

2019

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Recommended Citation

West, Amber, "Raceless Racism: Blackface Minstrelsy in American Puppetry" (2019). *Living Objects: African American Puppetry Essays*. 14.
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/ballinst_catalogues/14

Raceless Racism: Blackface Minstrelsy in American Puppetry

by Amber West, MFA, PhD

Introduction

The research I share today started when I was a doctoral student in English here at the University of Connecticut taking Bart Roccoberon's class on the history of American puppetry. It started with a desire to understand the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy for myself as a white person, an American, an educator, a lover of puppetry, and an artist who collaborates with puppeteers. I am excited to share this panel with Bart Roccoberon, Ben Fisler, and Paulette Richards. One of the most valuable sources I had for my research was Ben Fisler's unpublished dissertation on this topic. I am thankful for the opportunity this symposium is providing to continue conversations in person that I have been having in my head for so long, and to begin new ones.

The blackface minstrel show was the first distinctly American form of theater and popular entertainment. Some scholars even describe it as a precursor to, or the first "pre-tech" form, of American mass media, because of the power it had to disseminate stereotypes and shape culture. Despite enormous popularity during its heyday, primarily 1830-1930, the understandable discomfort and shame many Americans feel about blackface minstrelsy has hindered research and documentation over the years, stifling awareness of its significance during its time and its legacy today.

Within existing published minstrelsy scholarship, there is little or no discussion of the significant ways in which the tradition came to dominate American puppetry. At the same time, among contemporary puppeteers, this difficult history is often avoided through an insistence that puppets are raceless (Cooper 8). Perhaps more so than any other art form, puppetry has the potential to illuminate the socially constructed nature of race, to help us dissolve categories created to divide and control us. In the Western tradition, however, often just the opposite has occurred, with puppeteers disseminating

racist stereotypes in the name of audience appeal and upholding tradition. Today I will discuss the origins and influence of blackface minstrelsy on American puppetry in hopes of opening up dialogue regarding issues of racism and the performance of race in the art form.

Origins of Blackface Minstrelsy

Although mythologized to have black Southern roots, American minstrelsy began in the North, “evolv[ing] out of the racial fantasies of northern urban whites” (Engle xv) and the struggles of working-class European immigrants in the New World. The earliest performances involved a lone white male in blackface, such as Thomas “Daddy” Rice, who is often credited with inventing the form. In 1832 Rice, a young working-class New Yorker who had escaped the Bowery slums for a life in showbiz, returned home from a trip West with a new routine he claimed was inspired by watching an enslaved black man dancing as he cleaned out some stables in Louisville. The old man’s name, Rice claimed, was Jim Crow (Strausbaugh 58). Rice’s hit song “Jump Jim Crow” made him America’s first “pop star,” while his extreme make-up (burnt cork) and costume (threadbare rags) constituted an exaggerated caricature. Rice’s caricature helps demonstrate the ways that blackface minstrelsy is rooted, in part, in Western clowning traditions like “the harlequin of the commedia dell’arte, the clown of English pantomime [and] perhaps the ‘blackman’ of English folk drama” (Lott 22). Strausbaugh discusses “the social function of the clown as an Outsider, an Other, a creature of difference,” and why Rice might have chosen an African American slave for his clown character: “Who in nineteenth-century America was more of an Other than the Negro? [T]he clown was allowed to say and do things no one else could ... [to] satirize and make political comments” (68). In the early 1800s, many laborers in the north, particularly Irish and Scots who came to the New World as indentured servants, identified with black people, beside whom they worked and lived. In these earliest incarnations of American blackface minstrelsy, the surface satire and parody of black people also masked a working-class critique of the white upper class and “urbane East Coast gentility” (77).

