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What's in a Face?: the Dialectic of Facts and Possibilities in *Darktown Strutters*.

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Abstract

The role of the mask and its meaning has been the focus of studies on blackface minstrelsy. Interesting conclusions have been reached on the motive for which the mask is worn, its implications for race relations in 19th century United States and its preference for existence over essence in terms of the dichotomy between what the mask both reveals and conceals. The analyses of Lacan, Ellison and Huggins, among others, are particularly useful in exploring the mask as a symbolic representation of distance between reality and disguise, and hence a framework for the construction of the self and identity. In this article, I intend to explore the face on two levels of consciousness: first, as a symbol of meaning that the mask generates and second, as a mask itself. The thesis of my article is that a demonstration of these levels of consciousness not only accentuates the contrast between facts and possibilities, but in many ways, it complicates and problematizes the logic of the mask in terms of meaning, complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes. In the conduct of this study, I will rely on Hegel's dialectic of facts and possibilities and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of paranoia and mimicry.

Studies on Blackface minstrelsy have provoked diverse reactions and controversial reviews as well as thoughtful insights into its significance. The body of critique and the range of views that this study has generated accounts for both its popularity and its controversy especially in the implications of minstrelsy for race, ethnicity and culture. Wesley Brown's novel *Darktown Strutters* is one of such texts that focus on minstrelsy and its significance.

In the novel, Brown focuses on the logic of the mask in depicting the relationship that exists between the face and the

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mask and the meanings that can be attached to the interaction between the two at different levels. Thus the degree to which the mask can be regarded either as the same or as two different entities is explored in the novel. The following quote from the novel captures this duality:

*“Are we who we are when we open our eyes? **Is my face myself or just a disguise?** Do we know who is who when our eyes are shut? When the lids go down, do we know what’s what?...so this is the story of how faces can fool you...”* (197)
(Bold font my emphases)

This quote attempts to make a distinction between one’s face as symbolic of one’s being or reflective of one’s identity on the one hand and the face as disguise of identity or being on the other. This distinction between “my face as myself” and “my face as disguise” sets up a dialectic in the novel between facts and possibilities in which facts are interpreted to mean a set of determinates that define and characterize the face and the identity behind it, and possibilities as a process in which the individual through choice and action breaks from this realm of facts in order to achieve his existential freedom. In the latter, the individual attempts to achieve in the language of Paolo Freire his “ontological vocation” and his “humanism”.

The distinction between reality of being and its camouflage or disguise is what, among other things, the opening quote of this article attempts to capture. In this way, it sets up a dialectic between facts and possibilities as a function of the relationship between the face and the mask and its implication for both the players and the audience. This dialectic further establishes the novel’s preoccupation with the search for identity. In addition, it further explores the tension between these two aspects of facts and possibilities through a demonstration of the intricacies in the levels of consciousness associated with blackface minstrelsy as a medium of exploring identity and truth. These levels of consciousness could, for analysis, be described as “white blackface”, “black blackface”, and “white and black blackface”. I will make reference to these distinctions and the meanings that could be deduced from them at an existential level later in subsequent discussions in this article.

The thesis of my article is that a demonstration of these levels of consciousness not only accentuates the contrast between facts and possibilities, but that in many ways, it complicates and

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problematizes the logic of the mask in terms of its meaning, complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes.

A crucial aspect of minstrelsy is the role of the mask and what it portrays. Research into blackface minstrelsy has come up with interesting conclusions about the meaning of the mask. One such analysis is that given by Ralph Ellison and I will use it as a starting point for this discussion. Ellison writes in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" in *Shadow and Act* that:

America is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals. (23)

In Ellison's interpretation, several levels of meaning are discernible with the mask both as an aesthetic and as a dramatic device. Of particular importance is the motive for which the mask is worn, its preference for existence over essence in terms of the gestures it makes towards the future and the dichotomy it portrays between what it reveals and what it conceals. In Ellison's analysis, he hints that the mask is a source of freedom and the face behind it is not the sum of the being of the individual. As such, the mask thus has a way of creating identities, which though existing at one level as a form of identity, do not constitute the true being, or identity of the individual. There is a gap between the face the mask sets up and the real face behind it. This sense of distance produces ramifications of meaning, here perceived as ambiguities that are of crucial significance to my project. Hence, one of the tasks of this article is to unravel the dichotomy between facts and possibilities that the mask conveys.

