert*. The regeneration of the concert, i.e., musical entertainment, as the dominant element of the blackface stage, was meaningful against the backdrop of two historical facts. One, that around the late 1830s theaters were experiencing a decline, and concerts seemed to be just about the only theatrical

events patronized (Cockrell 150). Secondly, the denomination "minstrel" was applied prior to the appearance of the Virginia Minstrels—the band regarded as the first established minstrel band—to concerts given exclusively to middle-class audiences by white families in concert halls. That on 9 February, 1843 Dan Emmett named the first performance of the Virginia Minstrels a "Negro Concert" becomes especially significant in the context of the above cultural circumstances. By wedding the two terms "Negro" and "concert" Emmett wedded blackface to higher prestige and greatly patronized entertainment forms, thus largely intervening in the future fate of minstrelsy.

The concert then was more than just the employment of predominantly musical entertainment features within the minstrel repertoire. It was a form that revolutionized and altered blackface entertainment for good. As Dale Cockrell points out the status of the concert genre was such that it held the promise of economic "well-being to some blackface specialists" (150), since concerts generally enjoyed the favors and patronage of middle-class audiences. Blackface entertainers recognized that concertization, that is, the transfer to a subtler musical entertainment form spiced with the original blackface ingredients could draw larger audiences and this mode of entertainment could also bring greater profits for the minstrel troupes at one strike. Building on this higher prestige and respectability as well as the hope of bigger income, as Cockrell proves, blackface performers started to assume the format of the concert. Music had always played a central role in blackface entertainment, yet, making operatic burleques[64] and assorted musical numbers central features in the shows radically altered the earlier character of the minstrel genre.

As the influence of the concert penetrated into blackface, Cockrell shows, it gradually enervated the strident noisiness, the energy, and boundlessness of the blackface act. With concertization the blackface theater lost its freedom and ceased to be a site for limitless amalgamation between various ethnicities and classes; instead, it slowly gave in to the allure of greater respectability and middle-class appeal. Cockrell sums up the process with respect to the re-structuration of blackface audiences as a result of concertization in the following:

> Those working-class audiences of the 1830s who believed that theatre was participatory, as it had been to their ancestors for centuries and centuries, were replaced in the 1840s by audiences who believed theatre was better purchased than produced, as it had been by those of the first tier for a century. Management enforced a new code of behavior, one that led to the theatre becoming much quieter, more and

> more a private space for reflection, in effect a temple of culture whose sacralization was complete by late century. Almost never again did white, common Americans made musical theatre an intrinsic expression of who they were and what they wished to be. (148-149)

Although I believe that Cockrell exaggerates the extent of sacralization that took place in the minstrel shows of the 1840s, nonetheless he is clearly right in calling attention to the changing economic situation of the blackface performer, which was one of the central elements that motivated moves toward a more respectable, "civilized" and tamed format. Prior to 1843, blackface actors earned at best 10 dollars a week (Cockrell 150), and it was only Rice, whose salary was really exceptionally high.[65] The urgency to find more consolidated, as well as financially more rewarding theatrical expressions into the blackface act seemed to be in complete unison with the economic pressures and the call of the times.

Concertization became a central stimulus behind the institutionalization of blackface and the economic re-structuration of this entire entertainment form, which eventually also led to changes in the larger cultural landscape of the United States. The massive presence, tremendous and almost unexplainable mushrooming of literally hundreds of minstrel bands in the East alone (around major city centers such as Boston, New York, Baltimore, etc.) not two years apart from the actual establishment of the Virginia Minstrels,[66] clearly proves that the minstrel show as genre was widely known and liked. Its formulas and routines were imitated extensively by performers, who committed themselves to the new genre on a larger and larger scale, because minstrelsy guaranteed fast commercial success. The concert ensured marketability and great profit, whereas choreography and standardization injected the aspect of easy "cloning" into the blackface formula. Everything was together for the rise of a mushrooming new market.

If we stick to the figures, we might come across some amazing, heretofore vastly neglected facts about the actual scale of the first minstrel shows. According to the very first playbill in the HTC's Virginia Minstrels files, an advertisement for the Great Olympic Circus

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[64] For the significance of opera burlesques in blackface shows see Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask.*

[65] Cockrell brings into his study a lot of data about the salary of blackface performers unseen before. Consider, for instance, the detail about T. D. Rice, who, according to Cockrell, earned a sum of $5000 "for his several engagements during the season" of 1841 at the Chatham Square Theatre, according to a report in the *New York Herald* of 23 February, 1841 (182). Consider also that at around this time the average annual wage of a worker in New York City came to $297.12, a data Cockrell quotes from Wilentz's *Chants Democratic* 1984: 405 (180).

[66] The exact date of the formulation of the band is debated in the criticism; February 17 and January 31 are alternately given as possibilities in Hutton 140 and Leonard 226, respectively.

at Boston's Tremont Theatre, by March 24, 1843 (date printed on the original bill) the Virginia Minstrels had won "the admiring cheers of thousands, and who have often urged them to make their appearance at the Tremont Theatre." Even if the phrase the "cheers of thousands" is an exaggeration suiting the spirit of the times, one would wonder how a band established a bare two months before (if we accept the earlier date as their formation) could gain such fame and renown to be greeted not only in New York but also in Boston with such enthusiasm. That the Virginia Minstrels moved fast from one town to another is further illustrated by the fact that a playbill from Hull, England, dating from October 21, 1843 already documents the band's tour of England, and in the matter of months they were in Dublin (playbill for the Virginia Minstrels dating April 26, 1844). This certainly speedy itinerary of the band should be interpreted in more than one way. First, it is quite clear that the band had the means and funds to travel outside of America ten months after their foundation. Since the highest price for the show was 25 cents, it can easily be deduced that the first minstrel troupe was indeed seen by tens of thousands during their first year; and finally we can assert that the impact of the show was simply sweeping: judging mainly from the number of imitators, their recognition by the press, and the income they supposedly made to enable international tours. Minstrelsy was beginning to show the contours of a successful economic enterprise.

The third aspect that was effective in the rise of minstrelsy as a new cultural institution was the appearance of certain filtering mechanisms in the shows. As Cockrell argues, early blackface performances were all characterized by the engagement of blackface performers in their acts, and they tended to uphold to their audiences "that which was 'real enough (…) noise, politics, class, gender" (149). 1843 marks a distinct shift in this respect as well, since performers were removed not only from their street audiences by taking their shows to the concert halls, but also from the subjects of their impersonations. Along with the spacial change from the streets to the concert halls new qualities emerged in the minstrel act: imitation instead of engagement, a kind of patronizing attitude towards slaves instead of voicing a common class appeal. All these transitions indicate the gradual estrangement of performer and performed, delineator and delineated, which irreversibly altered the nature of blackface performance. This is how Cockrell summarizes these crucial changes:

> The Virginia Minstrels were not interested in a program of protest against conditions suffered by working-class whites. If anything, they reinforced latent (or not so) patronizing attitudes towards slaves

> and blacks. With their name, concert format, and middle-class audiences came representation instead of engagement, music instead of noise, and, ultimately, issues of race instead of class. (153-154)

The rise of the minstrel show as a large and complex commercial enterprise also necessitated the official representation of minstrel performers, and thus the fourth ingredient of institutionalization, the network of agency came into being. Agency wedged yet another filter between the minstrel performer and his audiences, and rendered direct appeal and impact even more impossible. This new managerial conception, however, also contributed to the creation of an altogether more constructed, profitable and marketable new entertainment form, hence the "show," in the modern sense of the word (Cockrell 154) was born. While the new type of professional management certainly helped to develop the shows in more professional directions (regarding constructedness, organization, systematization, quality, etc.), the former unbridled street performances had been irretrievably lost.

Choreography, concertization and agency moved the blackface minstrel show towards formulaic patterns—the creation of its recognizable signs—that were vital for its functioning as a successful enterprise. Yet, the minstrel show as an institution was also more than that: it was a market enterprise as well as an ideological investment. It functioned as a market enterprise because it applied organized procedures for the exchange (the selling and buying) of its goods and services (Johnson 164), however abstract these goods offered for purchase were. As markets, minstrel shows were sites where the mass production and dissemination of their special products took place. Minstrel shows were also driven by market mechanisms like competition, profit, agency, through which "class, gender, and racial inequality and oppression" were realized and perpetuated (Johnson 164). Thus, besides accommodating the above market mechanisms, minstrelsy also mediated significant values, beliefs, and ideologies. The ideologies minstrelsy promulgated were closely connected to and were often expressed through social, cultural, political strategies aimed at the distancing and debasement of the racial Other.

[2] Strategies and Ideologies of Racial Objectification

If institutionalization provided the economic basis of the commmodification of the genre (and the signifying units within), the cultural and ideological underpinnings of the same were guaranteed through the processes of "othering" or objectification. In other words, to make its product marketable, minstrelsy had to turn its "product," into a thing, a "packaged" consumer

good. Minstrelsy as an ideological investment effected the creation and promulgation of certain prejudiced images of blacks. The abstract product that evolved on minstrel stages—underlying almost all of the minstrel signs listed in Chapter II—, i.e. blackness, or more precisely, a particular mythicized reading of blackness, incorporated these ideologies into its core. The subsequent subchapter will identify those ideologies and ideologically charged strategies which supported the birth and were fed into the marketing of this product. It will list those cultural strategies and transactions through which these ideologies materialized.

(A) Aspects of Human Objectification

One of the most important cultural strategies that contributed to the transformation of blackness into a cultural commodity—expressive of minstrelsy's underlying ideologies—was the process of human objectification. Human objectification, that is the perception and projection of human beings as non-human things is almost as old as humanity itself, since it depends upon certain social and psychological mechanisms through which people tend to form groups and consequently begin to regard themselves as different from, as well as superior to other people. The establishment of hierarchic relationships creates artificial divisions among people, and in this process the group initiating the hierarchic separation would pronounce itself as superior and then necessarily distinguish others as inferior. The inferior, distanced and therefore allegedly sub-human group will end up being regarded as closer to the non-human, objectified ranks, claimed to be deficient in those qualities that are natural signifiers of the superior group. Michael Pickering summarizes this process as the "ideological construction of difference" (73).

In what follows I will classify and explain general cultural and social strategies of human objectification, and will subsequently highlight the historical, cultural and social backgrounds as well as the relevance of these processes in the culture of antebellum America, putting a special emphasis on the blackface minstrel show therein. In the analysis of human objectification I will primarily rely on Leonard Cassuto's argument outlined in *The Inhuman Race*, but will update his reasoning by applying it to a particular cultural institution, the minstrel show, and the product it sought to market: the othered image of the black man.

Since groups of people are (and have always been) prone to view themselves in opposition to other groups, and establish rankings among themselves, we can safely assert that the process of "othering" along with the practice of human objectification—two

profoundly similar processes—began with the emergence of human cultures. As Cassuto argues:

> Cultures define an "us" and a "them." The stronger group defines what is human and embodies that definition, while the weaker one falls short by design and is exiled to a category of indeterminate otherness. [...] The consequence of this human desire to divide and rank—in effect, to exclude—are at the conceptual core of more theorizing about race and difference […]. (xiv)

This perverted, yet expressly human, need to observe differences (whether biological, physical, intellectual, moral, or other) and on the basis of those implied differences dominate another person "has its roots in a desire for superiority, something deeper than money" (Cassuto 19). In effect, Cassuto argues here that the desire to dominate others is a psychic need (generic to human kind) prior to it being an economic need, and he further claims that thus human objectification may arise independently of economic issues (19). It should be stressed, however, that even this psychic need to other and objectify are rooted in common interests. The common interest aspect, together with the clash of these shared interests with those of another community, is an ideological game first, irrespective of whether it is based on further economic or other motivations.

Human objectification entails the systematic denial of humanness from another people, and its ideological function is basically to make this relation between the othered group and the othering group fixed (Pickering 72). Objectification then is an exclusively human transaction, which explains much of what has transpired in the history of humankind, as well as might reflect upon the future prospects of human civilizations. The distancing, othering and finally the exclusion of the out-group from the privileged space of the in-group are indeed processes that contributed to the rise and operation of most human cultures. Therefore, as a quite ironic fact of human civilization, we can observe that its emergence is closely tied to strategies of human objectification rooted in the denial of the humanness of others. To put it differently, the great human achievement of creating cultures has from the first been marked by the simultaneous stigmatization of some as unable to qualify to enter that circumscribed cultural arena. Civilization and de-civilization took place side by side.

Human objectification may take many shapes, since various human features, qualities and group affiliations might form the basis of differentiation and eventual depreciation among people. The debasement of the other as a thing is a practice most frequently linked to the objectification of racial traits, but other physical characteristics (height, weight, facial and

bodily features, etc.) as well as intellectual, and moral qualities, gender-, class-, caste-, or religious belonging may also function as its basis. Thus, external and internal human characteristics just the same as various group affiliations may serve as grounds for various types of human objectification. The different objectified qualities selected to marginalize individuals or groups based on chosen or received affiliations, however, might appear parallel in specific cultural practices, i.e., racial objectification besides the perception of, for instance, black people as things also frequently involves the objectification of facial (exaggerated eyes and lips), other bodily (huge legs, hands, or phallic images), mental (ignorance, infantility), etc. characteristics (see Chapter II, the section on stereotypes).

The best known historical example for the process of human objectification in the United States was racial objectification institutionalized in the form of chattel slavery (Cassuto 21-22). In spite of the fact that the American institution of slavery was strongly built upon the economic exploitation of black slaves, yet, with Cassuto, I wish to stress that the motivations for the enslavement of Africans were quite similar to other processes of human objectification in that they were fundamentally human prior to being economic. The American form of slavery was also primarily linked to a common interest and then to a psychological urge to observe and create dominant and dominated, ruling and subordinate classes among whites and blacks. Again the ideological function of this process of othering, as emphasized before, was to calcify this hierarchical gradation.

Strategies related to human objectification have from the first tended to be linked to well-contrived cultural arguments and practices. The process of human objectification "became the source of ideologies of whiteness and institutions to protect them" (Cassuto xiv). In the American context racial objectification has also been, Cassuto explains, "the chosen American strategy to uphold the Western category system—and myriad social, legal, philosophical, ideological, and imaginative complications have been the result" (24). If we further elaborate Cassuto's previous note, it can be observed that the evolution of certain cultural institutions necessarily marks the differentiation and complex stratification of practices linked to human objectification since it is from and through these institutions that the social, legal and ideological concepts of a culture may spread. Human objectification then is bounded up with complex ideological, political and cultural motivations through the cultural institutions that harbor their practices.

(B) The Cultural Forces Behind Minstrelsy: Ideologies of Belonging[67]

Since objectification and Othering are processes expressive of a sense of the othered group's "not belonging," as Pickering chooses to phrase it, these strategies presuppose and are constructed against "positive modes of belonging" (79). Before taking a closer look at the strategies applied in blackface minstrelsy to delineate the racial Other as different and dehumanized, let us examine those ideologies which created whiteness as the superior unifying principle signaling "belonging."

Although often viewed as the variant of the slaveholding system in the entertainment world that capitalized on the figurative exploitation of black people, the blackface minstrel show —along with the cultural, social and economic reasons that prompted its birth—had less to do with African-Americans than one might suppose. Lurking in the backgrounds of minstrelsy's emergence were new democratic and national ideals, pressures towards a new achievement ethic, as well as standards of civilization dictated by Europe, which all worked towards the emergence of a strong sense of belonging in the American nation, and ideologies that supported this sense of "chosenness."

The beginning of the 19th century was a period of great cultural and social turmoil in the United States. The second decade of the century brought the Treaty of Ghent, which closed the war of 1812. This political event is often mentioned in history books as the second war of independence, the result of which was an ever strengthening urge towards national unity and patriotism, which soon spilled over into cultural nationalism, a demand for national cultural forms and a truly national idiom. The evolving blackface theater was just the unique national form demanded, "truly shaped by and for the masses of average Americans" (Toll 26). Interestingly and ironically, the national character of minstrelsy was achieved through the representation of African Americans (a non-Anglo-Saxon people otherwise held in bondage) and a counterfeit imitation of the conditions of slavery (that was, owing to its disturbing moral dilemmas, nothing to be joked about). The allusion to slavery was unmistakable, but so also was the fact that minstrelsy was a white fantasy from the first.

Added to the quest for a truly national cultural idiom and form of art other cultural tendencies also furthered the favorable reception of the new entertainment industry that was about to hit America. The idea of expansionism, as described by Nathan Huggins, ceased to

[67] In the subsequent analysis of ideologies of belonging, not belonging and liminality I am borrowing Michael Pickering's central categories from the book *Stereotyping*, in order to highlight those aspects of his argument through which we can arrive at a more complex understanding of minstrelsy's underlying strategies pertaining to Othering and objectification.

be conceived as a merely physical (geographical, political and economic) process but emerged as "an individual economic opportunity," and he proceeds to state that:

> The American who saw himself as a man characterized by risk-taking, enterprise, and achievement, was defining the American Dream in terms of individual success and upward mobility. But crisis was built into such concept. For as the American Dream denoted success, it implied the possibility of failure and since success meant individual achievement any failure was personal. (252)

Huggins relates this push towards an "achievement ethic" (253) to the emerging success of minstrel representation. In many senses, Huggins explains, blackface was a reaction against risk-taking and enterprise; but it cleverly objectified this resistance to national ideals through the distanced character of the stage black, who came to be portrayed as irresponsible, unrestrained individuals, independent from the compulsions of everyday obligations. "White men put on black masks and become another self," he explains, "one which was loose of limb, innocent of obligation to anything outside itself, indifferent to success […] and thus a creature totally devoid of tension and deep anxiety" (253). As long as the black man took the blame and was scapegoated, white delineators were off the hook, and could vindicate their full-fledged support of the grand national ideals.

> The third process that contributed to the flourishing of minstrel stages and the pro-slavery ideologies within was prompted by the age-old inferiority complex the American nation felt in comparison to Europe. The processes of expansion, the search for the national vernacular, the budding of new national ideals of individualism, self-reliance, democracy, optimism, and finally the war of 1812, all urged the measuring and testing of America, American values, and, as Huggins writes, "the new American in the making" (255) against the values and traditions of Europe. The question latently asked was whether America and Americans could "measure up to traditional judgements of culture" (Huggins 255), whether it was civilized enough to reach the standards and norms set down by Europe. No wonder, Huggins reasons, that the new stage creation, the Comic Negro, was to embody the deep-seated anxiety of the white minstrel man that the answer to the above questions was in the negative. The Comic Negro consequently emerged as a denial of everything that could be tied to the concept of civilization.

The rise of blackface minstrelsy was then tightly connected to social and cultural ideas that strengthened the cohesion between whites, marking them as belonging to a new, independent and expansive democracy, while the inconvenient aspects of this group affiliation (such as the inferiority complex felt in relation to Europe, or the pressures of the achievement ethic) could easily be distanced, addressed through and blamed on the "alien," "not belonging," scapegoated darky characters.

Moreover, since the concrete cultural and political influences that mediated in minstrelsy's beginnings (expansionism, search for the national vernacular, inferiority) affected the white population predominantly, the derived processes of human objectification in essence also involved the feelings, ambitions and psychic imperatives of white Americans. Quite surprisingly then the Negro was only marginally considered in the generation of the blackface act, yet, as the subject of representation, he was the sufferer of the entire weight of the resulting performance. What I wish to stress, in other words, is that the blackface act from the outset was prompted by ideologies of belonging, delineating the concept of nationhood and its related ideals strongly around the joint concept of whiteness.

As Pickering explains, the concept of national identity is not always a value neutral or positive category, because, underlying it are certain dangerous tendencies towards making this belief absolute or essential. "A self-conception of singularity and uniqueness is then transposed on the broad social plane into desire for a pure and impermeable national identity, with very definite symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them'" (92). Moreover, "[n]egative stereotypes of foreigners or outgroups help to shape and endorse such claims, and in this sense they are constructed on 'our' behalf" (90). The concepts of nationhood and national identity entail not only the definition of a strong symbolic boundary around the in-group, but are consequently suggestive of strategies of exclusion, differentiation, othering.

Likewise minstrelsy objectified and articulated the white man's essentialist idea of nationhood, and the cultural ideals that this concept involved, while simultaneously alienating and distancing the "elements" which contradicted that definition. Yet another important factor in minstrelsy discourses was what Pickering labels as "dissociative antithesis," that is, "what 'x' is consists of not being 'y'" (93). This negative approach to the definition of one's identity also readily occurred in the context of the blackface stage and resulted in the practice of embodying the Other through the discourses of the otherer on the minstrel stage. Thus, although the black man was the visible subject of the objectification process, the actual black man, the black slave, or African Americans in general had very little to do with the product that was marketed on the blackface stage. Nathan Huggins makes the following note about the stage black, who was mass-produced in the minstrel performance:

> The verisimilitude of this *persona* to actual Negroes, who were around to be seen, was at best incidental. For the white man who put on the black mask modeled himself after a subjective black man […] which white men carried within themselves and harbored with both fascination and dread. It was the self that white men might become […] except for those civilizing restraints of character and order

> that kept the tension real. How much better it was to have that other self in a mask, on stage, objectified as it were. (253-4)

Among other things this is why Pickering asserts that "the Other says and reveals far more about the 'self' [i.e., the manufacturer of Othering] and its conditioned and self-directed possibilities than about the apparently all-determined Other" (74).

(C) The Politics of Liminality

The politics of liminality brings us a step closer to the complex rituals of self-definition—and the parallel processes of Othering and objectification—that occurred on the minstrel stage. Articulating a sense of belonging (to a nation, the in-group, the superior and singular) was only one facet of the minstrel act, as we have already seen. Along with the definition of belonging (usually taking place through dissociative antithesis), the blackface minstrel also constantly presented that against which he aimed to represent the self. Representing and represented, Othering and othered, dominant and dominated thus surfaced almost parallel in the performance. The ambivalence that resulted again reveals more of the producers of such discourses than of what the discourse hoped to represent.

The grotesque that emerged as one of the central concepts of the shows embodied the end-product of human objectification, but in essence reflected not the object but the generator, the agent of representation. Once again, "in being represented the Other speaks to the identity of those who draw up and distribute the representation" (168). The liminality that occurs through the representing discourse reveals ambivalences that constitute not the Other, but the otherer.

According to Cassuto, the grotesque is an image "that cannot be easily classified […], [which is] in constant motion on the edges of fundamental boundaries" (6-7).[68] The grotesque frustrates as well as fascinates, since it "intrudes upon the desired order of the world" (8). The blackface entertainer also stood on cultural, social and political boundaries that were difficult to negotiate, let alone articulate. Yet, the anomalies of his very existence, the ambiguity of his character, derived from the embodiment and objectification of actual racial, social divisions, also guaranteed the success of his act. Representing the symbolic boundaries of race, (being

[68] For more on the interrelation of the grotesque and the concepts of liminality and ambivalence see Chapter II of this dissertation.

simultaneously white and black—or rather neither black nor white), class, both middle and lower class, gender, both male and female, ranks, dominant and subordinate, the blackface minstrel represented the underlying conflicts of antebellum America, and eventually demonstrated the opposing energies that kept it in constant flux. Standing on the edges the minstrel entertainer, borrowing Werner Sollors' phrase, was "neither black nor white yet both" (book title),[69] and thus he represented a cunningly constructed intermixture of tabooed and actual cultural belongings and personal qualities.

"On its most abstract level," explains Ostendorf, "minstrelsy is symbolic interaction ritual which arises when different classes (rich and poor, urban and rural), different races (black and white), and different castes (in-group and out-group) have to deal with each other" (69). This interaction ritual between races, classes, genders and castes summarized and figuratively expressed through the persona of the blackface delineator, partially substituting for the lack of connections between the above layers of American society in reality, was yet another aspect upon which the popularity of the minstrel show rested.

The functions of the liminality of the performer's figure and the projected discourses were manifold. Firstly, as noted above, the representation of conflicting cultural groups, patterns, discourses served (a) to tame that blatant oppositionality that ideologies of belonging entailed. Secondly, these subtly mediated oppositions from the larger culture as expressed through minstrelsy were also reflective of ideology functioning as a "strategy of restraint" (Jameson 52). Thus, by representing cultural, social, ethnic tensions, minstrelsy also cunningly aimed (b) to keep these forces at bay. This reading of liminal discourses in minstrelsy in fact is very close to the argument Pickering presents as a criticism of postcolonial discourse. While Bhabha contends that stereotypical mimicry can be interpreted as "a strategic reversal of the process of domination" (qtd. in Pickering 170), Pickering suggests that "[m]aybe it was just a confirmation and measure of colonial control in its differential emulation of the codes […] of those […] socially dominant" (170). Rereading blackface discourses in this light allows us to see in its presentation of ambivalence the reinforcement of a cunningly devised control of alternative discourses. Thirdly, as Pickering proves the "conceptual use of ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity shows that (c) the fixity of the stereotypical Other is never absolutely achieved, never in place for all time" (170). The liminality innate in the representing discourse then suggests its own undoing. Trying to fast freeze the Other as a rigidified "sense of difference" (Pickering 168) the ambivalent status of

[69] Although we have to note here that Sollors implies the character of the tragic mulatto in his phrase, and thus his usage of the term is quite different from mine.

the impersonator and the impersonating discourse unfixes the firm contours of the intended image.[70]

The liminality of the blackface delineator, the representing discourses and the image produced and the suggestions ingrained within complicate as well as broaden our understanding of the minstrel phenomenon. Lingering between controlling and being controlled, the blackface minstrel could never bring his act to the point of completion where the Other would appear as an ultimately fixed image.

The liminal position of the blackface delineator also entailed his involvement in a series of self-denials. Nathan Irvin Huggins in his *Harlem Renaissance* suggestively describes the web of self-imposed objectification processes the blackface minstrel was caught up in due to his masquerades:

> Americans were No-Man and Everyman; the newness and openness of society created its special anxieties. White men's selves depended on blacks being less than men; the wholeness of the black person too often rested on his accepting that white judgement and achieving applause through self-denial and self-depreciation. But real achievement for white men, too, meant an acknowledgement of a superior European culture, and, thus, a self-denial and self-depreciation of a different kind. All was a jumble of masks and costumes covering naked uncertainties. White men pretended to be black men of their fantasy, black men pretended to be the grotesques that white men had created, while other white men pretended to be aristocrats […]. The deep realities from which they were all fleeing were doubtless more horrible than the acts that they put on. It all was a theater of the absurd. (274)

I chose to cite this section from Huggins at length because the various levels of human objectification, and the consequent liminality involved are convincingly highlighted therein. There are indeed three intertwining processes of human objectification expressed through the minstrel performance as Huggins explains it. The first of these comprises of general practices of racial objectification, or othering carried out by the white delineator of the black man through which he portrays his racial subject as less than human, the second process depends upon the acknowledgement of the allegedly non-human properties by real blacks to find acceptance in the white world (which fed back into the entertainment world through blackface black actors), whereas the third level of the masquerade once again involves the self-denial of white men to match expectations of taste, social standing, etiquette, civilization dictated by Europe. Out of these three levels of masking, indeed confusion of dependencies and belongings (self-denial or process of human objectification) the first and the third

[70] For more on the criticism of postcolonial discourses on stereotypical mimicry see Pickering 168-173.

type are linked to the white delineator on the blackface stage, therefore I will detail only those strategies of human objectification that occurred within these layers of the masquerade.[71]

(D) Practices of Racial Objectification: Ideologies of Not Belonging (I)

The third larger strategical device applied in minstrelsy (besides the politics of belonging and the politics of liminality) to assist the representation and objectification of the racial Other evolved through the application of ideologies of not belonging. Whereas the former strategies both contained some positive gestures, such as the affirmation of national identity or allowing a margin for the discourses of the Other, through this third strategy the Other appears in its most naked, distanced, excluded and essentialised character. As Pickering explains:

> The question of national belonging is organized and managed through arguments about […] idealised characteristics, but it is nationality itself which narrows the focus of belonging to negatives of exclusion, where what is essentialised as alien is underwritten by what is essentialised as 'our own.' (107)

In what follows I will look at those strategies of essentialisation within the minstrel theater that involved the racial Other, and which eventually underlined ideologies of not belonging.

In the minstrel show strategies of human objectification were initiated by the white delineator primarily to prove that the "Negroes" were hardly more than domestic tools, and indeed could (and should) not be treated as humans but rather as the property of whites. This ideology created in the minstrel shows too "a dangerous breeding ground for various forms of stereotypes" (Pickering 108). Consequently, the most common strategies of human objectification linked to this argument in the minstrel routines: **infantilization**, **atavistic representation** and **emasculation**, supplied the basis for the generation of disfiguring and distorted character clichés. These character clichés hid two "complementary qualities" of the creators of stereotyped imagery, as Pickering emphasizes: "the profound, but unquestioned sense of superiority of those who produced the stereotypes and their profound, but unrecognized depth of ignorance of those who were so stereotyped" (109).[72]

The Comic Negro appeared on blackface stages as a perfect child, innocent, irresponsible, totally dependent on the benevolence of the master. "A child in intellect," and a "child in faith," as Eric Lott writes (143), the Comic Plantation Slave or, as he was better known, the Happy Darky was characterized by a handful of traits that were to underscore his inferiority mentally, socially and

[71] Since my primary interest lies in explaining and tracking the causes and effects of white-generated processes of racial objectification here I choose to omit strategies of self-denial and self-parody that concerned black entertainers essentially.

[72] For more on the interrelation of ideology, nationalism and racism, see Pickering 107-146.

economically alike. As illustrated earlier, the outer as well as the inner characteristics of the Comic Negro were all shaped in accordance to his stereotypical infantilism. The childish naivete of the stage black was often complemented by the alleged laziness, negligence and carelessness of the type. The portrayal of blacks as children, besides it being a psychic need for the white delineators,—securing an engagement in laughter, a role-play to exercise superiority, as well as an exit from economic pressures, and personal responsibilities—was also an economic necessity. By proving that the slaves were immature, irresponsible, and childlike creatures, blackface performers unwittingly gave support to pro-slavery ideologies, since the infantalization of the slaves, as Cassuto argues "readily allow[ed] for their [the slaves'] economic exploitation by their white 'fathers'" (132). Strategies of infantalization were often disguised as arguments for the benevolent paternalistic slave economy, that allegedly aimed to protect and maintain the well-being and happiness of the childlike slaves, who would have been really defenseless without the charity of their owners.[73]

Although there were seemingly well-grounded cultural, pyschological and economic motivations lurking in the background of the strategy of racial objectification through **infantaliziation**, this cultural and social practice involved various contradictions from the first.[74] For one, there was an apparent tension between the alleged humanistic motivations of the masters as benevolent, charitable, paternalistic, religious and the more evident "profit-driven, economic ones, which marked the slave as a thing" (Cassuto 132). Another significant contradiction within the rhetoric connected to infantilization was that it only made the underlying social and political tensions more evident. The irony behind the strategy of infantilization was that it lay bare the threat the Other posed in actuality (cf. Pickering 113). The images of the naive darky presented and his too clever, rebellious counterpart, suppressed in the white fantasy, lived side by side. A masterful illustration of the two appearing in one character is Melville's Babo. Similarly antagonistic was the practice of depicting slaves "as made for manual labour […] but [also as] naturally hedonistic and lazy" (Pickering 128).

The happy-go-lucky fool of the Negro guaranteed a tamed and domesticated image and overwrote the threat and anxiety felt over its real-life counter-image the riotous black radical. Although these tensions were quite visible in reality, they appeared only in a highly coded language in the fantasy-world of the minstrel theater. The rebelliousness of the slave appeared in a tuned down

[73] More details on the interrelation of infantilism and ideology are offered in Chapter II: minstrel stereotypes. Also consult Pickering for correlation between alleged infantilism and the civilizing mission rendered in the writings of Richard Burton, David Livingstone, Albert Schweitzer, the explorer John Henning Speke (122-124). Further approaches to infantilization are highlighted in Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei*.

