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Calvert, Dave

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Dave Calvert

# 'Royal Pierrots' and 'White Coons': the British Pierrot Troupe in the Racial and National Imaginary

The Pierrot tradition, invented towards the end of the nineteenth century, established a prevalent but now largely forgotten mode of performance around the coastal resorts of Britain. In this article, Dave Calvert considers the relevance of this form in its historical context. Arguing that it observes the preservation of anachronism consistent with notions of invented traditions, he situates the Pierrot tradition within a symbolic network concerned with national identity and experience. This includes its declared links to the construction of royalty as the head of the imperial family, and both its schism and continuity with the tradition of blackface minstrelsy whose conventions it maintains. Its location at the seaside accentuates this network of relations and elevates it to a transcendental plane of the imaginary untroubled by the complexities of modern life. Dave Calvert is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Huddersfield. His research encompasses popular theatre, applied theatre and learning-disabled performance. He is also a member of The Pierrotters, the last remaining professional seaside Pierrot troupe.

*Key terms:* invented tradition, seaside entertainment, blackface minstrelsy.

THE PIERROT TROUPE emerged in the 1890s as a performance act largely focused on the coastal resorts of Great Britain. Adopting the image of the Pierrot character from the historical *commedia dell'arte*, the British troupes performed *al fresco* shows on beaches and promenades, incorporating a range of song, dance, comedy, and speciality acts that reflected contemporary tastes for variety theatre. The expansion and popularity of the form – sustained until the Second World War – suggests that it held deep-seated resonances within the British context of the time.

The appropriation of archaic spectacle for contemporary purposes was certainly a tactic of public performance that ranged beyond the construction of the Pierrot troupe. In employing the strategy, such troupes connected with a symbolic network that included the ceremonial pageantry of royal occasions, the architectural landscape of the seaside, and the influential performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy.

Speaking of the revival of royal pageantry in the late nineteenth century, David Cannadine notes that:

In such an age of change, crisis, and dislocation, the 'preservation of anachronism', the deliberate, ceremonial presentation of an impotent but venerated monarch as a unifying symbol of permanence and national community became both possible and necessary.<sup>1</sup>

The public presentation of the royal family in this period aimed at providing an antidote to the unsettling advances of modernism, and a British anchor for the pandemic global concern with nationhood. While serving as the most emphatic symbol of such concerns, the monarch and its family were far from unique in this respect. Cannadine notes that the foundation of redbrick universities at the time pursued, in their architecture and ceremonies, 'the anachronistic allure of archaic but invented spectacle'.<sup>2</sup> Ward notes similarly that, after the First World War, 'guild socialism was temporarily able to flourish as it applied 'medieval' organization to building houses for local authorities'.<sup>3</sup> In its reference back to the early modern form of *commedia dell'arte*, the Pierrot troupe linked into a contemporary rather than historical network grounded in the preservation of anachronism.

The connection with royalty was most explicit in the naming of several troupes as 'Royal Pierrots'. The wider resonance of this association moved from kingdom to empire. Since the declaration of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1877 monarchy and empire had become inextricable, so that the symbolism of national community was encircled by symbolism of imperial community. The place of the Pierrot troupe in this network negotiated these inward- and outward-looking complexities of nationhood. In this, the symbolic location of the seaside added a secondary relation which further contextualized such negotiations. Characterized as a liminal space where everyday restraints could be relaxed, the seaside was also relatively contained between the borders with home and empire. In architecture and culture, it looked back to the nation's metropolitan centres while at the same time pointing beyond to the exoticism of distant colonies.

The space of the Pierrot troupe is, in this sense, one in which the demands, tensions, and ambitions of the national and imperial character are brought into play. This is most markedly proposed through the third symbolic relation I would like to discuss, the interplay between Pierrot performance and blackface minstrelsy. The British tradition of blackface performance followed, but greatly diverged from, the American tradition. Where American blackface was, in part, a mechanism for a political response (from a predominantly white perspective) to urgent issues of race relations, not least those presented by the abolitionist movement,<sup>4</sup> the British counterpart had become, in Pickering's phrase, a 'racial and national imaginary' of the much more distant Other within imperial relations.<sup>5</sup> Pickering's description of Pierrots as 'clowns in white make-up, as if in reverse semiotic principle to blackface' opposes the forms too neatly.<sup>6</sup> Other shared aesthetics find greater points of connection that imply sympathetic as well as oppositional relations between them.

