

Allusion-Disruption-Reclamation in the Carolina Chocolate Drops' *Genuine Negro Jig*

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Introduction

In 2010, an editorial by Quincy Troupe appeared in *Black Renaissance*, excoriating an old-time string music band called the Carolina Chocolate Drops (CCD). Critics had hailed the band's recent album, *Genuine Negro Jig*, as “an extraordinary and stylish history lesson” (Bradley), “well worth checking out” (Denselow). Troupe, on the other hand, equated the music of the CCD with Tyler Perry films and “gangster rap,” in that all three “target mostly white audiences and are geared to reinforce the notion that African-Americans are simply buffoons, depraved, and violent” (4). Without saying the word “slavery,” Troupe put his finger on the troubling heart of the Drops' music—music which originated under the shadow of the “peculiar institution,” and which characterized the minstrel shows that misrepresented America slavery and its victims for decades. Dom Flemons, one of the three original members of the CCD, admitted the messiness of the situation to NPR correspondent Melissa Block when she asked about the minstrel history of old-time music. “When you dig your hands into the soil of American culture,” said Flemons, “your hands get dirty ... and that's something that we do” (“Carolina Chocolate Drops: Old Time Music With a Twist”).

In *Genuine Negro Jig*, the CCD play with the dirty history of American slavery and minstrel shows, attempting to rewrite the narrative of those historical events around creativity and independence rather than ownership and trauma. As often as possible—on their website, in their interviews, during their performances—the band introduces its audience to the idea that old-time, string-band, and bluegrass music were as deeply influenced by the Africans who brought

the banjos across the Atlantic as by the Europeans who brought the fiddles. For example, in her 2017 keynote address to the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) Business Conference, CCD founding member Rhiannon Giddens honored the “black dance band musicians who helped create an indigenous American music and dance culture; of barn dances, corn-shuckings, plantation balls, and riverboat and house parties”—all at the same time as white American culture was coming to see the banjo as the staple instrument of blackface minstrelsy. The CCD have made reading black celebration and ownership back through spaces traditionally marked by white oppression a central component of their artistic output. Because of this unique quality, the band has garnered acclaim from many young black banjo players like Kaia Kater, who describes the Drops’ appearance on the bluegrass scene as being transformational for her. It was an opportunity to see herself represented in the genre she loved, but had never known was so central to her history as part of the black population in North America. Examining the comments sections for Youtube videos of the Drops’ performances turns up more black fans of old-time music who express appreciation for the CCD’s representation of African-American heritage within the genre.

Despite the historical re-education the band attempts to communicate and the black bluegrass lovers whom they inspire, the fact remains that the CCD plays to predominantly white audiences, employs a genre overlaid with some of the most oppressive facets of American history, and is beloved by white music critics—three strikes which ultimately drew upon them the criticism of Mr. Troupe. “Who decided to promote this group *now*?” Troupe demands. “And *why* do we have to deal continuously with stereotypical images that hark back to traditions of blackface and minstrelsy?” (4). Troupe’s concerns raise questions about whether an attempt to reclaim banjos and bluegrass for black musicians merits the image crisis which the CCD creates

for African-Americans still trying to live down the legacies of slavery. The tensions between advancement and regression in terms of race relations, between positive and negative imagery, between seeming to lament and seeming to celebrate the era of slavery—all of these play out in the diverse tracks of *Genuine Negro Jig*. The CCD engages in sing-along allusion-disruption gestures, contextualizing and making ironic their references to slavery and minstrelsy. In so doing, however, the band stands on a razor's edge between robbing minstrel history of its power on the one hand, and actually reviving the minstrel show for the twenty-first century on the other. And no other song encapsulates this dynamic so well as *Genuine Negro Jig*'s titular track.

Snowden's Jig (or, What's Up with Dom Flemons's Suspenders?)

