

The Evolution Of An Artform:
An Analysis Of Black Characters In Animation from 1920-2010

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of History

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science in Marketing

By

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Signature Page

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Abstract

Throughout history, the animation industry has positioned itself as one of the most beloved and profitable forms of entertainment. The artform's success has always been dependent on its ability to adapt to cultural and societal expectations of audiences. By doing so, animation has managed to remain relevant regardless of the era it is in. One of the easiest ways for the animation industry to appeal to ever-changing audience interests was to capitalize on consistent societal sentiments, specifically black ethnic humor. By focusing on the humiliation and exploitation of black Americans in their cartoons, animators throughout history could maintain and grow their status in the entertainment industry. This research aims to understand how and why societal changes throughout American history have impacted black ethnic humor in the animation industry.

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Introduction

Human beings have been trying to depict motion in art since the beginning of time. However, it was not until 1603, with the creation of the Magic Lantern, "an image projector using pictures on sheets of glass," when technology would advance enough to meet that goal, introducing society to what would one day become modern-day animation.¹ Since its inception, animation has become a central medium for human beings to tell unique stories and communicate complicated concepts in a simple and easily digestible manner. Animation's predecessors, specifically comics and cartoons, were used to highlight people's ever-evolving perceptions of the world around them. Like other comparable art forms, animation adapted and illuminated the world it inhabited, often depicting the era's sentiments. As such, dynamic moments in American history can be tracked in parallel with the historical period's animated and illustrated content. Using the Reconstruction era's animated features as a starting point, the history of black Americans, as well as their shifting status and perception

¹ Bodo von Dewitz and Werner Nekes, *Ich Sehe Was, Was Du Nicht Siehst! Sehmaschinen und Bilderwelten* (Cologne: Steidl, 2002), https://www.academia.edu/345943/The_Magic_Lantern.

in American society, can be examined through the socio-cultural lens of animation.

Animation is often overlooked as a subject for in-depth academic study, especially in a historical context. On the surface, the art form can appear juvenile in nature, and it requires a certain suspension of disbelief to both understand and enjoy. These are factors that, in many cases, eliminate it from receiving serious academic attention. Furthermore, while racial disparities are often examined in live-action television programs, they are less likely to be studied in animated features. Although race itself is only skin deep, in animated content racial depictions and characteristics often rely on more than skin color, if at all.² Animated content can circumvent explicit racist or prejudiced depictions by creating non-human or whimsical characters that appear to exist, on the surface, outside of racial constructs. An in-depth examination of animation can both highlight and establish a more nuanced picture of the evolving societal depictions of blacks throughout American history. Such an examination illuminates how simplistic mediums can subtly communicate

² Michael J Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*, chap. 1, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uh/detail.action?docID=430654>.

complex ideas and perceptions regarding race, racism, prejudice, and subconsciously ingrained societal attitudes.

To understand the underlying sentiments, present in modern-day animation, it is important to track animation's rise to prominence. The medium started, and began to die, amid the Jim Crow era, which began in the years after Reconstruction ended and continued well into the 1960s.³ At the time, animation was an unfamiliar and ill-received form of entertainment. Moreover, the process for creating and mass-producing animated content was complicated, expensive, and did not guarantee a return on investment.⁴

Television was only just beginning to become popular when animation reached fruition, severely limiting the art form's access to the most important audience of that time - middle-class white Americans.⁵ It became increasingly difficult for animators to justify the continued creation of animated content, even as technology developed to support it.⁶ Because of this, creators of animated content had to find a way to appeal to the audience with the most buying power and access to their content. To garner supporters and investors, animators followed in their live-

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

action predecessors' footsteps by reflecting the period's sentiments in their animated features, often in a noticeably whimsical nature that mimicked minstrelsy.⁷ This method continued as animation developed, situated the white American middle class's viewpoints as the perspective from which animated features positioned their content.

Subsequently, that unshakable influence created the basis of modern-day animated features, resulting in the continued misrepresentation and stereotypical depiction of black Americans in animation.

It is important to note that animation is not immune to time. Developments in American society impacted the animation industry, as it did all other industries, and presented a new problem. The fantastical nature of animation, whose origins were rooted in minstrelsy and blackface, would no longer be acceptable with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.⁸ The art form adopted more covert versions of the same practices by altering depictions of black Americans in a manner that

⁷ Ibid.; and Silas Kane Ezell, *Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television: Animation and the American Joke*, 75-114, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uh/reader.action?docID=4533495&ppg=86>.

⁸ Sarita Gregory, *Contemporary black American Cinema Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, 175-199, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uh/reader.action?docID=981965&ppg=185>.

would avoid outcry while maintaining the same racially-biased sentiments.⁹

Despite the efforts of black Americans to combat their depictions in the medium, it was not until 1965 that blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities entered the animation industry.¹⁰ While this small increase in diversity has had some impact, the results often fall short. The modern-day animation industry continues to reinforce the skewed perception of black Americans popularized in the Jim Crow era. The industry's ongoing systemic lack of diversity in content and creators reinforces its innate racial bias, even as it attracts additional racial controversy.¹¹

Like its live-action counterpart, animation has yet to detach from the deeply discriminatory sentiments that defined the period of its creation. This research will examine the evolution of animation in tandem with the development of black America throughout significant periods in American history. Beginning with the post-Reconstruction era, my research will track American history parallel to the rise of black influence in the country, highlighting how black Americans' socio-political elevation changed

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, chap. 1.

¹¹ Gregory, *black American Cinema*, 175-199; and Ezell, *Humor and Satire*, 75-114.

their depictions in animation without ever moving the underlying status of whiteness as the standard of good in both the nation and the medium. The evolution of animation offers unparalleled insight into America's societal understanding of race and humanity as these concepts apply to black Americans and their continued work towards political, economic, and social equity.

Animation found its start during one of the most tumultuous eras in American history. Between 1928 and the late 1960s, a period known as the golden age of animation, the industry established the tropes, characters, and styles that would come to define the art form long after its transition from short films to serialized television content.¹² For all the impactful and revolutionary content animation generated during this period, it also "produced some of the most racist and sexist depictions of people of color in cartoon history."¹³ Despite its whimsical and simplistic nature, categorizing animation solely as a form of children's entertainment undermines the role the artform played in establishing, disseminating, and solidifying the nature of race relations in the United States. Animation

¹² Brian D. Behnken, Gregory D. Smithers, "Animating Racism." In *Racism in American popular media: from Aunt Jemima to the Frito Bandito* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2015), 83.

¹³ Ibid.

today, as in the past, teaches adults and children alike "how to think and speak about race."¹⁴ Because the very nature of traditional animation was designed to break the fourth wall, subsequently disintegrating the boundaries between the screen and the audience, the artform has always existed in a liminal space between reality and fantasy. This essay will attempt to explore how animation came to subtly influence race relations in America and to discover the industry's true legacy.

¹⁴ Ibid., 84.

Chapter 1: America in The Animated Golden Age

The golden age of animation began during the Roaring Twenties, a "period...of dramatic social and political change," but specifically in 1928 with the release of Disney's *Steamboat Willie*.¹⁵ To better situate the rise of animation, a brief historical overview is in order. For the first time in American history, more people lived in cities than on farms, a fact exacerbated by the first waves of the Great Migration as black Americans began their exodus from the Jim Crow South.¹⁶ Americans were living in the aftershocks of the Great War, which left many with both an aversion to foreign intervention and a relative affluence that prompted the rise of an "unfamiliar 'consumer society.'"¹⁷

Rapid urbanization led to a significant rise in commercial consumerism, as Americans had more money to spend than ever before, and spend it, they did. People bought ready-wear-clothes, shiny new home appliances, and invested in entertainment like never before. Historians

¹⁵ History.com Editors, "The Roaring Twenties History," History.com, last modified August 12, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/roaring-twenties-history>.

¹⁶ History.com Editors, "The Great Migration," History.com, last modified January 16, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>.

¹⁷ History.com Editors, "The Roaring Twenties History."

estimate that by the end of the 1920s, "three-quarters of the American population visited a movie theater every week."¹⁸ There, short-animated films and silent films, which were quickly being replaced with sound films, cemented themselves as core aspects of this new American lifestyle.

Despite the benefits of industrialization, Americans were faced with significant obstacles as they adjusted to their new living standards, crowded cities, and grueling work conditions required to maintain the country's newfound economic prosperity. Americans across the country began organizing to address and mitigate the problems caused by the industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and political corruption that had marked the Gilded Age. However, even as individuals attempted to mitigate rising economic and political difficulties in large cities, these urban centers were plagued by an even more complicated problem - social unrest. Newly established urban centers became epicenters for cultural and social turmoil as "city-dwellers and small-town residents, Protestants and Catholics, blacks and whites, 'New Women' and advocates of old-fashioned family values" all found themselves thrust together.¹⁹ America's overcrowded cities were filled with

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

underpaid individuals from varying backgrounds, fighting for the same limited resources. The stresses of city life, cultural differences, and increasing xenophobia established urban centers as breeding grounds for white supremacy, racial intolerance, and anti-immigrant sentiments.²⁰

Growing racial and cultural tensions, coupled with the vestiges of Progressive Era sentiments, fed into the popularity of social Darwinism. The theory became the "philosophical rationalization for imperialist, colonialist, and racist policies, sustaining belief in Anglo-Saxon or Aryan cultural and biological superiority" on a global scale.²¹ Eugenics, a pseudo-scientific off-branch of social Darwinism, was used in the United States to explain away societal conditions like poverty, vagrancy, and alcoholism. These conditions existed outside the Anglo-Saxon Protestant narrative of acceptability and were, therefore, genetic impurities in other races. Eugenicists justified not only forcible sterilization of the "unfit" but the racism, xenophobia, and hyper-nationalism highly prevalent in America.

²⁰ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Social Darwinism," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, published October 02, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-Darwinism>.

²¹ Ibid.

Such increasing political, societal, and cultural tensions were exacerbated by the economic devastation of the 1930s triggered by the stock market crash in October of 1929 and worsened by the Dust Bowl.²² Despite Franklin Roosevelt's multi-faceted New Deal, a plethora of policies and programs aimed to pull the United States out of the Great Depression, it would be England's constant need for military supplies that would pull the United States out of the Depression. In spring of 1941, Congress passed the Lend Lease Act, which gave President Roosevelt "virtually unlimited authority to direct material aid such as ammunition, tanks, airplanes, trucks, and food" to the European war effort without violating the nation's official position of neutrality.²³ The indirect support the United States provided to its allies, led to a dramatic increase in wartime production, enabling the United States to finally vanquish the 12-year economic depression.²⁴

In the years following the war, riding off the "Double V" - a movement launched by black American during WWII which worked for victory abroad and demanded victory over

²² History.com Editors, "Dust Bowl," History.com, last modified August 5, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/dust-bowl>.

²³ "The Lend- Lease Act," This Day in History, Library of Congress, Accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/october-23/>

²⁴ "Lend- Lease Act (1941)," accessed October 25, 2020, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=71>.

racism and discrimination on the homefront - campaign's success, a series of landmark cases for civil rights made their way to the Supreme Court .²⁵ Starting, officially, in 1951 and extending through 1965, the United States legal court system ruled on a series of cases including *Brown v Board of Education* 1 and 2; the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964; *Monroe v. Pape*; and revitalized Section 1983 of the Civil Rights Act of 1871.²⁶

The traditional ideas of American life and society underwent a rapid change throughout the early to mid-20th century. These changes led to significant social, economic, and political uncertainty, so much so that the very idea of what it meant to be American was literally up for debate in the nation's court system. The rapid evolution of the country left many Americans grasping for some semblance of normalcy.

A Product of Its Time

Although animation rose to prominence during an era of uncharacteristic economic prosperity, its success was far

²⁵ "The Double V Victory," The National WWII Museum New Orleans, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/double-v-victory>

²⁶ Library of Congress, "Legal Timeline," The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/legal-events-timeline.html>.

from immediate. Originating in 1911, animation functioned as an accessory to the widely popular vaudeville and burlesque shows of the time. Consequently, by the start of the 1920s, "animation had long since lost its novelty value."²⁷ Similar to other forms of entertainment prevalent in the early 1900s, animation was relatively performative. One of the most common forms of performative animation during this time was the Lightning-sketch. Illustrators were shown drawing sketches at lightning speed, often turning a word into a sketch of that word or turning an abstract shape into a sketch.²⁸ Mimicking the traditional vaudevillian style of performance, these animated short-films often blurred the boundaries between the real and the ideal while also exposing the intense labor needed to create the performance.²⁹ Animation subscribed so heavily to the vaudevillian style of performance that when its live counterpart began to be replaced with film, animated features began to die out as well.

Animation faced two problems that hindered its ability to entertain urban America. First, the artform's

²⁷ Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 9.

²⁸ "Lightning Sketches (1941)," *ImdbPro*, accessed March, 23, 2021, https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0140331?rf=cons_tt_atf&ref_=cons_tt_atf.

²⁹ Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 105.

inconsistent and inefficient production process made it difficult for animators to churn out the amount of content needed to generate profit. Secondly, while unique in its delivery method, animation was still essentially a vaudeville show, something Americans were no longer interested in. And so, despite the growing popularity of the film industry, "many cartoon studios that had never offered much else were either out of business or on the way there."³⁰

Despite its rough start, the animation industry would quickly find its way into the mainstream by successfully solving both of its problems. Starting in 1914, the animation industry began a period of rapid industrialization, marked by a "flurry of patents for improved techniques of registration..., reproduction..., and materials."³¹ These swift technological advancements not only "intensified commercial competition," but also enabled the mass production of animated short films. With mass production, animation quickly began to lose the inherently performative nature that had tied it so closely to vaudeville.

³⁰ Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 9.

³¹ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 55.

Even without its vaudevillian tone, animation had yet to find its own style. For that, it merely had to look to the American public for an answer. The early 1900s signaled the rise of Fordism. This term has come to mean both a mass production system and the typical postwar mode of economic growth and the political and social aftershocks associated with highly capitalist societies.³² While highly efficient and profitable, Fordism left its laborers feeling "a loss of productive freedom and in automation the diminution of their humanity."³³ Many Americans, especially those with an increased disposable income, were looking for an escape; several found it in the budding film industry and, eventually, animation.

The American public was desperate for a sense of normalcy and familiarity, and animation was in a unique position to provide those comforts. Instead of moving forward to find its style, the industry returned to the past. While vaudeville had died, its predecessor, minstrelsy, particularly blackface, found a new home on the big screen in live-action and animated films. The familiar characters made famous during the minstrel era reemerged in

³² Ibid., 57; and Encyclopedia.com, s.v. "Fordism," accessed August 26, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/fordism>.

³³ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 39-40.

animation. Animators adopted the role of interlocutor. Their characters came to represent a well-known figure of miseducation, oppression, and struggle meant to resonate with the audience.

Animated minstrelsy quickly became popular among moviegoers, and, in time, came to define the industry. The familiar messaging, coupled with the unique presentation, endeared animation to the American public.

Your Wish is My Command

The United States transitioned from a relatively rural self-subsistent society to one in which individuals found themselves existing as cogs in the machine of American capitalism. The lack of autonomy, crowded cities, and later the Depression left Americans feeling less than human. The early 1900s was, in short, a period marked by one rapid change after another. With the mass immigration following the First World War and the start of the Great Migration, Americans, specifically white Americans, found it difficult to adjust to the country's developments. Animation quickly capitalized on this growing unrest by providing white Americans with the escape from reality they desired by showing them exactly what they wanted to see.

