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# Beyond boundaries: political dictates found in minstrelsy

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BEYOND BOUNDARIES:  
POLITICAL DICTATES FOUND IN MINSTRELSY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

The Department of Theatre

by

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## ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century white minstrels portrayed white abolitionists, suffragists, and temperance advocates in blackface, in order to discriminate against them in the same way that blacks were discriminated against in minstrel performances. When minstrels blackened their faces to portray these white political advocates, the advocates were transformed into black caricatures, which demeaned the advocates as well as the political causes they supported. The separatist discourse, stressed in minstrelsy, typified the ideology of anti-abolitionist mobs and was used to symbolize their violence against white abolitionists and blacks. In 1850 minstrel performers used minstrelsy to protest suffrage. Since minstrels portrayed white suffragists the same way that black women were portrayed in minstrel performances, the minstrel suffragist was deemed undesirable and unappealing. In order to add to an already unflattering characterization, minstrels portrayed the suffragist as excessively masculine and physically combative. The political power of minstrelsy's anti-suffrage and anti-temperance rhetoric was intensified when performed in saloons. Because the saloon was a place where votes were bought and sold and where political conventions and primaries were held, votes were easily manipulated and influenced. Minstrelsy's nineteenth century's racist, sexist, and drinking ideology can be found on college campuses throughout this nation. White sororities and fraternities have routinely practiced blackface. Oddly enough, the very Greek organizations that used blackface have also been criticized for practices of sexism and binge drinking, the ideology endorsed by nineteenth-century blackface performances. This dissertation is aimed toward highlighting nineteenth-century minstrelsy and the resulting legacy of the art form's Jacksonian message.

## **Introduction: Minstrel Manipulation**

*“We must now think of the blackface mask as less a repetition of power relations than a signifier for them—a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which the social field there exists lags and multiple determinations” (Lott 8).*

Throughout the nineteenth-century minstrelsy was a huge hit. Considered “the national art of its moment” no other American genre earned more attention or audiences (Lott 209). As a result of minstrelsy’s immense popularity, audiences were consistently exposed to its racist discourse. These performances played a significant role in shaping society’s perception of blacks. There have been innumerable studies regarding the construction of racial identity for nineteenth-century blacks, but the scholarship of Robert Toll, Eric Lott, and Annmarie Bean conveys that nineteenth-century minstrelsy was more than an art form that ridiculed blacks. While Toll and Lott examine the similarities between blackface subject matter and working class values, Bean focuses on the demeaning characterizations of women found in minstrel discourse. Their work, however, does not completely reveal the full extent of the manipulative influence of minstrelsy.

This dissertation will focus on minstrelsy performed by white minstrels. Although I am aware of the existence black minstrels, they are outside the scope of this study. My study looks at the way minstrelsy used a constructed black image to denigrate white activists. White minstrels portrayed abolitionists, suffragists, and temperance advocates in blackface in order discriminate against them in the same way that blacks were discriminated against in minstrel performances. For the purpose of my analysis, I will refer to the abolitionists, suffragists, and temperance advocates as “Activists” when I

am discussing them collectively. When minstrels blackened their faces to portray white Activists, the Activists were transformed into black caricatures, which demeaned the Activists as well as the political causes they supported. The already ingrained racial prejudices advanced by minstrel characterizations were simply transferred from blacks to the white political advocates of social reform. Although the research regarding minstrelsy's attempt to pigeonhole black behavior is plentiful, the examination of minstrelsy's attempt to intervene in nineteenth-century politics does not exist. It is not surprising that minstrelsy used its method of ridiculing blacks to ridicule Activists since, as Stuart Hall maintains, "the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions" (Hall 28). When white Activists became minstrelsy's new targets, like all black minstrel characters, they were portrayed as socially unacceptable outcasts of American society. As a result, those who campaigned for abolition, suffrage, and temperance were characterized as juvenile, unintelligent, and illogical. These representations made the Activists, along with their political stances, appear obtuse and ridiculous.

Minstrelsy used its discourse to discourage audiences from being swayed by or adopting the liberal ideology expressed by the satirized Activists. Impersonating Activists in blackface conveyed that if others adopted the same non-conservative stance then they too would suffer the same disparaging treatment reserved for minstrel blackness. Minstrel performances regarding political issues suggested that whites, who supported liberal reform, would receive not only negative criticism, but also a racial and cultural demotion. Joseph Roach's definition of "performance genealogies" assists in illuminating the serious repercussions resulting from "blackening" white individuals.



Roach defined performance genealogies as “the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practice and attitudes through collective representation” (Bean xii). Repeatedly presenting white Activists as black, for countless audiences, caused the ridiculed whites to be perceived in the same manner as blacks. Minstrelsy caused them to be demeaned from generation to generation throughout the nineteenth-century. These performance genealogies performed on the minstrel stage assisted in shaping how blacks and Activists were perceived on and off the minstrel stage. This study intends to show how minstrels used and manipulated the portrayal of blacks and women to act as sullied models for abolitionists, suffragists, and temperance advocates from 1820 until the end of the nineteenth-century. It will also show how minstrel performance genealogies influenced national character, American thought and the Democratic ideology of its time.

Scholarship concerning nineteenth-century minstrelsy infrequently illuminates the art form’s propensity to use conservative ideology to dictate cultural identities for blacks, whites, and women. This is particularly true for early twentieth-century historians. In fact, Carl Wittke, author of Tambo and Bones, chronicles minstrelsy’s growth as pure performance, rather than focusing on any social or political influence minstrelsy advanced. While Wittke acknowledges minstrelsy’s use of racial stereotypes, like the historians that preceded him, he presents an indulgent view of them.

Unlike Wittke and his predecessors, recent historians have given minstrelsy a more in-depth analysis which illuminates minstrelsy’s role in both representing and manipulating social discourse for nineteenth-century culture. Robert Toll author of Blacking Up insists that minstrel performances gave audiences the opportunity to define their rules of social acceptance. Minstrelsy expressed the audience’s cultural and social

viewpoints. Toll attributes this to the increase in population between 1820 and 1860 when rural residents moved to the large cities. During that span New York City more than doubled its population. This caused the formally rural, now urban, population had to make new adjustments in cramped living conditions, unemployment and rampant disease. Minstrelsy, as a form of entertainment embraced their sense of identity in a new environment:

These rural immigrants, cut off from their folk groups, had to establish new definitions of themselves as Americans and to find new 'rules' to govern and explain their situation. They desperately needed amusements that spoke to them in terms they could understand and enjoy, that affirmed their worth and gave them dignity. (Toll 5)

Although no specific political causes were being attacked in early minstrelsy, it was expressing a nationalist political stance that saw immigrants as lesser than “native born” Americans.

Eric Lott in his book Love And Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, asserts that there is a definite correlation between the mentality of the nineteenth-century working class and minstrel performances. Lott doesn't limit his observation to the rural immigration, but maintains that the working class, whether formally rural or urban, has a similar ideology that is represented in minstrel performances. Lott maintains that minstrel performances were used to reflect and propel the social opinions of the largely white male working class audience. He further asserts that the image of the black body on the minstrel stage reflected how white minstrels sought to exert their power over blacks. When minstrels portrayed blacks as grotesque and inhuman, they were insuring that blacks would not gain the privileged status of whites. Although I agree with Lott's assessment, this study seeks to examine how

minstrels manipulated their empowered position to denigrate whites that dared to oppose minstrelsy's stance regarding social reform. In addition to using their performances to pigeonhole black appearance and behavior, minstrels used their performances to dictate "acceptable" white behavior regarding social reform.

Compared to Lott, William Mahar's stance regarding minstrelsy is drastically different. Appearing hesitant to focus on the racial element of minstrelsy, Mahar considers the musical component and concludes that minstrel songs were a valuable legacy to musical theatre. He maintains that the shows influenced the music of future generations, since two-thirds of each performance was essentially vocal or instrumental music. Although, he does mention the financial distinction of tastes between the elite and the working class, he refrains from assigning an association between the ideology of the audience and their financial status.

While historians, such as Lott and Toll have shown how minstrelsy's manipulation of race contributed to understanding working class values and cultural standards, it doesn't show the influence of Jacksonian ideology on the minstrel message. The rise of minstrelsy coincided, almost exactly, with the rise of the Jacksonian movement.

Andrew Jackson's election as the United States seventh president in 1828 ushered in the movement known as "Jacksonian Democracy." Many historians insist that the two words that describe the movement is a contradiction of terms. Rather than represent the interests of all people, as the word "democracy" suggests, the movement focused on exclusion rather than inclusion:

Throughout the country Jacksonians made war on black voters, taking away their voting rights in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Tennessee, and

North Carolina and opposing voting rights elsewhere” (Finkleman 122). Jackson led the movement to force Native Americans out of the states east of the Mississippi River. (Finkleman 122)

Although the Native American “Trail of Tears” occurred after Jackson’s presidency, his actions were directly responsible for precipitating the tragic incident.

Jackson became president at a time when working class society was angered by the disadvantages they incurred as a result of their economic status. They embraced Jackson because his ideology privileged the working class and opposed the emancipation efforts of blacks and women. His working class constituents also related to the false image that Jackson communicated to the public. Although he portrayed himself as an honest unassuming farmer and frontiersman, the slave labor from his stately Hermitage plantation made Jackson wealthy, and his was hardly the modest farm of his constituents.

While minstrelsy was just beginning to take hold in American theatres, “the impetus for widespread popular antagonism toward the cultivated classes was created by the Jacksonian movement beginning in 1824” (Zanger 33). Jackson and his Democratic party expressed a conservative ideology that adamantly opposed liberal reform movements, such as abolition, suffrage, and temperance. Minstrelsy became a useful tool in advancing anti-liberal propaganda.

Interestingly, the minstrel discourse that supported the Jacksonian movement dictated not only behavior and boundaries for blacks and immigrants; dictates were also directed to white citizens. If white citizens defied minstrelsy’s conservative ideology, they were literally and figuratively blackened. Blacking up the personas of white Activists was a unique and radical move on the part of minstrels. Although minstrels routinely lampooned whites, unless they were immigrants or Activists, minstrels

refrained from impersonating them. Luminaries such as, Jenny Lind and Shakespeare were the butt of many jokes, however minstrels stopped short of portraying the celebrities as black characters. While Lind's name was mentioned in a stump speech or the lyrics of her signature songs substituted for minstrel lyrics, she remained white in minstrel performances. Likewise, in lampooning Shakespeare his words were changed to accommodate minstrelsy's nonsensical verbiage. Reconstructing Shakespeare gave minstrels the opportunity to make light of the upper class and their artistic preferences:

Oh! Tis consummation  
Devoutly to be wished  
To end your heartache by a sleep;  
When likely to be dished  
Shuffle off your mortal coil,  
Do just so,  
Wheel about and turn about  
And jump Jim Crow. (Lott 73)

Although minstrelsy considered some whites off limits, others, such as immigrants were considered fair game. These portrayals, however, were vastly different from those of whites who advocated political reform. Instead of using immigrant characterizations to advocate a conservative political stance, they were used to define the newly arrived immigrants and explain their role in America. By exaggerating their physical traits and assigning different peculiarities to each group, minstrelsy communicated that differences were undesirable and socially unacceptable:

Asians had odd-sounding languages, bizarre diets, and wore pigtailed; Germans spoke 'Dutch,' and drank lager beer, and ate sauerkraut and sausage; and Irishmen had brogues, drank whisky, partied, and fought. (Toll 169)

The immigrant character, like the black character, was deemed atypical to the white American norm and as a result unworthy of citizenship.

## **Chapter 1**

Chapter one will explore ways in which minstrelsy portrayed those that were deemed unworthy of citizenship or a political voice by examining the subject matter, format, and the characterization found in minstrelsy. Another aim, for this chapter, is to analyze the extent of minstrelsy's considerable appeal and popularity.

## **Chapter 2**

The perception of blacks as anti-citizens was embraced by anti-abolitionist mobs in 1834, which may explain why rioters chose to perform minstrelsy in the midst of their rioting. Frustrated with the influx of freed blacks and the blacks' attempt to advance their citizenship, rioters expressed their dissatisfaction by attacking freed blacks and destroying their property. During rioting, designated rioters would sing minstrel songs, portray white abolitionists in blackface, or perform minstrel monologues. The incorporation of minstrelsy symbolized and underscored their anti-slavery sentiments. Chapter two will examine the use of minstrelsy and how its performance influenced and played a role in the riots of 1834.

## **Chapter 3**

The blackening of abolitionists set the stage for minstrelsy's next liberal protest. In the 1850's suffrage jokes, songs, and impersonations were extremely popular with minstrel suffrage audiences and as such played a role in combating the suffrage movement. Since minstrels portrayed white suffragists the same way that black women were portrayed in minstrel performances, the minstrel suffragist was deemed undesirable and unappealing. In order to add to an already unflattering characterization, minstrels

portrayed the suffragist as excessively masculine and physically combative. She was also characterized as an uncaring wife and mother, who frequently ignored familial obligations in favor of suffrage commitments.

#### **Chapter 4**

The political power of minstrelsy's anti-suffrage and anti-temperance rhetoric was intensified when performed in saloons. Since the saloon was a place where votes were bought and sold and where political conventions and primaries were held, votes were easily manipulated and influenced. Like minstrelsy, the saloon was extremely popular. Therefore, it was a huge drawing card for patrons, causing more of society to be exposed to its minstrel message in its anti-suffrage and anti-temperance climate. Chapter four examines the saloon's political and social environment and how it catered to female exclusion and drinking. The chapter also examines how temperance advocates were ridiculed in saloon minstrelsy.

#### **Chapter 5**

In the final chapter, I look at the cyclical nature of minstrelsy's tropes. Although minstrelsy experienced its heyday during the nineteenth-century, the twenty-first century continues to be influenced by minstrelsy's legacy in the form of performative genealogies. This is particularly evident on college campuses throughout the nation. Blackface has become routinely practiced by white sororities and fraternities. Oddly enough, the very Greek organizations that used blackface have also been criticized for practices of sexism and binge drinking. During the nineteenth-century, sexist practices and customs were the major obstacles that suffragists had to fight in order to gain emancipation. Similarly, women on today's university campuses have to contend with

sexist discourse such as that communicated by a fraternity newsletter at Dartmouth College that featured provocative photos of women that fraternity brothers claimed to be their sexual partners. Articles describe the women as fat and sluts. Additionally, 70 percent of sexual assault occurs on college campuses in a sorority or fraternity environment.

Just as drinking was celebrated in nineteenth-century blackface, most contemporary fraternities and sororities members celebrate in an alcohol saturated environment. The Harvard School of Public Health reports that those who have a history of drinking tend to be white and live in a sorority or fraternity house. These white sororities and fraternities demonstrate the ideology of past minstrelsy. Where there is blackface, there is generally sexism and binge drinking.

Nineteenth-century minstrelsy is much more than a genre that declared blacks inferior and whites superior. Minstrelsy is rarely that simplistic. As Chris Weedon asserts, “discourses do not exist in the simple bipolar relations of power and powerless” (Weedon 107). Using race and gender to assert a Jacksonian ideology illuminates one aspect of minstrelsy’s boundless, multifaceted, and complex role in influencing nineteenth-century society as well as our own. While influencing social and cultural boundaries for blacks minstrelsy simultaneously criticized dictated behavior for whites regarding nineteenth-century politics. To my knowledge no one has examined this aspect of minstrelsy. Examining the past in order to provide a key to understanding the present connects us to another time and place, which allows us to empathize with the struggles and challenges of the oppressed. It is important to research and analyze those struggles to prevent the reoccurrence or continuation of past oppression. Understanding how



discourse can be used to create damaging stereotypes at a particular time in history is the first step in instigating a change.

**Chapter 1**  
**Constructions of Race and Gender in Nineteenth-century Minstrelsy:**  
**An Overview**

*“There is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions” (Hall 233).*

Many members of nineteenth-century society perceived minstrelsy as an authentic representation of black culture. Whether it was the portrayal of plantation slaves or freed blacks in Northern cities, minstrelsy was perceived as a giant mirror that truthfully reflected and defined blacks. Lamenting over the decline of minstrelsy, nineteenth-century historian, Laurence Hutton seemed to confuse the minstrels with the characters they portrayed: “Their gibes, their gambols, their songs, their flashes of merriment still linger in our eyes and in our ears” (Hutton 144). In complimenting minstrelsy, Hutton bemoans the loss of the black characters and their misrepresentation of black people. Brander Matthews, Former Columbia University professor, similarly confused blacks with their minstrel representatives. In 1915 he declared that nineteenth-century minstrelsy was preferable to twentieth-century performances because twentieth-century minstrels were “content to be comic without any effort to catch the special comicality of the darky” (755). For Matthews, minstrelsy, which veered from the nineteenth-century minstrel caricatures and subject matter, lacked humor and realism.

Just as minstrelsy became adept at providing convincing commentary regarding blackness, it was equally skilled at presenting persuasive political messages. However, not all political stances were endorsed by minstrelsy. Using storylines, jokes and songs to support nineteenth-century Jacksonian ideology assertions minstrels supported the main principles of nineteenth-century ascendancy, which were: “expansion

(nationalism), antimonopoly (egalitarianism) and white supremacy” (Saxton 17). Northern Democratic leaders throughout the majority of the nineteenth-century sought to regain control over the Federal government. Before the Civil War, Democratic leaders faced a major hurdle in defending slavery. After the Civil War, temperance and women’s suffrage became the next targets for minstrelsy’s Democratic agenda.

In order to degrade the suffragists, abolitionists, and temperance advocates minstrels portrayed in blackface, minstrels had only to build upon the negative perceptions of blacks and women already embedded in the consciousness of minstrel audiences. These portrayals played a significant role in circulating and perpetuating a Jacksonian ideology, which demonized blacks, women, and liberals. Many nineteenth-century whites “built their sense of social reality on popular stereotypes” found in minstrel performances (Gaines 348). The starting point and underlining foundation for minstrelsy’s conservative position is the presentation of blacks and women shown routinely on the nineteenth-century minstrel stage. This chapter will explore ways in which minstrel performance circulated and verified conservative racist and sexist beliefs by examining the subject matter, format, and the characterization found in minstrelsy. Another aim, for this chapter, is to analyze the extent of minstrelsy’s nineteenth-century popularity. Since minstrel shows were America’s “most popular form of entertainment,” they played a key role in advancing the genre’s construction of race and gender (Hanners 23).

Although information regarding the minstrel male characterization is plentiful, information concerning female characterizations is not. Contemporary historians have provided very little scholarship regarding the subject. This omission, however, does not

appear to be a conscious oversight. William Mahar and Robert Toll, along with other historians, have expressed a need for more information regarding the presence of the female character in minstrelsy. In light of these opinions, it remains puzzling that no one has done any in-depth analysis regarding the subject.

The omission is perhaps due to nineteenth-century minstrels and writers who excluded the female character from their writings regarding minstrelsy. Though minstrels such as, Dan Emmett and Ralph Keeler included thorough information regarding the black male characterization in their books and articles, they disregarded the female. Likewise, nineteenth-century writers, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, E.S. Abney, and Phillip Hone, who detailed their observances of minstrelsy, also ignored the female characters. This dissertation will aim to analyze the impact of female marginality in minstrel performances and politics.

