

"De Genewine Artekil": William Wells Brown, Blackface Minstrelsy, and Abolitionism



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In 1856, in addition to continuing to deliver lectures, former slave and “professional fugitive” William Wells Brown began to read dramatic pieces of his own composition at antislavery meetings.¹ His first play—the first play known to have been written by an African American—was entitled either *The Dough Face* (a common epithet for “Yankees”) or *Experience; or, How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone* and provided a satirical reply to Boston clergyman Nehemiah Adams’s proslavery *A South-Side View of Slavery* (1854).² There is no extant text of this play, but two years later Brown published *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, another dramatic piece he often delivered to antislavery audiences. One of the central characters of *The Escape* is Cato, a slave characterized in the first two acts as a comic buffoon who toadies to his master and spies on his fellow slaves. In the second scene of the first act, Brown dramatizes Cato in an incident that he claimed was autobiographical and that he had already used in his novel *Clotel* (1853): when Cato is left to treat slaves for his doctor-owner, in a bit of slapstick humor he accidentally pulls out the wrong tooth of a fellow slave. In the third act, however, Brown reveals a different side of Cato when the slave is left alone: “Now, ef I could only jess run away from ole massa, an’ get to Canada wid Hannah, den I’d show ‘em who I was.” At this point in his dramatic readings, the light-skinned and eloquent Brown would, after a soliloquy full of malapropisms and dialect, break into an antislavery song set to the minstrel standard “Dandy Jim”—Cato’s “moriginal hyme”—which Brown had already published as part of his *Anti-Slavery Harp* (1848):³

Come all ye bondmen far and near,
 Let's put a song in massa's ear,
 It is a song for our poor race,
 Who're whipped and trampled with disgrace.

CHORUS

My old massa tells me, Oh,
 This is a land of freedom, Oh;
 Let's look about and see if it's so,
 Just as massa tells me, Oh.⁴

As one contemporary reviewer put it, at such moments “you lose sight of the speaker” and in place of the educated Brown see the caricatured Cato.⁵ This moment epitomizes Brown's performance of blackness—essentially a putting on of blackface—and is emblematic of how black abolitionists like Brown were necessarily engaged with blackface minstrelsy, the most popular entertainment form of the time.⁶ Whether in narratives, lectures, or fiction, professional fugitives were called upon to prove their authenticity by providing, as Frederick Douglass recalled his white supporters putting it, “a *little* plantation manner of speech.”⁷ At the same time, however, black abolitionists were expected to mirror the ideal traits of white manhood—intelligence, literacy, eloquence, and self-restraint—in order to exemplify black capacity for freedom. The professional fugitive was, in essence, required to embody simultaneously the social meanings of blackness and whiteness—to be both the illiterate plantation darkey of the minstrel stage and an eloquent defender of his race.

I will use this episode from *The Escape* as a starting point for reading Brown's *Clotel*—the first novel by an African American—as a reworking of the ways both the minstrel show and the antislavery movement constructed strict racial definitions through their display of race as a matter of masquerade. As in Cato's scene from *The Escape*, Brown “blacks up” in *Clotel* by invoking minstrel show stereotypes when fictionalizing incidents from his own life through dark black male characters. Through multiple blackface characters, Brown links antislavery and minstrelsy, highlighting the antislavery possibilities in minstrelsy. Brown defended his appropriation of such theatrical effects as a way to gain financial and popular support: “People will pay to hear the Drama that would not give a cent in an anti-slavery meeting.”⁸ Nevertheless, he did not turn to the minstrel show simply

because of its popularity, but because in the early 1850s minstrelsy provided perhaps the best forum through which to construct a viable representative black manhood. For Brown, the minstrel show offered particularly expansive representational possibilities because its commercialized images foregrounded the slippage between performative and essential notions of blackness and manliness.

In both abolitionism and the minstrel show, ideas about gender were intrinsic to the production of race as a sort of mask. The minstrel show was obsessed with the “black” male body, producing it as the embodiment of both a hypermasculine bestiality and a sentimental, effeminate childishness; antislavery rhetoric consistently circulated around one of two notions: either the proposition that slavery’s chief crime was the destruction of “true” gender relations based in the domestic family unit or the idea that the effeminate, more spiritual African race should be saved from the masculine, aggressively materialistic Anglo-Saxon one. Despite important political and iconic differences, the economies of race and gender at play in the minstrel show and the most prominent antislavery forms similarly equated manhood with whiteness; in this way, both forums attempted to use gender distinctions to anchor the slipperiness of race. But both also depended on displaying gender as a matter of performance. Through his redeployment of minstrel tropes, Brown reveals how the markers of manliness and whiteness were dependent upon and constantly in play with those of blackness and femininity, so that gender and racial markers were at once strictly defined and, to a limited extent, transmutable. In writing the first African American novel, Brown turns to fiction not to escape stereotyped black representations, but to negotiate the objectification and commodification of the black image by revealing its instability. In doing so, he turns the abolitionist platform into a minstrel stage and the minstrel stage into an abolitionist platform, thus revealing the logic of each.⁹

“The Blacking Process”

The parallel courses of the minstrel show and abolitionism begin in the early 1830s. White actors had appeared in blackface on the American stage as early as a 1769 production of *The Padlock*, but the minstrel craze did not begin in earnest until T. D. Rice “jumped Jim Crow,” first

in the old northwest (perhaps Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, or Louisville), sometime between 1829 and 1831, and then on the New York stage in 1832. At essentially the same time that Rice was first performing *Jim Crow*, the immediate emancipation movement emerged onto the political scene, inaugurated by William Lloyd Garrison's founding of *The Liberator* in 1831 and following on the heels of David Walker's *Appeal* (1829) and Nat Turner's revolt (1831).¹⁰ By the late 1830s, the demand for "black" male bodies had increased significantly—in the slave markets of the old southwest as laborers, in theaters and other entertainment sites as blackface performers, and in the abolitionist movement as antislavery lecturers.¹¹ What these sites had in common was a focus upon the black male body in slavery, on its status as an economic "article." Both the abolitionist platform and the minstrel stage attempted to invoke the "reality" of the Southern plantation by capturing and reproducing the "truth" of black life in the slave South. Neither minstrel shows nor abolitionism, however, focused exclusively on blacks in the South. Minstrel shows combined representations of the plantation slave *Jim Crow* with those of the Northern dandy *Zip Coon*; abolitionists demonstrated the connection between slavery in the South and racial prejudice in the North. Yet when defending their claims to authenticity by citing experience as the basis for their testimony or representations, both abolitionism and the minstrel show consistently set that experience either in the South or in some border region that granted access to the South.

In attempting to reveal "American Slavery As It Is," both the minstrel show and the antislavery movement produced and exploited what one abolitionist called "the public[']s] . . . itching ears to hear a colored man speak, and particularly a *slave*."¹² As antislavery groups began to employ black men to give "authentic" testimony about slavery in the late 1830s and early 1840s, minstrel performers began to claim that they gave a "true" picture of African American life through skits and "genuine" songs and dances.¹³ In 1842 and 1843 western New York witnessed both the beginning of William Wells Brown's career as an antislavery agent and what Edwin Christy claimed was the first complete minstrel show. While Brown and other fugitive slaves tried to represent black manhood to white Northern audiences through their experiences in the slave South, ads and reviews proclaimed that white performers like Christy, Rice, and Dan Emmett were "the negro, par excellence," "the best representative

of our American negro," "the perfect representative of the Southern Negro Character."¹⁴ The minstrel show spectacularized "black" bodies for commercial purposes; antislavery groups put ex-slaves on display—"curiosit[ies] from the South," "specimen[s] of the fruits of the infernal system of slavery"—primarily for political ends.¹⁵ Yet the representations of black character staged by each were often similar. The minstrel show has most often been characterized as an extremely racist caricature of blacks and black lifeways that served to legitimate slavery and racial prejudice, but as scholars like Eric Lott and Robert Toll have argued, despite its racist content the minstrel show was a complicated production in which various, at times contradictory, racial and political logics came into play. In fact, as Toll has pointed out, the minstrel show, at least prior to 1850 or so, "presented virtually every argument abolitionists used."¹⁶ The emergence of these arguments in the minstrel show points towards a deeper connection between the minstrel show and abolitionism, specifically, the way in which both the minstrel show and antislavery rhetoric linked the construction of racial and gender distinctions to racial and gender confusion.

It was these representational limitations and possibilities that Brown faced in writing the first African American novel. Inspired by the phenomenal success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Brown wrote *Clotel* in 1853 while living in England as an exile from the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.¹⁷ Rather than being, as its title implies, a coherent narrative consistently centered on Clotel, the president's daughter, Brown's novel is a fragmented, episodic overview of slavery from Virginia to New Orleans to Mississippi.¹⁸ Part of its patchwork quality is due to Brown's incorporation of stories from his *Original Panoramic Views* of slavery (1850) and his travel book, *Three Years in Europe* (1852), incidents from his slave narrative (1847), and whole sections lifted verbatim from Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" (1842). While Brown ostensibly focuses on the histories of Curren, her daughters by Thomas Jefferson, Clotel and Althesa, and her granddaughters—all beautiful mulattas who, with one exception, come to tragic ends—he does so through a series of often disconnected (or only slightly connected) scenes reminiscent of the segmented program of a minstrel show. In these episodes Brown not only recalls the minstrel show's formal aspects but also introduces a number of minstrel-like male characters who form a thematic line

parallel to the tragic mulatta stories. While the impact of slavery on the “fairer” sex—and in this novel they always are fairer—provides Brown’s starting point, he doubles the racial confusion caused by his apparently white but really black heroines through a number of black male characters who, by invoking and reworking the minstrel show, similarly reveal the markers of their blackness as a matter of performance.¹⁹ By incorporating the more “masculine” form of the minstrel show into his sentimental tragic mulatta stories, Brown uncovers the performative nature of race and gender in both abolitionism and minstrelsy while negotiating the ways in which such constructions both created strict equations of gender and race and allowed a certain space within which to rearticulate those equations.

