

Preface

Most writers, even cultural critics and scholars, tend to write about subjects that intrigue them, and I am no exception. This project and my other books have grown out of my own experiences of black radio, initially as a listener and more recently as a music programmer. My first encounter with black radio, in Columbus, Ohio, during the mid-1950s, was memorable for the level of culture shock involved. At the time, I was a fairly typical "army brat"; my father was a career officer and a West Point graduate. We moved to Columbus after being stationed in Heidelberg, Germany, for three years. While in Heidelberg, I attended a small, all-white grade school for military dependents and listened to sports and pop-music programming on the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS). My favorite radio show was the *Friday-Night Hit Parade*. Spike Jones and Johnnie Ray were my early pop idols; I even took to imitating Ray's famous tearjerker "Cry" at local school talent contests. By the time I left Heidelberg, Pat Boone's version of "Tutti Frutti" was the *Hit Parade's* top-ranked record, and white buck shoes were the latest fashion statement among my peers.

In Columbus, my cultural milieu changed drastically. Although still living on an army base, I attended an interracial junior high school where I first met black teens and became friends with some of them, especially on

the basketball court. One of those new friends was "Moon" Mullins, the point guard on the school team. Mullins introduced me to black radio in the person of "Doctor Bop," the DJ of choice among black youth in Columbus at the time. Doctor Bop was a rhyming and signifying verbal trickster: "This here's Doctor Bop on the scene with a stack of shellac in my record machine!" His local evening music show was notable for its vernacular pyrotechnics and raucous R & B discs by such artists as Little Richard, Shirley and Lee, Chuck Berry, LaVerne Baker, Bo Diddley, James Brown, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. Both the music and the language were a revelation to me. I had never heard black rhythm-and-blues records, only the counterfeit "cover versions" played on the *Hit Parade*; needless to say, I liked the black originals much better than the sanitized counterfeits. Hearing Little Richard's original recording of "Tutti Frutti" after a steady diet of Pat Boone's cover version alerted me to a racial paradox in popular music that I had never been consciously aware of and opened my ears to a segregated genre of black music.

Doctor Bop's inventive use of the black vernacular unmasked for me another facet of racial masquerading on the airwaves. Like many "war babies" of my generation, I listened to *Amos 'n' Andy* on network radio in the late 1940s; I also remember hearing Beulah on AFRS while living in Germany in the early 1950s. Understandably, I thought these caricatures were real black voices—until my encounter with Doctor Bop. His novel refiguring of black dialect had the effect of flushing out the impostors, once I'd made the connection. Little did I know that, almost thirty years later, these sort of racial contradictions in radio broadcasting would become a major focus of my writing.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, while finishing up high school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, I became a jazz fan. This new development of my musical tastes was facilitated by Sid McCoy, a velvet-voiced black DJ broadcasting on WCLF-AM in Chicago; his late-night show *The Real McCoy* could be heard in Harrisburg. The jazz artistry of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and the Modern Jazz Quartet, as well as the vocal styling of Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, Joe Williams, and the lesser-known Bill Henderson, was a revelation, and I listened to *The Real McCoy* religiously. The show inspired me to begin collecting jazz LPs and to seek out live jazz venues in both Harrisburg and New York City (which was three hours away by car).

By the time I got to San Francisco in the late 1960s, the Bay Area was a hotbed of radical political and cultural insurgencies: student sit-ins and strikes, the rising Black Panther party, massive and militant antiwar protests, the emerging youth counterculture. New media sprang up in the forms of a local "underground" press and radio outlets. The radio experiment took place on two marginal FM commercial stations: KMPX and, later, KSAN. An eclectic staff of renegade DJs and radical journalists crafted a counterculture-oriented "free-form" music, talk, and information format that was an overnight sensation. I was a student activist at San Francisco State, living in the Haight-Ashbury district, when underground radio hit the airwaves in the Bay Area, and it soon became essential listening for all of us involved in the student movement and the local counterculture.

While neither largely black-staffed nor black-formatted outlets, San Francisco underground radio emulated black radio in a number of important ways. Most of the white disc jockeys associated with KMPX and then KSAN during their underground heyday had started out as R & B jocks on AM radio in the previous decade; consequently, their musical tastes and playlists included the soulful sounds of Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Donny Hathaway, and Sly and the Family Stone, as well as the contemporary rock of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, Santana, and Jefferson Airplane. The most prominently featured jazz DJ in KSAN's underground lineup was Roland Young, an outspoken black musician and cultural revolutionary, who hosted a late-night show that explored the frontiers of jazz and world music. KMPX and KSAN also had similarities in mission to black radio: like the pioneering African American staffs on black-oriented radio in the 1950s, the San Francisco underground radio programmers made listeners' concerns, as well as community involvement and outreach, a cornerstone of their programming philosophy.

