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Blackface Shakespeare: Racial and Gender Anxiety on the American Stage

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Utah State University

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BLACKFACE SHAKESPEARE: RACIAL AND GENDER ANXIETY ON THE

AMERICAN STAGE

By

Kristen Hutchings

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

American Studies

Approved:

______________________________	______________________________
Dr. Phebe Jensen Major Professor	Dr. Evelyn Funda Committee Member

____
Dr. Paul Crumbley
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2014

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ABSTRACT

Blackface Shakespeare: Racial and Gender Anxieties on the American Stage

by

Kristen Hutchings, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2014

Major Professor: Dr. Phebe Jensen
Department: English

Early scholars of blackface minstrelsy have often over-simplified and rebuked nineteenth-century American Negro minstrel shows for their racially barbed gibes at African Americans. Though it recognizes minstrelsy's blatant racism against the newly freed slaves of the 1860s, this study agrees with many modern scholars in recognizing deeper cultural themes Negro minstrels highlighted onstage during the years surrounding the Civil War. The study focuses specifically on the rich literary contribution of two afterpieces (the final act of the minstrel show) burlesquing Shakespeare's *Othello*: *Desdemonum* and *Othello; A Burlesque*. Using the racist jargon as a tool, this study examines how women and immigrants during the nineteenth century were able to identify and differentiate their identities with African Americans and find their place within American Society. Though women, African Americans, and the Irish were the three most hated and feared groups of the American White male, they also exemplified a unified power through their representation on the minstrel stage.

(68 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Blackface Shakespeare: Racial and Gender Anxieties on the American Stage

Kristen Hutchings

This study focuses on the racial and gender commentaries portrayed by nineteenth-century Negro minstrel performances. It specifically looks at the Ethiopian dramas of *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum* to examine the important performing relationship of audience and actors and how these two burlesques culturally represented America during the years surrounding the Civil War. Effects of the Negro minstrels' influence were far reaching, and traces of it exist in our culture today in many forms from our pop culture icons to food products like Aunt Jemima pancakes.

The significance of this project is that it joins modern scholars in recognizing the merit within these burlesques despite the rampant racism aimed at African Americans. Minstrels proved to be a two-sided blade, a fact many early scholars blinded by the racist jargon failed to notice. In order to capture the full weight of minstrelsy's cultural and literary contributions, scholars must peer through a historical lens to join the nineteenth-century cultural context with these afterpieces. Minstrels paved a path for immigrants and women to identify with and differentiate themselves from African Americans as a subordinate group while also representing a potential for societal power and influence many American White elite feared.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize Dr. Phebe Jensen for her tireless efforts in guiding and supporting me through this project. After Dr. Jensen's brief discussion of American minstrels during her Shakespeare class, I became interested both in blackface minstrels and Shakespearean influence in nineteenth-century America. After researching this topic, I soon realized minstrel performing groups were much more complicated than I had originally thought; but finally, after spending many frenzied hours buried in research on this slippery topic, my argument slowly took form. Thank you, Dr. Jensen, for the many hours you mentored me on this project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Paul Crumbley and Dr. Evelyn Funda, for their input on this project, as well as their advice and direction on how I can extend this argument in the future.

I give a special thanks to my wonderful family, especially my mother, Alene Bloomdale. Without her consistent love and support, I wouldn't have the ambition and goals I have today. To my sister, Misha Young, and my good friend, Andrea Mower, I'm so grateful for the late-night phone calls of morale boosting and encouragement. I also want to thank Josh Anderson who talked me through the beginning stages of my thesis and helped me finally pin down my topic of interest. Last, to Randall Bloomdale for the technical help. To my roommates, colleagues, professors, and dear friends in Logan, thank you for bolstering my spirits during graduate school. I have learned so much from all of you throughout the years and have become a better scholar and person because of it. Thank you all for encouraging me to accomplish my goals.

Kristen Hutchings

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Figure 1 (Front page of a *Desdemonum* original manuscript)

INTRODUCTION: NEGRO MINSTRELS AND *OTHELLO* BURLESQUES

During nineteenth-century America, Negro Minstrel groups commenced each performance with a prescribed pattern: the stage curtain would rise to reveal blackfaced actors standing in a semicircle. After uproarious clapping from the audience, the phrase "Gentleman, be seated!" was traditionally yelled by one of the blackface group members onstage, which signaled the opening act (Paskman 23). Negro Minstrels were popular for their humor and entertaining jokes, dancing, and music, all of which were full of puns and originality rarely seen in American entertainment. The comical content of the performance mimicked African lore and slave medleys in a newly customized form—a form that inspired what we now know as American folk music (Wittke 3). Though minstrelsy became a major influence in future entertainment, it was minstrelsy's fusing powers that proved crucial for the social identity of the American working class. In a very real way, minstrelsy became a metaphorical transcontinental railroad. As the railroad construction of the 1860s geographically connected two halves of the United States, minstrelsy was able to socially connect the multi-ethnicities that comprised America's working class and join them with women experiencing similar hardships and subjugation from the male Anglo-American elite. Minstrelsy also proved powerful in linking its audience to the performers onstage; both the audience and the blackface actors were necessary in order to achieve a successful show.

The popular hubs for minstrel performances were often situated in densely populated towns consisting of racially varied cultures. At first, minstrel audiences were comprised of various ethnicities and social classes, but during the mid 1800s, the demographic shifted to consist mainly of immigrants and workers of the lower class, and

many scholars suggest women were also numbered among what was considered to be a male-dominated event (Lott 69). The venue where minstrels were held was unimportant, so long as it could contain a large number of people. In New York, many of the shows were performed in theaters specifically designed for minstrelsy, such as the Woods Minstrel Hall, or other performance halls owned by successful minstrel groups. Other minstrel performing groups, like George Christy's Minstrels, held their performances in saloons, specifically Niblo's Saloon, and other popular hangouts that drew masses of people (Paskman 148). Situated around relaxed social hubs often consisting of drinking and gambling, minstrels learned the latest gossip and current events, which they later satirized during the show. The minstrel show's most anticipated and politically parodied segment was the afterpiece, known for its "extemporaneous" nature that exhibited a "freedom from restraint, its lack of all formality, that provided its greatest charm" (Paskman 88). With its promise of chaos and disorder, minstrel afterpieces were the act that both delighted and horrified the audience.

Afterpieces were mini playlet parodies of the popular literature of the time. Because Shakespeare was well known by all audiences of the nineteenth century, minstrels often burlesqued the Bard's most popular plays, like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Richard III*. Minstrel groups strategically parodied *Othello* to convey America's mass fear of social issues within race, gender, and even homosexuality. One of the most popular burlesques of *Othello* rich in the exploration of race and gender was *Othello, A Burlesque*. The play begins with a blackfaced Iago complaining to the audience that, "When first I Desdemona saw, I thought her very fine, / And by the way she treated me, I thought she'd soon be mine; / But she's cleared out and left me now, with a nasty, dirty

fellar, / As black as mud—a white-washer—a nagar called Othello." Latent with racist jargon and slights at African Americans during the period surrounding the Civil War, Ethiopian burlesques like *Othello, A Burlesque* highlighted the threat newly freed slaves presented to the economy and civil rights of immigrant workers. Griffin and Christy's production of *Othello, A Burlesque*, later published by The Happy Hours Company, encapsulated the xenophobia occurring in modern America. Performed most consistently during the 1850s and 60s, *Othello, A Burlesque* encompassed the fears not only of newly freed African American slaves, but also the fear of the other "black[*]" group—black meaning an "alien, subhuman, and brutal species"—in America: the Irish (Lott 71).

The burlesque revolves around the three most threatening groups to White male dominance: Irish, African Americans, and women. However, as all characters within these Ethiopian Burlesques performed in blackface, the only designation of race was verbal cues and racial stereotypes. Brabantio is introduced while nursing his "lager beer" (3), Iago speaks in Irish colloquial phrases, and Othello's occupation is a common occupation for Blacks and others of the lower working class: a whitewasher.

Iago vows to punish Desdemona for choosing to marry Othello, the black whitewasher, instead of him. He claims, "And the way I'll plague her for marrying that nagur, will be something amazin' to see" (3). The story moves on to Brabantio, where the audience learns he was fattening his daughter to sell to P.T. Barnum until she decided to run away and marry Othello. The next scene opens with the two eloping lovebirds, Othello and Desdemona, singing a love medley and preparing for their wedding feast.

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[*] Throughout this study, I will be capitalizing White and Black in the vein that Peggy Pascoe uses in her book *What Comes Naturally*. By capitalizing White and Black, it denotes a culture, not just skin color. Pascoe mentions that by capitalizing White, it signifies that the culture "is often an aspiration as well as an entitlement" (Pascoe 14).

Iago warns Othello that Desdemona's father is on his way to punish Othello for marrying his daughter. Brabantio, with a few menacing friends and family members tagging behind him, confronts Othello about the misdeed of his interracial marriage. With no compromise on either side, Othello fights with Brabantio, who vows "you damn black rascal, I will have your life." The scene ends without naming the brawl's victor (5). Scene III pans over a game of Euchre between Cassio and Desdemona as Othello and Iago spy on the pair from the background. Just as in Shakespeare's original Othello, Othello is poisoned towards Desdemona by Iago's false information of Desdemona's promiscuity with other men. As Othello watches Desdemona play cards with Cassio, he is convinced of her infidelity and later physically abuses her. Drawn to complete madness at the end of the play, the abuse becomes murderous, and the act ends with Othello's famous "[bus.[business] with pillow &c]."

Another *Othello* burlesque that contains racial references and centers its main focus on the women's movement is *Desdemonum*, which as the title suggests, is centered on the main female character. Unlike *Othello, A Burlesque*, *Desdemonum* only distinguishes two races: White and Black. All character names ends in the suffix "–um," except for Oteller. Each character also speaks in Black vernacular, so the only designation that Oteller is different is his name and the racially charged nicknames the "White" characters call him.

