

ARTICLE

Japan Black: Japanning, Minstrelsy, and “Japanese Tommy’s” Yellowface Precursor

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On the Fourth of July, 1860, the *New York Times* introduced readers to a new persona treading the minstrel boards:

Matinéés are the order of the day, two at both the Bowerys, at George Christy’s, at Bryant’s, and at the Palace Gardens. Here “versatile performers” and “talented *danseuses*” will diversify the hours of patriotic emotion with comic pantomime and grand “Japanese ballets,” led by “Little Tommy.” Japan has dropped a little into the sere and yellow leaf, perhaps, for the natives, but for the “strangers from the provinces” the land of blacking may still have charms, and we desire that “all such” may understand that the Japan of their dreams will be on exhibition to-night at Miss Laura Keene’s Theatre.¹

“Little Tommy” was an actor named Thomas Dilworth, who, from that day forward, would be more popularly known as “Japanese Tommy.” Dilworth was best known for his acrobatic tumbling and outrageous burlesques of the prima donna role. But in this appearance, he almost certainly was referencing a particular figure—Tateishi Onojirō Noriyuki, a young interpreter who had been a member of the Japanese diplomatic embassy that had come to the United States to ratify the first commercial treaty between the two nations.² Throughout March and April, newspapers had relentlessly reported on the Japanese visitors, and especially the exploits of Tateishi, who had been widely dubbed “Tommy,” first by American sailors on the incoming voyage and then by elite white women who thronged the youth at public events. Evoking Tateishi’s endearing impudence, Dilworth’s “Japanese Tommy” led his company in a “Japanese Ballet,” no doubt full of slapstick humor and mock solemnity. But Dilworth does not match our expected profile of an antebellum blackface

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minstrel performer. For Dilworth was Black—one of two Black men known to have performed with white minstrel troupes prior to the Civil War—and he was a dwarf.³ Dilworth's appearance as Japanese Tommy, then, offered spectators a volatile mix of significations in which the material particulars of his body produced a specific set of meanings about "being Japanese" on the minstrel stage.

For this performance, as in his other stage appearances, Dilworth almost certainly blacked up. And, for this performance in particular he may have worn some sort of costume indicating "Japaneseness." But Dilworth also retained the name "Japanese Tommy" for the rest of his career, even as any explicit scenario referencing the Japanese faded soon after the embassy's departure. This leaves us to ask: In the motley repertoire of blackface minstrelsy's impersonations, what sort of racial performance was this, Dilworth's career-long identity as Japanese Tommy? This essay argues that we should recognize Dilworth's persona of Japanese Tommy as a particular form of yellowface, all the more notable because it precedes the consolidation of this stereotype a few decades later. "Japanese Tommy" was a yellowface activated by the racial visuality of blackface minstrelsy, to be sure, but it was *not* the Japanese (or "Oriental") impersonation that was to become predominant in the genre, recognized by its use of skullcaps, buckteeth, and taped eyes to construct a debased physicality. Instead I want to argue that Dilworth's Japanese Tommy, frequently with nothing more than his stage name, offered a different kind of racial impersonation, and a different kind of yellowface—that of "japanning."

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In 1612, the Dutch States General (assembly) commissioned William Kick, a master lacquerer in Amsterdam's *Lackwercken* guild to make a "Chinese" chest designed to match one imported from Asia, so that the pair could be given as presents to Sultan Ahmed Khan (Ahmed I) of the Ottoman Empire.⁴ This ponderous gift was an act of shrewd statecraft. The Western copy was a product of the new craft of "japanning"—the technique of producing imitation lacquerware by Western artisans, so named because the finest specimens of Eastern lacquerware came from Japan. The dedicated effort to develop this craft sought to answer European consumers' desire for these pieces, while supplanting Asian dominance of this market. Bestowed at the beginning of the fracturing of the Sultanate, these twinned pieces suggested both Dutch technological prowess *and* control of market access—a market whose entry had previously been in the hands of the Ottoman Empire. This gift, original and replica paired together, communicated the rising power of the Dutch, as a valued object from the East was returned to the East alongside its Western-made twin.

Japanning was thus a craft that performed material substitution as a demonstration of global political and market power. Its appeal for Western consumers was due to its alluring surface qualities—a glossy blackness embellished with intricate designs. Japanning's evocative surfaces were racial surfaces that, as I argue, conformed to an already established anti-Black visuality in European decorative arts; however, they simultaneously effected a form of decorative yellowface—objects impersonating and performatively constructing an oriental racial epistemology.

Japanning's origins began as early as the sixteenth century, as a process intended to supplant the importation of expensive lacquered goods from China and Japan.

The Asian sumac tree (from which Asian lacquer was made) would not grow in the West; its sap was poisonous to the skin—a fact that heightened the sense of a sinister oriental origin needing to be replaced—and, moreover, could not be successfully transported. And so, the Dutch and then British pioneered technologies to produce a lacquerlike surface using resin lac (itself an import from India, then refined as seed lac or shellac). Japanning soon became so fashionable that by the mid-1700s its production had expanded out of artisan workshops into the parlor, domesticated as a popular lady's craft. Even into the twentieth century, major newspapers ran articles about the process of japanning, suggesting its endurance as a professional and amateur practice.

In its reception in the West, Japanese lacquerware was, from the start, involved in an economy of imitative aesthetics. As historian Maxine Berg explains, from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, commodities from “the Orient” were valued in European markets for their ability to imitate more expensive goods. The copper–zinc alloy pinchbeck resembled gold, glass mimicked gemstones, and silver plate and porcelain elegantly stood in for silver.⁵ As analyzed by Adam Smith, these objects produced a sense of wonder that was in and of itself an aesthetic experience. That is, they were not merely cheaper substitutes, but gave pleasure through an appreciation of their ingenuity. The value of these objects, in turn, prompted European artisans to try to imitate these oriental commodities, leading to innovations in European production processes and technologies. Japanned ware was one such imitative commodity, engaged in an industrial politics of mimicry.

