Imagining a habitable imperium, facing west : the cultural work of ante-bellum stage entertainments

Autor(en): **Blair, John G.**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **10 (1997)**

PDF erstellt am: **01.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99939

Nutzungsbedingungen
Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.
Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.
Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss
Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Ein Dienst der *ETH-Bibliothek*
ETH Zürich, Rämistrasse 101, 8092 Zürich, Schweiz, www.library.ethz.ch

http://www.e-periodica.ch

Imagining A Habitable Imperium, Facing West: The Cultural Work of Ante-bellum Stage Entertainments

John G. Blair

The "habitable imperium" of my title is not a merely rhetorical gesture towards the theme of this bi-national conference, but an evocation of American colonization of conceptual space. In the early decades of the independent United States, the aspirations of Americans were not global but North American. In this North American world geography was secondary to the *enculturation* of space, more precisely, the cultivation of a mindset such that Americans would recognize themselves as American, the creation of a national identity. This work had to start from low levels at the time of independence, given that only about one third of the [white] population showed enthusiasm for breaking with England in the early phases of the war of independence.[1]

Describing the development of an American mindset as a process does not imply that anyone was directing it; indeed no one in particular was in charge, though political leaders certainly sought and succeeded in influencing broadly shared public conceptions. George Washington in his 1796 Farewell Address invites his compatriots to arrogate to themselves the label "American," thereby launching a habit which persists to this day in our discipline with the designation "American Studies" rather than the diplomatically correct "United States Studies."

The ideas which would define an "American" subject position needed less to be invented than to be inculcated, made credible – rapidly – to considerable numbers of people. This is where staged entertainments come in. Theaters in the 19th-century breadth of their offerings (variety shows, legitimate theater, melodramas, history plays, burlesques, Shakespeare, blackface

[1] I decline the standard reference to the "War of Independence" as the "Revolutionary War," terminology which serves more as a part of United States rhetoric of national self-definition than as a descriptive term. Instead I adopt the French usage, which implicitly acknowledges that little was changed by this war except for political hegemony.

minstrels) reached broadly inclusive audiences, particularly as of the late 1820s with Jacksonian populism. Staged entertainments, particularly before the Civil War reinforced class lines and differentiation among theaters and genres, provided one of the few loci for Americans coming together in widely representative groups.

Anyone who feels tempted to read the 20th-century status of stage entertainment back into the Ante-bellum period can only go astray. In our century first film and then television capture the broad public, leaving drama as an elite art form only affordable by the upper-middling classes. Before the Civil War theaters were designed to accommodate a wide range of the urban dwellers who were swelling city populations. What was later called the "orchestra" area when seats were installed in the 1860s and after, functioned like the "pit" in Shakespeare's time. Cheap entries, benches or nothing at all to sit on, attracting largely male and working class spectators. This is where Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick would have sat in the 1850s or 1860s before he learned that to waste a quarter at the Bowery Theater (capacity 3000 at the time) would keep him from ever rising in the world.[2] The next layer up in theaters were the boxes arrayed around in a half-circle, attracting spectators from the middle class and above, never mixing with those below or above. The third tier provided another locus of cheap seats, once again largely male but notoriously plied by prostitutes in quest of customers. In addition, up into the 1830s if not beyond, spectators willing to pay an extra fee were permitted on the stage itself up to and sometimes beyond the available space. The plays put on reflected the social complexity of the audience: there was something for everybody at all levels of taste. In short, an ideal gathering for cultural work to take place.

My thesis is that we can discern in the surviving plays of this period an implicit articulation of and cultivation of a distinctively "American" mindset which I want to sketch briefly before turning to some exemplary texts. In all I identify four facets of this mindset, which can be conceptualized as a kind of cubal space[3] within which the "American" subject position is established, facing West. Behind is Old Europe; ahead is the wilderness (the Indian, the frontier, the future); below is the black, represented as visible on the lower margins of American space but off the scale on the downside; above is the deity, whose presence guarantees the ultimate success of

[2] To give a sense of comparative costs at the time, note that for his quarter admissions to the Bowery Dick could purchase five hot breakfasts.

[3] I am happy to acknowledge here the influence of my wife Karin's book, *Cubal Analysis: A Post-Sexist Model of the Psyche*, Weston, CT: Magic Circle Press, 1983.

American enterprises, otherwise recognizable as happy endings. The left and right facets of this conceptual cube never stabilize into predictable orientations because, as we shall see, the sectional conflicts leading up to the Civil War involve overt conflicts figured between North and South.

Though such orientations of mental geography, what the French call "paysage moralisé," may start out as explicit issues to be resolved in early plays, they rapidly emerge as presumptions beyond challenge which serve to frame and resolve later issues. These presumptions constitute in a quite literal sense a "subject position," because they situate all spectators in a value-laden American geographico-conceptual space orientation.

This article can offer no more than a rapid outline. The archive of American plays relevant to this project contains about 4000 items, from which I draw the obvious plays, which, because of their popularity with the public or with modern editors, have been reprinted in various collections.

