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Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World by Dale Cockrell

Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy by Annemarie Bean ; James V. Hatch ; Brooks McNamara

Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910 by David Krasner

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Note

1. This article is reprinted, with a few slight editorial changes and two new opening quotations, from the 1996 *Performing Arts Journal* (1,1) issue on "Hybridity," edited by Michael Bridger.

Reference

- Erdman, Joan L.
1987 "Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West." *TDR* 31, 1 (T113):64–88.

Joan L. Erdman is Professor of Anthropology and the Humanities at Columbia College Chicago, and Research Associate on the Committee of Southern Asian Studies at the University of Chicago. Recent research awards include a Senior Fellowship from the American Philosophical Society.

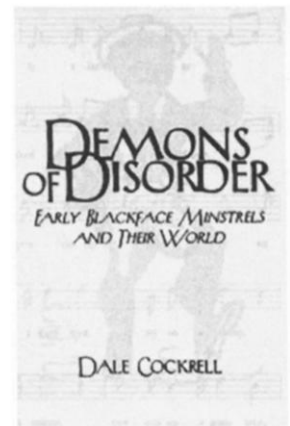
Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World by Dale Cockrell. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997; 256 pp.; \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy edited by Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, UPNE, 1996; 310 pp.; 25 illustrations, \$22.95 paper.

Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895–1910 by David Krasner. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997; 252 pp.; \$55.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

The project to map African diaspora performance practice onto a history of American popular culture production continues. Blackface minstrelsy and early theatre made by African Americans have risen in importance to scholars engaged in this project, as they offer obvious densely packed nodules of intercultural collaboration, with ever-widening critical implications. But the study of these performance forms knows no disciplinary boundaries, and scholars approach them from every conceivable angle: musicology, labor history, leisure studies, dance studies, theatre studies, and on and on. While historians of performance and American culture overlap primary source materials with musicologists and literary critics, no consensus arrives on how to ascribe meaning to the historical relationship between African performance practice and American popular culture.

Read in the chronological order suggested by their titles, these three volumes illustrate the contested state of scholarship concerned with black subjects and subjectivity on and off American stages. The various authors here agree on some basic points—blackface minstrelsy's significance derives from its immense popularity; blackface minstrelsy fixed certain stereotypes in the American popular imagination; black people in America are still recovering from the adverse affects of blackface minstrelsy as a powerful agent of symbolic racism—but they seldom concur in other areas, including terminology, or the very rationale for their own inquiry.





Dale Cockrell's project, which he describes as an attempt to comprehend the role of music in cultural history, proposes an unlikely recuperation of early blackface minstrelsy as both a source of intracultural continuity and a site of intercultural encounter rife with possibilities for vital relations between African Americans and working-class whites. Focusing only on performances and cultural contexts before the 1843 appearance of the Virginia Minstrels, Cockrell articulates the European feudal roots of blackface as an inheritance from folk theatricals of ritual inversion, such as the Lord of Misrule festival. Through detailed descriptions of performance traditions including callithumpian bands, mardi gras, charivari, and mumming plays, he argues that blackface allowed whites to incorporate the Other in the service of class-based populist activism. Calling his source material antislavery, if not downright abolitionist in intent, he hopes to persuade readers that early blackface minstrelsy offered its audiences "engagement at the edges, not simple perversity, and that it was, in promise, one of the most powerful means developed in the century for working out the problems that follow from the magnetic attraction of marginal opposites" (161).

To claim a meeting of marginalized opposites in minstrelsy, Cockrell has to place middle-class manners at the center of 18th- and early 19th-century American stage traditions. In a long opening chapter, he offers a detailed history of blackface performance predating minstrelsy; the carefully researched data allows him to argue that although the performative structures of minstrelsy as popular theatre developed from "folk" traditions, its racist ideologies were set in motion first by the legitimate theatres of the privileged. Trying to prove that early blackface minstrelsy might have "been about race without being necessarily racist" forces Cockrell into some tight corners. In drawing out European folk traditions of violent young male "rights of passage" which contributed to blackface performance, he goes so far as to note that "even the Ku Klux Klan seems to be derived from a tradition of 'whitcapping,' and was intended to enforce community mores, and some of its early-twentieth-century incarnations might have been substantial forces for ensuring the community's health" (46).