Realizing that the identities that the mask creates may not reflect the true identity of the player behind it, one has a sense of its paradox because the identity created on stage is circumscribed by time and space as it is limited to the stage and may not reflect the being of the player. The reader's task in the novel is to unravel the complexities between what the mask reveals and what it conceals as well as determining the point at which the mask or the face is a reflection of the truth and the point at which it is not. Thus one may ponder on the extent to which the mask is an illustration of facts, of negative societal stereotypes or an indication of possibilities. The question whether the mask can be

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used to break stereotypes and turn the joke of black inferiority and primitivism around as Ellison suggests becomes crucial.

In this article, therefore, I intend to explore the face on two dimensions: first, as a representation of the symbolic levels of meaning that the mask generates and second, as a study of the mask itself. In this regard, the meaning of the mask at various existential levels earlier referred to in the introduction will be used as framework for analysis while attempts will be made to bring out the ambiguities associated with the mask at these levels of meaning. Further, I will focus on what the mask signifies for players and society over and beyond the superficial representations that the face portrays; the paradox it demonstrates in projecting meanings of blackness other than that for which it is intended and for seemingly making whiteness ironically the butt of the joke that the mask creates and amplifies.

In the analysis of these issues, I intend to provoke discussion around the following questions that the mask raises: is the mask a representation of the truth or a falsification of truth? Is perception of the individual distorted by seeing the mask in place of the face, or the face in place of the mask? Is the novel a demonstration of how faces can fool people?

These questions that the novel raises make it clear that to adopt a Manichean attitude to the function of the mask as simply a signification of the dichotomy between “being” and “not-being” reduces the complexities of the mask and the level at which it operates. What the mask does is to a large extent much more than a polemical analysis of facts and possibilities could capture. Therefore, despite my efforts to locate the discussion within the discourse of Hegelian dialectic of facts and possibilities and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of mimicry and paranoia, I will submit that the mask is more complex than this.

However, in my attempt to navigate the stormy waters of blackface minstrelsy, I would rely to a large extent on Hegel’s notions of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Jacques Lacan’s concept of the subject in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, and Nathan Huggins’ mode of the self in *Harlem Renaissance*. In particular, Lacan’s analysis of mimicry and paranoia for an understanding of the paradox of the mask as it relates to the joke and images of the self would be useful. I must state that for an insight into these issues and the connotations of meanings that they generate, I found Mikko Tuhkanen’s article “Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge” very

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instructive and I will make references to it at certain points in this piece.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan writes:

Only the subject – the human subject of the desire that is the essence of man – is not, unlike the animal, *entirely* caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? ***In so far as he isolates the function of the mask and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze.*** (107)

(Bold font are my emphasis)

Here, Lacan stresses the distance between the true self, the human subject, from the mask and the image it portrays. In a sense, therefore, the mask reveals an identity that is not analogous to the self. The mask does provide an image within which it attempts to capture and subdue the self as an aspect of self-definition and identity. By establishing this distance between the mask and the players behind it, laughter is not only produced but becomes the very basis of irony, misconceptions, ridicule and sarcasm. The players, in effect, are seen to manipulate the meanings of the mask to their advantage and they succeed in hiding behind a shield that the gaze of the audience cannot penetrate. The players distance themselves from the mask, in other words, from the identity it creates. Thus, the identity the mask portrays is, in essence, a non-identity. In this instance, the mask may not be analogous to the face for while it creates an image and identity of the player, there is the possibility that the face holds a different identity behind it. The ability of the players to control and manipulate images and meanings associated with the mask accounts for transcending facts into possibilities as it offers players the opportunity of ascertaining their existence and thus achieving their ontological freedom.

