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Beyond Scared Straight

Shucking and Jiving in a New Age

By

Banks, Janaiya

Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements for the Department of Africana

Studies

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May 10th, 2019

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Abstract:

When minstrel shows were created in the 1830's, they emerged under the claims of being entertainment that showcased black slave life. This entertainment was supposed to serve as a direct representation of black slaves and blackness, for white America, However, the true purpose of the creation of the minstrel show was to be able to control, police and perpetuate the negative narrative of black people in America in response to rising white anxieties and fears of black social and political progression. The characters in the minstrel show, which showcased black people as degenerate and deviant, were effective in making sure this narrative continued. In 1978, Arnold Shapiro, the producer of *Scared Straight!* followed this character framework of the deviant and degenerate black person and crafted a documentary that would highlight these negative characteristics. Almost 40 years later, Shapiro returned with *Beyond Scared Straight* , and continued to push out the narrative of the degenerate and deviant black person. The minstrel show, *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* , were all created to sustain a practice of American Africanism, that is the practice of crafting a negative version of blackness to quell white anxieties and fears.

Africana Studies Final Thesis

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AFST 400 Writing in Africana Studies

Professor van Leeuwaarde Moonsammy

Beyond Scared Straight : Shucking and Jiving in a New Age

I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which, in my judgment, will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference.

- Abraham Lincoln

Introduction

“A necessity that there must be a difference”---Those are the words used by then President Abraham Lincoln, when describing white and black people¹, a man who has often been touted as the man who ended slavery. While it is true that his Emancipation Proclamation outlawed slavery in the southern states, it did not shift the assumption of black inferiority. Like his words above show, white America was hellbent on keeping the difference between itself and black people cemented. This ideology of difference and inferiority can be traced back to the initial encounters between Europeans and Africans. During these first encounters, whiteness began to take its place as the superior race in the world, and with race still being seen as a binary, blackness took its place as inferior. Mark Smith, in his book *How Race is Made*, writes that as Europeans “[made] whiteness the standard” they simultaneously “made blackness deformed and degenerative” (12).

¹ For the purposes of my paper, “black people” refers to black people in America , used interchangeably with black Americans and African Americans.

After the enslavement of Africans and their forced migration to the United States, it became even more important to distinguish what it now meant to be black, especially in direct opposition to what it meant to be white. As slavery progressed, white justification for its construction of blackness and what that construction prohibited blacks from doing was perpetuated through a paternalistic lens. White intellectuals offered that it was completely necessary to relegate blacks to a lower status as a way of protecting them from themselves. It allowed them to avoid the guilt of treating other humans as inferior, instead allowing the “demarcation of blacks as different and inferior [to allow] whites to maintain the rhetoric of otherness while also experiencing that difference” (Smith 21). It also allowed them to continuously profit off of the subjection of black people.

In 1812, white America experienced a challenge to its normal social order with the arrival of British warships to its southern shores. During this time, thousands of enslaved people fled to freedom among the British warships and found a platform to fight back against slaveowners (Millett). This newfound platform unnerved white anxieties and they needed to find a way to quell those fears and continue to perpetuate the idea of the degenerate and deviant black person. White Americans found their answer in the introduction of the minstrel show, which helped perpetuate this negative narrative. For the next 60 years, white minstrel performers and the minstrel show had “a fundamentally racist undertaking, [that neutered] a [black] identity by limiting it to demeaning stereotype” (Smith 3).

In 1865, at the end of the civil war, the white American public was again struggling with rising anxieties about potential black social progression. America struggled to understand what life would be like with the addition of the now free blacks into American social society. With their newfound freedom status, the potential for black people to rise in social status and

dismantle the prevailing narratives of black men and women as lazy, incapable, and unintelligent was frightening for the white public. Because minstrel shows had already been successful in showcasing life as a slave in a more palatable, and therefore explainable, way for white audiences, by relying solely on the ridicule of black people, it was easy for white minstrels to continue using it as a platform for subjugation (Swindler 7). By the time of the Reconstruction Era, they had succeeded in cementing the view of African Americans as degenerate and deviant.

While minstrel shows began as staged performances, they eventually shifted into the radio and tv industries. Scholar Noah Arceneaux notes that a Pittsburgh station was the first to air an entire minstrel show in 1921 (“Westinghouse to Cover Country,” 1921). By 1925 several stations had regularly scheduled minstrel shows². One such show was that of Pick Padgett and Pat Malone, who *Life* magazine dubbed “perhaps the worst blackface team in existence” (cited in Slide, 1987, p.34), yet they managed to remain on the radio, in one form or another, from 1929 until 1945 (Hickerson, 1992, pp. 316–317; Lackmann, 1996, p. 193). In 1945, Pick and Pat were even able to appear on television (“American Minstrels of 1949,” 1949). Negative representations of blackness through minstrel shows had made its way to television.

The final televised minstrel show was *Black and White Minstrel Show* which ran from 1958 to 1978 on BBC. The show had reached immense popularity , claiming over 16 million viewers worldwide. Nevertheless, there was one employee of the company that was aware of the negative affect of the show. He was the Corporation’s Chief Accountant, Barrie Thorne and had had spent some time in the BBC’s New York office and seen some parts of the Civil Rights movement (BBC UK). Subsequently he strongly argued for the show to be pulled from the

² This information comes from a variety of sources, specifically reference to WLS show in Ely (1991, p. 49), reference to KYW show in “Station Gleanings and News Briefs” (1925), numerous reference to WGBS show in the Paskman Papers, and reference to KOA show in “Broadcast Minstrel Show Makes Big Hit” (1925)

schedule.³ His argument was not immediately accepted , but in 1978 (the same year of the *Scared Straight!* documentary) the last minstrel show was broadcasted. Bill Cotton, the controller BBC 1 at the time , noted that “the “racist implication” of [BBC’S] minstrelsy was now obvious to all. Cotton explained “ [i]t’s all very well people who are not black saying ‘I didn’t think about it that way’...it’s the people who are black whose views surely needed to be taken into account” (BBC UK). Although the minstrel show was finally off the air, the usefulness of its character framework for perpetuating the narrative of the degenerate and deviant black person did not die out.

In the 1970’s the status of black Americans was once again shifting. The 1970’s saw the rise of the Black Panther Party and the continued uprising of radical black leaders who were ready to force change in America. This time, white fears and anxieties about the changing narrative of black Americans, particularly black youth, which were now being seen as intelligent, threatening, revolutionary and able to challenge the social order, were quelled by the documentary film, *Scared Straight!* , which showcased black people as deviant, degenerate, and uncontrollable unless the criminal justice system got involved. In 2011, the producer of *Scared Straight!* remerged on the scene with a new version of his documentary, now turned into the tv series *Beyond Scared Straight* . This was three years after America elected its first black president, Barack Obama, who not only shifted the narrative of what was politically possible for black Americans, but also shifted America’s understanding of race.

My research this year reveals that when white America found the narrative of black Americans beginning to shift, in regards to their social and political progression, it needed a

³ Memo from Thorne located in Appendix 4

medium to control the narrative and police the representations of blackness. White writers/producers of historical minstrel show, *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* constructed narratives of black deviance to uphold their beliefs about racial difference. It is my belief that the creators of the minstrel show, *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* are participating in “American Africanism,” as coined by Toni Morrison in her essay “Black Matters,” which serves as a way white writers create narratives about blackness to understand their Americanness. These narratives reveal American Africanism as more than a shadow that hovers in the white writer/producer's imagination, as Morrison suggests, but is constructed as a real life, threatening presence to American (read: white) lives and democracy. Like minstrel shows, *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* were developed as narratives that were used as tools for policing the images and controlling the perception of black people through media in order to dehumanize black people, perpetuate black inferiority and reinforce white social power.

Methodology

I employed the use of content analysis to analyze all of my primary sources. I watched 26 episodes of *Beyond Scared Straight*. I chose to watch the first, fifth and ninth and final season of *Beyond Scared Straight* in order to see how the show was set up in the beginning, the middle and the end. It was important to map the themes throughout the lifeline of the show. Using content analysis allowed me to systematically analyze the hidden and visible content in messages (McDougal 197). I also watched the hour and 45-minute original documentary *Scared Straight!* and minstrel clips that I was able to find online and analyzed pictures of minstrel programs as well as advertisements from that time.

Minstrel shows, in their inherent racist form, are a remnant of the colonial mindset and the subjugation that black people suffered at the hands of white people. There are remnants of silence as a form of rebellion by the black minstrels and by the participants in the *Scared Straight!* programs. After doing further research, I realized that the participants could also be using tricksterism, to survive their time in the jail program. These behaviors are similar to the survival strategies that were used by slaves. Therefore, the Colonial paradigm informed my understanding of the implications of the performances of black actors in minstrel shows and the performances of the black teenagers in *Beyond Scared Straight* . This paradigm was useful in helping me explore how both the black minstrel performers and the black teenagers were affected by the “asymmetrical power balance in the colonial condition” (McDougal 38). Finally, this paradigm will be useful because it is a lens through which “the black condition can be explained in some part as a consequence of systematic subjugation” (McDougal 38).

I employed Africana Critical theory to help me connect how the characteristics of the characters performed in minstrel shows are translated into the performances of the black teenagers in *Beyond Scared Straight* . Africana Critical Theory focuses on how the thought process and lived experiences of African people have been “affected and influenced, corrupted and conditioned by imperialism and the invasion and interruption of African history, culture and society, politics, etc.” (McDougal 62).

I applied Toni Morrison's theory of American Africanism to understand the motives behind the creation of the minstrel show *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* and why the minstrel character framework in regard to the negative narrative of blackness was replicated in the *Scared Straight* programs. Toni Morrison's American Africanism explains why white writers would create an Africanist presence in their work because a “real or fabricated Africanist

presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness” (Morrison 6). For my project I posit that creators of minstrel shows, and the *Scared Straight* programs fabricated a black presence and blackness to quell the white anxieties and fears that were rising before the creation of these shows. American Africanism allows writers to both “demonize and reify Blackness.... It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (Morrison 7). For the creators of the minstrel show and the *Scared Straight* programs, the “chaos” that they were contemplating was black social and political progression. American Africanism provided the creators of both minstrel shows and the *Scared Straight* programs the ability to test the problems of freedom, that is of black freedom, and produce a narrative that would counter that progression and show black people as being degenerate and deviant.

Finally, as an Africana Studies major I use the theory of Black Performance as a Site of Resilience to identify and understand the agency of the black participants in both the minstrel shows and the *Scared Straight* programs as they participated in these performances.

Definition of Degenerate and Deviant

Oxford dictionary defines degenerate as “having lost the physical, mental, or moral qualities considered normal and desirable” (Oxford). Webster’s dictionary defines deviant as “straying or deviating especially from an accepted norm” (Webster). For the purposes of my project, I am defining degenerate and deviant to mean someone who is uncontrollable, illiterate, inarticulate, careless and reckless. These are the ways that black people were portrayed in both the minstrel shows and the *Scared Straight* programs, by their white creators in order to dehumanize them and perpetuate the prevailing narrative of blackness as inferior.

