CHAPTER 1

A Gold Rush, Steamships, and Blackface: The New York Serenaders in San Francisco and India, early-1850s

Bradley Shope

Abstract

Between 1851 and 1853, the American blackface troupe New York Serenaders toured cities and towns across India, performing both minstrel songs and English traditional music. English-speaking audiences considered the group to be authentic curators of contemporary United States performance culture. Steamships facilitated their travel within the subcontinent and made available to the group shipments of the most up-to-date printed music of minstrel songs from the U.S., which was important to their reputation as leading-edge performers. The group traveled from the Atlantic seaboard of the United States to San Francisco during the gold rush era in 1849, but they left California soon after to pursue performance opportunities at destinations in the Pacific, and eventually in India. This chapter focuses on the technological, cultural, and commercial circumstances that made possible their travel from San Francisco to India. It more specifically examines the impact of racism unique to blackface minstrelsy in India, the availability of printed music on the subcontinent, the expansion of steamship transportation within and beyond the British empire, and the role of San Francisco as a blossoming Pacific port powerhouse. It ultimately suggests that the confluence of these determinants enabled an organized group of American blackface musicians to travel to India and successfully perform popular music from the U.S.

Keywords: steamships, blackface, minstrelsy, gold rush, printed music, popular music

The population of San Francisco increased dramatically within a few months of the discovery of gold in California in 1848. By 1849, improved transportation networks moved people, cargo, and news between the city and international destinations with ever-increasing efficiency and frequency, including to countries in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The New York Serenaders, a six-person American blackface minstrel troupe, initially led by Bill White on violin, were part of the flood of entertainers that travelled to San Francisco in 1849. Shortly after their arrival, they took advantage of the large number of ships departing the city to Pacific ports, seeking opportunities in Hawaii, Australia, and eventually India. They were among the first
organized American blackface minstrel troupes to tour the Indian subcontinent, travelling to Bombay (modern Mumbai), Calcutta (modern Kolkata), and other small cities and towns between 1851 and 1853. They performed minstrel songs, parodies, stump speeches, and skits in racist blackface, but they also performed British folk and traditional songs and dances, including clog dancing, a style of step-dance characterized by the use of inflexible wooden-soled shoes.

This chapter explores the confluence of technological, cultural, and commercial circumstances that made possible the New York Serenaders’ tour of India in the early 1850s. It focuses on four areas: (1) the expansion of steamship transportation within and beyond the British Empire, (2) the character and scope of racist elements inherent in blackface minstrelsy in India, (3) the California gold rush, and (4) the availability of printed music in India via transnational steamship networks. Historians Charles Bright and Michael Geyer suggest that occasional confluences of interweaving historical conditions—or “entanglements” as they term it—can become “thick,” achieving a threshold that “reverberates throughout the world.” The above four thematic areas converged and impacted commercial and musical activities in India and the Pacific world, creating a “thicker” moment that for the first time enabled an organized group of American blackface musicians to travel to India and perform American popular music. Much of this chapter addresses music mobility made possible by steamships, which in the early to middle 1800s facilitated unprecedented flows of passengers and ideas between India and distant locations, and significantly impacted communication and commercial activity throughout the empire and beyond. Steamships created novel connections between people and places, and supported a new mobility in music commerce between port cities in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The New York Serenaders were popular in India in part because the racism associated with blackface minstrelsy was uniquely relevant to audiences there. Subaltern scholar Clare Anderson suggests that categories of race at this time in the British empire were fluid, culturally contingent against broader politics of difference, and “not simply grounded in ‘birth’, ‘blood’, or ‘colour’.” Writing about race and the development of blackface minstrels in the British empire at the time, Richard Waterhouse proposes that audiences conflated “West Indian and African Negroes [sic] as well as the Indians into one inclusive category of inferiority …[t]hey were all savage, infantile and incompetent.” Colonialism is in many respects a relationship of domination and difference, or of domination and subordination, and the social construction of race—sometimes fluid and contingent, and sometimes rigid and essentialized—constituted a key marker of social position. Using blackface performance practice as a single frame of analysis, this chapter proposes, in part, that audiences conflated divergent categories of race into an essentialized classification—namely, black or African American—and ascribed to that very
classification a subordinate status. In the blackface minstrel performances of the New York Serenaders in India, less-provocative expressions of racial ordering could be maintained through performative subjugation of African Americans rather than any of the racialized populations specific to the subcontinent at the time. In this manner, the New York Serenaders' performances were more innocuous for public consumption. Essentially, audiences projected their class and racial awarenesses and apprehensions onto the American system of slavery and racial positioning.8

The New York Serenaders chose to travel across the Pacific and into the Indian Ocean from San Francisco in part because the British empire was an arena of expansion and profit. Audiences in India viewed the group as authentic curators of American blackface minstrelsy, and as such they became popular among British, European and other English-speaking audiences (including Indians). The term “entanglement” in this volume suggests that people and places are not only connected, but are also sometimes frequently disconnected and reconnected.9 The New York Serenaders left San Francisco after one of their instrumentalists, Arthur Reynolds, was murdered in the Bella Union, a popular saloon and performance venue. They arrived in San Francisco seeking riches and participation in the growing performance industry, but quickly left for Hawaii when violence struck, as I will discuss later. New York Serenaders' tour of India (a few short months after their travel to Hawaii) represented a “thicker” moment for blackface minstrelsy because the lawlessness of San Francisco pushed the group away from the city, the racial undercurrents that made popular blackface performances in India pulled them to the subcontinent, and the increasing efficiency and safety of steamships made possible much of their travel and growth in popularity.

