



THE GETTYSBURG COLLEGE JOURNAL OF THE CIVIL WAR ERA

Volume 3

Article 6

2013

Ole' Zip Coon is a Mighty Learned Scholar: Blackface Minstrelsy as Reflection and Foundation of American Popular Culture

Cory Rosenberg '12
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gjcwe>

 Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rosenberg, Cory '12 (2013) "Ole' Zip Coon is a Mighty Learned Scholar: Blackface Minstrelsy as Reflection and Foundation of American Popular Culture," *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*: Vol. 3 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gjcwe/vol3/iss1/6>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Ole' Zip Coon is a Mighty Learned Scholar: Blackface Minstrelsy as Reflection and Foundation of American Popular Culture

Abstract

The blackface minstrel show is often disregarded in both popular and professional discourse when American popular culture is being examined. Often dismissed as a unilateral, purely racist spectacle, this paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of blackface minstrelsy and its formative role in the creation of a trans-regional American culture. Through an exploration of the ways in which ethnic minorities, women, language, and histrionics were presented on the blackface minstrel stage, an understanding of the ways in which popular entertainments both reflect and create popular sentiment can be formed. As the dominant American cultural output of the 19th century, an understanding of blackface minstrelsy is integral to an understanding of the fluid and varied mores of racism, male privilege, and white privilege which linger in varying degrees to this day. This piece is intended to serve as an introduction to the ways in which 19th century Americans and their modern counterparts used and use blackface tropes to both reinforce and question the place of social hierarchies in a country founded on the premise that "all men are created equal".

Keywords

minstrelsy, blackface, antebellum, reconstruction, race, minstrel shows

Ole' Zip Coon is a Mighty Learned Scholar: Blackface Minstrelsy as Reflection and Foundation of American Popular Culture

Cory Rosenberg *Academic Essay*

“We Challenge all the “MILK-AND-WATER” Bands in the city to begin to equal them... as Ethiopian Dandies of the Northern States...As Southern Slaves!”¹¹³

“Ethiopian Operatic Troupe...Extra Attraction for the Benefit of Brudder Bones.”¹¹⁴

“We Confess a fondness for negro minstrelsy...’Uncle Ned’ goes directly to the heart and makes Italian trills seem tame...God Bless that fine old colored gentleman...”¹¹⁵

These lines from 19th century playbills and publications are but a modest sampling of the overflowing panoply of hyperbolic and enthusiastic writing about the most popular of 19th century entertainments: the minstrel show. As a predecessor to vaudeville and 20th century variety entertainment, the minstrel show blazed trails theatrically, musically, and culturally. It was also undoubtedly one of the most hurtful, damaging, and long-lived progenitors of the racist attitudes and concepts that plague American society to this day. How did such a spectacle arise? What drove men, white and black alike, to don the burnt-cork visage and ragamuffin regalia of the minstrel show delineator? Perhaps most importantly, one should ask why the minstrel

113 Minstrel Playbills, University of Virginia, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/minstrel/mibillshp.html>

114 Minstrel Playbills Pierce's Minstrels

115 *Dwight's Journal of Music*, “NEGRO MINSTRELSY,” July 24th 1852

show remains such a potent force in American cultural memory (if only tacitly) and what such an entertainment meant not only to audience members and performers, but also to those being portrayed. While ethnicity is undoubtedly a primary motivator in the creation of these entertainments, it is just as clear that gender, regionalism, class, and self-ridicule also contributed materially to the atmosphere of the minstrel stage. The broad variety of reactions, engendered by this entertainment in African American and White communities alike, attests to the multi-faceted and problematic nature of the minstrel show, and more specifically, to the creation of a space wherein groups of various ethnicities, genders, social classes, and political ideologies, were both brought together and rent asunder; where enmity and amity were verse and chorus of the same song.

“Every Time I Turn Around”

Black-face minstrelsy as understood in the modern sense began with a dance. The encounter itself is now the stuff of legend. As the story goes: at some point and in some city in the early 1830's (the location and exact date are lost to the ages) Thomas Dartmouth Rice (a musician about whom little is known) saw a black stable hand perform a song and dance for the entertainment of those passing on the street. The peculiar nature of the song, coupled with the performer's limp, was viewed as remarkably funny by T.D. Rice who decided to adapt it for his own stage performances. Rice took the not-unprecedented step of donning black-face makeup (a mixture burnt-cork and water) and a comically ill-fitting suit to perform a caricatured version of the stable-hand character. Rice was not only a smash success in America, but also in Great Britain where he toured in 1836. Despite the fact that chattel

slavery had been abolished throughout the British Empire in 1834, the black-face character proved a resounding hit, setting off a minstrel craze which ran parallel to, if not always in synchrony with, American minstrelsy. Perhaps most revealing of the amorphous and multiform nature of early black-face performance practice is the fact that some of Rice's most acclaimed black-face work would be performed upon his triumphant return to New York City in an 1854 stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*^{116,117} The modern reader will be forgiven for presuming that such a belabored and idiosyncratic spectacle should have died a quiet death, a passing fad among many to be relegated to the dustbin of history; and yet it persisted, as reported in the *New York Tribune*:

... Mr. T.D. Rice made his debut in a dramatic sketch entitled "Jim Crow," and from that moment everybody was "doing just so," for months, and even years afterward. Never was there such an excitement in the musical world; nothing was talked of, nothing written of, and nothing dreamed of, but "Jim Crow." The most sober citizens began to "wheel about, and turn about, and jump Jim Crow." It seemed as though the entire population had been bitten by the tarantula; in the parlor, in the kitchen, in the shop and in the street, Jim Crow monopolized public attention. It must have been a species of insanity, though of a gentle and pleasing kind.¹¹⁸

116 Robert Nowatzky, *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy*, (Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2010), 1-10.

117 The lame stable-hand that Rice impersonated would lend his name not only to Rice's character, but to future legislation informed in part by minstrel-show understandings of the nature of African Americans: he was called Jim Crow.

118 *New York Tribune*, June 30th 1855.



Sketch of “Zip Coon,” a popular minstrel character

(Source: Library of Congress)

II. “The National Art of Its Moment”

Black-face minstrelsy grew from the work of a lone performer to a defined style of theatrical entertainment. It had its own tropes and mores, its own set of specialized tunes and jokes (many of which became familiar to repeat audience members), and formed the basis of a definitive culture of inexpensive entertainment at a time when a national American culture had not yet coalesced.¹¹⁹ In an era before mass communication, such tropes created, for the first time, a homogenous popular culture in all settled regions of the country. An out-of-town visitor to a big city could sing a tune or share a joke he heard at the minstrel show secure in the knowledge

119 William J Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999), 11.

that the reference would not be lost on his urban audience.¹²⁰ This was just one of many levels of “belonging” which the minstrel show created. While foremost in the retrospective view was the creation of a White “in” group, which made itself distinct from African American culture by inhabiting and mocking it, in the mind of the 19th century viewer, this “in” group existed alongside several others. While minstrelsy was popular on both sides of the Atlantic, the American minstrel show of the 1840-50’s comported itself as a distinctly New World entity. What the Monroe Doctrine did to establish the New World as a hemisphere theoretically free from the fetters of European colonization efforts, the minstrel show did to establish music of this continent as a creative force free from the fetters of European musical dogma. This nationalist aspect of the minstrel stage is lost in most popular assessments. For the first time in the history of Anglo-American relations, a cultural output of the New World became a sensation in the Old. This shift of cultural focus laid the foundation of the present understanding of the United States as a land of creativity and innovation in the field of popular entertainment. This shift did not go unnoticed in the days of its occurrence, as reported in the *New York Tribune* of June 30th 1855:

Why may not the banjoism of a Congo, or an Ethiopian, or a George Christy, aspire to a musical equality with delineators of all nationalities?...As absurd as may seem negro minstrelsy to the refined musician, it is nevertheless beyond doubt that it expresses the peculiar characteristics of the negro as truly as the great masters of Italy represent their more spiritual and profound nationality.¹²¹

120 Ibid.

121 *New York Tribune*, “The Black Opera”, June 30th 1855.

This is one of many examples of minstrelsy functioning as a doubled-edged sword; it ridiculed one extreme of the social ladder by mocking African Americans, it ridiculed the other by mocking “effete” English tastes in opera and theatre. While many would assert that the minstrel show was merely a means of racial domination, it was often rather a burlesque of European theater which used Black characters as instruments of ridicule.¹²² It is precisely this targeting of both English theatrics and uneducated African Americans that defined the minstrel show as a working-class entertainment. What culture of dominance reinforcement there was on the minstrel stage (and there was plenty) came as the result of deriding those of a higher class than the audience (whom they despised) and those of a lower class than the audience (whom they disdained). In this way, the minstrel show served as the daytime television of its day, a mix of info-tainment, mediocre drama, and low-cost programming designed neither to edify nor to ennoble, but rather to entertain and appeal to the working class whose viewership could be sourced as a source of income.

Of particular note is the fact that the above quoted article, an appeal for the respect of the institution of blackface minstrelsy, appeared in the *Tribune* one of New York’s leading anti-slavery newspapers. This type of praise for minstrelsy among those whom one would expect to despise it is not altogether absurd. Indeed, the minstrel show was the essence of what we have come to term “popular entertainment”. The name is somewhat misleading in that it need not be entirely populist; that is, it does not necessarily arise directly from the will of the masses. It is often something created by a set of elites and marketed to the masses who then embrace

122 Robert Winans, *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, (Hanover, NH, 1996), 142-175.

it. While the function of the masses is appetitive, rather than creative, the masses are, by virtue of their expendable income (and the ability to decide where to spend it), an indissoluble part of the popular culture (and minstrel-show) industry. Thus the minstrel show represented a meeting of commercial interests and public tastes while not exactly functioning as a perfect metric of either. It was however; a site of such heavy investment in the representation of supposed “blackness” that it revealed itself to be, in the words of Eric Lott: “ a crucial place of contestation, with moments of resistance to the dominant culture, as well as moments of supersession...[it is] a principal site of struggle in and over the culture of black people.”¹²³ The burnt-cork mask was, after all, sharply distinct from the donning of standard theatrical make-up. In playing any theatrical role, the actor assumes the body of a character; in applying the burnt-cork, the actor assumes not only the body of a character, but of a race. This effect was particularly pronounced because of the absence of black performers from the public stage in the United States for much of the 19th century.