In line with Lacan's view, the mask further offers players an identity beyond non-identity, in other words, a non-identity as identity; for while the audience focuses on what it sees and believes to be the identity of the player; the true self, that operates as non-identity in the sense of that which is not perceived, is kept as the true identity of the player. This non-identity is the self that is shielded from "the gaze" and protected.

Lacan's analysis ascertains the inability of the audience to see beyond the mask and so the identity of the player behind it is

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protected from the gaze. The sense of “double identity” that the mask creates makes it possible for players to alienate themselves from the meaning(s) the mask creates. This possibility gives the players an ambit of freedom within which choices and decisions are made. The mask thus illustrates the distance between the signifier and the signified.

While acknowledging the freedom the mask offers the players, Huggins warns of the danger of the mask essentializing the being of the players. He writes:

*There is a danger of corruptions of the self in this pretence, and surely a rending of integrity. **How, and when does one call upon the real self to dispel the make-believe and claim humanity and dignity?*** (262)
(Bold font my emphasis)

Here, Huggins, like Lacan, recognizes the contrast between the true self and the make-believe self that the mask produces for the players. While Lacan stresses the ability of the maskers to use the meanings associated with the mask to manipulate and control, in the words of Ellison, to “change the joke and slip the yoke”; Huggins warns of the difficulty involved in “calling upon the real self to dispel the make-believe”, hence the risk of essentialization that the mask offers. Thus, there is a real danger of the mask becoming the face, hence transferring the meanings associated with it on to the player. This further points to the fact that while masking illustrates the possibility of achieving one’s ontological freedom, there is a risk that the meanings of the mask and the paradoxes associated with it may not be transcended by the player. In this regard, Brown’s question, is my face myself or merely a disguise comes to mind. He seems to be asking: is my face a mask or is it a reflection of my mind?

In addition, I would like to ask what happens when the face becomes a mask? Jim Crow’s slashed face will then pose a problematic here for while the slash points to the attempt of whites to impose a fixed identity on him, thereby denying him his freedom to hide behind his face, it is doubtful whether Jim is able to transcend this “new” identity. Does the face as mask offer Jim the opportunity “to play with the mask as that beyond which is the gaze” (107) or does it recall Huggins’ risk of “a danger of corrosion (in calling) upon the real self to dispel the make-believe and claim humanity and dignity?” (262)

In exploring the ambiguities and paradoxes of the mask, I propose to examine the significance of the mask on three

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existential levels; white blackface, black blackface and white and black blackface showing what aspects of self-consciousness they illustrate. These different levels of analysis show the contrast between “being” and “not-being”, facts and possibilities. I will also explore dancing and photography as two aspects of the novel that further illustrate this contrast and further contribute to an understanding of the complexities of the mask.

I propose to explore the point that the different kinds of masks lend credence to the blurring of racial borders, as players can put on either white or black faces depending on their choice. This choice that the mask offers the players serves to illustrate that race only exists in the degree to which it is interpreted and that whiteness or blackness is a choice. Further, it denotes the impermanence of a state of being defined by color as whiteness or blackness can be discarded in the same way as it is acquired both physically in the after-wash of the players’ faces and ontologically in the player stepping outside of his essence and role. From such analysis, it can be deduced that anyone can be black or white and that minstrelsy creates a futuristic mode of action that offers players possibilities of becoming rather than notions of fixation in essences. It is probably along this line that one can interpret Brown’s attempt at depicting Rice as a positive figure reaching out to blacks in a dialogical relationship that speaks of acceptance, recognition and self-realization.

In my discussion also I will make the following distinctions in the levels of meaning at which the mask operates. First, I would discuss white blackface, that is “white on black face” as a reaffirmation of white stereotypes as it illustrates the way whites want blacks to be seen. It attempts at defining blacks as facts in portraying them in dehumanizing stereotypes. By stepping into blackness and performing these negative roles associated with blackness, whites on black face were limiting blacks to essence rather than possibilities. This situation recalls Hegel’s notion of “being for others” in blacks being conditioned to live according to white social prescriptions.

