

A Darkened Past: The Role of Blackface Minstrelsy in Forming the Columbia Community

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11 May 2018



Black characters performed on the American stage long before black actors could. As early as 1751, white actors feigned blackness by applying a darkening substance to their faces, a practice today known as blackface.¹ The inception of this tradition was not the product of any particular genre's increasing popularity, and most blackface characters had no significant contribution to the storyline. Rather, as historian Dave Cockrell asserts, they were "servants who acted like servants; often they were mute or near-mute roles."² Those that did have speaking parts often were confined to two traditional roles as a comic or tragic figure, depending on the nature of the play they appeared in. While variations in character traits existed, "in almost all cases, blackness was a way of signaling 'intruder' or 'interloper' to the audience."³ It is out of this tradition of crafting the black identity as inferior that the minstrel show emerges.

Minstrel shows incontrovertibly became one of the United States' most beloved forms of entertainment. As a professional performance, the minstrel show "fashioned a romantic and sentimental recreation of a plantation experience that never existed."⁴ While the professional show enveloped a large part of the nation with its depiction of black people as racially inferior, the amateur minstrel show disseminated this practice to an even wider audience. Unlike the traditional minstrel show aimed at the white working class, the amateur show became a favorite pastime of middle class Americans. In the age of industrialization and rising consumerism at the beginning of the twentieth century, "amateur minstrels cared deeply about their middle-class positions and worked to identify the middle class as racialized and consuming."⁵ In order to affirm their identity in a shifting social landscape, white middle class people relied on the racist

¹ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*, pg 26.

² Id., pg. 26.

³ Id., pg. 27.

⁴ Richard Kislán, *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theater*, pg. 19.

⁵ Susan Smulyan, *Popular Ideologies: Mass Culture at Mid-century*, pg 31.

stereotypes and derogatory depictions suggesting the racial inferiority of black people that characterized amateur minstrel shows. Through guidebooks outlining the necessary steps to produce a show, amateur minstrelsy became “a simple activity, and that simplicity quickly gave the middle-class white person a chance to cross boundaries and investigate the construction of racial categories.”⁶ As a result, nearly anyone with access to one of the countless amateur guidebooks could stage a show. Participation in a show was open to anyone, from high school students to “local elites [who] showed that they were good sports, with secure places in the community, by blacking up and acting foolish.”⁷ Thus, a movement to define middle class America through the amateur minstrel show began.

At the heart of the amateur minstrel show movement were male college students. Similar to the interests of the rest of white America, the collegiate proclivity for minstrel shows was primarily motivated by a desire to claim a place in the imminent formation of a nationwide middle class identity. Historian Susan Smulyan argues “college students, with their ongoing investment in the status hierarchy, early used minstrel shows ideologically to express and construct a middle class-consciousness.”⁸ This middle class identity, which strove to appear refined and educated, closely aligned with the enterprise of liberal arts institutions like Columbia. Yet minstrelsy also satiated a separate impulse to entertain and be entertained. Unlike other forms of middle and upper class entertainment, “minstrel dancing avoided the polite and restrained steps of social dances in favor of the free and open movements of a liberated face and body.”⁹ In essence, college aged students were free to act absurdly with their companions

⁶ Id., pg. 21.

⁷ Id., pg. 21.

⁸ Id., pg. 34.

⁹ Richard Kislak, *The Musical*, pg. 31.

onstage, while remaining within the confines of a culturally sanctioned form of entertainment. Participating in a minstrel show was an even more worthwhile endeavor for a college male given the typical audience. As a result of its widespread cultural acceptance, “blackening up allowed the students to show that they had learned to be ‘easy’ with their status and proved that they could provide genteel entertainment acceptable for women.”¹⁰ Minstrel shows further enticed men as a form of simultaneously fraternizing with male peers, while appealing to women in the audience. Thus, college men capitalized on this mechanism of entering into the prevailing middle class culture, while still enjoying the liberties of student life.

Columbia Student Organizations Within the Tradition of the Amateur Minstrel Show

In line with the national phenomenon, blackface performances at Columbia crafted a tradition of racially influenced social gatherings by students. Though minstrel entertainment may occupy a more extensive, yet uncovered or forgotten place in Columbia’s history, the timeline of this tradition begins in 1878, if not earlier. What records do illuminate about this longstanding tradition is its form and purpose as white entertainment, its participants who shaped and sustained it, and its influence on the Columbia community’s identity for decades. Various student clubs and organizations utilized these shows to bring together their own constituents for social or financial purposes. The legacy of minstrelsy was not limited to insular groups, however, as the tradition of blackface permeated through campus traditions. Thus, the legacy of minstrelsy in America is a fundamental part of the legacy of Columbia.

The Form of the Columbia Minstrel Show

¹⁰ Susan Smulyan, *Popular Ideologies*, pg 23.

In the minstrel show, blackface was the central element of a performer's costume. Their darkened skin made their already doltish actions even more susceptible to ridicule by nature of their assumed racial inferiority. Thus, to bolster their comic appeal, student minstrel performers feigned blackness onstage to the best of their ability. According to one *Columbia Daily Spectator* article, this led students were disguised to be "as black and unrecognizable as burnt cork and vaseline could make them."¹¹ Columbia students attending campus minstrel shows considered the sight of their white peers as black impersonators an entertaining spectacle. In a review of the minstrel performance staged as the opening act of the 1914 Soph Show, a Columbia tradition discussed later in this paper, a *Spectator* contributing writer cites the experience of witnessing his fellow classmates in blackface as one of the show's primary successes, stating "it was hard to believe that one's friends on the Campus who are met every day ... could be so easily transformed into a blackened (and polished, too) group of original fun-producers worthy of Lew Dockstader himself."¹² The polished appearance of his classmates in blackface elevates the experience of viewing the amateur performance to that of a professional show. The allusion to the famous New York minstrel performer Lew Dockstader is even more striking given the fact that one hundred and fifty Columbia undergraduates actually travelled to his theater to witness his professional show just three decades prior, on December 22, 1886.¹³ Through amateur shows staged by student performers, fellow Columbians could partake in the tradition of minstrelsy at a community level, with blackface at the heart of the experience. Performances often advertised

¹¹ "Ninety-five Minstrel Show," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XXXII, Number 3, 23 March 1893.

