Against Minstrelsy

By Leonard Harris

ABSTRACT

I argue that minstrelsy in public forums, for example, on magazine covers such as *American Legacy*, in film, art, drama, literature, or publicly displayed sculptures—whether for the purpose of satire, showing examples of angst and alienation, depicting self-loathing, or for the purpose of praising the artistic acumen of artists presumably forced to portray self loathing—should end. I believe that some forms of performance, even if they demonstrate high artistry, should be forever relegated to, at best, such historical recording resources as archives, dissertations, and scholarly treatises. Even when used as a medium to elicit pity for slaves in order to promote the abolition of slavery, minstrelsy elicits the wrong sort of pity. Minstrelsy cannot be used substantively to critique, edify, or be appreciated as artistry. Minstrelsy cannot escape the already existing field of moral emotions and conceptual categories of race that make it coterminous with presenting blacks as buffoons and sluts. Lauding its artistry or the tenacity of its black performers substantiates the already existing image of African-American culture as one that sustains self deprecators as heroic figures and allows character traits such as cowardice and infidelity to be socially acceptable.

Bert Williams appears "majestically" on the cover of *American Legacy: The Magazine of African American History*.[1] He is dressed in his classical coon top hat, cocked to the side, indicative of sloppy befuddlement. His head is bowed and back slouching. He wears an over-sized bow tie, ill-fitting tuxedo, short pants that accentuate his overly large shoes, and white gloves—to add insult to injury—as an expression of his deep desire to be white. Ralph Allen's article, "Same as You," argues that we should recognize that Williams introduced a new tone in comedy, namely, a "mournful but unsentimental manner" and that "[t]oday he should be celebrated rather than blamed for the choices he was forced to make."[2] According to Allen, we, along with W. E. B. Du Bois, should pay tribute to Williams for bringing "the light mask of happiness that hid breaking hearts and bitter souls." I might add that Alain Locke, a far more astute aesthetician than Du Bois, also wanted Williams's genius at pantomime recognized, although, unfortunately, cloaked in the garb of minstrelsy. Neither Du Bois nor Locke, however, was allowed in the front seats of racially segregated theaters to see Williams's highly acclaimed performances.

According to defenders of minstrelsy, respect for the expertise and artistry of minstrel performers and performances helps defeat the idea that black persons are inferior. This argument, however, relies on the indefensible idea that the demonstration of expertise and artistry is indicative of full species membership. Eunuchs, for example, have historically performed highly technical accounting, tax collecting, and trade negotiations for their masters; domestic slaves were often used as sexual tools, clowns, cooks, and gardeners. Rarely does anyone confuse the status of a eunuch or slave as a subjugated person with the status of a free

[1] *American Legacy: The Magazine of African American History*, 10 (Winter 2005).

[2] Allen, Ralph, "Same As You," *American Legacy: The Magazine of African American History*, 10 (Winter 2005) 31.

person performing the same functions, nor does anyone suppose that the eunuch or slave is of equal worth as a free person. The expertise of subjugated persons is not suggestive of their full human worth nor does it grant them a higher status category: slaves and eunuchs remain that, regardless of their expertise.

The literary character of "minstrelsy" is dependent on an aesthetic predicated on the assumption that the action is that of an inherently, and irredeemably, inferior racial group. Minstrel performances require characters to be understood as inferior persons. Symbolically veiled in white or black face, the veil poignantly reveals a base soul. Whether featuring mammies, dead black baby jokes, children sitting in pig sties among pig feces while eating watermelon, or slumped-over black men expressing joy at having avoided employment, minstrelsy requires the audience to know that the performance is by and about inherently lesser beings. And awareness of this necessitates the use of categories of race, which convey what the slumping, hunching, and grinning mean as jesters, gazes, and symbols.[3]

One way to think about this is to consider the meaning of "minstrel" in relationship to how meanings allow for loose associations. The Latin root of minstrel is "minister"—"servant"— which is in opposition to "magister"—"master." A minister is the servant of God, but a minstrel is the servant of a lord, who cares for him; the minstrel worships his corporal lord as God. "Minstrel" can never mean servant of God; it can only mean someone who is a servant to someone who is a servant of God. The category of minstrelsy is entrapped by its own ethnology in a subordinate position.

