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Eugene Stratton an Early Ragtime in Britain

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EUGENE STRATTON AND EARLY RAGTIME IN BRITAIN

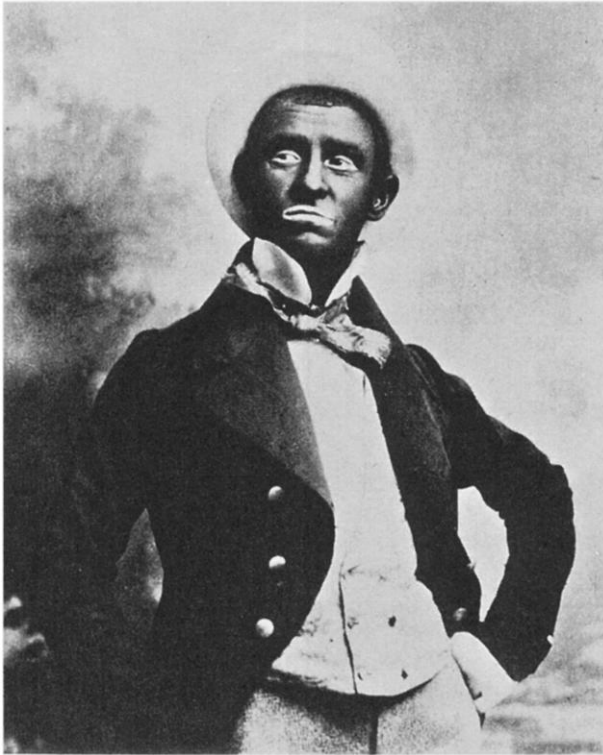
MICHAEL PICKERING

In 1869, the periodical *London Society* commented, "Good society hates scenes, votes every eccentricity of manners and demonstrativeness of demeanour bad form" (quoted in Cominos 1963, 42). This was a prevalent middle-class view in Victorian Britain. The restless, nervous energies of the industrial age, with its expanding urbanization, mechanization, and mobility, its ever-accelerating pace of change, its rolling back of existing cultural horizons, and its increasing awareness of non-Western cultures and peoples, seemed to many contemporaries to demand an increased control over social manners and morals, a stricter definition of the symbolic boundaries between national civility and order and their perceived opposites. Decorum, respectability, and moderation were bulwarks against the unleashing of newfound passions, pleasures, and aspirations—and the possible lack of self-restraint accompanying them. For "good society," these appeared to pose a formidable threat to the governing conventions of behavior and identity. Yet in one of the most respectable forms of contemporary popular entertainment, enjoyed by many orderly, genteel middle-class people, these conventions were disrupted and upturned.

Blackface minstrelsy in Britain depended for its very source of popular appeal on the opposite of those precepts enshrined in the concept of "good form." Its appeal lay in its garishly spectacular scenes, its eccentricity of manners, and its demonstrativeness of demeanor. "A nigger concert," wrote a correspondent in *Dwight's Journal of Music*, "without

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Figure 1. Eugene Stratton with his blackface makeup



grimace and copious gesticulation would be simply an ill entertainment" ("Negro Minstrelsy" 1859, 68). The nature of English civility and self-restraint, steadfastness and duty, and cultivation and manners was defined in part against an essentialized black nature, a nature still being referred to in the 1930s as "the animal exuberance of the nigger" (Duval 1933, 658). This description was offered not in a far-right or fascist publication but in the official weekly periodical of one of the most respectable of the new media of communications, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), at a time when that stern guardian of morality and decency, Sir John Reith, was still at its helm as director general. The appearance of this description in *The Radio Times*, the publication listing BBC programs, is a measure of its still-widespread acceptance in Britain in the early twentieth century. "Nigger" minstrelsy had contributed to this acceptance, over a long period of white mediations of "blackness"

that had coincided with the development of the British Empire and the "scramble for Africa." Minstrelsy, along with other forms of cultural representation, had established the sense of that "animal exuberance." By and large, the audiences of minstrel shows in Britain had accepted the "exaggerated and farcical antics of the black as authentic" (Lorimer 1975, 42), and to the degree that this was so, such "authenticity" was defined in contradistinction to British national identity and a racially determined British character. This of course raises the question as to why the British racially cross-dressed in blackface, why they put on the "nigger" mask and, having done so, become exhilarated by delight in the kind of "grimace and copious gesticulation" that was by definition so decidedly un-British.

The key to this question lies in how the British came to consider cultural difference, in this case a racialized form of cultural difference, during the process of becoming modern. Modernity as a way of seeing and experiencing the world relied heavily on a sense of contrast between its own orientation and its various exclusions, displacements, and projections of "difference." Strategies of symbolic expulsion, and of rendering inferior what was regarded as different, were integral to national self-definition in societies classifying themselves as modern, civilized, and advanced. In this way, what was construed as "racially" inferior became *interior* to national identity even as this was hidden behind its exterior front of civility and progress. The civilizing process of modernity required its decivilized counterpart, which a society found in its own racial fantasies. Blackface fantasies were one particular variant of these, built as they were around a theatrical staging of stereotypical black characters who were a peculiar and complex conflation of mimicry and mockery. These fantasies showed at once an ability to imagine and entertain cultural difference and an inability to conceive of such difference in any other terms but those that, in Britain, supported its own limits and legitimations, its own bounded sense of identity in being modern, rational, ordered, civilized, and controlled. These terms demanded, among other things, that difference, in its imaginary blackface versions, be entertaining, that it be made a source of comic and sentimental entertainment. As such, these differences could be kept at a certain distance and so disavowed, while at the same time enjoyed and regaled as a means of diversion from being British, being white, and being modern. Blackface fantasies set up a sense of contrast between the modern self, upright in the prow of its rationality, and a disorderly black low-Other who confirmed white racial superiority and advancement while appearing safe by being made ridiculous, a figure of harmless fun and clownish grotesquerie.

Nowhere was this grotesquerie, in all its deficiency and dysfunction,

more apparent than in the construct of the blackface "coon." The "coon" was a particular extension of an earlier blackface stereotype, the uppity, socially pretentious, outlandishly attired "nigger" buck of countless songs from the likes of "Long Tail Blue" onward. The urban "Dandy Jim" figure had been contrasted with the happy-go-lucky Sambo stereotype of plantation backwardness since the pioneer days of the minstrel show in the 1840s and 1850s. The disreputable black fop characterized the corrupting influence of a city lifestyle in grossly exaggerated form, providing an object lesson in overweening vanity, hedonistic laziness, demonstrativeness of demeanor, and lack of self-restraint, the exact opposite of "good society." The fop's "coon" extension in the early ragtime of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a more narrowly characterized and virulently racist figure. The personae of Eugene Stratton (1861–1918) exemplified this new form of racist stereotyping in British minstrelsy. In this article, I focus on this leading "coon" exponent. There are three reasons in particular why it is important to do this.

