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**‘It’s all the way you look at it, you know’: reading Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson’s
film career**

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This article engages with a major paradox in African American tap dancer Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson’s film image – namely, its concurrent adherences to and contestations of dehumanising racial iconography – to reveal the complex and often ambivalent ways in which identity is staged and enacted. Although Robinson is often understood as an embodiment of popular cultural imagery historically designed to dehumanise African Americans, this paper shows that Robinson’s artistry displaces these readings by providing viewing pleasure for black, as much as white, audiences.

Robinson’s racially segregated scenes in *Dixiana* (1930) and *Hooray for Love* (1935) illuminate classical Hollywood’s racial codes, whilst also showing how his inclusion within these otherwise all-white films provides grounding for creative and self-reflexive artistry. The films’ references to Robinson’s stage image and artistry overlap with minstrelsy-derived constructions of ‘blackness’, with the effect that they heighten possible interpretations of his cinematic persona by evading representational conclusion. Ultimately, Robinson’s films should be read as sites of representational struggle that help to uncover the slipperiness of performances of African American identities in 1930s Hollywood.

Keywords: Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson; tap dance; minstrelsy; specialty number; classical Hollywood

In 1935 musical *Hooray for Love*, a character played by Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson (1878-1949), one of Hollywood’s first black screen stars, declares, ‘it’s all the way you look at it, you know’ to describe his surroundings. This statement is a fitting description of the nature of Robinson’s cinematic representation, which can be read both as a historical allusion to blackface performance and as an artistic signification on contemporary racial discourses. Summing up the art of African American collagist Romare Bearden, writer Ralph Ellison (1958, 696) highlights two important points: first, that the works express the ‘distortions’ and ‘paradoxes’ of African American history; second, that they articulate ‘a vision in which the socially grotesque conceals a tragic beauty’, thereby complicating a crude surface image with a humanising, but often unrecognised, undertone. Artistic and genre differences notwithstanding, this synopsis provides a helpful introduction to Robinson’s cinematic image. For, in a film career defined by a fixed racial iconography, Robinson’s roles are filled with ambiguity. They can be read concurrently as capitulations and challenges to an occlusive racial order, not least because they give expression to a series of virtuosic tap performances that literally ‘dance’ within their racially subjugating and demeaning cinematic frameworks. At the same time that Robinson’s roles are restricted to subservient characterisations and segregated from their films’ white stars, they also represent expressions of an individual and ultimately self-referential bodily display enacted through dance.

This essay will investigate Robinson’s performances in *Dixiana* (1930) and *Hooray for Love* (1935) to examine their complexities within an otherwise straitening field of racist representations and cinematic segregation, and consequently their potential for manifold readings. In *Dixiana*, Robinson’s first film, the performer is positioned as a dutiful enslaved man in an exoticised display

of racial subservience and innate musicality: he features in the film as an apparently happy labourer whose purpose it is to clean thrones prior to an enthronement ceremony, a role that facilitates a seemingly spontaneous tap dance. Dislocated from the main action, desexualised by physical isolation and reduced to a single, three-and-a-half-minute performance number, the fact that Robinson has no spoken lines dehumanises him further. He can be read as an embodiment of racial 'otherness' and cultural exclusion, his performance an example of what Donald Bogle (1973, 35) describes as 'the blackface fixation', a common trait of 1930s African American performances in which the actor 'presents for mass consumption black life as seen through the eyes of white artists', thereby becoming 'a black man in blackface'. Distanced from human interaction in a film that upholds a romanticised vision of the antebellum South, Robinson evokes an original purpose of minstrelsy, which was to objectify black culture for the amusement of white audiences.

And yet, other readings are possible. I contend that Robinson creates a performance that may also be read as a subversive play on the minstrel image and a challenge to the film's racial codes. At the beginning of the scene, Robinson emerges from a hiding place behind one of the thrones in a move that at once compounds his representational absence and cultural dislocation, whilst simultaneously deceiving audiences into perceiving a humble enslaved man. This provides Robinson with an unassuming starting ground from which to unsettle racial stereotyping with cerebral artistry. As such, and, as this essay will show, the dancer's performance embodies a dialectical interplay of cultural imagery that facilitates complex, even contradictory, interpretations.

Robinson was one of America's first black stage and screen stars. His

Hollywood roles represented rare chances to see African American performances in 1930s and 1940s mainstream films. Marshall and Jean Stearns (1968, 151) note that, following his performance in musical revue *Blackbirds* of 1928, Robinson became the first African American dance star on Broadway. He was the first to achieve serious critical acclaim, ‘creating a new and much larger public for vernacular dance’ in the process (*ibid.*, 151). Dance historian Richard A. Long (1989, 44–45) claims that, ‘[i]t was Bill Robinson and tap ... which constituted the chief direct contribution to the Hollywood musical in the 1930s’. Robinson’s work as the most frequent screen partner of the Depression era’s highest grossing film star, Shirley Temple, meant that he was one of the most watched musical performers of the 1930s.¹ As *Life* magazine noted on 12 December 1949, his funeral cortege was witnessed by more than a million people, which it claimed was the largest crowd New York had ever seen for such an event.

