

CHRYsalis

[kris-uh-lis]

from Latin chrȳsallis, from Greek khrusallis

1. the obtect pupa of a moth or butterfly
2. anything in the process of developing

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CHRYsalis was created by Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson as a vehicle to showcase the most innovative, rigorous, and sophisticated research produced by students within the context of her Art History courses at McGill University (Montreal). Over the years, Nelson observed that undergraduate students in her courses were more than capable of producing exceptional research on par with that of graduate students, and at times even professional academics. Disappointed that the majority of these students were faced with a negligible audience (if any) for their incredible work, with the help of her MA Art History student Anna T. January, Nelson came up with the idea to provide another platform for their research dissemination. CHRYsalis is that platform!

CHRYsalis is an open access, electronic journal that will be published quarterly on Nelson's research website: www.blackcanadianstudies.com The goal of CHRYsalis is transformation: to publish scholarship that seeks answers to exciting new questions, to encourage students to undertake primary research and to open the discipline of Art History in ways that make it more welcoming to a diverse population of students. For more information please contact: charmaine.nelson@mcgill.ca

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PRECIOUS AND THE PERPETUATION OF COLOURISM

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Fig. 1: Lee Daniels *Precious* (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) sits in class at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

Colourism, or color stratification, was coined by author Alice Walker to describe a form of oppression that is expressed through the deferential treatment of individuals and groups based primarily on skin color.¹ This type of discrimination leads to intra-communal preferences for lighter skinned blacks in areas such as income, education, housing, marriage, and is a root cause of black self-hatred.² This essay will argue that colourism is still a major contributor in society’s representation and understanding of the black subject. The effect of colourism in the division of representation between whiteness, as a symbol of goodness, and blackness, as a symbol of malevolence, continues to manifest itself in contemporary culture, particularly in film. This manifestation in modern film can be seen in Lee Daniels’ movie *Precious* (2009), whereby all dark skinned characters were cast as villains, or intellectual inferiors, and all light skinned characters were cast as saviours.

Color stratification is a form of discrimination that is directly tied to America’s colonial past.³ The perpetual rape of African American female slaves by white male slave owners resulted in new generations of slaves with ever lighter complexions. These mixed race slaves, or “mulattoes,” were considered aesthetically superior to their dark skinned counterparts because of their proximity to whiteness. Slavery was a form of white domination that rewarded individuals who emulated whiteness in all aspects of life.⁴ These Eurocentric aesthetic preferences for lighter skinned slaves over darker skinned ones did not exclusively involve a consideration of skin tone, but also involved the consideration of hair texture, lip thickness, eye color, nose shape and other physiognomical features.⁵



Fig. 2: Lee Daniels *Precious* (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Blu Rain (Paula Patton) stands in front of her class at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

The differential treatment of slaves based on white ancestry, was most evident in the division of labour in the plantation systems of the Americas. Field slaves were disproportionately of pure African ancestry (or darker skinned) and were assigned to perform the most physically demanding and menial tasks in their service to whites.⁶ These dark skinned slaves remained largely unskilled throughout their lives and experienced the

least amount of contact with the language and customs of their white oppressors. House slaves, on the other hand, were largely the mixed race slaves, direct descendants of the sexual amalgamation that took place between white slave owners and their female property. These mixed race slaves fetched the highest prices in the slave market and were generally assigned more prestigious positions within the slaving system.⁷ Such desirable positions included employment in the slave owner’s kitchen or the opportunity to perform domestic work in the Big House. These types of skilled occupations were frequently reserved for the enslaved children of the slave owners. Such opportunities to possess a skill were not only a source of pride among slaves, but were equally a confirmation of other greater privileges which included the possibility of one day being able to buy one’s own freedom.⁸

These privileges and preferences associated with lighter skin slaves, were not the exclusive conviction of white patriarchal society, but became as much an intra-racial issue as a cross racial one. Mixed race slaves were entirely conscious of the physiognomical differences that separated them from their darker counterparts.⁹ Not only were they cognizant of these differences, they were led to assume that their “white blood” did indeed mark them as superior. The similarities between mulattoes and whites, in dress, physical appearance, speech and customary behaviour, equally reinforced these assumptions of superiority among the slave population as a whole. As a result of these color hierarchies, many slaves began to internalize the assumption that light skin was a desirable asset, while dark skin and black physiognomical characteristics were undesirable signs of inferiority.¹⁰ Thus, blackness represented everything that whiteness was not. It represented savagery, sexually promiscuity, stupidity and laziness. It was this very contrast between blackness and whiteness that was used as a justification for the enslavement and maltreatment of millions of Africans and the creation of the African Diaspora.¹¹

These interracial divisions between light and dark skinned individuals are equally a problem today as they were four hundred years ago. This internalized form of racism is a



Fig. 3: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) and Blu Rain (Paula Patton) first encounter at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

significant dividing force among modern black communities, whereby the repercussions of the slaving system has produced self-hatred among blacks who do not fit into these oppressive and limiting racial hierarchies.¹² The perseverance of colourism in modern society is reinforced by white patriarchal ideologies that continue to contaminate and

control popular culture. The deep-seated biases of color stratification are continuously present in modern advertisements

and beauty campaigns.¹³ In addition to the media, the preference for light skinned individuals over dark skinned individuals is perpetuated within popular entertainment, most especially in film.

These disparities of representation between whiteness as a symbol of virtue, and blackness as a symbol of sin, were reinforced by racist motion pictures such as D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915) and Raoul Walsh’s Band of Angels (1957). These films perpetuated the firmly held conviction that whiteness was superior to the savageries and evil tendencies that were associated with the dark, black “negro.”¹⁴ Not only did these films maintain a strict division between whiteness and blackness, they equally propagated the white supremacist belief that mixed race individuals are superior to their dark skinned counterparts due to their close proximity to the white race.¹⁵ This preferential treatment of light skinned blacks is notable in Band of Angels, when Amantha Starr’s character, an exceptionally light skinned Negro slave, was granted superior treatment over her dark skinned equivalents. Not only did Mantha’s character fetch a higher price in the slave auction in New Orleans, but her closeness to Eurocentric ideals of beauty provided her with enough charm to entice her slaver (Hamish Bond played by Clark Gable), which ultimately led to her freedom. This opportunity for freedom, as Patricia Mohammed discusses, would rarely occur for dark skinned slaves in Caribbean slaving colonies.¹⁶

Colourism in Modern Day Film

Although it is very rare to see barefaced examples of racial politics in modern film, subtle instances of colourism are still being exploited by modern motion pictures, either consciously or unconsciously, as markers of goodness versus lewdness between black and white bodies. This continued perpetuation of color stratification in motion pictures can be seen in the 2009 movie Precious, based on the novel Push (1996) by Sapphire. Although directed, produced and scripted by three African Americans, Precious reinforces the deep-seated stereotypical assumptions that

give privilege to light skinned individuals over their dark skinned counterparts.¹⁷ Such stereotyping strengthens the dated assumption that lightness is a representation of all that is good, while blackness is the antithesis to these white ideals.¹⁸

This movie was directed by Lee Daniels and like the title suggests, was based on Sapphire's award winning novel Push that describes the story of an illiterate, African American Harlem adolescent who was raped by her father and battered by her mother. Pregnant for the second time with her father's child, readers follow Claireece Precious Jones' journey that begins with a life full of heartache and tragedy, to a life full of enlightenment and education. A fundamental character behind Precious Jones' transformational journey, from an illiterate and abused teenager, to an independent mother of two, is a radical African American teacher named Blu Rain.

Daniels rendition of Sapphire's novel made its debut in 2009 and was almost instantaneously met with criticism from the black community.¹⁹ Although nearly consisting of an entire black cast, Daniels' film was criticized for supporting long-standing traditions of racist stereotypes that continued the oppression of black people in society. The vast majority of these criticisms focused on Daniels' troubling cast choices that chose to portray all light skinned African American characters as good,

and all dark skinned African American characters as bad.²⁰ This allocation of roles, based on skin stratification, perpetuated the white supremacist belief that an individual's proximity to whiteness indicates the extent of their virtuousness, while an individual's proximity to blackness indicates their associations with immorality and lewdness.²¹

This article will focus exclusively on the film's portrayal of Precious [fig. 1] and her teacher Blu Rain [fig. 2], played by actresses Gabourey Sidibe and Paula Patton respectively, in an attempt to reveal the workings of colourism in Daniels' film as an enforcer of this good versus bad stereotype that is a legacy of slave society. This distinction between lightness and darkness, as good versus evil, or desirable versus undesirable, is primarily achieved through the film's use of lighting and Daniels' departure from fundamental components of Sapphire's novel.

Sapphire's novel Push is not only a story about the struggles of an overweight, black, Harlem adolescent, but it is also a story about the lead character's journey towards self-

Fig. 4: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Blu Rain (Paula Patton) teaches Precious' (Gabourey Sidibe) to read, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.



acceptance through a gradual rejection of society's "white as right" beauty aesthetic.²² This gradual transition is reinforced by her acceptance of her black skin color. Precious' alternative school teacher, Blu Rain, mediated her journey. In the novel, Blu Rain is described as "dark, with big eyes and long dreadlocky hair..."²³ However, Daniels' decision to cast actress Paula Patton as Precious' mentor in his film is a rather disturbing choice since Patton's embodiment of the character, as a light skinned actress with relaxed hair, undermines one of *Push*'s central messages.²⁴ Precious' journey towards self-acceptance in *Push* was facilitated by her positive identification with Miss Rain who is a strong, *Black*, female role model. In her novel, Sapphire clearly associated Precious' personal growth with her positive identification with blackness in herself and in others as a means to negate her negative view of blackness as represented by her mother, her father and her former self.²⁵ Precious' identification with Patton's character, on the other hand, is problematic because it reinforces the not-so-subtle message that white and light skinned individuals are morally superior to their darker skinned counterparts. It is almost as if whiteness is a prerequisite for Precious' transformation and without it, this change would be impossible. As a result, the film perpetuates the ideological and prejudiced assumption that all heroes come in light or white skins.²⁶

Daniels' Cinematography Techniques: Reinforcing the "White as Right" Beauty Aesthetic

This distinction in *Precious*, between white as a symbol of good and black as a symbol of bad, was increasingly accentuated by Daniels' use of lighting. Throughout the film, Ms. Rain's character was backlit while Precious' character was positioned in the shadows. This distinction became abundantly clear when both actresses appeared in the same scene. One of the most palpable scenes of Daniels' film that exposes these underlying aesthetic biases is when Blu Rain and Precious meet for the first time in a dimly lit corridor at the *Each One, Teach One School* [fig 3]. Recently having

retched up an entire box of fried chicken, Precious' exceedingly large body, slumps laboriously into a chair as if in complete reluctance to go to class. At this very moment of Precious' disinclination, a door is opened at the end of the hallway and a stream of afternoon light floods the scene. Positioned within this stream of bright light is Blu Rain.

Fig. 5: Lee Daniels *Precious* (Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Teacher Blu Rain (Paula Patton) talks to Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes



The angelic quality of Patton's character is further emphasised when Precious walks into her classroom for the first time. Upon crossing the threshold, between the dark hallway and Ms. Rain's classroom, audiences are blinded by a flash of pure white light. This pure white light is not an uncommon filmography technique to symbolize an individual's ascension into heaven.²⁷ Thus, it is almost as if Precious has ascended into a heavenly sphere that is encoded as white, where Blu Rain's character becomes an embodiment of the white redeemer for the dark black body. This association between righteousness and light is



Fig. 6: Lee Daniels *Precious* (Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious' (Gabourey Sidibe) sits in the shadows of her class, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes

commonly cited in the bible such that "...the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day."²⁸ Blu Rain with her light skin color is the very symbol of morality and it is this morality that is so central to Precious' success.

This symbol of white sustenance is accentuated even more in Daniels' reading scene when Blu Rain evaluates Precious' reading abilities [fig. 4]. Positioned in the shadows of Blu Rain's office, Precious is incapable of reading a book on her own. Through Miss Rain's guidance, however, she begins to sound out numerous words and forms multiple sentences. This attempt by Precious is marked by her transition from the shadows of the office to her body's complete illumination by the very light that continuously shines upon Ms. Rain's face. This particular scene supports the ideological bias that privileges lightness over darkness as a representation of goodness and intellectual superiority. The compassion and intelligence that is afforded to Patton's character, through her light skin colour, is literally and figuratively being transferred onto Precious' inferior black body.

Daniels' choice in lighting not only stresses Patton's moral and intellectual superiority as a mixed raced individual but also equally accentuates her European facial features, which drastically contrast with Precious' black physiognomy. By continuously backlighting Patton's character, audiences have an unobstructed view of her exceptionally straight hair, thinner lips and nose, as well as her exceedingly light skin [fig. 5]. The emphasis on Patton's proximity to Eurocentric aesthetic preferences is further stressed by Precious' numerous voiceovers that praise her teacher's beauty. These voiceovers echo the internalized assumptions, preserved in slaving societies that understood light skin to be a desirable asset while dark skin was a sign of inferiority.²⁹ The beauty of Patton's character is thus telegraphed by Daniels' decision to place Precious' character in the shadows of numerous scenes. This placement of Sidibe in dimly lit

corners obscures her black facial features to such an extent that her face becomes an indistinguishable dark form [fig. 6]. This use of lighting in Daniels' film clearly distinguishes Patton's "attractiveness" from Sidibe's "unattractiveness." As a result, *Precious* reinforces the white patriarchal belief that one's proximity to whiteness determines their physical attractiveness. Sidibe's lack of Eurocentric beauty marks her as undesirable and as a result, her character becomes just another unappealing dark skinned African American woman.³⁰

Fatness as a Critique of Blackness

The undesirability of Precious' character is further emphasised by her large figure. Although Sapphire makes it clear to readers that Precious weighs over two hundred pounds, her weight is not a central component of the novel.³¹ Nowhere in Sapphire's *Push* is Precious' character outrightly criticized for her voluptuous figure. In Daniels' film, however, her fatness becomes a critique of her overall character as something that is undesirable and repulsive. This undesirability is directly associated with her looks and becomes a primary concern in Daniels' film. The repulsiveness associated with Precious' character is further emphasized by her tight clothing, which seems incapable of containing her excessive weight [fig. 7].³² Throughout the film, Gabourey Sidibe's character is shown consuming her food in the most revolting manner possible. Numerous scenes of the film show her licking and sucking her fingers like an animal, while the greasy extras of her food dribble down her thick cheeks and chin. The nastiness and excessiveness that Daniels attributes to her dark body assists in desexualizing her character to such a point that she becomes a big, black entity. Such revolting scenes in *Precious* further reinforce the entrenched stereotypes that associate blackness with loathing and disgust.³³

Blu Rain, on the other hand, is continuously portrayed in a desirable manner. Her proper fitting clothes accentuate this desirability, which unlike Precious, emphasises her slim and alluring figure. The numerous men in the film who are enticed by her beauty, further emphasize the attractiveness and charm associated with Patton's character.³⁴ It becomes clear then, that Patton and Sidibe's characters are portrayed as opposites. If Precious is an obese, dark skinned, illiterate teenager who is contaminated with HIV, raped by

Fig. 7: Lee Daniels *Precious* (Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious' (Gabourey Sidibe) walking the streets of Harlem, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.



her father and beaten by her mother, Patton's character is the complete opposite. She is a light skinned, employed, highly intelligent and desirable woman who is in a healthy and loving relationship. This strict division between light and dark, as desirable and undesirable, is a poor reflection of Sapphire's Push.

