

Localizing the Early Republic: Washington Irving and Blackface Culture

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The process of decolonization in the early American republic was a struggle in which the former colonies gradually asserted political, cultural, and artistic independence from England in particular and Europe in general. Yet, as the early republicans attempted to stabilize the new nation and create a cohesive national identity, they relied on colonial models of social stratification and centralized power, while ignoring the realities of the postcolonial condition. Part of this condition was the proliferation of diverse cultures at the local level, what Partha Chatterjee has, in another context, called “communities,” that is, fuzzy, democratic entities that resist the national narrative. In the western mid-Atlantic, the racially mixed festival and market cultures that would eventually coalesce into blackface minstrelsy functioned as such communities. Alive with local energy and hybrid diversity, the communities of nascent blackface belied republican notions of a culturally stable, homogenous nation, while evincing the emergence of postcolonial identity in the early national period.

Americanists have acknowledged how the interplay between the local and the (inter)national helps explain formations of early American selfhood. Dana D. Nelson argues that in the post-Constitutional era, white men identified with a sense of “national manhood” that abstracted them from locally created identities, while Edward Watts reveals how early republicans used imperial paradigms to create a facade of national coherence that American authors exposed by exploring the diversity of post-Independence communities. More recently, Malini Johar Schueller and Watts suggest that early America consisted of multiple, often contradictory, narratives wherein the imperial and the local interacted and overlapped. American identities, they argue, were “constantly negotiated through strategic identification and disidentification with Europeans,

on the one hand, and American Indians, African Americans, and other nonwhite populations, on the other” (2). These scholars all address how (inter)national and local cultural assertions shape and destabilize early American selfhood.

Building on these insights into the postcolonial nature of the early republic, this article demonstrates how Washington Irving, who witnessed the emergence of blackface culture in New York, produced “blackface” texts that negotiate the cultural complexities of the new nation. Critics have noted that Irving decolonizes his writing with Native American and Dutch materials, through which he invokes America’s past and asserts a non-English identity, but they have missed how blacks and blackface culture enable him to confront postcolonial realities within the republic.¹ Incipient blackface provides Irving not only with non-European material, but also with a biracial folk form whose cultural fluidity underlies and sometimes undermines national cohesion. Seen from a postcolonial perspective, the interplay between local white and black American cultures helps us better understand the unstable nature of the new republic. While Irving’s blackface texts expose cultural and racial instabilities, they do not necessarily break down racial hierarchies. Here, Eric Lott’s notion of minstrelsy as a dialectic of “love and theft” is useful. Lott argues that the desires and fears, envy and guilt, awe and abhorrence that drove blackface mimicry led to the “simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries” (6). In Irving’s writings, blackface desire drives characters across the color line, where they try on their version of blackness, implicitly disrupting ideas of cultural homogeneity. But by stereotyping and debasing blacks, an act rooted in dread and anxiety, his writing preserves racial hegemony. As such, Irving’s blackface productions embody the complexities and conflicting impulses of decolonization.

I. Storytelling, Cultural Hybridity, and Blackface Desire

I first want to turn to Irving’s treatment of black storytellers to demonstrate how it exposes cultural hybridity within New York’s local communities and reveals the kind of racial desire that motivated blackface performance. In the prelude to “Dolph Heyliger” titled “The Haunted House” from *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), Diedrich Knickerbocker, Washington

Irving's Dutch historian persona, recalls his boyhood encounters with a black farmer named Pompey, who would mesmerize him with tales of an old haunted house. When Pompey dies, he is buried in a field, only to be unearthed years later by a plowshare. The rediscovery of his body excites the curiosity of some townsfolk, but Knickerbocker is interested only in finding his friend a new grave. While overseeing the reburial, he meets a gentleman named John Josse Vandermoere, a storyteller from the neighborhood specializing in Dutch lore, who offers to tell a haunted-house tale stranger than any of Pompey's. Always eager to hear a new story, Knickerbocker welcomes the offer. As both men sit and watch the black farmer's interment, Vandermoere tells his tale, which later finds its way into Knickerbocker's "manuscripts" as "Dolph Heyliger."

Through Knickerbocker's appropriation of Dutch lore from characters like Vandermoere, Irving sought to construct a portrait of America's past at a time when the nation was calling for an indigenous literature. Whereas Irving's other major persona, Geoffrey Crayon, turns mainly to the old world for inspiration, Knickerbocker stays home, conferring with the new-world Dutch, from whom he ostensibly learns such enduring tales as "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819–20). But as much as the Dutch excite Knickerbocker, the above example suggests black storytellers also inspire him. Yet, while black storytellers play a significant part in his tales, they are often diminished by his fixation on the Dutch. In fact, burying Pompey to the modulations of Vandermoere telling his story captures how Knickerbocker's role as the zealous Dutch historian overshadows his investment in black oral culture. The example of Pompey, then, shows the need to "unearth" the African American influence in Washington Irving.

