BIRTH OF AN

INDUSTRY

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



RACE

HUMOR AND VIOLENCE

We shall best understand the origin of the pleasure derived from humor if we consider the process which takes place in the mind of anyone listening to another man's jest. He sees this other person in a situation which leads him to anticipate that the victim will show signs of some affect; he will get angry, complain, manifest pain, fear, horror, possibly even despair. The person who is watching or listening is prepared to follow his lead, and to call up the same emotions. But his anticipations are deceived; the other man does not display any affect—he makes a joke. It is from the saving of expenditure in feeling that the hearer derives the humorous satisfaction.

—Sigmund Freud, "Humor" (1928)

When it comes to cartoons, Sigmund Freud's description of humor as the invocation of affect and its diversion speaks well to the existential horror we call the gag. Especially in the short subjects that defined American animation until 1937 and still thereafter provided its bread and butter, life is an eternal cavalcade of pain.¹ Bodies twist, stretch, explode, melt; they are crushed by anvils, pianos, giant mallets, whole buildings; they are sliced and diced by razors and knives—and through it all we laugh. Why is it that, faced with such horrific violence and fierce torment, we are amused, tickled, jollified? And why have cartoons in particular linked that mayhem to other, more specific acts of degradation—inflected by race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity—happily harmonizing social and physical violence?

Of the rude shocks that 'toons have delivered and taken on our behalf, the brutality of racism is among the worst. Although the earliest days of American animation were relatively equal-opportunity in their stereo-



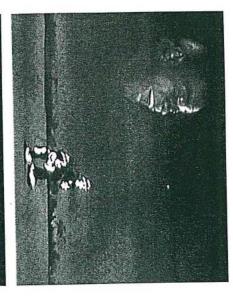


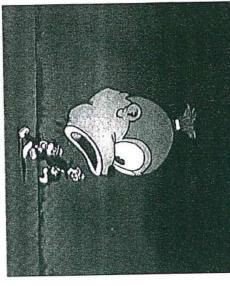
FIG. 4.1 Violence is a fact of life in the cartoon world. In Rabbit Fire (1951), Daffy Duck seems merely annoyed that a bullet has ripped his scalp from his skull.

typing of race, gender, and ethnicity-caricaturing with gusto Africans, African Americans, the Chinese, Mexicans, Scots, Jews, the Irish, Gerwith which they were associated. In theory, European immigrants could particularly virulent insult to human dignity and to the human bodies they were to the vicious histories of slavery and segregation, offered a mans, and so on-parodies of Africans and African Americans, tied as modation as hardworking, clever, and inscrutable—therefore nearly on a immigrants of Asian descent were sometimes afforded an uneasy accomexpect to eventually assimilate into a generic American whiteness, while grudging inclusion, and this only added further insult to the ongoing in-Other ethnic and racial stereotypes were subsumed slowly, in a process of continued to be the case in more recent quasi-scientific racial fantasies).² par with whites—in the eugenic hierarchies of the day (which has sadly and cartoons have continued to be a place where the cruelty of the unredeemable stereotype of blackness has found fertile ground for the ongoing expression of that distinction.* Fantastic African American 'toons, jury of white-black racism.³ This is a difference not of degree but of kind, anxieties that attend that dream make those characters the targets of anxdream about the libidinous power of black bodies, and the desires and whether as minstrels or as racist caricatures, have performed a repetitive of the inherent violence of stereotyping itself. ious violence—even as their very morphology constitutes an expression

> separation ("separate") as well as of a hierarchy invoked and disavowed violence generally, as well as an insight into why that violence was often nue through which to understand the relationship between laughter and explanation than an expiation, a reading of the means by which this has self that is daily life in the capitalist fantasy of a free society. Far more an sibly white audiences an opportunity to externalize the violence to the and explicit violence that surrounded these characters has offered ostenwas first the minstrel then the racist caricature. Laughing at the implicit mative and operationalized social and economic violence, and that form within its racialized origins, gave form to these historical moments of norof African American life as rooted in a nature that bracketed a faltering ately punished for that performance. Likewise, their descendants, swingminstrels were made to perform resistance to control and to be immedibody of the (cartoon) character an implicit and ongoing social violence of temporary logic of "separate but equal," attaches to the imaginary black the dawn of the American animation industry, articulated within a conexpressed in specifically racist terms. The operation of the racial binary at ing the often racialized violence of animation may offer a productive ave aggressive regulation of labor and of social desire. Perhaps, then, examinture served as avatars for the displaced affect of industrial-era workers as comic figure has been taken. been accomplished opens the heart of darkness from which the minstrel dominant culture. The inherent violence of animation, deeply imbricated era racist caricatures, gave shape and voice to a Depression-era fantasy ("but equal"). As avatars for the lost freedom of "wage slaves," cartoon (whether in the studio or in the audience), racialized embodiments of the The cartoon minstrel and its relative the swing-era racist carica-

The Betty Boop short I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal, You (Fleischer, 1932) offers an example of this carefully articulated fantastic racial violence. This short doesn't open with the iconic flapper or with her sidekicks Bimbo and Ko-Ko. Like many of the animated shorts the Fleischers produced with popular musicians of the early 1930s, it starts with live footage—here of Louis Armstrong fronting a small big band. After Armstrong and the band get rolling, the short's animated section begins. Betty, Bimbo, and Ko-Ko are explorers in the jungle, set upon by the generic cannibals common to the racist imaginary of early twentieth-century America. Betty is of course kidnapped by these savages, and of course Bimbo and Ko-Ko attempt a rescue. After a bit of business they all break free and flee the cannibal village. Yet one native in particular is





FIGS. 4.2-4.3 In I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You (1932), Louis Armstrong's joyous singing in the style of the dirty blues is transformed into the ravenous slavering of a cannibal.

dogged in his pursuit, and soon his body morphs into a giant flying cannibal head that, as it chases Bimbo and Ko-Ko, is intercut with a close-up of Armstrong's disembodied head, and both sing the title song, "(I'll Be Glad When You're Dead) You Rascal, You." Although Armstrong is dressed in a suit in the opening sequence and is carrying a trumpet and his trademark handkerchief, in the close-up he wears a black turtleneck and his shoulders are matted out of the frame. He sings with obvious pleasure and gusto. After a few verses, the image morphs him back into the voracious cannibal head, which so terrifies Bimbo that he sweats himself away to nothing (an obvious phallic joke). The cannibal then so scares Ko-Ko that a speedometer emerges from his ass; when it passes 120 mph it reads, in Hebrew, "Kosher." In the end, the protagonists (of whom Armstrong is obviously not one) vanquish the natives and go free.

a Hebraic speedometer from his butt—as the cartoon mocks their inade. impotence and Ko-Ko's anxious (and incomplete) white masculinity.10 strong's/the cannibal's voracious sensuality is that which reveals Bimbo's quate masculinity—only casts the racial binary in stronger relief: Arm-Bimbo melts into puddle of sweat and Ko-Ko's terror causes him to sprout singing is transformed into a desire to consume the errant explorers. That and eyes—slavering after his white victims, and Armstrong's pleasure in becomes voraciousness, literalized as a cannibal head—all lips, tongue, at moments performing as if his rival were right in front of him. In the tieth century and was noted for the enthusiasm and joy he brought to Armstrong was one of the greatest musicians and performers of the twenthrough its racism, and how it mobilized its racism through its humor. sonable. Yet how it is racist is also important: how it achieved its humor sessment-that this sort of film was racist and colonialist-is quite rea-Europeans in the minds of the movie going public."8 The core of this asto reinforce the justification of the continued colonization of Africa by encouraged disrespect for people of African descent and therefore tended sort: "Even if these cartoons did not directly incite bigotry, they certainly Sampson classed this type of film as an "Animated Safari" and said of its so. In his compendium on racist imagery in American cartoons, Henry hands of one of the premier animation houses of the time, that relish (which imagine someone cursing out a man who has slept with his wife), That pleasure in performance is evident here: Armstrong savors the lyrics his performances (which were sometimes criticized as Uncle-Tomming).⁹ The short is so obviously racist that it barely seems worth the ink to say

For all that, though, the Fleischer cartoon is at moments funny, and it

is well made. The music is vital and exciting, and the drawing is inventive, lively, and unpredictable. The cartoon is full of the sorts of transformations that Norman Klein has described as the stuff of "nightmarish humor [and] drunken hallucinations." It is alternately funny and racist, startling in its monstrousness. Its humor, or at least the affect behind that humor, is inextricably interwoven with its racism, its demeaning and derogatory portrayal of a great (African American) man. I'll Be Glad is charged with a blend of fear and desire—the fear of Louis Armstrong as a desirable object as much as a desiring subject—that threatens the film's protagonists, emasculating and whitening them at the same time. Bifurcating Armstrong between an ostensibly real self-contained and self-contented man and an idealized fantasy of uncivilized hunger, the film points up the relationship between the two, between the real and the ideal.

While the cartoon does this, though, it also performs the reinscriptive process by which the Fleischer trademark characters' strong associations with minstrelsy were obscured by the more potent and direct racism embodied by its stereotypical savages. By this point relegated to the status of sidekicks to the popular Betty Boop, Ko-Ko and Bimbo had each in his own moment been created as a continuing trademark character. Ko-Ko, in whiteface but performatively a minstrel nonetheless, had been the studio's mainstay from the late teens through most of the 1920s, the central character in struggles for control of the screen. As his popularity faded, the studio developed Bimbo—who more clearly carried the visual markers of the minstrel—as a potential replacement. Both of these trickster characters, however, lost their more direct associations with blackface minstrelsy when confronted by figures like the cannibals in I'll Be Glad or the ghetto underworld of Snow-White (1933).

A rereading of cartoons such as this should not understand this shift in the expression of racial formations in animation, in which swing-era racist caricatures joined trademark minstrels on the screen, as an unfortunate turn in an otherwise benign and childlike medium. The problem of understanding racism in American commercial animation is like that of discussing violence in cartoons more broadly. Generally, criticism of cartoon violence attempts to bracket it from the form itself, as if cartoons could simply be less violent and still be vital and interesting. This attitude ignores something that children and adults alike know and celebrate: animation, with its stretching, squashing, and metamorphosis of bodies, relies on a certain abstract violence as an essential demonstration of its distinct formal properties, of what it does best and differently from

standing in for him-then to perform their unpleasure in the face of that with animation's propensity for staging physically violent interactions one that is played out again and again. and resistance that foregrounds the metamorphic qualities of the form of this period depends on a sadomasochistic racial fantasy of encounter discipline. In short, the (troubling) vibrancy associated with the cartoons disciplined by someone — if not by their creator then by another character conventional history of featuring misbehaving characters that beg to be eral through the visual iconography of animation. Cartoons have had a racial stereotyping is a form of social violence that was often made litwith the human (or anthropomorphic) form itself isn't merely additive: everyday life. And, finally, the blending of such racial and racist fantasies which animation took form, to its understanding of the metaphysics of those overtones have been to the social and cultural circumstances within be evacuated of their racial overtones fails to attend to how fundamental live cinema, if not life itself. Likewise, the idea that cartoons could easily

Following Freud's logic, the humor of such racist cartoons, based on turning toward and then away from this history of horrible violence, should be hysterical. It sometimes is. Whether in the antics of Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid (1929–1938) or in the swamp-bound parody of Harlem night-life Swing Wedding (1937), again and again brutality is visited on ostensibly black bodies, whether they are physically assaulted or merely suffer the symbolic violence of grotesque caricature. And yet this racialized violence is performed in the service of a laugh, and in their manic pacing, jokes, and visual ingenuity these cartoons may evoke laughter. The racist stereotypes that inform these sorts of cartoons emerged from a specific iconographic lexicon and have circulated in animation as commonplace expressions of contempt that dismiss the harm they express as ultimately harmless: in cartoons no one bleeds and no one dies. It's all good fun, and it's not really real. The intense affect of racism, instead of evincing either vicious malice or utter horror, is reduced to a joke, a double take, a gag, a disavowal.