First, as well as representing this particular strand within minstrelsy, Stratton's career and repertoire provide a key resource for explaining the broader popularity and appeal of "coon" songs and acts in Britain, not least because he was regarded as having "no rival in his line" (cited in Barker 1980, 114). This appeal has been largely ignored in musical and cultural history. In some ways, such neglect is hardly surprising and can be compared with the historical treatment of one of his contemporaries, the renowned music hall actor, comedian, and singer George Robey (1869–1954). Robey first appeared in London in 1891, one year before Stratton himself switched from the minstrel show to the music hall. Following his debut at the Oxford Music Hall, Robey soon established his reputation as "The Prime Minister of Mirth." Today, his name remains among the best known of music-hall stars. By comparison with Robey's, Stratton's fame has been largely eclipsed, even though in his lifetime he was the "coon" singer par excellence, and both performers were celebrated in pantomime as well as in the halls. In his biography of Robey, James Harding cites an occasion in 1892 when Robey shared the bill with Stratton at the Holborn Empire in London and comments that "today his 'black-up' turn would repel, despite the charm of his soft-shoe shuffle" (Harding 1990, 28; see also Wilson 1956; Cotes 1972). Thankfully, this is true. Although the prohibition that prevents contemporary British theatrical performers from blacking up remains controversial—as if it is simply a matter of overzealous "political correctness"—the racism of Stratton and other "coon" performers is now generally regarded as among the most blatant aspects of "bad form" in the musical and theatrical culture

Figure 2. Eugene Stratton without his blackface makeup



of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the “coon” subgenre of blackface entertainments was at the height of its popularity.

This prohibition goes some way toward explaining the lack of critical attention given to the appeal of the “coon” craze, but it is not adequate in itself, primarily because popular racism in late Victorian Britain has not been neglected in the same way. Stratton as a minstrel and music-hall artist is worth examining because, as the chief exponent of “coon” songs in Britain, he has been credited with helping “to direct the course of public taste for popular syncopated music in its formative years” (Walker 1980, 124–125), ragtime being equated almost exclusively with “coon” songs in Britain in the late 1890s and early 1900s (see also Blesh and Janis 1971, 13; Berlin 1984, 111). Exploring the connections between the “coon” craze and popular racism provides the second reason for focusing on Stratton. The high point of popularity of the “coon” craze in Britain coin-

cided with the period of high imperialism, and British imperialism, along with its attendant forms of racism during this period, has been extensively studied by historians. In view of this, there is a strong case for attending closely to the relations of high imperialist racism and the popular music and theater of the time.

Finally, tracing the "coon" craze in turn-of-the-century minstrelsy through the figure of Stratton should help us overcome propagandist notions of popular culture in relation to imperial ideology. If this sub-genre of minstrelsy had existed solely for the dissemination of racist stereotypes and imperialist values, it is unlikely that it would have met with such enormous success. Its widespread appeal certainly should be understood in relation to those stereotypes and values, but to explain how it did work effectively in disseminating them, one needs to examine British "coon" acts and performers in their specific theatrical personae and contexts of cultural performance.

Such an examination is not quite so straightforward as it may seem. The major hermeneutic difficulty is raised by the historicity of cultural form. "Black-up" comicality and sentimentality now repels because its demeaning features have come to be seen as such, denying as they did the complex, beleaguered humanity of black people by characterizing them reductively in a narrow set of positive and negative stereotypes. Yet the obviousness of this as a history lesson does not take us much beyond our own righteous, and historically located, indignation. Such indignation, although eminently justified, may impede the development of a better historical understanding of what this particular aspect of blackface minstrelsy involved. Whether in sentimental "lub" songs or comic sketches, the "coon" craze of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pivoted on the uncontested point that its targeted victims were intrinsically a source of amusement, fun, and what William Makepeace Thackeray called "happy pity." They were not to be taken seriously. This was possible, of course, because the debased "coon" was only known through its stereotypical representations, which were not recognized, or were only partly recognized, as stereotypical in form. They were just as much taken as being in some way truly representative of black people. But the problem extends beyond this, again for reasons of historicity. The early twentieth century saw a sharp swing away from Victorian forms of sentimentality, which have seemed terribly outmoded ever since. This view applies also to much popular Victorian comedy.

Nothing dates more quickly than comedy. On the one hand, the resulting historical distance to some extent eases the difficulties of writing seriously about it. Because we are unlikely to find funny the comic discourse of popular entertainment in the past, or at least to find it as funny as did

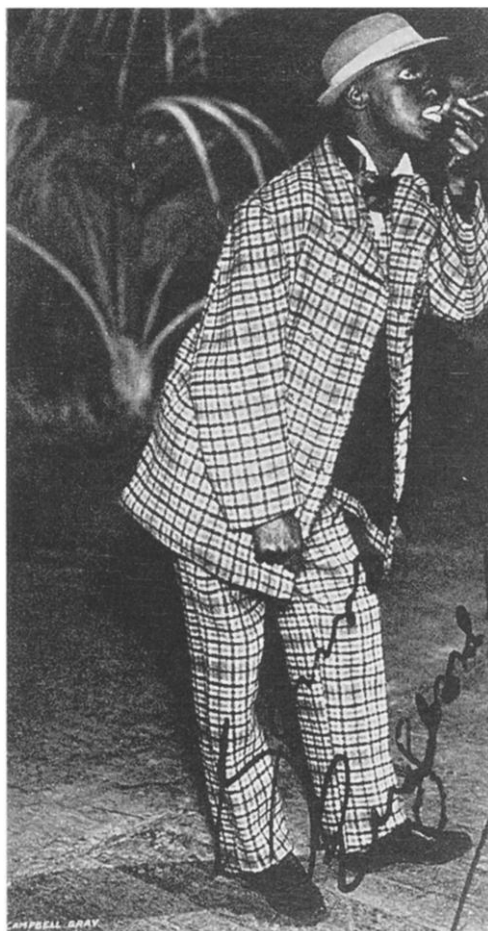
its contemporary recipients, we may have a definite leverage when attempting to develop a cultural analysis of what it involved. On the other hand, such distance in time may create obstacles to appreciating what made the comic entertainment of past periods effective for contemporary audiences. This is perhaps especially so when what was generally regarded as acceptable in the humor and comedy of past periods is now judged as offensive. Although this does not necessarily involve the politics of empathy—there is no intrinsic reason why, from our different historical vantage, we should value such humor and comedy—it does necessarily create problems of historical understanding. These problems are central to the comicality of the discourse with which I want to deal in this article.

"The Whistling Coon"

Stratton's career developed in what had, by the late nineteenth century, become established as a transnational cultural matrix that his own chosen genre of popular entertainment had helped to establish.¹ More specifically in relation to this genre, a blackface Atlantic had led to mutual influence and development in the minstrel shows of both North America and Britain, while at the same time each manifested its own particular trajectories and specificities (for British minstrelsy, see Pickering 1986, 1997, 1999). Born Eugene Augustus Rühlmann and raised in Buffalo, New York, Stratton learned his basic stagecraft in North America but only blossomed as a stage entertainer in the context of the British minstrel show and the British music hall. His first stage performance was at the annual gala of the Christian Brothers school he attended in Buffalo, when he sang "Jim the Carter Lad," which he coupled with an Irish jig, as well as a German patter song, "Michael Schneider's Party" (Morton n.d., 11–12). His schooling ended early, however. He worked as a "cash boy" in a local draper's shop and as a telegraph messenger before the age of ten, when he began full time in the entertainment business, drawing on his childhood interest in dancing and acrobatics, and making his public stage debut at Dan Shelby's saloon and music hall in Buffalo as part of a duo. The other half of the act was a physically huge man called Wesley. Billed as "The Two Wesleys," they presented a burnt-cork sketch, "The Big and the Little of It," and performed various acrobatic and tumbling routines, with Wesley throwing Stratton off his hands and feet (Busby 1976, 165). They toured throughout the United States, picking up engagements and setting up their own shows. The duo lasted for a year and a

1. Unless otherwise stated, information on Stratton's life and career is taken from Stratton (1913, 6), Reynolds (1928), and Barker (1980).

