A “genuine display of Ethiopian life”: the Virginia Minstrels at the Manchester Athenaeum

The Virginia Minstrels were founded in January 1843 in New York City and were the first blackface performers to put on a full-length blackface musical “concert.” By May 1843 they had brought their act to Britain. They performed first in Liverpool and then at the Athenaeum in Manchester and the Queen’s Theatre in Spring Gardens. They ended their tour in July, appearing as part of the Wizard of the North’s magic show at the Adelphi Theatre in London. This article is concerned with the Virginia Minstrels’ performances at the Athenaeum in Manchester which took place in June 1843. This article claims that the performances of the Virginia Minstrels at the Manchester Athenaeum contributed to the construction of middle-class identity in the Athenaeum audience by speaking directly to the middle-class imperatives of “respectability” and “improvement.” They did this through their choice of venue and their advertising in local newspapers—which framed the performance as an ethnographic “delineation” of American slaves. Nevertheless, the article also suggests that there were limits to the Athenaeum audience’s embrace of “respectability” as the Virginia Minstrels’ produced a comedy act that relied heavily upon a strong sense of the incongruous as well as a sense of moral superiority in their audience over both manual labour and, within the Atlantic context, Americans in general. Jessica Legnini is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Warwick. Her dissertation examines the reception of American blackface minstrel acts in Britain during the 1840s.

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On Friday, May 19, 1843, the Virginia Minstrels arrived in Liverpool on the packet ship New York.1 Daniel Emmett, the fiddle player for the group, recalled in 1877 that Richard Pelham, the “bones” player, had won enough money playing poker on the ship to allow the minstrels a couple of extra days to
recuperate from the colds they had caught on the journey. Emmett, who seemed to take pride in what he called the “improvident” nature of blackface minstrel performers in general, claimed that Pelham subsequently lost all his winnings at the “Bear Tavern” in Liverpool while playing poker with a German from South Carolina. It was this loss, according to Emmett, that forced the Minstrels to “go to work.” How accurately Emmett could remember the details of events that took place 34 years earlier is difficult to verify. What is certain, however, is that on Friday, May 26, 1843 at the Music Hall on Bold Street in Liverpool, the Virginia Minstrels performed the first documented American blackface “minstrel concert” ever to take place in Britain.

Two weeks later, the Minstrels began a series of performances at the lecture hall of the Manchester Athenaeum. In Manchester the Minstrels advertised in Archibald Prentice’s reformist newspaper the *Manchester Times* and described their act using language that associated it with ethnographic representation. It was the Virginia Minstrels’ claim to ethnographic representation, this article aims to show, which effectively “hailed” the Athenaeum audience and affirmed the audience’s vision in multiple ways. First, it made the Minstrels’ act appear educational, an important requirement if the performance was to be seen as “respectable.” Second, it attributed a “naive nature” to American blacks, slaves and manual labourers in general, whose apparent lack of education, bodily restraint and sophistication could be contrasted with the ideal behaviour of the “respectable” Manchester middle class. Third, it confirmed the British middle-class audience’s sense of moral superiority over Americans who, despite claims to egalitarianism in the 1840s, continued to hold human beings in bondage.

The Virginia Minstrels’ claim to “delineation” of the “slave race,” then, produced an image of “otherness” for the audience at the Athenaeum, which both reinforced and confirmed the audience’s sense of “normal” and “standard” behaviour in language and bodily restraint. Such a reading was especially powerful in Manchester because of the large labouring population made up of many recent Irish immigrants, who were already providing a contradistinction to middle-class identity in the 1840s. By the late 1840s the Manchester working class had been the subject of numerous social observations including James Phillips Kay’s *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes* (1832) and Friedrich Engels’ *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), both of which associated many of the social problems in Manchester with the presence of Irish immigrants. The labouring class, and the Irish especially, were increasingly described in terms of being a “race apart” by social observers and some observers even went so far as to make observations concerning what they deemed to be the physical characteristics of the Irish—“projecting mouths” and “depressed noses”—as evidence of their “barbarism.”

Similar observations were being made about Africans in the 1840s, although prior to 1870 British observers were taking more interest in slavery and race relations in America than in Africa. Therefore, any proclivities towards racial stereotyping among members of the Athenaeum audience in the 1840s...
would have been inflected by the identification of blacks with slavery and plantation labour in the American southern states, rather than by any image of the “savage” African.7

The representation of race, of course, is a dominant theme in scholarship examining blackface, not only by those examining minstrelsy in the American context, but also by those examining it in the British context. Although racial commentary certainly appears to be the most salient feature of blackface minstrelsy, and, as Michael Pickering has shown, an important element of later British blackface acts, this article will argue that the representation of the “non-white” in American blackface minstrelsy in Britain, which was associated with ignorance and lack of restraint in the minstrel performances, acted simultaneously as a broader performance of “otherness” and, therefore, also worked for the audience as a general means of cultural and social identification and demarcation.8 This approach does not aim to diminish the importance of interpreting minstrelsy within a racial framework; however, the main thrust of this article is to illustrate how the performances of the Virginia Minstrels at the Manchester Athenaeum in 1843 acted as a site where conceptions of class difference, notions of “respectability,” and even a sense of national distinction became heavily intertwined.

Background

The Virginia Minstrels are generally credited with being the first blackface minstrel troupe and the first troupe to put on a full-length evening “concert.” Nevertheless, by the end of 1843, a number of troupes had come into existence in America, including, for instance, the Christy Minstrels, Buckley’s Serenaders and the Ethiopian Serenaders. There was nothing new about blackface performance to British audiences. Performances by white men who blackened and masked their faces with burned cork had been popular in Europe for centuries.9 In medieval drama, for instance, black pigment was used as a marker of religious difference or as a signifier of evil; an evil usually embodied in the figure of the devil. In the 17th century, Othello (c. 1603) and Thomas Southerne’s stage version (1695) of Aphra Benn’s Oroonoko (1688), both of which remained popular throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, included blackface characters whose roles were often intended to be treated sympathetically. In the late 18th century, however, more caricatured representations of blacks occurred in plays like Isaac Bickerstaffe’s The Padlock (1768), Henry Bate’s The Black-a-Moor Wash’d White (1776) and George Coleman’s Inkle and Yarico (1787). The last play, Inkle and Yarico, initially featured the popular entertainer Charles Dibdin. Dibdin also performed a one-man stage act between 1787 and 1809 which included what he called “Negro impersonations.”10 Similarly, the British actor Charles Mathews, whose 1822 visit to the United States was staged in A Trip to America (1824), also performed what he called “black fun” characterisations. In one of the earliest appropriations of black American music by a popular white entertainer, A Trip to America popularised the slave song “Opossum up a Gum Tree.”11 Importantly, these two British performers, Dibdin and Mathews, both...
performed in North America and, along with the performance of British plays in America that included black characters, can certainly be credited with being early contributors to the development of blackface in the United States.12