Animation endeared itself to the American public by telling its audiences old stories in a new way, specifically using ethnic humor. Throughout American history, "ethnic humor was one of the means by which dominant white culture maintained its superiority."³⁴ In other words, through humor, a dominant culture can subtly but firmly establish and reinforce a racial and ethnic hierarchy in society. Ethnic humor works because it mocks the experiences of racial and ethnic populations unable to assimilate into the dominant society. And, in America, "the negro" remained "a strange unassimilated element" whose visage "almost immediately [found] its way to the stage in comic types."³⁵

It is no surprise that one of the most popular forms of ethnic humor was blackface minstrelsy. Not only did the artform entertain audiences with colorful stories and fantastical displays, but minstrel shows had the characteristic tendency of displaying black Americans as they were perceived, not as they were. Blackface minstrelsy toyed with ideas such as mobility, candor, or even basic intelligence and then perverted them. Minstrelsy purposely showed blackface characters breaking and reinforcing

³⁴ Ezell, *Humor and Satire*, 75.

³⁵ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 64-65.

societal norms. The shows provided white audiences with fantastical stories starring black Americans without ever moving them from their position of subservience. In other words, the characters in blackface minstrelsy shows lived to entertain their audience.

Even though stage minstrelsy was dying, "the desire for white audiences to see African American performers enact its stereotypes remained strong enough to border on a command."³⁶ If live minstrelsy characters figuratively lived to entertain white audiences, animated minstrelsy characters did so literally. Animated blackface minstrels filled the entertainment gap left by their live counterparts, donning the minstrel's costume - white gloves, wide light-colored mouths, and large exaggerated eyes.³⁷ One of the most notable characters to derive its titular look from minstrelsy is none other than Mickey Mouse (see figure 1). This animated icon's classic look was borrowed from Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*, a blackface minstrel musical, performed in 1927.³⁸ *The Jazz Singer* ended the industry's silent film era and inaugurated synchronized

³⁶ Ibid., 63.

³⁷ Behnken and Smithers, "Animating Racism," 85.

³⁸ Ibid.

recorded musical scores as well as lip-synching and speech-synching. It was the first full-length "talkie" with music.

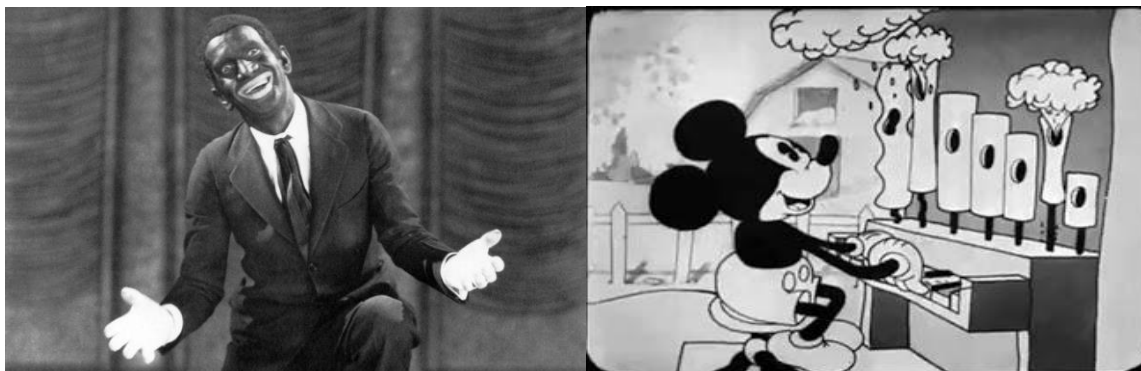


Figure 1: Al Jolson in his role as blackface minstrel Jackie Rabinowitz in the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* (left); Mickey Mouse in the 1929 short *The Jazz Fool* named for Al Jolson films *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool* (right)

The rise of "talkies" and the demand for animated minstrels set the stage for the golden age of animation, an era marked by Mickey Mouse's 1928 debut in *Steamboat Willie*.³⁹ This film and its successors would define the animation industry, officially introducing the animated minstrel to audiences.

The Art of Authenticity

Despite the influence traditional minstrelsy had on its animated successor, one would be remiss to define animation as merely an extension of late minstrel shows and vaudeville. The artform did not simply adopt the racist

³⁹ Dave Smith, "Steamboat Willie," accessed November 27, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/steamboat_willie.pdf.

caricatures of blackface, but instead "engaged in an intensification of racist imagery" all its own.⁴⁰ Audiences, especially during the Depression, expected "talkies" and animated short-films to provide familiar depictions and characters found in blackface minstrelsy.

As America underwent a rapid transformation throughout the early 1900s, audiences were craving entertainment that reminded them of the life they once had. Animated minstrelsy provided this. Due to animated minstrelsy's connection with vaudeville, the artform maintained the liminal space between the ideal - the life white Americans longed for - and the real- what white Americans could reasonably obtain - in its shows. This allowed it to showcase the fantastical and somewhat unbelievable nature of the animated minstrel while continuing to represent blackness "squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourses about 'whiteness.'" ⁴¹ Consequently, animated blackface characters were often relatively authentic, in the sense that they met the expectations of the white audiences who came to see them.

One of the earliest examples of this pattern of selective authenticity in depictions can be found in the

⁴⁰ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 29.

⁴¹ Ezell, *Humor and Satire*, 92.

short film *Bosko, the Talk-Ink Kid*. While this film was never released, it did spark a series of short films starring Bosko in the same style and, as such, serves as a base model for understanding the films of the time. The



Figure 2: Original design of Harman-Ising's *Bosko, the Talk-Ink Kid* (1929).

film showcases Bosko, a young black boy with a distinctive southern negro dialect, being drawn by and then interacting with animator Rudolf Ising. Bosko is drawn with the unmistakable large eyes and exaggerated lips characteristic of live minstrels, with Ising assuming the interlocutor's role

(see Figure 2).⁴² The only

feature Bosko lacks is the

distinctive white gloves of the common minstrel, an accessory Bosko's female counterpart, Honey, dons in his official release in the 1930 film *Sinkin; in the Bathtub*.

Animation was more than just pictures on a screen; it was a purposeful attempt to maintain a skewed image of America for white audiences. Therefore, it is no surprise

⁴² Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 220.

that the racial depictions found in blackface minstrelsy, and subsequently animated minstrelsy, are not actually based on real people, as performers often claimed. Early minstrel shows were popular because the audiences believed they were watching authentic reenactments of "genuine dances and songs that [the performers] (or their forebears) had witnessed slaves perform on southern plantations."⁴³ However, this was not the case due to one key factor that dominated the minstrel industry - creative borrowing.

"Animation developed in a milieu in which creative borrowing was the norm," meaning that blackface minstrels often borrowed or stole their performances, tropes, and songs from other performers.⁴⁴ The perceived authenticity of the performances was wholly the result of confirmation bias. Audiences saw the blackface minstrels as authentic because to do so reinforced the narrative of the "indolent and shifty slave, [and].... replicated a white fantasy of plantation life, of lazy African Americans wallowing in a sensual torpor, almost devoid of higher mental and moral functions."⁴⁵ When live minstrelsy faded from the forefront

⁴³ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 23.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Sammond, "'Who Dat Say Who Dat?' Racial Masquerade, Humor, and the Rise of American Animation," in *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Ira Goldmark and Charles Keil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 125.

⁴⁵ Sammond, "'Who Dat Say Who Dat?'" 123.

of entertainment, its animated successor promptly took up the mantle of maintaining this narrative.

Not only were animated characters able to relay the same visual and mental stimulation that characterized minstrelsy, but the artform, due to the rise of "talkies," introduced an entirely new form of blackface. Once sound synchronization found its way to the animated stage, audiences demanded characters that not only looked black but also sounded black. Thus, the fetishized concept of the "black voice" entered the animation industry. The idea suggested that "racial identity must be seen and heard, or, more precisely, that racial identity lies somewhere in the synchronization of sound and image."⁴⁶ Animation worked to become more authentic for its audiences as it developed, which resulted in ever more racist depictions of black Americans.

Entertaining a Nation

Even with the understanding of the racist tones present in animation, it is impossible to understand the impact the characters made unless one considers animation's primary purpose. Characters created during the golden age

⁴⁶ Alice Maurice, "'Cinema at Its Source': Synchronizing Race and Sound in the Early Talkies," *Camera Obscura* 17, no. 1 (2002): 33, muse.jhu.edu/article/7986.

were made to exist in a liminal space between the ideal and the real. As American society shuddered from economic disaster, mass immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and the Great Migration, animated features "continued to be a place where the cruelty of stereotypes ... found fertile ground for the expression of that distinction."⁴⁷ In an era of significant socio-economic upheaval, animation fed deeply into the Lost Cause narrative that *Birth of a Nation* reaffirmed in 1915 and occluded the hardships of slavery and later Jim Crow. The artform provided the "white fantasy of plantation life," choosing to ignore the



Figure 3: Pat Sullivan's 1919-character Felix the Cat.

whippings, lynchings, rapes, and other horrors interwoven in the system of slavery and Jim Crow in favor of showcasing the jovial lifestyles of pickaninnies like Felix the Cat (see Figure 3).⁴⁸

As such, animated minstrels, like Felix the Cat, Bosko, and Mickey Mouse, while often being shown as

⁴⁷ Sammond, "'Who Dat Say Who Dat?'," 116.

⁴⁸ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 214; Behnken and Smithers, "Animating Racism," 85.

simpleminded, somewhat lazy, and "prisoners of their own physical desires," were always depicted with happiness and laughter, a trait falsely associated with black slaves.⁴⁹ These characters, which existed solely to entertain white audiences, depicted black Americans "as nothing more than clowns and buffoons."⁵⁰

Despite the artform's socio-economic origins, animation must not be seen as solely emblematic of its time. It had its own "dominant notions about the relationship between blackness and whiteness in the United States." These ideas were expressed and reinforced long after its live-action counterparts faded into America's collective memory.⁵¹

Conclusion

Animation demonstrated on-screen what non-black Americans thought to be true of black Americans: "that the black body was always understood as socially less than but performatively more than his white counterpart."⁵² Animation, like blackface minstrelsy, established the black body, and subsequently, the black experience, as nothing

⁴⁹ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 214.

⁵⁰ Ezell, *Humor and Satire*, 91.

⁵¹ Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 68.

more than a malleable figure existing solely for the purpose of another's entertainment. Despite this, the "Animated Minstrel" must be understood as a socio-cultural phenomenon all its own. Even as its live counterparts disappeared, the industry thrived because it provided white Americans a liminal space between their fantasy and reality, a space in which they could reassure themselves that all was well in their world.

Chapter 2: The Studio Era

The cartoons produced during the Golden Era of animation established the familiar tropes and stereotypes about blacks often found in modern-day animation. This era, which started in 1928 and ended in the late 1960s, was heavily influenced by the Great Depression, changing social parameters on morality, rapid economic growth, increased black activism, and the concentration of power in the film industry. Understanding how black stereotypes manifested in the Golden Era requires a careful examination of the period's most influential studios and how they handled black characters and characterization.

Starting in 1927, and overlapping the Golden Era of animation, Hollywood entered the Studio Era, a period defined by the eight major companies that produced most of the films in the Hollywood studio system.⁵³ These companies had full control of the live-action content as well as animation, making an examination of their practices the most helpful way of understanding how black depictions were organized and understood in the industry. From 1928 to 1946, the major studios rapidly changed their cartoons' style and, subsequently, the way they depicted blacks.

⁵³ Joel W. Finler, "Introduction," in *The Hollywood Story*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 1 -10.

These changes were often a direct response to American audiences' fleeting desires, whose interests fluctuated based on the state of the country. Therefore, to fully understand how each depiction of blackness developed, the Studio Era must be examined in segments.

Humans, Not Animals (1928-1931)

The Great Depression had a significant impact on American society and in several distinct ways changed the relationship Americans had with entertainment. Media no longer existed as a mere add-on to life, but instead became the center of cultural importance. Hard-working Americans turned to the country's studio industry to find an escape from the bleakness of their lives. The animation industry had yet to create content explicitly for children during this time, rendering animation an entertainment source for adults. This change in what the media meant to Americans prompted a significant shift in how animation was created and understood throughout the Great Depression. The early 1930s represented one of the most controversial eras in animation due to the ways black characters were depicted in response to growing racial tensions in the devastated Depression-era job market. By 1934, the more revolutionary characterizations - such as, sexual deviants, immoral

figures, or radicals of any kind - created in 1932, were abandoned, and the industry shifted back to the degrading, antebellum style of depicting blacks. Even so, it is essential to note that antebellum-style depictions were a step up from previous depictions of animated black characters.

From 1928 to 1931, black characters were almost indistinguishable from their animal counterparts. Before this period, studios focused on the cheapest methods of creation for production, which often translated into using the traditional blackface minstrelsy style of animation to draw animals and black characters. In practice, this meant that "African-American and African characters shared the same facial design and black bodies with animal characters."⁵⁴ Had the Great Depression not occurred, and its social consequences not been so widespread and jarring, it is difficult to surmise when animators, or American audiences for that matter, would have felt the need to shift away from this not-quite-human style.

The depiction of black characters as humans came in waves. The first step took place in 1928 with the

⁵⁴ Christopher P. Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon: Black Presentation in American Animated Short Films, 1907- 1954" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, 2002) 6, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1915&context=dissertations_1.

introduction of talkies. Studios now could synchronize sound with film. Starting with music and working their way towards voice acting, studios could add more personality to their animated stars. No longer bound to song synchronization, animators could develop complex and unique plot lines driven forward by dialogue. Moreover, "as studios became more comfortable animating voices as well as music, black characters more frequently spoke in incorrect grammar and malapropisms."⁵⁵ While these characters still looked much like their animated animal counterparts, granting them the ability to talk coded them as more human than before.

The black characters' ability to speak moved them to the next stage of humanization - intermingling with whites. Because the Great Depression affected practically everyone, except for the elite, the economic calamity removed class distinctions between blacks and whites. Animators mirrored this social change on screen. Due to the dearth of employment, whites began competing for traditionally black jobs. This development meant that the two groups had to mix in public spaces. Moreover, because black characters were often drawn without any ethnic distinctiveness, they were

⁵⁵ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon", 25.

more likely to be observed in contemporary cartoons mixing in public spaces. While still placing black characters beneath their white counterparts, animated racial mixing solidified the studios' practices, which conveyed that certain black characters were human.

Blackness by Studio (1932-1934)

As the Depression continued unabated and Americans found themselves even more destitute, studios further leaned into the practice of illustrating black characters as more human-like but focused their efforts on stereotypical depictions: laziness, hypersexuality, servility, or immorality. The cartoons produced during this brief two-year period established several animation archetypes, each of which can be attributed to a specific animation studio. Though the studios shared some similarities in how they depicted black characters, each uniquely represented their own ideas and biases. These archetypes would eventually lay the groundwork for black characters found in the limited cartoons of the 1970s, when the art form experienced its Dark Age.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ "The Dark Age of Animation," Central Rappahannock Regional Library, published June 11, 2018, <https://www.librarypoint.org/blogs/post/the-dark-age-of-animation/>.