Figure 3. Signed photograph of Stratton in black dandy costume



half, after which Stratton's exasperation at Wesley's rough handling led to an argument and an agreement to separate.

Stratton struck out on his own as a clog dancer and tumbling entertainer under the stage name "Master Jean." He remembered later having had "a hard fight of it, sometimes being 'in' and sometimes 'out' of a job. At the age of thirteen I was reckoned to be something of a champion in a small way." His dedication in reaching this small-time status was considerable, including five or six hours' practice every day. He continued tour-

ing small halls until he was fifteen, sometimes performing solo, other times as a member of various minstrel companies. His long-term ambition was an engagement in New York: "As every American knows, a New York engagement means the top of a big climb, and when Messrs Harrigan and Hart, of the Theatre Comique, offered me 30s a week for a period of about four months I guessed I was 'made.'" After this stint, and at the age of fifteen, Stratton acquired further skills as an entertainer, joining a circus in which he rode, leaped through hoops, and did a tumbling turn. In 1876, he embarked on a long tour of the United States and Canada with a blackface sketch troupe known as The Four Arnolds, a sibling group described by Stratton as "an old stock company." The work was long and stretching: "I would be called upon to play a Hebrew, German, Irishman 'juvenile lead,' in fact any old thing at a moment's notice. It was a case of reading your part through once and being letter perfect after a single rehearsal."

In 1878, at the age of seventeen, Stratton joined Haverley's Minstrels along with the Arnold brothers, playing with this company for two years in the United States before coming to England as a full member of Haverley's under the management of Charles Frohman, opening at Her Majesty's Theatre on July 31, 1880, and then touring the provinces (Busby 1976, 165). He earned two pounds a week at this time. While with Haverley's, he acquired his stage name of Stratton, but the significance of his contract with this company lay much more in his having secured a position within the conglomerate blackface Atlantic business that minstrelsy had become in its most grand-scale manifestations, involving mammoth spectacle, international tours, and interaction with some of the leading lights of late nineteenth-century popular theater. When Haverley's troupe returned to the United States in early summer 1881, Stratton stayed in London and took an offer to join the Moore and Burgess Minstrels at St. James's Hall, Piccadilly. St. James's was one of the two main venues of minstrelsy in London, and Stratton performed there for eleven-and-a-half years. Initially, he played the bass drum and cymbals, working his way to the front to become, after the departure of Walter Howard in 1884, their "Mr. Tambo" corner man, playing opposite "Pony" Moore, one of the company's two proprietors. In addition, Stratton performed as a clog dancer, comedian, and singer, associated with such numbers as "The Whistling Yaller Gal," "The Darkie's Jubilee," "Eighteen Pence," and "O Dat Low Bridge." He was "[a] natural dancer with a wonderful sense of movement," and "he devised the troupe's song and dance numbers" (165). Despite marrying Pony Moore's daughter Bella (Annie Matilda Rosina Moore, a ballad vocalist and sketch player in her own right) in 1883, his wage remained at five pounds a week plus

“promises” for a considerable period before he got a raise. His St. James’s salary was never big, but the compensating factor was the acquisition of his reputation as a popular entertainer.

Having developed a powerful whistle, Stratton used whistling to considerable effect with his first song success, “The Whistling Coon,” a song that he bought from a fellow minstrel, Sam Raeburn (Busby 1976, 165). It was with this song that Stratton first rose to public prominence and from its title that he earned his first theatrical cognomen; he was billed for a time as “Gene Stratton, The Whistling Coon” (Mozart 1938, 78). Ironically, he never particularly liked the song and felt that its success was “a fluke”:

Some amateur minstrels had undertaken a “turn” at a benefit performance by the Moore and Burgess troupe, and one of them sang a song with a whistling chorus, in which we all joined. In a sheer spirit of mischief I whistled the chorus rather more noisily than the rest, so that my performance partook of the nature of a solo. It was much applauded, and the minstrel who sat next to me suggested that I should whistle still louder next time. So I did, and got still more applause. An encore was demanded, and then I “let go” with that shrill whistle between the teeth that I had acquired as a youngster. (*Era* 1893)

Stratton continued singing the song because of popular demand—great cries of “Coon, Coon” would arise from all parts of the house if he did not include it in his act—and only ceased in June 1893, when he “took it off because I got thoroughly tired of it.” The implication is that he tired of having to repeatedly sing the song, rather than growing tired of the lyric, which in itself he never repudiated. The song’s historical significance lies in the way it illustrates the increased virulence of stereotypical attribution in the entire “coon” subgenre. Indeed, it carries to an extreme the racist offensiveness of minstrelsy, although as already noted, that conclusion is a historically located evaluation that immediately calls into question the basis of its comicality. The song is about a “very funny queer old coon,” “a knock-kneed, double-jointed, hunky-plunky moke,” whose main pleasure in life consists of whistling his carefree way through the day. In love with his own laziness, little more could be expected of such a “happy, chuckle-headed, hickieberry nig,” such a “free-and-easy, fat and greasy ham / With a cranium like a big baboon” and a Jim Crow-type “limpy” gait. Further description in the second verse contains what must seem now some of the most vicious racist imagery ever advanced in minstrelsy: “He’s got a pair of lips like a pound of liver split, / And a nose like an injun-rubber shoe” (Stratton n.d.b., 15).

Although metaphorically more nasty, such imagery falls neatly in line with the hardening of racist attitudes and values that coincided with the period of British high imperialism, when Stratton was at the height of his career. Images such as these were not out of kilter with those commonly found in minstrel songs and sketches. Their culturally specific funniness to contemporary audiences belongs in the broader comic discourse of racial derogation prevalent at the time. The song's popularity is not in dispute. Stratton reportedly sang it consecutively over one thousand five hundred times. That it added considerably to his growing reputation may seem remarkable to us now, but this response should not obstruct a more rounded view of Stratton's artistry. Although it was compatible enough with popular racism in fin de siècle Britain, a song such as this cannot be taken in isolation. It is important to emphasize the high esteem in which Stratton was held by contemporaries as a "great coon-delineator" (East 1967, 243). In MacQueen-Pope's (1951, 116–117) seasoned estimation, he was "incomparable—one of the finest artists who ever graced our music hall stage." This is a commonly echoed evaluation, and one must see more fully what his theatrical artistry involved, and how it developed, before returning to the reception of his "coon" racism and the historical context in which it occurred.