Minstrels are eunuchs in the sense that the characters of coon, mammy, and buck are individuals incapable of being honorable.[4] The only desires they can represent are ones associated with emotionally infantile behavior. Emblematic of this fact is that the characters portray no stories about families that do not include incidents of infidelity, lunatic lust, and stupidity; no stories about owning property, such as a house, or inventions created by intelligent minds; no stories about persons taking actions to benefit their progeny; and no stories about persons with commitments to any past or future generation. Art types that represent agents who are capable of being in believable stories in which wealth is passed from one generation to the next are those that grant their forms full human agency. However, artistic types that presuppose that agents are fundamentally defective are antithetical to agency. Jewish misers and Chinese collies are stereotypical characters that, by virtue of what they mean, cannot portray transgenerational wealth transfer. They necessarily lack full human agency. It is not that they are simply stereotypes or one dimensional; it is that they are the kinds of characters to which the audience has been acculturated to know are absolutely limited. Vaudeville shows that featured these types, consequently, depended on an audience that knew, or were easily susceptible to learning, the flawed features of the characters. Minstrels, analogously, are invariably limited to roles as shadows, reflections, and deformed characters hiding behind masks—the mask functions as a double entendre. What the mask portrays is itself and what is behind it. Unlike other

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[3] The notion of "child abuse," for example, only exists within a field of moral emotions and categories that makes the concept of "abuse" something befitting children as a social kind; see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What*? (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Alain Locke, *Race Contact and Interracial Relations* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1992).

[4] Leonard Harris, "Honor, Eunuchs, and the Postcolonial Subject," in Emmanuel C. Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Company, 1997), 252-59; Leonard Harris, "Honor and Insurrection," in Bill E. Lawson, ed., *Frederick Douglass* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Company, 1999), 227-42; see also, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

performances that use masks, such as Kabuki or men playing the parts of women in Shakespearean drama, black-face minstrelsy is "black face" as a genre type, which means that the masked character and the *type of person* behind the mask—whether white, black, or otherwise—are to be understood by the audience as inferior.

Ganguro, which translates as "black face" in Japanese, is a pop culture phenomenon in which Japanese teens paint their faces black, as if modeling anyone from Amuro Namie, a tanned Okinawa singer, to more commonly known celebrities, such as Run-DMC or Mary J. Blige. They may also wear traditional geisha dresses or modern jeans. No one is likely, however, to mistake a ganguro for a coon because it would be a category mistake; one would have to assume that when someone is masked in black face that the category "Japanese" has the same meaning as the category "black." "Black" is a racial non-ethnic and non-national identifier, too often associated with traits of inferiority, docility, imbecilic demure, slovenly dress, dour attitude, and lazy behavior. That is, "black," unlike "Japanese," is associated with the traits that Bert Williams assiduously portrayed in his artistry as definitive of "black." Painted black lips on Japanese women or white paint on the foreheads of Aboriginal men have been considered beautiful. It is what the paint signifies in the public imagination that defines whether it conveys high status or lowly character virtue. All black-face minstrelsy points to is the portrayal of persons of lowly character virtue. When whites put on black face, the black face blackening represents the lowly, slovenly, and comedic. When blacks put on white face, the black face behind the mask is lowly, slovenly, and comedic. Thus, a black mask on a Japanese person may not indicate that a Japanese person as a racial kind is lowly; the black face could simply be comical, a fantastic monster, or a gleeful ghost. All black-face accoutrements are not minstrelsy. To be minstrelsy, a reasonably clear association must be made that black people are defective beings; all, if not each and every one, must be established as such for a performance to be minstrelsy.

Racial boundaries use, among other means, racial categories. The black-white binary categorically makes degeneracy surreptitiously encoded in the differentiation because, according to the American one-drop rule defining the black-white binary (i.e., one drop of "black blood" makes a person black), only two persons understood as "white" can parent another white person, while anyone with any "black blood" is black; blacks cannot ascend, but whites can. It is not possible to use the standard category definition and then "demonstrate" that black people are humanly the same as white people because, by definition, one is ascending and the other descending; equality is antithetical to the categories themselves. A category mistake would occur if one failed to understand that "black" is degenerative in this racialist way. To be antiracist or at least nonracial entails rejecting the ascendency and dependency of formation of the black-white binary.

A racial and cultural category mistake would occur if one places a family of items belonging to "Japanese" or "coloured" with the family of items belonging to "black." The boundaries between populations in the modern West are categorically restricted in a way that seems to rationalize the hoarding of assets, opportunities, and wealth among persons of the same race, making it appear natural and inevitable; it is certainly the case that these racial boundaries help make racism possible.[5] No one is likely to change his behavior or attitude by realizing that his unhappy fate—white or black—is portrayed well by a minstrel or gain a revelation that his unhappy fate is genuinely sad and, say, undeserving. The reason that members of an audience

[5] Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

watching a minstrel performance are not likely to become liberal through a revelation and have an epiphany motivated by its satire, parody, or subtle criticism is that the audience is not likely to make a category mistake.

