

Ridicule and Wonder:

Minstrelsy in Antebellum U.S.
and Its Effect on Working-class, White Culture

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Blackface minstrel plays were a cultural phenomenon that became the most popular form of entertainment by the Civil War in 1861. Theatrical productions in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit, painting their faces black using a burnt cork paste, minstrelsy held obvious racial implications. Principally found in the urban North in the early nineteenth century, these plays were the stage to more than just the blackface performers themselves; they were the stage to a collision of culture and race, class and gender that helped create the definition of American identity, black and white. The study of minstrelsy therefore treads upon the uncomfortable territory of racial conflict. Our discomfort with this topic has been ubiquitous in our society for years, a paradigm of which perhaps minstrelsy itself is a root.

However, we must no longer be satisfied to merely condemn the terrible aspects of minstrelsy and move on, for its legacy is all around us, even imbedded into our own American culture. Only by taking inventory of the cultural effects can we discover the social origins and psychological motives of the 'racial' impulses, reckonings, and unconscious reactions of the nineteenth century U.S..

Born into such a tumultuous time in our nation's history, minstrelsy was elemental in creating a black culture, and in doing so, also created an antithetical white culture. However, in its formation through minstrelsy, the burnt cork black on a white face was an ominous foreshadow of the residue of blackness to be left on the newly created white culture.

This creation of a culture may have been through horrid and grotesque robbery, but it was the collision of cultures, this crossroads of races, from which burst the phoenix of unity of culture, even if falsely created. Based on the created notions of blackness and whiteness, and

through the tactless and ridiculing exhibition of ‘black’ culture by whites from the minstrel stage of antebellum America, the formation of a self-consciously white working class became possible. But this collision of culture produced a quasi-miscegenation of blackness; the burlesque had the lasting result of leaving black residue on the white culture—the effects of which are still seen in our society today.

In order to determine minstrelsy’s effect on working-class white culture, it is important to understand the shape and makeup of the society into which minstrelsy was born. Theater was already a popular form of entertainment in the early nineteenth century, and was heavily influenced by elitist Europe and by the rural frontier on the home front. Urbanization and industrialization gave a quick pace to the evolving American culture, and a sense of identity and coalescence was needed in the fast-changing society.¹ What would it have been like to live in such a period? What was the shape and makeup of the culture that could name such blatant racism as entertainment? What were the initial intentions, and was it considered authentic?

Before we study white intention or the racial authenticity of the plays, there must first be an inquiry into the initial collision of culture, into the discovery of a possibly lucrative business opportunity for some, and into the theatrical manifestation of the pervading interest and envy that spurred the founding of a uniquely American strain of blackface theatrical performance. It is imperative to search out the origin of minstrelsy to then trace its trajectory.

It is important to note that this was not the first time that blacks were caricatured by white men in blackface makeup. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Southerne’s *Oroonoko* and Shakespeare’s *Othello* are a few examples. These ‘black’ characters are an understandably distracting vein of theatrical blackface. However, they are clearly different in that the emphasis of the production was still on white culture; these ‘black’ characters had simple supporting roles.

¹ Mary Caroline Crawford, *The Romance of the American Theatre* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1913), 80-117.

Black culture had not yet been commoditized and was simply portrayed, not stolen. It was not until Thomas Dartmouth Rice invented his character ‘Jim Crow’ that minstrelsy, as the American stage in the antebellum nineteenth century called blackface, came into existence. The first, most significant show,² and my argument for the origin of American minstrelsy, is in 1832 when T. D. Rice first “jumped Jim Crow” in New York City, that is, first performed as his ‘Jim Crow’ character.

To add irony to an already complex mixture, this cultural confluence was rarely accompanied by an actual meeting between racial representatives because the ‘blacks’ were really white men. Hiding behind the burnt cork mask, the music and the instruments, the costumes and the jargon was just another white man. Paradoxically, minstrelsy is a cultural phenomenon based largely on the clash of racial culture and yet was derived from relatively few cases where white and black (not white painted black) actually met. This does, however, give that much more significance to the few meetings where we actually do see an encounter between such representatives.