Situated between the power base and the outposts of empire, between the symbolic construction of the monarch and theatrical representations of the colonized black Other,

the Pierrot equally acts, I argue, as a racial and national imaginary. Starting with the crossover between whiteface and blackface minstrelsy, this article considers how the Pierrot, like the minstrel, 'provided a set of symbolic bearings for the ongoing production of identity and social relations'.<sup>7</sup>

### **An Antithesis of the 'Nigger Minstrels'?**

Pickering is not alone in recognizing the establishment of the British Pierrot as an inversion of blackface acts. Chapman and Chapman see the new Pierrot troupes, with 'faces whitened with zinc oxide', as 'the antithesis' of the 'nigger minstrels'.<sup>8</sup> Mellor and Pertwee both suggest that the emergence of the seaside Pierrot unseated the once-dominant blackface performers,<sup>9</sup> concurring with Walton's chronological assessment that they 'had superseded the Victorian "nigger minstrels" with their patter, banjos, and arch or sentimental "plantation" song'.<sup>10</sup> The transition from pervasive blackface minstrelsy to the dominance of the Pierrot was not simply a question of the older tradition succumbing to a new, antithetical whiteface challenge, however, since both continued alongside one another well into the twentieth century. As such, the two forms continued a complex interrelationship built on overlap as well as difference.

The adoption of the Pierrot in Britain multiplied the individual *commedia dell'arte* character into a collective troupe, and this expansion itself directly followed the earlier development of blackface minstrel troupes. Pickering notes that 'from the 1830s to the mid-1840s, minstrelsy evolved from an initial solo type of performance within a routine theatrical package towards an autonomous genre of entertainment with established conventions'.<sup>11</sup> Many of these conventions were also taken up by the Pierrot troupes, imposing generic connections beneath the differences in make-up.

Even the arrangement of the Pierrot stage space drew from blackface proxemics. The first half of a minstrel show tended to contain the variety performances, with the second half traditionally being given over to



The Waterloo Pierrots. Charles Beanland, aka Uncle Sam, is seated second from left.

an extended dramatic entertainment, often a sentimentalized evocation of plantation life. Pickering describes how, during the opening variety section,

a single row of minstrels sat around on chairs in a semi-circle . . . [which] allowed the performers to keep each other continually within sight, encouraged musical and comedic exchange, allowed for flexibility and improvisation, and bonded the performers together in the various kinds of business they were about.<sup>12</sup>

Chapman and Chapman have photographs of various Pierrot troupes mid-performance with this exact semi-circular arrangement in evidence for their variety performances (Catlin's Pierrots at Withernsea, Bert Grapho's Jovial Jollies at Saltburn, the Waterloo Pierrots at Bridlington). Pertwee records the same arrangement being used by troupes at Scarborough and Roker.

This spatial arrangement was specifically borrowed from the theatrical variation of

blackface in indoor venues. Yet blackface minstrelsy was perhaps the most pervasive popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century, infiltrating all arenas of popular culture. It was the persistent, smaller roving troupes of minstrels that the Pierrot troupes most immediately descended from:

Blacked-up entertainers performed solo, in duos and small bands at street corners, galas and festivals, town fairs and mops, chapel gatherings and wakes, markets and agricultural shows, club days and race meetings, boating events and seaside resorts, annual beans and festivals, as well as in village and small-town concerts, Punch and Judy shows, Christmas pantomimes, travelling shows and circuses.<sup>13</sup>

The British Pierrot troupe could also be found in many of these contexts, though its most comfortable setting was at seaside resorts with their own traditions of blackface performance. Such beachfront minstrels were usually itinerant, busking on the sands during

the day and in the hotels in the evening. Early Pierrot troupes followed this pattern while others performed on al fresco platforms, especially erected on the beach or promenade. It is this innovation in staging which allowed their adoption of the onstage semi-circle of chairs used by theatrical blackface troupes.

