Introduction

It was at this epoch that Mr. T. D. Rice made his debut in a dramatic sketch entitled "Jim Crow," and from that moment everybody was "doing just so," and continued "doing just so" for months, and even years afterward. Never 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." The most sober citizens began to "wheel about, and turn about, and jump 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. . . .

—New York Tribune (1855)

Despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of fiction are counterfeits. They are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role.

—Ralph Ellison

The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.

—C. L. R. James

Blackface minstrelsy was an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit. It has therefore been summed up by one observer as "half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy." While it was organized around the quite explicit "borrowing" of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural. Although it arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshly investments through ridicule and racist lampoon. Yet I am not so sure
that this is the end of the story. In light of recent discussions of race and subjectivity, we probably ought to take these facts and processes as merely a starting orientation for inquiry into the complexities of racism and raced subjects in the United States. In doing so we shall find that blackface performance, the first formal public acknowledgment by whites of black culture, was based on small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation, which indeed appear to be inevitable when white Americans enter the haunted realm of racial fantasy. Ultimately I am after some sense of how precariously nineteenth-century white working people lived their whiteness—a matter of the greatest consequence in the history of America’s racial cultures and their material or institutional transactions.

This study grew out of a dissatisfaction with erstwhile modes of racial critique, which in their political disapproval, dovetailing with aesthetic disdain, were unwilling to engage with the artifacts and social realities of popular life, too ready to dismiss the mentalité of the popular classes, finally impatient with politics itself. Cultural critics have recently become more aware of the uneven and contradictory character of popular life and culture, the ambiguities or contradictions that may characterize the pleasures of the masses. It is one of the arguments of this book that in blackface minstrelsy’s audiences there were in fact contradictory racial impulses at work, impulses based in the everyday lives and racial negotiations of the minstrel show’s working-class participants. Indeed, there are reasons for thinking of blackface in the years prior to the Civil War as a far more unsettled phenomenon than has been supposed; critics of minstrelsy have too often dismissed working-class racial feeling as uncomplicated and monolithic, and historians of working-class culture have usually concurred—or made apologies. It seems particularly clear that in the pages of recent social history the antebellum potential for a labor abolitionism has not been adequately explored nor its failure accounted for, and that the minstrel show crucially helps address this question.

This agenda may seem an undue burden to place on a “counterfeit” cultural phenomenon such as the minstrel show. One ought, though, to take seriously Ralph Ellison’s ironic image of whites racially girding themselves by way of rituals that mirror rather than distance the Other, in which whites are touched by the blacks they would lampoon and are in the process told on, revealed. Studying the most popular entertainment form of the nineteenth century together with its characteristic audience is perhaps the best way to understand the affective life of race in that time and in ours. The minstrel show has been ubiquitous, cultural common coin; it has been so central to the lives of North Americans that we are hardly aware of its extraordinary influence. Minstrel troupes entertained presidents (including Lincoln), and disdainful high-minded quarterlies and rakish sporting journals alike followed its course. Figures such as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Bayard Taylor were as attracted to blackface performance as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany were repelled by it. From “Oh! Susanna” to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts

and words have figured significantly in the white Imaginary of the United States.

Without the minstrel show there would have been no Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), no Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884); investments as various as Norman Mailer’s “White Negro” (1957), John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me (1961), or certain of John Berryman’s Dream Songs (1955–69) would likewise have been impossible. Leslie Fiedler’s thesis in Love and Death in the American Novel (1960) that our white male writers have been obsessed with white male—dark male dyads (Huck and Jim, Ishmael and Queequeg) finds intimate material expression in the blackface performer’s assumption of familiarity with “blackness.” The early history of motion pictures was bound up with blackface—witness its importance to such major cinematic developments as Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1903), Birth of a Nation (1915), and The Jazz Singer (1927)—and the movies have regularly returned to it since then, whether in Fred Astaire’s blackface tribute to Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in Swing Time (1936), Melvin Van Peebles’s ironic Watermelon Man (1970), or the egregious post-affirmative action Soul Man (1985). Bill Monroe, Jimmie Rodgers, and other early country music stars routinely “blacked up,” as did ethnic vaudevillians such as Sophie Tucker; as Armond White has written, “some form of darkie mimicking has been the strongest musical tradition in pluralized American culture.” Indeed, in minstrelsy’s cultural force, its racial crossings, and what the New York Tribune called its pleasing “insanity” (June 30, 1855), its emergence resembled that of early rock ’n’ roll. Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return.

For an index of popular white racial feeling in the United States, one could do worse than minstrelsy. I am concerned in this book with its shape and resonance in the decades before the Civil War. The tone and format of the early minstrel show, with its knee-slapping musical numbers punctuated by comic dialogues, bad puns, and petit-bourgeois ribaldry, should seem familiar to anyone who has seen American television’s “Hee Haw.” (The resemblance is apparently not coincidental, for one scholar has speculated that the rural white tradition, and its commercial issue in modern bluegrass music, inherited much from the minstrel show—not least the black style of banjo playing on which minstrelsy partly traded.) Although the makeup of minstrelsy changed continually after its emergence at the beginning of the 1830s, it was configured at the height of its popularity as a semicircle of four or five sometimes more white male performers (there were very rarely female performers in the antebellum-minstrel show) made up with facial blacking of greasepaint or burnt cork and adorned in outrageously oversized and/or ragged “Negro” costumes. Armed with an array of instruments, usually banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, and tambourine, the performers would stage a tripartite show. The first part offered up a random selection of songs interspersed with what passed for black wit and jery; the second part (or “olio”) featured a group of novelty performances (comic dialogues, malapropistic “stump speeches,” cross-dressed “wench” performances, and the like); and the third
part was a narrative skit, usually set in the South, containing dancing, music, and burlesque.

This “ethnographic miniature,” in Clifford Geertz’s phrase, jumbled together a dramatic spectacle based on an overriding investment in the body, a figural content preoccupied with racial marking and racial transmutation, and a social context of white working-class proximity to blacks (21, 444). We might almost call it a precognitive form: not, as in Geertz’s study of the Balinese cockfight, a story one people told themselves about themselves, but an encapsulation of the affective order of things in a society that racially ranked human beings. What the minstrel show did was capture an antebellum structure of racial feeling, in Raymond Williams’s phrase, “social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available.” Minstrelsy brought to public form racialized elements of thought and feeling, tone and impulse, residing at the very edge of semantic availability, which Americans only dimly realized they felt, let alone understood.11 The minstrel show was less the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences.12 By looking at the formal aspects of minstrelsy in the context of its time, we may see its historically new articulation of racial difference.

This articulation took the form of a simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries. Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed—minstrelsy’s mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation, what Homi Bhabha would call its “ambivalence” (“Other” 18) and what my title loosely terms “love and theft.” The very form of blackface acts—an investiture in black bodies—seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of “blackness” and demonstrates the permeability of the color line. I depart from most other writers on minstrelsy, who have based their analyses on racial aversion, in seeing the vagaries of racial desire as fundamental to minstrel-show mimicry. It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly unsupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure. As it turned out, the minstrel show worked for over a hundred years to facilitate safely an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures, a shape-shifting middle term in racial conflict which began to disappear (in the 1920s) once its historical function had been performed.13 It appears that during this stretch of American cultural history the intercourse between racial cultures was at once so attractive and so threatening as to require a cultural marker or visible sign of cultural interaction. This requirement would eventually wither away, or in any case transmogrify, not least because of the minstrel show’s success in introducing the cultures to each other. The blackface mechanism of cultural control, as John Szwed has suggested, also provided a channel for the black cultural “contamination” of the dominant culture: “The fact that, say, a Mick Jagger can today perform in the same tradition without blackface simply marks the detachment of culture from race and the almost full absorption of a black tradition into white culture” (27). In the mid-nineteenth century, however, culture was “attached” to race with some tenacity; blackface acts both enforced and, in the end, remapped this regime.