In 1867, Robert Nevin—a journalist for *Atlantic Monthly*—describes just such an encounter. It was in Cincinnati, Ohio, when Rice, who “sauntered along one of the main thoroughfares,” was “arrested by a voice ringing clear and full above the noises of the street.”³ The voice was that of a black man who sang the refrain to a song in an unmistakable dialect:

“Turn about an’ wheel about do jis so
An’ every time I run about I jump Jim Crow.”

Nevin goes on to tell how Rice was “struck by the peculiarities of the performance, so unique in style, matter, and character of delivery.” He thought, “Were not these elements...which might

² Other historians, like Dale Crockwell in his fantastic work *Demons of Disorder*, place the beginning of minstrelsy a few years earlier because with George Washington Dixon’s performance of “Coal Black Rose,” a folk song sung between to “black” men on the minstrel stage—Sambo and Cuffee—who are rivaling for the same woman. However, since this was just a song and not a show, it fits alongside Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The true beginning of American minstrelsy was, in my opinion, with “Jim Crow” in 1832.

³ Robert P. Nevin, “Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy,” *Atlantic Monthly* 21.121 (November 1867): 608.

admit of higher than mere street or stable-yard development? As a national or 'race' illustration, behind the footlights, might not 'Jim Crow' and a black face tickle the fancy of pit and circle?"⁴

Here is the meeting of races, the collision of cultures where Rice, a white man, sees a black man's dance and delivery, hears his dialect and jargon, and is struck by the peculiarities of his performance so much so that he is convinced that blackface minstrelsy would be a big hit for the working-class Americans who were a "theatre-going people": in a country in which "more journals [were] devoted to dramatic affairs...in New York City than in any European capital."⁵ The origin of the production that incorporated the song, jargon, dress, dance, instruments, and tendencies of the black man and grew overnight in popularity was simply "a casual hearing."⁶

But it was so much more than casual. Robert Nevin credited Rice with the higher development of the black culture. Minstrelsy was to be seen as the completion of 'black' culture, or at least an accurate portrayal of it. The white audience thought this was black culture at its best, and thus perpetuated the reinforcement of such stereotypes. The irony of whites painted as blacks to be ridiculed by whites as a proof of white superiority and racial domination, the image of a white man using a black face as a means to despotic sovereignty over the whole culture, strikes at the central issue of minstrelsy: the envy and fear involved in the cultural collision, and the desire to maintain control.

The early nineteenth century was a time of change and development for the new country. The desire for the glorification of the average, working-class white man in contrast to the European aristocratic gentleman produced a cultural media that tried to satisfy the conflicting demands of both lower and upper-class Americans. Out of this fragmenting and tumultuous cultural defining, came unequivocally popular forms that were both products of and responses to

⁴ Ibid, 609.

⁵ Laurence Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891): 4, 5.

⁶ Nevin, 610.

the way common Americans began transforming old cultural institutions, like theater, to meet their new needs and desires. The minstrel show was the most important new form to grow out of this process.

Unlike literature, stage entertainment was a socially based form that had huge operating costs and required a large attendance to survive. So, economic necessity forced all theatergoers into the same audience, clustering together the diverse, ‘common’ people of the new urban societies. Somewhat resembling the verbal arts of their rural folk communities, minstrelsy quickly grew in popularity. The stage entertainers were increasingly dominated by popular tastes and not by artistic criteria, by the rapidly growing urban middling and lower classes, not by traditional elites.⁷

The connection between the urban northeastern city culture and the antebellum theater’s popularity allowed minstrelsy to enjoy its greatest popularity in those same diverse cities. Rowdy and expressive people seemed to make up the majority of the audiences, so early minstrel programs frequently listed “Rules of Hall” and “pleaded with the audience not to whistle during the performances and not to beat time with their feet.”⁸ The power held in the hands of this rambunctious audience to disrupt mildly displeasing performances or to violently drive off those who really presented third-rate shows, caused the minstrel troupes to either shape their shows to suit the tastes and desires of the vulgar audience or to be replaced by companies that would.

In the eyes of this type of audience, to be black was to be, at best comic and happy, perhaps musical, and, at worst, unfortunate; to be black was to be, at best, patronized, and, at worst, condemned for the color of skin. New York’s *Courier and Enquirer*, one of the most influential papers of the time, certainly intended that there would be no ambiguity on issues of

⁷ Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 10.

