

BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY: HANDBOOKS FOR THE AMATEUR, 1899 TO 1921

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INTRODUCTION

This project tells the story of the rise of the production of large-scale amateur blackface minstrel shows as a highly popular performance practice in the white middle-class communities of the urban North in late 19th and early 20th century America. Amateur blackface minstrelsy was so popular at the turn of the century that publishing companies were able to tap into a ready market of amateurs eager for instructional materials and other commodities geared to producing their own minstrel show. Samuel French Publishing, a New York publisher of dramatic materials, and M. Witmark and Sons, a well-known publisher of Tin Pan Alley sheet music, were some of the first companies to tap into this market. However, other publishers soon followed suit, including those known for publishing dramatic materials: The Dramatic Publishing Company (Chicago), The Eldridge Entertainment House (Ohio and Denver) the Max Stein Publishing House (Chicago), T.S. Denison and Company (Chicago and Minneapolis), and the Walter H. Baker Company (Boston), to name a few.

Some of the same companies that published the instructional manuals also developed their own line of theatrical goods for amateur blackface performance and marketed them through mail-order catalogs.¹ Thus, the instructional manuals did not stand alone but were part of a system of commodities specifically packaged and marketed to support amateur blackface minstrelsy as a community performance practice.

Supplemental commodities included Tin Pan Alley sheet music as well as thousands of

¹ Catalogs published by M. Witmark and Sons alone included *The Amateur Entertainer* (1904); *Catalog of the Witmark Entertainment Publications and Supplies* (1914); and *What an Amateur Minstrel Show Means as an Entertainment for Schools, Colleges, Churches, Camps and All Amateur Organizations* (1925).

blackface skits, monologues and comic dialogue gleaned from the stages of vaudeville and professional minstrelsy and re-packaged for amateur use. Commodities also included lithographed posters, invitational post-cards and clip-art for use in promoting a show as well as musical instrument and stage-properties, including costumes, wigs, blackface make-up, and a range of cosmetics related to the application and removal of blackface make-up. Taken together, the instructional manuals and the visual and material commodities that accompanied them, added up to a kind of “ready-made,” a modern-day kit for performances of race and class.²

Most of the research on blackface minstrelsy has been written about the intersection between antebellum forms of blackface minstrelsy performed in the slums and saloons of the Bowery in New York and its early audiences of male laborers trapped at the bottom of the labor pool under the new regimens of industrial labor. As W. T. Lhamon, Jr. wrote in *Raising Cain*, antebellum blackface minstrelsy provided a leisure time venue for enacting a kind of masculinist “rowdiness” that was not only a form of compensation for the regulated hours of ditch-digging and factory work but that also functioned as a site of “mud-sill mutuality” for those at the bottom of the labor pool, including both black and white workers (15). And while there has been debate about the existence and significance of this interracial solidarity, suffice it to say that most scholarship on antebellum American blackface performance in the urban North describe it as a site of camaraderie among white day-laborers, one that typically engendered

² In *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* (1906), manual writer Albert Carlton explains that a key advantage of amateur minstrelsy is that “an entire Minstrel show may be bought ready-made...Today, at a mere nominal cost, you may purchase guides and paraphernalia so correctly planned, so readily understood, and above all, so appropriate to any grade or style of production, that a performance is complete...before the local musician or director calls the first rehearsal” (7).

somewhat riotous and highly participatory forms of homosociality and male display in antebellum concert saloons and other similar sites.

My project deviates from these concerns. I am less interested in professional minstrelsy's early male audiences and will focus instead on how the late 19th century *amateur* blackface minstrel show occasioned its own form of homosociality and masculine display for white middle-class men in the urban North. My own project is particularly concerned with the way in which white middle-class men used large-scale amateur blackface shows to enact both individual and communal masculinities and how the savvy publishers of instructional materials on amateur blackface catered to the anxieties and aspirations of these readers. Using the artifacts of instructional manuals, I move from questions about the motivation and engagement of individual participants to questions about the motivations and behaviors of social groups participating in these productions, including how organizations and clubs gathered in communal space to initiate important preparatory activities related to planning and production.

Participation in a middle-class amateur blackface minstrel show seems to have offered young white men in particular a prized venue for various forms of male display. The instructional manuals, theatrical supplies and promotional materials associated with these productions indicate that most large-scale amateur blackface minstrel shows were planned, produced and performed by middle to upper middle-class white men and by young men in particular. This conclusion is also supported by contemporary newspaper coverage, including announcements and anticipatory feature articles about upcoming shows as well as "theatre" reviews of recently performed shows and descriptions of after-show celebration. Newspaper coverage sometimes featured articles on individuals

playing a leadership role in planning and producing a show, and at times even featured illustrations or photographs of individual performers. But while these productions were highly homosocial affairs, the forms of male display associated with amateur blackface obviously were also popular with the entire community, for these productions were much anticipated community events, and they were always well attended.³ In short, large-scale middle-class amateur minstrel shows were not only about white fraternity, they were also about masculine self-presentation in the context of communal belonging and collective identity.

Even though most amateur minstrel shows were performed for only one or two nights, it is more accurate to think of the show as a community event that lasted several weeks, given the need for preparation, promotion, and rehearsal. In fact, most of the instructional manuals specify that an amateur show could take about a month to appropriately plan and develop. This suggests a certain depth of immersion by participants and underscores the fact that the racialized performative aspects of amateur blackface were not confined to the night of the performed show but began the moment a community group came together to plan the production. In short, given the racialized context of the minstrel show, every action and every form of communicative exchange, whether offstage or onstage, must be considered as part of the racial performance.

The way in which communities came together around the event of an amateur blackface minstrel show was also a distinguishing factor, for everyone involved with an

³ According to local newspaper coverage, an 1893 amateur minstrel show staged by the Ashland Club at their club house attracted 400 people ("Have an Amateur Minstrel Show." *Chicago Tribune*; 11 Feb. 1893; p.3); an 1896 amateur show staged by the South Side Cycling Club on the club lawn also attracted 400 guests ("Bike Men and Gags," *The Daily Inter Ocean*; 26 June 1896; p. 12); and over 600 tickets were sold for an amateur show staged at The Galena Opera House in Galena, IL in 1896 ("Blacked Faces for Charity." *The Daily Inter Ocean*; 2 Oct. 1896).

amateur show—whether as planner, performer or audience member—must be considered a participant. Everyone associated with the show was a member of the same community organization or club, and as previously noted, larger amateur productions even received newspaper coverage during the planning process. This means that amateur productions had an ongoing *presence* in communal discourse. In addition, audience members, producers and planners, and members of the cast often participated in a range of post-performance activities, including formal celebrations or more informal activities. Thus, unlike the passive performer-audience relationships that informed other forms of staged entertainments for the middle-class, audience-performer relationships surrounding the event of an amateur blackface minstrel show entailed a unique form of spectatorship that was highly interactive and not limited to the night of the staged performance.⁴ In other words, the preparatory rituals before the show, what happened on stage and in the audience during the night of the show, and what happened after the show either in celebratory events or more private aftermath activities were all part of a highly participatory performative whole that had particularly porous boundaries in space and time.

Contexts

While the production of amateur minstrel shows might have taken place nationwide, my dissertation contextualizes the production of amateur blackface as a phenomenon in the urban North. There are several reasons for this choice.

⁴ For an historical overview of the move from highly interactive audiences in antebellum popular theatre to the quieted middle-class audiences of mid-century stage entertainments, see Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge UP, 2000).

The first reason has to do with urban growth: industrialization, urbanization, and unparalleled increases in population, fueled in part by a rise in immigration and the displacement of young men who had left behind their families and rural communities in order to find work in urban areas. Thus, cities in the urban North were peopled by a mix of ethnicities that became more complicated with each successive wave of immigration (i.e., Irish, German, Eastern European, Southern European, Asian, and Chicano-Latino) as well as with the beginning of African American migration northwards after Emancipation. These developments were also concurrent with the rise of a particularly virulent nativist discourse and the workings of scientific racism and the hygienic movement throughout the 19th century, as well as with early and 20th century progressive era ideas that linked masculinized forms of nationalism with ideas about civilization, racial dominance and a vision of whiteness as the apex of evolutionary development (Bederman 170-215). Being categorized as white was not only crucial for demonstrating national belonging and claiming citizenship, it was also essential for upward social mobility. For some, like the “in-betweeners” David Roediger writes about (i.e., new immigrant populations not fully recognized as white), staging an amateur blackface minstrel show as a community event might have been about staking a claim to whiteness (*Working Towards Whiteness*). However, I would also connect the repeated staging of these productions with white anxieties about race: responses to early black migration north, fears of miscegenation, and the perceived threat of black upward mobility.

A second reason for framing this project in the urban North has to do with the growth of the entertainment industry, especially in New York. New York was an originating site for antebellum minstrelsy and saw the establishment of huge minstrel

halls, many of which were reconceived in the latter half of the 19th century as “opera houses” when promoters and troupes re-designed the minstrel show as a middle-class entertainment for the whole family. New York was also a site for the development of multiple forms of “staged entertainments” (Knapp, 41). Such entertainments included the variety theatre of the concert saloons, various forms of theatre in immigrant communities (e.g., Italian, Yiddish, and German American theatre), and of course, vaudeville, which reigned supreme during this era. Popular comic theatre also offered burlesques of mainstream opera and Shakespeare, including blackface burlesque of both of these forms.⁵ These entertainments of course expressed the social complexities of their milieu and catered to the desires of their various audiences; thus, those stages were informed by issues related to class formation as well as representations of race and ethnicity. All of these things informed the development of professionally performed blackface minstrelsy as the number one form of popular culture until the rise of vaudeville, as well as the emergence of amateur blackface as a pastime whose popularity rose as that of professional minstrelsy waned.

Ethnic Representations

As Heather Nathans tells it, representations of race and ethnicity had been central to the development of popular theatre in America, dating back to the Revolutionary War era. The 1820s and 1830s in particular saw a theatre-building boom in major urban centers as well as an escalation in the representation of ethnic types (99-100). Thus, in popular theatre, performers continually “wrestled with how to represent the ever-

⁵ For more on blackface burlesque of opera, see Renee Lapp Norris’ “Opera and the Mainstreaming of Blackface Minstrelsy” in *Journal of the Society for Music*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 341-3.

increasing range of ethnic groups jostling against each other in urban landscapes or racing across the Western frontier,” including the Irish, Germans, French, Spanish, and British, as well as Southerners, Yankees, American Indians, and black people from the West Indies and Africa. The key question informing these performances was what characteristics--what *markers*--could be used to clearly differentiate an American character (like the Yankee) from ethnic or racialized “others” (98-110). Markers that clearly identified the racialized or ethnic “other” were the markers of stereotype, and they functioned as a kind of shorthand for identifying stage types that endured throughout the 19th century and early 20th century.⁶ According to this shorthand, Irishmen were drunkards, Jews were cheapskates, and blacks were ignorant chicken thieves.

In the antebellum era, the most popular comic characters were the stage Yankee, who typically symbolized American values; the stage Irish, based on a demeaning comic caricature that migrated from the British stage; the stage Jew, a “maligned” character created in response to concerns about the rise in Askenazai Jewish immigrants (105), the stage German, who typically spoke in a Dutch dialect, the stage Indian, and the stage African represented as black through blackface. These representations were ubiquitous and were performed in staged entertainments that catered to audiences across class lines, in the concert saloon variety shows of the Bowery, in blackface minstrel shows designed for middle-class audiences, and of course, in vaudeville, which in Robert Snyder’s opinion, was never “sympathetic” to representations of ethnic culture. As Snyder explains, “vaudevillians who performed in cities like New York did not often present

⁶ Nathans notes that these matters became even more important when theatre sites became politicized as sites where candidates sought to better connect with voters (100-101).

immigrant cultures to their ethnically diverse audiences” but instead “expressed a synthetic ethnicity from elements of immigrant experiences, mass culture and the stereotyped national and racial characters of the American theatre” (110).

And while ethnic and racial stereotypes were portrayed onstage in various dramatic genres (e.g., melodramas or heroic political drama), our interest here is with comic representations of ethnicity and race, especially those representations that were highly popular at the turn of the 20th century and concurrent with the rise of these large-scale amateur minstrel shows. Alison Kibler’s work is useful for identifying these stereotypes. Kibler’s project is to document the ways in which Irish, Jewish and African Americans worked to take political action against the practice of “racial ridicule” in popular theatre. Kibler identifies the professionally performed middle-class minstrel show and the musical comic melee as two late nineteenth century theatrical traditions that “encapsulated the history of racial caricature as well as the social and political relationships between Irish, Jewish, and African Americans” populations in particular (21).

As Kibler explains it, throughout the 19th century, the blackface minstrel show “mocked almost everyone: Irish and German immigrants, Jews, Native Americans, and all types of authority figures came under fire in its polyglot humor,” although the “central joke” of minstrelsy was a kind of smug whiteness behind the blackface make-up,” a matter which my dissertation will address (22). In late 19th century theatre, however, the musical melee brought something new onstage; as Kibler tells it, the melee was a kind of musical slapstick staging in which various ethnic types were “chaotically thrown together through pratfalls, fisticuffs, and other stage gags--like dynamite, greased stairs, and flying

furniture” (21). The melee typically focused on interactions between certain immigrant communities--especially the Irish, German and Jewish communities, and African Americans.

While racial and ethnic caricature was the norm in these staged entertainments--i.e., in the minstrel show, in vaudeville, and in the musical melee--I want to take a moment to comment on the difference between comic representations of immigrant groups and stage representations of African Americans.

My first comment has to do with the general matter of the performers themselves. For example, while all of the performers representing specific immigrant groups in American popular theatre did not come from those groups, by the late 19th century many of those performers were in fact immigrants themselves, especially in vaudeville, since a good number of vaudevillians had moved from immigrant stages to vaudeville, as a way to improve their careers (Snyder 44). This means that performers did in fact have some control over how they might perform a role. In addition, there seems to have been a fluidity when it came to immigrant caricature, for as Robert Snyder explains: “According to the conventions of the period, anyone could play any nationality. All that was needed was a convincing presentation of stock traits down to skin color: sallow greasepaint for Jews, red for Irishmen, and olive for Sicilians” (11).⁷ What few black vaudevillians there were would never have had this flexibility. In fact, when African American performers like Charles Walker and Bert Williams performed at Koster and Bial’s Vaudeville House (1896-1897), they often appeared in blackface. The irony here is that Bert Williams was

⁷ Snyder goes on to list examples including two New York Jewish comedy teams: the Ross Brothers, who did Italian dialects and Morris and Allen who sang Irish songs and played the bagpipes (111).

a West Indian immigrant who broke into show business by impersonating a white construction of minstrelized African American blackness (Snyder 120). Even when Williams went onto perform in Ziegfeld Follies--where he was highly successful, he had to perform in blackface.⁸

My second comment has to do with the musical melee in particular. One key area of difference between comic ethnic representations and black-through-blackface representations in the musical melee had to do with characterization. Both Alison Kibler and James H. Dormon reference Harrigan and Hart as being especially popular and prolific throughout the Gilded Age, most notably through their blackface performance in minstrelsy and in vaudeville and for their representations of immigrant life in the musical melee, most of which were penned by Harrigan (Dormon, "The Ethnic Cultures of the Mind 21-22). According to Kibler, while all of these representations were meant to poke fun at, if not ridicule, various ethnic groups, the characterizations of ethnic groups that could at least vie for whiteness offstage (the Irish, the Jews, the Germans) were given a bit more character development and storyline while representations of African Americans were simply pulled from the traditional minstrel show. Dormon is not so sure, arguing that despite Harrigan's claims to the contrary, his characterizations of life on the lower east side of New York were quite dependent on what had become the traditional marks of ethnicity: the Irish were pugnacious and given to excessive drinking, Germans were fat

⁸ For more on the ways in which Walker and Williams worked to destabilize these stereotypes, see Louis Chude-Sokei's *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-On-Black Minstrelsy, and The African Diaspora* (Duke UP, 2006); Daphne Brooks chapter on Williams and Walker's *In Dahomey* in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Duke UP, 2006); and Karen Sotiropoulos's chapter on the coon craze in *Staging Race* (Harvard UP, 2006).

from sausage and beer, and Jews were depicted as poor immigrant street vendors speaking in Yiddish dialect and concerned with the acquisition of money (“The Ethnic Cultures of the Mind” 32-33).

That said, Dormon and Kibler agree that African Americans fared the worst on the stages, for they not only enacted minstrel show stereotypes, they were also represented as behaving in ways that were menacing to the other characters, a behavior that is not typically portrayed in the traditional minstrel show (Kibler, 22-23). Dormon is in complete agreement with Kibler here, writing that the musical melee, along with other late 19th century blackface entertainments saw the emergence of a new version of the stage African in the character type of “the coon,” a character type drawn from the “coon songs” of Tin Pan Alley between 1890 and 1910.⁹ This character type is also expressed in the amateur minstrel show, in the songs the instructional manuals suggest for performance, and in some of the skits consumers could purchase for performance on the amateur stage. Before delving into this character type, however, I want to step back and offer a brief overview of traditional minstrel show stereotypes as a way to trace the comic precursors to this character type and what is different about his manifestation at the run of the century.

Minstrel Show Stereotypes

According to theatre historians, representations of blackness on the white antebellum American stages were imported from a black clown tradition in English theatre, one that dated back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and was informed by

⁹ For a more complete discussion, see James Dorman’s 1988 essay, “Shaping the Popular Image of Post Reconstruction Blacks: The ‘Coon Song’ Phenomenon of the Gilded Age.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 450-471.

theological associations linking blackness with evil and especially with Lucifer and the darkness of the fallen angels. Thus, when demons and devils were portrayed onstage, they were portrayed in blackface. Robert Hornback takes this a step further by pointing to a “buried tradition of early blackface comedy” that also associated blackness with “degradation, irrationality, prideful lack of self-knowledge, transgression, and, related to all of these, folly” (47). Hornback goes on to write the following:

With disturbing consistency, blackface served as one commonplace mark of foolishness in the iconography of the so-called ‘natural’ fool--in medieval and Renaissance English parlance--a butt, laughed at because he was mentally deficient (whether ignorant, dull-witted or mad) and often physically different as well (for example, “hunchbacked,” dwarfish, lame, deformed, ugly, or blackfaced.” (Hornback 47)

Most important is that Hornback’s research links the Devil to the Fool and explains that blackface in early British theatre was associated with a form of holy “degradation” or even a kind of madness (48-49). Hornback supports his position through a comparative study between specific medieval and Renaissance plays with theatre traditions in antebellum America that associated blackness with irrationality.¹⁰

Sterling Brown, a poet and educator whose work established an important foundation for African American literary criticism in the 1930s, wrote an essay cataloguing and delineating representations of blackness utilized by white authors in a range of literary forms, including short stories, novels, and poetry. (James Hatch

¹⁰ Similar associations have of course been documented by Winthrop Jordan in his work on the origins of European and American racism: *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro-1550-1812* (University of North Carolina Press, 1968, 2012).

references Brown in the introduction to *The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays* (1991) because the catalogue of types Brown reviews also has resonance in American popular theatre.) Along the same lines as Hornback, Brown points to blackface portrayals of Lucifer and other demonic creatures as representations of blackness in early literature; however, he adds other character types to the list including the following: 1) Balthasar, who was one of the three Magi bearing gifts to the Christ child and who represented the darker races; 2) an early 17th century tradition in English masques which incorporated sumptuously dressed black figures appear as a kind of luxurious novelty; and 3) a tradition in Elizabethan revenge tragedies, which often featured a black king (usually designated as a Moor) who was taken captive and who then wreaked a bloody revenge on his Christian captors. And even though these last types deviate from the comic representations under consideration here, they are useful in liming out the range of stage representations, especially stage representations before the advent of slavery. As James Hatch notes, after the advent of slavery, there is a difference in representations of blackness, i.e., a movement away from kings to representations of servants and slaves.

On the minstrel stages, the comic character type emerged as two key figures: the plantation black--a minstrel stage representation of the rural slave--and the urban dandy, the freed urban black comically striving for upward mobility.¹¹ The comic plantation slave who dominated blackface minstrelsy in the antebellum era was the Jim Crow

¹¹ In *Iron Cages* (2000), Ronald Takaki describes Frederick Douglass as an astute analyst of the white male psychology and quotes something that Douglass wrote in *The North Star* (13 June 1850): "While we are servants, we are never offensive to whites...on the very day we were brutally assaulted in New York for riding down Broadway in company with ladies, we saw several white ladies riding with *black servants*" (qtd by Takaki, 142).

character, a character first performed on the stages of the Bowery by a white man, T.D. Rice. Jim Crow was the prototype of the escaped slave; not only was he dressed in rags, but in some versions, he had a raggedy body as well. One writer described him as “a curious mixture of pathos and humor. His right shoulder was deformed and drawn up high; his left leg was gnarled...stiff and crooked at the knee, so that...[he] walked with a limp, obviously painful and yet laughable. As he worked, he sang a rather mournful tune and, at the end of each stanza, [he] gave a queer little jump, setting his “heel-a-rickin” as he alighted” (Wittke 24-25).

W. T. Lhamon’s *Raising Cain*, among others, offers another version of Jim Crow, arguing that there was a brief moment in time when he functioned as a subversive figure who grew out of an interracial “Atlantic lumpenproletariat” street culture and signified a kind of “burst bondage” for the white underclass before being policed into formats less threatening to the middle-class (152). However, David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* argues that antebellum minstrelsy never moved away from racist humor and that even if there was a moment of interracial alliance around this figure, most blackface performances supported white supremacist politics (124). For Nathan Huggins, Jim Crow was simply a “theatrical grotesque”: “the theatrical darky was childlike; he could be duped into the most idiotic and foolish schemes...His songs were vulgar and his stories the most gross and broad; his jokes were often on himself...Lazy, he was slow of movement, or when he displayed a quickness of wit it was generally in flight of work or ghosts. Nevertheless, he was unrestrained in enthusiasm for music--for athletic and rhythmical dance” (*Harlem Renaissance*, 251).

Ronald Takaki's *Iron Cages* describes two other plantation stereotypes that emerged on the minstrel stage. The first was the stereotype of the contented slave who appeared in the 1820s. Takaki explains that this image grew out of southern "paternalism" which constructed the slave as a Sambo: i.e., as "childlike, docile, irresponsible, given to lying and stealing, lazy, affectionate and happy" and would always be loyal as well as completely dependent on the master (116). In short, the idea was that blacks were racially created to be slaves who were loyal and completely dependent on the master. These white constructions of blackness provided a rationale for Southern slavery and persisted as theatrical grotesques not only on the minstrel stage but in other staged entertainments, in variety, musical burlesques, and vaudeville. The contented slave was also featured mid-century, when the professionally performed minstrel show became dominated by an Old-South nostalgia that represented the plantation era as a time of peace and plenty when slaves willingly labored and offered their song and dance as forms of entertainment to plantation owners. Old South nostalgia also gave rise to another plantation stereotype: the character of the freed slave who did not want to leave his master or having left, still pined for the days when he was under his master's benevolent care. As Sterling Brown points out, both of the character types were also featured in various literary forms, particularly in sentimental literature like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (186).

These fantasies of the South are what Joseph Roach describes in *Cities of the Dead* as forms of a "memory" marked by what it forgets (2); here what white memory wanted to forget was the violence and horror of slavery. This mode of "misremembering" or "mystifying" a fairly recent past dominated popular music in the work

of writers like Stephen Foster, whose music was often incorporated into mid-century minstrel show productions (Knapp 50-56). Eric Lott's analysis of this phenomenon is worth reviewing; in a chapter on Stephen Foster in *Love and Theft*, Lott points out that while these idyllic representations helped to stabilize the racist ideology informing them, this music also resonated with minstrel show audiences because it registered "gaps," addressing homesickness and feelings of doom as well as unspoken concerns about white paternal authority and control (187). Lott then asks a profound question: "What...was the attraction of the plantation's "natural" hierarchy of master and happy slaves to a northern male working population not always, perhaps, unduly agitated about the state of affairs under slavery" (195)?

Because Lott was writing about the northern working class, his answer centers on the way in which the well-ordered plantation mythos appealed to working-class men, salving male anxieties about disturbances to family structure and a loss of paternal control produced by socioeconomic tensions and new patterns of wage-earning that led working-class women to seek employment outside the home (196). We might well ask these same questions about minstrelsy's middle-class audiences, for these images of racialized order persisted throughout the late 19th century in large extravaganzas staged for middle-class audiences. And although there was a period in the 1890s when the Old South nostalgia was replaced by a craze for "coon songs," (another theatrical grotesque that I will address below), Old South nostalgia made a return at the turn of the 20th century with "back to Dixie" music. This music was typically written by Eastern European immigrant composers in the urban North, mostly Jewish, who knew little of the South but who again represented "old Dixie" as a time and place that was idyllic--the

songs were typically about moonlight, cotton fields, singing darkies, and a longing to return home (Cox 16-17). These tunes and representations dominated Tin Pan Alley as well as blackface performance in professionally performed minstrelsy and in vaudeville.¹²

The other minstrel show character type emerging in the antebellum era was the Urban Dandy, a theatrical staging of the freed slave who had left the South for the urban North and who comically strove for upward mobility; and while he was a vehicle for farce and at times functioned as a white working-class satire of white social elites, he also represented white anxieties about black upward social mobility and miscegenation. There were numerous incarnations of this character. He may have had his beginnings as a figure of folly on medieval and Renaissance stages (as Robert Hornback theorizes); however, he also may have arisen from representations in 17th century masques which featured elegantly dressed black slaves as a luxurious novelties (as Sterling Brown suggests) or as a black clown arising out an amalgam of European clown types. Patrick Schmitt writes of a comic black clown in an 18th British play called *The Padlock* (1768); Schmidt describes the play as a “thoroughly conventional romantic comedy” which pulled from the commedia dell’arte tradition. However, what was unusual about the play was the inclusion of the character of Mungo, an African slave played by a white actor in blackface, who Schmitt describes as a possible “dramatic original” for a black clown

¹² It is worth nothing that in his 1933 essay, Sterling Brown had also delineated the stereotype of the contented slave, the wretched freedman, and the “perpetually mirthful” comic negro in various forms of literature written by white authors, including pro-slavery fiction, anti-slavery fiction, and reconstruction literature as well as in a range of “humorous” writings in the early 20th century. Brown also writes about “the brute,” a popular turn of century representation given to “rape, pillage and murder” and the “exotic primitive,” a man of appetites, living for liquor, women and the occasional razor fight with other blacks” (197).

tradition in British theatre (75-76). The play was highly popular in London and even more popular in antebellum America, due to the character of Mungo. Schmitt writes that Mungo was modeled after a stock European character, that of the “set-upon servant,” a character derived from the Fool tradition in Elizabethan drama. The “set-upon servant” was “frequently a ludicrous imitation...of his master”; he was attracted to fine clothes and was “a lover of creature comforts, hating work, travel, and physical discomfort of every kind” (77). This character also often had a physical deformity (e.g., he was obese or lame) as well as a “linguistic deformity” due to his mixing of a vernacular form of English with absurd imitations of “grandiloquent” language spoken by his master. Thus, for Schmitt, the minstrelization of blackness in antebellum America might have migrated from a European stage tradition in which the servant was a comic mirror of his master (77-79).¹³

Monica L. Miller’s *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (2009) is particularly helpful in tracing minstrel show constructions of the urban dandy. Miller’s project is “to write the first history of black dandyism in the [black] Atlantic diaspora and to consider black dandyism as a *black* form of self-styling that “negotiated” constructions and de-constructions of masculine identity on both a literal and material level (4-5). Miller also offers us a useful historical overview of the stereotype, beginning with how the minstrel show urban dandy first emerged in 1827 as “the Long-Tail Blue,” a newly freed urban black who wore elegant clothing, including a

¹³ Eric Lott places the emergence of minstrel types as being at “the intersection of slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters such as the harlequin of the commedia dell’arte, the clown of the English pantomime and the clown of the American circus the burlesque tramp, [and] perhaps the “blackman” of English folk drama,” i.e., in English mummer plays. See “Blackface and Blackness,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Wesleyan UP, 1996), p.10.

long-tail coat with somewhat phallic swishing tails, symbolic of his “animalism in both physiognomy and sexuality” (98). He approximated the white gentleman but was of course policed in minstrelized representations so that he could not escape his racialized status. A later incarnation of the dandy can be found in Zip Coon, who was even more a figure of farce, for he was a “larned skolar” with a more “beastly demeanor” (cite). Miller also references a third and lesser known version of the urban dandy who emerged in 1844: Dandy Jim from North Carolina. This particular incarnation of the black dandy is also described in great detail by Robert Mahar a decade earlier (1999) in his study of male social rituals in antebellum minstrel show song lyrics (202).¹⁴

The urban dandy has been described as a “composite” blackface stereotype because he also satirized white “sporting men,” i.e., a type of well-dressed con man in pursuit of pleasure and ill-gained wealth, usually through theft or gambling; he also could satirize outsider immigrant attempts at imitating upward mobility as well as the affectations of social elites. While Miller acknowledges the way in which the black dandy might have derived in part from “a cultural critique of perceived white decadence,” she adds two important layers: the sexuality of black masculinity and black desire for upward social mobility:

Although the early minstrel show presents the dandy in different guises, constant in its portrayal of blacks in fancy clothing is the figure’s

¹⁴Constance Rourke had already identified the Long-Tail’d Blue as one of three comic types distinct to American culture in her 1931 publication of *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*. It is worth noting that both Sterling Brown and Nathan Huggins praised Rourke’s work; however, Baker writes the following: The [minstrel] mask, for generations on end, has been so persuasively captivating, so effectively engaging in its seeming authenticity that an astute intellectual like Constance Rourke can actually take it as an adequate and accurate sign of a “tradition” of “negro literature” (17).

association with sexual threat and class critique. In the case of the blackface dandy, the donning of the clothing of elites translates to a desire not only for social mobility, but also for the most extreme form of integration, interracial sex. The threat of free blacks was expressed as what Lott describes famously [in *Love and Theft*] as “the bold swagger, irrepressible desire, sheer bodily display” of the black dandy...the phallic nature of the dandy’s iconography and mischief cannot be denied. (Miller 99)

Here Miller and Lott capture the threat of miscegenation as well as white anxieties about class formation, especially in the latter half of the 19th century when there were material signs of black upward mobility. This was especially true in cities like Philadelphia and New York, both sites of large opera houses where elaborate minstrel shows were performed for white middle-class audiences and both sites that saw the beginnings of black middle-class communities with churches, schools, newspapers, African relief societies, musical societies, masonic lodges and other fraternal organizations (102-103). And although they could not use clothing to disguise their outsider status--something that members of many new immigrant groups were able to do--African Americans did use clothing to advertise their freedom and, just like members of the nascent white middle-class, they also had an interest in using clothing to signify class status (102-104).

There is one other blackface stereotype--another incarnation of the urban dandy that emerged in the 1890s: the “coon” of the Tin Pan Alley “coon song” craze that was so prevalent between 1890 and 1910. Although he incorporated the traditional minstrel show stereotype, according to some source, this character was seen as potentially dangerous in

a new way.¹⁵ Although James Dormon does not see the same level of threat to the white social order that Lott and Miller identify in earlier urban dandy character types, his 1988 essay on this topic is helpful for capturing how this figure in the “coon songs” differed from previous incarnations. For Dormon, in comparison to the “coon,” the traditional minstrel show dandy was an “essentially unthreatening figure”; he was staged as a “happy-go-lucky dancing, singing, joking buffoon” who was comically “outlandish” in his “misuses of the forms and substance of white culture,” and he was always represented as “safe” (“Shaping the Popular Image” 451). But the character of the “coon song” brought something new; while he was still an indolent comic grotesque with an appetite for watermelon and pork chops, he was also a “razor-wielding savage” whose weapon of choice was a “flashing steel straight razor” (“Shaping the Popular Image” 455). Although white characters were never attacked in these stagings, blackface “coon” characters brought razors to all of their social gatherings and attacked each other “at the slightest provocation” (“Shaping the Popular Image” 450).¹⁶ As previously noted, both Dormon and Alison Kibler describe the staging of this character in the music melee as somewhat menacing to the other characters.

In Dormon’s opinion, the “coon” of the “coon songs” also exaggerated other characteristics of the traditional minstrel show dandy. For example, while the urban dandy had always been associated with an animalistic sensuality in earlier incarnations, in the “coon songs,” he was totally unrestrained in multiple ways: he was not only ignorant and indolent “but also devoid of honesty or personal honor, given to

¹⁵ The word “coon” also came into use during this period. The connotation was animalistic; it also referenced reputed black pleasure in hunting racoon and the racoon’s reputation for stealing its food as a generalized characteristic ascribed to blacks (“Shaping the Popular Image” 450).

drunkenness and gambling, utterly without ambition, sensuous, libidinous, even lascivious” (“Shaping the Popular Image” 455). “Coon song” lyrics not only featured bragging about prowess with dice, cards, and razors but also emphasized sexual prowess in new ways, especially in songs like “De Swellest Ladies’ Coon in Town” or “Red Hot Coon,” a song in which a woman brags about her lover. Dormon also references a song called “Mormon Coon” which catalogues the character’s polygamous prowess with various kinds of women, including white women (“Shaping the Popular Image” 459). Representations of black desire for upward mobility persists in these songs as well but again, it emerged in new ways. As Patricia Schroeder points out, “many coon songs of the ragtime era--such as “I’m a Lucky Coon” [1906] and “I’ve Got a White Man Running My Automobile” [1906]--showed the African American’s similarities to his white counterparts, emphasized their shared ambitions and threatened to destabilize white social authority” (147).

Why was the representation of black social relationships premised upon masculine volatility and aggression so popular with white people, not only on minstrel show stages, but in popular song and in vaudeville as well as in the amateur minstrel show? Dormon offers a tangle of reasons. The music pulled on the syncopations of ragtime, an exciting new black cultural production, it was also connected to all sorts of dances--the two-step, the cakewalk, and marches, and it “featured appealing foot-tapping, time-clapping rhythms accompanying the ostensibly funny lyrics” (“Shaping the Popular Image” 453).¹⁷ Dormon points out that “coon songs” were also popular because they also

¹⁷ Ragtime music also exposed white Americans to highly talented ragtime pianists and composers like Scott Joplin and Eubie Blake. A number of the coon songs were written by black songwriters. For more on African American debates about coon songs, see Patricia Schroeder’s “Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race” in *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2010.

represented African Americans as dangerous to the social order; thus, “the immense popularity of the “coon” image nationwide merely reflect the ongoing commitment to racist assumptions that underlay the system of American apartheid in which blacks were maintained in subordinate and subservient roles” (“Shaping the Popular Image” 465).

Yet, this is not the whole story. For more of an answer, I would like to turn to one of the character types that Sterling Brown addresses in his 1933 essay: “the exotic primitive.” Here Brown describes the “exotic primitive” as “a white projection of a desire to move from the self-control of Victorian life to a form of “modern expressiveness” by projecting those desires onto an image of black masculinity” that was “informed by the savagery his origin, by emphasis on appetite--food, liquor, and women--and by his unrestrained connection to modern forms of black music informed by ecstatic “savage rhythms” (197-198). Although Brown was writing about a stereotype emerging after WWI and had white slumming in Harlem in mind (the “savage rhythms” of music he references is jazz rather than ragtime), he importantly links white fascination with this character to the desires prompted by a transition from the Victorianism to the modern era. The coon of the “coon song” era could be read as a kind of precursor to what he describes.

Robert Snyder raises this same point in writing about the way in which vaudeville entrepreneurs worked to build a kind of middle-brow entertainment for the middle-class by marketing their staged entertainments as “respectable.” However, Snyder points out that while vaudeville might have been marketed as “respectable,” the comedy of vaudeville always posed a kind of “challenge” to Victorian values in a way that audiences found exciting. Importantly, this excitement was *racialized*:

Another way vaudeville undermined Victorianism was by presenting titillating characters who did not share the precepts of Victorian culture. The strategy was obvious in eroticized black stereotypes and coon songs--the fighting emancipatory tradition of black spirituals never received as much attention on the vaudeville stage as the sensual strut of the cakewalk. This strategy also appeared when ethnic stereotypes were used to approach sexuality and conflict between men and women. (Snyder 145).

Furthermore, as Snyder reminds us, ragtime music itself was a challenge to Victorianism and the dances associated with ragtime that Dormon describes above were at first criticized as “blatantly sexual and immoral” (Snyder 136) before becoming highly popular.

Racial Play for Middle-class Men

This overview of ethnic and racialized representations of white masculinity and black masculinity in staged American entertainments of the urban North is important for contextualizing my own project. Since amateur minstrelsy was quickly becoming an institutionalized amateur performance practice at the turn of the 20th century, and since more than half of the instructional manuals reviewed for this project were published between 1899 and 1912, representations of race and ethnicity in the most popular forms of staged entertainments are particularly important for framing my dissertation, especially in the era of the “coon song” craze (1890 to 1910). The coon song character is referenced in different ways in the instructional manuals. For example, some of the manuals offered their readers sample minstrel show programs as a guide for what kinds of comedy and music could be included in amateur productions; while the musical selections could

include traditional ballads and songs sentimentalizing the Old South, most of the programs included numerous Tin Pan Alley “coon songs” as well as skits featuring razor-toting blackface characters and grotesque stage representations of black social events that pulled from more modern sources (like the musical melee described above). Thus, when the publishing companies began marketing the instructional manuals and related commodities, I believe they did so with an eye to appealing to their mostly male reading audience by marketing amateur minstrelsy as a kind of “urban thrill,” moreover, a thrill that could be enacted in a new way completely under white control in everyday life.

Professionally performed minstrelsy was on the wane in late 19th-century America in the urban North because it could not compete with vaudeville; thus, the minstrel show stereotypes began to emerge on vaudeville stages as well as in other forms of staged entertainments, early film, and radio. That said, it is clear from the persistent sales of the instructional manuals and relevant commodities and from the rise of these large-scale amateur minstrel shows that white middle-class Americans did not want to let the live minstrel show disappear; they craved its rituals as a form of entertainment that also salved white anxieties about race, class, and modernity. These anxieties included concerns about the rising numbers of African Americans in the urban North, black upward social mobility and a growing black middle class that accompanied worries about maintaining a social order that featured white middle-class men who demonstrated their competence and readiness for modernity. These blackface shows indeed could display white masculine control over the details of production and performance; at the same time, the subject matter of these amateur shows also gave their mostly male participants access to a kind of “urban thrill” through racial impersonation, performances rife with violence

and unruliness that was at the same time “contained” through the structure of the minstrel show and minstrel show stereotypes.

So how do we understand this form of racial play and what do the instructional manuals suggest about individual and communal masculinities and the pleasures derived from this use of leisure time? On the face of it, those pleasures seem to derive from a set of complex impulses. On one hand, as it did for minstrelsy’s early masculine audiences, the white constructions of blackness that informed the amateur middle-class blackface minstrel show offered white middle-class men a site for enacting compensatory albeit *safe* middle-class transgressions of the social order (Takaki, Kimmel, Bederman). So, while middle-class racial play did not have the same bawdy sexuality or rebellious chaos of antebellum or postbellum minstrelsy, there obviously was just enough titillating “raciness” and excitement about cross-racial impersonation to engage middle-class men on a regular basis. Yet this is only part of the story, for the amateur blackface minstrel show was also a platform for displays of white privilege, not the least of which was the thrill of racial border-crossing through a kind of comic communal slumming.

At the same time, a close reading of the instructional manuals indicates that there were other kinds of middle-class pleasures offered by the staging of an amateur minstrel show that had to do with a display of racial order and white masculine enactments of discipline characteristic of a more Victorian impulse. This might have included a pleasure in a kind of self-control or display of industriousness required to stage a large-scale community show that was both entertaining and that met its financial goals. There was also a kind of blackface benevolence at work since most of these productions were promoted as fund-raisers for community organizations and local charities. In addition,

the manuals seem to betray a pleasure in systems of hierarchy and deference important to collective identity as well as to success in the new bureaucratic workplace settings of corporate America. And then, of course, there was simply the pleasure of staging the clear boundaries of racial difference.

For example, consider the introduction of one of the earlier instructional manuals: *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899). The manual opens with “a few words from the author” that pitch the amateur minstrel show (and the manual) as an important venue for young men desiring to display their skills to a communal audience: “A minstrel entertainment gives the young amateur rare opportunities to display talent in the vocal, comedy, and dancing lines...it affords vocalists a chance to *come out* in solo or concerted work, and the young comedians or dancers excellent opportunities to *shine forth* and give full vent to their humor and wit” (1). In this light, an amateur minstrel show is presented as if it were a coming of age event or a form of debut before a communal audience. This debut, however, is immediately racialized in the lines that follow:

Minstrelsy is the one American form of amusements, purely our own, and it has lived and thrived even though the plantation darkey who first gave it character, has departed. The dandy negro has supplanted him, but the laughable blunders are still incorporated in the negro of the present time. The ballads of Steven C. Foster, breathing of slave life and the cotton-fields, have been laid aside for the modern love-song with a dramatic story or descriptive ballad,--yet the minstrels sing them and the change from

antebellum days to the darkey of the present time, has been accomplished without perception. (Dumont 1)

This excerpt exemplifies a discursive thread that emerged across all of the manuals. Black masculinity will remain child-like in the modern era: socioeconomically inept and frozen in a pre-industrial past. White masculinity, however, will be associated with social fluidity through racial performance and a modern-day know-how bolstered by the expertise and knowledge that the instructional manual will deliver. The occasion of an amateur minstrel show will not only offer an occasion for male display, but will also help a man to develop other skills, such as how to manage his body in preparing for a blackface role, or how an amateur stage director might learn to manage people, or how show planners and producers might utilize a modern-day business model in order to achieve success. In these ways, the instructional manuals always tied a successful production—one that was both entertaining and met its financial goals—with a readiness for modernity and white manliness.

