

Blacks on Stage: Are We Still Replicating Stereotypes from the Legacy of Minstrelsy

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Introduction:

Few people realize that, as an artistic production tied to the consequences of “plantocracy”, the creativity and artistic production from which Negro performance traditions sprang in the slave quarters of America was originally meant to reflect early African-centered values. Early African American entertainers in slave quarters across the Americas would employ traditional African “masking” techniques to parody in song, derision and movement, the rich, white planter class that enslaved them—providing commentary on the African American condition.

“Clowning” as Barbara Babcock’s work suggests “is regarded as a means of catharsis and control, it is limited to simple farce or satire.” (Barbara A. Babcock, 11) The art in comedy, music and dance that these early African American performers crafted was highly improvisational—from the musical instruments they employed like the “banjar” and clappers made from dried beef bones, to the dance steps like the “Ring shout” and the “cake walk”, and then on to the storytelling motifs that would provide the rubric for their comic and dramatic vignettes. The “comedy” of these early African Americans operated as “a complex, miscellaneous genre, embracing a plurality of impulses: farce, satire, irony” tied together by the glue of African American music traditions. (Barbara A. Babcock, 11)

Separated in every other sphere, black music drew Black and white audiences across boundaries. Soon, the comedy, the music and the wealth of early Black artistic production itself would be copied, usurped and commodified by ethnic “others” with no understanding of the irony of whites performing “blackness” based on a tradition of blacks secretly performing “whiteness”.

The legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy:

The history of blackface minstrelsy was at the heart of antebellum popular culture. As its legacy, Ralph Ellison believed that in the American consciousness from the stereotyping of African Americans through examples of popular culture like minstrelsy “the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable.” (Ralph Ellison, 1958)

Before Ellison, James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) offered his thoughts on minstrelsy as well, in 1930, in his text *Black Manhattan*.

Minstrelsy was, on the whole, a caricature of Negro life and it fixed a stage tradition which has not yet been broken. It fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide grinning, loud laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being. Nevertheless, the companies did provide stage training and theatrical experience for a large number of coloured men...which, at the time, could not have been acquired from any other source.” (James Weldon Johnson, 1930)

None of those reproductions of the prevailing “stereotypes of blackness” in the products, goods and services tied to popular culture are *produced value-free*; and, as such none should be calcified in the historical record as if they were produced free of political pressures and impositions. (Lott, 6) Yet, as Stuart Hall’s work indicates, neither would those artistic productions in popular culture “passively mirror political domination.” (Stuart Hall, 227-40: Lott, 6) Thus, there is always a need for the necessary study of past discourses.

We cannot ignore the impact that Minstrelsy has had on American culture. As a result of the social construction of “blackness” embedded in the early public discourse of white minstrels “playing at blackness”, racism has worked to set limits to black modes of expression. The cultural “fallout” or negative effects that the legacy of minstrelsy in American culture has left us with, is still quite pervasive and still informs the instances and manner that Blacks still appear on the American stage today.

In an interesting inversion on the “finding versus stealing” dichotomy, the legacy of minstrelsy continues to validate whites who effectively absorb black culture and, most times, do so without attribution. The vanguards of white American popular culture reframes stereotypes and the “performance of blackness”; and then commodifies it in wholesale terms under the rubric of “nationalism”, as indigenous manifestations of *American culture*.ⁱ This text also makes the argument that the often-stereotypical “performance of blackness” on the professional stage has a direct correlation to the “expectation of blackness” in the public sphere. As a result, too many African Americans must always negotiate whether to imitate and play to the myths; stage a resistant counter hegemonic performance or, to succumb to expectation, and embody a psychic-social duality, simultaneously and alternating their notions of identity, “living out” the performance of both polar extremes.

Cognition and its Connection to Culture:

Culture is a force that produces, explains and then reinvigorates stereotypes. Cultural products, like theater, can be implicated in determining the observable patterns in a variety of social phenomenon. By deconstructing the production and maintenance of stereotypes in the public sphere, popular culturists can develop formulas that can help determine how and why certain attitudes develop and become calcified in the cultural consciousness of a given society. Theater, like the media, may be one of the important social influences that help to shape our contemporary era. In American theaters’ earliest beginnings, “Race” and the markers of racism, through artistic production and cultural products, have been transformed into pejorative designations.