Blackface as a distinct genre in the United States, however, can be traced back specifically to 1815 when, in Albany, New York, the musician Micah Hawkins published the first blackface song—“The Siege of Plattsburgh” or, as it was also known, “Backside Albany.” The act was then taken up by George Washington Dixon who was first documented playing in blackface in Albany, New York in 1827. Dixon subsequently performed at the Chatham Theatre in New York City in the summer of 1828. The Chatham was located close to Catherine’s Market, which was an area known for the street song and dance performances put on by black labourers coming in from the farms of Long Island and New Jersey.13 While in New York City, Dixon performed some of the earliest American blackface songs such as “Coal Black Rose” and “Long-tail’d Blue.”14

By 1836, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who had been an actor at the Chatham Theatre in 1828 and had watched George Washington Dixon’s performances, had brought his tremendously popular blackface character Jim Crow, and the popular song “Jump Jim Crow,” to London.15 It was in May 1843, however, that British audiences were introduced to a new kind of blackface performance—the full-length “minstrel concert”—by the Virginia Minstrels. The Virginia Minstrels performed in Liverpool, Manchester and London over a three month period before splitting up and then reconstituting themselves with the banjoist Joel Sweeney for a brief run in Dublin in 1844. Following their performances in Dublin, however, the troupe split permanently.16

By the mid to late 1840s, blackface troupes poured into Britain from the United States. Between 1843 and 1849, the British could be entertained by acts such as the Ethiopian Serenaders, the Buckley Serenaders, the American Southern Minstrels, the Sable Minstrels, the Ethiopian Minstrels, the Ethiopian Delineators, the Ethiopian Harmonists, the New Orleans Serenaders, the Female American Serenaders, the Lantum Serenaders, the Ohio Serenaders and the Tremont Serenaders.17 In fact, American minstrel troupes crossed the Atlantic in such numbers in the second half of the 1840s that in 1847 Punch respond to minstrelsy’s popularity, and what it called a “glut of Ethiopians,” by advising the “stars” of London’s “Italian Opera” to increase their own popularity by “adopting the peculiarities” of the tremendously popular American troupe known as the Ethiopian Serenaders.18 By the 1870s, the British had established their own blackface troupes. The most famous British troupe was the long-running Moore and Burgess Minstrels; it evolved from the American troupe known as the Christy Minstrels which, despite being in operation since 1843 in Buffalo, did not arrive in Britain until 1857.19

Blackface minstrelsy became increasingly popular in Britain throughout the 19th century. Sheet music was produced so that blackface songs could be played at home on the “pianoforte”—an instrument never used by the minstrels
themselves—and danced to in quadrilles and waltzes. By the end of the 19th century, blackface minstrel acts could be seen at many popular sites including seaside resorts, galas, festivals, town fairs, pantomimes and the music hall. By the early 20th century, step-by-step guides explaining how to stage an amateur minstrel show were being published, as were rudimentary histories of blackface performers in Britain, although the Saturday Review had published a short history of blackface minstrelsy as early as 1861.

Through much of the 20th century, minstrelsy continued to find an audience in Britain, initially through radio with The White Coons’ Concert Party (1932-1936) and The Kentucky Minstrels (1933-1950) and eventually, by 1958, through television with the Black and White Minstrel Show, which featured the song and dance routines of a group called the Mitchell Minstrels. The popularity of blackface minstrelsy began to wane, however, in the 1970s as the variety show fell out of fashion and the wider British public became increasingly aware of the malevolent racial tenor of the performance. With the BBC’s cancellation of the Black and White Minstrel Show in 1978, the mainstream popularity of blackface minstrelsy in Britain was over.

The structure and aesthetic of the blackface minstrel show in Britain changed over 140 years. It evolved in the 1830s and 1840s from the raw “depictions” of plantation slaves in the individual act of Thomas Dartmouth Rice (Jim Crow) and the “minstrel concerts” of the four-member Virginia Minstrels, to a more subdued and “refined” format of the five-member Ethiopian Serenaders in the late 1840s whose aesthetic and style became the basis of subsequent blackface minstrel acts in Britain. By the 1860s and 1870s, the medium in Britain had coalesced into a formula that included the use of a straight-man known as “Mr. Interlocutor” and comic “cornermen,” or “endmen” as they were called in the United States. These “cornermen” became known over time as “Tambo” and “Bones.” In the early 1840s, however, the full-length blackface minstrel “concert” was still finding its form. The use of “cornermen” and the character of “Mr. Interlocutor” were evident, but were not yet a fixed part of the act. The Virginia Minstrels used aspects of these emergent characters, but in their performances the characters were not yet permanent and nor had they been named.

The Manchester Athenaeum and its audience

After the initial performance at the Music Hall on Bold Street in Liverpool on May 26, the Virginia Minstrels gave three more performances on June 2, 3, and 5 which evidently drew enough people for the Minstrels to make a slight profit, or at least enough, it seems, to have enabled them to move on to Manchester.

