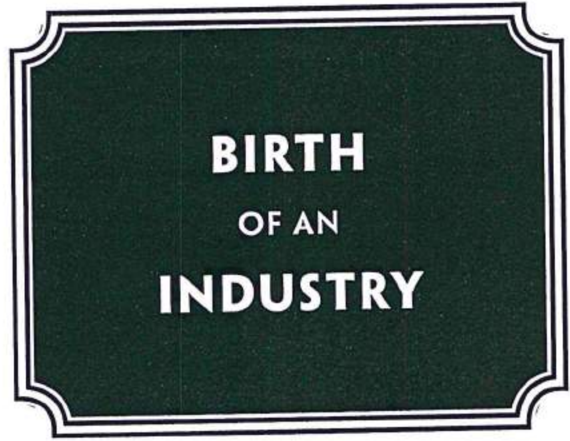

Blackface Minstrelsy and the
Rise of American Animation

NICHOLAS SAMMOND

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Dedicated to the Memory of

JOHN MCCLOSKEY MOYNIHAN

1960–2004

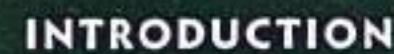
Animator, Author, Rogue

and

SARA ELIZABETH GARMENT

1960–2011

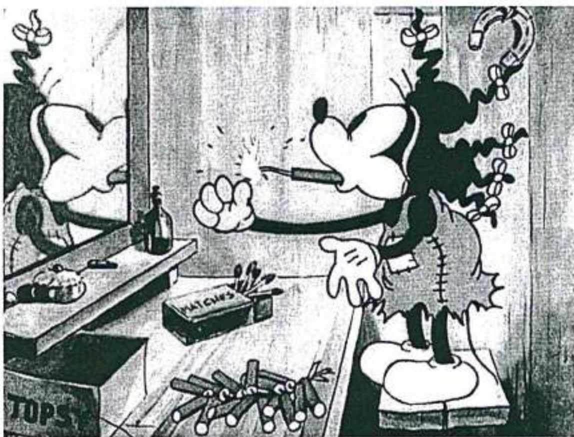
Poet, Translator, Swami

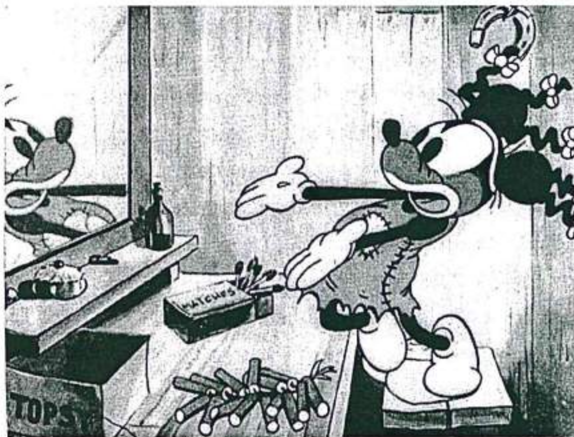


BITING THE INVISIBLE HAND

A tattered, makeshift curtain rises on a ragtag troupe of blackface minstrels preparing to offer their interpretation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a rural audience in a converted barn. So begins *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* (Disney, 1933), a telling artifact from early twentieth-century American popular culture.[1] In this cartoon short, Walt Disney Productions' wildly popular new star joins his "girlfriend," Minnie Mouse, and friends Goofy, Clarabelle Cow, and Horace Horsecollar in an amateur production of the classic abolitionist tale. As with many other versions of Stowe's melodrama staged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cartoon's racial organization seems a bit confused.[2] The short begins with the cast backstage, preparing. Minnie as Little Eva takes great pleasure in powdering her face and donning a blonde wig. Clarabelle blacks up with the aid of chimney soot from an oil lamp. Mickey—who will play both Topsy and Uncle Tom—inserts a firecracker into his mouth and lights the fuse: he literally blasts himself into blackness.[3] Once in costume, Mickey and Minnie take the stage, while in the wings Goofy, in a nod to nineteenth-century stage mechanics, manipulates a primitive pasteboard chorus of plantation darkies whose jaws flap while a phonograph plays Dan Emmett's "Dixie" . . . to which Mickey and Minnie tap dance.[4]

This mixture of abolitionist melodrama and blackface minstrel show may seem odd and contradictory, but it accurately captures one of the uses to which Stowe's tale was put in its long heyday. Yet what makes this scene truly strange and contradictory is that Mickey and Clarabelle were *already* minstrels before they blacked up (as was Minnie). With their white gloves, wide mouths and eyes, and tricksterish behaviors, Mickey and his friends





FIGS. I.1–I.3 In *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* (1933), Mickey Mouse, who is already a minstrel, uses a firecracker to black up further.

were just a few more in a long line of animated minstrels that stretches back to the beginnings of American commercial animation in the first years of the twentieth century. That in 1933 they seemed white enough that they needed to black up in order to clearly read as minstrels speaks to the state of animation at the dawn of sound film: they had become *vestigial minstrels*, carrying the tokens of blackface minstrelsy in their bodies and behaviors yet no longer immediately signifying as such. Their status as minstrels was becoming occluded by the rapidly changing conventions of cartooning and by the fading popularity of live minstrelsy itself. The historical operations by which popular continuing characters such as Mickey came to embody the conventions of blackface minstrelsy in the first place is the central topic of this book, even as, in the space of a few decades, those same conventions became obscured, though never erased.

This reading of the industrialization of the animation industry in the United States and its place in a larger history of blackface minstrelsy considers two notable details from animation history. One is unremarkable, the second less so. First, from its beginnings, the animation industry in the United States has been labor intensive and rationalized, and the industry itself has celebrated that labor in its public relations and in cartoons themselves. Second, many of the continuing characters that came to define the industry—Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat, Bugs Bunny—are actually minstrels. In brief, this book considers the relationship between American animation's ongoing fascination with its own production, especially with the labor involved in making cartoons, and its long-standing debt/contribution to blackface minstrelsy. Since animation shares with minstrelsy as one of its fundamental tropes the regulation of unruly labor—as many blackface minstrel characters were based on a fantasy of the rebellious or recalcitrant African American slave or free person—understanding this simultaneous fascination with labor and with its discipline through racially charged characters is this study's central project.

Although this book charts the place of animation in the history of blackface minstrelsy (and the history of blackface in animation), it is also about how those histories might inform approaches to the material practices of animation as they relate to cartoon aesthetics. More than that, though, it explores how fantastic performative relationships between animators and their minstrel creations modeled larger social and discursive formations in the United States, especially those perdurable racial fantasies that linked caricatures of African American bodies and behaviors to concepts of enthralled labor and its resistance to domination. For the

cartoon minstrel not only wears the gloves and painted-on smile of the live blackface performer, he (and in the case of cartoons it is most often "he") also shares the blackface minstrel's resistance to regulation, which is itself inextricably yoked to labor through the minstrel's indelible association with chattel slavery. Yet the cartoon minstrel does his live cousin one better in this regard: he is actually created by the very forces of regulation and domination he resists. So, while the lesser goal of this work is to carefully delineate the how and perhaps the why of cartoon minstrelsy, its larger goal is to link that analysis to a larger and longer history of racial iconography and taxonomy in the United States.