This view of blackface minstrelsy has been illustrated by a host of writers; significantly, Tuhkanen, in his article “of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge” has gone a long way in providing interesting details related with this perception. The mask at the level of white blackface attempts to portray blacks as inferior in the elaborate representations of black physical features and modes of speech on the stage. The Negro in this regard is

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almost always portrayed with a wide mouth, red lips and bloodshot eyes. Recalling the infantile image with which blacks were associated, white blackface essentializes blacks by creating and celebrating an “iconography of inferiority” of black bodily features against those of whites as a means of valorizing the latter.

Wittke sums up the negative stereotyping associated with white blackface as follows:

In minstrelsy, the Negro had all these characteristics and many more. He always was distinguished by an unusually large mouth and a peculiar kind of broad grin; he dressed in gaudy colors and in a flashy style; he usually consumed more gin than he could properly hold; and he loved chickens so well that he could not pass a chicken-coop without falling into temptation. In minstrelsy, moreover, the Negro alleged love for the grand manner led him to use words so long that he not only did not understand their meaning, but twisted the syllables in the most ludicrous fashion in his futile efforts to pronounce them. (8)

Therefore, what white blackface offers is the demonstration of the Negro as facts; an illustration of negative white perception of his being that plays out into “socially and ideologically constructed and manipulated stereotypes”. (12)

There is also the mask as “black blackface”. Here, the mask designates the possibility of transcending the negative image associated with facts depicted on “white blackface”. Though this may be true, apologists of this view point out the ambivalence of the mask and the dangers of postulating a one-to-one interpretation of its meaning in relation to the face it masks. Lacan emphasized the ability of the players to “play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze”. In this instance, minstrelsy in the words of Tuhkanen “necessarily provide us an opening for strategic intervention...a more radical potential for symbolic reconfigurations.” (14)

Based on this ambivalence, I propose to examine the meaning of the mask as an indication of possibility. Importantly, Lacan’s notion of mimicry and paranoia justify this aspect of the mask. In his depiction of “The Mirror Stage” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan makes a distinction between mimicry as “being for others” and Mimicry as “being for self”. He notes that mimicry constitutes the human infant’s misrecognition of itself in the mirror through

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which he comes to experience its body through the specular image as a totality, more coordinated than bodily experience would suggest. Through this, Lacan speaks of “the spatial captation manifested in the mirror” as the individual is arrested by the image he sees of himself and acts in accordance with that image. (4)

The Mirror stage thus represents for minstrelsy the situation in which blacks are made to act in accordance with the image “white blackface” constructs of them. They are arrested by that image and in acting it out on stage, they come to perceive themselves by what that image suggests of their “being”. In this regard, both “white on blackface” and “black on black face” suggest negative stereotyping of blacks. It is this level of Psychoanalysis that Lacan describes in *Seminar III: The Psychoses* as “animal mimicry” in which: “the imaginary is surely the guide to life for the whole animal domain” where the subject is captated by its image or counterpart. (9)

However, Lacan also distinguishes animal mimicry from human mimicry. In the latter, “while the image equally plays a capital role in our own domain, this role is completely taken up and caught up within, remodeled and reanimated by, the symbolic order”. Thus, in the mask as possibilities, the player is capable of transcending the boundaries and fixations that facts represent through his potential and capacity for “play”, for as Lacan notes: “humans are not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture (for they) isolate the function of the screen and play with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze”. (107) Susan Gubar has suggested that some black performers have acted out “white people’s conceptions of the stage Negro with a defensive irony that called attention to the artifice of the role”. (36) This capacity for action illustrates the realm of possibilities in that “doing determines being”.

In *Darktown Strutters*, Brown could be said to echo Lacan’s thoughts by using “white on black face” to break racial barrier as Rice’s performance with Jim shows. This is done through the motif of Bones and the song “who is who in Paducah?” that pervades the novel. Since they offer a vital platform for interpretation of action, I will take a moment to illustrate them. In one of his performances, Rice explains the symbolism of Mr. Bones: “...(I am) secure in the knowledge that when God was studying on making the human race, he wasn’t studying on Adam’s sin but his ribs. So you can stick with the

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skin if you wanna. But I'm stick with the ribs!" (39) Later, he tells the audience "you can be bones too if you'd get off your skin like me" (39).