"The Dandy Coloured Coon"

In examining Stratton's artistry, I want to begin by noting how Stratton made the blackface mask work for him, how it contributed to the power of his stage presence. Consider this description of Stratton's appearance on stage:

The limelight throws a circle of light directly in front of the wing on the "prompt" side of the stage. A lithe, willowy figure steps into the magic circle, and, in a succession of little, short, graceful steps, makes his way down to the footlights. The new-comer wears a pair of check pants, a check waistcoat, a white shirt, a small soft hat, and a black face. The burnt cork glistens in the white gleam of the lime, and the well-defined, clear-cut features are plainly outlined. There is a preliminary gaze at the audience, and then Eugene Stratton starts his love-plaint. (Morton n.d., 15)

This description splendidly evokes the studied captivation of Stratton's presence on the boards. It was a presence that depended as much on the glistening black outline of his theatrical mask in the limelight as on his nimble descent to the footlights and his immaculate sense of timing and stage dynamics. The extent to which Stratton's stage presence and command depended on his use of the blackface mask can also be illustrated by a disastrous turn of events that occurred when, in the early 1890s,

Stratton moved away from the minstrel show itself to the different, albeit allied, context of performance of the music hall. Such a move was possible because his reputation by then was such that he could afford to go out on his own and develop an individual act outside of the collective ensemble form of the minstrel show.

By the 1890s, the metropolitan music hall had changed considerably from its emergence around midcentury, when it had coalesced from such varied places of entertainment as the supper room, the tavern free-and-easy, the pleasure garden, the singing saloon, and the penny gaff. As a commercial business, it was now organized and administered on a more rationalized basis, with an increase in control by management over both performers and audiences in the interests of encouraging a respectable social tone and an expansion of its audience base. Along with a move toward countrywide syndication, the 1890s marked the beginning of the transition to variety entertainment. The development of the Palace of Varieties-style of music hall, catering to the late Victorian taste for extravaganzas and spectacular display, was a key feature of this transition. The music hall of the 1890s also contributed to the spirit of the "new imperialism," with a new emphasis on "claptrap patriotism" and a populist enthusiasm for the empire. The provincial pattern is more complex, with a greater retention of smaller halls and pub concert rooms and a less-restricted scope for class expression and solidarity. But even in the large metropolitan halls where Stratton appeared, performer-audience rapport remained characteristic of music-hall culture, with major stars contriving their own way of achieving it. For instance, the idiosyncratic blackface entertainer G. H. Chirgwin, "The One-Eyed Kaffir," capped the end of his act by looking thirstily toward the "gods" and drawing a suggestive hand across his mouth before exclaiming, "Could do wiv a drink!"²

In his one experiment in dispensing with the "nigger" mask, Stratton failed to establish a rapport at the very start of the music-hall stage of his career, which almost led him to abandon his *métier* as a popular entertainer. Opening as a solo performer over the August bank holiday, on a "turns system" basis at the Royal Holborn, Trocadero, and Paragon music halls, he was persuaded by friends to do his act in "white," with disastrous consequences. Audiences knew the musical introduction to his opening number because of his association with it in the Moore and Burgess company, but when he stepped onto the stage without his black makeup, they did not recognize him. Even though he did what he could to warm his audiences up, he had little success, and when he was working up to his "big point" at the Holborn, he got, as he put it, "that beau-

2. See Pickering (1993) for a broader summary of British music halls in the 1890s.

tiful thing called 'the bird.'" Mortified by this reaction, he came close to the point of giving up on his stage career: "I figured it out that as I was booked for eight weeks certain at the Holborn and the Trocadero, each paying £15 a week, I could count on just over £200 to take me back to America and make a fresh start—I was on a week's notice at the Paragon. My cup of bitterness was filled to the brim on the Friday of my first week, when the management of the Holborn told me that I needn't trouble to come to the matinee on the morrow" (Stratton 1913, 6).

Stratton's rapid return to blacking up coincided with a new song, taken up, albeit somewhat reluctantly, about a month or so before his one stage "death." "I Lub a Lubly Girl, I Do" was written by Brandon Thomas, with music composed by Gustave Chaudoir, musical director of the Moore and Burgess Minstrels. Stratton sang it with all the lights in the house down and just two limelights focused on him. The audience greeted his performance quietly, and at the end a huge silence lasted long enough for Stratton to reach his dressing room and start changing. There was then "a deafening roar of applause." The delay had occurred because the lights had not been turned up immediately after he had finished his song, so that the audience consequently did not realize that he had left the stage. This new "coon" song quickly became as much associated with Stratton as "The Whistling Coon" had been previously, and it paved the way to the establishment of his music-hall reputation as one of England's foremost "coon" singers. Even by October 1892, it was reported that he "is beginning to understand music-hall audiences better than he did when he first wooed them, and is prospering proportionately" (*Entr'acte* October 29, 1892, 10). A year later, critics felt that he had "increased his value very considerably" by moving from "corner" business to variety entertainment (*Entr'acte* December 2, 1893, 6). In the next six months, he appeared once nightly at the Royal, Tivoli, and the London Pavilion, all top halls, and subsequently at the Palace Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, and the Charing Cross Music Hall.

From then on, Stratton performed "at every hall of importance throughout Britain" (*Who Was Who* 1978, 2274), typically appearing as the only blackface artist on the bill, as for example on December 26, 1893, at the Royal Cambridge Hall of Varieties, Commercial Street, Bishopsgate (John Johnson Collection, file 4). A song written for him by Richard Morton and George Le Brunn, "The Dandy Coloured Coon," further consolidated this new stage in Stratton's career. Introduced in 1893, it earned Stratton his second and more lasting *nom de théâtre*, as the "dandy coloured coon." In Ireland, as well as England, Stratton's "following was enormous," with his "'Coon' on everybody's lips":

Why, it's John James Ebenezer Hezekiah Peter Hennery

Zachariah John James Brown!
 Don't yuh know me?—Garn! yuh will very soon
 For I'm John James Brown, the Dandy Coloured Coon!
 (Watters and Murtagh 1975, 164)

As he made his way as a solo act, Stratton attracted the attention of writer-composer Leslie Stuart (1864–1928), who is still perhaps best known for his jingoistic “The Soldiers of the Queen.” The two became close friends, not only because of a common interest in minstrel songs and music; they both shared a passionate enthusiasm for horse racing. Indeed, a quarrel over a horse created a rift between them and led to the eventual break up of their partnership. The partnership undoubtedly consolidated Stratton’s reputation and considerably enhanced the quality of his repertoire. Such “incomparable songs” as “Is Yer Mammie Always with Yer?” (1896), “Little Dolly Daydream” (1897), “Lily of Laguna” (1898), “The Cake Walk” (1898), “My Little Octoroon” (1899), and “I May Be Crazy” (1903) helped him rise rapidly to “fame and fortune [topping] the earnings of all other artists by getting the princely sum of £300 per week” (Abbott 1952, 10; see also Roberts 1900). The widespread performance of songs such as these contributed directly to Stratton’s iconic status as the “idol of the halls,” leading to his apotheosis in James Joyce’s *Bloodsday* of 1904 where his face on the hoardings, with its big “blub lips,” grinned down at Father Conmee and made him think of African missionaries and the saving of heathen black souls (Disher 1974, 75; Watters and Murtagh 1975, 164; Joyce 1964, 285). But the success of these new songs depended on both composer and performer. Stuart crafted a delicate, poised relationship between words and music that took the music, despite certain repetitive mannerisms, to a higher plane than that of many music-hall songs with their verse/chorus repetition. In “Lily of Laguna,” for instance, a studied “management of tone” creates—through “a slight touch of humour”—“a certain sobriety” and avoidance of “an over-languid, too sentimental effect” by breaking up the rhythm with a dotted quarter–eighth note musical pattern (Davison 1971, 96). Stuart also excelled in evoking the dreamworld of old Dixie, a travesty of tranquillity and order that was nevertheless vital for minstrelsy’s middle-class family appeal.

