

**Performing Jim Crow: Blackface
Performance and Emancipation**

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Interpretando a Jim Crow: Blackface y emancipación

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Abstract

A nineteenth-century American actor named Thomas Rice was sensationally popular as a blackface character named Jim Crow. His popularity is credited with giving birth to blackface minstrelsy as others began to imitate him in the hope of emulating his success. Rice's Jim Crow provided a name for laws and customs designed to repudiate the emancipation of African slaves. Blackface minstrelsy staged an idealized version of slave life on a southern plantation. Paradoxically, as blackface revoked the emancipation of slaves on stage, it emancipated the American theatre from its British origins and its audience of recently immigrated laborers from a low social position. It even occasionally performed an ironic reversal of the subaltern status of the very African slaves whose freedom by proclamation and constitutional amendment the performance sought to negate. Contradictions in the history of blackface performance in the United States stage American anxieties about race, class, emancipation, and the very construction of the concepts of blackness and whiteness.

Keywords: Blackface; Minstrel; Gilpin; Octoroon; Robeson.

Resumen

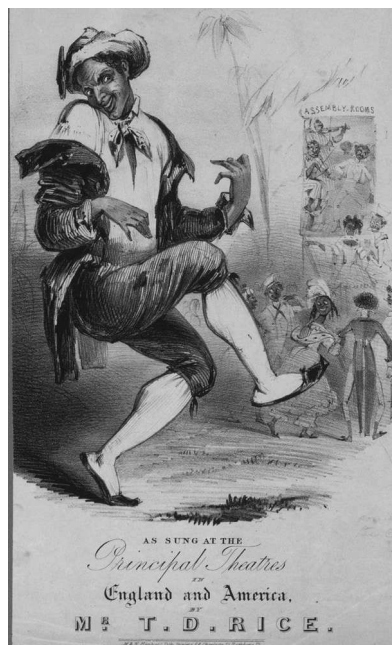
En el siglo XIX, Thomas Rice, un actor estadounidense, ganó mucha fama haciendo el papel de un personaje cuya cara estaba pintada de negro con el nombre Jim Crow. Se le da crédito a Rice la creación de grupos de actores que se pintaron la cara de negro (un estilo denominado blackface) que luego otros se pusieron a imitarlos con la esperanza de emular su éxito. El Jim Crow de Rice dio nombre a una serie de leyes y costumbres diseñadas para repudiar la emancipación de esclavos africanos. Los espectáculos de los actores en blackface representaron una versión idealizada de la vida de los esclavos en una hacienda sureña. Paradójicamente, mientras el blackface revocó la emancipación de los esclavos sobre el escenario, emancipó el teatro estadounidense de sus orígenes británicos y su público que consistía en obreros inmigrantes de baja clase social. De vez en cuando hasta representó un revés irónico del estatus barriobajero de los mismos esclavos africanos cuya libertad por proclamación y enmienda constitucional, la representación quiso negar. Las

contradicciones en la historia de espectáculos teatrales blackface en los Estados Unidos ponen de manifiesto ansiedades estadounidenses sobre la raza, clase social, emancipación y hasta la construcción misma de los conceptos de blanca étnica y negra étnica/”blanca” y “étnica.”

Palabras clave: Blackface; Grupo teatral; Gilpin; Octoroon; Robeson.

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Until the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865, the social and legal status of Africans in the United States was defined by slavery. When slavery ended, their status was redefined by a complex of laws and social practices termed “Jim Crow” which had the purpose of keeping freed, African slaves separated from and subjugated to citizens of European descent. In law and custom “Jim Crow” was a repudiation of emancipation. The term “Jim Crow” was popularized especially by the performances of a white actor named Thomas D. Rice who became sensationally celebrated for portraying a blackface character named Jim Crow and for doing a dance routine in which he “jumped Jim Crow.” Once popularized by Rice, blackface continued on the American stage into the twenty-first century and from that time to this, staged anxieties about race, class, and conceptions of white and black.



Thomas D. Rice jumping Jim Crow
TCS 82, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University

Rice began to “jump Jim Crow” in 1823 claiming that he had learned the dance and the song from a crippled black stable worker. The details of how Rice learned the routine vary as do versions of the song, one of which goes thus:

Step first upon yo’ heel
An’ den upon yo’ toe,
An’ ebry time you turns around
You jump Jim Crow (Roorbach, 1969, 1875: Introduction).

[Step first upon your heel
And then upon your toe,
And every time you turn around
You jump Jim Crow.]