What these quotes suggest is the issue of choice and decision, the possibility of stepping out of essence into existence. While it devalues skin color, it lays premium on bones by metaphorically bringing into play the issue of interconnectedness; bones are circumscribed by joints, the totality of which gives shape and form to the human body. Thus human anatomy is more a question of bones than skin. Bones are more fundamental than skin and the preference for bones over skin should assert the contrast between incompleteness and wholeness, superficiality and substantiality. Bones, in addition, may represent a working model of humanity; indeed, humans have the same skeletal structure regardless of skin color. Thinking in terms of bones rather than skin illustrates the contrast between thinking from outside – in to inside - out and Brown underscores the value of the latter over the former.

Again skin and bones could serve as a metaphorical parallel to the face and the mask. While the novel suggests a preference for the face behind the mask and the mind, it also places a premium on the structure within the flesh that holds the flesh outwardly together.

The other motif, the song "who is who in Paducah?", stresses the dichotomy between appearance and being, and calls for a deeper probing into the nature of things for truth to be achieved. Thus, it is in reacting against both "black blackface" as well as "white blackface" minstrelsy as an illustration of a level of consciousness that articulates "being for others" that Brown brings in the motif of bones and the song "Who is who in Paducah?" In this regard, Brown is able to articulate the positive side of minstrelsy; in effect, what minstrelsy could have brought to America had this point of view and perception of its significance been accepted.

In discussing "black on blackface", Brown hints at the possibility of deception operating at this level of the mask. Here, the mask illustrates a situation where blackness, in masking the true feelings and identity of the player, plays to the advantage of the player as he or she uses it as the instrument of white destruction. Jack Diamond tells Jim:

...if you put this on, you can even
beat them at their own game. Cause while they trying like the

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devil to hate you for what you are, your face is making them
laugh
at what you are ain't. (41)

This level of operation of the mask conjures up images of the trickster and it allows for the perception of the mask as an instrument of black freedom and intellectual superiority. Through this manipulation, the whites are outwitted and destroyed.

In a conversation with Jim, Two-Faced, another character in the novel remarks:

I know blacking up is US DOIN WHITE FOLKS DOIN
U!...Like most of our people, I know I gotta stretch the
truth in order to live. But long as WE know what we
doin, it don't matter what white folks think! (134)

Two-Faced, a recreation of Janus, the two-headed Roman god, gives us another level of consciousness and identity in minstrelsy. Like the god, his white face at the back of his head and black in front shows his deception. In this pronouncement, Two-Faced is making an existential statement that could be interpreted on two levels. First, it echoes Lacan's idea of the mask as play, and like Tuhkanen, I believe that "by embodying the black persona, black performers were able to parodically reconfigure racist representations and challenge the oppressive logic on which they were based." (18) Thus, as Huggins rightfully notes, black performers "tried to use the stereotype as an instrumental satire" by distancing themselves from damaging representations through exaggeration.

Hegel, on the other hand, would view this statement as a limitation of black consciousness. Since to Hegel consciousness is relational, then blacks need white acknowledgement as a means of justification of their being. Since self-consciousness requires an objectification of the consciousness of the subject, then it becomes dangerous for blacks to rely on self-relation for the image they would have of themselves would remain unjustified. Therefore, the words of Two-Faced: "it don't matter what white folks think" is a limitation on possibility rather than an enhancement. In this way, the mask offers the opportunity of using it both as liberation in terms of reconfiguring its logic to outwit the oppressor and as distortion of the reality when it is used as a one-dimensional approach to self-consciousness and self-realization.

Another level of consciousness that the mask generates is that of "black face without black". Jim plays out this level of

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identity in his refusal to blacken up for performances. He tells Rice of his discomfort in putting on a black face: "It ain't that I think I'm too good for it, Mister Rice. It's just that I'm already colored." (45) By refusing to blacken up, Jim is asserting here the notion of being for oneself. He is insisting on his sense of possibilities and is demanding to be seen the way he wants to be seen.

