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Stephen Johnson ed., *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. 266 pp. ISBN-10: 1558499342

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Burnt Cork takes up the complex terrain of blackface minstrelsy as a widespread and profoundly influential popular culture practice and performance. Importantly, the book touches upon the fact that this cultural form was dominant all over North America and elsewhere. As Johnson argues, “Indeed, as it persisted, prospered, and perhaps ossified over the next century, blackface minstrelsy became arguably the most widely disseminated and commercially successful entertainment form of the nineteenth century” (7).

Strikingly, Johnson identifies himself as a white Canadian male and questions his own visceral response to the pop cultural form. Commenting upon his response to blackface minstrelsy when he was first exposed, Johnson writes, “I recognized it as present in the fabric of my own personal, familial, and local culture, inextricably intertwined into my life” (5). His “connection” to the form is also Johnson’s response when questioned about why he has chosen such a research focus. The question reveals the continuing dissociation of whites in the West from the histories of their colonial performances of blackness and the concomitant exploitation of black populations. What Johnson does not address (and what I would like to suggest is another factor in this type of questioning) is the extent to which white Canadians have almost uniformly refused to deal with

their history of trans-Atlantic slavery, effectively disavowing a historical black Canadian presence. This allows Euro-Canadians to see Johnson's research and the topic of blackface minstrelsy as 1) not about Canada and a nostalgia for or representation of *Canadian slavery*, and 2) not about white *Canadian* performances of blackness. Johnson's book makes a start as a corrective to this problem.

Johnson's racial self-naming is very powerful precisely because of its rarity. Euro-Canadian denial of Canadian colonial origins parallels the under-employment of critical race scholars at Canadian universities. Furthermore, white Canadian scholars within such an environment bear no burden to disclose their racial identities, instead maintaining a false sense of racelessness. In opposition to this, Johnson discloses his profound cultural connection to the practice of blackface minstrelsy, as a "white male born in the 1950s and raised about sixty miles west of Toronto in a fairly secluded area of rural Ontario" (5). This engenders the possibility of another kind of reading of the book by white audiences, who must also consider their connection to such histories. Given all of this, it is unfortunate that the book does not include any discreet chapters on Canadian incarnations of blackface minstrelsy. Some of the more recent incidents include the Campbellford Legion Hall Halloween party of 2010, the Haute études commerciales (the business school affiliated with the Université de Montréal) frosh week debacle of 2011, the Radio Canada *Gal Les Olivier* comedy award show incident in 2012, the McGill University Halloween costume incident of 2012, and the Quebec student rally of 2012, which coupled a Charest effigy

with protesters in blackface. However, this absence is not Johnson's fault, but a result of the absence of support and encouragement for the creation of such scholarship in Canadian academia.¹

The collection is also very important due to the caliber and reputation of the assembled contributors: well recognized and widely published scholars on the subject. The book is mainly focused upon the more theatrical and performative aspects of minstrelsy. However, each of the chapters is firmly grounded in historical analysis, and given the book's thorough illustration, with over eighty images, it is also an extraordinary resource for art historians or other scholars working on the analysis of the art and visual culture that emerged from blackface minstrelsy. The book's focus on history and substantial illustrations makes it an excellent resource for undergraduate students.

Crucially, Johnson begins the book by introducing the vexing issue of the death/re-birth of blackface minstrelsy in Canada, the US, and elsewhere. Intriguingly, he suggests that incidents like Robert Downey Jr.'s recent blackface turn in *Tropic Thunder* or the use of blackface in *Mad Men*, or *America's Next Top Model* do not constitute a renaissance, because, as he argues, "I don't believe it did, or could, disappear entirely" (2). As such, Johnson challenges the (white) reader to acknowledge the ongoing pervasiveness of this popular form and to question its staying power and its transformation within new media and Internet platforms like Facebook and YouTube, and, finally, he probes the

¹ I recently mentored a student from Ryerson University, Toronto, who was misled by a supervising professor to believe that there was not enough of a history or repositories of material and visual culture objects on blackface minstrelsy in Canada to support such a research project.

continuing white desire for the re-presentation of black bodies within the grotesque, “comical,” form of the burnt cork mask.