As the craft and trade of japanning developed, these displays of mimetic doubling gave way to market substitution. For as artisans continued to produce objects decorated in “Oriental” styles, and with the fineness of Japanese-produced lacquer, consumers no longer needed to buy the foreign commodity. Japanned ware thus stood in for, and effectively supplanted the market for, Japanese lacquerware, especially after the turn of the eighteenth century, when guilds of japanners and joiners successfully petitioned British Parliament to suppress imports of the East India Company by raising taxes on lacquerware.⁶

Japanned ware's success in displacing Asian-made lacquerware from European markets effected a web of linguistic substitutions in the English language. Because the most valued lacquered objects came from Japan, that country's English name was soon applied to the range of lacquer-type objects produced first throughout Asia and then in Europe and the North American colonies. Like “china,” a term still used for porcelain today, the oscillation between place and product performed by the term “japan” was so common in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries as to be naturalized in ordinary language. Witness this line from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*: “She did not love the sight of japan in any shape.”⁷ Common language thus naturalized a market upheaval, so that not only did japanning replace lacquerware, but the Western commodity stood for and displaced an entire geographic region.

Japanned ware's capture of the European market also manifested in its decorative materialization of racial epistemologies. Although japanned ware (like Japanese lacquerware) could be produced in a wide array of colors—red, green, blue, white, and even gold—black was the color associated with japanning, to the extent that the words gained a sense of equivalency. For example, the *OED* gives a 1730 example:

“Dear Jack’ has exhausted his splendid Shilling, and now cries, ‘Japan your shoes, your Honour.” This quotation condenses not only the substitution of craft for color, but also evokes the (cheapened) labor that produces this characteristic glossy blackness. Indeed, japanning’s popularity in Europe and the United States produced a set of synecdochic associations—japanning for blackening and blackening for Japan—so that nation, color, and craft became interchangeable signifiers for the commodity of the polished black surface. In the quotation with which I opened this essay then, the reference to “the land of blacking” is not a poetic allusion to the minstrel stage, as some might assume, but is a reference to Japan (although undertones of minstrel black echo there as well, as is discussed below).

The overwhelming association of japanning with the color black fueled an obsession with how best to produce this black surface. The japanning classic, John Stalker and George Parker’s 1688 *A Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing*, recommended the use of “Lampblack,” made from the burning of cotton wicks, advising, “This is the only black for this business, I prefer it before Ivory, . . . this is a fine, soft, and a very deep black, and agrees best with the varnish.”⁸ The attention given to the qualities of lampblack insist on this color’s tactility, creating a nearly synesthetic visuality. This appeal to sensory engagement is one that continues throughout the japanning process, as the varnish, now tinted with lampblack, is laboriously layered onto close-grained wood:

With this black composition wash it over three times, between each of them rubbing it smooth, and suffering it cleverly to dry. Then . . . [with this mix of lampblack and seed lac] wash it six times, letting it stand 12 hours between the three first and the three last washings. . . . [Finally,] twelve times must it be varnished with this [finest lampblack varnish], standing as many hours between the six first and the six last washings, with this never to be forgotten caution, [t]hat they stand till they are dried between every distinct varnishing.⁹

The goal of this process is to produce a surface that operates like skin itself, creating an accumulation of strata that simultaneously effect and belie the impression of surface as singular or superficial. Concentrated into an almost-tactile color, layered into a seemingly discrete exterior, japanning produces the black surface as a self-sufficient object, an end in itself.

The fanatical attention paid to japanned ware’s sensual qualities should remind us of a broader obsession within Western white supremacy over Blackness as a fungible commodity. Krista Thompson, limning Hal Foster and John Berger, explains that in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, Black people were depicted by the same techniques of surfacism and pictorial shine that were the hallmark of the period’s still life paintings, where shine’s ostensible immanence in these objects (and people) seemed to suggest their intrinsic status as commodities.¹⁰ As both Thompson and Saidiya Hartman have emphasized, this same practice of producing an optical effect of commercial value can be seen in the greasing of the bodies of enslaved Africans before auction.¹¹ Thus the aestheticized commodification of b/Black skin transferred seamlessly, as a ubiquitous visuality, between these two linked spheres of art and the marketplace. Similarly, Kim Hall, Adrienne Childs, and Cyra Levenson and Chi-ming Yang have pointed us to a pervasive fungibility

of blackness as an aesthetic value. In examples as varied as sixteenth-century jewelry, eighteenth-century porcelain tableware, and eighteenth-century sculpted busts, we see objects decorated with figures of the Black slave or servant. In these items, the visual display of blackness as a color of opulent richness (often created with rare materials such as marble, varnish, and tortoiseshell) overlapped with the display of human figures in positions of ornamental servility.¹² In these examples, blackness served as a decorative convention in the manufacture of consumer products, a way of displaying and embodying the wealth of consumers through the racial commodity of Blackness. Finally, it should not be seen as coincidental that japanning's central process—the mixing of a burnt black powder into a paint that could then be skillfully applied to a blank substrate—is also the defining practice of blackface minstrelsy. Japanning's revered surface—popularly thought of as black despite the rainbow of veneers available—thus cohered with a broader visuality in Western aesthetics, in which the value of the black surface as an aesthetic commodity inescapably also whispers of the commoditized value of enslaved Black humans.

But japanned ware was not only esteemed for its rich, glossy blackness; what also caught consumers' eye were the fanciful designs that ornamented this surface, and provided its topical interest. Japanese lacquerware was well-known for its extraordinary techniques of embellishment that were used to create a surface of both visual and physical allure: *raden*—inlay of mother-of-pearl; *maki-e*—the sprinkling of gold leaf upon the still wet lacquer; *kirikane*—carving into the lacquer surface; *chinkin*—incising the surface and filling the notches with gold.¹³ From an early stage, these methods were put into service of Japan's participation in global trade, as Japanese designs were adapted for foreign markets. As early as the seventeenth century, Japanese-made lacquerware was produced to meet the tastes of Western markets, in what is known as the *namban* (“southern barbarian”) style, after Westerners arriving from the south.¹⁴ This style catered to preferences ascribed first to the Portuguese and later the Dutch, and resulted in products of European shape (such as cabinets with drawers), frequently inlaid with pearl, in an echo of Gujarati products with which the Portuguese were already familiar.¹⁵ Japanese lacquerware's designs were thus already fashioned to meet the desires of Western consumers, fabricated as material imitations of a Japanese imaginary. When the European japanning industry subsequently developed, its craftsmen produced designs that evoked popular images of the Orient, reiterating in ornamentation the putative tying of the craft to an oriental origin.