Desdemonum begins with Oteller and Desdemonum eloping. Both sing together "de hour am propitious—come my darling flame! / Dey say dat in de dark all cullers be the same"—an idea very advanced for a time period when many Americans were horrified at the thought of miscegenation (4). However, true to Shakespeare's *Othello*,

though Desdemonum and Oteller don't mind the racial differences, the other characters are furious at the interracial marriage. Brabantium takes the issue to court where the judge asks Brabantium, Oteller, and Desdemonum to testify. The last to speak is Desdemonum, who explains that "my husband's claim in law holds good. I owe my faith to him alone" (6). Though her father is upset and calls Oteller a "Jamaica nig," Brabantium recognizes the marriage as valid but warns Oteller to be wary of Desdemonum because like him, Oteller may also be swindled by her future actions. As traditionally occurs in the original Shakespeare text, Iagum convinces Oteller that Cashum and Desdemonum are in love, and that Desdemonum has given Cashum the dreaded handkerchief. Driven to madness by this news, Oteller "smothers her [Desdemonum] with the cushions" (7). After the murderous deed, all characters then barge into the room where Cashum explains that "Dis kerchief on the stairs I found, / and use it but to blow my nose" (8). Filled with remorse, Oteller then stabs himself. As the play concludes, all characters, the deceased included, dance around the room. These seemingly plotless afterpieces appear to be illogical scenes stitched randomly together and laden with comic violence and slapstick humor, much like a scene from the popular twentieth-century show, "The Three Stooges." Burlesque afterpieces usually ended in this chaotic, nonsensical manner, especially burlesques like *Desdemonum* and *Othello A Burlesque*, which were labeled as Ethiopian afterpieces.

Most of the nineteenth-century minstrel Ethiopian afterpieces published by The Happy Hours Company are all recognized by their unique, racist stamp: an oversized blackface head topped with fuzzy black hair, peeking at the audience from under a stage curtain while smiling a wide, toothy grin. At a first glance the face appears menacing, but

on closer examination soon loses the threatening vibe due to its strategic positioning on the stage. The curtain separates the head from the torso, confining the body to a contained, safe space distant from the audience. The only other body parts depicted on the illustration are the character's fingers, which curl beneath his shirt lapels like spider legs. With this blatant, exaggerated expression of African lore, the image reduces one of the most famous and revered trickster characters, the Ananzi spider, to a simple fool and becomes a racist snapshot of what the audience will encounter during the minstrel show. While many researchers have discussed the openly racist components surrounding the emotionally charged topic of blackface, this essay will instead focus specifically on Ethiopian afterpieces (the final act of the tri-part minstrel show) to explore how minstrels, within the controlled environment of the minstrel stage, exposed their audiences to a complex interface of racial and gender identities that reflect the anxieties experienced by women and minorities during the climactic years surrounding the Civil War.

To successfully spin their comedies in a way that would be acceptable to a wide audience, minstrel shows selected material from sources that would be familiar to most Americans. The most common minstrel afterpieces were burlesques of Shakespeare because his works permeated every niche of American culture during the nineteenth century (Brown 374). Many early scholars of the mid twentieth century like Ray Brown believed these Shakespearean burlesques were disrespectful to the Bard. Considering afterpieces distort and stretch Shakespeare's original text, that could be true. But when closely viewed, the afterpieces are completely different from Shakespeare's original text, and instead are examples of ways that America, a new nation, was adhering to tradition while simultaneously carving a path for itself. Shakespeare was a way to hold onto the

old by still trying to grasp a newly energized America experiencing the social changes of the 1860s, which included many women's push for the women's rights movement, newly freed African American slaves, and a surge in immigration. Amidst this chaotic social and cultural transitioning period, it was Shakespeare that connected American society; everyone from steamboat workers, to pursuers of the California Gold Rush, to the American White elite had a firm grasp and knowledge of Shakespeare. The fact that Shakespeare entered into popular culture is a sign of his endearment to the American people, not a sign of their irreverence.

Othello was one of the most common Shakespeare plays that Negro minstrels (often composed by White and frequently Irish men imitating Black culture) burlesqued because its themes of race and miscegenation were applicable to the American nation around the time of the Civil War. American culture, much like that of Elizabethan England, held mixed views about integrating Blacks into American culture and also clung to roles traditionally prescribed for women. Blackface was crucial to society because it used race and gender as ways to create a world that on the surface reflected the fantasies of the audience. However, deeper introspection into two of these popular afterpieces, *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum*, shows the underlying, and to a large extent coded, commentaries minstrel creators made on two issues central to nineteenth-century America: colorful ethnicities immigrating to America and prescribed roles of gender, both of which helped define what made an American citizen a truly accepted American. Though multiple burlesques of Othello such as *Dars-de-Money*, T.D. Rice's *Othello Travestie*, and *General O'Thello; or, The Wipe and the Wiper* exist from this time period, I will be analyzing the texts of *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum*, two plays reputed

to have been under G.W. Griffin's artistic mastery. Because Griffin was unique from other minstrel performers in recognizing the potential literary power of afterpieces, keeping meticulous notes, and paying careful attention to literary devices and double meanings of words (Engle 68), this essay will focus solely on these two rich, burlesqued afterpieces of *Othello*.

HISTORY OF MINSTRELSY AND ITS RELATION TO LITERATURE

Many scholars dispute the exact date of when minstrelsy first began, but all agree that minstrelsy blossomed with the debut of T.D. Rice's "Jump Jim Crow" somewhere between 1828 and 1831 (Wittke 21). Eric Lott mentions one of T.D. Rice's first performances of Jim Crow on the docks of Pittsburgh, where Rice asked a Black man named Cuff, who was both a performer and a dockworker, if he could borrow his clothes for his act. The African American agreed, and the crowd roared their approval over Rice's new outfit. Later, as a ship was about to dock, Cuff yelled to Rice from offstage that he needed his clothes back, but Rice could not hear over the loud applause. A disrobed Cuff then ran onstage to claim his clothing, which greatly amused the audience who cheered for more, believing Cuff was part of the act (Lott 19). While this story highlights Rice's act as a demonstration of white supremacy by the humiliating treatment of African Americans as puppets or simple children, Andrew Womack analyzes this passage further by explaining that from minstrelsy's beginning, the audience's reaction often determined the actions onstage. Within blackface minstrelsy, the content of the show was indeed shaped by American society, but in return, minstrelsy would also shape American culture (Engle xix) and introduce its audience to traces of African folklore and tradition.

As T.D. Rice and subsequent re-enactors continually performed successful Jim Crow show in the Northeast, they branded the Jim Crow character not only by his blackened face, but by his exaggerated limp—vestiges that arguably stem from the god

Esu of African lore who also walked with a limp. Attention to such characteristics produces a stronger reflection of African American culture within these blackface minstrels than has been previously thought. While many researchers may scoff at the idea of Negro minstrels aiming for "authenticity," it cannot be denied that Negro minstrels paid meticulous attention to Black culture, since they fooled many northerners, and even southerners, into thinking they were Black (Levine 30).

Because minstrelsy reflects the ideologies of the American public, during the early nineteenth century minstrelsy was supportive of slavery. The stage transformed black slaves into innocent children who were content and protected in their life on the plantation (Toll 78). But as abolition became the ultimate direction in the North during the late 1850s, minstrelsy no longer supported this romantic view of slavery. However, minstrelsy, as well as minstrel-inspired books such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* never stopped depicting African Americans as innocent, child-like fools. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim, probably a reference to Jim Crow, is a slow-witted slave who follows Huck blindly and is bound to him by love and duty, though he is technically free as a runaway slave. Jim relinquishes his freedom of choice and defers to Huck, a White child, as the sole decision maker during their journey. He even agrees to all of Huck's, and later Tom's, eccentric escape plans because he "allowed [they] was white folks and knowed better than him" (Twain 228). Mark Twain regularly frequented minstrel shows and allegedly formulated Jim and other characters of his novels after these minstrel characters who were not Black, but White (Hildebrand 180). Demonstrating a further influence of minstrelsy, Twain writes a scene in *Huck Finn* where two thieves on Huck and Jim's journey act out burlesques of Shakespeare (Twain 138 – 146). Burlesque soon

became a recurring trope in many of Twain's early writings as he attempted to harness the same success found in the oral practice of the minstrel stage.

Along with Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe also references blackface minstrelsy within her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Researcher Jason Richards explains the relationship between blackface minstrelsy and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "conjoined cultural twins" and discusses in depth how the two created the boundaries of African American selfhood in American society—not to mention, during the 1860s many performers translated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into a blackface act for the stage (Lott 9). Like blackface minstrelsy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has multiple scholars who argue for its antiracist agenda as well as those who insist on a reading it as an African American slave stereotype in its reduction of African Americans to either simple characters or naïve, loyal children. These various readings insist that like minstrelsy, *Uncle Tom* is both worthy of high "praise and condemnation" (Richards 205). Along with their positive and negative correlations, both minstrelsy and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* examine ideas of both racial envy and exploration. George, who descends from a White father and an African American slave mother, is described as European in his features with a "slight mulatto tinge" (Richards 216). Minstrel actors, often Irish men, were obviously of European decent and like George, were labeled as Black and grouped together with African Americans as the lowest of cultures and ethnicities in America. However, through darkening their faces, both George and the Irish immigrants of the minstrel stage were able to transcend their racial lines. In the end of the book when George obtains freedom by dressing up as a Spaniard and darkening his face, Richards explains that

> Blacking up sheds light on George's statement: "I have no wish to pass for an American, or to identify myself with them. It is with the oppressed, enslaved African race that I cast in my lot; and, if I wished anything, I would wish myself two shades darker, rather than one lighter" (374). Ironically, George's wish to become darker echoes the kind of racial envy that propelled minstrelsy. By blackening his light skin, he resembles the white minstrel who, as Lott argues, applied burnt-cork in order "to try on the accents of 'blackness.'" (217)

While the goal of many immigrants was to find a way to become more American, which often involved searching for ways to become more White, minstrelsy played with the idea Whites had their own racial jealousy, usually Black envy and fascination for African American culture (Lott 6). Much like George who received his freedom by blacking up, it was through these same "accents of blackness" and darkening their skin that the Irish men were able to transcend ethnic boundaries and achieve, onstage, a social freedom only enjoyed by the Anglo-American White male. Through blackface, the performers were neither White nor Black, neither American nor Irish—they occupied a liminal space that could not be defined by White society.

