

## Performing Blackface on the Newfoundland Stage: The Rossleys, Transnational Connections, and Early Twentieth Century Theatre in St. John's

Colleen Quigley et Melissa Templeton

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Résumé de l'article

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*Dans cet article, Colleen Quigley et Melissa Templeton examinent comment les idéologies racistes transnationales ont pu façonner la scène théâtrale de Terre-Neuve à ses débuts. Pour ce faire, elles se penchent sur un corpus qui n'a pas été étudié jusqu'ici : celui des spectacles grand public des Rossley, une troupe vaudeville qui s'est produite à St. John's de 1911 à 1917. Cette dernière présentait des numéros qui représentaient bien la rhétorique colonialiste sur la race à cette époque : des spectacles sur le thème du Wild West, des ménestrels en blackface, les Rossley jouaient des stéréotypes dérogatoires pour le plus grand amusement des Blancs de Terre-Neuve. Leurs activités sapent les fictions idéalisées d'aujourd'hui qui glorifient l'histoire de Terre-Neuve et du Canada sans s'attarder suffisamment à leur passé raciste.*

*Le cas des Rossley illustre la dimension transnationale de la construction raciale à Terre-Neuve. L'île, à cette époque, occupait une position d'entre-deux : elle ne faisait pas encore partie du Canada, et l'avenir de ce Dominion britannique restait incertain. De plus, le couple qui a fondé les Rossley était constitué de personnalités internationales : venus d'Écosse et de l'Angleterre jusqu'aux États-Unis, ils avaient participé activement au circuit vaudeville avant de s'installer à Terre-Neuve et accueillaient régulièrement des artistes d'Europe et des États-Unis dans des théâtres de la région.*

# Performing Blackface on the Newfoundland Stage: The Rossleys, Transnational Connections, and Early Twentieth Century Theatre in St. John's<sup>1</sup>

COLLEEN QUIGLEY AND MELISSA TEMPLETON

The subject of race does not often breach the surface of contemporary theatre in Newfoundland. When it does, racial prejudice tends to be presented in ways that absolve white Newfoundlanders of guilt while echoing Canadian nationalist sentiments that position racism, especially anti-black racism, outside the country's borders (see Robert Chafe's play *Oil and Water*). This kind of narrative oversimplifies Newfoundland's complicated history, creating its own racist paradigms of ignorance that fail to acknowledge the institutional discrimination, international influences, and local prejudices that inform racial construction on the island.

By contrast, this article considers how transnational racist ideologies shaped Newfoundland's early theatre scene by looking at the unstudied popular performances of The Rossleys. The Rossleys, a vaudeville-style performance troupe active in St. John's from 1911-1917, featured numerous acts that epitomized colonialist rhetoric surrounding race at that time. From Wild West-themed shows to Blackface Minstrelsy, The Rossleys performed derogatory stereotypes to the amusement of white Newfoundlanders. Their performances undermine contemporary idealized fictions that glorify Newfoundland and Canadian histories without adequate consideration of their racist pasts.

Studying the Rossleys highlights the transnational dimensions of racial construction on the island. Newfoundland held a peculiar space in North America at that time—not yet a part of Canada, the future of this British Dominion was still uncertain. In addition, the Rossleys were international figures; the husband and wife team immigrated from Scotland and England to the US (where they were active performers on the vaudeville circuit) and eventually established their company in Newfoundland, regularly bringing acts from Europe and the US to local theatres. This article discusses how racial ideologies in Newfoundland's early theatre scene were shaped by complex transnational networks, and in doing so, exposes erasures caused by patriotic imaginings of a racism-free Canada.

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At first glance, it might seem odd to include the island of Newfoundland in a volume about US-Canada borderlands, since “borderlands” doesn’t entirely capture its geographic relationship to the US.<sup>2</sup> While Labrador is connected to Canada’s mainland, the island of Newfoundland is not. Instead, its official border is situated in the water and is quite literally fluid. The perimeter that circumscribes its “land” is volatile too, considering that the shape and size of islands subtly shift with the tide. While the water surrounding Newfoundland can be isolating, separating the Island from Canada and the US by far more than an imagined boundary line, it is also what has connected Newfoundland to transnational trading networks for centuries. As the last North American destination before ships sailed to Europe, Newfoundland has since the 1600s been immersed in the culture of the Atlantic—a space which, as Paul Gilroy has demonstrated, is rife with the symbols, artifacts, and cultures of the transatlantic slave trade.

One such artifact that has circumscribed the Atlantic is the practice of blackface minstrelsy. Though not a part of the African diaspora culture that Gilroy writes about in *The Black Atlantic*, blackface minstrelsy, a racist practice that parodies black men and women for white amusement, emerged in the US in the 1830s but became a popular form of entertainment throughout Canada and the UK (Johnson).<sup>3</sup> Scholars have acknowledged that blackface minstrelsy was practiced in Newfoundland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Best), yet the details of its practice are still understudied. In part this is due to the relatively small amount of archival material available: while many accounts in Newfoundland newspapers refer to blackface performances, as Jeff Webb has argued, popular culture in Newfoundland in the early twentieth century was not often seen as

worth documenting, archiving, or researching (118). This lack of research may also stem from the discomfort that comes from discussing blackface minstrelsy—especially the way such materials complicate anti-racist narratives that often shape Canadian nationalist historiography (even discussions of Canadian slavery).<sup>4</sup> Camille and Charmaine Nelson argue that Canadians tend to place the “racial sins of North America” (3) on US soil, both as a nationalist tactic to show Canada is different from (and implicitly superior to) the US, but also as a way to deny or overlook Canada’s own culture of racism. From the colonization and genocide of Indigenous peoples, to slavery, to internment camps and head taxes, to residential schools, racism is ubiquitous in Canada’s past even though Canada so often superficially prides itself on its multiculturalism.<sup>5</sup> Newfoundland’s historical relationship to blackness is often romanticized in popular culture,<sup>6</sup> but as Kelly Best demonstrates, even in the nineteenth century, Newfoundlanders were familiar with blackface minstrelsy.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars writing on black Canadian studies often note the complex geography that shapes blackness in the country. Rinaldo Walcott suggests that Canadian blackness lives somewhere between the Caribbean and the US and that those writing about blackness in Canada are “preoccupied with elsewhere and seldom with here” (xiv) while Katherine McKittrick, in her writings on black women’s cartographies, identifies the problematic ways that many “black populations and their attendant geographies [have been incorrectly deemed] as ‘ungeographic’ and/or philosophically undeveloped” (xiii). Racial erasure is deeply connected to racial displacement, and an inability to claim black space in Canadian history reinforces the white, patriarchal, and classed cartographies that have mapped it.<sup>8</sup> Newfoundland only joined the Canadian federation in 1949, yet its histories of blackness are also marked by lacunae. There are few official documents available that might provide a sense of Newfoundland’s earliest black inhabitants, yet despite the scarcity of materials, there is evidence that slaves and slave ships landed on Newfoundland shores (Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* 28). Fishing boats, especially from Bermuda, brought black men, as labourers and slaves, to assist in their cod fishing, to the great frustration of local fishermen.<sup>9</sup> Afua Cooper notes that in 1741, after the discovery of a planned slave revolt in New York, hundreds of slaves were arrested and either executed or sent to live in exile in Newfoundland, though what happened to these exiled slaves is unclear (Rollman).<sup>10</sup> There is also space to consider here whether Nova Scotian communities of freed black men and women (including Africville) shipped to Nova Scotia as early as the 18th century, had any connections to St. John’s, though research on this possible relationship too is nascent.

