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**To Professor Wilson Ogbomo
for his contribution to Nigerian Studies**

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6 Blackface in America and Africa

Popular Arts and Diaspora Consciousness in Cape Town and the Gold Coast

Benjamin Brühwiler

Since the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century, contacts between people living in Africa and the diaspora—descendants of African slaves in the Americas—have had influences of changing importance upon the development of cultures on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Commodities and people have traveled from Africa to America and back, and performance styles have traveled with them.

While having moved mainly from Africa toward America during the period of slavery, performance styles of the African diaspora did travel in the reverse direction, especially after the end of the Civil War in the US. Blackface minstrelsy was one of the first major performance styles to move from America toward Africa. Originating in the US, the genre of blackface minstrelsy theater did not only travel to places like Nigeria, the Gold Coast and South Africa on the African continent but also to other parts of the world such as England, Cuba, Jamaica, India, China, Indonesia and Australia. This chapter takes a closer look at two key places in Africa, the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and the city of Cape Town in South Africa where local peoples eventually adopted blackface minstrelsy and incorporated it into their own performance culture. The main focus is on blackface as both a theatrical genre and a style of theatrical makeup, i.e., the actual making up of people's faces with black and white color. Section 1 looks at the emergence and popularization of blackface minstrelsy in the US, and Sections 2 and 3 are concerned with how exactly it traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to Cape Town and the Gold Coast, how local people adopted it and how blackface changed in the new environments. The differences and similarities that occurred during the adoption of blackface in these geographically, historically and ethnically very different regions of the African continent are discussed in Section 4. Furthermore, it reflects on the relation between blackface and race and on the emergence of the popular diaspora consciousness, which Catherine Cole dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century in the Gold Coast.¹ Drawing on Cole's work, this chapter examines blackface in the Gold Coast and compares it with blackface in Cape Town. The ways in which Capetonians adopted blackface practices at the end of the nineteenth

century give evidence that the popular diaspora consciousness existed in Cape Town already at that time.

Historical and social anthropological literature about blackface minstrelsy is vast, but no study has yet considered the genre's international dimensions. Trying to do this at least partially, namely for the Gold Coast and Cape Town, I rely on literature that deals with blackface minstrelsy within the national boundaries of the US and the colonial boundaries of the Gold Coast and the Cape colony. I consider mainly secondary sources since my aim is to establish a comparison between two already extensively researched topics: the use of blackface in the Gold Coast and in Cape Town.

Since processes of transmission follow no clear path or predictable pattern, two questions have to be answered in order to understand why people in Cape Town and the Gold Coast adopted blackface: what performance idioms were available for performance practitioners and spectators in the respective regions, and what did it mean for them to choose blackface?² Thus, the necessary attention is given to the cultural context, which is crucially important to understand popular performance history.

BLACKFACE IN THE UNITED STATES

The term *blackface* has been used both for a style of theatrical makeup and for a genre of theatrical presentation. The blackface makeup originated in the US where white actors blackened their faces with burnt cork, greasepaint or shoe polish, while exaggerating their eyes and lips meant to mimic and ridicule African Americans. White blackface performers were part of traveling troupes that performed in minstrel shows. The emerging genre of theatrical presentation was a combination of the blackface character and minstrel shows. It was characterized by its musical and comedy style and eventually adopted the name blackface or blackface minstrelsy.

Pre-Civil War Blackface Minstrelsy

While in England the blackening of white actors' faces or the "mask of blackness" dates back as far as 1377³ and had been common in the English theater since at least the late eighteenth century, blackface minstrelsy became popular in the US in the 1820s and 1830s, especially when Thomas D. Rice introduced the song "Jump Jim Crow" in 1828. The first blackface minstrel troupes in the US were composed of white comedians, singers, and musicians who dressed in eccentric clothes, spoke a supposedly Southern black dialect, sang "Negro songs" and played instruments such as the violin, the cello, the tambourine, the banjo and the bone-clappers. Unrelated songs, instrumental solos, and dances were loosely tied together by jokes and dialogue. Over the years, a standard format developed and was put

into practice for the first time by Dan Emmett and his Virginia Minstrels in 1843. An explosion of so-called "Ethiopian" entertainments with hundreds of minstrel troupes touring the US and Europe followed.

A minstrel troupe contained up to twenty minstrels with blackened faces. According to the standard format, they were seated in a semi-circle and the main characters were Mr. Tambo playing the tambourine, Brudder Bones playing the bone-clappers, and the Interlocutor or Mr. Johnson. The three-part show started with songs and dances, and above all, riddles and jokes performed by Brudder Bones and Mr. Tambo. The second part was the olio, which offered anything from acrobatic acts to the latest novelty. The main feature, however, was a speech delivered in a "nigger dialect." The last part of pre-war minstrel shows formed a one-act skit set on a Southern plantation, where happy "darkies" danced "break downs" and praised the goodness of the master.