### **Birth of Jim Crow**

The birth of minstrelsy began with a black male character, Jim Crow. Thomas D. Rice is the first performer to perform minstrelsy. His creation of the character Jim Crow played a crucial role in defining blackness. In 1820 Rice observed an old black man's song and dance while standing near a Cincinnati levee. Rice immediately saw the profitability of incorporating an imitation of an old black man's act into a future performance. By combining burnt cork and water, Rice created the makeup used to blacken his face; he also worked on perfecting his character's vocal cadence and stressed malapropisms. Rice sang the following refrain, while incorporating awkward jumps:

Weel about, and turn about, And do jis so;

Eb'ry time I weel about, I Jump Jim Crow. (Dorman 110)

The act quickly gained popularity on stages throughout America. It was not uncommon for audiences to demand that Rice “repeat it some twenty times” (Butsch 50). Buoyed by his success, Rice extended the song and dance routine to include monologues, which featured Jim Crow, the plantation buffoon. Jim Crow, complete with specious reasoning, unethical behavior, and lazy mannerisms was an instant hit with audiences.

Envyng the acclaim and lucrative revenue that Rice reaped, men began blacking up throughout America and abroad, quickly popularizing the new genre. In 1838 the Boston Post declared, “The two most popular characters in the world at the present time are (Queen) Victoria and Jim Crow” (Crockrell 161). In 1855, an article appeared in the New York Tribune that best demonstrates Jim Crow’s incredible popularity:

Never before was there such an excitement in the musical or dramatic world; nothing was talked of, nothing written of, and nothing dreamed of, but ‘Jim Crow.’ It seemed as though the entire population had been bitten by the tarantula; in the parlor, in the kitchen, in the shop and in the street, Jim Crow monopolized public attention. It must have been a species of insanity, though of a gentle and pleasing kind. (Lott 3)

Other minstrels built upon Rice’s prototype, and used Jim Crow to represent and symbolize black culture. To assume that these characterizations were solely accepted as a form of entertainment and not a commentary on black culture would be erroneous. The writer for the New York Tribune, like many nineteenth-century citizens, accepted the minstrel stereotypes as accurate: “Absurd as may seem Negro minstrelsy [...] expresses the peculiar characteristics of the Negro as truly as the great masters of Italy represent their more spiritual and profound nationality” (Lott 4).

The writer not only declares minstrelsy a typical portrayal of black culture, but he also defines minstrelsy as an honored symbol of America’s national heritage and compares it to images of high art and culture.

Minstrel performances constructed a “truth” for audiences that idealized the plantation south and glamorized its many offenses. Consequently, slaves were portrayed as satisfied with their status as well as grateful and obedient to their masters. This falsified version of slavery was soon accepted as truthful: “The determinants of community are frequently couched in a network of images, myths, and narratives depicted and purveyed in acts of performance” (Wade 3). Minstrelsy was based on lies, and these lies assisted in defending the institution of slavery while endorsing Jacksonian sentiments.

### **Construction of Blackness**

Using Jim Crow as the prototype, Rice and other minstrels developed minstrel characters with the same visual and behavioral characteristics to emphasize that all blacks were alike. The most prominent visual marker of race construction was the minstrel mask: “The traditional minstrel make-up, which effectively obliterated facial distinctions, made Tambo, Bones, Cuff, and Snow interchangeable—made them all look alike” (Zanger 34). Another aspect of the mask revealed these common features. “Lips were thickened and lengthened with bright red paint to such a degree that their mouths resembled slices cut in a ripe watermelon (Twain 60). When minstrel jokes referred to innate signifiers of the “black body,” such as kinky hair and black face, they declared to audiences that black signifiers were grossly unappealing. A minstrel gag, touted “Erasive Soap,” a fictitious product to be a “splendid article,” which “clears up the complexion of a Negro, and makes a curly head man’s head straight” (Tidwell 199). The product, regardless of its obvious fabrications, suggested that unappealing signifiers of blackness needed to be literally erased and reconstructed to give a more pleasing white image. For

nineteenth-century citizens reconstructing one's race was a laughably absurd notion and as such suggested that blacks were resigned to accept their inferior appearance as performed through minstrelsy's signifiers of race.

In order to appreciate the resulting damage of this occurrence, it is necessary to examine how and why white minstrel performers went to considerable lengths to avoid being mistaken for blacks. Although white minstrels gladly caricatured blacks on the minstrel stage, they were annoyed when audiences enthralled with what they perceived as a truthful presentation, mistook the white minstrels for black. Although P.T. Barnum is primarily known as an enterprising circus owner, he began his career in entertainment as a minstrel performer. He as well as other white minstrels objected to being mistaken for being black by audiences. After performing in a minstrel show, Barnum had not yet removed his makeup and was confronted by an audience member who was convinced that Barnum was black. Barnum was offended by the mistake. He wrote in his autobiography: "I rolled my sleeve up, showed my skin, and said, 'I am as white as your are, sir'"(Barnum 90). Since a significant segment of nineteenth-century society supported minstrelsy's damaging discourse regarding blacks, minstrels had a vested interest in avoiding an identical assessment.

White minstrels took various measures to prevent their occupation from blackening their white status: "Sheet music began the proto-Brechtian practice of picturing blackface performers out of costume as well as in" (Lott 20). Minstrels went to similar efforts in developing advertisement posters for future circulation. The top half of the poster featured the minstrel troupes in blackface and tattered clothing. Their wide grins, bucked eyes, and wide leg posturing promised a stereotypical performance for

future audiences. This presentation of the blackened minstrels contrasted drastically with their presentation at the bottom portion of the poster. It featured stylishly dressed white performers, without blackface, in elegant suits and sophisticated posturing. Their hands rested elegantly inside suit pockets or lapels.

The extreme opposition between the top and bottom renditions of the same people highlighted the negative perception of blacks that the white minstrels sought to avoid when they were off the minstrel stage:

When the white man steps behind the (blackface) trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell[...]and thus lose that freedom which, in the fluid, 'traditionless,' 'classless' and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man's alone. (Ellison 53)

It is understandable why minstrels objected to being perceived as black offstage, since their portrayal of blackness was something that no one would want to accept. In a typical performance minstrels "contorted their bodies, cocked their heads, rolled their eyes, and twisted outstretched legs" (Toll 36). When these minstrels portrayed blackness as feral and unrestrained, it communicated that blacks were hopelessly uncultivated, hence incapable of rising to the white standard of behavior. Black women were further demeaned when male actors performed the role of women, at a time when white women routinely represented their own gender on the legitimate stage.

Since minstrels physically portrayed all characters, regardless of gender, in the same manner, performances robbed the female character of her femininity. By manipulating the female presentation, male minstrel performers further devalued the female persona. Although female impersonators wore female clothing, they routinely



gave indicators that it was males who were performing the male roles: “The traditional climax of mirth [in the minstrel show] has always come when the simpering ‘lady’ suddenly displayed a pair of huge feet, emerging from dainty skirts, and preferably topped by unmistakably masculine trousers” (Paskman 91). The combination of male trousers and female skirts not only reminded audiences that males were performing female roles, it also robbed the female characters of their femininity.

By masculinizing black women they denied them any participation in the cult of domesticity that afforded respect, of a sort, to white upper-class women. When black women were portrayed as unfeminine, it gave them an atypical persona, making them glaringly odd. As a result, their actions appeared improper and unseemly, compared to the white female standard. When Sojourner Truth’s asked the famous question, “ain’t I woman?” minstrelsy’s answer was a resounding no.

In addition to portraying female blackness as masculine, Northern minstrels created and transmitted to audiences story-lines regarding Southern slave characters that they knew nothing about. Most minstrel performers gave audiences the impression that they were well aware of their characters’ Southern slavery experiences, however in most instances their own experiences were Northern. The Southern characters and locale of minstrel performances were conceived and perpetuated by men who grew up in, and gained fame in, the North. In fact, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York produced most of the famous companies that gained fame in minstrelsy:

Ordway’s Aeolians in Boston, Hooley’s Minstrels in Brooklyn, and E.P. Christy’s Minstrels in New York each ran ten years straight; in Philadelphia, Sanford’s Minstrels ran seven years and Carncross and Dixey’s ran nine; Wood’s Minstrels bested all others by running for fifteen years in New York City. (Toll 32)

These Northern minstrel troupes, along with others, “visited not plantations but racially integrated theaters, taverns, neighborhoods, and waterfronts—and then attempted to recreate plantation scenes” (Lott 41).

Even some of the more prominent writers and performers, known as the founders of minstrelsy, constructed their perception of Southern slave characters from their Northern roots. Thomas Rice was born in 1816 in New York and resided there until his death. Edwin P. Christy, founder of the most popular minstrel troupe in the nineteenth-century, was born in 1815 in Philadelphia. His troupe gained popularity in New York. Stephen Foster was born in Pittsburgh in 1826 and gained fame for writing minstrel songs. A prolific minstrel songwriter, Foster boasted that he received fifteen dollars apiece for songs. His most famous minstrel song, “Old Folks At Home,” sold 130,000 copies. Hence, the southern social context of minstrel texts was falsified by northern minstrels. In the next chapter, concerning anti-abolitionist riots, we will examine how these inaccurate minstrel-show versions of the South intervened in political conflicts, in both New York and Philadelphia—reinforcing Northern conservative politicians.

As a result of the minstrel performers’ false image of black men and women, they were richly rewarded:

When the Buckleys appeared as the Boston Ethiopian Serenaders during their 1848 stay in New Orleans, the company of five collected \$200 per evening and brought in \$1,100.00 at one benefit alone. Edwin Christy reported that the Christy Minstrels’ gross income from 2,792 performances was \$317,589.00, or an average of \$31,759.00 per year for ten years. (Mahar 10)

Huge ticket sales provided incentive to continue their efforts at misappropriating black culture. In 1852, a German orchestra leader, touring America, noted that famed minstrels

earned “enormous sums of money” and that money seemed to be valued more than the “well-deserved fame” (Howard 185).

### **Popularity of Minstrelsy**

Minstrelsy’s popularity was an effective propaganda tool in communicating an anti-liberal philosophy. The working class comprised the majority of minstrel audiences that adamantly embraced the Jacksonian movement and its Democratic stances. In endorsing the political concerns of its audiences, minstrelsy assured its own success. Performances spread its discourse nightly to large audiences, quickly surpassing the number of performances provided by competing theatrical genres. The New York Clipper reported in 1859 that:

While the drama is losing caste, the minstrelsy business, on the other hand, is improving, the novelties and comicalities of our ‘cullud brethren’ crowding the houses nightly, the weather, whether good or bad, making no difference. (Wittke 60)

Minstrel troupes encouraged by minstrelsy’s overwhelming popularity, increased their performances: “the rage for minstrelsy was so great that minstrel companies were forced to give morning concerts and ‘three-a-day’ shows in order to satisfy the theatre-going public” (Wittke 58).

As soon as they were copyrighted and printed, minstrel songs were quickly purchased by eagerly awaiting fans. They were easily assessable “from vendors at the doors of minstrel halls, from mail-order houses, or at local stationary stores” (Mahar 195). As a result, minstrel songs were played on home pianos and whistled on the street, likening their popularity to the twenty-first century’s top billboard hits.

Unfortunately, minstrelsy's overwhelming success was not limited to adults. Abolitionist and teacher, Mary Seldon, noted minstrelsy's influence on impressionable children:

It had often been a matter of wonder to me, while teaching, where the children could find such songs; until this (a minstrel songbook) was discovered. The sentiments had already pervaded the whole school. Hardly a recess occurred, without more or less of these being heard, and as a consequence the children were coming to consider the colored person as an inferior something, whose life was only to furnish amusement to others. One can hardly walk the streets of any city or village without hearing scrapes of these songs often from lips too young to be aware of the sentiment they sing. (Sheldon 30)

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of minstrelsy's popularity was its introduction to children and the messages it conveyed to them. As a teaching tool, minstrel performances introduced children to characters and concepts that would be stressed by on-going minstrelsy in the years ahead.

They "learned" about blackness the same way adults did. They were so familiar with the minstrel format that they incorporated it in minstrel performances—much like the following incident, recalled by a nineteenth-century writer. When she was five, she and her young siblings performed in the family's parlor for the evening's entertainment:

When the folding doors were thrown open, my baby sister and I were discovered as "end men." She was but eight months old and tied to a chair. Our two small brothers sat between us, and we were all as black as burnt cork, well rubbed in by my managerial hands. (De Navarro 581).

The minstrel format became a "lesson plan" for impressionable minds as it did for adults.

### **Minstrel Format**

The overwhelming success enjoyed by minstrelsy assisted in generating its negative presentation of blacks found in the genre's three-part format. In 1849 minstrel performances grew from an assortment of songs, dances, and skits into a structured three-

part format. Black and white identities were routinely defined in the walk-around, the first part of the minstrel show. Three characters, two end men and the interlocutor, along with four instrumentalists began the show by walking in a full circle around the stage and stopping center stage to form a semi-circle. The joking relationship between the interlocutor and the two end men, Tambo and Bones, dominated the segment and underscores minstrelsy's ability to dictate racial and cultural behavior for audiences. While Tambo and Bones, are black and speak in minstrel dialect, the interlocutor is presented in a vastly different manner:

He, the interlocutor, seated at the center of the stage, dresses with great resplendence, speaks in high-flown, multi-syllabic, 'learned' speech, is intensely dignified, and is always White. (Zanger 33)

The jokes shared between the interlocutor and the end men burlesque the interlocutor's dress and "learned" speech. As the only non-blackened member of the cast, the primary function of the interlocutor is to emphasize insurmountable cultural barriers between whites and blacks.

In stark contrast to the interlocutor, Tambo and Bones, primarily served as miscreants of black society, wreaking havoc due to their inability to live up to the behavioral and intellectual standard set by the interlocutor. The symbolic significance of the end men and the black humor they represented played such an integral part in minstrelsy's construction of blackness that a newspaper editor of a small Michigan town stressed to a minstrel performer "If you have two durned good end men you'll do well [...] But if you ain't got good end men our people won't patronize the show" (Toll 55). The editor was obviously referring to the end men's comedic talent. However, the end men's talent was based on their ability to successfully portray blacks as ineffectual idiots.

The characterization of Tambo and Bones embodied and secured the black stereotypes already instilled by minstrel performers.

While the first part of the show introduced perceived differences between blacks and whites, the second part of the show, the olio, offered a versatile component which extended minstrelsy's social commentary. Although the olio offered a variety of other acts, such as acrobats, men playing combs, songs and dances, it was the stump speech that made the segment distinctive. The stump speech was a monologue concerning virtually any topic selected and prepared by the minstrel performers, making it the perfect vehicle for setting forth conservative opinions on political issues.

Dan Emmett introduced the first stump speech in 1830. Targeting black ministers, minstrels delivered sermon monologues packed with unfocused and nonsensical dialogue. Once blacks were declared unsuitable citizens, minstrels used the black persona to declare that liberal political advocates were likewise unsuitable. These five to ten minute monologues made celebrities out of minstrel performers. For example, Eph Horn, Addison Ryman, and William Newcomb all gained fame lampooning women's rights. Other minstrels impersonated temperance advocates, such as Tony Pastor and abolitionists, like Arthur Tappan. It was considerably easier for these minstrel performers to ridicule the advocates of the liberal positions rather than directly attacking the positions, which would leave them, open to political challenges.

The culminating skit was different from the olio. Although the storylines many times stressed the points made in the olio, the skit was formatted like a short play, complete with plot and multiple characters to justify its theme. The themes of skits ranged from a black's inability to carry out instructions to the inability of blackened

temperance advocates to remain sober. Although females were mentioned in dialogue, the female character seldom spoke in the skit or any other portion of the minstrel performance.

The format of minstrelsy marginalized the black female. In the walkaround, the female character was absent, while the end men and the interlocutor exchanged dialogue. The olio featured several songs and monologues designed to debase the black female. If she appeared in the culminating one-act skit her appearance was brief, and her dialogue as well as that of the black male character, supported the negative descriptions of the black female evident in the preceding olio. The sparse dialogue conveyed an inability to articulate thoughts and opinions, reducing her status and communicating an apathetic response to her marginal role. The misogynist subject matter of minstrel performances was reinforced by the minstrel format.

### **Subject Matter**

Minstrel discourse routinely declared that blacks, because they had different physical characteristics than whites, were inhuman and therefore inferior. Minstrel performances stated that blacks “had to have their hair filed, not cut; that when blacks got sick and pale, they drank ink to restore their color; and that people could grow ‘niggas’ by planting their toes in the ground” (Toll 67). To perpetuate this construct, ignorant blacks were used to explain natural phenomena, such as gravity and electricity, or fads, like phrenology or transcendentalism. Since minstrel characters were portrayed as incapable of understanding these concepts, they were hopelessly inept at explaining them:

Transcendentalism is dat spiritual cognoscence ob psychology irrefragibility, connected wid conscientient ademption ob incolumbient spirituality and etherialized connection—which is deribed from a profound contemplation ob de irregability ob dose incessimable divisions ob de

more minute portions ob subdivided particles ob inwisible atoms. (Toll 70)

Minstrel storylines ran the gamut from science to genealogy. Many songs and skits focused on the minstrel characters' African heritage and suggested that African ancestry was responsible for the animalistic qualities of blacks:

My mammy was a wolf, my daddy was a tiger,  
And I'm what you call de old Virginia nigger;  
Half fire, half smoke, a little touch of thunder,  
I'm what dey call de eighth wonder. ( White 51)

African ancestry, for minstrelsy, evoked images of wild animals, further dehumanizing blacks in American culture.

Minstrelsy emphasized that blacks were considered eternally un-American by highlighting the African lineage of minstrel characters. This aspect of minstrelsy supported Jacksonian "nativism," which expressed a hostility to immigrants. Like minstrelsy, Jacksonian nativism defined Americans as white and American born, which excluded Africans and American born blacks. Both were considered African and as a result wild and unrestrained, which signified that they needed to be tamed or enslaved.

Troupes began adopting African signifiers to describe themselves, and frequently had names which conjured African images, such as "Ethiopian Delineators" and "Congo Melodists." Minstrel troupes opting not to use African signifiers to represent their troupe instead used them in the title of their songbooks. Consequently, Buckley's Troupe's songbook was titled, "Buckley's Ethiopian Melodies" and the best-selling minstrel songbook for the vastly popular Christy and White Troupe was the "Christy and White's Ethiopian Melodies". Moreover, numerous minstrel troupes performed acts that boasted African names such as, the "Virginia Jungle Dance," Nubian Jungle Dance,"



African Sailor's Hornpipe," and "African Fling." Minstrel blackness, due to its African roots, echoed the already ingrained perception that blacks needed to be tamed. This impression endorsed slavery, marking minstrelsy's initial foray into the political discourse.

