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PHANTOMS OF FANTASY:
MATERIALITY, ENJOYMENT, AND
THE MINSTREL LEGACY OF SENTIMENTALISM

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2017

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for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This research utilized material culture concepts, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and literary analysis methodologies to investigate the rhetorical and experiential legacies of the antebellum ‘complex of sentimental principles’ within the twentieth century North American culture industry. Drawing on Eric Lott’s concepts ‘love and theft’ and the ‘black mirror,’ the author analyzed culture industry products like songs and novels, and argued that the terms of sentimental identification among North American whites came to depend on associative processes preceded by blackface minstrelsy.

Whereas minstrels had once constituted the stage-form by appealing to sentimentalism, eventually, in the years after American Civil War and the marginalization of the minstrel show and sentimentalism from the realm of political discourse, the terms of sentimental identification came to depend on an appeal to the blackface mask. An experiential “Black Big other” emerged from the lingering object-agency of antebellum objects and tropes, that is, a perceived subjectivity from behind the agency of racialized objects which served to animate the white gaze.

The study traced the experiential and rhetorical consequences of these developments throughout the history of the twentieth culture industry.

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INTRODUCTION:

MATERIALITY, ENJOYMENT, AND THE MINSTREL LEGACY OF SENTIMENTALISM

The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the home.

- Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Objects are not simply cultural receptacles that acquire meanings which can then be unearthed and read by the student or researcher. Instead, objects themselves might have agency.

- Karen Harvey, *History and Material Culture*

The following is a material culture analysis of the colorline in its relation to the American culture industry. The study posits racialized objects, objects imbued with racial meaning, as important actors in the development, maintenance, and sometimes blurring of the racial colorline. The study characterizes the power, or agency, of these racialized objects as twofold. In the first case, it involves the ability of objects to afford or represent in continuity with the rhetoric of their cultural past, despite changes to broader signifying systems with which those objects relate. The second involves the ability of objects to afford things which no human subject intended, to become, in a small way, subjects themselves. In her very sophisticated work, *The Power of Objects*, Jennifer Van Horn argued that object *assemblages* often fostered complex, relational-based object agencies in eighteenth century America.¹ For Van Horn, objects' power originates from the cumulative spaces of their association, from which they gather their "ability to assemble the social."² She also argued that objects' "formal qualities," their unique aesthetic

¹ Jennifer Van Horn, *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth Century America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 8.

² Van Horn, *The Power of Objects*, 8.

and organizational aspects, each “leaves traces through which the actions of past actors and users can be recovered.”³ Van Horn directed these concepts toward physical objects like paintings and maps which remain today as sources among museum and university collections. The following study instead applies Van Horn’s concepts to a slightly expanded definition of “object,” using the concept to characterize more generally the encultured and ordered stimuli subjects experience in myriad ways and forms. The two expanded objects analyzed here are the rhetoric of sentimentalism and blackface minstrelsy. The study argues that these two objects, through the kinds of “object agency” described above, exerted a strong rhetorical influence over the colorline; its definition, perceptibility, and, most importantly, its social reality; throughout the twentieth century. To analyze this object agency, the study examines products of the culture industry which draw on sentimental and minstrel tropes, and whose creation are the result of inequitable exchange of racial currency. Songs and novels which evidence racial tropes, and which appear important within a white sentimental imaginary, are the objects, *avec puissance*, of this study.

The associative cultural values which constituted and supported the nineteenth-century social category of race were, quite obviously, not negated with the emancipation of slavery, nor during the period of Reconstruction. The rise of Jim Crow segregation saw the old racist attitudes and racist powers continue to constrict and belittle the lives of African Americans in ways new, and yet subtly old. Of course, the American Civil War and its aftermath were significant events in the lives and history of African Americans, as were they for the experiential properties of dominant white subjectivity in its relation to African Americans. These events repositioned the coordinates of racialized social and economic structures, as well as the tropes and associative precedents which animated the dominant racialized subjectivity; but neither was completely dispelled. Instead, this ‘repositioning’ involved just

³ Van Horn, *The Power of Objects*, 23.

what the term implies, that is, a shuffling of existing, and new, social and cultural precedents in ways productive of both continuity and change. Throughout these processes, objects, tropes, and rhetoric related to the politics of race in the antebellum period came into complex new patterns of association with a vast array of signifiers, some of which bore only tangential relation to race as an intellectual concept. By virtue of their acquired cultural significance, these antebellum racializing objects also acquired an *active agency* in relation to subjects interpolated into post-Atlantic World culture(s) of North America, granting objects a measure of ‘pushback’ against the development of various post-war discourses and narratives. Weakened, even cornered, and forced to share increasing space with the likes of Lincoln, Robert Smalls, and W.E.B Du Bois, the props of the antebellum stage, nevertheless, remained set to direct actors’ performances and, in turn, to position the ‘mirror of slavery’ before the *scene* of post-Reconstruction African American life.⁴

Sentimentalism After the War

One of the most prolific of these objects to reinforce antebellum racial precedents in the years after the Civil War was the rhetoric of sentimentalism, as well as the various tropes which circled it in fluid association. Much recent work on sentimentalism has striven to consider the affective, social, and political dimensions of the concept, without the familiar sneering and disavowal of its analytical potential. Mary G. De Jong, among other scholars, traced the origin of sentimentalism to eighteenth century ideologies of sensibility and feeling.⁵ She pointed to Adam Smith’s influential *The Theory of*

⁴ This author struggled over the inclusion of the term ‘scene’ to describe the social world of African Americans, for fear it would project an unintended association of artifice or frivolity on to claims of black marginalization. The term was finally decided upon due to its useful Freudian connotation. The ‘primal scene,’ despite several recharacterizations by both Freud and later writers, generally continues to refer to an encounter between a Real (here the lived experiences of African Americans, not essentializing tropes about black ‘realness’) and an imposing outside authority (here, very simply, white fantasy). During and after the encounter, its traumatic values are displaced in ways which continue to influence, through unconscious processes, the subject-object relation. The term ‘scene,’ this author believes, helpfully describes the ways white fantasy was translated, through parallax, into black reality. See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (New York: Penguin, 1900/1973).

⁵ Mary G. De Jong, “Introduction,” from *Sentimentalism in Nineteenth Century America*, edited by Mary G. De Jong, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013), 3.

Moral Sentiments, which argued that “individuals can form social and political communities because they are able, by effort of the imagination and will, to understand one another’s emotions.”⁶ Writing as editor of the collection of essays, *Sentimentalism in Nineteenth Century America*, De Jung characterized sentimentalism as a protean “rhetorical mode,” rather than constituting a distinct genre.⁷ For De Jung and the other authors in the volume, sentimentalism as rhetorical mode can be described as an empathetic appeal based on an imagined continuity of sentiment with an Other, or what Glenn Hendler terms a “fantasy of ‘experiential equivalence’.”⁸ De Jung and the collection’s authors also characterize sentimentalism as forming a central, if largely ambiguous, political space during the period. Several authors point to the seemingly contradictory ends toward which this rhetoric was put, and the ease at which its associated tropes were reflexively reworked to suite different political intentions; the familiar overlapping of sentimentalism and racist ideology in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* serving as one prominent example and object of analysis.⁹ As De Jung notes, “sentimentality could go bad when its universalization of human feelings blocked respectful recognition of the very real differences in experience between privileged observers and the objects of their gaze.”¹⁰

This potential for epistemological “confusion” about Otherness, that every person possesses a universal structure of sentiment, and the subsequent potential for colonization of an Other’s sensibility, De Jung notes, are witnessable in various political works, stemming from various political intentions, throughout the antebellum period.¹¹ “A potent complex of sentimental principles, whose unifying effects led to shared views and feelings, was widely credited in the antebellum period with generating a

⁶ De Jung, “Introduction,” 14.

⁷ De Jung, “Introduction,” 7.

⁸ Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-century American Literature*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 4.

⁹ De Jung, “Introduction,” 14.

¹⁰ De Jung, “Introduction,” 16.

¹¹ De Jung, “Introduction,” 16.

national “family,” which in turn conferred identity on individuals.”¹² It might be said that for those unincluded in this ideology of family-nation, the ‘complex of sentimental principles,’ as object-actors, worked instead to deny identity. And in addition to constituting a space of political discourse, another author in the collection, Maglina Lubovich, argues that sentimentalism was heavily involved in cultural approaches to death, mourning, and loss. Lubovich notes that “common memorial texts, customs, and objects such as locks of hair,” were used to “acknowledge mortality, preserve memories of the dead, and affirm continuing communication with them.”¹³ Still another author, Adam Bradford, argues that the largescale trauma and carnage caused by the Civil War threw many of these sentimental approaches to death into disruption. Bradford argues that the death toll associated with the war pushed these ideologies to a breaking point, causing the “flaws and gaps” in sentimentalism to become “evident and speakable.”¹⁴ This, in turn, disrupted sentimentalism’s grasp on political space, and both mourning and politics became increasingly expressed through other objects and new relational precedents.¹⁵ De Jong notes that other authors might explore the themes and arguments within the collection and to investigate the extent to which sentimentalism might have “continued in other cultural forms” in the aftermath of the war.¹⁶

Considering the positions outlined above, this author argues that, although sentimentality may have forfeited its main political involvement, it remained, even magnified as, a stage for white existentiality, as a space for whites to pose and answer questions of ontology. Objects do not simply disappear or have their cultural values negated with the onset of a paradigm shift. Instead, they have the potential to linger within the new paradigm. The lastingness of sentimentalism’s rhetorical power, its continuing ability to afford a historical and overdetermined form of empathy, depended on the

¹² De Jong, “Introduction,” 24.

¹³ De Jong, “Introduction,” 24.

¹⁴ De Jong, “Introduction,” 25.

¹⁵ De Jong, “Introduction,” 23.

¹⁶ De Jong, “Introduction,” 25.

continuing potential for association between its related objects and tropes, whose earlier incarnations often remained within the cultural landscape, and were just as often reproduced by the culture industry. In other words, the individual pieces of the 'complex of sentimental principles' may have been torn asunder by the war, but this did not completely prevent them from being "put back together," and thus reestablishing some aspects of their former collective agency within North American cultural discourse. Displaced from their central position in the discourse of politics and death, the fleeting power of sentimental objects began to afford fleeting new experiences for the dominant white gaze; where subtle sentimental rhetorics, no longer directly signified by any one of its constituent objects, were afforded in relation to a lingering complex of objects. These affordances remained both political and related to death, though in a fashion perhaps characterizable as "once removed." Being experientially *at odds* with newer signifying systems and rhetorics, these affordances, in turn, fostered a discreet new sentimental interiority. Not only did sentimentalism linger, it changed. Marginalized from the mainstream of discourse, *sans* its publicly ritualistic and group aspects, sentimentalism began to afford for the white gaze a new conception of essential subjectivity. Sentimentalism went "missing" from the "outside," but remained to be experienced on the "inside." Subtly affording sentimental rhetoric through lingering "object clusters," a rhetoric whose own historical object was often the twin construction of individual and group identity formations, these objects gained a new ability to impress upon the dominant gaze an image of a concrete and stable western subject in relation to a seemingly non-sentimental "outside." Near the end of the nineteenth century, sentimentalism quietly gained the ability to better afford for white Americans an essential and permanent "in here."

But how do sentimental objects' lingering signifying potentials, and their experiential consequences for the white gaze, relate to the social lives of African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era? As Eric Lott has argued, nineteenth century blackface minstrels understood well sentimentalism's strange rhetorical and experiential paradoxes, its ability to convey empathy while

negating the *otherness* of the person being empathized with; hence negating their personhood.¹⁷

Minstrelsy's relation to sentimentalism was not marginal, the former drew from the latter tropes and devices at every stage of its popular life.¹⁸ Through its utilization of these devices, the terms of minstrelsy came to overlap with those of sentimentalism, with minstrel tropes effectively becoming part of the complex of sentimental principles. These tropes gained an ability to activate sentimental rhetoric from the minstrel stage, to force the rhetorical processes so important to the construction of dominant eighteenth and nineteenth century western subjectivities into relation with their own point of suture; to make the western subject perceive the hidden cultural, namely African, sources immediate to its own identity. Lott argued that, over the course of the nineteenth century, increasing awareness of the close proximity of the western subject to Africa was often experienced as scandalous, and also proved to be quite politically motivating: minstrelsy's ambiguous politics revolved around how to rhetorically approach this scandal.¹⁹ As Lott has argued, early minstrel shows often featured sympathetic portrayals of African Americans and were potentially productive of working class solidarity across the colorline through temporary deconstruction of race.²⁰ That solidarity, effectively, never came. Playing with racial and sentimental tropes, nineteenth century minstrels soon utilized the fluid territory they occupied to colonize the images and sounds of African Americans.²¹ What started as enjoyment of African American culture soon became a wish to negate it.

Even more ambiguous was that enjoyment, and sentimental identification, never really left the stage. Whites worked to solidify the concept of race while increasingly relying on African American cultural precedents to *define themselves* as white Americans. After the war, minstrelsy, as a distinct

¹⁷ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁸ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 11.

¹⁹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 18.

²⁰ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 23.

²¹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (New York: Verso, 2007).

stage form, began to lose its central position in popular culture. Nevertheless, as arguably the first popular culture, its influence could be deduced in varying degrees throughout the entire burgeoning culture industry, where even black performers took to applying burnt cork and other hallmarks of the minstrel stage.²² The images and sounds of blackness, experienced through the latent minstrel process of paradoxical identification, became the outward currency of culture industry products like vaudeville, ragtime, and jazz. The market for this currency became coextensive with that of the complex of sentimental principles, as the tropes of minstrelsy and sentimentalism acquired commensurate values within the culture industry. African Americans remained as “pure objects,” as stage-props within the subjective economy of the dominant gaze owing to the continuing, and increasing, prominence of minstrel-like representation. At the same time, African Americans, as “pure objects,” became newly entwined within the complex of sentimental principles. As sentimentalism was confined to an existential space by broader discursive and ideological developments, the minstrel representation of the culture industry became one of few means of activating its lingering complex of principles. In a certain way, *sentimentalism became nothing without minstrelsy*. This rendered the images and sounds of blackness, the representational characteristics of African Americans as they existed within the dominant gaze, as direct means of activating sentimentalism, as well as its growing existential dimension. Burlesqued African Americans remained as props for white discourse on an American culture industry stage continuously in-use since, and directly preceded by, the antebellum period, while actual African Americans were forced to bear the weight of the deeds committed by their ideational representatives in white men’s minds. (See Figure 1).

²² Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Third Edition, 1997), 12.

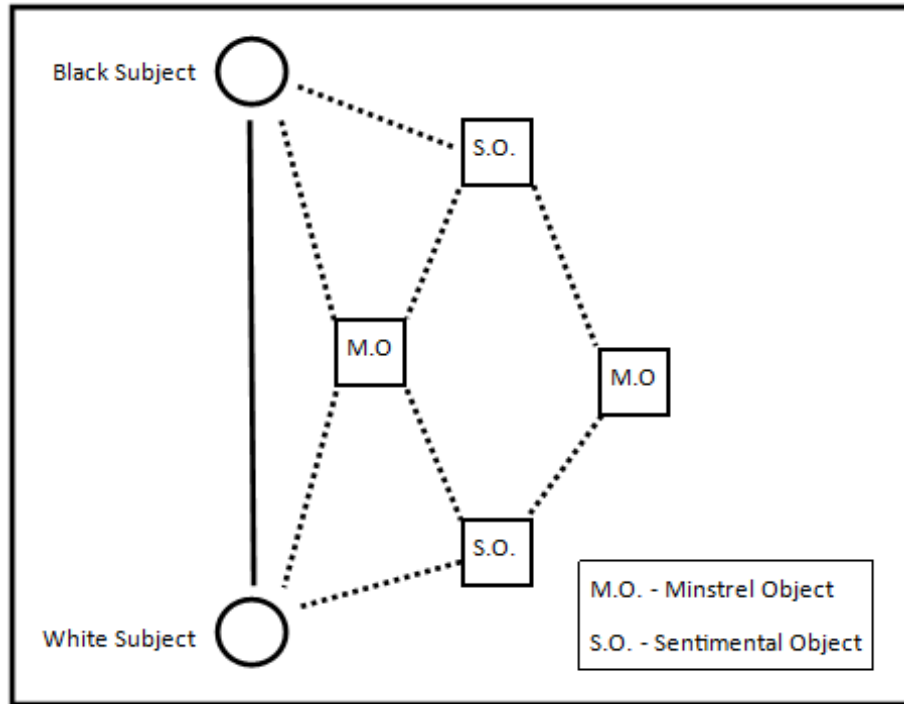


Figure 1. The colorline defined by its relation to sentimental and minstrel objects. (Created by author)

This dynamic, of course, stood in continuity with antebellum social relations, where African Americans were first conceived as agriculturally productive objects, sexual objects, or otherwise marketable objects before being directed and forced to fulfill those roles.²³ Considering this, the rise of lynching in the Jim Crow period, that phenomenon with little direct antebellum precedent and yet somehow seemingly so *close* to slavery, might be conceived as an effort to reaffirm white power in a highly specific way, that is, *to reaffirm white men’s rights to African Americans as objects*.²⁴ In addition to this, a new object-role emerged within the dominant gaze around the turn of the twentieth century which African Americans were soon compelled to fulfill: the existential object. Explorations of white

²³ See Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, (New York: Basic, 2016).

²⁴ In *Making Whiteness*, Grace Elizabeth Hale analyzed the “cultural work” of othering African American southerners during the Jim Crow era, and argued that lynching often functioned as a consumerist spectacle. Similarly, Cynthia Skove Nevéis argued that racial violence was closely important to the formation of white group identities. See Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), and Cynthia Skove Nevéis, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

existentiality through blackface gained a new character alongside the post-war shift within the complex of sentimental principles. As “pure objects” able to activate the tropes of sentimental identity formation, African Americans became constitutive factors in the construction of the dominate gaze *itself*. But how long did this last? If antebellum racializing objects had “worked” after the war to reinstate something of the status quo ante, to produce continuity and mitigate change, how did they fare alongside the cultural changes, and the culture industry changes, of the twentieth century?

The Culture Industry After Minstrelsy

In his ground-breaking 2012 monograph, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, Karl Hagstrom Miller argued that notions of “folk musical authenticity” were projected onto the American South by academic folklorists and the emerging phonograph industry during the early twentieth century.²⁵ Miller argued that a “folklore paradigm,” where cultural differences were characterized as purely structural and rooted deep in the past, came increasingly to displace an earlier “minstrel paradigm,” where access to another culture’s practices and forms was considered potentially open or negotiable (at least for the dominant culture).²⁶ He argued that “The 1920s witnessed the ascendance of folklore and the separation of minstrelsy – always more about white fantasy than black reality – from attempts at representing blackness.”²⁷ Miller characterized musical life in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as highly fluid and widely interactive with the emerging popular music industry. He argued that the musical tastes of southern audiences, black and white, widely overlapped with one another, as did the repertoires of both black and white musicians.²⁸ He analyzed the American Folklore Society’s early debates on race and philology

²⁵ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁶ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 8.

²⁷ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 10.

