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“An Octoroon in the Kindling”: American Vernacular & Blackface Minstrelsy in 1930s Hollywood

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For close on to a hundred years discourses on national identity, European ethnic assimilation and the problem of class division within the Republic had been principally addressed in the popular arts through the agency of the black mask. During the 1930s, blackface in American films shifted from the idea implied in the racial slur, “nigger in the woodpile,” to the rather less visible, but no less derogatory, “octoroon in the kindling,” a phrase used in *Her Man* (Pathé, Tay Garnett, 1930) to suggest something is amiss, but which is used here to suggest the cultural miscegenation that informs much of the material discussed in this article.¹

When Hollywood introduced synchronized sound in the late 1920s, blackface minstrelsy as a mass form of entertainment had long been on the wane. Yet, blackface performance maintained a limited public profile with the film industry’s recruitment and promotion of Broadway blackface acts like Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, and with the production of films based on nostalgic reconstructions of American’s theatrical and musical past.² Although the performance of blackface decreased during the 1930s, its legacy continued to resonate in Hollywood’s construction of an American vernacular. American cinema found itself in the paradoxical position of needing to evoke traditions of blackface minstrelsy so that a given film

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¹ An early version of this article was given as a paper at Southampton University’s conference “The Musical.” May, 1996.

² See Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 153–84.

could bring these discourses into play, while simultaneously attempting to efface the influence of blackface, as the contradictions implied in its use became ever more apparent and therefore problematic; a type of play that oscillates between revelation and concealment.

In this article I shall argue that the evocation of an American vernacular tradition inevitably leads into the fantasy world of blackness formed out of the conventions of blackface minstrelsy. Before tracing the legacy left by minstrelsy when the outward sign of the black mask of greasepaint is removed, I review how blackface in Hollywood is positioned as a symbol of America's theatrical and musical past and as a key element in the representation of an American vernacular tradition.

Hollywood, as Thomas Cripp's has noted in his study of the "Negro" in the American film *Slow Fade to Black*, was profoundly conservative in its representation of African-Americans. In part this was dictated by what he calls the "myth of the Southern box office," but also by an inability to envision a role for African-Americans that did not draw upon images of the Old South, a subject of only marginal interest within Hollywood's trends and cycles during most of the 1930s.³ When *Gone With the Wind* (Selznick, V. Fleming, 1939) made stories of the *antebellum* South popular again, the role of African-Americans in the film (despite being drawn from the pool of minstrel types) represented, according to Cripps, "a shift in racial arrangements."⁴ Hollywood had become more sensitive during the latter part of the 1930s to how it represented black characters; the more overtly derogatory racist representations used in early to mid-1930s films, such as that implied in the occasional use of racial epithets like "nigger" and "coon," became less common. The movement towards more positive portrayals of blacks was confirmed in 1942 when senior Hollywood executives met delegates of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. At this meeting an agreement was reached whereby the studios agreed to "abandon pejorative racial roles."⁵ "March 1942," writes Cripps, "became a date by which to measure the future against the past."⁶

The meaning produced in the performance of blackface has been studied in two recent scholarly works, Eric Lott's *Love & Theft* (1993), which concentrates on the nineteenth century, and Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise* (1996), which focuses on the same period under

³ See Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (London and Berkeley: 1993), 179.

⁴ Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 366.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 376.

examination here.⁷ The emphasis in both these works is on the form’s latent meaning. In Rogin’s study, this emphasis means that little space is given over to an assessment of blackface’s performance legacy in Hollywood, which demands a more historically grounded reading of its accents and disguises. Instead, Rogin uses the full weight of post-structuralist theory to obtain often tortuously intricate readings of blackface which he justifies by giving frequently marginal films an importance out of all proportion to their place in American film history:

With Edwin S. Porter’s film trilogy of 1902–3, encompassing the West in *The Great Train Robbery*, the city in *The Life of an American Fireman*, and the South in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the history of American Movies begins. It begins with race.⁸

Not many historians of early American film would agree with Rogin’s assertion that the history of American cinema begins with these three films, or that it begins with any one film in particular. Moreover, why has he chosen these particular films out of the many that Porter made in this period, and what evidence does he have to suggest that they were conceived as a trilogy? Rogin’s attempt to place order and causality on complex and very often contradictory phenomena, and his willingness to leap across the years to make a point, undermine the historical project he undertakes. It is difficult to argue with his final assertion that American cinema is obsessed with race, yet this needs to be put into a more finely inflected context.

My analysis of Hollywood and blackface begins with an overview of the meanings produced in its performance during the nineteenth century. This is followed by a discussion of *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, Warner Bros., 1927) which reveals how difficult it had become to contain the contradictions involved in the performance of blackface. *The Jazz Singer* is unique in Hollywood’s use of blackface. Rather than being an isolated celebration of Jolson’s star persona, Jolson’s character defines himself through blackface as an American and as a star; his performances in blackface are intrinsic to the narrative.⁹ *The Jazz Singer*, set in the present,

⁷ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1996); Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁸ Rogin, 14.

⁹ Eddie Cantor’s discrete blackface performances, unlike Jolson’s in *The Jazz Singer*, operate within a broader set of dramatic imperatives. For example, in *Palmy Days* (A. Edward Sutherland, UA, 1931) Cantor blacks up to attract more customers to the restaurant in the bakery where he works. It is an isolated use of blackface, and its principal function is to confirm the star persona Cantor formed on Broadway, where his novelty was the introduction of the fey, spectacle-wearing minstrel.

ends with Jolson's character in blackface. The other film discussed in the first part of the article, *Showboat* (James Whale, Universal, 1936), begins with the heroine as a young woman performing in blackface, and ends in the present. She has become a grand old lady of the American theatre, with blackface safely located in the past. It is in this latter formulation that blackface is most often encountered in American films of the 1930s.

Showboat's dramatization of the shift from a vernacular tradition, that is figured as vulgar and black, to a culturally refined America is considered more fully in the second part of the article. In films such as *She Done Him Wrong* (Lowell Sherman, Paramount, 1933), *The Bowery*, (20th Century, Raoul Walsh, 1933) *Barbary Coast* (Goldwyn, Howard Hawks, 1935), *San Francisco* (MGM, W. S. Van Dyke, 1936), and *In Old Chicago* (20th Century-Fox, Henry King, 1938), nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America is represented as a primitive yet vital period in which the American character was formed. These films set out to celebrate the formative years of America, but also to show that America had moved away from these vulgar beginnings. Blackface is not used in these films, but its legacy is there in the music and performances that take place in the principal dramatic space that all these films centre on, the concert-saloon.

Part three of this article develops the analysis of the legacy of blackface performance and music, when the black mask of greasepaint is removed, by examining Hollywood's use of popular song, particularly "Frankie and Johnny" and "St. Louis Blues." These songs are not only used in nostalgic recreations of America's past, but also in films set in the present. My analysis concentrates on two films, *Baby Face* (Warners Bros., Alfred E. Green, 1933) and *Banjo On My Knee* (John Cromwell, 20th Century-Fox, 1936).

The films discussed, with the exception of *The Jazz Singer*, show how America has progressed from "vulgar" beginnings to a "refined" present. The vulgar is consistently constructed as belonging to a vernacular American culture, which is signified as black, sometimes through blackface, but just as often without the mask. Black American culture, mediated through blackface, is the persistent signifier of an American vernacular.

