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THE *NEW* PLANTATION MINSTRELSY, BLACKFACE POLITICAL CARTOONS, AND CHORAL SONGS OF FREEDOM, 1867–86

With the passage of the British North America (BNA) Act, which brought the Dominion of Canada officially into being on July 1, 1867, the Confederation of four BNA colonies (Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick—British Columbia joined in 1871) officially created the country of Canada. It also initiated a growth spurt in cultural and political nationalism. The generation that came to maturity in the wake of Confederation saw “the possibility, even the necessity, of going beyond the deal-making of politicians to give the new nation a distinct culture,” writes Jonathan Vance.¹ By the late 1860s, a colour line had been established in Canada, identifying all people of African descent as members of a specified class and setting them apart from the dominant culture, which was majority composed of White, English-speaking Anglo-Saxon Protestants and Irish Catholics. Customs rather than laws upheld this *de facto* colour line. Furthermore, debates had been ongoing in the years leading up to Confederation, reaching their peak in 1864 at the Charlottetown Conference (organized by delegates from New Brunswick,

Nova Scotia and PEI, which aimed to discuss the union of their three provinces); at the Quebec Conference (also in 1864, which helped to create the country's first constitution); and at the London Conference in 1867 (a meeting that finalized the constitutional details of Confederation).² Unlike south of the border where a Civil War had to be fought to establish the unification of the federal government, Confederation was in essence an administrative accomplishment; as Daniel Francis explains, it represented "a practical solution to a political problem, not an expression of some great principle.... According to the imperialist view, Confederation did not imply any loosening of the tie with the Mother Country. The new arrangement was another signpost on the road to self-government, but Britain continued to retain ultimate responsibility for foreign relations and constitutional matters."³

All the institutions that formed in the decades after Confederation—the NWMP (Mounties), the transcontinental railway, and the mythology of the North—came to embody important cultural values. During its early years, for example, the NWMP acted as arresting officers, judge, and jury, imposing order from the top down, and while mythologized as "western nation-builders" and "protectors of our lands," they were created for similar reasons as the Texas Rangers, which were created to "specifically address the pressing 'native question' confronting Texas...among the few places where bison still roamed after 1870."⁴ The Texas Rangers had played a pivotal role during the US-Mexican War (1846–48). In the 1860s and 1870s, they renewed their mission to "drive Native Americans from within the borders of the state beyond the reach of the resources on which their survival depended," writes Andrew Graybill, adding "the Rangers killed half as many Indians as the federal troops did over the same period [between 1865 and 1881]."⁵ The building of the CPR also represented a clearing of Indigenous people from their land. As James Daschuk notes, "Acquisition of the west by the Dominion of Canada in December 1869 brought unprecedented changes to inhabitants of the plains. Within a decade, the bison would be gone, and the people who had depended on them would be marginalized by a new political and economic reality."⁶ Daschuk writes further, "Management of the increasingly serious food situation and Indian affairs generally shifted from a position of 'relative ignorance' under the Liberals to one of outright malevolence during the

Macdonald regime," he says, adding "‘Pacification’ of the plains Indians was an integral, if not always explicit, component of the Tory government’s program of development. To ensure that the west would be ready for the Canadian Pacific Railway and settlement, Macdonald himself became superintendent general of Indian affairs."⁷

Significantly, the expansion of the West was a huge economic risk for the Canadian government. "The railway preceded settlement, it did not follow it, which meant that once it was completed, there was no one to ride on it," notes Francis.⁸ At the same time, as Sarah-Jane Mathieu observes, "Canadians romanticized and co-opted the arduous construction of their transcontinental line into an ethos of survival and national identity, fashioning it into Canada’s ‘national dream.’" Mathieu writes further that "Advocates of Confederation in the East argued that a national railway line would be a powerful homogenizing national force. They maintained that if the line reached British Columbia, the Prairies would remain under the Union Jack."⁹ Much of the uproar over the railway centred on creating an industry that rivalled the American railway, but part of the task of reshaping Canada into a modern technological force involved cultivating an image of having conquered the West. As Canada’s modernizing artery, the CPR promised to populate the vast western provinces with "sound European stock," to save British Columbia from a perceived "perilous proximity to Asia," to rescue the Prairies from its "rebellious Indigenous peoples," and to centralize British-style political power in the East."¹⁰ To achieve this modern myth of the West, Canada had to overcome the challenge of ensuring the CPR turned a profit; to do this, the company first developed an immigration campaign for the Prairies that encouraged White settlement, and second it convinced travellers from across the country and abroad that western Canada, particularly the Rocky Mountains, were attractive tourist destinations.¹¹

This modernization coincided with organized mythmaking about the North, which provided an identifier for Canadianness that was not just about a place; it represented a promise and a destiny that was made manifest in the short-lived but influential group of young White writers and intellectuals who called themselves "Canada First." When this group formally met in Ottawa in 1868, they realized their shared desire to articulate what Francis has called the "new nationality" they hoped would take shape in

Canada, a nationality which “imparted to the people living [in its northern climate] a strength of character shared by other circumpolar ‘races.’”¹² While Canada First did not last long, what the organized movement solidified was that the North was for White people of European descent with supposedly “innate” traits such as self-reliance, physical strength, stamina, and virility that set them apart as a distinct group; this fabricated form of natural selection was reinforced with the lyrics, “true North, strong and free” that became part of “Chant national” (“O Canada”), a song about Canada—sort of.¹³

Initially written in 1880 as a new national song for Quebec composed by Calixa Lavallée with French lyrics by Quebec City Superior Court judge Adolphe-Basile Routhier (1838–1920), 6,000 copies of “Chant national” were printed by musician and music publisher, Arthur Lavigne (1845–1925).¹⁴ “L.-N. Dufresne signed the first edition, illustrating the cover with a portrait of the lieutenant-governor surrounded by such symbols of French-speaking Canada as the maple tree, the Saint Lawrence River, and the ubiquitous beaver,” writes Christopher Brian Thompson.¹⁵ The song made its debut at Quebec City’s Pavillon des Patineurs on June 24, 1880 becoming a hit with both French and English Canadians (although the official English lyrics were not adopted until 1980 when a parliamentary committee revised Robert Weir’s 1908 lyrics).¹⁶ The fact that a former blackface minstrel performer composed “Chant national” in the context of nineteenth-century Quebec is significant. Blackface minstrel shows frequently toured there from the 1860s onward, but as noted, Lavallée performed in these shows in the US. There is no way to know if he made any connection between the racial caricatures he peddled with Duprez’s New Orleans Minstrels and Black people who lived in Quebec, but as Duprez’s company made a point to hire French-speaking performers like Lavallée—to keep the connection to francophone Louisiana—and they performed across the South, along the Mississippi River, and to New Orleans and Montreal and back, he would have been exposed to the deprivations facing Black Americans in the North and South.

Significantly, New Orleans was unlike any other city in antebellum America. With a population divided among Anglo-Americans, Europeans, free Black people, and those who were enslaved, it was among the most cosmopolitan cities anywhere. Before the Civil War, free Black people and those of mixed ancestry (known as Creoles of Colour), and enslaved

Black people were spatially, politically, and geographically segregated but they comingled in the city's saloons, public squares, and most theatrical events. This living arrangement was fundamentally changed during and after Reconstruction when a racial line was ardently enforced, placing all Black people (including Creoles of Colour) under what Lerone Bennett, Jr. once described as "not a regional but a *national* system of subordination. The system was created in the South by Southerners, but it could not have survived without a national white consensus on the role and status of Southern black workers."¹⁷ Lavallée would have witnessed this two-tiered system first-hand. But what he likely would not have paid attention to is how a similar *de facto* system existed in Quebec. As Dorothy Williams's *Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (1997) explains, Black people lived in Montreal as early as the seventeenth century, and yet, "there is little evidence that they exerted any socio-economic or political influence."¹⁸ There was some official immigration to Quebec, but there was likely much more clandestine immigration and intraregional movement. As such, it is uncertain what the Black population size was in Quebec prior to when census records became more reliable after Confederation in 1867 when Quebec City became the "national capital" and home of the provincial legislature.¹⁹ Given the well-documented histories of Black settlement in Upper Canada and Canada West from at least the 1820s through 1860s, Black presence in nineteenth-century Quebec is a grossly understudied and needs much more attention.

At the same time, starting in 1871 through to the end of the century, the Canadian government made immigration a priority, attracting almost one and a half million new residents from Britain, central and eastern Europe, and the US; Black and Chinese immigrants, on the other hand, faced considerable hostility and the Canadian government ultimately took steps to restrict their numbers. The Quebec government focused its efforts on keeping its population at home rather than attracting newcomers.²⁰ Thus, by the late nineteenth century French Canada had developed a distinct culture and the "real" Quebec was, for many English Canadians, represented by "the rural French Canadians, the *habitants*."²¹ This notion became a stereotype of French Canada that circulated the print-visual culture of politics, and from late 1870s onward it was one of many other racial stereotypes that included Black people and stereotypes of Irish, Chinese,

and Jewish immigrants that were depicted in the pages of English-language political magazines.

This chapter examines the popularity of blackface minstrelsy across the newly formed Canadian dominion after Confederation. It contends with the sociocultural changes that happened post-1867, and how emergence of Black choral singing offered a different viewpoint on the Black experience in the aftermath of the end of American plantation slavery, but also the dispossession, removal, and extermination of Indigenous people from their lands. Between Confederation and the late 1880s, Canada witnessed a rapid modernization, urbanization, and industrialization that coincided with the railroads becoming the chief employer of Black men, both Canadian-born and emigrants from the US and beyond. The CPR not only had a profound effect on the settlement of the Prairies, including in cities from Winnipeg to Vancouver that became heavily dependent on the railway, but it also linked large cities to smaller towns that were “strung out along the railway like beads on a string.”²² The nation’s viability was essentially hedged on the CPR, which was framed as not only key to building a national economy but also a national culture. Despite hostility toward Black immigration, Black people lived in cities and towns across the country by the time of Confederation. In British Columbia, Black people who had been living there since the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush had, after almost a half a century’s contribution to the province, gained little more than tolerance from White residents. By the last years of the nineteenth century, Black immigration to the province continued but it did not do much to change what Crawford Kilian describes as the community’s “shrinking minority” status.²³ Like most Canadian cities in the nineteenth century, Victoria had relied on travelling theatrical troupes for its entertainment culture. White Euro-Canadian settlers, townspeople, miners, and labourers who resided there welcomed the production of live shows in their communities by groups of travelling entertainers as a brief relief from their daily hardships; they were highly entertained by the rough and tumble, lowbrow comedy which blackface minstrel shows were based.²⁴ Even Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was performed in the Victoria Theatre and the entire production had a kind of “Monty-Python-esque charm about it,” observes Jonathan Vance, adding that “the set was a cotton plantation being reused from a previous show.”²⁵