It may well prove that some plays I mention are unfamiliar. If so, the blame is to be laid primarily to the generations of 20th-century literary critics of several persuasions who insisted that 19th-century drama (and not only American) was beneath notice. In their largely untested view drama became artful and interesting only with the rise of "modernism" of one stripe or another, with Ibsen and his social-problem plays or in the USA with Eugene O'Neill and innovative modern theater as of World War I. Only then does American drama receive serious attention for social or aesthetic reasons or both. I obviously oppose this view – in the name culture study. Modern drama, as I remarked at the outset, sacrifices its breadth of popular appeal at the same time that it explores aesthetic and theatrical modernity. As an upper-middle-class art form, it can speak to and for its target audience but cannot tell us much about American culture at large. That possibility is reserved for 19th-century drama which did reach broad swaths of the population, thereby providing us with a window on the formation of an "American mentality."

Europe Behind

The association of Europe with decadence and danger is flagrantly consistent in Ante-bellum drama. I will concentrate on its first articulation in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787) and then rapidly survey its later iteration. Tyler's prologue in heroic couplets makes the issues perfectly transparent:

> Our free-born ancestors such arts despis'd;
> Genuine sincerity alone they priz'd;

> Their minds with honest emulation fir'd;
> To solid good – not ornament – aspired; (Jacobus, 7)

The conflict is articulated through two flirtatious young beauties, Charlotte and Letitia, who are clearly Europe oriented, and Maria, who is more sensible, hence admirably ready to prefer things American. Dimple is the revealing name of the young American male who has britified himself during several years in London, including acquiring embarrassing debts from his pseudo-aristocratic spendthrift ways. Maria is the heiress to a considerable American fortune, whence Dimple's motivation. Royall Tyler allows himself a bit of home satire by showing Maria's father Van Rough to be excessively preoccupied with "minding the main chance," in short, money, but even he finally approves Maria's choice of Colonel Manly, whose name tells all. The subplot replays the same issues on a lower social level.

The central conflict, then, is less between European and American suitors than between the latter and fellow countrymen who have adopted superficial European manners, fake British accents, wasty ways, thereby belying their origins. On the female side parallel issues are played out. Thus the Europeanized Americans fictionalized by Henry James a century later were not new to literature but a long-established type. Our hero, who does not even present himself as a suitor, is Colonel Manly, who military title comes from service in the late war of independence. As his name suggests, he is admirable on all fronts, sincere rather than flattering, plain rather than stylish, reliable rather than pretentious. Of course in the end he triumphs and gets the girl. Their children will confirm the future of the American values thus defended against decadence from the Old World in general and England in particular.

Over the following decades play the British are not the only locus of fascination and danger for naive Americans on stage. The French, with their high status in American eyes ever since Louis XVI sent troops and ships to help defeat the British in the 1780s, invite imitation from unwary Americans. Thus Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* (1845) turns on a French emigrant couple, both servants by origin, of whom the male member passes himself off as an aristocrat, "Count Jolimaître" (see Moody, 309-48). The American wife and daughter of a prominent New York merchant are so eager to associate themselves with the prestige of anything French that they imitate (badly) what they think to be French language and customs to the point of nearly marrying off the heiress to the bogus Count. Their spendthrift ways have nearly bankrupted the husband of the family, who is ultimately bailed out by a country cousin from upstate New York free from European aspiration and decadence. A recognizable avatar of Col. Manly.

Still later in 1857, Augustus Daly's *The Poor of New York*, the villainness of the piece, Alida Bloodgood, self-centered daughter of a corrupt New York banker, reveals her baseness by taking an Italian lover, this time a legitimate but impoverished aristocrat prefiguring a Henry James type late in the century (Gerould, 31-74).

As time goes on, however, Europe as a contrast gainer for American values drops away in plays where sectional rivalries polarize American space, as in Dion Boucicault's 1859 *The Octaroon*, where Europe is simply a handy place to send a plantation owner on a grand tour while race-related conflicts intensify back home (Jacobus, 101-27). In the emerging American subject position I have yet to find an exception to the spatial orientation which places Europe behind and the frontier before.[4]

The West as Frontier

In the prototypical American subject position implicit in these plays, the West is figured as straight ahead; not yet the Far West, of course, but somewhere west of the East Coast cities where the drama is flourishing : New York, Philadelphia, Boston above all. The personification of the wilderness is, of course, the Indian, featured in a whole series of plays in the Antebellum period. The most famous was John Augustus Stone's *Metamora, Last of the Wampanoags* (1829), which, as suggested by its title's echo of James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1825), places a noble and long-suffering Indian in a distant time (Moody, 199-228). Cooper's Mohicans flourished 50 to 75 years before he wrote and published his romances; this author distanced his audience twice as far since the events are linked to King Philip's War in late 17th-century New England. This play served as a wonderful vehicle for Edwin Forrest in the bombastic acting style of the period, but the Indian, as in Cooper, could act nobly only at the price of disappearance from history. There were no Indian presences to perturb the urban audiences of the early 19th century. The vogue of *Metamora* was finally ended by a two-act burlesque in the mid-1840s, entitled *Metamora, or The Last of the Pollywogs*, by John Brougham. One of the key devices of travesty here is malapropism, authorized, of course, by Sheridan's *School for Scandal* but

