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“Darkdown”: The Ideal Black Community in Late-19th Century White Imagination

Abstract:

The "Darktown" series, 1880-1900– black caricatures with distorted features, engaged in everyday activities – offers a peek into popular white ruminations about the emerging black community during the post-reconstruction era, a significant moment of realignment in the racial hierarchy. Built on notions of popular media as sites for battles over culture (e.g. Hall, 2006), my reading of Darktown is grounded in historical context and interpreted using theories of race/class and performance of self. Ultimately, I argue that the series reinforced three major claims about race, class, and status: 1) in battles between plain and fancy black figures the plain figure must win; 2) black failure must be celebrated; and 3) the black elite must be demoted to common status. This vision of black society not only allayed white fears about the changing racial hierarchy (they remained in power), but also offered blacks clear subject positions – common or uppity – to occupy within dominant society.