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# Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race

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## Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race

Until recently, scholars exploring blackface minstrelsy or the accompanying “coon song craze” of the 1890s have felt the need to apologize, either for the demeaning stereotypes of African Americans embedded in the art forms or for their own interest in studying the phenomena. Robert Toll, one of the first critics to examine minstrelsy seriously, was so appalled by its inherent racism that he focused his 1974 work primarily on debunking the stereotypes; Sam Dennison, another pioneer, did likewise with coon songs. Richard Martin and David Wondrich claim of minstrelsy that “the roots of every strain of American music—ragtime, jazz, the blues, country music, soul, rock and roll, even hip-hop—reach down through its reeking soil” (5). Marshall Wyatt opines that “most coon songs rate scant attention” (9). Even Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, compilers of a large and extremely useful volume on black traveling shows and coon songs, are careful to mention that they “take no pleasure” in the repeated use of the word “coon” in the “ignobly dubbed” coon songs (3-4). When I mentioned to an African American friend that I was writing an essay on black performers of coon songs, he offered to find me a bodyguard.

In the past decade, however, thanks in large part to groundbreaking research on the African American musical theatre and blackface performers like Bert Williams and George Walker, scholars have come to recognize that blackface and coon song performances by African Americans signify in rich and complex ways. In the decision by Bert Williams to perform with Walker as one of “Two Real Coons,” for example, one finds a West Indian man performing a white-created racial caricature of an African American person and billing it as “real” (Chude-Sokei 5-8). Authenticity evaporates. What might at first seem to be a mere reiteration of the deplorable history of racism becomes a profound challenge to its foundational parameters.

Louis Chude-Sokei, W. T. Lhamon, and Karen Sotiropoulos are among those recent scholars who have argued persuasively that coon songs as performed by black Americans constituted not simple minstrelsy or a capitulation to the forces popular consumer culture, but a

form of political activism, a way for young, cosmopolitan black musicians and performers of the 1890s and early twentieth century to challenge the racial status quo and thus participate in the creation of modern discourse. Recognizing the multiple levels of signification in play when African Americans performed in blackface in front of racially mixed audiences, Sotiropoulos finds that the performers “manipulated the stage mask in innovative ways that helped them forge a space for dialogue with their black audience--dialogue that included both assertions of black nationhood and critique of the racism that perpetuated stereotypical imagery” (2). These performers also represented a new generation of African American artists, who “had to negotiate nineteenth-century notions of morality and middle-class ideas of respectability” (97) held by their parents, while seeking ways to participate in the lively, urban theatrical culture of which they were a part. For Sotiropoulos, “This generation of black artists celebrated black communities, denounced Jim Crow, and critiqued black elite pretension--all behind the minstrel mask” (4). Daphne Brooks similarly contends that Walker and Williams and their peers created a black musical theatre that “contested the cultural legibility of racial representations and the black musical form itself” (40). Perhaps T. H. Lhamon best sums up this newer, twenty-first century response to minstrelsy in his discussion of “Two Real Coons.” By using this billing, Williams and Walker “held open season on conceptual coons” both on and off the stage, and “eviscerated whatever ‘coon’ resided in the imagination of their diverse audiences” (7-8). For scholars like these, coon songs thus deserve study not just as a transitional moment between minstrel shows and jazz or blues, but in their own right, as indispensable to our understanding of a American popular music, the larger cultural forces that produce it, and the sophisticated racial commentary of the talented artists who crafted and performed the songs.

What still remains to be studied, however, is the proliferation and persistence of coon songs beyond the New York stage and until almost 1930. While most recent commentators have focused on the urban musical theatre milieu of the 1890s to about 1920, African American musicians in the rural South were still performing coon songs throughout the 1920s--when the New Negro Renaissance was raging in Harlem and Washington, D.C.--and companies like

Columbia and Victor were still recording, marketing, and selling them widely across the South. Like their urban counterparts, the later black performers of coon songs were undoubtedly aware of the multiple levels of their own performances, but given the different geographical and historical contexts, as well as the difference in performance venues, the songs signify in varied ways. In this very different cultural context, far away from the blazing lights of Broadway, when an African American musician performed a coon song, what, exactly, was being performed, and for whom?

In this essay I will begin to answer that question by setting coon songs in their original historical context and examining the cultural changes surrounding black music in the early twentieth century. The now recognized subversive potential of coon songs suggests one reason why black performers continued to sing and record them up until the late 1920s, but in other respects, this continued vitality seems anomalous. In later sections I will analyze two coon songs recorded by African American artists in the 1920s, Alec Johnson's "Mysterious Coon" (1928) and Luke Jordan's "Traveling Coon" (1927). Both songs have roots in earlier music, including the blackface minstrel tradition, but by 1927-28 these recording artists were playing to very different audiences than were their uptown ragtime forbears, and their songs reveal some different performance challenges.

While some aspects of coon songs have been well studied, the synthesis of elements that I propose will, I hope, add something new to our understanding of the genre and its importance to American culture. Musicologists and music historians rarely discuss literature or performance; theatre and performance scholars have almost entirely ignored rural performers; and literary critics rarely tap into musical discourse. By viewing late recorded coon songs through multiple lenses, I hope to create an alternative way to understand them, one that demands no apology and suggests that coon songs continued to skewer racist stereotypes for decades, even in areas where Jim Crow was king.

Controversial Beginnings

The controversies over coon songs were certainly not new in the mid-twentieth century, when scholars first began assessing them. Disagreement began as early as 1896, when an African American composer named Ernest Hogan wrote a popular ragtime song called “All Coons Look Alike to Me.” Coon songs like Hogan’s, which described African Americans in derogatory language, had been recorded as early as 1890, but Hogan’s addition of an infectious ragtime beat spawned a worldwide craze.