I – FROM THE VULGAR TO THE REFINED

The decline in popularity of the discrete minstrel show in the urban north during the latter part of the nineteenth century paralleled its diffusion into other forms like burlesque. Individual white blackface performers found

spots in the growing vaudeville circuit, where minstrelsy maintained a popularity through its ability to influence and be adapted into new musical forms such as ragtime and later jazz.¹⁰ By placing the blackface performer in a variety setting, vaudeville had the effect of containing and isolating the performance. Rather than the whole show, minstrelsy now became an attraction amongst many others and a familiar sight given back its novelty value. Minstrelsy had become a performance style that was locked into the past, a signifier of an American musical tradition. In nineteenth-century minstrelsy, the disguise of burnt cork permitted European immigrant cultures to find a common language in their shared whiteness formed out of the negative construction of blackness. Blackface had acted as a syncretic form where ethnic markers such as Irish dance, Alpine yodelling, Shakespeare, Polish polkas, and Italian opera, would be performed through the Americanizing mask of burnt cork. This is a construction of whiteness that David Roediger has likened to the doomed master in Hegel’s celebrated essay “Lordship and Bondage:” “blackfaced whites derived their consciousness by measuring themselves against a group they defined as largely worthless and ineffectual... the trajectory of minstrelsy was to create an ersatz whiteness and then to succumb to a mere emphasis on the vulgarity, grotesqueness and stupidity of the black characters it created.”¹¹

In *The Jazz Singer*, blackface does indeed act to produce an ersatz whiteness which invites European immigrants to measure their recently acquired status as Americans and citizens of the Republic against the black American Other. Yet the film represses other equally important functions of the form, in particular the display of the contemporary marks of class and gender that are etched into blackface’s vulgar and grotesque portrayal of the African-American. Blackface’s original and primary audience was northern, urban, male, and wage dependent. *The Jazz Singer* does not recognize this constituency and, in a necessary displacement given the film’s setting in the present, it attempts to efface the vulgar through its emphasis on the sentimental.

The project of the film is to reconcile Al Jolson’s character’s movement from his parents’ Jewish culture into his adopted American identity. This process is mediated through the mask of blackface. Though the film

¹⁰ See Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque & American Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 158–78. For an overview of the history of minstrelsy see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

¹¹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race & the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991) 118.

suggests a resolving of the cultural conflicts at its closure, with Jolson assuming the dual role of Jewish cantor and blackface entertainer, it is a resolution achieved at the cost of creating an oxymoron. Jolson may have gained an American identity, but it is an identity formed in the likeness of the most oppressed of all Americans: the African-American, who is excluded from full citizenship within the Republic. However, despite the film's attempt to evade such a conclusion, to shake off his old world identity he must embrace its opposite the secular world of vulgarity.

The money, fame, and the enduring love of his mother is small compensation for his descent into vulgarity. The titular attempt to modernize and refine the tradition Jolson is working within by calling him a "jazz singer," rather than, for example, "Ethiopian delineator" or "coon shouter"¹² does little to disguise the contradictory nature of his identity as Jew and secular American. When in the latter stages of the film Jolson's character finally applies his black greasepaint we see not the exuberant and dynamic persona of earlier scenes but a cowered and pathetic figure. The emphasis on a sexually charged performance witnessed (out of blackface) with "Toot Toot Tootsie" is replaced by the sentimentality (in blackface) of "My Mammy" – a man/child's appeal to his mother to mediate and resolve the crushing dilemma that makes him so powerless. Behind the blackmask he is neither American or Jewish, but is instead locked into a kind of limbo between the two competing worlds. Is he Jackie Rabinowitz or Jack Robin? It is a contradiction the character cannot resolve, and a situation which would not arise in films that used blackface as a signifier of an American past. In *Showboat*, the white characters escape from the mask, not into it. *Variety* reviewed Al Jolson's *Mammy* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros., 1930) as a "glimpse of a dying earlier day."¹³ If blackface was dead or dying, it could now be revived as a vital part of America's cultural legacy.

Showboat: authenticating the past

In *Showboat*, blackface is used as a sign of a theatrical past, but it is also as a marker against which the characters are able to judge their social progress.¹⁴ This process is significantly aided by the presence of African-

¹² Calling someone a "coon shouter" did not even have to refer to a blackface performer. In *Miracle Woman* (Columbia Frank Capra, 1931) it is used to describe a radio evangelist. In other words it can describe anyone who performs within a vulgar idiom.

¹³ Quoted in Cripps, 113.

¹⁴ In *Dante's Inferno* (20th Century-Fox, Harry Lachman, 1935) Spencer Tracy's character, having been sacked from his job as chief stoker in the merchant navy and unable to find

Americans in the cast. Where, in *The Jazz Singer*, the signified of blackface – the African-American – is absent, in *Showboat* blackface is performed in front of a cast that includes African-Americans. The film produces the dual display of African-American actors conforming to character stereotypes developed in minstrelsy, such as Uncle Tom and Mammy, while white actors in or out of blackface reinforce these negative representations. The presence of African-Americans also distances the white actors from the images of blackness they assume by blacking up through emphasizing the performance’s artificiality and fabrication.

During preproduction, the film’s producers had hoped to cast white actress Tess Gardella in the role of Queenie. Gardella, who specialized in blackface acts and who was better known by her stage name, Aunt Jemima, had played the role in the New York productions of 1927 and 1932. But the difficulties of having her share scenes in the film adaptation with the black actor, Paul Robeson, proved insurmountable. Joe Breen, head of the Production Code Administration, in correspondence with Universal who had asked him for advice, noted: “I think you should be extremely careful, however, not to indicate any physical contact between a white woman and a Negro man for the reason that many people will know that Aunt Jemima is a white woman and might be repulsed by the sight of her being fondled by a man who is a Negro.”¹⁵ Eventually the role was given to the black actress, Hattie McDaniel. Regardless of whether a white or black actress played Queenie, part of the character’s function is to distance the white actors from the minstrel roles they were playing and to throw the emphasis squarely onto the artifice of the white masquerade. This, in turn, naturalizes the minstrel types the African-American actors have assumed.¹⁶

any other form of employment, accepts a job as the target in a “Hit the Nigger” carnival sideshow. The film unambiguously offers Tracy’s character’s appearance in blackface as a sign of his absolute destitution: he has all but left the white world behind. This blackface performance marks and measures his rise, fall, and eventual redemption. His rise is witnessed through the control he eventually exerts over the carnival, which he turns into a huge theme park built around rollercoaster rides. His fall occurs after he refuses to fund the necessary safety measures, his hubris and greed lead eventually to disaster. But, even this fall from grace does not take him as low down the social and moral scale that is implied by his initial appearance in blackface.

¹⁵ See correspondence in PCA file on *Showboat*, Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), Beverly Hills, Calif. Letter dated 17 Oct. 1935.

¹⁶ See also the Marx Brothers performance in blackface played out against a cast of African-American dancers and singers in *A Day at the Races* (MGM, Sam Wood, 1937).



Figure 1. *Showboat* (1936). The climax of the Olio on the showboat's stage. Magnolia (centre) performs in blackface. Courtesy of BFI stills, posters and designs.

In *Showboat*, the scene that best exemplifies the potential for racial confusion and the attempt to keep a sense of dramatic separation between representations of white and black, is where Magnolia (Irene Dunne) learns the song “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man.” The Mammy character, Queenie, overhears Miss Julie (Helen Morgan) singing to Magnolia, and wants to know how Julie learned that “coloured folks” song. Julie, as we are soon to discover, is a mulatto, but, before this is revealed to audience and cast alike, she further puts her race into question when, in answer to Queenie, she turns the song into a “blues.” With this change, the song’s recital turns into a full-blown performance with Queenie and Joe (Paul Robeson) singing it as a duet. Magnolia, now stage front, turns herself “black” by puffing out her cheeks, sticking out her backside, and sashaying her pelvic region inside her long dress, as a chorus of blacks gather alongside the showboat. Magnolia then leads the “troupe” out on to deck for an impromptu cakewalk, which is abruptly terminated by Magnolia’s snooty and self-regarding mother (Helen Westley), who fails to recognize the contradiction in her distaste for riverboat life and the



Figure 2. *Showboat* (1936). From the vulgar to the refined: the minstrel show transformed into a Broadway spectacle starring Magnolia's daughter. Courtesy of BFI stills, posters and designs.

vulgar performances of blackface and cheap melodrama with the fact that this is how her family earns its living.