According to one variant of the legend of Rice’s discovery of Jim Crow and subsequent rise to fame, he first performed the routine and used the name Jim Crow in a play called *The Rifle* (Roorbach, 1969, 1875: Introduction). His performance was so successful that he began to perform it everywhere and in many contexts. He even went on tour to England. Jumping Jim Crow became all the rage on both sides of the Anglophone Atlantic. An 1845 article in *The Knickerbocker* claimed—

From the nobility down to the lowest chimney-sweep in Great Britain, and from the member of Congress, down to the youngest apprentice or school-boy in America, it was all: “Turn about and wheel about, and do just so, /And every time I turn about I jump Jim Crow.”

Even the fair sex did not escape the contagion: the tunes were set to music for the piano-forte, and nearly every young lady in the Union, and the United Kingdom, played and sang, if she did not *jump*, “Jim Crow” (Kennard: 332-333, cited by Lott, 1993: 57).

Blackface burlesques of Shakespeare even jumped Jim Crow:

Oh! ‘tis consummation
Devoutly to be wished
To end your heart-ache by a sleep,
When likely to be dish’d.
Shuffle off your mortal coil,
Do just so,
Wheel about, and turn about,
And jump Jim Crow (Haywood, 1966: 88).

The popular acclaim accorded Rice is credited with giving birth to blackface minstrelsy in the United States as others began to imitate him in the hope of emulating his success. Thus began a history of blackface performance in the US that extends to the present. Dan Emmet expanded imitations of Rice's solo performance into a professional blackface minstrel troupe for the first time in New York in 1842. Two years later, minstrels performed at the White House (Toll, 1974: 28). Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy was a dominant presence in US performance and the ancestor of much of American popular entertainment in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. "[T]he foundation of American comedy, song, and dance was laid down by white and black minstrel stage legends" (Taylor and Austen, 2012: 4). Stephen Foster's central place in the history of American music is rooted in blackface. Early in life he performed in blackface and tried to sell Rice his songs. After 1850 he sold many of his most famous songs to the popular Christy Minstrels (Toll, 1974: 36). Al Jolson was known as a singer throughout the US in the early twentieth century and was especially well known for his blackface performances. He performed in blackface as a member of Dockstader's Minstrels, one of the largest and best-known minstrel companies of the time. In 1927 he acted in blackface in the classic movie *The Jazz Singer* (Goldman, 2000). Medicine shows touring small-town America as recently as the 1930s "blackened up" (Lhamon, 1998: 221). "Even as late as the Depression, the Federal Theatre Project of the Works Progress Administration was sponsoring minstrel shows; and *Dixie*, the 1943 movie, starr[ed] Bing Crosby in occasional blackface as the minstrel Daniel Emmet. . . . In Britain . . . the *Black and White Minstrel Show* was on TV every Saturday night through 1978" (Taylor and Austen, 2012: 43). The continued staging of minstrel shows into the mid-twentieth century in the U.S. caused the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the 1950s to initiate legal proceedings to stop them (Lhamon, 1998: 148).

In the waning years of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, blackface performance has become increasingly controversial. The Wooster Group performed a Pigmeat Markham blackface minstrelsy sequence in its 1981 production of *Route 1 & 9*. "By January, 1982 it had become the subject of a widely reported controversy" (Savran, 1986: 10). The New York State Council on the Arts cut the Wooster Group's funding by forty percent (Shewey, 1982: D7). The Wooster Group's *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)* uses excerpts from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Kate Valk wore blackface when she played Tituba, a West Indian woman and looked "more like the Aunt Jemima of fifties television commercials than a seventeenth-century slave" (Savran, 1986: 175). Kate Valk also wore blackface in *The Emperor Jones*. In an interview Valk speaks of a particular talk-back after a performance where the question of race came up and it got "uncomfortable in the room. . . . [S]ome people found it offensive" (Valk, 2007). Ted Danson inspired outrage when he performed in blackface at a Friar's Club roast of Whoopi Goldberg in 1993 (Rich, 1993: 24). In 2005 Dave Chapelle created a character in blackface makeup he called a "racial pixie."

He wore “a bellhop’s uniform and . . . [danced] to banjo music.” Later he said that he himself was made “uncomfortable” by his creation (Taylor and Austen, 2012: 1-2).