The "plantation ducky" was one of the favorite black stereotypes of the American culture at the time and he was portrayed in blackface minstrelsy. The "old ducky" was a variant on the slave archetype. He was the head of the black family and had positive aspects such as a loving personality. His death usually left the master in great pain.⁴

Even though white performers dominated pre-1860 minstrelsy, a few blacks began to engage in minstrel troupes by 1840. One of them was William Henry Lane, known as Master Juba, who appeared in blackface when he joined minstrel troupes in the early 1840s. Black troupes became a distinct feature of blackface minstrelsy in the US after the Civil War.⁵

Post-Civil War Blackface Minstrelsy

After the American Civil War ended in 1865, white minstrels increasingly introduced variety elements and discarded the old plantation material. At the same time, more and more African Americans entered the minstrel field and from the mid-1870s, they took a different direction than white blackface performers. While white minstrel groups abandoned the plantation scenes and introduced vaudeville elements and novelty shows, black minstrel groups romanticized the image of the "ducky" and the plantation and combined it with elements of genuine African American culture and with protest against oppression. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first choir to sing authentic slave music or spirituals to white audiences, though in a "Western classical style,"⁶ and their international success urged black minstrel troupes to increasingly feature black religious music of the southern US in their shows. One of the troupes was the Georgia Minstrels, who were so successful in the 1880s that spirituals were added to the standard repertoire of black minstrel shows. Another black minstrel troupe at that time was the Virginia Jubilee Singers founded in 1889 by a certain Orpheus M. McAdoo. His troupe soon decided to go abroad and tour in Europe and South Africa.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Europeans in large numbers and from various countries emigrated to the US and many of them arrived in New York. As many of them had a hard time getting accepted in America, they used blackface to erase their ethnic differences and as a means of becoming American. The well-known representative of this group of immigrants engaging in blackface is the entertainer and Jewish immigrant Al Jolson. He became popular when he appeared in blackface on screen at the beginning of the twentieth century when silent and later talking movies started to be produced.

Despite the revival of blackface due to the popularity of some movies, Americans began to lose interest in blackface minstrelsy in the 1930s. However, it did not fully die out until the 1950s when, with the success of the Civil Rights Movement, attitudes toward race and racism changed considerably, and blackface became a taboo in the US.

Blackface as Export Product

Blackface minstrelsy was one of the first and very popular forms of mass-culture in the US. This popular art form also traveled abroad and introduced African American culture to an international audience. When blackface minstrel shows became commercialized after the Civil War, black minstrel troupes incorporated authentic African American culture in their shows. White minstrel shows, on the other hand, came to represent African Americans in a definite racist manner.⁷

When focusing on the spread of blackface minstrelsy to the African continent, it is not only important to know to which extent its initial contents were "African" but also how new and opportunistic they were. Denis-Constant Martin emphasizes that minstrel troupes offered an opportunity for the American youth to form a counter-culture where a mixed urban working class could express their fears and hopes. He writes, "initial contents [of minstrel shows] were mixed, anti-authoritarian, imbued with youth and working class rebellions."⁸ With the help of blackface makeup, minstrels could perform the unusual, the grotesque and the unthinkable. These points have to be considered when looking at how and why blackface minstrelsy found its way to South Africa and Ghana.

BLACKFACE IN CAPE TOWN

Describing the so-called Coon carnival in Cape Town in 1995, Denis-Constant Martin described how the troupes made up their faces in preparation for the carnival:

Before leaving their *klopskamer*, members apply make-up to their faces. Some stick to the old minstrel pattern: black with white circles

around the eyes and the mouth, or a variation on it where half the face is painted black and the other half white. Many now prefer to use bright colors and a sprinkling of glitter, while others do not put any make-up at all.⁹

Coon troupes in the 1990s, and still today, use blackface makeup during the annual Coon carnival in Cape Town, recently renamed Cape Town Minstrels Carnival.¹⁰ The history of this carnival is closely related to blackface minstrelsy.

The Beginnings of the Coon Carnival

When the first blackface minstrels from the US performed in Cape Town in the 1850s, they encountered a society that had become very mixed over the past two hundred years. People from various parts of the world such as Indonesia, India, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia had been enslaved and shipped to Cape Town, where they mixed with each other and with the local KhoiSan. This Creole slave population was engaging in considerable musical activity. Due to a lack of designated performance places, the slaves played music outdoors and a street culture emerged. According to Martin, singing and parading in the streets, visiting and entertaining friends, and accepting food and drinks from them became a Cape Town tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹¹ Toward the end of the nineteenth century, street parades became a usual sight and increasingly important especially when different celebrations merged into one cycle of festivals: November 5 was Guy Fawkes Day, December 1 (1834/38) was Emancipation Day, and New Year and *Tweede Nuwe Jaar* were celebrated on January 1 and 2. Singing societies, or Coon troupes, with tight links to sports clubs were organized, and in 1898, a march by such a group was later described as the first carnival,¹² followed only nine years later by the first formal competition of those Coon troupes.

Capetonians' first encounter with blackface minstrelsy in the late 1840s and 1850s happened indirectly, i.e., even before American minstrel troupes performed at the Cape. Through visitors, sailors and newspaper publications, minstrelsy songs were brought to Cape Town and this led to the formation of local groups, so-called Serenaders. They specialized in the interpretation of minstrel songs and adopted blackface minstrelsy's dress style and makeup. Few years later, in the late 1850s and 1860s, the first white American blackface minstrels arrived in Cape Town, the most important among them being the then world-famous Christy Minstrels. These visiting American minstrel troupes gave rise to a similar form of popular performance at the Cape. Local white amateur troupes started—with great success—to perform in blackface in front of mainly white audiences. The racist character of the entertainment suited to the audiences' tastes so that blackface minstrelsy worked as a channel for racial hatred. Yet, not only

whites enjoyed blackface minstrelsy performances, also Africans and Creole Capetonians were fascinated and sporadically formed minstrel troupes. By the 1880s, the theater genre coming from the US was an integral part of any entertainment at the Cape.

