



Dancin' in the Rain

Author(s): Carol J. Clover

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Summer, 1995), pp. 722-747

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344065>

Accessed: 19/01/2014 21:41

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Critical Inquiry*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Dancin' in the Rain

Carol J. Clover

More than forty years after its release, *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) remains America's favorite object lesson on giving credit where credit is due. At stake is the talent of Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds), who, in the transition from silent movies to talkies, serves as a voice double for the famous Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen). Like John Gilbert, the silent actor on whom her character is based,¹ Lina has a voice that falls fatally short in the new technology of sound. Kathy is willing enough to "give" her voice when Cosmo Brown (Donald O'Connor) suggests it, but Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) objects: "I couldn't let you do it, Kathy." "Why not?" she asks. "Because you wouldn't be *seen*. You'd be throwing away your own career." Kathy's selflessness prevails at first, but when Lina later learns that Kathy will be getting "full screen credit" for the talking and singing in the film-within-the-film ("You mean it's going to say up on the screen that I don't talk and sing for *myself*?"), she uses her financial importance to the studio to extort a promise that Kathy's voice will remain unacknowledged. If that were not enough, Lina tells R. F. Simpson, the producer, that she wants the arrangement extended indefinitely: "If [Kathy's] done such a

I owe a debt of my own to Michael Rogin, Kathleen Moran, Richard Hutson, Joshua Clover, and James Williams for help and productive argument along the way.

1. So says Rudy Behlmer, *America's Favorite Movies: Behind the Scenes* (New York, 1982), p. 256. See also Hugh Fordin, *The World of Entertainment! Hollywood's Greatest Musicals* (New York, 1975), p. 352; hereafter abbreviated *WE*. By visiting all the misvoicings onto Lina, *Singin' in the Rain*, like Hollywood film in general, makes the woman carry a double burden of "lack"; so argues Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), esp. pp. 45–57.

Critical Inquiry 21 (Summer 1995)

© 1995 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/95/2104-0002\$01.00. All rights reserved.

grand job doubling for my voice, don't you think she oughtta go on doing *just that?* And nothing *else*." Simpson is appalled: "Lina, you're out of your mind. . . . Lina, I wouldn't do that to her in a million years. Why, you'd be taking her career away from her. People just don't *do* things like that!"

He *does* do it, of course. Money talks, in this film, and as the star property of Monumental Pictures Lina gets her way, at least in the short run. But the injustice will be dramatically redressed in the final scene, when the curtain behind the lip-synching Lina is jerked away and the true talent—Kathy at the microphone—is now, at last, *seen*. Lest the audience miss the point, Don calls it out: "Ladies and gentlemen . . . *that's* the girl whose voice you heard and loved tonight! She's the *real* star of the picture: Kathy Selden!" The film's final shot shows a billboard on which Don Lockwood's name and picture are paired not with Lina Lamont's, as before, but with Kathy Selden's. Not only has Kathy's talent been publicly credited, but Kathy herself has been lodged in the "firmament" that Lina cannot even pronounce.²

The concern with doubling precedes Kathy's appearance in the film, for, as the opening sequences tell us, Don Lockwood began his own film career as a stunt man. Indeed, in much the same way that the story of Kathy claims to present the originary moment of voice doubling, the story of young Don claims to present the originary moment of body doubling. The main actor in a western is knocked out in a saloon brawl, and Don proposes to the frantic filmmakers that he stand in. So his career goes for a while, hidden under a bushel basket, until he too gets his break and appears as his own body and under his own name. Once again, the wrong is righted and is thus not so much a wrong as a kind of benign apprenticeship in the show business life cycle, in which giving your talent away in the beginning is a kind of investment in the future. In the end, your talent will be joined to your person and you will be *seen*. Credit is given where it's due—just not right away.

The great irony here is that *Singin' in the Rain* itself enacts the kind of talent "relocations" it claims to deplore and correct. It is a well-known

2. To Simpson's "People just don't *do* things like that," Lina retorts, "People! I ain't no people! I'm a [quoting from a newspaper] 'shimmering, glowing star in the cinema firmament!'"

Carol J. Clover is professor of rhetoric (film) and Scandinavian (medieval studies) at the University of California, Berkeley. She has published books and articles on medieval culture and is also the author of *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992). She is working on a book on Anglo-American trial movies. Her email address is ccllover@garnet.berkeley.edu

fact about the film that every song in it but two had a prior life in some other venue (the plot was famously invented to accommodate the pre-existing songs of Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed) and that one of the two original works, "Make 'Em Laugh," was so shamelessly similar to Cole Porter's "Be a Clown!" from *The Pirate* that it amounted to "a stolen song," as Stanley Donen called it (quoted in *WE*, p. 359).³ Certain elements of the plot itself, including the shift-to-sound framework, are suspiciously reminiscent of *You're My Everything*, a Dan Dailey vehicle from 1949. Credit became an issue in another way when, in a letter to the studio executive in charge of advertising, producer Freed objected to the absence of a credit to his contribution as lyricist and Brown's as composer. "I do not care how much you reduce my credit as the producer," he wrote, "but as an artist I rebel against not receiving proper credit as a lyricist. . . . I know . . . your new duties . . . have made you a little ruthless in giving anybody else credit."⁴ Nor did the film feel constrained by its subject matter in the practice of dubbing. Kelly postdubbed the tap sounds for Debbie Reynolds's dance in the "Good Morning" number,⁵ and, more to the point, in the scenes in which Kathy Selden is shown dubbing Lina's speaking lines, the real voice is that of the actress playing Lina, Jean Hagen, merely speaking in her normal tones.⁶ What's more,

3. According to Clive Hirschhorn, the resemblance is coincidental. "No one has managed to discover why. Gene prefers not to think about the similarity, while Betty Comden and Adolph Green advanced the theory that Freed wrote it without realizing he'd once produced a picture with so similar a song in it" (Clive Hirschhorn, *Gene Kelly: A Biography* [Chicago, 1975], p. 213; hereafter abbreviated *GK*). Similarly Behlmer: "No one has ever discovered whether this was an amazing coincidence, a private joke between songwriters, or an innocent and amusing pastiche. Everyone in the unit preferred, apparently, not to bring up the subject to Freed" (Behlmer, *America's Favorite Movies*, p. 262). "Only a man of Cole Porter's tact and distinction would have chosen to ignore the existence of that song," Fordin noted (*WE*, p. 359). For a fuller discussion of the phenomenon of recycled or cannibalized songs, see Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982), pp. 96–106; hereafter abbreviated *HM*.

4. The letter in toto reads:

Dear Ralph [Wheelwright]: Just received the copy of the advertising billing for *Singin' in the Rain*, and I notice that you omitted the most important credit of the last ten years in not giving credit to those famous writers and composers of screen musicals, Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed.

I do not care how much you reduce my credit as the producer, but as an artist I rebel against not receiving proper credit as a lyricist. I know you will plead you have been so tied up with *Quo Vadis* and learning how to spell Mervyn LeRoy, and your new duties on the Executive Board of this great studio have made you a little ruthless in giving anybody else credit.

