The Tautology of Blackface and the Objectification of Racism: A “How-To” Guide

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Abstract

This essay examines U.S. blackface performance in the twentieth century through the lens of Adorno’s mass culture critiques, specifically of jazz music. Despite being rooted in the divisive logic of antiquated live performance traditions, blackface as a racist glyph flourishes in the technologically mediated social environment of the twentieth century. By replacing Adorno’s critique of jazz with a direct investigation of blackface, the essay argues for a more materialist approach to minstrelsy studies that acknowledges both circulation and accumulation as oppressive hegemonic forces.

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The 1905 *Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* includes a section titled “How to Black Up: An Instructive Interview.” The piece, a (probably invented) faux-Socratic dialogue between an unnamed reporter and a professional minstrel comedian, Frank Dumont, follows step-by-step the donning of blackface.

[Figure 1]

Figure 1. “Blackening Up and Adjusting Wig,” detail from *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*.

While coating his face in a paste of ash and water, Dumont discusses the contrast between mask color and lips. “So you paint the lips red?” he is asked. Dumont replies:

No, sir; when you have applied the cork and left the lips in the natural condition they will appear red to the audience. Comedians leave a wider white margin around the lips. This will give it the appearance of a large mouth, and will look red to the spectator. Having blackened my features, I now take my sponge and with it wipe the palms of both hands.... It represents the real color of the colored man’s hand; at the same time cleans that portion of the hands for the remainder of the make up for the stage. Thus you can handle the white vest, bosom of shirt, collars and ties without soiling them.¹

As it establishes the protocol for applying the blackface mask over one’s actual face, the instructional guide is very aware of its readership and what their concerns are about the

practicalities of corking up. The guide also presents a dizzying array of tensions regarding blackness and whiteness, fake and real, clean and soiled, performer and audience. In this scenario, the white performer assumes control and racial difference is presented as natural, essential, and ahistorical.

This essay presents a materialist approach to understanding the blackface mask: what it is, how it functions as an agent of racist oppression, and the way it exists and circulates in U.S. society. The essay's materialist methodology is derived from the critiques and writings of Theodor Adorno on mass culture products and entertainments. This approach gives proper attention to blackface and its impact on the broader social spectrum. By analyzing blackface as an object of reproduction and circulation, its ubiquity can be understood and appreciated. A materialist approach also fully considers the centrality of racial violence hidden behind the mask.

Focusing on blackface's materiality, its object-ness and how it solidifies racist thought, one can, in a quantifiable way, identify and trace its placement, prominence, visibility, and repeatability in society. Core ideas here are derived from Marx and filtered through the Marxist thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Several come from *Capital*, such as circulation (the movement of goods and money through society), tautology (a closed system of thinking that falsely justifies its own conclusions), and reification (a double-sided effect of capitalism: the thing-ification of people and the socialization of products).² Building upon economic analyses of history and society, Adorno and others were the first to apply terms such as commerce, circulation, and exchange value to forms of entertainment. But these philosophers also understood how social beliefs and national identity, class ideology and racial hegemony, all support a capitalist hierarchy of wealth disparity.

This article will highlight a few of Adorno's writings to argue for minstrelsy's comfortable place within the culture industry: how and why it functions, consistently and for over a century, as a reminder of white supremacy through black inferiority. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, of course, coined the term "culture industry" in their 1944 book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which explains how the domination of technological rationality over culture, leisure, and enjoyment "infect[s] everything with sameness."³ The terminology of their critique of twentieth-century popular culture is peppered throughout this study, from the alignment of advertisement to propaganda to the circulation of hegemonic ideas through culture. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno further writes of the culture industry as being "geared to mimetic repression, to the manipulation of repressed impulses to copy."⁴ The concept of mimesis is central to the ersatz presentation of African American life and the cornerstone to blackface performance. But more than this funhouse-mirror distortion is the idea of repressed impulses: the culture industry thrives by selling back to the public its own worst feelings and desires. Systemic tautologies, social reification, and commodity circulation contribute to this. Indeed, the increased thing-ification of the entertainment product dehumanizes the subject too, alienating a person's consciousness from him- or herself.