Historians of 1800s British imperialism often suggest that a wide variety of activities in the British empire impacted cultural and commercial mobilities and networks within the imperial framework.10 These scholars conceptualize the British empire as a complex patchwork of interacting and dynamic agencies and locations, rather than as one homogenous center-down entity with a single overarching objective directed from London. The remarkable growth of San Francisco and the efficient movement of musicians and printed music across the Pacific region exemplify some of these interrelated, horizontal entanglements. A pattern emerged in the early-1850s that positioned San Francisco as a location of impact with other metropolises in the empire. It became enmeshed with established British imperial cultural trends and commercial enterprises, which was most clearly seen in Bombay and Calcutta, where the New York Serenaders often performed British traditional music as much as blackface minstrel songs. They learned many of these English songs while in India, made possible to some extent by the availability of printed music, and they became entangled in a music culture in these two cities that obliged them to perform songs outside the blackface canon.
Steamships

Historian Frank Broeze suggests that 1850 was the beginning of the “disappearance of the wooden sailing ship as the prime mover of intercontinental and regional trade, and its replacement by metal vessels, first iron and then steel, propelled by sail as well as steam.” From the 1830s through the late 1800s, Britain maintained significant technological and commercial advantage in steamship development and construction, largely because of a worldwide system of government mail subsidies that supported the transportation of commercial cargo of all sorts, including printed music and newspapers. American maritime industry became more significant to this imperial transport network around 1849 with the growth of shipping activity from San Francisco. Jean Heffer, a historian of American imperialism in the Pacific, suggests that “[at] the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, all American ships trading with the Pacific left from, and returned to, Northeastern [United States] ports[,] ... in San Francisco the Americans had acquired direct, if still limited, access to the Pacific—an advantage their European competitors could only envy.” With the discovery of gold, San Francisco began to partially alter this British-dominated Pacific and Indian Ocean maritime commerce.

The early 1850s were the initial years of the large-scale impact of commercial steamship travel. Many scholars cite the 1860s as the critical period of impact, when a broader scope of steamships travelled farther, safer, and faster. The expansiveness of global steamship travel routes matured and intensified significantly during this decade. The impact of steamers on the mobility of music between India and the U.S. in the early 1850s was subtler. No regular steamship activity existed between San Francisco and Hawaii or Australia in the early 1850s. In fact, the New York Serenaders travelled to and from these destinations on sailing ships. However, in 1849 the Pacific Mail Steamship Company in the United States opened the route between San Francisco and Panama, as well as to ports in Latin America. Though it would be several years before a regular, timetabled system of steamers ran between North America and distant locations such as Australia, New Zealand, and India, the capacity of entertainers to travel in steamers from the Atlantic seaboard to San Francisco supported San Francisco’s role as a major launching point to locations in the Pacific. Additionally, while in India the group travelled via steamships, which was a comparatively safe and efficient means of transportation, and the most recent sheet music of blackface minstrel songs was available via established steamship commercial networks from Europe or England.

Steamships travelling to India carried news and information about San Francisco. In the months before the New York Serenaders arrived, English-language newspapers throughout the subcontinent closely followed developments in San Francisco and its growing potential as a Pacific port. The *Friend of India and
Statesman in Calcutta published regular articles that expressed anxiety about the growth of California and its potential to alter commerce in the Pacific. An article on August 26, 1852 stated with apprehension that, “[t]he giant strides of America have astounded the world, and in their greatness baffled all calculation ... with our eyes we see them grasping at the trade of the world.” Another anonymous article in the Bombay Gazette on October 30, 1850 even suggested that Americans had become the “lords of the Pacific”:

...Accustomed as our Transatlantic cousins are to expect everything and to claim everything, they little thought five years ago that they would soon occupy the western coast [of the United States], be the lords of the pacific, and possess a city there whose sudden rise surpasses even the imperial creations of Constantinople and Alexandria. They are quite beside themselves with wonderment and joy."

This same article suggests that the many “robberies and assassinations” in the city require “a rule which very much resembles the Saxon institutions of tythings and hundreds, and which alone seems capable of reducing to order any utterly heterogeneous mass of men.” Articles in the Bombay Gazette frequently referenced the lawlessness of San Francisco, so the readership was aware of both its historic growth and its disorder and, in this instance, readers were met with suggestions that British approaches to law and regulation might assist with the disorder.

The front page of the Bombay Gazette in this same issue printed a large advertisement for a performance of the Ethiopian Serenaders, a blackface group from England touring India at the time. The advertisement listed their song repertoire in detail, the price of admission, and other particulars. Blackface minstrelsy had been popular in England from the middle 1840s (almost as early as in the United States) and by the late 1850s at least 50 minstrel troupes were performing in Britain, with a dozen or so in London. A significant number of American performers stayed in England and started English-based troupes. By the time the New York Serenaders arrived on the subcontinent in 1851, both the growth of San Francisco and blackface performances in India were prominently positioned in the English-language news.

Articles about San Francisco in the India-based Bombay Gazette were frequently printed in a section titled “European Extracts,” which reproduced content from a variety of newspapers in Europe and England. Steamship historian Peter Putnis suggests that regularly timetabled steamship mail services enabled the steady circulation of news and information to cities within the British empire and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Steamships traveling across the globe carried newspapers, dispatches, and other communication matter to major port cities. According to Putnis, this global communication network was primarily a matter of the international circulation (via steamers) of content from local newspapers that...
were reprinted in special editions that provided news and information services aimed at promoting the interests of colonial communities throughout the British Empire and elsewhere. Urban centers with large ports became repositories of files of papers garnered from throughout the world. Roland Wenzlhuemer has recently emphasized that steamships not only brought their endpoints in contact, they also interjected themselves as mediators in the flow of information, gaining a “strong bearing on that which [was] connected.”

