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Paulette Richards

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“It’s Not Easy Bein’ Green”: Greenface and the *Jazzy Frog* Trope

by Paulette Richards

Manohla Dargis, who reviewed *The Princess and the Frog* for *The New York Times* on November 25, 2009, opens by quoting the title of the 1970 lament Joe Raposo composed for Kermit the Frog: “It’s not easy being green, the heroine of *The Princess and the Frog* discovers.” Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Diana Ross, and other African American performers of the 1970s took this *Sesame Street* standard and made it into a reflection on black experience and identity. Louisiana poet Jericho Brown’s poem “Letter to Kermit from the Swamp” extends this reflection. “But to judge from how this polished, hand-drawn movie addresses, or rather strenuously avoids, race,” Dargis continues, “it is a lot more difficult to be black, particularly in a Disney animated feature.” Many of the reader responses rejected Dargis’s comments as “cynical.” Yet cartoon representations of African Americans and African American cultural forms have long generated troubling images because American animation is rooted in blackface minstrelsy.

In *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954*, Christopher P. Lehman notes “[f]rom the outset of sound synchronization, animators relied heavily on the minstrelsy tradition for their music. Disney was among the first to do so” (16). He cites Mickey Mouse’s jet-black color, wide white mouth, and white gloves as typical features of minstrel performers, and traces the roots of the “Mickey Mouse sound” to the minstrel stage, remarking that Disney “constructed his first sound film—the ‘Mickey Mouse’ cartoon *Steamboat Willie*—around ‘Turkey in the Straw,’ which was, in turn, an instrumental version of ‘Zip Coon’—a popular song since 1834 and the closing number for many minstrel shows” (16-17).

American animation also has a long tradition of cloaking black performers in “greenface.” A Disney Silly Symphonies short titled *Night* introduced Ub Iwerks’ Flip

the Frog in 1930. Shortly thereafter, Iwerks received a lucrative offer to produce cartoons for Powers' Celebrity Pictures, distributed by MGM, where he featured Flip the Frog in *Fiddlesticks*, the first color sound cartoon ever produced. In 1935 and 1937, MGM studios released *The Old Mill Pond* and *Little Ol' Bosko and the Cannibals*, both of which feature frog caricatures of Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Cab Calloway, and Stepin Fetchit. According to Lehman, "former studio animator Mel Shaw recalled that because of their large mouths, frogs were considered suitable animals to depict as African Americans" (39).

The general public is not aware of these films, in large measure because they were withdrawn from public distribution in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Today's movie audiences are more likely to be familiar with Merrie Melodies' December 31, 1955 release *One Froggy Evening* featuring Michigan J. Frog, a character patterned after the great blackface vaudevillian Bert Williams. Williams and his partner, George Walker, found success on the vaudeville circuit by blacking up and billing themselves as "two real coons." Walker also founded the Frogs Club, an association for African American theater professionals. Frogs Club members organized popular benefit performances in New York, Philadelphia, and other cities in the early twentieth century. *One Froggy Evening* and other "jazzy frog" cartoons may therefore have begun as an ironic reversal of the positive identification African American performers made with amphibians and other swamp creatures.

While animators regard MGM's jazzy frog cartoons as some of the best ever made, this judgment rests on technical criteria. Those who objected to the amphibian incarnation of Disney's first black princess had justifiable cause for concern even before seeing *The Princess and the Frog*, but the question is not whether the frog transformation is an effort to hide the character's race; rather, the question is "what is the half-life of racist iconography?"

In his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the pain black parents experienced on seeing "ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form" when forced to explain to their children why they couldn't go to segregated

amusement parks like Funtown.¹ Funtown is now open to colored children, but are the reflections of themselves they see in its funhouse mirrors any less damaging? Has American society changed enough in seventy-five years that it is safe for second-graders to view *Swing Wedding* without concern that the negative stereotypes it depicts will damage self-esteem or foster racial prejudice? Is it possible for contemporary animators and puppeteers to liberate such images from their negative historical baggage?

