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The Notion of Cultural Appropriation: from Minstrelsy to Hip Hop

Supervisor
Prof. Filomena Mitrano

Assistant supervisor
Prof. Gregory Dowling

Graduand
Maria Giulia Veccia
Matriculation Number 870311

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Abstract

This research investigates the notion of cultural appropriation with specific reference to Black culture. It connects the key concepts of minstrelsy to more recent cultural and aesthetic expressions like Hip Hop. The initial analysis of *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott's pivotal work on early 19th century blackface, provides useful tools for the analysis of more recent phenomena, like Hip Hop and so-called *blackfishing* on social media. The objective is to establish a connection between the significance of blackface in 19th century's white America and the appropriation of African American artistic expressions in the 20th and 21st century by arguing that these are strictly entangled in meaning and audience perception. The link between past and present is conveyed through an exploration of black masculinity, from enslavement to artistic rebellion. Discussion includes an analysis of selected minstrel's songs, and of white appropriation of rap. The final part calls attention to a relatively recent phenomenon among celebrities and more specifically on social media, which consists in acquiring African American aesthetic features, both in skin color and in body shape.

When the white man steps behind the mask of the trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell (for there is a mystery in the whiteness of blackness, the innocence of evil and the evil of innocence, though being initiates, Negroes express the joke of it in the blues) and thus lose that freedom which, in the fluids "tradition less", "classless" and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man's alone.

Ralph Ellis, *Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke*

INTRODUCTION

The central topic of this study is African American cultural appropriation and the first part of the research focuses on the theatrical practice of blackface minstrelsy, one of the most popular forms of entertainment in 19th century North America. The initial chapter is going to be based on Eric Lott's study *Love & Theft Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class,* which is centered only on its antebellum phases.

Cultural appropriation is a widely discussed and flourishing topic today, both in and outside the academic world; think about James O. Young's numerous works *Cultural Appropriation and The Arts* (2008)*, Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation* (2005)*,* as well as *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* (2009) with Conrad G. Brunk, or *Borrowed Powers Essays on Cultural Appropriation* edited (1997) by Bruce Riff and Pratima V. Rao as well as in the news, with articles on *The New York Times, Vogue, Time, The Guardian* and even on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook. In this sense, one might find odd the choice of beginning the analysis of today's cases of black cultural appropriation by resorting to a two-century-old phenomenon, nonetheless I would argue otherwise. What I mean to prove is that current appropriations of African American cultural expressions have their roots in the deepest sentiments that minstrelsy staged, perpetuated, and spread widely. Aiming to create this connection between blackface and today's cultural appropriation I am going to first identify minstrelsy's primary meanings and then retrace its echoes in more recent phenomena. I am laying the foundation of my analysis on *Love & Theft* because it is one of the most in-depth and authoritative researches conducted on the phenomenon of blackface, and I find the author's perspective to be insightful and helpful for my objectives. Although Lott's analysis was published in 1993 and deals with a two-centuries-old practice, I find its interpretations to be timeless and useful for analyzing more current tendencies. Through his study, Lott is handing us the tools we need to have a clearer understanding of today's African American cultural appropriation.

Hence, the first chapter's fundamental intent is to analyze Lott's work in which he outlines his notion of cultural *expropriation* (rather than appropriation). Before proceeding into the analysis, I find it important to explain the choice of using the term expropriation for 19th-century minstrelsy, and shifting to appropriation in describing more recent cases. The need to use two different terms conveys the idea of a transforming phenomenon, which had a birth and evolved over the centuries. The difference in meaning between appropriation and expropriation is slight, but Eric Lott's work describes blackface minstrelsy as an act of cultural theft and that is why expropriation better defines it. If we take a closer look at the two

terms we realize that they both involve the semantic field of possession, which in relation to culture is extremely volatile, but there is a difference in definition. Expropriation means “to deprive of possession or proprietary rights” or “to transfer (the property of another) to one's own possession” (Merriam Webster); the definitions of appropriation are “to take exclusive possession of sth” or “to take or make use of without authority or right” (Merriam Webster). In the first case, there is a *forced* act of deprivation or seizure of property, as a matter of fact it is usually used in the field of law, in describing the intervention of the public authorities or law enforcement. On the other hand, the term appropriation involves the notion of usage without authority, which in my opinion is descriptive of the today’s phenomena. In other words, appropriation does not presume a transfer of ownership, while expropriation does. The choice of speaking of expropriation, in describing blackface minstrelsy, is symptomatic of the act of deprivation that Lott describes in his work, carried out towards the black community in antebellum North America. I mean to suggest that through the theatrical practice of minstrelsy, white minstrels had the chance to *steal* and re-construct black identity in the audience’s eyes, through ridiculous reenactments, which ultimately shaped the perceptions that whites had of black people. In this sense, Lott describes black culture as a possession, which is expropriated, destroyed and re-shaped.

As for more recent phenomena, I find it more appropriate to define them as appropriation, and not expropriation. The reason of such choice is to be found in my interpretation of today’s cases of appropriation as acts of *exploitation* or rather of taking advantage of the appropriated. In my opinion today’s acts of cultural appropriation do not represent acts of theft against the black community. What I mean to argue is that today’s appropriaton of African American culture does not entail a transfer of ownership, rather an exploitation of it; hence, for instance, when a non-African American decides to take advantage of the cultural and artistic expression of rap and uses it for monetary gain or fame, he/she is not stealing it bur rather using it inappropriately. In a nutshell, Lott’s expropriation describes the theft of a disadvantaged community, which in the midst of deportation, slavery and domination was deprived of any agency and identity. As for today’s appropriation, I would suggest that property is not involved; in the sense that culture is to be intended as social identity, membership, artistic expression and production. Thus, I argue that more recent cases of cultural appropriation do not involve ownership, but they do represent acts of exploitation.

With these premises, this first chapter's fundamental intent is to analyze Lott's notion of cultural expropriation carried out in the socially imbalanced environment of 19th century North America, which put pressure on the great divide between blacks and whites. In his work, Lott identifies several nuances of conflicting feelings towards the black community; in this sense, although it may seem rather daring to say this, through his point of view I realized how the façade of expropriation hid a concealed fascination with the *stolen* culture; the feelings of interest and curiosity entangle with the fear of the Other, ultimately evolving into obsession.

My aim with this analysis is to deepen the understanding of blackface minstrelsy in order to apply the knowledge acquired to the acts of appropriations that occur today in our society, which are distant from the ones recounted in this section but do share some common grounds with it. In order to do so, I want to provide an investigation into the widespread act of cultural robbery carried out towards the black community, over a time span of two centuries, focusing only on the North American experience. This investigation will be useful in order to better understand other forms of appropriation, which in my opinion take their cue from the obsolete stereotypes and views that minstrelsy spread. For instance, in the following chapters, I am going to highlight some common elements that minstrelsy's hidden meanings share with the more recent appropriation of African American music; it is also going to be clear how minstrelsy, together with slavery, and racism are to be considered the springboard of the stereotypical perception of African American men and women.

CHAPTER ONE
Minstrelsy as Theft

Blackface as cultural robbery: framing the phenomenon

Dealing with the topic of black culture and investigating the earliest stages of its expropriation it is necessary to analyze blackface minstrelsy, as one of the most popular forms of entertainment in 19th-century North America. Its earliest appearance was in the first half of the 19th century, more specifically the first blackface performance presumably dates around 1830, situating this form of entertainment in the midst of a century that saw important socio-economic changes. Lott argues that "[t]he moment of minstrelsy's greatest popularity (1846-1854) was marked by a variety of bitter political controversies: labor struggles in New York and other major cities, the Wilmot Proviso debates over the extension of slavery" (9) and many other noteworthy milestones in the history of the U.S. as the end of slavery in 1865. This theatrical practice that quickly grew in popularity among the white working class consisted in white actors caricaturing blacks by painting their faces with cork and impersonating blacks, both men and women, through skits, songs, dances that would lampoon the real cultural aspects they were inspired by. The birth of this entertainment goes back to the first few decades of the 1800s, years in which the separation of blacks and whites was sharp and evident, both in social and economic differences. Lott argues that blackface was more than cultural appropriation it was a "form of what [Karl] Marx called expropriation" (8) intended by the philosopher as appropriation without exchange or without equivalent (qtd. in www.monthlyreview.org). In taking this economic perspective, Lott argues that "popular culture [is] a place where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified" (8). He thus suggests that black culture becomes a commodity, hence an object of *exchange*. Such exchange never took place, as the "dispossessed", i.e. the black community, received no exchange of value in the *trade*. This is why minstrelsy is to be considered a cultural theft, in which blackness became a commodity taken by the white expropriator without anything in return. Such attitude towards the black community originates in a mindset that I have tried to retrace in the following pages.

In framing this theatrical practice, I isolated the main triggering factors that shaped this theatrical concept in Lott's work; these are to be considered as widely shared in the early 19th century white North American community:

1) The rooted conviction that the disparity between blacks and whites was natural and dependent on physical and mental inequality;[1]
2) The fixating interest in the black body, its capabilities and appearance;
3) The curiosity and enjoyment in slaves' songs and dances.

These elements gave rise to the phenomenon of blackface that would be destined to last for hundreds of years and to be considered one of the first examples of North America's national culture. Through the stage, minstrelsy shaped and constructed the boundaries of race between blacks and whites, providing the cultural construction of blackness and defining it through the show; at the same time the white audience had the opportunity to build their *whiteness*, counterposing their status with that of the humiliated disguised actors.

Lott describes the origin of minstrelsy as being the consequence of two different narrative paradigms, one being "an elision of expropriation, through absorption" and the other being "a transfer of ownership, through theft" (Lott 58). The first one he defines as "*en l'air*" which in my opinion refers to the racist conception of blacks being naturally suitable for submission to domination, but I see how both paradigms represented the development of an unbalanced relationship and I would argue that both coexisted in minstrelsy. He then argues that "both paradigms share an anxiety over the fact of cultural 'borrowing'[a]nd both […] have as their purpose the resolution of some intractable social contradiction or problem that the issue of expropriation represents" (Lott 58 - 59). The problems and social contradictions to which he is referring are miscegenation and slavery, which were meant to be solved and dealt with through these narratives, overcoming the anxiety and fear of their consequences, thus minstrelsy was supposed to *sweeten* these social conflicts. I find this analysis of the phenomenon of minstrelsy to be concise and complete all together; it provides two of the elements that are fundamental to the study of blackface: one being slavery and the other being racial intermixing, while simultaneously highlighting the hidden aim of America's self-absolution. These were upfront matters of 19th century North America, and the way they are transposed in minstrelsy gives us a perspective on the two-sided response to the contact with the other culture. Through the theatrical performance, minstrelsy would stage an innate attraction and a strong interest in establishing both a cultural and physical contact with the Other; such interest in miscegenation would coexist with the need to subject the Other to

[1] During those years (1840s-50s) the "American school of ethnology" was born, based on a widespread school of thought that viewed the racial difference between blacks and whites at the basis of an intellectual disparity, in which black were considered to be inferior to whites; slaves were considered to be 'creatures of feeling' (both men and women), simpleminded like a child, at the verge of a primitive being (Lott 33).

slavery. I find this dualism in the response to be a recurring theme of the entire phenomenon, meaning two diametrically opposed feelings, as in the white interest in racial intermixing and simultaneous subjection to slavery of the Other. These opposing tendencies resemble the game of tug-of-war, in which neither of the two pulling forces clearly wins over the other, but they take turns in taking over.

The reputation and the relevance that blackface minstrelsy achieved during the 19th and 20th century is the symptom of how it represented the most important social and political features of a nation. In examining them, Lott argues that minstrelsy was a mutating and fluid entity that carried with it a reflection of many different elements that connoted the social conscience of the time. He explains that minstrelsy, as other forms of popular culture, is not to be seen as the intersection of political and social conflicts, nor class expression, nor a representation of collective desires; it is rather a combination of many unstable elements, of symbolic forms, experiences of domination and subordination, "a principle site of struggle in and over the culture of black people" (Lott 18), in which every element that is taking part has its role and produces its effect. This in-betweenness is the core feature of blackface minstrelsy as a whole, a staged collection of interests and desires, and controlling impulses moved by fear and racist envy; an oscillating movement between love and hate, both fake and authentic. The result is the act on stage, which shows the attraction and enjoyment of black songs and dances, which at the same time are ridiculed, and reenacted with the will to diminish their worth.

This manipulation and re-enactment of black practices perfectly mirrors my interpretation of the expropriation process introduced in the beginning of this chapter; the systematic *imitation* of black cultural items by the white minstrels, gave them the opportunity to produce a dangerous representation of blacks, associating them with uncivilized and bad inauthentic remakes. In my opinion the infamous popularity of this entertainment is not so surprising, because the environment that frames these years was disseminated and connoted by acts of expropriation as intended by Marx; think of the practice of colonialism, the imposition of rules and power over someone else's territory; or think of enslavement, deportation and forced labor. I argue that all these practices are part of expropriatory behavior typical of white ruling classes during the time span we are focusing on. In this setting of cultural theft, of inequality between white masters and black slaves, the minstrels staged the white social feeling of superiority over blacks, who were simultaneously feared and seen as a threat. These were the feelings on which the minstrel show was built, the staged sketches

provided a socially constructed context that had white spectators feel safer, in control, hence providing them some sort of self-assurance.

Cuff, a naked man

In order to materialize the theoretical lines that I have delineated in the first few pages, here I present a meaningful performance, which I find useful and perfectly fitting as a representation of this expropriating process. It is the first appearance of T. D. Rice, a white performer, in blackface that took place in Pittsburgh in the 1830s; he is considered to be the very first minstrel to use blackface as entertainment (at least in North America). The following account dates back to November 1867, presented by Eric Lott, taken from *The Atlantic Monthly.* Titled *Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy,* the text is an account of how T. D. Rice started his glorious career as a blackface minstrel; prior to the event that follows, the author Robert Nevin presents him as a *light comedian* who "does not seem to have attained to any noticeable degree of eminence in his profession" (Nevin 608). The actor had been working in Cincinnati and while roaming the streets he had heard a black stage-driver singing the not-yet-popular Jim Crow song, he was struck by the performance, he thought "were not these elements […] which might admit of higher than mere street or stable-yard development?" (Nevin 608). Once he moved to Pittsburgh, in the 1830s, he finally had the chance to put into practice what he had imagined.

There was a black man at the Griffith Hotel whose name was Cuff, who had "won a precarious subsistence by letting his open mouth as a mark for boys to pitch pennies into, at three paces, and by carrying the trunks of passengers from the steamboats to the hotels" (Nevin 609). It is noteworthy to point out how Cuff is introduced by describing his business of baggage carrier and of *entertainer,* by letting boys throw coins in his open mouth; this emphasis on physical aspects is typical of minstrel shows, in relation to black men and women by exaggerating the characteristics of their body - in particular of the mouth, which is always described as very large. It is well documented how the actual make-up of blackface minstrels would consist not only in blacking their faces, but also in drawing an overly exaggerated large mouth[2]. Nevin goes on to say how with just a "slight persuasion", Cuff followed Rice to the private entrance of the theatre, where the actor would order him to strip off his *cast-off* apparel and then he would wear it together with a "dense black wig of matted

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[2] The features of the blackface make up – which consisted in coloring the entire face with black paint or cork and overlining the mouth by creating one that would look ridiculously big – are considered to be the precursor of the popular clown face mask.

moss" (Nevin 609). After having colored his face with the *contraband hue* he waddled onto the stage, and opened his performance by reproducing the song he had heard once in the streets of Cincinnati, provoking a "never heard before" electric effect in the audience:

"O, Jim Crow's come to town, as you all must know,
An' he wheel about, he turn about, he do jis so,
An' ebery time he wheel about he jump Jim Crow."

This is allegedly the first ever appearance of the Jim Crow song in a theatre and also the first blackface performance to be carried out; the account follows with more details that are worth quoting at length

> Now it happened that Cuff, who meanwhile was crouching in dishabille under concealment of a projecting *flat* behind the performer, by some means received intelligence, at this point, of the near approach of a steamer to the Monongahela Wharf. Between himself and others of his color in the same line of business, and especially as regarded a certain formidable competitor called Ginger, there existed an active rivalry in the baggage-carrying business. For Cuff to allow Ginger the advantage of an undisputed descent upon the luggage of the approaching vessel would be not only to forfeit all 'considerations' from the passengers, but by proving him a laggard in his calling, to cast a damaging blemish upon his reputation. …Cuff's patience could endure no longer, and, cautiously hazarding a glimpse of his profile beyond the edge of the flat, he called in a hurried whisper: 'Massa Rice, Massa Ride must have my clo'se! Massa Griffif wants me, - steamboat's comin'!' The appeal was fruitless. […] Waiting some moments longer, the restless Cuff, thrusting his visage from under cover into full three-quarter view this time, again charged upon the singer in the same words, … Driven to desperation, and forgetful in the emergency of every sense of property, Cuff, in ludicrous undress as he was, started from his place, rushed upon the stage, and, laying his hand upon the performer's shoulder, called out excitedly: 'Massa Rice, Massa Rice, gi' me nigga's hat, - nigga's coat, - nigga's shoes, gi'me nigga's t'ings! Massa Griffif wants 'im, - STEAM BOAT'S COMIN'!!' The incident was the touch, in the mirthful experience of that night, that passed endurance. Pit and circles were one scene of such convulsive merriment that it was impossible to proceed in the performance; and the extinguishment of the footlights, the fall of the curtain, and the throwing wide of the doors for exit, indicated that the entertainment was ended. (Nevin 609-610)

Reading the account and imagining the events the feeling that struck me was an overall sense of the symbolic meaning of the scene, which sums up the idea of expropriation that Lott is willing to transmit, and I want to highlight. What I mean by this is that behind the merriment and laughter of the white performer and audience, which are foremost in the account, we have the description of the concealment of a naked black man, who has stripped off his worn-out clothes, giving them to a white man who has assertively demanded and taken them. I would argue that this passage should be interpreted as the essence of that expropriation we are focusing on; it gives form to the theoretical definition of the act of theft without equivalent exchange. Taking this stance, Rice is representing the white ruling social classes, which feel threatened by the black community and the disrobing/theft of Cuff's clothes is the clear picture of the expropriating process. Cuff does not own the power to say "no" and to resist such a demand; he appears vulnerable and defenseless in his nakedness while secretively peeking out of his concealment, looking at the man who has taken his clothes and is acting as him, in front of the roaring crowd. This scene transmits the essential concept behind blackface performances, a white dominating side that enjoys the entertainment provided by blacks, by reenacting cultural aspects and physical features through ridicule and lampoon; Lott summarizes it by saying that "cultural expropriation is the minstrel show's central fact, and we should not lose sight of it" (Lott 35), which I find it to be the very gist of his thoughts about it. The allegorical meaning of the above skit that overall stands for the act of cultural robbery I am addressing had a greater purpose; the most straightforward was amusement, but behind the darkened faces the ultimate intention was to create a new identity of blacks; John G. Blair conveys this message by saying that "minstrels worked to obliterate blacks behind 'blacks'" (Blair 540). My perception of the idea of obliterating blacks behind "blacks" is helpful in understanding the concept of expropriation that through Lott we have delineated so far. Obliterate as in delete and destroy the identity of Blacks with their cultural baggage and redefine their social representation and perception through the show, in which the actors would create their new identity as "blacks", made of racist stereotypes, misrepresentations, ridicule, physical envy and lampoon.

The making of *blackness*

The concept of blackface minstrelsy in its entirety was the result of a range of factors that shaped it, thus it was not just the result of white theft and reenactment; there were several elements that got involved in this popular phenomenon, and Lott compares the outcome to a

knot, referring to the entanglement of many different *threads* that create a snarl of involvements,

> blackface performers' relations with the black artists, from whom their material was 'collected', these performers' engagement with the material itself; the mix of white material and black material; the reception of this mixed material by variegated white audiences; those audiences' attitudes towards the small number of black performers; and finally the struggle between minstrelsy and other contenders for the status of national art form (Lott 96).

By describing this interaction among parts, Lott helps us visualize the complexity of the development of blackface minstrelsy, created through a multi-layered intrigue of actions, some attributable to white minstrels, others to black people and others to the white audience of the show; the common thread of the practices mentioned here was the expropriatory intent of whites.

In the northern areas of the United States, by the first decades of the 19th century some slaves had achieved the status of *freedmen,* and they would meet in dance houses, festivals and taverns, which whites would also attend and *learn* dance moves and songs. Another source of inspiration was the practice referred to as *negro dancing,* describing slaves who were allowed to go on holiday and who would dance in the streets in order to earn some extra money. Reports and accounts of those years present such a phenomenon prior to the popularity of minstrelsy, and in this regard, Lott states that the resourcefulness of black slaves in using their talent to make small profits commodified the performance in the first place, in "an already frightfully commodified setting" (Lott 43), referring to the status of noncitizen and of enslavement blacks had to endure. Through these words, Lott outlines the circumstances of expropriation that permeate the overall span of years in which blackface was at its peak; he claims that the environment that developed this theatrical phenomenon was a threat to black culture, because of the looming and dominating presence of whites, whose ultimate goal would be that of symbolically *stripping* the entire black community of their cultural elements and making them available for reshaping. I agree with Lott in thinking that both the fervent production of black cultural aspects and the white expropriative system represent the two main jostling forces that resulted in the commodity of *blackness,* made of 'black linguistic patterns, practices, hairstyles and physical demeanor' (Lott 41), that eventually created a mode of behavior that would be directly associated with blacks by default, or stereotypically.

The imitable material served the white purpose of creating a stereotyped black behavior based on white fantasies, which consisted in a strong attraction to black physical appearance, mainly that of men, together with the fascination in black customs, songs, dances and celebrations; both of these endorsed by the widespread mentality that viewed the subordination of blacks as natural, due to their expected predisposition for submission to dominance. This interpretation of the relationship established between the two sides, might also be scrutinized under a different light, that of a reaction to the feeling of fear. In this regard, Lott's perspective is interesting and enlightening, because he argues that instead of appearing as a sign of power and control over the black community, the lampoon acted by the blackened minstrels showed signs of many other feelings, including fear, anxiety, obsession and pleasure. In other words, minstrelsy sprang from a sentiment of concern, and it became the means through which whites staged racial fantasies; these fantasies allowed them to be in control, moved by a racist mentality and fascination with the Other, hence simultaneously mirroring fear and symbolic control. My interpretation of Lott's concept of expropriation is reflected in the control obtained through the systematic theft of culture that would diminish the value of the community, devalue its components through ridicule to say the least, but also give it negative connotations, those of being uncivilized, violent, vulgar, loud, grotesque.

These conceptions, which belonged to the field of entertainment, guided by a mood of ridicule and control, later started being associated to revolts and riots, creating an indissoluble connection between amusements and rebellions. In the first decades of the 19th century, street celebrations involved masquerading, for example during Christmas Eve, and Lott states that "women and blacks, as usual, were the most frequent sources of disguise" (Lott 29). This cross-dressing would very often be used to start riots and attacks, creating a "correspondence between racial hostility, public masking and the minstrel show" (Lott 29)[3] . These violent and rowdy events, together with the representation provided in blackface shows, created a stereotyped idea of *acting black*, which would mean being unruly, loud, vulgar, riotous, violent, at the limit of civilized. The coexistence of these two practices brought together the two realities, that of entertainment and that of politics, which Lott argues were inevitably tied together in minstrelsy all throughout his work, by describing minstrelsy as a means of presenting problematic topics, that otherwise would be intractable.

[3]The Astor Place riot is one of the deadliest riots taken place in 1849; its origins were based on political and social tensions, but actors and civilians got involved in it.

The image portrayed by Lott in my opinion represents the factual materialization of the process of expropriation of the black culture in its earliest stages; it consisted in re-shaping the cultural perception of blacks, through the reenactment of whites, making being black something knowingly dangerous, which anyone would fear based on the widespread view of it being synonymous with riotousness, violence, promiscuity, ignorance and foolishness. The process created a precedent, which whites would leverage and which created a scapegoat to blame, providing the community with a *produced* representation of blacks, which would then be feared and seen as negative, to say the least. The characteristic of being produced, thus handled and re-elaborated so as to have the desired result is another crucial feature of the expropriation we have delineated. The shows and the masquerades were far from being authentic reenactments of blacks, the songs sung in the shows usually consisted of meaningless gibberish or dealt with topics that the audience would find entertaining, for instance they would praise slavery and the enjoyable life of plantation fields, or they would also make the singers sound and look foolish and ridicule; for example a staple in the show would be a brawl between two black men, usually over a woman, which would later be referred to as a "happy and accurate imitation of the usual and familiar negro quarrel" (Lott 132).