Because of their conservative and insular ways, Knickerbocker idealizes the Dutch as symbols of a simple American past, uncorrupted by the encroaching modern world. Although they were sheltered from outside influence, being inveterate slave owners, their life and lore were intimately bound with black culture. Irving's *A History of New York* (1809) offers an example of this relationship when Knickerbocker places a black storyteller at the heart of an old Dutch family. He describes a scene where "the whole family, old and young, master and servant, black and

white” would gather at the fireside (479). There an old patriarch would smoke his pipe, his wife would work the spinning wheel, and

[t]he young folks would crowd around the hearth, listening with breathless attention to some old crone of a negro, who was the oracle of the family,—and who, perched like a raven in a corner of the chimney, would croak forth for a long winter afternoon, a string of incredible stories about New England witches—grisly ghosts—horses without heads—and hairbreath scapes and bloody encounters among the Indians. (479)

This passage intimates that the tales Knickerbocker culls from the Dutch have some of their roots in black oral culture. Certainly, the oracle’s stories of “horses without heads” anticipate the headless horseman from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

That Irving’s celebrated legend may have an African American influence is all but confirmed years later. For although Knickerbocker claims in the story’s postscript that a shabby gentleman in “pepper and salt clothes” first tells the tale (8: 296), Crayon later suggests that it derives from a Dutch housewife and a black miller. In a scarcely noted reminiscence titled “Sleepy Hollow” (1839), Crayon recalls a time when he takes a tour of Sleepy Hollow with Knickerbocker. There the historian meets a woman at her spinning wheel who tells him ghost tales. Later, he confers with a black miller in the region’s backwoods, who proves to be his “greatest treasure of historic lore” yet (433). Consider Crayon’s description of the exchange between Knickerbocker and the black miller:

[Knickerbocker] beckoned him from his nest, sat with him by the hour on a broken mill-stone, by the side of the water-fall, heedless of the noise of the water and the clatter of the mill; and I verily believe it was to his conference with this African sage, and the precious revelations of the good dame of the spinning-wheel, that we are indebted for the surprising though true history of “Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman.” (434)

We might read this racial encounter as a figurative resurrection of Pompey, who now sits where Vandermoere sat, bonding with Knicker-

bocker and receiving recognition for his stories. In a revision of the account titled “Wolfert’s Roost” (1855), another neglected text, an unnamed narrator glorifies the miller even more, calling him “the great historic genius of the Hollow” (27: 15)—a startling statement, since Knickerbocker turns to the Hollow for many of his tales.

Given his persistent interest in black storytellers, one might assume that Irving’s fictitious Dutch historian spends as much time conferring with African sages as with those Dutch wives who spin tales as prolifically as they spin clothes. As the above examples suggest, the stories these women weave are neither wholly Dutch, nor entirely their own. Like the piebald “pepper and salt clothes” worn by the shabby gentleman, they are products of a black and white, cross-cultural fabric. Each example shows how cultural exchange at the local level produces fluid communities that can disrupt the national narrative. The various contradictory voices telling the legend challenge notions of cultural stability and seem to ask a crucial question: who actually narrates the national myths? These instances of cultural overlap and interracial bonding are also a useful way to begin discussing Washington Irving’s relationship to incipient blackface.

Like Knickerbocker’s tales, blackface was a hybrid production, rooted in the cross-pollination between European and African American cultural forms. While it began benignly enough—in New York, around the time Irving was born—as a more or less shared interracial experience, blackface eventually became the almost exclusive domain of whites, who interpreted black material, such as dancing, music, dialect, and folklore, for a white mainstream audience. As such, Knickerbocker’s translation of black folklore for a mostly white readership reveals a basic blackface impulse. His encounters with black storytellers even resemble accounts of minstrels who bonded with and learned from black people. Just as Knickerbocker sits with the miller sharing stories, performer Ben Cotton would “sit with [blacks] in front of their cabins,” swapping songs and becoming “brothers for the time being and . . . perfectly happy,” and Billy Whitlock, a Virginia Minstrel, would “quietly steal off to some negro hut to hear the darkies sing and see them dance, taking with him a jug of whiskey to make them all the merrier” (qtd. in Lott 50). Of course,

Knickerbocker—as Mark Twain and others do later—draws from black storytellers, whereas these minstrels court black musicians, but the motivation here is basically the same: each example illustrates white desire to absorb and translate black cultural forms, a fundamental impulse in minstrelsy as well as in Washington Irving, whose fascination with black folk culture did not stop with the black storyteller. Like many minstrel performers, Irving also adored black music and dance, which he reproduced in his early writings.

Written during what is now seen as minstrelsy's prehistory, Irving's blackface writings precede the acts of celebrities George Washington Dixon and T. D. Rice, who electrified audiences with Long-Tail Blue, Jim Crow, and Zip Coon. They are composed well before E. P. Christy inaugurated the formalized minstrel show in 1842.² And while later writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, and Twain would draw on a more organized, commercialized, and racist form of minstrelsy, Irving was positioned to tap blackface culture when it was more about negotiating racial difference than enforcing it; more about communal values than business; more about, as W. T. Lhamon suggests, "an eagerness to combine, share, join, draw from opposites, [and] play on opposition" (3) than to ridicule blacks. This is not to say that Irving's work is free from blackface stereotypes. As intimated earlier, it is rife with them. But Irving's use of nascent blackface also reflects a period when white American culture was opening itself to black influence, doing so when the nation was in its most formative years, assembling an identity out of the cultural confusion resulting from its break with England.