Kabuki is acting because we know that there is an authentic agent behind the mask, just as we know that when watching a horror movie, there is no being that is the fantastic monster.[6] The audience can enjoy a horror movie with radically unbelievable monsters and feel duly scared because of the background beliefs that they bring with them to the movie—the appearances on the screen can be fantastic and elicit fright of an entertaining sort. We are scared by the fantasia, but not actually substantively frightened because there is no belief that the monster in the movie is real. No one rushes out of a theatre to call the police because Frankenstein is on the loose. With minstrelsy, there is a belief that the agents are real persons—their artistry and expertise are not to be confused with fantasia but seen as fantastic representations of the real being types behind the mask.

Bert Williams introduced what became his signature tune, "Nobody," in the musical comedy *Abyssinia*, first prominently performed in 1906. The plot involves a group of African-American winners of a lottery who travel to France and Abyssinia before returning home. They become embroiled in a local Abyssinian conflict but are eventually forgiven by King Menelik II, avoiding the brutal death normally endured by the king's enemies. The usual stock characters, charlatans, clever schemers, and grinning or demure clowns, exhibit the highest form of honor that their primordial beings allow—comedic buffoonery within a sloppy and disjointed story. "Nobody" received ovation after ovation and was performed at the Ziegfeld *Follies* in various skits that Williams presented. One of the reframes from "Nobody" reads:

> I ain't never got nothin' from nobody
> No time
> And until I get somethin' from somebody,
> Some time
> I don't intend to do nothin' for nobody
> No time[7]

"Same as You" contends that "Nobody" is not a coon song. It does not make explicit that the singer is stupid or slovenly. Rather, it is a tune that allows the audience to appreciate the depth of the singer's sorrow. If, however, "Nobody" is not a coon song, it is certainly a minstrel tune predicated on knowing that blacks are to be understood as lazy and beggarly. The singer "never got nothin' from nobody," as if he should expect something for free from the only "somebody" who would have anything to give him freely, and whites must be understood as that "somebody."

The sorrow of the slave, from the standpoint of the slave master, is never something to be deeply lamented or expected to end; rather, it is something to be understood as an intrinsic condition of the slave's kind, possibly shallowly lamented but not alienable. One necessary condition for money to be seen as representing value in the modern world is that the community

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[6] Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Leonard Harris, "The Horror of Tradition or How to Burn Babylon and Build Benin While Reading *A Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*," *Philosophical Forum*, 24 (Fall-Spring, 1992-1993), 1-3, 94-119.

[7] Allen, "Same As You," 25. *Abyssinia*, Scene Two, Music Division, LOC, 1906 version. 1905 version in Manuscript Division, Reg. No. 7746-7811, Copyright Office, Drama.

that produces money is valued as "trusted" beings. Even if an individual bearer of a particular country's money is not trusted, the money, as an objective item, remains valuable and trusted independent of its bearer because its value is conditioned on the trust placed in the community of its seal. Analogously, the community that minstrels symbolically represent is unworthy of trust because, as the great artistry of black-face minstrels work so diligently to convey, its members are slovenly and beggarly. A full appreciation of why Williams's clothes and demure count as comedic entails one to consider that he is representing a type of person who is slovenly, beggarly, and lazy. Thus, sorrow in Williams's "Nobody" is emblematic of the sort of sorrow we might feel for a community unworthy of trust—like the sorrow we feel for a jackass eaten by a lion; it is unfortunate, but it is the jackass's nature to be the potential victim of a wild animal. Arguably, contrary to *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*, minstrelsy has no potential liberating force; at best, it can only be a trite, critical commentary. And given that it embodies racist tendencies, its disruption of racial sensibilities is pathetically disruptive. Contrary to Eric Lott's suggestion that comedic disruption invites reflection, the disruption promotes reflection on a demeaning stereotype, which befits the agent of the stereotype, not a negation of the stereotype.[8]

An existentialist might claim that racists characteristically demonstrate bad faith by considering persons inferior because the racists know that all persons are equal; for instance, racists know the appropriate sort of sorrow they should feel, and when they fail to do so, this is evidence of bad faith. I have reservations about this view. But even if this were the case, people live quite comfortably with bad faith and can quite comfortably believe that persons behind a minstrel mask lack agency, vital emotions, free will, and intelligence befitting full persons. Associating the dramatic character of a minstrel and the moral character of the performer as having similar traits is not irrational. How critical a minstrel performance can be, since I argue later that minstrelsy lacks what is needed to be genuinely subversive, is constrained in its efficacy to some degree at least because of such reasonable associations.