Robinson’s dancing style had a direct influence on other star performers of the era including Fred Astaire (1899-1987). In *Swing Time* (1936), Astaire performs an eight-minute tap dance homage to Robinson entitled ‘Bojangles of Harlem’. But the scene demeans Robinson and undermines his talents by reducing his image to a minstrel mask. Curtains open onto a stage that features what appears to be an enormous black head with huge lips and Robinson’s trademark derby hat. The ‘head’ is revealed to be a pair of gigantic shoes which are worn by a black-faced Fred Astaire. He then executes a tap routine and ends his performance against a background of black shadows that mirror his movements. Nonetheless, the sequence also highlights the artistic connections between Astaire and Robinson. Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2000, 83) observes that, ‘at least in part, [Astaire’s] work is based on the black tap dance tradition and aesthetic that were

developed by tap dancers whose names have been forgotten'. Thomas Cripps (1977, 99) points to a direct artistic connection between Astaire and Robinson by noting that, 'Astaire proudly boasted of appearing on the same vaudeville card with Bill Robinson'. Despite its distortions, Astaire's performance is a rare cinematic acknowledgement of African American authorship that highlights the creative influence that Robinson's artistry held over Hollywood's leading dance stars. The scene and Robinson's career more generally underscore classical Hollywood's conflicting treatment of African American entertainers. During this period, films marginalised and reinforced minstrelsy-derived representations of black performers but also sought to capitalise on their showmanship and in so doing provided platforms for their skills as technically accomplished artistries.

This essay examines a key form of cinematic marginalisation during the early sound era: the one-off performance, or 'specialty number', which featured African American musicians and dancers in short musical routines within otherwise all-white films. As Michele Wallace (1993, 265) notes, specialty numbers were 'designed to use Blacks in films without having to integrate them into the plot' so they 'could be cut out of the film when showing it in the South'. The potential for excision reflected the wider policy of racial exclusion in the South, where the law mandated segregated movie houses and censors banned films in which blacks and whites were depicted as social equals. Cripps (1970, 128 & 121) identifies what he terms 'the myth of the Southern box office', which held that the region's response to a film would impact significantly on its overall financial success, and which therefore allowed Southern racial attitudes to dictate the contents of Hollywood productions. Wallace's deployment of the term 'to use' highlights the external exploitation and control at the centre of specialty numbers,

and shows how they can be read as regressions to blackface minstrelsy and thus as dehumanising and commodifying representations of African American performances for amusement and profit.

This cinematic framework is particularly relevant to a discussion of Robinson because these sequences represented his most typical Hollywood role, with six of his twelve appearances in feature-length films falling into this category. Precisely half of Robinson's Hollywood appearances, therefore, were fleeting, irrelevant to their films' plots and characterisations, and restricted to northern audiences. Yet, these scenes are fundamentally paradoxical in their representations of Robinson. They dictate subservience to white rule, but they also facilitate a degree of cinematic acknowledgement within otherwise all-white films that complicates the notion of his subjugation. Further, and perhaps most significantly, they enable Robinson to cultivate a self-reflexive, highly personal cinematic image because they are disconnected from their films' plot constraints.

Central to Robinson's cinematic stardom were his tap dance performances. Marshall and Jean Stearns's seminal text on modern dance, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (1968), places Robinson at the heart of tap, and by implication modern dance's, development. They note that, '[h]e brought [tap] up on the toes, dancing upright and swinging', adding that he 'danced with a hitherto-unknown lightness and presence [emphasis added]' (ibid., 186–187). Maurice O. Wallace (2002) describes dance as 'a valuable sign system', a means of communicating with an audience that is unconnected to a film's script and, by implication, its plot intentions. For Wallace, in dance's 'deepest structures ... lies an alternate reality of black masculine subjecthood, one characterised by "new stylistic options" for identity display' (ibid., 150). Wallace sees dance

performance as a non-linguistic device that provides its own representational strategies and may in fact create meanings that are inherently transgressive, and which contests film frameworks even when it appears to be subsumed by them. Although the effect of plots on audiences should not be ignored, Wallace's reading of dance as a field of communication disengaged from film structures positions creative performances such as those by Robinson as potential means of contesting and even subverting popular cinematic representations of black masculinities.

