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MINSTRELSY, BLACKFACE, AND THE RACIALISED PERFORMATIVE IN NARRATIVE STEREOVIEWS, 1860–1902

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Abstract

This essay looks at the influence of blackface minstrelsy on stereoviews of British and American publication from 1860-1902, within a transatlantic perspective. Using Black and blackface models, as well as hand-coloring, or "photographic blackface", stereoview publishers employed ready cultural codes from minstrelsy for racialized performance in order to posit an antithesis to whiteness for comic effect. Taking a "yes, it's racist and" approach, this paper demonstrates that narrative stereoviews were informed by minstrelsy's codes of white racial superiority and Black inferiority, and these codes could be destabilized through over-signage and contradictory or crossed signifiers. Binaries of race, gender and sexuality in the stereoviews can become unstable, while the stereoview's two photographs contribute to this effect by offering an already doubleness that, when applied to race, suggests a relation more close than different.

Keywords: stereoview; Black; minstrel; race; homoerotic

Blackface minstrelsy was foundational to the cultures of the United States and Great Britain, and its legacy of racism endures to this day. While it is now taboo in these countries for a white person to wear blackface, the effects of blackface minstrelsy are still visible and can contribute to systemic racism. An immensely popular form of variety show from its nascency in 1815 until well into the twentieth century, blackface minstrelsy has had an out-sized influence not only in the nations where it was popular but through their global influence. The grotesquerie of blackened faces, a wide gash of red lips dribbling pseudo dialect, the rolling eyes rimmed with white, excessive hair, white gloves, and overly sexualised, garish or ragged costuming, created farcical stereotypes that have lodged in a collective, cognitive dissonance regarding perceptions of race. The minstrel show, and its derivatives such the Uncle Tom show, thrived by creating stereotypes of blackness billed as "authentic" for the consumption of 19th- and 20th-century audiences. This study begins in the mid-19th century when minstrelsy provided for the white, middle-class audience a continual fare of the ludicrous through blackened faces that signified an uncivilised, unrestrained other. Despite elements of genuine musical and dancing skill, minstrelsy's genius loci lay in stereotypes of black inferiority that were considered amusing, because, as with children or pets, they mimicked culture rather than owned it. For the transatlantic Victorians, the sympathy to the enslaved did not extend to free Black people in their midst, and the racialised performativity of minstrelsy lent plasticity to exclusions central to white culture.

Minstrelsy has staying power. Mickey Mouse is a minstrel. The song he whistles in the first animated sound film, Walt Disney's *Steamboat Willie*, is the scurrilously racist, "Old Zip Coon," a standard-bearer from blackface. It was a song every American knew, and in 1928, the year of the film's debut, Mickey Mouse with his white gloves was understood to be a minstrel (Sammond, 2015, p. 71). In the second half of the century, children knew "Old Zip Coon" by different lyrics as "Turkey in the Straw," and the song remained embedded in the psyche of a nation from sing-a-longs to its continuous play by neighbourhood ice cream trucks. If the racist lyrics are removed, does racist acculturation remain? I will argue yes, since sooner or later we find out its origin and recognise ourselves as having been conditioned. As late as 1978, the last minstrel hour on television, the BBC's "Black and White show," aired its final episode, having remained a Sunday evening staple for twenty years (Pickering, 2017, p. 182).

Nicholas Sammond demonstrates that blackface minstrelsy was originary to animation, and appears in film and rap, while W.T. Lhamon connects the history of Black, vernacular dance to minstrelsy and hip hop (Sammond, 2015; Lhamon, 1998, pp. 1–55, 181–182). But the distrust and suspicion engendered by blackface lingers as "psychic residue" for Blacks, claims Wesley Morris: "[minstrelsy] maintained a tight grip on American culture, on white perceptions of Blackness, on the psyches of Black people, whether they're on a stage or gazing up at one. The crime of blackface minstrelsy was the number it did on Black people's expectations of themselves" (Morris, 2021, p. 372). Minstrelsy continues to destabilise through the racialised performative, doubling and replicating until there is no origin, simply culture. Anne Anlin Cheng warns that repeated encounters with racialised subjects create "racial melancholia," the result of "an

inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity" (Cheng, 2001, p. xi). The question of the racialised performative has been facing off, like a mirror facing a mirror, for the over two hundred years of blackface minstrelsy, and it will not disappear if we simply ignore it. By examining stereoviews in the minstrel tradition, we can better understand the racism of their day and ours, and with critical understanding begin the process of revealing and dismantling its collective cognitive dissonance that continues to circulate as cultural norms.

