
Identities Masked and Unmasked: Racial Politics in the 19th-Century American Theater

Gabe C. Alfieri

The United States of America—as a nation, an economy, and a culture—was founded upon race confrontation. The first great experiment in European democracy began with the seizing of territory from the native Americans in the name of manifest destiny, and the violent importation of slave labor from Africa. In the case of the native Americans, their ghettoization, and the decimation of their cultures, to a large extent allowed the newly self-proclaimed nation to sidestep the process of assimilation that otherwise typically attends conquest and empire. When, through the course of the nineteenth century, new ethnic and cultural groups arrived in significant numbers, from the Caribbean, Asia, Europe, and elsewhere, each presented a new set of challenges to the White-Anglo-European hegemony of early U. S. culture. No racial confrontation, however, was more profoundly formative to the new nation than that between

the Euro-American and Afro-American within its own citizenry. From before the Revolution, African Americans formed part of the country's very fabric, brought forcibly in vast numbers to live and work here, and White America could not, as it had with native Americans, avoid confronting the subculture of the Black "other" that lived among it, had long worked its fields and factories, fought in its battles, and, from within, confronted it with its own moral contradictions. At the same time that White America strove to define itself in relation to the European progeniture against which it had recently stood in revolt, Black Americans groped to find not only their own cultural identity as "Africans" (a complex New-World construct in its own right), but their place within the dominant but still fluid White culture where they found themselves, in increasing numbers, free.

One of the loci for such confrontation was the American theater, where a changing terrain of racial identity and representation demanded complex navigation both on stage and off. In his landmark 1971 study, *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Huggins suggested that "the theatrical stage itself, more than any other cultural phenomenon, opens a perspective onto the pathology of American race relations [. . .] which persists despite all reform."¹ More recently, Marvin McAllister wrote, "The country's emerging theaters [. . .] provided coping mechanisms or processing laboratories through which American social identities could be constructed and transmitted."² Racial politics necessarily informed and in many ways defined such processes, as the fledgling nation struggled for those identities on multiple fronts. The carving out of a viable Afro-American social, cultural, and political space within Euro-American society, entailed

¹ Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 245.

² Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies & Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African & American Theater* (Chapel Hill, NC & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 4.

multiple layers of mimesis, performance, and identity experimentation in daily life, some of which was mirrored on the theatrical stage, all of which involved complex political negotiations of public relations, economics, social interaction, governance, and culture. To quote McAllister again, “for enslaved and free African Americans, it was paramount to accept and perform the role of dominated while also understanding and mastering the characteristics of the dominant class.”³

This essay considers three important Black-White cultural “contact zones” in the nineteenth-century American theater, and some of the political dynamics inherent to each. The first is theater created by Blacks for predominantly Black audiences, as exemplified in the founding of the country’s first Black theatre company in New York City in the early 1820s, and the politics of its existence within the larger community at the time. The second is the minstrel stage upon which Whites performed “Black” identities, the most famous representations of which were Jim Crow and Uncle Tom. Finally, the increasing presence of Black performers on the stages of White theaters as the century progressed will be considered. The purpose of these examinations is to compare various environments, products, and consequences of racial politics as they laid the groundwork for such quintessentially American forms of performing arts as jazz and musical comedy in the century that followed.

The Politics of Public Relations: The African (Grove) Theater

The legalities of slavery in early nineteenth-century America were largely managed at the level of state government. In 1799, the New York state legislature mandated the gradual

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

abolition of slavery, and (technically) freed all slaves born on or after July 4 of that year, though many remained long in various forms of indentured servitude. In 1817, all slaves born before July 4, 1799 were promised legal freedom by 1827, though many of those were manumitted before that time. Full emancipation throughout the state was finally accomplished on July 4, 1827.⁴

Six years earlier, on September 21, 1821, a group of free Black men and women under the leadership of William Alexander Brown, inaugurated the nation's first all-Black theater company, in New York City, with a production of Shakespeare's *Richard III*.⁵ This production was mounted on the former site of another one of Brown's business ventures, the seasonal "pleasure garden" (also sometimes called ice cream garden or tea garden) known as The African Grove, run for and by "people of colour"—the first of its kind in New York City— where cabaret-style performances were presented and refreshments served, and members of the free Black community of New York City could gather to enjoy leisurely interaction and a degree of "refined" society. By all accounts, Brown was worldly, ambitious, highly competent, and entrepreneurial, as demonstrated by his several undertakings in New York's entertainment and hospitality industries during the 1810s and 20s. In 1823, his company presented the play *The Drama of King Shotaway*, authored by Brown himself, said to be the first theatrical work written and produced by an African American—and, Samuel Hay suggests, the first African

⁴ Warner, et al, "A Soliloquy," 16.