Slavery was a popular subject of minstrel performances since slavery, as a subject matter until well after the Civil War. Promoting an opposition to the war, black characters sang songs expressing an appreciation of the white master and their enslaved status:

Old Massa to us darkies am good  
Tra la la, tra la la  
For he gibs us our clothes  
and he gibs us our food. (Saxton 18)

Shows suggested that blacks needed to be possessed by others because they were incapable of self-possession. Using black minstrel characters to speak for and represent the beliefs of all blacks was routine. Therefore when white minstrel performers sought to express a conservative ideology in support of the status quo, the black character was used to express it. Slave characters lamented that the abolishment of slavery would disrupt and separate the nation:

I would like the North and South to leave slav'ry alone,  
And stand by the Union unto the last stone;  
To settle the question by war, blood and vice,  
Is like burning your house to scare out a few mice. (Dennison 186)

The plantation slave was coupled with Jim Dandy, the personification of the Northern free black. He paraded in garish ill-fitting top hat and tails to declare that blacks are content to be slaves. However, if they are forced to fight they would be useless:

Niggers dey can pick cotton  
Dey'll do it freely

But when they smell the bullets,  
How dey'll run for Horace Greeley (Saxton 21)

Minstrelsy used these and other instances to outline what blacks should and shouldn't do. When blacks did not follow the minstrel standard of behavior, they were ridiculed in minstrel performances. There was a power in making the oppressed speak in support of the oppressor. It conveyed that minstrel blacks expressed the sentiments of all blacks. Had a white character expressed the same sentiments, it would have conveyed a white opinion rather than that of the oppressed black.

### **Defying the Minstrel Construct**

Minstrelsy was an important tool for discrediting blacks who were succeeding in the North and who clearly contradicted the images of blacks set by minstrelsy. In 1821, Charles Mathews gained fame by lampooning Ira Aldridge, a Northern freed black actor, who gained notoriety a decade later performing Shakespearean roles in Europe. In lampooning Aldridge, minstrels were essentially ridiculing the black actors of the African Grove Theatre, whose performances contradicted minstrel constructions of blackness.

Located in New York City, the African Grove Theatre, founded in 1821 by James Hewlett, was the only venue in New York, which offered black Shakespearean productions. In a desire to view themselves without the minstrel-derived representations, black audiences flocked in large numbers to performances. While blacks performed nightly at the African Grove, white audiences at the Bowery Theatre viewed Mathews ridiculing black Shakespearean actors. The following stump speech is Mathews' imitation of Aldridge:

To be or not to be, dat is him question, whether him nobler in de mind to suffer or lift up him arms against a sea of hubble bubble and by opossum end 'em. (Marshall 40)

Mathews' interpretation was like most minstrel performances. The character displayed illogical reasoning and spoke with minstrel dialect. Crowds left the performance curious and eager to see Aldridge, Mathews' model of ridicule. Angered by blacks' attempts to portray Aldridge as a legitimate Shakespearean actor, white audiences rioted the African Grove Theatre. For its production of Richard the III, the National Advocate reported:

The audiences were generally of a riotous character, and amused themselves by throwing crackers on the stage, and cracking their jokes with the actors, until danger from fire and civil discord rendered it necessary to break up the establishment. The ebony-colored wags were notified by the police that they must announce their last performance, but they, defying the public authority, went on and acted nightly. It was at length considered necessary to interpose the arm of authority, and on Monday evening a dozen watchmen made part of the audience [...] Finally they plead so hard in black verse, and promised never to act Shakespeare again, that the Police magistrates released them at a very late hour. ( Marshall 35)

Instead of enforcing the peace, the police enforced that blacks not be permitted to perform roles that did not match the characterization perpetuated by minstrel performances.

### **Conclusion**

The vast popularity of minstrelsy fueled the insulting stereotypes examined in this chapter. It is generally concluded that

the function of the stereotype is to exclude a people from one's perception. But the function is really inclusory; it seeks to explain the presence of other peoples in our midst or in the natural order of the world. (Szwed 23)

Minstrelsy not only defined blacks, it dictated how others should perceive them. Conveying that blacks were peculiar, distasteful, and unintelligent contributed to an overall inferior characterization of blackness. Distorting black culture and using it for the butt of minstrel jokes evoked more than the laughs from minstrel audiences; minstrelsy

created and perpetuated a dangerous ideology that dictated blackness for generations to come. Minstrelsy insisted that since blacks shared common signifiers, such as dark skin and kinky hair, they also all shared the same speech and behavioral patterns. This minstrel assessment played a powerful and significant role in conveying a damaging construct for black culture. The aim of my study, however is not to focus primarily on minstrelsy's degrading constructs; rather to show how minstrelsy's constructs of race and gender were used as a base for launching a conservative platform, which influenced the politics of its time. The following chapter will illustrate how minstrelsy was used to symbolize and justify violence against blacks during the anti-abolitionist riots of 1834.

## Chapter 2

### **Violent Symbolism: Anti-Abolitionist Mobs' Use of Blackface**

*“Great cities have ever been and probably ever will be [...] the theatre of the mob”  
(McConachie 17).*

Frustrated with the influx of freed blacks and the talk of impending Civil War, some nineteenth-century citizens expressed their dissatisfaction with violence. Abraham Lincoln, prior to his presidency, complained that mobs “have pervaded the country from New England to Louisiana; they are neither peculiar to the eternal snows of the former nor the burning suns of the latter” (Richards 9). Although opposition to anti-slavery movements exploded into violence throughout the country, the 1834 riots in New York and Philadelphia were unique because rioters incorporated minstrel performance into their violent activity. Designated mob members performed Jim Crow and delivered stump speeches as a finale to their rioting.

A Massachusetts prosecuting attorney, in his summation against a ringleader rioter, referred to the Jim Crow song as “the Io Triumphe of the rioters [...] the Io Paeon of triumph” (Massachusetts 64). The attorney rightly suggested that minstrelsy symbolized a victory cry for the rioters. In ancient Rome, Io triumphe was delivered as a victory chant during ceremonial parades. These parades honored the success of returning generals from battle. Similarly, Io Paeon also encouraged the efforts of fighters. It was a prayer to the Greek Gods by soldiers before, during, and after, battle. Minstrelsy, therefore, simultaneously symbolized the rioters' desires, and inspired their rioting behavior. Mirroring the rioters' philosophy, minstrel lyrics declared that the efforts of abolitionists were futile since “a Nigga will be a Nigga dey kin nebber make him white”

(Dennison 208). The incorporation of minstrelsy into mob behavior underscored several aspects of the rioter's Jacksonian ideology: 1) Minstrelsy labeled blacks as anti-citizens, which deemed them incapable and unworthy of carrying out duties of citizenry; 2) it voiced that freedom for blacks was unacceptable and unpatriotic; and 3) it symbolized the social identity of the new urban working class.

A society (America) that regularly proclaims democratic pieties also devotes extraordinary energy and wealth to establishing the symbols and trappings of hierarchy, the material markings that delineate who is better than whom. (Greider 411)

Though destruction of property and the determent of liberal advances were the main objectives for the mobs, the inclusion of minstrelsy added a theatrical element to their rioting activities. The interplay between performance and mob activity increased participation in the riots and acted to encourage the actions of rioters. A deeper understanding of minstrelsy and its use in mob behavior can be understood by examining 1) the abolition movement and the role its advocates played in nineteenth-century politics; 2) the New York and Philadelphia riots that utilized minstrelsy to protest abolition and its tenets; and 3) the minstrel response to abolition found in minstrel songs, jokes and dialogue. The chapter will end with an analysis of the riots and their use of minstrelsy.

### **Overview of Abolition**

Several leaders of the abolitionist movement, too numerous to list here, made significant contributions to the emancipation of blacks. This section, however, will focus on the abolitionists whose work, words, or actions influenced both the riots and minstrel performances of 1834. Undeterred by mob attacks and minstrel ridicule, these individuals' dedication to abolishing slavery remained unshaken.

William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the Liberator used his newspaper routinely to attack slaveholders. Although the newspaper had a circulation of only 3,000, Garrison's editorials earned him a national reputation as a leader favoring immediate emancipation. The state of Georgia felt threatened enough by Garrison's views that they rushed through a Senate resolution offering "a reward of \$5,000 for Garrison's apprehension and conviction in a Georgia court" (Dennison 157). In January 1832 Garrison formed the Anti-Slavery Society. He was influenced by the ideas of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and other feminists who joined the society. As co-founder of society, Garrison required that women play a prominent role, a radical move in 1832. The work of Garrison and members of the Anti-Slavery Society was aided by the financial backing of philanthropist, Arthur Tappan.

A Massachusetts native, Tappan moved to New York in 1807 and expanded his numerous business investments to include a profitable silk importing firm. He and his brother, Lewis Tappan, established America's first commercial credit-rating service. In 1832, Tappan was elected president of the Anti-Slavery Society. A year later the organization suffered division among the ranks. Unlike most male members of the society, including Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips, Tappan strongly objected to the prominent role played by women in the organization. As a result, Arthur Tappan and his brother Lewis left the organization in 1839. In addition to the Anti-Slavery Society, Tappan developed and funded several anti-slavery journals and, in 1850, financially supported the Underground Railroad.

Former slave, Frederick Douglass became a lecturer for the Anti-Slavery Society after he heard William Lloyd Garrison speak in 1833. The society helped Douglass

publish his autobiography, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. After the publication, Douglass was afraid of being recaptured by his former owner so he resided in Britain for a short time. In 1855 he returned to the states to create his own black press. This damaged the relationship he enjoyed with Garrison, “who was opposed to a separate, black owned press” (Dennison 112).

Douglass, Garrison, and Tappan, all members of the Anti-Slavery Society, played a significant role in its development. The growth of the society angered those who opposed abolition. In a combined effort to combat the advancement of the Anti-Slavery Society, New York Northerners formed the Colonization Society in 1830. Since the majority of its members were prominent citizens, the society was well funded.

### **Colonization as an Opposition to Abolition**

The Colonization Society and the Anti-Slavery Society became fast rivals. This fractious relationship worsened and as a result significantly influenced the New York riot of 1834. Adamantly opposed to the abolition movement, the Colonization Society proposed that blacks be shipped to Africa, their true homeland. The Colonization society’s declaration of principles expressed blacks were unsuited to remain in America:

Causes beyond the control of the human will must prevent their ever rising to equality with the whites. The managers consider it clear that causes exist, and are operating, to prevent their improvement and elevation to any considerable extent, as a class, in this country, which are fixed, not only beyond the control of friends of humanity, but of any human power. Christianity cannot do for them here what it will do for them in Africa. This is not the fault of the colored man, nor of the white man, nor of Christianity; but it is an ordination of Providence, and no more to be changed than the laws of nature. (Moore 306)

Because the Colonization Society tenets expressed a compassion for the predicament of the slave, many citizens misunderstood Colonization and its mission. Some felt that the



Colonization Society members were in favor of abolition. In order to battle the growing consensus that abolition was equal to colonization, William Lloyd Garrison published a pamphlet entitled “Thoughts on Colonization,” which suggested that the true motive of colonization was to expel blacks from white society, rather than free the slave.

Colonization was losing to the abolitionist movement. Garrison’s demand for immediate and unconditional emancipation for blacks, tagged Garrisonian abolition, gained a substantial following. A year after the Anti-Slavery Society began it grew from four local societies in two states to “forty-seven in ten states” (Richards 25). In 1833 Garrison traveled to England and established additional chapters of his society. His trip resulted in persuading some of England’s chief philanthropists to formally denounce colonization and offer financial support to the Anti-Slavery Society. Garrison’s work along with his newspaper became a major threat to the Democratic Party. The Anti-Slavery Society, formed by Garrison and Arthur Tappan quickly expanded as more whites turned out to hear abolition arguments. These arguments succeeded in converting many former followers of the Colonization. While the Anti-Slavery Society experienced an increase in attention and membership, the Colonization Society months before the New York riot “faced a \$46,000 deficit” (Richards 26).

In an effort to quell the growing interest in the Anti-Slavery Society, the Colonization Society actively circulated negative propaganda regarding the Anti-Slavery Society in their newspapers. Soon thereafter, James Watson Webb, editor of the New York Enquirer and Courier along with Solomon Lang, editor of the New York Gazette, met with other high-ranking members of the Colonization Society. It was decided that the colonization-operated newspapers would encourage readers to invade the initial

meeting of the New York Anti-Slavery Society in order to “put a stop to Garrison’s calumnies [and] misrepresentations” (Richards 27). The editors set about having the Anti-Slavery meeting advertised in the following day’s colonization-supporting newspapers. These papers encouraged attendance in order to “expose the weakness as well as the folly, madness, and mischief of these bold and dangerous men” (Richards 28). Pamphlets and handbills were also distributed in taverns and hot spots around town.

Webb’s newspaper articles, published in all three papers, encouraged readers to express their dissatisfaction violently at an upcoming Anti-Slavery meeting to be held October 2, 1834. Articles announced: “At eleven, the Fanatics meet at Chatham street Chapel, to have their zeal inflamed by the doctrines of abolition and amalgamation” (Wilentz 89). “Fanatics” was a term used to describe abolitionists in the street and on the minstrel stage. The word “amalgamation” referred to the practice of interracial marriage. Predicting that amalgamation would be beneficial in protesting abolition, anti-abolitionists routinely asserted that “abolitionists asked their daughters to wed blacks, and that abolitionist ministers frequently joined whites and blacks in holy matrimony” (Gilje 163). It was even falsely rumored that Arthur Tappan divorced his wife to marry a black.

Amalgamation thus became an important buzzword used to discourage abolition. James Webb understood and appreciated that the term could be used to evoke volatile anti-abolition actions. Asserting that blacks were actually meant to live like their fictional counterpart in minstrelsy, Webb conveyed that amalgamation should be avoided at all costs. Some nineteenth-century citizens deeply feared that amalgamation would lead to social integration. Some historians, such as Linda Kerber and Paul Gilje maintain

that the false assertion of amalgamation and Webb's role in publicizing it played a key role in instigating the New York riot.

### **New York Riot**

The New York riot broke out in three locations: Tappan's house, the Bowery Theatre, and the Chatham Street Chapel. At Lewis Tappan's house, abolitionist and brother of Arthur Tappan, more than one hundred men shattered doors, windows, furniture, and priceless artwork. When one of the rioters came upon a portrait of George Washington another rioter yelled, "For God's sake don't burn Washington" (Wilentz 265). One portion of the crowd stayed to burn Tappan's furniture on the front lawn, while another group left the site wielding Washington's portrait, a patriotic symbol of their mission.

The crowd met up with approximately 2500 rioters standing outside Clinton Hall angrily yelling for Arthur Tappan and Garrison to come out. They were to wait in vain. As a result of the highly publicized call for action against the Anti-Slavery Society, the members wisely chose to convene secretly in the Chatham Street Chapel, across the street from the original meeting place.

After discovering the ruse, the mob armed with "dirks and daggers" rushed to the chapel only to discover that the members had left out the back door after quickly deliberating and electing Arthur Tappan president (Abdy 389). Frustrated and angry, the mob was unwilling to accept that they had been outwitted. In an act of defiance they used minstrelsy to create a new ending to the failed attempt to stop the Anti-Slavery Society. "A wretched looking old black was seized hold of," they thought he would be a "good subject for ribaldry" (Abdy 390). He was forced to reside over the meeting—as a

stand in for Tappan. Ridiculing Tappan and other members of the Anti-Slavery Society, rioters made resolutions favoring “immediate emancipation and [...] immediate amalgamation” (Richards 30). The resolutions were made and wholeheartedly passed amid raucous cheers and laughter. One rioter stepped up to the pulpit and “preached in mock Negro style” while his fellow mob members “struck up a Jim Crow chorus” (Jentz 249). A portion of the crowd left the site of the Anti-Slavery meeting and progressed to the Bowery Theater where there was another riot in progress.

A rumor had spread that George Farren, an English actor, was guilty of making discriminating remarks regarding American audiences and had “insulted the American flag, cursed the Yankees, and called them jackasses, and said he would gull them whenever he could” (Wilentz 265). Of the four thousand in attendance, between five hundred and a thousand broke into the theatre disrupting the performance of Metamora. The Enquirer newspaper reported:

They were quelled only when the manager, Hamblin, rushed in from the wings to apologize, waving an American flag in each hand and summoning an American singer to perform Zip Coon. (Wilentz 265)

Former mayor and eyewitness Phillip Hone observed, “American Forrest (Edwin Forrest) [...] assured them that the object of their rage, Mr. Farren, had made a hasty exit” (Hone 109). Once again, patriotism and minstrelsy appeased the rioters.

Forrest was a hero to the Irish working class and his followers would soon have a riot of their own—the Astor Place Riot. Not surprisingly, Webb used the newspapers under his influence to express an objection to the British Shakespearean actor, Charles Macready. As in the New York 1834 riot, the Astor Place Riot was also instigated by the interference of the conservative press.

Meanwhile, the rioting at Lewis Tappan's house was in high gear. It finally ended at 2:00a.m. when rioters dragged "furniture and bedding out as contribution to a bonfire" (Kerber 31). Police were kept at bay with bricks. It seems that the police didn't put forth much of an effort. Webb alluded to the lack of police protection afforded abolitionists for themselves and their property two days later in the morning newspapers:

They (abolitionists) are always clamorous with the police for protection and demand it as a right inherent to their character of American citizens. Now we tell them, that when they openly and publicly promulgate doctrines which outrage public feeling, they have no right to demand protection from the people they thus insult. (Kerber 32)

As a result of Webb's ability to ignite vigilantism, the crowd that assembled that evening proved impossible to manage. The 27<sup>th</sup> National Guard had difficulty managing the crowd and no form of enforcement was sent to the worst site of rioting, the Five Points neighborhood. At 2:00 am, the mob's activities tallied "five hundred dollars" destroyed over sixty buildings and caused numerous injuries. (Kerber 31). After hearing that white "abolitionist ministers" officiated over interracial marriages at seven churches, the rioters burned them to the ground (Lott 131).

The fact that no estimation of numbers regarding the number of lost lives, limb, and property of black victims in nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals allude to the disregard for blacks and their dilemma. Although some writers do appear sympathetic, they fail to offer details: "The rioters alternated between hanging Negroes, burning their homes, and plundering generally, on the one hand, and fighting the military on the other" (Freeland 302). During the riot approximately 150 people were arrested.

## **Philadelphia Riot**

The combination of riots occurring within the same year, 1834, in New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia caused the year to be nicknamed “the year of the riots.” Like New York City riots, a series of incidents preceding the Philadelphia riot contributed to its development. There was no Philadelphian counterpart to New York editor James Watson Webb, who played a role in portraying blacks as minstrel characters as well as publicizing the date, place, and time of impending riots. Due to Webb’s association with the Colonization Society, and the minstrel caricatures it espoused: “local colonizationists played a significant role in at least 50 percent of the mobs, but not more than 75 percent” (Richards 30). Although colonization writers advanced negative images of blacks, they did not use amalgamation to incite readers or advertise abolition meetings. However, some colonization writers were culpable due to their efforts to advance negative images of blacks. As in the New York riot, blacks were portrayed as unseemly minstrel characters. A colonization writer reported that the blacks in the area, which experienced the most damage during the riot, were infested with “instances of loathsome disease, exhibitions of nudity or something near to it, intemperance, profanity, vice and wretchedness” (Runcie 215). Although colonization writers didn’t play a major role in orchestrating the riot, they assisted in branding blacks as undesirable and contemptible. Unlike New York City, Philadelphia newspapers did not have penny dailies until the “publication of the Public Ledger in 1836” (Runcie 197). Consequently, anti-abolition amalgamation propaganda was not frequently advanced. What then was the major impetus for the Philadelphia riot?

