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Subverting Blackface and the Epistemology of American Identity in John Berryman's 77 Dream Songs

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ABSTRACT

John Berryman has been criticized for his employment of white performance of blackface minstrelsy's conventions and dialect in 77 Dream Songs because of the complex history of this tradition of blackface's problematic performance of racial fantasy and because of Berryman's designation as a white, confessional poet. However, when one observes the history of this tradition of minstrelsy, its initial reception, its "transcodification" into the white American racial ideology, and subsequent scholarly analyses of its implications, it is evident that Berryman creates an anti-model of minstrelsy which consequently becomes minstrelsy of "whiteness." Through this anti-model, which shifts the public gaze from "blackness" to "whiteness," Berryman deconstructs each, eliminating the justification for unequal political power based on the faulty ideology of difference.

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I'm scared a only one thing, which is me,
from othering I don't take nothing, see,
for any hound dog's sake.
But this is where I living, where I rake
my leaves and cop my promise, this' where we
cry oursel's awake.
From Dream Song 40

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* —a "long poem" consisting of 385 individual "songs" contained in 2 books: *77 Dream Songs* and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*—has been criticized by many since the publishing of its first part, *77 Dream Songs* in 1964, for the very attributes that make it a masterpiece. Berryman has been accused of using "eccentric" and "grotesque " language; perpetuating "fractures of meaning and inconsistency in the text"; providing "no fundamental principle of organization"; "lack[ing] plot, either traditional or associative," containing "stanzas [that are] senseless and…meter [that is] atrocious"; and being generally "unintelligible" and "obscene" (Reff). The divisive issue for critics, however, has been the way blackface minstrelsy produced by white performers informs Berryman's structure, mode, language, and theme.

Rising to popularity in the early 1800s until its decline by the 1930s (Wittke 132), blackface minstrelsy used grotesque caricatures meant to represent African Americans through the blackening of white faces with burnt cork, the extreme

accentuation of the performers' mouths, the imitation of perceived African American movement and dances, the "borrowing" from traditional African American music, flamboyant attire representative of circus attire, and particularly the use of a garish, contrived black dialect. This form of "entertainment" was meant to be humorous and by all accounts was very popular with white audiences, predominantly in Northern cities but also in the South.

Current scholarship agrees that blackface was not the harmless form of entertainment portrayed in its initial reception. Though critics such as Eric Lott acknowledge that minstrelsy was the first recognition of black culture and some African Americans participated in the "blackening up" (23), Robert Hornback states,

> The short-term license established through blackening up in comic, irrational contexts was, paradoxically, actually limiting over the long haul, perpetuating a stereotype of irresponsibility and irrationality that underwrote systematic slavery and the stubborn denial of meaningful freedom for African Americans until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. (51)

Moreover, the stereotype of folly and its subsequent social and political implications portrayed by this medium was what allowed African Americans to be kept in "a state of de facto slavery" by denying them the full "rights and responsibilities" of Americans (Hornback 51). In *77 Dream Songs*, Berryman will relocate the insidious tropes of folly from African Americans to a white, middle-aged, male academic in order to make the case for the universal humanity and, therefore, the political inclusion of all Americans.

In his acceptance speech for the National Book award for *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, Berryman tells the audience, "It is no good looking for models. We need anti-models" (qtd. in Young xxi). The long-term hold the dehumanizing

stereotypes of African Americans disseminated through blackface had on the public's racial discourse is illustrated in Berryman's primary model for what would become his anti-model of the white blackface tradition, Carl Wittke's 1930 *Tambo and Bones*. Wittke clearly celebrates these types of "imitations" of African Americans as a national accomplishment:

> The burnt cork artist of the United States of the nineteenth century could have originated in no other country in the world. His art was indigenous to the United States, with only moderate success…to other parts of the globe. …The primary reason was that foreigners could not understand or fully appreciate the peculiarly American conditions from which this entirely new form of entertainment had sprung. (5)

Though Wittke alludes to the precarious nature of blackface's origins, namely the existence of black slaves whose perceived music, language, and lives were its inspiration, he attributes its lack of success outside of the United States to some type of ignorance, not to any type of distaste for slavery abroad or because of the issues surrounding, what Maureen McLane calls its "problematic performance" (449). He grants that blackface performers presented a poor construction of, what in euphemistically racist fashion Francis Pendleton Gaines calls, "the genuine darky"—"the folk-figure of a simple, somewhat rustic character, instinctively humorous, irrationally credulous, gifted in song and dance, interested in spontaneous frolic, endowed with artless philosophy" (Wittke 7-8). Yet, he clearly enjoys the minstrel production of "the plantation type" and transparently accepts the stereotypes it reinforced. The latter, he states,

> was calculated to give the impression that all Negroes were lazy, shiftless fellows, careless of the morrow…[who] loved watermelons and ate them in a peculiar way…[and] turned out to be an expert wielder of the razor, a weapon which he always had ready for use on such special social occasions as crap games, of which the stage Negro was passionately

> fond…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…the 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)

Further, Wittke would have the reader believe that this reproduction of "the plantation type" was all in good fun, a demonstration of some type of American ingenuity, as it capitalized on what Robert Hornback would call the natural fool tradition. It is rhetoric like Wittke's that framed blackface as a light-hearted form of entertainment while it evolved into a national discourse about race that perpetuated institutionalized racism long after the Emancipation Proclamation and even the decline of actual minstrelsy.

In addition to the highly problematic nature of a white poet employing blackface itself, Berryman's implementation of blackface becomes increasingly difficult for critics to justify given that *The Dream Songs* have generally been classified as confession. The issue of who, a conception called Henry or John Berryman, is the protagonist of *The Dream Songs* becomes a problem for critics because the speaker of racialized language in a racialized society is the first key to understanding its connotations and political currency. When anything concerning race is consumed, the consumer wants to know the "identity," the race, of its progenitor. Whether or not the consumer gains any real insight with this knowledge is beside the point. The consumer perceives that its origin *should* determine its interpretation. Of course this theory also applies to who is wearing the mask in blackface. If Berryman's work is confessional, Berryman is *personally* committing

and admitting to one or more offenses, including but not limited to openly reinforcing racial hegemony, naively and irresponsibly imagining "blackness" through the use of an invented black speech, or falsely allying himself with African American oppression. And, for those critics, such as Bruce Bawer, who have determined that Henry is Berryman, Berryman has been found guilty. In 1989, Bawer writes,

> The ever-alienated Berryman found it appropriate, upon starting on *The Dream Songs*, to identify his alter ego with the most isolated segment of American society, namely the black subculture. But *minstrel*-show talk? It is no surprise that Berryman has been accused by some critics of racial insensitivity, and one wouldn't want to defend him from the charge. But this insensitivity, if such it is, is only part of a larger problem with *The Dream Songs*: namely, that Berryman is almost invariably so engulfed in his own emotion that the feelings of other people—black or white, male or female, poet or non-poet—don't even enter into the picture. (qtd. in *Modern American Poetry*)

Critics like Bawer, however, allow the confessional aspects present in the *Songs* to obscure Berryman's politics.

Berryman, himself, complicated these matters for critics by downplaying the importance of, if not being evasive about, his use of racialized language and themes, leading many critics to mistakenly claim that Berryman was apolitical. In interviews, Berryman often stated that Henry is sometimes in blackface as a *matter of fact* but never alluded to why despite the derogatory reviews from critics who refer to "Henry's idiolect" as "baby-talk,' 'nonsense,' 'chants,' 'spells,' 'primitive,' 'raving,' 'savage,' 'odd,' 'grotesque,' 'arbitrary,' and 'sloppy'" (Reff). Furthermore, there is no indication in his private notes to counter Berryman's rhetoric that deemphasizes the importance of race to *The Dream Songs*; he does not mention how Henry's personality is shaped or dictated by race in his plans. Berryman writes his first song

in 1955 but, as Ernest J. Smith's "John Berryman's 'Programmatic' for *The Dream Songs* and an Instance of Revision" notes, Berryman does not seem to conceive the idea or, at least, commit to the use of minstrelsy until 1958, when he writes "NEW: the nameless interlocutor who calls Henry 'Mr. Bones'" and the word "STUDY" between "two sets of lines meant to find their way in Dream Songs" (434). This delayed arrival of a stock minstrel character into the schematic of *The Dream Songs* may have influenced critics to minimize minstrelsy's significance to the poems. Some critics, such as Robert Phillips, go so far as to suggest that Berryman's use of minstrelsy actually impairs the poems (93). However, these critics fail to realize the significance of the time of its arrival, the year following the Civil Rights Act of 1957 which was the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.