The Manuals and the Writers: Written by Men for Men

Although the instructional manuals were published well into the 20th century, I have chosen to concentrate on nine manuals published between 1899 and 1921. Five of these texts were published at or near the turn of the century: *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) by Frank Dumont, *The Complete Minstrel Guide, Containing Jokes, Parodies, Speeches, Farces and Full Directions for a Compete Minstrel Show* (1901) by William Courtright, *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* by Albert Carlton (1904), *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* (1911) by Press

Eldridge, and *The Minstrel Guide and Joke Book* (1912) edited by Paul Lowe.¹⁸ The other four minstrel guides were published about a decade later and include *The Making of a Minstrel Show* (1921) by Seymour Tibbals, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* (1921) by Harold Rossiter, *How To Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Burnt Cork Director* (1921) by Jeff Branen and Frederick Johnson, and *The Minstrel Encyclopedia* (1921) by Walter Ben Hare.

It is also important to point out that the manuals were written by men for a male reading audience. And although women are sometimes referenced in these manuals, these references are there mostly as a way to titillate the male reader. Some of the manual writers, like Frank Dumont, William Courtright, and Press Eldridge were well-known professional minstrel show performers who needed little introduction to their readers. Other manual writers, however, worked various jobs in the entertainment industry. Albert Carlton (*The Business End*, 1904) introduces himself as a businessman with special expertise in the production of amateur minstrelsy who promises to share a “system” based on modern-day business practices that will garner financial success, since most amateur shows are staged to raise monies for various communal causes (5).

Seymour Tibbals (*The Making of a Minstrel Show*, 1921) was a newspaper man and a writer of blackface skits and joke books and introduces himself as a longtime participant in amateur theatricals, who quickly learned the importance of using “snappy” up-to-date musical numbers rather than the old Southern melodies in order to capture an audience’s

¹⁸ The complete title of the 1912 manual is as follows: *The Minstrel Guide and Joke Book: a Comprehensive Guide to the Organization and Conducting of a Minstrel Show, and How to Make Up, Containing a Diversified Collection of the Latest Mirth-Creating Jokes, Gags, Cross-Fire and Monologues Passed Over the Footlights by the Most Celebrated Artists in Burnt Cork on the American Stage.*

attention (3-4). Harold Rossiter (*How to Put On a Minstrel Show*, 1921) owned a Tin Pan Alley style music company in Chicago and begins by explaining that he has been “producing minstrel-shows with amateur talent” for nearly ten years; thus, his expertise “is not based upon some fancy theory but is from actual experience” (3). Branen and Johnson (*How To Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Burnt Cork Director*, 1921) were both song-writers. They introduce their combined expertise as deriving from “years of experience with professional Minstrel troupes, the staging of hundreds of amateur Minstrel shows and the writing of a vast amount of blackface crossfire, sketches and songs” (5-6). Walter Ben Hare (*The Minstrel Encyclopedia*, 1921) was a prolific writer of short comedies and skits, including blackface plays and plays featuring a range of ethnic representation. He also published a voluminous amount of plays for amateur use, including plays for children, most of which were published by the Walter H. Baker Company (Boston) and T.S. Denison (Chicago), each of which published one of the instructional manuals reviewed for this project.¹⁹

Methodology

When I first began this project, I envisioned it as a documentation of the existence of a little-known form of print culture and the related theatrical supplies and commodities associated with them. I had never seen instructional handbooks for amateur minstrelsy before and came across them quite accidentally in the course of my research. And while I had some knowledge of the grotesque representations of blackness that dominated the American entertainment industry, I never would have imagined something like the

¹⁹ A short biography for Walter Ben Hare is available from IMDB at www.imdb.com/name/nm0362832/bio. Accessed 5 22 2018.

commodification of amateur blackface or the multiple modalities of this material. The commodity racism of amateur minstrelsy is unlike anything else I have encountered in my research simply because it manifested across a range of communicative modes, including print culture, visual culture, material culture, and live performance. While the minstrel show stereotypes in amateur blackface simply derived from the grotesque constructions of blackness that dominated the late 19th and early 20th century racial imaginary, what distinguishes amateur minstrelsy is the range of these modalities. Thus, one concern in my dissertation is how “the things” of amateur blackface--i.e., the instructional manuals, blackface jokebooks and cans of prepared burnt cork--helped to facilitate norms that shaped racialized communal practices as well as communicative exchanges and bodily gestures in everyday life.

In short, I soon realized that the challenge of this project would not simply be the matter of documentation; the real challenge would be threefold: 1) contextualizing late 19th amateur blackface as a performance practice; 2) imagining how “the things” of amateur blackface impacted human behavior; and 3) understanding how amateur blackface functioned as a male-dominated community event. Most important, however, was how to write about historically contextualized performance practices in everyday life.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor raises these kinds of questions in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003). According to Taylor, the tendency of academics is to privilege the written text as a form of knowledge; after all, a live performance is inaccessible after the fact: as a form of “non-discursive culture” that resides in a moment in time, it can never be captured (26). Even having the script for a play does not capture

the essence of the performed play, for “the performance” will be different every time and, once performed, it will be gone. Thus, we have to ask: what methodologies can we use in order to identify nonverbal cultural practices and to understand how these practices manifest and are culturally transferred in everyday life?

Taylor answers this question by classifying knowledge as it relates to performance into two major categories: 1) the archive, meaning “documents, maps, literary texts, letters, videos, sound recordings and archaeological remains as “items supposedly resistant to change,” and 2) the repertoire, meaning culturally and historically informed non-discursive forms of knowledge we carry in our bodies and express through performance onstage as well as in everyday life: through gesture, orality, movement, dance, [and] singing...all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible [forms of] knowledge” (19-20). Taylor also proposes certain strategies for writing about performance; most important is to articulate the “set-up” by contextualizing a performance in a time and place and by identifying relevant social relations in terms of race, class, gender, and the relations of power. Key to this articulation is the “scenario,” whose full consideration includes interrogating the tension between social actors and the roles they perform and how those scenarios might allow for reversal and parody, despite their often-formulaic structures.

Another model important for my project is offered by Robin Bernstein in *Racial Innocence*, a study that considers the innocence of childhood as a racialized social construct and the way in which the material culture of childhood--children’s books, illustrations, toys and various household items--worked to racialize the behavior of children. In particular, Bernstein introduces the idea of reading objects as historically

contextualized and racially charged “scriptive things” that invite or prompt certain behaviors in everyday life. Most important in Bernstein’s paradigm is that popular literary works are not isolated from the world of “things.” Thus *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, did not simply function as print culture but as a material site engendering multiple modes of communicative expression, including “parlor performances, prose, poetry, visual art and material culture” as well as multiple behaviors and “physical practices,” such as “reading, looking, singing, showing, weeping, drying tears, and masking” (13). Thus, something as simple as a handkerchief and certain kinds of dolls become ideologically charged objects due to their connections with the world of the novel. Like Taylor, then, her research does not rest on a written archive but considers text and performance as two semiotic systems that can be deeply interconnected.

In some ways, Bernstein’s thinking plays on Taylor’s ideas about the relationship between *archive* and *repertoire*, for while a novel or text of a play can function as *archive*, i.e., as a more or less authoritative and stable signifier of meaning, historically located and culturally specific performances of that text (both private and public) can also impact *archive* in ways that no author could foresee. In this light, the *archive* can be created by the situatedness of social life, i.e., by the cultural and temporal specifics of an historical moment or by the localized cultural geographies of performance sites or by the bodies of the actors, e.g., by descriptions of a white child’s gestures while playing with a Raggedy Ann or Topsy Turvey doll in a certain time and place.

That said, Bernstein also points out that the stability of the *archive* is a kind of illusion, for every object, including a text, become a scriptive thing in the moment of its use and those moments are always culturally and temporally situated, thus, “the heuristic

of the scriptive thing explodes the very model of archive and repertoire as distinct but interactive because the word script captures the moment when dramatic narrative and movement through space are in the act of becoming with each other... To read things as scripts is to coax the archive into divulging the repertoire” (13). In short, scriptive things emerge into the social life of a contextualized historical moment bringing with them “repeated stylized gestures” and forms of “subjectification” that link performance--whether an enactment or a simply bodily gesture--with a flux of ideological meanings.

In different ways, Taylor’s and Bernstein’s advice on reconstructing the terms of live performance has influenced each of my subsequent chapters. Their ideas not only gave me a map for how I might approach this project and an appreciation of the manuals and historical events as tools for understanding, they also made me thoughtful about my own responses to these histories and artifacts. Taylor suggests we consider how we ourselves are situated in relationship to the events and artifacts we are working with: should scholars approach their subject of study as a *witness* who studies a “scenario” to give testimony or as a *spectator* and owner of a more distanced gaze or as a *participant*, meaning as individuals cognizant of our own role as social actors in the events we seek to understand (xv-xvi)? Never before have I sat with such detestable images and texts; although I was familiar with racist stereotypes in Hollywood film, never would I have imagined the existence of “ready-made” kits used for the performance of these stereotypes as an everyday practice in everyday life. How should I respond to this material, given my own positioning as a descendant of Eastern European Jewish immigrants from the urban North who were able to achieve middle-class status? In each

of my subsequent chapters, I have tried to approach both analysis and writing bearing this troubling question in mind.

Organizational Strategies

Here I would like to offer a rationale for the way in which this dissertation has been organized and the choices of material it makes. Because my own project is concerned with amateur blackface as a form of racial play for white middle-class men at the turn of the century, I am particularly interested in how amateur blackface worked to enact both individual and communal masculinities. Chapter one surveys some of the ways that scholarship on blackface minstrelsy has focused on antebellum and postbellum blackface in the urban North and questioned blackface's function as a site of interracial solidarity for whites and blacks at the bottom of the labor pool. Looking at approaches that past scholars have used to understand minstrelsy's historical contexts and legacies as a white performance practice helps to pave the way for looking at the much less studied topic of amateur blackface.

The development of popular theatre in the urban North also reflected American class formation. Chapter two of this dissertation offers an historical overview of the changing venues of blackface as it moved from being an urban underclass entertainment to a solidly middle-class form of entertainment that claimed "respectability." This chapter will also highlight key historical events related to class formation and staged entertainments in New York, where minstrelsy was first conceived. In particular, this chapter considers how minstrel show promoters re-shaped the blackface minstrel show to appeal to middle-class audiences and traces a corresponding "discourse of respectability" in the instructional manuals.

In considering the racialized socioeconomics that informed the early years of the American republic, Ronald Takaki writes that America was founded as a white man's country informed by an ideology that cast blacks as childlike, savage, appetite-driven and incapable of industry or incentive (117). These constructions not only provided a rationale for slavery, they also established a racial binary that constructed "blackness" as the antithesis of "the self-made man," which was the ideal for white masculinity. Chapter 3 explores this context as a way to imagine male participation in the amateur minstrel show. I have divided this chapter into two parts. The first part synthesizes what cultural historians have to say about constructions of white masculinity in American culture, from the self-made man of the republican era to a culture of self-control that informed Victorian manhood to socioeconomic ruptures in the Progressive era that engendered nationalistic discourse on the need to re-make white masculinity. The second part of chapter three considers the psychology of "blacking-up" and uses the instructional manuals consider how the white amateur player might have approached his blackface role.

My last two chapters move away from questions about the gestures of individuals preparing for racial play to questions about social groups and collective identity; key consideration here is how the racialized pleasures of amateur minstrelsy helped to shore up social identity for middle-class white men. Chapter 4 considers the way in which middle-class minstrel shows arrayed the bodies of blackface men onstage and how the instructional manuals delineated the rules for such arrays. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on the organizational ethos connected to minstrelsy and so addresses three areas of concern: the historical connection between fraternal organizations and blackface

performance, racialized models of leadership for white amateur minstrel show directors prescribed by the manuals, and the manuals' delineation of a racialized social etiquette in which teamwork and group cooperation are modeled as *white* characteristics and a kind of counterpoint to representations of black social life in the comic chaos of the blackface skits.

CHAPTER 1: A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

I shall make an attempt to convey the notion of mask as form...by summoning a familiar imagistic array, a long-standing group of concepts and assumptions that serves as a spiritual repository for a quintessential American ritual. The form, array, mask that I have in mind is the minstrel mask. That mask is a space of habitation not only for repressed spirits of sexuality, ludic satisfaction, castration anxiety, and a mirror stage of development, but also for that deep-seated denial of the indisputable humanity of inhabitants of and descendants from the continent of Africa. And it is, first and foremost, the mastery of the minstrel mask by blacks that constitutes a primary move in Afro-American discursive modernism.²⁰

--Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*

Introduction

Blackface minstrelsy was a performance practice that drew on grotesque constructions of blackness drawn from the 19th century racial imaginary. It quickly became the primary form of popular culture in 19th century America, first with antebellum white working-class audiences in the slums and concert saloons of New York's Bowery in New York's Five Points neighborhood, and then with middle-class white audiences throughout the latter half of the 19th century. The first wave of scholarship on blackface minstrelsy emerged in the 1970s, with a renaissance in the 1990s and some revival of interest in the last decade. Often interdisciplinary in nature, this scholarship has been done in a range of scholarly areas, including but not limited to history, literary studies, theater studies, and performance studies as well as in music, dance and popular culture studies. This section surveys the scholarship on blackface

²⁰ Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Chicago UP, 1987, 17.

minstrelsy and so offers context for my own research on amateur blackface as a performance practice.

I review the scholarship with an eye towards the way in which amateur blackface has been studied as an essentially white male enterprise. That said, I would like to begin with a brief overview of some of the more general approaches that have been used to understand minstrelsy's historical contexts, formal properties, and continued legacies. Although much of this work focuses on antebellum and postbellum performances of the minstrel show, these scholarly explorations have significantly defined the contemporary paradigms of scholarship on blackface minstrelsy and given me a framework with which to approach my own area of study. The next section looks at the following: 1) archival work in print, material and musical culture; 2) antebellum minstrelsy's early male audiences 3) immigrant-based blackface; and 4) African American blackface. I will then end with a review of the relatively small body of existing scholarship that has been done on amateur blackface minstrelsy to date.

Archival Work

An historical review of scholarship on blackface minstrelsy necessarily begins with the work of cataloging and archiving a vast array of primary sources associated with professionally performed blackface minstrelsy. One of minstrelsy's first historians is Robert Toll, who wrote a history of professionally performed minstrelsy from its antebellum inception to late 19th century performances. Of interest is the way in which Toll writes of his own challenges when confronted with what Diana Taylor would call "the archive" (the mass array of textual sources affiliated with this performance practice), and describes his own opinion that while popular culture can be a source of insight into

social mores and the everyday life of social groups, there will always be distortions or “partial images of the subject” (282) that can be easily misread, especially when it comes to accessing and understanding audiences. His solution, then, is to review a large array of primary sources in order to look for repetitive themes and patterns that are truly representative of the time and place under review. This includes reviewing a huge catalogue of historical artifacts from print, visual, and material culture as well as considering the amalgamation of cultural forms associated with the minstrel show (281-284).

Much significant salvage work can also be found in musicologist Hans Nathan’s *Dan Emmett and The Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (1962), a text that traces the rising popularity of the antebellum minstrel show and its musicians as popular culture icons, and in Gary Engle’s *This Grottesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (1978), a textual reconstruction of minstrel plays accompanied by a pictorial history of key minstrel show performers popular throughout the latter half of the 19th century. W.T. Lhamon, Jr. has also contributed significant archival work in the same vein. Although he is best known for *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998), a theoretical text that traces a through-line between blackface minstrelsy and other forms of popular music, he also produced two books that resurrected numerous print genres related to antebellum blackface performance. His first archival project was *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Culture* (2003), a collection of nine plays performed by T. D. Rice, whose introduction of the Jim Crow character and the Jumpin’ Jim Crow dance in antebellum New York became phenomenally popular with American audiences at the bottom of the labor pool. Six

years later, Lhamon followed up with *Jim Crow, American: Selected Songs and Plays* in 2009, which continued his archival project as well as his analysis of the Jim Crow character as a figure of escaped bondage.

Other archival scholarship from the 1990s includes *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, an anthology co-edited by Annemarie Bean, James Hatch, and Brooks McNamara. Published in 1996, this project grew out of a graduate seminar jointly taught by the Theatre Department at City University in New York and the Department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. This collection is one of the first texts in 1990's scholarship to survey and assess what little had been written on blackface minstrelsy at the time. The work is organized around Joseph Roach's notion of performance genealogies, which the editors define as "the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practice and attitudes through collective representation" (Bean xii). Thus, the editors bring together secondary and primary sources in order to capture the "historical transmission" and re-combination of blackface minstrelsy cultural forms throughout the 19th century in music, dance, humor as well as the grotesqueries of white constructions of blackness that informed the antebellum and postbellum minstrel shows. The book also includes essays by Eric Lott and W.T. Lhamon, Jr. written before the publication of their seminal books as well as writing by Alexander Saxton and Robert Toll.

Scholarship on the cultural forms of blackface minstrelsy also includes an historical analysis of musical instrumentation as well as forms of dance and other bodily gestures. Robert Christgau, music critic and senior editor for *The Village Voice*, once posited that blackface minstrelsy could be best understood as a "syncretic creation" (21)

informed by a “tangle” of cultural forms and “stray elements” from various folk traditions: African, English, Irish and Eastern European. Thus, minstrelsy combined an array of traditions and performance modes in dance, song, and instrumental music (21); this mix of cultural forms has attracted a range of musicologists.

Scholarship committed to exploring musical forms includes two works of interest: *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (1984) by Robert Cantwell, a music history exploring the links between bluegrass music and blackface minstrelsy and *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (1999), a work by Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman that offers a visual history of the artisanal elements informing the design and construction of the American banjo, beginning with its early origins in the banjar, an African stringed instrument. Also important is musicologist William Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (1999), a project committed to collecting and analyzing the contextual evidence of antebellum minstrelsy through playbills, sample programs, the performance history of particular songs, and an extremely detailed comparative analysis of song lyrics.

Mahar's goal is to re-create the historical context of antebellum minstrelsy as a form of American musical theater; thus, he describes minstrel show formats and details various geographical sites where minstrel shows were performed. Like most of these music historians, he is most interested in the mix of cultural forms displayed by antebellum blackface performers, including traditions that informed Anglo-American folk music. Another well-known work is *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (1997) by Dale Cockrell, another musicologist. Cockrell's research

includes the development of antebellum songs used in blackface performance with a special concentration on key character types represented in this music. Cockrell also draws a parallel between blackface's early audiences and the Bakhtinian idea of the carnivalesque, a matter which I will discuss later in the context of scholarly research on minstrelsy's early audiences.

Ragged Masculinities and Antebellum Blackface

Much of the scholarly research on blackface minstrelsy has been concerned with blackface minstrelsy as a masculine working-class entertainment that emerged in the growing urban centers of the antebellum and postbellum North. Despite the fact that antebellum and postbellum forms of blackface performance were premised upon grotesquely distorted constructions of black masculinity and a strict racial divide in social life, scholars like Dale Cockrell, W. T. Lhamon, and William Mahar frame these performances as at least a temporary site of interracial solidarity for white and black male workers sharing a low socioeconomic status in the industrial North. This idea surfaces as early as 1974 with Robert Toll's *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, an historical work that understands antebellum minstrelsy as a "common man's culture" (3), a form of American popular culture that appealed to its early audiences because it was perceived as anti-elite, anti-European, and even egalitarian.

Dale Cockrell's *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (1997) resonates with this viewpoint. Cockrell is particularly interested in early antebellum blackface minstrelsy as a cultural form performed before the advent of minstrel troupes and the development of formulaic minstrel show formats (formats that became even more codified in with minstrelsy's move to middle-class venues in the latter

half of the 19th century). Although Cockrell is primarily interested in blackface musical traditions, he also seeks to imagine a time and place in which the subversive humorous elements associated with blackface entertainments might have been enjoyed—and performed—by both blacks and whites. Cockrell’s thinking is premised on Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais and the idea of the carnivalesque; thus, Cockrell conceives blackface performance in the context of pre-modern European performance traditions and folk humor. In particular, he is interested in male-dominated “Lord of Misrule” festivities, such as charivari, peasant mumming plays, blackface Morris dancing, German belsnickel wassails, “callithumpian” parades, and other expressions of the carnivalesque, all of which enacted inversions of the social order and forms of blackface masking (33). His project then is to draw a through-line between these practices and blackface minstrelsy in the antebellum urban North. To this end, he points to all-male callithumpian bands that took to the city streets of New York around New Year’s as well as West Indian John Canoe celebrations, Mummer’s Parades, and Pinkster Days as street celebrations characterized by parades, masquerade, various sorts of rough-sounding noisy music, and by blackface (30-61).²¹ Interestingly enough, his source material for these events are court records describing the behaviors of men arrested for disorderly conduct which he reads in tandem with antebellum playbills, sheet music, and song lyrics.

W. T. Lhamon, Jr. is another key figure in this area of research and is best known for *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998), a seminal text that traces a through-line between blackface minstrelsy and other forms of popular

²¹ For more on the history of Mummer’s Parades in and other forms of blackface racial performance in Philadelphia, see *Haunted City: Three Centuries of Racial Impersonation in Philadelphia* by Christian DuComb, Michigan UP, 2017.

music. Lhamon's work reflects a set of preoccupations characteristic of the best-known scholarship on blackface minstrelsy: i.e., how white constructions of black masculinity reflected the preoccupations and desires of the white mostly male Northern urban audiences who flocked to these performances and how both white and black workers in America's underclass experienced the blackface Jim Crow character as a figure of liberation. As previously noted, Lhamon's subsequent texts—*Jim Crow, American: Selected Songs and Plays* (2009) and *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Culture* (2003)—seek to demonstrate this thesis by resurrecting and explicating blackface skits and songs from the antebellum era.

Raising Cain received a great deal of attention at the time of its publication. This work frames early minstrelsy as a point of origin for interracial alignments that, Lhamon argues, continue to inform American popular culture. As previously noted, Lhamon begins with the blackface song and dance of Jim Crow as performed by T.D. Rice, a white entertainer who started his career in the 1820's in the slums and saloons of New York's Bowery in the Five Points neighborhood. Lhamon works to contextualize Rice's popularity in the demographics of this time and place, and is particularly interested in the idea that the gestures of the Jim Crow character might have been informed by an urban antebellum street culture shared by black and white disenfranchised urban youth; T. D. Rice, his "Jumpin' Jim Crow" dance, and other forms of early blackface performance were phenomenally popular with this male underclass. The Five Points was a slum populated largely by impoverished Irish immigrants, but it was also about 25% African American. Blacks and whites worked at an array of jobs at the bottom of the labor pool, including manual labor or working as servants or street vendors. Blacks and whites also

socialized with each other; they frequented the same saloons and interracial marriage was not uncommon. In addition, both whites and blacks performed in the streets and in saloons. Thus, Lhamon offers this content to explain the popularity representation of the Jim Crow character as a ragged runaway slave who had “burst bondage” and so a liberatory figure around which an “independently fearsome ragged cohort” could unite (*Raising Cain* 152). In short, antebellum minstrelsy marked an interracial male urban underclass alliance, albeit a temporary one, that was enacted in the streets, concert saloons, and working-class theaters of the Bowery.

The connection between minstrelsy’s rise as America’s first popular culture and its compensatory function for male audiences who spent their days engaged in the least respected forms of labor under industrial capitalism is crucial to Lhamon’s project, and he writes about the homosocial content of early minstrelsy as informed by a “mudsill mutuality” which developed between (*Raising Cain* 63) black and white workers. As Lhamon explains:

The mutuality of miscellaneous labor is a virtually untold story in the cultural history of the Atlantic world. What I call *mudsill mutuality* is the shared experience of sweating at hard material work, digging and cleaning, cutting and cropping, sailing and herding while all along being stepped on and despised for work others disdain. Mudsill mutuality existed alongside, and in vivid tension with, the gradually increasing internal opposition along ethnic lines. Although an internal schism becomes quite pronounced in the Atlantic world around 1825, this break does not mean that the shared experience of despised labor disappeared.

On the contrary, its consciousness increased proportionately with its increased embattlement...I do not deny the racism that also increased along with the schism. The racism is a fact. It had real costs for the life of laborers, and particularly that of black people. It became an intra-class distinction of tragic proportions. (*Raising Cain* 63)

Most important is that Lhamon does not simply situate early minstrelsy in New York's Bowery, its most commonly recognized site, but also considers other sites of early minstrelsy, again connected to these same forms of labor. For example, he describes the spread of early minstrelsy across a growing pool of manual laborers who built the canals of upstate New York near growing cities like Buffalo, Albany, and Syracuse. In this way, Lhamon sketches out a growing movement of underclass youth uniting around an early form of American popular culture.

Lhamon's work also resonates with that of other scholars interested in understanding blackface minstrelsy as a compelling tangle of cultural forms. Here, Lhamon offers the idea of minstrelsy as a "*lore cycle*," i.e., *as an* amalgamation of "expressive gestures" that took on specialized meanings for particular social groups and that then returned in repeated iterations over time.

Lore composes the basic gestures of all expressive behavior, from moans to narratives, signs to paintings, steps to dances. Part of this lore acquires a special status. Certain of these gestures separate from the others. These particular motions of the hands or mouth represent a group to itself and to outsiders, and they are recognized for their representation. Groups do not acknowledge all their gestures in this same way. Rather, they choose to

emphasize some gestures as abiding tokens of their membership. These key gestures the group promotes, centers on the stage (and other media) and makes talismanic. These are fetishized gestures. (*Raising Cain* 69)

Lhamon contextualizes this amalgamation of expressive gestures by looking to Irish American dance and black street dancing during the antebellum era. Lhamon supports his views with an archive of visual culture: with pen and ink drawings depicting blacks dancing for eels in the St. Catherine's fish market and with illustrations that stage T.D. Rice's performances as riotous affairs marked by deeply excited highly participatory audiences who crash the stage to join the performers (*Raising Cain* 56-115). Lhamon also documents scenes of antebellum competitive dancing between black and white men who frequented the Bowery saloons, and includes a write-up by Charles Dickens during his 1842 visit to the Bowery in which he describes Master Juba, a highly popular young African American dancer whose dance techniques spoke of these same kinds of amalgamations (*Raising Cain* 74).

In this light, early minstrelsy was informed by an interweaving of transatlantic folk cultures that combined to build America's first popular culture, and for scholars like Lhamon, these cultural forms did not begin as racist. It is not that Lhamon denies the racism of white laborers during the 19th century, for he does describe race as an economically informed *intra-class* distinction that eventually separated blacks and whites. However, if only for a moment, Rice's Jim Crow functioned as "the figurehead of a nascent, Atlantic *lumpenproletariat*" (*Raising Cain* 152) movement that was eventually "*policed*" (*Raising Cain* 153) by being reinterpreted in less powerful formats (e.g., in the formulaic formats and quieted venues of the middle-class minstrel show).

Thus, the liberatory gesture that was Jim Crow was eventually used to meet the ideological needs of those who feared cross-racial solidarity

William Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (1999) makes a contribution in this area as well, given his work on the musical construction of minstrel tunes and on how antebellum song lyrics spoke to its early 19th century male audiences. In this work, Mahar identifies certain categories of song as they related to expressions of working-class masculinity. In particular, Mahar categorizes minstrel songs into at least four categories: 1) masculine expressions of nostalgia and sentimentality; 2) songs dealing with male display and boasting informed by earlier songs in American folk culture (e.g., the boast of the backwoodsman); 3) burlesques and parodies of Italian opera and European high culture; and 4) comically topical songs that ridiculed and criticized local politics. Also covered are mock courtship songs, songs about sexual access (with men in control), narrative songs about tricksters and inverted master-slave relationships, songs that celebrated leisure time and fraternal bonds (e.g., drinking and sporting events), and humorous or ironic songs about a range of subjects (195-267).

Songs about male display are of particular interest because they reflected a construction of masculinity around certain kinds of social behaviors and male rituals that audiences of early minstrelsy found meaningful. These songs both celebrated and satirized public representations of masculinity with lyrics that addressed aggressive street behaviors, male competitiveness, and boasts about sexual prowess. Also useful is Mahar's classification and analysis of work and mock work songs and how those songs reflected popular responses to the back-breaking forms of manual labor or factory labor faced by minstrelsy's early audiences. Mahar also offers an extensive analysis of songs

ridiculing the pretensions and costumes of the Northern urban dandy, i.e., a “non-urbanized” black man attempting to perform male upward mobility through costuming and pretentious speech or gestures (202-228). Scholars like Cockrell, Lott, and Lhamon often interpret the emergence of this figure in antebellum minstrelsy as a way to belittle the affectations of upper-class whites rather than simply blacks who aspired to whiteness.

In many ways, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* was written as a corrective to earlier scholarship. As much as he admired Lott’s work, Mahar writes that “complicating the study of the subject distances us from the contexts in which blackface comedy thrived” (8). It is Mahar who does the painstaking archival work in order to better contextualize audience experiences of these performances. To this end, he gathers and scrutinizes a range of primary source, including playbills, song lyrics, and musical compositions in order to “identify the materials of minstrelsy more carefully, clarify the role of the African and European American styles that entered mainstream pop culture, [and] to interrogate texts whose surface meanings are too easily lost when antebellum contexts are ignored.” (8).

Nothing is Non-Racial

Mahar, Cockrell, Lott, and Lhamon want to assess antebellum minstrelsy in order to envision how America’s first popular culture might have genuinely functioned—at least for a moment—as a site of interracial communion, despite its racist content. This scholarship does not argue that white working-class racism was absent in early minstrelsy, but it does argue that early minstrelsy was at least an unstable site of racial meaning. While these scholars certainly acknowledge the disenfranchised status of blacks and the racism of antebellum and postbellum America, they emphasize points of

interracial alliance, delineating how white men— itinerant musicians and laborers alike— were fascinated by black masculinity and by what they perceived as “authentic” black cultural forms in music, dance and gestural expression. For them, the virulent racism informing blackface performance largely came not from working people but from social elites whose racist ideology eventually dominated.

Dale Cockrell is a case in point, for he argues if blackface performance had not been deformed by the socially elite, it could have been about race without being completely about racism (59). Cockrell also considers the idea that early blackface might have the potential to be about interracial healing, for laughter has the power to bring people together rather than dividing them (60-61). Thus, in his view, early American blackface might have occasioned an opportunity for marginalized opposites to express a sense of communal fraternity across racial lines. Cockrell ends *Demons of Disorder* with a biographical *Epilogue* in which explains his own subject position. Here, he identifies himself as a white working-class Southerner and references his own family life, including close family and fraternal relationships across the race line and his love of a southern music tradition informed by African American culture.

William Mahar also works to consider the historical contexts of blackface in a similar way. Certainly, Mahar is cognizant of the racism behind white constructions of blackness in antebellum minstrelsy; however, like Lhamon and Toll, he wants to conceive class solidarity as somehow trumping race, if only for a moment in time. Take, for example, his earlier work of scholarship entitled “Black English in Early Blackface Minstrelsy: A New Interpretation of the Sources of Minstrel Show Dialect” (260-285). Here, like Cockrell and others, Mahar describes antebellum minstrelsy as a theatrical

form utilized by the underclass to critique the American elite and explains that this performance practice stemmed from European stage traditions in which the greatest insult to upper class behaviors came from the lower classes. Thus, blackface stage characters can be understood as “reverse images—like the images of a photographer’s negative of cherished American values” (284). To this end, minstrels praised laziness and irresponsibility in an era that valued industry and integrity, and they presented a utopian image of slave labor on the plantation as a reverse image of urban factory life. Mahar also considers the use of black dialect in early minstrelsy as the means for a comic assault on the values and pretentious behaviors of the upper class; thus, dialect invoked an “American delight in self-parody in which language was used as a satirical weapon” (263).

At the same time, Mahar considers the idea that the use of black dialect in early minstrelsy was not there to ridicule black forms of broken English but to bring a degree of credibility to stage characters by representing the grammatical and syntactical features of three modes of Black English: West African Pidgin, Plantation Creole, and Black English Vernacular. Mahar also reads black dialect as originally conceived as different from but not inferior to Standard English and that to read blackface songs only in terms of their “alleged prejudice-producing characteristics” is an act that divorces “the topical and satirical songs from their appropriate context” (283). In short, Mahar wants to examine certain components of the minstrel show without highlighting their racial animus.

While I am sympathetic with the impulse to want to look past the racism inherent in blackface representation, I see this as an impulse informed by white privilege, for it is

only from a subject position of privilege that one can imagine the possibility of social relationships as “non-racial.” Even if there were moments of interracial alliance as Cockrell, Lhamon and others assert, and even if blackface character types and uses of dialect were about “self-parody” for a moment in time, these things are of little consequence, for blackface character types became entrenched as racist representations that dominated popular culture and elided the sufferings of slavery. David Roediger’s scholarship acts as a necessary corrective to these views.

The Wages of Whiteness

David Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness; Race and the Making of the American Working-class* was published in 1991, well before Lott’s *Love and Theft* (1995), Cockrell’s *Demons of Disorder* (1997), Lhamon’s *Raising Cain* (1998) and Mahar’s *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (1999). In *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger presents himself as a neo-Marxist labor historian participating in new forms of social and cultural history that have made a “tremendous political and analytical contribution of showing that workers, even during periods of firm ruling-class hegemony, are historical actors who make (constrained) choices and create their own cultural forms” (9). Thus, we must attend to the fact that antebellum era constructs of white supremacy were not simply from the top down but were informed by the desires of the white working-class.

Roediger pulls his inspiration from W.E.B. DuBois’s *Black Reconstruction* (1935). Here, Du Bois offers an analysis of the formation of America’s working-class under industrialized capitalism with important insights on why workers began to formulate their identity and their political interests as intrinsically white. He delineates some of the short-term more pragmatic advantages of being white, for native-born white

workers were seen as *skilled* workers; thus, being identified as white garnered more respect at the outset and typically meant an ability to earn a higher wage); but he also explains that there was another kind of “wage” to be earned through whiteness, for even when white workers were paid a lower wage, they still felt “compensated by the “public and psychological wages” of whiteness. Du Bois explains the benefits of whiteness:

They [white workers] were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely, with all classes of white people, to public functions [and] public park. ... The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with leniency. ... Their votes selected public officials and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment. ... White schoolhouses were the best in the country, and conspicuously placed, and cost anywhere from twice to ten times colored schools. (qtd in *Wages of Whiteness* 12)

Using Du Bois’s insights about Southern white workers as a guide, *Wages of Whiteness* considers the importance of white identity to labor in the urban North. As Roediger tells it, what was really at stake was a fear of *downward* social mobility. Thus, racial categorization as a form of compensation became important to white workers: white workers might have suffered certain losses in the nation’s move to an industrialized economy, but they could at least retain their whiteness. And if constructions of whiteness were inextricably entwined with forms of labor, they were also inextricably entwined with constructions of masculinity, for “a claim to republican citizenship and a corresponding sense of maleness...was central to the nineteenth century worker’s

devotion to whiteness” (*Wages of Whiteness* 59-60). All of this is crucial for considering the social meanings of America’s first popular culture.

It is worth taking a look at the nature of the losses that Roediger references. America’s move to both urbanization and industrialized capitalism brought about profound transformations in the nature of work. Under an agrarian system, workers were able to control the pace and conditions of their labor; they might own their own property or work as artisans in family-owned shops. If they worked for others, they were often tied by personal bonds related to family or community (*Wages of Whiteness* 133-135). Industrialization changed all this, creating an urban working-class as well as a *lumpenproletariat* rabble working at the bottom of the labor pool. American-born white workers subject to the new regimes of industrialized urban labor now became “wage-earners” or itinerant laborers with little or no control over the pace, property, and seasonality of their work. This meant that urban areas—particularly slum areas—were crowded with dislocated male laborers with no personal attachment to family, community or work. Roediger further illustrates white anxieties about the nature of labor through a consideration of permutations in everyday language that described racialized categories of labor and one’s place in those categories. Terms such as “hireling,” “master,” “boss,” “white slave,” “coon,” “servant” and “free white labor” all had their own histories of usage, and they were all concerned with separating forms of labor perceived as white from forms of labor perceived as black (*Wages* 15).

Although *Wages of Whiteness* was published before the works of Lott, Lhamon, and Cockrell referenced above, Roediger was no stranger to arguments contesting the racism in early blackface minstrelsy. In particular, he references Sean Wilentz, William

Stowe, and David Grimsted, all of whom argue that antebellum minstrelsy was a form of “oppositional” popular culture that did two things: 1) it ridiculed the upper-class and those who had upper-class pretensions, and 2) it also contested white supremacy. Importantly, Roediger does not agree, arguing that blackface minstrelsy never moved away from racist stereotyping or racist humor and that for the most part, these performances supported pro-slavery and white supremacist politics (124). Roediger does concede that there might have been moments of interracial mixing around musical events. For example, freed blacks in Northern urban areas sometimes held public celebrations of various holidays that were attended by hundreds of white onlookers and entertainments in the concert saloons and working-class Bowery theatres were often attended by mixed race audiences. But the “new industrial morality” dominating urban America was both angered and threatened by racial mixing. Some of these Bowery theatres were closed, and numerous municipalities passed legislation that specifically banned black-led public celebrations in public space (*Wages of Whiteness* 103-105).

But top-down policing and legislation were not the only actions taken to discourage racial mixing, for poor whites were also busy staging acts of anti-black sentiments in public space. Much of this resulted from a rise of racial tension over unemployment and the competition for jobs as well as the threat of civil war. As a parallel to the antebellum minstrel show, Roediger describes white behaviors as a kind of racist street theatre enacted in blackface. If working-class whites wore blackface in order to stage performances of rebellion against the upper class and figures of authority, they also wore blackface to stage violent attacks against African Americans and African American communities, especially between 1837 and 1848. There were ongoing attacks

on whatever civil rights had been given to blacks, an increased use of racial invectives in everyday language, and a record of growing violence against black communities. Thus, events that Cockrell might conceive as “carnavalesque” (e.g., charvari, mumming parades, belsnickels, and wandering callithumpian bands) were not some form of social inversion in the Bakhtinian sense because they also occasioned blackface on black violence (*Wages of Whiteness* 100-114).

Roediger’s point is that the sentiments that informed blackface acts on city streets also informed antebellum blackface minstrelsy, but there is a tension here between white desires for blacks to remain at the bottom of the labor pool and a white desire to take on the expressive powers of black culture they had witnessed in public street celebrations. In other words, Roediger argues, antebellum whites projected their longings onto the bodies of black “anti-citizens” and at the same time used black gestures as a way to express rowdy white male behaviors (*Wages of Whiteness* 110). Because its audiences came from the ranks of the same white working-class populations that participated in the race riots, blackface minstrelsy could never have functioned as a significant site of interracial alliance.

Minstrel Subjectivities: Contradictions in Blackface Performance

Eric Lott complicates both sets of views in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working-class* (1995). *Love and Theft* considers blackface minstrelsy—especially antebellum blackface— as a highly contradictory performance practice informed by a tangle of homosocial impulses related to formations of race, class, and gender (i.e., white working-class masculinity). Identifying himself as a poststructuralist, his goal is to complicate the question at hand by working to dismantle

binary racial categories. Thus, if antebellum minstrelsy cannot be considered non-racial, it can at least be considered as a “peculiarly unstable” site of meaning (11).

Lott contextualizes his study in antebellum New York and uses primary sources, i.e., blackface jokes, songs, and skits characteristic of minstrels, along with African folklore. His ultimate goal is not so much to document historical contexts as it is to understand the subjectivity of antebellum minstrel performers and their all-male audiences. To this end, he uses a psychoanalytic approach in order to consider how white working-class masculinity might have been constructed through an interactive fantasy with *white* constructions of black masculinity in popular culture. Thus, while antebellum and postbellum blackface was indeed informed by racial insult and condescension, it was also informed by envy, admiration, and fear.

Lott theorizes that for antebellum performers and their highly interactive audiences, black masculinity functioned as a cultural sign with a complex tangle of meanings that informed the excited participatory rowdiness that characterized blackface minstrelsy. Thus, from one point of view, blackness through blackface could be understood as an expression of collective fear of “a degraded and threatening male ‘Other’,” (25) In this light, the black body signaled dangerous power, and the black phallus signaled forms of sexuality threatening to white men (i.e., in the fear of miscegenation). This fear was exacerbated by the fact that black masculinity was also linked with the guilt-inducing realities of slavery, with black suffering, the physicality of slave labor and so with black anger.

At the same time, blackness through blackface staged a “liberatory boldness” through a “sheer bodily display” (13) that enacted exciting forms of rebellion Lott also

considers the emergence of the blackface trickster figure in these performances, a figure pulled from slave tales and African mythologies. Here, Lott understands the trickster as a figure whose speech, gestures, and bodily boldness are understood as both liberatory and potentially subversive. The trickster is ridiculed but he also ridicules, thus inverting power and authority. The excitement about performing “blackness” through blackface was also connected to the antebellum perception that blackface minstrel performances were, in part, *authentic* performances of African gestures.

Lott explains that minstrel show performers contributed to this excitement about performing “blackness,” for despite the fact that most of them were Northerners, they established a mythology about the *authenticity* of their performances by telling tales about their visits to the South to listen and learn from the music and dance of African American slaves. Thus, if antebellum blackface was about fear of black power (as well as an excitement about containing that power), it was also about white admiration of black masculinity and African culture— about *love*. At the same time, Lott explains, it was also about *theft*, including a theft of black expressive powers as well as a theft of African cultural forms and bodily gestures. In this way, antebellum minstrelsy enacted a masculine struggle for ownership of black culture (and the chance to commodify what was perceived to be black culture) as well as a “profound white investment” in psychosocial terms (18).

Some of the differences in these approaches to minstrelsy have to do with tensions between scholarly disciplines. While William Mahar wants to ground his writing in historical context as deeply as possible, as a musicologist, Dale Cockrell specifies that *Demons of Disorder* is not a history, for “the symbols and traditions that

make up social rites and traditions swim around in the collective imagination and join and reappear in places and times often ungraspable by the disciplined methodologies of historians, which is precisely why the history of ritual is generally delegated to the anthropologist and folklorist” (xi). Lott and Lhamon—both from literary studies—purposely seek to complicate and trouble existing disciplinary methodologies. Lhamon emphasizes how Lott writes as a radical schooled in the work of Edward Said, Walter Benjamin, Valentin Volsinov, and Stuart Hall. Thus, according to Lhamon, Lott brought a theoretical savvy” to a time and place that had received little scholarly attention and contributed deeply to an intersection between “labor history, racial studies, American canon deformation, popular culture, and the burgeoning of whiteness studies” (“Core is Less” 566-571).