Although the San Francisco underground radio experiment was short-lived, it made a lasting impression on me. In effect, the experience transformed me from a listener to a programmer. By the early 1970s, I was involved in the newly emerging "community" radio movement; at the time, I was a graduate student in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. While living in Santa Cruz, I was active in efforts to start two noncommercial FM stations, KUSP and KCSC. My first stint as a disc jockey occurred on KUSP, where I was also part of a staff collective. Later, I moved on to become KCSC's first manager and to

host a music show on that station. During this period, I also embarked on a major research project focusing on the cultural history of the blues, which would eventually evolve into my Ph.D. dissertation and then the book *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture*.¹ Quite naturally, my radio shows began to reflect my interest in the blues; I used them to explore the history of the music and to interview blues musicians, especially the older ones. By the time I left Santa Cruz in the late 1970s, I was hosting blues shows on KCSC and on KPFA-FM, the Pacifica radio network's flagship station in Berkeley, California. My shows on KPFA highlighted historic blues recordings from the pre-World War II era.

As fate would have it, my move to Washington, D.C., in 1977 coincided with the launching of the Pacifica network's fifth radio station, WPFW-FM, in the nation's capital. Unlike the other Pacifica outlets, WPFW was a black-staffed and black-formatted community station; its mission was to serve the needs of the city's large African American population. As a Pacifica and community radio veteran, I was asked to participate in putting WPFW on the air, and I was assigned a music show in the original program schedule. Initially, I hosted a Saturday-night mix of blues, jazz, and soul music called *Gumbo*, but after a few months in that time slot, I moved over to Monday nights to host *Blue Monday*, a show that focused exclusively on the blues. For the next twelve years I produced and hosted *Blue Monday*, acquiring the nickname "Doctor Blues" in the process. From Doctor Bop to Doctor Blues, my black radio odyssey had come full circle.

WPFW celebrated its twentieth year on the air in 1997. I still host a weekly music show on the station, but since the early 1990s I have been a world music programmer, part of a team of DJs hosting a weeknight music strip called *Rhythms of the World*. My Tuesday-night show focuses primarily on the musics of the African diaspora outside the United States. Over the past two decades, hundreds of people, mostly African Americans, have passed through WPFW as station managers, program directors, paid staff, and volunteer programmers. Many of these WPFW comrades have shared their extensive knowledge of black music and culture with me, as well as their perceptions and memories of black radio. We have also struggled collectively to maintain a financially strapped black community radio station in a highly competitive urban market.

The specific concerns of this project grew out of an earlier chapter on black radio that I wrote for *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*.²

While working on the chapter, two things soon became apparent. The first was the small number of scholarly articles, books, and dissertations on African Americans' portrayal and participation in radio broadcasting since the 1920s. The subject largely had been ignored by researchers and scholars in all the relevant fields of study—including media studies, cultural studies, and even African American studies. Some of this can be attributed to the lack of scholarly attention given to radio in general, studies of which pale in comparison to the material published on cinema, television, popular music, and the print media. Moreover, where the history of radio has been documented, as in Erik Barnouw's classic three-volume study of broadcasting in the United States, scant attention is given to African Americans' role in the enterprise.³ But in addition, black radio has always been, first and foremost, a local medium; it has never had the national exposure accorded to the better-known black film and television releases, with national distribution outlets. For these reasons, black radio has remained uncharted and, for the most part, undocumented as a historical terrain.

My second discovery while working on the *Split Image* chapter was that black radio had played a far greater role in the shaping of urban black culture—and the popular culture as a whole—than I had first surmised. Especially since the late 1940s, when it emerged as African Americans' most ubiquitous means of mass communication—surpassing the black press—black radio has been a major force in constructing and sustaining an African American public sphere. It has been the coming-together site for issues and concerns of black culture: language, music, politics, fashion, gossip, race relations, personality, and community are all part of the mix. Moreover, black radio has been omnipresent on both sides of the color line, part of a shared public memory that dates back to the 1920s and has deep roots in the broader popular culture. The point was brought home to me repeatedly whenever I discussed the project with colleagues, students, friends, and casual acquaintances: nearly everyone, black and white, had favorite stations, favorite disc jockeys, and fond memories of listening to black radio—especially while growing up.

