

Black Shakespeareans in Old New York



STORIES OF FREEDOM
IN BLACK NEW YORK

SHANE
WHITE



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The story most often told of African Americans in nineteenth-century American theater is of the appropriated black forms and caricatured black behaviors that fueled the rise of the blackface minstrel show in the 1830s and 40s. In recent decades, historians and cultural critics have mined minstrelsy to show, among other things, its reflection of Northern racism, its egalitarian undertones, its meanings within the white working class, its commercialization and co-optation by cultural entrepreneurs, its European origins, its African origins, its urban origins, its plantation origins, its complex musical structure, its status as “noise,” and its influence on everything from Mark Twain to vaudeville to Mickey Mouse and M.C. Hammer. Amidst all this argumentation and critical play, the one thing that has been taken for granted is that an Africanist presence on the stages of America emerged through the distortions of white actors in grease and burnt cork.

Now along comes Shane White to tell us that blackface minstrelsy actually supplanted a vital—if not fully realized—tradition of black actors seizing hold of the European theatrical tradition, mimicking and even one-upping the greatest white actors of the day. The focus of his elegant, beautifully researched, and compellingly sad (though misleadingly titled) new book is the African Company, a troupe of African New Yorkers who took to the stage before mixed-race audiences in the 1820s. In recounting their minor triumphs and especially their failures in the face of overwhelming obstacles, White provides a genuinely stirring counterpoint to all the mockery and exploitation of the minstrel acts that would follow.

The story begins not with the Company’s debut of *Richard III* on September 27, 1821, but in 1799, when the New York State Legislature passed an act that brought about the gradual emancipation of slaves. This “glacial” process, which initially only “liberated” slaves born after the passage of the law by placing them in a form of indentured servitude, was eventually revised in 1817 so that all slaves would be emancipated by 1827. The African Company’s career began,

then, in a time of great hope for the city's burgeoning black community. But as White sets the stage for their debut, he also shows that this transition to freedom had unstable and even dangerous meanings for blacks. As newly freed local blacks were joined by fugitive slaves from the South and by immigrant blacks from around the Atlantic rim, they competed for jobs previously held by whites and established an assertive, often defiant, culture that flourished in the streets. Black New Yorkers' freedom and their attainment of a degree of cultural autonomy, however, brought a serious backlash from whites, who frequently mobbed black institutions and even took sporadic measures to rid the city of its perceived black menace. These included several apparently successful schemes to transfer blacks convicted of vagrancy and other minor offenses to virtual enslavement on plantations in the South and the West. Add to this the constant threat of kidnapping, the emerging Jim Crow laws, and the scant opportunities for blacks' economic advancement, and it is difficult, as White remarks, "not to be impressed by the vitality of urban black life" (67).

The emergence of the African Company represents both the possibilities and the danger of this moment for African New Yorkers. It was founded by William Brown, a black former ship steward and tailor who was the proprietor of African Grove, a tea garden that catered to blacks who were excluded from elite white establishments and wanted a space to pursue the same cultural and gustatory delights as the whites had. African Grove, tellingly, was quickly shut down by the authorities, but Brown decided to turn the space into a theater. But apparently seeking more white clientele, he soon moved the performances to a rented hall in the Hampton Hotel, next to the successful Park Theater. The Park's managers were not amused by these upstart competitors, and within six months, one riot temporarily shut them down, and another saw Brown and an actor in his company badly beaten in their new home on Mercer Street. Brown blamed the Park's agents for this violence; but the case of the Park was taken up by the well-known newspaper editor and playwright Mordecai Noah, whose frequent sneering reviews of the African Company were perhaps the best publicity the troupe ever had. In apparent retaliation, the African Company chose for its next play a work by Noah himself, a disastrous early work called *The Fortress of Sorrento* that had never before been performed. White doesn't say so, but it seems safe to assume that they deliberately butchered it.