The ships themselves mediated, transformed and modified meanings attributed to the communication and merchandise they carried. Because the information was transported on an advanced, speedy technology, the onboard news (and cargo) sometimes garnered special attention. This value-added discernment impacted marketing and advertising strategies for cargo, especially for printed music, as discussed below.

Another article in the *Bombay Gazette* earlier that year referenced the availability of blackface minstrelsy in San Francisco:

> There are two or three sets of Ethiopian serenaders in the city, who nightly lament the absence of Miss Neal, mourn over the fate of Rosa Lee, inform the public that they have just arrived from Alabama, or request in the most earnest manner, to be carried by to Old Virginy.

Even though these dispatches came from the west coast of the United States, they possibly travelled from San Francisco to the east coast of the U.S., and from there to England or Europe, then via mail steamers to Alexandria, Egypt, and onward via steamship from Suez to India, or alternatively from England to India around the Cape of Good Hope, at least in the early 1850s.

Equally significant to San Francisco’s dynamic growth was widespread enthusiasm surrounding the arrival of steamship service. The *California* was possibly the first steamer to arrive in San Francisco carrying gold-seekers in early 1849. The *Alta California*, one of the earliest San Francisco newspapers, ran an article titled “LOOK OUT FOR THE STEAMER!” in anticipation of the arrival of this ship:

> The knowing ones say we may daily look for the first steamer. If this be so, ought not our citizens to take some steps to manifest their joy at an occasion so full of interest to this Port? We most strenuously recommend the holding of a public meeting, the appointment of a committee of arrangements, and the raising of a fund for burning of powder and spermaceti on the occasion. It is an event so fraught with future hopes of advantage, that our memories will almost deserve execration if we do not celebrate the event in proper style and spirit. It is an epoch that deserves to be brought into bold relief, and he who takes an active part in getting up a judicious observance of the occasion, will, ten years hence, think it the proudest event of his life.
Enthusiasm associated with San Francisco’s dramatically blossoming maritime industry compelled many musicians to not only travel to the city, but to also view it as an increasingly sophisticated port from which they could travel across the Pacific to various Asian destinations.

New York Serenaders and San Francisco

The rapid development of San Francisco created new industries, generated interest in musical entertainment among the large numbers of people arriving in the city, increased the number of entertainment venues, and expedited its role as a major transportation hub. It was a small town of about 500 in early 1848, but by 1851 it had grown to 30,000 or more people, with a variety of entertainment venues and performance groups, including an opera company. The transcontinental telegraph was not available in San Francisco until 1861, the regular overland mail by pony express was not available until 1860, and the transcontinental railroad did not connect the east and west coasts of the United States until 1869. Before the semi-monthly steamer service of the Panama Mail Steamship Company between San Francisco and Panama in 1849, news arriving in California from the eastern United States was often six months old. Even after the launch of this steamship mail service, news from the Atlantic seaboard was often a month old. Information from outside California in the early years of the gold rush was choppy and dated. The passenger ship service to San Francisco from Panama, part of the primary route from the eastern U.S. from 1848–1851, was tumultuous, with service cost-prohibitive for many potential travelers. By 1851, we start to see regular, large-scale service with the launch of the steamer Golden Gate. Kemble claims that this steamer started a new era of reliable timetabled travel: “[t]his was the first steamer actually built for the transportation of large numbers of passengers between Panama and San Francisco, and she inaugurated a period of fair stability.” In spite of such communication and transportation complexities, by the time New York Serenaders arrived in 1849, the city was awash with money, large numbers of people were motivated to pay hearty sums to make the trip to the city, and maritime transportation networks to and from the city were rapidly developing.

New York Serenaders were among the first minstrel groups to regularly perform in San Francisco at the dawn of the gold rush era in the late 1840s. When they arrived in San Francisco in 1849, competition among performance groups quickly increased, the challenges of lawlessness in the city intensified, and direct travel to Pacific locations such as Hawaii or Australia became more frequent and practical for musicians. In early 1850 the New York Serenaders travelled to
Hawaii via sail, arriving in January that year. They returned to California to perform in Sacramento beginning in June, and then San Francisco beginning in August. They travelled to Australia in February 1851 for a tour that lasted from March through the end of the year. The fact that they travelled to Hawaii in early 1850, then back to California, then to Australia in just a little over a year is testament to the potentials of travel via sail to locations in the Pacific from San Francisco.

Newly built performance venues in San Francisco catered to a broad scope of audience members of all financial means, and musicians travelled to the city to meet this growing audience demand, but at the same time the city pushed people away because of its profound challenges, at least in the early 1850s. In discussing the movement of blackface minstrel musicians to Hawaii in the early 1850s, minstrel historian T. Allston Brown suggests that Hawaii was “full of Californians avoiding the hardships of California incidental to the hard times of 1849.” Opportunities in San Francisco attracted entertainers to the city, and its foreboding pushed entertainers away, including westward to Hawaii, Australia, and beyond.

A key reason that the New York Serenaders left San Francisco for Hawaii in the early 1850s was the murder of their bones (a rhythmic instrument) musician Arthur Reynolds in a gambling/theatre house, the Bella Union. According to the newspaper *Alta California*, Reynolds was sleeping in a back room after a performance at the venue. At 4 am, the perpetrator Reuben Withers, a local businessman who had recently arrived from New York, asked him to leave the establishment, and when Reynolds refused, Withers pointed a pistol at his chest. Though witness accounts vary, a struggle ensued, Reynolds struck Withers twice with a chair, and while Reynolds was later holding Withers from behind, Withers pulled a knife and violently stabbed Reynolds’ throat. Violinist Bill White, leader of the New York Serenaders at the time, witnessed the murder. The *Daily Alta California* newspaper wrote that “Mr. White testified that when the deceased took hold of Mr. Withers, he was endeavoring to pacify him; told him to be quiet and that he was his friend.” Further complicating matters, Withers escaped immediate arrest, and a $3000 bounty was placed for his return to San Francisco. Rumors of his whereabouts circulated San Francisco, and some accounts suggest he travelled to Acapulco via steamer, where other passengers on the ship recognized him and alerted the authorities.