“Snowden's Jig (Genuine Negro Jig)” introduces listeners to the sort of historical signifying which defines the music of the CCD. The original “Genuine Negro Jig” was written down in the early- to mid-eighteenth century by Daniel Decatur Emmett, a blackface performer and self-proclaimed writer of the minstrel anthem “Dixie.” Emmett's neighbors in Ohio were the Snowdens who can purportedly lay claim to the “Genuine Negro Jig” —and possibly, according to researchers Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, to “Dixie” as well. In their 1993 book *Way up North in Dixie*, the Sackses describe how the children of Thomas and Ellen Snowden, former slaves from Maryland, performed across rural central Ohio to supplement the family's farming income. The Snowdens performed to primarily white audiences, and although the Sackses maintain that the family's repertory did not contain “the degrading songs in contrived Negro dialect characteristic of the minstrel stage” (Faust), the Emmett connection and the growing popularity of minstrel shows at the time lends a more complicated hue to the Snowden family band.

More than a century after this history took place, the CCD willingly takes on the Snowdens' difficult legacy for themselves. In "Snowden's Jig", the band brings the nineteenth century to a twenty-first century audience, with all of the pain—and, to their mind, joy as well—that that entails. They rebrand "Genuine Negro Jig" as "Snowden's Jig," paying homage to the black artists who wrote the song instead of to the white man who gave it its initial title. However, by still preserving "Genuine Negro Jig" as the song's subtitle and as the name of their album, the CCD signify both on the "blackness" of the songs in the album and on the white lens through which "hillbilly music"—whether played by black people or not—has traditionally been viewed. In fact, a fully-embodied allusion-disruption gesture takes place within the three short words of the song's subtitle. "Genuine Negro Jig" mocks Emmett's perceptions and parodies of antebellum black culture while celebrating the black history which gave birth to this and other string-band songs.

As with the title of the song, the CCD's performance of "Snowden's Jig" has a complex relationship with minstrel images of American slavery. This complexity finds its fullest expression in the figure of Dom Flemons. Dressed in a costume-y old-time outfit, shuffling along in a loose-limbed dance as he plays the rhythm bones over his head—playing minstrel show instruments in a style he actually *learned from blackface performers* ("Carolina Chocolate Drops: Old-Time Music with a Twist")—Flemons's idiosyncratic stage presence places the performance of "Snowden's Jig" in squarely the post-black space of play and ambiguity of meaning. His enthusiastic lean into allusions to minstrelsy feels like a disruption in and of itself, an ironic parody of stereotypes about the sort of black people who play banjos and rhythm bones. Flemons recreates the minstrel image of the antebellum South; at the same time, he honors the culture and tradition of black string bands that decades of appropriation and exaggeration by

minstrel performers could not erase. Flemons's appearance parallels the song he performs, in that both refuse to concede the normal restrictions that govern what depictions of antebellum blackness can be, choosing instead to reclaim aspects of culture and tradition from their longtime racist stigma.

Hit 'Em Up Style (or, Does Rhiannon Giddens Jump Jim Crow?)

From a song thoroughly grounded in antebellum America, the CCD leaps seamlessly to the present in their cover of Blu Cantrell's 2001 sensation "Hit 'Em Up Style." The band ages the song until it sounds like something that might have been played at a dance hall at the turn of the twentieth century, mixing modern terms and musical styles—the lyrics reference BMWs and department stores, and Justin Robinson uses hip-hop-reminiscent human beatboxing to add a percussive line—with the traditional sounds of banjos and fiddles. While not nearly as popular as the original "Hit 'Em Up Style," the Drops' version has become a favorite among fans of the band. It well deserves its popularity; on its surface, the song is irresistibly enjoyable. Upon reflection, however, the decision to tie contemporary black styles like R&B and hip-hop to music steeped in minstrel connotations becomes uncomfortable. Does this revision erase the progress—musically, legally, or otherwise—that blacks in America have made in the face of denigrating stereotypes and biases?

The CCD's old-time twist on the musical roots of "Hit 'Em Up Style" acts as another allusion-disruption gesture, but in almost the *opposite* direction as "Genuine Negro Jig." It alludes to modern manifestations of independent black culture in the form of R&B and hip-hop, while simultaneously suggesting that these genres are not that far removed from the "coon songs" of 1840s minstrel shows. In other words, instead of bringing old music into the present, it pulls the present back to old-time. The connection which this allusion-disruption suggests