Hollywood's early sound era revived the minstrel show, a genre widely confined to rural areas of the US in the first decades of the twentieth century (see Knight, 2002, 33-34). In so doing, it reignited the persistent image of the blackface performer, which had succeeded in degrading and dehumanising African Americans in US popular culture. As Daniel J. Leab (1975, 8) has argued, minstrel shows 'succeeded in fixing the black man in the American consciousness as a ludicrous figure supposedly born, as one show business history puts it, "hoofing on the levee to the strumming of banjos [emphasis added]"'. Fixing is the operative word here, because it underscores minstrelsy's function of ascribing 'racial' attributes onto African Americans to the extent that their identities were reduced to sport and play, as their bodies were objectified and their human complexities hidden behind a performance 'mask'. As Ellison (1958, 101) defined minstrelsy, it was a 'mask' whose 'function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask'.

In the 1990s, however, scholars such as Eric Lott (1993), Dale Cockrell (1997), W. T. Lhamon (1998) and William J. Mahar (1999) re-evaluated minstrelsy by positioning it as an important zone of representational conflict. Lott

suggests that it was ‘based on small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation’ (ibid., 4), and all agree that it was caught between a concurrent fear of and fascination with the black ‘other’ (ibid., 25). Lhamon seeks to ‘analyze the multiple aspects in blackface performance’. He suggests that ‘it was not a fixed thing, but slippery in its uses and effects’ (ibid., 5). He argues that,

[c]ultural work never produces a clean before-and-after situation of replaced categories, as in ‘man’ for ‘thing.’ Rather, it gives a ratio in which categories slide over and among each other, obscuring and peeking through their counterparts ... Culture transmits codes that are complex. People decode them differently (ibid., 141).

Readings of minstrelsy have tended to ignore the ways in which black performers intervened in the genre to develop methods of physical expression that allowed them to ‘signify’ on – and thus talk back to – racialised social hierarchies and attain a measure of self-affirmation. When black performers such as Robinson first appeared on the commercial stage in the late nineteenth century, they were confined to minstrel shows. Although Robinson’s biographers, Jim Haskins and N. R. Mitgang (1988, 33 & 43-44), provide evidence to suggest that the dancer never performed in blackface, his first stage role was as a ‘pickaninny’ on the minstrel show *The South Before the War* (ca 1892). Working within the minstrel tradition, black performers, including Robinson, developed an improvisational aesthetic that would become inherent components of jazz and tap dance, and which used innuendo to subvert racial codes at the same time that it challenged puritanical societal attitudes towards the body, which restricted human behaviours. As Berndt Ostendorf (1982, 88) asserts, ‘Minstrelsy may be said to have maintained in the midst of a culture of alienation an affirmative attitude toward the body, literally on the backs of Afro-America’.

As understood in this light, Robinson’s film career is critically important, both

for delineating the ways in which audiences interpret the meanings of African American cinematic performances, and for revealing the ways in which negative cultural frameworks can be – and have been – challenged. What is particularly significant about Robinson’s career is that it encapsulates Ostendorf’s (2000) notion of African American historical memory, which, he argues, is ‘torn between the dual and alternating heritages of pathological ascription and celebratory achievement, between outside habits of racist ascription and the appreciative inside view, and between past significance and present meaning’ (ibid., 218). According to Ostendorf, ascriptions of meaning can themselves be contextualised, a suggestion that hints at the potential fluidity and interpretative possibilities of Robinson’s screen identity. As considered in the light of its competing contexts, Robinson’s image, which has been variously celebrated, maligned and ignored, can be seen as part of a conflict between present interpretations and historical cultural and racial discourses.

Perhaps because of their brevity and also due to a wider critical neglect of Robinson, his scenes in *Dixiana* and *Hooray for Love* have received almost no scholarly attention. Discussions on the segregated specialty number as a whole have been passionate and insightful but generally fleeting and, until recently, quick to dismiss such scenes as unequivocally racist. For example, Jim Pines (1975, 57) lists a host of African American performers only to note that, ‘all were featured in “natural” roles providing consistent and dynamic entertainment in otherwise white movies; but they had no dramatic purpose apart from that’. For Pines, even in an example of significant re-evaluation of early African American cinema during the

1970s, specialty performers failed to humanise their cinematic personae; he consequently describes their delineations of black identities as ‘primitive’ and childlike. Writing in the early 1990s, James Snead (1994, 4–7) noted that ‘[t]he repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance creates the presence of the idea that blacks belong in positions of obscurity and dependence’, thereby positioning these scenes as cinematic capitulations to racial segregation. Like Pines, Snead’s reading failed to pinpoint the complex dynamics involved in performances such as Robinson’s, particularly the ways in which racist identity codes overlapped with self-referential creative artistry and subversive ‘play’ to heighten new possible interpretations of his cinematic persona while simultaneously colluding with these representational stereotypes.

