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THE THEME OF COMIC LOVE IN BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY: THE ANATOMY OF THE GROTESQUE

The past thirty or so years have seen a considerable upsurge in blackface minstrelsy's criticism. A lot of scholarly attention has been devoted to contemplating various aspects (racial, class, gender, political, cultural, etc.) connected with this once popular and influential form of the American theater. Among the most frequently debated issues is the racial aspect of minstrelsy, which also appears to be the major source of its recent appeal. This has resulted in a relative neglect of aesthetic considerations, which, however, should not be divorced from the concomitant issues of race, class, and gender. Thus it was inevitable that while attending to the central problems of race and class in early blackface, recent critics of minstrelsy should also touch upon aesthetic aspects such as mimicry (Berndt Ostendorf), misrepresentation (Sam Dennison, Robert Toll), counterfeit (Eric Lott), as well as the related issues of burlesque, travesty and parody. As a result, a whole spate of aesthetic terminology has by now sprung up with no one volunteering to sort out the various categories, or interpret them with regard to their special relevance in minstrelsy. The present study is intended as a preliminary attempt to reflect upon the complexity of aesthetic inquiries into minstrelsy, and it will also chart out options for further research along these lines.

The aesthetic quality addressed in this paper is the *grotesque*, which many have identified as instrumental in the production and subsequent proliferation of the minstrel image and stereotypes. The following analysis will highlight some layers and aspects of the minstrel performance where the *grotesque* played a major role; and for lack of space I will concentrate exclusively on one minstrel theme popularized widely in thousands of minstrel lyrics (one of the most fertile grounds for the analysis of the *grotesque*), that of comic love.

1. THE GROTESQUE IN LITERATURE VERSUS THE MINSTREL GROTESQUE

The heart and soul of the *grotesque* as a universal aesthetic quality is ambivalence, ambiguity or paradox, mostly resulting from distortion of the normal. From its beginnings, the *grotesque* was understood as a branch of the comic, which conjoined two apparently incongruous and disparate qualities, something threatening and benign at one and the same time. In literature, the *grotesque* always denotes a "disjunctive image, scene, or larger structure, composed of comic-horrific elements or otherwise irreconcilable parts" (Barasch 560). In literary history this base definition has gone through various shifts and changes and, inevitably, various times and periods interpreted and utilized this core definition in many different ways.

The *grotesque* is claimed to have originated with the Dionysian festivals in ancient Greece, "where celebrants dressed as satyrs ... sang abusive songs in the belief that degradation and destructions would assure birth and renewal" (Barasch 560). These basic destruction-renewal and degeneration-regeneration dichotomies were further expanded in Roman mime theater, where the comic love theme as an endless source of *grotesque* possibilities already reached the stage. Quite interestingly, this Roman mime theater seems to have possessed almost all the necessary ingredients for *grotesque* theater which later the minstrels were to incorporate in their expressive repertoire. Besides the *grotesque theme* (mostly farcical plots dealing with love),

this type of theater also employed "bestial masks and used exaggerated gestures, grimaces and obscene body language" (Barasch 560), as well as stock characters of various sorts. Here, for the first time in literary history, we might see a long line of *grotesque paraphernalia*: stock characters, masks, gestures and grimaces, which the 19th-century minstrel theater was to incorporate next (clearly entirely irrespective of and independently of the heritage of the Roman theater).

By the Middle Ages this aesthetic quality had infiltrated a widening spectrum of literary forms and types, and thus the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw the rise of bawdy tales and roguish jests primarily through the stories of Boccaccio and Chaucer. Among the new *grotesque character types* we witness the emergence of comic sinners, tricksters, dupes, many of whom "convey animalistic images harbored within the varied forms of mankind" (Barasch 561). The thematic realm of the *grotesque* also broadened while the 15th century was going to introduce its chivalric romances about the struggle between the monstrous and the beautiful, which finally coalesced in the paradigm of the beauty and the beast. The war between good and evil for the soul of man discussed in the morality plays is probably one of the most elemental representations of the essence of the *grotesque* through literary history.

The Renaissance period with its literary innovations of *grotesque techniques, style* and *genres* is most likely the age to which we should turn to look for the actual sources of the minstrel genre. This period's great inventions in terms of the *grotesque* are exaggeration (which the minstrel theater is going to be founded upon through its exaggeration of character, speech, and situation), the appearance of the horrific-comic style, and ambivalence as the keyword to understand *grotesque* logic (Barasch 562). To what extent and how these European, predominantly French and English, innovations could be influential on 19th-century blackface theater is almost impossible to trace here;[1]

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[1] Theories of intercontinental borrowings are at best dubious and questionable, and also without historical documentation to support their arguments. Two facts can be

similarities between these stylistic and technical phenomena might simply be accidental or casual. Not so, however, with the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, a theatrical tradition often identified as the origin of the minstrel stage.[2]

Although the *grotesque* features and qualities present in the *commedia* were mostly borrowings from classical plays and times (such as the stock characters: the parasite, the servant, lovers, the braggart soldier it imported from antiquity, or the exaggerated style it borrowed from medieval and ancient farce [Barasch 563]), yet the *commedia* also brought in novel elements to be mixed into the idea of the *grotesque,* which later would be of major import in the *minstrel grotesque* as well. These were the introduction of regional dialect in an exaggerated manner to denote rural character types (a method later applied in the construction of the minstrel dialect), the emergence of comic and *grotesque props* (to be discussed separately), and grotesque dance numbers, as well as novel *grotesque commedia* scenarios.