Daniels' decision to cast Blu Rain's character as a light, rather than a dark skinned individual, may have been motivated by his necessity to provide audiences with a clear visual distinction between Precious' abusive mother and Blu Rain. This, however, is a serious misreading of the novel. Both of these women were described by Sapphire as dark skinned to negate the prejudices associated with blackness.³⁵ By representing Blu Rain as a compassionate and intelligent dark skinned woman, Sapphire provides readers with a strong statement that dark skinned individuals are both good and bad. This rejection of white as good and Black as bad stereotype disrupts society's ideological assumptions and racial hierarchies that continue to position blackness as an inferior category to the white race. Daniels' decision to cast Patton as Blu Rain unfortunately reinforces the very stereotypes that Sapphire's novel eroded. This reinforcement of negative stereotypes can also be understood through Daniels' choice to use creative license in the casting of Blu Rain's role, but not for the roles of Precious' father Carl or Precious' mother Mary. If Daniels chose to make Blu Rain a light skinned woman, why did he not also choose to make Carl a light skinned man or Mary, a light skinned woman? These neglected alternatives would have undoubtedly counteracted the film's clear hints of colourism.³⁶

Although most elements of the film Precious perpetuate the engrained privileges awarded to light skinned African Americans, Daniels does a commendable job at demonstrating black self-hatred that is the direct product of white supremacist color hierarchies that afford more value to whiteness than blackness. This internalized self-hatred towards blackness is exceptionally clear in Daniels' film when Precious looks into a mirror and rather than seeing her own reflection, is confronted with a blonde hair, blue eyed, skinny adolescent girl. This longing for whiteness and refusal of black physiognomy is reinforced by Precious' numerous voiceovers that reference her desires to be "white, skinny [with] long straight hair...". Such scenes are essential to exposing the global phenomenon of black self-hatred that is continuously affecting African American youth and women.³⁷

Altogether, color stratification is an enduring phenomenon in modern society and is perpetuated through popular culture. Unfortunately, this perpetuation of colourism in modern film can be seen in Daniels' movie Precious. Although considered a black Hollywood motion picture, Daniels' unsettling cast choices reveal the extent to which colourism is not exclusively across racial issue, but also an intra-racial one. This perpetuation of colourism in the black community is clear in an interview with Daniels when he blatantly admitted to being "prejudiced against people who are darker than [him]..." adding that "making [Precious] changed [his] heart" and that "[he] will never look at a fat girl...the same way."³⁸ This statement by Daniels reveals the extent to which colourism is still engrained in society and exposes the extreme difficulty that society faces in its attempt to eliminate it. If a black film director is unable to make a film without skin tone prejudices, how does one expect to change a white patriarchal society

dominated by the “white as right” ideological bias? It seems, therefore, that the normative production of a film free of colourism may be further away than we may desire.

Notes:

¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose* (Chicago: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), pp. 290-91.

² Cedric Herring, “Skin Deep: Race and Complexion in a the ‘Color Blind’ Era,” *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the ‘Color Blind’ Era*, eds. Cedric Herring, Verna Keith and Hayward Horton (Illinois: University of Illinois press: 2004), p. 2.

³ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 80. However, it is important to note that colourism transcended the nation of America and proliferated across the Americas, Asia, and Europe as a by-product of slavery.

⁴ Margaret Hunter, “The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality,” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 2007), p. 237.

⁵ Huberta Jackson-Lowman, *Afrikan American Women: Living in the Crossroads of Race, Gender, Class, and Culture* (San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2012), p.158.

⁶ Maxine Thompson and Verna Keith, “Copper Brown and Blue Black: Colorism and Self-Evaluation,” *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the ‘Color Blind’ Era*, eds. Cedric Herring, Verna Keith and Hayward Horton (Illinois: University of Illinois press: 2004), p. 47.

⁷ Ben Arogundade, *Black Beauty: A History and a Celebration* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000), p. 5

⁸ Thompson and Keith, “Copper Brown and Black Blue,” p. 45.

⁹ Patrick Manning, *The African Diaspora: A History Through Culture* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 15.

¹⁰ Jackson-Lowman, *Afrikan American Women: Living in the Crossroads of Race, Gender, Class, and Culture*, p. 167.

¹¹ Paul Lovejoy, *Crossing Memories: Slavery and African Diaspora* (Africa World Press, 2011), p. 108.

¹² Stephanie Rose Bird, *Light, Bright and Damned near White: Biracial and Triracial Culture in America* (Westport Connecticut: Praeger, 2009), p. 20.

¹³ It is only recently that black models and actresses have begun to act as spokesmodels for makeup firms like Estée, Laurier, Revlon and Covergirl. Some actress and models include the singer Rihanna, as well as actresses Halley Berry and Queen Latifah. For more information on colourism in advertisements, see Ronald E. Hall, “Manifestations of Racism in the 21st Century,” *Racism in the 21st Century: An Empirical Analysis of Skin Color* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2008).

¹⁴ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2001), pp. 13-17. It is important to note however, that *Band of Angels* differed in its portrayal of the “black aggressor” since many of the film’s white actors including Patric Knowles (who played Charles de Marigny) and the suitor/soldier Capt. Seth Parton played by Rex Reason, were cast as the sexual aggressors against the “black” Amantha. Furthermore, this aggression only commenced once these white men found out that Amantha was not really the white daughter of an upper class planter, but a mixed race woman born to a slave.

¹⁵ For more films, including contemporary examples of colourism in film see Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), Universal Pictures, USA, 125 minutes; John Ford and Elia Kazan’s *Pinky* (1949), 20th century Fox, USA, 102 minutes; Spike Lee’s *School Daze* (1988), Columbia Pictures, USA, 121 minutes; Robert Benton’s *The Human Stain* (2003) Miramax Films, 106 minutes and Oprah Winfrey’s TV series *The Wedding* (1998) directed by Charles Burnett, USA, 240 minutes.

¹⁶ Patricia Mohammed, “ ‘But Most of All mi Love me Browning’: The Emergence in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Jamaica of the Mulatto Woman as the Desired,” *Reconstructing Femininities: Colonial Intersections of Gender, Race, Religion and Class*, *Feminist Review*, no. 65 (summer, 2000), pp. 29, 32.

¹⁷ *Precious* was directed by Lee Daniels, produced by Oprah Winfrey, and adapted by Geoffrey Fletcher from the novel *Push* by Sapphire.

¹⁸ It is interesting that Oprah Winfrey, the producer of Daniels film, allowed these obvious skin stratification biases to pass even though she is a major advocate against colourism in film and popular culture. See Oprah’s *Lifeclass Colorism: The Secret Shame*, directed by Michael McNamara, 10 January 2014 (Season 5, Episode 2) and *Dark Girls*, directed by D. Channsin Berry and Bill Duke, 14 September 2011, documentary for her thoughts on the perpetuation of colourism in America.

¹⁹ Criticisms from the black community include a review from journalist Armond White called, "Precious is the most damaging Film to the Black Image Since 'Birth of a Nation'," Hip Hop and Politics, <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2009/11/19/armond-white-precious-is-the-most-damaging-film-since-birth-of-a-nation> (date of last access, 8 June 2014). Interestingly, such criticisms were not the case from many white reviews that praised the movie as a genuine work of art. See A. O. Scott, "Howls of Life, Buried Deep Within," New York Times Magazine, 5 November 2009.

²⁰ Mo'Nique Imes-Jackson and Rodney Bear Jackson played Precious' physically and emotionally abusive parents, while Mariah Carey, Paula Patton and Lenny Kravitz played Precious' welfare case worker, a teacher and a nurse respectively.

²¹ Tara Green, Presenting Oprah Winfrey, her films and African American Literature (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 172.

²² Green, Presenting Oprah Winfrey, p. 172.

²³ Sapphire Lofton, Push (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 39.

²⁴ It is essential to question Daniels' casting decision of Blu Rain's role when he could have easily chosen an actress, such as Whoopi Goldberg, who would have been better suited to Sapphire's description.

²⁵ Green, Presenting Oprah Winfrey, p. 175.

²⁶ Green, Presenting Oprah Winfrey, p. 172.

²⁷ Pamela Jaye Smith, Symbols + Images + Codes: The Secret Language of Meaning in Film, T.V., Games and Visual Media (California: Studio City CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2010), p. 20.

²⁸ Anonymous, The Oxford Study Bible with the Apocrypha (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): Proverbs, p. 4.

²⁹ Jackson-Lowman, African American Women: Living in the Crossroads of Race, Gender, Class, and Culture, p. 167.

³⁰ This perception of unattractiveness is still a modern phenomenon, whereby black men are more likely to find lighter skinned black women attractive. This is the direct result of colourism, see Kimberly Jade Norman, Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and The Myth of a Postracial America, (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 16.

³¹ Green, Presenting Oprah Winfrey, her films and African American Literature, p. 175.

³² Nowhere in Sapphire's novel is the character Precious described as wearing tight-fitting clothing.

³³ Green, Presenting Oprah Winfrey, p. 177.

³⁴ Such men include Precious' light-skinned male nurse John McFadden, played by actor Lenny Kravitz.

³⁵ Bidisha, "Sapphire: 'I knew it was Disturbing,'" The Guardian, 18 September 2011.

³⁶ Dissent, "Sex, Race and Precious," Dissent A Quarterly of Politics and Culture, http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/sex-race-and-precious (date of last access 10 April 2014).

³⁷ Lynn Hirschberg, "The Audacity of 'Precious,'" New York Magazine, 21 October 2009.

³⁸ Hirschberg, "The Audacity of 'Precious'," .

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PLATE LIST:

Figure 1: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) sits in class at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

Figure 2: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Blu Rain (Paula Patton) stands in front of her class at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

Figure 3: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) and Blu Rain (Paula Patton) first encounter at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

Figure 4: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Blu Rain (Paula Patton) teaches Precious’ (Gabourey Sidibe) to read, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

Figure 5: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Teacher Blu Rain (Paula Patton) talks to Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) at the Each One, Teach One school, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes

Figure 6: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious’ (Gabourey Sidibe) sits in the shadows of her class, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes

Figure 7: Lee Daniels Precious (Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire) (2009), film still, scene: Precious’ (Gabourey Sidibe) walking the streets of Harlem, Lionsgate, USA, 1 hour 50 minutes.

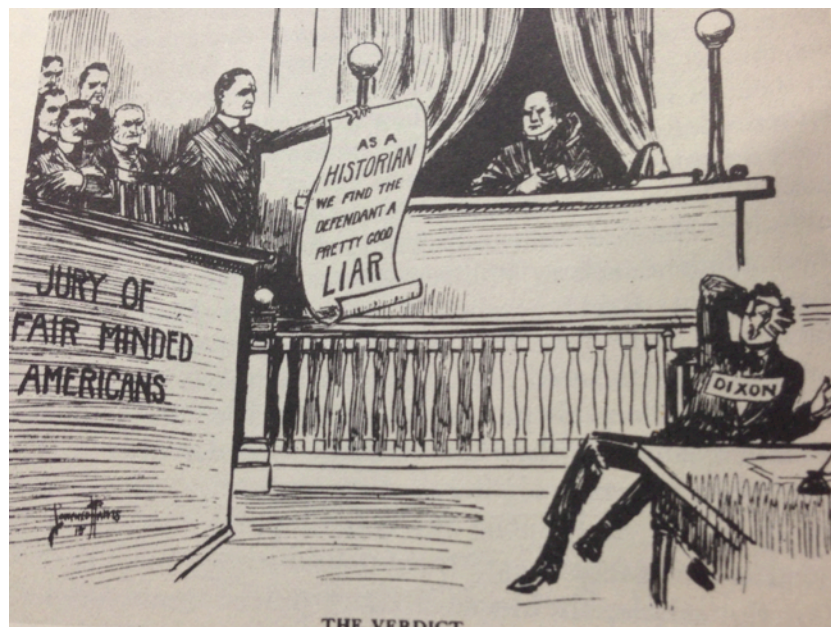
THE CINEMATIC DEGRADATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN DAVID WARK GRIFFITH'S *BIRTH OF A NATION*

Caitlin Cohen

Nowhere is the cinematic degradation of African Americans more obvious than in David Wark Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905), the film tells the story of two families and their experiences during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction period. Opening on 8 February 1915 in Los Angeles, as Daniel Leab asserts, this movie quickly became recognized as "Hollywood's first big gun in its war against the black American."¹ In spite of its negative anti-black depictions and systematic revision of history, *Birth of a Nation* is still among the most viewed² and highest grossing films of all time.³ This essay takes a two-part approach by first analysing the reasons that this film became so popular and then the consequential results of its success. Its fame was not the result of one direct cause, but rather, it was the convergence of multiple factors, including the historical conditions of the time, the revolutionary technical and aesthetic qualities of the film, the support of American President Woodrow Wilson, and an unprecedented publicity campaign. While there are some positive outcomes of the film's popularity, the negative effects of its overt racism, including cementing stereotypical representations of blacks, increased race hatred and violence, and the revitalization of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), are much more significant. The extent of these negative consequences demonstrates the film industry's (and more specifically) *Birth of a Nation*'s ideological power to shape racial prejudices.

Birth of a Nation became an immediate success and is still ranked as the all-time box office champion among American silent films.⁴ At a time when movie theatres held a film for only a few days, *Birth of a Nation* was shown for ten consecutive months in New York City and twenty-two weeks in Los Angeles.⁵ Newspapers across the country published thousands of excellent reviews and references to the film. As film critic C.F. Zittel argued, "The Birth of a Nation' will thrill you, startle you, make you hold on to your seats. It will make you laugh. It will make you cry... It is not only worth riding miles to see, but it is worth walking miles to

Fig. 1: N.A., [Cartoon that was part of the NAACP's vigorous campaign against *The Birth of a Nation*. Cartoon], (1915), Pen and Ink, *The Crisis* (New York City, NY), October 1915 issue.



see.”⁶ However, many harsh criticisms were also levelled at the film. It was the fusion of art, entertainment, and persistent propaganda that generated both love and hatred towards the film. Due to these components, it was ultimately banned from playing in specific American cities as well as France.⁷ Despite the intense controversy surrounding the film (mostly from the strong opposition of the *National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People* [NAACP] as well as some sympathetic whites) [fig. 1], many Americans praised the movie and Griffith was enshrined as film’s “first master.”⁸ In order to properly understand the great effect that *Birth of a Nation* had on American society, it is essential to first analyze the four reasons that this film became so popular.

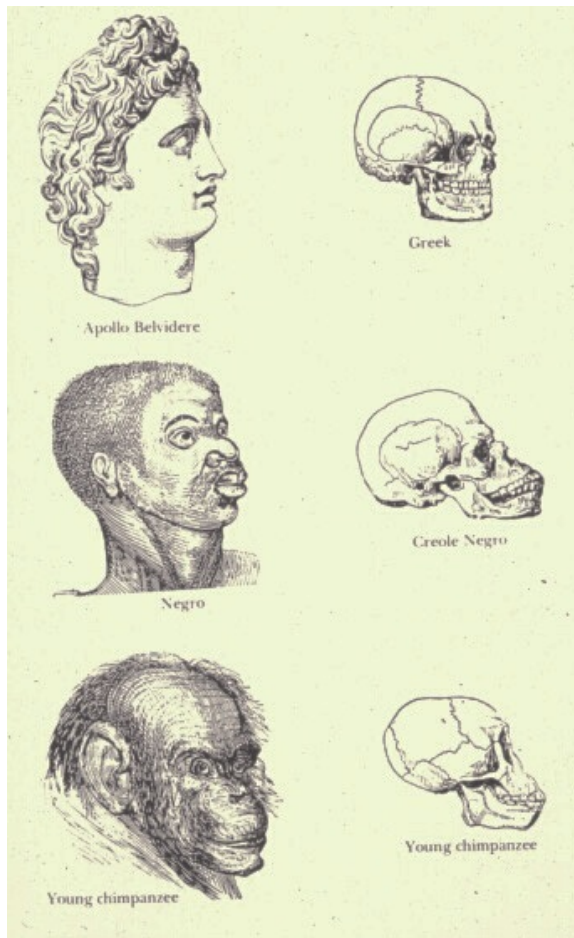


Fig. 2 Samuel George Morton, [The findings of anthropological “science” to deem the inferiority of African Americans compared to the white race.