Significance of my project

My research follows Africana Studies thought process as defined by Dr. Marquita Pellerin in “Benefits of Afrocentricity in Exploring Social Phenomena: Understanding Afrocentricity as a Social Science Methodology.” I strived to incorporate all of the elements of an Afrocentric research project, focusing on my “Psychological Location,” a “Commitment to finding the African Subject Place,” the “Defense of African Cultural Elements,” “Lexical Refinement” and the “Creation of a New Narrative.” I am orienting myself within an Afrocentric mindset. I am paying attention to the signs and motifs that are common among the Diaspora as a whole, but particularly acknowledging the specific places and their languages. I intentionally focused on the black participants in the *Beyond Scared Straight* episodes and center their experiences and performances. I was careful to make sure that I did not overlook the agency of each participant. I made sure not to ascribe some of their cultural elements to minstrelsy when they were really just being themselves. My research looked to the analysis of minstrelsy by Africana scholars. My research sought to create a new narrative because the policing of the images of black people using minstrelsy as a point of reference, *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* had not been discussed in relation to one another before.

Minstrelsy

Black People as Characters

Minstrelsy was not the first form of entertainment in which white men used blackface to caricature black people. Before the American Revolution, black people were not allowed on stage because they were relegated to a lower status and most often servanthood. It was not accepted that black people could be sophisticated enough to perform on stage. In Shakespearean dramas such as *Othello*, white performers darkened their faces to play the black moor. The prominent representations of black people rested in either “comic buffoons or romanticized

Noble Savages” (Toll 26). These stereotypical portrayals were based in the Englishman’s view of black people, speaking with an English dialect. Nevertheless, it was an English man named Charles Matthews⁴ who was the first to create a minstrel character around black Americans.

Black characters were represented in American drama literature prior to minstrel shows. In Washington Irving’s 1817 *Salmagundi*, there was a character named a “dancing darky” that was “flat nosed, big lipped. With the ear-to-ear grin.” (Toll 67) This description of this image is reminiscent of the sambo figure with the red lips, much like the coon caricature which was a staple character among minstrel performers. Minstrel show audiences would laugh at the slow-talking fool who avoided work and all adult responsibilities. However, Irving also portrayed black storytellers and fisherman (Toll 67). Other character types attributed to black characters would be their representation as proficient frontiersmen and sailors in James Fenimore Cooper’s books, such as *The Red Rover: A Tale* (Toll 67). While black characters were not always portrayed comically, they were nevertheless relegated to inferior roles, which would explain their evolution into comic buffoons in the minstrels show. The minstrel show was the perfect avenue to “intertwine the general American public feelings of black people as inferior with comic relief” (Toll 31).

What is going on Pre- Minstrel Show?

In 1812, the United States entered its first formal war over Britain’s interference with American foreign trade. Ten years earlier, in 1802, Britain had entered into its own conflict, the Napoleonic Wars with Napoleon Bonaparte, over the control of France. This was spurred by the termination of the Treaty of Amiens⁵. The United States had remained neutral in the war

⁴ “Possum Up a Gum Tree” performed during his “A trip to America” tour

⁵ Treaty of Amiens, (March 27, 1802), an agreement signed at Amiens, Fr., by Britain, France, Spain, and the Batavian Republic (the Netherlands), achieving a peace in Europe for 14 months during the Napoleonic Wars

providing services and goods to both sides. However, when Britain found itself losing the war, it employed the use of the Rule of 1756, which authorized the seizure of goods from neutral countries if they were being sent to an enemy colony (Millet). Furthermore, the British began to practice “impressment” which meant that they could force captured American soldiers to serve in the British Navy (Smithsonian American Art Museum). Angered by this, in 1812, President James Madison stated that “the conduct of [Britain’s] Government presents a series of acts hostile to the United States as an independent and neutral nation” (Records of the U.S. Senate).

This commenced the United States’ participation in the War of 1812. In 1813, Britain invaded the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia which brought the enemy to US soil (Taylor 2). However, Virginia had already been struggling with its own “internal enemy,” the enslaved African Americans who worked their fields. When British warships arrived on the shore, enslaved African Americans took the chance to “paddle to freedom’s swift-winged angels,” the British warships, to find freedom (Journal of the Early Republic). Britain, eager to undermine the United States’ economic ability to fight the war, welcomed the former slaves. Initially British officials were only willing to welcome a handful of runaway slaves, however as the war went on and entire families began to make their way to the warships the runaways “would not take no for an answer” (Taylor 176). During this time, approximately 5,400 runaway slaves found sanctuary and freedom with the British warships (Taylor 176).

This newfound freedom had ripple effects for slavery in the Virginia territory. Newly freed black people returned to America to free other slaves. One such former slave, Presley, fled his master in November of 1813. By October of 1814, Presley returned leading a British raiding party (Journal of the Early Republic). With his newly found emancipation, Presley renamed himself “Washington” and freed the rest of his master’s slaves (Journal of the Early Republic).

The British had spurred what Gamaliel Bradford deemed “The Sampson of Abolition” (Bradford 12). It is important to note that the abolitionist movement in the United States had in fact started at least 50 years before that. However, the British consignment of runaway slaves nevertheless unnerved white southerners and northerners alike. Subsequently, the American southerners needed to find a way to 1) quell the rising concerns in the north of the treatment and general contentment of slaves in the south, 2) squash the idea of the productive black American, and 3) distance themselves from European influences. The birth of the minstrel show was able to achieve all three goals.

The Minstrel Show Origins

After the War of 1812, America was intent on finding a new identity that was distinct from its European influences. Emerging as the first distinctly American form of pop culture, minstrelsy was born in 1828 (Toll 25). The minstrel show was a “unique development, a purely native form of entertainment, and a distinctively American contribution to theatrical history” (Witke vii). Although distinct, most of the songs in the American minstrel show were composed using European tunes. Minstrel shows began and matured in the Northeast and were comprised of comic skits, a variety of acts, dancing and music performances that depicted people of African descent. Its purpose was to create a form of entertainment the American middle-class could enjoy that did not represent the elitist nature of the Englishman. In Spencer Swindler’s essay “A New Jim Crow?,” published in 2008 in the *Black History Bulletin*, he identifies minstrel shows as a way for slave life to be more palatable for white Americans. Swindler writes “[a]t the minstrel shows, whites could laugh at the dimwitted characters who possessed those differences and not feel threatened or ashamed of their own behavior” (Swindler 5). Here the differences that were emphasized regarded language and behavior. Minstrel show audiences

were often made up of rowdy middle-class men who were easily pleased by the gritty nature of the show (Toll 24).

In the 1830s and 1840's, the show's growth built on its ability to bring together common man entertainment and the degradation of America's newest resident, the black man (Toll 25). The goal was to squash any idea of the productive black male and to lessen their perceived threat that had arisen as a result of the abolitionist movement. This is where the racialization of the minstrel show begins, as whites wanted to continue to control the position of blacks in America (Toll 26). It is here that we see the creation of the minstrel show as a way to quell white fears and anxieties about blackness. In its earliest form, blackface minstrelsy was built around the idea of the dark figures in European theater. In American minstrelsy, white actors applied burnt cork to their faces and wore curly wigs in order to portray and mock black slaves. With no intention of showing an accurate portrayal of black slaves or their lives, minstrel shows were to serve as a "comic embodiment of blacks by whites in the opera buffa."⁶ These artificial blacks⁷ were often evil or unpleasant characters; however, no form of discrimination was intended. These imitations were to serve merely for entertainment" (Saxton 27). While the claim was that these characters were only for entertainment, they also served to make white northerners more comfortable with slavery and to solidify the view of black Americans as degenerate and deviant.

Minstrelsy added the promise of satisfying white northerner's growing curiosity about blacks, and especially slaves, at a time when slavery was becoming a national controversy (Toll 34). The northern white Americans believed that the black slaves were gravely different than white Americans, although most did not know what slaves were like. This enabled the

⁶ A comic opera (usually in Italian), especially one with characters drawn from everyday life.

⁷ Here, "artificial blacks" refers to the white male performers using blackface to appear black.

perpetuation of the white fantasy that black people were inherently classless, uneducated and incapable of achieving success without them mimicking white Americans.

Minstrel shows were originally performed in between more sophisticated shows, such as Shakespearean dramas. The popularity of the minstrel show can be seen through the audience's yearning for minstrel characters, even during sophisticated plays. Toll details how one audience is remembered to have demanded that Hamlet stop his soliloquy and perform the song "Possum up a Gum Tree" (Toll 26). The audience members were entranced by the thought of being exposed to the life of a black slave and no longer wanted to see white performers impersonating Shakespearean greats.

Minstrel shows, although differing from performer to performer, always had the same basic tenets. The dialect of the characters was formed from the voyeurisms that white actors made of black slaves. While the dialect was supposed to be accurate, what was observed was often turned into comical displays. African American dialect is often accompanied by movement to "make it do" (Hurston 49). This movement can be seen by the use of their hands and their bodies to emphasize a word. Hurston writes that "we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" (Hurston 50). This can be seen with the addition of illustrative words to inanimate objects such as "sitting-chair, chop-axe and cook-pot" (Hurston 50).

Minstrelsy did not ignore the rising abolitionist movement nor its prominent figures such as Frederick Douglass. Antislavery narratives were often interwoven into minstrelsy as an appeal to the emotions of the audience. In fact, Robert Nowatzki recounts: "In general, minstrel songs using this antislavery trope did not seriously threaten the moral basis of slavery or argue for abolition; rather, they demonstrate how minstrelsy shared tropes and rhetoric with abolitionism

without committing itself to the movement” (15). The rhetoric that it shared with abolitionism would be that of portraying some African Americans as likeable, and some abolitionist meetings also incorporated songs and humor. Nevertheless, well known abolitionist Frederick Douglass had this to say about minstrelsy : “We believe he [the editor of a rival paper] does not object to the “Virginia Minstrels,” “Christy’s Minstrels,” the “Ethiopian Serenaders,” or any of the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens”(*The North Star*, 27 October, 1848.)

Minstrel shows emphasized differences surrounding the language and behavior of black people in relation to white people. This sentiment is echoed by Alexander Saxton, who calls the time of blackface minstrelsy “half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy.”⁸ Minstrelsy also saw the introduction of other characters, Tambo, Bones, Mr. Interlocutor, Long Tail Blue, Jim Dandy, and Uncle Tom. Mr. Interlocutor acted as the emcee of the show, often in-between the other minstrels, Tambo and Mr. Bones. His role was to be dignified amongst the rowdy end men.

White Minstrels

White minstrels entered the scene as “Ethnic Delineators,” who portrayed the life of a slave in a comical way that was palatable to the American public. They emphasized “Negro Peculiarities” also calling themselves “Congo Melodists,” and claimed their acts were reminiscent of an African origin, named “Virginia Jungle Dance “, “Nubian Jungle Dance,” “African Fling” and “African Sailor’s Hornpipe.”⁹In minstrelsy, the “images of Negroes were

⁸ Inurement here understood with the definition to accustom to hardship, difficulty, pain, etc.; toughen or harden

⁹ *Harmoneons*, Philadelphia , January 30, 1844, program HTC

shaped by white expectations and desires and not by black realities” (Toll 22). The decision to use such stereotypical names, that referenced Africa and its perceived savagery, showed what the white performers thought about black people, even before they got on stage and portrayed them in a negative light.

In 1828, an actor named Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy Rice” was the first to appear in a minstrel show as a white actor appearing physically as a black character. Here we see the introduction of blackface on the American scene, as he darkened his face with burnt cork. Daddy Rice’s “Jim Crow” character was based on a man that he saw on the side of the road while traveling through the south. The man appeared to be crippled and was doing a “peculiar shuffling dance” and singing a catchy tune (Wittke 62). Rice took this and turned it into a part of his set. His portrayal of “Jim Crow” was new and exciting and became a national sensation. The Jim Crow character was the perfect example of how different white and black people were and supported the idea that black people were inferior, and that white people were the most sophisticated.