²⁸ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 30.

and charted its increasing influence on ideas about folk difference. He argued that the society drew on deterministic concepts of historical and cultural development “to collect and interpret artifacts that were isolated from modern American culture by race, time, evolution, or exposure to media.”²⁹ Miller argued the society projected these concepts onto the musical life of the South, marking new lines of difference which had not previously existed.³⁰ He argued these developments effectively served to negate the region’s reality of fluid practices and earlier popular music influence. With the region’s musical practices and tastes academically exoticized, Miller maintained that phonograph companies increasingly began to select and market artists based on the society’s concepts and, in the process, helped to construct the genres of folk, pop, and race music within an emerging popular consumer consciousness.³¹

Miller’s is a work about processes of contingent cultural construction. He convincingly argues for the emergence of a new, more rigid set of social and cultural constructs owing to a repositioning of broader ideologies, the increasing sophistication of mechanically-reproduced culture products, and the related creation of new markets for phonographic records.³² In this sense it is a successful and important contribution to the broader historiography surrounding twentieth century constructions of American identity and obverse processes of marginalization. On the other hand, Miller’s work obscures the extent to which elements of the ‘minstrel paradigm’ maintained influence throughout the period of the ‘folklore paradigm.’ Miller does, briefly, leave some room for a later culture industry continuity with minstrelsy, noting that the processes he describes were nevertheless “incomplete and contested,” but this is a passing point, the work proceeds to investigate the changes it describes as *complete* and *uncontested*.³³ Yet other recent works are more ambiguous here. In *Black Mirror: The Cultural*

²⁹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 17.

³⁰ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 4.

³¹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 5.

³² Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 27.

³³ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 11.

Contradictions of American Racism, published in 2018, Eric Lott argued that white participants in the American culture industry continued to draw on ideological, phantasmatic notions of blackness as props for their artistic output and affective identification after minstrelsy and throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.³⁴ That work largely extended arguments Lott had made in an earlier work, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, published in 1993 and partly detailed in the above section.³⁵

In his more recent work, *Black Mirror*, Lott argued that white participants in the American culture industry continued to draw on the associative tropes and identificatory processes predated by minstrelsy after its decline as a popular stage form. He characterized his research intentions as analyzing the “screens and templates of black mirroring,” which he described as “the mechanics, dispositions, and effects of the dominant culture’s looking at itself always through a fantasized black Other.”³⁶ Here, minstrelsy remains as a subtle and fleeting range of associative precedents with the potential to activate the paradoxical identificatory and marginalizing processes found in the original stage form. Despite the strengths of his argument, Lott’s work does not directly engage with Miller’s. Considering this, the following project is an effort, in part, to mitigate the historiographical divide between Miller and Lott. In short, how did minstrelsy remain if the ‘folklore paradigm’ took its place? Some of the disparity between the arguments is owed to the different kinds of research questions posed by each author, as well as their differing methodological outlooks. Lott, it is important to note, is not a historian, he has a PHD in English and bases his arguments in literary theory and analysis. Thus, another aim of this project is to consider Lott’s broader arguments about the legacy of minstrelsy in a historical

³⁴ Eric Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

³⁵ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 14.

³⁶ Lott, *Black Mirror*, xvii.

context investigative of change over time. These considerations have led to the adoption of the material culture methodology outlined above.

The rise of the phonograph industry for minstrelsy looked quite a bit like the changes in post-war discourse for sentimentalism. In each case, a rhetorical process preceded on union with an Other came to be marginalized against broader changes in discourse. Yet minstrelsy, like sentimentalism, was able to continue on through its own associative agency: the culture industry may have adopted the 'folklore paradigm' but it also continued to produce objects associated with minstrelsy. A veritable 'complex of blackface principles' entered a period of lingering agency as its objects were directed toward the ends of the 'folklore paradigm,' but which often afforded *something else*. The 'folklore paradigm' did not so much efface minstrelsy as narrow and conceal its ambiguous identificatory and marginalizing processes within the space of popular sentimentality. The two objects, sentimentalism and minstrelsy, marginalized from discourse, came to rely singlehandedly on each other for signification; some decades after the war, *minstrelsy became nothing without sentimentalism*. This description, it seems, goes a long way toward mitigating the historiographical divide between Miller and Lott. Material culture consideration of sentimental and minstrel objects offers a glimpse into the antagonisms between changing racial discourses and the agency of racial objects. Examining racialized objects, one finds that during the rise of the 'folklore paradigm,' blackness, more than ever, gained constitutive status within the white gaze. Black people themselves remained all but powerless over whites, instead, the spectral images and sounds of blackness emanating from the culture industry gained the increasing focus of middle class culture industry consumers. The materiality of sentimental and minstrel objects, "pure objects" which sublimated living African American people, gained explicit experiential characteristics within culture. For the dominant gaze, these amounted to an experience of objects' very agency, the agency of the black signifier; a Black Big Other.

The Black Big Other

Eric Lott has already laid much of the groundwork for explanation of this concept.³⁷ In *Black Mirror*, he drew on Jacques Lacan's theories of desire, excess, and lack to characterize the libidinal economy of the dominant gaze in its relation to African Americans as props for the maintenance of identity, and posited blackness as the "(b)lack upon which whiteness depends."³⁸ For Lacan, lack is constitutive of every identity, it animates desire and subjective relation to culture.³⁹ Yet, desire is itself not caused by the object being desired, which merely fills a shifting and chimeric void within subjects' libidinal economy. Instead, there exists (an)other, unattainable object which conditions every other object, the *objet petit a* (represented as (*a*) in Lacan's visual formulas). The (*a*) is the lack within subjects which characterizes their relation to culture, it is "the Other inside us," a remnant of the Real held over after interpolation into symbolic identity.⁴⁰ This lack corresponds to another lack, the lack within the Other, the boundless, alienating alterity represented by that which is inescapably experienced as 'outside' the subject. According to Bruce Fink, this correspondence is attributable to the process of separation, that is, separation from the m(o)ther and the corresponding creation of a discrete new subjectivity. In *The Lacanian Subject*, Fink notes,

Separation results in the splitting of the subject into ego and unconscious, and in a corresponding splitting of the Other into lacking Other (\bar{A}) and object *a*. None of these "parties" were there at the outset, and yet separation results in a kind of intersection whereby something of the Other that the subject considers his or her own, essential to his or her existence, is ripped away from the Other and retained by the now divided subject in fantasy.⁴¹

For Lott, objects surrounding blackness became this "something the subject considers his or her own" for the dominant white gaze. Throughout *Black Mirror* he points to examples of white culture industry

³⁷ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 4.

³⁸ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 133.

³⁹ Ed Pluth, "Lacan's Subversion of the Subject," *Continental Philosophy Review* 39, no. 3, (Dec 2006), 293-312.

⁴⁰ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 6.

⁴¹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 61.

creators and consumers attempting to stabilize the lack represented by object a with objects denoting blackness.⁴² In addition, this authors argues, the lacking Other (\mathcal{A}) also played a part in the process. For Lacan, the object a conditions desire, but it is also directed toward the lack in the Other. In this sense the (\mathcal{A}) also plays an animating role. The boundless and unknowable alterity represented by the Other's lack comes to be experienced, within culture, as an agency whose intentions *are* knowable. This process is quite similar to the 'fantasy of experiential equivalence' Hendler described in sentimentalism. Just as the (a) is a 'piece' of the Other within the subject, so the (\mathcal{A}) is a piece of the subject within the Other; it is a projection of order on to an abyss. Lacan characterized subjects' actions within culture, to a large extent, as mere attempts to understand something about the Other and its desire: "Che vuoi?" (what is it that you want from me?), the perennial question attributed by Lacan to subjects surveying their relation to culture.⁴³ Racialized objects also came to occupy this lack by defining the (b)lack in the Other for the dominant gaze. Blackness came to act as a stage prop which stabilized the white gaze, and, at the same time, to constitute the audience to whom white cultural performance was directed.

The Black Big Other emerged from the lingering object agency of sentimentalism and minstrelsy; it was an experience, for the white gaze, of that agency. Whites came to need blackness, not only to "complete" their identities, but to understand something about what the Other wanted from them; to understand what the audience demanded of their performance. Within the lingering complex of sentimental and minstrel principles, the influence of racialized object-actors gained an almost god-like dimension, it was an agency that appeared to exist within the world itself. Sentimental and minstrel

⁴² Lott, *Black Mirror*, 152.

⁴³ This is a bit of an oversimplification and hopefully will not be interpreted as a rehashing of the Cartesian Cogito. For Lacan, there is no subject before interpolation. Instead, the subject comes about retroactively after the processes of separation and alienation. The subject only "exists" within the space between the signifier and the sublimated body. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (New York: Verso, 1989), 95-144.

objects gave rise to this experience, and also became the means of rhetorically countering it. (See Figure 2).

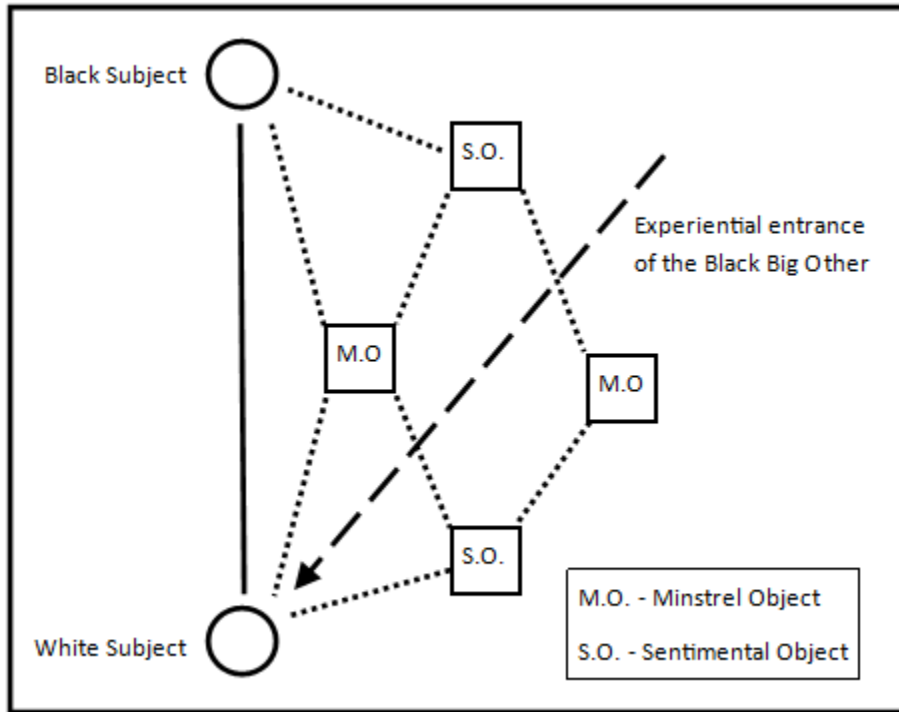


Figure 2. Relations between racial objects produce experience of object agency. (Created by author)

Afforded experiences of this phantasmatic third-party to cultural performance, white Americans began rhetorically reorganizing the relevant objects in efforts to negate it. Not only did the Black Big Other, as audience member, animate white subjectivity, give white performance its “life,” but the white actors on stage concurrently wanted to scare it out of the theatre. This latter effort is, to an extent, worthy of some sympathy. The Black Big Other did not and does not exist, it is the experiential result of a process of cultural mirroring going back centuries. Yet almost every method of its negation required the use of sentimental and minstrel objects. In order to be negated, the Black Big Other first had to be ‘summoned,’ but by summoning it, it would then have to be summoned again some time afterwards. Twentieth century whites were caught in a cultural feedback loop without obvious means of escape.

Nevertheless, there *were* means of escape. By allowing the complex of sentimental and minstrel principles to linger, by pretending the antebellum signifier no longer had any power, white Americans, namely culture industry creators and producers, thus allowed it to acquire a very insidious kind of object-agency; "...where the signifier is not functioning, it starts speaking on its own, at the edge of the highway."⁴⁴ The culture industry had only itself to blame for the experiential confusion wrought by its 'zombie-like' continuation of antebellum tropes. Ultimately, African Americans were the ones who paid the price for this confusion. If the Black Big Other held an agency over the white gaze, culture industry creators ended up projecting that agency on to African Americans while they worked to negate the Black Big Other. Throughout these rhetorical recalibrations, the agency of racialized objects remained intact, while the agency of African American people was repeatedly countered and made to resemble that of the Antebellum period, a time when there was nothing subtle about the phenomenon of black people existing as objects for whites.

The first chapter examines the process by which the complex of sentimental and minstrel principles came to rhetorically linger within the culture industry in the years following the Civil War. In doing so, it considers the origins of the Black Big Other and characterizes the latter's initial development. Relying on the material culture approach described above, the chapter examines two selections of early twentieth popular music.⁴⁵ It begins by considering the African American cultural origins of the song "Railroad Bill," and then examines its rhetorical reconstruction by white culture industry creators during the nineteen twenties. Created by African Americans during the first few years of the twentieth century, the song, nevertheless, drew on several sentimental tropes. After discussing this aspect of the song, the chapter notes that for the white musicians who eventually began performing

⁴⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 3: The Psychoses 1955–1956*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by R. Grigg, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993): 35.

⁴⁵ These sources were carefully chosen to stand in contrast with Miller's arguments, as the development of the two songs took place respectively before and after the rise of the "folklore paradigm."

it, these tropes quickly led into minstrel tropes. The chapter considers sources surrounding white “encounters” with “Railroad Bill” in an effort to characterize the song’s affordances and experiential values for early twentieth century white culture industry consumers. The chapter argues that white responses to “Railroad Bill” evidence the experiential processes described above. The chapter also points to later developments which indicate whites proved unsuccessful at negating African Americans through the negation of “Railroad Bill.” African Americans remained “in control” of the song, the chapter argues, long after whites tried to seize it. On the other hand, whites do appear to have been successful with another song: “Old Man River.” Written by whites to be sung by a black sharecropper character in the nineteen twenty-seven musical *Show Boat*, the song served as a compelling mixture of sentimental existentialism and minstrel projection, and overflowed with antebellum rhetorical and experiential precedent.⁴⁶ In “Old Man River,” whites first began to master the black existential object within the new folklore paradigm by reorganizing the staging of identifications to maximize the rhetorical power over the white gaze.

In the second chapter, discussion shifts more directly to the dynamics of sentimental and minstrel object agency within the folklore paradigm. It examines Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ nineteen thirty-eight novel *The Yearling*, and argues that the novel stages encounters with the Black Big Other through rhetorical deployment of lingering antebellum objects.⁴⁷ The chapter traces the range of identifications afforded throughout the narrative, and considers them alongside the social and cultural relations of its author. The novel, like “Railroad Bill,” stands out because of the unique circumstances of its creation in relation to surrounding discourses. It was written by a wealthy white woman living in rural Central Florida who employed several African American workers in both agricultural and domestic roles. These workers lived with Rawlings on her homestead at a time when the majority of African American

⁴⁶ Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, and Edna Ferber, *Show Boat*, (New York: T.B. Harms, 1927).

⁴⁷ Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and N. C. Wyeth, *The Yearling*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1939).

inhabitants of rural areas had moved away from their employers.⁴⁸ Like “Railroad Bill,” which seemed, for whites in the process of embracing the folklore concept, to follow the “rules” of traditional ballad composition in the age of popular music, this anachronistic social setting offered unique rhetorical access to lingering antebellum objects. The chapter argues that Rawlings not only relied on her employees for their manual labor, but as unique sources of, call it “inspiration,” for her literary works. Rawlings’ relationship with her employees is reflected in her novel’s rhetoric, where readers are led to utilize subtle tropes about blackness as existential props for the maintenance of identity. Readers are led to experience the agency of the black signifier, and then disavow that agency. Yet, the chapter argues, it is African American personhood which is disavowed, and, at the novel’s end, the Black Big Other returns again.

In the final chapter, discussion turns to the legacy the Black Big Other and antebellum objects in the aftermath of the mid-twentieth century changes within the culture industry. Mid-century saw the rise of Elvis and the relocation of the record industry from New York to Los Angeles, among other developments. If these are commonly considered paradigm-shifting events, might the old paradigms, by then twice or three times removed, have continued on in their influence?⁴⁹ Building on Lott’s arguments about *black mirroring* among cultural industry creators and consumers during the nineteen seventies and eighties, the chapter argues that the Black Big Other also continued to have influence during the period. The chapter examines Van Morrison’s nineteen eighty-three live performance of the song “Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two,” within the context of the artist’s broader career. Van Morrison was one of the most critically well-received artists of the era to evoke sentimental concepts.⁵⁰ And like the subjects of the previous chapters, the social and cultural circumstances surrounding his career seem to

⁴⁸ Rebecca Sharpless, “The Servants and Mrs. Rawlings: Martha Mickens and African American Life at Cross Creek,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (Spring 2011), 507.

⁴⁹ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 139.

⁵⁰ Several rock critics considered Van Morrison

better reflect earlier processes rather than contemporaneous ones. Here was a Northern Irishman who *really* sang like an African American, and who seemed to embody minstrel tropes of Irish blackness. The culture industry's then-typical racialized audio cues barely managed to afford his whiteness for listeners.⁵¹ Van Morrison seems to have internalized a set of tropes; the cultural closeness of Africa and Ireland, the "realness" of black music, etc.; dating back to the height of minstrelsy. He used blackness as a prop to buoy his own artistic output and personal identity in ways worthy of analysis alongside the subjects of Lott's works. And he also evoked the Black Big Other.

In "Rave on John Donne," Morrison worked within the (still) lingering complex of sentimental and minstrel principles to evoke an image of an essential western subject standing in direct continuity with that of seventeenth century English poet John Donne. And yet the song is not a simple attempt at codification of the past in the service of power, although that element is certainly present. The song is a dialectic of identification and negation; every identification proposed within the song is quickly negated lyrically, and even musically. While the song draws on antebellum tropes and identificatory processes, it does not simply repeat the earlier rhetoric. Instead, Morrison leads the audience to identify with the act of negation itself: "Is it true what you sang in your song?" he sings, "no," he replies to himself, and the audience.⁵² Similar to the process of "traversing of fantasy" in Lacan, Morrison utilizes sentimental and minstrel tropes to summon the Black Big Other, but shows that it *does not* demand performance from the white gaze.⁵³ It does not demand anything, it does not exist. He evokes the agency of the black signifier, but shows rhetorically that it is really just a signifier, just a song, an act; there is no one behind

⁵¹ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Colorline: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

⁵² Van Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two," *Live at the Grand Opera House Belfast*, (Mercury, 1984).

⁵³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

its curtain. Highlighting the Black Big Other's agency as a kind of "cultural mirage," Morrison shows that there are no black people in the audience, for the theatre is empty.

Still, Morrison's use of blackness as an artistic and identificory prop certainly remains problematic. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the contemporary agency of sentimental and minstrel objects, and a consideration of rhetorical approaches similar to Morrison's, but which avoid using blackness as a prop. These are directed toward increasing awareness and appreciation of the black signifier's continuing power within our cultural discourse. Only awareness of this power can negate its insidious influences. Eric Lott argues that minstrelsy remains, in an abstract sense, the space within which the politics of race in America unfold.⁵⁴ The recent controversies over the donning of blackface by prominent politicians, from both sides of the aisle, seem to confirm this judgment. Considering the agency of racialized objects offers the potential for a more dynamic interpretation of racial politics in America, and may offer insights into the construction of a more effective anti-racist political movement. We are not quite done dealing with "Jim Crow," neither the nineteenth century stage character nor the eponymously named twentieth century social relation. Taking account of its continuing influence is likely a necessary step toward its final negation.

