

African Americans and US Popular Culture

Kevern Verney

Introductions to History

African Americans and US Popular Culture

African Americans have made a unique contribution to the richness and diversity of US popular culture. Rooted in African society and traditions, black slaves in America created a dynamic culture which keeps on evolving. Present-day Hip Hop and Rap music are shaped by the historical experience of slavery and the ongoing will to oppose oppression and racism.

This volume is an authoritative introduction to the history of African Americans in US popular culture, examining its development from the early nineteenth century to the present. Kevern Verney examines the role and significance of race in all major forms of popular culture, including sport, film, television, radio and music. He also looks at how Hollywood and the entertainment industry have encouraged racism through misrepresentations and caricatured images of African Americans.

Kevern Verney is a Senior Lecturer in American History at Edge Hill College of Higher Education. He is the author of *Black Civil Rights in America* (Routledge 2000) and *The Art of the Possible: Booker T. Washington and Black Leadership in the United States, 1881–1925* (Routledge 2001).

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Contents

Preface	vi
Introduction: emancipation and segregation	1
1. Migration and urbanization, 1915–30	17
2. The Great Depression and the Second World War, 1930–45	31
3. The Civil Rights era, 1945–65	49
4. Black Power, 1965–76	68
5. African Americans in US society since 1976	87
Conclusion: from Ragtime to Rap	109
Further reading	112
Select bibliography	115
Index	121

Preface

Prior to the 1970s popular culture received comparatively little attention from historians. In recent years this situation has changed. Historians now recognize the importance of popular culture in understanding the past. It provides insight into how, and why, public opinion viewed issues in a particular way. Moreover, it gives a voice to groups, like African Americans, who are under-represented in written records because of their oppressed condition and the limited educational opportunities afforded them.

For these reasons I provided brief coverage of the relationship between popular culture and racial issues in *Black Civil Rights in America*, my first publication for the Routledge Introductions to History series. *African Americans and US Popular Culture* serves as a companion volume examining this topic in greater detail. The chronological periods covered in each chapter correspond with those in the earlier work.

Discussion is focused on a number of key issues, specifically:

- the persistent negative stereotyping of African Americans in popular culture, and the impact this had on the racial perceptions of both black and white Americans;
- the extent to which, over time, popular culture has responded to political, social and economic change;
- the role of popular culture in holding back or facilitating change in US race relations;
- the recurring historical paradox that whilst white Americans have frequently recognized black cultural achievement, African Americans themselves continued to be perceived as socially and racially inferior;

PREFACE

- the enormous, and continuing, contribution made by African Americans to US popular culture.

An inevitable dilemma in any work on popular culture is the question of what subject matter to include, and what to omit. This work is focused primarily on film, music, radio, sport and television. Other areas, like advertising, dance, fashion, literature and oral culture, are discussed, but these constitute secondary themes.

The achievements of African American writers, like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and painters, such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, are not considered. Although they have made a major contribution to American culture through their work, it generally has not reached the mass audiences of film and television.

Religion is also omitted. The Church has enormous impact on the lives of black and white Americans, but its role in society transcends that of popular culture. It embodies deep spiritual values that, to believers, represent the revelation of divine truth. To consider religion alongside film, sport and television, de-contextualized from this deeper philosophical meaning, would be to secularize the sacred.

INTRODUCTION

Emancipation and segregation

Modern representations of African Americans in US popular culture begin with the emergence of blackface minstrelsy in 1830–2. The practice of white actors appearing in burnt-cork make-up can be traced back to Elizabethan England, and comic black characters appeared periodically in the American theatre as early as the 1780s. The minstrelsy of the 1830s, however, constituted a clear departure from what had gone before. Minstrel shows marked the first systematic portrayal of African American culture on the American stage with most, if not all, of the performers appearing in blackface.

The principal inspiration in the creation of minstrelsy was the white entertainer Thomas Dartmouth Rice. Living in Kentucky in the late 1820s, Rice reputedly witnessed the performance of an unusual song and dance by an elderly, disabled slave. Mimicking and exaggerating what he had seen, Rice developed a comic musical routine, 'Jumpin' Jim Crow', to entertain local white audiences. The act was an immediate hit. Between 1832 and 1836 Rice played to packed audiences in towns and cities across the northern United States. Domestic triumph was followed by a successful tour of England, Scotland and Ireland that also included a brief visit to Paris.

At the same time that Rice began his rise to fame another blackface performer, George Washington Dixon, began to attract attention. In 1829 Dixon received popular acclaim for his performance of the song 'Coal Black Rose' in burnt-cork make-up at the Bowery theatre in New York. By 1834 Dixon had developed his own minstrel routine performing 'Zip Coon' songs. In contrast to the character of the slow-witted rural slave, represented by Jim Crow, Zip Coon was a pretentious dandy who, although grossly

EMANCIPATION AND SEGREGATION

ignorant, was hopelessly inflated with a sense of self-importance. The Jim Crow and Zip Coon caricatures continued as recurring images of African Americans in US popular culture until at least the mid-twentieth century, and arguably beyond.