As American themes became part of the theatrical culture of Western Canada, “the shows likely involved the same repertoire that Ricketts and Durang gave to eager Montrealers [a decade earlier]: jugglers, magicians, gymnasts, acrobats, dialecticians, singers, dancers, monologuists, and minstrel shows with blackface performers whose materials parodied the singing and dancing of slaves.”²⁶ Importantly, when the CPR launched an advertising campaign to “fill in the middle,” as Laura Detre explains, it aimed to lure “prosperous, white, family farmers.”²⁷ These immigrants began to arrive on the Prairies in the 1870s, and this migration helped to construct a Western society envisioned by Canadian officials—one that excluded Indigenous Peoples, Black immigrants, and by the 1880s, Chinese people. Between 1881 and 1884, more than 17,000 Chinese men arrived to work on the CPR, ten thousand of them arriving on chartered ships straight from China; this immigrant group was never given the opportunity to become citizens like the Scottish, Irish, and British labourers who had arrived in Canada a generation before.²⁸ For example, British Columbia Premier George Walkem (serving from 1874–76 and 1878–82) was elected for a second term on the promise of introducing a Chinese Tax Act to help keep the province White.²⁹ That was followed by the federal government’s implementation of the Chinese Head Tax in 1885, which imposed a fifty-dollar fee on every Chinese man who wanted to enter Canada, marking a period of several discriminatory legal measures passed against Chinese immigrants until 1923 when the Canadian government enacted an outright ban on all Chinese immigration.³⁰

This discussion of Chinese immigration is significant to the expansion of theatre in the nineteenth century. By the end of the decade, one of the first theatrical shows about Chinese people appeared on Broadway; *A Trip to Chinatown*, written by American dramatist and playwright Charles Hale Hoyt (1859–1900) appeared at the Madison Square Theater in 1892. Set in San Francisco, it was a musical centred on a group of White people venturing into Chinatown, a relatively new phenomenon in the 1890s, which became a site that both ignited fascination and fear among White communities. The Chinese community in California had grown because many men worked as labourers and miners in the gold rush of 1849; some of these labourers subsequently headed north during the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush in 1858, and a further wave of immigration

occurred when men were brought in from China to work on the CPR. By the 1890s, many Chinese workers were dismissed, and most eventually moved to Calgary, Moose Jaw, Winnipeg, Montreal, Toronto, and even St. John, forming a large reservoir of cheap labour that placed them in potential or actual competition with White residents.³¹ As news spread across the country of Chinese immigrants, who made up over 40 percent of the non-Indigenous mainland population in British Columbia at Confederation, stories about them would have appealed to White audiences. As an example, after its Broadway run, Hoyt's *A Trip to Chinatown* subsequently appeared at London, Ontario's Grand Opera House in 1894 and toured other cities across the region.³² Opened on September 8, 1881, the Opera House sat on the northwest corner of Richmond and King Streets. It eclipsed the city's Mechanics' Institute, providing the first proper theatre in town. With its 1,228-seats and French Renaissance-style auditorium, rooted by an elaborately dormered attic and the building exteriors made primarily of red pressed brick, the lavish theatre was embellished with illuminated tile belts and with band coursing and window labels of Ohio stone.³³

Enakshi Dua poignantly observes that "despite its claim to whiteness, at Confederation (1867), Canada was far from 'a white man's country,' as it had substantial numbers of Aboriginal, Asian and Black residents."³⁴ This milieu ultimately meant that when European settlers arrived and the "settler colony" became a nation, another part of the Canadian national story began to be told that did not include everyone. As Sherene Razack describes, it is "the story of the 'empty land' developed by hardy and enterprising European settlers. In our national anthem, Canadians sing about Canada as the 'True North Strong and Free'...the imagined rugged independence and self-reliance of the European settlers are qualities that are considered to give birth to greater commitment to liberty and democracy."³⁵ This chapter probes how blackface minstrel shows were some of the first forms of culture early White settlers produced on the Prairies, as well as in Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes. During British Columbia's Gold Rush, blackface minstrel shows entertained White miners, and shortly after landing in the Prairies, the Mounted Police produced their own minstrel shows, all before American minstrel troupes appeared on theatrical stages in Manitoba in 1873, Saskatchewan in 1882, and in Alberta by 1896.³⁶ The cultural milieu of the 1870s and 1880s is vital to understanding what Canada

was like when the first documented *Black* minstrels, using “Georgia” as part of their name, appeared in 1868 at Saint John’s Mechanics’ Institute and Fredericton’s Temperance Hall.³⁷

By the 1880s, Black choral singing, which had largely taken place in churches, also began to appear at newly built concert and performance halls. The first and most prominent of these choirs was the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who started out on a small fundraising tour for their school in 1871. Fisk University was founded as the Fisk Free Colored School on January 9, 1866 during Reconstruction just shortly after the end of the Civil War. Almost immediately, the Fisk Jubilee Singers rose to international prominence, even performing before Queen Victoria of England, as well as at the White House for President Ulysses S. Grant; their success also included multiple tours of Canada.³⁸ As John Frick explains “it was a group of freed slaves at Fisk University, originally known as the Colored Christian Choir, that initiated the trend.... In an attempt to inspire the company of nine performers, the group’s leader, George L. White, renamed them the Jubilee Singers, a biblical reference to the year of Jubilee (the year all the slaves would be freed) mentioned in the Book of Leviticus.”³⁹ As Black men, and later women, donned blackface to perform scenes and vignettes that reproduced the plantation South in minstrelsy, jubilee singers, as an educated class of Black performers, created a new genre of musical performance—Negro spirituals. In his 1903 canonical text *The Souls of Black Folk*, the great African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois called the songs of the Fisk Jubilee “Sorrow Songs,” noting that “through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.”⁴⁰

The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ success quickly spread to other newly formed Southern Black colleges such as The Hampton Institute, founded in 1868 as Hampton Agricultural and Industrial School in Hampton, Virginia. Students formed their own jubilee ensemble, the Hampton Jubilee Singers, which also toured North America to raise money for their school; in June 1874, they performed at Toronto’s Music Hall.⁴¹ In February 1877, a group

billed as the Original Nashville Coloured Jubilee Singers performed at Toronto's Royal Opera House, and on April 27 that same year, another jubilee group sang at the Grand Opera House.⁴² The Jubilee's spirituals were literal songs about their lives not performed to singularly entertain White audiences but also to impart hope into their lives, especially as some of these African Americans had either been formerly enslaved or the first of their families to be born free. As choral singing brought a new image of Black life to Canada and beyond, the racial stereotypes of *Black* and White minstrelsy became more aggrandized, almost as a response to jubilee singing. These two genres of Black performance circulated the Atlantic world as a representational bifurcation of Black life.



In Ontario by 1871, 20 percent of the province's population consisted of urban residents, and by 1891 they represented 35 percent of its more than two million inhabitants.⁴³ Hamilton's population rose from 26,000 to 49,000 in the same period, London's from 16,000 to 32,000, and Ottawa's from 21,000 to 44,000; meanwhile Toronto had grown more than three-fold, from 56,000 to 181,000.⁴⁴ Ontario was a staunchly Anglo-Saxon Protestant province with a long-standing sentimentality for the antebellum South. As sectors of nation-building developed, especially publishing and culture industries, this sentimentality helped drive the kinds of entertainments that were brought to cities like Toronto, Hamilton, London, and Ottawa. It was also one factor in the building of larger theatre houses, which became a feature of the period, along with music pavilions and performance halls such that by the 1880s, cities like London, Hamilton, and Ottawa each had an opera house, and there were two in Toronto.⁴⁵ Ottawa had three public theatres: Her Majesty's Theatre (built in 1854), The Rink Music Hall, Gowan's New Opera House (built in 1875), and a private house, Rideau Hall (built in 1838). London's Theatre Royal (originally named the Garrison Theatre) was built in the 1840s, but the Grand Opera House, built in 1881, was a 1,228-seat theatre on the second and third floors of a masonic temple that would eclipse the city's Theatre Royal and the Mechanics' Institute Hall, providing the city its first legitimate theatre.⁴⁶

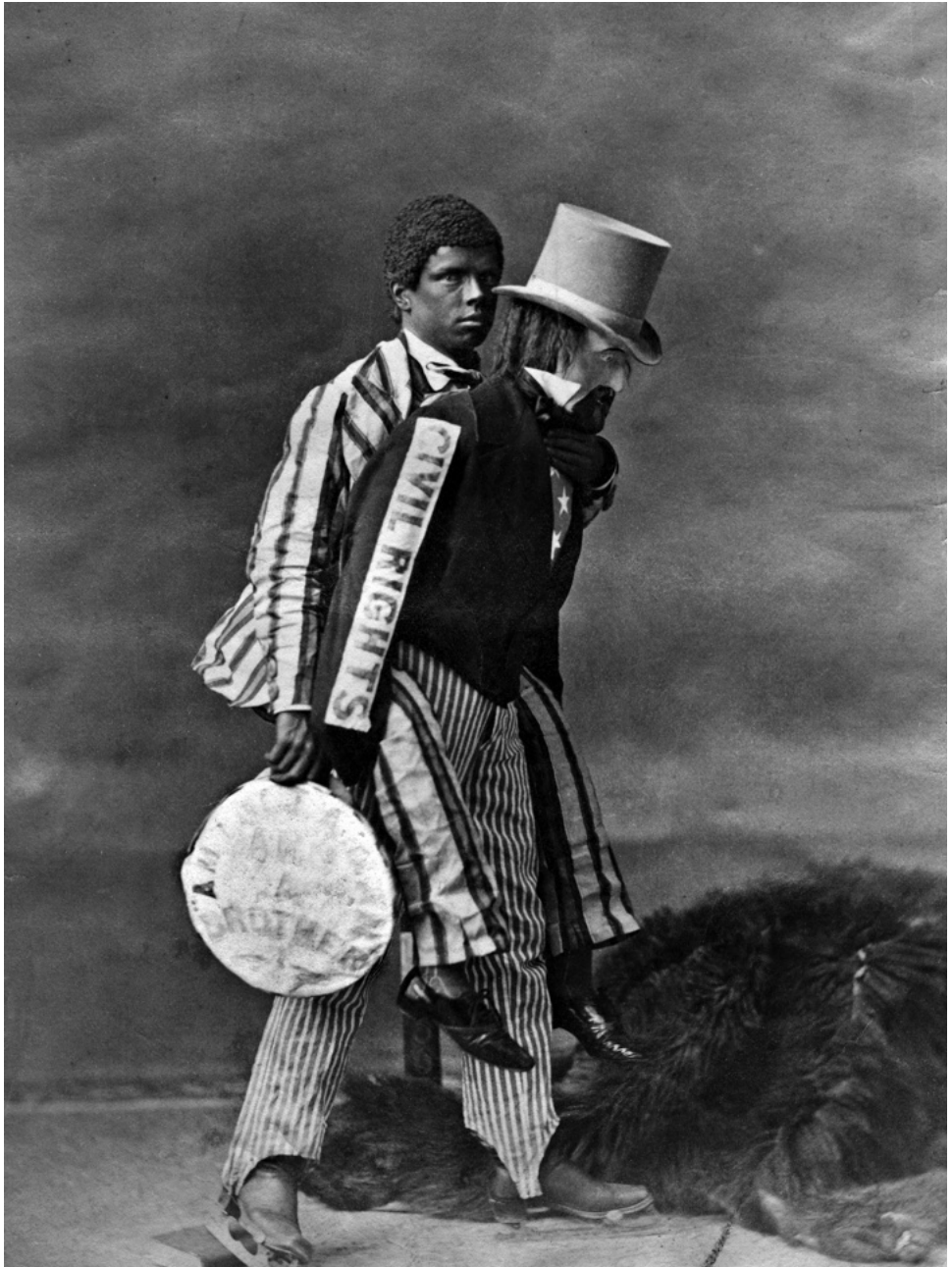
The Hamilton Royal Metropolitan was built in 1854, but when it burned down in 1866 it was replaced by the Grand Opera House, an auditorium with 1,169 seats.⁴⁷ The *Hamilton Spectator* once described the Grand Opera House as “This first-class theatre building, which opened in 1880...[and] constructed for \$25,000. The architect George H. Lalor spared no expense on the building, which drew international stars to its stage. The Opera House attracted such crowds that it underwent several overhauls and expansions in ensuing years.”⁴⁸ By the 1890s, the theatre needed repairs; after extensive renovations, the Grand Opera House reopened in 1892 with a house of 1,256 seats, and a proscenium arch surmounted by a metal sounding board, which created a technologically advanced theatre sound for its time.⁴⁹ Toronto’s Grand Opera House, located on Adelaide Street, west of Yonge Street, opened to the public on September 21, 1874. It was managed by actor Charlotte Morrison (née Nickinson), John Nickinson’s eldest daughter; she was married to Daniel Morrison, an ex-farmer and Toronto theatre critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, a short-lived Conservative newspaper founded by John Ross Robertson in 1866 (to 1872) after he left the *Globe*.⁵⁰ By all accounts, Morrison was one of the first woman theatre owners in Canada, and she brought in her three actress sisters while her brother managed the bookings; like her father years before, she ran her own stock company, acting in and directing many of the plays, and touring when possible.⁵¹ According to the *Canadian Illustrated News* of August 29, 1874, the Grand Opera House had a “seating capacity of 1,323 and campstool and standing room for 500 more.”⁵² Importantly, by the end of the 1877–78 season salaries were not being paid and Morrison was forced to let her actors go and give up her role as manager. She was succeeded by Augustus Pitou, who had been a member of the company. The Grand Opera House would eventually decline, and on November 29, 1879 it burned down but was quickly reconstructed and reopened on February 9, 1880.⁵³

