

Book Reviews

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Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance. By Kellen Hoxworth. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2024. Pp. 280 + 20 illus. \$100 Hb; \$36 Pb.

Reviewed by Marlon Ariyasinghe, Stanford University, marlona@stanford.edu

Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance by Kellen Hoxworth offers a comprehensive analysis of blackface minstrelsy's global circulation. Drawing from meticulous archival research, *Transoceanic Blackface* maps the flows of performers and performance materials between the United States, Britain and British colonies in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada, India, Jamaica, South Africa and others. The book effectively challenges the entrenched notion that blackface minstrelsy is an inherently American phenomenon.

The introduction contends with previous scholarship on blackface minstrelsy, such as Michael Rogin, who situates the origins of blackface minstrelsy within the United States, and Eric Lott, who posits that blackface minstrelsy relies on a theory of the racial politics of American culture. Hoxworth explains that these claims hark back to Brander Matthews's assertion in 1915 that minstrelsy represented a theatrical form uniquely indigenous to the United States, stating that it could not have emerged anywhere else in the 'civilized' world. Contrary to the foundational minstrel scholarship that rests on rearticulating Matthews's celebratory claim, Hoxworth argues that the minstrelsy and related forms of racialized performance were tightly imbricated with the racial politics of the anglophone empire. *Transoceanic Blackface* traces how the performance cultures of blackface minstrelsy and racialized performance fashioned and sustained imperial racial orders across vast distances, reanimating minstrelsy's racialized repertoires.

One of the more interesting case studies that *Transoceanic Blackface* engages with is the 1847 London premiere of the blackface musical comedy *The Buffalo Girls* at the Surrey Theatre set against a backdrop of burgeoning British fascination with blackface minstrelsy. The plot, embedded in a comedic yet poignant slave narrative, ironically juxtaposes the moral superiority of post-abolition Britain against the stark realities of slave-holding societies in the southern United States. The play begins with a scene on a vast sugar cane plantation, initially marked as in Jamaica – an erroneous site quickly corrected to New Orleans. The interchangeable use of Jamaica and New Orleans as sites of enslavement sharply illustrates how minstrelsy intertwined

the racial ideologies of the British Empire with those of the United States, revealing a shared complicity in racial exploitation.

Consequently, Hoxworth delves into the historical amnesia surrounding the Caribbean's influence on minstrelsy, particularly the formative impact of Jamaica on the early development of blackface dialects and caricatures. The iconic eighteenth-century British comic opera *The Padlock* is cited where Charles Dibdin utilized the blackface character Mungo to echo the dialects apparently learned from John Moody – a British actor reputed to have acquired authentic knowledge of black dialects during his time in the West Indies. This supposed authenticity was later mirrored in the American colonial performances by Lewis Hallam Jr, who similarly claimed legitimacy through his experiences in the Caribbean.

Transoceanic Blackface unpacks the evolution of racial caricature in performance, charting how Dibdin's blackface motifs in British theatre laid the groundwork for similar racialized performances in the United States. These motifs also manifested as yellowface acts, such as in S. S. Steele's *A Chinaman's Tale* (1857) and Frank Curtis's *The Artful Chinee* (c.1870), where early minstrelsy's 'chingaring chorus' was adapted to perpetuate Asian stereotypes. Concurrently, Hoxworth explores the spread of minstrelsy to portray South Asians through brownface, caricaturing them in roles that bolstered colonial racial hierarchies. These examples elucidate the broader imperial practice of racial mimicry, where both yellowface and brownface minstrelsy served as cultural mechanisms that entrenched racial stereotypes and reinforced the racial politics of the anglophone empire across its global territories.

By revisiting these narratives, Hoxworth's analysis not only exposes the cross-pollination of imperial and national racial ideologies through minstrelsy but also allows for the emergence of alternative performance genealogies that recognize the complex, often obscured, histories of racial representation. *Transoceanic Blackface* is a compelling critique of the racial dynamics that have shaped public entertainment and social perceptions across centuries. The book is a significant contribution to performance and race, cultural studies, performance historiography and postcolonial theory.

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Hope in a Collapsing World: Youth, Theatre, and Listening as a Political Alternative. By Kathleen Gallagher, with Andrew Kushnir and his original script

Towards Youth: A Play on Radical Hope. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. Pp. 376. \$39.95 Pb.

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Hope in a Collapsing World documents a multi-site applied-theatre project for youth, which combined ethnographic research with collaborative theatre workshops in five countries – Canada, Britain, Greece, India and Taiwan – during a five-year period and culminated in the creation and performance of Kushnir's *Towards Youth: A Play on Radical Hope*. The project and performance explore 'notions of hope and care ... by way of examining how theatre-making with young people' in diverse global communities might encourage adults to listen attentively to youth and help young people work through their political and social anxieties about today's complex world (p. 8). The authors use verbatim theatre to create a 'fictional non-fiction experience' that captures 'often-underrepresented voices (or historically