Stereoviews from the mid-19th to early 20th century in the US and Britain were part of a vernacular culture of typing for comic effect. They circulated in a free-wheeling fashion with sheet music, cartooning, farces, collectibles, and other photographic forms, and they reflect common assumptions about gender, race, ethnicity, the cult of domesticity, and, beneath the façade of the joke, the fragility of superiority. This paper looks at the racialised body, whites in blackface and Blacks, depicted as an antithesis to white culture for comedic ridicule. I will demonstrate that stereoviews influenced by blackface minstrelsy were racist and, in the over-load of their signifiers, became destabilised. I have written elsewhere that the stereoview invites deep scrutiny, seeming to transport the viewer into a volumetric space with a surfeit of photographic detail. The viewer can lose consciousness of the body, and drift *in medias res* in the simulation of 3D (Davis, 2015, pp. 3, 27). Yet, when we stop viewing the historical stereograph, we are left with a flat card and two small photographs more close than different. We may inquire how such volume occurs from so little by way of observable difference between the matched pair. Racialised typifications magnify and enlarge perceptions of small differences, investing in distortion and repetition until assumptions seem natural simply because they are so familiar. Stereoviewing encourages the viewer to read between small differences in order to invest in a larger, spatial perception. However, stereoviewing necessarily offers a physical break in the flow of the performative, oscillating between 2D and 3D, with a pair of photographs more close than different, alternating spatial perception with its deflation. Unlike other media which require cooperation as an audience member, with stereo, the viewer sets the pace and sequence of the viewing. This ability to pause at will and control the process can allow points of criticality to enter, siphoning off some of the enveloping power from the flow of racialisation, slowing the pace for meditation. The Victorian consumer of these views was likely responding to codes which freely circulated in media, but built into the process of stereoviewing is a break in the rhythm of the performative that offered the potential for criticality, divergence, and redirection.

This paper does not focus upon all minstrelsy, a broad and varied entertainment, but upon its performance as seen in commercial stereoviews from mid-century to the first years of the 20th century. A brief history of minstrelsy will aid understanding at this point. The first minstrel show occurred in 1815 in New York state, when Micah Hawkins wrote a blackface operetta in dialect, performed in Albany (Lhamon, 1998, p. 8).[1] In 1827, George Washington Dixon donned blackface

1. It is alternately titled, "Champlain and Plattsburg," "The Siege of Plattsburg," and "Backside Albany."

for his dandy character, Zip Coon, best remembered for his song about the taboo of cross-racial courting, "Long Tail Blue" (Fig. 1). Dandy characters like Zip Coon were mainstays of minstrelsy, portraying free, flamboyant, Northeastern American Blacks who never managed the codes of dress, speech or demeanor necessary for gentlemen, though they sure tried (Waters, 2007, p. 113).[2] Their attempts to be read as genteel hysterically failed, since by Victorian standards "Black" and "gentleman" were antithetical (Pickering, 2017, p. 105). Thomas D. "Daddy" Rice, another New York actor, entered the business in 1834 with the character Jim Crow, a disabled Black man in rags who wheeled about, repeating his song, and dancing with jerky abandon. Rice's Jim Crow was a hit, and he travelled the skit through the States (Lhamon, 1998, pp. 59–61), and then to England, where everybody from sweeps to nobs began to "jump Jim Crow." Both Dixon and Rice created stereotypes from pieces of Black culture (Lhamon, 1998, pp. 1–55) filtered through racist perception that retained, paradoxically, elements of admiration. Scores of other companies embellished this highly successful format, so that minstrelsy traveled to every town and hamlet on both sides of the English-speaking Atlantic. When exactly the tradition died out in the US is up for debate but, as mentioned, in Britain the year was 1978.

Fig. 1 Sheet music cover for "Long Tail Blue" by G. W. Dixon. New York: Firth and Hall, c. 1837. Courtesy The Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection, The Sheridan Libraries, John Hopkins University. https://www.library.jhu.edu/

From the beginning, minstrelsy was performed by white actors in blackface make-up, billed as a demonstration of the "authentic" American Negro. Its variety of instrumentals, songs, dance, and skits, evolved into a formula over the decades. Though primarily performed by white men, minstrelsy had Black male and white female performers, as well (Nowatzki, 2010, p. 37; Toll, 1974, p. 277; Vorachek, 2013). By the decade of the 1860s, blackface minstrelsy had transitioned into a

2. Other authors discuss the type: Nowatzki, 2010, p. 33; Pickering, 2017, p. 134.

highly conventional, middle-class, family entertainment, especially in England, where troupes such as Christy's minstrels played with great commercial success. Central to the shows were banjo music, "bones" (castanets), comic repartee, with lyrics and skits that portrayed Blacks as outside of every norm of genteel behavior – lazy, uncouth, dim-witted, pretentious, conniving, voracious, and nothing short of ridiculous in costume. Robert Nowatzki notes that whites did not wish to be entertained by Blacks but wanted to witness "Black behavior," and blackface allowed audiences to laugh at the dissonance these caricatures created in contrast to white norms (Nowatzki, 2010, p. 36).