In one of the many paradoxes when analyzing blackface and minstrelsy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, performance is both the most and least important aspect of the mask's longevity. As Frank Dumont and the *Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide* remind us, blackface began as part of a live theatrical event in which the mask replaced black identity. The idea of the mask derives from a live performance legacy, but what cannot be understated is how the blackface mask as a racist glyph gains new and wider traction in the twentieth century when minstrelsy loses ground—economically and

culturally—to film, radio, and musical recordings. The adaptability of the blackface mask to these media is due to the fact that the mask had done in the nineteenth century what these media were capable of doing in the twentieth: objectifying and reifying regressive thought. Technology allows for wider and more intense blanketing of images and messages, similar to advertising and propaganda. And, like ads and propaganda, the blackface mask is a closed system. It “proves” that black people act that way because black people act that way: form and content fuse, subject and object are sutured, and the object is primary. In the minstrel show, blackness is thingness.

Blackface’s ubiquity in so many cultural products fundamental to U.S. national identity had lodged it in the country’s sense of racial formation and racial difference. Blackface and minstrelsy benefited from many of the technological innovations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the first recording of a black artist on cylinder is the 1890s “The Whistling Coon”; the earliest silent film shorts to feature African Americans included stereotypical scenes of cakewalk dancing, watermelon eating, and general bad behavior; *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Jazz Singer* (1927) reinvented the language of film at the same time that Amos ‘n’ Andy popularized radio.⁵ In an era of increased distribution blackface takes hold. Because of the drive to prove itself as the pure, ahistorical concept of race difference, the blackface mask cannot be analyzed as an *inert* object. Rather, it self-fulfills, self-repeats, self-sustains, and self-perpetuates. This happens through its circulation in so many media.

The blackface mask as objectified racism makes it, in actuality, antithetical to race, which is exactly why it is used hysterically as a stand-in for race. It is well established that race is a socially conditioned, mutable performance, with symbols, mannerisms, and phenotypic signs to indicate difference. In *Theatre & Race*, Harvey

Young cogently sums up this position: “Although race is an invention, a convenience that encapsulates perceived (or imagined) difference, it should not be dismissed as either a mere fiction or an anachronism. Its broad acceptance, seeming materiality, and staying power are anchored in its ability to provide a narrative that unifies a collective social history with the variances in individuated social perspectives.”⁶ Here he discusses the positive effects of a racial community. Yet, relatedly, the *seeming materiality* of race allows blackface to act as a false surrogate for African American identity. The minstrel show has always trafficked in hypostasized racism, the circulation of racist ideology, and the assuagement and displacement of cultural, technological, and capitalistic anxieties. Whereas race as a performance mutates and changes as historical and social conditions change, blackface is the inverse: a racist feedback loop of material accumulation.

Adorno only directly discusses theatre when interpreting playtexts by Beckett, Schiller, Ibsen, and others. The minstrel show, full of songs, dancing, bad puns, situational slapstick comedy, and improvisation, lacks the textual authority of a script. This means one must tread carefully in approaching the performance of minstrelsy using Adornian concepts. As the editors of *Adorno and Performance* note, “Adorno’s treatment of performance remains simultaneously profound and perplexing, purposeful and purposeless, accidental and co-incidental.”⁷ Indeed, to explain blackface’s longevity, ubiquity, and elasticity requires a turn to mass culture entertainments and culture industry ephemera.

Setting aside Adorno’s writings on theatre, I want to turn to mass culture as a social force which, as Andreas Huyssen notes, “depends on technologies of mass production and mass reproduction and thus on the homogenization of difference.”⁸ This

aligns perfectly with Adorno's understanding of the technological era in which he was living. Richard Leppert summarizes Adorno's overall feelings when he writes:

The truth of modern society, for Adorno, was its falseness through and through. Modernity was structured around the commodity fetish and a commodified subjectivity, which together functioned in a deadly, mutually self-sustaining embrace.⁹

And Adorno was remarkably prescient in his critiques, as savage as they were.

Highlighting the propagandistic potential inherent in mass reproduction technologies can easily be extended to the racial hierarchies in blackface performance.