After the publication of *Split Image*, I spent the 1990/91 academic year in residence at the Schomburg Center for the Study of Black Culture in New York City, on a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship. With the support of Howard Dodson, the director of the center, and his dedicated staff, I was able to conduct an extensive search for print material

on black radio in radio trade publications, the black press, and the mainstream press. I also listened to a wide range of vintage black radio programs (docudramas, DJ airchecks, soap operas, news, talk and public affairs shows, etc.), and I continued to interview people who had worked or still worked in black radio. These oral histories, which I began collecting while working on the *Split Image* chapter, would become the backbone of my research.

Oral testimony was crucial to the project because the written material and recorded programming I uncovered on black radio showed significant historical gaps; probing the public memory was the only way to reconstruct the missing history. Yet I also had a methodological rationale for pursuing this line of research. I wanted the project to privilege the local and grassroots nature of black radio—to tell the story from the bottom up, and to do so as much as possible in the words of those who were involved. To do this, however, I needed to interview a large pool of subjects, especially in key urban areas where black radio has had a major historical impact. Needless to say, just getting the interviews on tape was an enormous logistical task.

Luckily, my research dovetailed with a similar project initiated by Jacqui Gales Webb, a talented producer with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Webb's proposal for a thirteen-part radio series on the history of black radio was funded in 1994 by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. She assembled a team of producers and researchers, including Portia Maultsby, an ethnomusicologist at Indiana University; public radio producers Sonja Williams and Lex Gillespie; Eric Gordon, a research consultant; and myself as the series' historian. Working together, we developed a blueprint for the series. Over the next year, we interviewed about 150 people we had targeted for interviews and conducted our research for the series. *Black Radio: Telling It like It Was* was released in 1996; it subsequently won both the Dupont (Columbia University) and the Peabody (University of Georgia) Award for the year's best radio documentary series. As for my book project, I now had access to a large enough pool of oral testimony to proceed with organizing and writing the manuscript.

A Howard University Faculty Research Grant enabled me to pull together all the research and write the first draft of the book. Howard was also important to the project in other ways. My colleagues in the School of Communications gave me much-appreciated support and encourage-

ment, as well as valuable feedback. In particular, I thank Jannette Dates, dean of the School of Communications; Bishetta Merritt, chair of the Department of Radio, Television and Film; and fellow faculty members Abiyi Ford, Judi Moore Latta, Abbas Malek, Paula Mantabane, and Sonja Williams. Howard students also proved a valuable resource while working on the project. We regularly discussed and debated the history of black radio in my class on "African Americans in Broadcasting"; in addition, the students kept me up to date on current listening trends among black youth throughout the country. And last but not least, Howard has two radio stations that have been on the air since I arrived on campus in 1980: WHUR-FM, a fifty-thousand-watt commercial station with an "urban-adult" format, and WHBC, a student-run cable outlet with a hip-hop format that is heard only on campus. Over the years, I have been able to monitor the programming, observe the internal operations, and interact with the staffs of these stations. This sort of ongoing access has furthered my understanding of the black radio enterprise from two very different perspectives, and it has proved a valuable asset to the study.

My publisher, Temple University Press, likewise played a pivotal role in bringing this project to fruition. Janet Francendese, my editor, was a constant source of encouragement and critical feedback while I was working on the manuscript; her grasp of the subject and eye for detail were invaluable to my work. I also thank Herman Gray at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Gilbert Williams at Michigan State University, both of whom reviewed the manuscript and made valuable suggestions on how to strengthen it. Their input is greatly appreciated.

During the final stages of organizing and writing this book, a new and complicated theme emerged. I was struck by how much racial crossover had taken place on the airwaves—both white Americans "sounding black" and, to a lesser degree, black Americans "sounding white." My research had uncovered constant references to this dual phenomenon, especially when discussing with interviewees the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. But this recurring theme was problematic; what did it mean to "sound black" or "sound white" on the air during those decades? These designations are obviously cultural markers that have as much to do with who is making the observation as with whom that person is referencing. Furthermore, there were and continue to be a multitude of vernaculars on both sides of the color line; standard American English is always in flux, under siege, and

being contested. Nevertheless, the documentation indicates that these verbal masquerades, which I characterize in this book as "racial ventriloquy," have played a prominent and contradictory role in the history of black radio, especially during the early decades. As a cultural historian, I couldn't hide from these data; at the very least, I had to try to make sense of the phenomenon for the readers. Consequently, I included the material and theme in the larger historical framework, thus giving weight to the contradictions as well as the continuities in the making of black radio.