The scholarship on blackface minstrelsy has experienced substantial growth in the last thirty years. Studies on the early decades of minstrelsy have less bearing on my topic, which begins some decades after the genre's start. Though my subject matter is distinct from these scholars, I remain indebted to their insights on the homoeroticism of minstrelsy and its borrowings from Black culture. Nowatzki remarks that the tendency to focus on the nascent era of minstrelsy from the late 1820s to 1840 has downplayed the increase of racism mid-century (Nowatzki, 2010, p. 5). This echoes Roediger's earlier position challenging the view that minstrelsy was oppositional to oppression, since the racial content cannot be neatly separated from other types of content (Roediger, 1991, pp. 123–24).

Douglas Lorimer's historical study, though not on the subject of minstrelsy, was the first to explore in depth the shift in mid-century British attitudes from sentimentalism toward a calcified racialisation (Lorimer, 1978). Nowatzki applies this theme to his study of minstrelsy asserting that abolitionist sympathy hardened into racial opposition once emancipation was reached (Nowatzki, 2010). Pickering, by contrast, asserts that British minstrelsy was not entirely racist; rather, it created a separate region of fantasy for the middle-class Victorians (Pickering, 2017, p. 100). From the perspective of whiteness studies in America, Roediger uses the term "blackface whiteness" to characterise the liquidation of many ethnicities into blackface's emptiness (Roediger, 1991, pp. 115–118). Pickering's study is superbly researched but equivocates between reading minstrelsy as racialised and as accomplished musical fare for Victorian families. The dualism cannot ultimately be reconciled. This paper is in accord with the premise that minstrelsy was a fundamentally racist genre, and wherever its sensibilities may lie in the early decades or in terms of musical esprit, when stereography adopted its subject matter, at the crest of the genre's popularity, the sympathy toward the slave calcified into fear, and pity turned into anxiety over who one's neighbours might be.

A few years before the boom in narrative stereoviews, a cultural "explosion" was imported from the United States to Europe. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a strongly abolitionist novel, took aim at the institution of slavery, while still remaining in a racist paradigm. According to Sarah Meer, the first five thousand copies of the 1852 publication sold out in a week and attracted a multi-media extravaganza that was "inescapable" on both sides of the Atlantic. Uncle Tom merchandise was prolific – soap, songbooks, almanacs, toys, guides for home tableaux vivants, and even wallpaper (Meer, 2005, pp. 1–2). In Britain, where the novel was pirated, 1.2 million copies of the book sold within its first year in 23 separate

editions. (Pickering, 2017, p. 23). Dramatisations of it were performed in every corner of England, from the upscale Drury Lane to penny gaffs (Meer, 2005, p. 144). It was a book you could find alongside the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the homes of all classes of society (Lorimer, 1978, p. 83). Tom Mania seized England, and Tomitudes created a transatlantic culture that has survived to this day.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was having none of it. The Tom mob was antipodal to the aestheticism of the poet and painter's Pre-Raphaelite circle. We see the artist's objection to popular culture in his 1853 pen and ink sketch, "Modest Pride," depicting a Black dandy served by a shoeblack (Fig. 2). Placards reading "Uncle Tom's Cabin" form a sort of protest march behind the duo. Accompanying this sketch were a bit of comic doggerel in Black dialect, then common on the English stage, along with a smaller sketch of a Black minstrel with a banjo. The Rossetti ephemera reveal that the integration of minstrelsy with Stowe's novel and the abolitionist movement was well understood by the artist, and the popularity of this hybrid disgusted him. It is commonly acknowledged among scholars that Stowe mined minstrel stereotypes for her characters, and minstrelsy along with "Tom Shows" cannibalised the novel to the furthest reaches of both countries (Meer, 2005, pp. 11–14, 59). Rossetti's dandy is a direct reference to characters found in blackface minstrelsy (Fig. 1).

Fig. 2 "Modest Pride," Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1853, ink sketch. From H.C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of his Life*. London: George Bell and Sons, 1899, pp. 217–218.