In Manchester, the Virginia Minstrels played two venues—the lecture hall of the Athenaeum, and the Queen’s Theatre in Spring Gardens. The Minstrels’ first performance at the Athenaeum on Princess Street took place on the evening
after their final performance in Liverpool, which suggests that the Minstrels’ “agent,” George Wooldridge, may have travelled to Manchester ahead of the troupe to secure them a venue. They gave five performances at the Athenaeum between June 6 and June 10. The Athenaeum, which was described as an institution to promote “the mental cultivation of young men engaged in commercial and other pursuits,” had been in existence since 1835. The founders, who included William Langton, John Walker, James Heywood (MP), Richard Cobden (MP), and Edward Worthington, were all leading reformers in Manchester. Many were also significant entities in other organisations, including the Anti-Corn Law League. The Minstrels advertised in at least one local newspaper, the *Manchester Times*, where they informed the potential audience that they would “delineate, through the medium of new and original Negro Melodies, lectures and dances, the sports and pastimes of the slave race of America [sic].”

Manchester was, by 1843, a city associated with the modern in the wider British public’s imagination. Manchester, and provincial cities and towns in general, were, by the 1840s, the primary sites for an emerging industrial business community. These wealthy bourgeois elite were a mix of Unitarians, Liberals, and Reformists. When the Virginia Minstrels arrived in Manchester the city was about one square mile, with 75 per cent of the population of 300,000 being manual labourers. About 13 per cent of Manchester’s population were Irish immigrants, many of whom lived by the River Medlock in an area known colloquially as “Little Ireland.” This area was highly studied in the 19th century, and became instrumental in the construction of both class and racial difference in the Victorian imagination.

In the 1830s and 1840s, therefore, the disparity in social conditions, which accompanied the gap between rich and poor in Manchester, became increasingly understood and framed by many in the wealthy elite as the consequence of “class” difference. Subsequently, reformists promoted the ideology of the bourgeoisie as being most suited to providing the social, political, and economic reform they (the reformists) believed was needed. Therefore, the discourse of class, especially as it related to the perceived value of a “middle class,” became ideologically intertwined with the cause of reform and associated notions such as “progress,” “improvement” and “cultivation.”

The idea for the Manchester Athenaeum grew out of that perception. For many in Manchester’s bourgeois elite it became imperative that the youth of the middle class be “improved” and “cultivated.” Speaking at the proceedings for the establishment of the Athenaeum in 1835, William Romaine Callender complained that “whilst there was an abundant education for the wealthy of the land, and while the education of the poor was to some extent provided for by Sunday schools and mechanics’ institutions,” the Athenaeum was needed because “the middle classes were the only portion of the country who had not justice done them in education.” Eight years later, in October 1843, the Athenaeum was celebrated by Charles Dickens who praised the Manchester Athenaeum for having successfully provided education for the middle class, a
cause which he linked to wider prosperity. The Athenaeum, he claimed, was “a splendid temple” which was "sacred to the education and improvement of a large class of those who, in their various useful stations, assist in the production of our wealth.”

Others saw moral and political benefits to “an institution whose object was to provide for the instruction and innocent recreation of a class of young men who would otherwise be thrown very much upon the town, and might fall into vicious courses.” Robert Hyde Greg, for instance, saw the Athenaeum as a place of political preparation; a place where young men entering commerce could be educated on matters of importance as he claimed they had, or would have, the “elective franchise.” Nevertheless, Hyde Greg continued, the benefits of the Athenaeum went beyond education and preparation. The institution would also act as a place of resort where young men could relax with “others like them” after long days of work.

In 1843, when the Virginia Minstrels arrived in Manchester, the Athenaeum had 1,135 members paying an annual subscription of 25 shillings. Writing a history of the Athenaeum in 1851, James William Hudson indicated that the subscribers were generally as the founders had envisioned. They were “professional men of all grades, quiet men of business,” as well as “young men employed as clerks in warehouses, and in retail establishments” who used the institution “for the perusal of newspapers and other periodicals, or for social intercourse or mutual instruction.”

In 1851, however, Hudson bemoaned what he considered to be a lack of seriousness in the Athenaeum subscribers. The first indication of this flippancy toward “proper cultivation,” according to Hudson, was to be found in the way the subscribers used the library. There were fifteen thousand volumes in the library at the Athenaeum, and, according to Hudson, at least one-third of the books lent out were works of fiction. For Hudson, such a fact indicated that the subscribers were dangerously interested in "light and meretricious subjects." Other indications show a little more convincingly that the subscribers to the Athenaeum were less enamoured with the formal education envisioned by the founders, and slightly more concerned with “social intercourse” and amusement. The “Essay and Discussion Society,” for instance, was a popular and “prominent feature of the institution.” The Society held literary discussions which, according to Hudson, were always well attended and often included “a sprinkling of the fair sex.” Moreover, after the annual soirees of the Society the members were known to adjourn to the news room where “the remainder of the evening might be appropriated to dancing.”

The Athenaeum put on two lectures a week for eight months of the year. Performances of music, drama, and lectures on history drew the largest audiences. Hudson again complained of the lack of seriousness of the subscribers when he claimed that the lecturer was “in too many instances” more “the object of attraction than the lecture.” An insipid interest by members in the more formal aspects of education at the Athenaeum is illustrated more persuasively,
however, by the failure of classes in bookkeeping, mathematics, languages, and music instruction. The Gymnastic Club, by contrast, was “nightly crowded,” with the annual “Assault-at-Arms,” which included “interesting exhibitions of Fencing, Singlestick, Sword Exercises and Boxing,” being one of the most popular events of the year. Such actualities not only suggest a limit to the appeal of scholarly “improvement” in many of the subscribers to the Athenaeum, but it also confirms that the Athenaeum’s subscribers were primarily younger men.45

These young male subscribers, along with the general public, would have made up the Virginia Minstrels’ audience at the Athenaeum. It is clear, however, from the preferences of the young men at the Athenaeum, that their interest in education did have limits. In fact, the performance by the Virginia Minstrels may have appealed to this younger audience less as the anthropological examination the Virginia Minstrels framed themselves as and more as a humorous song and dance act. The Minstrels’ claim of being instructive, however, provided them with an aura of “respectability” and thus made them more accessible to the middle class audience. It remained an act, therefore, in which the audience’s education and social condition could be contrasted with, and reaffirmed by, those being represented on stage.

