

Dear Readers,

Thank you for taking the time to read my article. I must say it has been the bane of my existence for some time. Let me give you some backstory. I started this article several years ago with the foundational idea that the cross-dressed performances of Black male comedians today traces back to the wench caricature of the early minstrel show. I also wanted to work on the portrayal of Black women in the minstrel show, which has been neglected in the current scholarship. Initially, this article focused on the influences on the wench caricature of the early minstrel show and the parallel to Black comedians cross-dressing today (Tyler Perry, Martin Lawrence, etc.). It took sometime but I eventually realized that the time period from 1830s until today in an article was not realistic and I broke my initial article into two separate articles. The portion (article) that focuses on cross-dressing Black Male Comedians will be published this month with the Pop Culture Studies Journal. Therefore, what you are reading is the portion that will focus on the wench caricature.

Early minstrel scholarship focuses on masculinity and whiteness, but I wanted to examine the portrayal of Black women and the manner this influenced Black womanhood in popular culture. This article (in its current iteration) finally looks close to what I (think) I am trying to say. You will see that I do not have a proper introduction. I have ideas and portions of an introduction, but I did not write an introduction because I (honestly) was confused on what the article was specifically saying. However, I can finally see where the article is going and think a workshop will help me compose a clear introduction. I believe the article reflects some of the major points I want to address. I have notes in text and footnotes that show my ideas, confusion, and tentative plans on the latter part of the article. I am confused about how far the article should go and what time period I should conclude my work. For example, should I stay in the very early minstrel era and maybe conclude about how minstrelsy further develops. Also, I believe the article is heavily focused on the yaller gal caricature (which is the caricature that is the most frequently reviewed in scholarship), so I need to further develop the (what I call) the grotesque wench. For example the notes on page 26 are referring to an idea about looking at the caricature of Topsy, as an unkempt black female child, and how this portrayal parallels with the grotesque wench. And I am torn about looking at delving further on the development of the comically ugly, black woman, as constructed by Edward Clay's portrayals of Black women. Also, I thought about putting in a section on coon songs and the manner that they continued the wench caricature, for example Miss Lucy Long has been remade and sung in popular culture until the 1960s.

I want to be clear/concise and let this be an introduction (or even a push) for other scholars to specifically look at the construction of Black womanhood in minstrelsy. I do not want to focus on whiteness, masculinity, or drag; which seems to be the emphasis on previous scholarship. I would like to make a contribution to further understanding the construction of Black womanhood in popular culture.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to read this article.

Best,

Katrina Thompson Moore

Tentative Title: The Wench

Intro-Need More

This article will place the wench into the larger conversations on stereotypes of Black women and the manner in which this caricature was developed in the blackface minstrel show of the early nineteenth century. The wench, similar to other aspects of the minstrel show, was not developed within a silo; therefore, an analysis of the manner the wench caricature reflected the perception and often (desired) treatment of actual Black women will be presented. I will recognize and review the conventional setting and history of minstrelsy to place black women back into the narrative. I am particularly interested in looking at the most prominent scholarship on the blackface minstrel show to illustrate how the wench has been analyzed and to illustrate the consistent neglect of black women. In order to examine foundationally the wench, I will mainly look at early minstrel songs and advertisements to illustrate the manner early wench was constructed to reflect popular ideals of actual black women at the time.

Body

The minstrel show is recognized as the first major entertainment genre of North America. The wench caricature needs to be understood in larger context, external to the physical stage, to understand how the minstrel show was reflective of popular racist ideologies, not simply the originator of them. Therefore, an examination of the term wench and the manner we start to see it being associated with Black women.

The meaning of wench varies according to time and location; however, it is always representative of those in the female gender, specifically a girl or woman. Excavating the historical meaning of the term wench reveals a complicated history. In the 1785 British publication *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, the wench appears periodically with

reference to “a harlot,” a breeding woman” and “a girl.” The term is often used in negative portrayals analogous to the term “Frenchifield,” which meant “infected with a venereal disease.”¹ In 1889, *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, refers to the term wench as “a female child; a girl; a maid or damsel, A lewd or immodest woman; a mistress; a concubine; a strumpet.” There is also a distinctly racial designation, where wench could mean “a colored woman of age; a negress or mulatress, especially one in service.”²

The Atlantic and domestic slave trade formed the economic basis for the division of women into pure and impure.³ The racial association of Black women and wench becomes quite clear in the advertisements of slave sales and runaways in the newspapers and posters.⁴ In the *Independent Chronicle* of Boston, Massachusetts a slave advertisement stated, “To Sell—A hearty, likely negro wench, bout 12 or 15 years of age,” in the February 27, 1777 publication.⁵ Beyond slave sale advertisements, the term wench was widely used to describe black women in runaway advertisements. An advertisement in the October 20, 1768 edition of the *Virginia Gazette* reads: “RUN away from the subscriber in Chesterfield [...] a bright mulatto wench named Jude.” Another ad in in the same newspaper on November 29, 1776 reads, “Run away the

¹Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: Printed for S. Hooper No. 212 High Holborn, Entered at Stationers Hall, 67 & 110, 1785).

² Benjamin E. Smith, *The Century Cyclopaedia of Names: A Pronouncing and Etymological Dictionary of Names in Geography, Biography, Mythology, History, Ethnology, Art, Archaeology Fiction, Etc., Etc., Etc.* (New York: The Century Co., 1889).

³ Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830*, Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg Virginia, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁴ Tamara Extian-Babiuk, “To Be Sold: A Negro Wench” Slave Ads of the Montreal Gazette 1785–1805” (Master’s Thesis, McGill University, Feb. 2006) and Adria Y. Goldman, Vanatta S. Ford, Alexa A. Harris, and Natasha R. Howard, *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues*, (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 207.