Images produce meaning and establish links to social practices. (Oscar Gandy, 12) “Part of the way these messages... work...is through the process of identification.” (Oscar Gandy, 12) The public expectation of a particular race, class, or ethnic group encourages individuals consciously and unconsciously, to align their behavior to fit the expectation. As a natural extension, racial alignments influence class formation. (Banton, 150)

“The celebration of Black artistic creativity was no doubt only a small part of a much more complex process of identity formation.” (Oscar Gandy, 46) In

that realm, associations of “black” with sadness, evil and death were oppositionalized with associations of “whiteness” with purity, goodness, truth and femininity. (K. Gergen, 397) But classification is not the same as identity. Ways of knowing tied to power and indoctrination, helps us to see and identify “markers” of similarity or difference as a method of identification. “Classification is a form of knowledge creation that has been associated by Foucault and others with the development and maintenance of systems of power (P. Rabinow, 1984) The acceptance of one’s assignment to a racial group or category is a response to that power that can be understood as a form of domination.” (Oscar Gandy, 48)

Racial markers, then become important aspects of our identity and those racial makers are intrinsically tied to indices of power. (Oscar Gandy, 50) The social construction of identity formation is mediated through perceptions and, in some cases (thanks to a legacy of the stereotyping in the “performances of blackness”) the consequences of negative representation.

Because of the centrality of racial stereotypes, with little or no effort (other than the slightest visual clues or vocal suggestion) the *stereotype* that individuals learn and then reference the memory of from our earliest periods of cognition can be easily activated and primed with enough stimuli and at any given moment. (Oscar Gandy, 54) The longer the history and the pervasiveness of the *stereotyping*, the more likely the preponderance that members of the group will act out the “performance of blackness” to meet the societal expectation thus reinforcing and reifying the stereotype.

The Pervasiveness of Stereotypes:

The presentation of self (i.e. language, style, dress); self esteem and status are just some of the ways that the “performance of blackness” is continually reaffirmed on the stage and in the public sphere thanks to the long history of racial stereotyping and the legacy of American minstrelsy. Even for contemporary black actors who have worked for and earned far more respect on the American stage, African American artists and writers are still challenged by those same old, worn-weary cultural images of inferiority that linger in the American cultural consciousness thanks to, up to now, what was only one side of the story of American minstrelsy.

“Minstrelsy was the first example of the way American popular culture would exploit and manipulate Afro-Americans and their culture to please and benefit white Americans.” (Toll, 51) White-owned and operated shows got the greatest exposure, made the most money and became the chief procurer of Negro stereotypes-turned-archetypes. (Cashmore: 37)

Minstrelsy became the first recognized American musical theater. In the early nineteenth century, whites in blackface minstrelsy fought for recognition *and an audience* in competition with some of the best of Europe’s theater and popular entertainment. Stealing, commodifying and then discounting early black performative traditions, white performers in blackface quickly turned caricatures of the Tom, the Coon, the Sambo, Topsy and others into archetypes that, today, still inform American popular culture.

As a form of “symbolic communication”, minstrelsy became a vehicle through which low comedy became ritualized in the American consciousness as a

way of keeping African Americans in their place. But also, as a secondary outcome, minstrelsy's stereotype of the *performance of blackness* created a discourse on American nationalism and, (by the sheer starkness of the polar opposite) the social construction of "whiteness". As a social function, minstrelsy provided a sanctioned social space for the "symbolic discharge of aggression" (Jacob Levine, 13; William J. Mahar, 209); or, as Nathan Huggins suggests, "a scapegoat *alter ego* into which white projected sinful, guilt-provoking wishes otherwise suppressed by puritan conscience" could reside. (Nathan Huggins, 253-4).

"Whites denuded African cultures to the bone and left blacks with little choice: either they submitted to the unremitting racist association of "blackness" and "badness" and accepted their inferiority without reservation, or they remade themselves." (Cashmore: 23) Eventually, audiences would tire of the structured minstrel show—white or black; until the conventions of minstrelsy would become so infused in every other form of theater, radio, television and film that addressed racial difference and "otherness:" that it became normalized.

