As part of the Vaudeville time period in the late 1800’s and into the 1930s, American media saw a rise of the minstrel show. As a form of entertainment, the shows included comical skits, variety acts, dancing and music performances that specifically mocked individuals of African descent through black face and stereotypical caricatures. Remnants of these caricatures (ie: Mammy, Coon, Picaninny, and Tom) still exist in reruns and within contemporary performances within TV, movies, theatre, and literature. While these inflammatory and discriminatory messages have created backlash and censure, some critics argue that the caricatures play a necessary role within history and education, and therefore should not be completely expunged from media.

Carefully read and view the following six sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then synthesize information from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed essay that argues a clear position on whether or not minstrel caricatures within media have historic value. You are NOT arguing as to whether or not these images are offensive.

Source A (Morgan)
Source B (Hughes)
Source C (Lehman)
Source D (Goldberg)
Source E (Jones)
Source F (Livingstone)
The following is excerpted from an American newspaper article dedicated to the theatre arts.

In blackface and clown-white makeup, minstrels of the 1800's were gawkers and buffoons, high steppers and jokesters who lived an illusion on stage through a mask of thick makeup.

These were the early entertainers who intrigued the playwright Samm-Art Williams, whose latest play, "Cork," explored the feelings of black minstrels and the reasons they participated in an entertainment genre that established and perpetuated negative stereotypes of black people in America.

"I have a tremendous respect for the minstrels because they paved the way for black entertainers today," Mr. Williams said recently. "Minstrelsy was wrong. But black minstrels were talented performers, and we have turned our backs on them and the conditions in which they had to perform."

The title "Cork" refers to the burned cork that some minstrels used to blacken their faces in caricature. Not all black entertainers of the 1800's used cork, according to historians, but the makeup symbolized the demeaning roles and self-mocking styles that black entertainers accepted willingly for a chance to show their talent.

In his play, which was recently presented at the Courtyard Theater, Mr. Williams unflinchingly brought the often-scorned image of the minstrel in blackface to center stage. By doing so, he created a thicket of inner conflict between sacrifice and selfishness, pride and shame, that helped illustrate the cultural significance of minstrelsy to American theater and music in the mid- to late 1800's.

In his book, "100 years of the Negro in Show Business," the black minstrel Tom Fletcher, who died in 1954 at the age of 82, said show business provided a big break for former slaves who had entertained themselves singing and dancing for many years.

"All of us who were recruited to enter show business went into it with our eyes wide open," Mr. Fletcher said. "The objectives were, first, to make money to help educate our younger ones, and second, to try to break down the ill feeling that existed toward the colored people. Before the end of the 1890 period, a large part of the malice and hatred toward colored people had softened. The foundation and first floor of colored show business had been laid."
Through the hard work and the sacrifice of their parents, Mr. Fletcher said, "children were given the opportunity to go to school and in that short time we produced musicians, poets, schoolteachers, music teachers, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, songwriters and many other types of skilled craftsmen, artists and professionals."

"And many of them," he said, "played a large part in developing show business into the enormous industry it has become, with thousands of people, both white and colored, sharing its fruits."

The historian Robert C. Toll, the author of the book "Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in 19th-Century America," said minstrelsy started in New York in the 1840's with whites blackening their faces and presuming to portray blacks on stage. From the 1840's to the 1890's, the minstrel show - a mixture of jokes, songs, musical parodies and dance - was the most popular form of entertainment in the country, and troupes were popular in towns that didn't have any blacks.

What occurred in minstrel shows, Mr. Toll said, was the development of images that have endured in this country ever since: images of the shiftless plantation worker or the dandy dresser with the diamond in his teeth.

"It's one of those ironies that one of the ways blacks could establish a foothold in show business was to claim to be authentic when the basic thrust of their material was roles created by whites," Mr. Toll said. We have come to understand the impact of the media and that things that might seem frivolous have a tremendous impact on the way that people think. The white minstrels were not out there to put blacks in their place," he said. "They were there to make a buck. And black minstrels were somebody. They were coming into towns in nice suits and top hats. They were not in the field picking cotton."

"There are certain plays one must write because your heart tells you to, even if it doesn't make a dime," he said. "I just had the need to reach back. Even though so many actors today who are black or white are out of work, I had to show that conditions back then were even worse, and that black actors come from pretty strong stock."
The following poem is by a leading Harlem Renaissance writer.

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long?

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter,
You do not hear
My inner cry?
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing,
You do not know
I die?

Source B
The following is an abstract for a text written by a professor of Ethnic Studies.