Immigrant-based Blackface Performance

Another area of scholarship that is important in studying blackface minstrelsy emphasizes its performance by immigrants. For the sake of time, I have elected to set aside the matter of immigrant identity in instructional manuals designed for amateur blackface. To look at specific ethnic make-up in these communal performances would require a kind of sociological research, including research into the demographic make-up of urban neighborhoods, clubs and community organizations; this is an area of research that deserves attention in its own right but it would be tangential to my present project. However this scholarship should be mentioned, as it is useful for understanding how immigrant groups (e.g., the Irish, European Jews, and others) might have used blackface to collapse what Matthew Frye Jacobsen (*Whiteness of a Different Color*) has conceived as *shades of whiteness* (i.e., meaning the racial identities of immigrant groups perceived

as not quite white) into a new category, i.e., a “reified monolithic whiteness” and so worthy of national belonging (7). This is a strategy that persisted throughout minstrelsy’s history. Therefore, I want to at least briefly map out the scholarship in this area, for it adds to our understanding of how different ethnic groups negotiated identities of race, class and gender through blackface performance.

The Irish were particularly well-known as blackface performers throughout the 19th century. Scholarship contextualizing Irish blackface performances of blackface minstrelsy includes David Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* as well as writing by Robert Nowatski (literary studies), James Byrne (theatre, film and television studies), Noel Ignatiev (historian and critical race theory), and theatre historian James Hatch. This scholarship is particularly useful in providing historical background on the social relationship between Irish immigrants and African Americans in the urban North. In the antebellum era, these two groups were conjoined by common experiences. They lived side by side in the same impoverished neighborhoods and had similar standing in the labor pool; new Irish immigrants came from pre-industrialized rural areas, many spoke Gaelic instead of English, and had few skills considered marketable in the industrialized Atlantic states. Irish and African Americans also intermarried, and they frequented the same saloons and music halls. They also shared songs, modes of dance and verbal expression (Roediger 9; Hatch, 93). As a theatre historian, James Hatch is particularly helpful envisioning the intermingling of cultures in these neighborhoods and in the possible expression of that mix in both black and Irish blackface performance. But even if that is true, the scholarship maintains that the characterizations of “blackness” represented in the minstrel show were premised upon white constructions of blackness

that represented *white* desires, an assumption that is the premise of my own project as well.

Most relevant to the topic at hand is Nowatski's "Paddy Jumps Jim Crow, Irish Americans and Blackface Minstrelsy" (published in *Eire-Ireland*, 2006), Byrne's essay "The Genesis of Whiteface in Nineteenth Century American Popular Culture" (published in *MELUS*, 2004), and Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness*.²² Nowatski explains that many Americans perceived Irish Americans not as culturally different whites but as racialized "others" who in many ways resembled blacks, and both Nowatski and Byrne write about the way in which African and Irish Americans were mocked on the minstrel stage. Evidently, these representations drew upon English theater traditions of blackface performance and Irish caricature and the emergence of these representations in American popular theatre added to a perceived equivocation between Irish and black stereotypes. As Byrne explains, "these two theatrical styles became almost synonymous, allowing actors to move easily between representations of the staged Irishman and the staged Negro, the Paddy and the Darkie, the Irish whiteface and the blackface" (138). In the final analysis, however, Nowatski writes that Irish performers "purchased their whiteness through blackface minstrelsy that specifically ridiculed African Americans" and so "engendered the coveted identification with white audiences through the distancing laughter of superiority" (163). Roediger echoes this idea in *Wages of Whiteness*, writing that for Irish immigrants, the "imperative to define themselves as white came from the particular public and psychological wages of whiteness offered to a desperate rural and

²² Nowatski is probably best known for *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolition and Blackface Minstrelsy* (2010), and James Byrne has interrogated both the Irish and Jewish immigrant experiences in *Inalienable Citizenship: Assimilation and the Crisis of Self-representation in Irish-American and Jewish-American Literature* (2002).

often preindustrial Irish population coming to labor in industrializing American cities” (137). For a fuller contextualization of the Irish American immigrant experience, see Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (1995).

Other scholarship on whiteness emphasizes the experience of Eastern and Southern European Jewish populations; this work includes Matthew Frye Jacobsen’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998)—a work that documents the experience of varying waves of Jewish immigration—as well as a later work by David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (2005), a text that considers the experience of various upwardly mobile immigrant groups in the urban North. Roediger introduces his book as a sort of corrective to Jacobsen because Jacobsen tends to elide the “messiness” of 19th century constructions of race and ethnicity by relying on intellectual sources or reports by various societal institutions, like the United States Immigration Commission, while Roediger works to look at everyday discourse as markers of the complexities of race and ethnicity. And while *Working Toward Whiteness* is not expressly about the minstrel show, Roediger adds to the scholarship on constructions of whiteness and white privilege by delineating an emerging middle-class peopled in part by immigrants working to place themselves in the category of whiteness; Roediger calls them “in-between peoples,” a term he borrows from immigration historian John Higham and religious scholar, Robert Orsi (12-13).

Taken together, *Whiteness of a Different Color* and *Wages of Whiteness* provide a valuable context for approaching Michael Rogin’s significant study, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1998). Rogin considers Jewish

blackface performance in American cinema. Rogin's central question is how blackface performance contributed to the Americanization process for Jewish immigrants: how could "blacking up and then wiping off burnt cork" function as a "rite of passage from immigrant to American" (5)? His readings of Al Jolson's second generation Jewish ethnic identity are complex, and he juxtaposes a psychoanalytic analysis with more historical and cultural tensions, such as Jewish masculine desire for assimilation despite communal pulls to old world culture, and the workings of family dynamics in response to these tensions. For Rogin, blackface was a product of European imperialism dating back to 17th century English theatre traditions (19), and he understands its performance as a "destructive racial desire" which served a melting pot function for Irish and Jewish immigrants, by enacting an acceptance of ethnic difference against a backdrop of racial division (25). By the turn of the century, "Jewish entertainers were the major blackface performers ... Jews in the entertainment business—vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, Hollywood—were creating mass culture for the immigrant, industrial age. In the cultural production of America, Jewish blackface was playing a role" (11). Interestingly enough, Rogin offers an idea for sociological research by suggesting that an "ethnography of stage blackface, vaudeville, the sheet music business and Broadway, or a study of early, New York-based silent film, would offer a rawer, more variegated picture of blackface than the view from Hollywood" (13).

My main focus here is on how the large-scale amateur productions of the minstrel show functioned as a performance practice in the urban North and how the savvy publishers of the instructional manuals catered to the social aspirations and desires of white middle-class men seeking to re-shape their masculinity through participation in

leisure activities that also fostered fraternal bonding. That said, the class-based struggles of these two immigrant groups and their involvement with racial performance does have resonance for the topic at hand. What was at stake for the antebellum Irish was the question of full citizenship and national belonging, obtainable only through a demonstration of whiteness. The same can be said for Jewish immigrants whose blackface performances and participation in the entertainment industry also spoke of a desire for Americanization and categorization under the banner of whiteness. Most importantly, these struggles were part of a larger framework related to questions about how racial performance figured in performing, achieving, and maintaining upward mobility.

Blacks in Blackface

Although this dissertation focuses on the amateur blackface minstrel show as a white performance practice, it is important to review several aspects of scholarship on African Americans in minstrelsy and black cultural production during the era of the “coon song” (1890 to 1910). First, the first set of scholars writing on black emergence into stage entertainment during these eras were addressing issues that had received little scholarly attention; thus much of the early scholarship is necessarily archival, offering an impressive gathering of primary sources on theater and music. Second, much of the scholarship overall expresses the idea that despite having to imitate the grotesque caricatures firmly dictated by white minstrelsy, black performers were able to use minstrelsy and coon song performance as a way to break into the music industry. Thus participation in these forms enabled the formative careers of musicians, vocalists and performers, who were later able to move onto other kinds of musical genres where they

had more control. A third and more recent development in the scholarly literature pays attention to how black performers worked with these forms to subvert their racial meanings and destabilize stereotypes.

Henry T. Sampson authored two important sourcebooks: *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865-1910* (1988) and *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (1980; second edition 2014). Sampson's projects offers historical reviews and accounts of African American performers from the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th century, many of whom had received little to no attention. Sampson's work offered later scholars a historical chronicle and ample resource material on numerous black performance modes, including minstrelsy, vaudeville, jubilee singing, ragtime and musicals. This chronicle is supplemented by reproduction of primary source materials, including excerpts from black newspapers (e.g., *The Defender* [Chicago], *the Freeman* [Indianapolis], and the *Amsterdam News* [New York]) and white-owned entertainment publications (*Billboard*, *Variety* and *the Clipper*) along with advertisements, promotional posters and photographs.

The Ghost Walks covers a smaller amount of material than Sampson's voluminous *Blacks in Blackface*, in which each chapter is devoted to a separate aspect of black musical performance. Sampson revisits black productions, troupes or performers from different perspectives. The chapter on black musicals describes individual cast members, managers, and sites of performance. He include chapters on black entrepreneurs who built the industry as well as pioneering black producers. He offers specific detail on key individuals, companies (including booking agents and publishing

companies) and the troupes or production performers who were associated with those enterprises. He devotes several chapters to specific acts in vaudeville, covering specific performers and audience response as well as performances by black vaudevillians in night clubs and cabarets. Other chapters chronicle black musical comedies and black performance in carnivals, the circus and traveling shows. These substantive volumes end with biographical sketches on different performers, and provide invaluable raw data on players, sites, and audiences. Sampson establishes a through-line by which black minstrelsy and vaudeville entertainment was a site of opportunity for African American performers, despite their having to cope with stereotypes and the racist expectations of white audiences.

Another text that chronicles black minstrelsy is *Out of Sight: the Rise of African American Popular Music: 1889-1895* (2002) by Lynn Abbott, a curator at the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, and Doug Seroff. Abbott and Seroff have authored several other important books on African American performance history, including *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and The Dark Pathway to the Blues and Jazz* (2007).²³ *Out of Sight* focuses on a seven-year period, covering black music (including minstrel performance) up until the rise of ragtime, while *Ragged but Right* chronicles the opportunities that opened to black performers as a result of ragtime. In the latter, Abbott and Seroff focus on three kinds of musical genres: circus side-shows band and minstrel companies, traveling tented musical shows (usually staged in the South) and black musical comedies. *Out of Sight* is organized year-by-year, with each year framed

²³ *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and The Dark Pathway to the Blues and Jazz*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

by a short narrative on developments in black music; each of those narratives are followed by chronologically arranged newspaper accounts, including African American newspapers and the *New York Clipper*. Through these highly detailed chronicles, readers learn about the first black minstrel troupes, some of them owned by African Americans (e.g., the original Georgia Minstrels, McCabe and Young's Minstrels, Mahara's Minstrels) and some of them by whites (Cleveland's Minstrels). *Out of Sight* also chronicles black minstrelsy's movement away from white minstrel show formats, adding innovations that more fully expressed African American musical and dance forms. In addition, we learn that some black minstrel troupes, like the Georgia Minstrels followed in the footsteps of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers by performing abroad (i.e., in Europe, the British Isles, and Australia) as well as throughout the US.

Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1971, 1983, 1997), Thomas Riis's *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890- 1915* (1989) and Tom Fletcher's invaluable primary source, *One Hundred Years of the Negro in Show Business* (1984), a first-hand account of life by a black performer who lived during this era, also offer valuable historical information. A scholar of both Renaissance music and African American music, Eileen Southern had a joint professorship in Afro-American Studies and the music department at Harvard University and also became the first African American woman to be appointed a tenured full professorship at Harvard, although she described her reception at Harvard as "less than cordial."²⁴ A musician and a musicologist, her work includes (in addition to *The Music of Black Americans*), *The*

²⁴ Saxon, Wolfgang. "Eileen Southern, Chronicler of Black Music, Is Dead at 82." *New York Times*, 19 October 2002. www.nytimes.com/2002/10/19/us/eileen-southern-chronicler-of-black-music-is-dead-at-82.html Accessed 26 August 2018.

Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians (1982). She wrote her first edition of *The Music of Black Americans* “to serve as a much-needed textbook for college courses that treat the subject of Afro-American music” and her second edition of the book, published 25 years later, was described “a leading history textbook and reference work.”²⁵ This ambitious book, which offers a detailed chronicle of Afro-American music from the colonial era through 1990, includes a useful chapter on black antebellum urban life and a write-up on “Black Ethiopian Minstrelsy.”

Southern also references books written by black minstrels about their experiences, including Tom Fletcher’s *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* as well as *Old Slack’s Reminiscence and Poet History of the Colored Profession from 1865 to 1891* by Ike Simond (circa 1892), and *Father of the Blues* by W.C. Handy (1941). Southern uses these texts to describe the everyday life of black minstrels as well as their musical repertoire, which included tunes by Stephen Foster as well as music written by black songwriters like Samuel Lucas and James Bland who alone wrote over 700 songs. Black minstrels also sang spirituals, ballads, and comic songs. Like Sampson, Southern reviews black minstrel stars and offers biographical descriptions of key performers, such as Billy Kersands, and specific black minstrel groups, like the Georgia Minstrels; she also covers black composers of coon songs and early black musicals. Most notable is that Southern, Sampson and Abbott and Seroff all adhere to a highly detailed chronological model and purposely refrain from concerted critical commentary.

More recent scholarship focuses less on historical chronology and more on conceptualizing the way in which African American performers “challenged the

²⁵ Book Review by Doris E. McGinty, *the Black Perspective in Music*, vol. 14 no. 2, 1986 (pp. 185-186).

foundational parameters of representation” particularly during the 1890s (Schroeder, 141). As Louis Chude-Sokei, W.T. Lhamon, Karen Sotiropoulos and Daphne Brooks have argued, African American performers did not simply comply with the demands of white audiences in staged entertainments, but challenged the “racial status quo” by subverting the content and representations in this form of music.

Three essays in particular explore the way in which black performers worked to contest the content of these racial caricatures. Stephanie Dunson’s “Black Misrepresentation in Nineteenth Century Sheet Music Illustration” looks at matters of visibility and erasure; in particular, she studies representations of blackness on the covers of Tin Pan Alley sheet music marketed to middle-class families for use in parlor entertainments. She interrogates the visual representations of black masculinity on the covers of sheet music and considers why middle-class whites found those images to be so compelling. Sheet music for Dunson exemplifies how white performances of blackness erased black identity, an erasure that did not begin with the minstrel show but that had been a longtime theatre practice in British and American theatre in which whites routinely stood in for black actors. In this way, the black body functioned as a vacant screen for white projections. Thus in regarding representations of blackness, whites never saw “legitimate black identity, autonomy, humanity” (47) but misrepresentations of blackness that rendered black people invisible. Dunson identifies this invisibility as one of the major challenges confronting the first generation of black performers, many of whom began their careers in black minstrelsy. Black minstrelsy offered black performers venues; however, the problem was how to meet audience expectations: how does one replace “invisibility” of the stereotype with authentic humanity? In other words, how

were black entertainers to deal with a form of entertainment that privileged white representations of blackness over self-representation?

As a partial answer to this question, she considers the way in which bodily carriage functioned to signal membership in the white middle class and how representations of black bodies functioned as a kind of antithesis. Dunson's point here is that the way in which one stood or walked or held themselves in conversation with others was indicator of class. White bodies were to be erect, poised and gracefully lithe. In contrast, minstrelsy represented black bodies as some kind of opposite. She offers, for example, illustrations of the Jim Crow character as performed for antebellum male audience that depicted the character "wiggling his hips, shaking his arms, ducking and weaving and jumping and hollering" (47). Her point is that these representations were never about black people but about a projection of whites wanting a screen onto which they could project "baser" impulses they could not comfortably express in their own bodies. The characterization of Zip Coon, the urban dandy function in this way, although in a much more "quieted" form that echoes a failed attempt to perform upward mobility; thus, visual representations of this character had little to do with black people but everything to do with white anxieties about performing class. Her point here is that these representations functioned as "stand-ins" or "surrogates" for white projections. If blackness had been invisible in this way, then what happens when actual black people enter staged entertainments, first through black minstrelsy and then through other forms of staged entertainments in black musical productions? These principles were at work throughout the 19th century, first in white minstrelsy and then in representations of male masculinity on the sheet cover of coon songs.

Dunson gives us a way to understand how performers like Bert Williams and George Walker responded to this challenge by billing themselves as two “real coons.” Dunson ends with an analysis of a promotional poster for the duo that echoes a representation strategy used on the covers of sheet music in the antebellum era in which depictions of white minstrel troupes depicted two versions of the troupe, one in blackface with bodily postures (or even facial expressions) expressive of the stereotype and one version of the troupe not in blackface but dressed in suits and with a bodily stance expressive of a middle-class gentleman. Dunson contrasts this with a reading of a sheet music cover for Bert Williams’ song “He’s Up Against the Real Thing Now.” At the center of this depiction, Walker and Williams are minstrelized in coon show garb; however, on either is a “visual assertion” (61) of another idea, of Williams and Walker as two African American gentlemen, poised, well-dressed, dignified and refined. As Dunson points out, “the actors are not tucked away or dwarfed by racial caricature. Rather, they beam assertively, even triumphantly, policing the periphery of their comic selves--characters they have inherited, but characterizations they control” (61).

David Krasner’s fascinating essay, “The Real Thing” (2011), takes the same question in a slightly different direction by considering how black entertainers used the idea of “the real” as both a performative and marketing tool for destabilizing the stereotype. Krasner addresses the way in which the emphasis on materiality and consumerism created a kind of void for middle-class Americans who became obsessed with the idea of wanting to experience “authenticity,” an obsession that was not only expressed in literary realism but that also found its way into theatrical performance. Krasner points out that while many are familiar with this trend in American literature as a

response to modernity, few think about how this might extend to strategies used by black performers as they emerged in stage entertainments. The dilemma facing performers during the “coon song” era was the same dilemma that faced black minstrel troupes, i.e., that white audiences insisted on conventional stereotypes; thus because they were “performing within a prescribed framework established by whites in blackface, black performers had to negotiate between representations of self, and representations of blackness fixed in the minds of audiences accustomed to white caricature” (105). In short, there was a tension between audience expectation and a desire for agency and self-determination, a form of what W.E.B. Du Bois described as double consciousness.

At the same time, if blacks were going to enter the entertainment industry, they would also have to make “blackness” marketable to white audiences. Krasner historicizes this dilemma by reminding us of racial social relations with Jim Crow segregation laws coming into play in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). This coincided with America’s growth as a market society committed to the culture of success and the importance of self-making. To this mix, Krasner adds Booker T. Washington’s message about African American self-reliance, which not simply about a willingness to embrace common labor, but also about the importance of gaining economic power through participation in capitalism. The dilemma for black performers, then, was to participate in the marketplace and establish a form of black theater that was both financially successful and free from white control (106).

Krasner turns to Bert Williams and George Walker as models for approaching this dilemma, as do a number of other scholars. But instead of analyzing how the two marketed the idea of “two real coons” to gain a sense of agency, he turns to George

Walker's wife, Aida Overton Walker, and how she commodified the "cultural authenticity" of the cakewalk to achieve success. Krasner's point is that the mode of exchange here was "performance"; thus, black performers "sold authenticity using rhetoric, gesture, and conviction--blackness in the body and not just the mere surface greasepaint of the face" (109). What emerges here is how Aida Overton took the amalgamated form of the cakewalk, a dance form that had its origins in slavery as a black mockery of white mannerisms, and re-shaped it into an elegant form of dancing that she then marketed as "the real thing." While many middle-class blacks associated both the cakewalk and ragtime as low forms of entertainment associated with a painful past, Aida Overton appropriated the form and translated it into a cultural signifier of "authenticity" that appealed to white desires to perform a new construction of "blackness" in popular dance. Through strategies like this, black performers could find ways to destabilize stereotypes and began to dismantle white hegemony over theatrical representations.²⁶

In her essay, "Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race" (2010), Patricia Schroeder offers another analysis of the way in which black musical artists were able to challenge "the foundational parameters of representation" by considering another performative feature, that of the interaction between black performers and black audiences. Like all of these scholars, Schroeder begins by addressing gaps in the scholarship, especially scholarship on the coon song era, arguing

²⁶ It is worth comparing Aida Overton's appropriation of the cakewalk to representations of the cakewalk in blackface skits. The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia (1899) includes a skit entitled "The Darktown Society Cakewalk," a skit which stages a black society event that deteriorates into a blackface slapstick melee. Stage directions call for the cakewalk to be performed in as grotesque a manner as possible, by pairing "as many grotesque couples as possible," depending on the sizes and body types of the cast. Comparing the grotesque depictions of the cakewalk in this manual to the grace and elegance of George and Aida Overton Walker performing the cakewalk in "Bandana Land," a Walker and Williams production, dramatizes the point that Krasner is making here.

that coon songs were not simply “a transitional moment” between minstrel shows and jazz, but signified an historical moment informed by complex levels of what she calls “multivocality.” Thus she is interested not only in the way in which black performers interact with this material when performing for white audiences, but also what informs those interactions when performing for black or multi-racial audiences. Thus, her question is this: “[W]hen an African American musician performed a coon song, what exactly was performed and for who?”

She begins by looking at the question of black cultural production in that genre, beginning with Ernest Hogan’s authorship of a highly popular coon song, “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” written in 1895. The song was highly popular with whites, but the black community was not happy with Hogan’s creation. The *Indianapolis Freeman* objected to the song, and Sylvester Russell, a black theater critic highly respected in the black community accused Hogan of perpetuating a grotesque stereotype of black masculinity and encouraging the use of offensive language. According to Schroeder, some African Americans in the urban North were so insulted by the song that fistfights would break out when whites referenced the tune (141). Hogan defended the song, for like black minstrelsy, that song alone opened doors for him as well as for other artists who could then go on to write music without using the word “coon.”²⁷ Schroeder notes that although Hogan was right about the way in which coon songs offered opportunities to black entertainers, the music lingered for some years even after it waned in popularity

²⁷ As an interesting side note, Schroeder points to a coon song written by white song writer Fred Fisher, “If the Man in the Moon Were a Coon.” The song sold 3 million copies in 1905; by 1930, however, the publishers refused to re-issue the song unless the word “coon” was removed.

in the North, showing up in medicine shows and often performed in the South by black entertainers for black audiences.

Because most scholarship focuses on coon songs as a phenomenon in the urban North between 1890 and 1910 (which was when coon songs began to lose their audience), her project is to consider coon songs as they were performed for black audiences in the rural South in the 1920's. But even though Schroeder's research takes her away from the time period that concerns my own dissertation (1899 to 1921), she raises some important points about the way in which black entertainers worked to destabilize the stereotype. In particular, she draws upon two scholarly works: *Staging Race* by Karen Sotiropoulos (2006) and Daphne Brooks' *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Schroeder's work is informed by Sotiropoulos's idea that Du Bois's double consciousness can also be applied to what African American performers experienced onstage. Even though Du Bois might not have had stage artists in mind when he wrote of this sensation in *Souls of Black Folk*, turn of the century many African American performers "hailed from the similar backgrounds, envisioned themselves as race leaders and believed that appreciation for black creative expression was an integral part of racial advancement" (Sotiropoulos 2). Thus, Sotiropoulos' project, whether writing about black performance at the 1893 world's fair, or on vaudeville stages or considering strategies utilized by performers like Williams and Walker to destabilize the coon song stereotype, is always informed by her conviction that black performers sought to build and promote new understandings of black identity while

still trying to achieve commercial success.²⁸ She asserts that black performers performed with more irony and awareness than white audiences recognized, given the fact that they performed in genres which forced them to lampoon themselves (144).

Scholarship on African American performance during this period marks a trajectory that is in many ways quite different from my project. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this period of the rise of African Americans on the popular stage is concurrent with the shift into white amateur minstrelsy that I am about to describe. These two very distinct aspects of minstrelsy—performed by very different individuals and companies—mark significant divisions as to what “blacking up” meant and how we should study this phenomenon.

Amateur Minstrelsy and Instructional Blackface

Very little has been written about amateur blackface minstrelsy or about amateur blackface as a performance practice in everyday life. Even less has been written on the development of commodities marketed for amateur use, commodities such as the instructional manuals, blackface paint, costumes, stage props and the proliferation of blackface joke-books, skits, and sheet music developed expressly for amateur use. That said, there is some research worth noting. Historians Daniel Bender, Jerome Bjelopera and David Roediger have all contributed to the discussion in different ways. Bender has written about attempts by reformers to “civilize” and Americanize “savage” street gangs of immigrant youth by having them perform varying types of blackface primitivism in

²⁸ Schroeder references David Krasner’s ideas about the ways in which parody was endemic to black theater at turn of the century; in particular, Krasner describes Bob Cole’s use of white face in the role of a white tramp in “*A Trip to Coontown*.” Schroeder writes, “Cole used his performance of a coon song to destabilize assumptions about race, authenticity, and the social status quo” (144). For Schroeder, “consciously telling at least two tales at once is a prominent characteristic of African-American cultural productions.

amateur minstrel shows that were staged in settlement houses (5-29). Jerome Bjelopera's discussion of amateur blackface as a leisure time performance practice popular with clerical workers in an early 20th century Philadelphia Department is particularly useful for envisioning the subjectivity and motivation of participants in these productions; see "White Collars and Blackface: Race and Leisure among Clerical and Sales Worker in Early Twentieth-Century Philadelphia" (*The Pennsylvania Magazine of History*, date, 2002) and *City of Clerks: Office and Sales Workers in Philadelphia* (2005). And, as previously noted, David Roediger is also helpful in contextualizing amateur blackface performance, for eight years after publishing *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger came out with *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (2005). And while this text is not expressly about amateur minstrelsy, Roediger's re-creation of a time and place in the nascent spaces of the New York neighborhoods and early suburbs offers two important contexts: a delineation of geographical sites where amateur blackface minstrel shows were performed and an overview of how these productions were linked with immigrant communities and various community organizations, e.g., schools, settlement houses and fraternal organizations.

There have been a few other instances of scholarly writing on amateur minstrelsy, including work by Susan Smulyan, who devotes a chapter on amateur blackface in her book, *Popular Ideologies: Mass Culture at Mid-Century* (2007) and who also co-authored a textbook with Kathleen Franz, entitled *Major Problems in American Culture* (2012), which features a section designed to teach students about amateur blackface. Another bit of research worth mentioning is Thomas Recchio's consideration of late

nineteenth century amateur minstrel shows written and performed by middle-class white women who used the blackface character types to enact various forms of feminist rebellion in “The Serious Play of Gender: Blackface Minstrel Shows by Mary Barnard Horne, 1892-1897” (2011). We can also look forward to some new and highly promising scholarship from cultural historian Rhae Lynn Barne’s upcoming publication of *Darkology: The Hidden History of Amateur Blackface Minstrelsy and the Making of Modern America, 1860-1970*.

CHAPTER 2. CLASS, GENDER, VENUES

Dan Bryant is now the proprietor of a beautiful little theatre in Twenty-third street, just west of the Sixth avenue. It is one of the coziest and most comfortable places in the city, and is usually filled with an audience of city people of the better class. The music is good, the singing excellent, and the mirth unrestrained and hearty. Dan Bryant, himself one of the most irresistibly humorous delineators of the "burnt cork opera," has collected a band of genuine artists, and has fairly won his success. He has raised Negro Minstrelsy to the dignity of a fashionable amusement, and has banished from it all that is coarse and offensive...Families come by the score to laugh at the vagaries of the sable minstrels, and the mirth of the little folks is one of the heartiest and healthiest sounds to be heard in the great city.

---*Lights and Shadows of New York Life*, 1872

Introduction

In this section of my dissertation, I want to offer a short historical overview delineating how the blackface minstrel show moved from a working-class entertainment catering to the desires of its highly interactive masculine audiences to a middle-class performance practice promoted as a wholesome form of family entertainment. At first this might seem tangential to my own project, since I am mostly concerned with the way that white middle-class men enacted individual and communal masculinities through amateur blackface. However, this overview is important for at least two reasons. First, this history will show that although minstrelsy began as a mode of performance characterized by boisterous, if not unruly, male audiences that were eventually policed by an anxious middle-class, blackface returned as a highly participatory and homosocial middle-class performance practice with the rise of these large-scale amateur productions. Thus, tracing this trajectory gives us a way to appreciate how the middle-class amateur

show resurrected performances of fraternity, albeit with a middle-class twist.²⁹ Second, this context will also give us a way to historicize the instructional manuals and relevant commodities with respect to class formation, for the amateur productions under consideration here were staged by community organizations that had the resources to stage elaborate spectacles in communal spaces that were very much connected to class status. This chapter will provide background on the changes in the class-based venues of professionally performed blackface, look at the discourse of blackface respectability that surfaced in the instructional manuals, examine venues of amateur blackface in middle-class communities, and consider aspects of spectatorship.

Blackface Venues: From Saloons and Minstrel Halls to Opera Houses

The best way to understand the various class-based incarnations of blackface performance is to focus on New York City. New York City was not only a site of origin for early blackface minstrelsy in the 1820's, it was also the site for the development of numerous forms of class-based staged entertainments, including the low-brow variety shows of the concert saloons, the more middle-brow entertainments created by vaudeville, and high-brow entertainments staged in elegant theatres that catered to the wealthy. In addition, the emergence of blackface minstrelsy into middle-class performance venues in New York has been particularly well-documented, including

²⁹ For a discussion of the sociological history of theater audiences in America, see Richard Butsch's *The Making of American Audiences* (Cambridge UP 2000). Here, Butsch traces the tradition of "audience sovereignty" in antebellum theater audiences, which encouraged a kind of interactive rowdiness in theatre audiences to the way in which social elites concerned about social order worked to quiet audiences and privatize entertainment. Thus, upscale forms of vaudeville and the minstrel show are implicated in 19th century class formations.

information on minstrel show venues, performers, and the composition of audiences.³⁰ Thus, New York's entertainment districts over the 19th century offer a useful microcosm for tracing minstrelsy's move from the slums and saloons of the Bowery to minstrel halls on lower Broadway to the opera houses where promoters worked to attract more middle-class audiences.

As previously noted, blackface minstrelsy began in American culture as a form of popular culture that was particularly resonant with young men who found themselves trapped at the bottom of the industrial labor pool. For them, blackface was a form of entertainment that compensated for the hours of low-paid manual labor and factory work, and the dominant figure of these entertainments was the character of Jim Crow, an escaped slave dressed in rags whose songs and dance expressed a liberatory notion that appealed to these audiences. The instructional manuals, however, pull from a later incarnation of blackface minstrelsy that was professionally performed in late 19th century middle-class opera houses and spoke to a middle-class or aspiring to middle-class audience in search of their own compensatory pleasures. Here, the frenzied ragged forms of antebellum blackface were replaced with costumed troupes, blackface burlesque of well-known operas, and racialized comic breaches of social etiquette and logic that appealed to middle-class audiences. In addition, the sometimes chaotic structures of the antebellum shows were replaced with formulaic if not ritualized formats that enacted a

³⁰ The following works were most helpful in envisioning New York's entertainment districts during the 19th century: Jill Van Nostrand's "Minstrelsy in Post-Civil War New York, 1865-1870" (Unpublished dissertation, 2005); Brooks McNamara's *The New York Concert Saloon: the Devil's Own Nights* (2002); Butsch, Richard's *The Making of American Audiences from Stage to Television, 1750-1900* (2000), and *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (2000) edited by Annamarie Bean, James Hatch and Brooks McNamara (1996).

kind of middle-class order reinforced by repeated and grotesque comic communicative exchanges between blackface characters.

As noted in previous chapters, blackface minstrelsy began in the 1820s as a *lumpen* saloon entertainment in the impoverished slum of New York's Five Points neighborhood, a racially-mixed neighborhood peopled by free, emancipated and fugitive blacks, Irish immigrants, and unattached young men who had left the farms and villages of rural America to seek work in the urban North. Early blackface was most likely a mix of cultural forms deriving from Irish and British folk traditions as well as from black street-dancing. According to W. T. Lhamon, Jr. and others, T.D. Rice, a white man, popularized this form of entertainment through his creation of Jim Crow, a white-constructed raggedy figure of "blackness" whose song and dance became phenomenally popular with Rice's masculinist audiences (*Raising Cain* 157). From all reports, these performances were high-energy, even frenzied, and inspired a similar response in the audience. In other words, early blackface did not invite a passive mode of spectatorship, but an interactive, boisterous response from a rough and ready male audience who often jumped onstage to participate in the song and dance (figure 1).

In 1843, however, four unemployed musicians calling themselves The Virginia Minstrels formed one of the first minstrel troupes. The onstage characters they created were grotesque caricatures drawn from an American racial imaginary that cast African Americans as an inferior racialized *other* who was at the same time a source of transgressive pleasure. In line with this raggedy style, performers smeared their faces with burnt cork, wore shabby clothes and strange hats and manipulated their stage make-up to create an appearance of bulging eyes, wide-open mouths, and huge lips. Their

performances were a non-stop frenetic program of fast-paced short songs and instrumentals, wild dancing, and often lewd sexual humor (Cockrell 159-156; Toll 30-31; Nathan 123).

Like T.D. Rice, the Virginia Minstrels played for an alcohol-consuming, mostly all-male audience, but rather than playing the concert saloons of the Bowery, The Virginia Minstrels played venues in lower Broadway, where they began to attract huge audiences of up to 3,000 people. The Virginia Minstrels and minstrel troupes that succeeded them during the 1840s and 1850s found phenomenal success in these venues, and entrepreneurs began to build a number of large minstrel halls in response to the demand. The Bowery Theater, the Chatham Theater, and Mechanics Hall were all huge—the Bowery Theatre alone could seat nearly 2700 people, and troupes at these sites often played to a full house of standing-room only crowds. Some of these lower Broadway minstrel halls were even built to accommodate fans of particular minstrel troupes, e.g., Wood's Minstrel Hall, Bryant's Minstrel Hall, and Christy's Minstrel Hall (Van Nostrand 67-68).

While the new minstrel shows still maintained their rowdy masculinist content and enacted blackface as a form of wildness and rebellion, some sources indicate that these performances also betrayed a working-class longing for respectability, often including love songs and sentimental ballads along with the ribald comedy. Thus, while a working-class hero might be considered “rough,” he might also be respectable in his own way (Butsch 47-49). Thus as David Roediger points out, even though these shows included cross-dressing as well as sexual or homoerotic humor, the content was often “more playfully erotic than nakedly pornographic” (*Wages of Whiteness* 120-121). The

move to these venues also began to attract a more upwardly mobile audiences; thus, minstrel halls were becoming sites where underclass, working-class and middle-class men often came together (Rodgers 386-387), including men from various ethnic communities. Jill Van Nostrand notes when Kelly and Leon's Minstrels put on a benefit for their treasurer in 1867, they advertised the show in five different languages (Van Nostrand 236).

Staged entertainments in antebellum New York very much reflected 19th century formations of class. According to theatre historians, upper-class Americans correlated upper-class status with an appreciation of "high art," which usually meant European opera or visiting theatrical groups from England; thus, there was an interest in constructing more exclusive theater venues, such as the Astor Place Opera House (1840), the New York Philharmonic Society (1840), and the New York Academy of Music (1852), all places which the working class was unable to afford and where they were not wanted. In contrast, popular low-brow entertainments included blackface minstrelsy, reenactments of disasters or battles, circus-style novelty acts, plays about murderers and robbers, and certain bawdy modes of song and dance. The upper class as well as an emerging middle class regarded these entertainments as rough, low and immoral. An excerpt from a New York City travelogue written by the Reverend Matthew Hale Smith in 1869 offers this description of entertainments in the Bowery:

At night it is brilliantly illuminated and the drinking-places are filled by thousands of women, children and men. The lowest drinking-places, the vilest concert saloons, negro minstrelsy of the lowest order, and theatricals the most debasing distinguish the pastimes of the Bowery. The places,

open on Sunday, are jammed to suffocation Sunday nights. Actresses too corrupt and dissolute to play anywhere else appear on the boards of the Bowery. Broad farces, indecent comedies, plays of highwaymen, and murderers, are received with shouts by the reeking crowd that fill the low theaters. (*Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, qtd. in Rodgers 386)

These entertainment districts engendered a great deal of anxiety in upper-class New Yorkers as well as in members of a nascent middle-class. That the alcohol in concert saloons, minstrel halls, and variety theatres was typically served by female waitresses or prostitutes was seen as another sign of indecency. Middle-class anxiety stemmed from the visibility of huge and unruly male-dominated audiences and the ongoing consumption of alcohol, but their anxiety was also related to a developing class conflict that played often played out in in the theatre and entertainment districts, which functioned as a kind of public sphere. These class tensions could also become violent, and in 1849, class tensions ran so high that a mob of thousands stormed the elite Astor Place Opera house, resulting in 22 deaths; this was a watershed event that led to a re-shaping of popular theatre in New York (Rodgers 705; Butsch 54-55).

Given the Astor Place Theater riot, ongoing class tensions, the prevalence of alcohol, and the swelling numbers of riotous male gathering in public sites, the fears of social elites began to escalate as never before, resulting in legislative efforts to quiet and police these audiences. These new efforts culminated in the Anti-Concert Saloon act of 1862, a piece of legislation prohibiting the service of alcohol in theater houses, a move that often required police enforcement. Bars and saloons still operated, but they were separated from entertainment sites and usually located near or next to a popular theatre

instead. According to theatre historians (Rodgers 391-397), this legislation changed the nature of staged entertainments in New York, forcing concert saloons and minstrel halls to operate more as theatres than saloons. These changes had a great impact on minstrel show promoters, who became so concerned about losing their audiences that they began to re-shape the minstrel show and develop new venues in order to attract more upwardly mobile audiences.

Another source of concern for minstrel show promoters was competition from vaudeville; Tony Pastor opened his opera house in 1863, marking the rise of a middle-brow entertainment that was designed to attract the middle class in particular. Vaudeville was sumptuous in these early decades. There were ushers to guide audience members to lush velvet seats as well as various musical acts characterized by lavish sets and ornate costuming. Consumers in this new age of commodity capitalism associated happiness and entertainment with displays of consumption, and vaudeville sought to meet those desires. The only way the minstrel show could remain viable was by adapting these same strategies; thus, minstrel show managers worked to get rid of the racy content in their productions and to secure new venues and new formats in order attract middle-class audiences, including women and children (Van Nostrand 88-111). Most of the large minstrel halls were re-designed as “opera houses” along the lines of vaudeville; theatre managers also added nailed-down seating, brought in ushers, and darkened the theatres during performances in order to quiet audiences and create a more upscale experience (Butsch 87-94).

As the minstrel show began to cater to middle-class audiences, the staging, costuming and choreography of the show was revamped. Instead of the frenetic chaotic

dancing and bodily displays that signaled the grotesque or lewd antics of the antebellum show, minstrel shows of the latter half of the 19th century, especially after the Civil War, were characterized by order, visual uniformity, and a synchronization of movements. No longer composed of four or five rowdy blackface musicians dressed in tattered mismatched clothes, minstrel troupes were expanded to include as many as 20 or 30 members or more, all of whom were ornately costumed in uniforms or evening clothes. Stage managers also began developing more thematically-based chorale numbers, using full orchestras and lavish stage settings as a frame for these performances; in short, in the latter half of the 19th century, the professionally performed middle-class minstrel show came to have a decidedly more middle-class look that responded to white audience demands for extravaganza; theaters responded by incorporating blackface bodies into the spectacle (figure 2).

This short overview of minstrelsy's move from working class to middle-class venues offers at least two considerations important to this project. First, it is the middle-class incarnation of the minstrel show that the manuals draw from; thus, any discussion of individual and communal masculinities enacted in amateur minstrelsy has to do with class-based displays of race and gender. Second, it is important to note that promoters marketed the middle-class minstrel show as a refined performance format that conformed to middle-class notions of respectability and good, clean "fun" that regularly incorporated the blackface grotesques of minstrelsy. These re-designed minstrel shows were so successful that managers scheduled them two or three times a day with extra matinees on Saturday to accommodate women and children (Lewis 316, Butsch 74-76).

The Discourse of Blackface Respectability in the Instructional Manuals

When Isidore Witmark expanded his Tin Pan Alley music business to include instructional manuals and theatrical supplies for amateur blackface minstrel show productions, he said he did it to tap into an already existent market (Witmark 279). The above overview gives us a sense of what that market must have looked like. One of the ways the manuals worked to capture this market was by promoting amateur blackface as a wholesome form of entertainment appropriate for community entertainment; this discourse is especially apparent in manuals published between 1899 and 1912. When publishers worked to promote amateur blackface in this way, they were of course echoing a discourse that had already been used by minstrel show promoters in the 1850s to market the professionally performed show to the middle class. This marketing strategy can best be described as “the discourse of respectability.”

Stephanie Dunson’s research on sheet music marketed for use in middle-class parlor entertainments is quite useful here; she identifies a trend that began in antebellum and postbellum America when the publishers of minstrel show sheet music worked to market it for use in the middle-class parlor. One mark of middle-class status in antebellum America was the designation of the parlor as a center for family life and social entertainments. According to Dunson, the consumption of sheet music played a key role in connecting the private space of the parlor to both popular culture and national identity. As Dunson describes it, the middle-class parlor was “a lavishly furnished living room used solely for entertaining and special occasions,” and as “a new kind of space in many American homes,” the parlor functioned “as the central domestic marker to middle-class status” (“Minstrel in the Parlor” *ATQ* 243). Dunson emphasizes the importance of

the parlor piano in this space, explaining that “the piano stood as the one defining feature of any well-appointed parlor” (“Minstrel in the Parlor *ATQ* 243) and that it “was readily accepted as material proof of middle-class standing in America” (“Minstrel in the Parlor” *ATQ* 245). In this way, through the vehicles of sheet music, parlor culture, and the parlor piano, blackface minstrelsy found another venue: a venue of middle-class respectability that also offered a site for a kind of amateur performance.