Philadelphia had a long history of incorporating minstrelsy into rioting behavior. An examination of the first incidents of group blackface in Philadelphia and its social regulation helps to clarify why minstrelsy was integral to nineteenth-century violence against blacks. In 1829, nine years after minstrelsy's inception, Philadelphian crowds of young white working-class males used blackface as a disguise during Christmas festivals, which explains why early minstrel shows were tagged "nigger festivals." Participants usually chose costumes of popular personalities, such as Jenny Lind or Lillie Langtry, but minstrel characters also proved to be extremely popular, since costumes were simplistic and easily accessible. Rummaging the nearest closet could assist in creating a suitable image of Jim Crow or Aunt Sally. A Jim Crow disguise merely required old clothes and straw hat to create the black country bumpkin, while Aunt Sally's image was brought to life with the donning of a garish dress and bandana. Men could easily wear a female disguise for the festival, however "arrests for transvestism brought stiff fines" (Davis 189). This permissiveness perhaps alludes to the theatrical nature of minstrelsy, where men dressed up as women for most of the nineteenth-century.

Blacking up for these Christmas festivals, like minstrel performances, permitted white men the opportunity to cross lines of both gender and race, while keeping their own white gender temporarily disguised. After festivals men dressed as Aunt Sally could return home, take off the costume and makeup and return from being marginal, black and female, to being white, male, and privileged. The minstrel characterization permitted white men to return to their true race and Other identity.

Choosing to disguise themselves as a Jim Crow or Aunt Sally empowered festival participants with the ability to visually shape and project their feelings regarding blacks.

Minstrel performances used a visual and vocal presentation of blacks to advance a marginalized persona, while festival participants used minstrel images, alone, to advance an anti-abolitionist ideology. The adoption of the minstrel image by large groups of celebrants expressed a mass objection to abolition. However, the use of minstrel disguises was not the only contributing factor to the imminent Philadelphia riots.

The well-populated Christmas festival fell at a time when creeks and rivers froze, making it impossible for workshops and factories to function. Unemployment gave rise to frustration and increased socialization, which led to intense drinking. Although some historians, such as Linda Kerber, feel that unemployment was a major contributing factor, it was not until participants incorporated blackface into their activities that violence quickly ensued: “Riot and revelry, disguise and debauch gave police and property owners reason to fear the approach of the holiday” (Davis 185). The blackface mask offered a degree of anonymity from being identified, but more importantly it signaled that minstrel elements coupled with violence would be used to express an opposition to slavery.

When the abolition movement gained momentum revelers were not content to merely voice their objections silently, with disguises. Angered by the abolitionists’ attempt to uplift the status of blacks, the rioters lashed out, in blackface. The mask symbolized their objection to the abolitionist mission. Like minstrel characters, blacks were expected to accept discrimination happily. When the abolition movement dared to denounce minstrel boundaries for blacks, the blackface mask was donned. Blackface, en masse, became synonymous with group violence against blacks: “racial clashes, initiated



by blackface mobs, took place regularly [...] on other occasions, blacked-up mobs attacked African-Americans who were in church” (Roediger 106).

The influx of Irish immigrants also contributed to the Philadelphia riot. Edward Adby, a British observer contended, “It appeared from all I could learn, that the Irish laborers were actively employed in this vile conspiracy” (Adby, 325). Though Irish immigration did not reach its peak until the 1840’s, “Irish migrants were already entering the city at the rate of several thousand a year during the 1830’s” (Runcie 198). The Irish came to America in search of the American dream and instead they were immediately faced with a city densely populated, disease ridden, and unclean. Additionally, they found themselves in competition with blacks for menial, unskilled, and low paid employment.

Data compiled by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1838 reveals that blacks were operating in small numbers in all the trades represented by the rioters. There were for example “fifteen cabinet-makers, five weavers, eleven plasterers, six painters, twenty-three blacksmiths, and as many as forty-one cabinet makers in the black community at that time” (Runcie 201). This rivalry between blacks and Irish created tension and resentment.

On August 12, a mob consisting of several hundred rioters destroyed a building, which housed a carousel machine, known as the “Flying Horses.” White rioters were angered that blacks were allowed to ride the carousel:

At one time it is supposed that four or five hundred persons were engaged in the conflict, with clubs, brickbats, paving stones, and the materials of the shed in which the flying horses were kept. (Runcie 190)

Afterwards rioters begin “hunting the Nigs” and advanced to the adjacent district of Moyamensing (Runcie 198). Moyamensing housed the core of the black Philadelphians.

During the three days of rioting:

At least one Negro was killed, many were severely injured, two churches and innumerable private dwellings were attacked and damaged and their contents looted or destroyed. A post-riot citizens’ investigation committee conservatively estimated the damage at about \$4,000. (Runcie 190)

The third and last day of rioting the mob expanded their destruction to include other neighborhoods. Rioters wore “black masks and shabby coats” (Abdy 325). Like the white minstrel performer, their blackened faces expressed their violent attitudes towards blacks and their belief in black inferiority. Rioters, unhappy with the freed blacks, wanted them to be enslaved, like minstrel characters. How is it that Jim Crow progressed from a minstrel song into a symbol of anti-black violence? Although there is an obvious correlation between the separatist viewpoint shared by minstrelsy and anti-abolitionist mobs, it remains puzzling that an angry mob, in the midst of mass violence, would take time to perform an art form intended to evoke laughter. The following section will illustrate the elements of minstrelsy that the rioters of 1834 embraced as well as show how minstrelsy defiled abolitionists.

### **Minstrel Response to Abolition**

#### Anti-slavery

In 1834 anti-slavery jokes and lyrics dominated minstrel discourse. Like the rioters, minstrelsy expressed an opposition to emancipation for blacks and a frustration with abolition attempts. Shows divided the black character into two categories, enslaved and free. The enslaved character was perfectly content with his status. Annoyed with the unrelenting talk of black emancipation, Jim Crow, Cuff, and Snow argued “Dis dam

abolition, ‘mancipation [...] Am a going to run de nigger in de ground!’ (Dennison 220). Minstrel characters appeared frustrated with the unrelenting efforts of abolitionists and protested:

The Abolition men they preach ‘bout settin’ niggers free  
I think they’d better hold their tongues and let  
the nigger be;  
They only want to coax them off, then leave ‘em  
all alone,  
But the niggers are contented as long as they’ve a home. (Dennison 185)

To show that freed blacks shared similar sentiments, Jim Brown, a character used to embody the Northern freed black, expressed that blacks disliked their newly freed status: “Dis being free is worsen den being a slave”(Rehin 372). Whether the minstrel character was freed or enslaved, minstrelsy portrayed that blacks preferred the slavery. Performances portrayed slavery as comforting and satisfying, and the white master is treasured because he provides the slave with food, comfort, and appreciation. Characters fail to mention unrelenting work, minimal food and drink, and brutal beatings experienced by slaves. Minstrel performers used classic tactics for nineteenth-century conservatives. For example, conservatives insisted that a woman’s place is in the home not at the ballot box, because the home is where she can be treasured and pampered. Having the oppressed praise the generosity of the oppressor was an ironic and highly successful strategy.

### Abolitionists

Northern abolitionists were also mocked in minstrel performances. In the popular sketch “Wonderful Eggs,” abolitionist Horace Greeley was ridiculed. In the sketch, a black slave escapes his master, and the South, by hiding in a box on a train to New York City. An unsuspecting worker loaded straw and eggs on the inhabited box. When the

train stopped near Niblo's saloon, famous for its minstrel productions, someone opened the box and saw the black man escape amid broken eggs. A white observer exclaimed that since Horace Greeley loved blacks, he would be interested in purchasing similar boxes because, "every egg would hatch a nigger" (Christy 35).

An innovative technique was used to ridicule lyricist and abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy. He had gained significant notoriety for penning "Jingle Bells," the popular Christmas carol. His lyrics are identical to the ones we sing today, but soon after Lovejoy's song became a success, George Christy, a popular minstrel performer, re-wrote the song and included the lyrics "Set 'em up, the sleigh-bells ring, while we darkeys laugh and sing" (Christy 26). While Christy's re-constructed rendition demanded that blacks remain oppressed, Lovejoy's song portrayed a festive spirit devoid of racial construction.

Successful businessman and philanthropist, Arthur Tappan was referred to as Massa Arfy Tappan "Ole Bobolition Glory [...] De black man's friend" (Strong 74). In falsely labeling Tappan a slave owner, he was portrayed as a hypocrite—an abolitionist and a slave owner.

Unlike white abolitionists, such as Greeley and Tappan, Frederick Douglas and other black abolitionists were seldom targeted. An exclusion of these men in minstrel performances would, at first glance, appear to be insignificant. However, by ignoring black abolitionists, minstrelsy ignored their existence and accomplishments. If they were mentioned by name, credence would have to be given to their achievements. It would also show that blacks were individuals not "types."

When black abolitionists were targeted, the true name of the abolitionist was changed. For example, in minstrels, Nat Turner was given the name Uncle Gabriel in the song “De Nigga General.” Though the song fails to include Nat Turner’s name, it accurately depicts Nat Turner’s insurrection and defeat in 1831. Audiences were well aware of the details of the insurrection, which left no doubt that the Nigger General was in actuality a characterization of Nat Turner. “De Nigga General” justifies the use of violence against black insurrection. Its two-fold message communicates a warning to blacks as well as suggests violence as a useful means of combating anti-slavery sentiments:

O, Johnson Ben he drove de waggon  
Ho, boys yere most done...  
And dey hung him and dey swung him  
Ho boys, yere most done. (Saxton 214)

The lyrics vacillate from the past to the present. While the character tells what happened to Nat Turner “dey hung him” the character also acts as if the hanging is happening at the present moment “yere most done.” This signifies that future rioters still have work to do. The minstrel lyrics convey that the rioters’ work will not be complete until abolitionists are hung. The capture of Nat Turner for his crimes led to minstrel songs as well as mob incidents. Soon after Turner was hung for leading an insurrection resulting in the death of 55 white people, mobs violently responded to the emotionally charged atmosphere. In the hysterical climate that followed the rebellion, close to 200 black people, many of whom had nothing to do with the rebellion, were murdered by white mobs.

While minstrelsy seldom targeted abolitionist individuals such as Frederick Douglass, it did not ignore black abolitionists as a whole. Minstrelsy uniformly portrayed all black abolition characters as idiots, incapable of mingling with blacks or

whites. The black characters' efforts to integrate with white society appeared ludicrous: In the minstrel skit "The New York Nigger," the character Jim Brown is a black abolitionist. His black friend, Pompey is puzzled by Jim's efforts to distance himself from the black race:

Pompey: Hello, Jim! How is you today?  
Jim: Look here colored man, don't be too familiar, if you please. 'Tis accessory dat you should know one ting perbious to your succeeding any funder in your observations.  
Pompey: What is dat?  
Jim: I will instruct you to know dat I hab been appointed to office. I am 'pointed trabblin'-agent fur de Bobilation Society.  
Pompey: Trabblin'-agent? Well s'pose dat means to go afoot—ha! ha! ha! Dare's one ting mighty sartin, honey—you won't be trabble bery fast if you tote dem heels wid you!  
(Christy 12)

Pompey's characterization is thus used to remind Jim of his proper station in life. "Dem heel" refers to the oft-repeated minstrel joke that all blacks have large feet. Minstrels would often wear clown shoes to emphasize this assertion. Large feet, as a minstrel symbol of blackness, underscored that Jim and the blacks he represented would never achieve social acceptance or cultivation. Their inferiority was literally written in their bodies. Cultivation was clearly Jim's objective since he spoke in a pompous manner. Characters such as Jim were also used to show that if Northern blacks remained free, it would lead to amalgamation.

### Amalgamation

In minstrel performances white abolitionists were linked with black female characters. In this way minstrelsy asserted to audiences that abolitionists practiced amalgamation, or interracial marriage. It was routine to see a minstrel version of Arthur Tappan embracing Miss Dinah, a popular black female character. The sight of a white

Tappan and black female caused other characters in the scene to “die a laffin” (Strong 74). Once minstrels cemented that abolitionists were amalgamators, minstrels incorporated dialogue to insist that abolitionists wanted everyone to participate in biracial relationships. Minstrelsy asserted that abolitionists:

want to make the white gal  
Marry to de niggar  
And dat jes what I call  
Goin de whole figgar.

I heard dey gib a premium,  
I tink about a guinea,  
For ebery couple what do hab,  
A real brown pick-en-ninuey. (America)

The lyrics preposterously proposed that abolitionists paid couples to marry and give birth to biracial children. Minstrel characters adamantly disliked and discouraged biracial products of amalgamation:

Let um stick to dere colour  
An no amalgamation,  
For I tink de Mulatto are  
A raal abomination. (Ibid)

Slave owners often fathered their children by raping their female slaves. Yet anti-abolitionists were adamantly against interracial relationships or the children the relationships produced if blacks in the relationship were freed rather than enslaved.

Even though minstrelsy was used as a form of entertainment to evoke humor, when it was used in rioting, it illustrated that “humor” had very real consequences. By evoking minstrelsy in the act of vigilantism, the mob effectively used minstrelsy as a form of retribution and a symbol of their mission. The anti-abolitionist mob responded angrily when blacks failed to adhere to the black behavioral standards presented in minstrel shows:

Blackface whiteness meant respectable rowdiness and safe rebellion. It powerfully addressed the broadest tensions generated by the creation of the first American working class. By and large, it did so by radicalizing conflict more than by directly articulating class grievances. (Roediger 127)

Mob actions embodied the violent sentiments shown on the minstrel stage. The rioters, as well as the minstrelsy they embraced, ridiculed efforts made by blacks to improve their educational, economic, or social status. Just as minstrel shows ridiculed efforts made by freed blacks to over-step minstrel cultural boundaries so did the rioters. This was particularly true with blacks attempting to improve their economic status through self-employment:

Isiah Emory, for example, received a threatening note stating that he had better shut his shop or be mobbed. Storekeeper E. Davis feared that the two brick houses he owned, 121 Broome and 123 Forsyth Street, were to be attacked. Likewise, on the night of the eleventh, a mob destroyed a barbershop at Bayard and Orange streets owned by a black man. (Gilje 166)

The property of these blacks demonstrated independence and economic success. Any attempts at empowerment were made to appear ludicrous and as such evoked laughter on stage, but violence in the street: “The minstrel show [...] inhabited—and began actually to signify—not an undifferentiated ‘mass’ culture but a class-defined, often class-conscious, cultural sphere” (Lott 67). The inclusion of minstrelsy allowed rioters to create a minstrel-like ending to their activities.

Using minstrelsy emphasized the rioter’s philosophy in the New York riot. Forcing the black man to portray Tappan, during the New York riot essentially created a blackened Tappan to fictitiously replace the real one, thereby reducing Arthur Tappan to a minstrel character and the Anti-Slavery meeting to a minstrel performance. Minstrel



elements, such as the stump speech and Jim Crow song, validated their actions and acted to underscore a philosophy that blacks were inept and unworthy of citizenship.

Minstrelsy was not only used to support the rioters' assertions, it symbolized their unification. It encouraged them to act as a group devoted to a common goal. Rioters considered these goals best for their country. Therefore, minstrelsy, like the American flag used at the Chatham Theatre and the portrait of George Washington used at Tappan's house, acted as a symbol of patriotism for the rioters. It was only when Hamblin had the flag waved and Jim Crow performed that the mob was appeased. Jim Crow, like the portrait and the flag encouraged, appeased, and rallied the rioters—functions of patriotism.

An American visiting Paris, defended the New York rioters by insisting that the rioters' actions were patriotic. While at a gathering, a Frenchman suggested that it was inconceivable that New York's law enforcement allowed mob activity to persist for three days. He further asserted that the French had a preferable enforcement organization. The offended American promptly responded "But suppose that mobs do occur with us, and are less promptly subdued than with you [...] mobs represent the good sense and patriotism of a community accustomed to self-government" (Littell 135). Mob activity did more than reflect philosophy and encourage a sense of patriotism; minstrel images in the mob inflamed the actions of both its participants and spectators.

The mob activity also had a theatrical element. An engagement between the audience and the artist "is necessary in all art" (Eliot 174). While the rioters were performers, observers of mob activity acted as audience members. Their applause and cheers encouraged the actions of the rioters. Mob performance entertained participants as

well as observers. A mob ringleader refused to retire “till he had some fun—he came for that, and that he would have before he went home” (Runcie 217).

Newspapers implored citizens “stay away from the scenes of disorder [...]well disposed citizens only tend to increase the crowd and give the rioters confidence” (Runcie 207). Acting as members of the audience, observers applauded the pilfering and destruction of property. When the police attempted to gain order the spectators assisted the rioters in attacking the police so the rioters “counted on their [the observers’] assistance” (Runcie 207). When the police threatened the continuation of the riotous act, the audience’s role as observer switched to that of participant. The minstrel masking combined with performative elements created a theatrical atmosphere: “Our city has almost been the theatre of disorders which practically nullify civil government” (Davis 190).

In both the New York and Philadelphia riots, before and during the riots, white residents were asked to identify themselves and their property by placing candles in their windows. The white candles were synonymous with the whiteness of the minstrel performers. Whiteness acted as a signifier of acceptable citizenship: Rioters cried as a reminder “light (for) white faces” (Runcie 200). Meanwhile, blackened homes were attacked. In this instance whiteness was literally and figuratively privileged and blackness was literally and figuratively a target for violence.

It was inevitable that the riots themselves would become the subject of minstrelsy. This self-reflexive song entitled, “Dinah Crow’s Abolition” leaves a warning for blacks and whites in the wake of anti-abolition mob violence:

An now my broder darkeys  
Just please to keep your station,

Keep clear ob de white folk  
An de devilish bobolition.

But if we don't behave ourselves  
An mingle wid de white,  
If we got a kick on the shin  
I'm sure it sarves us right.

An now God bress you massas,  
I tink it time to stop,  
You've punished us a plenty,  
So please to let it drop. (America)

The minstrel lyrics convey that if blacks attempt to mingle with whites, violence will incur. The last lines of the song not only begs for mercy, but conveys that freed blacks would like to return to their enslaved status. This is evident when the black character, although freed, continues to refer to his white audience members as “massas.” Rioters choose to incorporate the elements of minstrelsy and, minstrelsy in return recorded and validated their actions.

### **Conclusion**

Minstrelsy symbolized the separatist views of anti-abolitionist mobs and as a result was performed to underscore their anti-abolition assertions. Not only were minstrel performances used to portray black culture, they were touted as a treasured symbol of America. Poet Bayard Taylor alludes to the nineteenth-century perception of nineteenth-century minstrelsy:

The Ethiopian melodies well deserve to be called, as they are in fact, the national airs of America. Their quaint, mock-sentimental cadences, so well suited to the broad absurdity of the words—their reckless gaiety and irreverent familiarity with serious subjects—and their spirit of antagonism and perseverance—are true expressions of the more popular sides of the national character. They follow the American race in all its emigrations, colorizations and conquests, as certainly as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day. (Lott 100)

Unfortunately, violent anti-abolitionist rioters embraced the very elements of minstrelsy that declared it to be sentimental. Taylor, in describing minstrelsy as “quaint” and the characters’ “absurd,” erroneously defined blacks and their American experience. There is no authentic black experience in minstrelsy. Rather, minstrelsy is a misappropriation of blackness. This misappropriation is embraced as a national symbol and is favored and treasured as preferred signifiers of blackness. When blacks and white abolitionists contradicted minstrelsy’s dictates, regarding black character and behavior, blacks were beaten and terrorized. Violence was a means of preserving a minstrelized version of blacks and their place in American society—and this “patriotic” display cost the country hundreds if not thousands of lives.