In spite of North America's political separation from the old world, Irving's initial blackface productions are riddled with foreign allusions, evincing a cultural dependence typical of decolonizing nations.³ Eventually, however, his blackface writings shed foreign influence and fuse local cultures, resulting in a more culturally independent, *post-colonial* product. I am not suggesting that local cultures did not mix in the colonial period. But in the post-Revolutionary era, we can read Irving's local cultural fusions as postcolonial because they mark the emergence of a more distinctive American identity. When Irving begins to tap local

cultures, and ceases filling his blackface texts with foreign allusions, his work moves beyond foreign ontology. By the time he writes “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” his blackface writing largely overcomes foreign dependence to assert a more evolved postcolonial identity through local hybridity: the intermingling of indigenous cultural forms.

In what follows, I trace Irving’s relationship to three areas where cultures coalesced and minstrelsy developed. I first explore Manhattan’s interracial marketplaces, from which blackface emerged at the turn of the century. A passage in *A History of New York* illustrates that Irving knew this market culture well, and what he encountered there seems to have formed the foundation of his blackface productions. Next, I discuss the black transformation of the Dutch Pentecost known as Pinkster, which occurred throughout the Hudson Valley, an area Irving knew intimately. Third, I turn to the early American theater, which controlled racial signification via blackface makeup long before minstrelsy formalized. An offhand remark about a blackface performance of *Othello* in Irving’s *Salmagundi* (1807–08) opens a window onto this important period in minstrelsy’s prehistory. Drawing on these minstrel breeding grounds, I analyze a black performance from *Salmagundi* that combines blackface desire with republican colonial insecurities. Finally, I examine “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” which appears to contain the first white blackface dance in the American literary canon. Overall, these intersections between Irving, incipient blackface, and the changing republic help us better understand the role nascent blackface plays in shaping postcolonial selfhood and a distinctly hybridized American literature.

II. Washington Irving in the Blackface Breeding Grounds

Born in 1783 in New York City, Irving was no stranger to African American culture, since his city was at the core of the largest slaveholding region above the Mason-Dixon line. Along with high slave numbers, the city also had a large free black population, which increased dramatically following the Revolution, making New York, in Shane White’s words, “the most important urban black center” in the country (*Somewhat* 153). Irving scoured the city as a boy, attentive to the black street theatrics that were a regular part of life and a vital means of ex-

pression for everyday blacks. Growing up on William Street, which cut through lower Manhattan, Irving was just blocks from Broadway, where blacks routinely held music and dance celebrations. West of Broadway were the markets along the Hudson River. Slaves from Jersey ritually crossed the river in skiffs freighted with produce for the marketplace. In *A History of New York*, Knickerbocker describes such a scene, telling how the “dutch negroes” from a small Jersey village called Communipaw would bring their goods to Manhattan, probably either to Bear or Buttermilk Market:

These negroes ... like the monks in the dark ages, engross all the knowledge of the place, and being infinitely more adventurous and more knowing than their masters, carry on all the foreign trade; making frequent voyages to town in canoes loaded with oysters, buttermilk and cabbages. They are great astrologers, predicting the different changes of weather almost as accurately as an almanak—they are moreover exquisite performers on three stringed fiddles: in whistling they almost boast the farfamed powers of Orpheus. (437)

Fiddling and whistling provided the soundtrack at these markets. Dancing provided the spectacle. The Jersey slaves sold their goods at the Hudson markets, whereas at Catherine Market, on the East River, they sold their talents. According to New York historian Thomas De Voe, “After the Jersey negroes had disposed of their masters’ produce at the ‘Bear Market’ ... they would ‘shin it’ for the Catherine Market to enter the lists with the Long Islanders” (137). At Catherine Market the black body went up on display, as blacks engaged in competitive dance contests for money, eels, fish, and applause.

“From its earliest instances,” Lhamon suggests, “this dancing for eels at Catherine Market addressed the issue of overlap” (2). Part of this overlap derived from white fascination with black bodies, a desire that later helped motorize minstrelsy. Whites gathered at the market to watch blacks dance, and eventually to imitate what they saw: “They wanted to overlay this black cachet on their own identities—even *as* their own identities” (Lhamon 3; his emphasis). In the developing re-

public, the desire to try on other cultures—and fuse them into something new—was strong. Everyone was assembling an identity from new-world cultural confusion and seeming deficiency. Whites sought to enhance themselves with black accents, suggesting not only racial desire but also a cultural lack. And Knickerbocker suggests a different desire and deficit when he enhances black charisma with the cachet of medieval monks and ancient Orpheus. Though awed by their command and appeal, he relies on imported figures to affirm the “dutch negroes,” a clear symptom of cultural insecurity. These blacks are exquisite musicians, writes Knickerbocker; they are “almost” as powerful as Orpheus. In the young republic, the best way to test quality was by holding it to ancient and old-world standards, a habit Irving’s earliest blackface texts cannot seem to get beyond.