“In the nineteenth century the minstrel show became the most prominent and popular form of American entertainment” (Taylor and Austen, 2012: 4). Minstrelsy provided a broad range of entertainments including such fare as juggling, animal acts, female impersonation, dance, and acrobatics. However varied the program, though, a primary ingredient was the presentation of a stage version of life among the slaves in the American south. Before the Civil War, the minstrel show claimed to provide northern audiences a window on the exotic world of the southern plantation with an idealized view of life among African slaves who amused themselves and the audience with song, dance, comic repartee and skits. After the slaves were emancipated, minstrelsy enacted a nostalgic vision of life before the Civil War as it looked back on a time before the slaves were freed. After 1865 and emancipation, on stage at least, Africans were still slaves and enjoyed themselves singing and dancing and telling comic stories. Rice and his imitators made Jim Crow and his blacked up epigones a staple of American performance. It is not surprising, therefore, that when laws and customs were put into place to suppress and segregate freed slaves they were termed ‘Jim Crow’ laws. Rice and blackface minstrelsy had made Jim Crow the archetypal African in the United States. By recreating a post-war stage version of the antebellum South, blackface minstrelsy performed a fictional repeal of emancipation and gave a name to the laws that repealed it in actuality.

Paradoxically, while blackface minstrelsy staged a theatrical repeal of emancipation, it also helped to emancipate the US theatre from its British roots. The English-language theatre in North America was essentially British theatre until the first half of the nineteenth century. The repertory of the US stage was the English repertory or imitations thereof. In the eighteenth century, educated American speech had not yet deviated from British speech. In some early American plays that imitate the British, however, there are lower-class, vernacular characters who are uniquely American—they use pronunciations and idioms not found in the British Isles. These characters are frontiersmen like Davy Crockett, who was popular both on stage and in fiction. The Indian, the New England Yankee, and the Irish volunteer fireman known as “Mose the fire B’hoy” began to appear in minor roles on the American stage (Toll, 1974: Chapter 1). These were types not found in the British Isles and they spoke as no one spoke in the British Isles.

These vernacular American characters appeared in minor roles while the principal characters spoke and behaved much as their ancestors had on the British stage. Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* illustrates this phenomenon. The play is a typical mortgage melodrama in which characters intended to evoke the audience’s sympathy are threatened with eviction if their debts are not paid. First performed at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York in 1859, the plot concerns the financial troubles of the Peytons’ plantation in Louisiana and George Peyton’s love for a

woman named Zoe. Their love is doomed because Zoe is the eponymous octoroon. Though she appears white, she is legally black and is one of the slaves on the Peytons' plantation. She is, in fact, the property of George Peyton. She tells George that they cannot marry because she bears "the ineffaceable curse of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood" (Gassner, 1967: 197). Because of that fatal drop of black blood, she cannot marry the white hero of the piece but will fall into the clutches of the villain McCloskey as his slave if the estate is sold to pay its debts. She is saved from McCloskey, but the happy ending with a wedding normally expected for a melodrama cannot occur. In 1859 anti-miscegenation laws in Louisiana and in much of the United States made it illegal for a white man to marry an "octoroon." Zoe's whiteness masks a black identity that makes marriage with George Peyton and a happy ending impossible.

The Octoroon is set on a southern plantation populated by elite, educated white characters and less educated working-class white characters. These are joined by African slaves and even an Indian. With these features, *The Octoroon* is a perfect example of a peculiarly American play even though its author was born in Dublin. The problem of avoiding foreclosure and eviction is a conventional melodramatic plot, but the setting in Louisiana and the African and Amerindian characters mark it as distinctly American.

The elite white characters, except for their connection to a Louisiana plantation rather than an English country estate, could be found in a British play of the time. Indeed, Zoe's lover, George Peyton, has been living in Paris and when his mother speaks, she speaks in language that could easily come from the London stage:

I fear that the property is so involved that the strictest economy will scarcely recover it. My dear husband never kept any accounts, and we scarcely know in what condition the estate really is (Gassner, 1967: 187).

The laboring characters and slaves, however, speak in a distinctly American idiom. When one of the slaves, Pete, has a bucket he is using as a pillow kicked out from under him he says—

Hi! Debbel's in de pail! Whar's breakfass? (Gassner, 1967: 188).

[Hey! The devil is in the pail! Where is breakfast?]

When Scudder, a local white character, tells McCloskey that he is going to prevent him from getting Zoe, he speaks in an American idiom entirely foreign to the British stage:

By fair means I don't think you can get her, and don't you try foul with her, 'cause if you do, Jacob, civilization be darned, I'm on you like a painter, and when I'm drawed out I'm pizin (Gassner, 1967: 193).

The American theatre departed from its British origins by turning its attention to native vernacular characters like Scudder and Pete. The elite, educated characters who spoke like those appearing on the London stage were replaced by characters who called panthers ‘painters’ and devils ‘debbels.’ Of course characters like Pete were played by white actors in blackface. The most curious and one of the most popular of these entertainments based on minor vernacular characters was the blackface minstrel show. It was a uniquely American theatre form rooted in the uniquely American history of Southern slavery and the Civil War. When blackface characters like Pete separated themselves from white elite characters and performed on their own, they became the American minstrel show.

