Blackface, White Noise

Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot

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To escape from a servile life into the freedom
of just conditions.

Wat Tyler memorial, Norwich, England, 1949

For Ann,
and in memory of James E. B. Breslin,
December 12, 1935—January 6, 1996
Blackface, White Noise

*The Jewish Jazz Singer* Finds His Voice

I

Four race movies—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Birth of a Nation, The Jazz Singer,* and *Gone with the Wind*—provide the scaffolding for American film history. From one thematic perspective these motion pictures describe a circle: an abolitionist plantation story is answered by the southern view of Reconstruction, which in turn is answered in the shift from southern racial hierarchy to northern immigrant opportunity. By relocating the struggling immigrants Scarlett O’Hara and her family within plantation nostalgia, *Gone with the Wind* completes the circle. The entire cycle is played out inside white supremacy, however, creating a deep commonality among the films. The full historical development from one movie to the next appears at the juncture of thematic content and film form.

Primitive cinema was embedded in other prefilmic popular entertainments. One-reelers played to live accompaniment by musicians and projectionist/lecturers; short films were exhibited alongside live vaudeville routines. Incorporating within the films and in their mode of presentation their status as shows before live audiences, early one-reelers encouraged audience participation. The artisan-director Edwin Porter came out of this popular theater milieu; his project, however, was far more ambitious. In 1902–3, he shot three brief movies that together lay cinematic claim to the entire American landscape. He filmed successively *The Life of an American Fireman,* a semidocumentary about the modern city; *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* an entirely familiar drama set (as his subtitle announced) “in slavery days”; and *The Great Train Robbery,* the first important movie western and the first blockbuster film. The overwhelming majority of early motion pictures, whether real or staged documentaries or filmed vaudeville routines, did not tell stories. Each segment of Porter’s trilogy did. One authority calls *The Great Train*
to capture it, one must turn to the speeding train and racing horsemen in the western, the firemen riding to the rescue in the urban drama. Neither the steamboat race nor anything else in the plantation film depicts bodies in motion.

Porter not only filmed motion in the West and the North; he filmed it in a dynamic way as well. Motion pictures had the revolutionary potential to juxtapose events separated in space or time and to bring together different perspectives on a single event. The Life of an American Fireman records not just horse-drawn fire trucks racing through the city streets but also the passersby watching them. In his major innovation, Porter showed the rescue of a woman and child first from a point of view inside the burning building and then from the street outside. Whereas later filmmakers used crosscutting to preserve a single, linear temporality, Porter showed the same event from beginning to end twice. The two angles of vision were not point-of-view shots, strictly speaking, since each shows both the character and the event from that character's perspective. But the repetition places the spectator, sequentially, on the inside and the outside positions. Some film historians argue that Porter's pluralization, an alternative to the linear narrative of singular bourgeois subjectivity, was closer to immigrant, working-class experience of space and time. One need not enter the debate over the road not taken in mainstream film history to find Porter's dual perspective appropriate to the heterogeneous, modern metropolis.

Uncle Tom's Cabin has, by contrast, a single point of view, and it is not an abolitionist one. The conflict in the film occurs not between antislavery heroes and proslavery villains but rather between the plantation and the outsiders who threaten it. Those menacing the slaves—slave traders and auctioneers, Simon Legree (he kills St. Clair for defending Uncle Tom in Porter's stage-borrowed version)—intrude into the happy, interracial plantation home. The plantation features emotional, physical contact among Tom, Little Eva (“Tom and Eva in the Garden”), and St. Clair, as well as (in several scenes) merry, dancing slaves. (The combination of the two modes would reach the screen again in the enormously popular 1930s Shirley Temple/Bojangles Robinson southern.) Whether as entertainers or protagonists, all the blacks are whites in blackface; the prefilmic form of popular entertainment most organically incorporated into Uncle Tom's Cabin is minstrelsy.