At the time when the political authorities of the Cape colony increased segregation in the 1880s and 1890s and when the Creole people, who were called "coloureds" now, became *de jure* isolated from Africans and Europeans, the first African American minstrels arrived in Cape Town. Among them were Orpheus McAdoo's Virginia Jubilee Singers, who went on tour in South Africa twice, from 1890 to 1892 and again from 1895 to 1898. They brought with them a new type of song, which had never been heard before and managed to please everybody's ears: the spiritual. Veit Erlmann credits their extensive concert tours as "the first link in a chain of continuing African American influences on the culture and music of black South Africans."¹³

The case of the Virginia Jubilee Singers underlines the influence African Americans had on all racial groups in South Africans. Some members of McAdoo's troupe stayed in South Africa even after 1898, which reinforced the Virginia Jubilee Singers' lasting impact on coloured people, in particular. Already in 1887, coloureds had started to form performance clubs, and paraded through the streets on New Year's Day dressed and made-up as blackface minstrels, or rather "Coons," and thus starting the tradition of the Cape Coon Carnival. In addition to the Coons, there were troupes in period costumes and some dressed up as American Indians, *Atjas*. However, the Coon character, according to Martin, was included into the New Year festivals as the central character.¹⁴

While the Cape society was becoming legally more segregated, coloureds in Cape Town, by forming carnival troupes, consolidated their Creole culture and added blackface minstrel elements like special clothes, troupes' names, songs, and makeup. The Cape Coon evolved out of the fusion of American blackface minstrels and Cape Town Creole musicians. In 1907, only few years after the census started differentiating between coloureds and Africans, the Grand New Year Coloured Carnival was organized.

Until that very year, 1907, the Coon carnival was an informal event during which everybody was allowed to flock to the streets, make noise, and behave in unusual ways. The street culture, which had its roots in the eighteenth century, was continued, at least during the time of New Year. In 1907, however, the first formal Coon troupe competition took place at Green Point Track, a stadium where Coon troupes competed in marches, songs, and dance contests. After two more years, the competition at the stadium disappeared but was organized again in 1920 and has, since then, taken place every year. A stark contrast emerged between street performances, where everybody could watch and participate, and the stadium competition where there was reserved seating and limited participation.

At the end of the 1920s, a new medium, the talking movie, was introduced in Cape Town and so-called bioscopes, cinemas, opened their doors.

The first film to be shown in Cape Town in 1929 was *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson, a white American music-hall comedian who performed in blackface. The film was a sensation and rejuvenated the character of the Coon also because the talking movie—the latest technical invention in entertainment—was associated with modernity. Thenceforward, films, especially from America, became a primary source of inspiration for carnival troupes. The Coon character and blackface makeup remained of considerable significance to the Cape coloureds and only since the end of apartheid has it lost most of its relevance and been replaced by other performance practices.

Keeping in Touch with a Non-White Modernity

Coloured people at the Cape were interested in blackface since the first white American minstrel troupes had visited Cape Town. An expression of their interest was the formation of the first Creole minstrel troupe in 1869. What increased their interest massively, however, were the performances of visiting African American minstrel troupes in Cape Town in the 1880s and 1890s, which happened to take place in the years when the government implemented segregationist regulations. These regulations put external pressure on the Cape coloureds, who originated from various parts of the world, to feel as people of the same race. They then pragmatically chose to reinvent their two-hundred-year-old performance culture, which had mainly developed under slavery conditions. They decided not just to emphasize their own culture but to borrow elements from other cultures they knew. In late-nineteenth-century Cape Town, various European as well as African cultural practices were present in addition to American blackface minstrelsy. Why did they not choose to adopt European or African cultural practices?

European culture, on the one hand, was not acceptable for Cape coloureds because they were living in a segregated South Africa, where the Europeans, who had brought them to Cape Town to use them as slaves, were still the authorities even after the emancipation of the slaves. Furthermore, the European authorities began to implement new laws that disadvantaged all non-white people. African culture, on the other hand, was not attractive for the Cape coloureds because Africans in Cape Town were also disadvantaged in South Africa, and the coloureds themselves were more successful in terms of the developing racial hierarchy. African Americans, however, were considered as people who, despite being non-white, were not only free in their society but also successful. The American "coloureds," as they were occasionally referred to at the time, had achieved travel around the world by performing their own beautiful songs, which allegedly even impressed South African president Paul Kruger.¹⁵ Therefore, the Cape coloureds identified with the coloreds from the US and combined whatever was suitable—costumes, songs, dances, and blackface makeup—with their own street musical culture. What resulted from that fusion were the

carnival troupes—mainly *Coons* and *Atjas*—which paraded through the streets at New Year.

When apartheid was introduced in the mid-twentieth century and life for coloureds in Cape Town became even more difficult, the Coon carnival was in danger of disappearing due to a lack of money and an attempted ban of the carnival. The Cape coloureds, however, fought for their carnival and changed the carnival by reinforcing the already strong American elements of the carnival. Coloured people along the Cape considered colored black Americans as examples of what remained to be achieved in South Africa. While blackface makeup was considered racist in the US, it was not in Cape Town and Cape coloureds even chose to use blackface in their carnival. They invented the tradition of the Coon carnival, which allowed them, as Erlmann points out, to keep in touch with the coloreds in the US, and to participate in modernization and development.¹⁶ Only when apartheid ended and the different ethnicities in South Africa were allowed to participate in the political process did blackface and other elements borrowed from American blackface minstrelsy become less important.