⁵ The Montreal Gazette reference may be found in Tamara Extian-Babiuk, “To Be Sold,” 13–14. The reference to the *Independent Chronicle* can be found in J.D.B De Bow, ed., *De Bow’s Review: Devoted to the Restoration of the Southern States, And the Development of the Wealth and Resources of the Country: Journal of Literature, Education, Agriculture, Commerce, International Improvements Manufactures, Mining and Statistics*, vol. 2—After the War Series (Nashville: De Bow, 1866).

first of January 1775 a likely mulatto negro wench named Kate, 18 years of age.”⁶ Like buck for black men, wench often implied that a black woman was of child-bearing age. Although, there were other references in runaway and slave sales describing older black women as wenches. Therefore, when the wench appeared on the playbills and in song lyrics of the minstrel show, the reference was already solidified within American culture.

The term wench used on the theater stage does not originate with the minstrel show; it was active within the language of Shakespeare for centuries prior to the blackface show. American life and entertainment in the nineteenth century was saturated with Shakespearean shows.⁷ Mahar states, “...blackface and whiteface burlesques of Shakespeare’s major plays could travel freely among different classes and types of theaters because his work was part of a shared American culture.”⁸ With the popularity of these productions, it inevitably had influences in both public culture and blackface minstrel performances. Cross-dressing men to portray female characters, stump speeches, the often comic mockery and degradation of women and the term wenches used as reference to women are a few of the areas that Shakespearean Theater influenced blackface minstrelsy. Shakespearean scholar, Alison Findley, examines the term and character type wench in her work, *Women in Shakespeare: A Dictionary*. In her review she shows the complexity of the term, Findley states that wench “at its warmest, it carries with it positive nuances of affection familiarity, companionship...’Wench’ can be a patronizing or disparaging term of reference for a woman. At its most pejorative it refers to a prostitute.”⁹ Through a thorough review of the various times and styles the term wench was used throughout

⁶ “Transcriptions of Virginia Gazette Runaway Slave Ads,” Colonial Williamsburg: That the Future May Learn from the Past, accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.history.org/history/teaching/runaway.cfm>.

⁷ Ray B. Browne, “Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (Autumn, 1960): 374.

⁸ William Mahar does an exhaustive review of Shakespeare plays Found in *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, 187-195

⁹ Alison Findley, 436.

Shakespeare's plays, Findley concludes that wench "invoke more than one meaning of the word, colouring innocent young women with bawdy potential or whores with the vulnerability of girls."¹⁰ Women in Shakespeare fell into two main categories; "idealized married gentlewomen or their antitypes," according to Shakespearean scholar, Michael Shapiro.¹¹ Although recent scholarship on women of Shakespeare has deemphasized misogyny and women's oppression to understand the complicated and power many women had within the play.¹² Regardless, Shakespeare and the term wench illustrate the complicated and bipolar portrayal of women on the theater stage.

Wench, in association with the chattel slavery system becomes a term interconnected with a system of ownership and profit in which the black female body is a commodity, and therefore malleable to fit the needs of the trade. Consequently, allowing for white women, regardless of class, to become innately moral. Black women, however, were seen as synonymous with sexual impropriety and immorality. Historian Kathleen M. Brown argues that the sixteenth and seventeenth century witnessed the rise of "racial opposition in which women of English descent embodied the privileges and virtues of womanhood while women of African descent shouldered the burden of its inherent evil, sexual lust."¹³

The view of women as inherently corrupt and vile began changing in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, according to many scholars that have reviewed rhetoric and literature of the

¹⁰ 438

¹¹ Michael Shapiro, "Framing the Taming: Metatheatrical Awareness of Female Impersonation in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 23, Early Shakespeare Special Number (1933) and Jamieson, Lee. "7 Types of Female Characters in Shakespeare's Plays." ThoughtCo, Feb. 11, 2020, [thoughtco.com/female-characters-in-shakespeare-2984939](https://www.thoughtco.com/female-characters-in-shakespeare-2984939).

¹² Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* 2005 and "dated and outdated: the present tense of feminist criticism" *shakespeare*

¹³ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1–2.

period.¹⁴ However, this perspective only applies to white women and did not apply, necessarily, to the theater stage. Mocking and degrading women, black and white, was an active aspect of minstrelsy, but the white women that were performed were those who violated the dominated white male power structure. Minstrel performers reacted to the rise of women's activism through the burlesque of white women's rights speeches and activism. For example, the Wood's Minstrels incorporated a parody titled "Lecture on Woman's Rights," in their minstrel show which allowed white males frustrations and objections to white women's new public role to be expressed through comedy entertainment.¹⁵ Although there were mocked performances that focused on unruly white woman, the degradation of Black women was a staple aspect of minstrelsy that consisted from its origin and proliferated in American entertainment culture, overall.

Add footnote saying that the analysis of wench in this article will not examine the history of the negro bed wench nor look at the reincarnation of wench as pertains to black women dating white men in popular culture

One sentence

The beginning of the wench caricature type is often associated with the major song of Miss Lucy Long, first introduced on the minstrel stage in 1842¹⁶. Although there are many variations, one set of the earliest lyrics are as follows:

I jist come out afore you,

To sing a little song,

I plays it on the banjo,

¹⁴ Karen Newman, Anthony Flecher, Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, Jennifer Higginbotham, The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters: Gender, Transgression and Adolescence

¹⁵ ADD

¹⁶ Put in debate on who wrote the song and when

And dey calls it Lucy Long.

CHORUS:

Oh take your time Miss Lucy,

Take your time Miss Lucy Long.

Oh take your time Miss Lucy

Take your time Miss Lucy Long.

