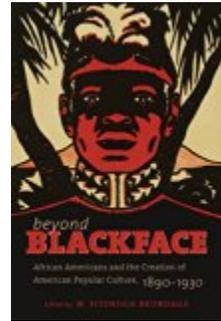




W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed. *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*. H. Eugene and Lillian Youngs Lehman Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. vii + 373 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3462-6; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7184-3.

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## Performing Race on the Great Divide

For scholars of race and popular culture, blackface minstrelsy has been the subject of enormous critical speculation. Eric Lott's *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* has dominated the field. Lott argues that minstrelsy and its popularity with the white working class was central to the construction of blackness. His work was published in 1995 at the time when other cultural histories by David Roediger and Micheal Rogin also explored the performative aspects of race and class in terms of the interaction of many actors. W. Fitzhugh Brundage's edited collection *Beyond Blackface* is inspired by the groundbreaking work of the 1990s. Since blackface has so dominated the field of race and entertainment, many of the essays are attempts to bring to light the diversity of popular cultural representation of blackness, as well as the participation of prominent, and not so prominent, black entertainers and businesspeople.

Brundage has collected thirteen essays that clearly owe a debt to the work of Lott, but also move beyond the more inflammatory dimensions of minstrelsy to other African American representations in popular culture. In his introductory essay, "Working in the 'Kingdom of Culture,'" Brundage provides an excellent short history of the conspicuous role that African Americans played in the production and consumption of popular culture during the early twentieth century. Brundage contextualizes the subsequent essays in reference to what Lawrence Levine described as the high/low culture divide of the late

nineteenth century in his *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1990). Black intellectuals, as well as the more genteel establishment of ministers and teachers, like their white counterparts, expressed great concern over the corrosive effects of popular culture. However, for the black establishment, popular music, theater, and popular advertising images were particularly destructive to their notion of uplift and respectability of a race that was suffering under an assault of odious stereotypes. Attempts to bring a more "authentic" black or African/African American sensibility that we currently associate with the urban intellectuals and artists of the Harlem Renaissance either ignored or creatively expropriated the more dominant "crossover" images of blackness that continued to be associated with the "cakewalk" and musical styles of minstrelsy.

Brundage divides the collection into four codas: "Representation of Blackness in Nineteenth-Century Culture," "The Marketplace for Black Performance," "The Meanings and Uses of Popular Culture," and "Spectacle, Celebrity and the Black Body." In the first coda, Stephanie Dunson's "Black Misrepresentation in 19th Century Sheet Music" is the only essay that focuses primarily on black face minstrelsy. It does so by reading representations of blackface on a series of sheet music covers. As is commonly known, the very term "Jim Crow" comes out minstrelsy, and Dunson offers several images in her essay. While much of her argument regarding the

erasure of blackness is familiar, Dunson does an excellent job of providing visual evidence to support her notion that standards of “black deportment” were established by minstrelsy. She ends her essay by describing the way black performers, like Bert Williams and George Walker, were forced to conform to these standards, as they simultaneously began to subvert these stereotypes with their growing popularity.

In the second set of essays, Brundage collects five pieces on the business of popular culture. He is especially concerned with what he describes early in the book as the “dilemma” for black performers and show business entrepreneurs, namely, “which market—white, black, or both?” The choice is more than a pragmatic, market choice for the many black artists concerned with respectability and authenticity, especially considering the eagerness of mass audiences to consume the old stereotypes. David Krasner, “The Real Thing,” openly borrows his title from Miles Orvell’s well-known work (*Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* [1989]) to argue that black performers often openly appealed to both audiences by appropriating minstrelsy. Krasner examines issues of African authenticity around the popularity of the cakewalk and one of the most famous black dancers of the era, Aida Overton Walker. Krasner argues that Walker and others took what had been considered a lowbrow minstrelsy dance and constructed an African tradition to elevate the status of the dance and its dancers. Provocatively, he argues that Walker’s creation of authenticity anticipated more contemporary forms of urban style that mash up high and low styles into unique forms of “ghetto chic.”

Subsequent essays in this section also emphasize the attempts by black performers and entrepreneurs to cross over either by usurping minstrelsy or by introducing forms of blues and jazz music to white audiences. John Giggie’s “Buying and Selling with God” provides an important reminder of the role of the black church in consumption during the 1920s. Preachers, Giggie argues, were often the mediators between the market and black consumers in many communities. Together, the two essays illustrate how the segregated marketplace affected different consumption patterns for black and white audiences of popular music.

The last two sets of essays are dominated by examinations of famous black cultural figures who directly challenged the legacy of minstrelsy stereotypes. Robert Jackson’s essay, “The Secret Life of Oscar Micheaux,” examines the life and work of this well-known black film-

maker. Jackson spends much of his piece on the reaction of the black community to the release of D. W. Griffith’s infamous *The Birth of the Nation* (1915). Jackson argues, like others before, that Micheaux’s films, especially his *Within Our Gate* (1920), were direct refutations of *The Birth of a Nation*. Unfortunately, *Within Our Gates* is one of the few surviving Micheaux films. Therefore, Jackson relies primarily on newspaper accounts and promotional material to restore the history of Micheaux. The last essay in the collection, “More Than a Prizefighter” by Lewis A. Ehrenberg, provides a brief, but compelling biography on the heavyweight champion Joe Louis, emphasizing the public reaction to his two fights with German champion Max Schmeling. Louis’s widespread crossover popularity is described in sharp contrast to the controversial reign of the first black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson. Ehrenberg argues that Louis was better able to negotiate the public image of his celebrity than Johnson and his handlers. For Ehrenberg, both champions led lives that may have offended the general public. However, Louis’s consciousness of the mass criticism of Johnson informed his decision to cultivate a persona appealing to both black and white audiences. For Ehrenberg, it is a tribute to Louis’s keen insight into the power of race and celebrity in the twentieth century.

The relationship of African American performers to popular culture has been, and continues to be, fraught with compromise. While many historians have described blackface as an expression of race anxiety among working-class whites, this collection of essays moves beyond blackface by describing the anxiety from the black perspective. For African Americans, as a minority group in the United States, obviously mass, popular appeal required the approval of white audiences. At the same time, black performers and cultural reformers hoped to provide an alternative to the condescending images of blackface. The old entertainment business cliché that if you “give the people what they want ... they’ll come out” offers little guidance to black performers, especially if “what they want” is racially offensive. How to balance this desire to apply one’s craft and to please a mass audience is a particularly difficult matter for a black entertainer. Reading this volume, I had a better understanding of the compromises that black entertainers, like Williams and Walker, had to make. They were difficult choices that most white popular performers did not need to make, beyond perhaps the “whitening” of changing one’s name to a less ethnic one, or creating a less odious stock ethnic character. While the color line and the “great divide” between high and low culture in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries posed a challenge, many black performers were able to navigate these obstacles to assert their own power to reinvent representations of blackness that could satisfy the demands of white and black audiences alike.

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