[74] Michael Pickering also relates the notion of racism and the evolution of negative stereotypes and practices of othering to certain scientific movements: evolutionary progressivism, scientific racism, Social Darwinism. Although these larger theoretical and social contexts of othering and human objectification are not addressed here separately, I wish to acknowledge the significance of these for the more complex understanding of minstrelsy and the strategies of othering it brought about.

manner through strategies of subversion applied by minstrel blacks. Tricking the master by trapping him in his own argument, had long been a favorite game among Negroes to get back at their oppressors. Robert Toll supplies the story of a minstrel slave named John, who, playing on his master's assumption of his childish naivity and stupidity "subverted the plantation by feeding green tobacco to sheep, eating oats meant for the horses, making his master's tea out of bitter leaves, and even beating the master's coat while he still had it on" (75). Similar subversive or counter-strategies that served to turn around popular stereotypes of the black's infantility often surfaced in high and popular literature alike in the antebellum period (see the analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Chapter IV).

The guilt, sometimes even terror or horror of the master who felt responsible for the denial of his slaves' humanity, and consequently feared their revenge, were also often objectified in the infantility of the slave. Predominantly, however, infantilization served the ideological support of the plantation system as can also be seen in the writings of the plantation school.[75]

Cassuto calls attention to the fact that the process of objectification should always remain incomplete. Although the initiator of objectification wishes to push the objectified group into "the liminal space between human and thing, a grotesque space where the person's essential humanness is questioned" (16), yet this will always remain but a failed attempt, since the humanity of the group should remain evident, and should reassert itself throughout the process of attempted objectification. Similarly, the strategy of infantilization as an objectification process fails because there is an evident contradiction between the slave as child and the slave as thing, or between the slave as submissive servant devoid of free will and the slave as a rebel.[76]

The second strategy of human objectification widely practiced on blackface stages was the representation of the black man as animal. This practice similarly to infantilization has also been widely treated in literature from Margaret Mitchell through Thomas Dixon to William Styron. **Zoomorphic descriptions** of stage blacks like strategies targeted at infantilization took various forms, starting from the representation of physical appearance through allusions to atavistic inner qualities to the circulation of these images in the form of publicity materials. The extent these images took a stronghold in the public fancy can be easily proved by the massive evidence of popular black paraphernalia that grew out of the minstrel tradition and that capitalized on the alleged resemblance between blacks and animals.[77]

The beginning of the minstrel era was still marked by subtle hints at the atavism of Negroes, in forms that the underlying ideology suggestive of the threatening or even brutal character of the Negroes could easily be missed. Minstrel darkies, for instance, were often portrayed in the company of

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[75] Renderings of the theme in literature are cited in Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* (100-106)

[76] For a similar argument about the ambiguity innate in labeling the slave both as a child and a thing see Fredrickson (101).

[77] Examples to zoomorphic representations in popular black paraphernalia and advertisements are listed in abundance in Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* (178-187).

their favorite animals: the coons, possums, crows, chicken, when strolling in the woods—as if these pastimes could be easily imagined as part of the routines of slave life. The famous Jim Crow act and song, however, began to carry associations between blacks and animals further, and illustrations that followed the introduction of the song often combined features of the bird and the white delineators, as on the sheet music cover of "The Crow Quadrilles" from the Lilly Library, included in Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* 211. The 1880s, frequently mentioned in minstrel criticism as the first decade of the coon-song era brought more radical and vulgar stereotypes of blacks and, as could be expected, the stereotype of the atavistic Negro was made even more exaggerated and grotesque. The illustration for May Irwin's "Bully Song" from 1896 proves the fact that racial caricature began to take a quite open form in the period. The sheet music cover portrays the Brute Negro as a gorilla wielding a razor in his paw, simultaneously evoking the threatening animalism of the Black Brute and the ridiculousness of the Comic Black Dandy (illustration included in Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* 244).

The idea of the black man's atavistic character, however, evolved much earlier than the zoomorphic representational practices of blackface minstrelsy. In his book, *White Over Black*, Winthrop D. Jordan observed that the tradition of perceiving and representing blacks as animals had to do with the fact that "Englishmen were introduced to the anthropoid apes and to Negroes at the same time [sometime back in the 15th century] and in the same place [i.e., Africa]. The startling human appearance and movements of the 'ape' […] aroused some curious speculations" (29). Associations and speculations regarding the alleged physical similarity between blacks and animals were later also supported by the American institution of slavery in order to justify as well as to maintain the subservient position of blacks. The tendency of pricing slaves as cows (described in Cassuto 133), the measurement of the slaves' physical and biological qualities at slave auctions similarly to those of animals brought along fantasies and ideologies that hammered in the notion of likeness between the slaves and animals. Slave advertisements and other routine practices of the slave trade often built upon the well-known stereotype of the black man as animal. As Kern-Foxworth notes in her *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus*, slave traders would commonly "purchase slaves by the pound and would note the poundage sought in the advertisement" (6). The objectification of slaves as livestock to be sold and bought at will irrespective of their human relationships profoundly contributed to the conceptualization of blacks and blackness as marketable products.

The animalistic slave developed into the most threatening stereotype of the minstrel stage, the so-called Brute Negro, or Brute Nigger.[78] The bestial Negro represented just the opposite pole to the Happy Plantation Darky image. Being the projections of the white men's

(the blackface performer's) fantasy, the Comic Negro (through his ignorant laughter) and the Brute Negro (through his sheer physical power, and animalistic instinct), in the end both spoke of the minstrel performer's psychic tensions, but were far from revealing anything about the character of the actual black slave. Leonard Cassuto explains the common roots of the two stereotypes as he analyses the fiction of antebellum America:

> The comic Sambo and the fearful Nat comprise two sides of a diptych in the slaveholder's mind. That the slaveowner should see the slave as comic and fearful at the same time is more than passing strange, for the combination of humor and fear is the source of the majority of definitions for *grotesque* from antiquity to the present. The dynamic tension between Sambo and Nat further illustrates the slave's liminality, a quality linked to the grotesque. (166)

The similarity between the two figures is more than evident. First, the fact that they were both white-generated, two, that they both expressed liminality and thus were linked to the grotesque, three, that they were both objectified fantasies in service of the white man's economic endeavor to maintain conditions of slavery (Sambo—because he was too ignorant, Nat—because he was an animal who needed to be tamed) attested to the fact that both figures sprang from the same root.

The third strategy through which white delineators aimed to objectify the black man was **emasculation** and the parallel practice of **disfiguration**. If the black brute appeared threatening owing to his limitless sexual prowess, blackface performers did their best to juxtapose that image by declaring the black man impotent through the character of the ludicrous black lover. The comic love song series of the minstrel repertoire is full of examples that deny or make fun of the black man's masculinity and along with it, his humanity. Again visual images on sheet music covers and billboards helped popularize the image of the failing or deficient manliness of blacks. A late illustration of one of the earliest minstrel songs, "Coal Black Rose" included in Lott (118) involves all three strategies of human objectification mentioned so far. The sexual potential of the black man is simultaneously emphasized and ridiculed through the banjo held between the legs. The accessories of the blackface performers, be them musical instruments, swords or coattails of soldiers, were positioned carefully to underline the lack of masculinity. Added to the sexual contexts, the portrayal of black soldiers with appendages that already connoted impotence also involved the presentation of the alleged cowardice of blacks, which took the emasculation process a step further.

Underlying the processes of both the sexual and the political emasculation of blacks—expressed mostly through bodily signs or objects attached to the body—, however, were strong social and economic fears. "The minstrel show as an institution", explains Lott

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[78] For a detailed introduction to this stereotype consult Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* (127-137).

> may be profitably understood as a major effort of corporeal containment—which is also to say that it necessarily trained a rather constant regard on the body. […] Specifically, there were the twin threats of insurrection and intermixture, the consequences, to white men's minds, of black men's place in a slave economy. Blackface performers accordingly devised further strategies to counter the various bodily powers they wanted to, and did, evoke. (118-119)

Whereas the threat of insurrection Lott talks about here was blunted by portraying the Black Brute as hardly more than an animal, thus intellectually immature, the danger of miscegenation was blurred by images of emasculated males and the Ugly Black Female stereotypes. Undermining the concept of the beautiful black female accordingly was the female gender variant of the strategy of emasculation. Whereas black males were often depicted as awkward and clumsy as well as completely unmanly in their courtship, the comic black female was presented by minstrels as a catalogue of disgusting features from head to toe. The popular minstrel song, "Gal from the South" is probably one of the best examples that attests to this latter:

Gal from the South

Ole massa bought a colored gal,
He bought her at the south;
Her hair is curled so very tight
She could not shut her mouth.
Her eyes they were so bery small,
They both ran into one,
And when a fly light in her eye,
Like a June bug in the sun.

Her nose it was so berry long,
It turned up like a squash,
And when she got her dander up
She made me laugh, by gosh;
Old massa had no hooks or nails,
Or nothin' else like that,
So on this darkie's nose he used
To hang his coat and hat.

One morning massa goin' away,
He went to git his coat,
But neither hat nor coat was there,
For she had swallowed both;
He took her to a tailor shop,
To have her mouth made small,

The lady took in one long breath
And swallowed tailor and all. (Lott 26)

Besides strategies of emasculation and disfiguration, the wench role, that is the general practice of transvestitism on the blackface stage (described in detail in Chapter II), also contributed to the process of sexual objectification and othering, since it quite openly represented a kind of sexual liminality. Neither fully male nor female, the blackface impersonator hesitated between sexual identities in a way that once again led to images of blackness as deprived of essential humanity. Objectification through the wench role was expressed on the grounds of gender roles. The black mask of the delineator guaranteed that the sexual grotesque brought to life always came to be attached to blacks and not the white delineator of the female role. The wench role objectified blacks as sexless having no definite gender identities, and therefore, once again marked as inhuman.

(E) The America Versus Europe Syndrome: Ideologies of Not Belonging (II)

The fourth larger set of strategies related to the process of racial objectification were motivated by the increasing need of average Americans to match standards of taste, style, fashion, manners dictated by Europe. This general urge to ape European ways was everywhere expressed and voiced in 19th-century American literature, but nowhere so neatly as Thoreau phrases it in his *Walden* when he says: "The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveller's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same" (17).

As explained earlier, this branch of objectification strategies disguised in the routines of blackface stages had indeed nothing to do with actual black men, unlike the previous set of practices, which at least took their motivation from the ever so contradictory relationship between blacks and whites. Although the reasons for this set of objectification rituals rested with imagined or real cultural conflicts between America and Europe, once again the blackface minstrel theater chose to represent these innately white dilemmas via the persona of the black man. The possibility of personal failure regarding proper manners, taste and style was transferred over to the stage black who soon became, as Huggins puts it, the antithesis to "respectable taste and manners" (254). It was really quite easy to make a fool of the stage Negro, and no one in the audience ever supposed that the grotesque dance, manners or speech of the darky in reality referred to deep-seated fears and self-doubt located in the white performer. As Huggins further explains:

> It was a cultural doubt, as well as personal, that compelled white Americans to use a black theatrical *persona*, defining themselves in contrast to it. Americans anxiously measured themselves through European eyes. And the nineteenth century was filled with contemptuous and condescending observations of American character and manners by Europeans. (254)

No wonder then that this "black theatrical *persona*" Huggins talks about, was made to fail in all possible ways, since through each of these failings the white man behind the mask could prove himself better. The cliché of the Citified Darky or Northern Dandy was expressly devised to pose as a catalogue of deficiencies in the face of civilized manners. While it was quite self-evident that the Comic Plantation Darky could not live up to the expectations of civilized manners, it was quite another thing to make his city alternative fail. The appearance, clothes, speech, movement, and habits of the Comic Dandy Darky were all caricatured and made grotesque (see more on this in Chapter II). The conceptual function of the citified Jim Crow (or Dandy Jim), was specifically to prove the Negro defenseless in and unsuited for the urban setting—in need of the white benefactor's assistance. The urban Negro was obviously more dangerous to whites than his plantation variant—as noted in the previous chapter—since he carried within himself allusions to the possibility of miscegenation, amalgamation, and a competition for work. These were good enough reasons to make him and his antiques, totally ridiculous and shameful to civilized norms and expectations. The parody targeting the Citified Dandy was apparently much more cruel and obvious than in the case of the Jim Crow type.

Clothing was only the most trivial vehicle through which white delineators could express the fact that Negroes had no place among white aristocrats, and could indulge in fantasies of failing in high society at the black man's expense. In describing the physical appearance of the City Coon, Robert Toll says: "long-tailed coat with padded shoulders, a high-ruffled collar, white gloves" (68), came to symbolize the standard outer attributes of the type.[79] Besides the extravagant clothing the movement and behavior of the Dandy Darky were also vulgar and offensive. Harold Rossiter in supplying practical advise for staging a minstrel show claims that "the idea is to make just as many grotesque *motions* while playing the instruments as possible" (15). Nathan Huggins makes mention of certain blackface sheet music illustrations as well as stage directions, where the performing minstrels were indeed demanded to "break all the rules of stage decorum" (255). Huggins further asserts:

> Not only were their bodies to move in very exaggerated ways—arms and legs flailing, head bobbing and rocking—but the performers were to sit with their legs spread wide apart, vigorously tap their feet to the music while making their faces grimace and contort beyond imagination. The minstrel's dialect, whatever its relationship to true Negro speech, was coarse, clumsy, ignorant, and stood at the opposite pole from the soft tone and grace of what was considered cultivated speech. (255)

[79] It is indeed interesting to note that Jim Crow and his city version Zip Coon had a great deal of similarity on sheet music illustrations (with respect to facial features, movement, even attire), with the difference that Zip

The Dandy Darky or, as was better known to minstrel audiences: Zip Coon, came to represent a denial of all that was put down as fashionable and tasteful. The grotesque nature of his character was built around a number of liminal traits: a hesitation between race borderlines (white and black), the liminality of class (middle-class pretensions tinged with working-class or slave roots), liminal attachment to a locality (hesitating between the natural setting of country and the chosen habitat of the city). Along with his distorted speech, attire and movement these liminal characteristics once again degraded the stage Negro into a non-human, objectified position. Having no recognizable belonging to race, class, place, lacking the ability to articulate himself clearly, Zip Coon finally also failed to be a human. His failure, however, demonstrated not the failure of real blacks, but that of whites who felt endangered in a number of ways: in their social positions, in their outward social performance, in their private lives. For each of these fears the white man created a black persona who would embody the threat: the urban Zip Coon and the stereotype of the professional black were threats to social standing, Zip Coon's refined manners were shown as endangering good taste and manners, and the Dandy Darky with his pretentious sexual potential stated an old taboo, the black male as a threat to white womanhood.

Freak shows as well as minstrel shows "were both causes and effects of human objectification and the racial grotesque" Cassuto argues (24). In other words they both were influential in the birth of practices of human objectification as well as demonstrated the resulting preponderance of chaotic energies. As Cassuto claims, the grotesque that the minstrel show devised was fascinating to the masses for exactly the same reasons that freaks were popular in Barnum's museum (8). Today's vogue of the abject and our attraction to the characters of horror stories reveal similar interest in the deformed, the deviant, the abnormal. The "racial freaks" (a term I am borrowing from Cassuto 168-216) that the minstrel shows brought to life were also anomalous, disturbing creations fleeing the binds of easy categorization (neither black nor white, neither male nor female, neither human nor entirely non-human), and were fascinating and attractive to many especially because of their disturbing liminality.[80]

Coon's clothes were slightly upgraded to suit the requisites of class and milieu assigned to him. For a further comparative analysis on the two clichés see Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei*, 217.

[80] The category of the racial freak that this chapter introduces and which comes about as an end-product of human objectification can be easily related to the "abject" that Julia Kristeva theorizes about. In his book entitled *Betűrés* (1999), Kiss Attila Atilla relates the current tendency of the commodification and large-scale marketing of the *abject* (the disturbing, alien, disgusting, and horroristic) to a cultural paradigm shift. As he explains the abject (along with the racial freak produced on the minstrel stage) "is disgusting only for those generations, who were brought up in a cultural paradigm which defined itself against the Other, and this Other was articulated exactly through the terms of uncleanliness, the rubbish, the filthy" (trans. mine, 123). The abject has been turned into a commodity by the capitalist consumer society, Kiss notes, and thus it has been consciously transformed into a source of pleasure from a source of disgust. Simultaneously with this the subject has been "deprived of all

[3] Marketing the Product

In the previous pages I looked at the factors that contributed to the rise of a new cultural institution, the minstrel show, and detailed the strategies this institution invented to "objectify" the product it sought to sell. But what exactly was the product that was sold and marketed within the institution of the minstrel theater?

We could argue that the whole package of the show was for sale, which is actually true, but on a more abstract level it was a particular interpretation of "blackness" that blackface performers tossed into the whirlwind of commercial circulation. "Blackness," however, was also more than minstrelsy's abstract product, it was also part of the essentialized content of its core semiotic units, the minstrel signs. Minstrelsy was, as Lott also observes, "an arena in which the efficient expropriation of the cultural commodity 'blackness' occurred" (18). Blackface minstrelsy indeed traded with a very unique product that was not necessarily visible or graspable. It brought into the marketplace of Jacksonian America a certain reading of, a particular and peculiar interpretation of race and ethnicity. Blackface minstrelsy evolved in the 1840s as a culturally acceptable institutional framework in which the production and consumption of images of blackness and slavery as well as certain lessons and ideologies related, were freely sold and bought by masses of Americans, be them white or black. The minstrel show in this reading is conceived as a site, where the possession, presentation and interpretation of a people's culture (i.e., that of African Americans) was negotiated and fought over. As Eric Lott articulates the same idea, 19th-century minstrelsy could be viewed "as a principle site of struggle in and over the culture of black people" (18). He further asserts: "[t]his struggle took place largely among antebellum whites […] and it finally divested black people of control over elements of their culture and over their cultural representation in general" (18).

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the areas that are without the supremacy of ideology" (128). Kiss argues then that the commodification of the abject is linked to concrete power strategies generated within the capitalist economy in order to extend its control into fields of life—such as leisure—which have not been penetrated by ideology beforehand (128). Blackface minstrelsy's commodification of the racial freak can likewise be interpreted as part of a major paradigm shift through which the minstrel show turned into a capitalist enterprise and the abject—appearing as the racial Other––it sold became something desirable for audiences, performers and consumers of minstrel-derived paraphernalia. Minstrelsy and its cultural producers and consumers, thus partook in processes very similar to those market mechanisms involved in the creation and reception of capitalist economy and the resultant ideologies. The marketing of the minstrel grotesque (like the commodification of the abject described in Kiss 121-129) assisted the rise of ideologies in support of the dominant power structure and undermined the independence of the subject.

Although the idea of blackness (or rather a certain reading of it) surfaced as blackface minstrelsy's ultimate but abstract product—as well as the latent content of its individual signs—minstrelsy marketed two additional concepts along with it: originality and authenticity. The first notion was to declare that no one had ever done mimicry in the fashion whites employed in the minstrel show, whereas the second asserted that the materials incorporated and the impersonation involved were all faithful to black life. Both of these claims were ridiculous from the outset. The claim for originality was false because of the impersonation of blacks in earlier theatrical traditions (see Varró's unpublished doctoral dissertation *The Comic Negro*, 1-7), whereas the argument for authenticity contained its own decomposition from the first, since to claim a mimicry true is evidently paradoxical.

(A) Originality and Authenticity: Products and Marketing Strategies

Besides being abstract notions themselves offered for sale the concepts of originality and authenticity also appeared as marketing tactics. Stressing the originality and authenticity of the minstrel performance, claiming that it was a faithful representation of real black life was a general and accepted practice among those who worked to boost minstrelsy's appeal. The minstrels accordingly liked to advertise themselves by flashing impressive, yet ironical labels as "The Original" or "The Only Real Ethiopian Band." This early 19th-century obsession with the original, the real is even more paradoxical if for a moment we consider the utter sham that was sold for the real on minstrel stages.

To illustrate the desire for authenticity almost any contemporaneous minstrel playbill could be quoted. In these publicity materials the words "original" and "authentic" themselves function as commodities on a marketplace that was eager to sell and buy truthfulness itself. A playbill by the Virginia Serenaders found at HTC, advertising the band's performance at Union Hall, supposedly in the year 1843, wonderfully demonstrates the production and the simultaneous denial of authenticity. The bill is odd for several reasons. The year 1843 is inscribed on it in pencil, which is highly dubious since a reference on the same bill to a performance by the band the year before (i.e., 1842!) in Salem would make the Serenaders the first minstrel band, and the starting date of minstrelsy's institutionalized beginning would accordingly be modified to 1842. If, however, we suppose that the date on the bill should be 1844, instead of 43, and thus the title of the first band is due to, or at least should be shared with, the Virginia Minstrels, the next thing that might give reason for confusion is this. The bill asserts that the Serenaders were also performing in England, just like the Virginia Minstrels did back in 1843, yet the bill includes a rather lengthy diatribe against unsolicited imitators, which goes like this:

> […] the Public may rely with the strictest confidence that every thing set down as Novelty is really so, and no trifling or catch-penny performance, got up for one day only, as the Gentlemen of this band are under articles of agreement. This explanation is given on account of a number of individuals having assumed our names, form of Bill, and names even of Songs, which they do not even know, let alone executing – and thus we guard all from being deceived by wretched counterfeits. (HTC material)

This piece of condemnation is all the more puzzling given the fact that it was very likely the Virginia Serenaders themselves who were guilty of stealing the name of the already well-known Virginia Minstrels, and who undertook the tour of England encouraged by the recent success of their forerunners. The two bands cannot be identical clearly, since the Virginia Minstrels included Dan Emmett, Frank Brower, "Billy" Whitlock and "Dick" Pelham, whereas John Diamond, Cool

White, J. Carter and Masters Edwards made up the Serenaders.[81] Thus, if we suppose that the Serenaders were right in accusing other bands of imitating them, then the Virginia Minstrels were obviously not the originators of the minstrel show. If, however, the invectives against counterfeits were unfounded, then the Serenaders apparently had no right to attack rival minstrel bands for finding their sources in the programs of others just as they did. As for the uniqueness of the Serenaders' minstrel program, stressed on the bill in question, this bill's offering includes among other things songs such as "Old Dan Tucker," "Who Dat nigger dar apeepin," "Lucy Neal," and Jim Along Josey." These, however, do not come from the Serenaders either, but had existed in the program of solo performances for several decades already.[82]

> The contest for proving the originality and authenticity of the bands, however, was not merely a conceptual question. It soon became evident that the minstrel business involved big money, and everyone wanted to get their hands on at least a portion of it. The great popularity of the new entertainment genre, the fact that minstrel theaters drew full houses, the standardization of the format, which guaranteed easy recognizability of structure, clichés, etc., the rise and involvement of agency with the minstrel business all pointed towards a necessary further step. The minstrel show was turning into a successful commercial enterprise that was to benefit from the mass production of images of blackness. Minstrelsy's appeal even today can be explained not only by the various artistic and cultural

[81] Among the bills I also located one that announced a joint appearance by the Virginia Minstrels and the Virginia Serenaders, the bill dating from the 4th of July 1844. This is clearly another documentation that proves the distinctness of the two bands, contradicting some assertions that the Virginia Serenaders was just another name for the Virginia Minstrels band (Wittke 44). In his *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* William J. Mahar provides the complete list of the personnel of minstrel companies, which nicely indicates the often changing composition of the bands. For details on the distinction between the above two bands see his Appendix (355).

[82] The need to stress authenticity were then part of that complex mythology and ideology through which 19th-century minstrel stages hoped to undo the obvious sham they created at least through figures of speech.

areas it absorbed (from music, through dance, acting, politics, psychology, etc.), but also by the systematic and at that time extremely modern marketing mechanisms it invented for the purposes of selling and spreading its "produce."

As a commercial enterprise, minstrelsy initiated a number of practices that we normally think of today as evolving from the middle of the 19th century, with the emergence of capitalist economy. These were, among other things: (a) the mass production of a product; (b) the invention of market strategies for the successful selling of the product: inventing market incentives (bonuses); (c) the employment of a range of publicity materials to promote the product: billboards, newspapers, publications, etc. (d) the creation of a strong control/dependence mechanism through which future "purchase" of the product could be guaranteed.

If we seriously measure the marketing and promotional strategies invested in the blackface minstrel show, we can safely assert that this cultural institution was in all likelihood the first really effective marketing industry, indeed an advertising institution where the product marketed was not an actual object but concepts and ideologies attached to a group of people and their culture. In what follows I will look at some rhetorical strategies blackface minstrelsy employed to stabilize and maintain the continued merchandizing of its product. Illustration for these strategies will predominantly be drawn from minstrel documents at the Harvard Theatre Collection.

(B) Additional Rhetorical Strategies

The main **promotional tools** for publicizing minstrel performances were minstrel billboards, sheet music, playbills, minstrel publications and, of course, newspaper ads. These promotional materials freely applied **strategies of verbal persuasion** to mark the advertised minstrel band as exceptionally talented and unique for one or the other reason. Besides the earlier-mentioned features of authenticity and originality, authors of publicity materials also frequently stressed the respectable nature of the performance to appeal to middle-class taste and requirements of manner. A relatively early playbill for the Virginia Minstrel's appearance in Hull, England, on October 21, 1843 declares:

The Virginia Minstrels will have the honour to make their appearance in one of their vocal and instrumental Entertainments, in which the SPORTS and PASTIMES of the Southern Coloured race is delineated in masterly and chaste manner, through the medium of songs, refrains, and ditties, sung by the slaves of the south, at their merry meetings, such as gathering of the cotton and sugar crops, corn huskings, weddings. […] The performance will be free from any objectionable feature, either in word, look or action, that could offend the most sensitive beholder. (HTC)

This fragment from the playbill does not only attest to the **strategy of appealing to respectable tastes** by marking the performance as "free from any objectionable feature," but it also illustrates the presence of the earlier-cited rhetorical tactic of stressing authenticity. Here this latter feature occurs through the claim that the materials incorporated are drawn from slave culture. Additionally, this playbill is also a revealing testimony to how the minstrels overwrote the realities of slave life, fabricating entire dream-

worlds around it, with happy workers who entertain themselves with merry singing amidst their everyday chores.

Another frequently present rhetorical device on minstrel publicity materials was the use of **hyperbolic style** through which journalists as well as the performers themselves tended to exaggerate the magnitude of the show, the talent of the actors or the significance of various features in the show. Examples to the exaggerated style could endlessly be cited from the minstrel documents, as can be seen in this bill advertising the United States Minstrels:

The Band of the Universe,
fifty strong men,
comprising none but artists of
ability and undisputed fame. (HTC material)

A similarly far-fetched outburst can be read on a bill advertising the appearance of the band called White's Melodeon at 53 Bowery for April 16, 1852:

Look at this!!!
the greatest bill of
ETHIOPIAN
Performers
Ever offered to the Public!!
[…]
This is decidedly the most extravagant
combination of Novelty and Fun!
That has ever heretofore been presented in this or any other
PLACE IN THE WORLD. (HTC material)

Occasionally playbills or magazine articles also stated the **educational quality** latently present in the shows in a style similar to a bill from 1860, which asserts that the band in question is to give "[…] a healthful, pleasing and mind-relaxing amusement, which seeks the ennoblement of the great mass [which] must be regarded as not only a luxury but a moral necessity of life" (HTC). A subsequent section of the same bill develops the idea of mass appeal further by stressing that the entertainment provided is within the reach of all: "[…] they [the members of the band] have determined to contribute their share to the general good, by placing the means of enjoyment within the reach of the whole people" (HTC material). The concept that minstrelsy was an **entertainment for the people by the people** created by average Americans matched not only the nationalistic, patriotic ideology that fuelled minstrelsy's popularity, but also underlined the notion that minstrelsy was the first truly American genre, and as such answered the need for a national vernacular.

(C) Promotional Strategies

The rhetorical devices that minstrelsy's promoters employed were certainly powerful and persuasive, but these, we have to note, were not exclusively the property of the minstrel genre. Any entertainment feature offered to the public (circuses, showboat attractions, medicine shows, etc., lectures, religious meetings, and gatherings of all kinds) were hailed in diverse publicity materials in an over-enthusiastic manner very similar to minstrelsy. The hyperbolic style and other strategies of persuasion that served to exaggerate the performers' excellence was clearly the vogue of the age. Therefore the agents and advertisers of minstrel shows had to come up with new strategies to emphasize the peculiarities that minstrelsy as an entertainment form had to offer. Minstrelsy's "hidden persuaders"[83] (its advertising strategies) had to suggest further deals in order to seduce more people to the spectacles they sold. Using the documents of the Harvard Theatre Collection I will enlist three promotional strategies applied in the publicity materials: offering business shares for sale, the promise of gifts and other bonuses for visitors of the shows, listing refreshments to be purchased at the site.

The already cited playbill of the United States Minstrels from the Collection indicates the unique practice of selling the shares of larger minstrel bands. From this practice it can be assumed that (a) minstrel shows really began to function as miniature business enterprises by the 1870s (the period that the bill in question also originates from), (b) that shares might have functioned as fundraising strategies used to finance and recruit the staff; and (c) that the practice of owning shares in these shows might have increased individual involvement of some audience members in the success of these ventures. We cannot, however, ascertain to what extent the selling of shares in minstrel shows might have been a general tendency. In all likelihood the practice was not too wide-spread for I located no other bill that referred to similar business options. The respective section of the bill reads:

> 104 remaining shares, at $50 each, can be had on application to W. M. Porter, treasurer at the United States Minstrels […] if applied for by or before April 15. The object of the Enterprise is to establish a Troupe of Minstrels, which the Capital will enable the Directors to secure on the best terms; and it is intended that the Troupe shall excel in Numbers, Talent and Novelty anything that has yet been seen in THIS BRANCH OF THE PROFESSION. (HTC material)

[83] The term, "hidden persuader," is a borrowing from Vance Packard, who coined the phrase in his book of 1957. Since then the term has gone into general usage to connote the usually invisible strategies of persuasion involved in the marketing mechanism of a product.

While the selling of business shares in minstrel bands could have been an isolated or at least rather uncommon practice, the promise of gifts to visitors was a received promotional device evidenced by several theatrical documents. An advertisement for the appearance of Charley White in New York on January 18, 1854 allures future audiences that the performer "will present ONE HUNDRED valuable and costly gifts! to the purchasers of Tickets to his Great Exhibition and Benefit!" (HTC material). A bill for the Virginia Serenaders' appearance on December 12, 1857 includes this promotional tool in a yet more explicit style. "Every visitor to this establishment will receive an order for a gift, which gift will be obtained at the store, No. 625 Chesnutt Street, under Jayne Hall, upon presentation, at which store the gifts are now open for inspection, and are the most COSTLY AND ELEGANT description" (HTC).

Although the technique of marketing the consumers' unconscious desires was developed as a successful marketing tool only in the middle of the 20th century, minstrelsy's advertising agents had already been aware that audiences should be tricked and lured by their own needs to pay for the show. A playbill from 1860, for instance, advertises refreshments that can be purchased in the intermissions of the program. The document reveals that alcoholic drinks and cigars were also sold in the buffet, thus we can assume that the atmosphere was rather light-hearted among the spectators as well. The bill is remarkable also because it transfers the already cited promise of originality from the features of the show to the cigars sold, thus further marking the hunger for authenticity as a wide-spread obsession of the period. It is quite telling that the minstrel show, the very incarnation of the sham, could create an extremely successful business enterprise out of the marketing of the "genuine" as its central legend and product. The bill in question enumerates the above claims in this manner: "All wines, liquors, ales and segars sold in this establishment are warranted *genuine*. Plain drinks 6 cents, brandy 10 cents, punches 12 cents. Segars are first class Punch Brand, and at all prices. Visitors are particularly requested to report any inattention or overcharges" (HTC).

CHAPTER IV

THE MINSTREL HERITAGE AS A FORMATIVE INFLUENCE IN 19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

> "Without the minstrel show there would have been no *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), no *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)" (Eric Lott, *Love* 5).