From the introduction of animated film in the early 1900s to the 1950s, ethnic humor was a staple of American-made cartoons. Yet as Christopher Lehman shows in this revealing study, the depiction of African Americans in particular became so inextricably linked to the cartoon medium as to influence its evolution through those five decades. He argues that what is in many ways most distinctive about American animation reflects white animators' visual interpretations of African American cultural expression. The first American animators drew on popular black representations, many of which were caricatures rooted in the culture of southern slavery. During the 1920s, the advent of the sound-synchronized cartoon inspired animators to blend antebellum-era black stereotypes with the modern black cultural expressions of jazz musicians and Hollywood actors. When the film industry set out to desexualize movies through the imposition of the Hays Code in the early 1930s, it regulated the portrayal of African Americans largely by segregating black characters from others, especially white females. At the same time, animators found new ways to exploit the popularity of African American culture by creating animal characters like Bugs Bunny who exhibited characteristics associated with African Americans without being identifiably black. By the 1950s, protests from civil rights activists and the growing popularity of white cartoon characters led animators away from much of the black representation on which they had built the medium. Even so, animated films today continue to portray African American characters and culture, and not necessarily in a favorable light.
The following video is cut from the bonus material of a special edition DVD of uncensored cartoons.

Source D
The following excerpt was written by the president of the Tony-winning Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, chair of the Radio City Diversity Committee for the Rockettes, and board member of the American conference on Diversity.

It’s vitally important to have the appropriate representation when creating artistic works that deal with cultures, societies and/or ethnicities other than your own. If you’re unable to have those “others” in the room, the sensitivity quotient of your creative team needs to be particularly high. As someone who has devoted his career to issues of diversity and inclusion, this is a truth I know all too well.

The classic instruction to young authors in Playwriting 101 is simple and clear: Write what you know. Following that premise, you, as the storyteller, possess an innate understanding of your story; further research is unnecessary because the truth is deep inside of you.

I can’t help but wonder what a novel, play or opera written by a gifted citizen of South Carolina’s fictional Catfish Row would look like. Of course, we’ll never know – it’s an unfortunate blemish on the history of the United States that the artistic talents of so many Americans were never fully realized to the weights of oppression and racial stratification. The world today is a very different place than it was in the 1920s; after thousands of lives were sacrificed and millions marched to demand equal rights and racial equality, outlets for stories about black culture are now abundant – TV cable networks, radio stations, book publishers, magazines, websites and, of course, a few theatre companies.

Still the wounds inflicted by racism run deep, and I’d venture to say that even with a black family residing in the White House, centuries of emotional scars caused by racism have yet to fully heal. The disconcerting residue of centuries of bigotry, racist superiority and white privilege is hiding in plain sight in our cities, our schools and our prisons.

When the new musical *The Scottsboro Boys* opened on Broadway in the fall of 2010, my inbox was flooded with emails from colleagues expressing their opinions about the show (for theatre folks, opinions are never in short supply). I was quite curious about it, because notices from the previous Off-Broadway run at the Vineyard Theatre had said that the show’s use of minstrelsy to retell an appalling bit of history – nine black teenagers were scurrilously accused of rape in 1931, and imprisoned and tried without resolution for well over a decade – was deft, and that the result was an excellent production.

I attended a preview at the Lyceum Theatre and was impressed with the sheer craftsmanship of the show: the staging and dancing. But I was not impressed by the show’s use of minstrelsy to communicate the story, and found myself agreeing with Charles Isherwood’s *New York Times* review. He wrote: “I’m not sure it’s possible to honor the experience of the men it portrays while turning their suffering into a colorful sideshow.” I didn’t see the point of reopening the many wounds this particular format created in its day. In short, I was offended.
What made it more painful for me was watching several gifted black male actors performing in a show whose style and method – if not its message – I found abhorrent. As a theatre producer and a black man, I know all too well how difficult it is to find suitable material for black actors, let alone then trying to find an audience for that material.

So it was extremely interesting to read comments by David Thompson, who wrote the book for *Scottsboro Boys*, discussing an irony he noticed early on:

> The very first day of the very first reading, ironically, was the day after Obama was elected, that Wednesday morning. Here you are, you’re sitting with a group of black men in a rehearsal studio and they’re reading the script. It was as if there had been a seismic shift in the world. For a moment we thought, is this piece relevant anymore? Have we discovered we’re on the other side of the conversation?

No, I don’t think we’re on the other side of the conversation. For me, the more important, more truly “seismic” shift would have come if the color of the people behind the scenes had been different. In this case, only the performers in *The Scottsboro Boys* were black. If any of the core storytelling creative team had been black, or if some of the producers were black, or if there had been an increased level of sensitivity among those holding the show’s reigns, I believe *The Scottsboro Boys* would have been a fundamentally different show than the one I saw.

The controversy around *The Scottsboro Boys* hasn’t been the message itself – the plight of these young men, who become emblems of the multitudes of black Americans afflicted by injustice – but rather in how the message was being delivered. With all due respect to the creators of *The Scottsboro Boys*, the use of minstrelsy as a storytelling device ultimately demonstrates a lack of empathy with the tragic events the show depicts. And the choice of minstrelsy only highlights the question of who gets to tell whose story, and how. The answer has always been, of course, that the dominant culture imposes its will on the minority. The dominant culture always has the audacity to claim whatever it wants, whether it’s someone else’s stories, or their land, or even their bodies.

Racial injustice and struggle are deeply woven into the history of America; more Americans (some 620,000 it’s estimated) died in the Civil War – a war essentially about race – than in World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam combined. One must face this history and all its subtexts to comprehend why watching the story of the Scottsboro Boys told as a minstrel show can be so offensive.
Source F