Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890â€“1930 by W. Fitzhugh -2 Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance by Marvin McAllister (review)

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Body, however, adds its own voice to their ongoing conversation, as well as to the larger and continuously challenging dialogue on the possibilities of self-fashioning in black performance.

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Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930. Edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011; pp. viii + 374, 42 illustrations. $65 cloth, $27.50 paper, $65 e-book.

Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance. By Marvin McAllister. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011; pp. xvi + 330, 15 illustrations. $39.95 cloth, $39.95 e-book.
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Reviewed by Kevin Byrne, Baruch College

Instances of racial impersonation abound in U.S. history, and historians are fascinated by this phenomenon because crossing a racial boundary can be an act of transgression or an ossification of difference: categories can be mocked or upheld, artists can be subversive or pandering, audiences can be placated or enraged. Racial impersonation has had an especially important role to play in the area of African American theatre and entertainment, as the indelible mark of blackface performance is an established truism in U.S. theatre and cultural studies. Historians are now investigating and reinvestigating African American cultural producers through the lens of racial impersonation, and this is the case in two new studies, W. Fitzhugh Brundage's edited collection *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930,* and Marvin McAllister's *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance*. The essays in *Beyond Blackface* present examples from various media of black responses to denigrating stereotypes; *Whiting Up* details African American appropriations of whiteness and white cultural signifiers. While *Whiting Up* is the more successful book, both expose the challenges in addressing the fraught, contradictory, and mutable concept of racial impersonation in the United States.

Despite some interesting topics, *Beyond Blackface* as a volume lacks any social or political theorizing about terms such as race, blackness, or mass culture in many of its essays; it also has a somewhat uncertain relationship to its defining concept, "blackface," which is addressed explicitly in only some of the contributions. This uncertainty is particularly visible in the volume's overlong introduction, in which editor Brundage sketches the biographies of many black entertainers and culture makers. He includes Bert Williams and Sherman Dudley, but without once mentioning their long performance histories as minstrel entertainers. The collection's subtitle promises essays from the Progressive Era to 1930—a period in

which, as Brundage writes, blacks' "conspicuous presence as both subjects and innovators of popular culture was unmistakable and unprecedented" (1); this, too, is slightly misleading, however, as the first two essays focus on antebellum depictions and distortions of black life, and the final essay discusses a boxing match from 1938. The book's various subjects range across disciplines from ragtime music and the cakewalk dance, to the race films of Oscar Micheaux, to the expanding Southern consumer markets of the 1920s. As a way of encompassing the selections, Brundage notes that "[n]ew technologies of mass culture, such as recordings, radio, and film, possessed a profound capacity to generate powerful memories, including memories that contested, sometimes in a dramatic and far-reaching manner, inherited prejudices" (34). This entirely progressive view of the benefits of mass culture and/or popular culture (the terms are used interchangeably), however, does not acknowledge their ability to reinforce biases as well.

An essay that illustrates well some of the difficult consequences of this progressivist trend is "Black Misrepresentation in Nineteenth-Century Sheet Music Illustration," by Stephanie Dunson. This essay examines the cover pages of sheet music, but also analyzes composers and song lyrics—despite the fact that the cultural producers of one (the lyrics and music) probably had no influence over the other (the cover images chosen by publishers). More troubling are some of the generalizations made throughout regarding black performers and their place in the entertainment landscape—generalizations that tend to force them into the narrative of progress first articulated in the introduction. Discussing the antebellum minstrel stage, for example, which was dominated by white performers in blackface makeup and motley outfits, Dunson writes, "Denied access to the venues and audiences that fueled the minstrel phenomenon, black performers were generally powerless to counter or extend the misaligned characterizations that white actors were setting as the standard" (48). While it is true that racism prevented blacks from performing in minstrel shows and other professional entertainments, it is problematic to imply that they would (and should) have countered racist conceptualizations given the opportunity. Dunson notes of Sam Lucas that "even as a respected actor, he could not escape the draw to pen such songs as 'De Coon Dat Had De Razor'" (56); again, to insist that Lucas should not have written such a song deprives him of agency by insisting that African Americans must always promote racial uplift.