⁵ There has been some confusion about Brown's identity, especially his middle name. George Thompson, Jr. seems to have uncovered city records that confirm the name William Alexander Brown, though some older histories name him as William Henry Brown, perhaps confusing him with several other nineteenth-century historical figures of that name. See Thompson, *A Documentary History*, 3-4. Another William Brown, William Wells Brown, was a prominent Black novelist, playwright, and lecturer of the period, author of *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, the first published play by a Black American writer.

American play written “strictly for political purposes”⁶—evidently based upon Brown’s own experiences in the West Indies.⁷ In addition to *The Drama of King Shotaway*, Thompson notes three more plays staged by Brown’s company with overtly political content: like *The Drama of King Shotaway*, the popular *Pizarro* (translated from a German original) dealt with armed resistance to colonial power; the other two, *Tom and Jerry* and *Obi, or Three Finger’d Jack*, both dealt with the issue of slavery. Throughout its existence, the company was constantly embroiled in racial conflicts and political maneuvering, inside and outside the theater.⁸ Some White New Yorkers were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a blatant display of Black initiative and creativity: frequent police raids and other forms of harassment forced the company to relocate and reincarnate itself several times over the few years of its existence between c. 1821 and c. 1826. In fact, Hay has called Brown’s troupe “the first guerrilla theater.”⁹

The founding of the African Theater¹⁰ coincided exactly with a constitutional convention in Albany during which the state legislature met to consider an amendment limiting suffrage to

⁶ Hay, *African American Theatre*, 11.

⁷ Eileen Southern, “The Origin and Development of the Black Musical Theater: A Preliminary Report,” *Black Music Research Journal* 2 (1981-82): 3-4.

⁸ Hay suggests this quite forcefully, but without much documentation. Hay, *African American Theatre*, 5-13.

⁹ Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

¹⁰ The research of McAllister, George Thompson, Michael Warner, and others suggests that Brown’s theater was officially named the American Theater, but was commonly referred to as the African Theater or the African Company during the years of its existence, both by the black community and by the White press. It’s first production took place at the former cite of Brown’s African Grove “ice cream garden” (named after the African Grove Hospital, also previously at the same site), which was closed by the New York authorities some time before the theater company was first formed. Evidently, the conflation of titles occurred in later written histories. See Michael Warner, et al, “A Soliloquy ‘Lately Spoken at the African Theatre’: Race and the Public Sphere in New York City, 1821,” *American Literature* 73/1 (March 2001): 1, 14, and 37-38, Note 1; and George A. Thompson, Jr., *A Documentary History of the African Theater* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 3-23. McAllister identifies different names for the company during its various phases of existence, including the Minor Theater on Park Row; the American Theater in Greenwich Village, and, finally, the African Company, in a newly-built theater also in Greenwich Village. See McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave*, 2.

White men, at the same time removing the qualification of property ownership. It was an historic moment that saw the politics of theater and the theater of politics converge. Among the key players in the effort to limit suffrage (and thus disenfranchise Black voters) was Mordecai Noah, a prominent New York newspaper editor, sheriff of the city, and the country's first important Jewish playwright. One of Noah's newspapers, the *National Advocate*, made frequent mention of Brown's theater during the months of September and October, 1821, while the constitutional convention was still in session, never in terms overtly inflammatory, but always with what might be interpreted as an air of condescension.¹¹ Michael Warner suggests that these mentions, presumably written by Noah or at least sanctioned by him, were intended subtly to alarm White readers regarding Black political ambitions, under the guise of poking gentle fun at their cultural ambitions. Noah himself supported the removal of the property ownership qualification for White male voters but evidently feared the Black vote should the qualification be removed unconditionally (since African Americans at the time were tending to vote overwhelmingly Federalist).¹² On September 25, 1821, for example, while the convention was still deliberating, the *Advocate* ran the following editorials:

Our colored population increases daily; the south sends us an annual number of the emancipated; their votes in time will become formidable [sic]; they even now have great influence or weight in the charter election for the first and second wards, and, if they are organized and led by designing persons, they will give us great trouble. It is inexpedient to allow them a vote, for it is not necessary for their comfort, security and happiness.¹³

African Amusements.—They now assemble in groups; and since they have crept in favour with the convention, they are determined to have balls and quadrille parties, establish a forum, solicit a seat in the assembly or in the common

¹¹ See Thompson, *A Documentary History*, 53-72

¹² Ibid.

¹³ As quoted in Warner, et al, "A Soliloquy," 18-19.

council, which, if refused, let them look to the elections. They can out vote the Whites, as they say. One Black gentleman most respectfully insinuated, that he thought “as how he mout be put on the grand jury!”¹⁴

Thus, it might be claimed, Noah and the *Advocate* surreptitiously aided in laying the groundwork for Black disenfranchisement.¹⁵ On October 6, the State adopted a new suffrage clause into its constitution that eliminated the property restriction for White men, at the same time maintaining enfranchisement only for those Blacks who owned at least \$250 worth of property (a high figure in those days). Thereafter, mention of the African Theater in the *National Advocate* dropped noticeably.¹⁶

Though Brown’s theatrical undertakings were clearly an experiment in Black identity and community building, he was not without his White patrons, including, no doubt, curiosity-seekers, among some who may genuinely have wished to support his endeavors. But the bulk of the White audiences appears to have come to cause trouble, giving rise to Brown’s legendary 1822 indictment boldly pronouncing that “white people do not know how to behave at entertainments designed for ladies and gentlemen of colour.”¹⁷ Already in October of 1821, according to the *Advocate*, the Black company had “graciously made a partition at the back of their house, for the accommodation of the whites.”¹⁸ Whether this was intended as a political statement about racial segregation, an accommodation to draw in more White patrons, or a necessary means of crowd control—or perhaps a combination—we do not know. Similarly, it may have been overt racial politicking, artistic competition, economics, or a combination of

¹⁴ Thompson, *A Documentary History*, 67.

¹⁵ Warner, et al, “A Soliloquy,” 16.

¹⁶ Thompson, *A Documentary History*. Notwithstanding all of this, extant records indicate that Brown saw fit to produce at least one of Noah’s plays in the months following the constitutional convention. Warner, et al, “A Soliloquy,” 15.

¹⁷ See McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave*, Introduction, n. 5.

¹⁸ As quoted in Warner, et al, “A Soliloquy,” 10.

causes that prompted Brown, in 1822, to hire space next door to New York's famous Park Theater, and to mount his production of *Richard III* there for a time, until forced to desist by city authorities.¹⁹

It is perhaps a testimony to the relative cultural freedom of New York City in the early decades of the nineteenth century that Brown was able to undertake his experiments in Black cultural identity-formation at all. Nevertheless, they were short-lived: Brown's projects appear to have proved particularly threatening to elements in the city's White theatrical establishment at the time, for the Black company was demeaned in the press, harassed, forced to move frequently, and presumably driven out of business by around 1826.

The Politics of (Re)Presentation: Blackface

In 1830, a few years after the last surviving record of the African Theater can be dated, another important phase in the history of American theater began, when a White entertainer in Louisville, KY, is said to have heard a Black stable hand singing to himself as he worked, occasionally punctuating his song with a funny little jump. As the story goes, the White performer immediately incorporated an imitation of the Black worker into his stage act; to enhance the comic effect, he blackened the skin of his face with burnt cork. The entertainer was Thomas Dartmouth Rice, and it was from this chance encounter in a horse stable that the most (in)famous character in American theater was born: Jim Crow—presumably named after the stable hand who inspired the imitation—who would lend his name to nearly a century of

¹⁹ See Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., *African American Theater Directory, 1816-1960: A Comprehensive Guide to Early Black Theatre Organizations, Companies, Theatres, and Performing Groups* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 5.