Dramatic transgressions in San Francisco were common at the time. Withers was arrested a few months later in Mazatlan, Mexico, sent back to San Francisco, and acquitted of the crimes because witnesses could not be secured and early gold rush legal ambiguities associated with his capture and re-patriation complicated his prosecution. The murder and the subsequent departure of the New York
Serenaders from San Francisco was emblematic of the push and pull of San Francisco. Reynold's unjustified and untimely death, and the escape Mr. Withers to Mexico, were likely a key reason the group left San Francisco for Hawaii shortly after the incident. The large number of ships leaving for Pacific ports facilitated their quick departure.

The Bella Union was considered a more refined saloon. Similar establishments in San Francisco were sometimes called “melodeons” (after the portable reed organ that could sometimes substitute for an orchestra). According to George Martin, the Bella Union and other melodeons offered a “better grade of liquor and barmaid, spitoons for the tobacco-chewers, and private rooms for gambling” than many saloons in the city. The performance area was typically accessed through the barroom and, according to Martin, “though the audience was perhaps less coarse in language, dress, and behavior, it was still almost exclusively male, still only marginally interested in the show.” The New York Serenaders were considered fit for these upper-end saloons equipped with a stage, and the sheer scope of advertisements for their performances in San Francisco and Sacramento suggests they did not have trouble finding work in some of these higher-end saloons. Yet these establishments were rowdy, and performances were only one type of entertainment among a broad scope of diversions such as gambling.

The movement of musicians around the world is both a matter of people seeking to perform elsewhere and people who want to leave somewhere. Andrew Jones has recently suggested that all performance circuits have various push-and-pull factors that compel performers to travel to and from international locations. According to Jones, emergent technologies—in our case, steamships—function not only to enable but also to delimit or prevent the flow of music and musicians. New technologies can render music more portable and accessible, scale-up musical networks, and according to Jones “bring together national, cross-regional, or even global communities of listeners.” The dramatic growth of San Francisco and the economic and transportation pathways that it facilitated compelled people to come to its shores, and when people wanted to leave—as was the case with New York Serenaders when their bones player was murdered—its newly created or reconfigured transport routes facilitated movement outwards towards the Pacific, and eventually India. Further, because of the efficient international circulation of news and cargo via steamers, interested audiences in India had access to printed music of minstrel songs and information about San Francisco even before the New York Serenaders landed on the subcontinent. When they arrived in late 1851, audiences wanted to hear their music and placed value on their background performing in California, especially San Francisco.
The Pull of India

Reviews of the New York Serenaders’ performances in Bombay and Calcutta suggest that they were enthusiastically received, and that interested audiences wanted to hear the most recent minstrel songs. Even before their arrival, newspapers reprinted reviews of their earlier performances in Australia, which generated excitement about their upcoming tour. This strategy of reprinting reviews of their performances from international locations outside of India was common. A review of a performance in Hobart Town, Van Diemen’s Land (modern Tasmania) in the Courier on November 15, 1851 was reprinted in the Bombay Gazette in July 21, 1852 before their arrival in Bombay from Calcutta, and was upbeat: “As anticipated, the Theatre was crowded, and a spirit of enthusiasm, that never once flagged, pervaded the whole house form the very commencement of the performances ... We spoke of the enthusiasm of the audience—occasionally bursting beyond all bounds[.]” Most of their reviews in India were similarly positive, and the choice to reprint a review from Australia in the Bombay Gazette was a strategy at marketing the international scope of the group.

Minstrelsy parodied African American life and culture through music, dance, and theatre. White performers blackened the face with burnt cork. Performers included songs that carried racist lyrics and skits that parodied African Americans, or slave culture more generally. Tayyab Mahmud suggests that British attitudes of racial difference during the colonial period implied that, “Europe, being the subject of History, had the right, nay the duty to govern other races, to impregnate them with reason, progress and the rule of law.” In India, accentuating the rule of racial difference included legally sanctioned sites of segregation such as vagrancy laws that called for the deportation of whites whose deviant behavior undermined the mystiques of the race, Contagious Disease Acts that contained inter-racial sexual relations, and so on. While England enacted discriminatory policies that recognized a range of racial distinctions, blackface minstrelsy in India at this time openly directed racism specifically towards African Americans. It was a racialized space of commodity production that circumvented direct prejudice towards most of the myriad categories of race and class found on the subcontinent. Prevailing imperial ideologies at the time that sought to eventually level Indian subjects to a higher plane in the social order made nonviable the possibility of ongoing, performative subjugation of Indians, Eurasians, and others inside and outside the broad classification of “European,” at least during this short period. The racism of blackface minstrels worked well in this racial climate, and it is one reason they were popular among English-speaking audiences of many backgrounds.

An article printed in the Bombay Gazette on July 31, 1852 references the strategy of recognizing, through performances of the New York Serenaders, the potential of “less favoured” races to achieve, under the proper circumstances, a higher status or
to be “hailed” with the appropriate recognition of social position. According to the article, their performances suggest the need to promote the standing of individuals of African descent to a more favorable level:

May it not be said that [the New York Serenaders] and similar Ethiopian companies, by presenting the world with the simple, but affecting, picture of the joys and woes of unsophisticated “Nigger [sic],” society, are, unconsciously, extending a livelier sympathy for a cruelly depressed race, and dissipating narrow-minded prejudices against a less favoured portion of the human family? If this be so, they must be hailed, as they never before were hailed—as engaged in a noble mission, the ends of which will better be served by those who work in ignorance of the results to which their labours are contributing. 58

According to this article, the New York Serenaders, though composed of white performers, were symbolic of the potential for individuals of African descent to achieve certain civilizing capacities. 59 This framework suggests that blackface performances had the potential to compel audiences to consider that the racially disenfranchised should obtain a more equitable future, and that a racial re-ordering might be warranted.