### From Minstrels to Pierrots

Other conventions of seaside minstrelsy were followed in some detail by the Pierrots. Pickering notes that 'beachfront minstrels commonly went under the sobriquet of variously named Uncles. This appellation had long been associated with minstrels.'<sup>14</sup> He pays particular attention to Harry Summerson, known as Uncle Mack, whose Minstrels performed at Broadstairs. Summerson's troupe post-dates the first Pierrot troupes, but his title is indicative of a longstanding minstrel convention. The use of the epithet Uncle also crossed over into Pierrot tradition. Andie Caine was known as Uncle Andie,<sup>15</sup> and a clutch of autographs in the Crimlisk Fisher archive reveals that several members of his troupe in the 1930s adopted the convention, with Gus Yelrob signing himself Uncle Gus, Tom Hall as Uncle Tommy, and Billy Gill as Uncle Billy.<sup>16</sup>

Charles Beanland of the Waterloo Pierrots in Bridlington was also called Uncle, though rather than Uncle Charles was 'known to one and all as "Sammy", and to the children as Uncle Sam'.<sup>17</sup> The reason for the change of name indicates one reason why whiteface and blackface minstrel troupes resembled each other structurally and conventionally: the Waterloo Pierrots were originally the Waterloo Minstrels, who, as Chapman and Chapman record, 'performed in blackface and wore striped blazers and straw hats'.<sup>18</sup> It is, presumably, in this context that Charles adopted the American nickname of Sam, just as Harry Summerson became Mack, harking back to the earlier minstrelsy devotion to Uncle Tom and Uncle Ned.

The Waterloos were not the only troupe, or performers, to transform themselves from 'nigger' minstrels to Pierrots: Johnny 'Smiler'

Grove ran a blackface troupe at Scarborough before establishing a Pierrot troupe at Redcar; Bert Grapho, Billy Jackson, and Philip Rees of Grapho and Jackson's Mascots had all performed with Joe Mulvana's Minstrels at Whitby; and the South Shore Minstrels at Starr Gate in Blackpool were reinvented around the turn of the century as a Pierrot troupe called the White Coons.<sup>19</sup> Fred White also ran a troupe known as the White Coons in Bognor Regis. Such titles not only acknowledged the transitions from blackface to whiteface performance; they also point to the ongoing fluidity and crossovers between these modes.

Uncle Mack's Minstrels instituted White Night in 1925, and subsequently performed as Pierrots every Thursday evening, while conversely Andie Caine had his Pierrot troupe perform in blackface occasionally at benefit nights. There is some dispute about the origins of Caine's Pierrot troupe which could suggest even greater fluidity. Chapman and Chapman claim that photographic evidence suggests Caine came to Filey after a couple of seasons with Will Catlin's troupe at Scarborough, placing his arrival at around 1897–98. This view was apparently proposed at one time by Geoff Mellor and refuted in a categorical letter to *The Dalesman*:

Soon after 1894 Andy [sic] Caine began his pierrot troupe with Teddy Miles and George Fisher . . . Mr Mellor said Andy left Will Catlin at the turn of the century, but I say he started no later than 1895.<sup>20</sup>

A playbill, identified as dating from 1904 and announcing the tenth season of Andie Caine's troupe, corroborates this account.<sup>21</sup> According to Caine's son, however, in 1895 Caine was performing in Scarborough, but with Captain Frank's Minstrels rather than Catlin.<sup>22</sup> These conflicting recollections suggest that his engagements were perhaps not exclusive and that, while establishing his own troupe in Filey, Caine could also have been performing with both blackface and whiteface companies at Scarborough.

The semiotics of the Pierrot troupes therefore appear to establish connections between the whiteface and blackface tradition not only in the reverse imaging of the make-up,



Will Catlin's Favourite Pierrots perform on the beach at Scarborough.

but also through the titling of troupes and individual performers, use of theatrical conventions, and the traffic of performers moving between the forms. At a striking visual level the contrast between blackface and whiteface would most readily distinguish the two forms from each other, putting the emphasis on racial difference. Yet the similarities of the forms and the fluidity of movement between them complicate this. A troupe name such as the White Coons not only acknowledges the change from blackface to whiteface performance, but suggests some continuity between the former and current acts. Pickering objects, appropriately, to Rehin's reading of the use of blackface which:

yokes minstrelsy together with medieval English pageantry and the *commedia dell'arte*, and so regardless of social and historical context feels free to refer to black masks as a traditional dramatic device with no racial significance. It hardly needs to be added that Arlecchino was not a 'coon'.<sup>23</sup>

In the specific cultural context of the late nineteenth century, however, the emergence

of Pierrot is interwoven with blackface performance to the extent that Pierrot, unlike Arlecchino, was in some measure identified as a 'coon'. In this sense, troupe names such as White Coons foreground racial significance by drawing a line of correspondence as well as distinction between the theatrical constructions of black and white identities. This was far from consistent or common to all troupes. Elsewhere, as in the case of Andie Caine's own Royal Pierrots, other names were adopted which point to connections that emphasized the alternative – though increasingly related – field of national identity and significance.

