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978-0-521-87011-5 - Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861: Lifting the Veil of Black

Heather S. Nathans

Excerpt

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Introduction

IN HIS *NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA*, THOMAS JEFFERSON argued that unlike white Americans whose emotions could be clearly read on their faces, Africans were concealed behind a “veil of black” that not only obscured any attempt to display sentiment but rendered Africans incapable of experiencing the same range of feelings as their white counterparts. Historian Jay Fliegelman has suggested that Jefferson’s portrayal of blacks as “insensible” to nuances of tone or color also implicitly disqualified them from any broader participation in a democratic system.¹

In many ways, Jefferson’s opinions reflect the general representation of African characters on the antebellum American stage. However a number of sentimental portrayals of African and slave characters on the American stage between 1787 and 1861 challenged these facile images and demonstrated the growing ambivalence about the place of slavery in a democratic system. I hope that an examination of the sentimentalized texts, images, and performances presented to American audiences during this period will illuminate how the debate over black participation in American society translated into the vernacular of the popular stage.

Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787–1861: Lifting the Veil of Black examines the works of playwrights like John Murdock, an eighteenth-century Philadelphia hairdresser so touched by the heroic actions of the city’s black citizens during the Yellow Fever crisis of 1793 that he wrote a play staging the nation’s first scene of slave emancipation. I explore the motives of New York playwright and performer A.B. Lindsley, who, in an otherwise innocuous farce called *Love and Friendship, or Yankee Notions*, included a monologue delivered by a slave character about the horrors of the Middle Passage. In this work I question the popularity of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in a

¹ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 192–193.

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year in which the nation witnessed some of its worst race riots, ignited by the threat of black and white amalgamation. Additionally, I mine the novels, pamphlets, and narratives of the period that influenced theatre managers and authors. For example, I investigate why theatre managers seized upon the novel *Aunt Dinah's Pledge* to create the first black temperance heroine and how they changed the original text to make it palatable to white theatre audiences. I ask how the lecture tours of traveling abolitionist "agents" exploited the image of the stage Yankee, and whether those images might allow scholars to re-think the familiar stage Yankee/stage African pairing.

Between 1787 and 1861 the American stage offered a site for negotiating black identity in the new nation. Images of blacks and slaves presented in the playhouse either confirmed or contested their right to participate in a democratic system – a right somehow predicated on their ability to "perform" the same emotional attachment to the nation as their white counterparts. Sentimental depictions of slavery on the national stage emerged as an effort to offer living proof that the "veil of black," while it described the "tincture of the skin," could not obscure the "texture of the mind."²

Of course most popular plays of the antebellum period depicted blacks as servants, clowns, or tricksters. Much excellent work, including, Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, William J. Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*, Dale Cockrell's *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*, and W. T. Lhamon, Jr.'s *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*,³ has probed the development of the minstrel character on the American stage. Additionally, several recent works including Errol Hill and James Hatch's masterful and encyclopedic study, *A History of African American Theatre*, Marvin McAllister's *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Color*, Shane White's *Stories of Freedom in Black New York*, and Harry Elam and David Krasner's *African American*

² Letter from James Hewlett, performer with the African Theatre, to Charles Mathews. Mathews, a white British actor, had lampooned Hewlett as an African American who had dared to play white stage roles. Printed in the *National Advocate*, May 8, 1824, cited in George A. Thompson, Jr., *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 148.

³ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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Performance and Theater History have traced histories of African American performers and playwrights in the American theatre.⁴ Works such as Natalie Zemon Davis's *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* and Donald Bogle's *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American films*, have mapped the history of racial stereotypes in the cinema.⁵ However, aside from numerous studies on the perennially popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, fewer works have pursued an in-depth investigation of the sentimental history of black characters in antebellum American theatre. Nor have they questioned how these portrayals of slaves shaped America's long discourse on slavery – a discourse that began before the final ratification of the Constitution. The thread I see running throughout these representations of black identity is the complex notion of “sentiment,” a word whose meaning transformed rapidly during the antebellum years, but whose multiple resonances inflected and informed the way playwrights and performers presented black characters on the national stage in the period from the Revolution up to the Civil War.