between hip-hop, R&B, and minstrelsy would be supported by scholars such as Kareem R. Muhammad, who argues that “as hip-hop as a subculture has gained increased commercial success, some have wondered [whether] the black people responsible for creating the culture lost [the genre’s initial] agency” (309), allowing hip-hop to fall into the stereotypical characters and characteristics of minstrel shows. R&B has a similarly complicated history of white appropriation—and subsequent underpayment of pioneering black artists—as well as an interracial popularity which has at times allowed the music to feed into negative stereotypes which white audiences hold against the African-American “other” (Newland). By putting an old-time twist on these musical traditions, “Hit ‘Em Up Style” enjoys itself onstage while subtextually projecting the minstrel picture of slavery onto contemporary black performance. In “Hit ‘Em Up Style,” the CCD make a broader stroke at reclaiming an entire independent black music tradition—from old-time to hip-hop. By alluding to the echoes of minstrelsy and hillbilly music in modern genres, the CCD suggests that not only are these genres all part of the same independent black music tradition, but all have multifaceted histories that merit not rejection, but exploration.

In analyzing the song, it’s important not to forget the singer: Rhiannon Giddens, a multiracial North Carolina native who trained in classical singing at Julliard before coming under the tutelage of black fiddler Joe Thompson (Lawrence). For a white audience primed with the stereotypes created by nineteenth century minstrel shows, Giddens’s most obvious place within those tropes is that of the “wench,” the attractive and sexualized mulatto woman. In her aforementioned IBMA address, Giddens recalls being characterized by one man as a “high yellow gal,” and Youtube commenters often remark on Giddens’ physical attractiveness. Bare feet, low necklines, and loose hair—sometimes braided or held back with a bandanna—add a

subtly sensual element to Giddens' stage presence, which only makes her conform more closely to the "wench" role. The comparison also increases in strength through its proximity to the caricaturish ensemble of Dom Flemons. As with Flemons's outfit and performance, Giddens's alignment with an outdated and denigrating stereotype has a certain post-black ambiguity to it, especially in light of her career, which has been spent almost entirely in an attempt to reclaim Americana music for African-Americans. Is the incorporation of the "wench" stereotype into her performance an intentional contribution to that goal, or a hindrance to it? A traditional understanding of allusion-disruption gestures would suggest the former interpretation, but, as the next section discusses, the actual reception of the song can differ greatly from the artist's intent.

"Kissin' and Cussin'" (or, Where Is Justin Robinson Now?)

Perhaps the best qualified person to understand the precarious nature of allusion-disruption gestures in *Genuine Negro Jig* actually wrote one of the album's songs. Justin Robinson, the last of the founding trinity of the CCD, contributed his original song "Kissin' and Cussin'" to the band's album alongside his skill on the fiddle. In terms of rhythm, tempo, and arrangement, this number is more low-key than "Hit 'Em Up Style" or "Genuine Negro Jig," and Robinson's voice comes close to disappearing under the sound from the strings of his and Giddens's instruments. In general, Robinson does not attract much attention to himself during performances, allowing Flemons and Giddens to take over much of the stage banter and refraining from donning clothing suggestive of minstrel stereotypes. In 2011, Robinson became the first of the original members to leave the band, a departure attributed to Robinson's weariness from touring and desire to take a new direction musically (Griffith). The nature of Robinson's change in direction became evident in 2012, when Justin Robinson and the Mary Annettes released their debut album, *Bones for Tinder*. Isaac Davy-Aronson describes the band's

music as “a little bit country; a little bit hip-hop soul,”¹⁶ a marked divergence from the old-time style of the Drops (“Justin Robinson and the Mary Annettes”).

Robinson’s departure from the CCD, his switch in musical styles, and perhaps his reticence in performance have their roots in the CCD’s complicated engagement with the legacy of minstrelsy. While many reviewers, interviewers, and black fans celebrate the Drops’ reclamation of minstrel music and black involvement in bluegrass, the view from the stage can be quite different. Robinson observed that people who fail to grasp the reclamatory intent of the Drops do not always respond with feelings of offense and outrage, like Quincy Troupe—they might, instead, relax into the comfort of racial tropes held over from the era of slavery. “They [the white audience] love it because it makes them feel comfortable,” said Robinson of one particularly difficult concert in Charleston, South Carolina. “I don’t know how many times I heard the n-word, like as I walked through the crowd. It was *soul-crushing*. This feels like, *not narrative disruption*. This feels like replication” (Kumanyika et al.). From the vantage point of a post-black artist, Robinson saw the line which allusion-disruption representations of slavery walk between playfully rewriting the script and actually recreating a painful past. White southern audiences in particular could, and too often do, view the CCD as a return to the “comfortable” version of slavery peddled by minstrel shows—cheerful dark-skinned figures producing catchy music for the amusement of a white audience.

