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THE SIGNIFIER RETURNS TO HAUNT THE REFERENT

**Blackface and the Stereotyping of African-Americans in
Hollywood Early Sound Film**



by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film Studies

University of Warwick
Department of Film and Television Studies
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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	iii-iv
Acknowledgements/Declaration	v
Abstract	vi
Prologue	1
Introduction	12
1:The Stereotypical Portrayal of African-Americans in Hollywood film.	13
2:The 'Nature' of the Blackface Medium	16
Chapter One: The Persistence of Blackface in Early Sound Film	29
1:Past Accounts of Blackface in Early Sound Film	29
2:Four Categories of Blackface in Early Sound Film.	35
3:Conclusions on the 'Map' of Blackface Persistence	81
Chapter Two: Shadows of Blackface: The Racial Marking of African-American Actors and Performers in Early Sound Film	93
1:Film Practices Involved in the Racial Marking of African-Americans in Film	97
2:Aspects of Film Form Involved in the Racial Marking of African-Americans in Film	106
3:Minstrelsy Rebuilt	119
Chapter Three: Co-presence in the Films of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor	127
1:Co-presence in <i>The Singing Fool</i>	133
2:The Afterlife of Jolson's Blackface Mammy	148
3:Blackface By Proxy, Whiteface and African-American Association in <i>Hallelujah I'm a Bum</i>	171
4:Co-presence and African-American Vernacular in Jolson/Cantor Films.	185

Chapter Four: Minstrelisation Shots, Blackface and the Racial Containment of African-American Music and Dance Vernacular	219
1: <i>A Day at the Races</i> and The Lindy Hop	222
2: Black and White Looks in <i>Operator 13</i>	245
3: The Wider Co-presence of Blackface with African-American Vernacular in Early Sound Film	257
Chapter Five: Unraveling the Minstrel Mask, African-American Self Expression in <i>Stormy Weather</i>	261
1: <i>Stormy Weather</i> 's Historical Context	263
2: The Origins of Minstrelsy; the Minstrel Mask and African-American Signifyin(g)	284
3: The Reclamation of Expressive African-American Vernacular in <i>Stormy Weather</i>	311
Conclusion	335
1: Blackface as an Irredeemably Racial Medium	336
2: The Textuality of Hollywood's African-American Stereotypes	338
3: The Minstrel Gaze	340
Epilogue	353
Bibliography	366
Filmography	373
Teleography	387
Appendix: Chronological List of the Persistence of Blackface in Early Sound Film	388

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

All Illustrations are Frame Captures From American Films 1927-1953.

Front Cover – *The Singing Fool* (1928)

0:1 – 0:8	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (1915)	9/10
0:9	<i>The Jazz Singer</i> (1927)	10
0:10-0:12	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (1915)	10
1:1 – 1:4	<i>The Jazz Singer</i> (1927)	86
1:5	<i>Saratoga Trunk</i> (1945)	86
1:6	<i>Check and Double Check</i> (1930)	86
1:7	<i>Swing Time</i> (1936)	87
1:8	<i>Torch Song</i> (1953)	87
1:9	<i>Stand up and Cheer</i> (1934)	87
1:10-1:11	<i>Rhapsody in Blue</i> (1945)	87
1:12	<i>King of Jazz</i> (1930)	87
1:13-1:15	<i>Dimples</i> (1936)	88
1:16-1:17	<i>Show Boat</i> (1930)	88
1:18-1:19	<i>If You Knew Susie</i> (1948)	88
1:20	<i>Babes in Arms</i> (1939)	89
1:21	<i>Babes on Broadway</i> (1941)	89
1:22	<i>Kid Millions</i> (1934)	89
1:23	<i>Coney Island</i> (1943)	89
1:24	<i>Here Come the Waves</i> (1944)	89
1:25	<i>In Old Kentucky</i> (1934)	90
1:26	<i>The Spoilers</i> (1942)	90
1:27	<i>The Littlest Rebel</i> (1935)	90
1:28	<i>Dream House</i> (1932)	90
1:29	<i>Whoopee!</i> (1930)	90
1:30	<i>Roman Scandals</i> (1933)	90
1:31	<i>Hard to Get</i> (1938)	91
1:32	<i>Everybody Sing</i> (1938)	91
1:33	<i>Up in the Air</i> (1940)	91
1:34	<i>Boston Blackie's Rendezvous</i> (1945)	91
1:35	<i>A Day at the Races</i> (1937)	91
1:36	<i>Round up Time in Texas</i> (1937)	92
1:37	<i>You Can't Cheat an Honest Man</i> (1939)	92
2:1-2:2	<i>The Big Broadcast of 1936</i> (1935)	124
2:3	<i>The King of Jazz</i> (1930)	124
2:4	<i>ShowBoat</i> (1936)	124

2:5	<i>The Big Broadcast of 1936</i> (1935)	124
2:6	<i>The Great Ziegfeld</i> (1936)	124
2:7	<i>Ali BaBa Goes to Town</i> (1937)	125
2:8-11	<i>Show Boat</i> (1936)	125
2:12	<i>Round up Time in Texas</i> (1937)	125
2:13	<i>Show Boat</i> (1936)	126
2:14	<i>The Littlest Rebel</i> (1935)	126
2:15-2:16	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (1915)	126
2:17-2:18	<i>Dimples</i> (1936)	126
3:1-3:8	<i>The Singing Fool</i> (1928)	211/12
3:9-3:10	<i>Mammy</i> (1930)	212
3:11-3:13	<i>The Singing Kid</i> (1936)	213
3:14	<i>The King of Jazz</i> (1930)	213
3:15	<i>Stand up and Cheer</i> (1934)	213
3:16-3:17	<i>Musical Doctor</i> (1932)	214
3:18	<i>The Kid from Spain</i> (1932)	214
3:19	<i>Thank Your Luck Stars</i> (1943)	214
3:20-3:28	<i>Hallelujah I'm a Bum!</i> (1933)	214-216
3:29-3:34	<i>The Singing Kid</i> (1936)	216-217
3:35-3:36	<i>Roman Scandals</i> (1933)	217
3:37	<i>Ali Baba Goes to Town</i> (1937)	217
3:38-3:43	<i>Kid Millions</i> (1934)	218
4:1	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> (1927)	259
4:2	<i>Rhapsody in Black and Blue</i> (1932)	259
4:3	<i>Jitterbug Party</i> (1934)	259
4:4-4:7	<i>A Day at the Races</i> (1937)	259-60
5:1-5:4	<i>This is the Army</i> (1943)	331
5:5-5:18	<i>Stormy Weather</i> (1943)	331-334
6:1	<i>A Day at the Races</i> (1933)	364
6:2-6:10	<i>Pardon Us</i> (1931)	364-365

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work which follows is my own. This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at any other University

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the persistence of blackface in Hollywood's early sound era 1927-1953. It establishes the extensive and complex nature of this persistence against previous historical accounts of its decline after the introduction of sound. Specifically this thesis considers the overlooked phenomenon of *co-presence* where blackface was juxtaposed with the increased visibility of African-Americans in Hollywood film. It argues that the primary historical significance of the persistence of blackface lies in its involvement in, and exposure of, the formal stereotyping of African Americans in film.

The thesis is founded on research which identified 124 blackface films and on viewings of 75 of these films. Primarily the argument is advanced on the basis of close textual analysis. In addition to its theoretical engagement with key positions on blackface and related areas the thesis also makes use of secondary sources in order to establish the historical context behind its persistence in film.

Principle areas discussed include the formal practices used to racially mark African-Americans in film, co-presence in the films of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, and blackface and the racial containment of African-American vernacular dance and music .

This thesis contributes to an understanding of the place of blackface in Hollywood history by setting down what is, to the best of its author's knowledge, the most extensive account to date of its persistence in the early sound era. In doing so it brings new material to the debates on the 'nature' of blackface and argues that current attempts to revise understandings of its racial bias may be misguided. In conclusion this thesis finds that the case study of co-presence indicates that one explanation for the longevity of Hollywood's African-American stereotypes lies in the sheer density of their textual construction.

PROLOGUE

Many of the key points of interest discussed in this thesis are exemplified in the textual detail of *The Birth of a Nation*, the founding historical moment of Hollywood racial representation. Donald Bogle notes that it was the first film to “articulate fully the entire pantheon” (1997,18) of the stereotypes that would dominate Hollywood’s portrayal of African-Americans through the rest of the silent era and through the first few decades of sound film. Clyde Taylor argues that the film was responsible for shaping a Hollywood film aesthetic that has since operated “simultaneously and harmoniously with a kindred ideology, that of western racial superiority” (1996,35).

One of the most frequently noted aspects of the racial representation involved in *The Birth of a Nation* is Griffith’s use of blackface as a ‘replacement’ for African-American actors. Taylor writes that Griffith “reject[ed] black actors in favour of white actors in burnt cork” (1996,26) and that all of the “foregrounded” (ibid) black characters in the film are whites in blackface. The notion that Griffith made a conscious decision to avoid using African-American actors is widely supported in other accounts (Leab,1973,34) (Nesteby,1982,49).

The fact that there are actually African-Americans in the film is occasionally suggested by comments such as Griffith “mostly” (Modleski,1991,119) (Null,1977,14) used whites in blackface. If they are specifically mentioned it is to highlight their background insignificance. Leab for example writes, “Griffith made

use of real blacks only in the crowd scenes”(1973,33) and Doane, “blacks are allowed to represent blacks only in their most marginal roles, as elements of a crowd or background” (1991,228).

It is true that any black character with an extended narrative role in *The Birth of a Nation* is played by a white in blackface. And yet at the same time a significant and overlooked feature in the specificity of the film’s racial representation is that Griffith frequently and strikingly used ‘real’ black images. The effect is that there are numerous examples, all be it momentary, where African-American men in particular are deliberately and consciously “foregrounded” in the film.

In fact African-American males provide the focal point of the opening shots of the film. After the first intertitle, “the bringing of the African to America planted the first seeds of disunion”, the film opens with a shot of a group of manacled male slaves, all played by African-Americans, on a slave ship. One of the slaves, positioned in the centre of the frame with his face turned upwards, stands out from the others (**fig0:1**). The next shot cuts to an abolitionist meeting where the same African-American actor is seated behind the white speaker. As the speaker talks he places his hand on the shoulder of the African-American man (**fig0:2**). After a long shot of the meeting there is a cut to a mid shot of another white man who stands with his hands on the shoulders of an African-American boy in front of him. In a rather striking confirmation of the presence of African-Americans in the film, the boy stares directly into the camera (**fig0:3**)

It is a curiously overlooked historical fact then that *The Birth of a Nation* opens by establishing its central racial theme through the use of actual African-American 'actors'. It is not until several scenes later that we are explicitly, through the use of an intertitle, introduced to a black character, Lydia Brown, who is played by a white in blackface. Lydia is the 'housekeeper' of Austin Stoneman, leader of congress, who is responsible later in the film for bringing the South under the 'rule' of blacks. It soon becomes clear in the scenes in the Stoneman household that Griffith's depiction of African-Americans at the start of the film has sewn a narrative "seed" which he explores more fully in later blackface characterisations. The innocent (same sex) touch that the abolitionists lay on the shoulders of African-Americans in the opening frames of the film evolves into a more 'unnatural' closeness between the races, as Stoneman lasciviously paws at Lydia's shoulder when he notices that she is upset (fig0:4). As the central theme of the film miscegenation reaches its representational zenith in the rape lust for white womanhood that Stoneman unleashes in the main blackfaced male characters, Silas Lynch and Gus, when he gives them equality with Southern whites.

Whilst it is true then that Griffith mainly uses blackface, the opening frames nonetheless illustrate the significance of African-American visibility in the development of the film's racial narrative. Indeed a pattern develops where African-American men momentarily rise to the surface of *The Birth of a Nation* as a formal reflection of its central content, where white men struggle to contain an insurgent and sexually charged African-American male presence in America.

Griffith principally uses images of African-American men for particular moments of emphasis in his 'historical' depiction of the degree to which the South was overrun by 'blackness' in the Civil war and reconstruction period. When the Southern Cameron family suffers its first violation and their household is overrun by the first (as an intertitle informs us) black regiment mobilised in the war, the only soldier who is clearly shown, as he pauses menacingly on the steps of the house, is a bare shouldered African-American actor (**fig0:5**). In the elections that follow the war it is an African-American actor who stops Dr Cameron from voting by placing his hand over the ballot box whilst a blackfaced soldier watches from the background (**fig0:6**). African-American actors are used in depictions of the black 'touch' reaching the very heart of American law and democracy. One scene shows a jury consisting entirely of African-American men (**fig0:7**) acquitting a black defendant. In another Griffith presents a historical "facsimile" of the black majority in the Southern Carolina legislative that is dominated by African-American men. It is the blackfaced actors, including Silas Lynch, who have a background role in this scene. When the law allowing intermarriage is passed Griffith cuts to the African-American actors as they turn and smile at the white women in the gallery (**fig0:8**).

Although not comparable to the extended narrative visibility given to the lead blackface players, images of African-American men are still a significant component of Griffith's racial iconography. African-American men are the main or sole focus in all of the scenes/shots described above. It is not entirely accurate then to describe the portrayal of blacks in *The Birth of a Nation* as a matter of 'replacement' where whites in blackface are used 'instead' of African-Americans. In fact there is a rather intricate pattern of *co-presence* in the film, an intermixing of blackface with actual African-

Americans. Many of the crowd scenes involve complex combinations of blackface and ‘real’ black imagery. This can be seen in the visit of the Cameron/Stoneman families to the slave quarters, the arrest of Dr Cameron, and in the general co-present *mise en scène* that provides the background to Silas’ rise to power.

There is another sense in which the consensus view that blackface was used as a ‘replacement’, a ‘stand in’, for African-Americans in *The Birth of a Nation* is inaccurate. Michael Rogin writes that blackface was used in the film as an “unselfconscious method of impersonating African Americans” (1996,167). Rogin distinguishes this type of blackface from the minstrelsy employed by Al Jolson in his role as Jack Robin in the first sound film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927)¹. In contrast to the blackface seen in *The Birth of a Nation*, Rogin argues, Jolson’s minstrel mask, with its large white mouth (fig 0:9), deliberately exposes his whiteness. Rogin highlights how Jolson’s blackface engages in the same self reflexive *performance* of blackness as the nineteenth century minstrel show from which it derived (ibid). Jim Pines elaborates on this distinction which is commonly made in discussions of filmic blackface:

[...] his [Jolson’s] use of blackface is not strictly a means of substituting himself, a white man, in a role suitable for a veritable black performer. That is to say, his blackface appearances in [his] films particularly are not ‘Negro imitations’ or caricatures in the same way as silent cinema’s burnt cork imitations clearly were. (1975,17)

The three lead blackface roles in *The Birth of a Nation* are examples of ‘realistic’ blackface. This is the term I use to denote blackface where, as Rogin and Pines

¹ All subsequent references to *The Jazz Singer* are to the 1927 version.

highlight, the character is meant to be understood in diegetic terms (regardless of whether the audience were or were not aware of the artifice) as an ‘actual’ African-American. Gus for example, the black soldier who attempts to rape the youngest Cameron sister, is evenly blacked up with no sign of a tell-tale white mouth. His hat additionally covers over the whiteness of the actor who plays him (fig0:10). The difference between ‘realistic’ forms blackface and minstrel forms of blackface can be seen clearly by comparing (fig0:9) and (fig0:10) .

As with Lydia (fig0:4) and Silas, the impact of Gus’s portrayal, the ‘horror’ of his pursuit of the Cameron girl, depends on the audience perceiving him as an ‘actual’ black man. The intended ‘realistic’ effect of the three principle blackface roles in the film is confirmed in the way that Lydia and Silas are more lightly made up than Gus so as to reflect their ‘mulatto’ status. Clearly then Griffith sought a degree of realism in his use of blackface for his three principle black roles. And yet the use of blackface as ‘realistic’ stand in cannot be said to entirely motivate his use of the medium since self reflexive minstrel forms of blackface are also prominently visible in the film. Once again it is ‘black’ men who are the explicit site and subject of this particular facet of the complexity of Griffith’s racial representation.

When Austin Stoneman visits the Cameron household he is accompanied a black butler who is clearly based on the minstrel model of blackface. His blackface is punctured by the markings of a large white mouth. When he is confronted by the feisty ‘Mammy’ of the Cameron household, who is made up in the alternative ‘realistic’ mode of blackface, he indulges in some classic minstrel show eye rolling (fig0:11). Minstrel figures are also prominent in the scenes involving Silas. The most

noticeable instance of this is when the Klan dump Gus's body on the steps of Silas's head quarters. Griffith positions a quaking minstrel man to the side of Silas in order to enhance the black fear that this event arouses (**fig0:12**). Most interestingly of all, blackfaced minstrel men are also prominent in several of the scenes where actual African American men are visible in the film. In the scene where Dr Cameron is prevented from voting (**fig0:6**) the African-American actor smiles and lifts his hand to let a man in minstrel blackface vote twice. In the jury scene (**fig0:7**) the 'black' defendant who is acquitted by the African-American jury is a grotesquely marked minstrel figure. Minstrel figures are also clearly identifiable in the depiction of the South Carolina legislative.

Much has been made in critical accounts of the fact that the black roles in *The Birth of a Nation* are so "obviously" (Taylor,1996,25) played by whites in blackface. Taylor identifies blackface as the "crack in the surface of the film" (1996,23). Modleski finds the artificiality of Griffith's blackface means of portraying blacks an interesting revelation of the white racial psyche, where blackface suggests "that blackness may be so monstrous it can only be signified but not directly represented" (1991,118), and Doane (1991,228-9) similarly considers the artificiality of blackface in the film in terms of what it 'reveals' about a white racial consciousness. In highlighting the fact that Griffith uses both 'realistic' blackface and self reflexive minstrelsy, I do not seek to challenge the positions of these writers. Crucially though, this diversity suggests that, far from "unconsciously" using blackface, the film knowingly 'plays' with the self reflexivity of blackface medium it employs. At times this self awareness reaches extreme levels, for example in the scene involving 'white armed Joe', a blackfaced actor whose arms are entirely white, and also in the portrayal of blackfaced Klu Klux

Klan members who are described as ‘white spies “disguised”’. Griffith’s depiction of black men as minstrel figures, and more interestingly his juxtaposition of this minstrel imagery with the visibility of actual African-American men, highlights the fact that the self reflexivity of blackface in *The Birth of a Nation* is *part* of its racial meaning and effect. The black male is manifestly the central pressure point of the film. The central narrative trajectory of the film involves the punishment of the principle blackfaced men, Gus and Silas. And yet at the same time there is also a subsidiary process at work in the film where Griffith, through his use of minstrelsy, could not resist engaging in racial play with ‘real’ black men in its surface imagery.

The African-American men in *The Birth of a Nation* continue to remain invisible in film history. In this respect there is a sense in which the intended mode of perception of actual African-Americans in the film lives on. A way of seeing that is captured in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, as Michael Rogin notes, “Far from ignoring peoples of color, the white gaze renders them invisible, as Ralph Ellison’s novel shows - not by averting the eyes but by staring so as not to see” (Rogin,1996,27).

In failing to see the significant visibility of African-American men in *The Birth of a Nation* we remain, in some small way, in the thrall of the film’s complex racial representation where Griffith manipulates the blackness of actual African-Americans as a racial sign just as assuredly as he manipulates blackface forms. The invisible men of *The Birth of a Nation* bring home to us the forgotten historical legacy that the racial power of blackface lies not so much in its ability to replace African-Americans, but more in the direct effects and consequences that it has on their portrayal and how they are perceived.



Fig 0:1

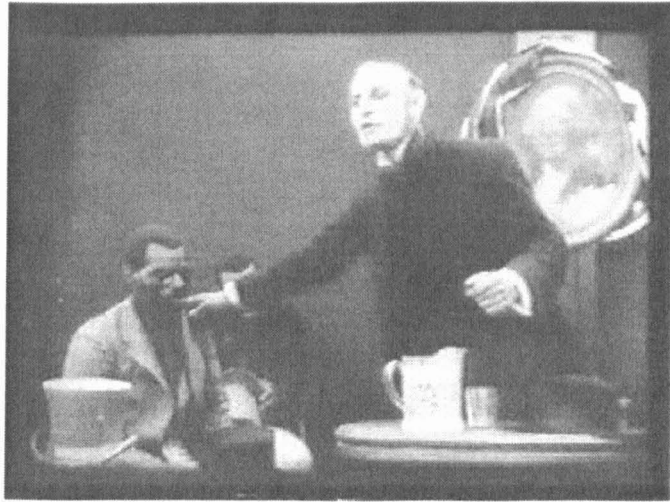


Fig 0:2

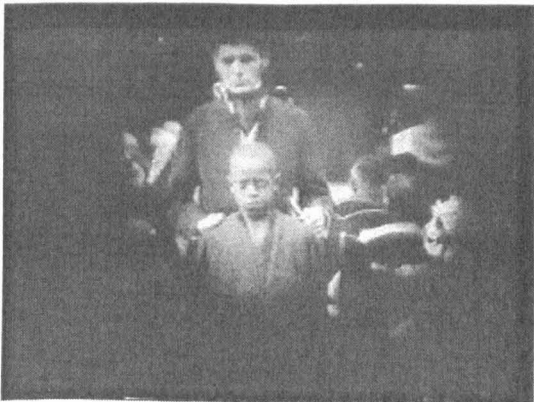


Fig 0:3



Fig 0:4



Fig 0:5



Fig 0:6

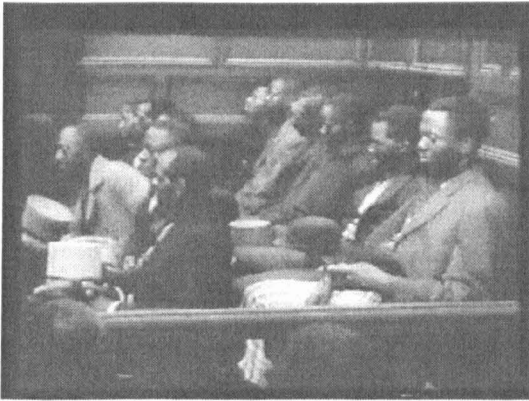


Fig 0:7



Fig 0:8

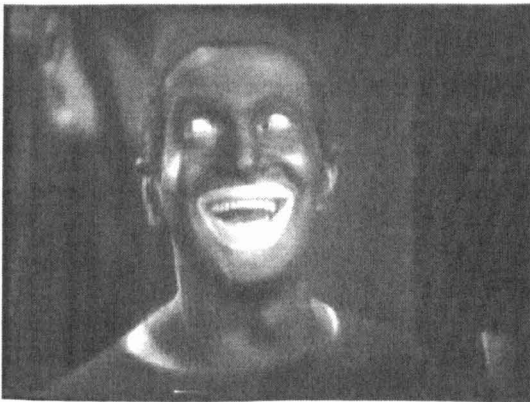


Fig 0:9



Fig 0:10



Fig 0:11

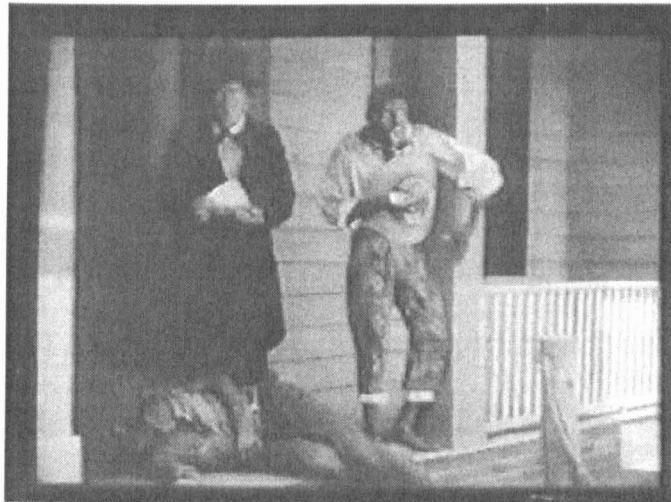


Fig 0:12

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about the persistence of blackface in early sound film. Whether the complexity of the racial representation I have identified in *The Birth of a Nation* is an indication of the general conditions in which blackface was employed in silent cinema, and my suspicion is that it is, is a matter which I leave for future research. What is clear however, and what this thesis sets out to demonstrate, is that the blackface which persisted into the sound era was very much along the lines of that which I have identified in *The Birth of a Nation*, diverse in form and, crucially, *co-present* with African-Americans.

It is the predominant co-present nature of blackface, i.e. its direct involvement in the racial portrayal of actual African-Americans on screen, which imbues it with a greater historical significance than has been acknowledged to date by the understanding of filmic blackface as a 'replacement' for African-Americans. The co-presence of blackface forms with African-Americans in early sound film highlights many aspects of the textual detail of Hollywood's racial representation. Blackface in early sound film then is not a self enclosed phenomenon. Instead it provides an excellent means of studying Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of African-American actors and performers¹.

¹ I use the term 'performer', here and through the rest of the thesis, to denote African-Americans who were cast in films principally on the basis of their contemporary status as professional music or dance artists.

My thesis uses the case study of the persistence of blackface in early sound film to address the central questions which have been asked about Hollywood's portrayal of African-Americans ever since the subject became an important critical issue in film studies. That is, why were Hollywood's images of African-Americans so racially stereotyped? Why did this stereotypical representation last so long, seemingly unaffected by the transition to sound and the rise in visibility that this afforded to African-American actors and performers in the early sound era?

My thesis engages with a case study that has largely been overlooked in film history and which may not be familiar. For this reason my first chapter sets out to map down the full detail of the extent and complexity of the persistence of blackface in early sound film. Though I deal with relevant theoretical concerns during the course of analysis in following chapters, this introduction highlights two areas of critical debate directly relevant to my analysis of the forgotten persistence of blackface. Firstly the debate on Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans, and secondly the debate on the 'nature' of the blackface medium.

1: The Stereotypical Portrayal of African-Americans in Hollywood Film.

1.1 The "Images of" Works

In the 1970s a number of studies set out to address the history of Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans. These included works by Bogle (1973), Cripps (1977) (1978), Leab (1973), Mapp (1972), Null (1977) and Pines (1975).

These works, as Stuart Hall has noted, have collectively documented “the astonishing persistence” (1997,251) of stereotypes of African-Americans in Hollywood film.

Richard Dyer has termed studies which set out to record the negative representation of oppressed groups as “images of” works (1993,1). Dyer argues that the “images of” works can “block real investigation” (ibid) and that their approach needs to be tempered by “considerations that get more nearly at the complexity and elusiveness, the real political difficulty, of representations” (1-2). Here Dyer touches on the problem that has been widely identified as existing in the 1970s studies on the “images of” African Americans in Hollywood film, their failure to engage with the complex nature of racial representation. James Snead for example writes:

The ‘black Hollywood’ books of the seventies took a binary approach, sociological in its position, hunting down either ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ images. Such a method could not grasp what closer rhetorical and discursive analysis of racial imagery can. (1994,1-2)

bell hooks has also written of the need “to expand the discussion of race and representation beyond debates about good and bad imagery” (1992,4) and similar statements by Clyde Taylor (1996,15-16) and Jude Davis/Carol Smith (1997,51) illustrate how recent works define their approach to Hollywood’s portrayal of African-Americans as a matter of moving beyond the “images of” works and ‘getting’ to the complexity of racial representation.

Stuart Hall has coined the phrase the “cultural turn” (1997,2) to describe the wide shift that has occurred in critical approaches to representation in the humanities generally. Hall notes that since the “cultural turn” representation has been

“conceptualised as a primary or ‘constitutive’ process [...] not merely a reflection of the world after the event”(6). It is through this understanding of representation as a “constitutive” process that the current study of Hollywood’s stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans proceeds. There is a consensus of belief that the confrontation of racial representation involves much more than simply the replacement of ‘false’ negative images with ‘real’ positive images.

1:2 The Complexity of Stereotypes

An important debate on stereotypes unfolded in the late 1970s/early 1980s, landmark contributions included Tessa Perkins’ ‘Rethinking Stereotypes’ (1979), Steve Neale’s ‘The Same Old Story: Stereotypes and Difference’ (1980), and Robert Stam and Louise Spence’s ‘Colonialism, Racism and Representation- An Introduction’ (1983). In different ways each of these essays argues that there was a need for critical studies to build a greater understanding of the textuality of stereotypes in order for them to ‘get’ to the complexity of stereotypical representation. Steve Neale writes, “what is rarely considered is the textual mode within which either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ characterisations are, have been or can be produced” (1980,35). Stam and Spence argue that, “the privileging of social portrayal, plot and character, meanwhile, has led to the slighting of the specifically cinematic dimensions of the films” (1983,3), whilst Perkins calls for an enrichment of “the very few and scattered references to how stereotypes function aesthetically” (1979,158).

This thesis is founded on the conviction that, certainly in relation to the history of Hollywood's portrayal of African-Americans, this 'call' for a greater understanding of the textuality of stereotypes has remained largely unfulfilled in film studies. Perhaps this has been due to a mistrust of close textual analysis methods which traditionally have been associated with the appreciation and aesthetical evaluation of film. The 'politics' of film representation has been approached through the heavy theoretical armoury of poststructuralist debate which has most often been disengaged from the historical and textual specificity of the formal construction of stereotypes.

In Hollywood's early sound era the century old means of predominant racial representation in American popular culture was juxtaposed and intermixed with the first sustained visibility of African-Americans on the Hollywood screen. The persistence of blackface in early sound film provides an extraordinarily rich textual site on which one can base an investigation of the "textual mode", the "specifically cinematic dimensions" and the "aesthetic" functioning of Hollywood's stereotypes of African-American actors and performers. This thesis offers close textual analysis of co-presence in the early sound era as a means of 'getting' to the textuality of African-American stereotypes in film.

2: The 'Nature' of the Blackface Medium

2:1 A Brief Historical Overview of the History of Blackface Forms in America

Cinematic blackface cannot be fully understood without recourse to its cultural past in minstrelsy. Some uses of blackface, certain folk rituals and performances of *Othello* for example predated the nineteenth century. However it was minstrelsy which was

responsible for the prominent visibility of blackface forms in America. Minstrelsy began with individual performers in the late 1820s/1830s, such as George Washington Dixon and T.D. Rice, and then in the 1840s evolved into the minstrel show. The staple elements of the minstrel show, the most popular American entertainment form of the nineteenth century, were a circular troupe of performers, two 'end men', and a whitefaced interlocutor who kept 'order'. The minstrel show was self reflexive and performative. The overdetermined white mouth of the minstrel mask (fig0:9) exposed the white performers and the 'entertainment' of minstrelsy was predicated on the audience being in the 'know' about the fact of white performance.

Minstrelsy strongly influenced all subsequent uses of blackface in America. Indeed it also provided the first space for African-American performance in American popular culture. Themselves required to wear the minstrel mask, African-Americans performed in segregated minstrel shows in the period after the end of the civil war until the end of the nineteenth century. The minstrel mask remained a key component of African-American involvement in vaudeville and popular music in the early part of the twentieth century. Whites also continued to perform in minstrel shows until their popularity declined at the turn of the century. However blackface entertainers in minstrel masks, such as Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, remained a key component of the vaudeville entertainment form that replaced the minstrel show.

Blackface took on a different dimension in silent cinema when it was used 'realistically' to depict black characters. This form of blackface had a more 'naturalistic' look, the exaggerated white minstrel mouth was missing and generally lighter shades of black were used (fig0:10). For this reason it is necessary to use the

term 'blackface', as opposed to blackface minstrelsy, as a generic description of its existence in cinema. Nonetheless, as we have seen in relation to *The Birth of a Nation*, self reflexive minstrel forms paradoxically retained a significant presence in silent cinema. Their presence indicated the continued underlying structural influence of minstrelsy in the 'realistic' use of cinematic blackface.

The self reflexivity of the minstrel forms in *The Birth of a Nation* illustrates a complexity which is rarely touched upon in discussions of cinematic blackface. In spite of the film's apparent use of blackface as a realistic 'stand in' for African-Americans the slippage of its formal appearance into minstrel forms suggests that the prevalence of minstrelsy in America had resulted in a double state of consciousness in the audiences' perception of blackface in silent film. Whilst they suspended disbelief in order to accept the blackface characters as actually black they were at the same time aware of its artificiality. As we have seen Griffith consciously plays with this 'doubleness' in the audiences' perception of blackface and he also interweaves it into his portrayal of actual African-Americans. The underlying sustenance of minstrelsy by the 'realistic' blackface forms of silent cinema was confirmed in the way that blackface persisted in predominantly minstrel forms in early sound film.

2:2 Studies on Nineteenth Century Minstrelsy

If the specificity of blackface in film has received little attention then this is not the case for nineteenth century minstrelsy which is an established field of study and has been subject to renewed attention in the mid to late 1990s. These recent minstrel

studies are an important consideration in this thesis for two reasons. Firstly the blackface forms in early sound film were strongly derived from nineteenth century minstrelsy. Secondly, these studies have attempted fundamentally to reassess the nature of the blackface medium in American history. Specifically they have questioned the extent to which it should be seen to have been 'about' the direct racial portrayal of African-Americans. The argument that this thesis makes on the deep involvement of minstrel derived blackface forms in Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of African-American actors and performers has the potential to have an impact on these recent moves to redefine minstrelsy.

The single most influential book on minstrelsy in recent times is Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. John Blair concludes a review of this book with the prediction that it will "stand for years as the best single work on minstrelsy because it shows how and why monovalent readings of blackface acts fail to respect the complexity of culturally loaded entertainment" (1995,542). The monovalence to which Blair refers concerns the long standing consensus that existed before Lott's intervention that saw minstrelsy unequivocally as a medium founded on, and defined by, its racial degradation of African-Americans. The principle contributions to this consensus had been Ralph Ellison's essay 'Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke' (1958), Nathan Huggins' *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), and Robert Toll's *Blackening Up* (1974). Toll's book in particular has been credited with rescuing the Africanist content of minstrelsy from the racism of its form (Gottschild,1996,82).

Lott names the above titles as “representative of the reigning view of minstrelsy as racial domination”(1995,7) and he presents his own work as presenting a history of minstrelsy which is in opposition to this consensus. For those uninitiated in recent debates on minstrelsy then, Lott’s book presents the surprising argument that the form was not the unequivocal racial medium it might seem. Instead he argues that minstrelsy was a practice that embodied “cross racial desire” (1995,6) and that it was a “visible sign of cultural interaction” (ibid). Lott argues that “the elements of derision involved in blackface performance were not so much its *raison d’être* as an attempt to ‘master’ the power and interest in black cultural practices it continually generated” (113).

Lott challenges the notion that racial derision was the defining feature of minstrelsy in order to turn the tables on the form and analyse it for what it reveals of the white performers and audiences who participated in it. Lott begins his book by declaring, “Ultimately I am after some sense of how precariously nineteenth century white working people lived their whiteness” (4) and he moves on to assert that in relation to minstrelsy, “Our subject properly becomes historical forms of white racial subjectivity as they were worked out in various arenas of cultural contact.” (38) His consideration of minstrelsy in relation to whiteness is not in itself a new development, works by Roediger (1991) and Saxton (1990) had previously explored this area. What was new in Lott’s approach, something which “rephrases the issues” (Blair,1995,542) in the study of minstrelsy, was his sense that the racial degradation of African-Americans had not been the central meaning and function of the practice. Roediger’s earlier study, for example, had emphasised the relationship between the rise in northern white racism and the popularity of the minstrel show (1991,96).

Studies which have followed Lott's work, Bean/Hatch/McNamara's edited collection *Inside the Minstrel Mask* (1996), Cockrell's *Demons of Disorder* (1997), Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (1998) and Lhamon's *Raising Cain* (1998) confirm that his "rephrasing" of the racial issues involved in minstrelsy has itself become the "reigning view" on the medium. In 'moving on' from the issue of racial denigration, Lott placed great emphasis on the self reflexivity of minstrelsy. It is the "double bind"(113) of the minstrel mask, and the fact of the foregrounded white *performance* of blackness, that Lott cites in arguing that minstrelsy had 'really' been about the unstable formation of white subjectivity. Similarly it is the self reflexivity of minstrel forms and the performativity of minstrel practice that are cited in other works which argue that the core meaning of minstrelsy lay 'beyond' issues of race and the racial degradation of African-Americans. Mahar defines minstrel shows as "performance texts" (1998,16) and highlights the "participant persona" (271) mode of their delivery. He argues that the key to understanding the minstrel show lies in recognising its burlesque form, "The spirit of burlesque identified minstrelsy as derivative and capable of accepting much more interesting material than just cheap racist caricatures." (335) The real target of the minstrel show, Mahar argues, was the high culture status of the foreign entertainment forms that they burlesqued, such as Italian operas and English comedies. As such the essence of the minstrel show lay in its role in the "formation of an American popular style"(336).

Lhamon finds in the performativity of minstrelsy and in the "doubleness" (173) of the minstrel mask, a "youth culture that was the defining itself to itself by turning around black song and dance" (1998,41). He argues that "blackface action is usually lashing

back at the pretensions and politesse of authority more than at blackness” (22).

Cockrell’s study focuses on the fact that “early blackface minstrelsy was deeply rooted in a long line of folk theatricals” (1998,56). Once again performativity is at the core of his progressive evaluation of minstrelsy as he argues that a folk lineage of “masquerade” (53) imbued the medium with a core function of class resistance, “It is in the streets, among the powerless, that the racial features of a blackface Jim Crow are less clear.” (82)

Cockrell does restrict his comments to the earliest individual blackface minstrels of the 1830s. Mahar and Lhamon however, engage in a much wider reassessment of the racial bias of the minstrel medium as a whole. Mahar questions “whether race should be considered the primary subject matter of all forms of blackface minstrelsy” (1998,186) whilst Lhamon finds the self reflexivity of any form of blackface performance so “slippery in its uses and effects” (1998,6) that “it seems most important to notice how blackface performance can work also and simultaneously *against* racial stereotyping” (ibid,Lhamon’s emphasis). Here then the wider impact of Eric Lott’s work becomes clear. His “rephrasing” of the racial issues surrounding the form can be seen to have paved the way for a fundamental reevaluation of the place of minstrelsy and its derivatives in the history of American popular culture.

2:3 Brenda Dixon Gottschild and the Racial Consequences of Minstrelsy

In *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* Brenda Dixon Gottschild includes a chapter on minstrelsy which offers an important challenge to the position advanced by Lott in *Love and Theft*. Gottschild

argues that although Lott may correctly contend that “the category of race works in tandem with other pertinent categories and divisions” (1996,90) this does not mean that “the notion of race is not the central presumption of minstrelsy” (ibid). In particular she raises concerns about the way in which Lott privileges white subjectivity over the black “mortal body” (ibid) of minstrelsy. She argues that it is wrong to separate the “white motives” behind minstrelsy from its “black outcomes” (ibid).

The fundamental difference in the position of the two writers is that for Gottschild the negative historical consequences of minstrelsy on African-Americans were such that they overwhelm any other historical impact that the practice might have had. She argues that Lott’s approach threatens to “underplay the tragic effect of white American racism on African American life and arts” (1996,89). Citing Lott’s allegiance to a “poststructuralist discourse” (90) that seeks to dismantle binary racial categories in favour of “multiply determined and positioned subjects” (Lott cited in Gottschild,1996,90) Gottschild contends that “it is short sighted to allow one’s contemporary lens to blur the racially weighted focus of the minstrel era and the minstrel trope” (90).

Here Gottschild’s phrase, “minstrel trope”, captures both the longevity of minstrel forms and the broad scope of their impact on African-Americans. For the value of Gottschild’s position is that it is grounded in the specificity of a central development in the history of minstrelsy, one which has great resonance for the position that my thesis takes on the persistence of blackface in early sound film, that is - the involvement of African-Americans in the medium. The fact that for decades, even

into the early years of the twentieth century, African-American performers had to wear the minstrel mask, and at the same time largely restrict the nature of the entertainment they offered to the stereotypical parameters established by white minstrelsy, is a stark illustration of the racial consequences, the “black outcomes”, of the minstrel trope for African-Americans.

In relation to Lott’s exclusive focus on ante bellum minstrelsy (a timescale also rigidly followed by Cockrell and Mahar) Gottschild writes, “Once African-Americans enter minstrelsy in the post-civil war era, the issues of exploitation and borrowing take on added convolutions that are not considered by Lott due to his central focus and cut off date.” (89) In outlining the problems inherent in Lott’s search beyond the racial aspects of minstrelsy Gottschild cites a line from Eileen Southern, “the black man was behind it all”² (95), and she writes, “that phrase must be (re)constructed and (re)membered for each generation of Americans - white and, sadly, even black - because generation after generation, the fact is covered up and forgotten.” (ibid). Here Gottschild highlights how the phenomenon of African-American minstrelsy stands as evidence of the core meaning and function of minstrelsy residing, after all, in its racial portrayal of African-Americans.

The self reflexivity and performativity of minstrelsy in its formative years has encouraged conjecture on different motivations for its existence. And yet minstrelsy unerring evolved into the racial mask which entrapped the first physical African-American presence in American popular culture. The way in which, after the inception of African-American minstrelsy, minstrel derived blackface, and the

² The original source of this citation is Southern, Eileen (1971) *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, W.W. Norton, New York. p 103.

minstrel trope more generally, evolved into the principle means of managing and controlling the cultural visibility of actual African-Americans, as we have seen in relation to the 'invisible men' of *The Birth of a Nation*, would seem to suggest that the racial work of minstrelsy overshadows any other significance it may have had.

This is the assessment which had been reached on minstrelsy by the earlier generation of writers that Lott seeks to move on from. Gottschild presents the difference in the positions as a matter of the earlier writers being grounded in the historicity of minstrelsy's racial consequences, "Lott addresses minstrelsy's white subjects, Ellison as well as Huggins and Toll, addressed the function and the effect of the minstrel mask on the black object (with function, here implying action)." (89)

It is worth dwelling further specifically on Ellison's account of minstrelsy since he reaches an unsurpassed clarity on the racial function and effect of the minstrel mask, he writes:

This mask, this willful stylisation and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the 'thing' in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign [...] (1967,49).

Here Ellison captures the racial impact of minstrelsy through addressing the minstrel trope in its entirety. Whether it was whites or African-Americans involved in minstrelsy, Ellison asserts that "the mask was the thing" in the medium's primary racial impact and meaning, that is - its racialised portrayal of African-Americans.

Crucially Ellison identifies the self reflexivity of minstrelsy, “this wilful stylisation and modification of the natural face”, as *part* of the racial impact of the medium, not as the basis for separating minstrelsy from issues surrounding the representation of race.

The history of African-American minstrelsy, the fact of blackface on black skin, tells us that blackface in America should not be understood as an exclusive self determining form which was in some way separate from the African-Americans it depicted. Minstrelsy should not be understood as having been primarily driven by motivations other than race. Instead, as *The Birth of a Nation* again illustrates, blackface needs to be understood in terms of *co-presence*, a term I use to capture the deep and abiding historical interrelationship between blackface and the portrayal and perception of actual African-Americans in American popular culture. Gottschild writes that, “Almost everything that occurs in African American performance, on stage and in life, is somehow predicated upon and circumscribed by the minstrel trope.” (81) The way in which the portrayal of African-American actors and performers in early sound film was “predicated upon and circumscribed” by blackface provides important evidence to support such an argument. The co-presence of the early sound era can be seen to extend, in cinematic form, the complex conditions of racial portrayal and perception that were at work in the ‘co-presence’ of African-American minstrelsy.

In discussing the co-presence of blackface with the first sustained cinematic visibility of African-Americans in film I will draw parallels with the historical precedent of minstrelsy being ingrained into African-Americans’ first visibility on the popular

stage. Gottschild's insistence on the racial bias of minstrelsy sets down a framework through which my analysis of the persistence of blackface in early sound film can contribute to the recent debates that have set out to redefine the function and meaning of the medium. In response to Lott's redefinition of minstrelsy Gottschild writes:

We can only guess at the impulses and motives [behind minstrelsy], but we can see (and for African Americans, experience) products of the white social, political, economic, and cultural perception and reception of African Americans. (1996,91)

My thesis proceeds on the basis that co-presence provides vivid evidence of the fact that Hollywood's stereotypical images of African American actors and performers in early sound film were "products" of the minstrel trope but that, like the invisible African-American men of *The Birth of a Nation*, the textual detail of this is not something that has been fully "seen" to date.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. In chapter one I map down the full hybridity and complexity of the persistence of blackface in early sound film. Chapter two sets down the framework for understanding the persistence of blackface in terms of co-presence by foregrounding the ways in which Hollywood's stereotypical images of African-American actors and performers can be seen to reconstitute the formal properties of minstrelsy. In chapter three I demonstrate the co-present nature of blackface in the films of the two leading blackface entertainers in early sound film, Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor. In chapter four I consider the racial containment of African-American vernacular music and dance in co-present scenes. The way in which the cultural force of jazz, and other vernacular forms which had done so much to enhance the visibility of African-Americans on the Hollywood screen, became a particular site

of co-presence brings out the racial function of blackface in its clearest terms. Chapter four then adds another dimension to the understanding that persistent blackface forms yield on the entrenched stereotypical portrayal of African-American actors and performers in the history of Hollywood film. This theme is followed up in the final chapter (five) in relation to the origins of minstrelsy. I consider how the original racial meaning and function of minstrelsy was reactivated in the co-presence of early sound film as a means of stereotyping African-American actors and performers. The focus of this final chapter is *Stormy Weather* (1943), the first Hollywood film to accurately acknowledge the history of African-American minstrelsy, and as such the film which can be seen to mark the end of a racially charged co-presence in Hollywood film. In conclusion I consider what the case study of co-presence has to offer for further research.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PERSISTENCE OF BLACKFACE IN EARLY SOUND FILM

This chapter maps down the full extent, hybridity and complexity of the persistence of blackface in early sound film. It is important to note that the account of blackface set down in this chapter is at odds with the way that the presence of blackface in early sound film has previously been understood.

1: Past Accounts of Blackface in Early Sound Film

1:1 The Decline of Blackface into Nostalgic Minstrelsy

The introduction of sound has generally been seen as the catalyst for the immediate and terminal decline of blackface in film since it ended its use as a 'stand in' for African-Americans. The "images of" works in particular place great emphasis on the issue of realism. For example Bogle writes, "What finally killed off the practice and simultaneously opened the door for a new realism that virtually demanded real Negroes in Negro roles was the advent of sound." (1994,26) Pines argues that the use of blackface in cinema "broke down somewhat with the advent of sound and especially with the exploitation of veritable black performers in entertainment

situations” (1975,17). Nesteby¹ also notes that blackface was a “dying tradition because Afro-Americans themselves appeared more frequently in films” (1982,49), and Cripps (1993,142) and Leab (1975,50) make similar points. More recent film history has continued to attribute the decline of blackface to the enhanced verisimilitude brought to film by sound. Leonard writes, “With the advent of sound [...] [b]lacks began to appear on the screen in parts previously played by whites in blackface” (1985,199), Guerrero that “sound created the popular demand for real blacks with real black voices” (1993,20), and Sarris that “blackface was on the way out not so much for its racist implications as for its affront to realism” (1998,34).

Blackface is described in terms of decline, as opposed to immediate death, because of its survival in the form of nostalgic minstrelsy. Cripps writes that, “The coming of sound brought a revival of the minstrel show” (1993,269) and Pines notes that, “with the real exception of nostalgic uses, blackface was redundant by the thirties” (1975,20). This understanding of blackface as a nostalgic throwback has defined the approach of the few works that have been specifically addressed to the presence of blackface in sound film. Susan Gubar, who includes a chapter on cinematic blackface in her book, *Race Changes*, writes, “By containing blackface within either stock vaudevillian comedy or historical episodes that self consciously capture the minstrelsy ‘of old’, Hollywood managed to recycle the form.” (1995,90) Peter Stanfield, in his essay ‘ “An Octoroon in the Kindling”: American Vernacular and Blackface Minstrelsy in 1930s Hollywood’, similarly writes:

When Hollywood introduced synchronised 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

¹ Though published slightly later. Nesteby’s book, *Black Images in American Films 1896-1954*, falls squarely in the tradition of the 1970s “images of” works.

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 America's theatrical and musical past. (1997,407)

1:2 Michael Rogin and the Paradigmatic Status of *The Jazz Singer*

Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* is the only book length study that is primarily based on the presence of blackface in early sound film. His understanding of blackface works from the basis of the consensus outlined above. He defines blackface as a declining nostalgic medium through an extended discussion of its presence in the first sound film. Rogin argues that *The Jazz Singer* pointed "not only to the slaying of silent pictures in general but to the specific destruction of blackface" (1996,118). Again the key factor is that the blackface replacement of African-Americans was no longer possible, blackface had "succumbed to the cinematic demands for realism" (117-118). Rogin metaphorically positions *The Jazz Singer* as pronouncing the death of blackface as a means of portraying African-Americans, "sound [...] did away with blackface as speech" (118). At the same time however, Rogin notes that "the talkies did not kill blackface immediately" (118) and that it retained a reduced presence because "sound's ability to capture the singing voice revived blackface minstrelsy" (167).

For Rogin too then, the presence of blackface in early sound film is principally explained by Hollywood's nostalgic revival of minstrelsy, "Beginning with *The Jazz Singer*, blackface musicals established Hollywood's roots in the first American mass entertainment form." (1996,167) As I noted in my introduction Rogin makes a

fundamental distinction between the way that *The Birth of a Nation* used blackface “unselfconsciously” (79) and the use of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* and other blackface musicals, “Calling attention to their nostalgia, blackface musicals are self-reflexive at their core.” (1996,182) He argues that the self reflexivity of blackface minstrel forms in sound film, at odds with the “blackface realism” of *The Birth of a Nation* and other silent films, marked them as an extension of nineteenth century minstrelsy, “Blackface self-awareness, the instrument of identity transfer, had always defined minstrelsy” (195).

Here, crucially, Rogin’s focus on the self reflexivity of blackface forms in sound film leads him to search, in the same way as the recent works on nineteenth century minstrelsy, for a core significance in the practice that lies beyond its racial surface, “Blackface, the performance of the white man’s African-American, opens the door to the meanings of whiteness in America.” (27)

Rogin does actually warn against the kind of progressive reevaluation of minstrelsy attempted by Lott and Lhamon. He notes that they dwell insufficiently on “the exclusion of actual African-Americans from their own representations” (37).

Nonetheless Rogin’s terms of understanding minstrelsy, his focus on white performance and his sense of its racial effect as residing in separation and exclusion, mean that he too suggests that its core meaning and function lies beyond the racial portrayal of African-Americans. For Rogin the fact that “Jews had almost entirely taken over blackface entertainment by the early twentieth century” (96) meant that blackface functioned as “the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American” (95). As Rogin indicates in formulating his argument, “We are entering

the plot of *The Jazz Singer*” (71), his account of blackface in the sound era is heavily dependent on one film which he sees as “making blackface its subject” (117).

The Jazz Singer does employ blackface as the key symbol of its central thematic exploration of ethnic identity. However, as Stanfield has noted, the way in which blackface becomes “intrinsic to the narrative” (1997,409) of the film is “unique in Hollywood’s use of blackface” (ibid). Blackface first appears in the key dressing room sequence where Jolson’s character, Jack Robin, is torn by the impossibility of both maintaining his Jewish past as the son of a Cantor and taking up a new American identity as a stage star. He has to decide whether to sing in the synagogue or on the stage. Robin assures his co star, Mary Dale, of his decision to carry on with the show and he turns around to show her the minstrel mask he uses in his act (fig0:9).

However, far from ‘holding himself together’ through adopting his stage persona the self reflexivity of the minstrel mask only serves to reveal his internal turmoil. Instead he ‘breaks up’ and emotionally admits the difficulties of his dilemma to Mary.

Robin crosses the dressing room to inspect himself in a mirror (fig1:1). In the key moment of the film the reflection of the minstrel mask is replaced by a superimposed vision of his father singing in the synagogue (fig1:2). In searching for himself, Robin discovers the irreducible nature of his Jewishness. Robin’s action of putting on the minstrel mask cracks open his internal hybridity. And yet at the same time it signals the resolution of his identity crisis. Robin decides to embrace his Jewishness. He sings the ‘Kol Nidre’ in the synagogue, a prayer which is “specifically about reaffirming Jewish identification after inquisitions forced conversions” (Lhamon,1998,107), before singing in the show. Then, once on stage, he further

embraces his ethnicity by bending on one knee and directing the song ‘ My Mammy’ to his Jewish mother who is sitting in the front row (1:3). The film’s closing image, as a fade suspends Robin’s minstrel mouth and white collar in blackness (fig1:4), confirms *The Jazz Singer*’s specific employment of the self reflexivity of the Jolson minstrel mask as a means of expressing and visualising ethnic hybridity.

Andrew Sarris has noted the unusual “sectarian Jewishness” (1977,40) of *The Jazz Singer* and the ending of the film in particular presents problems for Rogin’s argument that the film is about “assimilation” (1996,95). More significantly the distinctiveness of the film undermines the paradigmatic status which Rogin confers on it when he argues that blackface generally functioned in early sound film as a “mechanism of identity transfer” (95). No subsequent film employed blackface in the expressive and metaphorical manner that it is used in *The Jazz Singer*. In Al Jolson’s subsequent starring roles especially, as we shall see in chapter three, blackface was far from used expressively. Instead Jolson’s blackface was characterised by repeated moments of racial play with a perceived or actual African-American co-presence.

Rogin’s *Jazz Singer* based account of blackface in sound film encapsulates a more general understanding of blackface in film history. A nostalgic minstrel blackface, split from the ‘realistic’ use of blackface in silent cinema, is seen to have lingered on as a self enclosed nostalgic throwback to a bygone minstrel era. The actual persistence of blackface in early sound film however does not correspond to this model. A more accurate vision of the nature of blackface in sound film can be found in *The Birth of a Nation*. In subsequent chapters I will outline the way in which the central significance of blackface in sound film can be seen, as it is in *The Birth of a*

Nation, in its direct racial impact on the portrayal and perception of co-present African-Americans. Here I move on to an illustration of how blackface in early sound film can be seen to have continued the hybridity and complexity of blackface in Hollywood's founding racial text.

2: Four Categories of Blackface in Early Sound Film.

The account of blackface persistence I offer in this chapter is based on the 124 early sound films that I have located which used blackface imagery. Principally my discussion relies on viewings of 75 of these films but I also make use of secondary sources in relation to those films I was not able to view. This list of 124 blackface films (included as a separate appendix at the end of the thesis) gathers together every mention of blackface in the literature consulted for this thesis. Additionally it includes every mention of blackface in the three published filmographies of the African-American image in American film, Klotman's *Frame by Frame* (1997), Hyatt's *The Afro-American Experience* (1983) and Richard's *Film Through 1959* as well as all references to blackface in *The American Film Institute Catalogue 1931-40*, edited by Hanson (1993). None of these individual sources have themselves been directed to the task of recording the overall persistence of blackface and they are inconsistent in the examples that they record. Rogin's book was the most useful source although his particular interest in Jewish minstrel performance means that he identifies less than thirty of the films recorded here. I suspect therefore that the actual occurrence of blackface in sound film was significantly greater than the map of persistence offered here, which (Rogin excepted) is a reflection of, at best, only a partial interest in the topic to date in film history.

Nonetheless in piecing together the scattered references that been made to the presence of blackface in early sound film this chapter demonstrates that the persistence of blackface was more significant that has been hitherto recognised.

Blackface did not 'die out' as a result of the introduction of sound. Instead it retained as diverse and complex a presence in sound film as it had previously in silent film and American culture generally. Sound film even produced blackface permutations of its own making, such as full blown filmic versions of the minstrel show, and hybrid moments of racial play where white stars 'hide' in narrative scenes of blackface disguise.

Below I identify four categories of blackface which were present in early sound film, 'Realistic', Vaudeville, Minstrel and Disguise blackface. The defining feature of blackface in sound film, against the current understanding of it as a reduced and nostalgic minstrel presence, is precisely that it is extraordinarily difficult to categorise. The categories I identify are therefore fluid rather than mutually exclusive and many individual examples of blackface have touches of the different categories. Nonetheless it is instructive to identify the primary textual logic for the presence of blackface on screen. This was usually clear, i.e. it was an attempt to communicate 'actual' blackness, it arose through the casting of, or depiction of, vaudevillian blackface acts, it depicted or related to nineteenth century minstrelsy, or it was used as a disguise by a character within a film.

It is important to note that blackface motivated by some nostalgic engagement with minstrelsy 'of old' is only one of the categories of blackface which persisted in sound

film. In discussing this category I will outline the way in which nostalgic minstrelsy only became the dominant form of blackface in the 1940s. That is when blackface, in the very last years of its visibility before it disappeared all together in the early 1950s, can finally be said to have reduced its range and 'split' from its defining historical engagement with the racial portrayal and perception of African-Americans.

With the exception of this last phase I will outline the way in which the persistence of blackface was defined by complexity, hybridity and ambiguity. This is particularly evident in the blackface disguise films where white film stars use both 'realistic' and minstrel forms of blackface to disguise themselves as African-Americans. My discussion of this latter category leads me to conclude that the collective practices of blackface in early sound film originate, like the hybrid blackface of *The Birth of a Nation*, from a singular state of mind, a white racial consciousness about the blackness of African-Americans. For whatever explanations are offered for different examples of blackface representation in sound film, the collective evidence presented by its persistence in early sound film is that 'putting on the cork' remained a normative practice that fundamentally related to the racial portrayal and perception of actual African-Americans. The evidence for this lies in the co-present nature of most blackface forms. Although my focus is on a description of blackface forms themselves, such was the interdependence of blackface and African-American imagery in the early sound era that co-presence will become manifest at various times in this chapter.

2:1 'Realistic' Blackface

I have noted in relation to *The Birth of a Nation* that the use of blackface in silent cinema was a more complex affair than the simple 'replacement' of African-Americans. Nonetheless there is no doubt that the main cinematic precedent for the use of blackface in early sound film was the 'realistic' use of blacked up whites to 'stand in' for African-Americans in black roles. The key distinction of this type of blackface, in contrast to minstrelsy, is that its formal appearance made some real attempt at mimesis, i.e. lighter black and no exaggerated minstrel mouth.

Many of the earliest sound films which include blackface imagery are either lost or unavailable for viewing in the UK (23 of the 49 blackface films I was unable to view were made between 1928-1930). However William Leonard's book *Masquerade in Black* proved an extremely useful source in tracing what happened to the 'realistic' use of blackface through Hollywood's transition from silent to sound film. His book primarily covers theatrical performance but he includes a filmography which lists white actors who played black roles in film. The films listed are mostly silent. However, it does indicate that directors continued to use blackfaced whites for African-American roles in the first few years of sound film.

Noah Beery played the character 'Shep' in blackface in *Golden Dawn* (1930) and *Her Unborn Child* (1930) features Frances Nelle Grant as 'Mandy' in the kind of blackfaced mammy role she had played many times in silent film (Leonard, 1986, 373). *Not Quite Decent* (1929) features Louise Dresser playing 'Mame', *River of Romance*

(1929) features Natalie Kingston in an ‘Octoroon’ role and Monte Montegue is credited as a ‘Negro’ in *Tip Off* (1929) (Leonard, 1986, 376). Two early examples of ‘realistic’ blackface that I was able to view are *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), in which the pygmies are played by whites in blackface, and Griffith’s *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) where the one black role with a speaking part is played by a white in blackface whilst the rest of the black extras are African-Americans.

In general however Leonard’s filmography would seem to confirm the conclusion reached by the “images of” works that the introduction of sound killed off the ‘realistic’ use of blackface. Actors such as Tom Wilson, Porter Strong, Jim Blackwell and Nick Cogley who had made careers out of blackfaced roles in silent cinema (a combined total of 41 screen appearances) do not have any credits in the sound era. The only exception, interestingly an actress who achieved considerable later fame, is Myrna Loy. Loy played Fifi, a black waitress working as a spy for the Germans in world war one, in *Ham and Eggs at the Front* (1927), one of Warner’s last silent films (Klotman, 1997, 219). She went on to play a slave girl in blackface in *Noah’s Ark* (1929) and Leonard indicates that she used blackface in other “exotic” roles in sound film without naming them (1986, 375). A later film, *Saratoga Trunk* (1946) involved an extraordinary throwback to this use of blackface as a ‘realistic’ stand in. Flora Robson plays a black maid, Angelique, the confidante of Ingrid Bergman’s character in the film. She appears in several scenes with African-American actors. Robson, evenly made over in light black with a headscarf covering her hair (**fig1:5**), plays her role ‘straight’ and there is no indication within the film as to her actual whiteness.

On the basis of the above however, it would seem that the ‘realistic’ use of blackface did quickly die out in sound film and that this is evidence for proceeding on the basis, as Michael Rogin does for example, that blackface persisted only in reduced self reflexive minstrel forms which were split and isolated from the cinematic depiction of African-Americans. And yet ‘realistic’ blackface forms did in fact maintain a significant presence in early sound film in various permutations. Whilst these permutations usually involved clear audience consciousness of the use of blackface, the ‘realistic’ formal appearance of these examples of blackface demonstrate that the concerted attempt to mimetically reproduce the appearance of African-Americans remained part of the blackface repertoire right up until its last moments of visibility.

Examples of this included the two films that the blackface radio act Amos ‘n’ Andy appeared in, *Check and Double Check* (1930) and *The Big Broadcast of 1936* (1935). Although audiences at the time would have been aware that the duo were white, every attempt is made in the films to set up a diegetic logic where they are seen as ‘actually’ black. Their blackface is evenly distributed, no minstrel eyes or mouth, and their Caucasian hair remains hidden underneath their hats, as seen in the image capture from *The Big Broadcast of 1936* (fig1:6). All of the main black characters in *Check and Double Check* are played by whites in blackface although African-Americans are used as background extras, in the Harlem street scenes for example. The first number in *The Big Broadcast of 1936* is a segregated African-American number starring Bill Robinson. It is closely followed by an Amos ‘n’ Andy comic sketch set in a grocery store which is also presented as a segregated sequence. No distinction is drawn between the two and in terms of narrative logic they are both scenes of ‘African-American’ entertainment.

The Amos 'n' Andy act originated in vaudeville which generally used the minstrel mask that had been handed down to it from the minstrel show. Of all the vaudeville inspired blackface acts to cross over into sound film the reason why Amos 'n' Andy were the only ones to adopt the iconography of silent cinema style 'realistic' blackface throughout their screen appearances, when Cantor, Jolson and Moran and Mack used minstrel masks and were also seen in whiteface in their films, would seem to lie in the fact that their principal success had been achieved through adapting their vaudeville act to radio. In 1930, the year of *Check and Double Check*'s release, *The Amos 'n' Andy* show broadcast six nights a week and was attracting 40 million listeners (Leonard, 1986, 234) (Hilmes, 1997, 86)². The lack of any visual reminder of white performance on the radio show enhanced their mimicry of 'blackness' and Thomas Cripps notes that even African-American audiences were engaged with the idea that the pair were "genuinely black" (1993, 269). It appears then that they used 'realistic' blackface on film as a buffer against the loss of the perceived realism of their act. The example of Amos 'n' Andy's screen appearances demonstrates a continuing complexity in the range of blackface forms which persisted in early sound film, and it also highlights continuing complexity in the intended perception of these forms.

Another 'realistic' use of blackface, continuing a tradition seen earlier on stage and in silent cinema, occurred in the portrayal of Shakespeare's *Othello* in sound film.

Welles used blackface as mimetic attempt to look 'actually' black in his 1951 adaptation of the play. In the 1947 film *A Double Life* Ronald Colman plays an actor,

² Phyllis Klotman (1997, 94), in *Frame by Frame*, lists another filmed version of a radio show, *Captain Henry's Radio Show*. The Paramount short starred Padget and Malone as "Molasses and January". As there is not a copy available on general release I have not been able to determine the form of blackface employed.

Anthony, who descends into madness whilst playing Othello in a New York theatre. Whilst Welles' generally avoids extracting racial capital out of blackface, *A Double Life* draws a parallel between the blackness of Anthony's stage role and the 'black' deviancy of his own character. In one scene the film superimposes blackface onto Anthony's face so as to visualise the malignancy of his thoughts.

A particularly overlooked use of 'realistic' blackface in early sound film involves musical numbers where the intention is not to highlight the fact of whites performing blackness, as in minstrelsy, but to impress some authenticity in the replication of 'black' song and dance. One example of this occurs in the Dorothy Arzner directed film *Dance Girl Dance* (1940). In the sequence where the lead character Judy, played by Maureen O'Hara, watches a ballet rehearsal a traditional female ballet solo is transformed into a street scene. As the score briefly incorporates the strains of a jazz clarinet, a 'realistically' blacked up couple inject some 'authentic' (i.e. the intention is not minstrel type burlesque) 'black' dance into the urban scene depicted.

One of the better known films where this 'realistic' blackface portrayal of African-American dance occurs is *Swing Time* (1935). Fred Astaire mimics Bill Robinson's dance act in the number 'Bojangles Of Harlem'. Susan Gubar notes that the number was a "form of homage" (1997,88) and intended as a "tribute to Bill Robinson" (ibid). However, her assertion that the number falls "squarely in the minstrel tradition" (ibid) ignores the way in which the formal appearance of Astaire's blackface has more in common with silent cinema's 'realistic' use of blackface than with minstrelsy (fig1:7). Astaire attempts to garner real currency and 'realism' from the blackface he uses in order to maximise the authenticity of his dancing. Astaire's use of 'realistic'

blackface indicates a genuine acknowledgment and mimicry of black culture rather than the disavowal of such appreciation that minstrel burlesque represented. *Swing Time* is not typical of male blackface musical performance in early sound film which, perhaps because of the high profile of Jolson's and Cantor's minstrel inflected acts, usually involved obvious self reflexive minstrel masks, Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn* (1942), *Dixie* (1943) and *Here Come the Waves* (1944) for example.