Warner Brothers and the Moral Cartoon

In 1932, Warner Brothers began to give personalities to the black characters it created, but these representations were "incidental characters lacking ethnically stereotypical characteristics."⁵⁷ Black cartoon characters released by Warner Brothers from 1932 to 1934 were ethnically ambiguous and were only coded as black when it was narratively convenient. Their ambiguity allowed the characters to act and exist in spaces where blacks were usually not allowed. One of the leading examples of this sleight-of-hand is the Bosko character, who was created by the Warner Brothers team of Herman and Ising. Bosko was an ethnically ambiguous boy who spoke and acted similarly to Mickey Mouse, a character created in 1928.⁵⁸ Under the guidance of the Herman-Ising creative team, Warner Brothers followed the Bosko model whenever a black character was needed. This allowed the studio to place the black characters in any environment necessitated by the cartoon's plot and attach a level of ignorance and weakness to them.

When the original artistic duo of Herman-Ising left the studio, their successor, Leon Schlesinger, continued to create black characters with weak personalities. However,

⁵⁷ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 27.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7.

Schlesinger's characters were more stereotypically black, despite being ethnically ambiguous. His black characters were often paired with white ones, which humanized them while ensuring that they remained canonically inferior to their counterparts. This dramatic shift in characterization can be seen in the 1934 short film *Buddy of the Apes*. In the film, Buddy, a young white boy, is shown as having agency and intelligence, so much so that he manages to fight off



Figure 4: An unnamed drunken black farm hand, clutching a bottle of Gin in fear.

an African king, all on his own.⁵⁹ Comparatively, Bosko, an ethnically ambiguous character of the same age, is not given the same agency in the short-animated film, *Bosko Shipwrecked*.⁶⁰ Despite finding himself in a similar situation to Buddy, Bosko lacks the intelligence and skill to defend himself. Instead, Bosko runs.⁶¹

Such limited characterization eventually led to the Warner Brothers' animated claim to fame - the Moral Cartoon. The cartoon genre was created with the 1934

⁵⁹ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 31.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

release of a *Merrie Melody* episode entitled "Gain to Heaven on a Mule." As animation historian Christopher P. Lehman notes, "In the film, a slave experienced a horrible nightmare in order to stop drinking Gin, and because the studio characterized stereotypical black behavior as immoral, it was able to constitute both the action and the character as immoral in one fell swoop" (see Figure 4).⁶² "Gain to Heaven on a Mule" reinforced the common belief that blacks and the activities they are engaged in are immoral and wrong, and that it would take something traumatic, like a nightmare, to correct such unacceptable behavior.

"Gain to Heaven on a Mule" led to the development of Moral Cartoons in the animation industry. The animated short films found in this genre were defined by "characters experiencing physical torture in nightmares to stop anti-social behavior."⁶³ Anti-social behaviors, like drinking, gambling, and sexual promiscuity, were all considered stereotypically black. Moral cartoons reinforced blacks' perceived immorality, which classified them as inferior to their white counterparts and in need of intervention, often religious in nature, to no longer behave immorally.

⁶² Ibid., 32.

⁶³ Ibid.

The Fleischer Brothers, Paramount, and Racial Adventure

Animators, until the mid-1930s, relied heavily on music-based sound synchronization to carry the plots of their films. The Fleischer Brothers, in this regard, were no different from other industry professionals, but they also wanted to add a sense of realism to their films. To achieve this goal, the older of the two brothers, Max, often hired famous African-American singers to perform their songs in various cartoons.⁶⁴ Despite the effort the Fleischer Brothers put into ensuring an authentic sound in their films, black humor was not the basis of their storytelling. Instead, the Fleischer Brothers attempted to bring immigrant humor and jokes, often found in New York-style vaudevillian shows, to the forefront of animation. Their work eventually led to the unintentional creation of an entirely new genre of animation known as Racial Adventure films.

⁶⁴ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 32.

The Fleischer Brothers' films focused on white women leaving the shelter of their homes to visit the "exciting but dangerous environment of characters played by black musicians".⁶⁵ Originally, the animated films were meant to focus on the relationship between the main character, a young "flapper" girl named Betty Boop, her immigrant parents, and her desire to escape the confines of her surroundings. Instead, the films often depicted black musicians, who were cast as villains, pursuing Betty once



Figure 5 : Betty Boop jumping out of her dress to escape the lustful pursuits of the Old Man of the Mountain (left); Betty''s friends Koko the Clown and Bimbo being chased by the disembodied head of famous jazz musician Louis Armstrong.

she had strayed too far from the safety of her home. Betty was shown running away from the musicians as they sang and lustfully chased her (see Figure 5)⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 34.

In the *Betty Boop* film series, the Fleischer Brothers addressed the ongoing prevalence of ethnic segregation in the housing industry. As a young Jewish woman, Betty Boop lived in a community depicted as a safe, respectable environment, as opposed to the jungles and caves where the black characters she interacted with lived. Mimicking the reality of the time, "[T]he ghosts and cannibals played by black entertainers lived only among other ghosts and cannibals, thus suggesting an ethnically specific environment."⁶⁷ In the end, Betty always fled such environments because she could. Black communities, consequently, were characterized as both an appealing means of escape from life's restrictions and a dangerous and wild place for young white women, especially, to be.

The *Betty Boop* film series eventually introduced the genre of Racial Adventure films into the animation industry. By definition, this consisted of "white women [characters being] threatened with sexual violence by African characters."⁶⁸ They not only fed into the Black Brute caricature, which portrayed black men as "innately savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal," but also framed them as inherently immoral and dirty. Because sex

⁶⁷ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 34-35.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 37.

also had similar connotations, "blackness and sex combined in ideas of African-American sexuality."⁶⁹

Though audiences could not view the heavily sexualized *Betty Boop* cartoon series after 1934, due to the Production Code Administration's restrictions, the cartoons themselves set an animation precedent, *Racial Adventure*. As such, the films established a new basis for reinforcing the false narrative surrounding black sexuality and morality.

Van Buren and Zip Coon

During the Golden Era of animation, most animators used southern stereotypes to create black characters, often depicting them in a servile fashion. Amedee Van Buren was not most animators. While other animators like the Fleischer Brothers drew from black music and its deep southern roots, "Van Buren drew from comedic portrayals of blacks," namely blackface minstrelsy.⁷⁰ His characters were centered around the original style of shows in which white actors blacked themselves and performed for upper-class white audiences. This led Van Buren to animate the famous radio show *Amos 'n' Andy*. Because these characters lived in an urban environment, "whereas most black cartoon characters lived on plantations or in 'jungles,'" they

⁶⁹ Ibid., 37- 38.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 39.

became the first animated Zip Coon (ignorant northern characters) in animation.⁷¹

Though the animated show was unsuccessful, its legacy greatly influenced two specific areas of animation. Because the *Amos 'n' Andy* film series was essentially comprised of animated minstrel shows in which actual minstrels were paid to be voice actors, the studio established the importance of the "negro dialect" in animation. Additionally, because *Amos n' Andy* was originally a radio show, Van Buren used dialogue as opposed to music to progress the plots of his films. Van Buren's goal in doing this was to provide audiences with a seamless shift from the radio experience they knew to the visual one he was providing. Van Buren's decision would eventually set a clear precedent in the animation industry, "that racial identity must be seen and heard, or, more precisely, that racial identity lies somewhere in the synchronization of sound and image."⁷² In other words, black characters must look and sound black for an audience to understand them as black. While this was an essential aspect of live-action minstrelsy, the idea had not yet made it into the animation industry until this point.

⁷¹ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 41.

⁷² Maurice, "'Cinema at Its Source,'" 32.

The second thing this show did was set the standard for drawing black characters. Studios advertised that the characters Amos and Andy would appear "just as their millions of radio fans imagine them."⁷³ As such, Van Buren had to move away from the traditional animation style of drawing ethnic characters like Felix the Cat - with an all-black body, big white eyes, and a broad mouth. Instead, Amos and Andy "had light gray tones. They had broad noses with delineated nostrils, and their lips were smaller than other black cartoon characters, although still prominent."⁷⁴ Van Buren's decision made Amos and Andy the first black animated characters to not look like Felix the Cat (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Poster advertisement for the new animated *Amos n' Andy* show (1934).

Van Buren's films were all about synchronization of sight and sound to meet audience expectations. Amos and Andy needed to look and sound like stereotypical black men for the audience to perceive their actions as the studio

⁷³ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 42.

⁷⁴ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon", 42.

intended them to. Although the *Amos 'n' Andy* cartoon series ultimately failed, it forever changed the way studios animated black characters.

Disney and Personality Animation

Despite eventually becoming the industry leader for black representation in animation, "from 1932 to 1934, Disney's black images were the least evolved of all studios because of his focus on the blackface image."⁷⁵ Disney was behind the times when it came to the humanization of black characters and, instead, was known to favor "blackface gags—in which a light-skinned character accidentally wore blackface makeup because of an explosion or a fall into a mud puddle," as in the short film *The Grocery Boy*. Black representation, which was most commonly blackface, was rarely, if ever, central to the plot of Disney's stories.⁷⁶In fact, of all Disney's blackface cartoons, in only one did the gag become central to the cartoon's plot. In the short film *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* (1933), "after a cigar explosion blackened Mickey Mouse's face, he and his friends decided to perform a stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (see Figure 7)."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Wilfred Jackson, director, 1933, *Mickey's Mellerdrama*, Walt Disney Studios, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dw06K0dG1Zw>.

By the late 1920s, Disney's competitors had already

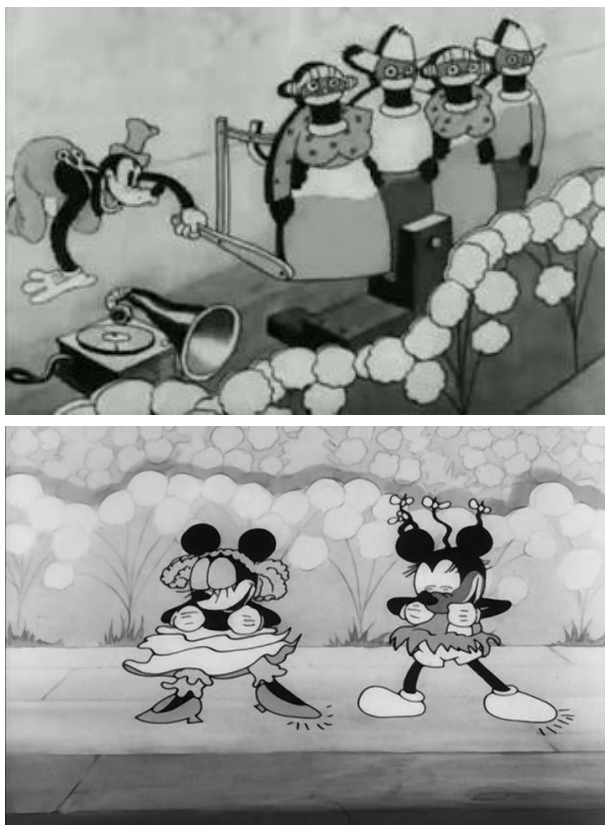


Figure 7: Goofy, working as in background and controlling four slave cutouts (top); Mickey, in blackface (right) and Minnie dancing as Topsy and Little Eva respectively.

begun to humanize their black characters, though Disney had not. Interestingly, he had started the process of including personality and nuance to his characters, but not the black ones. Disney began focusing on individualization and "[m]astery of personality animation" in his white and animal characters.⁷⁸ His characters quickly became known for having unique and

dynamic personalities. The culmination of Disney's efforts came with the 1937 release of *Snow white and the Seven Dwarfs*. This film showcased Personality Animation through the seven dwarves, whose personalities were expressed in more than just dialogue. When Disney did apply this practice to black characters, like the character Sunflower

⁷⁸ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 46.

in the 1940 film *Fantasia*, they were framed "as stereotypical black humans instead of individualized personalities."⁷⁹ By almost entirely ignoring black characters in his films, Disney set a clear standard for the entire animation industry. The 1928 release of *Steamboat Willie* situated The Walt Disney Company as an industry leader, with other studios often mirroring his style to gain larger audiences. Disney established an animation industry in which developing individual personalities for black characters was unnecessary. Success and profit could be achieved without it.

As expected, Disney's success with Personality Animation quickly prompted other studios to follow suit. Imitating Disney's style of animation meant focusing on the individual development of white and animal characters, while skillfully relegating black characters to the background of animated films.

Production Codes and Personality (1934-1938)

The developments that animation underwent during the early 1930s came to a screeching halt in 1934 with the implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code. Though the code was published in 1930, it was not until

⁷⁹ Ibid.

1934 that the code's rules began to be enforced. At that point, "the vast majority of U.S. motion picture [studios] needed Production Code Administration (PCA) approval" for their films to be released to the public.⁸⁰ The code's goal was to "maintain social and community values in the production of silent, synchronized and talking motion pictures."⁸¹ Several restrictions were placed on moral aspects and the portrayal of certain events and topics. More sexualized cartoons like the *Betty Boop* series, as well as the open use of substances like alcohol in Moral Cartoons, quickly disappeared. The code's restrictions fostered the juvenilization of cartoons that would come to define the Dark Ages of animation in the 1970s.

Due to the juvenilization that animation underwent, the industry soon found itself entering the Personality Era. Started by Disney in the mid-1930s, this style of animation featured "individualized characters who radically differed from the eternally cheerful stars of cartoons."⁸² Before this time, cartoon studios relied heavily on music,

⁸⁰ "Production Code Administration (Hays Office)," Encyclopeia.com, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/economics/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/production-code-administration-hays-office>.

⁸¹ "The Motion Picture Production Code," Board of Directors of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Inc, published March 31, 1930, <https://www.asu.edu/courses/fms200s/total-readings/MotionPictureProductionCode.pdf>.

⁸² Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 47.

primarily jazz, to carry the cartoon's narrative, which often focused on sex or moral impurities of some sort. Questionable behavior or mores were restricted in cartoons after the code's enforcement in 1934, forcing studios to vary their story lines. As film historian Christopher P. Lehman asserts, "The introduction of different story formulas in films of this period required individualized characterizations," with Disney taking the lead on this new form. He found significant success with Donald Duck, with his distinct temper and squawk, and Goofy, known to be rather accident-prone, over the ever cheerful, but plain Mickey Mouse.⁸³ Soon, other studios followed suit. The market was flooded with animated adaptations of fairy tales or short films starring children or cute animals, which leaned into the "popularity of contemporary child stars like Shirley Temple."⁸⁴ The Personality Era became even more dynamic when Disney lost the exclusive rights to technicolor after a year-long contract ended in 1935.⁸⁵

With the addition of technicolor, studios were able to differentiate their characters even more. Character design inspired solely by blackface minstrelsy quickly became a

⁸³ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 47.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ "Technicolor Signs with Walt Disney," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 16, 1934, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/59992094/> (accessed February 15, 2021).

thing of the past. Animators adjusted their methods of character design to include color variation to further differentiate them.⁸⁶

Of course, as with most developments, black characters were not fully incorporated into this shift. Instead of receiving the full personalities of their white and animal counterparts, black characters were simply given more streamlined generalizations. Film critics note, "Different types of black characters tended to have the same appearance in films from various studios. They still shared the same blackface inspired design" and tended to use the same Negro-style dialect popularized in *Amos n' Andy*.⁸⁷ The only thing that changed for black characters was that they were no longer depicted with jet black skin.

As the Personality Era progressed, animators increasingly focused on depicting black characters as realistically as possible. Despite the evolution of white and animal characters, black characters were returned to their antebellum-style depiction, which fed into the escapism that dominated the mid-1930s.