Within the realm of language and the act of imagining, Toni Morrison would counter the notion that any writer is apolitical. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison pleas with critics to change the way "Africanism"—the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning, about these people" (6-7)—is interrogated in texts. She writes,

> I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—and in what disables the foray, for purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer's imagination…imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*…My project rises…from what I know about the ways writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, and the ways they tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their texts. And rises from my certainty that writers always know, at some level, that they do this. (4)

In “Dream Song 24,” Berryman makes explicit that he is consciously “transforming aspect[s] of his social surroundings”; he is “fight[ing] secret wars” and is “limn[ing] out all sorts of debates” by the way he tells Henry’s story. The lecturing “servant Henry” was “put questions on race bigotry; / *he* put no questions on race bigotry / constantly.” In a 1970 interview with Peter Stitt, John Berryman seems to prescribe to his readers a method to negotiate the embedded contradictions concerning his use of blackface minstrelsy:

> “I don’t contradict madmen. When William Blake says something, I say thank you, even though he has uttered the most hopeless fallacy that you can imagine. I’m willing to be their loving audience. I’m just hoping to hear something marvelous from time to time, marvelous and true.” (17)

In Dream Song 24, Henry denies thinking about “race bigotry” but admits that he must not think about it all the time; continuously resisting contemplation requires a conscious effort, in other words, necessitates thought. At the same time, he does not “question” or doubt the existence of “race bigotry” because it is omnipresent.

While *The Dream Songs* is essentially about Henry, its subtext is about the constructions of race in America and their implications. While delineating a plan for the structure of *The Dream Songs*, John Berryman notes that “the poems should be ‘inevitably semi-contrapuntal,’” producing a “modern subjective” epic that “would follow the picaresque hero, Henry, on his ‘Quest’ and ‘Self-quest’ in what would be essentially a ‘survival-epic’” (Smith 432). Unlike a traditional epic that is structured by actual movement through time and place, depicting episodes of a character’s life as he or she evolves, Berryman frames “the personality of Henry as he moves on in the world” is the “ulterior” structure so many critics have failed to locate (4).

Accepting blackface as central and not extraneous, accepting its use as a conscientious choice, demystifies Berryman's use of minstrel dialect. It is no longer enigmatic but transparent; in his use of blackface, Berryman reveals what was always hidden in plain sight, the "whiteness" behind the mask of "blackness." Locating Henry in this racialized space reveals that Berryman's motive in "confessing" or "following" Henry's personality transcends Henry.

The Dream Songs is an anti-model for the American epistemology of identity that in Berryman's era was based on skin color. Offering Henry as evidence for the flaws in this ideology, Berryman makes a case for the equality of African Americans and white Americans. He questions this epistemology of identity in order to respond to the contemporary racial discourses that purported to aspire to destroy the old hegemonic structures and insinuates that the white public discourse on race of his generation was in contention with the private realities of whites who desired to maintain the status quo. He accomplishes this by exploiting the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy—that "long ago devised a formula which could transmit the mood of an idea and simultaneously conceal its reason (Wasserstrom qtd. in *Modern American Poetry*). This becomes problematic for readers not because Berryman's poetics are haphazard but because he demands so much. Berryman does not mimic the old mode of minstrelsy but uses it to construct something new which in turn requires the reader to transcend established interpretations of minstrelsy's tropes and, therefore, its political and social implications. When Berryman does not regurgitate traditional white models of blackface that perpetuate the racist ideology that underlie its performance, he exposes them as symptoms of an American racial ideology that

has taken over individual reason and disproves the "evidence" minstrelsy provides as a defense for justified racial oppression. By exposing the interior life of a white man who possesses many of the characteristics attributed to "blackness," he undermines this racial ideology and destabilizes the constructions of "whiteness" and "blackness." Yet, critics have and do struggle to make the new meaning Berryman intended because the "traditional" constructions of "blackness" are so deeply entrenched in the psyches of Americans.

CHAPTER II: A COLLECTIVE CONFESSION

As suggested, the label of confessional poet, grouping Berryman with poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, itself blurs, confuses, and denigrates any political agenda apparent in *The Dream Songs*. Confession has been dismissed by many critics as a product of *hubris* instead of art (Phillips 97). Charles Molesworth defines poetry as "confessional" if there is "a commitment to recording as directly as possible the shape of private pain and intimate sickness without regard to artifice or aesthetic transcendence" (174). He charges confessional poets with lacking the ability to overcome the "limitations" of their subjects, namely the pain of their own lives, and the "gigantism of their poetic egos" in order to speak for a larger community (167). Basically, in the case of *77 Dream Songs*, the label masks Berryman's racialized themes because it limits the scope of the reader's interpretation to the psyche of a white individual.

The Dream Songs do contain autobiographical elements; however, what is

more important than whether or not Berryman includes his life as inspiration for the *Songs* is *what* Henry confesses and *why*. In his biographical work on the confessional poets, *The Wounded Surgeon,* Adam Kirsch makes a connection between the seemingly uncensored, free flow of thoughts indicative of *The Dream Songs* and Berryman's own dream analyses. Of this project Berryman undertook in 1954, the year before he began writing *The Dream Songs*, Berryman writes, "I am unblocking gradually, or rather in violent painful strides…Some of my simplest (in appearance) dreams have proved…more complex than any poem I ever read, a great deal to say; I have almost a new idea of the mind's strength, cunning, and beauty" (122). Kirsch claims that this process led to a "new poetry" in which Berryman was able to record "the uncensored consciousness, the freely rising ideas, before his artistic superego had a chance to tame them" (123). Kirsch assumes that Berryman's discoveries and revelation of the "unconscious" had only to do with the self, but Berryman's journey into the manifestation of his latent or unconscious desires reveal to him much more, namely a strategy to uncover the unconscious American collective self as it was articulated through the production of racial fantasy in blackface minstrelsy.

Consequently, Berryman uses the complexities of the manifestation of individual desires in order to demonstrate the subconscious roots of racism in America. In "The Sublime Object of Ideology," Slavoj Zizek, drawing from Marxist and Lacanian discourses, argues that the Real—reduced to its most basic "kernel"—is found in the dream; and life, as it is enacted, is a symptom of this unconscious reality. Zizek suggests our mode of acting in reality itself is structured by the unconscious, forming a direct relationship between our unconscious desires and the formation and

acting out of ideologies (324). "The fundamental level of ideology… is not [as a cynic would say] of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" (Zizek 322). In this way, ideologies, such as those of racism, are not based on the facts of the real world but the "unconscious desire" that allows the construction of the ideology: a racist ideology overcomes reality "when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in favor" (325). Zizek does not discuss the phenomena of the existence of a racist ideology that allowed slavery *within* a "democratic" society as was the case in the United States of America. However, when the motivations which helped to justify the coexistence of such opposing ideologies within the "American way" are examined, Zizek's proposition—that is that ideologies are not based on facts from without that can be rationalized but desires from within—applies. When Berryman writes "this' where we / cry oursel's awake," he locates the place where these unconscious desires are so terrifying they force the dreamer to create an external reality that is more manageable only to realize "we are *nothing but a consciousness of [the] dream*" (Zizek 323-4). In other words, *The Dream Songs* depict this "place" where true consciousness is found, somewhere between reality and the dream, where in this case the lie of difference is revealed.