In an outstanding assumption of creative agency, white performers across the nation took up the mantle of “blackness” and interpreted, at least in part, what that meant for thousands of audience members across the nation. Ironically enough, this earned them the admiration of many (including the author of the *Tribune* piece quoted above) for what were purportedly accurate depictions of black life in the United States. The reception of the minstrel show varied greatly across the nation and throughout the run of its popularity; even individual authors demonstrated evolving views of this, the most popular entertainment of the age.

123 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, (Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1977), 18.

III. “The Basest Scum of the Earth”:

Varied Reactions to “The Old-Time Nigger Show”

Among modern audiences, black-face minstrelsy engenders a wide array of reactions. Americans, as a people with a troubled history of race relations, are often uncomfortable with implementations of black-face in modern entertainments. This discomfort is evidenced by the sharp decline in minstrelsy after the 1930’s. By the 1960’s, minstrel show characters were seen but rarely, and then usually in stage shows for various charitable organizations and the occasional high school talent show.¹²⁴ Today such classic films as *Holiday Inn* are often broadcast on television with references to minstrelsy edited out. This is in sharp contrast with the situation in Great Britain, where minstrelsy was also immensely popular but racial integration was less violently contested. A British television program, *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, brought a black-face minstrel show to thousands of eager viewers until 1978.

The seeds of the American discomfort with black-face makeup as a theatrical trope were sown in the 19th century. Reactions to this entertainment were as diverse then as they are in the present day. Great figures of American society were swept into the current of this theatrical madness that held the nation’s firm attention. It was, at the time, entirely unclear what the destiny of American creativity would come to resemble. As people from all regions of the country and social strata participated, either actively or as audience members, in the creation of American entertainment culture, the forces of European classical music, American rural tropes, and folk musics of the

124 Michael O’Malley. *Minstrelsy*, “Jacksonian Democracy”, George Mason University, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/jackson/minstrel/minstrel.html> (Accessed November 15, 2011).

world gathered to form a mighty confluence which set the stage for the later dominance of world entertainment by American artists. While the full complexity and long range impacts of these factors were not visible to those alive to see them, the strong emotions engendered by black face minstrelsy leant themselves nicely to public reviews.

In his anti-slavery newspaper *The North Star*, no less a luminary than Frederick Douglass laid bare his feelings on the matter of minstrelsy:

We believe he [the editor of a rival paper] does not object to the “Virginia Minstrels,” “Christy’s Minstrels,” the “Ethiopian Serenaders,” or any of the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens.¹²⁵

It is not surprising to see an abolitionist, particularly one as progressive and well-read as Douglass, scoff at the very notion of minstrelsy. Douglass here points out the grave insult of having white men perform in black face when black men were neither permitted on most stages nor allowed to sit in the same sections of the theater as whites (presuming they could secure entry to a theater at all). Douglass, in a tone of derision and sarcasm, describes minstrel hits such as “Ole Zip Coon”, “Jump Jim Crow”, and “Ole Dan Tucker” as “Specimens of American Musical Genius”. For Douglass, the minstrel show represented nothing less than the laying bare of the racist attitudes and postures that ran the country in often unquestioned prejudice. Here, writ large, was the white man’s impression of the slave, the northern black dandy, and black women as bumbling dogsbodies, ill-educated bunglers, and promiscuous nags respectively. These attitudes are

125 *The North Star*, 27 October, 1848.

particularly telling in complement to the legalized stratifications of race throughout the nation. As Chief Justice Roger Taney explained in his opinion on the Dredd Scott decision that the nation having been founded by white men was under the jurisdiction of a Constitution “...by them, and for them and their posterity, but for no one else.”¹²⁶ It was in this nation then, one which legally was designed only to enfranchise the white man and ensure his continued prosperity and protection under the law, that men like Douglass recoiled and still others reveled.

Samuel Clemens (known popularly by his pseudonym Mark Twain) was a life-long fan of the minstrel show. Although a racial progressive in his later years, Clemens invariably referred to minstrel shows as “The Old-Time Nigger Show”; a term not in common use even in the 19th century. His writings reflect upon minstrelsy both openly and symbolically to reveal white reaction to the phenomenon of minstrelsy. His popularity as an author both then and now, reflects the acceptability of these convictions among white members of society at the time and evidences a passion for minstrelsy not unique unto himself. “The genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show” was “the show which to me had no peer” and “a thoroughly delightful thing.”¹²⁷ Clemens was not at all conservative in his praise, later adding in his autobiography that if the minstrel show of the 1840’s could return in its former “pristine” condition that he would have “but little further use for the opera”^{128, 129} Clemens explained that the minstrel show’s success rested on

126 Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, (University of Tulsa, Tulsa, OK, 2003), 136.