¹² "Soph Show Justifies a Continued Existence - Minstrel Show Screamingly Funny and Original 'Suspended Animation' Ends with a Vim - Work of the Cast Praised." *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 60 - 4 December 1914.

¹³ "About College," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XIX, Number 5 - December 22, 1886.

the use of blackface to generate student enthusiasm, including the November 10, 1911 Teacher's College show, stating "forty Whittier girls, all of whom will be blackened up, are to take part in choruses, special stunts, and all that goes with an up-to-date minstrel show" in "what promises to be one of the most unique affairs of the year."¹⁴ A recap of the show highlighted the performers' appearance in the title, "Teacher's Entertain Friends with Aid of Burnt Cork."¹⁵ Thus, blackface as the predominant component of minstrel costumes lent credibility to the amateur performers, enhancing the viewer's experience and adding an air of excitement to the occasions.

In addition to darkening their skin through blackface, minstrel performers also donned garish outfits. Bright and exaggerated clothing was another important aspect of the minstrel's comic appeal, as it accentuated the ludicrous actions carried out by its owner throughout the performance. One description of the "iridescent suit" worn by the Interlocutor of a 1914 show reconstructs the outfits worn by Columbia minstrel performers. This performer, who is also noted as the president of the class of 1917, wore a suit of "a vivid lavender, trimmed with orange collars and cuffs—a broad stripe of blood-orange satin adorned the sides of an otherwise recalcitrant pair of trousers—a freshly-starched collar of enormous size with its ends flapping away violently in a pretended breeze, was all we could see."¹⁶ The costumes of the same show's chorus were equally hailed by student reviewers for their "the psychological effect."¹⁷ Through

¹⁴ "Teachers College," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LV, Number 36, 8 November 1911, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19111108-01.2.11&srpos=11&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

¹⁵ "Teacher's Entertain Friends with Aid of Burnt Cork," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LV, Number 39, 11 November 1911, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19111111-01.2.19&srpos=12&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

¹⁶ "Soph Show Justifies a Continued Existence - Minstrel Show Screamingly Funny and Original 'Suspended Animation' Ends with a Vim - Work of the Cast Praised." *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 60, December 4, 1914.

¹⁷ Id.

cockamamie outfits such as this, students created an exaggerated caricature of black identity for the purpose of ensuring their stage character was an object of ridicule. They would only willingly subject themselves to such mockery under the guise of a black person, however; this particular interlocutor was the class president, after all. With a darkened face, and a brightened and distorted body, the Columbia minstrel was ready to perform.

In addition to the performers' appearances, the content of minstrel shows at Columbia demonstrates how the amateur minstrel tradition as a form of entertainment catered to the Columbia community. In some ways, shows staged by Columbia students were identical to the countless other minstrel shows that occurred across the country at the same time. For performances, "11 singers, sat in a semi-circle on the stage," which was the traditional stage formation of any minstrel group.¹⁸ In this formation, Columbia students performed many overtly racist songs. A review of the opening night for the 1914 Soph Show lists a traditional minstrel song as one of the favorites of the night, stating "who could not enjoy the sweet and sympathetic rendering of 'Pickaniny Babe,' by our own Charlie Day?"¹⁹ Among the lyrics of this well-known song are "come and lay your kinky head upon old mammy's breast, you is my baby, my pride and joy... sandman he am comin' for you soon, comin' for my angel child, my pickanniny coon."²⁰ Thus, inherently derogatory songs were the hallmark of minstrel shows, and students showed visible signs of approval. Yet shows also sought to integrate familiar content into the more traditional forms minstrel entertainment. One performance from February 8, 1889 by the

¹⁸ "Columbia College Minstrels," New York Times, May 1, 1878,

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1878/05/01/80375517.pdf>

¹⁹ "Soph Show Justifies a Continued Existence," *Columbia Daily Spectator*.

²⁰ "Ma Pickanniny Babe," written by Will Oakland. Provided by UCSB Cylinder Audio Archive, <http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/search.php?queryType=@attr+1=1020&num=1&start=1&query=cylinder0456>

Baseball Association sought to garner student enthusiasm by promising that “the jokes and gags will be personal in character and will appeal to college men.”²¹ Original jokes and songs were often combined with more traditional content in amateur minstrel shows. Smulyan claims this tactic was utilized in order to fill “a gap as mass culture became more impersonal and audiences became part of a national audience, rather than local groups.”²² Thus, songs reflecting the tradition of Columbia College like “where, oh where are the sophomores,” were performed seamlessly amongst other songs titled “Three Little Darkies” and “The Charcoal Man.”²³ Evidently, both genres generated a sense of pride amongst the receptive audience. Another minstrel performance concluded as the chorus sang “‘Cheer for '17,’ the official class song and a good minstrel-show was over.”²⁴ Thus, the camaraderie students experienced through traditional campus songs was of the same nature as ballads espousing notions of the racial inferiority of black people. Through the interlacing of derogatory slurs and traditional school chants, Columbia men bonded over their shared identities as white middle class men and Columbia students.