Despite the dismal economic conditions, "people living at the time of the Great Depression may have only been the

⁸⁶ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 48.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 49.

first or second generation in their families to experience leisure time and the options it afforded.”⁸⁸ When the Depression hit, the same individuals were reluctant to lose their recently established connections to the country’s growing popular culture. Instead, they engaged in it as much as they could afford. Therefore, unlike most industries during the Great Depression, “all the entertainment industries responsible for creating and distributing popular culture thrived and evolved.”⁸⁹

Studios knew and understood this, and provided audiences with the content that would keep their audiences coming back. Between 1935 and 1938, the eight major studios began to release animated short films that shared a consistent message about blacks’ role in American society. Black animated characters were often shown in servile roles as either slaves, domestic servants, or assistants to white jungle explorers.⁹⁰ These roles reflected black Americans “continued exclusion from skilled labor positions, almost exclusively held by white workers,” and worked to maintain

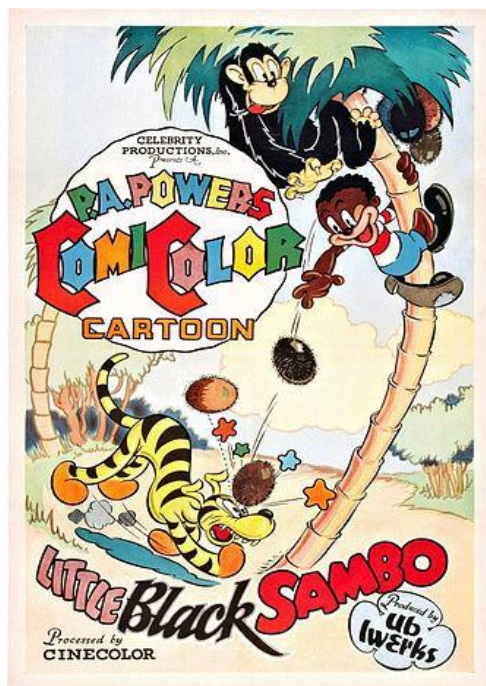
⁸⁸ “Escapism and Leisure Time 1929-1941.” Historic Events for Students: The Great Depression. Encyclopedia.com. (March 23, 2021). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-and-education-magazines/escapism-and-leisure-time-1929-1941>

⁸⁹ Encyclopedia.com “Escapism and Leisure Time 1929-1941.”

⁹⁰ Lehman, “The Colored Cartoon,” 48

the belief that blacks, even in cartoons, existed to serve whites.⁹¹

Eventually, the continued depiction of black servility developed into the Sambo stereotype in animation.⁹² The



Sambo stereotype was found in cartoons that focused on depicting black characters as weak, unintelligent, and unable to purposefully triumph over anyone. As "job competition between black and white men intensified during the Great Depression. Sambo was an image of comfort for white men who

Figure 8: Poster for Ub Iwerks Little Black Sambo cartoon in new technicolor.

competed with black men for jobs to which the former had

previously relegated the latter, such as janitor or porter." ⁹³ As a child, Sambo was too weak and young to work, which reinforced the white-held belief that black men were inherently inferior and could rarely, if ever, succeed without help (see Figure 8).

⁹¹ Ibid., 49.

⁹² Little Black Sambo is a cartoon character based on the controversial children's book of the same name by Helen Bannerman in 1899.

⁹³ Ibid., 50.

With the Sambo stereotype came another stereotype based solely on location. Reminiscent of the now taboo *Betty Boop* series, black characters were only ever shown in one of three places; the jungle, plantations, or Harlem. Animators, by restricting the movement of black characters, established a narrative that blacks never lived - and, by extension, should never be seen - anywhere else. Animated short films that showcased this stereotype reinforced the policies of ethnically-based segregation that were prevalent, by law and by practice, across the nation.

Studios contributed to the oppression of blacks by depicting them as stereotypically and geographically limited people. Because animators focused on creating a level of reality in their cartoons, animated media often reinforced what white audiences already believed about blacks. The misinformation, distributed by animators in their short films, was made worse because they failed to also "inform audiences of the factors causing black poverty or of the degree of the poorer class's suffering from segregation." ⁹⁴ Because such films were created from the oppressor's view - by studios dominated almost entirely by

⁹⁴ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 52.

white employees - and catered to largely white audiences, there were no nuanced black characters.

Despite the lack of nuance, black representation played a vital role in shifting animation from its more musical nature to telling "dramatic stories in the mid-1930s."⁹⁵ Due to the codes implemented by the PCA, only the "correct standards of life" could be presented on screen.⁹⁶ Therefore, animators could only depict immoral behaviors by displaying them in one of two ways: as either an act "required by the plot or for proper characterization," or by condemning the behavior as immoral in the film itself.⁹⁷ The easiest way to both animate the stories they wanted and abide by the PCA regulations was to star black characters in the Moral Cartoons that defined the period, such as with the 1934 film *Goin' to Heaven on a Mule* discussed later in the text.

Mostly, white animators focused on continually emphasizing white superiority in the cartoons they created to comfort the financially vulnerable majority-white audiences that frequented America's theaters. From 1935 to 1938, blacks were depicted as nothing more than passive,

⁹⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁹⁷ "The Motion Picture Production Code," 594.

servile, childlike characters, "content to serve whites in low-wage labor and incapable of handling skilled labor,"⁹⁸ The more realistic and sophisticated designs of black characters, coupled with the increased use of Negro dialect speech, characterized blacks "as slow and weak."⁹⁹ Much of this would finally change during World War Two.

World War Two Meets Animation, 1939-1946

World War Two significantly changed what Americans wanted from entertainment. Not only did the war increase the amount of money home front audiences had to allocate towards leisure time, but it also awoke a sense of violence in the masses that was quickly reflected on the screen. World War Two audiences responded to more "aggressive, brash characters," which reflected their reality. The popularity of "passive, gentler characterizations of Disney's Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck declined" during this time, and characters like the clever and somewhat crude Bugs Bunny rose to prominence."¹⁰⁰ Animation studios rallied Americans through cartoons" that often "presented aspects of World War Two in humorous ways."¹⁰¹ This can be observed

⁹⁸ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 87

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 88.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 89.

with the issue of gas-rationing, which was featured in the 1943 *Cartune* "Ration Bored," or military conscription in the 1945 *Looney Tune* "Draftee Daffy" (see Figure 9).

However, other films focused on depicting Nazi Germans and the Japanese in crude and racist ways. Cartoons were often metaphors of war, and frequently starred only two characters - a small protagonist against a much larger antagonist.¹⁰²

Black characters played a role in the war era's cartoons, but not as significantly as their white counterparts. When they were the protagonists, black characters only battled animals or other blacks; on the other hand, white characters would often "directly confront caricatures of Axis leaders like Hitler or Mussolini."¹⁰³



Figure 9: Woody Woodpecker stopping to read a sign, warning him to conserve gas by limiting unnecessary travel.

In the wartime animated films, the efforts of black enlisted men were often depicted as "playing jazz music to boost

¹⁰² Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 94.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 89.

troop morale, reflecting the segregation and service roles that African Americans faced in the nation's armed forces during the war.”¹⁰⁴ These films conveyed and reaffirmed to largely white audiences denigrating stereotypes, including black men's seemingly innate musical abilities, as in Walter Lantz's "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B" (1941), while highlighting their military ineptness.¹⁰⁵ In the film, a black trumpeter by the name of Hot Breath Harry, is drafted into the military to be a bugler of an all-black company. Despite the hate people have for buglers, Harry manages to win over his company by playing a "swinging wakeup" tune that results in everyone swinging through the day happy to wake up.¹⁰⁶ The film establishes the narrative that the musical talents of black man are his main, and only true, asset to the war effort.

Unfortunately, even an event as consequential as the war was not enough to considerably modernize black representation, as "traditional African-American characters appeared more frequently than the new ones" during World War II.¹⁰⁷ Studios continued to rarely showcase adult black

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company 'B' (1941)," ImdbPro, accessed March, 23, 2021, https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0033424?rf=cons_tt_atf&ref_=cons_tt_atf.

¹⁰⁷ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 91.

men, preferring to stick to Sambo-style characters, while black women, if they were shown at all, were often depicted as mammies who were "servile, desexualized, and kerchief-topped."¹⁰⁸ Such derogatory images continued to dominate animation in the war years, mostly due to blacks' increasing militancy and activism, as a means to reinforce their expected position in society and undermine their activities.

On the home front, black activists were fighting against the blatant injustices they faced on American soil. One such activist, A. Phillip Randolph, called for a march in Washington, D.C. in 1941 if President Franklin Roosevelt did not immediately desegregate the military and eliminate employment discrimination in defense industries. Randolph's demands, couched in the glaring hypocrisy of fighting fascism abroad while discriminating at home, caused white Americans a great deal of discomfort.¹⁰⁹ Worried about disruptions to the war effort, President Roosevelt barred discrimination in defense industries and federal bureaus and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee.¹¹⁰ In addition to the activism of A. Phillip Randolph, black

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "A. Philip Randolph," Encyclopædia Britannica, December 17, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/A-Philip-Randolph>.

¹¹⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica, "A. Philip Randolph."

Americans as individuals and as communities under the leadership of organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began the "Double V" campaign. Its goal was to work towards victory over Nazism while also working towards victory over racism and discrimination in America.¹¹¹

The more active black Americans became, the more cartoons worked to reinforce their second-class social status. However, this did not stop animators from using black characters to shift the medium from one stage to the next. "Sambo" characters contributed to the cartoon's functional transition from a moral lesson to a war metaphor. Studios began to cast "black boys as protagonists against large animals like lions or as antagonists against small animals like Bugs Bunny."¹¹² Animation's storyline transition, as well as the industry's shift from caricaturing "Al Jolson [the king of black face] and Stepin Fetchit [a famous but controversial black actor billed as the "Laziest Man in the World] to Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson [a black actor known for his banter, bold personality and comedic timing]," signifies a movement in

¹¹¹ "The Double V Victory," The National WWII Museum New Orleans.

¹¹² Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 93.

animation towards bolder, more action-based characters (note about stepin fetchit).¹¹³

Such developments led to the ordinarily docile stereotype of Sambo characters to turn from "powerless to violent—a reflection of the changes in both cartoon production and the African American war effort during that time." ¹¹⁴ They were also a result of the country's increased militarization after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Suddenly, the Sambo-like characters were armed with weapons to pursue their enemies, but almost always failed to succeed in their task.

Wartime depictions also included black females. Black women, who historically had been the "last hired and the first fired," were finally able to enter the workforce in large numbers during the war, filling both domestic and war factory jobs. Some white women refused to work next to black women on assembly lines, but black women viewed the opportunity to earn money and learn new skills as tantamount to family security and success. In response to black women's enlarged public role, animation continued to depict black women almost exclusively as mammies. The Mammy caricature remained solely as a background character in

¹¹³ "Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson" ImdbPro, accessed March, 23, 2021, <https://pro.imdb.com/name/nm0026655/about>.

¹¹⁴ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 98.

most cartoons until MGM gave its version of the character some dialogue. MGM animators had the character, now known as Mammy Two Shoes, "participate in some of the conflicts between Tom Cat and Jerry Mouse."¹¹⁵ As the only speaking character in the series from 1940 to 1943, Mammy Two Shoes became a vital, yet underrated, character, as she often "establish[ed] films' plots and gave films definite endings."¹¹⁶

Most of the animation created during the early 1940s that depicted blacks was designed to justify discrimination in the military. "Animated caricatures of African-American servicemen had roots in blackface minstrelsy," an art form whose sole purpose was to poke fun at the miseducation and supposed ignorance of blacks.¹¹⁷ No film illuminates this intentional choice as well as *Coal black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (see Figure 10). Though the film was marketed as "'a dusky satire on 'Snow white,'" in reality, the film's intent was to demean black service members, as each of the dwarves was in the military.¹¹⁸ The film's blatant racism

¹¹⁵ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 95.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 115.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 118.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 119.

prompted a response from the NAACP, which launched a protest against it that went nowhere.

Considering that “white supremacists harassed and occasionally killed black soldiers ... [and] racist vigilante groups ... used violence to discourage black

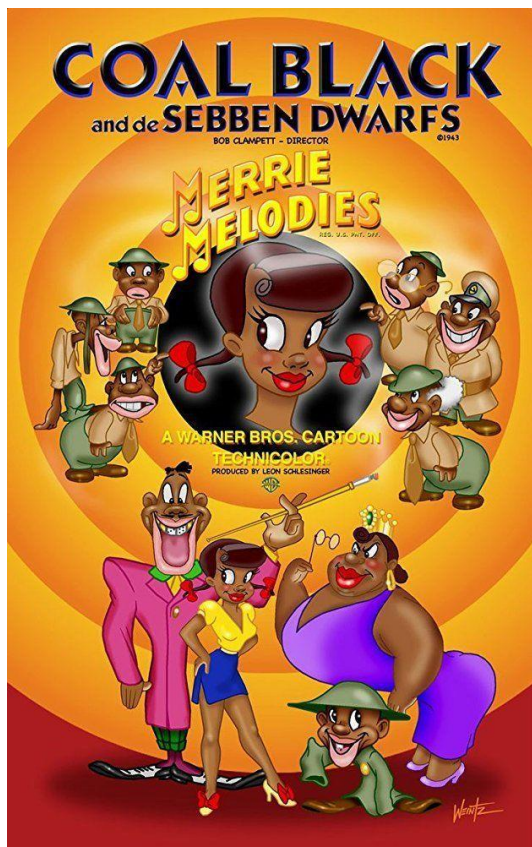


Figure 10: Poster for the 1943 parody film *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs*.

veterans from trying to achieve the democracy that they had fought to protect,” it is no surprise that young blacks sought a harmless but deliberate form of protest.¹¹⁹

The war effort required rationing on the home front, including tight restrictions on fabric. Wearing oversized clothing, like a zoot suit, was “an inherently disobedient act”

because the zoot suit required substantial amounts of

fabric.¹²⁰ Equally important to note, “zoot suits” had provoked violent assaults committed by white soldiers

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 122

¹²⁰ Alice Gregory, “A Brief History of the Zoot Suit,” *SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE*, April 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/brief-history-zoot-suit-180958507/>.

against Mexican Americans in 1943 in California; they, too, had faced both pre-war and wartime discrimination.

In response to such wartime upheavals, animation shifted into what is known as the Jive Era. Animators depicted black men dressed in zoot suits and black women who were not mammies dancing the jitterbug in clubs.¹²¹ These cartoons were created to undermine blacks' protests, demands, and opinions, as well as to make jazz a safe and depoliticized medium for whites to enjoy. Some studios "turned jazz into a patriotic music style during World War II," while others had "zoot-suiters become comical buffoons from Harlem— a modernization of the 'Zip Coon' characterization from the nineteenth-century blackface."¹²² This cartoon style lasted only until 1945, as the Zoot Suit Riot in Los Angeles in 1943 significantly undermined the studios' ability to depoliticize the subject matter in their cartoons.

As studios were undermining protests by portraying urban black life as more alluring than it was, they were also changing other depictions. During the early-to-mid 1930s, studios had consistently depicted southern blacks, a term used here to describe black characters shown on

¹²¹ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 122

¹²² Ibid., 123.

plantations, as passive and servile, but this changed with the start of World War Two. Suddenly, southern black characters were depicted as lazy as opposed to happy and content. As one film historian noted, "The stereotype of laziness in different media influenced African Americans' employment opportunities; white employers gave black employees hard labor and little pay because they believed that blacks were too lazy to perform the less strenuous jobs."¹²³

The laziness imbued in southern black characters began to appear in 1941, once blacks like A. Philip Randolph demanded and received employment in the military's various defense industries. The characters in these cartoons aimed to justify blacks' unequal treatment by making them appear incompetent and lazy. Endowing southern black cartoon characters with such negative traits reinforced blacks' lowly position in



Figure 11: Male slave lazily picking cotton, while sitting, one bulb at a time.