Between 1874 and 1913, Toronto became home to ten large venues, making it the largest urban centre for theatre in the country. It was also home to music halls like Temperance Hall, the Mechanics’ Institute, and the Music Hall, in addition to St. Lawrence Hall, the Princes of Wales Music Hall, Palmer’s Concert Hall, the Agricultural Hall, and Horticultural Gardens.⁵⁴ In terms of theatres, The Royal Lyceum, long past its prime by the time it burned down in 1874 was reconstructed by a new proprietor, James French,

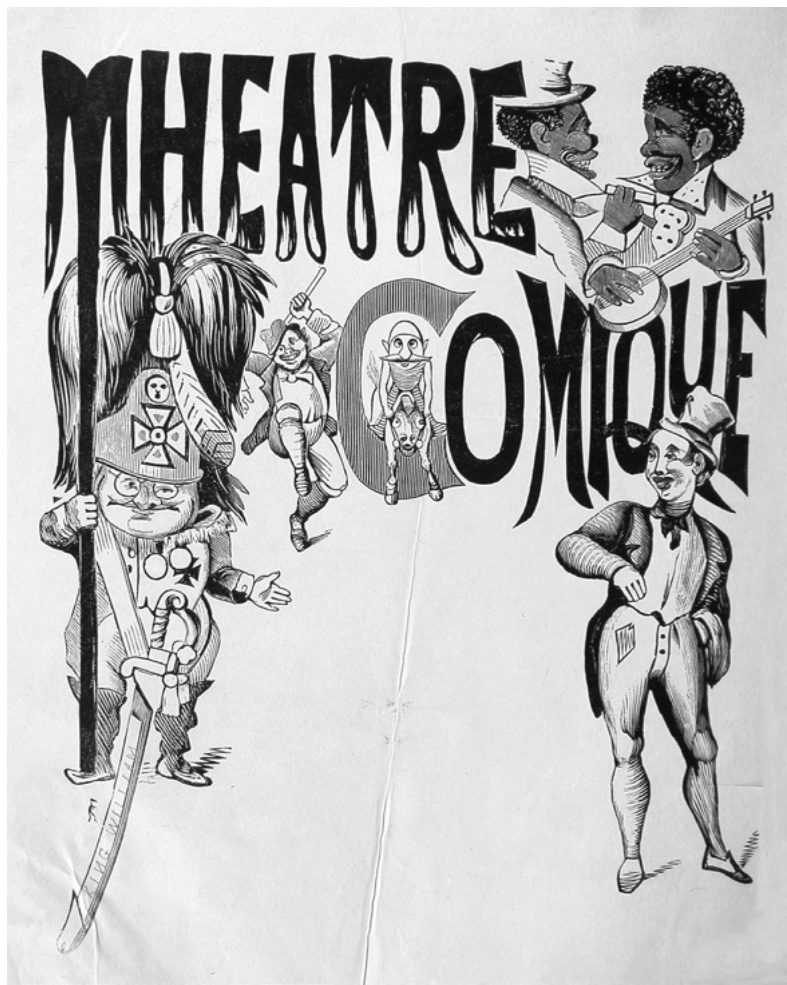
to the designs of his architect, Wallace Hume of Chicago; thereafter, the building became known as the Royal Theatre, or the Royal Opera House.⁵⁵ That same year, The Grand Theatre (1874–1927) was erected with 1,300 seats (compared to the Lyceum’s 600–700) with a big, well-designed stage, and a domed auditorium; the Grand competed for productions with the Royal Opera House until it burned down in 1883.⁵⁶ This new theatre helped make Toronto one of the foremost destinations for travelling minstrel shows, comic operas, and burlesque acts. Famed French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) gave one of her first Canadian performances in Montreal in 1880 and later at the Grand Opera House in 1881; she returned to cities across Ontario on eight separate tours between 1887 and 1917.⁵⁷

As theatre continued to thrive in Montreal, what also appeared were photographic depictions of minstrel performance, and other racially coded photographs, the majority of which were taken from Scottish-Canadian photographer William Notman’s (1826–91) studio at 17 Bleury Street on the eastern end of Old Montreal (or as it is called today, Vieux Port de Montreal). He took thousands of images of touring minstrel acts and actors born and raised in Montreal.⁵⁸ Barry Sheehy’s research located Notman as “a favorite of the Confederate community in the city. Confederate agents, commissioners, and operatives went to his studio... to have their photographs taken” and as such Notman’s collection at Montreal’s McCord Museum is also a reservoir of Civil War and post-Civil War images.⁵⁹ As an example of Notman’s post-Civil War work, in 1875 he took a photograph titled, “James Sutherland, costumed as ‘Civil Rights’” (see figure 5.1). In it, Sutherland, who is in blackface, wears a pinstriped suit and Afro wig. He is piggybacked by a mannequin wearing figure skates and dressed as Abraham Lincoln in top hat, bow tie, and pinstripe pants à la the iconographic “Uncle Sam” who first appeared during the War of 1812 as a symbol of American patriotism. The words “Civil Rights” are affixed to the Lincoln mannequin’s right sleeve, and Sutherland is holding a circular object in his right hand (unfortunately the text is indiscernible due to the lighting in the image). This image represents civil rights in a way that would have suggested to White Montrealers that Black people were riding on the backs of their White counterparts to obtain their freedom.

In a wood engraving titled *Theatre Comique* (c. 1870s) by cartoonist John Henry Walker, multiple elements of a minstrel show are depicted



5.1 Photograph of "James Sutherland costumed as 'Civil Rights,'" 1875, II-15870.1
The McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.



5.2 John Henry Walker's wood engraving "Theatre Comique," ca. 1850–85, M930.50.7.572 The McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

(see figure 5.2). Two *endmen* appear in the top right corner wearing shirts with elongated collars, one a top hat too small for his head, the other playing a banjo, and both depicted with exaggerated mouths. The engraving also features circus-like characters reflecting Theatre Comique's broad repertoire that included minstrelsy but also comic operas, dramas, and other forms of theatre.⁶⁰ This inverted view of slavery

parallels American visual culture in the post-Reconstruction period where some paintings and sculptures depicted enslaved and semi-nude Black men exulting their emancipation by holding up broken manacles and kneeling in gratitude before godlike, formally clad White men.⁶¹ The 1876 Emancipation Memorial in Lincoln Park, Washington, DC, for instance, depicts an elegant Lincoln standing over a kneeling and shirtless Archer Alexander, a formerly enslaved African American born into slavery around 1810 in Richmond, Virginia. These depictions intensified the problem of representing formerly enslaved Black men during the Reconstruction period. As argued in *Uncle*, “Once abolished, slavery retreated to the domain of memory. There, those collective memories had to be reckoned with in one way or another: suppressed, integrated, or romanticized. Emancipation, in effect, moved four million formerly enslaved African Americans, with their history of enslavement, into the national memory.”⁶² The shifting visual culture in 1870s Canada also created the conditions for *Black* minstrelsy to thrive.

Between 1866 and 1877, *Black* minstrelsy ushered in new themes and narratives. To survive as entertainers, these Black actors had to develop masks and facades that allowed White audiences to indulge their racial fantasies, while creating their own performance art whose words and actions could be differently interpreted by audiences composed of either aspiring actors or ordinary working-class people, both Black and White.⁶³ The presence of *Black* minstrels undoubtedly served to legitimize the racist caricature of “plantation darkies.” As John Springhall writes, “lampoons of ungainly black soldiers in uniformed marching units, for example, had been occasional minstrel features since the Civil War and from the mid-1870s they became the standard finale for the first part of the black minstrel show.”⁶⁴ The idea that African Americans were natural high-stepping “strutters” also painted an image of post-emancipation Blackness that, as David Krasner writes, was created as “the real was commodified in order to lead the challenge against minstrel theater.”⁶⁵ Stated otherwise, given the few opportunities for Black Americans, *primitive realness* was one of the few commodities available to them. But as the stage became a form of performative authentic-inauthenticity that was not just unique to *Black* minstrelsy but was, as Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen write, a fundamental element of American entertainment, which “has always had a desire

to 'keep it real,'...the black minstrel show was...more real than the white minstrel show could be."⁶⁶ As *Black* minstrelsy was billed as "authentic," even though performers were not depicting real life on the plantation as they had lived it but instead were primarily imitating how White Negro minstrel shows had depicted plantation slavery, they appealed to White audiences who had sympathized not only with Southerners but also formerly enslaved African Americans who now were thought to be depicting "real" vignettes of their formerly enslaved lives.