### Royal Pierrots

The troupe name Royal Pierrots is almost as old as the tradition itself, with the originator of the form, Clifford Essex, adopting it following an early performance for Edward, Prince of Wales. As well as Andie Caine, other seaside impresarios on the North West and Yorkshire coasts followed suit after playing to members of the royal family. Catlin's Royal Pierrots performed in Scarborough,

while Johnny Grove's Pierrots in Redcar had become the Royal Entertainers by 1907. Bradford's Ernest Binns also promoted the Royal Arcadians alongside his coastal troupes.

Other troupes, perhaps without the licence to use the Royal title, having not appeared before royalty, referenced the empire in their names. Jack Bellamy's Imperial Pierrots performed at Houghton-le-Spring and Seaton Carew in the North-East of England, and The Imps (managed by George Royle as a precursor to his celebrated Fol-de-Rols) was an abbreviation of The Imperials. The symbolism that circulated through these company names went beyond lending status and prestige to the troupes. Ward notes that increasingly during this period 'the monarchy was fundamentally entwined with the idea and reality of the British Empire. They were seen together as forming two basic foundations upon which Britishness could be built'.<sup>24</sup> The Royal and Imperial troupe names accordingly incorporated the British Pierrot into a network where national identity was in the process of being built through the cultural representation of the monarchy.

The question of national identity through this symbolic network was not being settled by debate at a level of substance but through presentation at a level of form. Cannadine has mapped the revitalizing of royal ceremonial that coincided with the emergence of the British Pierrot troupe, beginning with Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887, and advancing both in grandeur and expertise through her Diamond Jubilee and a succession of royal funerals up to the investiture of the new Prince of Wales in 1911. Financial and creative investment in spectacle was renewed at this time, and a more disciplined approach to the preparation and execution of public rituals was demanded.

This was not necessarily a demonstration of grandeur and discipline as reflective properties of national character. Rather, these were competitive strategies that responded to similar investments in ceremony and spectacle elsewhere, the playing out of Britain's greatness before its rivals on a global stage.<sup>25</sup>

On the domestic stage, the performance of royalty to British citizens utilized ceremony

as a focus for national unity. The tropes here included the preservation of anachronism: the monarch's carriage and other ritual objects emphasized historical continuity not as proof of the durability of national character but as a defining feature of that character. The Pierrot, with its own anachronistic allure drawn from the reference back to the early modern form of *commedia dell'arte*, contributed to the public impression of continuity operating here. Within the network, this was partly constituted by the hierarchical relationships being performed between monarch and entertainer: the Pierrot retained a servile and comic status, consistent with the *zanni* in the original Italian form, acknowledging regal patronage and observing the dignified authority of the royal position.

### The Pierrots and Imperial Pomp

The emphasis on continuity through anachronism can be seen as operating on the domestic stage as an overarching, national form of *commedia dell'arte* in which the intrigues played out in one sphere by the servile buskers are relative to, and bound up with, those of the royal masters – equivalent to the *vecchi* of the *commedia* – in another. In the symbolic network, national relations were also filtered performatively through the motifs of the family circulating in public discourse: thus the authority of Victoria as matriarch, or Edward VII as patriarch, was extended and complemented by the playfulness of the nominally avuncular Pierrots. Rather than advocating the observable properties of a singular British character, Britishness became constructed here through a network of relations.

Walter Bagehot wrote in 1867 of the 'Court Circular', the daily reports of the monarch's engagements, that: 'Its use is not in what it says, but in those to whom it speaks.' The analysis, in which the activities are meaningless in themselves and accrue value only *because* they are reported, is extended to the royal family, which

sweetens politics by the seasonable addition of nice and pretty events. It introduces irrelevant facts into the business of government, but they are



Above: Pierrot show at Holey Rock, Roker, 1905. Below: Andie Caine (downstage centre) leads the Royal Filey Pierrots in a show on the sands.