These problems aside, *Beyond Blackface* contains several essays that are rich in historical investigation. David Krasner's "The Real Thing" examines black entertainers at the beginning of the twentieth century and their canny use of the trope of "the real" (99). (In this, he builds on the history covered in his book *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* [Palgrave Macmillan, 2002].) His discussion of black agency in particular is more nuanced than that displayed elsewhere in the volume: "The mode of exchange was performance; what would be marketed would be teaching whites how to 'be black.' Blacks sold authenticity using rhetoric, gesture, and conviction—blackness in the body itself and not just the mere surface greasepaint of blackface" (109–10). This is a complicated cultural calculation, but a convincing one as Krasner articulates it.

Along with Krasner's essay, Clare Corbould's "At the Feet of Dessalines: Performing Haiti's Revolution during the New Negro Renaissance" artfully engages with notions of culture, race, and resistance. By detailing a variety of play-texts, performances, and receptions—from O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* to Hughes's *Drums of Haiti* to White and Matheus's *Tambour*—Corbould explains how "[b]lack writers and artists used a wide variety of cultural forms to campaign for adequate recognition of black Americans' past and present contributions to the American nation, but also to challenge the rhetoric that asserted America was exceptional" (259). Other articles, on black pilot Hubert Julian (by Shane White et al.), and the circulation of ragtime in white homes (by Susan Curtis), are also worth reading. But, in total, I found that the sloppiness of the volume makes it confusing for those approaching African American entertainment and cultural production for the first time, and frustrating for scholars already working in the discipline.

Marvin McAllister's *Whiting Up*, in contrast, is both novel and innovative in its approach to racial impersonation in U.S. entertainment, in that McAllister inverts the usual fixation on blackface performance. His analysis instead is on blacks jumping the racial divide to portray and sometimes parody whiteness and white behavior, which he describes using the terms *whiting up, whiteface minstrelsy,* and *the stage European*. McAllister initially articulated the idea of whiteface minstrelsy in his book *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theater* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003), and he expands on the idea in this new volume.

Some confusion around meaning, however, is created by McAllister's specific application of his three central terms. He smartly uses his terminology to distinguish racial impersonation from racist caricature, as conflation of the two is a problem that plagues many histories of black entertainment. Also rightly, he does not place "whiting up" in binary opposition to blackface—something that would reinscribe a Manichaean duality of black and white, reduce historical complexities, and disavow social and economic power imbalances between races. But as the book progresses and the three terms are used to analyze more and more cases, they end up meaning less and less.

McAllister defines whiteface minstrelsy as "extra-theatrical, social performance in which people of African descent appropriate white-identified gestures, vocabulary, dialects, dress, or social entitlements" (1). However, the number of qualifications and examples of whiteface minstrelsy he offers render the definition so broad as to mean almost anything related to black use of white racial signifiers. Separate from this is McAllister's concept of the stage European, which he defines as "black actors appropriating white dramatic characters crafted initially by white dramatists and, later, by black playwrights. Rooted in conventional theatrical practice, this component emphasizes physical and vocal manifestations of whiteness, often relying on visual effects such as white face paint and blonde wigs" (1). Performances of the stage European often involve whitening makeup—except when they don't; and the white characters may be written by either black or white playwrights. In practice, then, whiteface minstrelsy describes any

performance of "acting white" in the public realm—though this somehow includes comedy clubs and Broadway houses; the "stage European" is any white character written by a black playwright or any character known to be white performed by an actor known to be African American.

Nevertheless, *Whiting Up*'s conceptual confusions are balanced by fascinating archival work and fresh close readings of texts and performances. The book is structured chronologically, from the early days of the republic to the present, and it skips among genres and theatrical forms as it progresses. Chapter 1 looks at what McAllister calls "the earliest recorded examples of whiteface minstrelsy in America" (25): private parties and public promenades among slaves in the Charleston, South Carolina, region around 1800. McAllister finds blacks' leisure-time activities—breathlessly and sometimes hysterically reported in white newspapers—to be critical of the white power structure while simultaneously flaunting self-expression. One of the most intriguing, and debatable, hypotheses he presents in this chapter is that whiteface minstrelsy predates blackface performance and, furthermore, that blackface minstrelsy is a reaction to the displays by these slaves. Chapter 2 centers on one nineteenth-century performer, James Hewlett, and the works by white Europeans he performed, notably those of Shakespeare and Robert Burns.

