Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music, 1812-1925

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Much like the American public, following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s scholars of United States history have had a complex relationship with blackface minstrelsy. For scholars, as for many Americans, blackface minstrelsy partook in a vibrant and rich vernacular tradition, albeit one that by now most Americans have rightfully grown ashamed of. It was part and parcel of a working-class popular culture native to the early United States, yet represented some of the most heinous ideas about race to develop on American shores – or on any shores for that matter. Thankfully, Brian Roberts's recent study of blackface minstrelsy, *Blackface Nation* refuses to participate in any such ambiguities. Unlike former studies that employed subtle formulas to reassure readers that in its 1830s origins blackface had first developed as a subversive, anti-elitist formula wielded by a multiracial working class – only to be corrupted over the 1840s and beyond – Roberts locates blackface minstrelsy squarely and unequivocally within what he regards as 'the modern racial state' (p. 20). Furthermore, whereas earlier studies have often suggested that Americans have to some degree taken to blackface out of a sincere appreciation and even 'love' for black vernacular traditions, Roberts avoids such embellishments. Instead he regards the impetus to practice blackface as a variation of a hate crime: a 'love crime', marking in the early United States 'the appearance of racial ideologies that could become more widespread, more generally accepted, and linked with pleasure' (p. 158).

To establish his argument Roberts relates a narrative that traces the ebbs and flows of popular music from its premodern vernacular and communal traditions brought from Europe and the broader Atlantic world to their participation in culture wars over the national character following the War of 1812. Musical stage performances associated with blackface minstrelsy, Roberts persuasively shows, complemented from the very beginning broad social and political struggles over hegemony in the antebellum period. *Blackface Nation* lays much of the blame for the rise of this new form of music and dance with the growing turbulence caused by economic forces over the 1820s and 1830s, that ushered in a 'culture of the marketplace ... characterized by social relations emphasizing competition and deception for profit' (p. 161). Casting 'the representative black male – poor, uneducated, and always singing or dancing – [as] the bedrock of authentic identity', blackface imagery undermined any attempt to challenge this mainstay of the white racial state and denigrated notions of respectability or uplift associated with middle-class values (p. 102). In other words, it was the fighting music of the working classes in their clashes with middle-class notions of Christian reform,

moral suasion, and even more tensely, with abolitionism. According to Roberts, the middle class ethos too found its expression in contemporary popular music, most notably in the respectable and melodic performances of the Hutchison Family Singers, who in their style and content were the opposite, mirror image of the raucous and racy revelries of the blackface stage.

The book consists of an introduction and ten easily accessible chapters, the last of which is also a conclusion. The first chapter of the book examines the origins of 19th-century popular music in earlier traditions of communal song and dance. The second chapter casts the War of 1812 as a watershed moment, when patriotic effusions swept up earlier vernacular traditions, appropriating them as part of war-time jingoism. Both chapters employ a little known Boston print shop as a window into early print culture. Operated by Nathaniel Coverly, it captured, according to Roberts, the transition from vernacular to popular-culture traditions in the early republic. Chapter three follows the early beginnings of blackface minstrelsy in its urban, white, and working class setting, casting the urban environment of Journeymen-turned-laborers and newly arrived immigrants as the crucible that forged early blackface song and dance. Chapter four, by contrast, examines popular music traditions that *were* in fact part of the cultural fabric black folks wove in the early United States. The chapter also examines broader, often ambivalent, attitudes within black communities toward popular music, revealing strong affinities between leading figures in the black abolition movement and contemporary middle-class sensibilities. Chapter six, entitled 'Love Crimes', returns to the heyday of blackface minstrelsy in the late 1830s and beyond, capturing the cultural work it performed in service of the racial state and in opposition to middle-class reform, as well as its early inroads into middle-class popular culture through such figures as Stephen Foster.

In chapters five, seven, and eight *Blackface Nation* reveals a bit more of its agenda with the introduction of the Hutchison Family Singers, a singing group consisting of three brothers and a sister from rural Milford, New Hampshire. Bursting on to the scene in the early 1840s at the exact moment when blackface minstrelsy hit mainstream, national popularity, the singers represented, Robert shows, a popular movement led by dedicated reformers. In perhaps the most questionable and provocative gesture in the book, Roberts also suggests that the singing group's support for immediate abolitionism demonstrated that abolitionist reform was a broad, popular movement and should not be written off as fringe radicalism (p. 216). While chapter five traces the early years of the Hutchison Family Singers, chapter seven continues with their years of popular success, also introducing additional characters such as P. T. Barnum and the 'Swedish Nightingale', Jenny Lind. Chapter eight, entitled 'Culture Wars', continues with the story of the Hutchison Family and the emergence of a broader Northern anti-slavery movement, pitting it against the broad appeal of blackface minstrelsy and to the backdrop of the growing tensions that led to the Civil War.

