When it comes to racism in America, fingers are first pointed in a political direction. We talk about institutions, policies, education—the big systems that exist in the United States to disenfranchise and oppress those of color. It is not often that we point first to media, and the history of theatrical spectacle in the realm of race, even though it has almost as large, or perhaps equally as large a hand in influencing race relations. I’ve found this to at least be true for me in learning about minstrelsy for the first time. In my opinion, the legacy of minstrelsy did not end after World War I or the Civil Rights Movement, but rather remains heavily today. The two most prominent remaining legacies I see are the promotion of false pictures of it means to be black, and related to that, the white fascination with blacks as an “other” culture, without an understanding of the true experience.

One of the biggest problems of minstrelsy at the time, and the reason for it’s continuing legacy today can be encapsulated by a line from Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s book, Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts, in which she writes, “[…] these gross characterizations, when linked to blackface representation of an indigenous American population, were assumed by the audiences to be true-to-life representations of authentic African-American “types”” (103). The constant bombardment and promoting of this blasphemous caricature of black life in America had no counter-image of truth to be compared to, therefore giving (white) society a completely false interpretation of the black experience.
Later, she writes, “By the time that Hollywood entered the picture, the minstrel stereotype as the true picture of black offstage life was firmly ensconced in the American psyche” (124). This is entirely true and obvious today in media and Hollywood. The negative images that are spread by the movie industry, Youtube, and social networking (for these things are popular, and reach large masses of people), let false and stereotypical notions take reign over a real life vision of being Black in America.

The second most prominent remaining legacy of minstrelsy is the white fascination with black people (and fascination in the context of condescending awe in something strange). In the time of its peak, minstrelsy thrived not only because foreigners strived to release themselves as an other by encapsulating a worse “other”, but because this black other was deemed exotic and completely different from what they knew to be normal, or even human. The film talks about whites not being masked as black on stage but “released” as black, meaning, while performing in their minstrel show, they were allowing themselves to act in ways they never could in real life, display emotions they couldn’t display, tell jokes they couldn’t tell. With this, whites could take on the “fun” parts of what they thought it meant to be black, without actually being black. They didn’t have to or want to understand anything real about the African-American experience, but it was certainly entertaining for themselves and others to pretend like they did. This is perfectly illustrated in a modern setting in the book *Everything But the Burden* in which Greg Tate talks of how white people in America have come to adopt “black” styles and practices for their own (whether this be in dress, music, throwing up gang signs, using certain slang) without taking on the actual burden it is to be black and in America. I think this is definitely seen in everyday life, both in popular culture and media, and on a day to day basis—the “ghetto lifestyle” is glorified
by whites who think it’s “cool” and who long for that kind of “authentic” experience without the obligation of enduring the oppression that goes along with this, because they have white skin.

While minstrelsy can and should certainly be chastised for the harm it did in its time to reduce, mock, humiliate, and oppress African-Americans, there must also be recognition of what about this discrimination is still present today. It is easy to look at history and see how far we’ve come, and harder, but surely more important, to recognize what has simply stayed the same, taken on a new form, or is still awaiting change.

Nanny, pickaninny, coon, Sambo, uncle
Permeated American culture, mainstream
Of ethnic caricatures, these most enduring
Appeal to consumer
Seen that way, perceived that way…we come ot believe it ourselves
We don’t like that…look at images often enough, we mbegin to look like thst

“Because none of us, as Americas, are distanced enough from the minstrel stereotype, or sophisticated enough in our understanding of racial politics and our own internalizations of racism, to pull minstrelsy out of the hat as though we know how to weild it.” (125)

TD Rice
No intention of presenting truth

Images of happy slaves, slavery must be a good thing

“The problem, however, was that these gross characterizations, when linked to blackface representation of an indigenous American population, were assumed by the audiences to be true-to-life representations of authentic African-American “types”.”

“…minstrelsy was driven by the white male obsession with the black male body.” (89)

“Donning a mask, literally or symbolically, is a survival mechanism for mediating the conflicting waters of mother culture and dominant society.” (85)

Mammie
“to have the power to be both outsider and insider in relation to Africanist life and culture.” (83)

“a beast”

“animalistic black brute”

“blacks were subhuman”

Most Important Things:  
Blacks classified as beasts, animal, makes them an other, makes it easier to debase them. They’re not human, don’t have real human qualities  
Characterizations understood as realy representations  
Whites, fascinated with blacks, take on the “fun” parts, while removing themselves from the reality—still seen today

“Watching whites release themselves as blacks”

“cathartic”

“Doorway out of hunger..” enter workforce, perpetuating sterotype

Birth of a Nation

Sambo, docile laughing black man