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New Book by UCSB Scholar Examines Early 20th-Century African American Film and Theater

As an undergraduate at Princeton University, Stephanie Batiste saw a photograph of seven African American performers dressed in leaf costumes for a 1930's production of "Macbeth." She wondered how it could be that "these black men were dressed up like savages in a black show." That image became the genesis of her doctoral dissertation, and now serves as the cover art for her new book, "Darkening Mirrors –– Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance" (Duke University Press, 2011).

In her book, Batiste, an associate professor of English and of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara, examines ways in which African Americans imagined themselves as empowered, modern United States citizens and transnational actors in Depression-era plays, operas, ballets, and films. "That image had me asking in a lot of different ways how these people who were treated as second-class citizens could participate in what are essentially racist, nationalist, global imperialist cultural formations," she explained.

As Batiste describes it, the book is about the promises and failures of American national identity, and the cultural gestures through which that identity is sustained. "Imperialism is about nationhood and power, not only about race," she said. "I don't cast African Americans as perpetrators as racism, it is just one way of framing the

question. Instead, they emerge as people who operate fully as Americans in their use of U.S. symbols meaning."

In studying early 20th-century African American film and theater, Batiste takes historical as well as cultural perspectives. Focusing on the period between World War I and World War II –– and, more specifically, on the Depression –– she studies film and theater productions as manifestations of ideologies, desires, and beliefs that African Americans held during this period.

"That era was so important to me because, in a way, all bets were off," Batiste explained. "We didn't know what direction we were going in politically, no one was making money, huge segments of the population were out of work, labor was being reconfigured, and people's relationship to space was being reconfigured. Then we had the government sponsoring the Works Project Administration, which paid people to make art."

The book brings attention to the Harlem Renaissance, the literary and intellectual movement that spanned the 1920's and 1930's and fostered a new black cultural identity. "I'm finding it the case that students don't know about the Harlem Renaissance," Batiste said. "Students make this jump between slavery and the civil rights movement, but African American history between those two watershed periods has been sort of forgotten."

In her exploration of what she describes as "African Americans' investment in and resistance to American imperial and expansionist projects through stage and screen performance," Batiste has organized the book into six chapters, each focusing on a different imperialist discourse. She begins with the American West and a study of how African Americans were using the discourse of the frontier to articulate their own American national identity. She then focuses on primitivism and exoticism, examining how African Americans represented West Indians, particularly Jamaicans and Haitians.

Batiste presents a chapter on orientalism, which studies "The Swing Mikado," a version of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera put to swing music and performed by African Americans in yellow face. "The argument I make is that this is a conduit through which the United States appropriates a British imperial past and activates its own imperial present and future in the Pacific," she said.

From there, she takes a look at ethnographic anthropology as one of the foundational imperialist discourses from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During that period, African Americans made strides in anthropology, she noted, including formal training with notables in the field such as Franz Boaz, whom scholars have referred to as the father of modern anthropology.

Finally, she examines the film "Stormy Weather," and discusses how the various resistant and imperial operations of black culture were appropriated by a dominant discourse to reclaim black people as citizens.

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