"Same as You" contends that Williams's lyrics and performances were "presented in such a disarming and self-effacing manner that even his potential oppressors, mostly poor and working-class themselves, could see their own unlucky lives reflected in his."[9] A stanza from "Nobody" that Allen adopts for his 1986 musical comedy *Honkey Tonk Nights*, which featured the same sort of characters as *Abyssinia*—comedians, hoofers, a swaggering con man, a streetwise deal maker[10]—reads:

> My mama wanted me to work, but everyone knows there's no money in work, so I decided to be an actor and mingle with the crumbs and flakes and the upper crust. But it wasn't easy. In those days, pickings were slim for a man of my complexion.[11]

The language forms of minstrelsy rely on seeing black language usage as inferior imitations of normal white language usage, whether performed in 1906 or 1986. Early abolitionist, for example, imagined the noble slave speaking the King's English, with a bit of dialect, such as in

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[8] Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[9] Allen, "Same As You," 27.

[10] Note on "Honkey Tonk Nights" in *Sun Sentinel*.com, May 9, 1986.

[11] Allen, "Same As You," 27.

the 1768 English play by Charles Dibin, *The Padlock*, or in the abolitionist song, "Yankee Doodle" or "The Negro's Farewell to America":

> Now farewell my Massa my Missey adieu
> More blows or more stripes will me e'er take from you
> Or will me come hither or thither me go
> No help make you rich by de sweat of my brow
> Yankee doodle Yankee doodle dandy I vow
> Yankee doodle Yankee doodle bow wow wow.

Another song, "Lucy Neal," used courser dialect, bespeaking a poor slave further removed from acculturation than the slave who was versed in the King's English.

> Oh, dar's de wite man comin, To tear you from my side;
> Stand back you wite slave dealer, She is my betrothed bride.
> De poor nigger's fate is hard; De wite man's heart is stone.
> Dey part poor nigga from his wife, An brake dar happy home.

Both "The Negro's Farewell to America" and "Lucy Neal" appeal for pity for a powerless person. Black-face minstrelsy uses these dialect forms, more or less close to normal language usage but always as a deformed tortured dialect, to create grotesque images. Black-face minstrelsy does not make abolition or the end of racial segregation a primary theme. Rather, it focuses its lens on sneaky Zip Coons and lazy Sloppy Mammas.[12] The performance, the population it represents, and the character traits portrayed are reasonably associated. And if "unlucky lives" are what African Americans saw, then they understood "unlucky lives" to be normal lives and angst, misfortune, failure, abuse, and being loathed as conditions to be expected. Their expectations were pegged at a level always lower than others.

To pity is to care for persons suffering unfortunately due to harm befalling them, through their own fault or not. The status of persons who can pity others is normally higher than those they pity. One explanation is that persons requiring pity are entrapped in an unenviable position. Honor, for example, is what we reserve for individuals we hold in high regard to the point of trusting them. They are shown deference. Expressions of subtle discontent, however, may elicit pity. Persons we pity are not due deference but sympathy and help from those empowered to aid or believe themselves empowered to aid.

It is a misplaced emotion to honor those we pity, even if the pity is motivated by genuine feelings of care and benevolence. Persons giving pity are in conditions, or imagine themselves in conditions, free to give pity. We hope, at best, that the person receiving pity will be relived of his condition and live in a situation befitting his needs. If we pity a child suffering from cancer, for example, we hope that the child will be relieved of cancer and able to live a normal life. If we pity an enslaved carpenter, we hope that the carpenter will be freed from the condition of servitude and become able to pursue his profession. If we are moved by the sentiment of pity for a black-faced buffoon, we want the buffoon to be free. Freedom for a buffoon, the sort that befits his nature, is tantamount to the freedom expressed in Carl van Vechten's novel *Nigger*

[12] Scott L. Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), 321-23.

Heaven or the pornographic film *Niggers at Play*.[13] The freedom expressed by buffoons is unmitigated hedonism. No one works, saves, builds, or has a family. Play in *Nigger Heaven* consists of deriving pleasure from being a one-dimensional character. The unsuccessful effort to have a love affair between a librarian and an aspiring writer is eclipsed by the lunacy and hedonism that characterizes the highest form of spiritual ascendency possible for their kind. That is, "niggers" achieve the absolute highest forms of ascendancy possible given their infantile desires and limited cognitive abilities. The book's title is a name of the balcony in white churches where "niggers" were allowed to sit—their sanctuary. Minstrelsy attracts the sort of pity that itself reinforces the lowly status of the loathed.

When an individual representing a kind garners pity, such as a slave eliciting pity to encourage the abolition of slavery, we may transfer our pity from the individual to the group as a whole by normal means of kind association. We treat the individual as representative of their kind; each is replaceable by any other. This form of fallacious reasoning is a normal cognitive function. That we occasionally treat individuals as representatives of a group also means that we have no reason to honor the group. However, we can reasonably hope for a future in which the group achieves social equity. The highest form of kind ascendency for black-face minstrelsy is nigger heaven.