The Performers and Their Audience

The amateur minstrel show was a common form of student entertainment because of its adaptable form; nearly anyone could stage a show. For that reason, student groups of all kinds staged shows to entertain their peers. Performing arts groups like the Glee Club, Banjo Club, and College Orchestra, were the most frequent students to pose as minstrel entertainers. The Glee Club is among Columbia’s earliest college performing groups to stage a minstrel show on April

²¹ “The Minstrels,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XXIII, Number 9, February 21, 1889, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs18890221-01.2.15&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

²² Susan Smulyan, *Popular Ideologies*, pg 26.

²³ “*Columbia College Minstrels*,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1878, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1878/05/01/80375517.pdf>

²⁴ “Soph Show Justifies a Continued Existence,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*.

1, 1878 at Carnegie Hall.²⁵ Another pioneering student performing arts group was the Musical Society, in a December 21, 1892 show. An advertisement for the show in the *Daily Spectator* guarantees a sensational performance, “the like of which has never been given by any college society since college societies sprang into existence.”²⁶ This announcement demonstrates a noticeable level of student enthusiasm towards minstrelsy on campus at an early date. Countless non-performing arts groups channeled this enthusiasm through their own performance, most often to serve social functions. The Cosmopolitan Club hosted a “United States Night,” as part of a series of “national entertainments” in 1914.²⁷ In developing the program for the event, forty-five American members of the club elected to include a minstrel show as one the features meant “to represent many typical phases of American life.”²⁸ Thus, minstrelsy as a commonplace tradition in the United States was easily applied to serve a more insular Columbia community.

Columbia College students did not cease their production of minstrel shows upon graduation. One way alumni of the College maintained ties to their alma mater was through participation in amateur minstrel performances. Perhaps the most direct link between students and alumni through minstrelsy occurred at an amateur show staged at the Columbia Club on April 25, 1908. At their smoker night event, the Club invited the Varsity Crew to partake in a joint performance of club members and the Columbia University Glee Club. Attendance at the

²⁵ “*Columbia College Minstrels*,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1878,

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1878/05/01/80375517.pdf>

²⁶ “The Minstrel Show,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XXXI, Number 6, December 15, 1892 <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs18921215-01.2.57&srpos=43&e=-----en-20--41--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

²⁷ Cosmopolitan Club to Hold “U.S. Night,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVII, Number 111, 7 February 1914. <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19140227-01.2.9&srpos=49&e=-----en-20--41--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

²⁸ *Id.*

event was strongly encouraged, as a spectator announcement states “all club members are expected to contribute to the success of the affair by their presence.”²⁹ The interactive nature of the amateur minstrel show through audience participation was being utilized in this event to connect varying members of the Columbia community who share in the middle to upper class, white, male identity. This event was dubbed “the most successful entertainment ever given at the Columbia University Club” by the Columbia University Quarterly.³⁰ The success of the event was not a product of the Columbia students from the Glee Club slated to perform, however, as they reportedly did not appear at the event. Their unanticipated absence was condemned by students and alumni alike, as the Spectator article “Where was the Glee Club” asserted that “comment among the alumni, it need hardly be said, was not the kind that any Columbia man likes to hear, and the incident has done much to place the Glee Club in disfavor among the graduates.”³¹ The minstrel show, as an inherently collaborative effort, was meant to establish camaraderie between current and former Columbia men who reveled in its white, chauvinistic entertainment. Thus, their no-show at the event was a taint on their identity as Columbia men. Nevertheless, despite the lack of student participation, alumni and crew members found that “the entertainment, which was of a most informal character, was especially pleasing on account of the

²⁹ “Graduate Smoker for Crews Tonight,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LI, Number 158, 25 April 1908, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19080425-01.2.8&srpos=17&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

³⁰ “Columbia University Club,” *Columbia University Quarterly*, Volume X: 1907-1908. https://books.google.com/books?id=EEQjAQAAIAAJ&pg=PA401&lpg=PA401&dq=Columbia+College+columbia+university+minstrel+show&source=bl&ots=VtbcOq3_p&sig=MWvTWjjA5utTjxrWnt6xmjqAWPM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiX84TS7NDaAhUtlkKHc06BO8Q6AEwC3oECAAQcQ#v=onepage&q=Columbia%20College%20columbia%20university%20minstrel%20show&f=false

³¹ “Where was the Glee Club” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LI, Number 159, 27 April 1908, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19080427-01.2.13&srpos=13&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

large participation of club members,” leading to a consensus that “for future smoking concerts the club membership rather than professional talent can be drawn upon.”³² If traditional minstrel shows had been staged at the Club at prior smoker shows, as this statement would suggest, the amateur show was superior given the club members’ enthusiastic participation. Thus, amateur minstrel shows engaged Columbia men beyond their time as students, suggesting a rich tradition of minstrelsy that united a vast Columbia community.

While inclusion in the undergraduate community was limited to men, female students still manage to partake in Columbia’s minstrel tradition. Perhaps the most remarkable contribution made by Columbia women was the Teachers College minstrel show of November 10, 1911. This entirely female-run show was considered to be “one of the most unique affairs of the year,” in male dominated form of entertainment.³³ Their gender did not bar the success of their event, however, as “the audience completely filled the main floor and was appreciative of the girls' efforts, which served to put the performers at their ease immediately.”³⁴ Later female residents of Teachers College’s Whittier Hall also staged an event in 1918 of similar success, in which “everyone from orchestra to stage hands joined in the chorus of the darky songs.”³⁵ The minstrel tradition was so widespread at Columbia that women were granted an active role, even

³² “Columbia University Club,” [Columbia University Quarterly](#).