Significantly, it is important to recognize that Black people had been in proximity to blackface theatre almost from the start. They attended minstrel shows, and "must have laughed at...characters for some of the same reasons whites did.... In other words, audiences, black and white, could laugh down at characters who were worse off and/or more ignorant than anyone in the audience."⁶⁷ However, as Douglas A. Jones, Jr. writes, "Perhaps more than any other factor, white actors and managers barred the onstage contributions of actual African Americans, even though their performances usually took place near black communities. Black performance by black people would have subverted the mechanisms of identification and structures of (inter)racial feeling that white audiences (predominantly male) worked out for themselves in minstrelsy."⁶⁸ While Jones, Jr. writes further that "African Americans remained outside the theatrical frame, and blackface minstrelsy emerged as a performance form for, by, and about the white community,"⁶⁹ by the end of the nineteenth century, theatres began to cater to a diverse group of people, even as many theatres restricted Black patrons to the "cheap and less desirable seats up in the gallery."⁷⁰ This suggests that blackface was not singularly a racist form of entertainment that debased Black bodies, but that after the 1870s it was often *the* only mass form of entertainment available to Black people. Across the English-speaking world, *Black* and White minstrelsy was viewed by audiences who were fluent in English, which limited the extent productions could penetrate Europe, but the genre did have an impact in more distant parts of the English-speaking world.⁷¹

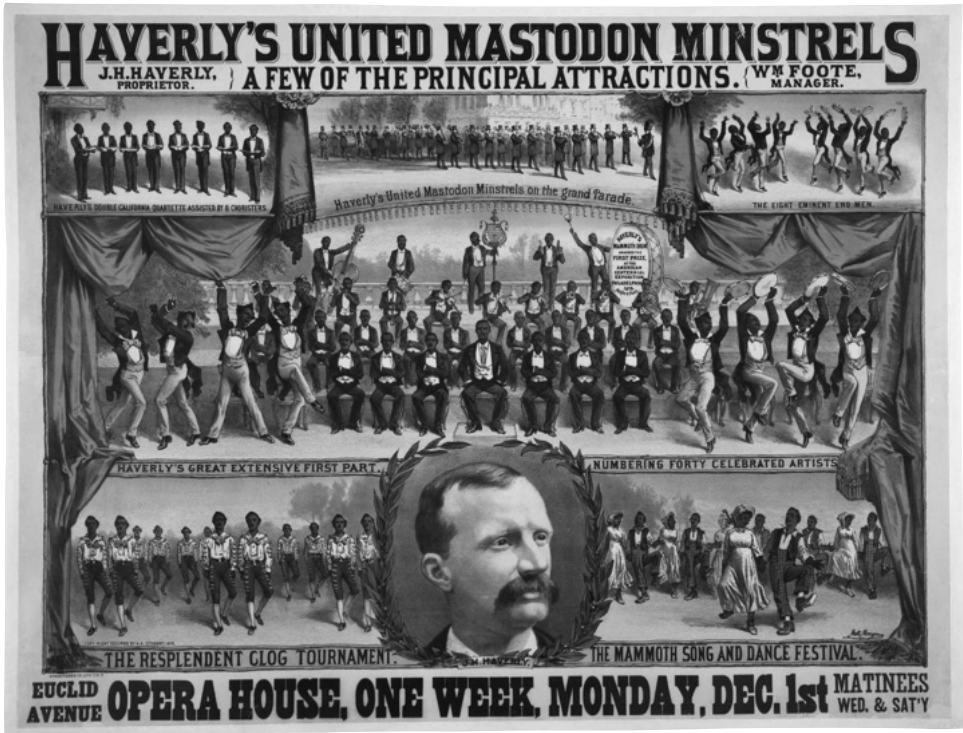
In South Africa, John Blair notes that blackface minstrels "who took part in Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1887 spawned 'Coon' singers in blackface as an on-going part of the Cape Carnival. Similarly in Australia minstrels were a big hit. Theatre records from Sydney show that in the

1870s hardly a month went by without some blackface performances by British or American groups or their local imitators.”⁷² In Britain, Michael Pickering found that blackface minstrelsy encouraged all social classes “to think in racial categories, and to rank those categories on the basis of allegedly innate inequalities between races.”⁷³ British audiences were not confined to young working-class males in its early days; from the outset, the genre was “cross-class and cross-gender in its popular attractions.”⁷⁴ Audiences of minstrel shows in Britain accepted White minstrelsy as authentic because this “authenticity” was defined in contradiction to British cultural identity. Stated otherwise, minstrelsy in Britain—even when performed by White Britons—was interpreted as racial cross-dressing that was not created out of British culture but that had a place in a modernizing British culture. The Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels, which came under the management and proprietorship of Sam Hague (a White minstrel performer who left Skiff & Gaylord’s Minstrels and changed the troupe’s name to Sam Hague’s Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels) toured England.⁷⁵ Hague’s Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels was composed of twenty-six formerly enslaved African Americans who had been freed from plantation existence only a few months before their first performance in England at the Theatre Royal in Liverpool on July 9, 1866.⁷⁶ As Pickering explains further, “Hague hoped to ride the wave of interest in the slavery of the Deep South that had been regenerated by the Civil War. His ragged band, now billed as the Great American Slave Troupe, ...[had] little if any prior experience of the popular stage. They were mainly required to offer a portrait of life on the old plantation, and their only stage costume consisted of garments identical to those worn in their slavery days.”⁷⁷

Initially, *Black* minstrelsy in Canada was most popular in the Maritimes. The region had long consumed Southern nostalgia and Lost Cause justifications. In simple terms, many Maritimers were on the side of the Confederacy, and theatrical productions depicting the *new* plantation only reinforced their beliefs that slavery was right and justified. As John Boyko writes, “[in Saint John] in 1862, hundreds of folks gathered to enjoy a large and boisterous parade celebrating a Confederate victory.”⁷⁸ He further writes, “Its Irish-Catholic majority empathized with Southern nationalism and with fighting a distant government.”⁷⁹ In 1865, *Montreal Gazette* publisher and Confederate sympathizer John Lovell printed, “In the Land

Where We Were Dreaming,” a poem about the South’s lost dream of independence; according to Sheehy, “it became part of the South’s ‘lost cause’ mythology.”⁸⁰ In the decades after US slavery ended, in many parts of Canada the abolitionist cause was replaced with a strong sentimentality for the South and a “happy” return to the plantation. In this context, minstrelsy of all forms flooded Canada with sentimental songs longing for the antebellum past and songs that were coterminous with ideologies of Southern redemption and Lost Cause justification.⁸¹

The expansion of railroad lines in towns that connected Windsor to London and Hamilton, and Toronto to Ottawa, greatly contributed to *Black* minstrelsy’s expansion in Canada. In 1884, the Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo Railway Company was incorporated to build a track from Toronto via Hamilton to the International Bridge on the Niagara River and Bridgeburg (now Fort Erie), however, no action was taken until 1890 when an act was passed granting authority to lease to the Michigan Central or the Canada Southern; this connected Hamilton with the Brantford, Waterloo, and Lake Erie Railway Company near the City of Brantford.⁸² *Black* and White minstrel troupes performed more frequently in Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes after the Intercolonial Railway was opened in 1876, which linked the Maritimes and central Canada. Specifically, it connected Halifax to Quebec City, and eventually provided a continuous connection, with branches from Montreal through eastern Quebec and New Brunswick, to North Sydney, Nova Scotia, and later PEI.⁸³ With the CPR connecting Western Canada to central Canada, minstrel troupes also increased their tours of the Prairies because of the ease of transportation afforded by these interconnected rail lines. The Georgia Minstrels was one of the first to perform at Toronto’s Music Hall on November 21, 1868.⁸⁴ Also that year, they appeared in Saint John at the Mechanics’ Institute, and at Fredericton’s Temperance Hall.⁸⁵ Haverly’s Minstrels appeared at City Hall in Halifax in 1879 before playing Toronto’s Grand Opera House in 1879 and again in 1882.⁸⁶ On December 6, 1879, Toronto’s *Globe* had described the troupe as “Haverly’s Splendid Triumph” in its reporting of J.H. Haverly’s United Mastodon Minstrels who appeared at the Royal Opera House in the city (see figure 5.3). “Numerically the strongest Company in the world. Original of negro minstrelsy and conceded by the press and public a PARAGON WITHOUT PARALLEL,” the *Globe* reported.⁸⁷



5.3 Haverly's United Mastodon Minstrels advertisement, 1878,
Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History | Huntington Library,
Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens | San Marino, CA.

Born near Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, Haverly first launched his show business career in 1864 in Toledo, Ohio, where he purchased a variety theatre; he created Haverly's United Mastodon Minstrels in 1877 after amalgamating four of the companies he owned and managed into one. Suddenly, the number of performers multiplied, and Haverly unabashedly boasted "FORTY – 40 – COUNT 'EM – 40 – FORTY" minstrels; as Haverly's company toured the country, it rivaled the size and flamboyance of the likes of the Barnum & Bailey Circus.⁸⁸ Charles Callender had become sole proprietor of the Georgia Minstrels in 1872 after Hicks, who worked as the troupe's initial manager, sold the company to Callendar.⁸⁹ After several poor attendances, Callender sold the Original Georgia Minstrels to J.H. Haverly who promoted *Black* minstrels by

increasing the troupe's size, adding new features, advertising flamboyantly, and completely focusing his shows on plantation material.⁹⁰ When Haverly took control of Callender's *Black* minstrel troupe and the Original Georgia Minstrels, which were sometimes called Callender's Colored Minstrels, he renamed them Haverly's Colored Minstrels.⁹¹ Haverly's Georgia Minstrels toured Western Canada in the early 1880s, appearing at the Princess Opera House in Winnipeg and Walker Theatre.⁹²

Some of the earliest editorials presenting reviews of minstrel shows, both amateur and professional, appeared in Toronto's the *Globe* in the early 1870s. "This minstrel troupe opened at the St. Lawrence Hall last night before a fair audience. The programme was spicy, and many of the eccentricities performed were well received," the newspaper reported of a minstrel troupe calling itself "St. James Combination" in its frontpage "City News" section on May 10, 1873.⁹³ Haverly's Georgia Minstrels first appeared in June 1877 at Charlotte Morrison's Grand Opera House, and in February 1881 his "Genuine Colored Minstrels" played the venue again.⁹⁴ From Hicks's Original Georgia Minstrels to numerous iterations that followed, as managed by Haverly and Callender, *Black* and *White* minstrels presented pastoral vignettes of the new plantation, stripped of conflict and reimagined as the "authentic" place for Black people. On March 11, 1882, the Grand Opera House "was crowded in every part last evening to hear [Milt] Barlow, [George] Wilson, [George] Primrose, and [William] West's minstrels. This company of minstrels goes far to revive the regard in which the first-class minstrel companies used to be helped in the early days of minstrelsy," reported the *Globe*, adding "From the opening to the close the audience is allowed only moderate relaxation from a strain of high enjoyment. The singing in the first part comprised several novelties rendered by the vocalists of the troupe in good style. This was followed by a series of specialties, character sketches, and dancing, the performance closing with a musical burlesque."⁹⁵ The paper went on to describe the show as "beyond all comparison, the best piece of minstrelsy that has been in Toronto this season." Principal comedian Billy Kersands (1842–1915), who toured North America and Britain as part of Callender's All-Coloured Minstrels (see figure 5.4), was one of the first Black actors to introduce audiences to "feats of dancing with a cup and saucer inside his mouth, or giving a monologue with several billiard balls in his cheeks."⁹⁶ In 1878, an advertisement