Richard Waterhouse has found that American minstrel performers in England during this time emphasized a vernacular considered particular to slaves in the United States, which was an important draw in India. 60 These references to slavery granted audiences real and imagined cosmopolitan access to the culture of the United States. Advertisements in local English-language newspapers often emphasized that the music represented certain rare or exotic elements unique to its American character. An article in the Bombay Gazette on July 8, 1852 suggested that, “The true American ‘Negro Character’ will be represented in their Entertainments, and nothing will be omitted to render their performances ‘recherche,’ and worthy of attention of all Lover of Music.” Minstrels held a “recherche” or exotic quality for audiences, but they also concurrently represented the culture of the United States more generally. An announcement of their arrival in Calcutta in the Friend of India and Statesman asserts that, “Americans have accepted the strange music of these bands as national.” It was strange and exotic, but also uniquely American, which—correct or incorrect—played into its value.

As an example of the use of racist elements in their song repertoire, consider one of their more frequently performed songs, Commence You Darkies [sic] All. This piece suggests that black (or blackface) musicians performing in the minstrel idiom have a special ability to generate enthusiasm and excitement for their performances:

White folks, I am goin’ to sing
A song dat am quite new,
Ob myself an’ banjo-string,
An’ you, an’you, an’ you!
Oh, Sam, don’t laugh, I say,
Our strings will keep in tune,
Just listen to de banjo play
For de white folks ‘round de room!
(Chorus)
Den commence you darkies all,
As loud as you can bawl!
Commence you darkies all tonight.

Touch light de banjo-string,
An’ rattle de ole jaw-bone,
Oh, merrily sound de tambourine,
An’ make de fiddle hum;
An’ make de fiddle hum, old dad;
De way dem bones will shake,
Am a caution to all living niggs,
An’ a deff to rattlesnakes.

The lyrics were written in a manufactured vernacular, subjugating the “darkie” musicians to a distinct status, and suggesting that the performers carry an innate musical capacity to incite unusual excitement among the “white” audience.

The year before the New York Serenaders arrived in India, the Ethiopian Serenaders from England performed in Bombay and Calcutta. Their repertoire included a broad scope of minstrel songs and, as was the case with the New York Serenaders, performance reviews often emphasized the American origins of their comedic structure. One review in Bombay emphasized their use of a sense of humor similar to that which was seen in the U.S.:

The great majority of those who went to hear and enjoy the entertainment, were only prepared for the ‘Nigger Songs [sic]’ and the accompaniment of the American Bones and other corresponding music;—their gratification must therefore have been much enhanced, when they found each song introduced by a dialogue spiced with witticisms and redolent of conundrums of the latest Yankee make and fashion.

Attention to the American origins of blackface minstrelsy was not unique to the performances of the New York Serenaders, and expectations of authenticity were a component of the popularity of the Ethiopian Serenaders, as well as other minstrel groups that played in India throughout the nineteenth century.
While in Bombay and Calcutta, the New York Serenaders often performed British traditional music, including traditional British and European operas, as well as original pieces set to lyrics from British writers and poets, often arranged by J. P. Nash, the group's guitar player. This segment of their show was called the “white face” section, and often constituted about half of the total songs they performed. The repertoire was romantic and melancholic. One of the pieces frequently performed in this section was an arrangement of *The Child's First Grief*, a poem by English poet Felicia Hemans (1793–1835). It imagines a child coping with the death of a brother. The poem addresses the child's lack of motivation to play in the absence of the deceased sibling. Using first-person from the child's perspective, it dramatically foregrounds the child's attempt to understand where the brother has gone, and why he cannot be brought back. Another song often performed in this section was a musical arrangement of the poem *My Soul Is Dark* by British poet Lord Byron. As the title suggests, it deals with a struggle to escape sorrow and sadness, and highlights the capacity of music to act as a cathartic release.

Their choice to perform a musical arrangement of one of the great English poets was a conscious effort to promote the fashionable arts of England. Minstrel shows in the United States in the early 1850s similarly borrowed from songs outside the minstrel canon and sometimes focused on melancholic sentimentalities, but they were typically comedic in nature, whether musically or dramatically. An overview of the songs performed in the “white face” section of performances in India suggests that the New York Serenaders seemed to steer from the musical or dramatic characteristics commonly associated with blackface minstrels. This section was essentially designed to showcase British music and literature. The serious, romantic themes contrasted the blackface sections, and offered British audiences a chance to experience a nostalgic slice of home. In his research on British cultural life in Calcutta, P. J. Marshall suggests that British residents in India were frequently concerned with “sustaining British cultural life for themselves.” In fact, the 1850 census of Calcutta suggests that only 7534 “Europeans” lived in the city, so audiences embraced the rare opportunity to experience live performances of British music and poetry. The New York Serenaders catered to this demand.

Claire Anderson suggests that the 1850 Calcutta census included “sailors, paupers and vagrants, sex workers, and even escaped convicts from Australia,” as well as other so-called “poor whites” which variously included individuals and communities whose background contributed to ambiguity in definitions of whiteness at the time. Categories of race were equivocal and fractured, with internal contradictions and ambiguous boundaries. Satoshi Mizutani suggests that ancestry and certain somatic indicators such as skin color were necessary but not always adequate to be recognized as a commanding white agent of
British rule. Social status and level of education were important indicators and, according to Mizutani, “only those whites with sufficient degrees of attainment in these terms were deemed able to command the respect and awe of colonized subjects.” Further, multiple English-speaking communities, including mixed-race populations, lived in India in an expansive multilingual environment. Not all of the 7534 “Europeans” were directly from Europe or England, and a larger number than that were English-speakers.

