4

The Uncanny History of Minstrels and Machines, 1835–1923

LOUIS CHUDE-SOKEI

On or about December 1835, sometime early in the month, though the details remain appropriately mythical and therefore necessarily fuzzy, American popular culture officially began. It may seem obvious that this is merely a restating of Virginia Woolf's famous declaration of the change in sensibilities that signals the formal birth of what we call literary or cultural modernism, but in truth it comes from Judith Wilt's paraphrasing of Woolf in a well-known essay that begins, "In or around December, 1897[,] ... Victorian Gothic changed—into Victorian Science Fiction."[1] Wilt's exploration of the birth of science fiction "in the light of imperial anxieties" is largely rooted in questions of genre; the interest here, however, is in exploring how those racial anxieties were shaped in American popular culture within that space between the formal birth of science fiction—Victorian or otherwise—and modernism.[2] This is a modernism from which American popular culture emerges as a result of those anxieties associated with slavery, colonialism, and industrialism. Though characteristic of the Victorian era, they will in the twentieth century become the primary tensions of race and technology at the core of an American imperial epoch.

This periodization ends with 1923, the date of the introduction of the word "robot" into the English language, a term coined for use in Nobel laureate Karel Čapek's *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* but derived from the Czech word *robota,* meaning serf if not slave labor. Much more will be made of this remarkable play, particularly since its anthropomorphizing of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anxieties about technology become superimposed on extant anxieties about race and empire in that long fin de siècle. But the

periodization begins in 1835, when the notorious P. T. Barnum "bought" or acquired the rights to display the slave woman Joice Heth, so-called mammy to George Washington, allegedly 161 years old, from an itinerant showman named R. W. Lindsay.[3] To say that American popular culture began at this moment may be an intentional overstatement, but it is a perception shared by those aware of the uncanny intersections at work in the relationship between Barnum and the woman he called "Aunt" Joice. As James W. Cook puts it, "If we were to pick a single moment to mark the birthdate of modern American popular culture, this just might be the one: on that fateful afternoon in July 1835, when an aspiring impresario from Bethel, Connecticut[,] took off his grocer's apron and began to think seriously about how to market Joice Heth as a popular curiosity in New York City."[4] (Figure 4.1)

It is generally accepted that Barnum built his entire career on the display of this woman, who was called everything from an "Egyptian mummy" to a "living skeleton," from "venerable nigger" to "The Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in the World."[5] In his own words, the "accident" of Joice Heth "seemed almost to compel my agency," and it was she who "first brought me forward as a showman."[6] She was his introduction into an American public life that he irrevocably changed and a popular culture that some—including himself—argue he essentially invented. But whereas Cook identifies the meeting of Heth and Barnum in July 1835 as that originary moment (or perhaps the meeting of Barnum and Lindsay, Heth being mere property and whose complicity or participation remains enshrouded in fable and confusion), it should be pushed four months further to New Haven, where she was first displayed alongside perhaps the best-known machine of the age of both wonder and reason. It should be pushed to the December meeting between Joice Heth—a human reduced to object—and the infamous chess-playing machine "The Turk," an object raised to the tentative status of human, and which has such a long and complex history of display and literary and cultural reaction (ranging from Descartes to Edgar Allan Poe to Walter Benjamin) that the attempt to account for it here fully would be both unsatisfying and impossible (Figure 4.2).

Very briefly, "The Turk" was constructed by Wolfgang von Kempelen in 1769 for the entertainment of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, but it would for years stun, terrify, and entertain much of Europe with its eerie mimicry of human beings, playing a game already established as a visible display of reason. This "thinking machine" was eventually acquired almost a century later by Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, purveyor of dioramas, court mechanic of the Hapsburgs, and close friend of Ludwig van Beethoven.[7] Although Barnum claimed that the pairing of Joice Heth and "The Turk" took place in Boston (Figure 4.3),

THE GREATEST
Natural & National
CURIOSITY
IN THE WORLD.

JOICE HETH

Nurse to GEN. GEORGE WASHINGTON, (the Father of our Country,)
WILL BE SEEN AT

Barnum's Hotel, Bridgeport,

On FRIDAY, and SATURDAY, the 11th. & 12th days
of December, DAY and EVENING.

JOICE HETH is unquestionably the most astonishing and interesting curiosity in the World! She was the slave of Augustine Washington, (the father of Gen. Washington,) and was the first person who put clothes on the unconscious infant, who, in after days, led our heroic fathers on to glory, to victory, and freedom. To use her own language when speaking of the illustrious Father of his Country, "she raised him." JOICE HETH was born in the year 1674, and has, consequently, now arrived at the astonishing

AGE OF 161 YEARS.

She Weighs but FORTY-SIX POUNDS, and yet is very cheerful and interesting. She retains her faculties in an unparalleled degree, converses freely, sings numerous hymns, relates many interesting anecdotes of *the boy* Washington, and often laughs heartily at her own remarks, or those of the spectators. Her health is perfectly good, and her appearance very neat. She is a baptist and takes great pleasure in conversing with ministers and religious persons. The appearance of this marvellous relic of antiquity strikes the beholder with amazement, and convinces him that his eyes are resting on the oldest specimen of mortality they ever before beheld. Original, authentic, and indisputable documents accompanying her prove, however astonishing the fact may appear, that JOICE HETH is in every respect the person she is represented.

The most eminent physicians and intelligent men in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New-York, Boston, and other places, have examined this *living skeleton* and the documents accompanying her, and all, *invariably*, pronounce her to be, as represented, 161 *years of age!*

A female is in continual attendance, and will give every attention to the ladies who visit this relic of by-gone ages.

She has been visited in Philadelphia, New-York, Boston, &c., by more than TWENTY THOUSAND Ladies and Gentlemen, within the last three months.

Hours of Exhibition, from 9 *A. M. to* 1 *P. M. and from* 3 *to* 5, *and* 6½ *to* 10 *P. M.*

ADMITTANCE 25 Cents. CHILDREN HALF-PRICE.

Printed by J. BOOTH & SON, 147, Fulton-st N. Y.

Figure 4.1. Playbill advertising the exhibition of Joice Heth by P. T. Barnum. Somers Historical Society, Somers, N.Y.

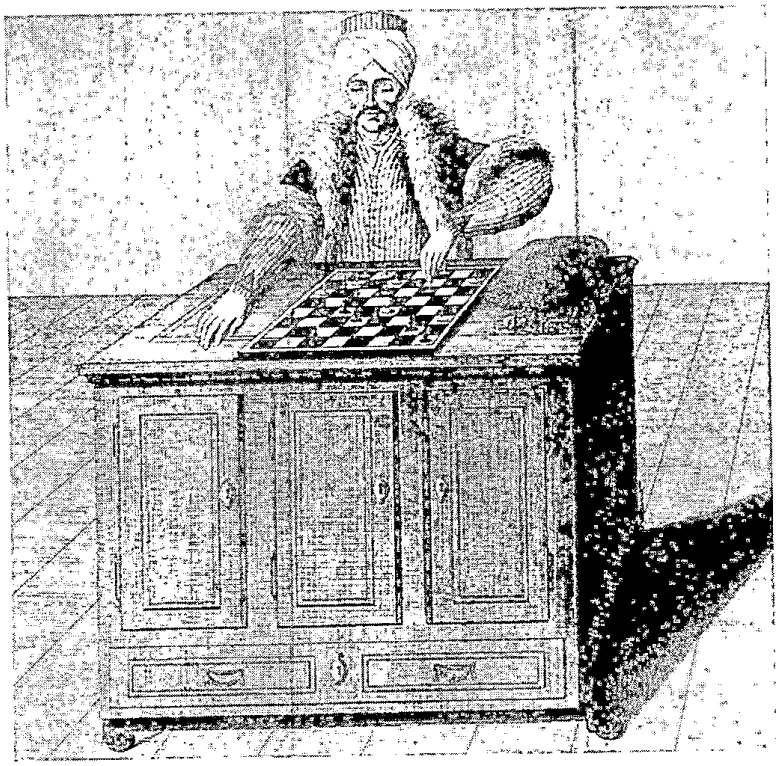
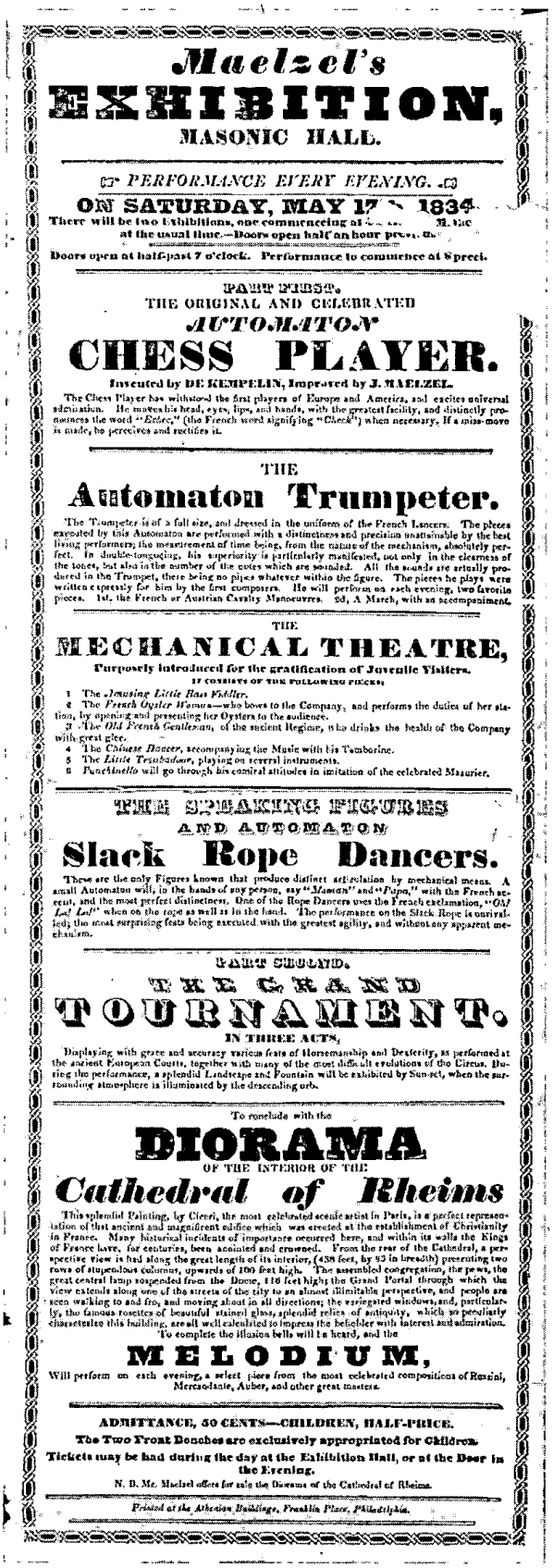