⁵⁴ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 5.

CHAPTER ONE:

“A MIGHTY BAD MAN” : “RAILROAD BILL” AND THE MAKING OF THE BLACK BIG OTHER

That minstrelsy continued to linger within the culture industry in the years after the American Civil War was certainly not lost on African Americans, nor was its influence confined to white performers and audiences. With narrow entries into the cultural industry slowly opening to them during the late nineteenth century, several African American performers also began to rely on blackface tropes to find acceptance with white audiences.⁵⁵ Several African American performers blackened their faces with burnt cork, sang sentimental songs, and reproduced other minstrel tropes.⁵⁶ Lott’s notion of minstrelsy as the politics of race in America is especially relevant here: African Americans were forced to utilize minstrel tropes in order to push back against the negative portrayals of blacks emanating from the culture industry.⁵⁷ In other words, the politics of race dictated that their blackness could still not be directly shown, it had to be concealed beneath the signifier for blackness. For black performers to push back against minstrelsy, they were forced, for a time, to don blackface themselves, to knowingly wear their identities as costumes on the culture industry stage. Even those performers who managed to go without the black mask generally ended up evoking minstrel tropes.⁵⁸ As racial hierarchies began to re-solidify in the years after the War, owing, in part, to the discursive pushback enacted by racialized

⁵⁵ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971).

⁵⁶ Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 23.

⁵⁷ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 10.

⁵⁸ Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 24.

objects, African Americans utilized the same objects in efforts to mitigate or negate those hierarchies. And, as hinted above, blackface was not the only antebellum object to gain political currency for African Americans during the period. Many had also grown familiar with the complex of sentimental principles, its tropes and rhetorical dynamics, and had directed it toward political ends similar those of black blackface. African Americans relied on sentimentalism during the period to sentimentalize, and thus elevate, actors, actions, and events which fell out-of-line from the dominant discourse, but which served to buoy their communities and to defend against white supremacy.

“Railroad Bill” as Black Political Sentimentalism

Among examples of black political sentimentalism stands “Railroad Bill,” a group of African American “folk songs” created during the first decade of the nineteenth century. The real-life “Railroad Bill,” né Morris Slater, was an African American turpentine worker turned successful outlaw. Robbing trains and evading capture throughout the southeast United States during the last decade of the nineteenth century, he quickly became a celebrated hero among African American communities in the Florida panhandle, Georgia, Alabama, and beyond.⁵⁹ Considering Miller’s arguments, it is important to note that the cultural “authenticity” or “purity” of any American folk music (or any folk music, or any music), is more ephemeral than concrete.⁶⁰ The “Railroad Bill” songs do not originate in any “unfiltered” or wholly African American context because, of course, no such context actually exists.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the extent to which these songs *do* conform to notions of the folk is striking. John W. Roberts noted the “spontaneous” circumstances within which the songs seemed to originate.⁶² For Roberts they were, in

⁵⁹ John W. Roberts, ““Railroad Bill” and the American Outlaw Tradition,” *Western Folklore* 40, no. 4 (1981): 318.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 20.

⁶¹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 13.

⁶² Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 316.

some sense, “party songs,” events where multiple participants each contributed ad hoc verses celebrating the song’s protagonist.⁶³

These songs exaggerated Slater’s actual feats, such as his shooting abilities and fantastic escapes. Some of the songs attributed to him magical powers. Importantly, all of these early songs remained oral, they were not written down or transcribed by African Americans. Certainly, the songs seem accurately characterizable as containing African cultural inheritances, yet the folk category, as applied to the songs in the early twentieth century, tends to essentialize developments which were, and are, ultimately historically contingent and overdetermined. These songs were not the pure expression of any group mentality. Instead, they are the products of several different participants with diverse intentions, all operating in a diverse cultural milieu made up of various cultural inheritances. It is certainly a complicated, if impossible, endeavor if one wishes to trace the endless exchange of post-Atlantic World cultural goods back to their respective continents of origin; something this project does not attempt. But the project does follow Frew and Woods’s argument that African American, as well as broader post-Atlantic World, culture(s) share some structural continuity with African cultural precedents.⁶⁴ In addition, it is important to note the similar experiential horizons imposed on African Americans by the ever-solidifying construct of race. Considering each of these, the early “Railroad Bill” songs seem accurately characterizable as containing diverse and fluid intentions and perspectives, yet forming a semi-uniform signifying system with vastly different experiential values for those on either side of the colorline.

In his 1981 article, folklore historian John W. Roberts argued that “Railroad Bill” contained universal outlaw tropes.⁶⁵ Roberts characterized the ballad as a distinctly African American class

⁶³ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 320.

⁶⁴ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁶⁵ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 319.

expression, which nevertheless “belongs to a legendary ballad tradition with universal implications for understanding human responses to powerlessness and oppression.”⁶⁶ Considering Miller’s and others’ contributions, as well as the general tone and outlook of much recent scholarship, this argument seems likely to meet skepticism. Meaning and intentionality are today widely understood to be highly contingent and culturally determined, and universal “folk-types” popular in twentieth century academia have largely been discarded. Without completely ruling out the possibility that some similar range of material conditions might afford some similar range of experiential values, regardless of cultural content, owing to some enigmatic universal aspect of language, this kind of skepticism seems warranted. Roberts himself notes that the ballad’s similarity to white outlaw tropes, its resonance with white sensibilities, likely had its origin in the performative roles African Americans were forced to play for whites. Roberts notes that “if the black badman is considered a dangerous type by whites, blacks do not abandon him as a hero but rather find a way of glorifying him and making him palatable to whites at the same time.”⁶⁷ Roberts seems to be undermining his own argument here. When one considers the political aspects of the song’s creation, the racial ideologies its creators had to navigate, Roberts’ universal dimension begins to appear superficial. That is, Roberts shows how African Americans created “Railroad Bill” to *appear* universal to whites while disguising what it afforded those marginalized by ideologies of race. The creators of the ballad did so with perceptive awareness of the sonic colorline and with intention to undermine or make it ambiguous, not out of a universal inclination afforded by oppressed circumstances to mythologize larger-than-life characters.

The problem with Roberts’ article is that he characterizes Anglo and African American cultural traditions as structures unto themselves, as developing without any reference to each other. This is how he attempts to frame the novelty of his argument, by appealing to a universal element, the class-based

⁶⁶ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 328.

⁶⁷ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 326.

outlaw tropes found in “Railroad Bill,” as showing a deeper structural sameness beneath a superficial representation of difference. As hinted above, this author believes there are subtle and convincing ways of making this latter argument which account for the contingency of all cultural and social forms, and ultimately of all experience, but Roberts does not make these.⁶⁸ Instead, Roberts attempts to characterize the protagonist as fitting an archetypal Robin Hood position owing to a structural determinacy of class. Yet the evidence he offers, when considered alongside recent theoretical developments, seems to point to something else, that being the song’s protagonist as the kind of outlaw ultimately unwelcome in the spaces closest to early twentieth century popular whiteness. This is most directly evoked by Roberts’ mention of Dubois’ concept of “double consciousness” to explain the ways African Americans presented their cultural forms to whites during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶⁹ The idea that “Afro-Americans have perfected the art of presenting their folk ideals in a way that is both acceptable to whites and meaningful to blacks at the same,” for this author, seems to go much further in explaining the cultural dynamics Roberts is after than the actual arguments he puts forward.⁷⁰ If we consider Anglo and African American cultural spheres as both existing within a wider, post-Atlantic World structure of association and difference, each in a continuous process of self-definition in response to the other, the presence of these seemingly universal outlaw tropes in African American culture, I argue, begins to come into view. “Railroad Bill” featured western outlaw tropes because they existed as precedents from which African Americans could draw, which could be directed in new ways to respond to dehumanizing social circumstances.

If the song’s lyrics were subversive in the Jim Crow South, they were fixed to a melody and

⁶⁸ Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998.

⁶⁹ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 326.

⁷⁰ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 326.

chord progression which seemed anything but. According to the song's varied creators, "Railroad Bill was a mighty bad man, shot the midnight lantern out the brakeman's hand."⁷¹ Morris Slater's banditry and eventual violent death were well-publicized events, white people *knew* who black people were singing about.⁷² And yet, at the height of Jim Crow and lynching, African Americans seem (as far as we know) not to have incurred any serious remonstrations about the song.⁷³ Instead, whites seemed to have enjoyed the song almost from the start. It seems likely that the song's creators, and any other blacks who sang it, were able to include such subversive lyrics, in part, because its chord progression and melody sat in close relation to the lingering complex of sentimental and minstrel principles. The song's C-E-F-G progression and diatonic scale had been used in several sentimental minstrel numbers. Its subversive lyrical rhetoric was mitigated by being placed in relation to other, musically rhetorical objects. White Americans, at first listen, appeared to have been disarmed by "Railroad Bill," to have been lulled by its ability to evoke such familiar, yet increasingly subtle, tropes. And Black Americans seem likely to have understood what was going on.

While, on the one hand, it is certainly true that no two African Americans exercised the exact same intention in creating the song, and no two African Americans experienced the created song in the exact same way. On the other, we can probably assume that for the members of black communities involved in the song's creation, the dynamics at work were palpable. Systematically marginalized by dominant tropes and objects, African Americans were afforded a systematic understanding of the former's marginalizing power. Several versions of the song represent the lawman's pursuit of the protagonist in ways which afford identification by those marginalized by racial hierarchies of power:

⁷² Roberts, "Railroad Bill," 327.

⁷³ The first record of white reference to the song, and first written transcription, appears as a collection of lyrics published in a nineteen eleven edition of *The Journal of American Folklore*. See Howard W. Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negro," *Journal of American Folklore* 24 (1911): 291.

Standin' on corner didn't mean no harm,
Policeman grab me by my arm,
Wuz lookin' fer Railroad Bill,⁷⁴

Roberts rightly notes that, “The singer's use of the first person . . . is indicative of the singer's identification with this type of situation.”⁷⁵ And by deploying these lyrics via the lingering complex of sentimental and minstrel principles, African Americans were able to afford and popularize these kinds of identifications within the black community, while concealing them from whites.

That African Americans successfully used such sentimental objects to disarm the white gaze tells us quite a bit about the latter during the period. And, in a way, these developments are the best evidence of lingering sentimental and minstrel principles during the period. If these tropes had disappeared from the most conspicuous areas of the dominant discourse, what does their use by those marginalized from the same discourse say about the experiential realities of American whites? Obviously, if African Americans felt a need to utilize “white” tropes, they must have still had some kind of currency for whites. Whites stood in a social place where they could *afford* not to know of their own continued use of these currencies. African Americans, on the other hand, could not; they had to know, their quotidian existence depended on their ability to navigate a world dominated by racialized objects. And even more to the point, African Americans had to navigate that world *as* racialized objects or racialized signifiers: daily lip service paid to all of white people’s weird tropes and cultural ticks was virtually akin to the donning of the minstrel mask. African American power during this period was not a power wielded directly over whites. Recourse was available only to the black signifier, to the specter of blackness. Through sentimentalism, African Americans gained power over the black signifier, which, in turn, held power over the white gaze. Through this removed influence, African Americans managed to

⁷⁴ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry,” 291.

⁷⁵ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 319.

carve out discreet spaces, almost always in close proximity to the Fourth Wall of the culture industry, for their communities and lives.

The Codification of "Railroad Bill"

The agency of the black signifier was not, and is not, the same as black agency over signifiers. African Americans could work within the limits of these signifiers' materiality, they could reorganize and redirect them, but the power of the signifiers, as objects, remained intact and distinct from African American power. Existing as stage props within the white gaze, African Americans gauged audiences' reactions, learned to decipher dynamics involved in the creation of spectacle which the audience could not see. If this gives clues to the show's inner workings, it still does represent the show itself, that is, the direct rhetorical power of the black signifier over whiteness. As noted above, African American political uses of sentimentalism in "Railroad Bill" highlight the lingering power of sentimental objects within the dominant gaze. In addition, white musicians who began to record and perform the songs during the nineteen twenties highlight a more qualitative or experiential aspect of the black signifier as it moved about the culture industry stage. As can be seen in Roberts's article, African American creation and interaction with the song can be characterized as "diverse" or "fluid." Several different versions of the songs existed, several of which highlighted different kinds of themes. Yet when white Americans began to play and record the songs, they drew from only a narrow range of those multiplicitous lyrics and themes. The first recording of the song was made by white musicians Riley Puckett and Gid Tanner in 1924, quickly followed the same year by white musicians Roba Stanley and Bill Patterson.⁷⁶ Although published and described as an African American "folksong" in the *Journal of American Folklore* over a decade earlier, Stanley took out a copyright on the song shortly after her recording.⁷⁷ Stanley's ability to copyright the song points not only to her opportunism, but to a lack of wide-spread familiarity with the

⁷⁶ James Penick, "Railroad Bill," *Gulf Coast Historical Review* 1194 10(1): 85-92.

⁷⁷ Penick, "Railroad Bill," 87.

song.⁷⁸ If the nineteen twenties marked a point of codification for the phonograph industry, and thus for the establishment of the “folklore paradigm,” it is important to note that the ensuing increase in popularity of the song among whites occurred *during* the new paradigm.

White Americans began to sing and identify with “Railroad Bill” at the same moment they were supposed to have closed the door on anything not already codified as white. While this development points to an earlier and fluid inability of white listeners to ascertain the “sonic color line,” to hear the song’s “African American-ness,” it also highlights the currency which black cultural products represented to white musicians and audiences, regardless of the latter’s ability to fully place the “culture of origin.” If the social pressures of white supremacy had rendered whiteness “present” in African American cultural creations, stemming from their political bricolage of white sentimentalism, blackness was also present in white cultural acts. Whites had appropriated a set of songs which had previously been used to shore up and reaffirm black community, and redirected them toward the maintenance of white community. Whereas white presence in black cultural forms was a social necessity, the product of a more-or-less realistic awareness of the social situation and a reflexive cultural response which guaranteed blacks at least some form of social autonomy, black presence in white cultural forms was the result of much less utilitarian developments. This presence was the result of the black signifier itself, the object-agency granted to the stage-tropes of blackness. Whites were blind to African American political uses of sentimentalism (for that was the point), they could not see the black agency quietly being wrenched from the safest batch of white tropes. The specific specter of blackness which arose in white versions of “Railroad Bill” was not a fear of black agency over signifiers, but a fear of black signifiers’ agency over whites, a fear of Africa falling within white America’s cultural horizons, animating the white gaze.

⁷⁸ That is, outside the Florida panhandle and areas immediately peripheral. White inhabitants of the areas frequented by Slater certainly knew who he was and likely made the connection when they heard their black neighbors singing about “Railroad Bill.” Stanley’s patent points to this signification as being regionally confined to the communities of the songs’ origin.

Therein lies the cultural scandal which motivated the rhetoric of minstrelsy and which came, in a newly contingent way, to motivate the rhetorical recalibration of “Railroad Bill” by white culture industry creators. White Americans *loved* “Railroad Bill,” but they *feared* their love for him. Their relationship with black people was a relationship to black signifiers, that is, characterized by processes of “love and theft.”⁷⁹ And as the song’s tropes were reworked into props to buoy white identity, they were also given tickets to sit in the audience of white cultural performance. It was as if whites were trying to convince, not other whites, but blacks of the song’s white authorship, to make the culture of the song’s origin believe that it wasn’t really a black song, and thus to perpetuate the fantasy of pure white link to Old Europe, clear of any African cultural inheritances. Here, finally, is “Railroad Bill” as the Black Big Other: the title character is accepted as prop and protagonist within the horizons of the white gaze, and rejected as audience and antagonist coming from outside the gaze. The scandal which motivated this experiential paradox contingently emerged from the fact of sentimentalism’s discursive marginalization, to the newly subtle existential power signifiers began to wield over the white gaze in the years after the war. African Americans successfully managed to utilize and reorganize the lingering complex of principles to create spaces for their communities. Still having immense cultural value, if an ambiguous range of symbolic meaning, this reorganization involved a set of objects which white Americans had kept around but decided no longer to name. Instead, economic values had been found for lingering cultural values, as the growing culture industry found it profitable to appeal to white enjoyment, but to deny its contingency, and thus to deny the very existence of the great white cultural scandal.⁸⁰

Despite the diversity of the songs’ lyrics and themes among black communities, an almost universal feature of songs about “Railroad Bill,” in both black and white versions, is the attribution of the

⁷⁹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 13.

⁸⁰ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 84.

term “bad” to the title character.⁸¹ As used in African American communities, the term likely had its origins in the trickster tales of nineteenth century enslaved peoples, and the stories themselves were likely rooted in much older African story-telling precedents.⁸² Well-versed in whites notions of ethics and morals, especially after the mid-century missionary push to convert them to Christianity, enslaved Africans Americans conformed some of their ethical notions to those of the dominant culture, likely those which were already quite similar, while preserving others with which to maintain agency in the face of enslavement.⁸³ “Friendship and altruism were held up as positive values within the slave community, but such traits were not exhibited by the tricksters in their social relations with the powerful.”⁸⁴ African American use of the term “bad” to describe “Railroad Bill” can thus be characterized as a discreet brand of metaphor, its associative potential working to reinforce different experiences for different social groups, and which reproduced an ethical system which helped African Americans to navigate their marginalized social situation. As Lott notes, the ambiguous identificory potential provided by minstrelsy and the act of black mirroring granted whites some ability to play in the associative corridors which constituted these black ambiguous ethical spaces.⁸⁵ And yet here it was only play, its only end was white enjoyment, and, ultimately, the corridors led back to the complex of associations which help constitute the white gaze. The “badness” of “Railroad Bill” might have been *fun* for white Americans, they might have understood that by “bad” African Americans had meant “cunning,” “determined,” “fearless,” or “strong,” but first and foremost, it just meant bad.

⁸¹ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 320.

⁸² Charles Joyner argued that the tales served to impart an ethics of survival to black children within the context of their enslavement. This is another example of African American ‘double consciousness.’ “Not the least of the lessons embedded in their folktales was that values which are appropriate in some situations may not be useful in others.” Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 105.

⁸³ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 10.

⁸⁴ Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 176.

⁸⁵ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 17.

As Roberts noted, the real Morris Slater, as “Railroad Bill,” “became known for his daring manner and audacious acts.”⁸⁶ Among the several sets of lyrics Roberts investigated in the 1911 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, almost all celebrated his prowess and the ethical ends he directed it toward:

Railroad Bill was mighty sport,
Shot all buttons off high sheriff's coat
Den hollered, “Right on desperado Bill!”⁸⁷

The same can be said about another source from which Roberts drew, a collection of lyrics compiled by pioneering African American ethnomusicologist John Wesley Work III, published in 1940:

Railroad Bill, he went down Souf,
Shot all de teef, out o' de constable's mouf,
Wa'n't he bad, wa'n't he bad, wa'n't he bad.⁸⁸

Each of the above-mentioned collections features several other examples of “Railroad Bill” in similar circumstances, violently standing up to white power and, at least for a time, doing so successfully. Some versions even depicted Slater as a radical egalitarian aimed at redistributing amassed white wealth. Roberts analyzed lyrics found in a 1912 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* which demonstrate this:

Railroad Bill said before he died,
He'd fit all the trains so the rounders could ride.
Oh, ain't he bad, oh, railroad man!⁸⁹

While Roberts arguments about “Railroad Bill,” class, and race might be objectionable, his observation

⁸⁶ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 321

⁸⁷ Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry,” 292.

