

THE 19TH CENTURY US: THINKING ABOUT RACE, CLASS, GENRE, AND GENDER

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THE PROBLEM OF THE DIVA

- “The ideal of upper- and middle-class women was to be domesticized and not to take part in public life. The performing woman was in direct opposition to this ideal and was consequently regarded by some as both making a spectacle of respectable femininity and posing a threat towards men’s masculinity. The diva was simultaneously worshipped and despised, praised and abused, and she had to walk the line between being a respectable role model or a social pariah.”

JENNY LIND (1820-1887)

- 1837: breakthrough
- often a merging of Lind with her roles
- 1849: Lind resigns from the operatic stage
- P.T. Barnum arranges for a concert tour of the North American continent—he promotes her as “charity, simplicity, and goodness personified”
- Lind presented as a pure, innocent girl of un-educated country folk who had risen from her class due to the magic of her voice
- The American opera singer Clara Louise Kellogg-Strakosch (1842–1916), who, in her childhood, witnessed Lind perform in New York, remembered “the way in which she tripped on to the stage that night with her hair, as she always wore it, drawn down close over her ears”.
- Lind’s tripping entrance as well as her simple and tidy hairstyle accentuated a femininity of innocent girlishness.
- Another witness described her in the moment before she began to sing: “[T]he divine songstress, with that perfect bearing, that air of all dignity and sweetness, blending a child-like simplicity and half-trembling womanly modesty with beautiful confidence of Genius and serene wisdom of Art.
- This description with keywords like, dignity, sweetness, child-like simplicity and womanly modesty, corresponded with idealized femininity of the era, even though Lind violated her femininity by performing on stage.
- But another strand of keywords in the quote like divine and Genius revealed that Lind was a diva, a proclaimed artistic genius, and as such she stood above some norms of mortal women.

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JENNY LIND (1820-1887)

- When Lind received Barnum's offer of a tour of the U.S., she explained to a friend that "since I have no greater wish than to make much money in order to found schools in Sweden, I cannot help looking upon this journey to America as a gracious answer to my prayer to Heaven."
- For the deeply religious Jenny Lind, money was not just a tool for a comfortable life, it was an instrument to achieve her philanthropic projects. After the opening performance in New York, Barnum informed the audience that it was Jenny's intention to give her profit of 10 000 dollars from the evening to charity in the U.S. Hereby, she captured the heart of the American audience across nationality, age, gender, and class.
- According to musicologist Hillary Poriss, philanthropy was a deliberate strategy that divas developed to distance themselves from their association with courtesans, which always followed them as female performers and women in the public sphere.
- Courtesans were, according to the general opinion, selfish beings who sold their bodies and made a spectacle of respectable femininity for financial gain, without giving anything back. The trademark of the diva was that she gave back.
- Through her extensive and very public charity Lind fulfilled her personal agenda that was based on her Christian ideal, but in that process, she also distanced herself from the connotations of the public woman. This diva signified that she had a divine mission with her performances. Following this spirit, Lind donated for example 1500 dollars to the building of the first Swedish Evangelical Lutheran congregation of Andover, Illinois. It was called "The Jenny Lind chapel" and still stands to this day.

