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Writing Process

I chose my topic for this project early in the semester and began researching it soon after that. I used eight sources for my research and wrote an annotated bibliography. This bibliography was a huge benefit to the first draft of my paper, which just included a description of the sources. That draft was peer reviewed and given notes by my professor. The final paper was turned in shortly after, including an additional introduction and conclusion. After receiving my grade from my professor I edited it before turning it in here.

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American Negro Minstrelsy: Good, Bad, or Somewhere In-between?*

In the early nineteenth century, African American slavery was a widely accepted institution in America. With the popularity of slavery came the American minstrel show. Minstrel shows in America were an extremely popular form of entertainment that drew upon the racial stereotypes of the African American slave. Slaves were portrayed as dim-witted, happy-go-lucky, lazy, superstitious, and musical. While there were African Americans in these minstrel shows, they usually included white men that used burnt cork to blacken their faces. The acts included these black or blackened men jumping and dancing around, singing hit minstrel songs. These men would travel around the country performing the shows that perpetuated racial stereotypes. The positive and negative outcomes of these shows have been greatly debated throughout the years.

Writing on the topic of American Negro minstrelsy has changed drastically over the years. The main points of dispute are the response to the minstrel shows, the origins of minstrel shows, and the contribution minstrelsy had to racism and its persisting influences in today's culture. During the times of minstrelsy in the nineteenth century there were very different responses to the subject. Some were greatly in favor, while others were strongly opposed. After minstrelsy fell off the map and before the civil rights movement there was a sense of nostalgic fondness in writing on minstrel shows, seeing them as a great development in entertainment. The subject of the origins of minstrelsy also finds very differing opinions. Some feel that minstrelsy

is a strictly American form of entertainment, while others believe that the European minstrel shows had a great influence on the American shows. In more recent writings the most debated topic is the African American response to the minstrel shows, and how they shaped the racism and stereotypes in America today. The most accurate writing finds that African Americans had a part in forming these stereotypes, and while there are negative effects of course, some are still using them to their benefit and, in some cases, profit in today's society.

In 1854 during the rise of the popularity of Negro minstrelsy, journalist Augusta Browne very strongly stated her opinion on the topic in her article for *Home Journal*, "Negro Minstrelsy." Browne felt that minstrelsy was a horrible taint on the American music culture. Negro Minstrelsy was completely lacking in any sort of intellectualism, and it was taking some of the greatest historical and biblical tales and making a mockery of them. Minstrelsy used to mean stories being told beautifully and poetically through song and dance. Now what had been tales of ancient times told with an air of romance and positivity had been changed to mean vulgar stories filled with profanity and sin. Depictions of African Americans, accurate or exaggerated, have no place alongside such a rich history of wonderful stories and music, because they only have a negative influence on culture and society (1).

Browne argues that not only is the popularity of this music and these shows testing the progress of the music industry, but it is also taking a toll on morals and religion. Some of the popular minstrel tunes contain lyrics that are meant to reflect God and religion; one example of this is with the creation story. Children hear the song of the creation story and are singing it before they even know the true teachings of the Church on the subject. Browne calls her readers to search for art of much higher intellect. "The mind does, indeed, require relaxation from the graver pursuits of life; but does not the whole universe of nature, art, science, afford sufficient

scope for the pleasure and gratification of young and old, simple and learned!” (1). Minstrelsy has no place in American culture and is negatively impacting the intellect of our society.

Browne’s opinion is one that was shared by a large group of dissenters during this time (1).

With the end of Negro minstrelsy came a great shift to the way people thought of it. This new mindset is evident in the historian Carl Wittke’s 1930 book *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage*. Wittke writes about Negro and blackface minstrelsy with extreme nostalgia. He uses the musical influences that came out of Negro minstrelsy to justify slavery. “Without negro slavery, the United States would have been deprived of perhaps the only and, certainly, the most considerable body of song spring from the soil, which properly can be called American folkmusic,” (3). The Negro minstrel show is “the only distinctively American contribution to the theatre,” (3). Wittke does not believe that the European forms of minstrelsy had any influence on the American Negro minstrelsy; the two are completely different things. The origins of minstrelsy derive from spontaneous and instinctive singing and dancing of African American slaves on Southern plantations. The “burnt cork artists” drew upon the African Americans’ “real sense of rhythm, ability to improvise as well as to borrow, and background of deep emotionalism”; these characteristics created authentic minstrel shows that were good representations of the black culture (3-4). Wittke does not see these shows as racist, but sees them only as a positive portrayal of black culture that would not have been spread had it not been for the African American slave trade. He argues that minstrelsy was a positive and purely American form of entertainment, and Negro slavery had the positive outcome of bringing this entertainment into mainstream American culture. While Wittke’s argument is very true to its time, it fails to recognize the negative racial stereotypes that came along with Negro minstrelsy, and uses it to justify slavery, which is completely invalid.