⁸⁸ John W. Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*, (New York, 1940)

⁸⁹ E. C. Perrow, “Songs and Rhymes from the South,” *Journal of American Folklore* 25, (1912)

that this last version of the song evidences a connection with Casey Jones seems accurate, if misplaced. He argues that the singer “apparently confuses him with Casey Jones.”⁹⁰ But what appears as a “confusion” to Roberts, when considering the necessarily subtle lyrical and metaphorical sensibility of black singers and songwriters, seems more likely to have been intentional. Each of these lyrics evidence African American singers and songwriters creating imaginary spaces where they come out on top, where dominant ethical rules produce free black people. By putting “Casey Jones” into relation with “Railroad Bill,” African Americans might have hoped, in an act of “reverse minstrelsy,” to “blacken Casey Jones,” to make the egalitarian tropes which surrounded that song work more directly for black people and black freedom. And despite the redirection of its surrounding tropes during white attempts at codification, African Americans managed to maintain control over the rhetorical space represented by “Railroad Bill,” as will be seen below.

As white Americans began to sing and record “Railroad Bill,” the protagonist’s “badness” began to take on different qualities. No longer performed by people forced by their social situation to perceive of its alternative ethics, the song’s power as signifier began to lead its white performers in new rhetorical directions. “Bad” became the normative bad, falling on the “wrong end” of a binary which helped to constitute the experiential terms of the dominant gaze. But that is not to say whites did not understand the metaphor. Working class and bohemian familiarity, and even fluency, with African American cultural forms dates to as early as the late eighteenth century.⁹¹ Early white connoisseurs of African American culture knew well the rhetorical corridors represented within songs, clothing styles, and expressions.⁹² As rearranged and performed by white musicians, the song retained a certain metaphorical cleverness. Its “aesthetics in the name of aesthetics” almost mirrored that of the original

⁹⁰ Roberts, “Railroad Bill,” 322

⁹¹ W.T. Lhamon, *Raising Cane: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 33.

⁹² Lhamon, *Raising Cane*, 104.

“aesthetics in the name of the social,” even revealing an overlap of bricoleuric proficiency concerning aesthetic ends directed at creating and maintaining social autonomy, and those of maximizing enjoyment, respectively. Whites maintained the alternative ethical space, not as a substitute for the cultural ethics afforded their social position by the dominant culture, but as a space for entertainment, a space for enjoyment.

Like several African American versions of the song, many white recordings began with an affirmation of the character as “bad” and recount an event representative of his prowess, strength, and/or cunning. Out of the diverse melodies, lyrical phrasings, and chord progressions evident in the African American songs, white versions, on the other hand, tended to rely only on variations of the C-E7-F-C-G-C progression. Considering this, it appears whites were drawn to versions of the song which appealed to their melodic sensibilities. Stated another way, lyrics and aesthetic ideas with the most object agency over the white gaze exerted influence over white appropriation and rhetorical rearrangement of the song. What began as a concealed enjoyment of the protagonist’s upending of social mores which marginalized black listeners became a purely aesthetic enjoyment. Thus could white performer Hobart Smith sing, supported by his proficient guitar skills and proficient ability to evoke sentimental tropes, that:

Railroad Bill, so mean and so bad
He whupped his Mammy, shot round at his Dad
One morning, just before day⁹³

But if the character’s exploits were to be enjoyed, they were not given the subtle approval they had received in the African American songs. Revealing identificory processes which stood in continuity with

⁹³ Hobart Smith, “Railroad Bill,” recorded 1942, track 6 on *The Alan Lomax Collection, Portraits: Hobart Smith, Blue Ridge Legacy*, New Rounder, compact disc.

nineteenth century minstrelsy, white versions of the song quickly began to rhetorically disavow the character, *while* enjoying him and his exploits. Whereas the pool of lyrics from which African Americans drew to create and recreate the songs were, as noted above, of diverse character and often critical of white power in systemic ways, white versions soon narrowed that range. While white versions did continue to bear some lyrical diversity; with some variations evident; they, nevertheless, overwhelmingly narrowed the scope of that pool and, in the process, set the terms for the song's rhetorical recalibration.

Smith's version, for instance, goes on to list individually, by verse, the characteristics of the protagonist's badness. While this dynamic and its accompanying lyrical content have African American cultural precedence, the rhetoric now shifts from being based in a fluidity of affordance between different racialized subject positions, to a fluidity between oral condemnation and musical enjoyment. This is most clearly evident in characterizations of the character's resistance to work, a common theme among the African American songs. Smith, echoing several African American versions, sings:

Railroad Bill is standing on the hill
He'll never work, or he never will,
Oh, ride, ride, ride⁹⁴

Of course, there exists a large historiography which explores the origins of the white working class and its history of resistance to changing workplace conditions owing to the growing influence of markets, and whites have popularly embraced several different ideas and tropes which champion resistance to market-dictated work.⁹⁵ This author does not deny the possibility that some overlap of meaning took place; that the whites who took up the songs valued these tropes, saw something of them in "Railroad Bill," and, in part, took up the song because of that connection. Nevertheless, proposing a simple

⁹⁴ Smith, "Railroad Bill."

⁹⁵ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 41.

one-for-one correspondence, as Roberts did, misses the influence of race, and especially racial currency, on the rhetorical development of the song. Even though whites took ownership of several tropes critical of excess work, and even if that ownership was present in the song, a racialized enjoyment was also present. Audiences' conscious knowledge of the song's African American origins, or even the race of its main character, were less important than the continuing lure of lingering sentimental principles and the increasing culture industry reliance on blackness as a prop for the stabilization of white identity.⁹⁶ The song's melody and chord progression, among other characteristics, appealed to white subjects' aesthetic sensibilities owing to this continuing influence. The same can be said about the song's lyrics. As whites began to sing about "Railroad Bill," the character's exploits became cause for a purely aesthetic enjoyment; the earlier acknowledgement of his personhood and agency, as well as its community-building potential for black communities, were obscured under the material agency of black cultural forms, in white cultural hands.

Whites redefined the character's "badness" in other ways as well. Of the diverse African American songs, some were sung from the point-of-view of women, and still some portrayed "Railroad Bill" as the singer's love interest. A lyric featured in the 1911 collection highlights this:

Honey babe, honey babe, where have you been so long?
I ain't been happy since you been gone,
Dat's all right, dat's all right, honey babe.⁹⁷

In this context, the character's "badness" referenced his sexual abilities. While, at least largely, absent from versions sang from the perspective of African American men (more on that shortly), this focus on the character's relationship with women took on ubiquitous status among the song's white male performers after the late nineteen twenties. And alongside this development was a general shift in the

⁹⁶ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 11.

⁹⁷ Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry," 292.

perspective of the singer; while most African American versions had featured the singer as a sympathetic third party to the events described, white versions largely came to identify the singer with members of the posse in pursuit of the title character. The textual evidence for the process by which this development took place is somewhat lacking, but a general trend is demonstrable. While there is no evidence that this lyric existed in African American versions, white performers, after the late nineteen twenties, redirected the earlier sexual dimension and sympathetic perspective and began to ubiquitously sing:

Railroad Bill took my wife,
If I didn't like it, gonna take my life,
And it's ride, ride, ride.⁹⁸

A similar lyric does appear among the 1911 collection of African American lyrics:

I'm goin' home an' tell my wife,
Railroad Bill try and take my life,
It's that bad Railroad Bill.⁹⁹

The available evidence is equivocal as to whether each of the above lyrics are of African American origin, or if the former resulted from direct white rhetorical intervention into the latter. Yet, regardless of the former's cultural authors, and even if it was created by African Americans, it does not appear to have played more than a marginal role in the African American songs. But after whites cultural industry creators began to codify the songs, they became standard in nearly every recording after the late nineteen twenties. Recalling that motivating factor of so much nineteenth century racial rhetoric, the

⁹⁸ Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Woody Guthrie, and Sonny Terry, "Railroad Bill," recorded early 1950s, track 5 on *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack*, Vanguard, compact disc.

⁹⁹ Odum, *Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry*, 290.

character's "badness" had, in part, morphed from that of sexual skill perceived by a lover, to a threat of miscegenation perceived by whites; a threat the singer, and thus the listener, became tasked with preventing.¹⁰⁰

This threat of miscegenation appears to have beckoned an interesting, and ambiguous, response from Woody Guthrie during his recording of the song with Ramblin' Jack Elliot and Sonny Terry during the early nineteen fifties. During the recording, Guthrie and Elliot play guitar and trade-off singing verses, while Terry accompanies with harmonica.¹⁰¹ The two white musicians sing a set of lyrics which had, by then, become standard among repertoires of American musicians, white and black. Given their frequent descriptions of trains and hobos in their respective other works, as well as the class-based political appeals which often surrounded those descriptions, Guthrie and Elliot were perhaps much more likely to identify with the character for strictly class-based reasons than other mid-twentieth century white performers. And for the first half of the recording this interpretation seems to play out. At the beginning of the seemingly impromptu session, Guthrie suggests "how about Railroad Bill?," before directing Elliot to trade-off off verses with him.¹⁰² As Guthrie states, in reference to the title character, that "...anyone that knows anything about trains knows about him," Terry, an African American, notes that its "a good song too."¹⁰³ Guthrie then states that the character "tried to a ride a freight train outta town," before the three musicians quickly launch into the song.¹⁰⁴

If this exchange seems innocuous enough, it begins to stand out when considered alongside what takes place later in the recording. Let us quickly note, before later revisiting the topic, that while Guthrie appeals to the character, Terry appeals to the song itself. As the recording progresses, the two

¹⁰⁰ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 100.

¹⁰¹ Guthrie, Elliot, and Terry, "Railroad Bill."

¹⁰² Guthrie, Elliot, and Terry, "Railroad Bill."

¹⁰³ Guthrie, Elliot, and Terry, "Railroad Bill."

¹⁰⁴ Guthrie, Elliot, and Terry, "Railroad Bill."

white musicians mention several of the tropes discussed above. The song's object agency over Guthrie and Elliot finally becomes apparent when Terry, unexpectedly to the other musicians, begins to sing during a bridge section. The white musicians seem to have intended the section to be a breakdown; the guitar begins to play a more complicated melody in a different rhythm immediately after one of Elliot's verses; and they had probably expected Terry to contribute his harmonica to that effect. Instead, as Terry begins to sing "I'm gonna buy me a pistol," a new aesthetic dynamic is introduced; one that is, to contemporary ears, probably the most interesting part of the performance, and one obviously unintended by the white musicians.¹⁰⁵ Half-way through Terry's verse, Guthrie ambiguously shouts "hey!" before quickly taking the next verse. During the shout, Guthrie's voice is under distress, its tone and timbre affording a vague sense of contemptuousness. It is also an excited, affected reply; Terry's singing has obviously had an impact on Guthrie and his reply works as an acknowledgement of such; the trope of the exasperated white hipster letting the black musician know their set was "hot."¹⁰⁶ Guthrie's reply is both of these things, contemptuous and compelled, for he has just encountered the Black Big Other. Like nineteenth century popular audiences to the minstrel stage, who felt scandalized over their attraction to African American cultural forms and phantasmatically asserted European cultural origin on those forms which compelled them most, Guthrie's reply to Terry is a kind of warning, "don't talk about it... don't highlight the theft implicit in my performance, and surrender the goods you've brought, they're *white* now."¹⁰⁷

Terry's verse, while difficult to decipher word-for-word from the recording (likely due to his increased distance from the microphone compared to the other musicians), nevertheless features a creative mixture of some of the different lyrics evident in the 1911 collection.¹⁰⁸ Like the African

¹⁰⁵ Guthrie, Elliot, and Terry, "Railroad Bill."

¹⁰⁶ For the trope itself, see Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, (New York: Penguin, 1957).

¹⁰⁷ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 110.

¹⁰⁸ Guthrie, Elliot, and Terry, "Railroad Bill."

Americans who first created, and continuously recreated, the earlier songs, Terry works as a bricoleur in relation to existing tropes to create a space for himself in a racialized social situation. Perhaps this explains his stated fondness for the song, compared to Guthrie's fondness for the character. "Railroad Bill," for Terry, represents a space which can be maneuvered and manipulated, a space which affords black men an agency in the example of the title character. Guthrie, on the other hand, is too compelled by the song to have agency over it. Sitting in relation to a lingering complex of sentimental principles, a complex which had subtly come to form the coordinates of white racialized subjectivity, the song, instead, had agency over him. Of course, outside the direct circumstances of the song, Guthrie and Elliot were the ones with comparatively the most agency in the situation. But within circumstances of the song, the rules of the culture industry stage were in-play, and once the show began, the theatre owners were forced to await curtain call before addressing any insubordination from the performers. And the disparity between these two power dynamics might explain Guthrie's stated fondness for the character. Like other white subjects, whose cultural experiences sat in specific relation to specific racialized tropes, organized along the rhetorical corridors of sentimentalism, Guthrie enjoyed the song *excessively*. This excess arose from the breaking of racial taboos involved in the listening process. Guthrie's was a guilty and overdetermined listening, his enjoyment predicated on disavowal of some cultural concept he experienced as normal. The whole outburst during the performance was both an acknowledgment of his excessive enjoyment and an attempt at its disavowal; a hurried and shoddy, but revealing, version of the broader rhetorical and experiential processes which were then taking place in relation to the song.

Yet whites, like Guthrie, were never really successful in codifying "Railroad Bill." Its fluidity standardized, and its subversive potential bought-and-sold, the unified song, nevertheless, remained a space with unique bricoleuric and creative potential for African Americans. Glossing over countless musicians who have performed the song through the decades of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, let us quickly examine a version of the song by Blind Boy Paxton, recorded in the twenty tens.

Paxton's musical career highlights the strange and unseen rhetorical and experiential corridors at work in North American racial identity formation and performance. Much has been written, and invented, about Paxton; about his being born and raised in Los Angeles, yet with an ability to indistinguishably present himself as a performer from the early twentieth century American South; about his reduced, though functioning, eyesight; and about his being an African American in an overwhelmingly white contemporary folk industry.¹⁰⁹ What is clear, at least to this author, is that Paxton's seeming folk authenticity has less to do with a strict adherence to the genre's archetypes, than with his ability to present those archetypes as new. His version of "Railroad Bill" engages with each of the themes and tropes standardized by white performers, and yet reintroduces the earlier fluidity. Like Terry, Paxton works as a bricoleur to create a space for himself within the song's rhetoric. Tying together and reinventing several of the codified song's rhetorical threads, Paxton, somewhat remarkably, sings:

You can drink your wine out the crystal cup,
But your man in that graveyard ain't never gonna wake up,
You can die with old Railroad Bill.¹¹⁰

The entire threat of miscegenation codified into the song is here reversed along the earlier ethical lines. To be sure, Paxton has just announced, rhetorically, his intention to murder his lover because of an infidelity with the title character. Without minimizing this instance of symbolic violence toward women, and there are other examples throughout Paxton's work, let us simply note the ethical ambiguity involved. Paxton has taken the song in a direction requiring proficiency in bricolage; he opens up new associative potentials in a set of seemingly hollowed lyrics. Throughout these subversions, the title character is reaffirmed as the trope shaped by whites, and yet the earlier radicalism is also reaffirmed. Like white performers and audiences of the song, who rhetorically sought the character as members of

¹⁰⁹ Steve Newton, "Digging for the Real Facts about Jerron "Blind Boy" Paxton," *Georgia Straight*, (January 29, 2014).

¹¹⁰ Blind Boy Paxton, "Railroad Bill," recorded 2012, track 2 on *Dirtiest Little Darling/Railroad Bill*, Evangelist, mp3.

the posse, Paxton too seeks the character. But Paxton seeks the character from a unique position compared to the white performers, whose overdetermined relationship to minstrel and sentimental tropes caused them to necessarily fail in following the character's example, too kill the character and take his place. Standing on the opposite side of the colorline, with a different kind of access to the cultural industry's staging of race, Paxton is able to do just that. Like Terry, he doesn't need the character, just the song.

"Old Man River"

Despite the influence of lingering antebellum objects, the rise of the folklore paradigm during the nineteen twenties did have important consequences for sentimental and minstrel processes of identification. If the rhetorical development of "Railroad Bill" had consisted in the white gaze coming into minstrel relation with, and attempting to reorganize, instances of black political sentimentalism, a process which had, in part, contributed to the experiential emergence of the Black Big Other as the audience to white cultural performance, the new paradigm shifted the terms of the latter's rhetorical disavowal. The folklore paradigm projected onto the past rigid cultural spheres, and accompanied a process whereby America's racialized music(s) were organized into strictly defined consumer groups.¹¹¹ Miller was right to note the artifice of this development, to criticize the constructedness of a one-for-one equivalent between race and musical meaning, but he missed the extent to which this construct was subtly negated by culture industry creators.¹¹² Despite being safely set in a white world full of white objects, white Americans continued to enjoy black cultural forms. The cultural scandal which motivated minstrelsy, and then the rhetorical development of "Railroad Bill," that is, white Americans unease over their "African enjoyment," led them to meet the lingering influence of antebellum objects in new ways; namely, by reorganizing the staging of sentimental and minstrel identifications. The emphasis shifted

¹¹¹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 14.

¹¹² Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 20.

from the reorganization of black cultural forms to the wholesale creation of new sentimental and minstrel identificatory potentials constructed from white tropes about blackness. The logic of culture industry efficacy is immediately obvious: why wait for African Americans to come up with something for the industry to peddle when the building blocks are cheaply and immediately available? It was no longer about taking specific black songs, dances, or expressions and reorganizing them in the name of white supremacy, it was now about inventing new songs for blacks to sing upon the culture industry stage, as well as subtly placing tropes about blackness amid scenes and songs meant to afford whiteness.¹¹³ This neurotic staging of imagined blackness before an imagined black audience is witnessable, or audible, in the nineteen twenties show tune, “Old Man River.”

Written by prolific culture industry lyricist and stage-producer Oscar Hammerstein II for the 1927 musical *Show Boat*, the song became standard repertoire among such performers as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Judy Garland.¹¹⁴ It is sung from the perspective of a black longshoreman aboard a turn-of-the-century showboat traveling along the Mississippi River. The song is notable here for two reasons: it deals with compelling existential themes, and it uses an African American to explore those themes. The crux of the song, that the river is coldly unconcerned with the worker’s unending toils, that “it just keeps rolling along,” is a compelling reflection on nature and even existence itself, a human subject agonizing over the likelihood of there being no intentional agency in nature, no gaze from its “other side.”¹¹⁵ The song contains an interesting, and sophisticated, use of metaphor in personifying the river, its personhood within the song being negated right when it is given a name:

I’m tired of living and scared of dying,
But Old Man River, he just keeps rollin’ along.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ More on this latter claim follows in Chapter Two.

¹¹⁴ Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, and Edna Ferber, “Old Man River,” from *Show Boat*, (New York: T.B. Harms, 1927).

¹¹⁵ Kern and Hammerstein, “Old Man River,” *Showboat*.

¹¹⁶ Kern and Hammerstein, “Old Man River,” *Showboat*.