Echoing the beginnings of the minstrel stage, George is also given a servant named Jim, which links to the birth of minstrelsy and Rice's Jump Jim Crow (Richards 215). By acting as a blackface character, George was able to free himself, just as Black minstrels (Black men playing themselves, occasionally in blackface) and the Irish used blackface as a source of liberation, or at least a tool to find humor in their precarious placement in America and an escape from hard, menial work that was almost

synonymous with slave labor. But as the Civil War broke out, minstrelsy took on a more racist hue because of the perceived threat freed Blacks posed on work opportunities and social status in the north. However, Black competition was only one of White Americans' concerns. During the 1860s, the threat of a divided America filled with multiple conflicting nationalities, freed Blacks, and women fighting for equal rights, caused America to fear for its volatile future.

Though the subject matter in the antebellum period was consistent, the various performances of early minstrels were often conglomerations of disjointed circus-like chaos until Edwin P. Christy's three-act minstrel show in the 1840s. The first act consisted of a line of actors sitting in a circle cracking jokes and playing music. Four main characters were involved in this act: two endmen, an interlocutor, and a straight, or middle, man. The second act consisted of an olio, essentially a variety show much like vaudeville in later years, and consisted of banjo players and dancers. The show then would end with an afterpiece, which often burlesqued a popular play that all audiences would have been deeply familiar with (Womack 98). These afterpieces were the culmination of the minstrel show where "minstrelsy achieved its highest degree of genuine humor" (Engle xviii). Most of this humor, Charles Townsend relates in his nineteenth-century handbook of minstrelsy, consists of the actors attempting to reach success by means of besting "White" (other White men in Blackface though set apart as being White) counterparts of the show. In the end of the skit, however, the designated Black characters consistently fail, reducing the threat of African Americans overpowering Whites in social and economic situations. Townsend claims it is this "would be dignity of some of the characters" that entranced and horrified the audience

with the threat of successful Black men who were always returned to the lowest rung of the social ladder by the end of the performance. (10). *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum* both teased their audiences with scenes involving Blacks, the Irish, and women prevailing over the "White" male characters of the play, but assuaged the audience's fears by demonstrating these characters' failure to succeed in White culture. It is this "almost" scenario that incites the involvement of the audience in laughing at the players, and essentially themselves, since many in the audience were Irish workers who often identified with some of the characters on the stage (Lott 35). Minstrelsy became a way for groups of differing ethnicities and genders to identify with one another while simultaneously noting the stark differences within each culture. Doing so enabled many to find their cultural place in America and attempt to stitch together a culturally fragmented nation. Minstrels also became an outlet for the audience to therapeutically relieve their apprehensions and fears through the characters on the stage, while performers signified alternative agendas that relied on the knowledge of the audience.

THE TUNE OF SIGNIFYING

Just as using Shakespeare for afterpieces signified an America that was learning how to set itself apart while keeping a foot in tradition, the songs and lines of *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum* signify multiple components of race and gender. Signifying, as Henry Louise Gates uses the word, refers specifically to traditions of African lore and illustrates the intricate relationship between audience and performers, which empowered blackface minstrelsy. This interaction can be best illustrated through Gates' book *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates argues that signifying stems from two complementary trickster characters found in African lore: Esu, the god of indeterminacy, and The Signifying Monkey. African lore describes Esu as having a slight limp, representing his simultaneous habitation of two places: one foot in heaven and one on earth with mankind (6). Esu also is known for speaking with a "double voice," in addition to his role as "metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text" (21).

The Signifying Monkey, also a trickster performing character and Esu's complementary other half, is known for his banter and his witty comments among the other animals; only those who hailed from a similar background could understand the multiple layers registering within the Signifying Monkey's conversations. Gates lists three reasons why these two tricksters play a crucial role in regard to theory: they

represent the strained relationship between oral and written narratives, the necessity of the double-voice, and the inability to determine exact meaning of narrative.

The Monkey and Esu represent the "tension between the oral and the written modes of narration that is represented as finding a voice in writing…. depicted in so very many black texts" (Gates 21). These texts usually contain two main voices that contrast with each other to represent the oral and written word that was later personified in first and third person within the structure of many African American writers' novels in the twentieth century (22). This tension is crucial in Blackface minstrelsy, which was originally an oral entertainment that wasn't recorded until the 1870s when aspiring amateur minstrel groups increased the need for handbooks filled with both popular and successful examples of jokes and afterpieces (Engle xxi). However, as in all literature, capturing the voice of the speaker is difficult, especially when it represents a group of individuals involved in a minstrel troupe. The two voices are often apparent in the text of minstrel burlesques not only by the multiple interpretations rendered by each scene, but also because there were literally two main voices at play within the performance itself: the recitation of the actors onstage as well as the vocal contributions of the audience. All acts of the minstrel show proved problematic to record in writing because they relied on the audience's involvement and a heavy dose of improvisation. Gary Engle claims, "A piece in its acting edition form might run fifteen minutes, but when subjected to the constant energy of audience feedback it might run three quarters of an hours [*sic*], depending of course on the talent and inventiveness of the performers" (xxiii). The involvement of the audience meant they became the joint creators of burlesque afterpieces with the talented actors themselves, which worked well for oral tradition but

inhibited its written form since no piece could ever be perfectly reenacted. As readers in the twenty-first century long removed from the historical context that is critical to an understanding of the text, it can be difficult to extract and separate one particular “voice” from the combined voice of the troupes, since minstrelsy represented the involvement of many different people from various class and racial spheres.

The second attribute Esu and the Monkey bring to signification is their double-voiced support of literal and figurative meanings in texts. Minstrel burlesques, especially those of Griffin, paid careful attention to both the literal and figurative connotations of the characters’ lines. The afterpieces resembled biblical parables where listeners could decipher multiple meanings depending on their background and depth of exposure to the content and level of understanding. This multiplicity leads to the third significant component of signification: the “indeterminacy of interpretation” (22). Indeterminacy, though the strongest connection between minstrelsy and the African lore trickster characters, is also the most difficult component researchers must tackle when analyzing minstrel afterpieces. Because of the rich layers of meaning and signification within these works, once the reader pins one meaning on the play, that interpretation shifts into a different, often opposing, set of meanings on further examination.

Though often difficult and frustrating to discuss the slippery interpretations of these plays, minstrel burlesques, much like the African lore trickster characters, by their very nature fulfill what they were created to do: transcend the confined space established by the American White elite and help their socially oppressed audience work through their social fears and political anxieties through blackface characters within the safe, controlled environment of the minstrel stage.

The minstrel stage was a stage of freedom that adhered to social constructs, but simultaneously defied them by using one of its own popular trickster characters inspired by Esu and the Monkey: the blackface wench. The wench is an important character both within *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum*. As a White man playing a woman in blackface, the comedic wench is able to push the political limits as far as the audience would allow. As a character that occupies a liminal space with no restrictions, the wench character was free to transcend any social circle because of her comedic position. Because the wench is technically a woman and also represents "othered" ethnicities because of the smear of burnt cork, the wench, as well as the afterpieces in their entirety, signified multiple perspectives of race and gender within the wit and power of minstrelsy texts. According to Jack Haverly, Charles Townsend, and many other minstrel entrepreneur's handbooks of Negro Minstrelsy written during the nineteenth century, all agree that the success on stage does not lie in extravagant, expensive sets and props, but instead with the words of witty, well rehearsed actors who understood their audience (Haverly 5) and, I would add, the rich layers of signification.

OTHELLO, A BURLESQUE: NATIONALISM AND BONDS BETWEEN RACE

Beneath its racist commentary and eccentric depictions of Black culture, *Othello; A Burlesque* examines racial relationships in nineteenth-century America by specifically focusing on the dynamics between the Irish and African Americans pre and post Civil War. During the 1840s-1870s, Irish and German immigrants became America's most prominent ethnic groups (Toll 173). While Americans easily accepted Germans because of their industrious breweries and classical music prowess, the Irish were by default tagged as the "othered" group in America and condemned to laborious, dangerous jobs such as constructing the Erie Canal, which offered menial wages (Lhamon 62). The Irish dug alongside both free Blacks and slaves, bending over their shovels in a posture similar to cotton picking. Cotton picking linked the workers to slaves, especially the Irish who were later referred to as White slaves (Smith 76). Slavery also linked this working class to the first minstrel character, Jim Crow, whose stooped back hinted at laborious canal work, but also holistically symbolized the fusion of Anglo-Irish and Black culture (65). Jim Crow's stooped back is evidence, according to Eric Lott and Christopher Smith, that these rough canaller communities became the fertile ground that inspired and nurtured blackface minstrelsy.

Within these canaller communities, which Smith geographically groups within riverine and maritime environments, African Americans and Irish worked and lived together, forming a familial alliance. Like any typical family, members fought and

bickered with one another other but also engaged in entertainment like dancing and singing. With such close quarters and consistent contact, it is likely that "tunes and dances, gestural and verbal languages could be—and were—borrowed, stolen, and combined" (Smith 76). Many minstrel researchers believed that this imitation—or even theft—of African American themes was a sign of how the Irish attempted to culturally dominate Blacks on the minstrel stage. However Lott, in his book *Love and Theft*, suggests that instead of a focus on hatred and domination, it is admiration and even envy that influenced the theft of Black culture within blackface minstrelsy (Womack 88). Minstrelsy also heavily performed in these environments of racially shared space, molding canaller communities between the 1840s and 1870s to become what Smith calls a "frontier," which coupled two racial territories. Smith defines a racial frontier as "the *social* limit of middle-class experience" (79). Under this definition, racial frontiers became groundbreaking territories of interracial neighborhoods that both terrified and intrigued the White middle class due to their flexible, and often non-existent, boundaries within society.

The Irish and Black merged their lifestyles together within these racial frontiers where they became culturally distant from socially prescribed perimeters that defined and separated race. Smith labels these communities as "culturally distant" because of the overlap of cultures; boundaries between the Irish and Black races soon lost their rigidity as the two cultures blended their traditions, vernacular, and entertainment. The horror and fascination used to describe these new communities would soon be the two most commonly heard words when describing the minstrel show, which was most often

performed in these racial frontiers of blended culture; the horror and fascination also helped lure such a diverse audience to the minstrel stage (79).