It was more common for female stars to adopt 'realistic' blackface in musical performance. In *A Ziegfeld Girl* (1940) Judy Garland wears a light shade of blackface for the number 'Minnie from Trinidad'. A film still (1977,95) from *Artists and Models* (1937) in Gary Null's *Black Hollywood* shows that Martha Raye wore similar lighter 'realistic' blackface in a number where she appeared alongside Louis Armstrong. Another still in Null's book (1977,60) shows an unidentified white woman in 'realistic' blackface dancing alongside Bill Robinson in *Cafe Metropole* (1937) in a number that Cripps (1993,256) notes was cut from the final version of the film.

One of the very last films to use blackface was *Torch Song* (1953) in which Joan Crawford and an ensemble of dancers perform the number 'I Am A Two Faced Woman' in light 'realistic' blackface (fig1:8). The number directly follows a scene in which an African-American pianist is prominently featured. As the title of the song in this last film indicates, audiences were of course aware of the use of blackface in these films. Nonetheless the attempted mimesis involved in the blackface used in these examples is important evidence of a complexity where 'realistic' forms of

blackface, with a greater perceived currency than minstrelsy had in its representation of African-Americans, did persist in sound film.

There are some examples of 'realistic' blackface where there is a certain degree of ambiguity as to whether the audiences would have been aware of the use of blackface. I had already viewed *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934) and discounted it from my list of films using blackface. However I then came across a reference (Leonard, 1986, 296) that listed the actress Tess Gardell as reprising a blackface role in the film, 'Aunt Jemima', which she had performed on the vaudeville circuit. On reviewing the film I found that, for me at least, her 'realistic' blackface disguise (fig1:9) had 'worked'. She features in the number 'I'm Happy' in a church scene which otherwise entirely consists of African-American actors. She is credited as 'herself' in the film which was frequently the way that African-American performers were credited at the time. It is hard to determine whether audiences at the time were 'fooled' or if they would have known of her vaudeville act.

That such complex ambiguity surrounding the perception of some blackface forms in early sound film may have been possible is demonstrated by another use of 'realistic' blackface in the 1945 bio pic of George Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*. The film's depiction of Gershwin's early success includes a scene involving Al Jolson playing himself. Jolson is depicted, *Jazz Singer* style, creating his traditional minstrel style blackface in front of dressing room mirror. He then goes on stage and sings Gershwin's breakthrough hit, 'Swanee River', that Jolson had premiered in real life. This is soon followed by a scene where the film uses the alternative 'realistic' mode of blackface in Gershwin's number 'Blue Monday Blue' as part of its depiction of

George White's 1924 'Scandals' Broadway revue. On first viewing this scene I assumed that the performers in this number were actually of mixed ethnic origin. However on closer inspection it is clear that the lead female singer and 'Joe', the man she sings about, are whites in blackface (fig1:10). In contrast to the previous registering of Jolson's self reflexive minstrelsy then, there no are narrative references to the use of blackface in this number.

What is interesting about this is that one of Gershwin's most famous orchestrations, the folk opera *Porgy and Bess*, was performed by African-Americans, a fact acknowledged later on in the film when African-American performers are used in the portrayal of the opera. It may be then that audiences at the time were not aware of the use of blackface in this depiction of 'Blue Monday Blue'. The number occurs at a stage in the film where Gershwin's authentic understanding of 'black' music, blues and jazz, is being underscored in order to establish the story of how Gershwin 'lifted' these forms to the level of art in his major works, *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Porgy and Bess*. Indeed the intended realism of the blackface used in 'Blue Monday Blue' is apparent at the end of the number when, in an attempt to impress the authenticity of Gershwin's understanding of blues music, there is a cut to an African-American couple in the audience who have been moved to tears by the music (fig1:11). Any audience attention to the artifice of blackface here would detract from this build up of 'authenticity' and the filmmakers must have been confident that this would not be the case. *Rhapsody in Blue* then is yet another example of a remaining 'realistic' currency existing in some blackface forms which were markedly different from minstrelsy.

Whilst not comparable to the ambiguity at work in *Rhapsody in Blue* the use of ‘realistic’ blackface for the backing ‘native’ singers/dancers in Marlene Dietrich’s famous (whitefaced) rendition of ‘Hot Voodoo’ in *Blonde Venus* (1932) also raises some complexity in terms of its intended perception. Are the film’s audience meant to perceive these dancers as actually black? The intention behind the number may have been that the audience perceive the association of Dietrich’s character, Helen Faraday, with actual African-Americans in the number as part of the film’s depiction of her closeness to ‘blackness’. Certainly the fact that the number is initially intercut with a smiling African-American bar man seems to confirm the fact that audience is not intended to notice the use of blackface as any attention to the difference between the two images would work to dispel the intended aura of ‘blackness’ surrounding Helen.

A final example to mention is the hybridised use of ‘realistic’ blackface in the ‘Voodoo’ introduction to Gershwin’s performance of ‘Rhapsody In Blue’ in *King of Jazz* (1930). Paul Whiteman introduces the number by explaining that “jazz was born in the African jungle to the beating of the voodoo drums”. There is then a cut, as the opening drum beats of ‘Rhapsody In Blue’ begin to roll, to a dancing ‘Voodoo’ figure whose body and face is completely blacked over (**fig1:12**). There is hybridity here in that, in contrast to the other examples we have considered, the man’s oily appearance carries the stamp of the dark overdetermined blackness of the minstrel mask. And yet at the same time there are no clues to the performer’s identity, no white markings and no close ups, and the intention is clearly to conjure up an aura of blackness rather than direct attention to the performance of blackness. The dancer

could even be African-American underneath the exaggerated oily blackness, certainly the segregated filming of his dance does not discount this possibility.

The way in which blackface dance sequence in *King of Jazz* fuses the abstract exaggerated blackness of minstrelsy with the mimetic drive of 'realistic' blackface, and at the same time invites ambiguity as to the possibility of an actual African-American presence, encapsulates the complexity attendant upon the persistence of blackface. The mimetic intention and occasional ambiguity of this 'realistic' blackface, and also the co-present nature of many of the sequences I have discussed, suggests that blackface in early sound film cannot easily be separated from the racial portrayal and perception of African-Americans in way that it has been to date.

2:2 Vaudevillian Derived Blackface

Notwithstanding the significance of the exceptions discussed above, the majority of blackface images in early sound film was similar to that seen in *The Jazz Singer*, that is minstrel derived and clearly self reflexive. Jolson's successful transition from stage to film and the fact that he was soon followed by Eddie Cantor, another famous blackface Vaudevillian, was an important factor in this. Although Jolson and Cantor performed in self reflexive minstrel masks it is important to distinguish their 1930s blackface from films which nostalgically recreated or paid reference to nineteenth century minstrel shows. Jolson and Cantor's blackface became visible on the Hollywood screen because of their contemporary success in taking their Vaudevillian brand of blackface onto the Broadway stage. The crossover of their blackface acts, as contemporary star brands, onto the Hollywood screen was part of a wider

contemporary process where the “Hollywood studios drained the top talent from the Eastern stage for talking pictures” (Jenkins, 1992, 153). The blackface entertainment in Jolson and Cantor’s starring roles of the 1930s was delivered in contexts which reflected their status as modern entertainers, on the Broadway stage or in nightclubs for example. Interestingly the contemporaneity of their blackface in their 1930s films was maintained on the few occasions that it was associated with the minstrel show, something I discuss in the next section.

Nostalgia can only be said to have become the dominant feature of Jolson and Cantor’s blackface at the very end of their careers in the 1940s and, as I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, this was a more complex process than a simple yearning for the minstrelsy ‘of old’. In fact such was the contemporaneity of their blackface in 1930s films that its defining feature was a racial engagement with the co-presence of African-American actors and performers. This is the subject of chapter three.

Jolson and Cantor perfected their routines as individual blackface acts within the variety ensemble of the entertainment offered on the vaudeville and Broadway Revue stage. A number of early sound films include backstage scenes which depict the integral place that blackface had continued to enjoy in variety forms of stage entertainment through the first decades of the twentieth century. These include *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929), *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Babes in Arms* (1939) and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942). Other films had lead characters who happened to be blackface entertainers in the mold of Jolson and Cantor. *Rainbow Man* (1929) was a copy (Fisher, 1993, 87) of Jolson’s second film *The Singing Fool* (1929) and it

starred Eddie Dowling as a blackface entertainer (Leonard,1986,87). Two other very early sound films which involve plots centering around lead characters who are blackface entertainers are *The Matinee Idol* (1928) and *The Grand Parade* (1930) (Leonard,1986,197). A later film which also involves a blackface entertainer as its lead character is *Your My Everything* (1949) (Leonard,1986,372).

Other films included specific scenes where characters performed as blackface entertainers. In *The Phantom President* (1932) George M. Cohan relives his vaudeville days by performing as a blackface entertainer, and there are similar scenes involving Paul Muni in *Seven Faces* (1929), and Jimmy Durrante in *George White's Scandals* (1934). The latter film *The Time the Place and the Girl* (1946) involves a scene where Jack Carson performs as a blackface entertainer. In *Always Leave Them Laughing* (1949) and *Hard To Get* (1938) Milton Berle and Dick Powell, respectively, mimic Al Jolson in blackface.

One real life vaudevillian blackface entertainer who did not fare as well as Jolson and Cantor on screen was Eddie Leonard. He starred in the box office failure *Melody Lane* (1929), another film with "overtones of Al Jolson's *The Singing Fool*" (Leonard,1986,272). Leonard was one of a number of old time vaudevillians to appear in the Bing Crosby film *If I Had My Way* (1940) and a later film which also revives real old time vaudeville blackface acts is *Yes Sir Mr. Bones* (1951).

The Vaudevillian derived blackface act which came closest to emulating the screen success of Cantor and Jolson was the comedy duo Moran and Mack, played by George Searcy and Charles Sellers respectively. Their first screen appearance was in

Two Flaming Youths (1927) (Leonard,1986,278). Next they starred in the sound film *Why Bring That Up* (1929), based on a script by the Jewish writer of blackface comedy Octavius Roy Cohen. Leonard writes that the duo were only in blackface for part of the film (1986,278) and this clearly aligns them with the self reflexive blackface minstrelsy of Jolson/Cantor rather than with the ‘realistic’ blackface employed by Amos ‘n’ Andy in their two film appearances. Further confirmation of this is offered by Gary Null’s (1977,53/4) book *Black Hollywood* which includes a still from the next Moran and Mack film, *Anybody’s War* (1930), that shows them in minstrel masks with large white mouths. ‘Moran’ in this film was actually played by Bert Swor, another well known blackface vaudeville artist. Swor made screen appearances in his own right in two Vitaphone shorts *A Colourful Sermon* (1930) and *Ducks and Deducts* (1930), which were filmed versions of his famed vaudeville blackface monologues (Leonard,1986,279). The original duo reunited for the last Moran and Mack film, *Hypnotized* (1933). Klotman (1997,548) also lists their appearance in the comedy short *Two Black Crows in Africa* (1929). She indicates, without naming the other titles, that this was part of a series of comedy shorts that they did for the Educational Films Company, a small indication that there may well be a “lost continent”³ of blackface in the music and comedy shorts of the early sound era.

A final example to mention where vaudevillians wore blackface in early sound film is *Diplomaniacs* (1933). The film stars the comedy team Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey who were not known as blackface artists in their vaudeville days. In one

³ Peter Stanfield made this comment in an email correspondence.

sequence however, a bomb⁴ is thrown into a political convention which transforms Wheeler, Woolsey and the rest of the delegates, into a minstrels.

2:3 Minstrel Shows and Nostalgic Blackface

The blackface discussed in this section is distinct from vaudevillian blackface in that the films involved either restage minstrel shows or pay homage to the nineteenth century minstrelsy era. Not only were minstrel show reenactments only one category of blackface persistence, as opposed to its mainstay, but they too were frequently more complex and hybrid in their use of blackface than is accounted for by the prevalent understanding of them as nostalgic throwbacks which were hived off from the rest of early sound film.

For example minstrel shows were frequently depicted in modern day settings. One of the first films to depict a minstrel show, involving a full troupe, end men and an interlocutor, was *Mammy* (1930). *Mammy* stars Al Jolson and, as its title suggests, the story concerning a modern day minstrel troupe is essentially used as a ploy for Jolson to sing his own blackface songs, in effect creating a vaudeville -minstrel show hybrid. Another depiction of a minstrel show in modern day America is *Happy Days* (1930) which tells the story of a minstrel troupe attempting to overcome financial difficulties (Leonard, 1986, 197). A latter version of this story line is utilised in *Minstrel Man*

⁴ Phyllis Klotman describes a similar moment occurring in the film *Genius at Work* (1946). "Carney of the comedy team Carney/Brown has an accident which singes him black" (1997, 1980). James Nestey (1982, 158) discusses *Genius at Work* and compares it to the oven explosion which turns Eddie Cantor into a minstrel in *Whoopee!* (1930). It would seem clear then that a minstrel image is involved.

(1944). It stars Benny Fields as a minstrel man who revives the minstrel show on 1940s Broadway. Fields also features as a minstrel man in minstrel show numbers in *The Big Broadcast of 1937* (1936) and *Somebody Loves Me* (1952) (Gubar, 1997, 86).

Minstrel shows were reenacted in a contemporary context in a variety of films; in musical shorts such as *Minstrel Days* (1930) and (1941); in comedy shorts such as *Ye Old Minstrels* (1941) of the 'Our Gang' series and *Mickey's Minstrels* (1934) starring a young Mickey Rooney; in musicals such as *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (1929) (Gottschild, 1996, 124) and *College Holiday* (1936); and even in other feature film genres such as the melodrama *Housewife* (1934) (Hanson, 1993, 971).

Other films did recreate minstrel shows in their original nineteenth century setting. This was done most extensively in the three Stephen Foster bio pics, *Harmony Lane* (1935), *Swanee River* (1939), and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1952). Period reenactments of the minstrel show were not without complexity in their use of blackface however. A good example is *Dimples* (1936) starring Shirley Temple.

Set in 1850s New York, the film tells the story of street urchin 'Dimples' who leads her Fagin type grandfather to a better way of life. They gain roles in first stage production of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Dimples plays Eva to her grandfather's blackfaced Uncle Tom. At the end of the play the show's producer announces, "Out of the South recently comes a new form of entertainment", and the blackfaced cast are transformed into a minstrel show with Dimples as the whiteface interlocutor figure (fig 1:13).

Here, in addition to masking the northern roots of minstrelsy, the film reverses the actual blackface trajectory connecting the minstrel show and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The minstrel show had risen to prominence in the 1840s and was in fact an influence on Stowe's depiction of African-American life. In particular the character of Topsy, as Lhamon has noted, was "lifted" (1998,143) from the minstrel show and *Dimples* depicts Topsy as a minstrel figure in its recreation of the play (fig1:14). Leonard (1986,159-221) has traced the complex nineteenth theatrical history where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was staged both as a serious drama and a minstrel show type production. Moments before the transition to the minstrel show *Dimples* depicts blackfaced whites attending the death of Little Eva as a 'realistic' scene without minstrel masks and uses the African-American spiritual 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' to enhance the pathos. *Dimples* demonstrates again then that blackface persisted as a hybrid and complex entity in early sound film.

One the most interesting points here is that Temple's casting as 'Dimples' was a result of the close association of her film brand with images of blackness. She had become famous through co-starring with Bill Robinson in *The Little Colonel* (1935) and *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) and had appeared in blackface in the latter film (discussed in the next section). Peter Stanfield argues that Temple's "dance style [...] draws heavily on styles developed as part of a blackface repertoire; a tradition invoked in many of Temple's films when she is 'taught' her dance steps by [...] African-Americans" (1997, 423). Bill Robinson is in fact credited as 'dance director' in *Dimples*, although he does not actually appear in the film. *Dimples'* complex interweaving of Temple's contemporary association with African-Americans and hybridised blackface imagery is completed by the depiction of a blackfaced Stepin Fetchit as one of the end men in

the minstrel show (fig1:15). Again this is a distortion of actual history since African-American minstrelsy, in strict segregated form, did not arrive until the 1860s.

Other films which included blackfaced depictions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* include *The Girl in the Show* (1929) (Klotman,1997,202), *Spanky* of the 'Our Gang' series (Klotman,1997,487) and *Can This be Dixie* (1936) (Leonard,1986,195). I have not been able to view these films in order to determine whether the blackface used is as minstrel inflected as that in *Dimples*.

Period reconstructions also captured the diverse permutations of nineteenth century minstrelsy. The singing cowboy film *The Singing Vagabond* (1935) depicts a traveling minstrel show (Hanson,1993,1952) whilst a minstrel 'ball dodger' is depicted in the late nineteenth century fairground scenes of *Coney Island*. In the opening fairground scene of the more modern setting of *Dante's Inferno* (1935) Spencer Tracy plays Jim Carter, a down and out who works as a minstrel ball dodger. He is befriended by his future father in law Pop McWade, played by Henry Walthall. There is an extraordinary moment in the film where Walthall, the actor who played the Little Colonel in *The Birth of a Nation*, washes the blackface off Tracy as he says, "We'll see what you really look like".

Show Boat (1936)⁵ includes a minstrel show type act, in which Irene Dunne as Magnolia takes the lead role (fig 4:16), in its depiction of the variety entertainment offered on the show boat. As Magnolia sings there is a cut to a tracking shot from behind the heads of the segregated African-American audience who are watching

⁵ All subsequent references to *Show Boat* are to the 1936 version.

from the balcony (4:17). If the fact that we do not see their faces creates a certain ambiguity as to their reaction to the minstrelsy in front of them, then other films sought a more explicit approval of minstrelsy from an African-American 'audience'. As the death of Stephen Foster is announced at the final minstrel show performance of *Harmony Lane* there is a shot of the segregated African-American audience rising to pay their respect. A similar sentiment is at work in *Holiday Inn* (1942) when a shot of Louise Beavers singing about how Lincoln set the "darkies free" is inserted into Bing Crosby's minstrel show inflected blackface number 'Abraham'. Similarly in the 'Our Gang' short *The Pinch Singer* (1936) there is a cut from a minstrel show type act in a radio studio to Buckwheat, played by Billie Thomas, who listens at home and pronounces them "swell". Earlier we noted how African-Americans were picked out from the audience to authenticate the 'realistic' blackface used in *Rhapsody in Blue*. That this also occurred in relation to Hollywood's depiction of self reflexive minstrelsy further highlights the continuing complexity at work in blackface forms and their perception.

Eddie Cantor begins his last film, *If You Knew Susie Eddie* (1948), by making his last screen appearance in blackface as a character, Sam Davis, who is also performing his last number before his retirement. Sam is one half of an old time vaudeville blackface act with his wife Susie, played by Joan Davis. They sing 'My How The Time Goes By' against a mise en scène of spinning clocks and struggle not to fall off the moving escalator that forms part of the set (fig1:18). As they are given a send off in the dressing room Susie expresses relief that "never again in my whole life will I have to take off blackface". Sharing the moment, Sam (still in blackface) gives her a kiss,

leaving a smudge of black on her face and a corresponding smudge of white on his (fig1:19). The room erupts with laughter and Susie says “Maybe just one more time”.

In addition to providing a neat analogy for the resilience of blackface in Hollywood film the opening sequence of *If You Knew Susie* also illustrates that it was only in the last phase of its visibility that blackface was predominantly framed in terms of nostalgia. Towards the end of the film Sam and Susie return to the origins of their career by reprising an opera burlesque in the empty and dilapidated vaudeville theatre that they had first performed in. Cantor’s only other blackface appearance in 1940s film, *Show Business* (1944), had similarly cast him in a role that self reflexively relived his vaudeville past. Jolson had featured in his last starring role in 1936 and he was next seen as a supporting player, in *Rose of Washington Square* (1939), as a blackface singer on the vaudeville stage in a role which reprised the beginning of his career. His appearance in *Rhapsody in Blue* was similarly framed and his blackface act was officially consigned to nostalgia, although extremely lucratively, when he provided the singing voice to Larry Park’s blackfaced portrayal of his career in *The Jolson Story* (1946) and *Jolson Sings Again* (1949). This was soon followed by Eddie Cantor’s bio pic *The Eddie Cantor Story* (1953).

These portrayals of Jolson and Cantor were in marked contrast to the sixteen films in which they had starred in the late 1920s and 1930s. This shift in the manner of their portrayal highlights the way that blackface did indeed return nostalgically to its origins in 1940s film. However this was a distinct phase at the end of blackface’s visibility which was specifically determined by Hollywood’s merging of vaudeville and minstrel show blackface and by the employment of blackface as a patriotic

symbol of American entertainment in and around the war years. Two 1939 films mark out the start of a concerted nostalgic shift in blackface forms, *Swanee River* and *Babes in Arms*.

After completing *Rose of Washington Square* Jolson took another supporting role as E.P. Christy in the Stephen Foster bio pic, *Swanee River*. There is a fascinating subtext in the casting of Jolson as the minstrel show pioneer who was responsible for making Foster's music famous. The very film that confirmed the end of Jolson's film career returns him to the historical origins of his own blackfaced brand of entertainment. There is a scene at the end of the film where Christy attends Foster's deathbed. *Swanee River* provides no space, as *Mammy* had, for Jolson's own songs and there is a sense that Jolson attends the death of his own vaudevillian brand of blackface entertainment which more than a decade before had been chosen as the vehicle to launch a new film era on.

Babes in Arms, Busby Berkeley's first film for MGM as a director, makes a more explicit connection between the death of vaudevillian derived entertainment on the Hollywood screen and a nostalgic revival of the minstrel show. The first sequence of the film depicts the emergence of sound film killing off vaudeville. The film then tells the story of how the children of some unemployed vaudevillians, led by Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, try to revive the fortunes of their families by putting on a stage production. The centre piece of their production is a fully staged minstrel show and the film ends with a Broadway producer signing the vaudeville kids up.

The same formula was repackaged for another Berkeley directed Garland/Rooney vehicle, *Babes on Broadway* (1941). Garland and Rooney, Tom Williams and Penny Morris in the film, are again the leaders of a teenage group of wannabe stage stars. The film is about their attempts to win an audition with a Broadway agent. In one scene, very similar to the one in Cantor's last film *If You Knew Susie*, Tom and Penny wander through an empty and dilapidated vaudeville theatre and Tom says that he can sense "ghosts in greasepaint". When they go on the stage however, they do not reprise the minstrel show that Tom's words conjure up but instead they perform the routines of a number of famous (whiteface) vaudevillians.

The minstrel show is revived at the end of the film when the 'babes' finally get their audition. They have no material and improvise by singing "What's wrong with doing something old, something tried and true. Well how about a minstrel show, does that appeal to you". Then, as they sing "Go and tell New York to grab a piece of cork", a montage sequence transports them onto a Broadway stage for an extensive reenactment of a minstrel show in the closing number, 'Blackout Over Broadway'. In blacking up Hollywood's brightest young musical stars as minstrels on the Broadway stage the two *Babe* films appear to conjure up nostalgia for the minstrel show. And yet in returning the Hollywood musical to its blackfaced Broadway origins the films are primarily motivated by nostalgia for the more recent death of vaudeville, as seen in the casting of Garland and Rooney as vaudevillian kids and in their reprisal of vaudeville acts in the empty theatre. Although *Swanee River* and the *Babe* films signal the shift to nostalgia which came to dominate blackface forms by the 1940s they also indicate the continuing complexity and hybridity of blackface at the end of

its cultural life in the way that they involve an interplay between minstrel show revivals and the final death of vaudeville's influence on film.

Judy Garland's first starring role, in *Everybody Sing* (1938), had involved a blackface appearance as part of the film's implicit characterisation of her singing style as 'black'. Her continued association with blackface in the two *Babe* films also highlights a particular hybrid 'realism' which featured in minstrel show reenactments throughout early sound film. In both *Babes in Arms* (fig1:20) and *Babes on Broadway* (fig1:21) she wears a lighter 'realistic' blackface in the duets that she performs with Rooney, who wears a dark minstrel mask. Women were commonly presented in 'realistic' blackface within minstrel inflected numbers. For example Joan Davis, with Eddie Cantor in *If You Knew Susie* (fig1:18), Ethel Merman, with Cantor in *Kid Millions* (1934) (fig1:22), and Betty Grable, with a male chorus in *Coney Island* (fig1:23), performed in similar numbers where their 'realistic' blackface clashed against the grotesquely marked minstrel mask of their male colleagues. These examples highlight a complex hybridity in blackface forms where even the most overt self reflexive minstrel performance in early sound film retained some capacity in its iconography to communicate 'blackness' in a more 'realistic' manner. Betty Grable's appearance in *Coney Island* for example is almost indistinguishable (same colouring, hair and split skirt) from the appearance of the female singer in *Rhapsody in Blue* where there is genuine intention that the audience perceive her as 'actually' black (the similarity can be seen by comparing (fig1:10) and (fig1:23)).

Women had not generally participated in nineteenth century minstrel shows.

Although male minstrels had performed 'wench' numbers, a more likely historical precedent for such hybrid imagery in Hollywood's minstrel numbers, adding to their sense of a partial underlying realism, were the African-American Broadway revues of the late nineteenth century. One of the principle innovations that these revues made from the minstrel show format which they emerged from was to juxtapose men in minstrel masks with lighter skinned African-American showgirls (Mizejewski, 1999, 122-123). These male female combinations in minstrel performances are an interesting confirmation of Richard Dyer's (1997, 132-142) argument in *White* that the presentation of heterosexual couples in Western cinema has historically involved lighter/whiter women and darker men. This particular imagery however, with the darker self reflexive minstrel masks distancing the men from blackness, seems paradoxically to suggest that it is the lighter coloured 'white' women who have, as Mary Ann Doane has put it in another context of discussion, "a close representational affiliation with blackness" (1991, 213),

The frequent use of lighter 'realistic' blackface to portray women within minstrel derived numbers highlights the problems, even in relation to the predominantly nostalgic blackface of the 1940s, embedded in the conventional approach to the persistence of blackface in early sound film which tends to proceed on the basis of separating it from an earlier 'realistic' use of blackface in silent cinema. However, by the 1940s blackface did for the first time generally conform to prevalent understandings of it as a self reflexive and nostalgic 'throwback' to a bygone era. An important determinant of this shift was the way in which blackface became a patriotic symbol of a distinctly 'American' music in and around the war years.

An extraordinary feature of the nineteenth century minstrel show is that its plagiarised African-American music was popularly received, a perception still dominant in the years leading up to the second world war, as the first home produced 'American' music. *Swanee River*, made before American involvement in the war, illustrates how minstrel nostalgia was essentially patriotic in its motivation. In a key sequence early in the film Foster, played by Don Ameche, reflects on the slave music he has absorbed but has yet to minstrelise. He calls it "the only real American contribution to music" and asks why "no one has taken the trouble to write it down ,develop the material , and write original music in the same mood".⁶ *Babes on Broadway* was made just before America's entry into the war and it confirms the minstrel show as patriotic icon. The war is referenced early on in the film when Penny sings the number, via an Independence day radio link up with London, 'Chin Up, Carry On' to the parents of British kids who have been sent to America. When Tom and Penny recreate the vaudeville of old in the empty theatre scene their final rendition, as they both emerge in an American flag costumes, is of George M. Cohan's 'Yankee Doodle Dandy'. It is in this spirit that the 'babes' bring the minstrel show to Broadway as an example of quintessential American entertainment. The title of their minstrel song, 'Blackout Over Broadway', was somewhat prescient of America's involvement in the war whether intentional or not. By the time the Cohan bio pic *Yankee Doodle Dandy* was made, complete with numerous references to the use of minstrelsy in his shows, America had joined the war. Cohan is depicted meeting President Roosevelt and

⁶ The full conversation that Foster has with his future wife, Jane, in relation to African-American music is as follows - Jane: 'there's nothing like them is there', Foster: 'no, they have something all of there own , its music from the heart, from the heart of a simple people, that's why it moves you like it does, and by jingo its the only real American contribution to music, I wonder, Janewonder why no ones taken the trouble to write it down ,develop the material , and write original music in the same mood'. Jane: 'why don't you Stephen, you can I'm sure you have a wonderful feeling for it'

planning to revive his world war one use of show business for patriotic ends with, as one line in the film puts it, “the smell of greasepaint in [his] nostrils”.

The use of minstrelsy as patriotic symbol of a distinctly American entertainment heritage during world war two is illustrated by the three blackface appearances that Bing Crosby made in 1940s film. In *Holiday Inn* he performs the Irving Berlin minstrel inflected number ‘Abraham’ to commemorate Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. In *Dixie* (1943) Crosby is cast as Dan Emmett. Emmett was credited with creating the first minstrel show in 1843 (Leonard,1986,226). The film’s central focus however, revealing its patriotic project in the process, is the song Emmett wrote for the ‘walk around’ plantation finale of one of his minstrel shows, ‘I Wish I Was In Dixie Land’. Better known as ‘Dixie’ and “undoubtedly the most famous song ever composed for minstrels” (Leonard,1986,227), the song (which is featured prominently in the score of *The Birth of a Nation*) was adopted as the anthem of the confederacy during the civil war. The film recounts the history where Abraham Lincoln closed his victory speech in Washington April 9 1865 by asking a band to play the tune (Leonard,1986,228).⁷

One of the most successful popular musicians of *his* time, Crosby is astutely cast as Emmett, author and performer of the most popular song of the minstrel age. And yet Crosby was also renown for his ‘black’ singing voice and it is again interesting to note that Hollywood often conjured up its minstrel nostalgia through figures who had

⁷ The absence of a critical approach in William Leonard’s *Masquerade in Black* does make way for some fascinating detail in his account of the place of blackface in American history. Soon after using the northern created, but southern adopted, minstrel song ‘Dixie’ as a tool for unification Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes, an actor who had been playing Othello in blackface over the previous seven years (Leonard,1986,63). Among the possessions found on Wilkes’ body was a picture of a famous blackface Uncle Tom actor (65).

some contemporary association with 'blackness'. *Here Come the Waves* (1944) begins with Crosby plugging one of his own hits, 'That Old Black Magic', that has an underlying flirtation with 'blackness'. Crosby is cast as a famous recording star, Johnny Cabot, whose desire for front line action in the war is thwarted by his appointment as the head of a recruitment through entertainment campaign. He produces a show with a minstrel inflected number, 'Accentuate The Positive', as its centre piece. Crosby/Johnny appears as a minstrel postman (fig1:24) who complains, against a stage setting of army recruitment stalls, about negative attitudes, "that's what wrong with people here, otherwise they'd be running up to buy tickets for the big show".

Hollywood's use of minstrelsy in support of the war effort was not without a basis in reality, as Joseph Boskin highlights:

At least six volumes containing hundreds of minstrel and comedy acts were distributed to military bases around the world under the aegis of USO [United Services Organisation] Camp shows; 'minstrelsy is the one form of American entertainment which is purely our own' the introduction to the materials patriotically intoned. (1986,88)

This is the Army (1943) illustrates the army's use of minstrelsy. The film was based on the stage shows that Irving Berlin produced for both world wars and it includes a minstrel number, of which Rogin writes "as method and signifier of American patriotism, the minstrel number has pride of place" (1996,180). *This is the Army* highlights how the second world war was the key determinant behind a general shift in 1940s blackface forms towards nostalgic minstrelsy.

There is also a certain tension in the film which illustrates why this nostalgic turn in blackface marked its final flourish on the Hollywood screen. Whilst reviving minstrelsy as patriotic symbol, the film at the same time attempts to reflect, and further motivate, African-American involvement in the war and it rather awkwardly includes a segregated African-American number alongside the minstrel number. Another film made in 1943, the all black musical *Stormy Weather*, illustrates the tensions surrounding Hollywood's use of blackface and the concurrent need for its films to positively include African-Americans. It was the first Hollywood film to use co-present imagery which was not overwhelmingly racially biased and which presented an accurate history of African-American minstrelsy for the first time. I return to a discussion of *This is the Army* and *Stormy Weather* in my final chapter in order to further explore the shift in blackface forms where they finally split from their earlier defining involvement in the racial portrayal and perception of African-Americans.

It was these second world war films and not *The Jazz Singer*, as Michael Rogin argues, which signaled the final decline of blackface into self reflexive nostalgic minstrelsy. Nostalgia is cited by Rogin, and others such as Gubar and Stanfield, as an all encompassing explanation for the persistence of blackface. Nostalgia, as it were, is seen as a kind of umbilical cord which sustained archaic blackface forms through the transition to modern sound cinema. In this section I have identified the specific factors, the death of vaudeville and the revival of minstrelsy as patriotic symbol in the war time era, which were responsible for the predominant shift of blackface forms into nostalgia by 1943. Interestingly the practice of featuring stars with preexisting 'black' associations in minstrel reenactments, seen in Jolson's role in *Mammy* and

Temple's role in *Dimples*, continued into the 1940s with Garland's and Astaire's involvement in Hollywood's minstrelsy. Generally however, this last phase of nostalgic blackface was hived off and separated from actual African-Americans and it did not engage in the direct racial association and racial play with an African-American screen presence that had earlier defined blackface. My thesis is centrally concerned with the racially charged blackface which was dominant in the years 1927-43. No-where was the racial bias of blackface more apparent than in the use of blackface in narrative episodes of disguise.

2:4 Disguise Blackface

In relation to the blackface sequence in *Holiday Inn*, where Bing Crosby persuades Marjorie Reynolds to perform in blackface so as to hide her from Fred Astaire, Susan Gubar remarks, 'As is often the case late in its history, the use of blackface has presumably only been justified by the need for a disguise' (1997,53). Gubar stresses that Reynolds' minstrel blackface is not at all "mimetically realistic" (ibid) and her understanding is that blackface is used simply as a mask to cover over Reynold's features. Rogin also cites *Holiday Inn* as an example of the fact that "blackface was often justified as disguise" (1996,183). It is true to say that *Holiday Inn* does not register any racial currency in its use of blackface. Although the blackface does obscure Reynolds' identity from Astaire it is clear to the film's audience that Astaire and everyone else in the scene sees Reynolds as a white performer in blackface. However this was not typical of the way that blackface had previously been used as a

disguise in early sound film. In fact it may well have been the *first* time that blackface was used in this way.

I have viewed more than fifty blackface films which were made before *Holiday Inn*. The use of blackface in more than twenty of them is motivated by a narrative need for disguise. In all of these films however, as I discuss below, the narrative intention, in contrast to *Holiday Inn*, is that the blackface disguise is seen as ‘actually’ black by other characters in the film.

Holiday Inn was made at the time where blackface was declining into nostalgic forms which were removed from its earlier racial work. In subsequent films, though actually not that often, blackface was reduced to the simple status of makeup. Benny Fields uses his minstrel act as a means of hiding his identity in *Minstrel Man* and there are also some interesting uses of blackface to disguise Al Jolson in his later cameo appearances. Blackface enables Jolson to perform ‘Swanee River’ in the Winter Gardens sequence of *The Jolson Story* without disrupting Larry Park’s imitation of him in the film. Fisher also notes that the decision to blackface Jolson for his appearance as himself in *Rhapsody in Blue* was “an attempt to hide his age” (1993,111). However, in presenting *Holiday Inn* as a typical blackface disguise scenario Rogin and Gubar ignore one of the most prevalent uses of blackface in previous films. The use of blackface as a racially charged disguise fully brings out the complex and hybrid nature of blackface forms in early sound film. The way that film audiences were ‘in the know’ about these disguise episodes relates this use of blackface to the self reflexive tradition of nineteenth century minstrelsy. At the same time however, the way that blackface diegetically functioned as ‘actually’ black in

these disguise episodes relates them equally strongly to the ‘realistic’ use of blackface in silent cinema. There is an additional complexity in that both ‘realistic’ and minstrel, and a third category I identify as ‘parodic’, forms of blackface were used in disguise sequences. Despite this diversity in forms all of these blackface disguise sequences functioned in the same way in that they diegetically conjured up the presence of actual African-Americans. The racial play with the African-American referent of blackface was compounded in many of these disguise sequences by the fact of an on screen co-presence, where African-Americans either helped construct the disguise or else were fooled by it.

2:4a ‘Realistic’ Disguise

In Old Kentucky (1934) stars Will Rogers as a horse trainer, Steve Tapley, and Bill Robinson as Steve’s servant, Walker. Steve is imprisoned just before the big race that much of the film has been building up to. Walker visits Steve in jail and Steve burns the cork of a whiskey bottle that he discovers in Walker’s pocket. He then blacks up in order to swap places with Walker and escape. As Steve makes his way through the prison office the sheriff, mistaking him for Walker, says that he has heard that he has “hot feet” and demands that he does a dance. The scene takes a distinctly comic turn then as Rogers/Steve has to counterfeit the famous ‘Bojangles’ shuffle so as not to blow his ‘cover’ (fig1:25). Steve successfully deceives the whites in the room until he inadvertently wipes some cork off his face and is discovered. The use of burnt cork and the mimicry of black dance in this scene involves a subtle undercurrent of minstrelsy and yet the formal appearance of the blackface (hair covered over and black evenly distributed), and the diegetic context in which it occurs, clearly harks

back to the 'realistic' tradition of silent cinema where blackface was used to 'stand in' for African-Americans. Steve's blackface is a genuine, in comparison to the minstrel mask, attempt at mimesis. This use of blackface in disguise episodes is further confirmation of a formal diversity where 'realistic' blackface retained a formal presence in early sound film. What sets the films in this section apart from the examples of 'realistic' blackface discussed earlier is the constant consciousness of the film's audience of the counterfeit, and also the ritual of unveiling of the counterfeit as the other characters in the films eventually 'discover' the disguise.

Laurel and Hardy's first feature film *Pardon Us* (1931) involves a similar sequence to that seen in *In Old Kentucky*. They too attempt to evade the law by employing 'realistic' blackface disguise after escaping from prison and they also have to maintain their 'cover' by participating in African-American song and dance on the plantation in which they hide.

An interesting variation of the 'realistic' use of blackface as a disguise occurs in *Operator 13* (1934). Marion Davies stars as a Northern female spy⁸ in the American civil war who uses blackface to go 'undercover' in the south. She maintains her disguise for a large part of the film and fools both white and African-American Southerners. In contrast to the other films discussed here, the disguise is not uncovered and she returns to the North undetected. Davies had also used blackface as a disguise in an earlier film, *Going Hollywood* (1933). Hanson (1993,790) describes how Davies plays an obsessed fan who stalks a famous singer, played by Bing

⁸ *Top Sergeant Mulligan* (1928) would seem to be a film in similar vogue to *Operator 13*. Leonard notes how "Wesley Barry and Wade Boteler resorted to burnt cork as U.S. army spies" (1985,197). I have been unable to locate a copy of the film and cannot ascertain whether it uses 'realistic' blackface in the same way as *Operator 13*, although I expect that it would have.

Crosby, and uses blackface as a disguise so as to get close to him without being detected. One suspects that Davies appears in the same 'realistic' blackface as seen in *Operator 13*. Hanson identifies another film, *Pursuit* (1935), which would also seem to involve 'realistic' blackface disguise. She notes how a group of white fugitives swap cars with an African-American family and black up so as to avoid detection (1993,1717).

John Wayne also used blackface as a 'realistic' disguise in *The Spoilers* (1942). He plays a gold prospector, Glennister, who along with another man, Detry, played by Harry Carey, leads a bank raid to reclaim a town's gold from a crooked marshal. In the scene preceding the raid the men sit around a fire and smear black on their faces as a disguise. One man asks another why he doesn't use charcoal and the reply is that he "prefers cork". What might simply have been an act of camouflage is now firmly located into the blackface tradition.

There is a cut to Wayne as he smears 'cork' on his face and starts an exchange with Detry that mimics the comic routine of the end men of a minstrel show; Glennister: "Well how are you Mr. Bones"; Detry: "Well Mr. Tambo I'm just about even", Glennister: "even?"; Detry: "even better than I was before". There is then real hybridity surrounding blackface here and the undercurrent of minstrelsy attending the visibility of blackface in the film is stronger than at work in *In Old Kentucky*. However, even as they imagine themselves to be minstrel men, the disguise which Glennister and Detry construct is a 'realistic' attempt to look African-American. Their intention is to create confusion as to the perpetrators of the raid, i.e. there are no

minstrel mouths, the black is evenly distributed black and their hair is covered by hats.

The raid is not actually shown but the intended currency of Glennister's blackface is confirmed by the denouement to the disguise episode which is played out on an African-American. In making his escape Glennister comes across Idabelle, an African-American maid played by Marietta Canty, who exclaims "Coloured boy ! Where d'y'all come from? " (fig1:26). Glennister plays along with the moment and says in dialect, "How's y'all sweet thing I figured it was about time for us to get acquainted". Idabelle only spots the counterfeit when Glennister removes his hat upon which she says, "Here now wait a minute, y'all ain't no coloured boy. You'se washable".

In the Shirley Temple/Bill Robinson vehicle *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) there is a hybrid look to the 'realistic' blackface disguise that the slaves devise in order to hide their southern belle from marauding Yankee soldiers. Temple's hair is covered by a head scarf and the boot polish used to disguise her is evenly spread. However Temple's appearance is much darker than any of the examples discussed so far. Her appearance carries the unreal quality of the exaggerated blackness of the minstrel mask and she looks bizarrely different from the African-American girl with whom she hides (fig1:27). Nonetheless the disguise works and the soldiers only discover her true identity when her head scarf is knocked off, an action which causes Temple's blonde tresses to spill over her blackened face and fully brings out the underlying hybridity at work in the scene.

There is a similar undercurrent of surrealism in Bing Crosby's 'realistic' blackface disguise in the musical short *Dream House* (1932). Crosby attempts to get on to a movie set in order to patch up his differences with his film star girlfriend. As he looks through a fence at the studio he is accidentally sprayed by black paint. This creates an extraordinarily complex situation where Crosby is initially unaware that he is disguised as a black man. Crosby's appearance is hybrid. The black is evenly distributed but it has an unreal shine and its colour has, as with Temple in *The Littlest Rebel*, more in common with the overdetermined minstrel mask than a naturalistic blackness. Nonetheless the narrative set up, paradoxically, allows this hybrid image to create a searingly accurate depiction of white-black social relations.

Crosby enters the studio office and sits down next to a white woman who reacts in horror and moves across. Only when he is told to join two other African-American extras on the movie set does Crosby realise how he has been perceived by the woman. He then goes along with the mistake and uses his new identity to 'blend in' with the African-American extras (fig1:28) and get access to his girlfriend on the set.

2:4b Minstrel Disguise

The hybridised blackface used to disguise whites as African-Americans in *The Littlest Rebel* and *Dream House* is perhaps made less strange when placed against the context of Eddie Cantor's early films, where even his obviously self reflexive minstrel mask was employed as a racial disguise. Cantor's first starring role was in the MGM

adaptation of the Florenz Ziegfeld stage play *Whoopie!* (1930)⁹. Blackface appears in the film in a scene where he is being pursued by a group of men. He plunges his head into an oven and emerges in the familiar minstrel mask of his stage act. He convinces, in dialect, the men that he is an African-American cook. In the next scene he approaches a female friend and, in another interesting revelation of black-white social relations, she recoils in horror and says “how dare you speak to me” (fig1:29). Cantor’s reply highlights both the diversity and complexity of disguise blackface forms and also the complexity and ambiguity that they raised in terms of racial perception. Realising how effective his disguise has proved, Cantor self reflexively plays with the woman’s perception of him, “Who am I, Amos ‘n’ Andy?”. The racial joke of course is that Cantor’s minstrel blackface is very different from the ‘realistic’ blackface used by Amos ‘n’ Andy. Indeed his, as the image caption demonstrates, minstrel brand was considerably more self reflexive than that used by Jolson. The minstrel mouth is more exaggerated and his hair is not covered by a wig.

In Cantor’s next film, *Palmy Days* (1931), Cantor simply performs in blackface and it is not used as a disguise. However in his next two screen appearances the extraordinary narrative motif of Cantor’s self reflexive minstrel mask being perceived as ‘actually’ black continued. In *The Kid from Spain* (1932) he uses blackface as a disguise in order to avoid capture. On this occasion he uses a more traditional method of blacking up by burning a cork that he finds under a night-club table. He emerges from the table speaking in dialect and, when he spots that two other blackfaced men are about to start a dance number, he evades his pursuers by saying “here’s my act”. There is some ambiguity here in the sense that we may be meant to think that Cantor’s

⁹ Cantor was perhaps the most famous star to emerge from the Ziegfeld stage and his blackface act is depicted in both *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936) and *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946).

pursuers do not recognise him because they perceive him, in similar fashion to Fred Astaire in *Holiday Inn*, as a white performer in blackface. However Cantor's use of dialect would seem to racialise him as 'black' within the diegesis.

Roman Scandals (1933) extends the racial play at work in Cantor's blackface by subjecting African-Americans to the 'joke' of his minstrel mask being perceived as 'actually' black. Cantor, having been accidentally caked in mud, capitalises on the fact that he is misrecognised as an "Ethiopian beauty doctor" in order to get a message to a woman in the segregated female quarters. Once inside the quarters Cantor dispenses beauty tips to the white women and their African-American maids in the famous Berkeley choreographed number 'Keep Young And Beautiful'. Eventually he blows his 'cover' by accidentally revealing his white legs to the African-American maids (fig1:30).

Cantor again simply wears blackface as a performer in *Kid Millions* (1934) and he did not use blackface at all in *Strike me Pink* (1936). However, an interesting variation of the disguise motif reoccurred in his final film of the 1930s, *Ali BaBa Goes to Town* (1937), when he blacks up in order to communicate with a group of African natives in ancient Baghdad¹⁰. Although he blacks up in front of them, the fact that the natives only understand him when he is in blackface creates an ambiguous sense of racial currency in the 'disguise'.

¹⁰ There is a similar scene in the Bing Crosby/Bob Hope vehicle *Road to Singapore* (1940). They darken their faces so as to pass as natives at an Island feast. Although they disguise themselves as Asians, the way in which they leave a clear white circle around their mouths would seem to be a reference to minstrelsy.

Jolson's fourth picture, *Big Boy*, was released a few days after *Whoopee!* in September 1930. It was the only one of his pictures to use blackface to disguise him as an African-American¹¹. Unusually the 'joke' of the minstrel mask being perceived as 'actually' black runs, as Cripps notes, through almost the entire picture before Jolson eventually appears in whiteface in its final frames:

Its white writers and director Alan Crosland hubristically asked their audiences to accept Jolson not as a blackface minstrel but a genuine Negro [...] only in the last moments are we allowed the evasive demurrer that it is all a game. (1993,253)

Minstrel forms of blackface disguise particularly accentuated the complexity surrounding blackface and its perception in early sound film. A description of the blackface sequence in *Hard to Get* will demonstrate this. Dick Powell plays an entrepreneur, Bill, who has been banned from plugging his ideas to a rich businessman. The blackface scene begins with party at the business man's house. As the door men vet the guests, we see that Bill has disguised himself in blackface in an attempt to get close to the businessman. One of the door men stops Bill and demands "Wait a minute what do you do Amos?" and Bill answers that he is the singer for the band (**fig1:31**).

Bill joins the band and, in order to maintain his cover, sings a parody of Jolson's 'Sonny Boy' with accompanying Jolsonesque voice and gestures. This action seems to confirm that Bill has disguised himself as an Al Jolson impersonator. His minstrel mouth would seem to indicate that the guests know him to be white even if they do

¹¹ In relation to the issue of Jolson minstrelsy being used in a black role, Daniel Leab records the extraordinary attempts that Jolson made to secure a lead role in the all black film *The Green Pastures* (1936) (1975,116).

not know that it is Bill. As he finishes two old ladies, continuing the self reflexive references to other blackface acts in the scene, exchange comments about him, “Does he remind you of Uncle Tom?”, “Yes, and he should have little Eva in his arms to put over that number”.

Bill now sneaks into a bedroom so that he can wash, change, and present himself to the businessman. On seeing Bill emerge in whiteface a white waiter, who has watched him walk into the room in blackface, looks surprised and asks him, “excuse me sir but did you see a coloured gentlemen in there?”.

The waiter’s comment, racialising Powell’s minstrel disguise in an instant, uncovers extraordinary complexity at work in the perception of Bill’s blackface in the previous scene. Up until this point it would be entirely logical for the film’s audience to think that the characters have perceived Bill as a white performer in blackface. The doorman compares him to another blackface act, Amos ‘n’ Andy, as do the old women. Their reference to ‘Uncle Tom’ seems to frame the entire sequence as a parody of Jolson’s blackface act as passé. And yet the waiter’s comment opens up an entirely different meaning in the preceding action. Now it would seem that the doorman and the old women may have been using blackface stereotypes as a means of perceiving and disparaging the unwanted presence of an African-American at the party. The use of blackface produces a racially charged ambiguity in the scene which is left unresolved. The film’s audience can take up either understanding of the disguise and there is even the possibility that the doorman/old women perceive Bill as a white in blackface whilst the waiter sees him as actually black.

There is similar ambiguity at work in Judy Garland's blackface appearance in *Everybody Sing*. Garland plays a teenager, Judy Bellaire, who blacks up Topsy minstrel style in order to audition for a show, for which she has been told she is too young. During her performance it becomes clear that one of the show's producers, Ricky played by Allen Jones, is suspicious but the other producer, Giovanni played by Henry Armetta, is not. Ricky questions her after her performance and Judy attempts to maintain her cover by telling him about her "mammy and pappy" in dialect (fig1:32). Again this adds a new dimension to the scene and racialises what may have been simply an attempted disguise through the use of make up rather than through the taking on of an African-American identity. Giovanni continues to be unaware that she is not African-American until Ricky pulls off her wig.

In both *Hard to Get* and *Everybody Sing* blackface disguise sequences begin in an apparently simple manner where, one would expect, the audience assumes that Bill and Judy have disguised themselves as white minstrel performers. Then their minstrel masks are apparently, in bizarre and surreal circumstances, perceived as actually black by other characters. We are left wondering whether Bill and Judy intended to disguise themselves as African-American in the first place and if so why they did not attempt a more 'realistic' disguise. It is hard to think of such genuine ambiguity existing in an audience's understanding of how characters perceive each other elsewhere in Classical Hollywood Cinema.

The racial meaning that is constant in the narrative ambiguity caused by minstrel disguise episodes arises from the joke played on an imaginary African-American presence that the minstrel mask *could* be mistaken as African-American. The joke

was also extended to include an on screen African-American co-presence. In *Up in the Air* (1940) Frankie Darro plays a porter at a radio studio, Frankie, who has ambitions to perform on the radio despite knowing that the producers will never give him a chance. He disguises himself in a minstrel mask and persuades his African-American side kick, Jeff played by Mantan Moreland, to perform in a 'black' comedy act (**fig1:33**). Again the choice of minstrel mask causes additional ambiguity. One might assume that it indicates Frankie uses the minstrel mask as make up. And yet he continues to speak in dialect in an attempt to maintain his cover when the suspicious producer questions them. Once Frankie's cover has been blown there is further ambiguity when the producer motions towards Jeff who exclaims "Don't touch me I don't rub off".

The last, to the best of my knowledge, example of blackface being used as a racially charged disguise in early sound film, and the only instance of this happening in a film made after *Holiday Inn*, is one of the most racist. *Boston Blackie's Rendezvous* (1945) stars Chester Morris as 'Boston Blackie'. Along with his white side kick, played by George E. Stone, he attempts to clear his name after being accused of murder. They track the real murderer to a hotel. He and his sidekick black up as chambermaids so as to gain access to the murderer's room. Our first sight of them in blackface is as they crash out of a closet into an African-American porter. Whilst their hair is covered by headcloths, they have grotesquely marked minstrel mouths. They introduce themselves as "Punnelah and Sapphire" and engage in dialect word play with the porter, clearly convincing him of their 'blackness' (**fig1:34**). The joke runs its course in a later scene when a police inspector recognises them. It is however revived again to close the film as, with the murderer caught and Boston Blackie

exonerated, the black porter enters the room holding up a mop and pail and asks, “Did you gentlemen see two ladies by the name of Sapphire and Punnelah, they done lost their equipment?”. Seeing that the answer is no the porter turns to leave. Offscreen we hear Boston and his side kick announce in dialect “I’s Punnelah ... I’s Sapphire”. The porter stares in wide eyed surprise and says “It’s a mirage” and the final shot shows Boston, his sidekick, and the inspector, laughing in unison. The last film to use blackface as a racially charged disguise saves the final moments of the ‘joke’ for an African-American actor and in the process illustrates the depth of the racial work carried out by blackface generally in early sound film.

2:4c Parodic blackface disguise

The racial impact of blackface on African-Americans is clear even in disguise episodes which might seem to parody the very idea that blackface could be perceived as actually black. There is a scene in *A Day at the Races* where the Marx brothers hide out in the African-American living quarters of a race course so as to avoid a sheriff. When the sheriff arrives they dive under a cart and use the axle grease from the wheel to disguise themselves.

Each of the brothers achieves a varying degree of ‘disguise’. Groucho has an uneven smearing of black with his white forehead exposed. Chico has a more even covering and, with a hat covering his hair, might almost be said to be in ‘realistic’ disguise. Harpo on the other hand has one half of his face, mannequin like, smeared a much darker black and the other half white and untouched (**fig1:35**). It would seem, from

the way that they attempt to mingle in with African-Americans, that their intention is to 'look' African-American. However, the sheriff recognises them immediately and the scene therefore avoids the normal extended racial 'play' involved in blackface disguise episodes. It might even be said to parody such episodes. And yet the film's portrayal of African-Americans is entrenched in the most formulaic of rural stereotypes and the appearance of blackface in the scene, as I explain in an extended look at this sequence in chapter four, completes one of the most pervasive examples of racial containment in 1930s film.

In *Round up Time in Texas* (1937) Smiley Burnette plays a cowboy, Frog Milhouse, who is captured by African natives. Frog 'blacks up' using charcoal from a fire and attempts to escape. Though clearly a narrative attempt to look 'black' his hybrid blackface is not at all mimetic, nor is it minstrelsy. The black is unevenly smeared, his white neck is clearly visible, and the natives immediately recognise him and give chase in any case. Again this sequence seems to parody the kind of disguise episodes looked at previously. However any sense that the process of racial stereotyping itself is under satire is quickly dispelled by the rabidly racist denouement. Having hidden in a tree Frog finds that his blackface is sufficiently 'real' to attract the amorous attention of a gorilla (fig1:36).¹² Ultimately then blackface serves to reinforce, rather than undermine, notions of 'race' despite the hybridity and lack of racial currency in the specific form used. Peter Stanfield (2001,162) notes that Smiley Burnette

¹² This juxtaposition of a blackfaced white with a gorilla mirrors the lamentable but frequent association of African-American performers with gorillas/monkeys in the early sound era, often in well known films. See, for example, the intercutting of Dietrich's gorilla costume with the African-American bar tender in the 'Hot Voodoo' number in *Blonde Venus*, or the cut between a monkey and a black couple in the 'Pettin in the Park' number from *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933). Other examples include an African-American hotel janitor thinking he is talking to another African-American man on the other end of the phone when it is really Cheetah in *Tarzan in New York* (1942) (Boskin,1986,155), and the association of African-American children with monkeys in the 'Our Gang' series, for example *Chicken Feed* (1927), *Don't Lie* (1942), *A Lad and a Lamp* (1932), *Monkey Business* (1926), *Three Smart Boys* (1937) (Klotman, 1997,103/149/294/359/531)

simultaneously appeared in drag and blackface in the later film *Carolina Moon* (1940).

Perhaps the most abstract use of blackface as a disguise occurs in *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man* (1939). W.C. Fields plays a fairground owner, Whipsnade, who attempts to avoid his creditors throughout the film. In one scene he engages in banter with the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his puppet Charles McCarthy, cast as themselves in the film. Edgar has been given a black eye and this appears to be the motivation for the puppet McCarthy to be in minstrel style blackface. Now Whipsnade's creditors arrive and ask Edgar/Charles if they have seen Whipsnade and describe his distinguishing big nose. McCarthy who hates Whipsnade speaks in dialect and says "I think we can help y'all". This prompts Whipsnade to hurriedly smear black over his nose whilst giving a 'black' laugh and singing "Hauling in the cotton".

Again there is a great sense of ambiguity surrounding the use of blackface as a disguise. Is Whipsnade just attempting to conceal his nose, is he attempting to disguise himself as a white minstrel man or is he trying to 'be' black? Fields fails to bribe McCarthy into silence so he throws his top hat over the puppet. This covering over of the only complete blackface image in the scene is the cue for African-American actor Eddie Anderson, 'Cheerful' in the film, to run in shouting "Boss". Whipsnade responds, "Now don't call me boss, be the lovely little pickinnini you've always been and find Whipsnade for these men." (fig 1:37) Cheerful, realising the situation, takes the creditors away and apparently taken in by Whipsnade's 'disguise' (on whatever level that may be, i.e. nose/minstrel man/black man).

The abstract nature of Whipsnade's 'disguise' (neither minstrel nor 'realistic' blackface) might seem to subvert the normal pattern of stereotyping in Hollywood film by exposing its constructed nature. However, Cheerful's appearance late in the scene is a repetition of the process seen at work in other films where the 'joke' of blackface disguise comes to rest on its African-American referent.

The hybridised blackface in these parodic disguise films, Harpo's mannequin face, Frog's charcoal smeared face and Whipsnade's blackened nose, exposes what other 'disguise' films and other blackface imagery in the early sound cinema sought to hold together. It highlights how the blackface signifier which had structured the portrayal and perception of African-Americans in popular culture for more than a hundred years was beginning to break apart in its last resting place on the Hollywood screen. And yet at the same time the co-present context in which blackface is seen to break up in each of these films works to impress how the history of blackface's racial work is uniquely revealed in early sound film.

3: Conclusions on the 'Map' of Blackface Persistence

My discussion of blackface disguise films completes what is, to the best of my knowledge, the most extensive account of the persistence of blackface in early sound film. The map of blackface persistence pieced together in this chapter would seem to confound previous accounts. The disguise films bring out a formal complexity and ambiguity which generally characterises blackface in early sound film. The diversity

of blackface forms in early sound film, and their intricate involvement in the racial perception of an imaginary or actual on screen African-American presence, demonstrate a repetition of the dynamics of racial representation at work in *The Birth of a Nation*. Blackface persisted in early sound film as the textual residue of a white racial consciousness about African-Americans and as a century long means of portraying and perceiving their blackness.

Throughout this chapter is an underlying sense of the co-present nature of blackface. In subsequent chapters I return to the detail of many of the films discussed so far in an attempt to illustrate how co-presence provides a valuable record of the textual processes involved in stereotyping African-American actors and performers on the Hollywood screen. This chapter paves the way for the consideration of co-presence as the central historical significance of blackface by challenging three commonly held assumptions about its persistence in early sound film, that blackface survived as a nostalgic throwback, that its use was greatly reduced in sound film, and that ultimately its death is directly attributable to the introduction of sound.

Blackface survived in nostalgic minstrel forms.

I have outlined why accounts of blackface as nostalgia do not provide an adequate explanation for cinematic blackface and also that such accounts overlook the racial nature of its persistence. Nostalgia did not become the principle motivation for the continued visibility of blackface until the 1940s. Furthermore this nostalgia was complex and arose in a specific context. The longing for the ‘minstrelsy of old’ expressed in films such as *Swanee River*, *Babes on Broadway*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *This is the Army* was actually determined by the more recent death of vaudeville

and by the status of minstrelsy as a patriotic American symbol in the war time era. Even in these later years, nostalgic minstrel forms do not account for the overall persistence of blackface as demonstrated, for instance, by the 'realistic' forms seen in films such as *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Saratoga Trunk* and *Torch Song*.

The use and influence of blackface as a medium and a practice was greatly reduced in sound film in comparison to the silent era.

Whilst the introduction of sound more or less ended the use of blackface as a straight replacement for African-American actors, 'realistic' forms of blackface did nonetheless persist in various permutations. It would also seem clear that the new technology actually expanded the range of blackface practices which could be employed in cinema, for example as demonstrated by the film careers of blackface vaudevillians, minstrel show reenactments and disguise episodes.

There is a sense that misunderstandings about the persistence of blackface, for instance that it was reduced to self reflexive nostalgic minstrelsy, relate to a general vagueness about the actual form and nature of blackface in silent cinema, an area much in need of further research. If the employment of blackface in *The Birth of a Nation* is typical then it must be acknowledged that blackface in silent cinema was complex, frequently intentionally self reflexive (including the employment of minstrel imagery), and extensively juxtaposed with the African-Americans that it is deemed to have 'replaced'. It may be that the use of blackface was far more selective than is indicated by the notion of it generally replacing African-Americans in silent cinema. If the 124 films listed in my filmography are only a partial account of the actual employment of blackface in sound cinema then it could be argued that blackface

featured in as many sound films as silent, that there were as many 1930s films with blackface imagery as there had been in the 1920s. In terms of complexity certainly, the different categories that I set down in this chapter demonstrate that the blackface which persisted into the early sound era was in no way a limited version or a reduction of the blackface employed in silent cinema.

The use of blackface 'died out' as a result of the introduction of sound.

Although the introduction of sound did effect blackface, the notion that it 'died out' or even declined would seem to be discounted by reflecting on the leading Hollywood figures mentioned in this chapter, and in the filmography at the end of this thesis, who (literally or figuratively) had burnt cork on their hands during the early sound era.

The most famous American composers of the time, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern and George Gershwin, were associated with blackface. Busby Berkeley was saturated in blackface imagery and was involved, either as director or choreographer, in at least nine blackface films. The cinematographer Gregg Toland repeatedly photographed blackface sequences. Directors who directed more than one film including significant blackface representation include Alan Crosland, Michael Curtiz, Ray Enright, Lloyd Bacon, Edward H Griffith, Roy Del Ruth, Edward Sutherland, Alfred Green, Irving Cummings, Norman Taurog, David Butler, and Raoul Walsh. A wider list of directors who worked with blackface imagery in one of their films reads like a who's who of Hollywood greats; Frank Capra, George Cukor, Josef von Sternberg, Melvyn Le Roy, James Whale, Dorothy Arzner and Orson Welles.

In addition to Cantor and Jolson, stars whose fame and status in Hollywood's early sound era is greatly underestimated today, Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, Mickey

Rooney, Martha Raye, Betty Grable and Myrna Loy repeatedly appeared in blackface during their careers. Again some of the brightest stars of their time took a 'turn' at blackface during their careers. These included Paul Muni, Spencer Tracy, Dick Powell, Fred Astaire, Shirley Temple, Joan Crawford, Ethel Merman, Irene Dunne, Marion Davies, John Wayne, Will Rogers, Jimmy Durrante, W.C. Fields and Laurel and Hardy.

In conclusion then, the persistence of blackface mapped in this chapter suggests that, far from dying out, 'putting on the cork' remained a normative practice in Hollywood film through several decades of the sound era. Blackface remained, as it had been over the previous 100 years, textually embedded in white minds as an element of racial consciousness about African-Americans, a way of seeing and communicating the 'stuff' of blackness. What united the variety, hybridity and ambiguity of blackface forms in early sound film was the fact that blackface remained fundamentally a singular act of racial marking. This was something of immense consequence for the formal portrayal of African-Americans on screen, the topic of my next chapter.



Fig 1:1



Fig 1:2

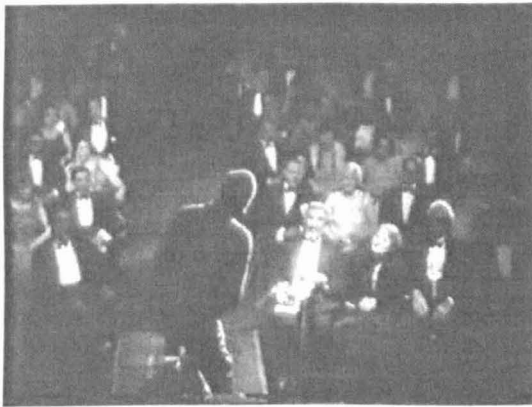


Fig 1:3



Fig 1:4



Fig 1:5



Fig 1:6



Fig 1:7



Fig 1:8



Fig 1:9



Fig 1:10



Fig 1:11



Fig 1:12



Fig 1:13

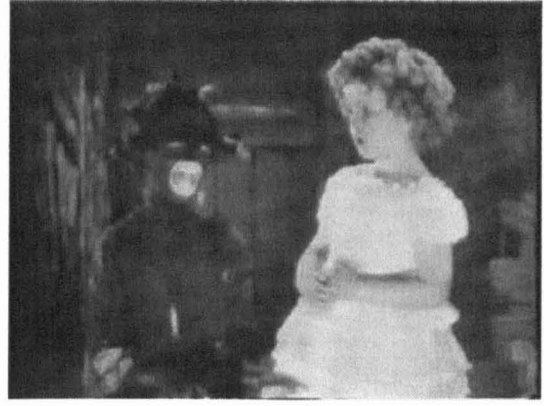


Fig 1:14



Fig 1:15



Fig 1:16

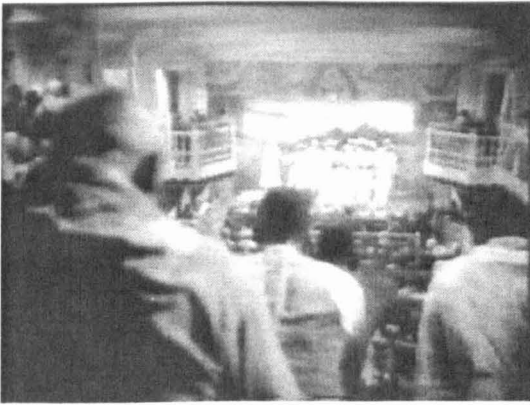


Fig 1:17



Fig 1:18



Fig 1:19



Fig 1:20



Fig 1:21



Fig 1:22



Fig 1:23



Fig 1:24



Fig 1:25



Fig 1:26



Fig 1:27



Fig 1:28



Fig 1:29



Fig 1:30



Fig 1:31



Fig 1:32

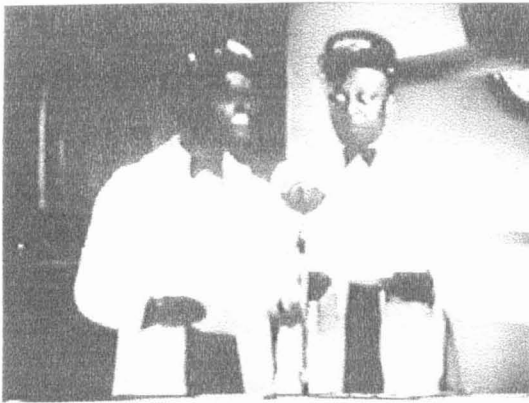


Fig 1:33



Fig 1:34



Fig 1:35



Fig 1:36



Fig 1:37

CHAPTER TWO

SHADOWS OF BLACKFACE: THE RACIAL MARKING OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ACTORS AND PERFORMERS IN EARLY SOUND FILM

“In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour” (Dyer, 1993, 142)

It is impossible to reach a full understanding of the nature of blackface in American cultural history on the basis of treating it as an exclusive representational form separate from the portrayal and perception of African-Americans in that cultural history. So central was the function of racialising African-Americans to the minstrel trope and so immense were its historical consequences for African-Americans, that blackface can only be fully understood when read in relation to the dominant cultural portrayal and perception of actual African-Americans. This chapter addresses the other side of the co-presence equation then, Hollywood’s representation of actual African-Americans in the early sound era.