³³ “Teachers College,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LV, Number 36, 8 November 1911, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19111108-01.2.11&srpos=11&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

³⁴ “TEACHERS ENTERTAIN FRIENDS With Aid of Burnt Cork,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LV, Number 39, 11 November 1911, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19111111-01.2.19&srpos=12&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

³⁵ “Fair Dormites Perform,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLI, Number 83, 18 February 1918, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19180218-01.2.14&srpos=9&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

at a time when their involvement as performers in other performing arts traditions like the Varsity Show was prohibited.

While female students at Teachers College exercised a significant level of agency in these instances, women at Columbia more often occupied the seats, rather than the stage. Historian Susan Smulyan asserts that this more conventional role for women as members of the audience was one of the primary motivators for college men to stage amateur minstrel shows. She argues that “camaraderie and a chance to meet the opposite sex remained at the heart of all amateur theatricals and proved an important factor in the choice to present a minstrel show rather than something else since minstrel shows involved simple performances requiring minimal rehearsal and thus allowed more time for socializing than more complex productions.”³⁶ In the April 31, 1878 show, it was noted that “the little theatre was about two-thirds full, and the audience was mainly composed of ladies.”³⁷ A New York Times report of a performance for the Columbia College Baseball Association staged on February 9, 1889 even provides a list of the “ladies present.”³⁸ The reliance on blackness as a pejorative source of entertainment, as well as a forum for the creation of otherness further demonstrates how the male student population at Columbia relied on racism to foster a community amongst themselves, as well as with women. Nevertheless, the wide scope of students and alumni performing and observing shows demonstrates how the Columbia identity was truly influenced by the minstrel show, as virtually any member of the Columbia community could partake in the fun in some capacity.

³⁶ Susan Smulyan, *Popular Ideologies*, pg. 23.

³⁷ “Columbia College Minstrels,” *the New York Times*.

³⁸ “Minstrels Who Play Ball,” *the New York Times*, February 9, 1889,
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1889/02/09/106338200.pdf>

In addition to uniting current and past students in their shared white middle to upper class identity, minstrel shows also served a more tangible purpose as fundraisers. Collecting funds was a hallmark of the amateur minstrel show across the country, demonstrated in one amateur guide book written by Arthur LeRoy Kaser, a renowned amateur minstrel show author. In one guide, Kaser assures that “putting on a show . . . remains one of the surest methods of raising funds for almost anything.”³⁹ While the proceeds of amateur minstrel shows were most often given to charitable organizations, Columbia minstrel shows benefited athletic teams above all other student organizations. This meant that performing student groups coordinated with athletic groups to put on a show, further exemplifying that shows developed a more unified College community from planning to performing. In a show staged by the Columbia College Glee Club on April 31, 1878, the crew team received the total amount collected of three hundred dollars for the purpose of sending a boat to the Henley Regatta.⁴⁰ A February 8, 1889 show occurred to provide funding for the Base-Ball Association, in which student organizers hoped “that all Columbia men [would] lend their aid, financial and moral, to clear the Nine from debt.”⁴¹ This performance was a similar collaboration of performing student groups, including the Glee, Banjo and Guitar clubs, as well as the Columbia College Orchestra which made its first public performance towards the end of the show.⁴² According to a *Columbia Daily Spectator* review

³⁹ Susan Smulyan, *Popular Ideologies*, pg. 33.

⁴⁰ “Columbia College Minstrels,” *the New York Times*.

⁴¹ “The Minstrels,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XXIII, Number 8, February 7, 1889, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs18890207-01&e=-----en-20--41--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

⁴² “Minstrels Who Play Ball,” *the New York Times*.

following the performance, a comfortable sum was also raised in aid of the Baseball association, just as Kaser promised amateur performers everywhere.⁴³

The Formation of a Columbia Identity through Campus Traditions – The Soph Show

Amateur minstrelsy garnered such a high level of student enthusiasm that it spurred the development of one of the College's beloved traditions: *the Soph Show*. While its composition changed in different iterations, *the Soph Show* started as an annual minstrel show produced by amateur performers in their sophomore year at Columbia. The 1893 Soph Show staged by the class of 1895 illuminates the tradition's character in its early stages. In accordance with most amateur minstrel shows, the Columbia sophomores performed in full blackface. Under the guise of black people, the all-white cast of sophomores would entertain fellow students through imbecilic songs and dancing, while delivering racially charged jokes depicting black people's identity as racially inferior. In response to these jokes, "the audience was most appreciative and even laughed when one of the end men told how he was employed scattering tomatoes on the railroad track, to make late trains ketchup."⁴⁴ The components of the performance expressed in this article demonstrate the Soph Show's inherent identity as an amateur minstrel show in its truest form: a showcasing of comedic stunts performed by white students depicted as racist caricatures of black people.