As shown here, a black male’s skull was presented to be close to that of an ape (a lower intellectual capacity). The white skull, on the other hand, was shown by means of a Greek sculpture. Anthropologists would not even criticize the look of the white male for the extent of “science”], sketch, published in J.C. Nott and Geo R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*: or,

Birth of a Nation was in many ways both a response to and commentary on the many social, political, and cultural conditions within America at the time of the movie’s production. Woodrow Wilson had just been sworn in as President (1913), becoming the first Southern Democrat to win a presidential election since the Civil War.⁹ While the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods had brought new black independence and political rights, Wilson’s presidency attempted to return American society to former discriminatory beliefs and practices.¹⁰ Fearing the severe dangers to the social and political order that would “inevitably” come from “Negro Rule,” the white South established the Jim Crow system of legally sanctioned segregation in all public spaces to counter black citizens’ new freedom.¹¹ Believing that African-Americans challenged the idea of a “pure” Anglo-Saxon country, these laws were meant to systematically disenfranchise and racially segregate the black community.¹² It was this system that President Woodrow Wilson was referring to when he wrote to his friend Thomas Dixon (the author of the novel upon which *Birth of a Nation* was based), “We are handling ... the coloured people ... in the departments in just the way they ought to be handled. We are trying – and by degrees – succeeding in a plan ... which ... will not in one bureau mix the races.”¹³ The findings of “science” by several anthropologists at this time further reinforced this legal separation

by validating the genetic inferiority of African-Americans.¹⁴ By scientifically “proving” that blacks were secondary to the normalized white race through various supposed physiological differences between the races [fig. 2], scientists not only reaffirmed their hegemonic notions of racial superiority, but also demonstrated the consequent need to protect white American “innocence” and “purity.”¹⁵

David Griffith, the infamous director of Birth of a Nation, was a Southerner who grew up in this atmosphere of deep racial intolerance. Raised on his father’s stories of service as a Colonel in the Confederate Army, Griffith was entertained by tales of the “righteous” campaigns fought against the North.¹⁶ The literature that Griffith grew up on also viciously caricatured blacks, glorified plantation slavery, rationalized lynching, and justified inequitable treatment of African Americans.¹⁷ Thus, Kentucky-born Griffith’s negative representations of blacks within Birth of a Nation directly reflect the rampant racism in society between the Civil War and the movie’s premiere. In other words, for many American moviegoers like Griffith, Birth of a Nation merely visually displayed their well-established beliefs about blacks in an aesthetically innovative style.

As Stokes argues, “to understand the impact of The Birth of a Nation, it is necessary to see it in the context of early 20th century US cinema.”¹⁸ No earlier film had been so impressive aesthetically and technically. Birth of a Nation was the first American film to be twelve reels long and to last around three hours. Previous American films were comprised of one reel that lasted from ten to fifteen minutes, costing a few hundred dollars to produce.¹⁹ In addition to this technical advancement, the movie’s aesthetic innovations were unprecedented. Film historian and author Donald Bogle described the qualities of Birth of a Nation as altering “the entire course and concept of American moviemaking, developing the close-up, cross-cutting, rapid-fire editing, the iris, the split-screen shot and realistic and impressionistic lighting. Creating sequences and images yet to be surpassed, the film’s magnitude and epic grandeur swept audiences off their feet.”²⁰

Like no director before him, Griffith utilized these cinematic techniques to create a psychologically dramatic effect.²¹ Since dialogue was not yet developed in movies, an alternative method of camera techniques and manipulation was constructed to successfully place meaning onto specific objects, bodies, and facial expressions.²² As Griffith was

Fig. 3: [An intertitle claiming the “history” presented within the film], film still, *Birth of a Nation*, David W. Griffith Corporation, United States of America, (1:28:06).

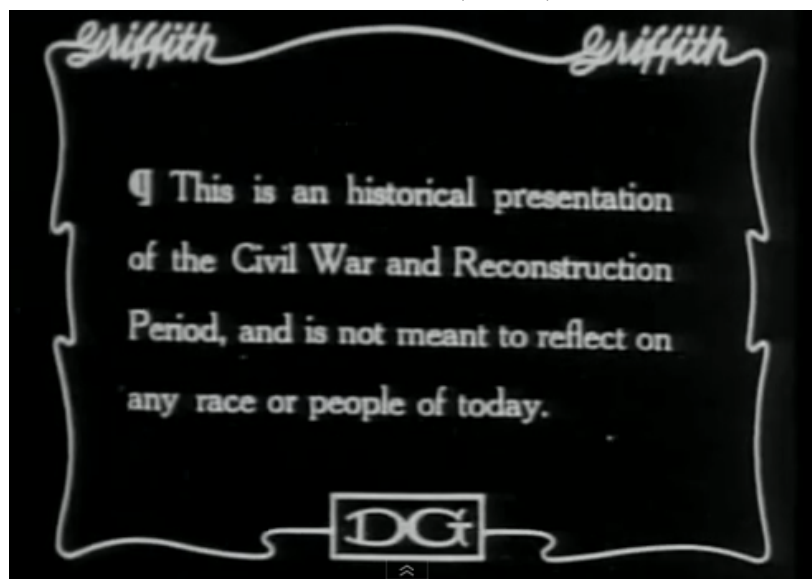




Fig. 4: N.A., [Advertisement for *The Birth of a Nation* emphasizing its presented “history” as authentic by stating “See whole pages torn from history and re-enacted before your eyes”]. Newspaper advertisement, 1915. *Greensboro Daily News*, (Greensboro, NC), 7 November 1915.

attempting to demonstrate the inferiority of African-Americans, the hierarchy of framing becomes evident almost immediately. In order to observe the glowing beauty of the white Cameron and Stoneman families as opposed to the black characters, white individuals were privileged by “brighter lighting.” The black actors, on the other hand, are intentionally shadowed in the unfocused background.²³

However, as Clyde Taylor reveals, the racist intentions behind these formal practices of aestheticizing “principal

characters as *White people*” went virtually unnoticed by critics at the time.²⁴ The historic and cultural significance of *Birth of a Nation* is often overlooked due to a sole focus on its aesthetic innovations. According to American author and publisher Lewis Jacobs, Griffith’s aesthetics

Propelled the film into a new artistic level ... So nice and profound in organization was this picture that for years thereafter it directly and indirectly influenced film makers everywhere and much of the subsequent film progress owes its inspiration to this master achievement.²⁵

Griffith initiated a further cinematic tradition of accompanying movies with a specially arranged orchestral score.²⁶ While this was not the first film to have an associated score, Griffith employed this system far beyond anything that had been previously accomplished.²⁷ Thus, the combination of *Birth of a Nation*’s technical, aesthetic, and musical innovations was a major factor in attracting the masses to the theatre. While members of the urban working class previously viewed films of this type, it appeared that every white American citizen (no matter what class) wanted to personally witness this cinematic brilliance and many noticeable differences from earlier American productions.²⁸ As Stokes has noted, “There has not been a vacant seat in the house since the opening performance.”²⁹

The support of President Woodrow Wilson for *Birth of a Nation* undeniably brought a significant amount of viewers to the movie. Promoter Thomas Dixon (author of *The Clansmen*) correctly believed that if the President would give his approval to the film, more Americans would pay the steep two-dollar fare to watch the movie. Accordingly, two days before the film was to be reviewed by the American film board, Dixon strategically asked his former schoolmate Woodrow Wilson to view the film.³⁰ As the President immediately expressed an interest in its

sympathetic Southern theme, Dixon was provided with the opportunity to screen *Birth of a Nation* in the East Room of the White House for Wilson, members of his cabinet, and their families.³¹ According to Dixon, the President congratulated the movie's director David Griffith saying that it was "History written in lightning"³² immediately after watching it. This unequivocal support for the movie from the highest office of the American government carried over on the following night when Dixon screened the film for Chief Justice Edward White, the Supreme Court, and several members of Congress.³³ By acquiring the support from President Woodrow Wilson as well as a significant portion of the American government, Thomas Dixon further ensured the film's success even before its official premiere.³⁴

To solidify its success among the American people, two of *Birth of a Nation*'s promoters' Theodore Mitchell and J.R. McCarthy arranged the most expensive and ambitious publicity campaign of any motion picture up to that period.³⁵ Their first major campaign was setting up road show exhibitions that would enable the film to reach a large audience. By preparing



Fig. 5: [Prologue intertitle to *Birth of a Nation* arguing that the black presence in the United States challenges the establishment of a unified country], film still, *Birth of a Nation*, David W. Griffith Corporation, United States of America, (0:1:40).

screenings in several major cities in the United States and abroad, the movie was extended to audiences across regions and classes. Private viewings for journalists were similarly organized prior to their city's official premiere. By publicly endorsing the movie before its formal debut, the numerous enthusiastic reports generated a deep curiosity and attraction for the average American to see the movie exhibiting "so much freshness and originality."³⁶ Eager to see the film that was attracting so much attention, people who

lived on the outskirts of major cities (many of them farmers) were brought in on "The 'Birth of a Nation' Special" trains to watch the film.³⁷ As a result, showings, scheduled twice daily, were selling out weeks in advance. The luxurious ambiance in which the film was screened, consisting of "reserved seats, scheduled performances, souvenir programs, costuming of usherettes, orchestral accompaniment, symphonic overture, stage prologues, dimming or elimination of half-lights, and total darkening of the house-interior through the showing, modulated or variable projection" became "added attractions" that extended its vast appeal.³⁸

Perhaps the most important method of promotion for *Birth of a Nation* was the fallacy that the film had historical value. [fig. 3].³⁹ Griffith and his publicists went to great lengths to convince audiences that they were watching history because in addition to attracting the large

middle-class audiences, they believed that it could also legitimize the film for other spectators and critics.⁴⁰ Moreover, in establishing Birth of a Nation as “history” through the numerous references to actual events within the first half of the movie, it would help to enhance the credibility of the exaggerated fiction in the latter half based on Thomas Dixon’s novel.⁴¹ Therefore in order to successfully define his film as “historical” (despite its highly fabricated version of events), several manipulative tactics were employed.

Firstly, Griffith strategically appealed to American nationalism by describing the film as “a red blooded tale of true American spirit” dealing with “national figures” and “stirring events in the development of our country.”⁴² As the story’s plotline of the Cameron and Stoneman families plays out within the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, historical facsimiles, such as the first Battle of Bull Run, the siege of Atlanta, Lincoln’s call for 75,000 volunteers at the start of the war, and the surrender of Robert E. Lee to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House are continually made in the inter-titles to authenticate the movie. Secondly, the film promoters ardently emphasized the amount of “research” that had gone into verifying the “history” that the film represented.⁴³ Providing support to this historical manipulation, the Milwaukee Sentinel claimed that Birth of a Nation was “the product of many months of research in museums and historical libraries. Persons ... who participated in the event, in one way or another, were interviewed”. [fig. 4]

Lastly, understanding that texts from the President would certainly legitimize the movie’s historical authenticity, Griffith used three “excerpts” from Wilson’s History of the American People (1902). While it immediately becomes clear through a cross-examination that Griffith had altered these quotations to portray an adjusted meaning, the average moviegoer would have been unaware of these minor modifications.⁴⁴ As this movie was considered to be a simple recounting of history for many of those who watched it in 1915, it is clear that such alterations and visual manipulations were executed successfully. The unfortunate truth was that many viewers at this time knew very little about slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan, making them likely to accept the “history” of the movie with little question.⁴⁵ This becomes evident through the numerous enthusiastic reviews, such as the Liberty Theatre’s “The Birth of a Nation, a feature film tracing the history of African slavery”⁴⁶ or the Baltimore Star’s assertion that “the scenes ... are historically accurate even to the chairs in the rooms and the pictures on the walls.”⁴⁷ Thus, this movie left viewers and critics alike ignorantly believing that Griffith’s modified version of history was an authentic recounting of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods.

Now that the four reasons for the movie’s popularity have been revealed, the latter half of the essay examines the outcomes of its success. While there were positive developments within the movie industry that arose due to the popularity of Birth of a Nation, including advanced film techniques and aesthetics, the formation of additional movie theatres nationwide,⁴⁸ and the creation of “race films” that more accurately represented African Americans in feature films,⁴⁹ the negative repercussions of this movie’s immense success are far more significant.

Hollywood has consistently degraded the image of African Americans and other blacks by confining their representations to a one-dimensional set of myths, stereotypes, and caricatures.⁵⁰ In so doing, dominant cinema has constructed black people as the subordinate Other, while establishing whites as the invisible, but dominant, norm. By constructing whiteness in this way where all Others fail by comparison, people with any sense of difference “ranging from skin colour to tastes to mannerism become represented as ... deviant threats to White rule, thereby requiring civilizing or brutal punishment.”⁵¹ These hegemonic ideologies are evident through the abundance of negative black representations within The Birth of a Nation.⁵² While these images were a result of long-standing institutionalized racism and prejudicial views embedded within society at the time,⁵³ Griffith provoked society’s inherent racism to such an extreme that he actually developed new African American archetypes that became conventional in later years of American cinema. The fact was that, as James Nesteby has argued, “Renegades like Gus” or the stereotype that “Anglo-American women never enjoyed the company of Afro-American men other than as servants ... did not exist before the death of Abraham Lincoln.”⁵⁴

It was only after the popularity of this movie that such black characters became stereotypes on the American screen. In addition to these latest ideologies, Griffith “elaborately constructed new images of blacks, ranging from the loyal slave, the mammy, and the dancing bucks in the slave quarters of pre-Civil War days to the insolent, criminal and free ‘brute negroes’ of Reconstruction,”⁵⁵ shown in legislature, “eating chicken, sipping whiskey from flasks, ogling white women, and passing a motion that all legislators must wear shoes in the legislative chamber.”⁵⁶ While there was no evidence to verify the rendered images,⁵⁷ the detailed and convincing presentation of this black mythology articulated American fears surrounding African Americans. Further confirmed by the laws and politics of the Jim Crow system that excluded blacks economically, socially and politically,⁵⁸ Birth of a Nation demonstrated white society’s specific fears of African American male sexuality,⁵⁹ violence and the inevitable disorderliness that would occur if they gained power.⁶⁰ Therefore, by vividly presenting such images to the masses of viewers, Griffith successfully strengthened the prominent American prejudice that African Americans were inferior to whites. It was due to Griffith’s vivid cinematic depiction of the African Americans characters that these caricatures became conventional in Hollywood.

As Griffith’s official biographer Seymour Stern argued, “I have never denied nor do I see how anybody can deny that Birth of a Nation, directly or indirectly, inflamed the already narrow-minded, prejudiced, puritanical white-American masses against the Negroes ... in the United States, in particular.”⁶¹ It is indisputable that the film attempted to justify the disenfranchisement of African Americans, as the second half of the movie overtly demonstrates the dire repercussions of giving blacks the right to vote during Reconstruction.⁶² Ultimately attributing the problems of the United States at this time to African Americans [fig. 5], the success of Griffith’s film stirred up race hatred and violence against blacks in many cities, including Lafayette, Indiana where a white man killed a black teenager after seeing the movie.⁶³

Birth of a Nation’s dangerous power in influencing people’s beliefs about African Americans is best confirmed by a 1931 study on an all-white group of students from Crystal



Fig. 6: N.A., [A crowd of spectators at the lynching of African American Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas], postcard, 1916, 5.5 x 3.5 inches, *Without Sanctuary*, <http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html> (date of last access April 2, 2014).

Lake School in Illinois. Prior to seeing the film, these school children were given a set of twenty-four statements to answer reflecting varying attitudes towards African Americans. Birth of a Nation was then shown to the students after which the same test was administered. The results indicated that there was a significant shift in attitudes between the two tests, implying that the film had substantially changed the students' attitudes towards African Americans in a negative way.⁶⁴ Using the results of this study as evidence, it is clear that Birth of a Nation not only reflected the prevailing national sentiments, but it also shaped dangerous, negative perceptions towards African Americans that were most commonly cultivated by and acted upon by the Ku Klux Klan.

While the white supremacist KKK had existed since 1866 (just after the end of the American Civil War), David Griffith's portrayal of the group in Birth of a Nation as the "organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule..." facilitated a full-blown revival, which had up until that point been in decline. Exploiting the positive portrayal of his group in the movie, the leader of the KKK at the time, Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons, used the film to further his group's cause to "protect the virtues of Anglo-Americanism, Protestant Christianity, the southern cult of chivalry, secretive fraternity, the idolization of Anglo-American motherhood, and the chastity of Anglo-American womanhood"⁶⁵ from America's "Negro problem."⁶⁶ In other words, as the "saviours" of the Anglo-American race, the film illustrated to society that while the KKK's actions (such as lynching) were severe, they were

necessary to “restore” the nation to its white supremacist normalcy.⁶⁷ Thus, week after week, record-breaking crowds of white Americans were going to the movie to cheer on the “protective” actions of the Klan within the film. As Franklin has argued, “Men who once wore gray uniforms, white sheets and red shirts wept, yelled, whooped, cheered – and on one occasion even shot up the screen in a valiant effort to save Flora Cameron from her black pursuer.”⁶⁸ This enthusiasm towards the KKK was strong [fig. 6]. Within five years of the movie’s release, the Ku Klux Klan had grown by 85,000 people, facilitating the group’s membership to a peak of five million in the middle of the decade.⁶⁹ As an inevitable result, violence against blacks greatly increased and as lynching was shown in the film to be a solution to the African American “problem,” lynching in the American South significantly increased after Birth of a Nation’s release date.⁷⁰

This two-part essay demonstrates the four reasons for Birth of a Nation’s success, including the historical conditions of the time, the revolutionary technical and aesthetic qualities of the film, the support of American President Woodrow Wilson, and an unprecedented publicity campaign. The latter half of this essay examined the negative outcomes of the film’s extraordinary popularity, such as the formulaic model of black stereotypical images, the increased hatred and violence towards African Americans as well as the rebirth of the KKK. Due to the harmful severity of these consequences, it is urgently important to discuss the impact of such films on society.