The next, and probably final, stage in the cultural history of the *grotesque*, echoes of which are going to be found in the minstrel *grotesque*, was the rise of the *gothic-grotesque* in the 18th and 19th centuries all over Europe and later in America (see Charles Brockden Brown, Poe, Melville, Hawthorne). In this distinct type of the *grotesque* (applied in Europe chiefly by German and English masters such as Büchner, Klinger, Blake, Coleridge) comedic techniques were put to tragic purpose, "and the old carnival fun [relevant in previous grotesque representations] ... [was] replaced by the threatening quality of the grotesque" (Barasch 566). This latter, gloomier aspect of the

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ascertained at this point, one, that from the 17th century on several European plays and novels reached America, and were either adopted to the American stage or circulated in book form; and, two, that there are certain universals in the development of human ideas (thoughts, styles, ways of expression) which occur simultaneously throughout the world because of the similarities in human or social formation, history and cultural development. For a more detailed analysis of "universalism" see George Rehin's "Harlequin..." 682—701.

[2] For more on the *commedia dell'arte* origins of blackface minstrelsy see Rehin's "Harlequin," and Richard Moody's "Negro Minstrelsy."

grotesque evolving with the literature of the gothic accentuating the horrific and the demonic as opposed to the lightly humorous, was again a tendency later reinvoked in certain motifs of the minstrel genre.

And thus this sketchy (and apparently incomplete) account of the historical development of the literary *grotesque* takes us to the America of the early 19th century, where the blackface minstrel established, invented or reinvented yet another distinct branch of the *grotesque*, the so-called *minstrel grotesque*.

Before attempting a tentative working definition of the *minstrel grotesque*, however, certain conceptual or theoretical questions need to be addressed. As can be seen in the above historical survey of the *literary grotesque*, the term has been applied through the centuries to denote rather varied aspects of literary creation: essentially an aesthetic quality signifying external as well as inner properties of the art work projected (applicable to character, theme, structure, content, idea, motif, or tone alike); yet, it was also linked with a variety of literary forms and styles, techniques as well as modes of representation.

With the rise of modern and postmodern literary theory, critics have begun to look upon the *grotesque* not exclusively as an aesthetic quality and artistic method of representation, but as an ideology, concept or structure that penetrates the author's mind, and brings about psychological dualities in the artist's mind and work (see Schlegel, Jean Paul). Theorists of the reader-response school, on the other hand, applied the *grotesque* to generate theories about simultaneous controversial responses to literary texts. Thus, *grotesque* as an aesthetic principle, a conceptual framework and an essential structural idea have by now penetrated the whole terrain of the literary culture: art, artist and audience alike.

Beyond the literary sphere of reference, the *grotesque* has also been seen as a term applicable to subliterary forms of (artistic) expression; and it has also been applied to express a world view, or a philosophy of culture and society. Therefore in the following analysis of the *minstrel grotesque* it is essential to distinguish at least three basic designations of the term: (a) the *minstrel grotesque* as a literary

phenomenon; (b) the *minstrel grotesque* as a subliterary or popular cultural ideology, and (c) the *minstrel grotesque* as world view or philosophy of culture and society.

(A) THE MINSTREL GROTESQUE AS A LITERARY PHENOMENON

Minstrelsy can be perceived as a component of the American literary culture, thus minstrel lyrics, characters, themes and the style it established can all be investigated along predominantly aesthetic lines. The *minstrel grotesque* in this basically aesthetic analysis is to signify all *grotesque* elements, features and characteristics which appear in early blackface minstrelsy, and which show striking similarities with several earlier-mentioned *grotesques* (in terms of style, character, technique, quality and mode) that occurred throughout pre-minstrel literary history. This is, however, not to claim that the *minstrel grotesque* was in any way directly indebted to these earlier representations, besides, of course, the quite distinct and historically ascertained *commedia* roots.

On the more general level, the category of the *minstrel grotesque* as a predominantly aesthetic quality is to signify all the literary minstrel phenomena in which a unique variation from the normal can be perceived. Thus, formal distortions of the natural are present in it as (1) ambiguous or ambivalent elements, features, characteristics, concepts, ideologies such as the ugly and laughable, the distorted/deformed and the attractive, the pleasure-giving and disgusting are combined in it for comic purposes; (2) it links with the bizarre, strange and unusual, fearsome and demonic aspect of the grotesque (an aspect that leads back to the terminology and phenomena of the *gothic-grotesque*)[3] (3) the technique of "exaggeration beyond caricature [is] carried [in it] to fantastic extremes" (a concept of Schneegans described in Makaryk

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[3] See Wolfgang Kayser on the "gothic-grotesque," a cultural as well as literary theory, where he sees the grotesque as "a structure of the estranged world," the primary purpose of which is "to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (Makaryk 88).