Figure 4.2. An engraving of the original chess-playing automaton "The Turk" from Karl Gottlieb von Windisch's book *Inanimate Reason* (London, 1784).

Figure 4.3. Patrons visiting Joice Heth in Boston. Illustration from *The Life of P. T. Barnum as Written by Himself* (New York, 1855).



Maelzel's
EXHIBITION,
MASONIC HALL.

☞ *PERFORMANCE EVERY EVENING.* ☜

ON SATURDAY, MAY 17, 1834.

There will be two Exhibitions, one commencing at [illegible] M. the at the usual time.—Doors open half an hour previous.

Doors open at half-past 7 o'clock. Performance to commence at 8 precisely.

PART FIRST.

THE ORIGINAL AND CELEBRATED

AUTOMATON

CHESS PLAYER.

Invented by DE KEMPELIN, Improved by J. MAELZEL.

The Chess Player has withstood the first players of Europe and America, and excites universal admiration. He moves his head, eyes, lips, and hands, with the greatest facility, and distinctly pronounces the word "*Echec,*" (the French word signifying "Check") when necessary. If a miss-move is made, he perceives and rectifies it.

THE

Automaton Trumpeter.

The Trumpeter is of a full size, and dressed in the uniform of the French Lancers. The pieces executed by this Automaton are performed with a distinctness and precision unattainable by the best living performers; the measurement of time being, from the nature of the mechanism, absolutely perfect. In double-tonguing, his superiority is particularly manifested, not only in the clearness of the tones, but also in the number of the notes which are sounded. All the sounds are actually produced in the Trumpet, there being no pipes whatever within the figure. The pieces he plays were written expressly for him by the first composers. He will perform on each evening, two favorite pieces. 1st, the French or Austrian Cavalry Manoeuvres. 2d, A March, with an accompaniment.

THE

MECHANICAL THEATRE,

Purposely introduced for the gratification of Juvenile Visiters.

IT CONSISTS OF THE FOLLOWING PIECES:

1 The *Dancing Little Bass Fiddler.*
2 The *French Oyster Woman*—who bows to the Company, and performs the duties of her station, by opening and presenting her Oysters to the audience.
3 *The Old French Gentleman,* of the ancient Regime, who drinks the health of the Company with great glee.
4 The *Chinese Dancer,* accompanying the Music with his Tamborine.
5 The *Little Troubadour,* playing on several instruments.
6 *Punchinello* will go through his comical attitudes in imitation of the celebrated Mazurier.

THE SPEAKING FIGURES
AND AUTOMATON

Slack Rope Dancers.

These are the only Figures known that produce distinct articulation by mechanical means. A small Automaton will, in the hands of any person, say "*Maman*" and "*Papa,*" with the French accent, and the most perfect distinctness. One of the Rope Dancers uses the French exclamation, "*Oh! Le! Le!*" when on the rope as well as in the hand. The performance on the Slack Rope is unrivalled; the most surprising feats being executed with the greatest agility, and without any apparent mechanism.

PART SECOND.

THE GRAND
TOURNAMENT.

IN THREE ACTS,

Displaying with grace and accuracy various feats of Horsemanship and Dexterity, as performed at the ancient European Courts, together with many of the most difficult evolutions of the Circus. During the performance, a splendid Landscape and Fountain will be exhibited by Sun-set, when the surrounding atmosphere is illuminated by the descending orb.

To conclude with the

DIORAMA
OF THE INTERIOR OF THE
Cathedral of Rheims

This splendid Painting, by *Ciceri,* the most celebrated scenic artist in Paris, is a perfect representation of that ancient and magnificent edifice which was erected at the establishment of Christianity in France. Many historical incidents of importance occurred here, and within its walls the Kings of France have, for centuries, been anointed and crowned. From the rear of the Cathedral, a perspective view is had along the great length of its interior, (438 feet, by 93 in breadth) presenting two rows of stupendous columns, upwards of 100 feet high. The assembled congregation, the pews, the great central lamp suspended from the Dome, 116 feet high; the Grand Portal through which the view extends along one of the streets of the city to an almost illimitable perspective, and people are seen walking to and fro, and moving about in all directions; the variegated windows, and, particularly, the famous rosettes of beautiful stained glass, splendid relics of antiquity, which so peculiarly characterize this building, are all well calculated to impress the beholder with interest and admiration. To complete the illusion bells will be heard, and the

MELODIUM,

Will perform on each evening, a select piece from the most celebrated compositions of Rossini, Mercadante, Auber, and other great masters.

ADMITTANCE, 50 CENTS—CHILDREN, HALF-PRICE.

The Two Front Benches are exclusively appropriated for Children.

Tickets may be had during the day at the Exhibition Hall, or at the Door in the Evening.

N. B. Mr. Maelzel offers for sale the Diorama of the Cathedral of Rheims.

Printed at the Athenian Buildings, Franklin Place, Philadelphia.

Figure 4.4. Playbill advertising Maelzel's exhibition of "The Turk" at the Masonic Hall, Philadelphia, May 17, 1834. From the Library Company of Philadelphia. P. T. Barnum and Maelzel met while touring their respective exhibitions.

it actually occurred in New Haven, where they were on display in contiguous rooms. It was in Boston, however, where Barnum first met Maelzel, who would inspire him and through whom he would be instrumental in reinvigorating a tradition of automata that had long fascinated and flummoxed Europe (Figure 4.4). Maelzel would will his collection of automata to Barnum, whom he very much thought of as his American protégé. But despite the showman's passion for automata and the fact that mechanical oddities would become as much a part of his repertoire as were racialized monstrosities, the display of "exotic" peoples and blackface minstrels—this was, after all, a mere three years after T. D. Rice's staggeringly successful performance of "Jim Crow" in New York—Gaby Wood is right to point out that Barnum ultimately "led the way for human oddities to replace mechanical curiosities in the public imagination."[8]

What makes the meeting of black slave woman and machine a necessary introduction to this essay was what happened next, something far more obscure than the now well-documented and richly theorized history of freakery, ethnographic display, and the complex birth of both the museum and the Western carnival-circus complex. Though he is notoriously unreliable, it is best to have Barnum himself tell the story despite the narrative sleight of hand at work in that relentless presentation of innocence characteristic of all of his autobiographies:

> When the audience began to decrease in numbers, a short communication appeared in one of the newspapers, signed "A Visitor," in which the writer claimed to have made an important discovery. He stated that Joice Heth, as at present exhibited, was a humbug, whereas, if the simple truth was told in regard to the exhibition, it was really vastly curious and interesting. "The fact is," said the communication, "Joice Heth is not a human being. What purports to be a remarkably old woman is simply a curiously-constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, India-rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together, and made to move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator. The exhibitor is a ventriloquist, and all the conversations apparently held with the ancient lady are purely imaginary, so far as she is concerned, for the answers and incidents purporting to be given and related by her are merely the ventriloquial voice of the exhibitor."[9]

