

# Whose Costume, Whose Body? Racial Impersonation and Bodily Autonomy at the Georgian Masquerade

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The Georgian masquerade has long been characterised as a space for anonymity, social mixing, and debauchery—supposedly open to all individuals, irrespective of rank, gender, or ethnicity. Though accessible through the purchase of a ticket, this ‘commercial’ entertainment was in actuality highly exclusive and reinforced social divisions through extortionate ticket pricing, spatial partitioning, and ostentatious costume display. As a watering hole of the fashionable elite the masquerade enabled the *beau monde* to shape and spread hegemonic perceptions of Black and Brown cultures by putting Enlightenment ideas of classification and ethnicity into practice through the embodiment of characters of empire and the “other.”<sup>1</sup> Popular examples of these costumes included enslaved people, Native Americans, the “Mussulman,” Pacific Islanders, and Africans (among others) and they could be purchased from a warehouse or made at home. The ability to become “other” through racial impersonation was temporary and could be accomplished through a combination of dress, cosmetics, and props and further enhanced through adopted speech and movement. This process however was extremely harmful, not only because it circulated negative stereotypes and laid the groundwork for later practices of cultural appropriation, it also removed bodily autonomy from the peoples behind each character type and replaced them with white impersonations. Before, during, and after the masquerade wealthy white participants who opted for these costumes remained autonomous bodies and individuals, regardless of whose body or ethnicity they were wearing for the duration of the evening. The option to discard or remove these characters allowed elites to shift between temporary, figurative, disposable bodies and their own real bodies.

This level of autonomy was not available to all masquerade participants, however. Persons of colour, whether resident in or visiting London, did not have this same freedom and were limited in their costume selections which often simultaneously restricted their bodily autonomy within and beyond the masquerade itself. When attending as individuals, non-white peoples were expected to play their “character” and adhere to cultural “types” which constrained their bodily autonomy considerably more than that of their white counterparts. It was rare for a person of colour to dress as a white character and considered a cultural taboo, highlighting the disparity between conceptions of whose body could be a costume. Additionally, unlike white participants, persons of colour were unable to simply take off their costume at the ceremonial unmasking since they had been costumed as themselves the whole time. Complete elimination of bodily autonomy is also evidenced in the treatment of non-white persons as props within masquerade culture across the British Empire. In one instance, East India Company wife Sophia Plowden, who went to elaborate lengths to dress as a “Kashmiri singer,” recruited a local boy “who had dark hair & eyes and looke’d like a Cashmerian” to enhance the authenticity and novelty of her costume.<sup>2</sup> Using peoples of

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<sup>1</sup> This has been examined in eighteenth-century studies in theatre and literature, but has yet to receive attention within wider leisure culture and the commercialisation of costume. For existing work on the significance of ‘character’ and harmful impact of repetitive stereotypes see: Lisa Freeman, *Character’s Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 1, 27; Felicity Nussbaum, ‘The Theatre of Empire: Racial Counterfeit, Racial Realism,’ in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73-82; and Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 27-72.

<sup>2</sup> Sophia Plowden to her sister, 4 April 1783, Mss Eur B187, British Library.

colour as accessory components within elaborate and spectacular costumes worn by white elites ultimately removed the autonomy from Black and Brown bodies further begging the question, “Whose costume, whose body?.”

This paper addresses the above question through an examination of the varied masquerade experiences of three persons of colour, Julius Soubise, Joseph Brant, and Mai. It will analyse the extent to which persons of colour actively maintained bodily autonomy and could use the masquerade space to impact public perceptions of racialised stock characters in Georgian culture. Manuscripts, visual culture, and newspaper reports all provide useful insight into the costumes they wore and their interactions within the masquerade. In addition to these sources, I will draw on the work of Noemie Ndiaye, Monica L Miller, Robbie Richardson, Philip De Loria and Troy Bickham, each of whom have contributed important scholarship on the histories and experiences of Black and indigenous peoples in the early modern world.<sup>3</sup> Miller’s conceptualization of character and type is particularly useful in examining bodily autonomy and how the “characters of empire” were impersonated in leisure spaces and influenced ideas of self-identity and “other.”<sup>4</sup> Ndiaye’s *Scripts of Blackness* provides important insight on performative blackness and how to examine agency in relation to performance and embodiment. Applying her crucial question about beneficial interest to the act of racial impersonation and self-performance will shed new light on the experiences of persons of colour who attended the masquerade and how agency was still achievable through their costumes and their bodies.

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*; Noemie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022); Robbie Richardson, 'Tomahawks and Scalping Knives: Manufacturing Savagery in Britain,' in *Material Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Nation of Makers*, ed. Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2021); Philip J Deloria, *Playing Indian* (London: Yale University Press, 1999); Troy O. Bickham, *Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Miller, *Slaves*, 70.