

Rapid #: -24061390

CROSS REF ID: **269740**

LENDER: **SPUDV (Universitat de Vic) :: Main Library**

BORROWER: **BUF (University at Buffalo, SUNY) :: Main Library**

TYPE: Article CC:CCG

JOURNAL TITLE: Dance chronicle

USER JOURNAL TITLE: Dance Chronicle

ARTICLE TITLE: The Imperial Reach of Blackface (and) Minstrelsy

ARTICLE AUTHOR: Joanna Dee Das

VOLUME:

ISSUE:

MONTH: 1

YEAR: 2025

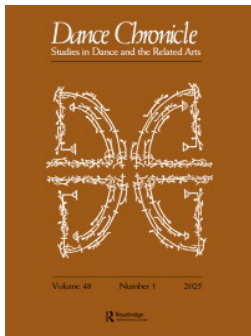
PAGES: 1-3

ISSN: 0147-2526

OCLC #:

Processed by RapidX: 2/21/2025 3:20:24 AM

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



The Imperial Reach of Blackface (and) Minstrelsy

Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance By Kellen Hoxworth. 278 pp. Illustrated. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2024. \$100 hardcover, \$36 paperback, \$36 ebook. ISBN 9780810147089 (hbk), ISBN 9780810147072 (pbk), ISBN 9780810147096 (ebk)

Joanna Dee Das

To cite this article: Joanna Dee Das (2025) The Imperial Reach of Blackface (and) Minstrelsy, Dance Chronicle, 48:1, 158-162, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2024.2433316](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2024.2433316)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2024.2433316>



Published online: 16 Jan 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Imperial Reach of Blackface (and) Minstrelsy

Joanna Dee Das 

Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance

By Kellen Hoxworth. 278 pp. Illustrated.

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2024. \$100 hardcover, \$36 paperback, \$36 ebook.

ISBN 9780810147089 (hbk), ISBN 9780810147072 (pbk),

ISBN 9780810147096 (ebk)

Kellen Hoxworth's *Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance* is a startlingly ambitious work. In an era when a common complaint about humanities scholarship is that its topics have gotten too narrow and niche, Hoxworth takes up “blackface (and) minstrelsy,” as he calls it in the introduction and traces its crossings across multiple oceans, multiple centuries, and multiple empires (p. 5). In so doing, Hoxworth offers a serious challenge to the nationalist conception of blackface minstrelsy as a uniquely US American project. While other scholars have acknowledged minstrelsy's global reach, they have still generally regarded it as a US cultural export. Hoxworth instead locates blackface performance's beginnings in the “eddis of the transoceanic Anglophone empire's processes of becoming” (p. 32) prior to the founding of the United States. With scrupulous archival research on multiple continents and careful attention to theorizing archives of performance as he analyzes those traces, Hoxworth's book is a tremendous achievement, and I hope it serves as a call to other young scholars to take up such ambitious projects.

In an important “Note on Terminology” that opens the book, Hoxworth explains his choices about capitalization and the reproduction of racist language, particularly the n-word. He chooses not to redact the word, arguing that such redactions would “mislead ... readers as to the widespread, explicitly derogatory usage of such language” (p. ix). While as a historian of performance I was intellectually aware of the extent of the use of the n-word, I was not prepared for the emotional impact of seeing it repeated again and again, used so casually and ubiquitously, across continents and centuries, as it is in Hoxworth's text.

It was part of what made Hoxworth's thesis that blackface minstrelsy was part of the “furniture of empire” (p. 5) so compelling. *Transoceanic*

Blackface argues that blackface minstrelsy was so pervasive that it helped create the “common sense” logic of imperial white supremacist thinking, turning radical and pernicious ideas about racial difference into something as ordinary, and as fixed, as furniture. As he argues, these performance repertoires gave white imperial subjects “ideological coherence and affective security” (p. 23). It “habituated Anglophone audiences and performers to imperial apparatuses of racial thinking, feeling, and doing” (p. 27). In short, blackface performance taught audiences how to understand race. Hoxworth does note the presence of non-white subjects in the audiences of these shows; he treads lightly in interpreting their responses, given the lack of their voices in the imperial archive. He lands on ambivalence, rather than a binary of “mystification and resistance,” (p. 29), as the way to understand colonized subjects’ viewing positions.

In Chapter One, “Eddies in the Anglophone Empire,” Hoxworth opens with a 1764 letter from John Adams to his wife that mentions “Imitators” of “Dutchmen and Negroes” (p. 31). This anecdote serves as a way into Hoxworth’s argument that blackface minstrelsy was a part of the Anglophone imperial repertoire decades before the popularity of the minstrel show as developed in the 1840s. Two of his other examples, the plays *High Life below Stairs* (1759) and *The Padlock* (1768), demonstrate how blackface performance intertwined with class and sexuality to stage anxieties about interracial desire. As he argues, these productions have been overlooked given that they were folded into nationalist, rather than imperial, histories. Other forms have been overlooked because they were in print; Hoxworth argues persuasively that blackface was a “transmedial complex of print and performance cultures” (p. 45) that crossed from image to stage and back again.

In Chapter 2, “Jim Crow Puts a Girdle Round about the Earth,” Hoxworth takes on the most recognizable history of blackface minstrelsy: T.D. Rice’s “Jim Crow” character and the subsequent rise of the minstrel show as a standardized and replicable theatrical genre emanating from the United States. Rather than seeing Jim Crow as a figure of nationalist origin, however, Hoxworth reiterates the central claim that it was a transoceanic, imperial performance genre. As he notes, Rice’s “sensational and singular popularity depended on the ubiquity of blackface throughout the Anglophone empire” (p. 73) and Rice’s previous appearances in shows such as *The Padlock*.