There is little doubt that Barnum himself or his associate Levi Lyman was in fact "A Visitor"; there is also little doubt that the very idea of suggesting to the public that Joice Heth was a machine came from Maelzel himself, given his long history of passing off a machine for human, and particularly that personification of a machine as someone clothed in the skin and costume of Orientalist fantasy. Barnum continues: "Maelzel's ingenious mechanism somewhat prepared the way for this announcement, and hundreds who had not visited Joice Heth were now anxious to see the curious automaton; while many who had seen her were equally desirous of a second look, in order to determine whether

or not they had been deceived. The consequence was, our audiences again largely increased."[10]

The presence of "The Turk" clearly had some impact on conditioning the public to imagine Joice Heth, too, as a construct of the age of industry, an American version of an automaton but masked in the dark flesh and withered femininity of a far more intimate, local, and familiar racial stereotype. But certainly that was not enough to guarantee the success of the hoax. Of course "The Turk" was revealed to have functioned by means of a steady sequence of diminutive chess prodigies hiding behind the machine mask; but though it played chess, it was clearly a manmade artifact, carved largely of wood. Most notably, *it did not speak,* and the phonograph and the spectacle of recorded speech were still decades away. So the question is this: Why were P. T. Barnum and the early market for freakery and human oddities so easily able to sustain this particular humbug? Why was it credible and indeed logical? And what would be the repercussions of this masquerade in which race, Africa, sexuality, and technology or artificial intelligence all came together in one performance? This essay is an attempt to answer these questions by situating them as the central concerns of American modernism and a popular culture for which they are its primary forces and tools of knowledge making.

Were we to trace Euro-American modernism back toward some elementary set of issues, influences, and obsessions, we could isolate two primary clusters of meaning among the intersecting many at work within the shock of America's relentless global expansion, which, as it was, was generated far more by cultural and technological influence than by techniques and axioms of territorial domination. The first cluster of concern here is the so-called machine aesthetic, produced by and through the West's difficult and ambivalent responses to industrialization, and which would ultimately find its political and social fulfillment in an America that announces its global presence via the language of inevitability, the language of the *new.* In America, technology would become celebrated as being central to its democracy, but also as a natural sign of it despite its initially disorienting and continually irruptive presence in a nineteenth century in which, as a defining issue, it was arguably second in importance and controversy only to slavery.

Yet despite the "triumph" of industrialization and the fetishizing of technology in the United States, the dominance over the landscape and the erasure of the frontier would only strengthen the nostalgia for nature that, as Leo Marx famously identified half a century ago, continues to define an American political and literary sensibility.[11] Utterly absent from Marx's otherwise magisterial work (despite being so central to his analyses and despite so many points of

entry, even given the limitations of his time) is the issue of slavery, which is much more thoroughly implicated in both the pastoralizing and technologizing of the American literary and cultural landscape than he would allow. Largely because of the African slave's central function deep within those very notions of "nature" and nostalgia, race is a primary factor not only in nineteenth-century industrialization but also in the process of modernization and the cultural experience of modernism through its assumed special intimacy with nature. Therefore, the second cluster of interest in this essay is the cultural legacies of West Africa, which will be here called the "African aesthetic" despite being a category with such a gloriously troubled history that one can only use it as a sign of still troubling conflicts embedded behind and among its multiple masks and their plural meanings.

But it is precisely that tendency to read Africa as an omnivorous and endlessly capacious sign for a diaspora of interlinked black differences and a complex set of aesthetic positions vis-à-vis the West that undergirds this notion of an "African aesthetic." This aesthetic describes a tendency and a sensibility rooted not in any quantifiable or provable historical authenticity despite the dependence on anthropology and ethnography that characterized so many of the modern movements that would draw from it. Instead "the African aesthetic" functioned—functions—as the flexible rationale for the metonymic relationships between and among blacks and their varied cultural products during and after slavery; it functioned as a loose network of meanings between and among all that was taken to represent or speak for an African continuum. It has been well documented how modernist movements from cubism, surrealism, dada, and futurism to primitivism, negritude, Pan-Africanism, and Harlem's Renaissance depended on some invention of "Africa" or some construction of an "African aesthetic" either to highlight a contrast with or to enable a critique of a "Western culture" also of their devising. Because the Negro in all of these dialectical manipulations inexorably represented "nature," "the natural," the primitive, *and* the pre-technological—and because "Africa" was both the Negro's point of origin and irreducible essence—these constructs ultimately manifested a complex set of relationships with its dialectical other: technology, industry, or a civilization that had already been describing itself in such terms certainly since Thomas Carlyle.

So it suffices to say that from the sun setting of Rule Britannia to the pallid emergence of an American century, all of these patently modern tendencies, movements, and transformations in figuring the "Negro" and "Africa" in *some* relationship to "the new," to technology and new techniques, also established links between "race" and that other significant twentieth-century sign of otherness, "the machine." During the period marked by the dates 1835 and 1923,

both of these categories would share the cultural spotlight in America; and the interbreeding and interdependence of their *uncanny* anxieties would require strategic moments when the two blend and pass for each other rather than function as the antinomies that they did and still do represent. In these moments of miscegenatory masquerade, all that was relatable to "Africa" would share and exchange space with all that was imaginable via the metaphor of "the machine" and the social and historical formations that quickly came to be described thus. In analyzing these two clusters and historicizing their fundamentally modern influence on each other, what we then find in the nineteenth century are two of the twentieth century's most distinct products facing and doubling each other: the blackface minstrel and the robot.

As is well known, in the years beyond this designated period the various figurations of the Negro and estimations of its cultural impact generally employed Africa in complex yet often contradictory ways. Africa could safely signify everything from an abyssal or timeless anteriority to the recolonization of the West by a suppressed primitiveness, or of the superego by the id. It could also be, on the one hand, the presence or return of a nonrational instinct in the midst of a materially powerful but internally decaying *cogito* or, on the other hand, the dangerous threat of atavism lurking beneath the slick processes of a democracy forced to contend with the new type of "humanity" represented by blacks after slavery. These uses of Africa were made affectively accessible via the presence of jazz, primitivist literature and art, banana-skirted dance spectacle, or the complex legacies of blackface, particularly after it became technologized in sound via "coon songs," in film, and in advertising. They would also be both strengthened and contested by the various claims on "Africa" and its legacy deployed by black modernist cultural and political movements operating both within and against the interests of Euro-American modernism. This complex and ambivalent fascination with colonial Africa, African America, and the Caribbean was most certainly the case during the interwar period, a moment characterized by a crisis of faith in technology inspired by the trauma of World War I. Indeed it was this crisis and the anxieties it generated that would enable the rise of a widespread cultural tendency that can be described by Sieglinde Lemke's seemingly oxymoronic but utterly accurate term "primitivist modernism."[12] In the words of Wilson Harris, "the gift of every advance in technology is fraught with ambiguity in its innermost content."[13] "Africa," the Negro, and the primitive became signs of that ambiguity and ambivalence as manifest in the realm of culture.

More important, the various movements and cultural tendencies of modernism would deploy the tensions generated by the juxtaposition of these two clusters of influence in order to explore and exploit the anxieties they depended

on. For example, as a symbol of the natural and the pre-technological, the "African aesthetic" and the Negro who represented it were either untouched by or opposed to the industrial technology that had brashly come to define "newness" in America, a newness that made American modernity exceptional; or the Negro pioneered a quite novel set of sensibilities in which tradition and the modern, the organic and the technological, were made somehow to "jive" or "swing," particularly in the music and dance spectacles of 1920s American popular culture, which, though now remembered as organic and rooted in black vernacular culture, were initially seen and heard as machine age spectacles, as elaborate rituals of the submission of "art" to the logic of the machine, of whites to the depersonalized rhythms of industry—hence Adorno's notorious description of jazz as a form of fascism in blackface.[14] These observations about "primitivist modernism" can, however, be traced back two generations to the birth of plantation minstrelsy, particularly as the form found ways of dramatizing the demise of its own socioeconomic rationale and the inevitable transformation of slaves into humans and the movement from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. Though an admittedly simplistic binary, these clusters of influence and anxiety did bring together two specific ways of reading and experiencing the cultural influence of Africa and "the machine" in that long American fin de siècle. On the one hand, there was an old romantic fear of a dehumanizing, depersonalizing technology and its concurrent loss of "nature." Although this was an evenly distributed fear as significant to northern transcendentalism as it would be for, say, a southern plantation owner, it was felt most potently in the South because of its connection to a specific and increasingly threatened socioeconomic way of life. But on the other hand, there was a much more specific and explicitly American fear: that of an increasingly humanized—which is to say liberated—African American social, cultural, and political presence. It was an overwhelming fear of a black subjectivity that had previously been demarcated by law and by science as inhuman or subhuman, reasonless and most certainly soulless. In the South, this too was uniquely felt and uniquely feared.

