

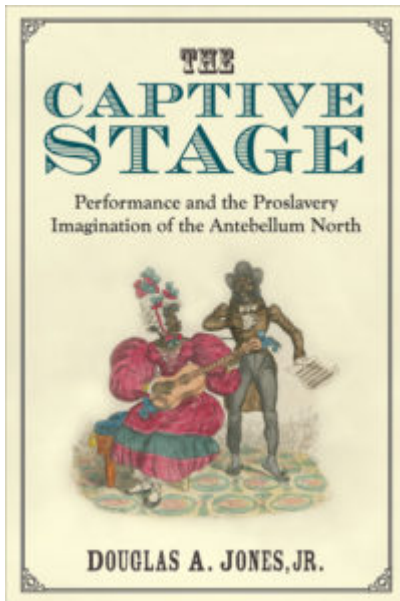
# Proslavery's Captivating Northern Performances

# THE CAPTIVE STAGE

Performance and the Proslavery  
Imagination of the Antebellum North



DOUGLAS A. JONES, JR.



Douglas A. Jones Jr., *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014. 232 pp., \$70.

Douglas A. Jones Jr.'s *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* foregrounds a dialectic of black captivity and black autonomy observable in the theatrical enactments and everyday embodiments of various constituencies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century North. Jones focuses on how a proslavery "common sense" was the dominant ideological platform upon which the region's politicized antebellum performance culture played out and against which black people sought to exercise self-determination. According to the logic of this ideology, the North faced the vexing problem of unenslaved black people produced by gradual emancipation; its solution was to dictate continued and unrelenting black subjugation to white governance. Thus, "to live a decidedly captive life" was to occupy a post-manumission social position of blackness that was ensnared by an ensemble of subjecting forces, including social estrangement, electoral deprivation, terror, relegation to noncitizenship and subhumanity, and economic predation, among others (1). As Jones argues, this proslavery "common sense" proliferated through popular pastimes such as theatergoing, speechmaking, lecturing, and parading. Together these avenues for dominance worked in concert with the more programmatic methods of black subjection upon which scholars generally concentrate, including disenfranchisement and the withholding of legal protections. Performance culture produced these subjections as common sense, Jones asserts, because it ostensibly permitted the active and spectatorial participation of everyone, which, in turn, imbued both mundane and momentous happenings with proslavery meaning; that far-reaching potential made performance one of the most expansive arenas for gauging the North's proslavery imagination (7, 9). Jones also unveils how that same ubiquity inculcated proslavery's commonplaceness among individuals and publics as diverse as

playwrights, orators, former slaves, politicians, bourgeois social reformers, theatre patrons, and blackface minstrels, notwithstanding their ostensibly incongruent political stances, even stances in seeming opposition to each other, such as antislavery and antiabolitionist.

How does black women's conspicuous exclusion from the stage of theatricalized black nationalism disrupt or even undermine the author's emphasis on performance culture's all-inclusiveness?

While Jones demonstrates the relentless nature of proslavery ideology in the North, he also spotlights activism against it. Jones accentuates such activism in his fresh reading of the rites and locutions of black male commemorators for abolitionist anniversaries such as the United States's outlawing of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808. In that early black performance culture, Jones also traces a genealogy of black nationalism that stressed participants' African lineages and specific racial designation. This version of black nationalism was also patently American, drawing on established national rhetorics and practices such as parading and speechifying to instantiate black citizenship and inclusion within America's proclaimed democratic mores. This performative drive for self-determined black citizenship radicalized significantly in the 1840s, as illustrated by the proceedings of the National Negro Convention movement. Jones pinpoints Henry Highland Garnet's rousing 1843 black convention address calling for forceful resistance to slavery as illustrative of performance's inception of militancy and affective nationalist bonds (118-23). Given the predominantly elite black male participation in such events, one of the questions provoked but underexplored by Jones is that of [gender](#). How does black women's conspicuous exclusion from the stage of theatricalized black nationalism disrupt or even undermine the author's emphasis on performance culture's all-inclusiveness? Did black women embody the general limits of performance culture's putative "democracy," as palpably evinced, for example, by Bostonian Maria Stewart's pressured exit from the public stage (9)? Arguably, the widespread absence of black women in *The Captive Stage* marks them as the epitome of what Jones terms the "state of black exception" that yielded black life in America as expendable (22).