In England, beginning *c.* 1861, the year of Abraham Lincoln's inauguration and the beginning of the US Civil War, Michael Burr published a series of views (Norton and Fleming, n.d.) that perform a comic protest against emancipation and social inclusion for Blacks, beginning with a figure in the exact pose of Rossetti's. In *The White Slave*, a hand-colored albumen print (Fig. 3), Burr portrays a minstrel dandy, featuring a man of African descent. Thanks to the playbills, which form a carnival of wood-type advertisements, the view can be dated *c.* 1861. The term "slave" for a white person appeared in

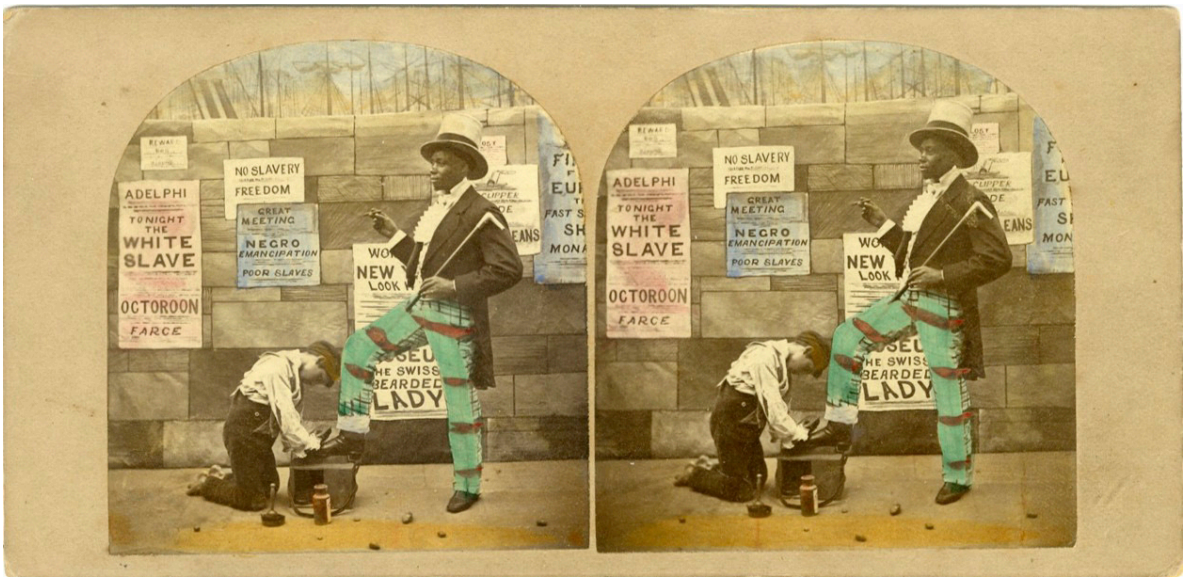

Fig. 3 "The White Slave," Michael Burr, 1861-62, hand-coloured albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of Jeffrey Kraus.

the US revolutionary period in protest against British tyranny, then resurfaced in the 1830s in the US and Britain to decry the conditions of grossly exploited wage workers (Hannah-Jones 2021, pp.12–13; Roediger, 2007, pp. 65–92; Klingberg, 1938, pp. 42–53). A protean term, "white slave," was by mid-century employed in earnest and in jest, denoting an exploitative situation for a white person considered worse than slavery (Roediger, 2007, p. 76). In Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, Mrs. Jellyby's children are called "white slaves," only half in jest (Dickens, 1852/1983). Hastily produced farces, such as "The White Slave of England," also exploited the term (Murray, 1857). Giving fearful resonance to the term, the one drop of African blood rule was, in Southern states, sufficient to enslave a person (Lorimer, 1978, p. 85).

A poster on the stereo reads "Adelphi," which refers to the theatre where minstrel troupes played, and to Dion Boucicault's play, *The Octoroon*, which also played there in 1861 (Boucicault, 1859).[3] The eponymous octoroon (or "white slave") is, in the play, auctioned for sale, and her new master murders a slave boy, played in minstrel blackface, in order to prevent him from delivering documents of her manumission and

3. *The Octoroon: A Play in Four Acts* premiered at the Winter Garden Theatre, New York. The UK version, *The Octoroon, or Life in Louisiana*, 1861, played at the Adelphi.

the family's inheritance. An omniscient camera at the crime scene self-operates to take a picture of the murder, and, though the camera is destroyed, a developed plate is magically retrieved from it, revealing the true murderer. Studies have cited the racism implicit in the operation and theatricality of this contrivance (Sheehan, 2018, p. 37; Sonstegard, 2006, pp. 375–95). I wish to focus, rather, on the camera as the central actor (if not character) essential to the play's climax and conclusion. Lazarus-like, it manages to animate, take an exposure, then self-develop a photographic plate, reproducing, as photography does, guilt and victimhood. The negative-positive process plays upon race, not only in terms of colour opposition, but also by the racialised associations of the two words' definitions – "negative," "positive." In this scene, the double "negative" of race and murder miraculously produces in auto-photography a positive proof, a haunting of space, like stereography, in another place and time.

