

Mark Steven Greenfield's Re-Animation

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The character featured in Mark Steven Greenfield's *Blamo* has a long history or, better put, a deep and complex genealogy. One may trace his present incarnation to the nineteenth century, and likely even earlier. In Greenfield's work, he appears as a bespoke, gun-wielding rabbit standing against a field of seductively careening black marks, the ferocity of his person perfectly echoed in the row of razor-sharp, spear-like stalks behind him. His ancestor, Br'er Rabbit (or "Brother Rabbit"), is featured prominently in Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation*, published in 1881, as well as subsequent Uncle Remus volumes by Harris.¹

In his book, which was set in the post-bellum era, Harris endeavored to record the folk tales of African Americans in the South, or at least his versions of them. His Uncle Remus character, a former slave, serves as the storyteller. Told to the young son of a plantation owner in Harris's rendering of "negro" dialect ("mawnin" for "good morning" and "sezee" for "says he," for example, or "gwine ter" for "going to" and "sho's" for "as sure as"), many of Uncle Remus's tales pitted the wily Br'er Rabbit against his animal counterparts. They included Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear, with a whole host of other creatures playing major roles or bit parts. Intended to be humorous, these tales—"The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," in which Br'er Rabbit gets his comeuppance, is perhaps the most well known—also served as allegories or moral lessons, and some scholars have interpreted them as barely-veiled parables addressing the plantation system and its various constituents.²

1 Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881).

2 Harris, "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings*, 23-25; Elizabeth D. Schafer, "Uncle Remus," in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jan Harold

The rabbit in *Blamo*, then, descends from Harris's Br'er Rabbit, but not directly. Before landing in Greenfield's drawing, he took a pass through Walt Disney's *Song of the South*, a movie musical based on the Uncle Remus stories and released in 1946.³ In *Song of the South*, which is set on a Georgia plantation during the Reconstruction era, live actors play the members of the resident white family and the African Americans who live and work on the plantation's grounds, while the tales told by Uncle Remus (James Baskett) are animated and feature the distinctly human-like animal characters from Harris's books. If Harris's old uncle caricature and his "negro" speech strike contemporary viewers as offensive, Disney's adaptation of his books hits the audience over the head with racist stereotypes, including the happy, grinning mammy character Aunt Tempy (Hattie McDaniel), and the animated Tar Baby. Historical distortions also abound in the film's refusal to acknowledge the Reconstruction setting. In fact, *Song of the South* makes the case for the benevolence of slavery, the simple-mindedness of blacks, and the desire on the part of slaves to maintain the status quo (the film's blacks are well-treated, well-fed, and clearly delighted to have their menial and degrading jobs).

As Patricia A. Turner writes in *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies*, Disney's recreation of Harris's story was "much more heinous than the original."⁴ The animated Br'er Rabbit, who we meet in the Briar Patch immediately after Uncle Remus sings his signature song, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," speaks in a minstrelsy-like idiom similar to that of the African American characters in the film, as do his nemeses Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear. In addition, he pairs this manner of

Brunvand (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 724-725; *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris*, ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981); Alice Walker, "The Dummy in the Window," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 233-239.

³ "Song of the South," IMDb, Inc. (Internet Movie Database), amazon.com, accessed December 22, 2012, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038969/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1.

speaking with goggle-eyed looks and exaggerated gestures and movements, as befitting a cartoon character but also typical of a blackface performer in a minstrelsy show.

Br'er Rabbit's comportment bears meaning. Like a whole host of racially stereotyped characters in animation from the first half of the twentieth century (and beyond), including those Greenfield references in his drawings and video work—Professor Scarecrow, Jasper, Mr. Popo, Jim Crow, Bosko, Little Black Sambo, and the inhabitants of Lazy Town—the boundary between animal and human blurs in *Song of the South*. Animals take on human characteristics, or vice versa, and humans and animals speak or sing to one another as if members of the same species. Br'er Rabbit stands upright, wears a collared shirt and long pants, and converses with Uncle Remus. Although animated, he appears in live action scenes, including one at the end of the movie in which the cartoon characters meet the actors in a live action setting, everyone singing “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” before the “real” world transmutes into an animated one as the sun sets. These hybrid forms and states of being allow for an unabashed and seemingly benign airing of prejudice—they are imaginary characters after all, and what's the harm in a bunny that talks? But that prejudice reifies *precisely* because these imaginary characters, when immersed in a live action context, seem so possible and real.