However, remember the old days when you were just a fella like one of us—plugging along, and try to incorporate this credit, which, after all, is the only thing that can sell the picture.

Thank you. [Quoted in *WE*, pp. 361–62]

5. See Behlmer, *America's Favorite Movies*, p. 267.

6. See *ibid.*, pp. 267–68. See also Silverman's discussion of the sexual politics of *Singin' in the Rain*'s sound relocations in *The Acoustic Mirror*, esp. pp. 45–57.

of the songs in the movie-within-the movie (*The Dancing Cavalier*) that seem to its audience to be sung by Lina Lamont and that are presented to us, the audience of *Singin' in the Rain*, as sung by Kathy Selden/Debbie Reynolds, one, "Would You?" is in reality sung by a certain Betty Noyes or Royce (different sources give different names), a woman neither *seen* in *Singin' in the Rain* nor mentioned in the credits.⁷ If Noyes/Royce eventually came into her own, it must have been in a small way; she does not figure in any of the standard Hollywood handbooks, and it seems a fair guess that she never made it to a billboard, either. On behalf of Betty Noyes/Royce, it seems, no Simpson moralized about giving credit where credit is due. Maybe the split between a movie's story and its production practices is so complete that it didn't occur to anyone that there was something funny about not crediting Noyes's/Royce's voice in a film that is precisely about the crediting of voices in film. Or maybe it did occur to someone but didn't seem funny or problematic enough to override whatever real-life protocol governs who gets and who doesn't get screen credits. In any case, Betty Noyes/Royce ended up without one, thus leaving her singing voice on permanent deposit in the account of Debbie Reynolds.

So wide is the gap between what *Singin' in the Rain* says and what it does that one is tempted to see a relation between the two—to see the moralizing surface story of *Singin'* as a guilty disavowal of the practices that went into its own making. Certainly the film itself invites a reflexive reading: the final movie in the sequence of movies it is about, the one the others lead up to and the one advertised on the climactic billboard, is *Singin' in the Rain*. Of course this narrow, in-house reading cannot explain the film's enormous popularity with four decades of viewers who know nothing of the backstage circumstances of its production. But if we proceed from the assumption that what may seem to be local anxieties are often universal ones in neighborhood drag, we might look again at the gap between *Singin' in the Rain*'s theory and its practice and ask what the larger resonances are. That is the point of departure of this essay, in which I argue that *Singin' in the Rain*'s morality tale of stolen talent restored is driven by a nervousness about just the opposite, about stolen talent *unrestored*, and that one reason for its abiding popularity is the way it redresses our underlying fear that the talent or art we most enjoy in movies like *Singin' in the Rain* is art we somehow "know" to be uncredited and unseen. The question is what talent and who it belongs to.

The obvious point to be made about *Singin' in the Rain* is that its soul lies not in stunt acts, or spoken voices, or songs, or even the singing

7. Behlmer has Noyes (see Behlmer, *America's Favorite Movies*, p. 267); Fordin has Royce (see *WE*, p. 358). Although the confusion may reflect a real name change on Betty's part, I suspect from the rhyme that it is the result of faulty transmission, in which case the issue of credit is even more poignant.

claimed by the title, but in dancing. The showstopping musical numbers, the ones that stick with us, are those in which Kelly and O'Connor, singly or together, burst into tap-based dance—above all, Cosmo's solo "Make 'Em Laugh" (a gymnastic tour de force of pratfalls, one-legged hopping, body-spinning on the floor, running up walls and backflipping down, and so on), the Cosmo/Don duet "Moses" (which turns an elocution lesson into a "spontaneous, anarchic dance routine"),⁸ and, of course, the "Singin' in the Rain" sequence itself, which is to the genre of the musical what the shower sequence of *Psycho* is to the genre of horror. Most of the other dance numbers in *Singin' in the Rain* are of the production-number sort: costumes, ballroom- and balletlike choreography and movement, linear narrative, and controlled affect—the "elegant style," as the commentaries call it.⁹ The three Kelly/O'Connor dances, on the other hand, are muscular, apparently impromptu, unrestrained, exuberant, largely tap-based routines in which the interest lies to a considerable extent in the athletic feats of the (male) body: how fast the feet, sinuous the twists, high the jumps. Kelly had a political agenda here, one that he would spell out three years later in a television show he did for Alistair Cooke called *Dancing: A Man's Game*, in which he showed how the moves of male dance matched the moves of male sport (baseball, football, boxing, and basketball) in hope of dispelling the "stigma of effeminacy that has always clung to the art of the dance" (*GK*, p. 261).¹⁰ ("For Kelly," Peter Wollen sums it up, "obsessed with the validity of male dance, the presence of the body was all-important, a male body that is acceptably exhibitionist in its athleticism.")¹¹ It is in any case Kelly who insisted on adding into the lyrics of the title song the word "dancin'." Where the Freed-Brown original has "I'm singin', just singin', in the rain,"¹² Kelly puts, "I'm singin', and dancin', in the rain," and, to the policeman, as an explanation for his behav-

8. Feuer, "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2 (Aug. 1977): 315; rpt. in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London, 1981), pp. 313–26.

9. The exception is the Don/Cosmo/Kathy trio "Good Morning," which is also an impromptu, tap-based number, though a rather run-of-the-mill one.

10. "Dancing is a man's business, altogether," Kelly said in an interview, "but women have taken it over" (quoted in Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* [New York, 1968], p. 196; hereafter abbreviated *JD*). Note the Stearns: "Perhaps it is enough to add that the question of whether or not dancers were sissies *never* arose in the native American tradition of vernacular dance" (*JD*, p. 355).

11. Peter Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain* (London, 1992), p. 57; hereafter abbreviated *SR*. Wollen also writes of Kelly's tendency to "carry" his ballet training in his upper body: "In dance terms he was, so to speak, determined to be upwardly mobile, adding a ballet carriage and arm movements above the waist to tapping feet below" (*SR*, p. 14).

12. Arthur Freed (lyrics) and Nacio Herb Brown (music) originally wrote the song for the *Hollywood Music Box of 1927*. It was included in MGM's films *Hollywood Revue of 1929*, *Hi Beautiful*, and *Little Nellie Kelly*. See *GK*, pp. 206–21.

ior, "I'm dancin', and singin', in the rain." A small but telling adjustment, it acknowledges that the title does not do justice to which art is really at stake.¹³

Although there are no body doubles here (Kelly and O'Connor are after all really doing their own dancing),¹⁴ I want to suggest that the film nonetheless worries rather openly about the "authorship" of certain of the moves they perform, that it is haunted by an anxiety of influence of a peculiarly American sort. Of course, to echo another formulation, popular culture *is* because it borrows; by definition it trades in a marketplace of endlessly circulating moves, riffs, bits of sound and image—a process that has always stood apart from high-culture notions of authorship and attribution and one that continues to confound copyright law.¹⁵ "Shuck," dancer Eddie Rector said, "if you could copyright a step, nobody could lift a foot" (quoted in *JD*, p. 338). Still, even within the world and terms of popular culture's processes, there are rules of thumb, general understandings about when a move is sustained and close enough to a distinctive "original" to be attributable and, in such a case, what sort of attribution paid the debt. It is said that the "unwritten law" of the Hoofers Club was "Thou Shalt Not Copy Another's Steps—Exactly" (*JD*, p. 338). How exactly turned on the context: the same reflex might be regarded as an homage in a noncommercial performance, but as plunder in venues where there was money to be made. Marshall and Jean Stearns write that inside the Hoofers Club "you could imitate anybody inside the club, and it was taken as a compliment," but "you must not do so professionally,

13. As Kelly tells it:

"Then a couple of days later I was running through the lyrics of the song to see if they suggested anything other than the obvious when, at the end of the first chorus, I suddenly added the word 'dancing' to the lyric—so that it now ran 'I'm singing' and *dancin'* in the rain'. Instead of just singing the number, I'd dance it as well. Suddenly the mist began to clear, because a dance tagged onto a song suggested a positive and joyous emotion." [*GK*, p. 215]

For a full account of the dance itself and a summary of what has been said about it, see *SR*, esp. pp. 9–29.