While little has been excavated that might help piece together a more thorough history of black Newfoundlanders here, this does not mean that the Island’s settler population went untouched by racial (and racist) constructions of blackness. Blackface minstrelsy performances in St. John’s highlight a perverse version of blackness—one crafted by whites to mock and ridicule black men and women—that traveled throughout the Atlantic, including the shores of Newfoundland.

In 2015, Memorial University’s Archives and Special Collections brought new material to light on blackface in Newfoundland, making publicly available records on The Rossleys—a family theatre troupe initially from Great Britain but who had spent years in US vaudeville before relocating to St. John’s in 1911. The Rossleys presented a wide array of variety acts

**Rossley's Theatre!**

BIG MUSICAL PRODUCTION—  
**"THE DARKIES WEDDING DOWN  
 ON THE OLD PLANTATION,"**  
 With 20 people. One of the finest Minstrel Shows ever produced by  
 young people.

**TUESDAY NIGHT COUNTRY STORE.**  
 BEAUTIFUL SILVER ARTICLES ON VIEW IN LOBBY MONDAY  
 NIGHT.  
 Wednesday night, the benefit for Convalescent Home. The finest  
 sight ever seen. Entire proceeds given. Under the distinguished pa-  
 tronage of His Excellency the Governor and Lady Davidson.

**Laughable Nigger Act.**

Last night there was a good big house at Rossley's and one and all enjoyed the show. To-night there will be a very funny sketch entitled, "A Dark Town Review," all laughs and fun. Pictures the best in the business. Mrs. Rossley is working hard on the Christmas Pantomime for which she has a number of our own girls, who will make a very fine show. All good looking Newfoundland girls, who are put through a course of special training. Mrs. Rossley has got the most beautiful songs specially written for the big production.

Figs. 1 and 2. Advertisements and reviews in *St. John's Daily Star*, 23 April 1917 and *Evening Telegram*, 3 December 1914.

including several blackface numbers performed by the Rossleys themselves, local actors (including children), and imported talent from the US and Great Britain. Although primary documents on the Rossleys are limited, there are accounts from the Newfoundland daily newspapers *Evening Telegram*, *Daily News*, and *Harbor Grace Standard* (see figures 1 and 2) totaling more than 1400 references to the Rossleys, from 1911 to 1917 (when they relocated to Saint John, New Brunswick).<sup>11</sup> Despite scouring archives in New Brunswick, online vaudeville newspapers as well as at the holdings of New York Public Library there are no known scripts, scores, choreographic notation, or theatre notes from the Rossleys that would help us better understand the specific content of their performances. In addition to newspaper references to the Rossleys, photographs and old advertisements help us piece together a partial narrative of their blackface performances in early twentieth century St. John's. We are faced with many unanswered questions about who the Rossleys were, why they came to Newfoundland, why they left, and what changes they brought to the St. John's theatre community. We've chosen to make plain where there are gaps, but even this limited material affords the opportunity to interrogate early twentieth century representations of blackness in Newfoundland popular culture, especially, given the Rossleys' personal history of migration, their connection to British Imperial and American discourses on race and racial construction.

When the Rossleys arrived in St. John's in 1911, Newfoundland was experiencing relative prosperity as a Dominion of Great Britain. The Island was still run on a responsible government model—a model of self-governance and financial autonomy from Britain established in 1855—yet Britain controlled external affairs, such as fishing rights, negotiated in European treaties. At the same time, Newfoundland became quite invested in an economic relationship with the US and many Islanders who immigrated to the US maintained strong familial ties to Newfoundland (Reeves). Considering the significant roles Great Britain and the US played in Newfoundland's cultural politics at that time, we examine how the Rossleys' connections to

both Great Britain and the US inform their blackface minstrelsy performances in St. John’s and potentially reflect larger patterns at work in Newfoundland racial discourses.<sup>12</sup>

The example of the Rossleys reveals the multinational layers of racial knowledge that informed the St. John’s theatre scene in the early twentieth century. The Rossleys spent years on the US vaudeville circuit (ca. 1894-1911) but were originally from Great Britain and their history of migration echoes migratory patterns that connect local Newfoundlanders to communities in the US and the UK. Their experience also speaks on a broader level to the transatlantic cultural relationships between Newfoundland, Great Britain, and the US and the transnational processes that inform St. John’s theatre. The Rossleys frequently brought guests from Europe and the US to perform in addition to hiring local talent. They called attention to their “Britishness” in advertisements while performing American musical numbers onstage. And their use of traditional minstrel formats and their appeal to middle class families highlights how both British and American approaches to minstrelsy are embedded in these local performances.

While this paper focuses on the Rossleys’ blackface performances, it should be noted that the Rossleys offer a complex lens for thinking about racialization in St. John’s beyond the black/white dyad that so often frames blackface minstrelsy. For example, their performance “A Night in Japan” (*Evening Telegram* 13 December 1915, 6) echoes earlier orientalist performances in St. John’s like the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *The Mikado* (see O’Neill 195) and speak to anti-Asian rhetoric and legislation of the period.<sup>13</sup> Other examples include performances like “Red Wing” (see figure 3) which reinforced colonialist imagery and the fantasy of playing Indian in Wild West-style productions (*Evening Telegram* 2 May 1913, 4), distorting the violence of colonialism and misrepresenting Indigenous struggles on the Island, especially the mistreatment of the Mi’kmaq people and the extinction of the Beothuk tribes.<sup>14</sup> These additional representations of non-white subjects similarly inform a sentiment of white superiority that shapes racism in St. John’s theatre at the time. Future Rossley-related research could further interrogate their orientalism and colonialist depictions of “Indian-ness.”

The Rossleys, with their use of blackface and other racist performance practices, demonstrate the complex way that Atlantic culture has influenced racial knowledge in Newfoundland.<sup>15</sup> Examining this past helps us understand twentieth century constructions of blackness in Newfoundland’s settler population while highlighting the transnational connections that inform the practice of blackface minstrelsy and constructions of race in St. John’s.



Fig. 3. Red Wing advertisement from the *Evening Telegram*, 22 May 1917.