Magnolia's move from her humble Southern origins into Northern society is, at all points in the film, marked through the signs of blackface performance. When Julie and her husband are forced to leave the showboat, Magnolia and Ravenal (Allan Jones) take their place in the cast. Magnolia now adds black grease paint and white lips to aid her minstrel performances. She marries Ravenal and, before long, falls pregnant. Ravenal meanwhile reveals his shady side as a gambler and a lucky streak takes him, his wife and child to the good life in Chicago. It does not last. Ravenal, almost destitute, deserts his family. Magnolia, without the means to support herself, is forced back on to the stage. At an audition, the impresario asks her what she does. "I do Negro songs," is her reply, "A coon shouter, huh?" he responds. Nervously, and without a hint of blue notes, she sings "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man." Miss Julie, who unknown to Magnolia, is the star of the show, secretly hears the performance and, realizing that Magnolia must be desperate for a job, disappears from the

theatre and the narrative, doomed forever to play out the role of the loyal “Negro”. Like Queenie and Joe, she defers her own needs and desires to help her “Little sister,” her white “family” from which the narrative, minstrelsy, and racism work repeatedly to exclude her.

Julie does not hear the “professor” at the piano transform her song into a ragtime number and, although Magnolia gets the job, she does not perform Negro songs or even a “raggy” rendition of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man.” Instead, she treats the audience to an “old favourite” “After the Ball.” Years pass and her acclaim grows. She retires, and her daughter follows in her footsteps; a theatrical dynasty is born. Magnolia has progressed from the vulgar, and from what is now marked as a vernacular and nostalgic tradition of blackface, to the refinement and modernity of the New York stage, where, as if to rhyme with her changed circumstances, blackface is turned into a ballet and her daughter into a Southern belle.

The film’s source novel, written by Edna Ferber and published in 1926, offers a different but complementary construction of Magnolia’s move from vulgarity to refinement. Despite Magnolia’s lowly beginnings on a showboat, her imitations of black song are shown to be more authentic than those found in the then emerging vaudeville culture of turn of the century America. At her Chicago audition she gives the following performance:

She threw back her head then as Jo had taught her, half closed her eyes, tapped time with the right foot, smartly. Imitative in this, she managed, too, to get into her voice that soft and husky Negro quality which for years she had heard on river boats, bayous, landings. I got wings. You got a wings. All God’s chillun got a wings.¹⁷

Magnolia’s performance is marked out as an authentic and essential evocation of the South, a vernacular folk music uncorrupted by vulgar commercial imperatives. “‘What kind of a coon song do you call that?’ inquired the gray derby. ‘Why, it’s a Negro melody – they sing them in the South.’ ‘Sounds like a church hymn to me.’ He paused. His pale shrewd eyes searched her face. ‘You a nigger?’”¹⁸ Irene Dunne’s Magnolia is never so racially confused. However, the reader of the novel knows that the only cross in Magnolia’s blood comes from the Basque region in France via her father, which gives her the fire in her dark eyes and a liking for good food. It is not Magnolia’s racial pedigree that is at stake (her whiteness is confirmed by the scarlet colour that rises to her cheeks in response to the “gray derby’s” question), but her authenticity.

¹⁷ Edna Ferber, *Showboat* (New York: Signet Class, 1994), 275. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

Magnolia, and by extension the showboat, its inhabitants, and audiences, are a nostalgic and sentimental construction of a lost yet authentic America, evoked through its theatrical history. Kim, Magnolia's daughter, carries the burden of modern America. Her marriage and acting are shown to lack the authenticity of earlier days. For Magnolia, Kim's three years at acting school represents a refinement of the profession that is wholly alien to her: “Her performance had been clear-cut, modern, deft, convincing. She was fresh, but finished. She was intelligent, successful, workmanlike, intuitive, vigorous, adaptable... There was about her... nothing of genius, of greatness, of the divine fire.”¹⁹ The “lifeless” approach to theatre is echoed in Kim's marriage. “Her marriage with Kenneth Cameron was successful and happy and very nice. Separate bedrooms... Personal liberty and privacy of thought and action... Magnolia wondered... seeing this well-ordered and respectful union, if Kim was not after all, missing something. Wasn't marriage, like life, unstimulating and unprofitable and somewhat empty when too well ordered and protected and guarded? Wasn't it finer, more splendid, more nourishing, when it was, like life itself, a mixture of the sordid and the magnificent...?”²⁰ Through its construction as authentic, the South is made to work in distinction to the refined, sterile, and nice world that Kim inhabits and to the vulgar roots of vaudeville exemplified in the coon song.

Singing the Minstrel's Song

According to Charles Hamm, a historian of popular American music, coon songs were the fifth and last stage of the minstrel song. The first stage was the *antebellum* nigger song such as “Old Dan Tucker” and “Jump Jim Crow.” This was followed by the plantation song of which Stephen Foster is the prime exponent. The third stage was the post-war song styles exemplified by the nostalgic sentiments of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginy” and “The Old Home Ain't What it Used To Be.” The fourth stage, the minstrel-spiritual, was popularised by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s and speedily appropriated by white performers.²¹ Magnolia sings in this latter style in the novel; “Old Man River” is also based on it. The coon song was, in some respect, a return to the nigger

¹⁹ Ferber, 297.

²⁰ Ferber, 299.

²¹ Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*. New York: Norton & Co. 1983), 271. For a more precise analysis of the distinction between *antebellum* and post-war nostalgia in the minstrel song see, Lee Glazer and Susan Key, “Carry Me Back: Nostalgia for the Old South in 19th Century Popular Culture.” *Journal of American Studies*, 30, 1 (April 1996), 1–24.

song. It eschewed both nostalgia and any notion of spiritual uplift. According to Hamm, “The coon song is usually in dialect, with a text somewhat less than complimentary to blacks.”²² This is a rather tight-mouthed criticism of a song type that plumbs the depths of racial caricature unseen before or since in American popular culture. However, the reticence in Hamm’s criticism needs to be measured against the still fairly widespread understanding of Stephen Foster’s work (despite the evidence of the songs) as, to quote from one recent scholarly work on the musical, “stereotyped yet sympathetic approaches to Black song.”²³ The full version of “Oh! Susanna,” contains the following couplet: “I jumped aboard de telegraph, / And trabbelled down de ribber, / De Lectrie fluid magnified, / And killed five hundred Nigger.”²⁴ The coon song managed to make even this characterization of the African-American seem polite.

The fad for coon songs lasted almost forty years, between 1880 and 1920, and became synonymous with a number of vaudeville’s greatest stars. Amongst those who carried the epithet “Coon Shouter” were Sophie Tucker, May Irwin, Norah Bayes, Dolly Connolly, Billy Murray, Bert Williams (the first African-American Broadway star), and Al Jolson. For the most part, the songs are delivered as comedies, because without this distancing effect of humour the listener is confronted with the frightening image of the African-American at his most vicious and bestial. The coon song has no saving graces, and many historians of popular song prefer to concentrate their studies of the era on the parallel development of ragtime, which allows them to make a much less problematic transition to discussions on the development of jazz. Yet the coon song entered all walks of American culture life, as well as creating a very influential space for itself in English music-hall. When *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) roadshowed in Britain in 1916, there was virtually no negative commentary by the press on the film’s representation of African slaves. The rapacious figure of Gus had been thoroughly naturalized by the repeated image of the razor-toting blackman of the coon song.²⁵ The coon song’s influence on African-American song would also be profound, not least because African-Americans were major contributors in writing some of the most popular songs of the genre, for example Ernest Hogan’s “All

²² Hamm, 321.

²³ Robert Lawson-Peebles, ed., *Approaches to the American Musical* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 2.

²⁴ Complete lyrics quoted in Lott, *Love & Theft*, 204.

²⁵ See unpublished research by Michael Hammond (Southampton Institute, UK) on the marketing, exhibition, and reception of *The Birth of a Nation* in Britain (forthcoming).