The concept of crime is symbolised in the Burr view by the "white slave," or shoeblack – notice how the signifiers of race flip flop. The boy's lower position vis à vis the Black man delivers a message of racial fear and resentment. The dandy in minstrel costume with garishly hand-coloured, plaid pants, frilled shirt, and top-hat is the product of abolition, and now that the race hierarchy is overturned, the little white boy serves a new Black master. Though minstrelsy in its early days appealed to lower-class whites, cross-racial sympathy waned once the American Civil War began. The view suggests that should the Union win, the consequences will be that whites will find themselves enslaved by newly freed Blacks, arriving perhaps on those backgrounded ships. Such a state would be as unnatural as the Swiss bearded lady, seen in typography on a poster between the man's parted legs, with a suggestion of emasculation typical of racism. Minstrelsy played fast and loose with gender, often feminising men in dandy or "wench" roles, and some actors regularly impersonated females (Meer, 2005, p. 37; Lhamon, 1998, p. 60; Carpio, 2008, p. 44). The shoeblack is indeterminate, too. A white blackened by his job, he and other shoeblacks worked in brigades organised to help waifs earn money so that they may emigrate to other countries. The clipper ship for New Orleans, seen on another poster, suggests a transatlantic passage for race to change places.

Though England abolished West Indian slavery in 1834, by the mid-century, according to Douglas Lorimer, an intensified, national racism began among the rising industrial class (Lorimer, 1978, pp. 209–210). Minstrelsy lost its element of worker and slave sympathy and became harshly derogatory to Blacks. In an unidentified British stereoview, "Hoop de Dooden Do," from the 1860s (Fig. 4), we see a boy, presumably Black British, with the rolled-up eyes, wild hair, exaggerated, red-lipped mouth, banjo, and a silly, blackface expression. He sings "Hoop de Dooden Do," an 1860s minstrel tune by Charles Louis Napoleon, made famous by the celebrated banjoist, Harry Fox. In the lyrics, a newly freed slave repeats the refrain that morphs from person to person and man to machine:

> I put my trunk upon de ground,
> Then I take a look around,
> Soon I heard de whistle sound:
> Hoop de dooden do.
> I hadn't trabelled very far
> Before I see de railroad cars

Fig. 4 "Hoop de Dooden Do," British, 1860s, hand-coloured, albumen print stereograph.

> Jumping over a pair of bars,
> Screeching: Hoop de dooden do.
> I heard a noise, see'd a sight,
> Den I ran with all my might,
> All de cars run off de track:
> Hoop de dooden do. (Napolean, n.d.)

"Hoop de dooden do" then transmorphs to a baby's cry and the exclamation of an injured uncle (an older enslaved man). Through the locomotive whistle and subsequent accident, as well as the chaotic transmigration of the refrain, we are reminded of the middle passage, the domestic trade of the enslaved, which broke up families, and the underground railroad. The train whistle and its strange iterations were part of minstrelsy's repertoire, and performers would segue from sentimental pastoral songs to "extended imitations of train sounds" (Roediger, 2007, p. 121). In this song, the train becomes bestial, but perhaps the fixation upon whistling is another form of haunting, a bringing of distance near, the auditory equivalent to stereoscopy's feat.

In this stereograph, we sense the transmigration of sound and see the body transmogrified into a deeper black. Upon close inspection, we can see that the skin areas of the lad are hand-coloured to a darker hue than the mid-range, brown-blacks of untouched albumen. There are visible lines running on each image from the hair above the ears to the chin, like masks. The darker and more prominent hand-colouring for

Fig. 5 "Oh! Would I Were a Bird," Michael Burr,1866, hand-coloured, albumen print stereograph.

the skin in "Hoop-de-Dooden-Do" differs in character and readability from the sparser hand-colouring typically used for white models. Here we have total coverage, or "photographic blackface." This imparts a sense that the boy is playing at blackness, through music and mask, reminding us that Black performers, too, were left with little choice but to play in blackface (Morris, 2021, p. 372).