This annual minstrel show expanded in 1894 through the inclusion of additional acts to the minstrel show. Under the guidance of a joint committee from the Class of 1896 Colleges of Arts and Mines, it was decided that "instead of the conventional minstrel show they propose to

⁴³ "The Minstrels" *Columbia Daily Spectator*, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs18890221-01.2.15&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁴⁴Id.

substitute a unique three-act musical farce, sparkling with wit and full of ludicrous incidents.”⁴⁵

As a result of this innovation, the Soph Show expanded its influence as a campus tradition, and it became “the duty of every Columbia man to support this entertainment,” according to one student writer.⁴⁶ Despite the inclusion of new acts, the show’s minstrel elements guaranteed student commitment to the tradition. In its positive review of the 1899 Soph Show, the *Spectator* qualifies its approval in stating “the class song introduced in the second act, though sung well, is really scarcely worth the doing, but Spencer's coon song is bound to be one of the features of the play.”⁴⁷ The new elements of the show were almost superfluous entertainment for a student body far more eager to witness the minstrel show. The notions of white superiority propagated by the act clearly resonated with the white, middle class Columbia students. The 1901 show two years later demonstrated similar favoritism towards the minstrel show, which acted “as a curtain-raiser and made quite a hit.”⁴⁸ As the opening act, the minstrel show ushered in the identity formation students would partake in year after year, as the annual show became tradition. Student organizers acknowledged how integral minstrelsy was to this tradition by opting to include the opening minstrel act in a performance in Yonkers staged a month later. Committee organizers considered removing the opening act to potentially lower production costs, yet “the minstrel

⁴⁵ “‘96 Entertainment,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XXXIII, Number 5 – December 20, 1893, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs18931220-01&e=-----en-20--41--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

⁴⁶ Id.

⁴⁷ “SOPH SHOW A SUCCESS,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLIII, Number 19 – December 12, 1899 <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs18991212-01.2.2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁴⁸ “Soph Show Last Night,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLV, Number 22, 20 December 1901, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19011220-01&e=-----en-20--41--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

show proved so popular that it [would] be taken to Yonkers, and probably elsewhere also.”⁴⁹ The inclusion of the minstrel performance proved to be an astute decision; the opening act was such a hit that “when the curtain rose on the ‘Arabian Nights,’ the audience was entirely in sympathy with the men.”⁵⁰ Through the enthusiasm expressed by student organizers and the audience alike, the minstrel act remained the seminal aspect of this campus tradition

Given its widespread status as an annual performance, the Soph Show required a great deal of organization. Rehearsals were held frequently, and could require cast members to attend nightly practice leading up to the performance.⁵¹ The *Spectator* provided public updates on the productions’ preparedness, including cast attendance. The 1914 Soph Show staged by the class of 1917 was reprimanded for inadequate preparation in a November 20th, 1914 article titled “Soph Fails to Report at Rehearsal.” Organizers beseeched performers to attend practice, stating “if the show is to be produced at all, the men must be on hand at every rehearsal.”⁵² Given the legacy of the Soph Show as an integral campus tradition, public notice of inadequate preparation to the point of potential cancellation could entice classmates’ cooperation. The same cast was admonished just five days later in yet another article titled “Work Ahead for 1917 Soph Show: Minstrels Need Practice,” stating that “some of the minstrels in the circle have fallen quite a

⁴⁹ “Soph. Show Arrangements,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLV, Number 23, 7 January 1902, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/columbia?a=d&d=cs19020107-01.2.5&srpos=16&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

⁵⁰ “Soph Show at Yonkers,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLV, Number 26, 17 January 1902. <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19020117-01.2.17&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁵¹ “Soph Show Thursday,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLV, Number 21, 17 December 1901, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19011217-01&e=-----en-20--41--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

⁵² “Soph Fails to Report at Rehearsal,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 51 – 20 November 1914, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19141120-01.2.40&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

distance behind owing to absence and only by hard work can it be made up.”⁵³ If performers were not adequately prepared, they were urged to honor their commitment to the show over other extracurricular activities, evidenced by the same article’s declaration that “football practice and the like will not be accepted hereafter as an excuse for not reporting or for being late to the Soph Show rehearsals.”⁵⁴ With the approval of the entire student body and the legacy of *the Soph Show* at stake, performers and organizers were meant to be fully invested in the show’s success. Thus, despite the fatuous nature of the show itself, its production was taken seriously through extensive organization and preparation.

The great lengths student organizers and performers went through to produce the Soph Show was often validated through glowing praise from the Columbia community. This is evident in the accolades bestowed upon the class of 1917 performance in the *Spectator* following the show. The overwhelmingly positive reception of the 1914 Soph Show is primarily a result of its successful opening act: the minstrel show. A review of opening night enthusiastically asserts the show’s success through its extensive title “Soph Show Justifies a Continued Existence - Minstrel Show Screamingly Funny and Original.”⁵⁵ This multi-page spread is dedicated almost entirely to highlighting each successful element of the minstrel show, limiting his commentary on the actual play to the terse statement “of the one-act sketch, "Suspended Animation" — we want to say a

⁵³ “WORK AHEAD FOR 1917 SHOW: Minstrels Need Practice,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 55, 25 November 1914, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19141125-01.2.3&srpos=30&e=-----en-20--21--txt-txIN-Soph+Show+1917----->

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ “Soph Show Justifies a Continued Existence - Minstrel Show Screamingly Funny and Original ‘Suspended Animation’ Ends with a Vim – Work of the Cast Praised,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 60, 4 December 1914, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19141204-01&e=-----en-20--41--txt-txIN-minstrel----->

lot of complimentary things but our space is gone.”⁵⁶ The show clearly owes its positive review on behalf of this author to the minstrel show. This critic is not alone, however, as the minstrel act was acclaimed a success in every review that year. The next article to recount the show states “the entertainment furnished by the minstrels was excellent, the audience being constantly convulsed with laughter because of the antics of the four end men.”⁵⁷ Only one review criticizes any aspect of the Soph Show, stating that the performers’ “work in places showed the effects of cutting rehearsals in favor of football practice and other worldly diversions.”⁵⁸ Yet even in this singular critique of the production, the author commends the minstrel show, stating “we had sharpened all our deadly weapons of satire, irony, sarcasm, and pungent humor for use against ‘deah old '17,’ but our first sight of the end-men in motley disarmed our wrath and made a foe a friend.”⁵⁹ Though used ironically, the critic’s genial sentiments towards his blackface peers in the minstrel show were real. Through the Soph Show’s minstrel act, Columbia students crafted an annual tradition meant to affirm their common identity as white, affluent males. This bonding experience relied on white students morphing black bodies to juxtapose their own identity with what they considered lesser. Thus, foes could truly be united as friends through the minstrel show, simply by virtue of belonging to the same insular community.