“separate but equal” discrimination institutionalized by law throughout the former Confederate states after the Civil War. This new brand of parodic cross-racial entertainment quickly became a staple of American theaters and by 1832 the *Boston Post* could print that “the two most popular characters in the world at the present time are [Queen] Victoria and Jim Crow.”²⁰

Through the character of Jim Crow, and his famous song and dance, to which more than a hundred verses survive, social and political statements could be made behind the blackface mask of humor. Here, as an example, is a verse from the Jim Crow Song, probably written in the 1830s, when the character was still fairly new:

De great Nullification
 And fuss in de South,
 Is now before Congress,
 To be tried by word ob mouth.
 . . . Should dey get to fighting,
 Perhaps de blacks will rise,
 For deir wish for freedom,
 Is shining in deir eyes.
 . . . An I caution all white dandies,
 Not to come in my way,
 For if dey insult me,
 Dey’ll in de gutter lay.²¹

That these clearly charged words could be uttered to an audience no doubt comprised largely of White people is a testament not only to the potentially complex social and racial politics of blackface masking, but to its alarming power to diffuse subversive or dangerous political messages. Eric Lott suggests that aspects of class struggle on the blackface minstrel stage offered a brand of “cross-racial” solidarity between White working-class audiences and their “Black” (as perceived by those audiences) comrades on stage— as, for example, the reference

²⁰ Dale Cockrell, “Jim Crow, Demon of Disorder,” *American Music* 14/2 (Summer 1996): 161.

²¹ Eric Lott, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly* 43/2 (Jun. 1991), 232.

to “white dandies” in the verse above—that may have helped to mitigate racial challenges.²² In the Northeast, at least, this may have coupled with a growing abolitionist sentiment, even among the working class, as well as an awareness that the performer was not, in fact, Black, but a theatrical invention of “blackness,” to diffuse racial tension. How else, one wonders, could a subject such as miscegenation be broached so seemingly nonthreateningly, as in another Jim Crow verse:

Jim Crow is courting a white gall,
And yaller folks call her Sue;
I guess she back'd a nigger out,
And swung my long tail blue.²³

Over the next decade, Jim Crow and blackface parody—or travesty, as Huggins terms it²⁴—combined with various other forms of theater popular at the time, including English ballad opera, Italian grand opera, and ballet, into a set form that became commonly known as minstrelsy. Musicologist Eileen Southern wrote the following description of the classic, mid-century minstrel show, in which may be seen the roots of vaudeville:

The show consisted of three parts: Part I was given over to songs, jokes, and dances—the performers seated in semi-circles with the major comedians on either end, Tambo with his tambourine and Bones with his bone rhythm clackers. The whole was presided over by a dignified master of ceremonies called the interlocutor. Part I opened with a rousing chorus of male voices (minstrelsy was a male phenomenon) and closed with another rousing chorus and a walk-around. Part II, called an olio, was similar to the first part with its songs, dances, and jokes, except that the performers stood in front of the lowered curtain. Part III typically was an extended skit, which originally satirized plantation lifestyles but in later years parodied almost any subject.²⁵

²² Ibid. 237-246.

²³ Ibid. 234.

²⁴ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 264.

²⁵ Southern, “A Preliminary Report,” 10-11. More recently, Mahar has challenged the three-part form as being less fixed and static than previously believed. See William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Political Culture* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 332.

This tripartite form seems to have established itself fairly widely by the early 1840s, first recorded in the productions of a group known as the Virginia Minstrels, and its popularity was well-established by 1844 when a minstrel troupe known as the Ethiopian Serenaders performed for President John Tyler at the White House.²⁶ William Mahar quotes the following entry in the diary of one Philip Hone, after a performance by the Ethiopian Serenaders: “Negro songs, glees, and other refinements of the same kind, helped along by worn out conundrums, form this refined amusement, which is very popular and fills the theater, in which so lately the scientific strains of Italian music floated over empty benches.”²⁷ Here is a clear indication of at least one vector of popular taste in mid-century America as audiences evidently sought home-grown alternatives to traditional European art forms. On March 12, 1847, the following announcement in the *New York Tribune* attested the ascendancy of the new form as presented by the famous Christy Minstrels at New York’s toney New York Society Library: “Many of the most fashionable families attend [minstrel shows], as the performances are a pleasing relief to the high toned excitement of the Italian opera. Negro melodies are the very democracy of music!”²⁸ In 1853, it is said, Commodore Matthew Perry introduced American culture to Japan with a minstrel show!²⁹