---

[4] Situating the American subject position as "facing West" may readily evoke a hard-hitting book of that title by Richard Drinnon, though it is based on a post-Vietnam assessment of very different evidence, namely American treatment of non-white populations from the 17th century on.

also at the time recognizably imported from blackface minstrels, a stage genre we will turn to in a moment.

It is not fair to rely only on the *Metamoras* to represent the whole subgenre labelled Indian plays by Werner Sollors, one of their astute students of recent years.[5] For example, in the late 18th century it was possible to depict white traders willfully cheating Indians and hence to elicit sympathy for the situation of Indians as in Robert Rogers' *Ponteach; or, the Savages of America* (1766). The sympathy, however, never suffices to save the Indian from historical defeat; at best he is offered nostalgia.

By mid-19th century Indian characters have lost their romantic aura. In Boucicault's *The Octaroon* (1859) the Indian character is well-meaning but a hapless drunkard who unwittingly helps capture the dastardly villain. Still later, in the 1880s, James Herne's *Within an Inch of His Life,* the character identified as Roanoke, an Indian, turns out to be the long-lost son of an English nobleman, thereby justifying racially the love he has expressed earlier for a white woman. The Indian wasn't really an Indian at all – hence no cause for alarm.[6] In general depicting the Indians as an embodiment of the wilderness acknowledges that they precede Americans on the land, but without fail they must yield to white domination by disappearing.

The second phase of representations of frontier figures starts in the 1820s and '30s with 'ring-tail roarers' like Ralph Stackpole in Robert Montgomery Bird's stage version of *Nick of the Woods* (1838). In their folklore origins these figures sprout from Mike Fink, a legendary flatboatman plying the major rivers of the Mississippi Basin. This roarer type boasts of hard drinking and fighting and womanizing, a self-sufficient essence of the frontier as a place where men are legendarily tough and women scarce. In a play like James Kirke Paulding's *The Lion of the West* (1831 and 1833, first published 1954), this macho figure, here called "Nimrod Wildfire," appears in New York as a farcical counterpart to "Mrs. Wollope," an unmistakable take-off on Mrs. Trollope, come to assess the "domestic manners of Americans." Wildfire is all bluster and noise, as, for example in his account of meeting a man near the Mississippi River one day:

---

[5] Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, esp. 102-48.

[6] The idea of staging a white character who appeared to be an Indian due to skin darkened by outdoor living was not original with Herne. See George Washington Custis' 1830 play *Pocahontas; or, The Settlers of Virginia,* where Barclay, a surviving Englishman employed by Powhatan as an advisor, has married an Indian woman and adopted their lifestyle. He affirms that his children by her are dear to him despite being the offspring of an "aboriginal mother."

> Well, he run his boat foremost ashore. I stopped my waggon and set my triggers. Mister, says he, I'm the best man – if I ain't, I wish I may be tetotaciously exflunctified! I can whip my weight in wild cats and ride straight through a crab apple orchard on a flash of lightning – clear meat axe disposition! And what's more, I once back'd a bull off a bridge. Poh, says I, what do I keer for that? I can tote a steam boat up the Mississippi and over the Alleghany Mountains. My father can whip the best man in old Kaintuck, and I can whip my father. When I'm good natured I weigh about a hundred and seventy, but when I'm mad I; weigh a *ton*. With that I fetched him the regular Injen war-whoop.[7]

The Indian war whoop is not accidental but the marker of the roarer type as a white American embodiment of the spirit of the frontier. This play is a farce: the roarer type cannot be taken seriously as an American model. Though this kind of talk continued through the 1830s and beyond to be popular in almanacs and chapbooks, notably linked to the character of Davy Crockett, its stage life underwent a remarkable relocation which transformed it irreversibly – the inferiority and rhetoric and malapropisms were projected onto "black" characters, black*face*, that is.

To sum up concerning frontier types, Indian and roarer both evoke the wilderness / frontier which mark not only the difference between the USA and old Europe but its future. The wilderness and its representatives, however, need to be put in their place (put out of history altogether or put down into laughably inferior status) in order to make way for a proper American future.