Another way to consider why black-face minstrelsy does not elicit healthy forms of pity is to think about the difference between the character of Moors in Giovanni Battista Giraldi's (Cinthio) tragedies and the Moor in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Shakespeare borrowed from Cinthio's tragedies. Moors in Elizabethan England were North Africans from the Barbary Coast. Cinthio's Moors had a proclivity toward jealousy, excessive passion, and rash behavior.

Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello* is the fair and gentle Italian daughter of a nobleman, who disobeys her father's wishes to stay away from the dark, and thereby foreboding, vile, aggressive, and emotionally undisciplined foreigner, Othello. Othello becomes a Shakespearean tragic hero. Othello recognizes at the end of the play his mistake in distrusting Desdemona and listening to the deceiver, Iago, who convinced him that she was unfaithful. Othello atones for killing Desdemona by taking his own life, thereby establishing that he has honor. Cinthio's Moors never evince honorable behavior, nor do they entail an honorable character.

Elizabethan theater allows for the possibility of characters to express different moral traits and personal virtues. Cinthio's Moor, for example, can be without honor, but Shakespeare's Othello can be honorable because Elizabethan theater allows warriors, kings, or clowns to portray a range of types within what is understood to be warrior-like, kingly, or clownish. In order to understand an Elizabethan performance, the audience knows that a scene change means a break in the action, but that the action returns as a continuation of an earlier theme. Analogously, with a minstrel performance the audience understands, or is encouraged to understand, western black-white binary oppositions and the cultural meanings associated with that binary. Few performances of Shakespeare's *Othello* in the twentieth century, for example, have used an actual Moor in the role of Othello. One reason for this is that in the modern imagination of race, Moors are "black," and blacks are sub-Saharan Africans, Afro-Europeans, and African Americans. A modern western audience would be bewildered by a light-skinned person with an Arabic accent being referred to as black; that was Cinthio's and Shakespeare's Moor. The category "black" for the modern western audience is trapped in a black-white binary.

[13] Carl van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926). This novel was translated into four different languages three years after its initial publication.

There can be no Othello in black-face minstrelsy because any minstrel warrior, king, or clown is some form of buffoon. Buffoons can only express an honor befitting a fool. Consequently, at best, a discontent buffoon is likely to elicit pity, befitting a buffoon, and by association, buffoonish pity of the population that the buffoon symbolically represents.

Certainly, minstrelsy has been used by blacks to display their artistry incipiently to poke fun at whites. This use, however, fails to help justify minstrelsy as a genre. It fails in this way because the incipient critique requires one to presuppose that black people are not substantively *conceivable* as inherently defective.

In order to consider some individual minstrels to be other than buffoonish, we must conceive minstrelsy as only entailing buffoonery, not defined by buffoonery, allowing for exceptions because minstrelsy is not synonymous with buffoonery. Sadly, minstrelsy is defined as buffoonery, and therefore no exceptions are possible. Minstrelsy, thus, always makes it possible substantively to conceive of black people as inferior. The tropes, figures, relations, and terms of minstrelsy embed inferiority into the genre; there is no minstrelsy genre without black people being depicted as inferior. Minstrelsy as a critique is not tantamount to a substantive subversion because the parody is entrapped and constrained in categories that the parody is intended to destroy. Substantive subversion requires one to use ways of thinking and categorizing that do not reproduce the object of rejection.

Using minstrelsy to convey cultural criticism, as in *Bamboozle*, requires the use of an architectonic of western racialization. Once all of the racial formations and cultural information, such as the names of cities and the meaning of such terms as darkie, nigger, buffoon, and gestures, such as slumping heads and shuffling along, are imposed, then it is possible to say that the use of "cracker" to describe a poor white person is an incipient critique, although a useless one for the purpose of subversion. The objective of subversion is to re-present or destroy its conceptual target. In so doing, it should not reproduce the target. *Bamboozle* can convey a criticism of racism, but it cannot critique (challenge fundamental assumptions) nor be subversive. It fails to be subversive because it uses the tropes of race (black-white divide, "nigger" as an acceptable label for heroes, etc.). *Bamboozle* requires that the audience knows, or learns, that it is to conceive of black people as inferior in order to appreciate the comedy, artistry, and pathos of the performers.

Work, for minstrels, is always something to be avoided, even if they are, as performers, working—as in *Abyssinia* or elected officials in the *Birth of Nation*. Seeing one's unfortunate plight in Williams's unfortunate plight cannot occur unless one imagines that there is a "plight" for a coon. The stanzas from "Nobody" portray the character traits of the people that the attire, make-up, and speech are intended to represent—blacks as slovenly, lazy, melancholy, and dour. The sentimental tones expressed by Bert Williams are ones highlighting these character traits. There were certainly minstrel performers and performances that were intentionally, and unintentionally, critical of minstrelsy, alienation, and racism. Such performances promoted the idea that white supremacy was contrived and that the actor was using available codes to convey existential angst, individual artistry, or independence, despite his apparent self effacement.

