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# Turning about Jim Crow

HOWARD L. SACKS

*Kenyon College*

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***Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop.* By W. T. Lhamon, Jr. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. 269 pages. \$24.95.**

WHY DOES BLACKFACE PERFORMANCE, WHICH FIRST ENGAGED AUDIENCES at the dawning of modern America, continue to animate and disturb our national culture? In the 1990s, a minstrel song is capable of stirring vigorous debate: witness the Virginia Senate's vote to retire "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia" (written by African American composer James A. Bland) as the state song, finally acceding to protests by black constituents outraged at its textual affection for the slavery era. Not long ago, the Ohio Dance Company received acclaim for its New York revival of "Cakewalk," a piece that revisited nineteenth-century dance including steps made famous in minstrel theaters. Likewise, the world of fiction sometimes turns to minstrel characterizations to explore racial identity: Wesley Brown, for example, gives literary life to the fictional source who inspired minstrelsy's Jim Crow in his novel *Darktown Strutters*. The answer, according to W. T. Lhamon, Jr., may rest with minstrelsy's liberating power as much as with its historical association with racist constraint.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, too, have turned to the blackface show in recent years, enriching fields as diverse as musicology, theater history, sociology, folklore, and English. Much of this work advances the postmodernist agenda of destabilizing meanings inherited from both public knowledge and the academy. Earlier interpretations of blackface tended toward the

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monolithic—it was a distinctive but unproblematic form of popular entertainment or, later, the purveyor of racial stereotypes. Examining minstrelsy's emergence in the 1820s through the 1840s, today's generation of researchers suggests a more complex interplay between blackface performance and the cultural meanings and social relationships associated with race, class, and gender.<sup>2</sup>

Central to unraveling this complexity is finding an adequate answer to the question of what the blackface shows' grotesque movements, dialect humor, and songs meant to artists and audiences, whose enthusiasm made minstrelsy America's first indigenous form of mass entertainment: "The main thing to recover is the minstrels', and their gathering audiences', own perspective" (134). But, entering into the subjective consciousness of those in the past presents a particularly difficult and precarious task for the cultural historian. Common folk left few written accounts of their own and were themselves "interpreted" by those in control of the press.

Unlike those who attempt to decipher minstrelsy's meanings by invoking neo-Freudian theory, Lhamon offers an interpretation built squarely on sociological terrain. In his view, blackface performance (like its antecedents in expressive folk culture) is constituted by a series of gestures designed to identify the performer and define his relationship with the audience. Although the author makes no explicit reference to it, this basic formulation closely resembles the social psychology of George Herbert Mead. In Mead's view, identity emerges not directly but indirectly within a conversation of shared gestures through which individuals imaginatively enter into the experience of the other—obtaining a degree of objective self-consciousness by symbolically putting themselves in another's shoes. Through ongoing interaction, individuals continually reconfigure their own character, simultaneously building layers of shared meaning among those who participate within the universe of discourse. Identity and culture, then, are to be understood less as distinct structures than as moments of a dialectical process taking place within the context of real historical conditions.<sup>3</sup>

Lhamon explores this conversation of gestures as it took place in the early nineteenth century on the docks of New York City's Catherine Market, a vital scene of multiethnic economic and cultural exchange in which participants could effect "an enthusiasm for the underlying possibilities in difference" (3). Here, Long Island slaves and newly freed blacks danced for coins or eels from admiring white patrons, defining for themselves a portion of physical space and a positive identity that garnered

a measure of personal respect and control. The wheeling gestures of the dance soon entered the common lexicon of local street culture and subsequently became a defining element in blackface performances that would attract the young, urban laborers in local theaters like the Catherine and the Bowery—significantly, the debut locales of pioneer blackface performers.

Lhamon credits the earliest Ethiopian delineators with deliberately and quite skillfully transforming gestures they observed in African American expressive culture, as well as those from European folklore and the conventions of English theater, in order to mimetically express the character and worldview of an emerging *lumpenproletariat*. As a talented mimic raised near Catherine Market, T. D. Rice employed movements and dialect familiar to the interracial audiences that so enthusiastically received his legendary blackface performances as Jim Crow. Watching this compressed processing of local life, workers experienced, in effect, a stylized mirror image of themselves: “The clustered gestures delineating . . . ‘Jump Jim Crow’ became organizing points for a new identity. This was true at first for Africans in the Atlantic. Then it became true for others who imitated their culture” (182).

The contours of this identity were decidedly antiauthoritarian, a stance with roots as old as the story of Cain. Like these laborers in a new industrial economy, the biblical Cain was a displaced farmer who, banished from his home at the hand of a disciplinary authority over whom he had no direct control, was exiled to a transient existence in the city. Interestingly, Lhamon locates the story of Cain in both African and European lore. In its African telling, transplanted across the Atlantic via the slave trade, Cain turned white with horror at his fratricidal act and from fear of God’s wrath. White skin forevermore marked Cain and all of his descendants as outsiders wherever they might roam; Cain’s own tormented conscience was relieved only by a dance taught to him by a crow.