Blackface has made a comeback in the twenty-first century, especially on television, and it is usually presented nostalgically, as an odd historical anomaly and a stand-in for more racist times and unenlightened performers and audiences.[5] Perhaps the most sustained, famous, and controversial use of minstrelsy in recent years is Spike Lee's satire *Bamboozled* (2000), an uneven commentary about the impossibility of authentic black performance in American mass culture, in which an African American television producer's sardonic revival of an old-time minstrel show on prime-time TV becomes an improbable hit. Yet even in that film minstrelsy is treated as if it were archaic, outdated, anachronistic—a throwback brought out of mothballs to reveal the underlying racism that structures and informs contemporary mainstream entertainment industries.[6] Not quite. The old-time minstrel show may be gone, but blackface is a surprisingly vital tradition and a global one at that. Whether via South African rap group die Antwoord's video *Fatty Boom Boom* (2012), Australian comedian Chris Lilley's rapper character S.mouse in his *Angry Boys* series (2011), the tragicomic scene in the prime-time cable show *Madmen* (2009) in which Roger Sterling blacks up to sing at his daughter's wedding, or Billy Crystal reviving his impersonation of Sammy Davis Jr. for the 2012 Academy Awards, blackface as a performance practice is still very much a part of mainstream popular culture. Even though there seems to be wide consensus that blackface is racist and unacceptable, each week finds instances of professional and amateur blackface performance in the United States and elsewhere, inevitably followed by expressions of outrage that in no way deter the following week's performances.

Which is to say that minstrelsy is a past practice that (to paraphrase William Faulkner and Barack Obama) isn't even past.[7] Although blackface—with its much-disputed origins sometime in the eighteenth or nineteenth century and reaching its popular height toward the end of the

1800s—is alive and well today, it has always been a creature of its time: it refracts contemporary anxieties about the power and meaning of whiteness through nostalgic fantasies about blackness. This particular study takes as its starting point the relationship between imagined blackness and imagined whiteness at the beginning of the twentieth century, and more specifically with how that relationship was made manifest in famous continuing cartoon characters such as Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse. More simply it asks, why the gloves? It traces how these relatives of live minstrels informed and inflected the conventions and practices of an emerging cartoon industry, and how, as that industry matured, those characters gradually became gestures toward minstrelsy's past rather than direct references to its ongoing practice. Describing this earlier moment in the history of animated minstrelsy may cast some light on why, in the face of overwhelming evidence that blackface is alive and well today, it is almost always treated as if it were a relic of a historically remote past that Americans have moved beyond—even as we demonstrate with pathetic regularity that we actually haven't.

That blackface as a tradition predates cartoons might seem to suggest that animation merely borrowed from minstrelsy. That reading is unproductive on two fronts. First, it plays into a long-standing and misguided critical tradition that sees blackface in cartoons as an exception or aberration, rather than as integral to the form. At the same time it underplays the syncretic practices that run through many popular American performance traditions—what more bluntly might be called a shared tendency toward theft. A diachronic ordering of minstrelsy, burlesque, vaudeville, movies, radio, and television is more or less chronologically accurate (as long as one ignores significant moments of overlap) but runs the risk of effacing the significant transit of talent between forms, and the outright lifting of techniques and routines from one form to another. American animation, which had its origins and developed many of its enduring conventions on the vaudeville stage, is not merely one more in a succession of textual forms; it is also a performative tradition that is indebted to and imbricated in blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville. Commercial animation in the United States didn't borrow from blackface minstrelsy, nor was it simply influenced by it. Rather, American animation is actually in many of its most enduring incarnations an integral part of the ongoing iconographic and performative traditions of blackface. Mickey Mouse isn't *like* a minstrel; he *is* a minstrel. Betty Boop's sidekicks, Bimbo and Ko-Ko, aren't references to minstrelsy; they, too, *are* minstrels.[8] This is more than

a mere conceit: although blackface is usually thought of as a live performance tradition, it evokes in its tension between surface and interior—between the makeup and the face beneath—a fantastic black persona that is analogous in many ways to cartoon characters who dwell in the flatland on the surface of the page or cel, and again at the liminal boundary of the screen onto which they are projected. Both gain force and substance through their play at the frontiers between ontological realms. (This liminality is the central gag in the nostalgic Disney short *Get a Horse* [2013], which depicts the boundary between the past and present as between 2-D and 3-D.)

Because the history of cartoons is more widely known today than that of minstrelsy, this narrative begins with a briefly sketched delineation of blackface as a traditional form. Just as minstrelsy has occupied many different media over the centuries, the blackface minstrel show as a live, staged spectacle has gone through many permutations, which the scholarship around its early history has chronicled in detail.[9] This study takes as its paradigmatic structure the minstrel show in its heyday in the years immediately between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century. While the three-act blackface show that epitomized the height of minstrelsy's popularity was formally contiguous with earlier and later types of minstrel performance, it is no more or less authentic than that which preceded or followed it. Studying blackface, or any type of performance, it is important to avoid an originary fantasy that sees one historical moment as more genuine than another, and to consider (albeit briefly) the historically specific iterations of minstrelsy during different moments of social and racial formation. Indeed, part of what makes blackface minstrelsy such a peculiar performative creature is that *minstrelsy itself* is based on just such fantasies about origins. One of its founding and recurring ideas is that blackface performers reenact dances, songs, and conversations learned from actual black folk, whether slaves on the plantation or free blacks in northern cities. At the same time, however, that nostalgic fantasy has served as a useful cover for mounting critiques of the political, social, and cultural issues of the times in which it is being performed.

American commercial animation did not appropriate a more authentic blackface minstrelsy from the stage, becoming a more distant or debased version of its live predecessor by virtue of chronology. Blackface minstrelsy is such a durable performance form, in part, because it has always adapted to the social and material relations of its day. At the beginning of the twentieth century, live blackface performance was still popular but was in decline; the emerging technology and vernacular artistic form of animation offered a new home for the minstrel, one more suited to its historical moment yet still dependent on the modes of minstrelsy that had preceded it. Each generation of blackface minstrelsy is a fantastic iteration of those pedestrian acts of casual racism that draw on and feed a racial imaginary, made strange only when they are pried away from the immediate circumstances that naturalize them. For that reason, rather than starting right into a comparative history of live blackface performance and animation—which is what much of this book does—I will pause here and offer up three other, distinct moments in the history of blackface, ones that may seem at first to have little to do with cartoons. As iterations in an ongoing history of blackface minstrelsy of which animation is one more element, each of these moments' oddity and historical specificity may better set the stage for understanding the cartoon's particular performative and iconographic place in that history. These three distinct instances in the history of American blackface—one from the early twentieth century, one from the 1960s, and one from a few years ago—may make it easier to get at how minstrelsy has persisted for so long, even after it ceased to be considered popular or even acceptable, and how minstrels, whether performed by living persons or drawings, serve as fantastic embodiments of the historical contradictions of the racial formation of the times in which they live. The first of these moments, though, actually does coincide roughly with the creation of American commercial animation in the first decade of the twentieth century.

MOMENT 1: THE BLACKFACE MINSTREL AND THE GREAT WHITE HOPE

On the Fourth of July 1910, heavyweight boxer Jim Jeffries, the "Great White Hope," stepped into the ring in Reno for the "Fight of the Century" against reigning champion Jack Johnson, who was African American. Jeffries lost. By most accounts, Jeffries, who had been enticed out of retirement by a large purse, had no personal or racial animus against Johnson. Many in the white press, on the other hand, did: they treated the fight as a matter of honor and Jeffries as having a duty to reclaim the championship for the white race.[10] Two weeks before the fight, the *New York Morning Telegraph* ran a photo of the Jeffries training camp, the caption of which identified Jeffries as "surrounded by his cronies and bosom pals,"

one of whom was the very popular blackface minstrel Eddie Leonard. In 1910, even though minstrelsy's popularity was in decline, Eddie Leonard was at the apex of his career. Having started with the Haverly Minstrels around the turn of the century, by 1903 Leonard was working for famed producer George Primrose, who owned one of the premier minstrel troupes of the day. Known first for his buck-and-wing dancing and his "wha-wha" style of ragtime coon shouting—a white fantasy of African American song—Leonard was a phenomenon on the B. F. Keith vaudeville circuit during the first two decades of the twentieth century.[11] By way of bona fides, Leonard also claimed that he and legendary African American tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson were close friends, having come up together riding the rails and performing in cabarets in the late nineteenth century. After Jeffries's loss, Leonard claimed in the same paper that two weeks of training in the heat and the thin mountain air of the Sierras before the fight had defeated the white boxer, not Johnson. "If the fight had been two weeks earlier," he suggested, "a white man would still be champion of the world." Leonard went on to recount telegrams that had exhorted Jeffries to "save the white race" and claimed that when the "negro left the ring [he] received not a hand; Jeffries, even though he had lost, was cheered heartily."[12] That a man touted as the "Great White Hope" apparently bore no ill will toward his opponent yet chose as a close friend a man famous for performing as a (caricature of a) black man, who also made free with expressions that smacked of white supremacy, may seem contradictory, or at least confusing. Surely, a man who claimed friendship with Bill Robinson wouldn't be invested in a white man's victory over an African American—yet he was. It would be easy to suggest that well, it was 1910, and well, times were different then. Yet times are always different—that's what makes them times.[13]