Although the African Company lasted only through 1824 (with a brief revival in 1828-29), its principal actor, James Hewlett—a former servant of two English actors who had toured the U.S.—carried their torch through the rest of the decade. Without the structure of a theatrical company to support his enormous talent, and apparently barred by prejudice from working with white actors, Hewlett developed a one-man show that won him considerable fame, and also considerable mockery (especially from Noah). Incorporating popular songs, arias, Shakespearean monologues, and—most famously—impressions of famous actors into his routine, Hewlett became a genuine celebrity, one of the two most famous African New Yorkers of the time. (White also claims that he is an unacknowledged progenitor of the one-man show in America, ranging from Lenny Bruce through Anna Deavere Smith and Richard Pryor. This is something of a

stretch; perhaps a more apt analogue would be the pre-political stage career of Paul Robeson, who, a century later, would make further inroads into elite European and musical spheres.) Along the way, Hewlett turned the tables on numerous detractors, including the famous English actor Charles Mathews, who spoofed Hewlett's performances after seeing him perform in New York, and Mordecai Noah, who continued his perverse fascination with black theatricals. Somehow managing to convince Noah to publish his retort to Mathews, Hewlett quoted Shakespeare back at the renowned tragedian, offering Desdemona's love for Othello as proof that Shakespeare would never ridicule blacks, and concluding poignantly that "he is *our* bard as well as yours" (133).

That Shakespeare was not *his* is cruelly reinforced by the story of Hewlett's demise. As white fascination with black actors imitating white theatrical performances began to give way to the more racy thrills of minstrelsy, Hewlett found diminishing interest in his act as "Shakespeare's proud representative." He attempted to remain in the public eye by turning increasingly to music and dance, but eventually he was reduced to exhibiting himself under the effects of laughing gas in the New York Museum in 1830. From there, White is able to trace him only in the court records and crime news of New York papers, where he emerges as a pickpocket and confidence man—apparently teaming up with a white woman whom he married. In this final New York episode, White writes, Hewlett apparently made use of "his verbal dexterity, his actor's poise and his mastery of mimicry" to fleece whites when the legitimate stage ceased to be an option (177).

The book's final chapter is a somewhat out-of-focus account of cultural borrowing, racial passing, and mistaken racial identity in New York. The stories White tells here are meant to explore the issues of impersonation and cultural hybridization outside the doors of the theater, but the effect is nearly to lose the main thread altogether. In an epilogue, though, White returns us to Hewlett, who—faced with T.D. Rice's meteoric blackface career as well as his own legal troubles and the notoriety surrounding his mixed marriage—opted for exile from New York. He put on a few shows in Trinidad, where he performed scenes from *Othello* and sang the "Banner of the Battle," and the "Marseilles Hymn." "What a spectacle," White writes: "a black man, an African New Yorker" performing this range of material "on a stage in Port of Spain, before an audience of British colonial officials, French planters, and newly freed blacks. Indeed, this is a fine example of the cross-cultural possibilities attendant on slavery's slow demise in the Atlantic World" (222).

And yet the story of Hewlett and his fellow players may seem to us less cross-cultural than assimilationist. There were a few instances in the African Company's history in which the troupe daringly portrayed scenes of slave life; and the interludes of music and dance in their typical performances seem to have incorporated "dynamic, unruly music and dance forms that anachronistically we can label as 'hot'" (98). But as Hewlett moved on to his solo career, there is almost nothing—other than his limited partnership with the pioneering black musician Frank Johnson—that suggests a conscious attempt to fuse European forms

with either African ones or the uniquely hybridized accents of black culture in the Americas. And so this episode may come across as a kind of cultural dead end, in which a black man in a rabidly racist culture tries to assert that the culture that excludes him is *his*. But *Stories of Freedom* presents another way of looking at it. Whites were claiming, in the 1820s as now, that Shakespeare's work was an exemplar of universal human values, and it seems that the black performers in White's tale wanted to test them at this claim. African New Yorkers, after all, wanted not just freedom, but everything the whites had: their public spaces, their fine clothes, their tea gardens, their opportunities for fame and self-transformation, and their supposedly superior cultural treasures. More than anyone since the poet Phillis Wheatley, James Hewlett demonstrated to a white audience that African Americans could not only appreciate, but actually produce and reproduce such treasures. Wouldn't it have been better, Shane White's book prompts us to ask, if white Americans had taken more seriously the accomplishments of Hewlett than of T.D. Rice?

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Benjamin Reiss is assistant professor of English at Tulane University. He is the author of *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). He is currently at work on a cultural and literary history of nineteenth-century American insane asylums.