Johnson’s introduction ably covers the scope of blackface minstrelsy, touching upon its ethnically and racially diverse origins from trickster figures in Africa to European practices of charivari and carnival. Importantly, he also spends time explaining the peculiarity of the black mask at the heart of the minstrel performance, the application of the paste of burnt cork (that was never intended to approximate the real complexions of people of African descent), and the exaggeration of the lips with white and red makeup. For Johnson, the music, performed with African instruments like the banjo, bones, and tambourine, provided the context for the stereotyped “primitive” movements and bodily comportments that marked the grotesque “black” performers as inferior to their white audiences. However, although Johnson cites Eric Lott’s pioneering scholarship *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995), his introduction does not pursue the more violent underpinnings of blackface minstrelsy, which Lott exposed as the foundations of the practice: the white fantasies of black torture and abuse as fundamentally based upon the deeply entrenched slave myth of the insentient black subject. This ongoing and vexing white desire for black humiliation and suffering as “comedy” is arguably the most under-examined issue in the collection.

But the book does open up the terrain of examination by including not only analyses of the more normative practices of blackface within the realm of theatre and the stage, but other contexts like twentieth-century animation (Nicholas

Sammond) and twenty-first century “ghetto parries” by white American university students (Catherine M. Cole). In moving from stage to screen to the lived spaces of higher education, Johnson and his contributors then drive home a central point of the book: “that the blackface minstrel tradition has never left us,” (2) and instead Johnson focuses upon contributing to an understanding of the “complex intentions and receptions of blackface” (3).

W. T. Lhamon Jr.’s chapter, “Turning around Jim Crow,” is a provocative revisiting of the origins of the minstrel figure, who was a vehicle through which Americans thought through their “deferred democracy” (40). In search of a social history capable of recuperating the emotional transformations of American cultural life and racial beliefs, he maps the transition of Jim Crow from T. D. “Jim Crow” Rice’s 1844 performance in *Otello* (22) to the outlawed Jim Crow that came to represent segregationist America (28). Along the way, Lhamon seeks to disclose the connection of Rice’s original Jim Crow/Otello, his white wife, and their surviving interracial child, to Barack Obama’s twenty-first-century ascendancy as the similarly mixed race offspring of a white mother and Kenyan father.

The promise of the interracial “problem child” of the totem of Jim Crow/Othello delivered from the cross-racial union of black man and white woman is for Lhamon materialized in Obama, who, he argues, is the embodiment of the American dream of racial accord and longing. For Lhamon then, the original Jim Crow is a transgressive and socialist totem that spoke through “blackness” about the brotherhood of men across races as he simultaneously

recognized his displacement and superiority to whiteness (“Kase its dar misfortune, An dey’d spend every dollar, If dey only could be, Gentlemen ob color” [23].) But Lhamon does not address the fact that such self-importance emanating from the “black” minstrel performer surely would have been a moment of comedic pleasure and release for white audiences.

Indeed, Lhamon does not fully articulate what it is about this specific type of overdetermined visually dependent blackness that facilitated this American popular arena of “truth telling” about all forms of oppression. Why was it the black body as “local, not exotic ... insurgent American” that became the vehicle of such expression? While Lhamon argues that Obama’s success hinged upon the evocation of a “positive counterlegacy that Jim Crow conveys,” at times it seems as if there is not enough evidence to support the direct lines that Lhamon seeks to draw between the original Jim Crow and the president (26). Lhamon argues against the politically correct suppression of Jim Crow and insists that Jim Crow’s continual resurfacing is necessary and useful as the transgressive political conscience that fights for social justice and common genealogies strategically through its veiled anonymity. Although provocative, this argument seems to overlook the racial violence and oppression that underpin the grotesque performances and have as their foundation the “comedic” displacement and expendability of the black body (40). If the black body as Jim Crow is the necessary vehicle of the rites that will “make the union whole and achieve democracy,” then we must ask at what point white America will ever relinquish its grip on the black subject (40).

Nicholas Sammond's "Gentlemen, Please Be Seated': Racial Masquerade and Sadomasochism in 1930s Animation" analyses Walt Disney's animated *Trader Mickey* (1932). Sammond examines Mickey Mouse's minstrel heritage and incarnation as an unspecified trader "into the heart of darkness" (otherwise known as Africa), which recalled American slavery and threw Mickey into confrontation with the African cannibals. Sammond ably explains why the aesthetic specificity of animation has lent itself so well to the representation of (racial) violence (165), arguing that "the vibrancy and magic associated with the cartoons of this period depend on a sadomasochistic racial fantasy of encounter and resistance that is played out again and again" (166).

Mickey Mouse was a biracial (black and white), banjo-playing minstrel figure whose "white gloves, black face, exaggerated mouth, and wide eyes" were shared with his blackface minstrel brothers. Profoundly, Sammond exposes the violence of the supposedly innocent child media of animation through which the terrorized black body became a source of "joviality, merriment, and song" for white audiences (172). Mickey as a black slave character was pleasurable for whites since he allowed them to witness black suffering as comedic. While Sammond notes that the pleasure of the white performer's inhabitation of the black body through blackface was their willing subjection to the sadomasochistic "pleasure" of racial abuse, I would offer that the appeal was also the ever-present escape hatch; the removal of the make-up and a return to their presumably whole and secured white bodies/identities.