In accordance with this level of interpretation of the mask, it is important to illustrate the scarring of Jim's face and its implications on meaning. Phenomenologically, the human face represents a sign of the mind that lies behind it. The face allows the individual to construct and articulate different signification that is not subject to control by any social ideology or phenomenon. This freedom to use the face as one desires and as a means of illustrating the inner workings of the mind points to an existential capacity to act in the realm of possibilities. In this regard, the personhood of the individual is guaranteed against any measure to subject it to the negative stereotypes which minstrelsy on one level strives to do. The individual thus becomes an existential object and the face becomes the key to measuring the individual person. Thus the face goes beyond its physical features as it turns the individual into personhood and gives him a spiritual dimension.

Therefore, the scarring of Jim's face represents a metaphorical attempt to deny him his spirituality by equating his face with the mask and to transfix him into a situation of permanence rather than change. In this situation, the face as sign of the mind and as symbol of the physical are interfused. Hence, Jim will always be his face, and in this sense his face is the scar (mask) that he wears, more obvious, open to ready interpretation, trapped in fact and is thus the butt of social stereotypes. Jim's scarred face illustrates "being for others".

In addition to the above level on which the mask operates, there is "black and white faces on the same face". Jubilee tells his fellow players:

I got a new skit... We'd all
be in black face in one side of our face and white on the other.
When *we start talking on both sides of our faces*, you try to figure out who's on your side and who ain't. We keep the audience guessing right along with you until the end when everybody finds out who's who. (66)

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This strategy has several implications for identity and consciousness. It allows the players to appeal to both sections of the audience, black and white simultaneously; it articulates the fact that since the players can be both white and black at the same time, skin color and in essence racism is a choice; it offers the players the possibilities of manipulating and controlling the feelings of the audience and it allows for self-identification and self-realization of the audience as they struggle to identify with the side of the mask that appeals to them and thereby define themselves. The crucial fact in this strategy is that the audience, in identifying with only one side of the mask is in essence identifying with a sense of incompleteness, as the players are neither black nor white. They are thus trapped between “what is” or “being” and “what is not” or “not being”. A call for transcending facts into the realm of possibilities is thus brought into play.

What then does blackface minstrelsy tell us? Is the purpose of the mask limited to making a practical joke on society? If so, what kind of joke and what is its implication? Are the players articulating the view that the problem of race, like blackface minstrelsy is a joke?

In answering these questions, one may well realize that the effectiveness of the mask is limited to the stage in the sense that what it portrays cannot be played out in real life. However, and on the contrary, there is a sense of parallelism for the mask also gestures toward the point that the stage is life as people are always acting. In effect, “to be” is “to act” and that act could connote both actions in real life as well as stage performances. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the mask is temporal and illusory. This feeling is made worse because the characters are merely playing, they are acting, and it is an act that connotes both pretension and self-delusion. This is what Ellison refers to as the joke that the mask portrays.

In analyzing the joke and its significance, I propose using Dubois’ idea of “double consciousness” and Lacan’s theory of paranoia. I believe that both players and audience are aware of a state of double consciousness while watching a play. The player is aware of another consciousness behind the face that he wears and the audience is also aware of another consciousness beyond the face that they see. This sense of double consciousness behind and beyond the mask or face accounts for the tensions and scenes of violence depicted in the novel. Rice’s death stems from this duality, for his assassin is aware of a white face behind the black

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and is annoyed that the white consciousness refuses to support the idea of out-dancing the player with the black face in the dancing competition. Significantly, he shoots Rice in the face, a metaphorical killing of the whiteness behind the black face that refuses to support white stereotypes.

However, the face, as Hegel would have us believe, either by its color or form does not entirely constitute the self of the individual it depicts. What it does is to articulate the distinction between the “me” and “not me”, positing a relational dimension between the subject and its image, and creating a sense of objectification of the self into the object.