Those gags, as they have fed into larger systems of structural and institutional racism, have contributed to human suffering. According to Freud, though, the intense affect that informs them, however brutal, may be converted to relatively more felicitous laughter. Yet most agree that this laughter is still inappropriate and that this sort of conversion does nothing to blunt the racism itself. A historical understanding of race—if not common decency—requires that good people decry racist humor and

depends on a notion of the universal experience of suffering—the endless specific hurts to particular people. In this regard, though, the racist caris to laugh. But racist humor is specific: on its surface at least it depends on rude shock of human existence. We all suffer, and one common response cartoons present. They become a useful correlate for how black bodies an independent subjectivity—may crack open the affective bind that racist cal status of these animated characters—made yet alive, objects yet with way out. If the problem lies in the either/or, then the ambiguous ontologitoon, as much as it contributes to this formulation, may offer an oblique of the last century. Like the animated character, perched on the border were imagined by American popular and legal discourse at the beginning between the living and the inert, the minstrel, predicated on a fantasy of age of "separate but equal," one could always approach but at which one of chattel slavery toward a fully universal subjectivity—a point that, in the plantation life, has long suggested a transit point from the object status can historical experience with cartoons. It is, however, to point out the might never arrive.13 This is decidedly not to analogize all African Ameri Is there a way, then, out of this either/or bind? Freud's notion of humor

utility of animated characters for expressing and exploring this contradictory tension between subject and object—as well as the threat to the subject status of nonblack bodies that this tension represented.¹⁴

sympathetic response, one need only recognize and acknowledge (yet not on that continuum of subjectivity may determine whether one responds sponse to this humor. Put more simply, one's perceived or actual place on that continuum becomes important for organizing one's affective reobject, with varied intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, and subjecfully autonomous white (male) subject to the black chattel slave as living jective object among fellow objects? does one act as a fellow subject, as a subject among objects, or as a subtween a subject and an embodied object emerges. In this chain of being different encounters with sympathy and empathy, a necessary tension beshare) the feelings that the joke's object might experience. Parsing those stands oneself as of a kind with the butt of the joke (in this instance); in a bad thing and we will not speak of it. In an empathic response, one underindicates an unwillingness to engage, a full disavowal of the object: it is a to racist humor with censure, with empathy, or with sympathy. Censure tivity operating between the two poles — and where and how one is located tivity on a hierarchical continuum extending backward from an ideal and That is, there is a history in the United States of predicating subjec-

If one acts as the latter, in the moment of recognition and empathy racist parodies become simultaneously injurious and funny. They are injurious because they participate in practices designed to inflict real injury and insult on specific people and to implicate others in inflicting that injury. They may be funny when we view them, not in the sadistic model that Freud elaborated in his earlier work on humor but from the vantage of his later work on empathy and shared affect. In this view, the racist cartoons of the early to mid-twentieth century continue to be funny, not because today's audiences necessarily choose to continue to practice or suffer the active, overt racism that informed their making (though that may sometimes be true), but because the social and material struggles that underpin that racism are still very much alive.

When approaching early American animation and its necessary involvement in contemporary racial formations, as well as its participation in overt racism—that is, through its use of both the subtler codings of race that shaped enduring minstrel characters such as Krazy Kat or Mickey Mouse and of broader racist caricatures—delineating animation's varied uses of stereotype becomes a useful way to productively engage with this

traditions of blackface minstrelsy popular at the birth of American animation, this time from the perspective of violence and humor. For while more virulent and direct racist caricatures came to the fore in American animation's embrace of swing music in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the vestiges of blackface minstrelsy—the white gloves, wide eyes, voracious mouth, and tricksterish resistance—had already informed animation's most popular characters and lived on long after the racist excesses of animation's golden age seemed to pass. Contemplating the similarities and shared histories of those forms, as well as their significant differences, in the light of the distance between sympathy and empathy may offer, if not solace, at least perspective.

GENTLEMEN, PLEASE BE SEATED

To rewrite the concept of a management of desire in social terms now allows us to think repression and wish-fulfillment together within the unity of a single mechanism, which . . . strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can be momentarily stilled.—Fredric Jameson, Signatures of the Visible (1992)

shorthand of the gag in the early studio animation era, the metaphysics of ingly at will (and certainly at the will of its creator). While live minstrels cartoon character, a being that could alter itself or its environment seembodied corollary to the plasmatic substance, the metamorphic form of the put, the fantastic and resistant form of the blackface minstrel was an emthe form favored rather particular stereotypes of blackness. More plainly While a variety of racial and ethnic stereotypes facilitated the efficient morphic and disruptive qualities of the cartoon. The same racial formaful resistance to the conditions of their making resonated with the metalacked this total transformative power, their transgressive nature and willtory positions simultaneously—informed a logic of animation that saw in of slavery to (near) personhood—or as occupying both of those contradictions that had positioned black bodies as in transit from the object status whether social or physical - if not to rewrite them altogether. the real and the ideal. The live blackface minstrel and the trademark carfantastic blackness a means to express the permeable boundary between toon character were cognates: both had the ability to cross boundaries—



FIG. 4.4 Judy Garland in blackface with Mr. Interlocutor in the minstrel show in Babes in Arms

(1939).

by folding the interlocutor into the duo of Tambo and Bones, making one writers who supplied their material) would compress this triadic relation the minstrels' fantastic minds and bodies. Vaudeville comedians (or the and culture, the interlocutor attempted an always failing regulation of in the face of natural turpitude. Operating at the border between nature questions performed the limits of race, education, and class superiority meaning, and his frequent inability to make them understand his simple The interlocutor was the instigator and butt of the minstrels' mangling of ion about their friends, their families, and the current events of the day. as an equal and interrogated the minstrels in a quasi-ethnographic fashaudience and the minstrels. He addressed the audience directly and often recall: in minstrelsy the interlocutor served as the conduit between the and the interlocutor, and animation in return borrowed from both.17 To and Allen) followed the same conventional principles as Tambo, Bones ated forms-the minstrel show, vaudeville act, cartoon, live film, radio two-man acts (such as Abbott and Costello, Hope and Crosby, and Burns and Gosden and Correll's Amos 'n' Andy. Yet none of blackface's mediin the same week—if not the same night. Vaudeville's famous comedic lapped, and one or more of these attractions could occupy the same stage program—simply replaced its predecessor. Their years of popularity overlar two-man minstrel acts such as Miller and Lyles, Moran and Mack, brief renaissance in the late 1920s and early 1930s with the rise of popuing as vaudeville gave way to radio and the movies, but it experienced a Blackface played a (subsidiary) part in vaudeville well into the 1920s, fad-Yet animated minstrels did not simply replace their live counterparts.

comic in the "two act" more intelligent and "civilized" while the other remained ignorant and resistant. Just as the interlocutor could not make the end men make sense, Bud Abbott failed to contain the childlike Lou Costello and George Burns failed to make Gracie Allen see reason: they were the conduits of nonsense.¹⁸

Like those end men before them, animated minstrel characters—Felix, Mickey, Bugs—were tricksters and interlopers at the boundary between the screen and the real, arising from a tradition of interplay with their creators and expressing a desire to escape the bounds of two dimensions for the real world of their animators. This was more than a matter of homology: the white gloves, big smile, and wide eyes that sat on an ostensibly racially ambiguous or unmarked body (usually that of an animal) were the markers of minstrelsy. Likewise, the animated minstrels' behaviors—their resistance to both the animator-interlocutor who created them and to the physical strictures of animate space—underpinned both the fundamental gag structure of many an early animated short and the basic template of the trademarked continuing character. And like their live counterparts, animated minstrels performed a desirable and humorous irrationality that begged both admiration and punishment.

a fear of the raw sensual power of those same bodies. Based as it was on a a liberation perversely located in subjugated bodies, a desire alloyed with wise, the rakish yet absurd figure of the black urban dandy, such as Zip torpor, almost devoid of higher mental and moral functions yet possessnotion of the indolent and shifty slave, minstrelsy replicated a white fan-Hall calls the "ambivalence of stereotype." 20 This performance expressed tic black characteristics as an act of "love and theft," similar to what Stuart slave cabin. Saidiya Hartman has suggested that minstrelsy's playful show forced labor—and all the institutions they supported and that supported incommensurate possibility of black cultural equality.) Torture, rape, and Coon or Jim Dandy, spoke both to a desire for fashion and style and for the ing an innate natural intelligence that made them crafty and sly. (Liketasy of plantation life, of lazy African Americans wallowing in a sensual (and expresses) a desire for an imagined liberation from social norms, of resistance titillated precisely because of the threat of recriminatory viothem—were occluded in minstrelsy, leaving the rustic domesticity of the laughter. On the minstrel stage, the comic inversions, bawdy humor, and ercised in minstrelsy reproduced black subjection, albeit accompanied by lence at which it hinted: "Certainly, the disciplinary vengeance of farce ex-Eric Lott has described the minstrel's performance of imagined fantas-

> suffering incredible torments yet remaining, in the end, unscathed. gaged in increasing levels of violence—enthusiastic, exuberant violence or racist caricature, cartoon characters in the 1930s encountered and enciplined for their rebelliousness had not. And, whether vestigial minstrel very laziness was work wasted, a passive revolt.23 The whip may have nadir of labor's enthrallment to capital in an era when contract labor was implicit violence of the stereotypes themselves. The slave represented the who talked back, who resisted work in favor of carnal pleasure, whose called "wage slavery" to signify its subordinate status. The minstrel, once more humane depiction . . . and no cartoon produced after 1934 showed been removed, but the convention of animated characters violently disremoved from the slave, stood in for labor unchained: s/he was the slave to the violence inflicted on or by vestigial minstrel characters or to the the whipping of slaves."22 This generous gesture, of course, did not apply revision to the Production Code, in animation "slave figures receive[d] a purpose of its regulation. Christopher Lehman argues that following a were inextricably linked. In cartoons, that resistance was created for the blackness was not only abject but was also resistant, and these qualities reproducing the abject status of blackness."21 On the minstrel stage, then, of the tolerable, particularly since this transgression of order occurred by lampooning of class hierarchies nonetheless operated within the confines

Yet as with the slapstick vaudeville routine or film short, this did not engender identification with a protagonist but identification of the situation and its referents. If the viewer in the classical cinematic apparatus, the one who gazed and was sutured into the narrative, was an individual whose interpellation occurred through the repetitive yielding of her or his self to the story, the vaudeville spectator was also meant to experience a subordination of the self—not to a subjectivity produced in concert with the image, but to a collective appreciation, to the crowd looking up at the stage or screen.²⁴ Rather than withdrawing the viewer from his or her immediate surroundings and into a dream world of (dis)embodied fantasy, the spectatorial practices of vaudeville, minstrelsy, and animation proffered the wink and the nudge, a collective experience in the here and now, located not in a cinematic imaginary but in the theater itself. There, the pleasure was not in seeing one's self in the protagonist but in witnessing the virtuosity with which the performers executed their acts.

In terms of an identificatory model based in empathy rather than on sympathy, this difference is essential. To identify with(in) the crowd is to locate oneself in a community of practice, and the experience of identifi-

gaze). Even in those instances when an audience rejects a given perfora sense of one's self as powerful enough to assume the role of protagonist than aligning) one's self with a character, which paradoxically reinforces ally depends on emotional distance: sympathy requires the narcissistic say, booing). Sympathy, on the other hand, requires only that the viewer possible, even as one perhaps makes a contribution to that suffering (by one's own (even provisional) community (succeed or) fail—and suffer—is tion.25 The empathic reaction that may come from watching a member of mance and boos a performer (for instance), the community of practice former onstage (rather than with the character or abstracted cinematic cation is first with one's fellow audience members and then with the perand then return to the safety of one's self at film's end. investment of identification, the conventional fantasy of replacing (rather does it not invoke an equal emotional investment in the other, it actufeel for (rather than with) the performer or character.26 Like pity, not only (audience and performers) remains whole, bound up by shared conven-

1928 essay on humor—when he describes a condemned man cracking a very divided consciousness to which Freud refers at the beginning of his empathy, one may laugh because the shared markers of experience, the is a division of the subject between theater seat and stage or screen.27 In unconscious urges amplified by an implacable apparatus. Instead there no always already interpellated subject, no yielding against one's will to conscious, this sort of identification may be consciously chosen: there is matic suture, whose investments depend on the requirements of the unfreedom of contract or violently through enslavement. But unlike cinelabor has been expropriated, whether under the voluntary pretense of an emotion shared between human commodities, between those whose case of minstrelsy—whether live or animated—empathy is in this light what happens to one's self could just as easily happen to another. In the ised on one person's affective response to another's condition as shared: necessarily require that defense of self. Conventionally, empathy is premprovide necessary ruptures in the tidy frame of reality.²⁸ The minstrel live incarnation, the greasepaint sits uneasily on the face: an ideal of black whether live or animated, is always a creature divided. In the minstrel's threatened ego but as embodiments of its protective ideal, creatures who joke on the gallows—are performed not as threats to the integrity of the forms a similar duality—that of a seeming autonomy entirely controlled ness atop a raced performer.29 In the cartoon, the animated minstrel per Conversely, and oddly, an empathic reaction to a performance does not

by its maker. Viewing either (racist) performance, one may laugh and ending that laughter say, "Well, that's not right." In empathy both expressions are felt and both feelings legitimate.³⁰

ostensibly white audiences, then, cartoons offered access to a forbidden to—a force that animated everyone and everything that dwelt there. For ment of those three locations—the jungle, the plantation, and the ghetmusical form but as a force able to produce an amalgamated embodiworld of (imagined) black culture visible, depicting jazz not just as a African jungle. When cartoons took up jazz they rendered an invisible ghetto, through minstrelsy's fantastic plantation, and on to an originary one link in an associative chain that stretched backward from the urban blackface's founding conceits, imagining the blackness of the minstrel as cial animation at the beginning of the twentieth century turned to the in American commercial animation have a distinct genealogy. Commerin the same historical frame. Performances of race and racial stereotype and transformation of stereotypes, of racist caricatures, and to appreciate better understood, though not absolved, through a careful survey of that territory of fear and desire, and the laughter they were meant to invoke is Krazy, and Mickey. During the swing era, American cartooning looked to minstrel stage to produce enduring continuing characters such as Felix, them at a feeling level, one must attempt to situate one's self, and them, mon ground from which to view those cartoons. To understand the transit be legitimate, depending on whether one has done work to find a com-Or perhaps it would be better to say that both sets of feelings may

TRADER MICKEY: THE MINSTREL IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