Following an introductory third-person “Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown,” Brown opens the novel itself by setting up these two narrative lines, distinguishing between the “fearful increase of half whites” like his heroines and himself and “the real Negro,” who “does not amount to more than one in every four of the slave population.”²⁰ This distinction first arises in the diegesis following the sale of Currer and her daughters in an auction block scene set in Virginia. When taken south via the Mississippi River, Currer meets Pompey, the personal slave of the slave trader Walker. Pompey’s duties include “getting the Negroes ready for market” as they are transported down the river (70). In his introductory narrative, Brown recounts how he was hired out to a slave trader—also named Walker—who would buy gangs of slaves in Missouri and then transport them down the river to New Orleans. One of Brown’s jobs under the “soul-driver” was “to prepare the old slaves for market.” In doing so he had to shave old men and “pluck out the grey hairs where they were not too numerous; where they were, he coloured them with a preparation of blacking. . . . After having gone through the blacking process, they looked ten or fifteen years younger” (21). Pompey, who “clearly showed that he knew what he was about,” has similar duties and instructs the slaves that they “must grease dat face an make it look shiney” when they go into the market (70). Neither Brown’s “blacking process” nor Pompey’s “greas[ing]” up is exactly equivalent to the corking of the minstrel show, but in his narrative Brown goes on to recount having to set slaves in the New Orleans market “to dancing, some to jumping, some to singing, and some to playing cards . . . to make them appear cheerful and happy” (*N*, 194).

What Pompey's "greas[ing]" up and Brown's "blacking process" indicate is the constructedness of the black body as a commodity form. Slaves are not simply what they appear to be on the auction block; rather, they must be coerced into performing their roles as valued (because of their youth, demeanor, and strength) objects.

Yet this implicit recognition of the performative nature of those traits most valued in the marketplace does not reveal race as an illusion. Instead, it seems to lead to strict racial distinctions.²¹ Brown notes that Pompey is, like all other male slave characters in *Clotel* (with one exception), "of real Negro blood." He "was of low stature, round face, and, like most of his race, had a set of teeth, which for whiteness and beauty could not be surpassed; his eyes large, lips thick, and hair short and woolly." Pompey "would often say, when alluding to himself, 'Dis nigger is no countefit; he is de genewine artekil'" (70-71). Yet Pompey, like Brown, is a master of counterfeiting, especially the counterfeiting of such valuable "articles" as slaves. This episode demonstrates that *appearing* as the "genewine artekil," like Pompey, involves masquerade, essentially putting on blackface; it reveals race as an illusion, as a mask that one puts on, while acknowledging the ways in which that mask makes race very real. What then does it mean for the light-skinned Brown to fictionalize himself in basically the same way, blacking himself up as a character (Pompey) described as a minstrel caricature? In narrating his own complicity with a slave driver in the form of a caricatured black figure, Brown could be, and often has been, accused of being "colorist"—of espousing the idea that the worst slaves were the "real Negro[es]" and that the ones most deserving and capable of freedom and its responsibilities were light-skinned, like his mulatta heroines and himself.²² I think that Brown is pursuing a much subtler point. While Pompey's actions show no resistance to slavery, other blackface characters in the novel complicate the idea of his complicity by forming a composite representative black male character who resists slavery through acts of subterfuge and masquerade. By describing the submission and resistance of his male slaves as different masks—as different ways of blacking up—Brown demonstrates both how masquerade creates them as "genewine artekil[s]" through strict racial definitions and how the performative nature of that masquerade allows them to redefine what it means to be a "genewine" black man.

Through these multiple black men, Brown reveals a different face

of the caricature of the happy black slave. Jean Fagan Yellin places Brown's characterization of these figures within the trickster tradition in African American culture.²³ I am more interested in the ways in which Brown was invoking and critiquing the minstrel show. This is not to say that Brown was not drawing upon African American traditions of the trickster figure; rather, it is to insist on the ways in which representations of such "folk" figures were already mediated by mass cultural representations.²⁴ Because of this mediation, the slave per se could not be represented. Brown frequently described this problem in his lectures: "I may try to represent to you Slavery as it is . . . yet we shall all fail to represent the real condition of the Slave. . . . Slavery has never been represented; Slavery never can be represented. . . . The Slave cannot speak for himself." At the same time, however, Brown realized that on the abolitionist stage he "represent[ed]" the "system of Slavery."²⁵ Or, as he put it in another lecture, "I stand here as the representative of the slave to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves."²⁶ In attempting to "speak for" the slaves still in bondage, the ex-slave entered into public debates over race and slavery. But to do so he had to cast off the markers of both his past enslavement and his racial difference and take up the language and figures of the dominant culture.²⁷ Through the minstrel show, Brown was able to reclaim the blackness that he had had to abandon in order to enter the public sphere.²⁸ In this way, he was able to produce a model of black manhood that could be read as representative of slaves in general, even while undermining any simple notion of "the Slave." In *Clotel*, Brown recognizes and demonstrates the possible uses and limitations of re-appropriating minstrel figures for explicitly antislavery purposes, but his appropriation does not amount to the complete transformation of a monolithically negative form. Instead, Brown is able to use minstrelsy for his antislavery purposes because of the ambivalence within the form itself—because of the ways in which the minstrel show, in both negative and positive ways, mirrored the representational logic and problematic of the abolitionist platform. Brown does not undermine the minstrel show in order to reveal a "true" representation of black manhood; rather, he undermines the idea of one authentic representation of black manhood by insisting on the instability of both white and black manhood and by pointing to the ways in which race and gender were always being performed and being performed together.²⁹

“And So Did I Pretend”

Although not strictly a masculine affair, the minstrel show centered on the interplay between markers of black and white manhood. As Eric Lott has demonstrated, the “main achievement” of the minstrel show’s white male audiences and performers was the “simultaneous production and subjection of black maleness.”³⁰ Lott and historians such as David Roediger have described how the minstrel show engendered the formation of a Northern white working-class male subculture that gave voice to some distinctly working-class concerns.³¹ I am primarily concerned, however, with how Brown was able to use the minstrel show for antislavery ends because of the ways in which it staged blackness in conjunction with characteristics of dominant (white middle-class) ideas of manhood, which, according to a certain antislavery logic, blacks had to demonstrate in order to prove their humanity.³²

Many blackface acts and performers did begin in working-class oriented theaters in areas like the Bowery in New York. But by the end of the 1840s, as Carl Wittke argues, minstrel shows had begun “to attract the patronage of the most respectable citizens,” in part because they had become one of the chief attractions of the more bourgeois environs—like Barnum’s American Museum—of Broadway.³³ In fact, discourse around the minstrel show is striking for its emphasis on how everybody was under its spell: “Mr. T. D. Rice made his debut in a dramatic sketch entitled ‘Jim Crow,’ and from that moment everybody was ‘doing just so,’ and continued ‘doing just so’ for months, and even years afterward. Never was there such an excitement in the musical or dramatic world”; “Next day found the song of Jim Crow, in one style of delivery or another, on everybody’s tongue. Clerks hummed it . . . artisans thundered it . . . boys whistled it . . . ladies warbled it . . . and house-maids repeated it”; “The schoolboy whistled the melody. . . . The ploughman checked his oxen. . . . Merchants and staid professional men . . . were sometimes seen . . . to unbend their dignity. . . . [It was] sung in the parlor, hummed in the kitchen, and whistled in the stable.”³⁴ Still others emphasized the minstrel show’s appeal to both cultural elites and the working class: “Many of the most fashionable families attend. . . . Negro melodies are the very democracy of music.”³⁵

While it appears that working-class men often did make up the majority of the audience in antebellum minstrel shows, and minstrel shows often did serve to enunciate working-class concerns and interests, minstrel shows were far from exclusively working-class forums. Although some diversification along class and gender lines did occur in New York (more “respectable” shows on Broadway catered to a more middle-class audience with Stephen Foster-type sentimental tunes, rowdier shows in the Bowery retained more sexual double entendre and humor), the minstrel show and its basic conventions, its racial masquerade and caricatures of simple, happy slaves, had by 1850 come to structure the ways in which a broad cross section of white Northerners confronted and constructed ideas of black character and understood and lived their own raced and gendered identities. Even though middle-class reformers attacked minstrel shows for their rowdiness and lurid humor, the minstrel show, as Roediger acknowledges, not only served as a site for the production of working-class manhood but also made “special appeals to those in the West and some in the respectable middle classes and above.”³⁶