The well-dressed, well-armed rabbit in *Blamo* is more zoot-suiter than hare. His skin is blacked up and his mouth a sneering version of a minstrel's cherry-red, bloated grin. His body is stretched and distorted as only a cartoon character's could be—huge feet, enormous hands; a feather-light torso. He counts Disney's Br'er Rabbit as an ancestor, along with the rabbit's

4 Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 113. See also Peggy A. Russo, “Uncle Walt's Uncle Remus: Disney's Distortion of Harris's Hero,” *Southern Literary Journal* 25 (Fall 1992), 19-32; James Snead, “Trimming Uncle Remus's Tales: Narrative Revisions in Walt Disney's *Song of the South*,” *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1994), chap. 6; and Jason Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence, and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

various animated animal brethren that have served as surrogates for African Americans and the sublimating vehicles for no-holds-barred racism in media.

But who is the rabbit in *Blamo*, exactly? And why does he make an appearance in Greenfield's art? Hailing from Ralph Bakshi's 1975 movie *Coonskin*, the character depicted in *Blamo* goes by the name of Brother Rabbit, but rather than the wily fool of the Uncle Remus stories and *Song of the South*, in Bakshi's film he is a fierce and clever gangster looking to rule the Harlem underworld. A parody of the Disney movie, it is a simultaneously a funny and tragic send-up of the pervasive racism in American television and film. More broadly, *Coonskin* replaces Uncle Remus with an imprisoned black man named Pappy (Scatman Crothers) who regales another prisoner, Randy (Phillip Michael Thomas), with tales of Brother Rabbit's exploits. Meanwhile, Randy, Brother Rabbit's live surrogate in the film, prepares to make a break from jail. Randy's partners in crime, Sampson (Barry White) and Preacherman (Charles Gordone), who race to the jail to spring him, have their own animated counterparts, Brother Rabbit's collaborators Brother Bear and Preacher Fox. They help the Rabbit overthrow a corrupt cop, a false prophet, and a mafia don in order to run the show in Harlem (the animated animals are in each case played by their corollary actor).⁵ The pose struck by Brother Rabbit in *Blamo* comes from a scene in which the mafia puts a hit on Rabbit, who turns the tables and shoots and kills the hit man, the don's son Sonny disguised in blackface. Almost all of the animated characters in *Coonskin*—including Bear and Fox as well as a whole host of gangsters, criminals, prostitutes, dirty cops, con men, and poor saps caught in the crossfire—boast the most egregious visual stereotypes on offer, easily recognizable from their cartoon and live action predecessors. Bug eyes, buck teeth, ruby-red and molasses-droopy lips, and skin so black it looks like negative

⁵ "Coonskin," IMDb, Inc. (Internet Movie Database), amazon.com, accessed December 22, 2012, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071361/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1.

space, offend equally in their grossly exaggerated speech, gestures, and proclivities. The story itself turns *Song of the South* on its head, allying Rabbit, Bear, and Fox against the proverbial Man. This plot twist, in combination with the relatively toned-down stereotype in the depiction of Brother Rabbit, distinguishes *Coonskin* from its vile precedents and signals that something other than racist hoots and hollers is afoot.

Whether or not the viewer of *Coonskin* recognizes or cares about the parody, rather than simply enjoying the taboo imagery or investing in it psychically, is another question. The film was controversial from the outset, as has been the case with other resurrections and appropriations of racist stereotype. Recent examples include Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000) and the work of contemporary artists such as Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles, which has a good deal in common with that of Greenfield.

This question of interpretation, of course, is one addressed by Greenfield in his art.

When the viewer looks at Greenfield's *Blamo*, he or she confronts a character built from layers of history, a single figure fashioned from a multitude of appropriated parts, one that brings into the present the force of a gunshot with the detritus of the past. The gangster Brother Rabbit's violent gesture portrayed here signifies this horrific past made present, while making clear that the "then" has always been a part of the "now," that the past has never really gone away.

