

Blackface, White Noise

Jewish Immigrants in the
Hollywood Melting Pot

Michael Rogin

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Blackface, White Noise

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Wat Tyler memorial, Norwich, England, 1949

*For Ann,
and in memory of James E. B. Breslin,
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PART 1

Made in America

The elements that went into vaudeville were combed from . . . the four corners of the world. . . . There were hypnotists, iron-jawed ladies, one-legged dancers, one-armed cornetists, mind readers, female impersonators, male impersonators, Irish comedians, Jewish comedians, blackface, German, Swedish, Italian and rube comedians. . . . Vaudeville asked only that you own an animal or an instrument, or have a minimum of talent or a maximum of nerve. With these dubious assets, vaudeville offered fame and riches. It was up to you.

Fred Allen, *Much Ado About Me* (1956)

CHAPTER 1

Uncle Sammy and My Mammy

I

“Owl Jolson,” the hero of a 1936 Warner Bros., Looney Tunes, and Merry Melodies cartoon, is thrown out of his father’s house because he wants to sing “jazz.” The father, identified by accent and demeanor as an Old World music teacher, had welcomed the hatching of Owl’s older siblings—“another Caruso!” “another Kreisler!” “another Mendelssohn!”—but Owl pops out “a crooner.” “Shtop! Shtop!” shouts the father as the fledgling bursts into song. Setting off on his own, the self-made American rebel auditions for a radio talent show. Failed contestants drop through a trap door whenever the judge bangs his gavel. But Owl wins the contest, and with it the approval of his entire family, by singing, “With a cheer for Uncle Sammy, and another for my mammy, I love to sing.”

This animated film, titled *I Love to Singa*, is in part an ephemeron from the temporary 1930s decline of the most popular entertainer of the first half of the twentieth century. It advertised Al Jolson’s effort to revive his flagging career on radio. It also promoted what would turn out to be another in his series of unsuccessful films, *The Singing Kid*, which opens and closes with the song cheering for “Uncle Sammy and my mammy.” Yet both the cartoon and the failed feature were situated between two of the most widely seen movies of classic Hollywood, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Jolson Story* (1946). The paternal “Shtop!” at Owl’s birth quotes the famous word with which the jazz singer’s cantor father interrupts the son playing piano for his mother, thus returning the first talking picture to silence. [Beginning with paternal disapproval and ending with familial embrace, the cartoon bridges the gap between the generational conflict of the 1920s film and the Americanization of the old people as well in the post-World War II, postimmigration, postgenocide *Jolson Story*.]

I Love to Singa overrides the details of its historical moment, how-

ever, in the way it links art to politics. Popular culture Americanizes Owl Jolson, defeating Old World high culture. How, then, does Uncle Sammy employ “My Mammy” in that process? The film jazz singer had Jewish origins, like Kreisler, Mendelssohn, and Jolson, and, as is attested by the record collections of numerous grandfathers—mine and the protagonist’s of Clifford Odets’s *Awake and Sing*, for instance—the Italian, Caruso, was also an idol in immigrant Jewish households. The Owl Jolson cartoon subsumed immigrant popular music—opera and *The Jazz Singer*’s cantorial chants—under a European elite label. What took the place of foreign influence, in the cartoon as in the first talking picture, was the sound of the man known as “the mammy singer.”

“Uncle Sammy” merged the patriotic icon of Uncle Sam with a familiar figure in American Jewish families—I had one—Uncle Sammy. But that hybridization, too ethnic for universal American appeal, was just another sign of Jolson’s foundering for an audience in the 1930s: “Uncle Sammy” was New York provincial.¹ Jolson’s act of genius was to gather immigrant Jews and other Americans together under Uncle Sam’s banner by invoking a second patriotic icon. Appearing in her Jewish incarnation in the plot of *The Jazz Singer*, she is named in the song Jolson sings in blackface to climax and end the film: “My Mammy.”

“The ‘mammy’ of whom we have so often heard,” as NAACP founder, Mary White Ovington, called the African American mother, nursed the master’s child as well as her own. In domestic service in millions of American homes (the percentage of black women in paid employment was several times higher than that of whites, and the difference for mothers was even greater), “mammy” bestowed “her loving care” on other families at the expense of “her own offspring”; indeed, Ovington attributed the higher infant mortality rate among African Americans to the fact that “mothers who go out to day’s work are also unable to nurse their babies.” Even if Ovington’s specific interpretation was distorted by progressive maternalism, she understood that “mammy” nurtured whites—that is, supplied material support and a symbolic, imagined community—at the expense of blacks. She knew, too, that the mammy of unconditional love was actually a domestic worker (not least in urban, Jewish households); that forcing her to compensate for immigrant family rupture effaced the distinctive maternal losses imposed by slavery; and that desexualization was the price the black mother paid for public acceptance. Ovington understood that the condition for displays of interracial intimacy was the color line.²

Segregation was only half of white supremacy, however, for it coexisted alongside racial cross-dressing. A single image inspired the present