The most immediate source for *The Princess and the Frog* is MGM's 1937 jazzy frog short *Swing Wedding*—not the Grimm Brothers' fairytale, or E. D. Baker's *Frog Princess*. The swamp setting of *Swing Wedding* and hence Disney's *Swing Wedding* remix is no accident. Historically the swamp was a space where the enslaved could carve out alternative modes of existence. Some runaways gathered there in maroon communities. The environment was harsh and the threat of re-capture constant, but maroons enjoyed a high degree of freedom. Other enslaved people went into the swamps for temporary respite. Skilled hunters could find fish, fowl, and game to supplement their meager diets. Healers could find herbal medicines. Artisans could find raw materials to craft household utensils and musical instruments. The swamps also harbored social gatherings where people could love, worship, and celebrate according to their own cultural preferences.

Early jazz musicians associated themselves with this subversive space by filling their music with allusions to swamp experience. Into the mid-twentieth century, wild, untrammled swamp was less than half a day's walk from New Orleans. Thus it was only natural that when King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band made its first recordings in 1923, three of the titles referenced swamp creatures ("Froggie Moore," "Snake Rag," and "Alligator Hop"). Jazz musicians also identified themselves with the swamp through their distinctive slang. Louis Armstrong claimed to be the first to use the term "gatemouth" (Major 193), but blues singer Clarence Brown was also known as "Gatemouth," and "gates" (short for alligator) became a familiar term of address between male friends in the jazz world (Major 193). Long before Paul Whiteman and his orchestra recorded James

¹ According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "The consensus on online forums is that the park closed rather than integrate ..." <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/exploring-atlanta-lost-amusement-parks/4W5YieExRcGORgS75MUkSN/>

Cavanaugh and Harry Barris's "Mississippi Mud" in 1928, jazz consciousness claimed the swamp as part of its origin.

Cavanaugh and Barris's offensive lyric, "when the darkies beat their feet on the Mississippi mud," represents the ongoing effort to co-opt and control the subversive energy of the swamp. The apocalyptic flood that followed the spring snow melts of 1927 left people throughout the Gulf South huddled on the banks of the Mississippi, scavenging for bits of driftwood that had once been their homes. African American communities were especially hard hit, but the song only pictures them singing and dancing with abandon. MGM's jazzy frog shorts continue this process of appropriation by adding visuals that position blacks firmly in the realm of the subhuman.

The "jazzy frog" trope makes one of its earliest appearances in a dream sequence from the 1925 film adaptation of George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's 1924 Broadway hit, *Beggar on Horseback*. Would-be composer Neil McRae ekes out a hand-to-mouth living by orchestrating Tin Pan Alley tunes. The strains of one such tune, "The Frog's Party," waft through the play as McRae struggles with the temptation to "prostitute" his art. McRae toys with the idea of marrying Gladys Cady, daughter of a wealthy industrialist, in order to gain enough leisure to pursue his art. He then falls asleep and dreams of what marriage to Gladys would be like.

Kaufman and Connelly drew on German Expressionism to critique the capitalist ballyhoo of the 1920s. The play introduced the word "widget" as the product Mr. Cady's factories churn out. In the dream sequence, McRae comes to recognize that instead of buying time to compose serious music, the marriage would effectively sentence him to a lifetime on an assembly line where each of his songs would be expected to become a million-dollar hit. The stage directions for the dream wedding sequence don't include any mention of frogs, although they do list a jazz band. In the film, however, four frog musicians lead the wedding procession to the altar in the cathedral. The instrumentation is trumpet, clarinet, drum kit, and banjo, so it is clearly a Dixieland band. These frog musicians are live actors wearing papier-mâché frog heads and frog costumes, so they could be described as body puppets.

There are no bridesmaids in this wedding. Instead there is a flock of groomsmen who wear bridal veils under their top hats and carry bouquets of dollar signs. Presumably

the gender bending signifies that McRae is about to “unman” himself by selling out his art for money, but the appearance of the “greenface” frog quartet in *Beggar on Horseback* further codifies the class conflict in racial terms by contrasting “low-brow” jazz music with McRae’s aspiration to compose “high-brow” music.

