Routes of Blackface

Catherine M. Cole and Tracy C. Davis

Throughout its history, blackface minstrelsy has been at once potent and slippery, notoriously difficult to control as signification. When one race impersonates another and bills it as entertainment, reception becomes a barometer of ethnic hegemony, interracial politics, and power. Artists have been repeatedly tempted to appropriate—and even to try to reassign—signifiers from this tradition, but blackface and its indelibly associated minstrel repertoire retain the power to reopen deep wounds. The least contentious attempts at this have happened far from the United States. Students in colonial Ghana, for example, imitated Al Jolson films as a way to travesty and ridicule colonial mannerisms taught in their schools (Cole 2001). As Nadia Davids argues in this issue, black Capetonians in South Africa selectively utilize cultural memory and amnesia of the creolized slave experience, the mid-19th-century visit by Christy’s Minstrels, and modern American and South African iconography in a living archive of minstrelsy and colored face-painting, evoking many historical practices and contemporary discourses, including the “rainbow” of the postapartheid state. Meanwhile, on many American college campuses, students stage “ghetto parties” in the semiprivate space of fraternities and sororities. A Google image search using the key words “ghetto party” conjures astonishing new incarnations of an old American form: white college students, clutching plastic beer cups, grin at the camera, their faces blackened with grease paint, their fingers pointed in gestures evoking urban gang signs yet also unwittingly ghosting the “Zip Coon” antebellum minstrel character in updated attire. Blackface, a quintessential signifier of the minstrel repertoire, continues to travel through time and space frequently unmoored from knowledge about its antecedents.

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Or so claim its embodiers; others are all too aware of its racist citationality. Like the kudzu vine (an imported plant now invasive throughout the American South) blackface minstrelsy in North America is persistent, destructive, and seemingly ineradicable. Cut the branch from the vine and kudzu—like blackface minstrelsy—can sprout up anew. Even to try to cite this tradition in order to depart from it makes for highly volatile cultural politics.

Blackface minstrelsy was the first American mass culture, and for nearly two centuries its media have kept up with the times, from dance, monologue, and song sheets in the 19th century to radio, film, television, merchandizing, and now the internet in the 20th and 21st centuries. Scholarship on the form began with the uncritical nostalgia of collectors and aficionados who celebrated it as Americana. At the turn of the last century, Paul Laurence Dunbar and W.E.B. DuBois provided politically incisive critiques. In his poem “We Wear the Mask” (1896) Dunbar lifted, ever so briefly, “the mask that grins and lies,” revealing a tortured soul and the “vile clay” upon which the masquerader was forced to stand. Mid-century writers such as Ralph Ellison and Robert Toll read minstrelsy as both reflective and constitutive of the material realities of slavery and racial segregation: as both “shadows” and “acts,” expressing and shaping public perceptions in equal measure. Blackface minstrelsy demands research methods and theoretical tools as multiple, heterodox, and polymorphous as the form itself. In recent years scholars such as Robin Bernstein, Saidiya V. Hartman, David Krasner, W.T. Lhamon, Eric Lott, and Tavia Nyong’o have moved well beyond the extremes that mark minstrelsy historiography—that is, uncritical celebration of the form or exclusive focus on moral condemnation—to ask precisely how blackface operated, what cultural and political work it did, and how its producers and consumers engaged with the form during very particular conjunctures of US history. As Marvin McAllister has demonstrated, the double consciousness of whiting up has never been blackface’s signifying, experiential, or political obverse.

Some of the most innovative research on minstrelsy of the past two decades has been authorized (albeit often in unacknowledged ways) by cultural studies. Through the work of Eric Lott, in particular, cultural studies liberated many scholars to move outside of disciplinary silos and understand minstrelsy’s persistent and problematic embodiments as critical sites for social action and intervention; as lacunae in which power relations were simultaneously established, unsettled, and reified; and as evidence of how social formations are thoroughly and viscerally racialized even as they move recklessly and mercurially from theatre to cinema, novel to merchandise, music to cartoons, and television to the internet. Performance studies has likewise enabled scholars to research across these domains while attuned to the complexities of embodied representation and reception, to perceive the recapitulations of repertoire echoing across time so that they are identifiable in the merest gesture, musical lick, or intonation, never mind the full-blown onslaught of burnt cork or its grease-paint progeny. In this issue, TDR examines historical roots as well as several branches—or routes—of blackface minstrelsy, repurposed in the United States as an alien heritage, racially triangulated alterity, Black Power, and camp; incarnated throughout the United Kingdom with highly specific local meanings; re-produced in colonial South Africa as a discourse of English identity; and reimagined in 21st-century Cape Town as an historicist, polychromatic palimpsest.