This may be so, and the power of laughter which "joins rather than divides" whites from black people may suggest that "early blackface minstrelsy was as much about healing as about wounding, as the ancient theatricals also taught understanding" (60-61). But Cockrell's efforts all but ignore the African-derived performance imperatives that white minstrels evoked. As he wonders whether "'Jim Crow' and kindred songs functioned, during this period, for black people much as they did for common white people, as songs of subversion, about dancing and the body and laughter, and of how the performance of joy and pleasure can remake a less than perfect world" (84), he fails to explore how these songs and dances functioned differently for African Americans than whites. Surely the centuries-old use of "blackness" as a metaphor for Otherness that Cockrell limns became transformed by the daily proximity to black bodies and African-derived performance practice. Just how that happened remains to be told.

In a surprisingly candid autobiographical epilogue, Cockrell describes growing up poor and white in the South of the 1950s, where embedded signals of racial envy and disdain mixed easily and led, no doubt, to his current research interests. He invokes a single black man from that era, his grandfather's farmhand "Pete," who attended his grandfather's funeral where "the ten-year-old boy in me still remembers his display of grief" (165). Cockrell doesn't seem to notice that his reading of early blackface minstrelsy relies heavily on the white male hegemony that allows him to invoke "Pete" as an experiential symbol of his early intersection with blackness. "Pete" lived in Niggertown across the creek, but he has no last name, no family, no history, no present or future that

Cockrell can recuperate even in this scholarly exercise. For me, this critical myopia foregrounds Cockrell's flawed effort to read blackface minstrelsy without engaging the black bodies which are, inevitably, among its subjects.

Annemarie Bean et al. have compiled a reader on minstrelsy that gathers writing from disparate methodological approaches and historical eras. Be warned: it is nearly impossible to determine when essays were written; there is no listing of contributors, so the authority of scholars cannot be thoroughly considered; and the editors offer little commentary and provide no contextualization for their choices beyond the fact of this being a first-of-its-kind anthology. That said, this impressive volume suggests innumerable directions for further study in its very organization, which includes section titles devoted to The Show, Humor, Images of Gender and Class, and Continuum.

As Mel Watkins notes in a short forward, the current fashion in minstrelsy scholarship explores the "potentially salutary aspect of the apparent fascination and attraction that has impelled white mimicry of blacks from the nineteenth century to the present" (ix). This critical maneuver, attempted by Cockrell but more solidly achieved by Eric Lott in his introduction to the anthology, holds far-reaching conservative implications, not the least of which may be about the nature of white privilege. As my reading of Cockrell suggests, if blackface minstrelsy can be discussed as an honest performative function of white desire for "blackness," it may be possible to historicize minstrelsy without seriously engaging its African-derived performance antecedents. The subjects of black people and Africanist performance practice in America—ostensibly at the heart of minstrelsy—can become a footnote to minstrelsy studies, which, in this process, join the ever-expanding inquiry of "whiteness." The danger is clear: African diaspora performance practice can subtly be made invisible within its own source materials.¹

Most authors in the volume write against an apparently widespread belief that audiences for blackface minstrelsy held monolithic demands and universal expectations of derision toward African Americans. In his introduction, excerpted from his larger study, Lott charges minstrelsy, the most popular American entertainment form in the antebellum decades, as "a principal site of struggle in and over the culture of black people." As such, he notes that the struggle "took place largely among antebellum whites, of course, and it finally divested black people of control over elements of their culture and over their own cultural representation generally" (6). Substituting "academic" for "antebellum," nearly the same can be said about the contemporary effort to historicize blackface minstrelsy. African American scholars and Africanist readings of the affects of minstrelsy and its performative gestures come in short supply in each of these three books.