It is worth noting that it was in the nineteenth century that our contemporary meanings of "technology" would begin to congeal, just as would the current meanings of "race" and "culture." In that century the very notion of "the machine" or even "industry" would evolve from merely material descriptions, tools, and objects into signs and metaphors of abstract social and historical processes. These metaphors would also begin to function as markers of specifically Western forms of power and descriptions of social and political systems and, as Locke would have it, of a deterministic social order. This would be the case just as the category of "race" would itself evolve beyond raw physical or

biological data in order to provide abstract historical and cultural formulations confirming non-Western and specifically African inferiority, largely in the name of or under the aegis of science and ultimately in the rhetoric of development. These terms—"race," technology, culture, and "the machine"—would be given transformative impetus by the fresh legacies of Darwinian evolution amidst the industrial revolutions in colonial England and in an American slave economy that was buttressed by it. This latter economic and cultural system is of great significance because it was the source of what would become blackface minstrelsy and the complex and variegated world of American racial stereotypes and the popular culture that would be based on them. Far in advance of modernism, the Jazz Age, and a formalized primitivism, the plantation sealed the relationship between blacks and machines and expressed it in performance via blackface minstrelsy.

As a *system,* the plantation was a significant precursor to the regimentations and formal, time-driven depersonalizations known as Fordism and Taylorism. It is this insight that has motivated Caribbean thinkers such as the venerable C. L. R. James to stress the plantation as a "dominant industrial structure" and to have argued consistently that it was in the context of the plantation that slaves became disciplined into distinctly modern subjects in advance of formal freedom.[15] As he writes in his famed appendix to *The Black Jacobins,* "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro": "Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern. It is an original pattern, not European, not African, not a part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of that word, but West Indian, *sui generis,* with no parallel anywhere else."[16] For James, because the plantation was "a modern system," slaves "from the very start lived a life that was in its essence a modern life."[17] So it is largely through a Caribbean lens—one attuned to the ambivalent complexities of creolization—that this exploration of race and technology will largely be framed. This same technologization of the pastoral through the plantation system in America and the Caribbean is what also motivates Sylvia Wynter's description of the plantation not as a perverse pastoral environment but as a "social machine" in which "the Negro then becomes the *symbolic object of this lack which is designated as the lack of the human.*"[18] She refuses the logic of naturalization that in and after slavery worked so hard to render the plantation the organic and natural home of the *darky* while simultaneously denying that patrimony by way of its innate "African-ness." For her the plantation is instead a *machine* that "colonized, above all, Desire."[19] A complex social machine, it allowed desire to "work 'freely,'" a process which suggests that instead of erasing black subjectivity (that which was already being erased by slavery), a new kind of black *non-African* subjectivity was being produced on the plantation on the eve of slavery's demise. This essentially *modern* subjectivity may have been produced in the name of an

industrial notion of "freedom," but it would limit the very meaning of the word in advance of its formal achievement.

Wynter's description of the Negro-in-the-machine importantly evokes Aimé Césaire's famed *Discourse on Colonialism*, in which he describes the machinery of colonialism's process of "thingification," whereby the "indigenous" becomes transformed into "an instrument of production."[20] But the Sambo stereotype/archetype simultaneously drew its charge and value from the suggestion that the Negro was actually the antithesis of production and the lacuna of an industrial temporality. In this guise, he was not only lazy but also immune to the work ethic, a position dialectically necessary in the construction of a certain kind of technological whiteness: "Central to the bourgeois ideology is the idea of the atomistic individual as a responsible agent. By constructing Sambo as the negation of responsibility, the slave master legitimated his own role as the responsible agent acting on behalf of the irresponsible minstrel."[21] It is important to point out that Wynter does acknowledge that Sambo is merely the double in a pair of stereotypes including "Nat," the rebellious figure drawn from Nat Turner. Nevertheless, despite the obsession with racial "resistance" that delimits much scholarly conversation and inquiry, Wynter finds in Sambo a far more liberating set of possibilities; in other words, she sees in the comic something far more complex than the melodrama of formal refusal. In the relationship between master and childlike mimic, the primary terms may have been racial, but indeed the overwhelming context was one of a struggle with a capricious "nature," the wilderness of both the unconscious and an American landscape that was seen as yearning for domestication. Yet for whites during the early years of industrialization in America, that comic figure offered the spectacle of escape from what was beginning to seem an all-encompassing deindividuating system, one that not only erased "nature" but also robbed whites of their own "organic" sense of agency and power in an increasingly regimented socioeconomic order. It is no exaggeration to suggest that it is the fear of this order that has fueled generations of science-fiction narratives in which whites fear their own mechanization and dehumanization in a context in which what Aristotle called "animated tools" gain consciousness and either seek revenge or claim their evolutionary due.

It is this rapidly changing agrarian landscape, a dramatically shifting industrial economy, and the threatened transformation of slaves into citizens—animals into humans—that will fuel the "theft" side of the dialectic in Eric Lott's foundational work on blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*. To play or enjoy blackface masquerade was also to resist the new industrial regime with its responsibilities and its clockwork temporality. In Wynter's words, blackface offered southern whites "the barest minimum of an affective and emotional life . . . to be sustained in the wilderness of technological rationalization."[22]

The Sambo mask was an escape from mechanization through the pleasures of an always flexible and always performative "African aesthetic" that was the chthonic doorway into a raw, primitive, and hypersexual nature as distinct from whiteness and "the West" as possible despite the fact that this mask was an indigenous product of modernity. This use of minstrelsy to construct a debased yet popular culture that enables and maintains a white sense of humanity in that wilderness of industrial modernity goes much further than spectacle and its economies of pleasure and play. It is through the minstrel stereotype and blackface mask that the white colonial/racist "self, to constitute itself as human in the normative conception, must then conceptualize the possibility of lack, the lack of the intellectual faculties, of being the non-human, of being Sambo."[23] Wynter's long-standing critique of the onto-historical category of the "human" preempts and predates Donna Haraway's "cyborg feminist" conceptual apparatus by some years; and it reminds us that during slavery, blacks were poised not merely between the categories of "human" and animal. The Negro was poised also between rational agent and soulless machine, between mindless brute and what George Lamming once described as "man-shaped ploughs."[24]

In light of Wynter's description of the experience of blackface performance as an experience of the "possibility of lack," it must be emphasized that the Negro was in fact neither human nor animal but something or somewhere either in between or incommensurably beyond. Or, as Wilson Harris would no doubt suggest, the carnivalesque blackface Negro occupied some other dimension entirely that refracts rather than reflects the foundational biases of slavery as it reimagined "unfathomable kinships" in the act of an organic masquerade.[25] Harris, after all, is a thinker much more attuned to the productive and cross-cultural value of the uncanny than any of those whose analyses are rooted in the binary logic of American racial differences. To return to Wynter, the "possibility of lack" was experienced through Sambo not as a complete being but not as an inanimate object either. Instead "he" was a figure of pure, unadulterated liminality, of the relentless possibility for "unfathomable kinships." Indeed, as she argues, Sambo is less a sign of racial binaries than "the scapegoat-carrier of all alternative potentialities that are repressed in the system. Sambo becomes the representation of all desire that flows outside the dominant order."[26] Because Sambo was necessarily kinetic with the mask relentlessly in motion, because the Negro was *not* inert and recognized as central to labor and the economy, this liminality could incorporate the *idea* of machinic production. Machines, after all, were in fact also others that bore some uncanny relationship to the very slaves they would eventually replace.