BLACKFACE IN THE GOLD COAST AND GHANA

When John Collins attended and transcribed a so-called concert party show of the *Jaguar Jokers* in 1973, he observed that several characters had their faces painted black.¹⁷ The *Jaguar Jokers* were only one of more than fifty concert parties touring in Ghana in the early 1970s. It was the high period of the concert party genre, which had already gone through many changes since it came into existence in the 1910s. For instance, the first section of the show known as the *Opening*, where the blackface makeup was pervasive, had become much shorter over the years. Nonetheless, it is of particular interest here because dress, music, and general style of the *Opening* of the 1970s were still based on concert party practices, which go back to the beginnings of the concert party when elements of blackface minstrelsy were incorporated into coastal Ghanaian performance styles. As the history of the Coon carnival in Cape Town is related to blackface, so is the history of the concert party in Ghana.

The Beginnings of the Concert Party

When the first American blackface minstrels went to the Gold Coast after the end of the First World War, they performed in the coastal cities of Sekondi, Cape Coast, and Accra. A localized hybrid culture had emerged in these cities due to a four-hundred-year-old trade of slaves and commodities between the coastal societies in the Gold Coast and different European nations. At the end of the nineteenth century, the British, whose formal colonial rule over the Gold Coast started in the 1870s and who carried out

a commercial colonialism, monopolized the trade with the coastal peoples of the Fante and the Ga. The centuries-long trade together with the politics of colonialism, which introduced the cash economy, contributed to the formation of three classes within the African society: a small bureaucratic elite, cash-cropping farmers, and between them, a heterogeneous group of people that Barber et al. call the “intermediate class,”¹⁸ a domain where the formal sector dissolved into the informal sector and everyone hustled to survive by combining two or three occupations. It was in this context that a theater genre emerged, which was popular, modern, commercial, traveling, and musical and that creatively combined elements of imported culture, such as blackface makeup, and indigenous culture.

The first concert performances in the coastal cities took place in the late nineteenth century. As early as 1903, African amateur comedians performed at elite social gatherings, “quite possibly in blackface makeup,” according to Cole.¹⁹ While turn-of-the-century concert performances were occasional events, they became an institution in the 1910s. First in Cape Coast and later in Accra and Sekondi, programmed concerts were performed in schools and social clubs. There were soon three venues for concert-style entertainment in Accra and two venues (the *Palladium* and the *Optimism Club*) in Sekondi. The latter had a great impact on the history of the concert party for it was there that Teacher Yalley, the headmaster of a Sekondi elementary school, gave a one-man vaudeville-style show at *Empire Day* 1918. The show consisted of jokes, singing and dancing, and Yalley wore fancy dress, wigs, false moustaches, and he had his face painted black with a white circle around his mouth. Yalley performed for the African elite and the white residents because the show was in English and entry tickets were expensive. In addition to Yalley, there were a number of amateur comedians performing in Sekondi in the mid-1920s. All of them were modeled on imported blackface minstrelsy that was brought to the Gold Coast in the 1920s by American blackface minstrels. The white tap dancer Gene Fenneran, who introduced new dance styles, was the first American to tour in the Gold Coast. More important were the tours of Glass and Grant, an African American minstrel duo, which resided in Accra from 1924 to 1926 and toured widely for elite audiences, Glass being the minstrel in minstrel makeup and Grant being the female impersonator.

In addition, other American as well as European and African cultural practices contributed to the formation of the concert party genre in the Gold Coast. Three cultural influences from Europe and the US shall be mentioned here. Colonial schools, which had been built since the 1870s, staged amateur British theatricals at the occasion of *Empire Day*. Until the 1930s, these theatricals had changed to the extent that black Africans wore blackface minstrel makeup, sang African American spirituals, and did American plantation songs. The cantatas, church-organized morality plays, together with the school cantatas were influential because they gave rise to the idea of having a raised platform as a stage that separated actors

and audience, an idea that had been unknown in traditional West African theater. Furthermore, silent films from the US affected the concert party. In the Gold Coast silent films were shown first in 1908 and regularly after the First World War when movie theaters sprang up in Accra and Sekondi. Performance practices by Charlie Chaplin and Al Jolson were most popular among concert party actors. The film *Mammy*, which was a recreation of a classic nineteenth-century minstrel show, was a big success. It featured Al Jolson in blackface makeup.

As far as African influences on the concert party are concerned, two cultural practices are worth mentioning. First, traditional roving minstrels and troubadours of West Africa were an important influence for they were traveling from town to town, a practice that was to become essential for concert parties. Second and more importantly, there was the Akan storytelling tradition, Anansesem, which has the characteristic of reproducing received ideas and adding revisions. This characteristic also applies to the main figure, Ananse, the spider. Ananse is portrayed as a trickster, who gets through life by manipulating others. Ananse became a major influence on early concert party performances because of his contribution to the Bob character of the concert party.