The 1932 Disney short *Trader Mickey* performs this racialized geography explicitly. The cartoon follows a fairly standard format for early sound efforts: a minimal plot and a centerpiece musical production number highlight the wonders of the still relatively new technology of sync sound, and popular melodies and dance numbers play on the trends of the day. The story here is that Mickey Mouse and his dog, Pluto, are captured by cannibals and dance their way to freedom by playing on the natives' innate susceptibility to jazz rhythms. The film is significant not only for its inflection of the popular swing-era trope of jazz as "jungle music" but also because Mickey's capture at the hands of these animated cannibals offers an instance of cultural contact between a blackface minstrel (Mickey) and

relationship to (an imagined) blackness. Trademark cartoon characters minstrels was fading into a set of conventions that maintained a less direct a direct association between trademark cartoon characters and blackface mation during its silent era that by the time of Mickey's arrival in 1928, understanding how the figure of the minstrel became so embedded in anithe early twentieth-century United States. It also provides an avenue for ingly innocuous cartoon short, then, offers a shorthand look at the comstrel's libidinous, animalistic, and uncivilized appeal. Reading a seemthe less oblique racist stereotypes that historically had informed the mina marker of bygone performance styles and simpler times. Increasingly with vaudeville, and minstrels' place in live cinema limited to serving as of the markers of minstrelsy while rarely referring directly to the tradisuch as Mickey were becoming vestigial minstrels, carrying all (or many) plex of race, violence, and desire that charged fantasies of blackness in embedded in the visual, auditory, and performative traditions of the cartion itself.31 Live performances of blackface minstrelsy were waning along acts of blackface minstrelsy.32 robbed of direct referents, minstrels in animation became more deeply toon, and less immediately understood as engaged in the performative

Reinscribing Mickey and his fellow cartoon tricksters as minstrels, however, is not a mere act of (empty and symbolic) reparation; it is an effort to place the often marginalized but always extremely popular form of the animated cartoon short more firmly into a historically specific racial matrix that included the vaudeville stage, the minstrel show, the world's fair midway native village, and the black-and-tan review—all of which, within a complex, varied, and sometimes contradictory fabric of discourse, produced, contested, and regulated race relations on the ground. Beyond revealing the racial (and racist) foundations of beloved animated characters, the point of understanding those characters as minstrels is, first, to witness how stereotypical ideas that were considered in another. Yet beyond that, seeing Mickey, Bugs, and Daffy as minstrels permits a more nuanced and detailed picture of animation as a fantastic, violent, and excessive popular art form.

Framed by that history, *Trader Mickey* is an interstitial object that brings the conventions of blackface minstrelsy undergirding American animation into conversation with the violent and excessive racist caricatures that crowded the jazz-inflected cartoons of early sound cinema. So, witnessing the difference between the minstrel and the racist caricature

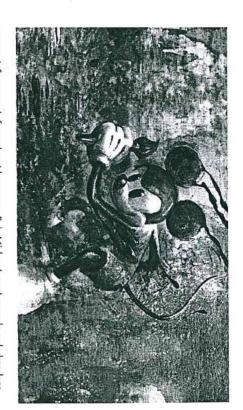


FIG. 4.5 A frame grab from the video game Epic Mickey (2010) reveals a darker, less wholesome side of Mickey Mouse than his previous incarnations.

in this cartoon may serve to alienate a few of the practices we have come to see as natural in animation—particularly its tendency toward excessive yet seemingly inconsequential violence. For although *Trader Mickey* is not the most vicious of the cartoons of the early sound era, even it is rife with violence threatened and enacted, and Mickey Mouse, who is so deeply associated with sweetness and light that Disney had to briefly mount a PR campaign to reintroduce his "edge" for the video game *Epic Mickey* (2010), is no exception.³⁴ *Trader Mickey* describes the difference between the animate minstrel and racist caricature, and the cartoon illustrates how the minstrel's intimate associations with voice, silence, and violence made it an appropriate avatar for the artisan animator increasingly constrained within an industrializing art form.

The very term "Mickey Mouse," with all of its various connotations, speaks to the character's semiotic weight. To describe something as "Mickey Mouse" is to call it trivial. Why? Already extremely famous when Trader Mickey premiered in 1932, Mickey was widely and enthusiastically praised by critics and by Disney's public and was a merchandizing juggernaut available in myriad forms, well on his way to becoming a ubiquitous household object.³⁵ Critics such as Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein carefully bracketed Disney's enthusiasm for capitalism while they celebrated the mouse, and in 1934 Cole Porter in "You're the Top" suggested that the object of his affection was as good as Mickey Mouse—that is, well, "the top." Yet it was his very ubiquity that contributed to the

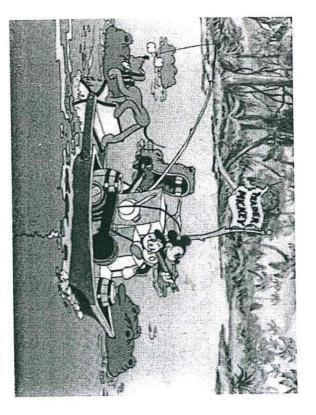


FIG. 4.6 The opening of *Trader Mickey* (1932) finds Mickey and Pluto making their way upriver in a paddle-wheel boat.

ways, although increasingly tamed as the 1930s progressed, spoke of a mascot yet was also presented as an autonomous being whose impish is to be cheapened through excessive commodification. Often figured as books, to frocks and flatware. So, to become "Mickey Mouse" was and imagine, from watches and water glasses, to toothbrushes and notecharacter and a trademark icon on every bit of girncrackery one could rodent's triviality. Mickey Mouse was simultaneously a beloved cartoon seemed, as a living being, to produce his own value but to hold none of it.35 of self-making (for which Walt Disney was hailed in the press), Mickey the Great Depression and its anxious celebration of Algeresque fantasies commodity: a living thing that signified itself and more.37 In the midst of if he were autonomous, Mickey Mouse was the exemplar of the animate minstrel's tricksterish, resistant behavior.36 Made by hand yet acting as Walt Disney's progeny, Mickey was also the company's trademark and and obedient; and, of course, simultaneously racially coded as both black The figure of Mickey was (and is) contradictory: important in its triviality handmade yet living; capricious and willful yet ultimately good-natured and white. It is through this dense and self-refractory complex of meaning that we encounter the mouse in Trader Mickey, and through which we may

approach the sadomasochistic complex that informs both the trademark animated character and the blackface minstrels who informed it.

neither fully animal nor human: he is a liminal figure in a liminal zone. he is neither fully white nor fully black; as an anthropomorphic mouse, his trade is in the savage bodies he is soon to encounter. As a minstrel byways of some colonial interzone; at worst he is slave-trader Mickey, and est. To be blunt: at best Mickey plays a dry-goods merchant working the easily signal the old South as a colonial adventure in an African rain forhome on his return voyage. The paddle wheel on his boat could just as are not sure for what (or whom) he expects to trade them before he heads of what? His makeshift boat is loaded with some sort of goods, but we in Africa like a vaudevillian donning a loosely fitting costume.39 A trader same year as Frank Buck's Bring 'Em Back Alive (1932), and several years toon confection has presented us with a wealth of information. Making crocodiles, their mouths agape. Mickey is perched atop his cargo, merrily before the onset of the tropical kitsch of Trader Vic, Mickey plays a trader his way into the heart of darkness a year after Trader Horn (1931), in the plucking away at a banjo. Within a few shots, this seemingly harmless carshackle paddle-wheel steamer loaded with cargo, passing hippos and Trader Mickey opens on Mickey and Pluto cruising upriver in a ram-

a re-presentation. The wooly wigs, burnt cork, and greasepaint that delinnineteenth century progressed as were the gloves that increasingly became a trademark of the form as the eated the head, eyes, and mouth of the minstrel were only the beginning lineators," as if what they performed were less a representation and more but always in blackface, minstrel performers were sometimes called "deand privileged to reproduce them for audiences distanced by geographical of enslaved Africans (barely removed from the jungle) and were pleased location and/or cosmopolitanism from their meanings. 40 Black or white, reports: visiting the plantation they had witnessed the primitive dances Early minstrel performers often framed their shows as anthropological phy based on race. Blackness simultaneously signifies the plantation and alternative space of subjugation: one of a number of representations that the jungle. This repeats one of the foundational conceits of minstrelsy the jazz age, with Harlem), the film posits (or accepts) a fantastic geograimagined the Old South as symbolically contiguous with Africa (and in is not so much an act of pentimento as the generation of a continuous lapses into the putative site of its eventual forced labor, the South. This In Trader Mickey, Africa, the originary locus of the black slave body, col-

A: Well, now, you've been to college two years, I suppos [sic] you can translate Latin some, can't you?

B: Yes, I can translate anything.

A: Can you? Well, what does this mean - Poeta nascitur non fit?

B: Oh! That means, a nasty poet is not fit!42

(A more accurate translation would be "A poet is born, not made.") Likewise, a stump speech attributed to J. Martin and delivered in March 1861 makes light of and hints at the tensions surrounding the looming Civil War:

Look at the patriots ob dis country. Talk 'bout Kossuth and Garibaldi; ain't we got Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, Wendell Phillips, and W. L. Yancey? Talk 'bout Garibaldi consolidatin' Italy. Why dem fellers is goin' to make any quantity of countries out ob dese United States, dem's de fellers dat tinks E Pluribus Unum sounds vulgar, so dey're goin' to changer it to E Unibus Plurium. Dat's what's de matter.

In de year Aunty Dominix, 1776, how was dis country bounded. I'll tell you—it was bounded on de Norf by dat celebrated female Sara-toga.

It was bounded on the de Souf by Gin'ral Jackson and de Cotton Bales. On de East by Moll Pitcher de Salem Witchcraft and de Boston Tea Party. An' on de West by—by—a howlin' wilderness. Now how is it bounded? Its bounded on de Norf by eberytin' dat's good to eat and drink; its bounded on de Souf by Secession; its bounded on de East by New Jersey, Harper's Ferry, and de Great Eastern. . . . Dat's what's de matter.

In both of these instances, the minstrel's apparent guilelessness, a condition of his exclusion from polite society and of his native inability to

stand-in for the chattel slave (or for his northern counterpart, the free but they would also admit the fast-paced patter of Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck "plasmatic" form for their first fifteen years; with the coming of sound metamorphosis of language that cartoons would render visually in silent, ited, doubles that liminal condition as a minstrel: he is doubly dislocated object granted a sentience and agency constantly in danger of being liminto violence against common sense. Likewise, Mickey Mouse, as a made from which he converts institutional and immediate violence on his body tion, speech, and action, yet that seems to be a privileged vantage point tion places him outside free society. He exists on the margins of cognioutside the flow of history; paradoxically his containment on the plantanot fully assimilated black man), embodies the outside: as an object he is he is seen as an object rather than a subject. The blackface minstrel, as it also provides a fantastic outsider's view of an emergent history of which grasp the finer points of language, ideology, social norms, or historical In its verbal form, blackface minstrelsy performed the deformation and fact, allows him to send up the pretensions of the dominant classes, but

tremes in favor of a performed moderate wholesomeness. Yet as that force and productive powers. He is a force of disruption—albeit one somewhat cial and material convention and who embodies significant destructive ditional role of the trickster, the imp who operates on the margins of soyond those obvious physical markers, he also performs the minstrel's tracharacters of the day and their progenitor, the blackface minstrel. But beaggerated mouth, and wide eyes that marked both the popular animated such, though: Mickey sports the uniform of white gloves, black face, exthat spawned him. It is not just the happy strumming that signals him as ably, a minstrel traveling steadily toward the headwaters of the tradition mance. 45 So in Trader Mickey the mouse is, quite simply and quite reasonlades mention its indebtedness to the minstrel stage for its sonic perforerroneously celebrated as the first sound cartoon, rarely do those accociated with the minstrel stage. In his first outing in sync sound, Steamboat banjo, and this isn't the first time he has played music specifically asso-As he chugs upriver, Mickey is happily strumming a raggedy tune on his he exists in a world of hurt, an animated cosmos in which incredible viotamed by an emerging Disney aesthetic that increasingly eschewed ex that steamboat made its way upriver. "Although Steamboat Willie is often known as "Turkey in the Straw") on the bodies of various farm animals as Willie (1928), Mickey played the minstrel standard "Old Zip Coon" (also But more than just (dis)location connects Trader Mickey to minstrelsy.