Miss Lucy she is handsome,

And Miss Lucy she is tall,

To see her dance Cachucha

Is death to niggers all.

Oh! Miss Lucy's teeth is grinning

Just like an ear ob corn,

And her eyes dey look so winning!

Oh would I'd ne'er been born.

I axed her for to marry

Myself de toder day,

She said she'd rather tarry

So I let her habe her way.

Pray &c.

If she makes a scolding wife
As sure as she was born
I'll tote her down to Georgia
And trade her off for Corn.¹⁷

The song begins in the style of Jump Jim Crow, as a formal introduction to the audience and minstrel theater of a new caricature, Miss Lucy Long. There are several consistent minstrel song themes early in the first two stanzas of the song. The reference and use of the banjo is common in minstrel performances and throughout advertisements. In the second stanza, her physical attributes of handsome and tall are stated. This is a common theme in many wench songs, often offering some description of physical attributes with emphasis on beauty or ugliness. In this version of Miss Lucy Long, she is performing the Cachucha; this dance is very intentional and has several meanings to the mainly white male audience members. The Cachucha was a Spanish solo dance that was created in Cuba, and later, popularized by Austrian dancer Fanny Elssler performances in ballet-pantomime *Le Diable boiteux*, which was seen in Austria, Germany, England, France, Russia, and the United States throughout the 1830s and 1840s. This dance was viewed as exotic and flirtatious and truly symbolic of the sexualized other, therefore the reference to the Cachucha in this version of the minstrel song demonstrates the minstrel

¹⁷ There are several versions of Miss Lucy Long that appear in minstrel song books from 1843–1854. William Mahar displays several versions in his book. For this version, see The Lester S. Levy Collection (Philadelphia: G. Willig, c. 1842) in "Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture, A Multi-Media Archive," University of Virginia, last modified 2009, accessed September 2016, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/>. Also see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests*, 276–77.

performances and audience familiarity with this Spanish folk dance and their desire to show Miss Lucy Long as sexualized and appealing.¹⁸

Evident within the lyrics Miss Lucy Long is an enslaved black woman, residing in the Southern portion of the United States.¹⁹ This song is sung from the male perspective that is both pursuing her as a love interest and has possession of her as a commodity. The race of the singer/pursuer is more complex, especially since the performer of this song is blackened up intentionally to depict himself as a black male. As a black male, and most likely a fellow bondsman, the associations to the “niggers all,” and the mockery of black language, are all implications that the pursuer/singer is a black male. While at the same time, if this “wife” is anyway unappealing then the pursuer/singer has the power to sell her as a commodity, which is often viewed as a white male prerogative. The performer seems to be able to shift races, from white slave owner to black bondsman/husband, throughout the song. The position of the Miss Lucy as a desired love interest or tradeable commodity seems to be contingent on her behavior. Further, the enslaved status of Miss Lucy Long only seems to become a part of the storyline if she is unruly, however the use of the term marriage illustrates the playful nature of the song which allows Long to be both free and enslaved and in some ways white or black. Miss Lucy Long is malleable to fit whatever needs of the performer. The consumable and commodity aspect of Miss Lucy Long separates her from white women, who while treated “like” property could not be reduced to an actual commodity. However, white men are making a statement about women, Black and white, those who do not behave according to (white) men’s expectations, during this Jacksonian era when women are actively pursuing more rights politically and socially, could then

¹⁸ Information on Cachucha comes from Lisa C. Arkin, “The Context of Exoticism in Fanny Elssler’s “Cachucha,” *Dance Chronicle* 17, no. 3 (1994): 303–25.

¹⁹ **The lower case b will be used in reference to minstrel performances to indicate that those persons were not actually Black but simply mocking black skin. Check other versions to see if this is normal.**

be denigrated. This first major wench song illustrates an appealing caricature of Black womanhood, as attractive in appearance and sensual in dance, while also reflecting the desired control white men wanted over women, both Black and white. Applying historian Kathleen M. Brown argument that “racial slavery [...] breathed new life into patriarchal social relations” while also reflecting on William Mahar’s assertion that “blackness is the cover under which the male fantasy of exercising complete control over women” both Black and white women, Miss Lucy Long represents these fears and desires of the developing working class white men in the industrial North.²⁰ Miss Lucy Long is also illustrating a figure that represents middle class women, one with a certain sense of self-possession and respectability, the desire to control these women and the physical attraction to these women are both evident within the various iterations of the song. Miss Lucy Long is appealing, but could become unlikable and undesirable if she does not follow the male contoured ideals of womanhood, and therefore the wench allowed the desires and fears to be played out on a theater stage.²¹

The song Miss Lucy Long is in many ways formal introduction of the yaller gal, although most of the songs in this category actually refer to the term “yaller gal.” With such titles as “Yaller Gal With a Josey On,” “Will No Yaller Gal Marry Me,” and “My Pretty Yaller Gal,” the storyline have slight variations but overall there is a similar theme.²² The yaller gal is physically appealing and desired by the pursuer/singer. Also, like Miss Lucy Long, she is often a transferable bondswoman; therefore her status is not often clearly stated or implied early within lyrics but often ends up being the dramatic turn towards the end. The yaller gal songs often end

²⁰ Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 312, and Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs*, 1. The emphasis on working class white men throughout minstrel analysis has yet to fully examine the animosity these men had toward middle-class women, regardless of race. The minstrel shows mockery of not only Bla

²¹ McConachie, *Performance and Cognition* (London: Routledge, 2007), 62.