On the surface, blackface minstrelsy seems little more than “a transparently racist curiosity, a form of leisure that—in inventing and ridiculing the slow-witted-but-irrepressible

²⁶ James Haskins, *Black Theater in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1982), 21. Frequently, both minstrel groups and minstrel shows were described as “Ethiopian.” Minstrelsy itself was sometimes referred to as “Ethiopian opera.” Ethiopia was, of course, familiar to White Christian audiences from the biblical story of Solomon and Sheba; thus, it may have provided a certain brand of non-threatening exoticism that entrepreneurs found a useful tool for advertisement.

²⁷ Allan Nevins, ed., *The Diary of Philip Hone 1828-1851* (New York: Arno, 1970), 710, as quote in Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 9.

²⁸ As quoted in Haskins, *Black Theater*, 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

‘plantation darky’ and the foppish ‘northern dandy negro’—conveniently rationalized racial oppression.”³⁰ Frederick Douglass characterized its practitioners as “filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from [African Americans] a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt tastes of their fellow white citizens.”³¹

Scholars often look to the commodification and containment of the Black body and/or identity in minstrelsy and other forms of theatrical representations of Blackness and, by opposition, the definitions of Whiteness that it allows. Joseph Roach writes:

It seems clear that the popularity of these minstrel shows arose at least in part from the need of white Americans to contain, even (re)subjugate, the African-American identity that was quickly becoming a social and cultural force to be reckoned with. As white Americans were engaged in the process of defining themselves and their society as both white and American, the process of “othering” proved a useful tool for identity-building, by providing an easy image of “what and who they thought they were not.”³²

He asserts that “American moderns [. . .] had to master and perform Indian, African, and European ‘others’ in order to create new selves and new nations,” a concept upon which McAllister expands by suggesting that, “from the beginning, cross-racial appropriation or mimetically embodying the ‘other’ proved to be a thoroughly necessary theatrical and social practice.”³³ Reiss describes the blackface phenomenon as a manifestation and acting out of “the fear, envy, desire, and identification Whites felt toward Blacks [. . .] by controlling these disturbing emotions through highly ritualized performances, they told themselves fictions not

³⁰ Lott, “The Seeming Counterfeit,” 223.

³¹ As quoted in Philip F. Gura, “America’s Minstrel Daze,” review of *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* by Dale Cockrell, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* by W. T. Lhamon, and *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Culture* by William J. Mahar, *The New England Quarterly* 72/4 (Dec. 1999): 603.

³² Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5, as quote in McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave*, 5.

³³ McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave*, 5.

just about what they were not, but about what they were: not just about the blackness they cast off from themselves, but about the whiteness they aspired to.”³⁴

Over the last three decades or so, scholars have begun to take a more nuanced and constructive look at the performance of blackface minstrelsy and its role in the development of American theater, American capitalism, and American culture. Newer critiques locate complex and surprising political enactments in minstrelsy that go well beyond issues of race. Cockrell writes:

In surprisingly ambiguous ways [. . .] "Jim Crow" was clearly many things to many people, of all ranks, races, and genders. At the upper social end of the male coterie that supported blackface minstrelsy, "Jim Crow" was clearly a song about racial inferiority [. . .] The evidence at this level of discourse is uniform and unambiguous. It is in the streets with the commoners that the racial features of blackface "Jim Crow" are less clear, where issues of identity, representation, and race are more complicated.³⁵

For Lhamon, "the tradition of minstrel criticism has reduced a vastly popular and multiply meaningful form to one-dimensional simplicity."³⁶ Lott suggests that "the fiction of black performers effectively created, for the first time, a sense of popular black cultural representation" in the United States.³⁷ Other scholars point out that blackface and other forms of masking had a long history, both in and out of the theater, before Jim Crow and minstrelsy gained popularity.³⁸ Some emphasize the elements of class struggle inherent in the content of minstrel shows, describing "class turbulence with a racial accent, one element of a cultural

³⁴ Benjamin Reiss, review of *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* by Eric Lott, *Qui Parle* 7/1 (Fall/Winter 1993): 154.