Blackface and The Varsity Show – A Lasting Legacy

⁵⁶ Id.

⁵⁷ “SOPH SHOW EPOCH MAKING PRODUCTION,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 61, 5 December 1914, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19141205-01.2.6&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁵⁸ “SOPH SHOW BEST IN RECENT YEARS: Excellent Coaching Brings out Vocal Talents,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 62, December 7, 1914, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19141207-01.2.8&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁵⁹ Id.

Blackface as a component of onstage entertainment was not reserved for minstrel shows. Rather, Columbia's broader musical theater legacy has been influenced by the integration of blackface into its longest standing tradition: The Varsity Show. While several of its earliest shows included skin darkening for various derogatory racial impersonations, including yellow face, blackface was most common.

The 1904 show "Isle of Illusia" is a stark example of Columbia's utilization of blackface in its most conventional form. In this original musical comedy written by Roi Cooper Megrue of the class of 1903, several playwrights travel to a mystical island in search of magical plants capable of provide inspiration for their work. In their attempt to gain control of the island, the play wrights go through a series of trials extensive enough for one play review to assert that "there was a real plot," unlike the Varsity Shows which preceded it.⁶⁰ Yet M. Issing Link, the blackface character performed by Walter E. Kelley, '07 is not mentioned by name once in the official synopsis. Rather than contributing to the plot, Kelley amuses the audience through song, signified by his character description simply stating "tis a merry tale."⁶¹ The M. Issing Link is brought to life through the lyrics of his self-titled song, "The Missing Link," written by Roscoe Crosby Gaige, Columbia College Class of 1903. Kelley's feigned blackness motivates the opening lines of the song:

I am the missing link between
The monkey and the man;
My home is in the lofty trees,
Just catch me if you can.
My mother was a kangaroo,
My father was an ape,

⁶⁰ "Columbia Men Give Jolly Show," Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The Varsity Show Records 1894- ; Series I: Productions, 1894 – ; Box 1, Folder 10, Series 1.

⁶¹ "The Isle of Illusia" playbook, April 11th, 1904, *Montclai Club Incorporated*, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The Varsity Show Records 1894- ; Series I: Productions, 1894 – ; Box 1, Folder 10, Series 1.

And now you know the reason why
I got my funny shape.⁶²

His entire comic appeal is predicated on his blackness given the content of this song. In fact, the juxtaposition of his identity to the white Columbia community is meant to be so extreme that he is diluted to a subhuman spectacle. Derogatory claims of black bodies being the link between man and ape are widely known, and the M. Issing link is meant to personify this for an adoring white audience.

The M. Issing Link's song evokes another characteristic of the conventional blackface character in American theater: a lonesome being without romance. In most performances, blackface characters were barred from partaking in a play's romantic scheme. Dale Cockrell illustrates this point through an analysis of one particular character, Sambo, whose "... blackness (referred to constantly) does serve to deny him access to the erotic atmosphere that perfumes the play."⁶³ The M. Issing Link laments his place in this tradition in the closing lines of his solo, stating:

There's one thing makes me very sad,
I've never had a mate,
I never knew a little girl,
With Whom to keep a date.

It is not only that the M. Issing Link does not partake in a love affair, though the play does in fact develop three separate love affairs in just two short acts. Rather, it is the contextualization of his loneliness by his black identity that guarantees racist motivations for such exclusion. Though the

⁶² H.L.V, "The Varsity Show in Columbia History," February 27, 1925. Source not listed (found in archives).

⁶³ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, pg 18.

M. Issing Link is not technically a human like Sambo, he nevertheless “assumes his rightful place in the world: always on the outside looking in” by virtue of his blackness.⁶⁴

Though the M. Issing Link lacks substantive character development, his contribution to the play’s positive reception was significant. In fact, his presence is recurrently hailed as one of the performance’s greatest successes. In the show’s first review published in *Spectator*, the contributing writer notes that “W. E. Kelley 1907, was a splendid ‘M. Issing Link,’ and earned numberless encores with his song, ‘The Missing Link,’ which proved a genuine hit.”⁶⁵ From the first show, the blackface character acted as a catalyst for student enjoyment. The same article provides commentary from another critic celebrating Kelley’s performance, who states “he made a monkey out of the part.”⁶⁶ Playing on the classic idiom, this critic ironically congratulates Kelley on his ability to portray an inherently ludicrous character. The show’s success is not only evident in positive student reviews, but also in the widespread attendance by members of the Columbia community. Ticket sales were impressive, and even in its second-to-last performance, the show entertained “an enthusiastic audience, filling every seat in the house” to the point that “many had to be turned away from the box office.”⁶⁷ While this signifies an immense level of student engagement and enthusiasm, they were not the only audience members. Like the Soph Show, members of the wider Columbia community attended, including “many people prominent in society and literary circles” like John Kendrick Bangs, the famous humorist and editor of *Acta*

⁶⁴ Id.