“Hailing” the middle class audience

The Virginia Minstrels may not have fully comprehended the political and social implications of the reformist ideology in Manchester. They were familiar, however, with some aspects of the ideology of “improvement” and “respectability” that shaped the reformist paradigm, as they had deliberately appealed to similar ideas in their American audience. Responding to the dire economic situation for American entertainers since the Panic of 1837, the Virginia Minstrels changed the emphasis of blackface away from the outright mockery of the European entertainment they considered to be increasingly elitist, blunted the social and political commentary that was inherent to the genre, and reimagined themselves as “respectable” entertainment by making stronger claims to the ethnographic “delineation” of southern slaves.46 By doing so they aimed to appeal to an audience who valued that respectability and wanted their vision of respectability affirmed rather than challenged. The Virginia Minstrels did this by copying the descriptive language of popular, “respectable” white European singing groups like the Rainier family from Austria, known as the Tyrolese Minstrels, whose evening-length musical “concerts” attracted large audiences in the United States even while the blackface performers struggled to make a living. Yet despite this change, as Dale Cockrell has pointed out, the satirical nature of early blackface continued to constrain the meaning of the Virginia Minstrels in the United States. In fact, it remained entirely possible for the Minstrels’ performance to be read as both “respectable” and “satirical” depending on the makeup of their American audience.47

The Virginia Minstrels, nevertheless, aimed to exploit this same tendency towards “respectability” in Manchester. To do this they promoted themselves as an instructional ethnographic display when they advertised, claiming that they
would “delineate . . . the sports and pastimes of the slave race of America [sic].” The educational claim made by the Virginia Minstrels’ performance went unquestioned by the reviewer for the *Manchester Times* who accepted the Virginia Minstrels’ assertion almost word for word: “This novel “importation” of Virginia minstrels,” the reviewer wrote, “has this week been gratifying the inhabitants of Manchester with exhibitions . . . illustrative of the social and festive habits of the sable sons and daughters of the slave states of America.” Moreover, the reviewer, who found the “specimens of the festive enjoyment of the negroes of America” all “highly interesting,” accepted the minstrels’ representation as authentic when he wrote that “with the exception of Rice’s [Jim Crow] illustrations, the English people have not been favoured with any genuine display of Ethiopian life.”

The Virginia Minstrels’ claim that they would instruct as much as entertain was further legitimised for the audience by the advertisements for other events that accompanied the review in the *Manchester Times* of June 10, 1843. The Virginia Minstrels’ performance was part of a competitive environment for educational events. The people of Manchester could that week attend Rev. E. H. Nolan’s “second lecture on Puseyism.” They could attend “Mr. Fraser’s celebrated musical and literary evenings” at the Mechanics’ Institution on Cooper Street, or take a class with “Mr. Day” in “elementary and practical chemistry.” The Virginia Minstrels’ claim to anthropological illustration “of the habits of the sable sons and daughters of the slave states” seemed, therefore, suitably edifying for the “respectable” audiences of Manchester. The *Manchester Times* reviewer’s unquestioning acceptance of the minstrels’ “display” as being “genuine,” and the fact that the performances were taking place in the lecture room of the Athenaeum would have all worked to reinforce the legitimacy of the entertainment as educational and, therefore, “respectable” enough for those planning to attend.

Education and the discourse of respectability, then, were crucial to the framing of the Virginia Minstrels at the Athenaeum. After all, entertainment at the Athenaeum was never presented as “frivolous” or “unseemly.” Other “entertainments” that appeared in the lecture rooms at the Athenaeum in the early 1840s were similarly framed in the language of instruction. An advertisement in the *Manchester Times* in July 1842 for “Mr. White’s Last Lecture” on “Irish Melody,” for instance, was described as a “lecture on the GENIUS and SONGS of [Thomas] Moore, with VOCAL ILLUSTRATIONS [sic].” Similarly, a couple of months after the Virginia Minstrels appeared, the Athenaeum hosted a “Prof. Greenbank” who performed “a series of READINGS and RECITATIONS, expressive of FEELING and PASSION [sic]” as part of his instruction “in Physical Oratory and Practical Elocution”—an illustration of “correct” speech that acted in contradistinction to the comedic dialect of the Virginia Minstrels. Similar events blurring the line between entertainment and instruction that occurred within months of the Virginia Minstrels’ performances included recitations of the “popular entertainments” of Charles Dibdin, and Charles Mathews, performed on the “pianoforte,” and a series of “Quartet Concerts” performed in the “small concert room.”
With the appropriate framework of education and respectability in place, the Virginia Minstrels then had to speak to specific assumptions present in the audience. These assumptions relied on a strong sense of the difference between “mental” and “manual” labour. Such a distinction was a cornerstone of the middle-class conception of itself, and so, at the most basic level, the Virginia Minstrels played to this distinction by illustrating the workers of the southern states. They were manual labourers working on the plantations of the American south or boatmen working on the Ohio River. The characters performed by the Virginia Minstrels, therefore, simultaneously affirmed the “rightness” of the middle-class vision by associating contrasting behaviour such as ignorance, excitability and poverty, not just with slaves, but with manual labour in general. Such an association built upon conceptions already present in the middle class of Manchester who were increasingly defined by social observers as being opposed to manual labour, and Irish workers specifically who were characterised in terms of ignorance, poverty and general lack of temperance.

The Virginia Minstrels spoke to ignorance and poverty through the aesthetic and style of their performance. A reviewer for the Manchester Guardian asked the paper’s readers to “imagine four jet black ‘coloured gentlemen’ of the ‘Jim Crow’ genus, dressed in the favourite costumes of the negroes [sic] of the southern states of America.” The so-called “favourite costumes” included odd-shaped hats, brightly coloured shirts and white trousers, a combination which worked in contradistinction to the matching suits worn by respectable, middle-class, businessmen.

Similarly, in contrast to middle-class perceptions of proper comportment, the Virginia Minstrels illustrated excitable behaviour by dancing energetically as they played their instruments while punctuating the tunes with shouting and laughing. The physical nature of the performance, and Richard Pelham, the “bones” player, especially, was described in the Manchester Guardian: “No description can convey any notion of the violent muscular contortions and fierce action of the castanet performer,” the reviewer claimed, and should his “accompaniment to a single melody . . . be compulsorily performed by any auditor, [it would] effectually dislocate every bone in his limbs.”