I situate my study not only among the outstanding scholars of African American theatre whose work has preceded mine, but within the theoretical and methodological models provided by cultural historians such as Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis who use sometimes pivotal and sometimes obscure texts or events in a nation's history as keys to unlocking the political, social, and cultural context that shaped them. I also draw upon the framework outlined by Stephen John Hartnett in his *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America*. Hartnett uses a wide array of materials, including speeches, pamphlets, poetry, paintings, and broadsides, surrounded by “thick descriptions that strive to portray antebellum America in all its stunning beauty and shocking barbarity.”⁶ I am, of course, also indebted to those scholars of American theatre whose research

⁴ Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Color: William Brown's African and American Theatre* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Harry Elam and David Krasner, eds., *African American Performance and Theater History: A critical reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Davis's work deals with slavery from the Ancient Greeks to the present day, but offers a significant discussion of the representation of African American slavery. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum Press, 2001).

⁶ Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 1.

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has laid the foundation for my study, including Bruce McConachie, Gary Richardson, Jeffrey Mason, Don Wilmeth, Joseph Roach, John Frick, Rosemarie Bank, Gay Gibson Cima, and others. These authors have examined the connections between theatrical representations and the dramas taking place outside the playhouse, illuminating issues of race, class, and gender conflict. A number of American theatre scholars also have new works underway that promise to expand the field of nineteenth-century American and African American theatre considerably, including Gay Gibson Cima, Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, John Frick, Peter Reed, Jeffrey H. Richards, and Lisa Merrill.⁷

I also owe much to those scholars of African American history and culture, including Gary Nash, Ira Berlin, John Hope Franklin, Shane White, David Brion Davis, Eric Foner, Philip Morgan, and many more, whose detailed investigations of every aspect of slavery in the antebellum period has provided such a rich landscape for me to explore. I hope that my work will contribute to the ongoing discussion of the role of African-American characters and performers in our cultural history and that my project will offer scholars in a range of fields a new perspective on a complicated moment in the nation's theatrical history.

Sentiment and slavery

Cultural historian Robert Darnton has recommended that one of the best starting points for a historical investigation is the place where the contemporary scholar fails to “get the joke.”⁸ For me, this study begins not with an impenetrable joke, but with a baffling choice – the choice to incorporate sentimental antislavery rhetoric onstage when so many other racist examples populated the nineteenth-century playhouse and culture. Just as the humor of a bygone era frequently seems inaccessible to contemporary readers, often its sentiment does as well. Indeed, the hyperbole of

⁷ Several of the scholars listed above have undertaken projects that may intersect with my own, but I have tried (when possible) to focus on areas that I know will not overlap with their studies. Frick and Mullenix, for example, are developing new studies on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Cima's study traces the role of women in the abolitionist movement and the performativity of their protests. Richards's work charts the presence of black labor in the theatre – especially in the South. Reed's forthcoming study investigates the representation of the black underclass in the playhouse (including the Caribbean).

⁸ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre, and other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 2.

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Gothic fiction or melodrama may strike the modern reader or audience member as somewhat embarrassing. Jane Tompkins observes that modern culture often critiques sentimental fiction for the very qualities of “evangelical piety and moral commitment” that actually make it particularly useful to contemporary scholars investigating “the way a culture thinks about itself.” Against those who would ridicule its emotionalism, who would “equate popularity with debasement” and “emotionality with ineffectiveness,” Tompkins contends that the sentimental stories of the antebellum era represent “attempts to redefine the social order” that scholars cannot and should not overlook.⁹