Therefore, by placing emphasis on facial constructs that inevitably articulates the realm of facts or essences through its use of a set of determinates to appropriate the being of an individual that paradoxically is both him and not him; one realizes the danger in this sense of appropriation of facial identity into social constructs.

Lacan’s theory of paranoia could further explain the significance of the joke as it asserts that the whites and not the blacks are the butt of the ridicule. In his dialectic of “odd and even”, Lacan speaks of human knowledge as paranoia and he posits that “the human subject is like a player who manages to beat his/her opponent by identifying with the logic of the other’s strategy”. In depicting the three stages of the game, he suggests the third in which: “As third party, I realize that if that other doesn’t play the game, he fools his opponent. And from then on I’m ahead of him, by opting for the opposite to the one which seemed to me, in the first period, to be the most natural”. From this analysis, he concludes: “someone of superior intelligence can in fact understand that the trick is...to play like an idiot, that is to return to the first formula”. Thus, through the superior intelligence of the players behind the mask, the reverse of white expectation is achieved as the joke is turned upon them through a recognition of the other’s strategy and of isolating and distancing oneself from the negative connotations that the mask represents.

In this regard, therefore, I would argue that what blackface minstrelsy does is to significantly challenge this perception of identity and level of consciousness by offering the players the possibility of stepping out of themselves into different characters and roles both as a means of subverting racial stereotypes and of discovering and affirming their identity and self-consciousness.

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Through this interpretation, a sense of the positive about minstrelsy is achieved for even though the black players do not seem to entirely transcend the dualism, and in a sense the joke also engulfs them; yet the fact that they have the capacity to act reflects the realm of possibilities in which they are operating and the potential of transforming facts into possibilities.

In conclusion, I would focus on two other aspects of the novel that illustrate the tension between facts and possibilities. The tension between the two is noted through the symbolism of dance as a means of identity and self-consciousness. In discussing this aspect of the novel, I propose to examine dance on three levels: Jim Too's dancing, Jim and Jack Diamond's dancing, and Jim and Rice's dancing. I intend taking each in turn.

Dance ontologically, it must be noted, is a form of self-possession. It represents the platform where the self can emerge and be projected in the physical act of movement of the body. Dancing, unlike racial phenomenon, involves the sum total of bodily activity and not raising a feature of the body like skin color to the ground of the body.

Again, in dancing, the body is put forward as a plane of freedom in the sense in which the individual is free to move his body as he wishes. In this way, society's control and domination of the individual is rendered ineffective when he dances.

From this framework, it is seen that Jim Too's dancing articulates the dichotomy between "doing determines being" and "being determines doing". By allowing Jim to dance, Brown opens him to a range of possibilities. Through his dancing, Jim is able to step out of himself, break the stereotypes associated with his situation, demonstrate his potentials and thereby achieve his ontological freedom. On one level, then, it is apparent that Brown by subtly playing on Descartes "cogito ergo sum", allows Jim to manifest that "I dance, therefore I am". Dancing therefore provides the opportunity to break free from facts and achieve possibilities.

In a statement to Charmaine, Starletta notes: "But that's why I love travelin shows. Cause you can always get away with a lot more on a stage than you can in the street" (138). She further declares that minstrelsy offers the individual "the chance to be somebody else in every show" (140). Minstrelsy thus posits both a sense of the future and identity in difference that accounts for

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the contrast between facts and possibilities in the novel and goes a long way in determining identity and truth.

However, and on the contrary, there is the feeling that dance could also be interpreted in the Hegelian sense as “being for others.” This is because in spite of the freedom of the player to use his body, recognition from that use comes from the audience. Thus there is a sense that his freedom is relational and it is effective and meaningful only to the extent in which the audience gives meaning to it. In this regard, “*Cogito ergo sum*” is not appropriate in defining self-consciousness, for after all, the dancer is not the controller or master of the “gaze” as it is the audience that does the looking, and significantly, the one that determines its usefulness and value.