MGM’s series of jazzy frog shorts continued the transposition of greenface onto “blackface.” Then, just as American puppeteers had reflected the popularity of live minstrel shows with blackface minstrel puppets, amphibian puppets that imitated African American speech and musical performance styles began to appear in American popular culture. In 1955, Bil Baird featured three frog puppets in a sketch intended to raise funds for the March of Dimes. The frog puppets lip-synched to “Love I You” by the Gaylords, an Italian American vocal trio singing in the close harmony style of the Mills Brothers, Ink Spots, and other African American vocal groups.

Such commercial appropriation of African American musical forms is the foundation of American popular music. Edwin P. Christy, who formalized the structure of the minstrel show, drew his material from performances he observed in New Orleans at the Sunday gatherings in Congo Square. In his *Plantation Melodies, No. 2*, he claimed that he was the “*first to catch our native airs as they floated wildly, or hummed in the balmy breezes of the sunny south, turn them to shape, and give them ‘a local habitation, and a name’ ...*” (5).

In *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*, Freddi Williams Evans relates this type of appropriation to the philosophical concept of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle

addresses the problem of how and whether an observer can acknowledge the subjectivity of another. Although heavily influenced by the circles he witnessed at Congo Square, Christy regarded the participants as insignificant and inferior human beings. He responded to their contributions as a commodity rather than as a conversation. (45)

Despite the great wealth he accumulated through this cultural appropriation, Christy committed suicide in 1862. He jumped from the window of his Manhattan home and died of his injuries in the hospital. On his deathbed Christy made an oral last will and testament, but the court declared it void because there were no witnesses. Thus, just as

Christy was able to appropriate African American cultural wealth because there were no written documents substantiating ownership of this legacy, his own legacy became fraught with competing claims.

The counterfeit dances and songs that blackface minstrels such as Christy gave currency are now inextricably woven into the fabric of American popular culture, yet they are also inseparable from racist caricature. Recently, a spate of scandals around blackface and minstrel imagery in the news has rubbed salt in old wounds. Confronted with a photograph from his yearbook page showing a person in blackface next to a person dressed in a KKK robe and hood, Governor Ralph Northam of Virginia first apologized, and then denied that he was either of the people in the photo. Instead, Northam confessed that he had once darkened his face to perform more convincingly as Michael Jackson in a dance contest. In an essay published in *The New York Times*, February 3, 2019, Wesley Morris asserts that

[t]he idea that a Michael Jackson costume would need shoe polish to read as “Michael Jackson” seems simultaneously to misread the racial tragedy of Michael Jackson and to practice upon him some very classic blackface-minstrel critique that puts him in his racial place—as a puppet for some white dude.

It is therefore admirable that Jim Henson, puppeteer par excellence, was able to step inside the hermeneutic circle to enter into conversation, creative collaboration, and economic partnership with African American performers and the African American cultural forms that he absorbed in his youth.

Though the Kermit character that Jim Henson introduced on *Sam and Friends* in 1955 was not initially a frog, he did appear in sketches playing the quintessential minstrel instrument—the banjo. Yet Kermit never spoke in caricature dialect. Ironically, it was the brown sock puppet known as Harry the Hipster who schooled Kermit on “Visual Thinking,” translating complicated jazz riffs into mental images.

Viewers watching black-and-white television sets of the period might not have registered Harry as racially “black” but his sunshades and “cool” manner of speaking paid homage not only to Harry “The Hipster” Gibson (a white jazz pianist who grew up speaking Harlem jive), but also to African American giants of jazz such as Dizzy Gillespie. Henson went on to create communities of blue, green, and purple monsters that

beamed around the world his vision of tolerance for difference and creative collaboration. Unfortunately, though Henson spent most of his grade-school years in the Mississippi Delta where blues music was born, the Mississippi state legislature was not ready to endorse that vision of beloved community when *Sesame Street* made its debut. They voted to ban the show from the state's educational television channel because they objected to the interracial human cast.