Chapter 3, “Ensemble Blackface Minstrelsy Belts the World” furthers this thread by focusing on the minstrel show, or what Hoxworth calls “ensemble blackface minstrelsy” (p. 91). In this chapter, I wanted Hoxworth to back up a little bit for non-experts and explicitly state that the term “minstrel” existed for centuries before the rise of blackface

performance. It was a medieval European word for an entertainer, and around the sixteenth century it evolved to specifically reference entertainers who sang and told stories through music. Such definitions would help explain his section on the Hutchinson Family Singers, a popular American singing group of the 1840s that promoted abolitionism and women's rights. Historiography's naming of the Hutchinsons as "anti-minstrels" actually "succumbs to the ruses of blackface hagiography" and inverts the historical sequence. The Hutchinsons were minstrels, in the classic sense of the term, and blackface minstrels were in fact "anti-minstrels" (p. 93). I consider myself fairly well-read in the historiography of minstrelsy, and thus it was remarkable to learn for the first time that the term "blackface minstrelsy" had its origins "as an antiblack joke" that burlesqued the Hutchinsons' abolitionist politics (p. 94). Once again, Hoxworth's detailed archival research reveals new depths to a story we thought we knew.

The discussion of the Congo Minstrels in this chapter brought up another question. Hoxworth mentions that the Congo Minstrels performed throughout the Caribbean and Latin America but goes no further about that tour. While Hoxworth is expansive in his transoceanic exploration of Anglophone empires, I wished to see at least an acknowledgement that multiple European empires were entangled with each other in the Caribbean, South America, Africa, South Asia, and Oceania. For example, talking about blackface in Jamaica would benefit from mentioning blackface performances in nearby Cuba, given that both elites and laboring classes migrated between islands and shared performance cultures. Delimiting to Anglophone keeps the performances to one linguistic stream, and perhaps most of the audiences of such performances were monolingualists. But the theorizations that Hoxworth is positing about how blackface performance repertoires circulated are even stronger when one considers the jumps made among French, Spanish, Portuguese, British, and Dutch colonies. Clearly the scope of *Transoceanic Blackface* is already huge, and its intervention clear, and so I do not fault the book for not engaging in a multi-empire, multi-linguistic archive. Instead, I see the book as an important call for further scholarship in that vein.

Chapter 4, "Othello Travestied," looks at Shakespeare's iconic play and its multiple, global, transoceanic stagings as a primary site through which Anglophone imperial subjects played out anxieties around the particularly fraught issue of interracial sex and desire. Othello's racialization varied based on location and situation; he could be "tawny" or a "Persian suitor" or Black African (p. 132). Hoxworth focuses on the burlesques of *Othello* and argues that turning the Moor from a tragic to a comic figure was a way to try to tamp down anxieties about miscegenation and reassert white supremacy.

Chapter 5, “The Racial Makeup of Empire,” takes up productions that combined Orientalist performance and minstrel tropes, triangulating the “racial geometries” of the genre “beyond minstrelsy’s foundational binary of Black and white” (p. 160). This chapter demonstrates how both yellowface and brownface performances in sites as disparate as Australia and India drew upon established blackface repertoires, particularly the trope of the dandy. Hoxworth productively complicates readings of such performances by examining how the “Bengalee Baboo” figure was reappropriated by some Indian performers as a critique of insufficiently “muscular, nationalist” masculinity (pp. 172-3). Other elite Indian men criticized the trope. This archive also delves into drag performances, in which men burlesqued Black, brown, and white women and betrayed anxieties about the threats that social reformers and others posed to traditional patriarchy.

The Epilogue, titled “Blackface Backwash,” opens by demonstrating how racial repertoires developed in the colonies found their way back to theaters in imperial metropolises like London, once again demonstrating that the circuits of culture are precisely that—circuits, not unidirectional flows. Hoxworth points to three areas where more scholarship is needed: first, to extend his study of “multidirectional, transnational circulation of mediated blackface” temporally into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; second, to “deprovincialize” the historiography of national theaters throughout the Global South to demonstrate their “unmarked investments in transoceanic blackface;” and third, to examine how blackface minstrelsy shaped the racialization of colonial subjects across the globe (p. 194). The minstrel show declined in the 1890s, but as Hoxworth points out, that end led not to the disappearance of blackface, but rather its “diffusion” (p. 195) into other popular entertainment forms: music, vaudeville, musical comedy, and dance.

Transoceanic Blackface is a tremendously impressive book that makes a bold intervention into how we understand the circulation of blackface (and) minstrelsy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For anyone teaching or writing about minstrelsy, it is essential. I can see this work as a foundational text for theater and performance studies scholars who study race, performance, and empire, and it promises to inspire many more studies.

ORCID

Joanna Dee Das  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9970-198X>

JOANNA DEE DAS, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Performing Arts Department at Washington University in St. Louis and an affiliate of the Program in American Culture

Studies, the African and African-American Studies Department, and the History Department. Her research focuses on dance in the African Diaspora, musical theatre, and the politics of popular performance in the United States. She is the author of the award-winning *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (Oxford 2017). With Ryan Donovan, she co-edited the special issue “Dance in Musical Theatre” for *Studies in Musical Theatre*. She has also published articles in *Journal of Urban History*, *Dance Research Journal*, *Theatre History Studies*, *TDR*, and *ARTS*, as well as essays in several edited anthologies. Her second book, titled *Faith, Family, and Flag: Branson Entertainment and the Idea of America*, is forthcoming from University of Chicago Press in 2025.