If the persistence of blackface has largely been uncharted territory to date then this is not so with respect to the ‘real’ black image of the early sound era. In particular the “images

of' works have recorded the stereotypical roles given to African-American actors and the limited scope of their place in Hollywood narrative film. My map of the 'real' black image in the early sound era does not therefore need to follow the broad contours set down in the previous chapter for the persistence of blackface. Instead the map of the real black image that I offer in this chapter focuses specifically on the one area that has been lacking in past accounts of Hollywood's stereotyping of African-Americans, the film specific formal practices used to racialise the visibility of African-Americans on film.

Accounts of how representation has been used historically to define African-Americans in racial terms often use the term *marking*. Davies and Smith note that "Hollywood representations of African-Americans have been marked pre-eminently in terms of race" (1997,51), whilst Linda Mizejewski notes that in the early twentieth century entertainment media, "African-Americans were the most visibly marked non white population (199,120). Stuart Hall bases his chapter 'The Spectacle of the Other', in the book *Representation*, on examples drawn from "the repertoires of representation and representational practices which have been used to mark racial difference" (1997,239). Hall repeatedly uses the term marking in his account of stereotyping. He argues that stereotypical imagery "works by the marking of 'difference' " (233) and in relation to various examples of stereotypical black images, including several from Hollywood's early sound era, he asks us to "note the preoccupation - one could say the obsession - with *marking 'difference'* " (265 Hall's emphasis).

In relation to film the notion of marking seems very suggestive of the actual formal practices involved in producing difference in stereotypical images of African-Americans. It offers the hope of 'getting' to the textuality of racial stereotypes on film and is a term richly suggestive of the how of Hollywood's racialisation of African-American actors and performers.

One scholar who brings out some of the textuality of applying the term marking to racial stereotypes on film is James Snead. At the start of *White Screens, Black Images* Snead identifies three "devices" whereby blacks have been "consigned to minor significance on screen [...] *mythification; marking; and omission*" (1994,4, Snead's emphasis). On marking Snead writes, "As if the blackness of black skin itself were not enough, we seem to find the color black repeatedly overdetermined, marked redundantly, almost as if to force the viewer to register the image's difference from white images" (5). Snead's elaboration on marking approaches the textuality of stereotypes in film and, though he does not use term itself, he identifies the specific role of *mise en scène* in "forcing" the viewer to register the difference of black images:

Film is a medium of contrasts in light, and so the shades of skin colour between black and white often must be suppressed, so that binary visual opposites might serve cinematographic as well as political purposes. Chauffeurs, domestics, porters, jazz musicians, and other blacks are marked by the black/white codings in the contrast between their skins and white articles of clothing. Aprons, gloves, dresses, scarves, headbands, and even white teeth and eyes are all signifiers of a certain coding of race in Hollywood films that audiences soon came to recognise (5/6)

As his emphasis on the binary oppositions produced by marking indicates, Snead is interested in film language in so far as it ties in with broader semiotic codings. He does not move much further in identifying the specific practices of film form involved in marking racial difference into images of African-Americans.

Below I identify three aspects of film practice (film technology, racial casting, racial naming and scripting) and three aspects of film form (mise en scène, editing, patterns of visibility/invisibility) where the marking of African-Americans works to produce the maximum 'difference' in their image so that their visibility on the screen is perceived in racial terms. The different categories amount to a formal map of the 'real' black image that can be juxtaposed with the map of blackface persistence. In subsequent chapters I will return to the co-presence of the 'real' black image and blackface in early sound film. This chapter does not leave the field of co-presence entirely however. With the exception of one category, racial scripting and naming, the formal map of the 'real' black image which follows is entirely crafted from co-present films. The racial marking of African-Americans in the films discussed below occurred then, as it were, under the shadow of blackface.

1: Film Practices Involved in the Racial Marking of African-Americans in Film

Even before African-American actors or performers arrived on a movie set a range of 'marking' practices in film technology, casting and scripting were in place to ensure racial qualities in their performance. They created the maximum of marked difference in black images in comparison to the 'norm' of white imagery and this helped develop normative interpretations of the 'difference' between blacks and whites into *racial* perception.

1.1 Film Technology

Richard Dyer's third chapter in *White*, 'The Light of the World', is directed towards uncovering the "racial character of technologies" (1997,83) and how "photography and cinema, as media of light, at the very least lend themselves to privileging white people" (ibid). Dyer notes that, "The assumption that the normal face is a white face runs through most published advice given on photo- and cinematography." (94) Dyer demonstrates how the historical development of lighting technology and lighting practices to privilege lighter skin has disadvantaged less reflective darker skin. Unless compensatory measures were taken, and nearly always they were not, African-Americans appeared darker on the screen than they actually were and their facial features were less defined.

That compensatory measures *could* be taken for less reflective dark skin is interestingly demonstrated by the standard close ups used to ‘reveal’ the disguise or blackface stage persona of whites in the blackface films of the early sound era. These close ups were of necessity sufficiently lit to maximize the ‘pleasure’ of audience recognition by clearly showing the features of the white star under the cork, the opening shot of Jolson’s blackface in *The Jazz Singer* is a good example of this (fig0:9) . The fact that ‘blacking up’ scenes (*The Jazz Singer, Swing Time, Show Boat*) were frequently staged in dressing rooms with mirrors and bright lights often gave narrative motivation for higher levels of lighting.

Dyer notes the complementary effects of different aspects of film practice in promoting lighter skin and subordinating darker skin, “the interactions of film stock, lighting and make-up illustrate the assumption of the white face at various points in film history” (91). The black and white film stock that cinema inherited from photography was inherently geared towards capturing white faces to the best effect. Brian Winston has recorded how a similar bias was at work in the invention of colour photography and he notes that “colour films, despite continuous improvements in performance, do not render black skin tones as easily as they do white” (1996,41). He argues that since colour television and colour film do not directly register the world, but are instead “a highly mediated, ideologically charged analogue of the natural world of colour”(1996,43) the imbalances can only be explained by “cultural assumptions” (ibid) about the colours black and white. Winston gives a particularly vivid example of the kind of cultural assumptions that have

historically racialised media technologies by citing Natalie Kalmus, wife of Herbert - inventor of Technicolor:

black is no colour, but the absorption of all colour. It has a distinctly negative and destructive aspect. Black instinctively recalls night, fear, darkness, crime. [...] white represents purity, cleanliness, peace and marriage. Its introduction into a colour sublimates that colour [...] White uplifts and ennobles, while black lowers and renders more base and evil any colour' (ibid)

1:2 Racial Casting

If cultural assumptions about 'blackness' had become ingrained into the very cinema technology used to capture the first sustained wave of African-American actors/performers to enter Hollywood then the same cultural assumptions were at work in the casting of those African-American actors and performers who gained visibility in the early sound film. Charlene Register notes how casting calls for African-American extras in 1930s 'Jungle' films included provisos such as "must resemble savages" (1997,104). The same emphasis on blackness and racial features was at work in the casting of more prominent roles. Most well known African-American actors in the early sound era were on the dark side of a black spectrum and also had 'Negroid'¹ features. This is in evidence for example in Donald Bogle's description of Hattie McDaniel:

¹ 'Negroid', a term both Cripps (1993,130) and Bogle (1994,83) use, seems a particularly unsavoury 'measurement' to call up. However it was clearly a 'look' Hollywood sought in its African-American actors.

A powerfully built woman, she weighed close to three hundred pounds, was very dark, and had typically Negroid features. With her enormous mouth, wonderfully expressive eyes, “Pearly white teeth”, and mammoth rounded face, Hattie McDaniel was one of the screen’s greatest presences (1994,83).

Exceptions to the rule were frequently darkened with makeup to make them appear darker on screen. Daniel Leab notes that studio make artists had darkened the light skinned Fredi Washington (1975,109) for her role in *Imitation of Life* (1934), and Bogle notes that “she had been heavily darkened with make-up to look more Negroid” (1994,62) in *The Emperor Jones* (1933). Snead adds Lena Horne and Nina Mae McKinney to the list of lighter skinned African-Americans who were required by the studios “to darken their skins” (1994,5) in the early sound era. In the light of the previous chapter one might label this an extreme form of ‘realistic’ blackface and, as with the other blackface forms covered in this thesis, the underlying central function of the practice was to racialise African-Americans.

The pattern of darker skinned African-Americans getting more prominent roles is repeated amongst those performers who crossed over from segregated musical sequences into sustained visibility in narrative roles. The blackness and Negroid features of Bill Robinson and Louis Armstrong contrasted noticeably with performers of similar fame, such as Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington, who did not make this crossover. The inherent bias within film stock and lighting interplayed with practices of racial casting in further marking the blackness of African-Americans on screen. Register notes that African-Americans of light complexion were denied opportunities to act because they

were “perceived as not being dark enough to photograph as black on screen” (1997,103). Inadequate lighting set ups also had the potential to exaggerate what were already perceived to be the ‘racial’ features of black faces. Dyer includes a citation from the 1990s African-American actor Joe Morton which illustrates this point. Highlighting the continuing problems presented to African-American actors by inadequate lighting Morton notes, “lots of black men have broad noses and that can be exaggerated.” (1997,97)

1.3 Racial Naming and Scripting

My discussion of black character names in this section is largely garnered from the credit lists included in Phyllis Klotman’s *Frame by Frame*, still the most exhaustive filmography of African-Americans in films.²

Commenting on the history of a particularly sharp white supremacist focus being placed on the practice of naming African-Americans, from slavery times to the minstrel show era to early twentieth century entertainment forms, Brenda Dixon Gottschild stresses “the importance of naming, and self naming for African-Americans” (1996,123). The process of naming black characters within scripts and attaching credits to their screen visibility was another recurrent site of marking in early sound film.

² I refer to numerous non blackface films in this section for illustrative purposes in my discussion of naming. Films mentioned in this section which are not referred to elsewhere in the thesis are not listed in the filmography.

African-American musicians and performers were one of the key components in the rise of African-American visibility in the early sound era but, as Daniel Leab notes, their “listing in the credits was invariably ‘as themselves’ ” (1975,103). Leab cites from a survey that found that such casting accounted for 15% of all black roles in 1930s film (ibid) and the practice would seem a particularly marked way of noting the difference between African-American performers and the white characters they usually performed for in the films.

On occasion African-Americans were not given a name for a narrative role at all. For example in the films *Wings Over Honolulu* (1937), and *I Take This Woman* (1940), Louise Beavers and Willie Best were credited, and referred to in the film, as the stereotypes they played, ‘Mammy’ and ‘Sambo’. Klotman notes that Joffre Pershing Johnson was also often credited as the latter in his films (1997,xi). A further act of marking difference in black roles was the practice of only attaching a first name to African-American actors whereas white characters generally had surnames³. If a black character name extended beyond one word the appendage was usually stereotypical, e.g. ‘Birmingham Brown’, Mantan Moreland’s character name in the *Charlie Chan* series.

These single names were intended to signify the peculiarity of African-American actors rather than to confer any individual character status on them. Typical were standard stereotypical names such as ‘Mose’, e.g. Sam Baker in *Public Hero Number One* (1935), Matthew Beard in *The Return of Frank James* (1940), and Eddie Anderson in *Three Men*

³ In relation to the beginnings of the Hollywood era Cripps conducts a survey of films between 1915-1920 and notes, “roughly half the Negro roles viewed in *Variety* were maids and butlers , and 74 percent of

and a Horse (1936); exotic sounding names attached to mammy roles such as ‘Beulah’ and ‘Cleota’, the names given to Hattie McDaniel in *Forty Five Fathers* (1935) and *The Male Animal* (1942), or ‘Delilah’ and ‘Petunia’, the names given to Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life* and *Seven Sweethearts* (1942); or ‘silly’ Roman names for African-American males in comic roles, ‘Cicero’ and ‘Scipio’, Stepin Fetchit’s character names in *Dimples* and *Carolina* (1934), or ‘Pompeii’, Willie Best’s character name in *The Arizonian* (1935).

‘Stepin Fetchit’ (a shortening of the white order “step and fetch it”) as ‘Scipio’ or ‘Cicero’, or ‘Sleep ‘n’ Eat’ (as Willie Best was generally known in the early sound era) as Pompeii are actually instances of double marking and they demonstrate the overdetermination involved in the racial marking African-Americans through naming. Further examples of this double marking of ‘Sleep ‘n’ Eat’ include his roles as ‘Sambo’ in *I Take This Woman* (1940) and ‘Drowsy’ in *Thankyou Jeeves* (1936). Another example of this double marking is Fred Toones who often appeared in credits as “Fred ‘Snowflake’ Toones”. He played ‘Mose’ in *Lady By Choice* (1934) and *The Lawless Nineties* (1936). In the Jolson blackface film *Go into Your Dance* his character name is also ‘Snowflake’. To hear the white characters in the film aurally conjure up pure whiteness by constantly calling him ‘Snowflake’ as his (already heavily marked through film technology, racial casting, mise en scène and editing) ‘blackness’ enters frame is a particularly vivid example of marking as Snead conceives of it. That is as a process of erasing the shades between black and white in order to draw absolute contrast between the

them were known in the credits by some demeaning first name.” (1993,112). One suspects that these

two, thereby forcing “the viewer to register the [black] image’s difference from white images” (1994,5).

Such oxymoronic character names, clashing against the self evident blackness of African-Americans (as constructed in the films), were common in the early sound era. When called out by whites, for the binary narrative structuring of blacks *in relation* to whites meant that it was frequently a white order that conjured up a black presence on screen, these white referenced character names at once conjured up a metaphorical image of pure whiteness in the audience’s mind to contrast with the overdetermined and marked blackness of the African-American actors who were at the same time conjured up on the screen by the order. Examples include Fetchit playing ‘Snowshoes’ in *Charlie Chan in Egypt* (1935), Willie Best playing ‘Euclid White’ in *Whispering Ghosts* (1942) and ‘Snowball’ Henry playing a janitor in *Save the Pieces* (1928). Louise Beavers provides an extraordinary case study of the range of white associated character names frequently attached to African-American actors in the early sound era. She plays ‘Madame Nellie le Fleur’ in *Bullets or Ballets* (1936), ‘Lily’ in *Cheaters* (1934) and *Made for Each Other* (1939), ‘Ivory’ in *Ladies of the Big House* (1931), and ‘Pearl’ in *She Done him Wrong* (1933). In *Rainbow on the River* (1934) she escapes such naming and plays ‘Toinette’ and yet she is cast opposite Matthew Stymie who plays ‘Lilybell’.

Frequently an overdetermined and ‘marked’ colour consciousness spilled into the dialogue scripted for African-Americans. Examples include *The Little Colonel* where Shirley

findings would have some bearing on the patterns of naming black characters in the early sound era.

Temple asks Hattie McDaniel if she knows any stories about the colour blue and McDaniel replies “No but I can tell you a black story about my first husband”; *Little Miss Marker* (1934) where Temple dubs Willie Best as her “Black Knight”; *Operator 13* where a Southern belle asks if all brides thought their husbands the most handsome men in the world and the African-American maid replies “Hell no, when I married my husband I thought he had the most ugly black face I ever did step on”; *Judge Priest* where Hattie McDaniel leads a black church choir by singing “Massa Jesus wrote me a note. Say he gonna wash me white as snow, though I be black as tar” (Rogin, 1996, 174); and finally *The Ghost Breakers* (1940) where Bob Hope says to Willie Best during a power failure “You look like a blackout in a blackout. If this keeps up I’m going to have to paint you white” (Bogle, 1994, 72). Running through these examples is a white practice of script writing where an overdetermined colour consciousness about blackness is placed into the mouths of African-Americans themselves. The last two examples in particular vividly demonstrate the binary colour consciousness which is at the heart of marking processes.

A final aspect to mention in relation to the marking of African-Americans in the scripting process is the pervasive practice of African-American actors and performers being required to speak in dialect. Gary Null identifies the dialect that African-Americans were expected to speak in the early years of sound film as “the dialect of the Southern shanties” (1977, 24). As a representative example he cites the case of the child actor Farina, of the ‘Our Gang’ series, whose “perfect enunciation so horrified the director that he was quickly shuffled off to desophisticate his language” (ibid). Bogle cites Louise Beavers as another representative example, her voice “had no trace of dialect or Southern patios. When the

talkies came in she schooled herself in the slow-and-easy backwoods accent compulsory for every black servant.” (1994,63)

2: Aspects of Film Form Involved in the Racial Marking of African-Americans in Film

We now move from racial marking in three aspects of film practice (technology, casting, and naming/scripting) to three aspects of film form which were heavily involved in the racial marking of African-American actors and performers, mise en scène, editing, and patterns of visibility and invisibility.

2:1 Mise en scène

2:1a Costume

Snead draws attention to the use of costume, “white articles of clothing [...] Aprons, gloves , dresses, scarves, headbands” (1994,6), as his principle example of the marking process where the range of hues between black and white skin colours is suppressed in order to create binary visual opposites that “serve cinematographic as well as political purposes” (ibid) and to force “the viewer to register the image’s difference from white images” (5). An extreme example of marking through the use of costume can be seen in Bill Robinson’s introduction to the segregated dance number of *The Big Broadcast of*

1936. The barber shop scene opens with a shot of feet tapping to radio music on the bottom of the barber chair. A longer shot shows that the occupant of the chair is obscured by a white towel that covers his face. A cut back to close up shows the hands of the barber tapping out the beat of the radio music onto the towel before he finally lifts (fig2:1) the towel to reveal Bill Robinson, who is credited 'as himself' in the film. Robinson initially rolls his eyes to the side and then breaks out into a wide eyed open mouthed pose (fig2:2) with the towel providing a stark background whiteness to the blackness of his skin.

A similar unveiling and marking of the blackness of African-American skin against a white background occurs in the 'Public Park' number in *The King of Jazz*. Essentially a romantic number about white couples in the park, Paul Whiteman makes a comic cameo appearance right at the end. Initially seen with his back to the camera he swivels round to reveal a small African-American girl on his lap (fig2:3). The girl's smiling face is turned towards Whiteman's face and is marked by the whiteness of his sailor uniform and also by the white bands in her 'pickannini' hair style.

In the *Show Boat* number 'Can't Help Loving That Man of Mine' the racial marking of Queenie, Hattie McDaniel, through mise en scène also serves a deeper narrative purpose. Dressed in a white shirt and over sized white head scarf (fig2:4) she stands behind Julie, Helen Morgan, and queries how she knows a "coloured folk's" song. Queenie's costume accentuates by white contrast the reality of her blackness and her juxtaposition here with

Julie, who is dressed in black, is part of the film's use of *mise en scène* to visually highlight and foretell the key narrative theme of Julie's mulatto status.

2:1b Setting

Frequently the overdetermined colour consciousness behind the use of white costume to mark black skin spilled out into the entire setting surrounding African-Americans. In our earlier example from *The Big Broadcast of 1936* Bill Robinson emerges from the barber shop in a pale suit to dance on the sun bleached sidewalk. With white buildings in the background he dances past various African-Americans in white costumes, including four white dressed African-American babies being pushed in a pram (fig 2:5). The effect is that the entirety of Robinson's appearance in the film in this segregated sequence is visually bathed in whiteness.

Another example of *mise en scène* marking can be seen in a dressing room sequence from *The Great Ziegfeld*. The scene opens with an African-American maid 'Flossie', the actress is unidentified in the credits, admiring some flowers that Ziegfeld has sent. The camera pans to reveal the recipient of the flowers, the stage star Audrey Dane, played by Virginia Bruce. Flossie walks towards her and says "Ain't that something, don't you like your flowers honey lamb". James Snead notes the recurrent pattern that occurred in Mae West's films where she was juxtaposed with African-American maids. He includes a film still (1994,68) from *I'm No Angel* (1933) where she is flanked by two African-American

maids who are marked by their white head scarves and aprons. This scene from *The Great Ziegfeld* however illustrates how the practice of white items of costume being used to mark black skin that Snead identifies often expanded to govern the entire arrangement of mise en scène around African-American actors and performers. Flossie is marked by the usual white head scarf and a big white collar (fig2:6). In addition to this however the white flowers in the foreground cut off her midriff and to her right Audrey is enrobed in a white feather costume. Even the background of the frame works to mark Flossie's blackness since her face rests against a white item of clothing. In relation to the example of Mae West Snead notes that "black women can elevate by contrast West's white and ethereal beauty" (1994,67). Similarly although the mise en scène of this shot might seem to be arranged around Flossie's blackness the actual focal point is Audrey, emblem of white femininity beauty.

The image capture (fig2:6) from *The Great Ziegfeld* is an opportune moment to reflect on the way that different aspects of marking tended to work in combination as a pervasive system of film practice and form which worked to racialise African-American visibility in the early sound era. In addition to the in built bias of film stock, the way that the motivated lighting in the left of the frame is arranged to privilege Audrey is an indication of how the general lighting set ups in such scenes worked to enhance the beauty of white femininity with the consequence, "by contrast", of marking blackness. 'Flossie' is a classic example of an African-American actor being marked by an associational white name. Additionally Flossie's reference to Audrey as "honey lamb" adds an aural dimension to the visual colour consciousness circulating the African-American screen presence in the scene.

Even the universal marking of African-American actors by dialect rises to the surface of this scene in the way that Audrey mimics Flossie by accusing her of having “done looked” at the present that arrived with the flowers, and by rebuffing the warnings not to drink before a performance with the retort “Ain’t y’all forgetting to pour that drink.”

2:2 Editing

2:2a Racial Cutting

The base unit of editing is the cut. Two of the earlier examples from our discussion of *mise en scène* illustrate how the timing of a cut was frequently used to mark racial difference into images of African-Americans. In *The Big Broadcast of 1936* (**fig2:2**) the cut at the end of our first view of Robinson arrives exactly as he breaks into his wide eyed open mouthed pose. Similarly in *The King of Jazz* (**fig2:3**) the cut is timed exactly as the little girl breaks into a grin with her eyes pushed to the side looking at Whiteman in order to visually ‘catch’ her in this racial gesture. The different posture that Whiteman adopts, mouth closed and looking down so that the whites of his eyes are not visible, confirms the racialised basis of the gesture into which editing traps the girl. I term this use of editing the *racial cut*.

Perhaps the most endemic use of this type of racial cutting to mark racial difference into the African-American screen presence, one that marked the entire film careers of some actors such as Mantan Moreland and Willie Best, was in relation to the supposed fear of ghosts and general superstition held to be characteristic of African-Americans. An

example of this type of racial cut can be seen in *Ali BaBa Goes to Town*. The scene involves a Prince bearing gifts in huge jars for the Sultan. The slaves, played by African-Americans, display the contents of the jars but then pause in apparent fear at the last jar. The Prince shouts “pearls, slave, the pearls”, in itself creating an oxymoronic colour conscious clash in the dialogue, and the slave lifts the sleeping Eddie Cantor (in whiteface) out by his hair. The slave then recoils in horror and as Cantor disappears again the cut is timed for maximum emphasis on the African-American actor’s wide eyed fearful expression (**fig2:7**). Again the way that the slave is marked by his white head band and the surrounding whiteness of the jars underlines how marking consisted of a series of inter-related formal devices, i.e. a general sense of colour consciousness about the ‘blackness’ of the slave accompanies the use of the racial cut to trap racial gesture into his screen presence.

This use of an edit on racial gestures also extended into patterns of inter-cutting. In the ‘Can’t Help Loving That Man Of Mine’ number in *Show Boat*, Joe, played by Paul Robeson, enters the scene to remark that it is his favorite song. As Joe and Queenie take up a verse of the song it is noticeable how restricted their plane of space is in comparison to that afforded to Julie and Magnolia. They are positioned side on to each other with Joe on the stairs and Queenie below him (**fig2:8**). This arrangement of *mise en scène* motivates a series of racial cuts between close up shots which catch both Joe (**fig2:9**) and Queenie (**fig2:10**) into eyes to the side poses as they sing.

2:2b The Minstrelisation Shot

This *Show Boat* scene contains examples of an even more overt use of editing to racially mark African-Americans. While Julie sings the opening part of the song there is an inserted mid shot of the grinning Queenie front on to the camera with her hand on her hips (**fig2:11**). The shot duration is timed to capture Queenie's facial gesture as she rolls her eyes slowly to one side and then to the other. Although the cut back to Julie is timed to catch Queenie's grinning face, with its eyes to the side pose, this shot differs from the racial cuts discussed earlier in that it is purely aimed at capturing racial gesture. The earlier sequence of shots involving racial cutting (**figs2:9/10**) between Joe and Queenie did at least show them singing. They function to reveal the delivery of their lines whilst at the same time serving narrative purpose in that Queenie's and Joe's intimate knowledge of Julie's song hints at the hidden blackness of her mulatto status. The shot of the slave in *Ali BaBa Goes to Town* (**Fig2:7**) begins with the narrative purpose of revealing Cantor's whereabouts before it ends with a racial cut on the slave's wide eyed fear. There is no such wider narrative work involved in this insert of Queenie rolling her eyes and the sole function of the shot is to trap racial gesture into Queenie's/McDaniel's screen presence. The effect of such shots is to build the contours of the minstrel mask, with its overdetermined and racialised emphasis on the eyes and mouths of African-Americans, into the 'real' black image, hence my definition of them as *minstrelisation shots*.

Another example of a minstrelisation shot can be seen in *Round up Time in Texas* where Gene (Gene Autry plays himself in the film) and Frog, Smiley Burnette, have been captured by African natives. Frog endears himself to the chief by teaching his children, played by the Cabin Kids, to sing along to his mouth organ. While Frog and the children sing there is an insert of the chief grinning and waving his hands, minstrel style, in the air (fig2:12). Again the function of the shot is entirely geared towards entrapping and marking racial gesture into an African-American screen presence. The formal elements of minstrelisation shots then are frontality, close up/mid shot size, and a shot duration built entirely around performed racial gestures accompanied with a racial cut timed to enhance and catch this 'minstrelised' facial expression.

The minstrelisation shots discussed above are entirely superfluous to the narrative in that the expressions of Queenie and the chief are directed towards the camera and they do not engage with other characters in the scene. Frequently however minstrelisation shots went a step further in their racial containment of an African-American screen presence through building stereotyped gestures into the narrative looks or reaction of African-American characters. This was also a feature of racial cutting but the effect was particularly pronounced in minstrelisation shots where the entire shot is designed to racially entrap African-American looks. At the end of the 'Can't Help Loving That Man Of Mine' number all of the participants, Magnolia, Julie, Joe and Queenie troop outside for a finale. They are spotted by Magnolia's mother who disapproves of her mixing with Julie and reaction shots of all four characters are edited together. Joe, like Magnolia and Julie, has a frozen expression but the final shot is a minstrelisation shot of Queenie as she opens her

eyes and mouth wide (**fig2:13**). A similar shot can be seen in *The Littlest Rebel*.

Virginia, Shirley Temple, has hidden from Yankee soldiers in a secret room and ‘Uncle Billy’, Bill Robinson, notices that she has trapped her dress in the door and that this will reveal her whereabouts. Again the minstrelisation shot that shows his reaction only lasts long enough to register the transformation of Uncle Billy’s face into a wide eyed open mouthed expression (**fig2:14**). Under normal circumstances the use of a close up shot to register a character’s look or reaction in the chain of narrative events would be a site of agency. And yet within the contours of a minstrelisation shot any narrative meaning that an African-American look might convey is overridden by the racial function of the shot which works to highlight the ‘peculiarity’ of their ‘racial’ features for the intended racialised perception of the audience.

2:2c Racial Gestures in African-American Acting

Marking through editing only works to enhance racial gestures that are already marked into the white directed acting performances of African-Americans. Whether wide eyed expressions of fear, or eyes to the side smiles, the facial expressions coaxed into African-American performance were intended to register the peculiarity and the comedy of the blackness of African-Americans and they formed the raw material on which the racial cuts and the minstrelisation shots were able to work. All of the examples we have discussed involve actors with ‘Negroid’ features who are on the darker side of a black spectrum.

The significance of racialised acting gestures and racial casting demonstrates again that, as with others types of marking, racial cutting and minstrelisation shots were produced through the complex inter play of different aspects of film form and practice.

2:2d Frontality

In his principle discussion of marking as practiced through the juxtaposition of white costume against black skin Snead remarks that “even white teeth and eyes are all signifiers of a certain coding of race in Hollywood films that audiences soon came to recognize” (1994,5/6). In order to repeatedly emphasise the whites of their eyes and teeth, part of a general focus on the ‘racial’ features of African-Americans, there was a tendency in the early sound era to present African-American actors front on to the camera. This gave the African-American image of the early sound era a general sense of frontality. The staging and framing requirements for racial cuts and minstrelisation shots accentuated this sense of frontality in the portrayal of African-Americans on screen.

2.3 Patterns of Visibility and Invisibility

We have been discussing an arrangement of mise en scène and editing where African-Americans are for one reason or another a point of focus in Hollywood film. Yet since Hollywood consisted of white narratives which posited white stars as points of

identification in their trajectories, African-Americans were generally marked by their marginal position in relation to the white centre of narrative film, a marginality which drew Cripps to conclude that movies in the early sound era were a “pristinely white medium” (1993,388). Snead addresses this imbalance in Hollywood film with his discussion of the device of “omission” whereby “the repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance created the presence of the idea that blacks belong in positions of obscurity and dependence” (1994,6). Principally omission worked in terms of a literal absence. There were not African-American stars or representations of African-Americans as important people on screen and “film scripts edited out the reality of blacks as lawyers, teachers and doctors” (7). However Snead also highlights the textual impact of omission, “Even within the individual frame, we often (though not always) find the black excluded, peripheral, distant from the source and focal point of the action” (ibid).

This chapter has broadly addressed the question of how stereotypical images of African-Americans were formally constructed. Consequently we have been necessarily concerned with occasions where films did ‘focus’ on African-Americans. And yet Snead’s notion of omission reminds us that the nature of my focus and analysis is against a general background of large swathes of black absence on the Hollywood screen. The general marginality of the African-American screen presence meant that for every shot where they were a point of focus, and even in these they were often marginalised in the sense that they were shown reacting to whites (see **figs 2:3** and **2:7** for example), there were many more shots where they were in the background of, or to the side of, or exiting and entering the frame at the direction of, whites.

The thematic and visual marginality of the African-American screen presence in the early sound era highlights one of the broadest trends in the formal marking of their 'blackness'. There was a clear binary opposition in the make up of 'real' black images in that they were either racially visible or else they were *invisible*. There was a binary process at work in early sound film where African-Americans were either presented for focused racialised perception or else they were consigned to a background invisibility and not meant to be looked at all.

Interestingly the binary shift from a focused and racialised mode of portraying/perceiving African-Americans to a disinterested mode of overlooking and ignoring them is often extremely apparent. There is an early illustrative example of this in *The Birth of a Nation*. A plantation scene opens by showing African-Americans working in the fields (fig2:15). Once the racial scene of the 'natural' place of blacks in the cotton fields has been established, the Stoneman and Cameron families walk into frame (fig2:16). Their entrance turns the shot into a mid shot and consigns the African-Americans to background invisibility.

In *Dimples* Cicero, Stepin Fetchit, is required to provide musical accompaniment for Dimples, Shirley Temple, as she auditions for a play based on Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The audition begins with a moment of racial focus on Cicero as we see him place the mouth organ inside his mouth in order to play it (fig2:17). Apart from one return shot to the comedy and peculiarity of his blackness as he more or less plays the mouth organ by

eating it, Cicero spends the rest of the scene in the obscurity of the background shadows and on the edges of the frame (fig2:18). Fred 'Snowflake' Toones is given similar treatment in *Go into Your Dance*. He is either in the centre of the frame subject to racial attention as delivers lines such as "Don't mention graveyards to me boss" or for Jolson to touch him "for luck", or else he is on the fringes of the frame, fetching and collecting coats, frequently being cut out by camera movement or editing as he carries out his tasks. Exactly the same binary switch from a centralised racialised focus to background invisibility occurs when, having delivered the 'number', African-American performers became part of the background of the club or party that they are depicted as performing at, Duke Ellington in *Check and Double Check* and Bill Robinson and accompanying band in *In Old Kentucky* for example.

Two of our earlier examples further illustrate the patterns of visibility and invisibility in the African-American screen presence of the early sound era. In the *King of Jazz* the contrived moment (fig2:3) involving the smiling African-American girl on Paul Whiteman's knee is the *only* image of an actual African-American seen in the film. In *The Great Ziegfeld* another white character enters the dressing room and Flossie is ordered to pour a drink and walks out of frame not to be seen in the scene again.

This dialectical interplay between foregrounded racial visibility and background invisibility was one of the most subtle, but nonetheless pervasive, ways in which African-Americans were marked on the Hollywood screen. The lack of degrees in between these modes of

either racially perceiving African-Americans or not seeing them at all was in marked contrast to the range of screen portrayals and perception afforded to whites.

3 : Minstrelsy Rebuilt

It would be difficult to find a better conceptual model than blackface minstrelsy for Snead's notion of the marking of African-Americans through *mise en scène*, and for the range of other formal markings of 'real' black imagery I have outlined above. What was minstrelsy if it was not an oxymoronic fusion of perceived opposites? What was the minstrel mask if it was not the most fundamental binary division of black and white⁴, an ironing out of the "shades in between" in order to maximise the difference between the two? In the overdetermined colour consciousness of the minstrel mask, the seeing and speaking consciousness of the enlarged mouth and the eyes provide the unchanging white subject onto which the substance and 'object' of blackness was manipulated and smeared. The notion of blackness as 'stuff', as manipulable substance, at the heart of blackface minstrelsy found particular expression in the blackface disguise films where a variety of dirty black substances such as oil (*Pardon Us*, *A Day at the Races*), mud (*Roman Scandals*), dirty puddles (*Pardon Us*), paint (*Dream House*), soot (*Whoopee*, *The Spoilers*), as well as the traditional burnt cork (*In Old Kentucky*, *The Kid From Spain*), provided whites with the means of transforming themselves into 'African-Americans'.

As the perennial 'blacking up' scenes of early sound film expose then, blackface was the very essence of 'marking' blackness. Minstrelsy's sense of blackness as something false, smearable, and manipulable, provided a model for the formal marking of the blackness of African-Americans on the Hollywood screen, for example the colour consciousness at work in the marking of their blackness against the whiteness of costumes and wider settings.

The practice of attaching character names to African-American actors that conjured up the whiteness of the natural world to clash against the 'peculiar' blackness that they were perceived to have brought to the screen similarly reprises the colour consciousness at the heart of minstrelsy. More directly, the tradition of giving African-Americans ridiculous names and of making scripted jokes out of the supposed 'peculiarity' and comedy of their blackness, and indeed the practice of dialect, all prominent markings in Hollywood's portrayal of African-Americans, had been central to the minstrel show.

The minstrel mask's overdetermined emphasis of a very dark blackness, expressive white eyes and a large grotesque mouth provided the precedent for the 'Negroid' features that Hollywood sought in its African-American actors and for the racial gestures coaxed into their performances. What could be a clearer model for the frontality emphasised in Hollywood's framing and editing of African-Americans than the frontal plane of space in which minstrel performance was exercised, so often recreated in Hollywood's depictions

⁴ Interestingly one of the only blackface minstrel acts to spell out that the blackface minstrel mask was about the binary division of black and white, as opposed to simply 'blackness', was the last, the British 'Black and *White*' minstrel show.

of minstrelsy, where the performer displayed their open palms to the side of their face in an emphasis both of the racial features and the one dimensional flatness of the mask ? Indeed what was the 'twoness' of the Hollywood African-American in the early sound era, where they were either subjected to an overdetermined and foregrounded racial visibility or else they were invisible in the background or absent from the frame all together, if it was not a repetition of the cultural conditions that the minstrel trope had set for the blackness of African-Americans for more than one hundred years ?

In the introduction I noted how Brenda Dixon Gottschild uses the notion of a "minstrel trope" to identify the historical consequences of minstrelsy. One fundamental historical consequence of minstrelsy lies in the process where key elements of its content and the formal shape of the minstrel mask can be seen to have resurfaced in the formal racial marking of Hollywood's 'real' black imagery in early sound film. There is in relation to film then a tangible and textual dimension to the historical consequences visited on African-Americans by the minstrel trope and this was perhaps never more in evidence than in the minstrelisation shot, an amalgamation of other formal markings (racial casting and gesture, frontality, sudden racialised visibility and the racial cut) which worked to build the minstrel mask into images of African-Americans.

In chapter one I noted that the consensus on the 'decline' of blackface in the early sound era has been to understand it in terms of 'replacement'. African-American actors are deemed to have replaced blackface as the principle means of depicting blacks in film thus leaving a separated and dying nostalgic minstrelsy as the only reminder of the previous

mode of representing blacks that had existed in the silent cinema. If this were an accurate account then my suggestion that the 'real' black images of the early sound era were an instance of minstrelsy rebuilt would remain simply a conceptual model of comparison. And yet we have seen that this replacement model is entirely insufficient. It neither accounts for the actual complexity of blackface forms and their perception in silent film, nor does it indicate the hybridity, complexity and extent of the persistence of blackface into the early sound era. Most significantly the sense of blackface as a separate and declining medium in the early sound era overlooks the fact that it was predominantly and pervasively juxtaposed with an African-American screen presence. All of the films I have cited in my discussion of the formal marking of the 'real' black image in this chapter also contain blackface sequences which I have covered in the previous chapter. With one exception, *The Great Ziegfeld*, all of these blackface sequences either involved an on screen co-presence with African-American actors and performers, or else a racially charged blackface where whites in blackface are perceived by other characters in the film as 'actual' African-Americans. Audiences of these films either found themselves watching a scene where their eyes moved from the markings of blackface to racially marked 'real' black images, or else they were confronted by the complexity of a diegetic situation where blackface is perceived as 'actually' black.

In the films covered in this chapter then, and in the other films that I consider in the rest of the thesis, the minstrel trope not only acted as the principle historical context and source for the stereotyping and racialisation of the African-American image on screen, but it also continued to exist as a textual presence along side African Americans in the shape of the

blackface forms that persisted in early sound film. In this *co-present* context then blackface existed as an extraordinary signifier, loaded with the continuing history of the ways in which African-Americans had been racially marked in cultural representation and in life. The significance of the co-present blackface signifier in early sound era lies not so much in what it did itself to stereotype African-Americans, although the juxtaposition of blackface with African-Americans was not without stereotypical impact, but more in what it revealed of the formal processes and textual conditions of perception that were responsible for such stereotyping. The way in which this blackface signifier acts for us today as a racial mirror which reflects and reveals the formal stereotyping of African-Americans on film is the principle value that I will extract from the phenomenon of co-presence through the rest of this thesis.

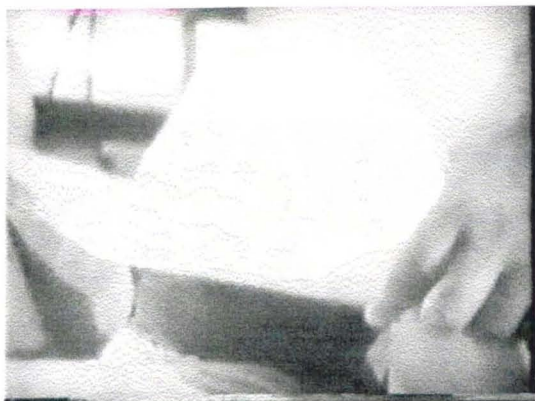


Fig 2:1



Fig 2:2



Fig 2:3



Fig 2:4

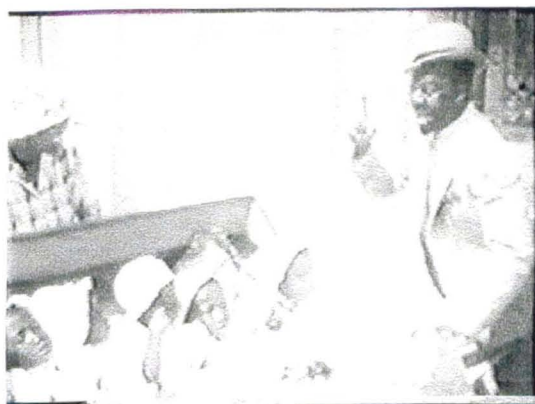


Fig 2:5



Fig 2:6



Fig 2:7



Fig 2:8

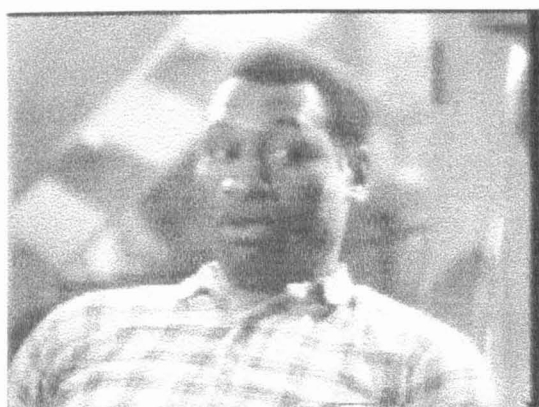


Fig 2:9



Fig 2:10



Fig 2:11



Fig 2:12



Fig 2:13



Fig 2:14



Fig 2:15



Fig 2:16



Fig 2:17

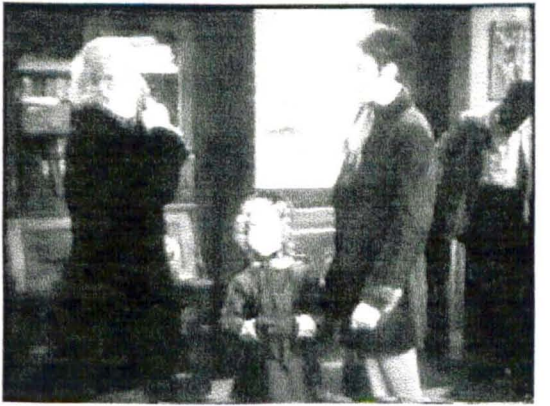


Fig 2:18

CHAPTER THREE

CO-PRESENCE IN THE FILMS OF AL JOLSON

AND EDDIE CANTOR

This chapter puts together the two 'maps' that I have established so far. I consider the co-presence of blackface and 'real' black images in the films of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor.

This focus on co-presence is continued through the rest of the thesis. I consider it in relation to the racial containment of African-American vernacular in chapter four and in relation to *Stormy Weather* in chapter five.

My intention is not to provide an exhaustive account of all the instances of co-presence in early sound film, as it was in mapping the persistence of blackface in chapter one. Instead I will pursue the two central themes of discussion established in my introduction. Firstly, in continuing the focus on racial marking established in the previous chapter my discussion is directed towards uncovering how the co-present scenes in early sound film offer us a meta commentary on the broader stereotyping of African-Americans in film. In tracing the contours of co-presence in the early sound era I aim to contribute to a history of African-American stereotypes which 'gets' to their specificity and textuality in film. Secondly the

consideration of co-presence involves the development of the critical position that I have established in relation to blackface, that the irreducible central function of the blackface medium was the racialisation of African-Americans.

In highlighting the overlooked dominant trend of co-presence in blackface in early sound film I will challenge the assumption made by Michael Rogin and most contemporary scholars of blackface minstrelsy that the self reflexivity and performativity of blackface took its core meaning and function 'beyond' the racial portrayal and perception of blacks. The critical stance taken by Brenda Dixon Gottschild on the consequences of blackface minstrelsy, her focus on "the function and the effect of the minstrel mask on the black object" (1996,89), figures strongly in my approach to co-presence.

My interest in the textuality of African-American stereotypes is entwined with my central argument about the racial function of blackface. The fact that the minstrel trope was so strongly reflected in the racially marked 'real' black image of the early sound era provides convincing historical evidence of the overwhelming racial function at the heart of the blackface medium. In demonstrating how the "racially weighted focus of the minstrel era and the minstrel trope" (Gotschild,1996,90) continued to determine the last phase of blackface visibility in the co-present films of the early sound era, my account highlights two positions concerning the racial function of the blackface medium which were elaborated on more fully in the introduction. Firstly Gottschild's emphasis on the fact that whatever the complexity of blackface forms and practice "the black man was behind it all" (95), and secondly Ralph Ellison's approach to the question of the racial function and

effect of minstrelsy, his notion that “the mask was the thing”. Ellison’s insight in particular will prove invaluable in demonstrating how the self reflexivity of blackface forms in the early sound era did not lessen their racial meaning and consequence.

This chapter explores these issues in relation to the films of Al Jolson and, to a lesser extent, Eddie Cantor. There are strong reasons for singling out these two figures in any discussion of blackface in the early sound era. Quite apart from the fact that their blackface films made them arguably the two most famous stars in the world¹ during the first five years of sound film, they also mark the beginning and end of the persistence of blackface in early sound film. Cantor made a cameo appearance in the final frames of his own bio pic, *The Eddie Cantor Story*, the last of the 124 blackface films I have identified. In total their combined blackface screen appearances, and the three bio pics that were made about them, account for 23 of the blackface films listed in my filmography.

Initially this thesis was to have been primarily centered on Jolson and Cantor blackface and I was able to track down and view all but 3 of their blackface screen appearances.² However it became clear from my research that the persistence of blackface in the early

¹ Herbert Goldman, who has written biographies of both stars, makes justified claims on the level of their fame. *The Singing Fool* set the box office record for eight years until 1936 (Fisher, 1994, 118) and was also responsible for launching the first record, ‘Sonny Boy’, to sell over a million copies (Rogin, 1996, 147). Goldman writes that in the wake of the film’s success “Jolson [was] the man of the hour- probably the biggest star in the world” (1988, 167). The success of Cantor’s 1932 film *The Kid From Spain* and his concurrent success on radio leads Goldman to write “this conquest of the two leading media of the day, added to his reputation from the stage, made Eddie Cantor probably the top star in the world” (1997, 153).

² Two of these blackface screen appearances that I could not view were shorts, the Vitaphone short *Al Jolson in a Plantation Act* (1926) and Cantor’s *A Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic* (1929). Fisher (1994, 123) notes that the Jolson film is incomplete and unavailable for viewing and to the best of my knowledge the

sound era extended beyond their particular vaudeville derived blackface. Also the key points of interest in their films, for example the co-presence of blackface and African-American vernacular as discussed in the next chapter, were replicated in this wider body of films. In the interests then of the wider analysis of co-presence and also for reasons of space, I will select key films of interest in this chapter rather than offer a comprehensive survey of their films.

I define 'co-presence' in this and the following chapters as any explicit or implicit connection that is made between blackface and an African-American screen presence. Co-presence in the early sound era ranged from the direct on-screen juxtaposition of blackface and African-Americans, to the diegetic calling up of an African-American presence through the use of blackface as a racially charged disguise, as in Eddie Cantor's early films for example. On other occasions there were more implicit connections where blackface is not actually visible but its presence was attached to an African-American screen presence, for example through verbal or musical reference to blackface practices. Even the juxtaposition of African-Americans with the whitefaced Jolson and Cantor sometimes functioned as an act of conscious racial play with their unseen blackface iconography.

On this last point it should be remembered that blackface was the overwhelming 'brand' associated with Jolson and Cantor and that many of their trademark gestures which featured in their whitefaced screen performances, e.g. Cantor's eye rolling and clapping

Cantor short is also lost. This leaves Jolson's *Big Boy* as the only extant Jolson/Cantor blackface screen appearance that I have been unable to view.

and Jolson's suggestive leers, asides, and whistling, had been perfected in their extraordinarily successful and well known blackfaced stage careers.

I begin by offering a brief chronological description of the films they made as principal stars in order to highlight the dominant trend of co-presence in their films. As discussed in chapter one, Jolson's three blackface supporting roles after his last starring role in 1936 and Cantor's two 1940s blackface films featured strongly in the wider shift to a final nostalgic phase of blackface in and around the war years. There was no on-screen co-presence in these films and no racial play in the sense of their blackface being perceived as actually black within the diegesis. This is in marked contrast to the greater number of blackface screen appearances they made in feature films during the late 1920s and the 1930s which demonstrate an extensive engagement with the racialised portrayal and perception of African-Americans.

After the unique and expressive employment of the minstrel mask in *The Jazz Singer* the blackface scenes in Jolson's second film, *The Singing Fool* (1928), involved extensive co-presence and a thematic 'pairing' with an African-American servant. I have not been able to view Jolson's next film, *Say it with Songs* (1929), although James Fisher's (1993,24) extensive account offers some compensation in establishing that this was the only one of Jolson's ten screen appearances for Warner Brothers in which he did not appear in blackface. The blackface scenes in his next film, *Mammy* (1930), all occur within the context of a minstrel show and do not involve co-presence although there is an extremely

telling African-American screen appearance at the end of the film which I discuss later in this chapter. His next film, *Big Boy* (1930), is the only other Jolson feature film that I have been unable to view (it is also the only Jolson/Cantor blackface appearance in a feature film that I have not viewed). However descriptions and film stills in Cripps (1993,253) and Rogin (1996,188) show that the film strongly confirms a dominant pattern of co-presence. In *Hallelujah I'm a Bum* (1933) he does not appear in blackface but is once again extensively 'paired' with an African-American actor. The blackface scenes in *Wonder Bar* (1934) involve extensive 'play' with the perception of contemporary African-American vernacular music and dance. In *Go Into Your Dance* (1935) Jolson appears in blackface alongside Fred 'Snowflake' Toones and the pattern of pairing him with an African-American 'double' is confirmed in his final starring role in *The Singing Kid* (1936) which includes an extensive co-present number with Cab Calloway.

In chapter one I described the pattern of blackface disguise in Eddie Cantor's first four films, *Whoopee!* (1930), *Palmy Days* (1931), *The Kid from Spain* (1932) and *Roman Scandals* (1933), where his blackface is perceived as actually black and also the on-screen co-presence involving African-American women in the latter film. He appears in blackface in *Kid Millions* (1934) as part of a minstrel show number which includes extensive co-presence and racial play with the African-American dance duo, the Nicholas brothers. Cantor does not appear in blackface for the only time in a 1930s film in *Strike Me Pink*. His final screen appearance of the decade, *Ali BaBa Goes To Town* (1937) involves a full co-present number with African-American vernacular artists.

My selective analysis of co-presence in the films of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor during the rest of this chapter falls into four sections. Firstly I will consider how the racial employment of blackface in the co-present scenes of Jolson's second film, *The Singing Fool*, contrasts with the earlier expressive use of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* that we discussed in chapter one. Secondly I will look at the way in which the 'mammy' blackface signifier, which also featured extensively in the expressive blackface of *The Jazz Singer*, is subject to racial play in two later Jolson films and also in some other 1930s film. Thirdly I will consider the notion of a blackface 'by proxy' effect in relation to Jolson's *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*. The film does not contain blackface but nonetheless racialises and stereotypes its only African-American character through visual play and association with the off screen Jolson blackface brand. Finally, as a way of establishing my principle topic of discussion in the next chapter, I will consider the pattern that emerged in the mid 1930s where Jolson/Cantor blackface was juxtaposed with African-American vernacular music and dance, focusing on Cantor's *Kid Millions* in particular.

1: Co-presence in *The Singing Fool*

Jolson's second film closely follows the formula that had made *The Jazz Singer* so successful. Once again the film tells the story of the rise to fame of an entertainer, Al Stone, who happens to sing in blackface and the film's narrative is again structured by a famous Jolson number. Jack Robin sings 'My Mammy' to his mother in the audience at the end of *The Jazz Singer* in order to resolve the contradiction in his life. He becomes

the modern American entertainer he aspired to be *through* singing of his love for his Jewish mother. Al Stone sings a song, 'Sonny Boy', at the end of *The Singing Fool* as an act of catharsis over the loss of his son.

In addition to maintaining the self reflexive Jolson minstrel mask seen in *The Jazz Singer*, the blackface imagery in *The Singing Fool* is shot through with the hybridity and complexity that was a key feature of the black signifier in the last stage of its cultural life on the Hollywood screen. And yet, in marked contrast to its unique employment in *The Jazz Singer*, the self reflexive minstrel mask is not defined through its development as a core element in the narrative as an expression of ethnic hybridity, but is instead used as a site of racial play with an African-American co-presence.

In the dressing room scenes of *The Jazz Singer* Jack Robin attempts to use blackface to cover over the problems caused by his Jewishness, only for the self reflexivity of the minstrel mask to crack open and give visual expression to his Jewish/American hybridity. In *The Singing Fool* this dressing room space is permanently occupied by the 'real' blackness of Al Stone's African-American servant. The self reflexive Jolson minstrel mask is again constructed in dressing room scenes in *The Singing Fool* and yet co-presence radically alters the meaning and function of blackface in the film.

The build up to the blackface scenes in *The Singing Fool* begins in the last third of the film. Al's wife has left him, taking 'Sonny Boy' with her. With the help of a platonic relationship with another woman, Grace played by Betty Bronson, he resumes his career

to take up a slot in a stage show. At the theatre door Al engages in banter with the stage hand. He unwraps a joint of meat and gives it to a black cat on the man's lap and an intertitle (like *The Jazz Singer* the film moves through silent and sound sections) carries Al's line, "Don't Worry it's Kosher". The appearance of blackface towards the end of *The Jazz Singer* is inextricably linked to the central narrative theme of the increasing turmoil caused in Jack Robin's life by his Jewishness. However in *The Singing Fool* we move from this, the *only* reference to Al's Jewishness in the film, to a quite different denouement of the Jolson blackface icon .

As Al walks into his dressing room the first sight to greet him, and the audience, is an African-American servant lying asleep on a couch. As the door opens the sound of the man's snoring cuts into the musical score and provides an aural cue that the film has shifted into sound for the final time. Less than a year after the release of *The Jazz Singer*³ and a year before 1929, the year that Thomas Cripps (1993,226) credits sound technology with giving African-American visibility on the Hollywood screen a dramatic boost, this is one of the earliest sounds made by an African-American in sound film and it indicates the stereotypical terms which would be laid down for black speech.

In an action visually mirroring the way in which he had animated the sleeping cat with the joint of meat, Al now disturbs the servant by tickling his nose. With Grace smiling and looking on, the 'lazy' black man has replaced the black cat as the 'object' of Al's humour. The servant motions as if to hold a woman in his sleep (fig3:1). Then he stands up, at this

point unaware of the others in the room, and speaks the first line spoken by a black in a Jolson, and perhaps in any (certainly of those I have viewed) blackface sound film, “My, this place is scary”. And so from an initial image of ‘lazy black’ the whitefaced blackface artist conjures up, through the action of tickling him awake, two further features in the cinematic stereotyping of African-Americans which had earlier been dispersed in popular culture through minstrelsy, a high libido and fear of ghosts.

Now, as the servant becomes conscious of the presence of the others, Al subjects him to what is structurally a classic exchange between the end men of a minstrel show, with the black servant acting as the straight man. Al remarks that he has never known anyone sleep so much as the servant to which the servant replies that the one thing he does know is that when a man is sleeping “he ain’t gittin no trouble”. Now Al, with a trademark sexual leer, delivers the punchline. Reflecting on the revealing action that the man had made in his sleep he says “yes, but be careful [pause for effect] ... where you sleep”.

Mel Watkins has identified how minstrelsy has been responsible for the way in which “blackness was associated with humour” (1999,82) throughout the history of American popular culture. He cites Constance Rourke in explaining the cultural perceptions behind the creation of minstrelsy, “to be black was to be funny” (Rourke cited in Watkins,1999,85). The way then in which comedy is created simply by the presence of the African-American servant in this scene is a direct descendant from minstrelsy. More significant however is the fact that this comic African-American screen presence is literally

³ *The Jazz Singer* premiered on October 6th 1927, *The Singing Fool* premiered at the scene of Jolson’s

conjured up by a blackface artist. There is a double sense of blackface association here in that this is Al Jolson, famed blackface entertainer, engaging in racial play with the man's blackness but also in that we are about to discover that the character he plays in the film is also a blackface singer who has walked into the dressing room to black up for the first time. Structurally then this African-American screen presence is called up by the offscreen iconography of Jolson blackface and also by the imminent on-screen appearance of his blackface.

With the joke on the man's blackness completed, the action continues and the pattern of racial marking most prominent in this particular film is initiated, namely that unless the servant is racially visible and subject to specific attention because of his blackness, he is consigned to marginality and invisibility. There is a cut from a two shot of Al and the servant to a longer shot of the whole room as the characters are rearranged in terms of their significance. Al sits foreground left as he sorts through his mail. Grace walks across and sits down foreground right, interestingly on the same couch that the sexually charged black male has vacated. This leaves the least significant figure in the scene, the African-American servant, to cross over to the left hand background of the frame and take a position behind Al. Al is now shown in mid shot and although this cuts the servant's face out of the frame the blackness of his suit continues to act as the background *mise en scène*. This maintains a subtle relationship between Al and the servant's blackness which soon becomes a much more explicit visual motif.

Al stops at one telegram and asks Grace if she knows of anyone at the hospital who is ill. Now a messenger boy enters the room and confirms that Al's son is unwell and Al leaves for the hospital. In the next scene 'Sonny Boy' dies in Al's arms.

A re-establishing shot returns us to the dressing room and interestingly it shows that the African-American man, whose unconscious sexuality was emphasised in the earlier sequence, has been left alone behind the closed door of the dressing room with Grace. On one level this is an illustration of a kinship between white women and blackness that was a feature of early sound film representation. Yet this situation is principally explained by the film's emblematic use of the man's blackness.

As Al opens the door from the other side the servant reaches out his hand to clasp the handle. Al pauses and looks towards Grace whilst the servant behind the door mirrors his posture and action of holding the handle (**fig3:2**). Al walks past the servant, seemingly oblivious to his presence, towards Grace who embraces him. A cut to a two shot of them consigns the servant to invisibility again and, with the score straining for maximum emotional effect, Al confirms the key narrative event of the film, 'Sonny Boy, he's gone'. Al takes off his hat and a match on action cuts back to a longer shot which confirms the emblematic use of the black man as the doppelganger of Al's grief. The servant, towering behind him, in slow and contrived movements, takes his hat, places his hands on Al's shoulders, and removes his coat to unveil the black suit underneath (**fig3:3**). His action turns most of the frame to blackness and consigns the whiteness of Grace to the far right of the screen. Here then *mise en scène* is used to establish the mood of the film. Al has

been wearing this overcoat throughout the previous dressing room and hospital scenes and only now do we see his black suit underneath.

And yet it is the blackness of the African-American which is the principle emblem and sign in this *mise en scène* arrangement. The motif hinted at in the earlier shot when Al opened his messages with the black suit of the servant in the background has become far more explicit now. The black man then, in closing the door and taking off his coat, has removed the flimsy barriers separating Al from the blackness of his grief. The scene is set for the Jolson minstrel mask to appear in the same emotional context as in *The Jazz Singer*.

But Al's transformation is not quite complete. It is the employment of the blackness of an African-American in the revelation of the minstrel mask which marks out the difference in the meaning and function of blackface in *The Singing Fool* as compared to *The Jazz Singer*. A long shot shows the servant turn and walk to a marginal position at the back of the frame before a cut to a two shot of Al and Grace consigns him to invisibility once again. The servant remains either offscreen or in the background of a long shot over the next few minutes until a final emblematic use is made out of his blackness.

Grace leaves the room and a cut backstage shows the stage manager refuse Grace's plea that he drop Al's act. Instead he sends the messenger boy to the dressing room. On the return to the dressing room we initially see the servant in a long shot but then he is again cut out as Al tells the messenger boy he will sing. Now Al is shown in an over the shoulder close up shot looking at his reflection in the mirror and the scene is set for him

to complete his emotional descent into blackness. By far the longest take in the film, this shot is also the longest unbroken look at the blacking up process that I have seen in early sound film and it is an interesting filmic, and indeed cultural, document of America's century long practice of whites 'becoming' black . With an accompanying mournful score it takes fractionally under a minute (59 seconds) for Jolson to skillfully construct the minstrel mask with carefully drawn minstrel mouth.

The entrance of blackface in the film then, as in *The Jazz Singer*, is intensely self reflexive. and now a sense of complex hybridity in blackface forms is also introduced. There is a cut backstage, with an accompanying switch to brighter music, and we see the performers preceding Al make their way to the stage. They are dressed as top hatted minstrel men, ready for what would seem to be a minstrel show type act. These blackfaced performers are accompanied by smiling showgirls (fig3:4). This juxtaposition reveals, by their similar height and body shape, that the blackfaced 'men' are also showgirls. Interestingly then the predominant pattern of female appearances in early sound depictions of minstrelsy consisting of lighter 'realistic' blackface is preserved here as the showgirls wear the darker minstrel mask as men. This scene is typical of the hybridity and complexity in the blackface forms of the early sound era. The way in way in which the whiteface smiling showgirls rush to catch the 'fun' of the minstrel show act, whilst Al prepares a more sentimental brand of minstrelsy in his dressing room, illustrates how different elements of the minstrel show had dispersed into twentieth century entertainment forms.

We now return to the dressing room to the same over the shoulder shot of Al and watch him complete his blackface transformation. He puts on his wig and smears black over the whiteness of his forehead. Now a cut shows Al in a side on position before he swivels round and stares directly into the camera, a crowning moment of self reflexivity, to present us with a close up view of the Jolson minstrel mask. As with Jack Robin's presentation of his completed mask to Mary in *The Jazz Singer*, the self reflexivity of the display allows us at the same time to view the troubled emotions of the character he plays beneath the mask.

Now a cut takes us to an extreme long shot of the stage proscenium over the heads of the audience as a ballerina act is completed. The ballerinas swivel off the stage into the wings as the men in the background strike a final pose. The stage manager beckons the next act and we cut back to the stage to see the black-suited top hatted minstrel showgirls troop out in a line, each with their hands on the hips of the person in front, as the men from the previous act are swept from the stage. The minstrels enter from the same side that the ballerinas have exited and again one is struck at a certain closeness depicted here between black men and white women as the white feminine ballerinas are interchanged for the raucous minstrel men. The added complexity is of course that 'inside' these black men are really white showgirls.

The way in which these blackfaced showgirls force their way into the ballerina act is also a fascinating historical depiction of the American stage where the modernity of a variety vaudeville aesthetic swept out higher forms of European stage acts (Jenkins, 1992, 62-3).

Their blackface also pays reference to the fact that vaudeville came directly from the minstrel show. There is one more intercut to the dressing room during this minstrel act. Before we consider that however, let us consider the end of the showgirl's minstrel act because it further illustrates the great complexity behind blackface forms in the early sound era.

After separating to dance in awkward style, one that is diametrically opposed to the femininity of the preceding ballet, the minstrels reform into a line and march off as the olio⁴ curtain comes down, setting the stage for Al's performance. As Gerard Mast (1987,18-20) has noted each part of the tripartite structure of the nineteenth century minstrel show broke off to form the basis of later forms of stage entertainment. The first part, the minstrel line, became the all black (i.e. African-American) musical comedy⁵, the second part, the olio section consisting of individual acts became vaudeville, and the final part, the musical comedy sketch, became the musical. In depicting the minstrel line as making way for Al's individual act in front of the olio curtain the film preserves the original structure of the first two sections of the minstrel show format which the two acts in this stage show had derived from. *The Singing Fool* then in its intercutting of the construction of the Jolson minstrel mask with an on-stage minstrel hybrid illustrates how Jolson was "an eager conduit for the collective force of blackface lore"

⁴ This standard term of reference for the theatre curtain itself came from the minstrel show. It derives from the olio section and refers to numbers that were done 'in one' in front of the curtain. (Mast,1986,18)

⁵ *The Singing Fool's* use of white showgirls in minstrel masks in its 'minstrel line' act adds further hybridity to an already complex blackface scene. The all black musical comedies introduced light skinned African-American 'showgirls' (one of their main innovations) to the minstrel show format by juxtaposing them with men who remained in dark minstrel masks (Mizejewski,1999,123), (Gottschild,1996,114).