Following Daddy Rice, other performers began using black face and caricaturing black slaves. Other performers, like George Nichols, Bob Farrell, George Washington Dixon, J.W. Sweeny and John N. Smith found similar success as they toured the States. Shortly after the arrival of the “Jim Crow” character, a new character, “Sambo,” appeared on the scene. Introduced for the first time in the play “The Patriot,” Sambo was a loyal trusted black servant (Moody 68). In Anna Cora Mowatt’s 1845 comedy, *The Fashion*, the sambo archetype appeared again, represented by the character Zeke (Matlaw 32). Zeke’s opening lines declared that based on his clothes and his vocabulary, he could now be considered a white man (Toll 29). This however was the punch line of the show, because Zeke was trying to be something he was not--a

white man. Zeke supported the idea of white Americans that black Americans were striving to be like them. For the white audience, the idea of the black man trying and failing to be like them was comical.

In 1843, twenty years after Daddy Rice first performed “Jim Crow”, the Virginia Minstrels hit the stage in New York City. This was the first time an entire minstrel show was performed and coined as an evening of “oddities, peculiarities, eccentricities, and comicalities of that Sable Genus of Humanity” (Virginia Minstrels, Dublin Ireland 1844 program).¹⁰The Virginia Minstrels took their performances worldwide and performed the same show in Ireland. It represented a shift in the legitimacy of minstrel shows. The Virginia Minstrels differed from the earlier minstrels who portrayed Jim Crow and Zip Coon because their performances claimed to represent “the sports and pastimes of the Virginia Colored Race, through medium of Songs, Refrains, and Ditties as sung by Southern Slaves” (Virginia Minstrels, Dublin Ireland 1844 program). These minstrels were legendary, “bursting on stage in makeup which gave the impression of huge eyes and gaping mouths, wearing ill fitting, patchwork, clothes, and speaking in heavy [“n*****”] dialects (Toll 36). Once on stage, the performers rarely sat still, instead contorting their bodies, cocking their heads, rolling their heads and twisting their legs in grotesque ways (Toll 36). While white minstrels might have observed this from voyeurism of black slaves, they lacked Zora Neal Hurston’s understanding of black expression as exaggeratory and dynamic in order to emphasize meaning.

This was the catalyst of the mainstream popularity of minstrel shows. In 1844, the Ethiopian Serenaders, a blackface minstrel troupe, performed at the White House for the

¹⁰ This show program was the same from the New York show

“Especial Amusement of the President of the United States, His Family and Friends” (Toll 31). This group was the first to seek the “respectability of high culture” and began concentrating on blackface concerts (Toll 53). Minstrel shows would continue to be performed at the White House in the coming years, entertaining Presidents Tyler, Polk, Fillmore and Pierce. This essentially legitimized minstrelsy as an appropriate form of entertainment and solidified it as accurate portrayals of black slave life. It was accurate in the idea that black people’s perceived inherent deviancy and degenerateness was comical. The demand for minstrel shows became insatiable, and minstrel troupes began to pop up everywhere.

While most popular minstrelsy leaned to the comical nature of black slaves, Stephen Foster had a more emotional approach. His songs and acts portrayed the romantic and sentimental view of American slaves (Howard pp 124-125). The slaves in his minstrel shows, were “happy and carefree, contented old men or exiles longing to return home” to Africa (Toll 37). These slaves would mention thoughts of freedom but would never strive to achieve it. Foster’s version of a minstrel show contradicted the narrative of only providing white northerners with the ludicrous caricatures of black slaves. The Christy Minstrels, debuting in 1844, combined the comedic aspects of the Virginia Minstrels and the emotional aspects of Foster’s shows to create the ideal minstrel medley(Toll 37).

The northern public, having mostly been unexposed to black slaves, were said to have mistaken the white performers for actual black slaves (Field 26). Minstrel performers, not wanting to be mistaken for an actual black person, then decided to make it explicit that only their makeup made them black. White Minstrels resented any implication that they had even the “least drop of black blood in their veins; so, they lost no time in publishing portraits of themselves with the white faces bestowed upon them by nature” (Living Age 138). This was to distance

themselves from being racially black as much as possible, to make sure the audience knew that they were only mimicking black life. Interestingly enough, although white minstrels went through great pains to cement their white identities, they also claimed to be authentic delineators of black life (Toll 40).

Furthermore, there was no attempt by the producers of minstrel shows to include black performers or even black input in their shows. In fact, although minstrel shows were often held near black communities, the producers still barred their contributions. This led to wide inaccuracies about actual slave life and the perceived slave life that white minstrels performed. That is, the marked and deliberate differences between actual slave life, in the North or elsewhere, and representations of slaves on the minstrel stage reflected the social and political desires of white northerners looking forward (Jones Jr 7). Remembering that minstrelsy emerged shortly after War of 1812, and the surge of enslaved people finding freedom through Britain, it is plausible that white northerners would be trying to cement their social status as being on top of the social ladder and civilized and cement the idea that black people were not. This is seen through their character portrayals, which only showcased negative portrayals of black people. One scholar deemed this the “social unconscious of blackface”(Lott 20). Blackface was then used as a way for white northerners to display the “worst case condition” of life post- civil war. Why would white America, on the one hand be obsessed with portraying blackness and , on the other hand, obsessed with claiming whiteness? It was because they were in fact obsessed with controlling the narrative of black people in America. They wanted to perpetuate the idea of the black man as inferior and portraying them as deviant and degenerate was the perfect way.

Reconstruction Era

In 1860, the election of Abraham Lincoln sparked a civil war. Lincoln was elected president without a single southern vote (Encyclopedia of American Studies). Lincoln represented the Republican party, which had become increasingly opposed to the institution of slavery. This sparked a response from seven southern states who decided that the United States no longer represented their views concerning slavery. Subsequently, the states seceded and formed their own government, the Confederate States of America (Encyclopedia of American Studies). This birthed the American Civil War, which lasted from 1861-1865. The economy in the south rested primarily on slave labor, which helped to fund their war efforts (Encyclopedia of American Studies). Knowing this, Lincoln, who was commanding the northern war front, sought to undermine their economy and therefore their stance in the war. In 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, an attempt to abolish slavery in the United States through executive decree (Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World). The proclamation declared an end to slavery in areas that remained in rebellion against the U.S. government, but the proclamation carefully avoided freeing slaves in the border states or in regions of the Southern Confederacy that were already under the control of Union forces (Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World). This is evidence that the proclamation was never really about the abolition of slavery, but about the undermining of the south's economic foundation. The proclamation was a huge step towards the 13TH amendment ¹¹which effectively abolished slavery in the United States. There was now an entire

¹¹ The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery and all forms of involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime, throughout the United States. Ratified on December 6, 1865, the amendment is a significantly more comprehensive measure than the Emancipation Proclamation.

population of newly freed slaves who needed to find a new place in the American social order. This thrust America into what is known as the Reconstruction Era.

The Reconstruction Era marked the time period in which the southern states that had seceded were brought back into the Union. Following the abolition of slavery, Lincoln created the Freedmen's Bureau, a temporary federal agency run by the War Department charged with easing the former slaves' transition to freedom (Ross 277). His reconstruction policy included giving black men the right to vote and introduced protections for the freedman and their property and basic civil rights (Ross 277). The tides were beginning, ever so slowly, to turn for the newly freed black Americans, but were abruptly stopped by the assassination of Lincoln one month into his 1865 term (Rose 227). The new president, Andrew Johnson, radically changed the outlook for Reconstruction and African Americans once again found themselves struggling to insert themselves into the American public and make a place for themselves in popular culture. Some former slaves found a place in the minstrel show joining the freedmen who had already begun performing in the 1850s.

Black Minstrels

Before the influx of black performers into minstrelsy, there was one black performer, a dwarf named Thomas Dilward, also known as "Japanese Tommy." Dilward was famous for violin playing, singing and dancing, but his main attraction was his height. Standing between twenty-three and thirty-six inches tall he was seen as a "curious attraction" and could perform with white minstrel groups (Early Days of Burnt Cork Minstrel Boston Globe, 1879). This, however, did not signal the beginning of black minstrel performers, who did not join until the later 1850s. Blackface minstrelsy took on a new face as "negros became the 'delineators of Negro life'" (Toll ch 5 p2). As early as 1855, African American minstrel troupes formed and

began to perform. After the Civil War, more former slaves began to get involved in the minstrel industry. Minstrelsy allowed for the first large scale participation in American show business.

The Minstrel Show at that time was one of the greatest outlets for talented [Negro] musicians and artists, stated W.C. Handy, a prominent black minstrel in the 1890s (Toll 195).

Black minstrels found success by emphasizing their authenticity as real Negroes and their claim to be ex-slaves. Unlike white minstrel performers, who relied on their voyeurisms of slavery to perform in the shows, the black performers did not have to rely on artificiality to perform these characters. Black minstrels, realizing that the legacy of minstrel shows could not be changed, began to market themselves with the understanding that performing the stereotypical characters was inevitable. Their presence on the stage was often relegated to a privilege of their freedom, with one headline reading “SEVEN SLAVES just from Alabama who are now EARNING THEIR FREEDOM by giving concerts under the guidance of their northern friends” (Toll 198). However, the performers were already free and this claim of “earning their freedom” was just used to authenticate their connection to slavery. This caused black minstrels to become the “acknowledged minstrel experts at portraying plantation material” (Toll 196). Nevertheless, black minstrels were entering an already cemented show type with the stereotypes that were already embedded in the show. The stereotypes served to control the image of black people for the white public, showing them as less than. Black minstrels then reinforced the stereotypes by making it seem like black people actually behaved like the black caricatures in minstrel shows (Toll 196).

In order to gain popularity with white audiences, black minstrels marketed themselves as “genuine,” “real” and “bona fide” Negroes (Toll 200). This was ironic, because these performers

were in fact participating in a manipulative form of performance as defined by bell hooks.¹² However, in the early years, black minstrel performers faced discrimination for being bona fide, with one newspaper editor saying, “Not being so idiotic as Black Tom [Blind Tom]¹³.... they are not doing so well as the latter gentleman” (Clipper Oct 21, 1865). Here the later gentlemen was referring to white minstrels. Nevertheless, as the years progressed, and blackface minstrelsy began to become more popular, comments like this decreased (Toll 200). African American minstrel performers, in order to further distance themselves from white minstrels, did not often use burnt cork. Astonished that black minstrels actually were “of all hues and complexions from light cream tint down to the darkness visible at Sanford’s House¹⁴,” northerner’s eyes were opened to a new version of the minstrel show where black minstrels were not uniformly painted imitations, they were the real thing, referring to their ethnic blackness (Toll 201) This change in actors represents a shift in the content of the minstrel show, and that the “minstrel shows were not taken seriously...It was entertainment” (Bauch). Bauch also notes that “even black minstrel performers kept to the racy stereotypes”(Bauch). For the black minstrel performers, the idea of manipulative performance would explain why they chose to continue to play the stereotypical characters formed by the white minstrel actors. Understanding that their success in the minstrel industry was intrinsically tied to the American Africanism that the white audience had created for them, they played their part.

Another way that black minstrels legitimized themselves was by harping on their connection to the plantation and its way of life. One of the most popular black minstrels’ groups

¹² Hooks defines this as a performance that as a necessity of survival in an oppressed world. Discussed further on page 55

¹³ Blind Tom was a character created by White minstrels. Here, the misrepresentation of Blind Tom as Black Tom is meant to be denigrating.