As I point out in chapter 1, writing on the minstrel show has been inordinately partial. Minstrelsy, of course, was long enveloped in a reactionary nostalgia that desperately needed debunking; partisans of blackface have always longed for the imaginary day of the strumming Sambo.14 A superficially similar (and still very questionable) tradition, however, has celebrated minstrelsy for its “blackness,” seeing the phenomenon as a public forum for slave culture which might have liberating effects. Constance Rourke’s chapter on minstrelsy in American Humor (1931), for example, gave modern force to what might be termed a “people’s culture” position—one whose sources, as I show, can be found in the writings of Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, and others. The revival of this impulse had everything to do with a 1930s reclamation of the “folk,” if not, as Warren Susman has suggested, with a new definition of “culture” itself (150–210): the extraordinary success of Marc Connelly’s near-minstrel show The Green Pastures (1929), the anthropology of Franz Boaz, Ruth Benedict’s Patterns of Culture (1934), the novels of John Steinbeck, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), James Agee and Walker Evans’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), and so on. Rourke’s genial view is a relatively benign, and to that extent unhistorical, one, though it has the virtue of acknowledging both the extensive effect of black cultural practices on blackface performance and the public effects of blackface itself. This position, in fact, was partially defended in Robert Toll’s Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America (1974), and some have ventured it in refurbished form, but it has not been a position to which scholars regularly recur.15

Harking back to a tradition of minstrel-show criticism that began with Frederick Douglass’s articles in the North Star, scholars and writers initiated a long-awaited political revisionism in regard to minstrelsy beginning in 1958 with Ralph Ellison’s “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” and crystallized—with attitude—in LeRoi Jones’s brief remarks in Blues People (1963). The most notable instances of this revisionism include Nathan Huggins’s powerful chapter on minstrelsy in Harlem Renaissance (1971) and Toll’s Blacking Up. These works can indeed be taken as representative of the reigning view of minstrelsy as racial domination. James Dorman, for instance, writes: “The arrival of Jim Crow was to provide the final ingredient in the total pattern of antiblack prejudice” (“Strange” 118). In retrospect this necessary critique seems somewhat crude and idealist; in reading off from a text the stereotypes that a historical moment is presumed to have
required it is typically presentist, and in viewing minstrelsy as the nail in the coffin of cultural containment it is rather narrowly functionalist. Based on a politics of “positive” black images, images meant to replace racist types with what Stuart Hall terms the “essential black subject,” this strategy still, in certain instances, offers the terms in which cultural struggle ought to be waged. At the same time, however, the engagement on the part of cultural critics with poststructuralist discourses, and a dismantling of binary racial categories in favor of multiply determined and positioned subjects, has begun to trouble the notion of “racial” representation itself. We must now recognize, as Hall argues, “that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions” (“New” 28). To do so will require a much more sensitively historicist look at the uneven class, gender, and racial politics of forms such as the minstrel show. And it will require as well a subtler account of acts of representation. Where representation once unproblematically seemed to image forth its referent, we must now think of, say, 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 and the social field there exist lags, unevenessenesse, multiple determinations. It will take a good deal of decoding to get at the meanings of blackface minstrelsy.16

In contrast to both the populist and the revisionist views, which see minstrelsy’s politics as univocal, my study documents precisely the historical contradictions and social conflicts the minstrel show opened up. It first reconstructs the antebellum cultural formation in which minstrelsy did its work (part I). One of our earliest culture industries, minstrelsy not only affords a look at the emergent historical break between high and low cultures but also reveals popular culture to be a place where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified—and contested. The heedless (and ridiculing) appropriation of “black” culture by whites in the minstrel show, as many contemporaries recognized, was little more than cultural robbery, a form of what Marx called expropriation, which troubled guilty whites all the more because they were so attracted to the culture they plundered. Indeed, for a time in the late 1840s minstrelsy came to seem the most representative national art. In this way minstrelsy became a site of conflictual intensity for the politics of race, class, and nation.

This interpretation is particularly suggested by my readings of blackface minstrel forms (part II). Each of the last four chapters concerns itself with a particular social and political situation, set of texts, and theoretical problem. Reading minstrel music, lyrics, jokes, dances, burlesque skits, and illustrations in conjunction with working-class racial ideologies and the sex/gender system, I show how blackface minstrelsy embodied and intervened in Jacksonian racial politics. Underwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear, the minstrel show continually transgressed the color line even as it made possible the formation of a self-conscious white working class. There was a good fit, for example, between the conflicted nature of the shows and the racial tendencies of their audiences, such that the artisan abolitionist constituency could rather benignly enjoy the same form of leisure that supported racist, antiabolitionist ridicule. This situation was aided by ideologies of working-class manhood, which shaped white men’s contradictory feelings about black men. Because of the power of the black penis in white American psychic life, the pleasure minstrelsy’s largely white and male audiences derived from their investment in “blackness” always carried a threat of castration—a threat obsessively reversed in white lynching rituals. Notwithstanding that this threat was itself part of the fascination, or at least a price white men appear to have paid gladly in patronizing blackface performances, the minstrel show was constructed along several lines of defense against it. This is not at all to claim that the defenses worked—only that their intermittent failure provided blackface with its longevity and power.

The moment of minstrelsy’s greatest popularity (1846–54) was marked by a variety of bitter political controversies: labor struggles in New York and other major cities, the Wilmot Proviso debates over the extension of slavery, the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention, the Astor Place theater riot, the Fugitive Slave Law and its aftermath, the Kansas–Nebraska bill, and others. In significant ways this historical moment suddenly made the misappropriations and distortions committed in minstrelsy politically dangerous. The conflictual character of minstrelsy only deepened with the approach of the gravest pre–Civil War threat to the social order of the Union, the debates over slavery that led to the Compromise of 1850. Stephen Foster’s “Plantation Melodies” unwittingly conjured up the hydra-headed conflicts; these melodies, and the vast dissemination of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in various politically divergent blackface theatrical productions—a kind of prelude to civil war on the stage—offer a lens through which to read a political crisis Michael Regin has called “the American 1848,” a revolution on American soil.

Given this formal and historical complexity, it is no surprise that minstrelsy has overwhelmed most attempts to study it in all its variousness and difficulty. The minstrel show was an entertainment form that called in turn on a variety of elements: folklore, dance, jokes, songs, instrumental tunes, skits, mock oratory, satire, and racial and gender cross-dressing or impersonation. From a variety of locales, including city, backwoods, small town, and frontier, it impinged on a history of intense class, racial, national, and gender formation. Scholars understandably most often take one or another aspect of minstrelsy for focused study rather than the whole; and the few comprehensive treatments of the minstrel show have without exception read the printed record (songsters, playlets, and so on) of what was in fact a negotiated and rowdy spectacle of performer and audience.17 I have restricted this study to the antebellum decades, and to the minstrel show’s performance amid the social and political life of (for the most part) New York City. Yet I have also attempted to do justice to minstrelsy’s various constituent parts as well as to its audience and its historical role, and in this I make no plea for my own sagacity. I have unquestionably poached on
academic territory in which I can claim at best amateur competence. Writing this book has convinced me, however, that such an interdisciplinary attempt is worth the gamble and, especially given the habits of specialists and subspecialists, is an opportunity rather than an embarrassment. In addressing my study to a variety of fields and disciplines, I mean not only to properly portray a complex phenomenon but to help solidify the claims of cultural studies as a practice.

Accordingly, this book has been oriented by several specific debates. One of these is, of course, the discussion of blackface minstrelsy, in particular its political status and effectivity as public performance. Also important are theoretical questions regarding the (post-Freudian) study of humor, the political interpretation of commercial popular music, the uses of folklore, the cultural exhibition of the body, and the political efficacy of melodrama. A related debate concerns the usefulness of film theory in the study of theater, a highly problematic but potentially generative development. Recent theoretical and political investigations of race, especially those oriented by psychoanalysis, are fundamental concerns, as are questions about the place of race in working-class culture and in the development of American nationhood.

Implicit in any work of this kind is also the question of American Studies as a field in (perhaps perennial) crisis and its relationship to cultural studies. The American Studies of a generation ago cast its vision over a wider expanse of American culture than is now sometimes recognized; and it often functioned as a left-liberal “culturalist” alternative to American New Criticism, however much it may now seem like the literary equivalent of the Truman administration. In fact there was a great deal of interchange between the British New Left and certain American Studies scholars, whether in the interested sideside reception of Raymond Williams’s and Richard Hoggart’s early work or the impact of Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden* (1964) on the early figures of British cultural studies. Of course, the older American Studies emphasis on “representative” texts and problems is out of date, while E. P. Thompson’s (contemporary) definition of culture “as a whole way of conflict” (“Long” 33) has offered a decisive reorientation to a generation of cultural studies practitioners, including myself. Indeed, my focus on a highly elaborated if crudely executed popular stage form has arisen from the immense importance, in such a definition of culture, of cultural texts requiring relatively few “inherent resources” such as literacy or education and therefore offering relatively unmediated access to those whose struggles make history. So very neglected in the academic study of cultures until very recently, such forms have usually been central to their time—certainly more influential than the great literature so often taken as culturally representative. Although American Studies has in some sense been a pioneer (e.g., Constance Rourke’s *American Humor*, Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*), it has restricted itself to addressing what is “most American” and exceptional about such forms rather than the richer questions of how cultures work, are contested, divide and cohere, or how transpersonal historical structures consort with human activity to produce social and political change.