These expansive, often ambiguous categories of race prove challenging when attempting to identify the composition of audiences in the early 1850s. New York Serenaders typically performed in the European sections of town, including the Barrackpore cantonment adjacent to Calcutta, and the Bombay Theatre in Bombay. However, the group sometimes performed in middle-class Indian neighborhoods far from these areas, including at the Grant Road Theatre in Bombay (opened in 1846), which showcased English theater traditions during this time. This theater was constructed primarily with the support of Indian (including Parsi) notables in Bombay and, according to Parsi theater scholar Kathryn Hansen, the venue catered to “both amateur British actors residing in the cantonment and civil lines and professional touring artists from England, Europe or America.” Hansen suggests that theater owners sought to attract a diverse variety of audiences, and its location on Grant Road situated it in a district separate from more upscale neighborhoods, which “suited theatre managers intent on attracting a larger, more heterogeneous audience” and broadened its class base of theatrical spectatorship. Presumably, these diverse audiences attended the blackface minstrel shows, which at the time were in English. Further, blackface minstrelsy included farcical material that was later a characteristic of Parsi theater traditions, which developed into a staged performance practice in 1853. The Grant Road Theatre was a major venue in the growth of Parsi theater, so we can conclude that, at the very least, Parsis constituted at least a portion of the audience. If we accept that audiences included some assortment of so-called “poor whites” as well as middle-class Indians (including Parsis), then we can conclude that racialized meanings and stratifications inherent in blackface were constantly configured and reconfigured.

Printed Music

When addressing the support mechanisms behind large-scale performance circuits, Timothy Taylor has recently argued that “things—whether tangible or intangible—circulate because they have value for people.” He suggests that value facilitates circulation, and with circulation comes the exchange of time, work, and action. Drawing from the varied works of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, Taylor
emphasizes that “things of value circulate whether or not they are considered to possess economic value.” While this may seem obvious at first, when we consider music, we see that aesthetics can contribute significantly to the attribution of value. As select audiences in India developed an appreciation for blackface minstrelsy, they sought to purchase printed music. Retail stores then sought to stock their shelves with the most recent selections, creating a commodity item that required global distribution and supply chain management.

Ian Woodfield has shown that printed music from Europe and England was available in India from at least the late 1700s. But with the advent of steamers, tight scheduling, and well-organized procedures for loading, unloading, and re-fueling, a sophisticated shipping process with strict timetables and continually improving ports streamlined the ordering and distribution process. Many of the first electric telegraph lines in India were constructed between shipping docks and city business districts, with the first of such lines established in Calcutta for public use in 1851. Often, steamers arriving in ports received up-to-date freight orders from the city center via electrical telegraph. Ships then communicated these inventory needs when arriving at their next port of call, essentially sharing information on freight orders throughout ports across the globe. More efficient, reliable, and fast shipping patterns made possible quicker communication with music publishing businesses in London, San Francisco, Melbourne, and Sidney from which stores in India could order the most recent selections.

Ports became highly efficient in unloading and distributing cargo to warehouses and retail locations in the central business districts. For example, consider a shipment of printed music that arrived in Bombay on Friday, January 23, 1852 for the importer/exporter and retail store firm Brown, Clough and Company. On that day, the steamer SS Achilles arrived in Bombay with the printed music cargo, as was announced in the shipping news section of the Bombay Gazette. The next day (Saturday, January 24), the company printed an ad in the Bombay Gazette indicating that they had received the printed music, that they were sorting through it, and that they were expecting that it would be available for purchase soon. On Monday, January 26 they printed another advertisement stating that the music was available for purchase at their retail location, and they even listed some of the song selections. So essentially, the steamer arrived at Bombay on Friday, and the printed music was unloaded, unpacked, inventoried, and marketed for sale by Monday, merely three days later.

An overview of retail companies selling music at the time suggests a good amount of demand, and perhaps competition, when the New York Serenaders were touring India. Robert Frith and Company, Crawford and Company, and Thacker and Company, among others, actively sold printed music that year, but Brown, Clough, and Company focused on printed music as a niche market, at least for a while. Their
marketing strategy involved advertising that it was new, that it arrived on steamers, and that they could make the music available before their competitors, as is evidenced in the above example. Companies initiated a wide variety of advertising tactics at the time. For example, many businesses listed songs for sale that referenced popular global performers such as Jenny Lind, who was performing in the United States at the time under the management of the American entrepreneur P. T. Barnum. Sellers also printed the date and the name of the steamship on which the sheet music arrived in India. This marketing strategy was important for printed music because the newest music often had more value than older selections. Additionally, the steamers that these advertisements referenced, especially the Achilles and the Ajdaha, regularly carried passengers and cargo between India and Suez via the Gulf of Aden, and consumers knew that cargo arriving on these crafts was recently shipped from England or Europe on two reliable and speedy vessels.