When Peter Stitt asked Berryman about his "label" of "confessional poet," Berryman makes a distinction between his project in *The Dream Songs* and mere confession by vehemently rejecting the categorization with "rage and contempt" (5). He explains that Henry's personality goes beyond a thinly masked version of himself: "Henry both is and is not me," pointing out that he, Berryman, is "an actual human

being; [Henry] is nothing but a series of conceptions"…that can only do what the poet "make[s] him do" (19). Though in Berryman's standard fashion, he will later contradict this statement, in it he concedes the limitations of writing pure autobiography and acknowledges Morrison's notion of the act of imagining: though everything one imagines is not an exact replica of the self, one cannot imagine beyond the realm of what one already knows. As "Dream Song 40" indicates, "from othering I don't take nothing" (44). Instead of arguing the case of commonality through the depictions of an African American who does not posses the characteristics of the constructions of "blackness," he makes the case by revealing what he knows, himself and the "blackness" present in his own "whiteness." And, in this way, he ironically re-models another tradition of the representation of identity. Though white academics of the 1950s have been called the "confessional poets," Henry Louise Gates tributes confession's origins to the black literary tradition:

> The confessional mode which is the fundamental, undergirding convention of Afro-American narrative, received, elaborated upon, and transmitted in a chartable heritage from Briton Hammon's captivity narrative of 1760 through the antebellum slave narratives to black autobiography into black fiction…the classic black narrative of the questing protagonist's "journey into the heart of whiteness." (915)

Perhaps when Berryman passionately rejects the title of confessional poet, he rejects its reduction of his project to vanity.

The Dream Songs do include a personal quest but one that carries heavy social consequences. Henry, the reader quickly finds in "Dream Song 1," is attempting to survive two things: "a departure" that left him "pried / open for all the world to see" and the self that this departure leaves in its wake. The personality of Henry is

revealed through the interaction between what Joseph Mancini posits as the conflicting "voices" of a single, fractured self used to depict the vicissitudes of Henry's mind in his search for identity. In keeping with the dynamics of an American minstrel show, these conflicting voices are distinguished by the use of white and black "dialects." As Henry "travels" through a life of teaching, writing, self-loathing, mental breakdowns, alcohol abuse, disappointing fatherhood, failed marriages, and, perhaps above all, womanizing, his voices acknowledge the divisions of the mind while attempting to maintain unity. This multiplicity of the individual is evident throughout the *Songs*: "Henry are / baffled." (4); "where I am / we don't know" (32); "we compose on one" (61); and "'we betrayed me'" (62). His quest is to survive his traumas and remain a human being. The many voices of Henry are reflective of the various voices of a multicultural, multi-dialectic United States that lacks solidarity. Metaphorically, the "I," "one," and "me" of the poems are America that is fractured because of its inability to understand and thus unify its many voices.

In "Dream Song 13," Berryman equates Henry with America by mimicking easily recognizable American nationalism when he writes, "God bless Henry." In this poem, one of Henry's voices—while blessing Henry who "lived like a rat" and "was not a coward. Much," who "may be…a human being" and "is a human American man"—brings the project of *The Dream Songs*, what Berryman had described as a self-quest, to a point: "We're in business…Why, / what business must be clear. / A cornering." By using the structure of the uniquely American form of entertainment and implementing more subtle examples of American rhetoric, it becomes apparent that *The Dream Songs* will be an indictment of Henry's actual identity and of white

America's racial ideology. And while the "we're" in the preceding lines definitely includes the many voices of Henry, the voice seems to imply that the reader will also have, what will become a motif throughout the *Songs*, a "vote."

The vote motif is historically important because under the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 already mentioned, was followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1960, both initiated, passed, and arguably failing at the time Berryman was working on *The Dream Songs*. Though recognized as a step toward equal voting rights for African Americans, many have argued that Eisenhower did not do enough to secure the right to vote for African Americans, resulting in the addition of few African American voters. "Dream Song 23" insinuates this failure of the governmental intervention that was meant to deter white interference with African American voting. In this "monologue, or stump speech," a standard act of the minstrel show "that usually fell to the company's premier blackface comedian, and was a somewhat more advanced state of fun-making" than other acts (Wittke 168), Berryman focuses on Eisenhower's whiteness as his expedient to obtaining and sustaining power. Ike is representative of the "Great White" United States whose true legacy is ominous. "Breaking no laws," he has committed legalized murder through war abroad. And he has accomplished nothing "at home," particularly "If your screen is black," because he has secured "no [voting] right[s]" for African Americans. Yet, Eisenhower smiles a "wide empty grin" because his vote will never be in jeopardy due to his white designation.

CHAPTER III:

REACTION TO THE LIMITATIONS OF THE MODERNIST PROJECT

The problems associated with utilizing the full range of American language in American literature certainly did not originate with *The Dream Songs*. In her interrogation of white modernist writers' uses of "darkened" speech, Rachel Blau Duplessis posits:

> A social philology shows that, in details of language, cross-purposes, contradictions, and secret narratives emerge that complicate the announced investment in "darkened" speech and other verbal and ideological signs of engagement with New Black subjectivity. (107)

Black and white writers of the first half of the 20th century were engaged in debates about how to employ black speech. For black writers, the debate was no less about maintaining the current aesthetic than about the reception of depictions of black life in white society. Countee Cullen and Richard Wright disagreed about whether to "racialize" their work by the use of "realist representations" of black dialect or to

pursue a "universal tradition" that was "not marked by racial difference" (Duplessis 109). White writers, on the other hand, had free reign over determination of the aesthetic and were not under any type of pressure or obligation to depict black speech or life as it really was. Moreover, in a pre-politically correct society, white writers of the modernist project possessed the freedom to utilize black speech for its linguistic possibilities without being encumbered by the need to be responsible for its social implications. Consequently, Duplessis concludes that instead of a quest for reality, white writers desired a "possession of blackness" (116) that allowed writers to imagine a "primitivism," "a simply irresistible mythology about others," that allowed "blacks of all and any kind" to "cure…whatever distressed Euro-American culture" (126).

In "The Dialect in/of Modernism: Pound and Eliot's Racial Masquerade," Michael North denies that some of the most "experimental white predecessors to Berryman, had any intention of providing a venue for meaningful expression for African Americans" in terms of their use of black speech. North posits that Pound and Eliot's use of an invented dialect resembling black speech in private correspondence—in which they claimed names like Possum, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Tom and Tar Baby—was rooted in "ambivalence and contradictions" born of defensiveness about American language inferiority (58). Moreover, North explains that the modernists embraced the use of "darkened speech" but only insofar as it was a rejection of "the dominance of received linguistic forms" (57); in this way the black vernacular assumed by white modernists seems to give a "voice" to the decided Other while covertly reinforcing the existing power structures of exclusion by such

techniques as "forc[ing] the language "back into minstrel stereotypes" (70). This is what he calls the "duplicity of modernism" (71): "the linguistic tool," used to "mock the literary establishment is in fact part of that establishment" (North 58).

This is where Berryman differs from his white predecessors; Berryman's use of black dialect departs from the black dialect used in blackface minstrelsy performed by whites. Traditional minstrel linguistic representations of "blackness" convey gross exaggerations of the variances between white and black dialects. Berryman marks a difference in speech as to distinguish the "mixed" identity of Henry and, consequently, America; however, his black and white voices resemble each other much more closely than those in minstrel shows. The following is taken from an actual minstrel "stump speech":

> Bredren, De text am foun' in de inside ob Job whar Paul draw'd him a pistol on 'Feesians, lebenteenth chapter, an' no 'ticklar verse: 'Bressed am dem dat 'specs nuttin', kaze dey aint gwine to git nuttin'…I sees a great many heah dis ebenin' dat cares no moa what 'comes of darr souls dan I does myseff. Suppose, frinstance, dat yoa eat yoa full ob possam fat an' hominy; yoa go to bed, an' in de mornin' yoa wake up an' find youseff dead! Whar yoa speck yoa gwine to? Yoa keep gwine down, down, down, till de bottam falls out! What 'comes ob ye den? You see de debble comein' down de hill on a rasslejack, wid a ear like a backer leaf an' a tail like a corn-stalk; out of de mouff comes pitchforks an' lightnin', an' him tail smoke like a tar kill! Whar is you now? No time for 'pentin'; de debble kotch ye, shoa! But bress de lan', he de great gittin'-up-day? Maby yoa tink yoa hold on to my coat-tail; but I'm gwine to fool yoa bad on dat'casion, kaze I'm gwine to wear my coon-skin jacket! Yoa crawl, up de hill on yoa han's an' 'nees,yoa fall down again, wallup!...den yoa's call'd a backslider…My fren's, I neider preach for de lob ob de lam', de good ob yoa souls, nor de fear ob de debble; but, if you got any ole shoe, ole coat, ole hat, jiss pass 'em 'roun' dis way, an' I'll light upon 'em like a raccoon upon a green cornstalk. It's no use passin' 'roun de plate for "Bredded am dem dat 'specks nuttin' kaze dey ain't a gwine to git nuttin.'" (Charles Burleigh Galbreath qtd. in Wittke 168-169)