I try in these pages to help reorient the traditions of American Studies by asking questions about the role of culture in the political development of a specific national entity. The challenge here is to resist the tendency in American versions of cultural studies to examine culture apart from political structures and movements—an airless “politics” of the cultural rather than social and political cultures. To this end the significance of current work in cultural studies lies in making it possible to situate the analysis of cultural forms, the various sorts of textuality and subjectivity most closely related to human agency, with regard to the analysis of social and cultural formations, the organizations, processes, and overdetermined conjunctures that bear most significantly on political life. The greatest yield of this work is an understanding of “historical forms of consciousness and subjectivity,” in Richard Johnson’s words (43)—as I see it, the chief concern and special ability of cultural studies.

If at this juncture we are to understand anything more about popular racial feeling in the United States, we must no longer be satisfied merely to condemn the terrible pleasures of cultural material such as minstrelsy, for their legacy is all around us. As Antonio Gramsci once remarked, 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 an inventory (Prison 324). Only by beginning to inventory the deposits of feeling for which blackface performance has been responsible can we hope to acknowledge the social origins and psychological motives of “racial” impulses, reckonings, and unconscious reactions that lie so deep in most Caucasians as to feel inevitable and indeed natural. An equally urgent outcome of this undertaking will be to make ourselves aware of the resistant, oppositional, or emancipatory accents of the racial bad attitudes residing in American working-class culture today.

*Love and Theft* is thus perhaps a product of its political times in investigating the ironies of cultural reaction, the potential reversals in a context of defeat. Like much of the recent cultural theory on which it draws, it has been marked by our age of “authoritarian populism,” as Stuart Hall has termed it, in its tea-leaf-reading documentation of culture—industry contradictions and subversions in the face of overwhelming odds. There is, I would rush to add, justification for this anxious attention: not only was blackface minstrelsy a peculiarly unstable form, but the social realities to which it in part contributed demand careful sorting out. The left has too often construed black Americans as saboteurs of class-based politics, their presence acting as an impediment to “real” social change. No less than writing off white working-class racial feeling, blaming black people themselves for being obstacles in the path of the American experiment has been a nasty habit. The story has usually taken the form of an imagined conspiracy of white liberals and black “extremists” who have foisted civil rights demands on to left
initiatives and in the process affronted working-class whites. But, as Adolph Reed and Julian Bond observe, this tale presumes a prior equality between black and white, and consequently “denies the reality of explicitly racial stratification within the working class and a history of white working-class antagonism toward blacks—coexisting, certainly, with many exemplary instances of interracial solidarity—that stretches back through the 1863 New York draft riot” (733–34). This gnarled history stretches back indeed into the antebellum decades I consider here, and I advance a revivifying attention to its contradictions: the competing but sometimes collateral claims of black and white labor. The source of post–World War II conflicts in those of white workers versus black slaves and their abolitionist allies indicates the need to study carefully a moment when a possible interracial labor alliance went awry. Any vision of a renewed socialism demands that we consider race as more than merely “incidental” (as C. L. R. James urges) to the motors of political change. And if it is culture rather than shared work experience that primarily creates the conditions for social movements, one critical task is to achieve a renovated public culture through inquiries into popular forms such as the minstrel show.25
Blackface and Blackness:
The Minstrel Show in American Culture

In the theatrical world, as in the aesthetic world more generally, ideology is always in
essence the site of a competition and a struggle in which the sound and fury of
humanity's political and social struggles are faintly or sharply echoed.

—Louis Althusser

The current consensus on blackface minstrelsy is probably best summed up by
Frederick Douglass's righteous response in the *North Star*. Blackface imitators,
he said, were "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a
complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the
corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens," a denunciation that nicely captures
minstrelsy's further commodification of an already enslaved, noncitizen people
(October 27, 1848). From our vantage point, the minstrel show indeed seems a
transparently racist curiosity, a form of leisure that, in inventing and ridiculing the
slow-witted but irrepressible "plantation darky" and the foppish "northern dandy
negro," conveniently rationalized racial oppression. The culture that embraced it,
we assume, was either wholly enchanted by racial travesty or so benighted, like
Melville's Captain Delano, that it took such distortions as authentic. I want to
suggest, however, that the audiences involved in early minstrelsy were not uni-
versally derisive of African Americans or their culture, and that there was a range of
responses to the minstrel show which points to an instability or contradiction in
the form itself. My project is to examine that instability for what it may tell us
about the racial politics of culture in the years before the Civil War.

Writing in Horace Greeley's antislavery *New York Tribune* in 1855, an anonym-
ous advocate of blackface minstrel songs celebrated the "earliest votaries of the
colored opera":

Why may not the banjoism of a Congo, an Ethiopian or a George Christy [one
of the most famous blackface performers of the 1840s and 1850s], aspire to an
equality with the musical and poetical delineators of all nationalities? . . .
Absurd as may seem negro minstrelsy to the refined musician, it is nevertheless
beyond doubt that it expresses the peculiar characteristics of the negro as truly
as the great masters of Italy represent their more spiritual and profound nation-
ality. . . . [And] has there been no change in the feelings of the true originators of this music—the negroes themselves? . . . Plaintive and slow, the sad soul of the slave throws into his music all that gushing anguish of spirit which he dare not otherwise express. (“Black” 107)

Surprising lines, these, from a writer sympathetic to the idea of African-American art. We tend not to associate an approving view of minstrelsy with a determination to take slave culture seriously, let alone a determination to take minstrelsy as slave culture. Moreover, the writer’s egalitarian rhetoric links one of the strongest antebellum cases on behalf of minstrel songs with a sympathetic (if typically condescending) attitude toward black people. The motivating idea here is a Herderian notion of the folk, articulated in the year of Leaves of Grass for much the same reason: to celebrate the popular sources of a national culture. It is possible, of course, to take such lines as evidence of the incomprehension that greeted minstrelsy, a position that is certainly defensible. But it does not fully account for the frequency of responses such as the one just quoted—the ready imputation of folk authenticity to patented “impro” songs as “Ole Dan Tucker,” “Jump Jim Crow,” and “Zip Coon.” Nor does it explain the desire to put moderate racial attitudes and minstrel shows together.

Indeed, Margaret Fuller spoke in a similar vein about this cultural form. In “Entertainments of the Past Winter,” published in the Dial in 1842, she claimed that Americans were “beggars” when it came to the arts of music and dancing:

Our only national melody, Yankee Doodle, is shrewdly suspected to be a scion from British art. All symptoms of invention are confined to the African race, who, like the German literati, are relieved by their position from the cares of government. “Jump Jim Crow,” is a dance native to this country, and one which we plead guilty to seeing with pleasure, not on the stage, where we have not seen it, but as danced by children of an ebon hue in the street. Such of the African melodies as we have heard are beautiful. But the Caucasian race have yet their rail-roads to make. . . . (52)

We will have occasion to return to the juxtaposition of American blacks with the idea of governance, particularly in the notion of slaves as poet-legislators. Interesting here, in addition, is the assumption that the only music and dance which are not false coin are those found in blackface minstrelsy, which represents, Fuller hints, something like the folk culture of an American peasantry. These comments begin to suggest that when, in the decades before the Civil War, northern white men “blacked up” and imitated what they supposed was black dialect, music, and dance, some people, without derision, heard Negroes singing.

Blackface minstrelsy as an African-American people’s culture: this may seem an odd view. But it is one perception of the minstrel show that has been understandably repressed in antiracist accounts of it. Most scholars have yet to appreciate W. E. B. Du Bois’s belief that Stephen Foster compositions such as “Old Black Joe” and “Old Folks at Home” were based on African-American themes; Du Bois included them in his assertion that black music was the “only real

American music” (“Negro” 231; Souls 382). In Black Manhattan, James Weldon Johnson similarly remarked that minstrelsy originated on the plantation, and constituted the “only completely original contribution” of America to the theater (87). These judgments appear terribly misguided now, given that blackface minstrelsy’s century-long commercial regulation of black cultural practices staved the development of African-American public arts and generated an enduring narrative of racist ideology, a historical process by which an entire people has been made the bearer of another people’s “folk” culture. We ought nonetheless to know how such positive assessments of the minstrel show were possible as well as wrong. Without a fuller understanding of blackface performance, one that includes the intensely conflicted set of responses it called forth, we miss the part it played in the racial politics of its time—the extent to which, for that matter, it was the racial politics of its time—from its northern emergence as an entr’acte in about 1830 to the various New York stage versions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the mid-1850s.