The commodification of minstrelsy's signifying units, i.e., the buying and selling of its images across various cultural areas and genres such as advertising, magazine fiction, cartoons, comic books, films, has by now been turned into a commonplace due to innumerable critical studies devoted to the examination of minstrelsy's cultural heritage.[84] Relatively little has been said, however, about minstrelsy's influence on the "high"[85] literature of its own time, the stimulus and energy it injected into the literary expressiveness of the 19th century. One would be surprised to know that the by now classic books of American literature from the pens of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville or Mark Twain could not have been written at all if it had not been for the "lowliest"[86] of popular entertainments, the minstrel theater. This chapter will extend the notion of Eric Lott, who drew an interesting parallel between Leslie Fiedler's thesis about the obsession of 19th-century American white male writers with portraying white and black character pairs and a similarly obsessive attitude revealed in the act of the blackface performer towards the represented Other. Lott argues that very much like the white writers of the 19th century, the blackface performers assumed a

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[84] For minstrelsy's influence in the vaudeville theater see Alkire, Stephen Robert, "The Development and Treatment of the Negro Character as Presented in American Musical Theatre 1927-1968." (1972); Brown, Ray B. "Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy." (1960); in the movie world see Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies* (1989); Cripps, Thomas. *Slow Fade to Black* (1977); Friedman, Lester D. *Unspeakable Images* (1991); for minstrelsy's survival in advertising, cartoons and postcards, see Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. *White on Black* (1992);

[85] Here I have to refer to Lawrence Levine, who has been a great influence on my perception of cultural hierarchy, especially related to the 19th century. In his *Highbrow/Lowbrow* Levine explains the relativity and permeable nature of cultural divisions, and notes on the arbitrariness of such denominations as high and low (8). Thus, what I am proposing based on Levine's findings is a rejection of a vertical division of 19th-century American culture, and argue for the concept of a shared culture, in which authors such as Stowe or Twain (excluding Melville, of course who did not receive much attention from any kind of audience in his own time) certainly spoke to very diverse audiences. See Levine page 30 for more.

[86] Once again there is a touch of presentist viewpoint when I classify minstrelsy as a low form of entertainment, since, as we know, in its own time minstrelsy indeed functioned as an accepted form of mass entertainment, received by audiences at both ends of the social scale. Consider, for instance, the presentation of minstrel entertainment to several of American presidents, including Abraham Lincoln, among others. For details about

curious "familiarity with 'blackness'" (*Love* 5), and thus their imaginings and masquerades, respectively, are often compatible. I will elaborate this notion of resonance or parallel between white writers and minstrel performers obsessed with "blackness" to include women as creators of fictional universes in which "blacking" surfaces. Specific emphasis will be laid on a type of "blacking up" which evokes the comic clichés of minstrelsy in white as well as in black literature. This literary demonstration will thus concentrate on a selected assortment of American *belles lettres* where cross-cultural interrogations tend toward the comic. When white and at times black authors decided to attach this comic guise to their black characters, they did hardly more than merely put their fiction in the mold of a powerful popular tradition that was familiar to their audiences. Yet, few did immediately realize the immense impact and role this comic overtone would later have in the shaping of the future prospects of black culture. In the analyses that follow I will attempt to outline the costs and benefits of this cross-cultural transaction in the prose writings selected, and will briefly note on the relevance of certain fictional characters with respect to the rise of America's black literature and the strengthening cultural consciousness of the black population.

Nonetheless, the present analysis will focus on the white writers of the 19th century in America, who tapped and drew upon the tradition of blackface minstrelsy in one way or another, thereby establishing a cultural link between texts (Robbins 531[87]) that "used" minstrelsy as their referent. Although many further examples for intertextual plays with blackface could be cited from literature also to include the dramatic literature and poetry of the 19th century, the present analysis only wishes to lay the foundations for similar analyses. Therefore my critical readings of literary texts here will merely serve as illustrations of a new analytical methodology, without attempting to exhaust the possibilities of this novel "cultural" semiotic reading of literature. In this spirit, I will not attempt an exhaustive survey of all the minstrel signs that surface in the authorial texts of the period in question; this would take up immense space and time, and certainly would not point any further than the selections chosen. Neither will I attempt to illustrate the working of all previously introduced minstrel signs in connection with the chosen literary works (needless to say, not all minstrel signs figure in the

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Lincoln and minstrel shows follow Lott's suggestions regarding references to Jesse Weik, *The Real Lincoln* 75, 85-6, and Albert Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln* 1:536, 597-98.

[87] Robbins applies the category of "generic link" between texts to describe a line of works of the same genre (slave narratives) that share a common rhetorical technique to resist, as Robbins states "the 'master's' version of historical presence" (531). Basically my analysis of 19th-century American literature through the angle of blackface influence is remotely comparable to Robbins' notion of "generic link," although the texts I study are linked in their cultural heritage rather than in genre or in their discourses.

authorial texts that reference the tradition—some minstrel signs, as indicated earlier, are better suited for literary representation than others).

When I speak of a new methodology, I primarily refer to that cultural-semiotic investigation of the minstrel heritage (detailed earlier in chapter I) that allows for a simultaneous adaptation of historical, literary, and cultural semiotics through multiple intertexual borderlines. Minstrel signification, as we have seen, is rooted in a complex cultural, historical, social and literary system of signs. Its textuality is not only dramatic (i.e., literary, fixed, written), but is also performative (i.e., acted, spontaneous, changing), the two unified in this analysis as parts of the same "textual performance" (a term borrowed from Spillers 29). As is the case with any textual representation, minstrelsy's evaluation too, is historically changing with each individual spectator, with each individual interpreter. The contextualization of minstrel signs (the textual manifestations of the larger tradition) within high literature, therefore, can simply be seen as yet another interpretation or recollection of the familiar patterns of the minstrel show in unfamiliar contexts. What I am after in this chapter, in other words, is the study of "any explicit relationship of priority and indebtedness between textual performances" (Spillers 29) that exists between the cultural-dramatic text of minstrelsy and its literary reconstruction, along with the semiotic, aesthetic and ethical consequences that follow. The scheme is, therefore, very simple: the translation in the authorial text of a prior textual performance, i.e., one text reading another.

The present chapter is premised upon the assumption that certain significant cultural signs retain their meanings even when removed from their original contexts. These outstanding cultural signifiers have a tendency to evoke the entirety of the tradition that supplies their meaning, that makes them part of a culturally determining tradition. Similarly, minstrel signs when transplanted and incorporated into cultural conveyors other than their original contexts, keep on signaling the complex conventions and meanings of the minstrel show from which they were derived. If, however, the reader of a given literary text with minstrel references or allusions in it is not familiar with the cultural tradition minstrel signification derived from, s/he will unquestionably miss both the signs and their authorial recontextualization, thereby missing substantial portions of the writing's cultural import, thus, ultimately, its moral and ideological reverberations (the Afterword of this dissertation will address this problem in greater depth). While Chapter II served to enhance the general recognizability of minstrel signs in diverse cultural contexts, and Chapter III assisted the understanding of the institutional foundations, the marketing and ideological procedures that contributed to the dissemination of minstrel signs, here I will show how to detect minstrel

signs in literary contexts, and what meanings can be derived from authorial practices of recontextualization. By pointing to the impact of the minstrel tradition in literature, I wish to emphasize the importance of cultural knowledge in transactions involving literary comprehension.

The transplantation of minstrel signs into literary contexts—from popular culture into "high" literature—entails the following consequences, which might otherwise be obvious from the aforesaid:

1) Minstrel signs will keep evoking their original sign function for those familiar with their institutional contexts;

2) Added to the original sign function, there will appear further sign functions layered upon the primary meanings. In other words, authors recontextualize, and at times transfer the original sign functions for their own purposes. This process is very similar to Ezra Pound's notion of cultural overlayering when one set of meanings and contexts, cultural traditions is placed upon another, always modifying the meanings of the layers that lie under the new ones. In the authorial re-writing of minstrel signs there are only two layers upon one another (the sign and its authorial reinterpretation), both present and both communicating significant messages to the reader.

3) The minstrel sign in a literary context will always appear as part of a (predominantly) coherent authorial discourse. Authorial texts in my analyses could be viewed as interpretive texts that translate selected elements of minstrel discourse. In the case of each selected writer the contents of this authorial over-writing will be detailed, the consequences of over-layering explored.

It is important, however, to state at this point that my literary analyses naturally will not reflect upon aspects of the ("receiving/representing") narrative beyond of the minstrel context. The presence and impact of minstrel signs within literary texts will exclusively constitute the focal point and center of my discussion of the works. Besides enumerating minstrel signs in the respective selected literary pieces, I will also comment on how these cultural signs are built into the controlling discourse of the "master narratives," while highlighting interrelations between the representing (authorial) discourses and the represented discourse (that of minstrelsy). The literary corpus will include the following works: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855) and *Confidence-Man* (1857), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

[1] Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Contradictions of Conflicting Discourses[88]

The enormity of minstrelsy's influence on 19th-century consciousness and cultural expression is nowhere more evident than in the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1811-1896) now classic—both controversial and important—narrative, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) [subsequently *UTC*]. As it has been widely stated (see Lhamon 96, for instance), there is no document to suggest that Stowe had ever attended a minstrel performance, yet sections of her work (I would even risk to include a substantial portion of the novel's ideology and structure) are filtered through the traditions and routines of blackface minstrelsy. Such penetrating influence would not be conceivable unless we suppose that minstrelsy—regardless of whether or not it was directly experienced—was indeed a familiar part of mid-19th-century entertainment world and was solidly embedded in the general cultural consciousness. From beginning to end Stowe's narrative closely references the tradition of blackface; without minstrelsy neither the narrative nor its cultural and political context/subtext would be fully accessible.

Stowe's attempt to portray the outrageous conditions of slave life in her time is, to borrow James Baldwin's phrasing, "laudable" (14), essentially since to her contemporaries *UTC* might have appeared as the first honest attempt at truthful depiction and representation of the Negro for the annals of American literature. The novel is considered "a first," in other words, because it recognized and legitimized the Negro population for the purposes of "realistic" literary representation, and this was at the time no small achievement. Stowe's undertaking also appears exemplary to present-day readers especially in the face of the practices of the minstrel show, which in Stowe's days was the only widely promulgated representation of the black population, but which certainly lacked the kind of realism *UTC* promised. Stowe, to be sure, did her best to achieve a degree of realism in her portraiture of black life. Yet, she was several "leaps" away from grasping an authorial truth that Baldwin defined in his "Everybody's Protest Novel" as "a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment" (15). No matter how committed Stowe was to the plight of the Negro population, she could not get out of the bind of the conventions of a typical genteel style and representation that was fashionable then. It is this genteel style which could be mostly blamed for the practices of "whitening," and the lapses into the minstrel-type denigrating portraitures that characterize the novel throughout despite Stowe's best intentions. Secondly, Stowe had never been "deeper south than northern Kentucky" before composing her subsequently world

[88] The present analysis has in large part been published in *Jim Crow örökösei*. Consult pages: 300-307.

famous novel (Lhamon 96). Which is to say, she was not really there at all. Finally, as Lhamon observes, she was "confidently integrated with the dominant assumptions of her time" (96). Underlying Stowe's courageous attempt to restore realism into black portraiture is her struggle to correspond with, and be recognized by the dominant white culture. From the clash of these two inclinations, the attempt at realism in constructing the black image, and the need to be approved by received discourses, arises the contradictory character of Stowe's rhetoric.

If Stowe's rhetoric is contradictory, so is the critical evaluation with respect to her views on blackness and blackface. The divide in the criticism of the author and her work mainly exists between white feminist and black critical readings. While feminists have argued for the revolutionary and original authorial attitude displayed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, its subversion of the old-fashioned rhetoric of patriarchal discourse and its deconstruction of white-generated black stereotypes of the minstrel kind, black critics have tended to view the work as reinforcing many of the dangerous patterns of minstrelsy, and along with it discourses of the dominant culture.[89] To represent these two standpoints I wish to start off my analysis of Stowe's indebtedness to the tradition of blackface with two quotations. In the words of Richard Yarborough—who represents the angle of Afro-American criticism—black writers still strive "to distance themselves from all that *Uncle Tom's* Cabin represents" (qtd. in Spillers 30). On the other extreme stands George Eliot's view, claiming that in Stowe's work we witness the "founding" of the "Negro Novel" (qtd. in Spillers 30), the entering of black people into the arena of literary fame and recognition. We are thus seemingly back in the familiar minstrelsy debate about authentic versus counterfeit representation.

In the analysis that follows I will take a stand between these two extremes—as my subtitle indicates—and prove that in some of her transactions Stowe indeed subverts and overwrites minstrel clichés, while at other places she totally succumbs to the racist conventions of blackface representation.[90] I will show that Stowe is in two minds about where she should stand with respect to the minstrel heritage, and generally considering the status of blacks in American culture. The latter question, i.e., defining the contribution of black culture to American cultural expressiveness, is often riddled. If an author echoes dominant

[89] For a similar evaluation of the critical reception of the novel see Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (183-184).

[90] Although I view minstrelsy's heritage as a complex cultural tradition (deriving its motivations from the suppressed, yet borrowing much of its rhetoric from the dominant), in my subsequent discussions references to minstrel discourse or minstrel representation will denote that racialized aspect of blackface that American writers of the 19th century mostly tapped.

discourses, s/he is likely to suppress notions of cultural indebtedness to blacks, and to uncritically borrow from blackface's racist discourse. Those subverting dominant discourses, on the other, will tend to critique minstrel influences as part of their rhetoric. To put it differently, the presence of minstrel motifs in literary works often implies larger issues of how to represent, imagine, handle blackness, as well as more urgent related historical and cultural problems of defining the position of the United States with respect to its black population.

In her essay "Fathering and Blackface in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" Christina Zwarg (from the feminist side) argues for a parallel between Stowe's attempt to challenge traditional interpretations of authority, power and selfhood as defined within the "discourse of patriarchy" (274), and Stowe's parody of the rhetoric of blackface. Although Zwarg's argumentation is somewhat exaggerative, and thus questionable at some points (e.g. her analogizing the character of Sam to Ralph Waldo Emerson), there are a number of statements in her study that can be used as significant imputs for the analysis of blackface signification in Stowe's narrative.

The first in the line of minstrel signs that Zwarg selects for analysis falls under my category of **bodily/or physical minstrel signs**, **minstrel cross-dressing**. As Zwarg argues, Chloe and Tom's bedroom with its extra bed serves as "an appropriation of white values" (277). This reference, taken out of context, could indeed be viewed as a reversal of the schemes of blackface cross-dressing, since it seemingly displays black culture in the process of cross-dressing in imitation of white values, thus parodying minstrel practices. Yet, as I will later point out, this alleged inversion of blackface cross-dressing, can simply be attributed to a white author's faulty filter in imagining the conditions of black living, a sentimental portraiture that reveals the innocence of the author regarding the realities of black life, more than any conscious position of rebelliousness expressed through inverted semantic codes. The choice of bedroom design is thus more a case of mere misrepresentation, than a conscious choice reflective of the underlying complexities in Stowe's rhetorical considerations.

Zwarg further insists that the cross-dressing ritual in the slave quarters is carried to extremes by the furnishing in the room which centers around the "portrait of George Washington painted in blackface" (Zwarg 277). This colored image of the founder of the country, Zwarg believes, "enters into a parody of origins that ultimately has the effect of disrupting the tidy complicity between the rule of the Father and the symbolic code presumed to be at the center of all social contracts, be they religious, social or political in form" (278). Some might take the bedroom and its picture as a double parody of the techniques of blackface for these reasons: 1) it reverses blackface cross-dressing with black subjects acting

as agents in the transformation ritual, and 2) it uses the sign of minstrel parody, the mask (on the founder's face), for the purposes of an attack on dominant white politicies. Still I am of the opinion that the scene underscores political satire more than anything else, in that it plays on the myth of foundation by attaching to it the "colour" that was left out of the actual construction of America's Independence.

Indeed, parallels can easily be drawn between blackface and the founding myth, since they both find their essences in (rhetorical and concrete) measures of suppression of that which supplies their meaning, the black man. Yet, to suppose that Stowe meant so much in this marginal reference (to bedroom and furnishing) would be, in my mind, a vast overestimation of her intentions. Moreover, the passing remark about the portrait of Washington "drawn and coloured in a manner which would certainly have astonished that hero, if ever he had happened to meet with its like" (*UTC* 28), does not necessarily denote a blackfaced president. The fact that Zwarg blows the scene's relevance and its interpretation out of proportion indicates to me that her reasoning is without much fuel. In short, Zwarg is altogether unable to prove that the "blackfaced" George Washington in the slave quarter turns the parody back on the initiators of racial jokes, which would signify, in Zwarg's words, the "hypocrisy at the center of American political system," as well as blackface, systems that both use blacks, but consequently exclude them "from its mythic space" (278).

Feminist criticism generally attributes too much complexity to Stowe's authorial discourse, a view that is one-dimensionally generated rather than logically following from Stowe's contexts. Although rituals of cross-dressing do appear in the novel in abundance, as Zwarg correctly observes, these instances of cross-dressings serve goals other than those hypothesized by Zwarg.

Most cross-dressing rituals surface through the motif of "passing." The scenes of passing predominantly portray blacks assuming the color and temporary status of whites in order to free themselves. Although these attempts could be seen as triumphant reversals of blackface masking for the purposes of black escape from white rule, they can also be viewed as stages in the general process of "whitening" in the novel, an argument frequently sustained by black critics of the novel. These **cross-dressing** rituals in their totality, as black critics argue, and I am inclined to agree, support dominant discourses, minstrelsy included, as opposed to complex subversion rituals against the dominant, analyzed in Zwarg.[91] George

[91] Lhamon, on the other hand, interprets Stowe's application of minstrel signs as underlining "the liberatory power of the minstrel show" (97). Thereby Stowe's reinforcements of the minstrel heritage are lauded rather than critiqued by Lhamon.

Harris, in Baldwin words, is "sufficiently un-Negroid to pass through town, a fugitive from his master, disguised as a Spanish gentleman, attracting no attention whatsoever beyond admiration" (17), similarly Eliza easily passes for white because of her light skin. Stowe characterizes her as being "so white as not to be known as of coloured lineage without a critical survey […]" (*UTC* 58). Neither George nor Eliza stand in the novel as representatives of black people, for who they really are, much more who they might be taken for. As Baldwin correctly notes, besides the field hands of the novel, there are only three significant Negro portraits in *UTC*, two of whom (George and Eliza) are almost white (16). Stowe, consciously or not, writes her black characters out of their respective cultural heritage, making them "as white as she can make them" (Baldwin 16). The general tendencies of Stowe's novel thus point toward the undoing of blackness under white guise, similarly to the strategy of the entire narrative that exemplifies a white writer's "authoring" of blackness—by molding it in familiar, dominant white rhetoric. Although Stowe's declared aim is to truthfully represent the Negro's plight, the cross-dressing rituals she applies in her characterizations undermine her rhetorical goals from within.

Another important part of minstrel signification that appears in Stowe's narrative is the **aesthetic sign of minstrel stereotypes**. As Zwarg correctly observes Stowe at times applies traditional minstrel stereotypes to reflect upon the technique of black subversion of existing racial stereotypes. "What Stowe toys with in her portrait of Sam," for instance, "is the way in which she (like Tom with his portrait of Washington) can take the stereotypes of the dominant culture, the 'myths' which empower its control, and use them effectively against it" (285). Sam can assist Eliza in her escape by "playing upon Haley's [and blackface's] sexist [or much rather racist] impulses" (285). By degrading himself to the embodiment of the foolish and clumsy slave (that is expected of him by white society), he can exercise control over his exploiters simply by pretending to be what he is expected to be. Yet, considering the entire context of the novel, Sam is molded more in the minstrel role than outside of it. The following brief scene between Mrs. Shelby and Sam might supply ample proof:

> "Why have you been loitering so, Sam? I sent Andy to tell you to hurry."
>
> "Lord bless you, missis!" said Sam, "horses won't be cotched all in a minnit; they'd done clared out way down to the south pasture, and the Lord knows where!"
>
> "Sam, how often must I tell you not to say 'Lord bless you, and the Lord knows,' and such things? It's wicked."
>
> "O Lord, bless my soul! I done forget, missis! I won't say nothing of de sort no more."
>
> "Why, Sam you just have said it again."

"Did I? O Lord! I mean—I didn't go fur to say it." (51)

Although we might almost believe Stowe's complete subversion of the heritage of blackface in her rhetoric when we listen exclusively to feminist critics, the truth about her discourse is not that one-dimensional. There are two important aspects about feminist readings of the novel that I wish to stress here. One that they deal in sporadic references, like the bedroom and its image of Washington, both of which reflect Stowe's sentimental white middle-class imaginings more than her revolutionary re-writing of blackface discourse. Two, that their claimed evidences are either taken out of context (like Sam's depiction as a subversion of minstrel clichés), or modified to fit the purposes of feminist rhetoric (like Washington's picture, which is not necessary painted black), Stowe only says so much that it is "coloured" (*UTC* 28).

Contrary to the often faulty feminist readings of the novel, there are indeed plenty of evidences in the book testifying to the fact that Stowe adapts the signs of minstrelsy without any major change to the often racist discourses that underlie these signs. In the characters of Topsy, little Harry or even Chloe and Tom, we confront almost crystal clear **minstrel type figures**. While Tom and Chloe might fall under the category of the sentimental clichés of minstrelsy, Topsy and little Harry are definitely of the familiar brand of the Comic Negro, the entertainers of white folks, who are half-wit, clumsy, and naturally lazy, but above all laughable in their habitual doings. "Enclosed in and structured by the essential silence," as Spillers correctly observes, "Chloe and Topsy, for all their sporadic 'talking,' remain the carnivalesque propositions for female character who inscribe 'growths' and bumps' on the surface of Stowe's fiction" (35). Little Harry's first appearance in the novel is an almost word by word recollection of a minstrel scenario:

"Halloa, Jim Crow!" said Mr. Shelby, whistling, and snapping a bunch of raisins towards him; "pick that up, now!"

The child scampered with all his little strength, after the prize, while his master laughed.

"Come here, Jim Crow," said he.

The child came up, and patted the curly head and chucked him under the chin.

"Now, Jim, *show this gentleman how you can dance and sing*."

The boy commenced one of *those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes*, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.

"Bravo!" said Haley, throwing him a quarter of an orange.

(11, italics added)

This early scene from the novel evokes not only the classic **minstrel figure**, the performing pickaninny, the black entertainer of white folks, who is made out to act as a complete fool, but also the traditional signs of the **minstrel grotesque**. Harry's song and dance both feature the elements of deformity and strange surprise, which from the first show-cased minstrelsy's routines. The **minstrel song and dance**, all depict the black man as object for laughter, although here a real black kid assumes the place of the blackface entertainer, thereby the association between grotesque and blackness is tied even closer. The scene is of further importance because besides rehearsing a complete minstrel scenario, it alludes to the **minstrel repartee**, where the interlocutor acts as master of ceremony, ordering the scene, as the white master—Mr. Shelby—does here. The exchange is modified only to a degree, since instead of verbal dialogue between the Interlocutor and the darky, here verbal order is followed by the act of the "darky" character, who earns his due reward for openly making a fool of himself.

The scene's close allusion to minstrelsy is further underlined by Shelby's calling Harry "Jim Crow," thereby revealing Stowe's invocation of "one of the most famous of early minstrelsy's talismanic performances," Rice's Jim Crow improvisation in Philadelphia (Lhamon 97). That Stowe may have meant to reference Rice with the scene is clear not only from the name, but also because the emphasis is on the grotesque. According to the legend, generated by Rice himself, the Jim Crow-act was borrowed from a Negro cripple, and in imitating the grotesque dance step of the model Rice aimed to invoke his alleged subject's bodily distortions. This deformity of body and movement, the irregularity of the song in Harry's act, as in blackface, are key motifs, because they stress difference. The black man is clearly portrayed as "other than" the normative. Stowe's rhetoric is nowhere closer to that of blackface than in this gesture of alienation, or "othering."

The continuation of the scene holds more minstrelized motifs as Harry is made to dance in imitation of Uncle Cudjoe "when he has the rheumatism," and Elder Robbins, when he "leads the psalm" (*UTC* 11). Both inserts are followed by the uncontrollable laughter of the masters. These acts that the masters "trick" the little black boy into doing, could be seen as rehearsals of various minstrel genres, namely the typical minstrel dance and the **imitation black sermon**. The application of the demeaning white naming practices with respect to their black servants, such as the use of "uncle," "aunt" (often irrespective of actual age), and ridiculous namings such as that of Sam and Andy also clearly reference the minstrel tradition throughout the book. Stowe's restoration of the **minstrel scenario** at the beginning of her book is disturbing on several counts. First she never states just how she evaluates this scene

that totally denigrates the child, two, the blackface scenarios bring about a more direct equivalence between blackfaced actor and the Negro as Stowe has the black child act out the demeaning burlesque of himself. Furthermore, Stowe's invocation of minstrel scenarios does not stop with this early scene. The novel will keep rehearsing blackface representations, repertoires, and routines.

The dialogue routines of Sam and Andy, for instance, are good examples for the recurring comic **dialogue exchanges** which imitate the also too-familiar **minstrel dialect** and end-men dialogue. In Chapter VI of *UTC* Andy breaks the news to Sam, the black servant, that Eliza has fled with her son, and the master ordered the two black males to go after them. Soon the minstrel dialogue follows:

> "Good, now! dat's de time o' day!" said Sam. "It's Sam dat's called for in dese yer times. He's de nigger. See if I don't cotch her, now; mas'r'll see what Sam can do!"
> "Ah! but Sam," said Andy, "you'd better think twice; for missis don't want her cothced, and she'll be in your wool."
> "High!" said Sam, opening his eyes. "How you know dat?"
> "Heard her say so, my own self, dis blessed mornin', when I bring in mas'r's shaving water." (50)

Shortly after this exchange it is Sam who lectures Andy about misses's intentions in true minstrel fashion.

> "Yer see, Andy, misses wants to make time,—dat ar's clar to de most or'nary 'bserver. I jis make a little for her. Now, you see, get all dese yer hosses loose, caperin' permiscus round dis yer lot down to de wood dar, and I spec mas'r won't be off in a hurry."
> Andy grinned.
> "Yer see," said Sam, "yer see, Andy, if any such thing should happen as that Mas'r Haley's horse *should* begin to act contrary, and cut up, you and I jist let's go of our'n to help him, and *we'll help him*—oh yes!"
> (52)

The exchange is typical not only because of its **imitation black dialect**—which characterizes *UTC* throughout—, but also because it depicts black servants in their "normal" dialogue, as boastful, trying to act as witty, and laughable primarily because they aim at outwitting their masters that minstrel audiences loved to see. The darky braggadocio and trickery retained here by Stowe are necessary ingredients in most minstrel dialogue routines.

In *UTC* Stowe plays with two options as determining the future relationship of whites and blacks: separation and union. The option of separation is expressed through Stowe's rhetoric of "othering," while that of "union" through her rhetoric of "whitening." The first of Stowe's general proposition for the place and status of blackness in mid-19th-century society, in spite of her attempts to call attention to the black man's plight, is that of displacement. Stowe's rethoric of "othering" consequently (yet mostly unknowingly) defines the black man, woman, and child as fundamentally distant from everything that whiteness implies, therefore as alien to it. As Hortense Spillers notes:

> The semantic traces into which "Uncle Tom" is structured—"that far off mystic land of gold, and gems, and spices, and waving palms, and wondrous flowers, and miraculous fertility" (*UTC* 197)—equate "The Negro" not only with "otherness," but with the *matrix* of difference and contradiction that enables this writing. Stowe *needs* "Uncle Tom," along with the novel's considerable display of massive *inarticulations* (the Topsies; the black young, piled in a corner of Uncle Tom's Cabin in a confused heap of noise and motion) in order to *signify* at all, in order, perhaps, to achieve the division in which meaning arises. (43)

According to Spillers then Stowe needs the othering of the black man in order to create meaning at all, but it is on account of this process of othering that she cannot elevate the black man and his culture into a position equal to those of whites. Despite this rhetoric of "othering," Stowe's work also frequently assumes the rhetoric of "whitening" through which blacks symbolically unite with the dominant culture. Although Baldwin sees the process of "whitening" in the novel (described earlier) as attempts to rhetorically annul and silence black characters, it might simply reflect upon Stowe's struggle to express blackness in her own terms. This rhetoric of whitening suggestive of possible union, is to be sure, much vaguer than Stowe's gestures of distancing. The rhetoric of othering along with that of whitening reaffirm similar paradoxical discourses that underlie *minstrel* representation. If we peel away the sentimental facade of Stowe's narrative, what remains is Stowe's urgency to call attention to the Negro's plea, except that she simply does not know how to manage this outside of her genteel and at points perfectly paternalizing discourse of minstrelized clichés. In the contradiction of her rhetorical choices Stowe reflects upon the incomprehensibility of both separation from and union with the black man (Virágos, *Négerség* 21). Stowe's position with respect to blackness is as paradoxical as any blackface performer's. Born out of a deeply felt desire to approach and realistically represent the black population, *UTC* once again fails to select the proper tools to do so. There is attraction and rejection, the duality of affection and

condescension in both Stowe and blackface with respect to the Negro but, in the final analysis, neither gesture wins out to finally exclude the other.

If we wish to insert a brief note about the afterlife of *UTC*, it is vital to remember the ease with which this novel re-entered the arena of popular culture from which it arose. The fact that the dramatized and minstrelized versions of the book[92] followed the publication of the original so shortly is accountable for by the fundamental similarity between *UTC*, and the cultural sources it drew from. Similarly to the intensity with which minstrelsy seeped into the novel, the narrative fed back into American popular culture that supplied its formative material.

[2] The Case of Herman Melville: Subverting the Minstrel Heritage[93]

(A) The Minstrel Sign Revisited: A Reading of "Benito Cereno"

> "As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white, Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other." ("Benito Cereno" 154)

Herman Melville (1819-1891) is probably the first in the line of 19th-century white authors to have addressed the problem of black representation, persistently subverting and assaulting the manufactured, schematic stereotypes of minstrelsy. As critic Warren D'Azevedo put it in the 1950s, "it is shocking that there has been so thorough an underestimation of the profound insight into the issue of human bondage which Melville brought to bear on characterizations and theme" (139) in his stories. Whether or not Melville was familiar with the minstrel shows of his day at first hand is of little concern here. Similarly to Stowe's, there is ample evidence in Melville's writings that attests to a profound familiarity with minstrel-derived clichés and motifs, which once again reveal a general cultural awareness in the application of the

[92] See Eric Lott for a detailed summary of the minstrelization of *UTC*. 211-238.

components of the blackface stage in the age in various media other than the theater. Melville was equally ready to serve up as well as to attack the commodified elements of the minstrel heritage, be they the white-created, manipulated stereotypes of blacks, the artificial minstrel dialogue routines, or the very ideological foundations of the minstrel show that he chose to satirize.

Melville was master in emblematizing his age, the social, cultural and ethnic conflicts of his times. The emblems deployed frequently reveal a complex of intertwining codes and ideologies that directly reference the racial co-existence of whites and blacks in the age. Who can ever forget the almost iconic contentment on Captain Delano's face as he looks at Benito Cereno and Babo, acknowledging their harmonious duo illustrated in the passage selected here for my epigraph? And who can ever escape the shocking revelation coming from the broken Don Benito at the end of the tale, finally admitting before his death his devastation on account of the Negro that has shattered his entire existence? In these two white faces, of the American and that of the Spaniard, Melville's penetrating insight into white perceptions of blackness is transfigured into the prototypes of ignorant superiority (Delano) and of shattering, even crippling understanding (Don Benito). Captain Delano remains ignorant of the real implications of both the mutiny and of Don Benito's private tragedy. Don Benito, conversely, dies, following his master, grasping—what I would term—a more complex understanding of race and acknowledging also the falseness of preconceived ideas associated with it. Yet, as Leonard Cassuto argues, none of the characters could be seen as corrupt in themselves, they are rather victims "of a social system that calls for the impossible: to take away the humanity of a human being" (214). Melville's entire authorial universe is comprised of iconic tableaux similar to the one cited above, where white visions and perceptions of the Negro are magnified for the reader to communicate the image and rightful status of the Negro for his contemporary America.

