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

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Kellen Hoxworth, *Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance* (Northwestern University Press, 2024), 278 pp.

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The rise of global cultural history has been exhilarating. Books like Lisa Lowe's *Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015) have reimagined the scope of the individual academic project. Yet such work can be formidably demanding: not only mastering multiple fields, but explaining them anew. Necessarily, the insights of the discipline must be founded in synthesis, braiding several scholarly traditions. Superficiality is one great risk, as is selectiveness, or oversimplification. Another is the unintentional emulation of the extractive economies the work sets out to expose. In a very harsh light, the notes to such studies can read as a register of plunder—of local archives, as well as the knowledge of specialists and translators. This can happen if the results serve primarily to adorn publishers' lists—and enrich classrooms—in the Global North.

Transoceanic Blackface will surely be taught alongside Chinua Thelwell's 2020 study, *Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond*. The two projects share even more terrain than their titles suggest. While Thelwell's significantly understates its range, South Africa figures very prominently in Hoxworth's thesis. So *Exporting Jim Crow* locates South Africa's blackface history within some of the same "international circuits" of performance which *Transoceanic Blackface* now examines in more detail. Thelwell pays particular attention to South African connections with Calcutta and Sydney, which are also prominent locations for Hoxworth. However, *Transoceanic Blackface* ranges more widely overall, emphasizing the Caribbean in the early history of blackface, and tracking longer routes for several troupes, especially through East Asia. Another difference, broadly, is that Hoxworth spends more time in the eighteenth century, but pretty much finishes in the 1890s, while Thelwell tracks minstrel legacies much later, right into the twenty-first. Above all, *Transoceanic Blackface* distances itself from other studies, including Thelwell's, by decentering the US, refuting the "export" model, and pointing instead to more interactive patterns of influence.

Nevertheless, there is some overlap. Generally, both books aim to enlarge the predominantly Atlantic field of Anglophone blackface studies; together they establish the extraordinary reach of this performance style, right across the mid-nineteenth-century British Empire. Both find their richest material in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. And notable characters, troupes, and tropes appear in both. Perhaps the most fascinating is the American impresario Dave Carson, who toured Australia in the 1860s, then India, where he developed his own specialism—"brownface" caricatures of Bengalis

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and Parsis. Hoxworth surmises that Carson drew on the "yellowface" figures of another American, Charles Backus, with whom he toured Australia in 1859. Hoxworth also notes Carson's later operations in Southeast Asia, China and Japan, and shows that his influence then washed back into the metropole. A 1904 column in a Bengali newspaper denounced the London musical comedy *The Cingalee* for its resemblance to Carson's "derisive song concerning the Bengal Babu" (193). Even more fascinating is Hoxworth's revelation that Carson's birth name was David Nunez Cardoza—he himself was yet another minstrel performer using blackface to exchange an immigrant ethnic identity for the privileges of whiteness. David Roediger and others have analyzed such social journeys in the US (*The Wages of Whiteness*, 1991). Hoxworth establishes that claiming whiteness through blackface operated more widely in the Anglosphere, including, for example, in the Parsi theater.

Still, when a narrative attempts in two-hundred-odd pages to account for a phenomenon that crossed at least seven modern countries, there will be casualties. Language questions, for one. Although Hoxworth makes reverential mention of Jill Lane's *Blackface Cuba* (2005), he doesn't otherwise engage with work outside British and American influence, nor with the growing literature on blackface in continental Europe.

A central pillar of *Transoceanic Blackface* is the continuity between "the British Empire, the United States, and their respective imperial projects" (5). The book convincingly asserts that blackface culture not only illustrates this relation but helped to create it. Even so, its phrase for this, "the Anglophone empire," inadvertently writes out all the non-English languages spoken across this vast domain. Yet the book itself examines texts and performances produced outside English. In particular, it locates an important source in an 1838 sketch, *Kaatje Kekkelbek*. This text has a foundational status in South Africa, partly because its indigenous protagonist sings a macaronic song, using both English and Cape Dutch. Critics argue about how far this strange piece mocks—or sympathizes—with her. Hoxworth emphasizes the ridicule, linking *Kaatje* to the transnational success of "Jim Crow," another comic song-and-dance act for a single performer, which similarly impersonates a semiliterate subaltern. Hoxworth's assertion that "*Kaatje Kekkelbek* is a minstrel song" bolsters his claim that it "gave figural form to imperial anxieties about the place of nominally free colonized subjects in the expanding British empire" (83–84). The problem is that Kaatje's bilingual song reflects *successive* colonizations. The Dutch domination of the Cape (1652–1795) helped bequeath her idiosyncratic language. Kaatje's representation may, as Hoxworth argues, be part of a transnational project of racialization, but her words also tell a local tale of imperialism under *two empires*. As a KhoeKhoe Christian settled in a colonial borderland, Kaatje reflects a process that began even before the British arrived. Plus, its horrors included cultural imposition, and indigenous language loss. It is not just an "anglophone" story.