FIG. 4.7 As Mickey Mouse heads toward the cannibal village in *Trader Mickey* (1932), he strums the minstrel tune "Old Zip Coon" on his banjo, reprising his first sound performance in Steamboat Willie (1928).

lence circulates through seemingly indestructible bodies, visiting itself on hero and villain alike.

trickster figure of the trademark cartoon character — Mickey, Felix, Ko-Ko, can. The body to which the minstrel referred and which informed the American body; s/he even invoked more than an enslaved African Ameri-South, the plantation, and slavery. Epitomized by minstrelsy's end men. rule. As a minstrel, he is an indexical marker, a gesture toward the Old purportedly felt less pain than her/his white counterpart and was natusary fantasy of the slave as a creature closer in the natural chain of being good-naturedly misdirecting the interlocutor — all derived from the necescentral tropes of minstrelsy-the singing and dancing, the stump speech and regimes of punishment that were the lot of chattel slavery. For the performance of a studied ignorance, attempted to avoid the forced labor through an artful combination of stereotyped laziness, cunning, and the Oswald, and so on-was one that recalled the recalcitrant slave who, Tambo and Bones, the minstrel did more than signify a generic African to the (equally stubborn) mule or the cunning Br'er Rabbit. 6 This figure Here and elsewhere, Mickey is more than just a trickster, a lord of mis-



FIGS. 4.8-4.9 Like Jim Crow, in his dress, his makeup, and his gestural repertoire, Mickey Mouse is not like a minstrel, he is a minstrel. Jim Crow courtesy of the Library of Congress. Trader Mickey (1932).

gang labor, argued that the "negro is accustomed to outdoor occupations and of the beginnings of the American cartoon, that rhetoric was very for joviality, merriment, and song."47 By the time of those chain gangs, as savage 'monkeys,' terror and collective disappearance are an occasion trious labor without the spur of punishment. For those humans branded recognizing the enormity of their dispossession, or of performing indusmic branding as animalistic, infantile, and lazy; as such the forebears of cartoon minstrel: "The physical branding that slaves received upon their scribed it in relation to the chain gangs that were contemporary with the rally inclined to hard physical labor in the open air. As Childs has desame aversion to working in public . . . as is characteristic of the white tant director of the U.S. Office of Public Roads, arguing in favor of chain much operative. For instance, Lichtenstein reports that in 1912 the assisthe plantation 'darky' [were] incapable of feeling the pain of internment, of kidnapping onto the coffle and slave ship [was] coupled with their episte-. . . [and is] experienced in manual labor . . . [and] does not possess the

sure, then, but the very association of those characters, however attenunisms of this coercive placement; it is a pleasure obtained from the secu of Cuff, Sambo, and Zip Coon but above all deriving from the very mechaengenders pleasure not only ensuant to the buffoonery and grotesqueries tion by others: "The bound black body, permanently affixed in its place, provisional subjects, as lacking full autonomy and available for appropriaown humanity might be affirmed if one were (able) to identify as white came sensible as fixed in a natural order, an order through which one's according to Hartman, it was in witnessing minstrelsy's systematic and deriving from the forced subjection of others. At the same time, though, racial hierarchy it embodied. This pleasure could be described as sadistic. ated, with the enslaved body, the system of chattel slavery, and the larger just the capering of Tambo, Bones, or Mickey that afforded audiences plearity of place and order and predicated upon chattel slavery." 49 It was not polite society's very humorous foibles and failings. and its subsequent defiance of that civilization the minstrel delineated to (white) civilization. Through that body's very necessary subjugation Blackface minstrelsy celebrated the black body as outside of and resistant distanced performance of the institution of slavery that the black body be For Hartman, this fantasy marks slave and minstrel bodies alike as

That in blackface minstrelsy this performance was often offered by a white man in blackface only added to its frisson. One could, watching

> in minstrelsy cannot be extricated from the relations of chattel slavery."50 use and enjoyment. The culture of cross-racial identification facilitated face restaged the seizure and possession of the black body for the other's the happy darky. "In this regard," Hartman argues, "the donning of blackment, in order to perform that enslavement as the positive condition of of signification that made reference to his or her own (potential) enslaveblack bodies. The black performer seemed to willingly yield to a system ment in that system of domination was asserted even over ostensibly free cases of black performers blacking up in order to gain access to the stage own right to the masochist as it was to the sadist. In those not infrequent sure combined the performance of subjection with the fantasy that its obsimultaneously white and black. Like a sadomasochistic act, this pleaperson at a distance, visiting that economic and social control on a body (and a livelihood), the pleasure of witnessing subjugation and an engage jects willingly entered into it, that the subjection was as pleasurable in its this performance, participate in the subjugation and exchange of another

tural timescapes that cartoons perpetuated."53 By the time Disney made ticular time, place, and significance in history that are convincing in their construct timescapes, that is, worlds imagined in the likeness of a paronstrates "the propensity of animators and the complicity of audiences to early animated character was created and disciplined by the same animawith the live minstrel created by whites to be subjugated by whites, the cially in Ko-Ko's case) were often punished for asserting themselves. As with their audience or tested the bounds of the screen itself, and (espe-Felix the Cat, Pete the Pup, or Ko-Ko the Clown frequently interacted era that this subjugation made itself most evident. Characters such as play between the character and its animator in cartoons of the early silent and a willfully disobedient character.51 But it was particularly in the interelasticity, the propensity to dance (and, with the coming of sound, to sing) still painted on) and exaggerated eyes and mouth—as well as the bodily strel-the white gloves, the black face (or, in the case of Ko-Ko, white but The continuing cartoon character carried the physical markers of the minconstraint and punishment, if not by hostile figures such as the cartoon's its insistence on highlighting bodily performance are examples of culdetails but patently fictional. Animation's preservation of minstrelsy and tor/audience.52 Donald Crafton has suggested that this convention dem disappeared, but the animate minstrel remained nonetheless subject to Trader Mickey, the trope of the intruding hand of the animator had largely As far as the animated minstrel was concerned, this was no less true.

cannibal king then by the environment itself; animated characters by their nature were the victims of torture—for the sake of amusement.

INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE

Yet these shared conventions only begin to tell the tale of why the black-face minstrel might figure significantly in the emerging cosmos of American animation, and why the violence sublimated in the song-and-dance of the minstrel stage would reemerge with a vengeance in the cartoon world. For the "security of place" about which Hartman speaks refers to the plantation in either its literal or figurative form—as a brutally codified, hierarchical social order. But it also organizes the North and the South into fantastic realms of free and unfree labor. To return to the cartoon, when Trader Mickey sets foot on the riverbank and slaps his feet on the mud of the Mississippi/Congo, he is met by a tribe of ravening cannibals, led by a buffoonish king who can't stop laughing. Mouse and dog are seized, and Mickey is thrown into a pot and prepped for cooking, while the king and his tribesmen sort through the items he has brought to trade with them.

Oddly, they find that much of Mickey's stock consists of trumpets, trombones, tubas, and the like—the instruments for a jazz band. Mystified, the grotesquely caricatured cannibals try to play them and end up only injuring the instruments, themselves, and others. But from this moment on the cartoon performs a continuum of animate being. Although the instruments are inanimate, they still strike back at the cannibals when abused. Similarly, in later scenes the natives will play not only the instruments but each other. In other words, both cannibals and trombones are relatively animate instruments. Plastic beyond the usual bounds of their being, their interaction reveals a mutual instrumentality, a common primitive bond. More tool than human, they share a certain happy deformability, and while each is instrument to the other, all are instruments to those above them.

But this gets ahead of the story. Just when it seems that all is lost, the chef who is preparing Mickey tries to use an alto saxophone as a ladle. Mickey gets hold of it and begins playing, and of course the natives can't help but dance. That dance will bond the trader and cannibals under the sign of rhythm, which the fantastic black body, true to stereotype, cannot possibly resist. The tune Mickey belts out sets off a medley of standards that signify both the Harlem demimonde and the Old South, including "St. James Infirmary Blues" and "Darktown Strutters Ball." Suddenly, even



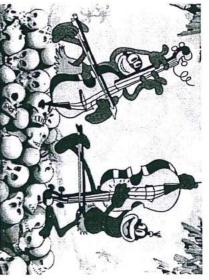




FIGS. 4.10-4.12 In Trader Mickey (1932), the cannibal chef trades a ladle for a saxophone before Mickey grabs it and triggers the natives' rhythm genes. Some break into his stores and wrestle with instruments they do not understand but on which they manage to play jazz music perfectly.

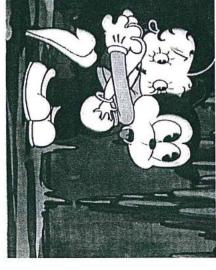
CHAINS OF BEING

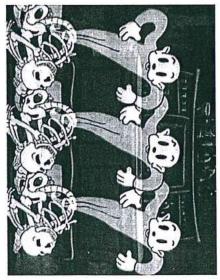
and anklets, some of which have an odd extra ring attached to them, as if ters little; the gesture is toward the association (the linking) of the ostenan escape from bondage as of being ready for chains. The chronology matthey are shackles. It is a fleeting and random image, equally suggestive of small details flit across the screen. Many of the cannibals wear bracelets Trader Mickey takes the case a little further. As the natives dance and play,











to death and decay. Mickey (1932) link jazz the natives in Trader FIG. 4.13 Like the Fleischer jazz cartoons, underworldly figures in

in fear at the underworldly Boop and Bimbo cower FIGS. 4.14-4.15 In Minnie Cab Calloway's singing. "spooks" engendered by the Moocher (1932), Betty

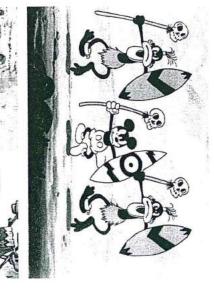




FIG. 4.16 Mickey dances with the natives, who for some reason wear shackles, in *Trader Mickey* (1932).

FIG. 4.17 Both Mickey and the Cannibal King (wearing a girdle for a crown and spats over bare feet) signify through the markers of the minstrel that they are more evolved than the other natives.

sibly black body with the condition of slavery, of being both subject and chattel. As if this offhand gesture weren't enough, chains or no, some of the natives dance and play their instruments upright while others play on all fours as if they were prehuman missing links. Here the much-noted anthropomorphism of the classic cartoon takes on a more subtle gradation: while somehow Mickey, an oversized mouse, is the most civilized creature present, the apparently African natives, who are meant to read as human, gambol apelike, playing their jazz instruments with equal ease with either their hands or feet.

Yet even within the social order of the cannibals there are necessary gradations of humanity. At the high end of the spectrum, both the king and the chef, like Mickey, wear the white gloves of the minstrel. A chain of being presents itself in the dance number, which, like a minstrel show, is performed face-forward, and in many of the shots the characters clearly acknowledge their audience. This performance describes a developmental timeline that begins at the protohuman—the cannibals not yet upright—continues to natives on two legs and then on to those who have donned the minstrel gloves but are still savage, and ends at Mickey, an anthropomorphic minstrel mouse who dances for his life—and toward a civilization he will never fully occupy.

It would be enough to point out that this voracious dance of life, death, and dirty blues produces a sadomasochistic fantasy in which ostensibly black bodies are so steeped in their own physicality, their own animal nature, that they revel in a world in which pain is an unremarkable part of a celebration of a sensual yet inherently incoherent life. It would be enough to point out that this particular cartoon hints at that primal fantasy about which Hartman speaks, one that traces the minstrel body back to the quasi-animal realm of the African native, and that it further implicates that minstrel figure in the slave trade. (For, again, what do the natives have that Mickey would want?) It isn't hard to read the cartoon as another in a long line of cinematic and performative fantasies in which the very nature of blackness masochistically invites its own torment.

But noting one more node in a matrix of fantasies about the African or African American body as a missing link between a white modern humanity and its roots among the apes does not tell the whole tale; nor does it fully account for the anxious violence that attends the cartoon minstrel. In addition to recapitulating a fantastic primate taxonomy, *Trader Mickey* also illustrates the minstrel's relationship to the slave as chattel, object, and tool. What the landscape of the cannibal village reveals (and

this is also true of animation in general) is that no body, no thing, is completely human or completely an autonomous subject. Because they are animated, and because they are located on a taxonomic continuum from the ape to the minstrel, every thing and person in the cartoon, up to and including Mickey, has the potential to be a useful object for anyone else in the cartoon. Of course, Mickey, being more civilized, is more likely to use than to be used, but this becomes assured only after he has deployed jazz to sublimate the brute force of the cannibals into song and dance.

subject-object relations, circa 1932. is also a mouse. Mickey is anthropomorphic; the cannibals are zoomorstrate their humanity. Mickey, too, seems to behave like a human, but he avowal: they, too, are alive, yet they seem unable to completely demonanimated cannibals that threaten Mickey serve to underscore that disbehind him and of the violent appropriation of the labor that went into ent condition as a living being is a disavowal of the hand of the maker object.57 He is also a fetish in the psychoanalytic sense, in that his apparcreation that occludes those relations through its production as a social crystallization of the social and material relations that obtain around his is a fetish in the sense that he is a commodity, a "social hieroglyphic," a phic; together they offer a visual treatise on the racial underpinnings of the very least an object masquerading as a subject.58 In this instance, the his making. He is at one and the same time a subject and an object, or at fetish for a set of relations that are present but not fully nameable. He As with its live counterpart, then, the animated minstrel stands as a