In vaudeville, Louis Armstrong introduced comic "bits" in his routine. "His drummer Zutty, would dress up in women's clothes and Armstrong in rags." (Cashmore: 37) Armstrong's willingness to play up to "white expectations" "assured him a white audience eager to accommodate a black person who confirmed (or, is it, "conformed") to the sambo type". (Cashmore: 37)

The Zulus, the hobo-like marchers associated with New Orleans' annual Mardi Gras celebration, took their costumes from a blackface vaudeville skit performed at a local black jazz club and cabaret.ⁱⁱ The popular performers dress in grass skirts, top hats and exaggerated blackface. (<http://www.helium.com/items/815984-minstrel-shows-and-their-effect-on-american-culture?page=2>) And, up until well into the 20th century (1964) some troupes in the Philadelphia Mummers Parade still performed down one of the city's major thoroughfares—Broad Street-- in blackface.ⁱⁱⁱ

Eddie Anderson played the Sambo-like butler/valet to Jack Benny in the 1950's television show; but adding a hidden transcript to his performances, television historians say Rochester often outwitted straight man Jack Benny, effectively "playing Sambo" but never conforming to it. (Cashmore: 36) These are just a few examples of how even after minstrelsy allegedly "died" as the prevailing dramatic "performance of blackness", the replication and then exportation of the stereotypes of blackness embedded in that first form of American Musical Theater continues to inform the production and maintenance of American culture and its aesthetic products today.

Political Economic Rationales:

"The reproduction of Race and racism can be understood as products or outputs of production and distribution systems." (Williams-Witherspoon, 2006a: 200) Stereotype is the output of the construction and reproduction of race. (Gandy: 93) Clearly, communication through the media and popular culture plays a role in the process of white "structuration". (Oscar Gandy, 34) Through media, literature and theater, popular culture constructs products that are neither purely entertainment nor purely political; but rather, socio-cultural products that

become more like a hybrid of the two forms—what Michael Parenti calls “political entertainment”. (Parenti, 3; Williams-Witherspoon: 2006a: 200)

We know that images have power. As cultural talismans (J. Pieterse, 153) the images of blackness in the media, theater, literature and popular culture “can and do affect the quality of relations between groups.” (Cashmore: 28) The reproduction of some of the same black images and stereotypes made popular in the American cultural consciousness since the days of whites in blackface minstrelsy are uncomfortable precisely because they so closely resemble the past and, unfortunately, for all too many of us, unknowingly become the blueprint for our present and our future. Just as Stanly Elkins proposed, because of the stereotype of “blackness” that was so prominent during the 19th and 20th century in the public transcript, there were, no doubt, some slaves and then later free blacks that did adopt the “happy, docile and fun-loving” Sambo-like character traits that dominated the American consciousness. (Stanly Elkins, 1959; William J. Mahar, 181) However, for those who did, like Bert Williams, Satchamo, Stepin Fetchit and others, the paradox becomes, is “playing to the expectation” the same thing as acting out “the kernel of truth”

“The sambo type fills us with horror. Not because it is so false, but because it is so disquietingly close to what has become “the truth”. African Americans have never been able to purge themselves full of the sambo legacy” and it continually works its way into the representations of African Americans on the American stage today. (Cashmore: 28)

Most of the work on the legacy of minstrelsy (circa 1760’s to 1980’s) suggests that stereotyping like that which has come down to us since the development of American minstrelsy is a prime example of the so-called “majority culture’s desire to maintain political, social, and economic control by transferring false theories of racial inferiority into a form of comic theater designed to demean African Americans.” (William J. Mahar, 182)

Even if race and racism were not the only topics covered on the minstrel stage, racism was certainly a component in the exploitation of the low-status of African Americans as a source of comedy. (William J. Mahar, 1996) The African American cultural “residuals” embedded in minstrelsy were preserved there quite by accident simply because of the wholesale way whites “collected” original material from blacks themselves, only to pen Anglo-American names on those artistic products and claim them as their own. While romanticizing the lives and the lifestyle that the institution of slavery helped produce. Ironically, as a rule, minstrelsy avoided slavery as a direct subject in its public transcript; upholding it all the while in its subliminal message.

White blackface minstrelsy depended on the reassurance that African Americans would always remain the lower-status individuals at a time when the social construction of whiteness and a burgeoning immigrant population needed guarantees that lower class whites would, at least, always be superior to someone else—even if by virtue of nothing else other than the physicality of color. (William J. Mahar, 209; Frederickson, 204) As Mahar suggests, “[t]hose characters were successful...not because they were seen as African Americans, but because they were...instruments of an egalitarian audience’s need to feel some form of superiority...to other classes or races.” (William J. Mahar, 210)

As one of the first successful media-driven “scams” to deflect the American people from a growing concern over the inhumanity of enslavement, minstrelsy was so successful precisely because the message behind its public performance of race (and later gender) “conveyed explicit pro-slavery and anti-Abolitionist propaganda [and] was in and of itself a defense of slavery...[tied] to the myth of the benign plantation.” (Alexander Saxton, 3-28; William J. Mahar, 182) Burnt-cork comedy relied on African retentions in its dance movements, rhythm and music while purposely de-valuing African Americans who created, among other things, aesthetic products like “the ring shout”; the “cane dance”; the “soft shoe” and the “cake walk”.