As indicated by this example of minstrel dialect, the disquieting connotations of

blackness were not only achieved by altering the appearance and natural movements of the body but making a mockery of black vernacular. Through the gross misreading or misguided interpretation of a bible verse in a convoluted idiom, African Americans are depicted as amoral; illogical and, at times, outright stupid; bound for inevitable damnation. In "The Folly of Racism: Enslaving Blackface and the Natural Fool Tradition," Robert Hornback, locates the origins of the stereotypes utilized in minstrelsy in an earlier theatrical tradition, dating back to medieval English dramas where "Lucifer and other devils 'were represented by actors painted black'" (48), he argues that "this color symbolism of evil" was not as "demeaning" as a "buried tradition of early blackface comedy, one that associated blackness with degradation, irrationality, prideful lack of self-knowledge, transgression, and, related to all of these, folly" (48). When closely looking at the above stump speech, it is apparent how language itself is capable of producing an insidious type of folly that underhandedly promoted slavers' justification for treating human beings with black skin as "beastlike" (50, 48).

One only needs to look at a few examples of Berryman's imagined black vernacular to recognize that he is doing something different. He levels the power afforded the white performers of minstrelsy by way of their speech by granting his black "voices" the equitable currency. Berryman's employment of blackface within the character of Henry often occurs through a gradual submersion from a form of Standard American English into Berryman's version of black dialect. In the case of "Dream Song 2," which illustrates a conversation between two blackface speakers, Berryman's use of black dialect is barely detectable until the second stanza. The first

stanza consists of a type of jaunty jive in which any variation in idiom is not recognizable bar two words, one being "are" because of its nonstandard conjugation and the other "ev'ybody." In the second and third stanzas, Berryman reveals what will become his most extreme performance of blackface dialect for the first time.

> Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance
>
> The jane is zoned! No nightspot here, no bar
> there, no sweet freeway, and no premises
> for business purposes,
> no loiterers or needers. Henry are
> baffled. Have ev'ybody head for Maine,
> utility-man take a train?
>
> Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip,
> but is he come? Le's do a hoedown gal,
> one blue, one shuffle,
> if them is all you seem to require. Strip,
> ol benger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on
> one chaste evenin.
>
> —Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin
> yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well?
> Honey dusk do sprawl.
> —Hit's hard. Kinged or thinged, though, fling & wing.
> Poll-cats are coming, hurrah, hurray,
> I votes in my hole.

Though many critics, such as Kevin Young, have claimed that this language is not really derived from "black life" (xxv), it is clearly a break from the minstrel dialect of the aforementioned sample stump speech and more closely resembles that of Standard American English, however racialized or Berrymanized. And in "Dream Song 5" in which every other line of the first stanza is in black dialect—"Henry sats in de bar & was odd, / Off in the glass from the glass, / At odds wif de world & its god, / His wife is a complete nothing,"—Berryman closes the distinction between the "others,"

mitigating it, reducing it to minute differences of some pronunciations and conjugation of some verbs. In both examples, the connotation is that the "others" are barely distinguishable and it is implicit that the "voices," however disparate, possess elements of unified thought.

In his choice of how to frame the black "voices" of the *Songs*, Berryman seems to directly respond to the limitations of modernism. Pound told a correspondent in the mid-thirties,

> "I wuz riz among nigguhs/ the uneven forms of the camp meetin…dos jes get right down into my blood / regular strophes BORE ME" (qtd. in Flory 76). In this crude and offensive way, Pound ties defiance of the standard language, presented here as an essentially black habit, to the literary experimentation of modernism. Black dialect is a prototype of the literature that would break the hold of the iambic pentameter, an example of visceral freedom triumphing over dead convention. (qtd. in North 57)

In "Dream Song 14," Berryman seems accuses writers like Pound of not possessing an imagination that would allow for the use of black speech in a way that would crack the racist overtones conveyed in genuine minstrelsy. In "Dream Song 14," a poem that begins "Life, friends, is boring," one of Henry's white voices thinks, "…moreover my mother told me as a boy / (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored / means you have no / Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no / inner resources, because I am heavy bored. / Peoples bore me, / literature bores me, especially great literature." Through his version of imagined black dialect, Berryman goes so far as to mock the failure of modernism to dream beyond the racial conventions of a pre-modernist era while proclaiming to be making it new.

CHAPTER IV: SUBVERTING MINSTREL CLICHÉ

Berryman makes clear that he is not attempting to depict real African Americans in *The Dream Songs* by explicitly situating Henry in a performance. He creates a performer/audience dynamic on numerous occasions such as in the following examples: "Is there anyone in the audience who has lived in vain?" (34); "Hey, out there!—assistant professors, full, / associates,—instructors—others—any / I have a sing to shay" (39); "Quickly, off stage, with all but kindness, now" (41). And the use of "black dialect" within this performance hints at minstrelsy. However, Berryman makes clear this performance is an American minstrel show with the use of two words: "Mr. Bones," which is unambiguously plucked from white blackface minstrelsy.

Like the stereotypes of African Americans the physical appearance and linguistic inadequacy were meant to purport, the minstrel show's arrangement, roles, and acts were completely formulaic. The show consisted of three parts: the "first part," tended to focus on the "northern dandy negro" (Lott 28); the second, or "olio,"

"consisting of a series of variety acts, ending with a farce or singing and dancing number, in which the entire company participated" (Wittke 147); and the third, which was likely to focus on the "plantation darky" (Lott 28). The actors would sit in a semi-circle with the white interlocutor who would function like a ringmaster introducing the individual acts and humorously interacting with the blackface actors—the endmen, often named Mr. Bones or Mr. Tambo—sitting in the middle. In *77 Dream Songs,* Berryman expropriates the traditional model of minstrelsy that Carl Wittke states had become "immutable" by 1850 (147) with one exception, the racial "identities" of the interlocutor and endmen, which allows Berryman to relocate the gaze from African Americans to whites in essence making a minstrelsy of "whiteness."

Wittke categorizes the comic interaction between the interlocutor and the endmen as the integral component of the minstrel show; and because the relationship and racial identities of these performers reflect the power structure white blackface performance was meant to illustrate and support, understanding the dynamics of the relationship between the interlocutor and endmen is essential to understanding the implications of blackface in *The Dream Songs*. First, the interlocutor did not perform in blackface. Second, he spoke a learned style of Standard American English that accentuated the foolishness of the language used by the actors who blackened their faces. Third, he did not provide comedy but rather directed it through his interaction with the show's "endmen." In the following passage, Wittke describes the functions of the interlocutor:

> It was the interlocutor's business…to begin his chatter with the endman, the crude device which enabled the latter to get off his jokes and 'pull his

> gags,' to the great delight of the audience and the apparent discomfort of the pompous interlocutor, whose intellectual standing always suffered in comparison with the nimble wits of the burnt cork stars on the ends. It was the duty of the interlocutor to bear the brunt of the jokes, and he received but little credit from the audience for the masterly manner in which he performed his task. On him depended the successful and smooth unfolding of the program of the show...The first requirement for a successful interlocutor was a big, booming voice, for the success of the endmen's gags depended largely on the former's ability to make himself heard by the audience, and on his success in stringing out his questions and comments until the most stupid person among the listeners could not fail to grasp the point of the joke when it cracked at last from the big lips of the endman…The interlocutor's function became as stereotyped as the form of the show he directed. (138-140)