³⁵ Cockrell, "Jim Crow, Demon of Disorder," 174.

³⁶ Gura, "America's Minstrel Daze," 610.

³⁷ Lott, "The Seeming Counterfeit," 235.

³⁸ See, for example, Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50-56.

revolution that made correlate use of grave racial conflicts [. . .] a prime example of the sometimes contestatory character of plebeian culture, articulating class difference, intentionally or not, by calling on the insurrectionary resonances of black culture.”³⁹

Regardless of the specific interpretation, it is clear that nineteenth-century White culture—just as twenty-first-century White culture—craved an experience of Black America, be it slave, plantation, some construct of “African,” or simply the most prevalent “otherness”—especially if it could be a somewhat familiar otherness already partially assimilated but still maintaining enough aspects of its essentially “other” character to remain titillating. Lott writes:

The minstrel show indeed was based on a profound white investment in black culture which occasionally surfaced in certain less malign ways. This produced a popular form in which racial insult was twinned with racial envy, moments of domination with moments of liberation, counterfeit with currency—a pattern at times amounting to no more than the two faces of our particular mode of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger; and all of it comprising a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling. This structure began to take the form of a complex dialectic: an unsteady but continual oscillation between fascination with “blackness” and fearful ridicule of it, underscored but not necessarily determined by an oscillation between sympathetic belief in blackface’s authenticity and ironic distance from its counterfeit representations . . . [. . .] From this perspective, the elements of derision involved in blackface performance were not so much its *raison d’être* as an attempt to “master” the power and interest of the black culture it continually generated. . . The counterfeit was a means of exercising white control of subversive cultural forms as much as it was an avenue of racial derision. . . Irony and interest were thus inextricable moments of white participation in the minstrel show.⁴⁰

It is important to remember, too, that America’s first great (White) songwriter made his mark in minstrelsy. Stephen Foster’s first published work, “Open Thy Lattice, Love,” appeared in 1844,

³⁹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 87.

⁴⁰ Lott, “The Seeming Counterfeit,” 227-9, 237-8.

in the early heyday of minstrelsy, and nearly all his best-remembered songs were written for the minstrel stage. Many are blatant records of racism at the same time that they are beautiful music, and representative of perhaps the most characteristic of all American art forms, popular song. Indeed, one might say that America's songwriting was its first truly great, truly *integrated* form of art, drawing as it did, especially in the "golden age" of the Great American Songbook, on both jazz and musical theater for its success, two forms firmly rooted nineteenth-century Black culture.

Perhaps just as important as Jim Crow and minstrelsy to an historical understanding of mid-nineteenth-century racial politics, in and out of the theater, was the appearance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's serial novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's abolitionist narrative was initially published in the *National Era*, a weekly newspaper, between June 5, 1851 and April 1, 1852.⁴¹ The novel, released in its entirety in March, 1852, became the best-selling American novel of the century, and theatrical adaptations followed in droves. Kruger writes:

Even before Stowe's novel was published in its entirety [. . .] an anti-Stowe minstrel sketch, *Uncles Tom's Cabin As It Is* [. . .] was produced at the Baltimore Museum. The first full-length adaptation, by C. W. Taylor, shared the evening's bill at the National Theatre with T. D. Rice's blackface burlesque of Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Rice himself starred in a minstrelized abbreviation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Bowery Theatre in 1854. H. J. Conway's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, produced by Morris Kimball's Boston Museum in November 1852 and by P. T. Barnum's American Museum in New York the following year, and George Aiken's adaptation, which opened at the National Theatre in July 1853, after running for months at the Troy Museum (in two parts), were the most enduring dramatizations of the story.⁴²

⁴¹ "Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*, <http://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/utc/> (accessed Nov. 3, 2012).

⁴² Loren Kruger, "Our Theater? Stages in an American Cultural History," *American Literary History* 8/4 (Winter, 1996): 708.