¹⁴ A white Minstrel Theater

was Brooker and Clayton's Georgia minstrels, who called themselves "The Only Simon-Pure Negro Troupe in the World" (Toll 199) This minstrel group was so popular that the northern public, curious about the newly emancipated slaves, flocked to see and learn about them (Toll 199). This group's impact was so large on the black minstrel scene that they began being known as the Colored Minstrels, as opposed to the Negro Minstrels, which white minstrel performers were called. It was also noteworthy because it was a black owned minstrel group. By 1866, because of the popularity all black troupes had been having, white men began starting and funding their own black minstrel troupes. Ten black minstrels joined and toured with a company owned by Sam Hauge (Toll 199). Hauge's Slave Troupe first found success in England which then led to the black entertainers becoming successful in America (Toll 199).

The Simon-Pure Negro company was marketed as being composed of "men who during the war were slaves in MACON, GEORGIA, who having spent their former life in Bondage... will introduce to their patrons PLANTATION LIFE in all its phases" (Toll 201). African American minstrels benefited from this characterization, because "being genuinely from the south, they were great delineators of genuine darky life in the south, introducing peculiar music and characteristics of plantation life"(Troy Wig quoted in Clipper Dec 30, 1865). Nevertheless, the view of African American minstrel performers was not as entertainers, but as people "[indulging] in reality" (Toll 201). Black minstrelsy was not a show, instead it was deemed a display of the natural impulses of the black performers (Toll 202).

Othering the Black Performer

The perceived authenticity of African American minstrels was huge competition for white minstrels. After the emergence of black minstrels, white critics began to question whether white minstrels were qualified to "perform Negro, especially plantation material" (Toll 202).

One critic noted that “there is nothing like the natural thing, and that a negro can play negro’s peculiarities much more satisfactorily than the white ‘artist’ who with burnt cork is at best a base imitator (Toll 202). This was one of the causes for the white minstrels to decrease the use of plantation material in their shows, instead shifting to variety acts, such as sports.

During the early days of the minstrel show, white minstrel performers and audience members had no interest in socially engaging with black people, let alone black minstrel performers. There was however always an economical and intimate (although often forced) engagement with black people. However, this is not supported by the early claims (by white minstrels) that they based their skits on observations of actual African Americans. In fact, some claimed that minstrel shows were created with the idea that it would be a bridge between lower class white people and black people. Touted as a “form of engaging the black ‘Other,” this engagement was never “supportive of action to correct the Other’s social plight” (Jones Jr 22). Here social plight refers to the lower social and economic status of African Americans. This assertion is false however because during this time there was no social progression, that is an increase of respect and equality, for the black participants. Nevertheless, it is clear that “blackface minstrelsy was for, by and about the white community” (Jones Jr 2).

The characters in the minstrel show continued to perpetuate negative stereotypes about African American slaves. The fact that once black Americans joined into the minstrel scene as performers, white minstrels found less popularity speaks to the idea that white minstrels were never authentic in their performance in the first place. White minstrels based their understanding of plantation life on their individual experiences when watching one subset of blackness. In addition, there was no way of knowing if the slaves were performing while they were being watched, or if they were being authentic. For black minstrel performers, they had the lived

experience from which to provide authenticity for their characters. While the ethnic authenticity was good for their popularity, it was not good as it reaffirmed negative stereotypes about black slaves. However, this begs the question of how the black minstrels could have used this time to assert their agency to change their current circumstances.

Minstrel Aspects

Language

White minstrels based the dialect they used during the minstrel performances on one of the three major varieties of black English at the time, West African Pidgin English, Planation Creole and Black English Vernacular (Mahar).

Jim Crow

The Jim Crow character spoke in broken English, in direct contradiction to his Dandy counterpart. See Appendix 1 for the lyrics to the most popular song performed by the Jim Crow character, “Jump Jim Crow”. Written phonetically, the lyrics are meant to showcase the illiterate nature of the black slave, as he fumbles to express himself. Performed opposite the more “sophisticated Dandy,” Jim Crow’s lyrics were supposed to illuminate his stupidity.

Zip Coon

The Zip Coon character spoke in what he perceived to be a more sophisticated way. Its role was to showcase how ignorant the Jim Crow character was, both through the language and through the content of his song. See Appendix 2 for the lyrics to one of the most popular Zip Coon song “Zip Coon”. These lyrics showcase the Zip Coon’s striving to be better, where he posits becoming the president of the United States one day. His use of bastardized

English delighted white audiences and reaffirmed the then commonly held beliefs that blacks were inherently less intelligent.

Interlocutor, Mr. Bones and Tambo

The Interlocutor's role was to point out how inarticulate Mr. Bones and Tambo were. In Appendix 3, you can see a conversation between Mr. Interlocutor and Mr. Bones, where Mr. Interlocutor serves to explain what Mr. Bones is really trying to say. The lyrics show a clear difference between the poised and well-spoken Mr. Interlocutor and Mr. Bones, who does not have the vocabulary nor education to speak well. Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo, speak ignorantly, often mispronouncing common words and being none the wiser.

Behavior

Jim Crow

The "Jim Crow" character represented the slave, "the lazy and careless Southern Negro...who drifted around and had a fondness of watermelons (Witkke 180). Carl Wittke argues this was to "give the impression that all negroes were lazy, shiftless fellows, careless of the morrow (8) The arrival of Jim Crow was to provide the final ingredient in the total pattern of anti-black prejudice' (Dormon 118).

Zip Coon

The Zip Coon character represented the "urban dandy type" with pretensions of grandeur. If the minstrel skit had an ante-bellum setting, the coon was portrayed as a free black; if the skit's setting postdated slavery, he was portrayed as an urban black. He thought he was as smart as

white people; however, his frequent malapropisms and distorted logic suggested that his attempt to compete intellectually with whites was pathetic (Pilgrim).

Mr. interlocutor, Mr. Bones and Tambo

Mr. Interlocutor acted as the emcee of the show, often in-between the other minstrels, Tambo and Mr. Bones. His role was to be dignified amongst the rowdy end men.

“The interlocutor usually was a big man, and he always was attired in a large, full dress suit, or in some very conspicuous uniform. He played ‘straight.’ The first requirement for a successful interlocutor was a big, booming voice, for the success of the end men’s ‘gags’ depended largely on the former’s ability to make himself heard by the audience, and on his success in stringing out his questions and comments until the most stupid person among the listeners could not fail to grasp the point of the joke when it cracked at last from the big lips of the end man. The interlocutor was at once the announcer for the show and the ‘feeder to the comedians.’” Wittke 139

The interlocutor never put on black face and did not wear a curly afro wig. He stood out as the cultured man who had to explain for the classless around him, both in the audience and on stage.

Scared Straight!

What is going on pre-*Scared Straight!* ?

The 1970’s marked a time where the fruits of the 60’s civil rights movement were being seen. In the decade before the 70’s America saw the rise of black leaders and revolutionaries such as Malcom X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and the Black Panther Party. The 60’s were marked by impressive political gains ¹⁵for African Americans. By the 70’s, however, the United States government had effectively infiltrated and dismantled the Black Panther Party. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X had been assassinated, but their legacies and ideologies lived on. African Americans continued the fight for equality and showing the world what they were

¹⁵ [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#), and the [Fair Housing Act of 1968](#)

capable of. The political climate had shifted, and African Americans were gaining respect. The 70's saw the Supreme Court, uphold the busing of students to achieve integration¹⁶, the first major party African-American candidate for President of the United States¹⁷ and the founding of Black History Month¹⁸.

Needless to say, for white Americans who still held racist views, their anxieties were on the rise as a result of all of the progress. George Lewis ,a Lecturer in American History at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom, discusses the “white response” to the movement in his book *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights*. Lewis defines massive resistance as “a multilayered and multifaceted campaign to resist the concerted attempts of both federal forces and indigenous civil rights movement to ameliorate the position of blacks” (176). White anxieties about black social progression needed to yet again be quelled and the American Africanism that was employed by the creators of minstrel shows was the perfect answer. Following this same ideology, of showcasing black people as degenerate and deviant, the documentary *Scared Straight!* served the purpose of creating and controlling a narrative that would reflect black people in a negative light.

History of the *Scared Straight!* Program

In 1978, Roul Tunley's article “Don't let them Take Me Back!” spurred nationwide interest in Rahway Prison's Juvenile Awareness Project, two years after its inception. The Juvenile Awareness Project was the birthchild of Rahway's Lifer's Group. “Lifer” is a term given to someone who has received a prison sentence that is so long it will ultimately end in them dying in prison. This group of men had been convicted of some of the most heinous crimes

¹⁶Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education

¹⁷ Shirley Chisolm

¹⁸ Professor Carter Woodson

and had sentences ranging from 50 years to life in prison. Lifer Richard Rowe was the mastermind behind the first iteration of the program. Rowe, serving a double-life term for rape, kidnapping, and armed robbery, was “personally motivated to try to do something for kids over concern from his own then twelve-year-old son who was getting in to trouble on the outside” (Finckenauer 68). Basing his idea on the prison tours that he had seen colleges hold to showcase prison life, he believed that they could replicate the program for kids struggling with delinquency. Here, the purpose of the project differed from that of the college tours, which were supposed to be educational, and the purpose for the program for juvenile delinquent now shifted to deterrence. In 1976, after receiving approval from a local judge and the current warden, the first group of young delinquents were brought into Rahway prison (69).

At first, the prison tried to keep its program under wraps, but it quickly spread to neighboring police departments and organizations. The young delinquents were brought into the prison, briefed by a guard, passed through a metal detector and then entered into a normally prohibited area of the prison (69). The Lifers then began to “rap” with them. These rap sessions employed harsh language to discuss prison violence, including assault and murder, homosexual rape, suicide as a fact of prison life, inedible food, the impersonal atmosphere in which there is no unity among inmates and the need to live ‘by the bells.’¹⁹(69). Following this, there was a brief tour of the prison, including viewing the “Hole” or solitary confinement. Like minstrels shows articulated the promise of an authentic look into the life of black slaves, the Juvenile Awareness program was to be an authentic look into the life of inmates.

¹⁹ ‘By the bells’ refers to the bells that indicate when the inmates can move about the prison, sleep and eat.

Tunley's article was the first mainstream introduction of the show to the outside world. By the time he participated in the program, the "Lifer's approach evolved into a form of shock therapy rather than a form of counseling...there was no overt attempt to intimidate or terrorize the youngsters at first, but this later became a more prominent and dramatic feature of the project" (69). Like the minstrel shows, which first started without the inclusion of race as the dramatizing factor, the prison program felt that it needed to increase its dramatics in order to be both more effective and authentic. Minstrel shows introduced race as a way of quelling white anxieties and creating a narrative about what blackness was. Tunley's article, which detailed his observation of the Juvenile Awareness Project, piqued the interest of director of motion pictures and special projects for Golden West Television, Arnold Shapiro (87). In April of 1978, Shapiro approached the prison superintendent and a sergeant at the prison, to get permission to accompany a group of teenagers into the prison, in order to "[get] a firsthand taste of what a Lifers session looked, sounded and felt like" (92).

Shapiro approached both the Lifers and the programs that referred youngsters to participate in the Juvenile Awareness Project, with the idea of creating a documentary that would capture all that the program was doing. Shapiro hoped to portray the students "before, during and after their Rahway visit." (92) This would be the first time that 1) the faces of the juveniles would be shown, and 2) obscene language would be heard on television (93). Shapiro did not have a hand in picking the 13 youngsters that would appear in his documentary. The participants agreed to accept the experiment in lieu of jail time and/or probation/public service. The participants were required to receive parental permission to be filmed. Shapiro noted that he wanted "a mixture of kids-by age, race, sex and offense type" (94). There is argument surrounding whether the locations from which these participants were chosen was planned or

were just coincidences. The white kids in the program were deemed as “softcore” by Shapiro, coming out of Ridgefield Park, a suburban middle-class community where the kids were less serious “law breakers” (94). On the other hand, the black kids were considered “hardcore” and came from Passaic, an urban neighborhood (94). Here, softcore crimes refer to things like smoking marijuana or skipping school. The black participants, however, were in the program for “hardcore crimes” such as gang affiliation and auto theft. According to Shapiro, the teenagers were not directed on how to act, respond, or express themselves in the prison (95).