This is the fetishistic magic of animation: any object in an animated world has the potential to come to life, and any living thing or even one of its body parts may be reduced to an object. Subjectivity is ephemeral and uncertain, granted by external circumstances and revocable. Thus, while *Trader Mickey* allows for the neat turn of providing a primer on the fantastic relationship between the savage and the minstrel, a compressed history of minstrelsy's anthropological conceit, Mickey would still be a minstrel, his subject status still contingent, regardless of whether he were threatened by cannibals. He was a minstrel before and after this particular cartoon. What this scenario permits is a study in contrasts: the cannibals are classic racist caricatures, but they are not minstrels. They do not obtain the status of pretenders to civilization because they have not yet bought into (or, more accurately, been sold into) relations of exchange. Mickey, on the other hand, as a trader in goods (and perhaps people), has. As a minstrel, Mickey embodies the animator's alienated labor: like the black-

face minstrel who enacts the imperfect resistance of the recalcitrant slave, he may take pleasure in his rebellion, but he will never fully realize its fruits. As a commodity that lives and works, Mickey enacts the fantastic relationship between property and labor, and in this, of never being fully the owner of his own self or his labor power. Minstrelsy is instrumentalism illustrated: the end men Tambo and Bones are both characters put on by their performers and the personification of the instruments they play, the tambourine and the bones: they are essentially instruments playing instruments. Daying

a quartet of monkeys singing in the style of the Mills Brothers (who were in front of the camera, singing the song's bass line. The scene then cuts to a derby like that of Fats Waller, the monkey most immediately in the foreexample of American animation's use of more overt racist caricatures humans. And they're missing links who swing, hard. links, falling somewhere in the primate world between chimpanzees and the huts belong to the monkeys, who logically, then, must be missing be as accurate to say that the presence is never fully realized as human human presence. That human presence is never fully realized. Or it might that the background to this jungle scene is a circle of huts, hinting at a dered famous jazz musicians as singing simians. Yet a careful look reveals From the get-go the cartoon has invoked jazz as "jungle music" and ren famous for performing vocally all the instrumental parts of a jazz quartet) by scatting "hidey hidey hi, hidey hidey hey" as another monkey swings phrase. After his appearance, the monkeys invoke Calloway more directly ground swings close to the (imaginary) camera and intones a single scat ber reminiscent of Cab Calloway's "Minnie the Moocher" (1930). Sporting cabal of chimpanzee-like monkeys dancing in a circle to a big-band numground.61 Playing off of a popular "desert isle" theme, the film opens on a to express the shifting boundary between object and subject, figure and formations. Columbia Pictures' Swing Monkey Swing (1937) offers up an already becoming vestigial, sharing the screen with other swing-era racial By 1932, four short years after Mickey's creation, his minstrelsy was

In fact, they swing so hard that soon the whole island rises up out of the waves and dances to the beat, as even the ocean slaps at the shore in time to the music. Jazz infuses and informs the landscape itself: it blurs the line between human and animal, between animate and inanimate. When the chimps play their clarinets and trumpets, the horns wail so hard that their bells become mouths—or the chimps' mouths travel through the horns, joining instrumental bodies to embodied instruments. Likewise,

swing-era jazz cartoons made explicit the implicit racial formations that different register from the minstrel antics of Mickey, Bosko, and Bugs: cartoon's color registration itself. This is an expression of race in a very mary colors-red, yellow, blue-as if the music were disrupting even the of different chimps rapidly repeating the song's chorus ("Got the St. Louis vocals, performing a parody of juke-joint shouters like Ethel Waters or that dance, a male monkey sings a trumpet part while a female takes the of the fire and the shadows of dancing bodies dominate the scene. After As the cartoon builds to a crescendo the cutting accelerates, and the red monkeys are dressed as gauchos but dance to the tune "St. Louis Blues." starts a fire for everyone to dance around. Suddenly, the African jungle castanets. Later, a monkey blows such hot licks on his clarinet that he in a brief Afro-Caribbean segment, the monkeys' teeth take the place of helped to occlude those minstrel origins with their brash, broad racist had helped shape trademark continuing characters, and in the process Blues / just as blue as blue can be"), the entire image shifts through pri-Bessie Smith. In the short's final production number, which consists only mixes with the Pampas, and with the ghettoes of the United States: some

of her or his labor, the tacit understanding being that the employer would stood to enter into negotiation with an employer to determine the value required, of course, a notion of surplus labor: the free laborer was underas deriving from her or his inability to realize the total value of her or his from the commodity itself when it is sold; the worker understands profit commodity-relation operates. The employer imagines profit as deriving up in order to complete the contract. (This, as Marx points out, is how the realize a profit from whatever excess value the laborer was forced to give to divorce one's own body from its products in the act of exchange. This the free laborer maintained a real fiction of self-possession, of being able extremely creative work under often onerous working conditions. Animaanimation industry did so freely, and in doing so they agreed to perform went to work for cartoon studios in the formative years of the American ing of a portion of one's self in order to maintain the rest. Artists who friendly transaction masquerading as a friendly one, a hiving off and selllabor when that is sold.)62 It was a necessarily unequal operation, an una day. Recall Bray's boast in 1917 that in his studio twenty workers turned with journeyman animators churning out up to thousands of drawings in tion production at that time was not unlike other piecework industries In the world into which this cartoon and Trader Mickey were projected

out sixteen thousand drawings in one week; in a six-day week that would amount to almost three thousand drawings a day. In that regard, Van Beuren's Making 'Em Move (1931) was not far off.

Even beyond the particulars of work in the animation industry itself, the cartoon minstrel as resistant trickster speaks to and of a culture moving from nineteenth-century craft modes of production to twentieth-century rationalized mass production. Read in this light, Mickey and his ilk would be examples of what Fredric Jameson has called "a kind of homeopathic strategy whereby the scandalous and intolerable external irritant is drawn into the aesthetic process itself and thereby systematically worked over, 'acted out,' and symbolically neutralized." Jameson was reading the impulse toward repetition and the use of mass cultural icons in modernist avant-garde production; extending that model to mass-cultural workers of the same period suggests only that the shock of the modern was felt by more than simply those of relatively more delicate and refined sensibilities.⁶⁴

ception, the slave in its abjection serves to prefigure the constellation of and ontological foundation to argue for her or his very personhood. How of torture, imprisonment, and forced labor, the slave also suffers from an or imagined) - of its own labor power. Wracked with the physical pains to labor power. This is to say that value is extracted from the ground of to free labor, the site or force of occasion of value is transferred from labor labor in emergent industrial capitalism: "In the transition from slave labor the slave, in effect stealing one's self from one's master. A necessary exbe to attempt to appropriate the property of one's self for one's self—for can a possession argue for its own independent existence? To do so would internal division: as property, the person who is enslaved lacks the legal being the owner of its self or—in the case of the commodified body (real modity cries out in the pain of being both property and labor, of never object.65 Specifically, Moten asks us to consider the slave as a fantastic obtions of the relationship of the slave (real or imagined) as subject and as Moten has noted that Hartman stops short of considering all the implicativity and subjugation, and of the violence lurking in sentimentality, Fred In his critique of Hartman's analysis of the relationship between subjecoften associated with childish joy and innocence, has long been a puzzle. others, and that the excessive violence visited by and on them, in a form intrinsic worth . . . and becomes the potential to produce value."66 The slave ject—the commodity that speaks. More than speaking, though, this com-There is no doubt that Mickey and his ilk existed for the pleasure of

body may, once harnessed, produce labor for the master, but even prior to that labor that body itself has discrete value. Thus, the slave is both the site and producer of value but never the possessor of either. The free laborer, on the other hand, maintains the real fiction of self-possession, of being able to divorce one's own body from its products: "This transference and transformation is also a dematerialization—again, a transition from the body, more fully the person, of the laborer to a potential that operates in excess of the body, in the body's eclipse, in the disappearance of a certain responsibility for the body." A paradox seems at play here. The slave (or minstrel or cartoon minstrel), by virtue of her status as object and property, is more fully embodied as a thing, useful for labor. The free worker, by contrast, is divided between her condition as the holder of labor power and her ability to dispense with that labor power as she sees fit. In this, the free laborer is abstracted, divided, pitted against herself.

slave in its vocal and physical abjection seems to give a perverse voice to commodity."69 Which part of the worker is alienated from which? Which worker's body is rematerialized as the speaking, shrieking, sounding dispossessed modality of subjectivity that Marx calls alienation. . . . Now is figure, and which ground? An exception necessary for the rule, the the commodity is rematerialized in the body of the worker just as the lize, later, in the impossible figure that is essential to that possessive and parted from her/himself.70 to the bodily excess of an oversized mouth and eyes, and even of jumping speech to the sartorial excess of wide cuffs and collars and white gloves, minstrel, expressed in everything from the verbal excess of the stump in what Corin Willis describes as "overdetermined signification"—for the in the labor market. The performance of this abject black body, engaged labor wrested from her/him during a seemingly voluntary participation the mute cries of the supposedly free worker's body as s/he has her/his Jim Crow—articulates and delineates the mute cry of the alienated worker According to Moten, this implicitly violent transaction will "crystal

The animated minstrel, who progressed from the silent and self-manipulating Felix to the logorrheic hijinks of Bugs or Daffy, became over time the yet more fantastic embodiment of that cry, the displacement of the violence of the separation of one's labor from one's self (if not one's self from one's self). A figure representing the descendant of the recalcitrant slave, this character was created as willful and resistant by the animator, made to be punished for resisting its own subjection, its own



FIG. 4.18 Sound made tangible: in the Disney short Alice the Whaler (1927), when the music of a jig made visible floats by, a parrot plucks a note from the air and eats it.

abjection. Hence one aspect of the primal, repressed, incredible violence of cartoons.

self-being something simultaneously inherent in the subject's coming to being and withheld from the slave-as-property. Integrated into a symmation in and through language-the ability to speak of and for one's slave, and to freely give up one's labor, one must speak, must agree, must after all—at least that part of one's self that must earn—is to be kin to the as an act of refusal to acquiesce to regimes of commodification that cannot you. Moten reads this necessary inarticulation as underpinning black yourself names you as an object and not a subject, then it has betrayed objection to that regime. If the very language that you would use to defend one's value as an object, the objecting slave will declare her/himself as an bolic order that will override one's status as a speaking subject in favor of the object body of the slave, is necessarily inarticulate: the subject's forbody, but it is decidedly not gone. slave and minstrel is attenuated (alienated?) in the emancipated laboring concede. The contradiction between subject and object embodied in both transcend race yet are not wholly defined by it either. To be a wage slave, radical performance in the twentieth century—the blues, jazz, poetry— For Moten, this cry of objection, the sound of value rematerializing in

This problem of the speaking commodity makes animation's transition to sound worth parsing carefully one more time. The continuing char-

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acters of the silent era, such as Felix, Ko-Ko, or even Disney's live Alice and her drawn companion Julius, lacking the power of speech, visually marked and remarked on their made environment, of which they were an uneasy part, using it against itself, sometimes even attempting to escape its bounds, into which they had been forcibly placed. Truly formed as an objection, apparently autonomous yet without free will, these continuing characters were forced to appear to resist the conditions of their making, then to submit to their masters for punishment for that very act of manufactured refusal.

THE ALIENATED LABOR OF ANIMATION

The animated minstrel, then, embodied a protest at the conditions of its own making and begged punishment for that very protest. This performance of condensation and displacement was the mechanism by which the animated cartoon was so easily integrated into blackface minstrelsy. Only fifteen years passed between the industrialization of animation in the United States and its transition to sound. In that time, a robust but relatively insular cartoon business arose, based on a journeyman-apprentice system that trained up artists to be industrial workers and within which workers often shifted from one company to another in search of better wages, working conditions, advancement, and recognition. This system engaged entry-level workers in repetitive task work such as washing cels, erasing pencil lines, and (eventually) "in-betweening"—drawing the molead animators, who were charged with character and story development, had that pleasure tempered by repetitive task work and long hours.

The cartoon minstrel was an embodiment of this rapid rationalization, an avatar of alienation. In this milieu conventions not only cohered quickly, they also spread from company to company through migrating workers. Popular characters were imitated, with only enough marginal differentiation to avoid litigation. Likewise, as in vaudeville and the silent live comedies of the period, gags that worked were lifted and repeated, creating a stable repertoire of repeating themes across product lines. In this creative labor environment animated minstrels—Felix, Ko-Ko, Oswald, Bimbo, Mickey, and others—representing the rebellious products of creative talent channeled into mass production, propagated incredibly rapidly. These animate minstrels, certainly not the sum total of the panoply of animated

characters of the time but equally certainly the most popular and enduring, embodied a commodified objection.

of their own making and regulation. also a lack of being voiced; as cartoon characters gained that voice (the sors. There was, to put it in Moten's terms, in silence a lack of voice yet own existence as a made object—if somewhat less than his silent precurit to interfere with the character's autonomy and with the continuity of an an articulate speaking voice. Located in a world more distinctly separate voice of another), they ceased to autonomously challenge the conditions mental conditions of his making, more opportunity to acknowledge his Yet compared to the more articulate Mickey soon to emerge, let alone the even of Trader Mickey could barely make more than an inarticulate squeak increasingly cinematic animated space. The Mickey of Steamboat Willie or outside the frame, and gone was the (hand of) the animator entering into contents and denizens. Gone were the sing-alongs that signaled a world opposition to the conditions of its existence from the cartoon's frame to its ticulate, its world also became more bounded as it became imbued with cartoon—Mickey, Bugs, Daffy, and others—became increasingly more arattention of the animator. Although the trickster of the swing-era sound to assert their will, to escape the bounds of the frame, or to fend off the ters regularly remade themselves or their drawn environment in order loquacious Bugs or Daffy, he had more freedom to challenge the fundafrom that of the animator or the audience, the character shifted its violent themes in cartoons was that of confinement and escape: cartoon characwhich that will was thwarted. During the silent era, one of the signature bounded by a frame within which it attempted to exert its will and within simultaneously made and yet seemingly autonomous, existing in a world Another inflection of the cry of objection, the cartoon minstrel was

To see in something as seemingly trivial and ephemeral as a cartoon short the expression of labor's protest against its own impressment may seem absurd. Likewise, to associate the incredible and real history of violence against the bodies of slaves—confinement, torture, and rape—with sadomasochistic performance (and also with cartoon characters) may seem a grotesque trivialization of a horrible inhumanity. It is. And it has been so in American popular culture for generations. Long before Winsor McCay capered with his animated creations, blackface minstrelsy was very concerned with issues of labor, freedom, and desire; it still is.73 Nor is the association of sadomasochism with working through issues of labor



FIG. 4.19 In On Strike (1920), the cartoon characters Mutt and Jeff negotiate with their creator, Bud Fisher, over their hours and percentages on net profits from each film.

untary nature of his desires, he also necessarily performs a willing suband power a gesture of petty homology for the sake of mere titillation.74 and masochist can find no ground on which to build their mutual fantasy uses his will to tame his will, to willingly become the slave. An actual chat the primal violence that charges sadomasochistic fantasy: the masochist mative gesture of yielding to his master's will-and serves as a root act of as being rooted in a core animal self is inflected in the masochist's perforfree. The fantasy of the slave's (un)willing participation in chattel slavery jection.75 At the risk of stating the obvious, unlike Severin, the slave is not For all that Leopold Sacher-Masoch's Severin does to protest the involnial of the horror of slavery depends on that very horror. will. Likewise, for the minstrel, animate or otherwise: her/his comic de which is entirely taken up with exploring the limits of subjection and free in Furs makes clear, without the figure and fantasy of the slave, the sadist animal urges outpace his will and betray him to his captors. Yet as Venue tel slave, on the other hand, is (imagined to be) a slave because his (or her)

Why would this be so in something as seemingly trivial as early American animation? For the animator of the early twentieth century, minstrelsy—a fading popular performance form—offered a ready-made fantasy of the rebellion of forced labor. In an art that went from an artisanal mode to a full-blown industry in the blink of an eye, the minstrel stood in for the animator as artist-for-hire, a creator become fabricator on spec.

