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## African-American Comedians and Blackface: Struggle against Racism

by Aneela Ahmed

(English 1102)

Racism is a prejudice or an animosity against a person or group of people who belong to a different race. It has been a major issue in the United States for centuries, and different races have been through this problem, including African-Americans. White Americans were given more privileges and rights than African-Americans. Most African-Americans are the descendants of black African slaves forcibly brought to and held captive in the United States. Those slaves were mocked by white Americans as foolish, lazy and illiterate people. During the course of the nineteenth century, a popular form of entertainment was developed based on cross-race impersonation: blackface “delineation,” or minstrelsy. Blackface minstrelsy,<sup>1</sup> presented by white Americans, showed their discrimination against blacks. Later on, some black comedians entered into the blackface, and tried to change world’s perception about them.

In any culture, comedians serve complicated functions as both entertainers and social critics. White people had a common belief that black people were “happier in slavery than they would be free” (Byrd 79). For African-American comedians, this has been further complicated by the burden of American racism and the historical legacy of racial comedy in this culture. Racially grounded humor has been both a means of denigrating black people, reinforcing their degradation and justifying their oppression by white society, and a repository of folk wisdom, a popular tradition of criticism and self-criticism, and a means by which black people could affirm and enjoy their own view of the world. Black comedians have derived much of their humor from the unstable balance between these two tendencies.

African-American comedy as a professional genre originated with blackface minstrelsy, which remained the province of white performers until around the time of the Civil War. The stock characters of blackface minstrelsy have played a significant role in disseminating racist images, attitudes and perceptions worldwide. Every immigrant group was stereotyped on the music hall stage during the nineteenth century, but the history of prejudice, hostility and ignorance toward black people has insured a unique longevity to the stereotypes. White Americans’ conceptions of black entertainers were shaped by minstrelsy’s mocking caricatures, and for over one hundred years the belief that blacks were racially and socially inferior was fostered by legions of white performers in blackface. Mel Watkins in his book, *On The Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* states that, “The Negro characters represented were most often portrayed as thieves, reprobates, servants, or amoral brutes; they were usually no more than incidental comic foils” (184). These shows featured a variety of jokes, songs, dances and skits that were based on the ugliest stereotypes of African American slaves.

African-American comedians took their position when the mounting frustration over racial injustice finally came to a head with the mass organization of the civil rights struggle in the South and across the nation. Constance Bailey, in her article, “Fight the Power: African American Humor as a Discourse of Resistance,” states that “The history of Africans on stage is illustrative because it establishes the black comic as part of a trajectory of black performers who have historically been objectified. The television and theatre become the site where psychological violence against blacks continues to be enacted” (256). Those performances provoked a great deal of anger among African-American audiences.

Several black comedians came into prominence in the early nineteenth century. The main driving force for them was not just to entertain people or to earn money, but to show the world who blacks really were. Leon Rappoport in his book, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, & Gender Humor*, confesses that “Jews and African-Americans have in common...centuries of oppression and...a more or less successful struggle against prejudice” (82). During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there were a number of minstrel troupes made up entirely of African American performers. They also put on blackface makeup while performing in minstrelsy. As one of them put it, if they wanted to be popular, they had no choice but to imitate the white minstrels’ imitation of blacks.

A few popular black performers of blackface were William Henry, Ernest Hogan, Billy Kersands, Bob Cole and Bert Williams (Watkins 168). William Henry Lane was born a free black man in Rhode Island in 1825, and began his career as a performer in minstrel shows. He played the banjo and the tambourine. Ernest Hogan was the first African-American entertainer to produce and star in blackface. Billy Kersands was a blackface minstrel and a vaudeville performer who was known for his comedy, dancing, singing, and musical performances. Bob Cole was an African-American lyricist, composer and vaudeville performer. He was one of the first blacks to become part of white musical entertainment in blackface. Bert Williams is remembered today not only for his comic gifts, but also as a man whose life was a struggle against racial prejudice.

Blackface minstrelsy originated in England, which then travelled to America (Rosset 424). This American representation of the Negro’s life had the purpose of enlightening the audience on the wider concern of slavery. Three men, Thomas Rice, Dan Emmett and E.P. Christy are generally recognized as founders of blackface minstrelsy. Blackface makeup was either a layer of burnt cork on a layer of coca butter or black grease paint. In the United States, white actors had the advantage of having seen actual black performer slaves. Later on, many black performers became an integral part of it; however, white audiences in the nineteenth century wouldn’t accept real black entertainers on stage unless they performed in blackface makeup. Blackface performers were to depict a true copy of the ups and downs of the Negro’s life. They not only played a significant role in cementing and proliferating racist images, attitudes, and perceptions worldwide, but also in popularizing black culture. It was through blackface minstrelsy that African American performers first entered the mainstream of American show business.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup>The minstrel show or minstrelsy, commonly known as blackface, was an American form of entertainment developed in the nineteenth century of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music, performed by white people in blackface or, especially after the U.S. Civil War, by black people. Minstrel shows lampooned black people as foolish, lazy, ridiculous, superstitious, happy-go-lucky and musical. The minstrel show began in the early 1830s and emerged as a full-fledged form in the next decade. By 1848, blackface minstrel shows were the national art form, translating formal art such as opera into popular terms for a general audience. The minstrel show was at its peak from 1850 to 1870, but passed with the coming of vaudeville, motion pictures, and radio.

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