5.4 "Lithographic Portrait of Billy Kersands promoting Callender's Minstrels," ca. 1880–85, from the New York Public Library Billy Rose Theatre Division, Callender's (Georgia) Minstrels Collection.



for The Georgia Minstrels' performance at Toronto's Royal Opera House alerted readers that Kersands would be appearing as part of the ensemble. He was described as "one of the most famous of all African American minstrel performers."⁹⁷

When Kersands toured with Callender's Georgia Minstrels he became famous for singing songs like "Old Aunt Jemima" and "Mary's Gone with a Coon." As Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff note, "Kersands' unflagging charisma was an essential factor" in his performances which is why he is "widely heralded during the 1890s and thereafter as an 'unconscious,' 'nature-gifted' performer, Billy Kersands was one of the original architects of African American minstrelsy's 'ancient oddities.'"⁹⁸ His act was renowned for "playing a slow-witted, big-mouthed, black caricature," which also

emphasized large lips and his mouth by acting them out as entertainment.⁹⁹ At the same time, Kersands is an important figure in the evolution of African American performance. As Constance Valis Hill poignantly observes, while audiences convulsed over the slightest curl of Kersands's lips or the opening of his yawning chasm, they also swooned over his dancing. "Kersands was the originator of the Virginia Essence, the most graceful and elegant of all soft-shoe tap dances, which he performed to a slow, 4/4 time signature."¹⁰⁰ In the tradition of the African derisive song that utilized symbolic indirection, the lyrics in Kersands's verses, which he sang while dancing, contained "victories" for Black characters, even if nothing more than psychological reversals.¹⁰¹ For example, his song "Essence of Virginnny" required a nimble "combination of knee work and head buttoning to keep time with the music," described the *Indianapolis Freeman*, the most widely distributed "race" paper of the 1890s.¹⁰² The dance also perfected a variation on the Irish shuffle in which African American ragtime composer Arthur Marshall (1881–1968) once described as "the performer mov[ing] forward without appearing to move his feet at all, by manipulating his toes and heels rapidly, so that his body is propelled without changing the position of his legs."¹⁰³

In addition to his dance innovations, Kersands remixed minstrel songs with African American folk music. In "Old Aunt Jemima," a song that by 1876–77 Kersands had reportedly performed two- to three thousand times, he improvised verses as he performed, something that was rarely done on the stage at the time.¹⁰⁴ In 1884, the *Globe* summed up Kersands's talents as "the greatest comedian living, in his original specialties."¹⁰⁵ When "Mammoth, Callender Minstrel Festival," featuring Billy Kersands, was held at the Grand Opera House on May 8–10, 1884, the paper said the show was in the city, "after its glorious triumph in all the large cities."¹⁰⁶ Before Kersands took his final curtain call on June 30, 1915 at a theatre in Artesia, New Mexico, where he suffered a fatal heart attack after his second performance of the evening, he had made his way into the twentieth century as a *Black* minstrel performer who contributed to the expansion of the genre through dance and song. One of his final hits, "Mary's Gone Wid a Coon" (1880), came to dominate the repertoire of *Black* and *White* minstrels.¹⁰⁷ After Kersands died, fellow Black performer Salem Tuff Whitney (1875–1934) eulogized him as "the best known and best beloved minstrel America

has known, regardless of color. Billy's name was a byword for minstrelsy the country over."¹⁰⁸

In 1876, the *Globe* ran a report on "Coloured minstrelsy" from a correspondent based in Chicago that described Toronto's Cool Burgess as a "Canadian favourite" performing at the New Chicago Theatre in a minstrel combination named, "California Minstrels" where Burgess "perpetrated some of his eccentricities with a face as white as that of a ghost. An unregenerate public viewed the innovation without favour, and after a few weeks' run, this hybrid party withdrew. Since then, there have been several visiting bands of burnt-cork artists, and they have all done well."¹⁰⁹ Even as *Black* minstrelsy took the theatre world by storm, White minstrelsy did not disappear in the 1880s. On May 15, 1883, for example, "a very large house greeted the first performance of Barlow, Wilson & Co's Mammoth Minstrels," reported the *Globe*, adding, "The long and excellent programme was carried out to the satisfaction of all. The 'social session,' or musical mélange, of which the first part consisted, was first-class, the singing calling forth loud applause.... Wilson, the inimitable, kept the audience convulsed with laughter while on the stage. The gymnasts, funny skaters, and concluding burlesque, wound up an entertainment which for general excellence would be hard to excel in the minstrel line."¹¹⁰

Horace Weston (1825–90) was another Black musician, dancer, and actor who toured Britain several times before joining Haverly's *Black* troupe, along with James Bland (1854–1911), one of the most notable Black songwriters of his day. Weston, a freeborn African American from Connecticut, is often touted as one of the finest banjo players to have ever lived, spending most of his career performing with Haverly's Georgia Minstrels and becoming one of the first Black performers featured in a special role when he toured in an overseas production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1873.¹¹¹ As Stephanie Dunson writes, "Bland came to be touted as 'The World's Greatest Minstrel Man' while a member of the internationally acclaimed Haverly's Genuine Colored Minstrels."¹¹² Bland is credited with having written over six hundred songs such as "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" (1878), "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" (1879), and "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane" (1880). According to Pickering, "Bland was a huge success in Britain, achieving for himself the sobriquet idol of the halls, and although he wore black-face when appearing in minstrel shows, he managed

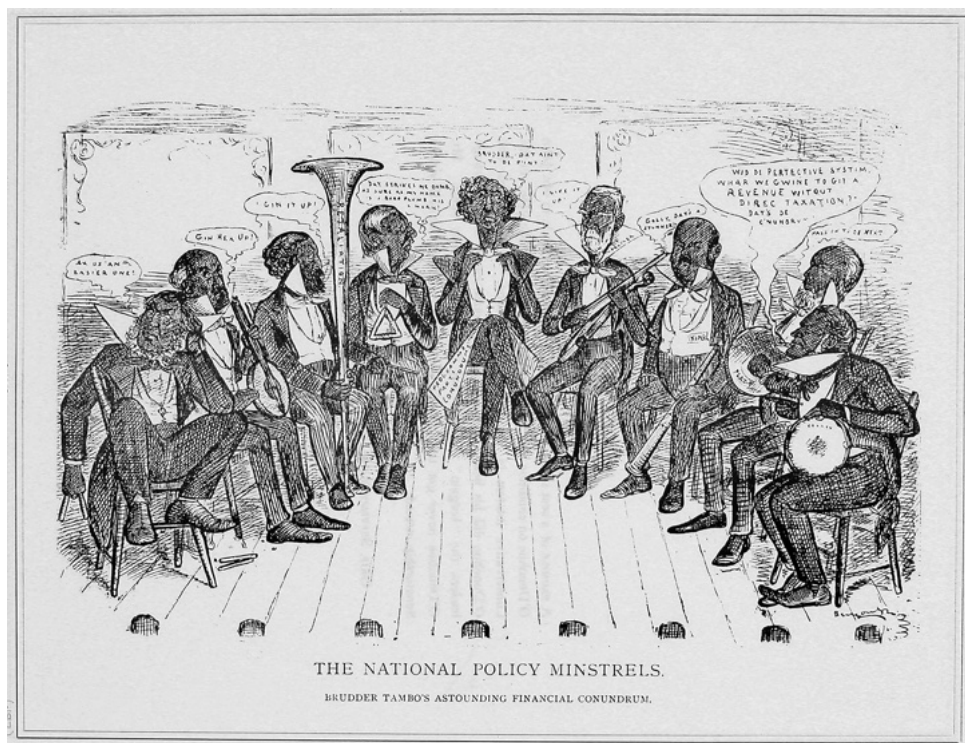
to discard the use of...make-up for his solo performances with the banjo in the concert halls, clubs and restaurants of the metropolis."¹¹³ These African American performers might have offered crude, if not disparaging, representations of "real" life on Southern plantations for the appeasement of White audiences, but given the employment options for Black men at the end of the Civil War, the detrimental stereotypes they peddled on stage must be weighed against the fact that ten years prior, they would not have been permitted to step foot on those same stages.



By 1871, 44 percent of the City of Toronto's total population was British-born, and 51 percent was Canadian-born, largely of British ancestry.¹¹⁴ As a result, it was a city that privileged Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. As Christina Burr writes, "while the rhetoric of labour reformers typically promoted the creation of a Canadian nation that incorporated all workers regardless of race, unskilled immigrants and Chinese workers were effectively excluded as a threat to the status of Anglo-Saxon and British-Canadian workers in the workplace."¹¹⁵ As emergent magazines began to publish blackface cartoons and prints, they helped erase Black people from the Canadian imagination as real people. Inspired by a transatlantic visual culture that had propagated negative depictions of Black people for centuries, these magazines stood as another manifestation of the blackface Atlantic. As Simon Featherstone writes of British minstrelsy, "[it] was not simply an imported [I]ndigenous American form, deracialized and rendered ideologically calm for the easy consumption of respectable audiences.... Rather, they illustrate an active network of transatlantic forms and performances that were energized by old complicities in slavery and emigration, new politics of emancipation, nationalism and imperialist activity."¹¹⁶ Similarly, blackface in Canada was never wholly an imported American form, or a travelling British entertainment; rather, it was a transnational genre that morphed and changed based on the specificities of the local. Its meaning was intimately and complexly reworked and reinterpreted depending on the sociocultural context for which it was either created or viewed, but decentralized in that it could belong to anyone at anytime, could become politicized, or could be denied as holding any meaning at all.