Specifically, contemporary critics celebrated the minstrel show as an antidote to or an escape from the increasingly complex and disciplined world arising with industrial market capitalism and urbanization.³⁷ By providing white audiences with models of “African nature . . . full of poetry and song,” minstrel shows could revitalize an overly refined and business-oriented white existence. Because “[African] joy and grief are not pent up in the heart, but find instant expression in their eyes and voice,” “these simple children of Africa,” though “[i]nferior to the white race in reason and intellect,” offer a valuable “lesson” in “lighten[ing] the anxiety and care which brood on every face and weigh on every heart.”³⁸ In the figure of the simple plantation darky, audience members could appreciate the joys of a bodily existence undisciplined by the market and developing ideals of decorum, while at the same time maintaining the distance from that bodily enjoyment mandated by the emerging discourse of bourgeois manhood.³⁹

In order to maintain the bodily (dis)engagement necessary to appreciate the pleasures associated with these images of natural freedom in slavery without succumbing to them, the minstrel show oscillated between acknowledging its performative nature and claiming unmediated authenticity. Although critics admitted that “We at the

North hear these songs only as burlesqued by our Negro Minstrels," commentary on the minstrel show often obscured the distinction between "Negro Minstrels" and "actual" "African[s]." ⁴⁰ Numerous stories circulated about naive viewers who believed that the performers were "actually" black, a confusion that could easily spring from the ubiquitous references to white performers as "Negro songsters" or "Negro dancers." ⁴¹ But at the same time, performers and audiences emphasized the artifice of performances, the fact that underneath the burnt cork were white men: lyrics, skits, and sheet music illustrations made frequent references to the white identity of performers. ⁴² Accordingly, minstrel performers simultaneously displayed characteristics that marked them as black and white. And by extension, in attending minstrel shows and learning the "lesson[s]" of "black" bodily and emotional freedom from such "Negro" entertainers, white audience members were imagined to replicate this logic by internalizing the characteristics of blackness while remaining "white" themselves: audience members "lighten[ed]" their "brood[ing]" "face[s]" by vicariously "blacking up." In this way, minstrelsy was driven by an oscillation between the celebration and denigration of black men, a dance of identification and differentiation that simultaneously foregrounded and disavowed the interpenetration of notions of white and black manhood.

Accounts of the most famous black minstrel entertainer of the period, William Henry Lane, demonstrate how this oscillation between authenticity and artifice produced strict racial distinctions and at the same time rendered those distinctions nonsensical. The story of Lane, who like Brown lived in England from 1848 to 1852, exemplifies the dual movement of the minstrel show that allowed Brown to articulate his antislavery argument. In the early 1840s, because audiences would "have resented . . . the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro," Lane "greased" and "rubbed" his face "with a new blacking of burnt cork" before appearing on stage. According to this contemporary account, although "a genuine negro"—"the genuine article"—Lane needed to become a "seeming counterfeit" in order to gain a place on the minstrel stage. ⁴³ This description highlights the way in which the minstrel show produced authenticity through "counterfeit[s]." ⁴⁴ Lane could only be accepted as black on the minstrel stage if he appeared to be a white man in blackface. Just as Pompey had to "grease" the faces of slaves and use a little "black-

ing” to make his owner’s slaves “de genewine artekil[s]” for the slave market, Lane had to become a “counterfeit” in order to reveal himself as “the genuine article.” In order to appear real—and gain commercial success—Lane had to perform the blackness that he supposedly embodied naturally.

As Lane’s fame grew, his “actual” race became well known, and apparently he began to appear on stage without blacking up. But even without blackface, the type of imitation and repetition staged by the minstrel show rendered Lane’s race simultaneously a mask and his essential identity. According to flyers from the period, at the climax of his performances, Lane would perform an “Imitation Dance . . . in which he will give correct Imitation Dances of all the principal Ethiopian Dancers in the United States. After which he will give an imitation of himself—and then you will see the vast difference between those that have heretofore attempted dancing and this WONDERFUL YOUNG MAN.”⁴⁵ In this series of imitations, as he imitates white men in blackface who claim they are imitating black men, Lane ends up imitating himself, conflating the authentic and the counterfeit and making any idea of the authentic appear bankrupt. This multiplication of Jim Crow-like images is at the center of the most famous description of Lane’s dancing, that of Charles Dickens. In his *American Notes* (1842), Dickens describes seeing Lane during a trip into the underworld of the Five Points district of New York: “the greatest dancer known. He never leaves off making queer faces . . . dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs. . . . He finishes . . . with the chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound!”⁴⁶ In Lane’s performances, his legs begin multiplying until it seems he has no legs at all, and his multiple “queer faces” leave him with no “real” face, making him at once “inimitable” and “a million of counterfeit Jim Crows.”

Lane’s performances verge on the unreal, as he becomes a counterfeit of a counterfeit and his body both multiplies and disappears. This is not to say, however, that the unreality created through this multiplication of images undermines the idea of authenticity. Rather, while it does deconstruct the possibility of finding a stable center of authenticity, it also enables the authentic to be re-invoked. Reviews used Lane’s imitations of imitations not to reveal how the blackness he represented was also an imitation, but to argue for the purity of pre-

vious dancers: “the Nigger Dance is a reality. . . . [Otherwise] how could Juba enter into their wonderful complications so naturally?” Lane was able to copy other dancers “so naturally” because they had reproduced “real” black dancing practices in their “Nigger Dance[s]” so well. Lane’s performances were “far above the common performances of the mountebanks who give imitations of American and Negro character” because he embodied “an ideality . . . that makes his efforts at once grotesque and poetical, without losing sight of the reality of representation.”⁴⁷ Through his performances, Lane both places the idea of authentic black identity into question and provides a possible site for its reinterpretation. His example points up how the minstrel show produced race and gender as authentic—as real—by repeatedly staging their defining traits as matters of masquerade.⁴⁸

As Lane’s story also demonstrates, the minstrel show simultaneously produced black men as white and white men as black, thus making the differential markers of white and black manhood interchangeable while creating notions of essential racial difference and authentic racial identity. Because minstrel performers embodied characteristics of both black and white manhood, the minstrel show at times staged “black” men who displayed characteristics of white manliness that blacks supposedly lacked. In particular, this slippage produced minstrel representations of the possibility of slave resistance even while the minstrel show as a whole actively discounted such possibilities. A number of minstrel songs actually constructed black resistance to slavery in a positive light. Early versions of “Jim Crow” raised the possibility of emancipation and slave revolt in reference to the Nullification crisis:

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

.
 I’m for freedom,
 An for Union altogether,
 Aldough I’m a black man,
 De white is call’d my broder.⁴⁹

This desire for freedom, by whatever means necessary, including violence, often appeared in the lyrics of early minstrel songs like “The

Raccoon Hunt": "My ole massa dead and gone, / A dose of poison help him on / De debil say he funeral song."⁵⁰ Such moments depended upon racial slippage. In singing of slave resistance, the performer of "Jim Crow" is at once "black"—"I'm a black man"—and "white," or at least the white man's equal, his "broder."⁵¹

First performed in New York less than a year after Nat Turner's failed revolt, "Jim Crow" evokes the image of "the Spartacus of the Southampton revolt."⁵² Turner's rebellion is explicitly celebrated in the song "Uncle Gabriel, the Darkey General," which conflated Turner's revolt and the Gabriel Prosser-led conspiracy of 1800: "He was the chief of the Insurgents, / Way down in Southampton. / Hard times in old Virginy." By simply invoking the memory of two of the best known American slave revolts, such songs gave evidence against the image of the happy plantation darky so central to Southern propaganda and many minstrel skits. Yet by referring to the slave leader as an "Uncle," and by focusing on his punishment—"And there they hung him and they swung him"—the song attempts to contain the specter of slave revolt by reinscribing black manhood as either submissive or disempowered.⁵³ In staging race and manliness as fluid and performed, the minstrel show, at least temporarily, enabled the union of blackness and manhood, pointing to a way of constructing an "authentic" black manhood through the instability of race and gender. In the slippage created by this constant repetition and performance of difference, the constant oscillation between whiteness and blackness, Brown was able to produce a representative black manhood through his "million of counterfeit Jim Crows."

In *Clotel*, Brown foregrounds the possibility of using the minstrel show to enunciate slave resistance in his characterization of Sam, the novel's second black male character. Pompey "*appeared* perfectly indifferent to the heartrending scenes" (70, emphasis added) of slavery and seemed simply to submit to its structures while displaying the stereotyped characteristics of the minstrel slave; yet Brown's description of him points toward the elements of masquerade in his appearance. With Sam, Brown turns that masquerade into an explicit critique of slavery. A slave with Currer on Reverend Peck's plantation in Mississippi, Sam is an earlier incarnation of *The Escape's* Cato. In the chapter "A Night in the Parson's Kitchen," Sam seems to be nothing more than comic relief in the form of a minstrel burlesque: he wishes he were lighter ("He was one of the blackest of his race"

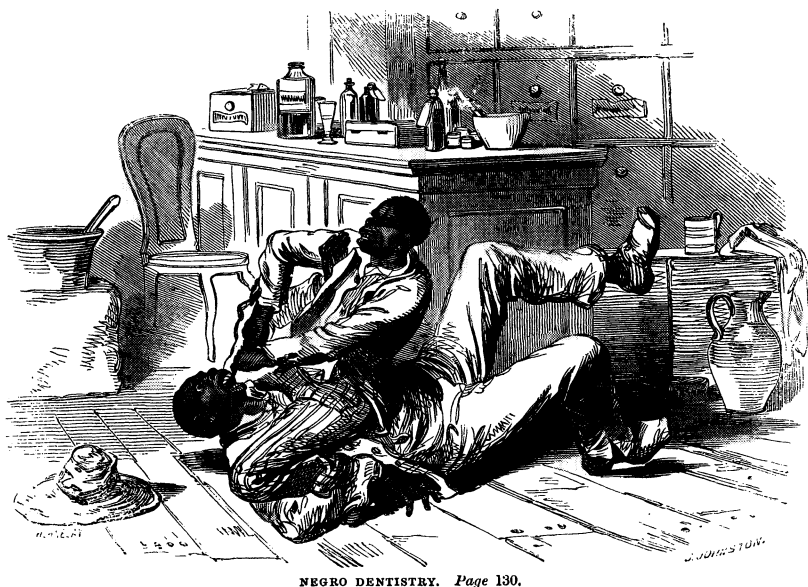


Figure 1 “Negro Dentistry.” Photo courtesy of The Newberry Library.