For minstrelsy studies, the best way to approach Adorno's dialectical materialist critiques of modern society is through his essays on popular music and jazz, which he wrote about for most of his life. Though he shifts emphasis between various media, be it radio or phonograph or sheet music, he is consistent in his feelings about the music itself: it is repetitious, boring, consumerist, deadening, and borderline Fascist. It may seem odd to state, but minstrelsy fits Adorno's attitudes toward mass culture better than jazz. Jazz contains an element of individual artistry and possible social critique that minstrelsy lacks. Blackface performance embraces the tautology of racism whole cloth.

I want to substitute minstrelsy for jazz as an agent of the culture industry that both effortlessly fits the technological schema of modernity (as well as comfortably conforms to the pseudo-primitivism of Modernism). As Robert Witkin notes in his essay "Why Did Adorno 'Hate' Jazz?": "Adorno's critique of jazz reinforces the classical sociological understanding of modernity as a system for the instrumental management of object relations," which means, in a classic Marxist sense, that modernity is "a vast system of

object relations in which individuals appear as objects even to themselves.”¹⁰ The thingification of bodies and people in modernity is aligned with the reification of racism that the blackface mask confers upon any culture product or technology employing it. In this vast system, Adorno looks to find cultural expressions that counteract the reification. Blackface is embraced by the culture industry, and by extension, minstrelsy is effective because it is willingly heteronomous and complicit in its own objectification.

I want to examine three of Adorno’s essays on popular music and jazz, and offer minstrelsy as a substitute for his more blanket statements about the musical form. In each case, I will offer examples of blackface from the twentieth century that include media and technology and which can be fully explained with Adorno’s methods. I will first examine “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” The essay laments the state of music in society, from the degradation of classical music to the infantilization of the listener. As with his earlier concerns about the culture industry, Adorno was horrified that the “regression” of consumer society was hastened through mass culture. For the purposes of refashioning Adorno to dissect minstrelsy, there are a few points about technology and art-as-advertising to address here, for these interrelated ideas speak to the place of minstrelsy and blackface in U.S. society, its circulation and accumulation.

Technology—in the case of popular music, the physical records and the equipment necessary to play them—reduces classical music to “light” music and jingles. The listener, concurrently, becomes a childlike consumer of musical sound bites. In analyzing how “musical life is dominated by the commodity form,” Adorno writes that music “serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music.”¹¹ The thingness and heteronomy of the cultural product heard through the record is now—the inverse of any preindustrial culture

product—less important than the record player itself, which confers comfort and status on the owner.

The culture form of music Adorno tracks becomes subservient to the technology that distributes it:

The change in the function of music involves the basic conditions of the relation between art and society. The more inexorably the principle of exchange-value destroys use values for human beings, the more deeply does exchange-value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment.¹²

The cost of a cultural product becomes the enjoyment of it; the money paid supersedes aesthetic joy. In a basic way, this relates to how minstrelsy and blackface are distributed through technology, in that the racist images and comedy routines participate in their own fetishization and regression. Minstrel performance no longer circulated through live performance in the twentieth century, for the same technological reasons as the degradation of all musical forms. Unlike other forms of entertainment, though, it works *with* the regressive tendencies of the medium, reduced to a carefully nostalgic object with no specific referent other than a sense of security, order, and rightness. Or, as Adorno notes, “the hit song remains salutarily forgotten in the half-dusk of familiarity.”¹³

I want to turn to the early film career of Al Jolson as a combination of blackface, nostalgia, and technology. The oft-cited *Jazz Singer* is a fascinating example of so many historical, racial, technological tensions that it is hard to even untangle the many threads.¹⁴ It can be analyzed through its transition from short story to stage play to talking picture. It can be read as an assimilationist tale, with the Jewish Jackie Rabinowitz

morphing into vaudevillian Jack Robin. It can be discussed for its confused musical styles—as Michael Rogin notes, there’s no jazz singing in *The Jazz Singer*.¹⁵ It can be interpreted for the Oedipal supplication of the final number, “Mammy.” But I want to analyze it through the gauzy lens of blackface nostalgia, as a film that is depicting the entertainment form that film itself was destroying.