Lott refers to these produced representations, performances and events as *counterfeit*, intending the means of exercising white control and regulating the black threat through a created representation of the community whose direct and intended consequence was the dispossession of black cultural forms (i.e. theft), and the re-creation of its significance. Lott points out that one of the problems that the show faced was "how to ensure that what it invoked was safely rerouted, not through white *meanings* […] but through a kind of disappearing act in which blackface made 'blackness' flicker on and off so as simultaneously to produce and disintegrate the body" (Lott 121). The portrayed representation of blacks in the show is the synthesis of this production/destruction process, a produced image resulting from the mixture of expropriation, re-elaboration, construction of behaviors and destruction of real cultural elements.

The systematic destruction-construction of the black stereotype, explains Lott, was based on every feature that whites were trying to hide of themselves; the author argues that "minstrel characters were simply trash-bin projections of white fantasy, vague fleshly signifiers that allowed whites to indulge at a distance all that they found repulsive and fearsome" (Lott 154); the intention of creating white subjectivity as opposed to that of the black minstrels could not be farther from reality, on the contrary it reflected the actual

impulses that whites had but wanted to suppress. I find meaningful and enlightening to think of the black cork on the faces of white actors as disguise, and to some extent a distraction, from the actual message hidden in the show. Once the mask is lifted we see the reality of a social construction made of hidden and secret fantasies and biased views, which are fully displayed and ascribed to the ridiculed characters; through this expedient whites no longer feel the social burden of their tendencies. I find this to be the eloquent expression of the minstrel show's meaning, stealing cultural elements from the black community, using them to create the social construct of *otherness* (or *blackness*), making it the representation of what should be avoided and shunned in social contexts, yet being the exact mirror of what was actually inside the white society, made of social transgressions that would not be socially accepted.

The reliability of the topics issued in the minstrel show made it one of the most beloved and enjoyed entertainments for the audience, which mostly belonged to the working class; nevertheless such entertainment was available for everyone and accessible to any social class, starting from the lowest to the president of the United States; the affordability of the show was in contrast with other theatrical forms of entertainment, which were expensive. Not everyone could afford such recreation, and furthermore not all the classes were allowed to sit in theaters and enjoy the shows. Minstrelsy together with drinking became the most common social activities available to workers; these were years, around the 1840s-50s, in which economic and industrial growth sharpened the difference among the social classes, but it is quite interesting to remark how blackface minstrelsy later became an entertainment that brought together all social classes, getting to the point where scholars consider it one of the first forms of American national culture, appreciated by everyone. Lott argues that "the minstrel show … brought various classes and class fractions together, here through a common racial hostility" (Lott 159) thus validating the theory that minstrelsy was not an entertainment exclusively dedicated to a specific social class, but rather functioned as glue that held various groups together, all sharing in the same racial feelings, those of fear, superiority and obsession.

These were the foundations of the identity that the audience would be assembling during the performances, in contrast with the characters on stage; the success and the engagement in the matters that minstrelsy handled, in my opinion proves the social component to blackface shows, which did represent a means of public reflection, to be intended as a mirror image of common views and misconceptions against blacks; Lott expresses this exquisitely by saying that "one of minstrelsy's functions was precisely to bring

various class fractions into contact with one another, to mediate their relations, and finally to aid in the construction of class identities over the bodies of black people" (Lott 70). Hence the primary purpose of the show, besides providing amusement to the audience, was to produce identities, both that of blacks and of whites; the *black bodies*, which we will focus on more closely in another chapter, were the tools used to create the threat of *blackness,* on which was cast the projection of disorderly behaviors and immorality that whites condemned, simultaneously giving the chance to the white audience to shape and adjust their *whiteness.*

Conclusion

In this part of my research, by analyzing Eric Lott's work on blackface minstrelsy, I have retraced his perspective on the expropriation that characterized this theatrical phenomenon, and thanks to this analysis I have acquired greater tools to better understand today's phenomena, which I will analyze in the next chapters. Through his study, the minstrel show is presented as a potent political and social tool, which had several effects on the public. Its repercussions on the social context cannot be concealed, hence through the perpetual exposure to these distorted representations and its intrinsic messages, the public has been part of the expropriatory system. The inauthentic remake of black culture, based on ridicule and annihilation is the result of the thievery, which could be compared to a symbolic destruction of the black community, that was ultimately stereotyped and used for white's interests. Thanks to Lott's tools, I was able to see that this destruction was not just for the sake of it, it rather had a *higher* purpose, which we have retraced and defined as expropriation, creating and spreading a misconception, by using blackface to wrongly represent the black community and to give the chance to the white community to create their identity. Blackface became a fundamental instrument, making the show a staple of American culture, so popular anyone would know and remember its jokes, songs and characters; the outcome was a stereotyped image of the black identity in their apparel, with foolish demeanor and squalid movements, hinting at sexual positions, being loud, illiterate and unruly.

The already existing prejudice against the community, based on misconceptions and rooted racist beliefs, grew bigger and stronger with the help of minstrelsy, providing the racial identity, which later reached the status of a standardized behavior referred to as *acting black*. The increasing popularity and the accessibility of the show created a stable and indissoluble bond with black culture, which was made into a commodity, the commodity of blackness, based on inaccurate depictions of blacks, and which would suit the interests of whites. *Blackness* became a marketable object, at the mercy of everyone who would want to use it, an

overall negative idea produced through the show becoming widely known and which Lott defines as "racial counterfeit", because its main characteristic was that of being inauthentic.

The process of theft and reshaping hid the interest and enjoyment that many had in black cultural aspects, but that was caught up in the knotty web of racism and fear of the Other; the expropriation we have seen gave whites the feeling of being in control, while establishing a relation with the other culture, casting on blacks any social behavior that would otherwise be unacceptable in a theatrical form, which instead turned out to be much appreciated and enjoyed. Regardless of the interest and pleasure that whites might have had in black culture, blackface minstrelsy in Lott's perspective was thought to be "a palliative to the economics of slavery" (Lott 62). He means to suggest that the actual twisted intention behind blackface minstrelsy was none other than the sugarcoating of the practice of slavery, in an act of self-indulgence. In an unexpected overturning, blackface became a constant reminder of the crime it needed to conceal, by being built on the stolen goods, taken by force from owners that were "not equal buyers and sellers on the market but are 'represented', bought and sold by brokers" (Lott 62). As in the story of the first blackface performance, T. D. Rice and Cuff are not 'equals'; the black worker in fact had no chance of objecting to Rice's demand, and the same was true for every other member of the black community. The intention of diminishing the white guilt of theft by making the minstrels sing of happy rendezvous and brief love stories was not enough, quite the opposite.

Blackface mirrored the social undressing of an already disadvantaged community; black culture was studded with misleading new meanings and faults that instead belonged to whites. The end result of the popular phenomenon was an inurement to the representations, which became part of a socially shared mindset, which saw blacks as the 'clowns of the American circus', the scapegoat for whites to blame, carriers of a burden that was ascribed to them with force. Ultimately the expropriation I have highlighted through Lott, saw the *undressing* of the black community first and the re-dressing of it, with deceptive meanings and forms of guilts.

CHAPTER TWO

Black Masculinity, the construction of an identity

Introduction

> There are days—this is one of them—when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it. How, precisely, are you going to reconcile yourself to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority that you are here. I'm terrified at the moral apathy, the death of the heart, which is happening in my country. These people have deluded themselves for so long that they really don't think I'm human. And I base this on their conduct, not on what they say. And this means that they have become in themselves moral monsters.
>
> James Baldwin, Kenneth Clark interview in 1964

"[T]hey really don't think I'm human", these are the words Baldwin pronounces referring to white Americans during an interview in 1964, which, in its essentiality, encapsulates the very gist of this chapter's focus. In the previous part I have focused on the notion of expropriation based on Eric Lott's *Love & Theft*, pointing my attention to the author's perspective of minstrelsy as cultural robbery, which lead to a redefinition of black culture and identity, through blackface performances. Minstrelsy was based on racial ideologies that reflected both political and social issues, primarily the practice of slavery, which besides being an important source for the growth of America, nurtured the social, not to mention economic, disparity between white masters and black slaves, making the expropriation and consequent reshaping/construction of black identity uncomplicated.

In this chapter, through the help of Lott's and other scholars' work, I am interested in providing my interpretation of the creation of the black male, which white society birthed and developed, through minstrelsy and slavery; by first sketching the means of minstrelsy, as outlet for whites' preoccupations and feelings towards blacks, I am going to outline the black male's profile that became a real identity based on white men's fears. Finally, I am going to find a reflection of his stereotyped identity in more recent examples, thus consequently outlining a parallel description of how today's perception of black men has been conditioned by the identity created in the 19th century, which has insidiously seeped through the layers of time and has corrupted more recent days. Hence, if in the first part of this research I have shaped the overall sentiment on which minstrelsy was founded, a forced cultural robbery and

consequent re-construction of identity of blacks, here I am going to ask, how did this reconstruction take places and what were the results of it? Here are my answers to these questions.

Black faces, white emotions

In Lott's study I have found a general argument that overall embraced minstrelsy, and that is found in its sense of duality: blackface both destroyed and created, it both loved and hated, it both showed and hid. In the first part of this research I have focused on the concept of cultural expropriation that Lott describes in his work; in this section I want to further analyze Lott's interpretation of minstrelsy as a representation of white men's sexual obsession towards blacks. In Lott's perspective, one of the most important aspects that minstrelsy hid in a veiled manner was the duality of the feelings that pervaded white men, feelings of attraction/envy and repulsion/hate towards black men; "transparent white male attraction to [blacks]" would battle itself with the "repulsion from the black penis" (Lott 59); these contradictory feelings were directed towards black men's bodies and sexual organs, the quintessential symbol of strength and virility, which threatened and fascinated whites all at once. As a result, by arguing that the most important source of interest for white men lay in the obsession with black male bodies, Lott maintains that the entire phenomenon of blackface had its major component in the bodily presence of minstrels, who would reenact blacks with skits, dances and songs, which all alluded to sexually exaggerated behaviors.

The rearrangement and use of black men's physicality seep through the shows:

> Performers were adroit at manipulating their bodies in order to bring forth the sexual weight of black men's 'impression' on 'colored wenches'. Song sheet illustrations captured the phallic sources of such lyrics over and over by showing coattails hanging prominently between characters' legs, and personae were often pictured with sticks or poles strategically placed near the groin or with other appendages occasionally hanging near or between the legs (Lott 124).

Every component of the shows was directed to the sexually exasperated depictions of blacks: the songs' lyrics, the dances they performed, their facial and verbal expressions, their appearance and gestures, everything hinted at sexual exaggeration.

As already mentioned, women were not allowed in theaters, thus female roles were played by male actors; nevertheless this was not a major inconvenience, given the fact that the focus of most of the performances was aimed at men, in fact the obsession of white men was mainly with the black men's body, the strength, the looks, the virility and capabilities. Of

course when female characters did appear on the show, their representation was centered on their physical presence; their bodies were represented as powerful and large and their "*engulfing* mouth" described as "*vaginal throats"* (Lott 27). These features were very often paired with references to masculine body elements, describing their extremely enlarged nose to be evocative of phallic shapes; hence the main interest, once again, was directed to men's sexuality and women were an entertaining element to have on the show, who did not represent a major source of obsession (in Lott's opinion women did instill uneasiness in white men, and I will focus more on the way they were represented in the show in the following chapter). Lott argues that the centrality of the physical presence is descriptive of the racial feeling that white men had for black men. Again, it was not just mere flesh, it was specifically that of black men, and Lott highlights how "much of the cultural negotiation I have outlined depended on encounters between a white man and a black man: master and slave, white minstrel and black vendor" (Lott 51) or Charles Mathews and Ira Aldridge [4].
Thus, if we consider minstrelsy to be a staged cultural contact, we might focus on the fact that the entire conversation was held by men, the exchanges were entirely delegated to the white man and the black man (whether real or caricatured) showing a preponderant interest in their participation. It might be argued that the centrality of masculinity is no surprise, considering that women were not even partaking in the audience, but truthfully we do not have to dig deep to find that the performances were not far from the reality of the *fetishized* relationship that white men had created in their racial fantasy, which instead was representative of the developing manhood of the white working-class.

The interest in and attraction towards the bodily presence of the slaves were reflective feelings of the multifaceted racial response that whites had towards them, made of envy, fear, repulsion, and attraction. White men were obsessed with the black penis, which symbolized both the object of jealousy and a great threat to their power and masculinity; in this sense Lott argues that the fixation with it would suggest a fear of castration, or more likely a lessening of white manhood, threatened by black sexual and physical potency. Black men were considered to be repositories of great physical strength, which was envisioned as attractive and enviable, but it simultaneously represented an enormous threat to white captors. The minstrel show

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[4] Charles Mathews was a famous British actor. One of his most popular caricature was his "lampoon of the black Shakespearean Ira Aldridge" (Lott 46). Aldridge was a famous black American actor. Mathew's skit turned out to be totally invented by him, as years later Aldridge himself denied ever performing Shakespeare. It is ironic to know that Mathew's skit was so popular that Aldridge incorporated it in his repertoire, "becoming one of Aldridge's most profitable performances" (Lott 47).

would be a great reminder of both these aspects, which through derision seemed to be under control, the same control that whites assumed to obtain through physical suppression in real life. The performances were useful to '*domesticate* black power' and in doing so whites would re-establish a figurative supremacy.

The sexualization of the show

Lott argues that "'[b]lack' figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screen on which the audience fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have had a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior controlling figures" (Lott 145); this compulsion of control over black masculinity represented a deviated mode of behavior, it hid the inability to manage the relationship, based on feelings of inadequacy, inferiority and attraction, which needed to be dealt with through a counterfeit parallel reality, where blacks could embody this identity that whites had sewed for them, made of foolishness, ridicule, animal-like instincts and exaggeration overall. Blacks would become the projections of fears and insecurities, which would feed a widespread ill-founded stereotype, which in Lott's opinion represented the irresistible attraction to minstrelsy, for the audience was drawn to deviant and depraved pleasures.

In this sense, Lott maintains the strong argument that the "simultaneous production and subjection of black maleness may have been more than a formal consequence of wearing blackface; it may indeed have been the minstrel show's main achievement articulating precisely a certain structure of racial feeling" (Lott 120). The *racial feeling* he is referring to was a mixture of tormenting insecurities, sexual attraction, obsessive interest, fear and superiority, and he presents it as the supporting frame of the show, or better its 'main achievement'. The in-between racial feeling of repulsion-attraction gave rise to a *good deal of trouble*, "Much of the trouble, … had to do with the black male body" (Lott 120). The trouble that Lott is referring to in this passage lies in the overwhelming attraction that white men had towards black male bodies, that same-sex attraction that needed to be concealed, but that the show was a constant reminder of. In a conservative and homophobic mindset, blackened minstrels would become the spokesperson for whites' sexual fantasies and taboos, which would otherwise not be allowed in any theatrical performance, "'blackness' provided the inspiration as well as the occasion for preposterously sexual, violent, or otherwise prohibited theatrical material" (Lott 145). The strategy was then to create an environment for whites to play with sexuality through the Other, making the minstrel show the perfect playground.

If we go back to the blackface performance we have mentioned in the previous chapter, that of T. D. Rice who takes Cuff's clothes and *persona* and brings it on stage, it is possible to find most of the elements we have outlined up until now, Cuff's nakedness and his lampooning. Taking the account from the very beginning, where Cuff is introduced "There was a negro in attendance at Griffith's Hotel, on Wood Street, named Cuff, - an exquisite specimen of his sort, - who won a precarious subsistence by letting his open mouth as a mark for boys to pitch pennies into, at three paces, and by carrying the trunks of passengers from the steamboats to the hotels" (Nevin 609). Right after his name we have his *employment,* before becoming a luggage carrier, his other occupation was that of entertainer, which consisted in having kids use his open mouth as a basketball hoop to throw pennies into, making them disappear and provoking a good laugh in his audience. It is not a coincidence that the mouth is Cuff's source of income, think of the representation of the minstrels on stage and their very makeup, which consisted of a dark face with big red lips. The mouth was one important source of interest in the overly sexualized reenactment of blacks, the lips were described as enormous both through makeup but mostly through songs and sketches, by having the minstrels sing of eating extreme servings of food or even an entire person. The rest of the account of Rice's performance, and specifically of Cuff's nakedness once again shows the rooted interest in the male body, through "Cuff's stripping, a theft that silences and embarrasses him on stage but which nevertheless entails both his bodily presence in the show and the titillating threat that he may return to demand his stolen capital, is a neat allegory for the most prominent commercial collision of black and white cultures in the nineteenth century" (Lott 20). Lott hands us more than just one view of the show. He presents the multifaceted value of it, which Cuff's scene includes entirely; his nakedness while hiding and ultimately while stepping on stage, represents both the fixating obsession with blacks' bodily presence and the need to humiliate him before the white audience, by silencing him at first and having him ridicule himself by bursting on stage completely unclothed; and the theft of his identity that we have discussed in the previous chapter.

The physicality of black men is a ubiquitous presence, their sexuality is obsessively exasperated through the use of escamotages that to our eyes might look innocent but that were purposefully enacted. Lott analyzes many instances of these depictions, one of which is the advertising poster of one of the most popular minstrel troupes, the Virginia Minstrels, who are pictured in equivocal positions, holding their instruments reminding of phallic figures, with their legs wide open and with raving and delirious faces: "The whole scene has rather the air of a collective masturbation fantasy – accurate enough, one might guess, capturing the overall

spirit of the show" (Lott 142). The *spirit of the show* precisely resided in the exasperated lewdness that would both nurture the stereotypical idea of blacks as libidinal creatures and contemporarily provide a chance to stage white erotic fantasies; this characteristic was purposefully combined with ridicule all throughout the show, which again would maintain the idea that blacks were inferior beings. By staging such concepts white men's virility and potency would be restored and safeguarded, overcoming that fear of ideal castration and of manhood loss, while simultaneously playing with the object of desire.

American bohemianism

It is starting to be clear how minstrelsy had several objectives besides entertaining, we have seen how the sexual component to the show was strong and very upfront, but it mainly pointed to blacks' sexual connotation. The reality that this aspect hid was again more related to whites' sexuality than blacks', hence hiding behind leisure and entertainment we have a reproduction of some "dominative tendencies" of a "self-conscious attraction to black men" (Lott 52), which minstrels covertly performed.

The ambiguity of feelings that the show symbolized was usually a modus vivendi that white performers would indulge in; in this sense Lott presents an insight into the environment the performers lived in to find material for the shows, by describing the practice of joining the black slaves or freed men in their celebrations and festivities; he defines this habit as a "tradition of class abdication through gendered cross-racial immersion" (52). Through these words, he argues that "with antebellum blackface performers a set of racial attitudes and cultural styles that in America go by the name of bohemianism first emerged", these racial attitudes would include a "tribute to … black culture's male representatives" (52). American minstrels gave their reproduction of the French bohemia that consisted in a generalized freedom of the individual, who lived by the motto of *laissez-faire*, which involved sexual ambiguity as well; and just as the French dandy played at being an aristocrat, some northern apolitical men in America played at being bourgeois (Lott 53). In blackface and minstrelsy context, white performers joined black slaves or freed men in their celebrations and "paradoxically coding themselves as 'black'. Marginalized by temperament, by habit, by ethnicity, even by sexual orientation, these artists immersed themselves in 'blackness' to indulge their felt sense of difference" (Lott 53). Therefore, *blackness* was considered a *space* for social and racial freedom that white men could enter in order to play with an assumed sexual liberty, displayed all throughout blackface performances. Due to the predominance of explicit references the show started to be considered vulgar, and during the performances

“The body was always grotesquely contorted, even when sitting; stiffness and extensions of arms and legs announced themselves as unsuccessful sublimation of sexual desire” (Lott 121).

In this space of male fantasy production, female characters were also descriptive of the ongoing evolution of a male-to-male relationship; blackface *wenches*, who again were played by men, were representative of the homosexual tendencies that were stepping on stage, together with the sentiment that Whitman defines “homoerotic moment of misogynist male bonding” (qtd. in Lott 90). The unilateral presence of men minstrels and the explicitly sexual content, even in the representation of women, tells us more on the deeply rooted obsession of white men with black men rather than the other way around, and besides homosexuality, which is not straightforwardly readable in the show in Lott’s opinion and it is not my main concern in this research, it is fundamental to focus on the role minstrelsy played in the development of white working-class men’s sexuality, which shaped the superiority and dominant position in the relationship with the black man.

The threat that blacks represented was also extended to women, who were handled on stage through transvestism; these ‘phallic women’ were there to be mastered and dominated and as Lott argues, “there is no desire to be a woman, only to ‘prove’ that feminization will not take away their maleness” (Lott 166), again in a panic to subvert a feared loss of manhood and castration, which both black men and women represented. The fear of de-masculinization applied both to black men and women, the submissive acts staged in the performances were useful to symbolically master and control this generalized dread, which was also fed by the stereotypical black representation that white themselves had created and spread. Both inside and outside the context of the stage, blacks represented an exhausting source of anxiety for whites, who wanted to keep their supremacy intact and who also sought an excuse for the atrocity of slavery, as a whole.

Sambos & Nats

With this section it is my intention to analyze the two personalities that were shaped through minstrelsy and which represented the widespread idea that white people had of black men in the 19th century. I would maintain that minstrelsy played an important role in the construction of these two identities, namely that of Sambo and Nat; here I outline how they were created in order to retrace their existance in more recent times.

In her *Journal of a Residence in a Georgian Plantation, 1838-1839* Frances Anne Kemble, an abolitionist British actress, wrote

> Oh, my dear E----! I have seen Jim Crow--the veritable James: all the contortions, and springs, and flings, and kicks, and capers you have been beguiled into accepting as indicative of him are spurious, faint, feeble, impotent--in a word, pale northern reproductions of that ineffable black conception. It is impossible for words to describe the things these people did with their bodies, and, above all, with their faces, the whites of their eyes, and the whites of their teeth, and certain outlines which either naturally and by the grace of heaven, or by the practice of some peculiar artistic dexterity, they bring into prominent and most ludicrous display. (Kemble 119 -120)

White minstrels' performances were *spurious, faint, feeble, impotent* versions of authentic black performers who instead seemed to have unique movement capability; such ability was interpreted and rerouted through erotic charge; blacks were usually said to be "animated by a savage energy" and this connotation in dance performances would just be the extension of the overall perception that whites had of black men. John W. Blassingame, an American historian who focused his work on slavery, in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* provides us with what are to be considered the three major stereotypical black male slaves in the plantation field on which blackface caricatures were based. The three examples are Sambo, Nat and Jack. Jack is the least frequent in literature, while Sambo and Nat are far more popular, and they represent the two main figures we have outlined so far in this research.

Sambo is the most popular of the three and he is described as

> Indolent, faithful, humorous, loyal, dishonest, superstitious, improvident and musical, Sambo was inevitably a clown and congenitally docile. Characteristically a house servant, Sambo had so much love and affection for his master that he was almost filio-pietistic; his loyalty was all-consuming and self-immolating. The epitome of devotion, Sambo often fought and died heroically while trying to save his master's life. Yet, Sambo had no thought of freedom; that was an empty boon compared with serving his master (Blassingame 225).

Sambo is happy and simple-minded, he would not know what to do with so-called freedom, he prefers serving his owner and making him laugh.

Nat is diametrically different, he is riotous and vindictive, mostly a rebel towards his master and other whites, whom he hates, he is depicted as a rapist, in the grip of his savage self; indeed he "was portrayed as a hatchet- or sword-wielding slave, his red tongue lolling in

lust for rape and violence." (Jones 29); a danger for every white man and woman, described as "revengeful, bloodthirsty, cunning, treacherous, and savage" (Blassingame 225). He leads revolts among his fellow slaves and is subdued only through *firepower*, he is deceitful and hides his intents which are "unquenchable thirst for freedom, hatred of whites, discontent, and manhood" (Blassingame 225). Nat is an overall threat to society, he is a lustful being, incapable of controlling his instinct which he demonstrates through violence and savagery; he must be tamed, caged.

The analogy that I find in both Blassingame and Lott is in regard to these two personalities: whites portrayed blacks through literature and minstrelsy in two exasperatedly opposite ways. On the one hand they perceived blacks to be inevitably bound with primitive instincts, which would mean being retrograded savages, uncivilized and overwhelmed by animal-like urges; keeping this idea in mind, we may assume how truthful and authentic it would look, to the white audience, to see black minstrels make a fool of themselves on stage. On the other hand minstrelsy, as much as literature, represented a self-absolution *space*, which presented the slaves as happy in serving their slaveholder, due to their child-like nature and inclination to submission. Through these entertaining depictions whites had the opportunity to clarify their conscience, justifying the enormous mistreatments and violence that they were carrying out towards blacks by representing them as Nats, which is to say violent savages, who deserved the torture and submission; while if they were as good as Sambo, they would gladly serve their owners and enjoy their time and no violence would be involved. In either case the burden of slavery would be lifted from their consciences, and above all it would be easier to face abolitionists by presenting them with this scenario.