Dunson explains that although professional minstrelsy was staged in public masculinist venues in the antebellum and postbellum eras, publishers had already begun to seek new markets for minstrel show melodies by marketing sheet music to the middle-class. They also altered their product to better appeal to middle-class sensibilities, especially to the sensibilities of white middle-class women. Thus, publishers replaced sheet music cover illustrations of outrageously garbed minstrel bands with drawings of “upstanding, well-groomed white performers [who appeared] alongside with the grotesque blackface characters they portrayed” onstage; as Dunson puts it, “cover illustrations seem to position the dapper entertainers as gentlemen callers, politely awaiting introduction into the refined space of the family parlor” (“Minstrel in the Parlor” *ATQ* 246). Originally, sheet music for parlor performance was comprised of sentimental songs that idealized middle-class family life and parlor culture, along with illustrations that echoed these themes. However, as publishers began marketing the racially inflected music of the minstrel show, these idyllic images of white family life on sheet music were replaced by grotesque cartooned representations of black family life.

These cartoons represented blacks as having deformed and “distorted” facial features and depicted several kinds of repetitive images, including “homely black wives”

who scowled “at their hapless and lazy spouses”; “animal-like pickaninnies”; and black lovers who gaped “licentiously at [their] hideous mates, their hypersexuality suggested by carefully positioned instruments or phallic drapes of clothing” (“Minstrel in the Parlor” *ATQ* 248). In addition, because this sheet music brought “rollicking minstrel show music into the intimate confines of the American home,” it also occasioned “the means for every parlor to be transformed into a minstrel stage” and for “every family gathering [to become at least] a potential opportunity to ‘blacken up’ ” (“Minstrel in the Parlor” *ATQ* 246). What is most important for our purposes, however, is Dunson’s idea that the “respectability” of middle-class parlor life commingled with blackface grotesqueries that at time bordered on the pornographic.

A similar tension exists in the instructional manuals; on one hand, the manuals utilized a discourse of respectability to frame amateur minstrelsy as a safe middle-class performance practice, sometimes occasioned as a coming-of-age event, as seen in the excerpt for the *Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899):

A minstrel entertainment gives the young amateur rare opportunities to display talent in the vocal, comedy, and dancing lines. No form of entertainment is so replete with comedy, nor gives such universal satisfaction when well represented. It affords vocalists a chance to come out in solo or concerted work, and the young comedians or dancers excellent opportunities to *shine forth* and give full vent to their humor and wit. (Dumont, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*, 1):

On the other hand, the manuals also promoted a kind of *blackface excess* by encouraging certain kinds of blackface skits--especially those informed by blackface chaos and slapstick humor--and by continually recommending “coon songs” for musical numbers, in which young white men in blackface represented young black men as hypersexual razor-toting beings at the ready for a fight (Dormon 455).

Yet the manuals reminded readers over and over again that amateur blackface minstrelsy was a respectable form of community entertainment that never failed to entertain. To this end, the manuals typically offered three ideas: 1) minstrelsy has been cleaned up and so attracts the most refined audiences; 2) the manuals offered professionalized forms of knowledge that were also educational, and 3) racial performance can function as a prized venue for young men seeking to exhibit their talents. Thus, the instructional manuals not only hailed their reader as a young white amateur who had something to offer his community, they also offered that young amateur a body of knowledge or lore derived from more experienced men such as professional performers or long-time producers of amateur minstrel shows with authoritative expertise in the art of racial performance. A number of the manuals also promoted the amateur minstrel show as a way for a young man to enact a kind of white Protestant work ethic. In short, the discourse of respectability that echoed throughout the manuals promoted participation in an amateur minstrel show as a form of racialized self-improvement.

For example, *The Witmark Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899), includes a note from the manual’s celebrity author, Frank Dumont, a blackface performer and leader of Dumont’s Minstrels, a troupe that headlined at the Eleventh Street Opera House for years. Here, Dumont notes that “Minstrelsy is the most popular form of

amusement and is always selected as a vehicle to present the talent of a club, college, school, or association,” and he promotes the manual by explaining that he is offering instructions for “a minstrel entertainment [complete] in all its details—from the ‘blacking up’ of the artists to the drop of the curtain on the concluding burlesque” and that “everything is arranged in the most simple manner to assist aspirants in their preliminary efforts.” (1-2). Significantly, he concludes by expressing his hope that “*The Witmark Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* will do some good and that the comic material his manual offers is guaranteed, for it has been performed before “very refined audiences” and has been “thoroughly tested by Dumont’s Minstrels and other first-class troupes of America” (2).

This matter of “respectability” is also reiterated in a note from the publisher describing the Eleventh Street Opera House as a “front rank amusement attraction in Philadelphia” due, in part to “the elegance of its vocalists,” its standing as the “Fountain Head of Minstrelsy,” and its reputation as a site frequented by genteel audiences who attended these performances in order to experience “amusement,” “merriment,” and “delight” (5). The respectability of the opera house is further emphasized by referencing its commitment to a strong work ethic and to honoring religious values, for “rehearsals are in progress every morning” and “no labor of any kind is permitted in the Opera House upon the Sabbath” (5). The passage ends by emphasizing that the Opera House is “noted for the character of its entertainments, is patronized by clergymen, and is a household word among local and visiting pleasure-seekers” (7). In other words, what is enacted here is not the low-down lewd humor of working-class blackface but a solidly middle-class form of entertainment appropriate for everyone.

The writer of a 1906 manual, *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* (one of the first instructional manuals to concentrate on the business affairs associated with a minstrel show), echoes this same discourse, assuring readers that “from a moral standpoint it [an amateur blackface minstrel show] is the safest performance to give. For the arrangement of the entertainment and the selection of the material with which to entertain is in the hands that control—the organization itself” (Carlton 11). Other manuals echo the discourse of respectability by referencing a kind of middle-class work ethic. For example, in the below excerpt, the writer of a 1911 manual, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show*, lets readers know how much work goes into staging a successful show:

It all looks so easy...But if he [the young amateur] only knew the care that had been taken to bring the show to a state of perfection before it is presented to the public; if he could see the pains taken with rehearsals and the many changes that are necessary to be made in the placing of the actors to find their fitness for a particular part of the program, the rigid training of the singers and the weeding out of objectionable lines in the gags of the end men, he would take quite a different view of the matter, and look upon the giving of a Minstrel Show more in the light of a serious undertaking than of a frolic. (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* 3)

The discourse of respectability continues to resonate in manuals published a decade later. *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* (1920) opens with a highly nostalgic anecdote about a home-town amateur minstrel show that also speaks to class status and middle-class respectability:

It has been the writer's privilege to take part in a great many amateur entertainments and among the very first was a home-talent minstrel show. I recall the great enjoyment the performers experienced in that wonderful production, as well as the pleasure we gave to the large audience in the village town hall. ...I recall that at our first minstrel show we had thirty of the most prominent young men of the village. Our opening chorus was a medley which our musical director, who was supervisor of music in the public schools at the time, arranged himself from old Southern melodies.

(Tibbals 3)

The amateur show depicted here is staged in "the village town hall" by "the most prominent young men of the village," and the show's musical director is also the supervisor of music in the public schools. The passages goes on to describe amateur minstrelsy as a viable form of community entertainment that again offers a young people a unique opportunity for a kind of community debut:

Properly rehearsed, arranged, and conducted, there is no more satisfactory form of amateur home-talent entertainment than a minstrel show. Its variety of program gives the young amateur rare opportunity to display talent in the vocal, comedy, and elocutionary lines. Minstrelsy has long been one of the most popular forms of amusement and today [it] is as popular as ever as a vehicle to present the talent of a club or lodge.

(Tibbals 4)

While the publishers of these manuals marketed their wares to community organizations, the discourse in the manuals directly addressed the aspirations of young men concerned

about self-presentation in a communal context, not only through their ability to entertain (as noted above) but also through an ability to plan and produce the show, an emphasis on racialized leadership that will be addressed in chapter 5 of my dissertation.

This discourse of respectability has multiple significations that will be developed at length in the chapters that follow, but aspects of which should be summarized briefly here. First, as noted above, the diction in the instructional manuals echoes the diction used by promoters of the professionally performed show in order to remind readers that, despite its rowdy beginnings, blackface minstrelsy has been safely re-designed for the middle-class. Second, the sense of respectability is heightened by emphasizing the educational nature of the instructional material offered by these manuals; in this way, the manual writers professionalize the knowledge they have to offer and market it as crucial for success. And if education was required to produce a show that was entertaining and financially successful, participation in the production and performance of such a show is a laudable form of self-improvement.

Third, despite the content in the blackface skits, humor, and songs, all of the manuals emphasize the importance of self-management and forms of self-control as well as the importance of functioning as a member of a team. Not only do the manuals offer blackface minstrelsy as a highly rule-bound form of racial play, the manuals also are explicit in delineating inappropriate behaviors associated with production and performance. Thus, whether preparing to play an onstage role in the performed show or simply planning to work behind the scenes to plan or promote the production, participants were given exacting behavioral guidelines to follow, including distinct guidelines for individuals in a leadership role and for troupe members.

The fourth aspect of the discourse of respectability—directly addressing white constructions of upwardly mobile masculinity—was the importance of being successful not only in staging a show that was entertaining but in attaining the financial goals of the staging organization. Every one of these manuals understood the amateur minstrel show as a fundraising event, either for specified charities or to benefit a community organization or club. Attaining these goals can be understood as a display of managerial achievement that was linked to displays of upwardly mobile white manhood in the modern era.

Of course, this discourse on respectability and etiquette had a counterpoint in the content of the minstrel show itself, especially in the skits where the blackface comic content was often informed by highly inappropriate social behaviors and a comic inability to enact such managerial skills. Appropriate social behaviors were enacted as white characteristics and thus related to upward social mobility while inappropriate social behaviors (including an inability to manage the self or others) were constructed as black characteristics and thus linked to an inability to achieve upward social mobility. And while these constructions of whiteness and blackness simply reiterated the content of the 19th century racial imaginary, all of these behaviors were significantly and distinctively codified in these instructional manuals as well as displayed in large-scale amateur productions planned and performed by and for white middle-class communities. In short, all described activities were racialized, including the social organizing required to produce the show on both an individual and communal level.

Amateur Blackface in Communal Space

While amateur blackface minstrel shows were certainly being produced nationwide, it is helpful to take a quick look at how these shows unfolded in particular locales. Here I would like to take a brief look at a sampling of shows performed during the 1890s in Chicago, Milwaukee and Minneapolis. This was a period when a growing middle to upper middle-class in midwestern cities sought to participate in the sophisticated civilized affluence that marked cities such as New York or Philadelphia. The occasion of a large-scale amateur minstrel show would have spoken to class formation and represented these cities as bastions of white civilization in ways that echoed the themes of the “White City” at the Chicago World’s Fair and similar other urban exhibitions such as plantation spectacles or “living villages” peopled by racialized others.

A quick scan of local papers during these years reveals that large-scale amateur minstrel productions were very popular and much anticipated community events in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis, with many of them staged on a seasonal or annual basis. These productions were covered by smaller community papers, such as *The Penney Press* (Minneapolis) or *The Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago) as well as by more prominent papers such as *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Minneapolis Tribune* and *The Milwaukee Journal*. Relevant coverage was usually featured in the society page or in sections of the paper that reported on various community entertainments and vacation options and included announcements of upcoming shows and as well as ongoing feature

articles related to shows in the process of being planned.³¹ Newspapers also published expansive reviews of particular performances that might include a description of the venue, numbers of people in attendance, and a description of the dance or banquet that might follow the show. Sometimes papers included a sample program with details about who played what role as well as reports on how audiences responded to individual performances or specific songs. Longer feature articles also incorporated fairly lavish illustrations or even photographs of principal players who were well-known in the community, as well as lists of other community members participating in the show, especially those heading various planning committees.³²

Productions receiving extensive coverage included shows staged by well-known church groups, high school and college groups, various sporting clubs, and, of course, fraternal organizations with national or multi-state membership. For example, middle-class minstrel shows in the Chicago area were staged by local chapters of national organizations like the Elks or the Moose Club, local sporting clubs like the Evanston Boat Club or the Southside Cycling Club, and by miscellaneous social clubs, such as The Ashland Club, The Oaks, The Bloomington Club and the Keystone Club. Amateur minstrel shows were also staged by employees of large local businesses like Marshall

³¹ A series of articles about the Milwaukee Wheelman (a bicycle club) and their annual show included two updates on rehearsals and comic material as well as an extensive review of the performance: "Burnt Cork for the Wheelman" (*Milwaukee Sentinel*, 15 March 1894, p. 6), "In Sporting Circles: The Milwaukee Wheelmen's Minstrel Show at the Academy" (*Milwaukee Journal*, 24 March 1894, p. 5); and "Ye Amateur Minstrels: Milwaukee Wheelmen Show Was a Success." *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 30 Mar. 1894, p. 3.

³² A long feature on an amateur show at Chicago's Central Music Hall included illustrations of the principle players, each with its own caption: "Urging Bashful Harry Treat to Respond to an Encore" pictured the three leads backstage in black tuxedos, "Off with the Burnt Cork" depicted the three men washing up, and "Have Cornered the Fun Market" offered two "snapshots," each one with a player in blackface delivering his lines. In "Joking for Charity." *Daily Inter Ocean* [Chicago, Illinois] 10 Dec. 1893, p. 4.

Fields or the Carson Pirie Scott department stores.³³ And although some of these shows were staged in local clubhouses, a number of them were staged in sites where professional shows were performed, such as the Central Music Hall, Bailey's Opera House, the Chatterton Opera House, and the Grand Opera House. In addition, many of these organizations had their own amateur minstrel troupes or banjo clubs ready to participate in these productions on a regular basis.

These large-scale amateur shows could garner surprisingly large audiences, and local newspapers typically described these audiences as having some degree of social standing, particularly in the Chicago area, where they were characterized as "society people" or as "leaders of Chicago society." For example, an 1896 amateur minstrel show staged at the Grand Opera House in Bloomington described the players as "young society men" selected from "two leading social organizations" (the Keystone Club and the Bloomington Club) and noted that the show attracted "the largest and most fashionable audience it [the opera house] has ever known." This production also featured the Keystone Club's 22-piece amateur orchestra.³⁴ A write-up on an amateur show given by the Ashland Minstrels, an amateur troupe from the Ashland Club (a kind of social club), explained how "members of the Ashland club and their wives and friends to the number of 400 crowded the entertainment hall of the clubhouse on Washington Boulevard."³⁵ A

⁶A sampling of headlines includes the following: "Moose Club's Minstrel Show. Entertainment and Ball for Charity at Battery D" (*The Sunday Inter Ocean*, 25 Oct. 1896, p.7). and "Will Use Burnt Cork: Marshall Field's Clerks Form a Minstrel Company" (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 Feb. 1894). "Clerks in Burnt Cork; Minstrel Show and Ball of Carson, Pirie Scott & Company Employees" (*The Daily Inter Ocean*, 20 Nov. 1896.)

³⁴ "Society at a Minstrel Show: Bloomington Young Men Give a Very Successful Entertainment." *The Daily Inter Ocean*, 17 March 1896.

³⁵ "Have an Amateur Minstrel Show: Members of the Ashland Club Enjoy a Pleasant Evening. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 Feb. 1893, p. 3.

show staged by the Southside Cycling club on the clubhouse lawn also attracted 400 people, most of whom were described as having “wept impartially at the tender recollections” aroused by sentimental songs that club members performed.³⁶ A short review of an amateur minstrel show staged at the Galena Opera house by “about thirty of Galena’s representative society young men” sold “over 600 tickets” in advance.³⁷ And an 1896 write-up of a minstrel show given by the Board of Trade Men on New Year’s Eve begins with these words: “When the gong sounded at 12 o’clock, there was a stampede, and the tardy arrival who could conjure up the hallucination of a vacant seat in the front row has almost as much chance of getting to it as the rustic has of realizing what the red street-car balls mean.”³⁸

Turn of the century amateur minstrel shows were also highly popular in Minneapolis and St. Paul, with a pattern of performance and staging similar to that of Chicago. A good number of these shows were well publicized and reviewed in *The Minneapolis Tribune* and seemed to attract middle-class audiences as well. Most of these amateur minstrel troupes seemed to have been fairly well-known. As in the Chicago area, some of these troupes represented smaller community organizations like church groups, neighborhood organizations, local businessmen, and sporting clubs—e.g., the Minnetonka Yacht Club, the United Fraternity club, transit workers, and the Roosevelt Club—while other productions were staged by local chapters of larger

³⁶ “Bike Men and Gags: South Side Cycling Club Gives a Minstrel Show.” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, 26 June 1896, p. 12.

³⁷ “Blacked Faces For Charity: Galena Young Men Give a Successful Minstrel Show.” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, 10 Feb. 1896.

³⁸ “Board of Trade Men Jollify: Give a Minstrel Show which was a Howling Success.” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, 1 January 1896.

organization, such as the YMCA, the Knights of the Maccabees, the Wheelmen, the Elks Club and the Shriners.

As in Chicago many of these shows were staged at well-known local theatres and opera houses. The Elks staged annual shows at the Shubert Theatre and Lyceum Theatres and, in a 1913 feature article about an upcoming show, they announced that the production will be preceded by a parade with 1000 participants expected.³⁹ The Zuhrah Minstrels, a troupe affiliated with local chapters of the Shriners also performed at the Lyceum Theatre (1896), as did The Roosevelt Club (1901), the Flour City Belles (an all-female amateur troupe), and the United Wheelman.⁴⁰ The Roosevelt Club also staged annual shows at the Metropolitan Opera House (1907, 1908).⁴¹ The United Fraternity Minstrels staged a large show at the Auditorium Theatre (1907) with a chorus described as “100 strong.”⁴² Other Minneapolis sites for amateur shows included the Tonka Hotel in Minnetonka (1905), the Lake Harriet Commercial Club (1912), the Auditorium Theatre (1907) and a staging by the St. Anthony Club at the Princess Theatre on Nicollet Island (1913).⁴³ There was even a faculty-staged minstrel show at the University of

³⁹ “Minneapolis Elks Preparing for Annual Minstrel Show, The Proceeds of Which Go Toward Furnishing Home.” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune (1909-1922)*; Mar 2, 1913; p. A2.

⁴⁰ “It Was of the Best” (*Minneapolis Tribune*, 3 Jun 1896, p.7) described the Zuhrah show. “Entertainments.” (*Minneapolis Tribune*, 21 Feb 1901, p. 6.) announced the Roosevelt Club, and “Ladies Minstrel Show” (*The Penny Press*, 15 November 1895, p. 3) is a write up on The Flour City Belles.

⁴¹ “Talented Endmen With Roosevelt Club Show.” *Minneapolis Tribune* 24 Mar 1907, p. 22; “City News: Roosevelt Club in big Vaudeville Show.” *Minneapolis Tribune* 26 Jan 1908, 10

⁴² “Amateur Minstrels Score Big Success.” 31 Dec 1907 covered the United Fraternities minstrel show.

⁴³ The Minneapolis Tribune announced Tonka Hotel amateur in a feature entitled “Lake Minnetonka” (26 July 1905). The Lake Harriet performance garnered this headline: “Minstrel End Men Cavort in Church Benefit Show” in the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, 26 Nov 1912. And East side businesses planning a minstrel show at The Princess Theatre received this headline in *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune* (30 March 1913): “Business Men to Cavort.”

Minnesota in 1919.⁴⁴ This is undoubtedly just a brief sampling of the hundreds of shows performed throughout the Twin Cities in these years.

Community groups also publicized their own upcoming productions and were able to purchase various kinds of “ready-made” promotional material through mail-order catalogues or various entertainment supply houses to help with the publicity. Promotional material available for purchase might include ready-made lithographed “minstrel posters” which could be ordered in a variety of colors and were designed so that community groups need only add the name of their organization along with the date, time, and place of their upcoming show (figure 3). The manuals also recommended purchasing pre-printed invitations, described as “Minstrel Postals” (Carlton, *The Business End* [1906] 21) which could be mailed out to community members or “little minstrel caricatures” or “cuts,” sold as a kind of clip art and used to decorate the various programs and announcements. (figures 3 and 4).

Spectatorship in Amateur Blackface

The middle-class amateur blackface show had an ongoing presence in the communal public sphere that differed greatly from that of professional minstrelsy. The kind of communities, the manner in which they came together, and the highly participatory nature of such an event reveal that large-scale amateur blackface minstrelsy in the urban north was a racialized form of spectatorship unlike any other in the history of racial performance. For example, unlike professional theatre in which a play or production might have a running engagement, most amateur blackface minstrel shows

⁴⁴ “Would You Have Ever Recognized Them! No! Our Own Faculty Will Cut Loose Tonight!” *The Minnesota Daily*, 11 Feb 1919, p. 1.

staged by prominent community organizations, clubs, and schools were one-night only events. However, judging from the manuals and newspaper coverage, most large-scale amateur blackface minstrel shows were often preceded by 4-6 weeks of communal planning that included all aspects of production, promotion, and staging (such as financial issues, publicity, casting, staging, and rehearsals). Most of the manuals advised participants to set aside at least four weeks for planning and producing, and a brief scan of Chicago newspapers covering these shows at the turn of the century indicates that this was a fairly common timeline. The way in which these shows unfolded in community space marks a deep immersion into the racial ideology of blackface.

It is important to think about the extent of communal participation during the weeks of preparatory activities that preceded a production. Such activities included planning, promoting, purchasing supplies (costumes, props, musical instruments, sheet music, etc.) and rehearsing. It is also worth considering the kind of ongoing presence an amateur minstrel show might have had when it was staged by a prominent social club or community organization. Preparatory activities, the performed show and even celebratory events held afterwards often received coverage in prominent city newspapers. Planning committees also circulated posters and postcards throughout the community and, judging from comments in the newspapers and manuals, word of mouth also played a key role in garnering community attention. In addition, many of these shows were held on an annual or seasonal basis in conjunction with annual balls and dinners; thus, an amateur minstrel show was an anticipated event with a regular revival.

The weeks of preparatory rituals enacted before every amateur show, what happened on stage during the performed show, and any aftermath activities (whether

public or private) must be thought of as part of the same performative event, an event that began the moment a community group came together to plan the show. Thus, what constituted an audience and when the act of spectatorship began would not have been confined to the night of the performed show, but must have been informed by a fairly high level of communal visibility and weeks of preparation. In addition, because an amateur minstrel show was staged by and for community members, all preparations, the performed show, and any aftermath activities were marked by unique and highly interactive audience-performer relationships both onstage and offstage. In short, audience members were not passive spectators, but actively participated in ways that showed familiarity with each other's social roles and the social groups to which they belonged. Thus the act of spectatorship in an amateur blackface production included how individuals observed and evaluated each other during the weeks of planning and production. This spectatorship was informed by multiple variables, such as the positioning of specific individuals within various social groups or the social relationships between participants as family members, community leaders, club members, or workplace colleagues. In short, audience members, planners and performers were all connected through a unique weave of complex conditions, all of which must be understood as highly racialized.

In short, the events of amateur blackface minstrelsy had permeable social and temporal boundaries and their racialized behaviors, gestures, and communal exchanges easily permeated daily life. There had to have been resonance between the roles individuals assumed as participants in an amateur blackface minstrel show and the ordinary roles individuals assumed as social actors every day within their communities.

In other words, the racialized resonances of the blackface minstrel event were not confined to the stage but spread into other dimensions of the performers' lives. How are we to understand the social meanings of racial performance in the case of a community member who practiced blacking up at home surrounded by friends and family or children or who practiced his or her lines during a family dinner? What does it mean that these performances were staged in familiar sites that had multiple meanings to the community, in places like schools, churches, library auditoriums, and clubhouse lawns? The participatory nature of amateur blackface and the permeability of boundaries are important for understanding the relationships between popular culture, social practices, and communal immersion into racial ideology.



Figure 1. *Depicting the 57th Night of Mr. T.D. Jim Crow Rice (1833); American Theatre, Bowery. Painting. 1833. In Jan Seidler Ramirez's Painting the Town: Cityscapes of New York, Paintings from the Museum of the City of New York (Yale UP, 2000).*



Figure 2. "Oliver Scott's Refined Negro Minstrels Representing the Pick of the Entire Minstrel World." Cincinnati, U.S.A.: U.S. Printing Co., c. 1898. Photograph. Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2014637022/. Accessed June 6, 2018.


44 *Denison's Minstrel and Song Catalogue*

Size 21 by 28 inches





Endman (poster) Alonzo and Alexander (poster) Comedian (poster)





Man and Girl (poster) First Part Circle (poster) Minstrel Girls (poster)

Denison's Minstrel Posters—Full Colors on Good Paper

Handsome lithographed posters in full colors, on good paper, for advertising your minstrel show. Six designs, each in standard half-sheet size (21x28 inches), suitable for either window or outdoor display. Made exclusively for our customers, and are not obtainable elsewhere. Flashy and catchy, arresting attention instantly. Dater strips, announcing date and place of your show, can be made by your local printer and pasted to bottom edge of posters. **Please note:** We do not imprint posters; we do not handle designs other than those here listed; posters come in one size only. Due to difficulty and expense in packing and mailing, each order must be for at least one dozen. Orders may be assorted. Be sure to specify designs wanted.

Endman. Alonzo and Alexander. Comedian. Man and Girl. First-Part Circle. Minstrel Girls. (Size 21 by 28 inches.)
Price, Per Dozen, Postpaid, \$1.80
Per 50, Postpaid, \$6.25; Per 100, Postpaid, \$10.00

Denison's Minstrel and Song Catalogue 45

Size 11 by 17 inches





Bones (card) Rufe and Raz (card) Tambo (card)

Denison's Minstrel Window Cards—In Two Colors on Cardboard

Three handsome designs, to be used in minstrel show advertising, each in two colors, mounted on heavy white cardboard, measuring 11 by 17 inches. Made exclusively for our customers and not obtainable elsewhere. Suitable for window or showroom display. Sufficient space is left at bottom of cards for announcing date and place of show.

Please note: We do not imprint window cards, but the work may be done by a local printer or the cards may be hand-lettered. We do not handle any other designs than those listed here. Window cards come in one size only. On account of the labor and expense of packing and mailing, each order must be for at least one dozen cards. Orders may be assorted. Be sure to specify designs wanted.

Bones, in black and yellow. Rufe and Raz, in blue and yellow. Tambo, in black and red. (Size 11 by 17 inches.) **Price, Per Dozen, Postpaid, \$2.40**
Per 50, Postpaid, \$8.75; Per 100, Postpaid, \$15.00

Minstrel Advertising Cuts

Just the thing to brighten up your programs, newspaper ads, handbills, etc. Each of the seven designs can be had in either half-column or full-column size. The latter make a better "flash" because of their size, but the former are sometimes preferred because they require less space. A clever advertising manager will find lots of uses for these laugh-provoking cuts, whose cost is nominal compared with the expense of making special drawings and cuts to order. As




Ad-Cut No. 1-C (Half-column size) Ad-Cut No. 2-C (Half-column size)

Figure 3. Minstrel Posters, Window Cards, and Advertising Cuts in *Everything for Your Minstrel Show: Denison's Minstrel and Song Catalogue* (T. S. Denison, 1920), pp. 44-45.

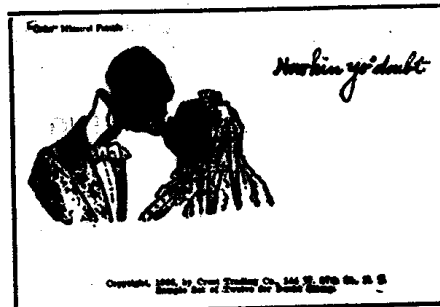
Advertise Your Show

**GOOD LITHOGRAPHS WILL
DO THE WORK.**

We Carry a Complete Line, All Sizes and Designs. Prices
on Application.

A NEW MINSTREL ADVERTISING FEATURE.

"CREST" MINSTREL POST CARD.



FILL THEM OUT AND SEND TO FRIENDS.

A Sample Package, 12 Original Designs, for 2 Cent Stamp

**ORIGINAL "MINSTREL CUTS," LARGE AND
SMALL,**

**FOR PROGRAMS, NEWSPAPER ADS, LETTER
HEADS, ETC.**

Send for Catalogue No. 66.

CREST TRADING CO.,

144 Crest 37th Street, New York.

Figure 4. "Advertise Your Show." Lithographs, Post Cards and Minstrel "cuts" from *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* by Albert Carlton (M. Witmark and Sons, 1906).

CHAPTER 3A.

WHITE MANLINESS AND THE CULTURE OF SELF-CONTROL

This section contextualizes amateur blackface minstrelsy by placing it at a certain moment in the cultural history of white middle-class masculinity and thinks about how middle-class white men, given socioeconomic ruptures to their identity in the corporate bureaucracies of late 19th century America, might have used amateur blackface performance as a compensatory leisure time activity. I begin with a synthesis of what cultural historians have had to say about American constructions of white upwardly mobile masculinity throughout the 19th century and offer examples of popular discourse on middle-class preoccupations with manhood, masculinity and self-making. A key concern is the way that white middle-class men turned to certain kinds of leisure activities and ideas about racial dominance to shore up their both individual and communal masculinities; thus this section delineates how amateur blackface minstrelsy emerged as a highly popular and deeply structured form of middle-class play. While the racial ideologies dominating this era were widespread (especially scientific racism, white supremacy, and the hygienic movement) and expressed in many different forms of popular culture such as professional minstrelsy or in “living villages” like those in the White City at the 1893 World’s Fair, the incarnation and enactment of those ideologies in the highly structured play of middle-class amateur blackface has received less scholarly attention.

American constructions of white masculinity and class shifted throughout the latter half of the 19th century, given the socioeconomic and demographic changes in the urban North. American ideals about upward mobility and white manliness stemmed from

certain characteristics important during the American Revolution and the establishment of the new Republic. Freedom from England also meant freedom in commerce; thus, between 1820 and 1840, America experienced a “Market Revolution” that offered unprecedented opportunities for entrepreneurial endeavors in various forms of small-scale agricultural and mercantile capitalism. Ronald Takaki’s *Iron Cages* usefully traces out a basic tension in colonial America between an American desire to distance themselves from temptations of luxury associated with British aristocratic decadence, new and unprecedented opportunities for upward social mobility and the acquisition of capital, and an adherence to self-discipline and the denial of pleasure associated with Protestant asceticism and the American ability to self-govern. British men were thus associated with extravagance and with effeminacy in dress and manner, while American white manliness came to be defined by a refusal of extravagance: honest industry, sobriety, frugality, and simplicity in manner. Most importantly, the Market Revolution depended on black slavery informed by white constructions of blackness that characterized black masculinity as the antithesis of white manliness: childish, primitive, and incapable of self-control or upward social mobility.

The “self-made” man (a neologism first coined in 1832) was successful not only because he worked hard, but because he also possessed a high-minded integrity that enabled him to be politically, personally, and financially self-governing. Manly self-mastery was a prerequisite for social achievement and valued economic independence gained through one’s own efforts as opposed to inheriting wealth. This egalitarian self-mastery also called for integrity in thought and behavior, virtues associated with

Victorian ideals of “character,” and any white man who worked hard enough and had “character” could achieve upward social mobility.

This construct of American manliness profoundly influenced the self-identities of those whom historian E. Anthony Rotundo has called “the comfortably middle-class” (25). Rotundo uses letters and diaries in order to uncover private expressions of a masculine pre-occupation with “self-cultivation” in late 18th and early 19th century young men, who felt compelled to seek “rigorous methods of self-improvement” in both moral character and their professional talents; thus, self-improvement, morality, and self-regulation were deeply connected to upward mobility (25-26).⁴⁵ This discourse was also prevalent in popular literature directed at young men and their families. As Michael Kimmel explains, “by the 1840s and 1850s, a veritable cult of the Self-Made man had appeared as young men devoured popular biographies and inspirational homilies to help future Self-Made Men create themselves” (Kimmel 19). Kimmel references popular “rags to riches” biographies, such as John Frost’s *Self-Made Men in America* (1848), Charles Seymour’s *Self-Made Men* (1858), and Freeman Hunt’s *Lives of American Merchants* (1858) and *Worth and Wealth: A Collection of Maxims, Morals and Miscellanies for Merchants and Men of Business* (1856).

After the Civil War, the American economy went through a series of transformations including economic depression, unprecedented technological development, and, of course, the rise of industrialized corporate capitalism. As Gail Bederman describes in *Manliness and Civilization*, the American economy changed so

⁴⁵ Rotundo emphasizes the study of the Northern middle-class in both published texts and his dissertation was entitled “Manhood in America. The Northern Middle-class, 1770-1920.” Brandeis University, 1982. Unpublished.

rapidly between 1871 and 1896 that “even a successful, self-denying small businessman might lose everything, unexpectedly and through no fault of his own” (12). These transformations and resulting economic changes led to a kind of identity crisis for white middle-class men, especially for those who were raised to value the kind of independence that came with entrepreneurial success. Thus, “the sons of the middle-class faced the real possibility that traditional sources of male power and status would remain closed to them forever—that they would become failures instead of self-made men” (Bederman, 12).

In addition, instead of becoming independent businessmen, more and more men found that they were forced to become “employees,” a new category of labor that soon became the norm in the latter half of the 19th century.” By 1896, the number of self-employed middle-class men in the urban north had dropped from 67% in 1807 to 37% (Kimmel, 12). No longer in control of their time and their capital, middle-class white men had to accept positions as managers or, worse, found themselves working in various positions as clerks, trapped in the bureaucracies of corporate capitalism. Furthermore, the work was sedentary, giving rise to new concerns about a loss of manly vigor in both body and spirit. These anxieties were exacerbated by the need to conform to systems of deference in corporate bureaucracies and the entrance of women into the workplace, feminizing changes that disrupted the separation of the gendered spheres that had characterized Victorian society.⁴⁶ By the 1920’s, these forms of labor were experienced as the beginning of a kind of “white-collar hell” associated with modernity (Clark 215).

⁴⁶ Useful sources dealing with dead-end clerical jobs and feminization in the turn of century workplace includes: Angel Kwolek-Folland’s “The Gendered Environment of the Workplace, 1880-1930” in *The Material Culture of Gender* (1997), 157-179; Clark Davis’s “The Corporate Reconstruction of Middle-Class Manhood” in *The Middling Sorts*, 201-216; Jerome Bjelopera’s *City of Clerks* (2005), and Stuart M. Blumin’s *The Emergence of the Middle-class*, to name a few.

Although Gilded Age and Progressive Era middle-class men found themselves trapped in bureaucratic jobs, they were still taken with ideas about the manly independence and the vigor of the self-made man; thus, they turned to leisure time interests linked with bodily health, fresh air, and manly forms of adventure that “embodied heroic physical action” (Rotundo 32). In short, this turn to leisure had a new emphasis on physicality (Rotundo, Bederman, Devlin). Wild West novels and the myth of the frontiersman became wildly popular as did certain kinds of sports. This included outdoor sports like horseback riding and biking as well as competitive team sports, such as baseball and football; also popular were physically strenuous sports, such as boxing and fencing, that pitted men against each other physically. There was also a great deal of admiration for soldiers and in many ways, in the popular imagination, this new figure of masculinity was embodied in Theodore Roosevelt as colonel of the Rough Riders during the Spanish American war.⁴⁷

There is one more element worth considering here and that is the way in which performances of masculinity were connected with forms of display in the public sphere. Michael Kimmel actually historicizes this idea by linking it specifically to 19th century constructions of American manhood, writing that “the central characteristic of being self-made was that the proving ground was the public sphere, specifically the workplace. And the workplace was a man’s world (a native-born white men’s world at that)” (26). Kimmel goes on to describe a form of homosociality that was historically central to American class formation:

⁴⁷ For more on progressive era manliness as represented by Roosevelt, see Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization* (1995).

If manhood could be proved, it had to be proved in the eyes of other men. From the early nineteenth century until the present day, most of men's relentless efforts to prove their manhood contain this core element of homosociality" (26).

If the workplace did not offer a site for satisfactorily enacting white middle-class masculinity, then performances of masculinity depended upon homosocial performance in other contexts. White men still needed some kind of proving ground in the public sphere. It is not surprising perhaps that late 19th and early 20th century men sought to sustain their masculine identity through leisure time activities informed by male display and bonding.

Middle-class male concern with these issues is reflected in the continued popularity of advice literature published in late 19th and early 20th century America. Much of this literature was directed to a male readership or family members concerned with the workplace success of male offspring; it focused on how a young man might achieve "success" in the modern workplace. This advice literature often prescribed an approach to modernity by referencing the comforts of the past. Judy Hilkey's *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* describes how success manuals found an active market by promoting Victorian-era notions of manhood as if they were still "in play" in the modern labor market; these values included strength of character, willingness to work hard, and capacity to enact an entrepreneurial impulse, characteristics that dated back to the era of the self-made man. Success manuals also worked to target men who were anxious about their ability to succeed in the modern workplace as well as middle-class workers trapped in corporate bureaucracies with little

hope of achieving the kind of entrepreneurial successes or economic independence that had defined masculinity a few decades earlier. Daniel Clark describes this same anxiety about the tension between traditional 19th century conceptions of manly success and the “more modern virtues” required for success in turn of century workplaces in mass magazines directed at socially elite audiences.⁴⁸ Usually, the topic at hand in this material had to do with questions about the value of a liberal arts education in a time and place dominated by the rise of modern business and the culture of success. The proffered guidance usually supported maintaining elements of a liberal education alongside a curriculum committed to the world of business, thus offering readers an amalgamated vision of middle-class manhood that combined the 19th century gentleman and the modern businessman (Clark 54-55).

If white manliness derived from success in the marketplace and forms of independent entrepreneurship in earlier decades of the 19th century, then what was needed to sustain this sense of masculinity while laboring as an “employee,” dependent on the approval of other men placed above them in the hierarchies of the modern workplace? If, as Kimmel suggests, performances of masculinity depended upon homosocial performance in the public sphere, white middle-class men still needed some kind of primary proving ground. It is not surprising, then, that late 19th and early 20th century men sought to sustain their masculine identity through leisure time activity, demonstrated through a rising interest in popular escape literature (especially Westerns); in spectator sports such as boxing, football, and baseball; and in increased male

⁴⁸ *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood, 1890-1915* (Madison, WI: U. Wisconsin Press, 2010).

participation in a range of sporting activities like bicycling, gymnastics, and physical fitness programs.

Athena Devlin points out the rising popularity of physical education at the turn of century and writes that “the conditions of...emergence” for maintaining a manly body stemmed, “mostly fully from anxiety about the fitness of the white male body as an effect of industrialism and new forms of work (5). In particular, she looks at physical fitness manuals written for the middle to upper-middle class male market and especially for men employed in sedentary bureaucratic jobs associated with modernity. Devlin’s findings echo those of Hilkey and Clark, for the fitness manuals also addressed anxieties about the tension between tradition and modernity, and posited a link between physical education and the culture of success in the modern workplace. On one hand, physical fitness manuals offered expertise on how to maintain a masculine body that resonated with pre-industrial markers of class and an older work ethic (the willingness to work hard, the notion of self-mastery, and even the importance of a certain kind of physical grace). In this way, physical education was marketed as a way to “revitalize” middle class male bodies that had become “enfeebled” by the sedentary nature of modern labor.

At the same time, however, these physical fitness manuals promoted a body type that was in alignment with workplace modernity. Devlin writes that “physical education for the middle and elite classes promoted a healthy, symmetrical body that emphasized efficiency above all else” (5). Thus while 19th century physical education manuals written for the middle-class promoted a body related to older forms of “character” and self-discipline, this same body also had a brand of “efficiency” and a “readiness” for action in sync with modernity. In addition, this ideal masculine body was a “class-

specific” body that reflected both racial and class superiority. This was not the muscular body of a working-class man, but a body that reflected middle-class values: a slim efficient body—white and native-born and informed by symmetry and harmony in all of its parts. Furthermore, this was a white body constructed in part by scientific racism and the need to maintain a superior placement in the hierarchies of race and class. As one manual explained, “each man should remedy his defects and pride himself on the purity of his skin, the firmness of his muscles and the uprightness of his figure”—as opposed to “the stooped position of labor” (qtd in Devlin, 22).

CHAPTER 3B. BLACKING UP:

MIDDLE-CLASS MASCULINITY AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

WILL USE BURNT CORK

Marshall Field's Clerks Form a Minstrel Company

Some of the lively young men in Marshall Field's retail store have organized a minstrel company and will follow the example recently set by the society folk of Kenwood and Edgewater, who put burnt cork on their faces and sang and danced and cracked jokes. The young men at Field's however, say they will avoid the error into which one or two of the other minstrel people fell. This error consisted of a too liberal use of advice...In minstrel circles for ages past a standing joke has been to surreptitiously place a few drops of kerosene oil in the burnt cork which goes on the face. This oil soaks into the pores, carrying cork with it, and the consequence is that the victim of the joke is compelled to be a negro, as far as his face is concerned, until in the natural course of events the black-soaked cuticle wears off...One or two of the Kenwood and Edgewater amateurs, it is related, were caught by the kerosene joke now serve as examples from following the whose footsteps the Marshal Field folks will steer clear.

--*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1 November 1894

Introduction

Participation in large-scale amateur minstrel shows required a great deal of effort as well as a sizable time commitment for most of the participants. According to manuals as well as newspaper announcements and feature articles on upcoming shows, it might take 4-6 weeks to plan and produce the kinds of amateur shows under consideration here. Not only would this have entailed a great deal of organizing, requiring an organizational ethos that I will discuss at length in the next chapter, it would have also entailed a great deal of effort on the part of individuals who vied for key roles in the production, such as the role of the end-man or Interlocutor or a lead role in one of the skits. Candidates had to audition for these roles and attend weeks of rehearsal and, as the instructional manuals and newspaper coverage imply, they must have felt some pressure to excel onstage.