(Lhamon, 1998, 103) and how he was a performer who “carried his past round with him in his repertoire” (Sarris, 1977, 41).

The central question of interest here however is where exactly does Jolson ‘carry’ the ‘lore’ of blackface to in early sound film? The answer that the final cut to the dressing room seems to reveal is back to its origins, to its African-American referent.

As we return to Al, who has now stood up from his seat, he repeats the gesture of turning and looking into the camera and presenting his completed mask to the audience. Only on this occasion, hovering over his right shoulder, is the blurred blackness of the servant’s face, the ‘double’ of Al’s minstrel mask. The African-American’s white collar, black tie, and black suit also mirror Al’s appearance (fig3:5). The image provides startling confirmation of the line that Gottschild emphasises in relation to the complexities raised by the practice of minstrelsy, specifically in this context in relation to the historical complexity of Jolson’s self reflexive minstrel mask and the hybrid minstrel showgirls, that “it was the black man behind it all”. The blurring of the African-American man’s face, a final confirmation of his emblematic status in the film, also results in the dynamics of this co-presence shot illustrating Ralph Ellison’s point on the racial function and effect of the minstrel mask, where the blackness of African-Americans was “reduced to a sign”. The historical significance of this shot is that it reveals that the self reflexivity which arises from minstrelsy’s play with the sign of blackness depends on African-Americans carrying this blackness *for real*.

Now in a slow contrived movement Al completes his turn so that his profile rests alongside the more frontally presented face of the servant before he walks past him and a cut shows Al outside the dressing room door. Al closes it and thus consigns the African-American servant, not seen again in the film, to his final invisibility. And yet the film recalls the African-American presence which has been so central to its exposition of the minstrel mask in its stirring finale.

When Al arrives backstage the stage manager, ignoring Grace's earlier advice that Al is "terribly broken up", insists that he will feel better if he sings the hit song named after his son. Al struggles through 'Sonny Boy' with a disinterested audience looking on. Then mid way through the song he looks off screen and a cut to his point of view shows a superimposition of his son appear over the audience. In the return close up (**fig3:6**) of Al's tear dashed face his performance becomes enthused with renewed energy and emotion. Then another shot of the audience shows the superimposition of his son fade away. Now there is a return close up of Al which is initially out of focus (**fig3:7**), as his cathartic grief metaphorically blurs the lens (the blurred effect can be seen in the difference between **figs 3:6** and **3:7**), before it sharpens on his ecstatic face and he belts out the finale of 'Sonny Boy' in an implied spiritual act of reunion with his son.⁶

⁶ There is no doubt that Jolson was a supremely gifted performer with a unique style and voice and this conclusion to the film is extremely affective. Indeed *The Singing Fool* does seem an extraordinarily forgotten film. One could hardly say the same about the feature film that displaced its box office record, *Gone With the Wind* (1939) [the animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) initially broke *The Singing Fool's* box office record before conceding to *Gone With the Wind*] (Fisher, 1994, 18)

The formal splitting of imagery through superimposition also occurs in *The Jazz Singer* in its expression of an unbreakable bond between father and son. Jack Robin looks at his minstrel mask, icon of American entertainment, in the dressing room mirror and it is replaced by a superimposition of his father in the synagogue. This use of superimposition confirms the film's symbolic use of the self reflexivity of the minstrel mask to 'break open' the hybrid ethnicity that Jack has attempted to cover over. In contrast the only use of superimposition in *The Singing Fool* performs the reverse function. The return cut from the superimposition of 'Sonny Boy' is to a blurred image where the self reflexive minstrel mask is momentarily dissolved and Al *becomes* black.

I do not suggest that the blurring of this image transforms Al's mask into 'realistic' blackface but it does return us to the crucial final dressing room shot (fig3:5) in which the film's emblematic use of an African-American culminated in Al's blackface being joined to the blurred blackness of the servant's face. In the earlier co-presence shot the camera aperture reduces the African-American actor to a sign, a symbol. The blurring of the shot drains the individuality and humanity out of this nameless African-American and reduces his features into a sign of blackness. In contrast the blurring of the shot during Al's finale of 'Sonny Boy' gives him subjectivity and completes the process where blackness is conferred onto him as a mask covering over, but at the same time enhancing and releasing, his grief. In the later out of focus shot Al momentarily *becomes* the black alter ego that he was attached to in the earlier shot and which has permanently occupied his dressing room throughout the film.

Jim Pines suggests that the distorted focus on the black servant's face in the co-present shot is an attempt to keep "the two racial images [...] segregated from each other" (1975,19) and he argues that "if the two had in fact appeared in the same shot in focus the result would have exploded the inherent pretentiousness of Jolson's blackface pathos" (ibid). However this second use of the out of focus motif on Al's blackface would seem to unfold the deep connection between the two racial images. The smudging, or one might say the marking through blurred focus, of the African-American face in this shot suggests that, in eyes of the filmmakers and audience of the time, the blackness he carries is as manipulable, and indeed it *is* manipulated as much as the cork which Al has used to create his illusion of blackness. The racial marking of the African-American man in the film brings out the way that the two forms of blackness are rendered, and perceived, as being *the same*.

Indeed the unified employment of blackness as a sign across both racial images even spills out into the *mise en scène* of the closing shots of the scene. The curtain falls and Al clutches onto the white stripe that splits the surrounding blackness (fig3:8), a closing visual emblem of the way in which he has 'held himself together' through the performative release of his blackface song. And herein lies the real historical value of that co-presence shot. It displays the historical consequences of the self reflexive minstrel mask. It displays how the immense self reflexivity and complexity of the late forms of blackface seen in the film, as Al Jolson looks through his minstrel mask whilst other minstrel hybrids dance on the stage off screen, was founded on a historical and *continuing* racial play with its African-American referent.

In relation to the revelation of the Jolson minstrel mask in *The Jazz Singer* (fig 0:9) James Fisher writes, “When his makeup is complete, Jolson turns and flashes an impish grin [to Mary]. This moment captures the essence of Jolson’s mystique and the power of his blackface mask in liberating him as a performer” (1994,17). And yet it is the co-present shot in *The Singing Fool*, with its blurring of the servant’s face into a mask of blackness, which captures the essence of Jolson’s blackface since every subsequent blackface film with Jolson as principle star turned his minstrel mask towards racial play with its African-American referent. The shot reveals the fact that if the minstrel mask offered performative release for whites then this came with the consequence of racial entrapment for African-Americans, for whom “the mask was the thing”.

Co-presence was not just a matter of the on-screen juxtaposition of blackface and African-American and it amounts to much more than a single shot in *The Singing Fool*. The entirety of the African-American servant’s screen presence is structurally called up by, and built through, blackface association. In arguing that the introduction of sound “did away with blackface as speech” (1996,118) Michael Rogin uses the analogy of speech to separate out the blackface which persisted into sound film from the portrayal and perception of African-Americans. And yet we have seen that one of the earliest performances by an African-American in sound film, whose first line activates the last spoken section of *The Singing Fool*, is inextricably linked to blackface, structurally, thematically, and visually. We continue our discussion by considering the afterlife of Al Jolson’s ‘mammy’ brand of blackface which was used to close *The Jazz Singer*.

2: The Afterlife of Jolson's Blackface Mammy

At the beginning of *Blackface White Noise* Michael Rogin highlights the central importance of the ending of *The Jazz Singer* to his approach to the topic of blackface in sound film:

A single image inspired the present study: Al Jolson, born Jakie Rabinowitz in *The Jazz Singer* and reborn as Jack Robin, singing "My Mammy" in blackface to his immigrant Jewish mother. How could blacking up and then wiping off burnt cork be a rite of passage from immigrant to American? (1996,4-5)

Rogin positions the first example of blackface in the early sound era as representative of all that followed in order to establish his argument that blackface functioned as a medium of identity transfer where immigrants were transformed into Americans. Robin's blackface performance of 'My Mammy' at the end of *The Jazz Singer* is the culmination of the specific and expressive formal and thematic development of the minstrel mask in the earlier dressing room scenes. It is the specificity of *The Jazz Singer* as a film which harnesses the most famous brand and song in the Jolson blackface repertoire into an expression of Jack Robin's unassimilable Jewishness as he sings to his Jewish 'Mammy' in the audience.

The specificity of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* is illustrated by the fact that Jolson's blackface mammy signifier was never again put to such expressive use. Instead, as was the overwhelming pattern in the general persistence of blackface in early sound film, the most striking subsequent employment of Jolson's blackface mammy signifier was to turn

it towards its African-American referent. In this section I look at two telling examples of this in the Jolson films *Mammy* and *The Singing Kid*, before considering how his ‘mammy’ blackface signifier was employed as an inter-textual racial sign in films that he did not appear in.

2:1 Mammy (1930)

Jolson’s mammy brand of blackface is not employed in *The Singing Fool* but one self referential intertitle describing Al Stone’s rise to fame, “Over the next few years Al rhymed mammy and Alabammy 981 times”, does highlight how ‘Mammy’ songs had become synonymous with Jolson. The Mammy icon was the dominant signifier called up in Jolson’s nostalgic references to the South in his songs. In addition to spawning variants of ‘My Mammy’, such as ‘Mammy I’ll Sing About You’ and ‘To My Mammy’, the conjuring up of mammy iconography is central to some of his biggest hits including ‘Rock A Bye Your Baby To A Dixie Melody’ and ‘Let Me Sing And I’m Happy’. As Sam Dennison writes “Al Jolson was the undisputed king of the mammy song with his widely imitated ‘My Mammy’ the lachrymose prototype of all such songs.” (1982,442)

On completing *The Singing Fool* Jolson signed a three picture deal with Warner Brothers which made him the highest paid star of the era (Fisher,1994,17-18). The first of these films, *Say it With Songs* (1929), was an unexpected box office failure. As the title of his next film, *Mammy*, indicates, the studio’s response was to fall back heavily onto the core of the Jolson blackface brand. Jolson plays Al Fuller, an end man in ‘Meadow’s Merry

Minstrels', a minstrel troupe on tour in contemporary America. This was a casting decision which highlights the 'return to origins' motif that frequently surfaces in blackface imagery of the early sound era. The minstrel show setting is used as a guise for Jolson to deliver past and present hits and *Mammy* involves the most extensive depiction of on-stage Jolson blackface of all his films. The fact that Jolson went on to wear blackface throughout his next picture, *Big Boy*, indicates that blackface was absolutely central to Warners' attempts to repackage the Jolson formula in order to recapture his former success. *Mammy* was an adaptation of Irving Berlin's minstrel show stage production, *Mister Bones*, that Jolson had considered doing the previous year (Goldman, 1988, 193), another indication of the continuing life in blackface forms at the time⁷.

Since Jolson's blackface is integrated into an all white minstrel troupe in *Mammy* there is less occasion for the film to attach a real black alter ego to his solo image, as seen for example in *The Singing Fool*, *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*, *Go into Your Dance* and *The Singing Kid*. With the blackface in the film confined to on stage minstrel scenes, *Mammy* is the post *Jazz Singer* film least marked by co-presence. Nonetheless Al Fuller's ethnicity is not referred to at all and there is no sense of blackface being employed thematically in service of the narrative. Indeed, as we will consider shortly, a telling

⁷ That the music for minstrel show reenactments could also call on a contemporary repertoire, and not simply nostalgic renditions of Stephen Foster music for example, is another confirmation of the continuing normative status of minstrel derived blackface practices in American popular culture during the early sound era. Another example is the number 'Franklin D Roosevelt Jones' in *Babes on Broadway* which was taken from a 1938 Broadway Revue that presented the US Congress as a minstrel show (Leonard, 1988, 197). On Irving Berlin's engagement with minstrelsy and its variants, such as 'coon' songs, see Gerald Mast's (1987) *Can't Help Singing*. Mast records how central black influenced music and blackface forms were to Berlin's career, as indeed they were for the other two 'greats' of popular music at the time. Jerome Kern and George Gershwin.

African-American presence is conjured up in the final sequence of the film which confirms the pattern of racial play at work in the blackface of post *Jazz Singer* films.

The minstrel show scenes themselves are not without interest in our consideration of the racial nature of blackface forms. Early on in the film there is an on stage sequence which reprises the full tripartite structure of original minstrel shows. It begins with a minstrel line and the accompanying command 'Gentlemen be seated'. Then there is an olio mid section, which includes a Jolson solo, and then a final musical comedy sketch with Jolson leading a burlesque Opera song.

This final opera burlesque is of particular interest because the burlesque form of minstrelsy has featured strongly in the recent revisionist accounts that attempt to delve beyond the racial markings of the mask in order to find non racial motivations and functions behind the practice of minstrelsy. William Mahar in particular has extensively researched the burlesque aspects of minstrelsy. He argues that the frequent burlesques of English comedy and Italian opera meant that "the Italian and English influences on minstrelsy were as significant as anything borrowed from African-American culture." (1999,3) He notes that such influences "were more important than the plantation [traditionally seen as the 'racial' material of minstrelsy] because burlesque was the foundation on which all minstrel entertainment rested." (1999,40) He argues that "racial disparagement [...] was *not* the only function of the minstrel show, because blackface groups often 'turned from racist humour to mocking the arrogance, imitiveness, and dim wittedness of the upper classes' " (ibid, Mahar's emphasis, last section cited from Wilentz), and that "in those

circumstances [blackface] did *not* reflect white perceptions of black culture but served as a vehicle to express the disappointments and doubts of those “others” (including whites themselves) who dwelt on the margins of political power.” (41, Mahar’s emphasis)

On the issue of the audience perception of minstrel shows Mahar laments “how the history of minstrelsy might have been written if ante-bellum audiences could tell us more about how minstrelsy looked and sounded.” (351) Clearly one cannot simply substitute this scene in *Mammy*, and other minstrel show adaptations in early sound film, for the experience, for ever lost, of watching original minstrel shows. And yet by the same token they are surely not insignificant material for understanding how they “looked and sounded”. Minstrel re-enactments on film, an under used resource in the debates on blackface minstrelsy generally, should offer us some partial glimpse of the intended perception of the minstrel mask at the heart of all minstrel derived blackface forms.

The song in the operatic burlesque, ‘Yes We Have No Bananas’, is an Irving Berlin number which Goldman notes had been specially adapted to fit the contours of the original opera burlesques in minstrel shows (1988,194). The number does reconstruct some of the features that Mahar stresses in his account. It begins in front of the olio curtain and the six men are dressed in rag tag imitations of opera costume which certainly removes the mise en scène of the performance dramatically away from the ‘racial’ material of the plantation. The appearance of the minstrel masks are also outlandish in the extreme. Jolson’s Afro wig is shaped as a three pointed hat and all of them have larger and more grotesque mouths than at any other point in the film. To the right of Jolson is an opera

'diva' who looks even less female than he does black, confirming the complete anti realist framing of the performance.

The presentation of this number conjures up the extreme self reflexivity in blackface minstrel forms which is so often cited as the reason for seeing its primary motivation as something 'beyond' the racial portrayal of African-Americans. Jolson sings most of the lines and is shown in close up through most of the number, his white shirt marking the blackness of his minstrel mask. What strikes a viewer most in the experience of watching this number today is the way in which Jolson completely reduces his blackface mask to racial gestures. He flutters his eye lashes and rolls his eyes and, when the opera diva hits a high note, he breaks out into an open mouthed wide eyed expression of surprise. The racial cut (fig3:9) that catches this gesture further reinforces the parallels that the representation of his blackness in this scene has with the formal marking of 'real' black images in the early sound era.

The fact that the minstrel mask is employed expressively in *The Jazz Singer*, aligned to the absence of any racial attachment to an African-American co-presence, results in the viewer being able to follow the turmoil that notions of racial or ethnic identity cause to Jack Robin. In other words they are encouraged to watch the *character* underneath the minstrel mask. Here the self reflexivity of minstrel performance is not directed to any narrative purpose. Instead it serves to enhance the grotesqueness of the racial gestures and the mask itself is placed as the centre point of perception in the scene.

Again there are difficulties in using this scene to gauge the perception and meaning of original minstrelsy but if anyone could convey some sense of this past then it was Jolson. Lhamon identifies Jolson as a twentieth century figure at “the bottom of the waterfall of gestural identity” (1998,103) of nineteenth century minstrelsy, and Fisher picks this scene in *Mammy* out of all filmed Jolson performances as the one that “vividly captures the sort of grotesque parodies typical of Jolson’s early stage shows” (1994,20).

If this reenactment of a minstrel show Opera burlesque communicates any sense of the place that the perception of actual African-Americans had in original minstrelsy then it seems difficult to get around Ellison’s assessment that “the mask was the thing” in the medium’s racial containment of their cultural presence. William Mahar emphasises how minstrel shows were directly connected to the burlesque culture of their own time, “much of which has been lost because the events of everyday life are easily forgotten and hard to retrieve” (1999,352). And yet what did survive was the minstrel mask and it seems from the evidence of this *Mammy* sequence that the most racist and base perception, i.e. the sheer hilarity and peculiarity in the juxtaposition of blacks and opera, had continually been the means through which any ‘burlesque’ meaning was achieved in minstrelsy.

2:1a The 'Real' Black Mammy

In its closing scene *Mammy* offers particularly vivid confirmation of the historical consequences of self reflexive minstrel performance for African-Americans.

Having been cleared of an attempted murder charge, Al Fuller is restored to his position as the head of the minstrel parade as it enters a new town. As he shouts out the details of the show he looks off camera and shouts "Mammy" ! This motivates a cut (fig3:10) to a mid shot of the large smiling face of an African-American woman with her two daughters smiling alongside her. Ostensibly this moment visually reprises an anecdote that Fuller told earlier in the film about a black women whose daughters were frightened of minstrel men, and yet there seems much greater significance in it than this. Jolson is portrayed at the helm of a minstrel show parade, a particularly vivid portrayal of the way he acted as "an eager conduit for the collective force of blackface lore" (Lhamon,1998,103) in early sound film. As he self reflexively shouts out the name of Jolson's most famous racial icon, and indeed the title of the film, it seems that the collective self reflexivity that has been raised around blackface in the film is dissolved into its only 'real' black image and that the African-American "behind it all" is finally revealed.

Although Jolson is not actually in blackface in this scene the second appearance of an African-American in a Jolson blackface film is pervaded with a sense of co-presence. Like

the servant in *The Singing Fool*, the African-American screen presence here is conjured up through association with Jolson's blackface and the minstrel tradition behind him.

The consequences of this process in the film, belying a much broader historical cultural process where African-Americans were portrayed and perceived *through* the trope of minstrelsy, are displayed in the racial marking of the 'real' black mammy and her daughters. The mother is marked by her white shirt in the same way as Al was in the Opera Burlesque and the performed smiles of the women match the racial gestures which he produced in the earlier scene. The shot of the women is a minstrelisation shot since its duration is timed purely to catch their smiles. Most of all, the women are marked through the fact that, aside from this overdetermined use of their visibility in a moment of emblematic play with Al's offscreen blackface, African-Americans are entirely invisible in the film.

Mammy opens with a minstrel parade in a rain storm. Al begins the film's self reflexive play with minstrelsy and the minstrel mask with his introduction to the crowd, "the rain could never wash the smiles (i.e. the white part of the minstrel mask) from the faces of Meadow's Merry Minstrels". The film ends with a minstrel parade which is punctuated with a broad grin encased in a more permanent blackness. The racial gesticulation of the minstrel mask which provided whites with the self reflexive release and 'fun' of the opera burlesque in the earlier scene becomes, when lifted onto the 'mammy' and her daughters in the shape of their fixed broad grins, a mask of racial entrapment for African-Americans.

I may seem at this point to have over extended our discussion on one moment of co-presence in *Mammy*. And yet it was Jolson's blackface Mammy icon which brought blackface into the sound era in *The Jazz Singer*. The ending of *Mammy* further confirms the distinctiveness of the former film. *Mammy* continues the pattern established in *The Singing Fool* where the Jolson blackface signifier was racially attached to its African-American referent. It paved the way for his next screen appearance as an actual black man amongst a surrounding African-American cast in *Big Boy*, a film which Cripps identifies as "Riding the crest of the black wave" (1993,253) of visibility on the Hollywood screen.

2:2 The Singing Kid

The mammy blackface icon launched Jolson's film career in *The Jazz Singer* and was the basis of Warners' concerted attempts to revive that career in *Mammy*. It was also the subject of a most extraordinary epitaph to Jolson's film star career in his last picture as principle star, *The Singing Kid*, which provides further confirmation that the self reflexivity of blackface forms did not lessen their racial impact. There are other moments of co-presence in this film which I will discuss at the end of the chapter but here our focus is on another instance of the African-American referent of Jolson's blackface mammy signifier being called up on screen.

In this film the self reflexivity normally surrounding Jolson's minstrel mask is overlaid by a pervasive self reflexivity surrounding Jolson the man. Jolson plays Al Jackson and the closeness of this character's name to his own is an indication of the extent to which the film draws from Jolson's life. Jackson is a singer who, like Jolson in real life, loses his voice and has to take a career break. The principle number in the film is 'I Love To Singa' and it calls up the Jolson persona with specific reference to his mammy songs. Jolson's full rendition of the song (it is also used to open and close the film) is his last number as a leading film star. The setting is a radio broadcast and Al (in whiteface until the very last shot) sings

I love to wake up with the Southa in my moutha
 And wave a flaga
 With a cheer for Uncle Sammy and another for my Mammy
 I l-o-v-e to s-i-n-g

With the orchestra breaking off from the snappy beat to the slower sentimental strains of the most famous Jolson number, Al, with arms outstretched, sings "Mammy" twice. Off screen there is a loud shout 'Stop' and the camera pans to reveal The Four Yacht Club Boys (a quartet of comedy singers who have featured earlier in the film) in the sound room.

This is another striking example of a return to origins motif in the persistence of blackface in the early sound era. The interruption reprises the famous spoken scene in *The Jazz Singer* where Jack Robin brings his modern music into his father's traditional Jewish home. Jack pauses in his rendition of 'Blue Skies' and says "mama, listen I'm gonna sing

this like I would when I go on the stage, you know in the show, I'm gonna sing it *Jazzy*, now get this.....". Then the Cantor returns home and with a cry of 'Stop', joining film form to content, he returns the film to silence. It is not until Jack finds the (paradoxically archaic) minstrel mask which can express both the modernity of his music and his Americanness, whilst at the same time including the tradition of his Jewishness, that the film returns to synchronized sound and image.

Here, in a self reflexive reversal that it is hard to believe that Warners or Jolson did not believe would be terminally damaging for his film career, The Yacht Club Boys position Al Jackson's/Jolson's music as old and ready to be replaced with 'modern music'. With his blackface mammy icon as their principle target they sing

If you like to singa, stick to moona, juna and a springa
But not a thinga about your old black mammy and her shack in Alabammy
If your for us please don't bore us with the same old chorus
They'll be murder if there's a worda about

Al continues the musical conflict by interrupting them with two more refrains of "Mammy". The Yacht Club Boys respond to Al's defiance by kicking the studio window through and marching in to the auditorium. They continue with an amusing tirade that might seem to completely debunk the Jolson blackface mammy icon, including perhaps its racism, and the wider minstrel trope on which it was founded:

You can't do that to us in 1936a, we're through with Dixie
People wish you'd forgotten your cabin in the cotton
Cos the cotton gotten rotten and the cabin's been forgotten

After telling Al “Stick the sunny Southa in your moutha” the boys create further complexity in the blackface undercurrents of the song by calling Al’s music “hammy”. By now the term ‘ham’ actor had become a derogatory term for poor acting but the pun here is in the fact that the term evolved from the use of ham fat to wipe off burnt cork.⁸ Jolson replies that though his mammy “may be ham today she made me what I am today”. As they leave the studio and get into a lift the boys sing about all the different kinds of love that Al could sing of and the last one mentioned is “songs of Warner Brother love”. The number really does seem to be at the extreme of end of self reflexivity in Hollywood film, even for the musical comedy genre.

As the lift reaches the bottom Jolson says, “but I want to sing of mother love” and he sings two more refrains of “Mammy”. On the second “Mammy” Al kneels down to

⁸ The term ‘ham’ does its rounds in blackface films. In the first of the three Stephen Foster bio pics, *Harmony Lane*, there is an interesting exchange which exposes its minstrel roots. There is an argument between his European classic music teacher and minstrel man E.P. Christy where Christy is called a ‘ham fatter’. In *Mammy* Jolson refers to himself as a ‘ham’. Goldman recounts how Jolson once sent a fellow entertainer a blacked up joint of ham when he could not attend a party (1988,217). The use of the term as a generic reference for all vaudeville actors can be seen in the film *The Dance of Life* (1929). When the lead couple meet she says that he is “better than all the other hams”. The way that the term came to denote ‘old timers’, as the Yacht club Boys use it here in relation to Jolson, can be seen in Eddie Cantor’s film *If You Knew Susie*. Another character describes Cantor’s character, Sam Parker, and his wife Susie, played by Joan Davis, as a “couple of hams”. In the scene where they walk past a dilapidated vaudeville theatre and Sam reminisces about the ham sandwich he gave Susie the first time they met. Susie remarks “and Sam when you gave me that ham sandwich you showed me what you were made of”. The use of the term to denote the outmoded and amateurish acting of the bygone vaudeville era can be seen in Judy Garland’s first starring role in *Everybody Sing*. Judy’s (her character name in the film also) actress mother bans her from performing in a show and responds to her emotional protest by saying ‘Judy, “don’t be a ham”’.

The blackface roots of the term come to the surface of the film when Judy uses blackface as a disguise to perform in the show. Intriguingly Stuart Hall, in an unrelated discussion about the changing perception of Africa under imperialist discourse, raises the possibility of there being more to this association of ‘ham’ with blackface. He records how “Africans were declared to be the descendants of Ham, cursed in *The Bible* to be in perpetuity ‘a servant of servants unto his brethren” (1997,239). Perhaps there is a revelation of this longer story behind the term ‘ham’, or it may just be an instance of double marking through naming, in the way that an African-American child actor is given the name ‘Ham’ in the 1934 short *Mickey’s Minstrels* when he participates in the minstrel show at the end of the film.

repeat the trade mark one knee Jolson delivery of the song, seen at the end of *The Jazz Singer* (fig1:3). If on this occasion Jolson is in whiteface *The Singing Kid* nonetheless moves to confer blackness onto him.

As the lift door opens, the camera makes a forward tracking movement past him to home in on the person revealed, an African-American 'mammy' (fig3:11). A cut from outside the lift shows the boys sing "Mammy stay away from his door" before a cut to a longer shot shows them all walk past her. The camera then tracks forward into a mid shot of the woman as she watches them walk away and then breaks out into a broad smile (fig 3:12).

Is it too much to emphasise the momentary blurring of focus in the first shot of the woman as the camera sweeps past Al's descending face, blurring his features and momentarily dissolving the woman's face into a mask of blackness ? (the blurred effect on the woman can be seen in comparing figs 3:11 and 3:12). The effect is there in any case and it mirrors the framing of Jolson against the blurred image of the servant in *The Singing Fool*. The shot works similarly to dissolve Jolson's features into the blackness of an actual African-American. The fact that Jolson is wearing the darkest suit, and that he is the only man to have a white tie against a black shirt, compared to the white shirts of the brothers, extends the colour consciousness of the moment and the emblematic use of the woman's blackness in the scene. As was the case in the similar scene in *Mammy*, which also reveals the African-American woman 'behind' the blackface mammy lore, and also in *The Singing Fool*, this is another example of an African-American screen presence being conjured up through association with Jolson's blackface iconography. And if this moment of co-

presence lacks the on-screen juxtaposition of blackface and African-American it is nonetheless central to the appearance of blackface at the end of the number.

Overcome with the effort of preventing Al from singing “Mammy” the boys collapse to the floor. Al places his foot on them for a final refrain of “Mammy” before a passing truck splashes them all with muddy water. The final shot, through a forward tracking movement, shows Al and the revived boys sing the finale in minstrel masks (fig3:13). If the forward tracking movement of this shot enhances the self reflexivity of the minstrel masks, so that we share in the ‘fun’ of their transformation, then the track forward used in both the shots of the African-American mammy is intended to mark out her racial features *for real*.

Indeed it seems as if the racially marked African-American woman called up as the referent of blackface play is the *only* point of stability in the incredible self reflexivity of the whole number. Again the dynamics of a co-presence scene displays the fact that the self reflexivity of blackface forms did not disrupt their fundamental racial function and effect.

In this scene even the *deconstruction* of the blackface signifier is played out as racial consequence for African-Americans. And again the consequences of the minstrel trope are displayed in the racial marking of the African-American in the scene. Racial marking of the woman is achieved through her casting by racial type (size, ‘Negroid’ features), her performed racial gestures (wide eyed surprise) and the racial cuts which end both of the shots used to capture these gestures, her white dress collar, the sense of frontality which is

enhanced by the forward tracking movements of the shots, and finally through the binary structures governing the African-American screen presence in early sound film where she is momentarily visible in an overdetermined fashion *because* of her blackness and then invisible once more when this racial interest in her presence has passed.

The way in which this woman's blackness is blurred through camera aperture, chopped up through framing and editing, and marked by *mise en scène*, reveals that it is perceived in the same terms as the blackness of the muddy puddle that splashes the minstrel mask on Al and the boys at the end of the number. If for them the minstrel mask acts as a final performative signing off of the visual and aural 'play' that they have had with blackface lore and blackness during the number, then the racialised blackness constructed in the black woman's presence functions as a mask of racial entrapment for her.

2.3 Jolson's Blackface Mammy as Inter-textual Racial Sign in Early Sound Film

There is a scene in *The Jolson Story* where Jolson, played by Larry Parks, walks in on Judy Benson (a character based on Jolson's third wife, Ruby Keeler), played by Evelyn Keyes, as she imitates him. She apologises by saying, "there are a million imitators of Al Jolson but none touch the original". Jolson actually supplies the singing voice for Park's impersonation of him in the film and the scene is another illustration of the extreme self reflexivity that surrounded Jolson as a cinematic figure.

Judy's apology also highlights the inter-textuality of Jolson as a figure in popular culture. No other blackface artist was referenced as often in other blackface films as Jolson. Full blackface impersonations of him featured in at least two films, Milton Berle in *Always Leave Them Laughing* and Dick Powell in *Hard to Get*. Once again Jolson's blackfaced 'Mammy' songs were the principle object of this intertextual mimicry. Cantor gives brief whitefaced impersonations of Jolson singing 'My Mammy' in both *Whoopee!* and *Ali BaBa Goes to Town*, whilst Hugh Herbert impersonates 'My Mammy' in yellowface as part of his role as 'Chinaman' in *Diplomaniacs*.

We have seen in post *Jazz Singer* Jolson films that his blackface mammy signifier was turned towards its African-American referent and used as a site of racial play with the screen presence of African-Americans. Below I consider three film sequences in which the intertextual dispersal of Jolson's blackface mammy signifier similarly circulates around the racial portrayal and perception of African-Americans on screen. These examples offer further evidence of the central racial function and effect of the persistence of blackface in the early sound era.

At the beginning of *King of Jazz* an announcer tells us that through the magic of the camera we will find out how Paul Whiteman came to be known as the "King of Jazz". Barely suppressing a smile he continues to relate how, tired of city life, Whiteman decided to go big game hunting, "A few weeks later we find him .. [pause, as the announcers face is replaced by a fade to black] in darkest Africa". These last words are spoken whilst the

frame is completely black and the combination of this colour conscious phrase and fade conjures up the blackness of African skin.⁹ An animated cartoon begins and we see Whiteman being chased by a lion. He delays the lion by playing a jazz tune on his violin. The choice of instrument here is a rather vivid encapsulation of Whiteman's self promotion of his music as "making a lady out of Jazz".

In response the lion dances, then falls on one knee and says 'Mammy'. The next figures to appear in the cartoon are two grotesquely depicted African natives who crawl along the floor and then stand up straight, front on to the camera, and put their hands to the sides of their heads and grin minstrel style (fig3:14). The reference to Jolson's blackface Mammy icon then features as the centre point of the intermixing of blackface forms with the perception of an actual black presence to the extent that this intermixed gaze, enhanced by the surrealism of animation, constructs the blacks in the cartoon as hybrid native/minstrel figures.

In *Stand up and Cheer* Lawrence Cromwell, played by Warner Baxter, is appointed as 'secretary of amusement' and given the job of getting Americans to laugh their way out of the depression. On his first day in the job Cromwell's intercom announces the arrival of George Bernard Shaw and suitably impressed Cromwell gives the signal for him to enter, only to find that this is the name of Stepin Fetchit's character. Cromwell stifles his laughter to confirm his name and then remarks, "you're a little sunburned aren't you?" The humour here is a direct legacy from the minstrel show, as seen in the opera burlesque

⁹ There is a similar reference to Africa in *Kid Millions*. A slow witted gangster sees that Africa is marked

in *Mammy* for example, where the very idea that blacks could be ‘cultured’ was a frequent source of comedy. Cromwell spills ink on his desk and Fehit assumes the servant role by mopping it up. In the meantime the intercom buzzes again and Cromwell barks requests for different entertainment acts and, as Fehit moves behind Cromwell and brushes his suit, the last act mentioned, is “fourteen dozen Mammy singers” (fig3:15). Another of the many revelations of the African-Americans ‘behind’ the blackface signifier in early sound film, this scene also highlights the complexity of the practice of racially marking African-Americans through naming.

Perhaps the most striking intertextual ‘Mammy’ reference in early the early sound era occurs in the Rudy Vallee musical short *Musical Doctor* (1932). Part of a series, the Kino video collection of Paramount shorts includes another Vallee short *Musical Justice* (1931), Vallee plays a doctor giving musical treatment to cure the ailments of his hospital patients. As in *Musical Justice*, where Vallee administers justice in the case of “Reverend Yassum v’s the choir leader Henry Whitewash”, it is the African-American actors who are the butt of the comedy. *Musical Justice* is conceived and structured through minstrelsy in the way that ‘Judge’ Vallee acts as an interlocutor figure controlling the interjections of the plaintiff and defendant who are presented like the end men (one comedian, one ‘straight’) of a minstrel show. *Musical Doctor* is similarly structured through reference to blackface lore.

as a light colour on a map and comments “I always thought Africa was black”.

An African-American man is brought in as an emergency case and when Vallee asks him the trouble the reply is “Why doctor I’s e got the black fever”. When pressed on how he feels he says “I’s e know how I’s e feels doc, I’s e got those missin all the kissin from my Alabammy mammy pains.” Musical accompaniment starts as the black patient (the actor is not credited in the film) speaks these words and their exchange develops into the number ‘Alabammy Mammy’s Pains.’ The African-American actor gesticulates his mouth as in heavy dialect he promises to visit his Mammy more often. A nurse, interestingly played by Mae Questel who provided the voice for Betty Boop thus marking the presence of another popular icon with black associations in this scene, hands Vallee the anesthetic gas pump.¹⁰ There is a cut to a high angle close up looking down on the black patient as he opens his mouth wide to breathe in the gas. He slips out of consciousness, flutters his eyes and breaks into a broad exaggerated grin (fig3:16).

Vallee asks the nurse to hand him his ‘favourite instrument’ and she gives him a megaphone. Now Vallee stands over the patient and sings a full chorus of Jolson’s ‘My Mammy’! This is filmed as a two shot with the man’s black face in foreground left of the screen surrounded by the whiteness of his own, and Vallee’s, white gowns (fig3:17).

This finale reveals then that the preceding number about the patient’s ‘Alabammy Mammy’ has been built through the intertextual profile of Jolson’s blackface Mammy icon.

¹⁰ Audiences would have been aware that Questel, was the voice of Betty Boop. In *Musical Justice* Questel comes on as the last case, pleading with Vallee not to take her “boop boop de boop” away.

The similarities across these three scenes extend beyond the fact that all of them make reference to Jolson's blackface Mammy song and act. All three scenes reveal the African-American, or in the case of *King of Jazz*, the African, referent 'behind' blackface practices. All three scenes are structured through racial play with the on-screen African-American presence that has been 'called up' by the unseen blackface signifier. In all three the introduction of the black screen presence involves the scripted reduction of the blackness of their skin to racial sign, "Darkest Africa", "You're a little Sun Burnt aren't you", "I've got the black fever". In all three scenes the progression to a spoken or sung reference to 'Mammy' acts as a privileged textual site which exposes the minstrel trope responsible for such over determined and racialised colour conciseness in the portrayal and perception of black skin on screen. In all three scenes the racial play surrounding the first blackface signifier of the sound era further confirms the anomaly of its employment in *The Jazz Singer*.

The racial afterlife of the original blackface signifier glimpsed in these three scenes hints at the much broader involvement of blackface forms in the racialised portrayal and perception of African-American actors and performers in early sound film. The 'Alabammy Mammy Pains' number in *Musical Doctor* seems particularly to resonate with earlier points of discussion in this chapter. The way in which it ends with a sleeping African-American man takes us back to the first image of co-presence in Jolson films, the sleeping servant in *The Singing Fool*. One is struck by the way in which the screen presence of both these African-American men is conjured up and constructed through their association with the blackface lore surrounding Jolson.

The bizarre and abstract ending to the number, where Rudy Vallee sings a chorus of 'Mammy' through a megaphone over the prostrate body of an African-American, has touches of the way that blackface appears in the final frame of the 'I Love To Singa' number in *The Singing Kid*. In both, the lurking presence of Jolson's blackface mammy signifier is strongly confirmed at the end of the number. The endings to these two numbers illustrate that however abstract blackface forms may at times have appeared to have become in the early sound era, they carried no less racial effect and consequence for African-Americans.

The fixed broad grin that the black man breaks into as he loses consciousness in *Musical Doctor* mirrors the broad smiles brought out in the African-American women in the Jolson films, *Mammy* and *The Singing Kid* as they are revealed as the real Mammy 'behind' his performative blackface lore. And how the fixed objectified grins of the blacks in co-presence scenes contrast with the suppressed smiles of whites! Consider for example the half smile Rudy Vallee wears throughout the scene as he looks almost into the camera avoiding eye contact with the black patient, or Cromwell's laugh when he discovers the identity of 'George Bernard Shaw', or the smile that the presenter suppresses as he introduces the cartoon sequence from 'darkest Africa' in *King of Jazz*. All of these white smiles communicate an extra diegetic consciousness, shared with white audiences, of the 'peculiarity' and comedy of the blackness they find in front of them. The unseen presence of the blackface signifier which is aurally named in these scenes through a spoken or sung reference to Jolson's 'Mammy' is more tellingly revealed in the racialised gestures of the

grinning blacks. These scenes illustrate and most importantly *visualise*, for this is the real value of the unique conditions of co-presence in the early sound era, the fact that if the white side of blackface practices involved performative and self reflexive play, as indicated by the white smiles, then this came with the historical consequences of the black side of the medium, epitomised in the minstrelised grinning of the African-Americans, for whom again “the mask was the thing”.

Once more the consequences of the minstrel trope for the cinematic African-American image are revealed through the dynamics of a co-present scene in the shape of the racial marking of African-Americans. In *Musical Doctor* especially the floating presence of Jolson’s mammy blackface signifier over the unconscious African-American seems to reveal, through his casting by Negroid type, his dialect and his gesticulating facial performance, through frontality and the marking of his blackness against a white *mise en scène*, and through his overdetermined visibility *because* of his blackness, how he is portrayed and perceived in the same terms as this invisible blackface presence.

3: Blackface By Proxy, Whiteface and African-American Association in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*

Musical Doctor illustrates the often ethereal nature of the co-present dynamic in early sound film. It demonstrates how a film scene may contain an aural non visible blackface presence which reveals the ways in which an African-American presence in the same scene is portrayed and perceived through the minstrel trope. On occasion there were scenes where Jolson or Cantor appeared in whiteface alongside African-American actors which were nonetheless structured by the invisible presence of their blackface brand. Before I consider my main example of this happening in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum* let us consider the process at work in the first and last screen appearances that Eddie Cantor made alongside African-American actors.

Although Cantor's use of blackface as a racially charged disguise in his first starring role in *Whoopee!* created 'co-presence' of a kind, it was not until his third feature, *The Kid From Spain*, that an African-American actor appeared in one of his films. A sequence of events leads to Cantor's character, Eddie Williams, needing to masquerade as a bull fighter. He meets a black bull trainer, played by Edgar Connor, who introduces Eddie to a trained bull that will allow him to remain unscathed. Cantor remains unsure and a shot in which he hides behind a barrier highlights how Cantor's brief juxtaposition with an African-American actor in the film is governed through association with the (for the moment) unseen blackface 'brand' that defined him as an entertainer. The barrier cuts them off just

below the neck creating an extra emphasis on their faces. The emblematic use of the blackness of the man's face as a sign which is in 'play' with Cantor's offscreen blackface is illustrated in the way that it is marked through *mise en scène*, by his white shirt and hat (fig3:18). Connor is further marked in the sequence through the absence of a character name, his dialect, and the use of racial cutting. Eddie's contrasting black hat provides a visual indication that the racial marking of the black man is linked to him and this is made explicit when in the very next scene Cantor dons his minstrel mask as a racial disguise.

The extreme binary marking of African-American visibility is apparent in the way that Connor's racialised visibility in this scene is the only time an African-American is seen in the film. Like the appearance of the servant in *The Singing Fool*, Edgar Connor's presence in the film is conjured up, portrayed and perceived through association with Cantor's blackface iconography. The absence of an on-screen co-presence of blackface and African-American does not lessen the consequences of the minstrel trope for Edgar Connor's role in the film.

Indeed there were occasions where there was no visible blackface, or aural reference to blackface, at any point in a film and yet an African-American screen presence could still be specifically conjured up and perceived through the minstrel trope. This is demonstrated in Cantor's last appearance on screen with an African-American, Hattie McDaniel in *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (1943). Cantor, playing himself, is the compere of a variety show of stars which is put on as part of the second world war effort. Included in the variety show is a segregated number 'Ice Cold Katie'. The film concludes with a medley where all the

performers briefly sing lines from their earlier numbers. Cantor begins the medley by reprising his song 'We're Staying Home Tonight' before going off stage. The choice of finale posed the filmmakers with the problem of how to include the earlier segregated number. Although he does not appear in his usual blackface brand in the film, a moment of associational play with it is nonetheless used to solve the problem of accommodating the earlier African-American contribution in racial terms.

'Ice Cold Katie' is the last number reprised and it is Cantor who initially sings it as he reappears from the wing of the stage paddling on a fake cloud. As the camera pans to follow his movement it reveals Hattie McDaniel, dressed in a white robe, literally fixed into the background setting. She sits on a fake moon against a white cloud. They exchange lines before Cantor's face crosses past McDaniel's face (fig3:19) and then disappears off screen. Then the camera tracks in for Hattie to provide the final line of the song.

The contrived nature of this moment would clearly seem to be spun from extra diegetic association with Cantor's blackface brand. Cantor's unseen blackface provides the motivation for him, out of any of the whites in the finale, to sing a line from the black song. The fact that the director, David Butler, had directed Cantor and Shirley Temple in blackface scenes in earlier films is also significant. McDaniel's juxtaposition with the black suited Cantor highlights how her sudden racialised visibility, and the extremities of her marking through mise en scène costume and setting, are conceived through the minstrel trope. In particular the action of Cantor's face visually touching and blotting out

McDaniel's face exposes the way in which her blackness, rendered as inter-changeable with the burnt cork Cantor so often used, has been reduced to the level of 'stuff'. In a heightened moment of self reflexive racial play then, Cantor's juxtaposition with McDaniel in *Thank Your Lucky Stars* functions as a form of blackface by proxy.

The most extensive of any of the juxtapositions of Cantor or Jolson with an African-American screen presence, Jolson's *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*, follows the pattern of this scene from *Thank Your Lucky Stars*. Jolson plays 'Bumper', the 'mayor' of New York's Central Park tramp community. His main companion in the hobo community is 'Acorn', played by Edgar Connor, the actor seen in *The Kid From Spain*. Jolson does not appear in blackface in this film, only his second completely whiteface role in the nine films he made as a leading star. And yet the film provides perhaps the most prominent illustration of how the presence of African-Americans in Jolson and Cantor films was conjured up and marked in the racial mirror that their blackface iconography provided. Co-presence in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum* lies in the allusions that are made to Jolson's offscreen blackface through the formal marking of Connor's blackness.

It is beyond the limits of this thesis to demonstrate how the racial marking of African-Americans through film form that has been illustrated in the co-presence scenes of Jolson/Cantor films was also the central feature of the African-American screen presence in the wider corpus of early sound film which was not directly touched by blackface forms and practices. However a detailed look at the racial marking of the African-American screen presence in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*, a film in which the influence of blackface is not

directly visible and where 'co-presence' is ethereal in its form, is a step towards this.

Hallelujah I'm a Bum illustrates how the racialisation and stereotyping of African-American imagery in the co-present scenes of early sound film were merely foregrounded instances of the way in which African-Americans on screen were generally portrayed and perceived through the dominant and pervasive cultural trope of minstrelsy.

Hallelujah I'm a Bum, made for United Artists in 1933, was Jolson's only break from Warners in his film star career and on its completion he would return to make three further films with them. One explanation for the lack of blackface lies in the fact that it is the only occasion where the role allotted to Jolson in a film did not trade intertextually and self reflexively with Jolson the man. Completely 'in character' throughout the film then, there is no cue for either Jolson's blackface or the customary inclusion of his hit songs. In noting the absence of these factors James Fisher comments, "it is fascinating to see him both without his blackface persona and without a backstage plot in which he is playing a variation of himself." (1994,96). However the real fascination of watching Jolson in the closed off diegetic space of *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*, where Bumper the lazy hobo is the antithesis of Jolson the workaholic star that all his other screen appearances traded on, is in the way in which the floating presence of his blackface persona *does* dominate the film's visual imagery through the nature of his 'doubling' with Acorn/Edgar Connor.

Connor's visibility in the film is such that Cripps highlights it as one of the "few memorable bits of black [...] life" (1993,255) in 1930s film and the underworld hobo

setting does create an unusual degree of social parity for an African-American role.

Nonetheless the emblematic status of Connor's presence in the film is highlighted by the fact that, following a significant pattern seen in some of the other films discussed in this chapter such as *The Singing Fool*, *Mammy* and *The Kid From Spain*, he is the only African-American seen in the film.

The fact that Jolson's doubling with Edgar Connor arises from connotational association with the Jolson blackface brand is made consistently clear in the arrangement of mise en scène and editing from the opening frames through to the last shot of the film. The racial play between Connor's on-screen blackness and Jolson's offscreen blackface begins in the first shot which introduces them to us.

The film opens with the real mayor of New York, Hastings, played by Frank Morgan, taking a shooting vacation in Florida. As a goose is shown falling from the sky we cut to a momentarily vacant screen (**fig3:20**). Then the faces of Bumper and Acorn move in from opposite sides to fill the frame and create a two shot (**fig3:21**). This particular use of framing, and movement within frame, calls up the blackface lore on which Jolson's fame rested by enacting the bringing together of a black and white face. In this first shot there is no marked difference between Bumper and Acorn as they both watch intently. However after a cut shows the bird landing they turn to look at each other in the return shot and Acorn is presented eyes to the side and grinning broadly, whilst Jolson's eyes are not visible and his expression remains impassive (**fig3:22**).

If the visual impact of these opening shots derives from extra textual reference to the Jolson blackface mask then they also display the consequences of such self reflexive play for African-Americans in the way that Acorn is imprisoned into wearing the mask of racial gesture for real. The racial marking and emblematic use of Acorn's blackness is reflected in Bumper's costume with his light jacket clashing against his black sweater. The next shot, a big close up which shows the contrasting skin colour of their thumbs as they place bets on where the bird will land, is a particularly vivid revelation of the function that Snead identifies in the practice of marking through *mise en scène* which was to overdetermine the "blackness of black skin" (1994,5).

Hastings recognises Bumper and in revealing the friendship that exists between the two 'mayors' of New York the film establishes a narrative 'doubling' of Bumper to accompany his visual doubling with Acorn. After posing for a photograph Hastings tells his men to give the goose to Bumper and Acorn. The arrangement of the duo in the next shot (**fig3:23**) further confirms the process where Jolson's off screen blackface motivates the iconographic doubling of Bumper with an African-American alter ego. The men stand in a similar gesture with hands in pockets but Acorn's body is completely enveloped by the larger figure of Bumper and he appears to be an inversion of the larger man. The image highlights in textual terms the way in which "racialised discourse is structured by a set of **binary oppositions**" (Hall,1997,243, Hall's emphasis) where black and white function as "signifiers of an absolute difference" (ibid). Acorn's face rests exactly under Bumper's face creating the binary pattern of white face, black sweater (Bumper), black face, white shirt (Acorn). Acorn's face is framed by surrounding whiteness, with Bumper's face

above and jacket providing immediate background, and with Acorn's own white sweater below. In Snead's terms then white costume is used to mark Acorn's face forcing the viewer to register its difference from Bumper's. In fact the entire mise en scène arrangement can be seen to enhance this process with even the background landscape splitting the cinema frame into a darker lower half and lighter top half.

Again though, as in the opening shot of the pair, the fact that it is Al Jolson's face which is brought together with an African-American face in this contrived mise en scène arrangement calls up the presence of his off screen blackface brand. This shot (**fig3:23**) functions as a kind of blackface by proxy and preserves the primary structural relation set by minstrelsy in its cultural play with black and white faces where white is the dominant and permanent background whilst black is the 'substance' manipulated to produce contrast. Here though it is the manipulated blackness of an African-American which is conferred on Jolson and once again a co-presence dynamic brings the racial marking of African-Americans to the surface of a film.

This image of Acorn/Connor standing in front of Bumper/Jolson seems a particularly vivid illustration of the blackface determined stereotypical lore trailing behind the increased visibility of African-Americans in early sound era. In addition to its colour consciousness and its structural binding of Connor's visibility to Jolson, the shot further underlines the fact that the most prominent feature brought out by the film in his performance is his racially marked blackness by fully revealing his dwarfism for the first time. In a film almost completely occupied by single character names Acorn, in a more convoluted

association than was the norm in the marking of black character names, is the only one grounded in the physical appearance of the actor.

Connor's juxtaposition with the most famous figure in twentieth century blackface lore heightens and reveals his racial marking throughout the film. In this opening scene Mayor Hastings sits down with Bumper who dispatches Acorn from the frame by ordering him to prepare the Goose. Hastings and Bumper begin to talk about how they met and Hastings attempts to reform Bumper's lifestyle. Here then Acorn's emblematic blackness has been discarded in order for the narrative to develop. And yet he is shown briefly through an inserted minstrelisation shot (fig3:24) in which he grins and rolls his eyes as Bumper and Hasting's conversation continues off screen. This minstrelisation shot does not confer any narrative agency on Acorn but rather functions to confirm his racial visibility and it continues the underlying 'fun' that his pairing with Jolson produces in the film. Thus the binary pattern in Acorn's racialised visibility in the film is established where either his emblematic blackness is visible because it furthers the vicarious play with Jolson's unseen blackface or else he is omitted from the frame all together.

Other examples of Acorn's racial marking in the film include the opening scene in Central Park where Bumper is reunited with his hobo citizens. Bumper lists "a new population" as one of the things he saw while he was in the south. This provides the cue for a minstrelisation shot to highlight Acorn's grinning gesture as he is picked out from the crowd and his blackness flickers into visibility once again. A later scene highlights the reduction of Acorn's blackness to a sign when Bumper finds a black bag and holds it

against Connor's face. When Bumper and Acorn do enter the normal social sphere as a result of Bumper finding a girlfriend they assume 'natural' roles. Bumper becomes a bank clerk whilst the white jacketed Acorn becomes the bank's laundry man and struggles to count the towels. This scene is reminiscent of Connor's stereotyped role as a piano delivery man in the Duke Ellington short *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1929) which Gabbard notes rendered him as a "minstrel figure" (1996,166) who cannot tell the time or read door numbers.

The film's shift to a New York location begins with an extreme long shot of Central Park which dissolves into a panning shot through leaves that comes to rest as a close up on Bumper's sleeping face. As he opens his eyes his visual doubling with Acorn is immediately re-established as there is a cut from his face to that of Acorn's. Acorn wishes him good morning in the musically accompanied Rogers and Hart experimental "rhythmic dialogue" (Goldman,1988,205) that punctuates the film. Bumper rises and on hearing a whistle returns it, which motivates two intercuts with groups of hobos who are making their way towards him.

We return to Acorn and Bumper for an extraordinary shot that brings the dynamics of their binary racialised pairing in the film, and its extra diegetic play with Jolson's unseen blackface, sharply into focus. Momentarily the shot appears to be a mid shot of Acorn then as we hear the offscreen voice of Jolson, rhythmically half speaking/half singing "Hold up the mirror...." a mirror appears from the bottom of the frame. Acorn's hand is holding the top right corner and Bumper holds the bottom two corners (**fig3:25**).

Bumper's reflection flickers into place just as he continues the line "...Son of Africana, in its reflection I will see my pallor". In a reversal of the arrangement of the earlier shot (fig3:23) where Acorn stood with his face resting below Bumper's face it is now Acorn's face at the top of the image with Bumper's directly below. The multi faceted binarism of black and white in the earlier shot is also repeated. Working downwards from the top one sees a pattern of black (Connor's face), white (Jolson's face), black (Jolson's sweater), white (Jolson's hand and jacket).

Again the density of the black-white binary structures built around the two faces in this image is enhanced by the fact that the background setting to Jolson's face in the mirror frame is dark whilst Connor's face is framed against a white background because of a gap in the trees behind. Again the determined marking of Acorn's blackness through mise en scène arrangement contrives to produce a blackface by proxy effect. On this occasion, with Bumper's body cut out of the frame and Acorn's body largely obscured by the mirror their faces are literally joined together. The top left hand corner of the mirror is missing with the effect that the circular edge of the mirror picks out the shape of Connor's broad grin with Jolson's face resting below.

The presence of a mirror in this scene seems to crack open the complex duplicity in Jolson's blackface lore, rather like the mirror shot in *The Jazz Singer*. *The Jazz Singer* turns, by means of superimposition, Robin's reflected blackface inwards to reveal, through his vision of his father's synagogue, the central theme of his inescapable Jewish-American hybridity. What is revealed 'behind' the mirror in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*

however, in the shape of Edgar Connor, is the racial basis and consequence of Jolson's blackface lore. In this moment of co-presence, as Jolson's reflected image rests under, rather than within a black-face, the self reflexivity of the moment is not turned introspectively by the film into narrative development. Instead the dynamics of this mirror image extend beyond this specific textual moment and reflect the racial markings in the portrayal and perception of African-Americans in early sound film.

This is made clear when the content of this scene itself turns to the racial marking of Acorn. Acorn sings/speaks "Wipe that toothpaste". Bumper's replies, as his hands leave the cinema frame but then reappear in the mirror frame, "I've had a snootiful". Now Acorn continues "Bumper, you look beautiful [Bumper begins to comb his hair in the mirror image] you certainly got sunburnt in Florida, you look tanned you do". Now Jolson replies "Yessir [pause as he reaches for his hat] Acorn ... [another pause as his hands reappear in the cinema frame to readjust the mirror frame so that his hat is in view] so do you".

As he says these last three words Bumper/Jolson breaks into the trademark leering grin he used to deliver suggestive punchlines. He lets go of the mirror again and moves his left hand up to stroke Acorn's face to the side of his broad grin (fig3:26). Now Bumper rubs his fingers on his thumb as if something has come off from Acorn's face. Bumper's hands finally leave the shot and then his face flickers from view, leaving the mirror reflecting the leaves above and Acorn is left as the sole point of focus in the shot once again as he had been in its first moments. The edit to the next shot does not quite come yet and the camera

lingers on Acorn's face as he replies in indecipherable high pitched dialect (it could be "I know what you mean" but I do not think we are meant to hear what he says) and his eyes and head move to the side following Jolson's offscreen movements. Now, in a prominent example of racial cutting, the edit does arrive and the effect is to catch Connor in this mask like, eyes to the side, grinning gesture (fig3:27).

There is much to reflect on in this shot. In the first place, like the floating mammy song over the prostrate African-American patient in *Musical Doctor*, the presence of Jolson's blackface lore is ethereal yet at the same time extraordinarily pervasive in its racial effect on the African-American depicted. As figures 3:25 and 3:26 illustrate, the shot reconstitutes minstrelsy in subtle and complex form. Jolson's white face (the consciousness, the subject 'inside' blackface) is juxtaposed with Connor's black body (the object). In particular the way that Bumper/Jolson's hand enters the frame to stroke and coax Acorn's grinning face vividly illustrates the manipulation of 'blackness' that is at work in both blackface forms and in the stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans in film. However it is the way that Jolson rubs his fingers against his thumb after stroking Connor's face which is the most suggestive aspect of the shot in that it almost seems to give visible form to the floating presence of blackface in this scene and in the film as a whole. In both *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool* we have seen how Jolson introduced blackface to sound film by smearing his hands in black as he looks at his reflection in the dressing room mirror. Here the set up is the same as he stands in front of a mirror, and yet the blackness that he dips his fingers into, *which seems to come off on his hand*, is that of an actual African-American.

It is an extraordinarily revealing moment both in terms of this film and also in terms of the dynamics of wider co-presence in the early sound era. It reveals how the state of white consciousness about blackness as ‘stuff’ at the centre of historical forms of blackface had spilled over into sound film as the means of effecting the racial portrayal and perception of African-Americans. *Hallelujah I’m a Bum*’s extensive doubling of the whitefaced king of twentieth century blackface lore with the only African-American screen presence in the film is based on the premise, the *perception*, that the two forms of blackness were the same.

In terms of what it demonstrates about the persistence of blackface forms and lore in early sound era, the mirror shot is revealing in another aspect in that its abstract reconstitution of a blackface mask serves to display the fact that “it was the black man behind it all”. The way that the shot ends on a racial cut also highlights how the play with Jolson’s unseen minstrel mask is a process of racial entrapment for Edgar Connor. Indeed the fact that “the mask was the thing” for Edgar’s Connor’s role in the film is visualised in a quite extraordinary manner by the closing shot of the film. The shot begins as a close up of Bumper who lounges against a tree dressed in a black dinner suit, the remnants of his failed attempt to crossover into normal life but also, interestingly, the standard ‘costume’ that Jolson wore for his blackface performances in his other films. Now the camera begins a backward tracking and panning movement which reduces Bumper to a background black suited figure and makes his face indistinct and invisible against the changed lighter background. At the same time, preserving their thematic pairing from our first view of

them until the last, this camera movement reveals Acorn, who is dusting down Bumper's hobo clothing ready for him to change into, on the left of the frame. The camera movement continues until it stops far enough away from Acorn so that the shot distance, together with the effect of his movement and his light shirt, renders his broad smile minstrel like in its appearance (fig3:28).

We are left then, in the film's final fade, with another abstract reconstitution of Jolson's blackface. The image is a striking confirmation of the way that, after one hundred years of prevalence, the minstrel trope had continued to structure the white unconsciousness (at least as evidenced through film practice) to the extent that images of African-Americans in Hollywood film were fashioned and styled according to it.

4: Co-presence and African-American Vernacular in Jolson/Cantor Films.

We conclude our analysis of co-presence in Jolson and Cantor films through considering the pattern that emerged in the mid 1930s where their blackface was juxtaposed with African-American music and dance. During the years 1933-1937 two Jolson films (*Wonder Bar* and *The Singing Kid*) and three Cantor films (*Roman Scandals*, *Kid Millions* and *Ali BaBa Goes to Town*) structured their central blackface number around African-American vernacular music and dance, key components of the increased visibility afforded

to African-Americans in the early sound era. My consideration of these films paves the way for the next chapter where I argue that the co-presence of blackface with African-American vernacular forms in early sound film presents some of the strongest evidence for understanding the persistence of blackface in terms of its racial function and consequence.

4.1 *The Singing Kid*

The significant profile of African-American vernacular in the blackface numbers of Jolson and Cantor's mid 1930s films is illustrated by the second burst of African-American visibility in the 'I Love To Singa' number of *The Singing Kid*. The earlier discussion of the number reached the point where the Yacht Club Boys tell the African-American 'mammy' to keep clear of Al. As they walk into the street they continue their criticism of Al's blackface songs, "Why don't you sing like Rudy Vallee or Binga [...] why don't you croona with romance on your kisser [...] something modern and different." Their attack, in naming two 'modern' white singers who were renowned for their 'black' singing style, reveals a fascinating and paradoxical subtext that Al's music is perhaps not 'black' enough. Al retaliates with further refrains of "Mammy". After a final exasperated shout of "Not with the knees", the boys pull Jolson to his feet. Now the score suddenly 'jives' up with strains of jazz music and they all look off screen. This motivates a cut to a long shot of a sidewalk where a row of African-American 'bootblacks' are bending to polish the shoes of white women and men sitting above them. Their white customers, and those walking past on the sidewalk, move in time to the speeded up rhythm of the music.

A cut back to the boys shows them sing “they’ve got it” and then in the return shot to the bootblacks they turn from their work to face the camera and sing “We’ve got it” (fig3:29). The next shot is of a slim blonde woman in a white costume whose hips shake rhythmically on a fat reducing machine as she too sings “I’ve got it” (fig3:30). Then there is a final shot of the bootblacks as Al and the boys walk past them singing “everybody’s got it” before the African-Americans are once again consigned to invisibility. The insertion of the shot of the blonde woman in between the shots of the bootblacks works to sexualise the rhythm that has been racialised in the shots of the African-American men. It acts as another of the unerring ruptures of blackness within the temple of blonde womanhood that was a prominent feature of 1930s film representation, from *King Kong* to Marlene Dietrich’s emergence from a gorilla suit in the ‘Hot Voodoo’ number of *Blonde Venus*.

Now Al turns to the boys and asks what it is that all these people have and the reply is “Rhythm !”. Up to this point the self reflexivity of the number has been confined to aural play with the Jolson blackface brand. Yet with the introduction of this ‘rhythm’ theme the song explodes what has so far been a naturalistically presented background street scene. The modernity and infectiousness of ‘rhythm’ in comparison to Jolson’s sentimental ‘Mammy’ music literally shakes up the frame. Showgirls appear and encircle the men. They are dressed in black costumes which continues an undercurrent sense of the closeness of white women to blackness. The frame itself momentarily begins to spin like a record and, as the brothers sing about rhythm coming in “every colour and siza”, the whole street joins in the dancing. In an extraordinary finale the brothers sing “We’d

die for rhythm” and a long shot shows hundreds of people fall to the ground. This provides the cue for the appearance of the minstrel masks discussed earlier in this chapter (fig3:13) and the presence of the blackface signifier which has floated through the number is finally given actual form in the last shot.

The ‘joke’ of the splashed on minstrel mask at the end of the number would seem to be on Al Jolson and his continuation of his ‘Mammy’ songs regardless of the musical changes around him. And yet what seems to be the target of the ‘joke’, is nonetheless, all be it in self reflexive and ironic terms, revived in the final shot. Instead the racial joke is on the African-Americans in the scene and once again we see that the self reflexivity of blackface forms in early sound era did not disrupt their fundamental racial function and effect. If at the end of the scene blackness is stuff that can be thrown on for whites then it is what the African-American shoe shiners have *really* ‘got’, where their ‘rhythm’ comes from. This is made evident through their racial marking. As they sing “we’ve got it” and turn to present themselves frontally to the camera they are marked by their white jackets and by the racial cut which captures their smiling gestures, reducing them to a sign of their blackness. So what we *see* that African-Americans ‘have’ then in this sudden burst of visibility is an emblematic and racialised blackness. Just as the African-American woman had been called up as the permanent unchanging racial referent to the Jolson blackface mammy signifier the African-American men are called up as the fixed racial referent of the modern ‘rhythm’ that the boys sing Al needs to ‘find’¹¹ in his music.

¹¹ The motif of whites ‘getting’ the ‘natural’ rhythm of blacks before a subsequent appearance in blackface is repeated in other mid 1930s blackface films. In *Show Boat Magnolia*, Irene Dunne, dances in ‘black’ style at the end of the number ‘Can’t Help Loving That Man Of Mine’. In the blackface sequence of *In*

This racialised employment of African-American visibility brings home the fact that the basis of the boys' musical attack on Al is not the cultural conditions that had produced one hundred years of blackface practices but more the specific musical forms and performative styles that should emerge from these conditions. The attack on Al's blackface mammy signifier is not about the appropriation of blackness per se but rather on the means of appropriating blackness, the particular accents of blackness that should be 'tried on'.

The most interesting aspect about the blackface ending to the number, where all the participants in the musical argument are transformed into identical minstrel masks, is that it reveals that what the boys have proposed as a replacement for Al's blackface music is essentially the same thing. Their identical minstrel appearance exposes what Linda Mizejewski refers to as the "circular logic of blackface" (1999,131). The modernity and rhythm that Jolson apparently does not have in this film is precisely the quality, as his 'jazzing' up of 'Blue Skies' in the piano scene with his mother demonstrates, that Warners utilised in him to launch *The Jazz Singer*. *The Jolson Story* depicts Jolson as discovering 'jazz' in a black club whilst on a break from his minstrel show slot in New Orleans. On his return his return he asks the leader of the troupe, Lew Dockstader, to include this 'new' music so as to improve the tired format of the minstrel show. Dockstader's refusal is the cue for Jolson to forge his 'modern' blackface music. The appearance of the

Old Kentucky Steve, Will Rogers, proves that he is black to the suspicious sheriffs by doing the dance steps Wash, Bill Robinson, has taught him earlier in the film. In *The Littlest Rebel* Walker's, Bill

minstrel mask at the end of the number 'I Love To Singa' seems to reveal how, as one moment of cultural theft is seemingly named and exposed, another is simultaneously enacted in the "blackface lore cycle" (Lhamon, 1998, 56) that has historically dominated American popular music.