In the pages that follow I return to the minstrel show to a northeastern political context that was extremely volatile, one whose range can be seen in the antimony of responses I have identified, themselves anticipatory of twentieth-century debates about the nature of the “popular.” On one side there is a disdain for “mass”-cultural domination, the incorporation of black culture fashioned to racist uses; on the other a celebration of an authentic people’s culture, the dissemination of black arts with potentially liberating results. Let me suggest that one finds elements of both in early minstrelsy: there is as much evidence to locate in it the public emergence of slave culture (as Constance Rouge argued in American Humor) or pointed political protest (as David Grimsted and William Stowe have written) as there is to finger its racism, this last needing little demonstration. Ultimately, however, this stubborn dualism is an impoverished, not to say obsolete, way of thinking about one of America’s first culture industries. Our simplistic (and almost completely ahistorical) understanding of minstrel shows comes partly as a result of swinging between one position and the other—or at least of the notion that these are our only choices.

Recent research into popular culture has allowed us to see the popular instead as a sphere characterized by cultural forms of social and political conflict, neither, in Gareth Stedman Jones’s terms, entirely the “social control” or the ruling classes nor the “class expression” of the dominated. Because the popular is always produced, capitalized, it is hardly some unfettered time-out from political pressures, a space of mere “leisure”—a clear enough distinction in the case of minstrelsy—nor does it arise in some immediate way from collective popular desires. But, as Stuart Hall has insisted, neither does it passively mirror political domination taking place in other parts of the social formation, as though it were only epiphenomenal—a form of dominant-cultural “reinforcement,” as commentators on the minstrel show have often said—or, in the Frankfurt School scenario, wholly administered and determined. Since the popular emerges at the
intersection of received symbolic forms, audiences' experiences of authority and subordination in workplace, home, and social ritual, and new articulations by various producers of symbolic forms—local teachers and labor organizers, storytellers and journalists, theater managers and actors—it is itself a crucial place of contestation, with moments of resistance to the dominant culture as well as moments of supersession. Talking about the minstrel show this way reveals the most popular American entertainment form in the antebellum decades as a principal site of struggle in and over the culture of black people. This struggle took place largely among antebellum whites, of course, and it finally divested black people of control over elements of their culture and over their own cultural representation generally. But it was based on a profound white investment in black culture which, for a time, had less certain consequences. My study documents in early blackface minstrelsy the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than the two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger, and all constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling.

So far are we from any idea of what the vagaries of this structure of feeling might have been—the relationship of blackface to "blackness"—that it is useful to generate some sense of the contradictions and ambiguities in blackface representation and its place in American culture. Let me, for instance, elaborate what I mean in calling minstrelsy a popular form by returning briefly to the symptomatic moments of the debate I have sketched. Each position has its partial force, and taken together they define the range of possible forms and effects that could be produced in the minstrel show. To be sure, minstrelsy was an arena in which the efficient exploitation of the cultural commodity "blackness" occurred, demonstrated in what this Atlantic Monthly writer (writing in 1867) supposes is a hilarious account of "originator" T. D. Rice's first blackface performance in Pittsburgh around 1830:

Rice prepared to take advantage of his opportunity. There was a negro in attendance at Griffith's Hotel, on Wood Street, named Cuff,—an exquisite specimen of his sort,—who won a precarious subsistence by letting his open mouth as a mark for boys to pitch pennies into, at three paces, and by carrying the trunks of passengers from the steamboats to the hotels. Cuff was precisely the subject for Rice's purpose. Slight persuasion induced him to accompany the actor to the theatre, where he was led through the private entrance, and quietly ensconced behind the scenes. . . . Rice, having shored his own countenance to the "contraband" hue, ordered Cuff to disrobe, and proceeded to invest himself in the cast-off apparel. . . . [Onstage] the extraordinary apparatus produced an instant effect. . . . The effect was electric . . .

Now it happened that Cuff, who meanwhile was crouching in dishabille under concealment of a projecting flat behind the performer, by some means received intelligence, at this point, of the near approach of a steamer to the Monongahela Wharf. Between himself and others of his color in the same line of business, and especially as regarded a certain formidable competitor called Ginger, there existed an active rivalry in the baggage-carrying business. For Cuff to allow Ginger the advantage of an undisputed descent upon the luggage of the approaching vessel would be not only to forget all "considerations" from the passengers, but, by proving him a laggard in his calling, to cast a damaging blemish upon his reputation. Liberally as he might lend himself to a friend, it could not be done at that sacrifice. After a minute or two of fidgety waiting for [Rice's] song to end, Cuff's patience could endure no longer, and, cautiously hazarding a glimpse of his profile beyond the edge of the flat, he called in a hurried whisper: "Massa Rice, Massa Rice, must have my clo'se! Massa Griffin wants me,—steamboat's comin'!"

The appeal was fruitless. Massa Rice did not hear it, for a happy hit at an unpopular city functionary had set the audience in a roar in which all other sounds were lost . . . [Another appeal went unheeded, when, driven to desperation, and forgetful in the emergency of every sense of propriety, Cuff, in ludicrous undress as he was, started from his place, rushed upon the stage, and, laying his hand upon the performer's shoulder, called out excitedly: "Massa Rice, Massa Rice, gi' me nigg'a's hat,—nigg'a's coat,—nigg'a's shoes,—gi' me nigg'a's tings! Massa Griffin wants 'im,—steamboat's comin'!!!]

The incident was the touch, in the mirthful experience of that night, that passed endurance. (Nevin 609-10)

This passage, in all its woozy syntax and headlong rush, is probably the least trustworthy and most accurate account of American minstrelsy's appropriation of black cultural practices. Indeed this eulogy to the minstrel composer Stephen Foster reads something like a master text of the racial economy encoded in blackface performance. For one thing, it calls on minstrel devices (ventriloquized dialect, racial burlesque) to narrate the origins of minstrelsy, as if this particular narratable event generated or secreted "naturally" the formal means appropriate to it; its multiple frames (minstrelsy within minstrelsy) amount to so many techniques of black subordination. True to form, a diminished, not to say "black-faced" Cuff has replaced Rice as this account's center of attention. And its talk of opportunity and investment, lending and ownership, subsistence and competition is more preoccupied with cultural value than we might have expected. Its social unconscious, we might say, reveals a great deal of anxiety about the "primitive accumulation" it ostensibly celebrates. Perhaps this is also why the passage is fully a third longer than what I have just quoted. The fascination with Cuff's nakedness, moreover, highlights the affair as one of male bodies, in which racial conflict and cultural exchange are negotiated between men. Cuff's stripping, a theft that silences and embarrasses him onstage but which nevertheless entails both his bodily presence in the show and the titillating threat that he may return to demand his stolen capital, is a neat allegory for the most prominent commercial collision of black and white cultures in the nineteenth century. Cultural expropriation is the minstrel show's central fact, and we should not lose sight of it. But it is also a fact that needs explaining, for in itself it establishes little about the cultural commerce suggested by one performer's enthusiasm as he gathered material for his blackface act: "I shall be rich in black fun."
Even in expropriation there was a strong white attraction to the material which surfaced in less malign ways. White people believed the counterfeit, often sympathetically, as I have begun to suggest; the blackface hieroglyph so fully unpacked in the *Atlantic Monthly* account went largely unread. There were, it is true, nudges and winks folded into claims like that of the Apollo Minstrels to be the “only original Negroes travelling,” or in the *New York Herald*’s coy references to Christy’s Minstrels as “the very pink of negro singers.” But often, in the minds of many, blackface singers and dancers became, simply, “negroes.” How else explain the tireless references to “these amusing darkies” (*New York Herald* January 21, 1848), as if the originals had somehow gotten lost? Early audiences so often suspected that they were being entertained by actual Negroes that minstrel sheet music began the proto-Brechtian practice of picturing blackface performers out of costume as well as in (see Fig. 1); and there are several existing accounts of white theategoers mistaking blackface performers for blacks. Even Mark Twain’s mother, at her first (and presumably only) minstrel show, believed she was watching black performers. Like Margaret Fuller (and, as we shall see, Walt Whitman), Mark Twain was himself intrigued by what he called the “happy and accurate” representations of the minstrel show.