127 Anthony Berrett, *Huckleberry Finn and the Minstrel Show*, <https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/amerstud/article/viewFile/2526/2485> (accessed October 24, 2011).

128 Ibid.

129 Twain goes on to relate an anecdote wherein he told his mother and a maiden aunt, both devout, church-going women, that he would take them to see missionaries from Africa in an edifying lecture being given at a local theatre. He instead took them to a minstrel show where they are said to have laughed louder than anyone in the theatre having never heard the tired old jokes before.

the artfulness of the burlesque of black styles of dress and speech. These combined in an effect that the master of 19th century comedy described as “Funny-delightfully and satisfyingly funny.”¹³⁰ Shortly after completing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Clemens toured the country to give a series of readings, usually of the dialogues between Huck and Jim which featured black face dialect, to eager audiences in an atmosphere and situation not unlike the minstrel show. This curious dichotomy, between the progressive message of the book and the overt and sweeping borrowings it made from the minstrel show is a valuable problematizer of our view of 19th century attitudes towards race and politics. What by our standards appears a contradiction of racist source material and a book promoting inter-race understanding was in the 19th century a neatly presented article, part and parcel of 19th century “progressive” views of race. Those who were progressive by 19th century standards (Lincoln for example) may have believed in emancipation without necessarily believing in racial equality. Furthermore, those whites who did have a kind attitude toward blacks often did so out of a sense of sentimentality and romanticism rather than justice. Not unlike the Orientalists of the same age, who raised a “mysterious other” to a lofty pedestal of interest and study, 19th century readers could view the character of Jim with pity and understanding, wishing earnestly for his emancipation but not necessarily for his equality.¹³¹

Berett and others observed that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is comparable in format to a minstrel show, with an exposition of songs and comic dialogues, followed by a series of novelty scenas, and closing with a wild burlesque. Surely the dialogue between Jim and Huckleberry is the product of an author who spent much time in the minstrel theatre. Their frequent misunderstandings and under-educated philosophizing is representative of the essence of minstrel show comic dialogue.

130 Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, (Harper Collins, NY, 1990), 59-61.

131 Eric Lott, 30-35.

The tropes of the minstrel show were so ingrained in white society that references to it could be found in the most polite and unexpected of locations. An obituary and comment on the observation of the Sabbath in *The Maine Farmer* of February 21, 1850, laments the passing of a local black gentleman with a line clipped from Stephen Foster's *Old Uncle Ned*: "Old Barber Johnson-God Bless him for 'he has gone where the good niggers go,' used to say..."¹³² *Dwight's Journal of Music* among scholarly entries and comments on the opera remarks "We confess a fondness for Negro Minstrelsy..." describing it as music that "...goes straight to the heart."¹³³ A later edition lauds the supposed models of minstrelsy: "The only musical population of this country are the negroes of the south...". Still others were less complimentary describing the banjo (the definitive instrument of minstrelsy and an instrument which stood in as a musical symbol for blackness' in the Victorian imagination) as being "not as classical an instrument as the lyre of the ancients- that the metrical compositions of the colored race and their imitators fall a trifle beneath the standard of excellence at which custom has rated the poets of antiquity..."¹³⁴ The piece goes on to explain that:

The homeliness, truthfulness of these compositions, established their popularity. There was nothing facetious in them; they filled a void in public amusement which was beginning to be sensibly experience, and from their very naturalness appealed to the sympathy of the multitude"¹³⁵

This contemporary account of minstrelsy is revealing in that, at least in some organs of the popular press, the minstrel show was regarded as an accurate

132 *Maine Farmer*. Feb. 21 1850.

133 *Dwight's Journal of Music*, 24 July 1852.

134 *Dwight's Journal of Music* 3, July 1858.

135 *Ibid*

representation of the music of southern blacks. The artifice of Northern white men in burnt-cork makeup seems to have avoided consideration as far as this publication was concerned. Of further note is the fact that these extracts come from a nominally apolitical publication in the abolitionist stronghold of Boston on the eve of the Civil War. So deeply absorbed in the convention of authenticity was this publication that the piece later posits, as if in confusion, that visitors to the South no longer hear the merriment of the minstrel stage but rather sad and plaintive melodies. The explanation they offered is not that the minstrel show had misinformed them, but rather that the slaves had altered their style of music radically since the early days of minstrelsy two decades before. The fundamental intellectual disconnect of this theory from reality, contrasted with the more enthusiastic view of Clemens and the more critical view of Douglass, demonstrates the wide variety of reactions to this entertainment. This broad range of acceptability continues to this day in the implementation of minstrel tropes openly on the European Continent and in Great Britain (where Morris dancers still appear in black face) and the tacit use of minstrel comedy and music in modern American cultural productions (one need only think of the frequent use of blackface in Warner Brothers cartoons). While the great authors and orators of the 19th century began our process of engagement with the hydra-headed problems of blackface performance practices, the deep hold that minstrelsy has on both the American imagination and the development of later comedy and music in this country evidences the fact that we are far from slaying the beast altogether.