88). These three broad areas of incongruity within the *grotesque* are to be remembered in the subsequent discussion of particular manifestations.

(B) THE MINSTREL GROTESQUE AS SUBLITERARY PHENOMENON AND IDEOLOGY

Minstrelsy in this interpretation is more a phenomenon of the rich store of 19th-century American subliterary culture than a mode of literary expression. However, viewing minstrelsy purely as popular art without any pretense at refinement is, as it were, the traditional "reading" of the phenomenon. A branch of popular entertainment "for the people by the people" was one of the basic slogans upon which the minstrel stage was founded.

Karl Friedrich Flögel, the first theoretician to see the *grotesque* manifested in subliterary forms, found several examples of it in low burlesque and farce over the centuries. His "tea-kettle" theory, according to which "the subliterary grotesque expressed an essential need of mankind to find comic relief from the monotony of work by letting off steam through indulgence in the crude pleasures of carnival festivity" (Makaryk 86), is also applicable to minstrel performances and audiences, although here an important component of institutionalized comic relief was embedded in social tension that grew out of the racial controversies of the day, rather than viewer anxieties created by work.

Minstrelsy analyzed along these lines can easily be seen firstly as the minstrel performer's flight from the contemporaneous problems of race and class, and his indulgence in carnivalesque fun through the image of the physically deformed and mentally disfigured darky and, secondly, minstrel stages offered an easy outlet for minstrel audiences, who were also welcome to the fun through the enjoyment of the cruel and often aberrant imagery.

Thus in minstrelsy the Flögelean *grotesque* operates in two channels simultaneously: giving comic relief to the minstrel performer whose escape from the tensions of the time was secured through the

"comic-horrific" image he turned himself into; while minstrel audiences could let the steam off by laughing at and also pitying the image presented.

(C) THE MINSTREL GROTESQUE AS A WORLD VIEW AND A PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

As noted by critics, minstrelsy, as an institutionalized form of popular theater played a major role in spreading popular ideologies of culture and society, and therefore functioned essentially as a shaper of the popular social consciousness and of the cultural awareness of the masses. Ostendorf, for instance, sees minstrelsy as "a symbolic slave code, a set of humiliating rules designed by white racists for the disenfranchisement of the black self" (66); Toll describes it as "the first example of the way American popular culture would exploit and manipulate Afro-Americans and their culture to please and benefit white Americans" (51); while Saxton has called it "half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy" (27); and examples could be quoted endlessly to prove that blackface minstrelsy clearly worked as a philosophy of culture (a cultural and also social and political ideology) through which the dominance of white cultural and political practices was reassured and rehearsed in code.

What should be obvious in this connection is that we are witnessing a sort of ideological game in minstrelsy. One way of understanding ideology is through looking at the repertoire of images, themes and ideas disseminated for broad public consumption by and for the dominant culture. In American culture, where a multitude of priorities have existed but not all of them prevailed, the very process of institutionalized or semi-institutionalized selection of images for a wide public audience (via, for instance, the minstrel network) was strongly reflective of interests and commitments determined mostly from above. Thus the selective process—along with its concomitant repudiation and subversion of alternative frames of reference (i.e. its suppression of the counter-culture)—has always been, intrinsically ideological.

Minstrelsy as a public theory of culture and society is closest to Bakhtin's view of the *grotesque*, where "the comic aspect of the folk carnival [is endowed] with meaningful philosophical content that expresses utopian ideals of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" ((Makaryk 88). This is a theory also strangely present in the conceptual framework of the minstrel show, which suggested acculturation, assimilation, and intermixture as possible cultural and political alternatives for Blacks, while in actuality it strongly moved against these "threatening" processes. Under the guise of these utopistic cultural principles, the blackface actor was given sufficient freedom to do whatever he pleased with the pseudo-black stage image or the pseudo-cultural baggage he was supposed to carry.

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Having observed the most essential manifestations and varieties of the *minstrel grotesque*, I will bring this analysis to more practical grounds, illustrating its concrete realizations through the minstrel lyrics. Concrete examples will be brought primarily to indicate the embodiments of the *literary minstrel grotesque* from the theme of comic love alone. Analysis will thus include the characters involved in the comic love theme; physical manifestations; bizarre props and costumes; plots and happenings; and further areas of the *minstrel grotesque* such as mask, language, and dance. References to wider aspects of the *minstrel grotesque* will be made throughout the following review, incorporating the subliterary, social, cultural and racial domains that minstrelsy and the aesthetics qualities linked to it also penetrate.

2. GROTESQUE CHARACTERS OF THE COMIC LOVE THEME

Besides the two well-established stereotypes popularized by minstrel stages, the Happy Plantation Darky and the Northern Dandy

Darky, the most memorable and lasting *grotesques*[4] on the minstrel stage came out of the theme of *comic love*. From the many comic love clichés that came to be paraded on the minstrel stages all across America, I will focus on the character of the Ugly Female, while also noting the strong presence of two further stereotypes entering the stage with the comic love songs of minstrelsy, and accompanying the figure of the *Ugly Female*: the *Jealous Black Lover* and the *Seducer*.