What will become useful from this passage is noting that it was the job of the white, "pompous" interlocutor to take the brunt of the jokes from the blackfaced endmen. Despite being described as having "nimble wits," however, the endmen were able to get the best of the interlocutor and, therefore, the audiences through ridiculously base means:

> The endmen furnished the comedy of the show, and…they were universally successful in keeping their audiences in an uproar, by their grimacing…grotesque dance steps, which sometimes became indescribably eccentric gyrations, and by their rapid-fire jokes. The apparent success of many of the latter defies all attempts at psychological explanation and analysis. The endmen "made up" with big lips…Most performers exercised great care in fixing their mouths, for there was a rather widely accepted superstition among them that they would be unable to work properly in their acts unless this part of their make-up was perfect…Endmen were expected to cultivate an eccentric vocabulary, full of bad grammar, faulty pronunciation and bombastic ignorance. On occasion…the endmen might try to imitate Negroes who were particularly stupid and slow in grasping the meaning of words. The manifestation of characteristics supposedly peculiar to the Negro, like superstition and fear, also was counted on to produce the desired comedy effects. (140-142)

These two descriptions illustrate the rigidity of the minstrel formula but also how public theater production itself solidified and perpetuated racial power structures in

the United States.

Wittke's failure to grasp the possibility of the humor of "Negroes," albeit imagined, duping a white man and entertaining a white audience is indicative of Zizek's notion that the unconscious supersedes logic in the forming of ideology. The means through which the interlocutor achieves his power to direct the show is through the color of his skin and his use of elevated language. Wittke attributes the success of the show to this performer despite his role of being the target of the "nimble wits" of the endmen who, after all, were white under their masks. And, yet, Wittke cannot articulate how this could be possible based on the "grimacing," "grotesque," "eccentric," big lipped, "faulty" language, "bombastic ignorance," and particular stupidity of the "Negroes" who were imitated. He knows that audiences were addicted to the low humor of these interactions, but he cannot quite articulate why because of a lapse in logic, namely that the white audience's delight—as with any sense of humor—came from within.

Berryman begins to unravel the traditional white model of minstrelsy within the first four poems of the *Songs* by changing the racial identities of the interlocutor and endmen. In the first three poems, Berryman introduces the various speakers that will interact throughout the epic: Henry's various whiteface personas, Henry in blackface, and the unnamed interlocutor who uses a black dialect and who addresses Henry as "Mr. Bones." Berryman refers to the interlocutor as the "2nd real characters of the poem" who "is to be Henry's 'confidant,' having been first an 'enemy, then friend,' [who] will talk and debate" with Henry (Smith 434). In addition to equating the intelligibility of the speech of the speakers, Berryman uses the title of "Mr.

Bones" in a way that completely violates its traditional use, as indicated when the reader comes to understand that the "black" interlocutor does not reserve this title only for Henry in blackface but also for his whiteface persona.

The "voice" of the first song is formal, rational, and objective. He carries the air of a college professor, introducing Henry, speaking *of* him in the third person, lecturing *about* him and explaining to his students *how* they should approach understanding this particular subject, which in the case of Henry should be with pity. Henry is "huffy," "unappeasable," "wicked and away." The "voice" sympathetically challenges the world to hear Henry's story and not feel sorrow when he says, "I see his point,—a trying to put things over," and "What he has now to say is a long / Wonder the world can bear & be." By the end of the poem the reader feels that Henry rightfully feels cheated because of some "departure," barely able to survive. For all intents and purposes, the "voice" purports to be the role of the reliable narrator, and as soon as the reader turns the page and begins to see the hints of black speech used by the voices in the second song, one distinguishes his language and tone as obviously meant to represent a white speaker. And once the reader establishes the nuances of minstrelsy in the second song, the "voice" of the first Song "naturally" seems to function as the straight man of the show. He introduces Henry and defines him; because of his language, he purports control and authority over his subject. Like the interlocutor of the minstrel shows, his "whiteness" appears to allow him to possess power over the other "voices" of the *Songs*.

In the aforementioned "Dream Song 2," Berryman introduces two more "voices," both speaking a black dialect. Even without Berryman's notes to indicate

that he will use an interlocutor, the reader may recognize this song as part of a minstrel show based on its title, "Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance," which references the gaudy stage clothing worn by white blackface minstrels and a brass instrument which would have been represented in the musical parade that often announced the minstrel show's arrival to a town.

At first glance, and in the context of the first poem of the *Songs*, it would *appear* that the two speakers are functioning as the endmen of the minstrel show, as described by Wittke, engaged in a standard exchange that illuminates the alleged graphic, licentious longings of African Americans which caused many minstrel show audiences to express pleasure and complain of vulgarity. The poem is written in three stanzas; the first two could be perceived as being delivered by separate actors and the third an exchange between the two. The voice of the first stanza tells Henry that the "jane" Henry is after is off limits while Henry—all of his fractured selves—"are" confused that he should be limited in this way. It is literally nighttime, "utility man take a train?," but Henry is also in a moral darkness as he is attempting to "get" a girl. The voice of the second stanza seems to be tempting Henry to lose his "grip" by getting this girl to dance, strip, and go to bed with him. When the first voice returns in the third stanza, he seems to encourage Henry, who is "legal"—white—and "good," to just take the girl when he chimes "Honey dusk do sprawl." The second voice responds graphically, referring to his genitals—"Hit's hard"—while cheering for the "poll-cats" who not only relate to the voting motif because of the play on "poll" but also remind the reader of actual strippers who simulate sex, and goads Henry to not intellectualize his choice but make it based on his physical desire.

However, when the reader takes a closer look at the poem and considers how the phrase "Mr Bones" functions in the text, what at first appeared to be trope is trumped. "Dream Song 2" does not portray a conversation between the endmen of the performance; one speaker is meant to portray the straight man. The speaker of the first two stanzas is Henry in blackface and the second speaker who enters in stanza three is the interlocutor. In the persona of this interlocutor, Berryman uses a technique from black oral and literary tradition to achieve the seamless effect between base comedy and what Berryman calls "damn serious humor" (Smith 430). When the interlocutor says, "Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin / yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well? / Honey dusk do sprawl," he is implementing the style of the Signifying Monkey. As Henry Louis Gates posits and "anthropologists demonstrate, the Signifying Monkey is often called the Signifier, he who wreaks havoc upon the Signified. One is signified upon by the signifier" (905). Will he be "Sir Bones," a buffoon from the minstrel stage, or "Galahad," one who is noble and pure? "Essentially… signifying is a 'technique of indirect argument or persuasion,' 'a language of implication,' 'to imply, goad, beg, boast, by indirect verbal gestures'" (Gates 909). This technique of "indirect verbal gestures" will allow the "black" interlocutor to trump the apparent white "straight man" voice of "Dream Song 1," who is also a target of his "signifying," and emerge as the true "center" of the drama of the *Songs* thereafter.

The first example of this signifying takes place in the second poem of the *Songs* when the interlocutor expresses a truth about Henry that the reader will later find out is at the center of his troubles. The interlocutor suggests that Henry's

licentious nature will ultimately determine his true identity. Referencing Henry as "Sir Bones," a buffoon of the minstrel show, he is not trying to encourage Henry to engage in an illicit sexual act but scolds Henry for his unmasked misogyny. He is mockingly shocked on one level that Henry who is "legal," white and married, would risk such illicit behavior especially since the connotations of the phrase "Honey dusk do sprawl," dusk implying that the woman who Henry desires is not white, heightens the severity of his transgression by implying another type of illegal activity, namely the intermixing of the races. Intensifying the exchange, the interlocutor seems to feign surprise that Henry, being "good" and "kinged" because of his "whiteness," would jeopardize losing this status and be made an animal because of engaging in sexual activity with one who has already been "thinged."