¹²³ Ibid., 132.

the cotton fields and, more honestly, as subservient and beneath whites. One of the most famous cartoons to illuminate these character flaws was MGM's *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat*, in which black characters were shown as too lazy to fight, pick cotton, or even immediately react to getting stung by a mosquito (see Figure 11).¹²⁴

Conclusion

The animation industry found significant success during both the Great Depression and World War Two by using black characters to shift the medium from one stage to the next. Through the use of animated black characters, animators were able to buffer their cartoons against the American public's ever-changing desires with little to no extra effort or cost. Despite the importance of black characters for industry progress, through the 1930s and well into the mid-1940s they still lacked the depth and individualization that had become standard characterization for white and animal characters. Black characters were highly valued but underappreciated in the animation industry. This pattern would continue until the mid-1950s, when black characters were no longer profitable to create.

¹²⁴*Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat*, Walter Lantz, producer, (1941; Beverly Hills: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc., 2006), YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UacUR7bPnMM>.

Chapter 3: The End of An Era

The Golden Era, which began in 1928 and ended in the late 1960s, was one of the most influential periods in animation history. Not only did it introduce some of the most recognizable characters in the industry, but it also established the tropes and archetypes used in modern-day animated storytelling. Of all the animated films created during the period, the most enduring and popular ones featured various forms of black representation. These cartoons were often scored with jazz music or highlighted caricatures like Sambo and Mammy, much to white audiences' delight. However, by 1946 the use of black representation in animation would become even more controversial. Between the budding Civil Rights Movement, the emerging Cold War, and the attendant Vietnam War, the animation industry would find itself in the middle of a rapidly evolving American public. The widespread social, civil, and political unrest between 1946 and 1954 gradually eroded "the role of animated black images as a comforter to white audiences" as the images became increasingly less popular and, therefore,

less profitable for studios to use.¹²⁵ By the mid-1950s, black characters disappeared from the animation industry almost entirely, leaving only vague references to black culture and struggles throughout the 1960s. Black characters would not find their way back into animation until the early 1970s.

Fight the Good Fight (1946-1954)

With World War Two behind them, many soldiers returned home to great opportunity. The G.I. Bill, passed in 1944, offered veterans tuition funds for college, unemployment insurance, and housing. Such benefits, the first of their kind, allowed many young men to earn a degree, get married, secure a decent paying job, move to the suburbs, and start a family; in other words, to join the growing middle class. Unfortunately, the benefits of the G.I. Bill were not extended to black and white veterans alike.

As the G.I. Bill was being drafted, southern legislators began to fear a backlash from black veterans, who, they surmised, might use public sympathy as leverage to protest Jim Crow laws. To curb this potential threat to white power, southern lawmakers, in particular Mississippi Congressman John Rankin, insisted that individual states

¹²⁵ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 141.

administrate the program instead of the federal government.¹²⁶ Without federal oversight, individual states almost entirely restricted black veterans' access to the G.I. Bill. Black veterans, and by extension their families, were all but barred from upward mobility in the United States. They were excluded from the jobs, education, and homes that white Americans used to enter into and secure a place for themselves in the middle class. For the first time since the Great Depression, black Americans were not an immediate economic threat to their white counterparts.

The country's rapid suburbanization prompted animators to change their storytelling approach to mimic the audience's lives and experiences. From this moment on, cartoon characters became increasingly suburbanized, while figures of "lazy, ignorant black characters," which had been used to represent the tense interracial labor conditions of the 1930s, quickly disappeared.¹²⁷ "Disney, Warner Brothers, and UPA studios frequently produced films starring white characters (or animal characters representing white people) and containing plots that reflected America's postwar residential changes."¹²⁸ Studios

¹²⁶ Erin Blakemore, "How the GI Bill's Promise Was Denied to a Million Black WWII Veterans," History.com, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits>

¹²⁷ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 122.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 159.

focused their cartoons on the new lives and experiences of their white suburban audiences.

Previous urban or rural characters were updated to mimic the appearance of the suburban middle class. The changes found in this period of animation are most noticeable in Disney's Goofy. The anthropomorphic character went from being "a rural black dog to a suited, suburban white 'everyman.'" ¹²⁹ With technicolor now an industry standard, animators abandoned Goofy's jet-black appearance in favor of pink or flesh-colored skin (see Figure 12). As suburban images flooded cartoons, animators had little use for the black caricatures and representations that had driven sales in the 1930s.

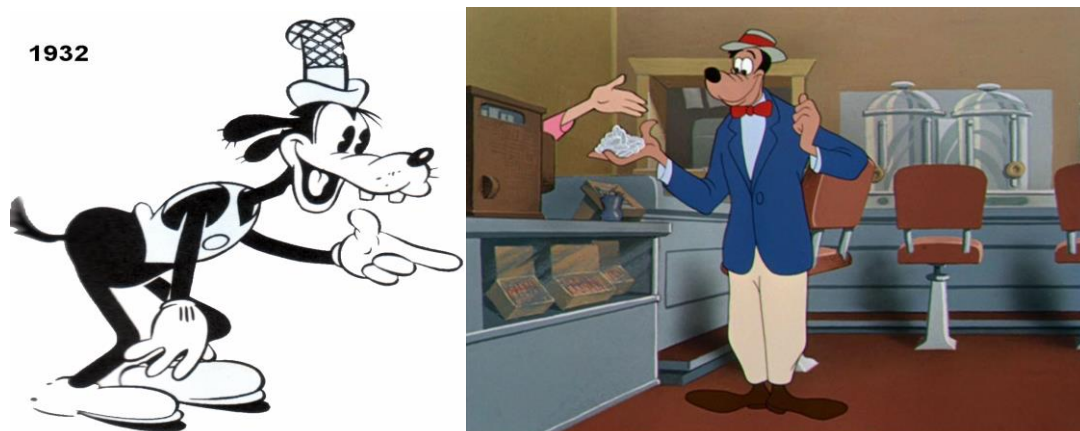


Figure 12: The original design of Dippy Dog, aka Goofy (left); Goofy in his updated persona as George G. Geef popularized in the 1950s.

¹²⁹ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 159.

The NAACP and the Fight for Proper Representation

Due to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the less black characters were needed in animation, the more problematic and complicated it became for studios to use them. When World War Two ended in 1945, so did the "Double V" campaign - victory for civil rights at home and against fascism abroad - that several black organizations, including the NAACP, and *The Pittsburgh Courier*, then the largest black newspaper in the United States, had championed during the war. Quickly, the NAACP latched onto another industry to challenge - Hollywood. In February 1946, the NAACP placed black stereotypes found in movies on par with some of the worst examples of racism against black Americans.¹³⁰ To create a significant impact in the industry, the NAACP needed to become an influential power in the movie industry. Fortunately, World War Two provided the organization with the leverage it needed to get its foot in the door of the movie industry by "[publicizing] the contradiction between America's ideals of freedom and its practice of segregation."¹³¹ In the beginning, NAACP intervention was somewhat effective at curtailing the production and

¹³⁰ Ibid., 143.

¹³¹ Ibid., 144.

distribution of some of the more degrading stereotypical representations of black Americans. In 1949, the organization managed to pressure Universal Studios into withdrawing the popular 1941 film *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat's* from being rereleased into theaters. The NAACP described the film as a "vicious caricature of Negro life in the South and one which portrays a very harmful stereotype. Negroes are indicated as being lazy and only activated by swing music."¹³² Though Universal tried to brush off the NAACP's concerns, the studio eventually withdrew the film and pledged to use better judgment in the future.¹³³

The NAACP's influence spread outside of merely stopping the production and distribution of films it deemed derogatory and racist. The organization's efforts also inspired the creation of two animated short films that "acknowledged African Americans as people and professed hope in equal rights for black and white people."¹³⁴ The more popular of the two, UPA's *Brotherhood of Man*, focused

¹³² Karl F. Cohen, "Racism and Resistance: Stereotypes in Animation" in *Forbidden Animation Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators in America*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 51, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Forbidden_Animation/gIyH_DLYhoIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA51&printsec=frontcover.

¹³³ Ibid., 52.

¹³⁴ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 143.

on promoting racial equality and argued that everyone deserved an equal opportunity regardless of ethnicity (see Figure 13). Not only did *Brotherhood of Man* win an Academy Award nomination for Best Cartoon Short Subject of 1946, but it also received positive reviews from the black-owned periodical *Ebony*, which asserted that the film had "'no Negro stereotypes' despite the occasional dialect and minstrel song."¹³⁵

Reviewers like Kenneth MacGown, an editor for the *Hollywood Quarterly*, believed the film was impactful enough to threaten Disney's animated empire. Viewing the film from a more technical aspect, MacGown stated:

Being shorts and not features, they escape the problems of economic popularity which beset Disney when he makes features. Their distinction is neither artistic nor technical. They are significant because they show how the cartoon can comment on life and society and still be entertainment. Under present conditions, such pioneering is probably not a thing for the feature-length cartoon to risk, but the short subject is another matter. Disney broke ground in the two-reelers which he made for the Office of InterAmerican Affairs. He cannot wish to leave the field to his competitors. ¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ibid., 149.

¹³⁶ Kenneth Macgowan, "Make Mine Disney," *Hollywood Quarterly*, 1946, 377, shorturl.at/cqxG5; This quote also refers to another film by the name of *John Henry and the Inky-Poo*, which premiered around the same time.



Figure 13: *Brotherhood of Man* showcasing the importance of equal opportunity in education and in life.

Despite *Brotherhood of Man* 's success in the industry, "the cartoon as socio-ethnic commentary did not last as a genre."¹³⁷

It's All About the Money

The NAACP's intervention positively impacted the film industry. However, as the well-known saying warns, no good deed goes unpunished. While studios were discouraged from creating stereotypical black characters for fear of their films' withdrawal from theaters, they were discouraged from creating non-stereotypical black characters for the same reason. Beginning in the late 1940s, the film industry faced a bleak financial future.

After the U.S. Supreme Court's 1948 ruling in *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, animation studios began

¹³⁷ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 147.

losing money at an unprecedented rate. The ruling stated that motion picture distributors could no longer force exhibitors to show short subjects with feature-length films.¹³⁸ For animation studios, losing the case meant they no longer had definite bookings at theaters. Moreover, exhibitors were unlikely to pay extra money for seven-minute films when customers paid the same ticket price regardless of if the short film was included or not. Coupled with the rise in production costs that began in 1946, it was clear that the animation industry was in financial trouble. By 1950, the film industry had lost most of its leveraging power and a larger percentage of its customer base.

Not only had the Paramount case undermined the ability of animation studios to distribute their films, but the G.I. Bill undermined the ability of urban downtown first-run movie theaters to sell tickets, as most middle-class families now lived in the suburbs.¹³⁹ Additionally, although television was not a significant threat in the 1940s, by

¹³⁸ History.com Editors, "U.S. Supreme Court decides Paramount antitrust case," History, last modified April 30, 2020, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-supreme-court-decides-paramount-antitrust-case>; U.S. v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. 334 U.S. 131 (1948) <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/334/131.html>

¹³⁹ Encyclopedia.com, s.v. "The American Film Industry in The Early 1950s," accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/american-film-industry-early-1950s>

the 1950s, it had begun making a notable impact on the industry, often undercutting ticket sales.¹⁴⁰ According to U.S. Census Bureau records, "weekly attendance dropped from 80 million in 1940 and 90 million in 1946 to 60 million in 1950 and 40 million in 1960."¹⁴¹

The question is, how does financial strain eliminate the presence of black characters in animated films? The answer to that question is partially tied to the actions of the NAACP. Any time the organization intervened and got an animated film withdrawn; studios lost money. Considering the financial strain, the industry was under, studios could not afford to show films that had a high risk of being withdrawn. Consequently, animated films that showcased stereotypical black images were less likely to be sold to exhibitors.

Conversely, audiences still preferred the traditional ethnic stereotypes of yesteryear, making "new black images financial risks" that studios, literally, could not afford to take.¹⁴² With the aforementioned in mind, studios only had one form of depiction that appeased both the audiences and the NAACP and did not result in financial ruin -

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 143.

blackface. Because the NAACP was concerned with representations and not caricatures of blacks, blackface gags often flew under the radar. Moreover, the gags also continued to appeal to white audiences. Blackface was the best option for studios to have their cake and eat it, too, without breaking the bank.

Not only was blackface a cost-effective animation trick, often only taking five seconds to depict on screen, but "[t]he explosion gags that gave white and animal characters the appearance perfectly suited the violent cartoon humor of the



Figure 14: Tom recovering from an explosion that left him dazed and looking like a blackface minstrel.

late 1940s and early '50s."¹⁴³ Moreover, studios modified the way blackface was expressed in their films. No longer did blackface constitute a character's design. Instead, blackface was often the result of an explosion or gunshot. This change is depicted in the *Tom and Jerry* short "The Yankee Doodle Mouse" (1943), in which Tom traps Jerry

¹⁴³ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 183.

inside a yellow tea kettle with a stick of dynamite. When the dynamite fails to explode, Jerry escapes through the spout of the kettle. After waiting for a moment for the explosion to occur, Tom sticks his face into the kettle to check if something has gone wrong. The dynamite explodes in his face and bends the tea kettle around his face, giving him the appearance of a sunflower - complete with blackface, large eyes, and thick pink lips (see Figure 14).¹⁴⁴ In this way, "a character's blackened face represented an injured or damaged" image, and no longer the race of the character itself.¹⁴⁵

The Cold War Years

Even if studios had been willing to create non-stereotypical black characters, doing so would have been next to impossible during the Cold War. The House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC) intervention hindered any significant developments in the film industry. Established in 1938, HUAC was tasked with investigating the alleged disloyalty and subversive activities of private citizens, companies, and organizations believed to have fascist or communist ties. In 1947, the House Un-American

¹⁴⁴ Jonathan Seitz, "Tom and Jerry flower joke," YouTube Video, 1:10, May 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PavRqL9qEA>

¹⁴⁵ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 183.

Activities Committee turned its attention to Hollywood to investigate possible communist influence.¹⁴⁶ The organization often targeted individuals who had "written or produced those few movies that gave the Negro a break and attack[ed] anti-Semitism."¹⁴⁷ HUAC made it clear that producing content which attacked or questioned the American way of life was unacceptable. It is no surprise, then, that HUAC subpoenaed *Brotherhood of Man's* four screenwriters as well as Gene Weltfish, co-author of the pamphlet *Races of Mankind* on which the film was based, to question them about their communist ties.

In response to HUAC's inquisitions, live-action studios began to informally blacklist performers who were viewed as radical. Animation studios followed suit and shied away from non-stereotypical black characters.

Gone, But Not Forgotten (1954-1969)

By the mid-1950s, studios realized that theatrical content alone would not be enough to keep them afloat, so they began to contract out their original shows to television stations. The NAACP consistently intervened in these transactions to ensure that negative or stereotypical

¹⁴⁶ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 156.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 157.

representations of black Americans would not be aired. For example, when Walter Lantz, known for producing the two racially controversial films *Scrub Me Mama With A Boogie Beat* and *Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy*, contracted his previous cartoons, such as *The Woody Woodpecker Show*, to ABC in 1957, he had to exclude the *Swing Symphonies* series due to its stereotypical depictions of blacks.