Moving beyond (or perhaps further into) the "it was the times" explanation, this welter of contradictions is susceptible to at least several interpretations. One explanation might be that Leonard's coon shouting, blacking up, and supremacist diatribes were consistent: nothing more than the racist diminution of African Americans. In this version, Leonard befriended Robinson in order to appropriate his techniques and knowledge and then deployed them in racist parodies, whose intent was eventually borne out by his statements regarding Jack Johnson. In a slight variation, known today as "some of my best friends . . . ," Leonard perhaps differentiated between the African Americans he knew as individuals, who were his friends, and the race as a whole, which he still held in contempt. Yet an-

JIM JEFFRIES' TRAINING CAMP, ROWARDENNAN, CAL., JUNE 20.

The Above Photo Shows James J. Jeffries at His Training Camp, Surrounded by His Cronies and Bosom Pals. You Will Note That Eddie Leonard, "The Minstrel," and One of Virginia's Native Sons, Is Seated Alongside of Jeff. Leonard Joined Jeff at Jeff's Invitation and Will Remain Until the Fight.

FIG. I.4 Blackface minstrel Eddie Leonard appearing with prizefighting "Great White Hope" Jim Jeffries shortly before Jeffries lost to the reigning champion, African American Jack Johnson. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

other interpretation—by no means the last—might have Leonard understanding full well that his performances in blackface were not imitations of actual African American dance and song but delineations of fantastic creatures known as "darkies," who, though based on common stereotypes associated with African Americans, were understood to be unreal.

And so on. Each of these readings of the historical record taken singularly imagines Eddie Leonard, a poor boy who chose the stage over the floor of a Richmond steel mill, as somehow carefully and consciously articulating his relationship to race.[14] Taken as a complex, though, they outline a person whose intersubjective relations were various and whose emotional, ideological, and performative investments framed an inconsistent worldview unperturbed by its own contradictions. That is, there is no reason to believe that Eddie Leonard was not all of those things—hard-core racist, racialist opportunist, selective racist, and fabulist—all at once. This, in essence, is the exploded view of "it was the times," one that, rather than offering up the casual racism of the moment as an apology for behaviors and stances unacceptable by today's standards, or merely condemning that racism out of hand, asks instead how it achieved its effects regardless of intent—muddled or otherwise. Leonard made use of the racial formations and discourse of his day (a "day" that actually spanned the first four decades of the twentieth century) to his advantage and to that of his (primarily white) friends.[15] Whether he did so with malice or without integrity is rather beside the point. The work was done either way.

What this slight parable of the minstrel and the prizefighter points out is that racist stereotypes are effective, not just because they appeal to extant prejudice, but because they circulate across forms and discourses. In this instance the imbrication of the racist fantasy of the blackface minstrel with anxieties about the relative abilities of black and white prizefighters produced a matrix of racial discourse that simultaneously empowered and enriched the blackface minstrel even as it demonized and debased the black prizefighter. Though he was much maligned by the white press in his day, Jack Johnson is now remembered as a champion and a hero; Eddie Leonard was celebrated at the height of his career, yet died alone in hotel room in 1941, at a moment when blackface minstrelsy was increasingly disavowed as regressive, worthy at most of nostalgic fondness.[16] His obituary framed him as warmly remembered, but a has-been.[17] Racial formation, and minstrelsy as one of its performances, is not fixed; it is always historically contingent.

MOMENT 2: A BLACKER VOICE FOR *PUTNEY SWOPE*

If blackface minstrelsy had begun a decline into seeming disrepute in the 1940s, by the 1960s and the height of the civil rights and Black Power movements, performing in blackface smacked of outright hostility. Nonetheless, in 1969, while working on the film *Putney Swope*, director Robert Downey Sr. had a problem he chose to solve through minstrelsy. At the time of its release, the film, a farce, was widely seen as a radical correction to mainstream racist representations of African American life, culture, and politics. In *Swope*, the title character, a black man working at a major advertising agency, finds that an unexpected turn of events leaves him in charge of the agency. Swope radicalizes the workplace, changing the agency's name to Truth and Soul, bringing in gun-toting Mau Maus as business associates, and producing ads designed to counter offensive stereotypes, to criticize the Vietnam War and senseless consumerism, and to assert black pride. So, what was Downey's problem? As he shot the film, he didn't like the vocal performance of Arnold Johnson, the actor playing Swope. Yet rather than cast a different actor, Downey dubbed Swope's voice in himself, apparently feeling no compunction about performing vocal minstrelsy. Truth and Soul, indeed.[18]

In addition to describing the relatively benign but nonetheless racist impulse behind Downey's choice, this anecdote also demonstrates that blackface as a traditional art form is not a relic of a past that died with Eddie Leonard in 1941 in a Philadelphia hotel; minstrelsy gets dredged up from time to time when it is useful. Blackface is a living performance tradition, the motivations behind it are often complex, and its modes and operations are always historically specific. In both of these cases, to describe a white performance of imagined blackness, either Leonard's or Downey's, as simply racist is reasonable, but at the cost of a nuanced understanding of what each of those white men might have imagined themselves accomplishing through their performances.

One such example of that white fantasy of the power of blackness is in the name Downey gave to the advertising agency that his imagined black executive created: Truth and Soul, Inc. In the film, truth is that which is spoken to power; the "soul" part refers to an essential, ephemeral, and often disputed quality associated with being black—one forged in pain, poverty, suffering, celebration, and hope and putatively offering access to a more genuine experience of the world—what in 1970 the band Funkadelic fondly and sarcastically boiled down to "a ham hock in your

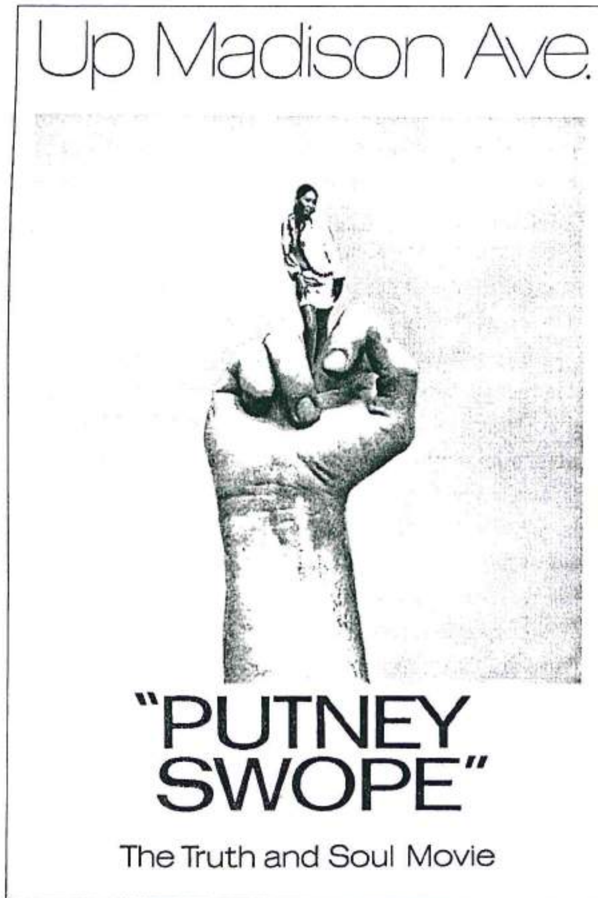


FIG. I.5 A promotional poster for the Robert Downey Sr. film *Putney Swope* (1969).