Despite its apparent mockery of the notion that there was any contemporary currency in Jolson's blackface music in the 'I Love to Singa' number, *The Singing Kid* nonetheless attempts to utilise some of the modernity of African-American 'rhythm' through pairing Jolson with Cab Calloway in the hope that some of it, as it were, 'rubs off' on him. The film begins self reflexively with the blackfaced Jolson singing a medley of his previous hits from his previous stage shows and films. Jolson then turns into a diegetic figure through a cut to a magazine headline about Al Jackson, "America's favourite stage and radio star", and his purchase of a "penthouse in the clouds".

Now a moving camera shot up the stories of an ultra modern sky scraper reveals Jolson standing on the roof top. He gives a few notes from the film's theme song, 'I Love To Singa', and then shouts "Morning Cab". A reverse cut shows Cab Calloway, with his band behind him, return the greeting. Now a long shot (**fig3:31**) taken from behind Cab establishes the fact that he is standing on the sky scraper opposite Al. They take it in turns to sing 'I Love To Singa' although inter cuts are used so that we do not see them in the same frame. The opening of the film then, brings the collective blackface lore trailing behind Jolson to rest on its African-American referent in the way that it moves Jolson

Robinson's, schooling of Virgie, Shirley Temple, in black dance is followed by her use of blackface as a

from the blackfaced medley to a whitefaced 'duet' with Cab Calloway. The skyscraper theme also acts as a rather graphic illustration of the convention of segregating black and white musical performance in early sound film.

Interestingly however, another feature that has been overlooked in its persistence, blackface had the symbolic power to collapse this norm of segregation. Cab makes his second appearance in the film in an extensive co-present number that features in Al's stage show. The number begins with a shot from behind the audience of Cab on stage with his band as he sings 'Keep That Hi De Ho In Your Soul'. Here Cab reprises his most famous stylistic feature and catchphrase, the call and response of 'hi de ho' between him and his band. Now a shot from behind Cab shows that the audience has been replaced by a African-American night club scene. In the preceding sequence we have seen Al black up and his entrance into this night club confirms, as with the other African-American 'doubles' in Jolson films, that Cab's visibility in the film is directly associated with and motivated through association with Jolson's blackface.

Al sings the words "Who's The Swing'iest Man In Town" and the change of number is a rather obvious attempt to deflect some of the verve and energy of Cab's performative style onto his own performance of 'blackness'. Indeed Jolson supplants Cab by mimicking his most distinctive feature as he stands in between him and the club dwellers and directs the calls and responses between them. It is not long however before the number reverts to the standard sentimentality of a Jolson blackface performance. A flash of thunder

disguise.

delivers an angel type figure into the scene and Al sings the number 'Save Me Sister' in recompense for the 'sin' of the previous revelry. This switch from 'Jazz' to 'Spiritual' is typical of Hollywood's binary depiction of African-American vernacular in the early sound era from *Hallelujah!* to *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). Indeed the presence of the blackfaced Jolson in the scene brings into focus the fact that these visions of 'real' black life are no less constructed and manipulated than Jolson's own interpretation of blackness.

The 'Sister' who arrives to 'save' Al and leads him, Cab and the other African-American night club dwellers up a heaven bound stairway (**fig3:32**) is the second blackfaced white, Winifred Shaw, in the number. The fact that we have seen Al black up in the preceding scene would seem to register his blackface as the same self reflexive minstrel performance seen in other Jolson films such as *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool*. In contrast the absence of a minstrel mouth and the use of a wig marks Winifred Shaw's blackface as 'realistic' in its form (the difference between the two forms of blackface is evident in **fig3:32**). The fact that Shaw is not seen elsewhere in the film would seem to confirm that her blackface is intended to mark her as 'actually' black in this sequence. Here then is another instance of the complexity and hybridity of persistent blackface forms in the early sound era and also of the ambiguity surrounding the intended perception of these forms.

At the end of the number Winifred Shaw, blackfaced 'realistic' vision of black spirituality, stands in between Al and Cab. She seems to be almost a fusion of the two of them, arising from the film's doubling of the last king of minstrelsy with a modern African-American Jazz performer. The image displays how the complexity, hybridity and

ambiguity of blackface forms in the early sound era came to rest on their African-American referent. It reveals how the blackness of actual African-Americans in the film, from the doubling of Cab with Al to the inserted rhythmic shoe shine boys and the 'real' black mammy in the later 'I Love To Singa' number, is portrayed and perceived through conditions set by the minstrel trope.

The convention of the segregated number is once again broken in the final moments of the film as Cab and his band accompany Al for his final rendition of 'I Love To Singa'. Al is in whiteface but it is the earlier co-present number which provides the context for this final juxtaposition, and indeed for Cab's entire screen presence in the film. The colour consciousness of the mise en scène with Cab marked by his white suit against Al's contrasting black suit adds to the sense of their juxtaposition in this scene functioning as blackface by proxy. The last shot of the film shows Al in a trademark Jolson, arms outstretched, finale (**fig3:33**). The camera tracks in, further marking Cab by returning him to offscreen invisibility (**fig3:34**), in order to create a close up on Al. The film's final fade, reprising the last shot of *The Jazz Singer*, leaves the after image of his starched white shirt. The dynamics of the last shot in Jolson's last film as principle star illustrate the extent to which the blackface signifier associated with him had become embroiled in its African-American referent. It also illustrates a wider process in the persistence of blackface in 1930s film where its juxtaposition with African-American music and dance acts worked to contain the energy and expressivity of African-American vernacular. Indeed blackface in the Jolson and Cantor films of the mid 1930s gives visible form to a

much wider process hidden elsewhere, where the principle music and dance forms in Hollywood film and popular music more widely fed off African-American vernacular.

4:2 Eddie Cantor and the Containment of Cab Calloway in Co-presence Scenes

Calloway's eventual appearance with Jolson in *The Singing Kid* was preceded by the extensive references made to his song/catchphrase 'Hi De Ho' in the blackface scenes of Jolson's *Wonder Bar*. Calloway was also the site of the first explicit reference made to an African-American vernacular artist in an Eddie Cantor film. *Roman Scandals* begins in the modern day American town of West Rome but soon transports Eddie into ancient Rome where a prominent feature of the mise en scène of the emperor's palace are his black slaves. When Cantor meets the emperor he regales him with stories about modern America. One of these involves Mickey and Minnie Mouse and Cantor ends with a pun by singing a line from Cab Calloway's 'Minnie The Moocher'. As he dances to his singing some dice drop from his tunic. This initiates further comedy as Cantor uses these loaded dice to shoot crap with the emperor and he begins the game by shouting in deep black dialect 'Come ooon dice!'. Needing 12 to win Cantor throws a four and three but convinces the emperor that this is a winner because four times three is twelve. At this point Cantor's collage of black impersonation from jazz artist to crap shooter is grounded into the blackness of an actual African-American with an insert of a minstrelisation shot of one of the slaves who opens his mouth and widens his eyes in astonishment at Cantor's cheek (fig3:35). The slave is further marked by the white bandanna around his head

which picks out the whiteness of the background setting and also by the racialised basis of his momentary screen visibility. Here the act of the slave looking, since his slave status denies him from speaking his knowledge (which in any case is racialised insider knowledge on the game of craps) is *part* of his stereotypical marking.

As in Jolson films this revelation of the actual black man 'behind' Cantor's performative calling up of blackness reveals a process of racial entrapment for African-Americans who carry the sign of blackness 'for real'. Again in similar vein to Jolson films, this overdetermined and emblematic calling up of the blackness of an African-Americans is structurally related to Cantor's off screen blackface in that it acts as a precursor to its subsequent appearance in the number 'Keep Young And Beautiful'. This number sets the pattern for Cantor's later blackfaced appearances in 1930s film in that it is extensively woven into an African-American vernacular screen presence.

Ostensibly the African-American women are in the scene as servants to the white women. However in the dance sections they become "jazzy black maids" (Mast, 1987,119) who dance with "hot verve and swing" (Routt, Thompson, 1990,31). The scenes which place Cantor's buffoonery, as he lifts the hem of his tunic to reveal his white legs, against a *mise en scène* of jazz dancing African-American women, who are marked by the surrounding whiteness of the setting (**fig3:36**), seems a particularly vivid attempt to contain the power of African-American vernacular dance. And yet, as we have seen in the juxtaposition of Calloway with Jolson in *The Singing Kid*, there is also a sense in these scenes that the aim is for some of the vitality and energy of African-American vernacular to rub off on the

blackface medium that for the most part of the previous 100 years had covered over and contained it.

Cab Calloway and his 'Hi de Ho' catch phrase/song also figure prominently in the last blackfaced screen appearance that Cantor made in the 1930s, his 1937 film *Ali Baba Goes to Town*. In similar vein to *Roman Scandals*, Cantor's character, Al Babson, is conveyed back to ancient times and he finds himself in Baghdad. The Sultan makes Al, who is renamed as Ali Baba, his prime minister and asks him to address the citizens of Baghdad. Ali ends his speech by saying "and so fellow Baghdadies and [as he sinks to his knees with his arms outstretched Jolson style] Bagmammies...". Once again a reference to offscreen blackface acts as the cue to conjure up an onscreen African-American presence. Ali looks offscreen and asks why some of the crowd have not been listening. A cut shows a group of blacks in native dress sitting to the side and the Sultan explains that they are his African musicians and they do not understand him because they speak in a "strange tongue".

Ali tries to introduce himself in various languages, French, Spanish, Yiddish, until, with his face brightening at finding a solution to the communication problems, he sings 'Hi De Ho'. A cut back to the natives shows them jump up and reply 'Hey de Hey' and Ali walks over to a cooking pot and uses charcoal to black up whilst he continues to mimic Cab Calloway's vocal style and the famous call and response that he practiced with his band. Then, slipping from jazz vernacular to another 'innate' African-American musical

'language', Ali continues his musical conversation with them by switching to a spiritual style and singing "Sound your Hosannas... Sing your Hallelujahs".

Marking yet another 'return to origins' theme in a blackface sequence Ali is positioned as a soothsayer for the 'natives' in the ensuing number, 'Swing Is Here To Stay'. He takes them through an extraordinary collage of the African-American vernacular scene that awaits them "a thousand years from today". Ali accompanies his musical predictions on Jazz and Swing with racist mimicry of how blacks will 'strut' on the streets of Harlem. Calloway remains a central reference point as Ali initiates a sequence of solo acts by singing that there will be a 'Minnie The Moocher'. He beckons an African-American woman to dance. He then circulates around her as she performs and, with accompanying mugging gestures, eats the baton that he has been using to conduct the band (fig3:37), another not too subtle attempt to mock and contain the energy and verve of the African-American vernacular that the number has unleashed.

The number ends with a series of cut aways showing the dancing Sultan and his citizens becoming infected with the rhythm of the Swing music. The most striking feature of the number, for today's viewers at least, is the way that its co-presence is apparently an attempt to get some of the modernity of African-American vernacular to 'rub off' onto Cantor's blackface act. Again there is a sense, unintentional on the part of the filmmakers, that the co-presence of this number displays all too graphically the process where the white stars of Hollywood musical performance drew directly from the content and style of

African-American vernacular, something not nearly so evident in the ‘Swing’ music sweeping through other Hollywood films at the time.

It is worth noting here that the associations that Jolson and Cantor blackface scenes made with Cab Calloway were repeated in other blackface films. Calloway was the African-American vernacular artist most heavily transcribed and contained by juxtaposition with blackface in 1930s film. Mae West repeatedly sings ‘Hi De Ho’ in the final song of *Goin’ to Town*¹² (1935) and Ramona Curry highlights the general motivation behind white mimicry of Calloway in 1930s film when she notes that the phrase “relates her [West] to that dynamic African-American performer [Calloway] and to the exuberance and urbanity associated with jazz performance generally.” (1995,223)

‘Hi De Ho’ is also referred to in the blackface films *Stand Up and Cheer* and *A Day at the Races*. One of the most interesting uses of the song/phrase occurs in Judy Garland’s first starring vehicle *Everybody Sing*. Garland plays Judy Bellaire, a teenager with an incurable penchant for (although it is never named as such in the film) ‘black’ forms of music whose family attempt, as her father says, to “send her where there isn’t any jazz”. In the opening scene of the film a disenchanted looking Judy is shown in a music class. When the teacher leaves the room she breaks up the discipline of the classical recital by launching into a ‘jazz’ song, ‘Swing It Mendelssohn’:

¹² Two other examples, Ethel Merman singing “Shang-hi-de-ho” in *Anything Goes* (1937) and Smiley Burnett singing ‘Heebie Jeebie Blues’ in *Public Cowboy* (1937), indicate that mimicry of Calloway extended beyond blackface films.

Music is a scene
 That's no good without that rhythm
 Sweet and hot
 Fast and slow
 You get yourself a little dash of ho -de - ho
 And swing it Mr Mendelssohn
 Sing it high and swing it low.

On this last line she mimics Calloway's distinctive vocal style. When the scandalised Judy returns home she admits that she has been expelled from the convent "for doing this, Hey de hey, ho-de-ho". Judy's mimicry of Calloway brings to the surface her internal 'blackness' which is otherwise visually submerged in a film that does not contain a single image of an African-American. Paradoxically, in a scene which rather neatly illustrates Ralph Ellison's assessment of minstrelsy as "a ritual of exorcism" (1967,48), Judy is only absolved of her black connections when she finds a legitimate space for the performance of blackness as a blackface performer.

4:3 *Kid Millions*

The blackface sequences in *Roman Scandals* and *Ali BaBa Goes to Town* are worthy of further discussion but I want to close our discussion of co-presence in the Jolson/Cantor films by considering the blackface number in Cantor's 1934 film *Kid Millions*. The

number marks a quite extraordinary screen debut for the African-American dance duo, the Nicholas brothers. It also offers a concise summary of the key themes of this chapter where we have considered co-presence in Jolson/Cantor films in relation to what it tells us about the racial function of blackface and also in terms of what it reveals about the racial marking and formal stereotyping of an African-American screen presence.

The film opens with a montage of Broadway theatre lights and then cuts to a music shop where Ethel Merman sings the number 'An Earful Of Music' in which she refers to her soul being "full of red hot rhythm". The painted minstrel figures on the windows and on the walls of the music shop reprise the Tin Pan Alley era of the early twentieth century in which the formative years of some of America's foremost composers, such as Berlin, Gershwin and Kern, were spent appropriating 'black' rhythm into the 'coon' song format.¹³ Merman was a singer from the tradition of white women, such as Mae West and Sophie Tucker, who sang in a 'black' style and she was famous for the way that she hit the 'blues' notes. She plays a gangster's moll, Dot Clark, who tries to pass her self off as the mother of Cantor's character, Eddie Wilson, when she realises that he has inherited a fortune from his long lost explorer father.

¹³ 'Coon' song was the derogatory term attached to songs that had 'black' influences in the Tin Pan Alley era. Performers frequently sang them in blackface. Al Jolson for example made his Broadway debut in 1910 singing a Kern coon song, and also premiered Berlin's, 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' (1911), and Gershwin's, 'Swanee', career making hits in blackface (Mast, 1988, 21, 68) (Douglas 1995, 356). Mel Watkins notes that 'coon' songs had their origins in minstrelsy and that they were "characterized as much by their derogatory, supposedly comical references to blacks as by their slightly syncopated rhythm." (1999, 145)

Eddie has set sail to Egypt to claim his inheritance and befriends a couple, Jerry Lane, played by George Murphy, and Jane Larrabee, played by Ann Southern. An African-American message boy delivers a note to Jerry from Jane. The message boy is played by Harold Nicholas, who with his older brother Fayard, had been signed from the Cotton Club by Goldwyn for their first Hollywood feature appearance (Goldman, 1997, 165). Eddie and Jerry turn to look at Harold (the brothers are credited “as themselves” in the film) and there is a cut to a close up of him. Harold’s blackness is marked through mise en scène by the whiteness of his suit and the positioning of his face against the white background. As he thanks them for the tip Harold rolls his eyes to the side and opens his mouth and a racial cut freezes him in this performed racial gesture (**fig3:38**) before he is returned to narrative invisibility. One might say that this overdetermined marking of Harold Nicholas’ black face and emphasis on his open mouth and rolling eyes minstrelises him.

Once again the sudden racialised visibility of an African-American in a Jolson/Cantor film heralds the imminent appearance of blackface. A brief scene shows Jerry and Jane agree to Eddie’s request that they perform with him in the ship’s show that night. Then, transforming the earlier formal minstrelisation of actual African-American into a literal narrative entity, there is a cut to a poster which reveals that the show is a ‘Minstrel Night’. The poster includes a photograph of the white suited and top hatted elder Nicholas brother.

A wipe gives us a view of the show's audience and we hear the off screen voice of Merman singing about "red hot rhythm" and hitting her famous blues notes. Now, in a moment which confirms the multi layered co-presence in the film, we briefly see Eddie blacking up in front of a white jacketed African-American servant (fig3:39). Another wipe down the screen (essentially a racial cut because it is timed at the moment the butler breaks into a broad grin) takes us back to the audience. Then a wipe up the screen reveals Harold Nicholas beginning the number with the words 'I long to be a minstrel man'. This is perhaps the most striking example of African-Americans in a Jolson/Cantor film not only being portrayed and perceived through the conditions of the minstrel trope, but actually having their screen presence literally 'called up' by it.

The transition from the shot of the audience who applaud the unseen Ethel Merman's/Dot Clark's mimicry of a black vocal style to the co-present scene with Eddie and the servant exposes the multi layered appropriations of blackness at work in much white performance in the early sound era. In blackface scenes the appropriated blackness underlying white performance was self consciously acknowledged and played with, although the consequence of such racial play was the effacement of the historical debt owed to African-Americans. In figures such as Merman and Mae West the historical debt to an African-American performative tradition was less visible but nonetheless strongly alluded to. Far more commonly (with their own extremely telling appearances in blackface excepted) the reliance of some of Hollywood's greatest performers, such as Astaire, Crosby and Garland, on an African-American performative style and tradition was submerged and unacknowledged.

In depicting Harold and Fayard Nicholas as participants of a white minstrel show *Kid Millions* raises complexities that cannot be fully unraveled here and I leave the topic of African-American involvement in minstrelsy until the discussion of *Stormy Weather* in chapter five. Here though we can note the mixed sense of historical accuracy/inaccuracy of portraying African-American vernacular in a minstrel show. It was through African-American adoption of the minstrel mask and appropriation of the minstrel show format at the turn of the twentieth century that African-American vernacular achieved its first self representation in American popular culture. However black and white minstrels did not integrate as depicted in this number in *Kid Millions*. In any case acts such as the Nicholas brothers, who like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway came to the Hollywood screen straight from the Cotton Club, represented the *results* of the counter hegemonic break that African-American vernacular made from the visible forms and structures of the minstrel show. In choosing, not for the first time, to introduce one of the brightest African-American acts through the continued filmic visibility that blackface had, Hollywood revealed the continuing racial function at the heart of blackface forms.

As Harold Nicholas finishes his opening lines he repeats his earlier action of opening his mouth and looking off screen from the sides of his eyes. On this occasion however the racial cut which catches him in this 'minstrel' pose is juxtaposed with the next shot, in big close up, of a Goldwyn showgirl in a black top hat. First she meets the off screen glance of the boy and then she looks into the camera. The Berkeley influenced filming of the

showgirls (this was the first Cantor film not choreographed by Berkeley) moves to two more big close ups of individual showgirls and the last one noticeably rolls her eyes.

In the earlier scene involving Harold Nicholas as the messenger boy, Cantor tries to entice Jerry into performing in the show with Jane and he describes her beauty to him. Without realising that she is already Jerry's fiancée Cantor says "She's got a nice round face, the biggest eyes, and the whitest teeth, and when she walks..." he finishes his description with a leer and a knowing laugh. It is striking that Cantor's description of sexual difference should so strongly slip into the visual imagery of racial difference as represented by the minstrel mask he wears in this number, and also by the racially marked African-Americans in the sequence where, as Snead argues, "even white teeth and eyes are all signifiers of a certain coding of race in Hollywood" (1994,6). The juxtaposition of the eyes to the side opened mouthed African-American boy with the big close ups of the Showgirl's (big eyes, whitest teeth and round) faces seems to highlight how the archetypal feminine beauty of the Goldwyn girls could be in danger of slipping into 'blackness'.

The cut to long shot, which offers us our first view of Harold and the showgirls together (**fig3:40**), confirms the extent to which the objectification of femininity has merged with the objectification of race. With Harold acting as the centre point of the overdetermined colour consciousness of the *mise en scène* arrangement, the binary marking of his black skin against a white suit spills over onto the showgirls. Their black costumes and top hats clash against their white skin revealed by the low cut tops. Even the white flowers on their costumes, emblems of white femininity, have black centres. This black-white binary

marking of the showgirls' bodies acts as the background canvas for the featured (both blackfaced and African-American) performers in the ensuing minstrel show.

The showgirls and Harold continue to strike open handed and eye rolling minstrel poses until one showgirl holds up a banjo and a dissolve transforms the scene into a full minstrel show circle. Jerry is interlocutor and Eddie and Dot are the end 'men' with Harold now absent from the screen. Interestingly the sense of women being 'closer' to blackness is further enhanced by Merman's/Dot's appearance in the usual lighter 'realistic' blackface worn by women in Hollywood's minstrel show adaptations which contrasts against the darker traditional self reflexive minstrel mask that Cantor wears (see **fig1:22** in chapter 1).

Eddie and Dot begin the number 'Mandy'. There is a dizzying complexity and hybridity at work in this choice of number and once again a 'return to origins' motif can be seen to surface in the blackface of the early sound era. For Cantor the song is a return to the blackfaced stage origins of his fame since 'Mandy' was originally scored for Ziegfeld's 1919 'minstrel' Follies by Irving Berlin (Goldman,1997,72). In this original version Cantor played end man opposite a blackfaced Bert Williams. For Merman, whose fame as a singer already rested on a non visible blackfacing of black female blues singers, the singing of a Berlin "coon song" reprises an earlier era when female artists, Fanny Brice or Sophie Tucker for example, such as herself who sang in 'black' style did so in the lighter "high-yellow blackface" (Mizejewski,1999,57) that she wears in this scene.

After an interluding whitefaced 'romance' duet between Jerry and Jane the Nicholas brothers are restored to visibility in the number once again. They emerge from behind Eddie to display their extraordinary dance prowess. One could argue that the ensuing dance with Cantor is shot through with potentially positive meaning. The way that the Nicholas brothers take it in turns to hold Eddie's legs in order to stop him from dancing (fig3:41) and display their more genuine talent registers an African-American consciousness of his racial tom foolery in much the same way as the inserted look of the black slave at Eddie's crap shooting antics in *Roman Scandals*. Indeed Cantor eventually concedes and backs out of the frame. And yet, like the slave's racial knowledge of crap shooting thousands of years before its existence, their exuberance and talent stems from the racialised visibility of their blackness in the film that is so overdetermined by the minstrel show setting. It is this 'return to origins', where African-American vernacular is reattached to the blackface signifier it had originally broken free from, which is fundamental to the presence of the Nicholas brothers in the number, and the number amounts to a prominent display of the racial function and consequence of this persistent blackface signifier.

Called up through association with Cantor's blackface and therefore present on screen because of the blackness they carry for 'real', the visibility of the Nicholas brothers in the film is subject to the ebb and flow of racial meaning attached to their blackness as they dance out of the frame once again. When the number is over the temporary bearers of the sign of blackness (Cantor, Merman and the Goldwyn girls) discard it whilst the permanent bearers of it are marked into invisibility and not seen in the film again. And yet there is

one more extremely telling restoration of African-American visibility right at the end of the number.

The Goldwyn girls stand in rows and cover their faces with tambourines. Their action turns them into an inanimate background setting and presents a closing image of their own particular objectification in the number. The blackness of their gloved hands and their top hats surrounds the blanched white tambourines which have replaced their faces, an illustration of the uneasy closeness to blackness that the objectification of femininity has caused in the number. Now there are close ups of the principles popping their faces in between the showgirl's tambourines, a process which ends with a close up of Cantor (fig3:42). This image is at the extreme end of the binary colour consciousness so often rendered in the *mise en scène* of early sound film by the presence of blackface. Like the binarism involved in some of the images of Al and Acorn in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum* (figs 3:23/25), this image is a striking revelation of Stuart Hall's observation that racialised discourse is structured through a set of binary oppositions where black and white function as signifiers of an absolute difference (Hall, 1997, 243).

The overdetermined levels of the splitting of black and white within the shot are extraordinary. If one starts with the white tambourines at the bottom of the frame and works to the centre the inversions are black (show girl top hat), white (Cantor's Jacket), black (his bow tie), white (shirt Collar), black (his skin), white (his mouth), black (more skin), white (eye ball), black (his pupils). And so the final black-white marking in Eddie's eyes, the centre of any facial close up, act as the vortex drawing the viewer into the binary

divisions. Pushed to the side, the eyes complete the stereotypical portrayal at work in the image's construction of blackness. Eddie's eyes seem to underline the way that blackface on film was at once a portrayal of, and a means of perceiving, blackness at the same time. What was it in this extraordinary filmic celebration of the minstrel mask that the eyes of white spectators were being drawn into? Was it a performative ritual where the self reflexivity of Cantor's minstrel mask indicates that blackface was 'about' something else other than the racial stereotype it so prominently displayed, the fundamental basis that modern minstrel studies now proceeds on ?

As is so often the case, the predominant co-presence of blackface forms in early sound film provides a rather telling answer to these questions about the function of blackface. Cantor begins the last refrain of the song "Mandy....." and then turns round for Harold Nicholas, who in some way has been affixed to Cantor's back (**fig3:43**), to close the number and complete the line "...and me".

This extraordinary moment seems to encapsulate so much of the discussion throughout this chapter. The truth that Eddie reveals about blackface practices and their associated lore when he turns around is (as seen in other moments of co-presence, the black servant standing behind Jolson in *The Singing Fool* or Edgar Connor standing behind Jolson's reflected image in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*) that it was the African-American "behind it all".

The exchange of Eddie's face for that of Harold Nicholas functions to replace the subjectivity of self conscious white performance of blackness for the real black object

itself. And in this the specificity of co-presence in early sound film uniquely conjures up the overriding fundamental historical reality of blackface minstrelsy that has been overlooked or ignored in many recent accounts: self reflexive white performance of blackness was enabled by, and continually sustained on the back of, the racialised perception and representation of African-Americans. In substituting a 'real' black-face as the central vortex on which the dizzying binary inversions of black and white in the number come to rest, the film places the racial perception of the African-American presence in the number at the centre of the meaning created by the marking of black and white as "signifiers of an absolute difference". Co-presence in this and other films reveals the function and meaning of the persistent blackface signifier of the early sound era as residing in the portrayal and perception of 'race'. Once again the central historical significance of blackface practices is displayed in racial marking, the consequence visited on African-Americans in film by the minstrel trope; for example in the extremity of the *mise en scène* marking of Harold achieved through framing his face against the whiteness of his and Eddie's suits and the tambourines in the background, in the final use of a racial cut to catch him in a wide eyed grinning racial gesture, and in the racial basis of his final visibility in the film (hanging him on the back of white minstrel man!!) where his identity clearly resides in his blackness rather than in his talent.

The way in which Harold Nicholas is fixed as the African-American referent 'behind' the minstrel man and then trapped, through editing, into a minstrel like pose is a particularly strong demonstration of Ellison's argument on the consequences of minstrelsy and the minstrel trope for African-Americans, that for them "the mask was the thing". Eddie's

playful swivel replaces his self reflexive minstrel mask with an African-American who fills in the contours of the mask for real. If the film marks blackness as the 'stuff' of performance for whites then it marks Harold Nicholas and its other African-Americans as blackness in essence. In the Janus like exchange of two masks, one reveals a process of performative release and the other an effect of racial entrapment. What is so powerfully revealed about the blackface medium in this moment is that the two are shown to be inextricably linked. One might say that it is the very self reflexivity and performativity of blackface which functions to bring about this effect of racial entrapment on African-Americans.



Fig 3:1



Fig 3:2



Fig 3:3



Fig 3:4

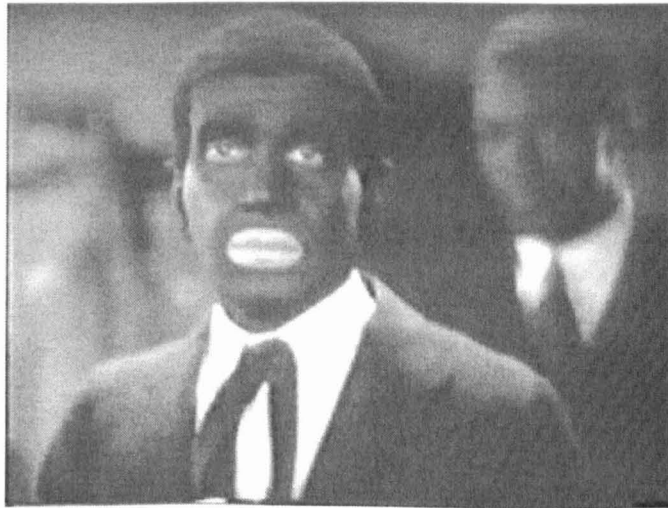


Fig 3:5

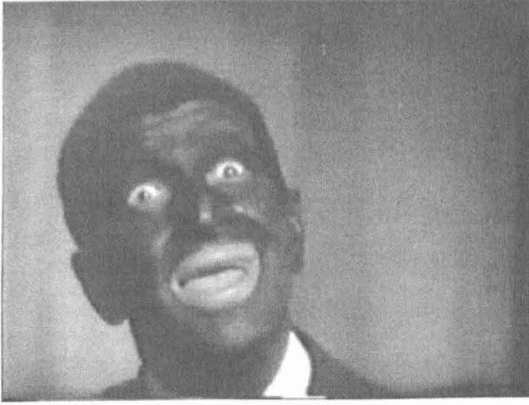


Fig 3:6

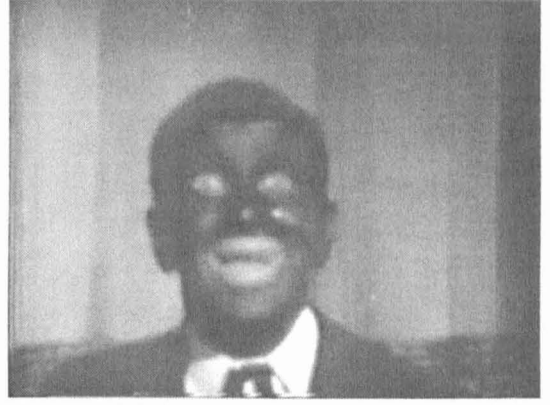


Fig 3:7

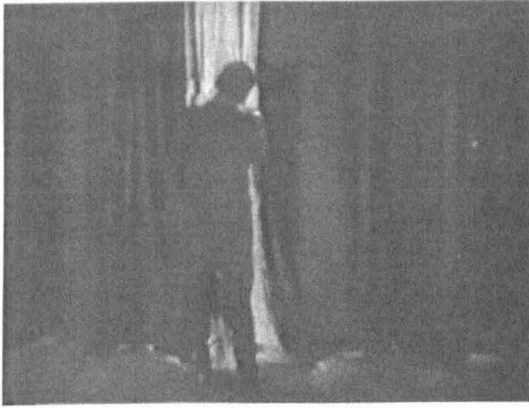


Fig 3:8



Fig 3:9



Fig 3:10



Fig 3:11



Fig 3:12



Fig 3:13

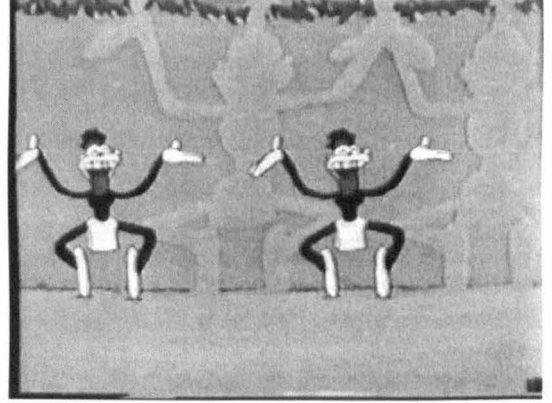


Fig 3:14



Fig 3:15

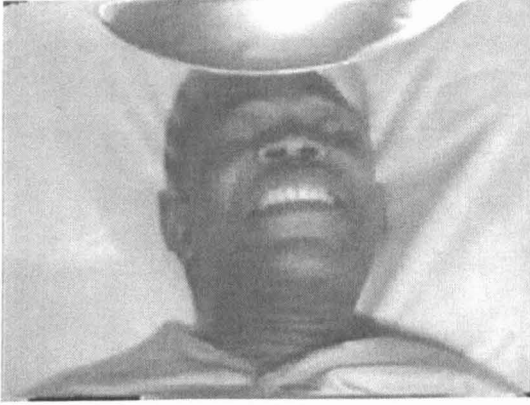


Fig 3:16



Fig 3:17

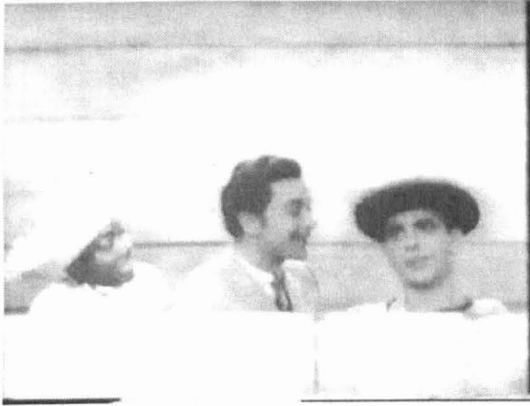


Fig 3:18



Fig 3:19



Fig 3:20



Fig 3:21



Fig 3:22



Fig 3:23



Fig 3:24



Fig 3:25



Fig 3:26



Fig 3:27



Fig 3:28



Fig 3:29



Fig 3:30

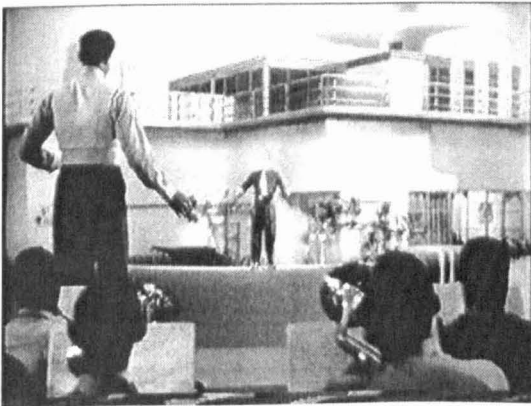


Fig 3:31



Fig 3:32



Fig 3:33



Fig 3:34



Fig 3:35

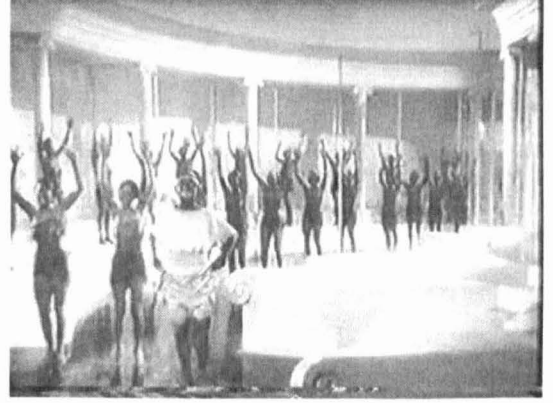


Fig 3:36



Fig 3:37



Fig 3:38



Fig 3:39



Fig 3:40

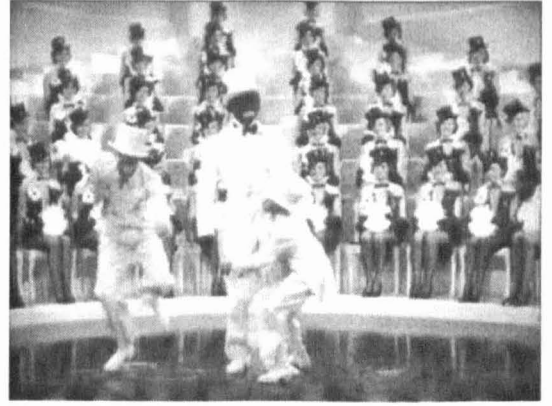


Fig 3:41



Fig 3:42



Fig 3:43

CHAPTER FOUR

MINSTRELISATION SHOTS, BLACKFACE AND THE RACIAL CONTAINMENT OF AFRICAN- AMERICAN MUSIC AND DANCE VERNACULAR

In the previous chapter we have seen that the 1930s post *Jazz Singer* films of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor contradict the prevalent understanding of the persistence of blackface as a loss of racial impact and a decline into self reflexive nostalgia. Far from having split from its racial function, blackface in Jolson/Cantor films was largely sustained through racial play with the screen presence of African-Americans. And that is in spite of, and even *because of*, its self reflexivity. The central historical function which had always been at the heart of blackface forms, the racial containment of the African-American cultural presence in America, was prominently revealed and displayed in the co-presence of the films of the last great exponents of blackface.

The racial function and consequence of blackface in Jolson/Cantor films was mirrored in the wider persistence of blackface in early sound film before blackface forms really did decline into nostalgia during the second world war and then disappear almost entirely by the end of the 1940s. It is not my purpose to demonstrate this through a broad survey of

films. Rather my focus from this point on in the thesis narrows down to a consideration of a few films in which I attempt to find the detail of the racial function at the heart of the persistence of blackface. I do this through a concentration on one particularly suggestive aspect of racial marking in co-present scenes, the minstrelisation shot.

At the end of chapter two I noted how the minstrelisation shot featured as a kind of finishing polish in the Hollywood's racial marking and stereotyping of African-American actors and performers. The minstrelisation shot encapsulates the broad arguments that this thesis makes on the overriding racial function of blackface forms and their stereotypical effect on images of African-Americans in film and it will feature strongly through the latter stages of our discussion. The profilmic building of the minstrel mask into 'real' black images created a 'co-presence' in a single image/shot which displayed how deeply interdependent blackface forms had been with the racialised perception of African-Americans. The minstrelisation shot captures and displays in a single image both the unyielding historical racial function of blackface forms and their consequence for African-Americans.

In particular this chapter considers how the minstrelisation shot encapsulated, in literal and textually evident form, the process in Hollywood film where the rich expressivity and potential autonomy of African-American vernacular¹ was contained within the paradigm established for an African-American cultural presence by the minstrel trope.

¹ Here, and throughout my thesis, I use the term 'vernacular' not in the wider sense of an African-American 'language', but specifically to denote African-American derived music and dance that was performed by African-Americans in early sound film.

The minstrelisation shot featured very prominently in Hollywood's portrayal of African-American vernacular. An example can be seen in the late silent film *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927). In the aftermath of Eliza's and George's wedding, both of whom are played by whites in lighter 'realistic' blackface, the film cuts between the celebrations of the whites in the big house and the blacks in the slave quarters. A white couple are shown dancing in slow and ordered fashion whilst other whites stand and sit motionless on the side. In contrast the blacks in the slave quarters, all played by African-Americans, are restless and exuberant as they watch a broadly grinning couple awkwardly mimic the dance of the white couple. A minstrelisation shot is used to pick out the first individual in the slave quarters scene. It shows a banjo player shake his head and mouth violently as he sings Stephen Foster's 'Old Black Joe' (fig4:1).

Minstrelisation shots can be seen to 'pick out' racial gesture in the instrumentalists in some of the most well known musical shorts. In Louis Armstrong's *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* there is a moment where the drummer is shown grinning and shaking his head from side to side (Fig4:2) and in Cab Calloway's *Jitterbug Party* (1934) the base player is shown rolling his eyes (Fig4:3). In each of these examples the minstrelisation shot encapsulates Hollywood's attempt to restrict and reduce the expressive power of African-American vernacular to the racial framework that had been established by minstrelsy.

Minstrelisation shots carried particular resonance in relation to Hollywood's racial containment of African-American vernacular when they occurred in a co-present context

in sequences which also contained the visible presence of the minstrel trope from which they originated. In this chapter I analyze sequences from two films, *A Day at The Races* and *Operator 13*. They involve co-presence with African-American vernacular and are also punctuated by minstrelisation shots. In one respect the sequences would seem to be quite different since they involve blackface which represents the different extremes of the complex and hybrid blackface spectrum in early sound film. The Marx brothers don hybrid minstrel masks in a moment of parodic and self reflexive play at the end of the sequence in *A Day at the Races* whereas the ‘realistically’ blackfaced Marion Davies is perceived as actually black throughout the sequence in *Operator 13*. And yet in both, blackface performs a central function of racial containment and in both the minstrelisation shots are emblematic of the way in which the autonomy and expressive capability of African-American vernacular was denied in Hollywood film.

1: *A Day at the Races* and The Lindy Hop

The narrative motivation for the sudden burst of African-American visibility in *A Day at the Races* is provided by the fact that the Marx brothers, along with the two lead characters Gil, played by Allan Jones, and Judy, Maureen O’Sullivan, hide from the sheriff and his bailiffs in the black living quarters at a race course. Judy has debts which threaten her sanitarium with closure. Gil sings to her that ‘Tomorrow is Another Day’ and, as Harpo ventures into the black quarters playing a pipe, the sentiment of the ensuing

sequence is that some of the carefree optimism and exuberance of African-American life, music and dance, should 'rub off' on to Judy.

After attracting the attention of the children playing in the yard with his pipe playing Harpo looks in through the window of the first house that he encounters. Inside is a scene built around African-American spiritual music as the occupants sing "Hallelujah" in gospel style. Harpo disrupts their music by playing his pipe. This prompts a cut to a minstrelisation shot of a man inside the house who sings, with wild gesticulation of eyes and mouth, 'Who Dat Man' (fig4:4). Harpo plays the pipe again and the occupants of the house, continuing the sense of an inherent religious fervor in African-Americans that runs through the number, sing "It's Gabriel". There is another minstrelisation shot of the wide eyed man as he raises his hands to the heavens, the stock gesture of black religious fervor. Harpo leads the black adults out of the house and the fact that they follow him as readily as the children indicates a general infantilisation of African-Americans in the sequence. Now Harpo notices another house which is literally swaying to the beat of the jazz music inside. This is a rather graphic example of a binary slippage between musical forms which had been frequently evident in Hollywood's perception and portrayal of 'black' music ever since the first sustained depiction of it in *Hallelujah!* (1928). The narrative of that first all black musical is strongly influenced by a musical binarism where religious music communicates a certain spirituality and purity in blacks whilst 'jazz' music communicates their physicality and sexuality. The physical/sexual side of African-Americans is principally portrayed through the character Chick, played by Nina Mae McKinney. In a jazz bar scene Chick tempts the film's leading character Zeke, played by Daniel Haynes,

away from his pious family into a world of vice and gambling. When Zeke's brother is killed in the bar he repents and becomes a preacher. Chick later 'finds religion' during one of Zeke's sermons in the pivotal scene of the film. However her religious ecstasy sexually arouses Zeke to the extent that he drags her out of the church and gives up being a preacher. The distinctions collapse with the result that black religious fever and black heightened sexuality become almost indistinguishable in the film.

A similar unstable and oscillating slippage between African-American spiritual and jazz musical forms featured prominently in several blackface numbers of the early sound era. Judy Garland begins her *Uncle Tom* derived number in *Everybody Sing!* with the spiritual 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' before slipping into a jazz influenced musical parody of Stowe's book. Eddie Cantor slips between 'Hi De Hos' and 'Hallelujahs' as a means of communicating with the African natives in *Ali BaBa Goes to Town*. The switches between religious spiritual and secular jazz musical forms in the 'Swingiest Man/Save Me Sister' number of Jolson's *The Singing Kid* is as contrived and visually striking as the motif of spiritual and jazz 'houses' in *A Day at the Races*.

Dancing couples and a male clarinet player, his large clarinet jutting across the window frame, are visible through the window of the 'jazz' house. The first shot inside is also dominated by the instruments of the male band members. First a clarinet and trumpet player in the background, then a trombone jutting skywards in the foreground, and then, after a dancing couple cross the foreground, another trumpet player walks on screen circling around with his trumpet pointing upwards. Krin Gabbard, in a chapter entitled

'Signifyin(g) the Phallus, Representations of the Jazz Trumpet', discusses how Louis Armstrong was the first of many African-American jazz artists to establish "the phallic authority of that most piercing of instruments, the trumpet" (1995,139) and he notes that "the phallicism of the jazz trumpet resides in pitch, speed, and emotional intensity" (1995,141). Harpo moves closer to the window and the return shot of the band confirms the trumpet as centre point of this sexually charged scene of jazz vernacular. The trumpet player, with frenzied body movement, plays a piercing solo and there is a cut to the ecstatic faces of the dancing couples. Now we get our first view of the principle singer Ivie Anderson, making her first appearance in a feature film. With a trombone jutting upwards across the foreground of the frame she sings her opening line "Come on and Jumble".

It is a rousing and affective scene and certainly the potency of the African-American music contrasts sharply with the little pipe held by Harpo. And yet it is the mute (!) white man who takes the ascendancy over African-American song and dance as Harpo mimics the earlier trumpet solo on his high pitched pipe. This serves to break up the jazz music and confirms the pattern of white dissipation and containment of African-American vernacular expression that permeates the entire sequence. Again Harpo's pipe playing is followed by a minstrelisation shot. This time, following the pattern we noted earlier in *Uncle Tom* and the musical shorts, it is a musician who is targeted as the pianist turns from his piano in wide eyed surprise singing "who dat man". Harpo's act of dissipating the phallic agency of the jazz music is completed then by the minstrelised containment of one of the performers.

Another minstrelisation shot follows of one of the male revelers as he sings “why it’s Gabriel”. Now Harpo leads the occupants out of this second house and heads back towards Judy and Gil who appear briefly in the foreground of the tracking shot. The African-Americans now sing “blow that horn” as Harpo mimes a blowing action with his pipe. The sexual potency of the trumpet players, still prominently visible in the crowd, has been subsumed into the infantile African-American perception that Harpo is the horn blowing angel Gabriel. Significantly Harpo now takes the role of conductor and he uses his pipe as a conductor’s baton. He slows their singing down so as to accompany Gil’s finale of the number with which the sequence started. A cut shows Gil and Judy in a separate space, standing away from the blacks and as Gil sings ‘Tomorrow Is Another Day’. Harpo crosses into the foreground of the shot to demonstrate Gil’s sentiment by flicking through the pages of a calendar.

Now a cut back to the ‘black’ scene shows that they have once again excitedly taken up the faster tempo of their earlier singing. Harpo crosses the foreground of the camera to join them again. He continues his conductor role by slowing them down once more and subdues the trumpets, directing them down from their skyward position to face the floor on their final note. The African-Americans join in a final choral repeat of ‘Tomorrow Is Another Day’. Now Harpo beckons Ivie Anderson out from the crowd and points her towards Judy off screen and the scene is set for the energy and vitality of African-American vernacular to act as the cure for Judy’s woes.

The Melvin Van Peebles presented Channel Four documentary on the history of Hollywood's portrayal of African-Americans, *X Rated*, shows this scene of Harpo manipulating and controlling African-American artists whilst Peebles' voice-over bitterly laments, "to add insult to injury when a white came across blacks doing their routine he immediately took centre stage and taught them to do what had already been stolen from them." The notion of whites teaching African-American vernacular forms to African-Americans seems a particularly insidious act of ideological reversal and yet we have seen how the dynamics of this scene in *A Day at the Races* were at work elsewhere in co-presence sequences. Again the number 'Swing Is Here To Stay' in *Ali BaBa Goes to Town*, where Eddie Cantor teaches African 'natives' about the impact their rhythmic music will have on America, is a memorable example. The 'back to Africa' as the origins of rhythmic music motif also features as a central theme in the opening cartoon sequence of *King of Jazz* when Paul Whiteman schools the 'mammy' singing lion with his violin. It also features later in the film when a blackfaced 'Voodoo' male dancer is used to introduce Gershwin's performance of 'Rhapsody In Blue'. Similarly in *Round up Time in Texas* Smiley Burnette teaches an African chief's children, played by the cabin kids, how to sing. Hollywood's three Stephen Foster bio pics also depict Foster as the 'teacher' of America's black derived music with *Harmony Lane* in particular punctuated by scenes where Foster, played by Douglass Montgomery, teaches African-Americans how to sing the songs and music which he had already stolen from them.

An insight into the mindset which produced this motif of whites as the teachers of African-American derived musical forms can be seen in Gilbert Seldes' famous book *The*

Seven Lively Arts. It was originally published in 1924 and was one of the earliest attempts to establish a critical appreciation of popular culture. Seldes' thoughts on jazz music for example can be seen to resonate strongly with the sequences described above. In assessing the qualities of "Negro" (1957,96) jazz Seldes notes that "the Negro is more intense than we are, [though] we surpass him when we combine a varied and more intelligent life with his instinctive qualities" (ibid). Seldes made this assessment of white composed jazz:

the free use of syncopation [i.e. 'black' style of music] has led our good [i.e. whites, George Gershwin and co] composers of ragtime and jazz to discoveries in rhythm and to a mastery of complications which one finds elsewhere only in great composers of serious music (1957,88).

Definitions of jazz are notoriously difficult to make but as Krin Gabbard (1996,15) has noted, perhaps the only accurate route to gauging how 'jazz' music was understood in the 1920s and 30s lies in the perception at the time that it had been produced through the amalgamation of high brow white musical forms with the low brow rhythmic qualities of 'black' music. Seldes' racial terms of reference in discussing jazz are again instructive here, "the greatest art is likely to be that in which an uncorrupted sensibility is *worked* by a creative intelligence" (1957,99,Seldes' emphasis). Such an understanding explains how Paul Whiteman attained his reputation as the 'King of Jazz', or why *The Jazz Singer* attained its title, when neither involved music that would be considered as 'jazz' today. Indeed an indication of the racialised understanding of the cultural processes at work in the production of 'jazz' in the 1920s can be seen in the fact, as Linda Mizejewski

(1999,127) highlights, that the terms 'high brow' and 'low brow' themselves derived from the perceived difference in the respective shapes of white and black foreheads.

Anderson begins her song in slow spiritual style by singing

I got a frown
 You got a frown
 All God's children got a frown on their face.

This last line refers to an actual African-American spiritual 'All God's Children Go To Heaven'. This would have had extra prominence in the minds of white audiences at the time because of Eugene O'Neil's use of it as the title for his well known 1924 play *All God's Chillun Got Wings*.

On this third line there is a cut back to Gil and Judy. He pinches her chin which prompts her to break her own 'frown' with a smile. This acts as the central diegetic reference point in the entire 'black' sequence as Harpo and Gil use the African-Americans to cheer her up. Now there is a return to Anderson who, with a faster beat breaking out from the band behind, switches into a more jazzed up style of singing. She begins to dance as she sings the song through in full:

Take no task with that frown
 A song and a dance turn it upside down
 All God's children got rhythm
 All God's children got swing
 Maybe haven't got money
 Maybe haven't got shoes
 But all God's children got rhythm
 For to push away the blues

All God's children got troubles
 Troubles don't mean a thing
 When they start to go Ho ho ho de ho all your troubles go away
 All God's children got swing.

There is an extraordinary depth to the way in which African-American vernacular is molded to diegetic concerns here and it is interesting to note that the film gained an Oscar nomination for musical arrangement specifically for this sequence (Hanson, 1993, 472). The 'black' musical qualities (as perceived by whites) referred to in the lyrics, the 'rhythm' and 'swing' which washes away the 'blues', are visually enacted for the attentive gaze of Judy, Gil, and the Marx brothers, by real life African-American vernacular performers. The lyrics call up actual reference points in African-American vernacular history, 'All God's Children Go To Heaven' and Calloway's 'Hi De Ho', which echo the earlier binary representation of the 'spiritual' and 'jazz' houses.

The central thrust of the number however, as indicated by its title 'All God's Children Got Rhythm', lies in the combination of these binary opposites, again something established earlier in the way that Harpo led the occupants of both houses to mingle as one in the yard. In the same way as Vidor's *Hallelujah!* or the 'Swingiest Man/Save Me Sister' number in *The Singing Kid*, this sequence seems to suggest that there was a certain quality in black life, a fusion of spirituality and sexuality, which could be used to enliven jaded white eyes and deflated spirits.

Krin Gabbard has identified this kind of binarism in the 1920s/30s white perception and portrayal of African-American vernacular as a “clash of discourses” (1996,167).

Specifically he considers how Duke Ellington, the man and the music, was presented on the Hollywood screen. He notes how this “clash of discourses”, for both the presentation² of Ellington and black vernacular in general on the Hollywood screen, was prophetically at work in Ellington’s first screen appearance, the Dudley Murphy directed Paramount short *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1929):

The juxtaposing of sophisticated artists of the Harlem renaissance with minstrel stereotypes [the piano delivery men] at the opening of the film is comparable to the moment in the middle section when Cotton Club dancers clad primarily in animal feathers shimmy while black men in tuxedos gracefully perform on shiny brass instruments. In the death bed scene the “folkloric” view of African-Americans as simple, rural, hymn singing Christians is layered over the urbane, profane sounds of the Ellington band. (1996,166)

Gabbard offers an explanation for the contradictions involved in Murphy’s “genuine admiration of the man and his music” (ibid) and his “simultaneous willingness to bring the minstrel figures Lovejoy and Connor [the actors who play the piano delivery men] into his film” (ibid) by describing the predominant white perception of African-American culture in the 1920s. Such contradictions were

consistent with the fragmented view of blacks that many whites held in the 1920s. Like Carl Van Vechten, who may have contributed to the scripts for both *St Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan*, Dudley Murphy was fascinated by the

² The way in which *Black and Tan Fantasy* contrives to end with both a Gospel choir and the Ellington jazz band in attendance at the death bed of Fredi Washington’s character is another example of the fusion of spirituality and sexuality that whites perceived in African-American life and vernacular.

combinations of sophistication, savagery, and buffoonery that Harlem night-spots such as the Cotton Club served up to white audiences in the 1920s. In this sense, Murphy resembled many negrophiles of that decade who did not distinguish between what we now consider to be positive and negative images (1996,166).

This lack of distinction between positive and negative images of blackness in white perception offers one explanation for the phenomenon of co-presence which jars so much against our eyes today. *A Day at the Races*' thorough intermixing of contemporary African-American vernacular with Hollywood mythology is confirmed in the way that Anderson is surrounded by black children in this rural setting once she has finished singing. One is reminded of the way that Harpo has led the African-American adults from their houses and it seems that the manipulation of, and racial containment of, African-American vernacular artists in the film is predicated on their infantilisation.

The children leave Anderson and she is joined in a dance by the fat man who we saw earlier as the piano player in the 'jazz' house. Though nimble and a talented dancer, the man is presented as a comic figure and he 'mugs' through his dance steps with wide eyed expressions whilst Anderson laughs at his antics. The man's dancing can be seen in Gabbard's terms as the "discourse" of comic buffoonery overlaid onto the "discourse" of urbane African-American vernacular as represented by Ivie Anderson and the jazz band. The man, in so far as he is presented by the white producers of the number, functions as a minstrel figure who dissipates and contains the cultural energy of the more raw and 'authentic' elements of African-American vernacular which are present in the sequence. This is confirmed by the final shot of his dancing interlude, yet another minstrelisation

shot. The earlier minstrelisation shot of the man, as he span round wide eyed from his piano and shouted 'who dat man', worked in unison with Harpo's pipe playing to break up the energy and vitality of the jazz session. Now this second minstrelisation shot of the man is inserted the very moment before a renewed injection of genuine African-American vernacular into the film.

The man completes his dance by spinning to a halt. Now a match on action edit to a big close up minstrelisation shot catches his performed (racial) gesture as he opens his mouth wide and pushes his eyes to the side to look at something offscreen (fig4:5). As with the earlier minstrelisation shots of the startled looks of African-Americans as they ask "who dat man", this minstrelisation shot enacts a particularly strong containment of an African-American screen presence. Under normal circumstances the cut to close up in order to privilege a character's look is an empowering moment in film. Here however the audience's attention is primarily directed to the peculiarity of the man's racial expression and his act of looking becomes *part* of his stereotypical containment in the film.

Within itself this minstrelisation shot works as strong act of racial containment of African-American vernacular. The way in which the man's minstrel mask like expression is overlaid onto the upstanding trumpet in the background works to dissipate the energy and virility of that most potent symbol in the African-American jazz band. There is a brief shot of the band with their instruments jutting upwards before a cut to a ground level long shot reveals what the man's offscreen look, and the accompanying shift to a much faster beat in the score, has been the cue for. Initially we see Harpo playing his pipe but then, as pairs

of dancers sweep into the centre of the frame, he is forced to stop and he hurries off screen.

The juxtaposition of a minstrelisation shot with this infusion of African-American dancing is all the more significant because the appearance of these dancers represents a genuine milestone in Hollywood's incorporation of African-American vernacular. As Robert Crease has identified, in his essay 'Divine Frivolity: Hollywood Representations of the Lindy Hop, 1937-1942', this sequence was the first time that the basic African-American vernacular jazz dance form, the Lindy Hop, was seen in a Hollywood film. Crease discusses the significance of the Lindy in African-American vernacular. It was the basis of subsequent dance forms taken up by whites, such as "Jitterbug" and "Swing" dancing (1995,210), and it has historical significance as a genuinely black cultural form, one for example that Malcom X credited as allowing him to rediscover his "long-suppressed African instincts" (Crease,1995,214)³. The appearance of the Lindy is also structurally linked to the eventual appearance of blackface in the scene since the Marx brothers black up in an attempt at disguise on its completion. Here then a co-present sequence is not only used as the Hollywood premier for a single African-American act, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers⁴, but also, like a previous blackface film *Check and Double Check*, for a wider African-American vernacular form. In the earlier 1930 film the blackfaced Amos 'n' Andy convey Duke Ellington and his band to their venue by taxi. They were the first African-

³ This is no doubt the motivation behind Spike Lee's use of the Lindy as the footage for the opening credits of *Malcolm X* (1992).

⁴ The name derives from Herbert White, the African-American manager of the dance troupe.

American jazz band (or indeed any African-American band) to be credited in an otherwise white film (Gabbard, 1996, 167).

Although the Lindy Hoppers might seem to be as a more 'genuine' injection of African-American vernacular they appear as the last act in the 'black' show that Harpo has orchestrated for Judy and the others. As such they are portrayed/perceived as the culmination of the various "discourses" that have been used to present African-American vernacular in the sequence, the comic peculiarity of black bodies (racial gestures in the minstrelisation shots, the fat man dancing), rural innocence (the race course setting, the religious house, children and childlike adults), and urban jazz (the jazz house, jazz band and Ivie Anderson). Crease describes the ambiguity at work in white perception of the Lindy. Carl Van Vechten believed that the dance was neither erotic nor of sexual derivation and wrote that it provoked an atmosphere "akin to religious mania" (Van Vechten cited in Crease, 1995, 210), whilst "others held the Lindy to be disruptive, barbaric, and obscene" (211). Both innocence and sexual display at the same time, the Lindy Hop appears in *A Day at the Races* as a fusion of binary opposites which seems to run to at the very heart of white perceptions of the essence, the *passion*, of African-Americans in early sound film.

The Lindy, like the other aspects of African-American vernacular in the film, is heavily inscribed by the white looks for which it has been enacted. These white looks range from the studio employee who realised what Whitey's Lindy Hoppers could add to the black scenes in the film when he saw them at the Los Angeles Paramount theatre

(Crease, 1995, 213), to Harpo in his 'conductor' role and the other off screen whites for whom he has put on the show, to the director/editor and the film's audience. Once again it is the minstrelisation shot that provides some of the strongest textual evidence of the heavy presence of a controlling white gaze in the film's presentation of African-American vernacular. The Lindy Hopper's ejection of Harpo from the screen seems to reassert the jazz vernacular that he had earlier stopped and controlled with his pipe playing. It seems to offer the hope, in the same way as the Nicholas brothers' action of stopping Eddie Cantor from dancing in their first Hollywood screen appearance in *Kid Millions*, that the infusion of brand new black talent onto the Hollywood screen had the power to wrestle back some degree of autonomy for black performers. Indeed Crease writes, "With the entry of the Lindy Hoppers and the departure of Harpo, it is finally black performers calling their own tune" (1995, 216). Here however, Crease underestimates the controlling role, soon reasserted, that Harpo has played in the scene and the overall containing minstrelisation effect that is brought to bear on the African-American performers by the heavy presence of a white gaze.

The racial containment of the Lindy, through its introduction by minstrelisation shot and its completion with the blackface mimicry of the Marx brothers, is further exacerbated by the insertion of minstrelisation shots of the performers into the dance sequence itself. The first four shots of the dance have been long shots and this stylistic choice, together with occasional full length shots of the dancers taken from ground level, help, as Robert Crease argues (215), to translate some of the key features of the Lindy to the screen. Of the 16 shots used to film the Lindy only two break this pattern of filming the dance in long

shot. Shot 4 is a mid shot of the woman shaking her head from side to side (fig4:6) and shot 5 is a mid close up of the man grinning and rolling his eyes (fig4:7). Both these shots are classic minstrelisation shots (i.e. mid/close up framing, frontality, shot duration geared entirely around a performed racial gesture, and a cut timed to catch this gesture). The timing of the cut is crucial in catching racial gesture in both the woman and man but the specific insertion of these minstrelisation shots into a dance sequence brings into relief how heavily performed, and therefore scripted/directed, minstrelisation shots in this and other films were. In the days before zoom lens existed, these shots were clearly filmed separately from the dancing and would have involved standing the performers close up to the camera in order for them to perform the gestures. Although the earlier minstrelisation shots in the sequence were designed to 'stand out', and they are particularly jarring for viewers today, the final pose of the fat dancer and the surprised exclamations of the men in two houses do not break up continuity in the way that these minstrelised shots break up the flow of the Lindy Hop dance.

Crease singles out these two shots as counter productive elements in the general communication of black vernacular that he sees the sequence as achieving:

These [shots] do interrupt the flow of the dance and the one of James [the male dancer] is especially troubling... [he] is shown grinning anticly and rolling his eyes skyward, Sambo-style. This disturbs because it recalls a stereotype that the Lindy Hoppers precisely were in the process of surpassing. Their dance involved the genuine recovery and celebration of African rhythms and body movements (1995,215).

Indeed the close ups of staged facial gestures work to break up and undermine the apparent narrative intention of filming the dancers in the first place , i.e. to capture the energy and vitality of 'black life' in order to show Judy the errors of her pessimism. And yet breaking up the long shots/takes of the dance with minstrelised shots of the performers is entirely consistent with the way that the sequence as a whole has been constructed through the "clash of discourses" at work in white perceptions of black life and culture. The minstrelisation shots function as an overlaying of comic buffoonery over the jazz urbanity of the Lindy in much the same way as the juxtaposition of the "minstrel stereotypes" (Gabbard, 1996, 166) of the piano delivery men with Duke Ellington in *Black and Tan Fantasy*.

The superfluousness of the shots within the context of a dance sequence brings into relief (if any were needed) how minstrelisation shots in general were included purely for/because of the presence of a dominant white racial gaze. The way that the visual motif of minstrelised blacks, signaled so prominently earlier in the sequence, becomes the point of rupture which breaks up a historically significant infusion of black vernacular onto the Hollywood screen brings into sharp focus the racial containment at work in minstrelisation shots. As Crease himself observes, the close ups invite us "to contemplate not the bodily movements [i.e. the site of black vernacular expression in the Lindy Hop form] of the dancers but their facial expressions" (1996, 215). The intrusion of the minstrelisation shots in emphasising the minstrelised facial expressions of the dancers is a particularly strong act of containment given the fact that the cut to the woman's face occurs as she performs an important move in the Lindy dance, she is "shown shaking her

head and wagging her finger, doing the “truckin”, a popular step that year”

(Crease, 1995, 215).

Here the fact that there is, although covered over, an alternative layer of African-American determined meaning within this minstrelisation shot raises the issue that there may be a certain degree of tension in this and other minstrelised images of African-American actors and performers. I address this issue in my discussion of African-American ‘Signifyin(g)’ practices in my next chapter on the film *Stormy Weather*.

The juxtaposition of mask like close ups of minstrelised African-American performers with an engaging and enlivening representation of African-American vernacular effectively reconstitutes the original cultural containment at work in the minstrel show and the central racial function of the minstrel mask within the medium. Berndt Ostendorf, in an essay which looks at the historical influence of minstrelsy on early jazz (the co-presence of blackface with African-American vernacular in early sound film can be seen as a late stage in this historical cross cultural formation) writes:

on the one hand, the American common man who supported these [minstrel] shows, admitted against much enlightened opinion that there was indeed something of interest in blacks and black culture. On the other hand he could not afford to be serious about this recognition. He coated his racism in comedy (1979, 577).