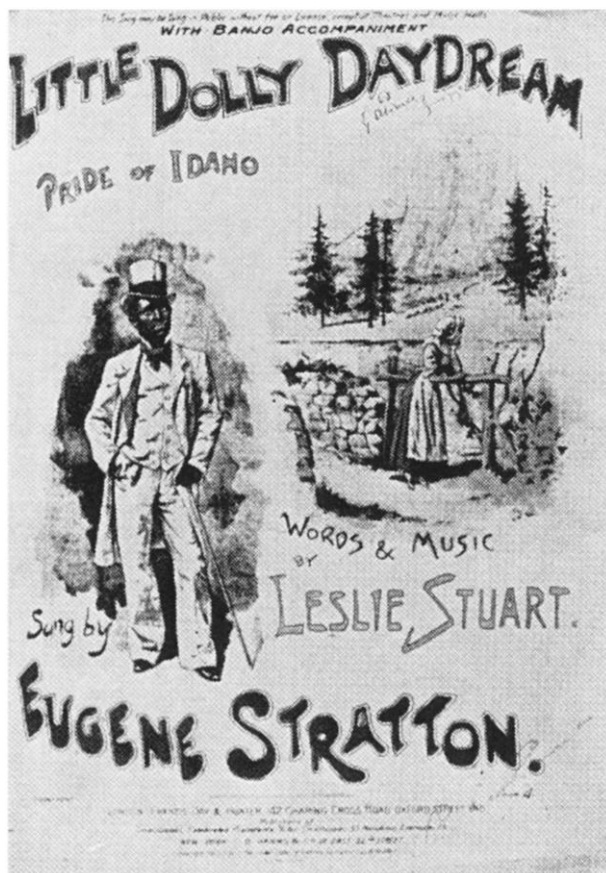
In turn, Stratton was a fine interpreter of Stuart’s songs, with their flowing melodic lines and special effects, despite the fact that his voice lacked range or resonance. Stratton’s singing was restrained, and he developed a sort of proto-crooning style of delivery that combined a cooing, caressing tone with “an odd staccato jerk” (Watters and Murtagh 1975, 164). Richard Morton (n.d., 15) ascribes his vocal artistry to the way he made his voice, gesture, and bearing seem “easy, natural, and

Figure 4. Leslie Stewart, writer and composer of many of Stratton's famous songs



unforced," with no "straining after effect, no exertion." Although his eschewal of bombast and artificial passion helped convey a depth of feeling, Stratton's interpretation of Stuart's songs depended more on the theatrical performance, the way in which he projected them, acting them out as much as singing them, starting softly and rising in pitch and volume, and providing an apposite choreographic accompaniment to the words and music with his soft-shoe dancing. In "Lily of Laguna," the dance steps, with their continually changing pattern, seemed to express in sinuous movement the sung words, such as when Stratton responded physically to the oboe obbligato calls, coming between verse and chorus and imitating the shepherdess's calls (Gammond 1971, 53). Stratton's consummate dance routines and improvisations were clearly central to the success of his interpretation of the songs, as he "seemed to be a feather blown hither and thither by Leslie Stuart's melodies" (Busby 1976, 165).

Figure 5. Cover of sheet music for a Stratton song, "Little Dolly Daydream," written and composed by Leslie Stuart



Morton (n.d. 17–18) described his wraithlike dancing as a “free, unfettered speech of the limbs, an unconcerned, careless movement which is at the same time graceful and full of expression,” involving full use of the body, every part moving in unison. Another admirer spoke of Stratton as “dancing like a spirit of the air, with perfect grace and rhythm” (East 1974, 26). There is clearly a degree of nostalgia in these panegyrics, but that is not so much the problem. The kind of soft-shoe dancing in which Stratton specialized—involving a delicate, rhythmic stroking of the stage with the feet—is hardly ever seen today, either on stage or on screen. The

Figure 6. Cover of sheet music for a Stratton song, "The Lily of Laguna," written and composed by Leslie Stuart



difficulty this creates in attempting to visualize its effects adds to the broader problem of understanding the appeal of the "coon" craze, which is why in Stratton's case the contextual importance of soft shoe needs to be emphasized.

The sheer theatricality of Stratton's "coon" performances requires equal emphasis, for it also brought the songs to life in a way suited to contemporary aesthetic tastes. Certain conflicting details need to be noted here. Stratton and Stuart undoubtedly attempted to achieve various dramatic effects with their staging, scoring, and performance of the songs. For example, when Stratton sang "I May Be Crazy," he adopted the role

of a "negro" horse thief on the run who cannot resist one last meeting with the girl he worshiped but who nevertheless spurned him. MacQueen-Pope later gave an awestruck description of the performance. With the posse on his heels, Stratton ends the song with a violent, hopeless dance of abandon, the music matching the gripping tension as his pursuers, pistols in hand, catch up with him. As they start to drag him away, he wrenches himself around in their grasp "to give one last despairing glance of dumb, stricken grief at the house of his loved one and throw out his arms in mute appeal" (MacQueen-Pope 1950, 414). It may be significant that MacQueen-Pope wrote this account nearly fifty years after seeing Stratton in this dramatic scene. The recording that Stratton made of the song does not tally with this description at all, as Peter Davison (1971, 97) has pointed out: "[I]t jogs along with surprising equanimity. . . . [I]t is more a song of the importunate flirt than the desperate lover." Indeed, when Stratton arrives at the chorus line, "I may be crazy, but I love you," the lilting rhythm's inviting sing-along quality is utterly out of step with the stark melodrama of MacQueen-Pope's recollection.

This sing-along quality is present in the chorus of "Lily of Laguna" as well, which is one reason that it became such a favorite in pub and party singing of the early twentieth century:

She's ma lady love, she is ma dove, ma baby love,
 She's no gal for sittin' down to dream,
 She's de only queen Laguna knows;
 I know she likes me,
 I know she likes me
 Bekase she says so;
 She is de Lily of Laguna, she is ma Lily and ma Rose.
 (Stuart 1898, 4-5)

Stratton began his performance of this song by being discovered, as the curtain rose, sitting on a gate whittling away at a stick, utterly lost in thoughts of love as the orchestra softly played the introduction and then the verse. According to MacQueen-Pope (1950, 412), "when the tension of watching that silent, dreaming figure could hardly be borne, was at breaking point," he would start very softly "to speak his thoughts, intertwined with Stuart's wonderful melody," not so much singing the song as caressing it. As Davison (1971, 95-96) notes, in this case the music appropriately interprets the situation in the song, and although full of sentiment, it avoids the excesses of sentimentality with its light comic touches and distancing of the emotion through the musical detachment and tonal management. This effect needs to be related more broadly to

the blackface context, which thrived on the ambivalence of resemblance and caricature. Audiences knowingly accommodated this ambivalence. A song about parting and loss such as "I May Be Crazy" may have been greeted with a real sense of pathos, even as the dramatic scene of horse thief and posse chase confirmed existing stereotypes. But as attempts to court such emotional responses through minstrelsy steadily diminished after the decline of antislavery songs and abolitionist fervor, other responses came more to the fore. Real pathos was in any case inappropriate in relation to "coon" performances. The many serenading love songs of "coon" ragtime belonged much more to the general comicality of minstrel discourse. In varying degrees, the "coon" love song parodically subverted the Victorian parlor ballad. The parodic effect was derived precisely from the incongruity of the blackface performance, for how could a "coon" buffoon really experience the travails of true romantic love? The absurdity of the notion guaranteed the amusement of the form.