## Introducing the Rossleys

Originally from Scotland and England, respectively, Jack Rossley (1870–ca. 1930) and Marie Rossley (nee Rostelle, ca. 1873–1930) worked in US vaudeville beginning around 1894 (*New York Clipper* 648), but there is little indication of why the two came to the US. It appears that Jack had a successful career as a European performer, he is credited with being the 1884 clog dancing champion of London, England (*Evening Telegram* 28 April 1913, 5) though it is also plausible that Rossley fabricated some of his successes for the press. Jack and Marie were active performers on the US vaudeville circuit, and Jack performed frequently with his brother Tom as the “Rossley Brothers” (*New York Clipper* 263). According to newspapers accounts, Marie, a burlesque dancer,<sup>16</sup> worked with the Rossley brothers for several years ca. 1894–1900. We suspect that Jack and Marie severed their professional, and possibly their personal relationship with Tom in the early 1900s, as the references in the newspapers cease to mention the brothers around that time.<sup>17</sup>

The Rossleys first came to Newfoundland as part of a tour, but why they decided to relocate here in 1911 is somewhat obscure. It seems most plausible that the Rossleys left the US, partly, for financial reasons. With the rise of film in the early 1900s, the vaudeville circuit in the US would eventually become an unstable business—audiences became fascinated with moving pictures and live theatre found itself suddenly in competition with this relatively new technology.<sup>18</sup> Vaudeville was profitable until 1914, when many of the major vaudeville houses began to run with a deficit. By 1910, 26 million Americans were going to the movies each week, a feat vaudeville would never attain (Erdman 164–66). Perhaps sensing vaudeville’s imminent demise, the Rossleys went on to present films in Newfoundland (a nearly untapped market on the Island), capitalizing on the medium’s newfound popularity.

It is also possible they came to St. John’s because their personal vaudeville success was waning. The US-based artists we believe to be Jack and Marie received strong reviews in American papers until about 1910, when critics were suddenly less enthusiastic about their work—in one case, a theatre cancelled their show because it was deemed substandard (*Billboard* 56).<sup>19</sup> Jack Rossley was also an older performer whose prime years as a dancer and comedian had passed (*Evening Telegram* 28 April 1913, 5).<sup>20</sup> With less competition, Jack and Marie’s twenty or so years in the industry made them seasoned entertainers and, judging by the enthusiasm in the local papers, a welcome addition to St. John’s. If Jack Rossley’s career in US Vaudeville was on the decline, relocating to Newfoundland offered him new opportunities as a performer and producer where he might capitalize on his international celebrity and connections to the US and Great Britain.

The Rossleys were prominent popular entertainment figures in St. John’s from 1911 until their departure ca. 1917. They opened their first St. John’s theatre in October 1911<sup>21</sup> and later managed Wabana Hall on Bell Island and three theatres in downtown St. John’s: Rossley’s East, located on Water Street, Haymarket Square; Rossley’s West, also known as OUR’s, located fewer than two kilometres away on Hutchings Street; and The Rossleys’ first and main theatre at 77 Bond Street, only 300 metres uptown from Rossley’s East, also known as “British Theatre –Paramount photo play picture palace,” “Rossley’s British Theatre,” “Rossley’s Star” or “British Hall” (O’Neill 204–05). The theatres employed more than 68 people full-time,

with performances featuring live acts by local and visiting troupes and performers, as well as film screenings on the province's first silver screen with orchestral accompaniment (*Evening Telegram* 26 June 1914, 9).

In the Rossleys' productions, Jack worked as a performer, promoter, and manager, while Marie was rehearsal director, costume designer, and manager of the children's vaudeville troupes, Rossley Kiddies and Rossley Dumbells Jr. Their daughter Bonnie was one of the lead performers and their son, Victor, worked backstage but occasionally made appearances onstage. Paul O'Neill characterizes the repertoire at the Rossley theatres as a combination of "slightly vulgar vaudeville with movies" that were "not forbidden by the church" (205).<sup>22</sup> The overwhelming number of references to the Rossleys in the newspapers indicates that their six-year stay in St. John's had a sizeable impact upon the Newfoundlanders who attended and performed in their productions.

Blackface acts were a regular feature in the Rossleys' repertoire, performed by Jack, local actors, international guests, or even the children themselves. The Rossleys' popularity and their frequent representations of racialized stereotypes onstage offer insights into the way British and American discourses on race likely informed racial constructions, especially for the Island's Irish- and English-descended middle-class families who appeared to be the Rossleys' target audiences.

## The Rossleys and Transnational Influences in Early Twentieth Century Newfoundland

During the Rossleys' time in Newfoundland, the Island was a self-governing Dominion of Great Britain with strong economic ties to the US and Canada. Sometimes erroneously depicted as an isolated island, Newfoundland was in fact deeply connected to Northern Atlantic culture (including a significant role as a military outpost), and its political economy was dependent upon a fluctuating global market. Newfoundland served as a major exporter of codfish to the Caribbean, and although the racial dynamics of Newfoundland and the British West Indies are very different, there is room here to consider these regions' shared cultural bonds (especially thinking about the experiences of their white settler populations who were often exposed to similar discourses on race and gender through British imperialism).<sup>23</sup> Much has been written on Newfoundland's Britishness. Islanders often proudly boast they are "Britain's Oldest Colony," yet residents were connected to Great Britain and its former North American colonies beyond economics, models of governance, and political status. Most of Newfoundland's population consisted of Irish and English settlers (1911 Census), tying it to Great Britain through familial ancestry. Its proximity to the US and Canada offered another significant path of migration (mostly outmigration in the early twentieth century), extending the Island's ties to other North American cities, especially in New England and the Canadian Maritimes. Islanders often travelled to the US and Canada and were avid consumers of British, American, and Canadian elite and popular cultural products such as books, newspapers, music, dance, and films. Newfoundlanders' sense of identity was multifaceted and influenced by its political and economic status and alliances, along with a cultural lens shaped by British, American and Canadian cultural references. These references



included racialized and gendered stereotypes of Jewish, Black, Asian, Indigenous, French, and French Canadian peoples.

In early twentieth century Newfoundland, similar to Canada, Britishness offers an important lens for thinking about race and constructions of whiteness. Discussing the Canadian context, Daniel Coleman explores the concept of “white civility” as an articulation of Britishness—British civilization is heralded as the optimal standard of an orderly society that ostensibly strives to allow for equal freedom of expression and access to economic opportunity (19). Kurt Korneski echoes this point in discussing the significant role of Britishness in late nineteenth-century Newfoundland. British Imperialists had by this time begun to privilege political autonomy for those colonies who could be considered “Britons,” while colonies housing primarily “lesser races” were considered dependents and still required governance (80). The Rossleys took part in this performance of Britishness, not only in their own ancestral ties to Great Britain, but also in their productions. During WWI, for example, when Newfoundland was swept up in imperialist rhetoric supporting the war, the Rossleys screened propaganda films and staged fundraising shows for wartime efforts, which included patriotic ballads and marches with such lyrics as “Their bit they are doing/To hammer down Britain’s foes./When the bagpipes are humming,/Newfoundlanders coming/From the land where the sturdy lads grow” (*Evening Telegram* 17 June 1916, 6).

Even as the Rossleys were aligning themselves with Britishness, they did not shy away from advertising their ties to the US. While Canadian nationalism has often hinged upon differentiating itself from the US and pushing back against American cultural imperialism, US culture was welcomed by some Newfoundlanders as a modernizing force.<sup>24</sup> As W.G. Reeves points out, many Newfoundland leaders, most notably Liberal politician Robert Bond, believed that a relationship with the US could propel Newfoundland into the “modern world” while staving off confederation with Canada (45). In this sense, we might understand the Rossleys’ own connection to American culture, in particular to vaudeville, blackface minstrelsy practices, the touring American acts they brought to their stages, as well as their investment in the burgeoning film industry, as a part of this modernization process.