Robinson’s original song “Kissin’ and Cussin’” expresses his distressing relationship with the tropes he realizes himself to be playing into. The couple in the song “kiss and cuss and carry on,” reflecting minstrel show characterizations of African-Americans as hypersexual, vulgar, and loud. However, the song itself is none of those things; it is understated and has a lamenting, ballad-type sound to it. The lyrics also suggest a sense of conflict by portraying two

lovers who seem to have violent intentions towards one another, paralleling Robinson's conflicting love of string-band music and fear of being viewed through a minstrel lens. Interestingly, Robinson brought "Kissin' and Cussin'" with him when he left the CCD, recreating it in 2012 in *Bones for Tinder*. The 2012 version has a new force behind it that suggests an intensified pain behind the lyrics, possibly fueled in part by Robinson's own painful realizations prior to his exit from the Drops. Drums and hand beats provide a percussive background to a new opening rap for "Kissin' and Cussin'", which is difficult to understand as a whole but from which certain inflammatory words spring like sparks: violent, abuser, bloodstained. These words rip away the sort of lighthearted play in which the CCD engaged and ground the folk roots of "Kissin' and Cussin'" in a violent, abusive, and bloodstained context—a reference, however indirect, to the racism and slavery so closely tied to the Drops' repertory.

Conclusion

In his review of Touré's 2012 book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, Orlando Patterson wrote that "post-blackness entails a different perspective from earlier generations', one that takes for granted what they fought for: equal rights, integration, middle-class status, affirmative action and political power." Each of the three founding members of the Carolina Chocolate Drops has expressed this same sentiment in their own ways. Says Dom Flemons, "[The CCD] come from a new generation that can take the time to explore these repertoires with a new outlook and a distance from the past, especially when it comes to the minstrel material" (Boyd 53). Rhiannon Giddens concurs, saying that "we are able to do this because of what our parents went through and our grandparents went through. We are able to look back without some of the pain of actually having gone through some of those things, and so we're able to say, well, let's look back and see what joy we can find from some of these times ("Carolina Chocolate Drops: Old-Time

Music With a Twist”).”²⁰ As for Justin Robinson, one of his mottos is a quote from British playwright W. Somerset Maugham: "Tradition is a guide and not a jailer" (Lawrence). True to the spirit of a rebellious new generation, the CCD engage in post-black play with slavery and minstrelsy, two of the most taboo subjects of liberal American culture. The band strips away the barrier between modern expressions of black identity and hillbilly music, refusing to conform to the tradition of putting slavery and its cultural products in the past. They push the boundaries of what old-time and minstrel music could be, using allusion-disruption gestures to reclaim these genres from their distressing histories and reframe them as celebrations of black culture, even in an era that restricted independent expressions of African-American traditions. But whenever artists push boundaries, they should expect some pushback, whether from their audiences, as in the case of the Troupe editorial, or even from their own psyches, as Justin Robinson experienced.

That isn't to say that there haven't been positive responses to the Chocolate Drops from within the black community; there absolutely have been. However, negative responses like the ones mentioned above demonstrate that black bodies playing minstrel songs touch on a painful nerve that still cuts through the heart of the African-American experience. When does reclamation of harmful traditions cross the border into reanimation? How much does the artist's intent matter in the face of the audience's interpretation? These tensions rear their heads throughout *Genuine Negro Jig*, whether in the lyrics of the songs, in the stories behind the songs, or in the visual aspects of their performance. Although it's easy to let the Drops' musical prowess and toe-tapping repertory lull you into a complacent enjoyment, be aware that you listen at your own risk. Echoes of slavery lurk behind every scrape of the fiddle, and it remains to you as the listener to decide whether those echoes are insults or comforts—or, perhaps, vessels of joy and reclamation.

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