And yet, any straightforward reading of the song's existentialism is made impossible by the racial dynamics at work. The white songwriter engaged these themes, because of the lingering influence of antebellum objects, the only way they knew how: by using a black marionette. And because of the sentimental and minstrel tropes which are evoked, and their ability to afford an experience of a Black Big Other, the earlier negation of the river's personhood is itself negated: a perceived intentional agency in nature returns, Old Man River is the Black Big Other. White existential fears are given symbolic expression, but the affective consequences are sublimated under the black signifier. The song is a staging of white ownership over black cultural forms before a black audience, the product of an overdetermined wish to both surpass the era's racial politics, and forever codify them. And like so many other tasks carried out by blacks under duress from whites, the image of blackness in the white mind was made to bear the weight of whites' bleakest existential fears; pure objects whose utility was to solve the problem of subjectivity for the powerful.

CHAPTER TWO:

ENCOUNTERING THE BLACK BIG OTHER IN MARJORIE KINNAN RAWLINGS' *THE YEARLING*

The restaging of sentimental and minstrel identifications which accompanied the rise of the folklore paradigm was not limited to popular music: the influence of lingering antebellum objects was felt throughout the culture industry, and it was rhetorically engaged and redirected in various formats. During the nineteen thirties and forties, the rhetorical strategies used to combat the agency of antebellum objects and the rhetorical power of Africa over white economies of enjoyment, evident in songs like "Old Man River," began to appear in popular sentimental novels. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' 1938 novel, *The Yearling*, is a prominent example. A coming-of-age story and hunting narrative in the Florida literary tradition, it holds a lasting place in the sentimental imaginary of the American white middle class.¹¹⁷ It was the best-selling American novel of 1938 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1939.¹¹⁸ Gregory Peck was nominated for best actor for his portrayal of patriarch outdoorsman Penny Baxter in the 1946 film adaptation.¹¹⁹ The novel has been read by generations of Florida primary school students and, since shortly after Rawlings' death in 1953, the house in which the novel was written has

¹¹⁷ Rawlings, Marjorie Kinnan, and N. C. Wyeth. 1939. *The Yearling*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

¹¹⁸ Kathryn Seidel, "A Boy and His Fawn: Parallel Animals in "A Trip to Florida for Health and Sport" and "The Yearling" *Florida Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (Spring 2011), 424.

¹¹⁹ *The Yearling*, directed by Clarence Brown, MGM, 1946. Film.

been maintained as a historic house museum, complete with idyllic Central Florida backwoods scenery and the outbuilding which once housed Rawlings' African American servants.¹²⁰

Race and Labor at Rawlings' Homestead

Indeed, the latter note looms increasingly large over perceptions of Rawlings' life and work. Recent studies of African American life at Rawlings' Cross Creek farm have revealed not only class, but racial stratification at work.¹²¹ Rawlings' servants lived full-time on the property (by the 1930s increasingly rare), performed all chores necessary to run a self-sustaining farm, and were expected to perform tasks at any time, day or night, upon Rawlings' request.¹²² Rawlings' temperament toward her employees has been characterized as highly mercurial: sometimes drunk and vicious, other times, usually when no white guests were visiting, seemingly concerned and affectionate.¹²³ Historian Rebecca Sharpless argues that Rawlings would often rely on this sense of closeness with her employees in efforts to manipulate working arrangements.¹²⁴ Sharpless argues that the image of sophisticated outdoorswoman, knowledgeable and keen to the rhythms and ways of rural life, which Rawlings projected into her fiction and social life, depended on the rural knowledge and skill sets of her African American employees.¹²⁵ Considering the influential and ubiquitous presence of African Americans on Rawlings' farm and the cultural world she drew from in her work, it is notable that, while they are featured prominently in Rawlings' semi-autobiographical *Cross Creek*, no African American characters appear in *The Yearling*.¹²⁶ This absence, considered alongside the novel's popular status as sentimental

¹²⁰ Rebecca Sharpless, "The Servants and Mrs. Rawlings: Martha Mickens and African American Life at Cross Creek," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (Spring 2011), 507.

¹²¹ Rebecca Sharpless, "Neither Friends nor Peers: Idella Parker, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and the Limits of Gender Solidarity at Cross Creek," *Journal of Southern History* 78, no. 2 (May 2012), 330.

¹²² Sharpless, "The Servants and Mrs. Rawlings," 508.

¹²³ Sharpless, "The Servants and Mrs. Rawlings," 510.

¹²⁴ Sharpless, "The Servants and Mrs. Rawlings," 511.

¹²⁵ Sharpless, "The Servants and Mrs. Rawlings," 507.

¹²⁶ Anna Lillios, *Crossing the Creek: The Literary Friendship of Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2011).

literature, raise questions about the novel's treatment of race and its relation to popular notions of white identity. What ideological and rhetorical values can be attributed to Rawlings' narrative? What can be made of the lack of African American characters? How might the novel's strange series of representations relate to the lingering influence of antebellum objects, the Black Big Other, and changing rhetorical tactics aimed at negating the power of the black signifier?

Although no black characters appear in Rawlings' narrative, African American cultural characteristics and related tropes are widely identifiable throughout.¹²⁷ Perhaps this is not surprising. After trips to research and interview the rural whites upon whom the characters and narrative are based, Rawlings would return to Cross Creek, where she was inscribed in a set of power relations containing lingering elements and echoes of the plantation. And like the forms of representation contemporaneous with the plantation, which sentimentally embraced black cultural characteristics while increasingly negating the presence of black people, Rawlings managed to subtly afford blackness, while negating black personhood.¹²⁸ In Rawlings' narrative, readers sympathetically identify with characters and experiences which are ideologically and racially ambiguous, a process of representation with important historical, political, and social implications. Kinnan's narrative displays a pattern of cross-racial fascination and racial projection owing to the ideological legacy of nineteenth century minstrelsy. Each of the characters occupy both white and black spaces of North American Atlantic culture and display cultural characteristics ideologically associated with either group. As a reader, the process of effectively shifting through and "classifying" these different racial aspects is nearly impossible. Throughout the novel, different racial characteristics bleed into each other. In some cases, characters develop through distinct black and white "phases" (although the phases are distinct, their

¹²⁷ The question of real authenticity regarding these characteristics and tropes is beside the point. What is important, for determining the rhetorical impact of Kinnan's text, is that Kinnan and the popular audience considered, and consider, them to be authentic.

¹²⁸ See above note.

boundaries appear gradual and porous). In other cases, characters display both white and black characteristics ideologically juxtaposed on top of one another.

The novel's 1938 cover illustration, advertising, and other paratextual clues showed the characters as white, and readers have likely, ubiquitously, interpreted them that way. Yet within the text itself, the characters' whiteness can only be deduced from fleeting accounts of the characters' lives before the start of the narrative. Readers learn that some of the characters had owned land before the start of the Civil War and some had fought for the confederate army. Without the knowledge that each of the characters had owned land and had either fought in the confederate army, had waited for a confederate soldier spouse to return, or else was born to one of these character types, the book's racial characterizations would have resulted, for readers both contemporaneous with its publication and those today, in a more serious case of representational ambiguity. The character's backstory, and the obvious paratextual clues denoting whiteness, ground the narrative's rhetoric on race. Of course, this ambiguous process of racial representation is not necessarily problematic, and one can note that it underlines the extent to which constructed racial boundaries could be made porous during Rawlings' era - a kind of cross-racial rural solidarity in experience and value. The problem is that Rawlings' readers are made to identify with black culture, not black people. Rawlings' readers identify with an ambiguously-white boy, himself caught identifying with ambiguously-black people, and whose frenzied relationship to nature and wildlife overlaps with his relationship toward the seemingly black, but white, Forrester family. Over the course of the narrative, Jody's, and the reader's, shifting identifications, with nature and with other characters, reveal rhetoric regarding race, whiteness, and notions of cultural authenticity. This ideological and racial rhetoric, though utilizing tropes and forms of representation based in nineteenth century social and cultural politics, was nevertheless directed toward the politics of race and identity in the 1930s.

Like “Old Man River,” which drew on white tropes about blackness to create an “original” white composition with increased white power over racialized objects, Rawlings’ narrative does not rely on any specific African American creation to sustain its series of racial identifications, but merely draws from the complex of tropes and objects which signified blackness within the white gaze. Rawlings, in her uniquely outmoded social position relative to her employees, had a kind-of “minstrel access” to black labor and black cultural forms, during the era of the folklore paradigm. Commanding and directing black labor in the house, in the yard, in the woods, at the lake, and in the workers’ *own home*, Rawlings similarly commanded and directed an abstract blackness in her literary works. Perhaps this explains something about her literary talents and success: the author had a unique ability as bricoleur to make blackness and the Black Big Other, source of paradoxical enjoyment and repulsion within the white gaze, fleetingly palpable in a “lily-white” product of the folklore paradigm-era culture industry. In doing so, the appearance of the Black Big Other, the perceivable agency of the black signifier, was rendered under full white rhetorical control, the actual agency of the black signifier was no longer of any concern. Rawlings’ novel is a meta-reflection on culture industry staging of racialized objects and their relation to enjoyment and power within American cultural discourse. White people’s enjoyment of African American culture motivates Rawlings’ narrative, produces its narrative tension, which is resolved when the reader is finally made to identify with a rigidly defined symbolic community, and the fantasy of white experiential equivalence has been fully set in a closed white loop.

The Yearling

Set in the late eighteen seventies, *The Yearling* begins with young Jody Baxter shirking his farm chores and sneaking off into the Central Florida wilderness. He and his parents live on a small, secluded homestead and are struggling to maintain their material existence. Abandoning his garden hoe and staying out of his mother’s line of sight, Jody heads for an idyllic fresh-water spring, where he spends

the afternoon enchanted by nature. Jody's father, an expert backwoods hunter, has taught him about the wildlife in the area. Jody knows how to track animals, about their intelligence and behavior, and, like his father, is fascinated with the birds, bears, and wildcats of nineteenth century Central Florida. Jody identifies different animal tracks and sees a deer at the spring. Jody accidentally falls asleep at the spring, awakens with a panic, and heads home worried his parents will scold him for his absence. Jody arrives at the homestead as the sun is fading, and meets his father outside their cabin. Confronted about his absence, Jody states that he had gone to investigate a beehive. Instead of scolding him, Jody's father reflects on the day's nice weather and notes that he would have done the same thing when he was young. "What would I do this fine spring day, was I a boy? . . . I'd go a-ramblin'."¹²⁹ But Jody's mother, his father warns, will not tolerate Jody's irresponsibility. He tells Jody he will cover for him. "Men-folks has got to stick together in the name o' peace. You carry your Ma a good bait o' wood now," he tells Jody.¹³⁰ The family sits down to dinner, in a better mood and with more food than usual, and Jody remains excited about his earlier encounters with nature. In fact, he's more than excited. "You're addled," . . . his mother tells him . . . "Just plain addled."¹³¹ Jody goes to bed overwhelmed, unable to fall asleep. Rawlings writes "A mark was on him from the day's delight, so that all his life, when April was a thin green and the flavor of rain was on his tongue, an old wound would throb and a nostalgia would fill him for something he could not quite remember."¹³² The first chapter ends.

This exposition announces two relevant sets of themes which develop over the course of the narrative. The first set: Jody's excited, almost obsessional fascination with nature and wildlife, his father's efforts to protect this fantasy space, and his mother's desire for him to abandon the fantasy space for "realistic" and responsible pursuits. The second set of themes are the characters' ambiguous

¹²⁹ Rawlings, *The Yearling*, 12.

¹³⁰ Rawlings, *The Yearling*, 13.

¹³¹ Rawlings, *The Yearling*, 17.

¹³² Rawlings, *The Yearling*, 18.

range of racialized speech, action, and sentiment. Jody's father, Penny Baxter, had been the son of a small-time farmer and preacher, had fought for the confederates in the Civil War, and had come from the town of Volusia after the war with his wife to settle in an area of the Central Florida wilderness just west of the St. John's River. Jody's mother, Ora Baxter, had waited for Penny in Volusia during the war. Because of this backstory, in addition to paratextual cues from promotional and marketing materials, readers *know* that Jody and his parents are "white." Yet, the terms of their whiteness are made ambiguous throughout the course of the narrative. Jody is "close" to nature, living on a homestead in the wilderness and knowledgeable of several rural skills. Within the reader's gaze, Jody occupies a similar position to the earlier minstrel trope of the "plantation darkie." Drawing from a similar range of tropes and signifiers used to produce the affective constructions associated with minstrelsy, the reader's experience of Jody is rendered intimately sentimental, nostalgic, and unconsciously racial. On the other hand, Jody is himself *looking*, and his structure of fascination toward objects in the narrative betrays the familiar white normative gaze. Beyond the initial minstrel trope of the sentimentalized rural, where seemingly any character can be made to appear as something *less than* white, the characters' speech patterns and stories betray a high level of racial ambiguity. Jody and his parents speak a creolized English with heavy African influences. Penny Baxter's many tales and colloquialisms; of cunning animals and awe-inspiring natural events; owe much to the African American folklore tradition.¹³³

Penny's seemingly super-human hunting and tracking abilities especially stand out in this context. David Roediger notes, regarding the emergence of the nineteenth century white working class, that an initial longing for the "pre-modern" ritual of the hunt, alongside an identification with the "coons and critters" of African American folklore, eventually gave way to a rhetorical de-ritualized hunt

directed toward otherized “coons.”¹³⁴ This same rhetorical slippage takes place several times over the course of the novel. After an enormous black bear viciously kills some of the family’s livestock, Penny and Jody pursue the animal in a way Jody has never seen, and in a way that greatly distresses him. On every one of their previous hunts, Penny and Jody had spent more time talking and admiring nature than actually hunting, with Penny telling Jody stories and teaching him how to discern the subtleties of the nature and wildlife. This bear hunt is grueling, there is no talking, no time or energy to admire nature. The devastation brought by the bear attack, the subsequent hunt, and the cycle of events which it propels, dramatically further a tension announced at the beginning of the novel, that is, Jody’s liminal subjective position between ecstatic fascination and an awareness and guilt over his aloofness and shirking of responsibilities. This event also breaks the “easy” sentimental identification the reader has with Jody and his experience, the first advent of a danger or immediacy with the potential to overwhelm sentimentality. The reader finds out there is something *more* to the story than pleasant sentimentality, and receives the first rhetorical hint that they should rethink the identifications they’ve made so far.

During the hunt, Penny’s rifle misfires and the bear severely injures one of the family’s hunting dogs. When Penny tells Ora about the episode, and that he intends to trade with a neighboring family for a new rifle, she is nearly as upset about the latter as the former. Ora dislikes the Forrester family, the only other family in the area, describing them as “black” and “black-hearted.” Interestingly, and ambiguously, this is the only outright racial language used in the narrative, and yet, following the same textual clues that lead the reader to identify the Baxters as white, the Forrester family is also, nominally, apparently, white. If the black bear represents a powerful and terrifying black Other awaiting in the unknown, the Forrester family represents an incarnation of blackness “closer” to white, but much further than the Baxter family. Indeed, the characters seem to exist on an ideological racial spectrum, with the character of Grandma Hutto, who lives in “civilized” comfort in the town of Volusia, occupying

¹³⁴ Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 12.

the most outright space of sentimental whiteness. The Forrester men are all muscular and strong, whereas Penny and Jody are small-bodied, in line with a common trope of African physical superiority over whites. When the Forresters hunt, they thoughtlessly charge out into the woods shouting and their dogs barking, while Penny hunts quietly and decisively, a difference in line with a multiplicity of tropes. Jody likes the Forresters, he likes the music they play, the large portions of food they eat. He especially likes Fodder-wing, the youngest Forrester, who, unlike the rest of his physically strong family, suffers from several physical disabilities. Fodder-wing is also purported to have a special, almost supernatural ability to communicate with and understand animals. These characteristics point to the minstrel trope of the “crippled” associated with the Jim Crow jig, and the trope of African natural spirituality. The Forresters, like the Baxters, rhetorically occupy different spaces of racial characterization over the course of the novel. They sometimes surprise the Baxters, and the reader, with unexpected acts of kindness and help, seemingly “redeeming” their whiteness. After trading a hunting dog for a new rifle, Penny and Jody eventually make their way to Grandma Hutton’s house in Volusia. While in town, Grandma Hutton’s son Oliver gets into a brutal fight with Lem Forrester over a shared love interest. Penny and Jody intervene on Oliver’s behalf, who has been badly beaten, causing a rift in their relationship with the Forresters. Later on, after Penny is bitten by a rattlesnake, the Forresters come to his aid and save his life. Buck Forrester then stays to help work the homestead for a week while Penny recovers. Yet, even in this redemptive section, while Buck is shown to be more than capable managing farm chores, opening up new ground and planting a cash crop, thereby demonstrating a “white” work ethic, he quickly becomes listless and abruptly leaves to resume his boisterous lifestyle. Nevertheless, Buck leaves redeemed in Jody’s, and the readers’, eyes. The ambiguous blackness which he represents once again appears, unlike the great black bear, to be an accommodatable neighbor.

Nature has been redeemed as well. The rattlesnake bite had been deeply traumatic for Jody, his fascination with nature problematized. In the wake of the incident, Penny shoots a doe and uses its

meat to draw the poison out from the snakebite. Penny and Jody, quickly trying to return home and get help, leave the doe's young fawn. After Penny survives the incident, Jody is allowed to return to the spot and retrieve the fawn as a pet. Buck's redemption overlaps with the new closeness Jody feels toward nature via the fawn, both buoyed by Penny's unlikely survival. Up until this point in the narrative, Jody has been longing for any kind of pet to be his companion, imagining what it would be like to have any one of Fodder-wing's many animals. Ora will not entertain the idea at all. After losing several young children to disease, Jody being the only one to survive, Ora has become guarded against things she sees as frivolous. Ora has no time to admire nature, knowing how nature can "go wrong." Here an overlapping redemption between nature and the Forresters occurs once again. Even Ora is impressed by Buck Forrester's stay at the homestead, her opinion of him changing just as quickly as Jody's. It is during this process of changing character identification that Penny tells Ora, due to the "extenuating circumstances" and according to his male authority, that Jody *will* be allowed to keep the fawn. The tension between Jody's responsibilities and fascination with nature, announced in the first chapter, is here reworked. The space for successful accommodation between the two seems tenable, and Jody works as hard as he can to ensure the balance. Ora mutes her complaints, making them audible through other means. Along with this change in the dynamics of tension, the family's racial characterizations shift as well. Fears of destruction overcome, the family takes a step toward ideological blackness. But after the death of Fodder-wing, the fawn's growing size and destructiveness around the farm, and new problems with the Forresters, the family begins to retreat into a space of whiteness. With these changes, Jody's ideological tension eventually reaches a breaking point, and his identification with his father becomes jeopardized. Throughout the novel, Jody's overlapping identifications with nature and the Forresters are always counter-balanced with his identification for his father, one most empathetic and wise among archetypal fathers. Occupying a more deliberate space of whiteness, Jody's parents, throughout the narrative, *know* about the failures in the Other. Penny may be empathetic toward

nature and the Forresters, may enjoy nature's beauty and the Forrester's music, but he also guards a deep sorrow over his and his family's plight, one from which he draws to reaffirm the racial boundary and remain white. The rattlesnake attack tested Jody's faith in nature, not his father's. His father's benign authority was reaffirmed in allowing Jody to keep the fawn. But when Penny eventually has Ora shoot the fawn to prevent it from once again ruining the family crops, Jody's identification with his father, after having to finish the kill himself, is fully broken.