It is crucial to recognize that the persistent association of this craft with an oriental origin was a linkage perpetuated through already established conventions of orientalism. For instance, the 1760 guide *The Ladies Amusement; or, The Whole Art of Japanning Made Easy* advised readers to correspond the fancifulness of their designs to their chosen subject: “With Indian or Chinese subjects greater Liberties may be taken, because Luxuriance of Fancy recommends their Productions more than Propriety, for in them is often seen a Butterfly supporting an Elephant, or Things equally absurd, yet from their gay Colouring and airy Disposition seldom fail to please.”¹⁶ Lodged within this advice is a set of racializing characterizations, in which the perpetuation of orientalism as a style is tied to depictions of the ludicrous as a naturalized convention. Thus an elephant balanced

upon a butterfly, clearly intended as an outrageous conceit, is presented not only as commonsensical in the Orient, but as the kind of rendering that an artist must necessarily depict in order for a representation of the Orient to be intelligible as such. Japanning's ornamentation thus paired ludicrous representation with intricate craft technique, and, in doing so, conformed to broader expectations for "Japanese" products; these imagined Japan as a harmonious, almost prelapsarian civilization of naive craftsman creating objects of diminutive and delicate beauty.¹⁷

Japanning's racial surface thus performed two racial significations at once. Its foreground of ornate embellishments answered to the Western imaginary of an exotic, artistic Japan. In this mode, japanned ware's black veneer signified as a surface of luxury and depth, a covering that in its glossy richness held the viewer in the allure of its visual abundance. However, as in the decorative objects examined by Hall, Childs, Yang, Levenson, and others, this black is overdetermined. Within the visuality of Euro-American white supremacy, it cannot be only a sign of exotic luxury and precious materials; it is always also the black of enslavement, of degradation, and of human commodity. Indeed, that this could be denied or overlooked is central to the disingenuousness of the black surface in white supremacist visuality. Japanned ware's very use of the black surface as something both to be seen, and to be considered merely background, resembles numerous other examples in art history where the color black's formal uses pretend to supersede its narratological and social significations.¹⁸

It is here that I want to suggest that, despite its suggestion of rarefied exoticism, japanning's black surface also functions in parallel with blackface minstrelsy's burnt cork mask, a similarity that, in turn, will allow us to recognize japanning as a form of yellowface. It goes without saying that "blackness" and Black people were both the subject and mode of blackface minstrelsy's violent repertoire.¹⁹ Once established as a theatrical device, though, the depiction and fact of b/Blackness could recede, as necessary, into mere background, so that other political issues, sexual or ethnic lampoons, could take the stage. Caroline Yang has traced precisely this transposition in the way that tropes and representational techniques developed in blackface minstrelsy for the depiction of "blackness" came to be used in the solidification of a "Chinese" stereotype, onstage and in literary works.²⁰ Japanned ware's racial surface operated in just this way: its black veneer both an object of attention, but also the background for the orientalist decorations that played upon its surface. I'd like to insist that this doubleness was crucial to japanned ware's appeal. While japanned ware ostensibly offered consumers an object of oriental exoticism, its anti-Black, circum-Atlantic evocations were also always present, hovering within the surface's reflective blackness. Japanning's doubleness, revealed through its resemblance to blackface minstrelsy, also points us to the craft's evocation of Japan as a form of yellowface. The absurd decorations that perpetuated orientalist stereotypes were activated by japanning's black mask, producing, in the interplay of back- and foreground, a surface imitating other surfaces—that is, a racial impersonation by means of a decorative yellowface.

Yellowface emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States as a sub-genre of US racial performance through the consolidation of a "Chinese" stereotype, specifically motivated by the increasing calls for Chinese exclusion from the US labor market. Prior to this point, evocations of China had appeared in

European and US music and theatre as sources of spectacle and theatrical exoticism (and were often conflated with other orientalisms).²¹ Although these representations certainly relied on an image of China as utterly foreign, they did not, for the most part, engage in the vicious degradation that was to become the focus of minstrel and other popular representations in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Such a shift was precipitated by the increasing presence in California and the US West of Chinese laborers, who were seen by their white counterparts as threatening competition. As Krystyn Moon writes, “Beginning with caricatures of Chinese immigrants as early as 1854, yellowface impersonations were a crucial way of circulating ideas of difference and inferiority, all of which supported anti-Chinese attitudes.”²² Moon tells us that, though there were a few such portrayals in the 1850s and 1860s, it was in the 1870s that the characteristic elements of this type begin to emerge—the queue, costumes of a dark tunic with loose pants, a pidgin English—and actors began to specialize in the “Chinaman” line.²³

To argue that japanning is a kind of decorative yellowface then, is, perhaps, anachronistic. But the craft’s use of a veneer to “become Japanese” effects a racial impersonation that locates it within this genre of white supremacist theatrical performance. Sean Metzger has argued that yellowface operates through the construction of a “skein of race.”²⁴ The “skein” attends to attire, and to the web of gesture and material objects that sit upon the performer to create caricature. Because it references clothing and other manufactured goods, it also evokes the economic circuits (and competitions) that fuel the slippage among race, ethnicity, and nationality that is so characteristic of orientalist depiction. The “skein” is thus in contrast to blackface minstrelsy’s overt emphasis on the “skin of race”—that is, epidermal pigmentation. Japanning, however, sits between these two forms of racial surface. Boasting a blackened veneer that is intended to adhere to its substrate, as well as decorative encrustation that sits upon this surface, japanning impersonates Japan through both its “skin” and its “skein.” This flexibility of racial indexicality is part of japanning’s allure: a decorative craft that holds within its ornamented varnish multiple worlds of alterity.