With this overview in mind, we cannot but agree with D. Marvin Jones when he states that slavery was the womb for the black male (Jones 15) where he was conceived and became more a construct rather than a real entity. Accepting Jones' argument, we might assume that both Nat and Sambo are artificial identities of the historical period of slavery, i.e. the 19th century, and Blassingame confirms it by maintaining that Sambo was a utopian figure that whites needed to feel safer and that would "relieve themselves of the anxiety of thinking about slaves as men" (Blassingame 230). As for Nat, his presence was a constant reminder of the atrocity that was slavery; he further represented whites' 'pathological fear' of being assaulted; he who would barge into their bedroom and slit their throats; this anxiety was overwhelmingly present. I would assume that the slaveholder's fear of revolt was not

completely unfounded, if we think of mere numbers[5] and Blassingame argues that "[j]udging from the ease with which whites conjured up Nat, they apparently felt that the relationship between the planter and the slave was one of continual war requiring eternal vigilance in order for the master to maintain the upper hand" (231). Jones has a very similar view to Blassingame about the paranoiac fear that whites lived in, stating that "[i]n its hysteria, slave law imagined black slaves as being always only a moment away from reverting to primitive beasts, held back only by unchallengeable authority of law. Thus it posited that the torture, maiming, crippling, burning and killing were necessary to prevent slaves from becoming Nat" (Jones 22). He adds more on control modalities that included torture and lynching, a practice that was so appreciated that whites would decide to join the monstrosity and take their children, witnessing the tortures and killings of slaves who had disobeyed, or who, as happened frequently, were charged with any sort of sexual contact with a white woman.

Sambo and Nat could be considered as the materialization of the identities that whites produced through minstrelsy and literature; by considering that even the thought of Nat would be overwhelmingly dreadful to them, it is possible to assume that they did not even believe in the existence of Sambo. So by means of the fragmented psychological nature of whites, made of "moral guilt and racial fear" (Jones 16) the black male was born, incarnating a projection that would be destined to last for centuries. Nat is alive to this day, he is the black man that fits the race-neutral-criteria when "police look for individuals who fit drug courier profiles" (Jones 30), he is the man lurking in the dark corners of the streets waiting for his victim, he is the one that gets killed for jogging in a rich neighborhood, he is in every black man.

Blacks as bodies

If slavery and minstrelsy had their main foundations in the bodily presence of blacks, considering that these *bodies* were suppliers of labor force in the plantation fields, the object of lampoon on blackface stages and a great threat for white masters, I would argue that, in a sense, by articulating these thoughts and concepts, whites had ultimately reduced black existence, to mere bodies. Their motions, the facial expressions, their strength and vigor, the urges, the sex, all of these were part of the process that had decreased blacks' humanity to the point of making it null, nonexistent.

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[5] In Southern States, by 1810, the slave population had reached 1.16 million; in the following years the slave population had grown by 340 per cent; taking into consideration the ratio of black slaves to white owners, in 1860 the ratio was of 1.23 in Mississippi (Evans 186)

In the context of minstrelsy blacks became flesh whose only real purpose was to act like clowns by playing with sexual taboos and fantasies, through their *savage energy*. The fact that the black grease was hiding the ridicule of actual human beings had been moved to the background, while the performance was upfront; dehumanizing blacks became a subtle achievement that whites were perpetuating; the slaves' value reduced to an instrument to make use of. Ralph Ellison refers to the use of the black *mask* and argues that it was evocative of "that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed […] The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign" (Ellison 49), where the mask and the entire attire were part of the process of concealing blacks' humanity. I would suggest examining the phenomenon through an analogy with the linguistics concepts of *signified* and *signifier* by F. de Saussure; minstrelsy was using the visual representation of the black body, our signifier, by associating with it a deviant meaning of blackness, our signified. Taking this perspective, the signified was no longer a human being with peculiarities, a culture, feelings and emotions, but rather a visible shell, which was given a different content, a role to fit into, an identity to adhere to. To this extent I would argue that minstrelsy was capable of reducing blacks to mere *shells,* laughs, to a fake dark complexion, to uncontrollable impulses, which altogether became representative of an entire community. Stripping black men of every possible reminder of their manhood was fundamental to their obedience; whites would refer to them using the word *boy* which "suggests to black men that their manhood is not recognized, much less respected" (Black 71), their names would be replaced with European or American ones, humiliation through bondage and physical pain would be inflicted on them, they would not have any power over their existence. This process overall undermined blacks' integrity and value as men, through total submission and denial of any ability of (free) agency.

The coping mechanisms that whites used to overcome the great frustration and anxiety to maintain supremacy did not just reside in minstrelsy and the reshaping of blacks' identity; whites also resorted to brutal violence, carried out through physical punishments up to the practice of lynching, consisting in the public execution of those convicted of crimes such as murder or sexual assault. Lynchings were mass events, where thousands of people would attend and cheer for torture, to the cry of justice and protection for white women. In a detailed account of the execution of Sam Hose (or Holt), accused of murdering his master, occurred in Georgia, Newman in April 1899 we read that

> before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits, and even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate was torn up and

> disposed of as ‘souvenirs'. The negro's heart was cut into several pieces, as was also his liver. Those unable to obtain the ghastly relics direct paid their more fortunate possessors extravagant sums for them (Ginzburg).

In my opinion, the common practice of collecting body parts as souvenirs was an exorcism of the danger and threat that blacks represented; once again they would be reduced bodies, which in a delirium of omnipotence would be dominated and under control; this would maintain white sovereignty and once again reduce the humanity of slaves to mere flesh, which could be disposed of, both alive and dead. Jones argues that the torture “was sometimes highly sexualized” (24) by stripping the victims naked in front of the crowd and cutting their private parts, which would also be sold.

> By lynching black males southern society punished black males in a way no white person could be punished, in a way no human being could be punished. The overwhelming acceptance of this practice as necessary and right confirmed symbolically that they really were less than human beings. By lynching black males white society dramatized, acted out, and wrote in blood the myth that black males were by nature beasts and should be destroyed on the first sign of reverting back to their true selves (Jones 26).

If sexual potency and virility had always been a concern of white men, mutilating the victims during these *events* was an additional manner of controlling the threat.

Lynching, besides the most upfront achievement of executing the condemned, contributed to the process of destroying these men’s identity; it would instill terror among slaves and it would maintain their submission and white supremacy. Ultimately these men’s identity was fractured. Black summarizes it by arguing that “one of the goals of enslavement, to be sure, was to destroy any sense of power or pride the African male possessed, that is, his manhood […] Stripped of virility and the ability to fill the roles of father and husband adequately, enslaved black men were left finally with little more than a newly acquired inferiority complex” (6). The virility and power that once would be praised and encouraged by their fathers now scared whites and created uneasiness and envy.

Paul Robeson, a modern Sambo?

So far we have focused on the idea of black masculinity in the 19th century, which is enlightening in investigating more recent times, in my opinion. In this section we are going to

shift our gaze to a period of time that is much closer to our present days, in which I am going to track down a more recent Sambo; it is indeed surprising to acknowledge that the residues of the Sambo's identity we have outlined in the previous paragraphs are still around.

Retracing black men's identity *construction* from its early stages is a harsh testimony that the stereotypes that were molded through minstrelsy in the early decades of the 19th century sticked around to this day. If minstrelsy was the first springboard, Thelma Golden argues that "one of the greatest inventions of the 20th century is the African American male – 'invented' because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fears and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male's existence" (Golden 9). Through this powerful statement, it is possible to maintain that the process of manipulation and redefinition of black masculinity did not belong solely to the 19th century and did not end with the abolition of slavery in 1865; on the contrary the process made it into the new century and is still here; Golden pictures the black male as a patchwork made of *fears* of being outclassed both physically and in supremacy, and *projections* of tendencies and peculiarities that did not fit into the socially acceptable.

The identity that minstrelsy had birthed for blacks through manipulations and rearrangements was made into a better fit for the new century, especially a more appealing one for a different public; it is possible to find testimony of such change in the analysis of the actor Paul Robeson. Richard Dyer, an English film studies academic, addresses the dynamics behind the creation of the identity of three extremely famous cinema stars: Marilyn Monroe~~,~~ Paul Robeson and Judy Garland. Focusing on Robeson, he sketches a portrait of the actor through the fruition of the audience, thus the identity of the African American actor through his work and the reception of the public. Robeson was appreciated by both black and white audiences, and Dyer maintains that "[h]is image insisted on his blackness – musically, in his primary association with Negro folk music, especially spirituals; in the theatre and films, in the recurrence of Africa as a motif; and in general in the way his image is so bound up with notions of racial character, the nature of black folks, the Negro essence, and so on" (Dyer 76). Robeson was considered as the quintessential incarnation of the black man; he was described as being a big man for his physique and his muscular appearance, with broad shoulders and chest, he was usually referred to as 'the giant Negro' or the 'dark cloud Robeson' in his football player career; simultaneously he was considered to be the keeper of *a black essence,* transpiring in his "naturalness, primitiveness, simplicity" (Dyer 77). I would argue that these adjectives are just more appropriate for 1986 and might be seen as *softer* versions of their 19th century predecessors. The actor in an article in *The Spectator* stated that "the Negro feels

rather than thinks, experiences emotions directly rather than interprets them by roundabout and devious abstractions, and apprehends the outside world by means of intuitive perceptions instead of through a carefully built up system of logical analysis" (qtd. in Dyer 84) fostering a stereotype that was already forced on every black man and instead of firmly rejecting it, he lived by it, supporting it both on and off the screen. Blacks' traits of naturalness, simplicity, spirituality, emotionality, and physicality all contrasted with being "civilized/rational/technological/arid" (Dyer 85), traits that were typically associated with whites.

I would create a connection between the relatively recent description of Robeson with the more obsolete and retrograde one of Blassingame's Sambo; by isolating the latter from the context of slavery, it is possible to see the connection; they are both pure in the intentions, they are rudimentary in mind and straightforward in thoughts, they are both driven by feelings rather than 'interpretating abstractions', they are natural and simple-minded, they have big bodies, small thoughts, they embody strength with restricted mental skills.

Although it might seem digressive - I will expand more on womanhood in the final chapter - I find it quite interesting to mention that in discussing Marilyn Monroe's social identity, Dyer describes this white woman as the "prized possession" of every white man and the envy of every other race, suggesting also a sexual undertone, which instead is only related to men.

> Christianity associates sin with darkness and sexuality, virtue with light and chastity. […] Men are then seen as split between their baser, sexual, 'black' side and their good, spiritual side which is specifically redeemed in Victorian imagery by the chastity of woman. Thus the extreme figures in this conflation of race and gender stereotypes are the black stud/rapist and the white maiden (Dyer 54).

Through these words Dyer is in a sense problematizing what he is about to argue about Robeson, the spiritual and natural black man who, in light of what is here quoted, might become the worst antagonist of our society, a threat to both men and women. I would argue that his naturalness and simplicity, does involve a deep connection with his carnality, hence the *simple* creature might suddenly overturn his docile being and become the worst threat, a nightmare for the civilized and rational whites.

Today's Nats

Whereas Jones had labeled slavery the womb of black manhood and Golden had firmly stated that the black male is an invention of white society, it is my intention to retrace from

early 19th century roots the results that we have today in the perception of black men, which have obviously mutated from savage slave and ridiculous performer, but take a closer look at a whole new set of identities which Jones recognizes in the “gangsta of rap music” or the “bad boyz of the hood” or the “dangerous suspect” (2).

> Recently, I came to my law school dressed in all black. I had on black pants, black shoes, black socks, and a black shirt, all contrasting textures. Over all this I wore a camel-colored wool and silk Sport coat. […] I felt that being GQ would deflect stereotypical thinking and allow me entry into the citadel of the ‘polite society’ on the academic world - or at least that at my law school. I went to a faculty meeting where another faculty member laughingly said that I looked ‘like a cat burglar’ (Jones 33)

“Cat burglar”, that’s how a law professor was humorously addressed by a colleague; it was obviously intended as a joke, but it actually hides more that we might see on the surface of a simple joke. African Americans are more likely to get incriminated and incarcerated, in an analysis of the U.S. Department of Justice that surveys statistics over a span of 10 years (from 2008 to 2018), although the percentages have seen an overall decline in incarcerations, we cannot but assess that African Americans lead the rates by far[6]. This is probably where Jones’ gangsters and criminals come from.

Only a few decades ago the entire metropolis of New York City had wrongly accused and condemned a group of teens of assaulting, raping and almost killing a white woman who was jogging through Central Park on the night of April 19th, 1989. These African American and Hispanics teenagers were defined as *wolf pack*, and New Yorkers asked to bring back the death penalty, to secure a righteous sentence for those *wildin' teens*. They were described like a gang of beasts or like “an animal that has caught the scent of blood, buoyed by excitement of the chase, the mob got out of control” (Jones 44). Here I am not interested in analyzing the case of the Central Park Jogger, my interest resides in the practice of resorting to the stereotype of black male’s bestiality, and how it is the most straightforward manner to channel the social turmoil that the brutal facts had caused. Here as much as in other numerous situations, the black male represents the main suspect in the investigations and is easily

[6] In 2018 on a total of 1,414,162 sentenced prisoners, 465,200 are African American, meaning 32.9% against 30.4% of Whites and 23.3% of Hispanics (Carson)

charged with the crime. The racialized vision of the black male, by associating him with an animal that has smelled blood and is now victim of his predatory instincts or by assuming that sexual assault is just innate in his being are to me the echoes of the identity produced through minstrelsy and slavery; so by association, the newspapers and the medias have taken the place of those obsolete tools that blackface minstrelsy and slavery represented in nurturing these racial misconceptions about black men. Jones metaphorically associates these prejudices with a virus

> The black male is peculiarly a target of violence and/or social control. I want to argue that this targeting of black males is a symptom of a virus in our collective thinking. […] The virus holds that the stereotypes are true – those black men really are beasts.[…] When racist images are accepted as a common sense, this virus is no longer a defect of a few terminals but a defect in the mainframe of American culture itself (Jones 5)

If we consider the long and continuous process of accepting these perceptions as natural and true we cannot but agree with Jones' point of view; the construction of black manhood as we have retraced it, has impacted us in a very invasive manner, and as much as we may attempt to run from it, we have it in our thought processes and it is sparked by default.

One might argue that these old stereotypes are only associated with criminals or crime suspects, yet the harsh reality is that they are ascribed to any black man; Professor Charles Phillip Gause refers to being described as "just an angry black man" by a class of graduate students, during the first seminar for his passionate and dedicated work in presenting the course; he argues that the use of the word *angry* "was rooted in racist and sexist constructs to further perpetuate the notion of a black man who shows any emotion is bestial, aggressive and animalistic" (Gause 39). An even more pungent example is given by Ann Arnett Ferguson, who during her fieldwork in Rosa Park Elementary School, reports of an African American man referring to a black boy saying, "That one has a jail-cell with his name on it" (1)

These examples are not fruits of fortuitous coincidence, these are perpetuations of racialized and stereotyped views; although it might seem audacious, I would argue that these could be described as Nat's comebacks; Nat is part of the black man in his deviated shared conceptions, he is in the black child who walks through the corridors of an elementary school, he is in the professor who enthusiastically presents his work to a class. Or maybe he is in the eye of the beholder that sees Nat in every black man, ready to turn into his unpredictable self, always on the verge of bursting into the inner savage, tamable only through suppression and fear.

Creating a new identity through hip-hop

In the environment that we have outlined so far, made of looming stereotypes like Nats and Sambos and the echoes of minstrelsy, in the early 1970s black young men tried to protect their identity, or rather they attempted to reconstruct their crumbled selves. After being the clowns of America for more than a century, after being held captive and enslaved, deprived of any agency and any right, being denied their manhood, their need to protect their loved ones, the right to be husbands and fathers, their identity was shattered like glass. Although two intense decades, starting in the end of 1940s till the end of 1960s, saw the Civil Rights movements bravely contrast discrimination and fight for equal rights, several issues remained unsolved, one of which was segregation, which in the 1980s was still harshly present. Through an examination of the residential data carried out by Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton and published in 1987 (on data coming from four minority groups: Anglos, Blacks, Hispanics and Asians) they highlight evidence that "blacks remain by far the most spatially isolated of the three minority groups" (Massey and Denton 812), even though in 1968 the Civil Right Act had banned housing discrimination, and especially low-income families remained strongly isolated and segregated.

It was in this challenging situation that, in the attempt of standing their ground, North American young black men growing up in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, grew tired of witnessing their parents provide for them through all manner of difficulties, enduring discrimination and poor working conditions; the values of "honesty, integrity and justice" (hooks *We Real Cool* 17) that their parents had taught them were not creating the expected results, and turning away from a harsh rejection of white capitalism, black youth started living by Walter Lee's statement "There ain't no causes – there ain't nothing but taking in this world, and he who takes most is smartest – and it don't make a damn bit of difference how" (qtd. in hooks *We Real Cool* 16). If money and manhood, (and much more) were denied to the black community for far too long, eventually these elements became their priorities; *showin' off* both an emphasized masculinity and wealth became two of the main preoccupations of young black men who used 'coolness' as a coping mechanisms that allowed them some control over their lives, "being cool invigorates a life that would otherwise be degrading and empty. It helps the black male make sense out of his life and get what he wants from others. Cool pose brings a dynamic vitality into the black male's everyday encounters, transforming the mundane into the sublime and making the routine spectacular" (Black 7).

These elements became central topics in the artistic production that African Americans were creating through rapping and music, in an extremely lively and flourishing environment

of the creative production of music, poetry, dance and so on. Although I am not going to focus on music in this section, but I will do so in a later chapter, it is here my intention to argue that the artistic expression that was born out of black ghettos would present issues and problematic themes in their contents; it is thus natural to imagine that male identity and economic struggles would be among the most prominent matters that rappers/hip-hoppers would deal with in their creations. By stating this I do not mean to reduce the value of the art of rapping to money and masculinity, but it is my intention to highlight how these elements became the *front page* of an artistic movement, which would voice the disappointment and dissatisfaction of young blacks in their living conditions.

> These performances, for all their supermasculinity, are intended at a deep level as counternarratives, as resistance in the context of a marginalized people attempting to represent themselves as potent, large, and in charge: predators rather then victims in a society where they have found themselves jobless, powerless, social victims languishing on street corners and in jails (Jones 59)

With these premises, if the genre of hip-hop became the outlet through which to voice these social difficulties and struggles, we find evidence that money and wealth were heavily discussed in song lyrics; to name a few songs, *All About the Benjamins*[7] by P. Diddy ft. Lil Kim, The LOX and The Notorious B.I.G., *Money on My Mind* by Tupac Shakur or Snoop Dogg's *Money Money Money*, which are just few examples, but the list could go on; in some instances this topic would also be associated with illegal activities.

In my opinion, this attempt at reestablishing black men's identity through the production of an image of virility, strength and vigor was a self-defense strategy, or as Jones defined it, a 'counternarrative' that would firmly reassess the individuality that had been taken from and denied to them for centuries. Keeping in consideration the preexisting prejudice and stereotype that whites had created of the black man as a uncivilized, savage, violent and unintelligent being, I see how the attempt I am outlining revealed itself to be a double-edged sword; what I mean by this is that the self-affirmation that blacks were trying to build for them would, in a sense, feed into the old stereotypes, and furthermore provide more material on which to create more prejudice. A similar argument is what Gause refers to when he argues that the creation of an aggressive black masculinity is carried out through *heavily*

[7] Benjamins "are 100 dollar bills; the reason people call them Benjamins is because the face on the bill is of Benjamin Franklin" (Urbandictionary.com)

rotated hip-hop songs, which he points as the vehicles of "the continuation of the construction of black masculinity in popular space" (42); correspondingly referring to the typical figures of the "black gangsta" in music videos with a gun in his baggy pants, Jones argues that "He is indeed received as an authentic image of black identity. But black identity through the lens of the dominant perspective is by definition alien and savage. He is received not as subject, but as an object onto which whites may project their fears" (Jones 59); the double-edged effect I am hinting at is in Jones' words, by accepting that the black man is still viewed from whites as an inferior being, who lacks civility and is still closely bound up with Nat and Sambo, the creation of the new identity might have inflicted more separation between blacks and whites, and maybe create an additional figure that could be exploited. "Nat is now portrayed in our social narrative in modern dress with a boom box and twisty braids, or wearing a rumpled jogging suit, the usual suspect in the war on drugs. […] He appears as a dangerous black man 'lurking' in the shadows" (Jones 29).

CHAPTER THREE

Minstrel Songs in Blackface Performances

The first and second chapter have as the central topic the phenomenon of minstrelsy as a tool of expropriation of black cultural identity, perpetuated by whites with all their intrinsic meanings and facets. In this section I am going to analyze the lyrical component of the songs performed during the shows to better enhance what has been stated so far about the representation of blacks. I would suggest that behind the label of entertainment, some durable and widespread stereotypes were shaping among whites, and minstrelsy would be the perfect environment to stage their anxiety of supremacy and domination on the black community, which was a great source of uneasiness among them.

Songs were a consistent component of the shows that would be played along with instruments like the tambourine, animal bones, the fiddle and the banjo. As a matter of fact, Lott tells us that the shows were tripartite, "the first part offered up a random selection of songs interspersed with what passed for black wit and japery; the second part (or 'olio') featured a group of novelty performances (comic dialogues, malapropistic 'stump speeches', cross-dressed 'wench' performances, and the like); and the third part was a narrative skit, usually set in the South, containing dancing, music and burlesque" (Lott 6). The earliest performances of the Virginia Minstrels, one of the first minstrel troupes, would usually consist of conundrums, burlesque scenes, skits, music and dances; the evening would be divided in two major parts, both "consisted mainly of ensemble songs interspersed with solo banjo songs, and were strung together witticism, ripostes, shouts, puns and other attempts at black impersonation" (144). Soon, the first part of the show started to be dedicated to the character of the northern dandy, the Zip Coon, and the second part would have the southern plantation slave, Jim Crow, as its main focus. Later in the 1840s, other minstrel troupes started being founded, the Ethiopian Serenaders, the Christy's Minstrels and many others, which were widely known by the public as the companies started touring and performing in several cities. Small songbooks would be produced during these years of peaking popularity of the show which "allowed fans of blackface to sing the words at home to tunes they knew by heart from the theater, and were therefore advertisement, a symbol of product loyalty, as much as entertainment" (Lott 176). The itinerant performances, just like the songbooks produced, were a conspicuous source of earnings for minstrel troupes, which attracted a very large audience.

Through scrutinizing the songbooks available online as well as the transcriptions that Lott presents in his study, I noticed that the lyrics were not firmly fixed, either in the content, the length, the choice of words or the morphology of the lexicon; it is possible to argue that these songs were rearranged and changed by the minstrels who performed them, whether because of the needs of performance or the minstrel's improvisation.

Linguistic features in minstrel songs

The songs analyzed here display several linguistic peculiarities that belong to the language that would be used by slaves during the 19th century, and through Lisa Green's analysis of African American English (AAE) I have highlighted the main features that will be displayed in the lyrics below. Green's work *African American English* represents a profound analysis of AAE from many different aspects, for the time being I am going to focus on Green's analysis of AAE in literature in the early 20th century, which she does by analyzing the speech patterns in William W. Brown's *Clotel; or the President's Daughter: a Narrative of Slave Life in the United States,* written in 1853 and in Joel Chandler Harris's folktales, providing a full array of features that can also be retraced in the examples below.

Starting with the phonological patterns of the language spoken by the slaves, one of the first feature that stands out while reading the lyrics is the articulation of the initial sound *th,* which usually results as *d*, as in the following sentence coming from the preface of the songbook I have focused on, "I shall wi**d**out a blush positibely declar **d**at **d**is little wolume is by far **d**e beast…" displaying the pronunciation of *th* as *d*; the same articulation pattern can be found throughout the minstrel songs that are transcribed here in this section or in the example provided by Green taken from Brown's text

Example 1 "**D**ees white fokes is **d**e very **d**ibble" (qtd. in Green 168).

Another phonological feature she notes is the use of sound *b* "in word medial or final position in environments in which *v* occurs in current AAE and other varieties of English" (Green 169); in example 1 the word devil is written and pronounces *dibble,* displaying the pattern described by Green, and it is also displayed in the preface fully quoted below in the words gi**b**, endea**b**ors, e**b**er, as well as in initial position in **b**erry and it is also found in the articulation of the preposition "of" which although it presents an *f,* its phonological transcription would be [ɒv]; she also notices that this pattern is no longer present in current AAE (169).

The vowel change in the pronunciation of the words "there/there's" and "were" as *thar/thars* and *whar*, for instance in the first verse of the third stanza of *Ole Massa is Going to*

Town “De wenches will all be th**a**r” or further on “’Case we wh**a**r his only pride”, “suggest that the use of vowel sound *a* in a word such as *there* was a regular part of the speaker’s early AAE rule system” (Green 168), Green also highlights how the initial sound *th* in the word “there” is not pronounced *d* as expected “but it does reflect a vowel change to set it off from the standard” (168).