cornflakes" and "rusty ankles and ashy kneecaps." Like the blues, an ineffable quality also intimately associated with African American life, "soul" refers to an essential being forged in adverse conditions, an emotionally nuanced yet vibrant lived experience, a virtually material perdurability in the face of oppression.[19] In the white liberal imagination (and guilt) of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ideal blackness represented by Truth and Soul, Inc., was a token of realness, fueled by a nostalgic longing for an authentic experience of life lived without the social and material padding of a white, middle-class, suburban existence pejoratively called "plastic"—as in manufactured, inorganic, and unreal.[20] The imagined black radical of the late 1960s and early 1970s—whose material touchstones were the likes of Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Bobby Seale, and Huey Newton—was genuine precisely because of her righteous anger, her firsthand experience of suffering and social censure. Her ostensible access to the wellsprings of spiritual and cultural solace in the black community was imagined to exist in inverse proportion to white America's relative excess of wealth and privilege.[21] To have access to some part of the black community ("some of my best friends . . .") could create a delightful frisson of guilt and expiation in which white liberals such as Downey could imagine themselves as both condemned by and forgiven through those associations. Short of having black friends or of sympathizing with "the cause," indulging in black popular culture could provide a sort of expiation through consumption, albeit one that required regular reinvestment. In this light, Downey's vocal minstrelsy, his updating of Leonard's coon shouting, would not necessarily have read as minstrelsy at the time. When Arnold Johnson couldn't do justice to Swope's authenticity, Downey gave that "authentic" voice to Swope himself. Shortening the circuit, he channeled the anxious power of the 1960s white bourgeoisie into a ritual performance of self-abnegation, a self-flagellatory rite of confession through which one's own inauthenticity is ameliorated through contact with the very thing that seemingly produced it in the first place. Minstrelsy always invokes a tension between the authentic and the inauthentic.

Yet even the suggestion that an ongoing fascination with African American cultural and social life in the mid-twentieth century encompassed the anxious intersubjectivity of rising members of a primarily white middle class only goes so far in explaining the durability of the blackface minstrel, whether in voice or in body, whether in live performance or in cartoons.[22] For beneath the fantasy of poverty as virtue and suffering as truth lurks an originary fantasy of the minstrel: that of the rebellious slave. Reduced be-

yond poverty to property, beyond unemployment to chattel servitude, the eighteenth-century "plantation Ethiopian" was *King Lear*'s "thing itself," little more than an object first appropriated into bondage and then reappropriated in blackface minstrelsy.[23] The central conceit of minstrelsy, that its performers had traveled to the plantation to witness (i.e., steal) the songs, dances, and wordplay of African American slaves (themselves stolen from themselves, made objects rather than persons) depended on an idea of the slave as a natural commodity, an owner of nothing, not even her own thoughts and gestures. Yet in the midst of this mise en abyme of theft, the minstrel figure appeared to repetitively reclaim itself through performances of misrecognition and wily resistance, through gestures of moral turpitude and the studied avoidance of physical labor. In the 1800s this figure was embodied first by Jim Crow, later by Tambo and Bones. In the twentieth century there are echoes of the minstrel in characters such as Lincoln Perry's Stepin Fetchit and Redd Foxx's Fred Sanford. Invoke blackface minstrelsy, though, and if we don't immediately think of Al Jolson we might well imagine the classic minstrel extravaganza of the mid-nineteenth century: the top hats, giant cuffs, and ridiculously wide lapels; the enormous painted lips, wide eyes, and wooly wig. These are its markers, and they also signify and condense the form's fraught origins in a rhetoric that supported chattel slavery—the fancier clothing invoking the northern urban dandy who misrecognizes the markers of civilization (the cuffs perhaps invoking manacles), the oversize eyes and mouths the childlike simplicity and brutish voraciousness used to justify the slave as subhuman—about which Hartman, Brooks, Moten, and others have written.[24] Yet blackface minstrelsy should also call to mind more recent attempts to call out and comment on the racial order of the day, from Ted Danson and Whoopie Goldberg's 1993 blackface performance at the Friar's Club to today's almost weekly YouTube videos of college students blacking up and pretending to be gangsta rappers. Which begs the question, when people black up today, what do they intend to signify and why? In an era in which Barack Obama's election as president of the United States is touted as proof of the end of racism, what is the "postracial" meaning of race?

MOMENT 3: *30 ROCK*'S WHITE CHICKS VERSUS WOOL WIGS

Blackface has always favored the comic over the dramatic, and when people black up today it is usually in the service of a joke, the minstrel turn being well suited to comedies of embarrassment such as *30 Rock* (2006–2013). Like comedian Jimmie Walker's character J. J. Evans on the 1970s sitcom *Good Times* (1974–1979), Tracy Morgan's character Tracy Jordan on *30 Rock*—modeled on Morgan himself—is a buffoon whose representation of pathetic ghetto realness has been hotly contested onscreen and off, and whose scenes often involve contestations and jokes around difficult issues of race and gender. In the 1970s, Walker's portrayal of a ghetto youth squandering his talent as a painter for the sake of immediate gratification rather than mobilizing it for the greater good was criticized as reductive and stereotypical. This so much seemed to undermine *Good Times*' purported message of uplift that costars John Amos and Esther Rolle each left the show in protest at different moments during its run. How, then, to read, in the early twentieth century, Tracy Jordan's constant threats to leave *30 Rock*'s show-within-a-show, *TGS*? Historically distant from the urban uprisings of the late 1960s that informed the reformist attitude of *Good Times*, Tina Fey's *30 Rock* operated in an ironic, "postracial" realm in which a stereotype, as long as it is accompanied by a wink, is justified.[25] So, for instance, its episode "Christmas Attack Zone" (2010) features Tracy showing his film *The Chunks Two: A Very Chunky Christmas* (a parodic nod to the Eddie Murphy *Nutty Professor* remakes) for families trying to celebrate the holiday in a battered women's shelter. It juxtaposes this awkward scene with a drag duet between Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski), in blackface as former NFL receiver Lynn Swann, and her boyfriend Paul (Will Forte) as Natalie Portman from *Black Swan* (Aronofsky, 2010). As Tracy (wearing a diamond-encrusted gold neck chain that reads "POVERTY") screens an offensive scene in which he plays all of the characters—all in fat suits and all projectile vomiting at a Christmas dinner—the show crosscuts to Jenna and Paul in drag, singing "Oh, Holy Night" to an unseen television audience. Tracy's oblivious offensiveness offsets and is offset by Jenna's clueless use of blackface for the sake of a visual one-liner.[26]

This was not the show's first use of blackface. In the episode "Believe in the Stars" (2008), Liz Lemon (Tina Fey), having overdosed on anxiety medication on a flight from Chicago to New York, hallucinates that the teenage girl sitting next to her is Oprah Winfrey. Meanwhile, in

FIG. I.6 In one of several blackface moments on *30 Rock*, Jenna (Jane Krakowski) and her boyfriend Paul (Will Forte) appear as Natalie Portman from *Black Swan* (2010) and the former NFL player and right-wing politician Lynn Swann.

the *TGS* studio Jenna and Tracy engage in a fierce argument about who has it harder, black men or white women. To settle the dispute, they trade places: Jenna blacks up and dresses as an African American man, circa 1974, while Tracy converts himself into a white woman in the style of *White Chicks* (Wayans, 2004). Lemon asks "Oprah" to intervene to settle the dispute. In the interim her medication has worn off, and the truth is revealed. In spite of this the teenage girl solves the problem as Oprah would have, and an argument that has troubled feminism since the nineteenth century is boiled down to teenage-version Oprah-isms: Tracy admits that he was hearing without listening, and Jenna confesses that she needs to go from being Tracy's frenemy to his BFF. The episode ends with the two singing Bill Withers's "Lean on Me" (1972) to each other.