To see japanning as a form of yellowface thus allows us to understand the particular significations of this craft’s decorative surface. Likewise, a view of japanning-as-yellowface also enables us to broaden our understanding and historiography of the theatrical genre of yellowface. To see this, we must return to Thomas Dilworth and his stage persona of Japanese Tommy.

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A particular set of anxieties swirled around the presence of the Japanese embassy that summer of 1860. We can see this in a *Harper’s Weekly* cartoon, printed in June, titled “Natural Mistakes” (Fig. 1). On the left side, a black waiter dismissively passes by a white patron who is seated at a table, menu open. The caption reads: “Gentleman: ‘Hi! Here, you Nigger, come here!’ / Colored Gentleman: ‘Nigger!—no Nigger, Sar; me Japanese, Sar!’” In the right panel, a man, identified as Japanese by his clothing and slanted eyes, teeters back on his heels as he encounters a pile of bricks that have fallen from the dilapidated wall behind him. The caption for this panel reads: “Tommy (*a little how-came-you-so*): ‘One of dem (*hic*) is my Hat me know; but me be (*hic*) if me can tell which him is.’”

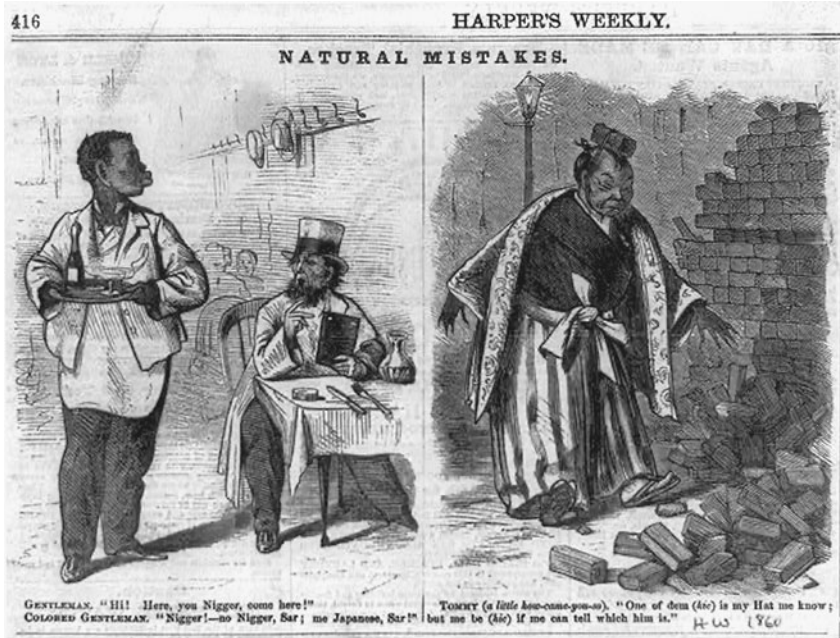


Figure 1. "Natural Mistakes," *Harper's Weekly*, 30 June 1860, 416.

We have to work backward to find the intended racist humor. The joke on the right side is that "Tommy" (likely our very same Tateishi) searches among the pile of bricks for his hat, which, in fact, is securely strapped upon his head—a "natural mistake" because, in the cartoonist's eyes, Tommy's hat looks like a brick. The panel on the left then, must also be a case of misleading similitude. In calling the waiter a "Nigger," the white patron, it is suggested, makes a similarly "natural mistake" based on appearances. Yet, by declaring that he is Japanese, the waiter refuses to accede to the familiar racial interpellation. The "joke" here is that the patron has not actually made a mistake; he has, however, been had by the disdainful waiter.

Suggested here, as well, is the possibility of switching races. In the cartoon, such a transformation is attempted by the waiter's verbal declaration, but the foundation for this very idea is the contemporary capaciousness of black visuality and its unstable signifying. In 1860, what "color," that is, what race the Japanese might be was an open question. Newspapers covering the delegation of Japanese visiting the United States that year were undecided about how to racialize the visitors. Though many illustrations shade their skin dark, in contrast to the naturalized "white," blank paper-colored skin of their hosts, reporters also frequently drew parallels between the Japanese and white people, as when the *Philadelphia Press* described Tateishi as "almost Caucasian in his complexion."²⁵ This cartoon is actually one of many from the period—along with popular songs, literary representations, and jokes—that featured an incident of racial masquerade and the dupes who fell for it. We thus see in the *Harper's* cartoon the panic over racial categorization that the

Japanese presence in the United States particularized, and how this anxiety fit into broader attempts to fortify a racial hierarchy.

A sticking point in this racial anxiety was that the embassy's arrival signified the replacement of *things* with *people*. Prior to the diplomats' arrival, knowledge of Japan was a knowledge of Japanese things, because it was Japanese objects—silks, swords, fans, vases, and lacquerware—that circulated in great numbers. The embassy's human presence, then, signified the beginning of a different kind of relationship with Japan. As Christopher Bush has argued, the arrival of the Japanese embassy upon US land became a fulcrum in the emergent vision of the United States as a world power.²⁶ The embassy's presence suggested the possibility of extending the mandate of Manifest Destiny, not only across the continent, but across the Pacific. US expansion involved the spread of US ideals, and the necessity that foreign peoples be assimilated into the "universalist" principles of American democracy. It was crucial then, to determine what kind of people the Japanese were: Were they, at heart, "similar" to Americans and thus an assimilable ethnicity—"a universal subject fit for modernity"?²⁷ Or were they fundamentally different and thus an alien "race"? Bush argues that this dilemma was recognizably pushed onto objects that he identifies as Japanese "ethnic things"—things not necessarily made in Japan, or by Japanese people, but that seemed to encode a particular imaginary about Japanese crafts as simultaneously "ethnic-particular and aesthetic-universal."²⁸