Coons Look Alike To Me.” The coon song would also find its way into the most “authentic” of African-American musical forms, the blues, a process of assimilation and adaptation that Paul Oliver, the blues historian, has studiously traced.²⁶

Magnolia’s Chicago audition is rhymed with an earlier scene when she first comes into contact with her husband’s gambling cronies. In an act of saving face, she plays the banjo and sings the same songs that she would later perform at her audition. The responses of these Yahoos complements those of the “gray derby”: “You call that a coon song and maybe it is. I don’t dispute you, mind. But I never heard any song like *that* called a coon song, and I heard a good many coon songs in my day.”²⁷ Magnolia’s “Negro Spirituals” come to offer an authentic, albeit sentimental, mediating ground between the urban lowlife of gambling and prostitution that is carried by the coon song and the metropolitan refinement and professionalism of modern theatre. The original showboat environment also works to move Magnolia’s sentimentality away from its usual generation through the plantation myth that the film version tacitly evokes in its closing moments, and instead locates it within a novel setting.

II – CONCERN-SALOONS

Bullies and clowns: whitening the coon

Like the showboat, the concert-saloon offered a novel historical setting for bawdy musical performances that managed to stay on the right side of the censors. Not quite the mid-nineteenth-century brothels of fact and fancy, but, in its heady mix of low-class patrons, dance, song, and liquor, the concert-saloon proved to be an able substitute. The concert-saloon had first appeared along the Bowery in the 1860s. According to Robert C. Allen in his study of burlesque, what distinguished it from other performance spaces where alcohol was consumed, was the “incorporation of feminine sexuality as part of the entertainment.” The concert-saloon appealed primarily to working-class men, who were served their beverages by “waiter girls” in “what were for the period, short dresses,” with variety acts providing the onstage amusements.²⁸ In a short time, by-laws were passed driving the concert-saloon underground. The idea of independent working women in a male environment carried implications of prostitution for the period’s middle-class moral guardians. For

²⁶ Paul Oliver, *Songsters & Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 47–77.

²⁷ Ferber, 243.

²⁸ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 73–78.

Hollywood's filmmakers, the implication that the saloon girl was a prostitute continued to resonate, and much play would be made around this ambiguity. But, just as importantly, the concert-saloon provided a place for musical and other divertissements of a decidedly vulgar turn. The concern-saloon was a milieu in which the kind of characters found in the coon song could feel at home.

I was standin' down the Mobile Buck just to cut a shine
 Some coon across my smeller swiped a watermelon rin'
 I drewed my steel dat gemmen to fin'
 I riz up like a black cloud and took a look aroun'
 There was dat new bully standin' on the ground.
 I've been lookin' for you nigger and I've got you found.
 Razors "gun a flying," niggers "gun to squawk,"
 I lit upon that bully just like a sparrow hawk,
 And dat nigger was just a dyin' to take a walk.
 When I got through with bully, a doctor and a nurse
 Wa'nt no good to dat nigger, so they put him in a hearse,
 A cyclone couldn't have tore him up much worse.
 "Bully Song," performed by May Irwin, ca. 1895²⁹

The Bowery, the first film produced by 20th Century Pictures, formed by Darryl F. Zanuck and Joseph M. Schenck after the former left Warner Bros., was clearly intended to ride the success and celebrity of *She Done Him Wrong*. Released in October, seven months after the Mae West vehicle, the film draws its story from the same romanticized locale and time period, the Gay Nineties, but suppresses the transgressive sexuality excluded by Mae West and replaces it with images of an ethnically and racially polyglot urban America barely there in *She Done Him Wrong*, and that, with the exclusion of Jewish immigrants, was utterly suppressed in the *The Jazz Singer* in order to present a less problematic image of ethnic assimilation.

The Bowery begins with a bravura sequence introducing the central characters and what now seems an almost unbelievable racist discourse. Opening with a shot of a saloon called "Nigger Joe's," a series of rapidly cut shots introduces the street life and the different ethnicities that inhabit the Bowery: a police raid on "Suicide Hall" (the setting for Mae West's play *Diamond Lil* that was adapted for the screen as *She Done Him Wrong*), singing waiters, street merchants, drunks, prostitutes, and the Salvation Army are all lampooned. At the hub of this steaming mass of humanity is the Irishman Chuck Connors (Wallace Beery), a saloon keeper,

²⁹ Quoted in Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 2–3.



Figure 3. *The Bowery* (1933). Publicity still of Trixie Odbray (Pert Kelton). Courtesy of BFI stills, posters and designs.

misogynist, surrogate father to Swipes (Jackie Cooper), and leader of a volunteer fire-brigade. His chief rival in work, love, and volunteer fire-brigades is his fellow Irishman, Steve Brody (George Raft). The two are like little boys in men's bodies, endlessly playing pranks on each other, until the denouement when both become fully assimilated Americans by joining the armed forces and going off to fight the Spanish in Cuba, by implication leaving behind their childhoods and their Irish identities.

The infantilism of the characters is played out through pleasures of the body: their love of the sensational and the spectacular, their loud and vulgar humour, their misogyny and racism, their lack of any meaningful responsibilities or deference to figures of authority, their non-productive and barely legitimate source of employment (both men front their saloons

for competing breweries which allows them pretty much to please themselves). These traits, if not exactly a match with contemporaneous representations of African-Americans (they are, after all, white, even if this is qualified by their being Irish, and they are given a space within the Republic at the end of the film), are nevertheless a display of masculinity and class analogous to that found within coon songs.³⁰ African-Americans are physically absent from the story; they exist only in the racist dialogue which calls attention to “those coons down at Nigger Joe’s.” Yet the “coon,” even in his physical absence, is made to function as the lowest mark on that social scale from which these giants of vulgarity remain only slightly distanced.

The generation of an American vulgarity, that consistently invokes images of blackness while simultaneously denying them, is carried through in the dance numbers performed on the stage in the saloon. In front of a chorus line of rather seamy women, Trixie Odbrey (Pert Kelton) sings and dances her way through “Ta Ra Ra Boom Der Re,” a song that had its origins in the St. Louis brothel run by Babe Connor. Mama Lou sang the song, and, according to Ian Whitcomb, at the appropriate moments the Creole dancing girls lifted their skirts to reveal their knickerless state.³¹ Clearly Trixie Odbrey is white and so are her supporting dancers, and just as clearly they have on underwear. But this does not negate the performance’s vulgar connotations. Overhead shots to show the girls’ jiggling breasts, over lit close ups, with long shots to reveal the sordidness of the saloon, and cutaways to the leering faces of the male punters, suggests that this is, *sans* greasepaint, a minstrel performance. In his history of burlesque, Allen quotes from a contemporary critique, which notes how the transgressive quality of many of the burlesque dances were compared to minstrelsy: “Burlesque offered only ‘cheap rhymes, pre-Adamite puns, impudent distortions of grave political and social subjects... [and] uncouth and immodest imitations of Negro dances by young women.’”³²

Despite their overtly sexual references, Trixie Odbrey’s routines still manage to be infantile. Her dance style is significantly similar to Shirley Temple’s, which draws heavily on styles developed as part of a blackface

³⁰ See Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 133–56 for an account of the construction of the Irish as “black.”

³¹ Ian Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin & Ragtime America* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988) 106. Also Oliver, 49. “Frankie and Johnny” was also said to have been first performed by “Mammy Lou,” see Vance Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs Vol. 2 Songs of the South & West* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1980) (reprint of the 1946–50 edn), 126.

³² Allen, 131.

repertoire: a tradition invoked in many of Temple’s films when she is “taught” her dance steps by either African-Americans, such as Bill Robinson, or as in *Little Miss Broadway* (Irving Cummings, 20th Century-Fox, 1938) by Jimmy Clayton’s (Jimmy Durante) Jazz Bandits. Either way, her dance style is usually signalled as having black roots. Even in a film such as *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1936), set in the world of radio advertising, where there are no overt references to African-American song and dance traditions, Temple injects “hallelujahs” and “hosannas” into a performance creating a contrast to the more sophisticated and adult delivery of her co-performers, Alice Faye and Jack Haley. The black roots are called up in this film, as in her other performances, to imply childishness rather than sexuality.