### Chapter 3

#### Minstrelsy and the Suffrage Movement: Masking a Woman's Place

*Owe! Woman, woman, how sweet you be,  
When you're dressed up to kill,  
I hope the time will never see  
When man's place you fill. (Hiram 123)*

When nineteenth-century male minstrels began portraying suffragists, they used the looks and behavior already present in their repertoire of black female roles. In order to portray the visually repulsive dark wench, minstrels crossed their eyes, wore garish tattered dresses, and clown shoes. The wench's lack of intelligence was evident in songs and jokes. Minstrels who portrayed the mammy wore padding and often carried a rolling pin, which the mammy used to physically abuse her husband. In direct contrast to the mammy and wench, the yeller gal was portrayed as visually appealing. Since minstrels sought to ridicule suffrage, they often used the mammy and wench to portray suffragists. By characterizing the unattractive wench and domineering mammy as suffragists, suffragists were portrayed as combative, unattractive, and unintelligent. Although minstrel suffragists verbalized a support of suffrage, their reasoning regarding the subject remained specious:

We believe wimmens has got rites, which man won't let her have. We believe the ballit is calkilated to raise woman to her proper speer. [...] and we are bound hensforth and forever, one and onseperable, to stand up for our rites, if we can only rope in enuff Congressmen to hold our bonnits. (Hiram 123)

Using malapropisms to express her cause, the minstrel suffragist was more concerned about the security of her bonnet than advancing women's rights in nineteenth-century society. Her misguided concern demonstrated that she was incapable of making

reasonable decisions, political or otherwise. This blackened version of the suffragist invited audiences to re-evaluate the suffrage cause through a discriminating lens. The popularity of minstrel shows throughout the nineteenth-century demanded an increase in productions, which helped to propel these insulting and unwavering characterizations into the psyche of citizens throughout the antebellum era. This chapter will explore the behavioral and physical traits assigned to the minstrel suffragist. It will also stress minstrelsy's attempt to use her characterization to propagandize against the suffrage movement and cement a sexist standard for nineteenth-century women.

Since suffrage was lampooned more than abolition or temperance, it is puzzling that more information regarding the subject does not exist. While historian, Annemarie Bean provides perceptive research regarding the subject, her work fails to delve into significant areas that I will illuminate in this chapter. While Bean includes songs and stump speeches which ridicule suffrage, she doesn't show how minstrel discourse mimicked the anti-suffrage assertions circulated in society. Neither does she examine the significant merging of the black female minstrel character with the white suffragist. By using the black female character as a prototype, minstrels assigned masculine and unnatural tendencies to both black women and white suffragists. Black female characters defied societal gender norms, and as a result characterized suffrage as improper for women. In order to further publicize these and other aspects of the suffragist's demeaning characterization, minstrel performers looked beyond the minstrel stage. They enlisted the assistance of newspaper editors and theatre critics. By printing false newspaper advertisements and theatre reviews, editors and theatre critics duped readers into attending performances of minstrel suffragists rather than bona fide suffragist

lecturers. A newspaper would also advertise a minstrel show as if it were a pro-suffrage rally. Using black female caricatures, was the initial, and perhaps the most damaging, aspect of the minstrel suffragist's characterization. Without the compilation of the multi-faceted suffragist characterization and the strategies used to publicize its discourse, an overall view of minstrelsy's leverage in battling the progress of suffrage remains insufficient and incomplete.

Blackface entertainment was used to reflect and endorse the anti-suffrage argument circulated off the minstrel stage. Opponents to suffrage insisted that, due to their sex, women "were not suited" to voting responsibilities. Instead, they should concern themselves with "more urgent duties," such as cooking and caring for their family (Cooper 442). According to anti-suffragists, women who supported suffrage were neglectful wives and mothers.

To strengthen their argument, anti-suffragists maintained that women who supported suffrage were forsaking their religious faith: "Let men make the laws, and let women be content to fill worthily, to the very best of their abilities, the noble position which the Heavenly Father has already marked for them" (Ibid). In this way religion was used to assert that the woman's place is in the home.

One of the most popular stances taken against suffrage was that women, due to their sex, were physically inferior to men, and as a result incapable of voting. It was argued that only men should vote, since fighting to defend the country and voting were masculine acts of citizenship: "men must vote as soldiers must fight" (Conant 74). Minstrelsy used the characterization of the black female character to justify and underscore the anti-suffrage arguments discussed in society.

## **Black Female Character**

By using the same stock female characterizations already ingrained in the psyche of minstrel audiences, minstrels initiated the first step in presenting the suffragist as marginal. Although she may have had a lyric to share in the refrain, the black female character seldom performed solo performances, which suggested that black woman was inferior to the black male and should remain silent until he included her in the conversation. Her infrequent appearance and silence reinforced a lack of voice for women.

The positioning of the black female on stage also contributed to cementing her marginalized position in society. While the male was on stage he primarily stood in the downstage center area. This strategic dominant positioning privileges the black male character while marginalizing the female in the upstage right or upstage left area. This placement encouraged the audience to focus first on the male, the individual centered on the plane closer to the audience, rather than the one farther away, the female. To strengthen an already marginal presentation, suffragists were portrayed as the dark wench, the mammy, or the yeller gal. To understand the damaging effect incurred by this portrayal, it is necessary to examine each black female character type found in minstrel performances.

Given that minstrelsy sought to make suffrage and its supporters appear repulsive, the wench, the most unattractive female character, was most frequently used to characterize the suffragist. To add an inhuman element to her already unsightly presentation, minstrels exaggerated the features of the black female body. In order to stress a negative persona of the black female, minstrelsy exaggerated her classical



African features: black skin, tight curly hair, broad nose, and full lips. This made the wench appear odd, unappealing, and unnatural. Lyrics, such as those found in the song “Gal From the South” illustrates minstrelsy’s attempt to mold the audience’s visual perception of the character:

Ole massa bought a colored gal,  
He bought her at the south;  
Her hair it curled so tight  
She could not shut her mouth.

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;

One morning massa goin’ away,  
He went to get his coat,  
But neither hat nor coat was there,  
For she had swallowed both;  
He took her to a tailor shop,  
To have her moth made small,  
The lady took in one long breath,  
And swallowed tailor and all. (Lott 26)

Female beauty, for minstrel characters, was measured by using the image of the white woman as the model of perfection. Since the presentation of the wench veered drastically from that of the white woman, she was considered grotesque.

Although the wench didn’t conform to the minstrel male’s vision of beauty, her possession of female genitals more than made up for her offensive appearance: “Miss Lucy she is tall, And de way she spreads her ankles, Is the death to the niggers all” (Dennison 121). Blatant sexual discourse used to describe the wench’s sexual prowess, alluded to the minstrel male’s disregard for the nineteenth-century custom of honoring and cultivating unspoken rules of modesty and self-discipline for white females and their

sexual acts. When the black male character ignores the cultural and social codes, he appears to justify discrimination against him as well as the wench.

Lacanian theory provides a means of understanding the significance of minstrelsy's strategem regarding the sexual role of the wench. For Lacan, meaning, and the symbolic order is fixed and controlled by the transcendental signifier which Lacan calls the phallus, the signifier of sexual difference. The phallus guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order and signifies power and control. When the minstrel male declares the wench solely useful for sexual gratification, her role is declared once again marginal to the male. The wench's submissive attitude toward the minstrel male also helped to cement discrimination against her.

Since Lacanian theory declares desire to be "the motivating principle of human life," the minstrel male's desire for control through sexual possession becomes the motivating source for his, as well as his female counterpart's, psyche (Weedon 52). When the wench fails to express an objection to her status, she is portrayed as socially dependent and perfectly willing to succumb to the minstrel male's sexual advancements to win his affection. Songs containing reports about "sexual exploits" and emphasizing "gender dominance" can be found in several minstrel songs such as, "Black Eye'd Susianna" (1846), "Belle of Baltimore" (1848), and "I'll Throw Myself Away" (1852) (Mahar 269). Lyrics concentrate on the male sexual fantasies and pleasures, while conveniently omitting the wench's sexual experience, whether pleasurable or otherwise. This noticeable omission further reduced her status, making her sexual experience unworthy of discussion and therefore inconsequential.

While the wench's presentation emphasized an ugly appearance, the mammy's portrayal showed a combative demeanor. Portrayed as loveable in the home of the white family, the mammy displays an entirely different demeanor in the presence of her black husband and children. Showing none of the loving and nurturing qualities she exhibits while in the presence of the white family, her black husband and children are forced to endure the mammy's physically and mentally abusive behavior. This aspect of her personality suggests dissatisfaction with her black family and their companionship.

Due to the mammy's attitude toward her husband, he is forced to contend with a domineering and abusive spouse, who readily displays her anger during violent episodes. Visibly frightened of his wife, the black male appears unable to assuage her wrath:

Ebery night when I go home,  
She scolds or it's a wonder  
And den she takes dat pewter mug  
And beats my head asunder. (Dennison 124)

Unlike the combative mammy and the repulsive wench, the yeller gal was deemed affable and physically attractive. Due to her "white-like" complexion and resemblance to the white model of beauty, the yeller gal was the black male character's preferred female companion. Minstrel men routinely proclaimed her lovely in looks as well as disposition: "I loved a pretty yeller gal, much sweeter than them all" (Old 104). Her elevated status was further amplified when in 1850, her facial make-up became increasingly lighter and her costumes grew to resemble the clothes worn by the upper echelon of white female society. White women flocked to shows to see the new fashions that were sure to be worn by minstrels performing the yeller gal. Her newly cultivated style was in stark opposition to the wench's ill-fitting clothes or the mammy's garish

dress and polka dot bandana. The yeller gal's visual presentation signified a significant departure from the minstrelsy's degradation of the black female.

The privileged status of the yeller gal spilled over onto the actors who made performing her characterization a specialty role. As a result of his meticulous devotion to the characterization of the yeller gal, Leon Francis became one of the "highest paid minstrel performers and one of the most praised" (Toll 142). In an effort to live up to the audience's expectation of the yeller gal's cultivated sense of style, Leon boasted that his costume closet contained approximately 300 dresses. His portrayal of the yeller gal privileged his occupation by influencing his overwhelming success and enhancing his artistic and economic status.

However, even Leon with his accolades and privileges, acquired from his portrayal of the yeller gal, could not overcome the vilification that minstrelsy attributed to suffrage behavior.

Whenever the yeller gal declared herself a suffragist, her beauty and privileged status was compromised. In "The Girl with the Coal Black Hair," the title character was described as a "cream color'd queen" that was "sweeter'n sugar cane" (Dennison 291). Although her beauty was emphasized throughout the song, her looks were tarnished when the song's ending revealed her suffrage association. Discouraging a minstrel male's proposal, the yeller gal admonished: "go 'way you nigger, how dare you ax me that, when I'se a female suffrage mancipation ristöcrat" (Ibid). The minstrel suffragist's embodiment of the yeller gal communicated that suffrage would result in a disinterest in matrimony and men. Consequently, minstrelsy effectively posed the question: Why desire a woman who, because of her political stance, will reject romantic opportunities?

A similar rejection of the yeller gal is seen in the song “De Yeller Gal Wid a Bloomer On.” The title character is declared a suffragist due to her new style of dress. Donning of bloomers, in nineteenth-century society, was equated with “wearing the pants,” “ruling the home” and other anti-suffrage accusations. Accordingly, when the husband notices his wife’s new bloomers and subsequent departure, he gladly proclaims, “Good Lor’—I’m glad she’s gone” (Campbell 23). This signifies that a woman wearing bloomers is disinterested in men and vice versa.

As a result of her positive attributes, the yeller gal was seldom used to portray the suffragist. Minstrels primarily used the wench as a prototype, for the suffragist portrayals. After all, the presentation of the wench was more demeaning than that of the yeller gal. Using the wench’s image to project a persona, radically different from white women, communicated that suffragists should also be regarded as unattractive, unfeminine, and completely inhuman. And when the suffragist was portrayed as the mammy, she adopted the mammy’s domineering and insufferable characteristics.

The use of the black female character to portray the suffrage character thus demonstrated a double motive. The performances acted to ridicule suffragists, while simultaneously discouraging others from joining the movement. Minstrelsy warned that women who chose to support the movement would be similarly ridiculed.

### **Marriage and Responsibility**

By presenting the suffragist as the overbearing wife and the husband as timid and unassertive, minstrelsy deconstructed the role of wife and husband. Minstrel scenes featured disgruntled husbands, taken aback by their wives’ sudden interest in suffrage. One popular joke featured a wife arriving home from a suffrage meeting. Upon hearing

her husband boast to a friend “I’m the boss in this house,” the wife, after a long heated exchange with her husband, ended the debate by “dragging ‘her nigger’ off the stage by the ear” (Wittke 161). Because the husband tolerates the wife’s role in suffrage, minstrelsy characterizes him with effeminate qualities. The message is clear. If a wife supports suffrage, it will transform her into the dominant patriarchal male role and the husband into the submissive female. Minstrelsy also insists that men who support suffrage are not manly.

Minstrel performances revealed suffragists that flaunted a disregard for societal standards of appropriate behavior. Minstrel performances stressed that women would be derelict in their duties and ignoring time-honored traditions if they participated in the suffrage:

Bands are playing as she swaggers by  
Banners swaying while the men all sigh  
Why don’t you go home and bake a cake?  
One like dear old mother used to make? (Wolff 127)

Since a minstrel male sang the lyrics, the song had an additional message beyond suggesting women adhere to generational customs. If a husband supported his wife’s participation in the suffrage movement, the wife would fail to provide for the family and as a result he would regret his commitment. In this way, minstrelsy proposed actions for both wives and husbands, which necessitated the exclusion of suffrage. In order to stress its discourse, minstrel performances dictated that its rules regarding wifely duties were biblically based.

Using the bible’s creation story to justify its anti-suffrage discourse, minstrel performances mandated that if a woman wanted to be considered religious, she would occupy her time cooking and cleaning for her husband rather than trying to obtain equal

rights: “Imagine, my antiquated sisters, Adam, afore Eve wuz med! Who sowed on his shirt buttins? Who cooked his beef steak? Who med his coffee in the mornin’ and did his washing?” (Dick 112). By associating the message with biblical characters, minstrelsy outlined accepted duties for women and marked suffrage as an opposition to her Godly duties. A woman’s place in nineteenth-century society was conveyed as not only tending to her husband, but also her children. Suffragist, Mary Sheldon outlines a mother’s duties regarding her children:

On her devolves the [...] task of caring for and instructing the children, not only the care of girls until they arrive at age but often the management of boys until they are prepared to leave home for College instruction or the duties of active life. (Seldon 5)

Rules of decorum for mothers were manipulated by minstrel performances to convey that dutiful mothers should oppose suffrage. Portraying the suffragist as a mother who would ignore the firmly entrenched codes of conduct, conveyed that suffragists were uncaring and unfit mothers. Minstrelsy also portrayed her as a woman eager to prioritize suffrage above the welfare of her own children:

‘Mama, mama,’ how the baby sighs,  
‘Papa, get the bottle,’ mama cries,  
For you know that I must go and make a speech tonight!  
All right! All right! He growls and wants to bite! (Wolff 127)

This portrayal of the suffragist is the antithesis of the nineteenth-century true woman who is supposed to be self-sacrificing. Because she is self-absorbed, the minstrel suffragist’s entire family unit suffers.

Minstrelsy proclaimed that a suffragist’s involvement in suffrage indicated that she had forgotten or chooses to ignore rules of feminine decorum set forth by society.

Minstrel performances suggested that women should be attracted to social parties rather than political parties:

Jim, I tink de ladies oughter vote  
No Mr. Johnson, ladies am supposed to care berry  
Little about polytick, cause de majority ob em am  
Strongly tached to parties. (Toll 88)

The work of suffrage supporters thus became the foolish meanderings of idle women.

As with most female minstrel portrayals, minstrelsy depicted the suffragist using an emphasized masculine gait and mannerisms, thereby reconstructing the sexuality for both the black female and the suffragist. The minstrel message, suggesting that suffrage would lead to the domination of males by females and turn suffragists into men, picked up steam and appeared in various storylines. In a minstrel women's rights lecture, the character Judge Julius Hannibal expresses that suffragists have a desire to be in control. In the lecture he asserts, "dese womans all want to be Captains, when ole Human Nature formed em spressly for mates!" (Mahar 95) If women seek to liberate themselves they are going against human nature. The lecture also equated the role of husband and wife to the naval ranks of captain and mate Hannibal declared "when a sailor captain ships a mate, he ships a mate, he don't ship a captain" (Mahar 95). The speech used nautical rank as an analogy to prove that a woman should follow the orders of the captain—her husband. This technique conveyed that a husband does not want a wife who will usurp his authority. When suffragists declared that they wanted equal rights, minstrelsy portrayed their declaration as an attempt to take over the male role and become men.

The stump speech, "Speech on Women's Rights" supports that suffragists would prefer the male gender to their own: "there's Lucy Stone, and Anna Dickinson; there's Lucretia Mott, and Mrs. Jinks, all uv whom showed thet women cood seese to be women,



and be ez neer men ez nacher allowed them. Thets what all our sex want—to be ez neer men ez possible” (Dick 114). It is significant that the speech excluded Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a mother of seven children.

Although the minstrel suffragist is physically abusive, like the mammy, minstrelsy equipped the suffragist with even more masculine characteristics, which ultimately were used to justify male rather than female suffrage. The suffragist’s portrayal included extreme combativeness, which transformed her into a persona that enjoyed participating in masculine-assigned activities. These activities illustrated the suffragist’s ability to perform feats that far exceeded the abilities of any mortal man. Fighting was a routine activity for minstrel suffragists. A minstrel suffragist overcome with the joy of exchanging blows proudly boasts:

I’ll run and fight and gouge and bite and  
Tumble in de mud  
Till all de ground for miles around am  
Kivered wid my blood. (Toll 88)

Minstrelsy empowered the suffragist with the ability to physically outmatch any opponent. This portrayal was drastically opposed to favorable off-stage characterizations of women. Women who fought were deemed atypical, masculine, and unacceptable, according to nineteenth-century codes of decorum. Consequently, the minstrel suffragist, as a fighter, was foreign and unseemly to audiences. In this way minstrel performances supported its repeated underlining threat: If women fought for suffrage, they would be characterized as combative, violent, and unfeminine.