The movie follows the story of a boy becoming a vaudeville star through blackface performance, and the obsolescence of live performance is at the core of the film’s nostalgia. As a hybrid of silent and sound film elements, the film is in many respects an advertisement for the technology itself. So how does blackface work in the film? To begin with, it’s diegetic: there are several scenes of Jack prepping his makeup and no one mistakes Jack for an actual black man. In an altogether common statement of blackface inversion, one character remarks upon seeing Jack in his makeup, “He talks like Jackie—but he looks like his shadow.” In his analysis of blackface’s transition to film, Arthur Knight notes:

Sound film... wrought some formal changes in blackface performance practices: By both spectacularizing and “narrativizing” blackface performance, it altered the frames in which blackface had been ordinarily placed and understood. ... What makes blackface work comically in these films is that it does not work narratively. The disguise has no reason.¹⁶

This lack of narrative reason for the mask is, I would argue, the reason for the mask. The nostalgia of blackface performance from a bygone era is the cover through which the new, technological advancement is being sold to the public. The blackface mask is the

perfect reproducible symbol for the film. The racism of the movie derives, in part, from how Jack Robin's complex and vibrant background contrasts with the deadening anonymity of his onstage black persona. But his belting of "Mammy" at the end is also meant to be familiar and comfortable to the movie-going public, to assist in the transition from the outdated live performative event to a mediated and mediatized one.

Moving beyond Adorno's general discussion of popular music and its distribution systems, I want to focus on how he writes about jazz. Adorno's writings on jazz have been dismissed as oversimplifications, but critics have also salvaged the core of Adorno's critiques and repurposed his arguments about mass culture for other aims.¹⁷ A similar repurposing happens here regarding Adorno's explication of essentializations and even the mixed racial roots of certain U.S. cultural products. Adorno rarely addressed blackness in his writings, but his work that touches upon black-generated cultural products is a fruitful way of analyzing faux-racial entertainments such as minstrelsy.

The essay "Perennial Fashion—Jazz" centers on the "paradoxical immortality" of jazz music.¹⁸ For Adorno, this style is so suited to machine-like technologies that the music itself has become mechanized. The roots of jazz, as a "mass phenomenon," actually stem from nineteenth-century minstrel tunes—Adorno names "Turkey in the Straw" and "Old Zip Coon" as antecedents.¹⁹ So he has an awareness of the minstrel show as a part of the American cultural fabric and is also keenly aware of the admixture of African American and white influences over the form. He confesses, "it is difficult to isolate the authentic Negro elements in jazz. The white *lumpenproletariat* also participated in its prehistory."²⁰ This racial confusion over minstrelsy's origins and inspiration is a keen insight. The twinned ideas of standardization and ahistoricization—fueled by the technologies of radio and phonograph—are also key to blackface in the

twentieth century and a racial hierarchy dependent on essentialized differences. To repurpose Adorno's writings on jazz, a probing definition for blackface is as an "image of the technical world [which] possesses an ahistorical aspect that enables it to serve as a mythical mirage of eternity."²¹ Key to its racist appeal is that blackface, against the mutability of time, could convey an essentialized standard of racial separation.

A further dialectical materialist analysis of blackface also means an examination of the physical object, the mask itself. In another essay, "On Jazz," Adorno articulates some ideas about repression and suppression that explain how the glyphic minstrel mask symbolizes racism's violent history. He writes:

There is nothing archaic in jazz but that which is engendered out of modernity through the mechanism of suppression. It is not old and repressed instincts which are freed in the form of standardized rhythms and standardized explosive outbursts; it is new, repressed, and mutilated instincts which have stiffened into the masks of those in the distant past.²²

This hits at the crux of minstrelsy's continuous power, both of adaptation and as a symbol of racial oppression. As a theatrical form created in the early nineteenth century, the new and the past are in constant tension. Repressed instincts of anger and fear over the racial other are calcified through the mask. And what also becomes clear is blackface's ability to continuously evoke the idea of smiling servitude: a discernible racial hierarchy and a black underclass that knows its place. By invoking all of this psychic aggression through the symbol of the mask, each individual use—in an amateur stage production, in a movie,

on a billboard—is linked to all the others. A sustaining web of racism supports itself and imposes its meaning upon society.