Newfoundland’s receptiveness to the Rossleys and their connections to American culture foreshadow Newfoundland interest in touring American musicians in later decades. In his writings on the McNulty Family, an Irish-American musical trio that toured and deeply influenced Newfoundland culture in the early 1950s, Pat Byrne explains that Newfoundland perceived Great Britain as both the “Mother Country” and the “ever indifferent masters” (65). Byrne describes many Newfoundlanders’ negative view of the “Canadian Wolf” (65) and that many Newfoundlanders shared closer ties “with the New England area, the ‘Boston States’, than with Canada” and that by the end of WWI and WWII, Newfoundlanders became more enchanted with emulating the US than Great Britain or Canada (66). While the McNultys’ popularity comes several decades after the Rossleys’ residency and is shaped by the identity crisis that followed Newfoundland’s 1949 Confederation with Canada (66-67), the troupe’s transnational connections to Irish and American culture and influence on Newfoundland identity echo a similar transnational quality found in the Rossleys’ successful years in St. John’s (though emphasizing British-ness rather than Irish-ness).<sup>25</sup>

Given Newfoundland’s substantial Irish population, the question arises: was there a connection between the Rossleys’ blackface performances and Irish ethnicity? Looking at the

great number of Irish performers in early American blackface minstrelsy, David Roediger and Robert Nowatzki have demonstrated how nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy had been an important way for Irish Americans to assert their whiteness. For Roediger, blacking up on stage allowed marginalized whites like working class Irish immigrants to appeal to a common white bond, in periods of strong anti-immigration sentiment (117). Nowatzki argues that the creation of racialized and ethnic categories like “white” and “American” was, in the nineteenth century, deeply informed by Irish minstrel performers (163-64). Did this phenomenon hold true in Newfoundland? Newfoundland’s Irish population may not play into this narrative as easily. Laura Onkey’s *Blackness and Transatlantic Identity* suggests that it was the 1847 Irish Famine migration that engendered a perceived connection between Irish and black oppression, (89-90) yet Newfoundland’s Irish population mostly immigrated before the Great Famine and was relatively well-dispersed among working, middle, and upper classes, even compared to their English-protestant counterparts (Mannion 25). Newfoundland faced an emigration crisis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Reeves 44); the anti-immigration sentiment so prominent in the US against the Irish was not felt to the same extent in Newfoundland where immigration was increasingly needed to sustain the population.

There is, however, some evidence that in the early nineteenth century, Irish Catholics were racialized as less white than English Protestants in Newfoundland.<sup>26</sup> Kelly Best for example scrutinizes the significance of a sealing ship built in 1835 in a rural Northern community in Newfoundland. On the ship’s mast was a depiction of Jim Crow indicating that even in the nineteenth century, Newfoundlanders were familiar with minstrel conventions. The ship’s crew is significant here; Best points out that most sealers at that time were new immigrants from Kilkenny, Ireland, and this was likely an intentional association which served as a kind of joke for the working class.<sup>27</sup> It does seem at the very least that a stereotype connecting blackness and Irish-ness was known on the Island, though how significantly it informed Irish/English relations is unclear. In a Rossley show called “Cowboy Act,” (May of 1913) Jack occasionally played the “Irish man on a war path” alongside actors playing other stock characters like “Buffalo Bill,” “Big Chief Battle Axe,” and “The N—er” (*Evening Telegram* 2 May 1913, 4). While Jack Rossley capitalized on the stereotype of the “fighting Irish” the character was also, at least superficially, distinct from the parody of blackness found in “The N—er.”<sup>28</sup>

Irish Catholics likely made up a significant portion of the Rossleys’ audience. In addition to the Rossleys’ appeals to Britishness, they made significant efforts to win the approval of the Island’s Catholic population, especially the Catholic Church who held significant sway in regulating and informally policing St. John’s entertainment industry (Moore 464). The connection between Irish Newfoundlanders and blackness may have held some significance for the Rossleys’ audiences, still, given the notable differences between US Irish and Newfoundland Irish populations and the significant influence of the Catholic church on early twentieth century popular culture in St. John’s, we should be cautious about applying the work of Roediger, Nowatzki, and Onkey (or others discussing Irish American experiences of blackface minstrelsy) to the Newfoundland context.

## The Rossleys and Blackface Minstrelsy in Newfoundland

The Rossleys presented blackface, both as single acts in larger vaudeville-style shows and as standalone evening-length performances, within months of opening their first theatre, but they did not introduce blackface minstrelsy to Newfoundland; they were adding to a tradition that was already well-established on the Island. Newfoundland was the home of many amateur blackface minstrel troupes before the Rossleys arrived: St. John's Amateur Minstrels, Mohawk Minstrels, St. George's Minstrels, Hibernian Minstrels, and Academic Minstrels to name a few.<sup>29</sup> An editorial in *The Newfoundland Illustrated Tribune* (16) recounted in detail the genesis of St. John's Academia Minstrels, founded in 1880's explaining that "many of the boys favored a n—er minstrel."<sup>30</sup> Their debut performance juxtaposed American and Newfoundland cultural references; set on a Southern plantation the production incorporates the story of a field hand named after William Whiteway, the Premier of Newfoundland. It is also important to note that minstrel troupes from the US frequented St. John's; according to a report in the *Patriot and Terra Nova Herald*, the popular Virginia Minstrels performed at the British Hall in 1853 (3), while the *Evening Telegram* reports that I. W. Baird's Mammoth Minstrels (hyperbolically advertised as the "largest and best Minstrel Company on earth"), the South Carolina Minstrels, and the Arabi Squasha's Minstrel troupe appeared in St. John's in the 1880s (21 May 1883, 1; 20 January 1883, 4; 9 October 1882, 1).

In December 1911, the first documented blackface performance at the Rossleys' theatre took place. The Rossleys mounted the stage production "Rossley's Merry Minstrels," which ran for three nights. It opened with an overture and a conversation between an Interlocutor and End Man followed by a series of individual acts, what is typically referred to as the "Olio" section and included ballads, jokes, and comic songs. The show ended with a finale performed by the entire chorus. The production follows the American tradition set out by Edwin P. Christy in the 1840s,<sup>31</sup> which at first glance might imply the Rossleys were imitating the American style of minstrelsy. But by the 1900s, this style of full evening minstrel production had fallen out of fashion in the US, with the exception of a few companies whose nostalgic remounting of minstrel performances, much like stagings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at that time, drew a crowd for sentimental reasons.<sup>32</sup> In the US, blackface was more often featured as short acts within larger multi-act productions, such as those in vaudeville. The British minstrel tradition, on the other hand, continued to mount evening-length minstrel productions until the 1970s, and the Christy label was particularly popular in England in the nineteenth century, "having spread across the land, even 'to the remotest village in Great Britain'" (Pickering 15). While the Christy program has roots in American antebellum minstrelsy, given their time frame, it is possible that the Rossleys became familiar with this style of evening-length minstrel program in Great Britain.

