In the decades after the War of 1812, Americans sought native forms and symbols that would affirm the virtue of their democracy in contrast to European aristocracy.* This is evident in the formal arts, in the democratic political rhetoric of the 1830's and 1840's and in the heavy influence of folklore on the rapidly growing popular media. "At no other period in American history," Richard Dorson has written of these years, "did a flourishing oral humor enjoy such intimate and fruitful connections with the popular culture of journalism, literature, and the stage." Paralleling the Jacksonian transformation of politics, common people dominated the theater audiences and clamored for and got egalitarian characters and themes that proclaimed the superiority of the American common man over effete aristocrats. Led by the Yankee, the Frontiersman, and the B'howery B'hoy, American folk characters, themes, tales, humor, and songs paraded before the dazzled and delighted public after 1825, confirming the strength, virtue, and potential of the nation and its common people.

* The encouragement and assistance of Alan Dundes of the University of California, Berkeley, have been indispensable to me in the preparation of this paper.
1 Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore (Chicago, 1959), paperback edition, p. 50.
2 The assertive role of the audience and its egalitarian bias are best discussed in David Grimsted, American Melodrama Unveiled, 1800-1850 (Chicago, 1968), chapter three. See also Dorson, chapter two, and Francis Hodge, Yankee Theatre (Austin, 1964), chapter two.
But in this same period, these self-congratulatory boasts of egalitarianism were subjected to piercing charges of hypocrisy because of the existence of human slavery in the supposed land of liberty. Although they might temporarily postpone it, Americans ultimately would have to make decisions about slavery and the proper position of Negroes in America. In this context, white men blackened their faces, climbed on stages throughout the nation, and quite literally acted out their images of black people, giving birth to minstrelsy. Like other popular entertainment, minstrelsy, in its formative years, drew heavily upon folklore to create its images of blacks, which included considerable opposition to slavery. But after 1855 both the folklore content and the anti-slavery sentiments were sharply reduced as the caricature of the happy, plantation darky overshadowed all else. This paper examines minstrels’ use of folklore in the context of their changing images of black men and slavery before the Civil War.

Although individual blackface minstrel acts began in the late 1820’s and spread in the 1830’s, led by T. D. Rice’s “Jump Jim Crow” song and dance, it was only in 1843 that four blackfaced white entertainers joined together to present a full evening of supposedly Negro song and dance. Within only a few years, innumerable minstrel companies commanded huge audiences with what they commonly described as their “Ethiopian Delineation,” which basically meant that they claimed to be performing ethnographies of blacks; that is, authentically portraying the qualities of Negro life. But minstrelsy reflected white conceptions and ideas much more than it did black realities. With only a few exceptions including the great Negro dancer Juba, antebellum stage minstrels were northern white men whose greatest audiences were in northern and western cities. The loose and eclectic form of the shows, the great competition between companies, and the boisterously assertive audiences all

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6 Of fifty-seven leading antebellum minstrels only three were from the South. Compiled from T. Allston Brown, *A History of the American Stage* (New York, 1870). The northern, urban concentration of antebellum minstrelsy is indicated in Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones* (Durham N.C., 1930), pp. 66-72.
made minstrels alter the content of their shows to suit popular tastes. Prior to the war, then, minstrelsy was a white man’s entertainment form which drew on diverse sources, probably including Negroes, to create images of blacks and slavery that changed to suit northern, white public opinion.

Minstrelsy became the most popular entertainment form in the nation partly because it incorporated the nationalistic boosterism and folk-based content of other shows into its routines. Blackfaced minstrels blustered of national destiny and power. They triumphantly advocated expansion to Texas, Oregon, and Cuba, offered to fight in Maine’s border dispute with Canada, and taunted Europeans, especially the British, for their weaknesses and vices. Minstrels also adapted western folklore by singing of their exploits as river boatmen in the best tradition of Mike Fink. As Blackface Roarers, they trumpeted their own oaths:

My mama was a wolf
My daddy was a tiger
I am what you call de old Virginy Nigger
Half fire half smoke
I am what you call de eighth wonder.