While blackface performance was freeing the American theatre from its British roots and revoking the emancipation of the slaves on stage, it also served to emancipate recently immigrated laborers and even, on occasion, the very African slaves who had been freed by proclamation and constitutional amendment. The presence of large numbers of Africans, first as slaves and then as citizens, created a special class system in the United States. As John Calhoun argued, class in America is a matter of skin color rather than wealth:

With us the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals (Cited by Corey, 2011: 56).

Once skin color becomes the marker of class, blackness can be attributed to any despised group. Laborers, especially laborers recently arrived from Ireland, were relegated to the lowest level in the social hierarchy. A slang term for African Americans in the nineteenth century was “Smoked Irishman” (Lott, 1993: 95). Eric Lott says that “An extreme instance of working-class ‘blackening’ was that of the immigrant Irish, whom antebellum native whites widely equated with blacks as an alien, subhuman, and brutal species” (Lott, 1993: 71). “Some suggested that the Irish were part of a separate caste or a ‘dark’ race, possibly originally African. Racial comparisons of Irish and Blacks were not infrequently flattering to the latter group” (Roediger, 1991: 133). Irish laborers were frequently used in the South for ditching and levee building because slaves were too valuable to risk in such a dangerous occupation: “Frederick Law Olmsted . . . quoted more than one Southerner who explained the use of Irish labor on the ground that ‘niggers are worth too much to be risked here; if the Paddies are knocked overboard . . . nobody loses anything’” (Roediger, 1991: 146). The laborer, especially the Irish laborer, needed to distinguish himself from the antebellum slave in the south and, after the Civil War, the emancipated slave in Northern cities.

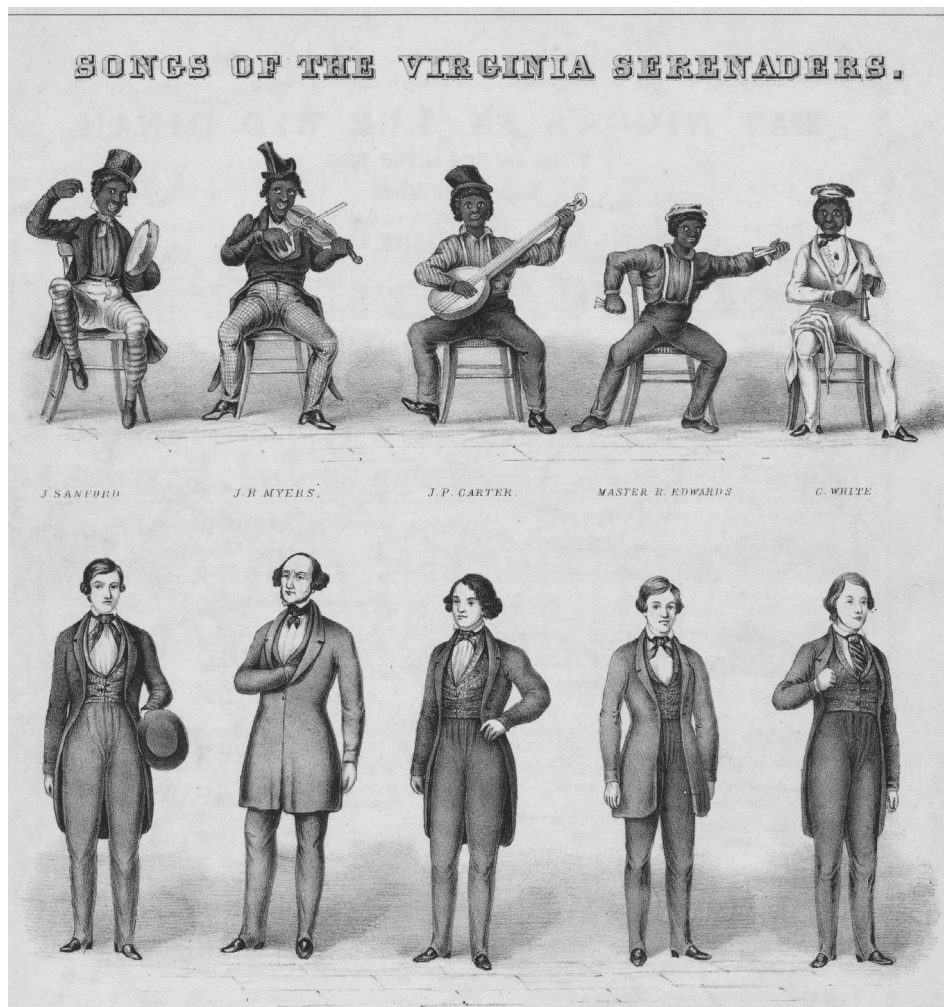
The audiences for minstrel shows in New York included a significant number of Irish working-class immigrants (Lott, 1993: 35, 96). Blackface minstrelsy provided a mechanism whereby those in a low social position, especially the Irish, could counter