The Black Below

The success of blackface minstrels as of the 1830s operated a shift in stereotypical representations of the black to new and lower status. Prior to that time (and occasionally afterwards) black servants functioned as representatives of the lowest social order, but nonetheless part of it. The indicative treatment here dates from 1825 and Samuel Woodworth's *The Forest Rose* (Moody, 143-74). The basic issues replay those of Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* in relation to English fops versus American truemen, but the Rose of the title calls attention to a new dimension concerning the black. Rose is associated with the forest not because she is wild like the Indians but because she is outside the pale defined by the main range of interactions between (Europeanized) city types and good old (American) farmer types. Rose is a servant but one who is twice substituted for a white woman in

---

[7] *The Lion of the West,* ed. James N. Tidwell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954, p 54.

order to discomfit unwanted white suitors. The first time she is put into this position by Sally, the Deacon's daughter, to mock her Yankee suitor Jonathan. The sly implication is that a man when blindfolded could not distinguish between kissing a white woman and a black (a Yankee man? an American man? a white man?). On the other hand, Rose is immediately relegated to the bottom socially due to her smells (onions and/or garlic), so she does not represent an alternative to the white women. Her second substitution is used to mock the villainous British seducer who seeks to abduct a good if city-oriented New England woman, Harriet. Rose speaks in the stage black dialect that would become standardized in minstrel use, except in the final sung chorus that wraps up the "pastoral opera" she expresses herself in standard white speech:

> Ye city beaux, accept a hint,
> If forest roses please you best,
> Be sure there's no sable in't,
> Or you may rue the jest. (Moody, 174)

Rose, of course, was played by a white actress in blackface so this stylistic shift out of character is simply part of the grand comic reunion at the end celebrating the values of the farming countryside.

The second contribution of this play to placing the black in the American world is the repeated formula by which the Yankee type, Jonathan, complains about being mistreated by others ("I wouldn't serve a negro so [badly]") or promises faithfulness ("I wouldn't serve a negro so [as to not do what I promised]"). This formula is repeated a good ten times during the play to the point where it becomes an identifying character motif. It too establishes the black as a pole of comparison within the social world against which to gauge white behavior, but at the same time it insists on the race line as a negative marker for acceptable American behavior.

The countryside as a locus of value, familiar from many iterations before it, was not at all new, but this particular play had a remarkable life of four decades or so on stage in the USA and in England, giving it an important status in defining the cultural role of blacks, pending the innovations which we group under the general label of blackface minstrels.

The new exploitation of white actors in black make-up was intimately tied up with the evolution of the frontier roarer type whom we have seen before. East Coast urban ambivalence about the roarer shows up as early as 1832 when his rant and braggadocio are transferred to a black character, or more precisely, a blackface character. Blackface results quite literally from

the application of burnt-cork make-up to the face of a white actor, typically an Irish-American.[8] The first to do it successfully was Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who started the song-and-dance character called "Jim Crow". If "Jim Crow" means to you a complex of laws and practices segregating black Americans from whites, formally ratified by the 1896 Supreme Court decision Plessy v. Ferguson, you need to go back another two-thirds of a century.

Though the precise origins of blackface performance disappear into anecdote, by the 1830s Rice hit it big with his impersonation of "Jim Crow" as a pseudo-plantation slave. His raggle-taggle costume (tattered pants, oversize shoes with gaping holes) may have made him seem pitiful, but his rambling ballad narrative recounts the fighting, drinking and sexual adventures already associated with the roarer frontier figures. The result is a remarkable shift in cultural coding which was first studied as long ago as Constance Rourke's *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931). When features of white folklore figures were transferred to black characters, what changed in the process?

One gain was in sheer spectacle. The folklore of Mike Fink and Davy Crockett was primarily limited to print or to songs and story-telling, more appropriate to amateur amusement than professional entertainment. The "Jim Crow" figure not only had a rollicking ballad to sing but a vigorous and startling dance unrelated to standard reels and square dance figures. This dance, like all the others it spawned, involved exaggerated, unnatural contortions as part of its appeal. Hans Nathan, as part of his useful recuperation of the blackface archive, summarizes the dance itself:

> Rice, according to his own words, wheeled, turned, and jumped. In windmill fashion, he rolled his body lazily from one side to the other, throwing his weight alternately on the heel of one foot and on the toes of the other. Gradually, he must have turned away from his audience, and, on the words "jis so," jumped high up and back into his initial position.[9]

---

[8] Recipe for burnt cork: Take a quantity of corks, place them in a tin pail or dish, saturating them with alcohol, then light. Let them burn to a crisp, when burned out, mash them to a powder, mix with water to a thick paste, place the mixture in small tin boxes and it is ready for use. In applying it to your face it is better first to rub the face and hands with cocoa butter, which can purchased from any druggist at a small cost, as when removing the black it can be rubbed off easily with a dry cloth. It is not necessary to use carmine for the lips to make them appear large. All that is required when applying the black is to keep it about one-half an inch away from the mouth, or more if a larger mouth is wanted. This applies only to end men. The balance of the company should black close to the lips so as to appear dignified and neat in appearance. (Jack Haverly's *A Complete Guide to Negro Minstrelsy*, 1902, 6-7).

[9] Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, second printing, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977, 52.