All the cross-cultural experiences I've described here have been invaluable to this project, as they have enriched my understanding and appreciation of African Americans and their culture. However, my long immersion in African American music and my long-term association with WPFW have ironically resulted in some confusion about my racial identity. It is not unusual for both black and white listeners who have heard me on the air to be surprised by my skin color when they meet me in person; this was especially true during my tenure as Doctor Blues. My affiliation with Howard University and published work on black music and culture undoubtedly contribute to the assumption that I am black, but being identified with WPFW seems to play a larger role. (To some degree, this assumption rests on the still widespread prejudice that a white person's interest and involvement in African American, Latino, or Asian American culture are insincere, illegitimate, and even irrational.) No doubt, some of the confusion stems from the music I play on my shows, but I suspect that how I sound on the air also influences how I am perceived racially—not that I try to "sound black" or to fool my listeners, but I do spend a lot of my time conversing with African Americans on a daily basis (and for that matter, listening to black radio stations). I also tend to incorporate the new jazz and hip-hop parlance of my colleagues and students into my conversational speech; in particular, this has proved an effective teaching technique.

At a recent party for WPFW staff and volunteer programmers, I was talking with the *Drive Time Jazz* crew, five veteran jazzologists whose collective wisdom defines the station's jazz canon. In the course of our conversation about white crossover jocks on black radio outlets, I confided in them that some listeners assume I am an African American and then asked them, quite earnestly, if I "sounded black" on the air. They all looked at me for a moment, then cracked up laughing. The verdict, so to speak, was unanimous.

Introduction: Shifting Voices

Language, for individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's context, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.¹

—Mikhail Bakhtin

In his groundbreaking history of African American humor, *On the Real Side* (1994), Mel Watkins uses the term *racial ventriloquy* to characterize the mimicry of black speech patterns by white radio entertainers: "Following a pattern established by minstrelsy and blackface actors on stage and screen, whites played Negro roles in nearly all the early radio shows. In the beginning, when programs were not broadcast before a live audience, this new electronic medium made the pretense much easier. The deception depended entirely on mimicking black dialect and intonation. Thus radio had introduced a new phenomenon: racial ventriloquy."²

Radio certainly enhanced the possibilities and the practice of racial ventriloquy. As an invisible "theater of the mind," it was the ideal medium for such voice impersonations. But these verbal transgressions were hardly a new phenomenon in popular culture; that characteristic applied more

to radio broadcasting in the early twentieth century. The roots of racial ventriloquy go back to the antebellum era and are intertwined with the rise of slavery. Moreover, the verbal mimicry took place on both sides of the color line, usually as part of a more complex code of cultural crossover practices. In her recent book on the subject, Susan Gubar refers to this phenomenon as "racechange: The term is meant to suggest the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality."³ Gubar also uses the term *racial ventriloquism* in her discussion of the uses of black rhythms and dialect in the poetry and prose of modern literary figures such as Carl Sandburg, Carl Van Vechten, e. e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, and William Faulkner. Their indulgence in the practice of racial ventriloquism attests to its resilience and influence in American culture.

The Masks of Minstrelsy

It was during the antebellum period that racechanges and racial ventriloquy first became fashionable in both white popular culture and black slave culture. In the beginning, white males in blackface mimicked the song, dance, dress, customs, and creolized speech patterns of African slaves for fun and financial gain; in the process, they created America's first culture industry—blackface minstrelsy. At the same time, black slaves were known to have enjoyed "puttin' on" the highfalutin airs of their white owners, parodying their dress, dance, and mannerisms as well as mimicking their English diction.⁴ This curious transgressing of the racial divide, played out in the white popular culture and the slave folk culture, would go through several reincarnations in the generations to come. But in terms of magnitude and impact, it was the white-initiated racechanges that carried the day; with few exceptions, they set the tone and defined the parameters of the discourse for the society as a whole.