Another aspect of the minstrel suffragist’s inappropriate behavior included extreme acts of strength:

I wunst noed a female friend of mine which hed strength reglarly to carry her husband, who weighed 207 lbs. averdupois, into the house every nite after he wuz lifted off frum a dray onto wich his friends wich cood stand more flooids than he cood, hed deposited him. (Dick 113)

Women were not supposed to be physically strong and by combining the two elements, fighting and strength, into one characterization minstrelsy strengthened an improper characterization.

The combination of the minstrel suffragist's exorbitant strength and relentless fighting ability assisted in developing a persona who was capable of engaging in battle and winning. It would seem that a "ready for battle" minstrel suffragist would support women's voting since anti-suffragist discourse equated masculinity and strength with voting. Instead, the empowered suffragist suggested just the opposite; granting women the right to vote would be as surreal a notion as the strong minstrel suffragist. Once this aspect of the minstrel suffragist was ingrained in the minds of audiences, minstrels attempted to demonstrate that suffrage was in direct contrast to nineteenth-century rules of decorum and that suffrage was patently absurd.

When temperance became a tenet of the suffrage movement minstrelsy songs mocked the new inclusion. Songs indicated that suffragists would automatically drink alcohol and adopt other unacceptable behaviors, which suffrage actively condemned:

Since the wenches all got busy,  
it would surely make you dizzy,  
now they've decided to be suffragettes;  
'Round the town till dawn they ramble,  
they've begun to drink and gamble. (Wolff 120)

When minstrelsy associated drinking with suffrage, society was bombarded with another negative image of the suffragist that also presented the suffragist as a hypocrite. By teaming suffrage and drinking together, minstrel performances expressed an objection to

suffrage and temperance. Perhaps many of the minstrel songs lampooned both suffrage and temperance because female suffragists spearheaded the temperance movement.

### **Mocking Activists**

In a continued effort to insure a negative perception of the suffrage movement, minstrelsy shifted from ridiculing suffragists as a whole to ridiculing particular suffragists. Monologues and jokes, commonly referred to as stump speeches, were incorporated in the olio. In minstrel stump speeches, diligent suffrage lecturers were lampooned into clownish caricatures. Imitators of suffragists used popular “women’s rights lectures,” advanced by suffrage supporters, and mocked the suffrage message.

Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith, a popular lecturer, and adamant activist, advocated that women should be given the right to vote. Maintaining that the negative propaganda promoted by anti-suffragists was misleading, Smith stressed that women should not let the false assertions affect their desire to vote. Insisting that the act of voting will not change a women’s femininity, she stressed that “dropping a ticket into a receptacle of any kind, does not look hazardous to [a woman’s] femininity, she might seem to do this with little or no commotion, and return in conscious dignity to her household” (Wolff 94). In an effort to suppress this direct contradiction to minstrelsy’s anti-suffrage message, minstrel performers belittled Smith’s efforts and distorted her assertions.

In 1853 William W. Newcomb, famous for his female impersonations, began imitating Smith by donning a Pilgrim dress and bonnet. Portraying Smith as an old-fashioned New Englander, Newcomb’s act used Smith’s image to give minstrel audience the impression that the real suffrage lecturer had changed her position regarding the

suffrage movement and had become an anti-suffragist. In these performances, Newcomb, as Smith, proposed that the suffrage movement would create havoc in the household:

‘Tis ‘Woman’s right’ to rule the house  
And petty troubles brave,  
But ‘not her right’ to rule the head  
And treat him as her slave. (Mahar 95)

This new approach of using a suffragist impersonator to give an anti-suffrage message grew in popularity, as did the portrayal of suffragists as domineering to husbands. The lyrics of Newcomb’s songs stressed that while it was acceptable for husbands to dominate their wives, suffragists shouldn’t treat husbands as slaves. This double standard, common in nineteenth-century society, was duplicated on the minstrel stage. If women balked at this male domination, according to minstrel performances, they were expressing a propensity to be dominant, which would eventually lead to a desire to be men. This assertion is interesting coming from men who dressed up as women. The negative images of women, portrayed by men, reflected men’s fears about women who would no longer need or desire them and who would take their place of privilege in the culture. Why was a switch in gender acceptable for minstrels, but insulting for suffragist portrayals? Perhaps white minstrel performers, due to the status afforded to their race and gender, were enabled with the ability to delegate a gender switch without fearing that the same accusations could be aimed at them.

Minstrel performances were also used to defeminize Amelia Bloomer, suffragist and crusader for women’s rights. When Bloomer began wearing a new style of dress which consisted of full Turkish-style trousers gathered at the ankles over a shortened dress, minstrels dubbed the radical pants, bloomers. Due to Bloomer’s notoriety and high visibility the new fashion was associated with her suffrage efforts: “By supporting dress

reform and wearing the notorious ‘Bloomer costume,’ she became a visual symbol of woman’s struggle to free herself not only from the restraints of restrictive dress, but also from the social, legal, and religious corsets and stays that bound her” (Coon 3).

The outfit became so closely associated with the suffrage movement that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other female lecturers stopped wearing the newly dubbed “bloomers” because the apparel drew attention away from the message of their addresses. Their action, however, did not prevent critics from associating the apparel with pants and declaring that suffragists wanted to “wear the pants in the family,” indicating that if suffragists were given their rights then they would take the man’s position and rule the house.

The suffrage-associated bloomers were included in many jokes to justify anti-suffrage remarks. The popular gag entitled, “The Love of Doughnuts” featured a wife returning home after an evening at a woman’s rights convention: When her husband pleaded for his favorite pastry, the irate spouse exclaimed, “Inferior sex! If you want doughnuts, cook ‘em yourself.” The husband concluded the debate with the shout, “Bloomerizical female, if de price ob doughnuts is to be de liberty of my sex, the bargain’s off, and so am I” (Wittke 35). The pants, or in this case bloomers, were associated with power and independence. The joke was so popular that the Christy Minstrel troupe continually included it as a staple in their olio. Minstrels began using the newspapers to support their assertions that suffragists wanted to be men.

### **Newspapers: Used to Advance Minstrel Discourse**

False newspaper advertisements were used to encourage suffrage supporters to attend minstrel shows that they might normally avoid. Using misinformation as a tool,

the Wood's Minstrel troupe advertised a stump speech in the daily newspaper. It was entitled "Lecture on Woman's Rights, a burlesque by J.T. Huntley," on October 8, 1853. One week later the troupe advertised the identical lecture on equal rights in the same newspaper. This time, however, the advertisement listed the lecturer as "Mrs. E. Oakwood Smith." There was no mention that the performance would be a burlesque, intentionally giving readers the impression that lecturer, Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith would be speaking. The name used by Wood's Troupe in the advertisement was so close to the suffragist Smith, that readers may have attended the minstrel show thinking they would see Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith. Instead, not only did they see an imposter, but one who distorted and parodied Smith's lecture. This deception was used to sway suffrage supporters to take the opposing stance and also to dissuade those in the audience who were considering joining the suffrage movement. The newspaper advertisements were so successful at duping suffrage supporters that troupes continued to use similar advertisements throughout the nineteenth-century.

Minstrel troupes would also advertise their stump speeches amongst a series of suffrage speeches. The false advertisement would indicate that a serious lecture was being advertised rather than a stump show performance. One of the following is a misleading stump speech advertisement and the other four are legitimate suffrage speech advertisements:

THE FUTURE OF WOMAN IN AMERICA—A COURSE of lectures will be given at Mozart's Hall, 863 Broadway, opposite Bond street, on the following subjects.

WOMAN AND HER LEGAL DISABILITIES—Hon. James T. Brady. Thursday, April 1.

FAIR PLAY FOR WOMAN—Geo. W. Curtis, Esq. Thursday, April 8.

WOMAN AND HER WORK—Rev. E.J. Chapin. Thursday, April 15.

WOMAN AND THE ELECTIVE FRANCHISE—Mrs. Lucy Stone,  
Thursday, April 1.  
BENEFIT TO WOMEN OF ORGANIZED EMIGRATION—Hon. Eli  
Thayer. (Mahar 93)

The minstrel show advertisement was the one with the title, “Woman and the Elective Franchise.” This confusion of the real and the minstrel suffrage lectures was intended to mislead audience members into attending the minstrel lectures. They may have hoped to convert supporters of suffrage or they may have wanted to mock them. In any case, the deceitful measures taken by minstrel troupes increased audience attendance and propagated their anti-suffrage message.

Like newspaper advertisements, newspaper reviews also gave misleading information. Reviewers of minstrel shows purposely omitted the gender of suffrage impersonators. When referring to suffrage impersonators critics used the female character names, rather than the name of the male actor. Eph Horn, a popular suffrage impersonator for Woods Minstrels, was positively reviewed. In the review the critic for Spirit of the Times implied that Horn was a female performer: I stopped at the Broadway the other evening to see “our Kate,” in Ware’s burlesque of ‘Woman’s Rights.’ The piece is well gotten up, and the spirited acting of this clever and beautiful lady kept us prisoner until the conclusion” (Miss 516). The readers are led to believe that Eph Horn was actually “our Kate.” The familiar use of the name implies that the performer is not only a celebrity but is also endeared to her audiences, encouraging readers of the review to buy tickets to see such a valued performer. In endorsing the performer, the critic endorsed the rhetoric of the minstrel piece and its offensive remarks concerning suffrage.

Another critic from Spirit of the Times reviewed a burlesque entitled, “Romance and Reality,” which featured the character Barbara Manly, a member of the Social

Reform Association. “Barbara is one of the ladies we read of who, carried away by the popular fallacy, ‘The Rights of Women,’ devotes her energies to disenthral her sex from their slavery to mankind. She talks much and very loudly [...] and seizes every new face to make a development and convert” (Romance 108).

Suffrage impersonator, George Winston frequently performed as the character Barbara Manly. The critic for Spirit of the Times used the name, Mrs. Winstanly in referring to the actor George Winston. In applauding Winston’s performance he enthused “The character is a splendid satire upon political women, and is performed by Mrs. Winstanly with great ability and truthfulness (Ibid). The critic was aware that the actor was a suffrage impersonator and was complicit in misleading the readers into thinking the performer was an actress. In implying that the actor is female implies that the performance was not a minstrel performance. If the readers were aware that the performance would be minstrelsy, then they would know that the message would be adamantly degrading rather than a parody by an actress. The critic claimed that the performance gave a “truthful” representation of suffragists, as minstrelsy claimed to be giving a truthful representation of blacks and women. These “distorted truths” of minstrelsy affected the real lives of women, both black and white. The preponderance of newspaper reviews and advertisements, which communicated false information regarding minstrelsy helped to underscore its persuasive and damaging discourse seen on the minstrel stage.

### **Conclusion**

The multi-layered characterization of the minstrel suffragist and the negative influence of her blackened status blended to present an odious portrayal of the suffrage



movement and its supporters. In opposing women's rights, minstrel performances voiced that social and political empowerment was dictated by male whiteness. Consequently, the minstrel suffragist, due to her race and gender was portrayed as inadequate and therefore incapable of possessing political citizenry. While the minstrel suffrage spouted pro-suffrage rhetoric, her behavior and mannerisms branded her as socially offensive. She was presented as the antithesis of the female archetype: "selfless, sentimental, nurturing, and pious" (Baker 620). The characterization and the publicity of its discourse, on and off the minstrel stage, gives an indication of the resistance that suffragists faced during their struggle for equal rights.

## Chapter 4

### Saloon Minstrelsy and its Political Influence

*“In a working-class saloon in a New England mill town in 1880, a visitor observed a solitary black man, a minstrel performer temporarily resting from the stage, called upon with hearty applause to sing many songs, ‘comic, sentimental, pathetic and silly.’ The ‘squalid dusty hall’ seemed a grand theatre” (Rehin 372).*

Nineteenth-century audiences, in search of minstrel performances, were not limited to the theatre. As a result of minstrelsy’s vast popularity, shows could easily be found in a variety of sites including circuses, museums, boardinghouses, and even the neighborhood saloon. In 1850 circuses, such as New York’s “Olympic Circus at Park Avenue”, and “Bowery Circus” began offering minstrelsy to compliment their standard entertainment (Nathan 117). Likewise, P.T. Barnum, circus showman and former minstrel performer, anticipated the revenue that minstrelsy could provide for his circus. Consequently, he developed and showcased famous minstrels, such as Frank Lynch and Master Diamond. Barnum was also responsible for incorporating minstrelsy into museum performances. Barnum’s inclusion of minstrel performers, such as Pete Morris was noted in minstrel lyrics:

Barnum’s Museum can’t be beat:  
De Fat Boys dar am quite a treat.  
Dar’s a Big Snake too, wid a rousing stinger;  
Likewise Pete Morris, de Comic Singer. (Lott 65)

Boarding house owners, enticed by Barnum’s success and the promise of additional income, began hiring amateur minstrels to perform for boarders and the neighborhood public. The first rehearsal for minstrel performer Dan Emmett and his troupe, the Virginia Minstrels, was held in “Mrs. Brooke’s boarding house” (Nathan

116). Encouraged by their response, the troupe went on to showcase their talent during subsequent boarding house performances. Whether it was the boardinghouse, circus, or museum all three venues provided opportunities for minstrels to test their craft before advancing to a highly sought after, and lucrative, theatrical career.

However, no venue could compare to the many training opportunities provided by the workingman's saloon. Since "most city blocks had at least one 'neighborhood' saloon," minstrels were provided a vast array of sites to promote their talent (Kingsdale 484). Renowned minstrel performers, Master Juba, Master Diamond, Billy Birch, George Christy, Virginia Minstrels, and countless others gained significant notoriety on the saloon stage, before progressing to the theatre. While not all saloons provided minstrel entertainment, many saloon owners chose to include the popularized minstrels to please regular customers and attract new ones. Patrons, throughout the United States, had the option of viewing blackface at their neighborhood saloons or they could frequent a plethora of more notable saloons, famous for their minstrel entertainment, such as New York's Niblo's and Cornucopia, New Orleans' Peter Lala's, or St. Louis' Babe Connor's.

Regardless of the location, saloon minstrelsy had one common denominator: due to its venue, minstrel discourse regarding politically determined issues, such as suffrage and temperance carried more political influence. In contrast to the theatre and other venues, saloon minstrelsy occurred in a place where saloonkeepers manipulated political votes and where voting regularly transpired. Consequently, minstrel songs, which opposed social reforms, gained significant political influence. Politicians and voters, witnessing these minstrel performances, were repeatedly exposed to anti-suffrage and anti-temperance views that they could politically endorse. Additionally, the saloon's male

dominated drinking environment mirrored and affirmed minstrelsy's support of female disenfranchisement as well as alcoholic drinking. This chapter will explore saloon minstrelsy and reveal how its anti-temperance and anti-suffrage message persuaded the saloon's clientele to endorse Jacksonian political and social ideology from 1850-1900.

Information regarding minstrelsy on the saloon stage is sparse. Minstrel historian Eric Lott provided half a page of saloon minstrelsy in his book, Love and Theft, while the scholarship of Annmarie Bean, William Mahar, and Robert Toll ignored the subject entirely. In lieu of the beneficial background and solid framework that their work normally provides, I relied heavily on other sources, such as periodicals, song lyrics, and biographical information regarding minstrel performers and their stint on the saloon stage. While saloon historians have advanced minstrel songs, popularized in the saloon, such as "My Nelly's Grave," and "Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ré," most of them ignore the social commentary inherent in these songs. My challenge was then to uncover minstrelsy which endorsed a conservative social ideology and examine it against the political background of the saloon. After an extensive examination, I discovered a reciprocal relationship between the political environment of the saloon and its minstrelsy.

### **Saloon as a Political Backdrop**

In order to better appreciate how saloon minstrelsy endorsed saloon politics, it is important to appreciate the saloon's political environment. A significant number of nineteenth-century saloons housed political primaries and conventions: "In 1884 nearly two-thirds of political conventions and primaries in New York were held in saloons"(Kingsdale 483). As a result, minstrelsy, like today's televised political endorsements, created a biased endorsement for a saloon's voting patrons. Whereas

today's political endorsements cannot occur within 15-150 feet of the voting place, depending on the state, saloon patrons witnessed minstrelsy within the same space that voting transpired. Before, while, or during voting, saloon customers viewed minstrelsy which lampooned temperance, suffrage, and other social reform movements.

Saloonkeepers also contributed to the saloon's political atmosphere and subsequently the political influence its minstrelsy. Saloonkeepers had a vested interest in providing a political obstacle to both suffrage and temperance. Since nineteenth-century saloonkeepers felt that "suffrage was formally and practically associated with [that of] prohibition," saloonkeepers rallied against suffrage (Hamilton 509). They feared that women, if given the right to vote, would advance prohibition legislation and thereby threaten the saloonkeepers' livelihood.

Since saloonkeepers frequently bought votes from saloon patrons, politicians would often pay saloonkeepers for these same votes. Saloonkeepers literally profited from the anti-suffrage and anti-temperance minstrelsy shown on the saloon's stage. The saloonkeeper was not above using any means necessary to accomplish a political goal, earning him a politically powerful yet unethical reputation. By 1881, a young Theodore Roosevelt entered politics as a New York Assembly man. His acquaintances disapproved and advised Roosevelt to rethink his aspirations by assuring him that politics were heavily influenced by unscrupulous "low" individuals, such as "saloonkeepers, horse-car conductors and the like" (Roosevelt 56). Roosevelt along with other novice politicians, new to the neighborhood, made introducing themselves to the neighborhood saloonkeepers a priority. While saloonkeepers were paid for buying votes, in order to show thanks to the neighborhood for their political support, politicians thanked

constituents by aiding “genuine cases of distress in the neighborhood”(Stott 239). If politicians failed to assist the community in supporting causes and fund raising activities they were “likely to face a challenge in the next primary” (Stott 239). Political “favors” insured that saloonkeepers and constituents remained loyal to a candidate.

Throughout the United States saloonkeepers had a reputation for influencing state politics. In 1886, George Cox, a Cincinnati saloonkeeper used “kickbacks, patronage, and careful coalition-building” to mount a “political machine that would dominate city government” (Haydu 1435). Saloonkeepers also held political offices in city government, which enhanced their political voice. In 1890 “eleven of New York City’s 24 aldermen were saloonkeepers” while “about a third of Detroit’s aldermen were saloonkeepers” (Kingsdale 483). Against this politically influential backdrop, saloon minstrelsy lampooned suffragists and temperance advocates.

### **Minstrelsy’s Political Message**

Temperance and suffrage were so intertwined in the public mind that they often appeared together in a single minstrel song or joke. This frequent occurrence suggests that the combined attack was not coincidental. Rather, the conjoining device was used to strengthen an opposition to both causes. Minstrel performers mimicked nineteenth-century activists, such as Susan B. Anthony, Annie Wittenmyer, and Frances Williard, who advocated both suffrage and temperance, and as such strengthened both causes.

While activists’ goals were aimed at both liberating women and preventing drunken husbands from abusing their wives and children, minstrelsy opposed both suffrage and temperance by suggesting that male drinking justified spousal abuse. Minstrelsy’s stance regarding drinking and spousal abuse prompted a popular minstrel

joke to ask: “Why is a man that neglects and abuses his wife like a man that likes brandy, and hates all kinds of malt liquor? Because he would rather liquor (lick her) than supporter (support her)” (Wood 43). The joke’s play on words makes an obvious connection between violence and alcohol, which suggests an acceptance and endorsement of male drinking and the abuse of women. The joke indirectly implies that men would rather abuse wives than “support” their quest for equal rights.