In contrast, and as a result of reevaluations in minstrelsy scholarship in the 1990s, recent critical approaches to film musicals by Sean Griffin and Arthur Knight (both 2002) suggest that the African American specialty number represented an alternative discourse of racial representation. In particular, Griffin seeks to recover these scenes as ‘the *raison d’être* of the [musical] genre’, arguing that ‘minority performers could at times use the structure of the [Twentieth Century-]Fox musical to “take over” the film’ (ibid., 22). He asserts that,

[i]n all likelihood ... audiences flocked to these films more for the musical numbers than for the plot lines, and evidence indicates that the virtuoso talent of minority specialties often worked effectively to interrupt and supersede the white stars and the narrative trajectory (ibid., 3).

Griffin reads these scenes as sites of cinematic anarchism that displaced conventional racial hierarchies by providing a platform for performers such as Robinson to display their superior technical artistry and thus to steal the attention from less talented white stars. They overcame positions of racial ‘otherness’ to

become their films' most visually dominant and thus most memorable performers.

Although Griffin's reading does not allow for the transience of these scenes in relation to their overall film frameworks, it helps to uncover their cultural significance for 1930s African American movie audiences. Arthur Knight (2002, 20) argues that one of the dangers of downplaying the specialty number is that it 'may downplay a key mode of black reception'. Like Richard Dyer (1986, 5), who suggests that the audience is part of the making of any image, he argues that film genres must be seen as 'a contest among variously interested producers, critics, and audiences' (Knight, 17). Knight affirms that, '[h]owever reluctantly, musicals – perhaps especially in their “more randomised, more fragmentary forms” like the specialty numbers ... offered African Americans access to these processes [of contestation] and remain as evidence of struggle' (ibid., 17). For Knight, therefore, specialty numbers represented sites of racial identification for contemporary African American audiences. These moments of apparent humanisation and stardom were, of course, restricted to one-off, easily excised scenes and so their acts of apparent 'misrule' remained temporally and visually limited, and containable within a white production framework. What the above critical interpretations reveal, however, is that, rather than fixing racial boundaries, specialty numbers could also open up new sites of signification to reveal an interesting interplay of representational conflicts and paradoxes.

Dixiana, Robinson's feature-length film debut, depicts a fantasy antebellum South filled with jovial, childlike enslaved women, men and children. There is no impending Civil War to destabilise this apparently contented world of enslavement, and the film's racial hierarchy is symbolically illuminated in the film's final scene: Dixiana, the white female lead, is enthroned as 'queen' in an

elaborate Mardi Gras ceremony. *Dixiana* therefore exemplifies Pines's description of the early sound era plantation film as a 'reactionary genre' that 'allowed white movie-makers to avoid social realities thoroughly' (28), insofar as it plays into a contemporaneous Hollywood vision of the antebellum South as seen in such films as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), both of which actively occlude human abuses at the heart of slavery. Through masking and caricaturing African American humanity, the film therefore recalls minstrelsy's attempt to appropriate 'blackness' to maintain cultural control over African American identities. Citing *Dixiana* as an example of the popularity of the plantation genre during the depression years of 1929 to 1941, Ed Guerrero (1993, 19) notes that these films reassured audiences through 'denial and escapism', which in turn 'functioned to contain and structure race relations'.

The scene's soundtrack, a nostalgic song entitled 'Mr and Mrs Sippi', compounds such racial attitudes. It connects Robinson's image to blackface performance by imitating the crude racist themes of nineteenth-century minstrel songs, telling of a former slave who is 'a-comin' home' to the Mississippi River because 'you're just like my mammy and pappy', and 'when's I's besides you I's happy'. 'Mr and Mrs Sippi's' similarities to Daniel Decatur Emmett's famous pro-slavery minstrel song 'Dixie' are striking; both mock black dialect and sing of a former slave who longs for the South, consequently positioning slavery as a patriarchal and benevolent institution. 'Mr and Mrs Sippi' also features in *Dixiana's* title sequence and opening scene, strengthening the connection between Robinson's performance and the film's nostalgic simplifications of daily enslaved life; the fact that it is sung by Everett Marshall, the film's white male lead, positions 'blackness' in *Dixiana* as a site of performance available for

appropriation by whites.