The two meanings of plantation domesticity—interracial intimacy
and blackface entertainment—come together around death. Loyal slaves are gathered about Little Eva as angels carry her away. Tom sees when he is dying visions of his earthly and heavenly home. Porter filmed adventure in the city and on the frontier; his view of love and death on the American plantation dramatizes domestic loss. Firemen rescue a woman and her child, to be sure, and the opening shot of *The Life of an American Fireman* places the fireman on one side of a split screen, the mother and baby on the other. But although the fireman will answer the rescued mother’s plea and return to save her child, the entire interest of the scene is in movement and the techniques used to capture it. The core of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by contrast, is buried in the historical and personal past—the lost child, Little Eva, and the maternal, sacrificed Uncle Tom. These figures had such a hold on the American imagination—coming as they did from the most popular novel and touring theatrica of the nineteenth century—that seven more silent film versions would follow Porter’s in the next quarter century.\(^5\)

Sergei Eisenstein distinguished in the work of D. W. Griffith between modern form and traditional, patriarchal, provincial content.\(^6\) That contrast separates not form from content in Porter but *Fireman* from *Uncle Tom*—with the crucial difference that Porter does not depict the traditional as patriarchal but shows it through a maternal blackface lens. Eisenstein’s distinction entirely fails to capture *The Birth of a Nation*, however. Porter filmed three separate regional identities; Griffith combined them into a single national epic. His antebellum plantation may have a more patriarchal inflection than Porter’s, but both filmmakers line up the plantation with loss and defeat. Both also make Lincoln sympathetic, one in Uncle Tom’s dying vision, the other as a feminized martyr. But whereas Porter’s Lincoln redeems the blacked-up, crucified Uncle Tom, the death of Griffith’s Lincoln sets the white-sheeted knights of Christ in motion. Griffith’s new nation is born not from northern victory in the Civil War but from the ride (derived from *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*, his own western movie) of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan, moreover, rides to rescue not a mother and child threatened by fire but a white woman menaced by a black rapist. White men in white sheets smash blacked-up white faces in the climax of *Birth of a Nation*. Griffith’s fundamental contribution to full-length motion pictures was to join “the intimate and the epic”\(^7\); he linked the personal and the historical through racial fantasy. Tran
cendentalizing the material birth pangs of immigrant, industrial Amer-
ica, Griffith supplied the postbellum United States with its national myth of origins.\(^7\)

It was not only the Klan that gave birth to the nation, according to Griffith, but also *The Birth of a Nation*, the motion picture itself. By filming speed and cutting between moving targets, Griffith brought modern technology to the Reconstruction Klan. Porter depicted the fireman’s rescue from two points of view. Cutting from the Klan to the menaced Elsie Stoneman to the black mob and back again, Griffith showed the Klan’s ride to the rescue from a single point of view, that of the director. As with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Griffith based his movie on a novel and a play; but whereas Porter presented a familiar story, Griffith created something entirely new. Porter separated his contemporary documentary (*Fireman*) from his staged history (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Griffith, claiming historical documentary status for his own fiction, made film the ultimate authority. Fully realizing film’s power to seize the audience, Griffith replaced history with the illusionistic, realistic, self-enclosed, cinematic epic.

Just as Griffith emancipated cinema from its dependence on prefilmic entertainment, so he rose above the film audience of which Porter was a participating member. Porter was a working cameraman, editor, projectionist, and bricoleur. There was little division of labor in a Porter production. Griffith, the first director-as-star, attracted mass media attention and presided over massively capitalized projects. Film historians argue over whether films before Griffith actually spoke for their immigrant working-class audiences or just to them. What is certain is that the period in film history that followed Griffith brought immigrants to Hollywood power. By the 1920s men like Porter and Griffith had lost out

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\(^5\) The Library of Congress has repressed what J. Hoberman calls our “birth rite” by excluding *The Birth of a Nation* from its collection of “Cinema’s First Century” (see Hoberman, “Our Troubling Birth Rite,” *Village Voice*, Nov. 3, 1994, 2–4). Not to worry. The 1994 smash box office and Academy Award hit *Forrest Gump* (best picture, director, actor, editing, screenplay adaptation, and visual effects) opens with a Ku Klux Klan scene lifted (or simulated) from *Birth*. Cutting from that movie’s hero masking his face to the massed, white-sheeted men on horseback (“they dressed up as ghosts, or something”), the interpolated footage illustrates the work of the founder of the Klan, “the great Civil War hero” Nathan Bedford Forrest, for whom the 1994 Forrest was named. *The Birth of a Nation* thus takes its place alongside the other newscasts from American history—the John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and John Lennon assassinations, the Wallace, Reagan, and Ford attempts, Nixon’s resignation, and LBJ newscast—through which Forrest moves (in the award-winning visual effects) and which fail to touch him. *Forrest Gump* passed *Star Wars* in 1995 to move into third place among the top-grossing movies of all time. (See “The Top Money Makers, for Now,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1995, H22.)
to immigrant Jews, whose rise to the top of the motion picture business coincided with the development of the Hollywood studio system. Jesse Lasky, Carl Laemmle, Adolph Zukor, William Fox, Samuel Goldwyn, Marcus Loew, Louis B. Mayer, Irving Thalberg, Harry, Al, Jack, and Sam Warner, Harry Cohn, Joe and Nick Schenck, David O. Selznick—of the major powers in the Big Eight Hollywood studios that dominated the industry from the 1920s through the 1940s, only Cecil B. DeMille and Darryl Zanuck were not immigrant Jews.