The next three views I will present as a sequence, whether or not they were intended to be. Michael Burr's "Oh! Would I Were a Bird," an 1866, hand-coloured, albumen print stereoview (Fig. 5) shows a Black British man, whom the photographer used several times as a model. We will follow him through the sequence, beginning with his parody of the English gentlemen. The title refers to an 1865 song by Charles Blampin performed by John Rawlinson of Christy's minstrels (Blampin, 1865). On verso are the lyrics:

> Oh, would I were a bird
> That I might fly to thee,
> And breathe a loving word
> To one so dear to me.

The archaic subjunctive tense "would I were" and the Elizabethan "thee" signal pretence. Along with the ostentatious, period clothing on a Black body, the view reproduces the signs of a sentimental minstrel. And he is a flutist! And dressed in butler-style, red breeches, with yellow great coat and embellished

Fig. 6 "An Awful Valentine," Michael Burr, 1865–66, hand-coloured, albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of Dr Peter Blair.

vest! Here was exactly the sort of parodied gentility that mid-century minstrelsy served to a family audience. The man's hair is as out-of-control as his activity is out of place, a clown among the genteel.

In Burr's, "An Awful Valentine," 1865–66, a hand-coloured, albumen print stereograph (Fig. 6), the skin tone of the model markedly differs from the previous stereoview. In "An Awful Valentine," the skin colouring is a deep, bluish black, not the natural albumen tone. Observe the lines along the right side of the model's cheeks on both prints – more photographic blackface. The lover has just received a valentine with the picture of an ape. Winthrop Jordan demonstrated that the comparison of Black people to apes had been circulating since the 16th century and was reinforced by the 18th-century concept of the Great Chain of Being (Jordan, 1968, pp. 220–21, 238-239, 254, 491–97). Pierre Camper's 1791 study on human faces, with the Negro modelled after the orangutang (Camper, 1791, p. 44), is but a prelude to the endless drawing of Blacks and the Irish with simian features in 19th- and early 20th-century cartooning and animation. For James Hunt, the Great Chain of Being was not just an evolutionary model but a fixity for Black people between human and ape. Hunt's ideas had little acceptance among scientists but found traction with the sons of industrialists and merchants who aspired to gentility yet lacked noble blood. For the young *sine nobilitate*, or snobs, the Anglo-Saxon race substituted for high birth, and the white man became the genetic aristocrat. By this standard, says

Fig. 7 "I am Going to be Married," Michael Burr, 1865–66, hand-coloured, albumen print stereograph.

Lorimer, "no black could arise to the status of gentleman" (Lorimer, 1978, pp. 139–161). With his gorilla colouring and garish red breeches, the model could have stepped off a minstrel stage. He is the embodiment of white fear after the emancipation of the American enslaved.

In the third stereoview, Burr's "I am Going to be Married," 1865–66, a hand-coloured albumen-print stereograph (Fig. 7), the favoured model returns. In this instance, a feeling of sympathy arises from his direct stare, smile, and the iris he tenderly holds in his hands. He stands close to the viewer, addressing us, breaking the fourth wall of distance. Comparing these sentiments with his over-sized paper tie, stuffed shirt front, and silly plaid pants, the view balances between sweet and ridiculous. The viewer may wonder, who is the bride for this groom? In minstrelsy-style, it may just be a white girl, perchance the sender of the simian missive. The dandy evoked the fear of the intermixture of the races, a great concern of Victorians (Jordan, 1968, pp. 542–45), while minstrel lyrics courted the taboo of interracial desire (Lott, 1993, p. 6).

Minstrelsy makes an appearance in US stereoviews, post-bellum, in Franklin George Weller's, "The First Day of April," 1871, an albumen print stereoview (Fig. 8). A model in blackface plays an April fool's joke on a young gentleman. The jokester's clothing indicates a female body, while the face, upon close scrutiny, suggests that this may be a man, typical for blackface