This episode juxtaposes Lemon's absurd, drug-amplified racial insensitivity, which leads her to mistake an African American teenager for Oprah Winfrey, with two pampered narcissists using an argument about who is more victimized to indulge in attention-getting racial/gender cross-dressing. In the wink-and-nod moment following the election of an African American president, which somehow generated permission for media producers to more freely express racist stereotypes and sentiments under the dictum that a forthright acknowledgment of racism also provides for its ironic absolution, Lemon's anxious racism is meant to be endearing, as is Jenna's, as is Tracy's misogyny. This does not in and of

itself make the writers of *30 Rock*, or Tina Fey, or Tracy Morgan, or Jane Krakowski any more or less racist than Eddie Leonard, or Walt Disney, or Robert Downey Sr. At best, it acknowledges more openly the difficulty of commenting on the operations of race outside the structural and institutional foundations through which racism is made substantial. This is perhaps why *30 Rock* located the excess of *The Chunks* and Tracy's oblivious bling in a women's shelter and paired Natalie Portman as ballerina with ballet-trained ex–football star and Republican politician Lynn Swann (nicknamed Swanny). This begs a couple of questions that will be taken up in chapter 4 and the conclusion: If you perform racist behaviors and stereotypes in order to demonstrate their absurdity, do you deflate them or invest them with new life by destigmatizing them? Is the comic depiction of racism itself racist?

Too often that is the last, rather than the first, question. That is certainly the case with Henry Sampson's otherwise admirable book *That's Enough, Folks* (1998), a survey of racist depictions of African Americans during the first fifty years of American commercial animation. A detailed and comprehensive catalogue, it seems content to call out the racism in American cartoons at the expense of a detailed analysis of its historically specific roots and uses.[27] Attributions of racism in and of themselves too often stumble into this sort of discursive quagmire of intent, where they may become framed as calls for atonement, which of necessity collapse the social into the individual. What the racist (or racializing) performers of 1840, 1910, 1969, and 2010 have in common—once we move beyond their individual and distinct modes of performance and their likely quite disparate intents—is a recourse to blackness as a fantastic primal realm and force (and it is treated as both). This contested and contradictory imagined state is simultaneously biological and social, unruly and contained, material and ephemeral, underpinning and threatening to disrupt or rewrite the social order. What is lost in the move to assign racist intent (or to absolve it) is a grounded understanding of what Richard Iton has referred to as the "black fantastic"—itself located in and around the profound importance of the black/white binary to the discursive production and regulation of relations of power in the United States.[28] This realm, this force, this matrix of meaning is present as much in the trivial productions of television programs (trivial but for their millions of viewers), indie movies, and prizefights as it is in larger moments such as in the highly charged debates over the election (and reelection) of Barack Obama or in the aftermath of George Zimmerman's acquittal in the killing of

Trayvon Martin.[29] For it is through the seemingly trivial that fantasies of blackness and whiteness circulate freely and with relatively little critical comment, stabilizing if not producing meaning. Where intent is invoked as an arbiter of meaning, the force and reach of circulation and reappropriation may become obscured.

For this reason cartoons, until relatively recently considered by most a juvenile and relatively ephemeral form of entertainment, are an important historical site for working through the fantastic relations between imagined blackness and whiteness. Early animation's play with metamorphosis, with the relationship between surface and interior, and with the boundaries between the page, the screen, and the worlds outside them, makes cartoons an important location for witnessing the creation and working through of the fantastic. On the surface, this rationalized, emergent industry would seem to have relatively little in common with the unruly live performance of blackface minstrelsy. For one thing, in the early twentieth century, when the animation industry was created, minstrelsy was already waning. Although I have suggested that minstrelsy is very much alive and well today, as a widely and regularly enjoyed popular stage entertainment, blackface had its greatest moment in the nineteenth century, while hand-drawn animation on film did not arrive until the twentieth. Yet in spite of that seeming historical distance, American commercial animation and blackface minstrelsy share far more than the surface similarities of the white gloves, wide eyes, and painted mouth, as a brief history of the form may begin to reveal. That is why it is important to see animators and the cartoons they made as inheritors of and practitioners in the complex of iconography, convention, and performance that is blackface minstrelsy. Cartoons didn't borrow from minstrelsy; they joined minstrels T. D. Rice, E. P. Christy, Lew Dockstader, Eddie Leonard, Bert Williams, and Sophie Tucker in minstrelsy's ongoing development as an art form, one with its roots in antebellum American popular culture and with branches in every mass entertainment of the early twentieth century.

AN ACCEPTABLE HISTORY: T. D. RICE LEARNS TO JUMP JIM CROW

To give a competent description of blackface minstrelsy in a few sentences is a daunting task. Though the form is only a few centuries old (and that dating is contested), a significant body of scholarship has grown up around it in the past twenty years or so. Initially, minstrelsy was a performance form often transmitted orally, or through the ephemeral traces of hand-

written song lists, scripts, playbills, and journals. In spite of these limitations, scholars such as Dale Cockrell, W. T. Lhamon, William J. Mahar, Annemarie Bean, and others have done substantial and important work to chronicle minstrelsy's songs, jibes, jokes, and dances as well as to carefully describe the contested moments and meanings in its history.[30] And because minstrelsy has so often inflected the social and political issues of the day through the lenses of race and ethnicity—especially in the stump speech (a minstrel parody of electioneering) or in the banter between the interlocutor and his end men—David Roediger, Eric Lott, Michael Rogin, Louis Chude-Sokei, and others have done significant work on minstrelsy's place in the operations of emergent, shifting, and imbricated discourses of race, class, ethnicity, and power.[31] In that this book is concerned with the place of American commercial animation in the forms and conventions of minstrelsy, it does not attempt to substantially intervene in that literature. Rather, it is a very modest addition to those projects, an extension of the historical analysis of minstrelsy from the stage to the screen and from the live to the drawn.

What the best scholarship on early blackface agrees on is that minstrelsy, which came to the fore in the United States in the early nineteenth century, defies easy categorization as either simply racist or as resistant to the dominant racial power structure; as a tool of capitalist domination, white working-class ressentiment, or transracial affiliation. The answer to these sorts of either/or classifications is yes. Multifarious and inconsistent, blackface minstrelsy as it has been practiced in the United States since the 1820s is all of these things because its practitioners by no means form a unified body. An extremely popular antecedent to the mass entertainments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—such as variety, burlesque, vaudeville, radio, and movies—blackface minstrel shows shared certain conventions, such as applying burnt cork or black greasepaint to the face, accentuating the eyes and mouth to make them seem larger and wider, and wearing wooly wigs and outsized clothes and sometimes white gloves. But beyond those outward similarities, the meanings brought to and taken from minstrel shows were more nuanced and varied, depending on a variety of circumstances on both sides of the footlights.