claims that their identity as white Europeans was suspect. “[B]lackface minstrels were the first self-consciously *white* entertainers in the world. The simple physical disguise—and elaborate cultural disguise—of blacking up served to emphasize that those on stage were really white and that whiteness really mattered. One minstrel pioneer won fame by being able to change from black to white and back in seconds” (Roediger, 1991: 117). Actors in blackface demonstrated that their blackness was not a permanent pigmentation of the skin but a mere fiction that could be wiped off in the dressing room. Indeed, ads and programs for minstrel shows pictured actors before and after blacking up (Toll, 1974: 38-39). “Songs repeatedly reminded the audience of its own whiteness by beginning ‘Now, white folks . . .’ Snappy jokes carried the point less laboriously, with performers proclaiming that they were ‘like widows’ in that they only wore black for a short time” (Roediger, 1991: 117).

The audience, with its approving gaze, could collaborate in this exercise in social climbing by looking on a blackness that was not theirs—that they as spectators could keep at a distance. Blackface dissolved ethnic and class differences among recent immigrants by insisting on a social structure that admitted of only two categories: white and black. Michael Rogin in *Blackface, White Noise*, cites Constance Rourke’s apt characterization of this process in the case of Jewish immigrants: “Assimilation is achieved via the mask of the most segregated; the blackface that offers Jews mobility keeps the blacks fixed in place. By wiping out all difference except black and white, blackface turns Rabinowitz into Robin, but the fundamental binary opposition nevertheless remains. That segregation, imposed on blacks, silences their voices and signs in their name. Replacing the Old World Jew, blackface also replaced the black” (Rogin, 1996: 29). What Rourke says that blackface did for the “Old World Jew” it could also do for minstrelsy’s laboring class audience. On stage the blackface performers are once again slaves. This fictive repeal of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation is staged in blackface, which, “[b]y wiping out all difference except black and white” (black on stage white in the audience), assimilates the laboring-class audience into what Calhoun characterized as a white upper class. Ironically, the theatrical re-enslavement of those on stage emancipates the audience from what Eric Lott calls “working-class blackening.”

Minstrelsy’s move to return the black faces of emancipated slaves to the plantation, however, also contained instances of revolt against the subaltern status of freed slave and black face. In the nineteenth-century US, as Zoe says in *The Octoroon*, a black skin was the mark of Cain; Africans were the descendants of Cain and therefore slavery was their appropriate condition. Comic, satirical lectures and sermons were a frequent feature of the minstrel stage and a recurring minstrel sermon turned racialized hierarchies upside down and made a white skin the mark of Cain.

’Strate am de road an’ narrow am de paff which leads off to glory!’ Brederen Blevers: You am ‘sembled dis night in coming to hear de word and have splained



Minstrel performers with and without blackface.

TCS 82, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University

and ‘monstrated to yu; yes yu is—and I tend for to splain it as de lite ob de liben day. We am all wicked sinners hea below—it’s a fack, my brederen’ and I tell you how it cum. You see

‘Adam was de fust man,
Ebe was de tudder,
Cane was de wicked man
‘Kase he kill his brudder.’

Adam and Eve were bofe brack men, and so was Cane and Abel. Now I s'pose it seems to strike yer understanding how de first white man cum. Why, I let you know. Den you see when Cane kill his brudder de massa cum and say, 'Cane, whar's your brudder Abel?' Cane say, 'I don't know massa.' But the nigger node all de time. Massa now git mad and cum agin; speak mighty sharp dis time. 'Cane, whar's your brudder Abel, yu nigger?' Cane now git frightened and he turn white; and dis de way de fust white man cum upon dis earth! And if it had not been for dat dar nigger Cane we'd nebber been trubbled wid de white trash 'pon de face of dis yer circumlar globe. . . . Brudder Bones pass round de sasser (Roorbach, 1969, 1875: 144).

['Strait is the road and narrow is the path which leads to glory!'] Brethren believers: You are assembled this night to come to hear the word and have it explained and demonstrated to you; yes you are—and I intend to explain it as clear as the light of the living day. We are all wicked sinners here below—it's a fact, my brethren, and I'll tell you how it came about.