As minstrelsy’s theatrical conventions quickly became calcified into racial stereotypes, the Tom, the Zip Coon, Topsy and the Sambo became the ready symbols for the “Jim Crow” “rules of engagement” that would disenfranchise, constrict and try to define all blacks (both slave and free) far longer than plantocracy itself. “The crude humor of the minstrel performer obliterated any redeeming qualities possessed by *the real black*”. (*my emphasis* :Sam Dennison, 154)

Operating as an interactive, performed public, civic, “code book”, minstrelsy created and maintained “a set of self-humiliating rules designed by white racists for the disenfranchisement of the black self” an innovative, new technique on purposeful censorship.. (Berndt Ostendorf, 575) While minstrelsy from the 1870’s through to the turn of the century used the same kind of ethnic stereotyping of Irish, Chinese, German and Yiddish characters as the fodder for comedy and as a public performance of the social construction of “whiteness”, the difference between those representations and unchangeable stereotypes of blackness is that, for most African Americans, despite class or education, the physicality of color meant that they were forever incapable of changing *their* status while the aforementioned ethnic groups –with perhaps the exception of the Chinese--could.

Minstrelsy became a mechanism for defining “in-group” behavior. (William J. Mahar, 184) For the Asian immigrant, physicality became a ready marker of “otherness” and a constraint for them as well.^{iv} But for the Irish, German and Jewish immigrant (familiar with blackface clowning in their own cultures), the burnt-cork disguise offered them an opportunity to participate in the public discourse and the social construction of “whiteness” too. (William J. Mahar, 184)

The German, the Irish and the Jews would *become white* in time’; but for the African American, those self deprecating social rules of behavior and Jim Crow rules of engagement were (and I would argue, still are) the public *expectation of blackness* in popular culture. In American Theater and in urban life, African Americans find themselves still struggling with the necessity of “playing to the expectation”

Conclusion:

Unfortunately, contemporary artist find themselves still forced to don the figurative (if not literal) masks of blackness made iconic through the history of stereotyping and white minstrelsy in America. We are reminded that “the social

construction of identity formation is mediated through perceptions and 'relationships between the attitudes, images, and impressions of self and others that have been shaped through direct and mediated experience'. (Gandy: 51; Williams-Witherspoon, 2006: 201) Oscar Gandy suggests that "[t]he quality of representation is determined in part by the level of participation by minority group members in important creative and decision making capacities within the media [and I would add, theatrical] industry." (Gandy: 97) Unfortunately, there are very few of those.

While African American theaters continue to close, and white theater houses and Hollywood fall back on resurrecting worn-weary stereotypes of old that do not complicate or compromise benign but nevertheless "racist" representations of blackness, should we be surprised each time we see the Mammy, the tragic mulatto, the vicious Brute, the Coon, the Croon^v or the Sambo resurrected in popular culture and on the American stage? The legacy of minstrelsy is in the reality that "Blacks may have been consciously playing the roles whites had created for them...[b]ut as subsequent years proved, whites had difficulty in seeing blacks as fit for anything more than singing, dancing, fighting and running, all for their amusement." (Cashmore: 29) What, if anything, has changed?

Unfortunately, all African American arts production is "exploitable and ultimately dependent on white culture for its production, dissemination, and its recognition as a legitimate cultural product." (Cashmore: 39) Nevertheless, Minstrelsy with its cultural symbols and iconic "markers" cannot be analyzed as simply epiphenomenal. As an artistic production, minstrelsy in American theater and popular culture was not just a form of dominant-cultural "reinforcement". (Lott, 1996)

Oscillating between the polar extremes of "racial insult and racial envy" (Lott, 6), this paper is just an excerpt from a much larger work that breaks away from most other examinations of African American theater. This project differs from other examinations of African American Theater because it does not, simply, confine its analysis to the "relationship between blackface and blackness". Rather, the larger project traces and contextualizes the African retentions in the masquerade traditions that provided the impetus for the artistic productions from early American "Africans"; to African Americans across the south and west that would later be commodified by whites in blackface, and then reclaimed by black artists, themselves, forced to keep up the "mask of blackness".