The roots of minstrelsy in canaller communities explains why the majority of minstrel shows' rough audiences consisted of Irish immigrant workers, though both women and men across all social classes are also said to have frequented the shows (Lott 67). Once again, the racial construct of minstrelsy formed a chain reaction; racial circles that overlapped in the audience were created by the racial depictions occurring on the minstrel stage, which were in turn inspired by the elastic boundaries found within racially integrated frontier canaller communities.

However, the close relationship between the Irish and Blacks soon dissolved during the Civil War. Irish and African American relations literally took a violent turn in 1863 as the Northern army drafted 30,000 Northerners to reinforce their troops (Frost 49). The bulk of that number came from the working-class Irishmen unable to pay their way out of service. As such, the Yankee reinforcements became a group of immigrant misfits embittered by their forced obligation to answer the call to arms and fight for a nation refusing to accept their culture—a plight very similar to that of Black culture. This injustice sparked the New York Draft Riots, a three-day massacre resulting in the deaths of over a hundred people, most of whom were free Blacks (50). The Irish targeted African Americans not only because many Irish believed African Americans and slavery were the main causes of the Civil War, but also because emancipation meant waves of freed slaves would move north and compete for the working-class jobs that the Irish then monopolized. Therefore, Blacks became the main target for property burning as well as lynching and rape. Stories of Irish terrorist groups burning down Black orphanages and

dragging African American bodies by their genitals through the streets of New York were common during the three-day insurrection. It was through this "sexual conquest and purification, [that] many white workingmen may have hoped to erase the threat of a new black dignity at a time when the social and political status of black people was especially unsettled" (qtd. in Frost 51).

The image of dragged bodies conjures the image of Cain dragging Abel's body as he tried to hide his evil act from God, found in the African Christian depiction of the biblical Old Testament story. The African Cain and Abel story is similar to that of White Christians, only the curse of Cain is a curse of Whiteness. Lhamon recounts the story: "…when Cain killed Abel, he was horrified at himself, and terrified of God; and so he carried the body away from beside the altar where it lay, and carried it about for years trying to hide it, but not knowing how, growing white the while with the horror and the fear….from Cain came the white races, while Abel's children are black, as all men were before the first murder" (qtd. in Lhamon 118). Therefore, wanting to receive the favor and citizenship of their American father, like Cain, Irish immigrants did not want to compete for citizenship with their Black brothers and sought to conquer and destroy their competition instead. By fighting, the Irish were trying to preserve a national identity that the minstrel show depicted onstage with *Othello; A Burlesque*. In this work, the complicated tension between hatred and envy becomes a whirlwind of dancing and acting in this afterpiece as the actors tried to demonstrate where each race fit within American society. By focusing on multiple punning, a mode of signification held in common by Irish and African performers, the Irish were both able to identify with and differentiate themselves from Black culture.

In *Othello; A Burlesque*, Iago the Irishman reflects all the evil qualities and stereotypes American Whites identified with the Irish (Frost 52). While it may seem contradictory for Irish actors to promote negative and exaggerated stereotypes, there was an agenda behind it, just as Blacks had ulterior motives for playing into the racial stereotypes Whites had created for them. The mask of blackface enabled Whites in the audience to indulge their fantasies while, as Eric Lott writes, the actors' "same words and actions could have very different meanings for whites, for the black bourgeoisie, and for the members of the black subculture" (262). Lott's quote is singling out Black performers within Black minstrelsy, but I would argue the Irish, who learned many techniques of Black culture from their canaller communities, were implementing the same idea, especially within *Othello, A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum* as the texts pun on multiple Irish and German phrases and characteristics that acknowledged their stereotypes within White culture. In *Desdemonum*, as Rodrigo claims he will drown his woes in a "washing-tub" and Othello is labeled as a "whitewasher" in *Othello, A Burlesque*, both burlesques are commenting on the actual occupations performed by many working class immigrants. What would be to the White middle class playful banter becomes a reminder for the working class of their poverty and subjection in America. These minstrel shows seemed to hint that in order to overthrow inequality, the working class needed to be informed of the problem and defend themselves, instead of succumbing to the whitewashing many Whites were prescribing. In order to be accepted in American society, each race and gender needed to act the part created by the White elite in order to become a non-threatening American citizen. However, minstrelsy also simultaneously fed a subculture beneath the mask of this illusionary White conformity—a nod to their immigrant fellow-

men and other ill-favored groups who could understand the subjugation of the lower working class.

The multiple puns occurring within *Othello; A Burlesque* exemplify the witty, shifting signification that often occurred on the minstrel stage. Blackness, the first layer of blackface minstrelsy's signification, is the most obvious. Throughout *Othello; A Burlesque* as well as *Desdemonum*, Blacks are depicted as ignorant, violent, and the scum of low class society (Toll 71). All these traits, especially violence, were humorously depicted. On a surface level, Othello's violent rages, which result in his chaotic fight with Brabantio, Iago, Roderigo at the beginning of the play as well as Desdemona's black eye at the end of the play, are the very illustrations of what white American society believed would happen if Whites and Blacks were to experiment with miscegenation. However, this piece is not only ridiculing and poking fun at interracial marriage; *Othello; A Burlesque* simultaneously sketches the volatile temperaments and relationships of immigrants and the lower classes.

Othello; A Burlesque, though transcribed in the 1870s, was probably performed in 1866 and quite possibly a few years before, or so its constant immigrant stereotypes and references to the Civil War suggest (Carlson 177). Though never directly stated, the burlesque contains three ethnicities—German, Irish, and African American—that can be established through each of the character's vernacular nuances. Othello, as tradition has it, is the "Negro," with Brabantio and Desdemona as Germans, and Iago as a cunning Irishman. Andrew Carlson, recognizing the different races involved in this afterpiece, argues that it is not Iago's Irishness, or Brabantio and Desdemona's German heritage that is central to the play, but rather Othello's Blackness that the burlesque focuses on (178).

However, as we see the extreme tensions occurring between race and identity throughout nineteenth-century society, racial discord between the Irish and African Americans is key in understanding the hidden agendas of this burlesque.

Griffin carefully denotes the race of each of his characters by language inflections and stereotypes. For instance, the audience finds an intoxicated Brabantio nursing a beer and feasting on "switzer kase [swiss cheese] and bread" at the beginning of the play. Iago signals Brabantio can be commonly found in this state when he asks Brabantio to "try for a time to quit your lager beer" to understand that he has lost his wealth and his own daughter (4). Iago's quip was a common understanding within American culture; American society during the nineteenth century recognized Germans for their lager breweries, enormous appetites, and their heavy hand on the liquor bottle (Toll 164). By painting Brabantio as a drunken oaf, Iago hopes his own Irish culture will be seen as the stronger nationality. Iago's own Irishness is exposed as he tells Brabantio to go to the "divil," an Irish spelling of the word, and later sings Irish airs such as "Ireland the Place is"—to gloat about his futuristic revenge on Desdemona (Griffin 7).

Most scenes in *Othello; A Burlesque* involve a humorous depiction of vengeful violence to signify the turbulent relationship between Irish and Blacks (Lott 94). For instance, when Brabantio learns Othello has seduced his daughter into an interracial marriage, Brabantio, along with Roderigo and Iago, chase Othello down and threaten him for his misconduct:

> Brabantio: You damn black rascal, I will have your life;
>
> Go in, Rodrigo, strike wid all your might.
>
> Iago: Whoo! Murder! Thieves! Here's a jolly fight!

Though Toll calls the fights found in afterpieces “brotherly brawls enjoyed by everyone” (176), they at the same time signify the aggressive acts of the Draft Riots (Lott 133). During the Draft Riots, the Irish targeted African Americans as scapegoats to release their frustrations about American class hierarchy and their failed pursuit of American acceptance. Within the burlesque, Iago is also using a Black man as a scapegoat for his revenge on Desdemona, who slighted his romantic advances. Iago illustrates his vengeful scheme at the very beginning of the play as he sings,

> When first I Desdemona saw, I thought her very fine,
> And by the way she treated me, I thought she’d soon be mine;
> But she’s cleared out and left me now, with a nasty, dirty fellar,
> As black as mud—a white-washer—a nagar called Othello,
> But I’ll kick up the devil’s own spree with her for the way she served me,
> And the way I’ll plague her for marrying that nagur, will be something amazin’ to see. (Griffin 4)

Iago reveals his dark heart with his reference to the devil, just as Christians considered Cain as a child of the devil for his evil act of murdering Abel. The “spree” in this passage also references that first human murder that Cain committed, and on closer examination, resonates with the Irish killing spree during the New York Draft Riots. Iago’s reasoning designates Desdemona as the true culprit of the play, a woman who Iago claims seduced him under false pretense (Griffin 4). More than that, if Desdemona, a German, married Othello, an African American, she would risk falling from her somewhat elevated position (in comparison to other immigrants) within American society. On another level, true to the double-voiced nature of signification found in minstrelsy, Desdemona also

represents the White American elite during the 1860s, which seduced the Irish and other immigrants to its shores with "The American Dream." The dream in reality became a nightmare as men and women labored in the lowest paying jobs and could never climb out of the working sinkhole they fell in upon arriving to America.

While the most prominent racial groups of the nineteenth century are represented in *Othello; A Burlesque*, Anglo-Americans are oddly absent from the script. Even more surprising, Othello is not cast as the stereotypical Black man usually depicted in the minstrel show—instead, he seems to assume a White identity. His language, unlike designated Black characters in other minstrel shows, reflects flawless American English, and until he loses his complete trust in Desdemona at the end of the play, he is a thoroughly "whitewashed" man. It is instead Desdemona who assumes the comical, buffoonish character usually seen from the "Negro" onstage. Just as the roles of Cain and Abel were switched for Irish and African Americans, Desdemona and Othello represent the opposites of gender and racial stereotypes; Othello resembles the epitome of decorum and Whiteness while Desdemona acts the part of a crass, slovenly, blackened male (Collins 87), exemplifying the arbitrariness of stereotypes.