'Adam was the first man,
Eve was the other,
Cain was the wicked man
Because he killed his brother.'

Adam and Eve were both black men, and so were Cain and Abel. Now I suppose you want to understand how the first white man came. Why, I'll let you know. Then you see when Cain killed his brother the master came and said, 'Cain, where's your brother Abel?' Cain said, 'I don't know master.' But the nigger knew all the time. The master now got mad and he came agin; he spoke very sharply this time. 'Cain, where is your brother Abel, you nigger?' Cane now got frightened and he turned white; and this is the way the first white man came upon this earth! And if it had not been for that nigger Cain we would never have been troubled with the white trash upon the face of this circular globe. . . . Brother Bones pass around the saucer (the collection plate).]

This 'sermon' emancipates African Americans from all the shocks that blackness is heir to and turns 'nigger' into a term of disapprobation for a man with a white skin. The mark of Cain is not a black skin, as Zoe avers in *The Octoroon*, but a white one.

In fact, there was a kind of emancipatory revolt built into the very structure of minstrel staging. Blackface provided a mask for the expression of class resentments and social satire. Traditionally, blackface minstrelsy put a line of performers across the stage. At center stage, the interlocutor was a master of ceremonies, an authority figure who was challenged by the unruly end men—Tambo and Bones—who

took their names from the tambourine and the bones (similar to castanets) with which they performed. The Interlocutor was sometimes white and his speech was correct and stilted. The end men disrupted the authority of correct speech with a theatrical version of black vernacular. “Blackface action is usually slashing back at the pretensions and politesse of authority more than at blackness. Certainly in these earliest instances of white fascination with black performance there was little laughing at blacks” (Lhamon, 1998: 22). David Roediger cites Sean Wilentz’ statement in *Chants Black* that “[a]s the form [blackface minstrelsy] developed, the real object of scorn . . . was less Jim Crow than the would-be aristo[crat]—either the white interlocutor or the dandified black” (Roediger, 1991: 123). The working men in the audience could safely experience an emancipating challenge to authority in the midst of a form that rescinded the emancipation of the slaves and staged the triumph of vernacular speech over the ‘correct’ speech of the elite. In their badinage with the interlocutor, the end men’s vernacular speech was richer and cleverer than that of the interlocutor. They had the punch lines, often using puns, and got laughs at the expense of the Interlocutor’s pomposity. The authority of the master’s correct speech was trumped by vernacular, lower class speech.

For example, in one exchange, “after a ballad has been sung,” Bones claims, in a vernacular idiom, to have composed the song that was just sung. He says, “Dat’s a nice song ain’t it?” [That’s a nice song isn’t it?] The interlocutor replies, “Yes, sir; a very pretty song indeed.” When Bones says that he composed the song, the interlocutor upbraids him for lying and encourages him to follow the example of George Washington who told the truth about cutting down his father’s cherry tree with his little hatchet. Now Bones goes even further and claims to have known George Washington. The interlocutor is huffily offended at Bones’ blatant lying, but Bones has the last laugh when he informs the interlocutor that it was a different George he knew—a school mate of his:

Well, I got tings mixed—dat aint de chap I ment. I ment George Washington Julious Caesar Andrew Jackson John Smith, but de boys at school used to call him George, and Wash, and Ju—just as dey liked, you know. Thought dat was de same fellow you was driving at (Roorbach, 1969, 1875: 17).

[Well, I got things mixed up—that isn’t the man I meant. I meant George Washington Julius Caesar Andrew Jackson John Smith, but the boys at school used to call him George, and Wash, and Ju—whatever they liked, you know. I thought that was the same fellow you were talking about.]

When this George was caught in a prank that ridiculed their teacher, he, like General George Washington, could not tell a lie and confessed that he made the teacher fall on his face by nailing his slippers to the floor with his little hatchet (Roorbach, 1969, 1875: 16-17).

Blackface minstrelsy sometimes portrayed freed slaves in the North, but both before and after emancipation the paradigmatic minstrel show was a theatrical representation of African slavery. Indeed, it made slavery seem a pleasant condition filled with jokes and music. It also provided the earliest opportunities for black actors on the American stage. Some time passed, however, until they could be emancipated from blackface so that they could move on to the main stream of US theatre. One of the earliest African-American performers on the US stage was William Henry Lane who was known as Juba when he danced at P. T. Barnum's Vauxhall Gardens Theatre in New York City. He was originally hired by Barnum when his star white dancer, Master Diamond, who performed in blackface doing "negro breakdowns," deserted him. According to Thomas Low Nichols—

Barnum, full of expedients, explored the dance-houses of the Five Points and found a boy who could dance a better break-down than Master Diamond. It was easy to hire him; but he was a genuine negro; and there was not an audience in America that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro (cited by Lott, 1993: 112).

