BOOK REVIEW – ‘Darkest America’ delves into meaning of minstrelsy

September 6, 2012 | Filed under METRO | Posted by admin

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER


In 1934, Zora Neale Hurston vented her spleen about minstrelsy. On stage, she wrote, Negroes were excused from popping their eyes only when they were rolling them in fright.

They say “Is you is, or is you ain’t,” grab a banjo and work themselves into a sound sleep…. All of which may be very good vaudeville, but I’m sorry to be such an image breaker and say we just don’t live like that.”

And yet, in her own stories and essays, Hurston drew heavily on the Black minstrel tradition. In “Lawing and Jawing,” for example, Judge Dunfumy tells a lawyer, “Yo mouf might spout lak a coffee pot but I got a lawyer dat kin beat your segastuatin.” And, as she looked down her nose at the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Hurston claimed that “Butter Beans” and “Susie,” stars of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, were among the few performers “of the real Negro School” in New York City.

In a sense, Yuval Taylor, senior editor at Chicago Review Press, and Jake Austen, editor of Rocktober magazine, suggest, Hurston “wanted to have her watermelon and eat it, too.”

Pride and shame

In “Darkest America,” Taylor and Austen demonstrate that minstrelsy (and its modern-day manifestations on TV sitcoms and in popular music) has a “complicated cultural history.”

Acknowledging that minstrelsy reinforced demeaning racial stereotypes, the authors claim that it also presented “a carefree life, liberated from oppression, responsibilities and burdens” and permitted performers to “signify on” or even subvert the very social norms and practices they appeared to be exemplifying.

It isn’t necessarily wrong, they conclude, self-consciously opening up a “burnt cork-sullied can of worms,” to feel pride as well as shame for “humming ‘Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens,’ chuckling at an Amos ‘n’ Andy dialect routine, or catching a Zulu coconut or a “Good Times” rerun.”

Dignified performances?

“Darkest America” covers a lot of ground: Taylor and Austen have interesting things to say about Bert Williams, Stepin Fetchit, Bill Cosby, Flavor Fav, Spike Lee and Tyler Perry.

Because the evidence is scarce, however, their assertions about the motives of performers and the response of (Black and White) audiences to minstrelsy are speculative.

Black minstrels may well have been performed with a wink, a shrug, and a signifying spirit. But it isn’t clear that Bert Williams was dignified “not just when he wiped off his blackface, but during his blackface act itself.”

Or that in “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South” Louis Armstrong was celebrating American entertainment itself “rather than an actual plantation heaven.” And it seems a stretch for Taylor and Austen to characterize the “mumbling post-scripts” uttered by Lincoln Perry (Stepin Fetchit) in racist 1930s films as “talking back” to Whites that is “borderline dangerous.”

Dangerous game

Taylor and Austen remind us that Blacks enjoyed watching minstrel shows. They suggest as well that stereotypes “seemed less odious” when Whites were not watching them. But we really do not know all that much about the composition of audiences – and what they were thinking and feeling.
Did blackface remind Blacks of good times? Codes of dignity, masculinity, and double consciousness?

Did some Blacks respond to minstrel shows by unburdening themselves of stereotypes or even “reclaiming” them? Do others, especially these days, enjoy embarrassing their bourgeois Black brothers, sisters and parents by airing “dirty laundry”? If so, why?

We live – and Taylor and Austen write – in deconstructive times. In-jokes, sarcasm, skepticism, cynicism, and self-parody dominate intellectual discourse and popular culture. In certain settings and with certain audiences, minstrels may have – and still may – supply balm for racist words and acts. But, let’s face it: They play a dangerous, dignity-denying game.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Related stories

- ‘Wonderful World’ weighs in on Armstrong’s music, stance on civil rights
- Tyler Perry to Spike Lee: ‘Go straight to hell’
- White version of ‘The Talk’ – Part II
- BOOK REVIEW
- Book explores Chitlin’ Circuit’s impact on rock ’n’ roll

You must be logged in to post a comment Login

FLORIDA WITH CAUTION THIS HOLIDAY WEEKEND AS RIP CURRENTS AND EXTREME HEAT MAY BE PRESENT