Before the twentieth century and in the period under consideration, the idea of machinic production had already been anthropomorphized, embodied. It had

been visualized and culturally registered by automata, those figures of artificial life that were also popular spectacles in sideshows and carnivals alongside the display of African or other natives and which featured all manner of blackface coonery. Though dating back centuries, these machines—many of which were clearly fraudulent, featuring bodies buried behind or below the machine mask, like "The Turk"—were resurgent in nineteenth-century America in no small part because of the efforts of "America's greatest showman," P. T. Barnum. As Benjamin Reiss puts it in his comprehensive study of Barnum and Joice Heth, the relationship between blacks and machines was so established in the ante-bellum period that there were a great many "automaton 'Negroes'" produced in America which were on display in the same spaces where oddities, curios, freaks, Negroes, and minstrels were often featured: "Black people and apes were fitting forms for automata since they both posed—in different degrees—questions for white audiences about bodies that resembled dominant conceptions of 'the human' but that may or may not have lacked fully human powers of intentionality or rational agency. Black automata, additionally, repeated at the level of amusement slavery's system of bodily domination."[27] In the spirit of providing a non-binary, creolized view of this history, it is worth mentioning here also the work of the African American entrepreneur John W. Cooper, who slightly reversed or supplemented this conventional power dynamic with his own fabrication and display of black machines sometime around 1909. His black minstrel automata shows lasted at least ten years and were good enough to earn him the title "The Black Napoleon of Ventriloquism."[28]

In a rare and important attempt to take seriously just how the "discourse of technology was and still is imbricated within discourses of race, civil rights, and slavery," the literary critic Michael Chaney points out how "proslavery ideology conceptualizes so-called inferior races as functional commodities dehumanized to the status of mere tools."[29] As Reiss would put it, "In their natural state [blacks] were like beasts; but in a perfect state of slavery, they could become, if guided by a master's rational will, something like machines or prosthetic devices."[30] But although he is three or four generations late in locating this intersection of race and technology "alongside the Civil Rights and feminist movements" and the concurrent discourses of cybernation when it is in fact a Victorian conceit, Chaney is right to argue that "slavocratic society may also reflect a commonplace recourse in prescience literature, which assuaged patriarchal anxieties regarding a technological revolution that was then unfolding," one that presaged "the new age in technology in terms of a return to the age of slavery."[31] This passage should be clarified since the "return" in question here is more accurately a fear among whites of their own transformation into slaves by machines, *not* a return to the age defined by America's peculiar institution in

which blacks were slaves. What Chaney describes is instead a fear of *reversal,* of a sudden loss of power rather than a return to an antebellum status quo. This fear of reversal will attend each technological change and ultimately racialize it since it is almost always (and has always been) articulated in the language of racial slavery—from automata to cybernetics.[32] So because Donna Haraway's still influential "ironic political myth" of the cyborg emerges from and depends on the primary transgression between the categories of human and animal, Chaney is on point to make the claim that *that* myth is perhaps doubly political or triply ironic in that it is ultimately rooted in "the category disputations over the black body in America, between what constituted human and animal"; and so Haraway has provided, in essence "a theoretical abstraction of African-American slave subjectivity" through the lens of gender and technology.[33] But in truth, P. T. Barnum got there first.

It is precisely this promiscuous liminality, with its relentless slippages between the categories of Negro and animal and machine, inhuman, nonhuman, and subhuman, that makes the Freudian uncanny necessary in making sense of those forces that maintain and depend on the historical relationship between Africa and "the machine." As discussed earlier, Wynter's critique of the "human" frames these "unfathomable relationships" within a Caribbean discourse of creolization in which Sambo is its most colorful product or manifestation; and it is from that discourse that Sambo and "the comic" can be deployed without the excessive trauma that the icon/image is made to evoke in a North American context in which minstrelsy's possibilities still remain stigmatized. Her use of Sambo thus broadens Chaney's valuable insights beyond the borders of the American plantation, especially since these category disputations around the Negro's "nature" were enacted throughout the African Diaspora and were routed through a generalized understanding of Africa as the source of that "nature." Wynter's thinking also precedes and completes Haraway's by questioning the "human" in order to detail its limits and to explore the very possibility of entry into it by those subjects previously named antithetical to the category; and as demonstrated in her discussion of Sambo, Wynter's thinking too is dependent on the uncanny. The uncanny, after all, entails that which is dreadful, fearful, and terrifying, but also that which is simultaneously familiar, long known, and intimate. It produces intellectual uncertainty and epistemic ambivalence precisely because it pollutes self with other, binding the former to the latter despite repressing the latter as an irreconcilable otherness.

The uncanny, however, is also a source of humor. As Eric Lott puts it: "Clowning is an uncanny kind of activity, scariest when it is most cheerful, unsettling to an audience even as it unmasks the pretentious ringmaster.

Blackface performers, often inspiring a certain terror as well as great affection, relied precisely on this doubleness."[34] In Freud the uncanny signifies the presence of a double, albeit one "concealed and kept out of sight."[35] It includes "the impression made by wax-work figures, artificial dolls, and automatons," and that "intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one."[36] For Henri Bergson, working in the considerable wake of Freud's essay, these figures of artificial, synthetic life would be examples of a comic sensibility precisely because of their being uncanny semblances of humanity via automation: "This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it. It belongs to the comic."[37] Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* demonstrates just how imbricated the discourse of uncanny doubles and machines was with the anxieties of race. It updates and completes the Freudian uncanny by way of its own uneasy relationship to minstrels and machines: "We begin, then, to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives rise to laughter."[38] This is what Wynter argues is the psycho-affective disequilibrium healed by Sambo, by his kinetic mask and racial masquerade. It is also classic performance theory, classic parody, and of course classic minstrelsy and carnival. As we will see shortly, Bergson's analysis is also a product of a long and familiar history of romantic racism in which the other is prized for its ability to heal the imbalances of the white or Western self—particularly in the context of alienating new technologies and their attendant ideologies of subject formation, social organization, and of course commodification. These insights will ultimately express how from analog to digital, the black other is almost always implicated in or conscripted by a white need to make sense of new relationships to new technologies as they "creep into his person." And these technologies accomplish this fearsome invasion of the self initially by way of imitation—by "nature" mimicking and therefore drawing attention to the "element of automatism" that is already there but masked as "nature."

Given what will prove to be his racialization of the comic through mimicry and the uncanny, Bergson in effect describes the therapeutic value of blackface minstrelsy: as a cure for the modern white disease of "automatism." This is evident when he asks, in a much more problematic way than with Freud's talk of androids:

> And why does one laugh at a negro? The question would appear to be an embarrassing one, for it has been asked by successive psychologists . . . and all have given

> different replies. And yet I rather fancy the correct answer was suggested to me one day in the street by an ordinary cabby, who applied the expression "unwashed" to the negro fare he was driving. Unwashed! Does not this mean that a black face, in our imagination, is one daubed over with ink or soot? . . . [A]nd so we see that the notion of disguise has passed on something of its comic quality to instances in which there is actually no disguise, though there might be.[39]

The most obvious aspect of this passage is of course its not so subtle dependence on blackface minstrelsy in a description of a "real" Negro, a black person so overdetermined in "*our* imagination" that she or he irrevocably partakes of that comic tradition even without the mask. Bergson goes so far as to leave us with the dangling possibility that even when there is no "ink or soot" (or burnt cork), the mask's traces exist in perpetuity, epistemologically "unwashed." The memory of the mask contaminates the experience of flesh, and the presence of organic flesh merely articulates a previous strategy of masquerade. Less obvious is the fact that by this 1911 essay, the very notion of "automatism" had already become so racialized that the Negro was merely one in the list of doubles for white subjectivity and the "human" as enumerated by both Freud and Bergson. Here, far in advance of the cyborgs of Haraway and Chaney, the linkage of Negro, dolls, and automata, blackface and machine, already operated with an unquestioned logic, each as a mask of the other.

To clarify the previous point, Bergson's various references to "our living personality" or "our imagination" clearly do not include the Negro as a subject. In the essay, the Negro is much more closely related to androids than to even "an ordinary cabby." The Negro is a mere doppelganger for "our living personality," being a sign not of life nor of the category of "human" but a double for it—innately comic and irrevocably in disguise. After all, it is not the Negro who is prone to or victim of "automatism," nor does the Negro benefit from the experience of uncanny doubling; he merely comments on it all, brings "our" attention to it, and thereby allows "us" to laugh at and transcend it. In this reading the Negro does not share in the full experience of "the uncanny" or "the comic" quite simply because he—or "it"—is so deeply linked to its primary cause or source. But it is Bergson's conclusion that seals the link between blackface and automata, contextualizing that most fully realized historical expression of a racialized uncanny, which was the epochal meeting of America's greatest showman and a female African slave in 1835. Bergson writes: "Let us then return, for the last time, to our central image: something mechanical encrusted on something living. Here, the living being under discussion was a human being, a person. A mechanical arrangement, on the other hand, is a thing. What, therefore, incited laughter was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing. . . . WE LAUGH EVERY TIME A PERSON GIVES US THE IMPRESSION OF BEING A THING."[40]

