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Minstrelsy speaking: Metaparodic representations of blackface and linguistic minstrelsy in Hollywood films[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines contemporary performances of blackface by fictional European American characters in three Hollywood films. The focus of analysis is the use of metaparody, or the parodying of a parody, and how this device problematizes White Hollywood representations of blackness while simultaneously reinforcing them. These metaparodic blackface performances also involve “linguistic minstrelsy,” a form of mock language that has existed since nineteenth-century minstrel shows, to construct Black identities for White characters. Linguistic minstrelsy in these films produces a jocularly oversimplified version of African American English. However, in these films, the linguistic and blackface minstrelsy are interpreted as humorous projections of incompetent white performances of blackness instead of merely parodies of African American language and culture for the following two reasons. First, the films include an “authentic” Black character who evaluates the performances for the audience. Second, the films limit the speaker roles for the blackface characters.

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1. Introduction

In 1993, about 2200 people gathered together at the Friars Club, a club for professional comedians in New York City, for a luncheon and roast, or ritual insult event, in honor of Whoopi Goldberg, an African American comedian and actress. At one point during the event, Ted Danson, a European American actor and Goldberg’s boyfriend at the time, entered the stage wearing a tuxedo and top hat, his face covered in dark shoe polish with exaggerated white lips. As audience members variously laughed or looked on in disbelief, Danson began a performance laced with sexually and racially charged jokes and over a dozen uses of the “N-word” racial slur; he ended by eating watermelon from a tray brought to him by a waiter (“[Whoopi Goldberg defends Ted,](#)” 1993).

Media interviews of attendees revealed that some audience members were untroubled by Danson’s act, while others left in the middle of the performance. The media firestorm after the event led Goldberg to defend Danson’s use of blackface and even to take partial credit for the idea. Although audience members present at the event did not agree on the success or failure of Danson’s performance, it is clear that it is an example of metaparody – that is, a parody of a parody. In other words, it is unlikely that Danson

was simply reproducing the blackface tradition of White mimicry of African Americans, but was instead intending to comment on that tradition in some way.

Danson’s performance, as well as its aftermath, is unusual but by no means unique in contemporary popular culture. Through an analysis of three key films from the 1970s to the 2000s that include White characters’ metaparodic representations of blackface, this article examines why some neo-blackface minstrelsy performances like Danson’s succeed while others fail. First, I suggest that in order for a film representation of blackface in the post-Civil Rights Era to be considered metaparodic instead of parodic, a Black character is needed to interpret for the (largely White) audience how the representation is to be received. Second, I argue that there must be an ideological gap between the White character and the performance of Black language and culture. That is, the audience must be made to realize that the performance does not entirely belong to the White character, but that he (and it is always a male character) is ventriloquizing the words or ideas of another character within the film. The analysis that I present exposes the fine line a neo-blackface performer must walk in order to index traditional forms of minstrelsy without appearing to endorse them.¹

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¹ See [Lopez and Hinrichs \(2017\)](#) for an audience reception analysis of a White performer of Black language.

2. Parody and metaparody

A core aspect of parody and metaparody is multivocality, or the potential for speakers to engage in cultural commentary through multiple layers of voice (Bakhtin, 1986). As Bakhtin points out, speakers can position themselves in multiple ways in relation to the styles they adopt, ranging from mono-voiced styling to unidirectionally double-voiced stylization (i.e., discourse that is voiced as belonging to the speaker) or vari-directionally double-voiced parody (i.e., discourse that is presented as not belonging to the speaker). Voicing becomes even more complex in film representations, which reflect multiple voices, including those of the screenwriter, the director, and the actors (Lopez and Hinrichs, 2017). In blackface performances, examining the ways in which White characters articulate Black voices can provide insight into the kind of social commentary and stance that these layers of voicing make possible.

Parody, as “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon, 1985:xii), is an important way in which a speaker can take a linguistic stance. In modern blackface films, the use of humor through parody allows the broaching of controversial topics such as stereotypes about race and gender by inviting the viewer to be critical of the blackface performances. It does so by comically overplaying particular linguistic and other stylistic practices in such a way that they become obvious. Humor through the use of parody can be used to contest dominant ideologies; however, because parody “has the paradoxical effect of preserving the very text that it seeks to destroy” (Dentith, 2000:36), it also reproduces the ideologies and stereotypes it asks the audience to critique.

In his discussion of Bakhtin’s theory of parody, Morson (1989:67) makes the following distinction between parody and metaparody: in order for a performance to be considered a parody, the performer must index a subject; he or she must deconstruct the subject; the result must be a new subject with “higher semantic authority than the original,” and the fact that it has higher semantic authority must be obvious to the audience. A performance only becomes metaparody if the final criterion of parody is not satisfied—if, in other words, the audience is not aware that the new subject has higher semantic authority.