What Irving encountered in the markets were contact zones where cultures collided, coalesced, and mutated. What he would have seen in the Hudson Valley was the Pinkster festival, which involved another kind of cultural mixing. In his youth, Irving escaped city life by rambling north along the Hudson River. In 1798 he wandered as far as Sleepy Hollow. In 1800 he took the first of many trips up river to see his two sisters near Albany. The Hudson River was a major part of Irving’s youth, and later of his old age, when he settled at Sunnyside. This river was also the spine around which blackface minstrelsy began fleshing itself out. By following it backward from its mouth at Manhattan’s tip, where blacks danced and whites copied their moves, we eventually get to Albany, where blacks were transforming a white festival called Pinkster into their own. Originally a Dutch holiday named after the Pentecost, slaves and Dutch alike practiced Pinkster during the late colonial period. But after the Revolution, blacks increasingly infused the festival with their own music and dance. Though it appeared throughout the valley, Pinkster was closely associated with Albany, which cultivated dance styles that found their way down river to New York City and later into minstrelsy.⁴

Irving’s ritual excursions in the Hudson Valley, his interest in Dutch and black culture, and his love of pageantry make it hard to imagine he missed Pinkster, which even the unadventurous were aware of.⁵ Had he

not seen it in Albany, or along the river, Pinkster was available at Long Island, New Jersey, and Catherine Market. Born when he was, Irving would have seen Pinkster's cultural colors change, turning from a Dutch and black ritual into a festival of mostly African American expression. Between Albany and the waterfront markets, he doubtless experienced a world marked by fluid, almost dizzying, cross-cultural exchanges. Albany slaves overlaid Pentecost with African forms. Pinkster dance styles rode the river down to Manhattan, where they were absorbed by black dancers. White appropriations of these black moves then danced their way into minstrelsy.

While these cross-pollinations were occurring, cultural overlap of a different nature was finding material expression in the legitimate theater via the blackface mask, which referenced racial fluidity, while simultaneously fixing race in its tracks with the blackface stereotype. Irving himself adored the theater. As a boy he would crawl through his window at night, drop to the ground, and head for the playhouse, pursuing a passion that informed such early work as *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle* (1802–03) and *Salmagundi*. In the latter, theatergoer Will Wizard exposes a pivotal moment in minstrelsy's prehistory when he mocks his friend "Snivers the cockney" for criticizing the white actor Thomas Cooper "for," as Wizard puts it, "not having made himself as black as a negro" (6: 137) while playing the title role in an American production of *Othello*. Because Othello is said to have "thick lips" and a "sooty bosom," Snivers insists he "was an arrant black" and should have been represented as such (6: 137). Wizard finds Snivers' complaint trivial, but it reveals how *Othello* was then being revised for public consumption. While whites had traditionally played Othello in straightforward blackface, in the nineteenth century he received two major makeovers. Due to increasing fears of miscegenation, actors began whitening Othello early in the century by lightening his makeup and portraying him as civil, temperate, and reasoned. By mid-century, minstrel parodies lessened the threat even more by making him a ludicrous figure.⁶

What Snivers' carping reveals is how whites controlled racial signification on the stage. While blackface was initially utilized for serious representations of black characters—as with early versions of *Othello*—it

was increasingly used to *produce* and control images of blacks. This production of black images, of course, thrived most on the minstrel stage, where racial stereotypes were solidified. But Irving did not have to wait for minstrelsy to see staged stereotypes. Dale Cockrell has analyzed several “legitimate” blackface plays to show that the early American stage abounded with comic, happy, musical black characters, and “that much of our conventional understanding of the relationship between blackface and race was a fixture of, if not fixed in, the legitimate theatre” (29). As a denizen of the Park Theater—a hot spot for legitimate blackface—Irving would have seen blackface plays fostering racial stereotypes, and that might explain why they appear in his texts. In fact, he becomes the first major American writer whose work is shot through with blackface stereotypes, especially the large-lipped, eye-rolling, loud-laughing, compulsively musical Negroes that became the most recognized feature of the minstrel show.

III. Dislocating Local Identity

In *Salmagundi*, Irving taps theater and Manhattan market culture to create an astonishing blackface production, which scholars have virtually ignored, probably because it is set in Haiti and written before minstrelsy formalized. Irving composed the *Salmagundi* essays with his brother William and friend James Kirke Paulding between 1807–08. Although their combined work raises authorship questions, the passage at hand is almost certainly Irving’s.⁷ Like most of his work, it involves multiple narrators: the text opens with Anthony Evergreen, who recounts Will Wizard’s anecdote about a Haitian black dancer named Tucky Squash. The anecdote is triggered when Wizard asks Evergreen about a “pretty young gentleman” (6: 125) named Billy Dimple, who is dancing at a ball they are attending. Evergreen mentions that Dimple is popular with the ladies and unrivaled on the dance floor, instantly reminding Wizard of Tucky Squash, whom he supposedly encountered at Dessalines’ ball in Haiti.