Some stump speeches used the linkage of male drinking and the abuse of women to suggest a positive result for the male batterer. Implying that spousal abuse was an enjoyable activity for men, a male minstrel character poses an invitation to his male friend: “Go und get full vid me to-night, you could come home, get a club, und have a good deal of fund around de house” (Dick 126). The speech’s message is that a husband’s excessive drinking would result in a state of drunkenness, which would give him the needed bravado to return home and beat his wife. The man and his drinking are absolutely privileged. Drinking gave the husband the right and the impetus to physically abuse his wife. While the drinking and spousal abuse may appear the sole message in the speech, the use of a German accent for the stump speech alludes to an additional minstrel message.

Although the temperance stump speech performed by popular minstrel performer Gus Williams lampooned temperance advocate John B. Gough, the German accent used to perform the speech had nothing to do with the British Gough. The German accent was used in delivering the lines to stereotype the influx of German immigrants entering the United States during the nineteenth-century. Using black minstrel characterizations to portray Germans suggested that Germans suffered an equal discrimination. Consequently,

thanks to minstrelsy, German immigrants adopted a “blackened” reputation, which deemed them lazy, stupid, and as a result hopelessly incapable of mainstreaming with white society. In this way, minstrelsy suggested to whites that Germans, along with other immigrants, such as Irish and Asians were unacceptable and devalued citizens. Therefore the above-mentioned stump speech had a two-fold function which justified male drinking and spousal abuse while simultaneously declaring Germans immigrants unsuitable citizens.

Another portion of the same stump speech maintains that drinking will make a husband affable, while abstinence will result in violence:

I vas called upon vonce to see vone of de hardest case of demperance it has ever been my good fortune to vitness. A man, who ven drunk vas de kindest of husbands; but ven sober he vos a perfect devil. (Dick 126)

The performance conveyed that a woman would be more satisfied with her husband’s demeanor if he indulged in liquor. It is interesting that one portion of the stump speech used drinking to excuse violent behavior, while another section insisted that drinking would promote docile behavior. Perhaps minstrelsy used two extremes within the same speech to underscore the assertion: whatever the situation, male drinking is excusable. This wide range of excuses for drinking made any drinking incident, no matter the reason, defensible. The thrust of all of the minstrel performances indicated that drinking, far from creating familial strife, would erase it.

Like the saloon’s stump speeches, minstrel songs opposing suffrage and temperance used various devices to emphasize minstrelsy’s resistance to the two causes. Minstrelsy gave a primary and secondary assignment to the subjects of suffrage and temperance. When a song included both suffrage and temperance one cause was given



more emphasis than the other. The following lyrics attack suffrage while subsequent lyrics of the same song will declare alcoholic drinking a secondary concern:

This is emancipation year,  
the woman's movement's on;  
Eliza plans to be a man, 'tis sad to think upon.  
(Packard 3)

While two additional stanzas continue to support an opposition to suffrage, the culminating lyrics reveal that Eliza's brothers are overcome with grief. In order to dull the pain, they resort to drinking:

And each one took to drink  
They made it flow to drown their woe,  
So that they need not think;  
(Ibid)

Since the song is sung from a male perspective, minstrelsy conveys that, overall, men would be dissatisfied with their sister or wife's participation in the suffrage movement. Minstrel discourse also conveys that suffrage, or any other situation interpreted by minstrelsy as unsuitable, can be assuaged with drinking. While anti-suffrage discourse carries the weight of the minstrel message, the song's concluding protest was a protest against temperance.

Conversely, other saloon minstrelsy prioritized drinking and made the opposition to suffrage, a secondary concern:

There's Sarah, that's my wife, sir  
Loves beer as well as me,  
Who's the happiest woman in life, sir  
Who's happy as a woman can be:  
Who does her work, takes care t' bairns  
No gossiping neighbors near  
And, as every Saturday returns,  
Like me, Sal drinks her beer. (Pearson 1)

Lyrics suggest that beer will make a woman compliant to her familial “duties,” supporting the common anti-suffrage mantra that suffrage would keep women from performing the expected role of wife and mother. Though suffrage and temperance exchanged priorities, the resulting damage to both causes remained steadfast for nineteenth-century saloon patrons.

### **Saloon’s Social Climate**

While adamant opposition to suffrage and temperance was viewed on the saloon’s minstrel stage, the social climate of the saloon mirrored the same opposition. Although the working class males made up the majority of the saloon’s patronage, women were excluded or given restricted access to saloons. Unlike theatrical minstrelsy, saloon minstrelsy, by virtue of its venue, shunned women as audience members. During the 1890’s women in Boston were “forbidden by police regulation to patronize the bar-rooms” (Rosenzweig 63). However, not all saloons denied women entrance into their male dominated space. Historian, Madelon Powers provides illuminating scholarship regarding the existence of a “ladies entrance”, located in many nineteenth-century saloons. Women were allowed to enter the less obtrusive side door, however they were denied access to the male dominated bar or tables. Instead, women were regulated to purchasing “carry-out alcohol”, and entrance “to a second chamber known as the ‘back door’ where they could feast on free lunches or attend social events housed there” (Powers 33).

In addition to the limiting entrance and seating space, the typical layout of the saloon expressed an opposition to suffrage and temperance. The saloon boasted shuttered swinging doors, a sawdust floor, and a long bar counter. At the bar was a foot rail and in

some instances “urination troughs” (Parson 283). Behind the bar, below a lengthy ornate mirror, rested an assortment of liquor. A turn of the bar stool in the opposite direction presented men at round tables actively engaged in card games, billiards, and ribald conversations. The walls, generously plastered with brewer’s advertisements, photographs of prizefighters, and naked women in a variety of poses, reminded drinking patrons of their subjects of conversation. In the corner of the smoke-filled room, past the tables and rickety chairs, stood an out of tune piano and an area cleared to accommodate minstrel entertainment.

Saloons did more than dispense liquor; they became a transmitter of working class culture which actively imposed boundaries that kept women away from male drinking:

In its maleness and gender segregation, the saloon both challenged and affirmed the dominate culture. On one hand, the saloon was a male institution in an era when the middle-class ideal was increasingly that of family-centered leisure. On the other hand, the saloon [...] mandated subservient roles for women. (Rosenzweig 63)

Even the names of the saloons supported a sexist stance. Saloons named after men, such as “The Fred, “Ed” and “Franks” evoked a pleasing respectful tone, which privileged men and their male environment. (Kingsdale 479).

Very few saloons were named after women. When they were, the names were associated with a male or female part of the anatomy: “Big Tit Irene’s” or “Peckerhead Kate’s” (Powers 35). Like the pictures of naked women on the saloon walls, the practice of naming saloons after body parts marginalized women as sexual objects.

### **Targeting Activists**

In this discriminatory environment suffrage leaders such as Susan B. Anthony were frequent targets of saloon stump speeches. Anticipating that saloon audiences

would enthusiastically respond to a ridiculing impersonation of Anthony, in 1885 Billy Arlington began incorporating an impersonation of her to his saloon performances. Due to the overwhelming success of his shows, Arlington was soon requested in popular theatres. Audiences demanded the Susan B. Anthony impersonation more than any other in his repertoire.

Minstrelsy also targeted Carrie Nation, an active and outspoken member of the Women's Temperance Crusade. Nation earned a national reputation marching into saloons, delivering sermons regarding the vices of drinking, and destroying the premises with her hatchet. When a newspaper cartoonist drew a hatchet-holding Nation with folded arms in a completely demolished saloon with the caption "I cannot tell a lie; I did it with my little hatchet," Carrie Nation's persona was forever associated with violent episodes (Taylor 55).

The words from the highly publicized cartoon appeared in a saloon minstrel show. In the stump speech, a temperance advocate asked a woman why her husband had a noticeable scar on his neck. The woman replied, "I cannot tell a lie; I done it mit a little hatchet" (Dick 127). Nation's name was not mentioned in the speech, however the exact wording from the cartoon along with the mention of the hatchet made it quickly apparent to the nineteenth-century saloon audiences, who were being spoofed.

It is ironic that minstrelsy portrayed temperance women as violent when it was male violence to women that was a leading motivation for temperance advocates. Some female temperance advocates, such as Susan B. Anthony became devoted to the temperance cause when they witnessed, first-hand, and the bruises of women who had been physically abused by their drunken husbands.

While the hatchet was used to symbolize an unrestrained dangerousness to Nation's characterization, the caricature also had a masculine element. Unlike the eighteenth century Shakespearean actors, who were trained to realistically portray women, most minstrel performers presented a boisterous and unfeminine portrayal. Although minstrelsy frequently portrayed suffragists as masculine, the fact that Nation invaded a place that privileged male bonding and that considered drinking "a symbol of masculinity emancipate" heightened saloon minstrelsy's objection to her actions (Hoke, 311). Since saloons were valued as a way for men to bond and carouse after work in a segregated male environment, any action, by women, to disrupt its sexist function was parodied as unfeminine. The drinking in the saloon was a deeply imbedded masculine tradition. Once a young boy reached manhood his father participated in the time-honored ritual of taking his son to the bar to celebrate his crossing into manhood. Minstrel songs, such as "Go It While You're Young," catered to this mentality:

Good liquor's a good thing,  
And plenty can be bought,  
Drink when you feel dry,  
for certainly you ought to. (Winans 1)

Temperance advocates were mocked in many ways; minstrelsy portrayed all temperance advocates as hypocrites. Since all temperance advocates maintained that alcohol should only be used for medicinal purposes, minstrel performances satirized the exception to the rule. Performances suggested that advocates of temperance were hypocrites and used the "exception" as an excuse to drink without guilt. The minstrel song "Pop Goes the Weasel," communicates that temperance advocates forget about their promise not to drink when they experience pain:

De Temperance folks from Souf to Maine,

Against all liquor spout and strain,  
But when dey feels an ugly pain,  
Den “Pop goes de Weasel! (Andrews 4)

In the stump speech “Temperance Burlesque,” performer Gus Williams uses his parody of temperance advocate Gough to make Gough appear disingenuous to the viewing saloon patrons. As Gough, Williams maintains that he is an adamant supporter of temperance, yet at the end of the performance Williams propositions the saloon patrons : “Of dere is any bresnt to-night dot vould like to help me in de good work, let dem come ub to de bar, und I shall be satisfied” (Dick 127). By presenting the temperance leader as a man ready to drink freely with saloon patrons, the advocate is made to appear hypocritical. The lampooning of suffrage and temperance advocates was influenced by the ideology embraced by the saloon’s working class patrons.

### **Contributors to the Saloon’s Ideology**

The saloon’s clientele was comprised of a range of poor to working class citizens, earning the nineteenth-century saloon the title, “poor man’s club” (Powers 13). The saloon’s ideology, like its minstrelsy, embraced the ideology of its working class patrons. Eric Lott’s extensive research supports that “working-class values and desires were aired and secured in the minstrel show” (68). In order to understand how the working class ideology developed into an opposition to suffrage and temperance, it is important to examine elements that influenced that opposition.

The working class ideology voiced a resentment of boundaries endured by the working class but not experienced by the upper class. As a means of endorsing intemperance, minstrelsy used class distinctions to underscore an endorsement of drinking. The economic station of men determined their alcoholic preference.

Consequently, types of alcohol acted as signifiers of class. Minstrel lyrics found in “I Likes A Drop of Good Beer” alludes to the mindful gap between the patrons of the working class saloon and the cultural elite. The song displays the working classes’ support of intemperance as well as designates a cultural boundary, expressed in terms of drinking preference, between the upper and working classes:

For, I likes a drop o’ good beer, I does.  
I’m fond of a drop o’ good beer, I is;  
Let gentlemen fine sit down to their wine  
But I likes a drop o’ good beer, I does.

(Pearson 6)

While wine is associated with wealth and an elevated status, beer is deemed the common man’s drink. In addition to establishing a separation of classes, lyrics also express a prideful boasting of the workingman’s culture and claims beer as one of its signifiers.

While signifiers of class worked to privilege alcohol, alcoholic toasts signified an endorsement and perpetuation of anti-suffrage discourse. When minstrelsy included toasts in their saloon performances, the toasts openly excluded women, while openly endorsing the saloon’s male working class patrons. While toasts celebrated a wide variety of things, they routinely included the words “Health to all good lasses! Pledge it merrily; fill your glasses” (Christy 6). Although the toast seems to fit any celebration, its foremost celebration is concerned with male congregation and female exclusion.

While toasts were staples of the working class saloons, they could not compare with the influence that the character Mose had on the saloon and its patron’s opposition to suffrage and temperance. In order to appreciate Mose’s representation of the working class ideology that opposed suffrage and temperance it is important to understand Mose’s incorporation into saloon minstrelsy. The character was introduced to audiences in

Benjamin Baker's play, A Glance at New York. When it premiered in 1848, the working class—particularly the Bowery B'hoys were enamored with the character of Mose. Dressed as a volunteer fireman, Mose expressed an opposition to upper class authority expressing "I ain't goin' to run with dat mercheen no more!" (Stott 223). It is significant that Mose was rejecting the upper class restrictions and instead relishing the signifiers of his working class. Instantly there arose a yell of recognition amongst the primarily working class crowd. Mose represented the ideals and resentment of the young working class males that frequented saloons and thus became the "representation of the young male worker and hastened public awareness of the development of a working class lifestyle in New York" (Stott 226).

Once Mose's characterization was included in minstrelsy and saloon performances, the association between Mose and the typical saloon patron began to develop. When minstrel songs such as, "Wake Up Mose" (1852) and "The Fireman's Death" (1855) were performed they combined to create a determined persona, unwilling to tolerate opposition to his group or his group's sexist or intemperate standards. As a result of the working classes' hero worship of Mose, they began to think of his persona as representative of the typical working class male. Mose, as the embodiment of the working class male, was so secure that minstrelsy used his characterization to stress that Chatham Theatre was a preferred favorite of the working class:

De Chatham keeps among de rest—  
Entertainments ob de best  
In public favor dis place grows,  
'Specially on account ob Mose. (Lott 65)



The inclusion of Mose as a favorite characterization of the working class theatergoers as well as a characterization found exclusively at working class theatres, such as the Chatham, alludes to Mose's acceptance as a working class representative.

Conversely, the Astor Opera House was singled out in minstrelsy and nineteenth-century society, as an upper class favorite:

De Astor Opera is anoder nice place;  
If you go thar, jest wash your face!  
Put on your "kids," an fix up neat,  
For dis am de spot of de eliteet! (Lott 65)

It is not difficult to imagine that saloon patrons saw Mose as the man they strived to be. The performances elevated the character to be morally forthright and dependable—values that saloon patrons admired. The Virginia Minstrels sung:

He goes wid a rush, my boys,  
No matter what befalls him—  
He's de fust man to de engine-house,  
Whenever duty calls him. (Stott 226)

However, Mose was also determined to destroy opposing figures, or as Mose called them "foo-foos" (Stott 256). Suffrage and temperance were social causes that the working class saloon patrons, like Mose, would not tolerate.

While the saloon stage incorporated Mose into its minstrelsy, the saloon keeper endorsed Mose by frequently including him, in the forms of stories and jokes, as found in The Saloon Keeper's Companion and Book of Reference. The reference book was an invaluable tool for saloonkeepers since besides jokes and stories it included voting laws for each state, legal forms, and business forms to assist the saloon's neighborhood patrons. The Saloon Keeper's Companion lauded Mose as "the champion exponent of native vigor and courage" (Stott 256). Mose's frequent inclusion in the book alludes to

his revered status and shows how Mose's opposition to liberal causes represented the same oppositions expressed by the saloon and its minstrelsy. The ultimate impact of Mose and his influence on minstrelsy's social discourse was heightened by his ability to lure patrons into saloon establishments.

### **The Allure of Saloon Minstrelsy**

The allure of the saloon meant that more patrons would be privy to its minstrelsy and its social stance. Anti-suffrage and anti-temperance messages were delivered to more audience members than other venues due to the vast numbers of saloons located in every neighborhood. Theatres, although plentiful, could not compare to the number of saloons throughout the United States. In Chicago nineteenth-century saloons "were as numerous as groceries, meat markets and dry goods stores counted together" (Kingsdale 472). While in Boston, "with a total population of less than half a million in 1895—including women and children, most of whom did not frequent saloons—a police count numbered 227,000 persons entering the city's saloons." (Kingsdale 473). Although not all saloons had minstrel entertainment, the vast number of saloons increased the possibility of sighting minstrel entertainment and exposing customers to its political and social messages.

In addition to the accessibility of saloons, the price of alcoholic drink provided an inexpensive means of enjoying blackface performances, which added to the saloon's appeal thereby increasing the numbers exposed to minstrelsy's attitudes. While saloon minstrels could be viewed for five cents, the price of a beer, theatres charged 25 cents for admission to minstrels, excluding the extra amount needed for refreshments. Even minstrel songs alluded to the price of theatre tickets during the last half of the nineteenth-

century: “Den I gib him a quarter to go to de show” (Strong 15). Costlier drinks such as “whiskey for ten or fifteen” cents were nominal compared to theatre tickets (Kingsdale 475). Saloons were so plentiful and popular that frequenting “several bars in an evening” was not an uncommon occurrence (Stott 218). Nineteenth-century barhopping resulted in an inexpensive means of viewing numerous minstrel shows in one night.

The price of a drink, in nineteenth-century saloons, provided not only a minstrel show but also a free meal, which added to the saloon’s attraction. When saloons started offering free meals, for the price of a drink, it increased attendance for its minstrel entertainment and discourse. In the 1850’s some cities, such as New York began serving a liberal lunch: from “eleven o’clock in the morning to three in the afternoon a special buffet lunch was served free to the customers—who were, of course, expected to buy at least one beer” (Kingsdale 477). More than half of the cities’ saloons offered a free lunch. Some cities, such as Boston were required by law to offer free food.

Free meals also offered political incentives and paid for minstrel entertainment. When saloonkeepers soon found themselves in the position of bartering free food for votes, the new incentive proved to be enticing to the public, particularly the indigent. Voters were hustled “to the polls—sometimes with ballots already helpfully filled out” (Powers 110). In some cases free food helped to provide minstrel entertainment for the saloon. Saloons located in indigent areas with economically deprived patronage were unable to financially afford minstrel entertainment. In these instances, saloon owners provided minstrels with free food and drink, in lieu of pay. Consequently, even the poorest saloon was able to afford minstrelsy and its persuasive discourse. Juba Lane was usually served “a plate of fried eels and a tankard of ale” as payment for his blackface

dancing routines (Winter 37). Lane received payment only when he performed in saloons located in New York's degenerated Five Points district. Five Points, considered New York's slum, housed Irish immigrants and newly freed blacks. A few years after Lane's departure, his career soared and he was noted as "the most famous—and, significantly, nearly the only—black performer to appear in white theaters in the mid-1840's" (Lott 113).

Lane's rise to fame, by way of Five Points saloons, alludes to the attraction and influence of the saloon and its minstrelsy, regardless of its patrons' economic station. Customers, due to their low economic status, were even more susceptible to saloonkeepers' efforts to buy their votes: "No man was too lowly" for the saloonkeepers' bribes (Powers 109).