The image that Robinson presents in this scene can therefore be read as a romantic display that adheres to Cripps's (1993, 4) notion of the early sound era African American performer as a 'conservative memory bank of a painless nostalgia'. Robinson performs an idealistic image of the past that obscures the abuses of slavery; his tap performance in this scene is apparently spontaneous – his actual role is to clean, not dance – which connects his image to racist notions of an innate musicality. Jacqui Malone (1996, 115) argues that 'Hollywood's tap dance sequences were usually staged in a way that made this difficult art form appear to be nothing more than spontaneous outbursts erupting from one's nature instead of one's culture', and thus a recourse to racist notions that African Americans were impulsive and childlike. By engaging in a seemingly impromptu performance, Robinson's character's artistic talents can be perceived as innate, positioning him as an uninhibited and 'uncivilised', and therefore dehumanised, spectacle of fascination for white audiences.

The humanity of Robinson's performance is undermined further because, aside from being separated from the plot, he is segregated from the other characters in his only scene in the film. Robinson is positioned as an enslaved man who can only enjoy the pleasure of sitting on an ornamental throne as he stoops to clean it. He is physically distanced from the film's porcelain-skinned female lead, the title character Dixiana (played by Bebe Daniels), who, despite being the film's main protagonist, notably never shares a scene with any of the film's many enslaved men and women. Robinson's performance therefore adheres strongly to the anti-miscegenation ruling of Hollywood's censorship body, the Motion Pictures Production Code (Hays Code) – which was introduced just months before the film

was released – that inferences of sexual relationships between black and white characters must not be depicted.ⁱⁱ

However, although the scene can be read as spontaneous, reinforcing popular themes of innate African American musicality, it can also be understood as an act of artistic creativity and self-expression, and therefore of jazz improvisation, a key component of tap dance. Tap dance as an art form, whilst often appearing spontaneous, is rooted in the ability to think quickly as well as an understanding of – and capability to rework – complex artistry. Malone writes that, ‘[r]hythm tappers are jazz percussionists who value improvisation and self-expression. Jazz musicians tell stories with their instruments and rhythm tappers tell stories with their feet’ (Malone, 95). According to Gottschild, it is the improvisational aesthetic inherent in African American vernacular dance that liberates the performer from societal structures:

[In swing aesthetics] body suppleness, vitality, and flexibility – the intelligence of the dancing body – were more important for dancers than demonstrating a predetermined movement technique such as the standardised ballet vocabulary. Rhythm, timing, vital flashes of innovation that might change with each performance – in other words, the overarching power of improvisation – were valued above set, formal, repeatable patterns (Gottschild, 14).

Robinson performs an act of social misrule in this scene as he sits on a throne and situates himself as ‘king’. The knowing smile that he gives to the film’s audience as he does so positions him as both jovial minstrel and playful trickster contemplating a rebellious dance act while no-one is looking. The lack of an onscreen audience, which situates the sequence as playful and spontaneous, can also be read as a subtle subversion of social hierarchies that negates notions of mindless spontaneity. While Robinson must perform in this scene as a servant, he

throws away his feather duster halfway through the dance, thus appearing to refuse to work, and using tap performance defiantly to discard his allocated service role.

Robinson's self-reflexivity is key to the scene, which culminates in an elaborate tap dance down a giant flight of steps, a direct homage to his popular onstage stair dance. Haskins and Mitgang (1988, 99 & 225) record that Robinson first introduced the stair dance into his act in 1918, and he became famous for this routine, which helped to launch his career on Broadway in *Blackbirds* of 1928 (Stearns and Stearns, 152). Robinson was so protective of this routine that he would not allow his rivals to copy it (*ibid.*, 152). His adoption of the stair dance in this scene therefore imbues his act with individuality and creative agency and as such problematises homogeneous readings of black artistry. The stair dance gives Robinson the opportunity to showcase his own elevated tap style as he articulates a faithful rendition of the split-shoe, the extremely precise and light-footed dance method that Stearns and Stearns credit him with developing, which situates his performance as highly self-referential.

The film therefore gives Robinson license to re-enact his theatrical persona onscreen, and provides a cinematic record of his onstage tap style, which blended complex polyrhythms with a lightness of touch and tremendous physical skill. It is a technically complex and, indeed, self-affirmative performance. The scene culminates in an anarchic and physically daring display, in which Robinson taps on one foot as he swings his other limbs in the air, all at the top of the oversized staircase. Robinson shocks and even challenges his audience with an elaborate and arresting performance based on precision and showmanship. Fellow tap dancer Pete Nugent described Robinson as 'the absolute tops in control' (Stearns and Stearns, 187), while author James Weldon Johnson (1930, 213–214) called the

stair dance ‘the utmost perfection in tapping out intricate rhythms’, an act that ‘never failed to give the listening spectator pleasurable surprise at the accomplishment of the feat’, and consequently highlighting the individuality and unique skill involved in the performance. Robinson works within early twentieth-century African American performance traditions of improvisation and creative self-expression to literally signify upon and expand the representational boundaries of the blackface image in which he performs. He plays inventively with the scene’s expressive possibilities to realise a very personal art form and counteract representational fixity. He manages his own spatial image through self-reflexive tap steps to reveal a creative authority that challenges the film’s racially homogenising framework.

