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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

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Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787–1861

For almost a hundred years before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* burst onto the scene in 1852, the American theatre struggled to represent the evils of slavery. *Slavery and Sentiment* questions how the texts, images, and performances presented to American audiences during the antebellum period engaged with the debate over black participation in American society. The book reconsiders traditional comic stereotypes like Jim Crow, as well as familiar sentimental ones, such as Uncle Tom, plus a host of long-forgotten characters who once populated the American theatre, and who provoked audiences to tears, laughter, and political action. Using plays, poetry, performances, popular novels, and political cartoons, *Slavery and Sentiment* blends American history, theatre history, and literary history to question how theatre and performance lifted the “veil of black” on American racism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The book contributes to the ongoing discussion of the role of African American characters and performers in American cultural history, and offers scholars in a range of fields a new perspective on a complicated moment in the nation's theatrical past.

HEATHER S. NATHANS is Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre, University of Maryland. She is the author of *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (Cambridge, 2003), as well as essays which have appeared in the *Pennsylvania History Journal*, *Early American Studies*, the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, and the *New England Theatre Journal*, among others. She has been a guest editor for the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* and also for a 2008 special edition of the *New England Theatre Journal*, on August Wilson. Nathans is the President-Elect of the American Theatre and Drama Society.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

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Acknowledgments

HAVING GROWN UP IN NORTH CAROLINA WITH TWO historians whose areas of specialization focused on slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, it was perhaps inevitable that I would eventually turn to the representation of slavery on the American stage as a focus for my own work. Thanks to my parents, Elizabeth S. Nathans and Sydney H. Nathans, I have always had a sense of the “drama” of slavery – its narratives, its landscape, and its impact on American culture.

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