The practice of "blacking up" began during the Elizabethan era in England. White actors applied burned cork to their faces in order to caricature African subjects; in most instances, they also parodied the slaves' creolized West Indian dialect to round out the impersonations. One of the earliest blackface characters to emerge on the American stage

was "Sambo," who appeared as a comic foil in Boston and New York theatrical productions in the late 1780s. A forerunner of the urban-dandy stereotype, Sambo's dress was gaudy, his manners pretentious, his intelligence lacking: "Sambo tink himself a pretty fella. He sing well, he dance well. Can't tink so pretty well." Sambo's rudimentary West Indian dialect was in sharp contrast to the highbrow English used by the play's white characters.⁵ As with blackface parodies in general, racial ventriloquy was employed here to give voice to the caricature; it was, in effect, the audio dimension of the stereotype.

Blackening up and racial ventriloquy were integral to the rise of blackface minstrelsy in the early 1800s. The minstrel show, based in the urban North, was the nation's first homegrown performance tradition, and it would dominate American popular entertainment for the rest of the century. The first wave of blackface characters to capture the public's fancy were initially identified with popular minstrel songs—in particular, "Jim Crow" (1828) and "Zip Coon" (1834). As popularized by Thomas "Daddy" Rice, Jim Crow was a ragamuffin plantation "darker" who performed a song-and-dance routine that bordered on the grotesque. Rice's Crow was a servile simpleton. He wore dirty and tattered clothing; rags tied around his dilapidated shoes, his toes protruding; a battered straw hat over a coarse, black wig; and burned cork on his face. His dance routine, full of awkward gyrations and clumsy footwork, was accompanied by the following nonsense verse:

Weel about, turn about.
And do jis so
Eb'ry time I weel about
And jump Jim Crow.⁶

The stereotypical counterpart to this plantation buffoon was the urban dandy Zip Coon, popularized by George Washington Dixon in the mid-1830s. Dixon's Coon was a pompous blackface pretender who vainly tried to imitate the dress, deportment, and speech of the nation's white urban elite. His high opinion of himself even led to presidential aspirations:

I tell you what will happen den, now bery soon
De Nited States Bank will be blone to de moon

Introduction: Shifting Voices

Dare General Jackson will him lampoon
And de bery nex President will be Zip Coon.
Now mind wat you arter, your turnel Kritter Crockett
You shant go head without Zip, he is de boy to block it
Zip shall be President, Crockett shall be vice
An den dey two togedder will had de tings nice.⁷

By the 1830s, the West Indian dialect of the colonial-era Sambo had been replaced by the native dialects of Jim Crow and Zip Coon. The unprecedented popularity of these caricatures on the new and robust urban theater circuit gave birth to the antebellum blackface minstrelsy craze. At first, individual blackface acts such as Daddy Rice's Crow and G. W. Dixon's Coon were in great demand; but in the 1840s, a number of minstrel troupes were formed, and they soon eclipsed the solo acts in popularity. These troupes (Virginia Minstrels, Ethiopian Serenaders, Christy Minstrels) created the first blackface minstrel extravaganzas—full evenings of stage entertainment based on parodying black song, dance, speech, and behavior. The standard minstrel lineup included a couple of musicians on banjos and fiddles; two comic end men named Tambo and Bones; and eventually a middleman, the "Interlocutor," who served as master of ceremonies. The strait-laced and supercilious Interlocutor was routinely ridiculed by Tambo and Bones; these minstrel end men, who often resembled Jim Crow and Zip Coon, also played the tambourine and bones rhythm makers on the musical numbers.⁸

The standard minstrel show had three parts. The opening act featured minstrel songs and mockery performed primarily by blackface urban dandies. The second part highlighted blackface novelty acts, such as the cross-dressing "Negro wench" spectacles and comic monologues known as "stump speeches." The finale was usually a narrative skit with song and dance, set on a mythical Southern plantation populated by happy-go-lucky blackface slaves. The minstrel show, in effect, linked together the plantation buffoon and the urban dandy, presenting them as two sides of the same coin.