As others have pointed out, social actors have choices about the kinds of leisure time activities in which they engage; thus, it is important to emphasize that the amateur minstrel show was not some kind of top-down popular culture format imposed on the masses, but a freely chosen performance practice that required effort, an ongoing time commitment, and an interest in a particular form of self-display before an audience.⁴⁹ What would have motivated a white amateur performer to devote so much of his leisure time to preparing for and playing a blackface role, particularly one of the principal roles? What pleasures might an amateur have derived from the preparatory activities and onstage performance? Did amateur players perceive “blacking-up” as connected to various forms of self-making or as a way to shore up their identities as middle-class white men with some degree of status in the community? Here I want to consider how white performers might have used amateur blackface as a kind of proving ground for a certain kind of middle-class masculinity, looking at the manuals as well as certain blackface skits to interrogate the relationship between the individual player and his blackface role.

The large-scale amateur blackface minstrel show functioned as a highly rule-bound form of racial play, with exacting prescriptions for individual and group behaviors on how to engage with bodies. In particular, amateur blackface enacted displays of self-management and self-control as characteristics associated with whiteness. This discourse of self-control is echoed throughout the manuals and is, in part, related to Victorian notions about self-management; this discourse is also informed by a kind of militant,

⁴⁹ Roediger writes of the role played by white workers in creating racialized forms of language in order to differentiate themselves from black laborers (43-60); Bjelopera writes of the way in which white collar clerks created their own forms of racialized leisure time activities (80-114); Bederman writes of the active role played by white middle-class men in seeking re-invigorate manhood through fraternal belonging and forms of leisure that valued physicality (e.g., boxing and prize-fighting) and racial superiority (16-23).

even “strenuous” self-discipline connected to physicality and the preparation of the body for racial play with other men. Participation in these kinds of amateur productions enabled white performers to experience and display certain forms of excess and primitivism associated with highly popular blackface character types and used these characteristics to strengthen a sense of white masculinity. In other words, while participation in minstrelsy was certainly about self-management, self-scrutiny, and self-presentation in the communal sphere, it was also about a driving desire to experience and display a new form of white masculinity that was emerging in this time and place, one that turned away from the over-civilized Victorian ideal to a form of white manliness informed not only by “intelligence, altruism and morality” but also by physicality, virility and racial superiority (Bederman 185).⁵⁰

It is useful to begin with two ideas from performance studies—Robin Bernstein’s notion of “scriptive things” and Diana Taylor’s thoughts about the relationship between the archive and the repertoire—as they help us understand how the interaction between players and the things of blackface perpetuated and naturalized racist ideologies through the body of the individual amateur performer. These concepts help illuminate how an individual player might have interacted with accessories of blackface with a particular focus on facial features and hair and to consider how these items worked to build and

⁵⁰ Gail Bederman links the late 19th century re-making of manhood with a contemporary discourse on civilization that was premised on a “precise relation between “the [white] male body, male identity, and authority” (42). Of interest is her work on G. Stanley Hall, an influential educator and an early figure in American psychology who taught that young white males must “access” primitive and barbaric impulses in their development as way to “avoid “racial decadence” and achieve “civilized virility” (43). Also of interest is her analysis of Theodore Roosevelt. By combining “manliness” [i.e., the Victorian idea of manhood based on character] and “masculinity”[a more modern idea premised on strenuous virility], “Roosevelt modeled a new type of manhood for the American people based on the millennial evolutionary ideology of civilization.” Through this new model, Roosevelt “claimed not only a personal power for himself but also a “collective imperialistic manhood for the white American race” (44).

“script” a repertoire of racialized gestures—what Diana Taylor might call a form of “embodied knowledge” as a performance practice in everyday life. This chapter ends with a meditation on the end-men and other specific blackface character types in amateur minstrelsy to help delineate how the white amateur actor was directed to play his part according to a strict set of rules; these forms of stage discipline also functioned as an embodied counterpoint to the unruly content of the skits and scenarios between the end-men and the Interlocutor.

“Scriptive Things” and Commodity Racism

Middle-class clubs and organizations in Midwestern and East Coast cities and towns staged amateur minstrel shows on a regular basis. While relevant theatrical supplies like blackface make-up, wigs, white and black gloves and various kinds of greasepaint and powders were of course available to professional performers, such products were also being made available to the general public, especially through mail-order catalogs. As the persistence of these products reveal, there was enough interest in amateur blackface performance that publishers found a ready market for both the instructional manuals and relevant theatrical supplies. In this section, I would like to consider the interaction between the individual amateur performer and the material culture of blackface and to think about how this interaction created and perpetuated a repertoire of embodied racialized behaviors.

In *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein analyzes the impact of racialized toys and other objects on children in late 19th century America. Using Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a foundation, Bernstein considers the behavior of children in interaction with objects that drew meaning from Stowe’s highly popular novel, such as

Little Eva and Topsy dolls marketed to young girls. Bernstein asks how certain artifacts (i.e., a set of historically contextualized artifacts might have “prompted,” “invited” or even “scripted” racialized human behaviors. What historically located behaviors did an artifact (a “scriptive thing”) invite? And what behaviors did it discourage? (8).

Diana Taylor would agree that behaviors prompted by “scriptive things” function as a source of knowledge and identifies them as “nonverbal embodied cultural practices” (26). Taylor also gives us terms to help clarify this method of inquiry: print, visual and perhaps even material culture falls under the heading of “archive” and scripted human behaviors are “repertoire,” a set of embodied physical practices that qualify as “an important system for knowing and transmitting knowledge” (26). For Taylor, the term “archive” references forms of textual knowledge typically privileged in scholarship because they are understood to be both stable and accessible. Knowledge based on “repertoire,” however, is another matter, since it is related to something that seems more ephemeral: human gesture, behaviors, and the bodies of social actors (xiii-27).

These terms provide a useful framework for approaching the source material and performance practices connected with amateur minstrelsy. Both archival knowledge (the instructional manuals, minstrel show posters, and skits) and the “scriptive things” of blackface (displayed in advertisements and mail-order catalogs) can help reconstruct and understand the “repertoire” of behaviors affiliated with blackface in everyday life. How did the individual amateur player interact both physically and psychologically with the things of blackface? How did those interactions create and perpetuate a racially-laden repertoire of embodied practices?

The instructional manuals were informed by a constant emphasis on rules, discipline, and self-control. They stated a wrong way and a right way to proceed when staging an amateur minstrel show; in order to avoid making “serious mistakes,” participants had to follow the proffered instructions to the letter. The manuals not only recommended specific commodities, i.e., specific brands of blackface paint or certain kinds of soaps, but even more importantly, taught consumers exactly how to use these products. Thus, the manuals encouraged commodity racism through highlighting relevant preparation and promoting certain props deemed necessary to producing the amateur show. These commodities fragmented the representation of the black body into wigs designed to signify black hair and into blackface paint and other forms of make-up denoting black skin. The manuals also offered obsessively detailed guidance on how to work with the wigs and make-up in order to achieve the desired results on the consumer’s own body.

The display of racialized commodities in mail-order catalogs put the individual white consumer in a position of power, or at least in a position where he might feel a sense of power, for laid out before him on the pages of the catalog were bits of the “other”—hair, skin, costume—available for scrutiny and purchase. Thus, interaction with a minstrel show mail-order catalog echoed the social relations of slavery and echoed connections with the auction block and the coffle. In short, these manuals appealed to white consumer fantasies about access, choice, and power over the body of the racialized other. Specific aspects of the instructional manuals spoke directly to these social relations, not only in the array of commodities in back-page advertisements and in the catalogue of the many blackface character types available to play on stage, but also in the

many choices one had in staging a show. *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* (1921) exemplified this idea of access and choice quite dramatically in its opening chapters, for as the manual points out, there were decisions to be made with respect to gender (“Men or Women, Or Both?”), to race (“Black or White?”) and to staging: (the traditional “circle” or “novelty settings” which pulled from scenes in everyday life) (10).

While consumers could purchase make-up, wigs, and other blackface theatrical supplies through various costume suppliers and supply companies, some of the publishers of the manuals developed their own minstrel show products and developed mail-order catalogs so they could market these commodities directly to consumers. A glance through these catalogs reveals a voluminous array of minstrel show supplies, including sheet music (e.g., individual songs, minstrel show overtures, and chorale music) as well as blackface joke books and hundreds of blackface skits and plays. Most important for our purposes, however, were the offers of wigs, blackface make-up and the multitude of products related to applying and removing that make-up.

Originally a Tin Pan Alley sheet music publisher, M. Witmark and Sons expanded their sheet music business at the turn of the century by turning to instructional materials for amateur blackface. They published two instructional minstrel manuals included in this study—*The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) and *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* (1906). In 1904, they joined with some other companies to establish the Crest Trading Company, a company dedicated to developing and marketing theatrical supplies to amateurs, especially amateurs interested in staging a minstrel show. The Crest Company’s mail-order catalog was entitled *The Amateur*

Entertainer; it was first published in 1904 with subsequent versions published in 1914 and 1925, and likely there were more. Modeled after the *Sears and Roebuck* catalog, *The Amateur Entertainer* was comprehensive and featured numerous products developed by the company, including the Crest brand of burnt cork, which sold for 50 cents a box (figure 5). Their catalogs also offered an array of minstrel show wigs. The 1914 publication of *The Amateur Entertainer* included the following list of minstrel-show wigs: “11 Plain Wigs for Ends; 3 Crop Wigs,” and “1 Crop Fright Wig for End” (45). The 1925 publication of the catalog sold minstrel show wigs for \$1.50 each and offered a discount price of \$15.00 a dozen.

T.S. Denison and Company, with offices in both Chicago and Minneapolis, also published their own mail-order catalog, the *Denison's Minstrel and Song Catalogue*. Their catalog offered five different kinds of blackface wigs for sale, including a “fright wig,” an “Uncle Tom Wig,” a “Topsy Wig” and a “Negro Dress Wig” as well as two kinds of blackface make-up: “Superfine Minstrel Black” promoted as “pleasant to use” and “nicely perfumed” and “Superfine Creole,” promoted as being of the same quality as Minstrel Black but advertised as a better choice for playing a “light negro.” Superfine Creole came in two shades: “dark” and “light” (41). It should be noted that the manuals did offer various opinions on which shades of blackface paint were best. For example, *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* (1921), promoted “Minstrel Black” as the shade of choice. That said, this same manual also offered consumers some other options, for “if Minstrel Black is found to be too black for some negro parts, grease paints Othello or black should be used...however, in burlesque

or minstrels, the blacker an impersonation is the better” (Brannen and Johnson, 1921, *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 43).

Wigs and blackface paint were also marketed in back-page advertisements in the manuals, along with other minstrel show supplies such as sheet music or blackface skits, but publishers also included product placement within the instructional section of the manuals. For example, in a section entitled “Blacking Up,” in *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* (1911), manual writer and minstrel show performer Press Eldridge offers readers this bit of advice: “If you do as I tell you, and not allow any wise friend...to give you wrong pointers, I will give you the easiest way and save you a lot of trouble. First, send to Samuel French, 28 W. 38th St., New York City \$1.50 for a pound box of prepared cork. This is sufficient to black up twenty men half a dozen times” (Eldridge 24). A manual published a decade later employs the same marketing technique, for in a short section entitled “Costumes and Make-up,” the author of *The Minstrel Encyclopedia* (1921) explained that “the publishers of this book can supply an excellent Negro wig for \$1.25 and Bakers Burnt Cork, forty cents a can, sufficient for eight people” (24).

Most importantly, the instructional manuals enhanced the drama of blacking up by including a kind of mythology about the origins of burnt cork and how to apply it. In this way, the manuals suggest there was artisanal quality to how burnt cork was made in its most “authentic” incarnations and that a certain level of expertise was required in both its application and removal across the manuals. These descriptions are rendered with a certain level of detail and linguistic precision. For example, in the below passage from the 1899 *Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*, manual writer and blackface performer Frank Dumont explains to a reporter how burnt cork is made:

“What is that you are putting on your face;” the reporter asks, “Is it black paint?” “No indeed,” replied Dumont. “It is burnt cork, a very simple preparation, but nothing has ever been invented to take its place. First, we get a lot of champagne corks, remnants of cork from a cork stopper factory. These are placed in an old tin pail which serves as furnace—and then ignited. A few holes in the pail which furnish draught for the blazing corks. When they have been thoroughly burned, they are crushed and reduced to a powder by hand. Then this powder is moistened with water, and we run it through a small paint mill to grind it fine. Then we place the paste thus made into tin boxes and it is ready for use. You moisten with a little water the quantity you need as you are applying it to your face. We do not mix anything else with it, although I have seen various recipes calling for Vaseline and other ingredients. (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 14)

The careful technology of burnt cork is also described in similar ways in *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs*, a manual written nearly a decade later (1920), which gives a somewhat different recipe: “Burnt cork, cocoa butter, carmine, and wigs are all that the negro minstrels require. You can prepare the burnt cork yourself by obtaining a quantity of corks, placing them in a metal dish, pouring alcohol over them and burning them to a crisp. Powder and mix with enough water to make a rather thick paste” (Tibbals 10). *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* (1911) warns of the challenges an amateur performer might face if he does not heed the expertise offered by professional players in these manuals:

Nothing is easier for the initiated or gives more trouble to the amateur than blacking up. The writer of this book has been blacking up for thirty years and can black up in two minutes and wash up in three; still I have met amateurs two weeks after their performances with traces of burnt cork still about their ears, eyes and the roots of their hair. If you will do as I tell you and not allow any wise friend, who has read somewhere about how it should be done to give you any wrong pointers, I will give you the easiest way and save you a lot of trouble. (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* 23-24)

Although ready-made cans of burnt cork make-up were advertised in the back pages of every manual, a number of the manuals included a good amount of detail about the original formula for preparing burnt cork as kind of marketing strategy: thus, the preparation of burnt cork took on a kind of mystique, and it was often described as something that could be used incorrectly (as the opening epigraph to this chapter illustrates). The instructional manual offered amateurs expertise in order to avoid such mistakes.

As we see in the careful wording of these passages above, the manuals offered their readers a body of expert knowledge, exemplifying what Diana Taylor might call an “act of transfer” (Taylor 1-52) of a repertoire of gestures and bodily movements evoked through the written archive and “the things” of blackface. In other words, between the manuals and the commodities, consumers had access to a “kit” that both promoted and taught racial performance. Teaching consumers how to use the product was part of the package. The persistent necessity for these products and the manuals that explicated their

use revealed that knowing how to black up—and how to wash up—was of great interest to consumers over a longer duration. Blacking-up was not only an act performed by professional performers for an often life-long career; blacking-up was also an act repeatedly performed by amateurs in various community sites and settings, practiced backstage during rehearsals in club houses or school and church auditoriums (depending on where rehearsals were held), and in more private spaces, such as the family home. The manuals promoted blacking-up as something that took skill, knowledge, and even years of experience, suggesting both the time and expense involved in these leisure-time uses of blackface.

Across all of these manuals was the idea that the instruction offered was derived from the experts—from professional performers and producers of amateur minstrel shows—and thus gleaned from years of stagecraft and real-life experience. All of the manuals professionalized the knowledge they offered, promising their readers an exhaustive amount of “encyclopedic” information so that amateurs might avoid “serious mistakes” and achieve “perfection.” As one manual writer explained, his handbook had been “compiled and arranged to instruct, suggest and prepare a minstrel entertainment, perfect in all its detail” (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 2). The writer of another manual published ten years later wrote that if the amateur understood all the care that professionals took to bring a show to “a state of perfection before it is presented to the public, he “would look upon the minstrel show in the light of a serious undertaking rather than of a frolic” (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* 3). A 1920 manual told readers that “properly rehearsed, arranged, and conducted, there is no more satisfactory form of amateur home-talent entertainment than

a minstrel show” (Tibbals, 1920, *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* 4). The amateur blackface minstrel show was clearly promoted as racial play bounded by exacting guidelines based upon stagecraft lore, with guaranteed success for those amateur players who followed their advice to the letter.

White Performers/Blackface Roles Play

Here, I would like to consider how the white amateur used blacking up to enact two things: 1) the performance of attributes of success associated with white middle-class white masculinity and 2) forms of excess associated with white constructions of minstrel blackness. As previously noted, the content of the instructional manuals was presented both as a body of knowledge to be learned and as a form of discipline that each individual “actor” had to study, practice, and enact upon his own body. For example, anyone participating in an amateur blackface minstrel show had to learn how to black up and wash off as well as how to select and employ the commodities that supported these acts. This was especially true in when it came to the act of blacking up. According to the manuals, there was a wrong way and a right way to proceed, and while not all of the manuals delivered all the detail promised for other topics, when it came to the act of applying blackface makeup, the manuals were markedly descriptive and precise. A review of these instructions reveals how individual players were expected to interact with the accessories of blackface and how these interactions helped to build and “script” a repertoire of racialized gestures—what Diana Taylor might call a form of “embodied knowledge”—as an everyday performance practice.

The Act of Blacking Up

For the individual player, the act of blacking up was a personal if not intimate act. Blacking up required an individual to regard his or her facial features in the mirror, to scrutinize skin, touch the face and to consider lips and eyes. As an individual gesture, blacking up was also about how to keep “clean” and “dirty” separate on one’s own body, especially in areas where blackness might border on whiteness. In this light, blacking up was an intimate act that physically immersed the performer in racial ideology through certain acts of self-regard. Repeated in every preparation for amateur performance, the act of blacking up became a form of embodied knowledge invited by material objects. But blacking up was not just a preparation for the amateur minstrel show; it was a form of racial play in itself, a backstage ritual rife with a multiplicity of racialized psycho-sociological meanings premised upon the American racial imaginary.

It is worth considering the specific body movements prescribed for blacking-up as well as the precise level of instructional detail found in the manuals. For example, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) directs readers to begin by rubbing burnt cork between the palms, an action replicated later in the act of washing up. The next step then is to “wipe,” not wash, the palms. The reason for “wiping” and not washing the palms is twofold. First, if one wipes instead of washes, there will be just enough pigment left on one’s palms to approximate “the real color of the colored man’s hand” (Dumont 14). Second, wiping in this manner will also clean certain “portions of the hands” just enough to apply the remainder of the make-up and to “handle the white vest” and the “bosom of [the] shirt and ties without soiling them” (Dumont 15). Thus, knowing to wipe rather than to wash is presented as a form of stage

craft, i.e., as a racialized technical knowledge to be enacted on the individual white body in preparation for racial performance. *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* (1911) also begins with the motion of rubbing burnt cork between the palms, although this manual specifies that the palms be dampened first. Echoing the diction of the 1899 manual, the 1911 manual instructs the amateur to then “smear” the burnt cork over his entire face and neck. The use of the word “smear” is worth noting here, for in this context the word is obviously connected to a racialized discourse about separating the clean and the dirty:

Now wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water and put on your end shirts or fronts, whichever you use, also your end collars, and finish dressing for the First Part. Don't touch your linen or fancy clothing until you have washed your hands. Cork rubs off on anything it touches, so be careful. After you have put on your collars and ties, it is a good idea to stick a piece of paper between your collar and your neck, letting it fold over the wings of your collar, thus keeping the collar clean until you are ready to go on the stage. Remove the paper just before the curtain goes up. Don't blacken your hands. Wear black gloves. Don't rub your face after you are blackened. Should you perspire freely and wish to remove the perspiration do it by patting the face with your handkerchief but don't rub it or you will rub off the cork as well. (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* 25)

The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia had offered similar advice in 1899, as evidenced in Frank Dumont's description of his process:

You will notice that in ‘blacking up’ I use an old under garment commonly called an undershirt. This is used to keep spotless white, the bosom of the article in which I appear before an audience. Now, you will observe, I am all blacked-up...now you see, I am blacked up and I take a small soft brush, which also get at a wigmaker’s, to rub off the particles of cork from my features to prevent them from falling on my white shirt front and white vest...Now sir; I put on my creamy white shirt, after I am thoroughly blacked up; then a paper or a celluloid collar, a small black tie—some use a white tie—then my cuffs, either of paper or of celluloid. Now I put on my white vest. Here my clean hands do not soil the vest as I button it. (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 14-15)

In these passages, the act of blacking up is presented as a special skill, requiring specific tools appropriate to the task, such as the “small soft brush” that can be used to rub off “particles of cork” (15). While the racialized distinction between clean and dirty is no surprise, given the racist discourse of the era, the manuals’ concern with clean and dirty was brought to a personal and physical level for anyone participating in an amateur minstrel show. Furthermore, every member of the troupe had to be concerned about separating the boundaries between clean and dirty in terms of his or her own body. Thus, separating areas of the body in this way was not only an individual concern; it was also a communal concern (a matter which will be dealt with in the next chapter), since all members of the minstrel troupe had to learn how to black up.

Washing Up

While the manuals typically focused more fully on how to black up, the matter of washing up was just as important to the preparatory ritual; as with blacking up, there were also various accoutrements that could be bought and used to accomplish the act. As with blacking up, the manuals were very descriptive in describing the necessary gestures, as is evidenced in this excerpt from *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*, 1899. Here, the manual writer explains his process: “I make a good lather and smear it over my face—then with the sponge well soaped, I go over the face and neck, and presto, the cork has almost vanished. No hard rubbing is necessary. Plenty of lather and a sponge. Then go over the face once more and then rinse your features in a bucket of fresh water—if you can get it—and once more you are a Caucasian ready to take up the white man’s burden instead of the coon’s” (Dumont 16). The writer of the 1911 *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* explains his process as well, utilizing a similar level of detail and including a promotion for “Ivory Soap”:

Take off your undershirt and wash your face and neck thoroughly with Ivory soap. Fancy toilet soaps are worse than useless. I have used Ivory soap for years and find it the best for the purpose. Get a good free lather of the soap on your hands, face and neck and wash yourself just as though you were taking your regular morning ablution; rinse the worst of the suds off your hands, then with a fair-sized sponge take off the remainder, using water liberally. Now wash out your sponges thoroughly with soap and rinse it clean, then fill it with a good heavy lather and go over your face and neck, into your ears, and up into the roots of your hair thoroughly;

rinse out the sponge, and after washing off the worse of the soap with your
 , take the sponge and go over your face and neck again using water freely.

DON'T TRY TO TAKE CORK OFF WITH GREASE OF ANY

DESCRIPTION, it won't remove it, it will set it; and then you will have
 great trouble getting it off at all. (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a*

Minstrel Show 25-26)

Although soap was promoted as the commodity necessary for washing up in the earlier manuals, later manuals sometimes promoted other products, such as cold cream or Vaseline, to be used alone or in combination with soap and water. But there were different models for how to proceed. For example, a manual published in 1920 recommended covering the skin with a thin layer of cocoa butter before applying the burnt cork so that the cork could be removed without the use of soap and water (Tibbals, 1920, *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* 10-11). In the below excerpt from *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* (1921), the preferred method is to use cold cream as a first step:

Rub it [the cold cream] in well until you get the burnt cork and the cream thoroughly mixed. Then simply take your towel or cheese-cloth and wipe it off carefully. You will find it will come right off very easily and your face will be almost as it was before you put it on. Under no circumstances ever try to wash off the burnt-cork with water before you have taken it off with cold cream as just explained. This method will take it off quite clean; enough so that you can go home and then wash with good warm soap-suds, and what little did not come off with the cold cream will come off very

easily with the hot soap-suds. (Rossiter, 1921, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* 20-21)

As evidenced in these examples, the products associated with the acts of blacking up and washing off were also linked with a rising contemporary advertising discourse that linked commodity fetishism with gendered performances of race and class. In this way, the commodities of blackface mirrored the commodities of a new American male grooming ritual that associated hygiene with the maintenance of whiteness. This discourse resonated across the manuals.

Anne McClintock's work on commodity racism is useful here in its explanation of the connection between racial hierarchies, middle-class values like cleanliness and hygiene, and imperial advertising campaigns that marketed racialized notions of empire through commodity capitalism in late 19th and early 20th century England. In particular, she explores soap as a "technology of social purification" and offers readings of advertising imagery and discourse aimed at the middle class that frames bathing and washing as racialized acts, part of an organized system of meanings establishing the boundaries between clean and dirty, black and white, civilized and uncivilized. McClintock writes about the way in which the advertising industry in Britain utilized "the poetics of cleanliness" as a kind of "social discipline" that "prepare[d] the body as a terrain of meaning, organizing flows of values across the self and the community and demarcating boundaries between one community and another" (145). Her insights into the development of commodity racism are most striking:

In the eighteenth century, the commodity was little more than a mundane object to be bought and used—in Marx's words—a "trivial thing." By the

late nineteenth century, however, the commodity had taken its privileged place not only as the fundamental form of a new industrial economy but also as the fundamental form of a new cultural system for representing social value...The new economy created an uproar not only of things but of signs. (130)

In addition, McClintock considers the semiotics of soap , magical fetish and purification rituals in the realm of racialization:

From the outset, moreover, Victorian advertising took explicit shape around the reinvention of racial difference. Commodity kitsch made possible, as never before, the mass marketing of empire as an organized system of images and attitudes. Soap flourished not only because it created and filled a spectacular gap in the domestic market but also because, as a cheap and portable domestic commodity, it could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress. (130)

McClintock's insights into the racialized meanings of soap suggest the embodied performative practices at play in the ritual of bathing and cleansing. In the instructional manuals too, products are associated with a specific set of gestures and a learned repertoire of bodily movements that the enactment of amateur blackface made part of everyday life.

What I am getting at here is not just about the semiotics of soap and blackface paint, but about the ritualistic dimensions of making up and cleaning up that amateur blackface actors voluntarily performed in order to signal an entrance into and an

emergence from blackface play. Houston Baker once wrote that that the blackface mask was not some “static object” but had a “symbolizing fluidity,” designating “a family of concepts or a momentary and [a] changing same array of images, figures, assumptions and presuppositions that a group of people (even one as extensive and populous as a nation) holds to be a valued repository of ‘spirit’ at the center of an American ritual” (17). More specifically, the mask was a “spiritual repository” for “a quintessential American ritual” that must be understood as a “motion seen rather than [a] “thing” observed (Baker 17). These preparatory and post-performance rituals were both personal and communal; thus, the “ablutions” of blackface were enacted not only in the public space of the communal sphere (enacted with other cast members during rehearsals or before performances) but enacted at home in the most private of spaces.

To connect blacking up and washing off to matters of personal grooming raises another set of issues, for these rituals also might have also intersected with a new masculine anxiety about the need to self-commodify in order to compete for a place in the new formations of corporate capitalism (Kimmel 59, 68, 71). For example, shifts in the construction of middle-class masculinity at the turn of the century resulted in a move away from sporting facial hair towards favoring a fresh and clean-shaven look instead. Facial hair was seen as unsanitary and unappealing to women. Thus, new commodities like the Gillette razor blade, shaving creams, and soaps for men flooded the market, and they were accompanied by an advertising campaign that depicted the American male standing before a mirror and scrutinizing his face in a new way (Delis 110-112). In other words, the instructional manual’s guidance on how to black up, how to wash off, and how to purchase and use the commodities that best supported these acts echoed a

contemporary interest in male grooming and in commodities that “scripted” these gestures. Images of cleanliness, whiteness and middle-class masculinity converged, and advertising in newspaper and magazines disseminated these images to the general public. It is no surprise then that a half-page feature article about an amateur minstrel show performed by Chicago “society elites” in 1893 also included an illustration that depicted the lead players (the two young men playing the two comedians, Tambo and Bones) scrutinizing themselves in the mirror (figure 6). Ostensibly, they are in the act of blacking up or washing off; however, their postures and gestures also suggest that they are involved in acts of personal grooming.

The Discipline of Racial Play: Disciplining the End-Men

The strict set of rules that the instructional manuals set out for the white amateur actor playing these parts suggests a provocative contrast with what may have actually been enacted onstage. Most of the instructional manuals emphasized the importance of adhering to certain kinds of individual and communal discipline when planning and producing a large-scale amateur minstrel show, including the ability to work hard and attend to detail and the importance of acquiescing to directions from whomever is appointed to play the offstage role of stage manager. However, this discourse tells us little about what actually happened onstage, especially when it came to enactments of blackface excess represented by the end-men or as one of the characters in a blackface skit. According to the manuals, participants must follow certain behavioral guidelines of strict discipline and control; furthermore, the manuals stressed that those who will be playing one of the principle roles (e.g., one of the end-men, a key character in a skit, or the Interlocutor) had serious responsibilities to the show and to the rest of the cast. For

example, anyone preparing to play one of the principal roles was required to attend weeks of rehearsal without fail and to learn the lines just as they were written in both the skits and crossfire jokes. A quick glance at the crossfire jokes included in the manuals suggests that these end-men and the Interlocutor had a great deal of material to memorize. Thus, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) explains that “there should be frequent rehearsals for the End-men and the Middleman, whereby jokes and dialogues can be thoroughly gone over and memorized” and that stage managers must schedule ongoing special rehearsals for these players two to four weeks before the night of the performance (Dumont 11). Not only did all of the manuals advise stage managers to fine players who missed rehearsals, they also emphasized the importance of not letting these players deviate from the written scripts. In other words, in almost every manual, amateur blackface was not about innovation; it was about adherence to certain rules and to the written scripts without fail.

Furthermore, the individual actor was given a very formulaic set of rules to follow; these formulas not only reduced the risk a white actor might face in improvising a blackface role, they also worked to meet audience expectations. For example, the spoken lines in a minstrel show were also part of a well-known and often-repeated ritual of communicative exchange, and while performers might not have known the particulars of every joke, they did know and understand the workings of the ritual and the patterns of the communicative exchanges staged in the show. In short, the amateur performer was performing something he had seen over and over, and so was delivering his performance to meet his own expectations as well as those of the audience. The rule against innovation in playing blackface echoes across the manuals. *The Making of a Minstrel*

Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs (1920), reminds readers that all of the business between the Middle Man and the end-men must not only be carefully rehearsed but that each player must be “letter perfect” in delivering his lines, for if the proper questions and answers are not given, the jokes will “fall flat” (Tibbals 19). *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Burnt Cork Director* (1921) reminds the reader that “the interlocutor and end-men should be required to learn all their gags “verbatim” and that “many a fine joke has missed fire because the [amateur] performers tried to improvise the dialogue and got the point mixed up” (Branen and Johnson 19-20). This same manual advises amateurs to rehearse the crossfire “as conscientiously as the dialogue of a drama” (24) so that the crossfire should go “like clockwork” (21).

Another key aspect of discipline had to do with controlling movement by correctly positioning and choreographing the end-men. For example, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1889) directs the stage manager to work closely with the end-men so that their movements are “exactly right” (Dumont 12). However, leadership is not the sole solution, for the amateur actor must also commit to constant rehearsal, “especially in the playing of the Tambourine and Bones, which, while seemingly simple, require[s] a vast amount of practice...to get the movements and taps alike, where to rest and fill in the time with graceful movements, or rising from chairs, going to centre of stage, and with graceful evolutions return again to work up a spirited climax for an emphatic ending” (Dumont 12). This emphasis on getting the movements of the end-men “exactly right” had a certain meaning in professional middle-class minstrel shows where the emphasis was on enacting an orchestrated synchrony of movements as opposed to the chaotic raucous performances of minstrelsy performed in

working class venues; middle-class amateur minstrelsy seems to have adhered to these middle-class formats.

The manuals prescribed a strict adherence to this model not only as it pertained to controlling movement but also when it came to controlling sound. For example, take a look at excerpts from two instructional manuals written in 1921. Here, the end-men are advised to eliminate the use of the “bones” or “clappers” and to opt for a more modern-day “technique” which favored synchronicity instead:

The practice of having the End-men on one side of the stage use bones or clappers, while the opposite ends use tambourines has gone out of fashion. The reason is that the skillful “rattling of the bones” has become almost a lost art. Many a good musical number has been harmed by inept intrusion of bones and mambos, thus spoiling the general good impression of the entire show. If you follow accepted present-day minstrel show technique, all of your end-men use of tambourines and bones will be eliminated.

[Here] the tambourines are employed for the opening chorus only, and then laid aside and not used again. (Branen and Johnson, 1921, *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 19)

In line with the discourse of discipline and control, the manual writer emphasizes the importance of achieving perfect synchronicity through rehearsal, noting that “all tambourine work by the ends should, of course, be as carefully rehearsed as the words of the chorus, so that the rattles and thumps, and the gestures of the performers, will be given in perfect unison (Branen and Johnson 19). In this next excerpt from another manual published the same year, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show*, the Stage Manager is

told that the end-men can reference the frenzy of the antebellum show through “grotesque” body movements, but these movements must be performed without a great deal of noise:

The end-men using the bones and tambos must be impressed with the idea that they are to make just as much motion with as little noise as possible. Motion is what you want more than noise although of course a certain amount of noise is necessary, but the idea is to make just as many grotesque motions while playing the instrument as possible. This feature can hardly be overdone; hitting the mambos on the head, on the foot, and shaking the bones under the legs, over the head, under the arms and behind the chair all help to make a good flash, from the front...Be particularly emphatic in your instructions to the mambo-men not to break their mambos and impress upon them it is motion you want more than noise. (Rossiter, 1921, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* 15)

Here the instructional manual advises both an invocation and containment of chaotic energy, a formula marked by a discipline of “blackness” enacted through strict adherence to written scripts, carefully rehearsed synchronic body movements, and a tight control over sound. Thus if minstrel constructions of “blackness” were about primitivism and excess, white performance practices in middle-class minstrelsy were just as often about containment. This echoed across the minstrel manuals, not only in the give and take of the verbal jousting between the end-men and the Interlocutor, but also in a desire to synchronize body movements and in the need to control the “noise” in the musical

performance. This was not the rough music of charivari but a highly regularized and formulaic enactment.

Another area related to self-discipline had to do with specifically delineated guidelines on how to tell a joke. The manuals had three basic rules here, and they were repeated across all of the manuals. These rules included not using dialect, the importance of assuming “a jolly manner,” and the importance of speaking loudly at all times, a bit of advice that signals a presentational style of delivery rather than a naturalistic style, despite the fact that some of the manuals told performers to speak naturally. While some of the skits and monologues utilized in these manuals were written using stereotypical versions of black speech, these were more the exceptions than the rule. Minstrel versions of black dialect did appear in some of the songs recommended for amateur productions, but it was not often utilized in the crossfire comedy reproduced in the manuals. Significantly, all of the manuals address the question of whether or not amateur players should attempt to mimic black “dialect” onstage. This issue was raised in every manual I reviewed, no matter what the date of publication, and the advice was fairly consistent across all of the manuals:

Do not use dialect, nor allow it to be used, as it spoils the stories and is often unintelligible to the audience. It is for this reason that the gags, etc., have not been written in dialect form...A matter of speech can be assumed without using the thick latter dialect of the Southern darkey, which is seldom heard among the latter-day children of Ham. (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 8)

Here the instructional manual suggests that the performance will be more realistic if “dialect” is not used, a point that is repeated again a few pages later: “Speak naturally, without dialect, as it is not used by the end-men,” although dialect is recommended for “imitations of colored preachers or old darkies... (Dumont 17-18). Manuals written a decade later echo the same advice: the writer of a 1921 manual advises amateurs to “Speak naturally, without dialect, as it is not used by the most successful end men,” (Tibbals, 1920, *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* 19), and a manual published a year later explains that “dialect should be indulged in sparingly” because “too much of it is likely to confuse the audience” (Branen and Johnson, 1921, *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 25). And then there is this bit of advice from Harold Rossiter (*How to Put on a Minstrel Show*, 1921): “A very important point to emphasize right here is this: don’t let the end-men use too much Negro dialect in in telling their jokes. The average amateur Negro dialect is almost pitiful, and they [i.e., amateur players] nearly always overdo it with the result that the audience fails to understand a word they say and the joke goes flat” (Rossiter 14-15).

The only other stage direction for the performer planning to play an end- man is to use “a jolly manner” when delivering a joke and to speak loudly, so he can be heard in all parts of the auditorium or theatre. For example, the 1899 manual includes a backstage interview of the manual’s author (a well-known celebrity performer, Frank Dumont) just before he is to go onstage. The reporter has just asked Dumont whether he has a system for telling jokes:

“Well, that is a rather peculiar question, but one that has often been asked,” said the minstrel manager. “There is certainly a style and a jolly

manner to be assumed in relating a story, especially while seated as ‘Bones’ or ‘Tambourine’. Imagine a blank-faced fellow telling a very funny story with features immovable, looking sad, expressionless and as if he didn’t have a friend in the world. How can he expect his audience to show signs of mirth with his funereal countenance and slow delivery, especially in this age of rapid transit?” (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 17)

A few pages later, Dumont explains that the amateur must not “rattle off” a story or smother” his voice when “coming to a point,” but to “keep the voice up” (17-18).

Manuals written nearly 10 years later offer very similar advice:

Everything depends upon the jovial manner, the quick reply of the Middle Man, the clear enunciation and the emphasis upon certain words. Don’t rattle off your story like a poll parrot, nor smother your voice when coming to a point. Keep the voice up. Don’t let it drop in concluding your words wherein lies the point of the story. Speak naturally, without dialect, as it is not used by the most successful end men. Above all, see to that your tone of voice is loud enough to carry to all parts of the auditorium. (Tibbals, 1920, *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* 19)

Another manual writer warns that “no matter how good a joke may be, it will fall flat unless it is properly “put across” (Branen and Johnson, 1921, *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 25) and yet another manual writer tells us to “insist upon the end-men talking slowly and loud. They should work up gradually

louder and louder until they actually yell the finish or climax” (Rossiter, 1921, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* 14-15).

Blackface Excess

Many aspects of these manuals connect amateur blackface with self-control, discipline and perfection as well as with performances of excess. Here I plan to delineate some of the major roles that were most likely played in these large-scale amateur productions. The problem remains how best to imagine or capture the repertoire of behaviors and gestures practiced by white amateurs who played as one of the end-men or delivered a blackface monologue or took on a blackface role in one of the skits. This repertoire of embodied behavior is illuminated by what historians of blackface have to say about turn of the century minstrel show character types prevalent in popular culture, each manual’s description of character types featured in skits or songs, and newspaper reviews of specific performances in amateur minstrel shows.

These blackface roles can be contextualized in the remaking of white middle-class manhood that began in the Gilded Age, with a move from Victorian forms of manliness defined by “character” to a middle-class masculinity informed, in part, by forms of male bonding and displays of virility and aggression more typically associated with working-class masculinity (Bederman 17). As noted previously, white middle-class masculinity experienced a sense of emasculation due to the sedentary bureaucratic workplaces of a rising corporate capitalism and in the need to self-commodify to be hired in the first place, and they often turned to forms of leisure (such as boxing, football, or physical fitness) and to forms of communal male bonding (e.g., in fraternal organizations) in order to enact new and more satisfying forms of manliness. As a form of leisure, large-scale

amateur minstrel shows must have satisfied similar needs. Thus, while playing blackface roles was certainly in part about using a popular culture ritual to display a discipline and control of blackness, it was at the same time about a white desire to enact blackface excess as a transgressive form of entertainment that also bolstered displays of white masculinity.

What did this mean for the individual actor? Historians of blackface suggest a shift in character types in the minstrel show during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era that might explain the attraction. Instead of the frenetic chaotic dancing and bodily displays that signaled the grotesque or lewd antics of the antebellum show, minstrel shows of the latter half of the 19th century, especially after the Civil War, were characterized by order, uniformity and synchronicity. Professional minstrelsy's move into the middlebrow opera houses featuring nationally known minstrel troupes or blackface burlesque opera also meant a move away from the Jim Crow characters of antebellum shows and a move towards varying manifestations of the urban dandy (Zip Coon), a character that emerged in antebellum minstrelsy but that persisted in minstrel shows during the latter half of the 19th century. The mismatched clothing and wild freefall movements that characterized antebellum minstrel troupes were replaced by the troupes of middle-class minstrelsy. i.e., troupes of blacked-up males uniformly dressed in evening clothes or black suits or in some kind of uniform, who followed a carefully crafted choreography of synchronous movement.

There were of course some important exceptions: the blackface clowns (the end-men), earlier blackface types revived in the skits, and constructions of blackness represented in Tin Pan Alley "coon songs," which became so popular in the 1890's.

These character types informed the professional performances of middle-class minstrelsy, in various vaudeville acts and they certainly emerged in the large-scale amateur productions under consideration here. In the instructional manuals--meaning both the illustrations and instructions or how to portray these roles--the end-men were typically portrayed as ineffectual bumbling urban dandies in mismatched poorly fitting suits; in the cross-fire jokes, they either spouted nonsense or sometimes offered clever word-play, but they mostly functioned as care-free childlike stereotypes who were easily handled by the Interlocutor. Thus, the amateur actor as end-man simultaneously performed a kind of middle-brow excess and an enactment of containment.

It is important to note that the manuals typically utilized a restrained almost genteel sort of diction in the instructional sections of the manuals, except in those sections devoted to discussing the end-men. Here, the language changed in notable ways: in the ready use of words like "darkey" and "coon," in the racial deformations of described stereotypes, and in the figure of the urban dandy as a continuation of a comic plantation stereotype into the modern era. For example, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) notes:

Minstrelsy is the one American form of amusement, purely our own, and it has lived and thrived even though the plantation darkey, who first gave it a character, has departed. The dandy negro has supplanted him, but the laughable blunders are still incorporated in the negro of the present time.

(Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 1-2)

Section II in the same manual explains the importance of use highly contrasting character types to highlight the caricatured blackface role played by the End-men:

One end man may represent the enlightened sarcastic darkey: another, the dense fellow—jolly, but ignorant. Still another, the imitative or declamatory darkey whose forte seems to be poetry or recitations; then, again, you can have a sleepy blundering fellow, mispronouncing words and totally at sea concerning etiquette or history, there being enough material in this book to suit all. (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 8)

Manuals published a decade later echo these same directives. For example, *The Minstrel Encyclopedia* (1921) instructs the Stage Manager to select his end-men with “great care” in order to ensure an exaggerated contrast in body types: “Have your end-men of different types, a short, funny, jolly fat coon is good for a laugh, but a tall thin, hungry-looking doleful moke may make just as good an impression” (Hare 21). Another manual published a few years later offers similar advice, only instead of focusing on bodily differences, stage managers are directed to cast players who can offer highly contrasting vocal intonations. The intent, however, is the same: to remind amateur players to exaggerate certain racialized characteristics for comic effect: “End-men should be chosen first because of known ability and second where this reputation is not existent, because of the possession of loud clear voices. Bass talking voices are found to be most effective, although one high-pitched voice in the lot proves to be screamingly effective” (Powell, *The World’s Best Book of Minstrelsy*, 1921, 41).