Reviews make it clear that Rice carefully varied his movements so that each verse seemed to offer something new, no mean accomplishment when he might be called for dozens of encores.[10] This was a spectacular act, well suited for presentation before a paying audience associated with the growing urbanization of Jacksonian America.[11]

The primary audience, all studies agree, was male, working-class, young, many fresh from the countryside, to whom the hard-drinking boastfulness of Jim Crow readily appealed:

And den I go to Orleans, An' feel so full of fight;
Dey put me in de Calaboose, An' keep me dere all night.
Chorus: Weel about and turn about and do jis so,
Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.

Whe I got out I hit a man, His name I now forgot;
But dere was not'ing left of him 'Cept a little grease spot.

Anoder day I hit a man, De man was mighty fat;
I hit so hard I knocked him in To an old cockt hat.

I whipt my weight in wildcats, I eat an alligator;
I drunk de Mississippy up! Oh, I'm de very creature

I sit upon a hornet's nest, I dance upon my head;
I tie a wiper round my neck An' den I go to bed.[12]

What difference does it make that the roisterer now appears on stage in blackface during the very same years that such sentiments are appearing in popular almanacs as attributed to Davy Crockett or other white figures? Instead of a frontiersman offering himself as a rough but positive national icon, Jim Crow's boasting exploits seem fundamentally ludicrous. He portrayed a happy-go-lucky hard-drinking type, freed from the urban industrial

---

[10] *The [London] Times*, citing a New York paper, marvels that up to 1838 Rice had sung and danced 37,000 verses in the USA, England and Ireland. During a run of *Oh Hush* at the Bowery Theatre [as an inter-act or an after-piece], "he sang 100 verses each night, always upon some new subject. His encores are generally seven or eight times a-night. He 'turns about' three times to each verse, so, by multiplying 37,000 by three, we find that he had 'wheeled about and turned about' 111,000 times" (25 October 1838).

[11] In Boston as of 1845, 40% of the population consisted of village-born New Englanders, 36% of Boston-born, and 23% of immigrants from Western Europe. See Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, 26.

[12] Text as reprinted by Dailey Paskman. *"Gentlemen, Be Seated!": A Parade of the American Minstrels*, revised edition, New York: Charles N. Potter, 1976, 8-10.

cares which might burden his watchers, but by the same token one who could not be taken seriously. A broad-gauged analysis of blackface minstrelsy suggests that nothing that takes place in blackface seemed serious. "Jim Crow" is a dressed-down figure of fun, a dancing fool, a boasting nobadaddy, a model for multiple generations of laughable black character types. The frontier clichés now serve to characterize blacks, not as an underclass which is part of American society, which is what free blacks in New York and similar cities were in fact in the 1830s, but rather as representing a fantasy of an exotic "plantation" slave, whose contortions were always entertaining.[13]

The implicit message: slavery itself couldn't be so bad if these were "representative" or, still more pretentiously, "authentic" blacks. The northern urban audiences who initially took to blackface had no exposure to plantation life. Despite Hans Nathan's eagerness to assess blackface characters as based on "reality," we are dealing here with stage creations whose primary goal was to entertain. Even the "black dialect" employed was only partly inspired by actual black speech and as a stage language its stylistic conventions quickly rigidified into an artificial simulated creole which, unlike actual speech, changed very little over the years.[14]

Blackface minstrelsy is much too complex a phenomenon to do justice to here, but its very popularity serves to signal the cultural work it performed : defining a conceptual space within which blacks could be defined and confined, one where they did not have to be taken seriously because they were less human beings than sources of entertainment. The timing of "Jim Crow" as a cultural phenomenon seems to me not accidental. Blackface came to the fore in the early 1830s, precisely at the moment when Abolition was becoming a prominent if not exactly popular feature of Northern urban life. One reason is that at that moment in time blacks in many Northern cities were finally escaping from the prior categories that assigned them a defined place within the larger American world. The final end of slavery in the cru-

---

[13] The second blackface character to emerge a bit later in the 1830s was often called "Zip Coon" (among other aliases): a posturing urban black who was as overdressed as Jim Crow was underdressed. Zip Coon, according to the songs he sang on stage, was imagined to be a self-important but bumbling lover, out to impress the ladies and the passersby with fancy clothes but always showing his inherent limitations by social maladroitness and pretentious malapropisms.

[14] William J. Mahar shows that the earliest minstrels did draw inspiration from diverse features of black vernacular but rapidly congealed these into an inflexible stage dialect which showed none of the evolution typical of a living language: another limitation in the "blackness" of blackface. See "Black English in Early Blackface Minstrels: A New Source of Minstrel Show Dialect," *American Quarterly*, 37 (1985), 260-85.

cial state of New York came about in the late 1820s with the end of a long process starting with the Abolition Law of 1799.[15] By 1830, then, not only did blacks in New York constitute a pool of free labor ready and indeed pressed by poverty to compete for jobs on the bottom end of the scale, most obviously with new and increasingly Irish immigrants, but they were free agents in a cultural sense. Blacks no longer fit into a slavery-derived inferior place in Northern society which they could be held to.

