


1-1-1987

Reel Blacks: Everything is Not Satisfactual

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Patricia A. (1987) "Reel Blacks: Everything is Not Satisfactual," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol1/iss1/6

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economists and other social scientists. Many analysts have found that equalizing black-white educational attainment would do little to decrease racial income inequality. S&W, however, appear to show that education and wage income are positively correlated. However the final verdict on this is not in.

There is little doubt though that the black South to North migration had an impact on black male wages and income. But as S&W admit, this was a one-shot deal and its effects are dissipating rapidly. In fact S&W claim that the improvement in the quality of black education was the result of the migration to better schools in the North. They are therefore somewhat pessimistic about any further advances in black school quality and end their study by prescribing a return to the economic growth rates in the general economy similar to those that prevailed in the 1960's as the mechanism for further reductions in black poverty.

The major mischief done by such upbeat accounts of black economic progress undergirded by a few selective measures is to give both the general public and those unfamiliar with the field a false impression that all is well and coming along nicely in the black community, and further that there is no real need for special efforts such as affirmative action to ensure that progress. This is a view many are all too happy to accept. See how quickly Albert Shanker embraces the notion.⁷ Note also that the Shanker

article says, "White-Black *Income* Gap Narrows" when it is really only the gap in black-white male *wages* that are measured in S&W.

The authors of *Closing the Gap* call the half-empty glass "half-full," with emphasis on the "full" and the "half" in sotto voce.

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Reel Blacks

by

Patricia A. Turner



Everything is Not Satisfactual

An unaccompanied black adult female at a matinee performance of *Song of the South* is about as out of place as Big Bird at a cockfight. However, having encouraged the students in my course on black media images to see the film during its fortieth anniversary run, I felt obligated to reexamine it myself. So there I sat, surrounded by exuberant white pre-schoolers and their parents, watch-

ing as animation and live action seamlessly interchanged on the screen in Walt Disney's adaptation for Joel Chandler Harris' classic collection of Afro-American folktales.

A late nineteenth century journalist for the *Atlanta Constitution*, Harris, an amateur folklorist, set himself to the task of collecting and preserving the folk tales that

he had heard slaves tell during his childhood. Scholars who have investigated these tales now agree that Harris' collection represents the most significant compilation of genuine slave folklore available from the nineteenth century. African antecedents can be found for more than half of the tales. The chief protagonist in these tales is the trickster Brer Rabbit, who uses his wit, guile, and spunk to sabotage the efforts of ostensibly stronger animals in the forest.

In presenting these stories to his public, Harris embroidered the core tales with a frame story about a docile, aged slave who spends his evenings telling the tales to a young white boy. It is easy to understand why Harris felt the need to add this seemingly innocuous frame story. He was writing from the South in the aftermath of Reconstruction. He clearly needed to present the tales in a way that would be palatable to his white readers. Recasting the stories in the 1940s, Walt Disney was clearly also concerned about reactions of his white audience.

The Slaves' Stories

By focusing on the frame story, Harris and Disney perform a grave disservice to these tales and to Afro-Americans. During the era of slavery the trickster tales constituted the largest component of slave oral literature. They were not merely moral or entertainment stories for children but, instead, functional narratives for the adult slave population. In slave reminiscences collected by the Federal Writer's Project in the 1930s, countless elderly slaves recalled the days in which the Brer Rabbit stories were shared among the adult slaves when whites were far out of hearing range. While adult slaves may have occasionally shared the tales with a white youngster, such a tale telling situation was the exception and not the rule. With his quick wit and unrelenting verve, Brer Rabbit was the perfect hero for a people who had to rely on verbal facility rather than physical strength in order to exercise any control over their day-to-day lives. In the world the slaves made, Brer Rabbit exemplified the most successful slave, the one who could minimize his work load, maximize his food intake and all the while escape punishment. Brer Fox or any other enemy in the forest symbolized the masters and overseers who were so persistent in their attempts to harness the wily rabbit.

Disney's 20th century recreation of Harris's frame story is much more heinous than the original. The days on the plantation located in "the United States of Georgia," begin and end with unsupervised blacks singing songs about their wonderful home as they march to and from the fields. Disney made no attempt to render the music in the style of the spirituals and folk songs that would have been sung during this era. No indication is made about the status of the blacks on this plantation. Joel Chandler Harris set his stories in the post-slavery era, but Disney's version seems to take place during a mythical time when blacks lived in slave quarters on a plantation, worked diligently for no visible reward, and considered Atlanta a viable place to set out for.

Kind old Uncle Remus caters to the needs of the young

white boy whose father has inexplicably left him and his mother at the plantation. An obviously ill-kept black child of the same age named Toby is assigned to look after the white boy, Johnny. Although he makes one reference to his 'ma,' Toby's parents are nowhere to be seen. The black adults in the film pay attention to him only when he neglects his responsibilities as Johnny's playmate-keeper. He is up before Johnny in the morning in order to bring his white charge water to wash with and to keep him entertained.

The boys befriend a little blond white girl, Jenny, whose family is clearly meant to represent the "white trash" of the neighborhood. Although Johnny coaxes his mother into inviting Jenny to his fancy birthday party at the big house, the black Toby is curiously absent from scenes surrounding the party. Toby is good enough to catch frogs with, but not good enough to have birthday cake with. When Toby and Johnny are with Uncle Remus, the gray-haired black man directs most of his attention to the white child. When Johnny's mother threatens to keep her son away from the old gentleman's cabin, Uncle Remus is so hurt that he starts to run away. Thus blacks on the plantation are seen as willingly subservient to the whites to the extent that the needs of their own children are overlooked. In the world that Disney made, the blacks sublimate their own lives in order to be better servants to the white family. If he had truly understood the message of the tales he animated so delightfully, he would have realized how distorted the frame story is.

False History Lesson

Even following its 1946 release, *Song of the South* sparked controversy. Each time it has been re-released the same debate begins again. Critics sympathetic with the views of black Americans bemoan the fact that yet another generation of white youngsters are being subjected to a patently false history lesson. On the other hand, Disney fans applaud the film for its technological excellence. Black film scholars are accustomed to this argument; it is the same one that is dragged out whenever *Birth of a Nation* or other racist films are revived.

This year many critics have rationalized their enthusiasm for the re-release of *Song of the South* by citing it as one of the few children's films available. Certainly I agree that good children's films are few and far between. Nonetheless *Song of the South* projects an erroneous and perhaps dangerous view of one of the most complex eras of American history. If studios are unwilling to permanently shelve it as they promised to do in the 1970s, perhaps they would consider editing the frame story out and leaving the fully animated sequences in tact. They could replace the narrative with newly animated versions of other tales from the Harris collection. The cartoons are not offensive, but the frame story is not satisfactory.

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