The manuals communicated another kind of excess in the application of make-up and in the fetishization of specific facial features as sites of difference, especially when explaining how the end-men should apply their make-up. In keeping with the precision characterizing advice given on other topics, the manuals proffered exacting instructions. Some of the manuals directed the end-men to apply a darker blackface make-up than other members of troupe; other manuals explained how to emphasize the eyes, and almost all of the manuals focused on how to exaggerate the appearance of the lips, although they differed on how to create the desired effect.

What follows exemplifies the kind of guidance the manuals employed. *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) advises amateurs not to paint the lips red but to leave a wide margin of white around them in order to “give in the appearance of a large mouth that will look red to the spectator” (Dumont 14). *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* (1920) offers a different prescription: first, by recommending “carmine,” a “brilliant red powder which is used on the lips of the end-men, to make them appear larger” and second, by instructing the performer to apply “a broad streak of carmine to the lips, carrying it well beyond the corners of the mouth” (Tibbals 10-11). A manual published a year later also recommends “carmine” for the end-men but suggests the use of “light-flesh paint” as another alternative (Rossiter, 1921, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* 20), while yet another manual published the same year warns against using “rouge” or “carmine” for the lips, noting that “the lips should be extended beyond the natural limits” and not with “a red lining pencil” but “by partly wiping off the color for a narrow margin around the eyes and mouth” in order to enlarge these areas, a bit of advice also echoed in the 1899 manual

(Branen and Johnson, 1921, *How To Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 43). These discussions on how to create a wide grin or whether to paint the lips red derived of course from racial stereotyping that fetishized and exaggerated specific facial features. These representations were rampant in visual culture, especially in the cartoons of Tin Pan Alley sheet music. However, what distinguished the instructional manuals from any other iteration of these grotesqueries was their connection to amateur performance and to the embodied repertoire of performative gestures learned and practiced by individual players in everyday life.

The individual player's enactment of excess was also performed onstage through certain musical numbers staged either in the first part of the show or as one of the variety acts that make up the olio, the second part of the show. While some of the manuals sometimes referenced old Southern melodies that romanticized the plantation era and elided the sufferings of slavery, they more typically recommended the performance of "coon songs," a new kind of modern popular song promoted through Tin Pan Alley sheet during the 1890s and well into the first decade of the 20th century. The recommendation of coon songs for amateur performance can be found in sample programs that some of the manuals offer their readers.⁵¹ However, the manuals tend to reference these coon songs with some restraint; for example, one manual writer explains that "the ballads of Stephen C. Foster, breathing of slave life and the cotton-fields" have now been set aside for more modern choices, such as "the modern love song with a dramatic story" or a "descriptive ballade" (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork*

⁵¹ Sample programs in *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) include the following: "Mandy from Mandalay" (29), "I'm the Warmest Member in the Land" (31); "Lazy Bill" (33); and "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?" (37).

Encyclopedia 1). That said, there is little restraint in the character types represented in coon songs; for despite the gentility of these references, the urban dandies in coon songs could have a more dangerous and aggressive streak. James Dormon describes the way in which coon song characters differed from earlier minstrel show representations of black masculinity:

In the [coon] songs for example blacks began to appear as not only ignorant and indolent, but also devoid of honesty or personal honor, given to drunkenness and gambling, utterly without ambition, sensuous, libidinous, even lascivious. “Coons” were, in addition to all of these things, razor-wielding savages, routinely attacking one another at the slightest provocation as a normal function of their uninhibited social lives. The razor...became in the songs the dominant symbol of black violence, while the “coon” himself became that which was signified by this terrible weapon. The subliminal message was clear...Blacks are potentially dangerous; they must be controlled and subordinated by whatever means necessary... (Dormon 455)

While Dormon represents the late 19th century coon song as a completely new phenomenon, Stephanie Dunson would most likely argue that this representation continues a representation of black masculinity found in the cartooned covers of antebellum and postbellum minstrel show sheet music marketed for use in white middle-class parlor entertainment (i.e., for evenings when the family might gather around the piano). As Dunson explains it, antebellum parlor music was often quite sentimental with lyrics referencing idealized white families, especially loving mothers, devoted husbands,

and adoring children. However, when minstrel show representations of blackness begin to appear on the covers of parlor sheet music, the “idyllic images of family life so present in other varieties of popular song are replaced by grotesque black characters with distorted features in absurd and comical scenes”: e.g., with “homely black wives” who scowl at their husbands and with lovers who “gape licentiously at hideous mates, their hypersexuality suggested by carefully positioned musical instruments or phallic drapes of clothing” (Dunson 248).

I do not want to over simplify the way in which coon songs functioned as a cultural form in this time and place, for they also occasioned black cultural production through ragtime music and music written by black song-writers like Robert Cole. What is important for our purposes, however, is that while the formats of the middle-class show endured in amateur productions and so offered containments of blackness through a spectacle of order and synchronicity, the individual actor did enact forms of excess in playing certain blackface characters, including the disheveled blackface clowns portrayed by the end-men and the character types portrayed in the coon songs. These enactments of excess were not only meant to be entertaining to the audience, but must also have been pleasurable to the individual player as they offered opportunities to act out aggressive behaviors as a form of virile play and male display.

Characters from the coon songs also populated blackface skits, such as “The Darktown Society Cakewalk,” a skit from *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) that offers the typical blackface scenario in which a white man plays a white construction of a black man who fails all attempts to imitate

white upward mobility (Taylor).⁵² This particular skit depicts a cakewalk contest as a kind of society event attended by the “blue-blooded four hundred of Darktown.”⁵³ The dialogue is not in dialect, but it is full of malapropisms, various forms of nonsense grammar, and words that are mis-used in comic attempts to perform whiteness and upward mobility. The roles in this skit also include women, although the stage directions do not indicate whether these parts were to be performed by amateurs impersonating black women or whether actual women might be cast in these roles. In any case, the society cakewalk is attended by both men and women dressed in “the most extravagant costumes of very showy colors and patterns” (99).

Much of their conversation centers on the high social status of those in attendance and includes snooty put-downs of lower-class blacks as well as male boasting by Perry, a character who talks up his prowess in combat by exclaiming: “I’m as good as a regiment of razors,” for “when it comes to close quarters and fighting, you know me!” Another character responds by noting that Perry is “a very warm member, when it comes to slashing with a blade” (99). As the crowd assembles to begin the cakewalk, two characters of lesser social standing: Rebecca Rabbitfoot (whose name implies that she is mixed blood, both black and Indian) and Beasley, a “tough specimen of a barber” who smokes “*a long segar*” (101). Together, these two characters wreak havoc, attacking

⁵² Although, plantation slaves used the Cakewalk to mock white dance forms, derogatory representations of black cakewalkers in popular culture were common (Baldwin). In *America Dancing: From the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk* (Yale UP, 2015), Megan Pugh explores the cakewalk as an emerging form of popular dance in late 19th century America and Europe, aptly commenting that European amateurs “were imitating professional black American cakewalkers, who were imitating white minstrel cakewalkers imitating black slaves imitating their masters, who were unable to recognize that they were being mocked” (23).

⁵³ The “four hundred of Darktown” is a comic equivocation of the social elites of Darktown in this skit and the social elites of late 19th century New York, known as the “Four Hundred,” meaning the 400 individuals who represented New York society. For more on New York social elites, see *Mrs. Astor’s New York: Money and Power in the Gilded Age* by Eric Homburger (Yale UP: 202).

various members of the crowd for overheard or imagined insults and arguing about who will judge the cakewalk. At one point, Perry calls for the cakewalk to begin; cast members go on to perform the dance which, according to the stage directions, should be enacted by “as many grotesque couples as possible,” depending on the sizes and availability of the cast (107). Stage directions are very specific for each of the couples as they enter, dance, and then exit the stage; and in every case, Perry is both the judge and the center of attention, for he is described as capering about, juggling his baton, and even seems to order the movements of each couple. Rebecca and Beasley finally take their turn as the last couple and begin their dance in what is described as a “very grotesque manner” when there is an interruption.

*At this moment a darkey with a white apron, cook's cap and jacket enters at back holding up a huge cake. All shout for joy at its appearance, and soon as Rebecca sees the cake she utters a whoop and a yell and goes into a fit, capering and jumping. Everybody is alarmed. All the men draw out razors. Beasley pulls out a large razor and rushes forward, captures the cake and a general razor fight takes place. Beasley smashes the cake upon Rebecca's head...she yells out and capers while the ladies up the stage faint, the men defending themselves from Beasley's attack. On this picture a quick Curtain. (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 107)*

The skit is also accompanied by cartooned drawings of the various characters which depict the action as it unfolds in the skit. As is typical in these cartoons, black bodies are depicted as misshapen. In addition, the stage directions for the fourth couple state that

the stage director should cast “a very tall man and short lady to make it grotesque,” and there is an illustration to match. The “melee” and chaos that ends this skit is very typical of blackface slapstick violence and thus meaningfully counters the careful sense of control that amateur blackface fostered in its players and for its audience.

THE CREST BURNT CORK.



There is Cork and there is what some call "Cork." Good Cork is healthful for the skin, while the other is very injurious.

We make only the best that is used by the most prominent professionals. The difference in price is trivial, but the satisfaction obtained is worth three times the money.

The Crest brand is especially prepared from the best possible ingredients and we stand ready to guarantee every box purchased.



Price per box, 50 Cents.

Add 7 cents for postage. ↗

Figure 5. The Crest Company brand of burnt cork from *The Amateur Entertainer*, a mail-order catalog published by M. Witmark and Sons (1904) p. 115.

JOKING FOR CHARITY.

Amateur Minstrel Performance in Central Music Hall.

"BONES" HAS HIS SAY.

So Do Many Other Bright Young Entertainers.

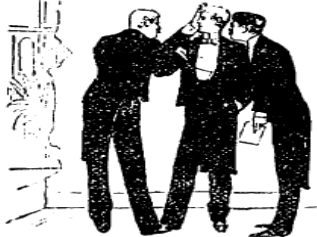
A Representative Audience Enjoys a Programme of Songs, Jests, and Specialties.

Society had fun together with the Chicago Glee, Minstrel, and Banjo Club last evening.

Burnt cork was at a premium in Central Music Hall, and so were seats, for the house was packed to the doors, and many were glad to stand.

The Glee Club has its origin in Oconomowoc, Wis., where every summer the choice spirits of Chicago's society young men while away the time and incidentally amuse the natives and the pretty girls with a high class minstrel show.

People up that way have come to look upon the annual summer symposium of



BRINGING BASHFUL HARRY TREAT TO RESPOND TO AN ENCORE.

lampblack, high collars, and spike-tails, as an event greater than the arrival of the first boarder fresh with the tint of morning and the city.

The fame of the impromptu minstrel troupe traveled apace, as the tramps say, and so it was decided to hold another and a greater revival of the lost art in Chicago.

To think was to act with these young men, as the end man said last night. So they engaged the orchestra and Central Music Hall.

It was an easy matter to secure the dramatic persons of the troupe as the following list of members will show:

- | | | |
|--|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Raphael Fassett, manager and director. | G. Edwin Jones, treasurer. | C. B. Guerin. |
| H. McGinn. | L. Heyworth. | H. Alward. |
| M. Egan. | E. F. Carter. | H. Alward. |
| F. W. Thompson. | Frank Simons. | E. L. Grannis. |
| John Jenks. | Dr. T. Gunn. | T. D. Richards. |
| C. J. Schmidt. | A. T. Harris. | Tom Richmond. |
| D. Gage-Clark. | W. Richards. | F. J. Hamill. |
| E. H. Smith. | J. T. Hill. | Wm. Moore. |
| H. W. Treat. | A. J. Hough. | H. A. Hubbard. |
| F. W. Peck, Jr. | Edward Oakley. | A. D. Goodrich. |
| H. A. Grannis. | Art Young. | |

For a Charitable Purpose.

But the club had other objects in view besides a unanimous request from the 1,500,000 people who inhabit Chicago in giving a home performance. Sweet charity presents a greater cause. Consequently the benefit of the weeks of study and understudy put in by the troupe will accrue to the Chicago Free



OFF WITH THE BURNT CORK.

Kindergarten and Young Woman's Christian Temperance Association.

With such praiseworthy purposes in view the leaders of Chicago's society became the patronesses of last night's entertainment.

picture that was truly realistic. He also sang "She Lives Down in Our Alley" with hydraulic power and touching effect. Quite a few of the audience were moved to tears. Dr. Gunn as interlocutor had a soothing effect and fitted his position to a nicety. He also recited several pieces which he had learned by heart. They were good pieces for a minstrel show, and unlike the "gags" of that profession were quite new and refreshing. It did not take the feminine part of the audience any time to see the various points in the jokes, and of course the doctor's encores were proportionately enthusiastic.

Everybody present came prepared to laugh and all got a chance when D. Gage Clark and H. A. Grannis burst into view. They were rouged to a pitch of blackness that would have made a somber streak in a dark alley at midnight.

Mr. Clark led off with "Imogene Donohue." Then he did a quickstep a la James T. Powers, a song and dance truly his own, and various other commendable things set to slow music. His recitation in German dialect was fetching.

He Had an Encore.

Mr. Harry W. Treat sang "Answer" with such true feeling that it took two stout men to carry to him a bunch of chrysanthemums, and another of roses. The accompanying cut represents the other members of the troupe persuading him to give another verse.

Mr. Ed Oakley caught the house with "Dese Bones Shall Rise," and Mr. William Richards rendered his ballad remarkably well.

The second part opened well. Then Mr. Art Young gave "His Idea of Music" by charcoal illustrations set to orchestral accompaniments. He made a hit. So did the orchestra. Once it played "After the Ball," when Mr. Young was illustrating "two little boys that are blue," but as the "little boys" were made to represent Cleveland and Gresham the mistake was overlooked. The little boys looked so blue the audience couldn't help pardoning the orchestral error.

Mr. Young showed how to idealize in charcoal the "Darky's Dream." Then he presented President Higginbotham leaving The Fair to the tune of "The Girl I Left Behind Me." His last sketch was set to a popular Midway air, and showed two popular publishers mounted on the back of a camel.

All the numbers of the programme were rapturously applauded, and the participants each were forced to respond with encores. Consequently it was after 11 o'clock before the banjo quartet brought the successful evening to a close.

The third annual banquet of the Amateur Minstrel Club was given after the per-



HAVE CORNERED THE FUN MARKET.
performance at the Chicago Athletic Club. The table was set in the shape of a banjo. The entertainment consisted of songs, jokes, and recitations. Those present were:

- | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Messrs. — | | |
| R. Earle Smith. | Lou Rollo. | W. H. Wall. |
| Chas. H. Hyde. | Geo. Banghardt. | O. F. Crane. |
| Bert Swift. | Geo. Holmes. | L. O. Davis. |
| Dr. Harris. | Morris L. Wolf. | C. H. Ambuhl. |
| W. J. Carter. | Bert Russ. | M. L. Burkhardt. |
| Ralph Corby. | E. R. Neely. | |

ITS ANNIVERSARY NIGHT.
Chicago Orchestra Celebrates the Fourth Year of the Auditorium Opening.

A fine audience last evening assembled at the Auditorium and gave approval to an interesting and diversified programme, artistically presented by the Chicago Orchestra. It had novelty in a new symphony from the pen of Christian Sinding, a composition remarkable for its fire and freshness, its freedom from conventionality, its strange rhythms, its masterly

Figure 6. Joking for Charity: Amateur Minstrel Performance in Central Music Hall. Newspaper review of the Chicago, Glee and Banjo Club amateur minstrel show. The Chicago Inter Ocean, 10 December 1893. p. 4.

CHAPTER 4. ORGANIZING BLACKFACE BODIES

While the art of Minstrelsy, like all of the rest of the world, has been moving along, however, the literature of Minstrelsy has been lagging by the wayside. Numerous books are to be had that will tell the amateur how to put on a Minstrel Show the style of a past generation. There are others with a wealth of bright material awaiting the hand of the Minstrel director who know how to whip it into shape and assemble it for a modern show.⁵⁴

---*How to Stage a Minstrel Show:*

A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director

Introduction

Chapter three of this dissertation focused on how the instructional manuals targeted the individual amateur actor and addressed matters of self-discipline, self-management and bodily self-scrutiny. From here I would like to consider the organizational ethos of blackface, especially how bodies were organized in late 19th century middle-class professionally performed shows and how those organizational strategies transferred to the amateur stage, and how carefully those strategies were delineated in the manuals. I also want to delineate the formulaic performance formats that characterized late 19th century professional minstrelsy and how those formats were also prescribed in the manuals; such elements signal a desire to discipline blackness in the context of racial play.

On one level, these organizational strategies referenced the desires for control over blackness related to the presence of African Americans in urban space at the turn of the century. As African Americans were moving North post-Reconstruction, they

⁵⁴ Branen, Jeff and Frederick G. Johnson. *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director*. T. S. Denison and Company, 1921, p. 5.

brought with them the persistent conditions caused by slavery and segregation in the South. Northern denial of these issues—consider the way in which the romanticization of the South in Northern popular music elided the conditions of slavery—did not erase anxieties about the growing presence of African Americans in Northern spaces. On another level, these enactments of control over blackness also reflected desires to control other kinds of social chaos produced by urbanization, new waves of immigration, transitions in the workplace, and a general turn from a Victorian sensibility into the modern era. Enactments of racial dominance through amateur minstrelsy echoed multiple forms of social control represented through music, comedy, and displays of middle-class whiteness.

Images from the Professional Show

As the minstrel show began to cater to middle-class audiences, the staging, costuming and choreography of the show was revamped. Instead of the frenetic chaotic dancing and bodily displays that signaled the antebellum show, minstrel shows of the latter half of the 19th century stressed a careful organization of bodies characterized by uniformity and synchronization of movement. No longer composed of four or five rowdy and outrageously dressed musicians in tattered mismatched clothes and blackface, minstrel troupes were expanded to include some 20 or 30 members (or more), all dressed in uniform or in evening clothes. In other words, minstrelsy was still informed by earlier instances of blackface, but the arrangement of bodies was now informed by a presentational array that had a decidedly middle-class look.

Several images suggest this shift. The first is an oil painting of a performance that took place in 1833 at the American Theatre (later re-named the Bowery Theatre) in the

New York's Bowery entertainment district; the painting is entitled "*Depicting the 57th Night of Mr. T.D. Jim Crow Rice*" and can be read as an historical record of what took place during these kinds of antebellum performances (figure 7). The venue is the Bowery Theatre, a popular site for numerous masculinist entertainments, including blackface. T. D. Rice dances Jim Crow center stage, and the swarm of men onstage and in the audience communicate the highly interactive audience-performer relationships typical of these kinds of performances. The theatre is crowded and chaotic; there is standing room only in front of the stage; the balconies are full, and the stage is packed. The scene displays a boisterous audience involved in everything from dancing to socializing to brawling, and the homosociality here is highly physical: bodies are close together, and there is a lot of touching, communicating everything from aggressive altercation to camaraderie. By some reports, the Bowery Theatre could seat up to 3,000; thus, this painting only hints at the kinds of crowds attending an event like this.

Figures 8 and 9 are typical of antebellum shows after minstrelsy moved to larger venues located mostly on lower Broadway in New York's entertainment district. As noted earlier in this project, the success of the Virginia Minstrels in the 1840s spawned numerous imitators who began performing in huge halls that could seat up to 3,000. Figure 8 comes from the cover of a piece of sheet music published in 1843 entitled "The Celebrated Negro Melodies as Sung by the Virginia Minstrels." This illustration of the Virginia Minstrels shows the troupe in aggressively expressive if not sexually suggestive postures. Their hair is wild; from all reports, the make-up worked to render their facial expressions in as grotesque a manner as possible. Eric Lott describes the postures of the players in this playbill: "Bower the bone player with legs splayed wide; Pelham on the

verge of forced entry of the tambourine; [and] Whitlock in ecstasy behind a phallic banjo” (Lott 128). The second image is taken from a playbill published in 1859 to promote a performance to be given by Bryant’s Minstrels. The imagery in the playbill echoes that of the sheet music, despite the sixteen-year difference in their dates of publication (figure 9). The illustration of the Bryant’s Minstrels depicts the troupe performing a “breakdown,” a frenzied free-form performance finale given at the end of every minstrel show and involving all of the players, each of whom would show off their individual talents (Nathan 248). In both depictions, the troupe’s clothing is mismatched, they wear outrageous hats, and their body postures express a kind of wild energy typical of the antebellum minstrel show even after its move to lower Broadway.

However in this same period, promoters also began to garner new audiences by presenting a kind of middle-brow minstrelsy designed for middle-class audiences. For example, a detail from a March 4, 1852, playbill promoting a performance by Wood’s Minstrels (figure 10) offers an illustration of a 10-person minstrel troupe dressed in black suits and white shirts, all of whom are seated in a fairly uniform manner, except for the two end-men on either side of the circle. In addition, many of the playbills during this period included a double set of images, one set of images portrayed the troupe as blackface characters, while a second set of images portrayed the troupe in dress suits, evidencing Stephanie Dunson’s analysis that “representations of upstanding, well-groomed white performers began to appear along with the grotesque characters they portrayed”; thus, cover illustrations that “seem[ed] to position the dapper entertainers as gentlemen callers, politely awaiting introduction into the refined space of the family parlor” (246). The imagery in these play bills is similar to imagery Dunson found on the

covers of sheet music marketed for use in the middle-class parlor. By the 1890s, this “gentlemanly” form of the minstrel show became even more ornate as evidenced in a poster of Thatcher and Johnson’s Minstrel troupe (see figure 11). This poster depicts what the manuals called a “novelty theme,” i.e., a visual presentation of the troupe members costumed around some motif which can also be echoed in the settings, music, and skits. Here the troupe is dressed in aristocratic hunting garb. Most important is that the array of bodies here is informed by a display of wealth and consumption, given the lavish costumes, the sumptuous stage settings, the full-piece orchestra and a blackface bodily array informed by order and symmetry.

As second poster worth viewing promotes an upcoming performance by Primrose & Dockstader, a minstrel troupe given to an extravaganza format that continued the commitment to a certain kind of lavish costuming and bodily array, although this blackface spectacle is suggestive of the circus, given the canvas tent as a performance venue. At the same time, however, there is a kind of middle-class gentility to the scene (figure 12). The minstrel troupe is comprised of over 60 blacked-up troupe members in evening dress; they are spread out across the stage and arranged and offer a massive spectacle of unity, symmetry and order. The poster is also compelling due to the huge crowd of ostensibly 3,000 people; however, this is an orderly crowd and a middle-class respectability pervades the scene. There are both men and women in attendance, everyone is appropriately seated, some hold programs, and there are three uniformed ushers directing patrons to their seats: one on the far-left middle-ground, a second one seating two ladies in the center middle-ground, and a third usher seating a couple in the

right foreground. Overall, this promotional poster offers a vision of idealized middle-class leisure and entertainment.

Bodies in Amateur Blackface

The instructional manuals recommend similar arrays of onstage order. Although the middle-class amateur minstrel show could not really imitate the opulent extravaganzas of late 19th century professional minstrelsy, large middle-class organizations (especially local chapters of large fraternal organizations) had enough resources to stage amateur productions that might at least echo the spectacle of professionally performed shows. The publishers of the instructional manuals certainly conceived their audiences as having access to sizable stages, such as school or church auditoriums and rented halls, and many amateur groups staged their productions in large opera houses where professional shows were also performed. In addition, the persistent publication of mail-order catalogs promoting theatrical supplies for amateur groups means that community organizations must have had the means to outfit large amateur troupes. Notably, a primary topic across all of the instructional manuals is the presentation and arrangement of minstrel troupes in amateur productions.

Most large-scale amateur minstrel shows were one-night only events; however, as previously noted, community members could spend 4-6 weeks engaged in a range of preparatory activities. A key preparatory activity across all of the manuals was how to ready the troupe for the First Part, with special attention to the show's opening image, the moment when the curtain first rises to reveal the full minstrel troupe spread out across the stage. To this end, the manuals offered readers a set of tools and tips, including diagrams, exacting guidelines for how to display the troupe onstage in the opening

number, and illustrations of options for costuming and set designs organized around a particular theme or motif, such as a nautical or military theme. A number of the manuals also included sample programs that included songs and skits which appropriate for particular motifs and themes.

The organizing of blackface bodies in amateur minstrelsy was not about creativity; it was about following the already established rules of racial play. The highly detailed instructional manuals promoted very prescribed formats for arranging the troupe that were derived from professional minstrelsy or vaudeville, and how to position the troupe correctly is a recurrent theme across the manuals. These discussions also offer ideas for how large a troupe to use and what community organizations can do to perfect the organization of blackface bodies. For example, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) includes a diagram depicting how to position a troupe of 30 members (12). This diagram includes placement for the tenor, baritone, basso and alto singers as well as a visual plan for elevating a 9-piece orchestra (figure 13).

In arranging the first part, select a handsome palace, conservatory, or columned interior for the set of the set... You place the musicians behind the circle of singers and comedians, upon an elevation or staging, high enough to be over the heads of the front circle, when seated, also second circle, if you care to have one. The “set” above described is for a handsome interior “First Part,” in which the costumes may be of regulation evening dress suit, court dresses, or any costuming suitable for

interior pictures. (Dumont, 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 13)

The 1911 manual, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show*, does not include a diagram for placing troupe members, but it does offer this advice in a section entitled “The First Part Sitting”:

There are several ways of making a First Part attractive. The old way of putting the men in a semicircle is all right where your number is limited. If you want to set your stage that way, place your chairs in a semicircle with the Interlocutor, of course, in the center, then place your singers each side of him. Let the Musical Director give them their positions as he knows best how to arrange their voices. Then comes your End Men, the Bones, to the Right, the Tambos to the Left as you face the audience. Place the orchestra at a slight elevation behind the circle. (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* 27)

The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs, written nearly a decade later (1920), suggests using a “Ladies” minstrel troupe as an alternative to an all-male troupe and offers a diagram which stages the ladies in a traditional minstrel show circle with the Interlocutress in the center and end-women, instead of end-men, seated at either end (Tibbals 14).⁵⁵ *How to Stage a Minstrel Show*, a manual published a year later, devotes full a chapter to organizing the bodies of the troupe, including a sub-section entitled “Organizing the Circle”:

⁵⁵ A discussion of women in amateur blackface is worth further research. Women performed in professional blackface (see Alison Kibler’s *Rank Ladies*) and in amateur troupes and are referenced in the manuals and in local newspaper coverage.

Organizing the circle means the selection of interlocutor, ends and soloist...To illustrate, we will confine ourselves to a small company; one that can be used on a small stage, under a tent, or in a small auditorium. Plan a circle of thirteen. Next to each of your “premier ends”—the two comedians who sit at the extreme ends of the circle—place a popular young girl with a big smile and a row of good white teeth. It doesn’t matter whether she can sing, as long as she can crack jokes and “cut up” with the male comedians. (Branen and Johnson, 1921, *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 14)

Some of the manuals suggest erecting tiers on which to position the troupe. For example, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* (1921) includes a set of highly detailed instructions as a supplement to the text’s diagram:

As shown in the diagram, the singers are arranged in a semi-circle with two ends nearest the front-stage at the foot-lights...If the stage will permit, it is best to have about twelve singers in the front row including the eight end-men. The rest of the Company can be arranged in a second row behind the first on the same level as the Interlocutor. If you have sufficient members to make up a third row they may be placed to the right and the back of the second row filling in the space at the back. This third row should also be raised about 12 or 15 inches above the level of the second row. These various levels of the stage can be easily arranged by planks laid across horses, and the front draped with a rug or bunting of

some kind so that it looks well from the front. (Rossiter, 1921, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* 11)

Another directive from this same manual offers a suggestion for using four end-men and explains that it is better to place them according to body size rather according to the kind of singing voice they have; this way, the end-men will visually mirror each other on either side of the troupe and so enhance the array (Rossiter 12).

Regulation Settings

Two typical settings are often referenced in the manuals: traditional minstrel show settings influenced by antebellum and postbellum minstrelsy (called by one manual “regulation settings”) and more modern vaudevillian “novelty settings” incorporating various motifs from everyday life. Regulation settings usually depicted the minstrel troupe as a row or rows of black-faced men (anywhere from 10 to 30 individuals) positioned in a semicircle or in a tiered semicircle spread out across the stage. The end-men (the comedians) were typically seated at either end of the circle. Sometimes only two end-men were depicted, one at either end of the semi-circle; other times, there were two or even three sets of blackface end-men, again stationed at either end of the semicircle. The Interlocutor, who functioned as both emcee and straight man to the end-men and who never blacked up, was always seated in the center of the semi-circle, as is typical in professional minstrelsy. If a tiered format was suggested, he was seated dead center in the first row. In addition, the instructional manuals did not prescribe choreography for the amateur troupe, although at least one manual (Eldridge’s 1911 *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show*) offered advice about how to handle exits and entrances if using more than one set of end-men and suggested that the Interlocutor’s exchange with

the seated end-men worked best if the Interlocutor walked around the stage (Eldridge 16, 9).

The traditional setting is pictured in illustrations in both *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) (figure 13) and *How to put on a Minstrel Show* (1921) (figure 14). Despite the fact that these two manuals were published a decade apart, they utilize almost identical illustrations to represent the troupe. Both of these illustrations are small (the handbook is only 5" x 7"), and takes up half a page. The 1899 manual depicts a blackface troupe of 14 men, while the 1921 manual depicts a troupe of about 30 players. In the *Witmark* manual (1899) the faces of troupe members are not blackened; instead, each troupe member has darkened eyes to represent blackface, and they replicate each other in body type, hair and facial features, orchestra members included (figure 13). Thus, the troupe displays a kind of a unified appearance—white shirts and black suits—and there is no visual distinction between the troupe members and the Interlocutor, except for the white lapels on his suit. The two sets of end-men are differentiated from the rest of the troupe only by their white collars and by wearing white rather than black slacks. The orchestra conductor stands center upstage on a platform in line with the Interlocutor who sits downstage center. Their positioning enhances the sense of order and symmetry.

The illustration in the 1921 *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* (figure 14) utilizes almost identical imagery, minus the orchestra and music director. The same reductive drawing style is utilized here, although the schema is reversed: the faces are black with a thick white “o” for the mouth, two small white horizontal lines for the eyes, and a curious white mark or line on each forehead, perhaps indicating glistening sweat or the line

between blacked-up skin and the wig. The white face is marked by two black dots for eyes and a dark disc for the mouth; there no markings on his forehead. The hair is the same on all of these characters. The only difference between the Interlocutor and troupe members is that the Interlocutor wears a black suit and is not wearing blackface, while blacked-up troupe members wear white jackets. As in many of the posters and playbills promoting middle-class professional minstrelsy, the bodies in these illustrations are seated in the same posture with hands placed in the same position, and their bodies are uniform. And even though the end-men are slightly differentiated from the troupe, that differentiation is very minor (in both of these illustrations, they hold clappers or tambourines, instead of placing their hands on their knees like the other troupe members).

The manuals are very exacting on matters of dress and placement. Rossiter gives this advice on the positioning and costuming of the troupe:

The most effective dress for the rest of the circle that I have ever used is: Dark trousers, black socks and black shoes, white negligee shirts, a high band turn-down collar, no coat and with a very large red bow tie, one that will measure nine or ten inches apart. Everybody in the show wears white gloves...It also adds greatly to the appearance against the black trousers. Every member in the company should wear [a] black wig...Every member in the company must sit in the same position: namely, feet flat on the floor and one hand on each knee. This position must be maintained throughout the entire show with the exception of the end-men when they are using the bones or tambos or are telling their jokes. Don't let people start crossing their legs. (Rossiter, 1921, *How to Put On a Minstrel Show* 16-17)

The level of specificity here is striking and the positioning of the torso, feet and hands is so important that the manual writer give amateur managers suggestions for how to ensure certain postures are maintained during rehearsals. In many ways, the bodies of participants in the minstrel troupe are displayed like a row of objects or elements in a stage set. This organization of bodies creates rows of indistinguishable puppet men with dehumanized and blank features who will rise, sit, and sing as directed by the Interlocutor.

As a point of contrast, I would like to turn to a depiction of the minstrel troupe taken from the prefatory pages of another manual published in 1921, Jeff Branen and Frederick G. Johnson's *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* (figure 15). Here, the stage is set with poles and Japanese lanterns (recommended across a number of manuals as good choices for amateur productions). The imagery echoes the traditional regulation format: the troupe is dressed in evening clothes, and the overall image communicates order, symmetry and decorum. However, this image visually accentuates the difference between the minstrel troupe and the end-men by using two different drawing styles in the same illustration; the minstrel troupe is depicted in an illustrational style (a style also found in contemporary newspapers), while the end men are portrayed by cartoon figures. With lithe bodies and notably erect torsos (chest out and shoulders back), most of the troupe is spread out across the stage in a semi-circle following the traditional minstrel show format. About 20 troupe members are depicted, with the first row of men seated in a uniform posture with legs spread slightly apart hands resting on each knee, a posture that is either depicted or described in most of these manuals. A second row of men stands behind the first row, also in uniform posture.

All troupe members are in evening dress with white shirt fronts and tuxedo-like jackets and, given their open mouths, they seem to be in song. Only the Interlocutor has a slightly raised hand, possibly consulting a card with notes he will need in order to introduce each act (the manuals advise using cards or a list pinned to a fan). What is unusual, however, is that the troupe members in this illustration are not uniformly blacked-up. Troupe members just to the left and just to the right of the Interlocutor seem to be lightly blacked-up by virtue of bit of angled shading, and only one troupe member is fully in blackface. While there is a uniformity of body types among the troupe members, they are not represented as blacked-up puppet men (unlike the minstrel troupes depicted in figures 13 and 14). Instead, the minstrel troupe here is composed of young men with well-proportioned and athletically trim bodies: they have well-defined necks and shoulders, and they assume an erect posture of readiness. In addition, their hair is neatly combed, and they are all in standard issue evening clothes.

The illustrational style used for the minstrel troupe differs greatly from the cartoon drawing style used to represent the two sets of end-men stationed on either side of the semi-circle, and the difference in these two visual vocabularies are racially charged. With one seated and one standing on each side, these end-men are grotesquely rendered in a style resonant of Tin Pan Alley sheet music. As is typical in racist cartooning, the black end-men have distorted bodies and features that are more creature-like than human; and they wear poorly fitted or outrageously decked-out clothing. Neither of the standing figures seem capable of holding himself erect. The standing end man in the left foreground has a protruding stomach and sloping shoulders; his head droops a bit, and his jacket and hat are too small. The end man in the right foreground

functions as kind of a mirror image, but with certain contrasting attributes. He is thinner; his body is depicted as a featureless column or pole; he has no neck and no shoulders, and his head droops forward as well. He is also decked out like a clown with checkered pants, oversized shoes, and a hat that is too large. The ape-like facial features of both men signal perplexity and woe. The seated end-men fare no better. The one in the left foreground has the typical minstrel show grin; he is thick-lipped and has “fright” hair while his counterpart on the right is expressionless, like a wooden doll.

Such illustrations were clearly designed to perpetuate minstrelized constructions of blackness, thus reassuring white readers about their placement in the hierarchies of race and class. The white bodies depicted in the Branen and Johnson illustration are very similar to those that Athena Devlin writes about in *Profits and Primitivism*. Devlin’s research on the re-making of late 19th and early 20th century middle-class masculinity historicizes the ways in which the white middle-class male body was being re-conceived. The physical fitness manuals she analyzes promoted a new class-specific body type that reflected middle-class values and took self-discipline to achieve. This adherence to discipline hailed back to notions about “character” and self-control that were important during the Victorian era, but are also informed by a “readiness” for action in sync with modernity. Distinct from the muscularity valued in working-class bodies, this new middle-class body was white, slim and efficient, with symmetry and harmony in all of its parts.

The illustration and the discourse in the Branen and Johnson manual emphasizes taking a modern approach to staging an amateur minstrel show. Thus, this manual is unique in how strongly it markets the connection between white readiness for modernity

and staging an amateur black show. Almost all of the manuals attest to being “modern” in some sense—either in a use of the modern-day business model to stage the show or in the promotion of the comic material as being particularly up-to-date or in the rejection of old southern melodies in favor of snappy modern-day tunes. The Branen and Johnson manual, however, takes the marketing of modernity a step further. Thus, the Foreword pitches the manual as meeting an important need:

While the art of minstrelsy like all the rest of the world has been moving along...the literature of Minstrelsy has been lagging by the wayside. Numerous books are to be had that will tell the amateur how to put on a Minstrel Show in the style of a past generation. There are others with a wealth of bright material awaiting the hand of the [amateur] Minstrel director who knows how to whip it into shape and assemble it for a modern show. (Branen and Johnson, 1921, *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 5)

The first chapter of the manual opens with a review of the evolution of the minstrel show and explains that the while the “groundwork” of the old-time show remains, its “superstructure has been so elaborated...that minstrelsy in its early form has been well-nigh forgotten” (9). From here, the manual offers a “review” of the styles of “modern minstrelsy,” a review that sets out options for organizing blackface bodies, for in deciding upon the composition of his troupe, the amateur director may choose from the following options: 1) “Men or Women Or Both?” 2) “Black or White?” and 3) “Circle or Novelty?” Each of these options are accompanied by a few paragraphs of explanation, and this kind of fluidity is echoed again in a discussion of “novelty settings” reviewed

above (29-33). In short, this manual links options for organizing blackface bodies with enactments of white social fluidity as a form of modern-day daring enacted through amateur blackface. In delineating options for how to organize blackface bodies onstage, the instructional manuals offered their readers a fantasy about access, choice, and enactments of ownership over blackness. And while these ideas informed the professionally performed minstrelsy show, their emergence as an everyday performance practice in white communities are troubling.

Racial Hierarchy

Scientific racism posited racial categories as both static and hierarchical; the anthropological cataloguing and classifying of peoples according to racial hierarchy was widespread impulse at the turn of the century, as evidenced by the organization of racialized bodies in the living villages of the 1893 World's Fair, advertising for various products such as soap, or government publications such as the 1911 *Dictionary of the Races or Peoples* produced by William Dillingham for the U.S. Immigration Commission.

This racial hierarchy is of course evident across all of the manuals in the discourse of both content and practice; white people participating in amateur minstrel shows not only rehearsed racial differences between "black" and "white," but also might have also been attuned to different racial hierarchies through their participation in the show. In short, who blacked up, how dark they blacked up, and whether they blacked up at all indicated a racialized hierarchy; individual onstage roles represented different degrees of an imagined descent into blackness. Thus, white people participating in

amateur minstrel shows not only rehearsed racial differences between “black” and “white,” they also rehearsed racialized hierarchies within blackness.

Colorism was a key part of the discourse in these manuals, especially in addressing the art of blacking up. For example, while the manuals typically prescribed a kind of uniformity for the minstrel troupe, they always directed those playing the end-men to differentiate themselves through both costume and makeup. Individuals playing the end-men were not only costumed differently than everyone else on stage, they were also directed to use make up in order differentiate themselves: to exaggerate their eyes and lips and to sometimes apply a darker shade of black-up than the other players (as consistent with the practices of the professional minstrel show).

In addition to illustrations, instructional manuals also included other modes of racial representation such as photographs, tiny little “whimsical” blackface drawings interspersed throughout some of the manuals, and advertisements, most of which appeared in the back pages of the manuals. *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) was authored by Frank Dumont, a celebrity performer and leader of Dumont’s Minstrels, a troupe that enjoyed great popularity at the Eleventh Street Opera House in Philadelphia, one of the last mainstays of the professionally performed middle-class minstrelsy at the turn of the century.¹ In the opening pages of the manual, we find a large photograph of Dumont positioned inside an illustrated picture frame; tiny cartoons of the end-men are positioned on either side of the portrait, one to represent Tambo (who plays the tambourine) and the other to represent Bones, (i.e., who played the clappers or “the bones”). Although seated, each end-man gestures a bit wildly (which was a standard posture used when representing the end-men), both have “fright”

hair, and their bodies are as large of their torsos. In the final analysis, what we here is a photographed giant white head flanked on each side by tiny cartooned black bodies. He is real; they are merely décor.

Many of the manuals include advertising for related theatrical commodities, typically including both words and grotesque cartooning in different formats throughout the text. Sometimes these appeared as one-page or half-page ads in the back-pages or as product promotions inserted in the instructional material as a way to solve various problems. Racial cartoons could be found in related materials that readers could order to promote their productions, such as circulars and ready-to-go lithographs that could be customized with the time and place of performance as well as the name of the community organization producing the show, souvenir programs for the audience, and “little minstrel caricatures” (Carlton 23), blackface minstrelsy images that, like clip-art, could be available for multiple uses.

Novelty Settings

This chapter ends with a consideration what Branen and Johnson call “novelty settings” (*How to Stage A Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* 25), or what Dumont refers to as “novel innovations” (Dumont, *The Amateur Witmark Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* 25), as they presented yet another kind of strategy for organizing bodies in amateur blackface. Novelty themes were ideas for staging a minstrel show around certain institutional and social settings taken from everyday life, such as military scenes from different time periods, social events like a lawn party or ball, and even school settings. These novelty themes probably derived from the professional minstrel show or vaudeville, but took on a new life in the

instructional manual. That white communities sought to re-enact such scenarios on amateur stages in communal venues signaled the depth of white middle-class immersion in the racializing ideologies of the minstrel show and its part in enacting embodied constructions of blackness in everyday settings.

Novelty themes appear in three instructional manuals that were published consecutively over a 20-year period: *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899), *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* (1911), and *How to Stage A Minstrel Show* (1921). Although recommendations for specific novelty settings differed somewhat across these manuals, it is useful to point out that the 1899 manual offered just as many options for novelty settings as the 1921 manual, reflecting consumer interest and organizations willing to invest in the production of a large-scale amateur minstrel shows. Including these options in the manuals created a demand for yet another set of theatrical supplies as well as enhanced the marketability of the manuals.