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ELIZABETH TAYLOR GREENFIELD

- Attempting biographical research for a woman born into slavery and whose correspondence and papers are largely lost to history is, of course, challenging
- born sometime between 1817 and 1826 on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi
- Her first name, Elizabeth, came from her mistress (Elizabeth Holliday)
- Her “Greenfield” surname came from the family that owned her and her mother, Anna Greenfield
- “Taylor” may have been her father’s (whose identity remains unknown) or a family name
- she occasionally used the name Elizabeth or Eliza Taylor on official documents at points in her life (perhaps signaling a desire to drop the “Greenfield” name? but hard to say)
- moves with her Elizabeth Holliday to Philadelphia; Holliday in process of freeing her slaves in the mid 1820s
- Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield’s mother was among 18 formerly enslaved African Americans from the Greenfield plantation who sailed from Norfolk, Virginia to Liberia in 1831
- E.T. Greenfield, however, remained with her former owner who served as her guardian in Philadelphia
- E.T. Greenfield’s early childhood memories likely more of Philadelphia than Mississippi
- became acquainted with the upper-class white neighbors, relatives, and friends of her guardian (we have letters from these sorts of folks authenticating biographical details about E.T. Greenfield)
- some Quaker influence in her Philadelphia circle
- E.T. Greenfield (despite later reports to the contrary) was clearly literate as a young girl and attended Clarkson School in 1833
- She learned reading, writing, and math—a little less clear where she learned to read and perform music
- she was, however, surrounded by a thriving and literate musical community in Philadelphia, including numerous Black professional musicians
- while white accounts from the 19th century emphasize the role of white patrons, E.T. Greenfield certainly linked to the large and prosperous community of free African Americans in Philadelphia in antebellum America
- late 1830s, returns to care for the elderly E.H. Greenfield, for which she was paid (and was a beneficiary in the will)
- supports herself as a music teacher in the 1840s
- 1851: first concert tour



MINSTRELSY'S IMPACTS

- minstrelsy is a pernicious [incredibly harmful] way of organizing visual and cultural stereotypes about Black people in the United States that can still be felt today.
- racist and exploitative
- All minstrel stereotypes are limited in the depth of their characterizations and do not allow for fully rounded portrayals. They are shorthand references reinforcing a patriarchal white supremacist ideology that prevent a role, or a narrative, from developing and moving past established racist formulas.
- as difficult as it is to discuss (or remember), this was one of the most widespread form of popular theatrical entertainment in the 19th century US
- minstrelsy enacted several cultural roles
- reinforcing white supremacy
- allowing minstrels to behave onstage in ways prohibited by polite society (a space for overturning social norms)
- the minstrel stage offered a space for critical commentary not just on Black-White relations but on society in genera: politics, culture, social class
- so minstrelsy not just about white views on Black culture—but also white responses to the conditions of their own lives
- Though the beginnings of minstrelsy as a practice has been written about and traced back to popular theater in the nineteenth century, one of the most common origin stories of minstrelsy connects back to an Irishman named Thomas Dartmouth Rice (aka T.D. Rice).
- Several sources identify T.D. Rice, a traveling actor, encountering a disabled black man who was singing about “Jim Crow.”
- T.D. Rice decided to imitate the man onstage by dressing in tattered clothes, blacking up his face with burnt cork, and doing a dance with a refrain that mentioned Jim Crow.
- Though T.D. Rice was not the first blackface performer, his Jim Crow performances in the late 1820s became so popular that he has become associated with the early stages of the whole style.



MINSTRELSY'S IMPACTS

- 1843: first full-length minstrel show in Boston. Features fiddle, tambourine, bones—note that all the people involved were from a working class Irish neighborhood in NYC
- performing customs emerged:
- 4 chairs in a semi-circle, tambourine and bones on end, violin and banjo in between
- short musical numbers
- often a first part set in the Northern urban scene, a second part in the South
- 1844: a minstrel troupe invited to the White House
- 1850s: countless minstrel troupes form across the country; but the center of this industry is NYC (at least ten minstrel houses open in 1850s)
- use of faux Southern dialect

- From this beginning of Jim Crow, minstrelsy developed a long list of additional characters in this tradition—all of which perpetuated incredibly false and painful stereotypes about Black men and women.
- these stereotypes become a way for whites to project racist fantasies about race relations in the South and the North

A couple of examples:

- Sambo and Uncle Tom: usually used to represent black man as smiling, docile, often sing and dance a lot
- the Buck: often depicted as a large or threatening Black man who was sexually predatory
- Trickster (sometimes also called Zip Coon): mischievous and dangerous character who brings trouble and cheats people out of their money
- Mammy: often depicted as a large Black woman, usually working in a domestic position (cook, nurse, maid) for a white family
- Jezebel: depicted as a highly sexualized Black woman who tempts all men