Robinson’s artistry in this scene is all the more profound and individual for having no connection to the film’s plot. It functions instead as an isolated performance situated outside of *Dixiana’s* plantation framework. The disconnected status of this scene therefore provides Robinson with license to escape direct deference to the film’s white characters. While the ‘private’ scene positions him as insignificant and expendable to the plot, it simultaneously defies racial subservience by facilitating his representational agency. In addition, his physical distance from his African American peers creates a contrast to their childlike but physically oversized characterisations. The film’s other black characters, all servants, are powerfully built and significantly taller than the white characters. Robinson undermines their potentially threatening, buck-like characterisations with cerebral artistry. Stearns and Stearns note that the effect of Robinson’s artistry ‘was to make the audience – and the critics – watch Robinson’s feet’ (156). This focus away from the body undermines attempts to objectify the

dancer. Instead, it encourages audiences to abandon their cultural associations of ‘blackness’ and engage with his artistry. Such emphasis supports Wallace’s suggestion that the dancer’s performances ruptured crude cultural notions of black physicalities – such as the colossal buck and the mindless coon – by articulating an extremely elegant, cerebral and self-affirmative stage image.

Robinson’s performance therefore facilitates different interpretations. By performing as a jovial enslaved man, he is unable to escape Dixiana’s fixed representational framework. But his self-referentiality and subversive play enables him to create a cinematic performance that breaks from the film’s plot and works against its depredations. The audience is forced to acknowledge Robinson’s dancing skill and his position as the scene’s star. His self-reflexive artistry coerces the viewer into confronting the individual behind the performance mask. By performing as a self-referential, cerebral tap dancer in this film, therefore, Robinson roots himself in racist iconography while paradoxically challenging its ability to undermine and confine his cinematic personae.

In contrast to Dixiana, *Hooray for Love* is set in Depression-era New York. Nevertheless, black performers are similarly sidelined from the film’s narrative. The production focuses on the trials of Doug (Gene Raymond), a young white man who, hoping to win over the singer Pat Thatcher (Ann Sothern), accepts an invitation from her con artist father, Commodore Jason Thatcher (Thurston Hall), to invest his life savings in the Broadway show *Hooray for Love*. Doug’s gullibility leads him to financial ruin, threatening to halt the production on its opening night. However, Pat, who by this time has fallen in love with Doug, persuades *Hooray for Love*’s costume and prop suppliers to work without financial

guarantee, and a wealthy widow eventually provides the money that is needed to carry on with the show. Robinson is one of the production's specialty acts, and does not appear until featured in a dress rehearsal near the end of the film.

Hooray for Love, like Dixiana, therefore focuses on an all-white romance and excludes African American artists from its main plot. Robinson is again marginalised as he performs with jazz musician Fats Waller and tap dancer Jeni LeGon in the film's all-black musical number, but he has no other role in the film. Similarly to Dixiana, therefore, Robinson's performance upholds Hollywood's racist segregation policies. This time, the dancer performs on stage, while Doug watches, shouting orders from the aisles. By positioning Doug as a detached voyeur, the sequence evokes minstrelsy's historical fascination with and commodification of black culture, and a shot of Doug halfway through the scene reveals his delight at the show's obvious entertainment value. Further, as the scene ends, Doug tells his performers, 'do it like that tonight, and we're okay'. Thus, 'whiteness' is clearly exploiting 'blackness' for its own gain in this sequence. Nevertheless, the fact that the performance is staged hints at its constructed nature, which facilitates readings of the scene as artifice rather than as social reality, and therefore as a site, like minstrelsy, in which seemingly immutable power relations become slippery and can be contested. By considering Robinson as an embodiment of historical misrepresentations of African American identities and yet also as a performer who ruptures or disembodies these representations through a focus on cerebral artistry, I will show how his performance encapsulates this representational ambiguity.