Most accounts of the beginnings of blackface minstrel shows mark the conventional stabilization of the form around 1843 by Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels in Manhattan and soon afterward by E. P. Christy's Plantation Minstrels in Buffalo. Yet the person commonly and mythically

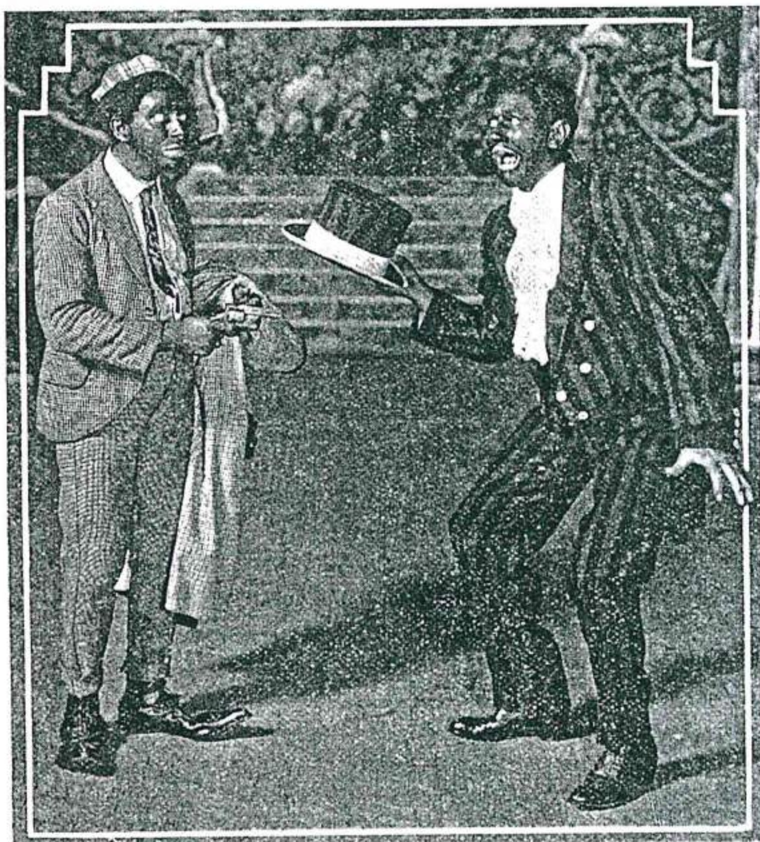


FIG. I.7 Minstrels Eddie Leonard and George Evans in blackface, c. 1904. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

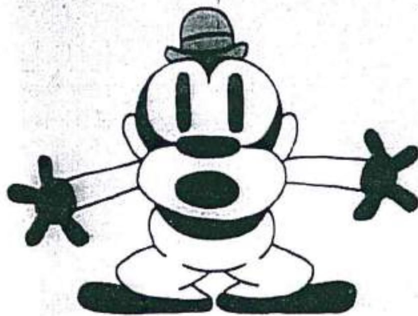


FIG. I.8 Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid discovers he has an audience, c. 1930.

named the originator of the form, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, began blacking up as Jim Crow long before either of these minstrel troupes established themselves or Stephen Foster began penning minstrel classics such as "Old Folks at Home" or "Old Zip Coon" (later somewhat euphemized as "Turkey in the Straw") in the 1840s and 1850s.[32] A legend that circulated as early as the middle of the nineteenth century had it that Rice was inspired to create the character Jim Crow when, sometime between 1828 and 1831, he witnessed an African American stagecoach driver in Cincinnati dancing and singing in a very eccentric way. Soon afterward, in Pittsburgh, Rice met an African American stevedore named Cuff whose ill-fitting clothes he felt would be perfect for his new character. According to the story, Rice rented the clothes right off of the man's back, leaving him nearly naked in the wings of the theater, and then combined the odd costume of one man with the song and dance of another to "jump Jim Crow."[33] Within five years, Rice was performing that act on stages in New York, London, and beyond, to much acclaim.

There are perhaps as many variations to this story as there are versions of the song and dance "Jump Jim Crow."[34] Yet what remains consistent across all of them is the theme of appropriation: Rice saw in the voice and movement of one man and the clothing of another useful elements for the synthesis of a fantastic and essential "darky." By these same sorts of tokens, the words "Virginia" and "Plantation" were important to Emmett, to Christy, and to many others who followed them, as was the oft-used epi-

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FIG. 1.9 A playbill for Christy's Minstrels describes the troupe as "the first to Harmonise Negro Melodies and Originators of the present popular Style of Ethiopian Entertainments." Courtesy of the Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

FIG. 1.10 Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, in *Babes in Arms* (1939), perform nostalgia for the good old days of minstrelsy.

thet "Ethiopian." These terms were metonymic, signaling in shorthand a set of assumptions about the fantastic nature of imagined blackness. The conceit of the minstrel show was that the white (or black) performers who blacked up claimed to reenact genuine dances and songs they had observed poor free black laborers perform or had witnessed slaves do on southern plantations in the fields or in the hours after a day's hard labor.[35] Minstrelsy traded on an authenticity based on the privilege of observing African Americans, be they free manual laborers or captive slaves, seemingly converting the burden of their labor into merriment. And minstrelsy depended on a fantasy by which those workers and slaves provided access through their libidinous bodies to the primal forces of Africa and the wildness of nature.

The form of minstrelsy nostalgically invoked in films such as *Babes in Arms* (Berkeley, 1939) or *Holiday Inn* (Sandrich, 1942) stabilized following the Civil War. Prior to the war, small troupes such as Christy's or Emmett's combined blackface, odd costumes, tambourines, banjo, and "bones" to create a carnivalesque mockery of African American "folkways" through which the decorum of proper white civilization was also lampooned and perhaps momentarily called into question. By the 1850s the minstrel format had changed somewhat. What had started as a loose collection of songs, jokes, and dances became divided into two rough parts. Lott suggests that the basic initial division in the show was along a North–South axis, with the first half centered around a dandy such as Zip Coon or Dandy Jim and the second around southern slave characters.[36] In the 1850s, this division was expanded to include an *olio*, which came between

the show's first and last parts and featured sentimental ballads, skits, stump speeches, and dances.

Regardless of the specific historical moment, though, class tension has always held an important place in minstrelsy. Though a full accounting of the nuanced and shifting relationships between race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion that surrounded and infused blackface are beyond the scope of this study, it is important to point out that a common thread in the different historical moments of minstrelsy is a conventional association between the minstrel body and its labor (or lack thereof).[37] Performed in its early days primarily by members of the working class yet patronized by people from varied class backgrounds, minstrelsy, in its songs, its colloquy, and its stump speeches often spoke to the sentiments, aspirations, and frustrations of working people and to American ideals of individualism and self-making. Yet beyond that, the figure of the minstrel itself was located in a mythos of the black body as resistant to labor—whether forced or voluntary—that is, as inherently "lazy." Whether the frame for that performance leaned toward affiliation or toward racial animus, minstrelsy performed that fantastic, imagined black body as always existing in relation to its labor. Within that construct, discourses of authenticity and inauthenticity—the conceit that what was being performed had been learned/appropriated/stolen from *actual* African Americans—marked the minstrel stage as a liminal zone, a place *between* insincere, exclusive, and elitist civilizing forces and the primal and materially grounded existence of genuine (imaginary) African American life and culture. Blackface minstrelsy's anthropological conceit framed a fantasy of otherness and reinforced a racialized hierarchy of labor in which Roediger suggests that even an indentured Irish day laborer could feel a momentary sense of superiority—even if some of his friends and coworkers were free blacks.[38]

Following the Civil War, minstrelsy's basic format remained relatively fixed for the next seventy years. Its central characters were often the interlocutor—a well-spoken master of ceremonies—and Tambo and Bones, simple-minded rural black folk whose confused replies to the interlocutor displayed both their own rustic ignorance and his pomposity. During the final act, the performers would arrange themselves in a semicircle with the interlocutor in the center and one or more banjo players nearby. At the far ends of each arm of this semicircle were the tambourine and bones players, Tambo and Bones. Although in minstrelsy's earlier days the interlocutor also appeared in blackface (but often spoke with a cultured accent), by the end of the century he also appeared in whiteface.