Man in black face – 1890s

(Source: Library of Congress)

IV: “United States it Am de Place”: The minstrel show as critic and guarantor of white culture

The minstrel show should not, however tempting the prospect may be, be pigeonholed into a narrow category of repression and racism. While those aspects remain relevant ones with which modern readers can and must engage, the minstrel show was a far more multifaceted creation. While seemingly a simple, one-way mockery of men too disadvantaged to defend themselves, the minstrel show actually functioned as a powerful public critique of white culture. The ruse is rather elegant in its multi-layered aspect: white men, in black face and exaggerated clothing, emulating black men emulating white men. It is this secondary layer (secondary only in public perception as it is arguably the operative function of the minstrel show) that is often overlooked. White audiences of minstrel shows were

(willingly or not) laughing partially at themselves. Thus the minstrel show performer is part impersonator, part confidence man; always careful to make the audience look the other way (towards the Southern plantation) while the real work of the plan unfolds (mocking of white society). It is part of the fascination and nostalgia that has surrounded the minstrel show from Samuel Clemens to the modern day, audiences love being fooled by a skilled performer. It is why the minstrel entertainer and his cousins, the snake oil salesman, and the carnival barker, occupy a perennial place in the American popular imagination. One need only consider the lyrics of Henry Clay Work's hit "Kingdom Comin'" to gain an understanding of the multiple targets of minstrel show satire:

Say, darkies, hab you seen de massa, wid de muffstash on his face,
Go long de road some time dis mornin', like he gwine to leab de place?
He seen a smoke way up de ribber, whar de Linkum gunboats lay;
He took his hat, and lef' berry sudden, and I spec' he's run away!

De massa run, ha, ha! De darkey stay, ho, ho!
It mus' be now de kingdom coming, an' de year ob Jubilo!
He six foot one way, two foot tudder, and he weigh tree hundred pound,
His coat so big, he couldn't pay the tailor, an' it won't go halfway round.
He drill so much dey call him Cap'n, an' he got so drefful tanned,
I spec' he try an' fool dem Yankees for to tink he's contraband.¹³⁶

While racial stereotypes are upheld in this piece through the simple world view of the narrator and the use of stereotypical black face dialect, the real target of the jibes here is the master who serves in this instance as a stand-in for an entire class of slaveholding Southerners. The appearance of the master is roundly mocked, starting with his mustache (frequently viewed as a foppish affectation in the 1860's) and ending with his ill-fitting coat

136 Henry Clay Work, *Kingdom Comin'*, (Firth, Pond & Co, NY, 1861).

and bulging stomach. The most clever of the barbs is saved for last. It is suggested that when the Federal forces arrive, the Master will attempt to use his sunburnt complexion (a mark of poverty in the eyes of a 19th century audience) to allow him to pass for a former slave. Although presented in a fashion which denigrates the intelligence and agency of the contraband narrator, this song, written before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, allowed audiences to explore what it felt like to find liberty after a lifetime of bondage. Tragically, the humor rests upon the then absurd notion of a world wherein whiteness was not automatically an advantage in society.

Of course, part of the effectiveness of this ruse was the subtlety with which it selected its target; very often, the show did not directly mock whites of the working class (that is, the audience member's own class) but those of the upper class. In the sharply divided world of 19th century class rankings, an upper-class gentleman of New York was as alien a figure to the lifestyle of a working man as was a plantation slave. The use of characters like Zip Coon, an urban dandy with pretensions of grandeur, was a subtle means of poking fun at the working class audience whose aspirations of social climbing (fed by the works of rags-to-riches schund authors of Horatio Alger's ilk) were no less ridiculous than a swell of a man like Zip trying to impress his white neighbors.

In the same way that the illusions of social-mobility fostered so lovingly by the working-class could be gently mocked by transmutation of the key-figure into a black man, so too could the entire process and art of theatre be subjected to the minstrel show's irreverent treatment. Indeed, burlesque of foreign theatre custom had been central to the minstrel show from the onset. British plays and stage practice were regularly lampooned

as were individual singers, actors, and musical groups. The minstrel show turned its eye to the progressive Hutchinson family singers, Jenny Lind, and the grand opera. At a time period in American history when opera was not a particularly popular pastime among the working class, sophisticated parodies of the works of contemporary greats such as Verdi and Donizetti were receiving rave reviews on the minstrel stage.¹³⁷ These burlesques were often topical in nature and so responsive to trends in theatre that some minstrel burlesques would mock European musical groups that were yet to make an American debut.¹³⁸ This process managed not only to reinforce a sense of belonging among the working-classes (the sense of being a member of an “in” group mentioned earlier) but also to chastise the larger white society to which the audience member belonged. The very act of having high-drama satirized by men assuming a black identity was, at the time, an intrinsically funny sight. At a time when black men could neither, to paraphrase Booker T. Washington, earn a dollar in the factory nor spend it in the opera house, a farce of “blackness”, a skin tone used as a social code for being ill-suited to a refined environment, was being used to both enhance and deconstruct a sense of working class “whiteness”, a social code for both cultural dominance and awkward pretensions of upward mobility.