14. Dance can in fact be faked more than one might imagine. The tap sounds (which in the thirties and forties were in themselves sufficiently popular to be broadcast on radio) can be dubbed (as Debbie Reynolds's were by Gene Kelly and Ginger Rogers's were by Hermes Pan), and the visible dancing can be fixed by segmenting and editing, "so that the feet do not belong to the dancer or the movements are so abbreviated that the dance is effectively created in the montage." But by a variety of means, including "the use of long takes and wide frames," Kelly made it clear that visible dance—his "own province"—was unfaked (*SR*, p. 57).

15. "American show dance *is* because it borrows; American show dance *is* because it is vulgar. . . . Show dance is a convention of body movement drawn from a variety of sources and applied to commercial entertainments for the purpose of artistic communication, unabashed diversion, or both" (Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* [New York, 1987], pp. xv, xiv).

that is in public and for pay" (*JD*, p. 338).¹⁶ It is worth remembering here that the English word *guilt* is related to the German *Geld* and originally denoted a concrete debt of money or property. Also worth keeping in mind is *Singin' in the Rain's* preoccupation with literal money: how much the studio stands to lose if the borrowing is revealed and the donor seen. For all his pieties about proper credit, Simpson never strays from the bottom line.

That *Singin' in the Rain* is not uninterested in progenitors is clear from the extended preface to the Broadway number, which takes us from the burlesque stage to vaudeville to the Ziegfeld Follies to the musical of the film's present, all clearly seen and clearly labelled under the urgent lyric "gotta dance." This spelling out of genealogical "credit" reminds us of the film's larger concern with individual credit, which in turn invites us to ponder the completeness of this particular evolutionary account. Which in *its* turn leads us to the thought that, although this may be a correct enumeration of the institutional categories that precede the cinematic dance musical, it is history with something missing. The omission is all the more striking in light of what some might consider outright "quotations" from the routines of, for example, Bojangles Robinson, John Bubbles, the Berry and Nicholas Brothers (especially backflips off the wall),¹⁷ Peg Leg Bates (one-legged dancing), and other tap artists of the forties. Surely these performers were more immediate models for Kelly and O'Connor in *Singin' in the Rain* than were athletes Bob Cousy, Johnny Unitas, Mickey Mantle, and Sugar Ray Robinson, whose moves Kelly claimed to be the essence of dance,¹⁸ or for that matter than were Martha Graham and other modern dancers, whom Kelly cited as inspirational, but whose actual influence on his work was minimal.¹⁹ But my point here is not to argue that *Singin' in the Rain* is built of thefts, much less to identify the sources or insist on "ownership." Nor is it to suggest that this musical is unusually derivative or derivative in unusual ways. It is to suggest that, for whatever reason, *Singin' in the Rain* is itself worried about something along these lines—if not about whether the screen credit "Musical Numbers Staged and Directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen" really meets the terms of its own moralizing about giving credit where credit is due,

16. Further:

If and when your act appeared on the stage of the Lincoln, or even better, the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, your routine must be notably different. Once word got around that an act was booked at these theaters, other dancers lined up, and as soon as the doors opened, rushed down to the front rows. "They watched you like hawks," says Baby [Laurence], "and if you used any of their pet steps, they just stood right up in the theater and told everybody about it at the top of their voices." [*JD*, p. 338]

17. The source of O'Connor's backflips in "Make 'Em Laugh." For a specific discussion of the Nicholas Brothers's influence on Gene Kelly, see Jerome Delamater, *Dance in the Hollywood Musical* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1978), pp. 81–82.

18. The athletes listed by Kelly in his television program *Dancing: A Man's Game*.

19. See Delamater, *Dance in the Hollywood Musical*, p. 162.

then more generally about the possibility that too many of the unseen artists whose moves have been put to such brilliant and lucrative use in the “white dancer’s field” of the film musical are black.²⁰

The moment to be reckoned with in *Singin’ in the Rain*’s consciously unconscious relation to African-American dance comes midway in the film, when Don and Cosmo present to the producer their idea of remaking *The Duelling Cavalier*, which has flunked miserably as a simple sound film, as a musical. Studio director Simpson loves the idea, but then halts.

Simpson: The title. The title’s not right. We need a *musical* title.
Cosmo?

Cosmo [thinks for a moment, then comes up with an idea]: Hey!
The Duelling Mammy!

[All three pause.]

Cosmo: No. [Pause.] I’ve got it! [Pause.] No. [Pause. Then, triumphantly]: *The Dancing Cavalier!*

Duelling cavalier—duelling mammy—dancing cavalier. “Dancing” is the word the sequence aims toward, the word that will solve the problem of the musical (“We need a *musical* title”), but it can only be suggested by and arrived at through a reference to “mammy”—a reference that in a split second puts African-Americans into the picture and acknowledges that the artistic bridge between a brittle eighteenth-century melodrama and a vibrant twentieth-century musical is a racial one. But blackness is no sooner admitted than it is denied, for the next full sentence erases the one before it. Not immediately, but after a teasing sequence of pauses and false starts that has the character of a set of inarticulate permutations—the in-betweens of morphing, as it were. We can only speculate on what thoughts are suppressed by the “no’s” that lie between “duelling mammy” and “dancing cavalier,” but insofar as they get us from female to male in a context of blackness and dance, one of them surely adumbrates a dancing black man, invisible in the given story, but a logical step in the sequence. In any event, the scene ends jubilantly, with Cosmo dancing the Charleston,²¹ and that is the last we hear of the bridge term that got our movie men from a white loser to a white winner. The question is why it is there at all.

This is not the first occurrence of “the word Al Jolson had made famous” in *Singin’ in the Rain*.²² “Mammy” is also spoken, or rather sung, by Cosmo in a direct imitation of Jolson’s voice in *The Jazz Singer*—an

20. Delamater, *Dance in the Hollywood Musical*, p. 79. See also Rusty Frank, *Tap! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories, 1900–1955* (New York, 1990), hereafter abbreviated *T*; and *JD*; and also note 29 below.