Blackface minstrelsy's penchant for racial ventriloquy was most evident in the stump speeches. This kind of lowbrow comic oratory customarily burlesqued the futile attempts of blackface characters to speak like educated and urbane whites on topics as varied as bankruptcy ("Def-

initiation of the Bankrupt Laws"), the steam engine ("Locomotive Lecture"), and the blues ("A Brief Battering of the Blues"). "Lectures Darkly Colored" by the so-called Professor Julius Caesar Hannibal is a typical antebellum example: "Ihah come from way down in ole Warginna whar I studded edicashun an' siance all for myself, to gib a corse of lectures on siance gineraly, an' events promiscuously, as dey time to time occur. De letter ob invit I receibed from de comitee from dis unlitened city, was full ob flattery as a gemman ob my great disernment, edicashun, de-finement and research could wish."⁹ Much of the humor in these monologues was based on crude malapropisms, trite puns, pomposities, non sequiturs, and slovenly pronunciation, but the blackface minstrels also went to the source when crafting their interpretations of black dialect. The most acclaimed practitioners, from Daddy Rice to Virginia Minstrels leader Dan Emmett, purposely sought out black people in order to learn their vernacular. Emmett, in particular, was known for his "close contact with the Negro" and reportedly spent countless hours rehearsing his dialect routines.¹⁰

During its antebellum heyday, blackface minstrelsy attracted a huge audience among young white working-class males in the North and Midwest. New York City was the mecca of blackface entertainment, but New Orleans and San Francisco were also important hubs of minstrel activity. Paradoxically, blackface minstrelsy did not have a large following in the antebellum South, and it was even banned in some Southern cities by the 1850s. Politically and ideologically, minstrelsy was closely aligned with Jacksonian democracy; hence it supported territorial expansion, white supremacy, and slavery. This final viewpoint was expressed in the blackface minstrels' propagation of the plantation myth, which reproduced the white slave owners' rationalization of slavery as benign, paternal, and racially desirable. In addition, minstrelsy's propensity for sarcastic blackface caricatures—from Sambo to Tambo and Bones—tended to justify race oppression. Historian Joseph Boskin has argued that these stereotypes enabled whites to keep black men in their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy: "To make the black male into an object of laughter, and conversely, to force him to devise laughter, was to strip him of masculinity, dignity, and self-possession. Sambo was, then, an illustration of humor as a device of oppression, and one of the most potent in American popular culture. The ultimate objection for whites was to effect mastery: to

render the black male powerless as a potential warrior, as a sexual competitor, and as an economic adversary."¹¹

The response to blackface minstrelsy by public figures is noteworthy. The nation's leading literary pundits—for instance, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain—touted minstrelsy as America's first native performing art. In his autobiography, Twain lamented: "If I could have the nigger show back again in its pristine purity and perfection I should have little further use for opera." He was particularly impressed by the quality of the racial ventriloquist: "The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny." In stark contrast, Frederick Douglass considered blackface minstrel troupes "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and to pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens."¹² In Douglass's mind, blackface minstrelsy crassly commodified race, thereby furthering a process of degradation set in motion by slavery. From Twain's vantage point, the "nigger show" carnivalized race, transforming it into the funny bone of American culture.

In his recent study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott has characterized these two poles of the debate over antebellum minstrelsy as the "people's culture" position (Mark Twain) and the "racial domination" position (Frederick Douglass). He goes on to point out that both perspectives continued to resonate in the discourse on the subject throughout this century but that the racial domination, or "revisionist," position eventually became the "reigning view." In Lott's interpretation, however, blackface minstrelsy itself was not "univocal" but rather a site of conflicting and contradictory articulations of race, "blackness," and slavery. For example, he shows that the popular "Uncle Tom" minstrel shows in the 1850s articulated proslavery, moderate, and anti-slavery viewpoints, depending on who was involved in the productions. Lott summarizes his findings as follows: "My study documents in early blackface minstrelsy the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger, and all constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling."¹³

Blackface entertainment languished during the Civil War. The call to arms forced many troupes to disband, and while the conflict continued, blackface impersonators all but vanished from the minstrel stage. A few groups survived by leaving the country; the Christy Minstrels, for instance, relocated to Havana, Cuba. After the war, however, some of the veteran performers returned to the stage in blackface. Dan Emmett, perhaps the best-known minstrel to resume his stage career as a blackface specialist in Negro dialect, remained active through the 1880s. Yet, while the blackface tradition showed some continuity after the Civil War, it no longer dominated minstrelsy as it had during the antebellum period. There was now competition from other ethnic stereotypes, such as the Asian and the Native American. In addition, the minstrel productions were more lavish, their social commentary was much broader, and women were now included in the entertainment as dancers, singers, and comics.¹⁴