Of course, the opposite corollary is also true and even more significant in the context of American slavery *and* in terms of blackface minstrelsy: "we" fear and dread the moment whenever a *thing* gives us the impression of being a person. In a "slavocratic" racial economy, this slippage occurs just when a designated thing dares assert itself as a person via mimicry of "human" codes, thereby suggesting the capacity for reason, for literacy, and thereby making a claim on kinship. This moment of slippage, of what Judith Butler has dubbed a "category crisis," though evident and traceable in performance, must be located in much stronger materialist circumstances as Chaney suggests. The uncanny as it characterizes the relationship between white and black, human and inhuman other, must be rooted in something more historically concrete than the mere dis-ease in sensibility described by both Freud and Bergson. Bill Brown is therefore to be commended for identifying it as a product of the "contradictory legal status of the American slave—both human and thing."[41] Given the history of American law and its ambivalence as to the category status and substantive quality of the black slave, Brown is absolutely correct to attribute a specifically "American uncanny" to U.S. law through which "the slave becomes the source of uncanny anxiety."[42]

This "uncanny anxiety," however—and the "intellectual uncertainty" whether the Negro was human or not despite being too much like both an ape and a "human" (read "white" person)—must be read beyond the bounds of the United States. This is not simply because Joice Heth was consistently advertised as an African but because she was brought over from the continent as a child. Wynter's deployment of Sambo should then also be read against the exceptionalism that claims minstrelsy as exclusive to a North American historical or cultural climate since the form depended on and in turn influenced so many discourses in and beyond the plantation of an American context. The racial or "American" uncanny must be read thus for two primary reasons: first, because the ramifications of U.S. law were globally inscribed, and the influence of its attendant racial and social assumptions were of no small influence in other parts of the world, most certainly in the Caribbean. Second, in the United States and in the Caribbean, the American Negro functioned as the necessary mediating link between America, the African Diaspora, and the "dark continent" itself. Sambo contained in his mask simultaneous and mediating relationships between the West and the non-West, America and the Caribbean, America and Africa. "He" was also a cultural presence in those sites because of the eventual migration of minstrel theater and music but also because he was a circulating product of local performances of race and colonialism in various plantation or imperial economies in which minstrelsy would be indigenized, from the Caribbean back to the African continent.

But it is the complex ambivalence in both U.S. law and colonial racism itself—this kinship-alienation dialectic, this animal-human-machine problematic—that is of greater consequence in the partial definition of a racial uncanny (since the uncanny can be only partially defined, being a fragmentary sense of completion in relation to a plenitude that is relentlessly suggested but always refused on the basis of race). It is this philosophically partial yet legally institutionalized definition that enables Wynter to posit a diasporic, creolized "Sambo" as the ultimate product and sign of "category crisis"; again, "it is in the sense that we should view the Sambo stereotype as the scapegoat-carrier of all alternative potentialities that are repressed in the system. Sambo becomes the representation of all desire that flows outside the dominant. Which is to say that through the Sambo figure and its logic and legacy of primitivism, through its doubling for and mimicking of the white rational subject, all forms of otherness—like machines—also have an echo and, eventually, a (black) voice and face. Recall that what links the uncanny other to the fragile self is not just the vague anthropomorphism of the former but its penchant for mimicry, for daring to seem like you, in fact to perform you as well as you perform it. Recall also that from automata to a "mimetically capacious machine" like the phonograph, machines were widely feared for possibly possessing reason or thought and as terrible replacements or substitutes for humans.[43] It is through those machines—particularly the phonograph—that the sound of black voices, for example, will make such a cultural impact that they will begin a history in which race or its aural signifiers come to function as a mask for the socioeconomic regime that the machine itself actually stands for, much in the way that Sambo will speak racism and white anxieties through a black mouth. It is worth adding here that many would first encounter the phonograph in those very sideshows and spaces of curiosity and freakery where both automata and Negroes were displayed or performed. The uncanny is therefore the space of epistemological uncertainty and cultural anxiety where the minstrel meets the machine. As a generalized sensibility, it contains them both and makes necessary the two best-known responses to severe anxiety and cultural uncertainty: laughter and terror. It is to his credit that so early in the history of American mass media and popular culture, P. T. Barnum would so astutely realize the power and possibility that lay in simultaneously commodifying them both (Figure 4.5).

Sambo, then, is a product of a changing American pastoral landscape which entailed a severe transformation in both technological development and race relations and which helped lay the foundation for an American popular culture. "He" must be read against an emergent global empire that depended as much on technological advancement *and* popular culture as it did on biological racial categories: "For a deep chord has been struck here by early twentieth-

Figure 4.5. Minstrel automaton, nineteenth century, in the Czech Museum of Music, National Museum, Prague. For an alternative image of the minstrel automaton, see Figures 7.1 and 7.2.

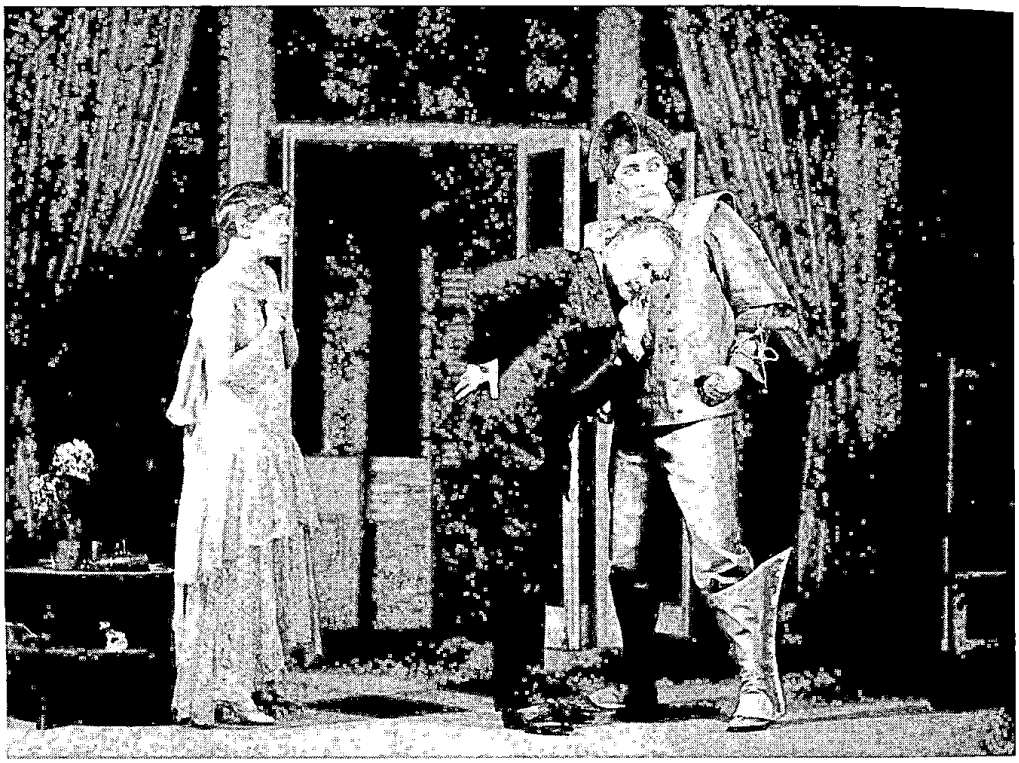


Figure 4.6. A scene from *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, by Josef and Karel Čapek, performed in New York City (1922), showing a new image of the "automaton," now renamed "robot." From the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts, New York Public Library.

century advertising and popular culture, substantiating the primitivism that Darwin connected to miming prowess."[44] As the missing link between animal and human, Sambo was the link to that other threat to white male centrality which was also the figure of a complex desire for cultural power and which also operated via mimicry: the machine. Though it would wait until 1922 to be provided with a permanent name, this economic and cultural "other" would be explicitly racialized in 1872 by Samuel Butler in his legendary *Erewhon*, which notably feared the inevitable coming to dominance of machines as they evolved into a distinct race of sentient beings. This anthropomorphization of this *other* uncanny other would once have been named an automaton by Freud and Bergson and most certainly by Samuel Butler and P. T. Barnum. But from the 1922 New York premiere of the Czech writer Karel Čapek's *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, it would quite rapidly begin to be called a *robot* in a play that told the story of a slave race of inhuman machines who not only evolve "souls" but then also emerge victorious over the (white) humans who had enslaved them (Figure 4.6). Perhaps the uncanny relationship between these narratives and

American racial and cultural anxieties is why, by the 1923 English publication of *R.U.R.*, the word "robot" so rapidly supplanted the much more common term "automaton," or even the ancient term "android" when used to describe this hypermodern figure of Wynter's "alternative potentialities" or Harris's "unfathomable kinships." Even more uncanny is the fact that the year when *R.U.R.* premiered in the United States, the African American modernist Jean Toomer would give the strange title "Rhobert" to a short story appearing in his famed collection *Cane*. In his criticism of a soulless northern black bourgeoisie adrift from its organic cultural roots, Toomer would echo Čapek by describing the titular character in the following way: "Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head. . . . Rods of the house like antennae of a dead thing, stuffed, prop up in the air."[45]