The *Kaatje* case indicates in miniature how the thrilling lateral connections offered by a globalized history can be both satisfyingly postnational, and unwittingly obfuscatory at the same time. Despite its determination to get away from the trap of US-centrism, *Transoceanic Blackface* strains when confronted with the complexities of societies which do not simply divide into colonizers and their victims. This is especially true when it turns to the tangles of religion, language, class, caste, and occupational position that made "Babus" and Parsis the prime targets of "brownface" parody in India, while Parsi performers also perpetrated "Ethiopian Delineation" and "yellowface" caricature. Faced with the alleged popularity in Mumbai of Dave Carson's Bengali acts and Parsi-mimickry in Calcutta, *Transoceanic Blackface* resorts to uncritical generalization: "Carson's brownface minstrel show animated regional, protonationalist antagonisms" (174).

It is probably thus wise that the book avoids minstrelsy's modern incarnation in the Cape. The best analysis of this phenomenon is still a breathtaking essay by Nadia Davids in a special issue of *TDR* to which Thelwell also contributed (ed. Tracy C. Davis and Catherine Cole, 2013). Davids considers the January Carnival, the *Klopse* parades long beloved of the communities that in South Africa are called "Coloured" (*sic*). That term doesn't translate well: it stands for a specific ethnicity produced by all those enslaving, removing, impoverishing activities which the British empire took over from the Dutch. The parades confuse outsiders. They are a joyful assertion of a once-despised identity, and in some ways a memorial, but they may also have been a distancing device from Blackness. For most of the twentieth century, participants also flaunted the parades' origins in blackface—in black and white makeup, club-names rejoicing in American racial slurs, and above all in the collective noun "minstrels." Thelwell has a long and thoughtful chapter on the Carnival, which has now mostly jettisoned those allusions. But I was relieved that Hoxworth didn't "go there," because his difficulties multiply when he addresses current sensitivities. A careful "Note on Terminology" explains policies on tricky words and changed place names. But there's a howler: trying to explain "Coloured," it refers to South Africa's "tripartite racial classification system since the colonial era." But *apartheid* legislated *four* populations into being, distinguishing "Asiatics" from "Whites," "Blacks," and "Coloureds." Nearly 20 percent of the population of Natal, the "Asiatics" encompassed a variety of South Asian migrants, including descendants of indentured laborers, the unfree labor system which replaced slavery after abolition. The Group Areas Act (1950) was partly intended to erase integrated neighborhoods, often poor communities, where whites, Blacks, Indians and Coloureds lived side by side. Infamously, it was followed by the bulldozing of Sophiatown in Johannesburg and District Six in the Cape, a still-mourned devastation of homes, histories and lifeways. This destruction included the traditional starting point of the Cape Carnival.

The residents of another such place, the Warwick Triangle in Durban, successfully fought their rezoning: most of it outlasted *apartheid*. But some homes and streets did disappear, including my grandparents' apartment in Market Building on Etna Lane. Strangely, my first venture into work on blackface summoned an echo of that richly mingled community. I only ever heard my father use Afrikaans that once. As an Indian from Natal, he tended to reject it as "the oppressor's language". But when I showed him an image I was studying in the mid-1990s, a picture of "Ethiopian Serenaders" in London, he started to sing. A childhood memory had stirred, of a miniature carnival in his own neighborhood in the 1940s. The song, "Daar kom die Alibama," is a typically opaque minstrel legacy. It may or may not refer to a Confederate ship. But one of the archives Hoxworth thanks, the gorgeous Killie Campbell Africana Library, lies only two and half miles from where my father learned it.