The men creating mass production studios were rising from their working-class and petty entrepreneur roots to positions as captains of industry. They were transforming local scenes of maker/distributor/audience interaction into centralized hierarchies that revolved around producer power, mass markets, and star fame. As was not the case with the artisanal mode of film production, and with the exception of certain directors and stars, a clear line now separated owners and executives from workers. Given the importance of the immigrant working class as an audience for early cinema, the fact that immigrant Jews should come to dominate Hollywood only once they left the ghetto behind is from one point of view paradoxical. From another it exemplifies the American dream.

Cultural guardians feared early silent cinema as an immigrant menace to the dominant culture. Attending storefront nickelodeons and small-time vaudeville in their own neighborhoods, immigrants watched (in addition to foreign imports) depictions of life around them and comic violence against authority. Some modern film historians, echoing the cultural guardians but reversing their values, believe that nickelodeon cinema united immigrant families across generational lines and resisted American standardization. The enormous variety of short silent films, in the decentralized mélange that was early cinema, included many on immigrant life; *The Jazz Singer* was in the tradition of the immigrant generational-conflict film. But even early cinema reached well beyond urban immigrants, and immigrant Jews rose to Hollywood power as the film audience was becoming predominantly middle class. The Jewish moguls who began as storefront exhibitors and distributors wanted, in Adolph Zukor's words, "to kill the slum tradition in the movies." They saw themselves as transforming motion pictures from sites of class and ethnic division to arenas of modern, mass entertainment, from threats to agents of Americanization. The 1920s motion picture palace, with its narrativized features, live orchestral accompaniment, lavish appurtenances, and mass audiences, silenced and incorporated the participant, immigrant crowds. *The Jazz Singer* depicted popular entertainment as a site of family conflict and an agent of Americanization from the beginning. Faithful to the triumphant tendencies in American Jewish and movie history, *The Jazz Singer*, to borrow Larry May's phrasing, screened out the subversive historical alternatives. It screened them out with blackface.9

Blackface also undergirds *The Jazz Singer's* predecessors, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Birth of a Nation*, but whereas those films apply burnt cork unselfconsciously, *The Jazz Singer* makes blackface its subject. Thematically, by contrast, *The Jazz Singer* shares *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* pleasure in blackface entertainment and its identification with suffering blacks, rather than *Birth's* race hatred. *Birth* and *The Jazz Singer* ostensibly exploit African Americans in opposite ways. *The Birth of a Nation*, climaxing the worst period of violence against blacks in southern history, lynches the black; the jazz singer, ventriloquizing the black, sings through his mouth. *Birth* makes war on blacks in the name of the fathers; *The Jazz Singer's* protagonist adopts a black mask that kills his father. *Birth*, a product of the progressive movement, has national political purpose. *The Jazz Singer*, marking the retreat from public to private life in the Jazz Age and the perceived pacification of the (fantasized) southern black threat, celebrates not political regeneration but urban entertainment.

These historical contrasts in the use of blackface arise from an underlying identity. Griffith used blacks not to restore plantation patriarchy but to give birth to a new nation. The immigrants absent from his screen were present in his audience; *Birth* used black/white conflict to Americanize them. The jazz singer also escapes his Old World identity through blackface. Moreover, miscegenation as well as assimilation energizes both movies. White identification with (imaginary) black sexual desire, powerfully unconscious in *Birth*, comes to the surface in *The Jazz Singer*. Whereas the white frontier literary hero replaces the white woman with his red brother,10 *Birth* and *The Jazz Singer* (the former in the psychological subtext of the film, the latter onscreen) use black men for access to forbidden white women. The black desire for white women, enacted in blackface in *Birth*, justifies not only the political and sexual repression of blacks but also the marriage of Civil War enemies, North and South. Blackface promotes interracial marriage in *The Jazz Singer*, by apparent contrast with *Birth*. But anticipating the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code, under which "miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden,"11 *The Jazz Singer* facilitates the union not of white and black but of gentile and Jew.
The Jazz Singer makes its subject what is buried in Birth, that the interracial double is not the exotic other but the split self, the white in blackface. Celebrating the blackface identification that Birth of a Nation denies, The Jazz Singer does no favor to blacks. The blackface jazz singer is neither a jazz singer nor black. Blackface marries ancient rivals in both movies, yet black and white marry in neither. Just as Birth offers a regeneration through violence, so the grinning Jazz Singer minstrelsy mask kills blacks with kindness.