The physical comedy of the Minstrels could also be seen in the so-called “wild” dances, which “closed the entertainment.” These dances were referred to by the Manchester Guardian as “the ‘grape vine twisting,’ and ‘unconquerable jigs,’ of Messrs. Brower and Pelham,” and were judged to be as “extraordinary as they [were] grotesque.” These so-called “Virginia Breakdowns” were, as indicated, primarily performed by Richard Pelham and Frank Brower and were “spiced with brief, pungent interjections” such as “Dats de heel what neber told a lie,” “Dars musick in dem ole heels,” and “Dem ole legs is hung on a swibbel.” Such interjections tend to support the minstrel performer and historian Harry Reynolds’ claim that the comedy of early blackface minstrelsy depended on their distorted English dialect rather than the actual wit of the words.
Nevertheless, these dances, which relied upon physical comedy, continued to be read by the reviewer of the Manchester Times within the framework of ethnographic description (which tends to indicate the power of the ethnographic framing put forward by the Minstrels and supported by the venue itself). The reviewer mentioned three dances which he described as “singularly attractive, and . . . really well performed.” The first dance (explained using a descriptive tone influenced by the Minstrels’ ethnographic framing), was called the “The Slave Match Dance” and was “performed during the holidays in the southern states.” He added to this anthropological description by explaining that it was danced by “the male slave in the presence of their master overseers and other whites, who urge[d] the negroes to their utmost skill by making small presents to the negro who [could] stand the most fatigue or remain upon the board for the longest time.” The reviewer’s explanation of the dance builds upon the educational framing of the performance by the Virginia Minstrels and may have legitimated the “respectability” of the performance for the Athenaeum audience while simultaneously allowing them to access any physical comedy that accompanied it. The reviewer went on to explain a second dance, the “Slave Marriage Dance.” Again he gave a detailed background which he described as representative of “the heel and toe science.” The third dance he called “the Corn Husking Jig,” a dance in which a “most expert dancer” amused the slaves as they husked corn “with his antics and grimaces to the music of the banjo.”

The humour of the songs sung by the Virginia Minstrels also offered imagery that reinforced the audience’s sense of congruous behaviour. The Manchester Times’ reviewer named two of their songs, observing that, “the parody called ‘The Fine Old Coloured Gentleman’ (the air being the celebrated English one), and ‘Miss Lucy Long’ are the favourite melodies, and they, of course, are received with boisterous applause.” The reception with “boisterous applause” indicates a familiarity on the part of the audience with at least one of these melodies, “The Fine Old Coloured Gentleman.” (Although “Miss Lucy Long” had been performed in traditional blackface acts in America prior to 1843, there is no indication that the British were particularly familiar with the song. The use of parody in “The Fine Old Coloured Gentleman” relied on the audience’s familiarity with the object being parodied. Here, Dan Emmett, applying the parody so typical of blackface performers, had adapted a 17th-century tune to accommodate his lyrics—a tune known in 1840s Britain as “The Fine Old English Gentleman.” “I’ll sing you an old ballad that was made by an old pate,” the opening lines of the original version went, “of a poor old English gentleman who had an old estate.” Dan Emmett’s reworking of the song played with the notion of “gentleman” and the assumptions that surrounded the term for the Athenaeum audience, while simultaneously reinforcing the boundaries of proper “gentlemanly” behaviour; behaviour that, like middle-class identity in general, was associated with a sense of “respectability” and included physical and emotional restraint.

The song told the story of a man named “Sambo” from Tennessee who was distinguished through his jumping, racing, and hopping by his “leven [leaven] feet” and for his banjo playing, and singing. The Minstrels painted a
picture of “Sambo” as a childlike, energetic, unrestrained, and loud individual who “sung so long and sung so loud, he scared the pigs and goats.” Yet “Sambo,” the refrain told the audience, playing on notions of incongruity, “was a Gemman [Gentleman], one of de oldest kind.”65 In America, where criticism of an emerging class-based cultural hierarchy was part of traditional blackface minstrelsy, the image of “Sambo” attempting to be a “gentleman” would have simultaneously mocked both blacks, and the idea of gentlemanly behaviour, for a traditional blackface audience (northern, male labourers) who disdained what they considered to be the emulation of the wealthy “English” by some of their fellow Americans. For the Athenaeum audience, however, where ideas of restraint were highly valued, the comedy in the image of “Sambo” may have relied more heavily upon a sense of superiority. Whilst recognising the incongruity of Sambo’s behaviour with that of a “gentleman” they may have missed the simultaneous mockery of “English gentlemanly” airs that was available to elements of the American audience.66 The comedy, however, for the Athenaeum audience lay in the sense of incongruity presented by the image of “Sambo” as a “gentlemen.” Although heavily reliant on racial imagery, the comedy simultaneously reinforced the standard of “respectability” for the audience and the “rightness” of the ideal of the “English gentleman.”

Performing difference

The evening’s entertainment, however, was not limited to singing and dancing. The first half of the performance usually began with an instrumental and ended with what blackface performers called a “stump speech.” Although the Manchester reviewers did not use the term “stump speeches” at the Athenaeum, the “quizzical lectures” referred to by the Manchester Times indicate that they were in the programme. Frank Brower was well-known in America for his stump speech entitled “Definition of the Bankrupt Laws” in which he attempted to explain the financial world. Richard Pelham often performed one entitled “A Brief Battering at the Blues,” and Billy Whitlock, the banjo player, performed the “Locomotive Lecture” which made use of pseudoscientific explanations and “highfalutin expressions and malapropisms.”67 The reviewer for the Manchester Guardian described these speeches as “nigger converzazione” and claimed it was “not the least amusing part of the entertainments.”68 These stump speeches, or “quizzical lectures” were accompanied by what were known as “conundrums,” which were essentially jokes that relied on puns for the punch line. All four minstrels asked and answered these conundrums, although playbills indicate that Brower and Pelham took the lead.69 There is no indication that these “conundrums and Yankeeisms” were considered by the Athenaeum audience to be unsavoury, but they were described by the Manchester Guardian as being “laughable [for] their absurdity.”70

The delivery of these stump speeches could certainly have been interpreted as anthropological descriptions of black character by the audience. The speeches had, after all, been developed in a racially conscious America, and spoke to a vision that saw blacks as unable to be properly educated, and lacking...
the intelligence to fully understand educated conversation. The comedy, for the American audience, was to be found in the black character mimicking, rather inadequately, the educated conversations of the learned, while simultaneously mocking the language of the educated classes. This would have been the dominant reading for a traditional blackface audience in the United States. Nevertheless, in traditional blackface these speeches were also used to satirise the ruling class and spoke specifically to the socio-political context of the United States. At the Manchester Athenaeum where any social commentary developed in the United States may have had limited meaning, the malapropisms and puns in the speeches would have been a critical element of the comedy.

