Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance by Kellen Hoxworth (review)

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Later chapters broaden to include stage technology histories. Chapter 3 surveys technical manuals and handbooks during the Great Leap Forward period, and multiple case studies successfully demonstrate the "localized, *tu* 土 (homegrown, indigenous, or grassroots) ethos among Chinese theater designers and technicians" (17). By discussing mechanized versus human-powered revolving stages, or the problems of creating facsimiles of neon lights, Chun effectively argues that Chinese technical production at this time involved an "act of fantasy" connected to the national politics of the era: believing in an illusionistic revolve or imitation neon lights created a "technical imagination that paralleled the socialist utopian imaginary" at work in culture at large (119).

In the final two chapters, the tight connections among history, play readings, and technological history weaken somewhat. Chapter 4 looks at the Cultural Revolution and its *geming yangbanxi* 革命样板戏 (revolutionary model operas). By looking to manuals and published "official performance versions" of these plays, Chun attends to failures of control: "extreme standardization" was impossible to attain, due to varying levels of technology and theatre architecture outside well-resourced companies. The focus is on one opera, *The Red Lantern*, and the case study is convincing in its demonstration of technics as method, as Chun moves from prop designs to theatre building blueprints to the changing stage directions of the text itself. However, the predominant focus on this one work leaves questions about the applicability of these ideas to other *yangbanxi*. In the final chapter, Chun asserts a widespread "technoscientific shift" (180) after the Cultural Revolution. Readings of specific productions of *Life of Galileo* and *Atoms and Love* are each, in themselves, convincing as proof of new attitudes toward science, technology, and scenic abstraction on Chinese stages. But the claim that "technoscience pervaded all layers of theater making during this period" (182) is strained, for while the plays discussed do show a scientific shift, it is less clear that technoscience defined a majority of the output in the post-Cultural Revolution period.

Revolutionary Stagecraft is an open-access publication, which will widen its readership greatly. Sections from the first few chapters would pair well with early twentieth-century Chinese dramatic texts in a classroom setting. The range of materials consulted is impressive; the notes are comprehensive and helpful; and Chun clearly articulates the complexities of translation and transliteration in a prefatory note. As the conclusion states, *Revolutionary Stagecraft* "demonstrates how theoretical and material engagement . . . creates dialectical relationships between associated concepts: fantasy and practicality, control and agency, innovation and failure" (219). This is a thoughtful, nuanced work that fully investigates the relationships among theatre technology, art, and ideology.

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TRANSOCEANIC BLACKFACE: EMPIRE, RACE, PERFORMANCE. By Kellen Hoxworth. Performance Works Series. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2024; pp. 278.

Blackface minstrelsy is often touted as a genre of performance unique to the United States that emerged in the 1840s. Kellen Hoxworth's history of this racialized form of performance expands our understanding beyond the US and into the anglophone imperial world across the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He traces a global assemblage of minstrelsy performance practices he terms "transoceanic blackface" in India, South Africa, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and Jamaica. In this meticulously researched study, Hoxworth introduces countless historic examples of the ubiquity of this genre. These range from Pell's Ethiopian Serenaders and the Wilson and Montague's Minstrels, who performed for Queen Victoria in 1846; to James Townley's 1759 class inversion farce *High Life Below Stairs* at the African Theatre in Cape Town in 1807; to an 1881 Singaporean performance of *The Quack Doctor*, originally a blackface burlesque staged as a yellowface parody of the Chinese population. Hoxworth's study offers a global revision of the practice of minstrelsy as an integral part of empire and not simply a US American artform.

For Hoxworth, minstrelsy was "cross-class, state-sponsored entertainment" that was a co-conspirator in the larger aims of the imperial project of global British supremacy (9). Minstrelsy's theatrical repertoires "suffused the empire," writes Hoxworth (15), replete with blackface, brownface, and yellowface burlesque adaptations of Shakespeare as well as drag engagements with the gender dynamics of empire. As blackface musical repertoires, scripts, and popular imagery circulated widely across the anglophone empire, they promulgated anti-Black sentiment in support of the white supremacist imperial project, often adapted to "animate—and to police—local racial dynamics" (16). Centering on the plantation as an "imaginative geography" of racial discourse—as site of habitation, sexuality, labor, and

violence—transoceanic blackface staged fantasies in support of the system of enslavement that was central to empire. Hoxworth picks up Catherine Hall's notion that racial thinking was "part of the furniture" of nineteenth-century society and argues that blackface materially structured the social and political life of empire, "furnishing forth" the racial subjects and scripts of the modern world (18).