Coon songs portrayed African Americans in grossly stereotypical terms, as foolish, lazy, and thieving. The term “coon” itself suggests something of this attitude. According to Clarence Major, the term probably came from the Southern belief that all black people were thieves, and raccoons were known to steal food (112). It is therefore not surprising that Hogan’s “All Coons Look Alike to Me” initially provoked sharp criticism from his fellow African American musicians for its sentiment, language, and especially the title, which Hogan had changed from “all pimps look alike to me” as a way of cleaning up a ditty he had heard in a Chicago bar (Watkins 146). The black press likewise took Hogan to task, with the Indianapolis *Freeman* asserting that the song represented “a letting down of the racial standard” (qtd. in Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight* 295). Sylvester Russell, the influential theatre critic for the *Freeman*, claimed that the song encouraged white journalists to use offensive language about African Americans and incited racial taunting and violence (Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged* 13-14). “All Coons Look Alike to Me” did actually start street fights in New York City, where African Americans considered it insulting for a white person to sing or whistle the song. Noted composer J. Rosamund Johnson reported seeing two men thrown off a ferry boat in mid-river when the song caused a brawl (Lemons 107). To some, it seemed that Hogan’s composition had become the unofficial theme song of segregation.

Hogan nonetheless defended his work, claiming that his composition—the first published “coon song” as well as the first piece of sheet music to bear the term “rag”—opened doors for African American musicians. And Hogan had a point. With its lively, syncopated rhythms, ragtime music had its origins in African American musical techniques and styles, and so offered

publishing and performing opportunities to an increased number of black songwriters (Starr and Waterman 33). Over 600 coon songs were published in the 1890s, many by African American composers, with some selling thousands of copies (Dormon 454). Hogan's "All Coons Look Alike" appeared at the historical moment when minstrel shows, in which white men in blackface mockingly impersonated African Americans for white audiences, were being replaced by vaudeville and tent shows, featuring black casts as well as white ones and playing to both black and white audiences. With their superficial humor and their catchy rhythms, coon songs were perfect for vaudeville and music hall entertainments. As we have seen, the most celebrated African American stage performers of the 1890s and early twentieth century came to prominence performing coon songs, from the "Two Real Coons" George Walker and Bert Williams to Bob Cole and Billy Johnson, authors of the first full-length, all-black musical comedy, *A Trip to Coontown*, which premiered in New York in 1898. The influence of Hogan's song is seen clearly in that musical, which contained a showstopping number, a parody of Hogan's hit called "All Chinks Look Alike to Me." Hogan's work also opened international doors for black performers, with Hogan's own company touring as far as Australia in 1899. As Hogan summed it up, "That one song opened the way for a lot of colored and white songwriters. Finding the [ragtime] rhythm so great, they stuck to it changing the lyrics, and now you get hits from my creation without the word 'coon'" (qtd. in Fletcher 141).

Hogan was both right and wrong on this count. It is true that ragtime changed the face of American music, helping to "blacken the beat" of popular music long before rock 'n' roll appeared on the scene (Davis 68). It is also true that the influence of ragtime music persisted while coon song lyrics faded from the scene. As early as 1905, just nine years after Hogan's "All Coons Look Alike," Sylvester Russell wrote in the *Freeman* that "men who write words for songs can no longer write such mean rot as the words of 'Whistling Coon' [recorded in 1890] and expect respectable publishers to accept it no matter how good the music may be. Composers should not set music to a set of words that are a direct insult or indirect insinuation to the colored race" (qtd. in Brooks 66). By the 1930s, even white publishers and recording

companies were dismissing coon songs. When white composer Fred Fisher copyrighted “If the Man in the Moon Were a Coon” in 1905, the sheet music sold three million copies. When he wanted to renew the copyright in 1933, the title was changed to “If the Man in the Moon Were a Loon” because the word “coon” was no longer acceptable (Lemons 109).

But coon songs did not disappear immediately, and black performers continued to sing and record them up until about 1930. In the early decades of the twentieth century coon songs were a major attraction of traveling medicine shows, where often mixed companies of black and white musicians would parade and sing to help some snake oil salesman sell his miracle cure. Coon songs also showed up occasionally in the recorded repertoires of African American singers through the 1920s, suggesting that the public appetite for racist entertainment had not diminished as much as Sylvester Russell had claimed in 1905.

But the issue of what was seen and heard in a coon song performance goes beyond the issue of popularity. Like any cultural or theatrical performance, the physical performance of coon songs raises issues of embodiment, audience, and ideology (Paulin 419), especially when one acknowledges the cultural construction and performative nature of race itself. In his groundbreaking study of blackface minstrelsy, Eric Lott has noted that “[w]hat was on display in minstrelsy was less black culture than a structured set of white responses to it” (101). The same is clearly true of African Americans performing coon songs well past the lucrative coon song craze of the 1890s. As Lott explains, all black performance is always already “performative”:

[Blackness is] a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world. Black people, that is to say, not only exercised a certain amount of control over such practices but perforce sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators. . . . At the same time, of course, there is no question that the white commodification of black bodies structured all of this activity. [In this complex

process] partly shared, partly black cultural practices were circulated as authentically black, with whites profiting . . . while obstructing the visibility of black performers. (39)

Given this multivalent performance context, in which blackness is a shared construction and performers and audiences are complicit in maintaining, adapting, and responding to it, recognizing the musical history, the regional performance contexts, and the varied audiences of a coon song performance become vital to understanding its significance.