After the African American blackface minstrels Glass and Grant had left the Gold Coast, the Ga actors Williams and Marbel became very well known and were the most important locals to carry on performing in blackface. They retained the variety-act format but because they were working with and inspired by visiting American vaudeville performers Fenneran and Glass and Grant and because they studied dancing from the movies and play books, they added many new touches such as minstrel tap dancing.²⁰

Also during the 1920s three young students of the Methodist School in Sekondi, Bob Johnson, Charles B. Horton, and J. B. Ansah were inspired by Teacher Yalley's shows and started their own show group, the Versatile Eight. In order to earn money during holiday breaks, the students took the concerts they had been performing at Empire Day out of the school and staged concerts at public venues. Their shows became so popular that they continued staging them at different venues and by doing so the Versatile Eight created the prototype of the concert party, which was to become a professional traveling theater accessible to ordinary people. Additionally, the Versatile Eight introduced the local Fante language into songs and dialogues, they established a dramatic structure, and they invented three stock character roles that came to be known as Trios. Ansah played the gentleman role, Horton his wife, and Bob was their steward and joker. Both the gentleman and the joker performed in blackface makeup.²¹ Members of the school orchestra supplied the music. In 1930 Bob and his friends went professional, but they still charged little admission money. They changed their name to The Two Bobs and toured around the local towns. A masked bell-ringer announced their program, which consisted of four parts: the Opening Chorus, where the three of them danced to quicksteps; the In,

where one of them sang a ragtime song; the Duet, where the Two Bobs cracked jokes; and the Scene, which was the actual play. The whole show lasted about one and a half hours, the Scene alone lasting for one hour.

The changes that the Two Bobs brought about were the beginning of the Akanization²² of the concert party. The Bob character was created, which drew largely on the Ananse character, the blackface minstrel, and Charlie Chaplin. In addition, the Fante language was introduced, and concert parties performed in towns so that ordinary people could attend the shows. The Akanization, however, did not mean a traditionalization of the concert party; it was rather perceived as modernization because the artists, who added their own variations, rendered the imported ideas into something new.

The Two Bobs and other contemporary concert party performers were children of urban migrants, who had been educated, who could speak, read and write English quite well, and who had been socialized to assume clerkships or skilled labor positions. Most of them belonged to the urban intermediate class but the bad economic circumstances of the 1920s did not offer them prospects for well-paid labor positions. Therefore, they chose to become professional performers instead. They exploited the opportunities that wage labor, a cash economy, and their formal education made possible, and thus, they succeeded to survive within the order established by the colonial power to serve interests other than theirs.

In 1935 Bob joined the Axim Trio, which enjoyed unprecedented popularity and made trips to northern Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, the Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. By World War II, the elitist vaudeville concert parties, such as Williams and Marbel, had died out whereas the Axim Trio served as example for later concert parties. Mr. Bampoe, the leader of the Jaguar Jokers, remembered having seen a concert party performance by the Axim Trio in 1946: "The afternoons after the Axim Trio had staged in our town . . . we painted our faces and imitated the Axim Trio."²³ Despite the Akanization of the concert party in the 1920s and 1930s the cultural practice of making-up as blackface minstrel had not disappeared.

Troops stationed at Accra during World War II brought new influences to the concert party genre and also provided some of the concerts with new audiences. Concert parties also traveled abroad themselves when an African Theater was set up in India within the West African Frontier Force between 1943 and 1946. The Burma Jokers, later named the Ghana Trio, were one offspring of this experience.

In the years after the war, the concert party succeeded in establishing itself as a popular performance genre. Thanks to the economic boom at that time, people got used to spending money, even for entertainment. The accelerated process of urbanization and the fast-expanding cities provided practical bases for concert parties' activities as well as an ideological landscape. At the same time people in the Gold Coast had a strong demand for education also because they wished to rule themselves and get a fair share

of the resources of their land. In the late 1940s and 1950s, an anti-colonial nationalism grew stronger and stronger until Ghana became independent in 1957.

The year 1952, when E. K. Nyame formed the Akan Trio,²⁴ is of particular importance for the development of the concert party genre. First of all, their performances were exclusively in vernacular languages, mainly in Akan dialects; second of all and more importantly, Nyame fused his guitar-highlife band with the concert party so that "the play could be seen as a vehicle for the music at the same time that the music embellished and punctuated the play."²⁵ The resulting performance practice was an instant success. Two years later, there were already ten concert parties in existence. Once again, the blackface makeup was still extensively used both for the introductory sequence and the play.

The 1960s and 1970s were the high period of the concert party. More than fifty concert parties touring in Ghana in the 1970s accounted for the most important development in contemporary Ghanaian drama. A fairly restricted set of themes and characters evolved. While the central character was often a victim, most plays had a Bob trickster character, very often in blackface. Two attempts for a concert party union were made during that period. In 1960 the Ghana National Entertainment Association was formed but became defunct in 1966. In 1978 the Musicians Union of Ghana, which is still operating today, was founded.

Concert parties' enormous successes were interesting for local television producers and filmmakers, and television eventually became a major medium for the concert parties. For TV shows concert parties had to adjust their performances to a restricted time frame. They cut out the introductory sequences and shortened the plays. The blackface makeup was discarded for TV shows and this adaptation spilled over into live performances so that television-oriented groups abandoned blackface minstrel makeup even in their stage plays. Instead, they began to dress their Bobs in funny masks with false noses, moustaches and spectacles. Another new medium for concert parties was comic magazines, an idea originating in Nigeria. They were made up of series of photographs from a concert play with the dialogue incorporated in balloon form and in vernacular.