This crisis is the rhetorical crux of the narrative. With both the benign authority of the father and the captivating lure of the Other problematized, what is a subject to do? Rawlings has Jody storm off to the river in an attempt to reach Jacksonville, and finally Oliver in Boston. Eventually recognizing the futility of reaching Jacksonville, Jody returns home, redeemed. Taking Penny's position with respect to the Other, Jody develops a guard against his ecstatic relationship to nature. The Forresters, including Buck, had burnt down Grandma Hutton's house in Volusia before Jody ran away and were, in turn, rendered morally irremediable. Jody can no longer ignore the danger which the Forresters represent. Like his father, Jody will now consider his responsibilities first, be discerning and skeptical in dealing with outsiders, and learn to console his broken spirit inwardly. No longer a "yearling," Jody now has the tools with which to maintain his own self-sufficiency. Jody remains "close" to nature, his family continuing to live in the same house in the forest, but he has grown distant from nature, no longer obsessing over its mystery and beauty. With this development, Jody also gains the tools with which to maintain his own stable whiteness. Jody will remain within a certain proximity to racial tropes, obviously not losing his creolized speech, for instance, but will maintain distance: he will now focus fully on his school lessons and farm chores, thus coming more fully into a "white position."

Rawlings' rhetoric here recalls the different characterizations of the Other respectively made by Lacan and Said.¹³⁵ Lacan characterized the Other as a perceived agency in the world, in both subjects

¹³⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Knopf, 1994).

and objects, and third-party to culture toward which all performance is directed; an inherent experiential byproduct of signification which animates subjectivity.¹³⁶ This is the Other Jody experiences in nature *and* the Forresters, the Black Big Other, the one he learns no longer to direct his performance toward. Here, Rawlings narrative has some rhetorical merit. Lacan's Other is a phantasmatic, lingering experiential remnant of religion's earlier grounding of culture. With the Other fictionalized, Jody appears to enter a realm of detached agency from which to observe his *real* circumstances. Rawlings' many references to the lingering nostalgia Jody will continue to feel after the novel's end, a fate he accepts, underline the content of that observation, that is, a dual awareness of the Other's nonexistence and its ultimate experiential inherency within language and culture. Yet, in highlighting Lacan's Other of experience, Rawlings has made it difficult for the reader to observe that *other* Other present in her narrative, that is, Said and Foucault's Other, the Other of power, the unconscious presence (or conscious non-presence) of African American people.¹³⁷ This the Other Jody experiences only in the Forresters, and it is the one with rhetorical, and thereby social, relevance for marginalized groups. Rawlings utilizes signifiers and tropes with unconscious racial associations, structuring the narrative's existential rhetoric on maturity and nostalgia. Employing blackness in fictionalizing the Other as myth, Rawlings fictionalizes the subjectivity that *does* exit behind the phantasmatic image of blackness.

Enjoyment at the Rawlings House Museum

Rawlings' narrative both reaffirms the trope of white fascination toward perceived African

¹³⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

¹³⁷ Of course, this is an overstated conceptual distinction between the two. The (big) Other is originally Lacan's concept and was later adopted in different academic contexts, a development which diversified and broadened the term's conceptual boundaries. Lacan's point was not that the *others* through which the Other speaks do not exist. Lacan highlighted the infinite perceptive distance between speaking subjects, the extent to which cultural associations *always* inform our experiences of one another, and the extent to which our attractions and repulsions are *always* structured by phantasmatic excess or lack. The Other does not exist, but its human representatives do.

American cultural patterns, a trope which first entered popular culture in blackface minstrelsy, and redirects that fascination, utilizing it toward new rhetorical ends consistent with the unconscious racial ideology of the late 1930s. In *the Yearling*, just as in minstrelsy, ideological racial boundaries are both crossed and reworked. This process is understated in *the Yearling*, blackness only appears phantasmatically through its ideological relation to the tropes and signifiers being employed, but it has no less rhetorical, and thus historical, relevance. The use of blackness in Rawlings' narrative gives some credence to Lhamon's notion of the blackface lore cycle, where the act of white cross-racial impersonation continues to be influenced, throughout its different cultural iterations, by the tropes and signifiers associated with minstrelsy.¹³⁸ Where there are *some* minstrel tropes, it might be argued, those who have inherited Atlantic culture tend to experience the *lack* of associated tropes and signifiers. It also gives credence to Lott's argument about the relationship between racial impersonation and broader racial ideology.

After the height of minstrelsy's popular culture importance in the 1840s and 1850s, growing mass media reproduction effectively served to solidify the racial boundaries which minstrels had earlier been able to openly cross.¹³⁹ The popularity of *The Yearling* serves as possible evidence of a pronounced ideological instability produced by the growth of mechanical reproduction and its more constricting racial constructions. Direct identification with African Americans more thoroughly discouraged in the popular space, I argue, white people likely began identifying with black people without knowing it, through acts of unconscious association and identification. I argue Rawlings' narrative serves as a vehicle for this identification while rhetorically leading readers away from it. Rawlings draws out the reader's cultural habit of cross-racial identification and problematizes it, and thereby further seals the fluid boundaries between race with which the narrative itself plays. In the

¹³⁹ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

process, Rawlings rhetorically conflates an existential dilemma (our subjective relation to the Other and our *real* separation from one another) with cultural otherness (our constructed social separateness), and thereby unconsciously furthers an ethics of cross-racial disavowal.

Today, visitors to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' historic house museum encounter much of this rhetoric in the museum's guided tours, as well as the built environment. The giant live oaks and magnolias of southern nostalgia dot the landscape, a Florida State Park and National Historic Landmark. Rawlings' home and orange grove are preserved in rustic simplicity, stirring in visitors the kinds of sentimental feelings Rawlings knew, and was able to evoke, so well. This author can attest to the landscape's ability, through its mimicking of sentimental tropes, to easily compel a sense of quiet nostalgia and beauty. Near the entrance to a hiking trail, on the edge of the homestead clearing so reminiscent of Jody's, sits the tenant house Martha Mickens and her husband lived in for several decades while they worked for Rawlings. Like the rhetorical and ideological paradoxes of Rawlings' novel, which, nevertheless, effectively serve to prop up dominant ideology, the presence of the Mickens' tenant house seems to be doing "two things at once." On one hand, the house has the potential to serve as a subversive reminder that visitors' identification with Rawlings' lifestyle and work is ideologically inscribed and overdetermined, the product of a history which has "covered its own tracks." The view of the big house from the tenant house, dappled by the leaves of trees separating the hundred-or-so feet between structures, potentially allows visitors a subaltern identification with Rawlings' servants and critical view of Rawlings' social world and rhetorical ethics. On the other hand, this author suspects that many of the visitors to Rawlings' house *seek out* the standard sentimental identification with the author's world and, unless these intentions are detected and redirected by docents, museum signage, etc., these visitors are unlikely to *see* anything like what Martha Mickens saw.

Additionally, this author suspects that, for visitors with such intentions, the presence of the Mickens' tenant house grounds their identifications with Rawlings and her world. Like Rawlings' novel,

the preserved layout of Rawlings' homestead is ideologically *close* to tropes associated with the plantation. And like the novel, the homestead occupies an ideological space inherited from blackface minstrelsy, both "tuned" to resonate with the "chords" of the blackface lore cycle. Of course, Rawlings' homestead wasn't, strictly speaking, a plantation; yet it is doubtful many interpellated into North American Atlantic culture would fail to see the resemblance. Here, Lott's notion of "love and theft" comes to mind. Recognizing the legacy of slavery embodied in Rawlings' homestead, some visitors, those seeking nostalgic identification, are confronted with a choice: recognize something problematic in Rawlings or else double-down on their identification. Considering the prominence of slavery's ghosts on Rawlings' homestead, their especially *easy* identifiability, I argue that for those who choose to double-down, they do so *aware* of what they're doing, in a way that doesn't necessarily depend on their conscious knowledge. Visitors *know* what they're doing because of the libidinal profit they receive from doing it. Like Jody, who closes his eyes to both the neurotic pull of nature *and* the real people who dwell on the other side of otherness, thus furthering the very perverse enjoyment which seems to be dispelled in the narrative, visitors who recognize *and* ignore the cultural legacy of slavery on Rawlings' homestead do so to the benefit of their own economies of enjoyment, the perversity of their decision enhancing the enjoyment they experience.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ This last interpretation is highly speculative, my impression of how the rhetoric in Rawlings' work might relate to the visitor of experience of her preserved homestead. Further research needs to be done on visitor experience at the homestead before this argument can be made in a more concrete fashion.

CHAPTER THREE:

“IS IT TRUE WHAT YOU SANG IN YOUR SONG?”: VAN MORRISON AND THE LEGACY OF THE BLACK BIG OTHER

From our twenty-first century vantage point, it is perhaps especially easy to observe Barthes' << La mort de l'auteur >> in the case of Elvis Presley.¹⁴¹ Has not the conviction itself become a kind-of trope, that if Elvis had not been born or at least discovered, another person would have surely taken his place in the spotlight? Afterall, wasn't Elvis just another handsome white man with an ability to afford an idealized version of hip blackness? Countless of his contemporaries could have occupied that same role, which was just what the many white rock n' rollers who followed him aspired to do. As Eric Lott notes, "Elvis inherited a blackface tradition that lives a disguised, vestigial life in his imitators."¹⁴² All this is to say that Elvis represents an important change in the dynamics of racial staging and production in the culture industry, but that he himself should not receive so much credit. Elvis Aron Presley, the bumpkin from Mississippi, was *cast* to play the part of Elvis, "king of rock n' roll," leading actor in what ended up being the first act of a new performative paradigm, a new season of culture industry racial productions. As a very public crosser of the colorline, Elvis announced a new script for white consumers to follow, but he did not write it, he merely read and sang the lines dictated to him by an ever-lingering complex of antebellum tropes and relational precedents.

¹⁴¹ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 142-148.

¹⁴² Lott, *Black Mirror*, 169.

In the decades after *The Yearling* was published, the culture industry underwent significant changes in terms of its growing distributional capabilities and the increasing technological sophistication of its product-mediums. In addition, showbusiness writers and executives also found themselves having to respond to developments in American racial politics. While debates are ongoing over how to best characterize the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, there is little disagreement that the tenor of protest began to increase sharply with the return of disaffected African American G.I.s from the Second World War.¹⁴³ And if the guardians of the representational status quo had tried to hold out against the rising and vocal tide of marginalized voices, some sections of the complex eventually began to give way and, similarly to the period after the Civil War, African Americans began to make new inroads on to the culture industry stage in the years after the Second World War. The strict representational segregation of the folklore paradigm was eventually overwhelmed by the direct pop culture visibility of African Americans and a new representational order emerged. And still yet, just as in the period after the Civil War, these African American performers, that is, those with newfound access to the culture industry's main stage, were still expected to perform by the earlier rules: once again, the new stage paradigm owed something to the old.

Nat King Cole, who in 1956 became the first African American to host a nationally televised program in the United States, knew these rules well. Over the previous two decades, he had become one of the most prominent performers in the United States and around the world, navigating the fleeting and subtle racial rhetorics, as well as hints and warnings of danger, brought by the folklore paradigm, or what here might be called the Swing Era. His cuts for Decca during the 1930s and 1940s had found success far beyond the label's racial target audience and had become popular with both whites and blacks. Cole's music may have appealed beyond the terms of the representational status

¹⁴³ John A. Salmond, "'The Long and the Short of it:' Some Reflections on the Recent Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 1 (2013): 53-61.

quo, but he was not, at least for a time, professionally committed to its direct contradiction. Although he later ended the practice, Cole had for a time continued playing for segregated audiences during the boycott of Jim Crow venues, even after being attacked on-stage by white supremacists.¹⁴⁴ Considering this, the selection of Cole for the host position by CBS executives appears as a calculated decision to get in on the ground floor of the emerging status quo. Cole, who had occupied a central position in the earlier status quo as an obscured source of the era's popular music hits, could, at the same time, convincingly occupy the newly visible space and yet, because he knew the rules of the game, refer to the old paradigm on matters of power. But if the potential existed for this kind of performative balancing act, the executives never got their wish. Unable to attract sponsors, Cole soon decided to end the show, famously stating that "Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark," and, somewhat ironically, felt galvanized enough by the set of experiences to become a public supporter of the Civil Rights Movement in the years before his early death in 1965.¹⁴⁵

The Elvis phenomenon represented a new pop culture dependence on a direct act of racial mimicry, a newly open acknowledgment of the affective currency which African American cultural forms had represented throughout the folklore paradigm. As obscured supplier of these forms, with a "license to print" (the affective currency) quietly obtained from show business bigwigs, Cole's professional success was owed to his abilities as a bricoleur, that is, his understanding of the lingering sentimental complex and his capacity to innovate within, and beyond, it. One can observe how the latter runs into the former, how each depends on the other to forward the culture industry spectacle, the staging of the black signifier. The terms of Elvis's minstrelsy were set by those of Cole's sentimentalism, and the opposite is also true. Like the African Americans who performed in blackface in the decades after the

¹⁴⁴ "Nat 'King' Cole attacked on stage," *The Guardian*, 1956. Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 55.

¹⁴⁵ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 23.

Civil War, Cole practiced a kind-of black blackface himself. As an intuitive bricoleur and purveyor of black political sentimentalism, Cole probably understood that white audiences lived their identities vicariously through relation to his voice, and presented his work in a way to maximize this response. Likewise, Elvis, as Lott discusses in *Black Mirror*, was often experienced in sentimental terms by white audiences, and in the extreme case of Elvis impersonators, the act of inhabiting the singer's body occupied a homologous relation to both the minstrel act and the identity-grounding, thus sentimental, feature of imitation: Hendler's "fantasy of experiential equivalence" again comes to mind.¹⁴⁶ As Lott notes, "Behind this seemingly bizarre demand," that is, to inhabit the singer's body, "lies a history of imitation in which Elvis figures quite centrally," and which, this author might add, Cole features as well.¹⁴⁷

So, the stage dynamics of the folklore paradigm had become trite with overuse through its inability to map the cultural horizons of pop culture consumers, to hide white love for black culture within what were represented as white cultural forms, and were finally overcome by the increasingly inescapable demands of the Civil Rights Movement. In the wake of these changes, whites continued relating to African American culture through minstrel identificory processes, and making sense of these processes through sentimentalism. On one hand, African Americans, no longer limited by the earlier status quo insistence on rigidly defined cultural spheres, now had access to a greater range of representational space. On the other, whites were no longer forced to hide their mimicry of African Americans. If these developments give a sense as to the level of entrenchedness of the sentimental complex, of the lingering object-agency of antebellum tropes and their difficulty of being negating by other discourses, then other post-war developments point towards its spatial scope.

¹⁴⁶ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 169.

¹⁴⁷ Lott, *Black Mirror*, 169.

An Atlantic Complex

The post-war economic boom set the terms for global dominance of the U.S. culture industry which has only just begun to wane in the last few decades: a global representational space created and administered to serve the interests of American economic power and which projected the associative sensibilities of the American middle class on to the rest of the world. MGM's production of *The Yearling*, for instance, was released a year after the war (1946) and earned nearly \$3 million in markets outside the U.S. and Canada.¹⁴⁸ But projection was not the entire story. Although U.S. dominance over this space was hegemonic and artificial (in the sense that it represented as natural associative precedents of very recent and specific origin), it is also allowed *un recontre* of related regional discourses which had been severed at the beginning of the nationalist age, to bring into the symbolic realm object-relations which had long since been made invisible. The complex of sentimental principles had developed within another complex, that is, the Atlantic World complex, the transregional, transhemispheric set of human cultural relations which had emerged during the early modern period.

Describing the scope and relational dynamics of the Atlantic world, historian David Eltis noted that "everyone living in it had values which, if they were not shared around the Atlantic, were certainly reshaped in some way by others living in different parts of the Atlantic basins," and that "events in one small geographical area were likely to stimulate a reaction – and not necessarily just economic – thousands of miles away."¹⁴⁹ Building on this characterization, Bernard Bailyn described the Atlantic World as "multitudinous, embracing the people and circumstances of four continents, countless regional economies, languages, and social structures," It was these interrelationships, this author adds, that set the terms for the emergence of a global empire of feelings.¹⁵⁰ The complex of sentimental principles had

¹⁴⁸ "Top Grossers of 1947," *Variety*, 7 (January 1948): 63.

¹⁴⁹ David Eltis, "Atlantic History in Global Perspective," *Itinerario*, 23, no.2 (1999): 141.

¹⁵⁰ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005): 34.

first arisen along the associative corridors of the Atlantic World as a set of positive terms between Britain and its colonies, and as negative terms between Britain and its colonies on one hand, and the non-British cultures of the Atlantic World on the other. The wars of settler/colonial independence had regionally compartmentalized this Atlantic complex, creating discreet sentimentalisms throughout the formerly intertwined Atlantic World, but this did not diminish its political currency in these newly isolated spaces. Not only would sentimentalism serve as a space for political discourse in the eventual United States, the complex took on political significance throughout these various areas, for cultures English-speaking and otherwise.

For instance, in continental Europe, a kind-of lingering sentimentalism is witnessable in the failed romanticism surrounding the First World War, that is, in the cultural dynamics that compelled newly outdated cavalry to hopelessly charge machine-gun fire in hopes of securing a fleeting sense of personal and group recognition in the service of some Other, thus establishing their end of the fantasy of experiential equivalence.¹⁵¹ And in Latin American, where romance became the currency of group cohesion, the common rhetorical appeal of virtually every nation-building project in the region during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵² And in Africa, where global sentimentalized music(s), themselves highly influenced by African forms, were heard by Africans and redirected toward the ends of group cohesion.¹⁵³ If these sentimentalisms had been set in different directions by the wars of independence and other developments, thus restraining the global complex to a limited set of local variables and power dynamics, their direction was again changed with the emerging post-war American hegemony of representational space and its efforts to project American sensibilities on to the world.

¹⁵¹ Nikolas Gardner, "Command and Control in the "Great Retreat" of 1914: The Disintegration of the British Cavalry Division," *The Journal of Military History* 63, no. 1 (1999): 29-54.

¹⁵² Doris Sommer, *Foundation Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 13.

¹⁵³

So, the emerging overseas popularity of American cultural products was not completely unprecedented, as there had existed an earlier set of transregional interrelations and aesthetic organizing processes from which the appeal of these products eventually grew. The different groups of the post-Atlantic world had lived different sentimentalisms, different tropes and associations made up each empire of feelings. But these different empires, by virtue of their Atlantic origin, had also echoed one another. If nineteenth-century elites saw evidence of a universal sentimental predisposition among men and women of “civilized nations,” it’s not that they were wrong about sentimentalism’s ubiquity, it’s that they denied its contingency, the history of how the complex had come to hegemonize discourse in “the West.” With the creation of a post-war global representational sphere under the hegemony of the United States culture industry, the different sentimentalisms shifted into a new period of interrelation, where individual complexes came to constitute meaning in response to other complexes. It wasn’t that people in Europe, Africa, and Latin America started consuming American cultural products after a clean break with their earlier traditions, on the contrary, people in these places were drawn to American products *through their own traditions*, they made sense of them via a network of associations which had once been linked to that of the Americans.¹⁵⁴ And so they made sense of what the American culture industry offered up alongside its version of the complex: blackface minstrelsy, and its insidious relationship with American sentimentalism.