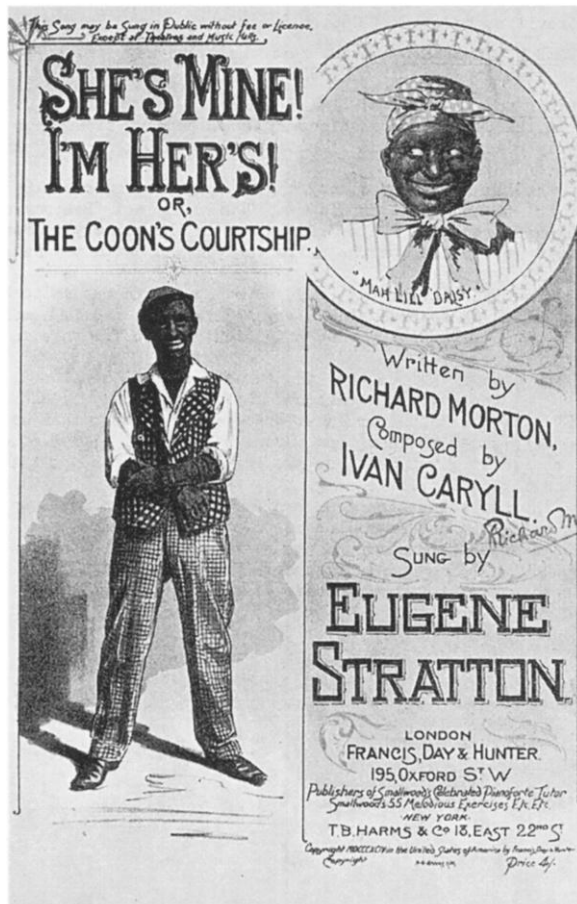
The "Bad Form" of the "Bad Nigger"

The dramatic side of Stratton's "coon" performances also included his delineations of contemporary black stereotypes. His achievement was to hone the "coon" stereotype to a peak of theatrical perfection, so much so that it is claimed he gave "a much more sophisticated and subtle performance than the usual plantation negro types favoured by the nigger minstrels of the period" (Busby 1976, 165). In its obituary of Stratton, *The [London] Times* similarly wrote of "the success of his 'coon' songs and dances" as "the result of shrewd observation and study as well as his own natural gifts" ("Death of Eugene Stratton" 1918). An earlier appraisal offered a rather different view, in which the appeal of verisimilitude was ambivalently weighted against Stratton's parodic artistry: "From him we have had a series of Nigger portraits, sometimes quaint, sometimes romantic, but always artistic and invariably clever" (*Era* 1896). These quotations demonstrate the conflation of realism and theatrical artifice characteristic of minstrelsy, on which it constantly played to its advantage. Thus Stratton, "with his inimitable drawl," was considered to provide "the greatest imitation of a coloured man ever seen on any stage in the world" (Roberts 1927, 201). The lexical choice is revealing, for "imitation" means at once a copy and a counterfeit, simulation and mimicry, reproduction and alteration, with the putative replication always entailing a debasement or cheapening of the "genuine article." Blackface acts pivoted on this duality, this ambiguity in the sense in which they should be taken, their uneasy sliding between realist pretension and comic par-

ody. Judgments of Stratton as a high-profile performer consequently move both ways—between positive assessments of his cultivated theatrical persona and appreciative endorsements of the “authenticity” of his depiction of black men, who were, of course, always reduced to the highly condensed caricatures with which he “graced” the minstrel stage.

Richard Morton, one of Stratton’s chief songwriters, claims that Stratton broke with the senseless, chicken-stealing, iron-headed “nigger” stereotype by portraying a “coon” who was a “self-confident, breathing, eminently practical, vital reality.” He went on: “His wildest caricature is

Figure 7. Cover of sheet music for a Stratton song written by Richard Morton and composed by Ivan Caryll



true to life. Idiosyncrasies remain such, and are not vulgarised into idiosyncy. The 'Dandy Coloured Coon,' inflated individual that he is, always keeps his wits about him and is never at a loss. He sees himself from his own point of view, and he acts up to the standard by which he measures himself. He is arrogant and presumptuous, but his vanity is not insufferable. It is merely amusing" (Morton n.d., 16).

What does seem to have been different was that he relied on individual detail in the studied gestures, demeanor, and costume of the caricature, rather than on the repetition of overused theatrical generalities; however, Morton made the basic error of mistaking the "coon" stereotype for "the actual type of an existent reality, whether he be singing a humorous or pathetic song or merely talking" (17). He wrote that "we," the English, "knew there was some such person in existence 'down South'—the locality being as nebulous as the ideas culled from previous delineators—but his personality was a strange one to us. We did not know our nigger until Stratton showed him to us." (16–17). For Willson Disher (1974, 75), in Stratton's wistful singing of Leslie Stuart's songs, "there was little of the nigger minstrel or the real negro." Another contemporary wrote that "Americans as a rule are dull dogs, but we have made of . . . Eugene Stratton (that very Anglo-Saxon negro) our own property" (Titterton 1912, 214). Here the ambiguities of minstrelsy's representations split in two contrary directions. Morton took them as accurate depictions, whereas Stratton's two other admirers appreciated the representations for their parodic comicality—with the term "Anglo-Saxon negro" intended as an ironic contradiction in terms. These ambiguities are clearly registered in the conflicting accounts and are even found in Morton's own. Alongside his claims for "the actual type," he referred to Stratton's "delineation" of a "stage type." If what Stratton showed was "the speech, the bearing, the laziness, and the grace" of a "live coon," all that was shown, however skillfully, was of course a stereotype with no bearing on "an existent reality" (Morton n.d., 17–18).