This manipulation of gender and racial stereotypes, which utilizes the signifying elements of African Lore, is discovered within the punning language of the text, specifically with the word "whitewash." Othello is labeled a "whitewasher," a common labor-intensive job the lower classes held of cleaning sooty walls in homes. On a surface level, this definition works well within the text. However, Kris Collins brings an alternative meaning of whitewasher to mean "a black person who attempted to be White, or [tried] to become part of white society" (96). While this is possibly a description of

Shakespeare's character of Othello, and a common stereotype Griffin depicts as the goal of many immigrants and Blacks during the nineteenth century, another possible meaning links whitewasher to a game called Euchre, one of the most popular card games of the nineteenth century. The audience is first aware of the game in Act II where Cassio and Desdemona are playing a round of cards. Cassio is distraught by the outcome of the game and complains, "By gosh I'm euchered! Isn't it a shame? / I'm so unlucky, I can't win a game. / Do what I will, I'm always getting stuck—" (5). Humiliated by his defeat, which is probably irreparable if losing to a female opponent, Cassio—oddly the only character who remains nationless throughout the play—runs off the stage before he is forced to play against Othello. In "euchering" Cassio, euchre in this context also seems to suggest the similar word, "eunuch." Cassio exemplifies the potential threatening power women have to castrate men. Desdemona has prevented him from scoring points during the multiple tricks, or rounds, of both the physical card game, as well as the game of love. But though Cassio is a terrible card player, Othello is no better. Othello is described as a "whitewasher," or whitewashed, which in a game of Euchre, means the player has scored zero points during the whole game. Whitewashing is minstrelsy's subtle hint that even though many African Americans and Irish consented to emulate White culture in order to be accepted in society, they still lost the game in regards to American citizenship and national respect. In regards to the Irish, they lost American acceptance due to their violent riots also reflected in the card game. Many of the tricks and plays of Euchre also reflect violent terms that signal war, such as "march," "shooting," "cut," "throwing off," "waiting in the bushes," etc. *Othello, A Burlesque* presents the Irish Iago as the best player of the group, and by doing so, Griffin cleverly takes this popular game and uses its

violent connotations and trickery to reflect the underhanded crimes and struggles inflicted and experienced by multiple races, but especially the Irish.

The multiple comic valences can also be examined in Desdemona, the blackface wench trickster, who transgresses the proper realm of womanhood through her status as a talented card player. She "trumps," or sets the rules of what is the most valued suit (or race) of the game, and in the larger scheme, the game of the minstrel afterpiece. While Desdemona excels at cards, she is also talented at playing men, a strange cyclical feat for a White man playing the blackface wench who must already be excelling at playing the part of a woman—yet another clever pun within Griffin's plays. However, though Desdemona does pose as a threat in the burlesque, her absurdity and transgender status reduce her to a comical character. This reduction of the character supports Townsend's general characterization of minstrel shows as plays that reduce threatening characters to failing fools at the end of the play, thereby allowing the audience to conquer their fears of competition as the White characters prove the victors.

In *Othello, A Burlesque*, George Christy, a renowned nineteenth-century impersonator and also Griffin's joint minstrel producer of *Othello; A Burlesque*, was assigned the role of the wench trickster. Christy, an Irishman acting as a German woman in blackface, would have caused race and gender to swirl into a chaotic Picasso-like image; the wench fits no racial label, nor does she fit any gender. She, or it, lies in a liminal space, thereby providing a way for the audience to both identify with and also to differentiate from the characters onstage. While this liminal space of chaotic comedy reduced the threat the audience felt from the stage, it simultaneously rendered the Irish (and all lower classes) both onstage and in the audience an opportunity to live the

"American Dream" through the wench character. Achieving the American Dream did not stem from the wench's ability to transcend gender, but instead from a life free of constricting, subordinate racial labels created by the White elite. As the wench character supersedes the limits of White culture, she could enter any racial or gender circle she wished, giving her the ultimate social power. Using the wench trickster character, *Othello; A Burlesque* recognizes the importance of nationalism, but also demonstrates a loophole where society's racial boundaries could be flexible.

Trickster characters of the minstrel stage, the two most prevalent in burlesques being Zip Coon and the wench, were common fools reduced to simplified, bigoted stereotypes. Zip Coon often represented the stereotype of free Blacks, mocking their search for equality of social positions as Anglo-Americans. The Black wench symbolized women as temptresses, though the act remained suitable for the stage because the role was played by men exaggerating and mimicking female sexuality for comedic effect. The idea of the fool is echoed in the Euchre game, which was the first game to introduce the joker to the deck of cards. This connection of trickster characters establishes that selecting Euchre as the card game in the scene was a conscious decision that reveals Griffin's clever double entendre of multiple games and tricks occurring within the burlesque. Like the card game, the minstrel stage also introduced the "joker" or blackface trickster fools to nineteenth century American society. But though tricksters can transcend racial boundaries, gendered and racial characters like Othello will always fail in their attempts to sidestep the designated racial structure Whites placed on them. Othello, when warned that Brabantio is furious about the marriage to his daughter, Desdemona, says, "Pshaw! Let him do his worst— / I've married her—let him undo that

first." Iago then answers, "He'll undo you, for loud he swore and said / that when he met you, he would smash your head" (Griffin 5). Once again, these lines reflect the friction between the working class and Blacks, but they also serve as a warning for Othello, the whitewashed African American. This attempt at imitating another race will only be his downfall in the end. As both Desdemona and Othello attempt to step beyond racial boundaries, they support the "eagerness in various groups to slide up and down social hierarchies leaving traces of their having been there" (Lott 49). Othello, to a certain extent, ascends the social ladder as he marries into the rung above his own; however, because he is easily beguiled, his educated White American speech reverts to his Black dialect as the play progresses. For instance, at the end of the play when planning Desdemona's death, he muses he will "not shed her blood—but choke her *wid dis* pillow" (Griffin 9, emphasis added). Othello was able to play the part of a White man for a little while, but reverted back to his authentic Black culture under Iago's pressure.

While Iago earlier in the play is likened to Cain by his evil association with the devil when plotting against Desdemona, near the end of the burlesque the minstrel characters shift the biblical characters they represented at the beginning. As Othello later succumbs to Iago's subtle evil counsel, Iago is then likened to the devil while Othello becomes the Cain figure, goaded by the devilish Iago into a violent rage of jealousy that drives him to murder Desdemona—just as Cain was provoked by Satan to take the life of his brother. And Desdemona, a woman promising fidelity and love who deceived Othello and previous men, represents White America, with its promises of opportunity that did not entirely transpire. Othello, upset by this betrayal, sings

Oh, if it was her plan, for to have another man

> I wish I hadn't known a bit about it—
>
> For a man's dats robb'd dey say, and don't miss what's took away,
>
> Can very easy get along without it.
>
> Ho, ho, ho! It's wrong to use me so;
>
> I never gave her cause to be complaining—
>
> I'se done everything I could, day and night to do her good,
>
> But I'll send her to the happy land of Canaan. (Griffin 6)

The song signifies the lament of immigrants and Blacks of the lower class, upset at the unfair treatment they received from America. It rings as a warning, a proletariat war cry of the promised violent slaughter to send perpetrators to "the happy land of Canaan," or death, if the White American elite did not change its ways. Othello himself becomes the instigator of violence after he is driven to madness. As he encounters Iago at the end of the play the stage directions say Othello "(…knocks him down with whitewash brush)" (8). It is odd and ironic that Iago uses a whitewash brush since it echoes early minstrelsy's accusation that White abolitionists attempted to scrub off the African American's supposed dark mark of Cain using sand paper, soap, and brushes (113). By using a brush, the very tool White Americans were rumored to have used to whitewash Blacks, Othello is exhibiting his defiance of Whites who tried to erase his race and culture. Like the example of George, who claims to not want to be American in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Othello no longer wishes to be White – instead, it is the Irish immigrant who is forced, by Othello, to succumb to White America's whitewashing techniques.

This example of Othello's rage recasts him from the Abel character to blackface minstrelsy's newer positive depiction of Cain, which is affiliated "with a theme of

breaking bondage" (Lhamon 132). Cain, "a figure oscillating between contraries," becomes the mask of blackface (125). Each character within *Othello; A Burlesque* dons the mask of Cain to challenge the strict categories of ethnicity. In this context, Desdemona becomes Cain in her liminal space of neither Black nor White, male nor female. Like a Cain figure, she also oscillates between two separate personalities: temptress and dutiful wife of Othello. Othello dons the mask in order to occupy both the White realm and the Black realm, first as the afterpiece character who assumes a Whitewashed role yet continues to dabble in Black culture, and second, as the White blackface actor on the stage who is White, yet simultaneously cast as Black by his burnt-cork mask and subordination to other characters. Iago juggles two worlds as he both hates and loves Desdemona. As he attempts to punish her for leading him on, he is still in love with her, or at least is drawn to her physically as seen in scene III as he says to himself, "by jabers you're a beauty!" (Griffin 5). Through the examples of these minstrel characters, the blackface mask both aligns and differentiates race and gender, transforming the wearer into a representative of a different racial or gender category—reiterating Smith's idea of a new social frontier. Like Esu, wearers of the minstrel mask are in multiple spheres at once: one foot in society, and one in the ethereal world of minstrelsy.

As historians looking back at a conflicted nation during the Civil War era, researchers often struggle to analyze the emotions of Americans during the 1860s, which is why minstrelsy is such a crucial area of study. Popular culture is the most accurate source that genuinely captures and reflects society's views as they fluctuate during times of transition. Lott claims, "…minstrel productions such as burlesque playlets clarify the

wayward impulses generating the [Draft] riots" (133). Through these burlesque afterpieces, researchers can better understand the racism occurring within nineteenth-century America, since minstrel afterpieces were the most popular entertainment during the mid 1800s. As such, minstrels mirrored the social upheaval of the nineteenth century. *Othello; A Burlesque* demonstrates that it is jealousy, fear, and discontent that drive the unsettled lower classes to find resolve, humor, and relief from their circumstances on the minstrel stage. But to appreciate the lessons afterpieces offer, the cultural aspects must be applied to the texts in order to cast light on these rich undertones of social commentary, which many early scholars of minstrel shows failed to do. After reading *Othello; A Burlesque* and many of the afterpieces published by The Happy Hours Company, Jennifer Dunn simplifies them as "not very funny" and, speaking of *Othello; A Burlesque* in particular, claims it "…as a whole, is a dismal failure from the point of view of wit" (216). Dunn, whose work was published in 1939, represents the views of many early twentieth-century minstrel researchers. On the surface, blackface Ethiopian Shakespeare burlesques do seem to blaspheme the great literary bard in their dismal attempts at low humor in depicting false, racist stereotypes. But if we look into the history of canaller communities and the darker stories of the Civil War including the Draft Riots, we can see there is a complex agenda in these seemingly simple works. This complexity allows researchers to analyze these burlesques through various, specific lenses like ethnicity and gender to obtain deeper readings into both the meaning and purpose of the play, as well as the culture of the nineteenth-century. Those who attempt to simplify Negro minstrelsy simply succumb to its layered signification system; researchers, like Dunn, who merely

skimmed the surface of afterpiece texts, would never understand the deeper racial nuances occurring behind the blackface mask.