The next chapter is the most central example of whiting up in the study, as McAllister energetically describes the late-nineteenth-century all-black musical *A Trip to Coontown* and its star, Bob Cole. Cole performed in white makeup to portray a tramp named Willie Wayside. Without an extant script, McAllister's careful archival work reconstructs, as much as possible, the specifics of the performance's plot, characters, and musical numbers. (The script has since been located; see "Forgotten Manuscripts: *A Trip to Coontown*" by Krystyn R. Moon, David Krasner, and Thomas L. Riis, published in *African American Review* 44.1–2 [2011].) McAllister finds many nuanced displays of class and race in the show, mostly centered on Cole's performance of Willie: "even in this inverted world of nattily attired Negro con artists and multitalented black musical suitors, the lone stage European is allowed the fluidity to read as a low-down 'coon' and later identify with white privilege and property" (104).

The several remaining chapters jump into the twentieth century. Chapter 4 looks at two actors—Evelyn Preer and Canada Lee—who performed, at important junctures in their careers, central roles in plays written by white Europeans. Grouping the two actors together reads as forced, however, as the differences between them are more intriguing than their similarities: the former was the star of a 1920s production of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* that featured an all-black cast acting without cross-racial makeup; the latter performed in a 1940s production of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, in which he was both the only African American cast member and *did* white up. Chapter 5 focuses on white characters created by three black playwrights during the 1960s. By analyzing these "stage European" characters McAllister sheds new light on well-known plays: Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, and LeRoi Jones's *A Black Mass*. The next chapter shifts to a different entertainment arena: black stand-up comedians with their brand of "white people

be like" comedy, and solo performers such as Anna Deavere Smith. By its close, *Whiting Up* temporally reaches the televised sketches of Dave Chappelle, a far cry from the promenading of antebellum blacks.

Taken together, *Beyond Blackface* and *Whiting Up* present a clear picture of the state of black theatre historiography today—at their best, there is an acknowledgment of the shifting nature of race and an emphasis on performance in social, political, and economic contexts. Through I cannot recommend *Beyond Blackface* as a whole, McAllister's work will be an important part of the discipline's conversation well into the future.

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Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic. By James H. Johnson. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2011; pp. xiv + 318, 52 illustrations. $45 cloth, $45 e-book.
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Reviewed by Christine Scippa Bhasin, The College of William & Mary

Replete with interesting, deftly reconstructed case studies mined from the Venetian archives, James H. Johnson's *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic* provides a comprehensive look at the historical theory and practice of masking in Venice, a tradition that flourished from the thirteenth century until the fall of the Republic in 1797. The central question Johnson poses is whether the act of wearing masks was truly liberating for Venetians, or simply a way to preserve the standing social order. Through an exploration of mask usage in venues ranging from the theatre, to the academy, to the public piazza, he ultimately argues that, in contrast to the modern employment of masks as tools of deception or disguise, masking in Venice was largely a conservative practice, since "[r]ather than obscuring identities, masks affirmed their permanence" (xii).

In twenty-one brief chapters—most ranging from a mere five to ten pages—Johnson presents the reader with a broad chronology, often skipping around in time from page to page and chapter to chapter. This structure is at once appealing and puzzling: the quickly read chapters and Johnson's pleasurable anecdotal style make it easy for the reader to pick up or put down the book at will, but this choppy arrangement also makes it difficult at times to follow the trajectory of the book's overarching argument and timeline. Aside from this critique, Johnson's book has much to offer—on a phenomenon that is at once cultural, social, and political—to both scholars and students in disciplines historical, theatrical, and performative.

From the outset, Johnson separates Venetian masking into two distinct realms: one, as it pertains to the festive and theatrical, the other, as it pertains to the everyday. The book is divided into four parts that retain this distinction. Part 1, "The Carnival of Venice," and Part 4, "Carnival and Community," deal almost exclusively with Venetian carnival, whereas Part 2, "The Culture of Masking," and Part 3, "The Honest Mask," treat the daily culture of masking more broadly. Readers