Berryman dedicates this poem to "Daddy Rice who sang and jumped 'Jim Crow' in 1828...and later" (Young xix). This is significant because it further supports Reff's argument that blackface is the clandestine structure of the *Songs* but is more important because of what Daddy Rice came to signify in the history of white blackface minstrelsy. Daddy Rice is credited by many to be the "father" of white blackface minstrelsy, being the first to capitalize on the impersonation of African Americans. In Jason Richards' comparison of conventions used in blackface minstrelsy and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he describes one of Daddy Rice's stock performances and, though Richards discusses Rice's influence on Stowe, suggests Berryman's political intentions in his use of blackface in the *Songs*. He describes how "Rice would emerge behind a mask of burnt cork, sporting red-and-white stripes for pants and a long blue coat that boasted a star-spangled collar" and

explains the significance of Rice's attire:

> Rice was referencing Uncle Sam, who was then appearing in political cartoons, decorated in red, white, and blue. A progeny of The War of 1812, Uncle Sam iconized the government, as well as national unity, liberty, and patriotism. However, the majority of blacks—enslaved, dependent, denied citizenship, and excluded from politics—experienced the virtual opposite of what Uncle Sam stood for. Thus it is easy to see how Rice's blackface masquerade synthesized the conflict between national ideals and slavery. (Richards)

Another story about Rice that sustains Berryman's intentions is repeated by Jeremy Reff:

> In a letter of T. D. Rice's in response to a hostile review from a New York literary magazine, the *Mirror*, he openly embraces the techniques of Signifyin(g), arguing that "if dandyism is rendered contemptible in their [ladies] eyes by its copying the blacks, may not the copy render a service to society by inducing the ladies to discourage its original in the whites? (Lhamon 23)

Overall, Berryman's dedication to Daddy Rice, who was responsible for the "craze" of "jumping Jim Crow" and outwardly acknowledged his belief that whites were their own inspiration for the transgressions projected onto African Americans depicted in blackface, clarifies that Berryman shared his perspective.

"Dream Song 3" introduces the fourth voice of the *Songs* within a conversation between Henry's highbrow professor-like voice of the first song who can rationally evaluate Henry for the world and Henry, once again in whiteface, but a more "private" Henry who does not censor his shortcomings or hide them with sophisticated language. The title is "A Stimulant for an Old Beast": Henry, though depicted as juvenile, harmless, and even pitiable is equated with the devil—a "beast," sinful and foolish, attempting to maintain the pretensions of the voice of "Dream Song 1" but failing, speaking of himself in the first person, revealing his true nature

by giving the reader access to his stream of consciousness. The title implies that the subject of the poem will indicate that which brings out the devil in Henry. The subject, as in "Dream Song 2," is once again, women. The element of comedy is still present with the imagery of the first line eluding to a witches' cauldron brewing with a foul smelling sticky substance fit for only Satan himself juxtaposed with the second line where Henry contemplates his existence, presumably, within the presence of a female psychiatrist at the "screwed-up" young age of 23. "Dream Song 3" functions as the means to reveal Henry's "white" personas as equivalent to the beast, both humorous and contemptible. The first stanza demonstrates how the "sophisticated" narrator of the first poem of the *Songs* is misrepresenting Henry's true identity by censoring his juvenile utterances. Instead of the indecisive, unaware "I'm not so young but not so very old," the other Henry glosses over his inadequacies with Romanticized language. When Henry turns to sophomoric, irrationality such as the bit about licking the psychiatrist, his "filter" counters with something abstract and maintains that tone through the second stanza where he is unable to outwardly reference the breasts of the woman to whom he speaks but instead compares her "chest" to the inflated one of a "seal." While Henry speaks abstractly about the woman's breasts in the midst of trying to sound cosmopolitan, he cannot hold back an attack on Rainer Marie Rilke, the 20th century German poet, who apparently Henry believes failed with women, "a threshold worse than the circles / Where the vile settle & lurk." The readers' conclusion is regardless of what dialect Henry speaks or what mask he wears, *Henry*, at his core, is ridiculous, mad, and beastlike—three attributes perpetuated by the minstrel show and, as already cited, Richard Hornback

claims have been synonymous with "blackness" since medieval theater.

"Dream Song 4" makes increasingly obvious Berryman's aim to equate the two voices of "Dream Song 3," both Henry in whiteface, and the voice of "Dream Song 2," Henry in blackface, as the buffoons of the show while the speaker who "signifies" him as such is the second blackface voice named as the interlocutor. There is no blackface Henry in this poem, only whiteface Henry and the interlocutor. The subject again is lust, particularly important in terms of Berryman's politics because the woman who Henry both desires and fears has a Latin, and consequently darker, complexion. Here Berryman points to the desire white men have had for "mixing" with nonwhite women, poignant because of the fierce white, public desire to preserve the homogeneity of the white race which consequently led to the lynching and castration of countless African American men. And as in "Dream Song 2," the interlocutor censures him by reminding him of the moral laws that should prevent Henry from acting on his desire. It is clear from the interlocutor's address that the reader is not to be fooled by this voice's learned speech and seemingly sound reasoning. By using the simple address of Sir or Mr. Bones throughout *Songs*, Berryman is able to negate the validity of his views regardless if they are packaged in a "white" or "black" idiom.

The first four *Dream Songs* demonstrate that Berryman's aim is not to irresponsibly recycle the old tropes of blackface minstrelsy performed by whites. In them, Berryman erases the American hierarchy of power established based on skin color, language, and rationality. While Henry disguises moral "blackness" when wearing the white mask and conceals that moral darkness' origin—the desires and

fears of "whiteness"—when wearing the black mask, the "black" interlocutor remains the voice of reason. After all, it is the interlocutor who erases the boundaries that minstrelsy covertly drew by proclaiming "—Mr. Bones, we all brutes & fools" (69).

CHAPTER V: DECONSTRUCTING "BLACKNESS" THROUGH THE DECONSTRUCTION OF "WHITENESS"

Once Berryman utilizes the structure of minstrelsy to eradicate its traditional racial hierarchy, he then systematically returns the tropes of "blackness" to their white creators. As evident in *The Dream Songs*, Berryman understood, as AnnLouise Keating would say, the "relation between" "blackness" or "whiteness" and biology is "conditional"; people with black skin can perform "whiteness" just as those with white skin can perform "blackness." This ideology, dependent on the aspects of performance, prohibits any characteristic of "blackness" or "whiteness" from belonging to any one race (Keating 909). Though Keating describes an ever-changing binary relationship between the two constructions in which attributes of each change as they serve various socioeconomic and political agendas of the elite class, Berryman makes visible the element of construction involved in the characteristics appropriated to African Americans by whites in minstrel shows that became part of the overall national racial ideology through "transcodification," an

occurrence by which the codes of one type of discourse transfer to another and influence political policy (Hornback 68).

Berryman's racializaiton of Herny's personas is an attempt to shatter the myth of difference that white Americans longed to protect as truth. In 1956 D. H. Lawrence writes about his personal experience and the disturbing disappointment with the destruction of the constructions of "blackness":

> "When reading true depictions of black people and their lives "it is absolutely impossible to discover that the nigger [sic] is any blacker inside than we are…It is rather disappointing. One likes to cherish illusions about the race soul, the eternal negroid soul, black and glistening…touched with awfulness and mystery." (qtd. in Duplessis 127)

In *The Dream Songs,* Berryman turns this type of ideology on its head and reveals that white people are not any "whiter" than black people. In essence, he removes the mask from white performance of blackface to reveal what has always been underneath, "whiteness." Moreover, he brings unconsciousness to consciousness by not permitted what blackface allowed whites to hide from themselves and project onto the Other: the fears, desires, transgressions, and ridiculousness of white Americans.

In order to "deconstruct" both "blackness" and "whiteness" as illustrated in this type of minstrel performance, Berryman recognized he only needed to transfer the characteristics of the constructions of "blackness" to the real lives of white Americans because the invisibility of whiteness, as Jaime Barlowe argues, only makes "whiteness" apparent by the absence of the "presence of blackness" (1). Barlowe summarizes critics' explanation of this phenomenon: "whiteness is…the unmarked case, whereas 'blackness is always marked by color'"; by "erasing its

presence, 'whiteness' operates as the unacknowledged standard or norm against which all so-called minorities are measured"; in other words, "'whiteness' is defined implicitly in the process of defining otherness, never explicitly for itself" (Barlowe 2). In other words, within the binary relationship of racialized "blackness" and "whiteness," the minstrel show defined what whiteness was by naming "blackness." If "blackness" carried all the connotations listed by Carl Wittke, "whiteness" is the opposite of these: in other words, industrious, responsible, not dangerous, prudent, temperate, intelligent, not lustful, and God-fearing. Through Henry's startling confessions about murderous thoughts, alcoholism, womanizing, blasphemy, and madness, Berryman shatters the image of the "eternal" white soul, inadvertently defined in the above passage by Lawrence, white "and glistening"...touched with beauty and grace.