Remarking on the underlying process at work in the development of minstrelsy, where “the black Other brought new blood to European popular entertainment forms” (1996, 99),

Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes that, “White minstrels played with Africanist characteristics and like Rice⁵ omitted the elegance [i.e. what motivated whites to mimic black vernacular forms] inherent in them and exaggerated them to the point of the grotesque.” (ibid)

It was the grotesque markings of the minstrel mask, with its exaggerated racial features, which allowed the white participants and audiences of minstrelsy to indulge in their fascination for and admiration of African-American cultural life, and yet at the same time dissipate this interest into the supposed comedy and peculiarity of the blacks who were being depicted. Minstrelisation shots, carrying the implant of the minstrel mask in images of actual African-Americans, functioned in a similar way. The early minstrelisation shots in *A Day at the Races* where various men shout “who dat man” suggests an African-American curiosity about whites yet they function to mask the real curiosity at work in the sequence. They serve to dissipate and dispel the white desire for the ‘life’ and energy of African-American vernacular which has drawn white eyes, both within and without the film, to the African-Americans depicted in the sequence. Minstrelisation shots of African-American performers in *A Day at the Races* carry the original racial function of the minstrel mask where the real motivation for white looks at blackness is made racial and passed off as arising because of the peculiarity, the comedy and the general difference of African-Americans themselves.

⁵ T.D. Rice, purveyor of the ‘Jump Jim Crow’ act from the late 1820s that is often credited as the originator of blackface minstrel forms.

That whites 'get' something from African-American vernacular is made clear in this sequence by the reaction of Harpo and the other Marx brothers to seeing the Lindy. As the dance finishes there is a cut to Harpo who, in half dance/half burst of insanity, waves a pitch fork around with a maniacal expression on his face. A cut to Grouch and Chico shows that they too are dancing with similar abandon. Now however Groucho spots that the sheriff and the bailiffs, who intend to seize ownership of Judy's sanitarium, have arrived. All three of the brothers dart under a cart and smear black axle grease over their faces in an ineffective (the sheriff recognises them immediately) attempt to disguise themselves as African-Americans. They emerge from the cart in various stages of incomplete blackface, with Harpo's half white half black face a particularly striking self reflexive image (fig1:34), and resume their dancing. They lead the African-Americans in presenting a finale of 'All God's Children Got Rhythm' to Judy and Gil. Then, with the final flourish of a minstrelisation shot, a startled African-American shouts "Da Sheriff" and a textual agent of the controlling white gaze that has constructed the African-American 'show' in the film is responsible for finally dispersing the African-Americans into offscreen obscurity.

The effect of the Lindy on the Marx brothers expresses a broader white perception at the time on the 'instinctive' and 'primitive' qualities of African-American vernacular. Van Vetchen wrote, "To observe the Lindy hop being performed at first induces gooseflesh, and second, intense excitement (Van Vetchen cited in Crease, 1995, 210) whilst Seldes noted that in relation to African-American vernacular artists, "there will always exist wayward, instinctive, and primitive geniuses who will effect us directly, without the

interposition of intellect” (1957,98). We have seen the similarly perceived infectious effect of the ‘rhythm’ of African-American vernacular on white bodies in other blackface films and co-presence scenes; in Judy Garland’s disruption of the discipline of the classical music lesson and the rigid postures of the school girls through her mimicry of Cab Calloway in *Everybody Sing*, in the way in which the entire street of whites break into dancing after the rhythmic interjection of the shoe shine boys in *The Singing Kid*, and in the similar scene in *Ali BaBa Goes to Town* where the white onlookers join in the lesson that Cantor gives to the Africans on ‘rhythm’ and ‘swing’.

Robert Crease notes the presence of the Marx Brothers’ “goofy blackface” (1995,214) but offers no further comment and leaves it as an insignificant moment in what he generally sees as a breakthrough sequence in Hollywood’s representation of African-American vernacular. Michael Rogin credits the typical “chaos” of the sequence as resulting in the Marx brothers ridiculing “everything they touch, including racism” (1996,197). I want to argue, however, that the emergence of the blackface signifier is central to the historical significance of the sequence. The co-presence of blackface with African-American music and dance artists in this and other 1930s films offers some explanation as to why the immense wider cultural impact of African-American vernacular was racially contained on the Hollywood screen and had little impact on Hollywood’s stereotypical representation of African-American actors and performers.

By indulging in the century old practice of blacking up and reducing blackness to the level of smearable ‘stuff’, the Marx brothers conjure up as textual entity and presence the very

process that the *film* has worked, formally and conceptually, on the blackness of African-Americans. We have focused on the insistent use of minstrelisation shots but they signal a much broader pattern of marking in the sequence, such as racial casting, dialect, racial cutting and a racialised pattern of visibility, through which the African-Americans in the scene are reduced to a sign of their blackness.

The appearance of the blackface signifier in the scene seems to reveal how the “clash of discourses”, principally represented by the binary motif of the spiritual and jazz houses, which Hollywood used to depict African-American vernacular in this and other films was no less a process of manipulating the ‘stuff’ of blackness than blackface itself. In this sense Harpo’s action of conducting the African-American’s music and singing, with even the mutest and childlike of whites being able to take up Gilbert Seldes’ sense of musical racial ascendancy where an “uncorrupted sensibility is *worked* by a creative intelligence” (1957,99,Seldes’ emphasis), and his act of blacking up emanate from the same state of mind and consciousness about the blackness of African-Americans. The formal and conceptual manipulation of the blackness of African-Americans in this sequence is such that it seems almost of itself to render the structuring influence of the minstrel trope as a visible presence.

Here the self reflexive and ethereal nature of the blackface adds to, rather than detracts from, its significance in the scene. As we have seen in relation to the films of Jolson and Cantor the racial power of blackface forms resided not so much in terms of mimesis or

realism, but rather in how they functioned historically in relation to African-Americans and in their consequences and effect on them.

The Marx Brothers fashion their disguise from their perception of the African-American life and vernacular that they see around them and the broken blackface imagery that they produce speaks volumes of “the fragmented view of blacks that many whites held” (Gabbard, 1996, 166). As with Judy Garland’s self reflexive Topsy minstrel mask in *Everybody Sing!*, Cantor’s collage from Jolson Mammy reference to co-present communication with ‘Africans’ in *Ali BaBa Goes to Town*, and the similar appearance of minstrel masks at the end of the ‘I Love To Singa’ number in *The Singing Kid*, the Marx Brothers’ blackface is not an aberration or nostalgic throwback. Instead it arises from the contemporary circumstances of racial perception and depiction in early sound film. Paradoxically its anti-realist form conveys as a textual manifestation, hieroglyphic in its effect, a rather accurate revelation of the fragmentary and contradictory nature of those circumstances of marking and looking at the blackness of African-Americans on the Hollywood screen. Indeed the abstractness of the Marx brothers’ blackface conveys the dirty work of the formal manipulation involved in fashioning stereotypes from a fragmentary white perception of African-Americans. The eventual emergence of blackface signifier in *A Day at the Races* marks the thorough racial containment of African-American cultural expression into the surface of the film. It communicates how Hollywood’s depiction of African-American ‘life’ in the early sound era was entirely framed within the white modes of perceiving African-Americans that had been established

by the one hundred year long prevalence of the minstrel trope in American popular culture.

2 : Black and White Looks in *Operator 13*

Our second example of co-presence enacting the racial containment of African-American vernacular involves an early screen appearance by the Mills brothers in *Operator 13*⁶.

Minstrelisation shots again figure prominently in the film's juxtaposition of blackface with African-American vernacular performance. A particular feature of the minstrelisation shots used in this film is the way in which they bring out the difference in the 'looks' that were generally afforded to whites and African-Americans in film.

The film tells the story of Gail Loveless, played by Marion Davies, a female spy for the North in the American Civil War. Gail is blacked up, given the name Lucille, and sent to the South as a maid to another female spy Pauline, played by Katherine Alexander. There she meets the Southern soldier Captain Gailliard, played by Gary Cooper. In an interesting first encounter, Gailliard questions Lucille but struggles to contain his attraction to her. At this moment, in a rather unstable dispersal of the undercurrent inter-racial desire at work in the scene, a symbolic white flower falls from her hair onto his arm. Marking works here, for once, to subjectify rather than objectify a black character. When

they meet again later in the film Gail has assumed another undercover identity as a Northern sympathiser, a would be Southern belle, and Gailliard falls in love with her. He uncovers this later treachery but they are nonetheless reconciled. However he never learns that she had also been Lucille and yet another leading lady in early sound film is left with a secret 'darkness' locked away inside her. The use of lighter 'realistic' blackface to confer 'mulatto' status on Gail Loveless in *Operator 13* is another illustration of the way in which the blackface signifier brought out a certain affinity of white women with blackness that was a wider feature of film representation in early sound era.

My principle interest in the co-present sequences of *Operator 13* however is in the way that, despite the contrasting forms of blackface involved, they illustrate the same racial containment of African-American vernacular and a wider African-American screen presence that we have seen at work in *A Day at the Races*. The Mills brothers, 'as themselves' in the credits, play the entertainers attached to a traveling medicine show which arrives in the town in which Lucille is operating. The Mills brothers are quite literally contained by blackface in the way that their appearance in the film is both immediately preceded and followed by big close ups of Lucille's darkened face. Further shots of Lucille are inserted into the two numbers that they perform as she uses the diversion that their singing creates as an additional 'cover' to carry out her spying.

The sequence of shots which introduces The Mills Brothers to the film is as follows. A big close up (shot 1) registers a knowing look on Lucille's face as she overhears a key

⁶ My copy of this film was unfortunately too dark to allow frame captures.

code word whilst eavesdropping. As off-screen singing is heard there is a cut to a long shot (2) of two carts arriving in the town. A change of angle (3) shows the cart arriving outside town's Confederate headquarters and we then cut (4) to Pauline and Gailliard who are standing on the porch. She looks offscreen and says "Oh look, a minstrel show!". Now (5) we see the four Mills brothers singing, their eyes cast towards each other. The next shot (6) is a minstrelisation shot of a smiling African-American onlooker nodding his head furiously to the sound of their music. Now a shot (7) inside the house shows some white women rush outside before there is a cut to a closer shot (8) of two of the Mills brothers. Finally we (9) return to Pauline who says "Oh captain Gailliard do stop them I just love a minstrel show".

These opening shots move us from blackface, to African-American performers, to real black minstrelisation shot, and they reveal the same manipulation and reduction of the blackness of African-Americans to a sign as we have seen in *A Day at the Races*. What is particularly interesting about them is that they reveal the contrasting meaning and agency of white and black looks which arises as a result of this manipulation, a contrast which grows in its insistence through the rest of the sequence.

The arrangement of mid shot and close up shots of characters in narrative film constructs meaning by allowing an audience to determine significance from looking at what a character looks at and perceives. In these opening shots we understand the significance (shot 1) of what Lucille has heard from the look on her face. We see the pleasure on the faces of the women (7) as they rush outside and we are directed, through Pauline's off

screen glances (4,9), to look at the Mills brothers. However the African-American looks in the scene offer no such narrative meaning. The minstrelisation shot (6) of the man registers his instinctive affinity with the music but there is not the same consciousness in his look that is present in the shots of Pauline and the women where their engagement with the arrival of the Mills brothers is registered. The looks of the brothers do not carry narrative significance since, a pattern continued throughout their presence in the film, they are turned inwards to each other. Interestingly Pauline, in directing the looks of other characters and the audience at the 'minstrel show', names the historical mode of perception responsible for the manipulation and objectification of the African-Americans in the scene.

As with the insertion of the Nicholas brothers into a minstrel show in *Kid Millions*, there is mixed accuracy in this presentation of the Mills brothers. African-American performers did gain their first visibility towards the end of the nineteenth century through engaging with minstrel show derived formats such as the medicine show. However this was a post civil war development and African-American entertainment was strictly segregated as opposed to the mixed entourage depicted in the film.

Lucille reappears and looks for an opportunity to pass her information on to Pauline. Further emphasis is placed on the meaning of looks and the racial division in their agency in the film as Lucille's fellow servant, played by the African-American actor Sam McDaniel, berates her for 'looking in' on white affairs, "Lucille Don't you go on heading for the white folks now, why don't you stay where you belong."

It soon becomes clear that Hitchcock, the owner of the medicine show, and his fellow 'doctor' are also Northern spies. A series of close ups, with the singing of the Mills Brothers on the sound track, shows them communicating through eye movements with the two female spies. Now Hitchcock stands up and gives coded messages whilst announcing the medicines for sale. As he announces the ailments he can cure, "heartburn, tape worm, rheumatism", there is a montage of close up shots of African-Americans, followed by further close ups of Pauline and Gail which show the recognition registering on their faces as they decode the hidden information in the speech. Whereas the close ups of the white spies communicate the significance of their looks, to each other and to the film's audience, the close ups of the African-Americans function to mark them as mere physical objects. They are allied to the body through association with the ailments mentioned and they act as the 'cover' for the espionage in the scene.

Hitchcock finishes his speech and sends the other doctor into the crowd. This is the cue for Mills Brothers to sing the number 'Sleepy Head'. Although there is clearly a mixed crowd around the medicine show editing is used to keep them apart on the screen. Blacks and whites are not seen together in the same shot through the entire sequence, save for those involving the 'intermediary' figure Lucille who moves between the two worlds. The film explicitly registers the audience for the song as white with a mid shot of several couples looking attentively offscreen at the singers. Throughout the number there are return close ups to these white couples, with soft focus shots of the white women resting their heads on the shoulders of the men and look offscreen.

These close ups register the white consciousness of the audience and objectify the black male persona of the song into a background setting for sleepy white romance in much the same way that the African-American screen presence has been objectified in the film. One of the song's lines, "I don't like the sun no how, because I'm too much sunburnt now", bears the hall mark of the frequent colour conscious references to African-Americans in minstrel songs and, in combination with a cut away to a giggling white woman, serves to overlay the theme of the laziness of 'blackness' with a sense of its comedy and peculiarity. A return to a close up of Gail in blackface consigns the number to background music as she receives instructions from Pauline to follow the medicine show as it moves on into the black township.

The township scene begins with an establishing long shot of Hitchcock standing on his cart selling his medicines to the African-Americans around him. Then there is a cut to a tightly framed shot of the four Mills brothers as they begin to sing the number 'Jungle Fever'. Their singing, unlike every other black character in the film is without a trace of dialect. Their voices are melancholic and melodic and the song is delivered in an understated manner which contrasts with the feverish atmosphere around them as the African-American townsfolk clamor for the medicine on sale.

The scene is another instance of the "clash of discourses" Hollywood used to portray African-American vernacular, with a sense of primitivism being overlaid onto "sophisticated artists of the Harlem renaissance" (Gabard,1996,166). The sense of

different layers being overlaid onto the band is particularly pronounced in this number with tight shots of their faces, their eyes cast down or towards each other, being interchanged with shots of blackface and minstrelisation shots of African-Americans. This visual arrangement works to contain the autonomy and expression of their music.

After a re-establishment shot of Hitchcock and the crowd there is a return to a longer shot of the band set against African-Americans in the background. In the previous number the white couples were positioned as an audience in front of the band and their conscious response to the music was captured in close ups which, together with the chain of looks between the spies, determined the meaning of the scene for the film's audience. Here the African-American 'audience' is lined up en masse behind the band, front on to the camera. They do not act as a mediating presence for the film's audience but instead function as a racial *mise en scène* for the audience to cast its gaze on.

The difference in the agency of white and black looks in the film is apparent in the fact that all of the close ups of the African-American audience during the number are minstrelisation shots. There is a return to the tight close up on the faces of the band they sing the chorus of 'Jungle Fever' :

Dusky maiden
 Dark haired siren
 Congo sweetheart
 I'm coming back to you
 Wild eyed woman
 Native dream girl
 Jungle fever
 Is in my blood for you.

In this film context the lyrics “dark haired siren” and “native dream girl” seem to threaten the affirmation of an Africanist beauty in place of the norm of white female film star. There is also a sense of black resistance to the visions of white supremacism, “I’m coming back to you”, that Hollywood crafted into its images of beauty. However the self determination contained in the first four lines (sung with the Mills brothers on screen), and the sense of autonomous black life separate from how it is perceived by whites, is denied by the film’s visuals. The visual arrangement of the film works to turn resistant African-American vernacular into confirmation of the white determined discourses which construct the overall sequence.

Exactly on cue to the words “wild eyed woman” there is a cut to a minstrelisation shot of a woman shaking her head with her eyes and mouth open. The shot works to insert a grotesque and peculiar image of black femininity in place of the alternative suggested by the lyrics, and it grounds the title of the song in white determined perceptions on the primitive nature of African-Americans. It is followed by three further minstrelisation shots, a woman with her eyes closed shaking her mouth violently, and then two similar shots of African-American men moving rhythmically whilst looking into the camera and grinning broadly.

The close ups of the white couples in the previous number positioned them as the principle subjects of the scene and they are detached from the music as they mediate a romantic

mood to the audience. Here minstrelisation shots separate out the black couples, two women followed by two men. Although shown individually, their rhythmic movements and racial gestures position them as part of the same objectified black mass. They are not separate from and consuming the music, but part of it. They function as the signifiers of the 'Jungle Fever' in black blood that the song names. After a return shot of the group there is a cut to a montage of three further minstrelisation shots which ends with a shot of a woman in the throes of religious like ecstasy, a fusion of all that has been seen so far.

After a return shot of the group, exactly on cue to the lines "Got that fever, jungle fever", there is a cut to a long shot of the seething crowd as they clamor for the medicines. This continues the metaphorical juxtaposition of black bodies with the medicine show which underlies the film's presentation of African-American vernacular. Evidently a perceived feature in 'black blood' beyond the reach of medicine was the 'rhythm' of their music and the uncontained physicality of the African-Americans in the previous minstrelisation shots is another representation of the 'infectious' nature of black rhythm that we have seen at work in co-present scenes in other films.

The intercutting between the group and the racial material of the minstrelisation shots and the shots of the fevered crowd has grown in its insistence and, like the appearance of blackface in *A Day at the Races*, the (re)appearance of blackface in *Operator 13* seems almost to arise out of this formal manipulation and reduction of actual African-Americans to the 'stuff' of blackness.

The emergence of blackface completes the containment of the autonomy and self determination of African-American vernacular in the scene. One of the brothers sings “the Congo’s calling and I long to go” and then, as they begin a repeat of the chorus, there is a return cut to the crowd. As the lines “Dusky maiden/ Dark haired siren” are sung we are aware of a figure pushing through the crowd. Then on the line “Congo sweetheart...” we see Lucille emerge. She pauses, looks offscreen and then disappears back into the ‘cover’ of the crowd on the side of the frame. As she does this there is a return cut to the Mills brothers as they sing ‘I’m coming back to you’.

The timing of the cuts seems quite deliberate. The Africanist affirmation contained in the words, sung with the brothers on screen, “the Congo’s calling [...] I’m coming back” is disrupted by the insertion of the shot of the blackfaced Caucasian features of Gail/Lucille so that she acts as the visual referent to the words “Congo sweetheart”. Having previously displaced the band’s accreditation of black beauty with a minstrelisation shot of an African-American woman, the film now undermines their affirmative words with an image of its white leading lady and the audience’s gaze is drawn to the white ‘beauty’ hidden beneath the blackness of the scene. The audience’s knowledge of Gail/Lucille’s disguise works to dispel the oxymoronic notion of black beauty. Instead they are provided with the real register of beauty, white womanhood, the very notion of ‘beauty’ that the song might otherwise seem to reject.

Lucille’s emergence from the African-American mise en scène of ‘Jungle Fever’ not only works to absorb the meaning of the song but also to confirm the place of white looks as

the engine of narrative meaning in the film. There is deep irony in the fact that Gail Loveless uses blackness as a cover to *enable* her secret looking as a Northern spy in the South. The shot of her emerging through the crowd establishes the narrative meaning of the 'Jungle Fever' scene as we see that she is looking for Hitchcock in order to communicate her information. And yet at the same time it also reveals the systematic denial of African-American looks here and elsewhere in the film. Whether the entrapped looks of the Mills Brothers, or the minstrelised shots of the African-Americans around them, the agency inscribed into the close up of Gail/Lucille's look in the sequence brings into relief the way in which close ups of African-Americans are not intended to reveal what they see, but the difference of how they look to whites.

Close ups of African-Americans in this and other films of the early sound era invite us to consider the racial basis (i.e. their blackness) of what, rather than who (only Lucille is given a character name in this 'Jungle Fever' scene) they are. The minstrelised close ups in the scene bring no active look to African-Americans but simply add to the spectacle of blackness to be looked at by the white audience. In this respect it is striking how Gail/Lucille 'minstrelises' herself so as not to be seen when she is cross examined by Southern whites. In her first encounter with Captain Gailliard for example she makes her dialect heavier and engages in the same racial gestures, eyes to the side and grinning, which feature in the minstrelisation shots of African-Americans. There is a double sense to the way in which Gail Loveless uses blackness as her 'cover' then in that she hides not only behind dark make up but also behind the objecthood of African-Americans as seen by whites in the film.

In both *A Day at the Races* and *Operator 13* blackface appears as the most loaded of signifiers. The specific timing of the blackface visibility in the 'black' sequences of both films seems particularly to reveal the constructed and manipulated nature of Hollywood's 'real' black imagery. The appearance of a literally marked blackness in these sequences brings into relief the discursive manipulation and formal marking of the blackness of African-Americans in early sound film. Gail/Lucille's 'realistic' form of blackface succeeds where that of the Marx brothers deliberately and self reflexively fails in that it allows her to seemingly blend into an African-American scene. The central significance of co-presence in both films is that it signals the survival of dominant white consciousness about the blackness of African-Americans which stemmed from the visual regime of race established by minstrelsy.

Both *A Day at the Races* and *Operator 13* illustrate that the formal shape of blackface, its 'realism', was of minor importance in comparison to the way in which its visibility functioned in relation to an African-American screen presence. Both films display the historical consequences of the minstrel trope in their emblematic racial containment of African-American vernacular through minstrelisation shots. The true historical significance of the persistence of blackface in the early sound era lay in the way that it impacted, reflected and signified on (a phrase I will explain further in the next chapter) the African-Americans with which it was co-present.

3: The Wider Co-presence of Blackface with African-American Vernacular in Early Sound Film

The racial containment of African-American performers and vernacular forms which we have seen at work in *A Day at the Races* and *Operator 13* was part of a wider pattern involving many of the 'greats' of African-American jazz music and dance. The co-presence of blackface and African-American vernacular artists in the early sound era is a particularly pronounced illustration of the racial function at the centre of the continued visibility of blackface forms in the early sound era.

At various points in this thesis we have discussed co-present sequences which marked the first screen appearance in a Hollywood feature for the following artists, Duke Ellington (*Check and Double Check*), the Nicholas Brothers (*Kid Millions*), The Pearl Twins (*Ali BaBa Goes to Town*), and Ivie Anderson and the Lindy Hop jazz dance (*A Day at the Races*). An addition to this list of minstrelised 'premieres' of African American vernacular acts is the Busby Berkeley directed *Hollywood Hotel* (1937), a film I have not been able to view. The film includes the first appearance in a feature film of the black members, Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton, of the Benny Goodman Quartet which is directly preceded by a blackface number (Knight, 1995, 18).

Also mentioned in this thesis at various points are the appearances of the following acts/performers in co-present scenes soon after (mostly within a year) their first screen appearance, The Mills Brothers (*Operator 13*), The Cabin Kids (*Round up Time in Texas*), The Hall Johnson Choir (*Dimples*), Bill Robinson (*In Old Kentucky*), Cab Calloway (*The Singing Kid*) and Louis Armstrong (*Artists and Models*). It is particularly striking that all the instances of co-presence involving African-American vernacular acts that I have been able to identify involve artists either gaining their very first feature film appearance or else one of their early feature film credits, almost as if blackface functioned as a racial marker early in the screen careers of those artists who managed to gain Hollywood visibility.

Co-presence sequences gave literal form to the minstrel trope which whites had historically used and continued to use in perceiving and making sense of the cultural visibility of African-American vernacular. When Arthur Knight identifies the juxtaposition of blackface with the first feature film visibility of the bi-racial Goodman quartet as an instance where “regressive, racist representation recuperated a progressive visual representation of the [jazz] music” (1995,28) he touches on a broader process of racial containment which has been one of the most overlooked aspects of blackface’s persistence in early sound film.

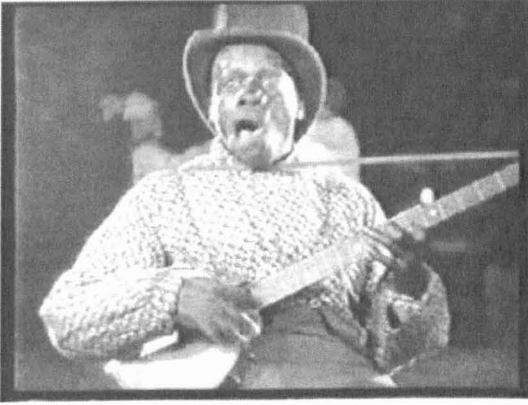


Fig 4:1



Fig 4:2



Fig 4:3



Fig 4:4



Fig 4:5



Fig 4:6



Fig 4:7

CHAPTER FIVE

UNRAVELING THE MINSTREL MASK, AFRICAN-

AMERICAN SELF EXPRESSION IN *STORMY*

WEATHER

The previous two chapters have exposed the racial basis of the persistence of blackface forms in early sound film. In this final chapter I return to the origins of minstrelsy and consider the complex cultural processes which were involved in the formation of the minstrel mask. My purpose in this is to uncover the full detail of how blackface forms in early sound film, the last significant visible remnants of the broader minstrel trope in nineteenth/twentieth century American cultural history, functioned to racially contain the African-American cinematic presence. In particular our consideration of the origins of minstrelsy will uncover the full significance of racially charged blackface forms being juxtaposed with African-American vernacular in early sound film.

The central contribution that this thesis makes to the evaluation of the blackface medium is to demonstrate how, to use Gottschild's phrasing, "the racially weighted focus of the minstrel era" (1996,90) was revealed in the late hybrid blackface forms of early sound film. In chapter one I noted a general shift in the early 1940s where blackface finally had

declined into nostalgia, a shift that Michael Rogin and others had identified as occurring much earlier with the introduction of sound to film. *Stormy Weather*, released in 1943, is a film which more than any other heralded the end of the visibility of “racially weighted” blackface in Hollywood film. A key element in this is the fact that it was the first Hollywood film to accurately depict the history whereby African-American vernacular performers had originally gained their first visibility in American popular culture through their participation in minstrelsy and their use of blackface.

In this chapter then, I use *Stormy Weather's* own particular return to a point of origins in the history of minstrelsy as a device to explore the origins of minstrelsy in broader terms. There are three sections to this chapter. In section one I establish the contextual factors which account for the special status of *Stormy Weather* and also outline its engagement with the history of African-American minstrelsy. In section two I consider the complex origins of minstrelsy and the historical relationship between the minstrel mask and African-American forms of Signifyin(g) as a way of reaching a deeper understanding of the racial function behind the persistence of blackface in early sound film. In section three I conclude the thesis by returning to a consideration of the ways in which *Stormy Weather's* presentation of African-American vernacular marks a decisive break from the minstrel trope in Hollywood film.

1: *Stormy Weather's* Historical Context

As a start to a contextual account of *Stormy Weather* let us consider a film made in the same year, *This is the Army*.

1:1 *This is the Army*

This is the Army contains the same elements, blackface, minstrelisation shots and African-American vernacular, as the 1930s films previously considered. And yet the different arrangement of these features reveals a shift in the nature of blackface forms. The film is an adaptation of the army stage shows that Irving Berlin produced during both world wars. The variety ensemble of numbers includes both a minstrel number and a segregated all black number. Blackface and African-Americans are kept separate in the film and there is no on screen co-presence. Nonetheless motivational war time ideology produces an interesting thematic link between the two numbers.

'Mandy And Me', the Berlin number also performed by Eddie Cantor and the Nicholas brothers in *Kid Millions*, begins with a close up on a minstrel man singing the opening line, "I was going out one evening by the silvery moon". The camera tracks back to reveal him standing in a line with other minstrels who are all dressed in 'zoot suit' style hats and smart white suits (**fig5:1**). A painted banjo dominates the background set whilst uniformed white soldiers sit in the foreground. The sentimental slow pace of the music,

much slower than the version in *Kid Millions*, and the backdrop of the painted banjo bring out the Southern minstrel nostalgia of the lyrics. The costumes on display however, soldiers in uniform and minstrels in modern zoot suit style, seem to clash against this mood.

The reason for this anomaly only becomes clear in the later all black number ‘That’s What The Best Dressed Man In Harlem Will Wear’. The song is about blacks putting on the army uniform and the lyrics call up the attire worn by the minstrel men earlier:

Mr. Zoot has disappeared with his fancy tie
 You’ll see in the Harlem Esquire
 What the world’s best man will desire
 As he struts down the street with his sweetie pie

As he sings these words the lead singer walks past various men in army uniform. Now he sings “If you want to know [a cut now reveals Joe Louis walking onto the stage] take a look at Brown Bomber Joe.” The return cut is a minstrelisation shot of the singer. He notices Louis, grins broadly, rolls his eyes, and then looks offscreen at him with his eyes pushed to the side (fig5:2). Although the man sings about “taking a look”, the sense of black empowerment that might have accompanied the entrance of the African-American heavyweight champion of the world has been denied by the cut to a minstrelisation shot. As we have seen in other films, minstrelisation shots frequently worked to transform the act of African-American looking into part of their stereotypical portrayal on film.

Louis is shown pummeling a boxing ball with immense power and skill whilst the singer moves his head closer to it. Then there is cut to another minstrelisation shot showing the singer gesticulating his face wildly in time to the ball as it flashes by his face (fig5:3). The intended perception of this shot is that the shadows cast by the ball create a strobe like effect on the man's face. However, as the frame capture demonstrates, the distortion of his features is achieved through editing since different images of the man are superimposed on top of one another. Like the smearing and manipulation of the blackness of the African-American servant's face in the out of focus shot in *The Singing Fool*, this minstrelisation shot is a particularly pronounced demonstration of the profilmic work involved in the reduction of African-Americans to racial sign, of the specific textuality of film stereotypes.

In contrast to the previous example (fig5:2), this second minstrelisation shot is entirely superfluous in that it does not register the singer's look and it functions purely as a racial containment of the power and agency that Louis brings to the screen. The juxtaposition of minstrelisation shots with an African-American sporting hero in *This is the Army* is an interesting variation on those we have seen juxtaposed with African-American vernacular in other films. Yet in containing the agency and self expression of an African-American screen presence the central racial function remains the same.

The number now moves on to the racial containment of African-American vernacular through a visual reference to the earlier minstrel number. As Louis throws his last punch there is a cut to a backward tracking long shot. A brief burst of military trumpets provides

the cue for Louis to salute and leave the stage as he is replaced by a group of tap dancing soldiers. The long shot reveals the painted backdrop for the first time and we see colossal zoot suited African-American men, with minstrel type bulging eyes and legs astride the streets of Harlem (fig5:4). The painted men tower over the now minute figure of Louis in the bottom right hand of the frame and this domination completes the overdetermined, and somewhat hysterical, containment of Louis's presence in the film.

Both the painted background minstrel figures and the earlier minstrel number function as referents for the lyrics of this segregated number, i.e. frivolous zoot suited blacks who must discard their carefree girl obsessed lifestyles and submit to army discipline. In a sense the painted blackface figures in the background transform this number into a co-present containment of African-American vernacular. They function to racially contain the dancers in similar fashion to blackface in *A Day at the Races*. The clash of the huge minstrel constructs against the African-Americans below suggests the continuation of the "fragmented" (1996,166) perception that Krin Gabbard noted in white views of black life and culture in the 1920s/30s and a continuing lack of distinction between "what we now consider to be positive and negative images" (ibid) in Hollywood depictions of black life. And yet the dynamics of this 'co-presence' are different from the sequences I considered in the previous chapter.

Although the all black number is formally and conceptually marked by racism it is nonetheless conceived as an act of inclusiveness, an attempt to reflect the contribution of African-Americans to the war effort and to motivate further African-American

involvement. This inclusion of African-Americans does coincide with the continuing visibility elsewhere in the film of minstrelsy as patriotic American national icon, a feature of blackface's persistence discussed in chapter one. And yet like other war time uses of minstrelsy in Hollywood film, such as *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *Babes on Broadway*, blackface in *This is the Army* is not a site of direct racial play in the manner that we have seen at work in Jolson/Cantor films and in 1930s co-presence sequences involving African-American vernacular. Although the looming presence of the minstrel figures over the all black number serves as a reminder of the history weighing down on African-Americans for a century and beyond, there is at the same time a sense in which the inanimate abstraction of these figures illustrates how the African-Americans below have taken a decisive step forward from the minstrel trope. In short *This is the Army* illustrates that the split which Michael Rogin attributes to *The Jazz Singer*, where blackface forms lost their racial currency and their ability to "speak" directly in racial terms, occurred a decade and a half later in war time film.

The number ends with the reappearance of Joe Louis. He marches through the dancers and, as the curtain closes behind him, gives a salute to the audience. The forward tracking movement which picks out his action is an interesting reversal of the opening shot of the minstrel number where the backward tracking movement revealed uniformed soldiers sitting below the zoot suited minstrels. This ending confirms the film's iconic use of a black boxing champion to lead African-Americans into uniform and into war. If the dance sequences in the previous number contained elements of a continued white desire for the energy and vitality of black bodies (c.f. *A Day at the Races*), then the closing image of

Louis illustrates how a more pressing need for African-American bodies meant that the continued racial denigration of African-Americans in film was now becoming untenable.

1.2 *Stormy Weather* in the Context of World War Two

The impact of world war two on Hollywood's portrayal of African-Americans is well documented. Whites found it harder to maintain a racist disavowal of African-American talent, agency and capability. Allen and Randhall note that the Office of War Information "specifically criticised racial portrayals" (1987,53) whilst Edward Mapp cites William Katz on the broader social changes enacted by the war which would result in Hollywood restructuring its images of blackness, "many whites had returned from Europe and Asia believing if the idea of a 'master race' was wrong for our enemies then it was wrong for America too" (Katz cited in Mapp,1972,37).

More significantly however the war acted as the catalyst for a renewed organisation of African-American political consciousness. Membership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) grew from 50,000 to 450,000 during World War Two (Nesteby,1982,209) and Thomas Cripps has documented how one of the organisation's central aims was an improvement in Hollywood's portrayal of African-Americans. Cripps ends his history of Hollywood's "pejorative racial roles" (1993,3) in *Slow Fade to Black* by highlighting the significance of a 1942 meeting between the leaders

of the NAACP and several studio heads. The meeting established an agenda for improvement in the portrayal of African-Americans and Cripps notes that, "March 1942 became a date by which to measure the future against the past" (1993,376). *Stormy Weather* then lies just beyond this watershed and indeed Cripps records, without giving details, that Twentieth Century-Fox reshot up to a third of the film "to avoid the appearance of renegeing on the NAACP deal" (1993,378).

Stormy Weather follows the motivational device of two other war time films that included blackface imagery, *This is the Army* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, by including scenes set in the world war one era as a reminder of America's recent war capability. The early part of the film is set in 1918 with a depiction of the home coming of two war veterans Bill Williamson and Gabe Tucker, played by Bill Robinson and Dooley Wilson, and it ends with a show given for African-American service men about to go over seas to fight in the second world war . In itself the admission of an African-American involvement in world war one was a topic that Hollywood had shied away from previously.¹ If other films only paid lip service to the need to reflect African-American contributions to the war effort and to society in general (the depiction of patriotic African-American servants permanently occupying the corridors of the White House in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and the inclusion of

¹ In fact Hollywood had used minstrel derived comedy to ridicule African-American involvement in world war one. One of Warners' last silent pictures, *Ham and Eggs at the Front* (1927), detailed the comic escapades of two African-American soldiers, played by whites in blackface. The blackfaced duo Moran and Mack made a similar film, *Anybody's War* (1930), in the sound era. John Trombold notes how the original adaptation of Moran and Mack's minstrel act into a novel (on which the latter film was based) about the first world war functioned to dispel the "spectre" (1999,99) of African-American agency that had been created by war service.

an African-American number in the soldier's show in *This is the Army*) then *Stormy Weather*, as an all black musical, offered greater scope for improvement.

Bogle notes that *Stormy Weather* was “a cavalcade, a revue of Negro entertainment from 1918 to 1943” (1994,131) as seen through the eyes of its star, Bill Robinson, of whose life the film was a “thinly veiled dramatisation” (ibid). Certainly the film was Hollywood's most direct acknowledgment to date of African-American vernacular's contribution to, and impact on, American life. The decision to tell the story *behind* the emergence of African-American vernacular in American popular culture instead of simply exploiting the African-American artists on the studio rostrum made *Stormy Weather* a unique film at that point in Hollywood history.

One could argue that the film was the high point of African-American visibility in Hollywood's early sound era. It was the only pre 1950s Hollywood all black cast film to eschew a spiritual/Jazz “clash of discourses” in its presentation of African-American vernacular. In this respect *Stormy Weather* fares much better than the other famous all black musical of that year, *Cabin In the Sky*, in which Krin Gabbard notes that “one moment [African-Americans] are simple, plantation-style darkies who vacillate between singing hymns and shooting craps; at the next they represent urban sophistication.” (1995,5) The film's choice of narrative line also means that *Stormy Weather* was the first Hollywood all black musical to deliver African-American vernacular performance through portrayals which communicated the actual professional status and fame of the African-American vernacular artists being presented.

The greater degree of accuracy in *Stormy Weather's* reflection of contemporary African-American vernacular extended into a unique depiction of blackface's place in its history. *Stormy Weather*, certainly from the map of persistent blackface established in this thesis, was the first Hollywood film to accurately reference the historical involvement of African-Americans in minstrelsy. The scenes which juxtapose African-Americans with a blackface signifier are examples of a 'co-presence' which has an actual historical basis. This contrasts with the numerous depictions of blackfaced whites performing with African-American vernacular artists in the early sound era which had no basis whatsoever in the segregated history of American performance. This was a history which Hollywood, outside the confines of co-present numbers, continued to effect with the practices of segregated numbers and all black musicals.

Two previously discussed films, the Nicholas brothers' appearance in the 'minstrel night' in *Kid Millions* and the Mills brothers' role as traveling minstrels in *Operator 13*, do offer partial glimpses of the minstrel past behind African-American vernacular. The historical reversal in *Ali BaBa Goes to Town*, where Eddie Cantor is depicted as a blackfaced intermediary figure delivering African-American vernacular to 'African' natives, also pays reference at some level to the actual historical inter-relationship of blackface forms and African-American vernacular. However all of the instances of blackfaced whites being juxtaposed with African-American vernacular artists that we have considered, like the broader patterns of co-presence we have seen at work in the films of Jolson and Cantor,

arose from a contemporary need for racial containment rather than from any apparent motivation to reflect an (erroneous) history of bi-racial performance in American culture.

The unique conditions surrounding *Stormy Weather* then, the direct impact of war time change on its production, the erosion of racial currency in blackface and its predominant minstrel nostalgia form in the 1940s, and its explicit attempt to narrate part of African-American cultural history, result in it being an immensely textured and significant film. *Stormy Weather's* narration of the emergence of African-American vernacular from minstrelsy enacts a significant break from the minstrel trope in film history. For the first time in a Hollywood feature one can catch relatively unfettered glimpses of a self determined and expressive African-American vernacular. Yet at the same time, like the image of the dancers stepping forward from the immense painted minstrel figures in *This is the Army*, African-American agency and self expression in *Stormy Weather* is fraught with tension. Its more genuine look at African-American cultural life is masked with formal features of minstrelisation. I consider this tension in *Stormy Weather* in more detail at the end of this chapter but first we need to map down its 'co-presence' and this in turn requires consideration of the origins of minstrelsy. A reading of the film against the historical context of African-American involvement in minstrelsy will help establish the film's credentials as a more genuine reflection of African-American cultural life, past and present.

1: 3 *Stormy Weather* and African-American Minstrelsy: The Cakewalk, Traveling Minstrels, and Comedy

Stormy Weather begins in a contemporary 1940s setting and establishes a framing device where Bill Williamson tells a group of children about his past. This establishes the first half of the film which is told in flashback and includes three sequences which explicitly reference the minstrel past of the African-American vernacular forms which *Stormy Weather* is designed to showcase.

1:3a The Cakewalk

The flashback begins with Bill and Gabe attending a party given for returning world war one soldiers. Here Bill meets up with the sister of a dead colleague, Selina Rogers, played by Lena Horne, whilst Gabe attempts to find a girlfriend by boasting of his exploits in Paris, where he drank “nothing but champagne”. This is an interesting self reflexive reference to a changing Hollywood climate. Perhaps the earliest ‘inclusive’ African-American role in 1940s war time film had been Wilson’s role as Sam in *Casablanca* (1942), where he is depicted as sharing a bottle of champagne with Bogart and Bergman in the Paris scene.

Once the central romantic relationship between Bill and Selina has been initially established the band leader Jim Europe announces the “Cakewalk”. Europe is one of a number of early twentieth century figures portrayed or referred to in this scene, including Noble Sissle and Bert Williams, who were part of the first wave of African-American vernacular to emerge from minstrelsy.

The stage curtains open to reveal a striking image of African-American women, with their backs to the audience, structured into the shape of a cake. Painted on the back of their heads, in the centre of their sun flower shaped hats, are minstrel masks (fig5:5). The women turn around and raise the hems of their skirts Can-Can style. Now couples begin to dance around the bottom of the cake and the women peel away from the cake to continue their Can-Can style dance amongst the audience, closely followed by the couples. Europe calls for everyone to join in and the scene closes with Bill and Selina dancing in front of the chorus of Cakewalkers.

The Cakewalk is significant in the history of American popular culture because it was “the first African-American Dance to gain popularity [i.e. amongst whites] as a stage form and a ballroom dance” (Gottschild, 1996, 114). However the visual presence of the minstrel mask marks this scene as a deeply textured reference in the film’s portrayal of the ‘history’ of African-American entertainment. It calls up the earlier status of the Cakewalk as a point of origins for the emergence of an African-American vernacular presence in American popular culture. The insertion of the Cakewalk into the minstrel show finale, towards the end of the minstrel show era in the late nineteenth century, had been “one of

the most important contributions to minstrelsy by African-Americans”
(Gottschild, 1996, 144).

The opening image of women built into the cake adds to the way in which the detail of this scene captures much more of the history of African-American vernacular than the inter war years timescale of *Stormy Weather* would seem to cover. The introduction of women to the minstrel show had been another African-American innovation and the Can Can style of dancing seen in *Stormy Weather* is an accurate depiction of the “Africanized version of the French dancer’s cheesecake style” (Gottschild, 1996, 114) which was a primary influence in the original Cakewalk section of the African-American minstrel show.

Gottschild highlights how the key aspect in the Cakewalk’s historical function as the *fin de siecle* bridge to the pervasive influence of African-American vernacular in the twentieth century was its attraction of the interest of a white elite:

It is the elite who have first license to try the “wild,” new Africanist dances, from ‘Cakewalk’ through ‘Turkey Trot’, from ‘Charleston’ to ‘Lindy’ to ‘Twist’. In the black minstrel-vaudeville transition era, this class frequents exclusive black hangouts, like New York’s Hotel Marshall, to rub shoulders with black arts. (In a later generation, it will be the white upper crust who come up Harlem to frequent the Cotton Club and other such spots). (Gottschild, 1996, 114-115)

The depiction of the Cakewalk then, is an extremely nuanced textual detail at the start of *Stormy Weather*’s showcasing of 1940s African-American vernacular artists. More than

any other cultural form, it was responsible for African-American vernacular breaking free from the minstrel show format. Gottschild identifies it as the

bridge between black minstrelsy and the transition musicals that led to early black vaudeville [...] in its final decade of popularity, the “Cakewalk” functioned as a conduit for African-Americans to white show business (1996,116).

The historical significance of the Cakewalk as a conduit for the escape of African-American vernacular from the shackles of the minstrel show format is confirmed by the fact that it was pivotal to the development of early forms of jazz. Jazz would provide African-Americans with their most successful cultural projection and greatest degree of self representation throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Gottschild outlines how “the dance required a new music and heralded yet another innovation brought about by black minstrelsy -the introduction of ragtime” (114). Berndt Ostendorf, in an essay entitled ‘Minstrelsy and Early Jazz’, confirms the significance of this development:

Early jazz musicians, however low their social status, knew that musically speaking they were leaving minstrelsy behind. Scott Joplin, for one, knew the worth of his music and Eubie Blake emphatically asserts the importance of ragtime for American popular music. (1979,597)

1.3b Traveling Minstrels

Stormy Weather continues its subtle encapsulation of a wide historical scope by moving from the Cakewalk to a depiction of a traveling African-American minstrel show in the

next scene. African-American traveling minstrels played a pivotal role in the dissemination of African-American vernacular forms:

The traveling minstrel shows were training-centres for a large number of black artists. Out of their combined efforts emerged certain forms of popular culture: burlesque, stand-up comedy, ragtime and cakewalk, blues, surrealist nonsense, coon songs and black minstrel tunes. It was this culture which provided the subsoil of the emerging jazz music. (Ostendorf, 1979, 594)

A transitional shot of a steamboat on a river is used to move from the Cakewalk number to the traveling minstrel show. We cut to a shot of Bill, now disbanded from the army, as he complains to a friend about his day heaving cotton bails on the boat. As he lies down the camera pans down to his feet before there is a cut to close up of him with his eyes closed. Fast paced music now begins off-screen and Bill opens his eyes wide in surprise and the shot ends with a racial cut which catches this facial expression. In the next shot we see his feet jerking in time with the music and then a pan upwards shows Bill grinning broadly as his friend tells him that the music “must be those traveling minstrel boys who got on at New Orleans”.

As Bill shuffles past the man there is a cut to the traveling minstrels who have broken out into an impromptu performance. Bill enters a scene of improvisation where individuals in the group compete and challenge each other to do their ‘stuff’ as the entire group intermittently chant “Yeah Man, Yeah Man.” The first soloist sings “I can do a _____”. Repeated viewings have not enabled me to decipher the term he uses but his routine involves contorting his face to the music and, with a cut from mid shot to close up, he

closes eyes and mouth and moves his lower jaw from side to side. There is a return to mid shot as he stops this action and pushes his top hat down. With his eyes and mouth now open he shakes his whole head violently from side to side. Once again we return to a close up on the man's facial movements but on this occasion the shot bears the hall marks of a minstrelisation shot, close up framing, frontality, and a shot duration geared to catch a performed racial gesture (fig5:6).

Even without an awareness of the authenticity which is buried in *Stormy Weather's* historical presentation of African-American vernacular forms, one suspects that a viewer today would find the film's portrayal of African-Americans relatively benign up until this point. Allied to the shock of its sudden appearance, the sheer grotesqueness that this shot builds into the portrayal and intended perception of the minstrel soloist means that it has to rank as one of the worst minstrelisation shots in early sound film.

In fact this minstrelisation shot marks an eruption of hidden tensions in *Stormy Weather* where its groundbreaking portrayal of African-American vernacular is in tectonic rupture with the minstrel trope that Hollywood, and other entertainment forms before it, had historically used to contain its expressive capabilities.

After further acts by different minstrels Bill joins in the call and response by saying "I can do some shuffling too". He takes the circle and performs some trade mark Bill Robinson tap dancing. One of the minstrel men shouts that Bill should get himself to one of the Beale street cafes when the boat stops in Memphis. Bill replies, "Boy you've been reading

my mind, watch me go to Beale street.” Now all the troupe join in the finale as the screen fades to black.

The next scene opens with an establishing shot showing the sign ‘Ada Brown’s Beale Street Café’ and then a pan reveals a poster advertising ‘Fats Waller and the Beale Street Boys’. A cut inside reveals that Bill has gained a job as a waiter in the café and then Brown and Waller break out into a rousing blues number, the Nat King Cole authored “That Ain’t Right”.

In conveying Robinson to Beale street via a traveling minstrel show, *Stormy Weather’s* juxtaposition of minstrelsy with the Blues is again grounded in the actual history of the emergence of African-American vernacular from minstrelsy. W.C. Handy for example found his way to Beale Street as a traveling minstrel man and his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, sets down how central his experiences in minstrelsy were to his composition of some of the most famous Blues anthems, such as ‘Beale Street Blues’, ‘Memphis Blues’ and ‘St. Louis Blues’. The narrative build up to *Stormy Weather’s* first presentation of contemporary 1940s African-American vernacular performance, with Waller and Brown playing “themselves”, is then an accurate and authentic structural retelling of how African-American vernacular had emerged in American popular culture.

1.3c Minstrel Comedy

There is a third and final reference to African-American minstrelsy in the film. On this occasion it involves African-Americans appearing in the minstrel mask itself. Ada, Fats and Bill are recruited to join a Chicago show. From there Robinson returns to New York to produce his own show. One of the principle acts shown in the on-stage scenes of Bill's show are a blackfaced African-American duo who do a comic routine around a broken down car.

The back stage scenes, involving the male duo in their minstrel masks with lighter skinned chorus girls, reprise the 'make up' of the New York all black musical comedies and revues at the turn of the century. These were the first non minstrel shows by African-Americans to find a white audience and Linda Mizejewski's description of them highlights the historical basis of *Stormy Weather's* depiction of Bill Williamson's 'breakthrough' New York show, "Photographs from these black casts reveal that the male actors frequently used blackface to make themselves darker, minstrel-style, for comic effect, whereas the chorus girls were generally light skinned." (1999,123) The minstrel mask remained integral to the first African-American comic routines to emerge from the minstrel show format, such those performed by the famous double act George Walker and Bert Williams, and Mel Watkins notes how this emergence from minstrelsy was the "proving ground" for twentieth century African-American comedy (1999,133).

Stormy Weather's historical scenes contain an underlying account of the way in which African-American vernacular artists broke through the minstrel trope and there seems to be a unique commitment, for a Hollywood film of the time, to offer a genuine reflection of African-American cultural life. And yet there is a permanent tension in these scenes in the way that they are delivered through the film's central narrative agent, perhaps the most heavily minstrelised African-American in early sound film, Bill Robinson.

1:4 Bill Robinson: Hollywood's Favourite Minstrel Figure

It is difficult to see mere coincidence in the fact that the white filmmakers chose to recount and 'see' the history of the emergence of African-American vernacular through the eyes of Bill Robinson's character. Robinson had achieved a prominent Hollywood screen profile in the 1930s because of his willingness to "Tom" through his roles (Bogle, 1994, 35) and no other African-American vernacular artist was more heavily marked, inscribed and 'minstrelised' by co-presence sequences in early sound film. After his Hollywood breakthrough with the first of his collaborations with Shirley Temple at the beginning of 1935, *The Little Colonel*, his subsequent screen appearances in that year included the opening cameo in *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, where he was followed by an Amos n' Andy blackface sketch, and co-presence scenes with the blackfaced Will Rogers and Shirley Temple in *In Old Kentucky* and *The Littlest Rebel* respectively. Although he did not appear in a co-present sequence in 1936 he was credited as Shirley Temple's 'dance director' in *Dimples*, a film centred around a minstrel production of 'Uncle Tom',

and he was the inspiration for Fred Astaire's blackfaced 'Bojangles of Harlem' number in *Swing Time*. Finally in 1937 Robinson performed a number with the blackfaced Martha Raye in *Cafe Metropole*.

The use of Bill Robinson as the central narrative 'frame' for the flashback sequences in *Stormy Weather* creates great complexity in the co-presence of blackface with African-American vernacular in the film. That is because the history of the emergence of the latter from the former is retold through a figure who himself had been heavily re-inscribed with minstrel trope on the Hollywood screen.

The tension in *Stormy Weather* between Hollywood's minstrelised past and a new dawn of more positive images of blackness is nowhere more apparent than in the film's central romantic pairing of Bill Williamson /Robinson and Selina Rogers/Lena Horne. When Bill first meets Selina he delivers a classic minstrel show derived line which makes comic and stereotypical reference to the African-American body, "My ears hear something but my feet don't believe them."² Just a year into her Hollywood screen career Horne would go on to establish herself as the first African-American Hollywood screen siren by taking a very different route from Robinson, as Null highlights, "She was one of the first black performers to be able to survive in Hollywood as a star despite refusing roles she considered demeaning to her race." (1975,119)

² There are similar comic references to African-American 'feet' in other co-present films. In DW Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) a blackfaced slave character recounts how he evaded some

The film's use of Bill Williamson/Robinson as a minstrelised narrative framing device is accompanied by formal features of racial marking (arising from the continued recourse to the minstrel trope in Hollywood film form) which also aim to contain and deny the full expressive power of the African-American vernacular forms on display. This racial containment is encapsulated by the minstrelisation shot in the traveling minstrel scene. It is a particularly resonant emblem of the tensions at work in *Stormy Weather* at a juncture in Hollywood history which, as we noted earlier, had become a time to "measure the future against the past" (Cripps, 1993, 376). The minstrelisation shot carries the same formal features as those we encountered in the previous chapter and it attempts to effect the same racial containment of African-American vernacular. And yet at the same time it occurs in a very different context, in a scene, and film, where the reality of African-American cultural history had genuinely begun to peep through the minstrel trope that Hollywood had so consistently used to cover over its African-American screen presence.

At the end of this chapter we will consider how the tensions at work in *Stormy Weather* are resolved in favour of an expressive and self determined African-American vernacular. This is enacted by a narrative shift from the recounting of the history of African-American vernacular through the eyes of Bill Williamson/Robinson to a presentation of contemporary African-American vernacular in a contemporary setting, a narrative shift which is signaled by the appearance and stunning musical performance of Cab Calloway.

Northerner's by saying "Feet, you travel". In the blackface Bing Crosby short *Dream House* an African-American janitor leaves a superimposed pair of feet running on the spot as he escapes from a lion.

However, in order to fully unravel the tension between the minstrelised containment and self determined expression of African-American vernacular forms at work in that emblematic minstrelisation shot and through the wider film it is necessary to take a detour into the cultural politics of African-American expressivity and its historical mediations. We return then to the origins of the minstrel mask. It may seem strange to end this thesis at the beginning but we bring so much more knowledge to our examination of the cultural complexity of the minstrel mask this way, and in a sense we are following the actual trail left by blackface in its last moments of visibility on the Hollywood screen.

2 : The Origins of Minstrelsy; the Minstrel Mask and African-American Signifyin(g)

With regards to the history of African-American participation in minstrelsy that is so strongly referenced in *Stormy Weather* Lisa Anderson writes:

The black minstrel show has come to be regarded as a 'reclaiming' of slave dance and performance. It differs from white minstrelsy in that it gave theatrical form to 'signifyin' on white minstrelsy in the manner in which slaves practiced 'signifyin' on whites in real life. (1996,17)

Henry Louis Gates writes that 'Signifyin(g)' is a means of expression that is "fundamentally black" (1988,64) and "so shared in ... [black]... culture as to have long ago become second nature to its users" (ibid). I retain Gates' transcription of the term

'Signifyin(g)' where the capital 'S' differentiates its meaning from the normal 'white' use of the word and the bracketed (g) indicates that the letter is not usually sounded when the word is spoken by African-Americans. Throughout the rest of my discussion I also retain Gates' transcription of the capital 'S' in my use 'Signified' and 'Signification' as a way of differentiating these terms from the normal 'white' understanding of them.

In relation to Signifyin(g) Gottschild writes, "African peoples are well versed in the art of role playing and role reversals, concealing and revealing double entendre and innuendo. These are positive characteristics and basic integers in the Africanist aesthetic." (1996,85) Signifyin(g) was a means of communication brought to America via slavery. Gates notes that it arose from the African tradition of the "double voiced" (1988,xxv) and he writes:

Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms from painting and sculpture to music and language use. (1988,xxiv)

Signifyin(g) gave African-Americans a double affirmation of black identity in the context of overarching white surveillance. It pre-existed this context as a distinct African form and it also sustained black experience and identity in America under the conditions of the white gaze.

Gates argues that the ability of African-Americans to be double voiced meant that Signifyin(g) developed into an African-American 'language' which has historically remained hidden within white language and communication from the time of slavery and beyond:

What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher? Nothing on the x axis of white signification, and everything on the y axis of blackness." (47)

The enslavement and subjugation of blacks resulted in the formation of alternative black and white means of communication, a "black difference" (46) which Gates denotes through the verbs "Signifyin(g)" (black), and "signifying" (white) and the nouns 'Signification' (black) and "signification" (white) (ibid).

Gates is understandably fascinated by the fact that the very process of naming this hidden means of black expression, the black voice within white language, in itself enacted the process of black speech, "Some black genius or a community of witty and sensitive speakers emptied the signifier 'signification' of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts." (46) The naming of the existence of a black expressive meaning outside, or rather *inside*, white meaning as 'Signifyin(g)' signaled an immense scope of black resistance and affirmation:

[...] to revise the term *signification* is to select a term that represents the nature of the process of meaning-creation and its representation, few other selections could have been so dramatic, or so meaningful. We are witnessing here a profound disruption at the level of the signifier [...]. (47, Gates' emphasis).

As the absent 'g' in the spoken term (Signifyin) demonstrates, the resistive *practice* of Signifyin(g) occurred on the level of spoken language. Gates mentions other terms such as "cool" and "nigger" as examples of a "political offensive" (47), a black Signification on "Standard English terms" (ibid).

2:1 The Body as Means of Signifyin(g)

More significant however, both in terms of the original context of slavery and a subsequent African-American performance presence in popular culture, was the fact that African-American cultural gesture and performance, the African-American body itself, became the principle physical means of Signifyin(g) meaning which could not be spoken under the watchful eyes of whites. In relation to this history Stuart Hall writes, "think of how these [black] cultures have used the body as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as canvasses of representation." (1997a,128-9)

Hall's account of the historical formation of black popular culture draws attention to the "rhetorical stylisation of the body" (1997a,129) and the strategies of "overdetermination" where blacks used "heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing [...]" as a means of "occupying an alien social space" (ibid).

In relation to the earliest cultural gestures and performances displayed by blacks for white eyes William Lhamon writes:

Before US whites started inscribing, painting and staging black talk, song, and dance at the end of the eighteenth century, slaves had long been performing public put-ons of whites. The cakewalk is probably the most familiar example. (1998,140)

The original Cakewalk involved slave men and women dancing for their masters, ostensibly attempting to copy white forms of dance, in an attempt to win the prize of a cake. However, as Lisa Anderson has noted, the apparent subservience of slaves copying whites for reward was shot through with Signified African-American expressivity, “the dances of the slaves were partially adaptations of African forms, and partially ‘signifyin’ on the dances of the whites.” (1996,23) The centrality of Signifyin(g) to the earliest forms of African-American performance in front of a white gaze is also highlighted by Gottschild, “African-Americans doing the “Cakewalk”..[were] .. simultaneously imitating and parodying whites” (1996,110). Berndt Ostendorf similarly notes:

Black Africans playfully acquired these [white] forms, or, if they found them strange, caricatured them. White dance, the Schottische or the quadrille, must have appeared singularly stiff to juba dancing blacks and they ‘condescendingly’ imitated what they saw in the big house. (1979,580)

The great historical irony about the presence of African-American vernacular forms in American popular culture, from the ‘Ethiopian delineators’³, as the first white minstrel troupes were known, to Hollywood’s presentation of African-American vernacular in early sound film and even to the present day, is that its complex performativity has been portrayed and perceived as ‘natural’ to African-Americans.

In fact the “repertoires of black popular culture” (1997a,129) that Stuart Hall identifies, the use of the body as a “canvass” and the “overdetermination” of black cultural gesture, arose from the fact that “excluded from the cultural mainstream, [they] were often the only performative spaces we had left” (ibid). Eric Lott elaborates on this point, “Black performance itself, first of all, was precisely ‘performative’, a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies...a way of getting along in a constricted world.” (1995,39)

A consideration of Signifyin(g), and the historical conditions in which it arose as the necessary means of African-American expression, unveils immense complexity in the earliest forms of African-American performance and also, more significantly, in the earliest forms of minstrelsy which were crafted from it. The Cakewalk can function as an arbitrary point of origin in an illustration of the complexity surrounding African-American performativity and its minstrel copy, though one should note Gates’s point in relation to black-white transcultural formations, that “origins are always occasions for speculation”

³ William Mahar notes that as new acts in the 1840s emulated the first minstrel shows established by the Virginia minstrels and Christy’s minstrels their success or failure depended on the degree of emphasis they placed on “delineations of Negro *eccentricities*” (1999,40, author’s emphasis)

(1988,46). The Cakewalk was one of the earliest examples of an African-American Signifyin(g) performance culture and it was through the white observation of such culture that blackface minstrelsy was originally developed. The Cakewalk is a rich demonstration of the fact that African-American cultural performance was already a complex hybrid *before* whites mimicked it in the form of blackface minstrelsy.

On one level the exaggerated and overdetermined racial markings of the minstrel mask might seem to make determination of its internal processes as simplicity itself. White audiences in the minstrel era may have read the form as 'simply' the mockery of the stupid and grotesque African-American, and today it is easy to read minstrelsy 'simply' as a history where racist whites and 'white' culture imitated blacks and 'black' culture. And yet it is hard to conceive of greater historical complexity than that which is concealed within the minstrel mask. As Lhamon notes:

[...] the earliest white imitations were of performance gestures that included pre-existing black imitations of whites or, at the very least, of African-American cultural combinations. That's why a dizzying series of inversions works through the simplest minstrel re-presentation. (1998,140)

2:2 White Misrecognition

The most common explanation for the reduction of an immensely complex cultural exchange into the overdetermined racial markings of the minstrel mask is that African-American Signification was fundamentally misrecognised and misunderstood by whites:

When around 1830 and 1840 a group of white entertainers began to blacken their faces and imitate black Americans they thought they were imitating African or Ethiopian behavior; or at least this is what their playbills announced. What they were trying to imitate, however, was already a new black American hybrid culture whose double edge they failed to appreciate, i.e. their imitation was far from accurate. (Ostendorf,1979,580)

Lisa Anderson records how the burlesque and humour of minstrel forms was predicated on the notion that its participants had observed and then delineated the attempts of African-Americans to “ape” whites, “presumably in an effort to ‘better themselves” (1996,17) whereas in actual fact, “What the white ‘observers’ of black culture were actually watching was often black people or performers ‘signifyin’ on whites.” (1996,22).

Gottschild argues that the white misrecognition of an Africanist aesthetic within African-American cultural forms resulted in the translation of Signifyin(g) into the grotesqueness of minstrelsy. African-American dance, the Cakewalk for example, was “characterised by qualities and body postures (non vertical alignments, exaggerations in the bend of knees and openness of the legs) that are, from a Europeanist standpoint , grotesque and awkward.”(97) Gottschild details how the racism inherent in the mask and performance of minstrelsy arose from the misrecognition of the physical means of Signification, the expressive use of the body and face in African-American performance. She argues that minstrelsy was an unconscious and unknowing mimicry of “signifying forms of expression that were alien to European culture” (1996,97).

There is a collective sense in all of these accounts then that the minstrel medium unconsciously bypassed the essence of the culture it mimicked, that African-American Signifyin(g) had been *overlooked*:

What slaves had performed as signifyin' on their white slave masters, white audiences [of minstrelsy] perceived as the personification of the black slave as lazy, shiftless and ignorant[...] the audiences were unable to read the signification of the slaves [as mimicked in minstrelsy] because they were not aware of the *cultural signs*." (Anderson, 1996, 23, my emphasis).

2.3 Minstrelsy as Conduit of Signifyin(g)

Despite its apparent basis in misrecognition, the minstrel 'copy' retained the cultural gestures which communicated the 'double edge' of Signified African-American cultural practice. Whites transcribed the rich depth of African-American cultural life into minstrelsy's stereotypical content. And yet, ironically, minstrelsy's self reflexive and performative form was a searingly accurate, though it would seem unconscious, reflection of Signifyin(g) forms of African-American expression. This feature of minstrelsy reveals the historical paradox where it functioned as an important means and historical mediation for the survival and growth of African-American vernacular forms. In reflecting on the immense impact of African-American dance on twentieth century American popular culture Ostendorf asks, "would such dance have survived the cultural ice age of the nineteenth century America except in the 'lunatic reservation' of minstrelsy ?" (1979, 595)

Lhamon argues that African-American expressivity had historically been “conveyed” (1998,225) through the cultural gestures that had been performed throughout the history of the American “blackface lore cycle” (ibid). He cites M. C. Hammer’s dance moves, which are inflected “as distinctively as pronouncing vowels in a dialect” (223), as an example of a consistent African-American language of expressive culture having survived from slavery to the present day. For Lhamon the ‘lesson’ of these cultural gestures which passed through the conduit of minstrelsy is “their astounding capacity to maintain meaning down the years against the physical erasure, the constant covering over, and the disdain even of those who chronicle them” (226).

In spite of its disfigured form, the ‘blackness’ that minstrelsy projected into American popular culture was of immense cultural significance and impact, it involved an “aesthetic redefinition that would stand American performance on its head and permanently shift its values to wards the Africanist” (Gottschild 1996,96). Gottschild argues that the immense popularity of minstrel forms meant that:

In the New world milieu of black-white exchange, not only dance but also the full performance environment took on a different cast. White audiences began to participate in call and-response , humming, shouting , and signifying forms of expression that were alien to European culture.(97)

Minstrelsy’s preservation of the cultural gestures of Signifyin(g) explains why the eventual participation of African-Americans in the medium has come to be regarded as the

“reclamation” (Anderson, 1996, 17) of African-American vernacular in American cultural history. African-Americans brought yet more layers of complexity to minstrelsy as they mimicked whites who had mimicked African-Americans who had originally been mimicking whites. Nonetheless, in spite of the continued presence of the racial markings of the minstrel mask, African-American minstrelsy gave African-Americans an intractable physical presence in American popular culture. Minstrelsy also gave them the means, at least in its Signification to African-American audiences, to achieve expression in the popular culture arena:

[...][African-American] artists could for the first time cultivate areas of their own culture and enter into a relationship with their own people in the national limelight. White audiences continued to ask for the symbolic pound of flesh, but when black artists were alone with black audiences minstrelsy was turned into the first institutionalised cultural stage on which blacks could enjoy aspects of their own life and culture with impunity. (Ostendorf, 1979, 592)

African-American minstrels reclaimed the Signified gestures of facial representation and performative body displayed by minstrelsy to create a second level of meaning for African-American audiences, even as these gestures continued to be (mis)read ‘straight’ as signs of black difference and peculiarity by whites.