Whether in blackface or white, the interlocutor increasingly represented the quasi-aristocratic elites in tension with the more plebeian Tambo and Bones.[39] This format continued as a stand-alone entertainment until the 1880s, when minstrelsy was gradually subsumed (via burlesque) into vaudeville—sharing the stage with Irish, German, and Hebrew acts, with jugglers, comedians, and performing animals—seeming to fade (as stage performance) only as vaudeville gave way to radio, movies, and television.

FROM STAGE TO SCREEN

This genealogy is important to the history of animation not simply because some of the first animators this study examines were vaudeville enthusiasts but because the earliest American cartoons were components in vaudeville performances themselves, deriving particularly from lightning-sketch acts and from minstrel performances. Cartoons (or vaudeville, or live film) were not a form of entertainment that supplanted a dying blackface minstrelsy; rather, they were a permutation of minstrelsy, a part of a complex of entertainments at the dawn of American mass culture of which live minstrelsy was a fading element and film, including animation, a rising one. The porousness between different modes of performance and media then (and now) argues against a notion of succession and for models of interconnection and appropriation; performers in one medium often worked in others and took with them from one medium to the next their signature material and schtick.[40] In vaudeville and in film this is generously called *homage* but more honestly called theft. Animation inherited this appropriative impulse from its forebears—with one animation house regularly lifting a character or gag from another with only minor emendations. And because the figure of the blackface minstrel itself was an appropriative fantasy of the black laboring body, a moment's consideration of the minstrel's physiognomy and its gestural economy will also delineate some of the most common visual conventions that animation's continuing characters shared with live minstrels and will set the stage for considering how those characteristics eventually became vestigial.

One of the most familiar tropes in classical American animation is characters wearing white gloves, which were also quite common in blackface minstrelsy. On Zip Coon, Long Tail Blue, or Jim Dandy, or on a blackface interlocutor, they could signify the false gentility of white manners on a black body, sitting obviously and uneasily on flesh itself painted on, or more generally a pretense to superiority. Recalling the hands of

FIG. I.11 George Dixon as Zip Coon. Minstrel characters such as Jim Dandy or Zip Coon portrayed free African Americans as northern dandies whose ignorance and confusion belied their pretensions to sophistication. Houghton Library, Harvard University (012172093).

both the master and the house slave, the white hands of control, they controlled little; for all his pretensions to taste and sophistication, Zip Coon always remained a clown. According to Lewis, the gloves marked a satire of upward mobility and bourgeois racial tolerance, simultaneously a sign of class ressentiment and racial animus.[41] The addition of white (or no) makeup around the eyes and mouth and the reddening of lips played into common stereotypes of African Americans as slack-jawed and voracious yet simple, innocent, and easily frightened or excited—all infantile, consuming eyes and mouth.[42] Similarly, the minstrel body's relative plasticity, its freedom of movement—as when wheeling around to "Jump Jim Crow"—suggested a primitive freedom from the constraints of civilized behavior. The same sort of freedom marks the bodies and behaviors of continuing cartoon characters, from Felix to Oswald, and to (the early) Mickey Mouse.

Lott has described the minstrel's assumption of fantastic imagined black characteristics as an act of love and theft. Similar to what Stuart Hall calls the "ambivalence of stereotype," it expresses a desire for an imagined liberation from social norms (perversely based in subjugated bodies) combined with a simultaneous fear of that freedom, of the imagined raw sensual power of those bodies.[43] Minstrelsy replicated a white, primarily northern fantasy of African American life and culture, particularly of plantation life, as populated by lazy black folk wallowing in a sensual torpor, almost devoid of higher mental and moral functions. The minstrel's body—fluid, voracious, and libidinal—represented a freedom from the constraints of Protestant middle-class morality. At the same time, that body suggested the threat of a fall from grace, of labor's ongoing enthrallment to capital.

This potent fantasy made the interlocutor, a conduit between audiences and minstrels, a particularly important character. Well spoken, and in the latter half of the nineteenth century often white, he addressed the audience directly and interrogated "his" minstrels in a quasi-anthropological fashion, asking them about details from their lives or, when they said something particularly elliptical, insisting that they explain themselves. He was the butt of the other minstrels' jokes, and his inability to make them understand his simple questions demonstrated the limits of education and of class in the face of natural turpitude. Regulating the border between nature and culture, the interlocutor—a role early animators would adapt and adopt when they interjected themselves into the frame with their creations—performed an always failing regulation of the minstrels' fantastic minds and bodies. The dynamic between the interlocutor and his end men found its way onto the screen via several avenues. It reappeared condensed into the two-man vaudeville acts of teams such as Weber and Fields, Abbott and Costello, and Burns and Allen, and in the power struggles between animator-character duos such as Winsor McCay and Gertie, Max Fleischer and Ko-Ko, or Walter Lantz and Pete the Pup. Thus, the conventions of blackface performance reappeared directly in the iconography and performance styles that informed continuing cartoon characters, and indirectly through vaudevillian performance and staging that had itself drawn from minstrelsy. Both the trope of the controlling and manipulating animator as interlocutor and of the continuing cartoon character as obdurate and willfully practicing misdirection, like Tambo or Bones, became standard conventions in American commercial animation, continuing long after the performance of animation had left the vaudeville stage (see chapter 1). Yet within the first three decades of the

twentieth century, as blackface minstrelsy diminished as a popular entertainment, the obvious associations between popular continuing cartoon characters and the minstrel stage became less evident. Except in the case of characters who were explicitly described as minstrels, such as Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid, by the late 1930s the associative links between cartoons and the minstrel stage were becoming increasingly vestigial.

Continuing characters—those characters who appeared in multiple installments and became trademarks of animation studios—often exhibited a number of physical features that marked them as minstrels. Not only Mickey wore gloves; so did Bimbo, Oswald, and many of the Warner Bros. characters. Most of these popular continuing characters also featured the wide, expressive mouths and eyes of the minstrel painted onto black bodies. Yet the markers of cartoon minstrelsy were not simply visual; they were also performative. Like the eccentric dancing and movement typified by "jumping Jim Crow," these characters had the ability to twist and deform their bodies, and they did so to express extreme emotions, to extricate themselves from intractable situations, or simply for the sheer pleasure of the act. In this, their personalities were those of a minstrel as well: they behaved as tricksters, indifferent or even hostile to the social norms of polite society, as well as to the laws of physics. It is for this reason that even the continuing Fleischer character Ko-Ko the Clown, who appeared in whiteface, yet who persistently punctured the cartoon's frame to rebel against his maker, was *performatively* a minstrel.

These cartoon minstrels, who have persisted to this day, are distinct from cartoon depictions of African Americans. In fact, they are of a different class altogether. There were some African American characters in early silent animation, and many more were created with the coming of sound film and the rise of swing music in the late 1920s. American animation, strangely, responded to jazz and African American popular culture with a plethora of intensely virulent and racist caricatures of famous musicians, and of African Americans in general, even as it celebrated the music and dance of the swing era. While related to the animated minstrel in important ways, these racist caricatures were also distinct, both in their explicitness and in their topicality and historical specificity. Even though they were distinct from their predecessors, these caricatures made literal many of the earlier, implicit associations that blackface minstrelsy had made to the plantation, to Africa, and to primal nature and that had become less explicit in continuing characters such as Bugs Bunny or Woody Woodpecker. Playing on a common association of jazz with "jungle

FIG. I.12 Warner Bros.' *Clean Pastures* (1937) performs the early sound era's more directly virulent racist caricature of African Americans, in this case of Fats Waller, Lincoln Perry, Cab Calloway, and Louis Armstrong.

music," these cartoons imagined a fantastic and often quite violent realm in which blackness linked Harlem, the Deep South, and Africa in a seemingly contiguous fantastic geography (see chapter 3). For that reason, it is important to understand the relationship not only between blackface minstrelsy and popular continuing cartoon characters but also between those characters and later caricatures of jazz greats of the 1930s and 1940s such as Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, and Fats Waller.