21. On the racial politics of the Charleston, see *JD*, esp. pp. 110–14.

22. Michael Rogin, “Making America Home: Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Pictures,” *Journal of American History* 79 (Dec. 1992): 1065.

imitation that lasts no longer than the word itself, but one that captures Jolson's unmistakable voice catch. *Singin' in the Rain* is of course set in 1927, and in it *The Jazz Singer* is mentioned repeatedly as the competition, the new Hollywood benchmark, the watershed between past and future. Indeed, insofar as *Singin' in the Rain* claims to show the originary moment not just of the sound movie but of dubbing and the musical, it presents itself as *The Jazz Singer*'s imaginary contemporary. The films are ideologically connected, as well, both effecting the transition from a root-bound, European past (Jewish family and religious ritual in *The Jazz Singer*, eighteenth-century formulaic melodrama in *Singin' in the Rain*) to a free, American present defined by the music and dance of the jazz age—the “heart” story of the Hollywood musical (*HM*, p. 57). But where, however ambivalently, *The Jazz Singer* acknowledges the blackness of that enterprise and indeed shows us in detail the act of blackface that Jackie Rabinowitz must perform in order to belong to and profit from it, *Singin' in the Rain* skips the blacks and blackface part or reduces them to references so fleeting as to be almost invisible and almost inaudible.²³

It is perhaps inevitable that in the single scene in which black people appear in *Singin' in the Rain* they are not black. I refer to the moment that Don, heading to the movie set of *The Duelling Cavalier*, crosses the set of another movie, some jungle picture with a bunch of cannibals in tribal regalia.²⁴ As he walks by, he greets a particularly garish fellow in body paint, mask, and headdress: “Hiya, Maxie.” “Oh, hi, Don,” the fellow responds and briefly joins him in conversation. The joke is that the savage is not a savage and probably not even black. But it goes further than that. What the cannibals are *doing* when we first see them is dancing—a wild, primitive dance. The point is that if one of them is a white guy named Maxie, so might they all be—a bunch of white guys in blacked faces and bodies performing allegedly African dance. (“More steam in the kettle! More action, boys! A little more rhythm, boys!” the scene director calls out.) Lest we miss the connection, Cosmo at this moment rushes up to Don and announces that he’s just read in *Variety* of a new talking picture called *The Jazz Singer*, an all-time hit in the first week. (“All-time flop into the second,” counters another cannibal, clearly visible as a white man in blackface.)

What is so striking about these moments is not just that they are the only bits of blackness in an otherwise white film and not even that the

23. For a full discussion (with extensive bibliography) of the racial and gender politics of *The Jazz Singer*, see especially Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Spring 1992): 417–53. Although Feuer’s book is not concerned with race, it broaches the subject in its repeated suggestion that the “flow of energy from performer to audience” on which the musical rests stems from the “blackface ‘mammy-song’ tradition” (*HM*, p. 1).

24. Needless to say, the presence of cannibals is especially fitting in a film as dependent on artistic cannibalizing as this one is.



FIG. 1.—Jakie's "Mammy."

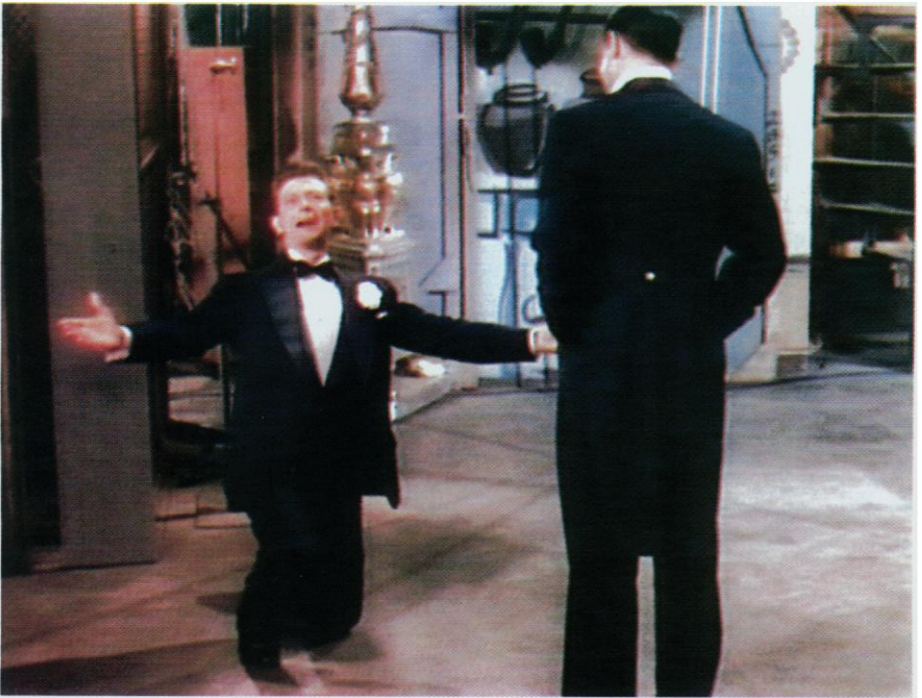


FIG. 2.—Cosmo's "Mammy."



FIG. 3.—Jakie corking up.



FIG. 4.—Don and Maxie.



FIG. 5.—Lip-synching revealed.



FIG. 6.—Macaulay Culkin and Michael Jackson.

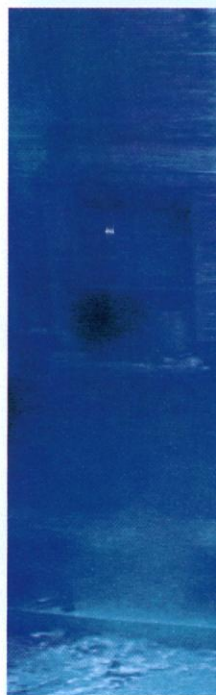




FIG. 7.—*Singin' in the Rain.*



FIG. 8.—“Black or White.”



FIG. 9.—*Singin' in the Rain.*



FIG.



FIG. 10.—From Rusty Frank, *Tap!* (1990), p. 131.



FIG. 11.—“Black or White.”



FIG. 9.—Singin' in the Rain.



FIG. 12.—Gene Kelly and the Nicholas brothers in *The Pirate*.



FIG. 13.—The Commitments watching James Brown.

FIG. 11.—“Black or White.”