But for a white status quo, the figure of the robot doubled and threatened a white rational subjectivity precisely while former slaves were increasingly asserting the rights of "the human" against the legacy of "slavocracy" and during the rise of industrialism. Nevertheless, the very question of the Negro's modernity—well, the Negro's modern*ism*—had already been rendered an open question in American minstrelsy back on the plantation. Temporal questions of the "African-ness" of the Negro vis-à-vis its American modernity were fully embedded in its fundamental narrative tensions, which depended on a rural-urban split; and in a context so defined by technology, one in which technological sophistication became increasingly the barometer for racial differences and cultural rankings, this question of temporality was dependent on a relationship to "the machine," or again, a civilization that increasingly defined itself in such terms and through such concepts. For example, most minstrel shows featured two distinct types of Negro, suggesting how blackface performance was divided as to whether or not "the Negro" was the rural or African past or the urban modern. In this temporal and historical dialectic, Sambo was simply the rustic plantation dweller inseparable from the symbolic economy of slavery; his bookend, Zip Coon, was linked directly to (and often known as) Jim Crow. Whereas the former represented nostalgia for the plantation and a ludic rejection of or a biological failure at the work ethic, the latter was its double, the slick urban dandy introduced into minstrelsy by George Washington Dixon in the 1820s. Zip Coon was notoriously "uppity," mocked for his aspirations, and did not know his place despite the fact that he was probably the earliest representation of a black hyper-consumer in American history (not to mention being the forerunner of all forms of contemporary post–hip hop pimpish masquerade). Zip Coon in fact *dared* or threatened to be placeless, divorcing himself from the economy of the plantation machine while claiming both the North and the freedom of migration. In shifting places as the itinerant and often flashy

bluesmen and women soon would, he suggested that space should be or could be shared with urban, modern whites while reminding them that the plantation, "Africa," and even Sambo were irrevocably in the past. Zip Coon was thus a self-conscious and self-fashioned product of the coming machine age and of a changed, migratory sense of a black "nature." Of course, in performance, the gravity of his threat made him much more vulnerable to jokes about lynching and much more threatening to those blacks uneasy with the threats to the status quo represented by his masquerade. Zip Coon achieved all of this while the much more organic Sambo basked in the safety of a pre-technological and nondemocratic stupor, a stupor that was understood as being due to his fundamentally "*African* nature."

For Eric Lott the two types of Negroes in classic minstrel theater represented a geographical "sectional break" attendant on all the political, social, and ideological distinctions that would build up to the Civil War; but insofar as the South was linked to the past and the North the utopian site of post-emancipatory dreaming, the split was an equally temporal affair.[46] As is evident in the terms used to describe and refer to antebellum blacks and then to minstrelsy, the question of the Negro's temporality, of which century he belonged in, was framed also in global terms, rendering Lott's "sectional break" transnational. These terms of geographical, cultural, and historical otherness maintained the absent presence of racial origins that was the African continent. Given the assumptions of the time, in which race, culture, and origins were seen as innately bound, this African "nature" was rendered as a loose, self-governing network of discourses (an "aesthetic") alongside the belief that minstrelsy was indeed an autochthonous cultural form. Blacks, for example, would be simultaneously contained by the relentless descriptions of minstrelsy as "African," "Ethiopian," "Egyptian," "Dahomean," or similar designations, as seen in the very way Joice Heth would be advertised, even in advance of the blackface era. These were not random or throwaway terms, despite the fact that so many scholars of minstrelsy seem to treat them as such out of a desire to will blackface into being an exclusively and exceptionally American form and a particularly American experience of trauma. Even when deployed in descriptions of whites in blackface, the terms detailed a relationship to or a governing body of ideas *about* the African continent, emphasizing its pre-technological history-lessness and its people who—unlike, say, those in India and China—had not proven themselves worthy by the civilizational indices of literacy and technological sophistication.

Particularly relevant in the lexicon of a then nascent advertising and racialized media spectacle, minstrels and minstrelsy were continuously advertised by terms of inflated patrimony such as "Congo," "Senegambian," or even "Abys-

sinian." As Lott points out, this "national cultural form" was presented as and considered "the Æthiopian drama" while simultaneously acknowledged as "the lowest description of American farce . . . not without originality, considerable invention, and a rich vein of burlesque humor."[47] Certainly the terms were deployed mock-heroically. But that such a potent and patently American folk form should consistently draw attention to itself by way of signifiers of the African continent is curiously deflective and most certainly a technique of managing a racial uncanny rooted in a space external to the United States. It was most obviously meant to remind audiences and performers that the Negro was not truly a native, not indigenous despite being bound to the spatial and social economies of the plantation. The terms made it clear also that the Negro *and* the continental African were unfit for modernity and for the responsibilities of full citizenship because of that biocultural link to a place of unquestioned savagery and darkness. And they were deployed aggressively, relentlessly *Africanizing* the African American's primitive and premodern "nature" precisely when debates about its humanity and modernity were gaining ground in political discourse. Arguably this racist use of Africa was at the root of the still much-ignored *anti-Africanism* and black vanguardism in a good deal of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African American culture and politics. This black hostility and disdain toward the African continent would only be transformed—though never fully reversed—by the various movements of black modernism, from Ethiopianism to Pan-Africanism to New Negro-ism.

Now, despite the omnipresence of "Africa" in the discourses of minstrel masquerade, it is the case that Wynter strays a bit too far out of the realm of historical accuracy in her imaginative theorizing when she argues that "the American Minstrel show is a direct development out of the popular folk cultures of Africa, with possibly, as the Jonkunnu plays show, contributions from the parallel folk cultures of precapitalist Europe."[48] That it is "direct" is of course debatable, or respectfully *dismissible*. But in light of her reference to "Jonkunnu," a Caribbean folk festival of subversive masking and ludic play also rooted in slave culture, it is clear that in her view, blackface functions much more broadly within ritual forms of the carnivalesque in and beyond the African Diaspora than simply within the binary racial dramas of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. Her strategy is ultimately to dislodge blackface from functioning as the almost exclusive sign of American racial trauma that so many desire for it to be and to see in it a longer continuum of "African" expressive play, one anterior to an ever-privileged American "blackness"—though it is also true, as some historians and scholars such as Alexander Saxton point out, that "early minstrels . . . had understood slave music not as African but as close to nature. Correspondingly, they perceived slaves as part of nature—part of the nature of the

South."[49] But the attempt in minstrelsy to render the plantation as the "home" of the darky and the organic site of his "nature" was in no way an attempt to *de-Africanize* black slaves, since that would be ultimately either to claim them as belonging to the same historical continuum as their white masters or to suggest that they had a prior, more authentic claim on the United States. Since "Africa" and the "nature" of African Americans were ultimately homologous in a time when race and culture were synonymous, these mock-heroic descriptions drew from a debased Africa to mock-authorize an emergent American form. This was a form that wore the mask of its Negro presence while speaking white anxieties about a changing landscape in a vernacular appropriated from slaves and former slaves. Such an intricate dance of belonging and disavowal, America and Africa was surely what allowed the form to be claimed by whites without attributing credit to blacks as its creators or its inspiration.

Despite the reluctance of so many to accept or admit the crossover from comic travesty to self-righteous militancy, the influence of minstrelsy was not present simply in a racist modernist American popular culture. It was equally notable in the cultural and political spectacles of black modernism. They inspire everything from Garveyism and its often willy-nilly appropriation of terms, icons, and signifiers from a wildly generalized African continent to the equally willy-nilly appropriation and deployment of those very terms in the poetry, music, and art of the New Negro movement.[50] These black moderns were arguably as ambivalent about Africa as they were about Sambo; or in some cases they would use the former to erase the latter. Being more Zip Coon than Sambo, the "African aesthetic" of black moderns was a myth that helped them claim a unique place within a modern urban civilization and allowed them to compete with white moderns in that aesthetic scramble for Africa at the root of primitivist modernism. For writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and even Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, Africa was a point of orientation in the face of what the arch-primitivist Claude McKay would describe as "the ever tightening mechanical organization of modern life" in which blacks were now "milling through the civilized machine."[51] This was, after all, a civilization that still bore strong doubts about their humanity and still depended on Sambo despite the fact that many whites were turning to a symbolic Africa out of a fear of losing theirs. Ironically, what whites feared in this transition was the loss of a humanity that they had long denied to actual slaves and blacks themselves.