⁸ Alexander Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (March, 1975), 19.

race. It reviewed at great length a popular minstrel production called *The Slave* at the Park Theatre in 1833, and concluded in this manner:

The opera of the *Slave* is beneath criticism, and beneath contempt. It seems to have been written from the anti-slavery society; the hero is a gentleman of color, whose love, heroism, and disinterestedness, far surpass anything which the degenerate whites have been able to exhibit for centuries past, and whose inflated declamations are almost too much for any body whose gravity is not like that of the Chinese philosopher, within one degree of absolute frigidity.⁹

It is not unfair to say that the representation of race on the legitimate stage was what we call ‘racist’; and it was so by very nearly official decree, emanating from the mouths of the powerful. It appears, then, that much of our conventional understanding of the relationship between blackface and race was a fixture of, if not also fixated in, the legitimate theater—often before there even was such a thing as blackface minstrelsy.¹⁰ This quote shows how the blackface view of race was promoted and how it gave clarity where ambiguity lingered about what race meant.

There was also an overriding concern about economic value, ownership, and slavery itself. Noah Miller Ludlow, writing in 1880, looking back over minstrelsy’s successful career, offers a second perspective of Mr. Rice and the now lustrous beginnings of this cultural phenomenon. In the Louisville Theater, Rice was standing at the stage door, looking at “a very black, clumsy, Negro used to clean and rub down horses.” Rice was “attracted by the clearness and melody of this Negro’s voice, and he listened with delight to the Negro’s singing and finally went to him and paid him to sing the song until he learned it. The result was that Rice invented the song ‘Jim Crow’ and ran the piece to a full house for many nights. The article goes on to say that “without the song it is highly probable that [the manager] would have been a ‘dead duck.’”¹¹

This account of Rice and the black man supposedly legitimized the cultural theft, implying that Rice paid in full. The recognition of a ‘negro version’ of ‘Jim Crow’ would seem

⁹ *Courier and Enquirer* (September, 1833).

¹⁰ Cockwell, 29.

¹¹ All quotes from this paragraph come from N. M. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis: G. I. Jones and Company, 1880), 392.

to give some semblance of neutrality and denote simple cultural differences and not ‘borrowings.’ However, the relationship was reversed. In this account, the white version of ‘Jim Crow’ is the original and the black is just a type, a version of the original. The fundamental paradigm might be that the ‘borrowing’ of culture is legitimized, but the foundation of this obtuse edifice is misshapen and ruined by the unauthorizable claim not only of authenticity, but also of originality. This reveals the inaccuracy of this attempted legitimization of minstrelsy.

However, it is clear that Rice’s discovery of ‘Jim Crow’ was not a malicious, racist, desire. But it is also clear that whites did not want the expropriations of minstrelsy to be equal to those of slavery. Along with the white anxiety about minstrelsy as an avenue to plunder black culture, there was a desire to have either forgotten or displaced slavery in accounts of the minstrel show—all was happy on the plantation, or so Ludlow’s article about the minstrel play’s authenticity is meant to reassure everyone. The minstrel show had become an economic alternative to slavery, a theft of culture instead of freedom, a denial or forgetting of the enslavement of the past by a cultural reenslavement from the minstrel stage, reiterating minstrelsy’s debt to black cultural production.

This is all visible in the evidence of the stage itself. The minstrel stage was a cultural arena in which the expropriation of ‘blackness’ occurred, demonstrated clearly by Robert Nevin in his 1867 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In what he believes to be a hilarious account of one of T. D. Rice’s first blackface performances in Pittsburg, 1832, the appropriation of culture is keenly visible through the physical theft of one black man’s clothes.

At the old theatre of Pittsburg there was a Negro named Cuff who made a living by carrying the trunks of passengers from the steamboats to the hotels. After slight persuasion, Rice convinces him to accompany the actor to the theatre where he is ordered to disrobe. Rice, now dressed in “an old coat forlornly dilapidated, with a pair of shoes composed equally of patches

and places for patches on his feet, and wearing a coarse straw hat in a melancholy condition of rent and collapse over a dense black wig of matted moss,” waddled into view on the stage.

