

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marvin McAllister. *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 336 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3508-1.

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In the 1890s, when blackface minstrelsy degraded and mocked African Americans, Bob Cole, a black performer, created Willy Wayside, a character he played by donning makeup so as to appear white. His popular performance forced audiences to grapple with the fluid nature of race within America despite the legalized segregation and lack of civil rights that characterized the United States during the Jim Crow era. The influence of blackface minstrelsy on popular entertainment and ideas about race and citizenship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been well-covered by scholars and critics over the last several decades, but “whiteface minstrelsy” is a far less well-known area of inquiry. Marvin McAllister explores the long-standing practice of Africans and African Americans assuming white identities to explore and challenge notions of race within the United States. He defines whiteface minstrelsy as “extra-theatrical, social performance in which people of African descent appropriate white-identified gestures, vocabulary, dialects, dress or social entitlements” (p. 1). He makes it clear that he views the extra-theatrical part of this as separate from “passing” as white. Those who passed as white bought into the notions of white superiority while white-face performers used their assumed whiteness to point out the inequities within racial hierarchy. McAllister also discusses “stage Europeans” whom he defines as “black actors appropriating white dramatic characters crafted initially by white dramatists and, later, by black playwrights” (ibid.).

Of the two definitions the author is clearer on stage Europeans, mainly because they were on the stage. McAllister never makes entirely obvious the extra-theatrical part of whiteface minstrelsy. For example, he

invokes Homer Plessy’s challenging of racial segregation on a Louisiana train as an example of a “social performance” of whiteface minstrelsy in the book’s introduction, but he never fully explains this (p. 10). Similarly, there is an attempt to link Cole’s performance with Busta Rhymes’s 1999 Mountain Dew commercial in which Busta plays both himself and a white skateboarder who appears to be stalking him. The connection is completely unclear, particularly since the very strange commercial’s goal is to sell a product, not appropriate whiteness, or presumably, to make a statement about the meanings of race in America.

McAllister is at his best when discussing actual theatrical performance. In performances by Cole and other black actors, it is clear that theater was one of the ways in which African Americans were able to confront Jim Crow and point out the nature of racism by reversing the dynamic of mimicry, namely, blacks playing whites on-stage revealed very real contractions offstage. These performances encouraged white audiences to identify with black actors not only in whiteface, but also in roles traditionally written for white actors. As the author writes, “stage Europeans directly contested and demystified the color line,” as these roles created a transgressive space demonstrating black ability in ways usually reserved for whites (p. 117). Contemporary critics praised the performances, sometimes preferring these shows to those performed by whites, though others complained that these performances were devoid of “peculiar racial characteristics”; such critics recommended that black companies should stick to plays that were written by and for blacks (p. 134). This study extends analysis into the stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor, Dave Chappelle, and others ar-

going that “white people be like” humor is a part of this long tradition.

The largest problem with the book is the first chapter in which the historical grounding of the work is thin and the historiography is tragically dated. Most of this chapter deals with Charleston, South Carolina, but its chronology jumps considerably, giving the impression that Charleston (Charles Towne) in 1735 was the same in 1772 and in 1822. Of course, 1822 is the year of the supposed Denmark Vesey conspiracy to incite a slave revolt in Charleston, which the author links, in an unclear way, to whiteface minstrelsy. There is no evidence that Vesey ever tried to appropriate whiteness beyond the trial record of the case, which Michael P. Johnson has demonstrated to be disastrously flawed.[1] McAllister misses the debate as to whether the Vesey conspiracy actually existed or was instead the product of a power struggle between whites. Clearly this chapter was to demonstrate the long-standing tradition of whiteface minstrelsy, but the dynamics of slavery, particularly within a city like Charleston, are not treated with the

proper complexity or historiographical grounding to be convincing. As with other mentions of extra-theatrical performance, it is not evident what makes this whiteface minstrelsy or how this fits into discussions of resistance to slavery and the power of slaveowners. In dealing with post-emancipation theatrical performances, the transgressive space of the stage is evident, but under legalized slavery and outside of the theater, the nature of that space was both more constrained and more complicated than this chapter indicates.

Aside from the first chapter, this book discusses a fascinating and understudied segment of race in America. While it might not reconfigure how we understand how race was negotiated and defined during the period it covers, it certainly adds a welcome layer of complexity.

#### Note

[1]. Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (October 2001): 915-976.

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