Participant Response

Although both the participants and their parents had signed waivers agreeing to their participation in the program and the filming, in 1979, they filed a 10-million-dollar lawsuit against Arnold Shapiro, Golden West Broadcasters, Peter Falk a sergeant at the prison and New York’s WNEW-TV (101). The suit called for punitive and compensatory damages on behalf of a majority of the Ridgefield Park juveniles that had appeared in the film (101). It is important to note here that not one of the participants from the Passaic, an urban black neighborhood, were included as plaintiffs in this lawsuit. The claims were that the teenagers and their parents were misled; that the [teenagers] were wrongly portrayed as juvenile delinquents; that they suffered from permanent psychological damage; and, that the families suffered mental anxiety (101). One could assume that they were either not invited to participate or did not find their portrayal in the film to be particularly different than the other portrayals of black teens on television at the same time. Nevertheless, it made it seem like it was permissible and acceptable for the black kids to be presented in this deviant nature, but it was not okay for the white kids. Ultimately the lawsuit was dismissed, as Shapiro proved that he did not misrepresent the participants .

Beyond Scared Straight

What is going on pre-*Beyond Scared Straight* ?

In the two years prior to the airing of the first episode of *Beyond Scared Straight* , America experienced a change it had not seen before. The 2008 election of the first African American president, Barack Obama rocked the nation. For the first time a black man was the supreme leader of the United States. With him he brought a black wife and showcased a wholesome black family. After winning against John McCain, a decorated war hero, Barack Obama was not popular with the majority of white Republicans. The idea that Obama's election created a post-racial America, where anything was possible for a black American shocked white anxiety again. Luckily, Shapiro was prepared with a revamping of his 1978 *Scared Straight!* documentary, introduced by his new tv series *Beyond Scared Straight*, which served to revive American Africanism and once again show black people as degenerate and deviant.

History of *Beyond Scared Straight*

Beyond Scared Straight was a television series inspired by the 1978 documentary “*Scared Straight!*”. *Beyond Scared Straight* follows “at-risk” teens as they participate in a redirection program aimed at changing their bad behavior. Its goal, “transforming the lives of young people through hope and second-chances,” is actualized by a one day visit to a prison in their neighborhood. In this prison they interact with inmates and are often berated. I am focusing my analysis on the black participants in these episodes and their performances. However, it is important to note that there are participants of various racial backgrounds in the show. I am assessing the blackness of the participants by their phenotypical attributes.

Much like the *Scared Straight!* documentary, in order for a young person to be included in the program, their parents must sign them up. Additionally, participants can be sent through

the program via the court system or by school counselors (Shapiro 2014). Unlike the documentary these producers record teens participating in juvenile awareness programs in cities all over the country (Shapiro, 2014).

In an interview about Shapiro's motive behind *Beyond Scared Straight* and its increasing appeal, Shapiro responded to the interviewer as follows:

Interviewer: Is part of the attraction for viewers, too, this vicarious thrill of seeing these punks, these bratty kids, finally getting a reality check?

Shapiro: That absolutely is a component of the appeal for a lot of people. Because most people have children, they don't want to see kids grow up to be criminals who could attack them. Even inmates don't want that, because most of them have kids. The idea of seeing a kid come in with that bravado and arrogance and tough-guy appeal — girls, too — and watching them have a sobering experience of finding out what jail is really like and what can happen to you, then coming out and saying, "I'm going to change. I've got to change, because I don't ever want to come back here. I couldn't survive here. This is just the worst thing ever." There's really something to be said in that case for negative reinforcement. It's coming up on two years from the time we did the pilot, and we have those kids to look back on and how many of them who have just turned their lives around and attributed it to that day because it was that traumatic.

Now, the idea that traumatizing the black youth was an effective measure for rehabilitation is problematic on several fronts. First, it runs the risk of a short-lived success because once they leave the prison, the participants are back into the real world, back into their old communities and their old lifestyles. Second, even if the traumatization had a lasting effect, it would be negative for their own self-perception and their mental health. Particularly the marrying of their traumatization and the filming off the show, now turns their trauma into entertainment. Like the black performers in the minstrel show, performing this version of blackness on a "stage" could end up in their performance turning into "madness." According to bell hooks, madness is when the two modes of performance, the ritualistic and the manipulative collide (210)²⁰. Here Shapiro

²⁰ Discussed further on page 55

is acknowledging the sensationalization of his show. This is contrary to his previous comment²¹ that speaks about showcasing the true and accurate experience of the participants. Instead, Shapiro crafts an episode that he thinks will bring the most viewership.

Analysis

Participants as Jim Crow

One characteristic that is prominent for the Jim Crow character is his recklessness and willingness to get into a physical confrontation. In the following lyrics, we see an example of this confrontational nature.

When I got out I hit a man, his name I now forgot;
But dere was noting left of him 'cept a little grease spot.

And oder day I hit a man, de man was mighty fat
I hit so hard I nockt him in to an old cockt hat.

Jim Crow points out the fact that when he comes into contact with a man he is quick to get into a physical confrontation with him. The following examples from *Scared Straight!* and *Beyond Scared Straight* showcase this same characteristic, as the characters boast about their fighting abilities.

Scared Straight!

The beginning of the documentary starts with interviews of the participants before they head into the jail. We meet several black participants who represent the Jim Crow mindset. The first teen we meet Terrence, when asked by the interviewer “How [he] feels about [his] victims”?, he proudly replies “I don't really care, you know whoever come I'm gone get em.” Like Jim Crow, Terrence does not care about who he gets into a confrontation with. Later in the

²¹ Comment mentioned on page....

documentary we see Terrence tell the viewers “I’m not worried about it myself because if they come to me talking I think I’m going to talk back, I’m not going to shut up for nobody.”

Terrence is showcasing that he is not afraid of anyone.

We see another young black participant portray this crafted deviant nature. John enters the documentary telling the viewers, when asked how he feels about his victims, “They shouldn’t have been around me at that time, you know I don’t give a fuck about em, that’s how I feel about it.” Here, John is speaking about his disregard for people. Something that the producers are sure to include in the documentary. John soon follows up saying “I kick ass you know and if I get my ass beat don’t mean shit cause hey I’m coming back you know that’s the kind of person I am, I consider myself a tough guy, that’s what I consider myself.” This tough guy persona is replicated later in *Beyond Scared Straight* .

Beyond Scared Straight

Almost every *Beyond Scared Straight* episode begins with a trailer of the participants it will feature. It shows them in their most aggressive state, often cursing and yelling at the officers or inmates. As the show continues we are introduced to the teens as they begin the first phase of their jail experience with a pat down (in order to make sure teens are not bringing contraband into the prison) and then the registration of the teens into the prison system via fingerprinting. In season 5 episode 2, the trailer features three young black teenagers, who are quoted saying “I shoplift a lot because sometimes my mom doesn’t have the money for me to have the things and I don’t be patient”, “I done a lot of bad things, I can’t remember the first thing I did”, and “I got expelled from high school for stealing and fighting”. All three teens make these statements with a smirk on their faces, as the camera pans to images of their neighborhoods. It is here that we see the purpose of the show shift from only showcasing prison life to also showcasing the life of

these black boys. This leads the viewer to believe that this must be the true reality of inner-city black life.

We are then introduced to Steven, a 17-year-old black boy who has been expelled from school for stealing and fighting, who has what I have deemed the Jim Crow mindset. In fact, all of the teens are “lazy, shiftless fellows, careless of the morrow,” the characteristics of the Jim Crow Character as identified by Carl Witkke. Steven tells the producers, and thereby the viewers that “[he’s] not afraid of going in no prison at all.” He refers to himself and his friend as Butch and Sundance, as outlaws. Shortly after we meet Dion, an 18-year-old boy who has joined the program because of auto theft and stealing. Introduced after is a 13-year-old boy named Sahn who has been shoplifting. Seconds into his introduction, Sahn proclaims “If an inmate gets into my face I’m going to hit him so hard their mom’s going to feel it.,” telling the viewers “other kids describe me as Bam-Bam, because I fight a lot and I knock a lot of people out.” Sahn grins as he recalls this story, leading the viewers to believe that he has pride in his actions. Like Jim Crow, Sahn is comfortable in his place in life and does not care about making better choices. Sahn understands his identity to be tied into how tough he is and keeps this persona up even when there is no one around but the producer.

The teens are then taken on a prison tour, in which they see inmates locked up in individual cells or in group lockups. In some of the episodes, the teens are given their own cells, in others, they are left out in the open with inmates. Whether the teens are in these cells or in a more general area, the next step is for the prisoners to enter and begin to scream and try to intimidate the teens. In this moment the teens are then tested, to see if they are as strong as the present themselves to be at the beginning of the show. Ironically, one of the inmates shouts “I want ya’ll to compare this to what you see on tv, that was real what you just experienced... The

crap you see about prison on TV, is it anything like this?” This is interesting because their experience is being televised, just like other prison shows. At some point in time following this initial interaction, the teens are introduced to prison food. This is done in an attempt to show them how poor life is on the inside. For some teens, the food causes dramatic reactions as they try to swallow it. For others, the food is not as surprising, and they help their friends get through eating it.

Lunch is then followed by introduction and storytelling from the inmates. Here the inmates talk about their background and how they ended up in prison. In these sessions the inmates can get even more aggressive, if they feel any sense of disrespect from the participants. It is here where the inmates begin to get more intimate with the participants, but this is also the time when some of the participants are unable to control their anger. Often, the corrections officers have to remove the participant because of their rambunctious and disruptive behaviors. After the group lectures, teens are then split up and get to have one-on-one sessions with the prisoners.

Participants as Zip Coon

Beyond Scared Straight

The one on one session is a lot more intimate between the inmates and the participants. This is where you see the change begin to happen for the participants. Their behavior turns more docile, and they begin to show the characteristics of the dandy. The participants begin to show “pretensions of grandeur.” The change in the participants is so drastic that it is almost unbelievable. Like the dandy, the participants begin to talk differently, trying to showcase how much they have changed into a productive member of society. Nevertheless, their dialect stays the same, so the new words they are using sound misplaced. Similar to how the dandy comes

across “[their] frequent malapropisms and distorted logic [suggest] [their] attempt to compete intellectually with whites. The whites that they are trying to compete with are Shapiro and his production crew, who give more airtime and attention to those who become reformed. Here , they are trying to compete with whatever idea the producers have of the biggest transformation from the show ” and top that performance so that they can stand out.

In some of the episodes, the end of the jail program is seen when the teens are presented in front of a local judge where the judge gives them a brief talk and asks them if that is where they want to end up. Of course, all of the teens respond that they plan to change after the program. At the end of the episodes there are brief follow-ups with the teens and their families. Sometimes the teen will report that they are doing better, but their family will report differently. If that is the case, then the teen will get a visit from someone in the correctional system. This is the last attempt from the program to set the teen up for a delinquent-free life.

Shapiro as Interlocutor

Scared Straight!