⁶⁵ “ISLE OF ILLUSIA" First Performance of Varsity Show a Great Success,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLVII, Number 128, 15 March 1904, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19040315-01.2.2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁶⁶ Id.

⁶⁷ “Crowded House at Show,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume XLVII, Number 132 – March 19, 1904, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19040319-01.2.8&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

Columbia from the graduating class of 1883.⁶⁸⁶⁹ Thus, the racist sentiments expressed through the show's blackface character captivated a wide audience of Columbia students and alumni alike.

The significance of the show's popularity is magnified by its enduring legacy years after its production. Even as The Varsity Show's reputation as an integral component of the Columbia tradition was magnified by more complex productions, the "Isle of Illusia" left a lasting imprint. Its lasting legacy is expressed in a 1925 article recounting the history of the Varsity Show as a campus tradition, which states that "most of the old-timers will insist that there never will be a better Columbia production than 'The Isle of Illusia.'" ⁷⁰ Given the M. Issing Link's fundamental role in garnering student enthusiasm at the time of the show's original production, blackface contributed to the show's legacy as an all-time favorite that this article commends. A separate *Columbiana's* article, "Varsity Show – *Springboard to Fame*," goes beyond commending this racist show to visually memorializing it; at the bottom of the page, an image of the *Isle of Illusia* cast prominently displays Walter Kelley in blackface, sitting below the rest of the actors as the M. Issing Link.⁷¹ If blackface was not deliberately meant to contribute to the show's longstanding notability, its outstanding presence as the article's sole picture reinforces its influence on the legacy of the Varsity Show. In addition to the visual tribute, the article also highlights several cast members from the *Isle of Illusia* cast who later joined the Varsity Show's cohort of famed alumni. Walter Kelley is singled out as one of these students "who became distinguished in later years," along with another cast member who later served as an Acting

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ "John Kendrick Bangs, Yale University Library, <http://drs.library.yale.edu/HLTransformer/HLTransServlet?style=yul.ead2002.xhtml.xsl&id=beinecke:bangs&clear-stylesheet-cache=yes>

⁷⁰ H.L.V, "The Varsity Show in Columbia History," February 27, 1925. Source not listed (found in archives).

⁷¹ "Varsity Show – *Springboard to Fame*," *The Columbian*, Volume 39, No 9,

President of Columbia.⁷² The influence of these racist caricatures was magnified through the men who brought them to life as they went on to influence Columbia's greater legacy. Evidently, their personal contributions to shaping Columbia's identity would be far more consequential from the President of the University's desk or from a donor's check than from their place on stage at a racist show. The magnitude of their later influence makes their initial contribution all the more shameful.

The M. Issign Link was not the only successful blackface character to appear in the Varsity Show, however. Blackface manifested itself a decade later in the 1915 production, *On Your Way*, through the character Argument Story. Unlike his predecessor in *Isle of Illusia*, however, this character played by Herman Axelrod, '15 was anything but irrelevant to the plot. As suggested by his stage name, Argument Story served as an ironic personification of the plot itself. The writer, Kenneth S. Webb '06, explained his inspiration for the character in *Spectator*, stating, "you know most musical comedies – most Varsity Shows, also – have no plots at all – the idea seems to be get as far away from the plot as possible. Well, we determined to dramatize that very idea.... we constructed a melodrama in which the chief motive of the rest of the cast is to get the plot out of the play."⁷³ This presents yet another conventional form of the blackface character: the black imposter amongst the white cast. It is not just his blackness that makes the character Argument Story an imposter, however. Instead, the interlacing of his race and his

⁷² Id.

⁷³ "Players to Make Debut Tonight – Kenneth Webb, Author-Coach Tells How He Conceived Idea of Play," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 147, 12 April 1915, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19150412-01.2.9&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

nature as the plot bearer imposed on an unwilling cast precipitates a desperate attempt by the cast to elude him. This chase drives the entire narrative.

Predictably, the persistent intrusions of the blackened Argument Story in the white play were a massive hit. One critic summarized the success of Axelrod's character in stating "the Plot, furthermore, not only prologued the play with amusing doggerel but furnished the distinctive humor of the show."⁷⁴ While his role as the plot is monumental in comparison to his black predecessors, his agency's intended effect makes it equally disparaging. It is the incessant, yet unsuccessful nature of these attempts to utilize this supposed agency that entertained the white Columbia audience. The perturbed white characters fleeing from black Argument Story further enforce the idea that black bodies were not meant to contribute to the Columbia student entertainment experience as equals. These implied sentiments were explicitly verbalized by the discomfort of one particular critic. After commending the show for its success, the author qualifies his approval in stating "the only fault that one could find with it – and that is a black fault, being symbolized in a colored man, named Argument Story – lies in the plot."⁷⁵ The production was clearly adulterated by the blackness of the character driving the plot, even if he was only staged for crude entertainment. To ensure that his approval of the show as a whole was not misunderstood as approval of this black intruder's presence, the author clarifies "it is not the dark, mysterious tale of Mr. Argument Story that stirs up enthusiasm in 'On Your Way,' but the wild, whirling dances of the college boys (and 'girls'), which check the plot at every turn."⁷⁶ This

⁷⁴ "On Your Way" review in *Al. News* April 16 1915, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The Varsity Show Records 1894- ; Series I: Productions, 1894 – ; Box 5, Folder 8.

⁷⁵ "Columbia '15 Show is a Big Hit– 'On Your Way,' at the Hotel Astor, a Rollicking, Unusual Review, with an Amazing Plot and Plenty of Fun," April 14, 1915 Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The Varsity Show Records 1894- ; Series I: Productions, 1894 – ; Box 5, Folder 8.