Steamers were advanced machines. Consumers wanted the music sent via these sleek new transport technologies because they were modern and new. For blackface minstrels, this quick arrival of minstrel music on steamers had advertising potential and helped popularize minstrels in India. For the New York Serenaders, advertisements of their performances often emphasized that the music they performed came directly from the U.S. As an example, consider an advertisement printed in the Calcutta Morning Chronicle on February 18, 1853 (see Figure 1). The New York Serenaders were playing in Calcutta during this time after a successful run in Bombay. This ad not only gives us a sense of the wide variety of minstrel music they performed, it also teaches us the importance placed on the origins of the music in the United States, and the role of the steamer in creating value. The top of the ad indicates that the entire performance was a program of “New Songs … Just Received By Steamer from America.” This point is well-emphasized a number of times, and the advertisement asserts that their performances “will consist of the Songs they have just received.” The pieces performed for the first time in India are listed in the advertisement with the qualifier “first time” listed next to the title, and constitute 8 of the 21 pieces performed. These songs were also listed for sale in retail stores in Bombay, as well as in the U.K. several months later, including in Glasgow and Greenock in Scotland. However, it’s questionable that the printed music came from the United States entirely via steamer. As mentioned earlier, steamship travel to India from North and South America was not active. If the music came directly from the United States, it likely arrived via sailing ship from the Pacific Coast of North America, then by steamer from Australia. It’s also possible that the music was shipped (via steamship or otherwise) from the Atlantic seaboard to England, then via steamships to India. Steamships had made the Atlantic crossing between the United States and Europe as early as 1819, and passenger liners travelled the Atlantic as early as 1837.
Fig. 1.1 Advertisement in *The Morning Chronicle*. 
Concluding Remarks

The sentiments, structures and commodities that enabled the movement of blackface minstrelsy from San Francisco to India—in our case gold, steamers, printed music, and racism—involved a set of conditions and connections that unfolded into remunerative types of economic exchange for the New York Serenaders, and ultimately contributed to a continuing sense of cultural continuity for British and European audiences. New patterns of globalized, interdependent commercial activities and knowledge systems emerged in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere that enhanced the movement of musicians and information across colonial and non-colonial spaces. The New York Serenaders, in sensing the potentials and possibilities in these interdependencies, engaged in the necessary patterns of entrepreneurship to successfully tour the subcontinent, including emphasizing their American origins and performing British songs outside the blackface tradition. Their achievements relied on social familiarity; British audiences viewed the whiteface components of minstrels as nostalgic representations of a slice of home, and the blackface elements as representative of the United States.

This chapter focuses on one key moment within a broader continuum of musical movements between India and the United States, and is not meant to be a comprehensive study of the New York Serenaders’ tour, nor of blackface in India more generally. In fact, a broad scope of support structures facilitated the tour of the New York Serenaders in India that I do not discuss here, including a system of ticket agents created by travelling opera and theater companies. Additionally, the 1860s witnessed a more expansive increase in the availability of blackface minstrelsy with the arrival of American minstrel performer Dave Carson. He designed performances that parodied a broader scope of populations, including British and Bengalis, and he made use of an even more efficient globalized transportation network. My arguments about racism are not necessarily relevant to minstrelsy after the 1850s because we begin to see performers, including Carson, comically mocking British, American, European, and certain Indian populations. By specifically examining India in the early 1850s, we see a unique set of circumstances that represented the early stages of globalized patterns of information and technology dissemination that, in conjunction with developing commercial and transportation enterprises, brought American blackface performers to India.
Notes

1 Several contemporary newspaper articles suggest that they arrived in San Francisco in 1848. I found no concrete evidence of this claim, but it's possible that one or more members of the group may have travelled to the city to perform, or to explore the potential of performing in the city. The personnel of the group changed over time, but many of the core members remained through the end of their tour in India.

2 The New York Serenaders were not the first organized blackface minstrel group to tour India. The Ethiopian Serenaders from England travelled to India in 1850, about a year before the New York Serenaders, and other groups possibly performed even earlier. Musicians from the U.S. (and elsewhere) travelled to India before this time to perform early manifestations of blackface minstrelsy and minstrel songs. Additional research is needed to identify a timeline of early blackface performances in India, and to define the distinction between blackface minstrelsy and nonspecific variety shows that incorporated blackface components. English-language newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s in India occasionally referenced Jim Crow performances in India, which was a style of entertainment often considered a direct precursor to blackface minstrelsy. See, for example, Englishman, March 3, 1838 and April 23, 1838. For brief accounts of Jim Crow performances in Calcutta in the 1830s, see R. Bhattacharyya, “Promiscuous Spaces and Economies of Entertainment: Soldiers, Actresses and Hybrid Genres in Colonial India,” Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film 41, no. 2 (2014), 50–75, and C. Anderson, Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920 (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2012).


8 I do not necessarily suggest that these sorts of anxieties and racial constructs were pervasive in other contexts.

9 T. Ballantyne, “Rereading the Archive and Opening the Nation-State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (and Beyond),” in A. Burton (ed), After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) uses a similar conceptual frame when suggesting that the empire is a structure or a “complex system of overlapping and interwoven institutions, organizations, ideologies, and discourse ... consisting of ‘horizontal’ filaments that run among various colonies in addition to ‘vertical’ connections between the metropole and individual colonies” (112–13). S.J. Potter and J. Saha, “Global History, Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire,” Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History 16, no. 1 (2015) suggest a similar idea in their
notion of “connected histories,” which proposes that, in part, commercial and cultural links within the imperial system impacted patterns of long-distance travel. According to Potter and Saha, the term “connected histories” is from an essay published by Sanjay Subrahmanyan in 1997. See also S. Subrahmanyan, _Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) for further exploration of these ideas.


Ibid.


E. M. Tate in _Transpacific Steam: The Story of Steam Navigation from the Pacific Coast of North America to the Far East and the Antipodes, 1861–1941_ (New York: Cornwell Books, 1986) suggests that by July 1849 there were 500 ships in port at San Francisco, a dramatic increase from previous years.


A gold rush in Australia in the early 1850s also impacted the movement of performers in the Pacific, an important topic outside of the scope of this chapter.