While concert parties entered into new media, the concert party performances themselves were changing in the 1980s. More and more women became members of concert parties, and they either substituted female impersonators or were added to them. For the first time, concert party leaders started to use written scripts so that they became more elaborate and more extended.

Meanwhile, the economic problems of the late 1970s and the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s made lives hard for most Ghanaians and also for concert party actors. Many troupes had to give up performing due to a lack of money and to a two-year night curfew from 1982 to 1984. In

1995 only few concert parties toured in Ghana, and today they are mainly known as highlife bands while their theater performances are not of importance any more.

Black America in Ghana

Similar to the Coon carnival in Cape Town, the concert party has been characterized by its hybrid form. Highlife music itself, which became an inseparable part of the concert party in the 1950s, had been shaped by a long period of cultural interaction.²⁶ The same is true for the formation of the concert party form since the beginning of the twentieth century when local people in the Gold Coast adopted elements of performance practices from various foreign cultures. Among these foreign influences, African American culture—in the form of blackface minstrelsy—turned out to be the most important one, and it had a formative impact on the concert party. The most obvious example of this was Glass and Grant. Blackface minstrel makeup was one of the elements used by concert party performers right from the beginning. Even though the concert party progressively incorporated an increasing number of indigenous elements while discarding foreign ones, blackface was used from the early twentieth century until the 1980s. Only when concert parties began to stage television shows in the 1970s did the blackface makeup lose much of its importance, because they did not perform in blackface on television. The reasons for the abandonment of blackface on television remain to be investigated. One explanation would be that television producers did not want the actors to wear blackface because they knew about its racist meaning in the US. The actors, on the other hand, might have thought that blackface, which also served them to create distance between themselves and the audiences,²⁷ was not necessary anymore because the medium of television automatically created distance. Other concert parties, which did not engage in television, continued to use blackface until the 1980s.

Concert parties in the Gold Coast—unlike the Coon carnival in Cape Town—developed into itinerant theater groups similar to the original American blackface minstrel groups. And there were other similarities between the two performance genres. Their shows were lowbrow musical comedies performed without a script; both theaters used similar makeup and costumes, and both used stereotyped characters; they were all male and combined music, dance, and story; and they dealt with the current problems of their audiences, who were members of a newly urbanized society. An important difference, however, was that African Americans were a minority population that were forced to perform in blackface if they wanted to be on stage in a dominantly white society,²⁸ whereas Africans in the Gold Coast, who by far outnumbered Europeans while still being less powerful, chose to perform in blackface.

THE ADOPTION OF BLACKFACE IN CAPE TOWN AND THE GOLD COAST

Both the Gold Coast and Cape Town were under British domination when local people adopted blackface in these two places. Their familiarity with the English language allowed people to establish contact with American culture easily and vice versa.²⁹ South Africa, however, was exposed to American cultural practices earlier than the Gold Coast because South Africa had been integrated into the order of global culture earlier than other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. So the first American minstrel troupes traveled to South Africa as early as the 1840s, whereas people in the Gold Coast did not encounter minstrel groups from the US until the 1920s. In Cape Town as well as in the Gold Coast, however, minstrel groups were responsible for people knowing about blackface minstrelsy and had the possibility to choose whether they liked it or not and whether they wanted to incorporate blackface minstrelsy elements into their own performance practices. In both places blackface became very popular. It was seen as modern and black culture, whose sophisticated and cosmopolitan style was much appreciated. The racist and derogatory aspects, which blackface had in the US, were not important for or not known to non-white blackface artists and spectators in the Gold Coast and Cape Town. Furthermore, the initial contents of American blackface minstrelsy were "mixed, anti-authoritarian, and imbued with youth and working class rebellions,"³⁰ as was mentioned above. This applies to the minstrel shows that were performed in Cape Town in the mid-nineteenth century as well as to the African American minstrel shows performed in the Gold Coast and in Cape Town at a later stage. Thus, coloured Capetonians as well as colonial Ghanaians, who were being disadvantaged by white people in their societies, were fascinated by American blackface performances. The fascination became even stronger when movies from America such as *The Jazz Singer* (in Cape Town) and *Mammy* (in the Gold Coast) were shown featuring Al Jolson in blackface. While the movies contributed to the introduction of blackface to the Gold Coast, they led to a rejuvenation of the Coon character at the Cape, where blackface performance had been known for more than sixty years.

When the Coon carnival and the concert party genre were formed, Africans in the Gold Coast and coloureds in Cape Town incorporated some elements of blackface minstrelsy into local popular performance structures. The blackface makeup was one of these elements. The Coon carnival and the concert party quickly became popular art forms.³¹ Barber considers popular art forms in Africa as a "shapeless residual" and "fugitive" category. They "are not elite arts (though they borrow from them, among other sources) nor traditional ones (though they are grounded in them)."³² Erlmann adds that they are "something that stands in opposition to the ruling classes, the government, the officials,"³³ who were white people in both the Gold Coast and Cape Town. Therefore, the adoption of blackface

makeup and its incorporation into a popular art form was certainly a class issue, and it was a race issue as well even though blackface in the Gold Coast and in Cape Town was not racist.