The minstrels who blackened their faces and took to the stage inverted the color relationships of the myth and masked its horrific elements with humor, but the many references to the story of Cain and Abel in minstrelsy testify to its salience and to the empathy audiences held for Cain’s plight. “Raising Cain” licensed blackface artists to explore the psychological and social tensions brought about by the exercise of discipline and by its resistance, a theme that struck a common chord among black people and whites suffering under the new industrial regime. To this end, Rice and others employed longstanding African American gestures of survival: the

bended knee in Jim Crow's dancing, for example, conveyed a body ready to spring from danger. Far from encoding racism, then, early minstrels "broadcasted blackness" (149), establishing a body of lore by which ethnically mingled working and scavenging people in cities of the Atlantic diaspora during the 1830s and 1840s negotiated the terms of their coherence. By using its blackface actions, a young working public so organized itself around its own tokens, so tickled itself into being its own expressive capacity, and so fought against the atomization of its cross-racial base that it mounted a real challenge to merchant hegemony.<sup>4</sup> (186–87)

Early blackface performances established the first moment of what Lhamon calls the blackface lore cycle, a process in which identifiable gestures emerging first in everyday interaction traveled across groups and performance contexts over time. The dynamics of this lore cycle reflect both the symbolic constellations constituting blackface performance and the external conditions within which they are expressed. Almost immediately, minstrelsy's power to unify and excite class consciousness troubled elites, who took steps to eliminate it and, failing that, to recast its character. The element of color inherent in blackface, employed initially by white actors to affirm interracial solidarity (Lhamon believes), was now inverted to establish racist stereotypes that served a discourse of divisiveness. At the same time, repeated critiques of minstrelsy as debased, low entertainment encouraged later minstrels to alter performances to accommodate more genteel tastes, thereby minimizing its subversive quality. Later expressions of minstrelsy, and those that would follow as blackface evolved through fictional interpretations, vaudeville, film, and television, multiplied the layers of meaning within the lore cycle. But the vitality that first stimulated minstrelsy's popularity remained, encoded, to emerge again in subsequent turns of the lore cycle, notably in 1950s rock and roll and 1980s hip-hop.

But if hip-hop represents a resistant spirit rooted in African American expression, is it because of, or despite, the legacy of minstrelsy? Lhamon would have us believe that it is both. Blackface performance harbored dormant seeds of resistance, even as it served more consistently as a potent tool of racism and discrimination. It is this multivariant character of minstrelsy that enabled blues singer Ida Cox, for example, to organize and headline a minstrel tour in 1929 called "Raisin' Cain" and prompted novelist Ralph Ellison to state that his first inspiration for the primary character in *Invisible Man* emanated from a blackface performance he had witnessed at the Apollo Theater.

Lhamon's provocative thesis gains persuasive momentum by enabling readers to empathize with early artists and audiences, a goal he pursues through interpreting a variety of fascinating texts and analyzing the contexts of New York City and other sites of early cross-racial exchange. Integrating text and context—the long-established domains of the humanities and the social sciences, respectively—represents a key problem for American studies in its effort to achieve a powerful and truly interdisciplinary (as opposed to merely multidisciplinary) paradigm. The interpretation of text, so valuable in exploring the subjective moment of human experience, nonetheless lacks the broad empirical grounding central to social science's sense of validity. And without exercising an interpretive voice, historical analysis often fails to convey actors' sensibilities, which inform a full reading of history. Overall, Lhamon achieves a greater balance between these two modes than previous writers on minstrelsy, at times creating a synthesis that offers a model for scholars of cultural history. His success is due in no small part to his writing style, which, like the substance of his analysis, emphasizes process: In these pages we enter the world of a mind at work, uniting seemingly disparate modes of analysis in the active enterprise of problem solving.

While Lhamon joins other recent writers who underscore social class as well as race as critical in defining minstrel performance, he offers new insight in his treatment of minstrelsy as part of a distinctive youth culture. Viewing minstrelsy as "the first among many later manifestations, nearly always allied with images of black culture, that allowed youths to resist merchant-defined external impostures and to express a distinctive style" (44) deepens our understanding of early blackface performance and of contemporary expressions of youth culture as a continuing manifestation of the blackface lore cycle.