The extraordinary dress and demeanor produced an instant effect and Rice performed ‘Jim Crow’ to thunderous applause. The article goes on to explain that Cuff was about to forfeit some business to Finger, his professional competition. So Cuff whispers to Rice,

“Massa rice, Massa rice, must have my clo’se! Mass Griffif wants me—steamboat’s comin’!” [This, and a second attempt, are fruitless due to the audience’s laughter.] Driven to desperation, and forgetful in the emergency of every sense of propriety, Cuff, in ludicrous undress as he was, started from his place, rushed upon the stage, and, laying his hand upon the performer’s shoulder, called out excitedly: “Massa Rice, Massa Rice, gi’ me nigga’s hat—nigga’s coat—nigga’s shoes—gi’ me nigga’s t’ings! Massa Griffif wants ’im—STEAMBOAT’S COMIN’!!”

Such were the circumstances—authentic in every particular—under which the first work of the distinct art of Negro Minstrelsy was presented.¹²

As we saw earlier in Foster’s account, Rice discovered the idea of the minstrel show without ever a collision encounter with a black man. Here, however, it is only once the show is already planned and Rice is ready to go out onto the stage that Cuff’s clothes come in useful. The issue of ownership emerges in the collision and we see value being determined.

Being black, Cuff’s dress and dialect were the perfect source for Rice to use as his ‘Jim Crow’ character, according to Nevin; the cultural expropriation could not be more overt. Literally, the clothes off of his back are stolen. However, notice that at first he gives them over willingly, ready to help even a stranger who is putting on a performance. It is only when the black man needs his identity back that he gets nothing. And all the while to “thunderous applause” from the audience.¹³ THAT is where the expropriation is truly found: in the audience. The physical theft of Cuff’s clothing and jargon was due to Rice, but the cultural borrowing and

¹² Nevin, 609-10.

¹³ Ibid, 609.

subsequent theft of 'blackness' was due to the white, working-class audience, cheering on the show.

The dialectic pendulum that swung between racial insult and racial envy fomented an uneasiness that was, if not calmed by the minstrel show, at least justified in the commoditization of black culture. 'Cuff' was applauded when in the form of Rice behind the mask but was quickly a laughing stock when standing in his underwear and his luggage-carrying business about to slip away. Seeing blacks both ridiculed and uplifted gave the viewers the desired excuse to confront those emotions inside themselves.

This clash of cultures on the stage was representative of the clash of culture in the society. When cultures clash, the dominant one wants to keep its dominance, to maintain the status quo and the control. Ironically, it was this same dread of miscegenation that was inherent in the minstrel show's audience—that which was both quieted and roused in the minstrel performance—that ended up giving the show its popularity and therefore helping define the new cultures that could no easier be separated than the actors could have performed without their black masks.

Cuff's stripping, a physical theft that silences and embarrasses him onstage but which nevertheless entails both his bodily presence in the show and the threat that he may return to claim his stolen clothes, the most prominent *commercial* collision of black and white, is an intense allegory to the most prominent *cultural* collision: slavery itself. Minstrelsy stole from the black man a combination of jargon and dress, action and gesture that constituted what 'blackness' grew to mean. And it was hilarious to the crowd.

Minstrelsy, this culturally specific phenomenon, depended heavily upon the audiences' reactions and desires. As already mentioned, the shows themselves were influenced by the audience to the point of almost real-time influence; as they shouted and cheered what they

enjoyed and booed and hurled trash at what they did not, troupes rose and fell at the whim of the patrons. One patron of the early minstrel audience, quoted in the newspaper *Spirit of the Times*, goes so far as to overtly claim this influence. “We [the sovereigns] determine to have the worth of our money when we go to the theatre,” the Boston correspondent boasted in 1846. “We made Blangy dance her best dances twice; we made Mrs. Sequin repeat ‘Marble Halls’... and tonight we are going to encore Mrs. Kean’s ‘I Don’t Believe It’ in *The Gamester*...twice; the latter depends on the furor of the moment.”¹⁴

Those minstrel shows that were successful were the ones that catered to the rambunctious audience and did not fear to take the burlesque to new levels. Only in such an environment could such a show gain popularity in the speed that it did.