Mickey's destination is rendered deliberately vague but decidedly dangerous. When the cannibals loot Mickey's cargo, his unfathomable jazz instruments perplex them enough to distract them from feasting upon him. It is Mickey's saxophone playing that transforms the aggression of the hapless Africans who, as Sammond notes, are helpless in the face of the rhythm. The cartoon collapses African American jazz with African "primitiveness" and reintroduces the diasporic minstrel as the cunningly comedic traveler.

This strategic juxtaposition of African Americans with other blacks (who become "othered" blacks) persists in contemporary popular culture with similar representational strategies. Michael Bay's *Bad Boy II* (2003), starring Will Smith and Martin Lawrence, featured the African American duo as the crime-fighting "good" Miami detectives pitted in part against a haphazard Haitian gang that is so unethical that they do not even produce their own drugs for sale but steal the shipments of rival gangs. The "civilized" African Americans are sophisticated and well-groomed and the black Caribbean "others" are disorganized, murderous, vodou-practising, ghetto dwellers with unkempt locks. Similarly, *Trader Mickey* telegraphs that Mickey Mouse as the Americanized bi-racial "black" is more "civilized" than the African cannibals.

Catherine M. Cole's chapter, "American Ghetto Parties and Ghanaian Concert Parties: A Transnational Perspective on Blackface," is perhaps the most urgent of the essays tackling the recent explosion of blackface amongst college-age white students at elite universities. Inspired by the scholar Louis Chude-Sokei's work on minstrelsy as a "transnational sign," Cole seeks to explain why

both the semi-private fraternity-sponsored “ghetto parties” and the Ghanaian concert parties rely upon “a close connection to sites of education and the social mobility such education promises and engineers” (225). Bringing an excellent close reading of the specificity of San Diego to bear, Cole probes the logic of ghetto parties in spaces where students are authorized to celebrate and degrade the “ghetto” from their elite white vantage point and to conflate slavery with a specific vision of racialized poverty. Through this vision, signs of material deprivation or socio-economic suffering are transformed into grotesque symbols for their own pleasure. Cole aptly critiques the absurdity of the white appropriation of black-owned, black-produced brands like FUBU (For Us, By Us) that white students are encouraged to wear and to exploit as signs of black racial inferiority and difference. Additionally, Cole astutely reads the white “ghetto parties” as a way for privileged white students to further alienate and disenfranchise the already negligible black student population (1.3%) of the University of California–San Diego campus (240).

Linking San Diego’s “Compton Cookout” to a host of similar parties that have taken place on university and college campuses across the US, Cole interrogates how these semi-private spaces authorize a spectacular staging of anti-black violence as comedic pleasure for young educated whites. In so doing, she poses what is perhaps the most difficult question: why? One unsettling explanation is that these white students, “deliberately wish to insult and alienate students of color” (245).

In a search for explanations, Cole struggles with two key possibilities. First, might white student investment in blackface minstrelsy signal their disavowal of the “other” as a symbol of the places, lifestyles, and identities they do not wish to inhabit? Or second, might the combination of government cuts and furloughs, rising debt loads, and university corporatization indicate that white students, also increasingly economically disenfranchised as “Generation Debt,” are also at risk of ending up in the “ghetto”? Both are interesting arguments, but I would add that what Cole overlooks is the specificity of the twenty-first-century moment in terms of the heightened visibility of the international black success stories of the über-famous. What does it mean that so many educated white youth are venting their frustration with themselves, their prospects, and their identities through the vessel of the black body in the age of Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Michaëlle Jean? Can we not also read their behaviour as a backlash against precisely the gains made by such extraordinary people (and the more mundane black middle-classes)? How is it that whites are insisting upon rehearsing a vision of the disenfranchised, poor, illiterate, idiotic, deprived black subject at a moment when so many blacks in America and elsewhere have long proven to be the exact opposite of such base stereotypes?

To conclude, Johnson’s *Burnt Cork* is a welcome addition to the study of a very complex and haunting subject. Its interdisciplinary combination of historical veracity across various media, periods, and regions of minstrel practice allows for a rich study of a multifaceted, challenging, and still unfolding legacy. The book reminds us that blackface minstrelsy must be confronted and understood, not

only because of what it says about our slave-holding past, but also because of its dogged resistance to decline and its deeply troubling resurgence amongst people who should know better. The book masterfully contributes to helping us answer the troubling questions of why (and why now) we are still being confronted by the deep-seated white compulsion for control and possession of the black body as a vessel of white desires.