While Wittke does not acknowledge the European influence on the creation of American minstrelsy, Hans Nathan in his 1962 book *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* argues that it was extremely important. He also argues the differences in the types of minstrelsy can help trace the severity of the racism in America. American minstrelsy is greatly influenced by, but very different from European minstrelsy, particularly that in England. America was built on racial prejudices; they are deeply ingrained in our culture. That is why American minstrelsy portrays African Americans so negatively. In England, African Americans were portrayed sympathetically, as pitiful or tragic persons. The minstrelsy in Britain appealed to the blacks because they were put in a positive light. This positive image was much more successful in creating racial acceptance. The American Negro minstrelsy showed no mercy to the African Americans, and as a result American's already racist attitudes grew worse and became more obvious.

Nathan credits the origins of American Negro minstrelsy to Dan Emmett, the founder of the first troupe of the blackface minstrel tradition. Although the character of Jim Crow was created almost a decade earlier, Emmett revolutionized blackface with his travelling troupe, the Virginia Minstrels. The travelling shows included "blacking up" an entire band and putting on full-length performances. Nathan argues that Dan Emmett's depiction of African Americans in these shows is a huge contributor to the persistent deep-rooted racial prejudices in American culture. Nathan performs a good examination of the European influences, but does not look closely at the response to the shows and how they were influencing either race.

Historian John Blair marks a change in the writing about minstrelsy. He looks for the true origins of the shows behind the obvious racism of the shows. Blair discusses this in his 1990 article, "Blackface Minstrels in Cross-Cultural Perspective." Blair agrees with Nathan that

blackface minstrelsy was a contributor, if not the sole cause of the spread of racial prejudices throughout America. But, Blair argues that one cannot fully understand any topic without looking at it from multiple cultural perspectives, so he examines different cultural reactions to blackface minstrelsy. Blair, unlike Nathan, argues that the origin of Negro minstrelsy comes from Thomas Rice and his creation of the black plantation worker “Jim Crow” character. Blair acknowledges blackface minstrelsy as a completely blatant form of racism. However, he says that “racism may not, in wider cultural terms, be the most significant aspect of the phenomenon” (56). He does not think that the rise to fame can be attributed to racism because the audiences that first took to the blackface shows were Western and Northern peoples who had little to no exposure to African American plantation slaves. It was simply the comedic, exaggerated features that these shows displayed that drew in the original audiences. Once the shows became widespread the racial stereotypes spread all across the country. This resulted in a strong form of racial discrimination that plagued the country for years to come (52-65). Blair looks at the minstrel shows from both perspectives, but is stuck on the idea of minstrelsy being completely racist and is unable to see the potential positive outcomes.

Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class by Eric Lott also seeks to look past the obvious racism that was blackface minstrelsy and examine the real roots of the minstrel shows. Instead of the minstrel show audiences being so obviously racist, he argues that “the audiences involved in early minstrelsy were not universally derisive of African Americans or their culture, and that there was a range of responses to the minstrel shows which points to an instability or contradiction in the form itself.” Lott claims that without minstrel shows some of the most famous works of literature would not have been possible, namely *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (5). Minstrelsy and all of the prejudices

that accompanied it were inevitable when whites were given the power that they had. When a whole group has a perceived superiority over another, there is bound to be something perpetuating the inferior culture, like minstrelsy, that comes with it. Whites used blackface minstrelsy to define “blackness” in a negative light. This had less to do with racism, and more to do with the insecurity of the whites (25). They felt they needed to assert their dominance over the black culture, and minstrelsy did this by defining whiteness just as much as it defined blackness. Although the blacks are the star of the show, they are being played by whites who are clearly putting them in their place at the bottom of the social ladder. Lott argues that while the shows are racist, it is more complex than that, because the minstrel shows shaped the identity of both blacks and whites. Lott successfully questions the truth behind the racial stereotypes, and sees some of the positive outcomes, but considers the response of white people more than the response of African Americans.