Thus, from the beginning, Stowe's creation found a home on the stage in forms both "pro" and "con"; and, from the beginning, it shared that stage with Jim Crow and minstrelsy. Though clearly sympathetic to the plight of slaves, by an author firmly committed to abolition and instrumental in the struggle toward Emancipation, Stowe's novel, as surely as Rice's creation, established persistent African-American stereotypes—the faithful, long-suffering male slave, the hyper-maternal "mammy," the "pickaninny" child—that would prove equally burdensome to Black identity formation, and equally restrictive to later Black performers seeking artistic freedom and opportunity on the country's stages (even up to the early Hollywood soundstages and beyond). Keep in mind, too, that these Stoweian stereotypes were created and recreated on the stage by white actors in blackface. It was not until 1878, more than twenty-five years after its first appearance, and thirteen years after the Civil War ended, that a Black actor appeared in a White production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Eileen Southern called it a "breakthrough" when, two years earlier, in 1876, Black musicians were finally hired to provide the "plantation music" for a production of the play, evidently creating such a fashion for "authentic" music in *Uncle Tom* that "it became almost fatal for anyone to stage [it] without colored singers".⁴³

The Politics of Self-Representation: Early Black Players on White Stages

As we have seen, blackface minstrelsy encompasses much more than just a simple enactment of racism. Lott offers, as another example, the story of P. T. Barnum who, after losing his best blackface dancer, goes out to find another, and succeeds in procuring the

⁴³ Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1947), 235, as quote in Southern, "A Preliminary Report," 8.

services of a young dancer, even better than the first, but who happened actually to be Black. Rather than risk the outrage of presenting a real Black dancer to his White audiences, Barnum opted to paint up his replacement in blackface—to hide the fact that he was, in fact, “the genuine article.” The dancer, as it turn out, was none other than William Henry Lane, who would eventually become the famous Master Juba, one of the few Black performers to appear regularly in White venues in the 1840s, and lauded so vividly by Dickens in his *American Notes* of 1842:

In what walk of life, or dance of life, does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about [Juba], when, having danced his partner off her feet, and himself too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter and calling for something to drink with the chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows in one inimitable sound!⁴⁴

An account of Barnum’s deception, from 1864, assures us that, “had it been suspected that the seeming counterfeit was the genuine article, the New York Vauxhall would have blazed with indignation.”⁴⁵ Lott’s point is that Juba apparently had no difficulty making Barnum’s audiences believe he was a White minstrel imitating a Black dancer, suggesting that Barnum’s show and, by extension, others involving blackface performers, may not have been so far, in some respects, from genuine Black forms of identity expression.⁴⁶ After Emancipation, it became increasingly common for Black actors to step before White audiences in blackface.

In 1845, a playbill carried the following announcement of another Juba performance:

“The entertainment to conclude with the Imitation Dance, by Mast. Juba, in which he will give correct Imitation Dances of all the principal Ethiopian Dancers in the United States. After which

⁴⁴ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, Vol. 1 (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1842), 218.

⁴⁵ Lott, “The Seeming Counterfeit,” 228

⁴⁶ Ibid; and Haskins, *Black Theater in America*, 23-33.

he will give an imitation of himself—and then you will see the vast difference between those that have heretofore attempted dancing and this WONDERFUL YOUNG MAN [emphasis in original].”⁴⁷ This time, the counterfeit was announced publicly. Lott points out, however, the irony that, at least in this situation, even the famous Juba was relegated to “imitation”—of Whites playing Blacks, no less, and even imitation of *himself*—an absurd situation that points to the bizarre duality, “the great charade,” of the minstrelsy genre: White audiences clearly craved contact with Black culture and expression; but, at least until after the Civil War, mostly at the safe and comfortable distance of simulation, which Lott calls “an instability or contradiction in the form itself.”⁴⁸ Eileen Southern insisted that “No one forgot that the black man was behind it all.”⁴⁹

Southern also noted that it was not till after the Civil War that the first Black minstrel group, “rooted in plantation lifestyles, which derived from the reality of slavery,” finally held out the promise to Blacks of “some measure of control over their lifestyles—whether on or off the stage.”⁵⁰ She is referring to a group known as the Georgia Minstrels, initially organized in 1865, which would go on to present the first Black production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁵¹ In order to more easily negotiate the politics of booking engagements in White venues, the troupe hired a White booking agent, who eventually became its manager.⁵² These Black troupes, in the face of strong competition from their White counterparts, are said to have stressed their “genuineness”—the fact that they were “authentic ex-slaves who sang real plantation songs

⁴⁷ Uncatalogued playbills in the Harvard Theatre Collection as quoted in Lott, “The Seeming Counterfeit,” 229.