While the NAACP was successful in getting studios to remove their more controversial content, the organization did not convince studios to produce non-stereotypical black characters. The consequences of this are worth noting.

"The absence of black cartoon images was part of a general absence of black actors from movies and television in the 1950s and '60s. The NAACP's protests led studios to drop stereotypical roles for black performers but did not push studios to develop roles without ethnic generalizations, leaving many African Americans in Hollywood unemployed."¹⁴⁸ Studios had no pressing need to return to black characterizations because white and animal characters were able to carry the industry on their own.

Notably, while black characters disappeared in animation, depictions of black culture and experience did

¹⁴⁸ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 203.

not. Cartoons often portrayed black stereotypes, ideas, and struggles without including black characters. Scant references to black life were all that remained in animation throughout the 1960s. Black characters would not enter animation again in a meaningful way until the early 1970s.

The Television Era (1970-1979)

The Television Era of animation, also known as the Dark Ages, is one of the most contentious periods in animation history. In some academic circles, the cartoons produced during this era, dated 1970 to 1985, are viewed as subpar at best. They assert that, during this time, animators broke away from the classic style of animation, a time-consuming practice that focused on conservative storylines and smooth, realistic movements in favor of cheaper alternatives. Conversely, some academics view the shift as a period of necessary modernization in the animation industry, a period which also marks Walt Disney Studios' declining influence. Following Disney's death in 1966, Walt Disney Studios lost significant leverage in the animation industry, which created opportunities for other studios to push the boundaries of animation. One of the most notable products to come from this boundary shift is the

reintroduction of non-stereotypical black characters into cartoons.

Back to Black

The reintroduction of black characters into animation can be traced back to several factors affecting the industry by the early 1970s. Since the early 1950s, the animation industry has been on the brink of financial ruin. The financial strain had inevitably caused a noticeable drop in product quality, which was worsened by ever-rising production costs and continued NAACP intervention. Animation studios quickly realized that theatrical content alone was not enough to sustain production. To stay in business, studios contracted out their early animated content and created original animated shows for television networks. With this change in distribution, animators needed to produce as much content as possible to stay on schedule. The need for a speedy turn-around prompted studios like Hanna-Barbera and Filmation to adopt a new, limited animation style. Limited animation refers to the process of "animating only a portion of a subject while holding the rest constant," including only animating a character's mouth when they speak or a character's arms

when they wave.¹⁴⁹ This animation method quickly differentiated television animation from its theatrical predecessor.

The move away from classic animation styles allowed studios to embrace and mimic the changes in live-action television. Starting in the late 1960s, television studios had begun reintroducing live-action black characters into mainstream television. In 1968, the show *Julia* successfully introduced the first female black lead to television. The animation industry followed suit. Between 1970 and 1973, animators created several black characters to star in television shows - *The Harlem Globetrotters*, *The Jackson Five*, and *Josie and the Pussycats*. *The Harlem Globetrotters* and *The Jackson Five* cartoon series feature entirely black casts voiced by black actors. Both of these shows subverted traditional expectations of how black men were depicted in animation. One Hanna-Barbera writer, Ken Spears, when discussing the *Harlem Globetrotters*, stated that the goal was to "treat everything on the show with the utmost degree of respect."¹⁵⁰ These shows moved away from the *Betty Boop* standard of depicting black men as overly sexualized,

¹⁴⁹ "limited animation." In *A/V A to Z: An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Media, Entertainment and Other Audiovisual Terms*, by Richard W. Kroon. McFarland, 2014. https://search-credoreference-com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/content/entry/mcfav/limited_animation/0

¹⁵⁰ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 130.

immoral creatures. Instead, the Harlem Globetrotters basketball players and the Jackson Five musicians were shown as compassionate, generous, and desexualized in the cartoons in which their animated characterizations starred. It was clear "studios were more comfortable presenting sexuality through black women than black men," as with Valerie Brown's character in *Josie and the Pussycats* (see Figure 15).¹⁵¹ Likely, it was easier for studios to sexualize black women characters than it was to clean up the narrative of sexuality surrounding animated black men.



Figure 15: From left to right bandmates Josie, Melody, and Valerie playing a show in their classic cat suits.

Valerie Brown represented a complete change in the depiction of black women in animation. Not only did her physical appearance go against stereotypical beauty standards of the time - she had an afro and dark skin - but

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 149.

she was just as sexualized and more intelligent than her female co-leads. Having been inspired by the black electronics agent Barney Collier of *Mission: Impossible* (1966-1973), Valerie was marketed to the public by CBS as a "bright, young black girl."¹⁵² Valerie's character design was a bold statement by Hanna-Barbera, considering that when the show debuted in 1970, the most popular woman wearing an afro was Angela Davis, who appeared on the FBI's "most wanted" list.

A significant cultural shift regarding media occurred in the 1970s. Americans no longer wanted content that ignored domestic issues.¹⁵³ The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968 caused a significant spark in black art in the years that followed his death. This great loss, coupled with the 1966 death of Walt Disney, a man whose conservative vision heavily influenced the animation industry, created the perfect storm for black creators and characters to take a new role in the animation industry. The changes brought about by these advances allowed for the creation of shows like *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* and *Kid Power*, which focused on showcasing the black experience and educating kids on how to deal with the challenges they

¹⁵² Ibid., 140.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 137.

face in everyday life. Both shows addressed racism, but in different ways. While *Fat Albert* focused on showcasing black youth positively, *Kid Power* was more focused on teaching tolerance and racial equality. By 1973, most animated cartoons featuring black characters reflected America's progress towards racial integration.¹⁵⁴ That being said, black leads in animation were few and far between in the 1970s; instead, most animators opted, sometimes unintentionally, for tokenism. A notable example of this phenomenon is the character Franklin, a young black boy introduced into the *Peanuts* franchise in 1968 and made his tv debut in the 1973 short film *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving*.¹⁵⁵ In the film, Franklin is shown sitting by himself on one side of the bale in a lawn chair, while the rest of the kids sit together in actual dinner chairs (see Figure 16).¹⁵⁶ Though Schulz and his supporters maintain that there was never any malintent in the depiction of that scene, or Franklin's limited depiction in the franchise as a whole Jean Schulz, Charles Schulz's wife, admits that her

¹⁵⁴ Lehman, "The Colored Cartoon," 182.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Joe Concha, "'A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving' accused of racism over seating of Franklin," *The Hill*, November 23, 2018, <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/418019-a-charlie-brown-thanksgiving-accused-of-racism-over-seating-of-franklin>

husband, struggled with integrating Franklin into the main story despite the goal of inclusivity.¹⁵⁷

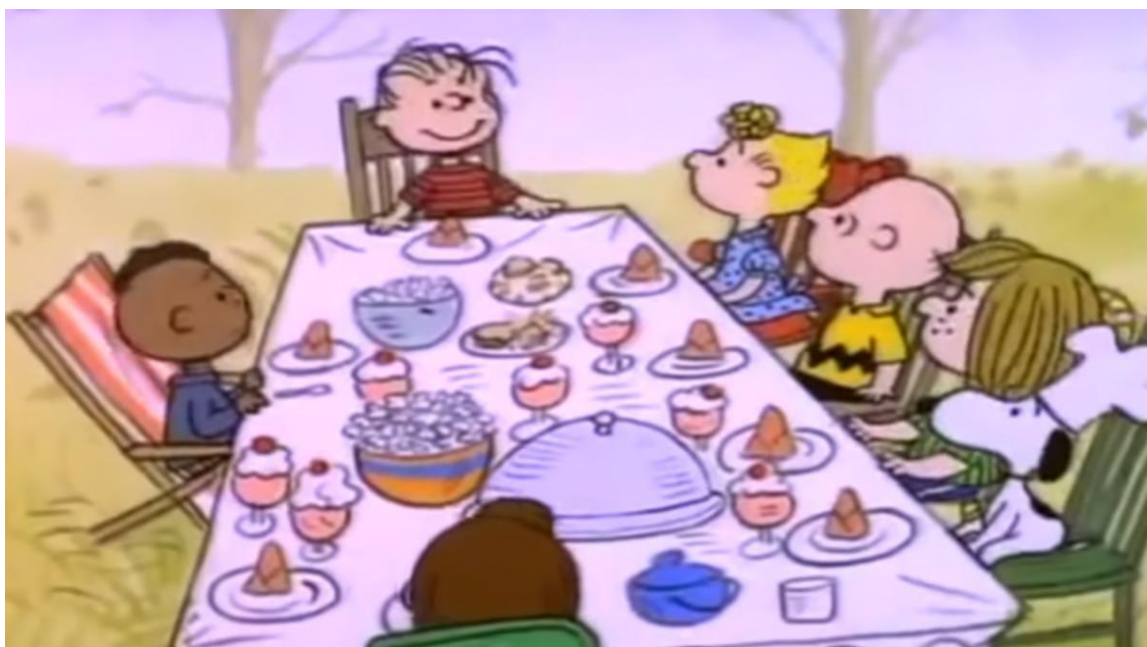


Figure 16: Franklin, the only black child, sitting by himself at the neighborhood Thanksgiving celebration.

Tokenized black characters add little value to shows as the characters often could be another race and exist solely for simulated diversity. Nonetheless, tokenism would become the industry standard for black characters in animation.

However, even these humble roles helped to lay the groundwork for continued representation of black characters in animation until the late 1980s.

¹⁵⁷ Jean Schulz, "The Pumpkins Are Out," *Jean Schulz's Blog* (blog), Charles M. Schulz Museum, October 24, 2019, <https://schulzmuseum.org/the-pumpkins-are-out/>.

Conclusion

Starting in the late 1940s, the animation industry underwent several changes that resulted in a significant decline in quality. From 1946 to 1969, the animation industry was faced with a changing American public, whose tastes no longer aligned with modern animation content. Moreover, rising production costs and the NAACP's continued intervention to ensure black characters were not depicted degradingly rendered studios unable to keep themselves afloat by releasing previous animated films and deterring them from making new films. The few animators who attempted to appease the NAACP by producing non-stereotypical depictions found themselves unofficially blacklisted from the industry due largely to HUAC's investigations of communism in Hollywood. By the early 1960s, the safest and most profitable forms of animation were the blackface gags that dominated Walt Disney's cartoons. Blackface appealed to mostly white American audiences and did not provoke concerns about overt racism. As blackface grew in popularity, black characters were no longer needed in animation and, so, were phased out of the industry until the early 1970s.

The 1970s marked a dynamic shift in American popular culture. Audiences were once again ready to see black

characters on screen, sans the stereotypes that had defined the cartoons during the Golden Era. In the early 1970s a few cartoons were produced which starred black characters, thereby slowly reintroducing them into the world of animation. However, these shows were few and far between, and the shows' black characters were often depicted as tokens hidden in the casts comprised of mostly white characters. It would not be until the late 1980s, when Disney launched animation's Renaissance Era, that black characters would fully reemerge in animation.

Chapter 4: Into the Modern Age

The Dark Ages, also known as the Television Era, significantly undermined audiences' attachment to animated content. By the mid-1980s, most of the Golden Age animators had passed away or retired from the industry. The loss of its most prominent creators, coupled with the drop in quality that began in the 1950s, set the industry on a path to ruin. It would not be until the late 1980s, when Disney launched the industry into its Renaissance Era, that animation would find its way back into the spotlight. The animated series and films released throughout the 1990s set the stage for the Millennium Age, which began in the early 2000s and continues into the present day.

Despite the industry's advancements, black characters, on a mass scale, would not receive the same attention and refinement as their white counterparts. The previous decades of neglect inevitably relegated black characters to the background of modern animation. To fully comprehend the role and meaning of black characters in modern-day animation, this chapter offers an overview of the industry between 1985 and 2010, followed by in-depth analysis of the black characters that appear in those years.

The Renaissance Era (1985-1999)

The beginning of the Renaissance Era was tumultuous at best. While several animation studios had marginal success producing televised content, the industry's theatrical side was under significant financial strain. The animated films of the late 1970s and early 1980s - such as, Disney's *The Black Cauldron* or Filmation's *Pinocchio and the Emperor of the Night* - had proven to be less than appealing to audiences and critics alike. Desperation caused the major studios of the time - Disney, Warner Bros., Hanna-Barbera, and Filmation Associates (until it went defunct in 1989) - as well as several newcomers to focus on television animation. The shift provided the animation industry with much-needed profits. By the early 1990s, animated television's continued success caused studios to stop contracting out their original animated films to television networks and to transition to first-run syndication. First-run syndication refers to television programs, usually 100 episodes, created explicitly to be sold into syndication.¹⁵⁸ The new syndicated content reinvigorated public interest in animation.

¹⁵⁸ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "syndication," accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syndication>.

The Studios of the Renaissance Era

Disney

Walt Disney Studios had been struggling since its namesake's death in 1969 because it had produced several unsuccessful films in the subsequent years. By 1985, the box office failure of its most recent film, *The Black Cauldron*, left the animation department desperate for a break or it risked closure. After more than thirty years of ignoring various offers to create televised animated content, Disney relented once Michael Eisner took over as CEO of the company in 1984.¹⁵⁹ The following year, the company created CBS's *The Wuzzles* and NBC's *Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears*.¹⁶⁰ Unlike most shows produced in this time, both programs enjoyed higher quality production and story lines than their other animated counterparts. While *The Wuzzles* lasted only one season, *Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears* enjoyed long-term success before ending its run in 1991.

This success prompted Disney to try its luck at first-run syndication on its channel. In 1987, the studio adapted Carl Barks' *Scrooge McDuck* comic books into the syndicated

¹⁵⁹ Micheal D. Eisner, "Bio," accessed March, 27, 2021, <http://www.michaelreisner.com/bio>.

¹⁶⁰ Mike Lyons, "Disney's Little Big Screen: Turning Animated Features into TV Series," *Animation World Magazine*, Published September 1998, <https://www.awn.com/mag/issue3.6/AWNMag3.6.pdf>.

hit *Ducktales*.¹⁶¹ In the following years, Disney would continue creating highly popular first-run syndicated content like *The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1988) and *Chip 'n Dale Rescue Rangers* (1989). The popularity of its animated content encouraged Disney to re-brand The Disney Channel, turning the service into a basic cable channel in the early 2000s, and to launch its sister channel ToonDisney, now Disney XD, in 1998.¹⁶²

The success of its syndicated content gave the animation department the leverage and confidence it needed to branch back into theatrical animation. Over a decade, starting in 1989, Disney released ten animated films: *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *Tarzan* (1999). The films have come to define the Renaissance Era and to mark a dynamic shift in the animation industry. According to animation historian Dr. Chris Pallant, these movies "reflect a phase of aesthetic and industrial growth at the Studio [sic]," which helped redefine what animated content

¹⁶¹ This series was successfully revamped in 2017 for 3 seasons on Disney XD.

¹⁶² "Toon Disney Launch," *Animation World Magazine*, published May 1998, <https://www.awn.com/mag/issue3.2/3.2pages/3.2television.html>.

could be.¹⁶³ Moreover, this era not only marked a complete revival of Disney's animation studio, but also "played a leading role in helping to establish animation as a mainstream form of filmic expression."¹⁶⁴

Warner Brothers

After years of cycling through several animators and acquiring a significant amount of debt, Warner Brothers opened Warner Bros. Animation in 1980. Unfortunately, like other animation studios during this time, Warner Bros. suffered several box office failures. It would not be until 1990, when the studio produced *the Tiny Toon Adventures* cartoon series, that things would begin to look up. The show's popularity reestablished Warner Brothers as a major contender in the animation industry. Capitalizing on *Tiny Toon Adventures'* success, the studio released several other animated series, including *Steven Spielberg Presents, Animaniacs* (1993), *Pinky and the Brain* (1995), and *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992). Together these four cartoons won 17 Daytime Emmy Awards and provided financial stability to Warner Bros. Animation.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Chris Pallant, "The Disney Renaissance," in *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 90, https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/6RBHAQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 110.