Of course, belief in the authenticity of blackface hardly ruled out racial ridicule; the oscillation between currency and counterfeit in the minstrel show was related to but often discrete from the oscillation between sympathy and ridicule toward its representations. Indeed, the wayward valuations attached both to irony toward the fakes and belief in them make the task of gauging audience response a dizzying one. What was the precise mix of irony, false consciousness, interest, and interracial recognition in a white Union soldier’s perception that two blacks in his barracks “look[ed] exactly like our minstrels” (Howe 91)? We are back where we began, but with a difference: although minstrelsy was indeed in the business of staging or producing “race,” that very enterprise also involved it in a carnivalizing of race, as the range of critical response has begun to suggest, such that the minstrel show’s ideological production became more contradictory, its consumption more indeterminate, its political effects more plural than many have assumed. It is worth asking what those effects could possibly have amounted to. Ultimately I would like to make some sense of the dialectical relationship noted in Constance Rourke’s observation that “little Jim Crow appeared at almost the precise moment when *The Liberator* was founded” (*American* 98). What was the brief shared history of blackface minstrelsy and racial ideologies of liberation? And was their relationship a story of racist compensation, or were there unsuspected similarities?
A Genealogy of Jim Crow

I begin with a brief genealogy of Jim Crow. This will offer a glimpse of blackface's ambiguous modes of authority based on certain of its earlier, as well as its minstrel-show, manifestations. The virtue of the genealogy, as Fredric Jameson suggests, is that it defamiliarizes the cultural object, revealing from a diachronic perspective, as in an X ray, functional elements in forms such as minstrelsy that probably seem transparent enough (Political 139). Although it will be necessary to trace the formal contradictions noted here in the various appearances of blackface through to the American cultural contradictions they figure, this genealogy begins to suggest the range of purposes the black minstrel mask could serve, both onstage and in public. It thus constitutes a certain groundwork for that dialectic of white responses to "blackness" which I believe traversed not only the early minstrel show but antebellum racial feeling as well.10

It would certainly be a mistake to see the minstrel types that began to emerge in the late 1820s as continuous outgrowths of slave tales à la Constance Rourke, though there exist certain similarities. They should rather be placed at the intersection of slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters such as the harlequin of the commedia dell'arte, the clown of English pantomime and the clown of the American circus, the burlesque tramp, perhaps the "blackman" of English folk drama. This intersection establishes the political and emotional range within which minstrel songs characteristically worked. The twin infusion of these antecedents in minstrel representations lends a highly uncertain status to an already ambiguous stage tradition.11 Clowns and harlequins are as often lovable butts of humor as devious producers of it; slave-tale tricksters are frequently (though not always) champions, heroes, backdoor victors for the weak over the strong. Early minstrel figures overlapped with each tradition, tending more or less toward self-mockery on the one hand and subversion on the other. The overlap was registered, first, in British productions such as Cowardy, Cowardy, Custard; or Harlequin Jim Crow and the Magic Mustard Pot (1836), which marked a trend beginning in the 1830s of appending the name Jim Crow to all sorts of British clowns and Punch-and-Judy figures;12 and, second, in the animal tales early blackface performers set to music, not to mention the alleged black derivation of the "Jim Crow" tune itself (about which more in chapter 2).

This contradictory lineage, the stage trickster overdetermined by the slave trickster, highlights some hint of danger in the earliest blackface types which few have been willing to grant them. Consider T. D. Rice's mid-1830s version of "Clar de Kitchen":

A Bull frog dress'd sogers close,
Went in de field to shoot some crows;
De crows smell powder and fly away,
De Bull frog mighty mad dat day.13

Such small victories were won continually in early minstrelsy. Small and undoubtedly self-diminishing though they were, the coded triumphs of black men over sinister Jaybirds and black crows over patrolling bullfrogs were triumphs all the same, reminiscent indeed of certain slave tales. It might even be said that part of the triumph lay precisely in their recalling slave lore, in which foxes flee roosters, goats terrorize lions, and Brer Rabbit gleefully taunts Wolf.

Other early minstrel characters veered much more toward an intentionally ridiculous blustering, inherited less from the slaves or conventional stage figures than from the Mike Finks and Davy Crockettts of southwestern humor. Whether plantation rustic (Jim Crow) or urban dandies (Zip Coon), these figures of exaggerated strength and overwhelming power, as Lawrence Levine has suggested, have little in common with the slave tricksters' underhanded manipulations and deceits (Black 104). There was thus a third tradition infusing the most common characters of antebellum minstrelsy, who, Nathan Huggins argues, were often little more than blackfaced versions of heroes from southwestern humor.14 Characters based on those heroes, however, sometimes took on "black" lineaments as well (Toil 42); and there was in any case an inherited power that came with the bluster, however culturally fraudulent that bluster may have been. Selected verses from the first song sheet edition of "Jim Crow" (published by E. Riley in the early 1830s) capture this ambiguity:

Come listen all you galls and boys
I'se jist from Tuckylou,
I'm goin to sing a little song,
My name's Jim Crow.

Weel about and turn about
And do jis so,
Ev'ry time I weel about
And jump Jim Crow.

Oh I'm a roarer on de fiddle,
And down in old Virginia,
They say I play de skycliffent
Like Massa Pagannini.

I'm a full blooded niggar,
Ob de real ole stock,
And wid my head and shoulder
I can split a horse block.
rather less so. Such contexts were contradictory in any case, invoking the power of "blackness" while deriding it, in an effort of cultural control, through the very convention that produced its power—the greasepaint and burnt cork of blackface.

Transvestism, of course, is subject to similar instabilities, though, as Marjorie Garber has powerfully argued, male cross-dressing can resist the stasis of ambiguity and thoroughly undermine traditional gender categories. Garber herself admits, however, that women often become the target of such humorous disguises. This is certainly the case with minstrelsy's many "wench" characters (played by men at a time when women regularly appeared on the legitimate stage), which offer one of the most revealing discourses on male sexuality in America at midcentury.

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

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

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

White men's fear of female power was dramatized with a suspiciously draconian punitiveness in early minstrelsy, usually in the grotesque transmutations of its female figures. It is as if that fear were so fundamental that only a major effort of surveillance—like a dream, revealing its anxieties even as it devises its censors—would do. The widespread prostitution in the theater's notorious third tier, the literal analogue of the song's wish to buy women, comes to seem an ugly kind of compensatory space given the unroundness of these stage figures, if the figures did not themselves contain the female threat. These "female" bodies, it is true, were "also" male, and minstrel performers did not hesitate to flirt with the homosexual content of blackface transvestism (the master's hat on the black "woman's" nose), which no doubt created an atmosphere of polymorphous license that could blur conventional gender outlines (for men). But a flight from such "compromising" subtexts may in fact have produced the reassertion of masculinity in misogynist representations, which usually constituted the reactionary face of a perhaps more "undecidable" racial masquerade.

When we turn from these dramatic roles to the public display of the blackface convention, we find as long a history. Victor Turner defends such displays—in parades, protests, carnivals, processions—as a mode of "public reflexivity," during which societies think in sometimes displaced and condensed ways about their forms and functions. He links them to "times of radical social change," when they can form part of the "repertoire of prophetic leaders who mobilize the people against invaders or overlords threatening their deep culture" ("Frame" 36). For this reason Barbara Babcock-Abrahams has likened stage tricksters to E. J. Hobsbawm's "primitive rebels," those backward, marginal antinomians who demonstrate quite literally that "oppression can be turned upside down" and who inspire myths and legends about their lives (Hobsbawm 24). Natalie Davis has more dialectically described these public performances as both harmless communal "safety valves" that deflect attention from social reality and proposals of new social paradigms or models; they "can on the one hand perpetuate certain values of the community (even guarantee its survival), and on the other hand criticize political order" (97). In conjunction with transvestism, the blackface mask has indeed been worn as an equivocal emblem of popular resistance, on behalf, variously—even simultaneously—of tradition and innovation. (The Boston Tea Party, with its howling "Indians" and "blacks," is only the most famous American occasion.) In her essay "Women on Top," Davis describes several instances of "ritual and festive inversion." In the Beaujolais of the 1770s, for example, "male peasants blackened their faces and dressed as women and then attacked surveyors measuring their lands for a new landlord" (147). The "Whiteboys" of Ireland, for about a decade (the 1760s), dressed in long white frocks and blackened their faces, setting themselves up as an "armed popular force to provide justice for the poor, to restore the ancient commons and redress other grievances" (149); they tore down enclosures, punished greedy landowners, and forced masters to release
De great Nullification,  
And fuss in de South,  
Is now before Congress,  
To be tried by word ob mouth.  

Dey hab had no blows yet,  
And I hope dey nebber will,  
For its berry cruel in bredren,  
One anoders blood to spill.  

Should dey get to fighting,  
Perhaps de blacks will rise,  
For deir wish for freedom,  
Is shining in deir eyes.  

An if de blacks should get free,  
I guess dey'll see some bigger,  
An I shall consider it,  
A bold stroke for de nigger.  

An I caution all white dandies,  
Not to come in my way,  
For if dey insult me,  
Dey'll in de gutter lay.  