²² Lyrics for “My Pretty Yaller Gal” music and words by Thomas Vaughn (New York: Jacques & Butler, 1847). Sheldon Harris Collection, University of Mississippi Libraries Digital Collection Archives and Special Collection. The “Yaller gal Marry me” lyrics may be found in Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland, 1982), 118-19.

in two ways: with the singer/pursuer establishing a romantic relationship with the yaller gal, or the pursuer/singer separated from her, either through being sold on the auction block, dying, or betrayal.²³ It is very common for the yaller gal to be desired, yet this longing often has regrettable ends for the pursuer due to some moral flaw within the yaller gal.

In many ways, the culture of slavery and defense of rape and sexual abuse was based in the belief that Black women were innately “lewd and lascivious.”²⁴ The yaller gal on the Northern minstrel stage represented a particular population of Southern Black bondswomen, those that were often a byproduct of rape, between a white male and Black woman. Dr. Johann D. Schoepf, a German physician that traveled in the South in the late eighteenth century stated that, “in almost every house there are negresses, slaves, who count it an honor to bring a mulattoe into the world.”²⁵ The sexual abuse of black bondswomen was ignored within pro-slavery propaganda, and instead Black women were depicted as innately sexual and desirous of white men.

Beyond the term wench and title yaller gal, both a direct result of the jezebel stereotype, the term “fancy” was also applied to sexualize black women. Sharony Green examines the term “fancy” as it was applied to nineteenth century black women and argues that previous scholarship has yet to capture the complexity of the fancy in the antebellum. To define the fancy, she places criteria on the term and those who applied:

These circumstances included (1) her actually being a concubine or prostitute; (2) her proximity to a slave trader or slaveholder who had the ability to shape her in a particular way, even if he had acquired her solely for his personal use and never

²³ The “separated lovers” theme is explored in detail by William Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 296–97.

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²⁵ Deborah G. White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman*, 30.

marketed her under the fancy moniker; and (3) her possessing certain attributes, high among them a particular skin color that were considered valuable in the marketplace.²⁶

Applying Green's criteria, it becomes quite evident that the yaller gal of the minstrel stage was constructed to represent the fancy. The yaller gal was considered the epitome of beauty and desirability, while also controlled by white men, both the audience and performer, (since yaller gal in early minstrelsy was performed by white men cross-dressed and blackened up). Similar comparisons may be seen with the fancy trade which was the sale of lighter skin bondspeople,, especially women, for sex or companionship throughout the South., although mainly associated with New Orleans. The women within the trade were often advertised by their skin complexions, with such terms as "quadroon," "bright color," "mulatto," "griff," or fancy. One typical advertisement stated, "Her color as that of a quadroon; very good figure [...] Her general appearance is very good."²⁷ Another slave trader, Isaac Franklin, referred to one fancy girl as "Yellow Girl Charlott," using the same term as the female and racial masquerade actors on the Northern stage.²⁸ Slave advertisements normally illustrated various features such as age, gender, skill set, but within the fancy trade physical appearance was the focus. The descriptions offered in slave advertisements closely paralleled the manner yaller gal minstrel songs often described the physical attributes of this wench caricature.

²⁶ Sharony Green, "'Mr Ballard, I am compelled to write again': Beyond Bedrooms and Brothels, a Fancy Girl Speaks," *Black Women, Gender and Families* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 17-40.

²⁷ Phillip Thomas to William Finney, July 26, 1859, William A. J. Finney Papers, RASP, *Fisk V. Beergerot*, #6814, 21 La. Ann. 111 (1869), testimony of Charles Godddard, University of New Orleans and Walter Johnson, "The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s," *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (2000): 13-38.

²⁸ Baptist, Edward E. "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States." *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1619-50.

In the 1850 publication of *Christy's Nigga Songster*, the song *De Yaller Gal In de Morning* illustrates the similarities between the yaller gal and the fancy women of the South:

Come gemmen all, both short and tall,²⁹

I hope dat you excuse me,

De reason why me come here now,

Am only to amuse you.

Some lubs black and some lubs wite,

But in spite ob nature's scorning,

Ob all de gals I eber did lub,

Gib me a yallar gal in a morning.

A pretty yallar gal a nice yallar gal,

Dere faces here always adorning,

Ob all de galls I eber did saw,

Gib me a yallar gal in a morning.

Der am a gal in New Orleans

Dat lubs me to extraction

Bery pity I doesnt like dat gal,

It is because ob her complection

She ab often tried to win my heart,

But now I'll gib her warning,

Dat from me she'd better start,

For I lub a yallar gal in a morning.

One night I went to a fancy ball
I am so fond ob dancing,
And soon as I got in de hall,
Round me de gals were prancing;
We dance all night till Zoureter give,
And when de day were dawning,
De ole banjo struck up, dere de go,
Sambo and him gal in a morning.

When me left dis place you soon shee,
Dat we did both get married,
And in a short time arter dat,
I wish dat I was buried.
No rest could I git even night or day,
For little niggars yawning;
So gemman all when you go to de ball,
Take care ob de gals in a morning [sic].³⁰

This song follows a similar pattern of many yaller gal songs. First, it describes a desire for a yaller gal that does not illustrate a specific yaller gal but instead speaks generally. Next, it tells a narrative of meeting a yaller gal. This part specifically refers to the city of New Orleans and a

³⁰ University of Virginia, "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

fancy ball, both references implying that the yaller gal is essentially a fancy. The *fancy ball* is emblematic of the various activities well-known in New Orleans in which white men could meet and have romantic relationships with Black women, either free or enslaved, and sought after for their lighter complexions.³¹ Lastly, the story ends in minstrel show fashion with the acquirement of said yaller gal, and then the regret of this action.³² With words “wish dat I was buried” the pursuer/singer laments his marriage and ends with a warning to the white men in the audience to be aware of attending fancy balls and acquiring (through marriage or purchase) a yaller gal. The construction of the yaller gal as desirous yet deficient in some manner is a common trope within these songs.