2:4 Minstrel Looks: Racial signification and the Containment of Signifyin(g) in the Minstrel Mask

The degree of white consciousness at work in the historical creation of minstrelsy is perhaps impossible to determine. And yet if the complex origins of the minstrel trope remain partially hidden then this is not the case with its visible ends, the persistent blackface forms in early sound film. My textual analysis of blackface forms in early sound film has attempted to demonstrate the racial effect and consequence of the minstrel trope on the African-American screen presence of the time. In the previous three chapters I have outlined the general reconstitution of minstrelsy in the formal racial marking of African-Americans on screen, racially charged co-presence in the films of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, and the racial containment of African-American vernacular in 1930s' co-present scenes.

If some of the truth about minstrelsy, and the wider minstrel trope, was revealed in these visible ends then it would seem that the notion that it was formed out of white misrecognition underestimates the full extent of the medium's interception, negotiation and containment of the African-American Signifyin(g) practices from which it was modeled. The sheer weight of racial signification at work in the co-presence of early sound film suggests an unrelenting strategy of direct racial containment at work in the textuality of blackface forms. This had historically functioned to guard against, rather than

unconsciously reproduce, resistant potentials of all kinds in expressive African-American culture.

In determining this issue further it is important identify the means through which African-American Signified meaning was originally communicated. It would seem clear that the external sign of the 'double edge' to Signified African-American cultural practice lay in the particular African-American *looks* which were created through exaggerated, or "overdetermined", eye movements and accompanying facial gestures, looks which Lhamon has identified as denoting "a *peeking through* of coexisting, alternative levels of reference" (1998,142, Lhamon's emphasis). These African-American looks registered performativity and Signified hidden meaning in the early African-American cultural practices, such as the Cakewalk, which whites used as the material for minstrelsy.

Gottschild discusses the origins of black-white cultural exchanges in America and cites the case of Fanny Kemble, the eighteenth century actress whose quasi-ethnographic observations of slave culture featured in her published diary. Gottschild writes, "As an actress she was about the business of observing human behaviour. She regarded the expressive body language and facial representation of African-Americans as both laboured and elegant , forceful and ludicrous." (1996,101) Gottschild cites from Kemble's account of a ball performed by the slaves on her husband's plantation:

It is impossible for words to describe the things these people did with their bodies, and, above all, with their faces, the whites of their eyes, and the whites of their teeth, and certain outlines which [...] they bring into prominent and most ludicrous display. (Kemble, 1995, 96)

Gottschild recounts this representative historical white encounter with the body and facial language of African-American Signifyin(g) in order to suggest a white awareness of the existence of a double edge in African-American cultural practice, but with “only the Europeanist code as a measure of worth” (1996, 101), an inability to decode its Significance, “Kemble knew there was something powerful and even intimidating here, but the only way she could deal with it was to disempower it and label it ‘ludicrous’.” (1996, 102) African-American looks then, what “these people [...] did with their eyes”, were the trigger for Kemble’s awareness of hidden meaning in African-American cultural practice that she encountered.

William Lhamon underlines African-American looks as the centrepiece of double edged meaning in ‘black’ cultural practices in his discussion of the complexities surrounding the characterisation of Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Lhamon demonstrates how the character of Topsy was “lifted” (1998, 142) from the minstrel show and he argues that her characterisation conveys features that minstrel show mimicry had in turn originally lifted from Signifyin(g) African-American cultural practice. He cites a passage from the novel where Topsy is introduced to Miss Ophelia, her teacher and overseer. Topsy dances in front of the watching white eyes before:

She came suddenly down on the carpet, and stood with her hands folded, and a most sanctimonious expression of meekness and solemnity over her face, only broken by the cunning glances which she shot from the corners of her eyes.
(Stowe, 1981, 352)

Lhamon identifies Stowe's description of Topsy's performance as conveying a lineage of gestures stretching back to original African-American cultural practice, "from Topsy, the various Virginia minstrels before her, and the black folk performers before *them*." (142, Lhamon's emphasis). He presents the spectacle of Topsy's apparent "meekness" being "broken" by her looks from the sides of her eyes, and here Stowe's description of Topsy echoes Kemble's fascination with what blacks "did" in the display of the "whites of their eyes", as embodying the gestures of Signifyin(g). It is Topsy's black looks then which show "a *peeking through* of co-existing, alternative levels of reference" (Lhamon, 142, author's emphasis).

Stowe's description of the dance Topsy performs for Miss Ophelia is inscribed with multiply mimicked African-American cultural gestures which have been filtered through the double prism of Stowe's reliance on white minstrelsy as her source for depicting the 'blackness' of Topsy, but Lhamon argues that:

What clinches them all together is Topsy's askance glances. These looks going awry flag her recalcitrance even when Stowe sanctimoniously downs her on the carpet. Especially then, Topsy is hiding behind an elaborately rehearsed mask.
(142)

For Lhamon then, what is centrally retained in the minstrelised copy of African-American cultural practice that Topsy represents are her 'black' looks from the sides of her eyes

which “exemplify the excess symbolism by which all performers indicate their self consciousness” (ibid).

Minstrelsy’s incorporation of Signified African-American looks is highlighted by Gottschild’s citation from Hans Nathan’s account of Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels, the first minstrel troupe who “institutionalised the character and structure of minstrelsy thereafter” (Gottschild, 1996,105). Nathan cites from a contemporary description of the performance of Frank Pelham, one of the four members of the troupe; Pelham exhibited “looks and movements comic beyond conception. He seemed animated by a savage energy.... His white eyes rolled in a curious frenzy.” (Nathan cited in Gottschild,1996,105)⁵ Gottschild uses a longer quote from Nathan’s history as evidence that “the seat of difference is strongly centred in minstrel body language” (195). In the excerpt I repeat here however, it is clear that it was the overdetermined minstrel mask above the dancing body, its ‘looks’ and eye movements and in turn the facial expressions these gave rise to, which signified the racial meaning of the practice as a whole.

If we refer back to Fanny Kemble’s fascination with what African-Americans “did” with the “whites of their eyes”, the window through which African-American participants/observers conversant with these “cultural signs” (Anderson,1996,23) looked in on a hidden world of Signified meaning, then we can see that Signifyin(g) looks became the central and most significant cultural gestures lifted from African-American vernacular

⁵ The source of this contemporary description of the Virginia minstrels is not listed in Gottschild’s citation of Nathan. Eric Lott uses the same quote and lists the source as *Ethiopian Serenaders. Music of the Ethiopian Serenaders*. Philadelphia: E.Ferret, 1845. (Lott,1995,140)

practice into the medium of minstrelsy. Gottschild sees “the seat of difference” in “minstrel body language” (1996,195) but it was the expressive white markings of the eyes and the mouth within the minstrel mask, the *black looks* that it crafted, which primarily framed and communicated the racial difference of the black body. If we have no visual record of this fact in the origins of blackface minstrelsy then, as we have seen in the pages before, the evidence is provided in its ends, by the incessant eye rolling of blackfaced whites in early sound film, for example Judy Garland’s “askance glances” as Topsy in *Everybody Sing* (fig1:31), Al Jolson in *Mammy* (fig3:9) and Eddie ‘Banjo Eyes’ Cantor in *Kid Millions* (fig3:42), and the enhanced eye movements and facial representation that Marion Davis performs when she is cross examined as ‘Lucille’ in *Operator 13*.

The notion of minstrelsy as misrecognition, that it repeated African-American gestures without understanding their meaning, would seem to be in danger of simplifying the process of racial containment at work in the medium. The fact that the afterlife of the white minstrel show materialised as a direct racial containment of African-American expression at key junctures in the continued visibility of minstrel derived blackface for a century or more, for example the enforced use of the minstrel mask in the first phase African-American stage visibility or the minstrelisation of their first prominent cinematic visibility in the early sound era, suggests that minstrelsy recognised and intercepted the Signified meaning of African-American gestures all too clearly.

If there is “genius” (Gates,1988,46) in the “fundamentally black” (64) concept and practice of Signifyin(g) then this was more than matched by the complex containment of

African-American Signification that was at work within the contours of the minstrel mask. In relation to the naming of a resistive “double voiced” African-American language as ‘Signifyin(g)’, Gates recounts how African-Americans “emptied the signifier ‘signification’ of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts” (1988,46). If the immense weight of minstrelsy’s racial consequence and effect on African-Americans is to be fully understood then it is important to recognise its profound disruption and denial of the African-American language of Signifyin(g). To rephrase Gates’ formulation, the practice of blackface minstrelsy functioned to empty the resistant black Signifier ‘Signifyin(g)’ of its received concepts and filled this emptied and reduced signifier with the dominant concepts of white signification. If Signifyin(g) black cultural practices achieved “a profound disruption at the level of the signifier” (Gates,1988,47) then in turn the practice of blackface minstrelsy achieved a profound disruption of the double voiced black Signifier and returned its Signification to the realms of dominant racist meaning. In short minstrelsy translated the double edged gestures of African-American Signifyin(g) cultural practices into the straightforward white signification of race.

Central to this process was the way in which minstrelsy transformed the origins of meaning production in Signifyin(g) practices, the overdetermined looks of African-Americans, into the overdetermined racial signification of the minstrel mask. Indeed the formal shape of the minstrel mask itself, its over sized expressive white eyes and mouth, was shaped by this process. Minstrelsy was an embodied process where whites were placed inside a black body. From within this white interior the minstrel medium endowed

racial meaning into the very *performative* looks that had enabled a “double voice”, and Signified hidden depth, in its African-American referent.

Descriptions of the double voicedness of Signifyin(g) African-American cultural practice have often called up the analogy of masking. Lhamon for example describes Topsy in *Uncle Tom* as “hiding behind an elaborately rehearsed mask” (1998,142) whilst Gottschild notes:

By necessity, Africans in America have had to mask themselves and use disguises to survive...In fact, performance is a common requisite enlisted to support the double identity maintained by diasporan Africans, it is a way of life, not just a stage convention. (1996,85)

Eleanor Traylor⁶ has suggested that the minstrel show was a “masking ritual” borrowed without knowledge of what the mask signified (Traylor cited in Anderson,1996,21). This raises the intriguing notion that the material that whites used for the ethnographic basis of the minstrel show had initially itself been an African-American ‘minstrel show’ of white behaviour. If then it was slaves who were the first American ‘minstrels’, nomadic performers, then the self reflexive white minstrel copy turned *their* original mask inside out. The minstrel mask soaked up the overdetermined gestures of African-American Signifyin(g) and transformed them into the overdetermination of racial signification. And behind the racial markings of the mask, blackface minstrelsy emptied and bestowed on

⁶ Eleanor W. Traylor, “Two Afro-American Contributions to Dramatic Form”, *The Theatre of Black Americans*, ed Erroll Hill (New York; Applause Book Publishers, 1987) p49

whites the expressive performativity that had been hidden from them in Signified African-American cultural practice.

2:5 Jazz Signification

My point in revisiting the origins of minstrelsy has been to provide a backdrop and context for my textual argument concerning the irredeemable racial function at work in the persistence of blackface. For example, we now have greater purchase in understanding the particular historical significance of the co-presence of blackface forms with African-American vernacular in early sound film.

If black people have historically “found the deep form, the deep structure of their cultural life in music” (Hall, 1997a, 128) then one of the most significant developments in this history was the emergence of early jazz from the African-American participation in minstrelsy. Berndt Ostendorf argues that ragtime and the other prototypes of jazz music that the African-American minstrels created “restored black culture to its true functions” (595). The “true function” revived in the African-American presence in popular culture during the transition from African-American minstrelsy to early jazz was Signifyin(g).

Jazz is the purest form of Signifyin(g) to have impacted on American culture, as Gates notes, “There are so many examples of Signifyin(g) in jazz that one could write a formal

history of its development on this basis alone.” (1988,63) Gates sees the essence of Signifyin(g) as residing in the aural depth and duplicity of jazz and its forerunners:

It is this principle of repetition and difference, this practice of intertextuality, which has been so crucial to the black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g), jazz - and even its antecedents, the blues, the spirituals and ragtime [...]. (64)⁷

Ostendorf records the historical process where the Signification involved in African-American minstrelsy passed into jazz:

While superficially confirming the racial stereotype of whites on the front stage these minstrels let their black audience in on the backstage secrets. Jazz musicians are familiar with the problem of having to satisfy mixed audiences. While they have to please their *economic* gin-guzzling patrons who often know nothing of jazz and keep asking for the equivalent of minstrel numbers they try to communicate on a different level with their *musical* friends. (1979,591-592, Ostendorf's emphasis)

Earlier in this chapter we noted how the overdetermined and expressive use of the body was one source of Signified meaning in the African-American cultural practices first mimicked by the white minstrels. Ostendorf outlines how this expressive use of the body passed into jazz and was central to its impact:

Minstrelsy got its start as the imitation of a dance step: Jim Crow, This dance involved the entire body.⁸ [...]Early jazz, as Handy and others have noted,

⁷ Jazz is central to Gates' account of Signifyin(g) as a 'black' form, and his application of the term to an understanding of a black literary tradition in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

struck listeners so forcibly because it called for the entire body. Many converts to jazz tell us that the initial effect of jazz was total. For many it was not just a music, it was a new body feeling and a new world view. (595)

Ralph Ellison identifies jazz as the essence of African-American expressivity and his description of Louis Armstrong highlights the place of Signifyin(g) in its form, and the place of the body and face in its articulation:

Armstrong's clownish license and intoxicating powers are almost Elizabethan; he takes liberties with kings, queens and presidents; emphasises the *physicality* of his music with sweat, spittle and *facial contortions*; he performs the magical feat of making romantic melody issue from a throat of gravel" (1967,52,my emphasis)

Both Ostendorf and Ellison convey a sense of unfettered African-American expressivity as having being achieved in jazz. Expressive African-American vernacular music and dance, culminating in Signified jazz performance, had an immense impact on America and its popular culture. One need look no further than the Hollywood screen for evidence of this, whether in the title of its first sound film, the music and dance forms which dominated Hollywood film thereafter, or more directly in some of the co-presence films discussed earlier in the thesis where the impact of 'black' music on white bodies is depicted, for example in *Show Boat*, *Everybody Sing*, *Ali BaBa Goes to Town* and *A Day at the Races*.

⁸ In the excised part of this quote Ostendorf justifiably highlights the immense irony of the fact that the first white minstrel act, a white incorporation of blackness, became the term to denote the legal *separation*

2:5a "I Heard no Colour in Jazz"

This statement by John Hammond⁹ (*Jazz*, BBC2, 2001) is extraordinarily rich in its account of why jazz acted as a cultural space for African-American expression and also why, to use Richard Merelman's phrase, the "black cultural projection" (1995,2) that jazz represented was closed down on the Hollywood screen.

The fact that it had developed "Free of the white person's gaze" (1988,xxiv) is central to Gates' account of Signifyin(g) as an African-American means of expression and communication. Signifyin(g) provided African-Americans with a double sense of evading white surveillance in that it sprang from an Africanist tradition of the "double voiced" (1988,xxv) which predated slavery, but also in that its existence in America remained buried and hidden from white eyes, at least until the colonisation of minstrelsy.

The electronic sound media facilitated the flowering of jazz into one of the first African-American popular culture forms to decisively break from minstrelsy. Ann Douglas highlights this, "Seeing was one thing, hearing another. Black musical performers had their biggest opportunities in the pure sound media." (1995,420) Michelle Hilmes highlights the cultural profile achieved by artists such as Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Ethel Waters and Fats Waller in the 1920s and notes the role of the sound media in conveying the Signified depth of African-American music:

of blacks and whites in America, i.e. the 'Jim Crow Laws'.

Importantly, radio and recordings allowed direct transmission in aural form of frequently improvised and rhythmically complex black musical performances, preserving blues and jazz in a condition unmediated by Western notation systems and translations by white musicians. (1997,77)

The Signified expressivity which the aural media afforded African-American vernacular artists did not survive the transition to sound film. The fusion of sound and visual media led to the Hollywood raids on Broadway which brought global fame for the seasoned blackface recording artists Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor. And yet at the same time the recruitment of African-American vernacular performers who had made their mark in the sound media only produced fragments of *their* cultural force. The difference is illustrated in the career of Louis Armstrong, the artist that Ellison saw as the very epitome of jazz Signification. Krin Gabbard captures the sense of reduction and containment at work in his Hollywood screen portrayals, “Better to remember him as the genius who improvised the stirring choruses of “Potato Head Blues” and “Weather Bird” than as the servile clown grinning to second rate actors” (1996,203).

2:5b Blackface Containment of Jazz Signification

Co-presence scenes involving African-American vernacular performers decisively illuminate why African-American vernacular artists fared so poorly on the Hollywood screen. All of the examples discussed earlier in this thesis, in a process uniquely enabled

⁹ Hammond was a white New York jazz enthusiast/promoter who was responsible for making numerous African-American jazz artists famous in the 1930s and 40s.

by the cinematic apparatus, involve African-American vernacular forms and artists being brought back under the glare of the very white racial gaze that they had historically emerged from. The juxtaposition of late hybrid minstrel derived forms of blackface with African-American vernacular artists reactivated the racial function already embedded in the minstrel mask since its origins, the racial containment of Signifyin(g) African-American vernacular expression.

Analysing nineteenth century minstrelsy Eric Lott writes, “the minstrelization of black practices helped to obscure them” (1995,46) whilst Berndt Ostendorf comments, “A pattern of minstrelization and de-minstrelization may be observed throughout the history of black music and jazz to this very day.” (1979,597) Ostendorf charts the emergence of early jazz forms from African-American minstrelsy as a key historical instance of the “de-minstrelisation” of African-American vernacular. One could argue then that the reattachment of the blackface signifier to African-American vernacular in early sound film can be seen as a significant attempt to re-minstrelise those forms, in a modern renewal of the original racial function of minstrelsy where “the stereotypical minstrel image[...] serves to contain and control black performance” (Gottschild,1996,82).

Co-presence in Hollywood film does not feature in the debates on the historical relationship between minstrelsy and African-American vernacular, just as it does not generally figure in the contemporary studies of minstrelsy. And yet in restaging the primary racial function of its origins the “baffling afterlife” (1995,240) of blackface, as Lott refers to the persistence of blackface in film in the light of “the death of minstrelsy as

a [...] stage activity” (ibid), would seem to offer real clarity in determining the unrelenting racial nature of the medium.

Ralph Ellison’s famous essay ‘Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke’ is most often cited for its inscription of Signified black expression within the phenomenon of African-American minstrelsy. However it was principally written to challenge the notion that “the figure in blackface [...] [was] related to an archetypal trickster figure” (Ellison, 1967, 51) and as an affirmation that this figure was instead “homegrown” (ibid) in America’s racial climate. In asserting that “the racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing” (1967, 49) the essay remains the most searingly accurate unpacking of the racial function of the minstrel mask, “it is not at all odd that this blackfaced figure of white fun is for Negroes a symbol of everything they rejected in the white man’s thinking about race, in themselves and in their own group.” (1967, 50)

The racial function at work in the juxtaposition of African-American vernacular with the racial signifier most loaded with the cultural history of its racial containment in America brings the wider phenomenon of co-presence in early sound film into sharper focus.

Whether the transformation of Jolson and the Yacht Club Boys into minstrel men at the end of the ‘I Love To Singa’ number in *The Singing Kid*, the racial play with Jolson’s off screen blackface icon in *Hallelujah I’m a Bum* and *Musical Doctor*, or indeed the blackface forms seen in all of the films used to illustrate racial marking in chapter two, the floating presence of blackface *signified on* the African-American screen presence in early sound film. The continued visibility of blackface forms alongside African-Americans, in

the film medium at least, signaled that the racial yoke had not been slipped and that the 'joke' remained on African-Americans.

I have in this and the previous chapter addressed the perplexing historical issue as to why African-Americans were so comprehensively racially marked on the Hollywood screen in the same era that, through jazz and other vernacular forms, they were leaving an indelible mark on the creativity and expressivity of American popular culture. Yet in delving into the history of the racial containment of African-American vernacular that is signified in the minstrel derived blackface which persisted in early sound film we have also thrown light on the broader concerns that this thesis addresses, why were African-Americans so stereotyped in Hollywood film ? Why did the stereotypes linger on for so long ?

The significance of persistent blackface in early sound film lies not so much in what it did itself to stereotype co-present African-Americans, but more in the way that it signified the prevailing historical conditions of minstrelised portrayal and perception that was responsible for Hollywood's stereotypical images of African-American actors and performers. The increased visibility afforded to African-Americans in early sound film which might seemed to have been a breakthrough was in fact a visibility fashioned from the same blackface mould.

3: The Reclamation of Expressive African-American Vernacular in *Stormy Weather*

I conclude my history of the persistence of racially charged blackface forms in early sound film by returning to *Stormy Weather*. We are now better placed to appreciate the deeply textured historical tension at work in the film and also to consider its status as the film which finally cracked the minstrel mirror.

3:1 Textual Tension in *Stormy Weather*'s Depiction of African-American Minstrelsy

In all three of the sequences which depict the emergence of African-American vernacular from the shadows of minstrelsy the implied independence of an African-American Signifying expression from the white construct of minstrelsy is confronted by a white racial gaze which works towards reducing this expressivity into racial signification.

The set design in the Cakewalk number (fig5:5) where the dancers are initially depicted as being part of a huge revolving cake is a particularly overdetermined reduction of the “double voiced” expression historically embedded in the Signification of the Cakewalk into straightforward ‘white’ signification. The African-American minstrels, and slaves before them, had used the Africanist aspects in the dance form to Signify on both the white dance forms it ostensibly mimicked and also on the white gaze it performed to.

However, *Stormy Weather*'s merging of the dancers into the structure of the cake works to objectify the African-American cultural gestures embodied in the dance and to signify, all be it rather hysterically, that the number really is about a cake after all. The most prominent musical strain accompanying the dance is Stephen Foster's minstrel show number 'De Campdown Races'. Given that the popularisation of the Cakewalk is credited with the development of Ragtime this adds to the minstrelised containment of African-American expressivity in the scene.

At the end of the number a long shot captures the choreographed head movements of the female dancers which work to interchange their own faces with minstrel masks painted on the back of their sunflower costumes. This creates an unstable background imagery which is visually similar to the moment in *Kid Millions* when the blackfaced Eddie Cantor swivels round to reveal Harold Nicholas on his back. This background imagery, like the number itself, oscillates between the self determination and minstrelisation of African-American vernacular forms. Selina and Bill dance in the foreground of the shot. The visual effect where the broadly grinning Bill Robinson, against a sea of blackface masks, momentarily appears to be in blackface himself (fig5:7) is less an accident than a product of the textual marking of African-Americans inherent in Hollywood film practice. From his racial casting and racialised performance (grinning), to the contrast of his face against a lighter background mise en scène, to the inherent bias of film lighting and film stock against darker skin, the shot contrives to give momentary literal form to his minstrelisation in the film.

The sequence involving the blackfaced comic duo is perhaps the film's strongest registration of the history of African-American participation in minstrelsy as the "reclamation" of Signifyin(g). The dressing room scene where the men black up in front of the dressing room mirror (fig5:8) is, as far as I am aware, unique in blackface imagery on the Hollywood screen. As they talk in a matter of fact manner, trying to remember where they have seen Gabe before, they *construct* the stereotypical minstrel icon which had historically haunted the African-American screen image. The most obvious historical basis for this comic duo is the Bert Williams/George Walker double act. Gottschild discusses Bert Williams' use of blackface:

Blacking up meant taking on the mask that afforded him the freedom to be ridiculous. Apparently, it allowed him to assume a stage persona that announced, as much as for any white minstrel, "This is a character - not *me*. I am playing a role here". (1996,84, author's emphasis)

The action of blacking up registers their performance of, and separation from, the stereotypical blackness that the minstrel mask enacts. Their *performance* of overdetermined minstrelised gestures (heavier dialect and enhanced eye movements) in their on stage act, gestures which so many African-American actors had to perform for 'real' elsewhere in early sound film, indicates the hidden world of communication behind the masks they present. Indeed their act centres on their intuitive understanding of each others' thoughts with the comic effect that neither manages to complete a sentence without the other continuing the conversation.

This separation of African-American performers and their means of expression from the white historical construct and artefact of blackface minstrelsy creates a rare space for African-American self representation and Signification on the Hollywood screen. And yet at the same time the prevailing white racial gaze continues to extract racial capital out of the presence of the blackface signifier in the film. The denouement of the blacks in blackface sequence highlights the way in which *Stormy Weather's* depiction of the minstrel origins of African-American vernacular is something of a double edged sword.

The presence of the blackface duo in the film relates to the subplot where Gabe has presented himself as the rich benefactor, the 'angel', of Bill's show. As they come off stage one of the duo over hears the chorus girls discussing how they have taken a 'shine to that angel'. This triggers the man's memory and he says, "he's a bootblack, that angel [...] he ain't no angel he's shined my shoes a thousand times". The way that Gabe 'performs' and 'talks' himself above his actual social status imbues him with the cultural power of African-American Signification. His girlfriend at the beginning of the film refers to him as her "Daddy" an example of "political" (1988,47) revision of standard English terms that Gates identifies as central to black Signification. In a later scene, dressed in a zoot suit, Gabe trades in 'jive' talk, as a similarly dressed Cab Calloway identifies it, and a bemused Bill Robinson, outside resistant black culture, says "what you two fools talking about".

And yet for all Gabe's duplicity and the Signification of African-Americans in blackface the film moves to level down the double edge in their characterisation through the familiar

device of racial marking through *mise en scène*. The oxymoronic clash contrived in the scripted dialogue about the ‘angel’ who is really a bootblack spills out into the visuals as the chorus girls attack Gabe with white powder and his face and hair is left covered in whiteness. Gabe’s newly whitened features are left framed by a white box of candy which has been crashed over his head (fig5:9).

The exchange between the blackfaced duo standing either side of Gabe, “You remind me of....[a white man is the implication]”- “No he looks worse than that”, continues the theme of unfinished lines and intuition from their on-stage act and it does suggest an African-American consciousness of, and resistance to, the process of minstrelisation at work in the visuals. And yet the overdetermined signification of this scene, like the earlier image of the cake, works against African-American Signifyin(g). It is clear that the colour consciousness of the *mise en scène*, including the arrangement of blacks in blackface either side of Gabe and the white shirts that all of the men wear, is directed towards a comic conclusion where African-Americans are reduced to a sign of their blackness and the final joke is on the racial signification of this blackness.

3:2 The Minstrelisation Shot

The key instance of the process where racial marking is used to reduce the performative Signifyin(g) practices of African-American vernacular to racial signification is the minstrelisation shot of the first performer to take a ‘turn’ in the traveling minstrel show

(fig5:6). Our consideration of Signifyin(g) uncovers further detail in the racial containment at work in the juxtaposition of minstrelisation shots with African-American vernacular. Let us reflect on the examples discussed in the previous chapter before moving onto the example in *Stormy Weather*.

The minstrelisation shot of the grinning fat dancer in *A Day at the Races* (fig4:5) against the background of an erect trumpet is a consummate and iconic containment of jazz Signification. Likewise the minstrelisation shots of the Lindy Hop dancers (figs4:6/4:7) work to break up the Signified and expressive fusion of performative body and music that is achieved in jazz dance. In *Operator 13* the minstrelisation shots break up and contain the performance of the Mills Brothers with the effect that African-American looks and consciousness are absented from the screen all together. The minstrelisation shots of African-American women work to empty the Signified black female beauty in the song 'Jungle Fever' and instead it is a blackfaced white woman who signifies the meaning associated around the words 'dark haired siren, native dream girl'. *Operator 13* imbues its blackface with the original reversal at work in the minstrel mask in the way that it is Marion Davies/Lucille who 'signifies on' the blacks and whites in the film by masking her real Northern identity through the very same overdetermined facial representation that racially marks the African-Americans in the minstrelisation shots.

There is a process embedded in all the minstrelisation shots we have considered where the very seat of original Signified African-American cultural expressivity, the facial representation and looks which communicated the hidden depth and meaning of African-

American performativity, is reduced and flattened into a racial mask which functions as the seat of racial difference. Minstrelisation shots, and racial cutting generally, repeat the original racial work of the minstrel mask in the context of narrative film by transforming the overdetermination of Signified African-American looks into overdetermined racial signifiers.

The minstrelisation shot in *Stormy Weather's* traveling minstrel scene carries all of this racial weight. It reduces the man's expressive use of facial representation to racial gesture. The absence of the man's look, with his pupils rolled to the back of his head, is central to his racial objectification in the shot and to its stereotypical effect. Film form, perhaps with far more intention than the similar effect achieved in the earlier long shot of Bill Robinson/Williamson (fig5:7), contrives to reduce the man's presence to a minstrel like mask with grotesquely marked, because of the effect (shown clearly in the frame capture fig5:6) of his rapid movements, white eyes and mouth.

And yet even in this most extreme example of a minstrelisation shot, in the belly of the racial beast, there is a counter force which arises from *Stormy Weather's* genuine inscription of the form and content of Signified expressive African-Americans vernacular, past and present. The man's top hat and formal attire signal that he of all the performers carries the threat of African-American Signification on 'higher' white culture. Indeed the acts in the 'minstrel show' which follow the man's facial contortions bring into relief the fact that his actions are *part* of the way in which this scene genuinely encapsulates the

expressive use of body and the general performativity which was handed down to early jazz from African-American minstrelsy.

A cut from the minstrelisation shot takes us to a long shot as the man is replaced by another man and the call and response goes as follows, "I can take a chorus too - You can't take no chorus too - yes I can take a chorus too- yeah man, yeah man." This second man is now shown in mid close up with one hand holding a muted trumpet which rests on his shoulder. His other hand waves expressively by his mouth as he 'plays' the instrumental solo with his voice instead of the trumpet (fig5:10). On the return cut to long shot the man turns to direct his voice solo to the previous soloist who, facing a third participating man, puts his entire body through the spasms and contortions that he had earlier demonstrated with his face. Bill Williamson then becomes the third soloist as he performs the tap dance routine that draws the scene to a close.

Berndt Ostendorf writes, "It seems that one of the most important single heritages of minstrelsy is the versatility in the presentation of face, voice, and body on stage in music and dance." (1979,594) This sequence then provides an archetypal vision of the essential properties of African-American musical/dance performance that Ostendorf sees as being handed down to jazz from African-American minstrelsy. The three improvised acts that are depicted, the face contortionist, the voice soloist and Bill's tap dancing, mirror exactly the "presentation of face, voice, and body" that Ostendorf identifies as the core performative lineage of African-American vernacular from minstrelsy to early jazz.

The moment where, trumpet resting on his shoulder, the voice soloist turns to accompany the bodily contortions of the duo behind him captures the essence of African-American vernacular expressivity as Ostendorf describes it:

Gunter Schuler notes that one important contribution of blacks to American music was the handling of the voice. I would enlarge this to the handling of the body, including the voice, i.e., the handling of the entire body as instrument and the handling of instruments as extensions of voice and body. (1979,594)

The grotesqueness of the minstrelisation shot of the first improvised solo masks the fact that the man's facial movements are tied into the expressivity of the entire sequence, the central expressivity that Ostendorf identifies as flowing into jazz from black minstrelsy, the "the handling of the entire body as instrument" (ibid). The fusion of body and instrument in the sequence is completed in the final shot as the entire band join the soloists in jumping up and down, continuing to play their instruments as they do so.

Nonetheless the grotesqueness of that minstrelisation shot, and its reduction of African-American expressivity and performativity to a sign of racial difference, seems to linger as the film quickly moves to its first presentation of contemporary (1940s) vernacular artists. The performance of Fats Waller and Ada Brown is electric and the music in this Beale Street cafe scene makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. Waller's performance in particular is imbued with all of the expressivity and performativity in African-American vernacular forms that has been on display in the previous minstrel show scene. Waller's retorts to Brown's admonishments of his behaviour in the number 'That Ain't Right' are laced with Signification, both on her persona in the song, and beyond that,

on watching white eyes. When Brown sings “what’s the matter with you” he replies in an upper class (white) accent with mock sanctimony in his facial expression, “One never knows do one”, and ‘one’ wonders how his retort to Brown’s line “taking all my money and having yourself a ball” – “I was born balling and I’m gonna ball for the rest of my life” ever evaded the censor’s attention.

In the second number, ‘Ain’t Misbehavin’, Waller deliciously masks the actual wickedness of the male persona in the song through soft vocal intonations and meek and solemn facial expressions. And yet at the same time he registers this hidden reality through expressive eye and facial movements (fig5:11). This may not be a direct instance of Signification on white forms, but it nonetheless derives from the history Stuart Hall identifies where black “cultures have used the body as if it [...] was the only cultural capital we had” (1997a,129) and Waller uses his face as a “canvas of representation” (ibid) in the number.

What is so troubling of course is that the expressive facial representation which provide such rich meaning in Waller’s musical performance has so prominently been formally and stereotypically marked as the physical evidence of racial difference in the minstrelisation shot of the previous traveling minstrel show scene. Exacerbating the after effect of this earlier image on the Beale Street scene is the grinning figure of the film’s protagonist Bill, who in his role as a waiter at the café, punctuates the screen space afforded to Waller.

We return then to the central tectonic tension at work in *Stormy Weather*, as indicated by this emblematic minstrelisation shot. The film offers unprecedented and historically

grounded glimpses of the rich expressive and performative vein in African-American vernacular forms, and its historical references to African-American minstrelsy figure strongly in this. And yet at the same time the racial marking of African-Americans in the film, and the sense of a white racial gaze being brought to bear on their screen presence is equally in evidence, with the blackface signifier figuring equally prominently in this racial side of the film. However, I would suggest that the tectonic tension under the surface of *Stormy Weather* is resolved in favour of an expressive rupture in the release of African-American vernacular forms in the last section of the film. Principally this arises and is initiated by the stunning performance of Cab Calloway.

3: 3 Cab Calloway

Bill and Selina split up over her refusal to give up her career after Bill argues that the 'Hollywood contract' he has won, an interesting reference to Robinson's prominent 1930s screen career, means that she does not need to work. Bill is left looking at the plans he has had drawn up for a Hollywood mansion. A dissolve brings us back to the contemporary second world war time setting. We return to the scene which started the film, with Bill sitting on the porch of his house with a group of children. He completes the reminiscence that we have seen in flashback by telling the children that Selina never returned to him.

This provides the cue for Cab Calloway's appearance. A soft top car pulls up and he steps out. In greeting Bill and the children with his famous catchphrase/song 'Hi De Ho' Calloway, who plays himself in the film, reclaims as his own the African-American song that had been subject, more than any other, to racial containment in blackface films, *Wonder Bar*, *The Singing Kid*, *Ali BaBa Goes to Town* *Everybody Sing* for example (cf. chapter 3). If the children surrounding Robinson carry the stamp of his infantilisation and minstrelised past in the 1930s series of films he made with Shirley Temple, then Calloway's appearance in the film heralds a brighter future. The last section of *Stormy Weather* involves perhaps the best portrayal of African-American performers seen on the Hollywood screen up until this time.

Calloway invites Robinson to the show he is putting on for the soldiers before "they go over seas". Bill's reply, "anything for the soldiers", is particularly revealing of the changed context behind the signs of improvement in Hollywood's African-American imagery. It also indicates why, to use the title of Thomas Cripps' book, the closing section of *Stormy Weather* is a particularly strong 'fade to black' in Hollywood history.

A dissolve takes us to the show. Calloway's performance in this scene signals a tipping of the scales, occurring both within *Stormy Weather* and more generally at this time in Hollywood film, away from the racial containment of African-Americans through minstrelised conditions of perception and portrayal towards a more genuine "peeking through" of an African-American cultural presence on the cinema screen, towards a fracturing of the white racial gaze. Calloway's stage entrance and ensuing performance in

the number, 'Geechy Joe', is spell binding. Generally his presentation in *Stormy Weather* marks out the originality of his act, the quality of course so often being mimicked by whites, in and out of blackface, in previous films.

Calloway emerges from the olio curtain, rather like Al Jolson did in his films, resplendent in the kind of zoot suit that *This is the Army* was at pains to remove African-Americans from. He straightens his bow tie (**fig5:12**) and caresses his trouser legs. Later in the number he rubs the arms of his suit in slow exaggerated movement to accentuate its centrality to his act. Here Calloway illustrates another of the features that Stuart Hall identifies as distinctive in history of black popular culture, that is style:

[...] within the black repertoire, *style* -which mainstream cultural critics often believe to be the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugar coating on the pill- has become *itself* the subject of what is going on. (1997a, 128, Hall's emphasis).

Calloway descends from the stage and stands in the middle of his band. As a piercing trumpet solo sounds out he raises his arm and turns to face the brass section of his band. A long shot, with trumpets and trombones jutting skywards in the foreground, and Calloway in the background (**fig5:13**), signals the fusion of his 'style' to the music. The shot also works to enjoin Calloway's "overdetermined" and performative handling of his body to the overall expressivity of the music, a fusion of body and instruments in jazz which was separated by the minstrelisation shots in *A Day at the Races*, for example the juxtaposition of the grinning, eyes to the side, fat man against the background image of a jazz trumpet (**fig4:5**). The fusion of body and instrument is maintained throughout the

number through the pattern of intercutting between Calloway and the trumpet/trombones sections of the band.

Calloway, standing with his legs apart, turns to face the camera and gesticulates his face into a performative smile, an overdetermined facial expressivity that he maintains throughout the number. Now he rolls his head around and displays his face through slow and deliberate action (fig5:14). Here is a moment of real historical significance, an act of reclamation, as Calloway marks out his face, his looks, his expressions, as the site of rich Signified meaning in his performance. *He* marks out the presence of his face in the film as opposed to having his face marked by the film as per usual for black performers in the era. Only now does he begin the vocals. And what expressiveness he enacts in his voice, with an instrumental like manipulation of piercing blues notes and lower, almost spoken, notes.

Mid way through the number he incorporates his entire body into the performance, touching the floor (fig5:15), and mimicking a walking action (fig5:16) as he sings about the railroad. Calloway's performance is a consummate illustration of Ostendorf's definition of "the handling of the entire body as instrument" (1979,594) as the key distinctive feature in African-American vernacular performance. Indeed Calloway's performative self presentation, moving from overdetermined facial gesture to instrumental like manipulation of his voice, to expressive body movement, repeats the order of performative gestures displayed by the soloists in the earlier traveling minstrel show and acts as further confirmation of the lineage that Ostendorf's identifies as stretching from

African-American minstrelsy into jazz performance, “the presentation of face, voice and body in stage and dance” (1979,594).

And yet what Cab Calloway achieves here, in these moments at least, is to restore what was marked and minstrelised as racial gesture in that earlier scene, and in so many films before, into the rich and expressive cultural gestures that had historically endowed African-American vernacular with such intense meaning and originality. Calloway, to return again to Hall’s description of performance in black popular culture, turns his face and entire body into a “canvas of representation” (1997a,129).

Stormy Weather’s unfettered portrayal of *his* self representation and performance in this scene allows Calloway to display all of the “cultural capital” (ibid) endowed in the body and performance of African-American vernacular that white musical stars, from Jolson onwards, had raided, and slavishly copied in shaping their own performative style.

Such is the power of Calloway’s performance that he seems to evade the camera’s racial gaze. There are no intrusive minstrelised close up marking his facial expressions into racial gesture as seen as in the earlier traveling minstrel scene. Calloway’s most frequent stance, functioning to mark out and claim his performance space throughout number, is to raise his hands to the side of his face with his open palms facing the camera (**fig5:17**).

This image takes us back to the beginnings of this thesis since it was through such gesture that Al Jolson projected the first ‘black’ presence and ‘black’ music in the sound era, and in turn which became the staple performative gesture in the revival of blackface minstrel

performance which featured significantly in the persistence of blackface. This image then provides an end of sorts for this thesis. *Stormy Weather* displays signs that the minstrelised conditions of portrayal and perception, signaled by the persistence of the racial blackface signifier, which had been responsible for the racial marking and containment of the African-American presence in early sound film were finally coming to an end. Here Calloway reclaims the staple minstrel gesture as part of an extraordinarily powerful and expressive performance which demonstrates that a relatively unmarked vision of African-American vernacular had finally materialised in a Hollywood feature film.

Indeed the penultimate shot (**fig5:18**) of the number, where Calloway is seen in long shot under the spotlight in front of the Olio curtain with his arms outstretched, mirrors one of the most iconic images of Jolson's blackface act in his films. This image however is different. Only the diasporic conditions which led to such hybridity and "overdetermination" (and the figure of Calloway is a consummate expression of the latter), rendering black popular culture with "no pure forms at all" (Hall, 1997a, 129), qualifies the sentiment that here, finally, the *original* of the Jolson copy is unveiled on the Hollywood screen.

Nonetheless, for once, it is whiteness which is reduced to a sign here, as Calloway's oversized and extravagant white suit not only conveys his 'style' but also the control and self expression that African-American vernacular achieves at this moment in *Stormy Weather*. And indeed the improvement is more than momentary as the closing section of

Stormy Weather includes some of the most celebrated African-American screen portrayals of the era.

3: 4 A Brighter Future ?

The film's rejection of folkloric discourse and its presentation of its African-American performers as professional entertainers creates the scope for real improvement on so many of the films we have considered previously. Lena Horne's extended performance of the film's title song 'Stormy Weather' directly follows Calloway's reclamation of African-American vernacular in 'Geechy Joe'. Horne's number is extraordinary for its lack of racial marking and her screen portrayal threatens to break into the enclaves of white space in the Hollywood musical. She looks like a white musical star and sings in the same self absorbed, far away, with eyes directed slightly off screen, style as afforded to white stars. The fact that an African-American was claiming such screen space perhaps outweighs the negative overtones of the way that Horne's 'beauty' conforms to white norms.

Most significantly of all, the camera does not treat her any differently: no mise en scène marking, no close ups capturing racialised gestures. As such the film constructs a gaze on her rather than on her blackness. Significantly then, in the figure of Lena Horne, *Stormy Weather* shows other signs of improvement in Hollywood's portrayal of African-Americans than simply the self representation of African-American vernacular forms.

'Stormy Weather' receives the big budget mise en scène expansion normally afforded to numbers in white musicals. As the camera tracks through the open window to a rainy street scene it could be any couples that are on view, rather than 'blacks', as the stereotyped rural mise en scène of *Cabin in the Sky* of the same year conveys for example. The ballet performed by Katherine Dunham and her dancers within this mise en scène expansion adds to the sense of diversity in the number, and it contrasts strongly with stereotyping and racial marking usually involved in the presentation of African-American musical performance and African-Americans generally on the Hollywood screen.

The final number in the film, 'The Jumping Jive', is again led by Calloway. Initially he demonstrates, this time through his famous routine of call and response with his band, the artistic fusion that African-American vernacular achieved in its presentation of voice, body and instrument. Then he plucks the Nicholas brothers from the audience and, in another consummate image of the "handing of the entire body as instrument and the handling of instruments as extensions of the body [...]" (Ostendorf, 1979, 594), they literally tap all over the band and their instruments before acrobatically leaping down a series of steps as a finale. The sequence is justifiably famous, Fred Astaire regarded it as the best ever depiction of tap dance on film (*History of Tap*, BBC 2, 2001), and it rather exorcises the minstrel ghost of their Hollywood debut in *Kid Millions* (cf. chapter 3). Its power derives again from the fact that *Stormy Weather* visualises the artistic fusion of body-voice-music involved in African-American vernacular performance in relatively unmarked and non racialised terms.

Stormy Weather allows for an unprecedented degree of African-American self expression in Hollywood film of the time. Principally this arises through the relatively unfettered portrayal of African-American vernacular in the last section of the film. This is helped by a narrative structure which employs urban African-American vernacular acts to tell the story of their own emergence in America, rather than use the contrived and stereotyped rural narrative framework which distinguished Hollywood's previous all black features.

This narrative strategy involved calling up the blackface signifier in rather unique circumstances in early sound film. The visual references to blackface are part of *Stormy Weather's* relatively accurate reflection of the history African-American vernacular. Of course, one cannot overlook the attempts made to turn the presence of blackface forms in this history into a continuing contemporary means of reducing and minstrelising the expressivity of African-American vernacular, for example the blackface hats in the Cakewalk scene, the minstrelisation shot in the traveling minstrel show, the powdering of Dooley Wilson, and the filtering of the story through the eyes of Bill Williamson/Robinson. Nonetheless *Stormy Weather's* substantive narrative account of the emergence of African-American vernacular from minstrelsy is central to the way in which the film marks out and separates African-American vernacular from the minstrel trope through which it had traditionally been perceived on the Hollywood screen.

Stormy Weather was made against a background in 1940s film where blackface imagery had largely been reduced to a nostalgic sign of past entertainment forms. The film's positive portrayal of African-Americans in spite of, and even *through*, the co-presence of

blackface forms signals that the ability of blackface to have direct racial impact on an African-American screen co-presence, in the manner that we have seen at work in 1930s Jolson and Cantor films for example, was very much on the wane. As such *Stormy Weather* acts as a better point than any other to end my analysis of the persistence of blackface in early sound film. It demonstrates that a significant, or should I say Significant, degree of genuine African-American expression and cultural life had finally seeped through the minstrel trope which had historically distorted the African-American screen presence in Hollywood film.

And yet our discussion in this thesis has been in relation to what went on before. The glimpses of depth in the images of African-American performance, and the space afforded to Signifyin(g) African-American cultural practice, in *Stormy Weather* only serves to reveal the cultural wastelands that lay before it in the history of early sound film.

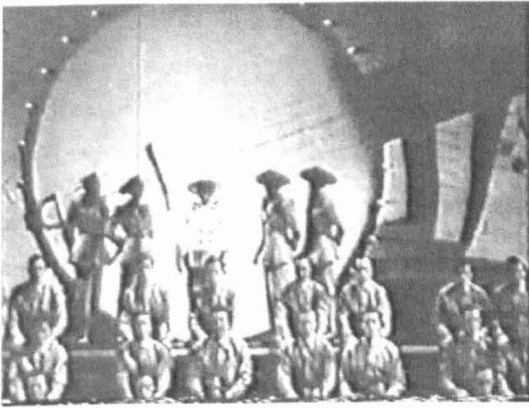


Fig 5:1

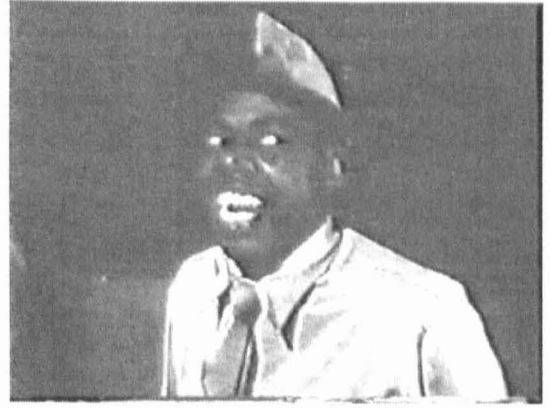


Fig 5:2

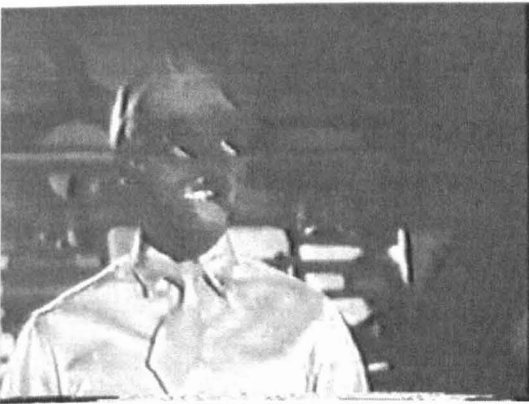


Fig 5:3



Fig 5:4



Fig 5:5



Fig 5:6



Fig 5:7



Fig 5:8



Fig 5:9



Fig 5:10



Fig 5:11



Fig 5:12



Fig 5:13



Fig 5:14

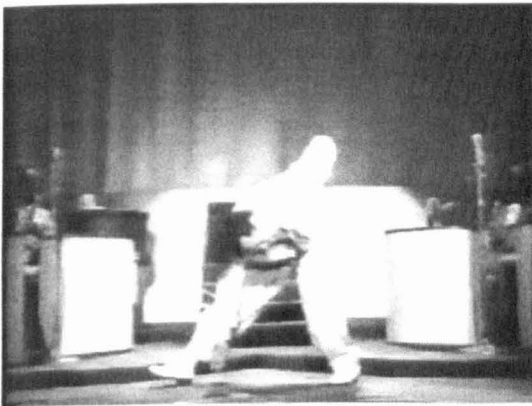


Fig 5:15

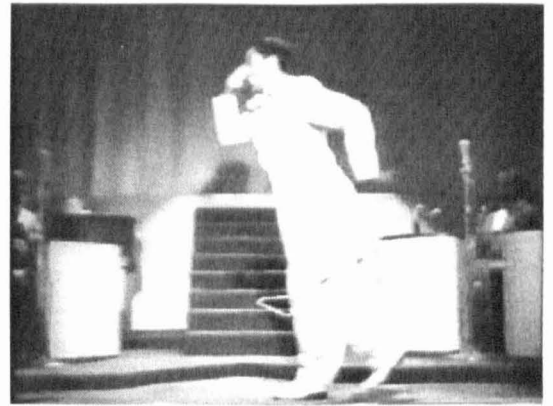


Fig 5:16



Fig 5:17

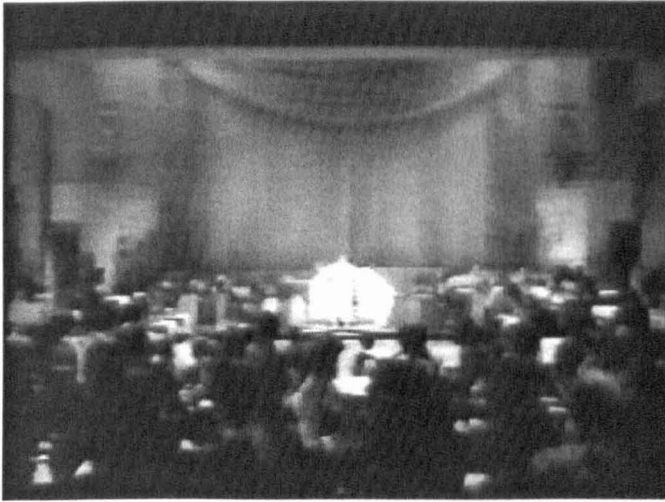


Fig 5:18

CONCLUSION

Although this thesis is based on the specific case study of the persistence and co-presence of blackface in early sound film, it is addressed to broad questions relating to Hollywood's historical representation of African-Americans. Why were such images so racially stereotyped? Why did this stereotyping last so long, seemingly unaffected by the transition to sound and the rise in visibility that this afforded African-American actors and performers in the period? The textual detail of the chosen case study has motivated discussion in specific areas, such as definitions of blackface forms and Hollywood's portrayal of African-American vernacular. There are, however, two interrelated and principle themes of discussion. First is the sense of blackface as an irredeemably racial medium. Second is the film specific textuality of Hollywood's stereotypes of African-Americans. Below I summarise my findings in these two areas. I conclude by indicating the most suggestive area for future research on blackface and co-presence, the notion of a 'minstrel gaze' being brought to bear on African-Americans in early sound film.

1: Blackface as an Irredeemably racial medium

1:1 The Specificity of Blackface in Film

The historical significance of blackface's persistence in early sound film has largely been overlooked in both the debates on minstrelsy and the debates on the representation of race in Hollywood. Consequently a substantial part of this thesis has engaged in mapping down and defining this persistent blackface. To the best of my knowledge this thesis offers the fullest account yet of the persistence of blackface in the early sound era.

In setting down the complexity, hybridity and the extent of the persistence of blackface beyond the introduction of sound, often cited as the event which killed it off or greatly reduced its presence, this thesis provides a detailed account of an important aspect of film history which can act as the basis for more informed study in the future.

My thesis restores co-presence as the defining feature in the persistence of blackface in early sound film, something which is ignored in the only other substantial study in the area, Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise*. In the analysis of the frequent use of blackface as a racially charged disguise (chapter one), the nature of blackface in the films of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor (chapter three) and the juxtaposition of blackface with African-American vernacular (chapter four), I demonstrate the way in which the blackface signifier engaged in sustained racial play with its African-American referent up until the 1940s.

I have challenged previous accounts of the persistence of blackface which have explained it as an instance of nostalgia for minstrelsy. Instead I find the real historical significance of persistent blackface in the specificity of its co-presence. My thesis records the historical process where blackface functioned as a continuing means, in a contemporary cinematic context, of racially depicting and perceiving African-Americans and their cultural life.

1:2 The Racial Function of Minstrelsy Reconstituted

This thesis draws attention to co-presence in early sound film as a remarkably unnoticed display of the racial consequences of blackface minstrelsy. The racial containment of African-American visibility and cultural practice which had historically been enacted by minstrelsy resurfaced in the dynamics of co-presence. The sheer racial bias that co-presence unveils in the “baffling afterlife” (Lott, 1995, 240) of minstrel derived blackface in early sound film invites reconsideration of the predominant line taken in recent accounts of blackface minstrelsy, by Lott, Mahar and Cockrell, that it had not really been centrally ‘about’ race. I attempt such revision in chapter five by demonstrating how the visible ends of the minstrel trope amounted to a restaging of its racial origins, the transformation of Signified African-American cultural practice into racial signification.

My discussion in the latter part of the thesis mainly centres on a particularly interesting feature of co-presence, the racial containment of 1930s African-American vernacular on the Hollywood screen. In displaying a final re-enactment of minstrelsy’s original racial

containment of African-American vernacular this specific aspect of co-presence in early sound film serves my broader aim of illustrating the irredeemable racial nature of blackface as a medium.

2: The textuality of Hollywood's African-American

Stereotypes

If the historical fact of co-presence has been the principle means through which I have been able to bring out the central racial function at work in the persistence of blackface then it has also been the basis for extending my discussion into an analysis of Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of African-American actors and performers. These two themes of discussion are deeply interdependent. The predominant juxtaposition of blackface forms with racialised and stereotyped images of African-Americans highlights the racial bias of those forms. In turn, the juxtaposition of African-Americans with this racially weighted blackface highlights the formal processes involved in their stereotypical portrayal.

2.1 Racial Marking

I found the basis of an 'answer' to my central question regarding the prolonged stereotyping of African-Americans in Hollywood film in the practices of racial marking. They reveal the sheer density and detail of the textual work involved in constructing

stereotypical images of African-Americans. I have demonstrated how the case study of co-presence offers heightened exposure of the various overdetermined formal practices and textual processes involved in Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of African-American actors and performers.

In this sense then there is a broader history underlying my account, that of the formal stereotyping of African-American actors and performers from the introduction of sound to the second world war, a history that supplements the account offered by Thomas Cripps and the other "images of" works of the 1970s. The case study of co-presence can thus act as a basis for closer investigation of the formal construction of stereotypical images of African-Americans more generally, in films, eras, and contexts not marked by blackface.

2:2 Minstrelisation as Textual Process/ The Minstrelisation Shot

Brenda Dixon Gottschild uses the term 'minstrelisation' as an analogy to highlight the racial effect and consequence of blackface minstrelsy on African-Americans. She argues that "the most insidious level of minstrelisation from the Africanist perspective, is the way in which that influence has persisted in non minstrel cultural forms" (1996,124), and then ends her chapter on minstrelsy by concluding, "With or without burnt cork, on-stage and in life, in America and in Europe, minstrelisation of the black image persists." (1996,125) I have tried to show that the practices of racial marking in co-present sequences are not just an historical concept but an actual textual process. Co-presence displays the

minstrelisation of images of African Americans in early sound film, textual evidence of the consequences that Gottschild sees as being visited on the portrayal and perception of African-Americans by the minstrel trope.

I have identified the minstrelisation shot as the epitome of this and it provides an appropriate point to end my discussion of the two central themes in this thesis. The minstrelisation shot displays the racial consequences of blackface on the African-American film image and it visualises Ralph Ellison's line on the defining racial function and effect of blackface in American history, that "the mask was the thing". At the same time the extreme overdetermination of the minstrelisation shot stands as testimony to the extent that textual processes in the Hollywood film text were involved in encouraging its audiences to see racial stereotypes in its images of African-Americans.

3: The Minstrel Gaze

The closing line above outlines both what this thesis does have to say and also what is left unsaid. My hope is that this thesis succeeds in drawing enough textual detail from the case study of co-presence to demonstrate that one explanation for the persistence of African-American stereotypes in Hollywood film lies in how they were constructed, in the sheer density of their textuality, and in the extent of the formal work undergone in their creation. It does not draw similar detail from the case study of co-presence as to how these stereotypical images of African-Americans were actually seen by audiences. If my

thesis began its investigation of co-presence with an interest in the way that stereotypical images of African-Americans were formally constructed, then it ends with a strong sense that co-presence has much to yield in terms of furthering an understanding of the way in which these stereotypes were perceived by audiences in the early sound era.

The notion of blackface forms and co-present sequences being negotiated through a minstrel inflected mode of perception has been an underlying issue in much of my textual analysis in this thesis, for example in my account of the way in which various forms of blackface disguise were diegetically perceived as 'actually' black in early sound film, in my discussion of the significance of Al Jolson's offscreen blackface brand to the portrayal of African-Americans in his films, and in my discussion of the minstrelisation shot. My sense that the dominant mode of audience perception at work in co-present scenes might be defined as a *minstrel gaze* is something which can only be fully articulated by future research. Indeed my closing speculation on the nature of a dominant racial gaze at work in early sound film arises only as a result of the understanding which I have built on the textuality of Hollywood's racial representation through my engagement with the case study of co-presence.

My initial impulse with regard to the way in which co-presence can contribute to an understanding of audience perceptions of African-Americans in Hollywood film is to note how the heightened textuality of co-presence actually registered the presence of a minstrel gaze in early sound film. Below I highlight features in the textual structures of co-presence which might be seen to engage with the ways in which a dominant gaze has

been theorised in two seminal works, Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

3:1 A Fashioning Gaze

The great significance of the persistence of the blackface signifier on film is that it was imbued not only with the history of America's representation of race but also with the history of race as social practice. I have referred to the historical process where minstrelsy at first absented the physical presence of African-Americans in popular culture all together and then, through African-American minstrelsy, continued to cover over this presence with the minstrel mask. For most of the nineteenth century, and even in the early twentieth century, minstrel forms were the dominant means of portraying African-Americans and at the same time the dominant socio-cultural means of perceiving the blackness of African-Americans.

Writers who are at pains to stress the immense racial consequence of the minstrel trope frequently allude to the notion that minstrel forms had a role in structuring the racial unconsciousness of white Americans. Robert Toll writes that the minstrel show "embedded minstrels' images and symbols into the structure and assumptions of American popular thought" (1974,271) and the last words of his book, *Blackening Up, The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*, are "...the minstrel show, long after it had disappeared, left its central image - the grinning black mask - lingering on, deeply

embedded in American consciousness" (1974,274). Toll's emphasis on the racial consequences of minstrelsy for the dominant perception of African-Americans in American society is echoed in more recent works which have expressed reservation on the general move to revise understandings of the racial bias of minstrelsy. Gottschild writes, "The minstrel stereotype as the true picture of black offstage life was firmly ensconced in the American psyche" (1996,124), whilst Anderson notes, "the images of the earlier white[minstrel] shows remained embedded in the minds of the audiences" (1996,23).

Laura Mulvey's account of the male gaze in Hollywood film is centrally posited on the notion that a dominant social mode of perception had manifested itself as the central means of audience perception in cinema. Her appropriation of psychoanalytic theory is aimed at demonstrating "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (1999,58). Mulvey's conception of the male gaze in cinema is as a fashioning gaze which determined the formal shape of images of women, and also built the ways of perceiving these images into the film text itself. This is expressed in these two well known statements, "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure *which is styled accordingly*" (1999,62,my emphasis), and, "Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema *builds* the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (68, my emphasis). A parallel can be drawn here with the notion of a minstrel gaze being brought to bear on the African-Americans in co-present sequences if the central consideration I have given in this thesis to the formal racial marking of African-Americans in film is taken into account. In noting the underlying racial content in most of the blackface forms present in early sound film I concluded chapter one by arguing that

blackface persisted as a singular and normative practice which communicated a white 'state of mind' on the blackness of African-Americans as 'stuff'. Interestingly this is a state of mind still carried today in the unconscious racial baggage of popular theatrical phrases such as 'ham' actor and the 'smell of the greasepaint'.

In chapter two I gave an account of the myriad of racial marking practices involved in the formal presentation of African-American actors and argued that they amounted to a reconstitution of the overdetermined colour consciousness at work in the formal and perceptual 'make-up' of minstrelsy. The practice of racial marking then, can be seen to render the minstrelised looks brought to bear on African-Americans as a textual presence in early sound film. Within the confines of co-present films certainly, the racial marking of African-Americans was as pervasive as the formal manipulation involved in Hollywood's construction of its images of women. It is against this context that I found Cab Calloway's appearance in *Stormy Weather* so Significant. It is quite literally the first African-American screen portrayal that I have seen in a co-present film which is not overdetermined by racial marking. If the formal marking of African-Americans in co-present films was simply a heightened instance of more universal practices involved in Hollywood's representation of African-Americans, and there seems no reason to suspect that this was not the case, then this case study would seem to provide firm ground for understanding the nature of the dominate racial perception brought to bear on African-Americans in early sound film as a fashioning minstrel gaze.

3:2 Racial Marking and the Epidermalization of African-American skin on film.

The racial marking of African-Americans in film is an appropriate point to turn to Frantz Fanon's analysis, in the colonial context, of race as a process of looking. Stuart Hall identifies the historical significance of *Black Skin, White Masks* as its examination of "the exercise of power through the dialectic of the 'look' " (1996,16). Hall paraphrases Jacqueline Rose (without indicating the original source) in defining Fanon's quest as an analysis of "race in the field of vision" (ibid). As Homi Bhabha has noted, there is a primary scene which echoes throughout *Black Skin, White Masks* where, "a white girl fixes Fanon in a look and word as she turns to identify with her mother" (Bhabha,1999,374-5). In the original text Fanon writes that the girl exclaimed "Look, a Negro [...] Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened" (1970,79).

Fanon describes the experience as an "external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by" (ibid). Then a few lines later he writes the famous words on the effect that this representative encounter with a white racial gaze had on him, "Then assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema." (79) Fanon's sense of "race in the field of vision" as a physical experience, where the very corporeality of blacks is overlaid by a "racial epidermal schema", wonderfully captures the process where race is, in part, constructed through a way of looking and seeing that seeks to shape and mould the fact of the blackness of black skin into racial significance. Stuart

Hall draws out the richness in Fanon's account when he writes, "A wonderful word, *epidermalization*: literally, the inscription of race on the skin" (1996,16,Hall's emphasis).

Hall writes, "In the 'epidermalization' of the racial look, Fanon tells us, exclusion and abjection are imprinted on the body..." (1996,20). Racial marking as a formal practice in film then, in Fanon's terms, would seem to be the textual result of a wider racialised social gaze which is brought to bear on the African-American screen presence. The totality of racial marking in co-present early sound film, an extraordinarily vivid and textual realisation of Fanon's concept of epidermalization, acts as testimony to the conditions of perception which constantly framed the filmic visibility of black skin in racial terms.

Whether specific sequences, for example the blackfaced Al Jolson touching Fred 'Snowflake' Toones for luck in *Go into Your Dance*, or Mantan Moreland's declaring that his blackness didn't 'rub off' when Frankie Darro's blackface disguise is rumbled in *Up in the Air* (fig1:32), or the phenomenon in general, co-presence in early sound film provides a detailed representational illustration of the white-black looking encounters that Fanon identifies as having historically structured lived black experience:

[...] for the Negro there is a myth to be faced. A solidly established myth. The Negro is unaware of it as long as his existence is limited to his own environment; but the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness." (1970,106).

There is a sense in which the epidermalization of African-American skin on celluloid endlessly recycled the primal scene of racial looking identified in Fanon's *Black Skin*,

White Masks in cinematic form, “Look a Negro!...”. The cinematic racial gaze which structured the overdetermined racial marking of African-Americans in film mirrored the gaze cast on Fanon which led him to conclude “I am overdetermined from without” (1970,82).

3:3 Seeing African-Americans through blackface

I want to conclude by drawing further detail from Fanon’s account of a dominant racial gaze which, certainly in co-present scenes and perhaps beyond, gives further indication as to why the dominant mode of perception at work in early sound film might be termed as a *minstrel gaze*. Let us return to the closing moment of a co-present sequence which has figured strongly in earlier discussion. At the end of their blackfaced mimicry of the Lindy Hop in *A Day at the Races*, Harpo leads his brothers and the African-Americans behind them, in a final pose for Gil and Judy who have been watching the ‘show’ (fig6:1).

It is interesting to note how the silhouetted figures of Judy and Gil in the foreground of the shot draw attention to the process that Mulvey highlights in mainstream cinema where the look of the audience and the camera are subordinated and tied to the looks of the characters within the screen illusion (1999,68). Also it is worth remembering how extensively the sequence is marked by the use of racial cutting and minstrelisation shots, which work to deny any agency in the return looks of the African-Americans in the scene.