Written between the Revolution and the War of 1812, the passage clearly reflects the decolonizing mind-set of the early republic. Here one sees the messy struggle between foreign ontology and local legitimacy. Overlaid

with the “cachet” of exotic forms, this Haitian-set description first appears wholly non-American, but I would argue that it derives mainly from local feeling and blackface culture. “Hayti” becomes a displaced site where American racial, sexual, and political concerns lurk: it is a space where Irving indulges and hides some of the fears and desires that haunt himself and the nation. More intimately, by writing the black body Irving engages in a blackface performance, replete with the desires, fears, disguises, and racial burlesque that crystallize in the minstrel show. Wizard’s description of the Haitian ball is worth quoting and discussing at length:

Such a display of black and yellow beauties! such a show of madras handkerchiefs, red beads, cocks tails and pea-cocks feathers!—it was, as here, who should wear the highest top-knot, drag the longest tails, or exhibit the greatest variety of combs, colors and gew-gaws. In the middle of the rout, when all was buzz, slip-slop, clack and perfume, who should enter but TUCKY SQUASH! The yellow beauties blushed blue, and the black ones blushed as red as they could, with pleasure; and there was a universal agitation of fans—every eye brightened and whitened to see Tucky, for he was the pride of the court, the pink of courtesy, the mirror of fashion, the adoration of all the sable fair ones of Hayti.

Such breadth of nose, such exuberance of lip! his shins had the true cucumber curve—his face in dancing shone like a kettle; and, provided you kept windward of him in summer, I do not know a sweeter youth in all Hayti than Tucky Squash. When he laughed, there appeared from ear to ear a *chevaux-de-frize* of teeth, that rivalled the shark’s in whiteness; he could whistle like a northwester—play on a three-stringed fiddle like Apollo;—and as to dancing, no Long-Island negro could shuffle you ‘double trouble,’ or ‘hoe corn and dig potatoes’ more scientifically—in short, he was a second Lothario, and the dusky nymphs of Hayti, one and all, declared him a perpetual Adonis. Tucky walked about, whistling to himself, without regarding any body; and his *nonchalance* was irresistible. (6: 125)

The above passage contains the primary elements of blackface minstrelsy. Just as minstrels could escape the strictures of Anglo-Protestant propriety by projecting excesses onto the black bodies they “inhabited,” through Tucky Squash Irving enjoys sexual and cultural freedoms denied by respectable society. Displacement facilitates fantasy here, both concealing and revealing attraction for Tucky. By writing through Wizard, who transfers desire for Tucky to the black women, and by channeling the anecdote through Evergreen, Irving can disguise and indulge his fascination for the phallic dancer—long tails, cucumber curved shins, and all. Both narrators function like the blackface mask in a sense, allowing Irving to fantasize black masculinity while shielding him from direct identification with it.

Tucky clearly embodies the fetishizing of black masculinity, a major impetus of minstrel-show mimicry, rooted in ambivalent responses to the black male body. For participants in minstrelsy, as Lott suggests, “[t]o wear or even enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black, to inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon . . . that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood” (52). This goes for Irving too. By writing the black body, he tries on his version of black masculinity. Yet, while black fetishes derive from white fascination, they more covertly arise from feelings of white inadequacy. The moment Evergreen extols Dimple’s talents, Tucky is brought in. His brilliant performance eclipses Dimple’s and asks a basic blackface question: can the white body do what the black body can? Given the power Wizard bestows on Tucky, the answer seems to be “no.” Nevertheless, Wizard wants to try. He wants to enjoy the cool, virility, and abandon that Tucky embodies. While he is “neck and heels” into his story—*into* his black male fantasy—a ballroom band starts playing, sending him into a dance so explosive he crushes the toes and tears the dresses of fellow party guests. His anecdote, in other words, inspires an act of blackface mimicry. If the “black and yellow beauties” can blush red and blue, Wizard can try to blush black.

Whereas the urge to occupy black bodies derived from feelings of awe and inadequacy, blackface whites could compensate for these emotions, and strengthen their white identities, by burlesquing blackness.⁸ Tucky

Squash is black cachet personified, yet his big grin, shiny face, strong scent, risibility, and compulsive musicality belong to racist caricature, enabling Wizard to disassociate from him. Tucky is the type of comical, ridiculous, musical blackface character Irving would have seen on the legitimate stage. His name may have even come from the blackface opera *Obi, or Three-Fingered Jack*, which featured a blackface slave named “Tucky” from a Jamaican sugar plantation.⁹ Yet, while racist lampoon helps Wizard disidentify with what he idealizes, Tucky still threatens to consume Wizard. That is, his “chevaux-de-frize” grin describes a mouth of razor sharp teeth—a *chevaux-de-frize* being a contraption of timber and iron spikes used in battle to thwart or impale horses—which, in this case, evokes cannibalism. With this fearful image, Irving is likely responding to the post-Haitian Revolutionary myth that Haiti abounded with savage black cannibals.¹⁰