Much like advertisements of the fancy trade, the minstrel show distinguished the wench caricature by complexion. Historian Walter Johnson’s analysis of the fancy trade states, “The values slave buyers attributed to light-skinned bodies [...] were proximate to those they claimed for themselves: this was whiteness made salable by the presence of blackness, what I will call hybrid whiteness.”³³ Although Johnson refers to the group as “hybrid whiteness,” it may be more illustrative to recognize it as hybrid blackness, since these women are considered commodities and racially (according to rules of society), Black.³⁴ Therefore, it must be understood that the yaller gal’s description as neither black nor white, was intentional. She straddles the proverbial line of race (and gender), therefore making herself accessible, or better yet not categorically unacceptable. Similarly, her gender is somewhat ambiguous. Many of the famous male actors who cross-dressed and cross-raced into their prima donna role were considered beautiful female

³¹ Fancy balls may represent the quadroon balls that took place in the city of New Orleans. More information on Quadroon Balls in New Orleans may be found in Liliane Crète, *Daily Life in Louisiana, 1815–1830* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1981).

³² Put info on the idea of legal marriage

³³ Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (2000): 7.

³⁴ Tavia Nyong’o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Russes of Memory*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

figures, who were physically appealing and sexually desirous to the male audience members; however, many of those white male attendees may have been aware that these “yaller gals” were actually white men. The yaller gal could be appealing racially during a time that race mixing was taboo and illegal; similarly, the caricature could be desired as feminine even though when manifested physically on stage was nevertheless a male. Therefore, the homoerotic nature of the performance can be overshadowed by the imaginative desires of power, sexual desire, and ownership of Black women and control of white women.³⁵

The yaller gal caricature was introduced on the stage a few years prior to the theater production of Dion Bouciault’s, *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*.³⁶ The play opened in 1859 in New York city and depicts a tragic tale of a mixed-race girl that is desired by several white men but due to her status as a bondswoman and race is unable to be with the person (white male) she loves and therefore commits suicide rather than submit to being a fancy of a cruel master.³⁷ This melodrama’s popularity is only second to Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the nineteenth century and although expresses a sentimental portrayal of slavery, it does not illustrate a pro or anti-slavery stance.³⁸ *The Octoroon*, has a similar storyline to the yaller gal caricature of the minstrel stage and evident with the title of the play it is clear that both of these archetypes are meant to represent the population of enslaved women in the southern United States that were a product of

³⁵ In his popular work on the minstrel show, *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott states that the “These female bodies, it is true, were “also” male, and minstrel performers did not hesitate to flirt with the homosexual content of blackface transvestism (the master’s hat on the black “woman’s” nose), which no doubt created an atmosphere of polymorphous license that could blur conventional gender outlines (for Men). Lott, *Love and Theft*, 27 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990, 2007, 2008, 2010).

³⁶This is just one example of the mixed-race female character in popular culture. For example Black abolitionist William Wells Brown 1853 novel, *Clotel*, constructs a fictional character that follows a similar pattern of the yaller gal or tragic mulatto caricature. Brown, W. W. (1853). *Clotel, or, The President's daughter: a narrative of slave life in the United States*. London: Partridge & Oakley.

³⁷ Faulkner, Seldon. “The ‘Octoroon’ War.” *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1963, pp. 33–38. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3204323. Accessed 28 May 2020.

³⁸ Degen, John A. “How to End ‘The Octoroon.’” *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1975, pp. 170–178. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3206111. Accessed 28 May 2020.

miscegenation between Black bondswoman and white men.³⁹ The description of the main character, Zoe, illustrates clearly that she is meant to be attractive to all that view her. The first mention of her within the play offers a clear description of the attractive and overall appealing nature of this woman. It states, “Guess that you didn’t leave anything female in Europe that can lift an eyelash beside that gal. When she goes along, she just leaves a streak of love behind her. It’s a good drink to see her come into the cotton fields – the niggers get fresh on the sight of her. If she ain’t her weight in sunshine you may take one of my fingers off, and choose which you like?”⁴⁰ Similar to the yaller gal descriptions prevalent in minstrel songs, the main character is neither fully recognized as Black or White, therefore represents this hybrid middle ground that makes her somewhat more alluring, however still enslaved due to the inherent condition of bondage through the mother’s womb.⁴¹ The storylines of the yaller gal and Boucicault’s play follow paths with the hybrid racialized female role being sexually desired, a product of miscegenation, enslaved, and regardless of this attractive position in society there is often a tragic ending.⁴² This archetype does not stop with the ending of slavery or the entrance of actual African Americans and women to the theater stage, but instead becomes a staple known as the tragic mulatto within popular culture from the stage to the screen.⁴³

³⁹ The term octoroon means

⁴⁰ Dion Boucicault. *The Octoroon: A Play, in Four Acts*

http://www2.latech.edu/~bmagee/louisiana_anthology/texts/boucicault/boucicault--octoroon_files/cover.jpg

⁴¹ Interestingly, in mention of Europe or European women also seems to be a theme in minstrel yaller gal songs and this play. The standards of white beauty were is referenced as Europeans,

⁴² Lydia Maria Child first introduced this type of character in short stories: “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843); William Wells Brown *Clotel* (1853)

⁴³ The popularity of *The Octoroon* continues for almost a century and a play that was initially performed in blackface is later performed by African Americans entering the popular stage in post-bellum North America. In 20 Sandra Jean Graham in *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry*, disucsses the manner music fom the famous play was often incorporated in Black Jubilees Singers traveling groups There were many revivals of the play and it was eventually made into

The tragic mulatto in literature, theater, television and film has been well-studied and reviewed by scholars for decades.⁴⁴ However, the recognition that the minstrel caricature contributed to the physical manifestation of the character on the stage has often been neglected. The yaller gal of songs and performance that was sexually enticing on stage (performed by female impersonators) that flirted with the white male audience members eventually became White and Black women performing these roles.⁴⁵ In the 1870's several white female minstrel troupes entered the stage, which eventually contributed to "new entertainment form" according to Robert Allen in *Horrible Prettiness*, the burlesque show.⁴⁶ Although Allen focuses on white women, Black women enter into this entertainment world of Burlesque soon after in shows that had titles such as the *The Octoroons* and *The Creole Show* (also referred to as the *Creole Burlesque Company*).⁴⁷ These very popular shows, as well as others, continued the yaller gal on the stage with the display of (as advertised) appealing, attractive lighter-skinned Black women performing music and dance on the stage. The tragic mulatto type has been well researched but the foundation of it in popular culture as a controlling image needs to be understood.

