Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film

Book Reviews

Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film
2025, Vol. 52(1) 116–138

DOI: 10.1177/17483727241286468
journals.sagepub.com/home/nct
Sage

Kellen Hoxworth, *Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2024), 280 pp., $36

It is always invigorating to come across a book that upends everything you thought you understood about a particular subject. This was my experience with Kellen Hoxworth's excellent new monograph, *Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance*, which convincingly overturns long-established historiographic narratives that position blackface minstrelsy as a distinctly US/American performance form by illustrating how repertoires of blackface performance circled the globe from the mid-eighteenth century through to the early twentieth century, aided by innovations in transportation, communication, and the racist logic of Anglophone imperialism. Like Noémie Ndiaye's *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (2022) and Kathleen Wilson's *Strolling Players of Empire: Theater and Performances of Power in the British Imperial Provinces, 1656–1833* (2022), *Transoceanic Blackface* draws deeply from a broad range of archival material to foreground theatre's critical role in the transoceanic flow of ideas, attitudes, feelings, and performance practices centred around race. Bolstered by accounts of blackface performance in the United States, Canada, Britain, and British colonies in the Caribbean, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Africa, and South Asia, Hoxworth powerfully demonstrates that 'blackface (and) minstrelsy were never bound to any single nation or its particular racial formations' but rather 'mediated racial thinking and feeling throughout the Anglophone empire' (5). To describe the entanglement of these shifting performance practices across land and sea, Hoxworth deploys the term *transoceanic blackface,* moving away from the limits of 'blackface minstrelsy' and its attendant associations with US/American performance history. This expansive term leaves room to consider the migration of blackface performance across time and distance, as well as its manifestation in visual and performance cultures during a period of creeping white supremacy.

Transoceanic Blackface is organised into five chapters and an epilogue that identifies major developments in the production, transmission, and subsequent adaptation of blackface repertoires. 'Chapter 1: Eddies in the Anglophone Imperial Stream' traces the migration of blackface performance from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth

century, attending to its emergence in and across comic opera, farce, dance, song, closet drama, and print media. Here, Hoxworth showcases the value of a performance studies perspective that looks beyond disciplinary boundaries to read play scripts alongside caricatures, and more. Key examples of blackface discussed in the chapter include James Townley's *High Life below Stairs* (1759), with its Black comic servant Kingston, first introduced by the British actor John Moody, who incorporated his take on Jamaican patois; Isaac Bickerstaffe and Charles Dibdin's comic opera *The Padlock* (1768), featuring the blackface character Mungo who 'embodie[s] tropes of Black drunkenness, impudence, and sexual promiscuity' (37); Andrew Barton's *The Disappointment* (1767), which was declared 'unfit for the stage' in Philadelphia but nevertheless circulated in print; the publication of 'Bobalition' broadsides in the US American north, which parodied Black political celebrations of Emancipation and calls for abolition; and corresponding print caricatures of Black life by George Cruikshank and Edward Williams Clay. Collectively and collaboratively, these manifestations of blackface 'animated racial common sense which consolidated around tropes of blackness as inherently servile, as burlesqued performance of whiteness, and as beyond the pale of white brotherhood' (33). Hoxworth's interdisciplinary approach in this chapter persuasively shows how racist ideas about Blackness circulated swiftly across oceans through citational practices that played out in public and private.

'Chapter 2: Jim Crow Puts a Girdle Round about the Earth' focuses on the tremendous popularity of Jim Crow, the blackface character invented by Thomas Dartmouth Rice c. 1830, which became one of the most recognisable figures of the era thanks to the publication and dissemination of illustrated sheet music. Without denying Rice's status as a central figure in the development of blackface minstrelsy in the United States, Hoxworth argues that the character casts a much longer shadow over the Anglophone empire. When Rice introduced Jim Crow to London audiences in 1836, only three years after the passage of the Act for the Abolition of Slavery, he 'offered the predominantly antiblack, proslavery, white Anglophone public a figure that affirmed their social power and feelings of racial superiority through performances of Black abjection' (75). Though Rice toured extensively, he was not alone in transmitting the Jim Crow repertoire. The rapid circulation of Jim Crow descriptions, imagery, and music made it possible for performers elsewhere to adopt the character and fold him into local performance cultures. Hoxworth follows Jim Crow and his imitators from 'the Ohio River valley to the South African frontier by way of metropolitan London, stopping off in colonial India, Jamaica, and Australia' (83). In so doing, he finds surprising connections between Jim Crow and the racialised characters featured in *Kaatje Kekkelbek; or, Life among the Hottentots* (1838), a song and dance act first produced in the Cape Colony in November 1838; these connections offer evidence of how an expanding repertoire of 'antiabolitionist tropes' circulated rapidly in the very year that Emancipation was fully extended to all formerly enslaved people across the British Empire (85).