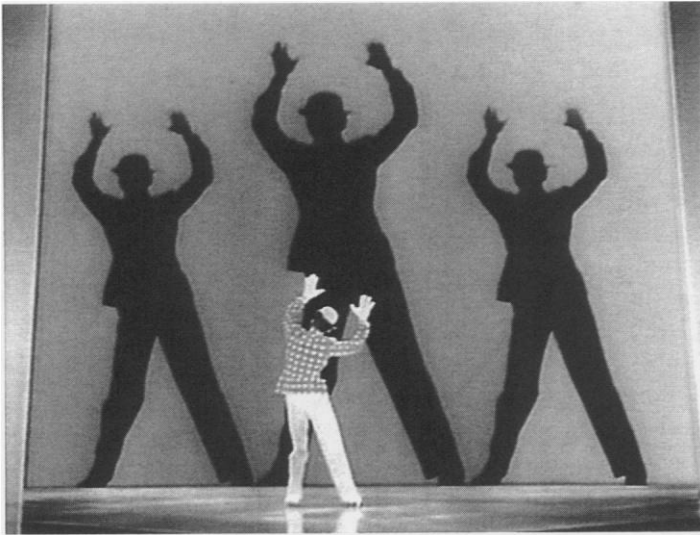


FIG. 14.—Fred Astaire's "Bojangles dance" in *Swingtime*.

blackness in question is arrived at through an act of blackface.²⁵ It is that they are so uncalled for. *The Jazz Singer* references may be justifiable in a plot about the shift to sound, but Cosmo's imitation of Jolson's blackface "Mammy," the "Duelling Mammy" title, and the dancing cannibals are downright gratuitous. So gratuitous that they want consideration as a system of symptoms, the kind of symptom that, in the postmodern critical scheme, is readable as a sign of repressed anxieties that underwrite the text but are denied by it. More particularly, I would suggest that these symptoms look for all the world like the complements of the paradoxical process Freud called *Verneinung*, negation, whereby the effort to "forget" necessarily calls up the very "memories" it means to put down.²⁶ The moments I have just enumerated in *Singin' in the Rain* seem to me just such "memories" in the framework of "forgetting." Glancingly but unmistakably, they suggest that *Singin' in the Rain*'s concern with miscredit has a racial underside—that its real subject is not white women's singing voices, but black men's dancing bodies.

It could be argued that black men's dancing bodies haunt even the film's title number.²⁷ The venue, at least, of the "Singin' in the Rain" se-

25. The film makes yet another joke on the subject when Kathy throws a cake at Don but misses, hitting Lina instead and leaving her with a white face.

26. See Sigmund Freud, "Negation" (1925), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 19:235–36, and Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, 1973), pp. 261–63.

27. For an extended discussion of what Wollen calls the "single most memorable dance number on film," see *SR*, pp. 9–29.

quence and the figure of the policeman conjure up the “school of the street” in which black tappers learned their trade in the shadow of the law. One tapper, LaVaughn Robinson, tells how dancers ranked corners and competed to get the best one and how, when a policeman was spotted, they quickly stopped and went back to their work shining shoes.²⁸ To judge from the number of film-musical street scenes that play out some version of the scenario, it was a well-known one among people who made (and danced in) movies in that era and presumably to some degree among audiences as well. One such movie sequence has a black tap dancer doing a street dance with a number of happy people looking on, a group that includes, in a spectacular example of pop-culture *Verneinung*, a couple of smiling, clapping white policemen (see *T*, p. 131). “Singin’ in the Rain”’s policeman is also benign, but he at least has a monitory effect on the dancer he catches in the act, an effect that hints at some other story behind this one, some other dancer and some other policeman behind these. If we in the nineties do not know the racial resonances of the trope of the street-dance-interrupted-by-policeman, Kelly and his colleagues surely did. Perhaps he even got a kick out of responding to Jolson’s performance in blackface with a performance of his own in black space. In any event, the setting of what has been called “the single most memorable dance number on film” is yet another racial gesture, one that puts Kelly where a black man used to be.

There is in itself nothing startling about *Singin’ in the Rain*’s happy use of African-American dance styles (and setting, in the case of Kelly’s solo dance). In this respect, the movie becomes part of the very history it gestures toward in the “hiya, Maxie” scene and *The Jazz Singer* references. These moments point to the immensely popular tradition, on stage and film, of the performance, by whites in blackface and often in venues that did not admit African-American performers, of music and dance deeply indebted to those performers. The film musical in particular drew heavily and variously on black art and talent. Only in the “Negro musical” was that talent front and center. The more common pattern was to put it off to the side (for example, the use of the Nicholas Brothers as Gene Kelly “flanks” in a number in *The Pirate*) or behind the scenes (for example, teachers like Herbie Harper and Buddy Bradley) or out of “creditable” range altogether (as in the case of those artists whose influence is palpable but altogether indirect).²⁹ The indirect influence of African-Americans

28. As Frank sums it up, “Dancing on street corners was an integral part of many a dancer’s schooling, and it was not, by any means, casual. There a dancer had to demonstrate bona fide skill to ‘survive.’ If a dancer could not ‘cut it,’ there was just no staying on that particular corner. Corners were ranked, and a dancer’s goal was to move up to the top corner” (*T*, p. 128).

29. The history on this point is abundant but frustratingly scattered. The single best source is *J.D. Delamater’s Dance in the Hollywood Musical*, which is overwhelmingly about white dancers, deals with African-American contributions in a couple of pages (indexed as

was nowhere more obviously admitted than in blackface numbers like those of the Jolson films, and numbers like Fred Astaire's "Bojangles dance" in *Swing Time* (1936).³⁰ For a variety of reasons, the Negro musical faded, and in the forties, in the wake of "post-World War II embarrassment about racial subordination and stereotyping" as well as in the wake of a deal the Hollywood studios struck with the NAACP on hiring and representational practices, and with the beginnings of the movement for civil rights, blackface came to an end.³¹ Traditional blackface, in any case. Blackface "more broadly understood"—whites simply imitating blacks, without the cork—throve as vigorously as before, notably in the phenomenon of covering in the music business.³² Although it could "no

"Black dancers, influence of"). In that short entry, designed simultaneously to acknowledge the black contribution and to justify his own lack of attention to it, Delamater notes the crucial importance to the film musical of eccentric dance ("eccentric" dancers being those who developed their own nonstandard movements and sold themselves on their individual styles) and goes on to say that

eccentric dancers in general have often been black, but with the prevailing fear in Hollywood that black performers might hurt a film's chances of success, few got the opportunity to establish themselves. Those who did, however, left a strong mark, for their performances not only displayed their own individual talents but also represented the enormous influence—direct and indirect—which black dancers had on all other contemporary popular dancers. Blacks had invented tap dancing as we know it, and they had, in turn, taught it to whites who, in their turn, became famous exploiting what they had learned. . . . Although it is unfortunate that more of the great black dancers of the first half of the twentieth century did not appear in film, it is a fact that dance in film has been almost exclusively a white dancer's field. [Delamater, *Dance in the Hollywood Musical*, pp. 78–79]

30. The Bojangles dance begins with a large black shape dominating stage center, roughly in the form of a head, with large white lips and a hat, surrounded by chorus dancers. The lips and hat disappear and we realize we're looking at two huge, overlapped shoe soles. The chorus girls pry apart the soles, which turn out to be attached to enormous legs, at the distant crotch of which we see a tiny Fred Astaire in blackface. The enormous legs are then rather startlingly detached from Astaire's body and carried off by the chorus girls. Fred steps down on his own (tiny) legs and embarks on a Bojangles-style tap dance in front of large shadows. For the case for homage, see Arlene Croce, *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (1972; New York, 1987), p. 107.

31. Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise," pp. 450–51. On the NAACP-Hollywood agreement of 1942, see Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (1977; New York, 1993), esp. pp. 3–7 and 349–89.