One of Eugene Stratton's "genial stories" provides an example of this stereotype. Stratton included stories as well as song and dance in his act, which he delivered in a heavy "nigger" drawl. As Morton put it: "His unctuous niggerisms—'unctuous' is the only adjective to describe the soft, rounded, rolled-together quaintness of the coon dialect—and tricks of intonation, nasal and guttural, give peculiar point to the snappy little anecdotes that he tells us." In "No Names Mentioned," Stratton relied heavily on the racy "coon" stereotype of the late-nineteenth century:

I'm a bad nigger. I allus carries a razor an' a gun. There's somethin' about a razor an' a gun that people object to. For instance, yo' can walk down one

side er the street with a razor an' a gun, an' that side er the street'll b'long ter you. Nobody'll bunk up against yer. I hev jes' bin playin' a game er cards with a lot of other niggers. An' amongst the party there happened ter be a one-eyed nigger. Now, I never did like a one-eyed nigger. There's somethin' crooked about a one-eyed nigger. I wouldn't 'a' cared, only the one-eyed nigger was cheatin' in the game. Well, I wasn't goin' ter let no one-eyed nigger beat me outer my good money. No, indeedy! I got right up an' declared myself in front er everybody. I say, "Excuse me, genelman, fer delayin' the game, but there's some crooked work going on hyar. Now, I knows the party what's doin' the cheatin'! Now, I'm too much ev a genelman ter mention any names, but, if the man don' stop, I'll shoot his other eye out!" (Stratton n.d.a., 25)

With the exception of sexual promiscuity, all the elements of the bad "coon" stereotype were mobilized in this comic tale. Low-life violence, treachery, dishonesty, and greed were accompanied by the shiftless, ne'er-do-well qualities characterized by the gambling at cards in which the razor-wielding bully and his companions indulged.

What was the appeal of such stories to late-nineteenth-century English audiences? Such audiences were not homogeneous of course, and responses would have varied, but the stereotype cannot be explained as "merely amusing." Mere amusement might be said to be confined to the ambiguity of the punch line, which could be taken as evidence of either the astuteness or stupidity of the stereotyped "bad nigger." But as with Stratton's other characters, the appeal presumably lay also in his racy "coon" persona and its correspondence to "an existent reality," however nebulous the connection. The character portrayed in "The Idler," for instance, was reported as being based on a lazy doorkeeper at the telegraph office in Buffalo where Gene had worked as a boy, and he was said to "stamp it with an individuality all his own" (*Era* 1896).

Individuality and stereotypicality are usually counterposed to each other—ironically, Stratton popularized Ernest Hogan's notorious "All Coons Look Alike to Me," and this ragtime song was thereafter always associated with him in Britain—yet the moral that could obviously have been drawn from Stratton's "coon" sketch was the need to distrust and discipline black people. This would have been to draw a "realist" lesson from it, but the appeal of the sketch may have lain just as much in its "bad man" element, stereotypical though it was. Without knowledge of the portrayed stereotypical codings being shared with the audience, the humor of the story would have evaporated. With it, the humor could strengthen the prejudicial imagery that would last long after the jest was forgotten, for the prejudicial imagery would have confirmed the belief that black people were, after all, simply "bad form." The appeal of this

Figure 8. Drawing of Stratton by Alfred Bryan. From *Entr'acte*, January 21, 1893.



and similar stories may well have extended beyond this belief, though, in the attraction of wildness and danger for “good society.” The thrill of enjoying this display of utter “bad form” at a safe distance may have been just as much a part of the pleasure of respectable, middle-class audiences as its confirmation of fear and distrust of a black low-Other and belief in the superiority of white racial character. This view involves approaching the inherent ambivalence of minstrelsy from another angle.

Social respectability, self-discipline, and Christian virtue ran directly

counter to all that was represented in Stratton's story, and it was perhaps this that gave his "coon" caricature its symbolic significance in the contemporary social imagination. In writing of the empire at this time, James Morris (1973, 6) has suggested that it was "as though the British had another people inside themselves . . . who yearned to break out of their sad or prosaic realities." This was precisely the function of the blackface mask for whites imbued with the need for order, sobriety, and civility, for it provided a ritualistic interval and carefully coded license through which this yearning could be accommodated and allowed safe release as an expression of the tabooed "other people inside themselves." Minstrelsy provided an opportunity to indulge in forms of sentimentality and fun that ran against the "prosaic realities" of bourgeois and petty bourgeois social life. This opportunity was of course subject still to the dictates of "good form" among its appreciative audiences, with the possibilities of fantasy and speculative desire conveniently distanced by the spectacle of the minstrel or music-hall stage. But there, scenes, eccentricities, and demonstrativeness were at a premium. A song dedicated to Stratton, called "The Canoodling Charming Coon" (1894) was sung in 1894 by a now relatively unknown, and probably pseudonymous, Miss Madge Merry. Its first verse and chorus mix silly-talking hedonism with self-singing praises:

I've just arrived from Alabama by the Pullman car
express,
And I feel as happy as a kid that isn't born.
The ladies where I come from wear very little dress,
And their Sunday togs they never take to pawn;

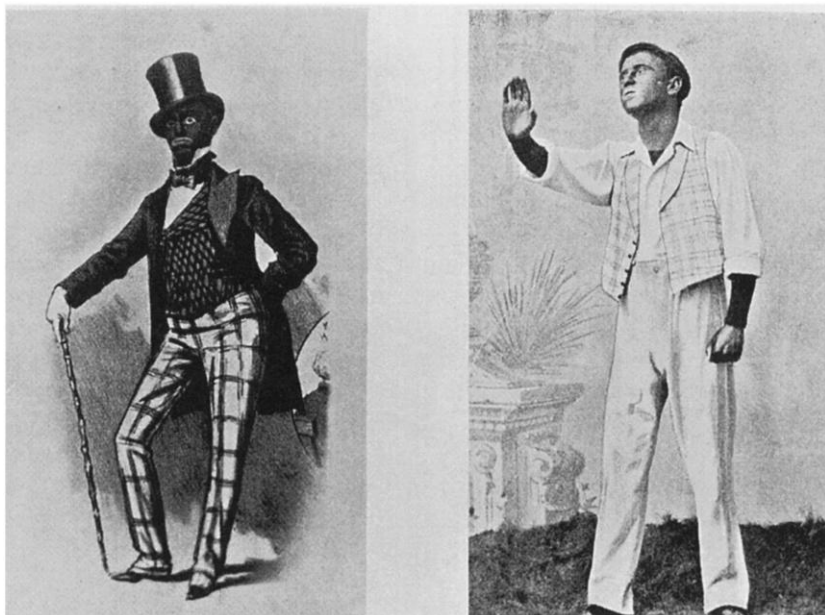
They say I am a darkie, and a credit to the place,
For I'm making love from July until June.
I'm admired by the darlings for my elegance and grace
Because I am a charming coloured coon.

I'm called by all the yaller gals the Charming Coloured Coon,
I mash the pretty darlings on a Sunday afternoon.
There's not a nig in all the world knows better how to spoon
Than this champion copper coloured canoodling charming
coon.