Of course, sentimentalism had existed alongside, and in relation to, a minstrel-like dynamic throughout the post-Atlantic world. The paradoxical representational terms surrounding the Argentine Gaucho, for instance; reviled outsider and idyllic representative of true Argentine-ness, and, importantly, one deserving of imitation by elite citizens; show a similar pattern at work.¹⁵⁵ If minstrelsy

¹⁵⁴ Aletta Biersack, “Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond,” from *The New Cultural History*, edited by Lynn Hunt, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 72-96.

¹⁵⁵ Brian Bockelman, “Between the Gaucho and the Tango: Popular Songs and the Shifting Landscape of Modern Argentine Identity, 1895-1915,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 577-601.

had subtly echoed among these sentimental discourses, similarly to the American case during the folklore paradigm, it entered the mainstream of global representational space with the projection of the Elvis phenomenon onto the world. Places like the British Isles may have had their own sentimental complexes, and may have experienced a subtle kind of minstrelsy in relation to those complexes, but the increasing hegemony of the United States culture industry made the link explicit. And not only did the potential for American-style processes of minstrel identification become tangible within culture industry exports, but the entire post-Atlantic world became directly involved with the racial politics of the United States. America may have hegemonized the situation, but the influence went two ways. And so were those British minstrels, those followers of Elvis; The Beatles and The Rolling Stones; able to find success in the United States during the 1960s and disrupt its cultural politics, including its racial politics. Influenced by the projection of the American complex, which was interpreted through appeal to a non-American, British complex, these groups help shift the terms of the American complex further still. While the many sentimentalisms of the post-Atlantic began to drift toward each other, the former positive relational link between the sentimentalisms of Britain and America afforded the British complex a particular influence over the American one, as experiential processes and relational patterns had probably echoed more loudly between the two than the other former Atlantic World regions. If the Americans owned this new post-war, post-Atlantic theatre, citizens of many regions and cultures now knew its scripts, its numbers, and its secrets; and some, especially those from the British Isles, would get a chance at re-interpretation atop its stage.

An Atlantic Bricoleur

The Beatles and The Rolling Stones were the big innovators, the ones who figured out how to package a British interpretation of American rock music for the world, that is, to persuasively mimic Elvis, and thus mimic African Americans, as white British men. Yet other performers more prolifically explored the terms of the new paradigm, and within it, the terms of sentimentalism and minstrelsy.

Among them, Northern Irish performer Van Morrison stands out because of the frequency with which these topics seem to reappear in his work. Over the course of a fifty year long career, Morrison consistently appealed to the kinds of tropes which had made up the complex of sentimental principles. The countryside and nature, desire and romance, mystery and adventure; each finds repeated resonance in his work. What's more is that the rhetorical deployment of these tropes seemed intended to produce the kind of identity-grounding experiential processes associated with the sentimental complex when it had occupied a more outright space of political discourse: Morrison was directly marketed as a sentimental artist.¹⁵⁶ As a bricoleur, the singer understood the terms of many discursive situations, he was uniquely receptive to parallax aesthetic meanings and ideas, and could navigate the rhetorical gaps which separated them. And his interpolation into this role speaks to the state, scope, and reemerging interrelation of the lingering complex in the years after the Second World War.

Morrison had grown up in Protestant Belfast deeply compelled by the old churches which dotted the cityscape and the sense of mysticism which filled the air.¹⁵⁷ His subjectivity was thus constituted among an older, pre-war Northern Irish sentimental complex, with its unique, multidirectional flow of associations between the Republic of Ireland, Britain, and the continent: a regional discursive dynamic which likely contributed to his abilities as a bricoleur relative to the broader post-Atlantic World. Interpolated into subjectivity alongside a host of specific Old World objects, which maintained a distinct object-agency over him, Morrison was obliged to perform, to make meaning, and to enjoy himself along precedented European cultural routes. But Morrison also came of age in the years after the Second World War (he was born in 1945), and being compelled by another set of discourses which, although they echoed those afforded by the Northern Irish sentimental complex, nevertheless introduced a new element. Listening to his father's large collection of American blues and

¹⁵⁶ Brian Hinton, *Celtic Crossroads: The Art of Van Morrison*, (London: Sanctuary Publishing: 1997): 14.

¹⁵⁷ Hinton, *Celtic Crossroads*, 16.

r&b records, which had been procured during a stint in the States during the early 1950s, Morrison found himself identifying with sounds and ideas from places across the Atlantic which he had never been.¹⁵⁸ And like Elvis, Morrison studied them; their phrasing and timbre; internalized them, and learned to reproject what he heard. In the process, he would take part in, and influence, a minstrel tradition which had formerly been confined to North America, and which would come to find, through the echoes of sentimentalism and the emerging hegemony of the United States, resonance throughout the former Atlantic World.

Like *The Yearling*, Morrison's work occupies a prominent place in the white American middle class imaginary. His albums *Astral Weeks* and *Veedon Fleece* were, and are, praised by music journalists in quite overwhelming terms, and together are the source of a significant cult following.¹⁵⁹ The former is especially described in "otherworldly terms." Music critic and outspoken Morrison fan Lester Bangs once noted a fleeting religious feeling when listening to *Astral Weeks*, an experience of Morrison's lyrics and music as reflecting ontological truth, in his words, "the sense of WHAT if he DID apprehend that Word, there are times then the Word seems to hover very near."¹⁶⁰ But if his music was experienced as *obviously* sentimental, *obviously* profound by the guardians of culture industry's aesthetic sensibilities, it is interesting that they so often failed to mention that other *obvious* aspect about Van Morrison the performer, that is, like Elvis, *he tried to sing like a black man*. Instead, quick mentions of his debt to African American music notwithstanding, he is generally described as a "Celtic musician," as the title from which this biographical information has been gleaned, *Celtic Crossroads: The Art of Van Morrison*, gives example. And what is more is that the music media so often failed to mention this, despite the fact that Morrison was such a better imitator than Elvis, such a better representative of what whites

¹⁵⁸ Hinton, *Celtic Crossroads*, 15.

¹⁵⁹ Van Morrison, *Astral Weeks*, Warner Brothers, 1968, LP. Van Morrison, *Veedon Fleece*, Warner Bros, 1974, LP.

¹⁶⁰ Lester Bangs, "Astral Weeks," from *Stranded: Rock and Roll for a Desert Island*, edited by Greil Marcus, (New York: Knopf, 1979).

associated with black performance. In the decades after Elvis, white mimicry of black performance became so ubiquitous throughout the culture industry, the terms of the folklore paradigm so thoroughly reversed, that white consumers seem to have become inured to its presence, even when it continued to motivate their economies of enjoyment. Morrison found critical, if not immediately commercial, success by invoking fleeting sentimental associations through appeal to the black voice as it existed within the white mind.¹⁶¹ It is not that Morrison could simply sing like black people. As black people did not and do not sing in any single or ubiquitous way there is no way to sing like black people. Instead, Morrison's success stood with his ability to invoke the ideal of the black voice as afforded by racialized objects, to audibly materialize the trope of *le chant des noirs* as afforded by the lingering complex.

Morrison's ability to "sing like a black man" was not directly commented on because it was not directly experienced as such. Instead, the terms of his minstrelsy translated into straightforwardly sentimental ones for his white American and white European listeners: the minstrel tropes were rhetorically active, they afforded *something*, but experientially led *around* conscious acknowledgement of race and pointed toward *something else*. How did this work? As noted above, blackness had acted as the currency of the culture industry since the nineteenth century, and the temporary prohibition on its open use had ended with Elvis and the repeal of the folklore paradigm. At a time when consumers had grown accustomed to the open use of this currency, had come to expect that the people on-stage would be some kind of white rock n' roll minstrels, Morrison, intuitively knowing the exchange rates, cashed in the currency for sentimentalism and, like the authors of "Old Man River," existentialism.¹⁶² The potential for this kind of experiential short-circuit was created by the Atlanticization of the lingering complex, the increasing and shifting dynamics in the field of meaning which undergirded the culture industry stage in the years after the war. Because of this, Morrison was able to be actively involved in American popular

¹⁶¹ Hinton, *Celtic Crossroads*, 101.

¹⁶² More on the latter below.

discourse while maintaining a parallax subjective position from across the Atlantic. Morrison understood the exchange rates, that is, the link between blackness as affective currency and the sentimental complex as the horizon of white American experience, because he occupied an emerging position of “extra-American” observer to North American cultural discourse, a third party constituted in tripartite relation *with* the present paradigm, in contrast *to* the previous one, and echoing the terms *of* the earlier Atlantic one.

If men from the British Isles were afforded a kind-of privileged access to American popular culture, Irish men were afforded a particular variety of access. As David Roediger notes, “it was by no means certain that the Irish were white” in early nineteenth century North America.¹⁶³ The racial status of Irish immigrants was one of the ambiguous factors in political minstrelsy, a question to be fought over and decided, in part, atop the minstrel stage. As Lott notes, “a social antinomy characterized Irish immigrants’ involvement in minstrelsy,” and that for them, “Blackface was at one and the same time a displaced mapping of ethnic Otherness and an early agent of acculturation.”¹⁶⁴ Of course, the question had been settled, as Roediger notes, “Irish immigrants won acceptance as whites among the larger American population,” and “the Irish themselves came to insist on their own whiteness and on white supremacy.”¹⁶⁵ And yet the associative precedent of the “black Irish,” as an active object-agent within the complex, continued to linger on with the rest of the intertwined sentimental and minstrel principles. The continuing strength of this trope, the enduring popular memory of an earlier racial ambiguity, is witnessable today in conservative appeals to the Irish having pulled themselves up by the bootstraps and “earned” their place in the middle class, unlike those impoverished African Americans who never took any initiative to better their social position.

¹⁶³ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 134.

¹⁶⁴ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 99-100.

¹⁶⁵ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 137.

Of course, this memory is a self-serving distortion on the part of whites, and yet some fleeting Real is reproduced as well, some residue of symbolization related to Irish immigrant and African American lived experience *ensemble* which resisted being fully committed to the domain of signs.¹⁶⁶ The associative terms which supported this precedent were further marginalized with the emergence of the folklore paradigm, but were sutured again when Elvis and Cole, and many others, brought the antagonistic desires which underlay the political currency of folklore to their points of excess, creating a potential for subtler values to occupy more outright spaces of discourse. So, unlike nineteenth century men from Ireland, Morrison did not have to leave his immediate surroundings to take part in minstrelsy (and although he eventually did, his interpolation had occurred long beforehand). The link between Irishmen, African Americans, minstrelsy, and sentimentalism had been subtly preserved by the culture industry, and then extended across the Atlantic after the war. The sound of Morrison's voice occupied an overdetermined associative position: it was the product of several discourses, the combined economy of which ebbed and flowed according to various global dynamics. And if today we hear its close resonance with tropes about black singing, during the heyday of Morrison's career those same sounds were likely experienced as more outrightly sentimental, and less obviously examples of minstrelsy. Morrison's parallax social involvement with the American culture industry allowed him to sublimate an image of white Irishness in place of blackness, to direct the ambiguous terms which undergird white Americans' performative relation to black Americans, its potential to excite and compel enjoyment. Sentimental identification was afforded outright, but the black props remained on-stage, Morrison having directed them, as he knew they could, to sing in its key.

Upstaging the Black Big Other

Like Elvis, Morrison's success was largely a matter of existing in a specific place and time,

¹⁶⁶ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009).

allowing him familiarity with a particular range of discourses which then spoke through his work. On the other hand, and as can be probably be deduced from the above explanation, compared to Elvis, Morrison lived a much more complex relation to the discourses which compelled him. The cultural productions with which Elvis was involved afforded audiences an experiential “lowest common denominator,” that is, the ticks and phrasings which characterized Elvis’s performances were *already ubiquitous* before being directly broadcast by the culture industry. Elvis did not invent anything, he simply brought on to the main stage an act which countless white Americans already performed in their own private theatres: only its novel publicness caused commotion. Although Elvis and Morrison performed on the same stage, and worked in the same genres, Morrison’s relation to these tropes and processes evidenced a much different dynamic. Morrison’s identification with African Americans and the American culture industry involved a form of active listening, a willing attempt to involve one’s own subjectivity in the pattern of sounds; to constitute one’s self alongside them, and not in spite of them.¹⁶⁷ Morrison has revealed plenty of evidence for this type of relation over the years in interviews, most recently in a string of videos posted to social media.

Entitled “Cutting Room Floor,” the interview series has Morrison answering questions submitted by fans about, among other topics, his early influences, his ability to access American popular music during his childhood, and his thoughts on the creative process.¹⁶⁸ Importantly, his responses about his musical influences are not hagiographic, he does not describe his heroes as having any magical abilities or as behaving like puppets, unlike responses to similar questions by so many North American and even British (as in from Britain) musicians.¹⁶⁹ Instead, he considers their personhood, and the immense labor

¹⁶⁷ See Eric F. Clarke, “Music and Psychology,” from *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, (New York: Routledge, 2003): 113-123.

¹⁶⁸ Van Morrison, “Musical Heroes,” from “Cutting Room Floor,” *Vanmorrison.com*, 2019.

¹⁶⁹ Led Zeppelin and Eric Clapton come to mind as prominent examples of white musicians who characterized their black musical heroes in over-the-top terms, coded minstrel terms, and, unlike Morrison, are often accused of plagiarizing African American blues musicians.

displayed during their musical careers, “These people like had to work hard just to get anything,” he notes at one point. And yet, although he considers their personhood, he also avoids conflating the fact of their cultural labor with anything qualitative about their personhood. At one point the interviewer asks, “Would you have wondered, as a kid, what was Louie Armstrong like as a person?” to which Morrison replies, “no, I never thought about that,” and then wonders aloud, concerning those people who would wonder such a thing, if “maybe they’re too nosey?”¹⁷⁰ He seems aware of himself as a bricoleur, “It’s not about me specifically,” he notes, “I’m energizing, like, concepts, ideas, and putting them into songs, but they’re not necessarily about me personally.”¹⁷¹ Of course, these concepts do end up implicating *him* personally. Morrison reveals the coordinates of his cultural horizons, the exact terms of the complex of associations which compels him, when he notes, in reference to the African American musicians of the nineteen thirties, forties, and fifties, quite simply, that he “can’t find anything better.”¹⁷² And still yet he seems afraid to say even that, as if he’s concerned with what it might imply. On Little Richard, he then notes, “if you’re not affected by that you must be dead,” before adding, cryptically, “I didn’t think about it actually.”¹⁷³

Morrison did not dwell on whether Louie Armstrong kissed his mother, or on Little Richard’s relationship with “Long Tall Sally.” Instead, he pondered the dynamics of identification in these black artists’ works, the fleeting *how* of their affective affordances, as he notes: “What was the emotional impact of it?”¹⁷⁴ Not marginalized in any comparable social sense to African American culture creators, his early life had been decidedly middle class, on the other hand, he did share a similar marginalized position in a cultural sense: with the emerging post-War Atlantic hegemony of the United States culture industry, Morrison, like many African Americans, came to occupy a specific paradoxical relation to the

¹⁷⁰ Morrison, “Cutting Room Floor.”

¹⁷¹ Morrison, “Cutting Room Floor.”

¹⁷² Morrison, “Cutting Room Floor.”

¹⁷³ Morrison, “Cutting Room Floor.”

¹⁷⁴ Morrison, “Cutting Room Floor.”

culture industry stage as both intimately *inside* the mainstream of discourse, knowledgeable of, and compelled by, its terms, and yet, for different reasons, an Other to that discourse. It was this liminal position that allowed Morrison, like those African Americans who had utilized sentimentalism, such complete access to the representational terms of the cultural industry stage, such a thorough understanding of what compelled audiences, and of all the tricks, tropes, and gimmicks it took to get it done. Unlike Elvis, who had been simply thrown onto the stage because he was such a shoo-in for the desired main character, but who lacked any obvious appreciation for what was going on in the space between him and the audience, Morrison understood his act as part of a stage tradition, and he understood something qualitative about that tradition.

Over the course of his career, Morrison occupied several distinct positions relative to the culture industry stage, he created various acts by appealing to different aspects of the lingering complex of which he was so perspective. From the late sixties to the late seventies, he moved back-and-forth between jazz-infused reflections on isolation and desire, like those found on *Astral Weeks* and *Veedon Fleece*, on the one hand, to up-beat soul and pop numbers, like those found on *Moondance*, *St. Dominic's Preview*, and *Tupelo Honey*, among others.¹⁷⁵ Between the two, there was a pretty straightforward dialectic at work: each end of the spectrum was present in the other, the former albums echoed themes found in the latter albums, and vice versa. These albums acted like windows into the discursive complex around which his career revolved, each one an opportunity for Morrison to gain another parallax perspective on the theatre of race, desire, and enjoyment within which he worked every night. And during this time, he also gained a meta-perspective on the operations of the Black Big Other. As a remote participant in North American cultural discourse, the Black Big Other had long influenced and animated Morrison's gaze: to some extent he shared with white Americans the fantasy

¹⁷⁵ Hinton, *Celtic Crossroads*, 80. Van Morrison, *Moondance*, Warner Brothers, 1970, LP. Van Morrison, *Tupelo Honey*, Warner Bros, 1971, LP. Van Morrison, *St. Dominic's Preview*, Warner Brothers, 1972, LP.

of wanting to claim black cultural forms as white and perform them for an African American audience, to 'prove it to them.' Nevertheless, his cultural distance from North America had allowed him to internalize these musical traditions differently. The European setting of his interpolation ensured no fears of miscegenation animated his relation to the Black Big Other. As a perceptive listener and cultural observer, he could sense the agency of the lingering complex, but for him it probably wasn't experienced in the same insidious terms which characterized its relation to white North American audiences. Of course, this is not to say that the potential for racism did and does not exist among European and Irish people, it obviously does. But it is to say that the history of racism in these places is not the history of racism in the United States, however much the two echo each other. Morrison simply experienced the agency of racialized objects differently than white American audiences, and after evoking that agency in several albums, using the different staging techniques he had learned, he gained a kind-of side perspective on to the manner by which the Black Big Other made its appearance. Morrison gained an ability to observe the entire culture industry theatre (not just the stage) as extra-audience member and extra-performer; in a sense, he came to occupy the phantasmatic space represented by the Black Big Other within the white gaze, to take the place of the phantoms of fantasy, observing the theatre of racial staging: audience, performers, et al.

The above-mentioned album dialectic continued until 1980, when the performer changed direction, and over the following decade, released a string of albums broadly focused on spirituality, Gnosticism, and other such "cosmic" themes. Actually, it is hard to say what concretely changed during this time, as he had already worked with them, besides a decision to embrace these kinds of themes more directly. If his earlier albums had appealed to these themes in the service of affording some other affective end-result in coordination with the lingering complex, his eighties and early nineties albums, with titles like *Enlightenment* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart*, seemed to embrace the themes for

their own sake.¹⁷⁶ In other words, if the earlier albums had flirted with spirituality, these were decidedly spiritual albums. And they are also widely considered to be low points relative to Morrison's other work. Reviewing 1980's *Common One* in *NME*, Graham Locke called it "colossally smug and cosmically dull; an interminable, vacuous and drearily egotistical stab at spirituality."¹⁷⁷ Time has been more forgiving, and critics have since found highlights among this and other 1980s Morrison albums, but the feeling seems to remain among fans that these are of much lesser quality than the earlier and later albums, that they have less of an ability to enact any spiritual catharsis, perhaps because they try too hard to do so. Of course, Van Morrison had found success because he is a discerning sentimental minstrel bricoleur, because of his ability to afford the "spirit" of spirituality, not its letter. Considering this, it seems Morrison's overtly spiritual albums were flops because he simply didn't have anything substantive to offer spirituality.¹⁷⁸ On the other hand, during this period of "offering his own two cents," of trying to communicate something other than just affect to his audience, Morrison did end up offering some insights into a topic whose letter he did understand, that being the Black Big Other and the materiality of the black signifier atop the culture industry stage.