32. See George Lipsitz, "Against the Wind: Dialogic Aspects of Rock and Roll," *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990), pp. 99–132. The last few years have seen the cultivation of what might be called open racial covering. The film *The Commitments*, for example, in which a character figures the Irish as the blacks of Europe, purports to be pure homage to 1960s soul music, but the film soundtrack advertised at the end is by the Commitments. The issue of real profits and white denial of same emerged sharply in the contrast between two appearances of Wilson Pickett, one within and the other without the film. Actually, Pickett never appears in *The Commitments*, but the rumor that he might turn up to jam with the Commitments after his own Dublin concert looms over the film's third act and is an idea with all the force of the Kelly-O'Connor anecdotes about black validation. In what is for all practical purposes the film's final scene, the band's manager, alone on the streets after a last disastrous performance, encounters a limousine

longer root itself in open blackface display," Michael Rogin writes, "the theft of black music and performance styles energized 1950s popular culture"—a theft helped along, one might add, by the very sound technologies that *Singin' in the Rain* claims to expose.³³ It could be argued that there was a perverse honesty to traditional blackface. In its own way, *The Jazz Singer's* blackface act does point to where credit might be due. Not so *Singin' in the Rain*, whose art, dancing, is surely as "energized" by African-American forms as *The Jazz Singer's* singing is.³⁴ But keeping with its investment in the form of blackface "more broadly understood" that will characterize the coming generation of popular culture, *Singin'* keeps its energy source firmly covered.

Kelly and O'Connor were hardly unaware of their own relation to African-American dance. Both acknowledged their indebtedness to black performers and their pride at being accepted and appreciated by them. As Fred Kelly tells it, a high point in the Kelly Brothers' early career was their acceptance into and success in an all-black show, a job for which they applied under false pretenses. When the time came to audition, "We just marched right backstage and asked for the manager. I remember this enormous black man came out, and that he was sporting a Derby hat. He looked down on us and asked, 'You're The Kelly Brothers?'" The manager called for Cab Calloway to break off rehearsal and come over: "'Cab . . . meet The Kelly Brothers!' Cab walked in, took one look at us, looked at his manager, and in a real Amos and Andy put-on said, 'Somebody done make a *big* mistake!'" But of course all turns out well. "Gene and I danced the thing, and as soon as it was over, they all stood up and clapped and cheered. That was really something. The guys we were nuts about were applauding us!" (quoted in *T*, pp. 177–78). Similarly, O'Connor:

I knew Bill [Bojangles Robinson] very well. He was a wonderful guy and great to me as a kid. When I was fourteen, my family would work a lot at the Apollo Theater on One hundred twenty-fifth Street

driven by a black chauffeur who addresses his invisible passenger as Mr. Pickett. The status of the black performer as the structuring absence could hardly be clearer. In a PBS interview about two weeks after *The Commitments's* American release, Pickett really did appear, and he made it abundantly clear that for him the film had nothing to do with homage and everything to do with royalty rip-off. Cases like Pickett's "Midnight Hour" were the subject of "Rhythm, Royalties, and the Blues: The Dirty Little Secret of the Music Business," *Nightline*, ABC News, 6 Mar. 1995. Nor, according to a *Newsweek* article on the subject (Rick Marin and Allison Samuels, "A Risky Business," *Newsweek*, 18 July 1994, pp. 56–57), have rappers done much better for themselves.

33. Rogin, "'Democracy and Burnt Cork': The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," *Representations*, no. 40 (Spring 1994): 10. The Rogin essays referred to in this essay are forthcoming in a book to be published this year.

34. Which is very little, thinks Rogin: "The most obvious fact about *The Jazz Singer*, unmentioned in all the critical commentary, is that it contains no jazz" (Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise," p. 447).

in New York. I met Bill up there a couple of times, and we'd go around to different night clubs. White guys, well, they weren't permitted in. With Bill I got in all the time. Everybody got to know me, and they nicknamed me King. They started calling, "Where's the King, where's the King." And after a while I was known as the "King of Harlem." [Quoted in *T*, p. 149]³⁵

One could hardly ask for a plainer expression of the speakers' desire to be as good as black: white men can *too* dance.³⁶ But what I want to draw attention to in these two accounts is the ironic fact that, whether true or imagined and however mixed with other feelings, they contemplate scenarios in which credit *is* given where it is due, even across nervous racial lines. At least as these white dancers tell it, blacks give their stages over to them, applaud them, call them "king."³⁷ It is a favor that *Singin' in the Rain* does not return.

But it is also a favor that it cannot forget. Fred Astaire once said of his style of dance, "I don't know how it all started, and I don't want to know. . . . I just dance."³⁸ It's a funny sentence, the second clause unbalancing the first, suggesting that he *does* know (certainly his Bojangles dance in *Swing Time* "knows") or knows more than he would like but

35. That the idea still has force is suggested by Joni Mitchell's recent confession, "You know, in my entire adult life, my favorite compliment—and I think a true compliment should be inspiring, not just flattering—was received from a blind black piano player. And what he said was, Joni, thank you for your music—it's genderless and raceless" (quoted in *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 Dec. 1994, p. E12).

36. Both subscribe, in effect, to Norman Podhoretz's 1963 declaration:

Yet just as in childhood I envied Negroes for what seemed to me their superior masculinity, so I envy them today for what seems to me their superior physical grace and beauty. I have come to value physical grace very highly, and I am now capable of aching with all my being when I watch a Negro couple on the dance floor, or a Negro playing baseball or basketball. They are on the kind of terms with their own bodies that I should like to be on with mine, and for that precious quality they seem blessed to me. [Norman Podhoretz, "My Negro Problem—and Ours," *Commentary* 35 (Feb. 1963): 99]

See also bell hooks's discussion of the passage in her "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, 1992), p. 96.

37. One could argue that the musical numbers that feature a white man between and above a black man or men (for example, Gene Kelly and the Nicholas Brothers in *The Pirate*, Dan Dailey and the Berry Brothers in *You're My Everything*) flesh out exactly this white (male) fantasy.

38. The remark appears on the last page of his autobiography, and it is his sole comment on "the history and the philosophy of 'the dance.'" He writes that he revolted against ballet but is vague on just what he revolted *into*. His book closes as follows: "When you come to the evolution of the dance, its history and philosophy, I know as much about that as I do about how a television tube produces a picture—which is absolutely nothing. I don't know how it all started and I don't want to know. I have no desire to prove anything by it. I have never used it as an outlet or as a means of expressing myself. I just dance." A variety of sources attest to Astaire's involvement with black tappers. See *T* and Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, esp. p. 99: "Fred Astaire proudly boasted of appearing on the same vaudeville card with Bill Robinson."