Dan Emmett, Edwin Christy and Stephen Foster were other leading influences in the early development of minstrelsy. In 1843 Emmett organized the first blackface quartet in New York and thereafter devoted the rest of his career to minstrelsy. The same year Christy formed his own minstrel troupe, 'Christy's Plantation Minstrels'. Foster, a songwriter, made a living by writing numbers for minstrel shows.

The careers of Emmett, Christy and Foster reflect the fact that in the early 1840s minstrel acts developed from being one-man performances to larger-scale entertainments with a cast made up of a variety of characters. No longer brief routines, minstrel shows now took the form of full-length productions.

Typically, the show comprised three parts. They began with a performance of songs and revels by predominantly blackface urban dandies in the Zip Coon mould. A middle section introduced blackface novelty acts, such as comic monologues or drag acts. A final section comprised song and dance numbers performed within the context of a simple narrative storyline, typically in the setting of a southern plantation populated by happy blackface slaves. Despite such imagery, prior to the Civil War the popularity of minstrelsy was confined almost exclusively to the North and Mid-west. In the 1850s the performance of minstrel shows was even made unlawful in some southern cities.

The artistic merit and social significance of minstrelsy have been issues of controversy since its early beginnings. Novelist Mark Twain hailed minstrelsy as a uniquely American form of entertainment. It can also be seen as marking the first public recognition of African American culture by whites, albeit in a grossly distorted form.

Modern historians, like Annemarie Bean, Eric Lott, and William Mahon, have highlighted the complexity of social meaning in minstrelsy. Looking behind the blackface mask, minstrelsy can be valued as an expression of white working-class culture. The comic guise of minstrel performers enabled them to lampoon leading politicians and other authority figures without fear of retribution. From this perspective minstrelsy was not just entertainment, it was

also a form of popular social criticism, played before audiences that were predominantly young, male and working class.

Less positively, blackface minstrels targeted women's rights campaigners and minority ethnic groups, like the Germans and Irish, reinforcing negative stereotypes of them. Deriding immigrants as ignorant amused the native white American audiences and at the same time reinforced feelings of ethnic superiority. It calmed working-class anxieties over immigrant labour as a source of competition in the job market. Similarly, the caricaturing of women's rights campaigners, by physically comic and overassertive blackface performers in drag, soothed sensitive male egos over the threat they posed to established gender roles.

Significantly, this occurred at a time when women's suffrage and immigration were both issues of public concern. In 1848 the Seneca Falls Convention in New York marked the emergence of a concerted women's suffrage movement. Fears over rising levels of immigration in the 1840s prompted the formation of nativist or anti-immigrant organizations like the secret society the 'Know Nothings'.

Minstrelsy was complex in meaning. Nonetheless, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the central feature of the genre was the appropriation of African American culture by white entertainers in a way that maximized negative stereotypes. Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, and the leading black abolitionist of his day, found minstrel shows deeply offensive. Blackface performers were 'the filthy scum of white society' who had 'stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature' in order to 'make money and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens'.

The growth of the minstrel phenomenon in the early 1830s coincided almost exactly with the emergence of radical abolitionism in the North, marked by the founding of the anti-slavery journal *Liberator* in 1831. Reflecting mounting concern over slavery, the abolitionist movement constituted the start of a concerted opposition to the institution by a small, but dedicated, number of militant campaigners. Despised in the South, abolitionist leaders, like *Liberator's* editor, William Lloyd Garrison, were also unpopular in northern states.

Northern whites were convinced of the racial inferiority of African Americans and resented the claims of abolitionists that black slaves had a right to freedom. The grotesque images of blacks

perpetrated by minstrel performers confirmed the 'wrong-headedness' of abolitionist arguments. Furthermore, they provided reassurance that blacks would never be able to compete with white workers, either as free labour in the North or as slave labour in the developing western territories.

By the mid-1850s slavery, rather than immigration, was the dominant political concern. Popular culture reflected this change. The publication of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe constituted 'the media event of the decade'. First appearing in serial form during 1851–2 in an abolitionist journal, *National Era*, the work had enormous impact. In book form it sold 50,000 copies within eight weeks of publication and over 300,000 copies within a year. By the early months of 1853 combined British and American sales exceeded one million.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was groundbreaking in other respects. It was the first recognized American novel to have an African American as its main character. Portraying the horrors of slave life through the story of Uncle Tom, a black slave, the work was a public relations triumph for the abolitionist cause. Northern readers wept on reading of the brutalities of southern plantation life as depicted by Stowe. Sadistic beatings, the enforced break up of families through slave sales and the martyrdom of Tom himself, whipped to death by the evil slaveholder Simon Legree, were enough to melt all but the coldest of hearts.