The Question of Race and Diaspora Consciousness

Since they were not forced to perform in blackface makeup but chose to do so, Cape coloureds and Africans in the Gold Coast did not consider blackface racist. What counted most for them was that blackface was a performance practice coming from the US and that it was closely associated with African American culture. People in the Gold Coast as well as people in Cape Town consumed blackface performances and acted in blackface makeup because they identified with African Americans and wanted to express their identification. In that sense, even though blackface was not racist, it was about racial affinity, which Cole shows for the case of the concert party in the Gold Coast,³⁴ and which also applies to the Coon carnival in Cape Town.

Before exemplifying this point among the people in the Gold Coast and Cape Town, it is useful to introduce the term *diaspora consciousness* first, which has been used particularly in the field of Culture Studies to describe issues concerning global diasporas. Steven Vertovec makes the distinction between three meanings of the term "diaspora," the second of which, namely "'diaspora' as a type of consciousness,"³⁵ is interesting here. This approach puts much emphasis on the diaspora as "a state of mind" and "a sense of identity," and it is marked by a dual nature. "It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion, and positively by identification with an historical heritage . . . or contemporary world cultural or political forces."³⁶ Paul Gilroy pointed in a similar direction when he described a kind of "duality of consciousness," which gives rise to individuals' awareness of multi-locality and which stimulates the desire to connect oneself with others who share the same "routes" and "roots."³⁷ According to Vertovec, this makes the diaspora consciousness also a "source of resistance *through engagement with*, and consequent *visibility in, public space*."³⁸ A diaspora consciousness cannot only emerge among people living in the diaspora but also among the people still living in the "homeland," which I will demonstrate using the examples of the Gold Coast and Cape Town. Crucial here is the above-mentioned racial affinity.

In the Gold Coast, Catherine Cole found out something surprising when interviewing veteran artists about blackface and racism: none of them ever explicitly said blackface carried notable ideological weight in terms of race nor did they know about the racist significance blackface had in the US. Rather, they said they used to blacken their faces because it made people laugh.³⁹ Even though Ghanaians today do not identify race as a component of concert blackface there is a possibility that blackface had racial connotations when it was first used in the Gold Coast. The ideology of white

supremacy exists in Ghana today, as I personally experienced during a six-month stay in Ghana in 2004, and it also existed in the colonial Gold Coast of the 1920s and 1930s. It was in these years that a racial consciousness was awakening and the popular discourse on black identity was growing. Literate Africans of the “intermediate class” who could not find jobs in spite of their good education were looking for models of successful black identity within a racist social order. What they found was Negro American life, which was present in the Gold Coast in the form of Negro literature⁴⁰ and in the form of blackface minstrelsy. These educated Africans became interested in both aspects of African American culture and started to read Negro literature and imitate African American artists. Africans in the Gold Coast had become race-conscious and began to see themselves as black people. The British colonial government considered this transnational identity as subversive and implemented the Gold Coast Sedition Act in 1934, which banned the importation and possession of “subversive” literature. However, performances of Negro spirituals, comedies and popular songs were not considered subversive by the British colonial authorities, who were certainly familiar with the derogatory meaning blackface minstrelsy had in the US and also in Great Britain. Africans in the Gold Coast, however, were not aware of the racism in blackface minstrelsy and copied minstrel imagery from visiting minstrel groups and from Hollywood films even though they represented African American culture mostly from a racist and derogatory perspective. Certainly the educated African people in the Gold Coast would have also kept on reading Negro literature in order to establish an identity linked to Africans in the diaspora, but after 1934 this literature was not available anymore. Therefore, they used blackface minstrelsy, which was the only element of African American culture still available to them.

In Cape Town, local authorities made several attempts at banning the Coon carnival and street processions in general. One of these attempts followed the so-called Hooligan Riots, which was actually a march of unemployed Capetonians, some of them having their hair in Coon fashion.⁴¹ Nevertheless, groups of singers and sports clubs continued to come together and march in the streets, making the minstrel and his blackface makeup the central character in the New Year’s processions and thus showing their affection for African American culture. The local authorities kept on preventing Cape coloureds from cultivating their street culture at New Year by implementing more and more laws of segregation. However, they never completely stopped the Coon carnival even though they would have had the power to do so. Most likely this was the case because the white authorities—just like the white government in the Gold Coast—were familiar with the original racist meaning blackface minstrelsy and blackface makeup had in the US and Great Britain. This made blackface available for coloured Capetonians.

Cape coloureds in the late nineteenth century and Africans in the Gold Coast in the early twentieth century were confronted with cultural practices

from America, Europe, and Africa. They, who were themselves unprivileged members of white-dominated societies, came in touch with African Americans or coloreds from the US, who offered an alternative, non-white modernity. In order to express their affection for African Americans, Cape coloureds and Africans in the Gold Coast chose to copy whatever they believed to be African American practices, even though some of them had become distorted considerably by white blackface minstrelsy and Hollywood films, and they fused them with local performance traditions and their own variations and thus domesticated and personalized them. What resulted was something new and original such as the Bob character in concert party or the Coon character in the Cape Town carnival.