The primary source of the *grotesque* quality in these character portraits was physical deformity which was vicariously conveyed to the public by means of the minstrel lyrics, or through direct visualization: the images of the sheet music covers and the very appearance of the minstrel performer. While the physical deformity of the male characters was not new to minstrel audiences, since the two core stereotypes were also built largely upon *physical grotesque*, the comic love theme introduced the black female in addition, to serve as the butt of minstrel jokes.

Although much of the humor of the comic love theme derived from situation comedy, the stereotype of the Ugly Female was largely built upon physical ridicule, similarly to the characters of the Happy Plantation Darky and the Dandy Darky. Besides the ludicrous situations the black female was caught up in by the side of her black lover and her secret suitor, the black female was often parodied because of her alleged physical defects. Interestingly enough, as Sam Dennison observes, the exaggerated physical features of the black female were frequently perceived as adding to, rather than decreasing, the desirability of the black woman (Dennison 117).

Her form was round, her step was light —
But, wan't her bustle heavy?[5]

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[4] "Grotesques" here denotes all the stereotypes represented on the minstrel stages, whose grotesqueness was due to a curious mixture of physical and also often mental deformity and ridiculousness.

[5] "The Yaller Gal With A Josey On" quoted in Dennison 120.

The *grotesqueness* of the black female's physical appearance was extended to every feature of her body. Songsmiths left not a single body part intact from ridicule. A recurring cliché of the character was her oversized body, feet and mouth. The fatness of the female body was contemplated in many a minstrel song. "The Ole Gray Goose," for instance, described the size of Miss Dinah Rose's body in such exaggerated manner: "she war by gosh so berry fat/ I couldn't sit beside her" (Starr)[6].

Most Ugly Female jokes revolved around the black female's facial features (specified, for instance, as a "sooty 'plexion" in one version of "Old Dan Tucker"), the color of her eyes, lips and teeth (e.g. "her teef was like de clar grit snow/ And her eyes like dem beans dat shine from de Moon/ sharper dan de teef of de Possum and de Koon," in "Who's Dat Nigga..."), the size of the mouth, the lips and the teeth (e.g. "Her lips war big, she could sing like a pig,/ Her mouth stretched from ear to ear" in "In De Wild Rackoon Track"[7]). A considerable number of wild metaphors applied to characterize facial features used animal similes underlining the alleged animality of the black female in a manner similar to the treatment of the pseudo black male of minstrelsy. Other similes directed attention to the sexual appeal of the black female. In a popular version of "Lubly Fan Will You Come Out To Night?,"[8] in the Starr Collection, pieces the black female's lips are made

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[6] References to "Starr" indicate a quote from the Starr Sheet Music Collection's minstrel lyrics at Indiana University's Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana.

[7] "Old Dan Tucker," "Who's Dat Nigga" and "In De Wild Rackoon Track" all quoted in Dennison 122—3, and 134—5.

[8] "Lubly Fan" Brown University, Harris Collection, no. 39. In Starr. M1.S8, Afro-Americans before 1863. The song, according to the Brown University notes for the piece, is evidently the long-lost original of the "Bowery Gals." It was written by Cool White, the year after he had organized the Virginia Serenaders, and it was sung by his banjoist, Jim Carter. Nobody seems to know why it was as "Buffalo Gals" that the song became famous. It is sung by Jim in chapter II of *Tom Sawyer* (Brown Library Notes).

to resemble the "oyster plant," a picture phrasing the sexual implications inherent in the black female figure rather explicitly.

The presence of the very real threat of sexual "amalgamation" or racial mixing between the black female and the white male was too close to everyday realities, and therefore was cautiously avoided by songsmiths. Instead, songwriters did their best to prove the black female undesirable and unattractive at every possible turn, a strategy already familiar from minstrel representations of the Dandy Darky character. To make a feature undesirable, songsmiths often turned to the method of exaggeration, and thus the *grotesque* came to life. Eyes, noses, ears, lips, mouths came to be enlarged over the limit. The enormous size of the black female's feet was also a favorite topic of Ugly Female songs, and it is quite amazing how inventive songsmiths grew on the subject. "Lubly Fan" had feet that "covered up de whole side-walk" leaving no room for her suitor, the heroine of "Who's Dat Nigga," Miss Dinah Crow could pride herself over such a gigantic foot that "when it dropt it was death to all creeping insects." Similarly disastrous effects resulted from the heels of Ugly Females described in songs such as "What A Heel She's Got Behind Her" (Dennison 125) or "The Ole Gray Goose." Miss Dinah Rose of the latter song, unlike many of her Ugly Female counterparts, did not feel even a little sore over her bodily disadvantage, to the contrary:

Says I to her: you Dinah Gal
Only looky dar
Dem heels are sticking out too far
As a niggar I declar.