As part of the dominant means of ideological productions, films such as Birth of a Nation, help to propagate racist ideas of white superiority and black inferiority. Thus, for society to ever be capable of breaking down this hierarchy in favour of a more accurate and positive representation of African Americans, a critique of such images and their repercussions is necessary. While the overt racism that is presented in Birth of a Nation is not as prevalent today, it has merely been replaced by covert racism on contemporary American screens. Thus, the deconstruction of longstanding institutional racism needs to address covertly racist elements prominent in films. This first requires that we critically analyze these trends in order to draw public attention to them.

Notes:

¹ Daniel Leab, From Sambo to Superspade: the Black Experience in Motion Pictures (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), p. 22.

² Between the years of 1915 and 1946, it is believed that over 200,000,000 people had viewed Birth of a Nation. Conrad Pitcher, “D. W. Griffith’s Controversial Film, ‘The Birth of a Nation’,” Magazine of History, vol. 13, no. 3 (Spring 1999), p. 50.

³ Lauren Stephanie Clark, “Contemporary Multi-Media and the Construction of Black Masculinity: (Re)Creation Revisited,” (Hanover: Master of Arts, Dartmouth College, 2012), p. 39.

⁴ Leab, From Sambo to Superspade, p. 34. To this day, there is still confusion about how much the film has earned, as the actual amount of its earning has never been made public. Bosley Crowther, “An Accounting is Sought on ‘The Birth of a Nation’,” New York Times, (New York City, NY), Monday, 4 January 1965, p. 35.

⁵ Leab, From Sambo to Superspade, p. 34.

⁶ This is one of the many enthusiastic reviews written on Birth of a Nation soon after the movie premiered. This particular review was by C.F. Zittel of the Evening American. Stokes, Melvyn, D.W. Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation: A History of ‘the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time’” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 117.

- ⁷ For a detailed analysis of the censorship and subsequent controversy surrounding the movie involving court action and criminal proceedings, see Nickieann Fleshner-Marzec's thesis. "D. W. Griffith's 'The Birth Of A Nation': Controversy, Suppression, and The First Amendment As It Applies To Filmic Expression, 1915-1973," (Madison: Doctor of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1977).
- ⁸ Fred Silva, Focus on The Birth of a Nation (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 168.
- ⁹ Michael Hurwitz, "D.W. Griffith's 1915 Film 'The Birth of a Nation' and its Impact on the Cultural Landscape of America," (Dominquez Hills: Master of Arts, California State University, 2006), p. 2.
- ¹⁰ Daniel Bernardi, The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 107.
- ¹¹ Fleshner-Marzec, "D. W. Griffith's 'The Birth Of A Nation'," p. 3.
- ¹² Hurwitz, "D.W. Griffith's 1915 Film," p. 4.
- ¹³ Leab, From Sambo to Superspade, p. 36.
- ¹⁴ Such anthropologists included Karl Vogt, Sir Francis Galton and Samuel George Morton.
- ¹⁵ Seymour Stern, Griffith 1: The Birth of a Nation Part 1 (New York City, NY: Film Culture, 1965), p. 165.
- ¹⁶ Hurwitz, "D.W. Griffith's 1915 Film," p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Leab, From Sambo to Superspade, p. 8.
- ¹⁸ Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 3.
- ¹⁹ The New York Times wrote in an article in January 1916 that Birth of a Nation cost \$250,000 to produce. "At Least \$500,000,000 Invested in 'Movies'," New York Times, (New York City, NY), Sunday, 2 January 1916, p. SM20.
- ²⁰ Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: an Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 10.
- ²¹ For details on Griffith's extensive camerawork, see "Editing in the Birth of a Nation" by A.R. Fulton reprinted as a chapter in Fred Silva, Focus on The Birth of a Nation (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1971).
- ²² To see Griffith's brilliant use of intercutting to generate synchronized action, look at artist and collector Theodore Huff's work for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Film Library. His findings have been put together in Theodore Huff's book, "A Shot Analysis of D. W. Griffith's 'The Birth of a Nation'," (New York, MoMA Film Library, 1961).
- ²³ Hurwitz, "D.W. Griffith's 1915 Film," p. 70. Richard Dyer also comes to the same conclusion in his essay "Into the Light: the Whiteness of the South in *The Birth of a Nation*" published in 1996. Dyer, "Into the Light: The Whiteness of the South in *The Birth of a Nation*," in Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Culture, eds. Richard H. King and Helen Taylor (London: Pluto Press 1996), pp. 165-76,
- ²⁴ Clyde Taylor, The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract - Film and Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 103-23.
- ²⁵ Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939); cited in Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 4.
- ²⁶ Furthering the perpetuation of negative images of African Americans within the film, Jane Gaines and Neil Lerner wrote about the original film score that played when crowds of "primitive" blacks were shown by using a theme called "the motif of barbarism." Jane Gaines and Neil Lerner, "The Orchestration of Affect: The Motif of Barbarism in Breil's 'The Birth of a Nation Score'," The Sounds of Early Cinema, eds. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), pp. 252-68.
- ²⁷ According to Fred Silva, an orchestral score had been used as early as 1908 in French films. Silva, Focus, p. 168.
- ²⁸ Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 3.
- ²⁹ Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 117.
- ³⁰ Thomas Dixon was a former schoolmate of Woodrow Wilson's at Johns Hopkins in Maryland. Silva, Focus, p. 110.
- ³¹ Silva, Focus, p. 114.
- ³² Silva, Focus, p. 115.
- ³³ Interestingly, the Chief Justice Edward White initially had no interest in viewing the film, as he was uninterested in motion pictures. After Dixon told White that the movie was a true story of Reconstruction and the redemption of the South by the KKK, White responded, "I was a member of the Klan, sir," and agreed to see the picture that night. Surely, White's status as a former Klan member resulted in racially biased rulings as a Chief Justice. John Hope Franklin, "'Birth of a Nation': Propaganda as History," The Massachusetts Review, vol. 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1979), p. 425.

- ³⁴ Thomas Dixon often used the support of the American government to silence opposition to the film. After a phone call to the White House confirming the President's support of the movie, the New York film board that had been discussing a ban of the film, withdrew their objection and the film opened there on 3 March 1915. John Hope Franklin, " 'Birth of a Nation' ," p. 425.
- ³⁵ Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 127.
- ³⁶ Seymour Stern, "Birthday of a classic; The Twentieth Anniversary of 'Birth of a Nation' Recalls its Significance," *New York Times* (New York City, NY), Part 2, 24 March 1935, p. x4.
- ³⁷ Seymour Stern, *Griffith 1: The Birth of a Nation Part 1* (New York City, NY: Film Culture, 1965), p. 67.
- ³⁸ Stern, *Griffith 1*, p. 67.
- ³⁹ Thomas Dixon and David Griffith would often comment that they were "faithfully recording the history of fifty years ago" within the movie. David Rylance, "Breech Birth: The Receptions to D.W. Griffith's 'The Birth Of a Nation'," *Australian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2 (December 2005), p. 4.
- ⁴⁰ Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 177.
- ⁴¹ Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 177.
- ⁴² Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 116.
- ⁴³ Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 175.
- ⁴⁴ To compare Griffith's excerpts in the inter-titles to that of Wilson's book, see Melvyn Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The birth of a Nation", p. 199.
- ⁴⁵ "The Worst Thing about 'Birth of a Nation' is How Good it is," *The New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/movies/2013/02/birth-of-a-nation-revisited.html>, (date of last access 31 March 2014).
- ⁴⁶ "Written on the Screen," *New York Times*, (New York City, NY), Sunday, 28 February 1915, p. X7.
- ⁴⁷ "Ford," *Star* (Baltimore), 21 March 1916; Stokes, D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", p. 175.
- ⁴⁸ After the success of *Birth of a Nation* where 10,000,000 people in the US were now paying admission to see pictures each week (one in every ten men, women and children were attending movies weekly), \$500,000,000 was invested in the developing movie industry. "At Least \$500,000,000 Invested in 'Movies'," *New York Times*, (New York City, NY), Sunday, 2 January 1916, p. SM20.
- ⁴⁹ An example of a more positive representation of African Americans can be seen in Oscar Micheaux's 1919 film *The Homesteader*. The film was produced, co-directed and written by Micheaux (an African American) for a black audience. *The Homesteader*, DVD, directed by Oscar Micheaux (Winner, SD: Micheaux Book and Film Company, 1919). For further information on this film, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th edition (New York: Continuum, 2001).
- ⁵⁰ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: the African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 9.
- ⁵¹ Bernardi, *The Birth of Whiteness: Race*, p. 5.
- ⁵² Commenting on the origins of the negative representations of African Americans in film, Donald Bogle exclaimed "If one 'trace[s] the evolution of images of African Americans in Hollywood cinema ... where does it really go back to? And I felt indeed it was Birth of a Nation.' " See "Revisiting 'Birth of a Nation' in Today's America," *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5377305> (date of last access 31 March 2014).
- ⁵³ Leslie Carlene Baker, "The Production and Reproduction of Stereotypical Images of Blacks in American Film From 1915 to 1991: An Ideological Textual Analysis in Three Stages of Twentieth Century Capitalist Development," (Washington: PhD of Philosophy, Howard University, 2000), p. 1.
- ⁵⁴ James Nestebey, *Black Images in American Films, 1896-1954: the Interplay between Civil Rights and Film Culture* (Washington, D.C: University Press of America, 1982), p. 36.
- ⁵⁵ For definitions of the stereotypes employed in the movie, including Tom, Coon, the black buck as well as the black brute, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: an Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 4-8.
- ⁵⁶ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 16.
- ⁵⁷ *The Chicago Defender*, a weekly newspaper founded by African Americans primarily for African American readers argued, "The film viciously plays our race up to the public as being one of rapists and murderers. No more vicious and harmful bit of propaganda has ever been put on the screen." Edward Mapp, *Blacks in American Films: Today and Yesterday* (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1972), p. 19.
- ⁵⁸ Baker, "The Production and Reproduction of Stereotypical Images," p. 1.
- ⁵⁹ Many white Americans believed that black males, as supposedly hypersexual beings, had a great desire for cross-racial sex and marriages. They feared miscegenation since it would dissolve white society's supposed racial purity.

The danger of this racial mixing is exemplified in *Birth of a Nation* where of the three “evil” characters in the movie, two of them (Lydia, the housekeeper of Austin Stoneman, and Silas Lynch, a black lieutenant-governor) are mulattoes (mixed raced).

⁶⁰ Demonstrating the extent of white American fears, the original cut of *Birth of a Nation* ends with an intertitle supporting Lincoln’s solution of sending the African Americans back to Liberia. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, p. 32.

⁶¹ Stern, *Griffith 1*, p. 11.

⁶² William Grimes, “An Effort to Classify a Racist Classic,” *New York Times*, (New York City, NY), Wednesday, 27 April 1994, p. C13.

⁶³ “The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow,” *PBS*, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_birth.html (date of last access 31 March 2014).

⁶⁴ It is important to note that their negative shift in attitudes did not go away with time, as was evidenced by a re-examination of the children’s responses eight months later. Cameron Douglas Moore, “A Study in the Influence of the Film, ‘The Birth of a Nation,’ on the Attitudes of Selected High School White Students Toward Negroes,” (Urbana: PhD of Philosophy in Education, University of Illinois, 1971), p. 57.

⁶⁵ Nesteby, *Black Images in American Films*, p. 32.

⁶⁶ After showings, Klansmen would stand outside the movie theatre with forms to gain new members from the crowd. Scott Cutlip, “Klan Made Potent Use of ‘Birth of a Nation,’” *New York Times*, (New York City, NY), Thursday, 12 May 1994, p. A24.

⁶⁷ James Vincent Lowery, “Reconstructing The Reign Of Terror: Popular Memories of The Ku Klux Klan, 1877-1921,” (Oxford: Doctor of Philosophy, University of Mississippi, 2008), p. v.

⁶⁸ This scene is intended to illustrate the need for the KKK to “save” Flora Cameron and other “pure” white women, as she jumps to her death to escape being defiled by the “black brute” Gus. Franklin, “Birth of a Nation,” p. 431.

⁶⁹ Heather R. Sager, “The Ku Klux Klan’s Portrayal of African Americans in Mass Media Technology,” (Morgantown: Master of Science, West Virginia University, 2010), p. 4.

⁷⁰ Most lynchers were proud of their actions. They took out ads in newspapers and circulated flyers announcing upcoming murders. Photographers had a lucrative business of selling postcards depicting lynchings with the murderers posing beside the dismembered remains. Anne Rice, *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 5. This is also discussed within “Foes of Klan Fight ‘Birth of a Nation,’” *New York Times*, (New York City, NY), Sunday, 3 December 1922, p. 29.

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Figure 1: N.A., [Cartoon that was part of the NAACP's vigorous campaign against *The Birth of a Nation*. Cartoon], (1915), Pen and Ink, The Crisis (New York City, NY), October 1915 issue.

Figure 2: Samuel George Morton, [The findings of anthropological "science" to deem the inferiority of African Americans compared to the white race. As shown here, a black male's skull was presented to be close to that of an ape (a lower intellectual capacity). The white skull, on the other hand, was shown by means of a Greek sculpture. Anthropologists would not even criticize the look of the white male for the extent of "science"], sketch, published in J.C. Nott and Geo R. Gliddon, Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches, Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History (Philadelphia: J.B Lippincott and Co., 1854), p. 458.

Figure 3: [An intertitle claiming the "history" presented within the film], film still, *Birth of a Nation*, David W. Griffith Corporation, United States of America, (1:28:06).

Figure 4: N.A., [Advertisement for *The Birth of a Nation* emphasizing its presented "history" as authentic by stating "See whole pages torn from history and re-enacted before your eyes"]. Newspaper advertisement, 1915. Greensboro Daily News, (Greensboro, NC), 7 November 1915.

Figure 5: [Prologue intertitle to *Birth of a Nation* arguing that the black presence in the United States challenges the establishment of a unified country], film still, *Birth of a Nation*, David W. Griffith Corporation, United States of America, (0:1:40).

Figure 6: N.A., [A crowd of spectators at the lynching of African American Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas], postcard, 1916, 5.5 x 3.5 inches, *Without Sanctuary*, <http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html> (date of last access April 2, 2014).

BARELY PROGRESSIVE: SHONDA RHIMES' SALACIOUS *SCANDAL* AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF STEREOTYPICAL CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD

Shannon Ellis

Created by Shonda Rhimes, *Scandal* (2012-) is an ABC network drama series centered on the black female character Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, a former media relations consultant to the white President, Fitzgerald Grant, who is played by Tony Goldwyn. Pope has dedicated her life to protecting and defending the public images of the political elite.¹ While working on Grant's campaign, Pope and the then-soon-to-be President (a married father) start an affair. After leaving the White House, Pope opens her own crisis management firm, hoping to start a new chapter of her life - both professionally and personally - but she cannot seem to cut ties with her past. Pope spends the majority of her time working to maintain the foundations of the American political system, and time and time again, falls back into the affair with President Grant.