For the documentary, Shapiro held a majority of the creative license and had a substantial hand in choosing what was shown and what was not, although he did take advice from others on his team. In part, Shapiro’s role reimagines the minstrel show’s Mr. Interlocutor, whose role as the emcee of the show was to be dignified amongst the rowdy end men. In this sense, Shapiro was the intermediary between the public and the documentary participants, both in the jail and the teenagers. Shapiro responded to a lawsuit alleging that he misled the participants and denied any misrepresentation of the teenager’s criminal involvement (Finckenauer 102). At the congressional hearing before the House Subcommittee on Human Resources, Shapiro stated:

“From the very beginning of this project, I have understood my responsibility as a communicator of information to be as honest and accurate as possible. I also did not want to make the Rahway program something that it wasn’t, I also did not want to underplay what it was... I am known by my colleagues as a very responsible and cautious documentary producer who will often avoid a dynamic piece of material if I feel that it is sensationalistic or inaccurate.”

In 1979, Shapiro was quoted in a Newsweek Article, stating “The *Scared Straight!* Uproar is far from over”. Ironically almost 33 years later, Shapiro’s word would ring true with the premiere of his new hit television series “*Beyond Scared Straight*”.

Beyond Scared Straight

Much like the documentary, Shapiro has control over deciding who gets to be featured in the episode. While there are about four participants featured on each episode, there are actually at least 10 participants in each program. When asked about the criteria for deciding who gets featured Shapiro states:

So, by the time we finish doing the pre-jail packages, we have a sense of which kids are going to be the most interesting to follow and by the time the jail tour is over we have an even better sense of which kids are going to be the most interesting to follow.- Channel Guide Magazine

Here Shapiro is acknowledging that the show is crafted in a way that will bring the most viewership. He is aware that there will be more interesting teenage participants, especially the kids who acted out against the correctional officers. When asked about what makes a participant more interesting, Shapiro states:

Interviewer: Is part of that formula based on which ones you think are more likely to change, or is it more just their personality?

Shapiro: You would think [their likeliness to change] would be the total reason, but it’s not. It really is based on their personalities and what happens with them. We didn’t have any belief that (SPOILER ALERT) Brandon T. from Michigan, who stood up to the officers and just kind of had a meltdown, would ever change. Even when the tour was over, he got thrown out. But we still picked him, because it was so explosive, and we never saw anything like that before or since. Although, other kids have stood up to officers. It’s amazing. When I went through high school or even college you never

thought you would disrespect a teacher or an authority figure, especially somebody in law enforcement, but these kids have no fear. – Channel Guide Magazine

Shapiro's use of "these kids" shows that he thinks of them as "other" as different, a spectacle to be looked at and examined. Brandon T is a black teenager that appeared in Season 2 episode 2. For most of the episode, Brandon is aggressive and combative. He refuses to do the activities that the correctional officers request and then gets kicked off of the tour. Nevertheless, by the end of the show, Brandon has become reformed, now seeing the error in his ways and then deciding to change. He is the perfect example of how for young black deviant kids, the criminal justice system is the only answer to get them in check. He represents Shapiro's solution to the version of blackness he has created through his mobilization of what Toni Morrison refers to as American Africanism.

Viewer Response

Minstrel Shows

The minstrel show had become the new hit show. George Thatcher, who became a minstrel star in his own right, spoke of the impact the first minstrel show he saw had on him, saying "I found myself dreaming of minstrels: I would awake with an imaginary tambourine in my hand and rub my face with my hands to see if I was blacked up... The dream of my life was to see or speak to a performer" (Toll 33). Minstrel shows had left such a mark on Thatcher that it became what he aspired to be, because the caricaturing of black slave life had proven successful, both as entertainment and as a way to control the narrative of the newly freed slaves.

The below newspaper clipping from *The Journal* in New York, printed on January 26, 1896 proclaims that the performance of Dan Quinn, was "very realistic". The viewers of the

minstrel show were under the impression that they were actually seeing black life, which informed their opinions of black people.

All through the song is heard a piano accompaniment. After the chorus the listener hears the sound of clog-dancing in time with the same chorus accompaniment repeated. It is very realistic. To the man with tubes to his ears it seems as if he could all but see "Mr. Dan Quinn" hoeing it down in good old negro minstrel style on the stage. As a matter of fact Dan²²

Scared Straight!

Once completed, the documentary was first aired on November 2, 1978, by KTLA Channel in Los Angeles. The addition of popular actor Peter Falk as narrator, "seemed to enhance the authenticity and drama of the film" (Finckenauer 97). Peter Falk was an iconic actor, known for his breakthrough role in *Colombo*, a crime fighting series. Having him narrate the documentary lent legitimacy to the stories within. It immediately garnered success, and in March of 1979, The Signal Companies, Inc, decided to show the film nationally" in over two hundred major cities (98). The documentary was titled *Scared Straight!* and was the "highest rated show in the time period – 39% of the total viewing audience, which translated into numbers that meant that over 3 million people in the New York/Northern New Jersey were watching" (98). While there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the documentary, some viewers responded negatively. One reviewer for the Kansas City Raytown News noted "If you like filthy language and think convicts are glamorous you'll like '*Scared Straight!*' If you think juvenile delinquents should be treated "like the animals they are" you'll love '*Scared Straight!*' If you believe criminals are the best doctors for a sick society, '*Scared Straight!*' is for you." (Finckenauer 98)

²² *The Journal*, NY , New York, January 26, 1896

Other viewers shared the same sentiment, thinking the program to be too harsh and amounting to “emotional electroshock” (98). Nevertheless, the documentary reaped a number of prizes and awards. The film won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1978. It also won Emmy Awards for Outstanding Individual Achievement–Informational Program and Outstanding Informational Program (The New York Times).

One critic of the film, Jerry Miller, noted “there were indications that the youngsters were encouraged to act in a particular manner i.e. boisterous and cocky going in, but contrite and scared coming out” (101). Here, the boisterous and cocky persona of the teens, is reminiscent of the Jim Crow character of minstrelsy, whereas the contrite and scared persona shares characteristics with the Dandy character. Much like the minstrel shows, which were created to portray a crafted reality to the general public (white Americans) of a group that was other (black Americans) *Scared Straight!* had the same effect. An editor from the Milwaukee Journal noted:

“I’m afraid we’ve all been had with the recently shown documentary “*Scared Straight!*” ... a “documentary” produced for profit, that probably had no particular social significance, undoubtedly scared no one straight, unfortunately got a lot of people planning cuss sessions to scare their delinquents with and for the most part, tediously assaulted the ears with the kind of language TV stations, in saner moments’ would never dream of permitting.” (101)

Here the reviewer questions the actual authenticity of both the project and the documentary. In relation to the minstrel shows, where the performers claimed to promote an authentic portrayal of black slave life, the *Scared Straight!* program attempted to do the same for inmates and prison life. Nevertheless, the for-profit nature of the film and minstrel shows negatively affected the ability of the viewer to trust that it is truly an authentic portrayal, and not just something crafted for maximum profit.

Beyond Scared Straight

Most research about the series is focused on its effectiveness at deterring these teenagers from their life of crime. Jeff Maahs and Travis C. Pratt conducted a study entitled “‘I Hate These Little Turds!’: Science, Entertainment, and the Enduring Popularity of *Beyond Scared Straight!* Programs” where they analyzed Netflix “member reviews” of the show in order to categorize responses. Responses were focused on beliefs about the effectiveness of *Beyond Scared Straight*, the level of brutality displayed, its inspirational and emotional content, and its authenticity. The researchers found that “the evidence demonstrating the ineffectiveness of *Beyond Scared Straight!* programs has a voice in public conversation. Yet on the other hand, that voice is generally drowned out by those belonging to entertainment, emotion, and the joy that people take in the misfortune of others” (Maahs 47). This is not surprising and can be corroborated by several newspaper articles about the television show that deem *Beyond Scared Straight* riveting. In a review written in anticipation of the series premier, journalist Brian Lowry writes “And unlike the kids — who, with menacing bruisees crowding them, understandably yearn to look away — most of those who tune in won't find themselves able to (Variety Magazine).

In order to understand how viewers were perceiving *Beyond Scared Straight*, I turned to Youtube comments. Unfortunately, Youtube does not share the ethnicity of its commentors, however some did have profile pictures that can be used to identify them. Below are a littany of comments that show how viewers are taking *Beyond Scared Straight* to be a representation of black kids everywhere. Much like how minstrel shows claimed to be an accurate look into the lives of black people, the viewers of *Beyond Scared Straight* are taking what they see on screen on to accurate potrayals of black life.

In the below exchange, we find @tachikoma747, commenting that the participants of the show are “always black”. What follows is a response from another viewer, who acknowledges that the production staff is choosing to film in places that are predominately black. Another viewer then adds to the conversation, noting that there is an agenda by the media to portray a certain narrative and that people often dive right into it. While the first viewer @tachikoma747 tries to defend their comment by clarifying that they should have included “always”, the idea that the show is creating a homogenous view of black kids is perpetuated by his or her next statement. @tachikoma747 writes that “a majority of the kids and inmates are black. It’s a sad predicament for black culture. Nothing racist here”. This statement indicates that @tachikoma747 has now mapped the experiences of the views of black kids from one episode onto the entire black community. Ironically, there were both white participants and inmates in this episode, but with the crafting and edits from the production staff they are seen in small glimpses and become a non-factor, as they are not given much screen time. Instead, this particular episode shows how a viewer can be guided to a generalization .



tachikoma747 4 years ago
Always black. Sad really.

👍 37 🗨️ REPLY

Hide replies ^

CALICOTV301 4 years ago

@tachikoma747 LMAO you're an idiot! Where do you think this was filmed?
FBI statistics show that white crime is higher.
Because someone films a certain place don't think that it is "always". You're dumb



tachikoma747 4 years ago

+Crayola I should have said "almost" always black but you have to admit that the majority of these kids as well as the inmates are black. It's a sad predicament for black culture. Nothing racist there.

👍 🗨️ REPLY

CALICOTV301 3 years ago

@tachikoma747

You keep saying this as if these videos aren't carefully planned. You act like they were just recording and suddenly black kids popped up in the video. No, they chose to go where they wanted to.

We also see more viewers begin to notice that there is a vast amount of black people featured on the show. One user notes that “80%” of the kids on the show are black. Two other viewers realize that all of the inmates and criminals are black in these episodes. If Arnold Shapiro’s only goal was to portray deviancy in young adults, then there should not be a color scheme to it. However, Shapiro’s inclination to film in areas that are predominantly black is a not coincidence. It instead is a direct example of his participation in American Africanism, where he is crafting a version of blackness that fits the degenerate and deviant narrative that has already been circulated in the media .



user546468 4 months ago
80% are black



Eto 4 weeks ago
Why olny black pple are criminal



Wiktor Jajcarz 3 months ago
Why every inmate is black in this series?

We can see another example of how the portrayal of black participants in an episode colors the view of black people in general in the comments below. In this episode we meet a black teen named Darica, who is 18 years old and pregnant. She confronts her boyfriend who is actually in jail, telling him of her pregnancy. While her supposed reckoning is supposed to be the focus of the episode, this viewer chose to focus only on her pregnancy. As he refers to her as “just another black woman using the pregnancy excuse to keep her man by her side” we can see

that this episode is both informing his view of black women and confirming a bias that he already holds.