The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia devotes a hefty chapter to delineating “Novel Innovations” for the First Part (27-41). Each of the recommended themes is accompanied by an illustration with ideas for costuming and arranging the troupe onstage; also included are sample programs with a listing of ballads appropriate for the chosen themes. Two of the innovations in this manual are structured around a military motif, reflecting a late 19th-century interest in U.S. imperialism and action in the Spanish-American war: “Our Boys in Camp” pictures the minstrel troupe seated in the traditional circle but dressed in cavalry uniforms (figure 16). The Interlocutor is pictured as the commanding Colonel; the troupe is pictured as staff officers, and the end-men are dressed as Roosevelt “Rough Riders” (32-33). The list of

ballads suggested as an accompaniment to the military theme includes a “Coon War Song” entitled “Lazy Bill,” a set of songs with a military motif and a finale for the whole minstrel troupe entitled “The Darkey Cavaliers” (33). The other military scene is entitled “Our Navy.” Here the illustration includes ideas for decorating the stage in a nautical manner with the Interlocutor as an Admiral, the troupe as naval officers, and the end-men dressed as sailors (figure 17). The program for “Our Navy” includes songs with a nautical motif and a “deck oratory.” The program also includes non-nautical pieces, such as “Musical Convicts,” which is described as a “laughable interlude” on “the pleasant life of jail birds” (Plink and Pluck); “Our Girl Graduates”; “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”; a “Congress of All Nations”; a “Shakespearian Carnival”; and “The Lawn Party (27-41). Although this manual does not discuss the idea of mixing white performers who are not blacked-up with white performers who are blacked-up as part of the novel innovation, note that the illustrations used to depict novelty settings in this manual do not always depict the performers in blackface.

How to Get Up a Minstrel Show, an instructional manual written in 1911, offers more novelty themes, including a recommendation for organizations with “modest” funds, however, this recommendation still indicates an assumption that organizations will be investing in fairly ornate costumes:

If you are a big organization with plenty of money, you will, no doubt, put the whole matter into the hands of a costumer who will provide everything at a stipulated figure, and, see that all is right on the night of the performance. If you are limited as to capital, there are no nicer costumes than a band uniform for your orchestra, full dress for your Singers and

Interlocutor, and for the End Men, evening dress with coat faced with bright-colored satin, and cuffs of the same material with fancy vests all alike. Knee breeches for the End Men are always attractive with low cut shoes well-polished and a buckle of nickel or brass... (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* 26)

This same manual also suggests staging “an Old Southern Plantation scene” by using big straw hats and different colored bed ticking which can be “cut fantastically” (26) . In line with this setting, the Interlocutor can play a “high-toned house servant with a rather shabby dress suit, white cotton gloves, gray bald wig,” and “you can dress some of your men as females in Topsy costumes or fancy colored frocks” (26-27). Other suggestions include staging the opening image to represent the deck of a yacht with the Interlocutor as the commander, the end-men as comical sailors and the minstrel troupe as Officers or to stage the First Part as a fraternal lodge with members of the troupe “sitting around at tables reading or drinking as though sitting in their club” while the blackface end-men play the role of waiters (26).

Like the 1899 manual, the 1921 *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* devotes two chapters related to organizing blackface bodies and likewise offers a large number of options for novelty settings. Chapter 2 of this manual is entitled “Organizing the Troupe” and gives casting recommendations, depending on where the show will be staged; the manual recommends an all-male troupe shows presented to a boy’s school or men’s college, a troupe that includes women for shows presented to American legion posts or fraternal lodges, or an all-female troop if staging a show for “a girl’s school or club” (13). Chapter 5 focuses on options for First

Part setting and begins with two options: “Regulation Settings” (i.e., the traditional single-row semi-circle described above) and “Pyramid Settings,” in which the orchestra is raised on a platform behind the troupe. After this, the chapter goes onto describe various novelty settings, including a Military First-Part, A Cabaret First-Part, and a College First-Part (30-31). There is also an “Old-time Setting,” a setting for “Female Minstrels,” an American history staging entitled “Colonial Day,” settings based on middle-eastern themes (e.g., “A Dream of the Orient” or “In the Harem”), and ideas for creating a “Boy Scout atmosphere” since (as the manual explains) so many shows are staged by Boy Scout Troops (32-33). These options for organizing blackface bodies, the savvy publishers of these manuals and offered their readers experiences and enactments of ownership over blackness: through the experience of reading about their choices, through a kind of shopping experience that set out an array of choices for organizing black through blackface bodies, and through perpetuating amateur blackface as a form of racial play. They also allowed for a variety of topics that could be used to create a satisfying sense of choice and novelty, even as the basic organizational structures and racial hierarchies inherent in amateur minstrelsy remained the same.



Figure 7. *Depicting the 57th Night of Mr. T.D.* Jim Crow Rice (1833); *American Theatre, Bowery*. Painting. 1833. In Jan Seidler Ramirez's *Painting the Town: Cityscapes of New York, Paintings from the Museum of the City of New York*. Yale UP, 2000.

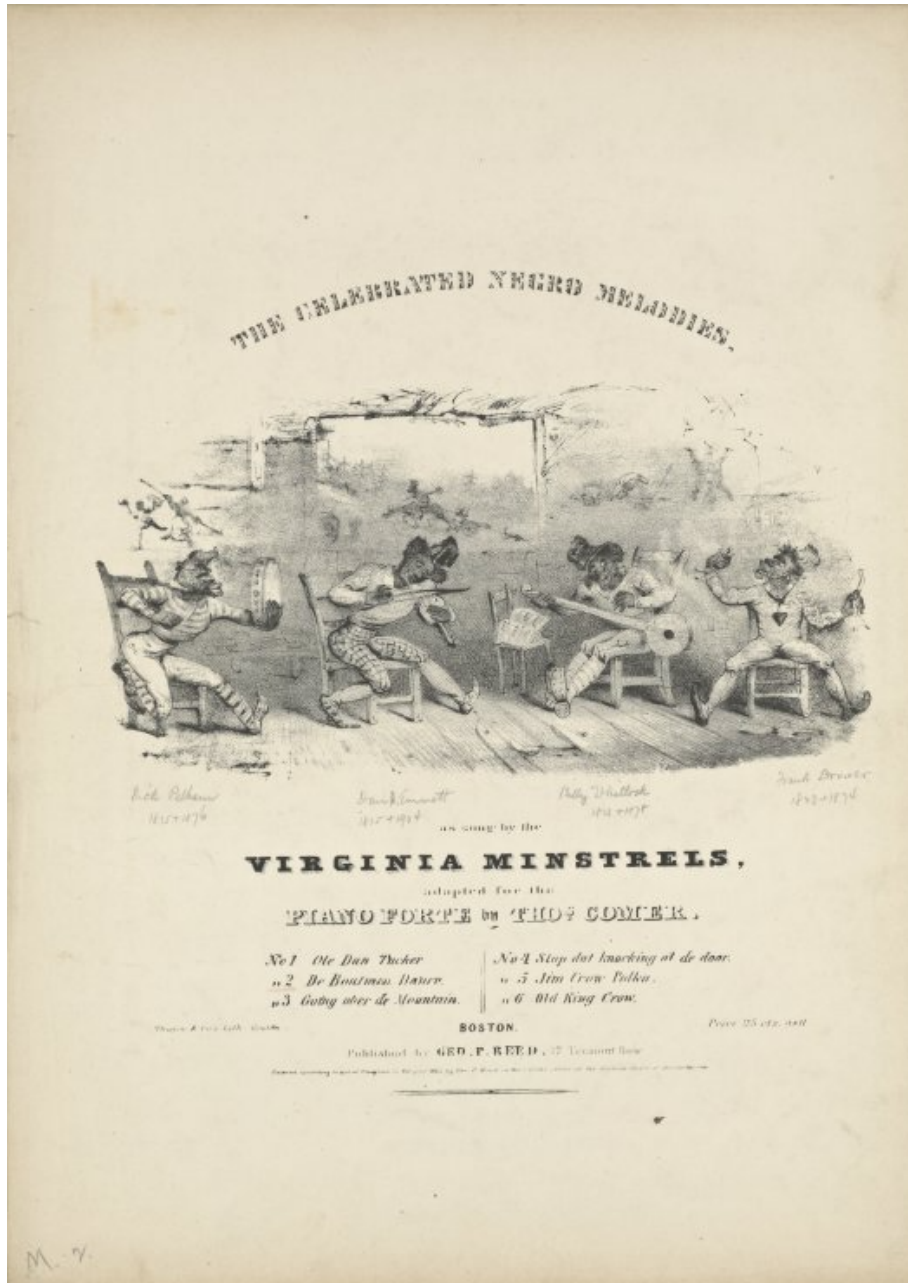


Figure 8: "The celebrated Negro melodies." Illustrated sheet music cover depicting the Virginia Minstrels in performance. 1859. The Library of Congress, Digital Collections. <http://www.loc.gov/item/2016647558/>. Accessed 5 May 2018.




Figure 9. Detail from a playbill, Bryant's Minstrels: Depiction of the final part of the walkaround. 1859. Scanned from Hans Nathan's *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*. Oklahoma UP, 1977.

www.commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bryant%27s_Minstrels_walkaround_2.jpg
Accessed 5 May 2018.

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 H Wood.....Proprietor
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The Manager takes pleasure in announcing that he has effected an engagement with the celebrated Artists so favorably known to the patrons of this place:

MR. E. HORN, LEOPOLD DE MEYER
 Better known as **BRUDDER BONES.**

S. A. WELLS, **T. F. BRIGGS,**
 The favorite Bass. The Popular Banjoist.

M. Mitchell, R. H. Sliter, W. Newcomb,
R. White, J. A. Herman,
J. Eastmead, M. Campbell, M. Shute

With others of **EQUAL MERIT**, and he trusts that in presenting the above array of talent, to merit a continuation of that liberal patronage which has been so beautifully bestowed heretofore.

Figure 10. *Detail from a playbill, Wood's Minstrels. 1852.* The Harvard Theatre Collection, The Houghton Library.
<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/minstrel/mibillshp.html>. Accessed 5 May 2018.



Figure 11. *George Thatcher and Carroll Johnson's Minstrels: Thatcher and Johnson's original 'first-part' creation, The Minstrels at the Hunt Club.*" Color lithograph minstrel poster. Strobridge Lith. Company, 1895.
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2014637029/>. Accessed 5 May 2018.



Figure 12. *Primrose and Dockstader's Huge Minstrel Company: The First Complete Canvas Theatre Ever Erected in America. Seating 3000 People. 2 Performances Daily.* Color lithograph minstrel poster. Strobridge Lith. Co., 1900. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2014637005/>. Accessed 5 May 2018.



Figure 13. "Gentleman Be Seated." An example of a minstrel troupe assembled for the minstrel show *First Part*. Photograph of illustration. From Frank Dumont's *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*. M. Witmark & Sons, 1899, p. 1.



Figure 14. Cover of an instructional manual depicting a minstrel troupe. Photograph of illustration. From Harold Rossiter's *How to Put On a Minstrel Show*. Max Stein Publishing House, 1921.

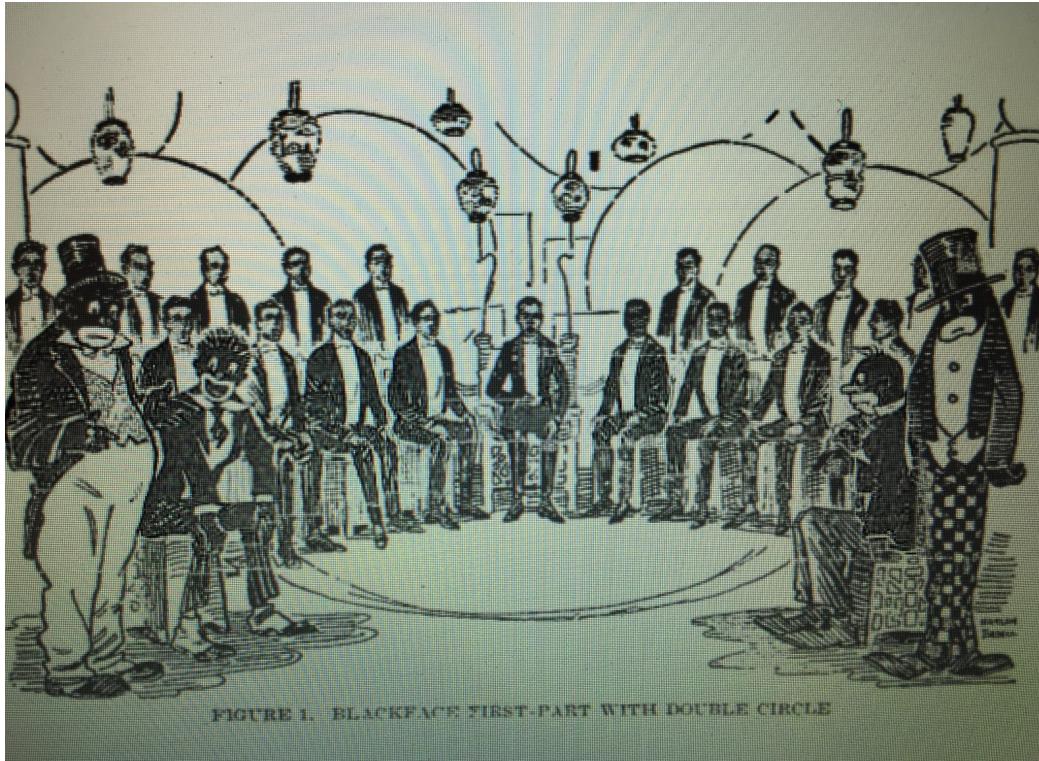


Figure 15. "Blackface First-Part with Double Circle." Photographed illustration of a setting for a minstrel show first part. From Jeff Branen and Frederick G. Johnson's *How to Stage a Minstrel Show*. T.S. Denison and Company, 1921, p. 4.

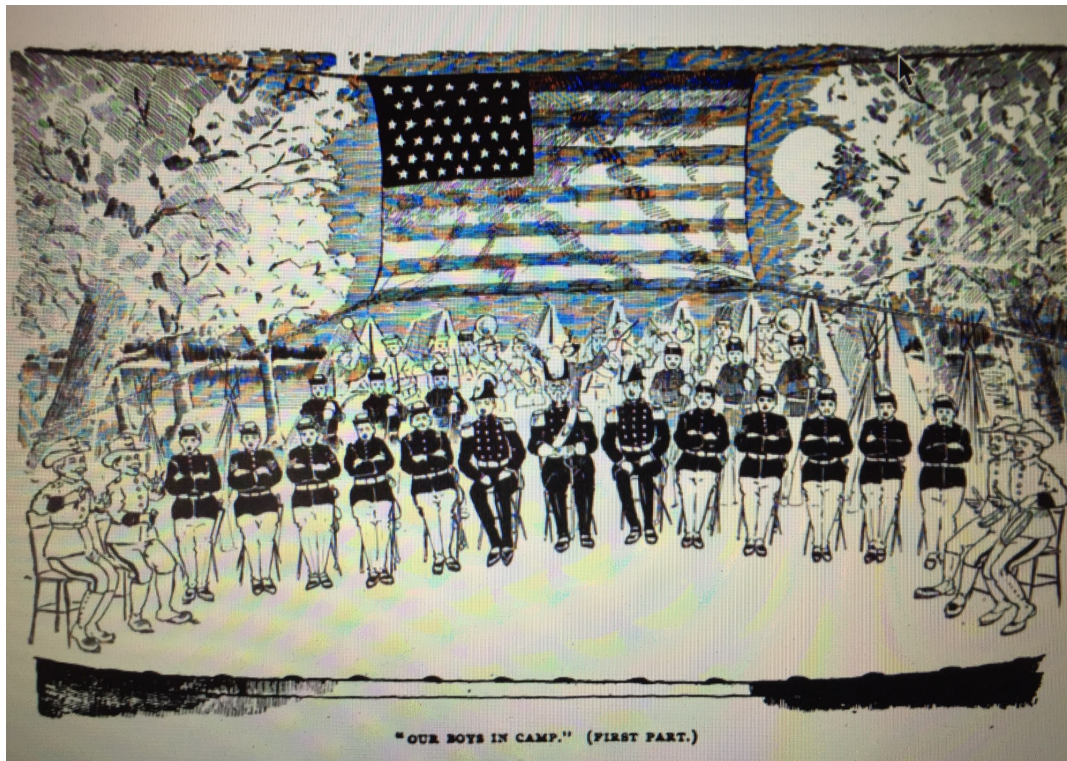


Figure 16. "Our Boys in Camp" (First Part). An example of a "novelty" innovation for staging a minstrel show First Part. Photograph of an illustration. From Frank Dumont's *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*. M. Witmark and Sons, 1899, p. 32.

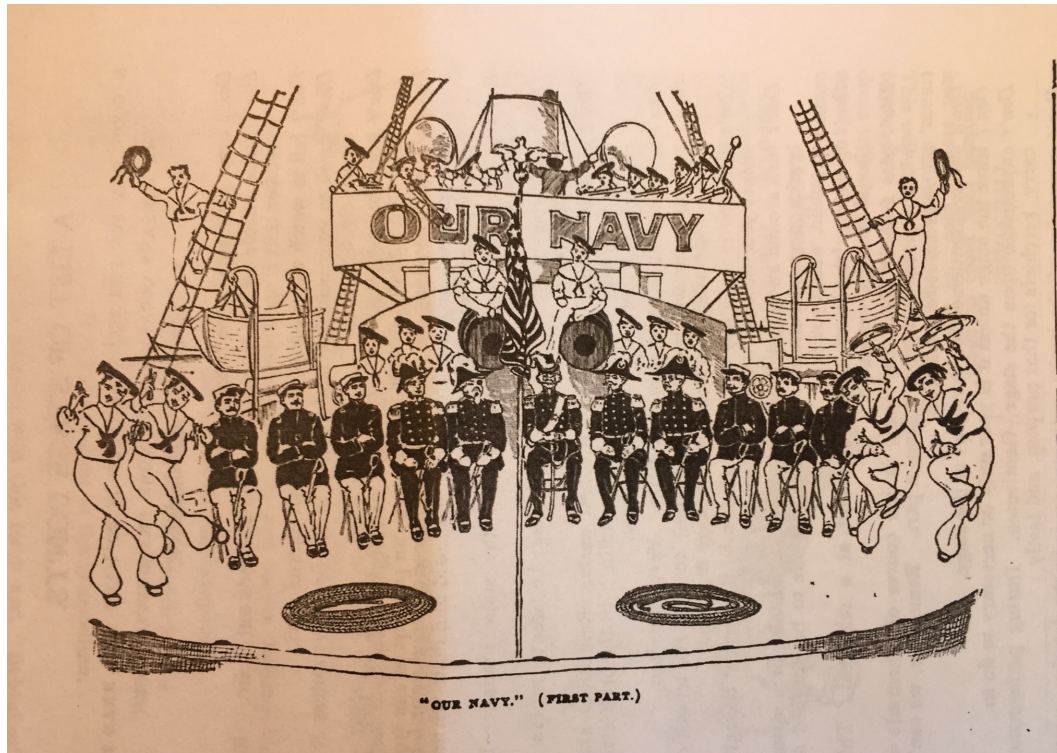


Figure 17. "Our Navy" (First Part). An example of a novelty setting for staging a minstrel show *First Part*. Photograph of an illustration. In Frank Dumont's *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*. M. Witmark & Sons, 1899, p. 28.

CHAPTER 5.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL ETHOS OF AMATEUR MINSTRELSY

No form of amateur entertaining is more popular than the minstrel show. Year after year the black-face comedians appear before the public to packed houses of pleased patrons. The spontaneous good humor, the quick repartee, the harmony singing, the " local " stories, the bright, end-songs and well rendered ballads attract an audience when all other forms of entertaining fail. Men naturally love minstrel shows, and the obliging ladies naturally love what the men love; and that is the secret of the popularity of the burnt-cork performance. We have elaborate professional minstrel shows with parades, brass bands, complete orchestras, a hundred performers, tons of scenery! Elk's Minstrels, Shrine Minstrels, K. of C. Minstrels, College Minstrels, Y. M. C. A. Minstrels, High School Minstrels, Ladies' Minstrels, Children's Minstrels, Church Minstrels and Club Minstrels...

At any rate the minstrel show is here, and it is here to stay.

---*The Minstrel Encyclopedia*, 1921⁵⁶

Introduction

Gender historian Michael Kimmel has raised the notion that performances of masculinity have always been connected to forms of display in the public sphere, writing that "if manhood could be proved, it had to be proved in the eyes of other men" (19):

From the early nineteenth century until the present day, most of men's relentless efforts to prove their manhood contain this core element of homosociality. From fathers and boyhood friends to our teachers, coworkers and bosses, it is the evaluative eyes of other men that are always upon us, watching, judging. It was from this regime of scrutiny that such men were tested. Every man you meet has a rating or an

⁵⁶ Hare, p.11

estimate of himself which he never loses or forgets,” wrote Kenneth Wayne in his popular turn of the century advice book, *Building the Young Man* (1912). “A man has his own rating, and instantly he lays it alongside other men.” (19)

Kimmel’s idea here has great import in thinking about amateur blackface as a prized venue for middle-class white men, especially at the beginning of the 20th century. One key element for Kimmel is the scopic element in gender construction. As pointed out earlier in this dissertation, white middle-class men at the turn of century were under visible scrutiny in new ways; they had to self-commoditize in order to find work; in addition, the spaces of the new bureaucratic work place of corporate America often displayed visible status in the geographical placement of its employees. Since the world of work no longer functioned as a satisfying platform for displays of white middle-class masculine competence, many men turned to leisure-time activities for compensation as well as for access to a kind of public proving ground: a site for enacting masculinity as well as site that offered a sense of fraternity, i.e., a sense of membership and belonging.

How did amateur blackface function as a proving ground for men at the turn of the century and how was racial performance implicated in the formation of various social groups? To explore this question, I would like to look at two general areas of concern in the instructional manuals: first, the occasion of an amateur minstrel show as a platform for enacting a white model of male leadership based on modern-day business principles, and second, how the amateur blackface minstrel show functioned as a form of racial play that also reflected white workplace virtues. I conclude by looking at how amateur blackface minstrel show acted as a popular showcase for fraternal organizations, which

will provide some specific insights into the historical practices and enactments that were suggested by the manuals.

Blackface Leadership

While the art of Minstrelsy, like all the rest of the world, has been moving along, however the literature of Minstrelsy has been lagging by the wayside. Numerous books are to be had that will tell the amateur how to put on a Minstrel Show in the style of a past generation. There are others with a wealth of bright material awaiting the hand of the Minstrel director who knows how to ship it into shape and assemble it for a modern show. But the countless requests received from amateur Minstrel directors who seek a manual that will show them how to go at the problem from the ground up and develop a modern organization for staging a fast-moving up-to-the-minute Minstrel show that exemplifies the newest and best technique in the world of burnt cork, indicate that the Denison line of practical manuals must reach into this field. "How to Stage a Minstrel Show" has been carefully prepared with a view to covering the subject exhaustively.

---*How to Stage a Minstrel Show* (1921)⁵⁷

The amateur practice of blackface, as practiced at this particular moment in American modernity, was linked to the education of young men for leadership roles in a managerial class premised upon a certain model of white masculinity. In particular, blacking up was tied up with ideas about successful business practices and organizational team-building, and it is worth looking at how the savvy publishers of the instructional manuals catered to these kinds of desires and aspirations in their male readers. In particular, the instructional manuals promoted the idea that amateurs who assumed leadership positions (such as stage manager or music director) could themselves stage a performance of competence by producing a successful show, meaning a show that entertained and raised money for community causes. Managing

⁵⁷ Branen, p. 6.

amateur blackface not only included managing funds and people, it also included a form of self-management evidenced in the discipline it took to function as a leader.

What kind of leadership was required? In many ways, these manuals promoted Victorian-era notions of manhood as if they were still in play side by side with forms of manliness required for success in the modern era. This kind of discourse was not unusual in popular self-help literature directed at young men concerned about achieving success in the workplace or determined to embark on a program of self-improvement. As Judy Hilkey has demonstrated in *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America*, this discourse can be found in success manuals directed at young white men and their families, and Athena Devlin finds this same discourse in physical fitness manuals aimed at white middle-class men concerned about the emasculating effect of sedentary bureaucratic work (*Between Profits and Primitivism: Shaping White Middle-Class Masculinity in the United States, 1880-1917*). Thus, all of this material continued to echo certain forms of discipline and self-control associated with the self-made man and Victorian ideas about self-cultivation and character.

This same discourse manifests in the instructional manuals but with a twist. Whatever Victorian-era principles or modern-day precepts informed the discourse in these manuals, the manuals must always be read in the context of the minstrel show in which white men in blackface played the antithesis of these ego ideals. What emerges is a triad of social meanings. On one level, the minstrel guides hearkened back to older forms of upwardly mobile white manliness by promoting the amateur minstrel show as a kind of entrepreneurial endeavor achieved through self-discipline, hard work, and

attention to detail. On another level, the assumed relationship between hard work and realizing success was juxtaposed, or at least layered, with understanding the amateur blackface minstrel show as a much more modern enterprise, for all of the manuals agree that the only way to stage a production that will be both entertaining and financially successful is to adopt modern-day business practices.⁵⁸ A third consideration is the blackface minstrelized content of the show itself: the comic breaches of social etiquette and the decidedly anti-Victorian impulses expressed in “coon songs” and in the slapstick play of the blackface skits.

While some of the manuals, like Carlton’s *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* (1906) and Branen and Johnson’s *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director* (1921) openly promote knowledge of modern-day business practices as a special feature, almost all of the manuals prescribe a bureaucratic form of organizing as a first step. The manuals consistently recommend that community members begin by organizing themselves into committees stressing group cooperation, systems of deference, accountability and certain models of leadership characteristic of modern-day business organizations. Another key motif across the manuals is the importance of demonstrating a modern style of managerial competence; thus, the manuals specify behavioral guidelines for social interactions between team members and individuals in leadership roles. According to these guidelines, the “successful” amateur show will be characterized by strong managerial practices and an organizational ethos based on hierarchy, conformity, and obedience.

⁵⁸ Gail Bederman writes about the way in which corporate culture upended Victorian values about the importance of character, self-regulation and hard work, attributes that no longer seemed important to achieving success (*Manliness and Civilization*).

On one hand, these practices are simply pragmatic guidelines required by any group of people preparing to stage an amateur production. On the other hand, given the context of blackface, these matters take on highly racialized meanings. In other words, taking on a leadership role in the context of an amateur minstrel show production was in itself a form of racial performance as well as a demonstration of white liminality, showing that white actors could move back and forth between these different behavioral models, while black characters remain frozen in stereotype.

Although earlier manuals were authored by professional performers, most of the manuals were written by individuals who presented themselves as businessmen with special expertise in the production of amateur shows. This phenomenon that might have begun with *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* (1906), a manual authored by Albert Carlton, who introduces himself as the manager of Witmark's mail-order business for amateur theatrical supplies.⁵⁹ Here Carlton presents himself as a successful entrepreneur who learned to apply the principles of modern business to amateur blackface productions; however, this realization only came after producing a show that failed to meet its financial goals.

As is the case with many today, I was not awake to...the importance of the "business end"... I had just brought off a most successful spectacular minstrel show for a local organization...In the midst of this rejoicing came the thunderbolt out of the blue...Inquiry showed that the finances had been wretchedly handled...Then there burst upon me the necessity for a

⁵⁹ A key component in this mail-order business was the development and marketing of minstrel show supplies. The company even included a mail-order form so that consumers could purchase minstrel show supplies custom-designed to meet their needs.

complete organization before as well as behind the footlights, if amateur performances are to be financially successful. The “business end” must be run along absolutely economical lines—conducted on strict business principles. (Carlton, 1906, *The Business End* 4-5)

Carlton goes on to describe how this experience stimulated him to conceive of a new career in “the field” of amateur minstrelsy and how he was inspired to develop a “system” for producing entertaining amateur shows that would also realize financial goals. The notion of “system” is important here, connoting a modern-day efficiency that would prevent “unnecessary expenditures” and ensure that “energy” and “time” will not be “wasted” (12).

The rest of the manual is devoted to delineating the business plan; thus, although a form of leisure-time activity, the amateur minstrel show takes on the aura of a modern-day workplace. Carlton begins by explaining the importance of identifying managerial talent in the community in order to establish a kind of workplace hierarchy: “I made inquiries as to the executive ability of the committee, and after satisfying myself, I selected my Business Manager to whom I gave absolute charge of the business end. I informed him that he had the full power of his office and that he would be held responsible for the actions of his assistants, as well as for his own” (Carlton, 1906, *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* 18) From here, he describes the rest of the hierarchy and carefully delineates the chain of command:

The club or organization elects or appoints a Business Manager at the same time that the Stage Manager and Musical Director are selected. The Business Manager is given a Treasurer and the latter receives his orders

from him. The Treasurer thus appointed may hold the same office for the organization, or, if he is taking part in the performance, another member may be appointed by the club to act as Treasurer for the Minstrels. This constitutes the Business Staff. (Carlton, 1906, *The Business End of a Minstrel Show* 18)

Other chapters cover such topics as the duties of the business manager, the duties of the Treasurer, advertising responsibilities, and how to arrange for a hall where the performance will take place. In a manual like this, the production of an amateur minstrel show seemed to offer opportunities for self-development, and blended an older form of entrepreneurship with the opportunity to display a modern-day managerial competence.

The Business End (1906) was published as a companion piece to *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899), with the latter focusing on the entertainment end while the former focused on the business end. Even though these were the only two manuals I found published in this way, every manual I reviewed for this project also promoted itself with references to both the entertainment and the business side of amateur minstrelsy; thus, expertise related to production, costuming and direction was always accompanied by advice on how to implement modern-day managerial principles.

All of the manuals, including those authored by professional performers, offer exacting detail on how to establish those offstage and onstage hierarchies important for successfully planning, promoting and staging the show; thus, the need for deference is emphasized throughout. Press Eldridge, a well-known professional blackface performer

begins his manual (*How to Get Up a Minstrel Show*, 1911) by explaining he has little business expertise but then moves immediately into a discussion of how to establish a business committee that will formulate “a set of rules for the government of the troupe” that will also be “strictly enforced.” Other recommended business committee tasks include establishing a Treasurer as well as a Secretary “whose duty will be to attend to all correspondence, keep the Minutes of the Meetings, and audit the accounts of the Treasurer” (Eldridge 4). Another key concern echoed across the manuals is the matter of appointing the right man for the job of Stage Manager, which Eldridge stresses, is “the most important office of all.”

On his shoulders rests the responsibility of the whole show, so be careful to select a member of discretion; one free from prejudice, who will show no favoritism, and who will not allow his personal likes or dislikes to interfere with the strict performance of his duties. (Eldridge, 1911, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* 5)

The extent of the stage manager’s authority is of key importance in these manuals; as Eldridge points out: “I cannot impress upon your minds too strongly the necessity of care in the selection of this officer; for once he is installed his word is law. He settles all disputes behind the footlights, passes judgment upon the jokes and songs of the comedians, arranges the program and assigns each performer his place” (5-6). Another manual from 1920 by Seymour Tibbals, a professional in the matter of amateur minstrelsy, echoes these same sentiments:

The most important individual in any successful amateur entertainment may or may not appear in the production. He is the stage manager, the

director of the performance, and he must be given strict obedience...He should fix the time of rehearsals and should insist that all participants be prompt in attending them...He must have your hearty co-operation during the period preceding the performance and on the night of the show.

(Tibbals, 1920, *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* 6)

Harold Rossiter, owner of a Tin Pan Alley type of music business in Chicago and author of *How to Put on a Minstrel Show* (1921) stresses that: “[t]he very first thing to do is to select some one person to act as Director”: “This person should be able to drill the company and teach them the songs and this person must have absolute control of the whole show and his or her decision must be final. A show cannot have two bosses” (Rossiter, 1921, *How to Put on a Minstrel Show* 4).

Managerial matters were seen as key to planning a modern-day program that would capture an audience’s attention as well as important for avoiding unnecessary expenditures. *The Making of a Minstrel Show* (1920) begins with a cautionary tale as the writer nostalgically recalls his first participation in an amateur minstrel show, remembering an older time and place when community members came together for a shared evening of laughter and song. The show was described as a “home-talent” production in the “village” town hall: it featured “thirty of the most prominent young men of the village in our circle,” and the musical program was planned by the musical director from the public schools. The problem, however, is that the “old Southern melodies” planned for the production did not engage the audience, despite the fact that the village hired costly professional musicians to create a ten-piece orchestration:

We rehearsed faithfully, but on the evening of the performance...the audience were so interested in picking out the individuals in the black-faced circle that there was a constant murmuring and laughing throughout the entire chorus. We learned right then that a twelve-minute opening chorus on which much time and money had been spent, was simply a waste. The opening chorus of an amateur minstrel show should be short and snappy. (Tibbals, 1920, *The Making of a Minstrel Show: A Help-U Book for Amateurs* 3-4)

In short, lacking a modern-day business savvy, the organizers of this amateur show lost time and money by misjudging their audience. Instead of the “old Southern melodies,” what was needed were more modern “snappy” songs.

Forward-looking leadership was also important when it came to readying the troupe for the night of the performance. Each of the manuals devotes a great deal of attention to matters of production, including casting, directing, costuming the cast, and as described in my previous chapter, the logistics of blacking-up. Blacking up might well be seen as an individual gesture in which the individual prepared himself for racial play with other men, but it also functioned as part of the organizational aspects of these community events, one described as requiring careful managerial planning and preparation.

Because amateur troupes could include as many as twenty or thirty members, blacking up was an activity that required some planning during the weeks of preparatory activity. A member of the business committee had to order enough blackface make-up as well as certain products for applying and removing the make-up, including soap, cold

cream, Vaseline, sponges, and soft brushes. More than one manual offered advice on where to purchase blackface make up in bulk. For example, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* (1911) advises buying a pound box of prepared burnt cork (\$1.50 a box), as a quantity sufficient to “black up twenty men half times” (Eldridge 22), while a manual published a decade later—*How to Put On a Minstrel Show* (1921)—advises the stage manager to purchase prepared burnt cork in “two half-pound cans instead of a one pound can” so that “it [the make-up] is more easily handled by a [large] number of men” (Rossiter 18). The level of detail here is painstaking. For example, *How to Get Up a Minstrel Show* (1911) even suggests that the committee designate a property man who can provide each member of the company with “a good-sized tin bucket of clean water” in case the entertainment site does not have washing accommodations (19). This same manual also advises participants to “look each other over carefully for spots that have been left white to touch them up” (23-24).

The organizational details of amateur minstrelsy not only included the management of funds and the direction of performers, but also specified the need for careful planning of time and space. Although the manuals did, on occasion offer advice on how a man might deliver his lines, for the most part the manuals must be thought of as guides that more generally “scripted” how one might control the many dimensions of the large-scale amateur blackface spectacle as well as develop skills and authority that easily might be seen in terms of racial management.

Blackface Etiquette

The organizational ethos of amateur minstrelsy also emphasized the careful ordering of bodies and actions, requiring each participant to place group interests above

his own at all times. This important ethos played out in the ways that all of the manuals emphasized proper etiquette and described how participants should take pride in both self-discipline and deference to management. The manuals also advised stage managers to eliminate those who did not comply. For example, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide* (1899) gives stage managers this advice:

There will be no excuse for your members to make other engagements when [rehearsal] dates are...arranged. Demand full attendance at rehearsals, and, more than anything else, *strict* attention. Stop all talking in the entrances, idle gossip and side remarks that may annoy the stage manage and those [individuals] intent upon their work... (Dumont 12).

How to Get Up a Minstrel Show (1911) warns that “if a man shows a disposition to shirk rehearsals or is inattentive or disobedient to the Stage Manager, cut him out of the show quick,” for “without discipline, no organization of amateurs can hope to prosper” and that a man who feels he knows his part so well that he can skip rehearsals is “tacitly confessing his selfishness and lack of interest in the general welfare” (19). These messages continue to echo a decade later. *How To Stage a Minstrel Show* (1921) recommends imposing fines on cast members who are absent or late for rehearsals: “An excellent method of promoting promptness has been found to be the system of imposing fines for tardiness or absence. ...Make your troupe realize the importance of faithfulness and punctuality, and you should be able to get good cooperation. (Branen and Johnson, 1921, *How To Stage a Minstrel Show* 23). Some of the manuals go so far as to include a list of “dos” and “don’ts” for stage managers to read to the cast. Typical guidelines include not dressing in a slovenly manner, not bringing friends to rehearsals, not making

eye contact with friends in the audience while onstage, and not sharing jokes with friends before the performed show. Troupe members were also told to sit erect onstage and not to cross their legs during the First Part, an edict that stage managers would insist upon in every rehearsal.

Another organizational ethos informing these shows has to do with maintaining group identity, and as noted above many of the manuals advise stage managers not to cast individuals who might place their own desires over the welfare of the group. Rossiter specifies that stage managers should not seek highly talented players, explaining that “wonderful” voices are not necessary for a minstrel show, for “nine times out of ten those persons who are reputed to have ‘wonderful’ voices are so temperamental that you have to be very careful in handling them...one of this breed will upset the entire show and cause the Director more trouble than all of the rest of the show put together” (*How to Put On a Minstrel Show* 5). Rossiter goes on to tell stage managers that an amateur troupe needs little musical talent, that the ability to read music is not important, and that participants need not know anything about harmony. Instead, the goal is for troupe members to “make a noise in the chorus,” for “it is the ability to forget themselves and enter into the spirit of the show which makes for the most success in a minstrel show” (6). Branen and Johnson offer similar advice: “In organizing the troupe, get all the talent you can, provided that you don’t impose any temperamental artists on the company. A man or woman with a fairly good voice and a willing spirit and a dependable and enthusiastic disposition is better than a genius who will cut rehearsals, refuse to take suggestion and demoralize the organization” (*How to Stage a Minstrel Show* 15).

There is also way in which this etiquette echoed certain behaviors valued by workplace culture. Historian Jerome Bjelopera's *City of Clerks* (2005) analysis of the workplace culture of office and sales workers in Philadelphia between 1870 and 1920 (*City of Clerks*, 2005) offers a window into the kind of "workplace virtues" valued by large organizations (115). Bjelopera's study is derived from two periodicals, one disseminated to employees of Strawbridge and Clothier, a Philadelphia department store, and one marketed to alumni of Peirce College, a Philadelphia business college, many of whom also worked for Strawbridge and Clothier. Workplace virtues echoed in this material emphasized "loyalty to the firm, industriousness, thrift and temperance," (115) all qualities resonant with Victorian values of manly character and self-control, although enacted in a modern workplace. Similar pressures to meet these expectations were felt in work-related leisure time activities, including amateur minstrel show productions put on by the workers. Bjelopera's analysis reveals a kind of paradox, for while workers might have performed blackface minstrelsy as a kind of transgressive outlet or a form of play outside of the workplace, they also performed workplace acquiescence in the name of whiteness. As Bjelopera explains, "[T]hese powerful workplace ideas reached beyond work":

Many employees indulged in blackface minstrelsy as both performers and consumers during their time away from their jobs, an activity through which they forged a notion of whiteness that referred both to workplace ideals and to the racist content of the minstrelsy they imbibed. In fact,

through minstrelsy, the traits of the exemplary worker became white traits.
*(City of Clerks 116)*⁶⁰

Through looking at the instructional manuals, we catch a telling glimpse into the cultural history of white middle-class manliness, the socioeconomics of a transitioning 19th century workplace, and ultimately the racial constructions of blackness that were deeply ingrained into the middle-class man's behavioral repertoire. Looking further at the specific history of fraternal organizations can provide even more concrete examples of how these terms played out.

Blackface Fraternity

This final section considers how the amateur blackface minstrel show functioned as a popular showcase for fraternal organizations, especially at the turn of the 20th century. This time period was marked by a nation-wide rise of middle-class fraternal organizations, most of whom utilized highly structured rituals as a way to cement group identifications. Historian Mark Carnes explains this phenomenon in *Meanings of Manhood*:

In 1897 the *North American Review*, proclaiming the last third of the nineteenth century the “Golden Age of Fraternity, reported that of a population of nineteen million adult male Americans, five and a half million belonged to fraternal order—the Red Men (165,000), Odd Fellows (810,000), Freemasons (750,000), Knights of Pythias (475,000) and hundreds of smaller orders. Millions more belonged to the Grand Army of

⁶⁰ For more on the Argyle Minstrel Club formed by male employers at Strawbridge and Clothier, see Chapter 5 in Jerome B. Bjelopera's *City of Clerks: Office and Sales Workers in Philadelphia, 1870-1920*.

the Republic, the Knights of Labor, the Grange, and similar organizations. The distinguishing feature and central activity of all of these organizations was the performance of elaborate sequences of initiation rituals. (Carnes, *Meanings for Manhood* 38)

Carnes describes how fraternal initiation rituals met the social needs of participants at a time when white middle-class men were facing the socioeconomic changes wrought by late 19th century corporate capitalism.⁶¹ The Order of the Red Men, which began as a working-class fraternal organization established by ex-Freemasons in 1834, is a case in point, with initiation rituals premised upon white constructions of Native American traditions. In 1868, however, the organization decided to revise these rituals in order to attract new members; these revisions were so successful that the Order of the Red Men saw a phenomenal increase in the number of new members, especially middle-class white men. By the early 1900s, hundreds of thousands of new members were joining the order on a weekly basis (Carnes 40). Carnes describes a process in the revised ritual that might have seemed transformative to middle-class white men. The ritual begins with an initiate who is deemed unfit at first glance by multiple threatening father figures; he then goes through a transformation process as part of the ritual, and the once-threatening father figures become both loving and benevolent.

This ritual clearly had racial dimensions; as Carnes notes “the men who were transforming America into an urban industrial society, had chosen to re-create a primitive

⁶¹ Cultural historians include Jason Kaufman’s *For the Common Good, American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity*; Mark Carnes’ “Middle-Class Men and the Solace of Fraternal Ritual in *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*”; and Barbara Franco’s “The Ritualization of Male Friendship and Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Fraternal Organizations” in *The Material Culture of Gender: The Gender of Material Culture*.

past” (*Meanings for Manhood*, 45). For Carnes, however, this primitive past is primarily associated with re-enacting a psycho-sociological process of gender identification, moving from a primary identification with the maternal to the paternal realm and addressing the “psychic pressures” of “the new social and institutional relationships” of industrial capitalism; such rituals did not really subvert the social order but only helped individuals to tolerate it and even conform (51-52). Even so, racial dimensions of the ritual is what informed these transformations.