The mass culture technologies allow for images and ideas to reach much further, and much faster, than a single live event or performance. These also allow for simultaneity of image production and consumption well beyond the confines of the playhouse. Take, for example, the blackface visage of Aunt Jemima, which Chris Ruff created as the advertising icon for his self-rising pancake mix in 1889 after he saw an inspiring minstrel performance.²³ By the 1920s, the image appears everywhere throughout U.S. society: the pancake box in stores and homes, the image in full-page advertisements in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the billboards along roadsides, the mail-order rag dolls. By that point, the Jemima ubiquity had become self-referential: white vaudevillian Tess Gardella performed onstage as Aunt Jemima and was then cast as Queenie in the first production of the musical *Show Boat*.²⁴ Jemima appears in the movies, too: a box of the mix is included in the 1936 film version of *Show Boat* (the second of three film versions), and she is the obvious touchstone for the black cook in the 1934 film adaptation of *Imitation of Life*. Over time these objects accumulate and take on a historical weight,²⁵ thereby formulating a particular racialized history that impacts how African Americans are perceived. And the residual racism of the image persists down to the present, despite halfhearted marketing efforts to update it. As Big Daddy Kane in Public Enemy's "Burn, Hollywood, Burn" notes about roles for black actresses: "For what they play Aunt Jemima is the perfect term/ Even though now she's got a perm."²⁶

Individuals in a society are on a Mobius strip of oppressive capitalism, where consumerist technology begets more consumption. And such tautologies, at the level of ideas, lead those things which are aligned with, and benefit from, oppressive capitalism to

be conceived of as ahistorical and faux-universal. The blackface mask is a glyph for race and black identity. As individual consciousness becomes calcified and ideas become rigidified, truth is lost. And within this totalizing and reified belief system of the culture industry, the blackface mask replaces what it never was: race itself. The use of blackface as a cultural and racial marker continues to demonstrate a hold in constructing racial perspectives well into the twenty-first century, even as its “old timey” presentation, with ties back to the nineteenth century, become increasingly unnerving. The blackface mask sublimates modernity's concerns about the reification of personal identity and social relations.

Consider, for example, *The Stratosphere Minstrels*, a 1950 playscript written specifically for amateur performers. The subtitle, benefiting the tensions it will address through its fun-making, is “A Complete, Fast Moving, Up and Going Minstrel Show.” The play traffics in dual anxieties about technology and blackness, which are set in opposition to each other while both are set in opposition to the values of the implied audience. The opening scene takes place aboard a rocket ship! To read this minstrel show, which features a line of dancing Martians, is to be reminded of the toll that technology was taking on people, especially the prospect of space travel. At around the same time as *Stratosphere Minstrels* was penned, Adorno was writing how technology subjects people “to the implacable, as it were ahistorical demands of objects.” As people feel more alienated, Adorno continues, “The new human type cannot be properly understood without awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things about him, even in his most secret innervations.”²⁷ To better grasp this understanding, and how society responded, the amateur minstrel show offers evidence.

The middle section of the script contains a solo piece entitled “Professor Ionize Explains: A Blackface Monologue.” The delight of the piece is the speaker’s inability to explain the functions and abilities of a spaceship. He stumbles through his faux-scientific lecture on the “stratumphere ship” in typical minstrel show-speak, full of racist dialect and mush-mouthed malapropisms:

In de fust place, de geometric epidemic dat surrounds de earth am caused by de bisectation of de meridian between de North Pole an’ Memphis, Kentucky. Dat brings it right square in de middle of Oshkosh, Minnesota on de Atchison, Topeka an’ de Santa Claus Fe. Dat am where de latitude an’ de longestude am expatriated.²⁸

Transcribing this monologue, I am amazed at its sense of rhythm and comic timing as much as I am astounded by its racism. Blackface is both entirely necessary and completely superfluous. Redundantly subtitled a “blackface monologue,” the humor of the piece and the racism derive from the idiocy of this obviously unsuited authority figure. The circumlocutions, mispronunciations, and overall nonsense of the piece put the audience in a position of superiority to the “professor.”