doesn't want to deal with the implications of that knowledge and so willfully denies it: I don't want to know, I just do it. So *Singin' in the Rain*, which on one hand denies, by whitening out, knowledge of black dance, but which on the other hand, as if enacting the second clause of Astaire's sentence, undercuts that denial and in so doing obliquely admits not only that it *does* know but that it feels guilty about it. No matter how energetically *Singin'* directs our attention to singing and whites, it keeps sending sideways glances to dancing and blacks.³⁹ Take those sideways glances (*The Duelling Mammy*, Jolson citations, dancing savages, Kelly's insertion of the word "dancin'" in the title song, street-and-policeman dance setting), put them next to the film's story of money and credit, consider both of these in the context of the lead dancers' charged relation to the black performers in their past, and you arrive at the anxiety that I am arguing both underwrote the production and to some extent drove and may still drive the reception of the most famous musical of all time. What *Singin' in the Rain* doesn't-but-does know is that the real art of the film musical is dance, that a crucial talent source for that art is African-American performance, and that, relative to its contribution, this talent source is undercredited and underpaid. It is admitting, in effect, that although there may be no fixed line between homage and theft in the world of the film musical, there are roughly zones, and even white people know what they are.⁴⁰

Recent studies have questioned the conventional view of the cultural appropriations of early nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy (1843 to the 1860s) as vicious theft, pure and simple. Directing our attention to the "slips, silences, and (in)admissions" that attend the various texts around and about minstrelsy, Eric Lott proposes that the act of blackface was, in the white racial unconscious, a far more complicated affair than the standard account would have it, one haunted by desire (toward black men) and guilt.⁴¹ Although there are traces of desire in the Kelly-O'Connor anecdotes of their early experience among African-American performers and arguably in Kelly's style of dance as well (or at least in his obsession with dance as masculine display, a "man's game"),⁴² it is the

39. As Rogin, on reading this essay in manuscript, summed it up, "the movie makes all the references to *The Jazz Singer* as an anxiety-of-influence false trail; it pretends it's about talking pictures and *not* blackface (surely Maxie as a blackface Jew is perfectly conscious)" (Rogin, conversation with author).

40. I would suggest that the impassioned quality of Croce's defence of the Bojangles dance indicates that she too knows; see note 30 above.

41. Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations*, no. 39 (Summer 1992): 37; hereafter abbreviated "LT." See also his *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993).

42. Writes Lott: "The primary purpose of early blackface performance was to display the 'black' male body, to fetishize it in a spectacle that worked against the forward motion of the show and froze 'the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation,' as Laura Mulvey has written of women in cinema" ("LT," p. 28).

guilt theme that bears most heavily on *Singin' in the Rain*. Lott notices in the early accounts of "meetings between racial representatives" (encounters in which whites expropriated the clothes, songs, dances, language, gestures of African-Americans) repeated references to ownership, payment, exchange value, cultural capital—to business transactions, in short. Insofar as they suggest that "all accounts have been paid in full," such references to transactions, however denigrating, and true or not, disclose "white guilt or anxiety around minstrelsy as a figure for the plundering of black culture," one stemming from the "slavery's unremunerated labor" ("LT," pp. 41, 42, 41).

Slavery may have been remote to audiences in 1952, but the plundering of black culture was not, and to judge from *Singin' in the Rain* neither were white guilt and anxiety on that score. This is not surprising, given the economics of the entertainment business. If ever there were an arena in which profit was to be had, this is it. ("The moment that interests me in these narratives," Lott writes of early minstrelsy, "is the one in which black sounds fill the air and fascinated white men understand for the first time that there are fame and money to be made" ["LT," p. 38].) What is more surprising is the way *Singin' in the Rain* announces the source of its concern. Its story could easily have been told without dancing savages and *The Duelling Mammy* (and the Charleston), and the appeals to *The Jazz Singer* as the first sound film could have pointed to dimensions of that work other than the blackface number. I said earlier that it is the very gratuitousness of these references that demands our attention. Actually, they are not *gratuitous* at all, at least not in the root sense of that word (*gratis*, free). Rather, they are moral payoffs in an economy in which "there are fame and money to be made." They are the "memories" that surface in the process of "forgetting," as though, in a perverse bargain, they must be admitted *in order* to be overridden.⁴³

But *Singin' in the Rain* goes the process of negation one better, for it not only footnotes its plagiarism but hitches the whole to a morality tale exactly *about* plagiarism: "people just don't *do* things like that!" In the world of the film musical—and it is important to remember here that *Singin' in the Rain* means to be not just the originary moment of the movie musical, but its key text—it is not enough merely to mention and silence, remember and forget, the source. An entire plot must be mobilized to accomplish the forgetting of "the efficient expropriation of the cultural commodity 'blackness'" in an arena, the film musical, that was not only

43. This is by no means the only thing *Singin' in the Rain* denies. Its focus on the failure of the female voice denies its origin in male concerns; its presentation of itself as folk art denies its money-making *raison d'être*; and its exposure of sound technology belies its own sound practices. On the first, see note 2. On the second and third, see Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*. Feuer is particularly struck by the way *Singin'* negates (that is, remembers in order to forget) sound technology: "It's as if we've been given a complete confession in order to conceal the real crime," she writes (*HM*, p. 47).

high stakes, but the essence of American cultural vitality for the better part of three decades (“LT,” p. 24).⁴⁴ Poor Lina carries a heavy burden. She is the scapegoat not only for all the actors, male and female alike, whose voices flunked the shift to sound, but for all the white performers who danced the art of unseen others—which is to say for the film musical itself. No wonder her exposure must be so brutal and her humiliation so complete; she is the repository of a guilt so much greater than her own.

In 1985, an aging Gene Kelly narrated the MGM-produced anthology of film dance called *That's Dancing!* “In 1983,” he declares near the end, “film dancing entered a new era. Music videos began to play on television and in motion picture theaters, offering audiences a stylized and exhilarating form of dancing on the screen. The most innovative and certainly the most successful exponent of this new medium is a young and gifted composer, singer, dancer, and choreographer who obviously will be leading the way for some time to come: Michael Jackson!” With those words, Kelly introduces the final dance sequence of the *That's Dancing!* compilation: Jackson’s “Beat It.” “And that’s dancing!” Kelly intones at the close of Jackson’s routine, and the credits for *That's Dancing!* roll.⁴⁵ One wonders whether Kelly would have been so generous to Jackson eight years later, after the appearance of “Black or White,” an eleven-minute music video said to have premiered simultaneously in twenty-seven countries to an audience of some 500 million viewers.⁴⁶ Because its infamous ending bears on the subject of this paper, I include a discussion of it here by way of a coda.

In fact, in 1983 when “Beat It” was released, and even in 1985 when *That's Dancing!* was made, Michael Jackson was one of very few black stars to have appeared on MTV. For some years after the advent of the “new era” and the “new medium,” MTV—yet another venue in which money was to be made—had notoriously higher thresholds for African-American performers, though it regularly featured white artists singing “black” songs (for example, Teena Marie or George Michael, whose album *Faith* was resented and even boycotted in some black circles on grounds that it was trying to “pass” on the R&B charts) and/or white artists (for example, Peter Gabriel and Madonna) who, like Gene Kelly in *The Pirate*, surrounded themselves with an “aura” of black musicians

44. According to Fordin (*WE*, p. 362), *Singin'* cost \$2,540,800 to make and grossed \$7,655,000 (on its first run).

45. *That's Dancing!* prod. David Niven, Jr. and Jack Haley, Jr., dir. Haley, 105 min., MGM/UA, 1985, videocassette.