It is not an accident, however, that this type of audience dominated the culture and society. Through a rich history of overcoming odds and surviving by the sweat of your brow and the work of your hands, coupled with the fires of industry and capitalism, came distilled hero figures of the frontier and the revolution. Before audiences could define blacks in minstrelsy, they forged positive images of themselves in rural characters like Davy Crockett and the ‘B’howery B’hoys’’: frequently rowdy firemen who were an unlikely mixture of urban and rural, hero and brawler, chivalry and daring—the manifestation of a new working-class, white culture unto which minstrelsy would cater at its height.¹⁵

Blackface minstrelsy was a complex commercial and cultural enterprise. All together, it was more than simple commercialized exploitation of racial imitation or the commoditization of ethnic or racial envy and white superiority, although this was very much a part of it. It created a now familiar pattern in American popular culture. The famous P. T. Barnum agreed that “from

¹⁴ *Spirit of the Times*, October 24, 1846, quoted in David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1860* (Chicago, 1968), 64.

¹⁵ Arthur H. Quinn, *A History of the American Drama from the Beginning to the Civil War*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1943), 304.

the allegedly authentic ‘delineations’ of African Americans to the representation of women,” antebellum minstrelsy established a culture in “American that would survive for centuries.”¹⁶

Race played a fundamental and undeniably primary role in the development of minstrelsy because racial and ethnic differences were defining features of American comedy. The way in which blacks were viewed evolved over time, as did the audiences and performers of the shows.

So what made minstrelsy work so well in antebellum America? It was the polarity that was presented. The historian Berndt Ostendorf agrees that “what made minstrelsy work is the race, class, and caste polarity: black and white, primitive and civilized, rich and poor, urban and rural.”¹⁷ Through such polarity, the evolution of minstrelsy and the black characters represented grew to be, in my opinion, the most original contribution that America has ever made to popular culture—it is unfortunate, however, that it had to be in the form of a racist discourse.

Minstrelsy helped constitute a break between elite and low culture. The dual emergence of the first remarkable body of American imaginative literature in melodrama and of such a notable popular phenomena as was minstrelsy demonstrates both the interrelatedness and the opposition of high and low cultural forms. Minstrel shows actually resembled the nineteenth-century lower-class opera, the ‘legitimate’ theatre, and was ranged explicitly against it.

Jim Crow seemed an unlikely character for a national cultural form, and yet, as the *Democratic Review* admitted in 1845, the idea had a certain plausibility. “The lowest description of American face,” to be sure, “still in its elements, not without originality, considerable invention, and a rich vein of burlesque humor, is the [minstrel] drama.”¹⁸ In what possible way could a host of white men in blackface and motley rags be considered representative of a national

¹⁶ P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs, or Forty Years’ Recollections of P. T. Barnum Written by Himself* (Buffalo, 1873), 72, 135-145, 357-62.

¹⁷ Berndt Ostendorf, “Minstrelsy and Early Jazz,” *Massachusetts Review* 20 (1979), 577.

¹⁸ “American Humor,” *Democratic Review* 27.87 (1845): 212-19.

art form? Evidently, this question was debated even in the decade where minstrelsy enjoyed its greatest popularity.¹⁹

In a different public sphere, in January of 1831, William Lloyd Garrison founded the abolitionist *Liberator* in Boston, setting one of the great radical movements in American history into motion. Little more than a year later, twenty-four-year-old T. D. Rice toured the northeastern seaboard with his popular ‘Jim Crow’ minstrel act. Nineteenth century abolitionism and minstrelsy, twin instances of white racial discourse, the first from the middle class and the second from the working class, were dialectical partners in their shared ambivalences. In as much as Garrison’s abolitionism was marred by a good deal of condescension toward the people he wished to liberate, so Rice’s blackface acts mixed equal parts of ridicule and wonder in regard to black culture.

Blackface minstrelsy will always be a multidimensional topic. A mixture of racial fascination and cultural expropriation, minstrelsy seems to mix the unmixable and the result is a complex, popular enterprise that marked our nation in more than one way. One has to wonder whether or not the performers of this early theater, with their impressive music and dance, had any idea about the impact that their actions would have on the definition of race, the American identity, and the clash of culture that would all ensue for the centuries to follow.

¹⁹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

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