In January 1912, less than a month after this first large-scale blackface performance, the Rossleys mounted another production at their Star Theatre that featured at least one blackface number; this standalone act is likely more in line with the American vaudeville style. There is a single review of this performance, and in it the writer mentions how actor Billie Brayley's "n—er stump speech, had the audience laughing heartily all the way through" (*Evening Telegram* 23 January 1912, 6). The stump speech is yet another trademark of blackface

minstrelsy both in the US and Great Britain: a comedian donning black make-up would recite a pompous speech filled with misused words for comedic effect. This was a style popular in both US and British blackface conventions but with some variation; British minstrelsy tended to use puns more often than malapropisms, which were popular in the US style (Mahar 59-63). Scripts of the Rossleys' performances that might elucidate American and British influences here are not available (and may not have existed), yet it is significant that this second blackface performance was but one act in a larger program, as this resonates with the practices that the Rossleys were more likely to encounter while in US vaudeville.

The Rossleys' blackface shows were promoted not only to men but to women and children as well. At first glance, this audience more closely resembled the patrons of blackface minstrelsy in Britain considering that blackface minstrelsy, from its earliest days in England, appealed to a diverse audience, while antebellum minstrelsy in the US tended to cater to working class men. However, American minstrelsy productions changed significantly by the end of the nineteenth century and often appealed to middle classes and the Rossleys advertisements and productions seem to be informed by the "family-friendly" marketing of American vaudeville (Erdman). Even here, American and British minstrelsy traditions have cross-pollinated so much by the early twentieth century that they are not easy to disentangle. Ambiguity shrouds the content of the Rossleys' shows, making it a challenge to look at specific characteristics that would further substantiate British, regional American, and even Canadian influences on the show itself.<sup>33</sup>

When the Rossleys came to St. John's, they initially relied heavily on performances by touring artists from abroad, but the Rossleys quickly formed their own community performance groups. Much like the British tradition of minstrelsy (Pickering 214), the Rossleys appeared to connect to the local amateur and vernacular traditions, and cast local talent. The most notable example was "Rossleys Kiddies," a group of children led by Marie, who often depicted racist caricatures including those common in blackface minstrelsy. They performed several times a week at the Rossley theatres and toured throughout Nova Scotia and New Brunswick 1916-1917 with seemingly daily matinee performances. The poster featured in Figure 4 comes from a production that was part of the Rossleys' six-month tour of the maritime provinces from February to August 1916 with a cast of 25 performers (mostly female), ranging in age from twelve to twenty-two years old (*Evening Telegram* 14 March 1916, 5). The residents of St. John's were given updates by the daily newspapers on the activities of the tours, with praise often given to the caliber of the performances and descriptions of large and enthusiastic audiences (*Evening Telegram* 27 July 1917, 7).

The poster advertising Rossley's children's troupe (figure 4) parodies colloquial phrases to sell its content. "Hey Folks-es! Comin T'see our Show?" it asks, prompting the audience's participation in the mockery. The poster references stock minstrel characters: Mr. Bones, Tambo, pickaninnies, Mammy and End Men as well as minstrel conventions such as soft shoe performances and a cakewalk. The song titles and lyrics reference the Southern US, including the Carolinas, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama. The illustrated figures exhibit the tell-tale signs of blackface—a trace of whiteness outlines their eyes and mouths to indicate that they are not actually black but dressing up as such. The scene borrows iconography around American slavery: one performer reaches over the sign to grasp for a watermelon while another, barefoot and dressed in gingham, smiles widely at the title of the show. Large

WE IS STARTIN' DIS FRIDAY!

# HEY FOLKS-ES!

Comin' T'see Our New Show?

Betcha life it's a'goin' to be good-- de very bes' yet!



## HERE'S THE PROGRAMME

1. GRAND OPENING CHORUS—"I'se Goin' Back to Caroline"
2. FLAPPER SONG—"Oh for Another Day at Digby"
3. BALLAD—"Mother, I Did Not Understand"
4. COMIC SONG—"In My Little Red Vest"
5. PLANTATION QUINTETTE—Introducing Soft Shoe Dancing
6. "FORTSHUN TELLIN'" — By the End Men.
7. SENTIMENTAL—"I Want My Mammy"
8. FOOLISHMENT—"Beating the Echo to It"
9. BOOK KEEPING—"Bones Pays Tambo What She owes Her.
10. ENSEMBLE SONG—"The Alabama Jubilee"—Entire Company.
11. ECCENTRIC DANCE—"The Melon-Patch Scare-Crow"
12. MISSISSIPPI SONG—"De Loadin' Ob De 'Mandy Lee'"
13. SONG—"Put on Yer Searchlight, Mr. Man"
14. DANCING DUEL--Between Rastus and Rufus
15. SONG—"Down at the Old Swimmin' Hole"
16. SONG—"The Ragtime Wedding Day"
17. SKETCH—"The Teacher and Her Pupil"
18. OLD-TIMER—"Good Old Southern Dance"—Eight Pickaninies.
19. BALLAD—"Can't You Hear Me Callin' Caroline"
20. WORDY WRANGLE -- Tambo Puts Bones Wise to Some Language.
21. PARODY—On Well-known Song --Mr. Bones.
22. PATRIOTIC BIT--Several of the Kiddies.
23. SONG—"That Croony Melody"
24. PIANO SOLO—Some Ivory-Tickler, Believe Me!
25. SONG—"Nashville, Tennessee"—Bones, Tambo and Miss Johnson
26. SONG AND CAKE WALK—"Mandy and Me"
27. SONG—"Are You From Dixie"
28. GRAND FINALE—Greatest Juvenile Dancing Chorus in the World

Matinee Prices: ADULTS - 25c.  
CHILDREN, 15c.

Evening Prices: ORCHESTRA SEATS, 35c\*  
BALCONY SEATS - 25c\*

*Pickaninies Appear at 3.45 and 8 p. m. Daily*

Fig. 4. The poster for "Pickaninies." Photo provided by the Rossley Kiddie Collection at Memorial Library's Archives and Special Collections.

sunflowers adorn the sign and in the open field, a large house in the background implies that the scene takes place on an idyllic plantation. Down the path a dozen more characters make their way, though their expressions are not entirely visible. The poster depicts the Rossley version of pickaninnies as “mischievous and often unruly,” playing into the stock character traits of the US “pickaninny” tradition (Brown 26). The fact that Marie was the leader of the group, and the title of sketch 17 “The Teacher and her Students,” also echoes the US template of “traveling pickaninnies” in which a stock characters of a schoolmistress and her pupils would perform together (Brown 49-50). At least two of the songs featured (“Are you from Dixie” and “My Croony Melody”) were released by Billy Murray in 1916 and 1914 respectively, the US vaudeville performer and voice of Victor gramophones (a brand that heavily advertised in Newfoundland newspapers with over two dozen ads that referenced Billy Murray’s recordings).

The program reveals a lot about the influence of transnational relationships on Newfoundland’s geopolitical identity at that time. In the 1910s, Newfoundland was a self-governing colony of Britain but was also deeply influenced by the economics and politics of Canada and the US. We see this influence in the poster as well. The group is advertised both as “Imperial” and “Canada’s Cleverest Collection of Colored Kids.” In its title and imagery, this performance connects itself to Britain, to Canada, and to the US through its iconography, text, and musical numbers. Though Canada likely had an influence on minstrelsy in Newfoundland, there is scant evidence to even speculate what the Rossleys’s possible interaction with Canadian minstrel practices might have looked like (it doesn’t appear that the Rossleys brought minstrel groups from Canada to their theatres). Importantly, though, the Rossleys not only imported blackface minstrelsy but also exported it to Canada.