In addition to traditions of blackface clowns who “are as often lovable butts of humor as devious producers of it” (Lott 22), American blackface minstrelsy is rooted in

the Western fascination with the Other. In England, actors and courtiers who played Moors had worn masks since at least the early sixteenth century, and Ben Jonson's early seventeenth-century court plays, *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Masque of Beauty*, are the first recorded instances of players actually darkening their skin. Queen Anne, wife of James I, asked Jonson to write a masque in which she and her ladies could "play black" in 1605 (Rogin 19), and Shakespeare's "sooty devil," Othello, from 1610 is another of our earliest recorded examples (Paskman 7)¹. Blackface has also long been utilized in European folk traditions such as charivari and mumming plays celebrating solstice. The blackface tradition, then, grew out of relations between medieval Christians and Moors, as well as colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade, while also tapping into longstanding Western European notions such as the superiority of light over darkness, the spiritual darkness attributed to non-Christians, and human knowledge as the antidote to the primitive darkness of the natural world. As Michael Rogin explains, "Curiosity about these new peoples, the trying on of their identities as Europeans imagined them, was part of the exploitative interaction between Europeans, Africans, and inhabitants of the New World ... Queen Anne's desire to play a blacked-up role dramatized a curious sympathy for Africans, an effort to imagine oneself inside the skin of an exotic people" (20). Though curiosity and sympathy are important aspects of blackface, the form remains deeply rooted in the racist ridicule and subjugation that were necessary ideological justifications of colonialism. Blackface and all its baggage thus journeyed to America with the Europeans.

By the 1840s, solo minstrel song-and-dance acts like Rice's grew into group performances often described as "Ethiopian operas" performed by "Ethiopian Delineators." The Virginia Minstrels, a New York City-based quartet, are credited with adding the now-infamous plantation setting, and creating skits to accompany the music and dance. The plantation setting signals a shift in minstrelsy to a focus on depicting "authentic" Southern black plantation life around the same time that Jacksonian Democracy was causing European immigrant workers in Northern cities "to see Black

¹ *Sic*; Paskman is incorrect in placing Shakespeare's *Othello* in 1610; scholars agree that the play was performed at court on November 1, 1604. See G. Blakemore Evans, et al., eds., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), 1198; cf. David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Seventh ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 1150. [Ed.]

[people] less as allies and increasingly as competitors or even enemies” (Strausbaugh 90). Blackface minstrel troupes began to compete by marketing themselves as “more authentically black” than one another. Their depictions of plantation life were often highly idealized, relating to minstrelsy’s role in upholding ideologies that justified racial subjugation, as blackface had done for centuries. The Christy Minstrels, led by Edwin Christy, eclipsed the Virginia Minstrels in popularity, greatly increasing the number of cast members and solidifying the minstrel show into a three-act format around 1846 (Engle xviii). The Christy Minstrels became so popular in the United States and England that the name “Christy” became synonymous with minstrelsy. Numerous traveling minstrel shows unaffiliated with Christy appropriated his name to legitimate their acts. It is the “Christy-style” minstrel show that is still best known today, and that had the greatest influence on American puppetry.

Minstrelsy’s Takeover of American Puppetry

Unaware that its European origins made this a homecoming, blackface minstrelsy arrived in Europe as America’s “hot new export” when troupes like the Virginia and Christy Minstrels began touring internationally. Fisler explains that it is this “oddly circuitous cultural exchange that initially brought blackface to the puppet theatre” (53). British puppeteer William John Bullock created the first puppet minstrel show, inspired by the Christy Minstrels’ sensationally successful mid-century tours of England. In Bullock’s minstrel show, the marionettes were “strung in two tandem groups, one on each side of [the interlocutor]; he, Tambo, and Bones ... would be separate so that each could rise and cavort by himself. ... When a specialty dance took place in front of them[,] all could be hung so that they would [appear to] sit and watch. Thus two or three puppeteers could animate eleven to fifteen puppets” (McPharlin 159). Bullock’s marionette minstrels received rave reviews after opening in St. James Hall in London in 1872 (Fisler 34). Bullock distinguished his show from numerous other puppet troupes touring at this time by creating a three-part format that included *fantoccini* (a series of spectacular trick puppets), a miniature minstrel show, and an extravaganza in the style of English pantomime (McPharlin 159). His minstrels performed some songs that sentimentally denounced the now-outlawed slavery (e.g., “Hunkey Dorum,” “Old

Runaway Jack”), and others (e.g. “The Old Nigger,” “We’ll All Skedaddle”) that idealized plantation life (Fisler 44-8). In this way, Bullock’s puppets encapsulated the contradictions of minstrelsy, a form that was widely and diversely practiced, often in ways that justified institutionalized racism but at other times critiqued it. By the 1870s, the name “Christy” had become synonymous with minstrelsy; by calling his puppets “Automatic *Christy* Minstrels,” Bullock tapped into the phenomenon for his own marketing benefit.