facts which speak to 'men's bosoms' and employ their thoughts.<sup>26</sup>

The sovereign augmented by an active royal family collectively constituted a peculiarly constitutional form of entertainment which, in the public playing out of its activities, operated as a political disguise. Specifically, the continuity it represented distracted from the lack of continuity – indeed the uncertainty – of elected governments. Announcements of the royal family's ongoing domestic engagements promoted an overriding stability in British public life that remained relatively untroubled by the destabilizing political context of the time. At a national level, this extended beyond the persistent turbulence of the 'politically explosive' Irish question: it 'was also the period when the first official recognition of Welsh national interests as such was made' while Scotland acquired 'a modest Home Rule movement'.<sup>27</sup>

Bagehot was writing some twenty-four years before the emergence of the Pierrot, and also at a time when royal pageantry was a less ostentatious affair. He himself opposed extravagant ceremony, arguing that it would compromise the necessary mystery and associated dignity of royalty. But increasing royal prestige acquired some urgency in 1877, the year that Bagehot died and the reclusive Victoria became Empress of India. This expansion of the symbolic royal role may have prompted the revival of grand pageantry a decade later; it also coincided with the diminishing role of genuine royal authority in political matters, so that the revitalized ceremony was, for Cannadine, 'not so much the reopening of the theatre of power as the premiere of the cavalcade of impotence'.<sup>28</sup>

Towards the end of the century, it was not only the changes in internal politics that unsettled royal power but the international threats from and rivalries with the newly unified nations of Germany and Italy, and a reinvigorated United States of America. If these new pageants continued to operate as forms of disguise, Cannadine questions whether this was perhaps less a constitutional distraction from political discontinuity

than the introspective masking of national insecurities:

Whether these royal ceremonials . . . were an expression of national self-confidence or of doubt is not altogether clear. It remains a widely held view that Victoria's jubilees and Edward's coronation mark the high noon of empire, confidence, and splendour. But others, following the mood of Kipling's 'Recessional', regard them in a very different light – as an assertion of show and grandeur, bombast and bravado, at a time when real power was already on the wane.<sup>29</sup>

### An Imaginary of Whiteness

The display of bravado was certainly a showcase of British power abroad; it was also a matter of domestic morale, bolstering national self-assurance. The deployment of continuity and anachronism that made the British Pierrot into a Royal Pierrot was not simply concerned with the maintenance of traditional reverence and privileges. The symbolic network bringing monarchy and Pierrot together was situated within a shared project to reaffirm confidence in the nation's sense of itself. As in *commedia dell'arte*, the skill and action of the *zanni* were oriented towards the realization of the larger design.

It was possibly for this reason that the whiteface clowns emerged from the blackface form, constructing 'a racial and national imaginary' of whiteness which confronted political reality and domestic anxiety. As Hobsbawm noted, this period saw a surge in nationalism which was predicated on ethnicity and language. Since English was already a major international language, British nationality was contested more, perhaps, through the ethnic question. The continuity evoked through anachronism and social relations in the Pierrot correlated with its whiteness.

If the form suggested sympathy and overlap with blackface minstrelsy, it also marked clear distinctions along racial lines. The soubriquet 'Uncle' is again illustrative here: in the case of blackface minstrelsy, the assumed name of the uncle was fictionalized: Harry became Mack, Charles became Sam. In whiteface, the Pierrot retained its own name. In this, as in other distinctions, the minstrel



Postcard views of Pierrot shows in the round (at Filey, above), and in the park (at Wolverhampton, below).

constructed a 'low-black Other' while the Pierrot assumed a higher status, though still below its royal patrons.<sup>30</sup> The constructed white persona was, however, no less imagin-

ary than either its blackface or regal correlates.

Hobsbawm remarks that, coinciding with the rise of national identities along ethnic lines,



the old-established division of mankind into a few 'races' distinguished by skin colour was now elaborated into a set of 'racial' distinctions separating people of approximately the same pale skin, such as 'Aryans' and 'Semites' or, among the 'Aryans', Nordics, Alpines and Mediterraneans.<sup>31</sup>

Combined with the demonic title Pierrot, designating the character as a citizen of the coastal pier, the troupe performances constructed a fictionalized white race.

Pickering proposes that the mask in blackface minstrelsy 'concealed the everyday ethnic identity of the performer, and revealed the racialized identity of the persona'.<sup>32</sup> In whiteface, the constructed racial gap between performer and persona was present but significantly reduced. The imaginary persona of the Pierrot still sat within the broader category of 'Aryan' consistent with the performer's own racial identity. The 'Uncle' character was neither Self nor Other in its ethnic dimension, but a racialized performance of whiteness related to but removed from the performer's everyday reality.

