Popular Art and Racism: Embedding Racial Stereotypes in the American Mindset--
Jim Crow and Popular Culture

Ronald L. F. Davis, Ph. D.

The onset of Jim Crow laws and customs rested upon the racist characterization of black people as culturally, personally, and biologically inferior. This image functioned as the racial bedrock of American popular culture after 1900, especially manifested in minstrel shows, the vaudeville theatre, songs and music, film and radio, and commercial advertising. So pervasive was the racial demeaning of black people, and so accepted was it by white Americans throughout the nation, that blackness became synonymous with silliness, deprivation, and ignorance. Most white Americans believed that all Africans and their descendants were racially inferior to whites, and that their common inferiority tied them together wherever they might live in the modern world.

In America, black people were portrayed as inferior almost from the time of their enslavement in the colonies in the 1620s. This racial characterization enabled white masters to justify slavery as something positive. Using racial stereotypes to justify the enslavement of blacks was especially pronounced after 1830 as white Southerners defended slavery against attacks by northern abolitionists.

This historic view of blacks became deeply embedded in American popular culture with the emergence of the minstrel show in the 1840s. By 1900, the image of silly and exaggerated black men and women in comic routines was the mainstay of musical acts, songs, and skits that dominated the theatrical scene in America well into the twentieth century. (For further discussion of the relationship of Jim Crow and minstrel shows, see **Creating Jim Crow, In-Depth Essay**.

The image of black people in the white mind focused on outrageous depictions of individual blacks and their assumed cultural practices. Countless representations of impoverished blacks with ink-black skin, large thick red lips, and bulging eyeballs appeared almost everywhere in the public arena. Dozens of graphic artists and illustrators prospered as racial commercial artists by drawing such images to sell products and to illustrate show bills and magazines. Most prominent was Edward W. Kemble, whose racist illustrations were notorious in America and Europe, including his 1896 "classic," *Kemble's Coons*.

Perhaps, the most popular of all the Jim Crow industries by 1900 was the sheet music field, which made the derogatory word "coon" a part of everyday language. The black American Vaudeville performer and composer, Ernest Hogan, did more than anyone else, ironically, to popularize the so-called "coon" craze and racist characterization of blacks. His wildly popular 1896 song, "All Coons Look Alike to Me," appeared, usually illustrated with the images of ridiculously dressed black men and women, on billboards and sheet music all over the nation.

At the same time, as Jim Crow music, dance, theatre, and illustrations distorted the image of black Americans, a wave of racially driven commercial advertising flooded the landscape. Most popular were the racist trading or advertisement cards that used the outrageous images of black people to sell everything from yeast to furniture, pillows, fertilizers, hardware, cigars, breakfast food, and tobacco. Of these cards, racist advertisements that depicted a Mammy-like black woman (Aunt Jemima) selling pancakes were, perhaps, most popular. The silly "Gold Dust Twins," who performed as half-dressed, house-cleaning pickaninnies dispensing commercial washing powder, were also especially popular. Everywhere one turned were brightly colored and skillfully drawn images of big-eyed and thick-lipped blacks eating corn, sporting fanciful attire and riding a wild pig or some other farm animal, aping white elites to comic effect, trying to ice skate, clumsily walking along a high fashion boulevard, haplessly trying to ride horses in the manner of an English gentleman, and strutting proudly in exaggerated dress at parties and "darkey" balls.

And soon, the images became products themselves--racist dolls and Mammy-style metal banks flooded the consumer market as children's toys. By 1900, so accepted was the popular concept of black inferiority that racist brand names, such as "Niggerhead," began to appear--usually selling some aspect of blackness, such as ink or dye.

This outpouring of images, performances, and music was supported by a largely racist or else highly romanticized literary tradition. The novels and writings of Joel Chandler Harris, especially his *Uncle Remus* tales, written from 1888 through 1906, looked back at the days of plantation slavery as a time of racial harmony in which happy and simple-minded blacks lived with respect and dignity as slaves.

Thomas Nelson Page, whose early novels and short stories, usually narrated by elderly freedmen, portrayed, like Harris, a tranquil life in slavery where faithful blacks adored their masters and were cared for with affection and tenderness. By 1898, Page had turned bitter, however, and began depicting blacks as sinister characters that could not be trusted in freedom. No author was more racist or more popular than Thomas Dixon, whose novel, *The Clansman*, published in 1905, blamed all of the South's woes on the inferior blacks who roamed the land unchecked following their emancipation.