### Minstrel Traditions

Coon songs had roots in the tradition of blackface minstrel shows, and this heritage reveals how performers inherited their roles and how audience expectations were constructed. These shows, in which white men blackened their skin and parodied African Americans, were among the most popular form of public entertainment in the nineteenth century, in the North as well as in the South, with troupes like the Christy Minstrels and the Virginia Serenaders frequently touring the country. A minstrel show typically included a plantation scene, sentimental songs, and a comedic segment that relied on stock characters supposed to be typical African Americans. Two of these stereotypes achieved special notoriety: Jim Crow, the dancing fool developed by T. D. Rice in the 1830s, whose name now describes the entire era of segregation; and Zip Coon, a ridiculous dandy and an obvious titular ancestor of the characters in coon songs. The widespread popularity of these characters throughout the nineteenth century ensured that stage depictions of African Americans, which were actually caricatures of blackness performed by white men, had little to do with black culture or actual black experience. Through their performances, however, white minstrels in blackface created a socially accepted definition of race, scripting racial difference as inferiority (Lott 101). In this way, the burnt cork performers may have paved the way for African American entertainers to appear in their own right after the Civil War, but “they also defined the terms in which they could do so: portrayed as ‘coons,’ they were expected to behave” as such (Oakley 23).



This imposed definition of blackness becomes most apparent in the careers of the first African American minstrel performers. The first all-black minstrel show to have a successful season was organized by Charles Hicks in 1865, with others beginning to appear about ten years later (Southern 164). These early performers blackened their already dark skin to achieve acceptance from audiences conditioned to view African Americans in the stereotypical ways created in performance by white men. The black minstrels usually eliminated the nostalgic plantation songs typical of minstrel shows and brought lively new dances to their programs, but the blackface tradition nonetheless trapped them into performing “an imitation of an imitation of plantation life of Southern blacks (Sampson 1).

Like the coon-song musicians of Hogan’s later era, the early African American minstrels—whether they were required to “black up” or not—participated in these degrading shows for a variety of reasons. Most obviously, the minstrel shows offered job opportunities for entertainers, with benefits like mobility, good pay, community status, and training in professional musicianship, all rare and valuable commodities for former slaves and the children of former slaves (Toll 222-28). Writer and musician James Weldon Johnson, a distinguished leader of the NAACP from 1916 to 1930, expressed his appreciation for the stage training he received while working in minstrel shows, claiming that he could not have acquired it from any other source (Sampson 4). Even the classically trained W. C. Handy, sometimes dubbed “the father of the blues” because he published the first sheet music in a blues format, was grateful for the experience and exposure he got in minstrel shows. In his 1941 autobiography, Handy wrote:

The minstrel show at that time was one of the greatest outlets for talented musicians and artists. Some of them were paying for the education of brothers and sisters, some taking care of aged parents, others supporting their own families, but all contributing to a greater degree of happiness in the entertainment world. . . . My association with [Mahara’s Minstrels] had made of me a professional musician and a bandmaster. It had taken me from Cuba to California, from Canada to Mexico. . . . It had thrown me into

contact with a wistful but aspiring generation of dusky singers and musicians. It had taught me a way of life I still consider the only one for me. (62, 69)

Seen through this lens, the minstrel show, justifiably deemed a social disgrace, can also be seen as the primary vehicle for the rise of America's first professional African American performing artists (Watkins 112).

But there were other less obvious and less commercially motivated pleasures that African Americans could derive from performing in minstrel shows, all emerging from the competing difficulties of racism and resistance. One such benefit was the opportunity to reverse the stereotypes constructed by white men in blackface. In an 1909 interview, Bert Williams claimed to be "hoping and working for the day when Negroes on the stage will take themselves and be taken more seriously, when the colored performer can be something more than a minstrel man, a song and dance artist, or a slapstick agent (qtd. in Brown 6). And indeed, Williams progressed from billing himself as one of "Two Real Coons" to eschewing blackface, forming his own company, and developing a highly successful career in more sophisticated comedy than that framed by minstrel stereotypes.

Others apparently performed with more irony than their white audiences appreciated, enjoying their status as tricksters by performing expected roles and subverting them. David Krasner has argued convincingly that parody was a key element of African American performances in the musical theatre of the era. To illustrate, Krasner offers the example of Bob Cole, one of the authors of *A Trip to Coontown*, who performed the role of a white tramp in that 1898 show. Wearing whiteface makeup and singing a song called "No Coons Allowed!," Cole used his performance of a coon song to destabilize a number of common social assumptions about race, authenticity, and the social status quo. Krasner sums up the parodic effects of this song:

An African American in whiteface singing an intended humorous song about Jim Crowism and the frustration blacks must encounter lies at the very root of signifying: racial signs are hurled topsy-turvy into the audience, with the result being symbolic

chaos, anarchy, and the disruption of the status quo. The very slipperiness of the performance of the song (comedy? pathos? satire?) serves as a form of protest and resistance. (37)

This technique of consciously telling at least two tales at once is a prominent characteristic of African American cultural productions. It reveals the duality of outlook that W. E. B. Du Bois described in 1903 as “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (102). In this well-known passage, Du Bois emphasizes the painfulness of double consciousness and the difficulties African Americans face from such culturally produced, internal self-divisions. Some recent commentators, however, have also seen double consciousness as an opportunity, providing a unique angle of vision from which to view and critique American culture (Smith 186). Surely this is one function of the polyvocality of African American musicals, minstrel shows, and coon songs. All these art forms speak simultaneously in two registers, one designed for a mainstream audience and another lying beneath the surface, coded, audible only to those who already know it’s there: an in-joke.