Barnum avoided this difficulty by having William Henry Lane black up and put on a wooly wig. The earliest black actors on the American stage blacked up just as their white colleagues did and imitated white actors imitating black slaves. Thus the stereotypes created by blacked-up white actors were perpetuated by blacked-up black actors.

Minstrel shows, especially after the Civil War, often claimed that they were presenting a true and authentic picture of plantation life. In spite of Thomas Low Nichols' belief that an American audience would resent "the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro," "[i]n a few instances there seems to have been genuine confusion among viewers as to the racial identity of blackface performers, and on at least one occasion a church agreed to let a troupe perform only on the condition that they not come as Blacks" (Roediger, 1991: 117).

Early audiences so often suspected that they were being entertained by actual Negroes that minstrel sheet music began the proto-Brechtian practice of picturing blackface performers out of costume as well as in; and there are several existing accounts of white theatergoers mistaking blackface performers for blacks. Even Mark Twain's mother, at her first (and presumably only) minstrel show, believed she was watching black performers. . . . Mark Twain was himself intrigued by what he called 'the happy and accurate' representations of the minstrel show (Lott, 1993: 20).

As companies tried to attract audiences with the claim that they provided a more authentic vision of the antebellum plantation than their competitors, producers hit upon the idea of using black actors and claiming that they were former slaves

who had a true and accurate knowledge of pre-war plantation life. The quest for authenticity brought actual black actors to the stage who claimed to be former slaves. “This was the culmination of the black minstrel show—an idealized vision of plantation life on display for white northerners” (Taylor and Austen, 2012: 68). “Black minstrels became the acknowledged minstrel experts at portraying plantation material” (Toll, 1974: 196).

By the early twentieth century, some black actors were beginning to win limited acclaim outside of minstrelsy. Charles Gilpin began his career in minstrel shows and moved on to have his own stock company in Harlem and to play roles on Broadway. He created the role of Brutus Jones in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* in 1921, which ran for three years (Mroccka, 2000). Still, the life of a black actor in the United States was and is a difficult one. White actors might black up to play Othello and other ‘black’ roles, but black actors were sometimes controversial even when they played a role written for them. Eugene O’Neill’s *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* concerns a white woman married to a black lawyer. One scene calls for the woman to kiss her husband’s hand. Paul Robeson was cast in the role of the husband, and the press was outraged and predicted race riots if the play was allowed to go on as cast. It was thought that if a white woman were to kiss a black character’s hand, the role ought to be played by a white actor in blackface (Gelb, 1962: 547 ff.). Charles Gilpin, on the other hand, played the role of the villain McCloskey in Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* in 1916. He and other black actors playing white characters wore whiteface. Theatre critic Lester A. Walton wrote of Gilpin’s performance that he “so cleverly makes up that he resembles the slave owner of days gone by to a remarkable degree, investing this type with a certain distinction” (McAllister, 2011: 113).

Critics were enthusiastic about the original production of the *Emperor Jones* and Gilpin’s performance. Heywood Broun for the *Tribune* said that Gilpin’s acting was “the most thrilling . . . we have seen any place this season. . . . It is a performance of heroic stature” (Gelb, 1962: 447). The heroism was absent from the Wooster Group’s production in 1993, which was revived in 2006. Charles Gilpin gave what Heywood Broun called “heroic stature” to the role of Jones. In the Wooster Group’s production, Jones was played by a woman (Kate Valk) in blackface, seated in a wheel chair and using a microphone. Instead of “heroic stature,” Kate Valk makes Jones a blackface minstrel. Her performance takes note that O’Neill has Brutus Jones speaking a language based on the theatrical idiom of blackface minstrelsy rather than on that of actual people in their everyday lives. For example, at the beginning of scene five of *The Emperor Jones*, Jones, frantic and delirious, is trying to escape some Caribbean islanders whom he has bilked. He has just hallucinated a scene of the time he killed his friend Jeff in a dice game and says—

Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer! I’s a po’ sinner, a po’ sinner! I knows I done wrong, I knows it! When I catches Jeff cheatin’ wid loaded dice my anger overcomes me and I kills him dead! Lawd, I done wrong! (O’Neill, 1954: 26).

[Lord Jesus hear my prayer! I am a poor sinner, a poor sinner! I know that I did wrong, I know it! When I caught Jeff cheating with loaded dice my anger overcame me and I killed him dead! Lord, I did wrong!]