The same topical eye that was cast to musical matters found a counterpart in the use of language in the minstrel show that used the same technique of the aforementioned “elegant ruse” as did the other portions of the show. Mock orations, delivered in “black dialect” were a popular part of the opening portion of the minstrel show. Often centering themselves

137 Winans, 160-1.

138 Ibid. Jenny Lind, a Swedish operatic soprano was dubbed “Leather Lungs Lind” on the eve of a triumphant tour underwritten by P.T. Barnum.

around discussions between two musicians, “Bones”, and “Tambo” and their long-suffering straight-man “The Interlocutor”. The Interlocutor was often called upon to give a speech, lecture, or sermon which ostensibly mocked the childlike world view of slaves and their inability to speak in an educated manner. Naturally the content of these presentations also lent itself handsomely to the mocking of fads and pretenses in white society at large making the use of language in the minstrel show but another double-edged blade in the minstrel arsenal.¹³⁹ The use of mocking speeches was kept so well in step with the changing times that by the early 1850’s male performers in minstrel shows were appearing as black women to deliver malapropism-laden entreaties in favor of woman’s suffrage.

These commentaries used the artifice of black-face makeup to further separate the speaker from the audience. In so doing, the minstrel performer inhabited a space entirely separate from that of his audience, marking anything which he would say as less than serious. Like a court jester, the minstrel performer served as a designated satirist of all things effete and bombastic while never causing offense by virtue of his lower station in life. In this tenuous economy of satire and commentary, the minstrel performer’s use of language combined with his special sense of “otherness” allowed audiences to simultaneously laugh at themselves, while reaffirming that the fact that they did not inhabit the lowest rung of the social ladder; merely the second lowest.¹⁴⁰ It was this sense of security which increasingly dominated the undertones of the minstrel show. As the nation underwent its greatest trial, the Civil War, the minstrel show used a reductive world view to give its

139 Ibid/ Mahar 59-62

140 Annemarie Bean. *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown CT, 1996), 86-90.

audience the illusion of control in an otherwise unstable world. By reducing new immigrant groups to small caricatures and blaming other regions of the country for the social problems of the day, minstrel groups were able to use mockery of whites as a builder of cohesion and solidarity that made white men feel more secure with their place in the world: “Though he did not offer an antidote for their problems, the Old Darky provided a temporary diversion, a reassuring certainty that whites desperately needed and clung to.”¹⁴¹

V. “Miss Lucy Long”: Gender on the Minstrel Stage

One of the most maligned groups in the delineation of minstrelsy (and still one of the most ignored) is women. Constantly portrayed as objects free of subjective agency (not altogether uncommon in 19th century American conceptions of womanhood but, for special reasons to be explicated, especially objectionable in this case) women on the minstrel stage faced a level of ridicule similar to that faced by ethnic minorities. Much like the ridicule of African-Americans which functioned as the main attraction of the minstrel show, the ridicule of women was multi-layered and multi-targeted. Aspects of the portrayal of women including casting choices, costuming, lyrics, and behavior combined to influence the audience’s perception of individual characters and women as a social class.

One of the striking features of female characters of the black-face minstrel stage is the fact that female actors were not permitted to play them. In a practice harkening back to the days of Elizabethan theater, almost all female characters on the antebellum minstrel stage were played by men in woman’s clothing. This signified a cooption of narrative agency as it represented white men having the sole authority of how black women

141 Ibid., 105.

looked and sounded in Northern minstrel entertainments. These “women” are often described as brash and audacious or as having little value to the male characters with whom they shared the stage. Take for example the most famous lady of the minstrel stage: “Miss Lucy Long”. Lucy Long was the central character of a song by the same name which was the most popular finale piece of the minstrel age.¹⁴² The lyrics ran in part:

Miss Lucy she is handsome,
Miss Lucy she is tall,
to see her dance Cachuca¹⁴³,
is death to niggers all

~

And if she prove a scoldin’ wife,
as certain as she’s born,
I’ll tote her down to Georgia,
and trade her off for corn!¹⁴⁴

Although Miss Lucy is prized for her good looks and dancing ability, it would appear she has little subjectivity, agency, or utility beyond these decorative aspects of her being. The comment in the second verse, promising to trade her for corn if she proves too much of a scold, is indicative not only of comically exaggerated views of the value of women (although these are based firmly in the true sentiments of the day) but also of the power of agents of personal destiny which white men saw in themselves. Most curiously of all, for a song with literally dozens of verses about a character which we know to have been represented on stage as part of the standard presentation of the song, the actor playing Lucy was never allowed to speak. In a final symbolic theft of agency from this woman (and by representative extension all women) robs her of her voice while having her engage in a