In *The Dream Songs*, Berryman demonstrates through Henry's shameless misogyny that what has been feared to be inherent in African Americans is actually located and should be feared in whites. By "Dream Song 26," Henry reveals that his fantasies of the comedic first four songs have come to fruition: "Henry. Henry became interested in women's bodies, / his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievements." The repeating "were" implies the frequencies of his "original crime." The progression from sexual fantasy to an obsession that overshadows Henry's marital and fatherly responsibilities portrays a break with the constructions of "whiteness" described by Keating. Marriage, a hallmark of stability, becomes something to dread, "he's about to have his lady, permanent; / and this is the worst of all came ever sent / writhing Henry's way"…"Bars will be closed. / No girl

will again / conceive above your throes" (48). And as Henry contemplates his two marriages and the "cunning wives" constantly vex him, he further degenerates: "He hardly know his selving. ('that a man') / Henry grew hot, got laid, felt bad, survived / ('should always reproach himself')" (73). In "Dream Song 69," Henry confesses how "low" he has become when he describes his fear of dying of lust for a woman he does not love, and in "Dream Song 70" he succeeds in his "overture" just before his wife returns home with his child which "he'd no choice / but to make for it room" (76, 77). Overall, it is revealed that the materialization of his fantasies have been the cause of his ultimate demise. After Henry expresses his fear of his impending marriage, he laments: "He stared at ruin. Ruin stared straight back. / He thought they was old friends. He felt on the stair / where her papa found them bare / they became familiar" but "This one was a stranger, come to make amends / for all the imposters, and to make it stick" (49).

Theorists have claimed that the fear of supposed unfettered, inhuman sexuality of the black man was what led whites to believe African American men were capable of other expressions of beastlike behavior such as the more terrifying crime of murder. This led to the "guilty until proven guilty" justice system still existent in Berryman's era. As Michael North writes, "To commit murder is to cut oneself off in utter savagery, to cross the river to the cannibal isle" (70). Berryman cuts Henry off from humanity when Henry refers to himself as a murderer while gazing at his reflection in the mirror (19). In Song 29—where Henry confesses "There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart / so heavy, if he had a hundred years / & more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time / Henry could not make good"—

Berryman demonstrates how engrained Henry's murderous thoughts are in his mind. In this poem, Henry cannot stay awake long enough to escape his desire to "hacks her body up." Though he never enacts actual murder—"He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing. / Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up. / Nobody is ever missing"—he continues to dream it, getting "away with murder / for long" and committing "genocide" through his "loverly" times (43).

Finally, in an act of self-loathing as a consequence for his licentious actions and murderous desires, Henry fantasizes about his own castration, bestial nature, and lynching. In "Dream Song 8," Henry is physically dismantled from hair to teeth until eventually "They took away his crotch" (10). In "Dream Song 9," "deprived" of this enemy, Henry's humanity will be put to the test, but he quickly discovers that he must die anyway for in "Dream Song 10" when Henry divulges "There were strange gatherings. A vote would come / that would be no vote. There would come a rope. / Yes. There would come a rope" (12). Henry envisions his punishment as that reserved for the invisible crimes of "blackness"; lynching seems inevitable. However, it is not until the reader witnesses Henry "swinging his daughter" on "a twine hung from disastered trees," reminiscent of an actual lynching scene, Henry is made to be subhuman. He lives "like a rat" (15); he has his "pelt…put on sundry walls" (18); he longs for the "one with so few legs" as he waits for the "barker" to nip him (32); "Bright-eyed & bushy tailed woke not Henry up" (59); in "Dream Song 53" he is "human (half)"; and he is referred to as a "coon" throughout. Rebuking Henry in these ways for the "black" crimes of a white man, Berryman denies the binary

relationship between “blackness” and “whiteness” that has dictated the social and political landscape of the United States through its history.

CHAPTER VI: CONTENDING WITH THE "RACIAL UNCONSCIOUS"

Despite the implications of Berryman's anti-model, the "undermin[ing] and reinforce[ing]' of "racial hegemony" (Richards) in conjunction with the public acceptance of formulaic and institutionalized racism Wittke describes has prevented critics from being able to fully understand Berryman's use of blackface in *The Dream Songs.* To illustrate the singularity of divisiveness Berryman's use of minstrelsy evokes, even Berryman's proponents, such as Adrienne Rich and Kevin Young, cannot fully contend with whether Berryman's use of language underscores or undermines Berryman's genius. While African Americans had established a voice in the national aesthetic by the time *The Dream Songs* was first published, white critics seem dedicated to protecting the authority they once held over the "Africanist" presence in American literature. This is exemplified through critics' initial if not shallow responses to Berryman's use of blackface dialect. T. J. Clark's work on, what Lott calls, the public "unconscious" that encourages readers of critical discourse

to pay as much attention to what is *not* stated as what is stated will be particularly useful in understanding this trend:

> Like the analyst listening to his patient, what interests us, if we want to discover the [public], are the points at which the rational monotone of the critic breaks, fails, falters; we are interested in the phenomena of obsessive repetition, repeated irrelevance, anger suddenly discharged—the points where the criticism is incomprehensible are the keys to its comprehension. The public, like the unconscious, is present only where it ceases; yet it determines the structure of private discourse; it is the key to what cannot be said, and no subject is more important. (qtd. in Lott 38)

Interestingly, these gaps in the discourse exist as much today as they did in the 1960s despite the public rhetoric's transcendence from unconcealed, unapologetic racism made possible by the lack of white self-awareness and the work of such critics as Toni Morrison. Morrison who encourages readers to resist the impulse of naming a text or its author as racist by "shift[ing] the critical gaze from the described and imagined to the describer and imaginers" in a manner that allows for the discovery—"through a close look at literary 'blackness,'" of "the nature—even the cause of literary 'whiteness' (90, 9). The problem lies in the critics' resistance or inability to decode the signs of the predominant, white American racial ideology in order to recognize them as constructions that can be and were manipulated by Berryman in order to disprove the reality of their traditional, white significations.

The problem faced by today's readers hardly warrants explanation. How can a text that propagates a racist medium not reinforce racial hegemony? Kevin Young, the editor of the 2004 American Poets Project edition of Berryman's selected poems, champions Berryman's initiative in using "black dialect (however imaginary)" as a gateway to a wider sense of American language, not as a sign of cultural decay but of

cultural vitality" (xxiv). He goes on to write that he has "come to admire" the way Berryman "explores the 'blackness' of whiteness" (xxv). However, once one compares his "selected poems" from *77 Dream Songs* with those of the entire work, the reader finds that Young's admiration falls short of total acceptance of Berryman's use of the "wider sense of American language." Young silences Berryman by omitting the poems that consist of solely minstrel-speak, the inflammatory epithet "coon," and others that seem to attribute African Americans with animal-like behavior or depict scenes redolent of lynching.