The dance put on by Jim and Jack Diamond also borders on existence as it articulates Hegel’s view that self-consciousness is consciousness of another self-consciousness. In the dance, the objective of the player is not to out-dance the other, but by recognition of the other’s steps through a careful observation of each other, the performance of the self is heightened. It is this consciousness of the other through “the look” that accounts for harmony and progress. Here again, the intention is the subversion of racial stereotypes as when both consciousness recognizes and accepts the other the distinction between black and white faces respectively behind the masks is significantly blurred.

The other aspect of dance as a means of achieving self-consciousness is seen in Jim teaching Rice to dance. While this points to black authenticity and the need for mutual cooperation between the two races, it further accentuates the idea of self-consciousness as relational. It is in Rice’s acceptance of Jim’s humanity and the need to perceive him not as facts but as possibilities that self-consciousness is again achieved, the racial barrier is blurred and the basis for authentic identity provided.

Finally, I would like to make reference to the face not as it appears in minstrelsy but in a photograph. It is probably in this metaphor that Brown fully captures the dynamics between facts and possibilities.

The photographer at the end of the novel tells Jim: “One way or the other your picture’s gonna end up in the ‘Rogues gallery’. It’s up to you what kind of shape you want to be in when your picture’s taken. (218 – 219)

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The picture represents playing God, possessing the world of the other in order to ensure stability and security of one's own and thus make certain control and domination of the other's world. It points to pinning someone down to a state circumscribed by time and space, reducing someone to facts and denying him his ontological freedom and existence. Paulo Freire, in his work "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Revised Edition" echoes a similar thought. He notes that such an action "...inhibits creativity and domesticates the *intentionality* of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human" (268). Jim's photograph thus constitutes an action that characterizes "immobilizing and fixating forces (that) fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings". (268)

Therefore what the novel and in essence blackface minstrelsy does is to emphasize the possibilities of transcending this limitation to facts. This it does, I would suggest, in the following way: the metaphor of movement signifying a deliberate choice to refuse to fit into social stereotypes. This is seen, first, in the photographer's realization that Jim's picture "didn't come out the way he wanted it because Jim Crow had moved" (220). In moving, Jim is asserting his "historicity" and affirming his humanity and freedom as a being in the process of becoming; in the words of Freire, "as unfinished, uncompleted being in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (268).

Second, movement is related to the workings of the mind particularly of desire, and the thoughts and imagination of the character. Jubilee asserts his freedom: "It ain't my mouth that makes me tasty. It's my mind". This stresses in Hegelian language the superiority of spirit over nature. Third, movement is also represented in dancing. In dancing, Jim asserts his freedom and strives to determine his identity. Fourth, and to a lesser extent, in movement is seen in the notion of "passing" as in Sweet Knees attempts to "pass" for a colored woman, and finally, in masking, as it offers players the possibility of moving out of themselves and stepping into other characters and roles. In these ways, Brown suggests that the problem of race is only as meaningful as society gives meaning to it. The novel thus offers a

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platform for an understanding of the conflict between facts and possibilities and the basis of transcending the former into the latter.

My analysis of the face and its relation to blackface minstrelsy has shown that the face is an existential phenomenon and like the mask, it operates on the logic of distance and identification. This logic is crucial to the identity of the masker. The face posits a distinction between various levels of consciousness and in Wesley Brown's novel demarcates facts from possibilities and "being for self" from "being for others". Recognizing the difference between the face as a symbol of consciousness behind which a player manipulates the audience and as fact of identity that represents his being is crucial to understanding the dichotomies and paradoxes in race relations in 19th century America and the search for black freedom and emancipation.

Contrary to popular belief that blackface minstrelsy postulates and supports a dehumanizing picture of blacks and that it reinforces negative social stereotypes associated with blackness, this article has shown that when aptly deployed it provides a means of asserting black freedom and identity. Blackface thus becomes the instrument in the hands of the slave that he uses to dismantle the house of the master and to turn the joke of inferiority and primitivism against him. Lacan's theory of paranoia and mimicry validates the ambivalence of blackface minstrelsy and underscores its political and social underpinnings.

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