The Marx Brothers’ action of smearing the ‘stuff’ of blackness on their faces gives an outward clue to their fragmented perception of the African-American cultural life around

them. Equally their position in this shot gives textual form to the nature of the gaze brought to bear on blackness of African-Americans in the sequence. Standing in between Ivie Anderson, the jazz band and the Lindy Hoppers positioned behind them, and the interlocked looks of the audience, camera and the white characters which lie in front of them, the Marx brothers literally signal how the dominant cinematic racial gaze of the time continued to perceive African-Americans and their cultural life *through* the trope of minstrelsy.

Fanon's account of epidermalization attaches central importance to the process where the white racial gaze on blacks is filtered through a history of stereotyping, and also on the way that the racial epidermal schema is laid on black skin because blacks are seen *through* white constructed stereotypes of blackness. Fanon describes how the elements used to construct a 'historico-racial schema' (1970,78) around his presence had nothing to do with his own biological self, his "corporeal schema" (ibid), but were provided, "by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (79). In the key description of his encounter with the white girl, in which he coins the phrase "racial epidermal schema", it is the "historicity" of stereotypes, and more importantly the sense of their continuing presence as a tangible entity in white-black exchanges, which constitutes the real power of Fanon's racialisation under the glare of a white gaze and which overcomes his resistance to it:

I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there are legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*, which I had learned about from Jaspers [a stereotypical cartoon black figure]. Then assailed at various points, the

corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (79, Fanon’s emphasis).

As Fanon moves on to consider the consequences of his encounter with the white racial gaze the sense of him being ‘assailed’ by the historical and contemporary weight of stereotypes remains fundamental to the account of his racialisation:

I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’ ” (ibid).

Here Fanon, trailing echoes of Ellison’s line on “the mask was the thing”, ends his account of the white stereotypical constructs which “assail” and “batter” his corporeal schema into a “racial epidermal schema” by placing greatest emphasis on the contemporary minstrelised grinning black images in advertising that surrounded him.

Indeed one is struck by the way in which Fanon’s account of epidermalization as arising from a black presence being seen *through* constructed stereotypical forms resonates with Ellison’s account of the effect of a white racial gaze on the central character of his famous novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison begins the novel with the line “I am an invisible man” (1965,7) and a few lines later elaborates by stating:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me [...] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or *figments of their imagination*- indeed everything and anything except me” (Ibid, my emphasis).

At the heart of both Ellison's and Fanon's account of a dominant white gaze is the notion of the white racial unconsciousness, formed through the a collective entity of past and contemporary stereotypical constructs of blackness, negotiating and structuring a black presence into a racial presence through the practice of racial looking. If Fanon's term "racial epidermal schema" describes the racialisation of blacks then Ellison's 'invisible man' describes the invisibilisation of the black self that results from this process. Both highlight the process where whites saw (with what Ellison terms as their "inner eyes" (1965,7)) actual blacks *through* their own constructions of blackness.

Herein lies the extraordinary richness of co-presence in illustrating the nature of a dominant white, *minstrel*, gaze at work in early sound film. Ellison's novel was in fact inspired by an encounter that he had had with an African-American comedian in a minstrel mask (Lhamon,1998,215). And yet it is Fanon's account of the white racial gaze which is manifested in extraordinary textual form by the unique conditions of co-presence in early sound film. Co-presence repeatedly employed the set up, seen in that final pose in *A Day at the Races*, where African-American actors and performers were perceived *through* blackface forms.

In the previous pages I have considered numerous specific moments in early sound film where the action of looking at African-Americans in early sound film was thoroughly intermixed into a process of looking at blackface forms which were the residue of the incredibly prevalent minstrel trope in American cultural history. For example the

introduction of Jolson's blackface against the background of the African-American servant in *The Singing Fool*, the exclamation, "oh look, a minstrel show", that greets the appearance of the Mills brothers in *Operator 13*, and the dancing of the African-American soldiers under the painted minstrel figures in *This is the Army*.

Indeed in all of my analysis of blackface forms and co-presence in this thesis there has been an engagement with the structural process where the African-American screen presence in early sound film and even, in the case of African-American vernacular, the concerted cultural projection of African-Americans, was perceived *through* the historical paradigm and formal conventions of minstrelsy and related blackface practices. It is this textual engagement which determines my accounts of the way various blackface forms were used as racial disguises to conjure up the diegetic presence of an African-American (chapter one), the reconstitution of minstrelsy in racial marking (chapter two), the 'calling up' of the African-American screen presence in Jolson/Cantor films through racial play with their blackface brand (chapter three), and the racial containment of African-American vernacular (chapter four).

Above all else we can make out the contours of a minstrel gaze being brought to bear on images of African-Americans in the minstrelisation shot, that emblem of so much of what this thesis has to say on co-presence in early sound film. The minstrelisation shot visually and textually encapsulates the haunting process where the lingering presence of the minstrel mask "embedded in American consciousness" (Toll, 1974, 274) was called to the

surface of the Hollywood screen in the portrayal and perception of African-Americans in early sound film.

Nathan Grant has described “the whole life of the African in the West” (1997,137) as “the very matter of *being seen*” (ibid, Grant’s emphasis). My brief consideration of the notion of a minstrel gaze complements the central finding of this thesis, that the dogged persistence of racial stereotypes in Hollywood film is in large part explained by the sheer density of textual work involved in their construction, by indicating the amount of textual work that was also involved in encouraging audiences to *see* ‘race’ in images of African-Americans. Both forms of textual activity serve to illustrate the constructed nature of ‘race’ all the more to us from our vantage point today. My discussion here has only served to set down the basis for future research on the ‘minstrel gaze’. Nonetheless in tentatively pointing out its textual presence in early sound film I have further confirmed the two themes of discussion which are fully articulated in this thesis, the irredeemable racial nature of the blackface medium and the textuality of Hollywood’s African-American stereotypes.

EPILOGUE

My thesis, as it relates to Film Studies in the broadest terms, resides in a belief that there is a pressing need for the discipline to return to its origins, to the matter of the textuality of film. In both its method (close textual analysis) and content (consideration of what the textual detail of persistent and co-present blackface forms tells us about the blackface medium and its consequences for African-Americans in film) my thesis has placed great emphasis on the textuality of early sound film. If nothing else, I hope that it has succeeded in uncovering the extraordinary richness of the persistence of blackface and that it has revived some extraordinary film sequences which have long been overlooked in film history, minstrel studies, and in debates on the representation of race in Hollywood films. Whether the moment in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum* where Al Jolson strokes the face of the African-American actor Edgar Connor, the bizarre end to Jolson's career as major film star in the 'I Love To Singa' number of *The Singing Kid*, the introduction of the Lindy Hop to the Hollywood screen in the blackface sequence of *A Day at the Races*, the debut of the Nicholas Brothers in the minstrel show in *Kid Millions*, or any of the film sequences discussed in this thesis, the complexity and insight brought to my consideration of the nature of the blackface medium and Hollywood's representation of African-Americans has in large part come from the rich textuality of the films themselves.

As a final illustration of this fact let us consider a co-presence sequence from *Pardon Us*, Laurel and Hardy's first feature length film. The rich textuality of *Pardon Us* virtually unfolds the detail of the historical narrative that has been presented in this thesis in relation to the persistence of blackface and co-presence in early sound film.

The 'black' sequence in the film follows a scene where Stan and Ollie escape from prison. Initially we do not see them. Instead we are presented with a plantation scene where African-American actors are shown picking cotton. Structurally this sequence returns us to a primal scene in Hollywood's representation of race, and indeed to our own point of origins in this thesis, since it strongly echoes the portrayal of African-Americans in *The Birth of a Nation*. Early in Griffith's film the stability of ante bellum black life is impressed in the sequence where the Cameron and Stoneman families visit the cotton fields where African-Americans work. They then retire with them to the 'Slave Quarters' where they sit and observe the music and dance of black life outside the world of white work. In similar fashion, *Pardon Us* teases us as to Stan and Ollie's whereabouts by presenting us with a timeless vision of black labour on the cotton fields of the South. Then, once we are shown that they have used blackface as a disguise to blend into this scene, Stan and Ollie retire with the African-Americans to their living quarters to observe and participate in their cultural life.

Pardon Us is very similar to *A Day at the Races* in that it contrives to present its white characters and the film's audience with an African-American 'show'. Like the African-Americans depicted in the living quarters of the race course in *A Day at the Races*, the

black community in *Pardon Us* perform a variety of music and dance acts. In this, both films carry strong overtones of the variety ensemble model established for 'black' entertainment by the minstrel show.

Before we actually see Stan and Ollie there is a shot of a reward poster of them in whiteface (**fig6:2**). Then there is a cut to a mid shot of the duo in blackface (**fig6:3**) as they turn from inspecting the poster and Ollie says "they'll never recognise us in a million years". Ollie's comment would seem to further indicate the sequence's similarity to *The Birth of a Nation* in that blackface, within the diegesis at least, is intended to function realistically. Certainly the formal appearance of their blackface has more in common with silent cinema's dominant strand of realistic blackface than it has with the minstrel mask. And yet the juxtaposition of their white faces on the poster with our first view of them in blackface conjures up the self reflexivity that ran through the core of blackface minstrelsy. It could even be a direct reference to the practice, as discussed by Lott (1995,20-21), where minstrel show programmes juxtaposed blackfaced and whitefaced pictures of the performers so as to underscore their whiteness.

Generally then it is the dominant strand of self reflexivity that marked the wider persistence of blackface in the early sound film, from *The Jazz Singer* on, which is most strongly referenced in this blackface disguise sequence. Self reflexivity permeates the ensuing action, principally through Stan's inability to maintain his 'cover', for example by raising his trouser leg (**fig6:4**) and falling into water (**fig6:5**). Nonetheless *Pardon Us* perfectly illustrates the complexity and hybridity of blackface forms in early sound film (as

discussed in chapter one) where the blackface signifier in film, at the end of its cultural life, was loaded with all of the formal properties, uses, and significance, that it had held through its earlier century long visibility in American popular culture.

In addition *Pardon Us*, by using blackface as a disguise which allows Stan and Ollie to mingle into the cultural and working life of African-Americans, graphically illustrates the racial content which was the common and connecting feature underlying the complexity and hybridity of blackface forms in early sound film. The film demonstrates how the engagement of blackface with the portrayal and perception of African-Americans was such that its persistence is better explained as having been fundamentally sustained by, and in racial dialogue with, the concurrent rise in African-American visibility in early sound film, rather than by the current consensus that it was 'killed off' by this co-presence.

There is further and subtle detail to *Pardon Us*'s illustration of the racial function driving the persistence of blackface in early sound film. The film illustrates the return of the blackface signifier to its origins in early sound film by moving from the cotton fields to place Stan and Ollie in a scene which conjures up the earliest moments of minstrelsy when whites used close observation of African-Americans cultural life as the basis for blackface performance. At the time of the film's making this scene of African-American cultural life in the living quarters of the Southern plantation would generally have been accepted as the referent for minstrelsy. This is a fact highlighted by, for example, the Southern paraphernalia called up by Jolson in his mammy songs and by the Southern based presentation of minstrelsy in films such as *Dixie*, *Everybody Sing*, *This is the Army* and

Swanee River. If modern critical accounts of minstrelsy, such as that offered by Eric Lott or William Lhamon, have now disclaimed such southern mythology by highlighting the Northern origins of minstrelsy, there has nonetheless been a consensus since the 1974 publication of Robert Toll's *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* that minstrelsy was based on the kind of observation and mimicry of African-American cultural life that is depicted in *Pardon Us*.

What makes the return to origins motif in *Pardon Us* so interesting however, is that Stan and Ollie, as they sit undetected on a porch amongst the singing African-Americans (fig6:6), attend this birth like scene of minstrelsy *already masked* in the hybrid markings of blackface at the ends of its cultural visibility in America. There is a line in the opening song that the African-Americans sing, "Run along Mammy...Run along children, whites folks seeing and watching what you do", which intensifies the complex richness of the co-present imagery in the film. Though no doubt included as a self reflexive joke on the African-Americans with regards to the hidden presence of Laurel and Hardy in their community, the words, in *this context*, crack open the historical complexities embedded in blackface mimicry. They speak of the fact that the 'original' African-American cultural life from which blackface minstrel forms were moulded already consisted of performative gestures and practices which had been developed because of the dominant white gaze on blackness, gestures and practices which worked to intercept and fool this white surveillance. Indeed, as I argued in the last chapter, the essential racial function of the minstrel mask, the white *embodiment* of racial containment, was to remove this "double edge" in African-American vernacular practice.

Blackface minstrelsy and its derivative forms functioned to reduce and racially mark African-American cultural practice and gesture. In the *performance* of blackness whites unlocked for themselves the performativity and depth which had been hidden from them in the original Signifyin(g) African-American referent. *Pardon Us*, unintentionally perhaps but brilliantly nonetheless, illustrates this central racial function which determined the origins and the ends of the cultural life of the blackface signifier. It does this in the way that it capitalises on the specificity (hybridity, co-presence) of blackface in early sound film to depict a scenario where an *unobserved* white gaze is smuggled in on African-American cultural life. The complexity of this sequence in *Pardon Us* rather neatly illustrates William Lhamon's line that, "There is no point in a [blackface] lore cycle when meaning is not already rich." (1999,143) In the dynamics of this scene in *Pardon Us* one can see the contours of the cyclic loop of racial representation into which the minstrel trope had ensnared the African-American image. Conditions which led Ralph Ellison to the sense of timelessness that pervades his narration of "race in the field of vision" in *Invisible Man*, where a couple of pages into the novel he states, "But that's getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead." (1965,9)

Pardon Us illustrates some of the more specific aspects of the discussion in the latter part of the thesis concerning the racial containment of African-American vernacular, and the 'minstrel gaze'. A cut to a two shot (fig6:7) of Stan and Ollie shows Ollie looking offscreen and this works to align the audience's perception with the looks that he casts on the African-Americans in the scene. The next shot (fig6:8) is of an African-American

band. The blackness of the African-Americans in this shot is typically marked in the way that they are swathed in whiteness, with the men wearing white shirts and the women white hats. Here then the gaze of the camera and the film's audience on African-Americans is filtered through Ollie's blackfaced looks and the images of African-Americans in the scene are styled according to the overdetermined colour consciousness of the minstrel trope.

Now a series of almost ethnographic vignettes of African-American life within the scene, an old couple smoking on the porch (fig6:9), a boy with a dog, a couple walking, are intercut with further shots of Ollie looking offscreen. This intensifies the sense of the blackfaced Ollie functioning as an intermediary figure in this scene, the means by which the audience perceive the African-American life on 'show'. *Pardon Us* is another prominent illustration of the process where the persistent blackface signifier was a textual marker of a minstrel gaze in early sound film where, following the contours of the dominant white racial gaze analysed by Fanon and Ellison, the dominant white perception of African-Americans passed *through* its own stereotyped constructions of blackness.

As was frequently the case in the early sound era it is African-American artists and their vernacular forms who are a particular focal point of the African-American life which is passed through the minstrel trope on the Hollywood screen in *Pardon Us*. A quartet of singers (unidentified in the credits) begin a new song and once again there is a cut to a shot of Ollie grabbing Stan's attention and forcing him to look offscreen in their direction. As with the films discussed in chapter four, this thorough intermixing of genuine African-

American vernacular performance with blackface forms has the effect of highlighting the intermixed and fragmented perception, the “clash of discourses”, involved in Hollywood’s presentation of African-American vernacular in the 1930s . Here for example a song which references African-American migration and train travel is racially contained through the stasis of a timeless Southern plantation setting.

All this, inexorably, leads to Stan and Ollie’s own blackface performance. Ollie takes his cue from the singers to perform a tenor solo of the minstrel inflected song ‘Lazy Moon’ and Stan follows by performing a ‘soft shoe’ dance (fig6:10).¹ This breakdown of the ‘black’ entertainment into individual acts is reminiscent of the individual performances in the ‘olio’ section of a minstrel show. Both acts are accompanied by the background singing of the African-Americans in the scene, a final underscoring of *Pardon Us*’s demonstration that, from its nineteenth century origins to its hybrid ends on the Hollywood screen, the blackface signifier took the cultural life of African-Americans as its referent.

In *Pardon Us*, as in many other films of the early sound era, the dominant racial signifier in American cultural history can be seen as rekindling the racial consequences that it had originally visited on an African-American cultural presence some one hundred years before. That is in the way that its stereotyped and marked blackness, worn as performative sign by whites, was marked and ingrained into images

¹ The soft shoe dance was a speciality of the nineteenth century white minstrel George Primrose. A reenactment of Primrose’s dance is included in the Warner Brothers musical short *Minstrel Days* (1941) and it indicates great similarity with the dance performed by Stan Laurel here.

of African-Americans *for real*. In *Pardon Us* and other co-present films we see blackface signifying on African-Americans and revealing the process of representation where the visibility and cultural practice of African-Americans on the Hollywood screen was reduced to racial signification.

In the final act of this scene Stan falls into a puddle and washes his face back to whiteness (fig6:5) before, at Ollie's instigation, he quickly blackens it again with the muddy water. This type of self reflexive play with the sign of blackness underscores their entire blackface appearance in the film, with Stan absent mindedly showing his legs and arms at other moments in the film. Even Ollie forgets himself and takes his hat off to accept the applause given for his song, revealing his white forehead in the process.

I conclude then, on the issue of the *performativity* of blackface forms in early sound film. It is the self reflexivity of minstrel forms which has led recent minstrel studies, by Lott, Mahar, Cockrell and Lhamon, to call into question the notion that the racial denigration and portrayal of African-Americans was the core meaning and purpose of minstrelsy. Instead they have found other core motivations in the performativity of minstrelsy, youth, class, and national identity formation. Similarly Michael Rogin uses the self reflexive form and performativity of blackface in early sound film to disengage it from its historical context of co-presence and explain its persistence on its function as a mechanism of identity transfer which turned immigrant Jews into Americans. The fragility and permeability of the blackface seen in *Pardon Us* and other early sound films might seem to make it somewhat insignificant. Its artifice would seem to display on the surface of film

the very truth about 'race' that modern critical study has unveiled, as Stuart Hall puts it, that, "Race is not a genetic but a social category. Racism is not a biological but discursive regime." (1996,21). The juxtaposition of blackface with African-Americans especially, would seem to display all too obviously the constructed nature of the white-black binarisms involved in the production of 'race' which led Fanon to assert at the end of *Black Skin White Masks*, "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man." (1970,165)

There is a parallel to the critical debates on the performativity of blackface in recent feminist debates on male drag. Judith Butler notes in relation to the male performance of femininity:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express becomes a *fabrication* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality (1990,336, author's emphasis).

As translated to the performativity of blackface in the early sound era, such an approach would posit that its supposed communication of the essential racial characteristics of African-Americans was displayed as nothing more than the fabricated markings of a mask, with the co-presence of African-Americans serving to confirm this. And yet what this thesis has found, something neatly captured in this scene from *Pardon Us*, is that from its origins to its ends the performativity and self reflexivity of the blackface signifier ran at the very core of its racial function. And the more that the signifier was stretched and exposed

the more the reality of its racial function was revealed. For if in co-present scenes whites were seen in performative play with the racial sign of blackness then African-Americans were seen, through racial marking in film, to carry this sign *for real*. And so the performativity of blackface is not a post modern sign to be celebrated to the exclusion of its racial effect. Rather blackface is perhaps our most revealing historical sign of the nature of 'race' as produced through representation. If there is a history of performance surrounding the blackface signifier then it is, as Gottschild highlights, not a progressive one, "It is because of this form [minstrelsy] [...] that the Africanist presence in American performance continues to be invisibilised and exploited." (1996,81)

This then is the history of the persistence of the blackface signifier in early sound film that has been presented in this thesis, one of racial effect and consequence for African-Americans. Stuart Hall has coined the phrase "floating signifier" (1997a,131) to impress the fact the 'blackness' seemingly impressed as an essential category in much black popular culture is in reality a complex "cultural strategy" (ibid) necessitated by the historical conditions of race. As the argument in the previous pages sets out, there has been equal complexity at work in the history of racial representation. The floating presence of the blackface signifier in Hollywood's early sound era was most definitely a case of the signifier returning to haunt the referent.



Fig 6:1



Fig 6:2



Fig 6:3



Fig 6:4



Fig 6:5



Fig 6:6



Fig 6:7



Fig 6:8



Fig 6:9



Fig 6:10

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Abraham Lincoln (1930) Dir. D.W. Griffith, Prod. Feature Productions/United Artists, Main Cast: Walter Huston (Abraham Lincoln), Henry Walthall (Colonel Marshall), Una Merkel (Ann Rutledge).

Ali Baba Goes to Town (1937) Dir. David Butler, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Al Babson/Ali BaBa), Tony Martin (Yusuf), Louise Hovick (Sultana), June Lang (Princess Miriam), John Carradine (Ishak), Virginia Field (Dinah), Alan Dinehart (Boland), Douglas Dumbrille (Prince Musah), The Pearl Twins (Specialities).

Always Leave Them Laughing (1949) Dir. Roy Del Ruth. Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Milton Berle (Kip Cooper), Virginia Mayo (Nancy Eagan).

Anniversary Trouble (1930) Dir. Gus Meins, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Matthew Beard (Stymie), Billie Thomas (Buckwheat), Hattie McDaniel (Mandy). **Comedy Short - 'Our Gang' Series.**

Anybody's War (1930) Dir. Richard Wallace, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: George Moran (Willie), Charles Mack (Amos Crow), Joan Peers (Mary Jane Robinson).

Artists and Models, (1937) Dir. Raoul Walsh, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Jack Benny (Mac Brewster), Ida Lupino (Paula Jewell), Louis Armstrong (Bandleader), Martha Raye (Speciality).

Babes in Arms (1939) Dir. Busby Berkeley, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Mickey Rooney (Mickey Moran), Judy Garland (Patsy Barton), Charles Winninger (Joe Moran), Guy Kibbee (Judge Black), June Preisser (Rosalie Essex), Grace Hayes (Florrie Moran), Betty Jaynes (Molly Moran).

Babes on Broadway (1941) Dir. Busby Berkeley, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Mickey Rooney (Tommy 'Tom' Williams), Judy Garland (Penny Morris), Fay Bainter (Miss 'Jonesy' Jones), Virginia Weilder (Barbara Joesephine Conway), Ray McDonald (Ray Lambert), Richard Quine (Morton 'Hammy' Hammond), Donald Meek (Mr Stone).

Band Wagon (1953) Dir. Vincente Minnelli, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Fred Astaire (Tony Hunter), Cyd Charisse (Gabrielle Gerard), Oscar Levant (Lester Marton).

Belle of the Nineties (1934) Dir. Leo McCarey, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Mae West (Ruby Carter), Roger Pryor (Tiger Kid), Johnny Mack Brown (Brooks Claybourne),

Katherine DeMille (Molly Brant), John Miljan (Ace Lamont, Owner Sensation House), James Donlan (Kirby, Tiger Kid's Manager), Duke Ellington (Piano Player Sensation).

The Big Broadcast of 1936 (1935) Dir. Norman Taurog, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: George Burns (George), Harold Nicholas (Dash), Fayard Nicholas (Dot), Bill Robinson (Speciality).

The Big Broadcast of 1937 (1936) Dir. Mitchell Leisen, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast Benny Fields (Himself), Jack Benny (Jack Carson), George Burns (Mr. Platt), Gracie Allen (Mrs. Platt), Bob Burns (Bob Black), Martha Raye (Patsy).

Big Boy (1930) Dir. Alan Crosland, Prod. Warner Brothers, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Gus), Claudia Dell (Annabel Bedford), Louise Closser Hale (Aunt Bessie Bedford), Lloyd Hughes (Jack Bedford), Eddie Phillips (Coley Reed).

The Birth of a Nation (1915) Dir. D. W. Griffith, Prod. Epoch, Main Cast: Lilian Gish (Elsie Stoneman), Ralph Lewis (Austin Stoneman), Mae Marsh (Flora Cameron), Henry B. Walthall (Colonel Ben Cameron), Walter Long (Gus), George Siegmann (Silas Lynch), Mary Alden (Lydia Brown), Jennie Lee (Mammy), Spotiswoode Aitken (Dr Cameron), Wallace Reid (Jeff, the blacksmith), Bessie Love (Piedmont girl), Eugene Pallette (Union soldier), Raoul Walsh (John Wilkes Booth), Madame Sul-Te-Wan (A Black Woman, Dr. Cameron's Taunter), Erich Von Stroheim (Man Shot from Roof), Elmo Lincoln (Blacksmith)

Black and Tan Fantasy (1929) Dir. Dudley Murphy, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Duke Ellington (Himself), Fredi Washington (Herself, the Dancer), Arthur Whetsol (Trumpet Player). **Musical Short.**

Blonde Venus (1931) Dir. Josef von Sternberg, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Marlene Dietrich (Helen Faraday, aka Helen Jones), Herbert Marshall (Edward 'Ned' Faraday), Cary Grant (Nick Townsend), Dickie Moore (Johnny Faraday), Gene Morgan (Ben Smith), Hattie McDaniel (Cora).

Boston Blackie's Rendezvous (1945) Dir. Arthur Dreyfuss, Prod. Columbia, Main Cast: Chester Morris (Horatio 'Boston Blackie' Black), Nina Foch (Sally Brown), Steve Cochran (James Cook), Richard Lane (Inspector John Farraday), George E. Stone (The Runt).

Cabin in the Sky (1943) Dir. Vincente Minnelli, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Ethel Waters (Petunia Jackson), Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson (Little Joe Jackson), Lena Horne (Georgia Brown), Louis Armstrong (Trumpeter), Rex Ingram (Lucifer Jr./Lucius), Kenneth Spencer (The General/Rev. Greene), John William Sublett (Domino Johnson).

Cafe Metropole (1937) Dir. Edward H Griffith, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Loretta Young (Laura Ridgeway), Tyrone Power (Alexis Penayev/Alexander Brown), Adolphe Menjou (Monsieur Victor Loberd), Gregory Ratoff (Paul/ The Penayev),

Charles Winninger (Joseph Ridgeway), Bill Robinson (Speciality) (**Robinson's role was cut in the final version**).

Can This Be Dixie (1936) Dir. George Marshall, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Jane Withers (Peg Gurgle), Slim Summerville (Robert E. Lee Gurgle), Helen Wood (Virginia Peachtree).

Captain Henry's Radio Show (1933) Dir. Unknown, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Pat Radget (Molasses), Pick Malone (January). **Musical Short.**

Carolina Moon (1940) Dir. Frank McDonald, Prod. Republic, Main Cast: Gene Autry (himself), Smiley Burnette (Frog Millhouse), June Storey (Caroline Stanhope).

Casablanca (1941) Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Brothers, Main Cast: Humphrey Bogart (Rick Blaine), Ingrid Bergman (Ilsa Lund Laszlo), Paul Henreid (Victor Laszlo), Dooley Wilson (Sam).

Check and Double Check (1930) Dir. Melville Brown, Prod. RKO, Main Cast: Freeman Gosden (Amos), Charles J Correll (Andy), Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra (themselves).

College Holiday (1936) Dir. Frank Tuttle, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Martha Raye (Daisy Schloggenheimer), Fred 'Snowflake' Toones (Porter, uncredited).

A Colourful Sermon (1930) Dir. Unknown, Prod. Warner Bros/Vitaphone, Main Cast: Bert Swor (himself). **Comedy Short.**

Coney Island (1943) Dir. Walter Lang, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main cast: Betty Grable (Kate Farley), George Montgomery (Eddie Johnson), Cesar Romero (Joe Rocco), Charles Winninger (Finnigan), Phil Silvers (Frankie).

Dance Girl Dance (1940) Dir. Dorothy Arzner, Prod. RKO, Main Cast: Maureen O'Hara (Judy O'Brien), Louise Hayward (Jimmy Harris), Lucile Ball (Bubbles, aka Tiger Lily White).

A Day at the Races (1937) Dir. Sam Wood, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Groucho Marx (Doctor Hugo Z. Hackenbush), Chico Marx (Tony), Harpo Marx (Stuffy), Allan Jones (Gil Stewart), Maureen O'Sullivan (Judy Standish), Margaret Dumont (Emily Upjohn), Leonard Ceeley (Whitmore), Douglass Dumbrille (Morgan), Esther Muir (Flo Marlowe), Sig Ruman (Dr. Leopold X. Steinberg). Ivie Anderson and the Crinoline Choir (themselves).

Dante's Inferno (1935) Dir. Harry Lachman, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Spencer Tracy (Jim Carter), Claire Trevor (Betty McWade), Henry B Walthall (Pop McWade).

Diplomaniacs (1933) Dir. William Seiter, Prod. RKO, Main Cast: Bert Wheeler (Willie), Robert Woolsey (Hercules), Marjorie White (Dolores), Louis Calhern (Winklereid), Phylis Barry (Fifi), Hugh Herbert (Chinaman).

Dixie (1943) Dir. Edward Sutherland, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Bing Crosby (Dan Emmett), Dorothy Lamour (Millie Cook), Billy De Wolfe (Mr. Bones), Marjorie Reynolds (Jean Mason), Lynne Overman (Mr. Whitlock), Eddie Foy Jr (Mr. Felham).

Dimples (1936) Dir. William A Seiter, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Shirley Temple (Dimples Appleby), Frank Morgan (Prof. Appleby), Robert Kent (Allen Drew), Helen Westley (Aunt Caroline Drew), Stepin Fetchit (Cicero).

The Dolly Sisters (1945) Dir. Irving Cummings, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Betty Grable (Jenny Dolly), June Haver (Rosie Dolly) John Payne (Harry Fox).

A Double Life (1947) Dir. George Cukor, Prod. Universal Pictures, Main Cast: Ronald Colman (Anthony John), Singne Hasson (Britta), Edmund O'Brien (Bill Friend), Shelly Winters (Pat Kroll),

Dream House (1932) Dir. Del Lord (a.k.a. Mack Sennett), Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Bing Crosby (Bing Fawcett), Ann Christy (Betty Brooks), Kathrin Clare Ward (Mrs. Brooks). **Musical/Comedy Short.**

I Dream of Jeannie (1952) Dir. Alan Devan, Prod. Republic Pictures, Main Cast: Ray Middleton (Edwin P. Christy), Bill Shirley (Stephen Foster), Muriel Lawrence (Inez McDowell), Louise Beavers (Mammy), Eileen Christy (Jeanie McDowell).

Ducks and Deducts (1930) Dir. Unknown, Prod. Warner Bros/Vitaphone, Main Cast: Bert Swor (himself). **Comedy Short.**

The Eddie Cantor Story (1953) Dir. Alfred E Green, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Keefe Brasselle (Eddie Cantor), Marilyn Erskine (Ida), Aline MacMahon (Grandma Esther), Arthur Franz (Harry Harris), Alex Gerry (David Tobias).

The Emperor Jones (1933) Dir. Dudley Murphy, Prod. United Artists, Main Cast: Paul Robeson (Brutus Jones), Dudley Digges (Smithers), Frank H. Wilson (Jeff), Fredi Washinton (Undine).

Everybody Sing (1938) Dir. Edwin Z Marin, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Allan Jones (Ricky Saboni), Judy Garland (Judy Bellaire), Fanny Brice (Olga Chekaloff), Billie Burke (Dina Bellaire), Henry Armetta (Giovanni Vittorino).

Footlight Parade (1933) Dir. Lloyd Bacon, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: James Cagney (Chester Kent), Joan Blondell (Nan Prescott), Ruby Keeler (Bea Thom).

Forty Little Mothers (alt title *Forty Little Women.*) (1940) Dir. Busby Berkeley, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Gilbert Jordan Thompson), Judith Anderson (Mme. Madeline Granville), Ralph Morgan (Judge Joseph M. Williams).

George White's Scandals (1934) Dir. Thornton Freedland, Prod. Fox, Main Cast: Rudy Vallee (Jimmy Martin), Jimmy Durante (Happy Donnelly), Alice Faye (Mona Vale), Adrienne Ames (Barbara Loraine).

Genius at Work (1946) Dir. Leslie Goodwins, Prod. RKO, Main Cast: Wally Brown (Jerry Miles), Alan Carney (Mike Strager), Anne Jeffreys (Ellen Brent), Lionel Atwill (Latimer Marsh/The Cobra).

The Girl in the Show (1929) Dir. Edgar Selwyn, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Bessie Love (Hattie Hartley), Raymond Hackett (Mal Thorne), Edward J. Nugent (Dave Amazon), Mary Doran (Connie Bard).

Glorifying the American Girl (1929) Dir. Millard Webb, Prod. Paramount Pictures, Main Cast: Mary Eaton (Gloria Hughes), Eddie Cantor (himself), Helen Morgan (herself), Rudy Vallee (himself), Dan Healy (Miller).

Go into Your Dance (1935) Dir. Archie L. Mayo, Prod. Warner Bros, Choreography Busby Berkeley, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Al Howard), Ruby Keeler (Dorothy Wayne), Glenda Farrell (Molly Howard), Barton MacLane (Duke Hutchinson), Helen Morgan (Luana Wells), Fred 'Snowflake' Toones (Snowflake).

Going Hollywood (1933) Dir. Raoul Walsh, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Marion Davies (Sylvia Bruce), Bing Crosby (Bill Williams), Fifi D'Orsay (Lili Yvonne), Sam McDaniel (Rasputin), Fred Toones (Porter).

Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933) Dir. Mervyn LeRoy, Prod. Warner Bros.

Golden Dawn (1930) Dir. Ray Enright, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Noah Beery (Shep Keyes), Walter Woolf King (Tom Allen), Vivienne Segal (Dawn).

The Grand Parade (1930) Dir. Fred Newmeyer, Prod. Pathe Exchange Inc, Main Cast: Helen Twelvetrees (Molly), Fred Scott (Kelly), Richard Carle (Rand), Marie Astaire (Polly).

The Great Ziegfeld (1936) Dir. Robert Z Leonard, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: William Powell (Florenz Ziegfeld Jr), Virginia Bruce (Audrey Dane), Myrna Loy (Billie Burke), Luise Rainer (Anna Held), Fanny Brice (Herself).

Hallelujah! (1929) Dir. King Vidor, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Nina Mae McKinney (Chick), Evelyn Pope Burwell (Singer), Eddie Conners (Singer), Daniel L. Hanyes (Zekial 'Zeke' Johnson).

Hallelujah I'm A Bum (1933) Dir. Lewis Milestone, Prod. United Artists, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Bumper), Madge Evans (Jane Mancher), Frank Morgan (Mayor Hastings), Harry Langdon (Egghead), Chester Conklin (Sunday) Edgar Connor (Acorn).

Ham and Eggs at the Front (1927) Dir. Roy Del Ruth, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Tom Wilson (Ham), Heinie Conklin (Eggs), Myrna Loy (Fifi), William Irving (Von Friml (as William J. Irving), Noah Young (Sergeant).

Happy Days (1930) Dir. Benjamin Stoloff, Prod. Fox, Main Cast: Charles E. Evans (Colonel Billy Batcher), Marjorie White (Margie), Richard Keene (Dick).

Hard to Get (1938) Dir. Ray Enright, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Dick Powell (Bill), Olivia de Havilland (Margaret), Charles Wininger (Ben Richards), Allen Jenkins (Roscoe), Bomita Granville (Connie), Meville Cooper (Case), Isabelle Jeans (Mrs. Richards), Grady Sutton (Stanley Potter), Thurston Hall (Alwater).

Harmony Lane (1935) Dir. Joseph Santley, Prod. Mascot, Main Cast: Douglas Montgomery (Stephen Foster), Evelyn Venable (Susan Pentland), Adriane Ames (Jane McDowell), Joseph Cawthorn (Kleber), William Frawley (Christy), Clarence Muse (Old Joe), Hattie McDaniel (Maid).

Hearts in Dixie (1929) Dir. Paul Sloane, Prod. Fox, Main Cast: Stepin Fetchit (Gummy), Clarence Muse (Nappus), Eugene Jackson (Chinquapin), Dorothy Morrison (Melia).

Her Unborn Child (1930) Dir. Charles McGrath and Albert Ray, Prod. Windsor Picture Plays, Main Cast: Nellie Grant (Mandy), Adele Ronson (Dorothy Kennedy), Elisha Cook Jr (Stewart Kennedy).

Here Come The Waves (1944) Dir. Mark Sandrich, Prod. Paramount Pictures, Main Cast: Bing Crosby (Johnny Cabot), Betty Hutton (Susan/Rosemary Allison), Sonny Tufts (Windy), Ann Doran (Ruth), Gwen Crawford (Tex).

Holliday Inn (1942) Dir. Mark Sandrich, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Bing Crosby (Jim Hardy), Fred Astaire (Ted Hanover), Majorie Reynolds (Linda Mason), Virginia Dale (Lila Dixon), Walter Abel (Danny Reed), Louise Beavers (Mamie).

Hollywood Cavalcade (1939) Dir. Irving Cummings, Prod. Fox, Main Cast : Al Jolson (himself).

Hollywood Hotel (1937) Dir. Busby Berkeley, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Dick Powell (Ronnie Bowers), Rosemary Lane (Virginia), Lola Lane (Mona Marshall).

The Hollywood Revue of 1929 (1929) Dir. Charles Reisner, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Conrad Nagel (Himself, Master of Ceremonies), Jack Benny (Himself, Master of Ceremonies), John Gilbert (Himself, as Romeo).

House Wife (1934) Dir. Alfred E Green, Prod. Wanrer Bros, Main Cast: Bette Davis (Patricia 'Pat' Berkley), Harison Green (Sambo), Morris Goldman (Rastus).

Hypnotised (1933) Dir. Mack Sennett, Prod. Sono-Art World Wide Pictures Main Cast: George Moran (Moran), Charle Mack(Mack).

If I Had my Way (1940) Dir. David Butler, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: Eddie Leonard (uncredited), Bing Crosby (Buzz Blackwell), El Brendel (Alex Swenson), Allyn Joslyn (Jarvis Johnson).

If You Knew Susie (1948) Dir. Gordon Douglas, Prod. RKO, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Sam Parker), Joan Davis (Susie Parker), Allyn Joslyn (Mike), Charles Dingle (Mr Whitley), Phil Brown (Joe Collins).

In Old Kentucky (1934) Dir George Marshall, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Will Rogers (Steve Tapley), Dorothy Wilson (Nancy Martingale), Russell Hardy (Lee Andrews), Charles Sellor (Ezra Martingale), Louise Henry (Arlene Shalluck), Ester Dale (Dolly Breckenridge), Alan Dinehart (Slick Doherty), Charles Richman (Pole Shalluck), Etienne Giradot (Pluvius J Aspinwall), John Ince (Sheriff), Bill Robinson (Wash Jackson).

The Jazz Singer (1927) Dir. Alan Crosland, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Jakie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin), May McAvoy (Mary Dale), Warner Orland (Cantor Rabinowitz), Eugenie Besserer (Sara Rabinowitz), Otto Lederer (Moisha Yudelson), Bobby Gordon (Jakie Rabinowitz - Age 13), Richard Tucker (Harry Lee).

The Jazz Singer (1952) Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Danny Thomas (Jerry Golding), Peggy Lee (Judy Lane), Mildred Dunnock (Mrs. Golding), Eduard Franz (Cantor Golding).

Jitterbug Party (1934) Dir. Fred Waller, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Cab Calloway (himself) **Musical Short**

Jolson Sings Again (1949) Dir. Henry Levin, Prod. Columbia, Main Cast: Larry Parks (Al Jolson), Barbara Hale (Ellen Clark), William Demarest (Steve Martin), Ludwig Donath (Cantor Yoelson), Bill Goodwin (Tom Baron), Myron McCormick (Ralph Bryant).

The Jolson Story (1946) Dir. Alfred E. Green, Prod. Columbia, Main Cast: Larry Parks (Al Jolson), Evelyn Keyes (Julie Benson), William Demarest (Steve Martin), Bill Goodwin (Tom Baron), Ludwig Donath (Cantor Yoelson), Scotty Beckett (Al Jolson, younger).

Judge Priest (1934) Dir. John Ford, Prod. Fox, Main Cast: Hattie McDaniel (Aunt Dilsey), Stepin Fetchit (Jeff Poindexter), Anita Louise (Ellie May Gillespie), Henry B. Walthall (Rev. Ashby Brand).

Kid From Spain (1932) Dir. Leo McCarey, Prod. United Artists, Cinematography. Gregg Toland, Choreographer. Busby Berkeley, Main Cast: Noah Beery (Alonzo Gomez), Eddie Cantor (Eddie Williams/Don Sebastian II), Lyda Roberti (Rosalie), Stanley Fields (Jose, Pedro's man), Edgar Connor (Bull Handler).

Kid Millions (1934) Dir. Roy Del Ruth, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Edward Grant 'Eddie' Wilson Jr), Ann Sothem (Joan Larrabee), Ethel Merman (Dot Clark), George Murphy (Gerald 'Jerry' Lane), Berton Churchill (Colonel Harry Larrabee), Fayard Nicholas (uncredited), Harold Nicholas (uncredited).

The King of Jazz (1930) Dir. John Murray Anderson, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: Bing Crosby (himself), Paul Whiteman (himself), John Boles (specialty singer), Laura La Plante (the editor/the secretary), Jeannette Loff (specialty singer).

The Little Colonel (1935) Dir. David Butler, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Hattie McDaniel (Becky, Mom Beck), Shirley Temple (Miss Lloyd Shermon), Lionel Barrymore (Colonel Lloyd), Evelyn Venable (Mrs. Elizabeth Shermon/Elizabeth Lloyd), John Lodge (Mr. Jack Shermon/Poppa Jack), Bill Robinson (Walker).

The Littlest Rebel (1935) Dir. David Butler, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main cast: Shirley Temple (Miss Virginia 'Virgie' Cary), Willie Best (James Henry), John Boles (Captain Herbert Cary, aka 'Master Cary'), Jack Holt (Colonel Morrison), Karen Morley (Mrs. Cary), Bill Robinson (Uncle Billy), Guinn 'Big Boy' Williams (Sergeant Dudley).

The Matinee Idol (1928) Dir. Frank Capra, Prod. Columbia, Main Cast: Bessie Love (Ginger Bolivar), Johnnie Walker (Don Wilson, Harry Mann), Ernest Hilliard (Arnold Wingate), Lionel Belmore (Jasper Bolivar), David Mir (Eric Barrymaine).

Mammy (1930) Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Bros, Music. Irving Berlin, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Al Fuller), Lois Moran (Nora Meadows), Lowell Sherman (Westy), Louise Dresser (Mother), Hobart Bosworth (Meadows), Tully Marshall (Slats).

Melody Lane (1929) Dir. Robert F. Hill, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: Eddie Leonard (Des Dupree), Josephine Dunn (Dolores Dupree), Rose Coe (Constance Dupree).

Mickey's Minstrels (1934) Dir. J.A. Duffy, Prod. Larry Darmour Productions/Columbia, Main Cast: Mickey Rooney (himself). **Comedy Short**

Minstrel Days (1929) Dir. Unknown, Prod. Warner Bros/Vitaphone, Main Cast: Mosby's Blue Blowers Band (minstrel performers). **Musical Short**.

Minstrel Days (1941) Dir. Bobby Connolly, Prod. Warner Bros. 21 mins. **Musical Short**.

Minstrel Man (1944) Dir. Joseph Lewis, Prod. PRC Pictures, Benny Fields (Dixie Boy Johnson), Alan Dinehart (Lew Dun), Rosco Karns ('Lasses' White), Judy Clark (Dixie Girl Johnston).

Musical Doctor (1932) Dir. Ray Cozine, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Rudy Vallee (Doctor), Mae Questel (Nurse), Sydney Easton (Patient). **Musical Short.**

Musical Justice (1931) Dir. Aubrey Scotto, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Rudy Vallee (himself), Mae Questel (herself/Betty Boop). **Musical Short.**

Noah's Ark (1929) Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Myrna Loy (Dancer/Slave Girl), Dolores Costello (Mary/Miriam), George O'Brien (Travis/Japheth).

Not Quite Decent (1929) Dir. Irving Cummings, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: June Collyer (Linda Cunningham), Louise Dresser (Mame Jarrow), Allan Lane (Jerry Connor).

Operator 13 (1934) Dir. Richard Boleslawski, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Marion Davies (Gail Loveless/Operator13), Gary Cooper (Captain Gailliard), Hattie McDaniel (Maid), Sam McDaniel (Rufus), Mills Brothers (themselves).

Othello (1952) Dir. Orson Welles, Prod. Mercury Productions, Main Cast : Orson Welles (Othello).

Pardon Us (1931) Dir. James Parrot, Prod. MGM/Hal Roach Studios Inc, Main Cast: Stan Laurel (Stanley), Oliver Hardy (Oliver), Boris Karloff (Tiger), June Marlowe (Warden's Daughter), Wilfred Lucas (Warden), James Finlayson (Schoolteacher).

Palmy Days (1931) Dir. Edward A. Sutherland, Prod. Samuel Goldwyn, Choreography Busby Berkeley, Cinematography Gregg Toland, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Eddie Simpson), Charlotte Greenwood (Helen Martin), Barbara Weeks (Joan Clark), Spencer Charters (Mr. Clark), Paul Page (Steve)

Pinch Singer (1936) Dir. Fred C. Newmeyer, Prod. Hal Roach Studios, Main Cast: Chet Brandenburg (Audience extra), Eddie Craven (Elevator boy), Blair Davies (Radio announcer), John 'Uh huh' Collum (Himself), Betty Cox (Herslef). **Comedy Short, 'Our Gang' Series**

The Phantom President (1932) Dir. Norman Taurog, Prod. Paramount Pictures, Main Cast: George M. Cohan (T.K. Blair/Doc Varney), Claudette Colbert (Felicia Hammond), Jimmy Durante (Curly Cooney), George Barbier (Boss Jim Ronkton), Sidney Toler (Prof. Aikenhead), Louise Mackintosh (Sen. Sarah Scranton), Jameson Thomas (Jerrido), Julius McVicker (Sen. Melrose), Charles Middleton (Abe Lincoln (Uncredited), Alan Mowbray (George Washington).

A Plantation Act (1926) Dir. Philip Roscoe, Prod. Warner Bros/Vitaphone, Main Cast: Al Jolson (himself). **Musical Short**

Public Cowboy (1937) Dir. Joe Kane, Prod. Republic, Main Cast: Gene Autry (Deputy Sheriff Gene Autry), Smiley Burnette (Frog Millhouse), Ann Rutherford (Helen Morgan).

Pursuit (1935) Dir. Edwin L. Marin, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Chester Morris (Mitchell), Sally Eilers (Maxine), Scotty Beckett (Donald McCoy 'Donny' Smith), Henry Travers (Thomas 'Tom' Reynolds), C. Henry Gordon (Nick Shawn).

Rainbow Man (1929) Dir. Fred C. Newmeyer, Prod. Paramount, Main cast: Eddie Dowling (Rainbow Ryan), Marian Nixon (Mary Lane), Frankie Darro (Billy Ryan), Sam Hardy (Doc Hardy).

Rhapsody in Black and Blue (1932) Dir. Aubrey Scotto, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Louis Armstrong (himself). **Musical Short.**

Rhapsody in Blue (1945) Dir. Irving Rapper, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Robert Alda (George Gershwin), Joan Leslie (Julie Adams), Julie Adams (Christine Gilbert), Charles Coburn (Max Dreyfus), Julie Bishop (Lee Gershwin), Hazel Scott (herself).

River of Romance (1929) Dir. Richard Wallace, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Natallie Kingston (Mexico), Wallace Beery (Gen. Orlando Jackson). Fred Kohler (Captain Blackie).

Road to Singapore (1940) Dir. Victor Schertzinger, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Bing Crosby (Josh Mallon), Dorothy Lamour (Mima), Bob Hope (Ace Lannigan), Charles Coburn (Joshua Mallon IV).

Roman Scandals (1933) Dir. Frank Tuttle, Prod. Samuel Goldwyn. Cinematography. Gregg Toland, choreography. Busby Berkeley. Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Eddie), Ruth Etting (Olga), Gloria Stuart (Princess Sylvia), Edward Arnold (Emperor Valerius), David Manners (Josephus), Verree Teasdale (Empress Agrippa).

Round up Time in Texas (1937) Dir. Joseph Kane, Prod. Republic, Main Cast: Gene Autry (Himself), Smiley Burnette (Frog Milhouse), Maxine Doyle (Gwen Barkley), LeRoy Mason (John Cardigan), Earle Hodgins (Barkey McKusky).

Rose of Washington Square (1939) Dir. Gregory Ratoff, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Tyrone Power (Bart Clinton), Alice Faye (Rose Sargent), Al Jolson (Ted Cotter), William Frawley (Harry Long).

Saratoga Trunk (1945) Dir. Sam Wood, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Gary Cooper (Colonel Clint Maroon), Ingrid Bergman (Clio Dulaine), Flora Robson (Angelique Buiton).

Say it With Songs (1929) Dir. Lloyd Bacon, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Joe Lane), Davey Lee (Little Pal), Marian Nixon (Katherine Lane), Holmes Herbert (Dr. Robert Merrill).

Seven Faces (1929) Dir. Berthold Viertel, Prod. Fox Film, Main Cast: Paul Muni (Papa Chibou/Diablero/Willie Smith/Franz Schubert/Don Juan/Joe Gans/Napoleon) Marguerite Churchill (Hélène Berthelot) Lester Lonergan (Judge Bertholet).

Showboat (1936) Dir. James Whale, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: Irene Dunne (Magnolia Hawks), Allan Jones (Gaylord Ravenal), Charles Winninger (Cap'n Andy Hawks), Paul Robeson (Joe), Helen Morgan (Julie LaVerne), Helen Westly (Parthy Hawks), Queenie Smith (Ellie May Shipley), Hattie McDaniel (Queenie), Arthur Hohl (Pete), Charles Middleton (Sheriff Ike Vallon).

Show Business (1944) Dir. Edward Marin, Prod. RKO, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Eddie Martin), George Murphy (George Doane), Joan Davis (Joan), Nancy Kelly (Nancy Gay), Constance Moore (Constance Ford), Donald Douglas (Charles Lucas), Bert Gordon (Himself), Gene Sheldon (Himself).

Side Show (1931) Dir. Roy Del Ruth, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Winnie Lightner (Pat), Charles Butterworth (Sidney), Evalyn Knapp (Irene).

The Singing Fool (1928) Dir. Lloyd Bacon, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Al Stone), Betty Bronson (Grace), Josephine Dunn (Molly Winton), Arthur Housman (Blackie Joe), Reed Howes (John Perry), Davey Lee (Sonny Boy), Edward Martindel (Louis Marcus), Helen Lynch (Maid).

The Singing Kid (1936) Dir. William Knightly, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Al Jackson), Sybil Jason (Sybil Haines), Beverly Roberts (Ruth Haines), Edward Everett Horton (Davenport Rogers), Cab Calloway (himself), Lyle Talbot (Robert 'Bob' Carey), Allen Jenkins (Joe Eddy), Clair Dodd (Dana Lawrence), Jack Durant (Babe), Frank Mitchell (Dope), Winifred Shaw (blackface singer).

The Singing Vagabond (1935) Dir. Carl Pierson, Prod. Republic, Main Cast: Gene Autry (Captain Tex Autry), Ann Rutherford (Lettie Morgan), Smiley Burnette (Frog Millhouse).

Somebody Loves Me (1952) Dir. Irving Brecher, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Betty Hutton (Blossom 'Bloss' Seeley), Ralph Meeker (Ben 'Benny' Fields), Robert Keith (Sam Doyle), Adele Jergens (Nola Beach).

Spanky (1932) Dir. Robert F. McGowan, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: George 'Spanky' McFarland (Spanky), Sherwood Bailey (Spud), Mathew 'Stymie' Beard (Stymie/Uncle

Tom/Topsy), Dorothy DeBorba (Dorothy/Little Eva), Billy Gilbert (Spanky's Father).
Comedy Short 'Our Gang' Series

The Spoilers (1942) Dir. Ray Enright, Prod Universal Pictures, Main Cast: Marlene Dietrich (Cherry Malotte), Randolph Scott (McNamara), John Wayne (Glennister), Margaret Lindsay (Helen Chester), Harry Carey (Dextry), Richard Barthelmess (Bronco Kid), Samuel S. Hinds (Judge Stillman), William Farnum (Wheaton), Marietta Canty (Idabelle).

Stand up and Cheer (1934) Dir. Hamilton Mcfadden, Prod. Fox Films, Main Cast: Warner Baxter (Lawrence Cromwell), Madge Evans (Mary Adams), James Dunn (Jimmy Dugan), Sylvia Froos (herself), John Boles (himself), Arthur Byron (John Hardy). Shirley Temple (Shirley Dugan), Ralph Morgan (Secretary To President), Aunt Jemima (herself).

Stormy Weather (1943) Dir Andrew L. Stone, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Lena Horne (Selina Rogers), Bill Robinson (Bill Williamson), Cab Calloway (himself), Katherine Dunham (herself), Fats Waller (himself), Fayard Nicholas (himself), Harold Nicholas (himself), Ada Brown (herself), Dooley Wilson (Gabe Tucker), Emmett 'Babe' Wallace (Chick Bailey), Ernest Whitman (Jim Europe), F.E. Miller (himself), Nick Stewart (Cousin Jake).

Stowaway (1936) Dir William Seiter, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Shirley Temple (Barbara Stewart aka Ching-Ching), Robert Young (Tommy Randall), Alice Faye (Susan Parker/Randall).

Strike Me Pink (1936) Dir. Norman Taurog, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Eddie Pink), Ethel Merman (Joyce Lennox), Sally Eilers (Claribel Higg), Harry Parke (Parkyakarkus), William Frawley (Mr. Copple).

Swanee River (1939) Dir. Sidney Langfield, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Don Ameche (Steven Foster), Andrea Leeds (Jane), Al Jolson (E.P Christy), Felix Bressart (Henry Kleber), Richard Clarke (Tom Harper), Chick Chandler (Bones), Russell Hicks (Andrew McDowell), George Reed (Old Joe), Diane Fisher (Marion Foster), George Breakstone (Ambrose), Al Herman (Tambo), Hall Johnston Choir (themselves).

Swingtime (1936) Dir. George Stevens, Prod. RKO, Main Cast: Fred Astaire (John 'Lucky' Garnett), Ginger Rogers (Penelope "Penny" Carroll), Victor Moore (Pop Everett), Helen Broderick (Mabel Anderson), Eric Bloore (Gordon), Betty Furness (Margaret Watson), Georges Metaxa (Ricardo Romero).

Tarzan The Ape Man (1932) Dir. W.S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan), Neil Hamilton (Harry Holt), Maureen O'Sullivan (Jane Parker).

Thank Your Lucky Stars (1943) Dir. David Butler, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Joan Leslie (Pat Dixon), Eddie Cantor (himself/Joe Simpson), Hattie McDaniel (Gossip), Willie Best (Soldier).

This is the Army (1943) Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: George Murphy (Jerry Jones), Joan Leslie (Eileen Dibble), George Tobias (Maxie Stolloff), Alan Hale (Sergeant McGee), Charles Butterworth (Eddie Dibble), Ronald Reagan (Johnny Jones), Joe Louis (himself).

The Time the Place and the Girl (1946) Dir. David Butler, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: Dennis Morgan (Steven Ross), Jack Carson (Jeff Howard), Janis Paige (Sue Jackson), Martha Vickers (Victoria Cassel).

Threes a Crowd (1927) Dir. Harry Langdon, Prod. Harry Langdon Corp, Main Cast: Harry Langdon (The Odd Fellow), Gladys McConnell (The Girl), Cornelius Keefe (The Man).

Tip Off (1929) Dir. Leigh Jason, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: Monte Montague (Negro), Bill Cody (Jimmy Lamar), George Hackathorne ('Shrimp' Riley).

Top Sergeant Mulligan (1928) Dir. James P. Hogan, Prod. Anchor, Main Cast: Wade Boteler (Top Sergeant Mulligan), Donald Keith (Osborne Wellington Pratt), Lila Lee (The Girl), Wesley Barry (Mickey Neilan), Gareth Hughes (Lieutenant Fritz von Lang).

Torch Song (1953) Dir. Charles Walters, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Joan Crawford (Jenny Stewart), Michael Wilding (Tye Graham), Gig Young (Cliff Willard), Marjorie Raibeau (Mrs. Stewart), Henry Morgan (Joe Denver), Maddie Norman (Anne), Rudy Render (Singer/Pianist).

Two Black Crows in Africa (1929) Dir. Unknown, Prod. Educational Films Corporation, Main Cast: George Moran (Moran), Charles Mack (Mack). **Comedy Short.**

Two Flaming Youths (1927) Dir. John Waters, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: W. C. Fields (Gabby Gilfoil), Chester Conklin (Sheriff Ben Holden), Mary Brian (Mary Gilfoil), Jack Luden (Tony Holden), Charles Mack (Mack), George Moran (Moran). **Comedy Short.**

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1927) Dir. Harry Pollard, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: James B. Lowe (Uncle Tom), Arthur Edmund Carew (George Harris), George Siegmann (Simon Legree), Eulalie Jensen (Cassy), Mona Ray (Topsy), Virginia Grey (Eva), Lassie Lou Ahern (Little Harry), Lucien Litkefield (Laywer marks), Gertrude Howard (Aunt Chloe), John Roche (Augustine St Claire), Ailleen Mannin (Aunt Ophelia).

Up in the Air (1940) Dir. Howard Bretherton, Prod. Monogram, Main Cast: Frankie Darro (Frankie), Mantan Moreland (Jeff Jefferson), Marjorie Reynolds (Anne Mason), Gordon Jones (Tex Barton), Tristram Coffin (Bob Farrell), Lorna Grey (Singer Rita Wilson), Clyde Dilson (Marty Phillips), Dick Elliot (B. J. Hastings).

Walking My Baby Back Home (1953) Dir. Lloyd Bacon, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: Norman Abbot (Doc), Fred Browne (Fred M. Browne), George Cleveland (Col. Dan Wallace), Buddy Hackett (Blimp Edwards), John Hubbard (Rodney Millard).

Whoopee! (1930) Dir. Thornton Freeland, Prod. Samuel Goldwyn. Cinematography. Gregg Toland, Choreography. Busby Berkeley, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (Henry Williams), Ethel Shutta (Mary Custer), Paul Gregory (Wanenis), Eleanor Hunt (Sally Morgan), Jack Rutherford (Sheriff Bob Wells).

Why Bring That Up (1929) Dir. George Abbot, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Charles Mack (Mack), George Moran (Moran), Evelyn Brent (Betty).

Wonder Bar (1934) Dir. Lloyd Bacon, Prod. Warner Bros, Choreography, Busby Berkeley, Main Cast: Al Jolson (Al Wonder), Kay Francis (Liane Renaud), Dolores del Rio (Inez), Ricardo Cortez (Harry the Gigolo), Dick Powell (Tommy).

Yankee Doodle Dandy (1942) Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Bros, Main Cast: James Cagney (George M. Cohan), Joan Leslie (Mary), Walter Hudson (Jerry Cohan), Richard Whorf (Sam Harris), Irene Manning (Fay Templeton).

Ye Old Minstrels (1941) Dir. Ed Cahn and Bud Murray, Prod. MGM, Main Cast: Billy 'Froggy' Laughlin (Froggy), Darla Hood (Darla), Robert Blake (Mickey), Billie Thomas (Buckwheat), Walter Wills (Minstrel Maestro). **Comedy Short, 'Our Gang Series'**.

Yes Sir, Mr Bones (1951) Dir. Ron Ormond, Prod. Spartan, Main Cast: Gary Jackson (as Gary L. Jackson), William E. Green (as Billy Green), Elliot Carpenter (as Elliott Carpenter), and Chick Watts, Cotton Watts, Ches Davis, F.E. Miller, William E. Green

You Can't Cheat an Honest Man (1939) Dir. George Marshall, Prod. Universal, Main Cast: W.C. Fields (Larson E Whipsnade), Edgar Bergman, (The Great Edgar) Charlie McCarthy (himself), Constance Moore (Victoria Whipsnade), John Arledge (Phineas Whipsnade), James Bush (Roger bel-goodie), Blacaman (himself), Eddie Anderson (Cheerful).

Your My Everything (1949) Dir. Walter Lang, Prod. 20th Century Fox, Main Cast: Dan Dailey (Timothy O'Connor), Anne Baxter (Hannah Adams), Anne Revere (Aunt Jane), Stanley Ridges (Mr. Henry Mercer).

Ziegfeld Follies (1946) Dir. Vincente Minnelli, Prod. MGM. Main Cast: Fred Astaire (Raffles/Tai Long), Lucille Ball (Specialty), Lucille Bremer (Princess/Moy Ling).

A Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic (alt title *Midnight Frolics* (1929) Dir. Joseph Santley, Prod. Paramount, Main Cast: Eddie Cantor (himself), Richard Dix (himself).

A Ziegfeld Girl (1940) Dir. Robert Z. Leonard, Prod. MGM, Choreography Busby Berkeley, Main Cast: James Stewart (Gilbert Young), Judy Garland (Susan Gallagher), Hedy Lamarr (Mrs. Sandra Kolter), Lana Turner (Sheila 'Red' Regan/Flatbush).

Teleography.

Jazz (Epidode 4), USA, BBC2, tx 13.6.2001

The History of Tap, USA, BBC2, tx. 24/02/01

X Rated, UK, C4, tx 17/6/97

APPENDIX

A CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF THE PERSISTENCE OF BLACKFACE IN EARLY SOUND FILM

- 1926 *A Plantation Act*
- 1927 *The Jazz Singer*
- 1927 *Two Flaming Youths*
- 1928 *The Matinee Idol*
- 1928 *The Singing Fool*
- 1928 *Top Sergeant Mulligan*
- 1929 *The Girl in the Show*
- 1929 *Glorifying the American Girl*
- 1929 *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*
- 1929 *Melody Lane*
- 1929 *Minstrel Days*
- 1929 *Noah's Ark*
- 1929 *Not Quite Decent*
- 1929 *Rainbow Man*
- 1929 *River of Romance*
- 1929 *Seven Faces*
- 1929 *Tip Off*
- 1929 *Two Black Crows in Africa*
- 1929 *Why Bring that Up*
- 1929 *A Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic* (alt title *Midnight Frolics*)
- 1930 *Abraham Lincoln*
- 1930 *Anniversary Trouble*
- 1930 *Anybody's War*
- 1930 *Big Boy*
- 1930 *Check and Double Check*
- 1930 *A Colourful Sermon*
- 1930 *Ducks and Deducts*
- 1930 *Golden Dawn*
- 1930 *The Grand Parade*
- 1930 *Happy Days*
- 1930 *Her Unborn Child*
- 1930 *The King of Jazz*
- 1930 *Mammy*
- 1930 *Whoopee!*
- 1931 *Blonde Venus*
- 1931 *Pardon Us*
- 1931 *Palmy Days*
- 1931 *Side Show*

1932 *Dream House*
1932 *Kid From Spain*
1932 *The Phantom President*
1932 *Tarzan The Ape Man*
1932 *Spanky*
1933 *Captain Henry's Radio Show*
1933 *Diplomaniacs*
1933 *Footlight Parade*
1933 *Going Hollywood*
1933 *Hypnotised*
1933 *Roman Scandals*
1934 *George White's Scandals*
1934 *House Wife*
1934 *In Old Kentucky*
1934 *Kid Millions*
1934 *Mickey's Minstrels*
1934 *Operator 13*
1934 *Stand up and Cheer*
1934 *Wonder Bar*
1935 *The Big Broadcast of 1936*
1935 *Dante's Inferno*
1935 *Go into Your Dance*
1935 *Harmony Lane*
1935 *The Littlest Rebel*
1935 *Pursuit*
1935 *The Singing Vagabond*
1936 *Dimples*
1936 *Can this Be Dixie*
1936 *College Holiday*
1936 *The Big Broadcast of 1937*
1936 *The Great Ziegfeld*
1936 *Pinch Singer*
1936 *Showboat*
1936 *The Singing Kid*
1936 *Swingtime*
1937 *Ali Baba Goes to Town*
1937 *Artists and Models*
1937 *Cafe Metropole*
1937 *A Day at the Races*
1937 *Hollywood Hotel*
1937 *Round up Time in Texas*
1938 *Everybody Sing*
1938 *Hard to Get*
1939 *Babes in Arms*
1939 *Rose of Washington Square*
1939 *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man*

1939 *Swanee River*
1940 *Carolina Moon*
1940 *Dance Girl Dance*
1940 *If I had My Way*
1940 *Road to Singapore*
1940 *Up in the Air*
1940 *A Ziegfeld Girl*
1941 *Babes on Broadway*
1941 *Minstrel Days*
1941 *Ye Old Minstrels*
1942 *The Spoilers*
1942 *Yankee Doodle Dandy*
1942 *Holliday Inn*
1943 *Coney Island*
1943 *Dixie*
1943 *Stormy Weather*
1943 *This is the Army*
1944 *Here Come The Waves*
1944 *Minstrel Man*
1944 *ShowBuisness*
1945 *Boston Blackie 's Rendevous*
1945 *The Dolly Sisters*
1945 *Rhapsody in Blue*
1945 *Saratoga Trunk*
1946 *Genius at Work*
1946 *The Jolson Story*
1946 *The Time the Place and the Girl*
1946 *Ziegfeld Follies*
1948 *Always Leave Them Laughing*
1947 *A Double Life*
1948 *If You Knew Susie*
1949 *Jolson Sings Again*
1949 *Your My Everything*
1951 *Yes Sir, Mr Bones*
1952 *I Dream of Jeannie*
1952 *Othello*
1952 *Somebody Loves Me*
1953 *The Eddie Cantor Story*
1953 *Torch Song*
1953 *Walking my Baby Back Home*