Whether referred to as the yaller gal, fancy, octoroon, creole, or any variation to denote lighter skin, due often to some familial association with a white person, this character was applied to actual Black women. These popular culture performances, either by cross-dressing, cross racial performances of white men, of actual African American women, or of white women

⁴⁴ Zanger, Jules. "The 'Tragic Octoroon' In Pre-Civil War Fiction." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1966, pp. 63–70. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2711111. Accessed 28 May 2020, Donald Bogle,

⁴⁵ Although this article will now focus on women performances, it must be understood that Black and white men continued portraying the yaller gal type in minstrel performances. Female impersonation does not end with women entering the stage; however I will focus on women's continuation of these roles.

⁴⁶ Allen, Robert Clyde. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1991. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1546&site=ehost-live.

⁴⁷ Bernard L. Peterson Jr., *A Century of Musicals in Black and White: An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage: An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage Works by, about, or Involving African Americans*, (Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1993), 92

with darker hue makeup; all represented malleable Black female bodies. Rape and actual Black women's voices are silenced. They are visual, sexual objects that perform at the will of the audience and producers of these shows. The onslaught of rape and overt-sexual stereotype of Black women were supported, encouraged, and continued through these performances and are a part of the controlling images that continue today. While the yaller gal represented the malleable erotic Black woman that can be sexually violated, the grotesque wench caricature signified the degrading humiliation and abuse of Black women.

The lyrics of an 1854 song titled "Gal from the South" written and performed by the highly popular Christy minstrels epitomizes the other type of wench caricature.

Ole Massa bought a colored gal,
He bought her at the south;
Her hair it curled so very tight
She could not shut her mouth.
Her eyes they were so bery small,
They both ran into one,
And when a fly light in her eye,
Like a June bug in de sun.

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

Old massa had no hooks or nails,
Or nothin' else like that,
So on this darkie's nose he used
To hang his coat and hat

One morning massa goin' away
He went to git his coat,
But neither hat nor coat was there,
For she had swallowed both;
He took her to a tailor shop.
To have her mouth made small,
The lady took in one long breath,
And swallowed tailor and all [sic].⁴⁸

“Gal from the South” illustrated a comically ugly image of a black woman. She has abnormal, phallic-like facial features of an extremely large nose and mouth that allowed her to cannibalistically consume not only inanimate objects but also people. From the lyrics, it is evident that she is a slave, and due to her abnormal physical features, she is featured as a piece of furniture, and malleable to any inanimate object. The blackface minstrel show by its very nature was vulgar, through its “dehumanizing images of African American people that evoke shame,

⁴⁸ T. B. Peterson, *Christy's and White's Ethiopian Melodies: Containing Two Hundred and Ninety-One Melodies; Ethiopian Song Book; Serenader's Song Book, and Christy and Wood's New Song Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1854), 84–85.

embarrassment, and rage” as argued by English scholar Sharon McCoy.⁴⁹ The manner black women are portrayed in minstrels, however, varied from the alluring yaller gal to the grotesque wench, the latter of which was appalling even when compared to the male caricatures.⁵⁰

The description in “Gal from the South” illustrates Black women with no voice. The grotesque wench in the song has no physical body; the entire story describes facial features and focuses on her utilization both dehumanizing and commodifying her existence. Similar to other popular culture illustrations of Black women at the time, this grotesque wench is not a domestic as the mammy nor is she sexual and attractive as the yaller gal, instead this caricature is constructed to dehumanize and humiliate Black women. The Grotesque theory is debated and controversial in scholarship, with most conversations are based in the domains of literature and art. The intersection of the diverse analysis of grotesque has some common principles, with underlying beliefs that the grotesque is always ugly, absurd, and unappealing. This is illustrative of the minstrel show, which was meant to be comedy, both at the expense and through the use of the black body.

The minstrel show was a display that represented in many ways a carnival fun house mirror of society, as understood and feared by white men. Scholar, Stella Butler in “The Grotesque as a Comic Strategy of Subversion,” associates theories of the grotesque and satire in an analytical review of previous scholarship. In her analysis, she states that the grotesque is a “violation of a norm” and it “constitutes a monstrous exaggeration of the already given satiric exaggeration.”⁵¹ The grotesque wench, for the audience and performer, was used as a mechanism

⁴⁹ Sharon D. McCoy, “The Trouble Begins at Eight”: Mark Twain, the San Francisco Minstrels, and the Unsettling Legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American Literary Realism*, 41, no. 3 (Spring, 2009): 232–48.

⁵⁰ Eric Lott refers to the grotesque wench as a “funny ole gal” of the minstrel show. Several works by George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Bruce McConachie have used similar language, however for this analysis this type of black female caricature will be referred to as the grotesque wench.