The word “sentiment” appears throughout the cultural discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its meaning underwent numerous transformations during that period. At times invoked in religious or patriotic rhetoric, at times allied to thrilling tales of Gothic horror, the word’s very flexibility made it useful to a culture struggling to define its emotional and psychological parameters in the wake of a revolution and under the pressure of creating a new nation. Many scholars have explored the uses of sentiment in antebellum America and I draw upon their useful models for my investigations here. For example, Joseph Fichtelberg argues that sentimentalism mediated conflict in an increasingly disjointed, capitalist-driven environment.¹⁰ Fichtelberg’s interpretation of the connection between upsurges in sentimental rhetoric and the depersonalized, disempowering expansion of the national economy may help to explain the effectiveness of the sentimental combination of characters such as the stage Yankee and stage African. Both moved in commercialized spheres and their alliance and camaraderie (though often temporary or uneasy) brought a more personal touch to the complex realms in which they circulated.

Elizabeth Barnes also stresses the power of sentiment to model “sympathetic bonds,” but for her those bonds allow the individual to place himself in another’s position and imagine that he is actually experiencing that other individual’s “authentic” emotions.¹¹ Barnes’s *States of Sympathy* explores the connection between sentiment, the family, and politics, suggesting that in order for works like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to function successfully for an

⁹ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 123.

¹⁰ Joseph Fichtelberg, *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Marketplace, 1780–1870* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 7.

¹¹ Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5 and 95.

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audience, sympathy must be made “contingent upon similarity.”¹² In other words, only by eliding racial/physical differences, and by emphasizing “not ... literal bodies, but the feelings and perceptions that come to stand for bodies,” can sentimental fiction develop the “affinitive politics” that will help to affect social, political, and cultural change.¹³ I suggest that this eliding of physical bodies is also part of “lifting the veil of black” on the American stage. It is a theme that playwrights, performers, and even theatre critics returned to repeatedly: How does the audience “overlook” the actor’s physical body (white, or white in blackface) in order to join in a political or emotional union that transcends racial identity – even as it makes demands for change contingent upon skin color? As Saidiya Hartman has pointed out in her discussion of the dangers of excessive “sentimentalizing” of slavery, picturing oneself in the position of a slave on the auction block might foster an understanding of the horrors of slavery, however it also risks displacing that slave’s very real experience and substituting the emotional identity of the observer. This imaginative displacement ultimately *distances* the spectator from his or her subject.¹⁴ Even the most successful abolitionist performances encountered this difficulty, from productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to the slave auctions of Henry Ward Beecher.

Julia Stern’s *Plight of Sympathy* questions the ways in which racial inversion (white characters masquerading in blackface), *disrupts* sentimental narrative structures by revealing both their instability (sentimental participation as predicated on racial identification), as well as their shallowness. Stern is interested in the *performance* of blackness rather than the transposition of a black experience onto a white body. For example, she suggests that early American authors used blackface to “issue a critique from a place ‘outside’ the purview of elite white culture,” an argument echoed by Eric Lott in his seminal work, *Love and Theft*. Stern contends that blacks in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture had a certain “social invisibility” that allowed them an “intimate knowledge of white culture.” This knowledge translated into what she describes as a “form of gothic power.” According to Stern, whites may assume this “gothic power” through the performance of blackness.¹⁵

¹² Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, 92. ¹³ Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, 92.

¹⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 214.

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But the power of this performance brings perils as well. While some might see the power of black performance and its simultaneous “invisibility” as an opportunity to affect social change, it carries an implicit threat to those campaigning for black rights outside the traditional spheres of performance. The successful counterfeit of black identity “detached from and unmoved by the plight of the bondsman,” may elicit a “genuinely compassionate response” from an audience, yet, as Stern notes, such a performance (if divorced from its sympathetic context), “raises disturbing questions about the moral efficacy of representation per se.”¹⁶ In other words, while Hartman argues that the game of racial substitution can invoke sympathy *in* the performer (albeit misdirected), Stern imagines a sentimental performance of blackness that stirs a sentimental response in everyone *but* the actor. While this is the long-standing argument of the anti-theatricalists, it is also a particularly poignant and disturbing point when the performance is put at the service of an enslaved people engaged in a life or death struggle for freedom. It also raises intriguing questions for the scholar examining the performance of race in the playhouse as well as the performance of race from the pulpit, the political platform, and the press.