Scandal would appear to be a progressive television series on the surface. It is not so common to see such a diverse and unlikely group of characters - black and white, male and female, straight and gay - come together to fight for a shared cause within a mainstream television show. Furthermore, creator Rhimes appears to break away from the Hollywood norm, wherein the protagonist is typically both white and male, and plays the great white hero.² In *Scandal*, Rhimes positions Olivia Pope in this central role - she who is neither white nor male. Audiences love seeing someone, especially a black woman, wield so much power at the flip of her hair or with her cold blank stare. It is intriguing to see a woman with such political power. In an interview on Oprah's *Next Chapter*, Kerry Washington discussed the fact that it has been nearly forty years since a black woman has starred in a network TV drama in this genre.³

While some audiences celebrate the portrayal of a black woman in a way that seems new and creative, I would argue that *Scandal* is in fact repeating the same old stereotyped societal representations of black womanhood. Pope takes on constructs of the dominant stereotypical cinematic representations of black womanhood through the characteristics of the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel. Further, under white patriarchal capitalism, black subjects do not evoke the same meanings as white subjects when placed in the position of the protagonist.⁴ When a white man is positioned as the protagonist of the story, he is typically depicted as the salvation for his non-white, non-male counterparts, because of his white maleness. The white male protagonist is positioned as a normative body, whose whiteness is defined more through what it is not, than what it is.⁵ For Pope, however, the great white hero narrative does not work to the same effect. *Scandal* shows us that even when black female subjects are positioned as the great (white) hero protagonist in a narrative, the restraints placed on black bodily performances in media are just too strong for that narrative to succeed.⁶ While Washington, positioned as Olivia Pope, is a black woman who has her life together, who has agency and controls her sexuality, she is still burdened by black female stereotypes under white patriarchal capitalism, taking on characteristics of the stereotypical representations of the Mammy, the Sapphire and the

Jezebel. Shonda Rhimes' "post-racial utopian" narrative is also problematic for other reasons. Scandal appears unrealistically colourblind whereby racial tropes are dressed up, yet function to the same effect - recreating the dominant stereotypical roles for the black body.

[Enter Mammy stage right.]

Pope takes the position of a political Mammy, who faithfully bears the burden of the white American political system on her shoulders.⁷ The Mammy stereotype, present in the slave economy, was characterized by her devotion to the happiness of the white people whom she served.⁸ Post-slavery, the Mammy image has been repackaged several times in order to embed itself within an ever-shifting culture. Scandal's Pope can be understood as one of the latest manifestations of this characterization.

Similar to how the Mammy of slavery was typically portrayed as neat in her plain uniform, happily docile to serve and maintain the inner working of her white master's house, Pope is neat, clean and well-dressed and works tirelessly to ensure the inner workings of the White House function as expected. Further, just as the Mammy stereotype would have us believe, Pope appears content with her life of service to the "good white folks" running the country. However, just as quickly as she can smile, she puts her hands on her hips, and hardens her facial expression, letting the audience know that she is up for a fight.⁹

[Enter Sapphire stage left.]

The Sapphire stereotype was developed in the Depression Era and war years within popular culture. Manning Marable describes the figure of the Sapphire as "a Black woman who was evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful."¹⁰ Pope's character, while smart and calculated in her demeanour, often slips into the stereotype of black women as quick-tempered, loud and angry. Pope's attitude, at times, can be read as cynical, especially in contrast to other characters' passive behaviours. Pope exhibits characteristics of the Sapphire stereotype as she snaps at co-workers, clients and even members of the White House team. To portray Pope as 'just' a faithful political Mammy, with a hint of Sapphire, who will use sass to get her way, might be too obvious as a stereotypical cinematic black role. Scandal uses what black feminist scholar bell hooks calls the Hollywood ingredients for success - sex, violence and violation - masked as romance to add complexity to her character.¹¹

[Enter Jezebel stage right.]

The Jezebel stereotype is associated with stubborn, manipulative, lascivious black women.¹² Constructed by white patriarchal capitalists, the Jezebel character is sexually charged and devious in nature, and as such, she is always positioned as the aggressor in her sexual encounters.¹³ Stereotypical images of African Americans are exaggerated and derogatory images constructed and perpetuated in the pre-Civil War era, as white supremacist propaganda. Threats of sexual violence pervaded the master-slave relationship, whereby slave owners had sexual access to their human property.¹⁴ The continuance of a master-slave relation discourse, is shockingly prevalent in Scandal, but is portrayed through the Jezebel stereotype.

When Pope is not going about her work at the White House in a docile manner, or alternatively, showing her overbearing and snappy facade, she often appears in the Oval Office

with President Grant, just as one might find a Jezebel and her master alone.¹⁵ President Grant cannot keep his hands off of Pope.¹⁶ He continuously expresses his incalculable love for her, yet he can only seem to express his “love” by forcefully grabbing and touching her. This takes place in almost every episode. In season one, episode one, entitled “Sweet Baby” (5 April 2012), President Grant forces himself on Pope despite her attempts to decline his advances.¹⁷ Audiences however, are conditioned to see Pope as a Jezebel. The audience sees her as desiring Grant. We accept any violation and believe there is nothing wrong with President Grant’s unwelcomed advances, where “no” doesn’t really mean “no” in this situation. What is problematic is that sexual intrigue and force do not equate to love. Scandal does not offset or balance these advances with any scenes of action that support President Grant’s claim to truly love Pope. What Scandal does depict conversely, are endless scenes that suggest Pope is nothing more than the object of President Grant’s sexual desire.

The character of Olivia Pope can be seen either as the ultimate amalgamation of the three dominant stereotypical cinematic representations of African American women, or as problematically perpetuating characteristics of all three. Media representations of black females often fail when they come into contact with the black female body because it is hard to represent them without excavating racist tropes as underlying insinuations. Perhaps the problem with Scandal is the social and political climate in which Pope is situated - whereby she does not possess the normative white male body for her role as the great (white) hero, and is instead positioned to reflect existing stereotypes under the discourse of white patriarchal capitalism. But there is a critique to be made on the part of production. Since Pope seamlessly switches between the political Mammy, the Sapphire and the Jezebel, Rhimes leads most audiences to believe Pope transcends them all. In such a way, Scandal subtly tricks audiences into celebrating Pope’s character as opposed to being critical of the reinforced stereotypes and alternatively demanding better.

[Enter “post-racial utopian” producer stage left.]

Shonda Rhimes, is often described as “the most powerful African-American female show runner in television.”¹⁸ As part of her *Shondaland* production company, Rhimes oversees some five hundred and fifty actors, writers, crewmembers, and producers. Rhimes has acquired tremendous power, particularly as a black woman in Hollywood. As a television producer, she is placed within a dominantly white cultural landscape. This landscape has been mostly void of black television or cinematic production, a world where blacks have been historically cast as the domestic help, the sidekick, the criminal, the prostitute or the comic relief.¹⁹ Charmaine Nelson provides that the spectre of white desire, is most often embodied as the white gaze, and participates at the level of production and consumption in the commodification and interrelated vilification of the black body.²⁰ In her position of power, Rhimes is implicated within power relations where money, access, and decision-making ability converge. This power could provide the potential to present the black subject from an alternative gaze, that of the black female.²¹ Yet Rhimes perpetuates existing narratives of the black female body, which according to Rinaldo

Walcott, create these problematic fields of homogenized and exploitative representations since “black capitalism is just as insatiable as white capitalism.”²²

What makes the salacious Scandal even more scandalous is that despite race being omnipresent (Pope is black, and the President is white), it is not often discussed explicitly. Scandal has been critiqued for being unrealistically colourblind - that it is only exploiting diversity in a superficial way. In Scandal, characters’ races rarely inform their choices or conversations. Rhimes disagrees with the critiques around race and explained her take on the subject in an article in the New York Times Magazine:

“When people who aren’t of color create a show and they have one character of color on their show, that character spends all their time talking about the world as ‘I’m a black man blah, blah, blah.’ That’s not how the world works. I’m a black woman every day, and I’m not confused about that. I’m not worried about that. I don’t need to have a discussion with you about how I feel as a black woman, because I don’t feel disempowered as a black woman.”²³

Yet, Harry M. Benshoff argues that when race goes unmentioned, whiteness is positioned as a default category. Without acknowledging race as a dominant factor in how people experience the world, stereotypical racial constructs will only be reinforced.²⁴

Rhimes seemingly attempts to address race more openly on season two of Scandal. Season two, episode eight, entitled, “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” presents the first overt reference to the show’s racial makeup.²⁵ Pope remarks to President Grant that she’s feeling “a little Sally-Hemings-Thomas Jefferson” about their relationship.²⁶ One might hope that this would be an opportunity for the plot to turn, whereby Pope might be relieved from the constant sexual violation. But alas, shortly after, President Grant and Pope meet in a garden where he accuses her of playing the “race card”. Outraged, President Grant yells at Pope saying “There’s no Sally or Thomas here! You’re nobody’s victim, Liv. I belong to you. We’re in this together!” Before Pope can respond, he storms off.²⁷ President Grant has the final say in how their relationship is defined, which is typical for the white patriarchal figure. Rhimes says “I don’t think that we have to have a discussion about race when you’re watching a black woman who is having an affair with the white President of the United States,” she argues, “the discussion is right in front of your face.”²⁸ For the enlightened viewer however, no matter what President Grant claims, or how romantic the script seems, the storyline is all too familiar. This is an instance of black female flesh as the object of white male sexual desire.

“Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” only grazes the surface of the complex race and gender issues taking place. In fact, I would argue that this “race” conversation functions as a tool to make characters and audiences continue to accept the relationship and dynamics between Pope and President Grant as the status quo. The episode acknowledges the problematic race concerns, and just as quickly dismisses them, whereby they appear not to matter to Rhimes’ story.

For many audiences, Scandal is a progressive television series with a diverse cast and a refreshing powerful black woman positioned as the protagonist. Beyond the surface however, Scandal repeats old stereotypical representations of black womanhood. Pope is constructed

through the functions of white patriarchal capitalism, and with the help of producer Shonda Rhimes, she takes on characteristics of the stereotypical Mammy, Sapphire and Jezebel. Faithfully bearing the burden of upholding the inner stability of the White House, Pope takes on a manifestation of the Mammy figure, happily devoting her efforts to service the white first family. Pope's manifestation of a political Mammy takes on a hint of the stereotypical Sapphire with her stubborn, quick-tempered attitude. Furthermore, when Pope is not maintaining the White House or being overbearing, she takes on the role of the stereotypical Jezebel. As a lascivious black woman, Pope is portrayed as guilty for repeatedly falling into bed with President Grant, despite the historical patriarchal social order of slavery, wherein Pope would appear to be disengaged and acquiescent to the power structure wherein President Grant dictates her life. Seamlessly switching between all three stereotypes, Scandal subtly tricks audiences into believing that Pope transcends them all.

In a dominantly white patriarchal capitalist landscape, Rhimes is in an overwhelmingly powerful position with the potential to influence major media depictions of the black female subject. Instead of positioning Pope through a black female gaze, Rhimes perpetuates the all-too-familiar heterosexual white male gaze, reinforcing the stereotypical cinematic representations of black womanhood. Furthermore, by refusing to engage such a diverse television show in the conversation about Race, Scandal appears unrealistically colour-blind. In fact, the only overt reference to race in Scandal, the mention of the Sally Hemings-Thomas Jefferson relationship, which merely grazes the surface of the complex gender race relations taking place and problematically functions to reinforce the theme of black female flesh being the object of white male desire. President Grant's aggressive treatment of Pope and his consistent disregard of her resistance to his sexual advances only reinforce the white patriarchal dominance rooted in slavery. Scandal is still a far cry from progression.

Notes:

¹ "Scandal," ABC, <http://abc.go.com/shows/scandal> (last accessed 10 April 2014).

² Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, "The Concept of Whiteness and American Film," America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 55-54. Benshoff notes that the structure of classic Hollywood narrative form encourages all spectators, regardless of their actual colour, to identify with the white protagonists.

³ "Kerry Washington & Shonda Rhimes," Oprah's Next Chapter (9 December, 2012). The last time a black woman stated in a network TV drama of the same capacity was the 1974 ABC drama Get Christie Love! starring Teresa Graves.

⁴ Benshoff, "The Concept of Whiteness," p. 53. Under white patriarchal capitalism, Benshoff notes that ideas about race and ethnicity are constructed and circulated in ways that tend to keep white privilege and power in place.

⁵ Benshoff, "The Concept of Whiteness," p. 55.

⁶ Benshoff points out, a society's dominant ideology functions optimally when individuals are so imbued with its concepts that they do not realize that a social construct has been formed or is being reinforced. He gives the example of the relative cultural invisibility of whiteness in the United States, whereby the white power base maintains its dominant position precisely by being consistently overlooked, or at least unexamined in most mainstream texts. Unless whiteness is pointed out or overemphasized, its dominance is taken for granted. See, Benshoff, "The Concept of Whiteness," p. 54.

⁷ Donald Bogle identifies the Mammy as distinguished by her sex and her fierce independence. Traditionally, the Mammy is big, fat, and cantankerous. The Mammy image directly supported the supposed beneficence of slavery. See, Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p. 9.

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- ⁸ Rebecca Wanzo, "Can the Black Woman Shout? A Meditation on 'Real' and Utopian Depictions of African American Women on Scripted Television," African Americans on Television: Race-ing for Ratings, eds. David J. Leonardo and Lisa A. Guerrero (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2013), p. 337.
- ⁹ Donald Bogle presents Nina Mae McKinney as the movies' first black whore, in her role as Chick in Hallelujah (1929). For Bogle, in McKinney's hands and hips, Chick represented the black woman as an exotic sex object. The hands on the hips, the hard-as-nails brassy voice, became stock in trade for black leading ladies. See, Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks, pp. 31-34.
- ¹⁰ Manning Marable, How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 85: Marable explains the Sapphire stereotype was utilized by white males to justify their dehumanization and sexual exploitation of black women.
- ¹¹ bell hooks, Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 122.
- ¹² Ronald L. Jackson, Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Radical Politics in Popular Media (New York: State of University of New York Press, 2006), p. 36. The Jezebel was first introduced in Bertram Bracken's Jezebel's Daughter (1918).
- ¹³ The Jezebel is similar to the Tragic Mulatto. Benshoff describes the Tragic Mulatto as a woman born of a mixed-race marriage or sexual union. She invariably died at the end of her story, punishment for her "sin" of being mixed race (and for being sexual herself). Kerry Washington is not mixed race, and as such does not suit the Tragic Mulatto stereotype as well as the Jezebel. See, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, "African Americans and American Film," America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 76.
- ¹⁴ Kristen Fischer, Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 164.
- ¹⁵ Rinaldo Walcott sees the problem of the black female within popular black culture as the binary of the loose black woman, the ho, or the uptight, sexless black woman, a hold-over of the asexual mammy stereotype. For Walcott, it is the absence of a range of possibilities of the black female subject that perpetually re-entrenches the two parasitic extremes: neither fully real nor human, both sites of male heterosexual pleasure, violence and contempt. See Charmaine Nelson, "Chapter Two: Panel #2 Response: Popular Culture," Ebony Roots, Northern Soil: Perspectives on Blackness in Canada (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 67.
- ¹⁶ Charmaine Nelson provides, there exists a long legacy of white desire for blackness, as black bodies, black sexuality and black culture in the West. See, Nelson, "Chapter Two," p. 60.
- ¹⁷ "Sweet Baby," Scandal, writ. Shonda Rhimes, ABC, 5 April 2012.
- ¹⁸ Willa Paskin, "Network TV Is Broken. So How Does Shonda Rhimes Keep Making Hits?," The New York Times Magazine (9 May, 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/magazine/shonda-rhimes.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Shonda Rhimes has produced a number of hit television series including Grey's Anatomy (ABC, 2005- present), Private Practice (ABC, 2007- 2013), and most recently, How to Get Away with Murder (ABC, 2014 - present).
- ¹⁹ Nelson, "Chapter Two," p. 69.
- ²⁰ Nelson, "Chapter Two," p. 56.
- ²¹ Rinaldo Walcott insists that blacks too are implicated within the power relations of money, position and decision-making ability. See, Nelson, "Chapter Two," p. 63.
- ²² Nelson, "Chapter Two," p. 56.
- ²³ Paskin, "Network TV Is Broken"
- ²⁴ Benshoff, "The Concept of Whiteness," p. 55.
- ²⁵ "Happy Birthday, Mr. President," Scandal, writ. Shonda Rhimes, ABC, 6 December 2012.
- ²⁶ Sally Hemings was a slave at Monticello (President Thomas Jefferson's plantation in Virginia) and was the mother of several of his children. Within the patriarchal social order of slavery, Sally Hemings would have had limited agency and control within her relationship with Jefferson. Hemings lived within a social power structure in which white men dictated the lives of the people they believed to be their property. For further study of the Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson relationship see Barabara Chase-Riboud, Sally Hemings: A Novel (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1994).
- ²⁷ "Happy Birthday, Mr. President," Scandal, writ. Shonda Rhimes, ABC, 6 December 2012.
- ²⁸ Paskin, "Network TV Is Broken".