Although distanced from a reflective representation of white identity, the Royal title adopted by the Pierrot troupes also conferred a sense of belonging that was not available to its counterparts in blackface minstrelsy. As a pivotal point between the royal and blackface elements of this symbolic network, the Pierrot in its imaginary *zanni* status mediated national power from neither the heights of the former nor the depths of the latter. The mediating, imaginary, and resistant properties of the Pierrot character found a logical home at the seaside, betwixt and between land and sea, in which individual or national identity could be suspended and reimagined.

### We Do Like to Redefine the Seaside

Ward has noted that 'the urban as well as the rural has been celebrated as contributing to national identity'.<sup>33</sup> The binary poles of town and country observed here suggest that, even within discourse, the seaside – neither conventionally urban nor rural – exists separately from the social environments that shape everyday experience. For residents of

seaside resorts, of course, questions of identity are no less urgent, and the particular economic and political structures of the coast no less determinate. Analysis is governed, however, by the principle that seaside locations are not primarily oriented towards the permanence and stability of residency, but the temporary experiences of visitors. Thus, for Ward,

holidays, especially those at the seaside and abroad, have often been seen as spaces where many of the rules of 'national character' no longer apply. . . . Holidays have been about an escape from restraint, including that presumed to come from Englishness, for the middle and upper classes associated with the stiff upper lip and for the working class associated with 'respectability'.<sup>34</sup>

Walton also recognizes the temporary escape of the seaside when he notes that it 'conjures up the spirit of carnival' and allows liberation from 'the leaden constraints of day-to-day identity'.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, he places restrictions around such freedom, insofar as resorts

were seldom places where constraints and conventions were cast to the winds; people brought their own internal controls and assumptions about proper behaviour with them . . . but the seaside provided a changed register of expectations, freer but still bounded by wider notions of respectability and propriety.<sup>36</sup>

Coastal resorts therefore allowed a rich space for the indulgence of imagined national identities in which social expectations could be loosened. This was not a revolutionary opportunity, however: rather than a *tabula rasa* the promenade was already inscribed with the boundaries and co-ordinates of national identity.

The symbolic network in which the British Pierrot was located operated in a compacted form at the seaside and so was instrumental in drawing these boundaries. Blackface minstrelsy already had a continuing, and competing, tradition here, strengthening the association with the Pierrot form. The naming of Royal Pierrots also served as a reminder of royal witnesses to performances, with the entertainers themselves acting as the shared connection between current spec-

tators and their regal predecessors. Royalty was not only summoned in the oblique claims and recall of the Pierrots, of course, but could be as physically present as blackface minstrels. Wally Cliff, a performer in Filey during the 1930s, recalls Gerald and George Lascelles, the sons of Princess Mary, building sandcastles and paying little attention to the Royal Pierrots nearby.<sup>37</sup>

This distilled national constituency of the seaside was matched by the setting: holiday-makers were, as Ward notes, 'met not only by the sea but by the extraordinary architecture of the Empire, and spectacular buildings given patriotic names such as the Victoria Pier, Empress Ballroom, and Royalty Theatre'.<sup>38</sup> Other regular attractions at the resorts dealt in foreign curiosities, including 'zoos, circuses, aquaria, roof gardens, exhibitions of exotica and of "other" cultures (Zulus, native Americans)'.<sup>39</sup> All the features of the resort lay along a continuum which began with the monarch at the heart of the nation and continued well beyond the familiar and the native to distant colonial endpoints.

### Constructing a Racial Imaginary

In line with the displays of exotica, the Pierrot did not present British whiteness as it habitually existed, but as an exhibition of whiteness at a remove from the context it inhabited. Its place in this continuum remained anchored to the primary national symbol of the monarch, so that it honoured and, on some level, harboured the ethnic dominance that informed national identity within Empire. At the same time, in the imaginary whiteness of the character, it also nodded towards the exotic Otherness of the blackface minstrel. Pickering observes that the 'dual purpose' of blackface was

to objectify, and make a stereotypical object of, a repressed self which was projected on to the low-black Other, and use this projection to give a satirical, burlesquing or simply frivolous dimension to the entertainment.<sup>40</sup>

The Pierrot could equally engage in satire, burlesque and frivolity, indulging the repressed elements of national identity, those

which might unsettle the 'sense of uniqueness and superiority' proper to imperial character.<sup>41</sup> These traits range across buffoonery, fantasy, and sentimentalism, which are staples of both blackface and whiteface performance but are excised from the royal imaginary.