In some cases, sentiment also provided a rationale for violence. For many American playwrights and activists linking the aggressive rhetoric of Othello, Cinque, Nat Turner, or Spartacus to the elevated language of sentiment helped to reconcile the “discordant spectacles” of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave culture.¹⁷ But, as Stern concludes, the competing elements in these kinds of spectacles inevitably prove irreconcilable, and thus they produce a violent response when the conflicts have to be eliminated. Obviously the “irreconcilable” elements of bondage and liberty were ultimately resolved through the violence of the Civil War, but the path to that final battle appears littered with other efforts to apply sentiment to the dangerous dilemma of American slavery.

Stern, Barnes, Tompkins, Fichtelberg, and Hartman each make compelling cases for the ways in which sentiment and African American identity intersected throughout the antebellum period, suggesting the simultaneous power and danger of the sentimental genre in transforming the role of blacks in American culture. The plays of the pre-Civil War period reflect this same tension. A sentimental moment is often undercut by a comic one, or theatre critics interrupt their moving tributes to an emotional performance to insert a pejorative comment about race.

¹⁶ Stern, *Plight of Feeling*, 214–216. ¹⁷ Stern, *Plight of Feeling*, 20.

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Despite the danger and the power that these scholars describe, many sentimental dramas often seem relegated to the passive and private sphere, confined to contexts that rob them of efficacy outside a narrow and often “feminized” realm. However, I would suggest that sentiment offered a way for playwrights, performers, and audiences to push through traditional social and cultural barriers. Fichtelberg makes an intriguing case for the way authors and playwrights used sentiment to think through a political, economic, or social impasse (such as racism). Describing it as a “slippery” and “experimental” vocabulary, he suggests that the language of sentiment provides “a simulacrum of immediacy,” endowing it with an urgency and a broad political, social, and cultural power.¹⁸ This sense of power is what I find most intriguing, along with Fichtelberg’s assertions about the wide-ranging impact of sentimental culture. He defines its work as more than a mediator between real world and domestic sphere. Instead, he seizes upon the “sentimental activity” of writers ranging from Equiano to Whitman to Stowe as a means to combat the *perpetual* states of crisis that plagued American society throughout the antebellum years.¹⁹ Reading sentimental slave dramas as a response to the ongoing crises of the antebellum era helps the contemporary scholar to recover a sense of both their immediacy and activism. It also allows the historian to trace the transformations of the sentimental slave genre in response to the shifting demands of the anti-slavery struggle.

Many of the performances I discuss in this work were obviously created by white actors in blackface. For example, the moving testimony about the horrors of the Middle Passage in A.B. Lindsley’s *Love and Friendship* was delivered by a white woman in breeches and blackface. As scholars have often noted, the passionate pleas of Uncle Tom fell to a white performer too. With the exceptions of actors like those in New York’s African Theatre, solo performers such as William Wells Brown or Mary Webb, or amateur companies such as Boston’s Histrionic Club, even the most radical anti-slavery sentiments were delivered onstage by white actors. Theatre historians have long puzzled over how or why these performances “worked” for audiences. Nevertheless, the evidence of reviews, diaries, letters, and editorials suggests that audiences found white performances of blackness effective and deeply moving. Did skillful acting on the part of the performers allow them to transcend questions of white or black, or did the underlying awareness of the actor’s true racial identity help to forge an unspoken bond with the audience? Again, theatrical reviews from the period suggest both

¹⁸ Fichtelberg, *Critical Fictions*, 12. ¹⁹ Fichtelberg, *Critical Fictions*, 71.

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possibilities. Did audience members “lift the veil of black” only to discover a white face underneath? Or in the quest for a “simulacrum of immediacy,” did performers generate a plausible simulacrum of blackness as well? The answers to these questions are as slippery as the language of sentiment that frames them. Throughout this work I will interpret the connections between the representations of African Americans being offered in the playhouse and the ongoing controversy about race raging outside the theatre’s walls.