The first half of *Transoceanic Blackface* details the emergence of blackface performance in the late eighteenth century and the ways performance tropes, forms, and images spread across the British Empire in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Chapter 1 explores the origins of blackface through what Walter Benjamin called "edd[ies] in the stream of becoming" (32). Hoxworth discusses the formation of several key minstrel characters, the first of which is Kingston from *High Life Below Stairs*, the earliest known Black comic servant in the English repertoire. In this play, servants on a West Indian plantation dress as lords and ladies to mock their master, Lovel, inverting the social hierarchy. *The Padlock* (1768) introduced the character of Mungo, a Black dandy with a caricatured West Indian accent, whose drunkenness, sexual appetite, and impudence would be threatening had it not been framed as laughable. Hoxworth continues his detailed analysis of these characters through what he calls "scriptive blackface" (32), or visual depictions such as lithographs and comics, which inscribed popular impressions of Blackness across the globe. Picking up on the ways these images traveled, the second chapter traces the transmissions of Jim Crow across empire. In particular, Hoxworth analyzes the popularity of Thomas Rice's song "Jump Jim Crow" and argues these performances were leveraged in "managing, containing, and delimiting Black freedom" in the context of the period between the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act and the 1838 emancipation of enslaved peoples of the British Empire. These opening chapters establish Hoxworth's claim of the transoceanic nature of minstrelsy as a practice that circulated distorted, highly popular concepts of Blackness across the globe.

Organized largely chronologically, subsequent chapters move readers forward into the late 1830s and 1840s, exploring the formal innovations and theatrical tropes that developed and helped spur minstrelsy's popularity. Chapter 3 focuses on ensemble minstrelsy, an expansion of the original solo acts and theatrical extravaganzas of early minstrelsy, and discusses both amateur and professional blackface performers and their formulas for success. The chapter also addresses the local and international troupes that repeatedly formed and re-formed, keeping blackface in circulation, especially following the 1843 US and UK tour of the Virginia Minstrels ensemble. In chapter 4, Hoxworth explores Othello and Desdemona's romance through the 1834 burlesque *Othello Travestie* by Maurice Dowling. The burlesque performance is framed as part of a constellation of imperial "contact zones" (Mary Louise Pratt) in which fears of "interracial marriage, miscegenatory domesticity, and hybrid progeny" are produced and worked through in performance (127). These chapters examine ensembles in Australia, the Caribbean, and South Asia—including India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), China, and Japan—and underscore the book's claims of the larger reach of minstrelsy as part of the imperial project.

Hoxworth's study concludes with a chapter on minstrelsy's expansion into transpacific yellowface and Asian caricatures through Charles Backus's "Burlesque Chinaman" and into the brownface repertoire in Australia and South Asia. *Transoceanic Blackface* ends with the return of international minstrel productions back to the United States, bringing full circle the proliferation of this genre in the US. Hoxworth's scholarly intervention is a masterful mapping of this genre beyond existing scholarship's frame of minstrelsy as a uniquely US-based phenomenon.

Throughout the book, Hoxworth provides an "expansive material archive" with copious case studies and visual reprints as well as data on numbers of performances, length of show runs, and audience demographics that support his thesis of the proliferation and ubiquity of transoceanic blackface (204). His degree of detail and excellent footnotes are models of historical performance research. His prose is dense and theoretical and, as such, may be more suitable for advanced graduate study rather than a generalized undergraduate audience. *Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance* is a deftly researched, thorough, and compelling analysis of a fraught theatrical form. Hoxworth's book offers readers a better grasp of blackface minstrelsy, not just as the "privileged preserve and national shame of US American popular culture," as it has been understood, but as a global phenomenon, central to the "ongoing transnationality of whiteness" in the imperial project (205).

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