Like theatre historian Krasner, scholars in other fields have also expressed the view that parodic intentions are inevitable for artists descended from a culture steeped in double consciousness and then forced to lampoon themselves. Lawrence Levine, for example, places African American minstrelsy in the tradition of slave songs, which were often coded to suggest one meaning to a white listener and another to a fellow slave, and sees minstrel performers using “the commonplaces of the minstrel idiom to criticize, parody, and sharply comment on their society and their situation” (194). Francis Davis goes even further, reading African American minstrelsy as a form of drag, noting that minstrel shows always had an element of transvestism because the original white male performers played both male and female black characters. If blackness was a form of masquerade for white minstrels, couldn’t the inherited stage version of blackness provide a mask for African American performers? Davis writes:

The joke might have been on those laughing the loudest. Did it occur to whites of that day that the so-called Negro dandy might be spoofing them? Nineteenth-century minstrelsy can be seen as both a perpetuation of a cruel status quo and the first sign of change, a form of theater and a form of drag, an entry into a world in which black could be white, white could be black, anything could be itself and simultaneously its opposite. (37)

This notion of performance that undermines its founding principles can help us understand the African American singers of coon songs in the 1920s, who were also parodying the very conventions they seemed to employ, inserting into the language of dominant racist discourse a meaning contradictory to the originally intended one. However, times had changed since the heady early days of the 1890s musical theatre, and African American artists and intellectuals had become impatient with the minstrel mask.

### The Jazz Age

By the late 1920s, when Alec Johnson and Luke Jordan recorded their apparently outdated coon songs, the New Negro Renaissance was in full swing. The intellectual leaders of this movement—men such as James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles Johnson, and Alain Locke—had a serious social agenda in common, despite the tactical differences and sometimes heated conflicts among them. For these luminaries, the Renaissance was “an effort to secure economic, social, and cultural equality with white citizens, and arts were to be a means of achieving that goal” (Floyd 2). Rejecting the old plantation stereotypes was one necessary step in the direction of equality, so it is no surprise that coon songs found scant favor with the black intellectual elite. Founders of literary magazines and theatre troupes, these leaders emphasized the promotion of literature and drama, but they also recognized African American music as the only truly original American art form (Floyd 3). Their attitudes about the value of black music reveal some striking contradictions, however, not unlike those we have seen in black composers and performers of the ragtime era.

For the elite thinkers of The New Negro Renaissance, jazz was of primary importance among black secular musical forms. Locke saw jazz as “ragtime more fully evolved” (70) and agreed with J. A. Rogers that “Musically jazz has a great future” (Rogers 221). That future, however, depended on welding jazz to “higher” forms like classical music, creating a fusion of African and European sounds. Disparaging other secular forms (what Locke would define as “overly emotional” folk music or popular music that “diluted” folk music—8-9) they regarded African American music primarily as a stepping stone toward cultural acceptance by whites, not as a valuable art form in itself. Concomitantly, they saw American popular performers and composers as less worthy than classically trained ones. This attitude is most apparent in Locke’s 1936 treatise on *The Negro and His Music*, in which he remarks that

the spirituals and even the secular Negro folk melodies and their harmonic style have been regarded by most musicians as the purest and most valuable ore in America; the raw materials of a native American music. So gradually ever since, their folk quality and purity of style have been emphasized by *real* musicians. (21; emphasis mine)

Here, African American folk music is “raw” material to be forged and polished into something more brilliant by other, “real” musicians. Similarly, Locke opines that Chicago style jazz—which he calls “hot” or “trashy”—is too rowdy and primitive. He prefers the “sweet” or “worthwhile” jazz of New York City, especially when performed by W. C. Handy and a few other “arrangers of genius” who “organized Negro music out of broken, musically illiterate dialect and made it a national music with its own peculiar idioms of harmony, instrumentation, and technical style of playing” (66). This split in Locke’s attitude—he recognizes the importance of African American folk art and music, but only when these “illiterate” forms are “organized”—has caused Jerry H. Bryant to describe Locke and his ilk as “intellectual mulattos,” not fully comfortable with either the folk art that they valued as their heritage nor the white artists whose works had shaped their educations and their tastes (42). Paul Burgett sees Locke’s whole treatise on black music as an attempt to “vindicate” black music by highlighting the arrangers and performers who brought it to

“citadels of serious music” here and abroad and therefore made it “universal,” that is, more appealing to white audiences and white composers (34-35).

Given this agenda of achieving equality and respect, it is not surprising that Locke had nothing good to say about coon songs or those who sang them. Borrowing from the work of Isaac Goldberg, an early commentator on minstrel music, Locke coined the term “Pseudo-Negroes” to describe not just white men who performed in blackface (as Goldberg used the term), but also African American minstrels. Claiming that white blackface minstrels were “pseudo-Negroes spiritually,” he adds that “Even the real Negro minstrels were, too, in the psychological sense” (53). He saw the coon song as “a relic of the worst minstrel days (59). And lest we assume that this disdain for folk music was restricted to the educated elite, Jon Michael Spencer reminds us that black folk culture embarrassed many middle-class black people as well, who were striving for success in a white-dominated world and resented any representation of supposed inferiority. Musician R. Nathaniel Dett was one such figure, who blamed black minstrels for illustrating that African American culture was something to be ridiculed rather than valued (Spencer 33).

The 1920s thus offered a less than ideal climate for African American artists to perform coon songs. But at least a few of them did. What counter-forces might have allowed Alec Johnson, Luke Jordan, and a few others (such as Geeshie Wiley and Jim Jackson) to continue to record coon songs in the face of such public opposition from African American leaders and other middle class folk?