Melville's "Benito Cereno" (published by *Putnam's* as a three-part serial in 1855 [Robbins 548]; subsequently BC) is an oft-quoted example to illustrate resonance between literary representations of **racial masquerade**, **travesty**, deception, and related strategies of indirection in blackface minstrelsy. The parallel is undoubtedly present, although there is little if any evidence that Melville had the minstrel stage in the back of his mind in constructing his famous narrative about the ill-fated journey of the *San Dominick*. The background to the

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[93] The discussion on Melville's "Benito Cereno" has already been published as a separate article (listed among the "Works Cited"). Also large segments of the subsequent analysis are incorporated into *Jim Crow örökösei* (307-312).

story, however, undoubtedly suggests a culture that, as Eric Lott remarks, embraced and was "wholly enchanted by racial travesty or so benighted, like Melville's Captain Delano, that it took such distortions [as that of the minstrel show] as authentic" (*Love* 15). Taking sham for the real, the travesty for the original, the play for actuality, these are indeed some of the central concerns in this ingeniously composed narrative. Yet, quite interestingly, these too are some of the focal dilemmas problematized on the blackface stage.

The aspect of enchantment, the tug-of-war between the reality and surreality of experience form a coherent pattern in Melville's narrative. From the very beginning, Melville supplies a system of motifs to enhance this layer of his story, first by emphasizing the unreality of the ship, then by stressing the theatrical nature of the experience, in which Delano acts more like one in an audience, merely witnessing a choreographed performance. Leonard Cassuto also emphasizes that Delano behaves as spectator, who expects the blacks on board the ship to behave in a certain prescribed manner: "Delano wants to see a structured display of carefully mediated performance by his quasi-human inferiors, a performance designed to reinforce his own sense of powerful whiteness—and thanks to Babo's understanding of his ilk, that is just what he gets" (210).

Delano, the American captain from Duxbury, Massachusetts, is completely enchanted as he enters the Spanish ship that is in the state of great distress. Nothing is what it seems, the *San Dominick* and the greyish hue surrounding it, both suggest a complexion that is ambiguous, neither clearly white, nor entirely black. The color symbolism is further elaborated through the deliberate confusion of sensations that communicate, both to the reader and to Delano, a curious atmosphere of being charmed (174), and the enigmatic nature of the entire experience. There is also a web of secret communications and signs—which the white crew of the ship wishes to convey to the good-natured American, but to no avail. All these transactions reveal a coded, secretive universe, a dizzying performance in masks (just like in a minstrel show), unlocking which the American could himself gain entry to a world yet unknown to him, where nothing is quite as definite and clear-cut as he has previously supposed. The lessons this world of puzzles hides are of ethical and ethnic nature, and are educational not only in understanding Don Benito's curiously refrained behavior and future fate, but also toward unfolding the not-so-"latent" racism in Captain Delano's character. This hidden universe, however, is revealed primarily to the reader, and not to Delano on whose ability to decode signs and understand messages the tale really depends.

Throughout the story illusion and reality clash in memorable symbolic scenes, setting, backgrounds, characters, events and suggestions, all framed within the context of curious

dualities. Although evidences of the former slave rebellion are continually transmitted to Captain Delano, he ignores and misses the signs nonetheless. Delano, in other words, does not know sham from real, he dwells in the web of inherited stereotypes, in the alleged reality of a minstrel show, where questions of true identity or real conditions of Negro life are never posed, and do not matter.[94] To put it simply, Delano dwells in appearances, enchanted by acts and masquerades which he observes without ever realizing their import. He functions as one in the audience of a show, who, while watching the performance, never questions the legitimacy of the act, the authenticity of actors. His "suspension of disbelief" is complete. In the minstrel performance too, it is often taken for granted that the masked role-players are real blacks, as in this story the submissiveness or inferiority of blacks is considered a trivia. Delano's knowledge is circumscribed along **minstrelized conceptions of reality and of blackness**. The practical American is simply not in the position to "undo" the riddles/signs of the slave revolt essentially because his frame of mind prevents him from imagining blacks outside of the minstrel mold. Moreover, Cassuto argues, the preconceptions Delano possesses highlight "the assumptions that lie beneath the stereotype," namely "that blacks are somehow not fully human" (210).

The theatricality of events is well outlined from the start, when, on boarding the Spanish ship the American observes a set of "strange costumes, gestures, and faces" as if all part of a "shadowy tableau" (145). Still further into the story, Delano begins to sense the artificiality of the production that he is witnessing, and he thinks to himself: "If Don Benito's story was throughout an invention, then every soul on board, down to the youngest Negress, was his carefully drilled recruit in the plot" (167). Yet, although from time to time Captain Delano ponders the "createdness" of the events, he still falls back to acting his proper role of passive observer in the scheme.

It was Sarah Robbins who first called attention to the dialogue that exists between Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and "Benito Cereno,"[95] the two works published only three years apart from one another. That Melville intended a response to Stowe's sentimental didacticism with his short story would be difficult to ascertain, yet it is true that the **minstrel signs of easy**

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[94] Whereas the matter of authenticity versus authentication does not concern Delano in the least, Leonard Cassuto proves in a fascinating way that for Babo and Don Benito the desire for authenticity is mutual and is also a matter of life and death (207).

[95] In spite of the fact that I quote Robbins's article here at several places, I fundamentally disagree with the overall argumentation of her essay in the *American Quarterly*. I especially contest her gender-based readings of Stowe and Melville, and her conclusions with respect to the two authors' readership and their understanding of the Negro's plight. To quote Robbins: "Whereas George Shelby's maturing understanding of the negro gave Stowe's reader a caring model to replicate, Delano's confused vision of slavery offered a flawed view for

stereotyping are as discernible in Melville's Captain Delano as in some of Stowe's paternalistic characters (especially the elder Shelby). Embedded in Delano's perceptions and utterances Melville parades a long line of racial stereotypes which delude Delano as much as they deluded the white public at the time, and which in fact the minstrel stage also exploited and benefited from. Some of the clichés depicting blacks might have been popularized on contemporaneous minstrel stages, such as "the peculiar love in Negroes of uniting industry with pastime" (146), blacks lacking sophistication, them being affectionate Sambo-like servants of whites, their strange animal grin (165). The fact that they are all stupid, and characterized by "easy cheerfulness" (184) can also be part of generalized conceptions borrowed from minstrelsy.[96] By describing slaves as natural servants, and by applying zoomorphic symbolism to depict them, Delano reaffirms those character clichés that represent "the kind of under-trained sentimentalism" (Robbins 545) and benign paternalism that is part and parcel of **minstrel-type rhetoric** both in Stowe and in Melville's American Captain. Delano's statements about slaves being "the most pleasing body-servants in the world," (148), his description of Babo as comparable to a Newfoundland dog (185), might all find suitable equivalents in Stowe's text, or in **minstrelsy's animal symbolism** and other denigrating characterizations of the black man. All of these rhetorical gestures point towards but one generalized ideology that Robbins describes as "the ideology of slave as loving companion" (556), an image that matches minstrelsy's sentimentalized black character cliché, or that of a grinning and empty-headed entertainer of white folks. Delano accepts the ready-made minstrel clichés without so much as a question, and thus it is no surprise that our New Englander should remain in the dark about the revolt all through the tale. As Don Benito states towards the end of the story, kind of ironically,

> you were with me all day; stood with me, sat with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me; and yet, your last act was to clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So far may even the best man err in judging the conduct of one with the recess of whose condition he is not acquainted. (221)

Melville's audience to critique" (556). This, I believe, erroneously implies a direct correlation between Melville's own views and those of Delano.

[96] References to minstrelsy once again appear here as part of a entirely negative code system, yet, as noted earlier, minstrelsy did not only confirm but also (on a more abstract level) subverted popular stereotypes of blacks. While black-related stereotypes were strengthened due partly to minstrel stage practices, the heritage of this theatrical institution is more complex (and more positive) with respect to black cultural development than the current analysis allows to believe. This, by all means, should linger on in our minds, in order to perceive the present analysis in its complexity.

These words naturally implicate not only Don Benito himself but also the blacks who carried out the mutiny, especially the black slave Babo, who was capable of masterminding the plot, strikingly contradicting hereby the belittling qualities Captain Delano ascribed to him. The blacks of the story, in truth, are all armed by the most excellent of human values, they are intelligent, dignified, decorous, disciplined and organized to the utmost. Delano is deprived of understanding any of the deeper implications of their true nature. While the Africans mastermind a mutiny and subvert the rule on the ship, the American remains innocent and ignorant of this till the very end. Captain Delano is simply unable to suppose either that they would be capable of such scheme—he even goes so far as to state at one point that: "they were too stupid" (175)—, or that in any way they would feel in need to do so. As Schiffman rightly suggests, "Melville intends Delano perhaps as a microcosm of American attitudes of the time toward Negroes," who, by the way, "suffers a mental block in looking at the Negroes" (124). Delano will not be ready to conceive the larger significance of the realities of a slave mutiny, nor the general power that lies within blackness as the tale suggests. It is also significant that Melville selected a New Englander to illustrate confrontation and misinterpretation of the power of blackness. It was New England that was supposed to be the center of intellectual power in the country, as well as the region where the clash between truth and sham, appearance and reality had been addressed before through several historical incidences (witchcraft trials; minstrelsy, Transcendentalism). The fact that it is a New Englander from Massachusetts who fails in this battle of wits, is clearly Melville's ironical even satirical comment on his fellow-countrymen.

In spite of the surface parallels that might exist between Stowe's and Melville's works, it is apparent that Melville's rendering and general treatment of the clichés inherited from blackface are much more complicated and intellectually hard-earned than those in Stowe. As Robbins correctly observes, "[c]apitalizing on the emerging highbrow attacks against sentimental stereotypes, "Benito Cereno" simultaneously *appropriated and critiqued* flawed white behaviors and attitudes towards blacks as initially made familiar in Stowe's text" (554; emphasis added). Like Robbins herself seems to have hinted, Melville's work, whether directly responding to Stowe or not, was meant as a corrective of generalized perceptions and representations of blacks, thus a corrective with respect to minstrel typing also. Melville's conscious upsetting of popularized minstrel clichés is indicated not only in his satirical portrayal of the northern captain's flawed conceptions of blacks, but also in his resolute refusal to apply the convenient device of **minstrel dialect** in his depiction of Babo.

D'Azevedo explains the lack of black dialect by stating that, "[h]e [Melville] does not use dialect or broken speech which had begun to be popular device in fiction. This is noteworthy because it indicates he was in some way aware that to do so in his time, before the general development of such usages had taken place in literature, would distort his characters" (140). We could also assume that Melville being very much aware of the corrupting influence of minstrel dialect (in fact the only pseudo-literary representation of black speech at the time), was determined to write his blacks out of the minstrel mold by refusing to have them speak that distorted and also comic lingo. As it is well known, the twisted black talk on the minstrel stages helped link the notion of blackness and ridicule, thus Melville's achievement to dismiss this powerful tradition here seems all the more remarkable.[97]

The exceptional nature of the story is also striking in the face of the existing contemporary tradition of black portrayal apart from that of Stowe, which D'Azevedo describes as follows,

> the Negro was either portrayed as a wordy philosopher in chains, full of northern white sentiments, or a cringing pathetic waiting to be rescued by his protectors from the North. Before this time the Negro had appeared mainly as a picturesque or ludicrous character in the fiction of Irving, Cooper, Simms, Poe and others. Not only until much later was there any evidence […] that white writers were beginning to understand the Negro people as an extremely vital influence upon American culture. (140)

As I see it, the most exhaustive (and in my view unique), and certainly the most original analysis of "Benito Cereno" from the aspect of the tale's minstrelsy-based signification comes from Eric Lott.[98] Lott interprets the story as "Melville's version of the minstrel show, in which he ingeniously brings together the narrative paradigm of slave insurrection with the ironies and conundrums of minstrel acts" (*Love* 234). It is from Lott's brilliant paradigm that I wish to make my final observations about the tale. Lott reads the "slave-turned-mutineers" as "virtual" blackfaced performers, who act out their expected roles as accommodating slaves for the northerner, who receives their performance as reality (*Love* 234). With this brilliant statement Lott acknowledges the manipulatedness and carefully planned nature of both performances (that on the ship, and the other in the theater), both seeking approval from northern whites, but indeed geared toward a secretive gain, to satisfy the plight of blacks. If

[97] It is also relevant to note here that at other places, like in the case of *Moby Dick* or in *Confidence-Man* Melville does return to the use of dialect in his characterizations, therefore it is clear that in Babo's case he makes a conscious choice when he withstands the lure of employing the minstrel dialect.

we re-read the story in this light, the references to acts of observance and performance become curiously magnified in the tale, thus enhancing its dramatic character as of a theatrical production. As Lott argues, "[t]he implication is that Captain Delano's inadequate responses to the slaves in secret revolt have been so conditioned by forms such as minstrelsy that the blacks are reduced to instances of white fantasy about them, a fact the insurrectionaries use to their advantage" (*Love* 234). The blackface guise and consciousness, as Lott seems to suggest, defends the blacks in their mutiny (like playing according to the dictates of blackface allowed blacks in reality to win small victories over their masters). Pretending to confirm the imposed image of the fool, the black mutineers of the *San Dominick* outwardly affirm, and inwardly subvert the minstrel guise. They use and subvert the blackface pattern for their own purposes, ultimately turning the joke back on the innocent American, who witnesses the "show" without knowing what it really is, in fact an assault on his status as well.

In "Benito Cereno" Melville applied the stereotyping practices and character-clichés of minstrelsy to depict the perceptions of his American captain as well as that of his own contemporaries. But he also subverted these popularized perceptions of blacks through the subtle and powerful portrayal of Babo, the other mutineers, and Cereno. In order to cast the black population in more humane colors than his contemporaries ever dared to do (apart, of course, from Whittier, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman or Lowell), Melville was willing to discover "the common continent of man" (Brown 140). As black critic Sterling Brown observed in his *The Negro Character in American Fiction*, Melville came "nearer to the truth in his scattered pictures of a few unusual Negroes than do other authors of the period" (140).

A society living and feeding upon deceptions and racial travesty is indeed the setting not only for "Benito Cereno" but also for *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. In the novel, as in the tale, the role of masquerading, racial crossings and trickery is expanded beyond a single episode in life, to create the meaning and foundation of a whole being, and indeed of the entire American society at large. The book, that came out in 1857, "was mildly praised (particularly in England) as a satire on America" (Franklin xiv), and then it was forgotten as so many of Melville's masterpieces were. It was rediscovered about a century later along with "Nabokov and Borges, at the height of the Theater of the Absurd, in the days of *Invisible Man* and *Catch 22*, while history has been taking the shape of a paranoiac hallucination" (Franklin xv).

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[98] Leonard Cassuto himself draws a parallel between the staged performance in the narrative and a freak show (210), while Eric Sundquist calls the masquerade enacted "a farce of a minstrel show" (153), yet neither elaborates on the correlation between Melville's narrative and minstrelsy to the extent Lott does.

(B) *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*: A Rereading of Chapter 3

The Confidence-Man (subsequently *CM*) has so far been widely analyzed along the line of a variety of critical angles that readily offer themselves as possible clues to the heart of this cryptic narrative. As Aladár Sarbu observes in his *Reality of Appearances* (1996), exhaustive studies have "established much of the background of the novel both in terms of Melville's personal life and literary orientation, and in terms of the socio-economic situation that had developed in America by the middle of the century" (200).[99] The novel was dissected for its literary and philosophical allusions (that range from the Bible and Greek philosophy through Milton and Shakespeare to representatives of American Transcendentalism), and it has been viewed as a paradigm of Buddhist and other Oriental philosophies also.[100] Scholars have read it against the folk figure of the confidence man in Southwestern literature (Lenz), and several additional thematic foci have been selected by critics for in-depth analyses (e.g. the Miltonian pact with the Devil surfaces widely from Pommer to Schroeder; the theme of reality vs. allusion is researched from various aspects in the case of Sarbu; readings have also been devoted to the novel as a systematic critique of Transcendental philosophy).

Here I briefly wish to present an alternative reading (or re-reading, as it were) of the novel, with special emphasis on its Chapter 3, the characters, themes and the occurrence of minstrel signification therein. What I intend to prove is that in the chapter in question Melville elaborates a dilemma that in more generalized terms also underlies the totality of the narrative. This dilemma, broadly speaking, is the necessary re-writing of the universe from a novel authorial, ethical, social and cultural point of view, which consequently also infers Melville's subversive attitude to traditional notions. Thus, the past, taken-for-granted categories of blackness and whiteness, good and evil, charity/confidence and lack of trust, reality versus appearance, construction versus destruction, all emerge in Melville's narrative

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[99] The China Aster story being a personal allegory of Melville's unsuccessful literary career is highlighted among others in Parker Hershel's "'The Story of China Aster': A Tentative Explication." *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade.* Ed. Hershel Parker. New York: London, 1971. 353-356.; The indebtedness of the narrative to American folk traditions and folk literature is explored in Lenz, William E. *Fast Talk & Flush Times; The Confidence-Man as a Literary Convention.* Columbia: U of Columbia P, 1985. Literary extensions of Melville's novel include the Bible, Hindu mythology, Shakespeare, Milton, Poe, the representatives of American Transcendentalism, Hawthorne, and many more. For related studies see Wright, Nathalia. *Melville's Use of the Bible.* Durham: Duke UP, 1949.; Foster, Elizabeth S. "Emerson in *The Confidence-Man*." *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade.* Ed. Hershel Parker. New York: London, 1971. 333-339.; Shroeder, John W. "Sources and Symbols for Melville's *Confidence-Man*." *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade.* Ed. Hershel Parker. New York: London, 1971. 298-316.; Pommer, Henry F. *Milton and Melville*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1950.

[100] On parallels between *The Confidence-Man* and Hindu mythology see Franklin, Bruce. *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1963.

as part of an unorthodox authorial discourse. They are perceived as complex entities collectively formative in, but not selectively essentialized in the composition of abstractions such as authenticity, identity and truth. Before substantiating this, to some extent conclusive remark, however, let us proceed from our focal unit of the minstrel sign and signification to the larger implications of the narrative as a whole.

The narrative starts out on "a first of April" (*CM* 3), when a stranger "in cream-colors" (3) boards the steamer called the Fidéle.[101] Upon his boarding he comes to witness a gathering around a placard near the captain's office that offers "reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East" (4). Already at the outset Melville likens the placard to a kind of "theatre-bill" (4), and therefore the ensuing line of "performances," exchanges, happenings or events (indeed all the subsequent chapters) can easily be put down for those theatrical acts of trickery that the "bill" "advertises." This theatrical and performative nature of the work is maintained throughout (with ample references to acting and premeditated representations of all sorts),[102] and it underscores associations to the dramatic contexts that might also assist the solution of the story's riddles. In other words, once the reader (as victim, subject, witness; see Bruce Franklin [xiv]) conceives the designed (composed, scripted, choreographed, planned, orchestrated) therefore primarily dramatic/artificial versus natural character of the actions and "roles" of the protagonist, the possible implications of the narrative might crystallize. Although there is no doubt in the attentive reader that the stranger in the cream-colored outfit is the person sought after[103] in the advertisement—and who in one person is generator of and solution to the enigma the story alludes to—the comprehension of the rest of the tale largely depends upon the reader's ability to identify the subsequent guises and shapes of the impostor. Besides following certain dramatic patterns, then, the narrative is also modeled after a story of detection, where it is the reader's task to know and recognize the trickster behind the diverse

[101] The name of the ship by itself references a kind of transmutation or changing of shape and form, which are central to the novel. "Fidéle," as Bruce Franklin observes is derived from Shakespeare's *Cymberline*, and "it" is no other than the male identity of the female protagonist Imogen, assumed in a moment of insight. (see note 1 in Chapter 11 of the Bobbs-Merrill edition of *CM* [80]). The connection between shape shifting and epiphany are going to be relevant in my reading of the novel.

[102] One of the characters (Charlie Noble) even admits that he used to be in an "amateur play company" (157) once. Other characters (although lacking such professional backgrounds in the theater) are driven into acting out a certain role (like Egbert S. Oliver), while still others unwillingly participate in role-playing games masterminded by the confidence trickster.

[103] Whether the man in cream colors is the first disguise of the confidence trickster is debated in the criticism, see Sarbu 201, for instance. I personally am inclined to lean towards explanations that name him as the first avatar, primarily because he upholds the idea of confidence the same performative way as the subsequent trickster figures. There is a certain kind of artificiality about his characters similar to his followers, and he likewise

masks he is prone to assume, and to be able to make a distinction between what he does and says. Aladár Sarbu articulates the apparent gap between the confidence man's actions and words through the central images of his book:

> What the reader has to guard himself against, then, is the temptation to yield to the deliberately deceptive (but not undetectable) appearance that Melville creates with his central character: powerful, attractive, genial, warm and human, yet the very opposite, in every practical way, of what he champions in words. Reality (action) *versus* appearance (words—good and kind and tolerant and compassionate), if you will. (208)

One of the first performances on board the Fidéle comes from a "grotesque negro cripple" (15) named Black Guinea (in Chapter 3), whose role is crucial and decisive for the rest of the book. His key monologue foreshadows the outline of the subsequent narrative, as Guinea names (and eventually brings to life) the characters who will surface and assume relevance in the chapters that follow. The famous lines of Black Guinea's monologue identify, thus "create," those personages whose call it will be, among other things, to attest to the Negro's true and authentic identity for the suspecting spectators. Simultaneously, the lines locate one of the focal concerns of the entire narrative with the authentication of identities; a dilemma also central to blackface representation as a whole. What is black and what consists of whiteness, what is just and unjust, real and fake, and more importantly, what comprises a "me," a true self, is there anything such as a real identity? These are only some of the questions that the conjured up forms of the confidence man are destined to seek answers to. The characters Guinea names in the following monologue are ultimately also the shapes he will consequently assume:

> Oh, yes, oh yes, dar is aboard here a werry nice, good ge'mman wid a weed, and a ge'mman in a grey coat and white tie, what knows all about me; and a ge'mman wid a book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge'mman in a yaller west; and a ge'mman wid a brass plate; and a ge'mman in a wiolet robe; and a ge'mman as is sodjer; and even so many good, kind, honest ge'mman more aboard what knows me and will speak for me, God bress 'em. (20)

As has been widely observed, the Negro's narrative prefigures only half of the book, since the characters named in the above monologue appear in subsequent chapters only to the exact

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disappears shortly after his act is completed. Yet, since this level of the book is marginal to my endeavor, I do not wish to attend to this problem any further.

middle of the book.[104] The rest of the characters, starting with the gentleman in violet robe, called upon by Guinea in order to verify his identity, have dubitable equivalents in the novel. As Aladár Sarbu argues, "[…] from mid-point in the action […] it is the cosmopolitan who takes over as the deceptive appearance of the trickster. But unlike his predecessors, he is not followed by further impersonations, which enables him to dominate the entire second half of the novel" (202). Even if this is true, Black Guinea identifies thereby authors at least half of the book (and certainly has impact through its entirety), thus his import for the entire narrative cannot be stressed enough. The questions that immediately arise are, who Black Guinea indeed is, and how his authorship is relevant for the rest of the book.

According to a footnote in the 1967 critical edition of the novel, "'Guinea' was short for Guinea Negro and guinea pig. [Further etymological explanations add that] since a guinea was a gold piece, a black guinea would be a counterfeit, probably brass" (15). This etymology already alludes to the sham and the falsehood that are tied to this character from the outset. Another possible source for Melville's choice of name for his "black" character, however, might have been blackface entertainment. It is a known fact that the first American comic Negro song was one entitled "The Guinea Boy" form 1814, which depicted the Negro "as a comic figure in uniform […] fighting, willy-nilly, for the British" (Nathan 34).[105] Although it would be difficult to ascertain that Melville borrowed the name exactly from the above popular song, there is ample evidence as to the blackface origins of Black Guinea himself as well as to Melville's indebtedness to the minstrel tradition in drawing this piece. If it is possible to prove this, certain links between counterfeiting and minstrelsy, and their mutual relevance for the narrative at large could be directly extrapolated.

Besides speaking a marked **minstrel dialect**—and that a true one, since Guinea in reality is a white man masking as Negro—with all its characteristic mispronunciations ("der" for "there," "massa" for master, "sar" for sir, etc.), Black Guinea's speech is also full of **puns.** His exchange with one in the crowd reiterates the Interlocutor-endman routines of the **minstrel dialogues**, as can be seen in the following example:

> "What is your name, old boy?" said a purple-faced drover, putting his large purple hand on the cripple's bushy wool, as if it were the curled forehead of a black sheep.
>
> "Der Black Guinea dey calls me, sar."

[104] For a detailed analysis of Black Guinea's list see Franklin's introduction to the Bobbs-Merrill edition (xx-xxiv).

[105] Sam Dennison adds the note that the song established the stereotype of the Comic Negro in military roles to be widely imitated in numerous popular songs of the period (28).

"And who is your master, Guinea?"

"Oh sar, I am der dog without massa."

"A free dog, eh? Well, on your account, I'm sorry for that, Guinea. Dogs without masters fare hard." (15-16)

The dialogue demonstrates the impudence of the darky, his come-backs are rapid and clever, all typical characteristics of the minstrel black's **repartee,** and rapid-fire comic verbal exchange. The continuation of the scene is a still better illustration of the stereotypical elements of the Interlocutor-endman routine and the wily cunning innate in the Guinea-trickster character. The **minstrel punning** which appears in the forthcoming lines, as Franklin rightly observes, elaborates the central metaphor of the baker (footnote 4, p.16):

"But where do you live?"

"All 'long shore, sar; *dough* now I'se going to see brodder at der landing, but chiefly I libs in der city."

"St. Louis, ah? Where do you sleep there of nights?"

"On der floor of der good *baker's oven*, sar."

"In an *oven*? whose, pray? What *baker*, I should like to know, *bakes such black bread* in his oven, *alongside of his nice white rolls*, too. Who is that *too charitable baker*, pray?"

"Dar he be," with a broad grin lifting his tambourine high over his head.

"The sun is the baker, eh?"

"Yes, sar, in der city dat good baker warms der stones for dis ole darkie when he sleeps out on der pabements o' nights." (16; italics added)

The passage is rendered in the best tradition of minstrelsy with comic misspellings and intentional misinterpretations involved. The section also displays the conventional wittiness of the darky, and his triumph over the "Interlocutor" or the assumed superior intellect, who (as the purple-faced drover) looks down on the darky nonetheless. Beside the characteristic minstrel speech, the typical generic minstrel signs scattered in the dialogues, and **the Darky versus Interlocutor routine**, Chapter 3 contains even more evidence that Black Guinea indeed is a minstrel derivation.

Black Guinea appears as a cripple, in the words of Melville, he "was a grotesque Negro cripple, in tow-cloth attire and an old coal-sifter of a tamborine in his hand, who owing to something wrong about his legs, was, in effect, cut down to the stature of a Newfoundland dog" (7).[106] The cripple and the tambourine are in themselves specific —and revealing— emblems of blackface minstrelsy. Moreover, the misshapen appearance of the character and

[106] Note the obvious parallel with "Benito Cereno."

the fact that Guinea makes money by putting his own deformity on display brings the narrative extremely close to the very foundations of the blackface genre. The trademarks that Melville incorporates into Guinea's description are curiously identical with the details Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808-1861), the father of blackfaced minstrelsy, applied in shaping the legend about his original model: i.e., physical deformity, musicality, grotesque dance, "authentic" black source. The mythic story of how Rice borrowed his famous **Jim Crow number** from a Negro cripple by imitating the cripple's "comic" dance-and-song act is common knowledge. The segments of Rice's contrived fable—used primarily to boost his popularity—his alleged mimicry of the black stable hand, and the Negro's distorted dance step had later been interpreted as factual elements in the account, and were consequently adapted as clichés and standard formulas for blackface portrayal. It is more than telling then that Melville, too applies the singing cripple (indeed **the stereotype of the Plantation Darky**) as one of the chief personae among the guises of the confidence trickster. Hence the immediate sources (Rice's Jim Crow piece and its respective cultural ingredients) of blackface impersonation are fed symbolically into the creation of Guinea's figure, and consequently into Melville's narrative.

Among the antiques of Black Guinea, there is a strange, even grotesque number. Black Guinea earns a few pennies from the crowd by letting them pitch coins into his mouth, he receiving the alms by opening his mouth as if he were a live money bank. The objectification process in Black Guinea's representation is taken to the extremes when his mouth is depicted as a coin box.[107] Here is yet another minstrel sign, the **bodily sign** of the exaggerated mouth Melville borrows from the minstrel arsenal. What is even more fascinating about this episode is its striking parallel with a chapter in the life of the above-cited Rice. As mentioned earlier in Chapter II of this dissertation (see page 100), T. D. Rice attained fame besides his "Jim Crow" routine by an act almost exactly identical with that of Black Guinea's catch-penny number. One of the "historical accounts" recalls Rice's fabricated tale like this:

> There was a negro at Griffith Hotel on Wood street, named Cuff, who earned a precarious subsistence by allowing boys to pitch pennies into his open mouth at a distance of three paces, also in carrying trunks for passengers from the steamboats to the hotels. Slight persuasion upon Mr. Rice's part induced Cuff to accompany him to the theatre, where he was quietly ensconced (ensconsed in the original)

[107] The tendency of portraying blacks as animals, or the objectification of certain body parts became a received practice with the appearance of black paraphernalia as consumer goods. The exaggeration of the mouth to make it function as the opening of the bank to place pennies within, or ash-trays modeled on enlarged black mouths became standard consumer items that demonstrated the excesses advertisers and manufacturers indulged in. Pickering expressively calls similar practices "commodity racism" (127).

> behind the scenes. After the play was over, Rice having shaded his countenance to the 'contraband' hue, ordered Cuff to disrobe, and proceeded to invest himself in the cast of apparel. When the arrangements were complete, the bell rang, and Rice, habited in the old coat forlornly (folornly in the original) dilapidated, with a pair of shoes equally of patches and places for patches on his feet and wearing a coarse straw hat, in a melancholy condition of rent and collapse over a dense black wig of matted moss, waddled into view. The extraordinary apparition produced an instant effect. (*New York Clipper* December 9, 1871, p. 284)

The pitching "game" described at the beginning of the article is humiliating as it is shocking, degrading the "black" to the position of an animal, a simile frequently articulated in Melville's other narratives as well. Guinea is invariably likened to a Newfoundland dog, or to a "half-frozen black sheep nudging itself a cozy berth in the heart of the white flock" (16), and even to an elephant. "[I]n short," Melville's narrator summarizes, "as in appearance he seemed a dog, so now, in a merry way, like a dog he began to be treated" (17). The use of animal symbolism, or zoomorphization, the application of bodily minstrel signs, the recurrence of well-established minstrel character clichés, the generic minstrel markers (such as minstrel puns, dialogue routines and the minstrel repartee), along with the quite explicit allusions to Rice through Guinea, all create a web of curious entanglement between Melville's narrative and the "narratives" of the blackface stage. Moreover, Guinea's liminality which is made obvious through several levels of his character, in his hesitation between blackness and whiteness (guise and real face), human and thing (person and animal or coin bank), and between alternative universes as a trickster figure, also echo the carnivalesque liminality within blackface.