⁷⁶ *Id.*

refinement is meant to restore order to the Varsity Show's white identity by deeming the white characters responsible for the show's triumph, rather than the black Argument Story. According to this critic, this credit is due not only because of their own merit as performers, but also because of their successful expulsion of the only black character. Thus, even as students commended blackface performances by virtue of their prejudicial humor, the mere presence of a black figure still had the potential to taint this Columbia tradition.

With another Varsity Show production in 1916 came another blackface character, played by the beloved Columbia College alumnus Oscar Hammerstein. Cast as Washington Snow, "a dark secret," Hammerstein's character renewed the commonplace function of a blackface role in *On Your Way*. His foremost appearance came in the first act as he sang "Jungle Jubilee." The song was performed against a backdrop of pandemonium: "while the Jungle Jubilee was being sung by O. Hammerstein, the chorus entered as jungle beasts and capered around in true animal fashion."⁷⁷ Though his character was merely included as a vacuous entertainer, his racist portrayal of black dialect remained the show's salient form of humor. Many reviews saluted his crowd appeal, stating "Oscar Hammerstein, as Washington Snow the Darkey... had everyone laughing continually at his dry wit and unexpected jokes."⁷⁸ Hammerstein immediately joined the ranks of past performers who successfully donned blackface for a delighted crowd. One *Spectator* article went as far as emulating his character's speech with the opening lines "Bawth—we'z always makin mithtakes—as dat dere Washington Snow done said—"dats why dey put 'rasers on de pencils." But believe me, Bawth—dis yare Varsity Show am sure 'nuff good stuff—

⁷⁷ "AUDIENCE TAKEN BY PIRATE HOARD AT HOTEL ASTOR," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LIX, Number 148 – 13 April 1916, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19160413-01.2.12&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁷⁸ *Id.*

taint no mistake nohow.”⁷⁹ This tribute to Hammerstein’s fundamentality demonstrates that the racist parody the black speech and intellect was evidently replicated by other students for equally crude entertainment value. Thus, the implications of the Varsity Show’s persistent portrayal of black people as inferior are monumental.

Beyond merely presenting a derogatory distortion of black identities to support notions of white superiority, the Varsity Show profited from this exploitation. Like the Soph Show, the money received from tickets was used to fund organizations enjoyed by white students. In fact, the Show began as a fundraiser meant to supplement the limited funding athletic programs received from the University.⁸⁰ As the Show’s increasing complexity made it more difficult to stage, however, greater portions of ticket revenues were allocated towards discharging production costs. To sustain the Show’s original purpose as an athletic fundraiser, a mammoth ticket-selling operation ensued each year to fill the theater. Fundraising campaigns were a cooperative effort by performing arts groups, athletic groups, and student publications. In preparation for the 1915 campaign to promote *On Your Way*, the Spectator warned of the imminent marketing operation, stating “no man on the campus need be surprised if he is accosted by a suave representative of the Varsity Show . . . It is only by this means that sufficient funds can be secured to pay all expenses of the Show and also to give a creditable amount toward the cancellation of the Crew Debt.”⁸¹ These productions exhibiting notions of racial inferiority were

⁷⁹ "PEACE PIRATES SOME PUNKINS," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LIX, Number 150 – 15 April 1916, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19160415-01.2.10&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁸⁰ "About" The Varsity Show Website, <http://www.thevarsityshow.com/about/>

⁸¹ "ON YOUR WAY FINANCES LOW Campaign Started to Sell Out Remaining' Nights— Other Activities Help WILL HELP CREW DEBT," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Volume LVIII, Number 150 – 15 April 1915, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19150415-01.2.2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

not only harmful simply by virtue of being accessible at Columbia. Rather, their funding capabilities led to active marketing campaigns meant to magnify these racist sentiments for a wider audience. Students were heavily encouraged to partake in the tradition, making its legacy on the Columbia student identity far more comprehensive, and thus even more detrimental.

Conclusion

Amateur minstrel shows and blackface plays utilized racial prejudice for cheap laughs. Their influence on Columbia's legacy is palpable, particularly through enduring traditions like the Varsity Show which have become part of the fabric of student life at this university. Amateur minstrelsy was carried out well into the twentieth century in America, and "as college populations and racial attitudes changed, students used minstrel shows as a form of rebellion against 'political correctness' rather than as the status-affirming entertainments of earlier generations."⁸² Though blackface is no longer utilized, vestiges remain through other traditions that exploit the identities of marginalized groups in opposition to political correctness. This is a hallmark of a present Columbia tradition. Orgo Night, the comedy act staged by the Columbia band which initiates the start of finals each semester, seeks to entertain through jokes about various student identities. Students in favor of the tradition rely on a similar faulty logic predicated on notions of political correctness that past students evidently utilized to justify minstrelsy. This logic defines a petition by participating members of the tradition who are seeking administrative approval to hold the event in the library, stating "as alumni and students of the University who cherish Columbia's traditions, including the tradition of free expression, we urge the administration to reverse its decision to prohibit the twice-yearly Orgo Night student

⁸² Susan Smulyan, *Popular Ideologies*, pg. 39.

gathering in Butler Library Room 209. Let Our People Orgo.”⁸³ In light of Columbia’s less well known but deeply disturbing history of minstrel shows and other forms of racial slander in the name of comedy, the petition’s claim of legitimacy in the name of cherished traditions is troubling. The harm caused by these “cherished Columbia traditions” shows that exploitation of identities is not acceptable in the name of comedy. Rather, it critically engages with Columbia’s shameful past, and makes a dark past even darker.

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