Though it is not difficult to understand why Young would evade Berryman's use of all these signs because of their offensive nature, omitting them compromises the readers understanding of *The Dream Songs* and makes Berryman's political agenda barely visible. As already discussed, "Dream Song 2," the first poem neglected by Young in the "selected poems," is imperative for creating a context for Berryman's use of minstrelsy throughout the *Songs*; it introduces Henry in blackface and the interlocutor who also uses a black dialect and sets up the rebellious power structure representative of the remainder of the *Songs.* And "Dream Song 5," also omitted, is necessary to illustrate the unified thought and consciousness of the black and white personas of Henry. There is no insinuation of blackface in poems 16, 57, and 66 of the *Songs*, yet they too are ignored presumably because Henry is bestial in all three. The Henry who is made animal-like is the white Henry and, in these songs, he is revealed to be alcoholic, licentious, and pathetic. Once again, these three songs are integral to understanding Berryman's argument that Henry should be judged based on *his* "savage" behaviors, the content of *his* character, not the white color of

his skin. Finally, "Dream Song 60" and "Dream Song 72" are overtly political, both criticizing the inequality between whites and African Americans despite legislation that meant to change the disparities. In "Dream Song 60," Berryman—through Henry's blackface persona—comments on the problems of racial integration of schools in the South and complains of the racial inequity of employment and housing in America, ultimately suggesting that communism is more humane than American capitalism. When the interlocutor asks Henry "Who gonna win?" in the struggle for equal rights, Henry answers, "—I wouldn't *pre*dict. / But I do guess mos peoples gonna *lose*. / I never saw no pinkie wifout no hand. / O my, without no hand." And in "Dream Song 72," when he is referencing the legislative oppression of actual African Americans, he uses the once considered respectful racial designation "negro" not the highly offensive "coon." In this way, Berryman makes apparent that his use of "coon" throughout the rest of *The Dream Songs* was reserved for the white Henry.

Young underestimates the readers' ability to decode Berryman's use of racialized significations in the context of white performance of blackface minstrelsy—in its entirety, a construction of "blackness" that well before 2004 had been translated to indicate a reflection of "whiteness." In her 1993 work, Toni Morrison describes the "obvious" implications of white writers imagining "a real or fabricated…presence" of the "dark, abiding, signing" African American that is crucial to white writers' (and in minstrelsy, performers') "sense of Americanness" (4-6):

> The subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. (17)

And critics, such as Eric Lott, who in 1992 argued that the menacing fascination with degrading African Americans in blackface minstrelsy stemmed from a desire to repress something inside whites rather than oppress something without, conjectures that the "staging or constructing" of "boundaries separating black and white cultures" was in effect a consequence of this repression not the overt motivation for the creation of the performance. Lott writes:

> Though it was organized around the quite explicit 'borrowing' of black cultural materials for white dissemination (and profit), a "borrowing" that ultimately depended upon the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural. Though it arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies that underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshy investment through ridicule and racist lampoon. (23)

Here Lott articulates the inherent interdependence of blackface minstrelsy and slavery as well as the reflexive implications of its representations of black people. He suggests what many others have supported, that the minstrel show was the performance of white sexual desire and fear of perceived black sexual power: in addition, through the effacing of the humanity of those in possession of something whites could not control, whites were able to somehow affect the power they lacked. Eric Lott calls the minstrel show a manifestation of the "'racial unconscious'—a structured formation, combining thought and feeling, tone and impulse, and at the very edge of semantic availability, whose symptoms and anxieties make it just legible—of this desire and fear (23). The acknowledgement of white desire and fear of "blackness" evident in *The Dream Songs* produced and produces anxiety because it creates a flux in the master/slave dichotomy. Berryman uncovers this "love and theft" of "blackness," not to validate its previous uses but to accentuate what will be

Lott's argument. But, Young's racial consciousness or unconsciousness, the desire to suppress the signs of racist ideology and the fear of failing to do so, itself is materialized in his censorship of *The Dream Songs.*

Adrienne Rich, a contemporary of Berryman, demonstrates the "just legible," if not "semantic[ally] available" nature of blackface in the white public discourse of Berryman's day. Rich was not overtly, though she most likely was covertly, concerned with the potential racial, not racist, implication of Berryman's employment of blackface. In her comments about Berryman's use of blackface in *The Dream Songs,* she openly is concerned with defending his potential linguistic offenses which border on violating the status quo of what Kevin Young calls "the polite diction of academic poetry" (xxiv). Of lines like "After eight years, be less dan eight percent, / distinguish' friend, of coloured wif de whites / in de School, in de Souf" from "Dream Song 60" she writes:

> A new language is evolving in the heads of some Americans who use English. Some streak of genius in Berryman told him to try on what he's referred to as "that god-damned baby talk," that blackface dialect, for his persona. No political stance taught him, no rational sympathy with *negritude*. For blackface is the supreme dialect and posture of this country, going straight to the roots of our madness. A man who needs to discourse on the most extreme, most tragic subjects, has recourse to nigger talk. ("Living with Henry" qtd. in *Modern American Poetry*)

As illustrated by the above passage, Rich's discourse "breaks, fails" and "falters" because she wants to commend Berryman for his use of black speech without legitimizing the inclusion of the people who inspired it. She attempts to limit her analysis to the implications of using an unconventional literary idiom but cannot do so without revealing her fear of how the inclusion of this language could undermine the authority of Standard American English. Her first difficultly lies in the fact that

she is attempting to describe language that the white aesthetic did not categorize as language at all. She refers to it as a "new language"—something never before expressed, "god-damned baby talk"—the beginnings of language not yet formed, "blackface"—clearly a stage dialect existing for over a hundred years, and, simultaneously, a "supreme dialect" and "nigger talk." Yet, this "new language" she refers to in the first sentence of this passage all too quickly gets reduced to "nigger talk."

She commends Berryman's "genius" for using a blackface dialect based on the drama of its effect, but she does not allude to any humanistic implications, racial or otherwise, neither acknowledging the presence of nor the implications for the people that inspired its imitation. In fact, she seems particularly intent on distancing Berryman—and most likely, herself—from any political agenda that would align him with any African American cause. In doing so, she defends against an implied allegation, that Berryman's use of black dialect, one she understands to be genuine "nigger talk" may grant some kind of power to African Americans which in the binary relationship between "black" and "white" would mean less for whites. In light of her difficulty in naming the language Berryman uses, when she describes blackface as the "supreme dialect and posture of this country," she appears not to be criticizing blackface's racist origins but to be disturbed by the insanity of imitating black speech and life. Moreover, when she juxtaposes madness and "A man" she seems to be defending Berryman's own rationality; something that was apparently in question given his semblance of "sympathy with negritude." Ironically, however, Adrienne Rich's defense of Berryman seems more poignant than Kevin Young's alleged

acceptance; she recognizes what “Henry, pried / open for all the world to see” has to say about how the “unconscious desires and fears” of blackface minstrelsy’s “dreamer” dictate the need for “othering,” and she is incredulous (Berryman 3).

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

In “The Souls of Black Folk,” after describing the ever invasive question—“fluttered around” but nevertheless present in his conversations with probing whites (868), “How does it feel to be a problem?,” W. E. B. DuBois gives his response to this question he “seldom” answered when he describes what he calls the double-consciousness of the American “Negro”:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (869)

Berryman understood that he, nor Henry, regardless of his actions, would ever be forced to contend with the consequences of such a dual existence of partial inclusion

and, therefore, exclusion in his own country because of his white skin. In *The Dream Songs*, Berryman exposes the consequence of this unfettered right to full participation in American society, a double-unconsciousness—that allows white Americans to hide from themselves that their significations created for the African American Other are not rooted in fact and, at the same time, deny that this "othering" is motivated by a desire to negate their own desires and fears.

In *77 Dream Songs*, John Berryman does not expropriate the tropes of African Americans created for and disseminated through the white performance of blackface minstrelsy in order to reinforce or perpetuate their social and political implications. Instead, he manipulates the formula blackface minstrelsy utilized in order to illuminate the irony indicative of the white "othering" of African American people. He asks, if white Americans deny enfranchisement to African Americans based on the stereotypes of transgression and folly, should not they also deny the vote to themselves? In "Dream Song 64," the interlocutor says, "—Hear matters hard to manage at de best, / Mr Bones. Tween what we see, what be, / is blinds. Them blinds' on fire." In *77 Dream Songs*, Berryman attempts to remove the blinds that allow whites to justify institutionalized racism based on the lie of difference The reason critics and readers alike have struggled to understand Berryman's project goes beyond the complexities of blackface itself; Berryman's anti-model completely undermines the entire social, economic, and political structures of the United States and, as indicated by the interlocutor, it's "terrifying" (74).

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