(Dennison 51–57)

blackface out of clowning (whose present mask in any case is clearly indebted to blackface), and continually found under the big top a vital arena of minstrel performance. Clowning is an uncanny kind of activity, scariest when it is most cheerful, unsettling to audiences even as it unmasksthe pretentious ringmaster. Blackface performers, often inspiring a certain terror as well as great affection, relied precisely on this doubleness. Ralph Ellison locates their specifically American resonance:

When the white man steps behind the mask of 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. (“Change” 53)

The black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them. Yet the intensified American fears of succumbing to a racialized image of Otherness were everywhere operative in minstrelsy, continually exceeding the controls and accounting, paradoxically, for the minstrel show’s power, insofar as its “blackness” was unceasingly fascinating to performers and audiences alike. This combined fear of and fascination with the black male cast a strange dread of miscegenation over the minstrel show, but evidently did not preclude a continual return to minstrel miming.

Far from simple indulgence, however, the returns began to take on the aura of attempted mastery, of a culture trying to contain what Ellison calls “disorder and chaos” but which could more historically be called intermixture and insurrection. The effete but potent black “dandy” figure incarnated these threats, as in “Long Tail Blue” (1827):

As I was going up Fulton Street,  
I hollered arter Sue,  
The watchman came and took me up,  
And spoilte my long tail blue.  

If you want to win the Ladies hearts,  
I’ll tel you what to do;  
Go to a tip top ‘Tailor’s shop,  
And buy a long tail blue.  

“What, undomesticated bodily and collective power,” as Victor Turner would have it, the blackface trickster, “long tail blue” or not, suggests white men’s obsession with a rampantous black penis (“Myth” 580). As Ellison puts it, “The mask was the thing (the ‘thing’ in more ways than one)” (“Change” 49). Bold swagger, irrepressible desire, sheer bodily display: in a real sense the minstrel man was the penis, that organ returning in a variety of contexts, at times ludicrous, at others
people's culture or cultural domination?

To put it another way, the early minstrel show was a Janus-faced figure for the cultural relationship of white to black in America, a relationship that even in its dominative character was far from self-explanatory. The duplicity of this cultural form is suggested not only by my genealogy, minstrelsy's formal makeup, but also by its role in American racial discourses. In many kinds of racially fraught cultural production—novels, cultural histories, and minstrel commentaries no less than antebellum blackface performance—minstrelsy has been a ground of American racial negotiation and contradiction, based on the antebellum collision course of competing modes of production and the various historical transformations in its aftermath. From this perspective certain representative critical engagements with the minstrel tradition turn out to be little less than furtive serial positions in a debate on American racial politics. The critical problem announced in this section's title—people's culture versus cultural domination—is thus an ideological problem of the broadest import, and it bears so much on the minstrel show's place in American culture that we ought to do what we can to unpack it before we attempt to supersede it. The fact is that these two positions both have their paradigmatic nineteenth-century instances: Mark Twain's vexed relationship to the minstrel tradition and Frederick Douglass's various writings on it in the North Star. In their nineteenth-century guises, however, these perspectives are actually more ambiguities than positions, betraying slippages, coming off conflicted. Like the traditions they exemplify, they are worth examining for what they tell us about minstrelsy's role in the racial politics of American culture.

As I have said, the position favoring minstrelsy as a people's culture typically celebrates the minstrel show's folk authenticity, its elevation of black types and black culture through blackface to a place in the national mythology. The rather revealing problem inherent in this position, however, is that it regularly slips into an indulgence of racist typing. Mark Twain's avowed love of minstrelsy—"if I could have the nigger show back in its pristine purity and perfection I should have but little further use for opera" (Autobiography 59)—is contradictory in just this way. Twain first saw rural minstrel productions in early-1840s Hannibal, where they burst on the unwitting town as a "glad and stunning surprise":

The minstrels appeared with coal-black hands and faces and their clothing was a loud and extravagant burlesque of the clothing worn by the plantation slave of the time; not that the rags of the poor slave were burlesqued, for that would not have been possible; burlesque could have added nothing in the way of extravagance to the sorrowful accumulation of rags and patches which constituted his costume; it was the form and color of his dress that was burlesqued. (Autobiography 59)

This perception is far from incautious. Twain even observes that minstrels had "buttons as big as a blacking box," collapsing blackface masquerade, the means of its artifice, and an echo of one of its literal sources—Negro bootblacks—in a single self-conscious figure. His involvement here, however, soon outstrips all moderation:

The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny. . . . [Minstrels'] lips were thickened and lengthened with bright red paint to such a degree that their mouths resembled slices cut in a ripe watermelon. . . . The minstrel troupe[s] had good voices and both their solos and their choruses were a delight to me as long as the negro show continued in existence. (Autobiography 59-61)

Twain's response marks a real (and perhaps typical) attraction to and celebration of black culture. Indeed, in Following the Equator (1897) he notes his love of beautiful black bodies and his disgust for white ones. But when such observations do not fall into derision, they are clearly the patronizing obverse of it, and at the very least signify an unexamined investment in exoticism. Ralph Ellison's remark to the effect that Huckleberry Finn's Jim rarely emerges from behind the minstrel mask is to the point here.28

Huckleberry Finn (1884), as more than one critic has observed, was not only written but situated in minstrelsy's boom period. Anthony Berret has argued that this fact accounts for the odd indebtedness of the novel's language, rhetorical strategies, and structure to blackface minstrelsy: the preponderance of comic dialogues between Jim and Huck (much of the comedy at Jim's expense); the burlesques of both elite and popular literature; and the tripartite comic dialogue-olio-burlesque structure. In the spring of 1882 Twain visited George Washington Cable and Joel Chandler Harris in New Orleans, and suggested that they do a lecture tour (which he called a circus or menagerie) to include William Dean Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. As Berret points out, this authorial circus was, in conception at least, little more than the variety acts of a minstrel show; and the reading tour that finally materialized, with Cable's straight man countering Twain's comic, found both authors reading the roles of black characters onstage, Cable even singing songs (Berret 38). It was during this tour that American audiences first heard parts of Huckleberry Finn, notably the "King Hollerman" and "How come a Frenchman doan' talk like a man?" passages, scenes whose fit with the minstrel tradition is rather close. These passages may even have been expressly written, after the novel's completion, for readings in just such a context (Woodard and MacCann 5). The ideological complexity of this affair is compounded by the fact that Cable rather remarkably wrote a stinging rebuke of southern racism, "The Freedman's Case in Equity," which appeared during the tour in the same issue of Century Magazine that printed an excerpt from Huckle Finn. But this perhaps collective commitment did not prevent blackface tones from creeping into the readings, or Twain from naming one of his offerings "Can't Learn a Nigger to Argue," a title he changed only at Cable's behest.30 These events no doubt put a highly ambiguous spin on America's greatest nineteenth-century political novel, but they indicate as well that the contradiction
unwilling apprentices. They referred to themselves as "fairies," and signed themselves "Ghosty Sally"—prototypes, says Davis, of the Molly Maguires and Ribbon Societies of the nineteenth century (149).

In each of these instances the "unruly" resonances of blackness and female-ness emerged from the dramatic frame into public, where they were put to new uses by men in a political realm that obviously excluded both blacks and women, Davis observes:

> On the one hand, the disguise freed men from the full responsibility for their deeds and perhaps, too, from fear of outrageous revenge upon their manhood. After all, it was mere women (or mere blacks, or indeed black women) who were acting in this disorderly way. On the other hand, the males drew upon the sexual power and energy of the unruly woman and on her license (which they had long assumed at carnival and games)—to promote fertility, to defend the community's interests and standards, and to tell the truth about unjust rule. (149)

There was no immediate internal racial context for blackface in these examples, but the European slave trade provided the broadest conditions of possibility; and the assumed inferiority, sexuality, license, and perhaps even sense of injustice associated with women were clearly ascribed to black people as well. Davis does not mention whether blackface was seen as representational rather than abstract or "metaphysical" (recall the diabolical associations with blackness that Winthrop Jordan extensively documented in *White over Black*), but there is no question that by the late eighteenth century blackface had taken on representational force, as the many sentimentally "noble" black characters on the British stage illustrate.

The dynamic of the processional mask in these instances thus preserves the ascription of certain detested qualities to "blackness" while momentarily paying tribute to their power, a power that even in peasants’ or workers’ movements is compromised by such ascription. Herein lies the meaning of blackface in the American context of rioting and revelry, though it is perhaps not surprising that in such a conflictual racial scene the mask was increasingly used for reactionary purposes.