Irving’s use of Haitian material brings me to my next point, which I begin with a question. Are we to believe the passage truly derives from Dessalines’ court in Haiti? I would suggest instead that it is largely constructed from local materials, masquerading as a Haitian ball. By looking beyond the guests’ perfume, feathers, and fine clothing, we find elements of a Manhattan market scene, blackface action and all. The crowd watching Tucky Squash resembles the spectators Irving would have seen surrounding black dancers along the waterfront. More important, the Haitian Tucky dances “double trouble” and “hoe corn and dig potatoes,” which were both North American dances, routinely performed at Catherine Market. Also, the scene’s colorful chaos reflects motley marketplace energy; as mentioned earlier, these markets were contact zones, where class and cultural diversity reigned: “a universal agitation of fans,” as Wizard puts it. Finally, the description evokes Knickerbocker’s passage on the “dutch negroes,” who whistle, fiddle, and are elevated by ancient and old-world analogies, as is Tucky Squash.

The notion that the scene evolves more from local market culture than from Haiti is strengthened by the fact that Irving never set foot in “Hayti.” And Wizard would not have been “cronies” with “Dessy,” as he puts it (6: 125). Dessalines was a courageous leader of the Haitian Revolution and a notoriously brutal despot, who was bitterly anti-white

due to his struggles with colonialism. After achieving its bloody independence, Haiti filled the white American imaginary with fears of violent black revolt. Dessalines embodied these fears. North American newspapers, as Bruce Dain notes, portrayed him “as a bestial Negro madman, bloodthirsty and out of control” (90). To Irving’s audience, Wizard’s visit to Dessalines’ court would have been too bold to be taken seriously. But Irving’s impressions of Haiti may not have been only media driven. Along with press coverage, he could have seen black Haitians in his city, where several of them were brought just before the Revolution.¹¹ The “French Negroes,” as they were called, were a prominent ethnic group who likely added their own dance styles to the market mix. Irving may have even found his Haitian muse at home in New York City, dancing for eels at Catherine Market.

As a quasi-mythical setting, Haiti suggests another imaginary buffer, a geographical mask of sorts, enabling Irving to indulge the black body at a distance. It also adds one more culture to what is a stunning collage of foreign allusions. On the one hand, Irving’s reliance on French, British, Greek, and Haitian references reflects new-world cultural deficiency. On the other, it suggests the unstable cultural identity that characterized the new republic. Written when the national identity was in fact fragmented, displaced, and confused, Irving’s blackface collage becomes a metaphor for how hard it was to locate “America” in the decolonizing moment.

The scene clearly privileges the foreign over the local. For instance, the Haitian Tucky Squash—suave as Adonis, talented as Apollo—dances better than the “Long-Island negro.” His superiority makes sense too, for as Watts suggests, “a sense of colonial marginality pervaded republicanism; products of local origin were never privileged the way imported ideas and objects were” (13). Therefore, instead of letting it stand naked, Irving dresses up this very American scene in foreign cultural capital. While it resists the artificial coherence promoted by republicanism, it is still bound up in colonial insecurities, which appear to inhibit its local expression. Irving’s blackface production in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” written when America was further along in the decolonizing process, is less beholden to standards of foreign cultural legitimacy.

IV. Localizing National Identity

Ironically, the blackface creation that most reflects localism appears in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, which was produced overseas. After the War of 1812, Irving left for England, where he began writing the sketches and tales that would win him fame at home and abroad. But because most of the collection is narrated in an elevated British style, and given the text's interest in English scenes, culture, and history, *The Sketch Book* was long regarded as little more than proof that an American could write as well as an English author, and it obtained only minor status in the American canon. Recent scholarship, however, emphasizes the text's engagement with national issues. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky sees it as a working-through of America's post-Revolutionary "crisis of identity" via the Crayon persona, while Laura Murray suggests the sketches romanticize the loss of British inheritance and the life and culture of American Indians. And Watts, after illustrating how Irving's *A History of New York* works within but subverts old literary paradigms, argues that *The Sketch Book* breaks free from inherited modes of writing to become a viable postcolonial text. He suggests that, because they strive to become indigenous, "Rip Van Winkle" and "Legend" best exemplify this transition.

Although they derive from German folklore, "Rip" and "Legend" are Irving's way of asserting an American identity in a text preoccupied with Britain. Both tales are told by Knickerbocker and draw on Irving's boyhood in the Dutch communities along the Hudson Valley. While "Rip" addresses national issues more overtly than "Legend," I want to show how the latter uses native materials to confront racial realities of the republic, a topic Irving's critics have avoided. I take my cue from Lewis Leary, who observes that while "Legend" is an imported story, "Irving's skill in caricature" and "of dance and frolic and rich tomfoolery is genuinely his own" (202). The vivid caricatures, description of dance, and tomfoolery, I argue, provide the text's most distinctly American moments, not just because they are Irving's invention, but because they tap African American and nascent blackface culture. By doing so, they weave local materials into a markedly indigenous expression. Instead of merging foreign and native materials, the scenes I focus on involve the fusion of local forms through various acts of racial appropriation.