Finally, the last two chapters provide a pithier account of the rise to dominance of blackface minstrelsy during the 1850s, and even more so in the wake of the Civil War. Casting blackface imagery and song as the dominant form of American popular music well into the 20th century, it ends by hinting at the many ways in which this odious heritage is very much still with us. In this latter account of events following the Civil War Roberts again casts economic transformations and a resurgent racial state as the primary historical forces behind the rise of blackface minstrelsy to an almost ubiquitous position in American popular culture. As the title of the book suggests, by the era of Jim Crow – not incidentally a name burrowed from blackface popular music – the United States had become a 'blackface nation'.

Wide in scope, *Blackface Nation* examines many of the important episodes in 19th-century US history through popular music. Demonstrating both story-telling skills and a remarkable command of print sources – including song sheets, songsters, broadsides, and numerous other published records from the period – perhaps Roberts's greatest achievement in this study is unfolding a gripping account of American culture while maintaining a remarkable focus on its expressions in song and music. The result is one of the most informative and persuasive cultural histories of the 19th century to come out in recent years. Especially for historians who do not tend to engage very widely with literary scholarship from the period, *Blackface Nation* will prove invaluable as a study that maintains a firm grip on the broader historical context and the archive, even as it approaches subject matter that too often remain in the realm of other, related fields such as theater,

music, and American studies. This interdisciplinary approach that does not shy away from thought-provoking theoretical literature – yet remains firmly grounded in the sources and context in ways that make it palatable for historians – is surely a much needed addition to the field of US cultural history.

Though siting blackface within the culture wars and market upheavals of the 19th century is a great strength of this study, its weaknesses stem from an overly rigid conceptualization of these historical contexts. For as much as culture wars in United States history have featured two opposing sides locked in a struggle that engulfed a vast array of cultural phenomena, they have also to a significant degree complemented each other, helping the United States as a nation skirt around the most troubling aspects of its heritage. Thus when *Blackface Nation* associates the white working class with blackface minstrelsy and the middle classes with the culture of abolitionism and reform it fails to fully grapple with the complicity of the American middle classes in the creation of what Roberts aptly regards as the racial state.

This is also where a dated and somewhat cryptic conceptualization of the ‘market revolution’ hides more than it reveals. In what at times appears like a move designed to avoid putting the full brunt of the blame on the white working class, *Blackface Nation* turns to the market as an external rather than internal element in the interplay of forces in American history. Thus it leans on an abstract notion of the market and the alienating culture it fostered to explain the corruption of vernacular cultures by modern capitalism. A more nuanced conceptualization of the market, by contrast, would cast it as fundamental to the creation of the United States and the British North American colonies from the outset. By the War of 1812 economic and social forces long at work as part of the settler-colonial project in North America had reached an important and formative moment, but they were hardly new or external. Indeed, they were intrinsic to the processes that bred the very middle class culture that *Blackface Nation* tends to romanticize. By focusing our attention on the Hutchinson Family Singers as representatives of middle-class reform agendas, Roberts elides the very structure of class stratification the middle classes – including the Hutchison Family Singers – participated in. Even more problematic, it diverts our attention from the central role middle-class reform culture played in sanitizing the racial state in their own minds. Casting the blame for the darker aspects of American history on the white working class, middle-class reformers and their captive audiences could rest assured that their hands were clean of their country’s original sins. Yet content and sanctimonious northerners seldom hesitated to reap the fruits of slavery and western expansion. Indeed, in many ways they were the ones who most benefited from the exploits and labor of Andrew Jackson and his flock of ‘crude’ frontiersmen and urban ‘rabble’.

To be fair, like most other histories critical of the United States, in its own way *Blackface Nation* seeks to find glimmers of hope within the violent and grim history of the racial state; to not leave the reader without some comforting moments with which to return to the present where the culture wars still rage. Stories have use for inspiring protagonists and vibrant tales of resistance that might suggest alternative outcomes. Roberts’s choice to highlight the exploits of the Hutchison Family Singers and later in the narrative the Fisk Jubilee Singers as worthy, if at times troubled, cultural warriors reminds us that for every hegemony there are counter hegemonies and that ‘you cannot fool all the people all the time’. It also suggests that many cultural products, and even some traditions cultivated by white folks over the stretch of American history, have not been wholly complicit with the racial state. Roberts could have done much worse than choosing to treat the Hutchison Family Singers generously. As he shows, they were in fact central to a popular and lively protest movement that played an important role in pushing the Northern American public toward a more hostile and eventually even militant position against slavery. Despite the shortcomings noted above, *Blackface Nation* reminds us that even though some of the more commendable movements and ideas in United States history were partly products of elitism and class stratification, it does not mean that the ideas themselves are not worthy or that the history of middle-class reform has nothing to teach us today.

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/278404>