In David Krasner's book, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre*, there are no cases in which the author analyzes the beliefs of minstrel men and women who considered themselves and other blacks to be inherently inferior.[14] Rather, the performers and authors of minstrel works are often considered to be engaged in a grand hoax.

[14] David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

This is a form, I believe, of sheer racial romanticism. The chapter "Have You Ever Seen Anyone Stick So Close to A Cracker? Parody, Romance, and History in Williams's and Walker's *Abyssinia*" contends that "*Abyssinia* stands at a cultural divide between minstrel buffoonery and Black Nationalism."[15] George Walker and Bert Williams, as Jas and Ras, respectively, are African Americans touring Africa. Africa is portrayed as a pathetically underdeveloped location. Yet, the author finds some "subversive" commentaries, which makes the play a combination of Black Nationalism and buffoonery. Here is one:

> Jas: What's the duty of a philoso-, philoso-
> Ras: Philosopher
> Jas: Well what's his duty?
> Ras: To look on the bright side of other people's troubles when you haven't any of your own.
> Jas: (Shaking his hand violently) You're right, you're right.
> Ras: Now [that] we understand each other. I'll let you into a little secret.
> Jas: Before you tell me that secret, give me one of the crackers you've got in your pocket.[16]

"Cracker" is the name for poor whites. So using "cracker" is taken as "subversive" by the author because it is not just a cookie but a type of person that receives a negative connotation. However, none of this "subversion" makes sense unless one has been acculturated into modern American racial codes, and none of it is suggestive of the need to destroy anything. It certainly has nothing to do with encouraging a black person to own property, build cars, save money, communally control waterways and roads, or establish a nation. Mentioning "cracker" as a poor white is not a condemnation of poor-white-initiated racism but, at best, a slight toward poor whites and a pathetic boast by a character equally due a slight. "Cracker" is derogatory, but "crackers" remain fully human, and "nigger" remains derogatory and inferior. The slight can never change the conditions of staging because the precondition for the performance is that the performers present themselves and their kind as eternally subservient. Audiences ignorant of the history of minstrelsy must become educated into modern, and western, race hatred. There were certainly plenty of performers, who portrayed dumb, feces-eating collies, lying and stingy Jews, dirty, idiotic Welsh, and stupid, drunk Irish, who exhibited great artistry. But I see few entertainment industries that remain profitable by staging such performances or authors who contend that such performers are due our high regard because they had no choice, and we should therefore applaud and advertise their artistry as laudatory.

The non-western world is not likely to appreciate fully what is meant by a minstrel performance unless it learns the rudiments of what is necessary for its mode of conveying meaning. Non-westerners must engage in cognition using a black-white binary. The Ba Benzele of the Republic of Congo, the Rana Tharu of Nepal, the Palaung of Burma, or the Ainu of Japan, for example, cannot know that a minstrel performance includes a moment of subversive parody or satire to combat antiblack racism unless they become acculturated to western racial codes. The African audience has acculturated the minstrel tradition, with Bert Williams's help, as one in which black inferiority is a necessary feature of meaning.

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[15] *Ibid*., "'Have You Ever Seen Anyone Stick So Close to A Cracker?': Parody, Romance, and History in Williams's and Walker's *Abyssinia*," 99-115.

[16] *Ibid*., 102.

In May of 2004, I watched the Cape Coloured Minstrels, or rather, colored men from Cape Town, South Africa, play minstrel tunes and do a "jig" for tourists. Thirty feet away, I listened to boot dancing Africans, a dance using the tall rubber boots worn in mines to make rhythmic, dance-created sounds, and another thirty feet away I listened to Zulus singing Zulu songs popularized by the group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The minstrel show was the only show that required a necessary background of assuming black inferiority as a condition for understanding the performance.

There is no reason why anyone should present themselves as inferior to perform for a living in hopes of scrupulously fighting antiblack racism any more than anyone should promote Nazism to demonstrate Jewish artistry. Persons made a living as spies within the African National Congress, and people make a living as sellers of cocaine throughout Africa; I see no reason to applaud such persons because they demonstrate expertise, artistry, intelligence, and skill, any more than I see a reason to applaud contemporary minstrels, especially since the options available to them are vastly greater than the options available to their forebears. If there is a reason to applaud the artistry of minstrels during slavery and shortly thereafter, I see no reason to applaud such artistry among contemporary minstrel troops.