If we accept that Knickerbocker draws from black oral culture and, more specifically, that he encounters a black miller—"the great historic genius of the Hollow," as he calls him—who inspires "Legend," it seems logical that the text would have an African American influence. It has become cliché that the rivalry between the Connecticut-born Ichabod Crane and the rural Brom Bones in "Legend" dramatizes the Yankee versus the Backwoodsman, a coupling that became a fixture of American literature and folklore. But this pairing, I suggest, also evokes aspects of African American tricksterism, with Bones playing trickster to Crane's slavemaster.

The rhetoric of slavery surrounds the schoolmaster Crane. Often called "master," he routinely beats his students with the birch, his "scepter of despotic power," which he uses to dominate his "little empire, the school" (8: 283, 275), from which his students, when dismissed, receive "emancipation" (8: 284). Crane's rival Bones, with "short curly black hair" (8: 281), is a trickster par excellence. Through his wit and cunning, he will rid the community of the imperious, but gullible, Crane. He begins by making a mockery of the pedant and his little empire, turning it "topsy-turvy" each night, until "the poor schoolmaster began to think all the witches in the country held their meetings there" (8: 283). Then, much like the shape-shifting trickster, he transforms himself into the headless horseman, presumably by covering his head with a black cloak. His various tricks, which play on superstitious fears, have the earmarks of conjuring associated with African American trickster tales.¹²

Bones' trickster ties are reinforced by his connection to blackness, a color the text also uses to connote phallic potency. When he plays his final trick by routing Crane with a pumpkin, he appears near the road as "something huge, misshapen, black and towering" (8: 292). After Bones ascends the path, Crane perceives him as "a horseman of large dimensions, and mounted on a black horse of powerful frame" (8: 293). As he chases Crane through the woods, the homoerotic energy intensifies, approaching climax as Bones bares down on the pedant. "[Crane] heard the black steed panting and blowing close behind him," writes Knickerbocker; "he even fancied that he felt his hot breath" (8: 294).

While elements of African American tricksterism expand the tale's indigenous dimensions, blackening Bones to suggest sexual potency extends the fetishizing of blackness we see in *Salmagundi*.

But Crane, too, is blackened. Just before Bones drives him from town, the pedagogue attends a party, where he performs a blackface shuffle that wins the admiration of the town's blacks, and impresses his dance partner Katrina, the Dutch heiress he hopes to marry, who is also the source of his rivalry with Bones. I quote the passage at length:

And now the sound of the music from the common room or hall, summoned to the dance. The musician was an old grey headed negro, who had been the itinerant orchestra of the neighbourhood for more than half a century. His instrument was as old and battered as himself. The greater part of the time he scraped away on two or three strings, accompanying every movement of the bow with a motion of the head; bowing almost to the ground, and stamping his foot whenever a fresh couple were to start.

Ichabod prided himself upon his dancing as much as upon his vocal powers. Not a limb, not a fibre about him was idle, and to have seen his loosely hung frame in full motion, and clattering about the room, you would have thought Saint Vitus himself, that blessed patron of the dance, was figuring before you in person. He was the admiration of all the negroes, who, having gathered, of all ages and sizes, from the farm and neighbourhood, stood forming a pyramid of shining black faces at every door and window, gazing with delight at the scene, rolling their white eyeballs, and showing grinning rows of ivory from ear to ear. (8: 287–88)

Here Crane enjoys his best moment in the text. Katrina is “smiling graciously” at him, while the crowd of approving blacks, like the fans around Tucky, suggests he is really turning it on. This is the only time the gangly pedant seems to physically outman the strong and dexterous Bones, who, “sorely smitten with love and jealousy, s[its] brooding by himself in one corner” (8: 288). By dancing to black music and delight-

ing black spectators, Crane seems to overlay black cachet on his own identity—perhaps something he must do to win the girl. Interestingly, the rivalry between Crane and Bones resembles later blackface romance parodies, where two “darkeys” vied for the affections of a beautiful wench.¹³

But the scene does more than enhance Crane through ostensible black approval: it virtually embodies everything blackface stood for then and would come to stand for later. On the one hand, it evokes the mutual interest and cultural exchange prevalent among blacks and whites in such blackface breeding grounds as Catherine Market and Pinkster, where blacks reveled in white translations of their moves and vice versa. Just as blacks appreciated their white imitators, Crane becomes “the admiration of all the negroes,” possibly because they recognize aspects of their dancing in his gestures. We know that African American dancing at Pinkster was characterized by extravagant movements that suggested the loss of bodily control.¹⁴ Being from the Hudson Valley, Crane’s spectators likely would have been Pinkster participants; that might explain why they are drawn to the schoolmaster’s clattering frenzy.