⁵¹ Stella Butler, “The Grotesque as a Comic Strategy of Subversion: Mapping the Crisis of Masculinity in Patrick McGrath’s *The Grotesque*,” *Orbis Litterarum* 62, no. 4 (2007): 338.

to deflect fear and anxiety of white men in the North. The perceived threats came from white women, black men, and black women, through a variety of means; competition for jobs and resources, political power, and social status.

While the yaller gal represented the desires of Northern white men, the grotesque caricature signified the fears and animosity of that group. The grotesque wench allowed a combination of anxiety and ludicrous qualities to be applied to the Black female body to express white male hate towards anyone that they thought jeopardized their (imagined) whiteness.⁵²

Arthur Clayborough contends that “the grotesque encompasses a deeply unsettling confusion, which gives rise to an ambivalent laughter fraught with anxiety.” This was evident throughout the traveling troupes of minstrel performances, especially in the constant appearances of the grotesque wench through skit references and songs, however rarely manifesting physically on stage.⁵³

The amalgamation of horror and humor in the grotesque wench can be seen in the minstrel song writer Anthony Winnemore 1848 publication of “Mrs. Tucker.”

Mrs. Tucker is big and fat

Her face is black as my old cat

Her eyes stick out, her nose sticks in,

Her under lip hang over her chin.

Mrs. Tucker is juss eighty-nine,

⁵² Several theorists have examined the relationship within the grotesque of the fearful, ludicrous and humor. See Michael Steig, “Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29, no. 2 (Winter, 1970): 253-260; William Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 225-35.

⁵³ Arthur Clayborough examined the idea of the grotesque as objectively real in art but as a “reflection of actual phenomena” essentially stating that the grotesque, in his analysis, illustrates an internal conflict of the artists, this theory can be applied to the minstrel show. Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

Her hair hangs down like oakum twine,
Her face so black, it shines in de dark,
Her eyes shine like a charcoal spark.
She came home drunk, to bed she reel,
She put her night cap on her heel,
She blows out de light and shut her eyes,
And snore away until de sun does rise.

Mrs. Tucker's heel so long,
Se ploughs de street as she goes along,
De city marshal say one day,
When she goes she must say [sic].⁵⁴

Similar to “Gal from the South,” it is evident from the first lyrics that Mrs. Tucker is intentionally depicted as unappealing, both in character and physical appearance. The wench is unattractive and abnormal in several ways, for example “her under lip hang over her chin” is meant to depict her ugly characteristics. Also, her extremely black skin was used to illustrate her as unattractive. Her behavior is described to illuminate the fact that she is although a designated female as seen with the “Mrs” reference, however her appearance and behavior, from snoring to “ploughing de street” illustrates her lack of femininity. There are also several references about this wench leaving large foot impressions due to her abnormal extremities. The emphasis on large extremities is a common theme in grotesque wench song and appearances. For example, in

⁵⁴ *The New Negro Forget-me-not Songster: Containing All the New Negro Ever Published with a Choice Collection of Ballad Songs, Now Sung in Concerts* (Cincinnati: Stratton and Barnard, 1848).

the popular 1847 minstrel song “Buffalo gals” there are verses that reference large feet: “And her heel covered up de hul sidewalk.” It later states, “And her foot was so big she couldn’t wear a shoe.”⁵⁵ In an 1848 version of “Lucy Long” there is a verse that states, “Miss Lucy, when she trabels, she always leaves de mark; Ob her footsteps in de gravel; you can see dem in de dark.”⁵⁶ Therefore while white women and their femininity was associated with delicate, smaller features and therefore needs to be protected, Black women were illustrated as the opposite which can easily contribuThese comical notions of the grotesque wench bear a marked similarity to the clown type of grotesque theory.

Art philosopher Noël Carroll argues that the “clown type [...] is generally a subhuman being whose physical appearance deviates strikingly from human perfection: he or she is either too fat or too thin, or his or her parts (small heads, large torso) combines disproportionately, and or their features are vastly exaggerated—mouths, lips, and noses outsized; eyes minuscule.”⁵⁷ Clowns are designed to be ugly, through their ugliness is meant to be a source of mirth. The large extremities also emphasize that this grotesque wench cannot translate into an actual woman, either black or white. For Eric Lott, these large extremities represent “phallic” woman—physically large and strong with gigantic appendages and oversized shoes or boots, the insignia of maleness peeping through the womanly pretense.”⁵⁸ The nineteenth century rise of grotesque wench caricature on the theater stage—depicting Black women as ugly, inhumane, and possessing overly large physical features—correlates with the popular display of other caricatures of Black women in the urban North. Prior to the grotesque wench on the minstrel stage, there was the

⁵⁵ Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 273-275. For Mahar, these references were emblematic of women, mainly white women, “whose behaviors in their new social environments encouraged more open liaisons,” essentially prostitutes.

⁵⁶ Found in Lott, *Love and Theft*, 165. The ability to have Miss Lucy Long as both yaller gal and grotesque in different iterations of the song illustrates the manner minstrel performances played out their ideals of black women.

⁵⁷ Noël Carroll, *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 90.

⁵⁸ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 166.

popular 1820s print series by visual artist Edward Clay in his work title, “Life in Philadelphia.” Clay produced fourteen engraved plates of observations in the burgeoning city of Philadelphia; ten of these images were focused on the antebellum free black population of the city. These images presented an exaggerated caricature of physical features of black women often with large abnormal features in an effort to illustrate their unattractiveness and otherness. “Clay’s work offered American audiences a cruel portrayal of black figures that uttered malapropisms, overdressed in clothing of exaggerated proportions, struck ungraceful poses, and thereby failed to measure up to the demands of freedom and citizenship.”⁵⁹ As seen in Figure ___ and __, Black women, similar to their male counterpart, were illustrated comically to show that Black people were inept for freedom. Comically examining the burgeoning middle class Black community of the North The focus in minstrel scholarship is often the performance of the male Dandy, however Black **Finish this section and work on next section**⁶⁰

Readers: This is a jumbled mix of thoughts, sentences, and confusion. Any help will be appreciated.