[131]), fawns over his master and mistress, treats his position in the household with an excess of pride and dignity, and is overly concerned with his dress (“he was seldom seen except in a ruffled shirt” [131]). Despite his ability to read, Sam still believes in fortune tellers, and Brown explicitly links his prejudice against blacks (he claims his mother was a mulatta) to “ignorance” (133). Finally, “A Night in the Parson’s Kitchen” ends with Sam telling of his experience as a doctor’s assistant, including the story of pulling the wrong tooth that Brown later used in *The Escape*: “We once saw Sam taking out a tooth for one of his patients, and nothing appeared more amusing” (134). Through an illustration of minstrelized blacks (see figure 1) and the use of the communal “we,” Brown’s novel stages a scene that could have come directly from a minstrel show, a skit that represents blacks as inherently comic and incapable of performing the more intellectual tasks involved in professions such as medicine.⁵⁴

Up to this point Brown has shown his black male characters as buffoons and toadies who accept the master’s ideology. Yet as he develops Sam more fully, “we” realize that we have seen only the stereotypical laughing black face, not the critical, freedom-yearning face

that coexists with it. We next encounter Sam after Reverend Peck's death. As Peck's abolitionist daughter Georgiana and her friend Carlton walk over the plantation grounds trying to decide what to do with the slaves, they hear "[h]ow prettily the Negroes sing." After Georgiana informs Carlton that the slaves will stop singing if they realize they have an audience, the pair decide to remain secluded and "stop, and . . . hear this one." Leading the singing is Sam, and at first it seems that he is still the simple plantation darky who is "always on hand when there's any singing or dancing" (154). The setting of this song recalls Stephen Foster's minstrel standard "Massa's in De Cold Ground" (1852): "Down in the corn-field / Hear that mournful sound; / All de darkies am a weeping—/ Massa's in de cold, cold ground."⁵⁵ But instead of expressing their sorrow and love for their master as Foster's song seems to do and as both the lovers and "we" the readers might expect, Sam and the other slaves celebrate their master's death, recounting his many cruelties and their own pretended sadness:

He will no more trample on the neck of the slave;
 For he's gone where the slaveholders go.

 Mr. Carlton cried, and so did I pretend;
 Young mistress very nearly went mad;
 And the old parson's groans did the heavens fairly rend;
 But I tell you I felt mighty glad.

 He no more will hang our children on the tree,
 To be ate by the carrion crow;
 He no more will send our wives to Tennessee;
 For he's gone where the slaveholders go. (154–55)

Here, Brown redeploys the standard conceits of the minstrel show—slaves singing and dancing on the plantation—to uncover its anti-slavery possibilities. Brown's rewriting of Foster's song makes its possibly subversive meaning explicit. In Foster's song, "all de darkies am a weeping," yet the natural world, and specifically the mockingbird, with which blacks were often aligned in minstrel songs, is joyous—"mockingbird am singing, / Happy as de day am long." And though the "days were cold / . . . [and] hard" while master was still alive, now, "summer days am coming." Finally, Foster's song raises the pos-

sibility that the slaves are faking their sorrow in order to gain respite from work: “I cannot work before to-morrow, / Cayse de tear drops flow.” Like other minstrel songs, “Massa’s in De Cold Ground” depends on the slippage between characterizing its singers as childishly sentimental—as “black”—and cunningly subversive—as intelligent and courageous (or at least treacherous) *men*.⁵⁶ By making explicit this implied critique within minstrelsy, Brown shows another side of both the minstrelized Sam and the minstrel show itself. In particular, this scene demonstrates that the slave’s submission cannot be taken at face value and that representations of the male slave depend on occasionally revealing his unexpected resistance to oppression. But what Brown also makes clear is that “from these unguarded expressions of the feelings of the Negroes” his two white abolitionist characters can “learn a lesson” (156). Specifically, what Carlton, Georgiana, and other abolitionists can learn is a different way of approaching one of the central problems of antislavery rhetoric, the problem of representing black manhood.

“A White Man . . . Within”

Antislavery rhetoric consistently spoke of the debilitating effects of slavery in gendered terms. During the antebellum period, rising bourgeois ideologies of the family foregrounded gender—as defined by strictly distinguished traits—as an essential quality of humanity. Being human meant being either a “true woman” or a “real man.” Hence, as Kristin Hoganson has argued, despite its radical sexual politics, Garrisonian abolitionism attempted to show both how slavery deformed “true” gender relations and how blacks demonstrated their humanity by still maintaining these gender roles.⁵⁷ These contradictory impulses come together in the most famous antislavery topos—the ubiquitous “am I not a man and a brother”—which Brown used in both his *Panoramic Views* pamphlet and his *Anti-Slavery Harp* (see figure 2). The emblem emphasizes that the slave is a man—is human—while making its declaration in the form of a question that focuses on the disempowered and enchained figure of the unmanned male slave.⁵⁸ Although the accompanying text implies the slave’s common manhood, the illustration strips the black man of the markers of manhood; with his body exposed both to the gaze of all onlookers and to the whips at his feet, his hands chained, his head turned up

A DESCRIPTION

OF



WILLIAM WELLS BROWN'S
ORIGINAL

PANORAMIC VIEWS

OF THE

SCENES IN THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN
SLAVE,

FROM HIS BIRTH IN SLAVERY TO HIS DEATH OR HIS
ESCAPE TO HIS FIRST
HOME OF FREEDOM ON BRITISH SOIL.

FICTION.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are LIFE, LIBERTY, and the PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS."—*Declaration of American Independence.*

FACT.

"They touch our country, and their shackles fall."—COWPER.

LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY CHARLES GILPIN,

5, BISHOPSGATE STREET WITHOUT;

AND TO BE HAD OF ALL BOOKSELLERS.

Figure 2 Title page to *A Description of William Wells Brown's Original Panoramic Views . . .* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849). Photo courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum.

in supplication, the figure represents the black male as dependent upon the sympathy and good will of others, an object to be pitied and acted upon rather than a subject who acts. According to this logic, under slavery a man could not be a true man and a woman could not be a true woman. Yet abolitionists needed to show that blacks were capable of such gender identities. As Richard Yarborough has argued, “the crucial test of black fitness” for freedom came “to be whether or not black men were, in fact, what was conventionally considered ‘manly.’”⁵⁹

Abolitionists faced two primary problems in representing black manhood: first, slavery was constructed as antithetical to ideal manhood; second, because ideas of enslavement were intrinsic to the construction of blackness, blackness itself came to be seen as unmanly. The position of ex-slave orators highlights this first problem.⁶⁰ Professional fugitives like Brown displayed the markers of genteel middle-class manhood—intelligence, eloquence, and especially literacy—but in becoming educated they were seen as less and less representative of the majority of the slave population.⁶¹ As Frederick Douglass recounts in his 1855 autobiography, “People doubted if I had ever been a slave. They said I did not talk like a slave, look like a slave, nor act like a slave. . . . ‘[H]e is educated, and is, in this, a contradiction of all the facts we have concerning the ignorance of the slaves.’ Thus, I was in a pretty fair way to be denounced as an impostor.”⁶² And it was not just that the ex-slave did not mirror accepted images of the slave; ex-slaves themselves often interpreted their acquisition of freedom as a complete transformation of their old selves. Douglass’s paradigmatic narrative underlines the gendered nature of this transformation. There he recounts that his resistance to Edward Covey not only “rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom” but also “revived within [him] a sense of [his] own manhood.” For Douglass, regaining manhood meant that “however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” and “that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.”⁶³ Through active, physical resistance to slavery, Douglass becomes a man by ceasing to be a slave.