Says she to me, you nigger Jo
What are you about
Dere's science in dem are heels
And I want em to stick out.
/Starr/

Probably the most vicious of all attacks minstrels launched on their female characters, was the imagery describing the characteristic odor of the female body. This notion was founded upon a "widespread belief among whites" that blacks had a strong, unpleasant smell (Dennison 124), while willingly forgetting the possibility that their own body odors might disturb blacks very much the same way. "Ginger Blue," described this commonly held stereotype through the representation of the black female:

Wid de nigga wenches ob de inhabitation
De gals looked well,
My eyes what a smell...
/Dennison 124/

The Ugly Black Female of minstrelsy like her male counterpart was a composition of *grotesque bodily features* from head to toe, therefore undesirable yet somehow exotic and strangely alluring, comic and repellent at the same time. The magnification and distortion of body parts went to such lengths that the image reached the borderline of the horrific. Although minstrel imagery sometimes did express this horror at the sight of the black female, it was more the sheet music covers which reflected this aspect of the *grotesque*, where the image of the alleged black female approximated the inhuman and the ape-like. The cover illustration of "Coal Black Rose" (the first comic love song in minstrelsy discussed later in more detail) depicted the pseudo-black female as an ape attired in beautiful costume, where confrontation between body and dress, the ideal female and the vulgar pseudo-black female, horror and comedy manifested the very essence of the *grotesque*. This depiction of the black female as a composite of startling and often even disgusting features later came to be standard in the comic black female imagery of the coon songs of the 1880s. Still somewhat later several characteristics of the Ugly Female were transformed into the mammy character of vaudeville stages, cartoons, postcards, and a variety of popular paraphernalia.

The third "vehicle" (besides minstrel lyrics and sheet music covers) that brought the *physical grotesque* of minstrelsy into the spotlight was the minstrel performer himself. As Toll and several other critics of minstrelsy note, the mainstream of minstrelsy was all-male even in the 1860s and 70s (139), and therefore female roles were traditionally acted out by male performers. Minstrel transvestism or the wench role, as it is popularly known, was introduced by the great masters of minstrelsy such as Barney Williams and George Christy (to whom the first song of this kind, "Lucy Long" is attributed), and later by Francis Leon, who was one of the most popular actors in this genre, and who was frequently taken for a member of the female sex because of his ingenious imitations.

The notion of the minstrel "wench," that is, the blackface male minstrel cross-dressing as a "sweet young thing" flirting and forcing beaux to steal kisses from "her" (Toll 140), was by itself the very embodiment of the *grotesque*. Here the binary opposition, which is at the heart of the *grotesque*, came full circle. The minstrel performer posing as the *ne plus ultra* of female sensuality was both repulsive and strangely attractive, familiar yet distant and different in a bizarre manner, comic as well as sadly deformed, male and female at the same time.

Although, as Toll observes, the prima donna or wench role was different from the low-comedy burlesque female role (of the Ugly pseudo-black female), it being "played seriously by an elegantly dressed performer in a very delicate manner" (140), *grotesque* deformity was undeniably part and parcel of this role.

Eric Lott goes much further in his interpretation of the wench character of minstrelsy. He analyzes minstrel transvestism as an expression of the "white men's fear of female power," which was overcome through the act of cross-dressing. "The attraction of all such representations," Lott declares, "appears to consist in portraying

'masculinized,' powerful women, not in order to submit but, through the pleasurable response, to take the power back" (161).[9]

It is hard to judge with any certainty what exactly was dramatized, inferred and acted out in the wench acts (whether taking into account the performer or the reaction and feelings of their audience); some note only the rarity or strangeness of the act (Toll), others like Lott go further to bring in psychosexual arguments about the homoerotic appeal or the white male's need to take the power back from women as inherent in such acts. Whichever interpretation we might accept, the *physical grotesque* in the phenomenon can undoubtedly be ascertained, and as for the racial, class and gender issues contained, it should suffice at this point to note their ambivalence, and complexity (which, however, might only be a result of projecting such implications into the act by late 20th-century observers).[10]

3. GROTESQUE ELEMENTS IN THE MINSTREL PROPS

Although minstrel props can easily be seen as part of the physical appearance of the minstrel performer, I intend to separate the biological from the cultural by divorcing the intrinsically bodily features of representation from objects attached to the body, essentially because

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[9] Eric Lott devotes a whole subchapter in his book *Love and Theft...* to the wench character, analyzing it both along gender as well as racial lines of inquiry. Besides seeing this character as an apparent manifestation of the white man's frustrations in regard to womanhood as well as his own masculinity, Lott also believes that the wench role offered ways "to demystify [the] black men's sexuality" as well as to express "white male desire for black men" (163), and in a true cavalcade of varied impulses of desire, hate, identification, rejection and need to annihilate rival and potential sexual mate, the familiar irony of race presented itself. "[T]he act derided white America for its fascination with blacks while at the same time it marketed the fascination. Surely this structure of feeling," Lott claims, "evidences again the precariousness or dissonance or conflictedness that marked white people's sense of their own whiteness" (166).

[10] On the ambivalence of racial issues treated in minstrelsy see Ostendorf 65—94, and Lott's *Love and Theft.*

of the complexity and the unique external and inner properties of the latter. It should be noted, however, that the essence of the aesthetic "error," the core of the *grotesque*, often lies in transferring the biological to the level of the culturally significant.