One obvious factor is that not all musicians followed R. Nathaniel Dett’s lead in agreeing with the black intellectual leaders that the best use of African American music was to inspire “higher” art forms. Even in New York, the intellectuals were often a source of amusement for jazz and show musicians. Samuel Floyd notes that some musicians referred to them as “the dicty set” and lampooned them in songs like Fletcher Henderson’s “Dicty’s Blues” and Duke Ellington’s “Dicty Glide” (19).

Class issues affected the reception of coon songs in other regions, too. Some middle-class African Americans had always resented popular music like blues and coon songs, which they saw as degrading and which they associated with a disreputable lifestyle, but virtually every community also included plenty of people who enjoyed and supported the local musicians. This long-recognized Saturday night/Sunday morning split in African American culture can account for some of the displeasure that artists like Dett expressed, but that displeasure would hardly have been universal. Furthermore, the highly educated leaders of the New Negro Renaissance were located in major cities, mostly New York and Washington, so their impact would have been minimal at best in rural Southern communities. Alec Johnson probably came from Mississippi, and he recorded "Mysterious Coon" in Atlanta; Luke Jordan lived most of his life in the Piedmont region of Virginia, recording "Traveling Coon" in Charlotte. These artists and the audiences they played for may never have heard of the New Negro Renaissance. This is not to suggest that the issue was uncomplicated for rural performers. As early as 1911 folklorist Howard W. Odum reports that the young black musicians he encountered were proud of the number and variety of popular songs they could sing, "at the same time that they resent[ed] a request to sing the older melodies" such as coon songs (137). But the wholesale disapproval expressed by the Renaissance intellectuals would not have filtered down to Southern audiences who still looked forward to the arrival of the traveling show and to the strumming of local musicians outside the tobacco warehouses on payday.

Possibly the largest factor in the ongoing African American performance of coon songs in the 1920s was the growth of the recording industry. By that time, sheet music sales were no longer the measure of success for a musician: record sales were. While radio was starting to broadcast in the early 1920s, most people in the rural South could not afford, or did not have access to, the electricity needed to power it. But anyone could crank up a gramophone; stores and restaurants could provide juke boxes; and record salesmen crisscrossed the South in cars, selling popular recordings out of their trunks. To capture this market, recording executives at many major labels (such as Okeh, Columbia, Paramount, and Victor) developed "Race

Records” series, that is, lists of songs recorded by African American artists and aimed at an African American audience, designated by specific serial numbers, and marketed in segregated catalogs. Paul Oliver estimates that in their best years—from the mid-1920s to 1930—race records sold in the millions, with studios issuing about five hundred new discs yearly (“Sales Tax” 197-98).

To support this industry, record companies sent scouts throughout the South to seek talented musicians, whom they would then send to field recording units in urban centers like Atlanta and Charlotte. Race records were subject to the influence of the executives who found the artists and chose what to record, but those choices were made with marketing in mind. The coon songs they recorded throughout the 1920s were expected to sell, and thus offer some hints about popular musical tastes in rural African American communities.

The recordings suggest that despite the changing intellectual climate, coon songs remained popular, perhaps for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the era’s heightened sensitivity to the significance of representation may have magnified the subversive potential of coon songs. In other cases, the coon songs may have retained their popularity because the daily cultural life had not changed much since the turn of the century, and the slippery humor of the songs still pertained. A close examination of two 1920s coon songs performed by black artists will illustrate how different audiences in the 1920s heard or saw different things when African Americans performed coon songs. It will also show how 1920s coon songs, in a phrase borrowed from Ralph Ellison, offered multiple ways for African American musicians to “change the joke and slip the yoke” (45).

### “Mysterious Coon”

Alec Johnson’s 1928 recording of “Mysterious Coon” is clearly a transitional piece, with roots reaching back to both minstrel shows and ragtime, but branches spreading into twentieth-century culture and feeding on the fertile soil of parody. The connection to ragtime is most obvious, since the song is a re-titled version of Cole and Johnson’s “I Wonder What Is That



Coon's Game," written in 1893 and later featured in *A Trip to Coontown*. The song describes the appearance in Coontown of a well dressed, mysterious stranger who insults the town regulars (called "darkies" throughout the lyrics) by remaining aloof and flashing his money around. This man of mystery has a serious demeanor and is never seen gambling, but wears diamonds, drives a fancy car, and is very popular with the town's "yellow gals," or lighter-skinned women. Out of jealousy, a townsman reports him to the police on suspicion of theft. When hauled into court and fined one hundred dollars, the stranger pulls out a wad of money "big as your head," peels off one thousand dollars, and tells the judge to keep the change as he majestically exits the courtroom.

The "Mysterious Coon" of this song is clearly a descendant of Zip Coon, the minstrel show dandy who made himself ridiculous sporting mismatched dress clothes. In this song, however, the mysterious stranger mocks this conventional figure: he has excellent taste and the money to indulge it, with patent leather shoes, kid gloves, and a silk cravat. His wealth is real, not imagined, and his success with both money and women makes him the envy of the black characters rather than a figure of ridicule to a white audience. Furthermore, he is apparently beyond the reach of the law. While we don't know where the stranger got his money, there is no evidence in the song to suggest that he really is a thief. He is taken to court simply because the local men resent his stylish presence in town, and even in front of the authoritarian Judge, the "Mysterious Coon" retains the upper hand. In the 1920s, when Ku Klux Klansmen and other vigilantes did their best to control the African American population through fear, the Mysterious Coon prevails even in a public, government-regulated situation.