Newspapers in India frequently mention that they travelled within India via steamers. See, for example, _Bombay Gazette_, July 8, 1852 and _Bombay Gazette_, November 13, 1852.

From an anonymous article in the _Bombay Gazette_ on October 30, 1850 reprinted from _The Times of London_. It also directly references San Francisco: “As for the California republic, and the scattered community of the Pacific, of which it is suddenly the queen, one can almost see them growing in each fresh arrival from the States. At San Francisco the ravages of the last conflagration have been repaired with more substantial materials. All the wants of civilized man are there supplied even quicker with the thirst of the goldhunter … San Francisco is now as well supplied with vegetables and fruit as this metropolis. The press flourishes...”.

_Bombay Gazette_, October 30, 1850.
23 Ibid.
24 The article in the Bombay Gazette that claimed Americans had become “lords of the Pacific” was originally printed in the Times of London on September 23, 1850. It was also printed in the Buck Herald (September 28, 1850), which served the county of Buckinghamshire in England, the Hampshire Telegraph (September 28, 1850), which serves the county of Hampshire, the Northern Whig (September 26, 1850), which served Northern Ireland, and several other newspapers in the UK.
27 Bombay Gazette (March 4, 1850), reprinted from The Times of London.
30 Weekly Alta California, February 1, 1849. See also Kemble, “The Genesis of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company,” 396.
32 Ibid., 4.
34 Ibid.
35 G. Martin, Verdi at the Golden Gate: Opera and San Francisco in the Gold Rush Years, 4.
37 Ibid., 405–17.
40 Sacramento Transcript, Volume 1, Number 47, June 25, 1850.
41 Daily Alta California, Volume 1, Number 182, July 31, 1850.
42 The Cornwall Chronicle (Launceston), March 1, 1851; The Courier (Hobart), November 15, 1851.
43 Taken from Slout, Burnt Cork and Tambourines: A Source Book of Negro Minstrelsy, 137.
44 Daily Alta California, December 14, 1849.
45 Daily Alta California, December 17, 1849.
Daily Alta California, December 26, 1848. For a brief account of Reynold's murder, see Wittmann, “Empire of Culture: U.S. Entertainers and the Making of the Pacific Circuit, 1850–1890,” 23.

See S. Johnson, Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000) for other accounts and further discussions of the scope and character of lawlessness and social transgressions during the gold rush.

Daily Alta California, May 30, 1851.

G. Martin, Verdi at the Golden Gate: Opera and San Francisco in the Gold Rush Years, 12.

Ibid.


Ibid., 8. Jones is referencing middle-twentieth century transistor technology here, but his theoretical approach is relevant to our discussion.

Ibid., 6.

The Bombay Gazette, July 21, 1852.

Reviews in Australia before they arrived in India were not always positive. In one instance, the group even offered to return the admissions fee and perform only in “white face” in West Maitland in 1851, just before they departed for India. The assumption here is that by only performing in whiteface, they would focus on British or European traditional music such as glee tunes, religious hymns, traditional ballads, and the like. The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advisor (September 3, 1851) wrote that: “On Monday evening the attendance was again poor, and the Serenaders were so dispirited that they offered to return the money taken, or to sing without blackening their faces. The audience agreed to hear them without paint.”


Bombay Gazette, July 31, 1852.

For a similar discussion of race in the context of colonialism, see Mahmud, “Colonialism and Modern Constructions of Race: A Preliminary Inquiry,” 1219–1246.

R. Waterhouse, “The Internationalization of American Popular Culture in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of the Minstrel Show,” 1–11. This draw was also seen in Australia.

Friend of India and Statesman, January 29, 1852.


Bombay Gazette, June 28, 1850.

The group followed a similar format in Australia, where they travelled before and after their Indian tour. They performed similar repertoire in Bombay.

The first few lines begin: “Oh! Call my brother back to me, / I cannot play alone! / The summer comes with flower and bee- / Where is my brother gone? / The Butterfly is glancing bright / Across the sunbeam's track; / I care not now to chase its flight- / Oh! Call my brother back!...” The lyrics were taken from L. Herrig, The British Classical Authors: Select Specimens of the National Literature of England with Biographical and Critical Sketches (Brunswick: George Westermann, 1872), 416.

The first few lines begin: “My soul is dark-oh! Quickly string / The harp I yet can brook to hear; / And let thy gentle fingers fling / It smelting murmur o'er mine ear.”


69 Ibid.


73 Ibid.

74 For a discussion of English-language theater in late nineteenth century India, see R. Bhattacharya, “Promiscuous Spaces and Economies of Entertainment: Soldiers, Actresses and Hybrid Genres in Colonial India,” 50–75.

75 See *Morning Chronicle* (Calcutta), January 28, 1853.

76 See *Bombay Gazette*, August 2, 1852.

77 See *Bombay Gazette*, October 20, 1852.


80 Blackface minstrelsy in India was regularly performed in other languages, including Hindi and Bengali, beginning in the 1860s with the arrival of Dave Carson from Montana.


83 Ibid., 262.


86 Ibid.


88 See, for example, *Bombay Gazette*, March 20, 1852.

89 Ibid.

90 Information about the *Achilles* and *Ajdaha* is taken from the “Shipping Intelligence” section of a number of editions of *The Indian News and Chronicle of Eastern Affairs* (London) throughout 1852.

91 *Morning Chronicle* (Calcutta), February 18, 1853.
Initial attempts to develop a steam route from Panama to Australia and New Zealand in the early 1850s were interrupted by the shipping demands of the Crimean War.


Many of the meanings inherent in blackface minstrelsy in India that I discuss were seen in other places in the 1850s, including in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii. These locations were important stopping points in the movement of music and musicians from the U.S. to India. Performance groups, including the New York Serenaders, often toured these locations before or after tours of India.