The Bowery, perhaps because it was 20th Century’s first production, was not submitted in script form to the Motion Picture Producers & Distributors Association (MPPDA). Instead the first report was conducted after a preview screening. Two deletions were demanded: an image of Beery stepping into cat excrement and a shot of him mouthing “son of a bitch.” It was noted that the dance scenes with Pert Kelton and her chorus girls were “questionable” but deletions were not called for. However, when the film played before censor boards both in America and abroad, cuts were asked for that would eliminate the dancer’s breasts. The Australian authorities demanded the removal of all the ribaldry in the opening scenes. On the film’s rerelease in 1946, Pennsylvania asked for the word “coon” to be deleted along with the sign “Nigger Joes.” It is debatable how much of the film’s coarseness would have been cut at the script stage if the screenplay had been submitted for the usual review process under the Production Code, but it is clear from the reports in the film’s file that the MPPDA’s censors responded very enthusiastically to the performances of George Raft and Wallace Beery. Arguably, their comic delivery undercut what on the scripted page would have been unacceptable. By playing their parts in a childishly innocent manner, the actors help dilute most objections to the film’s relentless revelling in vulgarity. And as “children” in adult bodies they find their most ready comparison in the happy and unthreatening caricatures of the plantation darkey of minstrelsy, an ambiguity that allows them to be both thuggish bullies and innocent clowns.³³

The Bowery and *She Done Him Wrong* popularized and helped fix Hollywood’s representation of the concert-saloon, making it an essential

³³ See correspondence and notes in PCA file, *The Bowery*, Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS.

dramatic space in rowdy portrayals of nineteenth century America. In films that dramatised America's move from anarchic and vulgar beginnings to ordered civilisation, such as *Barbary Coast*, *San Francisco*, and *In Old Chicago*, the concert-saloon is the site of contestation between the forces of lawlessness and reform. The influence of these films in their representation of the concert-saloon is most keenly displayed in the 1939/40 cycle of Westerns, which made the milieu almost wholly synonymous with the genre.

Barbary Coast transposes the gangster genre to California at the height of the gold rush. Louis Chamalis (Edward G. Robinson), with the help of his sidekick Knuckles (Brian Donleavy), runs San Francisco and the Bella Donna saloon, where he tricks miners out of their booty. Mary Rutledge (Miriam Hopkins), who is absolutely broke, has travelled by ship from New York to marry a man she has never met and, on her arrival, she discovers he has been killed after losing his money to Chamalis. The only thing of value that she possesses is her whiteness. Disembarking from the ship, Mary is met by gasps of surprise and desire. "Suffering snakes, a white woman," says Old Atrocity (Walter Brennan), who takes her by ferry from ship to shore. His observation is repeated again, and then reinforced by a call from a group of men waiting at the quay-side: "What you got there?" they shout to him, "a white woman." "You're lying!" they respond, "No I'm not. A New York, white woman – whiter than a hen's egg." The scene introduces the main musical themes, a medley of Stephen Foster's minstrel tunes, interspersed with other nineteenth-century signature tunes, such as "Molly Malone." The men, making a great fuss, carry Mary across the muddy streets and walk her past a line of bars, out of which piano renditions of more minstrel tunes are heard. As they pass a group of Chinese men, the music changes to an oriental theme; "opium, miss," says one of her chaperones, "opium and Chinamen sure perfume up a stink." This image of a godless alien hell-hole is given back its American specificity by an off-screen female singing a few lines of "Frankie and Johnny." In the Bella Donna, a trio on stage are stopped midway through a performance of "Camptown Races" by the sight of the white woman now in their midst. Louis Chamalis, like all the men, is instantly smitten with Mary. He renames her Swan and she starts work at the crooked roulette wheel.

Though the dialogue denies any physical relationship between Chamalis and Mary, her sense of self-loathing and her easy manner when knocking back hard liquor suggest she is a kept woman. When Chamalis demands that she love him, her reply is that he should be content with what he has:

“Do you still think I’m Mary Rutledge?” she asks him, “do you think I’m still a white woman?” Eventually, she finds redemption through the love of the poet and prospector James Carmichael (Joel McCrea), who takes her away from the saloon and minstrel tunes and gives her instead marriage and a book of poems by Shelley. San Francisco is characterized as a “mud hole,” a mix of races and ethnicities that need to be expunged if this frontier town is to join the Republic. Old Atrocity, who has helped con James Carmichael out of his gold, like Mary Rutledge, reforms midway through the film. He wishes to cleanse his “black soul” by returning some of Carmichael’s gold: “the only decent thing I’ve done in my whole black life, sort of overwhelms me,” he tells Carmichael, “I feel like a little white kitten – reborn.” Progress, both moral and material, is measured by the characters’ distance from the image of blackness that so thoroughly mark the *habitués* of the concert-saloon. Blackness in *Barbary Coast* becomes equated with the deep mud the characters are endlessly shown trudging through; it is the primal element out of which America is formed, but, like the mud, it is destined to be cleaned away, “Rome wasn’t built in a day,” says the town’s first newspaper man, “the paths of empire have always started in mud and ended in glory.”

A much less bawdy representation of a concert-saloon is displayed in *In Old Chicago*, but it performs essentially the same function. Alice Faye’s character sings a reverent version of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” to an admiring audience, but she does not perform in blackface. *In Old Chicago* was Fox’s attempt to emulate the success of MGM’s *San Francisco*. Both films offer sensational special effects in their representation of their respective city’s destruction. Chicago and San Francisco are America’s Sodom and Gomorrah, with the sinful gathered together in concert-saloons. Just before the earthquake rips San Francisco apart the great and the mighty are brought together for the “Chicken Ball,” a yearly talent contest that Blackie (Clark Gable), a saloon owner, has yet to lose. Mary (Jeanette MacDonald), daughter of a country parson, opera sensation and one-time protégée of Blackie, gets down in the gutter to win it for him and finally (though not in blackface) to provide the minstrel performance of the song “San Francisco” that she has resisted throughout the film. This descent into the vulgar, it is suggested, is too much for God, and His wrath causes the hall to fall down around the revellers, and San Francisco to burst into flames. Earlier, a performance of “Ta Ra Ra Boom Der Re” is heard but not seen, which suggests the shift in representing the vulgar that has occurred between *The Bowery* and *San Francisco*. The debauchery of San Francisco’s aristocracy is similarly not seen but referred to through

dialogue and a distantly heard rendition of “Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,” a standard in the coon singer’s repertoire. Popular song derived from black culture is still the signifier of vulgarity, but it is here being pushed to the margins by the apparently divinely sanctioned operatic style of Jeanette MacDonald’s singing.

III – AUTHENTICATING THE VULGAR Singing the Blues

However refined blackface attempted to become, its roots in the vulgar working-class entertainments of the nineteenth century inevitably show through. Mae West, more than any other Hollywood performer in the early 1930s, represented the low, coarse, bawdy, and vulgar image of early twentieth-century urban America. Mary Beth Hamilton, in her critical biography of West, writes:

Like burlesque performers, West wriggled her body in dances redolent of “primitive” cultures: not just the cootch, but the Grizzly Bear and the Turkey trot, raucous steps that were rooted in African tradition and were all the rage in the urban working class dance hall... Mae West performed [these dances] in a fashion that brought lower-class “indecent” to the foreground.³⁴

Hamilton then quotes a passage from her subject’s autobiography where West recounts a defining moment in the construction of her stage persona:

We went to the elite Number One and the colored couples on the dance floor were doing the “shimmy-shawobble.” Big black men with razor-slashed faces, fancy high yellows and beginners browns – in the smoke of gin scented tobacco to the music of “Can House Blues.” They got up from the tables, got out to the dance floor, and stood in one spot, with hardly any movement of the feet, and just shook their shoulders, torsos and pelvises...