Minstrels also used tall tales as part of their fare. In 1848, a leading minstrel bragged in song that he had scratched out a panther’s eyes with his toe nails, bent a tree till it had a hump like a camel, and pulled a steamboat out of the water with a fishing pole. Others sang of sailing down the Mississippi River on the backs of alligators or on logs turned into sea serpents. This borrowing of common American lore helped


8 Nathan, 52-55, quotes examples of minstrels’ use of western lore, which was in virtually every minstrel songster in the 1840s and then declined. The oath quoted appeared as late as 1851 in Christy’s Plantation Melodies (New York, 1851). Roger Abrahams, who graciously read and commented on another version of this paper, suggested that American frontier boasts may have been influenced by the boasts characteristic of Afro-American tradition. Letter of November 26, 1970.

9 Charles White, New Illustrated Melodeon (New York, 1848), pp. 5.

minstrels establish themselves with the public and also implicitly linked blacks to whites, but what made minstrelsy unique was its portrayal of black life.

With some even bragging of “field work” in the South, minstrels claimed to be familiar with black tradition, and they did indeed exhibit some knowledge of it. Both minstrels and ex-slaves portrayed “jumping the broom” as a way slaves “wed widout any bodder.”\footnote{Pop Goes the Weasel Songster (Philadelphia, 1853), pp. 192-193; Buckley’s Songbook for the Parlor (New York, 1855), pp. 25-26; B. A. Botkin, Lay My Burden Down (Chicago, 1945), pp. 65, 86, 91, 124.} Minstrelsy also included superstition. The song “We Are Coming Sister Mary” was advertised as “founded on a superstition that exists among the Slaves that when one of their number is about to die they are forewarned by singing spirits” or “in a dream song.”\footnote{Christy Minstrels, 1854, and Wood and Christy Minstrels, 1855, Programs, Harvard Theater Collection (hereafter HTC). Newbell N. Puckett, Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1926) records numerous death omens and warnings.} Several songs tell of beliefs that heads should be shaved before burial, while others attest to Negroes’ belief in the devil:

\begin{verbatim}
White folks say de debils dead
An buried in a tan vat
De nigger say he raised again
And turned into a ram cat.
\end{verbatim}

Still other songs claim to present Negro folk beliefs about the origin of the world and natural phenomena.\footnote{Howe, pp. 126-127; Old Uncle Ned Songster (Philadelphia, 185?), pp. 66-67.}

Minstrels also drew on Negro nonsense humor and fables.\footnote{See Constance Rourke, American Humor (New York, 1931), chapter three and The Roots of American Civilization (New York, 1942), “Traditions for a Negro Literature,” for her fine treatment of probable Negro contributions to minstrelsy and of its social meaning.} Allusions to animals occur frequently in minstrel songs, often as unconnected fragments focusing on symbolic and nonsensical activities of raccoons, possums, jay birds, alligators, frogs, chickens and hounds, many of which are found later in black folksong collections. The tone of these verses ranges from ordinary hunting scenes to more ambiguous toughness:
Jaybird pon a swinging limb
Winked at me I winked at him
Cotched up a stone hit him on de shin
And dats de way we sucked him in.¹⁶

Much of the animal imagery was realistic, but some of it bordered on aggressive fantasy, which is clearly shown in two versions of “Jim Crack Corn.” In the common one, the blue tail fly bites the master’s horse, causing it to throw him to his death.¹⁷ But in another, a fly “big as an elephant” is in the master’s shoe and proceeds to devour him when he puts it on.

Poor mass did scream, de fly didn’t care
He eat till de shoe alone war dere
An all ob de ole Massa dat we could spy
Stuck out ob de troat ob de Blue Tail fly.¹⁸

Such anti-master sentiments were certainly not limited to animal songs.

Before the mid-1850’s, minstrel tricksters often ridiculed and harassed their masters in incidents resembling those later found in the John and Old Master stories in Negro folk tradition. By far the most common of these was the slave party held in the master’s absence. But unlike the black folk versions collected by Dorson and others, minstrels did not elaborate what happened on the master’s return.¹⁹ Like most of their parallels to folk tradition, these are fragmentary. Masters were pictured as unable to saddle horses, as running into posts while chasing chickens, and as not realizing that supposedly stupid blacks were in fact subverting the plantation by feeding green tobacco to sheep, eating oats meant for the horses, making master’s tea out of bitter leaves, and even beating the master’s coat while he still had it on.²⁰ Another of these tricksters served

¹⁸ Ethiopian Serenaders, “Jim Crack Corn,” n.p., n.d. [1846?], sheet music, HTC.
monkey leg instead of pork, caused his mistress to fall off her horse, and when she complained of being served ale without a head on it, he told her "put you own white head, marm, in de jug." In the ultimate turnabout he married his mistress after his master died.