A 1913 Rossleys performance summary further highlights how these complex national allegiances and geographic layers inform Rossleys productions. In this performance, Jack Rossley hired the vaudeville duo Shadrick-Talbott: Mr. James Shadrick was a blackface performer while his wife, Ms. Julienne Talbott, was a singer and dancer (not a minstrel performer) whose European background was heavily covered in the press. Shadrick’s performances featured a troupe of twelve minstrels (*Evening Telegram* 5 May 1913, 5); considering the number of performers, the expense of bringing actors to St. John’s at that time, and the fact that newspapers would likely have noted foreign talent, it seems plausible that these minstrels were locals.<sup>34</sup> In this complex exchange, Newfoundland minstrels engaged with an American minstrel, were presented on the same stage as a “European” singer, and together these acts were organized into a single production by Mr. Rossley, a Scottish clogger who had performed extensively in American vaudeville. As Paul Moore explains, Newfoundland’s entertainment industry in the early twentieth century was characterized by the adoption of products of “transnational mass culture” like films and vaudeville (457-58).

How do these transnational connections interact with understandings of race in Newfoundland? This history of blackface minstrelsy (and the accompanying offensive stereotypes it engendered) should be understood not just as a product of a local milieu, but also deeply informed by circum-Atlantic exchanges between Europe, Newfoundland, the US, and Great Britain, and in particular racial discourses that privileged Europe while denigrating blackness. These racial discourses can be seen, for example, in analyzing the newspaper coverage of the Shadrick and Talbott duo. Talbott’s heritage and background (possibly fabricated—a

common practice for nineteenth-century performers) is discussed in relative depth compared to her husband's. The *Evening Telegram* describes Ms. Talbott's supposed European background—born in Italy, educated in France, and popular as a singer in London—to emphasize her ties to Europe (4 April 1913, 6). Few details are provided on her husband Shadrick: they describe his previous work as a minstrel (and his connections to the famous blackface minstrel Lew Dockstader) and explain that his “blackface acts will delight, as that is where he shines.” The paper does not stress his upbringing or education the way it does Talbott's (*Evening Telegram* 3 April 1913, 7). Talbott's performance depends on the circulation of this knowledge—her success hinges in part on people knowing her “cultured” background and especially her ties to Europe. Meanwhile, Shadrick's performance shies away from detail of his own life, to add fantasy to the already highly fictionalized representation of black life in the US. In this way, the Rossleys present “Europe” and the “Southern Plantation” on the same stage and in doing so, Shadrick acts as a foil to Talbott in a manner that mirrors racial hierarchies of European colonialism; Europe becomes a cultural zenith while racialized others are depicted as base subjects, with parody. Aligning Europe with sophistication and gravitas while delighting in the mockery of blackness, the press praised Talbott as captivating and exquisite (*Evening Telegram* 3 April 1913, 7) while describing Shadrick's performance with the simple headline “Funny Negro Sketch at Rossley's” (*Evening Telegram* 8 April 1913, 4).

In considering the local “roots” and transnational “routes” (to borrow Gilroy's phrasing) that inform the Rossleys productions, the question arises: what was the relationship between these performances and black Newfoundlanders? Archeologist Heather Macleod-Leslie proclaims that there is a “shameful lack of black archaeology in Canada” and that the focus “on sites in Nova Scotia to the veritable exclusion of the other three provinces in the region. Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, and New Brunswick remain in need of theoretically grounded archaeological investigation of their African diaspora culture and heritage” (137-38). The common understanding of the experience and construction of racial identity for members of the African diaspora in Newfoundland has not been fully explored and is reliant upon sparse primary and secondary sources.

What relationship there might have been between black Newfoundlanders and the Rossleys remains, at this stage, conjecture. It seems unlikely that black Newfoundlanders took part in the Rossleys' blackface productions. Based on the way that many American minstrel acts were advertised, showing images of actors before and after blackening up, it seems reasonable that if any of the were performers black, the local paper would have included this detail in its advertisements or reviews.<sup>35</sup> There is evidence however that black performers did take to the St. John's stage (see figure 5).<sup>36</sup> The Dora Patterson Trio<sup>37</sup> came to the Rossleys' theatre in 1913 and were reviewed positively in the press. While not much is known about this African American group's presence in Newfoundland beyond these performances, this information offers at least some potential for connecting African diaspora artists to the St. John's theatre scene.<sup>38</sup>

While this research has looked at blackface minstrelsy in Rossleys' performances to consider depictions of race in early twentieth-century Newfoundland theatre, a more nuanced understanding of racial construction in Newfoundland would triangulate blackness with other racialized acts, especially with the representations of Indigenous peoples like those in the aforementioned “Cowboy Act,” a 1914 performance at the Rossleys' Theatre that in addition

to its offensive “Big Chief Battle Axe” also included a blackface character simply called “The N—er.” In reviewing this performance, the St. John’s local paper reported that “scalping Indians was one scream” and encouraged audiences to “send the youngsters” (*Evening Telegram* 2 May 1913, 4).<sup>39</sup> The violence of the image of “scalping Indians” was sufficiently normalized to make it an acceptable show for children, just as donning black makeup to mock black people was. However, there is an additional layer of physical violence that is unsettling. Considering the tensions between English/Irish settlers and Mi’kmaq and the extinction of Beothuk tribes, did these Wild West-style performances potentially provide an outlet for settlers to re-imagine and legitimize through fantasy their power dynamic with those they colonized? Like performances of blackface minstrelsy or “playing Indian” outside of Newfoundland, such theatrical depictions are often less about “blackness” or “indigeneity” than they are about a white racial psyche, so it is hard to make such inferences. But the possibility exists.

## Navigating the Rossleys and Canadian Racial Discourse

While nationalist boundaries often define the scope of studies on race and racism in Canada, this paradigm cannot work for discussing the Rossleys’ blackface minstrelsy performances. Racial construction in Newfoundland should be understood as a transnational process, epitomized by the Rossleys in their blackface performances. In the early twentieth century, when the Rossleys arrived in St. John’s, Newfoundland’s political affiliations with Great Britain, Canada, and the US were nebulous, yet it had strong cultural, political and economic ties to all three. The Rossleys themselves came from Scotland and England but spent over a decade on the vaudeville circuit in the US; the Rossleys’ blackface performances highlight both of these influences. Informed by British minstrelsy—although even the British tradition borrows heavily from the US in its use of the Christy minstrel program—the Rossleys also call attention to US blackface. This is exemplified by the iconography of their *Kiddies* poster that recalls, quite simplistically, the Southern plantation. The Rossleys *Kiddies* imitated the “pickaninny” groups popular in the US. In their travels, they engaged with Canadian audiences with seeming success, bringing their minstrel practices to their surrounding neighbours. They also featured international guests who shared a stage with local performers, engaging in a corporeal and racially performative exchange. As a result, these deeply transnational influences mingled with local understandings of racial construction, from a belief in British supremacy to murky connections between blackness and Irishness to the racial violence of settler colonialism.