Re-humanization of the jazz frog began with Peter, Paul and Mary's vision of inter-species romance, "I'm in Love with a Big Blue Frog." The song appeared on their *Album 1700* in 1967, the year the Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia* struck down prohibitions against interracial marriage. According to the Pew Institute, rates of interracial marriage subsequently climbed from three to seven percent of all newlyweds between 1967 and 1980. The lyrics of the song dismiss common objections to interracial marriage, portraying the big blue frog as an intellectual from a noble family who will presumably pass on prowess in swimming to his offspring. Still, the third verse of the song addresses residential segregation as one of the more intractable forms of American intolerance:

The neighbors are against it and it's clear to me
And it's probably clear to you
They think value on their property will go right down
If the family next door is blue.

Sesame Street presented a beloved community where the family next door might be blue, green, purple, or members of a completely different species. Kermit's performance of Joe Raposo's "Bein' Green" on the show's first season in 1970 therefore put audiences in the shoes of anyone who had ever suffered for being different.

Between 1968 and 1978, approval of marriages between whites and non-whites rose from seventeen to about thirty percent of Gallup's white respondents (Jones, "Record-High"). While the Muppets' 1976 take on interspecies romance, "I'm in Love with a Big Blue Frog," cast Mary Louise, a blonde whatnot puppet, with Kermit, Robin, and a chorus of blue and green frogs, viewers like the poet Jericho Brown also saw Kermit and Miss Piggy's relationship as analogous to an interracial romance:

...They say
 the blonde's got you in tap shoes
 singing the blues like show tunes
 with her on stage next to you,
 done up in sequins and tiaras,
 a real pretty pink trophy.

Brown imagines a brother for Kermit who, like fifty-six percent of African Americans in Gallup's 1968 poll on attitudes towards interracial marriage, can say "I'm happy for you long as you're happy."

By 2011, ninety-six percent of African Americans and more than eighty-four percent of whites approved of interracial marriage. Among Gallup respondents who were 30-49 years old in 2011, overall approval of interracial marriage was ninety-one percent. Many shifts occurred in the American cultural landscape between 1967 and 2011, but the cohort of Gallup respondents who were 30-49 that year would have imbibed Henson's vision of tolerance for diversity in the first seasons of *Sesame Street* and at the height of *The Muppet Show*'s popularity; thus "greenface" gave them a much more positive frame of reference on race relations than earlier versions of the jazzy frog trope. *Swing Wedding* used jazzy frog caricatures to ridicule the idea that Negroes can fall in love and seek to solemnize their unions, asserting instead that Black life is a chaotic brew of sex, drugs, and intoxicating rhythms. In contrast, while the 1979 *Muppet Movie* opens with Kermit sitting in the swamp strumming a banjo, he sings about a "rainbow connection" uniting lovers and dreamers of all persuasions.

In 1978, Henson invited Harry Belafonte to appear as a guest star on *The Muppet Show*. Jim and Jane Henson had attended one of Belafonte's concerts in Washington, DC as one of their first dates, and Henson's regard for Belafonte was so high that he took time off from shooting *The Muppet Movie* to meet with him personally, and gave him significant creative input on the episode. This collaboration culminated in a five-minute segment that invited viewers to affirm the subjectivity of "the other" within the hermeneutic circle as the path to "Turn the World Around," as the song by Belafonte suggests:

Do you know who I am?
Do I know who you are?
See we one another clearly
Do we know who we are?

A cast of Muppets designed to look like African masks performed in this segment with Belafonte, thereby presenting a visual representation of Blackness that was rooted in an African aesthetic.

Six years later, in 1984, Henson recruited a talented young African American puppeteer to train as a Muppet performer on *Sesame Street*. Kevin Clash created a distinctive voice for a furry red monster named Elmo, and turned the character into a phenomenon. E. P. Christy never considered sharing credit or profits with the creators of the songs he published in *Plantation Melodies*, but Clash eventually became the highest-paid Muppet performer on *Sesame Street*; his share in the profits from licensing the Elmo character made him a multi-millionaire. He was given responsibility as a director and executive producer on *Sesame Street* and also served as a puppet captain on a variety of Henson productions. Thus, Henson underwrote his re-humanization of “greenface” with greenbacks, giving credit and respect to African American performers for their contributions to American culture as a whole.

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