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PAIN, PLEASURE, AND POWER: SADOMASOCHISM, RACIAL HIERARCHY, AND BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY IN WALT DISNEY'S TRADER MICKEY (1932)

Lara Oudjian

Several scholars and cultural critics have observed that the original Mickey Mouse cartoons mimic many of the conventions of blackface minstrelsy. The 1932 Walt Disney animation Trader Mickey (1932) is a site of postcolonial violence towards blackness and the black body. This cartoon is particularly exemplary of such violence because its characters represent two types of stereotyped blackness, the American blackface minstrel and the “savage” African caricature. In this article, I will analyze the ways in which the cartoon’s physical and social violence, perpetuated through slapstick humour, racial stereotyping and the commodification of black identity, establish a racial hierarchy that subjugates the black body. More specifically, I will show that the racial violence inherent in both the Walt Disney cartoon

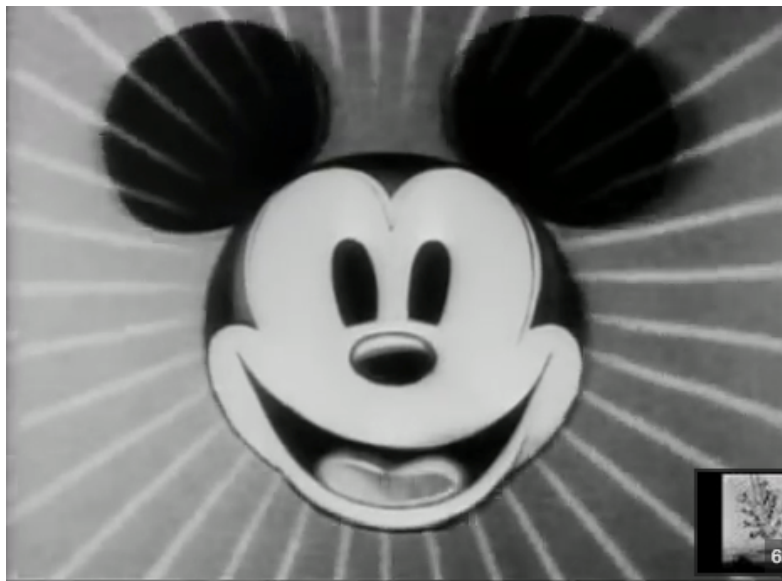


Fig.1: David Hand, Mickey Mouse in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.
Title, Trader Mickey; Character, Mickey Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

and minstrel shows it references is specifically a sadomasochistic violence. This sadomasochistic violence allows the performers in minstrel shows and the animators of the cartoon to take pleasure in both domination and suffering - a sadomasochism that is contingent on and instrumental to a fossilized racial hierarchy.

being eaten. The animation was directed and animated by David Hand and Walt Disney himself performed the voice of Mickey Mouse.² The intended audience for Mickey Mouse cartoons was the white, middle-class family, as for all of Disney’s animations produced in the first few decades of the twentieth century.³ Since the cartoons were loveable and enjoyable, bringing a sense of adventure to their audiences, they exerted a subtle but powerful influence over viewers’ ideas about racial identity.⁴ The cartoons’ link to childhood and innocence allowed them to reinterpret the history of racism as a natural and unproblematic element of American culture.⁵

To understand the origins of the cartoon’s racism, we must turn to Mickey’s predecessor, blackface minstrelsy. Blackface minstrelsy is a form of American theatre established in the

In Trader Mickey, Mickey Mouse and his dog Pluto travel to Africa, where they meet a cannibalistic tribe of African “savages.”¹ At first, the king directs the tribe to eat Mickey. But Mickey initiates a music and dance number that saves him from

1830's and popular throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁶ It featured performers who darkened their faces with burnt cork or black greasepaint and wore oversized or ragged costumes with white gloves. The shows included trickery, comic dialogues, cross-dressing, narrative skits, dancing, music, and burlesque.⁷ The performers were working-class and usually male; whether they were white or black, they were *always* required to wear blackface when playing a black character.⁸

The performances exerted both literal and symbolic violence toward black subjects; the physical violence mimed on stage, and the social violence of controlling black identity through stereotyping and commodification. In the 1840's and 1850's, under the growing influence of the American

School of Ethnology, many people viewed racial differences through a scientific lens. "Polygenesis," the idea that different races have different biological origins, contributed to various

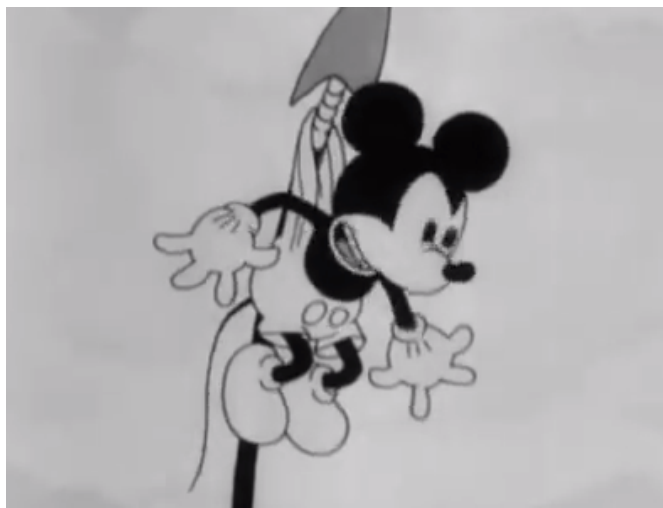
justifications of racial stereotypes based on spurious biological hypotheses. These stereotypes were taken up in minstrel performance; black characters were shown to be intellectually inferior, lazy, naturally musical, highly sexual, and prone to violence.⁹ Minstrel shows propagated a number of distinct black stereotypes, including the Tom, a submissive and generous older man, the Coon, the young and dishevelled "screwball," the Mulatto, the mixed-race character who experienced tragedy because of his or her blackness, the Mammy, a fat and bossy, asexual older woman, and, most significantly for this analysis, the Buck, the sexually potent black man.¹⁰ Eric Lott suggests that these stereotypes helped create and maintain boundaries between races by limiting and controlling black identity.¹¹ Through repeated display in popular culture, these stereotypes eventually became the only reproducible modes of black identity.

Performing blackness was part of a wider world of social violence. The practice of blackface implied that a white body was a privileged canvas that could both appropriate and control race and culture. Minstrelsy thus re-conceptualized "blackness" as a commodity for



Fig. 2: photographer unknown, Al Jolson in The Jazz Singer (1927) Black and White Photograph. Warner Brothers. Title, The Jazz Singer; Character, Jackie Rabinowitz; Director, Alan Crosland; Actor, Jolson; Production Company, Warner Brothers; Year, 1927; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Fig.3: David Hand, Mickey Mouse in *Trader Mickey* (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, *Trader Mickey*; Character, Mickey Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year. 1932; Date of Screen Shot. April 9, 2014.



reproduced Trans Atlantic Slavery's legacy of physical violence towards black bodies. Violent abuse of black bodies was rendered trivial during enslavement in part because of its ubiquity. Violence was also a method of establishing racial hierarchy. Sexual violence towards black women played an important role in subjugation and was rendered acceptable through the practice of "breeding."¹⁵ Similar sexual violence was reproduced on minstrel stages. A key example is what Lott refers to as the "blackface fetish image," a skit in which a group of white men assault a black female by beating her or through a more disturbing act, such as gauging out her eyes, an inverted reference to the Oedipal myth.¹⁶ This type of skit symbolized the white desire to tame the black female body, a body that was of powerful sexual interest to white males.¹⁷

Although such violence was mainly directed at female characters, it exerted power over the black male body as well. One can argue that inflicting violence on the black female symbolically castrated the black male by denying him possession of her. Though within the context

exchange, simplifying a complex identity into a reproducible object. In the words of Susan Willis, the blackface mask was simply a "black image that white people paid to see."¹² Just as the black body became a physical commodity during the four hundred years of Trans Atlantic Slavery, black identity became a cultural commodity in the era of minstrel shows. As Eric Lott suggests, the symbolic crossing of a racial boundary made a mockery out of blackness.¹³ This refused the social legitimacy of African Americans.¹⁴ To suggest that blackness is an object satirizes the possibility of blackness as a cultural identity.

In many ways, minstrel shows

Fig. 4: photographer unknown, *Al Jolson in The Jazz Singer* (1927) Black and White Photograph. Warner Brothers. Title, *The Jazz Singer*; Character, Jackie Rabinowitz; Director, Alan Crosland; Actor, Jolson; Production Company, Warner Brothers;



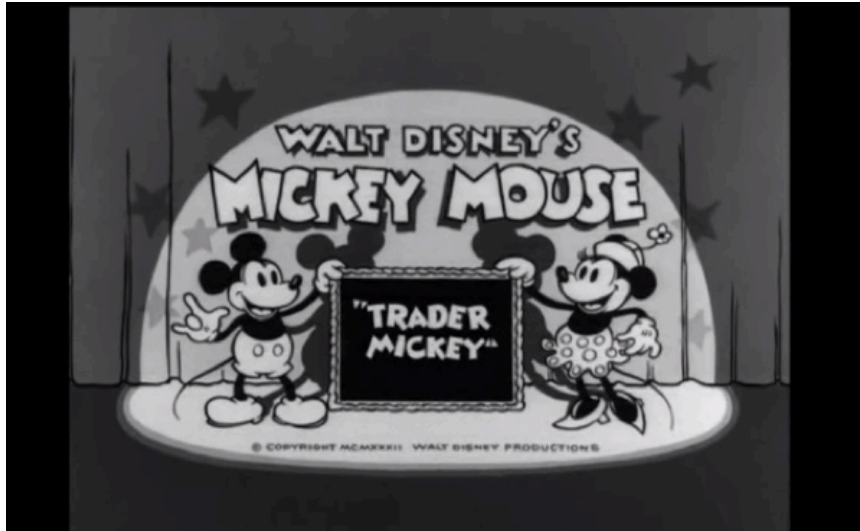


Fig. 5: David Hand, Mickey and Minnie in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, Trader Mickey; Character, Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

of slavery she was legally her master's possession, in a patriarchal context she was also considered the possession of her husband or male family members. The black male characters depicted on stage were highly sexualized so that their sexual humiliation was all the more potent.¹⁸

This variety of performative violence expressed a complex sadomasochistic urge for white control over the black body. The sadistic quality of

the performance is self-evident: white characters took pleasure in violently dominating black ones. But the performances are also characterized by veiled masochistic tendencies, which emerge through the practice of blackface. By embodying a black male, the white male performer symbolically reaches what is perceived as extreme sexual potency, only to be castrated. The sadism and masochism are inextricably linked: the performer's masculinity is symbolically

degraded *for the sake of* degrading the black body.

The subjection paradoxically brings pleasure to the performer because it is a sign of the power of the white body. A similar coupling of pleasurable power and humiliation occurs for the white male embodying the black female.

The sadomasochistic violence of blackface minstrel performances is an important reference point in considering the nature of the violence in Trader Mickey.

Fig. 6: David Hand, Mickey and "Savages" in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse and two unnamed dancing "savages"; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.



Mickey Mouse was created as part of a movement to bring minstrelsy to the animated screen. He and other characters like him, known as vestigial minstrels, have many of the markers of the blackface mask and costume.¹⁹ The cartoons did not explicitly refer to blackface minstrels, for all of the vestigial minstrels are animals, devoid of racial specificity, and Mickey's face



Fig. 7: David Hand, “Savage” King and Cuckoo Clock in *Trader Mickey* (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, *Trader Mickey*; Character, unnamed “savage” king ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

is white. Nonetheless, Mickey's aesthetic is modelled on the traditions of blackface minstrels,²⁰ who outlined and widened their mouths and eyes, and wore white gloves [fig. 1].²¹ *Trader Mickey* itself resembles a minstrel show because it includes singing, dancing, and trickery. The beginning of the cartoon, which pictures Mickey and Minnie Mouse on a stage announcing the act, establishes a theatrical atmosphere [fig. 2].²² As in minstrel shows, the characters address and play to the spectators during the musical numbers [fig. 3].²³

Just as in blackface minstrelsy, violence towards blackness in *Trader Mickey* is enacted both physically and socially. We can understand the nature of this physical violence in part by turning to animation studies. Animation habitually exaggerates and trivializes physical violence, through the contortions and metamorphoses made possible by the malleable cartoon body.²⁴ Violence in cartoons is seemingly inconsequential, because no cartoon body is real – or, rather, no cartoon body is an indexical reference to a live body.²⁵ This is not to condemn animation as an art form, but to consider that the prevalence of such forms of comedic violence helps to explain why the racial violence in many Disney Cartoons could be presented with apparent innocence.

In *Trader Mickey*, physical violence is enacted through excessive cartoon violence. Physical violence and commodification work hand in hand to propagate the ideology that the black body is inferior and easily manipulated in the hands of whites. For instance, during a song and dance number, Mickey kicks the “savage” king in time with the music [fig. 4].²⁶ The king momentarily responds in shock and pain, but then continues to dance. In this moment, aggression towards blackness is released, only to be reeled back into the apparent innocence of a cartoon musical number. Also, when the “savages” discover Mickey’s instruments, they cannot play

them properly at first. Due to “ignorant” mishandling, the instruments physically strike the “savages” instead of producing music. This violence against the black body is ideological in that it happens as a result of black people’s apparent “inferior intelligence”. It also marks them with the same status as the objects that they are handling.²⁷

The symbolic commodification of blackness is mirrored strangely in the actual commodification of the cartoon characters. Disney has a history of producing and reproducing their characters in the form of various consumer goods.²⁸ Thus, a double process of commodification and violence is taking place - the symbolic commodification of black identity and the reification of the cartoon body in toys and household goods.²⁹

Nicholas Sammond contends that racial stereotyping was often made literal in the visual iconography of animation.³⁰ Just as Trader Mickey replicates the comedic physical violence of minstrel shows, it also reproduces its social violence by representing the stereotype of the “savage” African. This stereotype was popular during Trans Atlantic Slavery, supporting the concept that Africans needed to be tamed and civilized. The group of “savages” that Mickey

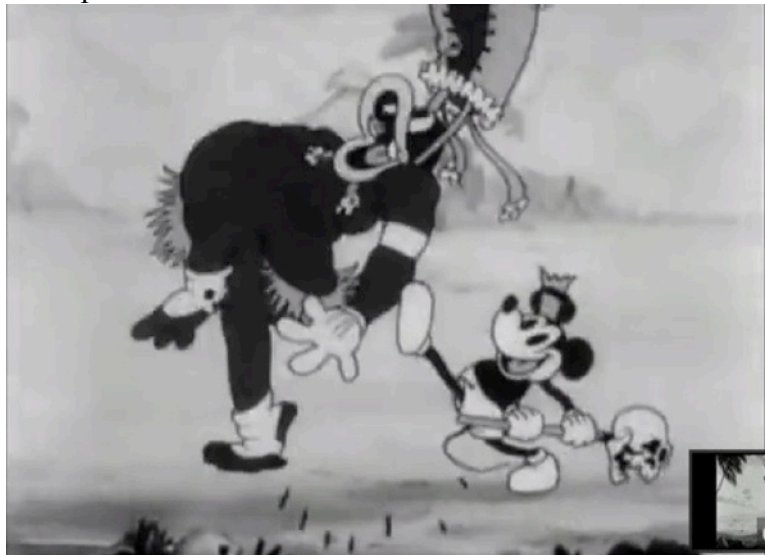


Fig. 8: David Hand, Mickey Kicks the “Savage” King in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, Trader Mickey; Character, unnamed “savage” king, and Mickey Mouse ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

comes across are represented as animalistic and wild. Their king is depicted as lazy and gluttonous, a character trait that recalls the stereotype that African people are inherently lazy. The African characters are framed as inferior to westerners when they are depicted as ignorant to western innovation, for instance when the “savage” king eats a cuckoo clock [fig. 5].³¹ The concept that Africans did not have the capacity to understand western civilization was also a trope used to legitimize enslavement. Additionally, the cartoon invokes the stereotype that the black body cannot resist music and dance, for as soon as Mickey

plays the saxophone, the “savages” begin to dance uncontrollably.³² Such a notion stemmed from the practice of African music and dance traditions by enslaved blacks. The cartoon’s stereotyping is further highlighted when it is pitted against a visual reference to the slave trade; shackles around the “savages” ankles [fig. 3].³³ Even though these “Africans” have not yet been enslaved, the time frame does not matter, their bodies are marked with this signifier of slavery, as though to say that enslavement is deserved and inevitable.³⁴

We may laugh at the slapstick humour in Trader Mickey despite ourselves. While scholar Douglas Brode posits that laughter can be a mode of inclusivity in Disney films, I hasten to say that it is quite the opposite in this animation.³⁵ Instead, in the words of theorist Virginia Richter, humour can be understood as a key mode of racial aggression in a postcolonial context. She contends that “stereotyped identity to others goes hand in hand with the affirmation of one’s own identity as superior, individualized, non-stereotyped; derogatory laughter plays a crucial role in this mechanism of distancing and hierarchy formation.”³⁶ In the case of Trader Mickey, humour has a violent function. To provide an example, the sound of the “savage” king’s laugh, or his appropriation of a woman’s corset as a headpiece are humorous moments through absurdity, goofiness, and the sudden misplacement of an object [fig.5].³⁷ Freud wrote that the primary impulse of a joke is hostile, and is based on the release of sexual or aggressive impulses. Such impulses are strongest when a joke is directed *against* someone, specifically an ethnic group.³⁸ Thus, the humorous moments listed above make a mockery out of Africans, and the humour is contingent on racial aggression.