The redundancy of the subtitle is key to how the piece exemplifies the circulation of blackface. Words such as “bisectation” and “longestude” have a tactile-ness to them, a physical presence in the way they are written and how they demand to be pronounced. The monologue continues in its unrelenting logorrhea:

Now den, s'posin' we is headed for de moon... den we counts up de H-2-
 O an' adds it to de longitudinal stability. What does we git? Not much. But
 if we add de escillations of de interceptions to de centrifugal capacity,
 what does we git? De same thing, only not so much of it. De ratio of de
 least amount varies wif de more you got. Derefoh, celestial navigation am
 based on de condensation of de cumulo-nimbus dat surrounds de
 effervescent alimony. Of course, dat predominates de equivalent potential
 temperature where de resistance of de ship scapes its ribs on de vacuum
 gyroscopic inertia.²⁹

After several additional paragraphs, it not so much concludes but rather exhausts itself
 amid this anxious, hysterical, terrorizing material.

A dialectical materialist perspective—an emphasis on hegemony, propaganda,
 and circulation beyond the immediate racisms of the written and performed blackface—
 enhances an understanding of the racism and explains how, even in 1950, the blackface
 mask continues to convey the meaning of racial difference. The main anxiety, the main
 tension, of the piece is about the loss of control, a feeling that the members of the
 audience are projecting upon the stereotyped caricature in front of them. Professor Ionize,
 having lost his bearings, is scared because he can hardly understand, let alone pilot, the
 speeding craft in which he finds himself. Minstrel show monologues are usually as one-
 joke as this one, in which the monotony of his confusion is finally broken by the end of
 the scene. The piece ends with Ionize as clueless as he was at the beginning. The real
 change is in the audience who, by their laughter, alleviate their own anxieties through the
 dismissal of this African American scapegoat.

Race is never mentioned in the monologue, yet faux-blackness is essential to its enjoyment. The mask is the necessary object for delivering this speech. Without the visual and aural reminders, a monologue about the confusions of technology might be unsettling if presented solely as a sad confessional by a white man. The presence of blackface makes it somehow comforting to the white audience. The seeming simplicity of the piece covers the deep-seated anxieties about modern life and the deep-rooted racisms of the time. The monologue is overdetermined by the blackface mask.

For white minstrel performers, the pleasurable dalliances with blackface japery and buffoonery include its opposite, the pleasing and knowing ability to take off the mask and erase all that it connotes. To return to the “How to Black Up” section of the *Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*, it concludes with the reporter asking how to reverse the transformation. The simple task of removing this object, a physical thing, invariably exists alongside violent tensions of race and racial difference. The return to white normalcy is the dialectical opposite of blackface:

“One thing more,” said the reporter. “Now the cork is on, how do you get it off? Scrape it off with a knife?” Mr. Dumont laughed of course at the scraping part of the make-up. “I just remove all my finery... and with a sponge and a cake of soap I go at it.... Plenty of lather and a sponge. Then go over the face once more and then rinse your ‘features’ in a bucket of fresh water—if you can get it—and once more you are a Caucasian ready to take up the ‘white man’s burden,’ instead of the coon’s.”³⁰

In these instructions, the physical object is tied to the idea of racial identity. The passage begins with the comical and horrific violence of the scraping knife, which is laughed off by Dumont. In anticipating the concerns of the white reader, Dumont explains the ease with which one can remove the mask, which suggests an anxiety about washing away the stain or taint of blackness. The reader wants to know that it will not stick to you, literally or psychologically. Fresh water helps, thus connecting cleanliness with whiteness. In this passage, the hegemonic oppression of blacks and supremacy of whites is assumed and then celebrated.