This modified version of Zip Coon is entirely in keeping with the changes that occurred in coon song characters in the early twentieth century. As James Dormon has demonstrated, the mid-nineteenth-century minstrel show stereotypes were non-threatening; they were fools designed to help white audiences maintain their sense of superiority. But late in the 1890s and continuing into the twentieth century, the caricatures became not merely foolish, but often dangerous or at least a menace to white supremacy. In some cases the characters were

literally violent. Dormon speculates that this change was in part a justification for the repressive segregation laws of the late nineteenth century, as the lazy, chicken-thieving clowns of the mid-nineteenth century gave way to drunken, licentious, razor-wielding gamblers who required strict social control (455). In other cases, however, the menace was less overt, more a matter of black characters assuming a place in society formerly reserved for whites, thereby threatening race mixing (a serious concern for many racist Americans in the early twentieth century) and a loss of white power (458-62). Zip Coon's absurd donning of fancy dress clothes simply indicated how far from the mark he was in aping a white gentleman's manners. In contrast, many coon songs of the ragtime era—such as "I'm A Lucky Coon" and "I've Got a White Man Running My Automobile"—showed the African American's similarities to his white counterparts, emphasized their shared ambitions, and threatened to destabilize white social authority.

But it is in the local townspeople of the song, the "darkies," that we can see the broadest parodic intent. On one level they appear to be throwbacks to the comic characters of minstrelsy. They are undifferentiated by name, occupation, or any other defining marker. What they share is a comic resentment of the successful stranger and a tricky way of dealing with him. In an ironic maneuver, they call on the police, symbols of the legal order that keeps them subservient, to restrain a fellow African American who has simply gotten too uppity. However, while retaining their minstrel show foolishness, the darkies are also the dominant majority within the song's lyrics, and they use the law to enforce their will. Their anxiety about the stranger and their trumped-up court action against him parody contemporary white reactions to the increased social visibility of African Americans. In this way, these black characters stand in ironic parallel to the dominant white majority of turn-of-the-century America, enacting white fears and white law enforcement actions. With their stereotypical qualities, they are, in effect, passing for black to mute the song's parody of white fright and white authority. Furthermore, their displeasure at the Mysterious Coon's success with the "yellow girls" reflects the white anxiety over racial mixing, suggesting the premium that society placed upon white or nearly-white women and the extreme measures to which white men would go to maintain a claim on them. The lyrics of

“Mysterious Coon” thus offer one example of the polysemy of coon songs performed by African American musicians. The song recapitulates racist discourse only to subvert it by placing black characters in traditionally white roles, mocking their motives and actions, and asserting the superiority of the unflappable, unbeatable Mysterious Coon.

Alec Johnson is as much a man of mystery as his title character. Nothing is known of who he was, where he was from, or what sorts of performance opportunities he had. Some reasonable surmises can be made, however, from the six songs he recorded for Columbia in 1928. Several commentators have suggested that Johnson had minstrel and/or medicine show experience because “his vocal delivery is that of a stage performer—forceful, animated, and clearly articulated” (Wyatt 60). This speculation is supported by noting the backup musicians on the recording of “Mysterious Coon,” which include Bo Chatmon and Charlie and Joe McCoy, all Mississippi string band musicians with documented experience on the traveling show circuits. Paul Oliver has observed that the song also uses imagery typical of minstrel and medicine shows, with its “humor, self-preservation, supernatural powers, [and] success through covert means (*Songsters* 99). It is worth examining the song in the context of these traveling shows to help us understand not just the images of the lyrics but also the possible performance venues for Johnson’s rendition of the song.

Traveling minstrel shows at the turn of the century played to both black and white audiences, and medicine shows offered a rare example of often mixed-race performance troupes playing to a mixed-race audience—whoever was on the street when the medicine wagon pulled into town. Oliver suggests that the lyrics of “Mysterious Coon,” with its “yellow gals” and “darkies,” invited exaggerated blackface and white-glove performance, which Furry Lewis, a Memphis performer in such traveling shows of the period, recalls using (*Songsters* 99). Given Johnson’s polished vocal interpretations and the theatricality of his phrasing, he may well have performed the song in traveling shows sporting this traditional blackface costume. Worn for a mixed-race audience, this outfit would have compounded the parodic slippages in the lyrics. Johnson’s elegant vocals would reflect a sophistication similar to that of the suave

Mysterious Coon of the song, but his costume would have presented him as one of the farcical “darkies” who resent the intruder. Add in the notion that the darkies are parodic substitutes for the white majority of the time, as I suggested above, and one can only see Johnson’s performance as inverting the status quo as fully as Bob Cole did by singing in whiteface.

The 1928 recorded version of “Mysterious Coon,” however, is divorced from this possible performance context. Instead, it reflects several things about the recording industry of the time and its place in the developing American consumer culture. All Johnson’s recordings were made as part of Columbia’s 1400 “Race records” series, targeted primarily to African American consumers. This marketing strategy suggests that African American audiences were expected to enjoy the song, despite the derogatory language that was no longer so fashionable (even among white audiences) as it had been in the 1890s, when the song was penned. What was it about “Mysterious Coon” that might have interested African American record buyers? In addition to the superficial comedy and the superior singing and musicianship of the record, the song would no doubt have appealed to those who heard complexly and recognized the potential for social critique underlying the minstrel stereotypes.

Richard Martin and David Wondrich have noted that “American music has always been a conversation between white America and black America, and the early [recording] industry documents only one side of the conversation—often deeply offensive and an embarrassment to sensitive people today” (8). If one can get past the disturbing lyrics to view these songs as historical artifacts, however, coon songs performed by African American musicians can help us hear the formerly silenced aspects of that conversation, especially in the light of our postmodern understanding that race is always an historically determined social construct. The coon songs performed by African Americans like Alec Johnson reveal the power dynamics and bigotry of the times, but also suggest a rich African American vernacular response that lays bare the era’s racist agenda and offers an alternative racial self-definition.