46. See Michael Jackson, *Dangerous: The Short Films*, prod. Ute Leonhardt, dir. David Lynch et al., 112 min., MJJ Productions, 1993, videocassette. The broadcast premiere of “Black or White” was on Fox. For a somewhat different take, see Lott, “The Aesthetic Ante: Pleasure, Pop Culture, and the Middle Passage,” *Callaloo* 17 (Summer 1994): 545–55.

and dancers.⁴⁷ In short, the new disposition of race on MTV in the 1980s looked remarkably like the old disposition of race in the movie musical of the 1930s and 1940s, with the brilliant but also token Jackson holding down a position not unlike that once occupied by Bojangles Robinson.⁴⁸

"Black or White" opens with a young white boy (Macaulay Culkin) playing heavy metal music too loudly in his bedroom. His father orders him to turn it down, and in revenge the boy turns up the amp and blasts his father through the roof into outer space. The father lands in Africa amidst dancing tribesmen, who morph into dancing Balinese women, who in turn morph into dancing Native Americans, and so on through a series of ethnic dance performances, with Michael Jackson always at the center singing the title song "Black or White." Meanwhile, back in America, the Macaulay Culkin figure is now hanging out on the street with a group of hip-hoppers and miming a rapper as he lip-synchs an adult male voice. We move to a recording studio and, still over the title song "Black or White," witness another morphing sequence, this time of faces (black, white, Asian, blond, dark, male, female, and so on) blending into one another. The recording session ends and people drift away, leaving only a black panther that, once outdoors, morphs into Michael Jackson. Alone on a dark, abandoned street, he begins the dance that met with so much public consternation that it was cut from nearly all subsequent broadcasts of the video.⁴⁹

At the point that we move to the street, day gives way to night, vivid color to something like dark blue and white, fast cutting to longer takes, international flitting about to a single, focused location, cheer to gritty intensity, racial harmony to black panther,⁵⁰ and, most strikingly, music to silence, or rather to silence punctuated by the natural sounds of Jackson's movements (tapping, panting, hitting things) and a reiterated scream. No singin' here, just dancin', with no music at all, for nearly five minutes.

And on a back street.⁵¹ The identity of that street emerges gradually.

47. Performers in the latter category, conspicuously British ones like Gabriel, often took the righteous position that they were at least offering black backup performers work, even work that located their talent in their own bodies; but the income and fame differential remains.

48. Robinson's racial position has long been a sore point. See, for example, *JD*, esp. p. 151; Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today* (1972; Princeton, N.J., 1988), pp. 231–33 and n. 61; and Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York, 1973).

49. Whether the whole event was staged as a publicity stunt remains an open question. Certainly the commercial video used the uproar for all it was worth.

50. Reported Mary Hart of *Entertainment Tonight*: "He was only trying to interpret the animalistic instincts of the panther into a dance" (in Jackson, *Dangerous*).

51. I can't help noting that, as if in mute deference to the centrality of the tradition, *That's Dancing!*'s compilation of show dance, ballet, and modern dance stars and numbers is bookended by street-dance scenes: kids break-dancing to a boom box at the beginning and, at the end, the inner-city dance-war "Beat It."

Early details (wind, leaves, newspapers, cat) recall Jackson's earlier video "Billie Jean," but when the camera pans and brings into view the telltale lamppost, and when we then see, in closeup, Jackson's feet stamping in puddles on a street that at first seemed dry, we recognize the terrain of the Kelly classic.⁵² The connection is sealed when Jackson interrupts his own dance routine to tilt his hat forward, hooper-mode, and indulge a quick Kelly-style tap sequence. But no sooner are we situated in *Singin' in the Rain* than the mode changes. The dance turns increasingly sexual, as Jackson grabs his crotch and thrusts his pelvis, and increasingly violent as he takes his "umbrella," a crowbar, and starts smashing first car and then store windows. To be sure, the windows all bear hate graffiti ("Hitler lives," swastikas, "nigger go home," "no more wetbacks," "KKK rules"), and the video ends with the rubric "Prejudice is ignorance," but networks were less impressed by the pieties than by the sheer violence of it all. When it comes right down to it, no message in the world is good enough to sustain the image of a black man atop a car battering it to smithereens.⁵³ The video ends with a snippet from *The Simpsons*.

Just what Jackson meant by putting his dance in the "Singin' in the Rain" frame is not clear. What *is* clear is that it is racially loaded. This is, after all, the final sequence of a video that is titled "Black or White" and that features a white kid imitating black hip-hoppers (indeed, lip-synching a rap song, in Michael Jackson's shadow), a white man landing in Africa amidst dancing natives (in a scene remarkably like the dancing cannibals scene in *Singin' in the Rain*), two racial morphing sequences, black and white babies sitting on top of the world, lyrics that insist "I'm not going to spend my life being a color," a black panther (out of and into which Jackson morphs) on an inner-city street, a sequence of racial graffiti, a moral about prejudice, and a dance number by a black man—the greatest show dancer of our time—in something awfully close to white-face. Actually, as the censors clearly saw, the video falls into two distinct parts: the cheerful singing part and the angry dancing part. If the first seems committed to the erasure of racial difference ("I'm not going to spend my life being a color"), the second reinstates it with a vengeance

52. Kelly would have us believe that he was inspired by "children . . . splashing about in rain puddles" and that he "decided to become a kid again during the number" (quoted in *SR*, p. 17), but there is a touch of vehemence in his splashing, and it does escalate—to be interrupted and contained only by the sudden appearance of the law. On "Black or White"'s street, no policeman enters. The law that we imagine kept even back alleys in order in 1952, and is said to have stopped street dance, is nowhere to be seen in 1991.

53. This is not the first rewriting of "Singin' in the Rain" as an exercise in violence. In a no-less-infamous scene from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) Alex sings and dances the song as he uses his "umbrella," a club, to beat a woman to death and her husband within an inch of his life ("I'm singin'"—bash—"and dancin'"—bash—"in the rain"—bash, bash). Whether Jackson's "Black or White" video was also gesturing toward the Kubrick film is not clear. What is clear is that both reflexes seem to "know" something about the "Singin' in the Rain" number that the film *Singin' in the Rain* and the voluminous commentary about it both deny.

as the black man, under the sign not of the police but of a black panther, does what, in the American imaginary, black men do on dark and now policeless inner-city streets: practice violence as an art form.

If this is an homage to the man who inducted Jackson into Hollywood's hall of dance fame, it could hardly be more perverse. I would propose that its eruption has all the force of a return of the repressed, and insofar as it has unequivocally to do with race, I would venture further to say that, intentionally or not, it works to "un-cover" or "de-blackface" *Singin' in the Rain*. It obliges us to ask whether Kelly came by that street corner honorably and to consider what talent sources might have been behind *his* "curtain" and, by extension, behind the "curtain" of the white dance musical in general. Some forty years after Cosmo faltered at the gap between *The Duelling Cavalier* and *The Dancing Cavalier*, Michael Jackson vehemently dances forth its no's.