Pat Thatcher is absent during Robinson's performance; like Dixiana, therefore, the scene appears to obey the anti-miscegenation rulings of the Hays

Code. Nevertheless, whilst the show is carefully segregated between white and black characters, the performance number positions Robinson as its pivotal hero – he helps LeGon’s character to regain her home – thereby disrupting the film’s racial power relations. Further, as Robinson enters the scene, he attracts the attention of a female admirer, who blows a kiss at him, and he later performs as LeGon’s dance partner. The film’s casting of the much younger and paler-skinned LeGon alongside Robinson invites readings of the sequence as a subtle play on the Hays Code’s ban on scenes depicting miscegenation. This apparent subversion is limited, however, as the pair dances toe-to-toe, with the result that there is little body chemistry between them. The purportedly platonic nature of Robinson and LeGon’s relationship is underscored in a twenty-second sequence at the end of the film, when the show is finally staged. LeGon is desexualized in a top hat and tails, which match those of Robinson, and the couple performs a synchronised tap dance, precluding any suggestion of physical interaction. Yet, in the rehearsal scene, Robinson can nevertheless be read as LeGon’s potential suitor. He tells her flirtatiously, ‘child, with that smile you got everything’, an expression that situates him as a plausible male lead, and counters the servant characterisations featured in *Dixiana*.

Like Robinson’s performance in *Dixiana*, this scene is strikingly similar to Robinson’s vaudeville and Broadway image. Robinson plays a mayor in this film which elevates his social status and hints at self-representation. Renowned for his charity and community work, Robinson was named ‘Mayor of Harlem’ in 1933, an unofficial title conferred on important figures in various localities throughout New York (Haskins and Mitgang, 214–215). Robinson is therefore literally playing ‘himself’ in this scene. Moreover, he is allowed to recreate his stage persona by

wearing his trademark stylish clothes and, as he taps down his front steps, the audience is reminded of his well-known stair dance and as such this is a sequence that literally panders to the Robinson star image.

In contrast to *Dixiana*, *Hooray for Love* presents Robinson in an identifiable setting: a staged version of a contemporary Harlem street. The scene therefore recognises the street as an important site of African American artistry, and also situates it as an arena to celebrate: Robinson extols the benefits of outdoor life in the song's title number, 'I'm living in a great big way'. But the performance also allows for a reading of African American life that is as conformist as it is affirmative, and Knight describes the scene as a 'utopia built to serve ... racial separatism' (Knight, 118). *Hooray for Love* was filmed at the height of the Great Depression, but Robinson creates an aura of endurance and even satisfaction as he tells a homeless woman that she can exist quite happily on the street. Thus, the scene represents a cinematic articulation of contemporary social concerns, whilst simultaneously deflecting their radical potential. Nevertheless, Robinson helps this woman to confront her landlord and regain her apartment and, in so doing, defeats a cruel social hierarchy. Robinson never challenges the causes of the young woman's homelessness directly, but instead relies on subversive play and his gentle persuasion to achieve a happy outcome. Consequently, the scene provokes ambiguous interpretations: it may be read simultaneously as conforming to an existing social order, and as a subtle critique of that status quo. As Robinson declares, 'It's all the way you look at it, you know'.

Notions of joviality and musicality also disturb the scene, which culminates in an impromptu celebratory tap dance by Robinson when his unnamed charity case regains her home. Robinson dictates his own artistic persona as he adopts a

performance style whose light-footed, up-on-the-toes approach is clearly his own. But the performance can be interpreted as self-referential and improvisatory or merely spontaneous; the mood of the dance can also be read as excessively comic or affirmative. Robinson employs overstated facial expressions as part of his dance performance, an act of self-mockery that serves as a reminder of the crude exaggerations of the minstrel mask and heightens possible interpretations of a dance that hints simultaneously at self-reflexive artistry. It is a complex, varied performance that allows Robinson to showcase his physical dexterity and balance – his trademark derby hat never slips from his head, even in the scene’s fast-paced climax – before descending finally into lopsided bodily farce. This juxtaposition between dehumanising minstrel-like objectification and self-referentiality occludes comfortable readings of Robinson’s performance.

The scene is also culturally significant, because it functions as a unique cinematic duet between Robinson and Waller, and also as a rare record of important African American performance traditions. White composers wrote the scene’s song, ‘I’m Living in a Great Big Way’, yet Robinson and Waller both generated their own lyrics; the inevitable effect of their creativity is that the duo individualise – and thus humanise – their performances.ⁱⁱⁱ Robinson also communicates in humming sounds to replace the song’s lyrics with his own non-linguistic expression, concluding the act with the line ‘Do you understand me’. He therefore mystifies the performance with unintelligible sounds that eschew interpretative certainty. Waller and Robinson’s call-and-response musical dialogue, which incorporates indirect talk and scat singing, fits into popular African American performance traditions. The fact that the pair performs on the street, which is where tap dance developed, strengthens interpretations of the scene

as a cinematic celebration of African American vernacular expression. The sequence provides a showcase for street life art forms. It can be read as an assertion that these cultural creations are worthy of significant artistic attention.