A look at the specific conditions of being a cartoon animator for Disney in the 1930’s will shed light on the sadomasochistic aspects of the violence in Trader Mickey. In the silent cartoon era, the actual human hand of the animator would appear on screen and inflict violence on the character, who would fight back and then ultimately lose.³⁹ With the advent of sound, violence towards cartoon characters was instead materialized within the cartoon world, in interaction with other characters. Sammond reads such violence as an out lash on the part of the animator, who was part of an oppressive capitalist labour system. Entry-level Disney animators carried out repetitive, menial tasks such as erasing pencil lines and washing cells. Even the head animators worked in onerous working conditions in order to meet deadlines.⁴⁰

Sammond contends that the capitalist system is a minor form of enslavement, because one must sell ones labour for survival.⁴¹ Thus, the animator’s urge to aggressively toy with his creation can be understood as a way of dominating the

Fig. 9: David Hand, “Savage” Chef Excited to Eat Mickey in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” chef; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.



commodity which controls the system that subjugates him, Disney's production system. Trader Mickey exaggerates the vengeful aspect of the relationship of the animator to the cartoon, because David Hand was symbolically abusing a character voiced by his employer, Walt Disney.

The sadism in this exchange is clear: David Hand enjoys abusing his characters out of vengeance. The masochism in the



Fig. 10: David Hand, Mickey in Cauldron in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” chef; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.

exchange is more complex. Sammond observes that an integral element of a sadomasochistic relationship is that the masochist enters into the relationship “willingly”.⁴² With this in mind, we can understand the most basic layer of the sadomasochistic dynamic between Hand and his characters. Hand is the sadist because he takes pleasure in inflicting violence on his characters and the characters are masochistic because they enter into the experience “willingly”. This “willingness” lies in the fact that it is Hand himself who activates the characters and puts them in violent circumstances. The agency of each character is entirely controlled by Hand. So, their “willingness” to be subjugated derives from Hand's desires to dominate them. The sadomasochism here can be understood through the animator's ability to doubly identify: he is both the dominator and dominated.

In order to take this analysis further, we must first observe that all of the characters in Trader Mickey represent blackness, whether as “savage” African caricatures or as American blackface minstrels. So, we can understand the sadomasochistic dynamic as one that maintains a hierarchy in which white bodies dominate black ones. And, a key way to understand masochistic pleasure is that subjugation is pleasurable because it confirms a rightful truth about the power structure within the sadomasochistic relationship and by extension within society. Abuse is thus pleasurable because it is “deserved.”

In order to apply this observation to Hand's relationship with his characters, we must observe the racialized, sadomasochist dynamic between Mickey Mouse and the African “savages.” In Trader Mickey, Mickey Mouse, the racially ambiguous westernized minstrel, is at

first in danger because the “savages” demonstrate their desire to kill and eat him. Here, Mickey is the object of their sadism; they laugh and lick their lips while placing Mickey into a cauldron, implying that eating him would bring them pleasure [fig.6].⁴³ However, this violence gets turned around through a performance. Mickey controls the bodies of the “savages” with music. The physical and social violence that Mickey imposes on the “savages” during the performance is given levity, seeming natural and pleasurable instead of horrific, because the violence is displayed in an upbeat musical number. The “savages” also seem to enjoy the various abuses that they receive, taking pleasure in the hostility and humiliation and continuing energetically with the performance. By the end of the number, the “savage” King falls into the cauldron that Mickey occupied at the beginning [fig.7].⁴⁴ This finalizes the reversal of the violence; the “savages,” the blackest bodies represented on screen, have been dominated. Furthermore, their enjoyment of this process of domination demonstrates, through a sadomasochistic lens, that there has been a return to the “rightful” order of things, that the Africans “deserve” to be put back into a lower place in the hierarchy of society.

The cartoon itself has sadomasochistic themes, but the comparison between minstrel shows and Trader Mickey is clarified if we consider the animator as a stand-in for the white performer in blackface. Hand invented, activated, and thus experienced all the black bodies in Trader Mickey. He thus had both the privilege of control over black identities and the power to assume the identities at will. As I have implied, the sadistic pleasure in the cartoon is partially based on the assumption that whiteness is neutral and that a white person can choose to

Fig. 11: David Hand, “Savage” King in Cauldron in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios. Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Pluto, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” king; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.



symbolically embody “blackness”—the same assumption made by the practice of blackface.

The cartoon’s sadism is also grounded in control of identity since the cartoon’s Africans are created wholesale out of ignorant stereotypes. More explicitly, Hand’s sadism lies in his ability to inflict social and physical violence on his characters. Through his privileged identification with the character Mickey

Mouse in Trader Mickey, Hand can experience the sadistic pleasure of turning the violence around on the “savages,” thus subjugating his blackest characters within a social hierarchy. This sadism is coupled with a masochistic pleasure since Hand had the privileged power to empathize with the “savages,” he experienced the physical and social subjugation with them. In Hand’s case, this subjugation is pleasurable because, as for the minstrel performer, the abuse is a sign of his cultural power.

Homi Bhabha writes that the binary structure between the colonizer and the colonized must be replaced by an analysis of rejection and desire in order to achieve “a profound understanding of colonial discourse...and break the chain of endless repetition.”⁴⁵ With Bhabha’s injunction in mind, this article has tried to demonstrate the violent, sexual subtext in a popular racialized cartoon. In considering the physical violence and social oppression present in blackface minstrelsy and in Walt Disney’s Trader Mickey, I suggest ways that sadomasochistic violence in American popular culture perpetuates the postcolonial ideology of a racial hierarchy in which whites dominate blacks. Only in deconstructing such desire and subjugation can we begin to stop its repetition in popular culture.

Notes:

¹That Mickey and Pluto arrive in Africa is not explicitly mentioned in the cartoon, but it is made quite apparent by the foliage and the dark skinned “savage” tribe that they find.

²Mickey Mouse was first animated by Ub Iwerks, who began collaborating with Walt Disney in 1919. David Hand began animating for Disney in 1930. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), p.1.

³Eric Smoodin, “Introduction: How to Read Walt Disney,” Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom, ed Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 19.

⁴As contended by Michael O’Prey, another way that Mickey Mouse exerted a powerful influence over its audiences, especially over children, was the way that he seemed to invite the audience to experience an imagined, shared embodiment. Drawing upon Freud’s notion of the omnipotence of thoughts, or more specifically, Freud’s claim that we believe that we can transform the external world solely through one thoughts, O’Prey contends that Mickey’s seemingly utter control of his own movements and the onscreen environment fulfill a viewers desire for all-powerfulness. Michael O’Prey, “Eisenstein and Stokes on Disney: Film Animation and Omnipotence,” A Reader in Animation Studies, ed. Jayne Pilling (Sydney: John Libbey & Company, 1997), p. 199.

⁵Henry A. Giroux, The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992) pp. 95, 107.

⁶Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, (New York: Oxford Press, 1993) p. 1.

⁷Lott, Love and Theft, p. 6.

⁸Lott, Love and Theft, p. 4.

⁹Lott, Love and Theft, pp. 18, 33.

¹⁰Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012) pp. 4-10.

¹¹Lott, Love and Theft, p. 27.

¹²Lott, Love and Theft, p. 50.

¹³Lott, Love and Theft, p. 30.

¹⁴It is perhaps redundant to say that slaves would be denied social legitimacy. However, minstrelsy was still popular after 1863 in the post emancipation period, when African Americans were struggling to obtain and maintain social legitimacy in American society. Eric Lott, Love and Theft, p. 1.

¹⁵Slave status was passed down through the mother and as a result slave owners were very attentive to the fertility of their slave women. Thus originated the practice of “breeding,” which resulted in slave women being regarded as animals who have the capacity to reproduce. They were thus displayed naked at auction, fondled, and examined for signs of fertility. One of the outcomes of the slave owners’ manipulation of the sexuality of their black female slaves

was the commonality of their use of rape against their enslaved females for sexual gratification as well as “breeding”. Deborah Gray White, “The Nature of Female Slavery,” *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), pp. 68-69.

¹⁶ In the legend of Oedipus Rex, Oedipus gauges out his own eyes after realizing that he has had sexual intercourse with his mother. Notably, this inversion punishes the woman for her sexual behaviour, unlike in the original myth, where Oedipus gauges out his own eyes as punishment. J.C Smith and Carla Ferstman, “Oedipus,” *The Castration of Oedipus: Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism and Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) pp. 259-60.

¹⁷ For the sake of this example, the minstrel would have had to be a white man, in blackface, dressed in drag. Men in drag mostly played female characters. However, sometimes, black minstrels would perform, still wearing blackface. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Lott, *Love and Theft*, pp. 156- 57.

¹⁹ Nicholas Sammond, “Gentleman, Please be Seated: Racial Masquerade and Sadomasochism in 1930’s Animation,” *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed Stephen Johnson (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) p. 164.

²⁰ Sammond, *Racial Masquerade*, p. 170.

²¹ Fig.1a Title, *Trader Mickey*; Character, Mickey Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014. Fig.1b Title, *The Jazz Singer*; Character, Jackie Rabinowitz; Director, Alan Crosland; Actor, Jolson; Production Company, Warner Brothers; Year, 1927; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014. Fig.1c Title, *Trader Mickey*; Character, Mickey Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Fig.1d Title, *The Jazz Singer*; Character, Jackie Rabinowitz; Director, Alan Crosland; Actor, Jolson; Production Company, Warner Brothers; Year, 1927; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

²² Fig. 2 Title, *Trader Mickey*; Character, Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

²³ Fig. 3 Title, *Trader Mickey*; Characters, Mickey Mouse and two unnamed dancing “savages”; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

²⁴ Sammond, *Racial Masquerade*, p. 166.

²⁵ Take for instance, the seven-minute cartoon *Fast and Furry-ous* released in 1949 as the first cartoon by Looney Toons and Merry Melodies that featured the characters Wile E. Coyote and The Road Runner. The body of Wile E. Coyote is twice exploded by dynamite, twice falls off a cliff, once is crushed by a boulder, and once is run over by a bus. He also runs into, or is hit by, the Road Runner and several other objects (a metal platter, rock faces, a boomerang, The Road Runner himself) without any distress. Though his body is sometimes momentarily mangled, he does not die, nor is he injured in the long term, as within seconds his body returns to its original form.

²⁶ Fig. 4. Title, *Trader Mickey*; Character, unnamed “savage” king ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

²⁷ This resonates with the notion that the black slave body was only partially a sentient being and was also partially an object. As contended by Marcus Wood, this semi-sentient status gave slave owners power to not only physically abuse their slaves, but also relate to a tortured slave body in a number of ways. Whether through apathy, sympathy, eroticism, or otherwise, the white master possessed the freedom and power to construct their relationship to an abused black body. Wood makes this observation when considering John Stedman’s relationship to the black tortured female body that he describes in his journal from the period that he served as a soldier fighting against the slave uprising in Surinam. Marcus Wood, “Slavery, Empathy, Pornography,” *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography in John Gabriel Stedman’s Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 97.

²⁸ Bell, Haas, Sells, *Mermaid*, p. 242.

²⁹ It is also important to note that Mickey Mouse is a term that now means “cheapened through excessive commodification.” Sammond, *Racial Masquerade*, p. 166.

³⁰ Sammond, *Racial Masquerade*, p. 166.

³¹ Fig. 5. Title, *Trader Mickey*; Character, unnamed “savage” king ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

³² Mickey is framed as the culturally superior subject because, even if he is a partial representative of blackness, he embodies a westernized blackness. Sammond, *Racial Masquerade*, p. 175.

³³ Fig. 3 Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse and two unnamed dancing “savages”; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

³⁴ Sammond, Racial Masquerade, p. 178.

³⁵ Douglas Brode, “Beat of a Different Drum: Ethnicity and Individualization in Disney, Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 102-03.

³⁶ Virginia Richter, “Laughter and Aggression, Desire in a Postcolonial Context,” Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial, eds Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2005), p. 62.

³⁷ Fig. 5. Title, Trader Mickey; Character, unnamed “savage” king ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

³⁸ Richter, Laughter, p. 63.

³⁹ Sammond, Racial Masquerade, p. 174.

⁴⁰ Sammond, Racial Masquerade, p. 184.

⁴¹ Sammond, Racial Masquerade, p. 186.

⁴² Sammond, Racial Masquerade, p. 186.

⁴³ Fig. 6a Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” chef ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014. Fig. 6b Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” chef; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.

⁴⁴ Fig. 7. Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Pluto, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” king ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.

⁴⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994); cited in Richter, Laughter, p. 64

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PLATE LIST:

Figure 1: David Hand, Mickey Mouse in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Character, Mickey Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 2: photographer unknown, Al Jolson in The Jazz Singer (1927) Black and White Photograph. Warner Brothers.

Title, The Jazz Singer; Character, Jackie Rabinowitz; Director, Alan Crosland; Actor, Jolson; Production Company, Warner Brothers; Year, 1927; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 3: David Hand, Mickey Mouse in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Character, Mickey Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 4: photographer unknown, Al Jolson in The Jazz Singer (1927) Black and White Photograph. Warner Brothers.

Title, The Jazz Singer; Character, Jackie Rabinowitz; Director, Alan Crosland; Actor, Jolson; Production Company, Warner Brothers; Year, 1927; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 5: David Hand, Mickey and Minnie in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Character, Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 6: David Hand, Mickey and “Savages” in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse and two unnamed dancing “savages”; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 7: David Hand, “Savage” King and Cuckoo Clock in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Character, unnamed “savage” king ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 8: David Hand, Mickey Kicks the “Savage” King in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Character, unnamed “savage” king, and Mickey Mouse ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, April 9, 2014.

Figure 9: David Hand, “Savage” Chef Excited to Eat Mickey in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” chef ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.

Figure 10: David Hand, Mickey in Cauldron in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” chef ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.

Figure 11: David Hand, “Savage” King in Cauldron in Trader Mickey (1932). Hand drawn pencil and ink animation. Walt Disney Studios.

Title, Trader Mickey; Characters, Pluto, Mickey Mouse, unnamed “savage” king ; Director, David Hand; Voice, Walt Disney; Production Company, Walt Disney Studios; Year, 1932; Date of Screen Shot, July 18, 2014.