These insights came, in what might seem odd at first, during a live performance of the especially cosmically-minded song "Rave On John Donne" in 1983, released as "Rave On John Donne/Rave On Pt. 2" on the album *Live at the Grand Opera House Belfast* in 1984.¹⁷⁹ The original album recording had basically conformed to Locke's description of the earlier *Common One*. Here was a song that *really* tried to be spiritual, here was a singer working within a popular culture milieu who had seemingly lost all

¹⁷⁶ Van Morrison, *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart*, Warner Brothers, 1983, LP. Van Morrison, *Enlightenment*, Polydor, 1990, LP.

¹⁷⁷ Clinton Heylin, *Can You Feel the Silence? Van Morrison: A New Biography*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 19.

¹⁷⁸ Morrison eventually seems to have realized as much. Fans often point to the song "I'm Not Feeling It Anymore" from 1991 as marking a turning point away from such overtly spiritual themes. Van Morrison, "I'm Not Feeling It Anymore," from *Hymns to the Silence*, Polydor, 1991.

¹⁷⁹ Van Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two," *Live at the Grand Opera House Belfast*. Mercury, 1984, LP.

sense of self-awareness, and whose success had seemingly led him toward taking himself, and the imagery that motivated his career, too seriously. In addition, the original recording shows Morrison at his most problematic, at his closest point to evoking those essentialisms which can lead to fascism. Morrison very matter-of-factly compares Buddy Holly's "Rave On," that is, a specific, contingent, and recent example of the experiential terms of blackness within the white gaze (black music makes white teens "rave on" and so on), with much older religious, cultural, and artistic practices. Morrison evokes the sensuous, metaphysical work of seventeenth century English poet John Donne, and characterizes it as representing an experiential base a-historically moving through time, "down through the industrial revolution, Empiricism, atomic and nuclear age, Rave on down through time and space."¹⁸⁰ The result is boring; the Jack Kerouac-style jazz-poetry vocal phrasing awkward against the slow pacing of the recording. But it is also eyebrow-raising. The song posits a consistent positive being on the part of, and between, those people who might be compelled by rock n' roll music in the twentieth century, and those who might have been compelled by Donne's poetry centuries ago, that is, a mystical or transcendental link over time. This is an obvious essentialist trap, an obvious and yet coercive conflation of culture and biology, and a fantasy of experiential equivalence which is represented as taking place over several centuries. Van Morrison is becoming more like Elvis here, that is, less of a bricoleur, less someone who manipulates discourses from a reflexive meta-position, and is instead lazily being led by them, going wherever the signifier *wants* to go (recall Lacan's teaching about the signifier "at the edge of the highway").

Morrison allowed the signifier to sublimate the complexity of historical experience, to condense the real differences between subjectivities at different moments in time. But when he performed the song at the Grand Opera House in 1983, he stepped back into a position of agency and offered a

¹⁸⁰ Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two."

complex and compelling critique of the rhetorical terms which defined his career, and of the ultimate phallic lack which characterizes the Black Big Other. Morrison introduces a new dialectic to the song, he adds several new sections which retroactively condition the earlier parts. The first part of the song finds itself reenergized, already the rhythm works better than on the album recording, the timbre of Morrison's voice blending with it to create, by the affective standards of the post-Atlantic World, a more powerful set of sounds. Yet, so far this doesn't signify much more than that Morrison and his band are on point on this particular tonight. The band then gets to the end of the album version but continues on, the tempo shifts upward, and an extended saxophone solo intervenes.

This section works like an antithesis of the original song; it is not a new song, the band hasn't stop playing, but, after several minutes, the music has gone off in a completely different direction. Then the tempo shifts upward again, and Morrison starts singing a new set of lyrics which, at first, seem to continue the rhetoric of the original song: "tonight, you will understand the oneness," he repeats several times.¹⁸¹ But it is soon apparent that something else is going on, that this is a repetition of the first part within a new synthesis of ideas and identification. Morrison begins to ask, while singing, "Is it true what you sang in your song, is it real what you sang in your song?"¹⁸² Who is he asking and what song is he asking about? The answer is none other than himself and his song about John Donne. More precisely, he is questioning the status of the Other relative to his subjectivity (his unconscious), and the status of the Other within the specific complex of objects which conditions and determines his subjectivity (the Black Big Other as superego). The question is akin to the Lacanian "che vuoi?" (what is it that you want from me?): "what is the content of the Other's desire, both that Other 'within myself,' and that Other which is forever distant, beyond the 'rock of castration'?"¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two."

¹⁸² Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two."

¹⁸³ Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press): 68.

At first Morrison doesn't answer. Instead he launches into another set of lyrics: "Can we talk it over one more time, tonight? . . . tonight?," one last effort at tarrying with the Other's desire, but soon this leads back into the earlier part, "tonight, you will understand the oneness."¹⁸⁴ He begins to ask the question again: "is it real what you sang in your song?"¹⁸⁵ But this time he answers, and in the process, rhetorically leads listeners to confront the power of the Black Big Other over them and to disavow it, that is, to understand the agency of the black signifier as a blind, dumb power, a nonentity which doesn't want *anything* from those who direct their cultural performance toward "it." Morrison answers, very simply, "no, no, no, no..."¹⁸⁶ He is telling the audience, quite literally, in a moment he has been narratively leading up to over several minutes of music, that it is *not* true what he sang in his song. This rhetorical moment is very similar to the "traversing the fantasy" in Lacanian clinical analysis, where the gaze of the Other, source of endless questioning, is deprived of its ability to animate the subject. The analysand comes to a point, not of identification with the analyst's strong ego, but of comprehending the ultimate disjuncture between the Other's desire and the subject's being, of the Real nonrelation between the two. Fink again:

The ultimate struggle in analysis – that of getting the analysand to assume responsibility for his or her castration instead of demanding compensation for it from the Other – is played out between the analysand and the analyst, who stands in for the Other (and for the lost object at the same time). The analysand must be brought to the point where he or she no longer blames the analyst (as object or Other) for his or her troubles, and no longer seeks compensation or retribution. At the same time, the analysand must, faced with the analyst's constant desire for him or her to continue the analysis, reach a point at which the analyst's wishes have no hold on him or her.¹⁸⁷

Van Morrison has thus turned the culture industry stage into the analyst's couch, he has reinterpreted the earlier act (the album-version part of the performance) as so many ambiguous, unconscious wishes

¹⁸⁴ Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two."

¹⁸⁵ Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two."

¹⁸⁶ Morrison, "Rave on John Donne/Rave On Part Two."

¹⁸⁷ Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 71.

for a stable, fixed being in the eyes of the Other, and more specifically, as a phantasmatic claiming of African cultural products as substantially “white” objects in the eyes of a Black Big Other. In addition, the earlier “mistake” (the lazy, “automatic” discursive work found on the album version) is here seen to be dialectally crucial to Black Big Other’s final negation. As Žižek argues, “the true speculative meaning emerges only through the repeated reading, as the after-affect (or by-product) of the first “wrong” reading.¹⁸⁸ This repetition allows Morrison to cover all his rhetorical bases, to cast each of the characters necessary to negate the Black Big Other. Morrison as marionette is present in the first act, where the Black Big Other nakedly speaks *through* him; an *actual* black musician, James Brown’s bandleader and co-author of “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud” Pee Wee Ellis, plays the saxophone section, displacing the Black Big Other with the presence of his personhood in an act of antithesis; and Morrison as bricoleur, who is finally able to stage the dialectical remediation, “the final reversal of things: a reconfiguration of the fundamental fantasy.”¹⁸⁹

This time around, Morrison shows that the relationship between fans of rock n’ roll and the much earlier fans of Donne’s poetry is not characterized by any continuing “essence,” but by shifting cultural horizons whose earlier terms “echo” in each new distribution.¹⁹⁰ The two groups do not share anything substantial, the act of “breaking bread,” and other such religious practices, for instance, which he mentions during the album version in relation to both groups, would have ultimately been experienced in quite different terms between the two groups (to say nothing about differences *within* those groups: the fantasy of experiential equivalence again).¹⁹¹ Morrison does, on the other hand, pose a qualitative connection related to the status of their desiring, and of the two groups’ experience of the

¹⁸⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009): 33.

¹⁸⁹ Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 71. James Brown and Pee Wee Ellis, “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud,” from *Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud*, Single, King, 1968, EP.

¹⁹⁰ For a breakdown of her “fantasy echo” concept see Joan Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*

¹⁹¹ Van Morrison, “Rave on John Donne,” from *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart*. Warner Brothers, 1983, LP.

motivating potential of objects as stage-props. The god-like experience of objects' agency, the gaze of the Big Other/superego, motivator of experience for "western subjectivities," may have come to acquire several new components during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but for all the contingent differences which arose in this transition, for all the ways the present *is not* the past (and it most certainly *is not*), a certain performative, experiential, and identificatory dynamic was also reproduced through the lingering agency of the sentimental complex. What twentieth century subjects of popular culture discourse shared with earlier subjectivities was not the latent content of their desire, but their failure to recognize the Big Other's phantasmatic hold over them, the extent to which their cultural involvement was motivated by a desire to perform for an audience; an audience which, being a mere projection on to a set of inert objects, didn't *really* exist.

And still yet, for those of us seeking ways of negating the insidious agency of racialized signifiers, and of increasing the Real agency of living African American people, Morrison's example only seems to go so far. The question becomes how to follow Morrison's rhetorical procedure without the first "mistaken" identification with the Black Big Other as something substantial, how to avoid letting "it" speak through us in the first place. This author's response is at first pessimistic: we cannot really avoid the racial fraughtness of the culture industry stage, there is no firm ethical ground to stand on within this milieu, we're *all* implicated, *all* of our enjoyment is caught up in histories of racial theft, reflected back-and-forth across a completely fictional, and yet very tangible, racial colorline. Lott came to such a conclusion in his analysis of Dylan's "*Love and Theft*," an album named after, and obviously influenced by, Lott's own monograph on minstrelsy: "he (Dylan) knows full well the cross-cultural indebtedness of music in the Americas, his included, and alludes to it in the songs as well as the title, itself stolen, of "*Love and Theft*."¹⁹² And yet for Lott, Dylan is able, much like this author's description of Morrison, if not

¹⁹² Lott, *Black Mirror*, 197.

to find stable ground, to at least push back against the coerciveness of these stolen good by recognizing them as such, by directly pointing it out, and by thus developing a reflexive ability to self-criticize his own libidinal investments. And if this argument seems something of a political letdown, we need only consider the layout of the contemporary culture industry paradigm to find some hope. These histories no longer echo in the way they used to, their very ubiquity is now felt in drastically different terms. Information about the endless performers, genres, and tropes of the culture industry stage have been made widely and easily available via the rise of the internet. Music fans (almost all of us) now have access to the complete audio history of the culture industry stage via the rise of streaming services. If earlier generations had mostly maintained singular parallax relationships with the culture industry stage, if the dynamic was only able to be furthered because certain aspects of the stage were consistently obscured, today all the characters have been unmasked, the entire stage lit. Today we have something of a (metaphorical, of course) VR access to the culture industry stage (intangible as it may be), we know *too much* for these repetitions to work in the same way, we're no longer completely caught by them, we've come to expect them.

So it seems, for most popular culture consumers today, the first two parts of Morrison's remediation have already taken place: the terms of the knowledge complex now almost automatically afford an appreciation of the culture industry stage in its historicity, we understand it as the backdrop of our identities, and yet this very understanding leads to a certain distance, an affective antithesis relative to the lingering complex. And thus, like visitors to the Rawlings house museum, contemporary popular culture consumers are faced with an ethical choice: the question is whether they will go through with the third step of the remediation. With all they've seen, with every performance, with every song, will they take responsibility for their fantasies, and for the social repercussions of those fantasies, or will they retreat into the domain of obscene enjoyment, and set the terms for the emergence of another new paradigm, another stage where personhoods are negated?

Conclusion

This study proposed that an antebellum complex of sentimental and minstrel principles came to afford a lingering object-agency over the terms of North American, and eventually broader post-Atlantic, cultural discourse during the twentieth century. The study characterized that agency using concepts about the staging of cultural performance and the experiential terms of subjective identification and interpolation, taken from material cultural studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis respectively. This author hopes that the interdisciplinary use of these concepts might represent a small codification or partial forging of relational links between the involved methodologies and the historical discipline, and, following this, that the study might contribute to a broader materialist consideration among historians of the relations between enjoyment, desire, materiality, and the history of race. Building on Eric Lott's work, the study characterized the lingering complex as influential over the aesthetic and social terms of the North American culture industry. This author hopes that the present work might serve, not merely as a liberal "meeting-in-the-middle" of competing discourses, but as a parallax shift in discursive outlooks from Miller to Lott: a (re)writing of a Marxian-Lacanian notion of value and jouissance into Miller's compelling, but analytically and politically limited, arguments about race and the culture industry.

The current project's thesis, expressed in metaphors and metonymies of the stage, the audience, and the theatre, owes much to Lacan's methodological appeal, during the last decade of his life, to the mathematical field of topology in his search for a "pure" structure of the subject beyond the limiting effects of language, that is, toward a description of speaking subjects taking place at the level of the Real. And while Lacan eventually "admitted that the entire project was likely to fail in light of the inevitable interference of meaning," and that the topology of the "Borromean knot had turned out to be an inappropriate metaphor" for subjects' disparate caughtness between the registers of Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, this author believes, following Lacan's own self-criticisms, that the present project

avoids this failure through its repeated appeal to material culture studies, a field which engages the metonymical aspects of structure.¹⁹³ The project considers, in a Lacanian way, the agency of the letter, that is, the agency of words, ideas, and cultural tropes over human subjects, but it also investigates, in a way influenced by material culture studies, the influence of objects' physical properties relative to their cultural involvement, the way objects' rootedness in the world limits and directs what they afford within culture, and what within which culture. Thus, the project thinks structure *and* contingency, while engaging the inevitable literary quality of history. The "culture industry theatre and stage" become, not reductive catchalls, but reflexive concepts which echo the very reflexivity under investigation, concepts compelled to engage their own histories and "spill the beans" like enemy spies under duress.

This project has only made claims on that which the disciplines of history and psychoanalysis, and the field of material culture studies, make available. By bringing these areas of thought into a new dialectical interrelation, the project has made a structural argument about the dynamics of racial identification in North America and the broader post-Atlantic world. This structure is not quite Lacan's "pure mathematics of the subject," nor could it be, we're speaking here of the space *between* subjects, not the subjects "themselves," after all. But it does reflect his investigation into topological structure. The project's central concepts, "the theatre of racial performance," and the closely related "Black Big Other," each contain a spatial logic: although they do not exist on their own, outside of human cultural performance, they nevertheless mirror the spatial logics Lacan associated with the different structures of subjectivity. Stated another way, there is an aspect of the unconscious that plays out in spatial terms, Lacan's famous "the unconscious is structured like a language," and, with regard to the history of race in America, those terms evidence a spatial logic akin to a theatre: with a stage, performers, and an audience. *This structure* was the twentieth century legacy of nineteenth century sentimentalism,

¹⁹³ Dany Nobus, "Lacan's Science of the Subject," from *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 65.

unwittingly, but perversely, reproduced by the North American culture industry, within which, as a constantly shifting complex of tropes and undergirding social (capitalist) terms, it had been first constituted.¹⁹⁴ And so, as white Americans began to sing “Railroad Bill,” that ambiguous product of black political sentimentalism, they helped to usher in a new performative paradigm, a new way of staging the construct of race. But, crucially, they constructed this new paradigm directly out of the old, they took the old highways to get to new places. In the process, the lingering influences of history were forced out of the representational sphere, *but then returned* in displaced or condensed forms *as symptoms*. The rhetorical processes involved in the harbingering of the new paradigm were akin to an act of making unconscious and unknown the massive shaping effects of history, of separating signifiers from signifieds which might benefit the African American freedom struggle. This splitting is palpable, at least from our contemporary standpoint, throughout the pages of *The Yearling*, whose disjunctured series of identifications reveal the rhetorical processes involved in the maintenance of the paradigm, that is, the processes involved in keeping unconscious the influence of the black signifier.

As Elvis and Cole came to occupy the culture industry’s central stage, this influence gained an open status, blackness again became the *outward* currency of American cultural products. Gaining greater access to the field of representation, African American performers engaged in an expanded critique of race and racism, and many whites began to listen and self-criticize in new ways; and even many of those listeners who didn’t were forced to pay political lip service to the principles of anti-racism. Yet, despite these developments, the status of the black signifier, although openly acknowledged, remained to be fully challenged. The terms of this new paradigm echoed the old minstrel one, and African American rhetorical power over whites remained blocked-up by the overdetermined

¹⁹⁴ As the culturally inscribed social “link” between subjects, this theatre should not be conceived as a “window” into the Real, but as a “mirror” reflecting a given subject’s own Imaginary. The stage itself is the product of fantasy, it is the structure of the racist fantasy

qualities of the black signifier, which whites artists and culture industry producers failed to experientially negate throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Black artists could aesthetically and intellectually challenge the construct of race, they could describe it as arbitrary, but, ultimately, these attempts were akin to the praxis of ego psychology, where the analysand's symptoms are, or at least supposed to be, negated through identification with the analyst's strong ego. The problem with this approach is that the problem already involves/consists of an identification with African Americans: its not enough for African American performers to be right about the constructedness of race, to describe it as such in their works, in order to negate the black signifier's experiential power over white audiences. One needs specific tools, has to take advantage of specific rhetorical processes made accessible from specific points of cultural interpolation, to bring white audiences to the point of experiencing the arbitrary quality of race, of the ultimate phallic lack which characterizes the gaze of the Black Big Other. Because of the mélange of discursive terms which characterized his cultural interpolation, Van Morrison had access to these tools and processes, and could serve as analyst to white culture industry consumers who lived a neurosis of race.

This last point of analysis is, ultimately, the one this author intends to be the central contribution of this work, that is, to point toward an interdisciplinary model for historians to investigate the libidinal energies at work in the construction of dominant racial identities, and to point toward a formal rhetorical praxis for the negation of racialized signifiers. This author hopes to have shown that any political project aimed at deconstructing race and racism must rhetorically engage the unconscious of history which conditions its staging, and to give it a new symbolic presence, a talking cure for the history of race. And thus, in this specific way, Barthes was wrong: the Other is most threatening when most perfectly an object, while James Baldwin, on the other hand, was right: "Whatever white people do not

know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves."¹⁹⁵ It is the job of historians to help them find out.

¹⁹⁵ James Baldwin, "Letter From a Region in my Mind," *The New Yorker*, (November 09, 1962).

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