⁴⁸ Lott, “The Seeming Counterfeit,” 230, 224; and Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 261.

⁴⁹ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 92.

⁵⁰ Southern, “A Preliminary Report,” 10.

⁵¹ Haskins, *Black Theater*, 28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 27.

and performed real plantation dances,”⁵³ lending credence to the notion that White audience did not entirely forget the counterfeit of blackface. Southern suggested, too, that they strove “to work past the derogatory stereotypes to produce entertainment of universal appeal.”⁵⁴ In fact, it appears that repertory was the main difference (at least to the historian’s gaze) between Black and White minstrel troupes, with Black troupes incorporating spirituals more frequently than was common for White troupes, and presenting the songs of Black composers with greater regularity, including works by James Bland, Gussie Davis, Ernest Hogan, and Sam Lucas, in addition to the ever-popular works of Stephen Foster and other White composers.⁵⁵

Mention should also be made, in this context, of two Black American actors who failed to find acceptance on the American stage but who made important careers in the theaters of England and Europe. Ira Aldridge, originally a member of William Brown’s African Theater, became one of Europe’s most celebrated Shakespeareans and the only African American to be honored with a commemorative plaque in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. Similarly, S. Morgan Smith, though never achieving the level of international recognition that Aldridge did, nonetheless made a noteworthy career in England, prompting one contemporary British commentator to publish the following rebuke of American audiences:

There is but one opinion amongst those who have seen and heard Morgan Smith, on or off the stage, and that is that the provincial tour upon which he is now about to enter as a star actor will end with a position on the London stage as eminent as that of Ira Aldridge on the continental stage; and that America may ere long have more food for reflecting how well she is leading the van of humanity, whilst some of her finest spirits can find a free arena for their development and movement only under the monarchies and aristocracies of the

⁵³ Southern, “A Preliminary Report,” 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

old world.⁵⁶

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William Brown's early experiment in Black theater was short-lived, fraught with resistance, and not to be attempted again for many decades. The Black presence on the American stage for most of the nineteenth century would take the prevailing form of counterfeit representation by Whites in burnt cork face paint, employing dubious portrayals of pseudo-Black cultural products. Only very slowly after the Civil War and Emancipation did Black actors begin to find an authentic voice on the American stage, as in, for example, the productions of the Hyers Sisters' companies beginning in 1875, which, according to Southern, often featured stories of Blacks moving from slavery to freedom and more rewarding forms of existence.⁵⁷ But progress was slow, and for many decades, well into the twentieth century, the racial stereotypes inherited from minstrelsy and other theatrical enactments of blackface severely limited the presence of African Americans on the nation's stages. Nevertheless, regarding the racial stereotypes Black performers were forced to assume as the post-war legacy of Jim Crow, Uncle Tom, and other such representations, Webb cautions that

we risk handing the historical victory to those interpretations [of simple racism] and demeaning the efforts of black performers if we conclude that these [. . .] shows only held the potential to signify in terms of oppression and racism, for the evidence suggests that black performers created possibilities for something called African American performance in and through—rather than behind—the constraints of history, tradition, and whites' expectations.⁵⁸

On April 14, 1865, national politics and race politics converged violently at Ford's

⁵⁶ Errol Hill, "S. Morgan Smith: Successor to Ira Aldridge," *Black American Literature Forum* 16/4 (Winter 1982): 133.

⁵⁷ Barbara L. Webb, "Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s," *Theatre Journal* 56/1 (Mar. 2004): 77; and Southern, "A Preliminary Report," 6.

⁵⁸ Webb, "Authentic Possibilities," 65.

Theater in Washington, not on the stage but in the presidential box, when anti-abolitionist and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln during an evening performance, a violent reminder that racial politics informed virtually every aspect of American civic life before and after Emancipation, including the development of American theater and the new nation's cultural and artistic identity in general. In turn, the theater mirrored and influenced the negotiation of those politics, as Americans, Black and White, struggled for self-identity.

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