The humour of these speeches relied on the incongruity of the uneducated attempting to sound learned on a particular subject and upon the audience having knowledge of what was being mocked. At the Manchester Athenaeum, therefore, these speeches spoke directly to the audience's worldview. They spoke to an audience who lived within the orbit of the specific knowledge being used inappropriately by the minstrel. Recognition of the malapropisms, mispronunciations, and misunderstandings made by the minstrel for comedic effect, therefore, confirmed an audience member as part of that educated community where the language was used appropriately. In that way, by understanding the jokes, the audience's respectability and middle-class status was affirmed by these lectures.

Moreover, because these speeches relied heavily on the parody of the uneducated for their effect, it was where the Virginia Minstrels' claim of being educational most obviously broke down into outright mockery and burlesque. This may be the reason why the reviewer for the reformist Manchester Times, who embraced the ethnographical framing of the Minstrels most effusively, did not expound on this aspect of the show. The lack of exposition on this part of the performance suggests that the vision the Minstrels' spoke to in the racially conscious northern states of America did not translate so cleanly to the Manchester lecture hall audience. The Athenaeum audience valued the notions of education and improvement but had limited experience of both white American assumptions about race and the American socio-political context.

The Manchester newspapers do, however, indicate that the stump speech known as "Locomotive Lecture" was performed at the Athenaeum by the Virginia Minstrels. The "lecture" was, as William Mahar described it, a long "autobiographical boast" which included malapropisms and comical sound effects.71 The Manchester Guardian reviewer spoke only of the sound effects made by Whitlock who "imitated the various sounds heard on the starting of a railway train, the phuzzing and panting of the engine, the shrill steam-whistle and all." The speech itself was long and bears some discussion as it spoke directly to elements of the audience's sense of the congruous in the use of "proper English," notions of "femininity," as well as various aspects of science, and conceptions of racial difference. It was, of course, written in the context of American socio-politics and would have had limited meaning to the Athenaeum audience. The "lecture," moreover, came quite early on in the development of
steam engines, and the modernity that the locomotive represented would have acted in contradistinction to the pre-modern world represented by the slave. Nevertheless, the talk described an America of “funny” names and inappropriate behaviour. In this respect the parody and burlesque that was intrinsic to the Virginia Minstrels’ performance was as much about America and Americans as it was about the overt parodying of blacks for the Athenaeum audience. “I is what you call a scientific loco-smokive bulgine niggar,” it begins, “I is a gwine to gib you de multiblication ob de variation.” The comedy, if the Athenaeum audience could follow it, was to be found in the absurdity of the language used and the incongruity of American slaves being in contact with such technology. Continuing in this vein, Whitlock told of how “dey gib dis niggar his edjumfication [education]” in “pumbsologus” [phrenology] and how he was “tern’d” out of “dar boya-lition meetins [abolition meeting].” He also told of falling in love “wid a brack girl” who was so “brack in de face she couldn’t tell when it was daylight.”

The story continued with a description of his “sweetheart” that relied upon an exaggerated and absurd description of the physical nature of blacks and an incongruous sense of “feminine beauty.” Her hair was “wool curl’d so tight on de top ob her head dat she couldn’t shut her eyes; an her nose-by golly! Dar was so flat, dat whenever she went to blow it, she had to put tar on her fingers to keeb a good hold ob it.” The “lecture” continued to describe the narrator’s trip to a travelling menagerie and finally ends with the narrator raising “de steam.” It was at this end point that Whitlock imitated the locomotive. Such overt and absurd racial parody went without comment by the reviewers, but it was clearly an element of the performance that surely put strain upon the claims made by the Virginia Minstrels of education and “respectability” for some in the audience.

A moral superiority

In an environment shaped more by notions of class difference than by concepts of racial difference it is difficult to speculate on how this “lecture” was received by the audience at the Athenaeum, although the reviewers’ silence upon it may indicate that they did not fully comprehend it. Nevertheless, the malapropisms, puns, and jokes may have worked less to shape a sense of racial difference in the audience (although over time this kind of act would be instrumental in shaping conceptions of race) and worked more to reinforce both a sense of “English” difference in opposition to Americans, and a sense of middle-class difference. Such grotesque mimicry, therefore, did more than construct racial stereotypes in Manchester, it simultaneously worked to affirm and confirm the “rightness” of the middle-class vision of “standard” and “normal” behaviour for those in the Athenaeum audience.

A broader critique of American claims to egalitarianism, however, may also have constrained the Athenaeum audience’s understanding of the Virginia Minstrels’ act. Manchester had maintained an abolitionist movement since the late-18th century. By the 1840s, the anti-slavery movement had turned its attention to the problem of foreign slavery and particularly American slavery. Manchester, problematically for some, made its money from the products manufactured from American cotton that had been picked by American slaves.
Consequently, in Manchester in the 1840s, the interest in slavery and race revolved around America rather than Africa. The preconceptions of racial difference the Athenaeum audience brought with them to the Virginia Minstrels' performances, then, were shaped primarily by the identification of blacks with American slavery and southern plantation labour. Moreover, any interest in the American slave on the part of the Athenaeum audience was largely due to the humanitarian arguments against slavery made by the Evangelical movement in the early 19th century. Although the movement had lost steam in the early 1840s (compared with the 1830s), only to be revived with the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, there remained for many reformists a "protective role" to be played by the British towards slaves; a role that was an important component of many reformists' sense of their "moral and civilising mission." Any interest in the American slave, as represented by the Virginia Minstrels, may have been enhanced by the fact that the Anti-Slavery Convention was to take place at the Free Mason's Tavern on Great Queen Street in Manchester on Tuesday, June 13 to Thursday, June 15, the week that the Minstrels moved their act to the Queen's Theatre in Spring Gardens. According to reports, delegates from Britain as well as the United States and Canada were to convene in Manchester to "take measures for the total abolition of slavery and the slave trade." Whether or not the upcoming convention had any bearing on the Minstrels' reception cannot be verified. The presence of the convention in Manchester, however, does illustrate that, for many in the reformist community, the treatment and plight of American slaves was a pertinent issue.