That Melville's mind was truly haunted by the minstrels, or the attached concepts of representation, counterfeiting, liminality and carnival at the time of writing *The Confidence Man*, is clearly spelled out in Chapter 6, where the wooden-legged man, and the trickster—now appearing in the costume of the man in gray—exchange thoughts about Guinea's authenticity. To the inquiry whether the wooden-legged man would be so kind as to tell if he had been joking about the identity of the Negro, the man replies:

> "No, I wont be so kind, I'll be so cruel."
> "As you please about that."
> "Well, he's just what I said he was."
> "*A white masquerading as a black*?"
> "Exactly." (46, emphasis added)

It is of crucial importance here that it is the man in gray, who utters the words I italicized in the text, since he as the master of appearances, an "original genius" (4) as Melville phrases it earlier, should know all about falsification. The fact that he is the first to identify Guinea's act for what it really is, i.e., a blackface performance, reveals his involvement in the "production" of the very act he seemingly helps unveil. As the exchange between the two men proceeds, the man in gray forces the other to articulate the essence of the Negro's masquerade not so much for his own but more for his audience's (or the readers') sake:

> "Tell me, sir, do you really think that a white could look the Negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting."
>
> "Not much better than any other man acts."
>
> "How? Does all the world act? Am *I*, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?"
>
> "Yes, don't you both perform acts? To do, is to act; so all doers are actors."
>
> "You trifle.—I ask again, if a white, how could he look the Negro so?
>
> "Never saw the Negro-minstrels, I suppose?"
>
> "Yes, but they are apt to overdo the ebony…" (47)

The wooden-legged man sees through the performance of Guinea, and understands the larger significance of acting which lies at the heart of society. Acting, performing and hiding are indeed recognized here as general symptoms of society, vital to the human essence. Yet, while he is able and also willing to conceive in acting a trait common to our kind, he is unwilling to tolerate the premeditated form of acting applied to serve personal ends. His sharp perception and profound understanding leads him to identify the Negro as fake, however, he fails to make the final leap to connect the man in gray with Guinea. Although the wooden-legged man does fail in identifying the confidence man for who he is, in subsequent chapters there will appear several characters who are either in the same league as Guinea (themselves being swindlers like Charles Noble) or simply clear-sighted enough (like the Missourian or the barber) to recognize treachery in his varied disguises.

Guinea and his future shapes, however, are not representations of singularly negative principles. Although their mode of living is trickery, their existence on borders make them wise so that they can manipulate but also know dichotomies like no one else. Through the character of Guinea Chapter 3 is suggestive of a kind of liminal suspension between blackness and whiteness, truth and illusion, reality and appearance, which foreshadows a preference for

ambivalent, complex qualities in the construction of final categories such as identity, reality, truth, fiction.

At the beginning of the present analysis I hinted at the fact that Melville's aim in *The Confidence-Man* is not an ordinary one. Although the book has long been neglected, and was discovered as one of Melville's greatest masterpieces only in the middle of the past century, since then several of its intriguing layers have been highlighted. Aladár Sarbu concludes his analysis of the book by labeling it as "the first great modern novel" (214), which in all likelihood it is. Melville does not merely integrate certain intertexts within his writing, and provide a historical review of the deeds of famous con-men through the ages, but he also satirizes contemporaneous American society by supplying something like an encyclopedia of mid-19th-century American culture through the pages. In the words of Bruce Franklin:

> On board the Fidéle are American representatives of herbdoctors, land agents, counterfeits, impostors, charity agents, card sharps, divines, transcendental philosophers, con men of all kinds. They and their victims discuss, quote, and reenact the roles of other con men of history […]. Many American types and American figures are passengers on the Fidéle. While we are on this ornate riverboat we are floating down the Mississippi River in the middle of nineteenth-century America, surrounded by local forms, local customs, local language, local characters. (xvi)

Given the "diabolical suggestiveness" (Franklin xvii) of the book, its meaning/s clearly cannot be reduced to the exploration of a single thematic dilemma, like the discussion of fraudulence, social satire, swindlery or con games, nor are there any easily determinable questions/problems that the author wishes to lead us through. As the duck-billed beaver cited in Chapters 14 throws off the possibility of any scientific classification, so also Melville's text resists categorizations which offer themselves too readily. Chapters 14, 33 and 44 are expressly devoted to the analysis of the process and technique of writing, and therefore are metafictional in the postmodern sense of the term. Although the readers might expect some sort of clarification from these with respect to characters, theme, authorial goals, what indeed follow are cunningly devised schemes that assist Melville in writing himself out of the mold of Romanticism. In them (and scattered through other parts of the narrative) the author indeed reproblematizes approaches to representation, narration, and character as such. While the novel constantly comments on its own internal proceedings (not only in the self-analytical chapters), it also directs the reader-author-subject from the convenient binarisms of the American Renaissance towards concepts such as indeterminacy, incongruity, pluralism, polyphony and ambiguity. As the writer is writing himself out of the tradition that originally

catapulted him to fame (and later when denying it he was compelled to obscurity), so is the reader gradually forced to envision himself/herself as part of an authorial scheme that demands him/her to take an active role in moving along with the author and the various forms of the trickster from "precision into ambiguity" from the particular towards "the universal—or apparently chaotic" (Franklin xxi) in interpreting the self, society, and the work. The epiphany that awaits the reader is: that one-dimensional judgements and readings of these concepts are no longer available to mankind. As the self is constructed along positive definitions of identity so it shares in procedures determining the identity of the not-me, the Other; blackness is composed of whiteness (and vice versa) and the politics, the ideologies and strategies related to its making; and reality and truth both contain and play upon their opposites.

The conclusion of the book, the slow fading out of the lights, the con-man leading the old man away is not a real conclusion. The closing words of "[s]omething further may follow of this Masquerade" (217) partly suggest an extension of the trickery into the reality of the reader—calling for the actualization of the preceding fiction in the interpretation of society around us—, partly redirect attention back into the world of the narrative, so that the words, the figures, the discussions and the ideas keep on haunting and troubling us. The narrative undoes its resolution, and instead offers further games that the reader might or might not wish to be involved in. *The Confidence-Man* as a whole thus is a game (like any piece of narrative, with the difference that here the setting, i.e., 1st of April date of the happenings also infers the game context); the game is played with whoever is willing to participate in it and Melville sets the rules.[108] The game can be about detection (when finding out the real identity of the con-man is at stake), but the game could also very well involve a novel epistemological interpretation of the universe, refusing the categorization of oppositional principles as exclusive or essential in themselves. The reader is allowed to penetrate these complexities, only if s/he is willing to endorse the ambiguities the fictional and the real life freaks hide.

Our life, Melville seems to hint, passes amidst a jungle of masks, masks of our own, and then the masks of others,[109] just how well we can play the masking game, or how well we can identify the masks of others could be crucial to our survival. If the beginning of the narrative is brought in curiously close relationship with the first blackface acts, its techniques and ideas maintain resonances between the two. In the social implications of role-play and

[108] Bruce Franklin pointed to the fact that while the April Fool's Day setting in a way compels the title character to be playing tricks on the rest of the characters throughout the narrative, we may also "suspect that the author is going to be playing tricks" on us, readers (xviii).

[109] This is an idea that later also surfaces in several writings by Eugene O'Neill, Ellison, Hughes, Capote, Pound, etc.

masking in particular, the tendency to choose the ambiguous over the one-sided, in the refutal of binary oppositions Melville designs a new mould to cast fiction in, but into which many of the contemporaneous social and cultural phenomena could also be fitted, blackface minstrelsy included.

In Chapter II I claimed that minstrelsy had a **grotesque world view** and ideology (that were vital in both upholding and subduing Black culture) which made its characters simultaneously appealing and repellent. The world and the characters of *The Confidence-Man* are likewise benign and threatening at one and the same time, and the author hastens to announce at certain pivotal points in the narrative that this is intentionally so. By stressing the centrality of incongruity and inconsistency to his fiction/character Melville basically glorifies the grotesque as an aesthetic, ideological as well as cultural reality. The afore-mentioned duck-billed beaver in its defiance of classification, yet with its own separate reality could stand as the metaphor of the entire narrative. Melville's definition of the grotesque, however, is far removed from the Romantic perception of it (coinciding with the aesthetic category of the bizarre) and is altogether closer to 20th-century absurdists conceptions of it (a representation of demonic forces, allied with a fundamentally tragic and chaotic view of the universe [Szerdahelyi 250]). This tragic or rather tragicomic, grotesque world view, the idea of a suspect and complex reality that feeds upon the inclusion instead of the separation of opposites allies *The Confidence-Man* with those ambivalent and carnivalesque ideologies that also nourished the institution and the practices of blackface minstrelsy.

[3] The Adventures of the Minstrel Sign in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*[110]

> 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 we had not heard of it before and it burst upon us as a glad and stunning surprise. The show remained a week and gave a performance every night. Church members didn't attend these performances, but all the worldlings flocked to them and were enchanted. Church members didn't attend shows out there in those days. The minstrels appeared with coal-black hands and faces and their clothing was a loud and extravagant burlesque of the clothing worn by the plantation slave of the time; not that the rags of the poor slave were burlesqued, for that would not have been possible; burlesque could have added nothing in the way of extravagance to the sorrowful accumulation of rags and patches which constituted his costume; it was the form and color of his dress that was burlesqued. […] The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny. (Twain, *Autobiography* 59)

Mark Twain (1835-1910) was a great fan and admirer of the minstrel shows, and he himself attended many performances in and around Hannibal and St. Louis, Missouri. In his *Autobiography* he offers several accounts of the elevating experience provided by the shows, and his firm belief that blackface entertainment was one of the most perfect forms of humor remained his conviction throughout his life. Once he even persuaded his mother and aunt to accompany him to the theater. He told them, however, that missionaries who had just returned from Africa were to lecture on African music. The respective section of the *Autobiography* reads as follows: "When the grotesque negroes came filing out on the stage in their extravagant costumes, the old ladies were almost speechless with astonishment. I explained to them that the missionaries always dressed like that in Africa. But Aunt Betsy said, reproachfully, 'But they're niggers'" (62).

The two previous citations from Twain's *Autobiography* are remarkable for several reasons. The first one demonstrates, on the one hand, how Twain is totally captivated by the humor of the minstrel show, and, on the other, the somewhat apologetic tone assumed in the name of the white performers for the not completely adequate parody exercised on the stage. This quotation also clearly proves that Twain describes the blackface act not as an outsider, but more as a professional humorist who lives within and becomes one with this strange, enigmatic and complex world that the show is. This explains why Twain understands blackface's rituals and strategies more than an average outsider would. Mixed into the account are feelings of uncertainty, guilt, admiration and ecstasy, which reflect ambiguities that are not exclusively the author's but inherent in the blackface act. The ambivalent psychological processes revealed in the passage also attest to complexities and ambivalences regarding the relationships between the minstrel performer and the object of his impersonation (the slaves), those between the spectators and the performance (the blackface act), the spectators and the black ethnic group, and finally the minstrel performers and their spectators. It can be thus hypothesized that Twain's own complex feelings indirectly reflect the underlying psychological processes of the blackface performance itself.

The point of interest in the second quotation is that in it Twain widens the scope of parody to include minstrel audiences along with the Negroes parodied on stage. Back in the 19th century there were many people who mistakenly identified the blackface stage entertainers with blacks—as has already been noted several times in this dissertation—,and

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[110] A substantial portion of the ensuing discussion has been published in *EJAS* (see "Works Cited"), and also in *Jim Crow örökösei* (312-322).

likewise the contents, the narrative elements of the shows were often decoded as authentic features of black existence. In the scene described, Twain is amused as much by the minstrel performers as by his relatives, especially as he witnesses their consternation at the sight of stage Negroes, whereas in real life the ladies were in daily contact with blacks. To the women the appearance of the Negro on stage is inappropriate and inadequate, this is not the "natural" environment where they should appear, hence the shock. Comedy arises from the complete failure of previous expectations pertaining to the performance, the missionaries are replaced by "Negroes" (in the ladies' interpretation at least), the Negroes are in reality white performers in blackface, and light-hearted entertainment is thus overridden by indignation. Twain's meditation about the scene, however, is not constructed along the authenticity-inauthenticity dichotomy—he is not interested in whether the audience is capable of recognizing the true identity of the performers—instead he is testing the reactions of white audiences with respect to the Negroes as incarnated through white impersonation.

In a sense the two quotations might very well be conceived as a kind of summary of Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). On the one hand, the novel charts the attraction-resistance dichotomy between blacks and whites, which also simulates the rhythmic shifts in the ambivalent psychology of blackface performance (see the quotation used as the epigraph). On the other hand, Twain is deeply interested in how typical the emotional and ethical responses of various social classes (upper, middle and lower) to blacks really are (cf. the second quotation). The latent question that seems to be formulated throughout the entire novel cycle is whether there is any development possible in inter-racial, inter-ethnic communication within certain social groups.[111]

Twain's curious attraction to the minstrel show can be explained in many ways, but first among these possible arguments is one closely tied to the author's own aesthetic mission. Namely that Twain, being, among other things, an ardent promoter of a truly national vernacular, believed to have found the genuinely American cultural idiom and diction in the minstrel tradition, on the basis of which he considered the formation of national identity and consciousness feasible. It is a different matter, however, that this form of popular theater appeared in a racist mould (where Negroes were deliberately humiliated and subjugated), similarly to the southwestern branch of national humor popularized by Twain, which also

[111] It is a surprising coincidence that current minstrelsy criticism (similarly to the emphasis laid out by Twain's writings) is also intent on moving away from the authenticity-inauthenticity dilemma with respect to black representation, primarily since this has always been regarded as a politically sensitive issue, and secondly because this area of debate contains a multitude of subjective elements. Contemporary minstrelsy criticism also

abounded in jokes at the black man's expense. Minstrel shows frequently used the elements of regional humor as their source material, and the genres of southwestern humor also oftentimes surfaced in minstrel programs. Among the characteristic features of southwestern humor were "incongruity, gross exaggeration, understatement, caricature, anecdotes" (Bell 129), tall tales and further elements, which came to be part of the aesthetic apparatus applied in the portrayal of black people when transferred into the minstrel shows. These facts by themselves, however, do not prove—what is nonetheless affirmed by many critics— that Twain turned to the minstrel tradition exclusively because of its racist charge. It is altogether more likely that Twain was driven to the blackface show primarily because it meant for him the first originally American popular tradition (irrespective of the image it drew of blacks), and this very well matched the writer's cultural mission. An additional factor worth mentioning here is that liberating, inter-ethnic aspect of the minstrel show which has been explored in minstrelsy criticism only recently—and in its core also appearing in Twain's art— and which might lead to reinterpretations regarding the former, exclusively condemnatory evaluations of the shows.

The second element that may have played a part in Twain's patronage of the minstrel theater throughout his life was his upbringing. In the *Autobiography* Twain mentions the fact that since in the region where he grew up there were no stories of atrocities involving slaves, he received no input from his immediate surroundings that could have suggested even in the smallest degree the necessary rejection of slavery. This paternalistic attitude and the similarly pseudo-benevolent attitude revealed on the minstrel stages with respect to the social position of blacks show many similarities. "[…] [T]here was nothing about the slavery of the Hannibal region to arouse one's dozing humane instincts to activity. It was the mild domestic slavery, not the brutal plantation article. Cruelties were very rare and exceedingly and wholesomely unpopular"—Twain writes in his *Autobiography* (30). This might be the reason why, reflected through Huck Finn's great moral dilemmas regarding the acknowledgement of Jim's humanity and his natural right for freedom, we indeed witness Twain's innate humanism and his received paternalistic Southern perspective battling against each other.

In this brief analysis of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I will attempt to seek answers to the following questions: [1] To what extent and in what respects can we identify the infiltration of the minstrel tradition in Twain's authorial world? [2] What is the result of the fact that Twain lived inside the world of the minstrel shows and was familiar with the strategies, methods, and world view applied therein? [3] Does Twain provide an evaluation or

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stresses the research of interrelations between the minstrel shows and various social classes, while underscoring the significance of political alliances across class and ethnic boundaries revealed in the contents of the shows.

interpretation for posterity with respect to this theatrical tradition that he knew so well? [4] Does his interpretation ever reach the level of criticism, and if so, is he in the cultural position to be objective about it?

Let us first take a closer look at those elements of blackface which are incorporated into the novel, and examine how Twain applies these in the construction of his narrative. *Huck Finn*, which Twain wrote through almost a decade with intermissions, was published in 1884. This was the age when the "Negro" minstrel show reached the peak of its popularity in America. By the 1870s minstrel companies had achieved unequalled success, and were touring the entire country. "Meanwhile," as Eric Lott noted, "the new phenomenon of the "Tom show"—dramatic blackface productions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—was emerging to displace and reorient the minstrel tradition" (*Love* 129). The entire American nation was captivated and spellbound by the minstrel shows. Thus it is no surprise that Twain's text is also interspersed with the expressions, social and cultural vision disseminated by the shows. Anthony Berret, for instance, interprets the novel's thematic layers, style and strategies as well as its entire structure as being affected by the minstrel influence. The hypothesis, namely that the novel is constructed along the tripartite arrangement of the classic minstrel show, will be demonstrated here partly following Berret's interpretation and argument, and partly on the evidence of examples directly from the text.

It is a well known fact that the majority of classic minstrel shows (from the end of the 1840s) were comprised of three easily distinguishable units, namely, the first part, the olio, and the closing number.[112] These larger units could be subdivided into yet smaller segments. The first part, or *overture*, contained primarily comic dialogues and sentimental song and dance acts; the *olio* or variety section centered around the stump speech of the lead actor and a variety of acrobatic or circus numbers, and finally the *closing* was organized around a plantation skit or one or more burlesque numbers. This wide range of genres and themes belonging to the shows can also be found in Twain's work.

A recurring element of the tripartite minstrel performance was the **humorous dialogue scene**[113] of the overture. These comic dialogues were exploiting the possibilities of verbal humor—described in detail in Chapter II—. Among the devices of verbal humor were the so-called **banter**, the teasing and mocking of each other, as well as the **repartee**, which

[112] For further details on structure see Chapter II of the present dissertation where the tripartite arrangement is analyzed as a structural minstrel sign.
[113] A nearly exhaustive analysis of minstrel-type dialogues in the novel can be found in Rogers, Franklin. *Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns as Seen in the Novels and Narratives, 1855-1885.* Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1960.

built upon the practice of fast and ingenious remarks like in a verbal duel. The respective criticism often labels this kind of comic element as **end-man humor** (Starke 175), mostly because these fast exchanges were routinely exercised by the endmen.

The above stylistic features are as much perceptible in the humor and incongruity generating tricks and devices of the group called the Literary Comedians, who were Twain's contemporaries, as in the later Donald and Costello shows, or still later in radio shows modeled after minstrel shows like Amos 'n Andy, as well as in the improvisational technique of the gag shows.

Likewise, *Huck Finn* also abounds in the possibly most popular comedy-generating technique of the minstrel shows, **end-man humor**. Let us now take a look at some instances where this comic device can be unmistakably pinpointed as present in the book. The most striking example of the employment of the end-man humor probably is Chapter 14, where Jim and Huck first begin to talk about some very illustrious people, and then they exchange ideas about the wisdom of the Biblical King Solomon, and finally they debate about the strange language of the French people:

> I read considerable to Jim about kings, and dukes, and earls, and such, and how gaudy they dressed, and how much style they put on, and called each other your majesty, and your grace, and your lordship, and so on, 'stead of mister; and Jim's eyes bugged out, and he was interested. He says:
> 'I didn' know dey was so many un um. I hain't hearn 'bout none un um, skasely, but ole King Sollermun, onless you counts dem kings dat's in a pack er k'yards. How much do a king get?'
> 'Get?' I says; 'why, they get a thousand dollars a month if they want it; they can have just as much as they want; everything belongs to them.'
> '*Ain*' dat gay? En what dey got to do, Huck?
> '*They* don't do nothing! Why how you talk. They just set around.'
> 'No—is dat so?'
> 'Of course it is. They just set around. Except maybe when there's a war; then they go to the war. But other times they just lazy around; or go hawking—just hawking and […] and other times, when things is dull, they fuss with the parlyment; and if everybody don't go just so he whacks their heads of. But mostly they hang round the harem.' (84-85)

This is where the dialogue between Huck and Jim shifts to the wise King Solomon theme. We are informed that Solomon "had about a million wives" in his harem, and that the harem itself is a "bo'd'n-house," Jim claims, and it is rather noisy, mostly because "de wives quarrels considerable." Still Solomon is said to be the wisest man on earth, although he lived at such a noisy place. "I doan'

take no stock in dat," says Jim, "Bekase why would a wise man want to live in the mids' er sich a blimblammin' all de time?" (85)

> 'Well, but he *was* the wisest man, anyway; because the widow she told me so, her own self.'
> 'I doan k'yer what de widder say, he *warn't* no wise man, nuther. He had some er de ded-fetchedes' ways I ever see. Does you know 'bout dat chile dat he 'uz gwyne to chop in two?'
> *'Yes, the widow told me all about it.'*
> *'*Well*, den! Warn' dat de beatenes' notion in de worl'? You jes' take en look at it a minute. […]*
> 'But hang it, Jim, you've clean missed the point—blame it, you've missed it a thousand mile.'
> 'Who? Me? Go 'long. Doan' talk to *me* 'bout yo' pints. I reck'n I know sense when I sees it; en dey ain' no sense in sich doin's as dat. De 'spute warn't 'bout a half chile, de 'spute was 'bout a whole child; en de man dat thinks he kin settle a 'spute 'bout a whole child wid half a chile, doan' know enough to come in out'n de rain. Doan' talk to me 'bout Sollermun, Huck, I knows him by de back.'
> 'But I tell you you don't get the point.'
> 'Blame de pint! I reck'n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de *real* pint is down furder—it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one or two chillen; is dat man gwyne to be waseful o' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. *He* know how to value 'em. But you take a man 'dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. *He* as soon chop a chile in two as a cat. Dey's plenty mo'. A chile er two, mo' er less, warn't no consekens to Sollermun, dad fetch him!' (86-87)

Huck gives up the verbal duel, because he is not able to get the upper hand over Jim's humorously intensive ethical indignation. As he notes immediately afterwards: "I never see such a nigger. If he got a notion in his head once, there warn't no getting it out again" (86). As David E. E. Sloane remarks, this, and similar dialogue exchanges apply "the texture of a minstrel show interrogatory" to bring home a particular moral. Whereas, Sloane argues, a Dickensian character "would flatly declare that law's an ass," Twain reaches the same point by entangling his protagonists in minstrel-style question and answer routines (65).

Concluding the above exchange, Huck immediately seeks a new theme for discussion, and they start to converse about Louis XVI, the French king who was executed, and his son, the heir, who stayed alive according to the legend and fled to America. But, asks Jim, what would a king do in America, where there are no sovereigns. "Well," says Huck, "I don't know. Some of them gets on the police, and some of them learns people how to talk French" (87). This is the point where Twain begins one of his best dialogues that reflects all the magic of oral improvisation. This section with its fast rhythm, cunning exchanges, and bizarre logic is a masterful verbal simulation of the end-man humor of the minstrel show.

> 'Why, Huck, doan' de French people talk de same way we does?'

'*No*, Jim; you couldn't understand a word they said—not a single word.'

'Well, now, I be ding-busted! How do dat come?'

"I don't know; but it's so. I got some of their jabber out of a book. Spose a man was to come to you and say *Polly-voo-franzy*—what would you think?'

'I wouldn't think nuff'n; I'd take en bust him over de head. Dat is, if he warn't white. I wouldn't 'low no nigger to call me dat.'

'Sucks, it ain't calling you anything. It's only saying do you know how to talk French.

'Well, den, why couldn't he *say* it?'

'Why, he *is* a-saying it. That's a Frenchman's *way* of saying do you know how to talk French.'

'Well, it's a blame' ridicklous way, en I doan' want to hear no mo' 'bout it. Dey ain' no sense in it.'

'Looky here, Jim; does a cat talk like we do?'

'No, a cat don't.'

'Well, does a cow?'

'No, a cow don't, nuther.'

'Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?'

'No, dey don't.'

'It's natural and right for 'em to talk different from each other, ain't it?'

''Course.'

'And ain't it natural and right for a cat and a cow to talk different from *us*?' […] Well, then, why ain't it natural and right for a *Frenchman* to talk different from us? You answer me that.'

'Is a cat a man, Huck?'

'No.'

'Well, den, dey ain't no sense in a cat talkin' like a man. Is a cow a man?—er is a cow a cat?'

'No, she ain't either of them'

[…] 'Is a Frenchman a man?'

'Yes.'

'*Well*, den! Dad blame it, why doan he *talk* like a man? You answer me *dat*. (87-88)

According to Berret chapters 1 to 19 match the **minstrel first part** or overture. As can be seen from the examples cited above, Jim plays the role of **the minstrel end-man** here, while in the dialogues between Huck and Jim, Huck is acting as the **Master of Ceremony**, or the minstrel **Interlocutor**.[114] Befitting the minstrel tradition, Jim acts as the comic end-man, who is characterized by his uneducated speech, is inexperienced in the matters of life, and therefore can easily be cheated or tricked. In contrast to him, Huck attempts to speak in a more polished language, and at times we even have the feeling that he is showing off his knowledge. Still, as can also be witnessed in the minstrel dialogues, Jim, with his twisted

[114] In the conversations with others, however, like Miss Watson or the widow, Huck appears as the minstrel end-man (Berret 41).

logic, often gets the best of the "Interlocutor," i.e., Huck. Sloane points out that here and elsewhere Huck applies the term "nigger" as "the *ad hominem* shift in logical reasoning" (28), to dismiss Jim's come-backs altogether. Infuriated by Jim's "logical illogic" (Sloane 28), running short of counter-arguments the white boy has no other choice but to retreat at the end of the verbal duel quoted above. As the end-man has the last words in the conversation, the "battle" is clearly decided in his favor.

The episode, Sloane stresses, presents "sophisticated ideology hidden beneath burnt cork minstrel dialect" (66). The chapter despite its light and comical tone confronts the readers with complex questions of humanity and humanism, and challenges (as the entire novel does) those preconceived racial stereotypes (about the foolishness and naivite of blacks) that were ingrained in social consciousness at the time.

Similarly to the minstrel show audiences who, depending on their class affiliations—the lower classes taking the part of the weaker characters—, frequently changed loyalties, shifting from one to the other side in the respective debates, the readers' sympathies also tend to change. At times we feel for Jim, because we see that he is defenseless against Huck's pretentious intellectual superiority, and at other times we sense Huck's pseudo-scientific, yet, often self-contradictory and entangled arguments, providing a mixture of facts and details to be close to us. The same **double-edged parody** was also the source of the minstrel show's great popularity, where upper classes could freely laugh together with the Interlocutor (here impersonated by Huck) at the clumsiness of the Darkies, while the lower classes (especially the northern working-class members of the audience) could delight themselves at their will at the expense of the occasional mistakes, or enforced rationalism of Mr. Interlocutor, who always failed in opposition to the resourceful folk wisdom of the Darkies.[115] As Berret puts it, "Like the best **comic dialogues** of the minstrel shows" the dialogues between Huck and Jim simultaneously parody and celebrate "a display of social superiority" (40). Thus Twain pillories the contradictory notions of his middle-class audience as well, who demanded "social equality and upward mobility" (Berret 40) under the same breath.

An additional note that should be included here is that while Twain was on a lecture tour of the country in 1882 in the company of George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, and other established writers, he got the idea to give appearances in a minstrel style. At these occasions Twain played the end-man, and Cable took the part of Mr. Interlocutor. It

[115] It is very important that Huck is able to play the upper hand only with respect to Jim, whereas in his other relationships he is degraded to the level of the Darkies. This strikingly illustrates the contingency of social positions, as well as the fact that these social layers are by themselves meaningless without the support of true ethical contents.

can thus be indirectly assumed that Twain felt closer to the darky role, the traditionally lower class part, than to the pompous style of Mr. Interlocutor, who was usually despised by the masses (Lott, "Mr. Clemens" 134).

Another favorite device of the minstrel overture besides the comic dialogues was the **sentimental song cycle**, which in the original minstrel shows served to introduce the stars of the company, who were later to return to the stage during the subsequent parts of the show. Although Berret cites the song of the Grangerford ladies, "The Last Link is Broken" to demonstrate the presence of sentimentalism in the novel, it can be added that the entire cultural environment of the Grangerfords, the wall paintings, the poems of Emmeline, or the resigned reception of the unavoidability of the vendetta between the two families are also part of the same style. Moreover, the rhythmic separations and unions between Huck and Jim probably capture the true emotional contents of sentimentalism more than any other element in the novel. A concrete example of the separation-union theme occurs when, in Chapter 15, Huck and Jim lose each other in the fog, and they shout to find one another through an entire day without any luck, only to be reunited finally and each overjoyed at the sight of the other. This section of the book is often cited, because it is in this scene that Huck suddenly becomes aware of Jim's deeply human emotions. When Huck attempts to fool Jim, stating that the latter only dreamt their separation, Jim is profoundly shattered, since Huck was the last person he thought would attempt to mock him so. Jim's humanity is probably at the highest peak at this point in the novel.[116]

In the section of the novel that matches the **minstrel olio**, there are a number of **burlesque skits, parodies**, and sensational happenings. This part is dominated by the stunts, pranks and solo numbers of the duke and the king, like the anecdotes of their noble origins, the **stump sermon about temperance**, the perfectly **twisted Shakespeare monologue**, or the Royal Nonesuch performance. In this variety section of the novel clichés referring to theatricality predominate, for instance, the Boggs and Sherburn duel in Chapter 21 seems perfectly choreographed, Jim is dressed up as King Lear not to be captured, moreover, in Chapter 22, Huck attends a real circus performance. Likewise, Huck's narrative on Henry VIII in Chapter 23 evokes the practice of minstrel stump speeches (applied as a central attraction of the minstrel olio), mixing up various historical facts, ages and personalities.

[116] Some critics claim that even in Chapter 15—and generally in the sections which narrate the union between Huck and Jim—Jim is unable to step out of the minstrel cliché. Woodward, for instance, argues that in these episodes Jim resembles a *mammy* stereotype, since his behavior is characterized by exaggerated feelings of caring and protectiveness (146).

> "Ring Up Fair Rosamund." Fair Rosamund answers the bell. Next morning, "Chop off her head." And he made every one of them tell him a tale every night; and he kept that up till he had hogged a thousand and one tales that way, and then he put them all in a book, and called it Domesday Book—which was a good name and stated the case. […] Well, Henry he takes a notion he wants to get up some trouble with this country. How does he go at it—give notice?—give the country a show? No. All of a sudden he heaves all the tea in Boston Harbor overload, and whacks out a declaration of independence, and dares them to come on. (169)

The underlying **psychological tensions of blackface** performance are strikingly evoked in this section as well. The most vivid example of this is the scene in which the duke dresses Jim up in King Lear's outfit, and paints his face in blue paint (Chapter 24). Regarding Twain's image of blacks some critics draw the conclusion from this scene that here once again Jim plays the white man's clown, and elicits laughter from the audience by the humiliation of himself. It is more likely, however, that we gain an insider's look into the psychological process of the white blackface delineator here. The whole ritual is very much like a minstrel act in reverse, since this time it is the black man's face which is covered with paint, and the black paint of the minstrel stage is turned into a death mask. Yet, in Jim's blue face we recognize not the Negro's, but the blackface entertainer's deathly glance, who shatters the essence of his own identity behind the mask; his death being the curious resurrection of the black man. The spiritual torments of the masquerade are represented through Jim's prearranged mad outcries in the respective scene.

Meanwhile Twain is talking both to and about his audiences. The snobbery of the masses is well illustrated by the fact that they automatically favor the upper classes as it is demonstrated in the plays staged by the duke and the king, or in the Wilks episode. By the time their doings are finally exposed, the two frauds have deceived the people who live along the Mississippi shore several times. Thus, while Twain follows the structural units apparently scripted by the minstrel show, he also exposes the larger culture, and those democratic ideals which are but empty poses. Interestingly, however, Jim's masquerade in blue and the episodes exposing snobbery reveal the same deeper social tension, identified by Twain as the curse of the entire American society: that is, the contradiction between democratic ideals and the social realities racism and prejudice.

The minstrel third part usually consisted of a short scene about the life of a Southern plantation, a one-act burlesque, or the parody of a well-known play. According to Berret, the third section of the novel from Chapter 32 to the end corresponds to the minstrel third part (44). Berret emphasizes the motifs of the peaceful, happy home, the undisturbed, quiet working days, and the cohesion within the family at the Phelps farm, as being characteristic minstrel clichés traditionally formulated by the average minstrel finale. As Berret claims, "[t]his scene contains all the elements that

made the minstrel shows appealing to the urban and industrial audiences of the North […]" (44), since their nostalgia towards the peace of country life gained free expression there. The true burlesque scene, however, comes when Huck and Tom persuade Jim to act out the escape from captivity. Many critics blamed Twain for the fact that after Jim's humanity gradually strengthened in the novel, it was most probably a mistake to annul this development with a single stroke of the pen. As the argument goes, in the scenes of the Phelps farm, Jim is once again the same naive, comical clown figure that he used to be at the very beginning of the story.