This now almost clichéd modernist malaise and its fetish for Africa mirrored the earlier movement from a slave economy into an industrial one—a movement that was dramatized by blackface minstrelsy. As Wynter points out, Sambo was the denial of that humanity rendered as masked spectacle; but as she also argues, he was the sign of affective life, too, for those threatened by the spiritual

and emotional death of industrialism and modernization which would so feed modernist literary and cultural expression. For that generation after slavery, in the midst of what Claude McKay described as "a world-conquering and leveling machine civilization," Sambo would participate in the various movements, tendencies, and cultural explosions called cultural modernism as the link between "the African aesthetic" and "the machine," between a slave past, an industrial present, and a technological future.[52] Owing to the persistence of a racialized and technologized uncanny, blackface would become as much a sign of the modern as of the antebellum, as much a symbol of the pre-technological as a harbinger of the machine age. It is in the latter context that the influence of minstrelsy on modernism can be seen, not simply in the effect that blackface would have on black moderns, but most notably in the very translation of nineteenth-century American plantation racial economies into cultural forms that would disperse throughout the cabarets, sound recordings, literary texts, and images that fed cultural modernism. We should add to this cross-cultural mix the growing fetish for African masks that conditioned much of the modernist impulse alongside the brewing explosion of jazz, which was as much a product and signifier of technological artifice and machinic incorporation as it was an organic black musical form. As the noted 1920s-era anti-jazz crusader Daniel Gregory Mason put it in distinctly Adorno-esque terms, jazz was "so perfectly adapted to robots that the one could be deduced from the other. Jazz is thus the exact musical reflection of modern capitalistic industrialism."[53] The Sambo and the Zip Coon masks are ineluctably linked to West African masks, each a visual cue for—or perhaps an echo of—the other.

So even though parodic, imprecise, and dense with racist, romantic, and/or fuzzy nationalist intent, the presence and legacy of blackface minstrelsy did help popularize and domesticate a flexibly defined "African aesthetic" in the wider climate of early-twentieth-century American modernism in the wake of the fateful meeting of "America's greatest showman" and the African female slave. As is well known, the success of displaying Joice Heth both as decaying African animal and then as the epitome of mechanical engineering set Barnum on a career that profited greatly by the display of automata, black freaks, *and* minstrels. In this commercial and spectacular relationship, the blending of the "African aesthetic" and the "machine aesthetic" was already on the way to being naturalized in the American imagination with the discursive logic of one being buttressed by the historical and cultural associations of the other. This uncanny relationship and history are constitutive of cultural modernism and at the core of the discursive and economic effects that are American mass media and popular culture. This is, after all, a popular culture that functions largely by way of naturalizing artifice in the language of the inevitable, the language

of "nature," and all too often the language of "race." Because of this history, the suggestion of the one *as* the other was not just credible but necessary to a form of commodification rooted in slavery and in racial travesty, one in which race would be necessary in domesticating a new system of technology and its attendant sociocultural and economic relationships. This miscegenatory birthing of American popular culture found its annunciation in the strange case of a wizened black slave woman and her passing for or being passed as a machine. Because she was a slave, however—a mere thirty years before a full legal emancipation into the "human"—she was actually being passed as a machinic simulacrum of something other than a human being, something that was already passing for something else and could therefore be used to pass for anything as long as it existed on the far edges of the "human." To put it in deliberately mythic terms, "Aunt" Joice Heth was the black Madonna of the coming machine age. In her infinite masks, an old social and economic system passed as a new one and a new technological system of culture and power masqueraded as an organic one. In this sequence of transubstantiations, dumbstruck audiences partook of the glory of a new commodity masquerading as an old one and witnessed an old performance of "nature" naturalizing and therefore legitimizing one that had already changed.

NOTES

1. Judith Wilt, "The Imperial Mouth: Imperialism, the Gothic and Science Fiction," *Journal of Popular Culture* 14, no. 4 (Spring 1981): 618.

2. Ibid. I'm particularly taken by Wilt's preliminary attempt at adumbrating "a theory of imperialism as a major contributing pressure for the mutation of gothic into science fiction"; this attempt modifies and specifies the work of Patrick Brantlinger in his well-regarded *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), a text that operates with a periodization not accidentally quite similar to my own. Another quite useful text is John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

3. I emphasize the ambiguity in whether Barnum acquired/bought "the rights" for display or bought her outright; there is some confusion there as a result of his continual reinvention of his own history and autobiography to distance himself from slavery and his participation in it, particularly as he moved his racialized spectacles from slave states to free ones.

4. James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

5. Ibid., 5–6; Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1, 106.

6. P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs; Or Forty Years' Recollections of P. T. Barnum. Written by Himself* (Buffalo: Warren, Johnson & Co., 1873), 73.

7. Gaby Wood, *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 60.

8. Ibid., 217.

9. P. T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (New York: Redfield, 1854), 157.

10. Ibid.

11. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

12. Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). For more on this familiar and much-remarked-on tendency, see Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Petrine Archer Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

13. Wilson Harris, "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" in *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1999), 244.

14. For an effective yet incomplete exploration of this argument, see Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). See also Felicia McCarren, *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of Mechanical Reproduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). I have described Dinerstein's argument as incomplete simply because of its somewhat triumphalist assertions concerning the process by which race "tames" technology and domesticates it; though I do agree it is also true that it is by this very process that race becomes a sign of technology and of American imperial processes precisely because of its all too easy association with discourses of "resistance," which have become merely a new language of American exceptionalism.

15. *The C. L. R. James Reader,* ed. Anna Grimshaw (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 306.

16. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 391–92.

17. Ibid., 392.

18. Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," *Social Text,* no. 1 (Winter 1979): 152.

19. Ibid.

20. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 21.

21. Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," 151.

22. Ibid., 149.

23. Ibid., 152.

24. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 121.

25. Harris, "Creoleness," 44.

26. Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," 154–55.

27. Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave,* 121.

28. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 336–37.

29. Michael Chaney, "Slave Cyborgs and the Black Infovirus: Ishmael Reed's Cybernetic Aesthetics," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 265–66.

30. Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave,* 121.

31. Chaney, "Slave Cyborgs," 265.

32. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149. The tension around this transgression is certainly present in

the work of Norbert Weiner, founder of the science of cybernetics, whose classic text *T Human Use of Human Beings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1950) was once described the so-called Afro-futurist Kodwo Eshun as W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* "updat for the Analog age." Though I find this a characteristically imprecise formulation, I thi Eshun means that Du Bois's text and its metaphors of doubling are as dependent on anal technologies of duplication as they are on new modes of apprehending the mind. Weine now classic text is itself suffused with an anxiety about race, particularly in the inesca able conversation about slavery that emerges as he attempts to distinguish cybernetics an machine labor from "real" slavery. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun* (Londo Quartet Books, 1998).

33. Chaney, "Slave Cyborgs," 267–68.

34. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Ne York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25.

35. Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers,* trans. Joan Riviere and James Strachey, vol. 4 (Lon don: Basic Books, 1959), 375.

36. Ibid., 378, 385.

37. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,* Project Gutenber E-Book no. 4352 (2009).

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Bill Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006): 179.

42. Ibid., 199.

43. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

44. Ibid., 211.

45. Jean Toomer, "Rhobert," in *Cane* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 40.

46. Lott, *Love and Theft,* 207.

47. Ibid., 89.

48. Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," 155.

49. Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy,* ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 75.

50. See Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

51. Claude McKay, *Banjo* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), 324.

52. Ibid., 66.

53. Lawrence W. Levine, "Jazz and American Culture," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture,* ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 437.

5

Surprised by Blackface

D. W. Griffith and *One Exciting Night*

LINDA WILLIAMS

According to current critical wisdom, D. W. Griffith's 1922 film *One Exciting Night* fails to deliver the excitement of its title. Indeed, many critics consider it the legendary filmmaker's very worst film, playing to all his weaknesses, both racial and aesthetic.[1] Not equipped for the tight plotting of mystery or for the light comedy required by the kind of clever modern stage play he was attempting to imitate, Griffith is deemed to have fallen flat. In a note on the film for the 2007 *Giornate del Cinema Muto* program, Steven Higgins concludes that the proof that Griffith lacked the ability to direct with a "light touch" resides in the fact that he "fell back upon the broadest and most offensive kind of racial stereotyping, portraying the character of Romeo Washington as a lazy good-for-nothing whose quaking in terror at the slightest provocation was clearly meant to incite riotous laughter in the audience. The fact that the part of Romeo was acted by Porter Strong, a white man in blackface, makes the effect all the more painful for modern audiences."[2] Higgins is surprised and offended by blackface, and especially by the evidence that audiences of the time found two of the primary performers, Porter Strong and Irma Harrison, to be not only "skilled burnt cork performers" but also "highly entertaining."[3]

Reacting much like the entire field of film studies in his surprise and offense at the survival of blackface performance traditions in this twentieth-century medium, Higgins naturally wants to distance himself, and this field, from the unenlightened souls who may have found blackface entertaining. Of course this is what we all might want to do. Audiences who laughed at the demeaning minstrel stereotypes of blackface or who thrilled at the spectacle of the Ku Klux Klan riding to the rescue of white women threatened by black brutes seem