But while the blackface tradition was losing favor on the established minstrel theater circuit, it was finding a new home in the postbellum South. There, a revival of the antebellum minstrel show became linked to the rise of a "cult of the Confederacy," whose adherents no doubt found solace in the blackface stereotypes and the plantation myth. This convergence opened up a new circuit of venues for blackface acts: at veterans' halls, fraternal lodges, public parks, college campuses—wherever festivities honoring the Confederacy were held. As a result, the South helped spawn a new generation of blackface entertainers, who learned their trade performing at these grassroots venues. Born during Reconstruction, the cult of the Confederacy would continue to thrive well into the twentieth century, providing blackface minstrelsy with a solid base of support.¹⁵

Another important factor influencing the postbellum blackface tradition was the influx of African American entertainers into minstrelsy. During Reconstruction, black troupes (Georgia Minstrels, Callander's Colored Minstrels, Haverly's Colored Minstrels) and individual performers (James Bland, Sam Lucas, Billy Kersands) emerged as stars on the minstrel stage. White and black audiences flocked to the shows of these "genuine" Negro entertainers; the Georgia Minstrels initially billed themselves as the "Only Simon Pure Negro Troupe in the World." But paradoxically, the authenticity of the black minstrels was masked by burned cork, and their stage acts re-created the antebellum blackface stereotypes and plantation myths—in effect, giving them renewed credibility. To a large

Introduction: Shifting Voices

degree, this recycling of plantation material was orchestrated by the white entrepreneurs who owned and managed the urban theaters, the music publishing firms, and even the black minstrel troupes; they were reluctant to part with successful blackface minstrel formulas. Furthermore, African American entertainers had little autonomy. Minstrelsy was the only venue open to them, and they lacked the power to negotiate for their artistic and racial integrity, because the white owners hired the talent and demanded compliance with the blackface legacy. Black performers had to fetishize their own race to gain access to the minstrel stage.¹⁶

The careers of black minstrelsy's most famous entertainers, from James Bland and Billy Kersands in the 1870s to Bert Williams in the early 1900s, offer clear, if disheartening, illustrations of this protracted dilemma. Bland, the most talented African American tunesmith of his generation, routinely wrote nostalgic "darky songs": "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," for example, told the story of an elderly ex-slave longing for his former master and life on the plantation. Kersands, perhaps the greatest black minstrel showman of all, was best known for his ostentatious deportment, dialect jokes, and huge grinning mouth—all prominent features of the recycled Coon stereotype in the postbellum era. Williams, the most gifted humorist of his generation, also relied heavily on dialect jokes and continued to entertain white audiences in blackface long after other African Americans refused to do so. All three men found success in accommodating antebellum minstrel stereotypes and thereby became locked into demeaning performance styles. They also added a new twist to the racial ventriloquy cycle: black entertainers imitating white impersonations of African Americans.¹⁷

New Medium—New Voices

Radio came of age during the twilight of blackface minstrelsy and helped prolong its slow demise. The first racial ventriloquists to take to the airwaves in the 1920s were white entertainers such as Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll (*Amos 'n' Andy*) and Moran and Mack (*Two Black Crows*); they pioneered the showcasing of blackface dialect comedy on radio. During the next decade, these race impersonators, along with many more of their ilk, were major attractions on the national radio networks, and they

also proliferated on local outlets. Their radio shows recycled many of the previous century's most demeaning blackface stereotypes (Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Mammy), with little regard for the racial implications of their humor. (See Part 1.) For their part, the first African Americans to break the color line in radio broadcasting in the 1930s were announcers and disc jockeys who sounded white on the air. Black radio pioneers such as Jack Cooper (Chicago), Eddie Honesty (Hammond, Indiana), Ed Baker and Van Douglas (Detroit), and Bass Harris (Seattle) followed the lead of the industry's leading professional announcers with respect to their use of the English and their style of announcing. Their voice masking was motivated by a desire to achieve parity with their white counterparts in broadcasting, but in addition, they sought to distance themselves from the blackface dialect that was so pervasive on the airwaves at the time and to attract black and white middle-class listeners. (See Part 2.)