White blackface minstrelsy was as much "administered and determined" for racist uses in popular culture as it was continuously created and reinvigorated by authentic black contributions to its repertoire of music, song and dance, (Lott, 6) "Minstrelsy was an arena in which the efficient expropriation of the cultural commodity "blackness" occurred." (Lott, 6)

So why do we continue to internalize the stereotypes of blackness and then mimic the myth? Again, Oscar Gandy's work suggests that "the extent to which an individual's personal belief system matches the dominant structure of beliefs is a reflection of the extent to which they have internalized the dominant ideology." (Oscar Gandy, 81) For those of us who find ourselves still playing to the "perceptions of blackness", are we simply suffering, as Shelby Steele suggests,

from “racial fatigue”—tired “of being represented by and representatives of” *the race*? (Oscar Gandy, 77) Or, is it simply “easier” to play to the expectation of blackness in the public sphere to camouflage or deflect suspicion of a more subtle resistance in the hidden transcript that is oftentimes, invisible or opaque to whites?

We must remember that racism and sexism are linked to the economic systems that reinforce them and depend upon them. (E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein, 1991; Oscar Gandy, 79) Michael Pickering wrote, “the discourse of sexist and racist humor can seep through into other discourses, and its clichés and stereotypes may contribute to a symbolic lexicon from which fear and prejudice are able to derive their self-sustaining expression. “(Michael Pickering, 330)

As we battle to reject the commodified and calcified stereotype of blackness made iconic by the legacy of white minstrelsy; we can still claim the African retentions and performance contributions of pre-encounter, mid-encounter performative traditions of African Americans through to Black minstrelsy traditions and its legacy today. We must, however, never forget that, just like the public transcript greatly affects the formation, maintenance and, sometimes, the dismantling of cultural identity, (Turner: 90; Williams-Witherspoon, 2006a: 201) power (or the lack thereof) dictates the side a story will take in the historical record.

This paper has tried to make right some of that wrong by offering a critical analysis of cultural hegemony embedded in American Theater history. By deconstructing white minstrelsy as a commodified form of pre-to mid encounter Black performative expression that was its precursor and template, white minstrelsy can no longer merely be viewed as “authentic” but rather, as a commodified cultural product that speaks volumes about power dynamics, the social construction of discourses about race for Blacks in America; and the political economy of African American arts production and reproduction in popular culture and on the American stage.

But more than anything else, this work attempts to trace the legacy of the stereotypes of blackness that have been made iconic in the cultural consciousness of American popular culture. Pointing to contemporary examples of African Americans still being forced to “don” the masks of minstrelsy for any measure of success and acceptance in the transgressive white public sphere of American Theater, hopefully this research provides a framework for future analysis of the role “purposeful censorship” and the legacy of stereotypes of blackness in American minstrelsy has played in the social construction and reproduction of racism and power relations in the larger global marketplace.

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ⁱ We have witnessed this “commodification” of black artistic expression in Jazz, blues, gospel, dance, even the black preachers performance and linguistic traditions showing up on the pulpits of white Baptists and Methodist ministers.

ⁱⁱ Louis Armstrong was voted King of the Zulu’s in 1946, the first time a celebrity had been chosen for that honor. It involved making up in blackface, with huge white patches around the eyes and wearing a long black wig. (James Lincoln Collier, 1985: 311).

ⁱⁱⁱ The wearing of black face paint was once a traditional part of the parade. Growing dissent from civil rights groups and the offense of the black community led to most clubs phasing out blackface in the early 1960s. A 1964 city policy officially ruled out blackface but some still appears in the Parade. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummers_Parade)

^{iv} Today, [f]or Asians in the United States, the special character of American racism has produced an almost irresistible pressure toward becoming White to avoid the consequences of being treated as Black.” (F. Wu, 1996)

^v Adding to the new roster of contemporary black stereotypes, I offered the designation of the “Croon” as the new proliferation of hip hop artists, singers and musicians who, because of a meteoric rise to fame and fortune oftentimes find themselves caught between the stereotype of the “Coon” with rhythm burdened by the reality of being black in America, much like the “Wretched Freeman” stereotype that Sterling Brown had identified in 1933. For more detailed description of the “Croon” stereotype please see “From “Coons” to “Croons” to Would-Be “Bloods” and “Crips”: representations and the Social Construction of Black Identity in the U. S. Media” in *Mass Media Research: International Approached*. (2006)