Since Twain wrote the novel through seven years, exactly between 1876 and 1883, some analysts suspected that the narrative reflected the changes that occurred during this period in the author's private life. More precisely, Twain's marriage to Olivia Langdon, and their moving to Hartford, Connecticut, might have been of serious consequence to the writer's thinking, especially because the relatives of the new wife, as well as her aristocratic circle of friends diverted Twain from his standard audiences, the lower and middle classes. In spite of this, it is not very likely that the concluding episodes and its burlesque Negro character fashioned after the minstrel tradition reflect the influence of the writer's new environment. It is altogether more believable that Twain intentionally takes his material through the structural stages of a minstrel show. If we read the novel in this fashion, the ending appears to be a confused parade of diverse motifs consistent with the choreography of minstrel show third parts.

Twain thus seemingly adjusts his novel to the structure of the minstrel show. This, however, does not mean that he fails to draw upon other source materials in his narrative. In connection with *Huckleberry Finn* many critics identify, for instance, the presence of certain motifs from Afro-American folklore and oral tradition, and it was probably Shelley Fisher Fishkin who argued the case most persuasively.[117] The adaptation of the minstrel show frame in the novel does not automatically result in the distortion of Jim's personal character traits either. We cannot say that he is exclusively pictured as ridiculous, inferior, or having weaker intellectual faculties. Moreover, as can be seen from the examples above, Jim proves a worthy rival to Huck in their verbal duels, and he oftentimes turns the situations, originally meant to discredit him, to his own advantage. (In Chapter 2, for instance, Tom plays a trick on Jim, which is later turned by Jim into a great tale of having been bewitched, which he applies to

[117] Fishkin goes so far in the examination of African American traits in the novel as to state that even Huck's figure contains certain black influences. In Fishkin's reasoning Twain created Huck from the mixture of the personal traits of "a black child named Jimmy, a black teenager named Jerry, and a white child named Tom Blankenship" which, as the critic claimed, "involved a measure of racial alchemy unparalleled in American letters" (80).

evoke the appreciation and gain the esteem of the other blacks; power relations also visibly shift in the episodes of the fog.)

Huck Finn's minstrel ritual does not result in the stereotyped representation of blacks, although there were many critics who argued so (among them Guy Cardwell, Fredrick Woodard, Donnarae MacCann, etc.). I am inclined to share the views of David L. Smith, who affirmed that Twain focuses on "a number of commonplaces associated with 'the Negro' and then systematically dramatizes their inadequacy" (qtd. in Fishkin 81). After all, the burlesque-like closing episodes spell out the bitter conclusion that the years after the Reconstruction merely brought about the parody of the hopes for freedom for former slaves (Fishkin 74). The relationship between Twain and the minstrel tradition is much more complex than that of any of his contemporaries. The writer in part indicates that given within this tradition is the possibility of freezing the black image into a cliché, but also the subversion of minstrel stereotypes. The consistent maintenance of the minstrel frame, and the presence of the motifs of black folklore therein, the social critique exercised within the adapted minstrel ritual, all prove that Twain identified the minstrel tradition as a mixed (white as well as black; upper as well as lower class; inter-racial), as well as radical tradition. It is an entirely different matter, however, that by the 1880s, the time of the publication of the novel, out of the inner tensions and ambivalences which governed the shows, primarily not the liberating forces had proved viable with respect to blacks but rather the harmful stereotypes. This is why Ralph Ellison in his analysis of the novel could state: "Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity—and Twain's complexity—emerge" (65).

CHAPTER V

EXTENSIONS OF THE MINSTREL SIGN IN 20TH-CENTURY LITERARY TEXTS

The forthcoming chapter is intended to prove that blackface minstrelsy's varied signifiers survived well into the 20th century, and among their multifarious cultural influences (from vaudeville, through film, radio and television to advertising and consumer goods) they also shaped the spectrum of American literature of the past one hundred years. It is quite obvious, however, that it would be an impossible enterprise to review all the literary materials with minstrel signification in them from the given period. Therefore, I propose, like in Chapter IV, to offer here an analysis of selected literary texts, this time also to include in the corpus an outline of some sporadic survivals of the minstrel signs in literary contexts heretofore largely ignored in the relevant criticism. The distinction between [I] texts that consistently incorporate the minstrel signs as constructive elements—discussed in the subchapter "Minstrel Signs as Substantive Compositional Features"—and [II] texts with sporadic minstrel signifiers—detailed in the subchapter: "Sporadic Literary Minstrel References"—is adopted here to indicate the inner division of the subsequent discussion. Again, the function of the present analysis is primarily to substantiate the earlier statement about the significance of minstrelsy's literary heritage, and it also serves to initiate readers into some additional (modern and postmodern) authorial strategies with regard to the adaptation of minstrel signification.

The first half of the chapter is devoted to three literary texts, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), John Berryman's *Dream Songs* (1964), and Ntozake Shange's *spell #7* (1979), which all integrate minstrel signification as their nuclear constitutive element. Although the texts named have mostly been arbitrarily selected, the choice could be justified by the wish to supply an illustration for minstrelsy's survival in different literary genres (from fiction through poetry to drama), and secondly, I meant to indicate the growing involvement of black writers in the treatment of the minstrel heritage through the 20th century (which, of course, accounts for the presence of Ellison and Shange among the three). Also, Ellison and Shange represent two extremes of the same pole, since while Ellison is still very much in touch with the realities of blackface shows, Shange responds to a phenomenon that is already a segment of the past, yet one that is strongly connected to the history of her people. John Berryman's inclusion in the list of selected authors is justified not only by his substantial and conscious

evocation of the minstrel tradition in his corpus, but he and his writings also mark the shifting direction white America was taking concerning minstrelsy's heritage (as it gradually came to be paired with post-modern schizophrenia over inauthenticity [Gubar 166]).

The second part of the chapter will largely focus on sporadic survivals of the minstrel heritage primarily studied in the context of the poetic works of the Harlem Renaissance and the early modernists as well as in the fiction of some post-world war II authors. In this second section emphasis will shift towards the analysis of predominantly white compositions while also observing the relation of some post-war literary trends to minstrel signification.

[I] Minstrel Signs As Substantive Compositional Features

[1] Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: A Satire On Masks

The indebtedness of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (published in 1952) to various comic traditions has been widely acknowledged and revealed in the extensive critical responses to the narrative almost from the moment of its first publication.[118] Yet, despite the recognition of Ellison's interest in European, Afro-American and American comic literary conventions (ranging from Dante's *Divine Comedy* through African American folk tales to Emerson's tract on "The Comic"), the author's not less obvious fascination with and criticism of blackface minstrelsy—in this work and elsewhere in the essays—has not been sufficiently explored. The present analysis seeks to bridge this gap without pretending to supply a full-blown study of this richly textured narrative.

There are four main areas of minstrel signification that Ellison enumerates and comments on in his novel: the protagonist as a minstrel derivation; the minstrel mask and connected to it the role and functions of masking—which in a way are the guiding forces of the narrative—; the world of fictional objects—evocative both of Afro-American history as well as the cultural route and relevance of minstrel relics—; and the conceptual/ideological problems linked to minstrel stereotypes and stereotyping practices—also incorporated as structuring principles of the text—.

[118] For studies exclusively devoted to the exploration of comic traditions in *Invisible Man* consult, Andreas, James R. "*Invisible Man* and the Comic Tradition," or Rovit, Earl H. "Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition".

(A) The Hero as Minstrel Man

The fact that the conception of Ellison's nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man* was partly indebted to the minstrel tradition was explicitly stated by the author himself, who admitted having grasped "at the range of implication suggested to him by a blackface comedian bragging on the stage of Harlem's Apollo Theatre" (Lhamon 215). Although numerous critics questioned the figuratively invisible narrator's minstrel extensions,[119] Ellison's particular acknowledgement of the fact, the title hero's initial misreading/misinterpretation of the grandfather's will and his submissive and grinning attitude in the beginning (as well as in the larger part of the narrative) all attest to his indebtedness to the minstrel stereotype of the comic fool, whose greatest desire is the unquestioning accommodation of white expectations.

Since the novel is a modern picaresque, it is the fate of the protagonist to learn and change in the course of his long journey (fashioned symbolically after the history of African Americans in the New World through "some one hundred years" [Klein 250]). This learning process, however, does not automatically lead to the eventual slipping off of the confining framework of the white-created stereotypes. The young black hero matures to the end to accept and to be able to deal with his own invisibility, yet his outward judgement is not radically altered. It is Ellison's perception that although the reaction of white society towards its black population fundamentally and quite tragically remains the same, individuals might triumph over the system of degrading stereotypes by affirming themselves, thus creating (and recreating) their race and their culture. In Chapter 16 of the novel the Invisible Man evokes the words of his high-school teacher that advance the prospect of the protagonist's ensuing learning: "We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture" (*IM* 346). The development of the protagonist from minstrel man to a full-grown human being recognizing his limitations is described by Earl H. Rovit with the following words:

[…] the hero has created the features of his face from the malleable stuff of his experience. He who accepts himself as "invisible" has ironically achieved a concrete tangibility, while those characters in the novel who seemed to be "visible" and substantial men (Norton, Brother Jack, and even Tod Clifton) are discovered to be really "invisible" since

[119] Andreas alleges that Ellison denied "that he had the 'darky entertainer' in mind as a source for the hero" (104).

they are self-imprisoned captives of their own capacities to see and be seen in stereotyped images. (110)

(B) Versions of Masks and Masking

The mask, its various functions, psychological, social, cultural and even political implications predominate the entire oeuvre of Ellison, and it also surfaces as central to the interpretation of *Invisible Man* as a whole. The author's complex understanding of the devise might highlight issues that point well beyond the fictional world of the novel, towards tensions latent in the position of black literature in white America, the conflicting streams of American society, experience and her manifested ideals, as well as central to the operation of certain cultural and social institutions which usurp the above contradictions.

As is well known, Ellison contemplated the psychological roles inherent in the blackface mask at several places in his *Shadow and Act*[120], and his concept of the various functions of the blackface mask in particular and masks in general also shapes the text of *Invisible Man* in profound ways. In the novel, as later in the essays Ellison differentiates roughly between four areas in the use of the mask: 1. blackface masking, metaphorically interpreted to involve all the humiliating role-plays initiated at the black man's expense; 2. a strategy that Ellison calls the "darky act" (the Negro's social masks; containing the most general implications of masking as pretense, as well as the subversion of minstrel-type masking games). 3. a view of American identity as a peculiar version of the mask (a process through which the clash between certain social realities and ideals are managed within the American setting);

1. Blackface Masking

From among the masking techniques Ellison employs blackface masking directly evokes the tradition of the minstrel stage. In the context of Ellison's novel, the minstrel mask, however, does not connote whites *appearing as* blacks (which would be the traditional understanding of blackface masking), but more whites—and occasionally blacks—pressuring blacks to appear and behave as they order them to. Thus interpreted, blackface masking appears in *Invisible Man* through the **stereotypical roles** white society assigns to its black population—the

[120] See Chapter II for the analysis of these hypothetical contents incorporated in the blackface mask.

objectification of them as types , i.e. less than human[121]—and also as practices triggered by white Americans to delimit the social and cultural space intended for blacks. This metaphorical extension of blackface masking to include all social and cultural strategies targeting the deliberate suppression of the black individual interweaves the entire narrative.

Blackface masking, viewed as a supervised channeling of black energies into areas that match white expectations most, is masterfully illustrated in the first chapter of the book (which according to Marcus Klein contains "both in its significances and its form, the most of the hero's career. The same chaos of appetites and guilt that is the real, hidden nature of Negro and white relations is exploded at the hero in each of his subsequent accidents" [258]). This episode that renders the happenings at the gathering of the town's "big shots" (*IM* 17) is a condensed foreshadowing of the movements and thematic patterns of the novel: from initial optimism to disappointment, from accommodation to denial, from willing involvement to exclusion. More than that, the chapter also envisions a cavalcade of masks both intentionally and inadvertently assumed. The Invisible Man participates at the meeting of the town heads because he has to repeat his outstanding valediction speech in front of them. Yet, before giving the speech he has to go through a set of ordeals unforeseen by him. First, along with a number of other black boys he is made to witness the dance of a naked blonde (whose only "attire" is the American flag "tattooed upon her belly" [*IM* 19]), and next, blindfolded the boys have to battle against each other to entertain the white townsmen. The rituals that the young black boy unwillingly participates in are strikingly similar to the rituals of blackface.

Like in blackface performance, the role and position of the black man is carefully circumscribed and defined by the white customers who order the "show." Here, too, the sequence of action, as well as the role the black boys (the protagonist included) are to take is predetermined. They should act as they are told, and that without resistance. It is quite telling, however, that the hero is dizzied and nauseated by the ensuing events, so it becomes clear from Ellison's phrasing that the masquerade is not to the Negro's liking and also that he, most of the time, cannot even make out what he has to do. Both of these reactions might be interpreted as direct comments on the social role carved out for the Negroes by whites, which blacks either instinctively riot against or, secondly, the assigned position being too paradoxical (containing both fascination and rejection, desire and evasion), they are unable to decode it properly.

The staged performance of the Negro boys is imitative of the minstrel show from the aspect of the white audiences as well. The white townsfolk indulge in the sexual, physical and

[121] This aspect of masking will be treated separately in the ensuing subchapter b/4.

also economic humiliation of the black boys with fascination. They do so not merely because thus they are able to experience in the form of an orchestrated performance what they hope to emerge as social reality (i.e. the exploitation and abasement of blacks in the above areas), but also because the boys represent for them the lack of restraint they secretly hope to partake in. Nathan Huggins' words about the psychological contents involved in the blackface mask may further underline the consonance between the blackface ritual and Ellison's text, and might also illuminate some hidden contents of the battle royal scene of the novel:

> […] the blackface minstrel objectified and therefore created a distance between white men's normative selves (what they had to be) and their natural selves (what they feared but were fascinated by). With such a creation, one could almost at will move in or out of the blackface character. It is not hard to believe that the white performers did find remarkable freedom behind their black masks. (257)

Reading the valediction episode against Huggins' comments on blackface pyschology it becomes apparent that Ellison (knowingly or not) framed the respective episode within the minstrel context. Quite clearly the black boys function as scapegoats, who liberate their white audiences through the enactment of the hidden, secretive and tabooed selves and fantasies. The whites move between identification and rejection, indulgence and denial throughout the scene, simultaneously embracing and negating blackness and its respective connotations of wildness, danger, freedom. The complex psychological underpinnings of the battle royal episode is suggestively summarized by Klein:

> The hero is not only discriminated against. The politics of this system goes much deeper. In fact, he is coddled by that white man, the school superintendent, who has most immediate authority over him […]. He and his schoolmates are not without honor. These whites use them in ways curiously like love. It is the function of this caste system to suppress a great deal more than the Negro, and it is the lesson of this episode that these Negroes incarnate for these whites everything that they suppress. The Negroes are made by them into the bacchants they themselves dare not be. They are made agents of, and at the same time sacrifices to, the forbidden, everything that is dark, their irrational craving for cruelty, their greed and their sex and their itch for self-destruction, the swoon of the id. (257)

The same scapegoating ritual occurs in the Trueblood episode, where, once again, the white man's suppressed fears and desires (manifested in the story of incest) are induced, served up

and accordingly rewarded by money. In the various entanglement of the races (in the college, the Brotherhood, at the eviction scene and elsewhere), the symbolical intertwining of colors (the paint factory episode) the politics of blackface is undoubtedly present. As dominant white society is channeling black creative energies according to its own norms, guiding the nameless protagonist to comply with its dictates, we witness the strategies of minstrel practices metaphorically envisioned. There is but one difference, that this time it is not the white blackface man who performs his grotesque dance center stage, but it is the black man "dancing" willy-nilly as he is ordered about. White power feeding on the energy ingrained in blackness (a fictional scenario that suggestively captures the essential momentum of blackface) is expressed in the paint factory episode of the novel as well, where the drop of black paint is used to enhance the whiteness of white, to make it a special "optic white."[122] Quite paradoxically, too, the blackface "author" of white fun, the delineator, can also construct his superiority only by the recognition of that which it seeks to subdue, the power of blackness.[123]

2. The Darky Act

"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or burst wide open". (*IM* 16)

The passing words of the grandfather determine the adventures of the young black boy throughout his journey, and besides the frame of the novel set by the Prologue and the Epilogue, these words provide an additional framework (a frame within a frame) to the happenings. The protagonist, however, largely misreads the will as one that should be understood literally, i.e., as a wish for complete submission, and accommodation of white society's dictates. Accordingly through the larger part of the journey he enters the adventures being completely hopeful of his acceptance and recognition as a human being. In reality,

[122] The respective episode also alludes to the percentage of black population within the nation, reflecting the fact that the dominance of whiteness, the exercise of power is meaningful only in the presence of and in relation to the minority groups.

however, the grandfather passes down to the grandson a teaching about survival tactics, an outward agreement and an actual overturning of dominant white codes, rules and directives.[124] In other words the heritage of the grandson is a lesson on masking in the most universal sense of the word, that is pretending.

Pretense as a strategy is a complex means of concealment in the novel, identified both as fulfilling the role that is expected of one (blackface masking), and while playing according to the expectations also beating the "opponent" at his own game (subversive masking). The darky act, the playing of the fool, is clearly a minstrel derivation—similarly to Stowe's Andy, or Melville's Guinea—where the techniques of blackface masking and its subversion are simultaneously applied. The grandfather's will hands down the wisdom of darky trickery where subversion of the rule is allowed for in the context of pretending to be part of the "system." The darkies of the minstrel stage also often ridiculed the power of Mr. Interlocutor by turning the idea of their ignorance against him.

Ellison in *Shadow and Act* explains clearly how he meant the grandfather's will to be understood: "There is a good deal of spite in the old man, as there comes to be in the grandson, and the strategy he advises is a jiujitsu of the spirit, a denial and rejection through agreement. […] Thus his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the 'yes' which accomplishes the expressive 'no'" (70). It is in effect this interpretation of the darky act the hero learns to practice as well as learns to perceive in his grandfather's behavior by the end of the narrative. And eventually a great deal more, for by then he understands that measuring himself from the outside (through stereotypes, and objectified roles imposed on him) will not do, and that, in the words of Ellison "he must assert and achieve his own humanity" (*Shadow* 180).

Compared to the former technique that dominates the narrative, a considerably smaller part of the novel's masquerade illustrates the second type of masking practice, that of the Negro initiating the application of social masks. In *Shadow and Act* Ellison contends: "Very often […] the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race

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[123] For minstrelsy's inadvertent recognition of the black cultural idiom see Berndt Ostendorf's claim about minstrelsy giving way to the incorporation and "the translation of black music, black song, and black dance into the mainstream of American popular culture" (67).

[124] In connection to black minstrels Ostendorf describes the strategy of "the backstage conspiracy" originally borrowed from the world of jazz, which in essence is identical with the grandfather: "While superficially confirming the racial stereotype of whites on the front stage these minstrels let their black audiences in on the backstage secret" (84).

manners, to know his identity" (70). Ellison's Invisible Man launches a similar challenge against society at large when at the ultimate point of the journey he decides to embrace the mask of invisibility, a kind of inverted identity, but an identity nonetheless. The acceptance of invisibility is the end of the quest for identity, however negative or pessimistic this discovery might be. We can interpret this invisibility either as yet another mask that objectifies the general disregard and rejection with which the blacks are treated or, following Nathan Huggins' reading, as the essence of the black man's unmasked self, since: "outside the mask the black man was either invisible or threatening" (261).

There is a double irony involved in this search for identity that the narrative follows. Firstly, the genre itself is a pattern borrowed from the grand white European and American *Bildungsromans* with a twist, namely that the hero's route ends with the discovery of his own identity as a nonbeing, an acceptance of his exclusion from society. Secondly, in the best tradition of minstrel darkies, the hero decides to turn his invisibility to his advantage by using thousands of light bulbs to illuminate the blackness of his invisibility (*IM* 13). The final masquerade also happens to be the only one which does not involve an outwardly imposed objectification of the self (a denial of humanity). This kind of a mask—however abstract this mask of invisibility may be—Ellison affirms, serves two ends. One, it allows the Negro a certain amount of freedom to reject dominant discourses—facilitating the subversion of the dominant from within—, and secondly, it is a form of camouflage, which hides the real self, the true identity of blacks from the public. This second strategy involves both the objectification of the social assumptions pertaining to blackness—thus a social mask—, and the overturning of minstrel-type masking practices, when while accepting the assigned metaphoric invisibility blacks attempt to defy the system.

3. Masks of the American Absurd

The third strategy of masking integral to the novel has to do with the conditions and perspectives of identity formation in America. Basically this level of the masking games in the novel ties the technique of masking to the national history, the national character. There is something about masking and trickery, Ellison affirms, which is truly American, and beyond that, something that connects both of these notions to the idea and politics of survival. America as a "land of masking jokers" (*Shadow* 70) from Benjamin Franklin, through Lincoln all the way to Faulkner and Hemingway is repeatedly affirmed by Ellison. Without question *Invisible Man* extends specifically American themes that have widely been explored in

American literature from Herman Melville through Ralph Waldo Emerson (Ellison's namesake) to Mark Twain. Themes such as the tensions between reality and appearances; the narrator as social critic forced to assume the guise of the comic; exploration of the relationships between the individual and society whose morals and codes are chaotic, establish subtle connections between 19th-century American thought and dilemmas and their reverberation in the modern context of Ellison's novel. For Ellison as for his predecessors the social, ethnic and ethic incongruities of American culture and society can be condensed into the metaphor of the mask. As Ellison himself states in his collected essays:

> For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. (68)

This contradiction between expressed ideals and the actualities of everyday, the grand American irony, is embodied best in the organization of the Brotherhood in the novel, whose declared objective, to assist the underprivileged, turns out to be a sham in service of illusory party disciplines and Brother Jack's despotic ambitions. Blackface minstrelsy, too is subtly aware of this contradictory nature of American social and cultural reality when it upholds and at the same strike undermines the cultural materials as well as the figure of the Negro.

The conflicts of love and theft, desire and evasion, attraction and rejection have been widely noticed and acknowledged as central to the underlying strategies of minstrelsy, and basically the very same paradoxical rhythm characterizes the black hero's route in Ellison's novel as well. Each episode registers the uniform movement from submergence to refutal in the different interactions with members of the white society (Mr. Norton, Brother Jack, Sybil). The perception that the black American is necessarily caught up amidst these contradictory streams of thoughts, ideals and politics is to acknowledge from the part of Ellison the fundamental absurdity of American existence, and the racial grotesque (see Cassuto) as an ultimate reality of the Negro within it: mistreated, misunderstood, dismissed, objectified. Yet, it is the great achievement of Ellison's rendering of America's existential irony that he shows his protagonist as pursuing and defining his individuality in invisibility both against and despite the background of the American absurd. As the hero says in the Epilogue:

America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's "winner take nothing" that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many—This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gay. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going. (*IM* 564)

C) Minstrel Paraphernalia

Although minstrel paraphernalia were not part of the classic minstrel show, and therefore they did not appear in the catalogue of minstrel signs (in Chapter II of this dissertation), with minstrelsy's spread in consumer culture they did evolve as significant signifiers of the tradition.

There are two central scenes in the novel where Ellison enumerates a series of objects, and each of these affirms the significance and power of the world of objects to us humans. Objects represent and embody our history, thus manifesting both our personal history (as individuals) and collective past (as members of a collectivity, a nation or a group). Chapter 13 tells the story of the eviction of an old couple in Harlem. The protagonist perceives the proceedings first as an outsider but later gets involved in the events rousing the mob to action. While the white marshal leading the eviction and his men pile the household goods of the couple on the walk in the dirty snow, the narrator enlists the goods that he stumbles into[125]:

My eyes fell upon a pair of crudely carved and polished bones, *"knocking bones,"* used to accompany music at country dances, used in *black-face minstrels*; the flat ribs of a cow […] that gave off a sound, when struck, like heavy *castenets* (had he been a *minstrel*?) or the wooden block of a set of drums. […] *a dime* pierced with a nail hole so as to be worn about the ankle on a string for luck, an ornate greeting card […]; another card with a picture of what looked like *a white man in black-face* seated in the door of a cabin strumming a *banjo* beneath a bar of music and the lyric "Going back to my old cabin home" […] a *rabbit foot* […]. (emphasis added 265-66)

[125] The cultural and historical context and relevance of the scene (beyond the minstrel signification detailed above) is further highlighted in Virágos „Az elveszett üzenet" (205-207).

The jumble, as the narrator calls it, besides being a mess of objects is also a disorderly specification of icons that denote both the personal past of the couple, as well as on a more symbolical level they are iconic representations of Afro-American history. Strangely, minstrel signs predominate the set with instruments (the bones and the banjo) and figures (the blackfaced minstrel) from early minstrelsy, and the postcard, the dime and the rabbit foot[126] evoking the requisites of the coon song era (i.e., from the late 19th century). The objects listed partly serve to identify the old black couple as former slaves (also proven by the free papers found among the junk). The minstrel paraphernalia—however despised minstrelsy's heritage was in the eyes of Ellison—indicate that on a certain level they are also part of the history of blacks, since blacks also participated in it, like the old man in the couple might have had. Another aspect of the scene, however, is that the enumerated minstrel relics signify the figurative former enslavement of the couple, later also reaffirmed and documented by the actual emergence of the free papers. This reading is further justified by the nauseating feelings stirred in the narrator at the site, and the "bitter spurt of gall […] splattered" (*IM* 266) on the possessions of the old folks denotes his rejection of it all, both on the private and on the racial levels.

The second scene of relevance, where Ellison enumerates a series of objects comes in the last chapter of the book, Chapter 25. The hero trying to get out of a hole he fell into has to light his way out by burning the contents of the briefcase he received as a present at the beginning of his journey. His freedom symbolically depends upon his ability to shake off the weight of his former experiences. Like in a scene of exorcism he is setting the contents (the objects collected in the course of the journey) on fire, one after the other, symbolically and literally freeing himself from history—both personal and collective. The high-school diploma, denoting his Jim Crow education, Clifton's doll, the history of enslavement and humiliation associated with the minstrel heritage, the paper with his Brotherhood name and the anonymous letter, signaling his futile belief in a cause and his repeated betrayals, are all set aflame. After a furious rage and a nightmarish vision, the protagonist suddenly sobers up to see: "No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home" (*IM* 558). Having undone the past—represented by the confining objects—he now looks ahead, free, embittered, but with an assertion of his humanity.

[126] On further literary rendering of the rabbit foot as a lucky charm underlining the superstition characteristic of blacks (a typical stereotype born in the coon song era of minstrelsy), see Virágos „Az elveszett üzenet" 207.

Ellison clearly attributes great power to the world of objects, and accordingly they interweave the entire texture of the narrative with subtle symbolical threads of signification. From among the burning objects of the briefcase two are especially worth mentioning from the point of view of minstrel signification: Tod Clifton's Sambo doll and Mary's minstrel bank, both unequivocally signifying the harsh and racist tradition in minstrelsy.[127]

Tod Clifton, the youth leader in the Brotherhood disappointed by party politics and unable to follow Ras' (modeled after Marcus Garvey) aggressive race-supremacy nationalism, decides to peddle Sambo dolls in the streets. Although the narrator interprets Clifton's action as breakage within his personality (as well as takes it as an action targeted at him directly), he decides to glorify him after his death in the funeral oratory. Yet, the image of the Sambo doll keeps haunting the protagonist and it recurs through several episodes as a gloomy and frightening memento of minstrelsy:

> A grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper with thin black cardboard disks forming its head and which some mysterious mechanism was causing to move up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face. It's no jumping-jack, but *what*, I thought, seeing the doll throwing itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public, dancing as though it received a perverse pleasure from its motions. (421)

The perversity in the dancing Sambo, the impotent rage felt at the sight by the narrator is taken yet a step further when one of the bystanders looking from Clifton to the doll suddenly bursts out in laughter (423), thereby drawing a direct analogy between blackness and the grotesque performance. The fact that the narrator repeatedly tries to explain the twisted movement of the doll, and especially the mechanism that keeps the thing going, might hint at Ellison's contemplation of those mysterious mechanisms that keep minstrelsy as such going. The Sambo doll that the narrator picks up at the scene of Clifton's murder and which later reappears in the final chapter burns fast, yet as is also clear from Ellison's novel, the minstrel heritage did not extinguish as quickly as Ellison makes the doll vanish at the end of his tale.

At the earlier cited eviction scene the Invisible Man, while meditating upon the message of the junk people gather through their life, states: "*why were they causing me discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning as objects? And why did I see them now, as*

[127] For a detailed analysis of the minstrel bank and its relevance for the novel see Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* (280-282). The mechanism of the pitch-penny bank is confoundedly similar to Guinea's minstrel act in Melville's *Confidence-Man*, which draws further parallels between the two novels.

behind a veil that threatened to lift, stirred by the cold wind in the narrow street?" (267) Objects are larger and more significant than they appear to be at first. They carry ideologies, and are overburdened with meanings as signs of the past. They are history calcified. Quite tellingly it is the fate of the Invisible Man to attempt to rescue himself from the psychological, moral and also the political weight ingrained in these objects, yet as it turns out in the novel the weight of one's history is not so simple to shake off. Mementos of the minstrel past infiltrate the novel as concrete objects, and also as the hero's haunting memories of them. It is on account of this latter that their destruction to the last is deemed impossible.

D) Minstrel Stereotypes

The way the Sambo doll is kept in constant motion by a mysterious mechanism so is the hero kept running from the point of his dream that predicts this movement at the end of Chapter I to the final destination at his underground dwelling place. He is figuratively running through the history of his race, and the people and the objects he comes across through the journey represent different stages, historical moments of the past. The book is often interpreted as an encyclopedia of black history and life in the United States (although it is much more than that), since it summons those stereotypes, objectified perceptions that black Americans were often identified with.

The hero, for one, represents (through the larger part of the book) that image of the accommodationist, who frequently was associated with the Uncle Tom stereotype. Lucius Brockway at the Liberty Paint Factory, where the hero also works for a period, is also often seen in the criticism as matching that type. The president of the Negro college, Dr. Bledsoe, modeled after Booker T. Washington, is an accommodationist in the pragmatic sense, who pretends to submit to whites in order to receive financial support for his people from white benefactors. Brother Tarp, like the old black couple evicted represents the slave heritage in the novel, while Ras, the Exhorter depicts the radical black nationalism and race cult represented by Marcus Garvey. The figure of the comical coon easily fooled (the hero), the comic darky who fools others by his pretenses at fulfilling white expectations and stereotypical images (Trueblood and Dr. Bledsoe), the stereotype of the Brute Nigger, who possesses great sexual appeal and prowess (projected at the Invisible Man by Sybil[128]), the

[128] A detailed analysis of the episode is to be found in Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei*...(164-166); the stereotype of the Brute Negro is further introduced and conceptualized in the same book, see pages: 130-137.

cliché of the dancing darky, envisioning the darky as entertainer of white folks (embodied through Clifton's Sambo doll) are all minstrel derivations.

The enumeration of all the white-created black clichés in the novel would be impossible, they are so varied, and within each separate stereotype we can see many diverse ideologies materialized. It is partly the mission of the Invisible Man to recognize the clichés along the lines of which his perception is defined, and then to move from this outward perception and evaluation of himself inward toward discovering his real identity. The protagonist's final realization is that both the objects carried in his briefcase and the stereotypes through which society hopes to identify and deal with him, as Rovit claims: "represent not him, but the world's variegated projections of him" (111). Yet, it is upon the ashes of these fragments that the construction of his identity, the affirmation of his own humanity might begin. Minstrelsy's heritage extends into the present reality of the Invisible Man, and he, like Ellison, knows fully well that it is not through the denial but the integration of it into the black past that the formulation of identity (both personal and national) in the present might become feasible.