Animators at the dawn of cartooning's industrial age were expected to be skilled artists and draftsmen and able to readily reproduce characters created by others. Continuing characters such as Ko-Ko or Felix became avatars of that impressment, simultaneously thwarted and assaulted and rebelliously and deviously fighting back against the conditions of their existence. More masochists than slaves—that is, performing a pantomime of "freedom of contract" in which both employer and employee pretend to meet as equals though they are not—early animators were willing subjects in an emerging industrial system, subjugating that will and their talents in order to participate, and to get paid. In the process, they made a commodity of their labor power—and displaced and embodied that act in the characters they made then compulsively punished.

The conventional marking of the continuing character as a blackface minstrel points to a complex interaction between animation studios and their audiences. Both animators and critics of animation have noted the form's indebtedness to minstrelsy, and the persistent popularity of minstrel characters in a commercial art form constrained by tight profit margins and highly sensitive to taste and preference indicates that the choice resonated with moviegoers. The animated minstrel, then, served as a touchstone in the changing racial formations of the early twentieth century. That these uses of the minstrel were not widely named as racist at the time, and that the direct associative links between the minstrel and the continuing cartoon character have been occluded over time, are both indications that in any cultural regime, dominant or otherwise, racial formations are not stable or consistent, and it is as much in tracing their alterations as in outlining their forms that the operations and applications of race become clearer.

With the coming of sound and films such as *Trader Mickey*, racist caricatures such as the cannibal king—themselves stand-ins for the profound matrix of desire and fear engendered in polite white society by the efflorescence of African American culture in the early twentieth century—joined the minstrel trickster on the screen. In the process the more explicit links between the continuing cartoon character and the stage minstrel were subsumed in that emergent swing-era racial formation—not replaced but complicated and obscured. While the animator ostensibly freely sold his marketable skills and labor power to cartoon producers, his creations violently enacted a fantasy of enslaved labor unchained, rebellious and duly punished for a rebellion instigated by their creator. Whether for the creator or the created, a fantasy of consent was predicate

to the violence that was sure to follow, and it guaranteed never to fully redeem a contract made in bad faith. Mickey Mouse may have been ubiquitous, but he was in the end "Mickey Mouse"—a cheap object repeated endlessly, made valuable through his own repetition, rising above his conditions only through the subjection of others.

IMITATION IS NOT THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY

Since his creation in 1928, Walt Disney Productions has suggested in its public relations that Mickey, far more than just a mouse, was actually Walt Disney's child. The studio even went so far as to build a tiny garage for his imaginary car on its Burbank campus. However, Mickey was not alone in his ambiguous ontological status: since James Stuart Blackton's back-and-forth with his lightning-sketches in the first decade of the 1900s, animators have played with the notion that cartoon characters, though they are made, are (semi) autonomous beings. What marks animation as a substantial expressive form, a place of contentious pleasure, is that at its best it maintains this tension between the ideal and the real. More so than live cinema, animation is produced and regulated as an other to what is real. Its alterity, its uncanniness, is contained in its very name: to animate is to enliven that which is not alive. Animation produces an other that lives but doesn't, an object that perpetually threatens to become a subject.

of us who live in the real world. They are homunculi, distillations of beshort bits, so did cartoonists. Where longer narrative forms permitted the The Irish were lovable but irascible drunks. Mexicans were lazy. And so cheap. The Chinese were hardworking and either excitable or inscrutable thence the easy designation of its proper social status. Scotsmen were for the rapid recognition of a social hieroglyphic through character type. mation has a tradition of drawing on stereotypes for its characters: in placed desires and fears. For the sake of expediency and efficiency, anihaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices; they are condensations of diswere brutally efficient. period of time. Stereotypes—the perversely ideal inflections of the real to transmit a dense packet of social and cultural information in a short emergence of characters over time, the vaudevillian gag used stereotyping on. Just as vaudeville performers found utility in stereotypes for their the seven-minute cartoon the stereotype was efficient because it allowed Animated characters have never been cut from the same cloth as those

In this sense, the stereotype is itself a form of commodity fetish, a



FIG. 4.20 Predating and setting the stage for the practices of ethnic stereotyping in early animation, an ad for Larkin soap from 1881 depicts Irish immigrants as finely dressed apes in the style of Zip Coon.

crystallization of social and material relations, a way to effectively and efficiently sell a gag. At the same time, like a Freudian fetish, it is built around a disavowal: it is the aggressive refusal to acknowledge an object of fear and desire for what it is, and an act of replacing it with a substitute container for the affect of that desire and its repression. The stereotype, even as it draws on the necessary social and corporeal substance of persons, is a disavowal of their basic humanity in favor of grossly exaggerated features that represent characteristics both feared and desired by an imagined dominant audience. And nowhere is this operation clearer than in the figure of the "darky" or minstrel, based as it is on the bodies of subjected persons denied their basic humanity. In this figure, and in stereotypes more generally, the real is necessary as ground and is necessarily repressed in the service of a functional and efficient ideal: the fetish

is a shorthand for an experience simultaneously acknowledged and denied. In animation this has been all the more true because the artist puts pen to paper (or now stylus to pad) and feelingly produces the stereotype as totem, a sign for relations effaced then immediately made present in its tormented body. The conjuring trick that fueled this difference was, first and foremost, located in the hand that made the animated character that resisted it, a hand that asserted its own dubious reality in relation to what it had made, and that audiences accepted as their own avatar in this struggle.

THE HAND

Aggressivity is the correlative of a mode of identification that we call narcissistic, and which determines the formal structure of man's ego and of the register of entities characteristic of his world.

– Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" (1948)

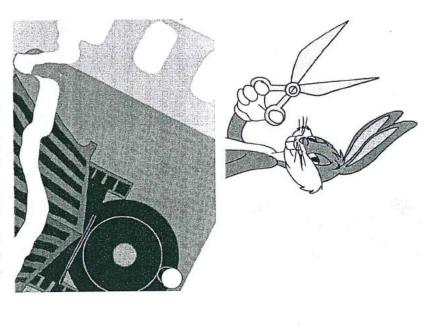
stereotype, this was a gesture of delineation, of creating clarity and with of narcissistic projection. If it is merely sympathetic, this gesture is an to know the essence of another-speaks of the struggle between symso-secret gesture toward one's own fragile integrity (isn't the same true it control. Just as the disavowal at the heart of the Freudian fetish is a nothis or her divided self, performing an aggressive act of self-preservation nymic interlocutor, feelingly producing a totemic body that stands in for an overt stereotype or producing the animated minstrel, serves as a metovoluntary, known as laughter. The hand of the animator, whether tracing that bizarre social gesture, which itself hovers between voluntary and intensity of affect through disavowal, the incredible energy that informs lates the experiences of the Other into one's own.79 Both bespeak an inan intimate (mis)understanding of similarity and difference that assimiequally narcissistic nod toward affinity through the acknowledgment of the Other, the threat of an independent being lurking outside the range close relation with its object, to fend off the substantial affective reality of pathy and empathy. If it is hostile, this gesture is an attempt to deny any for Marx?), so the mimetic gesture of the comic stereotype—the claim life to an image of the Other, and then attempted to control it. Like the In early animation, the animator's hand (or a photograph of it) imparted that knows itself as doomed yet cannot help but continue, compulsively to repeat the act

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Little Nemo (1911) seems to demand the attention of the viewer.

ter both as living and as made film's status as a made object, of the incorporeal qualities of the bodies on at the loose threads of suspended disbelief. It reminds the viewer of the tears at the seams of coherence and spatial contiguity, playfully pulling that that world is a fantasy and that it is handmade. The intruding hand and whole animate world, the hand intrudes into that world to remind us doxical tradition of transgression. Having created the illusion of a separate little more than a photographed cutout of a hand, pointed toward a paratured toward tradition, skill, and craft, the other, which became in practice hand as the locus of skill and transformation.80 Yet if this one hand gesin which the live performance of animation centered on the animator's defi directions: one pointed to the lightning-sketch, a performative tradition hand as much as its animated products. The repeating trope of the intrudtive imperative "Watch Me Move." Yet the short film features McCay's ist of the N.Y. Herald and His Moving Comics (1911), begins with the plaintion, Winsor McCay's first animation, Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonhand that imparts motion. Like a child clamoring for its mother's attenmation as a trade and a set of practices celebrates the moving hand, the in scopic passivity (or, if you like, a fantasy of aggressive activity), then aniabstracted eye and its refinement in realism our conventional entraining of motion and calls it life. If live-action cinema is the celebration of the pendage as important to animation as the eye that witnesses the illusion to early animation: the hand that draws the lines that appear alive is an apthe screen, of being a viewer. And it gestures to (at) the animated characing animator's hand in early animation was a gesture in two contradictory It is for this reason that the trope of the drawing hand is so important



FIGS. 4.22-4.23 Bugs Bunny intentionally destroys the film he occupies in Rabbit Punch (1948).

a difference. The animator and historian John Canemaker summed this livered the promise of realism in live cinema. practices that have worked to keep the two apart—is part of what has deand this proximity—and the many years of theoretical and production Animation occupies an ontological realm adjacent to that of live cinema. it, that asserts its own dubious reality only in relation to what it has made in animation is in the hand that makes the animated character that resists who stands in for the hand that animates the mouse.82 The conjuring trick nauseous "cast member" of indeterminate age, race, gender, and sexuality Mouse is at best a giant plush costume that houses a sweating, slightly more or less as we do. On the other hand, in the world we inhabit, Mickey ably share with them. We believe that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie exist are to ostensibly living persons in an ontological realm that we presumto the fantasmatic bodies that appear before us, indexically linked as they leash. With live-action cinema, though, we grant agency and autonomy free, tied always to the hands of their makers but made to strain at the and ducks, humanoids, or giant talking lemon candies, are alive yet unthings we watch on the screen, be they abstract lines and dots, rabbits tant thing, and how the hand and mind are seen in the product."81 The form of animation: I think the interpretation of the artist is the imporup recently when he suggested, "I'm not that fond of literalism in any we watch was made "by hand," and in that awareness we acknowledge ferent from that offered in live-action cinema. We are reminded that what lationship between producer, text, and viewer that is fundamentally dif animator's insistence on a place in the frame as its maker) creates a recharacter's insistence on its ontological status as a made object (or the This convention is fundamental to animation's alterity: the animated

WHO DAT SAY WHO DAT?

This hand, fading with the development of animation from a presence, to an indexical marker, to an implied presence, gestured not merely toward the abstracted process of making a cartoon; it also invoked in each iteration a landscape charged with the fantastic presence of labor and its appropriation. Whether in its performance of animated blackface minstrelsy or in producing racist caricatures, the hand feelingly constructed a geography that became coextensive with the world in which it was made and through which it circulated. American commercial animation contributed to the broader circulation of racial formations in both the nostal-

whose stage show was also featured on radio and made into films such as gic trope of the blackface minstrel and its more virulent cousin the racist logue directly from Moran and Mack: not only shun work in typical minstrel fashion but also borrow their dia cartoon called The Early Bird and the Worm, which features two crows who mark routines eventually found its way into a 1936 мсм Нарру Harmony Why Bring That Up? (1929) and Anybody's War (1930). One of their tradethe movement of the blackface duo Moran and Mack ("Two Black Crows"). caricature. An example of this circuit—discussed briefly in chapter 3—is

MORAN: I would work, if I could find any pleasure in it. MACK: You wouldn't be broke if you'd go to work.