The author also finds the word final velar nasal sound *ŋ*, which can be found in words such as “telling” or “going”, to be usually articulated as *n*, for instance in the preface below we find *preachin’* or *speakin’* but we also find syllable timing, where “unstressed initial syllables are not produced” (172), see the words ‘couragment*,* ‘zammination, ’speck and ’titled.

From a syntactical perspective, the major features that should be highlighted for our purpose relate to handful of characteristics, which Green also covers in her work. Starting with the accordance of number between nouns and verbs she uses example 1 to underline how the verb to be is used in its third singular form with a plural subject (Dees white fokes..) or in the second stanza of *We’ll all Make a Laugh “*Howeber, we **am** happy, and contented whar we **am**” where both plural pronouns *we* are followed by the first person singular of the verb to be *am.* There are also attestations of copula *be* omissions, a feature both present in earlier and current AAE, but not present in the examples of this chapter.

The use of *ain’t* instead of auxiliary *isn’t* in *Sally is de Gal for me* “If Sally **aint** at home..” or in *We’ll all Make a Laugh* “…and it **aint** no use to talk” which also shows a double negation with *aint no*, which persists in current AAE.

A form that is instead found in *Oh! Susanna* is *for to,* used to express the result or consequence of an action (“I’m gwine to Lousiana my true love **for to** see”), which Green founds to be attested “but used by only a small number of speakers in [parts of southwest Louisiana]” (252) and that is not used in mainstream English.

Given this brief phonological and syntactical overview, I would also state that the features just discussed are not always consistent in the examples I have selected. If we consider the song *Ole Massa is Going to Town*, the gerund of the verb to go is fully articulated (or better written) with a velar ŋ, instead of presenting its dental variation throughout the song; as well as the definite article *the* in *Gal from the South,* which is written in the standard form and does not present its variation *de*; in the verse “We’**re** a happy set ob darkies, and we’**re** ’sembled here to play” the two plural pronouns *we* are followed by the plural form of the verb to be in the contracted form, not presenting the number disagreement mentioned above. In this regard, I find it fitting to argue that this inconsistency is quite

reflective of their inauthenticity, considering these songs written and sung by white minstrels and meant to be a mockery of the language of blacks; my opinion is that the pronunciation and also the construction of the sentences were unnatural and forced to better reproduce the characters played on stage.

White's New Illustrated Melodeon Songbook: **Preface and Content Analysis**

The songs that are here presented were taken from the songbook *White's New Illustrated Melodeon Songbook* (https://digital.library.pitt.edu). The year of publication of the copy I am referring to seems to be around 1865, but there are other copies of this same collection dated 1848, hence in the years of the maximum popularity of minstrelsy; I should also underline that there is no mention of the year of composition of each song. The songbook has been digitalized and made available online; it contains a great repertoire of minstrel songs, from which I have selected some that I am going to analyze in their contents, primarily in the light of what has been discussed so far.

On its first page the title is followed by a subheading explaining the content of the small volume to be a "variety of all the new and most popular songs, jokes, conundrums, burlesque lectures, etc embracing the choicest collection as sung by white's band of serenaders, the Christys, Campbells and Sable Brothers", an illustration is placed just underneath this description of a black boy with curly dark hair, while dancing. The following page presents a preface, titled. "TO MY READERS" which is here quoted at length:

> As my berry intimate political friend, Pompey, used to say, in times ob important preachin', Countrymen and feller-citizens, unaccustomed to public speakin' as I am, I fear dat I cannot find words to spress my feelin' for de berry tankful 'couragment which your patronage and your pennies hab gib me, and in my endeabors to add to de powerful literature ob de present iron age, I shall widout a blush positibely declar dat dis little wolume is by far de beast seasoned and most spicy exposure ob darkey wit dat has eber afore been seen in de shape ob a book: darfore, my frens, after careful 'zammination ob de contents, I 'speck dat you will not hesitate to shout out, bold and fearlessly, widout de slightest preguce, dat dis number, togeder wid de t'oders, am certainly 'titled to de medal. But understand dat I excludes dis address, and scrubscribe myself, eberyboddy's 'bedient serbant,
>
> PEABODY, Esq.

This brief introduction to the small volume presents it as the first book containing the best and most popular songs, jokes and riddles played during minstrel shows, which is referred to as *exposure of darkies*; this expression, besides being a typical manner of addressing the minstrel show, in my opinion touches two important concepts that describe blackface as a whole. The first is that of authenticity; from its early stages the minstrels claimed to be actual black men singing and dancing, and not blackened white actors tricking the audience, and that it was an actual representation of blacks' behavior, rather than an exaggerated performance. The other concepts it brings forth is more of a personal reading of mine, which relates to the choice of words "exposure of ..""; considering the overall feeling that blackface represented, these words seem to be evocative of a display of animals, something like a zoo, more than a theatrical performance, which underlines the ill-founded representation that the performances staged of black people as animals, which were caged and *exposed* to intrusive eyes.

a) Ole Massa is Going to Town

Ole Massa is going to Town
(composed by Chas. White)

Ole Massa is going to town;
De ole grey hoss he'll ride;
An' when he's gone, we'll hab some fun,
Down by the riber side.

Chorus: Massa griebes himself to death,
Since missus she got drown'd;
An ebery day we hear him say,
"Darkies, I'm going to town."

De wenches will all be thar,
Susannah an' Emma Snow;
Escorted by dat prince ob darks,
De handsome Julius Crow

Ole massa's bery rich,

An’ lubs his darkies too;
When we all behabe ourselves,
He cares not what we do.

Long time ago he promised,
(Just arter missus died)
Dat Rose an’ me ha’d both set free
’Case we whar his only pride!

Ole massa’s kept his word;
Dat time is near at hand,
When we must cry, an’ say, “Good bye!”
An’ leabe Virginia’s land!

Shaw! What’s de use ob going
’Mong strangers in de West?
We’d best stay here, whar we are near,
Wid ole massa an’ de rest! (22)

I have discussed how through the show whites were trying to create a parallel reality that would support anti-abolitionists, or rather justify the practice of slavery; by creating these idyllic scenarios, made of enjoyable moments of sharing between slaves and masters, or among slaves of cheerful nights, whites were maintaining these sugarcoated realities in which living conditions on the plantation fields would be presented as pleasant and amusing. With this intent, the songs are disseminated with numerous depictions of gaiety and cheerfulness; one can be found in this example, *Ole Massa is going to Town,* which contains several elements that I find to be explicative of a typical song.

In the lyrics that are displayed above the slaves plan to have some fun while their master is gone; already here we may identify one of the stereotypes that were typically associated with slaves in the plantation field, which was that of being lazy and deceitful to their master, tricking him by working while he is present and loafing around in his absence. The slaves seem to take advantage of the situation in which *massa* is mourning for the death of his wife (in this regard I would also highlight how interesting it is that women characters appearing in these songs often tragically die, these deaths are either the very focus of the

lyrics or a marginal scene). The master leaves and addresses the slaves by saying "Darkies I'm going to town", the word "darkies" is one of the many terms whites would use to refer to black people.

"De wenches will all be thar/Susanna an Emma Snow", the choice of the word "wenches" is representative of a connotation that was associated with black women, of being unfeminine and bulky, on the contrary rather masculine; they would usually be incorporated in the show either to create sexually allusive scenes or grotesquely problematic situations; on another note we might imagine Emma Snow to be white; she is mentioned in other songs, and she is described as having "pearly white teeth" (6), but there is no mention of her complexion. These girls are escorted by "dat prince ob darks/de handsome Julius Crow", which I find to be a stinging and ironic manner to address the character; it seems to me more a sarcastic way to ridicule the black male, rather than actually granting him the title of prince; on the contrary I find it to be sarcastically remarking his status as slave and subordinate.

The following stanza again underlines the pleasant living conditions of the slaves, by pointing out that the master is very rich, he provides for his slaves and "lubs his darkies too", hence he is loving and appreciative of them, but only when they behave. In this regard I find it necessary to state that living conditions of slaves were usually far from what is described in these songs; through direct testimony we know that slaves would be flogged or beaten for any given reasons, or, as Black puts it, for "the most trivial of offenses or simply for the captor's humor" (45). Nevertheless, in Equiano's autobiography, we find proof that not all masters were evil, there were exceptions

> My master often gave the owners of these slaves two and a half of these pieces per day, and found the poor fellows in victuals himself, because he thought their owners did not feed them well enough according to the work they did. The slaves used to like this very well; and, as they knew my master to be a man of feeling, they were always glad to work for him in preference to any other gentleman; some of whom, after they had been paid for these poor people's labours, would not give them their allowance out of it. Many times have I even seen these unfortunate wretches beaten for asking for their pay; and often severely flogged by their owners if they did not bring them their daily or weekly money exactly to the time; (Equiano 67-68)

Besides the exceptions of loving masters, the ‘emblematic familial grouping’ as Lott describes it, seemed to be more a supporting strategy for slavery rather than an ideal depiction of reality and “the mythology of plantation paternalism became a figure for the family in America” (Lott 201), spreading a patriarchal example of firm but loving control over the household. Through the lyrics we know that the attentive slave owner promised to free two slaves a long time ago because they are “his only pride”; obviously considering him to be the benevolent patriarch he will keep his word and they will have to leave the State of Virginia sadly. Freedom is another topic frequently found in these songs, it is longed for by the “black” performer, but always associated with a feeling of sadness, loss and melancholy, which is why the song goes “When we must cry, an’ say “Good Bye!”, again maintaining the idea of happy familial environment where slavery is rather pleasant, and slaves do not want to leave.

The final stanza is one of the most meaningful, because its verses let a whole set of other meanings seep through, in my perspective. The slave projects his imagination to a near future, when Rose and he are freed, he asks himself “what’s de use ob going”, questioning whether it is worth it to leave and be with strangers instead of staying with their master and the other slaves. I see in this depiction a reminiscence of the stereotypical Sambo, happy and content with his status as slave and who does not wish to be freed, because he would not know what to do with freedom; the character of this song is just like Sambo, he is already satisfied in being with his master, he needs a white man to help him through life, he would not be able to live without such leadership, thus he concludes that it would be better to stay with him.

b) We’ll all Make a Laugh

We’ll all make a laugh

Now, darkies, sing and play, and make a little fun;
We’ll dance upon de green, and beat the Congo drum
We’re a happy set ob darkies, and we’re ’sembled here
to play,
So strike de bones and tambourine, and drive dull care
away.

Some massas love dar darkies well, and gib ’em what
dey want-

Except it is dar freedom – and *dat* I know dey won't;
Howeber, we am happy, and contented whar we am,
As a serenading party, and a scientific band.

Dar's Sam, and Joe, and Uncle Ben, likewise my sister
Sally,
Wheneber fun is in the wind, de niggers dey can rally;
And if dancing is de order, or any other sport,
Dese niggers dey am No. 1- and it aint no use to
talk.
Old massa feeds us bery well, and make us work all
day,
But after sun is set at night, he lets us hab our way.
He often comes to see out sports – a fine segar he
quaffs –
'Case de merriment ob niggers often makes him laugh.

Now its growin' late – de moon is down- and we'll be
gettin home;
So put up de music, boys, and onward let us roam.
We'll say "Farewell" to ebery friend, and strive wid
all our might,
To 'semble here on dis same spot again tomorrow
night.

Chorus: Massa laugh, wid a Ha, ha, ha !
Massa laugh, wid a He, he, he !
Ned open his mouth, wid a Yah, yah, yah !
Den we'll all make a laugh wid a Ha, ha, ha ! (12)

Presenting slavery as amusing and pleasant was in the intrinsic message of minstrelsy, creating and promoting these idyllic scenarios of loving relationships between slaves and master, also through depicting moments of bonding on the fields, which is what this example is about, in which the master joins his slaves during the night when they usually spend some

time dancing and singing, before heading to bed; the title of the song is *We'll all make a laugh*, already setting the mood for the entire song. The first stanza exhorts the others to join the fun, by dancing and playing the "Congo drum", the bones and the tambourine to get some relief from the hard and tedious working day.

The second stanza introduce the topic of freedom, which again is related to the benevolence of the master, who loves the slaves but would not allow them freedom; as one might guess the singer objects "Howeber, we am happy and contented whar we am" maintaining the "standard blackface argument against freeing the slaves, that they could not stand on their own two feet" (Lott 202). If we accept the perspective that minstrelsy, by means of ridicule and exaggeration, was a representation of whites interest in black cultural practices, as dancing and singing may have been, the following stanza may recall such feelings, where the singer states "And if dancing is de order, or any other sport, /dey am No. 1- and it aint no use to talk", underlining the dexterity that was associated with them.

The next stanza describes living conditions that benevolent planters would allow their slaves, referring to the nighttime, when they would have free hours to gather and spend some time dancing, singing and playing instruments; in this regard, testimonies do confirm that slaves would have their free time, recreational activities were permitted outside the working day, which would be either at the end of the day or on Sundays, when everyone was allowed to rest and slaves could spend their time hunting, fishing, or gathering. "He often comes to see our sports – a fine segar e quaffs/'Case de merriment ob niggers often makes him laugh" to this regard Blassingame states that "African-born slaves sometimes sang their tribal songs and performed tribal dances for the amusement of their masters and fellow slaves" (31); but it is also true that, according to the narratives the slaves themselves have provided of their existence on the plantation fields, I could find no such accounts as joyful rendezvous with their owners, quite the opposite; some masters "locked the doors of the cabins at night and instituted the patrol system to keep slaves in the quarters after dark" (Blassingame 107) and most prominently singing would rarely happen out of happiness, as Frederick Douglass describes in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

> I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.

> […] I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery (26-27)

Although cheerful nights with their masters are not confirmed in these autobiographical texts, what is instead upheld is that Sundays were conceded as days of rest, and it is possible to imagine that dancing and singing would happen.

The last stanza, which is indicated as the chorus, recalls the title of the song, in which everyone seems to be laughing out of merriment and joy, "Massa laugh wid a Ha, ha, ha" and "Den we'll all make a laugh wid a Ha, ha, ha", but pointing out "Ned open his mouth wid a He, he, he", drawing attention to the mouth of one of the participants, which as already argued was a central element of interest in the reenactment of black slaves; illustrations as well would depict blackface minstrels with big open mouths laughing uproariously. In conclusion I would suggest that these songs depict a historically inaccurate reality.

c) Gal from the South

Gal from the South

Ole massa bought a colored gal
He bought her at the South;
Her hair it curled so very tight
She could not shut her mouth.
Her eyes they was so bery small,
They both ran into one,
And when a fly light in her eye,
Like a June bug in de sun,
Chorus: Yah yah yah yah yah yah
De gal from the south
Her hair it curl so very tight
She could not shut her mouth

Her nose it was so berry long,
It turned up like a squash,
And when she got her dander up
She made me laugh, by gosh;

Old massa had no hooks or nail,
Or nothin else like that,
So on this darkie’s nose he used
To hand his coat and hat.
Yah yah yah yah &c.

One morning massa going away,
He went to git his coat,
But neither hat or coat was there,
For she had swallowed both;
He took her to a tailor shop,
To have her mouth made small,
The lady took in one long breath,
And swallowed tailor and all.
Yah yah yah, &c. (3)

This example, titled *Gal from the South* presents several peculiarities that must be looked into, because they reveal much of what has been discussed in the previous chapters. It may be seen as an example of how the physical presence of blacks would be sexualized and it also gives us the chance to analyze a feminine character on stage, how it is portrayed and what kind of features are focused on. In this case we find the tale of a young woman, referred to as “colored gal” that has been purchased by the white master from the South; the notion of buying the young woman, besides actually being descriptive of the procedures of the slave trade, seems to be gesturing towards a more hidden meaning that Lott explains is fairly typical in blackface minstrelsy in the description of women; he argues that “[w]hite men’s fear of female power” called for a need to ridicule them and I would add that the concept of buying them would help men overcome this fear in a sort of objectification, which would facilitate defeating the threat of women. Lott similarly argues that “the empowering insistence of the two ‘boughts’ attempts to cancel the threatening open mouth (later to be made small)” (27). The rest of the first stanza and the next one are dedicated to describing her hair tightly curled, and her eyes that are said to be small and crossed, “they both ran into one”, and her extremely large mouth, which she could not shut; the overall image that is portrayed of the young woman is rooted in the stereotypical representation of black slaves, considered to be dull and stupid.

Next the description shifts to her nose, which was "so berry long/It turned up like a squash"; on the recurring theme of the nose, Lott draws a connection between its description and a phallic figure, suggesting that it would conceal the obsession of white men with the black men's body and penis. Just like the character of the wench, which was played by a man, the 'phallic woman' by looking masculine helped lessen the "threatening 'castrating' power of women" (166). The girl's nose is used as a hook by the master, who hangs his clothes on it, once again objectifying the girl to a coat hanger. The sexual undertone of the entire song culminates when "the engulfing, vaginal throat finally wreak[s] revenge on the master" (Lott 27); through her enormous mouth the girl swallows her master's clothes.

In an attempt to restore some sense of domination and control on this wild deformity of the girl's mouth (and on the female threat), in the last stanza the master takes the girl to a tailor, in order to have her mouth sewed and made smaller, yet in she takes one *long breath* and devours the tailor as well. The feminine character entails the problematic connotations that women would represent for white men, through a sexualized and masculine representation the song tries to restore a state of control and domination, which is firmly opposed by the savage mouth of the protagonist.

d) Sally is da Gal for Me

Sally is da Gal for me

Last year I was twenty;
Ole master set me free;
An'Ise got money a plenty,
When I get in a weaving way
Spend my money free,
Oh, here's good liquor! Come and drink
Oh Sally is de gal for me

Ise gwine down to Sally's house;
If Sally aint at home,
I'll set myself in de big arm-chair,
An' play on de ole jaw-bone;
Chorus: When I get in a weaving way, &c.

If she don't come when I get done,

I'll jump into de fedder bed;
Go right in like a trooper's horse,
An' lay like I was dead.
When I get in a weaving way, &c.

Oh, Sally is de gal for me;
I wouldn't hab no oder
If Sal dies to morrow night,
I'll marry Sally's brudder!
When I get in a weaving way, &c.

Ole master buy me a long-tail coat,
Wid boots up to my knees:
When I gets on my Sunday cloes,
I am sassy as you please!
When I get in a weaving way, &c.

Missus gib me a pieace ob meat,
Ole massa gim be bread;
Sally gib me one sweet kiss,
An' it almost kill me dead!
When I get in a weaving way, &c. (38)

In the song *Sally is da Gal for Me* the first stanza starts by presenting the singer as a freed slave; he has been freed by his master and now he says he has got "money a plenty"; in the chorus, sung after each stanza creating rhythm and repetition, the performer says that having so much money and being free, he is able to spend it on whatever he pleases and what is spends it on is liquor, alcohol, inviting Sally, the girl he is interested in, to drink with him, corroborating the image of lazy black Sambo slaves, who would indulge in triviality if given freedom. In the following two stanzas the performer sings of finally being able to be with Sally, and he describes going to her house and waiting for her, either playing the *jawbone* while sitting on the armchair, or "I'll jump into de fedder bed/Go right in like a trooper's horse", which I would see as a word game to describe an intimate encounter, in light of Blassingame's argument that slaves would use metaphors to describe such events, opting for

verbs like “pushing, rocking, blowing, cooking, shaking, riding, beating and rolling to refer to sexual intercourse” (124).

Based on the assumption that sexuality and veiled homosexuality were central elements to the show, invoked through “black” men, in the next stanza much less is left to interpretation, when the singer clearly states that “If Sal die tomorrow night/I’ll marry Sally’d brudder”. This, in Lott’s opinion, would be a way to allow “white men to imagine same sex desire even more freely than when virile black men were represented” (169), arguing that homoerotic desire represented “the jewel in minstrelsy crown, ensuring crowded houses night after night” (169); supporting once again the thesis that vulgarity was one of the main achievements of minstrelsy as a whole which attracted the audience to its depraved allusions. The daring references persist in the next stanza through the singer recovering on the character of the urban dandy, clumsily addressing himself as “sassy” in his “long tail coat”, another readily mentioned item that in Lott’s opinion probably refers to black men’s penis , like an obsessive threat and persistent attraction (26). In the final stanza, the singer is asking for bread and meat to his masters, which in my opinion would maintain the conception that a freed slave would not be able to provide for himself; and lastly he asks Sally for a kiss, which would kill him, probably hinting at her dangerous presence.

e) Da Old Jawbone

Da Old Jawbone

De jaw-bone hung in de kitchen hall;
De sea-bass shine on de white-wash wall;
Old massa’s brack friends loved fun, and was gay,
And they kicked up de devil on a holiday!
Old Jim it was seen was his father’s pride,
His own colored child, young Bowshin’s bride;
And she wid her brack eyes seemed to be
De full moon ob dis company.
Chorus: Oh, de old jaw-bone!
Oh, de old jaw-bone!

“I’ve eat all de ’possum fat now!” she cried;
“Den hang up de banjo! – I’ll hide! I’ll hide!

And Bowshin, be sure you're de fust to trace
De clue to my secret hiding-place!"
She ran out ob de kitchen; de niggers began
To hunt all around, and find her if they can;
When Bowshin cried out, "Oh whar'bouts you hide?
I'm lonely widout you, my own brack bride!"

Dey hunted dat night, and dey hunted next day;
Dey hunt all around, 'till a week pass away;
In de short, in de long, in de big holler log,
Young Bowshin hunt wildly wid a bull-terrier dog.
Though years gwan by, and grief at last,
Was told as a colored tale long past:
When de old man came out, de little nigger cried
"See, de old man weeps for his fairy bride!"

At length, an old log all covere wid brush,
Was found in de swamp – and dey all made a rush;
when a pink striped dress, and some old wooly hair!
Though hard was her fate, like de little bull-frog,
She hide from her lub in de old holler log;
Whe de brush was trown ober, and her colored bloom
All faded away in de old log tomb.

About twelb o'clock, or de hour ob one
A figure appears, and it strikes you dumb!
It has no flesh upon its bones;
It shakes its teeth – it laughs – it groans!
It seizes you by de wool ob de head,
And it shakes you about 'till you're almost dead!
It rings in your ears, "I was murder'd thar!"
And dis is what dey call de old nightmar! (18)

In *Da Old Jaw Bone*, the song starts by setting the scene in a night of merriment, dancing and singing; the jawbone would be an instrument obtained from the actual jawbone and teeth of a dead animal, usually a horse or an ox, which would be scraped with a piece of metal or anything else to produce a sound used to create a rhythm (tunearch.org). The protagonists of the song are referred to as "Ol massa's brack friends", this would be a very common way to refer to the slaves, in order to fully corroborate the thesis that the relationship between slaves and master was one of friendship – thus they are called *friends*, and continues "loved fun and was gay", this as well would depict a happy scenario, nurturing the idea that slavery was not as brutal as abolitionists pictured it.

In this setting of lightheartedness, the "colored child" is a young girl who is the bride of Bowshin, one of the men taking part in the celebrations. She is described to the "de full moon ob dis company", thus she is the only female and this description, in my opinion, might hint at the fact that she is probably the center of attention of all the other men. This may find confirmation in what is described next; she suggests playing a game, conceptually identical to what we would call hide-and-seek; at this point she becomes the object of the *hunt*; again here, the choice of using the verb to hunt is more a reference to the animal world, making me think that these men hunt her down, like wolves with a prey, rather than a playful scene.

The chase goes on for days and gives no results, as no one seems to be able to locate the young girl; in fact we are told that years go by without the lady being found, and Bowshin, who should have married her, "weeps for her fairy bride", who once gone and lost, from a colored child has oddly become a "fairy". In the fourth stanza we finally learn what happened to the young girl; she is found in a swamp, covered in bushes; her "tapering" body is wrapped in her dress, her hair is described as "old wooly", which was a very common way to refer to blacks' hair type and her "colored bloom". She has been killed "like a little bull-frog", once again nurturing the animalistic semantic field evoked with the choice of the verb *hunt.*

In the final stanza, we are told that during the night a figure with "no flesh upon its bones" appears and scares its victim; it is her who "shakes its teeth – it laughs – it groans", just like an animal, she growls and groans and warns you that she has been murdered and now she has become an "old nightmar!". These deaths were useful in calming the anxiety that racial and social questions were encouraging, "[s]imultaneously lamenting and killing off the black victim, it condensed ambivalences of racial feeling into a single complex figure, implicitly connecting such ambivalences to the antislavery impulse" (Lott 196).

f) Oh! Susanna & Good Bye, Linda, Lub

Oh! Susanna

I'se come from Alabama with the banjo on my knee,
I'm gwine to Lousiana my true love for to see.
It rained all night the day I left the wedder it was dry,
De sun so hot I froze to deff, Susanna don't you cry.
Chorus and repeat: Oh Susanna, don't you cry for me,
Ise come from Alabama
With the banjo on my knee (11)
[…]

Good bye, Linda, Lub

Twas down in Alabama State,
Our little hut did stand;
A wife and little darkie eight,
Composed our happy band.
Chorus: Good bye Lida lub
Oh Linda fare you well"
Massa say Ise getting old;
Dis darkey he must sell.