The minstrel show's ability to move in and out of spaces—real and imagined—helped position the genre as “safe” for Canadians to dip their viewing toes into. While lithographic prints depicting blackface were not outwardly about Black people (blackface was not meant to be the focus of representation in a mimetic sense), it was often used as an aesthetic in political commentaries in post-Confederation Canada to defile those political leaders deemed to be harming the population identified as White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and middle class.¹¹⁷ Blackface was depicted as a corporeal reminder of a political system deemed detrimental to “old stock” Canadian interests. As *Black* caricature became the unifying signifier for national rights, it mirrored an American strategy that privileged working-class values and desires aired and reinforced in the minstrel show. Its racial “narrative” dovetailed with its class sources in surprising and sometimes confusing ways; theatrical displays of “Blackness” seemingly guaranteed the atmosphere of licence so central to popular entertainment in this period.¹¹⁸ On August 31, 1878, thirty-five years after the Virginia Minstrels first travelled the Atlantic world formalizing blackface repertoire, J.W. Bengough created the satirical cartoon, *National Policy Minstrels*, that was published in *Grip* (see figure 5.5).¹¹⁹ Bruce Retallack found a cartoon from the magazine as early as 1849 with the central image of a capering French Canadian *habitant* standing in marked contrast to the upright figure of Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine (1807–64) depicted as standing in the background.¹²⁰ Following the 1837/1838 Rebellions, and Lord Durham's report on Canada, Lafontaine, a politician who was born Boucherville, Lower Canada, had been a supporter of *Patriotes* Papineau leading up to the Rebellions, but he switched to supporting a system of working within the existing constitutional order to achieve the political rights of French Canadians, an act that became known as “Responsible Government.”¹²¹

By the mid-1880s, *Grip* hit a peak circulation that varied between 7,000 and 10,000 copies, and the paper was reportedly read by over 50,000 people each week.¹²² As part of the expansion of mass-circulation magazines in Canada, *Grip* reached multiple publics. According to Burr, “politicians expounded their interpretations of Bengough's cartoons in official government institutions and on the stump, and intellectuals commented on his cartoons in competing periodicals. The cartoons, with the aid of the numerous public lectures, or ‘chalk talks,’ that Bengough conducted throughout the country,



5.5 John Wilson Bengough's political cartoon, "The National Policy Minstrels," 1886, M994X.5.273.197, The McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

became part of the everyday culture of work and family in Victorian Canada.¹²³ *National Policy Minstrels* was a commentary but as was typical of *Grip*, it used "weapons of ridicule and satire to demonize...disparate races, religions, and ethnicities. Whatever their differences from each other, all were targeted because they failed to fit the white, Protestant, Canadian-born ideal promoted by *Grip*'s editor."¹²⁴ The real National Policy was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by Canada's first parliament. It set in motion an era of industrial and cultural modernization that would have far-reaching impacts beyond politics.¹²⁵ Prime Minister John A. Macdonald promised that the National Policy would broaden nation-building efforts, including substantially increasing tariffs on a long list of manufactured goods, and introduce measures to promote railway-building and Western

European immigration.¹²⁶ By binding the Conservative Party to building an all-Canadian transcontinental railway, Macdonald added a potent nationalistic mythology to the philosophy of railways; the National Policy, western settlement, and the Pacific railway were all elements of a complex, interrelated development strategy wherein an urbanized and industrialized central Canada, flanked by rural and resource-based regions, would form the superstructure of a newly sovereign northern nation.¹²⁷ Scotland-born leader of the Liberal Party Alexander Mackenzie, Canada's second prime minister (serving from 1873 to 1878), opposed many of Macdonald's policies but what he did share with the Conservative leader was a White supremacist belief that it was the White man's cultural mandate to settle the West and build railways. "It is the mission of the Anglo-Saxon race," asserted Mackenzie in a speech in 1876, "to carry the power of Anglo-Saxon civilization over every country in the world."¹²⁸

By the early 1880s, many social Reformers began to realize that Conservative campaign promises of prosperity for the working class under the National Policy had not occurred, and that overpopulation in cities like Toronto had resulted in factory closures and wage reductions while a handful of monopolists accumulated more wealth.¹²⁹ Bengough's writings and cartoons were transnational, appearing in journals and newspapers such as Toronto's the *Globe*, the *Montreal Star*, the *Morning Chronicle* (London), the *Public* (Chicago), the *Farmer's Advocate* (London, Ontario), the *Varsity*, and *Review of Reviews*.¹³⁰ While his cartoons were about Canada, through the purview of *Grip* he often borrowed from American politics, most notably, Thomas Nast's (1840–1902) style of political parody.¹³¹ For over twenty years after the US Civil War, Nast's political cartoons were the most recognizable visual feature of *Harper's Weekly* (1862–86), one of the most widely circulated magazines in the US.¹³² As Baird Jarman writes, though never an official organ of the Republican Party, "the *Weekly* evolved into a highly influential advocate of Republican principles during the war. By the late 1860s the periodical had established a consistent political viewpoint anchored by...Thomas Nast, who provided political cartoons and other illustrations, and George William Curtis, who supplied political editorials and other commentaries."¹³³

Carl Spadoni asserts further that Bengough's ambition was to follow in Nast's footsteps, but with a Canadian perspective. "Filled with admiration

for Nast's work, Bengough saw at once how caricatures could translate beliefs into graphic statements of moral conviction.¹³⁴ While he used the strokes of his pen to show public contempt and ridicule for perceived-to-be political dishonesty and mismanagement, Bengough absorbed a mentality about racialized others, using caricatures of their likeness to "prove his point," which was something he might have also borrowed from Nast. In *National Policy Minstrels*, Macdonald, as the middleman (*interlocutor*) is depicted with "Programme parti conundrums" written on the left of his tailcoat; his caption reads, "Brudder dat aint to de point." Macdonald is flanked by members of the Conservative Party who are dressed in black tailcoats, white shirts with elongated lapel collars, bowties, black dress pants and black dress shoes. The minstrels all take turns speaking to Macdonald in "black dialect," such as "Ax us an easier one" to "Gin her up." One minstrel is holding a large horn labelled "retaliation." Another says, "I give it up" while holding a fiddle and beside him, a patch on a dress shirt says, "King" with the caption, "Golly dat's a stunner!" A final *endman* is holding a tambourine with, "Wid de perpective systim whar we gwine to git a revenue without direc taxation? – dats de c'nundrum" written on it. As denoted by the cartoon's subtitle, *Brudder Tambo's Astounding Financial Conundrum*, this cartoon is a satirized depiction of the believed-to-be negative effects of the National Policy; however, by appropriating blackface and replicating the style of the Virginia Minstrels (blackface characters seated in a semicircle playing tambourine (tambo), bones, fiddle, banjo, and sometimes triangle and horn), the cartoon is also a commentary on race in Canadian federal politics.

If you consider that Bengough's audience was, like himself, White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant, *Grip's* cartoons demonstrated what Alan Mendelson calls "a bias against most of the ethnic and religious groups that had immigrated to Canada.... Though Bengough did not have the terminology to call 'the Other' by that name, he used ridicule and satire" to perpetuate the view that Black people, Asians, and Jews "belonged to a lower order, with the unstated implication that these groups did not qualify for inclusion in the political nation."¹³⁵ The use of blackface served to lampoon not only a policy deemed unfavourable to working-class White men, but it was also a critique of the perceived *Americanization* of Canadian economic development. Specifically, the National Policy was seen as

replicating key elements of the “American System,” promoted in the early eighteenth century by Henry Clay and other Whig politicians as a system that emphasized high tariffs and infrastructure improvements; the American System had been just as partisan as the National Policy.¹³⁶

Bengough’s cartoons reveal how minstrelsy and politics were always bedfellows. From T.D. Rice to the Virginia Minstrels, White minstrelsy was, from the outset, influenced by sectional conflicts over Western expansion, Northern industrialization, and Southern plantation slavery, not to mention demographic struggles between White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants of self-proclaimed “old stock” who arrived prior to 1776, and Irish Catholics versus Black people. Considering the Whig Party aimed to identify with “rural White common people” and that the party was often lampooned as “sly political manipulators, posturing...as friends of the common man,”¹³⁷ Bengough’s *National Policy Minstrels* similarly spoke to how Liberals viewed Conservatives—sly manipulators lying to the common man. The use of so-called “Black dialect” also perpetuated a racist stereotype about Black people, which was common practice in *Grip*’s cartoons. As Mendelson explains further, Black stereotypes were drawn with distorted features, the jokes used derogatory terms like “coon,” or the characters were depicted either as illiterates who were naturally dishonest, cowardly, or stupid.¹³⁸

In addition to *National Policy Minstrels*, which Bengough continued to produce through the 1880s, in another political cartoon appearing in *Grip* in 1886, titled *The Bill Board Re-Decorated*, he used seven comic panels to satirize the National Policy again. This time, the satirical cartoon parodied Macdonald’s efforts to pursue political reform with Liberal politicians and Ontario Premier Sir Oliver Mowat (serving from 1872 to 1896), both of whom, as members of the Liberal Party, opposed many of Macdonald’s policies (see figure 5.6). Titled, “Mackenzie and Mowat’s Minstrel Combination and Several Brass Band” with a subtitle, “Organized Regardless of Expense or Consistency to Run Out John A’s Greatest Show on Earth,” *Bill Board Re-Decorated* was a parody of showman P.T. Barnum, whose circus was first billed as the “Greatest Show on Earth” in 1871.¹³⁹ The first panel (top left to right) featured Joseph Rymal (1821–1900), Liberal for Wentworth South (Hamilton) serving in the House of Commons from 1867 to 1882, who was a staunch opponent to most of Macdonald’s



5.6 John Wilson Bengough's political cartoon "The Bill Board Re-Decorated," 1886, M994X.5.273.167, The McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

policies, including the National Policy and the construction of the CPR.¹⁴⁰ "Funny Joe Rymal, in his stump effusions," reads the caption depicting Rymal sitting over a desk that read "old jokes" next to a top hat placed on the ground. The second panel includes nine politicians sitting in a semi-circle à la the Virginia Minstrels, wearing blackface and holding instruments with the *interlocutor's* caption reading, "opening chorus 'we's all (illegible) for Ferguson," a statement that likely referred to the Liberal-Conservative political figure Charles Frederick Ferguson (1834–1909), who served in the House of Commons from 1874 to 1896. The third panel features Mackenzie and Mowat in blackface with the text, "Mackenzie & Mowat in their political double songs and dances as formerly performed by John A. and Johns Macdonald." The fourth panel (bottom left) depicts two White men

staring at a sign that read, “regular annual demonstration tour [...] look at the array of talent.” The print listed many other prominent Liberal figures including George Brown and more.

The fifth panel features staunch Liberal Brown in blackface, sitting on a chair holding a banjo, sticking up his left middle finger. The text in this comic reads, “the great & only G.B in his new banjo solo, ‘The Exile of Erin’” while the text on Brown’s elongated shoe states, “there is no standing room for me in the reform party.” The sixth panel depicts six minstrels in blackface plugging their noses in a circle with *interlocutor* in the middle; the text above them reads, “Grand Cabinet Walk-Around By the Entire Company,” a reference to the walkaround of the minstrel show (when a large cast, walking in circular procession to syncopated music, strutting steps, and improvised solos would take to the stage in the finale), with a statement below them that states, “He’s Rank and Smells to Heaven.” The seventh panel depicts businessman and Conservative cabinet minister, Richard (Dick) John Cartwright (1813–1912) in a top hat, holding a gun over a White woman lying on the ground in a dress that declares “Canada” on it; above her, the gun points toward a balloon that reads, “Protection,” and next to Cartwright it states, “The Star Artist Dick Cartwright in His Own Adaptation of Forbidden Fruit,” a vignette that harkens to the myth of White women’s rape at the hands of foreigners. Cartwright was a tenacious foe of the National Policy, decrying the decline of property values, excessive government expenditures, and the increase in Canadian emigration to the US, all of which he argued was the direct result of the National Policy.¹⁴¹

This cartoon ultimately reveals how commonplace blackface was in the visual and popular culture of late nineteenth century Canada. Blackface was part of the Canadian common culture; just as newspapers were read by a wide public, that same public was exposed to blackface imagery even if they themselves did not attend blackface theatre productions. In the 1890s, coon songs, as they were called, would become the most popular form of minstrel music, with the word “coon” referring to the animal raccoon, whose thievery and guile were associated with Black people. It also harkened back to the first Black character of the American stage discussed in Chapter 1, Raccoon from *The Disappointment*.¹⁴² The term was also given new meaning by the success of several African American performers who claimed the term as part of their act. First, Bowling Green, Kentucky-born