-  RobVS 1 year ago
Just another black woman using the pregnancy excuse to keep her man by her side. SMH..
-  Tiphani 9 months ago
..
-  Rayan Alsharki 7 months ago
How come most of them are black?
-  Akil Lawrence 1 year ago
what away to portray black people, thanks a&e 😂
-  Chubby Eggroll 2 years ago
this should be the real 50 shades of black right here 😂

Another user also notices that there is a predominance of black participants on the show. Even more interesting is Akil Lawrence's comment, where he notes that A&E is portraying black people in a negative light. Finally, we see the last viewer who sees the episode as comedic, adding a laughing emoji. The problem here is that the impact of the show shifts, as it was supposed to showcase teenagers who become reformed after visiting the show. However, on the contrary the way that the show is edited and what is featured, makes the show lose its original purpose and opens the door to comments like those above. In essence, it presents the performances of the black participants on the show as natural impulses. It shows them all as being disrespectful in every episode, as if black kids cannot have manners. This is reminiscent of the perception of black minstrel performers and their participation in skits as portraying natural behavior. It is assumed that the black people on the show are behaving in a deviant way because it is a natural part of their psychology and they do not know another way to behave.

These following comments refer to a scene where a young black girl is walking towards the visiting center to see her mother. This is the moment where the participants see what it would be like to talk to their loved ones if they were actually imprisoned. While the importance of the scene was the fact that the mother and daughter were having to talk through a glass window, for this viewer it became more about her scratching her head. Furthermore, the viewer uses this scene to express derogatory comments about black girls, which leads to more conversation about what black girls are doing. One commenter even points out how problematic the first comment is, but that is overlooked as the rest of the conversation goes on. It follows with another black girl asserting her blackness and choosing to differentiate herself from the girl in the episode. However, this is undermined by her decision to point out that she is “not like other black girls.” The comments about the girl’s hair speak to a deeper classification of black hair as nappy and untamed. This is another form of othering that is focused on questioning the intellect of the girl, simply because she is patting her head. In addition, the texture of black people’s hair has often been used as a justification for deeming them unintelligent. This is because it has been likened to that of an animal. For the uniformed viewer, who doesn’t understand that her patting her head is just a way of scratching it, he instead decides that it must be emphasizing it being “hollow inside.” Calling her head hollow is synonymous to calling her dumb.



XIPurely Codedxl 3 years ago

she pats her hair because black people need to scratch there head weeve



Its Lilbit 3 years ago

u being racist



Xenon Akali 2 years ago

She tapping her head so she knows it is hollow inside



user431622 1 month ago

Only black women talk this way to their kids, no wonder their kids are so angry



Michaela Fleming 1 year ago

Well I'm black and I don't wear weave, nor do u use grease. Just some argan and coconut oil. Then again, my hair isn't like most African-American hair so

Now after the mother is already talking to the girl about her previous behavior, we see this next comment, where someone comments on how the girl is being spoken to. The viewer makes a generalized claim about black mothers and their relationship with their daughters. The viewer then uses this assumption to make another claim about black children in general, stating that they are always so angry. This is problematic because it paints both black women and black children in a negative light. This narrative of the angry black women is one that is perpetuated constantly. This anger is often used to explain an irrationality, a recklessness, an inherent deviancy. For the viewers to immediately deem the mother and child as angry means that they are seeing that representation in Shapiro's show.

The next comments are in reference to a young black participant who was adopted by black parents. This particular participant presented as exceptionally difficult and was being disrespectful to his adoptive parents. When one viewer laments the idea of adopting a child for them to turn out to have such horrible behavior, another viewer then attributes his behavior to his blackness. The viewer clearly believes that deviancy is inherent to black boys, and the show portraying him as an ungrateful uncontrollable teenager only reinforces this point of view. Other viewers do notice that the comment is negative, but it nonetheless is indicative of how the show can influence the perception of black teenagers. What is interesting is that the show's producer, Arnold Shapiro, has made it clear that these are the types of participants that he is looking for and who he enjoys featuring. He capitalizes on the dramatic and inappropriate behavior of the teen in order to make his show more popular. But what he does not account for is the negative implications that his theatrical choices can have on the perception of black teenagers. When the audience views these participants acting irrationally, it leads them to the conclusion that this is how black teenagers behave all the time. This can inform how they react when they interact with a black teenager, where they assume that the teen's behavior will be what Shapiro highlights in the series.



Artsy Tyger 3 years ago

Yuck.. can you imagine adopting a kid and having him turn out like this..



Bad Trigger 2 years ago

he's black, what were you expecting?



Lifesajoke 2 years ago

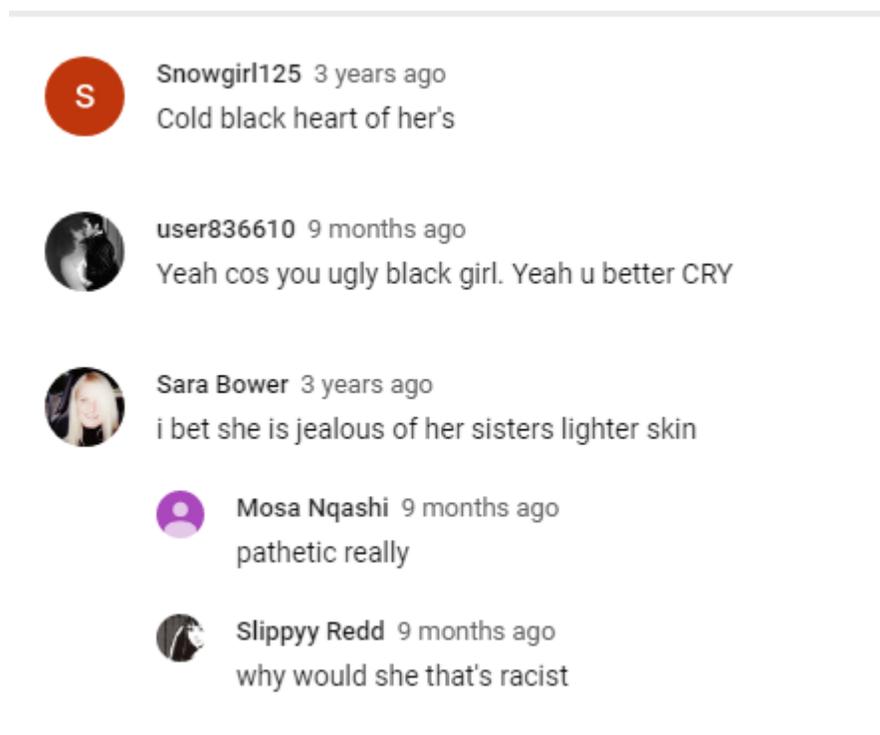
Rude



LA Gang 2 years ago

[Bad Trigger](#) can u not be racist cause I'm black

Another example of how the public can miss the point of the show is revealed in the comments below. Here the views are talking about a 13-year-old girl and her sister. The sisters have animosity between them which causes them to be unable to get along at home. During the episode, the root of their problems is uncovered. However, that is irrelevant to this viewer. Instead the first viewer talks about her “cold black heart” which can be thought of as referencing her mean spirit. The next viewer chooses to insult her and make fun of her crying, claiming she deserves it because she is an ugly black girl. This shows that her being black is justification for not having sympathy for her. Her blackness becomes a reason for this viewer not to care about the fact that she is just a child. Finally, another view brings up colorism as an explanation for why the sisters might be fighting. This viewer is white, and now has another reason for believing the false narrative, of the degenerate and deviant black person, heightened by the next comment that the girl is “pathetic really.”



Another viewer notices this discrepancy between white participants and black participants. This is reminiscent of Arnold Shapiro’s previous characterization of “softcore crimes” and “hardcore” crimes.



The Iceman 3 years ago

Lool! It's funny how white kids are mostly there due to domestic violence but black people are there due to gang affiliation? Smh

Below, we can also see more comments that focus on the idea that all black kids are deviant, as portrayed by the show. These viewers are allowing this show’s portrayal of black teenagers to inform their understanding of blackness. Here the viewers note that “Blacks are just being blacks” and are assuming that this show is an accurate portrayal of black people. They are not considering that there are editors and producers that craft these shows to be sensationalized and dramatic.



user131626 3 months ago

it's a typo black behavior violence and drugs
blacks got no class



Brian Walden 7 months ago

They should make all black kids do this



Jerome Zozoa 2 months ago

All the bad kids I have seen in this show are black



Ker Magro 3 years ago

"WW2 is going to start".. Black just being blacks



Lortax 2 months ago

Fucking black guy all he's good at is stealing



Her 3 years ago

wtf..



Meme Soilerr 3 months ago

So we're not questioning why all the kids are thugs and hood and black and ugly so they should be killed and on death row

Effect of Media

Both the audience for the minstrel show and the audience of the *Scared Straight!* programs are digesting the portrayals of black people that the producers are pushing out and making conclusions about the entire race. In the viewer responses from minstrel shows, audience members became obsessed with the black characters of minstrelsy. They genuinely believed that what they were seeing was realistic and this informed race relations between whites and blacks for years to come. In fact, the popularity of minstrel shows aided the spread of Jim Crow as a racial slur (Ferris State University). By the end of the 19th century, Jim Crow was being used to describe laws and customs that oppressed blacks (Ferris State University). This long-lasting impact of the narrative of the degenerate and deviant black person can also be seen in the rise in police brutality, particularly against young black men. The viewer responses to these shows show how this narrative can give society a reason to exert power over black bodies .

Black Performance as a Site of Resilience

Throughout history, African American voices have been both literally and figuratively muted. In that same vein, with the introduction of white actors performing in minstrel shows, there was a theft of African-American voice, and it was molded to be palatable to a white audience. In fact, the actual lived experiences of African-Americans were of no importance to the white minstrel performers, instead, they wanted to create something that would stand out for being original and comical and the direct opposite to what was valued in white society. This crafting of the African American performer on stage, through language and behavior, served as a means to force black actors to present a self-narrative that was inherently damaging.

Even with the addition of black minstrel performers, they still prescribed to the stereotypes and archetypes put forth by the white minstrel performers that came before them.

Likewise, in the *Scared Straight* programs, the producers craft the version of blackness, particularly for black teenagers, that we see in each episode. For the black participants, it can be said that they are not in control of their portrayal, with the producers, editors, and other production staff members being able to choose what is presented to the audience. Like the goal of the minstrel show, to create a show that was both entertaining and falsely explanatory (although disregarding the actual inaccuracies of their representations), the *Scared Straight* programs also try to reach those same goals and falls into the same pitfalls. Here “falsely explanatory” refers to the idea that although the minstrel show was supposed to explain black slave life to white northern, the performance of blackness was false and was a version of American Africanism. It fulfilled the white desire to create a narrative that “[demonized and reified] the range of color on a palette and [made] it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless” the social status of black Americans and keep circulating the narrative of them as degenerate and deviant.

Nevertheless, the view that African Americans have no autonomy at all when it comes to their performances on stage and screen denies them their agency and is not always accurate. Renowned scholar, bell hooks, discusses the different versions of agency that we see come out of black performances. Hooks identifies two modes of black performance, the ritualistic and the manipulative. The ritualistic mode, “embodies the amalgamation of ancient tradition where one performed during a rite of possession” (hooks 210). The manipulative mode on the other hand, was performed “as a necessity of survival in an oppressed world” (hooks 210). When these two modes of performance collide, they become “madness” (hooks 210). For the black minstrel performers, this could be used to explain why they chose to continue to play the stereotypical characters from the white minstrel actors.