When film and radio burst onto the American scene in the new century, the racial stereotypes were easily adapted and strengthened in these revolutionary forms of popular culture. Radio captured the imaginations of millions of passive listeners who tuned in for broadcasts of the Amos and Andy shows--the most popular radio show in America in the 1930s. Rooted in the old minstrel shows and blackfaced vaudeville acts, the program portrayed two southern black men who had moved to Chicago. Its characters of the Kingfish, a dishonest and lazy confidence man who massacred the English language by mispronouncing words, and Sapphire, his loud, abrasive, bossy, and emasculating wife, became permanent fixtures in the minds of white Americans. The program dominated radio in the 1930s and 1940s, and played as a popular television show in the 1950s.

Like radio, Hollywood films also presented blacks within the context of images from the minstrel shows and vaudeville. Usually, blacks were presented as faithful and often wise or hapless servants, resolute and devoted Mammy-type characters, and often stupid and silly chicken-stealing blacks. Many of the classic film landmarks of American culture featured such stereotypical portrayals of African Americans. These films included such classics as *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which was the first sound film, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the most popular film of all time, and the sentimental *Song of the South* (1946), an animated film produced by Walt Disney and based upon the *Uncle Remus* stories of Joel Chandler Harris.

Birth of a Nation was truly a product of its times when it hit the nation's movie houses in 1915. It fused the two most basic racial themes of the Jim Crow South, demonstrating the close link between the two: the minstrel show and lynching. And, in the latter case, it greatly strengthened the racist image of black men as beasts who lusted after innocent white women and girls. The film, which was the blockbuster of its day, raking in over $200 million dollars from its debut in 1915 to the mid 1920s, launched a wave of "Negrophobia," which is the fear of and/or contempt for black people and their culture. After viewing this film, many white males honestly worried about leaving their wives and children at home alone out of fear that black beasts lurked in the shadows all around. In some communities, after seeing the film, the whites randomly attacked and beat any blacks they found on the streets. The movie helped revive the long dead Ku Klux Klan and inspired a new wave of white supremacy in the 1920s.

Most "Southern Films," although far less viciously anti-black than *Birth of a Nation*, played, nevertheless, to the white supremacy convictions of most Americans. Continuously voted the most popular film of all times whenever surveys are made, the epic *Gone With the Wind*, based on the novel by Margaret Mitchell, presented a range of black characters who exemplified various aspects of the accepted racial stereotypes. Although the black actresses Mattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen brilliantly played the Mammy character and the witless house servant, both women were barred from the week's events surrounding the Atlanta premier of the film in 1939. McDaniel, who went on to be the first African American to win an Oscar for her performance as the strong and resolute Mammy, was viewed by white audiences as a loyal and faithful servant--which was an acceptable black image.

And McQueen, who had starred in dozens of black theatrical performances during the Harlem Renaissance, displayed a genuine comic talent in ways that sadly supported the racist views of blacks as incompetent people. Her performance, along with those of the popular black actors Stepin Fetchet, who portrayed a lazy, whining, clown-like character in numerous films in the 1930s and 1940s, and Billy "Bo Jangles" Robinson, the tap dancing house servant in several Shirley Temple films in the 1930s, continued the long line of racial characterizations stretching from the minstrel shows through vaudeville and radio.

At the same time that black stereotypes and racist characterizations dominated the popular culture of white supremacy, significant contrasts did exist and provided refuge for black Americans. The Harlem and Chicago Renaissance movements in literature and the arts of the 1920s presented richly creative and genuine black achievements in contrast to the popular images of white supremacy.

In film, for example, over 200 "race movies" were produced between 1915 and 1945. Most of these films countered the stereotypical images of blacks, presenting them instead as doctors, lawyers, soldiers, cowboys, gangsters, and men and women of character. Most importantly, they featured all-black casts. Three Oscar Micheaux films were among the best of these: *Within Our Gates* (1920), which presents the lynching of Leo Frank in Atlanta; *The Brute* (1920), which is the story of a black man standing up to a lynch mob; and *Birthright* (1939), which tells of a black Ivy League man who returns to the South after college. In the white mainstream, moreover, the popular musical, *Show Boat*, featuring the great black actor and singer, Paul Robeson, was one of the first films to show black people as strong and complex men and women victimized by racism in America.

Still, images of blacks as lazy, thieving, conniving people; hapless or faithfully devoted servants; or dangerously sex-crazed beasts dominated the media during the Jim Crow era. The accepted racial stereotypes supported a racist America in which lynching, the Ku Klux Klan, disfranchisement, and segregation ruled the land. At a sold out charity benefit during the premier of *Gone With the Wind* in Atlanta in 1939, local promoters recruited blacks to sing in a "slave choir" on the steps of a white-columned plantation mansion built for the event. Among the local African Americans in the choir was a young black man dressed as a slave who made his first appearance that evening in the national spotlight. His name was Martin Luther King, Jr.

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