The single known newspaper record of an African American audience's response to the film unearths the scene's significance to contemporary black audiences. In a Chicago Defender article dated 17 August 1935, Knight discovered that, in an African American theater in Kansas at least, 'the audience feels recognized and recognizes itself in [*Hooray for Love's*] musical moment' (Knight, 21). The article's author, Tommye Berry, notes that, 'when Bill's Harlem scene flashed, the applause was deafening', and '[i]t was as if Bill was on the stage in person, smiling in response to the welcome, as if he knew and understood that he was the asset necessary to the happiness of the audience'. Robinson complicates associations with blackface performance by suggesting that contemporary African American audiences were receptive to his artistry and identified with his achievements as a black performer in 1930s Hollywood. Knight asserts that this identification rests on Robinson's stardom, but also on the fact that he is 'both recognized by and better than the rest of the movie, that he is deservedly in but at the same time not of the movie' (ibid., 21). The specialty number's physical distance from the film's plot enables Robinson to capitalise on his theatrical stardom by constructing a performance that is based around his unique tap style and stage persona rather than a racially demeaning characterisation. The sequence therefore showcases Robinson's artistry to reveal how a performance that was positioned by Hollywood racial codes to be expendable could be – and was – read as superior to the rest of the film. From this study of the production's reception, we can begin to see that interpretations of

Robinson's performance are complicated by its artistry and cultural significance to 1930s black cinemagoers, in turn suggesting potential disunity between historical and current readings of his cinematic image, and underscoring the necessity of a recontextualisation of his career.

Robinson's scenes in *Dixiana* and *Hooray for Love* position him as a performer who is able to dictate his cinematic image, even while appearing to remain behind a straitening minstrel mask of joviality and deference to a white framework of control. His scenes can be read simultaneously as subservience to a firmly dictated racial boundary and as creative play and subversion within it, whilst the scenes' physical dislocations from their plots heighten his creative and expressive potential. In the face of white producers' attempts to dehumanise and displace, Robinson remains within a containable framework of transient misrule but attains a measure of autonomous agency whose effects evidently provoked feelings of identification among contemporary African American audiences. He is at once a spectacle and commodity for white entertainment and profit, and yet succeeds in portraying 'Bojangles' the stage star image on screen.

Consequently, Robinson's performances in *Dixiana* and *Hooray for Love* tie his image to a wider concern in contemporary cultural studies: namely, the ways in which the interplay between Hollywood production values, audience subjectivities and a performer's own interpretation of their role implicitly challenges the rigidity of popular cultural boundaries. In this regard, Robinson fits into wider concerns regarding historical hybridities and ambiguities in African American performance. He serves to validate Harry J. Elam, Jr's (2001, 20) argument that '[e]very theatrical performance depends on performers' and spectators' collaborative consciousness of the devices in operation and their

meanings', and that individual performers and viewers play a large part in shaping the signification of a performance.

As one of the foremost black film performers of Hollywood's early sound era, Robinson therefore serves to highlight the reductive nature of African American performance roles, while also revealing their subversive and humanising potential. The interpretative possibilities of Robinson's film performances are underscored by an incident involving Ellison in which he responded to interpretations of the dancer's cinematic work as straightforwardly racist by declaring simply, '[d]id you notice how Mr. Robinson danced?' (Ostendorf, 217). As Ostendorf notes, Ellison 'signified on the pathology thesis by celebrating Bojangles' artistry, which, although backgrounded in the film and incidental to its plot, no amount of pathological ascription could write out of the picture' (ibid., 217).^{iv} Through Robinson's films, we are able to see how early sound era Hollywood continuously straitened, segregated and subjugated its African American performers, while observing how performers such as Robinson were able to individualise their roles and use creative play and self-referential artistry to challenge their subjugated cinematic status and achieve a measure of cultural recognition and dignity. Robinson's cinematic image is therefore a site of representational struggle and ambiguity: it is a visual embodiment of fixed notions of 'blackness' governing depictions of African Americans in early sound era Hollywood, yet it is also a terrain of individual creativity, subtle subversion and seminal artistry.

Notes

ⁱ Between 1934 and 1938, Temple was Hollywood's highest grossing performance artist. Robinson was her most regular on-screen companion, appearing in four films with her (*The Little Colonel* [1935], *The Littlest Rebel* [1935], *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* [1938] and *Just Around the Corner* [1938]) and choreographing the dance scenes of yet another (*Dimples* [1936]). See Karen Orr Vered (1997, 52),

ⁱⁱ The United States Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, or Hays Code – Hollywood's regulatory body between 1930 and 1967 – articulated only one concern with 'race' in films: that 'miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races),' must not be depicted. 'The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930', as quoted in Jeff and Simmons (2001, 288).

ⁱⁱⁱ All scenes in the film were written by white song-writing team Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh.

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