During the postwar era, changes in the radio industry sparked a second wave of racial ventriloquy on the nation's airwaves. In this instance, white disc jockeys who "crossed over" to play popular black music (jazz, R & B, soul) on their shows also tended to imitate the vernacular and speech patterns of the era's leading African American DJs. The new generation of black "personality jocks" was fashioning an innovative and playful style of radio announcing based on the use of common black urban street slang and folklore. (See Part 3.) White DJs from Alan Freed in the early 1950s to Wolfman Jack in the 1960s copied and, in most cases, exaggerated this style on the air in order to sound black and outrageous to their racially mixed teenage audience. In some respects, these impersonations were a form of flattery, but they also involved a good deal of parody. The numerous white DJs who crossed over to black vernacular and music formats were both cultural rebels and voyeurs; they transgressed the color line while indulging their racial fantasies. (See Part 4.)

For their part, the majority of African American disc jockeys in the postwar era sought to reverse and undermine the racial ventriloquy cycle by privileging contemporary black vernacular in their announcing styles. The exception to this trend occurred only when black announcers and DJs managed to secure employment at white radio outlets; in these instances, they were invariably expected to sound white. But given the lingering segregation in the radio industry during this period, only a small number of African Americans were hired by white stations. Then,

Introduction: Shifting Voices

in the wake of the civil rights movement, segregation began to break down in both the radio industry and society at large. By the late 1960s, black disc jockeys who crossed over to white rock formats were no longer required to mask their voices (a prime example being Frankie Crocker in New York City). At this juncture, the youth counterculture was incorporating black urban slang into its own "hippie" vernacular; racial ventriloquy was, in effect, giving way to racial hybridity in the popular culture and on the airwaves.

While racial ventriloquy played a major role in the early portrayal of African Americans on radio, its importance has diminished considerably over the past few decades. Since World War II, the history of black radio has become increasingly woven into the fabric of the broader African American struggle for racial equality, political empowerment, economic prosperity, and cultural self-determination. In the postwar era, African Americans working in radio mounted their first sustained challenges to Jim Crow employment practices in the broadcast industry. They also produced the first black radio docudramas to counter the corrosive blackface stereotypes still featured on the networks, and black entrepreneurs purchased their first radio stations. During the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, African American disc jockeys, talk-show hosts, and radio newscasters played a critical role in facilitating the flow of information about civil rights issues and activities. They helped mobilize people for demonstrations and marches, provided a forum for civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and, in the case of the DJs, boosted the morale of listeners by playing "message music" on their shows. By this time, radio had become the omnipresent mass medium in the black community; a huge majority (over 90 percent) of African Americans owned radio receivers and listened to black-formatted stations on a daily basis.

During the urban riots in the mid-1960s, African American personal-ity jocks stayed on the air around the clock in an effort to contain the civil unrest. They kept their listeners up to date on the latest news from the riot zones, opened up the microphones to community leaders, and urged people to exercise caution and restraint. After Dr. King's assassination, there was a movement among the more militant African Americans in the radio industry to extend the "Black Power" cultural agenda to broadcast programming, especially on the newly emerging FM stations. Although these efforts eventually collapsed, while in progress they accounted for some

groundbreaking programs and left their imprint on black radio formats nationwide. (See Part 5.)

Black Power militants also made station ownership a major issue for African Americans involved in the radio industry. By the mid-1970s, a coalition of black media activists and entrepreneurs was pressuring the broadcast industry and the federal government to open up more opportunities for people of color to purchase their own broadcast outlets. At the time, African Americans owned less than 1 percent of the nation's radio stations. As a result of this offensive, the number of minority-owned stations increased steadily in the late 1970s and continued to do so well into the 1980s. From the late 1980s to the end of the twentieth century, however, this trend has reversed, mostly due to ownership deregulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In the 1990s, the number of black-owned stations has declined; overall, they make up less than 3 percent of the nation's total. (See Part 6.)

Voice Over chronicles the rise of black radio in the twentieth century, from its prewar roots in racial ventriloquy, to its postwar contributions to the African American freedom struggle, to its current status as the most popular mass medium in the black community, as well as that community's most vital source of information and culture. Along the way, the book documents the role black radio has played in extending the popularity and influence of black music nationwide, helping shape the always-changing urban black vernacular, mobilizing African Americans around political and cultural issues, and galvanizing a sense of community among African Americans—especially at the local level. But first and foremost, *Voice Over* is the untold story of the people involved in the making of black radio—the unheralded programmers, producers, entertainers, entrepreneurs, and activists who devoted their careers and much of their lives to creating an African American presence on the airwaves. The reconstruction of their collective history, told in their own words whenever possible, is the major objective of this study.