Harkening back to the idea of blackface, that is the use of cork to darken one's face in minstrel performances that we saw among some black minstrel performers, hooks brings up the "notion of wearing a mask" as a means of manipulation. When performance is a part of ritual play, it can be also seen as art that upholds the ideology of the wider society. For both the black minstrel performers and the black *Scared Straight* participants, there is a mixture of both modes of performance. Hooks describes this mixture below:

[We see them] engage in strategic performances in the interests of survival employing the same skills one uses to perform in the interest of ritual play, yet the performative standpoint alters both the nature and impact of the performance. In one context performance can easily become an act of complicity, in the other, it can serve as critical intervention, as a site of resistance. (Hooks 211)

For the black minstrel performers, who up until the end of the Civil War, had not been allowed to perform on stage, the opportunity to be in minstrel shows was not one that they wanted to refuse. Instead, they used it as a platform for showcasing the artistic and creative nature of African Americans. When it came to showcasing the dancing skills of African Americans, the minstrel performers held nothing back and wowed the audience. Nevertheless, some black performers practice manipulative performance as they wore blackface to appear more authentic.

The same can be said for the black participants who participate in *Beyond Scared Straight*, who are signed up to participate in the show under the premise that they are not really as hard as they appear and perform a type of hyper-toughness to fight that assumption. The participants can showcase how hard they are and that they have learned the lessons of strict survival that their community has taught them. Nevertheless, one can still see this as liberatory subjectivity. I define liberatory subjectivity as a form of freedom, but still controlled through the viewpoints of the outside world. So, for the *Beyond Scared Straight* participants, who may be striving to give a truly authentic view of their respective communities and lifestyles, there are still elements of it

that are left out when the producers edit the episodes. Even without the edits from the production staff, the performances of the black participants cannot be seen as all encompassing, for a host of reasons, such as location, age and personal circumstances. This is because the participants are in a new environment and might not be acting as they normally would. bell hooks explores this when deeming African American performance as a

“critical ethnography, because it usually represents individual experiences in ways that, as [McDougal] suggests ‘metonymically refer to, but can never grasp, an entire culture.’ Hence it is always a partial truth, ‘subjective and incomplete’ that uses polyphonic strategies to convey specific aspects of black experience.”(Hooks 213)

Because each episode identifies five or six separate participants to feature, no one story encompasses the truth of “an entire culture.” Similarly, because each episode is located in a different state or at the very least a different county, the “polyphonic” aspect is equally prevalent.

It is important to note that for both the minstrel shows and *Beyond Scared Straight*, there is a financial goal. This for-profit nature of the shows also colors the behavior of the performers and the setup of the show altogether. In fact, this commodification of both shows changes their purpose from becoming authentically explanatory to instead being explanatory for a profit.

According to hooks:

All African-American engagement in the performing arts, whether through performance of poetry and plays, or through rap, risks losing its power to disrupt and engage with the specific locations from which it emerges via a process of commodification that requires reproduction in a marketable package. As mass product, live performances can rarely address the local in a meaningful way, because the primacy of addressing the local is sacrificed to the desire to engage a wider audience of paying customers. (Hooks 214)

This is evident in both *Scared Straight* programs and the minstrel shows, particularly when they became more popular. When minstrel shows were at their peak, with theaters often being sold out, it corresponded with the presence of black performers. This caused an increase in the number of shows presented and the shows became increasingly generic. Previously, there would

have been some variation to the show's content, but with the emergence of the Georgia Minstrels, everyone looked to pattern themselves after that company because it was so financially successful .

Likewise, with the high success rate of both the documentary *Scared Straight!* and the tv series *Beyond Scared Straight* , the show began follow a similar script template. Each episode began in the same way, with the introduction of the featured participants, an early conflict (when one of the participants proves most difficult to deal with) and then a breakthrough where that same participant begins to understand where they went wrong. Nevertheless, when the episode is being promoted on tv through its trailer, the moments that are focused upon are those that showcase the participant in the worst light and not those that showcases the “change” that the show is supposed to hold in such high esteem.

However, aligning myself with the theory of performance as a site of resiliency, I assert that both the black minstrel performers and the participants of *Scared Straight* programs make the choice to intentionally participate in this commodification. For the black minstrel performers, they use the stereotypes to their advantage and their authenticity as ethnically black as a way to make the show more popular and therefore more profitable. I have not been able to find information on whether the participants of the *Scared Straight* programs were financially compensated for their time on the show, nevertheless, their performance during the taping of the show does determine whether they are featured on each episode. Being featured on an episode can lead to exposure, notoriety and being popular in their neighborhood. I believe that this knowledge alone can be motivation enough to perform as expected. Some participants, even during their opening interviews, admit that they have seen the show before and that they will be the toughest kid that both the prison program and the tv series has ever seen.

Conclusion

While some people would say that the creation of the minstrel shows, *Scared Straight!* documentary, and *Beyond Scared Straight* had no connection at all, besides being created for entertainment purposes I posit that the political climate and social climate that was being experienced by both black and white people before the creation of each of these shows was a driving force in why these shows were created and how they chose to portray blackness. More importantly, I think about the impact that these shows have on the viewing audiences and their understanding of blackness. In my thesis semester I identified the connection between the motives, particularly surrounding white anxieties and fears, behind the creation of minstrel shows, the 1978 *Scared Straight!* documentary and the creation of the popular television series, *Beyond Scared Straight*. Although having vastly different content, minstrel shows and both *Scared Straight!* programs follow the framework of portraying blackness as both degenerate and deviant.

Appendix

1. Jump Jim Crow²³

Weel about and turn about and do jis so,
Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.

I went down to the river, I didn't mean to stay;
But dere I see so many gals, I couldn't get away.

And arter I been dere awhile, I tought I push my boat;
But I tumbled in de river, and I find myself afloat.

I git upon a flat boat, I cotch de Uncle Sam;
Den I went to see de place where dey kill'd de Pakenham.

And den I go to Orleans, an, feel so full of flight;
Dey put me in de calaboose, an, keep me dere all night.

When I got out I hit a man, his name I now forgot;
But dere was noting left of him 'cept a little grease spot.

And oder day I hit a man, de man was mighty fat

²³ Cited by: www.pdmusic.org/1800s/29jc.txt, and page 209 from "Minstrel Songs, Old and New" (1808-1860)]

I hit so hard I nockt him in to an old cockt hat.

I whipt my weight in wildcats, I eat an alligator;

I drunk de Mississippi up! O! I'm de very creature.

I sit upon a hornet's nest, I dance upon my bead;

I tie a wiper round my neck an, den I go to bed.

I kneel to de buzzard, an, I bow to the crow;

An eb'ry time I weel about I jump jis so.

2. Zip Coon (1834)²⁴

O ole Zip Coon he is a larned skoler

O ole Zip Coon he is a larned skoler

O ole Zip Coon he is a larned skoler

Sings possum up a gum tree an coony in a holler

Possum up a gum tree, coony on a stump

Possum up a gum tree, coony on a stump

Possum up a gum tree, coony on a stump

Den over dubble trubble, Zip Coon will jump.

CHORUS: O zip a duden duden duden zip a duden day.

O zip a duden duden duden duden duden day.

O zip a duden duden duden duden duden day.

O zip a duden duden duden zip a duden day.

O its old Suky blue skin, she is in lub wid me,

I went the udder arter noon to take a dish ob tea;

What do you tink now, Suky hab for supper,

Why chicken foot an possum heel, widout any butter.

Did you eber see the wild goose, sailing on de ocean,

O de wild goose motion is a bery pretty notion;

²⁴ Cited from Zip Coon, utc.iath.virginia.edu/minstrel/zipcoonfr.html.

Ebry time de wild goose, beckens to de swaller,
You hear him google google google goller.

I tell you what will happin den, now bery soon,
De Nited States Bank will be blone to de moon;
Dare General Jackson, will him lampoon,
An de bery nex President, will be Zip Coon.

An wen Zip Coon our President shall be,
He make all de little Coons sing posum up a tree;
O how de little Coons, will dance an sing,
Wen he tie dare tails togedder, cross de lim dey swing.

Now mind wat you arter, you tarnel kriter Crocket,
You shant go head widout old Zip, he is de boy to block it,
Zip shall be President, Crocket shall be vice,
An den dey two togedder, will hab de tings nice.

I hab many tings to tork about, but don't know wich come first,
So here de toast to old Zip Coon, before he gin to rust;
May he hab de pretty girls, like de King ob ole,
To sing dis song so many times, fore he turn to mole

3. BONES IN LOVE. BY J. HARRY CARLETON²⁵

Interlocutor. I say, Bones, were you ever in love?

Bones. I wasn't nothin' else, old hoss.

Interlocutor. What kind of a girl was she?

Bones. She was highly polished; yes, indeed. Her fadder was a varnish-maker, and, what's better still, she was devoted to her own sweet Pomp.

Interlocutor. What do you mean by that? She must have been a spicy girl.

Bones. Yes, dat's de reason she was so fond of me. She was a poickess, too.

Interlocutor. A poetess, you mean.

Bones. Yes, she used to write verses for de newspapers

Interlocutor. Is that so, Bones?

Bones. Yes, saw. De day I went to de house, I -- golly! -- I dressed myself to kill, and my ole trunk was empty. Well, just as de gal seed me, she cove right in -- she was a gone coon.

When I left, she edged up to me and whispered, "you're too sweet to live." Next day I got a billy-doo.

Interlocutor. How do you know it was a billet-doux?

Bones. 'Cause Billy Doo was de name of de boy dat brought it. It smelt all over like a doctor's shop. I opened it, and found dese words:

What lub is, if you must be taught,
Thy heart must teach alone!
Two cabbages wid a single stalk,
Two beets that are as one!

Interlocutor. Well, Bones, you responded?

Bones. Yes, sir.

²⁵ Cited from Black-Face Minstrelsy, twain.lib.virginia.edu/huckfinn/minstrl.html.

Interlocutor. What did you say? Bones. You see, her fadder was a gardener, so I wrote what I call very appropriate lines:

O you sweet and lubly Dinah!
Dare are nofin any finer;
Your tongue is sweeter than a parrot's.
Your hair hangs like a bunch of carrots,
And though of flattery I'm a hater,
I lubs you like a sweet potater!
Interlocutor. That was very nice, Bones.

Bones. Yes, I thought so. So delicate was her constitution, dat it nearly killed her. So terrible was de concussion, dat de next time I went to see her she was dissolved in tears.

Interlocutor. What! weeping?

Bones. Yes, wid tears in her eyes and a big knife in the other. She raised it as I approached.

Interlocutor. Rash girl!

Bones. Yes.

Interlocutor. What was she about to do? Commit suicide?

Bones. No; she was peeling onions to stuff a goose wid!

4.

*Review To discuss with
N. White*

From: Barrie Thorne Room 421 B.H.
PBX: 3963 19th May, 1967.

Subject: BLACK AND WHITE MINSTREL SHOW

To: C.A. to D.G. Copy to: D.A.; The Secretary

As you may know I previously expressed my dismay about the continuance of the BLACK AND WHITE MINSTREL SHOW. The current protest has renewed the passions.

The BBC says that the Black and White Minstrels is "a traditional show enjoyed by millions for what it offers in good-hearted family entertainment". I think it was George Melly's comment that the same was said of throwing Christians to the lions. Many regard the show as Uncle Tom from start to finish, and as such is underlyingly offensive to many no matter what the outward gloss and size of audience prove to the contrary.

Those of us who think this way may be entirely wrong. But so might the BBC.

One way of testing responsible opinion would be for the BBC to send the Black and White Minstrels book and the coloured Radio Times front cover of them to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples and the Urban League, and ask for their opinion. The BBC might also ask the three American networks, since it is only a theatrical show, what reaction they think the series would have on responsible coloured opinion in the United States if they put it out coast to coast.

The theatrical tradition of the show could then be measured against the historical background and the continued fight against segregation going on in the United States, here, and elsewhere in the world.

Barrie Thorne
(Barrie Thorne)

*Original filed
N 441*

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²⁶ BBC's Written Archives

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