Susan Davis has demonstrated that in militia burlesques and Christmas street festivities, public "masking"—the assumption through disguise of a new or inverted identity—became common in northern American cities after the 1820s, precisely contemporary with the rise of minstrelsy (and over against similar traditions of black pageantry). During carnavalesque Christmas Eve celebrations, for instance, roving young working-class men paraded the militia, marched to the rough music of kitchen-utensil instruments, and brawled on street corners. On one occasion in Philadelphia in 1834, one hundred men in intentionally makeshift uniforms conducted elaborate sham maneuvers, accompanied, one newspaper said, by a masked band of "Indians, hunters, Falstaffs, Jim Crows and non-descripts." Women and blacks, as usual, were the most frequent sources of disguise. While only public transvestism, not blackface, brought a stiff fine—a fact that underscores both the permissiveness of the popular theater and the possible radicalism of men in drag during this period—blackface cross-dressing, as in its extended European history, was a popular favorite. Such disguises appear to have served similarly duplicitous purposes as those of Natalie Davis’s peasants, but the American context added an even more troubling dimension. Gang attacks on blacks, mobbings of black churches, and battles between black and white gangs were commonplace holiday occurrences. Other racially motivated mobs repeated the pattern: during the 1834 Philadelphia race riot in the Moyamensing district, some of the antiblack rioters who attacked the homes of well-to-do blacks, burned black churches, and destroyed racially integrated places of leisure wore black masks and shabby coats (Runcie 209).

This "blackface-on-Black violence," as David Roediger has called it, would seem to indicate a fairly direct correspondence between racial hostility, public masking, and the minstrel show (Wages 106). In many instances we find this to be the case, but such a notion generally underestimates the complexity of both antiblack racial politics and minstrelsy itself. Susan Davis suggests of the Christmas celebrations, for instance, that "masking made an ambiguous statement about race despite its violent mocking tone, for blackface found use as a way to play with racial identity, important in a city where black inferiority was taken for granted yet segregation was incomplete" ("Making" 193). Stage blackface was to be called on to negotiate just such contradictions in the culture of the antiblack American popular classes—between "white egalitarianism" and interracial urban practices, or between antislavery and antiblackness—called on so frequently, in fact, that its primary purpose appears to have been to provide "imaginary" resolutions to intractable social conflicts. Moreover, if minstrelsy was a theatrical celebration of how deeply American racism is "embedded into a sense of racial and class affection and even envy" (Grimsted and Stowe 95), this contradictory structure occasionally witnessed unexpected returns of indentificatory desire. At the very least, symbolic crossings of racial boundaries—through dialect, gesture, and so on—paradoxically engage and absorb the culture being mocked or mimicked (Szwed 27–28). Acting black: a whole social world of irony, violence, negotiation, and learning is contained in that phrase.26

Minstrel representations, then, were not continuous with either earlier dramatic blackface figures or the deployment of blackface in rioting and revelry; although in certain cases there clearly were borrowings and affinities, these were scarcely all structurally "the same." Such traditions do, however, highlight a feature of American blackface masking that critics have been slow to recognize: an unstable or indeed contradictory power, linked to social and political conflicts, that issues from the weak, the uncanny, the outside. Above all, the slippery political valences of the traditions I have outlined are instructive. For it was with precisely this slipperiness that the minstrel mask resonated: a derivative celebration of the power of blackness; blacks, for a moment, ambiguously, on top.
between the book’s overt politics and its indebtedness to the minstrel show was much less cumbersome in the nineteenth century. Many antiracist arguments, that is, were unfortunately not so far from the exoticism and hierarchical assumptions of the minstrel tradition. The ideological cement of such a seemingly outrageous yoking was of course nineteenth-century sentimentalism—"romantic racialism," as George Fredrickson has termed it—which underwrote the widespread and arguably radical attraction of an African-American people’s culture even as it postulated innate differences between the “Anglo-Saxon” and “African” races.

Regrettably, the recent major histories of sentimental or women’s culture find no place for racial categories. Neither Ann Douglas’s _Feminization of American Culture_ nor Mary Kelley’s _Private Woman, Public Stage_, for example, pauses over the centrality of the passive, sentimentalized, often male slave in the mid-nineteenth-century culture of feeling; even Jane Tompkins’s soteriological reading of _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_ deemphasizes the racial component of that novel’s power. In fact Tompkins’s reading is compelling because the sentimentalist strategies for representing white women and blacks were often identical, each image lending the other emotional and political force. “Blackness” was indeed a primary site of the religious appreciation of the emotions that came with the decline of Calvinism. In the 1830s, Fredrickson observes, theories of Negro personality were in a state of relative flux; the debate was largely one between “environmentalist defenders of a single human nature and proponents of deep-seated racial differences” (_Black_ 101). With the emergence of the “American school of ethnology” in the 1840s and 1850s, however, which argued the case for “polygenesis,” or the separate creation of the races as distinct species (there were biblical versions of this argument as well), both sides of the dialogue increasingly assumed the fundamental difference of the races. A new kind of theoretical fluidity now entered the picture. On the polygenetic view, blacks were intellectually inferior because in thrall to the emotions. But since this notion was closer to a racial relativism of the Herderian variety—that the various races make contributions of their special “gifts” to humanity—than to a hierarchical racism, both evangelical religion and literary romanticism could virtually recuperate such a belief into an ideology of black superiority. As William Ellery Channing put it in 1840: “We are holding in bondage one of the best races of the human family. The negro is among the mildest and gentlest of men” (50). Like women, blacks were considered creatures of feeling at a time when feeling was paramount in the culture; what fund of emotion the “go-ahead-ative,” aggressive Anglo-Saxon lacked, blacks would surely supply. Thus, stereotypes and arguments of this kind already in place in the plantation school of fiction tended to be taken over, but _revalued_: slavery was evil, for example, because it destroyed the great good nature, the blithe innocence, and above all the family structure of, in Methodist Bishop Gilbert Haven’s words, “the choice blood of America.” Blacks, it came to be argued, were not only exemplars of virtue but natural Christians.31

Nor was the antislavery movement exempt from such condescension. Awk-ward attempts to rewrite what were believed to be natural differences into special racial capacities resulted in notions of racial “variety without inferiority,” as Lydia Maria Child, editor of the _National Anti-Slavery Standard_, put it: “Flutes on different keys . . . will harmonize the better.”32 Although the idea was to move “feminine” values to the cultural center, such arguments relied on the black inferiority they sought to displace. Karen Sánchez-Eppler has suggested that this tendency derived in part from the final asymmetry of white women and blacks in such rhetoric. Child’s story “Mary French and Susan Easton” (1834), for example, urges the sentimental ideal of equality-in-difference, but can imagine even this outcome only by obliterating the racial lineaments of the good Negro figure, as though blackness, even when feminized, were inferior by definition (Sánchez-Eppler 39). Black leaders themselves, it should be said, did little to contest such unwittingly hierarchical thinking. Martin Delany, perhaps the most vehement of midcentury black nationalists, spoke of his race on several occasions as a repository of natural aestheticism and morality; thus it flourished in music and oratory, while whites “probably excel in mathematics, . . . commerce and internal improvements.” Frederick Douglass attributed his implicitly feminized “love of letters” to the Negro ancestry of his mother rather than to his Anglo-Saxon paternity.33 Such widespread attitudes, Wilson Moses argues, may have been responsible for the emphasis of black leaders from Douglass to Booker T. Washington on specifically industrial training (46).

The key text of explicitly antislavery romantic racialism is of course Harriet Beecher Stowe’s _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_ (1852). With the character of Uncle Tom we are already on our way to the gentle, childlike, self-sacrificing, essentially _esthetic_ slave Mark Twain created in Jim and thought he recognized on the minstrel stage; and it is instructive to remind ourselves that _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_ and _Huckleberry Finn_ were among the most powerful antislavery or antiracist novels of the nineteenth century. All the more remarkable, then, that Tom bears so much resemblance to the many sentimental slaves of Stephen Foster’s complacent “Plantation Melodies”: Old Uncle Ned, Old Black Joe, and so on. Very little distinguishes the types in such minstrel songs from those in Stowe or Twain. Loosed from Stowe’s rhetoric into stage tableaux, they are quite continuous with the minstrel tradition; T. D. Rice, who began his career in the 1830s playing Jim Crow, ended it in the 1850s playing Uncle Tom on the stage. And _Huckleberry Finn_, as Anthony Berret observes, seems nowhere closer to the sentimental ethos of Foster’s songs than during Huck’s many fictional tales of disunited families, or his returns to the raft and an emotional Jim (42-43). If Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” or “Oh! Susanna”—somewhat better versions of staple minstrel themes in the 1840s—depend for their effect on the pathos culled from black families forced to split up or attempting to reunite, Twain’s novel relies on similar “familial” reunions whose resonance derives from the stereotyped emotionality of the black slave.