Though the name makes it easy to attribute the relationship between puppetry and minstrelsy entirely to Bullock’s “borrowings” from Christy, Fisler reminds us that the much older English Punch and Judy tradition is yet another branch in the roots of the nineteenth-century phenomenon he describes as “puppet minstrelsy” or “blackface puppetry.” He is referring to one of the many stock characters from Punch and Judy, “a black servant who tries to silence Punch’s incessant ringing of a bell. ... Like nearly all his fellow supporting characters, the servant is made a fool by the protagonist [Punch]” (Fisler 21). This unnamed, bristly-bearded black servant is sometimes referred to as the Moor or “Shallaballa,” the word he says when fighting with Punch. After 1850, however, this puppet character was regularly referred to as “Jim Crow” in Punch and Judy shows, and would sometimes even dance and sing Rice’s popular number. Fisler argues that by changing Shallaballa to Jim Crow, English puppeteers (consciously or unconsciously) transformed him from “an African foreign resident to ... an American blackface clown,” while also setting the stage for future borrowings and interactions between minstrelsy and puppetry on both sides of the Atlantic in the following decades. Punch and Judy thus influences the minstrel marionette tradition, according to Fisler, by “associating the blackface puppet with dancer/singer, exotic other, and object of ridicule, all fundamental essences of blackface puppetry” (22).

Fueled by his huge success in England, Bullock brought his Royal Marionettes to New York City in 1873, where he again opened to rave reviews. The *Daily Graphic* said, “The minstrels give songs and choruses in true burnt-cork abandon” (qtd. in McPharlin 165). For nearly two years, Bullock toured his marionette minstrels to such cities as Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco, making an astounding six thousand dollars per month (Fisler 52). Similar to what had occurred with the (human) Christy Minstrels,

Bullock's Royal Marionettes were such a phenomenon in England and America that other troupes quickly began following his highly successful format. The words "Bullock's" and/or "Royal" became synonymous with marionettes, and the inclusion of a minstrel show became standard puppetry protocol. The Middleton Brothers, for example, an English family who had performed with marionettes for generations, commonly presented a three-part variety show in America during this period that opened "with a Negro minstrel first part, with nine characters" (qtd. in Bell 18). In 1882 Daniel Meader, a San Francisco prop maker who had earlier performed with McDonough and Earnshaw, made his own Royal Marionettes, which included "a five-member group of black-faced minstrel brass musicians in formal dress, as well as stereotyped 'darkies' in work clothes, familiar to the white audiences of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (Bell 27). Like many other forms of American art, entertainment, and culture more broadly, puppetry was overrun with minstrel shows well into the twentieth century.

For those interested in more details about the relationship between puppetry and minstrelsy, I strongly recommend Fislser's dissertation, available through Google Scholar and cited here. Tracing blackface puppetry from Bullock to the end of the Federal Theater Project in 1939, Fislser argues that Paul McPharlin started a trend in early twentieth-century American puppetry in which puppeteers made distinctions between exaggerated blackface minstrel puppet characters, which they used for lowbrow puppetry (i.e., lighter themes, clowning, and farce), and more realistic-looking (albeit exoticized) representations of black people, which were often used for more "highbrow" or "high art" puppet shows (i.e., serious themes and drama). "The less the puppeteers wish their 'negro puppets' to play the fool," Fislser argues, "the more likely they are to try to shape their vestiges within the boundaries of photographic realism" (13). He also calculates that ten percent of American puppeteers adapted Helen Bannerman's 1900 children's book, *Little Black Sambo*, to the puppet stage during the 1930s (189), and that twenty-five percent of American puppeteers depended on blackface puppets for their livelihood in 1934 (175). Particularly in puppetry produced in rural frontier communities or for children's audiences, blackface puppetry "was as widely circulated as puppetry itself" (186). Many puppeteers continued to "revive the form for the delight of collective recognition" (185),

unwittingly prolonging damaging stereotypes of African-Americans in the name of tradition and nostalgia, particularly through dissemination to schoolchildren.