Brown narrates similar feelings in his introduction to *Clotel*: “I was no more a chattel, but a MAN. . . . The fact that I was a freeman—could walk, talk, eat, and sleep as a man, and no one to stand over me with the blood-clotted cowhide—all this made me feel that I was

not myself" (34). But Brown also critiques Douglass's construction of a black voice and black manhood through physical resistance. In the second chapter of his 1847 narrative, Brown recounts his memories of a slave named Randall, who, like Douglass, "declare[d], that no white man should ever whip him—that he would die first" (*N*, 181). Randall staked his claim to manhood on physical resistance and thus was a slave only "in form." Yet rather than eventually escaping to freedom, Randall is finally "subdued" (*N*, 182) by the cruel overseer. In Brown's narrative, active resistance to the mechanisms of slavery does not make one a man, as Douglass insisted; instead it leads to one's being completely unmanned. Brown's critique of Douglass's model of black manhood points up the problem of representability. Douglass proves his own manhood through his resistance and eventual escape, but his narrative also emphasizes his exceptionalism. And this exceptionalism characterizes the majority of slaves as "brute[s]" who demonstrate their "want of manhood" in not making "at least one noble effort to be free."⁶⁴ As Douglass phrased it in his 1855 autobiography, "I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW. . . . A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity." Importantly, in this version of Douglass's autobiography his reclamation of manhood and freedom erases racial distinctions—"I now forgot my *roots*, and remembered my pledge to *stand up in my own defense*. . . . The very color of the man was forgotten."⁶⁵ At the moment of becoming a man, race disappears because achieving middle-class attributes of manliness—autonomy, freedom, self-control—was seen as antithetical to the servitude with which blackness had become so forcefully bound. It is only by denouncing his slave past that Douglass can fully become a man. In achieving freedom and the literacy and eloquence required to gain access to the public stage, the ex-slave was able to prove his manliness, but by doing so he could no longer be representative of black manhood; he might be black, but he was not "really" black, not like most blacks. As Frantz Fanon phrased it a century later, white acceptance was premised on the idea that "At bottom you are a white man," "You have nothing in common with real Negroes."⁶⁶

In trying to prove black humanity by demonstrating black manhood, antislavery rhetoric did not simply face the problem that slavery seemed antithetical to physical self-possession, family protection, and powerful activity; rather, the supposed absence of these traits among slave men was consistently seen—often even by antislavery advo-

cates—as characteristic of black men. According to this logic, blacks were not submissive because slavery made them so; they were naturally submissive.⁶⁷ The focus in antislavery fiction and forums on light-skinned characters and speakers highlights this problem. Certainly one of the reasons Brown and Douglass became so influential was because white abolitionists viewed their light complexions as both potentially more acceptable to the unconverted and proof of the sexual degradations of slavery.⁶⁸ But, as often happened in Brown's case, the light black spokesman's manly attributes—especially his eloquence and intelligence—were explained as coming simply from his white blood: “He is far removed from the black race, being just the ‘color of mahogany,’ and his distinct enunciation evidently showed that a white man ‘spoke’ within, although the words were uttered by the lips of a redeemed slave”; “eloquent, humorous and interesting, showing clearly the white blood of his father.”⁶⁹ As Douglass put it, “an intelligent black man is always supposed to have derived his intelligence from his connection with the white race. To be intelligent is to have one's negro blood ignored.”⁷⁰ In being recognized as intelligent and eloquent, the professional fugitive was accepted as manly, but his manhood made him “white.”

This logic of mulatto exceptionalism—the idea that blacks displayed admirable traits because of their “Anglo-Saxon blood”—appears in gendered terms in abolitionist fiction. Attempts to reveal slaves as either true women or real men—attempts to engender the black body—often ended up turning that body white.⁷¹ As Karen Sánchez-Eppler has put it more generally, “The problem of antislavery fiction is that the very effort to depict goodness in black involves the obliteration of blackness.”⁷² The central role of tragic mulatta figures in antislavery fiction in general and in *Clotel* in particular illustrates this problem. Such characters embodied the ideals of middle-class true womanhood and illustrated the dangers of slavery to the virtue and modesty deemed essential to this idealized femininity. Yet in rendering female slaves true women, such stories erased all but the most minute trace of their blackness.⁷³ A similar problem obtained in depicting male slaves in antislavery fiction. As Nancy Bentley has shown, black heroes of antislavery fiction who displayed the “masculine” traits of self-reliance and physical resistance to the degradations of slavery were almost invariably nearly white, like George Harris in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁷⁴ The contrast between

such mulatto characters and black slaves distinguished fully gendered white slaves from more androgynous black characters. Specifically, mulatto heroes underlined a gendered racial distinction between the more active, masculine white race and the more passive, feminine black race.⁷⁵

Even when writers characterized black men as heroes, they were burdened by this equation of race and gender. In “The Heroic Slave” (1853), a fictionalized account of the 1841 slave revolt on board the *Creole*, Frederick Douglass attempts to depict Madison Washington as a traditional hero who retains a black identity. Douglass’s story underlines, however, the ways in which the display of manliness racially transformed even an explicitly *black* man. Douglass first introduces Madison Washington by his voice, a move that denies his black body. When Washington appears, Douglass’s first narrator describes him as “‘black, but comely,’” with a “sable” “manly form.”⁷⁶ While these descriptions stress the blackness of Washington’s skin, the first begins to feminize his “manly form” with an adjective usually reserved for women and its allusion to the bride of Solomon.⁷⁷ More telling, in the second narrator’s depiction of the key moment of the revolt aboard the *Creole*, Washington’s heroism all but transmogrifies him into a white man: “I forgot his blackness. . . . It seemed as if the souls of both the great dead (whose names he bore) had entered him” (75). While this second white narrator’s point has been to correct the “ignorance of the real character of *darkies* in general” (70) by showing their true nobility and courage, at the moment of these traits’ clearest manifestation he erases not only Washington’s black body but also his black soul. Douglass might be emphasizing the racism of his second narrator, but this moment clearly echoes Douglass’s 1855 account of achieving manhood by fighting Covey: “[t]he very color of the man was forgotten.” As the commentator on Brown’s oratory might put it, both Douglass’s and Washington’s manliness reveal a white man acting from within.

In the early 1850s, to depict a black man as a man required either painting him white—as with mulatto heroes—or stripping off his blackness to reveal a white interior—as with Madison Washington.⁷⁸ But both solutions replicated the racial distinctions they attempted to question—whiteness made one a man, blackness, by itself, left one less than a man. In *Clotel*, however, Brown uses his mulatto hero, George Green, to point towards a way out of this conundrum.

Specifically, George's story helps Brown expand and elaborate his understanding of race and gender as masquerade by revealing the performative nature of white manhood. Yet as with his black male slaves and mulatta heroines, Brown uses his mulatto hero not only to render racial lines fluid but also to demonstrate the ways in which the performance of race and gender made them real. By demonstrating the fictive nature of race and gender, Brown is able to construct black manhood as a reality. Brown introduces George Green near the end of the novel as both a participant in Nat Turner's rebellion and the betrothed of Clotel's daughter Mary. Like Stowe's rebellious George Harris, Green "was as white as most white persons" (224). Whereas Stowe saw slave rebellion arising from an "infusion of Anglo Saxon blood," Brown offers a more environmentalist understanding of his mulatto hero's rebelliousness.⁷⁹ Green's mixed blood does, in part, enable him to become an insurgent. But it does so because his complexion makes "his condition still more intolerable" (224)—both blacks and whites treat him harshly—and because it grants him greater opportunities for realizing what freedom means: "George's opportunities were far greater than most slaves'. Being in his master's house, and waiting on educated white people, he had . . . heard his master and visitors speak of the down-trodden and oppressed Poles. . . . [F]ired with love of freedom, and zeal for the cause of his enslaved countrymen, [he] joined the insurgents" (224).

Brown further undermines the idea that black rebelliousness arises from an "infusion of Anglo Saxon blood" by making it clear that Nat Turner—"respected by the whites, and loved and venerated by the Negroes"—was "a full-blooded Negro" (213). And, the only other slave rebel Brown mentions is the Maroon Picquilo, "a large, tall, full-blooded Negro, with a stern and savage countenance" (213). But Picquilo points up yet another problem of representing black male resistance. George—whether because of his greater educational opportunities or because of his "Anglo Saxon blood"—can denounce the slave system and cite European wars of liberation as examples for his own activities. Picquilo stands mute, "a bold, turbulent spirit" whose "revenge imbrued his hands in the blood of all the whites he could meet" (214). George rebels because of his "love of freedom"; Picquilo fights for "revenge" because of his "barbarous . . . character" (213–14). Picquilo becomes an animalistic spirit rising out of the Virginia swamps, the black, atavistic Nat, the mirror image of the submissive

Sambo.⁸⁰ While white men became men by waging war for their freedom, black men who did the same were irrational primitive brutes.⁸¹ Middle-class manhood was based upon the ideal of control over one's own body, and fighting for one's freedom—as Frederick Douglass did—could demonstrate this power. But unless it could be defended in rational terms, physical conflict came too close to undisciplined bodily expression, an attractive but threatening prospect. Because Picquilo cannot speak for himself, because he must always be represented, he cannot account for his actions. Readers might temporarily identify with Picquilo's embodiment of primitive manliness, his "savage" rebellion—as minstrel show audiences might have identified with the singer of "Uncle Gabriel"—but emerging discourses of manhood encouraged them to disavow such embodiment. While minstrel show representations of black resistance might similarly be interpreted as displaying blackness as atavistic, the minstrel show undermined any easy reading of this form of embodiment as essentially black, as anything more than yet another mask. Through its constant interplay of blackness and whiteness, the minstrel show made it unclear whose atavism was whose, whose body was out of control through rebellion and whose was the tool of rational and righteous revolt.