Notwithstanding the desperate ambiguity contained in the sentimental make-
over of these black types, in their culture they were capable of wielding enormous power. As William Taylor has written, "To attribute to someone the simplicity of a child, . . . especially in the middle of the nineteenth century, was a compliment of the first order, and dangerous, too, if the child were to be mistreated and sympathy was not the response sought for" (305). Hence the somewhat back-handed power of Uncle Tom's Cabin and, in a more vestigial way, Huckleberry Finn. And yet, obviously, such a racial philosophy very quickly fell into one of white supremacy. Romantic racist thinking, George Fredrickson notes, "was one aspect of the retreat from environmentalism and the Enlightenment view of a common human nature" (Black 125). At this point the minstrel show rears its ungainly head; but precisely because it revolved in the contradictions I have outlined, unmistakably present in the work of Mark Twain, among others, we must attend to the rather gnarled effects of blackface performance in the context of nineteenth-century racial ideologies.

To be sure, the ambiguity easily empties out of this perspective, and its later nineteenth-century instances represent little more than the ritual, reactionary celebration of an ideologically rigidified minstrelsy meant to counter American antislavery practice.54 (In intention at least Huckleberry Finn is something of an "immanent critique" of this tradition.) In the guise of what has come to be called "scientific racism"—a set of post-Darwinian explanations for the arrested development of blacks—this period's anthrology straitjacketed the relative fluctuations of earlier racial ideologies. Thus legitimized, white historians and memoirists in the nostalgic mood frequently recounted stories of the minstrel show's origins, tales of famous performers, even formal histories of the representation of blacks on stage, assuming (when they thought about it at all) that minstrelsy's scurrilous representations of black people were scrupulously authentic. "Their gibus, their gambols, their songs, their flashes of merriment," wrote one such historian, "still linger in our eyes and in our ears; and before many readers scores of quaint figures with blackened faces will no doubt dance to half-forgotten tunes all over these pages" (Hutton 144). The nostalgia of this view is ultimately for a simpler, pre-emancipation America: "That such [distinguished men] should have appeared at a leading theatre, between the acts, in plantation dress and blackened face, shows perhaps better than anything else the respectable position held by the negro minstrel half a century ago" (Hutton 140). By 1915 Brandreth Matthews of Columbia University was sadly detailing minstrelsy's decline, which he attributed to the fact that blackface performers were less and less true to life, increasingly "content to be comic without any effort to catch the special comicality of the darky" (758). This emphasis—deriving just as much as Twain's from the idea of blackface as a people's culture—is racist either by default or design, and it has infected its share of modern theater historians. The important point about this tendency is not only that it deserves censure but that it, no less than the others, stands for the historical existence of a certain kind of audience response.

It was thus critical that a revisionist corrective, denouncing minstrelsy's patent inauthenticity, its northern white origins, its self-evidently domineering character, should have come to displace the more complacent views.55 This critique, inaugurated by Frederick Douglass, later sustained treatments of the minstrel stage in novels such as Paul Laurence Dunbar's Sport of the Gods (1901) and Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry (1929); both fictionalize black stage performances derived from the minstrel tradition to represent some version of racial false consciousness—in Dunbar the facile, corrupted world of northern urban Negroes, in Thurman an indulgence by color-conscious blacks of racial caricature. In certain ways, however, this position is least satisfactory as historical and cultural analysis when it works best as antiracist politics. This is not to urge a position that, somehow avoiding politics, might get the emphases right for once. On the contrary, the minstrel tradition is still too present for us to take antiracist critiques of it for granted. Rather, we must better historicize the minstrel show, for in fact we remain ignorant of exactly what its ante-bellum political range happened to be. It strikes me as tautological to catalogue racist stereotypes from a time when slavery existed in fifteen states. In their indispensable focus on minstrelsy's oppressive dimension, revisionist accounts leave perfectly intact the cultural dualism—wholly authentic or wholly hegemonic?—that I want to complicate. Outmoded antiracist strategies of reversal and inversion, of simply turning the polarities of racist discourse around, must give way to a wider recognition of the complexities of white subject formation and subjectivity, and of the multiple determinations that make race such a complex lived social reality.56

Among these determinations number primarily social class and the sex/gender system. One might return briefly here to Huckleberry Finn. Pap's notorious rant about a "free nigger . . . from Ohio" who, in his wealth, his knowledge of languages, and his right to vote, threatens the status of Pap's own working-class whiteness instances one way in which class over-determines if not overrules race in my account.57 Conversely, Twain's sly construction of this scene so that Pap, covered with mud after a drunken night in the gutter, is actually blacker than the hated "mulatto" free man suggests the underlying "racial" equations between black and working-class white men that occasionally called forth in the minstrel show interracial recognitions and identifications no less than the imperative to disavow them. And the fact that Twain's fantasy of racial harmony, of Jim and the adolescent Huck, could occur only by excluding conventional manhood altogether reminds us here of the gender dynamic through which the intersections of race and class, in the minstrel show as elsewhere, were lived.

When one notes as well that those who "blacked up" and those who witnessed minstrel shows were often working-class Irish men, the complex picture of the blackface institution and its audiences is complete. Minstrelsy's role as a mediator of northern class, racial, and ethnic conflict—all largely grounded in a problematic of masculinity—has much to do with the equivocal character of blackface
representations. This conflict can be seen to underlie the minstrel show’s most politically productive and politically regressive moments. That moments of each kind occurred has not yet been adequately accounted for.

Certain nineteenth-century revisionists were, however, aware of this complexity. James Monroe Trotter, for example, though cognizant of what he called the “often malicious caricaturing” of the race to which he belonged, posed the “fine musical achievements” of the black Georgia Minstrels against “severe and somewhat sweeping” denunciations by other critics.38 This, too, at the most virulently racist moment (the late nineteenth century) in the history of black representation. The most careful assessment of this kind, however, was also the earliest. As I began with one of Frederick Douglass’s disdainful comments from the North Star, so I will end with his 1849 article on a short-lived black minstrel troupe, Gavit’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders. I believe he has the clearest sense of any contemporary as to what was at stake in early minstrelsy—its limitations, possibilities, and ultimate importance—and has therefore guided my own interpretations. Douglass begins:

Partly from a love of music, and partly from curiosity to see persons of color exaggerating the peculiarities of their race, we were induced last evening to hear these Serenaders [in Rochester, New York]. The Company is said to be composed entirely of colored people; and it may be so. We observed, however, that they, too, had recourse to the burnt cork and lamp black, the better to express their characters, and to produce uniformity of complexion. (141)

Conscious or not, there is a doublessness in that word “characters” (inner self? dramatic role?) which begins to capture Douglass’s insight into blackface performance: that “blackness” is a matter of display or theater, as Melville would dramatize in “Benito Cereno” (1855).39 It is reiterated in his charge that the Gavitt’s singing was “not even a tolerable representation of the character of colored people”; indeed, Douglass signifies, “their attempts at it showed them to possess a plentiful lack of it” (141). “Blackness,” then, is not innate but produced, a cultural construction. Douglass inverts the racist logic of minstrelsy and locates its actual function of staging racial categories, boundaries, and types even when these possessed little that a black man could recognize as “authentic.” That is to say, Douglass also clarifies the way the blackface convention disguised “blackness,” marking this black troupe’s race first as hearsay (“said to be”), and then as latent possibility (“it may be”).40 But this disguise did not close down the political play of blackface; in a culture where “blackness” was construct and exhibition, blackface kept it on display and up for grabs, politically speaking. Although Douglass does not extend his argument to white performers, he does concede that the production of “blackness” remains a potential source of political advantage:

American prejudice against colored people; and in this they might be right; but we think otherwise. It is something gained, when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race. (142)

Douglass defined blackface minstrelsy, a few months before the 1850 Compromise debates, as a site of political struggle for representation, debased and suspect though it may have been. “Blackness” in the minstrel show indeed generated a conflictual intensity, occasionally unsettling the notion to its roots—as the complexities in the foregoing traditions of response suggest. We might have expected nothing less than conflicted messages from such a cultural mediator, despite the fact that minstrelsy attempted precisely to mute conflict. The story that follows is one of dissonance as much as domination, although we will need to specify its outlines, uncover the codes that clashed.

Writing on minstrelsy has failed to move very much beyond the debate over people’s culture versus cultural domination. But as my genealogy and close examinations of Mark Twain and Frederick Douglass reveal, this dualism, like that of class expression versus social control, may be a fabrication. Already encoded in these antinomies are the political conflicts and cultural contradictions early minstrelsy was devised to repress. Modern writing on the minstrel show turns out to have been an unwitting accomplice in this repression. By foregrounding the minstrel show’s position as one new working-class entertainment industry in the embattled formation of northeastern American capitalist culture, a racially loaded form situated in the most politically explosive moment of the nineteenth century, I hope to show the shifting contours of this racial counterfeit, as well as its currency.