In identifying this cultural role for blackface minstrels I somewhat reluctantly part company with Alexander Saxton, whose book *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990) is one of the best informed and most insightful attempts to write a cultural history of the U.S. 19th century. Saxton rightly points out that there are several regional character types and dialects circulating simultaneously as of 1825 or 1830: Yankee Jonathan (recalling the 40-year stage life of Woodworth's *Forest Rose*), urban toughs like the New York fireman Mose (representing the Bowery B'hoys and the G'hals), the frontier boaster like Nimrod Wildfire, and the blackface Jim Crow or Zip Coon, the latter three in particular during the 1830s and 1840s exploiting much the same rant of drinking, fighting and boastful male prowess. The major difference in the distribution of these images lies in the concentration of [white] frontier roarers in print media like popular narrative and almanacs where as blackface representations reached the illiterate via the stage. Saxton, with his primary concern for politics, rules the minstrels out of court: "Blackface minstrels, because of their racial masks, were precluded from direct participation in such spokesmanship" (184-85), implying "spokesmanship" for shifts in political and cultural alignments due to Jacksonian innovations. Saxton's primary emphasis on politics, in short, slights the cultural work of blackface minstrels as a new phenomenon of the 1830s and 1840s. While it is true that blackface-minstrel characters were excluded by definition from politics, their cultural function is considerable, precisely because they redrew the race line larger than life in indelible blackface pencil. In short minstrelsy served the political world shared by all [white] Americans by definitively laughing blacks out of serious consideration. The black as irremediably Other consolidated the political world for whites of whatever stripe. This function shows up, for example, in the minstrel satirical set piece, common in the "olio" or variety second part for decades. No blacks, of course, could vote till decades later, but in blackface the politician could appear as generic, neither Republican nor Democrat but blockhead.

---

[15] For new births as of that year, the law freed the female offspring of slave mothers as of age 25, while male offspring were to be freed only at age 28.

Blackface minstrels served this large cultural purpose, not because of any conspiracy – no one was in a position control the development of such a complex and diffuse entertainment vehicle – but because the young males flooding from farms into Jacksonian cities liked the message from the outset. They were joined by increasingly middle-class spectators as time went on, notably as of the 1850s. After the Civil War couples began appearing more frequently among the spectators, indicating genteel acceptance as well. Blackface had come to define black. Indicator: at mid-century in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*, Hepzibah Pyncheon opens a little store whose first customer is a young urchin whose first acquisition is a dancing Jim Crow in gingerbread. The boy is shown swallowing the stereotyped figure well before reaching an age of social awareness; in short. blackface stereotypes are fully assimilated in his culture world.

In entertainment terms "Jim Crow" was just the beginning. By the early 1840s blackface entertainment had become so popular that performers joined in companies to provide a whole evening's entertainment, but at the outset an urgent American priority was to establish the fact that the performers were all white, black in face only. Racially mixed acting companies were unthinkable and for white audiences to watch black performers potentially scandalous.[16] Hence sheet music covers in the early 1840s often showed the performers in tails without make-up but also in full stage regalia including blackface. After a few years potential spectators had so thoroughly accepted the convention that there was no further need to call attention to it.[17]

As of mid-century the popularity of Uncle Tom challenged the minstrel stereotypes with another not less unreal fantasy of blacks: the saintly all-suffering martyr. The play versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* changed a great deal in the history of American theater. A performance of the Aiken version in 1852 was the first occasion that American audiences saw a single play that filled a whole evening's entertainment without any of the traditional

---

[16] There was considerable unease as well about black spectators watching blackface performances. In Northern and Southern theatres alike small special areas were sometimes set aside on the third tier for blacks to watch minstrel shows.

[17] The American presumption on stage (and off) that blacks and whites could not be imagined as mixing. becomes an international issue in one play just before the Civil War, Dion Boucicault's *The Octaroon* (1859). Here the beauteous and virtuous octaroon, Zoe, who bears no visible races of her one-eighth black genes, would properly, according to the reigning romantic conventions, marry her true love, the young savior of the plantation. This outcome is unimaginable, however, even for relatively enlightened New York audiences, so the author has Zoe commit suicide by drinking poison. That the prohibition against miscegenation is specifically American can be shown by the fact that when London audiences rebelled against this sad ending, Boucicault cheerfully complied by rewriting it so that love could triumph over all. Except in the USA.

interacts or afterpieces or burlesques. The play as a whole and sufficient object of attention became standard, but it is healthy to be reminded of just when and where the modern practice began. Also *Uncle Tom's Cabin* brought religiously inclined spectators to theaters for the first time. As a "moral drama" it was approved by clergymen who had previously followed the Calvinist condemnation of all theatrical representations. When the purpose, namely Abolition, was manifestly "Christian," then playgoing could be approved, even for Harriet Beecher Stowe, who came from precisely the kind of earnest Protestant environment that had been hostile to theater. In this spirit she had even refused permission for the novel to be dramatized, obliging the several adapters to work without official sanction.