“Traveling Coon”

Not all coon songs developed so clearly from minstrel and ragtime traditions, nor were they always performed in the contexts of traveling tent and medicine shows. Luke Jordan's 1927 rendition of "Traveling Coon" offers one example of a coon song derived as much from rural musical styles and African American folk traditions as from minstrel tunes. Jordan was a well-known songster and blues musician in central Virginia. As music historian Tony Russell has noted, most black singers from Virginia and the Carolinas in this era exhibited "an extremely satisfying mixture of black and white traditions" (43), so Jordan's song may offer a useful site for further exploring the conversation between black and white that can be said to characterize American music. "Traveling Coon" shares much of the subversive parody of "Mysterious Coon," but both the history of the song and Jordan's performance contexts allow us to see further permutations in coon songs' challenges to the racial status quo.

"Traveling Coon" describes a man who makes his living as a thief and hops trains to avoid the law. Gifted with superhuman speed, the Traveling Coon can spill a pail of water, run home to get another pail, and catch the water before it hits the ground. On one of his travels he stows himself aboard the Titanic, but jumps overboard when he sees the iceberg coming and is shooting craps in Liverpool when the ship sinks. When the Traveling Coon is finally caught by the police and sentenced to death, he convinces the jurors to bow their heads in prayer, and while they're not looking, he crosses his legs, winks, and flies away. While that wink certainly offered a marvelous performance opportunity, it is undercut by the chorus that follows every verse and which ends with these lines: "He never give up, no, he wouldn't give up, / Till the police shot him down."

Luke Jordan, a highly regarded singer and guitar player in the Lynchburg, Virginia area, recorded this side in 1927 for Victor Records' "Race Series." The song had been widely known in the rural South since at least 1911, with versions recorded by several different musicians. But in Virginia's Piedmont region, the song was closely identified with Luke Jordan. As late as 1969, when ethnomusicologist Don Kent traveled to Lynchburg to research Jordan (who had died in the early 1950s), elderly residents easily recalled both Jordan and the song. Well known

in Lynchburg as a fun-loving performer, Jordan played about equally for black and white audiences (4-5). He also regularly drew crowds in parks, on main streets, and in the tobacco warehouses of the region, especially on payday, where he would no doubt have performed for both black and white listeners—a mixed audience of whoever was about, like those present at medicine shows (Barlow 108).

This variety of informal stages would have offered Jordan the opportunity to express multiple layers of signification in his performances. Mainstream white listeners of the day could hear the lyrics of the song and freely indulge their stereotypes about African Americans. The traveling man is a comic criminal, a chicken thief and a gambler. His apparently supernatural powers of evasion would no doubt confirm racist images of African Americans as superstitious (Oliver *Songsters* 99). Finally, and reassuringly, the unruly and unrepentant traveling man ultimately falls under the control of the dominant culture's authority—in this case, the police—as the chorus repeatedly reminds us.

Audiences more familiar with African American folklore, however, may have heard something quite different, since the Traveling Coon retains many qualities of traditional African American folk heroes. First, he is an escape artist, a recurring character in early blues songs, especially those about life in prison, whether literal or metaphorical. As Lawrence Levine explains it, these well known folk characters are epic figures, cultural heroes “whose exploits are performed in the name of the entire race” (429) and who succeed not by feats of strength (like, say, Paul Bunyan), but by ingenuity, improvisation, and inverting the usual power structures (400-01). The theme of escaping from unsatisfactory conditions is underscored by the song's images of trains and flight. Trains are recurring symbols of freedom and mobility in African American history, music, and tales (Baker 216), from the underground railroad out of slavery to the dangerous practice of “riding the blinds” (illegally riding a freight train) practiced by traveling musicians and hoboes throughout the rural South. The lonesome whistle of a distant train speaks of far horizons and a better life. In Jordan's rendition of “Traveling Coon,” the hero's unearthly speed enables him to catch any train, suggesting his freedom from the forces of

containment. And like the “flying African” slaves of Gullah legend who one day laid down their hoes in the field, pivoted, and then flew up into the sky, back to Africa and freedom (Powell), the traveling man flies off the gallows to achieve his liberty once more. Audiences conversant with African American cultural traditions could thus easily identify with this cunning hero.

Escape artists like the Traveling Coon were also widely celebrated in African American “toasts,” the rhyming narratives that recounted, in dynamic performance, the exploits of folk heroes. One of the most popular toasts of Jordan’s era was the story of Shine, the mythical stoker aboard the Titanic who escapes the sinking ship, ignores the white passengers’ pleas for help, and swims to safety. The third verse of Jordan’s “Traveling Coon” incorporates this legend wholesale, superimposing the story of Shine onto the generic traveling man of the old folk song. Through this conflation of tales, Jordan thus undermines the coon stereotype by overlaying it with that of a cultural hero. Finally, by including Shine’s story within that of the Traveling Coon, the song also offers a subtle criticism of Jim Crow practices. The master trickster escapes from the sinking ship—on which he would not have been accepted as a paying customer—while the white passengers drown.

In addition to appreciating the song’s celebration of African American folk heroes, audiences familiar with the various versions of the song would have been equipped with other cultural contexts in which to decode the lyrics. The song was well known in black communities throughout Virginia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas, so many listeners would be aware of the verses left out of Jordan’s recorded version. Folklorists Percy Dilling, Alan Lomax, and Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson all located early variants of the song in which the traveling man is shot by the police, but by the time his mother arrives from the South to claim his body, it has disappeared from the coffin: the traveling man has apparently cheated death and is presumed to be on the road once more. Familiarity with the unspoken subtext would provide both Jordan the performer and some members of his audience with another reason to wink.