Dilworth's appearance as Japanese Tommy provides a different view of this muddling of people, things, and putative "Japaneseness." Other commentators on Dilworth have similarly honed in on what this performance of "Japaneseness" might have meant. Josephine Lee suggests that the actor's ability to masquerade as Japanese offered "some measure of artistic freedom, and even some claims to being American" even though these liberatory moments were circumscribed by the inescapability of racialization.²⁹ Christian DuComb similarly proposes that Dilworth used "Japanese-sounding locutions" for his impression, and that the success of this performance "eclipsed his blackness, his dwarfism, and his female impersonations in the popular imagination."³⁰ While I agree that "becoming Japanese" may have offered Dilworth some recourse into the alluring exoticism of far-off Japan, I believe that the overwhelming effect of his persona and its ongoing popularity was to incorporate Japan into minstrelsy's ludic racialization, and thereby insist on its accessibility—both to US trade and to US racial epistemology. Indeed, whereas Bush points to the Japanese ethnic thing as "ethnic" precisely because it seemed to offer the possibility of assimilation (and deracination) into the American "universal," Dilworth's persona speaks to a parallel vision in which the Japanese diplomats were just another curious set of Japanese (racial) things. Here, we can see minstrelsy carrying out one of its crucial social roles—the performance of a revanchist conservatism and representational violence intended to solidify patriarchal white supremacy. In the case of Japanese Tommy, the genre's anti-Black repertoire was combined with an emphasis on the "thingliness" of the Japanese to incorporate Japan into US racial epistemology.

The success of "Japanese Tommy" was no doubt due to Dilworth's capabilities onstage, combined with his particular physicality. We can see him, in an undated photograph, his eyes, direct and discerning, gaze back at the camera as his mouth

holds the hint of a wry smile (Fig. 2). Thomas Dilworth was, by all accounts, a very talented comedic actor. Particularly gifted at physical humor, he appeared in pieces with titles such as “Music vs. Intrusion!” in which Dilworth played the role of “intrusion.” Another article refers to Dilworth as the troupe’s “football.”³¹ These characterizations at once evoke the actor’s immense physical capabilities, as well as the regime of ludic violence such talent served. Dilworth was also reputed for his singing, a talent that was put to use by casting him in the female impersonator line, often in the prima donna role. Dilworth’s function here seems to have been a sort of burlesque on a burlesque. The prima donna role represented the light-skinned, delicate mulatta, sexually available and figuring transgression.³² Both George Christy and Francis Leon, in whose troupes Dilworth performed for extended periods, were considered foremost practitioners of the prima donna line. Dilworth’s prima donna burlesque thus appears to be a double travesty—of both the sexually desirable, ultrafeminine mulatta, and of the white actor-managers of his minstrel troupe. The *Times Picayune* of New Orleans said as much in a review of Dilworth’s appearance with the Kelly & Leon troupe:

[T]he most unique member of the company is Japanese Tommy, whose grotesque humor well accords with his diminutive stature and bulky body. To see him arrayed in the gorgeous costume of the *Prima Donna* is one of the most ludicrous of caricatures—the most libelous of affectations—a *prima facie* burlesque of the broadest dimensions, without evidence of the art which indicates intention. The effect is achieved by contrast, and the incongruity between the wearer and the apparel.³³

The immense incongruity of Dilworth dressed in the vestments of an *almost* white woman produced for spectators a comedy of physical extremes. The burlesque worked because Dilworth’s own physicality made his imitations implausible as anything other than burlesque. That is, what ended up being lampooned was less the figure of the prima donna, or the white actor-managers of his troupe, and more Dilworth’s own corporeality as a Black dwarf—a corporeality that appeared incapable in its overdetermined signification.

The same ridicule of incongruity was surely at work in the name Japanese Tommy. That is, Dilworth’s persona was successful because it evoked his Japanese namesake while materializing onstage as his degraded opposite. The young Japanese interpreter Tateishi had been, from the moment of his first encounter with the US public, an object of amusement and affection, taken as a symbolic figure for the unfolding relationship between the United States and Japan.³⁴ Described as “lively,” “mirthful,” and “comely,” Tateishi’s youthful eagerness contrasted with the more guarded mien of the Japanese mission’s older ambassadors. Journalists hailed his “purely American spirit of delivery,” thus domesticating Tateishi as rightfully American, in a linguistic process that mirrored the unfolding vision of Japan as being subject to the United States’ sphere of control. Tateishi’s “exceedingly agreeable” appearance also appealed to young women whom he encountered in the Northeast. Here, his youthfulness, symbolic of Japan’s status as a possible US protectorate, became the object in need of protection, as opposed to America’s own white womanhood.³⁵ Indeed, when hints of a scandal erupted in



Figure 2. Thomas Dilworth, the actor known as “Japanese Tommy.”

the pages of the *New York Times*, suggesting that Tateishi had toyed with the good hearts and reputations of various young women, quick defenses mounted from several sources, demanding not only a retraction, but a mock call for the formation of a bodyguard to protect him from the “crinolines,” those “would-be despoilers of Japanese virtue.”³⁶ Simultaneously domesticated and infantilized as a cheerful American youth, and effeminized as the victim of American women, Tateishi, at this early moment in US–Japanese relations, stood as an overdetermined figure of the emergent tropes of Japanese racialization.

When Dilworth took the stage as “Japanese Tommy” that same summer, he called up these events, and immediately, in the very materiality of his body, lampooned them. Here, Dilworth’s stature was key. In nineteenth-century popular culture, dwarfism was included in the range of corporeal variation considered “freakish.” Moreover, Dilworth’s dwarfism supported his racialization and confirmed its legibility. As Ellen Samuels explains, “the meanings ascribed to disability are even more ‘fixed and immutable’ and [so] disability functions as the invisible, submerged supplement to the bodily realities of both gender and race.”³⁷ Onstage then, Dilworth’s racialization and dwarfism mutually reinforced each other to make the actor into an exemplary figure of dehumanizing ridicule. The suggestion that Dilworth was “Japanese” incorporated the already active stereotype of the Japanese as “little” into this web of derision, and, further, encouraged spectators to view this stereotype as a physical defect in line with other examples of human “abnormality.” Much as Sean Metzger argues that Charles Parsloe’s own physicality was exaggerated to produce an absurd but quickly naturalized “Chineseness,”³⁸

Dilworth's own body reified a vision of Japaneseness as deformed and childlike, helping to enfold Japan and the Japanese into US racial heuristics.