I neber will forget, my lub
De hour when fust we met;
Your voice was softer dan de dove,
Your lips was sweeter yet.

I remember well dat happy morn,
When Linda say, she lub;
Dis darkey shellin' massa's conr,
Wid Linda in a tub!

I tink wid joy upon de day
    When Linda and I was one;
I feel like ’coon in summer day,
    A basking in de sun.

We’ve watch’d our little nigger boys,
    A playing on de green;
A happier day of sweeter joys
    Dis nigger never seen.

A long farewell, my Linda, dear,
    Our happiness am o’er!
Come, Linda, lub den dry your tear,
    You’ll neber see me more! (31)

Thus, in the midst of minstrels’ gaiety, dancing and singing, some songs strikingly dealt with feelings of sorrows and sadness originating primarily because of deaths, as much as forced separations, memories of long-gone family unity, which all promoted a sentimental undertone. In *Oh! Susanna* the protagonist is singing of reuniting with his lover, he describes a difficult journey from Alabama to reach her in Louisiana. In *Good Bye, Linda, Lub* the performer, who has been sold because of his age, hopelessly sings his pain in remembering his family with his wife and his children since he was separated from them. “[…] this emphasis on the departing and the departed nonetheless had the useful outcome of endowing black people with human emotion, indeed the perpetual sorrow of life under slavery” (Lott 195); I would argue that this result would, in some ways, problematize the original conception of minstrelsy as a stage of racial identity construction, and it would deepen the psychological aspects of slaves in a way that was instead intended to be obliterated. Lott indeed refers to this fashion as ‘morbid opportunism’, which to me restores the primary concept that minstrelsy was not interested in depicting blacks as humans, and foremost was not interested in their mourning or sorrows. Contrarily “what was being repeated in these songs amid a sympathetic emotional agenda was, simply, racial and sexual aggression, that is, metaphorical murder” (195); the songs through irony and playfulness served “to distance rather than entrance the listener” (196). “[T]he general run of such songs supervised the elimination of black characters rather than mark[ing] their passing away. And it seems to me that what was being

symbolically eliminated and put to rest was the whole lamented business of slavery in the United States, by means of the elimination of black people themselves" (196).

The examples presented in this chapter encompass the topics that I find to be most representative of minstrelsy; with a background of racism and inequality, these songs would embody the social sentiments that the white community had towards blacks. By protecting slavery and representing it as a *perfectly oiled mechanism* with just masters' supervision, with ideal and peaceful relationships between planter and slaves, who were allowed recreations and amusements, but simultaneously describing the slaves as inept creatures, incapable of existing without white guidance, lustful victims of bodily instincts. At the same time, while the characters of these songs were being constructed, the audience had the opportunity to build its white identity, igniting feelings of superiority and domination, while playing with sexuality and taboos, soothing the fear of subversion and the ever-present threat of manhood loss that black men represented, all of which was done at the expense of the Other.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Appropriation of Rap

From Minstrelsy to Rap

In the previous chapters I outlined how 19th century stereotypes based on slavery, racism and minstrelsy had created the foundations of the society in which African Americans were living. In this part of my research the aim is to compare 19th century reality, discussed so far, to more recent phenomena specifically in the music industry, discussing two specific identities of the rapping scene, Iggy Azalea and Post Malone. My aim is to recognize in our contemporary music environment, hints of minstrelsy, but above all to investigate whether today's white appropriation of black culture is a modern version of blackface. In order to do so I am going to first retrace the main features of the hip hop movement, in its act of rebellion against white hegemony and racism; I would suggest that if in the previous century the roaring voices belonged to the audience of the minstrel shows, laughing and shouting at the ridiculous performance, now the hip hop movement was trying to outclass in volume and resonance those voices.

Interestingly, Kopano poses the question of "how can a society with such rigid and punitive policies entrenched to reinforce racial boundaries prioritizing the supremacy of whiteness and the inferiority of blackness establish its mass cultural forms on the culture of the group it so despises?" (2) and the answer lies in Cutler's argument that "[w]hiteness exists in a binary but unequal relationship to categories such as blackness" (211). Whites used black culture to state their identity and their position as superior; just as it had happened in the previous century with minstrelsy, the appropriation of rap would underline such dominant-dominated dichotomy that whites had imposed on the relationship with the Other, ever since. Naughty by Nature raps in his lyric of *The Chain Remains*

> Nowadays still we're captured, still hear wicked laughter while shackled/We're beaten and battered then cuffed after we're tackled/We're tugged while increasing the mugged and indecent/Hit one more time wit a black jack then dragged in the precinct [...] How many more times of this humiliation?/ How many more bouts do we have to lose while we fight for our rights in/This nation

I would suggest that the chains to which the artist is referring may literally recall those that bound his ancestors in 19th century, but may also be intended as a figurative representation of the constraints that the African American community has endured through mistreatments, lack

of rights, segregation and racism; hence, these chains may have mutated in their shape but were still present in the following century.

Hip Hop, "Liquid Amber"

> Here in the inner city there are no shopping malls, no manufacturing plants, no hotels- not anymore. Here the police drive through with their own windows closed and their doors locked. Self-respecting whites come here only if […] they take the wrong exit off the freeway. Here in this abandoned place, where unemployment may exceed 68%, virtually the only legitimate businesses are liquor stores, funeral parlors and junkyards. The hood as it has been called has increasingly been a dumping ground for drugs, AK-47s, and for people society has thrown away (*Manchild in the Promised Land* qtd. in Jones 64)

Segregation rates were still high in the 1970s and 80s, urban ghettos in North America were spatially marginalized areas from white American society, where joblessness and poverty represented the greatest factors of isolation, but also pushed towards a cultural and moral distancing from white supremacy. Geneva Smitherman describes these spaces of segregation as the "hotbed of unrest, dispossession and powerlessness" (*The Chain* 4) where the restlessness of the souls became one of the strongest stimuli for the creative expression that in the late 1970s blossomed into a new form of art, Hip Hop. As Kopano describes it "[t]he essence of black folk is marked by triumph and pain, and that pain has been channeled into artistic expression where 'we [blacks] transformed our suffering into an opportunity to express spirit" (1).

From the South Bronx, in New York City, hip hop started to embody the uneasiness that the black community was experiencing, becoming the binding element among African Americans who felt marginalized, exiled in the ghettos, where living conditions were discouraging, to say the least. The frustration of young African Americans living the injustice of unequal opportunities, the oppression of domination and the disappointment in a system that alienated them and treated them as outsiders, turned into artistic expressions that started to be developed in the ghetto. Afrika Bambaataa, considered to be one of the fathers of hip hop, believed this movement to be a way of providing a sense of identity and unity among black young generations, joining black expressions into one entity (Gosa 60) made of Rapping, also referred to as MCing, DJing or 'spinning', Breakdancing and Graffitiing, the four principal components of hip hop, which would channel disquiet through manifestations that closely reflected African American and Afro-Caribbean cultural aspects (Rose 2).

In the environment described in the previous chapters, the black male had become a threat to white society. His identity was built by his master since his very arrival to the New World and *renovated* over the years with newer and better fitting prejudice and stereotypes; starting from the idea of him as an inferior being together with his ridiculous reenactments in minstrelsy which depicted him as a dull savage. His aching voice transferred to music passed through blues, jazz, rock n' roll, and ultimately to rap, which became an additional response to the social and human mistreatment that blacks had endured ever since. In the early 70s rapping and hip hop in general became the vehicle of black resistance, hence as Smitherman maintains, "rap music is not only a Black expressive cultural phenomenon; it is, at the same time, a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against White America and its Eurocentric cultural dominance" (*The Chain* 7). Similarly Jones argues that the rapper himself is the embodiment of such resistance, he is the image of rebellion and rejection of white domination, "in favor of a sense of cultural integrity and distinctiveness" (58); he stands his ground through being the subversion to the master-slave and predator-victim dichotomy that whites had imposed upon the black-white relationship. The resistance fights back with the *weapons* created by the oppressor and creates new ones, for instance "having been insulted and formerly enslaved, he picks up the word 'Nigger' which was thrown at him like a stone, he draws himself erect and proudly proclaims himself a black man, face to face with white men" (Sartre 296). The intention of the artists was to weaken and destabilize white people's impositions by subverting domination and supremacy, by ways of authentic, raw and hard discourse, channeling emotions on rhythm with "strong, aggressive, highly fluent, powerful talk" (Smitherman *The Chain* 4). The rapper, by declaring himself spokesperson of the entire community, intends to reaffirm his and every other black community member's identity; he has become the tool of the revolt, in the artistic insurrection against his living condition. Baldwin argues that "[a]rtists are here to disturb the peace" (qtd. in *The Chain* 3) and the rapper's subversion takes Baldwin's argument literally, so black culture through hip hop was willing to disrupt that white peace established through centuries of domination (4), starting from a raw and unfiltered spoken testament, bothering white with some "black noise".

It is no coincidence that this artistic rebellion makes use of spoken words. The oral tradition, starting from slavery, had represented a great value to the black community; "[t]he persistence of the African-based oral tradition is such that blacks tend to place only limited value on the written word, whereas verbal skills expressed orally rank in high esteem" (*Talkin* 76). The African concept of "Nommo" (i.e. the word) is an entity that has a force of its own,

speech is much more valuable than written words (Smitherman *Word from the Hood* 208), thus by following this tradition, the rapper is considered to be a storyteller; he is able to convey through sharp and brilliant language; he *testifies* and speaks the truth, from the ghetto about the "burning problems of racism and economic oppression" (Rose 1). Through him, the rebellion against white hegemony was starting from the lowest layers of society. If we were to make a comparison with the obsolete idea of the white masters who feared that their lives might be taken by savage Nat, now the rappers barged in their houses *spittin fire* into their ears, shoving hard truths in the oppressor's face, claiming back both black agency and identity, negated for so long.

From expropriation to appropriation

In a previous chapter, I argued that the living conditions of isolation and disparity that the African American community was enduring in the late 20th century, had symbolically fractured black males' identity; in other words, 19th-century slavery, racism, the complex phenomenon of minstrelsy, the lack or total absence of rights, the violence and stereotypes had affected the African American community and more precisely black men's identity. In the process of picking up the pieces of his identity and re-creating his self, the rapper channeled his struggles and sorrows creating a new form of art, which reflected himself and his community through creativity, eloquence, orality, sharp and strong language. Hip hop as a whole artistic movement, and rap in particular, in its figurative escape from the ghetto, reached audiences throughout the world, gaining more and more consensus among youngsters of every race, unified by those feelings that the rappers were speaking of. While it is true that all black music genres have been appreciated by white audiences ever since, starting with 19th-century Blues and Jazz and then Soul in the 20th century, the appreciation is problematized by how "extensive white participation in black culture has also always involved white appropriation and attempts at ideological recuperation of black cultural resistance" (Rose 5). Precisely as happened in Alice Walker's story *Nineteen Fifty-five*, which covertly portrayed Elvis Presley's case of becoming the "King of Rock n' Roll" through buying Willie Mae Thornton's songs, similar events had occurred for other musical genres. In this regard, one might argue that artistic expressions cannot be treated like property, thus anyone might feel represented by the artistic essence of a movement and decide to adopt such a tendency and create more artistic material through personal interpretation. Accordingly,

Tricia Rose maintains that “[t]o suggest that rap is a black idiom that prioritizes black culture […] does not deny the pleasure and participation of others” (4).

The freedom of finding artistic expression is obviously unquestionable, but what is at stake here, in my opinion, is the divergence and the inequality of the interlocutors. By the inequality of interlocutors I mean to suggest what Lott had expressed by describing white minstrels and black slaves as “not equal buyers and sellers on the market” (62); this metaphor may be applied to African Americans and white Americans; their relationship is not one of equality, their power is not comparable. I am arguing that their rapport is not one of cultural exchange on equivalent terms, but rather one of domination, in which the hegemonic figure appropriates the subordinate’s cultural items, without crediting the source. The domination is remarked by such action and it reestablishes the relationship of white superiority and black subordination; in the exact moment the white appropriator uses and profits from rap, which was devised by the oppressed to subvert the domination, that tool loses its pristine significance, or worse it becomes polluted and contaminated, representing once again an infliction on the oppressed.

The appropriation of black artists’ production became a common practice for whites who had started the process by expropriating blacks of their identity during slavery, when their culture was shredded into ridiculous reenactment and lampooning. In the hip hop scene,“[t]he black artist is seen as a trope even as he strives with all his spiritual and mental resource to present himself as an artist” (Jones 57), similarly to what had occurred to his predecessors and ancestors, when they were perceived by whites as ridiculous and hilarious beings, who inspired the grotesque skits that were blackface performances. In its more up to date version, the rapper was perceived as an object rather than a human identity. In a repetition of history, whites see the rapper’s rebellion, which vehemently sprung from his violent poetry, to be the materialization of the old existing stereotype of Nat; just like a broken record from the past, the black artist becomes the screen onto which they could project fears and prejudices, just like his predecessors. “They [whites] do not hear a counternarrative, they hear the drum beats; they gaze at the spectacle and consume a cultural experience, as they would a trip to Africa, with a voyeuristic relish, but without empathy for the people who produced it” (Jones 59); Jones thus describes this subject-object relationship more as a spectacle, in which the rapper is received as an exhibition, just as the black man had been received as one in the previous century. In this return of the past, the rapper becomes the mirror of white people’s introspection; analogously to what the minstrel represented on stage by darkening his face and wearing his costume, the white man decided to step into the

rapper's shoes, by assuming that the rapper/rebel was a character that he could take over and exploit to assert his identity.

By comparing the minstrel and the white rapper, I would argue that this phenomenon of reception and processing of the black (rapper) identity could be seen as the evolution of the expropriation process that had happened in the 19th century with minstrelsy, which produced entertainment by mocking and ridiculing black people and, as argued in the first and second chapters, it simultaneously produced whites' identity. Consequently the late 20th and 21st century versions of minstrelsy got rid of the black cork and mutated to wearing the rapper's *clothes,* appropriating rap and African American English, to both define white identity and produce entertainment, which soon turned out to be extremely fruitful. In accordance with Lott's argument that minstrelsy had been used to affirm white identity in the 1800s, Leon Wynter similarly states that the appropriation of black cultural expressions is closely connected to the institution of "whiteness" and its need for expression (qtd. in Brown and Kopano 2), supporting my idea that more recent examples of white appropriation of black culture are ascribable to the need of self-assessment of white American identity. Yousman, in his paper addresses this exact assumption by maintaining that "[w]hite youth adoption of [b]lack cultural forms in the 21st century is also a performance, one that allows [w]hites to contain their fears and animosities towards [b]lacks through rituals not of ridicule, as in the previous eras, but of adoration" (369); he thus concludes that the phenomenon of whites' "Blackophilia" is to seen as a disguised "Blackophobia" (370-371).

In a sense, this hegemonic behavior of white America is maintained in Jones' argument, where he states that "[t]hrough the lens of the dominant perspective the black male is captive even at the apotheosis of his struggle to resist, to break free and find his way home" (59); that is to say, even in the fight to have his identity recognized, the rapper is still imprisoned in a white men's world, where he is both ruled by former masters and received as an object. Every scholar seems to gesture to one fundamental concept that I find to be condensed in Jared A. Ball's words, who describes black people as "mythological creations" of the "dominant ideology"; "Black people are not what is imaged in popular culture. The popular image is determined by the role they are meant to play in society (that of colonized people)" (75). In agreement with Lott's view that the identity theft of black slaves was directed towards a white self-definition using *others'* identity, as well as Jones' argument that sees the rapper as the representation of fears and stereotypes, every move was "committed to preserving a role for colonized people as dominated, controlled, and exploited subjects." (Brown and Kopano 3).

Taking blackface minstrelsy and white appropriation of rap and locating them face to face, I am trying to create a figurative mirror, comparing the two phenomena that, although relating to two separate centuries, reflect each other, with differences but with an underlying feeling that combines them in an indissoluble evolution of a white search for identity and need of affirmation. I argue that minstrelsy is to be considered as expropriation because its *loudness* in the representation of black men and women was invasive and did not meet any opposition by its victims, who had no possibility to contrast its advance; whereas in the more recent scenario, whites appropriated the artistic creation that blacks had produced; therefore, I no longer talk of expropriation but rather appropriation. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the act of taking cultural expressions from Others has mutated in the procedure, but it has kept the underlying meanings, namely that of building the identity of the appropriator by affirming superiority over the Other.

African American English "Flippin the script"

As Sartre had argued, African Americans picked up what had defined them for a long time and turned it around into lyrics and rhymes, using the language that had been fruit of an elaboration that had started when their slave-ancestors had arrived in the United States. African American English, considered for a long time an illiterate and ungrammatical form of English, became the vessel of the rebellion, which had started back in the day when the slaves needed to communicate without the slaveholder understanding their messages. In Marlene Nourbese Philip's words "the havoc that the African wreaked upon the English language is, in fact, the metaphorical equivalent that coming to the New World represented for the African" (qtd. in Potter 57); that havoc became the symbol of the resistance, drawing African Americans closer to one another and distancing whites all together.

In this section dedicated to language, I mean to provide an analysis of AAE, both in its importance in the birth of the art of rapping and in its linguistic features. In this first part I aim to highlight the importance of language and its value to African Americans by resorting to the authoritative words of Geneva Smitherman; in her works she describes such concepts and consequentially retraces the role of language in the development of rap and the importance of the rapper's ability to make use of AAE and to master practices like signifyin', playin' the dozens, and braggadocio, (which are more or less present in today's music). In the following sections I am going to provide a thorough linguistic analysis of African American English, relying on Lisa Green's work, for two major reasons: the first being the need to stress how AAE is rule-based, hence not founded on the illiteracy of the speakers; the second reason

is more related to the goal of this chapter, i.e. to analyze the appropriation of the genre of rap by white rappers/singers. In order to do so, I find it fundamental to preface African American English's syntax and phonological features, which are the most evident peculiarities, and to retrace them in the lyrics of white rappers, who not only appropriate the genre, but the language as well.

Just as race had been an issue with names, language too was the center of a long debate and name shifting, from more outdated Negro Dialect, Black Talk, Black Slang, Ebonics and finally to African American English or African American Vernacular English, which is also a source of rejection for its "vernacular" consideration as colloquial and casual. Smitherman refers to it as African American Language (AAL) and in describing it, she argues that it "was a communication system that functioned as both a resistance language and a linguistic bond of cultural and racial solidarity for those born under the last" (*The Chain* 8); in this regard, she maintains that the idea of resistance is scattered throughout the language, by associating new meanings to preexisting words or rejecting grammar rules. "Because EAL [European American English] stigmatizes the use of double negatives, AAL goes one better and uses multiple negation […]. Because 'nigger' is a racialized epithet in EAL, the AAL embrace its usage, encoding a variety of unique Black meanings" (8). This rejection of grammar rules by African American English needs expanding and better understanding, it is in fact important to underline that AAE is not based on disorder or rooted in ungrammaticality; studies conducted on the language have proved this misconception to be wrong. Green's work, cited extensively below, is a proof of this; through her book *African American English,* she provides the reader with a profound and considerate phonological, morphological and syntactic analysis of the language, through which she firmly sustains that AAE is rule based and systemic in its peculiarities. She obviously clarifies that AAE is not a monolithic entity, regional differences occur, thus "although speakers of AAE in Louisiana and Texas use very similar syntactic patterns, their vowel sounds may differ" (1) and other states as well.

Another important aspect of African American English is related to its use in strategically conveying meanings and messages, through rhetorical figures and distinctive speech events, which are also the stem of rap music. Green identifies two commonly used strategies in rap, braggadocio and signification. Smitherman uses an old saying of the oral tradition to underline the importance of this practice; "Signification is the nigga's occupation" (*Word from the Mother* 70), which she defines as "a style of verbal play that focuses humorous statements of double meaning on an individual, an event, a situation, or even a

government" (69). Thus it is a way of addressing important topics through the playfulness and creativity of African American English. Signifyin' differs from "playin' the dozens" which is more offensive because it targets the ancestors of the addressee, in most cases the mother, and it is "blunt, raw, in-yo-face" while signification is usually "more subtle, indirect […] it also often carries a serious social message" (76). Braggadocio style is a self-celebration of the rapper who brags about his possessions, his verbal skills and his strength (Green 156), and very frequently it celebrates his sexual prowess and lovemaking skills (*The Chain* 13). Verbal dexterity is an overall peculiarity of the rapper, and of African American English overall; ever since enslavement AAE speakers have rearranged meanings and modified them to their liking by changing English semantic structures; Smitherman calls this practice "flippin the script", which "linguist Grace Holt called 'semantic inversion', in which the speaker reverses the meanings of words and lexicon or changes it (*The Chain* 17).

As mentioned earlier, language in its every form is considered of great value in African American culture; many of its nuances are to be ascribed to the Traditional Black Church, which African American music has widely tapped into. Its styles of Call-Response, which is the "back-and-forth exchange between the preacher and the congregation during the sermon" or *shoutin,* referring to verbalized cries of ecstasy, shouts of joy, or *gittin the spirit*, meaning "evidencing intense emotional excitement and feelings of happiness by shouting, spontaneous dancing, clapping or waving the hands during musical performances at concerts, clubs, cabarets, and other places of entertainment" (Smitherman *Word from the Hood* 208-209). These, among other verbal and gestural communications, were typical of both the sacred and profane environment of the African American community, which did not have a deep separation of the two in vocabulary and gesturality, but viewed both involved in life as a whole. As a result African American English is the reflection of such a relationship with language; it is a living entity that transforms itself along with the user who *plays* with words and new meanings, expressing creativity and lively personality through it.

AAE in its uniqueness and in its apparent ungrammaticality is governed by patterns of grammar that have been recognized and presented by many scholars, in its phonology, morphology and syntax along with its distinctive lexicon. Lisa Green, in her profound analysis of African American English, provides a great insight into all of its aspects, which I am going to summarize in order to provide some basic knowledge that will be useful in analyzing excerpts of rap songs further on in this chapter. She highlights how some of the characteristics ascribed to AAE are similar to features of other varieties of English, like those spoken in the South of the United States "[b]ut in making these comparisons, it is important to

move beyond linguistic superficial similarities between AAE and other varieties to testing whether elements such as the marker *dən* and *be* exhibit the same patterns in AAE and these other varieties" (Green 35). The following linguistic overview is going to be essential in analyzing the extensive use that white rappers make of African American English, which is an additional element that they appropriate.

- **Phonological features**

1. Final consonant sounds

   Green highlights a systemic reduction of final consonants that she claims has two explanations. The first reason is relatable to a systemic phonological process that reduces final sounds in certain environments, this process is called consonant cluster reduction; the second explanation ascribes this phonological feature to be caused by a descendance from African languages, which do not have final consonant clusters (107). Hence, words such as "test", "desk" and "hand" are articulated *tes, des, han.* Green here obviously maintains that words cannot be considered in isolation, they need to be studied in different environments, where they actually occur; by doing so she argues that the final sounds are reduced following a systemic process based on the voicing of the consonant that make the final cluster. If the final consonants in a word have the same voicing they are going to be reduced (in the words *fast*, *s* and *t* are both voiceless, hence we will have *fas*); on the contrary if the final consonants in a word have different voicing, they will both be articulated (in the word *jump*, *m* is voiced, *p* is voiceless, thus both will be produced in *jump*). When suffixes that start with a vowel are added to the word, the final consonants are fully produced; for example the word *expect* would be pronounced *expec* while *expectable* is fully articulated; instead, if a consonant initial suffix is added, the final cluster is reduced, as for the word *soft* which would be articulated *sof* while *softness* is pronounced *sofness.* There are exceptions with suffixes like -er and -ing, for example *colder* would be articulated *coler, spending* would be *spening,* even if the suffix is vowel initial. Green also underlines that when the suffix *-ing* is placed after the word *act,* the cluster may be retained when the sentence refers to playing a role, while it may be reduced when referring to behavior as in "Stop acking like that" (107 -113). Another feature that effects final consonant sounds is sonority; using the sonority scale, Green explains that if the consonants making the cluster are too close in sonority they are reduced, while if there is no conflict in sonority they are not reduced (115). These systematic processes

of reduction are not consistent in auxiliaries such as *ain't* or *don't,* where the *nt* sounds are usually skipped because of their nature of function words; even initial sounds may be omitted as in "I 'on know" for "I don't know" (115).

On the basis of the final consonant reduction described, Green identifies that these phonological results also modify the production of plurals, thus words that end with clusters like *st, sp,* or *sk* and reduced to *s* will form plurals by adding -*es, contests* results *conteses* (114).