The naiveté of the blackface characters certainly fed into abolitionist logic concerning Britain's responsibility towards the protection of slaves. Such a stance would only have been enhanced by the sentimentality surrounding, for instance, the illustration of the various aspects of the slave marriage relationship described by the *Manchester Times*. Later in the decade, the popular Ethiopian Serenaders fed into similar sentimental notions concerning love and commitment in songs like "Lucy Neal," which told of the forced parting of two married slaves and the eventual death of the wife. In 1843, however, the illustration of the marriage rites of American slaves by the Virginia Minstrels may have been enough to confirm their humanity for many in the audience.

Such a reading allowed the Athenaeum audience to affirm their moral superiority over the Americans, who continued to hold such "poor helpless beings" in bondage. The British had outlawed slavery in the empire in 1833, and, although there was an ongoing discussion about the benefits of slavery over the horrors of wage labour being witnessed in the industrial towns of Britain and America, bondage was itself an anathema to a middle-class ideology that was shaped not only by Christian imperatives, but by an increased acceptance of the concept of upward and downward mobility, which was, as Simon Gunn pointed out, a critical element of the idea of the "self-made man." 

**Conclusion**
Despite the Minstrels’ framing themselves as “educational” and “improving” the reviewer for the Manchester Guardian was limited in his approval. “As a specimen of negro enjoyment, the entertainment is worth seeing once; but there is much sameness in most of their airs,” the reviewer wrote, “the only one processing any pretension to musical merit is that of ‘Miss Lucy Long;’ and if they could substitute a few more of equally pleasing character, for the monotonous ditties they sing, it would give more life and zest to their performance.” The claim that the Minstrel performance lacked “musical merit” is in keeping with a reformist reviewer who valued the notion of “cultivated taste” based on an understanding of musical sophistication. His approval of “Lucy Long” tends to highlight the tension between the embrace of “respectability” as an idea and actual adherence to “respectability.” In the American context the song was always sung by a male performer in a dress, and was instrumental in establishing cross-dressing as part of the American blackface performance. Such a salient lack of the mention of such burlesque in the Manchester review, however, indicates that the Virginia Minstrels performed the song “straight” rather than in burlesque, an illustration of how much they had “cleaned up” the traditional act for the “respectable” audience.

It has been the position of this article that the performances of the Virginia Minstrels contributed to the construction of middle-class identity in the Athenaeum audience, by speaking directly to the middle-class imperatives of “respectability” and “improvement.” They did this through their choice of venue, the lecture hall of the Manchester Athenaeum, and their advertising in local newspapers which framed the performance as an ethnographic “delineation” and mirrored the language used by other “respectable” entertainments taking place in the city. Nevertheless, there were limits to the Athenaeum audience’s embrace of “improvement” and “respectability” and this can be seen in the comedy of the Virginia Minstrels. This comedy relied upon a strong sense of incongruity and superiority in the Athenaeum audience, based on both a sense of difference between mental and manual labour as well as a sense of “English” difference. After all, much of the comedy may have merely confirmed what many in the audience already understood Americans, and other foreigners, in general to be—feckless, unrestrained, and stupid. Nevertheless, if the Athenaeum audience was to understand the jokes presented by the Virginia Minstrels they needed a strong sense of what congruous behaviour was. It was through the comedy of the performance then, that the Minstrels most thoroughly hailed the Athenaeum audience as a middle-class community, and reinforced the Athenaeum audience’s sense of “respectability” and middle-class difference.

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1 The packet ship New York is listed as arriving on May 19 in “Shipping News” The Times, Monday, May 22, 1843, 8; Although Richard Pelham remembered arriving on May 21 he did name the ship and its captain “Thomas Cropper” in R.W. Pelham, “An Authentic History of the Virginia Minstrels,” The New York Clipper, August 8, 1874, 148. The Minstrels’ intention to tour Britain had first been made public in The Sporting Whip of February 4, 1843, see Dale Cockrell, Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
For a similar statement of intention see Spirit of the Times; A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage, April 15, 1843, 84.


3 See advertisement in the Liverpool Mercury, Friday, May 26, 1843, 1. This advertisement refers to a previous performance, although it does not specify time or place. I found no other evidence that a previous performance took place in Liverpool. See also Dan Emmett, “The Origin of Minstrelsy,” 61; R.W. Pelham, “An Authentic History of the Virginia Minstrels,” 148, in which Pelham remembers performing only twice in Liverpool.

4 It is not the intention of this article to enter into the discussion concerning the actual relationship between blackface performance and black American culture in the 1840s. The Virginia Minstrels maintained that their blackface performances were authentic delineations and so legitimate ethnographic description, and claimed they had developed their acts from watching and listening to northern and southern blacks in America. Such claims of authenticity were not challenged by historians until the 1960s. In the 1990s, however, Alexander Saxton and David Roediger both argued that the representation of blacks in minstrelsy was little more than a construction, or fantasy, of northern white performers that enabled certain behaviours that contradicted what was being performed on stage to be associated with “whiteness,” see Alexander Saxton, The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America (London: Verso, 1990, 2003) and David R. Roediger, Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London: Verso, 1991). W. T. Lhamon then argued that in actuality there was a more complicated relationship between blackface performance and black culture. Lhamon identifies Catherine Market in New York City, as a place where black and white culture intermingled in the 18th and early 19th centuries, see W.T. Lhamon, Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Making a similar argument concerning the relationship of blackface to black American culture, Eric Lott has argued that white performers were so fascinated by the kind of cultural expressions witnessed at places like Catherine Market that blackface performance allowed these white men the opportunity to control and steal aspects of that culture, see Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). These studies, then, have complicated the relationship between black American culture and blackface performance primarily in an effort to illustrate the hybrid nature of a founding form of American popular entertainment.