Lott concurs with Cockrell that blackface had acquired representational force on the British stage by the late 18th century; but in Lott's view, American stage blackface negotiated "contradictions in the culture of the antebellum American popular classes—between 'white egalitarianism' and interracial urban practices, or between antislavery and antiabolitionism," a task that forced it to provide "'imaginary' resolutions to intractable social conflicts" (17). This more complicated rendering of the 19th-century desire for representations of blackness leads deftly to well-chosen selections dealing with specific case histories, like Hans Nathan's "The Performance of the Virginia Minstrels" reprinted from *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (1962) and Eileen Southern's "The Georgia Minstrels: The Early Years" from 1989.

The Alexander Saxton excerpt, drawn from his landmark *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990), and used here to supply commentary on the political climate of minstrelsy's reception, assumes that its racist underpinnings are unavoidable, that blackface minstrelsy "epitomized and concentrated the thrust of

white racism" (67). Saxton mines a rhetoric of appropriation, in terms of the critical designation of minstrelsy's music as "folk" music without recognizable provenance, which allowed "the dual task of exploiting and suppressing African elements" to begin "from the first moments of minstrelsy" (70). In Saxton's analysis, early minstrels "perceived slaves as *part* of nature—part of the nature of the South, and from this curiously ahistorical viewpoint undertook to 'delineate' the plantation culture of the South" (75). Ultimately, despite a smattering of antislavery discourse in later material, "minstrelsy not only conveyed explicit pro-slavery and anti-Abolitionist propaganda; it was, in and of itself, a defense of slavery because its main content stemmed from the myth of the benign plantation" (79). In this reading, the "imaginary resolutions" offered by performance mirrored the contemporary dynamic of political power.

The volume includes an excerpt from Robert Toll's seminal, but out-of-print study *Blacking Up* (1974) focused on how minstrelsy's various ethnic stereotypes "made the nation's diverse immigrants seem comprehensible to native white Americans" (86); and among musicological essays here, Robert B. Winans 1984 study "Early Minstrel Show Music, 1843–1852" offers a statistical analysis of minstrel band instrumentation. Although the editors have included a small but rich selection of primary sources including playlets, stump speeches, and broadsides, the sole entry in the dance section, Marian Hannah Winter's excellent "Juba and American Minstrelsy" (1947), arrives without the images that accompanied its original publication. And why are the primary source materials centered in the volume without editorial comment, as if they could speak for themselves among the contradictory array of revisionist readings?

In the volume's final article, W.T. Lhamon, Jr., suggests a conciliatory point of view for contemporary analyses of blackface and racial desire based upon his articulation of 19th-century youth culture. Noting that the audience for minstrelsy included "middle-class boys not yet come into property" as well as "the vast and rapidly changing population of working-class youths," Lhamon argues that blackface minstrelsy mitigated young people's anxieties over their relationship to market forces; that "the minstrel show was the first among many later manifestations, nearly always allied with images of black culture, that allowed youths to resist merchant-defined external impostures" (277).

Lhamon excludes black youth from his discussion as he asserts that the minstrel show demonstrated a "struggle over the settlement of youth's chaotic energy, in which youth projected themselves as blacks in order at least in part to rouse and engage the hypocrisies of their fundamentalist opponents" (278). He also overstates his case in claiming that "nearly all vernacular American dance derives from African American gestures that black William Henry Lane, dancing as Master Juba, and other minstrel performers spread all across the land (and took to England)" (281). Still, he alludes to the presence of African-derived performance practices that forced minstrelsy, over time, into its crowded, contested performative space of simultaneous degradation and virtuosity.

Blackface minstrelsy provided, at least, employment and social opportunity for African American artists; eventually, these performers escaped the burnt cork to produce recognizably "legitimate" American theatre. David Krasner's formidable study picks up the story here, with an intention to uncover "the ideas that reside at the core of black self-identity, ideas that provide the *constitutive elements of black modernity* circa 1895–1910" (4–5) as they were evident in theatre of the time. Working through a close reading of several key musicals and dance events of the era, he hopes to limn a history in which "black performers used the stage and the celebrity status some attained to advance the civil rights struggle between 1895 and 1910" (13), and black theatre "evolved as a reappropriation and redefinition of white-controlled theatrical images of African Americans" (15).