2. Devoicing

   Consonants *b, d* and *g* are devoiced in final position, thus being articulated as *p, t* or *k,* for example *cab* will be pronounced *cap.*

3. *Th* sound

   Sound *th* is usually articulated as *t/d* or *f/v* based on the environment in which it occurs and based on systemic patterns. Green starts by making a clarification on the production of sound *th* in American English, which has two ways of articulation, one is voiceless θ, and the other one is voice ð; the substitution is rule based, hence voiceless *t* and *f* will be used in environments where θ is used in American English, as in *baf* for *bath*, or *dat* for *that*; accordingly *d* and *v* substitute American English ð, hence *diz* for *these* (117-119)

4. Vocalization of *r* and *l*

   Consonants *r* and *l* are not always pronounced as liquids when in postvocalic position, in the word *bear* the final *r* is transformed into a schwa [*bæə*], or in *court* it is pronounced [*kot*], henca becoming an unstressed vowel sound, as schwa ə or *uh* sound; Green also states that they might not be pronounced at all as in the word *tore* produced [*to*] (120).

Green adds some other phonological features, such as the production of -*in* instead of the suffix -*ing*, as in *walkin, talkin;* the pronunciation of *str* in initial position as *skr*, like *skreet* for *street* which has not been researches extensively, just like the use of diphthong [oɪ] in environments where *oa* should occur, *road* is articulated *roɪd* (121-123).

- **Syntax**

1. Auxiliaries

   There are multiple characteristics that Green underlines in regard to auxiliaries, starting with the usage of a single auxiliary verb form used for both singular and plural subjects thus "don't run/eat" is used for 1st,2nd, and 3rd persons both singular and plural

(38). The auxiliary or copula be which should be used before -ing form verbs, or before adjectives, nouns and others, "does not obligatorily occur on the surface in all environments" (38); it does occur with first and third person singular pronouns (as in *I'm* and *it's*); it also appears in the past tense in the form *was* indistinctively of the subject number.

Green also observes that simple past and present perfect forms are not distinct, hence the simple past form is used to express both; the difference in auxiliary is evidenced only in the emphatic affirmation forms (such as "he DID ate" or "He HAVE ate"). The negation is expressed through *ain't* which does not have "past or non-past forms" (39), it may occur in "he ain't ate" or in "he ain't ate" but also "he ain't eat"). *Had* is also used as an auxiliary in past forms, while for the future tense, the modal verb *will* is used together with *gonna* and *gon',* with the exception of the first person singular that uses *I'ma.*

The auxiliaries show a set of properties:

a) In some instances, they express the tense, (for example in "He had/hadn't ate" the auxiliary expresses past perfect tense, while the main verb in simple past form);
b) They may have a contracted form as in "It's the one I like" , reduced as in "You should'a made you mind up before I called you" or zero form as in "They Ø walking too fast" (40);
c) They may have a contracted negation (*n't*) attached, such as ain't, didn't, won't;
d) Auxiliaries do not occur in questions obligatorily; they are replaced through a special intonation, as in "Bob here?" or "Bob gon' leave?", but modals and past tense auxiliary or copula cannot be omitted in questions, thus "Bruce was running?" (42)

Overall auxiliaries in AAE have similar functioning to American English, with some slight dissimilarities in present perfect and in cases in which the auxiliary does not appear; (44)

2. Aspectual Markers: be, BIN, dən

   Green explains that aspectual markers are similar to auxiliaries, but are used in specific environments and unlike tense which situates the action in time, aspect "refers

to duration, completions or habitual occurrence" (45); they are followed by verb in -ing or -ed form and no distinction is made for person or number.

a) Aspectual *be* is used to express habitual or repetitive occurrence of the action, and unlike auxiliaries it cannot be omitted; "Bruce Ø running" and "Bruce *be* running" have two different meanings, in the first example Bruce is running at the moment, in the second Bruce runs habitually; (47) aspectual be is never inflected, thus it will never occur as *is* or *are*; it precedes the verb in -ing form or it can precede other grammatical elements such as prepositional phrases "I be in my office by 7.30" or adjectives "Your phone bill be high, don't it" (48-49), or adverbs, nouns or dən;

b) Remote past BIN is used to situate the beginning of an activity in the remote past and that this state continues at the moment of utterance (54-55); it is used to express that the action is taking longer than normal; it is different in pronunciation from *been* and *bin,* and has a different meaning (55). There are three types of BIN highlighted by Green, STAT, which refers to the state that started in the past and continues); HAB is used to express an habitual activity that started in the past and continues) and COMP in which the activity has ended a long time ago "I could'a BIN went back to work" meaning 'I could have gone back to work a long time ago' (58).

c) Dən is used to express that an event has ended, used for expressing having changed, having finished something, having done everything (59); it precedes a verb in -ed form, it not stressed during pronunciation; "I told him you dən changed"; it may be used in some contexts with expressions of state that does not have an endpoint (62).

3. Preverbal Markers: *finna, steady, come*

a) *Finna* indicate the event is about to happen in the immediate future and it is followed by the verb in its bare form, with no tense and no agreement marking (71); the auxiliary be precedes the marker in some sentences while it does not in others, for example "I'm finna leave" and "Y'all finna eat?" (70); it can also be used after aspectual be as in "They be finna go to bed when I call there" (71)

b) *Steady* is used to express that an action is carried out consistently and intensely, which is why it does not precede verbs such as have, know, and own; it is followed by the verb in the -ing form (71). It can be used without the

auxiliary be as in “They want to do they own thing, and you steady talking to them” or with it, or even with the habitual be as in “Them students be steady trying to make a buck” (72)

c) *Come* is one of those lexical items in AAE that is used to express attitude, in this case a negative feeling of resentment described by the speaker, it is followed by a verb in the -ing form, as in “You the one come telling me it’s hot”, or with verbs like walking or acting (73-74).

4. Negation

AAE accept the coexistence in a single sentence of multiple negators, it may be expressed through the auxiliary as in *don’t* or on indefinite nouns as in *anybody, anything, nobody, nothing.* AAE thus admits utterances like “Bruce don’t want no teacher tellin him nothing about no book” (77), this sentence counts four negators (don’t, no, nothing and no), thus Green explains that there is no limit for the number of negators that can be used and most importantly double negations do not make a positive (as American English assumes).

Negative inversions are another peculiarity of AAE, in which two initial elements are marked as negative as in “Don’t no game last all night” (78) in which the negative auxiliary *don’t* is followed by a negative noun phrase *no game*; or in existential sentences like “Ain’t nothing you can do” (78).

5. Existential *it* and *dey*

It and dey are used to express that something exists, to indicate “There is some coffee in the kitchen” Green provides several examples in AAE, such as “It got some coffee in the kitchen” or “Dey some coffee in the kitchen” and explains that “it’s” can be followed by *got* or *have*, “dey” can be followed by a noun phrase or *got* or *have*. Aspectual be can also be used as in “It be too many cars in that parking lot” (80)

6. Questions

Interrogative sentences can be conveyed through intonation, but they might be formulated with or without using auxiliaries as in “You know her?” (84). *Wh*-questions can be formed in different ways: the wh-word is the object of the main verb, the auxiliary can either follow the subject as in “What they was doing?” or not be used at all as in “Why you looking like that?” (85-86); indirect questions, hence questions that are introduced by *wonder* or *ask* for example, are formed by inverting the auxiliary just as in a direct question, as in “It’s gonna ask you do you wanna make a transfer” (87-88).

7. Relative Clauses

   These clauses follow the noun and they modify or specify something about it, they are usually introduced by *that, who* as in "That's the person who gave me the ticket", but it is also possible to find "zero relative pronoun" which are introduced by Ø pronoun, as in "You the one Ø be telling me" (89-90)

8. Preterite *had*

   Had + verb -ed is used in certain cases to express simple past, rather than an action occurred in the "past before the past", so it is possible to find "I had went to the city last night and the only Affirm they had was super, I didn't get it" (91).

Morphosyntactic features are also very important in AAE; Green highlights three major points on which she focuses, which are past morphology, verbal -*s* and genitive marking. To talk about the past, in the majority of cases, AAE relies on the use of the past simple forms, so we may find sentences like "I ate yesterday" and "I had ate a snack by the time they delivered the pizza " (95), Green argues that some verbs have no morphological distinction between past and past participle, but she maintains that verbs like *go* and *see* do have a this distinction which is reflected in use: *gone* occurs for adjectival (or descriptive) use, hence " I could'a BIN went back" meaning "I could have gone back a long time ago" (96), while *went* occurs in verbal uses as in "Aw, he BIN gone" meaning "Aw, he's been gone for a long time" (96). Verbal -s is neutralized, thus one form is used for both plural and singular contexts (99) hence we find "When he come down here, I be dən talked to him"; nevertheless verbal -s may be used in other context, for example as a marker for narrative present, or to convey habitual meaning, as in "When I think about Palm Sunday, I gets excited" or "The devil haves us in a state of sin" (100-101)

Lastly, genitive marking -s is one of the elements that AAE gets rid of, by not expressing it, thus we may find "…we be hanging out at mama house" (102).

With this linguistic analysis of AAE and the general overview on the importance on spoken words for the African American community, I mean to underline how African American English had a fundamental role in the development of practices such as braggadocio or signifyin', or rappin', all of which involve a creative process that the speaker puts in the production of discourse. In the next section I intend to describe how the genre of rap entered the music industry, and how the values of rapping, intended both as artistic expression of the black community and also as a sort of denunciation of or testimony to their struggles and the difficult realities that got spoilt in the process.

Rap and the Music Industry

The *landfall* of rap on the international music scene was marked in 1979 with the release of *Rapper's Delight,* by The Sugarhill Gang that climbed the music charts and "[o]ver the next five years rap music was 'discovered' by the music industry, the print media, the fashion industry, and the film industry, each of which hurried to cash in on what was assumed to be a passing fad" (Rose 3); these industries' interest created a vortex that quickly spiraled into a multi-billion machine, when producers and musicians started to be aware of the figurative oil well that had been uncovered, a worldwide movement of advertising and producers labels directed their interest onto the genre. Profitability spread like wild fire among those involved in the production of music, spoiling the core fundaments of the hip hop movement. For instance, the pivotal principle identified by Afrika Bambaataa as "knowledge", referring with this term to Gosa defines in M. Williams as the "Afro-diasporic mix of spiritual and political consciousness designed to empower members of oppressed groups" (57) would be swept aside. Something similar happened to the hip hop mantra of *keepin it real* (Rickford and Rickford 23), which refers to the idea that music should represent genuine and authentic feelings and life experiences of the rapper, for the audience to feel connected and relate to the lyrics, and "not to 'front' or pretend to be something they are not" (Cutler 212) . Both these key concepts got spoilt and compromised in the name of the money gods; to clarify my point I may take Kopano's example of Snoop Dogg wearing clothes with a Tommy Hilfiger logo on a tv show in 1994 and "sales for the company jumped $93 million the following year" (11).

Hence the popularity that the genre had achieved became both a victory for creators who used it as a means of expression, and simultaneously an extremely profitable process for everyone involved. Scholars refer to the years of 1992 and 1993 as the "'neo-liberal turn' in hip hop: the corporate consolidation of independent music labels, the silencing of Black Nationalist politics, and the commodification of human suffering as one of America's most profitable global exports" (Gosa 56). I would associate this 'commodification of human sufferings' with the concept that Lott formulates in defining the entertaining depiction of slaves' deaths and separation in minstrel songs as "morbid opportunism" (Lott 195).

In its commercialization, the feelings that had once sparked the birth of hip hop and rap diminished their strength. On this regard, Dj Kool Herc, one of the fathers of hip hop, addressed such change of direction in the essence of hip hop in the introduction of Jeff Chang's work, with this words:

> To me, hip-hop says, "Come as you are." We are a family. It ain't about security. It ain't about bling-bling. It ain't about how much your gun can shoot. It ain't about $200 sneakers. It is not about me being better than you or you being better than me. It's about you and me, connecting one to one. That's why it has universal appeal. It has given young people a way to understand their world, whether they are from the suburbs or the city or wherever […]. But too often, the ones that get the most recognition are those emphasizing the negative. And I think a lot of people are scared to speak on issues. "Keeping it real" has become just another fad word. It sounds cute. But it has been pimped and perverted. It ain't about keeping it real. It's got to be about keeping it right. For example, rappers want to be so "bling-bling." Are you really living a luxurious life? Don't you have other issues? What things touch you? That's what we'd like to hear rappers speak about. Start a dialogue with people. Talk about things going on in the neighborhood (xii).

Those themes that moved DJ Kool Herc's soul, just like the other leading figures of hip hop, were not as important and fundamental to those involved in the music industry, who instead had other objectives. Rapper Too Short in an interview with HipHopDX in 2012, talked about how his music labels were steering him towards specific topics to deal with in his albums in the 90s. "I'm rappin' this pimp image but I'm also – In all of my early albums with Jive [Records], they all had lots of songs that weren't about sex, that didn't have curse words in 'em, and I would pick subjects like crack cocaine, poverty and police harassment and rap about it", yet these did not seem to be as *interesting* to his label as the more explicit ones:

> I was actually being pushed into a direction where I would talk to people at Jive [Records], I would go talk to the President, Barry Weiss, and he was like – I always wanted to do these [side] projects like the E-40 duet album, which was one they never would let me do. Jive would never let me and E-40 do an album together. They kept making excuses and so it never got done. I also wanted to do an album that was filled with songs like "The Ghetto," "Life Is…Too Short," "Money In The Ghetto," "I Want To Be Free." I wanted to do a whole album of positive Too Short songs, just to keep that balance. I had made a verbal deal with Barry Weiss, where he was like, "Right now would be the perfect time, you should do like the raunchiest Too Short album ever – the album cover, the songs, just do a dirty fuckin' Too Short album." This is the

> executive running the company advising me to put out an entire album of just cursing and sex (hiphopdx.com).

Hence, labels and producers had sensed the opportunity in making music that contained cursing, sexually allusive and misogynistic content combined with flaunting wealth by talking of money, jewelry, expensive clothes and cars. Here I mean to argue that labels and producers were, in a sense, contributing to the creation of a negative depiction of rap, and consequentially the black artists who represented it.

In explaining these choices and the management of music production, Kopano uses the metaphor of colonialism to explain how high-ups would push for more explicit themes to dominate in rap rather than more socially active songs; he compares big music labels to the master colonizer and the African American artist to the colonized; by doing so he argues that the exploitation of *material* produced by the colony was not the greatest reward, but "[c]ontrolling the messages and the values emanating from the cultural creations [would be] the supreme recompense for the colonial master" (3). In a frightful similarity to Lott's reconstruction of the white masters' intentions of molding the black slaves into dull and savage creatures, Kopano uses Armah's thoughts

> To reduce them to beasts the predators starved their minds. The predators lowered in number an in seriousness the matters that could cause these hangers-on to think, till in the end there was nothing at all they cared to exercise their minds on. To reduce them to things the predators fed their bodies, indulging their crassest physical wants promptly, overflowingly (qtd. in Brown and Kopano 4).

Black characters who had once been the center of attention on minstrelsy stages were now being distorted once again for a more modern objective, and if minstrelsy's Other had been the projection of the whites' inner self division (Lott 153) in the 19th century, now these same bodies were the subjects of a new projection. Douglass's *North Star* had described the blackened minstrels of the first half of the 1800s as the "filthy scum of white society" (qtd. in Lott 15); in the late 20th century black entertainers, creators, hip hopers, performers were being received and transformed into new expressions of whites' conceptions and stereotypes. Whites would profit on the message distortion, so, as in the words of rapper Too Short, he was being *pushed* to create the "raunchiest" material ever, I would compare the rapper to the obsolete stereotype of Nat; he would be encouraged to search in his recondite identity for the most vulgar, obscene but also the most shallow themes, like materiality and the ephemeral, which needed to be displayed and showed to the world, to keep on nurturing the stereotype of

the savage sexual and dull beings. If minstrelsy had white men caricature black slaves through disguise, leading the black hip hopper to embody the new minstrel was a sharp move; what I mean to suggest is that the industry promoted and sustained black rappers who would fit into the image that they needed to represent, hence the socio-political motives that African American rappers wanted to convey in their production did not fit into the masters' plan. The Harvard Report, commissioned by the president of Columbia Records to examine and organize beneficial market routes, had suggested a figurative colonialization of black music by having smaller independent labels sign "with major company conglomerates creating companies that were blackfaces music labels […] Images of crass materialism, gross objectification and disrespect of women, and alcohol and drug abuse consumption were the dominant themes of these labels" (Brown and Kopano 9-10).

Are these the new minstrels?

In order to concretely investigate the scenario that I have been outlining so far, in this section I intend to focus my attention on two cases specifically, Post Malone and Iggy Azalea. I focus on their use of rap and African American English, because I find that both aspects deserve attention and investigation, considering the underlying meanings of the genre as a form of resistance of the black community and its evolution being rooted in the peculiarities of AAE. My choice of concentrating on these two white artists has been influenced by my personal fruition of music, hence while casually listening to their music I would notice their extensive use of AAE and their contents, which I decided to investigate through this research.

Iggy Azalea

The first music figure I am analyzing in this section is Amethyst Amelia Kelly, known in the music industry as Iggy Azalea; the reason why I have chosen her over many other white female rappers lies in the approach she has to the production of her music and the construction of her persona through it. I mean to highlight how the majority of the content in her lyrics is directed to the celebration of her wealth, success, beauty and sexual appeal. This braggadocio is typical for African American female rappers, who use such counternarrative to subvert ideals of beauty and reassess their sexual appeal and desirability (Eberhardt and Freeman 319); Iggy's appropriation is problematized by her whiteness. I mean to argue that Iggy's constant praise of herself, both in her physical appearance and success, is a redundant reminder of her status as dominant white woman. Her appropriation of African American

English in her lyrics represents an additional form of misuse or even abuse towards the African American community.

The Australian rapper was born in 1990 in a small town called Mullumbimby; at the age of 16 she decided to move from the small rural place where she was living with her family and go to Miami, where she wanted to succeed as a rapper. She was soon signed by the African American record producer Clifford Joseph Harris Jr. also known as T.I., who helped her reach success. In her first popular songs she retraces the struggles she faced in moving to the United States to follow her dream of becoming a rapper, when she would have more than a job to support herself; she won many awards, as in 2015 when she won both People's Choice Awards Best Rap Artist and Favorite Rap/Hip hop Album.

In an interview with Hardknock.tv in 2013 she talks about how she came into contact with hip hop by chance during her teenage years, and how she would obsess over the lyrics of the songs, which eventually lead her to write her own rhymes. Although this interview relates to the early stages of her career, there are already some hints at her attitude towards the critiques that would become very prominent in her musical production. The interview, which is split into segments and available on Youtube.com, touches a number of topics and the interviewer eventually introduces the topic of black culture in the conversation: "We talked to Scarface [African American rapper] last week, one of the things he thought is that hip hop is becoming white, […] you know hip hop [is] black originated and then it needs to stay a certain way or is there room for other races or other people to come in..?". Iggy appears to be bothered by the question and slightly rolls her eyes at the words "black originated", but her answer is "I can tell you there is [room for other races] 'cause I only make money one way, and that's rappin".

She states that culture cannot be associated with a color and that the belief that "old white men" are controlling the music production is unfounded because

> it's not old white men making the content and it's now white old men buying the content either […] I think what shapes the culture is who's consuming it, and that's people of all different colors and that's a great thing. I think that, like.. this idea that rap should be black, or rap should be this or that is worrying to me, because it's like why should something…it's like… almost like segregation. Why would you want to segregate cultures and races and things like this, isn't it where conflict has always come from in the world? Shit like that.. If we have something in music that is unifying, that other cultures are drawn to and people of different colors like myself that want to be a part of it, then it should be a positive thing,

> because it brings understanding and a closeness, and makes it… just helps make it evident that it's all fucking ridiculous anyway..

While I may agree with her view of not making culture one color, I find it necessary to raise the point that rap, as a black cultural product, is the artistic expression born out of a painful and long-lasting social condition that she is overlooking. When she asks "Why would you want to segregate cultures and races?" she is demonstrating her unobservant attitude towards the genre, because rap and hip hop were born out of segregated neighborhoods, created from the margins to give a voice to the oppressed. Without showing any awareness in addressing this topic, she seems to be exploiting and profiting from rap; to *minimalize* the deep discrepancy between her and African Americans is to reaffirm once again her freedom of agency, which has been one of the main struggles that the black community has had.

In the interview she mocks those who argue that record labels create *characters* or identities for the music industry; instead she argues that success and popularity of the artist is in the audience's hands. She states that "Things seem so impossible and so we create… reasons in our mind of why we could never do that […] it's kind of like we almost make excuses in our mind of why we aren't great, and there's no excuse, if you're great, you're great". Her attitude regarding her approach to hip hop, and rap more specifically, has been seen as controversial for this specific reason, and that is her lack of awareness of what she is appropriating without giving enough credit; her identity as a performer is a persona in my opinion, a performance of blackness that has nothing to do with her true self, and her way of not asserting this matter is even more problematic. Eberhardt and Freeman address her attitude towards hip hop by describing it as one of entitlement, "she views her success as indicative of hip-hop's movement away from strong ties to African American culture and communities" (317); one may not agree with such an argument, but what is consistent in her career and music production is the conflict of her employment of this black originated music genre, without honoring its roots. In the dedicated paper the two authors analyze her identity *construction* by investigating her use of African American English in her music, which is not at all consistent in her interviews, where she speaks in a subtle mix of Australian and American accent, both replaced by AAE when she raps. The two authors define this sort of usage as "linguistic minstrelsy" by describing it as a performance of a racially-linked language, which represents her white hegemony (Eberhardt and Freeman 305).

Her international debut song *Work* (2014) is a narrative of her commitment to becoming a rapper, of her hard work as a young teenager who had just moved to the United States to chase her dream of becoming a famous artist; in a sequence of the music video, in which all her backup dancers are African American women, she is lap dancing on a man, from whom she secretly takes the car keys and steals the car. Her lyrics already present a number of peculiarities that belong to AAE, as the remote past BIN in the first and second verse of the stanza quoted below and the overall pronunciation of the lyrics.

I been up all night, tryna get dat rich
I been work, work, work, work
Workin' on my shit
Milked da whole game twice
Gotta get it how I live
I been work, work, work, work
Workin' on my shit
Now get this work

Although she is trying to legitimize her success by describing her hard work to achieve her goal of becoming a famous rapper, the overall impression that I have had in reading the lyrics and watching the music video of the song, gestures more towards a longing for wealth and self-praise, rather than an artistic expression of her past struggles. For instance, further on in the songs she raps: “So, I went harder, studied the Carters ‘til a deal was offered”; I would suggest that ‘the Carters’ refers to Jay Z and Beyoncé, one of the most famous and wealthiest couple in the music industry; the fact that she has ‘studied’ them seems to me to reveal a specific interest in popularity and monetary gain rather than in artistic growth.

In 2014 the song *Fancy* was released in which her first line is “First thing first, I’m da realest”, touching directly into the topic of authenticity and hip hop’s *keepin’ it real*, which has been the target of wide critique, maintaining the concept that she is playing at being black by sounding African American. Analyzing her pronunciation of the following stanza it is very clear that she emphasizes a phonology that is not properly Australian, hence the majority of the sound *th*, as in the demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that*, are articulated as *dis* and *dat;* she makes use of double negatives, as in “Can’t stand no haters” or “I can’t shop in no department”, and of remote past BIN several times in her songs, as in the last verse of the following stanza “ I been working…”.

I said baby, I do dis, I thought dat you knew dis
Can't stand no haters, and honest, the truth is
dat my flow retarded, each beat dear, departed
Swagger on stupid, I can't shop in no department
And get my money on time, if they got money, decline
And swear I meant dat der' so much dat I give dat line a rewind
Said I get my money on time, if they got money, decline
I just can't worry 'bout no haters, gotta stay on my grind
Now tell me, who dat, who dat? dat do dat, do dat?
Put dat paper over all, I thought you knew dat, knew dat
I be da I-G-G-Y, put my name in bold
I been working, I'm up in here with some change to throw

The articulation of the lyrics of this song is just one example of the linguistic *imitation* she is perpetuating; she resorts to AAE in order to purposefully shape her character, again supporting the idea that she is enacting a form of linguistic blackface.

In *Clap Back* (2019), she addresses the allegations that have been moved against her of *acting black*; she does not provide any concrete answers or contradictions to such accusation, on the contrary she uses African American English in an even more upfront manner. Copula *be* absence, habitual be, preverbal marker *finna* and phonology overall are displayed all throughout the song.