Pickaninnies, samboes, and golliwogs in twentieth-century America were popular images in children's books and cartoons. Whether via minor productions, such as the *Isle of Pingo Pongo* (1938), or major productions by important companies, such as Warner Brothers, Walt Disney, MGM, Merry Melodies, Looney Tunes, and R.K.O., cartoons for adults and children have been effective tools of acculturation to self-loathing for black youth, disdain for black persons, and attitudes of white youth superiority. We are never told, however, in *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre* that Bert Williams or any minstrel performer promoted a sense of inferiority in black children and a false sense of superiority in non-black children. The book portrays minstrelsy as responsible for the subversive features of its performances, motivated by pious intentions. As is unanimously agreed upon by the authors, perpetuation of the image of black persons as stupid, lazy, licentious, and untrustworthy is caused by antiblack racism; however, minstrels remain irresponsible agents. That is, they are not considered responsible participants in promoting a sense of inferiority in black children, let alone contributing to the popularity of "dead black baby" jokes or demeaning portraitures of black children in children's books. The psychological terror suffered by innocent children from the minstrels performances or the informal legitimacy of the degradation of black children through such well known minstrel-inspired images of "black ink as nigger milk" (a black child in water) or the animalization of black children (black children in black face playing with alligators) is simply indefensible, and minstrelsy performers and performances substantively contribute to race-based pedophilia.

Full persons are normally considered responsible, to some degree, for the unintended consequences of their actions as well as unreasonable omissions. It is arguable, although I do not argue this here, that the horrible influence on children warrants contemporary suppression of minstrelsy, despite the great artistry by the performers or the artistry of the performance.

Traitors, whether a Pope or infidel, eternally suffer in the lowest section of hell (level nine) in Dante's *Divine Comedy*; adulterers in level two are swept off a cliff the way they were swept away by their passions. But there are no jesters or harlequins in hell for being jesters or harlequins. The reason is simple. Jesters and harlequins have no wills. Failure to accord any unseemly responsibility to minstrel performers, other than puerile, pious intentions, leaves the

reader with an image of not only emotionally infantile actors, but that of the persons behind the masks being as banal as the character types they portray.

It is not ironic that despite Marcus Garvey's black nationalism and staunch fight against minstrelsy, a famous South African minstrel troupe would be named after his failed Black Star Line passenger ship company. The Black Star Line Coons, who parodied the failed steamship company created by Marcus Garvey's Universal Improvement Negro Association for the repatriation of blacks, practices free association amidst the variations within literary and dramatic genres. As Robert Nowatzki argues in *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy*, the appropriation of images flows freely between numerous antithetical causes.[17] The Black Star Line Coons relied on a prevailing racial assumption that racial kinds are cultural kinds, and thus a business created by a member of an inferior kind would exhibit the traits of that kind, such as coon behavior. By simple kind association, a business venture initiated by a black person is comical. Accepting racial categories created by whites, within the practical, daily ways in which cultural codes are transmitted, necessarily requires the entrapment of all the terror that those codes entail. Afrocentric pornography and Eurocentric pornography differ in at least one way: the first includes minstrelsy performances, and the latter characteristically does not because that would require establishing cultural codes, where none are popularly in the audience's imagination, in which whites are marked as inherently inferior. But everyone entrapped in the dominant racial codes of the modern West understands that blacks dressed in ancient Egyptian clothes or African clothes of no particular group, if also in black-face minstrelsy, are buffoons. Whites so dressed and acting would likely elicit curiosity because they are not, as a category, already marked as the kind of beings that could be inferior.

On the second of January, annually, minstrels troop on to the stage at Green Point, just outside of Cape Town, South Africa, in a nearly one-hundred-year-old procession, the Cape Town Minstrel Festival.[18] The names of revelers in South Africa have included: the Mississippi Nigger Minstrels, the Glamour Boys, the Penny Pincher All Stars, the Young Pennsylvanian Crooning Minstrels, the Young Happy Bostons, the Fabulous Playboys, the New World Classics, and the African Zooks. There are a few troupes with "coloured" in their names, like the 1908 reveling Dandy Coloured Coons or Traveling Coloured Coons. There have also appeared troupes with evocative names, such as: the Alabama Sunflower Gentlemen Darkies (1964 revelers), the Young Golden Lily Minstrels (1973), the Golden Star Dixies (1966), and the Athlone Cotton Field Darkies (1940). The Cape Town Coons were just that—coons, not pretending to be coons for the purpose of making a living while surreptitiously fighting antiblack racism. And the Mississippi Darkies were advertising what they had to sell—black buffoonery and not buffoonery in black. This is so because it is not possible to have minstrelsy buffoonery in white. Nearly all of the black entertainers perform for free; they are proud darkies, coons, mammies, and buffoons, giving performances as close to authentic performances by "niggers" who exported their culture from ships docked at Cape Town ports at the turn of the century or touring performers influenced by Bert Williams's performance in *In Dahomey*, a musical