Sigmund Freud described the unconscious as a repository for repressed memories of trauma, painful feelings, phobias, atavistic instincts, and socially proscribed desires. Freud also described how the repressed unconscious might return, radically disrupting normal psychic functioning. Brother Rabbit in *Blamo* might then be characterized as just such a return of the repressed, a violent or sudden eruption of the forbidden or taboo. In this case, it combines a racist stereotype (or the illicit enjoyment of it) and traumatic memories of racism and racial violence. Greenfield the artist offers two distinct modes of signification in his drawing: popular culture, as represented by *Coonskin*'s Brother Rabbit, and high art, as figured by his eloquent, squirming,

almost-Pollock-like forms. In their mutual invasion, the world of cartoons infiltrates the realm of abstraction and, in turn, abstraction colonizes the rough-and-ready domain of animation. One such disruption in <name of artwork here> is indicated by a vertical tear in the field of abstract forms where, it seems, Brother Rabbit has burst through. In this way, the abstract field assumes the guise of a screen ‘memory’, theorized by Freud as a false recollection of the past that masks an emotionally significant or traumatic event.

According to Freud, a screen memory may be as disturbing or perverse as the actual event, and *Blamo* seems to run with this idea, positing Brother Rabbit and the whole array of animated characterizations of African Americans over the years as surrogates or substitutes for actual history. Slavery, segregation, the demonization of race, are no less disturbing than the real when they are transformed into animated fun and games that serve as vehicles to carry the persistent, actual material effects of racism.⁶

Greenfield has likened the mark-making in his recent work, as exemplified by *Blamo*, to traditions of automatic writing. It was practiced by nineteenth-century believers in the occult and, more famously, by the Surrealists, a group of artists interested in probing the human unconscious. Automatic writing involves the attempt to produce texts without the interference of conscious intent.⁷ Created spontaneously, without volition, automatic writing was thought by the Surrealists to express the contents of the unconscious and reveal what the psyche had repressed.

In this way, the black marks that weave through Greenfield’s drawings, morphing into abstract shapes, quasi-objects, or anthropomorphic forms, allude to the veil of historical memory.

They also constitute the vehicle by which Brother Rabbit and his attendant traumas have been

⁶ For definitions of these basic Freudian concepts, see *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (London: Hogarth Press, 1973).

⁷ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969); Rachel Leah Thompson, “The Automatic Hand: Spiritualism, Psychoanalysis, Surrealism,” *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* 7 (Spring 2004), http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_7/title7.html, accessed on 1/3/13.

called forth, as if the unconscious of the American nation was laid bare through this involuntary writing. What is more, the inky sharpness of Greenfield's weaving and wending forms evokes an animator at work, manipulating his pen or brush to conjure live bodies from inert media. In this way, the abstract marks serve to implicate the human creators of such animated characters as Br'er Rabbit. There are many others, including the pint-sized "darky" and tiger antagonist Little Black Sambo, repurposed for Greenfield's *Little Black Sambo Joins the Boy Scouts*; Jim Crow, the jive-talkin' bird in Walt Disney's *Dumbo* and featured in Greenfield's *Jimmy Crow*; Jasper, the dim-witted black boy in George Pal's *Puppetoon* series from the 1940s, who appears in Greenfield's video montage; Mr. Popo, the slack-jawed, big-lipped, and demonic caretaker in the anime *Dragon Ball*, depicted by Greenfield in *Mr. Popo and the Poppies of Forgetfulness*; and Mammy. A staple of American cartoons at mid-century, Mammy was featured in "Scrub me Mama with a Boogie Beat," released by Universal Pictures in 1941. It tells the story of a bodacious female visitor's jazz singing, which galvanizes the monkey-like residents of Lazy Town to dance, work, and bathe. The cartoon closes with Mammy bending over to reveal the words "The End" written on her outsize bloomers.

Indeed, in his work Greenfield repeatedly references the craft of animation through his chosen media and by way of his abstract mark-making. In doing so, he calls attention to the deliberate craft of racism.