Ernest Hogan (1865–1909) wrote a song called “All Coons Look Alike to Me” in 1896, which had accompanied a Broadway musical of the same name. “All Coons Look Alike to Me” became a fighting tune in New York City, writes Stanley Lemons, because “blacks considered it to be insulting for a white person to sing or whistle it. J. Rosamond Johnson reported seeing two men thrown off a ferry boat in the middle of the river in a brawl caused by ‘All Coons.’ When Hogan died in 1905, he had been bitterly attacked by most of the black intelligentsia and was sorry he had ever written the thing.”¹⁴³ Importantly, “a song like ‘All Coons Look Alike to Me’ could, quite simply, not have been written before 1848,” writes David Roediger, “because human *coons* were typically *white* until that point.”¹⁴⁴ However, *coon* had gradually emerged as a racial slur around 1848 when, as he explains further, “it first found racist use mainly on the minstrel stage” where the slur evolved from the character Zip Coon, and in the context of the many references to coon-hunting and eating coons in blackface songs.¹⁴⁵

Hogan’s hit was followed by the first full-length Black musical comedy, written by African American playwrights Robert Cole (1868–1911) and Billy Johnson (1858–1916), titled *A Trip to Coontown*, which debuted in New Jersey in 1897 before touring across the US and finally closing at New York’s Third Avenue Theatre on April 4, 1898.¹⁴⁶ When the show appeared at London’s Grand Opera House during the 1897–98 season it was described as “Bob Cole and Billy Johnson in their roaring, racy, rollicking musical comedy, *A trip to Coontown*, supported by a select company of colored artists.”¹⁴⁷ Cole and Johnson’s show broke new ground, not because it was the first musical to be written, produced, and performed solely by Black Americans, but because it was one of those shows most clearly affected by what Eileen Southern once described as “five kinds of stage entertainment: the ballad opera music extravaganza, the comic opera, the minstrel show, the variety show, and the touring play,” and it created excitement around the potential innovations happening on the American stage.¹⁴⁸

There is no doubt that Quebec City-born caricaturist and illustrator Henri Julien (1852–1908) would have heard of or seen this show when he created his satiric and folkloric series of cartoon images for the *Montreal Star* (1869–1979) in 1899, titled *Songs of the By-Town Coons*. This series stands as a historical example of how a derogatory word, originally meant to deride African Americans, could transform into a word used by African



5.7 The sheet music cover of the *Montreal Star*'s "Songs of the By-Town Coons." ca. 1889–1900. 0007098897. Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec.

Americans as a matter of describing not only a place but also modes of behaviour; however, it could, in the context of an Anglophone-Francophone culture, be co-opted to embody entirely different sets of meanings. *Songs of the By-Town Coons* depicts Sir Wilfrid Laurier's (1841–1919) Liberals, the first Francophone-led federal government, as a group of blackface minstrels (see figure 5.7). As Dominic Hardy explains, "The black/white conflict is implicitly reconfigured as both French/English and Liberal/Conservative conflicts.... The institution of parliament is seen, under the governance of a Francophone-led Liberal government, as little more than the production of a minstrel troupe, as a parody of true (English-speaking, British-Canadian, Conservative) governance."¹⁴⁹ In describing a depiction of Laurier's lieutenant, Lanoraie, Quebec-born Joseph Israel Tarte (1848–1907), and Halifax-born Minister of Finance William Stevens Fielding (1848–1929) singing in "Black dialect," Hardy asserts "[Tarte's] French-Canadian identity is fused with that identified in his time as 'the negro' or 'the coon' by blacking up

and through the adoption of a mock Habitant voice that functions as a replacement for the caricatured 'negro' voice exemplified by Fielding's song.... Julien renewed a longstanding correspondence between the caricatural space of representation and that of the theatre, with which the form was intimately allied in both Britain and France."¹⁵⁰ Where Julien's *Songs of the By-Town Coons* reflected the popularization of racial caricature via the appropriation of racial physiognomies in Canadian visual culture, Bengough's *National Policy Minstrels* and *Bill Board Re-Decorated* spoke to the popularization of racial caricature via this appropriation in theatrical minstrel shows. Both depictions came at a time when a new generation of Canadian-born blackface performers hit international stages.

Most notably, London, Ontario-born George Primrose (1852–1919) teamed up with Syracuse, New York-born William H. West (1853–1902) in 1877, and toured North America initially as part of Haverly's White minstrel troupe until they left to form their own, Primrose and West's Big Minstrels.¹⁵¹ Eventually Primrose and West teamed up with Lexington, Kentucky-born Milt Barlow (1843–1904) and George Wilson to form Barlow, Wilson, Primrose and West.¹⁵² When Primrose and West rose to fame in 1877, instead of the tattered old clothes of a Jim Crow-style performance, their troupes wore satin coats, vests, breeches, silk stockings, low-cut, white satin shoes with diamond buckles, lace collards, and white wigs.¹⁵³ Primrose and West's "Big Minstrels" was one of the first shows to cast Black and White performers who took to the stage in separate parts of the show but fell under the same billing. Ultimately, just as nineteenth-century political cartoons of Irish Catholics or French Canadians are not read as neutral, depictions of White Canadians encoded with markers of a derogatory Blackness are not neutral either; they reflect a pervasive and unchecked racial discourse both informed by travelling blackface minstrel shows, domestic discourses about Otherness, and the "rightful" place for difference(s) in Canadian society.



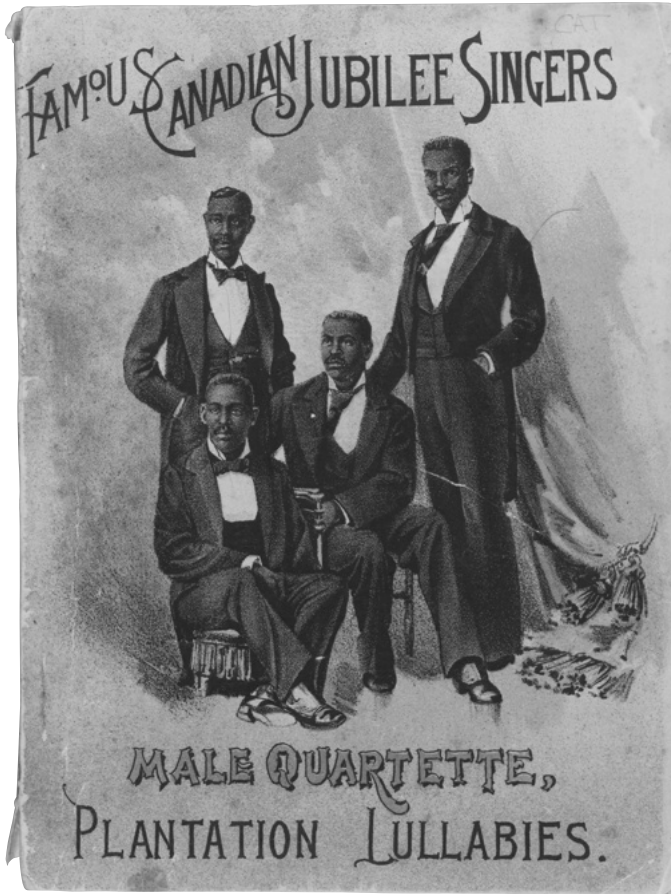
Authentic Black performance—as developed from within and of Black community—existed in the nineteenth century. It took the form of choral singers of Negro spirituals, songs that provided hope, salvation, and inspiration

to enslaved people and post-emancipation. These songs, as first performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, travelled the Atlantic world and beyond with the same frequency as blackface minstrelsy. Their singing was primarily for fundraising purposes, but in the process, they reimagined the possibilities for Black performance on stage. Like many other African American choirs, such as the Wilmington Jubilee Singers (1874–80) who formed out of the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina,¹⁵⁴ there were numerous other singing groups that formed in the 1870s and 1880s, such as the Georgia Jubilee Singers (1876–190?), the Alabama Jubilee Singers (1876–1940s), the Tennessee Jubilee Singers (1876–91), and the New Orleans Jubilee Singers (1873–77), to name a few.¹⁵⁵ In Canada, the Fisk Jubilee Singers first appeared in Toronto in 1880. “The origin of this famous company of vocalists has already been noticed, and so has the cause they are labouring to promote. Fisk University has developed out of one of the schools established in the South at the close of the Civil War by Northern friends of the emancipated slaves,” explained Toronto’s *Globe*, adding that the school organized the band, composed of its students, to travel throughout the US to sing not only in promotion of Fisk but also to help raise funds to get the school out of debt.¹⁵⁶ The newspaper continued, “Starting out with eleven young vocalists, [their business manager Geo White] crossed the Ohio and made his way with some difficulty to New York, where, through the exertions of friends, a more promising career opened up for the troupe and their merits as singers began to be appreciated.”¹⁵⁷ After making a tour of the northern states, the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured Europe, spending three years continuously travelling throughout England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, parts of Austria, and France; they raised over \$150,000, which enabled the university to erect a new hall, enlarge the site of the institution, and advance the school’s curriculum.¹⁵⁸

Their style of singing was not fully appreciated by Canadian audiences initially. As an example, the *Globe* feature also noted, “The company includes four soprano, two tenor, and two bass voices and one, contralto, all of them being of a fine quality.... The pieces sung are mostly the crude... vigorous hymns in vogue amongst the plantation negroes, all of them being extremely melodious, while most of them have been well harmonised.”¹⁵⁹ On their next tour of Toronto, Hamilton, St. Catharines, and Brantford, the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed a catalogue of Negro spirituals, many of

which are still performed today, such as “Steal Away to Jesus” (c. 1862), “My Father how Long?” (c. 1865), “I’m Rolling Through an Unfriendly World” (c. 1840s–1860s), “Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep” (c. 1840), “Home, Sweet Home” (c. 1857), “Bright Sparkles in the Churchyard” (c. 1874), “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” (c. 1847), “I’ve Been Redeemed” (c. 1880s), and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (c. 1872). These songs encouraged enslaved people to flee from their bondage, have hope for a better life, and in the North they provided solace to African Americans separated from family in the South. While Toronto, Hamilton, and St. Catharines were terminal cities on the Underground Railroad, Brantford also had a history of not only slavery but Black emigration and the establishment of Black community, which is why jubilee singing was popular there.¹⁶⁰ In addition to Brantford, Hamilton and Halifax produced their own Jubilee choral choirs.