What, exactly, does the blackface mask symbolize? What glyptic purpose does it serve for those who observe, witness, wear or purchase it? I believe minstrelsy is a form of entertainment, not something that is entertaining: an objective designator as opposed to a subjective descriptor. And the blackface mask is one of the signals for this category of entertainment; its presence in any format indicates the promise of the intention to amuse. But part of its function as entertainment is the suppression of pain, which in the confines of U.S. race relations, means an obviation of the legacy of slavery. Concurrently, the mask projects or reminds the consumer of demeaning, subservient characteristics ascribed to blacks. It suggests the hodge-podge of belittling and contradictory social characteristics: African Americans are simultaneously stupid and easy-going, rapacious and nurturing, loyal and conniving, brutish and comical. These flicker across the surface of this false, uncanny face—whether it is an applied mask, an image in an advertisement, or a dancing shadow in a cartoon. This is the unremarkable yet amazing quality of blackface: no matter the media—radio, film, stage, sheet music, record, magazine ad—no matter how ubiquitous or singular, small or large, quiet or loud, a host of racist tropes

accompany it without need of explanation even as they ruthlessly repeat the same hegemonic stance.

For Adorno, art's truth content is its openness; conversely, the tautology of blackface is its falsity. As Adorno repeatedly discussed in his writings, the core dialectic in any artwork stems from a divide between subjectivity and objectivity. Any artwork, he notes, must have some physical presence, whether it be paint on a canvas or notes on a page. But an artwork's meaning lies in the gap between its objective state and the subjective response it generates; it resists the rigidification of a single meaning derived from its creator. This gap of meaning—gap of truth—is what distinguishes art from propaganda. Blackface strives for rigidification and demands to be calcified; likewise racism wants to be essentialized, wants to be essence. The problem with blackface's tautology is that it cannot be totalizing and its efforts at being ahistorical—of proving that the way things are, is the way things always will be—must be anxiously repeated.

I believe that the tautology of blackface can be challenged through performance. The live, black body onstage contradicts the stultifying effects of blackface. Works of art, in the Adornian definition, can resist the propaganda of racial separation and black oppression. But a full understanding of the weight of minstrel effects and imagery is required, through an acknowledgement of the blackface mask's materiality. Only then can the overt acts of protest and covert undercutting of privilege really be appreciated for their efforts and the daunting task in front of them.

Notes

¹ Frank Dumont, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (Chicago, IL: M. Witmark & Sons, 1905), 14–15.

² See, in particular, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,” in Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 163–77.

³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.

⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974), 201.

⁵ Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films*, 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1995); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2003); Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon*, rev. ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

⁶ Harvey Young, *Theatre & Race* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 6.

⁷ Will Daddario and Karoline Gritzer, introduction to *Adorno and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 8.

⁸ Andreas Huyssen, “The Hidden Dialectic: Avantgarde—Technology—Mass Culture,” in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 9.

⁹ Richard Leppert, introduction to Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 32.

¹⁰ Robert W. Witkin, “Why Did Adorno ‘Hate’ Jazz?” *Sociological Theory* 18.1 (March 2000), 163.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *Essays on Music*, 295.

¹² *Ibid.*, 296.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹⁴ See, for example, Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), and Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 112.

¹⁶ Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 50, 52.

¹⁷ In addition to Witkin, see James Harding, “Adorno, Ellison, and the Critique of Jazz,” in *Adorno and “A Writing of the Ruins”: Essays on Modern Aesthetics and Anglo-American Literature and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), and Lee B. Brown, “Adorno’s Critique of Popular Culture: The Case of Jazz Music,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 26.1 (1992).

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, “Perennial Fashion—Jazz,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967), 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁰ Ibid., 122.

²¹ Ibid., 125.

²² Theodor Adorno, “On Jazz,” in *Essays on Music*, 478.

²³ M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1998), 60–61.

²⁴ See the chapter “Colored Chorus Curtains” in Todd Decker, *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 101–22.

²⁵ I am thinking also of Walter Benjamin’s famous metaphor for progress: the angel of history being blown into the future against his will. See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

²⁶ Big Daddy Kane, vocal performance of “Burn, Hollywood, Burn,” by Public Enemy, on *Fear of a Black Planet*, Columbia 1990, compact disc.

²⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 40.

²⁸ Arthur Kaser, *The Stratosphere Minstrels: A Complete, Fast Moving, Up and Going Minstrel Show* (Boston, MA: Baker’s Plays, 1950), 18.

²⁹ Ibid., 18.

³⁰ Dumont, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*, 16.