The blackface minstrels did not give up their opposing comic vision of the black. They played any number of burlesque versions under titles such as: *Happy Uncle Tom* or *Uncle Dad's Cabin.*[18] Though the sentimental *Uncle Tom's Cabin* succeeded immensely on stage, spawning road companies for decades even after the Civil War, blackface minstrels held their own for decades as well.

In short, as of the 1830s blackface conventions began constituting the core social definition of black for northern whites. Simultaneously the same conventions imply the social construction of white as, precisely, "not black like them."[19] Changes in the white stereotypes inculcated by blackface entertainment have of course taken place – at a pace and at a depth which is not readily traceable – but blackface minstrelsy defined the base against which change and resistance to change have to be tested. The traveling minstrel companies which toured all over the North and West carried the same images wherever they went so that millions of whites who never saw an African American "knew" what THEY were like.[20]

---

[18] This complex conflict between sentimental and comic stereotypes of the black is well studies by Eric Lott, "Uncle Tomitudes: Racial Melodrama and Modes of Production," in his *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 211-33. This book is the single best study of blackface minstrelsy in many years.

[19] Eric Lott has an important article on this process, "White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan & Donald E. Pease, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

[20] Ante-bellum minstrel companies did travel in the South but with less of a popular following. Christy's Minstrels in the 1850s might schedule three days in Charleston, South Carolina but three months in New York. The Christy's company was in fact caught in Charleston at the outbreak of hostilities of the Civil War but had little difficulty convincing the rebels of their hostility to Abolition. See M. B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management*, New York: Broadway Publishing, 1912, 30.

Entertainment is never MERELY entertainment. Laughter, an irrefutable instrument of cultural work, may serve as a more influential medium of enculturation than schools or churches or any other formal institutions of value transmission.

The Deity Above

If blacks were implicitly depicted as off the scale of American life on the downside, the comparable presence on the topside is not human at all but rather divine. The deity does not appear in these place, except in an offset form derived ultimately from the ancient Greek theater as "deux ex machina." Whatever the trials the virtuous were subjected to, the audience could always have confidence that the ending would be happy. Typically, as in all melodramas, the happy ending is unearned, even miraculous. Without the deity being evoked directly the message seems clear: American enterprises cannot in the long run go wrong.

Of course, melodramas with happy endings were appearing regularly in London and Paris during the same period but with recognizable differences. For example, Pixérécourt, the dominant French playwright of the first half of the century, typically depicted a virtuous aristocratic family brought low by villains. The happy ending consists largely in their restoration to a merited place in a traditional social order. American melodramas envision a more democratic sense of justice, whereby the honest will triumph even if they come from less than the best classes. The American emphasis is on good guys not reliably identifiable by class: whence plaudits for the poor but deserving. An example comes from Dion Boucicault's *The Poor of New York* (1857) where Mr. and Mrs. Puffy, a hard-working but impoverished family of bakers manages by sheer merit to survive the worst of the 1857 Depression. The proper term at the time to signify the positive intervention of divine presence was "providence," so one can quite properly describe the happy endings as providential. They demonstrated – over and over – that American enterprises were (and are) destined to succeed.

North and South: Conflictual Themes

The prototypically American subject position sketched out so far is cube-like in that it has a top and a bottom, a front and a back, which constitute the "habitable imperium" of my title. What of the sides? In grand-scale geographical terms the outer boundaries might have been identified with Canada

on the right and Cuba/Latin America on the left, and indeed both of these entities figured in the discourse of Manifest Destiny for many decades in the 19th century. On the other hand, these fantasies of territorial expansion did not notably affect entertainments on stage. Instead. as of roughly mid-century, the North and South began to appear as explicit loci of conflict in many plays. North-South tensions were particularly troublesome because they could not be resolved by reference behind (Europe) or ahead (the frontier) or below (the black) or above (God). North and South were both irrefutably part of American conceptual space; somehow both had to be accommodated.

North/South tensions are clear as early as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For example, in the novel Harriet Beecher Stowe had carefully avoided antagonizing Southern readers by attributing Northern origins to the most villainous slave owner, Simon Legree. Dion Boucicault would follow the same tactic in *The Octaroon* at the end of the decade. The scheming overseer who tries to cheat his way to both the girl and the plantation is named M'Closkey, who has left the North to seek his fortune in the South.

Once the Civil War had ended it was years before its issues were handled directly on stage. In Bronson Howard's *Shenandoah* (1888) Southerners are accorded as much right to their regional culture as Northerners, though obviously the latter win the War. The villain of the piece is named Captain Thornton, who is not only a spy for the Confederacy, signaling a lack of forthrightness, but still worse he is a turncoat Northerner who schemes to tarnish the honor of a well meaning Yankee woman, who to boot is the second wife of a Yankee general. Honest attachment to one's heritage, in short, can find reconciliation in an imaginatively reunited USA, but switching sides constitutes an unsalvageable disloyalty.