The next day on stage at the matinee, the other actors were standing in the wings watching my act. I always did a dance for an encore. Then inspired by the night before, during the dance music I suddenly stood still and started to shake in a kidding way, for the benefit of the actors in the wings backstage, recalling to them what we had seen the night before at the Elite Number One. The theater began to hum.³⁵

Hamilton uses this anecdote to underscore her argument about West’s vulgarity scaring off big-time audiences. But it also resembles other

³⁴ Mary Beth Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp: Mae West, Sex & Popular Culture* (London: Pandora, 1996), 24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24. See Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: the Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 104–5 on Mae West’s claims to have invented this dance.

musicians’ and minstrels’ authenticating accounts of their appropriation and commercialization of vernacular black culture. In the early 1830s, the originator of blackface, T. D. Rice, acquired the clothes and mannerisms of a Negro performer he encountered outside his Pittsburgh hotel, offering his open mouth for boys to pitch pennies into at three paces. Blacked up and wearing the man’s wretched clothing, Rice strolled onstage: “the extraordinary apparition produced an instant effect... The effect was electric.”³⁶ W. C. Handy’s first encounter with the blues, according to his autobiography, followed similar lines. Handy, waiting for a train, noticed that “a lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me... his clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages.” This anecdote is joined by another in which Handy recognizes the commercial potential in selling the blues to a white audience. During a break, he and his orchestra give up the stage to a local “colored band”:

The music they made was pretty well in keeping with their looks. They struck up one of those over-and-over strains that seem to have no very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all... [The audience went wild and money rained onto the stage.] Then I saw the beauty of primitive music. They had the stuff the people wanted. It touched the spot.³⁷

In each example, the African-American functions to authenticate the appropriating performer, the wide-mouthed and bedraggled Negro for Rice’s “Jump Jim Crow”; the lone itinerant guitarist for Handy’s stature as “Father of the Blues”; the razor-slashed faces of black men and high yellow dancers for West’s taboo-transgressing tough girl. Each artist takes the raw material that it was their fortune to encounter and turns it into a performance that simultaneously signifies and distances itself from its site of origination. The originators provide the performers with a veneer of authenticity, which in turn is reified by the appropriating artist and transformed into a commodity. Mae West’s persona is formed through this play between authenticity and artifice, creating, as Hamilton notes, a style that is “exceedingly hard to pin down”:

She performed an impersonation at several removes: an authentic tough girl mimicking fairy impersonators mimicking the flamboyance of working-class women. What resulted was a baffling hall of mirrors that fascinated and bewildered nearly all who saw it.³⁸

³⁶ Quoted in Lott, *Love & Theft*, 18.

³⁷ Quoted in Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, the Music, the People from Charlie Patton to Robert Cray* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995), 25–26.

³⁸ Hamilton, 134.

Later, Hamilton also adds race to the hall of mirror's emphasis on class, gender, and sexuality: "West's early Broadway exploits earned her the title 'World's Wickedest White Woman,' a phrase that suggested an excess of lewdness rivalled only by legions of lascivious blacks."³⁹

When Mae West sang in her movies, she sang the blues: "Out on the Deep Blue Sea" and "I'm an Occidental Woman in an Oriental Mood for Love" in *Klondike Annie* (Raoul Walsh, Paramount, 1936); "St. Louis Woman" and W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues" in *Belle of the Nineties* (Leo McCarey, Paramount, 1934); and, in *She Done Him Wrong*, "Frankie and Johnny" and "Easy Rider." Though the last song is rewritten to hide its otherwise unambiguous sexual content behind a story of a day out at the races, it remains in delivery and sentiment a blues number about a pimp and his whore. Blind Lemon Jefferson provides perhaps the best-known recorded version. The title, *She Done Him Wrong* is drawn from the refrain of Frankie and Johnny, a song of no known origin but performed by black and white vernacular and professional musicians since at least the turn of the century. The folk-song collectors Alan and John Lomax, writing in the early 1930s, note that another collector had documented 300 variants of the song.⁴⁰ West would perform it again in *I'm No Angel* (Wesley Ruggles, Paramount, 1933). The song is concerned with a lover's betrayal and Frankie's murderous revenge, and like "Stagger Lee & Billy Lyons," the other key example of a turn of the century unauthored "folk song"⁴¹ emerged out of the coon-song era. But its lack of authorship gives it an aura of authenticity compared to the tin-pan alley crafted coon songs, and for Mae West, no doubt, the song appealed because of its celebration of a public display of love, sex, and violence, and not least for the racial ambiguity of its leading protagonists.

Mae West, in her feathers and shimmering dresses of the period can, with only a little imagination, be found facing Bessie Smith in her "hall

³⁹ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁰ John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934, reprinted New York: Dover, 1994), 103.

⁴¹ For a revealing account of the history and myth behind the song see G. Marcus, C. Brown, and N. Cave, "Stagger Lee: The Murder Mystery," *Mojo*, 26 (Jan. 1996) 72–84. "Stagger Lee" is given an airing in the hillbilly-family feud-coming of the railroad-outdoor melodrama, *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (Paramount, Henry Hathaway, 1936), sung by Fuzzy Knight. For more on "Frankie and Johnny" see Davis, 18–19. Oliver, 235–42, and Randolph, 124–36, that records a number of variants and gives a detailed breakdown of the song's contested parentage. One thing that does seem certain is that the male side of the title's duo only became "Johnny" when The Leighton Brothers, vaudeville performers, copyrighted the song in 1912; he had previously been known as "Albert."

of mirrors.” “Mae learned from the songs of the Blues Queens,” reads yet another formulation of authentication. “She went to Harlem to see them and listened to their race records with more than passing interest. She tried to imitate them.”⁴² But, however sincere Mae West may have been in her imitations of blues singers, the performance’s function is to further her identity as the personification of vulgar female sexuality.⁴³

Frankie and Johnny get the St. Louis Blues

Popular song is a particularly efficient carrier of meaning. “Frankie and Johnny’s” representation of vulgarity, for example, is carried through the *implication* that the song deals with a pimp and his whore whose racial characteristics are open to interpretation. When “the father of country music” Jimmie Rodgers sang it on his 1929 recording, the characters are, the listener presumes, white. But, on blues artist Mississippi John Hurt’s recording (1928), it can be presumed the couple are black. This racial confusion was played upon by the African-American poet, Sterling A. Brown, who in 1932 published a poem about the duo that has a white Frankie and a black Johnny.⁴⁴ Bessie Smith’s version of the song, “Frankie Blues” (1924), creates even more confusion by switching the gender of the characters. These examples are responses to the massive popularity of the song in the late twenties and early thirties. In 1930, a puppet play, using the song’s characters, was performed in New York. It was authored by the young John Huston who had also published a book of stories about the star-crossed lovers. In the same year, a stageplay by Jack Kirkland (who wrote the successful theatrical adaptation of Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*), again based on the song, was closed down by the New York authorities. A review of the property for the MPPDA noted “This is an unbelievable cheap melodrama and I can’t conceive of any company being interested in it. It is of course entirely out so far as the Code is concerned as it is censurable from beginning to end.” But by then Pathé had already produced its own screenplay based on the song, which underwent a large number of changes to meet the censor’s requirements and now carried the less contentious title, *Her Man* (Tay Garnett, 1930).

⁴² Rosetta Reitz, sleeve notes to *Mae West Sings Sultry Songs* Rosetta Records CD RRCD 1315, 1990. See Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 111, for a telling distinction between “Mammys” and blues “Mamas.”

⁴³ See Romana Curry, “*Going to Town* and Beyond: Mae West, Film Censorship and the Comedy of *UnMarriage*,” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. K. B. Karnick and H. Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1995), 219–26 for further discussion of race and Mae West.

⁴⁴ *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 44.



Figure 4. *Her Man* (1930). Frankie (Helen Twelvetrees) and Sailor Dan (Phillips Holmes) who rescues her from Johnny. Courtesy of BFI stills, posters and designs.

Variety's review of the film noted: "Plenty of 'Frankie and Johnny' publicity around New York of late with the dirty play of that title pinched. The picture here merely basing that verse is not dirty. 'Her Man' could have well stood for 'My Man,' and that it will stand up for Pathé seems a certainty. It may also square with the unknowing a lot of girls who are victims of environment" (*sic*).⁴⁵ Ruth Vasey has documented the problems the film had with the MPPDA and how the location of the story moved from the Barbary Coast to Cuba, to an unidentified island off the coast of America (and at least in the studio publicity, if not in the film, to Paris).⁴⁶ But, despite these changes in locale, the song remains intrinsically American and decidedly low class.