But death lay Jack massa by de heels
And Jack soon love widdy missy he feels,
She take compassion, him wounds she heals
Dey dance same night de bridal reels.21

That much minstrel material was later collected from black tradition is clearly shown by these examples, by Newman White's extensive use of early minstrel songs to annotate his *American Negro Folksongs*, and by the frequent appearance of minstrel songs in other Negro folksong collections.22 White found that 104 of his 680 total songs had minstrel parallels. These and the other correlations between minstrelsy and folksong collections are almost entirely to *early* minstrelsy, when minstrels made their greatest use of folklore and frequently claimed they borrowed black lore. But since reliable records of antebellum Negro folksong and lore are so sparse, it is impossible to determine the extent of minstrel use of black tradition or their accuracy.23 It is probably safest to conclude that minstrels drew on black lore before the mid-1850's for part of their performances, which were at least compatible with black experience. But what is of most interest here is that many of these folk or folk-like elements virtually disappeared from minstrelsy after the mid-1850's. To explain this, one must see the audiences' relationship to minstrel images of blacks and slavery in their historical context.

Northern audiences were genuinely intrigued by the nature of the Negro especially the slave, and flocked to theaters and museums to learn about him as they did about Indians, Turks, Gypsies, dwarfs, elephants, and other exotic curiosities!24 Billing their shows as portraying "the oddities,

21 "Jasper Jack," *De Susannah and Thick Lip Melodist*, pp. 91-93.
peculiarities, eccentricities, and comicalities of the Sable Genus of Humanity," minstrels did create images of blacks that made them appear ludicrous and absurd. But before the mid-1850's, audiences also witnessed sympathetic images of black slaves' helpless plight. Besides presenting black slave tricksters, minstrels attacked slavery in terms very similar to those used by abolitionists, even though they condemned abolitionists as fanatics. Both pictured Negroes as having deep human affections and sensitivities, as being abused as slaves, and as trying to escape. Both charged masters with physical cruelty to slaves, with coveting and violating black women, and with destroying black families for lust and profit. Both argued that slaves ran away to escape brutality and to search for loved ones and that others died of heartbreak after masters inhumanely tore families apart.

But at the same time that minstrels humanized blacks by linking them with white folk types, by attributing the full range of human emotions to them, and by drawing audiences to identify with their predicament as slaves, they also maintained psychological distance between black and white by emphasizing Negro "peculiarities." Minstrels used heavy dialects, portrayed Negroes as foolish, stupid, and compulsively musical, and pictured them as physically grotesque. Minstrel blacks did not have hair; they had wool; they were "bleating black sheep: and their children were 'darky clubs'. They had bulging eyeballs, flat wide noses, gaping mouths with long, dangling lower lips, and gigantic feet with elongated, even at times flapping, heels." Blacks might be like the audience in being oppressed common people, but at the same time they were very, very different — and inferior. In this context one can imagine that northern audiences must have been even more delighted by the antics of the simple black tricksters against their white, aristocratic masters than by the similar triumphs of the white tricksters so common on antebellum stages. Thus, until the early 1850's, the egalitarian audiences sympathized with slaves only as symbolic victims of an oppressive, aristocratic institution,

25 Virginia Minstrels, 1844, program, and many others in HTC.
26 "Lucy Neal," described the breaking of families and was done by nearly all early minstrels; e.g. Howe, 3 and sheetmusic in HTC. "Walk Jawbone," Howe, pp. 216-217, details the physical torture. For full documentation, see the author's dissertation cited above.
27 Negative references to Negro features pervade minstrelsy in these years and then sharply decline after mid-1850. Patterson, pp. 45-85; Quotes are from Christy's Plantation Melodies #2 (New York, 1851), pp. 57-58, and Elias Howe, Ethiopian Glee Book #4 (Boston, 1850), p. 228.
while at the same time branding Negroes as inferiors with racist physical stereotypes. Slavery was abstractly opposed because it was a blot on American claims of liberty and equal opportunity for all, but audiences had no commitment to improving the welfare of blacks. Their primary commitments were to the nation's destiny, to their democratic creed, and to maintaining and enhancing their own status. Until the sectional crisis deepened in the 1850's, opposition to slavery as expressed in minstrelsy was consistent with these goals.