To further complicate the interpretive process, rural performers of coon songs were known to adapt their songs to fit different live audiences. For example, chicken hunting and stealing could be taken as literal theft of property, but as Paul Oliver explains,

it was relatively easy for a singer to sing “I got chickens on my mind” with an ogling eye to any young woman in the audience. To a predominantly white crowd he could “play nigger” and satisfy their delight in the chicken-stealing black simpleton; to a black audience he could lay more emphasis on harassment by the police or the successful duping of white people. (*Songsters* 100)

Such double entendres derive (at least in part) from the African appreciation for circumlocution in language. The veiling of information in ever-changing paraphrases is the mark of an excellent orator or storyteller in African and African-derived cultures (Borneman 23-24). A black performer of “coon songs” is thus also a performer of African American cultural practices that would likely be recognized only by audience members familiar with these traditions.

In addition to the different ways audiences *heard* “Traveling Man,” they most likely *saw* African American performers like Jordan in disparate ways as well. Black cultural critic Stuart Hall has noted that members of black cultures have often “used the body—as if it was, and it often was—the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation,” a phenomenon that is often overlooked in western cultural criticism (“Where is”, 23-24). Thus, a musician’s physical presence, his embodiment of “blackness,” was also a factor of the performance that spectators might have read variously. Hall has commented elsewhere on the difficulty of interpreting “iconic signs,” that is, signs that appear to resemble the thing represented, as in the case of blackface minstrels or African American singers of coon songs. According to Hall, such icons are most often taken as “natural” or transparent—the thing itself—when, in fact, they are signs, and like all cultural signs, they can be decoded in three different ways: through the dominant cultural ideology; through a “negotiated version” of that ideology, which would acknowledge cultural norms but adapt them as necessary; or in opposition to the



dominant view. For Hall, the “meaning” of a cultural production circulates within these multiple decoding practices (“Encoding” 96-103).

Just as Sotiropoulos sees the musical theatre artists as political activists, so too can one read these rural African American coon song performers as directly challenging the prejudices of the dominant culture. At the very least, a knowledgeable audience could certainly recognize them as negotiating with that dominant ideology, acknowledging its power yet adapting a response to individual circumstances and to mixed audiences. Thus, performers like Luke Jordan (and probably Alec Johnson) would have counted on mainstream white audiences decoding their performances according to the prevailing racism of their day, while other segments of the audience, familiar with African American folk culture, would have a more complex knowledge of what, exactly, was being performed, and perhaps experience a heightened pleasure in their superior understanding.

In physics, there is a principle called the “black body,” which is defined as an ideal black substance that absorbs all, and reflects none, of the radiant energy falling on it. Examples of such “ideal” substances include the black grease that contemporary athletes smear under their eyes to reduce glare, or—more pertinent here—the lampblack sometimes worn by nineteenth-century white minstrels. Blues historian Francis Davis has used this “black body” as a metaphor to describe the early career of folk singer Hudie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, during the years when John Lomax was taking him to perform at incongruous events like the MLA Convention (Davis 168-79). One might surmise from a close investigation of coon song performers in context that their black bodies functioned in much the same way, absorbing the projected ideologies of different audience constituencies. While these singers may have reinforced minstrel stereotypes for those who already accepted them, for those who understood the subtext of the lyrics and the satire embodied in the performance, what appeared to be a modern form of blackface was actually a vehicle for undermining stereotypes and mocking the culture that produced them. In effect, Alec Johnson, Luke Jordan, and their contemporaries

were “passing” for black with white audience members, while parodying white definitions of blackness for those who understood the joke.

\* \* \* \* \*

This point about audience brings me back to the contemporary audience for coon songs and the critical apologists with whom I began this essay. While these scholars lament the negative images and language of minstrelsy and coon songs, they have nonetheless done important work in recognizing the significance of these artifacts in our evolving American conversation about race. Their work demonstrates that racism and prejudice are not the only things being preserved for study when we examine coon songs performed by African American musicians, and that the performers themselves were engaged in creating a new vocabulary of race and performance so as to speak and be heard in the modern world. Alec Johnson and Luke Jordan were engaged in a similar enterprise, but doing so in the South during the heyday of the night riders compelled them to use slightly alternative methods. In their precarious world, African American performers of coon songs were indeed participating in the modern discussion of race, but their music also incorporated many traditional African American art forms. In this way they differ from the New York theatre artists that Sotiropoulos sees as consciously breaking generational ties. Musicians like Johnson and Jordan were recycling images and performance strategies, both to challenge stereotypes and also to sustain the community bonds that had long been necessary for survival.

T. W. Lhamon has recently proposed the notion of “subaltern song,” which he sees as different from the halting, self-defeating “subaltern speech” defined by Gayatri Spivak (Lhamon 3). For Lhamon, subaltern song may not achieve its intended result immediately, but “it has momentum and cumulative flow. It gathers slights into memory. Crystallized in song, its echoes persist through repertoires down the eras, staying alive by cycling through all the modes of performance” (9). Lhamon uses this new category to appreciate the genius of Bert Williams, whose best work, he claims, “does not transcend its conditions. It works through them” (9). To

me, the notion of “subaltern song” is even better suited to rural performers of coon songs like Johnson and Jordan. In “Mysterious Coon” and “Traveling Coon” we see the challenges to dominant racist discourse, but we also see the traces of all that came before: of medicine shows, of the blues, of folk songs, toasts, and tall tales, of generations of playful parody and making a way from no way. By laying claim to the dominant racial discourse of the era, mixing it with conventional local formulas, and deploying it for their own subversive purposes—by “passing” for black, as black was then understood—these African American performers of coon songs were preserving centuries-old traditions of African American survival and resistance, while helping to complicate and re-shape the national understanding of race itself.

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