WOMEN'S ROLES AND SEXUALITY WITHIN *DESDEMONUM* AND *OTHELLO; A BURLESQUE*

Each afterpiece deals with racial issues from a different perspective. While *Othello; A Burlesque* focuses specifically on racial stereotypes and the relationships existing between multiple ethnicities in nineteenth-century America, *Desdemonum* semantically bifurcates its characters into Black and White. This distinction can be confusing, since all characters in Negro minstrels are White performers in blackface, but only a few characters, like Oteller, are fully coded as being Black. Though Oteller's dark skin is emphasized when other characters call him "nigger" and "darky," *Desdemonum* also uses character names to signify Othello's racial subordination. All of the names in *Dedemonum* end in "–um," except for Oteller. As Othello remains Oteller and never ascends to Othellum throughout the play, he is continually othered and never fully accepted into White American culture. Through this example of semantics, *Desdemonum* illustrates that people are not designated White by adherence to White culture or skin color, since the Irish with their pale skin were still referred to as "black Irish" or "smoked Irish" (Toll 95). Instead, Whiteness within *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Desdemonum* became a social construct that Whites sporadically used to label ethnicities and gender as accepted citizens based on what their culture could offer the White elite American male. Through the racial exploration of the blackface mask within *Desdemonum* and *Othello; A Burlesque* minstrel afterpieces, minstrelsy helped their audience define women's role in society through its connection with race.

Race is used within burlesques of Shakespeare's *Othello* to explore the social issue of women's subjugated role under male domination. As *Desdemonum* and *Othello;*

A Burlesque honed in on different components of race, the two plays also appropriated various scenes from Shakespeare's original *Othello* in order to portray different sides of female subordination in America's patriarchal society. Both plays explore the dangers of overanxious women who pushed the boundaries of True Womanhood, but they examine this theme from different angles. *Othello; A Burlesque* focuses on the critique of the masculine woman who defies male control while *Desdemonum* explores the political ideas behind True Womanhood. Both afterpieces demonstrate the power their Desdemona characters hold at the beginning of the play, followed by their comic failure at the end of the show. To erase the fear White men had of emasculation by women, nineteenth-century society tried to follow the strict guidelines prescribed under the Cult of True Womanhood, which maintained that women should excel in areas of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity (Roberts 150). However, just as race and class boundaries often blurred in various situations both in society and the minstrel stage, the rigid parameters defining women's roles also softened as demands and opportunities arose throughout the nineteenth century.

As both the North and South recruited many men to join the military during the 1860s, women of all classes and races were forced into various employments including managing family plantations, nursing wounded soldiers, campaigning for support of the war, and performing the industrial labor once considered the province of men. Heavy war casualties also caused more women to seek work in the public sphere since they lacked husbands to financially provide for them. Though employment was originally seen as masculine, necessity created a bigger push toward the nineteenth-century woman's movement (Cruea 191). While the woman's movement maintained the importance of

separate gendered spheres as prescribed in True Womanhood, it also granted greater flexibility and freedom for women in regard to employment. However, despite this gradual introduction of women into the public workforce, society continued to produce negative stereotypes of the public workingwoman. Public women at the beginning of the nineteenth century were at first synonymous with prostitution, America's first kind of female employment. Years later, when additional female jobs were added to the market, these nonsexual employment positions continued to be associated with either loose morals or masculine traits since it was believed truly feminine women were not employed outside the home (Cruea 194). Wishing to be considered chaste but still aspiring to promote social change in society, many women attempted to find ways to remain in the private sphere while they distantly influenced the public sphere. For this reason, many proactive women became writers in order to bridge communication between public and private, and to voice their social concerns surrounding race, class, and gender reform.

This new wave of women who promoted female education and women's influence with the written word started in the 1830s and 1840s with two powerhouse females: the English writer, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the American Margaret Fuller. Both women were proponents for greater respect and acknowledgement of women's influence in the public realm, especially Fuller's influence in America. Fuller even was bold enough to say that the Greeks, who were seen as barbarous in their polytheism, understood and appreciated the dignity of women much better than monotheistic nineteenth-century America. As men were already afforded ample room in literature, Fuller claimed it was time for the " 'silent history' of women to be given a voice" for the edification of both men and women, since the two sexes were

interconnected and continuously affected the other (Hurst 461). During the 1860s, many women, probably influenced by the example set by Fuller, recorded their grievances of women's subordination and likened the bonds of domesticity to the bonds of slavery in their own written works. *A Book Without a Title*, written in 1866 by M.W Tyler, defines family life for women as synonymous to slavery on the plantation and wage slavery in the factory (Toll 198). Nothing is romantic about the situation of these women as Tyler defines them; they are tied to serving their husband, the land, and their children with no hope of escape. This depiction was revolutionary, since many conservative women and men believed marriage meant financial and social freedom, especially when compared to some of the jobs available to single or poor women during the nineteenth century. In multiple accounts, women working for the new "bourgeois middle class" complained of maltreatment, low job security, and deplorably low wages; many female laborers in these positions referred to their work as the work of a slave (Cruea 194). When likened to these horrific conditions, marriage might seem a better prospect, but Tyler's book instead displays marriage as a more permanent form of slavery bound by a similar government-sanctioned contract. Other more subtle authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe focused on African American slavery and were more discreet in their connection between slavery and women. But whether blatantly commenting on women's issues or making subtle hints at the need for social change, these nineteenth-century women exemplified the importance of literature and writing to the critique of women's position in society—especially through the medium of the novel. Just as the novel revolutionized the relationship between society's private and public spheres, women used the novel to bridge their private opinions to the public realm (195). As their

private and public spheres overlapped, female authors demonstrated the need to redefine these gender roles for women across racial and class divides.

However, women belonging to the lower classes had a more difficult time finding the freedom women such as Stowe and Tyler found. One of these groups that drew a lot of attention in the nineteenth century was the Circassian woman, a seductive, exotic female who embodied the prescribed pure qualities of True Womanhood and combined them with the mysterious traits of the African American female, such as exaggerated lips and body parts, which were considered very sexual and forbidden to the White race (Frost 66). Historically, Circassians hailed from Circassia, or North Caucasus, a land connecting the borders of Western Asia and Eastern Europe. During the mid 1800s, Russia conquered Circassia and displaced the Circassians to Turkey and other areas in the Ottoman Empire. Linda Frost explains that these relocated Circassians lived difficult lives, especially the women. Circassian women lived like slaves under their brothers, fathers, or husbands who condemned them to hard physical labor. Their only compensation for their intensive chores was a lower life expectancy and premature aging. America caught wind of these women's circumstances, which inspired the story paper, *Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner*, to include an article written in 1866 called "The Sale of the Circassian Woman" (Frost 72). The article described the dismal life of these women and explained how their only hope of restitution from their circumstances was to be kidnapped and sold into slavery, or auctioned off by their own fathers. The men in those families would "'…launch her [the Circassian daughters] upon the market, with anxious speculations as to the amount which a commodity so valuable, though to them useless, may bring'" (qtd. in Frost 73). Circassian women, with their domestic life disrespected by

greedy male family members, would rather live a life in actual bondage to strangers in order to escape the grueling servitude of their domestic private sphere.

The Circassians' situation reflected Tyler's association of married American women to the bondage of slavery. Instead of America standing for a place of liberty, Tyler demonstrated that this country was no different in its treatment of women than in underdeveloped, heathen countries like Circassia. Even more deplorable, it was these hopeless Circassian women P.T. Barnum bought under slave contracts for his circus. While the United States was fighting a war over Black slavery, it simultaneously supported a new kind of gendered and racial slavery within popular entertainment (Frost 64). The lives of those newly enslaved women connected with the feelings and despair of many American women held in bondage by society's strict expectations of the female stereotype. The Circassians' tawny skin also bridged the gap between Black and White culture by creating a middle ground where women exhibited racial exoticness but were still presented as White. In a sense they became "yellow" women, a higher position than Black women, admired for their beauty and respected for their demure behavior. However, as Circassian women became expensive to procure and ship to America, P.T.Barnum contracted immigrant women—usually Irish—who, dissatisfied with slave wages accompanying their grueling labor of the "washtub," agreed to masquerade as Circassians (Frost 84). While acting as yellow women or Blacks, these immigrant women obtained freedom from a life they believed fell short of their pursuit of the American Dream, just as Circassian women fled to the circus performance to escape their domestic servitude.

While Circassians, both authentic and Irish, bridged the gap between European and American women, they also forged a connection to the minstrel stage by demonstrating how identity was fluid, especially in the context of performance. As Circassians found their niche and freedom within circus acts, minstrel performers and their audience were also able to escape the strain of manual labor and harsh treatment of White American elites by acting Black on the stage. Through masquerading as Black, minstrels actors elevated their own, and the audience's, position in society by occasionally subjugating the African American race on the stage. Frost strengthens this connection even further by likening the Circassian to a type of minstrel character, marked by her bushy thick hair, which signified the wooly wigs found in blackface minstrelsy. However, though Circassian women depicted the mirage of an elevated race, they were in reality placed under the power of another overseer who displayed them in cages for visual consumption. Similarly, minstrel characters were also bound by their same supposed freedom. True to the nature of minstrelsy, all aspects of the stage became a two-edged sword; though the stage allowed minstrels certain freedom to explore social issues, they were still under the control and influence of their American audience who vocally influenced the direction and even subject matter of many performances. It was not uncommon for the audience to hiss, scream, shout, laugh at inappropriate timing, and yell obscenities; according to Levine "audiences remained proudly independent and insisted upon receiving what they had been promised and judging openly what they received" (180). Levine also relates an example of one traveling company who shortened their performance in order to catch a train to their next showing. The audience was so enraged that the next time the company came by train to perform, the audience waited on the

loading platform armed with guns—the company was forced to move on because they did not previously deliver the performance they had originally promised (180).