142 See Winans.

143 a Spanish dance similar to the Bolero

144 Bean, 247.

grotesque pantomime for the amusement of the audience.¹⁴⁵

Other women were represented on the stage, representing various racial lineages in the tortured lexicon of the day. Representations of a “mulatto wench” were common as they introduced a character, who by virtue of being partly white in the 19th century imagination, was an appropriate object not only of attention, but of sexual desire. It has been observed that one of the functional aspects of transvestitism on the minstrel stage was the creation of a safe place of sexual fantasy. In creating a false object of sexual desire who was neither a member of the race nor the gender being portrayed, the minstrel show proffered up a world which existed only in the imagination and a world in which, therefore, the rules and strictures of Victorian society did not apply. This creation of an object of musical/sexual desire was eventually honed into a delineation of a separate female character portrayed by a man. This character was “nearly white” with a fine tenor singing voice and known by the 1860’s as “the Prima Donna”.¹⁴⁶ For the first time, members of the white working class had a means of fetishizing and admiring non-white women in a safe space which also offered distraction from this taboo exercise of desire by reinforcing their notions of ethnic and gender superiority.

In line with the taste for topical humor, the minstrel show would use these female characters and verses about them to ridicule the woman’s suffrage movement which was struggling in the mid 19th century. The movement was challenging long-held notions of the necessity of male leadership and male agency in the management of a nation. It was also challenging fragile male notions of superiority in the home and in society at

145 Lott, 160

146 Bean 248

large. This is evidenced in the following sample of verse from the 1850's:

When woman's rights is stirred a bit
De first reform she bitches on
is how she can with least delay
Just draw a pair of britches on¹⁴⁷

It is clear here that the ulterior motive that men sense in the suffrage movement is the cooption of male authority (symbolized of course by the britches). As woman's fashions changed and bloomers were introduced later in the century, this fear would come once more to the fore. The understanding of gender binary with one sex clearly superior to the other was so ingrained in the minds of the Victorian Age that woman's suffrage could not be portrayed as a bid for equality, but rather as an attempt to reverse the social order entirely. A similar feeling of fear regarding the upsetting of social order was found in the heart of the antebellum North as well leading to the fear that freed black slaves would come north and seek superiority over their white neighbors. The treatment of women in pieces such as Stephen Foster's "Oh Susannah!" among others evidences a view of women as objects rather than determiners of their own lives. Although couched in sentimental terms, these songs represent the curtailed sphere in which a woman could operate and make her own decisions, often focusing solely on the inconvenience or sadness of the male narrator rather than the view of the titular subject of the song. As William J. Mahar explained: "However much blackface comedy demeaned and insulted African Americans, its usually sentimental and often hostile values reinforced the limitations on freedom and equity for American women even more."¹⁴⁸

147 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, (Routledge, Chapman and Hall, New York, 1998), 277.

148 Mahar , 328

VI. "Gentlemen Be Seated!"

The minstrel show was a complex and nuanced form entertainment. Generalizations and firm conclusions are difficult to make due to the ever-changing and multifaceted nature of the show; yet certain common themes and tropes still present themselves. The last of the minstrel players having long since gone to meet his reward, he is no longer here to discuss with us his motivations, his impressions, and his purpose as a performer. More than likely, the kind of hermeneutic interpretation being performed upon the show by modern scholars problematizes the matter far beyond the view of the average performer. The performers were, foremost, attempting to make a living. This does not excuse the content of their shows, but it does underscore their motivation. It is clear that the minstrel show, while not a sensitive gauge of public sentiment, often adjusted its program in an attempt to best please that most fickle of beasts, the general taste.

The one great certainty of the minstrel show is its long-lasting and cross-cutting popularity. For 80 years beginning in the 1840's, the minstrel show was a major force in American entertainment until it was eventually supplanted by vaudeville. While geared specifically to white working-class males, it found fans in all classes and stations (Abraham Lincoln and Queen Victoria, it should be noted, were fans¹⁴⁹). With a panoply of characters representing caricatures of African Americans and women in varying degrees of reprehensibility, the minstrel show electrified the American imagination. It found ways of reinforcing white (and particularly white male) feelings of superiority by providing these stage representations of the class of Zip Coon's and Jim Crow's with a then-humorous set of foibles. It is

149 Bean, 122

also clear that this ridicule of race and this portrayal of characters was found utterly unacceptable by some members of the African-American community (Frederick Douglass, a master wordsmith, would not throw about a term such as “the basest scum of the earth” without careful consideration). The subject matter of the show of course expanded its purview beyond the African American community and used the aspirations and flaws of these characters to seat white society firmly, if indirectly, as the target of much of the humor and ridicule. This further informs the treatment of women on the minstrel stage, who received perhaps the worst treatment of all through a combination of racism and misogyny.