Brown uses George to point toward this kind of racial (and gender) confusion as an alternative to equating manhood with resistance—an equation that eventually turned the black male into a white man or a primitive brute. After George is sentenced to death for his part in the rebellion, Mary, while visiting him in prison, suggests that they exchange clothes so that he can leave the prison unnoticed as a woman. When eventually discovered, Mary will be punished but not executed, and George will have escaped. George finally accepts Mary's plan and succeeds in escaping (Mary is sold south for her part in the plan), but he tellingly must remain "in the dress of a woman" (229) until well into the free states.⁸² Eventually George emigrates to England, where he becomes a successful clerk while passing for white. Through improbable plot twists, George meets Mary in France soon after she has become a widow, and the two are finally married. Brown's denouement underlines masquerade—both of a gendered and racial nature—as a route to achieving a freedom that regrounds the basis of manhood. It is by putting on a feminine face of obsequiousness and acceptance that the black man can eventually gain the markers of (white) manhood: economic and political freedom and a family truly his own.

Brown shows that George's "white" manhood—his ability to resist slavery—depends on being a "black" woman, his ability to act as a "slave woman" (229). Through George's escape Brown underscores the ways in which race and gender—specifically white manhood—are matters of masquerade, while using that masquerade to create a representative black manhood.

Though antislavery rhetoric and conventions, like the minstrel show, relied on destabilizing racial and gender distinctions, their logic of revealing black men as truly "white" (whether spiritually or physically) maintained a basic racial equation of gender. Douglass's Madison Washington troubles distinctions between blackness and whiteness by containing both, but his whiteness still marks his manhood and resistance to slavery, his blackness his emasculating inability to escape. Brown, through his multiple minstrel "heroes" and through George Green's story of masquerade, not only destabilizes notions of blackness while conjuring up "authentic" representations of it; he also reveals the instability of whiteness and the dependence of white manhood on blackness. Brown suggests this interdependence not just through George Green's escape but also in his characterization of Sam. Sam acts as a matchmaker between Georgiana and Carlton, enabling a marriage that he knows must take place for their plan of emancipation to come to fruition. By standing in for the desire that Carlton's "high spirit" (161) will not allow him to speak of, Sam enables Carlton to escape pauperism and take possession of the markers of middle-class manhood: economic independence and a beautiful, religious wife. By granting him access to the body (the desires of which he cannot speak) as the minstrel show was imagined to do, Sam's agency allows Carlton to become a man. But Sam's actions also grant him access to manhood. By steering the couple together, Sam reveals his "general intelligence" (165) and is rewarded for his work by gaining a position of power in the new economic dispensation—he becomes the foreman over the incredibly productive, soon-to-be-freed slaves. Sam's intelligence and work earn him economic success and freedom, replicating the dream of self-made manhood upon which middle-class manhood was founded. By figuratively putting on blackface, Sam not only enables the flowering of white manhood but also demonstrates the possibilities of black manhood.⁸³

Brown's multiple black male characters in *Clotel* reveal how the performative nature of both race and gender allowed the negotiation

of a type of black manhood dependent upon covert resistance and isolated moments of subversion rather than on heroic but fatal attempts to prove manhood through physical rebellion. The masquerades of George, Sam, and other black male characters do not enable Brown's novel to escape the need to oscillate between blackness and whiteness in order to create black manhood; Sam, for example, sings his subversive song without a touch of dialect. Rather, *Clotel* emphasizes, through its invocation of the minstrel show, the way in which white manhood was similarly indebted to an oscillation between whiteness and blackness, thus demonstrating the instability of both race and manliness as markers of identity. While in early chapters Sam and Pompey appear to be simple buffoons, as the novel continues Brown shows that such a reading is one-dimensional because it neglects the critical, at times almost rebellious, side of these characters. By keeping both masks in play, Brown does not denounce the minstrelized face as untrue but prompts us to look beyond the buffoonery of such acts and see them as more than evidence of black inferiority or effeminacy. Like Lane's performances as Juba, Brown produces a plethora of "counterfeit Jim Crows"—Pompey, Sam, William, Jack, Cato—all of whom seem to be unreal reflections of one another while simultaneously being "de genewine artekil." Rather than attempting to substitute a singular "real" picture of slavery for the minstrel show's depiction, Brown multiplies minstrel images ad infinitum, rendering blackness unreal even as he redefines it. Through "real Negro" men—who are "real Negro" men through masquerade—Brown reveals to his white audience the numerous minute ways in which black men in slavery grasped power, if only temporarily, and hence reveals the ways in which black men conformed to middle-class ideas of manliness—and thus proved their humanity—even while remaining slaves. In this way he mirrors both the constant interplay of artifice and authenticity within the minstrel show *and* the minstrel show's own critique of slavery. By turning to the minstrel stage, Brown demonstrates the inherent instability of representations of race and gender and points towards the possibility of a representative black manhood that, while depending upon the instability of blackness and manhood, denies neither.

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Notes

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- 1 I take the term and idea of the “professional fugitive” (a way of designating former slaves who supported themselves through abolitionist activity) from Larry Gara, “The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 48 (spring 1965): 196–204. The best overall study of black abolitionists is still Benjamin Quarles’s *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969). For a general history of free blacks in the antebellum North, see Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961).
- 2 See William Edward Farrison, *William Wells Brown: Author and Reformer* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), 277–80.
- 3 Brown entitled this song “A Song for Freedom” in his *The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs For Anti-Slavery Meetings* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 37–38. This volume compiles a range of abolitionist songs (only a few of which Brown wrote), including “Get off the Track” (set to “Dan Tucker”) and, in later editions, “The North Star” (set to “O, Susannah”).
- 4 William Wells Brown, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), in *Black Theater, U. S. A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847–1974*, ed. James V. Hatch (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 47. Further references will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically.
- 5 Quoted in Farrison, *William Wells Brown*, 281.
- 6 As Robert C. Toll (along with numerous other historians) has noted, minstrelsy “swept the nation in the 1840s,” becoming the “most popular entertainment form in the country” and the “first American popular entertainment form to become a national institution” (*Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974], v, vi).
- 7 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855; reprint, New York: Arno, 1969), 362.
- 8 Quoted in Farrison, *William Wells Brown*, 294.
- 9 Brown’s construction of race as performance prefigures later formulations of black racial consciousness as a matter of double-consciousness (W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903]) and as a matter of masquerade (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952]). For a reading of DuBois that has influenced my understanding of the relationship between cultural (or sociohistorical) and biological understandings of

- race, see Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (autumn 1985): 21–37.
- 10 Eric Lott notes this historical conjunction and other connections between abolitionism and minstrelsy in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 111. In his afterword, Lott moves toward investigating black appropriations of the minstrel show, citing Martin Delany's *Blake* (1859–1861) as a text that "devises a complex reinvention of the minstrel tradition" (236). My work attempts to complicate and expand Lott's theorization of the ambivalence of the minstrel show in the direction in which this brief discussion points.
 - 11 Despite my characterization of the abolitionist movement as "white" (which is generally true of its early leadership), the movement depended on the support of free blacks from the beginning. For example, Garrison's *Liberator* would have failed in its first years but for black subscriptions. It was not until the late 1830s, however, that blacks began to gain positions as speaking agents for abolition societies. Apparently Charles Lenox Remond, a native of Salem, Massachusetts, became the first black antislavery agent in 1838. While he provided "a living refutation of the stereotyped falsehood of inferiority," he could not speak of slavery from his own experience; see Robert C. Dick, *Black Protest: Issues and Tactics* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1974), 207. See also Leon F. Litwack, "The Emancipation of the Negro Abolitionist," in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, ed. Martin Duberman (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), 137–55.
 - 12 Letter from John A. Collins to William Lloyd Garrison, January 1842, quoted in Gara, "The Professional Fugitive," 196. See also Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839). Weld's record, which became one of the sources for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), reports an incident—a slave being drowned by a mob in New Orleans—that Brown claimed to have witnessed; see *Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave, written by himself* (1847), in *Puttin' On Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 200–01. Further references to this work will be to this edition and will be noted parenthetically as *N*.
 - 13 The antebellum minstrel show was not primarily based on anything that could be called "authentically" African American. Rather, it drew from conventions of representing Irish and frontier characters, popular Euro-American songs (already influenced by African American culture), and some elements of an already hybridized African American slave culture. The minstrel show became a place where elements of American culture already marked as "black" or "white" (although, in both cases, already a mixture of "African" and "European" influences) came together