The ridiculing of Dilworth's stature (as that which made him Japanese *and* as that which secured the Japanese as racial inferiors) was reinforced by blackface minstrelsy's repertoire of physical comedy, in which the actor was consistently interpellated as a thing. Even prior to his appearance as Japanese Tommy, Dilworth's presence onstage already pivoted around the idea of his *thingliness*. Indeed, early advertisements, before he received his stage name, often publicized him as, "Tommy; or, What Is It?" And, as we saw with the types of role he played in sketches, he was frequently *cast* as a thing—tossed around, beaten up, tripped and flipped—the minstrel repertoire demanding a performance of thingliness intended to corroborate the meanings of objecthood already attached to Dilworth's body. Dressed in "Japanese" clothes, dancing around the stage in a "Japanese ballet" that surely crossed lampoons of the diplomats' physical carriage with minstrelsy's standard slapstick and physical violence, Dilworth as Japanese Tommy served to turn the Japanese visitors reassuringly back into Japanese things. This, then, is the culmination of the treaty whose signing occasioned the visit by the Japanese diplomats: the United States would not merely have privileged access to Japanese products, but would have confirmed power over the Japanese people, just as much, and perhaps in the same way, as their things.

The significance of *things* to Dilworth's evocation of Japaneseness is not surprising. As many scholars of yellowface have shown, this theatrical representation emerged through an imbrication of people with things. Since the exhibition of Afong Moy in 1834 as a curiosity among curios in a staged drawing room, the display of oriental things helped Victorian spectators to place "Oriental" people, and to formulate a notion of difference.³⁹ While, as Metzger and Moon have shown, oriental objects were crucial to the broad phenomenon of orientalism and yellowface, things held particular power in the conjuring of a putative Japaneseness—a power effected by precisely the Euro-American fascination with Japanese objects I have been tracing in this essay's investigation of jpanning. The particular force of "Japanese" objects to index a "Japanese" person could be seen offstage and on, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, on the one hand, Mari Yoshihara has traced how the purchase and artful display of Japanese objects was tightly linked to white women's assertion of agency as both consumers and cultural producers.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Josephine Lee reveals in her magisterial reading of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* that the actual obvious traits of corporeal yellowface are almost secondary to the operetta's primary production of yellowface through reference to fans, teacups, and folding screens.⁴¹ Thus, to play at being Japanese, whether onstage or in everyday life, was a performance carried out through objects, and Japanese things became constitutive of yellowface and its indexing of a theatrical "Japaneseness." Dilworth's performance as "Japanese Tommy," then, is an important event of prehistory for these signal moments in theatrical yellowface. But there is a crucial distinction to be made: whereas these examples all chart the representation of an "Oriental" through the display of oriental objects alongside or upon the performer, Dilworth's yellowface manifests not so much by his being surrounded by Japanese objects, but rather by his becoming one.

And so, it is worth looking a little more closely at how Dilworth becomes a sort of “Japanese thing.” I have suggested above that his burnt cork mask, the defining characteristic of the minstrel genre and the requisite for his appearance onstage, also signified as a japanned veneer. I have also argued that japanning, though it predates the theatrical practice by a good deal, should be understood as a sort of decorative yellowface, for the way that the craft combined a putatively black background with ludicrous ornamentation to conjure a racializing orientalism. Together, I want to propose that in Dilworth’s appearances as Japanese Tommy, while the burnt cork mask relentlessly continued its anti-Black baseline signification, it also performed as a japanned surface.

The yellowface effected by Dilworth’s performance then, is not, as in later yellowface, the impersonation of some notion of a Japanese person; rather, like the japanned object that mimics Japanese lacquerware, it is an impersonation of a Japanese thing. Japanese Tommy thus appeared as a product of US ingenuity. Like the “Chinese” chest with which I introduced the craft of japanning earlier in this essay, which demonstrated Dutch technological and trade supremacy, the minstrel stage’s offering of Japanese Tommy displaced the recent presence of Japanese people with its own creation. As with the craft of japanning, “Japaneseness” thus became a racialization that the United States could produce and control: no longer the essence of a far-off people with their own culture, history, practices, and lives, it was portrayed, instead, as a process and product made in America, according to the terms it would set—via gunboat diplomacy abroad and minstrel representational violence at home.

Coda

If Dilworth was thus, through his persona as Japanese Tommy, conscripted into performing a historical precursor of an emerging yellowface, his performance and career is not entirely, or not only, an acquiescent embodiment of this racial regime. Without reclaiming his performances as sites of resistance, we still have avenues, both historical and theoretical, with which to consider moments of recovered agency or alternative personhood. The historical archive, for one, offers us the tantalizing news report that Dilworth brought a civil rights suit in 1882, seeking \$5,000 in damages, after being refused service in a Brooklyn restaurant.⁴² Anne Cheng’s theory of ornamentalism suggests a different path, as it posits a form of personhood that emerges out of objectification and out of synthetic ornamentation—one that, Cheng proposes, is “a peculiar state of being produced out of the fusion between ‘thingliness’ and ‘personness.’”⁴³ This essay’s preoccupation with the decorative craft of japanning, as a parallel to blackface minstrelsy and as a form of yellowface, offers yet another avenue, through what it tells us about the racial surface, and race as surface.

As noted earlier in this essay, black surfaces shine, an aestheticized metaphor for their value. Krista Thompson, Anne Cheng, and Tina Post have written about representations of shine or sheen upon black skin, in Dutch still life paintings, in photographs of Josephine Baker, and in the efforts of minstrel actors to imitate, with increasing supposed realism, the optical effect of black skin and black labor.⁴⁴ Japanese lacquerware, too, gleams, an excessive signification of its

claim to value. Polished to a high gloss, its surface catches the light, which bounces and ripples across the lacquered object, following the spectator's gaze. But Japanese lacquerware doesn't just shine; it also reflects. In the right light, such objects become a mirror, and you can see yourself within the smooth surface. It is not that the color of the object disappears in the refracted light, but rather, that your reflection becomes tinged with it; like a colored filter, your visage takes on a bit of blue, or red, or black. Japan black, then, is a surface that colors the spectator, a surface that does not adhere to its substrate but instead captures the spectator in its thrall.