While the troupes named Royal Pierrots and White Coons emphasized different associations within the symbolic network, the underlying project remained the same: to construct a racial imaginary which negotiated the idealism of the imperial self-image and the turbulent realities of political division and, in doing so, to situate itself at the boundary between the familiar and the foreign. The imaginary whiteness of the Pierrot, however, acted as a corollary of the imaginary whiteness of a common national (or imperial) British identity. Engaging with the repressed and alienated properties of identity, it occupied a critical distance from its own selfhood.

Without being wholly located in Otherness it also avoided diminishment by the destructive stereotyping that operated in the constructions of blackness by white performers. Rather, the frivolous dimension here allowed some licensing, or even celebration, of the repressed and alienated elements of white identity. As long as these were understood as exotic and contained by the liminally carnivalesque spaces of the seaside, such traits secured a place in the national psyche without, in theory, threatening social order and belonging.

The geographical isolation of such repressed elements was nevertheless impossible to regulate in practice. Walton notes that the exotica of the seaside also encompassed preserved anachronism alongside the novelties of modernity:

the seaside resort was to become the last outpost of the horse-drawn landau, providing another reliably old-fashioned travel experience alongside the shock of the new on the fairground rides (some of which were themselves to focus nostalgia as they passed from novelty to tradition).<sup>42</sup>

This opens up one further network in which the Pierrot is implicated – a negotiation

between its own emphasis on continuity and the dramatic social changes brought about by technological innovation. Hobsbawm further identifies the 'onrush of modernity' as one of the threats to social order that demanded the invention of imagined national communities as a response.<sup>43</sup>

The Pierrot form is acutely distanced from the technical advances of modernity in its practice. Acoustic and intimate in performance, the troupes could not compete with the overwhelming spectacle of fairground rides, which is why they 'flourished most in smaller resorts where there was little competition from a weighty entertainment industry: they struggled to make headway against the competition of Blackpool, for example, except when a company found a niche on one of the piers.'<sup>44</sup> Their own commitment to continuity and anachronism already implies incompatibility with change and innovation.

### **The Anxieties of Progress**

Such resistance acts as a reminder that the Pierrots were not simply offering a temporary liberation of the repressed elements of national identity, but were engaged in a more intricate process of managing national identity as continuity of the established relations between things. In this way, the racial and national imaginary performed at the seaside emphasized continuity as a provocative challenge to the contemporary investment in technological change and innovation.

This is indicated in Walton's observation on fairground rides which assume nostalgia in the passage from novelty to tradition. The peculiarity of the seaside is that, in its diverse yet coherent array of exotica, distinctions between the archaic and the innovative become confused: all exhibits appear to always already belong to the imaginary space of the resort and only the encounter with it is new. It is through this perception that the seaside can accelerate the passage from novelty to tradition as the objects, characters, and curiosities found there are assumed always to have existed somewhere in the space between the native and the non-native.

The dichotomy of the seaside as both a permanent landscape and a temporary escape is significant here. The coastal resorts are only a site of impermanent experience for the visitors who arrive and leave; unlike conventional carnival, the seaside is primarily defined by the space, rather than the time, of festivity and so carries its own permanence that endures beyond the temporally bounded holiday period. It persists – as both place and memory – outside the tourist experience, lending additional dimensions of continuity and belonging to the Pierrot troupe.

The song 'Come Away to Binga-Boo', by Hampden Gordon and R. Penso, is indicative here. According to a songbook dating from around 1912, it featured in the repertoire of Andie Caine's Royal Pierrots.<sup>45</sup> The song's satirical target is modern urban technology ('Aeroplanes and motor bikes') and oppositional politics ('Suffragettes and Railway strikes'). The emphasis is on resistance to such political antagonisms and noisy new inventions which are 'awf'ly in the way' and form disturbances to the status quo.