Ralph Ellison once advised that antiblack representational repertoires are like ritual objects, perhaps best approached using a jujutsu of the spirit ([1953] 1995:56, 276–77). The essays assembled here deploy a range of rhetorical and analytical strategies, as they leverage new sites and source materials and bring fresh interpretive techniques to bear on the potent histories and politics of blackface. The authors challenge and contribute to the historiography of blackface.

1. See Toll (1974). For more recent appraisals of blackface, see Lott (1993); Bean et al. (1996); Cockrell (1997); Hartman (1997); Krasner (1997); Lhamon (1998); Cole (2001); Lane (2005); Chude-Sokei (2006); Brooks (2006); Nyong’o (2009); Bernstein (2011); McAllister (2011); and Johnson (2012).
minstrelsy by examining previously untapped evidence, question current orthodoxies about the role of minstrelsy in American racial formations, expand the geographic scope of the performative genealogy to consider American minstrel performances exported abroad, and focus on iterations of the form in unexpected contexts such as the World War II Japanese internment camps; the Black Arts Movement; and the contemporary drag performances of Chuck Knipp, a white gay man who performed as the character Shirley Q. Liquor while wearing “Queen Latifah black lady makeup from Wal-Mart.”

The issue begins with “Notes from the Blackout” by Omar Ricks and Kim McNair, a poetic intervention that performs through unconventional form (for an academic journal) its own kind of jujutsu. Responding to a racially themed party — the now infamous “Compton Cookout” held in 2010 at University of California, San Diego — students at Berkeley staged an alternate spectacle of blackness. In the face of black stereotypes unleashed by the Cookout, they created searing images of solidarity and uniformity. In answer to the cacophony of racist insults that spewed onto the internet in the wake of the UCSD party, the Blackout protest exploited the rhetorical power of silence. In response to the historical amnesia of the Compton Cookout, which attempted to tap the potency of minstrelsy while simultaneously erasing memories of its foundational histories of violence, Ricks and McNair offer a condensed catalog stretching across centuries of the ignoble legacies upon which this incident drew.

Ricks and McNair assert the importance of black people and the material realities of their lives when viewing the specter of blackface, a premise shared by Douglas A. Jones Jr. in “Black Politics but Not Black People: Rethinking the Social and ‘Racial’ History of Early Minstrelsy.” Jones overturns Eric Lott’s construct of love of blacks through white working-class solidarity and theft of blacks’ cultural heritage. He argues that minstrelsy is precisely the space where race and racism are equally important in expressing whites’ anxieties over waged capitalism as being too like the brutalities of slaveholding. At the same time, early minstrelsy absorbed whites’ fear of blacks’ violent reprisals against a system in which gross injustices abided with or without the presence of slaves. For Jones, the formative years of minstrelsy do not show a simple mimetic equivalence (through adoption by white performers and their substitution as transmitters of black repertoires of gesture, stories, and dance). Instead, minstrelsy constructs a new category — “blacks”—whereby grotesquerie is the vehicle and the target of white performers such as T.D. Rice, and fuels proslavery ideology. Thus, the Jacksonian stage is central to the social processes of class and racial alignment. This helps to account for minstrelsy’s volatility over time, and the inability of any of its elements to be “innocent” or “separate” from the history and legacy of American slavery.

The following three articles trace travel routes from the United States to the United Kingdom, and thence to South Africa. Tracy C. Davis and Chinua Thelwell both document Christy’s Minstrels, a troupe formed in New York State in 1842, immortalized in Britain from 1857, and that ventured out on a global tour to South Africa and the Antipodes from 1864. Like Jones, Davis recognizes political substructures imbued in blackface minstrelsy, but argues that given the multidirectional cultural flow of the form (and its constitutive elements), and the absence of consensus about polygenic racism in Britain during 1850s and ‘60s, many factors complicate what made English, Irish, and Scottish spectators into a public. Close attention to time and place shows how blackface minstrelsy was less a comingling of cultural elements (as in Lott’s model) or of respective black and white anxieties about race and class (as in Jones’s model) but an abutment between two systems that can be differently identified depending upon the locale. Performances travel, but more readily than their meanings, which are locally legible.

Chinua Thelwell traces a little-known and far-flung route of blackface that links Christy’s in Britain to mid-19th century South Africa. Landing in the Eastern Cape, the minstrel form found its way into South Africa’s built environment, including a Port Elizabeth inn named “Jim Crow” and a Kimberly hotel called “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” In the polyglot milieu of Cape Town, minstrelsy took root and spawned new variants, as when an amateur “coloured” troupe
performed the song “Malingo Hoy, the Cape Town Coolie” in the Dutch-Mozambique language. Within a preindustrial, pre-apartheid era, minstrelsy functioned as a discursive strategy for defining settler culture, erecting and preserving racial boundaries, collapsing images of blacks into a typology that included romanticized notions of productive and happy black American labor, and performed this against a backdrop of local stereotypes about indolent, thieving, and hypersexualized Xhosa. In a land where “white” identity was fractured by British and Dutch subcultures, minstrelsy enacted a very particular white identity—English—and served as a means to knit together British subjects within this outpost, a remote relative to their colonial metropole.