Contrary to notions of surface as repellent boundary, lacquerware produces a surface that enfolds the consumer into its visual, kinesthetic sphere. And while japanned ware possesses this capacity "to color" its viewer, it also faces an internal threat to its own material integrity—it lacks durability. Starting with the first experiments to find an acceptable Western manufacturing process, durability was the characteristic that distinguished true Japanese lacquerware from japanned ware, rendering even the finest designs of japanned ware into "fakes." As a writer in the journal *Art Amateur* wrote in 1880, "The old lacquer of Japan is almost indestructible. Not only can it not be easily scratched, but it may be soaked in water for months, and even years, and submitted to other rough usage, which would be ruin to similar objects of European or American manufacture, and lose not a jot of its beauty."⁴⁵ Japanned goods, by contrast, were more likely to chip or crack, or have the wood underneath swell and warp when exposed to either heat or water. In Japanese lacquerware, then, the surface, in some respects, became the object that it enveloped, sealing the cabinet, tray, or box in its impermeability—surface as object, object as surface. But with japanned ware, surface and substrate threatened to pull away from each other, disclosing the unreliability of the one, and the presence of the unbidden other. It is for this reason that japanning manuals require the endless layers of varnish, repeatedly dried and polished, in a dogged attempt to secure against the surface's rupture.

Like the fraught application process, this very anxiety over durability should remind us, again, of blackface minstrelsy. The minstrel actor continually had to contend with a primary threat to his act of impersonation: sweat. As rivulets of blackened perspiration made their way down the actor's face, the impermeability of the smooth, deep, and glossy black mask fissured to reveal whiteness (and a glimpse of miscegenation?) beneath. But just as problematic as these rivulets of black sweat may have been, perhaps even more troubling was the implied fear that the blackness would, in fact, *not* wash off. In almost all minstrel manuals, directions for applying blackface makeup are quickly followed by instructions for its removal. As one manual put it, "being black, the washer spares no energy in getting every particle from his face."⁴⁶ Indeed, the anxiety about burnt cork's permanence was potent enough to serve as a trope in an advertisement campaign for Ivory Soap running in the *New York Clipper* in the 1890s (Fig. 3).⁴⁷ This series of illustrations depicted minstrel actors in the middle of their postperformance ablutions. The graphic line drawings, relying upon the contrast of ink and blank page to represent the contrast of blacked-up skin with that treated by Ivory Soap, threatened readers with the possibility of minstrel black's durability, even as it promised its solubility in soap and water.



Copyright, 1896, by The Procter & Gamble Co., Cincinnati.

THE MINSTREL must have a soap that will lather freely, that will take the paint off quickly and that can be used frequently, without injury to the skin. Ivory Soap will do it.

IT FLOATS.

Figure 3. Advertisement for Ivory Soap, *The New York Clipper*, 29 January 1898.

We might here recall Robyn Wiegman's explanation that Western racial hierarchy's consolidation as a visual regime required that surface—that is, skin—guarantee interiority, not merely affirming but becoming the very mode by which knowledge of the human (and lesser, or inhuman) could be ascertained.⁴⁸ That

is, the “structure of vision” of Western racial discourse required that surface *be* substrate, that it be the object itself. Minstrelsy, then, has a strange role to play in this equation, for under the black surface of most minstrel actors was, of course, a “white” person. The black surface of minstrelsy was one that, almost by definition, had to remain distinct from its substrate. Instead, the black mask of minstrelsy was intended to encode not its actual wearer, but the necessarily displaced Black person, whose attenuated body is conjured by the substitutional power of the animated black surface. And yet, in the constant anxieties about this surface—will it drip off, will it cling on—minstrel black offered an unreliable vehicle for the representation and perpetuation of racial hierarchy. Minstrelsy, then, like japanning, is what we might call a “bad surface,” one that does not hold, but cracks, warps, or runs, and in the glimpse of substrate, of human face beneath, threatens to disrupt the structuring logic of racial ideology.

This contradictory discourse, of the durability of the black surface and its haunting, feared impermanence, finds its point of wavering tension in Dilworth as Japanese Tommy. We can see Dilworth’s persona as an example of Claire Jean Kim’s racial triangulation, or Shannon Steen’s racial geometries.⁴⁹ But this story of a minstrel performer and the craft of japanning also suggests the reflective visions of looking through a darkened window. In the figure of Japanese Tommy, the recourse to Japan—to being a Japanese thing, an imitative japanned thing—lets loose familiar tropes of orientalist racialization: the inscrutable visage, the untrustworthy countenance, the deceitful surface. But when we peer hard enough at this racialized surface, we begin to see through it to the shadowy image of the black racial surface, within and behind. Recent treatments of surfacism in Black studies have articulated the black surface as a refusal, a fugitivity, a blindingness.⁵⁰ When we stare at the orientalist veneer of inscrutability, then, we fall into the possibility of the black surface as protective opacity; but just as surely, when we gaze long enough at this black opacity, we are greeted again by the specter of inscrutability. The shadowy images lurking within these reflective surfaces recall the very purpose of lacquer—a covering that binds, protects, and preserves, but also one that traps and poisons. Japanned yellowface, a sort of decorative encrustation upon a black surface, makes clear this reflective visuality, and the almost parasitical, rapacious nature of its racial impersonation. For japanned yellowface, blooming upon anti-Blackness like coral, is a surface upon a surface, floating, but also fixed, in the hardened varnish of oriental veneer.

Endnotes

1 “The Theatres on the Fourth,” *New York Times*, 4 July 1860, 1.

