Christopher J. SMITH, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy*

Jack Harbord

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/4517>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.4517

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 June 2015

Number of pages: 170-172

ISBN: 978-2-913169-37-1

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Jack Harbord, "Christopher J. SMITH, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy*", *Volume !* [Online], 11 : 2 | 2015, Online since 15 June 2015, connection on 14 November 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/4517> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.4517>

résonnance du geste après l'acte, celui du club de golf percutant la balle, égal à la vibration de la main accompagnant la corde, ou encore du

rebond de la main sur un instrument percussif, ou à l'écho de mon propos chuchotant ce texte.

Julie TALLAND TERRADILLOS

Bibliographie

BARTHES R. (1982), « Le grain de la voix », in *L'Obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III*, Paris, Seuil.

DELALANDE F. (1980), *La musique et la main*, série documentaire radio en quatre volets, Ina/GRM, réalisation Evelyne Gayou et Christian Zanési, total 4 heures, en ligne : <http://www.inagrm.com> [consulté le 3/03/15].

— (1988), « La gestic de Gould : éléments pour une sémiologie du geste musical », in G. GUERTIN (ed.), *Glenn Gould pluriel*, Montréal, Louise Courteau éditrice.

GUÉRIN M. (2011), *Philosophie du geste : essai*, Arles, Actes Sud.

JOUSSE M. (1969), *L'anthropologie du geste*, Paris, Éditions Resma.

MAUSS M. (1936), « Techniques du corps », *Journal de Psychologie*, vol. 32 n° 3-4, édition électronique réalisée par Jean-Marie Tremblay pour la collection « Les classiques des sciences sociales », UQAC, 2002 : http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/mauss_marcel/socio_et_anthropo/6_Techniques_corps/Techniques_corps.html [consulté le 3/03/15].

Note

1. Citation tirée de l'émission radiophonique *Les greniers de la mémoire*, « Petite échappée du côté de la danse et de ses rapports à la musique », *France Musique*, animée par Karine Le Bail, 14 septembre 2014.

Christopher J. Smith, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Scholarship of blackface minstrelsy in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries has primarily sought to complicate entrenched perceptions of the entertainment form. A range of existing scholarly accounts including those by Eric Lott (1995), Dale Cockrell (1997), W. T. Lhamon (1998), and William Mahar (1999) have laid the groundwork for the growing re-evaluation of minstrelsy's history. Christo-

pher J. Smith clearly seeks to continue this trend in *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy* by building on the perspective of his predecessors whose contributions he is careful to acknowledge and engage with. Like his predecessors, Smith aims to debunk the notion that minstrelsy was simply crass cultural appropriation of African American culture by white Euro-

The Creolization of American Culture...

pean Americans, highlighting the hybridity of its origins and formative contexts by mapping the range of people, places, and social practices that facilitated the formation and popularisation of minstrelsy as a home-grown popular culture.

The primary focus for Smith is the works (paintings, drawings, and sketches) and records (letters, music manuscripts, autobiographical documents, and family accounts) of William Sidney Mount (1807-1867). Following his birth on the North Shore of Long Island, Mount relocated to the Lower East Side of Manhattan where he was exposed to the meeting of African American, Anglo-American, and Caribbean cultural expression. Studying under his uncle Micah Hawkins—who Smith situates as a key role model for the young Mount—he developed a style of art which captured the movements and moments of musical and physical expres-

sion. For Smith, the collected works of Mount represent an “unusually clear and detailed snapshot” of the formative stages of blackface performance practices and his portraits “precisely depict essential insights about the creole synthesis” (2014: 123) at the heart of American culture which extend across the Atlantic, the Caribbean, and mainland North America. Mount is, according to Smith, particularly reliable as a measure of the cultural expression of the era: his biography (described in some detail); tastes (as a collector, designer, and player of a range of musical instruments); and artistic works (technically accurate and drawing from real-life) lead Smith to this conclusion. However, it is through the artworks of Mount and of the wider body of vernacular artworks of the nineteenth century, that Smith seeks to expose and explore his primary target: “the sound world of minstrelsy” (2014: 21). Key to Smith’s work is the desire to imagine the sounds and movements of a music that was heard and performed before the dawn of audio recording and photography, a desire that is not adequately sated by interpretations of notated music that may fail to represent the “sounds as performed” (2014: 211) by those early pioneers to the mingling and diverse crowds of early nineteenth century America.

Students of minstrelsy studies may find Smith’s micro-focus on Mount to be alienating; many may be ignorant of the artist and not recognise his relevance to the wider field (myself included). However, Smith is careful to punctuate his work with comments defending his subject’s importance and value to understanding a world little recorded and even less remembered. But the book has wider value. Smith clearly articulates his arguments and guides the reader through a structurally demarcated and obsessively sub-

titled text. Moreover, the author provides an appendix of Blackface Scholarship which carefully outlines the disciplinary approaches to the subject in existing literature which both simultaneously digests a large body of work and draws further attention to the sources to which his research is indebted.

Smith ambitiously claims that *Creolization* "provides a third stage in the reconsideration of blackface minstrelsy" (2014: 211) following the first stage (represented by the works of Hans Nathan) and the second stage (represented by the works of Dale Cockrell, Eric Lott, W. T. Lhamon, Robert Carlin, and William Mahar). Whether *Creolization* represents a third and distinct stage in minstrelsy scholarship is debatable,

but the book does provide a valuable and unique perspective through the close study of Mount's life, artworks, and collected artefacts, and on an era of American culture often overlooked as a result of what blackface minstrelsy has become in popular consciousness. His step away from a reliance on sheet music and a focus on using vernacular artworks of the nineteenth century as a prism through which to reconstruct an idea of what "what frozen motion might tell us about musical sound" (2014: 175), Smith broadens an understanding of a vital stage in the development of American vernacular and popular culture and continues "minstrelsy's rehabilitation" (2014: 211) in scholarly research.

Jack HARBORD

Bibliography

CARLIN Robert (2007), *The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy*, Jefferson (N.C.), McFarland & Company, Inc.

COCKRELL Dale (1997), *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

LHAMON W. T. (1998), *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, London, Harvard University Press.

LOTT Eric (1995), *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, New York, Oxford University Press.

MAHAR William (1999), *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press.

NATHAN Hans (1949), "Dixie", *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXV, Issue 1, The Oxford University Press, 60-84.

— (1958), "Emmett's Walk-Arounds: Popular Theater in New York", *Civil War History*, vol. 4, no. 3, Kent (Ohio), The Kent State University Press, 213-224.

— (1962), *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, Oklahoma, Oklahoma University Press.