Minstrel props or accessories might have their roots with the Italian *commedia*, where players "wore demonic, bestial, leering masks; [and] ... leather phalluses that might be stuffed full for the Zani or hang limp for the Pantalone; later ones carried a sword and pouch in place of genitalia, and the Bawd carried a purse as a sign of her business or a rosary when she played a hypocrite" (Barasch 564). Clearly these *commedia* accessories show striking similarities with the paraphernalia applied in minstrelsy. Yet, whereas in the *commedia* these props served as mere triggers to stimulate laughter, in the minstrel theater comic accessories (just like the minstrel comedy in general) could not be divorced from their racial implications.

In minstrelsy "[t]he body was always grotesquely contorted, even when sitting; stiffness and extension of arms and legs announced themselves as unsuccessful sublimations of sexual desire.[...] Banjos were deployed in ways that anticipated the phallic suggestions of rock 'n' roll" (Lott 117). The explicitly vulgar imagery of sheet music covers and of minstrel lyrics served to strengthen, on the one hand, and to immediately undermine, on the other, the black man's sexual power and appeal. Therefore most *grotesque minstrel props* should be seen within this secretly communicated, coded racial subtext.

The most frequently applied props were the common minstrel instruments (banjo, bones, violin), which, as noted, often carried sexual implications, just like the accessories of the Comic Black Soldier such as "coattails hanging prominently between characters' legs [...], sticks or poles strategically placed near the groin or with other appendages occasionally hanging near or between the legs" (Lott 120). These *grotesque* props primarily belonged to the male stereotypes of the comic love theme, where sexual implications played a central role. The *grotesque* emerged partly as a result of the substitution of male sexual organs by objects (which by itself was a bizarre practice), plus the use

of these objects to generate comic, surprising and alienating effects, and all this through the exploitation of and fascination with the black male as the butt of jokes as well as the object of desire.

The bizarre, the highly exaggerated, the ambivalently attractive and repellent, yet always somehow perversely distorted was everywhere in the *grotesque props* appearing on sheet music covers, in minstrel lyrics and directly on the stage.

4. GROTESQUE MINSTREL SCENARIOS OF COMIC LOVE

The theme of love has always presented itself as a popular topic for the stage, whether writers dramatized its tragic or comic aspects. As expected, of all the themes that circulated widely on minstrel stages, it was undoubtedly the theme of love that proved most durable. In due course, like in established drama, the American popular minstrel stage also developed its own stereotypes and clichés for the love theme in its sentimental, melodramatic (the tragic mulatto formula) and comic modes. Therefore it is in the theme of comic love that we find the most fertile ground to examine variations on *grotesque minstrel scenarios*.

The very first burnt-cork song of comic love, "Coal Black Rose,"[11] is seen by many critics as also marking the beginning of the minstrel theater as such (Boskin 74). According to the Brown University notes for the song, George Washington Dixon was singing it as early as 1827, "while playing with a circus" (Wittke 18). Dixon was author of a number of early minstrel songs, and was widely known as one of the earliest blackface delineators. The Starr Collection version of the song cites Mr. W. Kelly as one of the many performers of the song, who got "unbounded applause" for his presentation, if we can believe the note on the sheet music cover.

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[11] "Coal Black Rose" Brown University, Harris Collection, no. 13. In Starr. M1.S8, Afro-Americans before 1863. The Starr Collection edition was written by White Snyder; although Dennison cites a John Clemens as another possible author of the song.

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

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

The minstrel show, however, had no interest in reality, or the actual reasons for historical conditioning, it wanted to entertain successfully, and to reach the goal the first thing it had to do was to turn its back on reality. The shows tried to justify the inhumanities of slavery (breaking up of families, selling married slaves to different owners, divorcing the child from the parents, etc.) by picturing the black as perfectly unfit for marriage. Slave marriages were pictured on the stage either as absolutely ridiculous, or disrupted by some *grotesque* disaster. In "The Yaller Gal With a Josey On,"[12] for instance, the songwriter expressed the black man's happiness over the elopement of his wife with a cattle driver. "Lucy Long,"[13] a popular minstrel song, remembered by Edward LeRoy Rice[14] as a tune "still is to be heard in remote hill-billy regions" (12), represented the black male as joyously expressing his willingness to get rid of his would-be wife:

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

Another minstrel air, "Will No Yaller Gal Marry Me?" declared the young husband's preference for a life-time bondage in slavery over the hardships of his marriage ("Help! oh, help me, Mister Lawyer, cut the

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12 "The Yaller Gal With A Josey On" quoted in Dennison 120.

13 "Lucy Long" Brown University, Harris Collection, no. 31. In Starr. M1.S8, Afro-Americans before 1863. The song was also identified in some minstrel repertories as "Take Your Time Miss Lucy," and what critics regard as the original version of the song came to be published in 1842. The Brown University notes for the text claim that in one of the many variants of the song "Miss Lucy crosses the color line and becomes wholly white" (Brown Notes).