2 The earlier Treaty of Kanagawa, signed on 31 March 1854, had been a result of Commodore Matthew Perry’s “gunboat diplomacy.” That convention allowed for two coaling ports for American ships in Shimoda and Hakodate, established an American consulate in Shimoda, and provided protections to US whalers; it did not, however, “open” Japan for trade. The Commercial Treaty (sometimes known as the “Harris Treaty” or the “Treaty of Amity and Commerce”) was brokered by Townsend Harris and representatives of the Tokugawa government, and signed on 29 July 1858. It was then ratified by both parties in Washington, DC on 22 May 1860. See Masao Miyoshi, *As We Saw Them: The First Japanese Embassy to the United States* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2005.)

- 3 The other Black actor known to have performed with white minstrel troupes in this period was William Henry "Juba" Lane. Thomas Dilworth (whose name is also rendered Dilwerd or Dilward) is briefly mentioned in several studies of minstrelsy, and of its relationship to orientalism. Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 197–8; Richard Waterhouse, "The Minstrel Show and Australian Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 24.3 (1990): 147–66, at 158; Eileen Southern, "The Georgia Minstrels: The Early Years," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, for Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 163–75, at 166; Josephine Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert & Sullivan's "The Mikado"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 94–8; Christian DuComb, *Haunted City: Three Centuries of Racial Impersonation in Philadelphia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 113; W. Anthony Sheppard, *Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 465–6 n. 16.
- 4 Madeleine Jarry, *Chinoiserie: Chinese Influence on European Decorative Arts, 17th and 18th Centuries* (New York: Vendome Press, 1981), 135.
- 5 Maxine Berg, *Luxury & Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89.
- 6 Hans Huth, *Lacquer of the West: The History of a Craft and an Industry, 1550–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 38.
- 7 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817; New York: Barnes & Noble, 2012), 189.
- 8 John Stalker and George Parker, *A Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing* (Oxford, 1688), 19.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 19–20.
- 10 Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *Art Bulletin* 91.4 (2009): 481–505, at 486–8; and Thompson, *Shine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 11 Thompson, "Sound of Light," 481–8; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 38.
- 12 Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Adrienne L. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain," in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 159–78; Cyra Levenson and Chi-ming Yang, "Haptic Blackness: The Double Life of an 18th-Century Bust," *British Art Studies* 1 (November 2015), <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-01/harwood>.
- 13 Tomio Yoshino, *Japanese Lacquer Ware* (Tokyo: Japan Travel Bureau, 1959).
- 14 Oliver Impey, "A Brief Account of Japanese Export Lacquer of the Seventeenth Century, and Its Use in Europe," in *Japanische und europäische Lackarbeiten: Rezeption, Adaption, Restaurierung / Japanese and European Lacquerware: Adoption, Adaptation, Conservation*, ed. Michael Kühnlethal (Munich: Arbeitshefte des Bayerischen Landesamtes für Denkmalpflege, 2000), 15–30.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 16 Jean Pillement et al., *The Ladies Amusement; or, The Whole Art of Japanning Made Easy* (London: Robert Sayer, 1760), 4.
- 17 For particularly effective examinations of these stereotypes and their cultural force in Europe and the United States, see John Walter de Gruchy, *Orientalizing Arthur Waley: Japonism, Orientalism, and the Creation of Japanese Literature in English* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003); Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
- 18 See, for example, Joseph Roach's discussion of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 227.
- 19 Douglas A. Jones Jr., "Black Politics but Not Black People: Rethinking the Social and 'Racial' History of Early Minstrelsy," *TDR: The Drama Review* 57.2 (2013): 21–37.
- 20 Caroline H. Yang, *The Peculiar Afterlife of Slavery: The Chinese Worker and the Minstrel Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).
- 21 See Angela C. Pao, *The Orient of the Boulevards: Exoticism, Empire, and Nineteenth-Century Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture 1776–1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

University Press, 1999); Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

22 Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 47.

23 *Ibid.*, 40–56.

24 Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 11–14.

25 *Philadelphia Press*, 11 June 1860, quoted in Miyoshi, 67. The stakes of such racialization were clear to the Japanese even at this early moment. When a rowdy onlooker in the crowd called the visitors “Niggers,” a journalist reported that the Japanese clearly registered the insult. *New York Tribune*, 11 June 1860.

26 Christopher Bush, “The Ethnicity of Things in America’s Lacquered Age,” *Representations* 99.1 (2007): 74–98.

27 *Ibid.*, 91.

28 *Ibid.*, 87, 84.

29 Lee, 97.

30 DuComb, 113.

31 “Morris Bros. Minstrels,” *Broadside*, St. Louis, MO, 1867; “Drop Curtain Monographs,” *New York Times*, 17 July 1887.

32 Annemarie Bean, “Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, ed. Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, 245–56.

33 “Kelly & Leon,” *Times Picayune* (New Orleans), 9 October 1877.

34 On Tateishi, see Miyoshi.

35 “The Japanese Embassy: Its Arrival at Washington,” *New York Tribune*, 17 May 1860, 6; “The Japanese Embassy: A Day at Willards,” *New York Tribune*, 26 May 1860, 8.

36 “Japanese Tommy’s Body Guard,” *New York Times*, 29 June 1860, 2.

37 Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 36.

38 Metzger, 44.

39 On Moy, see, among others, Tchen, 101–6; and Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 20–2.

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41 Lee, 7. On a later theatrical example of the traffic between Japanese things and Japanese performers, see Tara Rodman, “A Modernist Audience: The Kawakami Troupe, Matsuki Bunkio, and Boston Japonisme,” *Theatre Journal* 65.4 (2013): 489–505.

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43 Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 18.

44 Thompson, *Shine*; Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Tina Post, “Williams, Walker, and Shine: Blackbody Blackface, or the Importance of Being Surface,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 59.4 (2015): 83–100.

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47 See also Anne McClintock, “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising,” in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 207–31.

48 Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 4; 21–42.

49 Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics & Society* 27.1 (1999): 105–38; Shannon Steen, *Racial Geometries of the Black Atlantic, Asian Pacific and American Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

50 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male*

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