As previously noted in this project, white constructions of the racialized other informed staged entertainments since the founding of the Republic. These performances often represented American Indians, African Americans, and others as uncivilized, instinctual beings, and this cross-racial theatrical constructions of these groups functioned to provide relief or escape from the responsibilities and pressures of self-restraint that informed ideals of whiteness throughout the 19th century. For example, in the ceremonies that Carnes describes, American Indians were aestheticized into noble savages with transcendent qualities and tribal qualities unlike anything that existed in white man’s culture. Thus, the fantasy enacted in the ceremonies resonated with white practitioners and offered a specialized public sphere--a shared space of racialized fantasy that enabled whites to feel interconnected in some manner.

In the rituals tied to fraternal organizations, white upwardly mobile men could turn the various forms of racial impersonation to enact pleasures, vulnerabilities, and desires for social control. If the initiation into the Order of the Red Men glided over or elided the violence of genocide and slavery to depict the “aesthetic” Indian (linked to woodcraft and mystical spiritual understanding), blackface minstrelsy as performed by

other fraternal orders similarly cast African American types as part of their performances of music and dance. Large-scale amateur minstrel shows, like other fraternal ritual practice, called for live, voluntary, and repetitive forms of racial performance that required a set of specialized accessories and a certain set of preparatory activities. Most important, both events enacted forms of racialized and gendered membership through deep involvement with these acts of play.

The Elks

The fraternal brotherhood of the Elks offers a model for understanding both the phenomenal growth of fraternal orders in late 19th century America and the links between fraternal organizations to the music business and professional and amateur minstrel shows. The minstrel show was deeply imbricated in the life of the Elks, for many of the founding members were minstrel men. Elk histories paid homage to members' musical careers, remembering their performances with great fondness and nostalgia. *An Authentic History of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks*, self-published in 1910 by Charles Edward Ellis, a long-standing member of the Elks, gives us a window into a 19th century male-dominated sub-culture organized around an admiration of "minstrel bands" (Ellis 24). Organized chronologically, the 500-page history covers the years between 1868 (the year that the Elks was first established as a fraternal organization in New York) and 1910.

According to Ellis, the Elks derived from a British social organization and drinking club called "The Jolly Corks," made up of musicians, comedians, and comic singers who worked the British music halls in the latter half of the 19th century (24). The name of the group was derived from various initiation pranks having to do with champagne corks

(every member had to have one) which typically resulted in new initiates having to pay for drinks. One member of this group—a comic singer from the London music hall who relocated to New York in the 1860s—had the idea of continuing the club in New York, mostly as a way to get around an excise tax imposed on alcohol consumption on Sundays. The idea was to form the club and to set up by-laws as well as a “judge” who would then “fine” members for infractions and so gather funds for “refreshments” (i.e., alcohol) (Ellis 31). Ellis’s history describes the development of the Elks into a fraternal order, including the establishment of their first charter, the development of early Elk rituals, and the group’s expansion into a national organization. He also includes a description of the organization’s development from a social club into a “benevolent organization” that supported fellow members in need, memorialized deceased members, and adhered to certain values of brotherhood and charity.⁶²

A key component of the history, however, are the pages of biographical tributes written to document and memorialize key founding members. These tributes read like a who’s who of late 19th and early 20th show business and covers people like Tony Pastor (i.e., Antonio Pastor) (325), the founder of vaudeville, as well as nationally known late 19th century blackface performers like Frank Dumont (354), Billy Courtright (78), and Tony Hart (88); also included are biographical tributes to various well-known writers of blackface skits, plays and songs. The tributes include a photograph of each man (sometimes in blackface); biographies of better-known performers can be extensive,

⁶² It is worth noting that there was a benevolence component associated with amateur blackface, for almost every manual I reviewed associated these large-scale amateur minstrel shows as primarily fund-raising events for charitable and communal causes. Newspaper coverage of turn of the century shows in Chicago, Minneapolis and Milwaukee echoed this same theme.

sometime including information about their parentage, early childhood, performance history and professional life as well as the circumstances of their death where relevant. The tribute might also list what minstrel troupes an individual was affiliated with, well-known sites where he performed, playbills from various performances, key roles he played onstage as well as the lyrics of certain songs he had performed. In short, this homage to the Elks was also an homage to the performers, stage managers, and various personnel affiliated with 19th century vaudeville and minstrelsy, and to the stars of the professional minstrelsy in particular.

Like most turn of the century fraternal organizations in the urban North, the Elks excluded African Americans, but what emerges here is not only segregation but a continued racism disseminated through American popular culture. This history reveals that the grotesque stereotypes of the minstrel show had become so naturalized that amateur blackface practitioners either did not recognize or could not comprehend the violence and vitriol in the racial ridicule informing their performances. The fact that blacks not only were excluded from fraternal organizations such as the Elks but that fraternal organizations also took legal action against blacks who formed “parallel” fraternal orders tells the rest of the story.⁶³

How fraternal orders like the Elks organized themselves, as shown through their governing structures, documents, material culture and rituals, offers another important context for understanding the market for instructional minstrel manuals and the

⁶³ For more on resistance to racial exclusion in fraternal organizations, see Ariane Liazos and Marshall Ganz’s “Duty to the Race: African American Fraternal Orders and the Legal Defense of the Right to Organize.” *Social Science History*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2004, pp. 485-534; and Theda Skocpol and Jennifer Lynn Oser’s “Organization despite Adversity: The Origins and Development of African American Fraternal Associations.” *Social Science History*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2004, pp. 367-437.

commodities (the costumes, make-up, and props) that accompanied them. There are ways in which the material culture and instructional discourse of amateur minstrelsy seemed to mimic the structures and hierarchies of fraternal orders. First, fraternal orders like the Elks were highly organized societies with very formal governing bodies; they had designated officers and a way of running their meetings reminiscent of the proceedings of local government or the modern-day workplace. Fraternal orders also wanted to support their members of their organization who might be in need; thus, a certain level of organization and leadership (such as a treasurer) was required in order to fulfill this mission. These kinds of hierarchical structures seem to have been common in fraternal organizations as well as in other kinds of communal organizations; thus, perhaps it is not surprising that the instructional manuals advise their readers to begin by establishing committees and leadership in order to plan, produce and promote an amateur show. But while the need to organize might have been a logical first step for producing an amateur theatrical, the fact that these organizational structures also served to promote amateur blackface in particular is what differentiates them.

Second, fraternal orders often produced numerous documents delineating both organizational and individual behaviors such as charters and constitutions as well as by-laws and codes of conduct. In addition, fraternal rituals were typically written out in a prescriptive manner (i.e., in a kind of handbook), and while these rituals were supposed to be secret, these writings were probably available to all members. It is possible that the publishers of some of the instructional manuals actually may have been influenced by these aspects of fraternal documents. For example, the handbooks often offered the expertise of their writers as if they were sharing forms of secret lore, and they detailed

components of that lore with a kind of precision that echoes the precision used in manuals that describe fraternal rituals.

Though the organizational structures serving amateur blackface did not have the same content as fraternal ritual, certain dimensions of amateur blackface seem to have echoed various forms of fraternal ritual, linking the rise of amateur blackface minstrelsy with the unprecedented rise of fraternal organizations in late 19th and early 20th century America. Another element that amateur blackface production had in common with fraternal ritual was an opportunity to experience fantasies outside the bounds of everyday life.⁶⁴ Both fraternal orders and amateur minstrelsy employed forms of play and liminality that inverted the social order. In particular, constructions of blackness and other forms of otherness allowed white actors to release anxieties about their own abilities as well as express anxieties about upward mobility in urban spaces. Another commonality between amateur blackface minstrelsy and fraternal ritual is that both modes of performance were forms of highly rule-bound amateur theatricals and that they both drew upon certain “props,” scripts, and instructions for bodily movement.⁶⁵ Thus, like fraternal organizations, amateur blackface performance was known by certain signs

⁶⁴Historian Mark Carnes utilizes Victor Turner’s notion of liminality as a way to understand why Victorian men were so attracted to fraternal ritual, especially initiation rites (*Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, 1989). According to Carnes, Turnerian liminality is premised upon the workings of a dialectical process in social life. Social groups function according to structures informed by hierarchy, rules, and prescribed social roles; at the same time, individuals long for deeper “less restrictive” experiences and so react against these structures (unconsciously) by participating in “liminal rituals” that take them outside the boundaries of everyday life (32-33). I would like to suggest that amateur minstrelsy enacts a liminal ritual occasioned by the blackface mask, especially in onstage performances of blackface excess, i.e., in the blackface skits, the crossfire humor or in certain musical numbers, such as the “coon songs,” a category of song recommended throughout the manuals. Coon songs were highly popular in the 1890’s and had a risqué even rowdy content quite unlike forms of popular music that romanticized the Old South.

⁶⁵ For more on the material culture of fraternal ritual, see Barbara Franco in “The Ritualization of Male Friendship and Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Fraternal Organizations” in *The Material Culture of Gender: The Gender of Material Culture*.

and symbols: blackface paint that effaced the specificity of facial features, certain kinds of wigs, special gloves and certain onstage gestures.

In addition, the initiation rituals of fraternal orders and the ritual play of amateur blackface minstrelsy were performances that were repeated over and over again. An 1897 article in *The Northern Review* points out that the rituals of fraternal orders were repeated at every meeting; this repetition was so extensive that members had little time to form actual friendships with each other (qtd in Carnes, 38).⁶⁶ The middle-class minstrel show had an exacting formulaic structure as well, not the least of which were certain modes of communicative exchange across the color line that were repeated over and over again with every production in both professional and amateur productions.

Last but not least is the fact that amateur minstrelsy was promoted by nationally known professional performers who were also members of the Elks. Three of the manuals reviewed for my study were written by nationally known performers, and two of those performers were Elks: Frank Dumont and Billy Courtright. Frank Dumont wrote *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) and also authored numerous blackface plays and skits, many of which were listed for sale in the back pages of the instructional manuals. Dumont headed Dumont's Minstrels which was a headliner at the Eleventh Street Opera House, a highly popular minstrel hall in Philadelphia where he later took over as director. According to Jerome Bjelopera's research, the Eleventh Street Opera House was frequented by white collar workers who then formed their own amateur troupes (137-140). Billy Courtright was another

⁶⁶ *The Northern Review* was a 19th century literary magazine founded in 1815. JSTOR describes it as one of the oldest literary magazines in the U.S.

nationally known minstrel show performer and, according to the history of the Elks, he played well-known venues in New York, San Francisco, and London, and was featured with some fairly famous minstrel troupes (e.g., Kelly and Leon's Minstrels, and Hart and Harrigan). He also authored *The Complete Minstrel Guide* (1901), a manual which is sub-titled: *Containing Gags, Jokes, Parodies, Speeches, Farces, and Full Directions for a Complete Minstrel Show, with Chapters by Frank Dumont and Others.*

To conclude, the Elks were but one of many groups whose activities sustained the naturalization and institutionalization of amateur blackface as a performance practice. Through these shows, white control over the representation and meaning of blackness was played out in weeks of preparatory activity and in a strict organizational ethos, as well as the particular content of this racial play. But if amateur minstrelsy is prompted by ideals of "whiteness" and upward social mobility, the story has its greatest impact on African Americans, representing them as those who did not know how to behave, control themselves, or run a "modern" organization. White performers who participated in such representations publicly differentiated themselves from blackness and took refuge in their status as middle-class white men. One wonders whether participation in amateur blackface minstrelsy truly worked to alleviate white masculine anxieties about what could go wrong with their own efforts at upward social mobility. Perhaps the need to repeat such performances over and over suggests that these were only a temporary exorcism of their own worries about achieving and maintaining their place in the social hierarchy.

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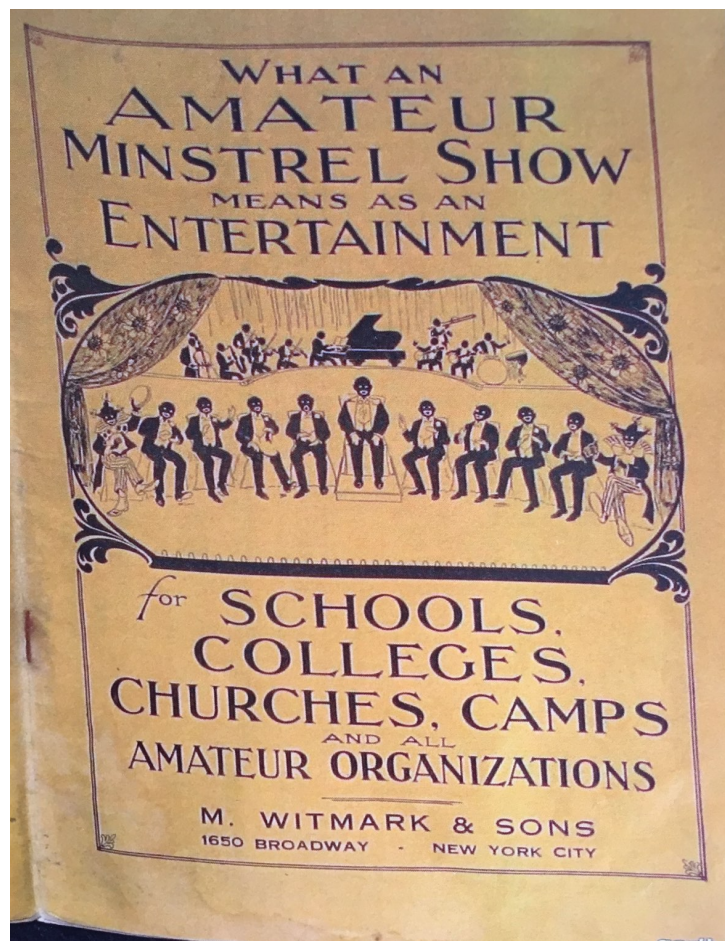
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APPENDIX A. MANUALS AND MAIL-ORDER CATALOGS

Although the manuals were produced by different publishing companies, most of them had the same format. The instructional sections offered advice on staging, managing publicity, and handling finances. There were also tips on how to cast, direct, and manage a minstrel troupe. Instructional material was typically followed by “canned” comic material, including comic cross-fire dialogue, monologues, stump speeches, and blackface skits; if not, this material was also marketed in back-page advertisements. Back-page ads also offered supplemental sheet music (e.g., orchestral overtures, chorale arrangements, sentimental ballads and comic songs); promotional postcards and posters, sample programs, stage properties, costumes, and burnt cork make-up. The figures below offer a sampling of what mail-order catalogs and instructional manuals looked like.



Mail-order Catalogue Cover.

What an Amateur Minstrel Show Means as an Entertainment for Schools, Colleges, Churches, Camps and All Amateur Organizations. M. Witmark and Sons, 1925.



Cover.

The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Show and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia.

M. Witmark And Sons, 1899.

www.library.si.edu/digital-library/book/witmarkamateur Accessed 5 May 2018.

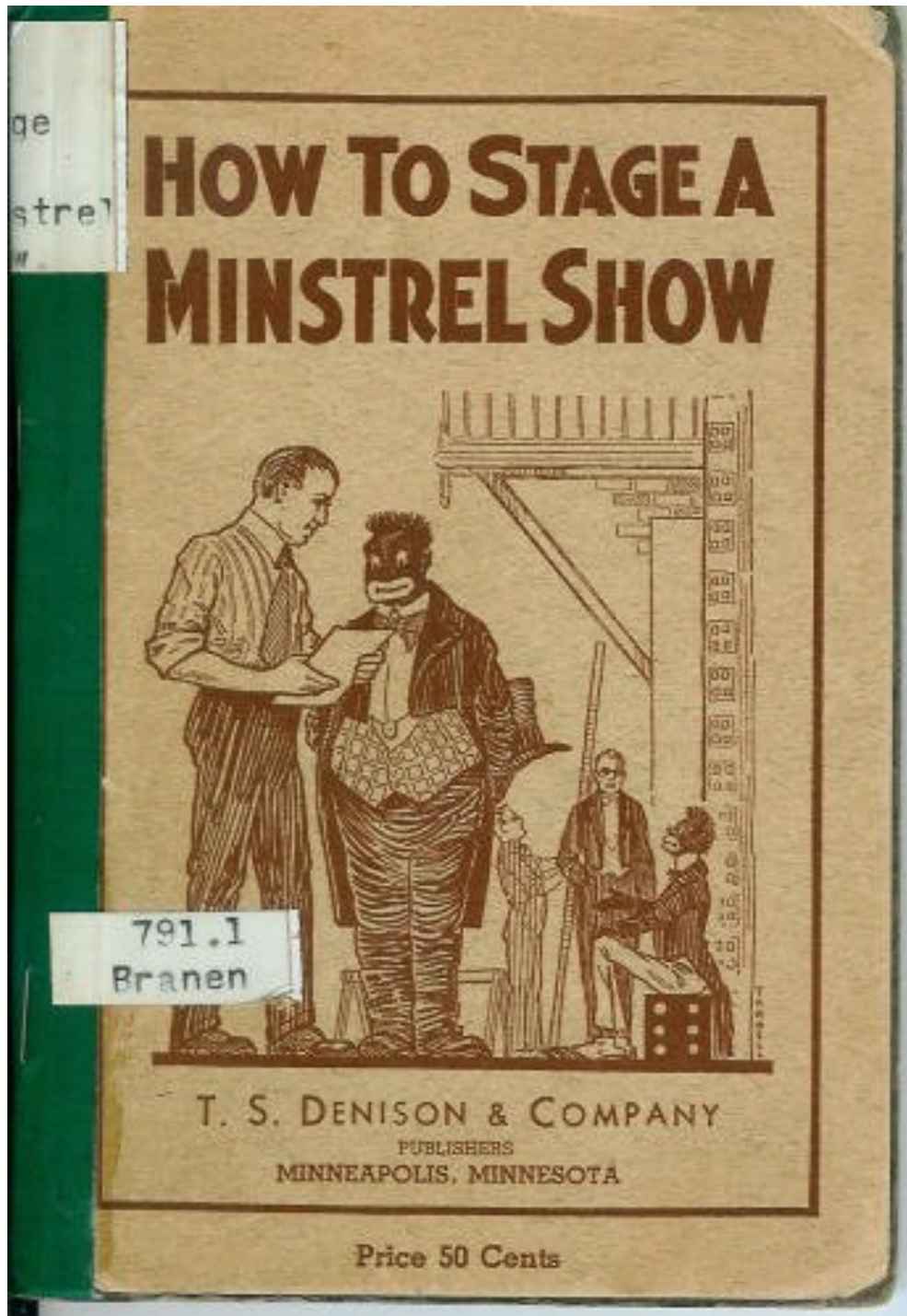
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The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Show and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia. M. Witmark and Sons, 1899.

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Cover.
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1921.

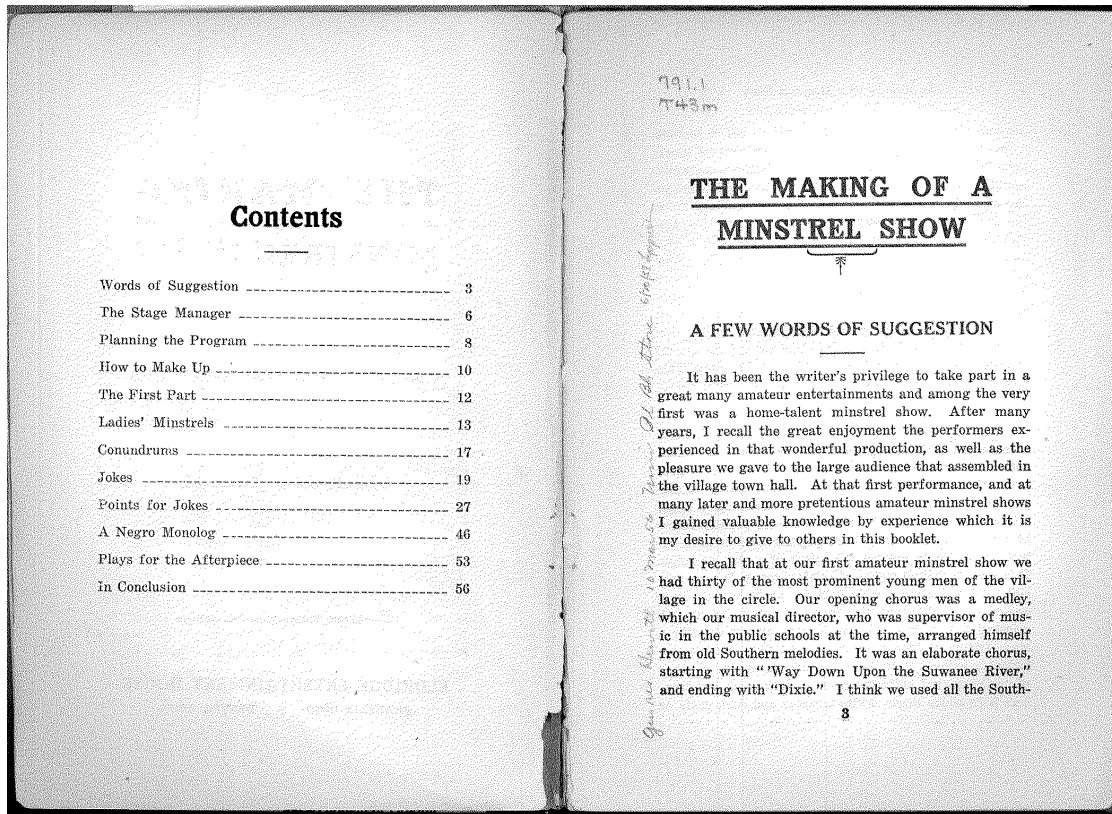


Table of Contents and opening page.

Tibbals, Seymour S. *The Making of a Minstrel Show*. Eldridge Entertainment House, Ohio: 1920.

APPENDIX B. PARADES



Poster.

Al. G. Field Greater Minstrels: Oldest, Biggest, Best. The Al. G. Field Greater Minstrels Passing Through Dewey Arch. 2 February 1900. Lithograph. Library of Congress. www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2014636974/. Accessed 5 May 2018.



Poster.

Haverly's European Mastodon Minstrels. As they appeared by special invitation at the inauguration of President Garfield. 1891. Lithograph. publisher not identified.

Library of Congress.

www.loc.gov/item/2014636992/. Accessed 5 May 2018.



Photograph.

Elks' Grand Parade, July 8th, Minneapolis, MN. Keystone View Co. Photograph. Library of Congress. www.loc.gov/item/2002717139/. Accessed 5 May 2018.

APPENDIX C. BLACKFACE AMATEUR TROUPES



Photograph

Men's Club, Wayne, PA. Frontispiece.

Powell, Herbert Preston. *The World's Best Book of Minstrelsy*, Penn Publishing, 1926.

Minstrels Guests of the Association

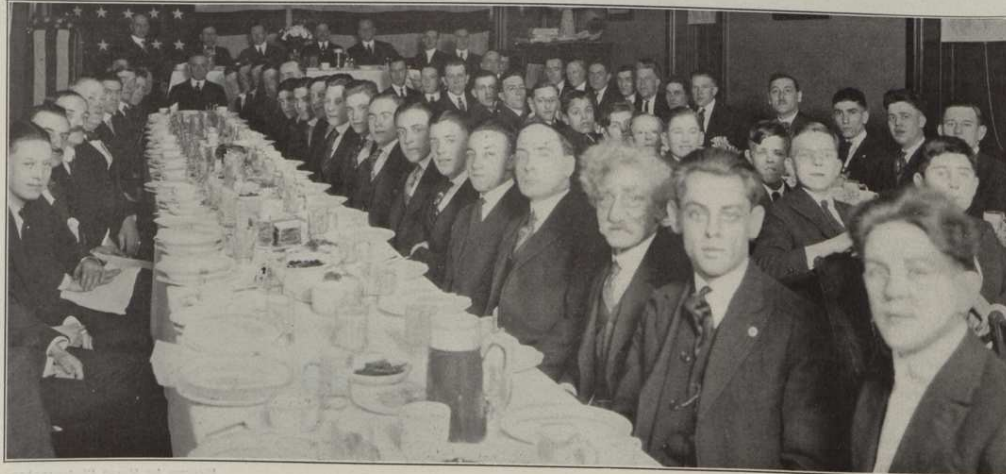
A TESTIMONIAL dinner tendered to those who took part in the recent minstrel show was held at the Twelfth Assembly District Republican Club on the evening of February 5th. The dinner will be remembered by those present as another Morse success. After a repast of endless courses and generous portions, the guests were entertained by various members of the company present, who recited, sang or spoke to the great enjoyment of all.

The fun started with the singing of the opening chorus of the show, followed by stories by the well-known traveler, Carlisle Stecher, Mr. Hanbury, President Joseph McGuirk, Mr. Benner, Charles G. Pearson and Harry E. Gold, who directed the minstrel show.

Mr. Benner served as toastmaster and got much fun out of the affair by unexpectedly calling upon different ones present for a speech, song, story or dance. Joe McGuirk recited in his usually funny man-

ner and also sang "Down on Old King Solomon's Farm."

During the evening Mr. Gold was presented with a gold watch as a token of the esteem in which he was held by those who took part in the minstrel show and also by the Employees Association. He graciously responded to the gift by telling his audience that he had enjoyed his work from the very start and he attributed the success of the show to the hard work that the different ones in it put in.



Picture by Morse Photographer.

Magazine clip.

"Minstrel Guests of the Association." *The Morse Dry Dock Dial*. Vol. 4, no. 3. March 1921. The Morse Dry Dock Dial was an in-house publication for company employees. The company was a leading shipbuilder centered in New York.

www.digital.hagley.org. Accessed August 24, 2018.



Photograph.
“Actors in Blackface Makeup Seated in a Semi-Circle.” Byron Company. New York.
1906. www.collections.mcnyc.org/Collection/Minstrels. Accessed 22 May 2018.

The Minnesota Daily

The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Tuesday, February 11, 1919.

CLEMENT TO URE TODAY AT ITTLE THEATER

Is Graduate of Univer-
f Paris—Won Many
Scholarships.

AKING LECTURE UR OVER COUNTRY

tured In Egypt and In
ost Every College
In France.

rguerite Clement of France
a lecture at the University
ta in the Little Theater at
k today, February 11. Her
be "Where French and
Educators Differ and Some-
gree."

ment is one of the progres-
n of her nation, and is a
f the University of Paris,
ferred upon her one of its
rees, that of Agregoe. From
enth year, Mlle. Clement
her education entirely
e scholarships she won. Un-
ahn Scholarship (University
she went half way round
and when in Egypt delivered
lecture ever given before
women.

lement was the first Ex-
rofessor and Lecturer for
Newham and Girton Col-
lidge, (England). She
the professor in the Lycée
ux and now holds the chair
Language and Literature in
de Versailles. She has
nearly all of the leading col-
rance, and is now on a tour
series of lectures through-
United States at various col-
universities.

lement is a member of the
staff of the L'Oeuvre of Paris.
ings deal with social ques-
now especially with after-
problems. She has been ac-
rested in furthering a fuller
iding and a richer exchange
between France and Amer-
speaks English fluently.
ke Monday, February 10, be-
liance Francaise on "Clemen-
e Tiger."

ible is invited to attend this
oday, which, it is reported,
f particular interest to those
d in secondary and higher

QUERS WILL CONSIDER PLAYS

ee of Five Appointed to Rep-
sent Club's Choice of
Plays.

WOULD YOU EVER HAVE RECOGNIZED THEM! NO! OUR OWN FACULTY WILL CUT LOOSE TONIGHT



Sedate Faculty Members Will Throw Big Surprise At Minstrel Show Tonight

Taft To Speak At Convocation This Thursday

No third hour classes will be held Thursday morning and the entire two hours from 10:30 to 12:30 will be devoted to convocation when former president William Howard Taft, judge of the Supreme Court and president of the League To Enforce Peace; President James Lowell of Harvard University and Henry Morgenthau, former United States ambassador to Turkey will speak.

It is very seldom that a university audience or any other audience is privileged to hear such a brilliant combination of speakers, according to those in charge, and the University of Minnesota is indebted to the Northern Congress for a League To Enforce Peace, which brings these eminent men to Minneapolis for this rare opportunity. This congress, which includes Minnesota, North and South Dakota and Montana, convenes Thursday at the Radisson Hotel, Minneapolis and will continue through Friday. Admission to the Armory will be

100 Wounded Soldiers From Fort Snelling To Be Honorary Guests.

PRESIDENT BURTON TO WELCOME THE VISITORS

Armory To Be Decorated With
Flag Display of Dr.
C. V. Fox.

Through the generosity of members of the faculty and downtown patrons of the all-University minstrel show, to be given under the auspices of the Faculty Women's Club tonight in the Armory, 100 wounded soldiers from Fort Snelling will attend in a body, enabled to do so by the chartering of a car at the expense of the University Glee Club. The wounded men will be the guests of honor tonight. In his address of welcome, President M. L. Burton will extend a special greeting to them. The girls of the University are to have the honor of playing hostess to the soldiers at the dance which is to follow the program.

National flags of the 18 countries which have student representatives at the University of Minnesota will fly from the balcony. They will come from the prized collection of Dr. C. V. Fox of Westington Springs, S. D., whose daughter, Miss Helen Fox, is a

Solo Dancers To Be At The "Cage" This Afternoon

Burlesque parlor dancing by Mary K. Hartung and Loraine Eichten will be one of the special features at the Parrot Cage this afternoon. The Alpha Phis will act as hostesses. The cage will open at 3:30 and dancing will commence at 4 o'clock sharp.

On Thursday the Thetas will again entertain during the afternoon. Friday will be Delta Gamma day. On Saturday a sunlight will be given in the ballroom of the Union with the same orchestra which played last Saturday. The proceeds will go to the Parrot Cage free will fund.

Miss Gretchen Schmid, who is in active charge of the afternoon tea-room is very much pleased by the way students are patronizing the place. "Groups of co-eds are growing accustomed to dropping in after class for a piece of cake and a dance or two. The floor is nearly always filled with dancers and the Cage is steadily growing in popularity."

KAPPA PHO MEETS.

COMMITTEE M BANQUET REPORT O

Banquet, Talks, and
of "M's To I
Events

DANCE IN BALL FOLLOW PRESI

Tickets To Be On S
Postoffice, Shev
and Co-C

The "M" Banquet
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day night. The comm
following report:

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in the hopes of estab
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and its particular form
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tainment has been pla
to the committee, con
quet, followed by a p
talks by prominent c
mer campus speakers
tion of the M's and
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is expected by many
one of the outstandi
of the school year, a
tee solicits your aid
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for the future. It is
sure that the "M" ba
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Tickets are \$1 a perso
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and Co-Op. As the
ited, none will be a
dance only.

The committee gu
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(Continued from

INTERFRATE GAMES PO

Faculty Minstrel St
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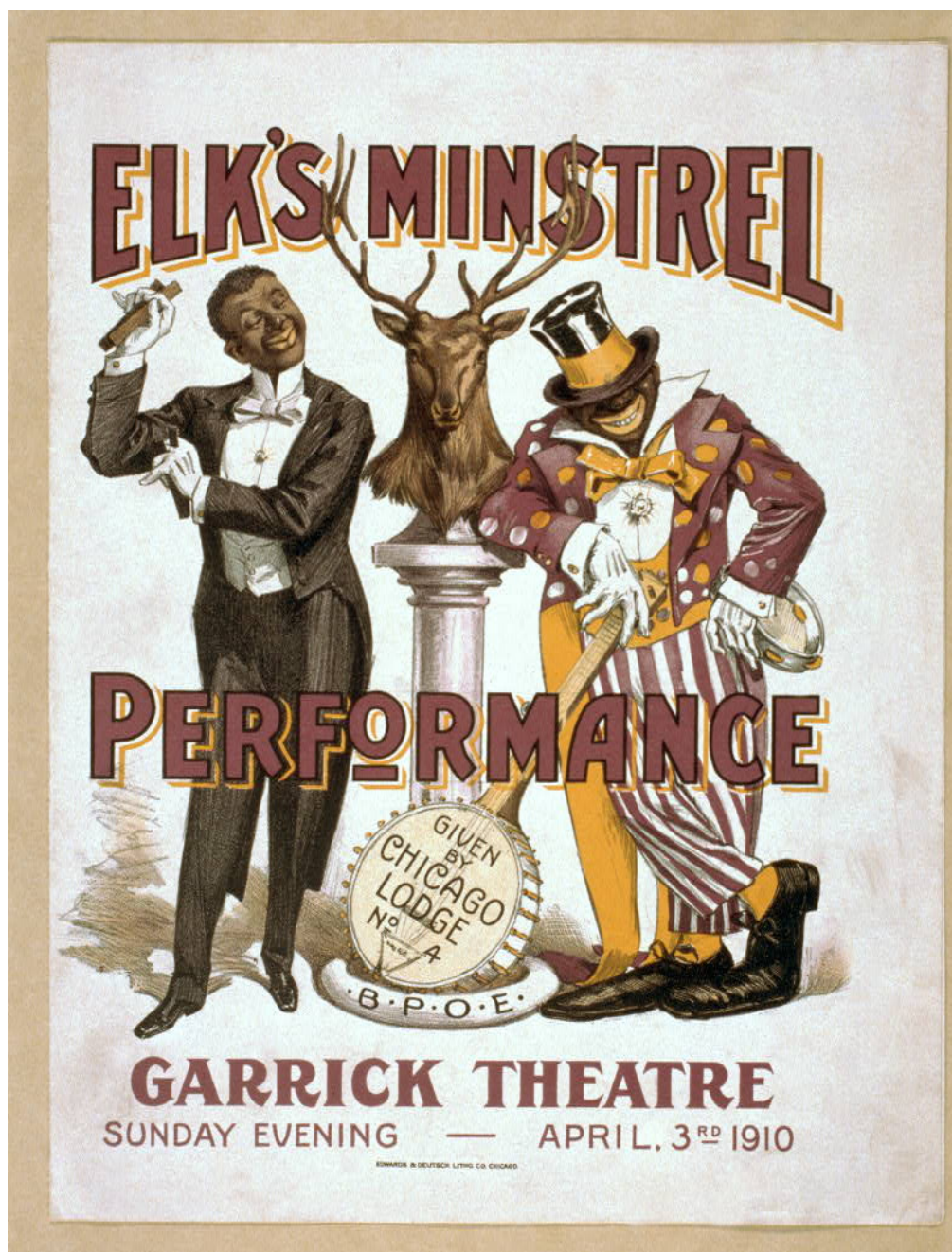
Newspaper Clip.
"Sedate Faculty Members Will Throw Big Surprise at Minstrel Show Tonight." *The Minneapolis Daily*, 11 February 1919, p. 1.



Photograph.

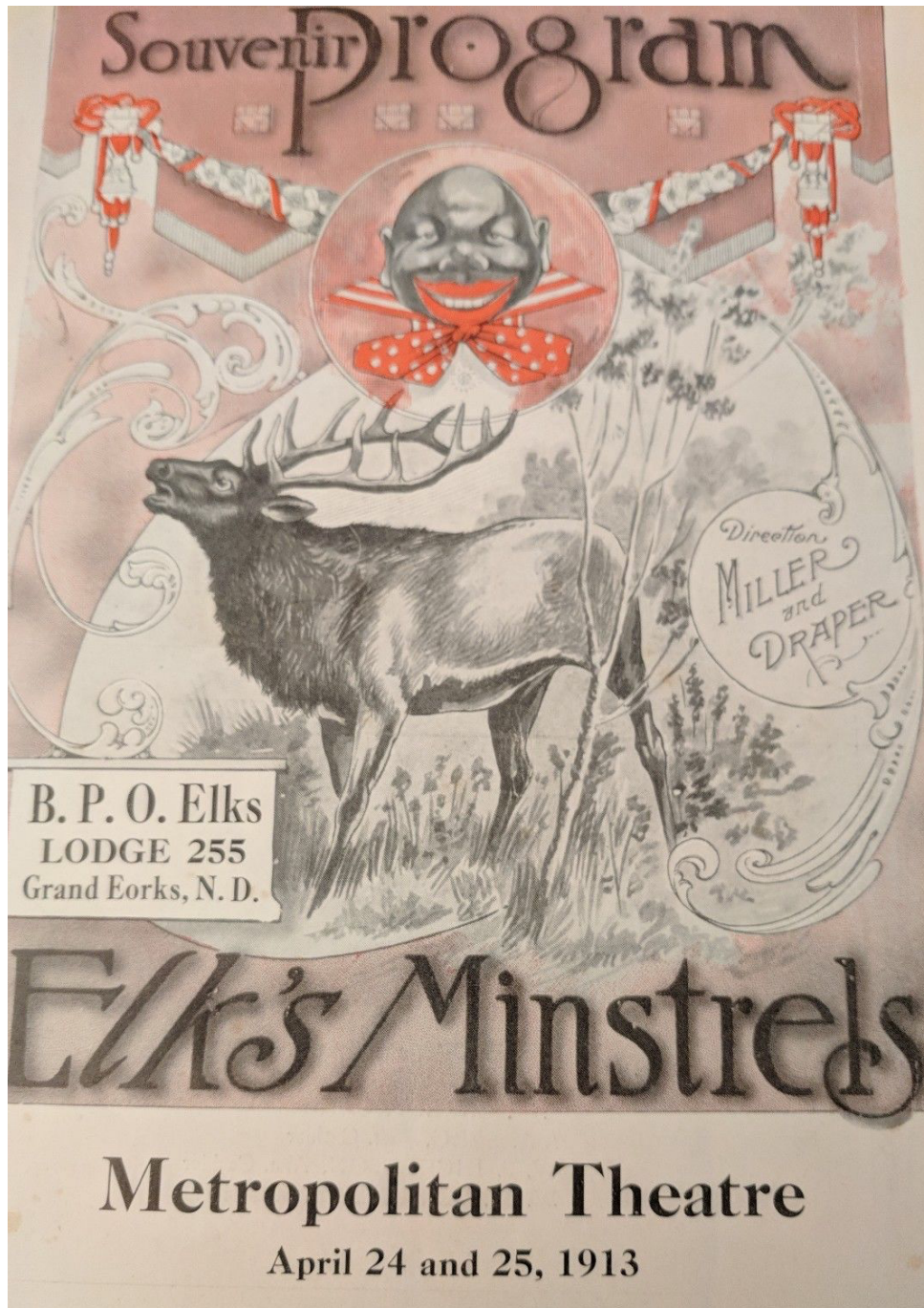
“Cub Scouts and Parents Rehearse for Minstrel Show.” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, 11 April 1948. www.search-proquest-com.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/hnpminneapolisstartribune/ Accessed 22 May 2018.

APPENDIX D. THE ELKS



Lithography minstrel show poster.

Edwards & Deutsch Litho. Co, and Elks. Elk's minstrel performance given by Chicago Lodge No. 4, B.P.O.E. Edwards & Deutsch Litho. Co. Photograph, 1910. The Library of Congress. www.loc.gov/item/2014635572/. Accessed 5 May 2018.



Souvenir Program.

Elks Minstrels, Metropolitan Theatre, Grand Forks, N.D., April 24-25, 1913.
www.ebay.com/itm/Souvenir-Program-for-Elks-Minstrels-Metropolitan-Theatre-Grand-Forks-ND. Accessed 5 May 2018.



5086—Elks' Grand Parade, July 8th, 1897, Minneapolis, Minn.,
Our Motto:—"Charity, Justice, Brotherly-love, and Fidelity."

Photograph.

Elks' Grand Parade, July 8th, Minneapolis, MN; Our motto:-- "Charity, Justice, Brotherly-love, and Fidelity." Keystone View Co. Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2002717139/. Accessed 5 May 2018.

Minneapolis Morning Tribune (1909-1922); Mar 2, 1913;
 toQuest Historical Newspapers Minneapolis Tribune (1867-1922)
 g, A2

Minneapolis Elks Preparing for Annual **Minstrel Show**, The Proceeds of Which Go Toward Furnishing Home



THE ELKS' NEW HOME



SEVEN PRIZE DANCERS OF '44'
 (KNOWN AS THE SEVEN DANCING BEAUTIES)
 (LEFT TO RIGHT) FRANK MINNEMENY, GEO. BUCKINGHAM,
 W. E. FURBER, A. LAURENCE, CHARLES PEARL, J. W.
 ROBERTS AND HARRY RAWSON.

IMPRESSIONIST
 SKETCHES OF
 SOME OF THE
 MINSTRELS
 "CARTER"

With a heavier advance sale of exchange tickets than in any previous year, and with the actor-Elks primed and groomed by one of the best stage talents in the country, everything is set for the annual Elks' minstrel show which will begin in the Schubert later the last half of this week, beginning Thursday evening.

"If enthusiasm, energy and conscientious effort have anything to do with it, we shall have the best minstrel show ever seen on a local stage, whether professional or amateur," said Jerry Miller, the stage director. "I have met a crowd that took hold of things as willingly and seriously as the boys of '41' and, unless my

judgment, backed by 15 years' experience, is wrong, we shall have the snappiest, classiest show ever put together."

Proceeds for New Home.
 The proceeds of this year's show go to the furnishing fund for the new Elks' home on Seventh street and Second avenue south. Every member of the lodge is working hard to make this the grandest success from every standpoint in the history of the organization.

At the last regular meeting a resolution was passed that every member

of the Minneapolis lodge should take the second balcony seats, giving the visitors and regular theatergoers the choice of the two lower floors. The wives of the members have formed a "Purple Matinee club" that will attend the Saturday matinee in a body,

and each one will wear something purple for the occasion.

Promptly at noon on Thursday, the first day of the show, a street parade will be given and it will be a "knockout" in point of originality with over 1,000 men in line.

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Newspaper Clip.
 "Elks Preparing for amateur Minstrel Show." *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*,
 Minneapolis, MN, 2 March 1913.