It has been suggested (by Lawrence Levine among others) that one lens through which the minstrel show should be understood is that of white guilt coming to terms with an inherent flaw in the vision of American exceptionalism. The flaw of course was the existence of a class of chattel slaves in a nation founded on the ideal of liberty. The minstrel show, in reinforcing attitudes of racial and gender superiority, excused this imbalance in the minds of the audience. So long as African Americans and women could be portrayed as helpless and hapless buffoons, there was no reason to extend to them basic civil rights.¹⁵⁰ In the words of Lawrence Levine, the minstrel show had a functional role in “distancing whites from their personal responsibilities in their tragic perversion of American principles.”¹⁵¹

This curious cocktail of music, commentary, dance, and burnt-cork has long since left the spotlight. In the United States, black-face is now a byword for racism, and yet, a careful analysis reveals this view to be miopic

150 Mahar, 330

151 Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 444-5.

at best. The performers inhabiting the black-face roles, while assuming the form of another race, were almost universally understood to be whites in disguise (although the material they presented was purportedly authentic). Period advertisements regularly displayed the performers both in and out of black-face that the audience might wonder at the remarkable efficacy of their disguises. This adoption of black-face therefore was not exclusively about the adoption of black bodies for the purpose of maligning them, but also the adoption of a performative shape wherein the performer was not accountable for his actions. Just as the introduction of white men representing black female characters created a sterile and safe means of interaction between white men and representations of black women within 19th century society, the burnt-cork visage allowed performers a safe space to lampoon the failings of their sociopolitical climate.

Blackface comedy, while assuredly a racist and demeaning construction, heralded the beginning of an age of American satire. This notion of the creation of a safe imaginary space where progressive society could be skewered by men feigning ignorance is the basis of later popular forms of social commentary. Stephen Colbert's long-running use of the character of a hapless neo-conservative pundit is a fine example of the modern expression of this phenomenon. Blackface minstrelsy also represented the cooption and alteration of art forms taken from the societal periphery, an action which has defined American popular music for much of the last century (Jazz, Blues, Rhythm and Blues, Rock and Roll, and Hip-Hop all represent African American cultural constructions which later gained acceptance in white society, usually after their forms were taken up by white artists).

The minstrel show is often damned wholesale, when it is given consideration at all. It was certainly reprehensible. Aspects of it most assuredly reinforced and informed racist attitudes which haunt us to this day. And yet, it is also a basis of modern American popular culture and music, having started the trend of cultural cooption and public ridicule in a safe-space which defines much of our pop-culture today. It is therefore neither to be glorified (and those remaining today who look back on it with nostalgia are, thankfully, very few) nor relegated to history's dustbin. To ignore a fundamental aspect of American cultural history would indeed be dangerous; allowing the negative aspects of it to once more impinge upon our society. It is only through an honest appraisal of this meeting and rending point of rich and poor, black and white, men and women, that any healing of the deep scars left by a racially troubled age can begin. Many would suppose that a form so contradictory, so convoluted, so ridiculous would not and could not have found the success it did. When laid against the backdrop of the divisive society of the 1850's which, within a decade, would tear itself apart with musket and ball, the contradictions and convolutions of the minstrel stage seem right at home. In some ways, they still are.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Bean, Annemarie et al. (See Winans) *Inside the Minstrel Mask*. Wesleyan University press. 1996
- Berret, Anthony J. *Huckleberry Finn and the Minstrel Show*. University of Kansas Journal of American Studies. Vol 27. No 2. Fall, 1987. <https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/amerstud/article/viewFile/2526/2485> Accessed November 15, 2011.
- Douglass, Frederick *The North Star. Edition of October 27th 1848 and 29th June 1849*
- Emerson, Ken *Doo-Dah!* Simon and Schuster. New York. 1997
- Emmet, Dan *I Wish I was in Dixie's Land*. Original manuscript, Gettysburg College Special Collections
- Finkelman, Paul. *Defending Slavery*. University of Tulsa. 2003.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. Routledge, Chapman and Hall. New York. 1992.
- Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Oxford Univ. press. 1977.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft*. Oxford University Press. London. 1993.
- Mahar, William. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*. University of Illinois press. 1999.
- Nowatzki, Robert *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy*. Louisiana State Univ. Press. 2010.
- Michael O'Malley. *Minstrelsy*, "Jacksonian Democracy", George Mason University, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/jackson/minstrel/minstrel.html> (Accessed November 15, 2011).
- Winans, Robert et al. *Inside the Minstrel Mask*. Wesleyan University Press. Hanover NH. 1996.

Period Resources and Collections:

E.P. Christy original sheet music courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections
Camptown ladies,
Oh Lud Galls
Ole 'Zip Coon
Jump Jim Crow
all Firth, Pond & Co. New York, 1850-1861

Dwight's Journal of Music February edition of 1853. Boston.
Dwight's Journal of Music November edition of 1856. Boston.
Dwight's Journal of Music July editions of 1858. Boston.
Dwight's Journal of Music May editions of 1859. Boston

The Maine Farmer Feb 21st 1850

New York Tribune, June 30th 1855

Shoo-Fly Songster, Dan Bryant's troupe, New York 1868 (Gettysburg College SpecColl)

Spirit of the Times; A Chronicle of Turf Agriculture ... Apr. 27 1850

Turner's Comic Almanac 1851