[2] John Berryman and the Minstrel Tradition[129]

The link between Ralph Ellison and John Berryman has been supplied by the former, who had the "suspicion that Berryman was casting me [him] as a long-distant Mister Interlocutor—or was it Mister Tambo?—" (Mariani 387) in the *Dream Songs*. The above claim, however, has never been substantiated anywhere else, and Berryman's masquerade as a black man in his poem cycle has alternately been rejected as "inadequate simulation" and glorified as a brilliant experiment relying "on cross-racial ventriloquism" (Gubar 137). The example of John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, nonetheless, is a fairly obvious case for the perpetuance of minstrelsy, since the volume abounds in quite apparent minstrel references, although their meaning, and relevance are not readily accessible. By looking at some specific examples from the collection I will examine particularly which minstrel elements Berryman borrowed for his poetry (characters, certain psychological strategies and dialect), how these elements have been transfigured to fit the new medium, and what possible causes, intentions, urges prompted the author to turn to this dubious tradition.

John Berryman was an outstanding figure of the confessional school of poetry that was popular among poets after World War II. He taught in Cambridge, England, and was

professor of literature at several prestigious American universities such as Harvard, Princeton. During the last one and a half decades of his life he was professor at the University of Minnesota, where his life tragically ended when he jumped into the Mississippi River in front of faculty and students in 1972. The *Dream Songs* have been seen by critics either as Berryman's brilliant masterpiece, or as a confused and confusing chain of confessional poems through which the author suffers to give a proper expression to his troubled thoughts and feelings. Whether the work of a genius or of a troubled mind is not our task here to decide. The work nonetheless has been referred back to various literary traditions that seem to fertilize its expressions. Some quote the poems' indebtedness to Petrarch (also to Williams and Eliot), whose long poems might have been models for Berryman, where the individual sections, although seemingly stand apart, in reality build from and closely refer to one another, composing a unity together. Other commentators cite Berryman's rewriting of Whitman's *Song of Myself* with the difference that here it is the dreamed self that confesses about himself and America. As Berryman puts it in song #22 in a truly Whitmanian fashion:

> *I am the little man who smokes and smokes.*
> *I am the girl who does know better but.*
> *I am the king of the pool.*
> *I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut.*
> *I am a government official & a goddamned fool.*
> *I am a lady who takes jokes.* (24)[130]

The literary cross-references could be listed and analyzed endlessly, but Berryman's *Dream Songs* are clearly distinct from these literary models, and it would be a crude simplification to interpret them as mere re-writings of, say, the Song of Myself theme. The ambiguities, allusions, jokes and intricate coherences of the *Dream Songs* play upon but also move beyond the modernist traditions. From the network of the many possible cultural intertexts that the poems carry I will follow up on Berryman's entanglement with minstrel signification.

While reviewing the impact of minstrel signs in the realm of literature Berryman's contribution is of key importance, since his collection *77 Dream Songs* (1964) directly refers to the minstrel tradition. In the volume the lyrical "I" assumes various different identities which converse between themselves in unique, polyphonic voices. These voices are all reflections of Berryman's self-examining, confessional persona, readable and interpretable

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[129] Part of the subsequent analysis can be found in Hungarian in Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* 325-8.
[130] Citations from the *Dream Songs* are all taken from Berryman, *77 Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, 1964.

from several angles. One layer of Berryman's speech evokes a familiar element from the world of the one-time minstrel show, the character of **Mr. Bones, the minstrel endman**. Like the minstrel endmen, Berryman engages himself in biting humor and satire throughout the cycle, although here the final target of the jokes is usually the author himself. Yet, Berryman makes it a point to draw the lyrical personae and his own identity strictly apart. He explains the multiplicity of his poetic personae thus:

> The poem is about a man who is apparently named Henry, or says he is. He has a tendency to talk about himself in the third person. His last name is in doubt. It's given at one point as Henry House and at other points as Henry Pussy-cat. He has a friend, moreover, who addresses him regularly as Mr. Bones, or some variations on that. (qtd. in Meredith 88).

The dialogues between Henry and his unnamed friend signify on the acrimonious, witty, ironic humor of **the repartee** between the minstrel theater's Tambo and Bones characters, where the unnamed friend acts as Tambo in the dialogues with Henry-Bones. Some, like Helen Vendler, see in their exchanges the replica of the *Id* and the *Superego*, others, like Susan Gubar, mention archetypal allusions like son and father, since the unnamed friend appears to be sane and rational at most times, while Henry is mostly irrational, his behavior is absurd, he is often bored and drifting, wishing to die, as it is apparent in song #14.

> […] *I conclude now I have no*
> *inner resources, because I am heavy bored.*
> *Peoples bore me,*
> *literature bores me, especially great literature,*
> *Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes*
> *as bad as achilles.* (16)

Although the humor of the rapid-fire exchanges between the friend and Henry appears at times in the cycle (evidenced in songs like #4 and #5) the darker side of the minstrel mode is altogether more dominant. It is present in the cycle through the psychological tensions inherent in minstrelsy's masking game.

The questions that might obviously arise in the reader is what makes Berryman assume the guise of this discreditable tradition? Why does he engage himself in these controversial roles that represent a history of white expropriation? The answers to these questions are as complex as the songs themselves. Partly, we have to observe, as Robert

Lowell noted at one place that Berryman's dream verses only expedite the portrayal of inner struggle in the cycle:

> The dreams are not real dreams but a walking hallucination in which anything that might have happened to the author can be used at random. Anything he has seen, overheard, or imagined can go in. The poems are about Berryman, or rather they are about a person he calls Henry. Henry is Berryman seen as himself, a *poete maudit*, child and puppet. (Internet)

Berryman's innermost feelings, repressions and doubts are projected into this puppet that he invents for the expression of his secret self. This psychological mechanism is almost identical with the one that was perceptible in the minstrel theater where partly suppressed feelings of self-doubt or guilt were expressed tinged with the racial mold. Henry-Berryman is tossed about "with a mixture of tenderness and absurdity, pathos and hilarity" (Lowell, Internet), as is expressed in this section of song #26:

> *All the knobs & softness of, my God,*
> *the ducking & trouble it swarm on Henry,*
> *at one time.*
> *—What happened then, Mr. Bones?*
> *you seem excited-like.*
> *—Fell Henry back into the original crime : art, rime*
>
> *besides a sense of others, my God, my God,*
> *and a jealousy for the honour (alive) of his country,*
> *what can get more odd?*
> *and discontent with the thriving gangs & pride.*
> *—What happened then, Mr. Bones?*
> *—I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.* (28)

It is quite clear that Berryman would not be able to explore the complexities of his psyche were he to speak in the first person, and his self-irony would also likely be incomplete without the minstrel filter. Berryman-Henry the crying—at times raging—comedian acts out, but also re-lives the role of the marginalized. This imagined union with the minorities (with the ethnic Other) is merely applied, however, as the symbol of a wrecked, failed life filled with agony, and is never an actual identification. Similarly to the minstrel act, Berryman keeps a distance from the dreamed alter-egos. The author simultaneously preens in his own

act, and suffers from its ossifying, compelling roles and tasks. His Negro imitations do not evoke the playfulness of early minstrel representations so much as the **excruciating scizophrenia of the minstrel mask**, pointing towards an inner division impossible to eliminate. The madness of masking is beautifully highlighted in song #40, probably Berryman's most famous piece from the collection:

> *I'm scared a lonely. Never see my son,*
> *easy be not to see anyone,*
> *combers out to see*
> *know they're goin somewhere but not me.*
> *Got a little poison, got a little gun,*
> *I'm scared a lonely.*
>
> *I'm scared a only one thing, which is me,*
> *from othering I don't take nothing, see,*
> *for any hound dog's sake.*
> *But this is where I livin', where I rake*
> *my leaves and cop my promise, this' where we*
> *cry oursel's awake.*
>
> *Wishin was dyin but I gotta make*
> *it all this way to that bed on these feet*
> *where peoples said to meet.*
> *Maybe but even if I see my son*
> *forever never, get back on the take*
> *free, black & forty-one.* (44)

Hesitating between masked identity and real life, attraction to and fear from the marginalized, acting and becoming, Berryman's balancing act recalls the psychological strategies blackface's impersonators stooped to. Canarroe notes, however, that although Berryman's speech and lyrical personae might strike us as exploitative, his "feelings of kinship [with blacks and Jews] are sincere, touchingly so, expressing the self-mockery of a victim" (qtd. in Gubar 279).

To a certain extent one might interpret Berryman's poem cycle as a chain of visions written under the spell of a nightmare or a feverish dream, in which the author's inner repressions and secret selves portrayed in blackface are partly applied to peep into some of the negative historical roles American whites had taken throughout the past. If we stick to this

reading, it might also mean that the poems are more and different from a simple self-examination serving to unfold the inner tensions of their author's personality. Berryman's regression to the rite of blackface—if we allow for this reading—might be seen as an attempt to face a portion of the nation's past. His aim is clearly not to make amends or do penance for past sins in the name of whites. Whether intended or not, Berryman reveals essential components of the minstrel mask in the ambiguities of style (moving between the artistic, the playful and the infantile), mood and identity characterizing each and every poem. Through these inner tensions one is reminded of the cultural, social and psychological ambivalences of minstrelsy itself.

The third layer where Beryman's playing upon the minstrel heritage is perceptible is through the use of **minstrel dialect** as is evidenced for instance in this section from song #2. The song apparently, at least according to Gubar was written to commemorate minstrelsy's first famous entertainer, T. D. Rice:

> *Arrive a time when all coons lose their grip,*
> *but is he come? Le's do a hoedown, gal,*
> *one blue, one shuffle,*
> *if them is all you seem to require. Strip,*
> *ol benger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on*
> *one chaste evenin.*
>
> *—Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin*
> *yo legal & yo good. Is you fell well?*
> *Honey dusk do sprawl.*
> *—Hit's hard. Kinged or thinged, though, fling & wing.*
> *Poll-cats are coming, hurrah, hurray.*
> *I votes in my hole.* (4)

The question that might be asked again is why Berryman would use a dialect so contaminated if he sympathizes with the plea of blacks. In her book entitled *Racechanges* Susan Gubar addresses the same problem and looks into the possible motivations for Berryman's choice of dialect. According to Gubar, Berryman's originality lies in the fact that his adaptation of minstrel dialect is not slavish imitation of black speech but through it he aims to represent "his predominantly white audience's stereotypical image of blacks" and along with it "the difficulty of altering something what is known to be destructive" (164). And as she further notes:

> Dis and Dat's retrograde pleasures give Berryman a chance to display his addiction to a host of damaging activities he knows to be harmful not only to himself (drinking, whoring around, smoking, suicidal abjection) but also to the culture at large (consumerism, militarism, racism). (164)

The minstrel dialect is fittingly identified thus with all kinds of white perversions and absurdities (leading from personal concerns to larger cultural issues). It is not applied primarily to either parodying blacks, or in any way delineating the racial Other, much rather it becomes a vehicle through which to demonstrate the fallibility of whiteness. Imitation black talk serves in Berryman as a metaphorical tool for the evocation of the Negro-aping whites, and generally speaking of artificiality, of failure (whether personal or communal, the mimicry theatrical or real). Strangely enough this interpretation of Dis and Dat (its power to represent whiteness more than blackness) is identical with how blacks view minstrel dialect or its literary applications. I will conclude with what William Meredith said at one place: "this dialect gets at the truth in a world where the Negro's situation is both a symptom and the metaphor of our failure" (89).

[3] Signifying Practices in Ntozake Shange's *spell #7*[131]

What I wish to call attention to in this subchapter are really two different types of signification, one that occurs in the unique semiotic system of the white-created minstrel stage, and secondly signifying as it is understood and applied within the context of black discourses. As we know from Henry Louis Gates, signifying generally denotes a type of parody, overturning and subversion among black people. Gates writes, "[t]he black rhetorical tropes, subsumed under signifying, would include marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozen, and so on" (237). Whereas in white discourse signifying implies merely the referential power of a specific group of signs that build up a semiotic system, in black discourse signifying is rebellion, it is in Bloom's phrase a "trope-reversing trope" (qtd. in Gates 236). In this analysis I will predominantly comment on black signifying practices applied at the apropos of minstrel signification, and will highlight especially this rebellious attitude behind black signification.

[131] A large part of the ensuing discussion has already been published in Hungarian as a segment of Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* 328-334.

Ntozake Shange (a Zulu name meaning "she who comes with her own things," and "she who walks like a lion") born Paulette Williams, an illustrious black American dramatist, poet and performing artist, has already been recognized by several awards such as the Obie, a Los Angeles Time Book Prize for Poetry and a Puschart Prize in the United States; yet, her name lapses into relative obscurity over in Europe. Part of the reason for Shange's considerable (and let me add, unfortunate) anonymity in European theatrical circles results from the rather specific thematic scope her writings seem to cover. Her poems, dramas, and novels tend to zoom in on the most pungent problems of African-American women, measuring the chances of black female cultural production in the still hegemonic and exclusive cultural landscape of the American theatrical world. As one critic notes, "she foregrounds the intersection of race and gender oppression in the experiences of African-American women" (*CLC* 346). She also shows great interest in the survival of black folk art and the rescue work black American artists may perform in order to preserve, cherish the remnants of traditional black culture.

Although Shange's fame has been largely founded on the success of her *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is not enuf* (1975), here I will mostly treat another dramatic work of hers, entitled *spell #7* (1979). Through the analysis I will hint at some of the recurring themes laid out above, but more significantly discuss aspects of both minstrel signification and black signifying practices in this work. Firstly, I will explore in what shapes and forms minstrel signification occurs in the work; next I will identify specific black signifying strategies Shange/the text puts to use in the presentation of the blackface mode (ranging from undoing, through subversion to rewriting). As a conclusion, I will pose the puzzling question of why so many contemporary black artists (novelists, dramatists, producers, etc.) turn to this dubious white tradition of minstrelsy, and suggest possible answers for their motivations.

(A) Minstrel Signification

What is obvious at the very first reading, even for the least initiated observer is that the play abounds in references to blackface minstrelsy. The most striking of these minstrel references in *spell #7* include Lou, who simultaneously appears as himself, the black magician as well as Mr. Interlocutor, a traditional minstrel part, the straight man in the original minstrel show setting. In both of his personae he is the controller and director of the entire show. There are also the blackfaced black actors, who when at work perform in blackface in the entertainment world of New York, but when away from it, they gather at Eli's lower Manhattan bar to

discuss, in the words of the play their "secrets, fantasies, nightmares, or hope" (254). The use of black masks that the characters assume and cast away with great frequency (as Mr. Interlocutor orders them to, or sometimes at their own will) establish a close symbolical tie to the idea of mimicry and masking—the central aesthetic signs in the original minstrel acts.

There are also occasional and scattered hints that connote the minstrel tradition in more disguised forms. The minstrel shuffle, the soft shoe step that Mr. Interlocutor performs at the beginning was a traditional minstrel dance number. The theatrical company that appears with "the countenance of stepan fetchit" (248) at the opening alludes to the famous movie star who carried the Sambo character of minstrel stages on to the Hollywood show business world. As Donald Bogle claims, "Fetchit was the first Negro to receive featured billing, and special scenes were often written into pictures for him. He popularized the dim-witted, tongue-tied stammer and the traditional slow-lazyman shuffle" (39) that the characters of Shange's, at least in their stage personae are also bound to uphold. Through these theatrical parts, devices, movements Shange catalogues stereotypical markers of blackface as well as signifies upon the minstrel tradition, in order to dissect and unveil its politics, psychological and aesthetic maneuvers. These and other minor minstrel signs are coherently worked into the subversive black signifying practices of the play which will be listed below.

From among the minstrel signs Shange catalogues in her play the most striking and memorable element is the "huge black-face mask hanging from the ceiling" (247). This mask is a looming ominous presence which powerfully affects the atmosphere and dominates each momentum of the drama. It functions as a constant reminder of the accursed white tradition passed down to black people, although it does work as more than just a figment from the past. The sinister mask is an evocation of the past and a reference point through which the actions of the play, the fate and experiences of the characters unfold, and upon which the larger meaning of the play depends. Karen Cronacher, a critic of the play, hence interprets this device as something through which Shange confronts "the audience with the minstrel mask's historical role in the American theatre, and the question of its enduring power" (177).

In the opening stage instructions Shange asserts: "members of the audience must integrate this grotesque, larger-than-life misrepresentation of life" (247) actually starting from the moment they enter the theater. In Deborah Geis' comment this note allows the ritualistic function of the play to shine through, that is, it is not only the play addressing a passively receptive audience, but the audience is called upon to "address the performance" (368). Shange simultaneously presents and critiques the minstrel mask emphasizing that it does not only dominate the stage or control future happenings in the drama. It also is a clear

"misrepresentation of life" (247) something that works like a filter blotting reality and falsifying truthful and valid experience. When the mask is lowered, its significance and dominance expand over the actions of the play; when lifted, it strangely gains relevance through its temporary absence. The whole text could be read through its rhythmical relationship to this central device, the mask's dominant and domineering function which indeed shapes Shange's world. In my interpretation, the text (among other things) as the embodiment or envisioning of black experience struggles to define itself as distinct from the lure of the mask. The mask, on the other, is a specimen of white culture primarily construed to forge theatrical representation of blackness. The drama is indeed a battle of black and white signifying practices for the control of the representation of blackness in the theater.

Shange motions at least three strategies to do away with the spell of the mask, as well as the entire tradition it stands for, i.e., the heritage of blackface minstrelsy. Here I will cite examples to (1) the subversion of blackface minstrelsy as a dominant white discourse, (2) the undoing of the stereotyped patterns of black experience, and (3) to the rewriting of blackface through elements of black folklore.

(B) Authorial/Textual Strategies of Rebellion

1. Subversion

The subversive strategy of *spell #7* has to do with the psychological games that lurk behind blackface masking. The original minstrel stage (to drastically simplify things) sold hegemonic tales of white supremacy by hiding behind the stage persona of the black man. It was big enough of an irony to strengthen the myth of dominance of one by hiding behind the guises of another, but the blackface stage moved even further than that. What Shange aims to stress additionally is that blackface worked not because it repeated the familiar social and economic enslavement of a people by the use of a symbolical system of effacement, but because it escaped into representation from identification. From the "safe region of spectacle" as Deborah Geis calls it, Shange insists to take the audience to "the unsafe region of pain and emotional assailability" (369) thus subverting the minstrel performance. The show that profited from creating a spectacle of blacks and itself was perceived as performance and spectacle is subverted in Shange's text as Geis observes to become "the subtext of the spectacle itself" (370). When Lou says: "why dontchu c'mon and live my life for me" (250),

he parodies the essential psychological stress that underlies the blackface mask, and the blackface act. The blackface farce, while it seemingly undertakes passing the color line, does not ever allow crossing to the realm of real black life. Lou's ironical suggestion is to replace representation with being (as is stressed in Cronacher also [186]), the play with actuality, the fantasy with the real. The submerged question is whether any white actor of the blackface stage would be willing to substitute their mimicry with black identity. The self-assurance, the dominance and myth of blackface are shaken since these operate only on condition that the safe shelter of the white skin can be reproduced after each performance. Playing the black is safe, because it is temporary.

Blackface mimicry can be sustained only when the danger of becoming that which is parodied is excluded. Shange's subversion is founded on turning mimicry into the ritual of black living. Lou's call reveals this psychological phobia at the heart of the blackface act that pretends becoming but is forever avoiding and is terrified of being that which is conjured up. Lou's promise at the beginning of the play that you'd be "colored and love it" (249) is a threatening prophecy, and, as Shange indicates, it is as much of a lie as the minstrel stage was a lie. This curious prediction or spell that Lou has the audience bound by allows the viewers to share in the psychological burdens of the stage experienced by the white initiators: becoming and experiencing blackness from up close—not eliminating the darkest aspects of it. Shange, however, also reflects on the psychology of blackface from the black side. When Alec says "i'm not playing the fool or the black buck pimp circus/ i'm an actor not a stereotype" or later "i cant stay in these 'hate whitey' shows/ cuz they aren't true" (283), he discloses the fact that the recognition of black talent is circumscribed along boundaries that whites define. Success for blacks is impossible apart from the white world, as Alec states at one point: "if i become a success that means i have to talk to white folks more than in high school/ they are everywhere […] they are now all over my life/ and i dont like it" (284).

Shange thus subverts the myth of blackface's power by turning the spectacle into black experience and also by emphasizing the psychological paranoia that feeds it. She posits in its stead the real psychological and social pressures that blacks suffer from thus prompting audiences to question the conditions, expectations and fallacies of the original productions.

2. Undoing

The dramatic sequence illustrates aspects of black living and experience in order to demonstrate the colorfulness of black life (contrasted to the schematized black life dramatized

in minstrelsy) and the complications of it (flattened out in the easy thematic patterns of the blackface stage). Whereas the minstrel stage popularized and sold certain stereotyped versions of black identity and experience, Shange aims at undoing these essentializing approaches and highlights complexities and varieties. The very form of the drama—choreopoem—allows this multi-voiced introduction to black life, denying monolithic interpretations popularized by the minstrels. The idols of black culture such as Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, Tina Turner, Butch Morris, Etta James are positioned against the artificiality of white-dominated entertainment world (symbolized through Madison Square Garden). The constructedness of the minstrel show is made fun of by the cast's pretense at happiness and willingness in doing the blackface: "we dress up" "is our way of saying/ you getting the very best" (259). Even the blackface mask that looms "larger in the darkness" reveals that minstrelized interpretations only work in the darkness and ignorance of the past. The task for the present is to bring this device out of past darkness into the light, the reality of the present.

The politics of representation inherent in blackface is strangely equated with (historic as well as current) national politics pertaining to blackness. When Eli the barkeeper presents the rules of the bar he ironically comments on the founding principles of the US, which seem grotesque both in the light of minstrel practices (claiming to present a true picture of black life) and in the light of national political ideas claimed to be democratic. The imperatives of immaculate chastity, whiteness, cleanliness reveal the underlying paranoia of the nation to turn everything white, and to exclude "discoloration" at all costs. When Eli extends these rules beyond the bar over the construction of "myself my city my theater" (253), he indicates that these obviously racist, exclusive ideologies determine and limit the possibilities of identity formation, the prospects of minorities in local and national politics, as well as in the realm of performance, i.e., in the theater. While blackface insists on presenting true black life, in fact it undermines its chances emphasizing whiteness behind the mask. As it becomes apparent, the theatrical world at large works by annihilating the black subject. Another example of this is Lily's story who attempted to get a black part for which she was too white, but when auditioning for a white role was charged with unethical behavior (285). Knowing the history of blackface in which white actors regularly assumed black roles, the refusal of Lily seems unjust and outrageous.

The unfair marginalization of the black self and, more significantly, of the black female body comes to the fore in Act II. In the statements "i cdnt say i learned it/ az niggah cant learn views" (272), "the whole world knows that nobody loves the black woman like they love farrah fawcett-majors" (275) or "i never saw a black woman reading nietzsche"

(278), Shange reveals that these degrading stereotypical views of blacks have seeped into and taken root in the national consciousness from the minstrel shows, so that the debasement of blacks has grown into a shared ritual. Breaking down, confounding these clichéd views is made possible, overwritten by the unique black rituals depicted in the play. Such is, for instance, Lily's monologue about her brushing her hair, which develops form a simple monotonous act of self beautification through obsessive dealing with appearances into signification on blackness as uniqueness, blackness as culture, blackness as self-identity and shelter (266). But this is only one example through which the politics of exclusion is shifted to emphasize the politics of exceptionalism. Another beautiful example of this is Maxine's closing story about pieces of gold purchased for each black person who does something wrong, who violates this code of exceptionalism. "i wear all these things at once" says she, "to remind the black people that it cost a lot for us to be here/ our value/ can be known instinctively" (290).

As Geis observes, "the very nature of role-playing has been appropriated as a tool for 'performing a self'" (370). To paraphrase Geis's statement, Shange is simultaneously applying and undoing the idea of role-play (the performance of a prescribed identity) in order to give way to the creation of the real self. The most astonishing example of this is Sue-Jean's story about her pregnancy with a child named "myself." The story symbolically references the abuse, hardships and sacrifices until the "me" is born. The creation and performance of the self is portrayed as a hard and troublesome birth which occurs through the path of humiliations, self-torture, and hopefulness.

3. Rewriting, De-spelling

Underlying both of the above strategies is Shange's determination to separate and define black culture and experience as clearly distinct from the lure of blackface. Her exorcism of the blackface sign and signifying practices becomes complete by re-writing or rather over-writing the original blackface mimicry by employing elements of black folklore: rhythms, songs, movements, culture heroes. In other words, she signifies on minstrel signification, and thus launches a rebellion against its system of signs. The black gestures, stories that she spreads over the blackface act undercut the power of minstrel mimicry. As a more effective device, Shange sometimes replaces the devices and characters of the original blackface acts with objective markers and characters from African-American folklore. By this substitution

she manages to rewrite blackface's story from a black point of view, as well as reclaim the past that was forged under minstrelsy's spell.

The minstrel mask domineering the stage intentionally evokes the "African voodoo mask," observes Geis (368). Lou appearing as the trickster figure of black folktales de-spells the role of Mr. Interlocutor. Lou asserts, "everything i do is magic these days and it's very colored, very now you see it/ now you dont mess with me" (248). The fact that the straight man of minstrelsy (the one who controls action and orders the scenes) is displaced by the figure of the black magician denotes that in order to undo the heritage of blackface, one has to turn to magic, to the roots of blackness, folk knowledge and wisdom. In order to undo the spell one has to rewrite blackface's ritual, and smuggle true black elements back into the falsified patterns. Blackface mimicry applied to dispossess black people of their own selfhood is exorcised, over-written, de-spelled by the force of black magic. The play hence becomes a celebration of that blackness that was buried and undermined by blackface. black ritual overtakes white mimicry.

(C) Blacks and the Blackface Tradition: A Dubious Alliance

When Hermine Pinson, the American Literature professor of William and Mary College visited our department in Debrecen in 2001 I briefly talked to her about the fairly recent tendency of black people collecting paraphernalia from the minstrel past, and black authors signifying on the tradition of blackface in their works. As the professor explained, these phenomena spring from the same root, a common demand in black people to reappropriate, and take back a segment of their past no matter how grotesque or twisted this past may be.

Interestingly, thus, blacks seem to have a claim over minstrel relics, because they are left with very little objective ties to slavery times (and minstrel relics might function as such), and secondly, they want to obtain these relics from whites or grab a hold of these before whites accumulate them in their homes. Taking a hold, reclaiming, de-spelling the black past tend to motivate not only processes of the cultural life, but also the literary expressiveness of blacks these days. Evidently blackface still looms large and affects sorting out and defining black past and present. The cultural and literary strategies activated to overpower its influence appear to be a fertile ground for future research.

[II] Sporadic Literary Minstrel References

Whichever way we look the minstrel gesture is everywhere in 20th-century American literature. Ranging from the smallest and seemingly innocent phrase or a brief dialogue fragment through fictional characters passing the color lines, all the way to the application of imitation black talk (in Gubar's phrasing racial ventriloquism), minstrel signification takes varied and fascinating forms. The difficulty in detecting and identifying minstrel signs in 20th-century literary works lies not only in the radical broadening of the corpus as we come to consider sporadic minstrel survivals, but also in the increasingly more abstract and metaphorical evocations of the phenomenon. Depending on how widely or narrowly we choose to interpret minstrelsy and its related signs we move from scattered gestures, dialogue fragments, and replicas of minstrel stereotypes to the complex world of literature on the passing theme or a long list of examples in racial ventriloquism.

Taking the blackface mask as our initial example, we can move from John Barth's hint at a "minstrel in reverse" while referring to a Noxzema-covered face in his story "Lost in the Funhouse" all the way to complex literary renderings of racechanges by authors as diverse as Carl Van Vechten, James Weldon Johnson or Nella Larsen. If we choose to open the focus even wider, the blackface mask (originally understood in this thesis as one of the central aesthetic signs of minstrelsy) in a more general sense might anticipate thus incorporate all the boundary crossings depicted in literature, and then we already have an almost unmanageable corpus at hand. This approach would necessitate the extension of the analysis of minstrel signification into works treating racial cross-dressing, the theme of racechanges or inverse racial mimicry (see for instance Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* [1900], James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* [1912], Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* [1928], Nella Larsen's *Passing* [1929], and more)[132] through the literature of gender crossing (see from *Huckleberry Finn* through Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* an extremely wide variety of works) and the violation of class demarcation lines (starting with the stories of Horatio Alger to works modeled after the pattern like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) to the wide-scale application of racial ventriloquism (discussed in great detail in Gubar [134-168]).

[132] For an in-depth analysis of narratives on racial cross-dressing or the related theme of the tragic mulatto consult Susan Gubar's *Racechanges* (104-107), or Virágos-Varró *Jim Crow örökösei* (111-117).

Such degree of generalization, however, would necessarily blur the contours of the minstrel phenomenon and ensnarl the question of its literary survivals, moreover, it could result in the autocratic reduction of the contexts of the examined literary works.

Yet, given the range of concrete literary minstrel signification, we do not have to turn to tricks of overgeneralizations to have a substantial corpus at hand. The sporadic minstrel references, however scattered and varied they might be, can be systematized. Their classification may reflect the extent of their presence in the given text (moving from smaller to more complex significations), they might also be chronologically arranged, or classified with respect to their connection to certain literary movements and trends. The ensuing discussion will follow a chronological arrangement of selected texts while applying the arbitrary division of the pre-1945 and post-1945 period, but will also integrate the approach regarding order of magnitude as analyses will move from the smallest literary minstrel references toward more complex and systematic references to the minstrel tradition.

[1] Sporadic Minstrel Signification from the Pre-1945 Period

When in 1916 Benjamin Brawley declared that "[t]he day of Uncle Remus as well as Uncle Tom is over" (qtd. in Gross 8), he did not only anticipate the position authors of the Harlem Renaissance were to assume with respect to the harmful heritage of minstrel stereotypes (i.e., that of unequivocal opposition), he also set the tune for an entire generation of black authors. The gesture that prevails with respect to the minstrel heritage throughout the period of black revival (which, in fact was more of a birth than a renaissance as many critics note[133]) is one of unanimous rejection. Yet, quite paradoxically, while black authors attempted to write themselves out of the confining framework of minstrel dialect and the minstrel character clichés, they kept recycling and strangely reinvigorating minstrelsy's formerly low-prestige signifying arsenal.

One of the most evident examples for the survival of minstrel signification through the Harlem Renaissance comes from Langston Hughes, whose poem "Minstrel Man" (1926) is a frequently anthologized and often analyzed piece. Although a relatively short poem, its complex invocation of the minstrel phenomenon is both appalling and challenging.

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter

[133] For the Harlem Renaissance being a misnomer see Susan Gubar 95, or Virágos, *Négerség* 215.

And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long.

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
You do not hear
My inner cry;
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing
You do not know
I die.[134]

Central to the poem's undertaking is the registration of divisions between outside and inside, appearance and inward reality, the mask and what it conceals. Hughes' minstrel man is not the stereotypical grinning fool of blackface, more the bearer and embodiment of the tensions that consume the masked delineator. The poem alludes to the tradition of blacks taking blackface roles in the entertainment world, while also implying the larger cultural and social necessity for blacks to play roles in the white world. Thus the lyrical "I" and "you" also mark a clear racial divide. The fragmentation into outward appearance and inner cry, apparent gaiety and inward dissolution ultimately point to an impenetrable divide between enchanted audiences and the tortured blackface actor. What is observed and what is felt, reveal the liminality of both the delineator (the performer behind the mask) as well as the delineated (the masked role). As the focus is shifting from the surface appearance to inner consciousness we move with Hughes toward the psychic struggle hidden behind the blackface mask, and ultimately to the souls of black people. The poem simultaneously comments on the psychological contents of the blackface mask and indicates through it the larger cultural realities of blacks—compelled to enact mortifying roles in order to achieve recognition at all.

The minstrel man's mask is both symbolic and protective, and its presence also asserts the time-tested dilemma whether the inner self of the black subject is accessible to the uninitiated. The surface gaiety of the blackface act conceals the tortured face of the minstrel,

[134] Hughes, "Minstrel Man." *The Negro Caravan.* Ed. Sterling A. Brown, et. al. New York: Arno P, 1969. 370.

the crippling effect of the mask as well as the inward reality of the Negro, all of which are rendered inaccessible to the white voyeurs. As William R. Nash puts it in his recent analysis of the poem: Hughes refuses "to portray himself or his fellow blacks as simpleminded. His poem, "Minstrel Man," challenges conceptions about black identity, reminding readers that the surface frivolity and lightheartedness associated with the minstrel tradition often masks deep personal pain and always obscures black performers' humanity" (150).