- and influenced one another. For one interesting case study of the way minstrelsy emerged through a constant play of cross-racial cultural appropriation, see Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).
- 14 "Editor's Table: Bowery Theatre," *Knickerbocker*, July 1840, 84; advertisement quoted in Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Show* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1930), 37.
- 15 Both quoted in Gara, "The Professional Fugitive," 198.
- 16 Toll, *Blacking Up*, 101.
- 17 In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison dated 17 May 1853, which recounts the fanfare accompanying Stowe's arrival in England and criticizes her husband for his reconciliatory rhetoric, Brown declared that "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* has come down upon the dark abodes of slavery like a morning's sunlight, unfolding to view its enormities in a manner which has fastened all eyes upon the 'peculiar institution,' and awakening sympathy in hearts that never before felt for the slave" (*The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 1, *The British Isles, 1830–1865*, ed. C. Peter Ripley et al. [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1985], 344). See Peter A. Dorsey, "De-authorizing Slavery: Realism in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Brown's *Clotel*," *ESQ* 41 (winter 1995): 256–88, for a discussion of the intertextual borrowings of these two novels.
- 18 The novel has often been criticized for its fragmentary and episodic character. Like M. Giulia Fabi, however, I see the fragmentary nature of Brown's novel as giving him access to a systemic critique of slavery, specifically in the portrayal of male slaves; see M. Giulia Fabi, "The 'Un-guarded Expressions of the Feelings of the Negroes': Gender, Slave Resistance, and William Wells Brown's Revisions of *Clotel*," *African American Review* 27 (winter 1993): 639–54.
- 19 Fabi focuses on these "two competing plots" (639) while pointing to Brown's failure to depict any *black* female slaves in a positive light. While I am more interested in how these two plots intersect to destabilize the idea that race is legibly inscribed on the body, Fabi's point about the lack of black women is well taken. Alongside a viable representative black manhood, Brown offers multiple mulatta heroines whose mixed racial status stands as evidence of the sexual crimes of slavery as it troubles any easy racial essentialization. While the mulatta heroine can stand in, to an extent, for black women, Brown fails to offer the same critique of—or at least devotes less attention to—constructions of black womanhood as he does constructions of black manhood.
- 20 William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853; reprint, New York: Carol, 1969), 59; further references to *Clotel* will be to this edition and will be noted parenthetically. Numerous critics have seen the third-person introductory

section as a key moment in African American letters, explicitly marking the shift from the autobiographical slave narrative to fictional forms and acting to displace the “authenticating white abolitionist preface” of slave narratives (Carla L. Peterson, “Capitalism, Black (Under)development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s,” *American Literary History* 4 [winter 1992]: 563). See also William L. Andrews, “The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative,” *PMLA* 105 (January 1990): 23–34.

- 21 In regard to gender masquerade, Judith Butler argues that “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks . . . the notion of a true gender identity” (137). Thus, “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (138). While my work is indebted to Butler’s delineation of the power of masquerade, my point is that while masquerade does reveal the constructedness of race and gender, it also works to substantiate those distinctions. Butler does note that such masquerades “become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (139), but I believe her account (at least here) is overly celebratory of the subversive possibilities of masquerade; see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). In a discussion of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Butler provides a more nuanced reading of the constitution of racial and gender lines through a movement of acknowledgment and disavowal of their fluidity; see *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 167–85.
- 22 I borrow the term “colorist” from Alice Walker. For her critique of Brown as a racist and sexist, see *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 297–303.
- 23 See Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776–1863* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1972), 160. Fabi also comments on Brown’s “folk characters” (640). Brown’s blackface characters could be seen as part of the tradition of signifying that Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988). My point is that this tradition is always being constructed in dialogue with and through a constant interplay of appropriation and reappropriation from and by both “white” literature and mass cultural forms such as minstrelsy.
- 24 As Ralph Ellison puts it in a different context, “Without arguing the point I shall say only that if it is a trickster, its adjustments to the contours of ‘white’ symbolic needs is far more intriguing than its alleged origins, for it tells us something of the operation of American values as modulated by folklore and literature [and, I would add, mass culture]” (“Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” [1958], in *Shadow and Act* [New York: Random House, 1964], 51–52).

- 25 William Wells Brown, *A Lecture Delivered Before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem At Lyceum Hall, Nov. 14, 1847*, in *Four Fugitive Slave Narratives*, ed. Larry Gara (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), 81–82.
- 26 “Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Horticultural Hall, West Chester, Pennsylvania, 23 October 1854,” in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 4, *The United States, 1847–1858*, ed. C. Peter Ripley et al. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991), 248.
- 27 Brown’s statements provide an early articulation of some of the difficulties Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak enunciates in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.
- 28 In other words, Brown is able to use the minstrelized black body as, to use Lauren Berlant’s term, a prophylactic body in order to remain black even while entering into the essentially white male realm of the public sphere; see Berlant, “National Brands/National Body: Imitation of Life,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), 173–208.
- 29 Brown’s appropriation of minstrelsy is only one way in which he provides an important contrast in strategy and focus to Frederick Douglass. In 1849 Douglass reported on going to see Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders, a minstrel troupe “said to be composed entirely of colored people.” Douglass remarks that “they, too, had recourse to the burnt cork and lamp black, the better to express their characters, and to produce uniformity of complexion. Their lips, too, were evidently painted, and otherwise exaggerated. Their singing generally was but an imitation of white performers, and not even a tolerable representation of the character of the colored people.” By appearing in blackface, and thus producing themselves as “uniform,” the black performers fail to give “a tolerable representation of the character of the colored people.” Imitating white performers, they do not reveal “the peculiarities of their race,” but rather exaggerate them. Douglass states that “[i]t is something gained, when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience,” but he immediately qualifies this gain by arguing that “this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race. But they must cease to exaggerate the exaggerations of our enemies; and represent the colored man rather as he is, than as Ethiopian Minstrels usually represent him to be. They will *then* command the respect of both races.” According to Douglass, black performers in blackface cannot succeed in fighting racism and slavery because they do not represent the black man “as he is.” It is by representing the “true” “character of colored people” that blacks can help in the struggle for equality and freedom. Brown, on the other hand, uses minstrelsy to obscure the very notion of a “true” black character while simultaneously

constructing a representative black manhood; see Frederick Douglass, "Gavitt's Original Ethiopian Serenaders," *North Star*, 29 June 1849; reprinted in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 1, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 141–42.

30 Lott, *Love and Theft*, 115.

31 See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 115–32.

32 Generally, middle-class manhood in this period has been identified with rising ideals of decorum and self-restraint—a more spiritualized manhood—while working-class manhood has been identified with a certain rugged, unconstrained physicality; see, for example, E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986). I find it useful here to invoke this idea of middle-class manhood, but, as the middle-class celebration of the physicality of the minstrel show indicates, I think middle-class manhood was actually more complicated in its attempt to balance bourgeois decorum with a more physical manliness.

Lott engages the "class unevenness of minstrel audiences" and suggests the minstrel show's "possible counteruses as a mode of cultural embourgeoisement" in his chapter on Stephen Foster (182). But even there, his focus remains on working-class investment in the minstrel show.

33 Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 52. As Alexander Saxton has noted, the major stars of antebellum minstrelsy "were clearly [men] of middle-class background . . . [who] rejected the straight ways of the Protestant ethic and sought escape into the bohemianism of the entertainment world" (*The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* [New York: Verso, 1990], 167). The minstrel show provided a forum in which white men generally could access the pleasures of the body associated with blackness and middle-class whites in particular could access the pleasures associated with both blackness and the lower classes.

34 *New York Tribune*, 30 June 1855, quoted as Lott's epigraph, 3; Robert P. Nevin, "Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1867, 610; "Negro Minstrelsy—Ancient and Modern," *Putnam's Monthly*, January 1855, 72.

35 From 1847, quoted in Marian Hannah Winter, "Juba and American Minstrelsy," *Dance Index*, February 1947, 27.

36 Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 116.

37 As Toll puts it, "By focusing on caricatures of frolicking Negroes in the idealized plantation family, minstrelsy created a state of perpetual childhood that audiences could vicariously participate in and feel superior to at the same time" (*Blacking Up*, 86).

- 38 "Songs of the Blacks," *Dwight's Journal of Music*, 15 November 1856; reprinted in *What They Heard: Music In America, 1852–1881*, ed. Irving Sablosky (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1986), 264–65.
- 39 Frantz Fanon quotes "a friend who was a teacher in the United States, [who said,] 'The presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance'" (*Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. Charles Lam Markmann [New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967], 129).
- 40 "Songs of the Blacks," 264.
- 41 The most famous account of viewers misperceiving minstrel performers as actually black is Mark Twain's story of taking his mother and aunt to a show; see *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (1924; reprint, New York: Harper, 1959), 58–63.
- 42 For discussions of sheet music covers, see Toll, *Blacking Up*, 40, and Lott, *Love and Theft*, 20–21.
- 43 Thomas L. Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life*, vol. 2 (London: John Maxwell and Co., 1864), 231–32.
- 44 See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 113–18, for a discussion of this point and others related to accounts of Lane's performances.
- 45 Quoted in Winter, "Juba and American Minstrelsy," 33. Winter and Lott provide the best overviews of Lane's career.
- 46 Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (1842; reprint, London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), 90–91.
- 47 Both comments quoted in Winter, 36.
- 48 As Homi Bhabha puts it in his discussion of the ambivalence of stereotypes, "in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of . . . mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy." This "recognition and disavowal of 'difference' is always disturbed by the question of re-presentation or construction" (*The Location of Culture* [New York: Routledge, 1994], 86, 81).
- 49 Quoted in Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982), 56.
- 50 Quoted in Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 177.
- 51 Toll hypothesizes that the dearth of antislavery material he sees in the minstrel show after 1850 or so was related to a move away from slave sources: the antislavery jokes on masters performed on the minstrel stage "may be among the authentic folk materials that minstrels borrowed" (*Blacking Up*, 73). Saxton, while seeing less antislavery rhetoric in minstrelsy, goes further in accrediting such subversive messages to minstrelsy's appropriation of African American cultural elements: "[T]he early borrowings of African American music and dance carried antislavery connotations that sometimes persisted subliminally in traditional verses" (*Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 176). Again, my point is not