For instance, many of his pen and ink drawings, including *Blamo*, are executed on Duralar, a polyester drafting film. Greenfield lays down the ink drawing on the film's surface and then adds color on the reverse, a process that mimics the production of animation cels hand-drawn by animators in the first half of the twentieth century. Likewise, Greenfield's appropriation of the cartoon character Bosko, who makes an appearance in two of Greenfield's works—his video montage and *Bosko Dispensing Cool*—speaks directly to the technique and

materials of animation. Described as a “Negro boy” when his creators, Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising, copyrighted him, but simian in appearance and possessed of an Uncle-Remus-like voice, Bosko starred in a series of *Looney Tunes* shorts in the 1920s and 30s. The clip that launched Bosko’s career at Warner Bros., entitled *Bosko, the Talk-Ink Kid*, combines live action with animation: Ising draws Bosko, who then comes to life and performs for the audience before disappearing into the inkwell from whence he came.⁸

In *Bosko Dispensing Cool*, a panel executed in cotton embroidery, Greenfield stitches meandering, abstract marks similar to those in *Blamo* and his other drawings. Combined with the Bosko character embroidered at lower right, these marks allude to his inky origins and thus to the painstaking handwork and tools involved in producing decades’ worth of racist imagery for eager audiences.

In this way, Greenfield posits animation in the first half of the twentieth century as something like a blackface factory, its workers mass producing minstrel-like characters that proliferated in American entertainment just as Greenfield’s abstract forms proliferate and spread across his images. The cotton motif that appears in many of Greenfield’s works - including the Bosko embroidery and *Br’er Rabbit Negotiating Solo*, *Jimmy Crow*, *Professor Scarecrow and the Contradiction*, and, of course, the *Vague Memories of Cotton* series – especially conveys this proliferation. Its repetition and multiplication serves as a potent symbol of unchecked propagation. The fiery explosive form of Greenfield’s cotton boll evokes not just the violent history of slavery, but also suggests the incendiary assault of degrading imagery when broadcast on television.

The medium, and tedium, of embroidery itself registers persistence. As a handicraft often associated with the past, especially nineteenth century America, embroidery in the present

⁸ Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 154-160.

manifests as a kind of haunting, an effect underscored by the black-on-black of Greenfield's three embroidered works. The ghostly sheen produced as light strikes the surface of the tightly stitched forms calls to mind another nineteenth-century medium, the daguerreotype, where the photographed subject appears or vanishes depending on the viewer's angle of vision.

Embroidery also allows Greenfield to stage what might be called a re-writing or re-animating of the characters featured in these works. In each, one animated character—Jim Crow, Bosko, and Br'er Rabbit—stands in the center of a ring, as if performing at a circus, and behaves as he might in his original cartoon context: Bosko shucks and jives for an unseen audience, Br'er Rabbit tips his hat to the Tar Baby, and Jim Crow confidently sizes up his out-of-frame antagonists. Adjacent to each circus act churns a tangle of abstract shapes and forms that, while they evoke accoutrements from the cartoons, including string instruments, musical notes, and top hats as well as the bodies, limbs, and faces of the characters themselves, never settle into fixed or identifiable shapes. They remain unintelligible as they transmute and transform, an effect analogous to that of Greenfield's video montage, which defies coherence by offering three simultaneous feeds. The fluid, distorted motion of Greenfield's embroidered marks mimics the typical gravity-defying and body-warping movements of characters in a cartoon, as if to suggest that these very characters have taken on a wholly new form. They shed the clothes and skin of minstrelsy to become unrecognizable, making their own, haphazard, joyous, and irreverent way. They are tricksters no longer tricked; the double-cross involved in appropriating African American folklore to create centuries worth of racist imagery now exposed.

This simultaneous return and metamorphosis—now you see Br'er Rabbit, now you don't—drives home the idea that only by resurrecting the truth behind movie and TV images can one forge a new path and move forward instead of endlessly repeating the past. Only by re-animating and re-contextualizing these characters, or, in the case of the embroidery works,

literally re-stitching them, as if remaking the world, might one come to understand them well enough to move on. Uncle Remus, *Song of the South*, *Coonskin*, and, now Greenfield, who perpetuates the genealogy only to expose and disrupt the lineage: in *Blamo*'s pedigree the stench of the past coexists necessarily with the slightly more fragrant present, and Brother Rabbit's gun is aimed right at history's heart.

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Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881).

Harris, "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings*, 23-25; Elizabeth D. Schafer, "Uncle Remus," in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 724-725; *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris*, ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981); Alice Walker, "The Dummy in the Window," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 233-239.

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