Other Conflicts: Resolvable

There are other loci of explicit conflict in numerous plays which are substantially peripheral to my focus on enculturation. I will mention several quickly in order to situate them in relation to my context:

Conflicts between city and country: these are particularly prominent in the first half of the century. The contrasts are not between country bumpkins and city sophisticates, at least among the principals, but rather between honest unpretentious men who live on agriculture and city dwellers whose wealth comes from commerce. Colonel Manly in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1789) is an early example of the former. Often, to make it clear that

class conflicts are not at stake, playwrights play off country and city using members of the same family or at least the same well-to-do social stratum. The country squire habitually wins out over corrupt city commercialism, which often includes excessive obeisance to spendthrift European ways. In Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* (1845), for example, Adam Trueman, a farmer from upstate New York bails out Mr. Tiffany, the New York merchant who has become dishonest to sustain the excessively fashionable life style of his wife and daughter.

Class conflicts between rich and poor are muted in this corpus of plays. Audience diplomacy, given the wide range of spectators, dictated that playwrights include representatives rich and poor but not in conflict with each other. Larger ideological reticences show up as well since the status quo is never seriously challenged. Even a play like Dion Boucicault's *The Poor of New York* (1857), produced during the depression of the late 1850s and explicitly evoking the depression of 1837, does not analyze the causes of financial panics beyond a vague implication that Mark Livingstone, the promising young man gone sour, would have no problems if he had not spent away his father's fortune. The corrupt banker, Gideon Bloodgood, is even excused in part because he seems not inherently dishonest but merely excessive in his indulgence of a spendthrift daughter. The lower-class hero, Badger, does openly criticize Bloodgood's strong-arm use of his money: to buy and then burn down the tenement where Badger lives and has concealed the paper which could prove the banker's perfidy. Nonetheless the emphasis is on worth in a moral sense. Mr. and Mrs. Puffy, impoverished bakers now reduced to selling hot potatoes and chestnuts on the street, exemplify the noble poor. Lucy Fairweather, from a good family reduced to poverty by the banker's cheating, nearly commits suicide but in the end is restored to the man she loves and sufficient resources to live decently. God, in accordance with the American mindset, wouldn't let deserving citizens suffer for long.

In these plays as a whole there is plenty of conflictual gender by-play between men and women. Upper-class women are conventionally depicted as self-indulgent and spendthrift, motivated typically by excessive inclination to European-inspired fashion and status. Men who indulge them are criticized as weak, having lost track of the thrifty virtues associated with country life with its basis in agriculture. There are admirable upper-class women, like Lucy Fairweather, but they are long-suffering victims until the improbable plot resolutions rescue them. The admirable males are avatars of Tyler's late 18th-century Colonel Manly, embodying solid property-owner's values as a complement to their patriotism. In terms of gender, then, the

plays do not significantly differ from the conventional wisdom of their time – not surprising given the cultural work they undertake. We are not looking at a revolutionary world – except in the very special and limited rhetoric of the "American Revolution" as a national ideological counter – but rather a world of emerging nationhood which cultivates a sense of national identity by reiterating its fundament over and over. In this idealized American world women would not become involved in expensive frippery but rather stay at home – implicitly, given that plays do not dwell much on domestic details (too familiar and boring?). On their side the men should work hard and bring home lots of money in a reliable fashion, an explicit message in the temperance plays exemplified by W. H. Smith's *The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved* (1844).

I hope I have been able to show how a fundamental geographical-ideological orientation remains consistent: facing West. By "habitable imperium," I evoke an American colonization of national conceptual space.

Works Cited

Playtexts: because 19th-century editions are scarce, I cite recent collections in which the plays cited can more readily be found.

Alger, Horatio. *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York.* New York: Penguin, 1985.

American Melodrama, ed. Daniel C. Gerould. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983. Cited in notes as Gerould.

Blair, Karin. *Cubal Analysis: A Post-Sexist Model of the Psyche*, Weston, CT: Magic Circle Press, 1983.

Drama from the American Theatre, 1762-1909, ed. Richard Moody. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1966. Cited in footnotes as Moody.

Laurie, Bruce. *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989.

Leavitt, M. B. *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management.* New York: Broadway Publishing, 1912.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Lott, Eric. "White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan & Donald E. Pease. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Mahar, William J. "Black English in Early Blackface Minstrels: A New Source of Minstrel Show Dialect," *American Quarterly*, 37 (1985), 260-85.

Nathan, Hans. *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, second printing, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977.

Paskman, Dailey. *"Gentlemen, Be Seated!": A Parade of the American Minstrels*, revised edition. New York: Charles N. Potter, 1976.

Paulding, James Kirk. *The Lion of the West*, ed. James N. Tidwell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954.

Saxton, Alexander. *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic.* London: Verso, 1990.

Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.