But by the mid-1850's, with the bloody Civil War in Kansas, slavery was no longer an abstract and distant issue. Indeed, the very existence of the Union itself was at stake — and for what? The grotesque black curiosities seen on the minstrel stage? Or the northern Negroes challenging the racial caste system by demanding full exercise of their rights? Or the abolitionists, who were attacked on and off the minstrel stage as fanatics bent on miscegenation and destruction of the Union?28 Hardly. Northern public opinion supported the racial caste system and was intensely nationalistic.29 Confronted with issues that struck at the heart of their principles and self-interest, the northern public polarized. Some supported the abolitionist movement and the northern Negro rights movement, others found their answers in the Republican Party, and most probably hoped for compromises like those of 1820 or 1850. But as the struggle intensified, the options seemed to narrow. "Slavery and Union, antislavery and disunion — these seemed to be the alternatives facing Americans," James Rawley has recently written of this problem. "Confronted with the alternatives, Americans at midcentury put the Union and white supremacy first."30

After the mid-1850's, the tone of minstrelsy sharply changed as its folk and anti-slavery content dramatically decreased. A strikingly similar pattern has been found in the children's literature of the period by John Crandall. Before 1850, this literature contained all aspects of the moral and ideological cases against slavery, but these disappeared in the 1850's. In their place were diatribes against sectionalism and patriotic exhorta-

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28 Minstrel attacks on abolitionists began in 1843 and peaked after 1855, e.g. "Aunt Harriet Beech Stowe," *Pop Goes the Weasel*, pp. 210-211.
tions in favor of compromise and compromisers. Writers of this literature were unable to reconcile the value of this reform with the threat it posed to the social order. "They chose," Crandall concludes, "to suppress the former in the interest of the latter." But these northerners still faced the problem of rationalizing slavery with the American Creed. Minstrelsy played an important part in this process.

After the mid-1850's, happy images of contented slaves dominated minstrelsy, and its popularity rocketed after a midcentury lull. Happy plantation types were part of minstrelsy from the very beginning, but until the late 1850's they were just one of many Negro character types. But after mid-century, these figures and the nostalgic, old "darky" looking back to the good old days on the plantation dominate minstrel images of southern Negroes. In drawing these images, white Americans rejected the humanizing content of folklore for the comforting facade of a romanticized, folksy caricature. Wily black tricksters and anti-slavery protesters were thrust aside for loyal, grinning darkies who loved their white folks and were contented and indeed fulfilled by working all day and singing and dancing all night. They contrasted their own carefree and blissful existence to the sorry state of northern Negroes, who were presented as either longing to return to the plantation or ludicrously aping white men without being able to take care of themselves.

Minstrels even transformed Uncle Tom's Cabin, also a very successful play after 1853, into "Happy Uncle Tom", which many minstrel companies performed with great success after 1854. The anti-slavery elements were deleted as the play became just a series of happy plantation songs and dances. Tom, who was not sold, sang of his preference for the plantation over the status of free Negroes; George and Eliza Harris merely courted, "jumped the broom", and sang romantic duets; and Topsy was topsy. This striking change in Uncle Tom's Cabin clearly reveals the basic thrust of minstrelsy in this period. Minstrels demonstrated in their portrayals of black characters that there was nothing wrong with the plantation system and in fact that it was best for Negroes.

The solution to the whites' dilemma was now clear. If Negroes were

32 Nathan, pp. 227-229 links the rise in popularity to Bryant's Minstrels' use of Dan Emmett's songs, which were heavily pro-plantation.
to enjoy the American rights to Life and Happiness, they could not have their Liberty. Total fulfillment for blacks came only within the subordinate roles of a benevolent caste system. Only on the plantation could they reach their potential and receive the supervision and care they inevitably needed. It would be a disservice to them if slavery were abolished. Confirmation of this for northerners was as close as the nearest minstrel show after the mid-1850’s.

Although some folk-based elements were retained and even greatly expanded because they confirmed these stereotypes (for example, superstition and love of music and dance), the full range of thoughts and emotions expressed in folklore was no longer suitable for Negro characters. Minstrel audiences’ brief glimpse at the complexity and humanity of the black man, though itself quite limited, gave way to simplified caricatures that rationalized white American racism and provided the molds into which blacks were forced — on stage and off.

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