

Session 3: Mainstreaming Racial Difference: Late Minstrelsy and its Transformations

History of Popular Music; Prof. Jenkins

- I. Changing Political Character of Minstrelsy
 - a. From the late 1820s to the early 1850s, minstrelsy often used blackface to address issues of class and to some extent to justify Irish immigrants as truly “white.” Some minstrel shows even portrayed black as the unfortunate victims of a cruel system. Thus, many Southern states outlawed minstrel performance.
 - b. However, in the 1850s, stereotypes in minstrel performance hardened and it became increasingly pro-slavery. Slaves were portrayed as relatively stupid and happy within the institution of slavery. Free slaves (e.g., the Northern “dandy” character) were portrayed as being out of their element and ultimately unhappy. Even the abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was inverted to become a farce about slavery and “happy” Uncle Tom.
- II. Decline and Transformation
 - a. During the Civil War, minstrelsy in its “classic” phase lost popularity but was replaced by variety shows, musical comedies, and vaudeville, all of which employed comic styles and song types derived from minstrelsy.
 - b. However, the blackface tradition did not die. Many films, including the very first feature-length film to include synchronized sound, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) starring Al Jolson, employed actors in blackface. Other films featured black actors playing stereotypical roles derived from minstrelsy (see Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in his films with child star Shirley Temple; or the even more blatant minstrel act of Stepin’ Fetchit). Several Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse cartoons feature both blackface and derogatory racial stereotypes. These roles survive to the present day—some argue Jar Jar Binks is a modern Fetchit. Others argue that certain popular figures like Flavor Flav are modern minstrels.
- III. Black Minstrelsy
 - a. But as the stereotypes hardened (and with the abolition of slavery that followed from the end of the Civil War in 1865), ironically more black performers found a place for themselves as professional entertainers—specifically by performing as *blackface minstrels*.
 - b. In the 1840s black minstrels began to perform—notably William Henry Lane and Thomas Dilward. By the 1850s there were all-black minstrel troupes. But it was with the close of the Civil War that black minstrelsy became a viable career path for black musicians and actors, as well as a business opportunity for certain black entrepreneurs.
 - c. In most of the troupes, black men (and a few women) still wore burnt cork and the exaggerated lips, conforming to stereotypes established by traditional minstrelsy.
 - d. George Hicks (a black man) helped organize and managed Brooker and Clayton’s Georgia Minstrels (an all-black troupe) in 1865 and they toured the Northeast US. He soon founded his own troupe (Hick’s Georgia Minstrels) in 1866 and enjoyed success for the remainder of the decade culminating in an 1870 trip to Germany. When the group returned to the US in 1872 it was bought by white manager and entrepreneur Charles Callender.
 - e. Lew Johnson (black) founded his own troupe (which went by many names but is often referred to as Lew Johnson’s Plantation Minstrels) in 1866 and focused his career on the Midwestern section of the US.
 - f. The black community and black leaders were deeply ambivalent about the rise of the black minstrels: on one hand, it seemed like participating in the degradation of the race; on the other, it allowed for a prevalence of black performers that would not have otherwise been possible (moreover, blacks performing not only for black audiences but also for white ones).
 - g. Frederick Douglass, “Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Singers,” *North Star* (1849): “Partly from a love of music, and partly from curiosity to see persons of color exaggerating the peculiarities of their race, we were induced last evening to hear these serenaders. The company is said to be composed entirely of colored people; and it may be so. We observed, however, that they too had recourse to the burnt cork and lamp black, the better to express their characters, and to produce uniformity of complexion...We are not sure that our readers will approve of our mention of those persons, so strong must be their dislike of everything that seems to feed the flame of American prejudice against colored people; and in this they might be right; but we think otherwise. It is something gained, when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience, and we think that even this

company, with industry, application, and proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race.”

IV. James Bland (1854-1911)

- a. One of the most impressive figures to emerge from black minstrelsy, Bland was from a middle-class family and was educated at Howard University. He left college to join Haverly's Colored Minstrels (also called the Original Georgia Minstrels) as a singer, composer, and banjoist. The group traveled to England in 1881 and Bland stayed in London, stopped wearing minstrel clothes and had a successful career as a music-hall performer and composer in England and Germany.
- b. By 1890 he was hugely successful and wrote many famous songs including “In the Evening by the Moonlight,” “Oh, Dem Golden Slippers,” and “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.” In total, he wrote over 700 songs.

V. Ernest Hogan (1865-1909)

- a. First African-American entertainer to produce and star in a Broadway Show: *The Oyster Man* (1907) and helped to create (and perhaps even named) the genre of ragtime music.
- b. Also established the “coon song,” a sort of late minstrel song with his hit “All Coons Look Alike to Me” (1895). The song was so popular it was the test tune for the 1900 World Ragtime Competition in NYC.
- c. Coon songs built on minstrel stereotypes but instead of merely being indolent, coons were dishonest and given to drinking, gambling, and violence. In some ways coons were the beginning of a tradition that continues in which largely white audiences are simultaneously repelled and attracted to the violent, rebellious black male (see *Gangsta Rap* as an obvious example—what would 50 Cent be without the aura of violence?). See the Stagle character as an example of the “coon mentality” in country blues.
- d. Hogan came to regret the song and felt that he betrayed his race. Indeed by the second decade of the 20th century many black leader decried the coon song but the trope of the violent black antihero proved incredibly influential.