In the social world in which British minstrelsy developed, the superiority of the Victorian civilized order was a largely unquestioned assumption. The alternative make-believe world of the popular theater was but a temporary respite from its necessary, self-generating restraints. Minstrelsy's rite of reversal, shifting the body into a brief ascendancy over the head and allowing the heart a self-indulgent spell of rule, was

perhaps in some ways appreciated because of the racial and cultural status quo that it served, in the end, to affirm. In other ways, however, black-face acts and shows afforded a period of license in which sentimental vaporings, half-formed imaginings, and obliquely perceived alternatives to normative compulsions might have been posed, and perhaps not simply for the sake of dismissal. In its time, minstrelsy symbolically catered to and attempted to contain a taste for cultural "difference." Because it could do neither with any degree of completeness, it cannot simply be judged as escapist. Escapism is in this sense contrary to make-believe. Escapism always carries a pejorative ring, whereas make-believe is open to possibility; it can make us believe, or at least conjecture, and in this sense is compatible with the ambiguity of the term *entertain*. In a fascinating study of masks, A. David Napier (1986, 23–24) has suggested that "a hierarchy of perceptions that is empirically ascertained may be subsumed by an understanding that is not." This was the significance of the blackface mask for the performers and audiences of British minstrelsy. As Nathan Huggins (1971, 254) observed, the "nigger" or "coon" minstrel represented the self that white people "might become—would become—except for those civilising restraints of character and order that kept the

Figure 9. Two representations of Stratton in stage costume



tensions real." Much of the theatrical dynamic of British minstrelsy came from those tensions. The high symbolic visibility of the "coon" in British popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had then nothing to do with its apparent realism, even though this could be accepted in other ways. It had everything to do with living through the "subjective black man," which the "coon" encapsulated: "a black man of lust and passion and natural freedom (licence) which white men carried within themselves and harboured with both fascination and dread" (254; see also Johnson 1968, 328). Images of the black Other in popular culture of the time were, as a composite amalgam, constructed in opposition to everything the British believed themselves to be in their imagined national community. This was true of the potent racism of "coon" and "bully" stereotypes and of the crooning, love-sick paramours of sentimental "coon" ditties in which Stratton also specialized.

The respectable aura of the minstrel show—one increasingly cultivated in the music hall as well—subdued the disruption raised by blackface stereotyping in its discursive strategy of positioning the black low-Other in a status of racial inferiority. The possibility of disruption had nevertheless been announced, condemning the stereotyping to incessant work in order to achieve victory for "good form" in the face of its potential dissolution. The entertainment was to be routinely subsumed by the containment, but this could never be a smooth operation when pinning down the "threat" in the name of certainty also meant unpinning the certainty in the name of the "threat." Minstrelsy was like a hall of distorting magic mirrors in which, temporarily, social and cultural problems, psychic tensions, and conflicts were grotesquely magnified or dissolved and images of self were inverted, reversed, thrown bizarrely out of shape, and then reassuringly restored. This is perhaps to make explicit what was usually latent, but unless one is to say that popular art has no relation to ordinary life and that entertainment is just entertainment and nothing more than harmless fun, then one needs to think in terms of the ways in which staged performances such as Stratton's operated as a sort of symbolic metacommentary on such questions as hierarchical structure, social order, moral institutions, and cultural identity. The metacommentary of "coon" stereotypicality was concerned most fundamentally with the question of identity.

Although the British may have prided themselves on having preceded the United States in the abolition of slavery and outpacing Brother Jonathan in humanitarian philanthropy, abnegation of racial hierarchies and the acceptance of equality of status between black and white ethnic groups were, of course, not part of these achievements. Slavery may have been formally abjured, but other less-extreme forms of subordination

were enjoined on blacks everywhere within the empire, which inevitably involved renunciation of the claim to independent self-consciousness. Although the subordinated ethnic group was fixed as inferior in racial theory and colonial policy and administration, the reference could not be completely stable when self-definition occurred in relation to it. Within imperialist discourse, the constituent features of civility, order, and dominance were never established with absolute security; that which they were established against always posed a potential threat, constituting a necessary ideological counterpart that required the discourse of mastery to negotiate a double jeopardy, a game of risk in which, because repulsion cannot escape the danger of sliding laterally into attraction for the Other, the outcome was never eternally guaranteed. The self-affirmation of national conceit that came with disavowal of the "identity" offered in the "coon" stereotype carried underneath it a hidden freight of anxiety, fear, and discordant desires.

The contradictory black stereotypes of British minstrelsy as a whole signified the deep ambivalence with which the arrested forms of the representation seem to have been viewed. The transvaluation from abolitionist altruism to the high-imperialist cynicism that had come to the fore at the time of Stratton's popularity was a further manifestation of the contrary racial conceptions and criteria of British whites, for wide endorsement of the treatment and repression of colonial blacks coexisted with enjoyment in plantation idylls, Black Mammy and Old Joe characters, and desert-island lyricism. The black Other was either innocent of sin or brutally vicious, a cotton-eyed "coon" singing blithely to "der moon" or a razor-toting, gun-slinging "bad nigger." Stratton regaled his audiences with all of these contradictory stereotypical manifestations, catalyzing the vacillating movement between power and pleasure, dread and desire, that was central to blackface fantasies. In so doing, he made symbolically visible for his British audiences what was otherwise evaded or concealed "inside themselves" and acted this out ritualistically on the public stage—although of course (and quite crucially) it was done in the form of a discriminatory knowledge that attempted, out of self-protection, to fix the black antithetically, in a process of projective identification, so that aspects of self were imagined as located in an external, degenerate, or happily sentimentalized group.

Otherness exists only to define self. Stratton's various "coon" personae were a means by which a cultural unconscious could reoccupy the stage and could be staged. The taste of freedom and release offered by minstrelsy was inevitably outweighed by the need for assurance, compromise, and reassertion of the norms and codes of respectability, but the pleasures of minstrelsy were not inevitably confined to this reduction of

tension. British minstrelsy's comic and sentimental representations made blacks utterly familiar where empirically they were relatively unknown, but it was exactly these familiarized images, for which contemporary audiences had an obsessive interest, that signified the audiences' conflicting oscillations between fear and delight, anxiety and gratification. Black stereotypicality could not, however, succeed absolutely in its objective of constructing an arrested mode of representation; not only did it lack sufficient intentionality or control over intercessions against the relations on which it was based, but the stereotypes themselves were never uniform and could be taken up in contradictory ways. The aspects of self that were projected onto the black in the elevation of a masterly self-conception and in the regulation of desires within the social and imperial order can then be said more precisely to have been repressive, because the ambivalences of blackface minstrelsy rested on a symbolic exchange between the poles of perceived qualities and the lack of those qualities. This exchange required the channeling of libidinal energies into prescribed molds and the annulment of certain alternative forms of cultural creativity and pleasure—processes affirmed but at the same time always potentially threatened by those alternatives despite the active effort to marginalize and incorporate them. It is in this sense that minstrelsy historically spoke to, informed, and supported a bourgeois worldview and an imperial view of the world.³

3. For a catalog of many of Stratton's songs, see Kilgariff (1998, 349–350). For the relation between white bourgeois values and black people in New York during the early ragtime period, see Erenberg (1981), and for a broader overview, see Middleton (2000). It should perhaps be emphasized that, in the period covered by this article, the term ragtime was used both with an elasticity of reference and more than a slight confusion of meaning. It was often used rather imprecisely and was certainly used to cover more than instrumental music. It may be said that we now associate the term more with instrumental music than with song and dance, partly because "classic" ragtime is commonly related to written piano music, as for instance in the piano rags of Scott Joplin or James Scott, and partly because of the rapidity with which ragtime became notated and published as a literate form of music, with its accompanying standardization and the imposition of a more constricted syncopation. But these associations are the products of historical accretion, and they tend to obscure from view the broader relations of the term with other forms and practices, however messy and imprecise these might have been, in the period with which I am concerned. It is these broader relations that are invoked in my reference to early ragtime.

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