As the audience was very sensitive to the material performed onstage, minstrel performers often adlibbed and dressed up the content of the burlesque when discussing heated content like bondage, depending on the audience's reactions. However, the gender issues *Desdemonum* discusses echoes similar themes from Shakespeare's original text of *Othello*—a text the audience would have been very familiar with. Though afterpieces experimented with artistic freedom and often broke away from Shakespeare's original storylines and themes, the female stereotype perpetuated by Shakespeare's Iago is one of the few Shakespearean themes that transferred to *Desdemonum* from the original text. Shakespeare's Iago, along with many nineteenth-century White males, adamantly argued that women were not to be trusted. In Act II of Shakespeare's original *Othello*, Iago claims women "…are pictures out of doors / Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens.… / Players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds" (2.1.111 - 115). Iago's words suggests that women are merely actors when it comes to portraying feminine virtues. In actuality, they are sexual, loud creatures who threaten to emasculate men by luring them with their beauty. Women cannot be treated as equals, but they can be useful as a means for men to achieve financial or social advancement. In *Desdemonum,* Iagum carries this mentality as he assures Roderigum that securing another wife is simple; it has nothing to do with love, since women are untrustworthy of such devotion. But women instead can offer great revenue, like a fish bought and sold in the market. Iagum convinces Roderigum that "Dere's fish in de see / Just as good as any / in de market dat be" (4). Though the proverbial saying "there's plenty of fish in the sea" is

often an innocent phrase of comfort dispensed at the end of catastrophic relationships, Iago's use takes a more sinister tone, as it stems from Desdemonum's commodification throughout the text. As Kris Collins explains, this quote taken from *Dedemonum* gives the character Desdemonum a "market value" (Collins 96).

This market value and commodification of women is explored specifically in the afterpieces of *Othello; A Burlesque* and *Dars-de-Money*. "Market" has a significant connection to blackface. According to Lhamon, minstrelsy began on the docks of New York's Catharine Market where fisherman and tradesman brought their victuals to sell. Entertainers were drawn to the populated market and would compete for the prize eel or cash—marketing their race and talents for income (16). As non-White ethnicities and women often reflected each other in terms of their social subjugation, this marketing of race was soon replicated into the market value of females. The title of *Dars-de-Money* blatantly signifies that the character of Desdemona is a source of income, but *Othello; A Burlesque* deepens this signification by its commentary on Desdemona's market value throughout the play. Desdemona's reduced status from human to property is best illustrated by Brabantio, who enslaves Desdemona and raises her as a type of livestock for his financial gain. In Act 1, Brabantio explains to the audience that he overfed his daughter in order to sell her to the circus where she would be "So fat to see her dat people would pay" (Griffin 5). Like a Circassian father, Brabantio plans to sell his daughter to P.T. Barnum and cares only for the financial gain Desdemona has to provide. His loss of revenue is the main reason Brabantio is angry Othello steals his daughter away. This language of stealing also signifies that Desdemona is an object to be owned, and that Othello is a thief who robs Brabantio.

The same relationship exists in *Desdemonum* as Brabantium describes the situation to the judge. While the judge decides whether Brabantium or Oteller maintain the rights to Desdemonum, Brabantium laments to the judge how "Dat darky's *stole* my daughter, but de act I'll make him rue" (5 emphasis added). Not only is Desdemonum a commodity that can be stolen in this burlesque, but she also demonstrates the dependence women had on men in the nineteenth century. In order to be supported financially under True Womanhood, Desdemonum needed a man to provide for her financially. Within the scene she either belongs to Oteller or Brabantium; she can never take ownership of herself. Later in that same *Desdemonum* scene, Brabantium completely blames Oteller for seducing Desdemonum with his black magic. Oteller instead implies Desdemonum had complete control over her own decision by confessing to the judge, "De gal, you see, got struck wid me / and would to parson go" (8). According to Oteller, Desdemonum fell in love with him on her own accord, and it was she who pushed the hardest for marriage. Oteller suggests women have an extended freedom to make their own decisions, even those consisting of gender code transgressions and financial decisions, like marriage—a rare stance for men to take during the mid-nineteenth century.

However, Othello is not always pictured as a progressive supporter of women's rights. The Othello within *Othello; A Burlesque* also carries an opposite ideology that supports Brabantio's view of Desdemona as an object for financial gain. Othello promises Desdemona in Scene II that "…hand in hand we'll take a stand, / To spend Brabantio's money—away, away, &c" (4). Wealth could have been the reason Othello married Desdemona. Since the burlesque never specifies if the money he and Desdemona will spend is tangible currency, the money could be signifying Desdemona herself since

she is the large—both physically and financially—source of income that Brabantio was planning to invest. In any case, whether the money means cash or Desdemona, one of Othello's, and probably Iago's, motivations in pursuing Desdemona was for financial gain. It is little wonder, when Desdemona is seen as property, that both Iago and Brabantio are agitated in this play; both lose a large chunk of their capitol because Desdemona transgresses the prescribed female role.

Though Desdemona, by marrying Othello, seems to escape the auction blocks of slavery and an unwanted marriage to Iago, the minstrel stage condemns Desdemona's success through Iago. Unlike Shakespeare's original text, Iago's revenge is not meant for Othello. His viciousness is targeted at Desdemona alone, not only because she slighted him as a potential lover, but also because she had full control in directing their relationship. In *Othello; A Burlesque*, Iago relates that Desdemona led him on "and by the way she treated [him], [he] thought she'd soon be [his]" (4). Desdemona instead dominates Iago, who is emasculated by Desdemona's control over him. Iago vows to reclaim his rightful power, even if it results in Desdemona's death. Similarly in *Desdemonum*, instead of achieving domination over Desdemona through marriage, Roderigum, is given "the mitten" (*Desdemonum* 6). By leading these men on and evading their marriage proposals, Desdemona shuns the submissive female gender role and threatens to emasculate men.

White man's fear of emasculation and castration was a large impetus behind the strict confines of the female sphere. As women began redefining their own social spheres by taking on multiple masculine characteristics through their gradual entrance into the public world, afterpieces like Griffin's *Othello; A Burlesque* poked fun at these ambitious

women to relieve the male audience's fears of losing their domination and identity within the public sphere. Desdemona reduces women to comedic characters as she adopts masculine traits and transgresses all laws of womanhood. In Scene III after Othello's enraged spousal abuse gives Desdemona a black eye, she vows,

> But I'll have satisfaction on that nigger
> As sure as my name's Desde. Oh, my head
> It aches like fury. So I'll go to bed.
> (Bus.[iness] Lies down and snores) (8)

True to the form of signification explored by Gates, this stanza crackles with puns. Desdemona quips that she will have "satisfaction" on Othello, signifying violent and sexual connotations, both which are uncouth and defy the traits upheld by True Womanhood. Defying such codes unseats Desdemona from her holy calling as a "Female Saviour" (Cruea 190) and drops her in the dangerous, unchartered social territory of female masculinity. Annemarie Bean, recognizing the impact of these masculine women, comments that "If women had equal rights, minstrels argued, they would be 'lowered' from their exalted moral position until they would lose their femininity and act like rowdy men" (88). Desdemona illustrates a "rowdy man," with her defiant nature, manly snoring, and her large girth, all which make her both unnatural and comedic.

But even Desdemona's simplest acts of unlady-like behavior, such as snoring, are not the only signs of the minstrel show's effort to punish manly women. True to Gates' theory of signification, there are other ways in which Desdemona resists containment. According to Lott, the body is seen as an object to be controlled, so that "activities such as spitting, eating, or yawning may become areas of refusal to conform to the dictates of

propriety" (157). Desdemona's snoring in Griffin's play, then, though comedic, represents an act of defiance. By defying a ladylike role, women are defying propriety, but more accurately, defying their powerless position as property. In defying all sense of womanhood, they also lose all respect. Though both Desdemona characters prosper onstage for a while, their transgressions of True Womanhood lead to a failed marriage, a husband driven to madness, and ultimate death—all under the farce of comedy. Charles Townsend mentions in his handbook of Negro minstrels that the pinnacle of comedy within minstrelsy lay in the oppressed, lower classes—and I would add women—almost gaining control or power, but failing miserably and humorously at the end of the act. The characters' proximity to success was the component the audience enjoyed seeing the most (Townsend 10). In the first scene of *Othello, A Burlesque*, the audience assumes Desdemona will resemble a Circassian-type character, but the later description of her lack of submission, aggression, and obesity exempts her from aligning with them. The Circassians, depicted as delicate beauties, willingly obeyed their family's slavery transaction with P.T. Barnum; Desdemona on the other hand, a large, masculine, and obstinate woman, escaped her circus destiny by marrying a man of her own volition. It was these masculine traits that converted Desdemona's deplorable state to a comical farce, reassuring men in the audience of the absurdity of a male-dominating woman and that retribution awaited the woman who denied her feminine calling. In these ways the afterpiece shows how unruly women are tempted by power but inevitably squander it.