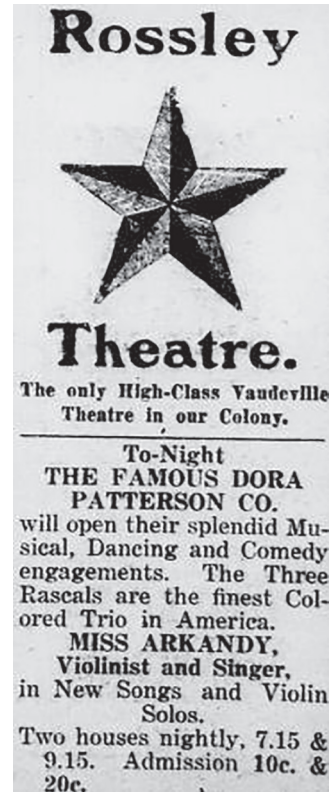


Fig 5. A Dora Patterson Trio advertisement, from the *Evening Telegram*, 28 October 1913.



Blackface minstrelsy in Newfoundland, and Canada more generally, is an understudied topic. Despite the Rossleys' seeming dominance of the popular entertainment scene in St. John's from 1911-ca.1917, they have escaped the scrutiny of scholarship. Given the gap, there is a need to further examine the impact and influence of the Rossleys (as well as other popular culture expressions) on constructions of white, black, Indigenous, Asian, and "other" racial identities. There is an urgency in understanding Canadian theatre history in light of its relatively understudied but abundant use of blackface. Archives are biased in the materials they preserve, but traces and fragments can be valuable in piecing together these important histories that challenge hegemonic nationalist rhetoric that feigns multicultural inclusion.

Our discussion situates the Rossleys as a key example of Newfoundland parodies of blackness both apart from and informed by Great Britain, US, and (to a lesser extent) Canada. Like the ocean current that both connects and isolates the Island, Newfoundland culture at once subsumes external influences and is an independent body that must be understood as such. Newfoundland should be part of a broader conversation about traveling racial performance cultures in Canada, the US and Britain. Nationalist understandings of blackface are limited; minstrelsy and the racial meanings it engenders readily traveled back and forth across the Atlantic, a quality epitomized in Newfoundland's indefinite relationship to nationhood, and its complex (and very real) histories of race and racism.

## Notes

- 1 We would like to extend our thanks to Jessie Chisholm, Kristin Harris Walsh, and Jeff Webb for their generous feedback on this paper. Many thanks as well to Katherine Zien, Colleen Kim Daniher, and the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and insightful comments.
- 2 Newfoundland and Labrador is the official name adopted by the province in 1980. The term Newfoundland used in this paper indicates the official name of the Dominion during the period discussed.
- 3 While blackface minstrelsy is sometimes described as a practice made by whites and for whites, Brenda Dixon Gottschild explains that minstrelsy's racial make-up is more complex: "The dancing body of minstrelsy is informed by deep-structure Africanisms that were already a recognized but sublimated part of the American landscape. And the strange, elusive, contradictory meanings of minstrelsy are embedded in its central paradox: *It is and it isn't black*" (88). Much of the music and dancing seen in minstrel performances are appropriated versions of early African American social dances and songs and many influential black artists (William Henry Lane, Bert Williams, and Bill Robinson for example) spent years crafting their art on the minstrel stage, complicating the racial identity of minstrelsy.
- 4 Consider for example Robin Winks's writing on slavery in Canada that outlines the many sanctions that limited slavery and suggests that "On the whole, slaves appear to have been well treated" ("Slavery" 36) in Canada. This sort of conclusion makes light of the gravity of bondage. As George E. Clarke writes: "Canadian slavery was not as extensive as the Southern US version [...] However, we must recognize that slavery was practiced in a solid third of what is now Canada [...]; that it numbered thousands of slaves [...], held 'legally'

- under various colonial regimes and traded globally; that it lasted for more than two hundred years; and that it ended only because it was not vital to the boreal economy” (xvi).
- 5 As Himani Bannerji explains, multiculturalism has received high praise in mainstream English Canadian politics—becoming a kind of slogan to promote Canada (291) and a way to encourage tourism through cultural events like festivals (295), a tool to justify and legitimize Canada as a liberal democratic state, and defend white-Anglo Canada’s understanding of “Canada” against the charges made by Quebec and Indigenous groups that ask Canada to account for its colonial injustices (292).
  - 6 *Oil and Water* is a popular play by Robert Chafe, which premiered in 2011 and toured Canada in the years that followed. It is the story of African American naval soldier Lanier Philips who was shipwrecked off the Burin peninsula in 1942 but saved by the locals of St. Lawrence who, as the play implies, did not see race.
  - 7 Best considers how blackface may have influenced mummering, a Christmas tradition in Newfoundland with English roots, on the Island. Similar to Best, Dale Cockrell contends that endpieces and farces on minstrelsy could be “distant relatives of mumming plays” (47).
  - 8 McKittrick offers the story of Canadian slave Marie-Joseph Angélique, accused of burning down a large part of Montreal and subsequently hung for this crime, an example of “geographic opposition” (31) that challenges the absence of blackness in Canadian histories.
  - 9 D. W. Prowse’s *A History of Newfoundland*, though often a problematic source, details an instance in 1788 when approximately 300 black slaves working in the local fishery “excelled the locals” as fishermen (quoted in Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* 28). Also worth noting is a letter from Governor Eliot to the Bermudan government dated 11 August 1788. Elliot described the more than 200 men as “a large proportion raw inexperienced men, and but a few blacks” (Prowse 417). The right to dry fish was not legally extended to these fishermen.
  - 10 For an examination of recent historiography on forced and voluntary migrations of black peoples to Atlantic Canada, see Harvey Armani Whitfield.
  - 11 We refer to primary sources as original documents from the show itself and secondary sources as the published accounts of the performances (newspapers, articles etc.).
  - 12 It is likely the case that Canadian blackface minstrelsy was in conversation with Newfoundland minstrelsy, yet the scholarly work on nineteenth and early twentieth century blackface minstrelsy in Canada is still nascent and focuses predominantly on Southern Ontario. Neil Rosenberg’s writing on the contributions of black country musicians in the Maritimes offers some background discussion of blackface minstrels like the Doane Brothers in Nova Scotia, or James and George Bohee who were black New Brunswickers but gained notoriety as minstrel performers in the US and Britain. Further studies on Blackface in Canada’s Maritimes would be beneficial here.
  - 13 Korneski for example mentions that Newfoundlanders were compared derogatorily to the Chinese to encourage Newfoundlanders to build a railway (89).
  - 14 There are also images of Rossleys’ children’s company dressed as “gypsies” that could be of interest here. Please see Memorial Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections: Rossley Kiddie Collection (Coll 472).