The O’Banyoun Jubilee Singers, founded by Reverend Josephus O’Banyoun, who was born in Brantford in 1838, comprised seven singers and an accompanist, all but one of whom were from Hamilton.¹⁶¹ This group, which toured North America and Europe, were at their peak popularity during the period between 1884 to 1900.¹⁶² In an editorial in the *Amherstburg Echo* dated November 25, 1892, the O’Banyoun Jubilee Singers were described as “[being] greeted by an audience of about 200 persons at the [Amherstburg] Town Hall, on Wednesday evening, when they appeared under the auspices of the Young Ladies’ Social Club, of the A.M.E. [American Methodist Episcopal] Church.” The editorial continued, “The troupe under the personal direction of Rev. J. O’Banyoun, are travelling in aid of African missions.”¹⁶³ The O’Banyoun Singers also appeared in Windsor that year, giving a concert at the A.M.E. Chapel on November 21 to “an overcrowded house,” as reported in the Black-operated newspaper, *Detroit Plaindealer*.¹⁶⁴ On September 17, 1880, in celebration of the laying of the cornerstone of the British Methodist Episcopal church on Essex Street in Guelph, the O’Banyoun Jubilee Singers performed a special concert in the City Hall.¹⁶⁵ Because the Fisk Jubilee Singers had influenced a whole generation of African Americans and African Canadians, the O’Banyoun Jubilee Singers’ performance included Negro spirituals made famous by the Fisk singers, like “Steal Away to Jesus,” “Turn Back Pharoah’s Army,” and “Good News – the Chariot’s A’Coming.”¹⁶⁶ As Adrienne Shadd explains, “Although initially they sang a couple of ‘slave songs’ or Negro spirituals



5.8 Sheet music cover for the Famous Canadian Jubilee Singers' "Plantation Lullabies," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. ca. 1890–99. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-bb3e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

as encores, they quickly realized that these songs had a powerful impact on their audience and these became the mainstay of their program."¹⁶⁷ The Canadian Jubilee Singers and Imperial Orchestra were another group inspired by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Established in Hamilton in 1879 they performed before the Royal Family, touring England, Ireland, and Wales for five years during the 1880s (see figure 5.8).¹⁶⁸ Like the O'Banyoun Singers,



The Original Canadian Jubilee Singers

5.9 Postcard of the Original Canadian Jubilee Singers, ca. 1890, from the New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division. Helen Armstead-Johnson Photograph Collection.

the Canadian Jubilee Singers were a troupe that featured a male vocal quartet, a soprano soloist, and bass solos by “Boy Boss” James E. Lightfoot, who also served as orchestra director and mandolin virtuoso.¹⁶⁹ William and Sadie Carter, the proprietors and managers of the Canadian Jubilee Singers and Imperial Orchestra, were both from Hamilton; by the 1894–95 season, the group was kept busy with a touring schedule that included a nonstop forty-seven week tour of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan, closing July 26, 1895 in London, Ontario.¹⁷⁰ Importantly, the Fisk Jubilee, O’Banyoun, and the Canadian Jubilee Singers toured cities and towns across Ontario several times over in the 1880s and 1890s, but they were also extremely popular in New York, which is why a photograph of their contribution to Negro spirituals can be found in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City labelled, “The Original Canadian Jubilee Singers” (see figure 5.9).

The group also spent five years touring Britain during the 1880s, dividing their time between tours of the US and Canada for the next three decades.

Their tours were covered by the *New York Clipper* (founded in 1853 by editor Frank Queen), an entertainment weekly that regularly covered sports along with theatrical news.¹⁷¹ The *Clipper* published five reviews of the Canadian Jubilee Singers during their 1895 tour. “We are now in our thirty-eighth week...not missing a night since Sept. 3, 1894. We have been traveling in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan, and our season closes July 25, in Detroit,” the *Clipper* reported on June 1, 1895.¹⁷² “We closed a successful season of forty-seven weeks in London, Can., July 26,” the paper reported on August 3, and then on September 28, “Notes from the Canadian Jubilee Singers and Imperial Orchestra” informed *Clipper* readers that “We are having success so far, although we were compelled to cancel two dates at Warsaw, N.Y., on account of an epidemic of diphtheria.”¹⁷³ The spiritual songs of African Americans and African Canadians were popular with White audiences for several reasons. First, as many of these performers were descendants of formerly enslaved people, their songs were imbued with the spirit of European music, which they would have learned during their enslavement. “Sometimes slaves were permitted in the whites’ churches and exposed to white spiritual music, and versions of these songs began to be heard on the levees, plantations and riverboats. Slaves were brought from many parts of Africa, so there is no clear single musical background,” asserts Angela Files.¹⁷⁴

Second, the common elements of African and American spirituals—syncopation, polyrhythmic structure, pentatonic scale, and responsive rendition of text—resonated with White audiences, though they did not know what to think of Negro spiritual singing initially.¹⁷⁵ Stephen Talty explains further that in the antebellum American South, African Americans and Whites, enslaved persons and masters, freedmen and poor Scottish-Irish farmers, free and bond, “lived in communities more integrated than most middle-class suburban neighbourhoods today” and as a result of this close proximity, when enslaved African Americans accepted the Gospel, they consciously “entered the Western tradition. It was an irreversible decision: blacks committed their minds to the new world and began to focus much of their lives and their strategies for liberation in the church.”¹⁷⁶ Songs like “Steal Away to Jesus,” for example, were plucked directly from the African American experience on the plantation. “Come nightfall, they would steal away and either gather themselves in a prayer house or in the woods for an

'arbor mass.' If the masses were forbidden, slaves might alert one another that they were to occur that night by singing the spiritual 'Steal Away to Jesus' in the fields,"¹⁷⁷ explains Talty further. During some of their early appearances, many jubilee singers evoked hostility from predominantly White audiences who expected them to perform minstrel numbers, not spirituals sung on the plantation to assist those who absconded. However, skepticism and animosity quickly turned to praise and standing ovations as people came to appreciate the singers' voices.¹⁷⁸ As Mark Sanders explains, "That audiences immediately celebrated this 'folk' music, and in turn that this unprecedented financial success inspired similar singing groups...demonstrate the overriding influences of both economic and cultural forces in transforming a functional idiom of ritual into a consumer product better known as performance art."¹⁷⁹

In Britain, Pickering notes while most reviewers were highly favourable of the African American jubilee singers "there is clear evidence of uncertainty and confusion as to how to evaluate their performances, especially among highly educated musicians and writers, with inevitable comparisons being made to blackface minstrels." Pickering writes further, "This was part of the broader pattern of vacillating, contradictory responses made by whites to black entertainers and musicians in nineteenth-century Britain.... Audience perception and pleasure was always mediated by white cultural standards, white race-thinking, and white racial stereotypes of blacks."¹⁸⁰ In Canada, there was a range of performances that took place from travelling circuses to minstrel shows, jubilee choral concerts, and variety acts that reached a broad-based population that included women, children, and the White working- and middle-classes, but also members of the Black community who might have shared the same space at theatre and performance hall venues with the aforementioned.¹⁸¹ By the late nineteenth century, Canadian audiences would have been exposed to happy-go-lucky Uncle Toms alongside abject plantation Jim Crows; "uppity" Northern dandies and depictions of lazy Southern coons. As such, Negro spirituals were not simply another form of Black expressive culture arising out of slavery, but they were quite possibly the first genre of performance that spoke directly to the African American experience.

Jubilee choruses and orchestras might have been plucked from the Southern plantation, but their songs of freedom stood in direct opposition

to *Black* minstrelsy and its reified songs of enslavement. Following an August 19, 1879 performance by the Canadian Jubilee Singers, a review published in the *Guelph Mercury* described their singing as:

... in every respect first-class, and the pieces sang were of a sacred character, mostly plantation songs, the composition of which went to show that although the black man was a slave and in the house of bondage, the spirit was unfettered, and that he was a freeman in the highest sense of the word. Whether in the low and plaintive wail of sorrow, or in the high and jubilant song of victory, there was alike displayed a pathos and vigor enchanting. While the clear intonation in which the words were uttered made it capable for everyone to catch the words distinctly, and while enjoying the music of the song were able to appreciate the words.¹⁸²

While jubilee singing offered the other side of the enslaved coin because performers did not wear blackface nor dress in caricature, they still performed “plantation” songs depicting life from the point of view of the enslaved as only rememberable through song, not through real-life depictions of slavery’s violence and White acts of terror. As John Springhall aptly observes, “Church music or spirituals (‘Let My People Go,’ ‘Angels, Meet Me at the Cross-roads,’ ‘Oh, Rock o’ My Soul’) did not seriously challenge minstrelsy’s plantation mythology, however, but allowed whites to retain their negative caricatures of blacks by focusing on and exaggerating as alien African American styles of worship that differed greatly from more straitlaced white norms.”¹⁸³ As choral singers used the stage to exercise some modicum of “freedom” in terms of expression they still did so during a period of declining Black freedoms. Thus, one of the lasting outcomes of Black performance in this era was the reframing of Black realities through entertainment. As Alison Kibler argues, there were “romantic portraits of a distinctive southern past that erased racial conflict. Such homage to a fictive southern history emerged...which attempted to redeem the Confederate tradition, and in the hundreds of popular songs that presented the South as an escape from the northern city.”¹⁸⁴ At the same time Negro spirituals crisscrossed the Atlantic adjacent to *Black* and White minstrel troupes, all-female acts began to appear on stages across North America, embracing the burnt cork tradition of the minstrel

show by putting on blackface and singing the songs of minstrelsy just as their all-male, all-White counterparts had done during the heydays of the minstrel show. The major difference, however, was that some female performers cross-dressed in male costume, some revealed their bodies in performance—something many audiences found shocking—but all women entered the theatre during its transition into what became known as vaudeville.

White women's performances in vaudeville are an important chapter in the story of racial disguise as they are the link between new and old identities, between modern culture and tradition, between the brutalities of racial hierarchies in America and the "whitewashed" histories of racial unity.¹⁸⁵ Whereas the minstrel show was primarily centred on the plantation, vaudeville's racialized performances emerged in the midst of political struggles over integration and Black migration following Reconstruction. As African American communities became more visible in the North, segregation and discrimination intensified; as Kibler explains further, "big-time vaudeville, with its segregated seating and the prominence of racial stereotyping in its productions, was one of the many institutions restricting African Americans' freedoms following Reconstruction."¹⁸⁶ As White women, Jewish women, Black women, and men took to stages across North America, the racial rules of vaudeville meant that White (mostly male) managers allowed White performers to take on a range of racial disguises, but they discouraged Black performers from trying to "look or act" like White performers. In contrast to White women who had the privilege of playing with Blackness, Black women struggled to be taken seriously, in many cases trying to break into the White ranks of leading ladies and highbrow artists.¹⁸⁷ The next chapter explores the development of vaudeville in the 1870s through early 1890s and the ways this integrated theatrical genre created new opportunities for White women and Black women (and men) who had been left out of the North American theatre just two generations prior. At the same time, vaudeville's large-scale productions and extended tours reinforced power relations that existed in slavery wherein White women maintained some privilege over Black women who remained largely stuck in positions of servitude. As such, vaudeville gave immigrant women, especially Jewish women from Western Europe, the ability to enter the mainstream entertainment industries as

they brought their gender identity, race, and sexuality to the forefront on the stage. They also appropriated the rules of the theatre regarding *Black* minstrelsy. As Lori Harrison-Kahan explains, Jewish women complicated White identity in that “their cultural productions stage multivalent and thus highly ambivalent encounters among Jewishness, blackness and whiteness.”¹⁸⁸ At the same time, in addition to jubilee singers, Black operatic singers challenged the minstrel show’s insistence on stereotypes of Black people on plantations while an increasingly rigid colour line, both on and off the stage, upheld White supremacy and the policing of Black bodies.