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

Both this last example of swing-era racist caricature and the three moments of blackface that opened this chapter indicate a tension in the study of the history of minstrelsy generally, and of animation in particular. There is no doubt that animation went through rapid and significant technological and formal changes during the first fifty years of its development, yet assuming that this development has been unreservedly progressive—that the fading of explicit links to minstrelsy in American commercial cartoons necessarily indicates a gradual improvement in animation's articulation of racial formations—risks producing a narrative that glosses over profound and significant discontinuities in the form. Rather than becoming less racist as live minstrelsy faded, American commercial animation engaged in an intensification of racist imagery in its depiction of music generally and swing music in particular, as in racially

problematic cartoons such as many of the Warner Bros. Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes, in George Pal's stop-action Puppetoons (1932–1947), and in Disney's combination of live action and animation *Song of the South* (Jackson and Foster, 1946). Likewise, an implicitly progressive narrative occludes the ways popular commercial animation actively participated in (rather than simply reflected) the racial formations of the day through its circulation of fantastic embodiments of dominant notions about the relationship between blackness and whiteness in the United States. Cartoons created visual correlates that associated African Americans with slavery, the jungle, and animals, literalizing and animating long-standing stereotypes. Simply put, the demise of minstrelsy on the stage coincided with a period of far more intense racist caricature in American animation, one that ended only with the rise of the postwar civil rights movement . . . and then only slowly. Thus, what unfolds in the chapters to come is not a progressive history. It is an examination of different facets or nodes in a matrix of discourses that produced, policed, and regulated the meanings and uses of the black/white binary in animation (see chapter 4). This study ends in the 1950s—not because the relationship it describes between minstrelsy and broader swing-era racist caricatures became fixed, or because the coming of television somehow obviated the racial overtones of the cinematic cartoon minstrel, but because the rise of the civil rights movement and the momentary stabilization of regimes of labor in the 1950s and 1960s mark a significantly different moment in the ongoing formation of the racial binary, and of the associative links between the laboring and the racially marked body. At the beginning and end of this study I discuss the contemporary rise of a "new blackface today," a seeming revival of minstrelsy in popular mass entertainments coincident with regimes of precarious labor in the neoliberal and increasingly neofeudal moments of the early twenty-first century. Perhaps reviewing the regimes of an earlier, discontinuous historical moment will illuminate similar dynamics at work in our present circumstances.

To the degree that there is a narrative to this study, it does not unfold linearly. Instead it loops back on itself, recursively. Because one of the key tropes of animation is repetition, the examination of cartoons encourages a repetitive mode of reading in which the same objects and practices are viewed from different vantage points, as different facets of the same object. So the first facet of the industrialization of commercial animation this study takes up is that of *performance*, followed by the *labor* of making cartoons, then the role of animation in the alteration and regulation of

space, both within and outside the screen, and then finally what the vestigial minstrel might indicate about *racial* formation in both the moment of its effacement in the 1930s and in the purportedly postracial moment we now occupy. Animation is one site in the vernacular struggle over emerging social formations of labor, race, gender, and class. An art form that celebrates creating audiovisual correlates for ideas, it is in many ways a nonpareil for witnessing struggles over the meanings and uses of those social formations.

Between roughly 1913 and 1916, animation shifted extremely rapidly from a cottage industry to a fully realized and rationalized industrial complex, and its vernacular response to its own rationalization also reveals how new regimes of efficiency and accumulation, and of the industrial absorption of creative workers, translated into those seemingly living commodities, the continuing, trademark characters those same workers produced. For although animation is a far less grueling job than rolling steel, building automobiles, or stoop harvesting, it shares with other rationalized industries an intensified division of labor that reduces tasks to manageable, repetitive components and which views the workers engaged in those tasks as necessarily interchangeable. So even though the stereotypical view of animators is of happy-go-lucky creative sorts whose work is more play than toil (like Disney's seven dwarfs), and even though the field is generally described by animators themselves as creative, it is also true that it is a demanding *industry*—hence the strikes in animation studios in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Designing popular continuing characters as minstrels was not an accident of history; it represents a visual correlate for the satisfactions and frustrations of an industrial art. Animation, via its minstrels, was particularly suited to creating a visible and eventually audible vernacular expression of work experience in its products. Animation is an unusual industry in that the commodities it produces appear to be alive and independent yet so often struggle against the conditions of their existence. Like live minstrels, they embody a performance of comic protest. Animation's very innocuousness, its lack of seriousness, its propensity for caricature makes it ideal for the promulgation of displaced fantasies of racialized ressentiment. Animation's irreality becomes its plausible deniability, its traditional location in comedy its exculpation for its repetitive performances of violence against others. But more than that, the traditions of metamorphosis and boundary crossing make animation an immanent and evanescent medium for producing a hieroglyphics of racial discourse: as the

white blackface minstrel played with the seeming immutability of race (and by extension with anxieties around passing and racial categories), so the cartoon minstrel calls into question the boundary between the animate and inanimate commodity, the person and the thing.

So this is a book that asks, quite seriously, where did Mickey and Bugs get their gloves, their huge eyes, and their capacious and voracious mouths, and why have they kept them for so very many years? It asks why these enduring and endearing continuing cartoon characters so often show so little respect for authority, so often rail against the conditions of their existence, and so rarely succeed in overcoming them. It attempts to answer these questions by considering American animation as a lineal descendant in the very American performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy, and in the process compares Mickey and Bugs to Tambo and Bones—and Walt Disney or Max Fleischer to (equally vestigial) interlocutors. The purpose of this comparison is not to tar American commercial animation as racist, nor to root out its contributing villains so that we can then enjoy its remaining nonracist fare. Nor is it an attempt, at the end of the day, to usher in through critique the sort of utopian postracialism that some have imagined as having been magically engendered by the fantastic figure of President Barack Obama. The purpose of this comparison is, rather, to puzzle out how an industry whose primary products act like living beings chose as a fundamental template for those creatures a being that is itself an imaginary commodity, a living, breathing embodiment of property rebelling against the conditions of its existence—and why that still makes people laugh.

PERFORMANCE

BUG VAUDEVILLE, OR, THE CURTAIN RISES AND FALLS ON WINSOR MCCAY

Early animators were not artists as much as they were entertainers.
—Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *The Illusion of Life* (1981)

In their epic review of animation technique à la Disney, *The Illusion of Life*, Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, two of Walt Disney Productions' "Nine Old Men," offer a historical snapshot that hints at common assumptions about the relationship between popular art and entertainment, and between high art and animation, in the early twentieth century. The notion that an animator was an artist (or draughtsman) first and an entertainer second (if at all) speaks of a division of labor that was increasingly common when the two men began working for Disney in the early 1930s. It had not been the order of things during animation's beginnings twenty years earlier. Thomas and Johnston were skilled craftsmen, animators who could draw Disney's trademark characters on spec and could faithfully contribute to the company's evolving and distinctive style of "full" animation. Yet they were not entertainers: as workers in a rapidly changing industry, they were aware of American commercial animation's origins on the vaudeville stage and its profound debt to that stage's traditions and conventions, which were based in, borrowed from, and shared the spotlight with vaudeville's antecedent forms: burlesque, variety, and blackface minstrelsy. In the 1930s, Disney was the premier animation house in the United States; in the two decades prior to its rise, though, American commercial animation went from an art form that sometimes incorporated film into live performances to an industrial content sup-