8 Michael Pickering, Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).


11 Pickering, Minstrelsy in Britain, 7.

12 Ibid.

13 W.T. Lhamon, Raising Cain, 56 and 237 n.1.

14 Ibid., 29-31.

15 According to Lhamon, Jim Crow was already a cultural icon before Thomas Rice made him popular. Jim Crow was a “folk trickster” popular in the racially mixed communities of Georgia. Prior to the American Civil War the character of Jim Crow was used to criticise and satirise the ruling class. By the middle of the 19th century, however, Jim Crow came to represent the segregated South. See W.T. Lhamon, Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), viii and W. T. Lhamon
Rice’s famous song entitled ‘Jim Crow’ was known in England before he arrived. A newspaper report in 1833 refers to the song, see ‘Varieties,’ The Leicester Chronicle, Saturday, 2 February 1833, 4; Thomas Rice was performing at the Surrey Theatre in London by September 1836, see The Morning Post, Tuesday, 13 September 1836, 3. For a more in depth discussion of Jim Crow in Britain see Michael Pickering, Minstrelsy in Britain, 7-10.

10 The banjoist Joel Sweeney took the place of the original troupe’s banjoist Billy Whitlock, who returned to the United States.

11 The descriptor “Ethiopian” was used during the 19th century to denote all things “African” in both the US and Britain.

12 Punch, XII (1847), 122.

13 The term “Ethiopian Serenaders” became the generic term for any blackface minstrel act in the 1840s and 1850s. When the Christy Minstrels became famous in Britain in the late 1850s, however, the name “Christy Minstrels” replaced it as shorthand for all minstrel troupes.


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23 Ibid., 271.

24 Emmett is said to have described the Virginia Minstrels as “all end men and all interlocutors,” quoted in Laurence Hutton, Curiosities of the American Stage (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), 126. The format using Mr. Bones, Mr. Tambo, and Mr. Interlocutor would be popularised by the Christy Minstrels.

25 Manchester Athenaeum, Friday, June 6, 1843, 1; Dan Emmett, “The Origin of Minstrelsy,” 61.


28 Manchester Times, Saturday, June 6, 1843, 1.


33 Briggs, Victorian Cities, 96 and Joyce, Democratic Subjects, 165-166; Gunn, Public Culture, 1-35.


35 The John Rylands Library, Report of the Proceedings of the Public Meeting, Held 28th October, 1835, For the Purpose of Establishing the Athenaeum [Pamphlet], remarks by Mr. W.R. Callender, 11-12.


37 Report of the Proceedings remarks of Mr. John McVicar, Esq., 5.
Ibid., remarks of Mr. Robert Hyde Greg, 7-8.

40 Hudson, Adult Education, 116.

41 Ibid., 110.

Ibid., 117. There were twelve thousand in 1847 according to the Catalogue of the Library of the Manchester Athenaeum, The John Rylands Library.

42 Ibid., 117. There were twelve thousand in 1847 according to the Catalogue of the Library of the Manchester Athenaeum, The John Rylands Library.

43 Hudson, Adult Education, 119. See also Louis M. Hayes, Reminiscences of Manchester and Some of its Local Surroundings from the Year 1840 (Manchester and London, 1905), 28.


45 Hayes, Reminiscences of Manchester, 28-29.

46 The Panic of 1837 was sparked by a rush on the banks for gold and silver causing a massive economic depression in the United States.

47 Cockrell, Demons of Disorder, 152.

48 Manchester Times, Saturday, June 10, 1843, 4.

49 Ibid.

50 Manchester Times, Saturday, July 30, 1842, 1.

51 Manchester Times, Saturday, October 14, 1843, 1.

52 Manchester Times, Saturday, November 18, 1843, 1; Manchester Times, Saturday, December 2, 1843, 4; Manchester Times, Saturday, March 4, 1843, 1.


54 Manchester Guardian, Thursday, June 7, 1843.


56 Nathan, Dan Emmett, 123.

57 Manchester Guardian, Thursday, June 7, 1843.

58 Ibid.

59 Nathan, Dan Emmett, 132-133.

60 Harry Reynolds, Minstrel Memories, 58.

61 Manchester Times, Saturday, June 10, 1843, 4.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.


65 Nathan, Dan Emmett, 134.

66 American minstrelsy also developed a northern "Jim Dandy" stereotype, along with that of "Jim Crow," that mocked urban blacks. "Sambo" is different, however, in so far as he is very much a rural character in Emmett's song, coming from Tennessee, which in the 1840s was still considered a western state in the United States. Nevertheless, the black urban dandy would have had limited meaning to the British audience. It would have been the figure of "the gent" in Britain which carried more meaning. The "gent" had become a butt of comic journalism in the 1830s and 1840s. Perceived as a new social type, "the gent" was a figure understood to have come from the middle class. These men were men of aspiration. They were made up of what was described as "scrubby clerks, apprentices and medical students." One commentator described "the gent" as a "rude untutored man" who attempted to achieve "a spurious gentility advertised by his pursuit of what he [took] to be modish pleasure in what he [thought] to be modish dress;" see Albert Smith, Natural History of the Gent (London: David Bogue,1847) and Ellen Moers, The Dandy: Brummell to Beervorm (London: Viking Press, 1960) quoted in Peter Bailey, Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 57.

67 Nathan, Dan Emmett, 133-134.
68 Manchester Guardian, Thursday, June 7, 1843.


70 Manchester Guardian, Thursday, June 7, 1843.


72 Negro Singer’s Own Book, containing every Negro Song that has ever been printed (Philadelphia, 1846) in Mahar, Burnt Cork Mask, 65-67.

73 A notion derived from Cockrell, Demons of Disorder, 53.

74 Lorimer, Colour, Class and the Victorians, 11.


76 Manchester Times, Saturday, June 17, 1843, 5.

77 Gunn, Public Culture, 23.

78 Manchester Guardian, Thursday, June 7, 1843.

79 Mahar, Burnt Cork Mask, 18.

80 Such an attitude is apparent in Frances Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans (London: Whittaker, Treacher and Co., 1832).