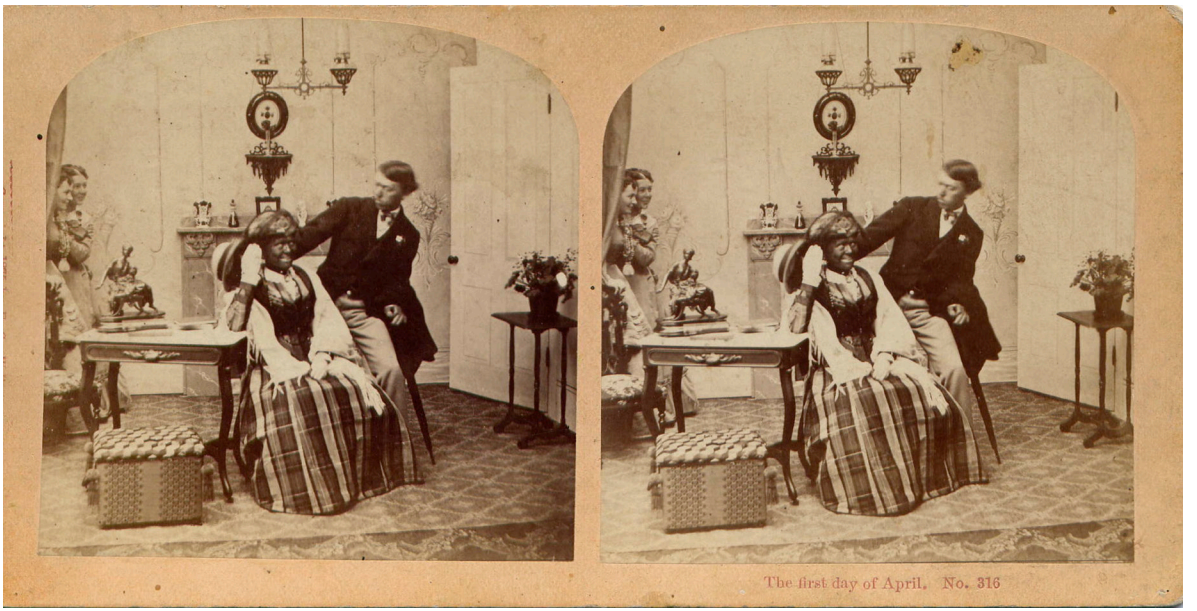

Fig. 8 "The First Day of April," F.G. Weller, 1871, albumen print stereograph. Courtesy of the Kelvin Ramsey Collection, Special Collections Research Center, William and Mary Libraries.

minstrelsy. Again, we have indeterminacy. The standing gentleman is startled by seeing a Black person in the parlour, while the minstrel raises their white gloved hand, as though to say *gotcha* in the tradition of the trickster. White gloves are a given of the minstrel, an accoutrement that mocks gentility (Sammond, 2015, pp. 3–5). The table figurine, perhaps the sportive goddess Diana, glances away from this low-culture gag, while a pair of young women in the corner, who smile at the jest, serve as a stand-in for the audience's gaze. A ripple effect of doubling occurs. The women are a double for the Black and white couple; for audience stereo perception and imaginative completion of the story; and for stereography's photographs, close but different. This sort of play on pairing and cross-glances was typical of F.G. Weller, whose tableaux were set in the parlour, home to the culture of stereoviewing (Davis, 2019, Section 6). The parlour was also a place that determinedly excluded Blacks from the visual codes of domesticity (Davis, 2015, pp. 196–97).

In the Kilburn company's 1892 gelatin-silver stereoview, "Making the Old Kitchen Rattle" (Fig. 9), we are no longer in the parlour but the kitchen, where every member of this ensemble is a man in blackface, including the bride. The banjo and fiddle are stock instruments of minstrel shows, and a type

Fig. 9 "Making the Old Kitchen Rattle," B.W. Kilburn and Co., 1892, gelatin-silver print stereograph.

called "Old Uncle Ned," a mature man who was formerly enslaved, occupies the left side in front of the low-class deity, the kitchen stove. The ever-popular bridal series, with their posh gowns and cascades of lilies, is transformed into a servants' break-down, part of the olio portion of minstrelsy. As with "Ho-op-De-Dooden-Do," imaged music crosses the short space into stereo perception, which happens within the individual mind, and just as quickly, the card is lowered, so that one photograph barely distinguishes from the other.

Cross-dressing, fluidity between the sexes and races, and homoerotic puns were steady fare in blackface minstrelsy (Roediger, 2007, p. 121). They reappear in Underwood and Underwood's "Is yo' sho' lady when I wears dese stockings I won' fin' ma laigs all black," a gelatin-silver stereoview of 1902 (Fig. 10). A queen speaking in pseudo-dialect that could come from any minstrel show has a problem with changeable colour. The joke, residing in the fact that she already has black legs, turns on her misgiving that the stockings may make her legs darker yet, effectually masking them with "blackleg." The joke inverts the old trope of "washing the Ethiop white," which advertising, even quite recently, has used to suggest that a superior soap could wash off race like burnt cork (Wootson, 2017; Business Insider, n.d.). Coming from a cross-dressed man, whose very appearance would have been comedic at the time, the dialogue strikes the tone of a trickster (Gates, 1988). He perches at the cross-roads of racism, homophobia, and gender, poking at underlying

Fig. 10 "Is yo' sho' lady when I wears dese stockings I won' fin' ma laigs all black," Underwood and Underwood, 1902, gelatin-silver print stereograph.

anxieties of the time, which laughter teases into release. This begs the question – does the joke depend on emasculation or homoeroticism, or both?