MACK: I don't know anything about pleasure, but always remember

it's the early bird that catches the worm

MORAN: Uh, the early bird catches what worm? MACK: Why, any worm!

MORAN: Well, what of it, what about it?

MACK: He catches it, that's all

MORAN: Well, what's the worm's idea in being there?

[Continued argument.]

MORAN: Who wants a worm, anyhow?83

to its eventual expression in a cartoon, the more explicit lines of racist cariminstrel remained for those who knew the referent in the original routhrough their depiction as (Jim) crows—but the vestigial markers of the cature were absent—the blackness of the characters referred to obliquely In the circuits that traced from this routine from the stage to the radio and

sequent racist caricatures? Associated with the native wit of the young it, especially around the rebellion of unfree labor.84 With the coming of tive disregard for the bonds of either social convention or physical reality, Mickey, or Bugs partook of the minstrel's fantastic blackness and redempthe Cat's origins (see chapter 1), trademark characters such as Felix "pickaninny" to which Otto Messmer referred in his description of Felix both radio and sound film-and with them broader and more explicit fear of blackness with a desire for the freedoms imagined to derive from While the blackface minstrel was a form of racist caricature, it alloyed a the more explicitly negative qualities associated with fantastic blackness expressions of an autonomous black culture, especially in jazz music— What was the difference, then, between the cartoon minstrel and sub-





of the minstrel show and vaudeville stage are subsumed into newer the screen (and between the live and the animated) as the vestiges forms of mass entertainment. minstrels Moran and Mack circulate between the stage, radio, and FIGS. 4.24-4.25 Intermediality in the early sound era: the blackface



FIG. 4.26 In Swing Wedding (1937), jazz whips the frog musicians into such a frenzy that they destroy their instruments; one injects himself with music from a trumpet valve.

marked racist stereotypes in animation, and increasingly detached from depictions of blackness. While continuing characters referred back to the Ko-Ko or Bugs, differed in their direct, hostile, and far less ambiguous tures that, while they shared a history with vestigial minstrels such as dance, for instance, were combined in these cartoons to produce caricature of fear and desire that charged popular reception of swing music and aggerated physiognomy, a simple matter in animation, and the admix-Bros., 1943), who existed in a purely segregated world. Grotesquely exfound their expression in figures such as the jazz maniacs of Scrub Me figures of rebellion and resistance. These more vituperative stereotypes (fear, violence, lust, stupidity, etc.) were increasingly assigned to clearly (1937), Lehman notes that "Harman-Ising turned the hip, urban Cotton stereotypes. Reading the MGM Happy Harmony cartoon Swing Wedding blackness—these caricatures simply and directly referred to raw racist minstrel—ostensibly a white or black man playing a nostalgic ideal of Mama with a Boogie Beat (Universal, 1937) or Tin Pan Alley Cats (Warner tured them as frogs; former studio animator Mel Shaw recalled that be-Club musicians into unsophisticated rural blacks. The studio also carica-

cause of their large mouths, frogs were considered suitable animals to depict as African Americans." There were exceptions to the rule, however, as when Cab Calloway played opposite Betty Boop, an ostensibly white character. Even as his voice and dance moves remained unmistakable, he could be made "white" (as in Old Man of the Mountain [1933]) or rotoscoped onto an ambiguous minstrel character such as Ko-Ko (Snow-White [1933]) or a ghostly dancing walrus (Minnie the Moocher [1932]). More respectful only by comparison, these shorts made more explicit the chain of signification between the minstrel and the inchoate and anxious desire for black culture that it represented.

nivalesque celebration of the underdog, and in doing so could offer an all-too-familiar realities of class and ethnic inequality.87 Burlesque and a common experience of resistance. This was the vaudeville turn, the ville stage and on-screen converted nativist hostility into a shared joke More simply put, stereotypical representations of ethnicity on the vaude and difference, and the pleasure of that common experience was to come working-class movements offered early vaudeville and film audiences a with the slights related to assimilation and the struggles around nascent audiences. A common turnult of reappropriated ressentiment associated minstrel and racist caricature is through their ideal relationship to their ethnic others from tinged into white.88 nonblack performers) that pointed to the possibility of transformation of apart from those operations and, according to Rogin, a performance (by turn, blackness served as a fundamental ground for difference, a place bination of inherent jubilation and native cunning. In that carnivalesque performance somewhat for an imagined white, middle-class audience. In imagined reply to those structures; later, "big" vaudeville sanitized that early vaudeville had the potential to invert operations of power in a carproduction of unexpected differentiation, the defamiliarization of the from the conversion of the expected sting of oppression into humor.86 communal performative space in which to experience/express similarity fantasy of the recalcitrant slave who resisted oppression through a comblackface, a minstrel such as Tambo or Bones referred to the plantation Another way to understand the relationship between the vestigial

Yet, again, the very power of the minstrel as trickster and as protest against power depended on the very inescapability of the real oppression that informed it. Because at the end of the day, when the house lights came up, as the minstrels wiped the cork from their faces or the screen flashed "The End," audiences likely left through different doors marked

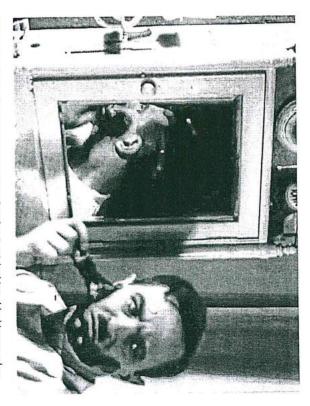


FIG. 4.27 In Ko-Ko the Barber (1925), Max Fleischer is tricked into blacking up when Ko-Ko slips ink into his shaving cream.

exits, the crowd dispersed into the same discursive matrix, within which difference, not of commonality. Yet even leaving through those different escaping the confines of the animated space, precisely because the real metamorphosis and immutability remained inextricably intertwined Then a different sort of recognition set in, one of enforced and immutable charge of blackness, the racial alterity that came from alloying the subject one's circumstances, only because he was invested with the immutable strel embodied the guarantee of the melting pot, the promise of changing tutional logics of race. Like his brother on the stage, the cartoon minpeople on which the minstrel was based could not escape larger insti-The animated minstrel expressed the power of transformation, and of "Black" and "White," if they even shared the same theater to begin with standing in for him, the animate minstrel enacted a rebellion against its with the object, the commodity with itself. Created by the animator and commodity nature, in its distillation of the social and material relations delimited as other and elsewhere, blackness was powerful only in that commodity nature that was designed to fail. Circumscribed and legally that regulated the intercourse between subjects and objects.

The Fleischers, for instance, built this dynamic into the many gags in

choice of entering a virtually compulsory labor market commodity status, a status imposed on him or her by the seemingly free strel reads as a shorthand marker for the worker resisting his or her own text of this compulsive convention, the stereotypical blackness of the min commodity status, the always failing fantasy of its autonomy. In the con and compulsive underlining (or delineation) and undermining of its own mated world of which it was a part marked the commodity's conventional order in Duck Amuck (1953). The cartoon character's disruption of the aniberry blown in the face of Rudy Ising, and Daffy Duck's desperate plea for audience, to Felix's deconstruction of the cartoon frame, Bosko's raspstruggles with Gertie, through Col. Heeza Liar's frequent winks at his it was a recurring trope in American animation—from Winsor McCay's maker, with the added twist that the maker also created that resistance. While the Fleischers revisited this trope more often than most studios The animate character was a made object actively resisting the hand of its or mix it into his shaving cream, causing him to inadvertently black up.89 made to foil Max—as when Ko-Ko would splash ink onto Max's white shirt which their trademark character Ko-Ko used the ink from which he was

VIADUCT? WHY NOT A CHICKEN?

Is such a historical and instrumental explanation of the genealogy of the racist practices in animation that led from the minstrel to the more racist caricatures of the sound era exculpatory? No, and that's not the point. The point might be the specific historical relationship between racist stereotypes and the humor that some people found or find in them. According to Dave Fleischer, Cab Calloway fell to his knees and rolled on the ground in hysterics when he saw the Fleischers' rotoscoped rendition of him sing-ing "Minnie the Moocher" as a ghostly walrus. But Calloway's purported willingness to laugh at himself being reproduced as a "spook" is not an absolution, any more than the widespread popular African American acceptance of *Amos 'n' Andy* in the late 1920s and 1930s is an indication of the accuracy or goodwill of the program's depiction of African American life. 91

Nor does blacking up indicate, in and of itself, a performer's individual affinity with or hostility to African Americans. For example, it was possible for Bert Williams to black up, to complain of racist discrimination at the hands of a white dressing-room attendant, and yet to state, categorically, "The white men who have interpreted our race in this manner [of

commonplace confusion between personal and institutional racism. this—with their focus on the words or acts of individuals—draws on a sive racial matrix in which those intentions and acts became legible. Their can culture with which he was sometimes uneasy.94 The intentions of the cal, cultural, and political distance from a contemporary African Americharacters-racist stereotypes through which he could create geographiwas a West Indian immigrant who blacked up to create African American his friend Bert Williams, who, as Louis Chude-Sokei has pointed out means for expressing his considerable talents. The same may be said for he created or even regulated minstrelsy but because he found in it one for himself as a blackface minstrel (among other talents), not because Eddie Cantor, for example, was a brilliant comedian who made a name cumstances, intents, and practices: within the moment of a stereotypical Hebrew, or Irish acts used offensive stereotypes to take advantage of their its affective charge not in spite of that racism but because of it. As Dutch, acts were racist, and they were funny to many. That humor gained some of individuals in each of these instances are not as important as the discurperformance the weight of institutional racism could be manifested, felt purposes and effects of deploying stereotypes depended very much on ciryet seemingly endless debate around the uses of the word "nigger," the transgressive qualities, so did minstrelsy. As with the absolutely necessary stages and screens were required to come and go through separate enrelation to a world in which African American audiences in front of those age didn't happen only onstage or on-screen; it happened within and in and dealt with in terms momentarily concrete and immediate. The damtrances, or to patronize black-only theaters, and watch seated separately The important and meaningful discursive work in instances such as

with "their own kind." The racial matrix, and the affective charge behind the associated humor, happened in the gap between the real and the ideal

sisted that early animators' adoption of minstrelsy became sedimented in acters derive from blackface minstrelsy.96 Yet, a breath later, they have incollectors and historians have readily agreed that the white gloves, broad racial caricatures in early cartoons.95 In conversation, some animation Spiegelman, intentionally drawing on animation's uneasy racial history, early "white" continuing characters, such as Heeza Liar, Bobby Bumps stock, cels, and lighting was uneven, black bodies were easier to register an issue of contrast: in the early days of animation, when the quality of film famous continuing characters for purely practical reasons: First, there was mouths, and overly large eyes that are standard for many animated charthe inspiration for his depiction of Nazis and Jews as cats and mice from has recounted how in developing the graphic novel Maus (1986), he drew to rationalize it, has been no less true in animation than elsewhere. Ari and broad gestures were more emotionally expressive, which was imporeven as it appeals to efficiency.) Third, clarity: the large eyes and mouths to render well. (This, of course, contradicts the argument for contrast, their minstrel counterparts.) Second, economy: white gloves on a fourand Dreamy Dud, who are somehow less well remembered today than than white ones. (To fully accept this answer, we have to overlook all of the course to blackface minstrelsy. tant in the short form. Somehow, these technical limitations required refingered hand meant less repetitive detail to draw, since hands were hard Yet the impulse to situate this work in relation to race, and sometimes

So, yes, indeed and yes, but: one explanation does not contradict another. Exploring a forbidden terrain where images and gags might be racist and funny, it becomes possible to understand that these sorts of practical explanations are all at least historically valid, and that the practices they explain (away) were still grounded in racist institutions and discourses. They are historically reasonable in that they may have served as rational explanations given by animators at the time their cartoons were made. But even if that were true, and even if we grant that those animators had far greater technical facility and a far better understanding of the shortcuts and tools that made for efficient and effective animation, it would not exempt them from the racial formations within which they lived and made their choices. That animators from the early twentieth century may have lacked the critical discourses available to animators today

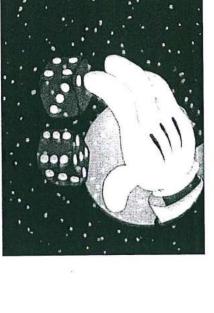


FIG. 4.28 At the end of Uncle Tom's Bungalow (1937), Uncle Tom's gloved hand reaches through an iris-out to reclaim the pair of dice that he used to gamble his Social Security benefits into a stake for Eliza, Topsy, and Eva's life.

(i.e., that "they didn't think of what they were doing as racist") does not immediately mean that the choices they made were not of a piece with racial and racist discourses of the time.

enough to argue that broad racist caricatures and the use of the vestigial duplicity) on the part of the discursive founders of animation and their the day, because it seems to suggest a maliciously racist intentionality (or were the coin of the realm for ostensibly white artists and audiences of ally racist, the practices that animators by necessity entered into were, and animation in discursive, institutional, or structural terms rather than in presence of racial and racist formations in the emergence of American animation practices. Accepting this, it becomes more valuable to read the elements of minstrelsy point to black stereotyping as underpinning early those cartoons as wrong, and not at all entertaining. It would certainly be patrons. And if that were so, it would require good people to disavow "ambivalence of stereotype," the imbrication of intense fear and desire in how racial animus in animation was important to the joke itself, how the that is worth noting. But it becomes a more significant exercise to explore personal ones. Whether any specific animator was or was not intention the same derisive image, alloyed fear of racial difference with desire for that difference.97 But it is sometimes difficult to raise this point, that racist attitudes

THE FACT OF LAUGHTER

Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is strong enough to assert itself . . . in the face of . . . adverse real circumstances. . . . By its repudiation of the possibility of suffering, it takes its place in the great series of methods devised by the mind of man for evading the compulsion to suffer—a series which begins with neurosis and culminates in delusions, and includes intoxication, self-induced states of abstraction and ecstasy.