Also welcome is Lhamon's reshaping of the time frame within which minstrelsy should be understood: here, it stretches backward to the biblical era of Cain and Abel and forward to the videos of M. C. Hammer. Scholars have repeatedly commented on minstrelsy's influence on various forms of popular entertainment, yet research has focused almost exclusively on the form's earliest, antebellum expression.<sup>5</sup> If, as Lhamon suggests, we view this period as representing simply the first moments of the blackface lore cycle, then we must devote serious attention to the changing character and meaning of the minstrel shows that continued as a significant form of popular entertainment for over a century after the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

Lhamon does much to liberate scholarship from debates that have



limited the study of minstrelsy. The question of authenticity is a case in point. A generation of folklorists and musicologists has examined published sheet music, minstrel routines, diary accounts of plantation frolics, newspaper articles, and oral histories to assess the validity of minstrels' claims to be authentic delineators of African American culture. These debates have been confounded by assertions, often politically inspired, as to minstrelsy's racist character.<sup>7</sup> Lhamon suggests the vacuousness of the issue for understanding minstrel performance: "White working youths . . . were identifying with blacks as representations of all that the YMCAs and evangelical organizers were working to suppress. Whether their songs were inaccurate pictures of African-American culture is not the point" (44). More importantly, by viewing minstrelsy's folk expression, theatrical performance, and literary interpretation as moments in a lore cycle, Lhamon offers the conceptual foundation for a new, process-oriented paradigm for the study of cultural history.

At the same time, *Raising Cain* helps us see the black face in blackface performance. In what is surely one of Lhamon's more controversial suggestions, blackface performance embedded an African American *weltanschauung*, one that continues to inform some African Americans as well as people of European descent. This viewpoint carries important implications for American studies. Scholars too often have objectified "blackness" in telling the story of minstrelsy, effectively eliminating African Americans as actors on the historical stage. This trend may well account for the segregation within our own field. In 1997, I participated in a conference on antebellum culture and the banjo, sponsored by the Carter G. Woodson Institute at the University of Virginia. The first day of the conference, which focused on African and African American antecedents of the banjo, included a number of black participants. But as the sessions moved on to a discussion of minstrelsy, those in attendance were, save one individual, exclusively white. What are the implications of a discourse that reproduces intellectual and social segregation? At the very least, this situation undermines efforts to achieve an inclusive reading of our cultural past that might inform a broad public. Lhamon's exploration of the meaningful interpenetration of black and white experience in minstrelsy's evolution suggests a fruitful avenue for a more integrated approach.

In the broadest sense, minstrelsy matters because it refers to fundamental problems that continue to define American social experience. As Lhamon so clearly establishes, minstrelsy emerged as a response to the epochal changes defining urban, industrial capitalism. The grotesque



gyrations of Jim Crow constituted an act of hell-raising—sometimes hidden, other times more brazen—in the face of increasing social divisions of race and class at odds with this nation’s democratic and egalitarian ideals. “The scandal of modernity . . . is the very problem of thresholds where multiple selves intersect. That threshold, that problem, is what blackface took as its topic. It was a scandal because people felt the need to find, impose, and police a unitary self, one self more real or authentic than the others” (131). Notwithstanding the fiction that we live in a postmodern world—one that has mastered, or at least shrugged off, the disquiet and inequities of the modern age—our society is still rife with Cains exiled within the urban, industrial environment. *Raising Cain* holds out the possibility that, in its ever-turning cycles, blackface performance offered a moment of cultural critique and remains a wellspring for new expressions of liberated identity.

### NOTES

1. “Virginia’s Senate Votes to Replace the State Song,” *New York Times*, 29 January 1997; “Like Old Times: A Minstrel Show, Big City of ‘32,” *New York Times*, 13 February 1998; Wesley Brown, *Darktown Strutters* (New York, 1994).

2. Early considerations of minstrelsy as popular entertainment include Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (1962; Norman, Okla. 1977); Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, N.C., 1930). For discussions emphasizing minstrelsy’s promotion of racial stereotypes, see Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York, 1982); Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974). Recent efforts include Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York, 1997); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993); Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family’s Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Washington, D.C., 1993).

3. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (1934; Chicago, 1970); David L. Miller, ed., *The Individual and the Social Self: Unpublished Work of George Herbert Mead* (Chicago, 1982).

4. For a very different analysis of blackface performance’s meaning and social significance, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997). Hartman takes issue with recent scholarship treating minstrelsy as a subversive expression of cross-racial class solidarity.

5. Recent examples of work linking minstrelsy to contemporary popular entertainment include Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996).

6. Little has been published on shows following the Civil War, and even less on twentieth-century minstrelsy; but see Charles Hamm, "The Last Minstrel Show?" in *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (New York, 1995). Although eclipsed by other entertainments, blackface shows continued in some rural areas of the country as late as the 1970s. The last days of minstrelsy are the subject of my current research in Knox County, Ohio.

7. Regarding the debate over authenticity, see Cecelia Conway, *Appalachian Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1995), 102–9; Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York, 1992), 133, 136; Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 89; Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York, 1971), 102; Alan W. C. Green, "'Jim Crow,' 'Zip Coon': The Northern Origins of Negro Minstrelsy," *Massachusetts Review* 11 (1970): 391.