Red Headed Woman (Jack Conway, MGM, 1932) caused considerable

⁴⁵ *Variety*, 17 Sept 1930.

⁴⁶ See forthcoming, Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood* for discussion of censorship problems with the story's location. Many thanks to Richard Maltby for supplying the Production Code file on *Her Man*.

controversy because of its story of a working-class gold-digger who uses sex to get what she wants. When her boss stays home with his wife rather than making love to her, the heroine, Lillian (Jean Harlow), consoles herself by drinking cheap hootch and playing “Frankie and Johnny” on her phonograph. The song functions to confirm her illicit desires. But the film that brought the song’s vulgar implications to a head for the PCA was Select Productions’ *Frankie and Johnnie* [*sic.*] (Chester Erskin/John Auer), starring Helen Morgan and Chester Morris as the title characters. Filmed in 1934, it was denied a Production Code certificate until 1936, by which time new scenes had been shot, the ending changed, and the singing of the ballad eliminated. The song’s theatrical and cinematic history meant that, by 1936, when 20th Century-Fox wanted to use the song in *Banjo On My Knee*, Joe Breen at the PCA was strongly advising against its inclusion: “use of the song Frankie and Johnnie [*sic.*] is generally deleted by political censor boards. The music alone may be acceptable. We suggest, however, that this be changed.”⁴⁷ The producers replaced “Frankie and Johnny” with “St. Louis Blues,” an instrumental version of which was also played on Lillian’s phonograph in *Red Headed Woman*, though in this scene she gets her man. In *Her Man*, “St. Louis Blues” is used to underscore a moment when Frankie (Helen Twelvetrees) appears to be turning against her new lover.

“St. Louis Blues” was composed by W. C. Handy, the self-styled “Father of the Blues,” but better described by Ian Whitcomb as the “stenographer of the blues.”⁴⁸ When Handy published the song in 1915, he had his eye firmly on the mass white market. The popularity of “St. Louis Blues” on its publication, and since, is extraordinary, showing how acutely attuned Handy was to what white consumers wanted from a “black” song. “St. Louis Blues” soon found a home with blackface minstrel performers such as Emmett Miller who recorded the song in 1928 and in the following year released a version of “The Ghost of The St. Louis Blues,” in which the singer is haunted by that “Darkey’s

⁴⁷ PCA file, *Banjo On My Knee*, Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS. The song was still on the PCA “blacklist” at least as late as 1944 when MGM hoped to include it in *Ziegfeld Follies*. Breen again noted it was “unacceptable from the standpoint of the Production Code, on account of its flavor of prostitution and excessive sex suggestiveness.” Quoted in Hugh Fordin, *The World of Entertainment: Hollywood’s Greatest Musicals* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 121–22. However, the song is back again in Preston Sturges’s *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (20th Century-Fox, 1949); and before that in the Droopy cartoon, *The Shooting of Dan McGoo* (MGM, 1945) as a piano instrumental in a goldrush barroom scene.

⁴⁸ Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin*, 205.



Figure 5. *Frankie and Johnnie* (1936). Frankie (Helen Morgan) and Johnnie (Chester Morris), who done her wrong... Courtesy of BFI stills, posters and designs.

melody.”⁴⁹ The song was also the vehicle for one of Bessie Smith’s greatest performances (1925), producing an almost definitive evocation of the blues, and one of Paul Robeson’s worst, in which he eschews blue notes and turns out an utterly soulless rendition. Its use in the Barbara Stanwyck films *Baby Face*, an urban melodrama, and *Banjo On My Knee*, a Southern melodrama of poor whites, reveals how closely associated black American culture is with portraying a white American vernacular.⁵⁰

Baby Face has entered the film studies canon largely through the

⁴⁹ The two songs can be found on Emmett Miller, *The Minstrel Man from Georgia* (Columbia Legacy, 483584 2, 1996).

⁵⁰ “*St. Louis Blues*” is also used in the Barbara Stanwyck film *Ladies They Talk About* (Howard Bretherton and William Keighley, Warner Bros. 1933); and in *Dancers in the Dark* (David Burton, Paramount, 1932) which stars Miriam Hopkins and Jack Oakie; *Rain* (Lewis Milestone, United Artists, 1932) starring Joan Crawford; and, not surprisingly, in *Saint Louis Blues* (Raoul Walsh, Paramount, 1939). In short films it appears in: *St. Louis Blues* (1929) starring Bessie Smith; *That’s the Spirit* (1932) in which it is sung by Noble Sissle; and *Barbershop Blues*, as part of a medley played by Claude Hopkins’s band. These shorts are discussed in Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 204–7 and 233. And the tune continues to weave its spell in the decades that followed the 30s.

controversy caused on its release, created by the explicitness of its portrayal of a woman who sleeps her way up the corporate ladder from office boy to president of the bank. Her amorality and rise from illegal drinking shop, where her father forced her to sleep with his customers, to eventual wealth and marriage, is both qualified and commented on by the presence of her black friend/servant (Theresa Harris), who punctuates the narrative with her rendition of “St. Louis Blues.” The song, which is both vocalized and used as a musical motif, acts as a constant reminder of Stanwyck’s character’s lowly status. It functions like an aural birthmark, a sign of her vulgar beginnings and flawed character which, regardless of how much wealth she accrues, she is unable to shake off. The film’s resolution has her return, penniless but happily married, to the city where she started out from. Although this ending is tacked on to provide a lesson in morals and to placate the censors, it can also be seen as the confirmation of who she is, where she has come from, and where she must stay.⁵¹ What happens to her black friend/servant is not revealed, but it is clear that she now no longer has a function to perform. Her singing of “St. Louis Blues” never allows an audience to forget that any and all attempts by Stanwyck’s character to escape her vulgar upbringing were always doomed to failure. In other respects, “St. Louis Blues” could be said to comment overtly on Stanwyck’s character: “St. Louis woman without your diamond ring, / if you didn’t have good looks you wouldn’t mean a thing. / If it wasn’t for powder and store bought hair, / without the man who loves you, / you wouldn’t get no where.” She is the woman with “A heart like a rock down in the sea.”

In *Banjo On My Knee*, the heart of Pearl (Stanwyck) is not hard, just sorely tested by a husband Ernie (Joel McCrea) who consistently absents himself from the narrative and their bed whenever it appears as if they are finally going to consummate the marriage. This is a problem for Pearl but, in the film’s scheme of things, it is an even greater dilemma for her father-in-law, Newt (Walter Brennan), who has waited many a year to play “St. Louis Blues” outside his son’s and daughter-in-law’s bedroom on their first night of matrimony. The setting is a cluster of rafts tied to an island in the middle of the Mississippi. Newt’s riverboat neighbours had serenaded him and his bride with the song, and now it is his turn to pass on this totem of good luck and blessing for his future grandchild.

⁵¹ For example, Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930–1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 266–72. Also Richard Malby’s meticulous case study of the film’s production: “*Baby Face*, or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash.” *Screen*, 27, 2 (1986), 22–46.

The film caused some initial difficulties between the production company and the PCA. A reader of the first complete script complained about the “excessive drinking” and “the suggestive running gag showing Newt’s efforts to have Pearl and Ernie sleep together so that the marriage may be consummated.” Darryl Zanuck, the film’s producer, in a fit of outrage, responded with a three page tightly typed letter which made the counter complaint that “Your reader has injected smut and sex where none was ever intended... We are telling a beautiful love story laid among a certain type of river people that exist on the Mississippi today... It is a real human romantic drama, about real human beings... They are not drunks, they are not whores.”⁵² Zanuck clearly felt that his film had been slighted, yet the PCA reader’s view is not without considerable foundation. Even after a number of changes had been made in the script to bring it in line with the Code, the film can still be read as sexually suggestive. If the characters were to have any credence as “a certain type of river people” then they needed to be given traits by necessity vulgar – how else to characterize an underclass given Hollywood’s world view? For Zanuck, the vulgar is ameliorated by playing on stereotyped ideas of an American vernacular and through the construction of the characters as childlike. As such, at least for Zanuck, any sexual innuendo simply does not exist. The ambiguity carried by the characters – sexual adults or innocent children – is similar to that found in *The Bowery*. This ambiguity, that draws upon the childlike happy plantation darkey and the sexualized razor-toting coon, belongs only to white characters. To represent African-Americans, even through the mask of blackface, as multidimensional would contradict the racial caricature by humanizing the object of ridicule.