Is Puppet Minstrelsy Inevitable Today?

Reading Fisler's work, I began to question whether every African American puppet created or operated by a white puppeteer should be considered a blackface puppet. Fisler rightly identifies exaggeration as one of the fundamental essences of blackface, but I am concerned that things get problematic when utilizing exaggeration to assess puppet minstrelsy, since exaggeration is fundamental to so much of puppetry in all of its various forms. For example, self-identified white puppeteer Ralph Chessé adapted Eugene O'Neill's drama, *The Emperor Jones*, to the puppet stage in 1936. He based his design for the main character on Charles Gilpin, the African American actor he observed famously playing the role on the human stage. Though Fisler describes this as puppet minstrelsy, due to the puppet's having some exaggerated features, I argue that Chessé's design may have less to do with adhering to minstrel traditions and more with creating an aesthetic to best embody the uneasy, contradictory mix of expressionism and realism in O'Neill's drama. In this light, Chessé's production appears an ambitious attempt to represent African Americans in puppetry that confronts issues of racism and oppression, an act of resistance to the puppet minstrelsy trend of his time rather than a reproduction of it.

To take a more recent example: there's a puppet-based hip-hop video that helps to demonstrate the potential for white puppeteers to contribute useful representations of African Americans, even through the use of the most crude and exaggerated puppets. *Your Parents' Cocaine* is a hip-hop song by Oakland, California-based revolutionary rap group The Coup, led by African American rapper and film director Boots Riley, from their 2012 album, *Sorry to Bother You*. In his lyrics, Riley uses acerbic satire to raise awareness about race- and class-based disparities in America's War on Drugs. The video for the song was made by a group of largely white puppet artists who perform by the name Eat the Fish Presents. Are the puppets in this music video grotesque and exaggerated? Yes. Were they built and operated by white puppeteers with some of them representing African Americans? Yes. The purple puppet with a small afro, for example,

is a representation of Riley himself. Should this video thus be considered puppet minstrelsy? I would argue no.

In this case, the puppeteers strengthen and support Riley's critique of vast socioeconomic disparities in the criminal justice system through their visual storytelling, particularly their choice to use crude, exaggerated puppets with non-human skin tones. Within the story told in the lyrics and visuals, Riley's character is an entertainer who leads a band hired to play for a rich kid's house party. Toward the end of the video, Riley (i.e. the purple puppet) is beaten and arrested by the police, despite being the only one at the party not breaking the law. The puppetry in this video supports and extends Riley's message about how intersections of racism and classism have led to unjust enforcement of drug laws in America, and thus to the mass incarceration of poor people of color. Though this example by no means guarantees that blackface puppet minstrelsy is permanently extinct, I believe it speaks to the power of puppets, and of thoughtful puppeteers, to critique racism and other forms of social injustice.

Conclusion

Despite some small disagreements with Fisler, I find his work vital as the only thorough examination of the use of blackface by countless American puppeteers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including heavyweights like David Lano, Paul McPharlin, Tony Sarg, Remo Bufano, and Ralph Chessé. His dissertation also contains an impressive variety of photographs and other images from the period. Fisler makes clear that minstrelsy is an extremely prevalent and significant, but often unacknowledged, tradition within American puppetry. For those interested in issues of race and racism in contemporary American puppetry, I would also recommend another unpublished dissertation, this one by Heidi Louise Cooper, who begins with the many "how-to" books about puppet building published in the 1920s and 1930s, and examines a variety of racial representations, from children's shows such as *Sesame Street* to abstract puppetry for adult audiences by Hanne Tierney and Basil Twist. Cooper writes:

[T]he desire to claim puppets as unraced [or 'raceless'] is a reflection of the discomfort which many puppeteers feel when trying to represent human diversity

... working in a folk medium with a history of racist images. [But] representations of humanity ... almost always have the potential to read in terms of race and ethnicity. ... It is ultimately more useful to recognize this fact of representation and incorporate it consciously and responsibly into one's art work than to try to de-racialize the medium. (8)

I would add that the fact that Fisler and Cooper's dissertations remain unpublished may speak to our continued hesitancy to grapple with these difficult issues, making their work (and this Symposium) all the more important and necessary.

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