'Cause I talk like dis and my ass fat
They be saying Iggy tryna act black
Hatin' broke hoes get laughed at
All they do is cap like snapbacks
He hit me up, he said he having flashbacks
You're my ex for a reason, I don't backtrack
Gimme 50 feet bitch, back, back
I got time today, I'm finna clap back

While impudence may be considered a common feature of rappers, I would argue that in this case it is underlining, once again, her self-granted privilege in using AAE. She seems to create an image of herself as a strong and inconsiderate woman, who disregards the value that AAE and rap have, although she is profiting from it. For instance, she affirms her sexual appeal and beauty in her music, which is very common in African American female rappers' songs in an attempt to subvert the old role of the *wench* characters and release themselves of

the widespread idea that black women are unattractive. White beauty is already well established as a canon and to reaffirm it once again would be just redundant; on the same note, Carolyn Corrado argues that white female rappers have been imitating "stereotypically black feminine identified traits (for example, being short tempered, quick to engage in physical altercations with other girls, aggressively yelling in another girl's face, and using particular hand gestures in these enactments)" (qtd. in Williams 52), for fitting into the character of the rapper. In this sense, Iggy is also a subtle example of blackfishing, which I am going to investigate in the next chapter, which is a widespread desire to acquire stereotypical African American female body features. The ostentatious celebration of her beauty in her music and playing at being a tough girl, nurture my conviction that she has been crafting her persona, like a stage character, rather than representing who she truly is. In a sense she is taking advantage of an instrument she does not need, because her status as attractive white woman is already defined and recognized. She plays at being black because she finds it advantageous to her musical career, but her minstrelsy is "one with particularly deleterious effects" (Eberhardt and Freeman 321).

Post Malone

The other white rapper that I want to investigate is Post Malone, whose real name is Austin Richard Post. Malone differs from the image that Iggy Azalea has created of herself as an artist. As a result while he may struggle with allegations of being an appropriator or a culture vulture, it seems to me that he is received by the audience in a different way; in other words I find him to be more accepted in the rapping scene. This may be the result of several variables and I have tried to analyze them.

Post Malone was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1995, but he lived most of his life in Grapevine, Texas with his family. He is a self-taught guitar player and in an interview with rapper Snoop Dogg he says it was his father who introduced him to music, not just to a specific genre but he would play anything for him, from Metallica, Snoop Dogg, Megadeth, NWA, Ice Cube, etc; that's when the interviewer asks if the mash of all these kinds of music made him who he is today and Post answers:

> Well, I feel like, you know, all culminated togede' to make wha' I am righ' now, but you know I started off makin' music you know I was in a hardcore band, you know, like crazy heavy stuff and then I mov'd on to like, softer rock and then.. by dat time I was already producing my own beats and stuff and rappin' and all dat

stuff and 'en I just... brought all dat over to you know like the hip-hop element of everything.

I find his genuine interest in music, both as a consumer and as a producer, to be one of the reasons why he is so appreciated by the audience and less criticized than other white rappers. As a matter of fact*, The New York Times* describes him as "a rock singer whose cadences come from hip-hop, a pop songwriter who marries brightness with sleaze. He's every genre — it's all in him" (www.nytimes.com)

Besides some early accusation of appropriating black culture because of his appearance, which draws on African American aesthetics, contrary to his colleague Iggy Azalea, he was later praised and appreciated by both audience and critics.

In his music he mainly sticks to rap, although he does explore other genres at times, which is why he is considered an eclectic artist, song writer, and musician who raps his emotions out. I would assume that his positive reception as an artist and as a rapper relies on his visceral connection to music, which does actually represent his authentic identity. In this sense it is possible to consider his way of expressing himself through music authentic, rather than a *performance* of a character; as already discussed, this authenticity is fundamental in the hip hop environment, where *keepin' in it real* plays a major role in the perception that others have of the rapper. He has been awarded and celebrated since his very first hit *White Iverson* in 2015, then used in his first album *Stoney* in 2016 followed by *Beerbongs & Bentleys* in 2018 and *Hollywood's Bleeding* in 2019. Most songs seem to be striving to legitimize his success, by describing hard work and patience, as in *No Option* (2016)

Everything that I worked for
Waited so long to get on
The Caddy just sits on the chrome
I swang through on dubs on the four
Baby wanna get in this S-Class
Little mama, she just wanna go fast

Or in *I'm Gonna Be* (2019), in which he denies having had luck for obtaining his success,

They tryna tell me that it's luck
You probably think I made it up
I got it all, it ain't enough
But I'm still gonna run it up, so

Something that I have found to be common in both Post Malone's and Iggy's lyrics is the need to stress how deserving they are, due to the effort and hard work they put into their job; my hypothesis is that, as white rappers, they are trying to convince the audience that they deserve the success, although they may be seen as *white outsiders.* On a different note, something that I notice to be different from Iggy Azalea is in his pronunciation; reading the lyrics and listening to his performances it is noticeable that his articulation of the words, which does resemble AAE, seems to be effortless and natural, as opposed to Iggy Azalea's, who seems to emphasize a production of African American sounding words. For instance, in the song *Congratulations,* Post Malone, featuring rapper Quavo, celebrates his success, which through patience and hard work has rewarded him with money and fame, everything he has dreamed of. In the text there numerous instances of AAE syntax, starting from the second verse "Said shit done changed" where *dən* is followed by the verb in its -ed form, respecting the systemic production of the past in AAE to express an action that has ended**;** double negations "I wouldn't be nothing", "They ain't never had …", absence of accordance in number in subject/verb "They was never friendly", habitual be "I be itching like an addict".

My momma called, seen you on TV, son
Said shit done changed ever since we was on
I dreamed it all ever since I was young
They said I wouldn't be nothing
Now they always say congratulations
Worked so hard, forgot how to vacation
They ain't never had the dedication
People hatin', say we changed and look, we made it
Yeah, we made it
They was never friendly, yeah
Now I'm jumping out the Bentley, yeah
And I know I sound dramatic, yeah
But I know I had to have it, yeah
For the money, I'm a savage, yeah
I be itching like a addict, yeah
I'm surrounded, twenty bad bitches, yeah
But they didn't know me last year, yeah
Everyone wanna act like they important

(Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)

But all that mean nothing when I saw my dog

(Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)

Everyone counting on me, drop the ball

(Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)

At the beginning of the song he is celebrating his success, by saying that his mother has seen him on the television; again here he stresses how dedicated he has been to his career and how he has dreamt of it and worked hard to achieve it: “Worked so hard, forgot how to vacation”. After praising himself for the effort he has put into his job, he discredits the others by saying “They ain’t never had the dedication”. In the following stanza he starts by saying “they was never friendly” which I think is related to some verses later when he says “I’m surrounded, twenty bad bitches, - but they didn’t know me last year”, what I think he is trying to address is how people started to be friendly and *surround* him only when he became famous and could buy a Bentley.

In his debut with *White Iverson* (2015) music video he appears wearing his hair braided like the basketball player Iverson, to whom the title refers, and with grills on his teeth, typical piece of jewelry used by rapper for decorative purposes on the front part of the dental arches.

Double OT

I'm a new breed

Saucin', saucin', I'm saucin' on you

I'm swaggin', I'm swaggin', I'm swaggin', oh-ooh

I'm ballin', I'm ballin', Iverson on you

Watch out, watch out, watch out, yeah

That's my shot, that's my shot, that's my shot, yeah

Spendin', I'm spendin' all my fuckin' pay

The song is an ode to himself, and in this first stanza he is bragging about *stepping over* his haters and acting *cool* in their faces; he refers to himself as a ‘new breed’, which I would interpret as a new generation of white rappers, and he does so by using basketball terminology and Aller Iverson as metaphor, comparing his behavior to the player’s deed in the field. It is interesting to know that Post Malone is not very good at playing basketball, but he uses this typical rap rhetoric to convey his message. In an interview at The Breakfast Club, when questioned about the title and the overall reason of the songs he states that he is too young to remember the famous player, but he adds:

> when I got my first braids, some lady did on me […] you know, I felt cool, I said I felt like the White Iverson, you know wha'mean? I felt like I had de sauce, I felt like .. you know I just did it 'cause… I wanted to, and you know that gave me the confidence to just be like… just whatever, I can do whatever I wanna do and nobody can tell me nothing

It is actually in this exact interview that he is questioned about being received as a "culture vulture" and, in my opinion, in his answers he shows a lack of awareness of his *performance*:,

> I 'on think so, I'm not scared, because I'm not tryna be anybody dat I'm not. I'm just tryna…you know, I like what I like and I 'on think I'm bitin' off of a certain culture or copyin' a certain culture or tryna be part of certain culture, because you know I like what I like […] I mean, It's not even the hip hop culture, it's like the young culture, the young generation of people, like I mean.. they get mad 'cause I have braids but you know, I like the way it looks, they get mad 'cause I got gold teeth or wha'ever, I like the way that it looks

The second stanza of *White Iverson* describes what he states in the interview, in other words that he has got his hair braided just for his personal taste, while still referring to basketball through specific terminology.

I got me some braids and I got me some hoes
Started rockin' the sleeve, I can't ball with no Joes
You know how I do it, Concords on my toes
(This shit is hard)
[…]
Like they OT
Double OT like I'm KD, smokin' OG
And you know me, in my 2-3s and my gold teeth
Bitch, I'm smiling, bet you see me from the nosebleeds
I'm a new three and I change out to my new 3s

Through the lyrics of the song and what he states in the interview I think that his response "I like what I like" in relation to the adoption of a certain culture, style, music genre, aesthetics and language should not be accepted. I mean to suggest that there is more to the artistic expression of hip hop than just the visible features of gold teeth and braids, there is a more profound message of resistance and rebellion to abuse, segregation and discrimination, which cannot be bypassed and just ignored. He gave this answer when he was just 20 years old, a

very young man who had just stepped into the music industry and got an overwhelming response and popularity, but it is representative of a widespread phenomenon, in which young generations are drawn to hip hop and rapping just because they like the outside shell of it.

As already mentioned, I find him to be persistent in the use of AAE in his music as much as in his interviews; this would probably mean that he is accustomed to using the language and is not just performing a *persona.* It is also important to underline that Green argues that southern states of the US do have some common elements with AAE and he lived in Texas while growing up. In opposition to these assumptions, Cutler's data in the investigation on the use of AAE by WHHS (White Hip Hoppers) maintains that "[t]he more peripheral hip-hoppers […] tended to make much bolder use of HHSS [Hip Hop Speech Style] – at least in the interview data I collected – whereas the core members were generally more conservative in their linguistic display of HHSS" (217); "bolder use of HHS" is thus associable with an exaggerated imitation of the language by *non-native* speakers to manifest hip hop membership, thus the need to fit in the social group through extensive use of the language. In his lyrics he consistently uses grammar structures and vocabulary that belong to African American English; in *White Iverson* Post Malone uses several words typically associated with hip hop, see the following stanza:

Bitch, I'm saucin', I do this often, don't do no talkin'
My options right when I walk in, jump all them Jordans
I'm ballin', money jumpin'
Like I'm Davis from New Orleans
Or bitch I'm Harden, I don't miss nothin'
Fuck practice, this shit just happens, know y'all can't stand it
I have it, I never pass it, I work my magic
High average, ball on these bastards, it makes me happy
It's tragic, I make it happen, and all y'all Shaqtin'
Chorus: White Iverson…

Post Malone repeatedly adds words such as saucin', swaggin', ballin', and overall terminology associated with basketball, as for example with the word shaqtin', in the final verse of the stanza; this is an abbreviation of "shaqtin' a fool", which is the title of a section of the TV programme *Inside the NBA* dedicated to hilarious moments on the basketball field; the references to this sport continue by referring to famous players such as Anthony Davis or James Harden.

There are many other instances of Malone's usage of AAE vocabulary; he indulges frequently in the use of the word hoes, a variant of the word whores, which has now become widely used by many non-native speakers of AAE. Other examples may be found in the song *Rockstar* (2017) with words such as "homies" to indicate his group of male friends; or "whip" for expensive car. In the song *Montley Crew* (2021) the first verse "Count up the bands, stickin up", where bands stands for a thousand dollars; or the term "broke" used to express poverty or lack of money; or in a following verse he sings "Covered in ice, Siberia" where the word "ice" does not refer to its actual meaning but to expensive jewelry or more specifically diamonds. Similar examples of both African American vocabulary and grammar structures have been scattered throughout his lyrics ever since. It is indeed possible to understand how his earliest appearances may have caused a negative response in the hip hop environment; I am referring to his first music video, where he seems to be profiting from the popular image of the rapper, with braids, jewelry and expensive cars. Hence I understand how many might have seen him as an impostor, appropriating both the aesthetics, the rhetoric (that of basketball) and the language of a typical rapper; nevertheless his subsequent music production granted him acceptance in the hip hop scene, where he was perceived as authentic and original.

Comparing the two white rappers discussed here, Iggy Azalea and Post Malone, it is possible to argue that their careers have taken two different directions; their music and their identity have been received by the audience in two diametrically different ways. Iggy Azalea's musical expression has been perceived as counterfeit; through her attitude towards hip hop and considering her inauthentic use of African American English, as well as the way she underlines her sexual appeal, she seems to be more an example of imitation and mocking of the rapper, rather than a truthful expression of her personality. Keeping in mind that one of the most important elements in hip hop is authenticity and truthfulness, it is clear how she may be labeled an example of linguistic and artistic minstrelsy by the audience. Post Malone seems to have had a different fate, by being perceived differently by the public, probably due to the portrayal he has created of himself; I mean to argue that he has presented himself as a music enthusiast ever since he was a teenager, by exploring different genres, he has slowly grown closer to rap. In this sense, it is not my intention to uphold him and condemn Iggy Azalea. My intent is to highlight the difference in audience reception of the two, and underline how she is seen as a character, or a straightforward performance. I am also convinced that Post Malone is surely taking advantage of the genre he adopted, but his candor in addressing his love for music suggests a true appreciation, rather than appropriation.

CHAPTER FIVE
Blackfishing

Blackfishing, another form of minstrelsy?

In this final section of my research, it is my aim to focus my attention on blackfishing, which is a relatively new phenomenon that spread online through social media. Here through the help of Lott, bell hooks and other scholars I intend to investigate whether blackfishing may be considered another form of minstrelsy. Before heading into the analysis, I want to summarize what I have discussed so far. I have moved from Lott's definition of 19th century blackface as cultural expropriation of the black community, which may be considered as an attempt to construct the hegemonic identity of whites while covertly showing desire for contact with and interest in the Other. By means of minstrelsy and racism, I have looked into the production of the stereotypes related to African American men, which ultimately lead me to analyze the artistic movement of hip hop as an act of rebellion towards discrimination and racism. I have then moved to the appropriation of the genre of rap by white men and women, which I have described through the analysis of Iggy Azalea and Post Malone, two white rappers who have different responses in the audience reception.

A great portion of this research has focused on the African American man and the residues of his perception based on historical events, with blackface minstrelsy representing one fundamental tool in nurturing these representations. In this final section of my research it is my intention to create a similar investigation with the representation of African American women. I intend to maintain that there are some elements of correspondence between the 19th century conception and consideration of black women and today's representation on social media. This cyber environment has been the setting for a relatively new phenomenon in the last decade, which has come to be labeled as 'blackfishing' for its extensive presence online. This widespread tendency gets its name from 'catfishing', which indicates the online practice of scamming others by creating a fake identity; by association 'black'-fishing has been coined to define those who manipulate their appearance to look black, either through make up, photo adjusting, or even through surgical interventions.

With these premises, I am going to analyze the phenomenon of blackfishing by creating a connection with the perception of African American women in the 19th century, because I find today's phenomena to share common aspects with the obsolete and racist stereotypes created almost two centuries ago. My main sources of evidence and term of comparison is going to be Sarah, or Saartjie Bartmaan a South African woman whose body

became the stereotype of black women in early 1800s. I am going to analyze how the phenomenon of blackfishing on social media follows the same underlying tendencies that minstrelsy followed; I mean to suggest that the white woman *appropriating* the body of the black woman is, in a sense, constructing her true identity by exploiting a commodified idea of the Other.

The obsession with black bodies: Sarah Baartman

I have highlighted in the previous chapters how the sexualized fetishization of black bodies was overwhelmingly present in the minstrel show; through Lott's analysis I have argued that this representation and construction of black identity mirrored more what whites feared and lacked rather than actually reflecting real black traits. This process of destruction and reconstruction of black identity was carried out for black women as well; hence the approach that whites had towards male bodies, discussed and examined in the second chapter, may be retraced for black female bodies as well. Black women were the object of white men's interest and lascivious looks just as much as black men, but this interest was slightly different from that addressed to men. In this regard I have already argued that, contrary to black men, black women were no source of *envy* for whites, even when dressing up in women's clothes during blackface performances, men had no intention to *feminize* themselves, but it rather represented an attempt at mastering them (Lott 166); a way to affirm control over the threat that women represented to them. Black women were seen as objects, either useful to handle household chores or tools for sexual purposes, pursuing the racist idea of blacks as non-human beings.

In order to provide better insight into this approach to black women, I am going to rely on one of the most best-known examples of such perception, and that is Sarah Baartman, the emblem of the obsession that white men had with black women's appearance. Sarah, or Saartjie was a South African Khoekhoe woman who was brought to London to be displayed in freakshows in the 19th century due to her physical features. Although she spent her short life being exhibited only throughout Europe, I find her existence to be exemplary of the perception that whites had of women of African descent in North America. "[Her] body was exhibited in 1810, she was ironically and perversely dubbed 'the Hottentot Venus'. Her naked body was displayed on numerous occasions for five years. When she died, the mutilated parts were still subject to scrutiny" (hooks *Black Looks* 62). The attitude towards her and her body is very similar

to that of white men towards black male bodies. In other words, I mean to suggest that her body was a "mere spectacle", like that of a rare animal that causes astonishment and amazement in the audience; exactly like black men she represented a wildly sexual creature to the eyes of the white audience, due to the size of her body and particularly that of her buttocks. She was treated and considered as an entertaining tool, hence the underlying feelings towards her dovetailed with those directed to men and staged in blackface performances, with ridiculous reenactments, grotesque skits and allusive songs. Although Sarah was not wearing a costume or a blackened face, I intend to associate her display with a blackface performance. That is to say, that the exhibition of her body may be considered as an expression of the same feelings that whites were trying to stage through minstrelsy; namely the need to ridicule the Other to hide strong feelings of attraction towards and obsession with the black body, and in doing so maintaining superiority and control. The use and abuse of her body did not end with her premature death, on the contrary her remains were mutilated and displayed in the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, France till the late 1970s; thus her genitalia, skull and skeleton were subjected to further intrusion and abuse. From my perspective, these events readily recall the barbaric practice of lynching, when black males' executed bodies would be dismembered, and their body parts sold as morbid souvenirs or displayed to further satisfy obsessive white curiosity. Although I have maintained that the representations of black women and men shared underlying meanings, it is important to underline that they did present differences; what I mean by this is to be found in how African American men were perceived as a threat to white men, due to their strength, sexual potency and power, while black women were looked upon as mere objects, ready to satisfy whites needs.

I am creating this metaphorical bridge between minstrelsy and the figure of Saartjie Baartman for two main reasons. The first is the one I have discussed so far, hence the correlation that I find in the approach that whites had with their stereotypical view of black men (see the two artificial identities of Sambo and Nat), and the very similar ideologies of black women. What I mean by this is that Saartjie was a quintessential example of how black women were viewed; she embodied the stereotype of the black woman in her body features, which supported the idea of her unrestrained sexuality, and she was a creature to look at or an object to exploit and to project fears and fantasies on. It is indeed true that black women, during slavery, were considered as property as they were tools of the white masters, used to procreate and care for their masters; in Blassingame's description they had to *willingly* offer

themselves for sexual favors to their owners and other white men (154). In 1855 through a black slave case, the law had established that "black women by definition could not be raped" (Jackson 25), because they were not considered human beings, just like their male counterparts. Saartjie is the emblematic personification of these concepts. The second reason is the one that leads to this chapter's topic, and it is to be found in the odd correspondence of the obsession over Saartjie's physical appearance and the current urge of white women to acquire those same characteristics, namely a darker skin color, large breasts, big and voluptuous hips and bottoms, tiny waist and fuller lips. From my point of view, the old way of viewing her body as a spectacle is to be interpreted as the foundation of blackfishing, which still perceives the black body as an object, or rather an outside shell, which does not entail a human being in the inside, but instead a set of elements that one can acquire.

From my perspective, these feelings are the basic principles on which blackfishing rests; the obsession with obtaining features that resemble black people is closely connected to the obsolete view of blacks as characters, which one may want to embody for a reason, whether it be monetary gain or self-affirmation. This practice lies on the supremacist idea that whites dominate the Other, even in its physical shape. bell hooks correspondingly argues that "[w]hen race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power over in intimate relations with the Other" (*Black Looks* 23). In a sense the *black body* becomes a playground, an exploitable means through which the identity of the *user/appropriator* can be produced. My aim is to focus on instances of non-black women who strive to obtain ambiguously interracial looks, either through surgical intervention, dieting or training and thus retrace in these examples the same tendencies that characterized the approach to black female bodies in the 19th century.

Women in Minstrelsy

Before heading to blackfishing I find it necessary in my discussion to recall how women of African descent were considered by whites in the 19th century, and it is possible to do so through minstrel songs. As already discussed in the third chapter, female characters would usually be *handled* very roughly by having them killed, or die for whatever reason, but with the malicious tendency to sexualize their characters, and with "the widespread preoccupation […] with oral and genital amusements" (Lott 149). Black women, like black men, were destined to be treated like projecting screens, hence in the lyrics of many songs the

audience would be given details about their appearance to further sustain this image. In the song *Lubly Fan Will You Cum Out To Night?* the protagonist of the song, Fan, is said to have big feet that "left no room for me" and "[h]er lips are like de oyster plant […] dey am so berry large" (Lott 150). Her body is described as big and obstructive, which is also connoted by the sexual reference to her *lips,* which may resemble the female sexual organ, with which whites were also obsessed (see the mutilation and exhibition of Saartjie's genitalia after her death). The insatiability of women for food and men was usually recounted in these songs, as in the following song where the performer sings of two female character and says:

I took them into Taylor's shop
To get some ginger beer-
They flirted up and down the room –
The white folks they looked queer.
One swallow'd six milk punches,
Half a dozen eggs as well;
[…]
The other ate six mince pies,
Twelve juleps quickly sped
(Lott 151)

Their mouth, which was very frequently the focus of interest may be hidden behind the description of their voracious appetite; the description given of black women in these songs, and the image that resulted clashes considerably with the ideals of femininity and womanhood that would be associated with white women. This argument may indeed be clarified through Dyer's analysis of Marylin Monroe, as the "most highly prized possession" (37), who is the exact opposite of the black woman; her whiteness is a strong symbol of her purity, desirability, vulnerability; she represents no trouble (39), which is the complete opposite of the way black women would be represented as problematic and *obstructive*. Their bodies are not seen as docile, nor *available,* unlike Monroe's body, who is described as "[u]nthreatening, vulnerable, [she] always seemed to be available, on offer" (Dyer 42). The one aspect that turns out to be commonly shared by both black and white women is their lack of agency in the eyes of men, they are the object of desire and a "response to male sexuality"; they are seen as a "recipient of male sexual drives and not an active outgoing sexuality" (Dyer 43-44).

Keeping in mind this brief summary of how black women were represented as savagely sexual and unattractive compared to white women it is interesting to see how more than a century later some of these conceptions are still around. Take into consideration psychologist

Satoshi Kanazawa's 2011 article *Why Are Black Women Rated Less Physically Attractive than Other Women?* (now deleted from PsychologyToday.com). This study, in Brown's words,

> typifies the norm of celebrating European standards of beauty, which have in turn defined women of African descent as less than beautiful if they did not have these physical characteristics. 'Euro American women see their body image and beauty reified and accepted by mainstream society, as opposed to African American women whose body image has traditionally been defiled'(Brown and Kopano xiii).

Nonetheless by the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, the world of fashion started picking from African American aesthetics to create new trends, so as Brown argues:

> Typically, women of African descent have been ogled or maligned for their physical characteristics and sense of style even if the trend of fashion was then copied and appropriated. White women permed their hair in an attempt to achieve the 1970s afro, got lip injections to make their mouths fuller white ridiculing African Americans for naturally full lips, tanned to the point of premature aging or the possibility of melanoma to achieve a darker color while black women might internalize skin color as the antithesis to the beauty standard (xii-xiii).

Hence, although African American women had been considered unattractive for centuries and had been taught to modify their appearance in order to fit a certain standard, the black features mentioned by Brown, i.e. textured hair, fuller lips and a dark complexion became fashionable in white people, while being discriminated and unaccepted in blacks. Thus, the black aesthetics made it into mainstream beauty standard, by enduring a process of choosing and picking by white observers and appropriators; I mean to maintain that African American features were split into what would be considered desirable and what not; thus the black female body is not desirable in its entirety, rather a set of its features are acceptable.

In other words the textured hair is not acceptable, nor beautiful; natural hair must be *restrained*, straightened or covered with a wig; the color of black women's skin is not always what the mainstream appreciates, so they may need to lighten their complexion a few shades. The breasts must be big and firm, the waist must be tiny and the stomach flat; the hips should be large and curvy, just like the bottom which must be perfectly round and as big as possible. What this description outlines is a crafted body, a mythical idea of a black female body, something that is created, shaped, produced

through the perspective of dominance, which whites have imposed on the Other. In an additional expression of domination and discrimination, this *mythical* black body became much more appreciated on a white woman. Put in other words *Black is cool, unless you're actually black*, which is the title of an article on blackfishing published by The Guardian, perfectly encapsulating the idea I am conveying here; blackness is not *cool* in its authenticity, but it is desirable only when *tamed* through imposed white standards.