¹⁶⁵ Television Academy - Emmy Awards, 2020, Emmy Awards Nominees and Winners [database], <https://www.emmys.com/awards/nominees-winners/2020>.

When Disney began finding popularity in animated feature films in the 1990s, Warner Bros. Animation followed suit, releasing the movies *Cats Don't Dance* (1997), *Quest for Camelot* (1998), and *The Iron Giant* (1999). Although the films were popular in their own right, they did not hold a candle to Disney's ten renaissance films. Despite comparable success, Warner Bros. Animation continued to imitate popular Disney films. One of the most notable examples of this is the 1996 cult classic *Space Jam*, which Warner Bros. released to profit from the success of Disney's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, which artfully blended live action with animation while featuring several notable characters like Betty Boop and Porky Pig.¹⁶⁶

Outside of its subpar attempts at mimicry, Warner Bros. Animation would spend most of the 1990s revamping its original *Looney Tunes* characters for syndication, to varying degrees of success.

Hanna-Barbera and Cartoon Network

The late 1980s was a troublesome time for Hanna-Barbera. Unlike its counterparts, Hanna-Barbera had quickly adapted to the rise of television in the late 1950s and had

¹⁶⁶ "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," ImdbPro, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0096438/details>; It is important to note that unlike *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Space Jam*, does have black characters, such Micheal Jordan as the lead, though these characters are not animated.

found significant success with its primetime series *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* throughout the 1960s.¹⁶⁷

Unfortunately, the studios head start into the television industry had quickly eroded throughout the 1980s, as other studios began contracting original cartoons and producing content for first-run syndication. The company was on the verge of ruin when it was sold to Turner Broadcasting in 1991.¹⁶⁸ Ted Turner, the company owner, was primarily interested in Hanna-Barbera's back catalog; the goal was to use the catalog to fill several time slots on the Cartoon Network channel when it launched in 1992. However, under television producer Fred Seibert's guidance, Hanna-Barbera would become far more valuable to Turner Broadcasting. With a new team in place, Hanna-Barbera developed some of the most popular animated television series of the 1990s, like *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Johnny Bravo*, and *The Powerpuff Girls*.

Along with the successful Hanna-Barbera cartoons, Cartoon Network also supported several animated shows from other studios like *Ed, Edd, n Eddy* and *Courage the Cowardly*

¹⁶⁷ "The Flintstones," ImdbPro, accessed March 27, 2021, https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0053502/?ref_=search_search_search_result_2; "The Jetsons," ImdbPro, accessed March 27, 2021, https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0055683/?ref_=search_search_search_result_3,

¹⁶⁸ John Lippam, "Turner Is Buying Hanna-Barbera Film Library," *Los Angeles Times*, published October 30, 1999, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-10-30-fi-565-story.html>.

Dog. When Time Warner acquired Turner in 1996, the success of Cartoon Network's original shows resulted in the catalog of Hanna-Barbera cartoons and original *Looney Tunes* cartoons – which Time Warner owned the rights to – being transferred to a spinoff channel entitled Boomerang.¹⁶⁹

Nickelodeon

Nickelodeon was the first cable channel created solely for children.¹⁷⁰ The channel's claim to fame was the 1991 launch of three major series – *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, *Rugrats*, and *Doug*. Each series, especially *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, was reminiscent of Golden Era style animation, quickly endearing the shows to their target audiences, kids ages 2 to 17.¹⁷¹ The show's success encouraged Nickelodeon to create other popular shows throughout the 1990s – *Rocko's Modern Life*, *Hey Arnold!* *The Angry Beavers*, *CatDog*, and the channel's longest-running animated show, *SpongeBob SquarePants*. With the rising popularity of animation on the

¹⁶⁹ Mark Landler, "Turner to Merge into Time Warner; a \$7.5 Billion Deal," *The New York Times*, published September 23, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/23/us/turner-to-merge-into-time-warner-a-7.5-billion-deal.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Linda Simensky, "The Early Days of Nicktoons" in *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, (New York: New York University Press, 2004) https://www.google.com/books/edition/Nickelodeon_Nation/eb2QkMtZjQ4C?hl=en&gbpv=1.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 86.

channel, Nickelodeon created Nicktoons, a channel focused on exclusively showcasing animated content, in 2002.

Adult Animation

Children's animation was not the sole focus of studios in the 1990s. The animation industry began to lose its appeal with older audiences after 1934 due to the implementation of the new production code. By the 1970s, most animated content specifically targeted children. This would all change in 1987 when "The Simpsons" debuted as a short cartoon during a segment of *The Tracey Ullman Show*. The short was so popular that, in 1989, it gained a half-hour series under the same name. The show was a victory for the fledgling Fox network, which had only recently launched in 1986. *The Simpsons*, 32 years later, is currently the longest-running American animated series, the longest-running American sitcom, and the longest-running American scripted prime-time television series, both in terms of seasons (32) and number of episodes (698).¹⁷² The show's success prompted several other adult cartoons on Fox, including *King of the Hill*, *Futurama*, *Family Guy*, *American Dad*, and *The Cleveland Show*.

¹⁷² Dan Snierson, "The Simpsons breaks TV record as Maggie takes out Gunsmoke," *Entertainment Weekly*, published April 27, 2018, <https://ew.com/tv/2018/04/27/simpsons-record-636-episodes-gunsmoke/>.

The Simpsons' influence extended far past Fox. In 1994, Cartoon Network produced *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast*, an adult-oriented parody talk show hosted by the 1960s Hanna-Barbera character Space Ghost. The popularity of this and other adult-oriented content on Cartoon Network prompted the channel, in 2001, to launch Adult Swim, its nighttime (8 p.m. to 6. a.m.) programming block that caters to young adults and teenagers. Other networks followed suit, with MTV producing some of the most impactful and popular adult animated TV shows, including *Beavis and Butt-head* and *South Park*, known for its profanity and dark humor, and its satirical "take" on various topics intended for a mature audience.

Computer Animation

This era also saw the rise of CGI or computer-generated imagery. CGI found traction in the animation industry in 1995 when Disney contracted and worked with Pixar to produce *Toy Story*, making it the first feature film created entirely using CGI. The film attained such notable success that other animation studios quickly began using CGI for their films and television shows. CGI put Pixar on the map as the premier studio for content. *Toy Story's* success led Pixar to create some of the most

critically acclaimed and box office successes in the CGI world - *Monsters, Inc.*, *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, and the *Toy Story* sequels.

DreamWorks

In 1994, when Jeffrey Katzenberg left Disney studios after several disagreements with upper-level staff, he teamed up with Steven Spielberg and David Geffen to create DreamWorks Pictures.¹⁷³ Though the studio struggled at first, it finally found success with the 2001 film *Shrek*. The film parodied and subverted most of the expectations found in the popular Disney films of the time, by perverting classic fairytale style storytelling and instead telling a fairy tale starring an unlikely pairing of an ogre and a princess.¹⁷⁴ Following the success of *Shrek*, DreamWorks created several popular franchises and movies in the following decades, including three *Shrek* sequels, *Madagascar*, *Kung Fu Panda*, *Monsters vs. Aliens*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, and *The Croods*. The studio's early

¹⁷³ Robert Lewis, "DreamWorks Animation." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 3, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/DreamWorks-Animation>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.; Daniel Downes and June M. Madeley, "The Mouse Is Dead, Long Live the Ogre: *Shrek* and the Boundaries of Transgression," in *Investigating Shrek*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011) https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230120013_6

victories in CGI quickly established it as Disney and Pixar's main competitor in the CGI animation space.

The Millennium Age (2000-present)

As animation transitioned into the 2000s, the industry continued to evolve. However, most of the developments in this age had little effect on the representation of black characters, at least through 2010, which is when my research ends. The Millennium Age marks the rise of CGI animation and its domination in the animation industry, especially for American feature-length films, which are significantly less likely to use 2d animation.

Walt Disney Animation

Even though Disney and Pixar are under the same parent company, the two studios remain solely independent in the production of their films.¹⁷⁵ Walt Disney Animation was converted into a CGI studio in 2003, and released its first computer-animated film, *Chicken Little*, in 2005 to moderate critical and box office success. The studio would not achieve tangible success again until the release of *Bolt* in 2008, which had the greatest critical reception of any

¹⁷⁵ Sarah Whitten, "Disney is dominating the animation category and no other studios seems to be able to compete," *CNBC*, November 30, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/30/disneys-dominates-animation-category-why-other-studios-cant-compete.html>.

animated film since *Lilo & Stitch*.¹⁷⁶ Riding on *Bolt*'s success, the studio released an adaptation of "Rapunzel" entitled *Tangled* in 2010, also to significant success.

Black Characters from 1985-2010

Considering the animation industry's evolution from 1985-2010, one would presume that black characters would have had a more significant role in development. Unfortunately, this was not the case. By 1960, over 80% of American households had at least one television, a figure that would jump to 98% by 2010. This meant that black Americans were consuming comparable amounts of animated content as their white counterparts.¹⁷⁷ Despite this fact, black characters were still less likely to be featured in animated series and movies, let alone featured as the main character. Black characters were rarely given the same level of consideration as their white counterparts because animators had already added them as token characters, providing, at best, a superficial attempt at diversity

¹⁷⁶ Kayla Cobb, "'Bolt' Is the Disney Success Story No One Remembers," *Decider*, published July 22, 2018, <https://decider.com/2018/07/22/bolt-helped-save-disney/>.

¹⁷⁷ TV History. "Number of TV Households in America: 1950-1978." *The American Century*, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://americancentury.omeka.wlu.edu/items/show/136.>; Julie Siebens, "Extended Measures of Well-Being: Living Conditions in the United States: 2011," United States Census Bureau, issued September 2013, <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/sipp-data-appliances.pdf>

without actually having to take the time to fully flesh out the characters.

This section of the research will focus primarily on animated series and films produced by the top studios of the time - Filmation Associates, Hanna-Barbera, Warner Bros. Animation, Columbia Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and Disney. These animation studios produced the majority of popular animated content between 1985 and 2010. Unlike other periods in animation history, these influential studios did not differ widely in terms of content creation and story lines. Instead, animation in the late Renaissance Era and early Millennium Age is very nearly formulaic. Animated shows often utilize one of two forms of storytelling: slice of life, which depicts a cut-out sequence of events in a character's life, or villain/monster of the week, which depicts the main character facing an antagonist that usually appears once in an episode of the show. The formulaic nature of the shows produced during this time period allows them to be analyzed without the need to categorize by studio. Instead, the best way to understand black characters' roles is to examine how they appear in animated cartoons: side characters, stereotypes, or leads.

Side Characters and Token Blacks

This thesis section will focus on one of the most common forms of black representation in animation and the way it manifests. Animated black characters are often the sidekick to a white protagonist, and, more often than not, are tokenized in the animation series. Token black characters began to appear in media after the 1970s, when studios were attempting to appear more inclusive. Black characters' plotlines were either shaped solely around the actions of their white counterparts or they existed to portray the creator of the show as inclusive.

One of the most common forms of side characters in animation is the "token black." The term refers to characters, in any form of media, who exist solely to make a piece of media, usually with an entirely white cast, appear more diverse than it is. There were few animated series in which a black character played the lead. Instead, they were relegated to the sidelines as the sidekick or best friend of a white protagonist. Miranda Killgallen and Darren Patterson, black teens in the 2000 Nickelodeon show *As Told By Ginger*, are prime examples of this phenomenon. These two black characters were cast as the best friends of two of the four white female leads of the show. In most cases, black characters, like Darren or Miranda, were the

only, or token, blacks consistently depicted in the show. One of the most recognizable token black characters during this time period was Liberty "Libby" Folfax in Nickelodeon's *Jimmy Neutron Boy Genius*. Libby is the sassy black best friend of the main character and rival to the show's protagonist, Cindy Vortex. Although Libby is considered a main character, her original characterization was relatively flat compared to her counterparts' roles.

Moreover, when Libby was eventually given a personality in later seasons, it was based on her Egyptian ancestry and love of R&B and funk music (see Figure 17).



Figure 17: Libby Folfax in season one of the show (left) vs. her appearance in subsequent seasons.

Libby is rarely ever seen separate from Cindy or given story lines that develop throughout the show like her white

counterparts. The

same can be said for

Kim Possible's best friend, Monique, in the Disney Channel Original series of the same name. Monique is Kim Possible's best friend, yet her personality is limited to being the sassy black friend who loves fashion.

Of course, tokenism is not a problem limited to children's animation. Consider the Brown family in the hit series *Family Guy*. In this show, the father, Cleveland Brown, is the whitewashed black best friend of the main character Peter Griffin. In *Family Guy*, Cleveland has little actual bearing on the plot and could just as easily be a white character.

The problem with tokenism, especially in media, is that it offers to a large audience a narrow-minded view of the featured minority group, regardless of if the character is stereotypically depicted or not. white characters are given diverse personalities, interests, and viewpoints irrespective of their classification as hero or villain or something in between. That level of nuance allows white characters to be understood as individuals instead of as generalized representatives of their entire race. Tokenism, especially black tokenism, limits viewers' ability to understand individual characters as exactly that, individuals. Instead, their actions appear more indicative of their race due to the lack of alternative perspectives. Considering the already limited exposure to black Americans that many white Americans have, token black characters can place unrealistic expectations, for better or worse, upon actual black Americans.

Black Stereotypes

Back to Dehumanization

The Millennium Age reinvigorated a common practice from the Golden Era's animated films - the dehumanization of black characters, as in Disney's 2009 film *The Princess and the Frog*. The film stars Anika Noni Rose as the voice of Disney's first black princess Tiana. In the film, Tiana, a hard-working waitress from New Orleans, is turned into a frog after attempting to turn Prince Naveen of Macedonia back into a human by kissing him. The rest of the film follows the two frogs as they venture through the bayous of Louisiana, learning valuable lessons about love and hard work along the way. On the surface, it seems like a classic Disney princess movie; however, in actuality, the film is reminiscent of the Moral Cartoons of the 1930s. Moral cartoons focused on an antisocial black character undergoing a traumatic event, a rite of passage of sorts, in order to be worthy of rejoining society as a better person. *The Princess and the Frog* follows the same pattern, with Tiana and Naveen undergoing a traumatic event to fix their antisocial problems, over-work and self-absorption, respectively, to return to polite society. The similarity is made even worse because one of the film's final scenes, in which Tiana and Naveen get married as frogs in the

bayou, mimics the 1937 MGM short film *Swing Wedding*, in which a group of black-coded frogs hosts a wedding in a swamp (see Figure 4.5). The film clearly establishes that Tiana and Naveen cannot learn their lessons as human beings; only by getting married as frogs, in the end, can they become human.