Because many of the texts considered in this study were performed over a wide geographic region and because several of them enjoyed popularity on the American stage throughout the antebellum period, this work is arranged as a thematic, rather than a chronological or regional study. Within each chapter I explore a diverse geographical and chronological range. Adhering to a thematic structure allows me to illuminate the interplay between specific local cultural, political, and economic shifts and the transformations taking place within the playhouse. Naturally it has not been possible to locate every production of each of the plays discussed in this book and I am sure that there are a number of texts I may have overlooked or productions I have failed to locate. Additionally, while I have attempted to cover a range of regions, including the Northeast, the Midwest, and the Upper South, not every city can be discussed in detail and better records exist in some cities than others. Nevertheless, I hope that the examples I offer here will provide at least a starting point for future debate.

Perhaps not surprisingly one of the greatest challenges in mapping such a study is gleaning the audience response to many of these now relatively obscure works. In the absence of direct records and personal accounts I have found alternate means to trace the trajectory and popularity of the works discussed here. Some enjoyed only a fleeting popularity on local stages. They sprang up in response to a particular event or were created to suit the tastes and talents of a particular performer. Others, such as *The Africans, or War, Love, and Duty* – a romantic drama set in the African landscape – enjoyed a several year span of popularity that coincided almost directly with the first phase of the colonization movement. *Aunt Dinah’s Pledge*, the first melodrama with a black temperance heroine, enjoyed only a brief heyday in New York but subsequently made its way to a wider audience outside the playhouse, turning up in places as obscure as a tiny church temperance festival in Wisconsin. Moreover, the novel on which the play was based remained in print for more than thirty years, suggesting that the story spoke to a wide audience. The political satire *Whigs and Democrats* enjoyed periodic revivals throughout the late 1830s and 1840s (played “by request” just before two

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significant state and national elections), with actor-manager William Burton as the star. Studying the *timing* of these plays, the number of productions and revivals they received, and their travels throughout the States can suggest what kinds of performances audiences were hungry for, since antebellum theatre managers were too canny to offer fare their patrons would find unpalatable.

I have also tried to pay close attention to the *context* in which significant performances appeared, whether literary, economic, social, or political. Throughout the work I include examples of poetry, newspaper debates, images, or local rivalries that I hope provide a broader frame in which to situate these dramas. For example, Thomas Morton's drama *The Slave* remained popular on the American stage for some years, but in chapter 5 I focus primarily on an 1818 production in Baltimore that coincided with a major local victory by the city's abolitionist community.

The early republican and antebellum periods offer a particularly rich newspaper culture, and in addition to personal papers, census data, and play texts, I have made extensive use of antebellum newspapers. Exploring a range of publications – from small local papers to national magazines – has demonstrated the ways in which the sentimental discourse on antislavery permeated every aspect of American life (even in those Southern papers that vehemently rejected it). Newspapers have proven extraordinarily helpful in understanding the performative culture of the era. I have drawn on their interpretations of what constituted “performance,” from the burning of the Pennsylvania Hall in 1838 to the parade of the Sons of Temperance in 1850s Boston.

Although the issue of morality loomed over the antislavery debates of the antebellum era, slavery's legal status in the nation remained a major source of conflict from the 1760s up until the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter. Chapter 1, “A Nation's Promise,” examines some of the legal debates in the pre-Revolutionary and early republican period that laid the foundation for conflict in the nineteenth century. It also questions how the early culture of sentiment infiltrated these dialogues.

As the Revolution approached, Americans and Britons took turns blaming each other for many things – including the institution of slavery. Americans claimed that the British had foisted the system on them, while Britons claimed that American slavery reflected the brutality of its backward colonial custodians. This debate played out in political campaigns and in performances on the colonial stage that posed the thorny question of who was to blame for American slavery. Chapter 1 also examines those plays that