The threatening women characters were also bridled onstage because a White man always performed the Desdemona wench character within Ethiopian afterpieces, which diminished the credibility of the "women" onstage. These female impersonators

dealt with the threat of women by depicting them with exaggerated vulgar male characteristics. According to Bean, "gender impersonation and blackface minstrelsy are two uniquely Anglophone forms that combined in performances in the Jacksonian age of America" (246). Gender impersonation and blackface were consistently blended together within American entertainment. Though both gender impersonation and minstrelsy seem like embarrassing and demeaning contributions to American society, and rightly so, Bean recognizes that these two areas are the first steps America took in creating clever, original forms of entertainment. Lott, who further explores this idea of masculinity and impersonation on the minstrel stage, hones in on the power and motivation behind cross-dressing. He mentions "…psychoanalysts consider one form of cross-dressing in men to be a way of warding off castration anxiety, of recovering the phallus for heterosexuality….proving femininity will not take away their maleness" (161). Burlesque in particular, Lott says, was "the language of defensiveness, and the first of its referents is the apparently profane and murderous power of women" (159). By conquering these women onstage, men in the audience were able—through blackface characters—to conquer fears of women obtaining more authoritative roles in American society. But it was the blackface impersonators, especially the wench, which assuaged men's fears by stepping inside the female sphere. Lhamon explains this strange connection of minstrelsy to the female world by focusing on the word "minstrel" and its similarity to the word "menstrual." Besides a resemblance in name, Lhamon explains there is further support behind his seemingly outlandish connection. He divulges a ritual in African American cultures where a clown or trickster character must travel into uncharted territory to secure a powerful medicine. This medicine is usually "symbolized by menstrual blood, but

sometimes, also, by feces and urine mixed with female pubic hair….or mud smeared on the body or face" (179). The mud represents the bunt-cork, or grease paint actors smeared religiously on their faces, which became the icon of Negro minstrelsy. Lhamon explains that blackface characters enter into these forbidden zones in proxy for the audience. Instead of risking the dangers for themselves, the audience members could glean the information without having to tread in taboo areas and risk emasculation.

The wench trickster character represents the brave, transcendent clown from this African lore, but even more, the wench represents Esu in this situation. As an ethereal character who can be in multiple spheres at once, the wench carries the secrets of womanhood and becomes a trustworthy informant to the male audience who are able to live through her experience. The blackface wench was able to funnel the mysterious power of women through the burnt cork "mud" on her face while simultaneously assuming feminine characteristics. However, according to Lhamon's quote, not only the female characters of the stage have this power, but all who wear the mud of the blackface mask can transcend the gender sphere. This understanding turns blackface minstrelsy into a sign of male domination over the female gender. And just as the African trickster secured "powerful medicine" to slather on their faces, blackface actors also believed the burnt-cork held a sacred element that aided in the minstrel show's success. The blackface mask assumed a superstitious status where many actors were afraid that if they misapplied their mask, it would deeply affect their performance (Townsend 10). By controlling the mask, and subconsciously controlling women, minstrel characters could control all violations of gender norms enacted on the stage. Verification that the blackface character successfully entered and conquered the female realm is seen in

Desdemonum as the stage directions state, "(He [Oteller] smothers her with the cushions)" (9). Oteller takes a piece of the domestic world, a cushion, and uses it to murder the "queen" of the private sphere. By taking an element from the women's realm of the household, Oteller shows perfect mastery over women.

Along with bridling women on the minstrel stage, minstrel actors also castrated women and Black men to erase all threat of White male's emasculation (Collin 89). For instance, in *Desdemonum*, Rodrigum exclaims

> Ring de bell and beat de gong
>
> Fotch your swords an' guns along;
>
> While I sing a little song—
>
> My darter's cut her stick!

The stanza above signifies at least two possible meanings that register from "cut her stick." The first reading can signify an Irish definition, solidifying the connection once again of White oppression toward both Blacks and the Irish. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* defines the phrase "*I must cut my stick--i.e.* leave. The Irish usually cut a shillelah [wooden walking stick] before they start on an expedition…" Once again, the Irish are stamped on the history of minstrelsy. However, "cut her stick" also conveys the last, more sexual connotation. The "stick" could instead represent a phallic symbol, making "cutting the stick" a reference to castration—symbolically representing Desdemonum's femininity and Oteller's Black sexuality—in order to appease the audience's anxiety concerning intermarriage between races. As Desdemona and Othello dance around the stage in each other's arms, Othello claims, "Oh, Desdy, dear, now you're my wife, / I mean to pass a happy life Away, away, &c / I'll never more be

melancholy / but be happy, gay, and jolly. Away, away, &c" (7). Desdemona responds, "I love you and you love me, and all our lives we'll merry be.—Away, away, and &c." Their duet seems to be a sincere romantic passion between an interracial couple, but Desdemonum is castrated because of her desexualized wench character: a man playing a woman in blackface. The female impersonator, the wench, inhabited the spheres of both men and women, creating this sexless creature as has been previously stated.

However, though the wench assuaged the cultural problems with interracial passion, she instead sparked other terms of sexuality, such as homosexuality. Because the wench was in reality a man, the scene of miscegenation is simultaneously a scene depicting two men of different race professing love for each other and entering into marriage. Not only is this scene dealing with forbidden relationships between ethnicities, but also homoeroticism, which was an even more taboo during the nineteenth century. Oddly, it was often these verboten feelings that drew the audience to live out their fascination of and horror with emasculation in the afterpieces printed by The Happy Hours Company. However, despite its homosexual lure, the wench was still often seen as a sexless character; it was the mask that enabled this new, promiscuous clown character to occupy this newly created, and potentially dangerous, space (Lott 166).

To expunge the blatant threats of othered groups, the African American characters within the play, like the female, also needed to be castrated. The most explicit references to this desexualizing activity occur before Othello and Desdemonum are married and Othello sings, "Now sheath'd be my sword, / And to beauty Let duty, let duty gib way" (4). A sword is a phallic symbol, which signifies that Othello on one level appears to be describing sexual penetration—it is Othello's duty and right as a husband to fulfill his

sexual conjugal rights. True to Collin's idea of the sexually charged phallic black body, Othello is eager to perform these rights "widout delay" (4). Such sexualized power from a black character aroused intense fear from the audience. To combat this retaliation of the audience, Lott suggests "minstrel songs and dances conjured up not only the black body but its labor, not only its sexuality but its place and function in a particular economy" (117). By alluring the audience with these lines but also defining where the Black body belonged—which was in a subordinate position to Whites due to their vernacular and outrageous outfits—the minstrel stage controlled the space where the audience could live out their fantasies without fear of them becoming reality. Minstrelsy created a new frontier for entertainment where race and gender were malleable entities poked and stretched to such extremes that they no longer could be identified with one particular race or gender. Blackface simultaneously encompassed and conquered everyone and no one at the same time and created a circus of spinning confusion that left the audience in wonderment, but also confident that the only sure and secure foundation was the status quo.

Female subordination and the strict gender restraints within the minstrel stage may seem to enforce a hopeless situation for women of the nineteenth century. However, Frederick Douglass, though speaking of the ignorant stereotypes blackface conjured, suggested that any time a Black man was represented on stage, it was a step toward African American acceptance and progression. The same idea could be suggested for women. Even though women were often ridiculed, especially when transgressing gender boundaries, any time they were represented onstage meant women's rights issues were

continually revisited. Any recognition could be an empowering step toward social change.

CONCLUSION: VESTIGES OF MINSTRELSY IN MODERN AMERICA

During the nineteenth century, to achieve the American Dream was to achieve some shade of Whiteness, or acceptance. As other scholars have focused solely on White culture's hatred and racist stereotypes, I hope to establish that this simple formula is complicated by blackface minstrelsy. The mask itself gave freedom because like the Cain of the minstrel stage and the African god, Esu, the blackface mask enabled the simultaneous inhabitation of two spheres and became a contradiction in itself, both freeing and enslaving; simultaneously racist and an advocate of subordinates' rights—the mask became a symbol of new beginnings and a new frontier.

However, at the turn of the twentieth century, minstrelsy faded in popularity as the audience was propelled toward the burgeoning vaudeville performances. Though minstrelsy was replaced by the newest entertainment in popular culture, blackface performance continued into the 1960s; but by then, original blackface mask was ripped from its historical roots. Without the medicinal mud associated with the minstrel characters found in African lore, the mask lost its connection to nineteenth-century racial relations and the woman's movement. Because of this, the minstrel mask was soon reduced to mere racism once removed from its cultural context. The audience no longer knew what lessons to take away from blackface performances, as the word minstrel comes from the word "minister," which means to teach (Lhamon 12). Though farcical, afterpieces dealt with social issues, signifying changes that needed to be addressed by those who understood the multiple layers occurring on the stage. However, once popular culture like Shakespeare and blackface minstrelsy began to fade at the turn of the

twentieth century and was replaced by the audience’s fervor for vaudeville, the permeability of racial and gender spheres on the stage disappeared with them.

Many modern-day Americans, ignorant of the rich background behind Blackface minstrelsy, are ashamed of what seems to be a simplified racist history of domination. On one layer, it is; but on a deeper, cultural excavation, blackface minstrelsy is more complicated than it appears. And though it seems a trend of the past, remnants of the minstrel stage still remain in our culture today. Pop culture, especially film and music, depict minstrel characters like Zip Coon or the wench—like M.C. Hammer’s music video during the 1990s (Bean 245). On other occasions, like the reversed stereotypes of Desdemona and Othello in *Othello; A Burlesque*, Black men have inverted the system and painted themselves White to poke fun at White culture. The movie *White Chicks* implements the wench character in reverse. Instead of a White man masquerading as a woman in blackface, Black men don white makeup and parade as White females—shocking twenty-first century America just as blackface minstrels surprised and horrified their nineteenth-century audience.

An even more discreet vestige of blackface exists in our very own grocery stores. Just as the grinning Ethiopian character mischievously peeking from under the curtain marked all Ethiopian burlesque afterpieces, a related minstrel character peeks at us from a pancake box on the pantry shelf. Aunt Jemima, who was inspired by the minstrel wench character Old Aunt Jemima in the nineteenth-century, depicts a plantation mammy. Though Aunt Jemima has been whitewashed from the blatant minstrel symbol she presented during the early 1900s, she remains a mammy rendition of Uncle Tom, a demure slave who is at ease with her status of servitude. With Aunt Jemima and various

other traces of minstrel influence found in pop culture, minstrelsy has played its last trick of multiple signifying. Americans, ashamed of this piece of American history, are consuming the very racism they are so ashamed of. Just as the nineteenth-century audience visually ingested the agendas of the minstrel stage, we are currently consuming it through our food options of the twenty-first century. The minstrel stage, now often misunderstood and even more often overlooked, has built itself into American culture and pancake mix is just the tip of the iceberg. Minstrelsy has become a buried icon of American history that will be consistently embedded within our culture.

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