Given Stowe's intention in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to expose the evils of slavery, it is ironic that the novel is now most commonly thought of as a source of demeaning stereotypes of African Americans. The central character, Tom, was intended by Stowe to be a quietly heroic figure. Instead, his name has become a term of abuse. It evokes the image of a black man, often elderly, with little or no racial pride, and a deferential loyalty to white authority figures, similar to that bestowed by dogs on their owners.

The novel popularized other stereotypes as well. Stowe's portrayal of the slave child Topsy set a precedent for the enduring image of the 'pickaninny'. This creature possessed a set of identikit characteristics that made it instantly recognizable. Pickaninnies were mischievous and ignorant to the point of being comic. This lack of comprehension was one of their redeeming features, for it was not that pickaninnies were deliberately naughty, but rather that they were unable to understand the difference between right and wrong at all.

Their physical appearance was bizarre, the typical pickaninny being unwashed, possessing a large grinning mouth, rolling eyes, and an erect hairstyle. In short, this was something scarcely recognizable as human at all. The language used in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to describe Topsy suggested some kind of composite menagerie. She variously possessed the qualities of an ape, a cat, a dog and a 'glittering serpent'.

In common with many abolitionists Stowe's opposition to slavery did not mean that she was free from the racial prejudices of her age. She believed whites to be mentally and morally superior to blacks and also more physically attractive. Many of the black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were unappealing to look at. The principal exceptions, George and Eliza, were slaves of mixed-race ancestry whose white bloodline was revealed in their more alluring features. Their dramatic flight from bondage demonstrated that they inherited an Anglo-Saxon longing for liberty that did not exist in the full-blooded African American characters in the novel.

In the South the rise of radical abolitionism in the northern states after 1830 led to the development of a siege mentality. White southerners united against the growing threat. One consequence of this was the development of a systematic proslavery ideology. Once perceived as an embarrassing legacy of British imperial rule, from the 1830s onwards, in journals like *De Bow's Review*, southerners defended slavery as a positive good on economic, political, social, racial and religious grounds.

Central to this thinking was the belief that even black slaves benefited from the 'Peculiar Institution'. This was because in their native African environment blacks lived a bestial existence, prone to cannibalism and other depravities. If slavery denied black Africans their freedom this was a small price to pay in return for the benefits it offered in terms of religious education and instruction in civilized behaviour.

The perception that black slaves possessed no culture or social organization of their own persisted long after the abolition of slavery in 1865. Writing at the end of the First World War the white southern historian Ulrich Bonnell Phillips became recognized as a leading academic authority on the 'Peculiar Institution'. In *American Negro Slavery* (1918), Phillips, himself descended from a slave-owning family, presented an image of an idyllic bygone age. Kindly masters and slaves schooled in Western civilization lived alongside each other in an earthly paradise.

EMANCIPATION AND SEGREGATION

Writing in the 1950s the historian Stanley Elkins presented a grimmer picture. No heaven on earth, slavery, he argued, was more akin to a concentration camp with its inmates engaging in a daily struggle for survival. In some respects, however, Elkins shared Phillip's preconceptions. Black slaves captured in Africa went through a traumatic process of 'shock and detachment' that meant that by the time of their arrival in the United States they had been stripped of all vestiges of their tribal culture. Once settled on a southern plantation they were subject to the 'absolute authority' of the master.

The end product of this experience was not the enlightened bondsman envisaged by Phillips but 'Sambo, the typical plantation slave'. A psychological basket case, Sambo was 'docile but irresponsible, loyal, but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing'. His 'behaviour was full of infantile silliness', a 'childlike quality that was the very key to his being'.

In the 1960s and the 1970s later historians highlighted the failings of the Elkins thesis. Scholars like John Blassingame, Herbert Gutman, and George Rawick demonstrated that slaves retained elements of West African culture as a defence mechanism that enabled them to preserve their sense of identity in the face of the daily oppression of plantation life. Although the nature, extent and regional variation of West African survivals continue to be a subject of debate the essential validity of these findings is now generally accepted.

Tribal culture lived on in slave music, dance and religion. Children were given African names in addition to those bestowed on them by their white masters. In the South Carolina low country, where there was a large black population, slaves retained elements of West African language in the distinctive 'Gullah' dialect of the region. Women adopted tribal hairstyles and dress, such as the wearing of colourful bandanas or headscarves. These traditions were passed down from generation to generation, ensuring the continuation of African culture even among American-born slaves.

More than simply the preservation of a remote, dead past, survivals of this type were meaningful components of a dynamic slave culture. Folk tales told to slave children about Anansi the Spider and Brer Rabbit contained important lessons in life about how vulnerable insects or animals might prevail over a physically more powerful adversary, like Brer Fox or Brer Bear, by superior wit and clever dissimulation.