Jones's genealogy of early black nationalist praxis also cites its twin-birth with the unabashedly proslavery print and performance genre "bobalition" (a malapropism of "abolition") that white northerners created to oppose directly black embodiments of autonomy. "Bobalition's" caricatures set the stage for other conduits for black captivity, especially blackface minstrelsy (40-9). This attention to "bobalition" allows for one of Jones' most adroit interventions: rethinking the normative scholarly claim advanced by scholars such as Dale Cockrell and Eric Lott that early blackface minstrelsy radically enacted solidarity with the black people burlesqued in white entertainers' burnt-corked mimeses. Jones underscores the proslavery antics of Jacksonian-era minstrelsy by focusing on its northern production conditions and extra-

theatricality, specifically the barring of black people from the performance stage and theatrical pit. He also underscores how that extra-theatricality complemented blackface minstrelsy's onstage choreographing of blackness as inherently inferior to whiteness. Jones casts acclaimed performer Thomas D. Rice as the avatar of this particular brand of proslavery ideology, enacted through blackface minstrelsy, which Rice most succinctly articulated in his 1837 curtain speech asserting that the medium allowed him to "effectually prove" that "negroes are essentially an inferior species of the human family, and they ought to remain slaves" (68).

In concert with Rice's patent endorsement of black bondage, white minstrels' simultaneous appropriation of black political aesthetics and repudiation of black people as fellow citizens portrayed working-class whiteness as a merited signifier of citizenship rights in contradistinction to a "grotesque blackness" (65). Jones keenly highlights how minstrelsy's white working-class publics and performers used the phrase "white slavery" to reject their fettering to exploitative economic relations with southern slaveholders and northern capitalists, not to condemn the thralldom of black people whom they rendered as innately enslaveable (60-1). The fact that minstrelsy was both the nation's first popular entertainment form and the practice that most undercut black people's autonomy in its endorsements of the logic for their enslavement further supports Jones' argument that proslavery thought was quotidian in the North (56). Relatedly, Jones's attention to the minstrelization of black characters—exemplified by Harry Seymour's temperance drama *Aunt Dinah's Pledge*—and his analysis of how white reformers (like Garrisonian abolitionists) drew upon such theatrical tropes encourages readers to see how reform and minstrelsy could constitute two sides of the same coin. While white laborers appropriated black performance as they rebuffed black people as inherently inferior and thus fit for slavery, white reformers extolled black moral value as they sketched black people as naturally pious, pliant, and puerile and thereby in need of white paternal authority; in this way, both groups' claims about black people's innate constitution implicitly endorsed the logic behind black captivity, even if reformers expressed antislavery aims (109). White Garrisonians' paternalistic reaction to Frederick Douglass's break with them epitomizes both white reformers' renouncement of black autonomy and black people's attempts to escape white oversight.

In his reading of both familiar and underexamined cultural materials, Jones sketches "a uniquely northern strand of proslavery thought: namely, black people as slaves were pivotal to the nation's founding and are therefore most useful to the nation as slaves" (77). His most vivid example of this comes from P.T. Barnum. In Barnum's staged mastery over Joice Heth, alleged wet-nurse to George Washington, Jones illustrates how the logic of black captivity enthralled northern audiences and crystallized, through repeated performance, a proslavery common sense. Barnum's auction-block-like exhibition and his narration of Heth's biography as the founding patriarch's enslaved "mammy" before a range of audiences and settings enabled his ascent as the most famous showman of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Heth spectacularly "signified as

the nation's mammy because she was the national Father's mammy" (89). That northern audiences flocked to Barnum's spectacle of Heth and failed to question either her status as enslaved or the legality of Barnum's control over her body in allegedly "free" territory supports Jones's central argument that proslavery thought was customary in the North (91-2). As with his focus on antebellum abolitionist anniversaries and black conventions, however, Jones does not specify how the gendered and sexualized aspects of Barnum's exposition of Heth shaped the northern proslavery imagination. Because gender and sex were foundational to racial slavery, as manifested, for example, in the principle *partus sequitur ventrem*, which accorded slave status through the mother's line, and in black bondwomen's consignment to the labor of suckling white infants, were they not central to antebellum northern proslavery logic? Was Barnum's exhibition of Heth as national mammy emblematic of the kinds of confining roles to which northern proslavery thought conscripted black women, particularly in the post-gradual emancipation era?

Overall, Jones's major contribution is in delineating the antebellum North as an incubator of a pervasive proslavery ideology and in uncovering performance culture's scaffolding and, occasionally, dismantling of that thought. With conceptual rigor and empirical precision, Jones accomplishes that work by drawing upon a breadth of cultural artifacts, including joke books and songsters, dramaturgy, blackface minstrelsy, oratory, newspapers, portraiture, and slave narratives. Given the history that Jones dramatizes, we must view the captive stage as a complex and often contradictory site through which seemingly discrepant repertoires of performances and casts of actors enacted black subjection to white mastery in a way that captured the northern imagination. In this way, northern proslavery ideology was rendered omnipresent and thus seemingly inescapable.

This article originally appeared in issue 16.2 (Winter, 2016).

---

Patricia Ann Lott is assistant professor of African American and African Diaspora Literatures in Africana Studies and English at the College of William and Mary.