Blackface characters and dice were a regular part of minstrelsy, and an actor speaking this language could just as well be telling an audience “how de first white man cum . . . ’pon de face of dis yer circumlar globe.” Even though O’Neill’s language smacks of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, when I saw the 2006 revival of *The Emperor Jones*, Kate Valk gave the language a haunting rhythm and poetry. O’Neill’s play in its time was praised for innovation, yet the Wooster Group production discloses that it looks backward to the time of minstrel shows.



Kate Valk as Brutus Jones in the Wooster Group’s *The Emperor Jones*
Photo: © Paula Court

Blackface performance is not unique to the United States. Arlecchino wore a black mask in Italian *commedia dell’arte* (Brockett, 2003: 180) and English Morris dancers and mummers blacked up (Brockett, 2003: 102). The Molly Maguires in Ireland blackened their faces and wore women’s clothes. Nor was blackface in the United States always associated with Africans. “In the vast Christmas processions of antebellum Philadelphia, blackface spread rapidly to become the ‘most common

disguise' in the festival masking shortly after its first use in 1829" (Roediger, 1991: 105). Nevertheless, the presence of widespread African slavery in the United States, gave a particular significance to American blackface as performers blacked up to represent enslaved and freed Africans.

The northern white population faced with a sudden irruption of freed black Africans, many of whom were coming north to industrial cities, turned to blackface minstrelsy in large numbers. One of the main venues of minstrel performance in New York was Mechanics Hall, the home of the famous Christy Minstrels for several years. The very name indicates the audience it sought to attract. For the working-class audience in competition with freed slaves for jobs and social status, blackface actors could stand in for actual African Americans and thereby replace actual black people with a theatrical fiction. This fictive repeal of emancipation allowed white audiences to avoid dealing with the unruly and unpredictable variety of actual black people and to turn their attention to the managed and controlled artistic creations of the minstrel stage. Blackface performance emancipated white audiences from having to come to terms with the complex and varied reality of freed black slaves.

Blackface minstrelsy has often been considered simply racist and vulgar. Frederic Douglass wrote that blackface minstrels were "the filthy scum of white society..." (Cited by Roediger, 1991: 15 from the *North Star*, October 27, 1848). More recently, in his 2012 forward to *Darkest America*, Mel Watkins cites the authors' characterization of blackface minstrelsy as "based precisely on the adoption of the most slanderous fictions that white people have used to characterize black men" (Taylor and Austen, 2012: xiii).

American blackface however is not so simple. Jim Crow on stage and Jim Crow in law rest on the assumption that black and white can be exactly determined. If Jim Crow laws are to segregate black and white, the boundary between them must be clearly marked. Hence the anxiety about miscegenation expressed in Jim Crow laws prohibiting interracial marriage, which were not declared unconstitutional until 1967 in *Loving v. Virginia*. Plays like *The Octoroon* blurred the line between white and black. A white actor in blackface played the black character Pete and a white actor without blackface played the 'black' character Zoe. Though the character Zoe appears white, she is black. P. T. Barnum, according to Thomas Low Nichols had to disguise the black William Henry Lane as a white actor in blackface in order to make him acceptable to an all white audience in an all white (except for Lane) cast. Blackface performances undermine the very dichotomy on which they depend. Audiences mistake the blacked up minstrel for an actual black performer. A minstrel performer named Sam Sanford reported that the owner of the boarding house where he and his company were staying wanted to come and see the show. Afterwards the landlord told Sanford, "I looked around but did not see you." Sanford replied that they were there and "if you was you could not help but see us." The landlord said, "I saw no one but the Negroes" (Lhamon, 1998: 172-173). The landlord was unaware that

his white guests were the blacked-up ‘Negroes’ he had seen on stage. The minstrel version of the story of Cain and Abel makes Adam and Eve black and a white skin is the mark that God puts on Cain to show that he is a murderer. The rebellious end men with their vernacular antics triumph over the authority and the correct speech of the interlocutor who is sometimes white. Blackface performance deploys a kind of surreptitious emancipatory escape from rigid social categories based on skin color. It constructs an artificial world of distinct categories of black and white only to blur and undermine them. As Virginia R. Dominguez writes, “[In legal history] we find ample evidence of the changeability and arbitrariness of the boundaries of legally instituted racial categories” (Dominguez, 1986: 267). She begins her book with the celebrated case of Susie Phipps, who, when she applied for a passport in 1982 discovered that according to her birth certificate she was legally black though she had always considered herself white and other members of her family were identified as white on legal documents (Dominguez, 1986: 1 ff.). Susie Phipps in actual life had entered the fictional world of blackface performance; a world that declares an emancipation from strict racial categories and defines a space where a woman like Susie Phipps can be both black and white at the same time.

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