The Survival of Blackface Minstrel Shows in the Adirondack Foothills

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Long after most Americans had found blackface minstrelsy demeaning, performances continued in isolated rural areas, with no apparent racist intent. In one declining community in New York’s North Country—a place whose residents had virtually no contact with African Americans and no reason to feel uneasy about “the other”—minstrel shows may have served to honor a folk tradition and to express community solidarity in the face of economic hardship. Respect for the show’s directors and self-conscious reflection on the town were additional factors. I explore the meaning, structure, and function of blackface minstrel shows in the context of Adirondack community life.

In the back of my grandparents’ closet in Colton, New York, where we sought out old prom gowns for dress-up games, was a relic—a wood silhouette in the shape of a banjo. It had strings painted on the front and lines of text on the back. My father told me that it had been my Grandfather Hurley’s stage prop when he played a blackface character called Tambo in Colton minstrel shows in the 1950s, and that the words on the back were entrance cues.

... Shows in blackface are undeniably hurtful and demeaning. Recent scholars have argued that racism alone does not explain their popularity, however, and foremost among the functions they served their white audiences (Lott 1993; Averill 2003) was enabling actors to comment on their own culture in an uninhibited way. Musicologist Charles Hamm (1995) has taken this analysis further, suggesting that the persistence of blackface minstrel shows in small-town America was a nostalgic idealization of nineteenth-century values and a rejection of twentieth-century multiculturalism. Based on interviews with living participants and a study of scripts, scores, and photographs, I maintain that there were other important reasons why the people of Colton participated.
Hamm studied Tunbridge, Vermont, where the last blackface minstrel show was produced in 1991. Colton and Tunbridge resemble many small communities of the Northeast: They are sited along rivers that once powered small mills and industries; they have harsh winters, short growing seasons, and rocky soil unsuitable for large-scale agriculture; their white, working-class populations have never included a statistically significant number of people of color.

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**Blackface Minstrel Shows**  
Blackface minstrelsy in America began with blackface song-and-dance routines in the 1820s. Full-length minstrel shows performed by whites for whites were formalized by the early 1840s and quickly became popular across the United States (Henderson n.d.). Countless professional groups formed, and these barnstorming troupes reached northern New England and New York State by 1850. They were particularly popular in small cities and rural areas.

North Country historian Linda Casserly (1998) has documented the annual arrival of minstrel show troupes by train in Canton, New York: The performers would announce themselves with a midday parade and then play to packed houses for many consecutive nights. Such troupes toured until the late 1920s. As they disappeared, amateur community groups took up blackface performances, finding new homes in fraternal organizations, summer camps, civic clubs, and churches.

...  

**Persistence of Blackface**  
Hamm suggests that the survivals of blackface minstrelsy in Vermont are the last cry of a threatened subculture that strongly identifies with the past and clings to nostalgic notions of nineteenth-century morality and mentality...

...Can the Colton shows be understood as the “last cry” of townspeople clinging to the memory of more prosperous times, when blackface minstrelsy was a favorite entertainment? Do they represent a rejection of multiculturalism, or worse yet, the embrace of racist views and political ideologies?

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In August 2003, I met with the original music directors for the shows: Evelyn Riehl (who with her husband Bill revived the local tradition in 1954), and Cindy Hennessy, both music teachers. These elders of the community were somewhat uncomfortable discussing the minstrel shows because they know that blackface is now taboo. They described the show as part of a tradition: it was family and community oriented, involving people of all ages and professions; it raised money for local scholarships; it was good homespun entertainment that allowed townspeople to laugh at themselves. According to them, the shows were not about “making fun of blacks,” they were just the style of musical comedy that suited them best.

The desire to portray “the other” was as important an aspect of these blackface shows as in other theatrical reversals—from the annual outdoor “Winnetou” reenactments in Bad Segeberg, where Germans don cowboy and Indian garb to create an imaginary American West, to the northern New York cross-dressing mock wedding ceremonies described by Brenda Verardi (2002)...
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...the shows were ideally suited to small-town talents: The format was flexible enough to allow contributions of all sorts, from tap dancing and square dancing to barbershop quartets and traditional ballad singers. The shows’ survival without blackface makeup suggests that the community-based form of the production was perhaps more important than its portrayal of blacks... The _Historical Historical Colton_ show from 1959, which was not performed in blackface, contains deliberate nostalgic references to the past...the shows preserved some of the oldest Anglo American folk traditions around: the repertoire of the Adirondack storytellers, woodsmen balladeers, and fiddlers—the Colton culture bearers documented in folklorist Robert Bethke’s (1981) book _Adirondack Voices_. Ham Ferry, a well-known local storyteller and folk poet, contributed a recitation to each show, and Bill Smith, the highly respected Adirondack storyteller and basketmaker, participated in at least one show as a young man.

23 Skidoo: A Musical Revue of the Nine-teen-Twenties, of 1958, was also nostalgic: ...actors impersonating blackface mimed blackface, but their performance style was only marginally influenced by African American music. Their jokes primarily made fun of locals, but some songs were clearly racist. Eric Lott (1993) has pointed out the complex racial relationships in minstrel shows: Some scholars suggest that whites have often borrowed or stolen aspects of black performance to enrich and vitalize their own performance styles. It has also been noted that taking on the persona of “the other” can help a group deal with social tensions or express sincere interest in a different culture...

Blackface minstrelsy is no longer acceptable, and it is hard to imagine that anyone would mourn its passing. Although it may be difficult for outsiders to view these blackface minstrel shows as a bona fide expression of folk theater, it is much easier to see how they served the needs of Colton. The minstrel shows helped establish community solidarity through music, strengthening bonds by involving citizens of all ages and occupations and providing an opportunity to reflect on Colton’s past and present. Putting on blackface allowed the local community to mock itself in an open and unconstrained way, something that seems to occur whenever people put on masks.

...I think that the lyrics from the 1963 opening number, sung to the tune of “On Top of Old Smoky,” provide a glimpse of what the Colton Community Minstrels thought they were doing with their shows. How they will be judged by the outside world is yet to be determined.

Gather round all ye people, and listen to me
I’ll try to tell you, how we happen to be.
Now as I recall it, it was nine years ago
That a group of good people put on the first show.
They had to have talent, yes, all they could fine
And among all you people, they found the best kind.
They needed suggestions and gimmicks to try,
From telling true stories to telling white lies.
They told jokes on Piel Farmer. Kate Klein did a dance,
And poor Harley’s coffee did not stand a chance.
They blackened their faces, they let down their hair,
And hoped they’d be welcomed, to come back next year.
Now singing’s a pleasure, rehearsals are fun,
You’re welcome to join us, we need everyone.
Thru meeting together, there’s one thing we found:
The world’s greatest people live right around town.

REFERENCES


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