—Sigmund Freud, "Humor" (1928)

sound cartoon - with all of its very troubling dynamics of race, class, genwhat was funny at exactly the historical moment when the animated and nonwhite Josephine Baker and her "heathen dances" from its streets same Vienna that, also in 1928, attempted to bar the scandalously sexual rebellion in service (or perhaps honor) of the pleasure principle, knew the form of short entertainment. Yet Freud, in describing humor as a violent der, and sexuality—was exuberantly bursting onto the scene as a popular pleasure principle. minstrel, and the racist caricature of the lazy coon, as a rebellion against in the United States or Europe-blackness stood, in the guise of jazz, the its tidy march into modernity. For ostensibly white audiences—whether into polite, white civilization threatened/promised to disrupt/accelerate music of America, had become a worldwide phenomenon, and in Europe audiences enough to make her enticing, hence a threat. Jazz, the mongre with "self-induced states of abstraction and ecstasy," titillated European sauvage" and its associations with the jungle and the American ghetto and stages for fear of cultural pollution.98 The former vaudevillian's "danse far better than the raucous districts of the swing-era cartoon. This was the genteel, white society of Vienna, where he had dwelt for most of his life In a 1928 essay on humor, Sigmund Freud revisited the psychology of the strictures of white, Protestant, middle-class life and in favor of the the (sometimes celebrated, sometimes abhorred) eruption of the "jungle'

In the United States, the brashness of movies, jazz, vaudeville, and minstrelsy sparked elite anxiety and a reformist impulse to shore up "civilized" behavior in a rapidly urbanizing public landscape increasingly crowded with uncivilized immigrants, migrants, and rubes straight off the farm. For black audiences, of course, the psychic violence of the "civilizing" force could signify quite differently from the way it did for rural mi-

sist the conditions of its making and to suffer for that resistance. ship to the commodity self—a relationship that the (performed) animator caricature and the vestigial minstrel, cartoons offered up not a model for own) laughter. In the fantasy of blackness that underpinned both racist simultaneous performance in cartoons of blackness as primally powerful demonstrated so well in creating a commodified character designed to rewhere sympathy may reasonably give way to empathy, is in one's relation-(including, perhaps, one's self)? Maybe one meeting ground, one place visited on others, but with empathy for all on whom that violence falls that of the object. Is it possible to laugh, not in sympathy with the violence laugh at, or to laugh with—the choice between the side of the subject or ages one to consider the fine distinction between whom one chooses to detail in earlier work) and laughing with. 100 Or, more properly, he encourtion is the difference, in brief, between laughing at (which he covered in the question: which kind? What Freud outlines in the epigraph to this secbehavior as much as a test of affinity. In the case of laughter, they begged fication than of internalization, hence through the interrogation of (one's yet as pitifully abject seems more fruitfully understood in terms of identiing) nor necessarily, as Freud might have had it, simply internalized. The trials, violence against black bodies was neither abstract (nor abstractthe South to the North, in the time of the coal wars and the Scottsboro grants and ethnic immigrants undergoing Americanization and urbanization. At the beginning of the Great Migration of African Americans from

and its inevitable failure and discipline, became in the early sound era the early animation a pantomime of the creature's rebellion against its creator, vibrant, emergent African American popular culture. What had been in shade into actual rebellion, the disruption of a racialized social order by a the fear that the symbolic and carnivalesque revolt of the minstrel would made literal in the racist caricatures presented the flip side of that desire, niability of its being an anthropomorphic animal or a clown. The race tion, one in which the character's race was masked by the plausible detrademark-minstrel character offered the image of a safe but violent reracist caricatures of animation's "golden age" remains important. The compressed this cycle of displacement into a single series of actions: a necessary and violent repression. The MGM short Lucky Ducky (1948), diliteralization of post-Emancipation blackness as rebellious excess and its bellion against normative social mores and the strictures of rationalizarected by Tex Avery, provides an example of a standard swing-era gag that Here the distinction between the animated minstrel and the broader



FIG. 4.29 An exploding shotgun shell transforms two witless hunters into pickaninnies in Lucky Ducky (1948).

seemingly vulnerable trickster character, in this case a mischievous duckling, chased by an enraged attacker, suddenly turns and savages that attacker by shooting him or blowing him up. Yet rather than being reduced to the carnage that reality would require, the attacker is instead blown into racist black(face) caricature, and becoming unwillingly "black" expresses his abject humiliation at the hands of the animate minstrel trickster.

In the aborted chase at the center of this gag, the motive force of the trickster/minstrel is made manifest: its potency derives from its very desirable blackness, and in that moment of violence the complex interplay between appropriation and subjection becomes literalized in the blackening of the desiring pursuer: be careful what you wish for. The gag articulates the danger in the amalgam of fear and desire that is the stereotype: an attempt to fully possess the raw power of the minstrelized object (such as Lucky or Bugs) may blast you into abjection. (Compare this to Mickey's Mellerdrammer [1933], in which the mouse intentionally blows himself into blackface in order to play Uncle Tom.)

The joke literalizes an omnipresent threat: do not desire too much, and do not identify too much, either. It is the color bar violently maintained all

that go in and out of symmetry . . .' but 'they all laugh.'"103 content, for the length of the occasion, to lend their mechanical bodies to see,' and whites 'now see themselves from the outside as well; but they are consciousness articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois, 'but they like what they sion, and offered no guarantee of social acceptance or advancement.102 can Americans that internalization was a path to double consciousness, a ethnic Americans. 101 As has been well remarked for generations, for Afrithe comic machinery.' Blacks and whites 'laugh from different positions black folk 'see themselves as whites see them,' in the tradition of double work of the late comic Richard Pryor: "In this and other performances... perience and by circumstance. As Glenda Carpio puts it, discussing the Thus, the laughter that the joke might elicit is inflected differently by ex potential act of violence against one's self, the internalization of oppresthat which Rogin described as an avenue to whiteness for Depression-era internalized from within a larger set of social and material relations, was compulsion to conform to white middle-class norms of socialization, itself tion) could vary both in the degree of its interiority and in its objects. The the way down to the ground, even in cartoons. The "compulsion to suffer" about which Freud speaks (to and from a certain neurotic subject posi-

sionate and detached abstraction that sees such an audience as a unified at the same animated caricature or minstrel. Except in the most compasence-whites in the orchestra, blacks in the balcony-laughing together taking a necessarily failed liberal sympathy.104 Imagine a segregated audiof the social (and sometimes material) relations from which shared laughof the object, and positioned real empathy as a gesture of historical selftial and divided as those who are the objects of ridicule. Sympathy, on the The investments of the various audience members are too diverse, as are form, any more than is the fabric of struggle and violence that informs it injury to one is an injury to all), the meaning of that laughter is not uni whole, all sharing in the victimhood of racism's violence (in which an ter erupts leave only the uncertain possibility of a collective empathy over immolation. Yet even careful distinctions between the forms and objects that internalization carried with it the requirement of the repudiation other hand, is a safer choice that permits the illusion of subjective unity imagine feeling as another-carries with it the risk of becoming as par it may rob one of a precarious subject status. That is, to feel for others—to included, the threat of empathy in the context of the racist cartoon is that their locations in the racial formation of the moment. To the potentially Even for those making the transition from ethnicity to whiteness

denying the freedom to laugh with, leaving only the possibilities of censoriously not laughing, or of unsympathetically laughing at.¹⁰⁵ In all of this, the cartoon character, whether vestigial minstrel or racist character, serves as fetish, as a simultaneous embodiment and disavowal of these belabored social relations.

avowal would fatally disrupt the social order. (And both assume that fetish stitious believer in the animate power of an inanimate object-as that ness (primitive, not in possession of one's self and one's labor, subjugated) similar with blackness in cartoons. The tension that informs the animate an object charged with the affect behind that disavowal. The situation is with a scarred similarity so horrible that it, too, must be denied, then with witnesses in his mother and cannot face the threat of paternal castration tion. Yet that disavowal is also a refusal to accept the incommensurable the sexual difference produced through the violence of (imagined) castraread as describing the production of the fetish as a refusal to acknowledge tional; for Freud, it is cultural and personal/integrative. Usually, Freud is Marx, the history invoked in this operation is social and material/opposi is the embodiment of an almost willful misconception of those forces.) For which stands in materially for a larger set of historical forces whose open fetish meets Freud's. 106 Both build their notion on a romantic anthropoand more so (naturally carefree and free from the bondage of labor and of ness as human - but as necessarily and simultaneously less so than whiteminstrel (or the racist caricature) is twofold: it requires witnessing black that she seems to represent. He disavows her difference, replacing it first tension between difference and similarity. In Freud's example, the boy logical conceit that has its roots in a fantasy of an African Other—a superscreams of the (perpetually disavowed and disavowing) commodity. making.107 And so there is violence. And so there is laughter, the raucous made but knows (and needs to forget) that it has lost the tools of its own made. To paraphrase Marx, it addresses an audience that is hailed as self. civilized decorum)—and seeing the animated creature as living yet hand But there is, in the end, still laughter. This is where Marx's gloss on the

CONCLUSION

In his study of American animation, 7 Minutes, Norman Klein suggests: "Blacks in musical comedy had so powerful a meaning in American entertainment, and they were so often played by whites themselves, they almost transcended the issue of race itself. Almost, but certainly never entirely.

of who is laughing, and how. conditions of its making, and destined it to fail in that rebellion. And if about race but about performance. As with the fetish, that performance is whites in blackface, and that being authentically black seems to be not of the incredible influence of actual African Americans on the developuse of "they" in the same passage. At first, it seems that Klein is speaking the beginning of an explanation is in the strange ambiguity hiding in the animation. Nor does he quite explain the incredible tension in his amazexactly why race and minstrelsy so deeply informed the art and craft of velopment of cartoons in the United States, he does not actually explore can American music and dance, and of blackface minstrelsy, in the dewas to the cartoon form." 108 While Klein admits to the centrality of Afriwith its audiences, it is many and various. But it always begs the question nervous and hesitant. Other times it is raucous with guilty pleasure. As that makes for laughter, then that laughter is complicated; it is sometimes mator created in that animated minstrel a compulsion to rebel against the real, almost uncontainable in its contradiction. The white hand of the animade to do so—by that very same hand. The cartoon minstrel was almost mated minstrel who must turn on that hand, but only because it has been from it. And one direction it leads is toward the hand that draws the anirooted in the material world, indeed requires it, but leads inexorably away unwinds, we discover that some of these influential blacks were actually ment of an (implicitly white) American entertainment. Yet as his thought ing claim—the tension that is concentrated in the word "almost." Perhaps To say 'almost' merely captures the sense of how important 'blackface

Yet the ambiguity of the audience and its relation to the minstrel is not the same as that which Klein confronts as he slips from delineating actual black performance into the register of minstrelsy. That fantastic blackness, premised as it was (and is) on an anxious white fantasy of rebellion, resistance, and countercultural critique, certainly requires as its ground actual African American life and culture, actual people. Yet only as a point of departure: the minstrel itself always hovers immediately over the body, no further than the distance between skin and greasepaint. In the formative stages of American animation, when blackface minstrelsy hovered between popularity and nostalgic reinvention, the minstrel offered a template for continuing characters in the form of the recalcitrant commodity rising up against the hand of its maker, against the frame, the very stuff of which it and its world were made. That these characters—Felix, Ko-Ko, Bimbo, Oswald, Mickey, Bosko, Bugs—were popular enough to catch the

public's eye and imagination suggests that the fantasy, while originating on the drawing board and circulating from studio to studio as convention, found fellow feeling in its publics.¹⁰⁹

every subject lurks a howling object much like ourselves, one that we can stumbled over the years argues for a gentle reminder that behind each and of that distinction between figure and fantasy over which many a critic has minstrel depended (and depends) for its vitality on the constant collapse of autonomous African American cultural production. That the cartoon were vital and exciting yet very racist, a reaction to the promise and threat laugh with, rather than at. ferent, and in the latter case could not help but be in response to texts that minstrel and the racist caricature—the laughter could not help but be dif the very distinction between those two modes of figuration - between the their expression for a presumption of underregulated difference. Given fascination with swing-era music and culture, it punished the avatars of studios was anything but empathic. Even as animation demonstrated a contained rebelliousness, something truly human, the response of the which it depended. That is, at a moment when African American cultural life expressed something beyond the register of the nostalgic and safely the minstrel represented and the actual facts of African American life on one that depended on the distance between the fantasy of blackness that on a notion of the minstrel as a conduit through which a shared resistance caricature of the 1930s and 1940s, that optimistic reading is predicated to an (un)equally shared commodity nature was imperfectly expressed— And, parsing the difference between the animated minstrel and the racist To see in that fellow feeling something empathic is perhaps optimistic