In 'Chapter 3: Ensemble Blackface Minstrelsy Belts the World', Hoxworth examines the boom in blackface minstrel troupes that followed in the wake of the Virginia Minstrels' first transatlantic tour in 1843. The flexibility of the ensemble minstrel show format, with its blend of jokes, music, song and dance, and comic sketches, made it

relatively easy for imitators to establish their own ensembles or replace departing ensemble members, all while responding to shifting local conditions and audience expectations. Thus 'blackface minstrelsy constituted a distinctly transoceanic performance culture, with professionals touring transnationally, amateur troupes enacting local imitations of the leading professionals, and new professional troupes forming throughout the Anglophone empire' (91). Hoxworth's meticulous archival research is on full display in this chapter, as he traces the touring itineraries of amateur and professional companies moving through California, Hawaii, Australia, South Asia, and more. The chapter concludes by attending to the role of dance within blackface minstrelsy and the practice of giving a prized 'silver belt' to the white dancer deemed most skilful.

'Chapter 4: *Othello* Travestied' may seem like a departure from the previous chapters' analysis of blackface minstrelsy, but *Othello's* status as 'one of the most frequently produced plays in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the Cape Colony of southern Africa, South Asia, and the United States', meant that it played a central role in the articulation of 'racial sensibilities' throughout the Anglophone empire and related white anxieties about interracial desire and miscegenation (129). One of the strengths of this chapter is its analysis of intimate touch and sexual desire, represented in frontispiece illustrations, lithographs, and other images of actors portraying Othello and Desdemona. Hoxworth shows how such images simultaneously amplified white audience anxieties about 'miscegenatory contact' and assuaged them by rendering Othello a ridiculous figure.

The final chapter, 'The Racial Makeup of Empire', illustrates how the popularity and ubiquity of transoceanic blackface gave way in the 1860s to other forms of racial and gender impersonation. Reiterating the importance of moving beyond a nationalist framework when tracing repertoires of racialised performance, Hoxworth demonstrates how the evolving practices of yellowface and brownface performance emerged from and remained entangled with the established practices of blackface. For example, Frank Curtis's yellowface song, 'The Artful Chinee' (c. 1870), with its choral refrain 'chingaring chi, and chingaring chee', has ties to much earlier blackface songs such as Charles Dibdin's 'Negro Philosophy' (1796), with lyrics such as 'Chingaring, Chingaring, never mind' (164). So, too, performers like Dave Carson expanded the repertoire of racialised performance first honed through blackface to appeal to colonial audiences in South Asia. In response to local racial tensions between the British and the local Parsi community in Mumbai, Carson created a brownface character to mock the Parsi, thus aligning himself with imperial privilege. Though white accounts of Carson's performance insisted that the local Parsi audience was not offended, Hoxworth stresses the need to read such accounts of 'interracial harmony at blackface minstrel shows…for their gaps and aporias' (174), acknowledging the complexity of audience responses to racialised impersonation.

A book review can only ever gesture towards the richness of the book at its centre, and so it is with this review. Supported by extensive archival research and detailed readings of primary sources, *Transoceanic Blackface* makes a valuable contribution to twenty-first-century theatre and performance history and its investment in troubling both the historical *and* historiographic legacies of racism and white supremacy. Though undergraduate readers may need help parsing some of the more complex theoretical language, which this reader also found occasionally repetitive, the effort will be

worthwhile. *Transoceanic Blackface* offers a wonderful model of interdisciplinary theatre and performance scholarship and invites a deeper consideration of 'the *how* of performance history: how performance networks were formed, how performance repertoires furnished performers with theatrical material, and how such repertoires shaped popular culture' (23). For those looking to further this work, Hoxworth offers several helpful suggestions in a surprisingly full Epilogue. Clearly, much more work is needed to untangle the threads of empire, race, and performance; *Transoceanic Blackface* offers an excellent way forward.

Marlis Schweitzer
York University, Canada

ORCID iD
Marlis Schweitzer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3181-1098

Diane Piccitto and Terry F. Robinson (eds), *The Visual Life of Romantic Theater, 1780–1830* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023), 396 pp., $90 (hardcover).

The Visual Life of Romantic Theater, 1780–1830 is a landmark collection of essays, edited by Diane Piccitto and Terry F. Robinson, which reevaluates Romanticism not as an exclusively literary and introspective movement, but as a period profoundly shaped by theatrical performance, stagecraft, and visual culture. The volume interrogates long-standing anti-pictorialist and antitheatrical prejudices that have defined Romantic studies in a false attempt to distinguish it from the low 'visual culture industry'. Such a separation, as the collection makes clear, distorts our understanding of Romanticism and dismisses the significance of the rich entanglements between visuality, performance, material culture, and highbrow aestheticism. Indeed, among the book's revelatory essays, one encounters numerous visual treats, from paintings and drawings to images of theatrical memorabilia and remnants of toy theatres, not to mention playbills, scenographic sketches, and political cartoons and caricatures. The essays explore how Romantic theatre shaped national identity, influenced political discourse, and created new forms of public engagement with visual culture. Arguably, the most significant contribution of this volume is that it shows us a way to amalgamate various theoretical and methodological approaches and thus to overcome challenges presented by the constantly nagging recognition of the ephemerality of live performances which only survive in the form of visual and textual archives. The volume is a *tour de force*, bringing together a range of scholars who complement and challenge each other to open up the field of Romanticism to new forms of inquiry. The thirteen essays that make up this collection are divided into three major sections: 'Imagined Scenes', 'Spectacular Bodies', and