- 15 While Eric Lott contends that it is presentist to describe nineteenth century blackface performances as racist (7-8), it is our position that avoiding such labels further privileges white perspectives on minstrelsy. Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes: “My main concern with Lott’s work is that it may function as a mirror for the postmodern, reflexive turn, shedding light on white intent while decentering the Africanist presence in the process. For the sake of pluralist cultural theory it may serve to underplay the tragic effect of white American racism on African American life and arts” (88-89). We suggest that blackface minstrelsy can be studied in relation to its social context while still acknowledging its racism.
- 16 In the late nineteenth century, Burlesque dancers tended to combine musical numbers and/or ribald comedy with adult entertainment, a “leg show” or strip tease, often in a transgressive way (Durden). Vaudeville incorporated burlesque elements into its acts and were advertised as less provocative (Erdman 12-14).
- 17 It is also possible that Tom Rossley died around the time Jack and Marie left for Newfoundland. There is a Tom Rossley who was a vaudeville performer who died at a hospital for the poor in Duluth, December 1911 (*Duluth Herald* 15 and 22 December 1911). However, several Duluth newspapers (*Duluth Herald*, *The Labor World*, and *Plainview News*) report information that conflicts with our understanding of the Rossleys, including that Jack is dead (*Duluth Herald* 15 and 19 December 1911, 5).
- 18 For further discussion of the role nickelodeons played on theatre in St. John’s, see Paul Moore’s “Early Picture Shows at the Fulcrum of Modern and Parochial St. John’s Newfoundland.”
- 19 There are two performers working in the US that we believe to be Jack and Marie Rossley, but there is some conflicting evidence that makes it difficult to know for certain.
- 20 It is also worth comparing the careers of the Rossleys with the well-known minstrel George Primrose. Though Primrose comes a generation before the Rossleys, his old-fashioned style of minstrel performance, which involved a full evening-length production (much like those the Rossleys would present in St. John’s), was falling out of fashion in the early 1900s and in the face of a dwindling sales.
- 21 An announcement in the *Evening Telegram* on 2 March 1911 (1) stated that the “Rossley Trio have decided not to perform in Vaudeville until further notice” but were performing again April 12, 1911 (*Evening Telegram* 8).
- 22 While O’Neill’s *History of the Performing Arts in St. John’s* is a rich and comprehensive survey, we use it somewhat cautiously as it lacks citations and sources.
- 23 Marlis Schweitzer compares how the British child actress Jean Davenport travelled to Jamaica in 1840 and Newfoundland in 1841. Davenport was marketed similarly to both colonies as a product of high caliber from the mother country, but sparked different debates in these locales.
- 24 For some in Newfoundland, interest in the US had even led them to consider annexation but as James Hiller has pointed out, it is difficult to know how seriously these debates were (99).
- 25 The Rossleys come to Newfoundland sixteen years after Newfoundland and Canada revisited talks about confederation, though neither side seemed enthusiastic about

- the prospect and were unable to reach an agreement that could sufficiently support Newfoundland while appeasing the Canadian provinces (Hiller).
- 26 For studies of the intersection of race and class, see Linda Little and Sean Cadigan.
- 27 Best also suggests that blackness may have in other instances been intentionally appropriated by working class Irish Newfoundlanders. Irish Newfoundlanders often used mummering as a kind of social protest but in the nineteenth century, this practice also involved using blackface make-up and incorporated aspects of theatre and public performance. For a discussion of mummering (also called “The Fools”, “jannyng”) as social protest, see Gerald Sider and W. Gordon Handcock et al. For international context, Blow et al.
- 28 Similar Irish parodies occur in nineteenth-century American minstrel performances. Consider for example the dialogue between Irishman and Anthony in Charles T. White’s *The Hop of Fashion* ca. 1856 (see Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, 126-34).
- 29 St. John’s Amateur Minstrels were active 1860s-1880s, and there is some surviving archival evidence relating to the group’s administrative activities 1864-1865 (St. John’s Amateur Minstrel MF-286) as well as numerous newspapers accounts of their performances (*Evening Telegram* 22 April 1880, 2). The *Evening Telegram* regularly reports on minstrel performances and meetings regularly including the local groups: Mohawk Minstrels, active 1880s-1900s (25 May 1906, 3); Academia Minstrels (22 February 1883, 1); Hibernian Minstrels (2 April 1883, 1); Terra Nova Minstrels (10 March 1882, 4); Locomotive Minstrels (2 September 1882); Merry Makers’ Minstrel Circle (24 October 1908, 7); new C.E.I. Minstrels (17 November 1898, 4); and Mr. [Johnny] Burke’s Minstrel company (14 January 1901, 8).
- 30 Though the article also describes blackface minstrelsy as old fashioned and unpopular form of entertainment by the 1880s.
- 31 Christy Minstrels were known to local audiences as the frequent Victor Gramophone ads also featured their popular recordings featuring Christy Minstrels and Billy Murray. Evidence that local audiences were aware and fans of the early US blackface minstrelsy can also be found in an 1897 review in *Evening Telegram* which waxed nostalgically about the “familiar Christy Minstrel” (27 April, 4).
- 32 Tracy Davis discusses this phenomenon in her work on Uncle Tom’s Cabin. It should be mentioned that successful full company minstrel troupes were rare in the early 19th century. Even famed soft-shoe minstrel George Primrose, who had successfully toured a large-scale minstrel company in the US with William West (1871-1901), could not maintain a financially viable company after 1901 and was “forced into vaudeville” (Stearns and Stearns 51-52).
- 33 We also know that Jack Rossley was known for his skillful dancing; he is described as a strong tap dancer who also took interest in reviving clogging (even ordering wooden clogs in London to bring back to St. John’s). We might speculate that his minstrel tap performances borrowed from his training as a clogger in Great Britain, but what this dancing looked like is difficult to identify or connect to a specific tradition.
- 34 As Paul Moore explains, in St. John’s theatre, the distinction between amateur and professional troupes often blurred (458). The Rossleys also blur the line between amateur and professional and between local and import as they were introduced to the Island as short-term visitors and planted roots as a local troupe.

- 35 This was true twenty years later for example, when African-American Willie Johnson performed in St. John's and reporters commented on how his "race enhanced his authenticity and made the performance exotic" (Webb 124-25).
- 36 While their race was mentioned in the advertisements, surprisingly there is little mention of race in the reviews.
- 37 Dora Patterson is referenced in *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960* (Peterson 163) for co-starring with John "Jolly" Larkins in Boom's Black Diamond Company (1902-1903), and playing the original female lead in Larkins' *A Trip to the Jungles*, renamed *A Trip to Africa* in 1904.
- 38 Neil Rosenberg's writing on black country musicians in the Maritimes uses the music of blackface minstrelsy to discuss black source material in Eastern Canadian music. We suggest that traveling black artists like the Dora Patterson Trio offer a more potent example for African diaspora studies in Canada.
- 39 While we have not found references to Buffalo Bill touring NL, there are several mentions in 1886 *Evening Telegram* (August 23 and 25) report on Buffalo Bill performances as if they are known to the reader. The St. John's newspaper *The Colonist* features regular advertisements for the colored illustrated "Buffalo Bill" magazine. There was another Shadrick-Talbott show entitled "Buffalo Bill" in June of 1913 (*Evening Telegram* 1 June 1913, 6) with a review "you can bring your wives, mothers, sisters and sweet hearts, nothing to offend the most fastidious."

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