14 Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy from "Daddy" Rice to Date* a collection of biographical sketches of the most famous minstrels.

rope and set me free,/ I will sell myself forever, if you will unmarry me!" (Dennison 120)). Slave marriages terminated by unusual events proved a similarly fruitful topic for songsmiths. "In "Rosa Lee," the mate "cotched a shocking cold"; "Sweet Rose of Caroline" was bitten by a rattlesnake and died; ..."Mary Blane"...[also] suffered a variety of misfortunes ..." (Dennison 110). "Dinah Crow"[15] from 1849 described the *grotesque* ending of a nice love affair:

> *One night I ax'd my Dinah, if she wid me would go*
> *A sailing cross the ribber for to see my fader Joe;*
> *When on de way so happy, so light and so gay,*
> *My Dinah she fell over board and on de botom lay.*
> /Starr/

In one version of the popular song, "Lucy Neal,"[16] Miss Lucy, the lover of an Alabama 'nigga' "was taken sick" and died a ludicrous death soon afterwards, because of eating too much corn meal. Minstrel sweethearts, mistresses and wives died various *grotesque*, sometimes even "funny" deaths. The imagination of songsmiths knew no bounds if love's tragicomic conclusion was the matter at hand.

Unlike the suitors of Miss Lucy Neale, Dinah Crow or Mary Blane, other minstrel lovers or husbands did not usually mourn their dead partners too long. "The Ole Gray Goose"[17] of 1844 pictured this lighthearted spirit of the minstrel black who could not be shaken by any disaster:

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[15] "Dinah Crow" Ethiopian Melody arranged for the Spanish guitar by Henry Chadwick; 1849.

[16] "Lucy Neal" published by G. Willig in 1844; "Miss Lucy Neale or The Yellow Gal," a celebrated Ethiopian Melody.

[17] "The Ole Gray Goose" Brown University, Harris Collection, no. 41. Available also in Starr. M1.S8, Afro-Americans before 1863. Cited as the "Gray Goose and Grander" in Dennison 124.

Monday was my wedding day
Tuesday I was married,
Wen'sdy night my wife took sick
Sat'day she was buried.

Wen'sdy night my wife took sick
Despair ob death cum o'er her
O! some did cry, but I did laff
To see dat death go from her.
/Starr/

Another version of the song quoted in Dennison registered the proceedings after the wife's death in a more explicit fashion, prefiguring some of the concluding events in Faulkner's poor white story of *As I Lay Dying*, where on the day of Addie's burial Anse Bundren goes off mysteriously by himself and then returns to his family with a new wife.

Saturday night my old wife died,
Sunday she war buried,
Monday was my courting day,
On Tuesday I got married.
/Dennison 124/

The pseudo-black male of minstrelsy did not take his relationships seriously, nor did he regard others' as sacred, or something to be respected. The stereotype of the Black Seducer and that of the Jealous Black Lover appeared together in most songs. The black male was pictured as at once careless and jealous in love. This discrepancy, however, did not seem to worry songsmiths who produced hundreds and hundreds of songs to fit both patterns. Most songs with the jealous lover theme fell back on the dramaturgy of "Coal Black Rose," which, as I have noted, set the convention for songs of this kind for several decades.

Although the script of the love-triangle theme did not show much diversity in songs, the reaction of the cheated lover to the treachery of his sweetheart varied from song to song. Some, like the cheated suitor of "Dearest Belinda"[18] by S. A. Wells, showed weakness and the inability to take revenge on their rivals. The song in question showed the black suitor as uneducated in chivalrous matters, and a coward in the rivalry between black males for the hand of the woman ("Belinda made me feel so bad,/I wished my rival dead,/My feelings got de best of me,/And so I went to bed."). This attitude prefigures E. Caldwell's treatment of callousness in the face of love betrayal in poor white families. To illustrate that the black male did not take his love affairs too much to heart, the black suitor went on singing:

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

In some songs the black male got satisfaction simply from threatening his rival, like in "Katy Dean," ("I'll call that darky out, I will, and kill him very dead" /Dennison 136/). Occasionally, calling the rival ludicrous names proved enough of a put down, as can be seen in the already quoted "Dearest Belinda" or in "Who's Dat Nigga Dar A Peepin'?"[19] Besides humiliation and ridicule, naming practices in both cases helped to join the pseudo-black male figures with the stereotype of the ludicrously pretentious black dandy. The maleness of Count

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[18] "Dearest Belinda" quoted in Dennison 136—7.

[19] "Who's Dat Nigga Dar A Peepin?" published by C.H. Keith in 1844. Starr Collection.

Mustache, and Massa Zip Coon, the comic black lovers in hiding—as cited in the respective songs —, thus came under attack from two sides simultaneously.

In the majority of blackface songs the pseudo-black male was eventually engaged in physical encounter after the unfaithfulness of his mistress had been revealed. The harmless threatening and name-calling between rivals most of the time served merely as a lead-in exercise and open confrontation soon followed. In "Who's Dat Nigga Dar A Peepin'?" (1844) or in "Tell Me Josey Whar You Bin" (1841) there is no doubt left that the revelation of the love triangle would end with physical confrontation between the parties concerned. "Tell Me Josey Whar You Bin,"[20] a duet sung by John W. Smith and Thomas E. ("Pickaninny") Coleman (Brown University Notes), pictured the infuriated lover as breaking the back of his rival in anger.