From parodied on the stage and in art to the actual exhibition of black female bodies, black women were malleable objects to be exploited as needed.

The disproportionate clothes in Clay and of the dandy on the minstrel stage to symbolize the manner Blacks were ill equipped to deal with freedom compares to the extremely large and ugly descriptions of the grotesque wench illustrating her incompatibility with femininity, and white

⁵⁹ “Reframing the Color Line: Race and the Visual Culture of the Atlantic,” (paper presented at the University of Michigan by The William L. Clements Library and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies).

⁶⁰ Put in something about the dandy and class issues within the work...the working class white men’s anxiety, jealousy and animosity towards the middle class Black community was expressed through caricature. The dandy on the minstrel stage specifically expressed a mockery of this emerging Black community, however in scholarship degradation of men have been the focus. However, as seen in Clay’s work Black women were also the focus of the ??

women's standards of beauty. If the yaller gal was the standard of beauty as illustrated in comparisons with European women, then the grotesque wench was the aberration.

The grotesque wench may not have physically manifested on stage as the yaller gal but the image, archetype, and sentiment behind the caricature lingered in popular culture. Minstrel playbills continued to display the

The humor of this type of character was within the ludicrous characteristics. This ugliness and extreme features contributes to the demotion of the female status but it also allows for the dehumanization of the caricature which often manifests into a comedic violence towards this wench. For example in one minstrel stump speech it states, "You may scold a gal; you may scare her to death, an' den starve her arterwards; you may talk to her, an' persuade her on your knees, till de flesh wants pathen, an' she may be coold as salted ice an' water; but jist tickle her a mile off wid a bango-string, twenty words ob a song, an' galwanize her heart, as a cat fassagenates a catbird, an' she walks right into you, done overan' obercome, an' as submissive as a sucken kitten, jist de same as dat wench in de dang niggertype."

Should I show more examples? If so, could use song below

There were references

One evening at a ball, ha, ha,

A thick lipped wench so rall, ha, ha

She fell in lub wid me, ha, ha,

She fell in lub wid me.

Ha, ha, ha, &c.

I dance'd wid her all night, ha, ha,
She did my finger bite, ha, ha
I hit her wid all my might, ha, ha,
An spoil de wenchs sight.

This article intentionally focusdd on the first two decades of the minstrel show to initiate dialogue on the wench caricature, and the need for further analysis. However, this articles early focus is not due to the wench cariactures disappearance in popular culture. Furthermore, the focus on the popularity and early presence of the wench caricature is meant to illustrate a guidelines for future analysis. The yaller gal and grotesque wench do not disappear from the minstrel show or North American popular culture as it further develops.

Ideas on how to further talk about the grotesque wench

PUT IN THE RELATIONSHIP ON SIMILARITES WITH THE ADULT TOPSY
..UNKEPT HAIR , RIDICULED THE GROTESQUE WENCH ALSO MAY BE VIEWED AS
DEMEANING MEN...PROGRESSES TO THAT...AND CAN ALSO SEEM TO BE A..SHE IS
NOT NECEARRILY A BONDSWOMAN...SHE CAN SEEMS TO HAVE SOMETIMES
BEEN A FEMALE DANDY..AS DEPICTED IN CLAY...SHE IS SIMPLY A BLACK
WOMAN THAT IS NOT CONSTRUCTED TO BE ATTRACTIVE, ESSENTIALLY UGLY,
SHE MAY BE LAZY BECAUSE SHE IS NOT MEANT FOR LABOR...NECESSARILY,
SHE IS MEANT TO BE THE BUTT OF THE JOKE, AN UGLY WOMAN NON FEMININE
IMAGE LIKE THAT IS MEANT TO BE UGLY AND LAUGHABLE...SHE DOESN'T FIT
IN FREE SOCIETY AND SHE DOESN'T' FIT AS A FEMININE...FOR EXAMPLE THE
GROTESQUE WENCH CAN LOOK LIKE A MAMMY CARIACTUER WITH THE

TURBAN, ETC HOWEVER HER ACTIONS MAKE HER UNSUITABLE TO BE THE TRADITIONAL DOMESTIC MAMMY AND INSTEAD SHE IS THEN THE ANTITHESIS OF MAMMY, IN A COMICALLY HUMILIATING MANNER

..

The wench, in title, continued on the minstrel stage for decades with the entrance of African Americans and women. Black men female impersonators often performed under the title of wench in minstrel shows into the early twentieth century.

As the institution of slavery ended and the United States

Conclusion.

The wench caricature lingers in entertainment and manifests in various ways.

The wench caricature type does not linger as other black caricatures from the minstrel show.

The movement of many black caricature types from the stage to radio, film and later television, has been reviewed by many scholars. However, the wench has been neglected but the manner this caricature continues can be seen in the continuance of the music and in the imagery of the advertisements. For example, although performed in various iterations Miss Lucy Long may be one of the sustaining songs from the minstrel era. It has been

The rise of coon songs in the ??? allowed for minstrelsy to continue, even if less overt.

The emergence of actual African Americans and women in entertainment does not stop the continuance of the wench, the grotesque or the yaller gal.

The yaller gal continually appears on the stage and eventually on the screen. List the films and there is an actual film called yaller gal, octoroon, etc.

-continuation of the term wench...put in those references from the book chapters. The imagery of the wench and comedic portrayal of black women, in which large features to express ugliness, was an aspect of the comedy continues.

Although women enter the vaudeville stage, female impersonation does not leave the stage but rather some of the staple wench type roles continued, being performed by African Americans and white men.