Krasner's interdisciplinary analysis succeeds in large part because of its unrelenting, complex readings of performance events. Following Houston Baker, Jr., he locates a "black modernist aesthetic" in the collusion of performance form and function which offered its participants a simultaneous model of social integration and resistance to racism. Following Toni Morrison, he explores compositional strategies by which artists counteracted the symbolic racism of everyday life. Following W.E.B. Du Bois, he traces the sense of acting within a veil of "double consciousness" which demanded that black performers simultaneously consider the sometimes contradictory expectations of white and black audiences. Writing with a highly energetic tone, he applies contemporary theory from a broad swatch of approaches, including cultural studies, gender studies, and political science, with an overarching hope that the study "will promote interest in the complexity of black American history" (14). Indeed it might.

Consistent with its aggressive literary style, Krasner's rhetoric assumes that black artists wasted no time creating empty entertainments; each performance provided an opportunity for social intervention that could mitigate racism and strict segregation. Black performers originally inhabited the minstrel mask by necessity, but refashioned it during this era according to their own nationalist agendas through techniques he describes here as reinscription and reversal. Reinscription "describes the manner in which black performers entered into the blackface caricature and refashioned it" (26), while reversal mined "the trope of parody and double meaning known as 'signifying' in black rhetorical strategies—which undermined the notion of racial authenticity" (29). He suggests that the elastic rhetorical foundations of African American culture conveniently allowed minstrel caricatures to be refigured by black artists at will into manners simultaneously familiar to African American audiences and amusing to cultural outsiders.

Krasner asserts that at the turn of the century, African American performers mingled with whites more than any other professional group, and the shows produced by these men and women explored the space between black and white cultures in function and form. The "disconnection" that these writers experienced led them to "produce shows that emphasized angst and discontinuity. A collage of acts, skits, solos, and dance numbers, instead of tight plotlines possessing linear consistency, developed out of the vaudeville tradition" (51). The pitfalls of such an essentialist argument become obvious quickly, and Krasner runs the risk of regulating every action by African American artists to the status of a reaction. In a fascinating sustained exploration of Aida Overton Walker's version of the cakewalk, he discusses how the choreographer reconfigured the popular dance "to accommodate race, gender, and class identities in an era in which all three were in flux" (75). Consulting clippings from the black and white presses, as well as Walker's conspicuous writings about her own work, he demonstrates that Walker managed to rewrite the bodily gestures of the dance to appeal to white elites as well as African Americans. But when he writes that she "articulated an embodied discourse as an instrument of her self-representation" (82), I wonder if she danced well, or how her artistry was measured by her various audiences.

Surprisingly, Krasner never problematizes his terminology or its historical emergence; he simply assumes that an identifiable phenomenon called "black theatre" exists. At times, the critical distinction between an ideological concept of "blackness" and its associated array of political and performative imperatives is not separated out from the corporeal fact of black people. These oversights diffuse Krasner's assertions, and produce some fairly circular arguments along the way, for example: "In early black theatre, the visibility of 'blackness' onstage was not solely a function of production and performance,

but was part of the assumptions of the spectator, whose vision of blackness dictated the way in which cultural images would be shaped during performances" (136). Here, it would be helpful to know, at least, how Krasner defines "early black theatre" and "blackness."

Also unfortunately, Krasner's book has no images, not even his own, and he offers no autobiographical narrative to document his relationship to this material. This only becomes noticeable because he does bother to identify white and African American critics when their cultural differences support his thesis. Surely Krasner is not hiding from his readers, concerned that his whiteness may suggest blackface scholarship at play. He shouldn't worry. His study turns the spotlight squarely on the complex relationships between black subjectivity and white spectatorship, predicting a more fruitful discourse of African diaspora performance practice by scholars of every ken.

—Thomas DeFrantz

Note

1. Brenda Dixon Gottschild offers this argument in relation to Lott's work in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (1996:88–94).

Reference

- Dixon, Brenda
1996 *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

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