While Thelwell’s article explores how white settlers used minstrelsy to negotiate mythologies of Xhosa identity, Nadia Davids focuses on a very different instance of blackface minstrelsy in South Africa: the contemporary Cape Carnival. The form known in Afrikaans as klope kamers originated as an emancipatory procession by the city’s coloured population through colonial Cape Town, and today it expresses a cultural dislocation wrought by slavery. Davids places this blackface form within two key South African theoretical discourses—“race” and place—in order to interpret the Cape Minstrel Carnival as both an expression of racial anxiety and, more significantly, a repository for the Cape slave experience. Davids ends by exploring the potential of this blackface performance to be a powerfully transformative mask and not merely a racist caricature.

Amma Y. Gharney-Tagoe Kootin demonstrates how indisputably removed blackface minstrelsy had become from African American life by 1901: when the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo, New York, recruited performers for its Old Plantation exhibit, Southern blacks were taught a curriculum of camp-meeting songs, cake walks, buck dances, and negro melodies that had no ethnological grounding whatsoever. White instructors were the repositories of the repertoire of this “genuine black culture.” Hired black performers learned the manners of their purported antebellum culture of playtime and agricultural labor as if they were the ways of a foreign country. Indeed, blackface minstrelsy had long since circled the globe, but the broken lineage to American slavery that Kootin highlights is filled in with manufactured authenticity of whites’ nostalgic recapitulations of antebellum life.

Emily Roxworthy examines blackface acts performed in 1942 by teenaged Nisei internees at the Santa Anita Assembly Center, a Los Angeles–area racetrack and entertainment mecca hastily converted into a concentration camp, where Japanese Americans were housed in horse stables. While suspecting that these performers laid claim to a domestic form of racial suffering in citing the film Holiday Inn, Roxworthy found that nowhere in the extensive scholarly literature on minstrelsy did an appropriate precedent exist for analyzing such racial impersonation on the part of non-white actors in the United States. She argues that blackface and Asian alterity strategically functioned in a racial triangulation to highlight the parallel (though hardly equal) persecutions of African Americans suffering under Jim Crow segregation and Asian Americans suffering under US exclusion laws, most pressingly President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s executive order authorizing the evacuation and internment itself.

Kootin, Roxworthy, and Mike Sell all detail versions of how blackface minstrelsy is a “deliverable” commodity capable of aesthetic repurposing, repackaging, and recapitulation depending upon the aims of those who wield it. In 1901 Buffalo it was a pseudo-restored behavior packaged into a Midway entertainment. In California in 1942 it was repurposed from the movies to express displacement, yearning, and agential dignity. In the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 70s—the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power movement that revolutionized the way we understand race, culture, and power—it was an instrument of deconstruction, politically honed to a fine point for audiences primed by a lifetime’s saturation in black culture and thus capable of reading the steps of détournement. Yet what (or who) is the black or blackness reified in these performances? How did artists of the BAM devise means to speak
back to the Empire (of racism) in which blackface minstrelsy flourished and from which it still could not be expunged? Through an examination of the vertiginous ironies produced through BAM’s deployment of the minstrel idiom, Sell argues that, like the Situationists, figures such as Amiri Baraka, Douglas Turner Ward, and Ed Bullins appreciated the power of critical appropriation and strategic symbolic reversal. They understood that there is no true escape from blackface, only strategic positions with respect to it. Two decades before the rise of critical whiteness studies, Sell argues, BAM artists performatively realized the idea that though blackface was the quintessential sign of inauthenticity, in the hands of subversive playwrights it also confirmed revolutionary Blackness.

Finally, Jennifer Schlueter’s work on Chuck Knipp’s voluble character Shirley Q. Liquor reveals many of the persistent problems with blackface minstrelsy: no matter what the white performer’s intention, or willful ahistoricism, reception is overdetermined. Not all mimicry is minstrelsy, but racial impersonation—even as drag, homage, and recognizable “folk” figures—cannot escape a legacy of racist deployments. In this case, even a Southern clown who draws Southern conservatives’ indignation can never “just” be campy parody. Knipp readily identifies in his fans the enduring opportunism that has dogged minstrelsy since its inception.

So, like kudzu, which springs up seemingly at will and has so far been impossible to eradicate where imported, blackface minstrelsy is voracious in its appetite though, when felled, adaptable for aesthetic purposes. Yet such constructions—whether pretty, ugly, or useful—are still kudzu even when the lush foliage is stripped away and the vines are twisted and modeled into a sculpture that is left to dry. When alive, kudzu thrives on herbicides, and with its astonishing growth rate—up to two meters per week—its supply far outstrips even its most nimble-witted adapters. Verdant and damaging in equal measure, such a growth can neither be eradicated nor ignored.

References