AUNT JEMIMA: THE SMILING MAMMY IN YOUR CUPBOARD

Jewel Seo

The smiling Aunt Jemima has become a ubiquitous presence at the breakfast tables of many North American homes for the last one hundred and twenty-five years. Today, Aunt Jemima's logo depicts her with a light brown complexion, relaxed hair, and pearl earrings; a readily identifiable figure on a favourite pancake mix brand. However, an analysis of Aunt Jemima's history shows that the current revised logo is one that erases her previous affiliations with Trans Atlantic Slavery.¹ As her logo endured modifications throughout the years, the way Aunt Jemima products have been advertised has also gone through significant changes. Promotion methods have changed from live appearances, print advertisements and collectible items, to television commercials. In live promotion, print, and radio advertisements, Aunt Jemima was always the central figure speaking on behalf of her products. However, as the advertising medium transitioned into television commercials, Aunt Jemima suddenly became reduced to a silent picture on the box. This article will outline how all methods of promotion indicate a problematic underlining message of white nostalgia for the antebellum South. In particular, it will argue that the elimination of Aunt Jemima's presence in television advertisements denied a chance to portray Aunt Jemima as a progressive, modern black female subject. The television commercials will be criticized for portraying Aunt Jemima products with emphasis on characteristics affiliated with the black mammy stereotype, catering to a specific white nostalgia for the practice of slavery.

The character Aunt Jemima was created in 1889 by Chris Rutt and Charles Underwood of the *Pearl Milling Company* located in St. Joseph, Missouri.² Rutt was inspired to name the new product Aunt Jemima after he had attended a minstrel show where a blackface performer was singing a tune titled "Old Aunt Jemima".³ In the image that was first used to represent Aunt Jemima, she visually echoed a blackface performer with her exaggerated bright red lipstick and her black coal-like complexion. She has a headwrap entirely covering her hair that is tied with a knot in the front. Art historian Charmaine Nelson discusses female black slave's headwraps as the material evidence of the continuation of African dress heritage that has evolved across the Atlantic.⁴ Nelson explains that headwraps worn alone or under hats were a common factor in the dress of black female slaves.⁵ Nelson also points out that despite the diverse functional and aesthetic reasons behind the headwrapping practices, misrepresentation of headwraps by whites took place largely within the representation of the mammy stereotype.⁶ In the case of this early Aunt Jemima logo, her headwrap was placed to draw a connection with the defeminized and desexualized mammy stereotype with which white audiences were familiar.

In 1890, a year after the establishment of the Aunt Jemima product, Rutt and Underwood sold the company to R.T. Davis who then changed the company name to *Aunt Jemima Mills Company* signalling the success of the product.⁷ Also in 1890, Davis hired Nancy Green, a former slave who was working as a maid for a Chicago judge, as the first spokeswoman to go on promotional tours around the country.⁸ Green's image as Aunt Jemima had a particularly lasting

effect, as her face became the basis of the new representation of Aunt Jemima when the *Quaker Oats Company* purchased the *Aunt Jemima Mills Company* in 1925.⁹ Although the changed representation closely resembled Green with her dark brown complexion and facial features, she was still represented wearing a headwrap. While this image is a much more realistic representation of a black female than the previous comical drawing, it is ironic that a former slave woman was playing the role of the happy mammy archetype, a role from which she had fought to escape.

Starting with Green in 1890, successions of actresses were hired to become the Aunt Jemima character until the year 1970.¹⁰ A notable live appearance took place in 1933 when Anna Robinson, who the official Aunt Jemima website describes as “a large, gregarious woman with the face of an angel,” was hired to promote Aunt Jemima pancakes for the Chicago World’s Fair.¹¹ As live appearances were quickly becoming more popular, the *Quaker Oats Company* even created a fictional biography for Aunt Jemima to further encourage the myth that she was a real woman. She was presented as a former slave born on Louisiana’s Higbee Plantation who was famous for making her owner Colonel Higbee and his guests pancakes using her secret recipe.¹² The *Quaker Oats Company*’s efforts to bring Aunt Jemima to life through live performances and attributing a biography was a way to keep the out-dated view of black females as the subservient, nurturing mammy figure alive.

Along with the live appearances, print advertisements in magazines and newspapers further reinforced the myth of Aunt Jemima as a real person by incorporating drawings and photos of actresses who were playing Aunt Jemima. Print advertisements were dominantly published around 1940’-1950’s. In one of the early examples, a drawing of Aunt Jemima holding a stack of pancakes serving her owner Colonel Highbee and his entirely white guests is used to promote the product. In this image, Aunt Jemima and a black butler figure who has his back turned towards us are the only people standing. The ten-seated guests are all white. It is notable that the seated figures are depicted with their bodies turned, mouth open, hands gesturing to show that they are engaged in conversation with each other, while Aunt Jemima and the butler figure are not even acknowledged by a turn of a head. Despite this, Aunt Jemima is represented with a wide smile across her face looking jolly and ready to serve her stack of pancakes. Above her head, the headline states: “It tantalized the country-side...this old plantation’s famous secret!”. This advertisement exemplifies the deliberate choice made by the *Quaker Oats Company* to imbue Aunt Jemima products with a romanticized nostalgia of the days where simple-minded and devoted black servants catered to their white owner’s needs.¹³

In another print advertisement from roughly around the same time period, Aunt Jemima is shown smiling wide at a white woman who is holding a box of Aunt Jemima pancake mix in her hands. Here the figures are represented using photographs instead of drawings. By showing Aunt Jemima and this white female in the same frame, their physical features offer a contrast. Aunt Jemima’s hair is completely hidden under a headwrap, her body is physically larger than the white female, she is wearing a white bandana like scarf that covers most of her neck, and her complexion seems even darker next to the white female. On the other hand, the white woman is

depicted with emphasis on her feminine features with her voluminous hair, nicely applied makeup, light skin and a blouse that reveals part of her neck. The white woman is shown with a speech bubble that says “With a box of your ready-mix in my kitchen, it’s like having you there in person, Aunt Jemima!”¹⁴ Similar to the print advertisement discussed above, here Aunt Jemima is also shown smiling wide at her white consumer. The fact that Aunt Jemima is always coming to the aid of white consumers suggests that her presence in the modern kitchen is similar to the role of the black slave in the Big House kitchen. Although these two advertisements are just a fraction of the many that the *Quaker Oats Company* commissioned, one thing is clear, Aunt Jemima’s presence was the core feature in marketing these products and the fantasy for whites of her cooking.

When Aunt Jemima radio advertisements began in 1943, the advertisements included the Jemima Chorus who sung gospel-like tunes¹⁵ interrupted by Marvin Miller, a white voice-over actor, and various actresses who played the voice of Aunt Jemima.¹⁶ Contrasting the live performances, in these radio advertisements, Aunt Jemima was played by both white and black actresses such as Tess Gardella and Harriette Widmer.¹⁷ It is notable in these radio advertisements, Aunt Jemima’s African-American accent was overly emphasized and her grammar was deliberately made incorrect. This speech was transcribed into the print advertisements where Aunt Jemima was depicted with speech bubbles saying phrases such as: “Lawsee! Folks Sho’ Cheer for Fluffy, Energizin’ Aunt Jemima Pancakes”. The radio advertisement also had a segment where the presenter encouraged Aunt Jemima to share a “happy thought of the day”¹⁸ in which she would reply with various happy thoughts that encapsulated the docile, simplistic stereotype of the mammy.¹⁹

In 1957, television commercials began replacing these print and radio advertisements. With this medium change, her central lively presence was suddenly nowhere to be seen. Aunt Jemima’s dominating presence was completely reduced to just her face on the box of various ready-mix products. The commercials began featuring episodes of different ideal white American families composed of a wife, husband and well-behaved children. The emphasis of the advertisement shifted from presenting Aunt Jemima products as an authentic Southern recipe and instead to the ability for ready-mix products to allow families to make easy, delicious, and nutritious meals. The commercials often started with the white wife/mother figure in the act of making the pancakes, followed by her husband and children enjoying and complimenting the white female for the excellent meal. These commercials often featured actors from an American sitcom titled *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, which aired on ABC from 1944 to 1966 starring the Nelson family.²⁰ Since this popular television show depicted the 1950’s ideal American family life, the *Quaker Oats Company*’s decision to advertise Aunt Jemima products with these actors demonstrates the connection they sought; the ideal white American family eating the authentic American breakfast.

In these television advertisements, the adjectives quick, easy, simple and different amongst others were used to describe Aunt Jemima products. It showed that these products catered to the new modern lifestyle of the growing middle-class population of workingwomen.²¹

It only featured white families and the previously emphasized presence of Aunt Jemima was completely removed. Aunt Jemima's face was now only reduced to an image on the box. With the change in medium to the modern method of advertising, Aunt Jemima was denied the chance to become a modern woman herself. Only white women were given access to this modern space, and they were the ones who were depicted as the clever contemporary women who took care of their white families using the domestic help of the mythical black mammy figure, Aunt Jemima.

Along with this stress on domestic convenience, the nutritious benefits of Aunt Jemima products were also being pointed out in the television commercials. These television commercials featured a voice of a white male narrator who encouraged men to ask their wives for meals made from using Aunt Jemima products. This following transcription is part of a commercial that was aired in the late 1950's:

“Men still need a hearty nourishing breakfast and men love Aunt Jemima buckwheats and they are so easy easy easy...lots of lucky men can have Aunt Jemima buckwheats tomorrow if only they ask for them. Men! Ask for Aunt Jemima buckwheats tomorrow! Mmm my! They are good!”²²

This commercial showed a white man eating his pancakes as the narrator was commenting over him with a choir that echoed his words in the background. This commercial explicitly encourages the white men to consume and ask for Aunt Jemima pancakes from their presumably white wives. This commercial exemplifies the desire of white people to maintain the out-dated belief of black people as their master gardeners, farmers, and cooks, lingering from the antebellum experience. Aunt Jemima products can be seen as a promise to allow the continuation of the lifestyle perpetuated by slavery. Her comforting presence becomes for the white consumer a stabilizing factor in the white homes where she can help raise the white family and nourish the white master.

The fact that no black family was shown in these early advertisements shows the denial of black families as part of the rising modern demographic and demonstrates the extent to which black Americans were largely ignored by companies and their advertisers. Aunt Jemima is to remain smiling for her white surrogate family rather than to be seen with her own black family or helping another black family benefit from modern domestic convenience. This denial to depict Aunt Jemima providing nutritious meals for her black family is ironic because the *Quaker Oats Company* had even expanded the effort to create Aunt Jemima family characters. Aunt Jemima's husband was named Uncle Mose and their two children were Diana and Wade. The company also produced collectible items to be sold between the years 1895-1950.²³ The range of promotional items featuring Aunt Jemima and her family included salt and pepper shakers, cookie jars, condiment holders, syrup dispensers, rag and paper dolls, clocks, and many more.

These collectible items reinforced the idea that the black body, as within the context of slavery, was still a commodity that could be purchased and mobilized for the purpose of feeding white nostalgia for slavery. These collectible items were also highly demeaning as the user could

pour syrup out of the figures' mouths or their heads could be lifted to reveal the cookies or other condiments inside, as if the process of using the item mimicked the decapitation, severing or violation the black body. It was only when the company could profit from showing Aunt Jemima's family in a degrading way that they were deployed.²⁴ Yet Aunt Jemima's black family was denied the chance to be portrayed as a modern family in Aunt Jemima's television commercials.²⁵ It should also be mentioned that the skin colour on the collectible items returned to the dark black colour similar to the evocative blackface logo used in 1890's.

In tracing the history of Aunt Jemima, it is notable how her fictitious biography as a former slave defined and trapped her in an identity that was denied progress. Her success as a recognizable brand was achieved through a consistent portrayal of a reductive mammy archetype. Her long enduring history has produced a large number of visual materials to aid in tracing this underlying theme of white nostalgia for the black body to remain a slave. The changing process of the Aunt Jemima logo and her advertisements shows how the different companies that owned the Aunt Jemima brand, largely the *Quaker Oats Company*, were aware of their white customer's reception to Aunt Jemima's image. This signals that the choices made to maintain Aunt Jemima's representation were conscious ones kept in place for profit. In conclusion, it is clear that Aunt Jemima's different stages of advertising (from the live performances to the early television advertisements) always forced her to remain in a position below her white consumers, denied the right to be represented as a modern black woman feeding her own beloved black family.

Notes:

¹ It should be noted that the *Quaker Oats Company*'s decision to depict her hair in a relaxed style alludes to the fact that she cannot possibly be a modern woman with her hair in its natural curly state.

² "Aunt Jemima's Historical Timeline," *Aunt Jemima*, http://www.auntjemima.com/aj_history/ (date of last access 1 April 2014).

³ Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, "Aunt Jemima: The Most Battered Woman in America Rises to the Top," *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus, Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 64.

⁴ Charmaine Nelson, "Tying the Knot: Black Female Slave Dress in Canada," *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 97.

⁵ Nelson, "Tying the Knot," p. 97.

⁶ Nelson, "Tying the Knot," p. 98.

⁷ Aunt Jemima, "Aunt Jemima's Historical Timeline," (date of last access 1 April 2014).

⁸ Kern-Foxworth, "Aunt Jemima: The Most Battered Woman" p. 66.

⁹ Aunt Jemima, "Aunt Jemima's Historical Timeline," (date of last access 1 April 2014).

¹⁰ Aunt Jemima, "Aunt Jemima's Historical Timeline," (date of last access 1 April 2014).

Nancy Green, Anna Robinson, Edith Wilson, Rosie Lee Moore Hall, and Aylene Lewis were some of the actresses who played the role of Aunt Jemima in live appearances.

¹¹ "Aunt Jemima's Historical Timeline," (date of last access 1 April 2014).

¹² M.M. Manring, *Slave in a Box, The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 128.

¹³ Charmaine Nelson argues that such white nostalgia for black servitude persists and was manifested in the comments of the sixty-something, white, female, American celebrity chef Paula Deen when she allegedly commented (within the context of planning her brother's wedding): "What I would really like is a bunch of n-----s to wear long-sleeve white shirts, black shorts and black bow ties...now that would be a true Southern wedding, wouldn't it?" See Charmaine Nelson, "What Sergio Garcia's and Paula Deen's Racism Really Tell Us," *Huffington*

Post Canada, 27 June 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/charmaine-nelson/paula-deen-racist-comments_b_3505115.html (date of last access 10 January 2015)

¹⁴ “All you need is a Wish,” *Good Housekeeping Magazine*, vol. 110, no. 3 (1 March 1940), p. 133.

¹⁵ This is significant because gospel music was developed by African slaves in America as a way to preserve their African heritage and a collective means of expression to deal with the miserable conditions of slavery. See: Rose Blue and Corinne J. Naden, *The History of Gospel Music* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2001), p.9.

¹⁶ “Aunt Jemima Old Time Radio Commercials,” *Old Time Radio*, <http://www.otrcat.com/aunt-jemima-p-48526.html> (date of last access 1 April 2014).

¹⁷ “Aunt Jemima Old Time Radio Commercials,” (date of last access 1 April 2014).

¹⁸ Aunt Jemima’s happy thought of the day included the following examples: “folks says you can’t buy happiness but you can earn it.” and “the happy folks don’t measure time by years but by the smiles they have spread around the world.” It should also be noted that the happiness of Aunt Jemima belies the brutality of slavery.

OTRCAT.com Old Time Radio Catalog <http://www.otrcat.com/aunt-jemima-p-48526.html> (date of last access 17 January 2015)

¹⁹ “Aunt Jemima Old Time Radio Commercials (date of last access 1 April 2014).

²⁰ Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 61.

²¹ The adjectives “quick” and “easy” were cited in a 1960 advertisement. At 0:30 second, Harriet states “I wanted something quick and easy to fix.” See: “Aunt Jemima Pancakes 1960 TV Pancake Commercial Ozzie and Harriet,” *YouTube* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuiBcu_OUuA The adjective “easy” is repeated three times in a row at 0:34 second in a 1955 commercial. See: “Aunt Jemima Pancakes (1955) – Creepy Commercial,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBRIvZffmtQ> (dates of last access 17 January 2015)

²² Quaker Oats Company, *Aunt Jemima Buckwheat Pancakes Commercials* (ca.1957).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIpDlabi_d4 (date of last access 1 April 2014) 0:29-0:59.

²³ Judy Davis, “ ‘Aunt Jemima is Alive and Cookin’? ’ An Advertiser’s Dilemma of Competing Collective Memories,” *Journal of Macromarketing*, vol.27, no. 1 (2007), p. 29.

²⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the brands Uncle Ben and Darkie Toothpaste are other examples of how black people have been inappropriately used as logos to promote products.

²⁵ It was not until 1994 that the black artist Gladys Knight appeared in an Aunt Jemima television commercial as a contemporary, working grandmother, enjoying breakfast with her grandchildren.

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