- to deny that some “authentic” black folk material containing antislavery elements might have persisted in the minstrel show, but to foreground how the minstrel show’s structure required the retention (or production) of such material.
- 52 This phrase is from Brown’s description of Turner in his lecture on St. Domingo in 1854; see William Wells Brown, *St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and Its Patriots. A Lecture . . .* (1855; reprint, Philadelphia: Rhistoric, 1969), 23.
- 53 *Christy’s Plantation Melodies #2* (Philadelphia: Fisher and Brothers, 1852), 44–45.
- 54 Minstrel shows were rife with this kind of characterization. Stump speeches depicting blacks as incompetently trying to follow the white examples of famous speakers like Daniel Webster and scenes involving blacks failing to act as lawyers, doctors, and such were central to minstrel shows. See, for example, “Sambo’s Address to his Bred’ren,” in Dennison, 41–45; the selections on the minstrel show in *Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762–1909*, ed. Richard Moody (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1966), 475–500; and skits such as “The Quack Doctor,” in *This Grottesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage*, ed. Gary D. Engle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1978).
- 55 *The Music of Stephen C. Foster: A Critical Edition*, ed. Steven Saunders and Deane L. Root (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 1: 216–18.
- 56 Foster’s song has a different antislavery connotation without being read against the grain, as I have done. In Stowe’s *Dred* (1856), the slaves sing “Mas’r’s in the cold, cold ground” to the abolitionist lovers as part of a minstrel-like entertainment in which they express their love for their owners; see Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), 342–43. Foster’s song here serves to demonstrate the humanity of black slaves by underlining their capacity for genuine affection and emotional attachment.
- 57 Kristin Hoganson, “Garrisonian Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Gender, 1850–1860,” *American Quarterly* 45 (December 1993): 558–95.
- 58 Jean Fagan Yellin reads this emblem as representing the slave as “powerful and athletic,” on the verge of “bursting his fetters and asserting his freedom” (*Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989], 8). I concur with Hoganson, however, that in such contexts “black men’s bare bodies represented impotence, . . . an impotence caused by the inability to resist the master” (567).
- 59 Richard Yarborough, “Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave,’” in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 167–68.
- 60 At least early on, white abolitionists focused on finding black men to

- serve as lecturers. While black women such as Sojourner Truth had denounced slavery in public forums at least as early as the 1830s, black women did not, it seems, become antislavery agents per se until the 1850s. For black women lecturers, writers, and workers in the antislavery movement, see Carla L. Peterson, *“Doers of the Word”*: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880) (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995); and Yellin, *Women and Sisters*. Two quintessential texts of ex-slave women negotiating middle-class gender expectations are Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Sojourner Truth’s perhaps fictional “A’n’t I a Woman” speech (1851).
- 61 Henry Louis Gates Jr. explores the importance of literacy in the fight for recognition of black humanity in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987). Janet Duitsman Cornelius has argued that literacy was actually far more common among slaves than previously believed; see her *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1991). My point is that slaves, correctly or incorrectly, were perceived as illiterate and ignorant.
- 62 Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 362.
- 63 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845), in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Mentor, 1987), 298–99.
- 64 Douglas, *Narrative*, 293, 305. The most conspicuous calls for black resistance during the period forcefully play out this logic. David Walker’s *Appeal* (1829) is particularly telling on this account. Walker declares that “we are *men*, notwithstanding our *improminent noses* and *woolly heads*” (25), yet like the antislavery emblem, Walker’s declaration repeatedly becomes a question: “Are we MEN!!—I ask you, O my brethren! are we MEN? . . . How could we be so *submissive*?” (36). If the enslaved blacks are truly men, they would chance death rather than submit to the degradations of slavery (34, 42, 46). Only by actively resisting slavery, “meet[ing] death with glory,” will they prove to themselves and “the Americans, who are waiting for us to prove to them ourselves, that we are MEN” (*David Walker’s Appeal, In Four Articles . . .* [1830 (3rd ed.); reprint, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993], 48). See also Henry Highland Garnet, *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (1848), in *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*, ed. Sterling Stuckey (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 165–73. Garnet’s address was originally delivered at the National Colored Convention at Buffalo in 1843, where Douglass and Brown helped to defeat its adoption.
- 65 Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 246–47, 242. Douglass plays on the word *root* by referring both to the charm he was given by a fellow slave and his roots as a slave. In both cases, he is breaking explicitly with what becomes constructed as a feminized and ineffectual slave past.
- 66 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 38, 69.

- 67 As Herbert Aptheker has shown, violent slave rebellions were more common than has often been recognized. See, for example, his *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943; reprint, New York: International Publishers, 1983). Although the majority of slaves did not take part in such uprisings, as Eugene D. Genovese has shown in his Gramscian study of slavery and hegemony, blacks did exert a limited amount of control over their own lives in slavery and actively partook in both symbolic and covert resistance to white power; see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974).
- 68 See Frances Smith Foster, "Racial Myths in Slave Narratives," in *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 127–41, for an account of the importance of mulatto spokesmen in abolitionism.
- 69 Both quoted in Farrison, *William Wells Brown*, 259 (December 1854), 288 (September 1857). Because eloquence in light-skinned black speakers called into question their "blackness," white abolitionists not only desired more "plantation manner" from spokesmen like Brown, but also actively sought out the "full, unmitigated, unalleviated and unpardonable blackness" of men like Henry Highland Garnet; see Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 43.
- 70 Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered: An Address Delivered in Hudson, Ohio, on 12 July 1854," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series One, *Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847–1854*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), 510.
- 71 For an account of how the black body was constructed as ungendered and at the same time hypersexualized, see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (summer 1987): 64–81.
- 72 Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 102.
- 73 See Judith R. Berzon, *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1978), especially chapter 2, "Racist Ideologies and the Mulatto," for a rehearsal of the critiques of the tragic mulatta as a racist figure. For a defense of its effectiveness in antislavery literature, see Jules Zanger, "The 'Tragic Octoroon' in Pre-Civil War Fiction," *American Quarterly* 18 (spring 1966): 63–70. While the mulatto character was almost always imagined to be the product of a union between a black slave woman and a white man (frequently a close relative), as Sánchez-Eppler has demonstrated, the mulatta heroine could also stand in for the most unspeakable cross-racial desire, that of a white woman for a black man.

- 74 See Nancy Bentley, "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," *American Literature* 65 (September 1993): 501-22.
- 75 Stowe's novel is the essential text for mapping out this notion of gendered racial traits, which George Fredrickson has termed "romantic racialism"; see Fredrickson, "Uncle Tom and the Anglo-Saxons: Romantic Racialism in the North," in *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 97-129. Cynthia Griffin Wolff has attempted to qualify readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that see Tom as effeminate by correctly showing how Stowe calls for a type of manhood in which being "brave, manly" is equated with being "gentle, domestic." Wolff, however, fails to take into account the ways in which Stowe bases this idea of a more "domestic" manhood on the notion that blacks *naturally* have a more "feminine" disposition that white men need to learn; see Wolff, "'Masculinity' in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Quarterly* 47 (December 1995): 595-618.
- 76 Frederick Douglass, "The Heroic Slave" (1853), in *Violence in the Black Imagination*, ed. Ronald T. Takaki (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), 40, 41. All further citations will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically.
- 77 Richard Yarborough, whose reading of "The Heroic Slave" has influenced my own thinking about the story, argues that Washington's blackness is also called into question from this opening description (173-74). For more positive accounts of "The Heroic Slave" and its obviously important reconceptualization of black manhood, see Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 115-24; and Maggie Sale, "To Make the Past Useful: Frederick Douglass' Politics of Solidarity," *Arizona Quarterly* 51 (autumn 1995): 25-60.
- 78 Shirley Samuels explores the ways in which sentimental antislavery fiction worked on the premise of revealing the "white" inside of black slaves; see Samuels, "The Identity of Slavery," in *The Culture of Sentiment*, 157-71.
- 79 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1981), 392.
- 80 For more on the Nat/Sambo dichotomy in the Southern imagination and in the slave community, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972). Brown invokes the image of black atavism again in his lecture on St. Domingo from 1854. While Brown stresses that the educated, rational French started the violence and were far worse in their cruelties, when he explicitly connects this revolt to the Southern states, his point is clear: "Let the slave-holders in our Southern States tremble when they shall call to mind these events" (25).
- 81 This construction of black resistance and rebellion as irrational or pre-rational was a commonplace. Perhaps the best example of this constant

shift between seeing the rebel slave as admirable and as insane is T. R. Gray's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831).

- 82 Brown notes that upon escaping George went "but a short distance before he felt that a change of his apparel would facilitate his progress" (228), but he makes it clear that George remains in women's clothes until in the North. Both Bentley and Fabi misread this passage as indicating that George immediately reclaims his masculine appearance. Bentley argues that Brown uses the scene to set up a "contrast between the female and male Mulattoes," so that "White male bodies are spared and female bodies are sacrificed" (507); Fabi argues that George must reclaim his manliness immediately because of Brown's "evaluation of passing as un-heroic" and feminine (645). My point is that Brown *stresses* George's escape through masquerade because of the impossibility of heroic action and because of his desire to emphasize the performative nature of white manhood.
- 83 Brown reiterates this logic in the story of Clotel's escape with William, a dark black slave. In their escape Clotel poses as an invalid white man and William poses as her faithful servant. Not only does Brown point to the instability of white manhood—a "black" woman can become a white man—but William achieves manhood, thus demonstrating that he is "as good as white folks" (177), by reconfiguring his status as a "Jim Crow"-like slave (176).