The thrust of the song is avowedly lacking in patriotic fervour, however. Within the satirical framework, the opening line – 'England's going to the dogs!' – is less a lament for the nation than a note of despair at progress, underpinned with a feeling of disenfranchisement. The singer evokes alienation from politics, modernity, and even the personal ('If you're tired of life or your wife is tired of you'). The lyric itself cannot give a decisive indication of the song in performance; the line 'People! Don't be trodden on!' suggests, however, that the song is sung in direct address to the collective audience. The song appeals to a presumed sympathy with the alienation experienced by the singer(s) when confronted with the inexorable anxieties of progress.

Taking the appeal further, a rallying cry to arms is not offered by the Pierrot(s); instead, those who identify with such alienation are invited to abandon England for 'Binga-Boo', a distant and fictional island. The mock-African name of this exotic asylum points towards the blackface tradition, resonant

with the sense of disenfranchisement in the song, and also to the wider imperial context beyond the restraints of solely English concerns. The predominant characteristic of the island is the simple life, devoid of the complexities of modernity, in which political rupture and insecurities play no part. The seaside setting contextualizes this song within a portal to imagined spaces in which resistant or anachronistic British identities could take refuge and thrive.

The imaginary location of the Pierrots shifts from fictional to remembered landscapes in Sacheverell Sitwell's recollections of watching the entertainers in Scarborough during his youth:

Two or even three companies of them in their theatre booths at low tide, where one could walk later and even see the marks of their trestles on the wet sands. Or on a winter morning or afternoon when there was no sign of them whatever. They might never have existed at all, and their season was still far away. . . . I have not forgotten it, and still remember individuals in those summer companies of more than half a century ago.<sup>46</sup>

The description here notes the paradoxical situation that the Pierrot exists vividly in Sitwell's memory at moments when it appears never to have existed at all in reality. It is in this imaginary dimension that the Pierrot ultimately acquires a sense of permanence outside of its coastal existence. The Pierrot occupied the marginal spaces of the seaside but was not contained by or in them, haunting the national imagination long after the close of the show.

At the *al fresco* seaside, the Pierrot is called into existence in the space between the permanent and the temporal, the new and the traditional, the yet-to-be and the already-is. On both ontological and imaginary levels, it is also situated between the performed identities of the blackface minstrel and the royal *vecchi*. The white construction of a stereotypical black identity was used cathartically to bolster national unity through both the indulgence and mockery of an imagined, inferior Other. Alternatively, the public presentation of royalty enacted a superior mode of existence that could be

sustained above the complexities and difficulties of political or ordinary life.

The liberation of repressed elements by the whiteface mask, performed by and to a once-removed ethnic variation of itself, confounds questions of superiority and inferiority by mediating the imaginary positions of royal and blackface personas. The imaginary spaces it occupies extend the transcendental realm of the seaside in which the anachronistic and untroubled relations between the Pierrot, royal personages, and blackface minstrels can continue to reverberate and be symbolically negotiated.

## Conclusion

The institution of the British Pierrot, enduring through the first half of the twentieth century, suggests that it held relevance for its audience, predominantly composed of British holidaymakers. Although a unique performance form, it located itself within a symbolic network that resonated with contemporary national concerns. These included the increasing significance of racial and national identity, against an imperial backdrop; the diminishing of British power at international levels; anxiety about the political discontinuities inherent in the parliamentary system; and a growing sense of disenfranchisement in the face of relentless modernization.

Such concerns were addressed by the repositioning of the royal family as symbols of national continuity and power that transcended socio-political ruptures. At the other end of the scale, the performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy constructed a low-black Other through which a white audience could vicariously enjoy and dispel all the traits considered inimical to a proper British identity. The whiteface Pierrot situated itself between these two poles, recognizing growing points of alienation within the country and seeming to hold the potential to reconnect them to a unified and continuous whole.

This dimension of the Pierrots' significance was accentuated by its context at the seaside, a space in which national restraints could be loosened – within reason – with a view to exploring alternative modes of

being. The atmosphere of exotica that was pervasive here extended to the Pierrot itself, which appeared as an imaginary variation on a white racial and national identity. In its conservative antipathy to change, however, the imaginary character could blur and present itself as the more authentic embodiment of British aspiration and realization. As such, it existed between reality and imagination, in both the fantasy lands of its own making and the recollections of its audiences, where its symbolic significance could circulate and exert a vivid influence.

## Notes and References

With thanks to Eric Pinder at the Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey, and to Tony Lidington for access to his private collection of Pierrot memorabilia. Images are also reproduced courtesy of Tony Lidington.

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