The economically poor weren't the only ones to view minstrelsy in the downtrodden saloons. Upper and middle class patrons would enter saloons to see minstrelsy. Charles Dickens, no doubt intrigued by the reputation of Juba Lane, attended one of the Five Points saloons where Lane was performing. Dickens marveled at Lane's talent and trademark finale, which included "leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink" (Dickens 139). Dickens' attendance alludes to the crossover that audiences resorted to in order to view highly praised talent. The occurrence of Dickens and others attending saloons below their economic station, proves that minstrelsy spread its political message into the middle and upper class as well. Non-working class society found the entertainment present in working class saloons irresistible.

Rosenzweig and other historians maintain that the saloon remained the exclusive domain of the working class. The middle and upper class men “generally drank at home, private clubs, or expensive hotels” (Rosenzweig 51). While this is generally true, the upper class chose to periodically attend more elaborate saloons, such as those found on entertainment ships. The Floating Place, the Banjo, the Gazelle, and the James Raymond along with other ships provided numerous amenities for those wealthy enough to afford its price. Customers were treated to attractive elements frequently found in circuses, which included “invisible ladies, stuffed giraffes, and puppet-dancing,” (Keeler 79). They were also treated to expansive dining halls, exquisite staterooms, and an elaborate saloon. Ralph Keeler, minstrel performer, boasted that the Ridotto saloon housed on the Floating Place was so vast that it easily housed an immense audience and a “full band of minstrels” (Ibid). The saloon ship’s unique location and its extravagance significantly contributed to its upper class allure, making the water-based saloon an upper class favorite. Due to its gender segregation and drinking atmosphere it also underscored the anti-suffrage and anti-temperance discourse present in working class saloons.

### **Conclusion**

Minstrelsy in saloons achieved many goals. It assisted in communicating and cementing a dislike for two important social causes. The saloon’s climate and working class ideology demonstrated an opposition to temperance and suffrage. As a result, it is understandable that the political manipulations found in the saloon would support the identical anti-temperance and anti-suffrage discourse found in saloon minstrelsy. Saloonkeepers were invested in defeating suffrage and temperance and politicians were invested in the saloonkeepers’ cooperation. This ensured the politicians, elected with the

help of saloonkeepers, would support anti-suffrage and anti-temperance legislation. Similarly, minstrel performances protested suffrage and temperance. Minstrel discourse voiced discrimination against women, so did the saloon, by restricting women to particular areas. In this way, the nineteenth-century saloon, as a transmitter of political thought, heightened the political significance of its minstrel entertainment.

## Conclusion

### Minstrel Residue

*“The minstrel show, long after it had disappeared, left its central image—the grinning black mask—deeply embedded in American consciousness” (Toll 274).*

There have been numerous attempts by playwrights and screenwriters to illustrate the dangerousness of minstrelsy’s racist and sexist message for contemporary audiences. Themes found in Ntozake Shange’s Spell #7 (1981); Glenda Dickerson’s Remembering Aunt Jemima a Menstrual Show (1992); Douglas Turner Ward’s, Day of Absence (1965); and Spike Lee’s Bamboozled (2000) are all aimed towards providing a better understanding of minstrelsy’s impact on race and gender relations and countering its messages. By incorporating minstrelsy into their own performances, artists use the identical minstrel techniques implemented by nineteenth-century minstrels. Contemporary actors blacken up to portray minstrel characters with the same mannerisms and dialect developed and perpetuated by antebellum minstrels, but the result is radically different.

A successful deconstruction of minstrelsy is brilliantly demonstrated in the play Day of Absence. The play reveals the happenings in a small southern town when all the blacks mysteriously disappear in 1945. Instead of white actors using blackface, black actors apply white makeup. The deconstructed make-up has a two-fold purpose. It makes it possible to accept the black actor as a white character and uses the tool of minstrelsy to support a new message. The black actor surfaces as a trickster figure whose commentary on minstrelsy’s stereotypes complicates the foundation of racism. Signifying in black rhetorical strategies, Henry Louis Gates notes, is often representative of the signifier “who wreaks havoc on the signified” (Gates 131).

However, changing the color of the minstrel mask from black to white does not complete the act of deconstruction. The white mask merely acts to support the dialogue, which upholds a supportive message. The play conveys that the blacks are valued citizens. The white characters discuss the activities that will go unaccomplished because of the missing blacks and how their lives are unmanageable due to the blacks' absence. As a result, blacks are re-constructed as appreciated citizens rather than shiftless buffoons. From the mother who can't manage her crying child to the mayor who can no longer manage his office, the blacks are sorely missed. Fearing that the citizens will take their frustration out on him, the mayor asks for the darkies to return—via a news conference.

The characterization of the white citizens also assists in inverting the minstrel message. The discourse of racist whites illuminates their ignorance, and in doing so ridicules racism. When a television reporter interviews Clan, a representative of the Ku Klux Klan, he is livid because the blacks have left. When the reporter asks why, since it was assumed that Clan and his organization “would be delighted at the recent turn of events,” Clan angrily retorts, “They’re not supposed to go, till we tell ‘em to git!”(Ward 34). By illuminating Clan’s ignorance, Ward is essentially conveying that ignorance is a byproduct of racism.

Day of Absence highlights that the constructed images of nineteenth-century minstrelsy are still in circulation as “real portrayals” of blacks 150 years later. Therefore the efforts made by artists to refute minstrelsy’s assertions are crucial. Unfortunately, minstrel caricatures that support minstrelsy’s separatist sentiments far outnumber the attempts of contemporary artists who have sought to deconstruct minstrelsy’s message.



Minstrel caricatures can readily be found on television and at movie theatres, such as those found in the movie Bringing Down the House or the television series, The Parkers and Good Times.

The character J.J. in Good Times is a typical minstrel character. He is poor, buffoonish, unmotivated, and peppers his speech with malapropisms. His childish antics and specious reasoning is coupled with a propensity to buck his eyes and contort his body for the amusement of the television audience. Even his mother, played by Estelle Rollins, contributes to the minstrel climate by personifying the domineering and verbally abusive mammy.

Frustrated by the propensity of black performers to embrace and perform minstrel caricatures, Bill Cosby, whose show illuminated black culture without minstrel stereotypes, maintains that today's situation comedies are in actuality "sittoms," symptoms of minstrelsy's legacy: "Today's sittoms are worse than 'Amos and Andy'" (Poussaint 81).

Spike Lee is another black artist to express that his dissatisfaction with the increase of minstrel caricatures appearing on television and in theatres. Lee contends that the blame lies with the black actors who accept minstrel roles. Lee further asserts black actors don't have to blacken up to convey minstrelsy's message:

My people have to wake up and realize what's going on and our responsibility in it. I mean, back in the day we didn't have a choice. Hattie McDaniel and Bojangles didn't have a choice. Nowadays we don't have to do this stuff. So anything you do is on you. (Allison 75)

In the nineteenth-century blacks, who wanted an acting career, were forced to perform minstrelsy, the art form used to denigrate and define them. Today, even though blacks are no longer limited to performing minstrel caricatures as they were in the past, black

actors are increasingly performing roles that deem black women combative and black men hopelessly juvenile and idiotic.

Unfortunately, the minstrel legacy, perpetuated by television and movies has influenced students at institutions of higher learning. Some white sororities and fraternities have made the act of blacking up a popular pastime. Unlike Douglas Turner Ward, whose play Day of Absence was used to deconstruct the minstrel message, sororities and fraternities are using blackface performances to communicate a separatist message. In the spring of 1986, the University of Wisconsin's chapter of Kappa Sigma fraternity held a black theme party. Decorations, meant to support the fraternity's perception of blackness, consisted of "trash on the floor and graffiti on the walls. Members wore Afro wigs and blackface makeup" (Racist 52). Blackface guests were served watermelon and chicken in a space, temporality dubbed the "Harlem room."

In total, from 1986 to 2001, there have been ten reported occurrences of blackface performed by white fraternities and sororities on campuses. In many instances incidents were fraught with the same minstrel dialect, caricatures, and discriminating language used by the fraternity at the University of Wisconsin. What is even more disheartening is that many more occurrences exist that the public are not aware of. Adele Terrell, program director for the National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence contends "You'd have to think that there is more going on, because for every one that that gets reported, there are a number of others that don't make it into the media" (Reid 106).

Some educators see the influx of blackface occurrences on college campuses as "a byproduct of the Reagan administration's ethnic and cultural polarization" (Reid 106). Reagan's popularity triggered conservative activism on college campuses, and college

students' conservative ideology was fueled, and often financed by conservative interest groups, such as Young Americans for Freedom; Young America's Foundation; the Leadership Institute; the Collegiate Network; and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. These groups spent money in various ways to endorse a right-wing agenda. While some make direct cash "grants" to student groups to start and run conservative campus newspapers; others provide free training in conservative leadership. This conservative ideology copies some aspects of Jacksonian democracy. Just as minstrelsy's ideology embraced racism, sexism, and drinking, so did the sororities and fraternities that performed in blackface. When the University of Wisconsin Chancellor, Donna Shalala, discovered that the Kappa Sigma fraternity had a blackface theme party, she appointed a commission, which suggested several recommendations. In order to prevent another blackface incident, the committee recommended workshops to educate members on issues of "racism, sexism and date rape, and tighter controls on alcohol at parties" (Racist 52).

It is not coincidental that the same minstrel ideology that protested equal rights for blacks, women, and temperance has evolved into the ideology embraced by the fraternities and sororities that participate in blackface. After all:

Ideology is a practice. It has its own specific way of working. And it is generated, produced and reproduced in specific settings (sites)—especially, in the apparatuses of ideological production which 'produce' social meanings and distribute them throughout society. (Hall 273)

This final chapter will discuss the recent use of blackface on campuses and show how they reflect and bear the influence of the same ideology perpetuated by nineteenth-century minstrelsy that promoted racism, sexism, and drinking. The chapter will also

illustrate why it is dangerous to allow minstrelsy to continue to dictate or represent black identity.

### **Blackface Incidents**

It is important first to examine the various ways in which blackface was performed on college campuses. In 1991, a member of the Sigma Chi fraternity at George Mason University appeared during an “ugly woman” skit at a campus fundraiser. In the same year, at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa “Who Rides the Bus?” was the theme of a party held by the Kappa Delta sorority. Two members wore blackface and stuffed basketballs under their shirts to give a pregnant appearance. In 1992, at Texas Tech University, members of the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity wore blackface and Afro wigs at an event called “Party at the Projects.”

Other blackface incidents have occurred without the accompanying discriminating party themes, however the incidents express a negative assessment of blacks. In 1993, two female students at Shawnee State University wore blackface to a women’s basketball practice the night before the team played a predominately black university. In 1997, at State University of West Georgia, members of the Kappa Alpha fraternity appeared in a skit wearing blackface and mimicking the Jackson 5.

The most publicized and recent occurrence took place in 2001 on the campuses of Auburn University and the University of Mississippi. At the University of Mississippi the members of Alpha Tau Omega celebrated Halloween with a fraternity costume party. A picture of the party reveals a non-blackened fraternity member, dressed as a policeman, holding a gun to the head of a fraternity member, in blackface, in the act of picking cotton from a bucket.

In 2001, at Auburn University, two pictures of a Halloween party also reveal minstrel assertions. Three members of the Delta Sigma Phi fraternity pose for a picture. A member of the fraternity, dressed as a Ku Klux Klansman, holds a noose around the neck of a student, in blackface, who is standing in front of a confederate flag. The same year pictures are posted on the Internet of another fraternity at Auburn University, Beta Theta Pi. The picture shows two members dressed in T-Shirts of the black fraternity they were impersonating, Omega Psi Phi. In order to imitate the black fraternity, the blackface impersonators used rap-like gestures and wore several rings on each hand.

Some of the blackface incidents, committed by white sororities and fraternities, have gained the support of university newspapers that justify their actions. In 1992, Texas A & M University's fraternity, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, wore blackface and dressed in grass skirts for a "jungle" theme party. In response to the incident, Texas representative, Ron Wilson, promised to "curb racism on Texas campuses" (Ackerman 36). However, the university newspaper, the Battalion, published an editorial cartoon, which portrayed Wilson as a dog "yapping at an A & M boot—along with an editorial calling the attempt to 'dictate' punishment 'out of bounds'" (Ibid). A copy of the cartoon was sent to Wilson along with an anonymous letter, which stated if Wilson wants war, "we'll give you one you won't believe" (Ibid).

### **Administrations' Response**

Ignoring the situation does nothing to solve the problem. A & M president William Mobley called the cartoon "inappropriate and subject to misinterpretation" (Ackerman 36). The president's remark did nothing to stop the racism that led to an environment which allowed and encouraged blackface minstrelsy. Ten years later, in

January 2002, Texas A & M newspaper, the Battalion, once again used minstrelsy to express racist sentiments. A Battalion editorial cartoon featured minstrel characters, which depicted “a black mother and son with exaggerated lips and eyes, as well as other features frequently found in racist caricatures” (Nissimov 15). Ray Bowen, the new Texas A & M president, apologized for the incident, but, like his predecessor, made no provisions to prevent further blackface on campus. Likewise, the University of Mississippi chancellor made no attempt to correct the problem. He merely stated that the blackface photograph of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity is evidence of a “hurtful but isolated incident” (Bartlett 33).

Conversely, Auburn University’s disciplinary actions against Delta Sigma Phi and Beta Theta Pi were swift and purposeful. Fifteen students were suspended and the university withdrew the official recognition of the two fraternities. Unfortunately, Beta Theta Pi sued the university for violation of First Amendment rights and in 2002 the 10 students were allowed to be readmitted to the university. There has been no lawsuit regarding Delta Sigma Phi. Although the university was forced to readmit ten of the fifteen students, it is admirable that the administration made an attempt to correct the problem. Other universities have made less assertive attempts. Sensitivity training was required for the sororities and fraternities at Shawnee State University and State University of West Georgia that participated in blackface activities.

### **Analysis of Campus Blackface**

Like nineteenth-century minstrelsy, the campus incidents convey a message that simultaneously degrades blacks and declares they are all alike. The named blackface events and themes support commonalities, such as: all blacks live happily in projects, all

black women are ugly and pregnant, and all blacks are poor. Additionally, themed sorority and fraternity blackface assert that black women use welfare as a means of living it up in today's society and that black men are dangerous. These aspects of blackface on campuses mirror those found in nineteenth-century minstrelsy. Campus blackface portrayed blacks as living happily in the projects; likewise nineteenth-century minstrelsy portrayed blacks as content to live in squalor as slaves. Campus blackface declared black women as unattractive and nineteenth-century minstrelsy utilized the wench, the most popular female character type, to convey that black women are unattractive and sexually promiscuous.

These incidents, particularly at the University of Mississippi and Auburn University, convey a dangerous and threatening message. The picture of Alpha Tau Omega at the University of Mississippi shows a white man dressed as a policeman with the gun aimed at the blackface character picking cotton. The picture underscores the role of the dominant white and the marginal black. The white man dressed as a police officer enforces white supremacy. Like minstrelsy, the picture supports the institution of slavery and justifies violence against blacks.

The picture of Delta Sigma Phi members at Auburn University features a blackened person with the noose around his neck beside a person costumed as a Klu Klux Klansman. The blackface person is also standing in front of a Confederate flag. The picture conveys a sentiment that fondly recalls Jim Crow segregation. It is not happenstance that segregation laws were named after Jim Crow, the character that symbolized minstrelsy. Just as minstrelsy used threats against blacks to promote its anti-abolition position, so do these fraternity men in the picture. Both the noose and the two

rifles, crossed in front of the blackface person, communicate violence against blacks. Like the nineteenth-century newspapers, which endorsed the actions of anti-abolitionists and anti-suffragists, A & M University's newspaper, the Battalion, supported the actions of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members who wore blackface and dressed in grass skirts for a jungle party. The university newspaper's revealed a conservative stance by justifying the fraternity's actions in an editorial cartoon. The cartoon ridiculed Texas Representative, Ron Wilson, who expressed outrage at the actions of the fraternity. When the cartoon was sent along with a threat to the Texas Representative, Ron Wilson, it evoked similar tactics found in nineteenth-century minstrel songs, which protested abolition.

But if we don't behave ourselves  
An mingle wid de white,  
If we got a kick on the shin  
I'm sure it sarves us right. (America)

Instead of "behaving" himself, Wilson expressed an opposition, therefore he, like abolitionists, was ridiculed and portrayed as a small black yapping dog, annoying and ineffectual.

### **Drinking and Sexism on Campus**

While not all sororities and fraternities participate in blackface, the majority of them demonstrate an affinity to binge drinking and sexism—two elements found in nineteenth century minstrelsy. The organizations embrace alcohol use as a central part of their identity. The Harvard School of Health reported, "those who binge the most tend to be white, live in a fraternity or a sorority house" (Hsu 1). The drinking culture in these fraternities exacerbated the situation and when racism and alcohol mix, violence against blacks is enacted and ostensibly justified.



The drinking culture of fraternities' mimics the saloon environment of the nineteenth-century—discussed in chapter four. Both are time-honored traditions, handed down from generation to generation. And both honor and celebrate male companionship and female exclusion. Sexism is also prevalent in university Greek organizations: “Seventy percent of sexual assaults on campuses occur in a fraternity or sorority environment” (Leger 7). As in the nineteenth-century, fraternity and sorority blackface communicates more than a racist commentary; it is multifaceted and reveals an ideology that embraces racism, sexism, and drinking. White sororities and fraternities, unfortunately, prove that minstrelsy's ideology has remained steadfast.

More must be done to reverse minstrelsy's powerful impact on campuses. As Johnny Williams, a student at Brandeis University suggests, in order to alleviate the problems it is important to “change the environment on the campus” (Reid 106). This can be accomplished by requiring mandatory seminars on race relations for faculty and students. Activities must also be incorporated that strive to involve all ethnicities. Since universities can be sued if they suspend individual students, universities should temporarily suspend the fraternities or sororities that participate in blackface activities.

### **Conclusion**

As Antonio Gramsci insisted

the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving inventory. (324)

It is only by initiating an inventory that we will appreciate the legacy of minstrelsy on our culture. This study has attempted to illustrate how minstrelsy created and propelled its insidious ideology during the nineteenth-century. Unfortunately, the

same ideology has emerged on today's campuses and manifested itself in blackface performance. The "art" form has influenced our best and brightest students. We must resist minstrelsy's insidious messages about blacks and women as minstrelsy itself resisted those who advocated for the rights of blacks and women to be full citizens in our culture. These university students are fighting against the full inclusion of blacks in the prestigious world of education and privilege just as their ancestors fought against abolition. It is the same impulse and must be treated with the same seriousness. If society ignores minstrelsy's powerful influence, its ability to pigeonhole the attitude, actions, and behavior of blacks will continue to thrive, unchecked and unimpeded. As Foucault insisted, "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions"(Foucault 101). My dissertation is an effort to protest minstrelsy's occurrence in the entertainment arena as well as society. Those fraternity boys and sorority girls might argue that they are only blacking up for fun. Minstrelsy, since its inception, has often been perceived as innocuous "fun," until you read the political messages so deeply embedded in its "entertainment."

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