Sarah Meer, similarly to Lott, credited minstrel shows with the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous work *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in her 2005 work on the subject, *Uncle Tom Mania*. While Stowe likely never saw a minstrel show, the racial times that were present in blackface minstrelsy are extremely prevalent in the novel’s themes. These themes include an “emphasis on comedy, on black life, and on dialogue and ‘Negro-English’” (21-22). These themes had already come into popularity with the emergence of blackface culture, so they greatly contributed to the popularity of Stowe’s novel. The audience of the novel, just like minstrel shows, could take away from it what they wished. Although the novel was written with the intention of an anti-slavery message, some people took the novel as a joke on African Americans, which led to the later proslavery minstrel adaptations. Others saw the novel as a very good and positive representation of African American culture. The minstrel adaptations of *Uncle*

Tom's Cabin could be found with both anti-slavery and proslavery themes, depending on the show. Many African Americans, including Fredrick Douglass, believed blackface minstrelsy had the potential to eventually work in the African American's favor. This mindset drew African Americans to attend not only anti-slavery, but proslavery minstrel shows. The attendance of slaves at a proslavery minstrel show justified and solidified the racial prejudices that were depicted. Meer argues that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and minstrelsy were very negative contributors to racial prejudices. Meer fails to recognize the potential positive effects of African Americans participating in minstrel shows.

Some of the most recent historians argue that these blackface minstrel depictions of African Americans can still be seen today, but that may not always be a bad. In *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, the authors discuss the persistence of minstrel culture in today's media. They argue that the cultural appropriation and prejudices that have been spawned from blackface minstrelsy can be found for generations to follow, including in today's society. This collection attributes the origins of the American minstrel show to the blackface characterization of Jim Crow, while recognizing the influences of the European minstrel shows. Whites using burnt cork to blacken their faces and put on ridiculous shows did not have as negative of an effect as it may seem. In W.T. Lhamon's essay "Turning Around Jim Crow," he states "When Rice blackened up to sing 'Jump Jim Crow' that first time...he brought blackness into the house in a way that started some Americans, white and black, to consider identifying with it" (20). The writings consider the varying responses to the shows both from white and black people when it was happening. *Burnt Cork* argues that minstrelsy did not have an all-bad effect on the African American stereotypes, and actually generated some sympathy for the

slaves. *Burnt Cork* successfully finds both the positive and negative outcomes, but does not look deep into the African American participation and response to Negro minstrelsy.

The most accurate writing on Negro minstrelsy can be found in Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen's 2012 book *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop*. Similar to *Burnt Cork*, *Darkest America* recognizes the differences in response to blackface minstrelsy, and its persistence over time. Both are able to find that there are significantly positive effects of minstrelsy. The authors examine not only the negative African American response to blackface, but also the positive one, and their participation in the shows. They found that there was a large population of real black performers in minstrel shows, and Taylor and Austen argue that what they were doing was not simply reenacting their degrading stereotypes, but satirizing them to liberate themselves. "If you dismiss [minstrelsy] as simply 'demeaning,' you miss half the picture. There are many reasons to be horrified by minstrel material and as many reasons to be attracted to it" (4). These racial stereotypes that characterize blackface minstrelsy have been long since reclaimed by African Americans, most often by being exploited through black comedy.

Taylor and Austen found that there were three general reactions that African Americans have to minstrelsy. The first was to simply embrace it as comedy and entertainment. The second was to engage in self-aware parody in order to make a larger point. The third was waging wars on such stereotypes, often causing much outrage. The second is the reason African Americans were willing to participate in minstrel shows that had been popularized by blackface performers. "While black shows also featured performers imitating the dehumanizing stereotypes used by whites in blackface, African Americans were able to distinguish themselves by their pale imitators by bringing humanity to the caricatures and providing coded messages to their brothers and sisters" (6). These blacks that participated in these shows have allowed for the liberation of

African Americans throughout the years, allowing them to take these stereotypes and reshape them into a positive portrayal of themselves.

Darkest America gives the best representation of all aspects of Negro minstrelsy. The book is extremely well-researched and cites many of the aforementioned works as contributors to its contents. The authors were able to take an unbiased modern perspective on the Negro minstrel shows. While many of the other works view the African Americans only as the victims of racial prejudices, this book recognizes that African Americans were freely participating in these shows for a reason. They were taking the reins of the stereotypes, giving them liberty to form them into a more positive portrayal of themselves. Because they were not formed completely against their will, we see so many black entertainers in today's society drawing upon those stereotypes. While there are obviously negative stereotypes that came out of Negro minstrelsy, many have been able to find peace and benefit in the fact that African Americans played a part in shaping those stereotypes.

While Negro minstrelsy was on the rise it had many admirers and many adversaries, but when it was over people found themselves nostalgic for the American entertainment. There were disputes concerning the origins of minstrelsy, and the influence of European culture. Some believed that minstrelsy was not racist, but more concerned with shaping identities, while others believed that it was the sole cause of racism in America. The reality of the matter is that it is impossible to brand Negro minstrelsy as completely good or completely bad. Negro minstrelsy fell somewhere in the middle, with both positive and negative effects on African American people and society as a whole.

* This essay received the award for Excellence in Research Paper Writing.

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