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[17] Robert Nowatzki, *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

[18] Martin Denis-Constant, "The Burden of the Name: Classifications and Constructions of Identity: The Case of the 'Coloureds' in Cape Town (South Africa)," in *African Philosophy*, 21 (Volume 13, 2000), 99-124; Gugu Hlongwane, "What Has Modernity To Do With It?: Camouflaging Race in the 'New' South Africa," *Journal of Literary Studies*, 18.1-2 (June 2002), 111-31.

comedy performed in such grand locations as Buckingham Palace, London (1903), and the Grand Opera House, New York (1904). In a series of skits, imbecilic Africans chant in an unintelligible "African" language and then switch into nigger dialect, revealing their true being—another form of imbecile. They find a pot of gold, travel to Africa, become aristocrats, czars, and chiefs and eventually return to New York. The Black Star Line Coons have a cultural association with the kind of coon musicals Bert Williams spent his life performing, such as *A Senegambian Carnival*, and *A Lucky Coon* or *Sons of Ham*. Stereotypical conceptions of blacks as inferior racial kinds, as ubiquitous generalized kinds without religious or character differentiations, and blacks as quintessentially African, are conveyed by such musical comedies as *In Dahomey*. Some of the generalizations that seem to work well for Afrocentric nationalism, for instance, Africans as a common kind, also work well for antiblack racism.

The annual Cape Town Minstrel Festival, replete with fully black, really colored, and honorary white (African Americans legally and socially considered honorary white under apartheid), is a grand carnival generating significant local and tourist business. Adding insult to injury, as in the past in the United States, the large businesses gaining from minstrelsy are owned by whites.

Certainly, some minstrel performers may be self regarding and others may be self deprecators. However, minstrelsy in public forums thereby is not warranted by pointing to those that are self regarding because the art form requires a performance to show inferiors as buffoons, bums, whores, etc. Establishing that some minstrel performers were or are self regarding is like establishing that some white colonial farmers who raped young girls in Rhodesia under the rule of Cecil B. Rhodes were intelligent or that American slave owners often were loving fathers. Being parental and intelligent in no way determines the worthiness of either the performance or the social roles they performed. Being talented does not warrant for how the talent is being used. If the intent is to prove that minstrels are really human because they had artistry or loved freedom, this seems like an indefensible reasoning strategy. People who are not freedom loving, are really servile, and have no artistic skills are still humans. If all minstrels are self deprecators and pathetic artisans, that in no way affects their humanity. Minstrelsy is a sad feature of black history, and its influence is an utter catastrophe. The humanity of the performers is neither confirmed nor denied by this, so long as it is possible to see the performers as people who make choices under duress; some of those choices are horrible. It seems to me that their humanity should remain stable whether or not we see them as making horrible choices or as making great choices under duress.

Human history is littered with millions, if not billions, of dead artistic types. It is not clear that there could be evolution without the death of some art forms and types. Each new generation would be trapped in the imagination of their forebears if some of their forebears' art forms and types did not die. G. W. F. Hegel and Edward W. Blyden are wrong: history is not a perfect cumulative record of human consciousness, nor is there a progressive collective consciousness moving invariably toward true self consciousness.[19] Rather, a great deal of history is completely destroyed, ignored, and relegated to, at best, archival dustbins, nowhere adding to the consciousness of new generations, forever and everywhere lost, nowhere publicly present, and nowhere of significance in human life.

Minstrelsy requires, not just allows, the conception of black persons as inferior. And if a performance elicits pity, it is unhealthy; if lament, that lament does not recommend equality; and

[19] Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race (*London: W. B. Whittingham & Co., 1888).

if existential angst, sadness, sorrow, or shame, the care expressed befits the category or kind portrayed by the character of the minstrel. We should be saddened by the many trials and tribulations of minstrel artists and laud their great tenacity for surviving in the face of interminable odds, but I see no reason to make the type of art they perform enviable. We have reason to believe that black-face minstrelsy is not likely to motivate the audience to condemn the servitude of African people unless members of the audience consistently make category mistakes or fail to learn that the performers are intended to present and represent inferior persons by definition. Minstrelsy, intrinsically defined as the performance of and by buffoons, is on a field of moral emotions that make it necessary to see black people as inferior. Some forms of performance, and in this case minstrelsy, should be forever relegated to, at best, such historical recording resources as archives, dissertations, and scholarly treatises.

Minstrelsy should die a quiet, unsung, death.

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