Through a series of incidents that are as implausible as they are ridiculous, Pearl and Newt end up performing in a New Orleans’ bar, Cafe Creole, where she wows a slumming sophisticated audience with sentimental ditties, and he gets them dancing as he plays his bones and banjo, and bangs out a medley of nineteenth-century minstrel tunes on his weird contraption that harnesses all sorts of homemade instruments. This is a low-rent version of the kind of novelty act that was contemporaneously performed by the Hoosier Hot Shots, a comedy hillbilly group that found fame playing on the same bill as Gene Autry on WLS’s National Barn Dance, broadcast out of Chicago in the 1930s. In the 1940s, Spike Jones & His City Slickers would popularize another variant of this

⁵² PCA file, *Banjo On My Knee*, Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS. Letter dated 24 Aug. 1936.

kind of act, which can be seen to good effect in *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (David Butler, Warner Bros., 1943), a variety film led by Eddie Cantor, who by this point had given up performing in blackface.

Newt and Pearl, despite their success and acclaim, drift back to their river home where he finally gets to play “St. Louis Blues” as Pearl and Ernie consummate their marriage in the film’s closing moments. In *Baby Face*, the song reinforces the heroine’s lowly status; in *Banjo On My Knee* it serves the same purpose, but with the added resonance of having a white character sing the song. The song’s black origin is confirmed in a scene in the last third of the film when Stanwyck’s love-sick character, roaming the back streets of New Orleans at sunset, hears a black woman singing “St. Louis Blues” (performed, as in *Baby Face*, by Theresa Harris). Cut into the scene are vignettes of black labourers bent double by the weight of the cotton bales they carry on their backs. The scene both adds poignancy to the evocation of lost love, and works to suggest how close the river boat community are to becoming “black.” Indeed, the lighting of Stanwyck changes from the opening scenes where she gives off a white radiance to the scenes in the Cafe Creole where she becomes markedly darker.

The beginning of the film creates a view of primitive yet vital community that draws heavily from combined stereotypes of poor Southern whites and blackface minstrels. One of the marginal characters Buddy (Buddy Ebson), who performs accompanying dances to Newt’s music-making both on the boats and at the Cafe Creole, belongs firmly within the minstrel tradition. Despite Zunuck’s claims to the contrary, much is made of the excessive drinking, the frivolity of the singing and dancing and the centrality of the sexual act in all this party-making. The blackface tradition that this is being drawn from is also signalled in the film’s title, which is taken from Stephen Foster’s “Oh! Susanna.” The film only refers to the song briefly in the title music, offering instead an original composition, which suggests the title was chosen to emphasise the film’s commonality with the minstrel milieu. The film is, of course, a grand farce, a celebration of a vernacular American culture, and it was well received by the American press who responded positively to “the novel characters and situation.”⁵³

Banjo On My Knee is something of an anomaly in its appropriation of black culture, because the characters refuse to refine or leave this culture behind. In the other films discussed in this article, with the exception of

⁵³ See press clippings in *ibid.*



Figure 6. *Banjo On My Knee* (1936). Newt (Walter Brennan), extreme left, behind his musical contraption, accompanies Pearl (Barbara Stanwyck) and Buddy (Buddy Ebson) at the Cafe Creole. Courtesy of BFI stills, posters and designs.

The Jazz Singer, the contradictions involved in the performance of blackface are made redundant through a nostalgic evocation of the past. In *Banjo On My Knee*, the contradictions are only tentatively contained by separating and isolating the riverboat community from the rest of America. The production was motivated in large part by the desire to cash in on the success of the Broadway adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, which featured similar character types. However, in its aligning of white characters and Hollywood stars so closely with images of blackness that are not distanced and displaced through the mask of blackface, or through a presentation that nostalgically evokes a theatrical tradition, it raises the possibility that the key distinction between black and white is economic rather than racial. This clearly is an untenable idea with regard to the period's dominant ideological construction of race.

As Roediger and Alexander Saxton have argued, the peculiar construction of American racism has its roots in the foundation of the Republic which, in counterpoint to Europe, declared its independence

through the call of deference to no one.⁵⁴ However, this statement of equality was profoundly qualified by the presence of slavery within the Republic. Roediger argues that this lived contradiction came to act as the means by which the white American working class were able to reconcile their dependency on an employer (a situation which worked against the rhetoric of living in a republic) through the “psychological wage” of being “not black” and “not slave.” The creation of the Republic removed many of the certainties about the individual’s station in life, but what was certain for the white working-class American male was that he was neither black nor slave. Roediger shows “how Blacks, free and slave, could be stigmatised precisely because slavery thrived in republican America, indeed that they could be stigmatised as the *antithesis* of republican America.”⁵⁵ It is in this space that blackface minstrelsy derived its meaning: it helped create a new sense of whiteness by creating a new sense of blackness. The central characters in *Banjo On My Knee* seem not to care whether they are seen as white or black; suspended in a pre-modern world their lot is to remain isolated from the rest of America.

Hollywood’s use of blackface towards the end of the decade was declining though examples can be found in such elegiac tributes to America’s theatrical past in films as *Babes in Arms* (MGM, Busby Berkeley, 1939), where showbiz kids hope to revive vaudeville, and a Stephen Foster biography, *Swanee River* (20th Century-Fox, Sidney Lanfield, 1939), then into the forties with the brace of films that set up Jolson as a figure of the past, *The Jolson Story* (Columbia, Alfred F. Green, 1946) and *Jolson Sings Again* (Columbia, Henry Levin, 1949). While *Dixie* (Paramount, Edward Sutherland, 1943) a musical biography of the nineteenth-century blackface star Dan Emmett made full use of burnt cork, *My Gal Sal* (20th Century-Fox, Irving Cummings, 1942), a biopic of the minstrel tunesmith Paul Dresser substituted “Lisa Jane” for “I’se Your Nigger If You Wants Me, Lisa Jane,” and kept the banjo-strumming star of the movie (Victor Mature) out of blackface. By the early forties, with the success of Westerns like *Dodge City* (Warner Bros., Michael Curtiz, 1939) and *Destry Rides Again* (Universal, George Marshall, 1939), the concert-saloon had become part of the iconography of the Western. In its transition to the West, the concert-saloon loses much of its urban specificity, but it remains a sign of America’s primitive beginnings – the dances on stage are often little more than variations on “Ta Ra Ra Boom Der Re,” and the

⁵⁴ Alexander Saxton, *The Rise & Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in 19th Century America* (London: Verso, 1990); Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

⁵⁵ Roediger, 36.

incidental music is, almost without exception, based on the most immediately recognizable minstrel tunes of the nineteenth century, “Oh Dem Golden Slippers,” “Oh! Susanna,” “Camptown Races,” “Buffalo Girls,” etc. The logical extension of the Western’s play with minstrelsy is found in John Wayne’s appearance in blackface in *The Spoilers* (Universal, Ray Enright, 1942). Popular song derived from black American culture would continue to be a significant element in American cinema’s representation of vulgarity and illicit desires. Hollywood’s representation of blackface as a signifier of nostalgia helped to undercut whatever relevance the form still had for a contemporary audience, but, in doing so, it also made blackface an essential element in the evocation of an American vernacular, a cultural miscegenation at once recognized and denied.

In an early scene in *Showboat*, two hillbillies go to see their first theatrical performance. They pay for their tickets with Confederate currency. The money is worthless, but it is still in circulation. Blackface is like that worthless currency. Its time has apparently long passed, yet it refuses to disappear, returning whenever American culture needs to express a vernacular tradition.