Irving’s racist caricature, on the other hand, disrupts any interracial reciprocity, anticipating disasters on the minstrel horizon. The black spectators’ shiny faces, rolling white eyes, and enormous grinning mouths emphasize the features blackface makeup would exaggerate in order to ridicule and stereotype blacks. Irving’s caricature, like early staged blackface, presages what minstrelsy would become some twenty years later. Although nascent blackface provided common ground for cultural exchange, the minstrel show became a massive racist enterprise where whites controlled black representation, while keeping blacks outside their profitable circle. Like Irving’s characters who stand at every door and window watching Crane dance in the blackface tradition, black Americans eventually became spectators to the white counterfeiting of their culture. Situated as it is between blackface folk emergence and the dawn of the minstrel show, the above passage virtually synthesizes the conflicted history of blackface.

Irving’s text also reveals how black and white cultural forms, when merged, produce something uniquely American. With its overlap of

Anglo and African American folklore and dance, “Legend” can be read as a more confident postcolonial assertion than Irving’s earlier blackface productions. Using Saint Vitus as its only old-world allusion, the description of Ichabod, for the most part, moves beyond foreign ontology: we see Irving embrace, rather than displace, the complexities of local identity. But the passage not only achieves local legitimacy; its racial fluidity also serves as a kind of adversary to the republican myth of coherent national identity. Crane’s hybrid frenzy taps the cultural confusion from which the country was emerging and reflects the precarious nature of racial and cultural categories. However, while the schoolmaster embodies fluidity, the exclusion of his black audience from the “white” festivities reminds us that cultural fusion does not necessarily melt away hierarchies of race.

Notes

- 1 Several critics have remarked on Irving’s use of Native American and Dutch materials. Rubin-Dorsky asserts that *The Sketch Book’s* “Traits of Indian Character” and “Philip of Pokanoket” exemplify Irving’s “conception of the core of the national character” (95), and Murray sees the Indian tales as Irving’s “troubled attempt to make his book American” (214). Hedges writes that Irving idealized the Dutch past because of his “dissatisfaction with the present” (66), and McLamore suggests that Knickerbocker’s Dutch stories, in tune as they are with the culture along the Hudson River, “refute English assertions of American cultural inadequacy” (46). Finally, Watts argues that Knickerbocker’s Dutch tales “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” both strive to become indigenous.
- 2 The formulaic minstrel show is usually said to begin in 1843 in New York City, when Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels took the stage at the Chatham theater. However, Lhamon has exposed this historical inaccuracy. “[T]he first minstrel show,” he explains, “was not in New York City but in provincial Buffalo. That’s where E. P. Christy formed his band and gave his first concert in June 1842” (59).
- 3 Irving’s multicultural collages resemble what Buell calls “cultural hybridization” (209), one of six traits, he suggests, that reveal postcolonial anxiety in American texts.
- 4 See Stuckey, who suggests that King Charley, the black dancer who presided over Pinkster in the eighteenth century, taught Albany slaves his dance styles, which were carried into the nineteenth century, and down river to New York City.

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- He suggests that Charley helped pioneer the double shuffle (46). The double shuffle, of course, became popular on the minstrel stage.
- 5 For brief remarks on Irving's love of pageants, see Williams 8.
 - 6 Snivers' remark is especially significant because it deflates the conventional thesis that the British actor Edmund Kean inaugurated the "tawny" Othello in 1814. Cooper's "browning up" on the American stage as far back as 1807 suggests that recolouring Othello might have been an American idea; that may explain why Snivers resists the light Othello. For more information on the whitening of Othello, see Collins and MacDonald.
 - 7 The editors in the "Assignments of Authorship" section of the Twayne edition of *Salmagundi* provide a chart detailing those who have weighed in on the who-wrote-what question, 327–328. The most weight is given to James Kirke Paulding and then Robert Stevens Osborne, who both believe Washington Irving wrote the passage. Paulding's notes of authorship assignment in the 1814 presentation copy of *Salmagundi* credit Irving as author, making it fairly certain that he wrote the passage.
 - 8 For the theorization of how minstrelsy helped whites construct their racial identities in relation to blackness, see Roediger 95–131 and Lott 63–88.
 - 9 See Nathan 126n.6. He notes that *Obi, or Three-Fingered Jack* was an English opera. I have found no evidence as to whether or not the play was produced in America, although several English blackface plays were. Still, Irving could have seen it in Britain, where he visited before writing *Salmagundi* and fell in love with the English stage.
 - 10 For stories about Haitian "cannibals" and atrocities, see Hunt 37–83.
 - 11 See White (*Somewhat More*) for further remarks on black Haitians in New York City 31–32.
 - 12 For more on the slave trickster versus the slavemaster, see Roberts 17–64.
 - 13 For a popular example of such male rivalry, see *Oh, Hush! Or, The Virginny Cupids* in Engle 1–12.
 - 14 See Shane White's "'It Was a Proud Day'" 29–31.

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