In the chapter of her book *Racechanges* entitled "Making White, Becoming black: Myths of Racial Origin in the Harlem Renaissance," Susan Gubar poses the question whether minstrelsy could be "effectively adopted and adapted by African-American artists or would it prove inexorably debilitating, even demeaning to them?" (95). As Gubar asserts, there were examples to both in the respective period. Whereas Hughes clearly reflects upon the former attitude as he willfully subverts minstrel clichés using them to reveal profound truths about the conditions of black Americans, many black authors have fallen victim to the second alternative by mostly inadvertently repeating harmful clichés or strategies borrowed from minstrelsy. Nonetheless, whichever attitude we might choose to highlight, what should be clear from the above is that defining one's individual standpoint with respect to minstrelsy's heritage prevails as a leading authorial dilemma throughout the Harlem Renaissance. As Gubar further elucidates, the incorporation of minstrel signification in black literature necessarily led to a double bind: to adopt minstrelsy was "to collude in one's own fetishization; but to relinquish efforts to adapt it […] [was] to lose completely a cultural past appropriated by whites" (96). Neither the re-affirmation nor the complete removal of the minstrel sign could provide a promising alternative.

A great portion of the literature composed during the Harlem Renaissance is devoted to the rendition of **inverse minstrel masquerades**, as the characters attempt to pass the color line from black to white. Although originally envisioned as access to the privileged cultural space of whites, passing is often linked to the loss of a true identity "a haunting estrangement from colored origins" in narratives like James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) or Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Yet, it is not my intention or task here to give a systematic analysis of the literature of passing in the Harlem Renaissance, neither do I wish to supply an exhaustive list of narratives written on the theme. With the examples given I only wish to indicate that the inverse or reverse strategies of minstrel masking (as passing for white by blacks can be interpreted) result in psychological turmoil roughly similar to that brought about by blackface masking. The attachment of the coveted mask of whiteness concludes in the disappearance or at least the shattering of the identity

veiled behind the disguise, just the same way as in the case of the blackface delineator. Whereas Hughes' "Minstrel Man" asserts the reality of the black self while deploring social conditions that necessitate the application of the mask, the authors of the literature of passing reverse but do not subvert the interpretation of the blackface mask.

Besides the two opposing streams within black literature (one subverting the other recycling minstrel clichés and strategies), white authors of modernism also made their voices heard roughly around the time of the Harlem Renaissance. These white modernists, while they tend to adapt and recycle the signifying elements of the minstrel tradition in their works, thus reaffirming minstrelsy's predominantly racist arsenal, however, do not negate their similarly powerful attraction towards and tampering of the resources of black culture. In fact, the two processes often run parallel. Alternately labeled as "romantic racism"[135] or "imperialist nostalgia,"[136] the exploitation of black cultural materials by white American authors of the modernist period was a widespread practice. The motivations, nonetheless, vary. As Gubar explains these authors either wish to tap "a dissident lexicon of subversive power, one at odds with the hegemonic cadences of mainstream culture" (136), or they emphasize ideas of "ineptitude, passivity, or savagery" (Gubar 136) in association with blackness and therefore they feel entitled to speak for and in the name of blacks.

Out of the rich spectrum of modernist excursions to the language of what Gubar calls "Boomley BOOM," an imitation black speech (137),—also involving the simultaneous assumptions of pseudo-black identity—, I will cite but one example, that of Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo." I have to remark, however, that several writings of Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot (especially: *Sweeney Agonistes* [1926-27]); Ezra Pound, e.g. *The Pisan Cantos*, or in fiction Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* (1925), Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926); in drama Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) or *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), could be cited to exemplify similar adventures in the supposedly enriching world of the African or African-American. I say "supposedly enriching," because although most of these instances of racial ventriloquism prove interesting technical experiments, they almost always reveal the failure of the white authors as they approximate but never really manage to authenticate their black speech.

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[135] A term first applied by Aldon Lynn Nielsen in his *White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* to strategies of objectifying the racial "Other," is cited in Gubar 136.

[136] Renato Rosaldo's contention (cited in Gubar 139) that the dual and contradictory tendencies of domination and compassion fuel white creative energies and substantiate the operation of cultural institutions throughout the 20th century is nicely condensed in the term.

Vachel Lindsay's poem "The Congo" subtitled "A Study of the Negro Race" follows closely in the wake of those modernist poets who turned to African-American materials to inject energy, life-force, and a degree of exoticism into their texts. This vogue of "imperialist nostalgia" involving the contradictory gestures of simultaneous exploitation of and compassion towards the African, was often explained away by the irresistible lure of the primitive, the untamed, the genuine, the original by the fabricators of racist imagery. With the advent of Freudianism, the vision of the Negro as both tied to and drawing his powers from nature as well as the natural, became a fascination and also a favorite mask of white authors. White modernist poets were eager to attach this mask of the black "Other" and experience the wild, savage, and unbridled energies within. What thus emerged as a recurring stereotype of the generation, fed both on the comic hilarity and hedonism of the comic coon of minstrelsy as well as on the murderous, savage bestiality associated with the Brute Nigger,[137] born in the coon-song era of minstrelsy.

Lindsay's poem reiterates the commonly known racist clichés about the African primitive in Section I of the poem. The African appears in the heart of the dark African jungle as a wild savage, a cannibal, sounding his heathen song to the accompaniment of the "deadly voo-doo rattle" (179). The comic stereotypes of minstrelsy occur in part II of the poem, entitled "Their Irrepressible High Spirits." Lindsay's **minstrel impersonation** (the author masking as a hedonist Dandy Darky) reaches its climax in this section, where his pseudo-Africans appear as "wild crap-shooters" (a common stereotype of the coon-song period), dancing the juba "in their gambling hall" (180). The images of the dancing and gambling Negroes[138] are topped off by the darkies taking lodging in a place Lindsay calls "Negro fairyland" which has a "minstrel river" running through it, and where, as one might expect all the "dreams come true" (180). Lindsay's romanticized fantasy is running wild, wilder than any popular song composer's, creating a luxurious ebony palace with richly dressed Negro dames and their suitors, to enjoy the grandest ball of their lifetime. The long-tailed coats and the "coal-black maidens with pearl in their hair" (181) are all familiar **minstrel types**, whose indulgence in the hilarity of the ball is both a romantic and a racist creation (which might strangely evoke images of the happily dancing darkies of the plantation now transferred to the city).

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[137] On the historical, social and political and ideological roots of the stereotype consult: Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* 127-133.

[138] For a nearly complete list of the stereotypes of the coon song era consult Varró's doctoral thesis: *The Comic Negro*; as well as Virágos-Varró, *Jim Crow örökösei* 245-257.

It is quite revealing that Lindsay, I assume unwittingly, associates the Negro paradise with a fantasy world, a fairy land, inadvertently hinting at the clear unfeasibility of anything of the like in real life. Thus, the minstrel clichés along with the minstrel river, and all the glamor of black life are relegated to the mythic or imaginary in Section II, consequently subverting the transparently racist (Gubar 140) scenario of the poem from within.

Lindsay's **linguistic experimentation** (like his masquerade as black savage then as Black Dandy) reveals the familiar double bind inherent in games of masking, which result in helpless suspension between being and becoming. As Gubar explains, the

> deployments of African rhythms, on the one hand, signal nostalgia for the oral, the originatory, the primordial, the real, the genuine; on the other hand, they denote white writers' consciousness that they are using not an undiluted but a minstrel-speak version of black talk that melds the genuine to the ersatz, generating a spurious speech to which the white imagination will perpetually be condemned. (139)

Lindsay too was caught up in the hellish liminality of his own masquerade, and that beyond the composition of the piece. Gubar reveals that "the enormous popularity of the poem seemed to punish Lindsay for his cross-racial impersonation by forcing him repeatedly to stand in the place of the Other" as a "versifying Al Jolson" (141) during the recitals of the poem.

The heathenish gibberish of mumbo-jumbo uttered by the vultures at the closing of "The Congo" as the Negroes are finally delivered from their pagan roots, however, did not stop resounding after Lindsay. Modernists frequently turned to nonsense rhythms in order to substantiate ties with the primitive or atavistic, but what in reality was but another version of the minstrel speech. Other modernist poets like Edith Sitwell, T. S. Eliot applied nonsense, Gubar notes, in order "to ridicule the high seriousness of Western culture's monuments of unaging intellect," which highlights still further connections between "the projects of modernism and minstrelsy" (143).

While the mimicry of black cultural sources nourished the rhythms, themes and characters of white modernist literature, the cadences and strategies of blackface minstrelsy kept resurging from behind the guise of imitation. The indebtedness of modernist experiments to techniques of minstrelsy is striking. The alliance between these two cultural phenomena, in fact, is more substantial than those passing references to familiar minstrel clichés, the minstrel dialect or to the psychological strategies applied by the minstrel delineator. Minstrelsy's influence prevails as much in the nonsense verses of modernist poets, as in the lampooning of

aristocratic pretenses at high intellectualism, as well as in the liminal status of the African-aping white author. Accordingly, the generic, the aesthetic and even the linguistic signs of minstrelsy resurge in abundance in the modernist texts. Notwithstanding the personal failure incorporated in the racial parody or racial impersonation modernists turned to what was deemed a true—in fact ersatz—African persona primarily to liberate themselves as well as their art.

[2] Fragmentary Minstrel References from the Post-1945 Period

The spectrum of sporadic minstrel signification from the post-war era is almost as wide and varied as that of the period preceding. Minstrel signification again runs from minstrel-like dialogue scenes, through minstrelsy-derived characters acting the darky, all the way to various appearances of the minstrel dialect. A short scene in Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) masterfully illustrates that a brief Western-like shoot-out episode might just as easily evoke minstrel allusions as the longer and more substantial minstrel references. In the respective section of the novel Jack Crabb, the protagonist comes to meet the infamous Wyatt Earp, while being unaware of the fact. The verbal duel between the two begins abruptly when Earp picks a fight with the narrator's brother for placing snake-heads at the bottom of whiskey barrels. It is at this point that the skinner (Earp) turns to Crabb.

> "Did you ever see the like of that?" Meaning my brother, and being under some strain, I just belched. The sight of the snake heads had got to me, though I never touched a drop of the rotgut.
>
> The skinny fellow walked quickly to me and staring coldly from under his straight black eyebrows, says: "You have an objection?"
>
> I allowed I did not, but I also requested he state a reason why in the goddam hell he thought I might.
>
> "You just spoke my name," he says.
>
> "I dont know your name," says I.
>
> "It," he says, "is Earp."
>
> "Oh," I says, laughing, "what I done was belch."
>
> He knocked me down. (330)

Besides being a wonderful **rapid-fire exchange** in the best tradition of western movies as well as that of the **minstrel repartee**, the passage is also playing on the humorous misunderstanding involved in the homophonic character of the name "Earp" and the belch the

narrator inadvertently utters. The unintentional comical degradation of Earp's otherwise prestigious character (his name having the sound of a belch), plus the added ignorance of Crabb about his notorious opponent makes the scene burlesque-like and ironic at the same time. Berger tops the comicality of the episode by making Crabb hold his ground and insist on a fight in spite of the initial rebuff, just to be cold-cocked by Earp with his pistol.

Whereas Thomas Berger evokes the former minstrel-like dialogue routine in the respective scene as a familiar ingredient of Western humor,[139] Flannery O'Connor turns to minstrel signification as something that is already deeply ingrained in the overtly prejudiced perception of blacks in the American South. The very title of O'Connor's story, "The Artificial Nigger," (1971) might strike one as evocative of those grotesquely grinning red-lipped, shiny black-faced and bulging-eyed minstrel paraphernalia whose deemed role it was to extend the abasement of blacks beyond the immediacy of the minstrel and vaudeville stages into the world of black Americana. Yet these former expectations are mostly subverted by the story's narrative, which takes us into the heart of darkness on a trip to the big city to accompany an innocent young boy (Nelson) and his supposedly well-advised grandfather (the ironically named Mr. Head). What initially seems to be a simple visit to the boy's birthplace in order to give him a lesson about false pride, reverses into a devilish excursion. The hell of the underground that the grandfather seeks to point out in the sewage system of the city, awaits them on the surface, over the corner, in the realities of everyday. The characters are drawn into the abyss of Southern city life mostly against their will, only to confront feelings of fear over being lost, excluded, unwanted, accused, charged, discriminated against, and finally betrayed by their own kin.

Although O'Connor summarized her intentions with the story as: "What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (qtd. in Grimshaw 51), the story does much more than that. In reality O'Connor systematically takes her two white characters through the hell of black experiences, which are primarily of psychological and moral character. In a sense the story is the exact opposite of the minstrel show in that here the immersion in black realities initiates whites into the actual position of the underdog instead of keeping them at a safe distance from it.

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[139] As has been stated, minstrelsy incorporated many devices of the humor of the Old South West, especially the elements of the tall tale and the technique of the "braggadocio." It was primarily on account of this indebtedness of minstrelsy to regional humor that formerly Twain and later Berger, for instance, applied elements of minstrel signification mostly to enhance local color.

Besides this metaphorical and rather broad reference to the minstrel heritage, the text also contains concrete allusion to the minstrel heritage, when, the two wandering characters chance upon a **minstrel darky** in the form of a plaster statue of a Negro sitting bent on a low fence. The author describes the sight in the following words:

> The Negro was about Nelson's size and he was pitched forward at an unsteady angle because the putty that held him to the wall had cracked. One of his eyes was entirely white and he held a piece of brown watermelon. […] It was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either. He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead. (124)

The **grinning face** as well as the piece of **watermelon** held in the hands undoubtedly identify the statue as the **Comic Darky** of minstrelsy, yet the figure is made ambiguous by the author when she envisions it as hesitant between joy and grief, youth and age, happiness and misery. The **liminality** incorporated in the Negro's statue is masterful on several accounts: firstly, the sculpture reflects the white vision of blackness while undermining (happiness) yet hinting at its real nature (misery). Most probably being a statue by a white sculptor it is a passive witness to and victim of the objectifying white gaze in the white suburbia of a Southern town. Secondly, liminality is also ingrained in the material used for the statue. Plaster is bound to turn white with age—already observable on one of the eyes of the statue—slowly depriving and denying the object of representation its natural color. The implications are manifold: a) the liminality of the Negro in America is a white construction, b) the domination of the Negro can only be achieved through freezing him into a lifeless statue, c) human objectification cannot fully triumph (see Cassuto) because humanity (the inward suffering unwittingly revealed) is bound to shine through the image enforced.

Quite revealingly, the two white characters rediscover their attachment and dependence on one another by confronting the "Artificial Nigger." The statue makes them conscious of their mutual sin towards the Negro (as whites), or is it the common humanity of the defeated (beyond the bounds of color) the Negro helps them recognize? The author does not specify.

The title remains almost as ambiguous as the resolution. It stresses the constructed nature of the black image, fabricated and circumscribed according to white expectations; yet, it might just as well denote the two white protagonists, who immersed in the psychological realities of black life are themselves made to behave as "artificial niggers" for an entire day.

The weight of the adventure nonetheless proves too heavy, since the story's concluding words reveal the redemptive yet mortifying result of the metaphorical racechange for the young boy: "I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again!" (126), simultaneously implying the town, his humiliation, and the confrontation with black experiences.

The case of John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1956) displays those ironic games post-modern authors tend to play with the varied cultural (popular cultural, mythic, etc.) materials they bring into their texts. The piece, although it can be safely cited as an example of minstrelsy's sporadic literary survivals, gives a full enumeration of almost all of minstrelsy's relevant signs, in a short chapter that comes towards the closing of the novel. I will cite the section at length in order to give a better idea of Barth's general attitude:

> "Now, then, see if ye can't be a little nicer to the next folks," Capt. Adam grinned. "At least pitch quarters at 'em. Ladies and gents: those **knights of the burnt cork**, the U.S.A.'s greatest sable humorists, the chaste and inimitable **Ethiopian Tidewater Minstrels**!"
>
> We applauded complacently, for this was what we'd come to see. Prof. Eisen ripped into "I'm Alabammy Bound" at an express-train tempo, and the curtains parted. The set for *The Parachute Girl* had been replaced by a solid blue backdrop, against which stood out shockingly the **bright uniforms** of a small **semicircle of minstrels**. There were six in all: three on each side of Capt. Adam, who took his place as **interlocutor**. All wore fuzzy black wigs, orange **clawhammer coats**, bright **checkered vests and trousers, tall paper collars**, and **enormous shoes**, and sang in raucous unison the words of the song. The two minstrels on either side of the interlocutor assisted the effort with **banjos and guitars**, while **Tambo and Bones**, **the end men**, played the **instruments** from which their names are derived. With a great rattling and crashing the tune shuddered to its end.
>
> "**Gentle-men-n-n-n**…" cried Capt. Adam, raising his arms to heaven, "**BE…SEATED**!" (257; emphasis added)

The performance runs on to supply a nearly exhaustive enumeration of all the familiar minstrel signs from requisites of the opening number (characters, dress, structure, routines), spiced with the repartee between Mr. Interlocutor and the Darkies, through minstrel jokes and conundrums, and the stump speech of the olio, all the way to the closing numbers of the walk-around. Despite the exhaustive rehearsal of minstrelsy's time-embalmed building blocks, Barth's is not a slavish imitation of the minstrel show formula; his cataloguing of the arsenal of minstrel signifiers is more than an arbitrary exercise. Although the well-known formulas do appear in their traditional sequence, Barth parodies as well as re-writes the usual spectacle on several levels. Firstly, when paying tribute to the recognized audience psychology involved in the shows Barth notes:

> Tambo and Bones vindicated our ordinariness; made us secure, even smug, in the face of mere book learning; their every triumph over Mr. Interlocutor was a pat on our backs, a reassurance. Indeed, a double assurance: for were not Tambo and Bones, our champions against intellectuality, but irresponsible Negroes? Superior to the interlocutor, to be sure, but we solid, responsible citizens (down here in the orchestra)—*we* were superior to all. (258)

The vindication of the members of the audience in their unshakable superior position to the "irresponsible Negroes" of the stage, as well as the light-hearted entertainment value habitually attached to the minstrel show, are both parodied and ironically undermined by Barth, when shortly after the termination of the show, the protagonist Todd Andrew attempts to commit suicide at the diner situated under the theatrical stage in the underbelly of the boat. By making minstrelsy a prompter of the hero's suicidal act, the author upholds and undercuts the tradition under the same breath. Barth's handling of minstrel signification through the postmodern gestures of parody, overwriting and subversion are nicely supplemented as we become conscious of the linkage that ties minstrel entertainment as a whole to the central conceit of the novel, the floating opera. As Barth claims at the opening of the novel, explaining the relevance of the metaphoric title:

> I think that to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute it is, requires the understanding of every other thing in the world. […] Well, *The Floating Opera*. That's part of the name of a showboat that used to travel around the Virginia and Maryland tidewater areas: *Adam's Original & Unparalleled Floating Opera;* […] It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along the banks. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wait until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps they'd have to use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbors, or hear the words passed along from upriver or downriver. Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't. Lots of times they'd be able to see the actors, but not hear them. Need I explain? That's how much of life works: our friends float past; we become involved with them; they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely; they float back again, and we must either renew our friendship—catch up to date—or find that they and we don't comprehend each other any more. And that's how this book will work, I'm sure. (14)

The floating opera is, to be sure, an ingenious metaphor which, as we saw, highlights the operation of an endlessly floating stage performance, that of fiction as well as life. Since one

of the last performances on board the Floating Opera is a minstrel show, the symbolism tied to the boat is also carried over to the show. The relevance of Barth's imagery for our understanding of the workings of minstrelsy is larger than the author could have supposed. For the lines expose not only our fragmentary comprehension of performance (whether of life, fiction or the stage), but also the constructedness of cultural meanings to which individual members of a culture all contribute. The image of the floating opera moreover reveals some additional aspects also profoundly vital to the understanding minstrelsy's long-lived heritage: a) that the communicative value of a cultural institution (or an artifact for that matter) is maintained by the audience: minstrelsy's lingering influence, its continuously recycled haunting imagery and adaptations owe much to prevailing interest in its receivers to decode its messages; b) the meanings attached to these cultural phenomena are as varied as their decoders—and accordingly the connotations of minstrelsy cannot possibly be fixed to either a historical period or a particular critical evaluation, but they shift and float between moments of occasional comprehension and occasional misinterpretations or gaps involved in the processes of "reading."

Chapter VI

AFTERWORD: THE TRANSLATABILITY OF CULTURES[140]

The problems of translation and translatability are in themselves complex areas of the humanities, and the complexities multiply if these terms are applied with reference to the interpretation of the signifiers of an entire cultural tradition. The present dissertation, in its humble way, also aimed to contribute to the great mission of cultural translation by enhancing the intelligibility of the various components of minstrel signification in the context of selected literary works. Before taking a backward glance at the ways the present dissertation hoped to add a chapter to the field of cultural translation, I will briefly clarify an important distinction that should be made between the strictly literal and the more figurative interpretation of the word "translation."

If we interpret the word "translation" literally, it means "the expression of the sense of (a word, text, etc.) in another language or in another, especially simpler form" (*OD* 971). Included in this definition is an allusion to a certain kind of loss that the word or the text "suffers," when it is being translated, since its meaning reappears in translation in a somewhat altered or simpler form, as the definition suggests. Translation as equivalence as Mary Snell-Hornby argues "is limited to a few areas of technical translation, which depend on a conceptual identity independent of context" (qtd. in Pavis, Theatre at the Crossroads 113).

Without rehearsing the vast theoretical arsenal of translation theory, I wish to underscore the obvious constraints of the enterprise. It is easy to demonstrate that translation should always take into consideration the cultural environment in which texts are imbedded. Translators of literary texts with cultural references in them (e.g. sporadic or consistent occurrences of the minstrel signs scattered in literary materials) have a still more complicated task than merely supplying or expressing the meaning of a word or a text. If they opt for a faithful representation of the original cultural material, they have a lot of explaining to do in the footnotes to highlight the cultural phenomenon that the reference in question was a signifier of. Thus interpreted, "translation" denotes more than the mere expression of meaning ingrained within texts, it signifies a type of explication of the original contexts involved. Clearly, if the literal usage of "translation" leads to a necessary loss of certain meanings

[140] The phrase, "the translatability of culture," that I apply here as the title of my afterword, originates from Stephanos Stephanides, who uses it in an article that explores the interrelation between translation, ethnography, literature, as well as the historical development of the poetics and theory of translation (for bibliographic data see Works Cited). The thoughts of this article shaped my own thinking about and understanding of cultural translation profoundly.

innate in the original, this latter interpretation of the term implicates, as Stephanides phrases it, the "agency of the translator in literary and cultural innovation" (39). "Translating" in this sense is closest to the Latin '*traducere*' that is "to 'lead across' rather than just 'move across'" (39).

It is no surprise then, given this complexity involved in literary and cultural translation, that in many cases translators refrain from providing this enriching cultural context for the material at their disposal. In fact, the more we look at literary translations the more aware we are bound to become of the marked disappearance of particular cultural references (e.g. to the minstrel heritage) as we switch from the original to the translated version. A relatively brief dialogue exchange taken from Chapter 27 of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, for instance, demonstrates the complete omission of minstrel signs in the Hungarian version.[141] The events reach a dramatic turning point at this section of the book. The chapter shows General Sherman and his soldiers breaking into the state of Georgia from the north, the Yankees demolishing and burning everything in their way. The Tara plantation is no exception. The soldiers set the cotton bales of the O'Hara family on fire, take away Scarlett's jewelry, etc. As they leave, they set the house, too, on fire, Scarlett and Melanie try to extinguish the fire with wet rugs and cloths though coughing heavily from the smoke. It is at this point that the following passage occurs:

> She opened her eyes and looked up into Melanie's face. Her curls were singed, her face black with smut but her eyes were sparkling with excitement and she was smiling.
> "You look like a nigger," murmured Scarlett, burrowing her head wearily into its soft pillow. And you look like the end man in a minstrel show," replied Melanie equably (462).

The final words of Melanie in the Hungarian translation read: "*Te sem vagy szebb, olyan, akár a kéményseprő*" (486). The translator could be justified in the choice of the term *kéményseprő* (in English: chimney-sweep), since the lines are perfectly intelligible for anyone with an understanding of Hungarian. Also for such a reader the translation contains the surface meaning of the reference, that is the fact that both Scarlett and Melanie looked like white people blackened as Negroes. If we keep in mind that translation in the words of Patrice Pavis "does not entail the search for the equivalence of two texts, but rather the appropriation of a source by a target text" with the cultural competence of the future audience in mind (Theatre at the Crossroads 138-9), we might accept the cited solution as successful. This kind

of translation, however, keeps both the text and its interpretive process on the level of the literal (and there is necessarily a sense of loss involved).

Should we move beyond this literal sense of "translation" and the surface meaning of the text, we enter the realm of interpretation and cultural sense-making. The reader of the present dissertation, for instance, could now attach more relevance to what might seem to others as a passing reference to whites with blackened faces, had the translator included the minstrel context in the Hungarian version. This hypothetical reader, along with our hypothetical translator (carefully explicating and highlighting the minstrel context), could push the meaning of translation from the literal to a more abstract domain, explicating rather than merely expressing the meaning of the original, while also moving the creative process of translation towards the more sophisticated solutions of cultural translation.

The question that necessarily arises from the aforesaid is this: what are some of those factors that usually tend to prevent (or at least make difficult) the translation of the signs of minstrel culture (and other cultural references) in literary (as well as other: movies, advertisements, etc.) contexts. The translatability of culture has long been an issue in the humanities, well before the rise of what we identify today as Cultural Studies. Cultural translation directed attention to problems such as whether it is feasible at all to transform or transplant the signifiers of a given culture to the recepients of another culture without losing a substantial portion of the meanings ingrained within these culture-specific signifiers. The same dilemma has occurred in relation to European cultures ever since the age of the early Humanism again and again (Stephanides 39), and as time passed several further dilemmas have been added pertaining: "the historical relationships between translation and tradition, and the author(ity) of the translator" (Stephanides 39); the range of the translator's authority; the limits of the translator's innovative scope, negotiations between dominant and minority cultures, etc.

Within the past two decades the issues of translation resurfaced once again as vital in our "increasingly multicultural and polyglot Europe" (Stephanides 39). Meanwhile new dilemmas have been articulated at the meeting point of novel cultural and translation theories (such as questions concerning the translation of the Other; the translation of culture and its relation to cultural and ethnic identity; the "unequal" distribution of power among languages and cultures, etc.). Complexities multiply as we turn towards postcolonial theories of culture and the threat of globalization. Regarding the perspectives of globalization the alarm has been sounded: the predicted threats of destructive homogenization caused by the global economy

[141] Portions of the section that follows have been published as part of *Jim Crow örökösei* (338-340)

and culture as well as the dangers of centralization have been widely formulated. Visions of a mono-cultural future have also been sketched in rather gloomy colors, in which dominant cultures would devour the minority cultures, or those of the margin (Stephanides 39). In February 2002 UNESCO published a map that documented the results of a survey according to which 6000 languages of all the languages of the world are threatened with extinction. The confrontation with the shocking reality of the extinction of languages compels one to ponder the ever-decreasing means for the expression of human thoughts. It is no surprise that in the light of these alarming perspectives the reaction of subcultures (which are especially endangered by the process described above) points towards the rediscovery of individual traits, the articulation and conscious stressing of difference. One of the tools that could assist in these counter-processes is indeed the translation of cultures. As Patrice Pavis contends:

> […] it is time to acknowledge the plurality of cultures, individualities, minorities, subcultures, pressure groups, and thus to refine socio-cultural methods of measuring the extent and effects of culture, which leads sometime away from a global conception of the functioning of society, and towards solutions that are partial and technocratic. ("Theatre at the Crossroads" 156)

The results of globalization and centralization in a figurative sense are comparable to those translations which disregard the acknowledgement of culture-specific connotations—since the essence of all of these procedures is the disrespect for individualistic cultural traits. Likewise, the restoration of the complex meaning of cultural signifiers gradually relegated to obscurity involves a counter-reaction to processes that threaten to impoverish our cultural knowledge.

To return to the former question of just what are some of the causes that prevent or render difficult the transplantation of minstrel signification (or any other culture-specific meanings) in, say, Hungarian, the forecast is not extraordinary. The answer could be sought in the extreme distance between Hungarian culture today, and the culture of 19th-century America, which the minstrel show was part and parcel of. Translating the culture of minstrelsy demands a movement between extremely diverse historical periods, cultures, social spaces, which might render this task almost impossible. Indeed, translation in this sense is more than the explication of a phenomenon, rather it is the bridging of the past with the present. As Patrice Pavis articulates the same contention while elaborating the problematics of theatrical translation, "we cannot simply translate a linguistic text into another; rather we confront and communicate heterogeneous cultures and situations of enunciation that are separated in space and time" ("Theatre at the Crossroads" 136).

Yet, before giving in to the temptation of fetishizing cultural difference, let me hasten to declare that there is probably no cultural system whose alphabet could not be learned. Stating this I hope I identified the proposed solution to the difficulty that underlies the translation of cultures, and specifically the translation of minstrelsy's signifiers. Should we accept the notion that the knowledge of the period, culture and social space of 19th-century America is crucial to our comprehension of the minstrel phenomenon itself, as well as acknowledging that the arsenal of minstrel signs (the identification of minstrelsy's semiotic system) functions as a kind of language, the perspective of recognizing and understanding of minstrel signification might not be so far out of sight as we earlier supposed.[142]

Learning the semiotic system of minstrelsy as one learns a foreign tongue might enable us to decode the texts with minstrel signification in them. The language of minstrelsy is to be sure not an easy one. It is a language interwoven of many diverse threads of expression. It is ideologically overburdened, containing a web of iconic signifiers, culturally specific ideologemes, ethnic clichés, rhetorical devices, political slogans, stereotypes, complex aesthetic markers, each of which are structured and layered and thus complicated further by the defining, yet ever-changing historical, cultural, social, and psychological contexts of the period that nourished it. In order thus to speak, read, understand, explicate minstrelsy—or the language of any foreign culture (be it the culture of minstrelsy, or any other cultural "language")—first we have to learn its cultural alphabet.

The semiotic system of minstrelsy I described in Chapter II aimed to supply this kind of a cultural alphabet for the readers, while in Chapters IV and V I sought to illustrate some techniques in reading this strangely coded, but far from unintelligible language. By pointing to ways in which the signs of another cultural "language," in fact of a different period can be systematized and made accessible I hoped to increase, in however modest a degree, what could be generally called cultural literacy. Stephanos Stephanides claims that "the questions raised by translation extend well beyond the scope of literary criticism and aesthetics to suggest that identity formation is inseparable from questions of translatability" (39). Translating minstrelsy's cultural codes for myself and others has indeed been a process of learning not only about critical theories (of culture and literature), the historical and social context of 19th-century American culture, but also about those factors that shape identity on the private as well as on the cultural and national level.

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[142] In his *Interpretation of Cultures* Clifford Geertz introduces the idea of cultural materials functioning as "cultural texts," a notion that resonates closely with my own conception of cultural systems conceivable as languages. Geertz defined the ethnographer's task along the metaphor of reading faded cultural manuscripts (10), which parallels the translation, or interpretive process highlighted above.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX I—CHART I
KOWZAN'S TAXONOMY OF THEATRICAL SIGNS

APPENDIX II—CHART II
THE PAVIS QUESTIONNAIRE

APPENDIX III—CHART III
ELAM'S TAXONOMY OF THEATRICAL CODES

APPENDIX IV—FIGURE I
THE SEMICIRCULAR STAGE ARRANGEMENT

APPENDIX V—FIGURE II
THE MINSTREL GROTESQUE: GROTESQUE ILLUSTRATION OF THE VIRGINIA MINSTRELS

APPENDIX VI—FIGURE III
THE BLACKFACE GRIN