CONCLUSION

When considering blackface an example for the existence of a diaspora consciousness in Cape Town and the Gold Coast, two social scientists’ points of view are helpful. On the one hand, Karin Barber argues in her survey of popular arts in Africa that the method by which modern synthetic arts combine old and new sources is neither automatic nor random, but “the result of conscious choices and combinations.”⁴² Her statement is affirmed after having looked at the formation of the concert party in the Gold Coast and the Coon carnival in Cape Town. On the other hand, Veit Erlmann considers the studies of popular performance as “one of the most rewarding venues for scholarly inquiry into the workings of popular consciousness,”⁴³ whereas he uses Comaroff and Comaroff’s definition of consciousness “as the active process . . . in which human actors deploy historically salient cultural categories to construct their self-awareness.”⁴⁴ When looking at the spread of blackface as performance practice of American and especially African American origin to Africa and how people in Cape Town in the nineteenth century and in the Gold Coast in the early twentieth century consciously chose to adopt blackface and managed to use it successfully in popular performances, the existence of a diaspora consciousness in those two places at the respective times is affirmed. People in the Gold Coast and in Cape Town began to imagine themselves as members of a transatlantic, non-white community. These enlarged boundaries of identity arose not only through print culture and mass media but above all through an “active, performative process of consumption.”⁴⁵ Hollywood films and American minstrel shows were not just watched by numerous local people but they themselves started to perform in blackface, as concert party actors and as Coons, and were consumed by even more numerous local people. Practitioners and spectators together imagined the modern, transatlantic community which makes the diaspora consciousness in Cape Town in the late nineteenth century and in the Gold Coast in the early twentieth century a historical fact.

NOTES

1. Catherine M. Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
2. Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, 21.
3. George F. Rehin, "Harlequin Jim Crow: Continuity and Convergence in Blackface Clowning," *Journal of Popular Culture* 9 (1975): 686.
4. Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 78–79.
5. Toll, *Blackening Up*, 195–233.
6. David Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 38.
7. White minstrel troupes of the pre-Civil War period, on the other hand, tended to be less racist and inspired by genuine African American life and culture, at least to some degree. For a more extensive discussion, see Denis-Constant Martin, *New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1999), 79, and Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, 164.
8. Martin, *New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present*, 79.
9. Martin, *New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present*, 9.
10. Local authorities replaced the word "Coon" so as not to offend local people and tourists from the US and Europe where "Coon" has a racist and derogatory connotation.
11. Denis-Constant Martin, "'The Famous Invincible Darkies': Cape Town's Coon Carnival: Aesthetic Transformation, Collective Representation, and Social Meanings" (paper presented at 'Confluences,' a Conference held at Faculty of Music and Dance, University of Cape Town, 16–19 July, 1997), 47.
12. Martin, "The Famous Invincible Darkies," 45.
13. Veit Erlmann, *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xviii.
14. Martin, "The Famous Invincible Darkies," 49.
15. Erlmann, *African Stars*, 39.
16. Erlmann, *African Stars*, 11.
17. John Collins, "The Jaguar Jokers and Orphans Do Not Glance," in *West African Popular Theatre*, ed. Karin Barber et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 92–116.
18. Karin Barber, John Collins, and Alain Ricard, "Three West African Popular Theatre Forms: A Social History," in *West African Popular Theatre*, ed. Karin Barber et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2.
19. Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, 164.
20. John Collins, "Jazz Feedback to Africa," *American Music* 5 (1987): 182.
21. Catherine M. Cole, "Reading Blackface in West Africa: Wonders Taken for Signs," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1996): 185.
22. The term *Akanization* has been used with different meanings. Here it refers to the incorporation of non-Akan elements of black minstrelsy into the concert party genre of the Gold Coast. At other places it has been used to denominate the dominance of politicians of Akan descent in party politics, e.g., in the ongoing discussion in Côte d'Ivoire on the PDCI-RDA.
23. Cit. in Collins, "The Jaguar Jokers," 70.
24. The names Akan Trio as well as the earlier-mentioned Ghana Trio give indications of the anti-colonial nationalism of the 1950s.
25. Barber et al., "Three West African Popular Theatre Forms," 13.
26. John Collins, *Highlife Time* (Accra: Anansesem Publications, 1997).
27. Collins, "The Jaguar Jokers," 59.
28. Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, 26.
29. Even though neither Africans in the Gold Coast nor coloureds in Cape Town had English as their first language, they were familiar with English to a certain degree.
30. Martin, *New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present*, 79.
31. In Karin Barber's triad traditional-popular-elite (Karin Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa," *African Studies Review*, 30, no. 3 (1987): 1–78), popular art forms stand as the central category.
32. Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa," 12.
33. Erlmann, *African Stars*, 19.
34. Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, 34.
35. Steven Vertovec, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora,' Exemplified among South Asian Religions," *Diaspora* 7 (1999): 1–37.
36. Vertovec, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora,'" 8.
37. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).
38. Vertovec, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora,'" 10.
39. Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, 20–22.
40. E.g., the periodical *Negro Worker*, published by the International Trade Union Committee of the Negro Workers; the newspaper *Negro World*, founded by Marcus Garvey; the writings of George Padmore; and Nance Cunard's anthology *Negro*.
41. Martin, *New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present*, 92.
42. Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa," 39–41.
43. Erlmann, *African Stars*, 12.
44. John L. and Jean Comaroff, "The Madman and the Migrant: Work and Labor in the Historical Consciousness of a South African People," *American Ethnologist* 14 (1987): 205, cit. in Erlmann, *African Stars*, 13.
45. Cole, *Ghana's Concert Part Theatre*, 37.