He. Lubly Dinah then I'll tell you
It happened in an oyster cellar
A nigger hit me wid a stick
He. I laid him right out on the stone
She. Joe, you did't break his bone
He. Yes, I heard something crack
She. Oh! Joe, you've broke the nigger's back.
/Starr/

„Who's Dat...," on the other hand, quite unusually, showed the black female getting bested in the fight in a rather bizarre, burlesque-like fashion:

Oh den us niggers you ort for to see
Dar was me hugging him and he was hugging me

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[20] "Tell Me Josey Whar You Bin" Brown University, Harris Collection, no. 29. In Starr Sheet Music Collection, Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana, M1.S8, Afro-Americans before 1863;

Oh he bit me pon my arm and tore my close
I fotch him a lick and broke Miss Dinahs nose /etc./
/Starr/

This kind of violence between the pseudo-black male and female characters was always presented in a light-hearted spirit in the shows, under the guise of "jealousy, braggadocio, bullying, and the like" (Dennison 134). Open degradation, ridicule and burlesque of the black male was quite unlikely on minstrel stages. Both social criticism and racial satire were delivered to audiences in a very subtle form. The primary suggestion of the blackface minstrel show was that it was pure comedy, and nothing else. An 1876 advertisement for the performance of the Georgia Minstrels in the *New York Clipper*, like many advertisements of the kind emphasized this purity of blackface presentations, it being completely free of racial burlesque:

> THE BOSTON ADVERTISER SAYS: Callender's band of the Georgia Minstrels presented an entertainment last evening that sparkled with fresh business, fresh jokes, and fresh music, and the charm of the whole was mainly to be found in the clever, realistic representation of broad Negro character, prompted by a good conception of the humorous side, without falling into the weakness of coarsely burlesquing it. The company is very strong*** They have no equals (*The New York Clipper* 18 March 1876: 408.)

Considering the extensiveness of minstrel materials on the comic theme of love, it is no exaggeration to state that this topic provided the most fruitful subject of all the various themes held up for comedy on the minstrel stages all around America, and certainly a bountiful site where the *minstrel grotesque* was flourishing in a variety of configurations. Situation comedy playing on bizarre and absurd confrontations and scenarios (grotesque deaths and fights), the downgrading of love through placing unworthy parties to act out elevated feelings, exaggeration of farcical situations and motifs, were

some of the techniques applied by songsmiths to create the *minstrel grotesque* in the thematic realm of the shows.

5. OTHER MANIFESTATIONS OF THE MINSTREL GROTESQUE

As can be seen in these examples, *minstrel grotesque* penetrated various layers of the show, from stereotyped characters to minstrel props, themes and motifs. Yet, as should also be obvious from the previous accounts, the *grotesque*, although almost always present in every important feature of the shows, is hard to divorce from other branches of the comic, with which the *grotesque* tends to amalgamate in several of its occurrences. Hence it is worth reemphasizing the difficulty of giving exclusive dominance to a single comic quality in the analysis of different facets of the minstrel show, knowing what curious ambivalences of comic qualities (such as the *grotesque*, burlesque-like, satirical, farcical, ironical, humorous, etc.) are inherent in minstrelsy's characters, themes, styles and motifs.

In closing it is also important to note that beyond the rather obvious occurrences of *grotesque imagery* in the portrayal of characters, in minstrel accessories and themes, there were other areas or layers in minstrelsy where the *minstrel grotesque* was present, but which are not treated in detail in the present analysis. These possible fields of analysis are not incorporated here, partly because they would demand the application of new types of inquiry (the analysis of the *minstrel grotesque* in the minstrel dialect for instance would require a thorough linguistic line of analysis), partly because critical inquiries into the area have been exhaustive (like in the case of the minstrel mask), and partly because data are missing concerning certain areas (such as dance features, where the only proof as for the *grotesque* appearance of these dance numbers come from the scarce sheet music illustrations, and some recollections regarding early shows such as Thomas Dartmouth Rice's "Jim Crow" number).

Finally, here is a minstrel song, which to my mind epitomizes all the important aspects of the *literary minstrel grotesque*, through its

detailed *physical grotesque* of the Ugly Female, its *grotesque props* (which in this case is the female nose and throat inferring male and female genitalia, respectively), *grotesque theme* (the ridicule of the black female to make her impossible for male desire), diction (where nonsense lines, grammatical and stylistic lapses are serving to establish the alleged inferiority and ridiculousness of the character) and the *grotesque* of the invoked stage movement:

GAL FROM THE SOUTH

Old massa own'd a coloured gall
He bought her at the south,
Her hair it curl'd so bery tight,
She couldn't shut her mouth,
Her eyes dey were so bery big,
Dey both run into one,
Sometimes a fly lights in her eye,
Like a june-bug on de sun.

Yah, ha, ha; yah, ha, ha,
De gal From the south,
Her hair it curl'd so bery tight,
She couldn't shut her mouth.

Her nose it was so bery long,
It made her laugh, by gosh,
For when she got her dander up,
It turned up like a squash,
Old massa had no hooks or nails,
Nor nothin like ob dat;
So on dis darkey's nose he used
To hang his coat and hat.

One morning massa gwain away,
He went to get his coat,
But nedder hat, nor coat, could find,
For she had swollow'd both,
He took her to the tailor's shop,
To hab her mouth made small;
De lady took in one long breath,
A swollow's tailor and all.

/Dennison 126/

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