Crafting the *black* body

So far I have outlined what I consider to be the foundations of the phenomenon of blackfishing, which rests on the discernment of desirable and non-desirable African American female features, which would consequentially be appropriated by white women. In this section it is my intention to analyze this form of appropriation with its earliest appearance in the music industry, leading to the social media trend that it is today. I am going to take on the field of music and specifically some music personalities under a different aspect than the one debated earlier with regard to on hip hop and rap; thus, this chapter focuses more on the appearance of the figures that I am going to mention, rather than their artistic and music production.

In the previous chapter, analyzing Iggy Azalea, I have suggested that she is representative of the phenomenon of black music appropriation and linguistic blackface performance; in doing so, I have also suggested that she may also be seen as a subtle example of blackfishing. I use the word 'subtle' because I would not argue that she is trying to trick her audience into thinking she is black, but at the same time she may be seen as a moderate example of this phenomenon. Although she stresses her whiteness frequently in her lyrics, I would maintain that her body becomes more and more black in the set of features that society has selected as desirable. Eberhardt and Freeman argue that she has crafted "her public persona around what is desirable and desired of African American female bodies in the mainstream" (320), and I agree by underlining how her music is centered on her beauty and sexual appeal by making use of a stereotypically crafted black body. I am suggesting that she is appropriating this *fashionable* black appearance just as much as the musical genre of rap. Already in one of her first major appearances in the music video of her song *Work* in 2014, her body shape entailed some of the features mentioned so far, namely voluptuous hips and bottom, and a very tiny waist. This body shape already fitted into a standard that was becoming more and more popular, which drew from black female body features, and which

was considered the aesthetic canon that spread rapidly and on a vast scale in the first years of the 21st century among white women (but not only).

The Australian rapper is one of the most recent examples of this tendency of acquiring black features in the music industry; nevertheless the practice of *becoming black* has appeared in the early 2000s in other ways. Jackson's book *White Negroes* is useful in outlining a sketch of the evolution of this practice among music figures, such as Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera. The author, by means of a description of the two singers' evolution, seems to argue that their development mirrors a process of nearing blackness through changes in the music production, style and appearance. In a sense it seems that the appropriation of black aesthetics becomes a *vehicle* through which express rebellion, change, growth. For instance, Christina Aguilera in 2001 attended the Annual Grammy Awards looking "bronzed in a fuchsia kaftan, her eyes heavily lined, her blonde hair encased in waist-length box braids. African styles and African texture proved crucial to the evolution that took place from 2001 to 2004" (16); her look could already be defined as representative of a tendency that was taking form and that in my opinion started from taking inspiration from African American fashion or hairstyles and that two decades later can be seen as identity appropriation.

Jackson pairs Aguilera's evolution from *whiteness to blackness* to Miley Cyrus' similar itinerary. Mostly popular for her role as Hannah Montana for Disney, Cyrus' performances and attitude mutated heavily in the first years of 2010s. In 2013 during the MTV Video Music Awards in Brooklyn her show with Robin Thicke entails a variety of elements that cannot go unseen or overlooked. The heavily critiqued and controversial performance is available on YouTube.com but I will describe it briefly. Miley Cyrus steps on stage coming out of a giant stuffed bear, she is wearing a fuzzy grey bodysuit with the illustration of a bear sticking its big red tongue out on the front; her hair is tied in two small buns on the top of her head, and she appears to be animated by a strong energy. One of the first things I noticed while watching the performance is that she repeatedly sticks her tongue out, just like the bear illustrated on her costume; while it may go unnoticed, this detail immediately reminded me of the blackface make-up or even more the illustrations of blackface performers with their lolling tongue out. Her back up dancers are three African American women; there is a fourth black woman and she is wearing a considerable pair of high-heels, which emphasize her height and with whom Miley engages for a few second by placing her hands on the woman's bottom and shaking it while nearing her face to the buttocks. This woman's role in the performance caught my attention because she is not there to dance with the other backup dancers, on the contrary it seems that her presence on stage is

finalized to her display. I mean to say that her *contribution* to the show is limited to the size of her body and specifically her bottom, which represent the main focus of interest and that is also the only *thing* to which Miley points attention; I find her presence on stage recalls the way Saartjie's body would be displayed during freakshows and other events. With the appearance on stage of Robin Thicke, the performance takes a more explicit turn, with Cyrus getting into a latex nude color bikini dancing graphically, mimicking sexual movement and twerking on her co-performer; although the singer is not wearing blackface costume nor make-up, the performance does remind of a minstrel show, because of the way she acts on stage, wildly and grotesquely contorting her body, touching Thicke's crotch and licking her lips repeatedly.

This performance in Jackson's opinion signaled a rupture in her career, with which she distanced herself from her former role as good Disney teenager and represented a step into a rebellion phase through modifying her persona and by 'becoming black'. My interest in her development from young white girl and Disney character to *black* teenager and young woman mostly revolves around the construction of her persona rather than her evolution as an artist and singer; the reason why I have chosen to use Cyrus' example is to bring forth how her *character* turned to blackness to transmit rebellion, growth and need for expression. This is the point that Jackson argues by stating that "Hip hop culture could break [her] free of the tug-and-pull game she'd been playing with her own sovereignty since she was fifteen years old. She achieved her desired end, though her means weren't novel" (19). Her means were indeed far from novel, as I have already underlined in the previous chapter through Walker's example of Elvis Presley; hence, just as Christina Aguilera consumed "not blackness but the idea of black aesthetics" (Jackson 18), Miley Cyrus was traveling through those same steps by modifying her character. Thus, if Aguilera's "entry into hip-hop sound, collabs with rap artists, and approximated hood style coincides with her transition from sexually suggestive to sexually explicit" (Jackson 18), so Cyrus' evolution followed a very similar path, through adopting a style and an attitude that by being very explicit and rowdy would be considered *black*.

If we consider Miley Cyrus' transformation and approach to blackness as a metaphorical passage, or rather a moment of rebellion against and resistance to the role of *good girl* she had played for many years, it is possible to pair such discourse with Leslie Fiedler's concept, which is eye-opening and perfectly encapsulates the process of evolution in which blackness becomes a passage:

> [i]n our very lives, we have come to repeat this pattern, individual biography recapitulating cultural history. Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we are told we really are: white once more. Even our whiteness, however, threatens to become imaginary, as the Negroes we have long mythicized begin to mythicize *us* (134).

By means of the three stages of life, namely childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, he associates adolescence, which may be considered a period of rebellion of the individual and of development, change, growth and search for identity with being an "imaginary Negro". I find this nexus to be representative of the phenomenon I am researching here. Could it be possible that a white person needs (or wants) to *go black* in order to find his or her identity? I would argue that it is indeed an acceptable option to keep in mind in the analysis of the appropriation of black aesthetic features by non-black celebrities, singers or online users. I find it to be a moment of rebellion and disassociation from whiteness; what I mean by this is to be found in the conception of blackness as alterity and diversity, based on stereotypes and concepts developed during slavery and nurtured through minstrelsy and through the production of personalities like Sambos and Nats, which also influence the perception of the rapper. Similarly, African American women have been subjected to the same process; starting from slavery and moving on to more recent times, their perception by whites has been based on their physical presence.

Through this overview and description of the modification and changes of style towards blackness that in the early 2000s started to be fashionable among celebrities of all environments, it is my intention to argue that from these examples of appropriation, there was an even more evident and sharp turn towards *blackness* ache by whites, a selective process that picked on black women's features. The exasperation of this process may be seen in the generalized need of white women online (and offline) to acquire a body shape, an attitude and an overall appearance that has been built, or rather processed through a dominant perspective and produced to create something desirable, admirable, beautiful, which is an inauthentic blackness overall.

The popularity of white celebrities and models who seem to *adjust* their appearance to a standard that resembles a black woman has been spreading online for years and it is my intention to argue that the heavy diffusion of black aesthetic appropriation by whites may have its roots in obsolete 19th-century perceptions of African Americans.

Blackfishing

In investigating the phenomenon of blackfishing, several names could come to mind in order to provide examples of white women, models and celebrities who are known for blackfishing their followers online. One of the most popular cases of a such a practice is that of Rachel Dolezal; a white woman who became the president of the National Association for Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) who would present herself as a black woman, by perming her hair and darkening her skin. There are several celebrities who have been accused of blackfishing, like for example singers Rita Ora and Ariana Grande, or the Swedish model Emma Hallberg, together with other Instagram models such as Jaiden Gumbayan, or Aga Brzostowska and many others. The article *How White Women On Instagram Are Profiting Off Black Women* on *Paper* Magazine in 2018 contextualizes the fundamental concepts of blackfishing online, by arguing that

> [i]n recent years, Instagram has become a breeding ground for white women who wish to capitalize off of impersonating racially ambiguous/Black women for monetary and social gain. With extensive lip fillers, dark tans and attempts to manipulate their hair texture, white women wear Black women's features like a costume. These are the same features that, once derided by mainstream white culture, are now coveted and dictate current beauty and fashion on social media, with Black women's contributions being erased all the while (www.papermag.com).

In creating a "racially ambiguous" woman these models and celebrities are drawing from an inauthentic idea of blackness and simultaneously *playing* with those features that were considered ugly for so long. In this sense Stevens maintains that "[These influencers] are literally whitewashing an urban environment to present a more palatable, seductive representation of Blackness. Not only are the models appropriating Black identity, but they are also selling an identity of what we imagine the 'cool' Black subject to be" (9).

It is my intention in this following section to retrace this practice of building an identity that appropriates the traits of produced *blackness*, and in order to do so I intend to direct my attention to the extremely popular figures of the Kardashian/Jenner sisters. Their accounts are among the most followed on Instagram; Kylie Jenner is in fact the third most followed account with 302 million followers while Kim Kardashian is eighth with 279 million followers. The Kardashian and Jenner sisters are the clearest examples of this practice in my opinion, and that is why I am going to focus on them more

specifically. Their content varies a lot, going from family pictures, photoshoots or advertisement of their merchandise; it is indeed possible to argue that their body, intended as their physical presence is the product they sell the most, their major stock-in-trade. Their bodies have undergone a metamorphosis over the years, and in my opinion this transformation has directed their appearance towards blackness, and I mean blackness as the constructed product of white domination. I have already mentioned that blackness is not accepted and appropriated as a whole, rather a set of features that have been selected as desirable are the focus of interest by whites, and in this sense I find hooks' description of Saartjie Bartmaan's body to interestingly retrace Kim Kardashian's and Kylie Jenner's Instagram feed. Just as Saartjie's body was an exhibition, so are their bodies; their appearance is fully central in their online existence, all while appropriating blackness aesthetics fashion. The shape of their bodies has mutated towards a more and more black-created figure, their hourglass shape with voluptuous hips and breasts has become more and more accentuated, the color of their skin tends to be bronzed and golden, rather than actually representing their natural skin color, either through post-production editing of the photograms or through make-up or fake tan. By scrolling through the two sisters' photos, one may get the overall feeling that their physicality is specifically enhanced and one may notice the resemblance of the photos with the 19th-century representations of Saartjie's figure.

The analogy between Kim Kardashian and Saartjie Baartman is not completely novel; Time magazine (www.time.com) made this parallel comparison back in 2014, following Kim's appearance on the cover of Paper on November 12th, 2014. The picture on the cover of Paper is revealing enough, showing her fully unclothed back and bottom, while wearing a pair of long black gloves and holding a sequin black dress to cover her legs. The main attention is clearly concentrated on her perfectly round bottom, while the color of her skin is dark enough to almost match the warm brown backdrop. The author of the Time's article maintains that Saartjie is to be seen as the "symbol of racism, colonization and the objectification of the black female body" (www.time.com) and in doing so questions whether Saartjie's fate may be similar to Kardiashian's, meaning that the latter is victim of a world that still objectifies women's bodies, hence "how much free will can she really have?". The article's focus is centered more on Kim Kardashian's choice to use her body as a vehicle to fame and popularity, while my main interest is to be found in the profound resemblance that her body has with Baartman's; what I mean to suggest is that Kim, just like her sister Kylie Jenner and many other less

popular women, is representative of the widespread tendency to modify the body and to become more and more *black*, reaching an alarming level of resemblance to Saartjie's body.

In my perspective, the need to pull apart the black female body by choosing what is to be desirable and what is to be considered ugly is once again a form of domination, or even colonization. With colonization of the black body I mean to argue that the blackfishing phenomenon may be considered as one form of conquest and ruling of the black body; it is a demonstration of supremacy over the African American being, who is forced to a form of physical obedience in the appearance. In this sense hooks argues that "There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy and this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people" (*Black Looks* 2). The institutionalization of specific images is in my opinion represented by these celebrities who create an inauthentic representation of African American bodies, by appropriating some specific features which have been divested of any naturalness and instead have been charged with new meanings of sensuality and desirability.

In this regard, it is fundamental to mention that the stereotypical and fake black female body has also been burdened with other meanings and images, which Woodard and Mastin describe in their essay published in the *Journal of Black Studies* in 2005. They analyze the presence in the magazine *Essence* of the four dominant stereotypes of black women identified by Collins and Bobo, which are: the mammy, the matriarch, the sexual siren and the welfare mother/queen. The mammy is represented as a "loyal domestic servant to [w]hite people[, s]he loves, takes care of, and provides for her [w]hite family over her own" (Woodard and Mastin 271); the matriarch is the mother in the black house, she is "controlling, emasculating [b]lack woman who dictated to both her children and her man their place in her home" (271). The sexual siren "represents negative portrayals of the [b]lack women as bitch or whore. The sexually aggressive, uncaring Jezebel image […] She dresses in skin-tight, short suits that reveal and display her legs, waist, and breasts" (272); it is this latter image that I find to be the most commonly evoked in the appropriation of the stereotypical image of black women. In my opinion it is indeed the sexual siren stereotype that white women are mostly appropriating and trying to perform on social media; it seems to me that the common denominator of both singers and celebrities on whom I have focused so far is to be

found in the ostentatious sexuality and sensuality. As for instance Miley Cyrus' transformation towards upfront explicitness of the content she creates, see the performance with Robin Thicke, not to mention the sudden evolution of her music production to something similar to rap, resorting to African American English as well, or Iggy Azalea's affirmation of sexual appeal discussed earlier.
I see how the stereotypical images outlined by Woodard and Mastin have their roots in the obsolete representations of African American women, for instance starting from the idea created through minstrelsy of animal-like women, with ferocious and uncontrollable instincts; hence, if we consider hooks' argument that contemporary popular culture nurtures 19th century black female sexuality (*Black Looks* 62), it is possible to maintain that the appropriation carried out through the phenomenon of blackfishing fosters the stereotypes of African American women, or more specifically that of the sexual siren.

It seems to me that sexuality, throughout this entire research and discussion on the relationship between blacks and whites, plays a major role in the dynamics of establishing a contact with the Other; think about how minstrelsy resorted to through an explicit sexualization of the characters on stage in order to represent the interest in miscegenation that whites had towards blacks. Such an assumption is issued by hooks in her essay "Eating the Other", in which through reminiscing about overhearing a conversation among young white men she states that "these young men talked about their plans to fuck as many girls from other racial/ethnic groups as they could 'catch' before graduation. […] Black girls were high on the list" and she adds

> [t]o these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white 'innocence' and enter the world of 'experience'. As is often the case in this society, they were confident that non-white people had more life experience, were more worldly, sensual, and sexual because they were different (*Black Looks* 23).

These words coincide perfectly with the idea I am trying to convey of growth through contact with the otherness/blackness, which in her case it is sexual, but I would expand such a notion to the practice of blackfishing as well. By assuming that sexual contact with the other equals the emancipation of young white men, L.M. Jackson links this concept to the practice of whites imitating and appropriating blackness in order to create suitable personas for the entertainment environment, or in our case for social media success. Commenting on hooks' words, Jackson argues that "[these men] assumed their racial desires would ultimately free them, white pop stars, native to the industry as little girls and young women, need to go

'primitive' to be sexual in ways whiteness doesn't afford" (*Black Looks* 26). "[White males] claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects" (*Black Looks* 24) I would suggest that this need of closeness and involvement with the Other, which in the case described by hooks is related to young white men's sexuality, is the same driving force that encourages white women to do something similar in acquiring a crafted black body.

CONCLUSION

I find hooks' argument on black women's body and image exploitation to be in harmony with the theoretical process described for the construction of the black male in the second chapter. She argues that the perception of African Americans is obviously influenced by a white supremacist perspective; moreover she adds that "[t]hose images may be constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy" (*Black Looks* 1); it is through this latter statement that she makes way for an important concept which I have found to be mentioned sporadically by other scholars. The concept I am referring to can be summarized as the inurement of African Americans to the construction of their stereotypical identity, meaning that some may have accepted and adopted such notions; taking this idea and applying it to the focus of this section of body image appropriation and blackfishing, it is possible to find support in hooks' words when she tells us of a young girl who: "Not only is she fundamentally convinced that straightened hair is more beautiful than curly, kinky, natural hair, she believes that lighter skin makes one more worthy, more valuable in the eyes of the others" (*Black Looks* 3). Hence through this systematic and repetitive production and diffusion of stereotypical images of black women with golden brown skin and perfectly straight hair, or with a smaller nose and tiny waist with perfectly round hips it is possible to admit that African American women have gotten used to these artificial representations, and these repercussions cannot be overlooked.

hooks' mentions these consequences of the systematic promotion of ill-based stereotypes of African American women, by maintaining that

> [b]ombarded with images representing black female bodies as expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it. Popular culture provides countless example of black female appropriation and exploitation of 'negative stereotypes' to either assert control over the

> representation or at least reap the benefits of it. Since black female sexuality had been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious. Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant (hooks *Black Looks* 65-66).

These words transmit and encompass the notion of inurement to the widespread stereotypical image of black women as "available", which in my opinion not only suggests sexual freedom or availability, but also suggests the not-so-veiled conception that the African American woman's body is usable, available; in other words it may be considered as a tool, an instrument to make use of. What I mean to suggest is that in hooks' notion of the availability of the black female body lies the root of the blackfishing phenomenon, which considers the black body as a disposable entity that one can acquire, use and dispose of. Precisely as Saartjie's body was considered as an entertaining device to look at, so the online blackfishing model is retracing a similar path by using a fake black body, which has been created to serve her need of expression and identity.

I would argue that the white model playing at looking black is comparable to a minstrel who is impersonating a black man, or rather a projection of the black man. Blackfishing and minstrelsy share more than just the inauthentic reproduction of black bodies; as a result analyzing the phenomenon of blackfishing it is indeed possible to identify some elements that Lott associates with minstrelsy. What I mean to argue is that blackfishing may in a sense be seen as a form of blackface and thus carry with it much of its intrinsic significance. To further expand on such a concept we may consider Dyer's idea of the woman (38) as a chaste, pure and docile being as opposed to the stereotypical black woman; we may assume that the appropriation of black femininity may be seen as an instrument to subvert such a felt sense of diversity, to *exorcise* it. The reason why I am comparing these perspectives on black and white women is because I find these perceptions to be involved in today's digital blackface and blackfishing. What I mean by this is that if we accept 19th-century blackface as a tool for stereotypical black identity production and development, which simultaneously helped whites produce their identity, we may well connect today's blackfishing to a very similar process. I mean to

compare minstrelsy as a coping mechanism to overcome those unsettling feelings of anxiety, fear and inferiority that white men had towards black men, to the phenomenon of blackfishing, which may be seen as a way to fight those feelings of inadequacy that white women might have felt. The 19th-century practice of impersonating black men on stage was a way to overcome the fear of contact and diversity that white men had towards black men. Correspondingly blackfishing may be a method to coerce the feeling of *sexual* inadequacy and submission that white women have been given during the centuries. I would argue that blackfishing might be perceived as an attempt to assert one's identity, hence if white adolescence in Fiedler's perspective is seen as a "Negro" period, it may be viewed as an attempt at growth, or an expression of personality and self-affirmation, similarly to what white minstrels in their blackened faces were trying to do, hence assert white society's identity through *black* characters.

In unraveling the intrinsic meanings of blackfishing and considering that it rests on the constructed and inauthentic identity of African American women, it is possible to assume that such a process recalls the one described above for the creation of the black male, who represents both a great source of interest and attraction and one of anxiety and trouble for white men. Stuart Hall, in describing the problem of racism in the media, identifies three common representations of black characters in the 'grammar of race': the slave-figure, the native and the clown (21). His comment on the three images is striking, as he maintains that

> [o]ne noticeable fact about all these images is their deep *ambivalence* – the double vision of the white eye through which they are seen. The primitive nobility of the aging tribesman or chief, and the native's rhythmic grace, always contain both a nostalgia for an innocence lost forever to the civilized, and the threat of civilization being over-run or undermined by the recurrence of savagery, which is always lurking just below the surface; or by an untutored sexuality, threatening to 'break out' (22).

In his words there are a number of elements that encompass what I would define as the *fil rouge* that connects all the aspects of this research into African American cultural appropriation. What I mean by this is to be found in Hall's words, starting from the very beginning where he underlines how the images of the 'grammar of race' are ambivalent, hence they all include double meanings as he states that they imply both imply nostalgia and a threat. This notion of duality is connected to Lott's description of minstrelsy's which is intrinsically dual, as it is based on whites' interest in and desire of contact with the black men just as it distances the white man from him through ridicule.

In conclusion I strongly believe that blackfishing is entangled with the past centuries' obsession with black bodies, of which Saartjie is a perfect example. Indeed, bell hooks' argument could not be more up to date when she maintains that "[r]epresentations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism and which still shapes perceptions today" (*Black Looks* 62). As a result, I find this phenomenon to be illustrative of the need of domination on black existence that whites had shown ever since; the supremacist tendencies are conveyed through the act of establishing what is to be considered as beautiful of a black body and consequentially appropriated, and what is to be modified, erased and considered unattractive.

Minstrelsy in Eric Lott's opinion would be a perfect stage to shape black identities, as well as to create a space for sexual fantasies and taboos to played with; in agreement with this perspective hooks outlines the attitude of whites towards black bodies in a similar way, by arguing that "black presence in early North American society allowed whites to sexualize their world by projecting onto black bodies a narrative of sexualization disassociated from whiteness. […] [The black female] is there to entertain guests with her naked image of Otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. […] [T]he black women whose naked bodies were displayed for whites at social functions had no presence. They were reduced to mere spectacle" (*Black Looks* 62). Therefore, she agrees with Lott in arguing that whites would construct black identities in order to play a sexualized role in a fantasy world, where blacks would be considered as mere bodies. In a sense I find this to be the underlying concept of today's social media phenomena, which is to say the bodies that celebrities and many other users are creating are spectacles that draw from mythical ideas of black femininity. That is to say that these users are mocking and recreating a racialized ideal of black women, a stereotype which is inauthentic and based on obsolete racist ideas.
hooks highlights a vicious twist hidden behind the approach with the racial Other by arguing that "mass culture […] perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference" (*Black Looks* 21) but such enjoyment is not to be seen as the appreciation and praise of the beauty of diversity, but rather as the possibility of fruition it offers; in other words "race is transformed into a commodity that can be bought and sold" (Stevens 4) and the racialized bodies become especially profitable behind "the guise of 'appreciating the aesthetics'" (4). In this sense, hooks argues that this tendency to render the Other *consumable* hides no feeling of appreciation, instead

> [t]he commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. Cultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressed and made explicit as the media bombards folks with a message of difference no longer based on the white supremacist assumption that 'blondes have more fun.' The 'real fun' is to be had by bringing to the surface all those 'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy (*Black Looks* 21-22).

Through these words hooks hands us a perspective that applies to blackfishing, and thus to black women's representation and consideration, which in my opinion connects it to the deep and hidden messages that minstrelsy was conveying. I mean that blackfishing draws inspiration from an unreal representation of black women, and it displays the fantasy of contact with the Other that whites have but which they need to hide. In this sense, this phenomenon evokes minstrelsy's intentions, that of staging fantasies of white men, which would allow them to cope with their conflicting feelings towards black men.

Overall it seems that the world of entertainment has incorporated blackness in various ways, starting from minstrelsy with its ill-founded racist conception of black people; through literature it has produced stereotypical figures like Sambo and Nat, from which the film-making industry has drawn, creating movies like those mentioned in the analysis of Paul Robeson. Moving to the music environment we have seen how music producers have played a role in shaping the rapper's identity for monetary gain and how consequently white performers have appropriated the genre of rap. Lastly I have pointed my attention to social media, where appropriating a constructed idea of blackness has become a widespread trend among models and celebrities. hooks defines this sort of entertainment, based on the appropriation of blackness as "the spectacle of contemporary colonization, dehumanization, and disempowerment where the image serves as a murder weapon" (*Black Looks* 7), which in my opinion connects it once again to the similar concepts of colonization and dehumanization that minstrelsy represented.

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