Figure 18: Tiana and Naveen getting married as frogs in a swamp in the 2009 Disney film *The Princess and the Frog* (left); Unnamed black-coded frogs dance at their swamp wedding in the 1937 MGM short film *Swing Wedding*

The dehumanization of minority characters is not limited to *The Princess and the Frog*. Before Disney turned its first black princess into a frog, it transformed Kuzko, an Incan emperor and main character of *The Emperor's New Groove*, and Kenai, an indigenous teenager starring in the film *Brother Bear*, into a llama and a bear, respectively. The reasons for their transformations were similar to Tiana and Naveen's; their antisocial behavior needed to be corrected. Despite the controversy of dehumanizing minority characters, especially black ones, the practice appears in

the 2019 film *Spies in Disguise* and, again, in the 2021 film *Soul*.

These films lend themselves to the previous use of animal characters to tell stories to white audiences, as they are more relatable and less political fraught than black characters are. The problem with this form of storytelling is that it sends a message that black characters, and other animated characters of color, need to go through some form of dramatic and traumatizing situation, similar to the Moral Cartoons popularized in the 1930s, to be worthy of being a human being in society.

Black Representation in Adult Cartoons

Adult cartoons were no better than their juvenile counterparts in properly representing black characters. One of the most notable animated black males, Cleveland Brown, a friend of Peter Griffin on *Family Guy*, lost his status as a token black character



Figure 19: Five-year old Rallo Tubbs.

in 2009 when he was given a spinoff series, *The Cleveland*

Show. In the series, Cleveland, and his son Cleveland Jr. move to his hometown, where he marries his high school sweetheart Donna Tubbs and moves in with her and her two children. Though the show does not deal with tokenism, it is filled with stereotypes. One of the most glaring problems of the show is that, like Cleveland, Donna's five-year-old son, Rallo, is voiced by Mike Henry, a white man. This fact is made worse due to Rallo's characterization as a jive-talking 1970s blaxploitation caricature, despite his young age. This is only one of the stereotypes presented without nuance or context in the show, as none of the writers are black. One of the most unmistakable signs that *The Cleveland Show* lacks the perspective of a black writer is the lasting joke that Cleveland's best friend in the series is a gun-toting, racist confederate named Lester Krinklesac. In the pilot episode, Lester almost shoots Cleveland and his son because they are black men following Donna into her home; yet, the series makes it a point to show just how close the two men and their sons are. Despite the stereotypes, *The Cleveland Show* does feature black leads, which most other adult cartoons do not. One of the most popular shows in the adult animation space, *The Simpsons*, lacks leading black characters. Instead, the two main recurring black characters in the show, Carl Carlson

and Dr. Hibbert, are voiced by Hank Azaria and Harry Shearer, two white men.

Few shows address stereotyping or the tokenization of black characters and the impact that has on audiences. *South Park* is a notable exception to this rule with the introduction of the character Token Black. Except for a young black girl named Nichole, Chef Jerome McElroy and a few guest characters, Token is often the only black character on the show. He is meant to satirize his name's sake, but to translate correctly, Token must be the only black character. As such, *South Park* intentionally lacks black representation. The manner in which the writers of the show choose to address tokenism only reinforces the problem. In other words, *South Park* is offering a narrative that conveys it is acceptable for a show not to have black representation to raise awareness of the fact that insufficient black representation and nuance in media are problems.

Blaxploitation in Animation

Dehumanization is not the only thing the Millennium Age of animation returned to the forefront of television. Starting in the 1990s, the animation industry adopted the blaxploitation film genre, which had ended nearly two decades earlier, into its shows. Blaxploitation or "black exploitation" films are an ethnic subgenre of exploitation films, which were "specifically low-budget movies that emphasized sex, violence, or some other form of spectacle in favor over coherent narrative."¹⁷⁸ Blaxploitation films grew in popularity in the 1970s amidst significant controversy because non-black producers often created them. However, the films are notable because they "rank among the first in which black characters and communities are the heroes and subjects of film and television, rather than sidekicks, villains, or victims of brutality."¹⁷⁹ The Blaxploitation Era of film opened the door for black actors and actresses and, eventually, black storytellers to profit from their talents and create content for blacks by blacks. By the time the Blaxploitation era had ended, several black artists had found fame and fortune and had made the genre

¹⁷⁸ "Exploitation Films." Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film. Encyclopedia.com. (March 27, 2021). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/exploitation-films>

¹⁷⁹ "Exploitation Films." Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film.

their own. Animation did not continue the trend of controversial empowerment that blaxploitation had come to represent. The fast-paced, action-based film genre easily lent itself to animation; unfortunately, only the film's styling managed to translate appropriately and not the storytelling that came with it.

When blaxploitation showed up in animation, it was often in jest and was used to undermine the blaxploitation



Figure 20: The Boogey Man dressed in a suit reminiscent of the styles in early Blaxploitation films.

genre's message.

While blaxploitation itself is steeped in controversy, it came to prominence at the peak of the

independent black film movement and

provided black creators with a way to tell more positive stories about their communities.¹⁸⁰ This nuance was lost or rejected in the genre's shift to animation. A significant example of this is the *PowerPuff Girls* episode "Boogie Frights," which features a character known as the Boogey Man, who is reminiscent of early blaxploitation

¹⁸⁰ "Exploitation Films." Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film.

protagonists - in dress and attitude - but is the villain, rather than the protagonist of the episode (see Figure 20).¹⁸¹ This is the exact opposite of blaxploitation films' primary goal, which subverted the traditional ideas of good and evil concerning black characters. Casting a blaxploitation style character as a villain sends a pointed message about how the era should be viewed in modern times.

Blaxploitation appears even more controversially In *The Cleveland Show*, particularly in an episode entitled "Hot Cocoa Bang Bang." Cleveland's wife Donna is revealed



Figure 21: Donna confronting a security guard in her old Hot Cocoa Bang Bang costume from her Blaxploitation days.

to have once been the blaxploitation character for which the episode is named. Though Donna is cast as the protagonist, the entire episode is

designed to poke fun at blaxploitation films. Halfway through the episode, Donna dons her outdated costume and is regarded as a sloppy version of her former self (see Figure

¹⁸¹ *Boogie Frights*, Craig McCracken producer, (1998; Burbank: Cartoon Network Studios, 2016), DailyMotion. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3mrhgp>.

21). While reprising her role as Hot Cocoa Bang Bang, Donna and Cleveland spend the episode struggling to get the film's original cut back from Robert Rodriguez, a filmmaker appearing as himself in the episode. Rodriguez plans to release *Hot Cocoa Bang Bang*, despite Donna's wishes. The episode sends a terrible message about blaxploitation films that the genre is something to be ashamed of based on Donna's reaction, plus it misses the mark on its message about using black bodies for profit. The show frames blaxploitation as something that should be forgotten, rather than showcasing the significant positive impact it had on the black community, as well as the opportunities it provided several black creators.

Black Leads in Animation

Despite the shortcomings of animation, one would be remiss to discuss the downsides of the art form without studying the instances in which animators did create shows that presented black characters with the same care and nuance of their white counterparts. There were a few shows during the Renaissance Era and the early Millennium Age that went against the grain of traditional animation when it came to black characters; for example, *Little Bill* (1999-2004), *The Proud Family* (2001-2005), and *The*

Boondocks (2005-2014). While these were not the only shows that had black leads during this time (see appendix 1), each of the shows depicts a black family from the perspective of a black creator. The shows act as exemplars of how to portray black characters for varying age groups and, for that reason, deserve further analysis. They prove that proper representation can be achieved; unfortunately, it just is not prioritized.

Little Bill

Premiering in 1999 on Nick Jr., *Little Bill* was a flash-animated series based on the best-selling children's book series of the same name, created by Bill Cosby. The show follows five-year-old William Farnell "Little Bill" Glover, Jr. and his adventures growing up in Philadelphia with his family. Each episode showcases Little Bill as an inquisitive young boy learning about the world around him. Not only does this show feature a young black protagonist, but it also spotlights his loving and supportive family - his parents, his two older siblings, his great grandmother, and occasionally his extended family. The show paints a positive picture of urban black life for young children and their families, so much so that in 2002, after winning a Peabody Award (which honors the most powerful, enlightening, and invigorating stories in television,

radio, and online media), Little Bill became the first black character balloon in the 76th Annual Macy's Thanksgiving Parade .¹⁸² Little Bill provided children "with television fare appropriate to their needs and helpful to their emotional and psychological development," and was

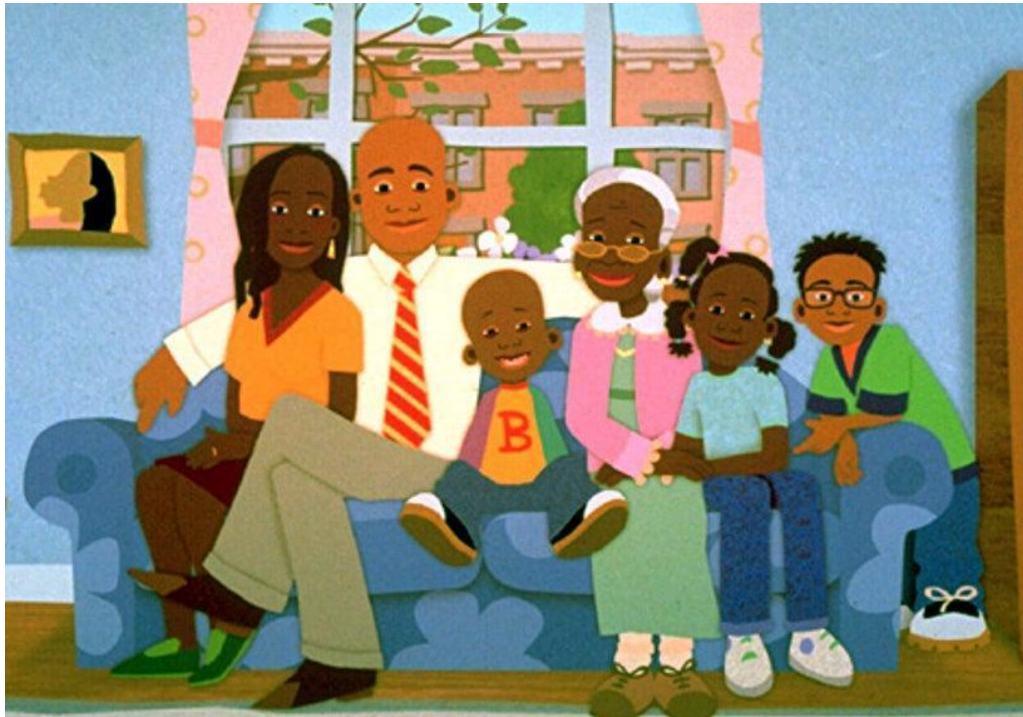


Figure 22: Little Bill (center) and his family as they appear in the final shot of the show's title sequence.

revolutionary for its time. ¹⁸³

¹⁸² Multi Channel News Staff, "Little Bill to March in Macy's Parade," *Multichannel News*, published November 12, 2002, <https://www.nexttv.com/news/little-bill-march-macys-parade-148578>

¹⁸³ Brown Johnson, "Acceptance Speech" (speech, New York, May 21, 2001), *American Rhetoric*, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/little-bill>.

The Proud Family

This popular show premiered on Disney Channel in 2001 and targeted older kids than did *Little Bill*. Created by Bruce W. Smith and Doreen Spicer, the show followed the life of 14-year-old Penny Proud as she is growing up and trying to find herself. The slice-of-life show depicts



Penny and her friends, with the support of her parents Trudy and Oscar and Grandmother Sugar Mama, navigating the struggles of

growing up and all that comes with it in comical ways.

From learning to drive a car to dealing with the responsibilities of being an older sister to simply protesting their favorite show getting canceled, *The Proud Family* provided teenagers with a relatable character to follow.¹⁸⁴ However, what made the show revolutionary was that it depicted a healthy black family with subverted

Figure 23: Penny Proud (center) and her parents, grandmother, and twin baby siblings as they appear in the final shot of show's title sequence. gender roles. In

¹⁸⁴ "The Proud Family," ImdbPro, accessed March, 27, 2021, <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0293737/details>.

the Proud household, Dr. Trudy Proud, a veterinarian, was the primary breadwinner, as Oscar attempted to get his snack company off the ground. Throughout its four-year run, *The Proud Family* received twenty-three nominations and six awards, including a NAMIC Vision Award, which honors "original programming content created for television and digital platforms that best reflect the increasingly diverse, multiethnic and multicultural viewing audience."¹⁸⁵ *The Proud Family* was a classic coming-of-age story that appealed to a wide audience through its relatable content and diverse cast.

The Boondocks

Launched in 2005 on Adult Swim and created by Aaron McGruder, *The Boondocks* followed 10-year-old Huey Freeman and his younger brother Riley after moving from the East Side of Chicago to live with their grandfather, Robert, in the predominantly white suburb of Woodcrest, Maryland.¹⁸⁶ *The Boondocks* works to showcase the family's cultural clash from the move and the inner dynamics of a traditional, non-nuclear, black household. Granddad, as Robert Freeman is referred to in the show, is an old-school black man who is

¹⁸⁵ "2021 Namic Visions Awards," Namic Visions Awards, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.namicvisionawards.com/>.

¹⁸⁶ "The Boondocks," ImdbPro, accessed March, 27, 2021, https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0373732?rf=cons_tt_atf&ref_=cons_tt_atf.

constantly at odds with his grandsons – Huey, the modern revolutionary, and Riley, who is fully immersed in the urban rap culture and lifestyle.¹⁸⁷ The two-



Figure 24: From left to right, Huey, Riley, and Robert Freeman in a promo for their show *The Boondocks*.

time Peabody award-winning series satirizes topics like capitalism, white privilege, and mixed-race relationships through humor.¹⁸⁸ Having been created by a black man, the show possesses the ability to address common socio-political topics in a way that few other shows in its genre can.

It is clear from the three shows, all targeting different age groups, that content starring black characters could and would be successful if given the opportunity. They indicate not only that black characters have just as much value as their white counterparts in storytelling, but also the added depth of having nuanced black characters provides a much appreciated and awarded perspective in animation. Moreover, understanding these

¹⁸⁷ "The Boondocks," ImdbPro.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

shows and the topics they address, in contrast to what appears on programs like *The Cleveland Show*, highlights the importance of having POC writers in the room and in positions of power when writing stories starring minority or marginalized characters.

Conclusion

Like the other eras of animation, black characters were left behind in the modern development era on a mass scale. Animation underwent significant growth starting in the late 1980s, but the industry's continued use of tokenization highlights how black characters continued to exist in the background. However, with the introduction of black creators into the entertainment industry in the 1970s, there was a significant movement towards blacks representing themselves in the media. Their ongoing influence is slowly offering more diverse perspectives on the black experience in animation, as well as the opportunity to make a significant impact on the industry as time goes on. While the animation industry persists in undervaluing black characters, there has been some movement towards more diverse representation on and off the animated stage.

Epilogue

It is important to note this research stops with the year 2010, except for television programs that began before and ended after that date. As such, there have been developments in the last decade of animation, including a purposeful shift towards telling more diverse stories as can be seen in *Steven Universe*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse*, *She-Ra and the Princess of Power*, *Kipo and the Age of the Wonderbeasts*, *The Owl House*, *Doc McStuffins*, and *Soul* to name a few. These shows all highlight black leads or relevant and reoccurring black side characters, who are intentionally characterized outside of the stereotypes that continue to dominate the animation industry. It is for this reason that the research for this thesis ends in 2010. The problems of misrepresentation in these shows and films stem from a different place than what has been discussed thus far. Nevertheless, the animation industry is making forward strides in diversity, and is focusing on telling stories that relate to a broader, more modern audience.

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