Traditional minstrelsy was a form of parody, and the target for the White blackface performer was blackness. Blackness was thus reduced to its most stereotypical elements yet it was performed as if the portrayals were accurate and hence endowed with a higher semantic authority than authentic blackness. By contrast, neo-minstrelsy is metaparodic and consequently has two targets: one for the White character and one for the White actor playing that character. For the White character, the target is the same as in traditional minstrelsy: blackness. For the White actor playing the White character, however, the target is the failed White imitation of blackness (Bucholtz and Lopez, 2011). Because the performance of blackness in neo-minstrelsy is deliberately unsuccessful, it purposely lacks higher semantic authority than the original. In the present study, I examine the role of metaparody in films that recycle many features of traditional minstrelsy, focusing on the under-examined role of linguistic minstrelsy (Bucholtz and Lopez, 2011). I suggest that the metaparodic performances of blackface complicate the reception of these movies by both audience members and film critics (Lopez and Hinrichs, 2017).

3. The history of blackface minstrelsy in american popular culture

Early in its formation, the United States of America (America) began to develop Westernized ethnocentric binary notions of race

that shaped the way in which Whites thought about the Other. These concepts have permeated America’s social institutions, including the media, which have made a practice of justifying and perpetuating forms of race-based subjugation and inequality. Indeed, research on media portrayals of racial minorities has demonstrated that stereotypical representations of minority groups influence Whites’ perceptions of these groups (Ford, 1997; Lippi-Green, 1997; Monk-Turner et al., 2010), particularly those who heavily consume Hollywood representations of race.

Central to such portrayals is the long-standing Hollywood tradition of typifying the White character who “acts Black.” In its current manifestation, this character performs blackness by using both linguistic and non-linguistic features associated with a subset of the Black community, namely, young, urban African American males, consistently using and reinterpreting these features in such a way as to create a recognizable racial archetype, the “wigger” character (Lopez, 2009, 2014; Bucholtz and Lopez, 2011). However, this tradition is in fact much older, having started with the use of blackface in nineteenth century minstrel shows and ending in 1950 with the death of singer Al Jolson, probably the most widely known blackface performer (Lott, 1993; Rogin, 1996; Stark, 2000; Strausbaugh, 2006). Blackface minstrelsy, the most popular form of entertainment of the nineteenth century, took place mostly in the urban North. These performances involved White male actors who imitated Blacks for entertainment and profit. Although blackface is most notorious for its caricatures of Blacks as well as for articulating nostalgia for slavery and the “simple” rural life, it is also argued to have been part of a resistant working-class White culture as a commentary on this group’s station in America (Lott, 1993). Although their representations were oppressive in nature, minstrel performers also strove to entertain and showcase their artistic skills and thereby demonstrate their competence in performing blackness. In other words, they took pride in what they viewed as accurate representations of Black language and culture (Mahar, 1999, Strausbaugh, 2006).

Having very little opportunity to perform professionally, Black performers also embraced minstrelsy after the Civil War (Strausbaugh, 2006). Once Blacks began to participate in minstrel performances, a hierarchy of blackface performance was created (Rogin, 1996): one in which Whites were believed to perform blackness better than Blacks, so that Blacks were thought to emulate White performances of blackness.

Nineteenth-century minstrel shows, which primarily involved Black male characters, both commodified Black masculinity and exploited racist ideology (Lott, 1993; Rogin, 1996; Stark, 2000; Strausbaugh, 2006; Halilic and Palmer-Mehta, 2009).² With their faces covered in burnt cork, their bodies draped in ragged clothes, and their tongues ventriloquizing a dialect indexical of southern plantation-style speech, both Black and White minstrels performed a caricature of Black masculinity that humorously portrayed Blacks as buffoons. In doing so, these performances revealed underlying social issues such as Whites’ fear of the increasing presence of Blacks in American culture and the potential power of Black men in particular (Strausbaugh, 2006; Halilic and Palmer-Mehta, 2009). At the same time, minstrel performances also uncovered Whites’ fascination with African Americans and their culture.

When minstrel performances moved from the stage to mass media, these stereotypical representations of blackness extended to national audiences. In these forms of entertainment, as in minstrel shows, White performers maintained control of the representations of blackness, claiming to speak both for themselves and for Blacks (Rogin, 1996). In radio performances such as *Amos ‘n’ Andy*,

² Representations of Black femininity were rare in minstrelsy, but there were a few female minstrel characters played by men in drag, including the stereotypical mammy, jezebel, and mulatto characters (Turner, 1994).

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