Clinton Hutton has coined the term "gyalification" for the emasculation of Black men through cross-dressing and subordination, as well as slavery's dissolutions of families, a form of castration, whose nadir was found in the socio-psychosis of lynching (Hutton, 2014, pp. 21–45, 148). Though Hutton does not discuss minstrelsy, specifically, his term "g'yal" applies to the Underwood and Underwood view, considering that gender fluidity for the purpose of mockery were minstrel staples. Eric Lott claims that minstrelsy demonstrated cross-racial, homoerotic desire which required "its boundaries to be continually staged" (Lott, 1992, p. 27).

That homoerotic desire was bounded by derision does not disguise the fact that, as Lott claims, "in a real sense the minstrel man *was* the penis" (Lott, 1993, p. 6). Here is an echo of Frantz Fanon's oft-cited assertion that the Black man is viewed as a penis symbol (Fanon, 1952, pp. 159, 170). Minstrelsy's obsession with Black masculinity is focused, in psychoanalytic terms, on a part-object, the penis, or its metonym, the phallus.

Queen or g'yal, take your pick – the conundrum they have with clothing is one of race and gender. The stockings become a mask with the potential for greater distance from white culture through intensified blackness as well as innate phallicity. The leg psychoanalytically represents the phallus, but the ludicrousness of the feminine inversion saves the signifier from threat. This laughter walks beside anxiety, suggesting that the masks of blackface, gender, and race are but costumes worn at will. Whatever fixities a society imagines for them, they have no stability here. Laughter or scorn, often both, is the result, which marks the customary misuse of the marginalised subject for comic derision. By the very nature of stereoscopic photography, too, the view is ontologically doubled, or queered. "Is yo' sho' lady when I wears dese stockings I won' fin' ma laigs all black" – the doubleness rises – even the title is long – exceeding the limits of signification in a pile up of crisscross and flip-flop. There is a sort of hysteria in how many turns we have, evoking Jim Crow with his wheel-abouts.

This view is highly structured stereoptically, with the counter and hanging stockings providing maximal depth cues for the perception of a deeply perspectival space. With the use of well-placed framing elements, the locus and stereopsis are anchored by a gal and a g'yal who meet over a sales counter, each holding a feminine article of clothing in black, their gazes locked, while a line of stockings, phallic signifiers, hang in patient suspension above them. An umbrella, too, leans between the knees of the g'yal, pointing to the region of sexual ambiguity. With all its apparently racist humour, the view invites us to consider that femininity, queerness and race are matters of interpretation and negotiation. Like the stereoview, they can be seen in two ways and suggest a suspension between modes of perception.

The stereoviews in this essay have been informed by minstrelsy, presenting blackface or Black people enacting racialised characteristics. Part of a media culture that rose around minstrelsy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and white insecurity about free Blacks, the jokes in these views, as with ridicule in general, alleviate stress for a majority class concerned with maintaining control. But this is not their only operation. The stereoviews also reveal how hard white racial superiority had to work to sign itself as maintaining that control. The piling-on of signifiers expresses strain, contradiction, and too obvious artifice, such as "photographic blackface." Rather than create distance, a dynamic of ridicule, they begin to look like something overworked for lack of confidence, and their constructed nature reveals itself. Returning to the card itself, we hold two small photographs that seem to bely the volume they create in the viewing process. The creation of stereopsis in the view is entirely up to the will of the viewer, and the quality of the experience of spatial perception very much depends on our desire to see it. Stereoviewing is invested perception, but it is important to note that investment in the technique does not necessarily transfer to subject matter. Stereoviewing allows for questioning through the individual's control over a process that oscillates between 2D and 3D, which offers small ruptures through which critical reflection may enter. Stereoscopy by its interactive nature and the embodiment of the process is emblematic of the scrutiny through which signifiers can magnify or deflate, as we will them to. The viewer grants a scene perceptual depth and then removes it, so that no matter how convincing a scene may be, we know it is a fictional construct.

That knowledge can strengthen us in viewing the inexcusable topics of racism and their enduring control over our lives.

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