The Jazz Singer's plot could not be simpler. The desire to be a blackface singer brings young Jackie Rabinowitz into conflict with his cantor father. Returning home a success, and having changed his name to Jack Robin, the son is thrown out of his father's house. Then, when Jack is about to open on Broadway, he learns that the cantor is dying. Torn between his mother and the dancer who got him his break, between Broadway and the synagogue, Jack abandons the show. Replacing his father for the Yom Kippur service, he chants Kol Nidre as the old man dies. In the movie's final scene, however, Jack is back on the Winter Garden stage, singing “My Mammy” in blackface to his gentle girl friend and Jewish mother.

The original reviews of this, the first talking picture, in keeping with the souvenir program issued for The Jazz Singer's premiere, responded as much to Jolson's blackface as to Western Electric's new sound and film projection system, Vitaphone. On the film's fiftieth anniversary, with The Jazz Singer now securely established as the first talking picture and blackface an embarrassment, the four film journal commemorative articles barely mentioned blackface. Nonetheless, each publication reprinted movie stills that unavoidably made visible what their texts had repressed: all showed Jolson in blackface. Eighties critics, stimulated in part by Neil Diamond's self-consciously Jewish 1980 remake, downplayed sound in favor of the story, generational conflict, and Jewish assimilation. Yet The Jazz Singer actually gives equal weight to all three stories—the conversion to sound, the conversion of the Jews, and the conversion by blackface. Far from being separate but equal, so that one story can be rescued from contamination by the others, the film amalgamates all three. As immigration and technological innovations were creating American mass culture, the film announced Old World, patriarchal defeat to obfuscate New World power. It appropriated an imaginary blackness to Americanize the immigrant son. White masks fail to hide black skin, in Frantz Fanon's analysis, and turn African into European. The beholder's eye alienates the black man from his bodily inte-

rior, inflicting an epidermal consciousness on the black masked as white; he is forced to experience himself as he is seen. That same shift from embodiment to eye allows the blackface performer to speak from his own, authentically felt, interior.15

II

Although it is always problematic to identify revolutionary innovations with a single achievement, The Jazz Singer can legitimately claim the status of the first talking picture. No feature film before The Jazz Singer had lip-synchronized either musical performance or dialogue. None used sound to cut away from and yet retain the previously visible action, and none incorporated words and music into the story. These innovations are still electrifying, because they are preceded within the film by the earlier forms that this movie will destroy: silent, documentary, Lower East Side scenes (fig. 4.1); pantomime gestures; and intertitles. When young Jackie Rabinowitz sings in Muller's cafe-bar, he announces a cinematic revolution.

The second sound interval is even more startling. The sound track for Jackie's song was not matched to his lips. When the grown Jack Robin (formerly Jackie Rabinowitz) sings “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face” at Coffee Dan's, for the first time in feature films a voice issues forth from a mouth. Jack then breaks free of both the intertitles that have carried the dialogue and the musical accompaniment that has carried the sound, and speaks his own words: “Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You ain't heard nothing yet,” says Al Jolson, repeating the lines he'd already made famous in vaudeville. These first words of feature movie speech, a kind of performative, announce—you ain't heard nothing yet—the birth of sound movies and the death of silent film. The vaudeville performer, Al Jolson, has killed silent movies.

Jolson paid for his triumph, however, a sacrifice to what Andrew Sarris has called “the cultural guilt of musical movies.” Although The Jazz Singer and Jolson's next film, The Singing Fool, were box office hits, Jolson's career did not prosper in the 1930s. Vaudeville and silent movies complemented each other; talking pictures displaced both. Sarris writes, “Al Jolson became the first scapegoat for the cultural guilt assumed by movie musicals as the slayers of silent cinema.”18

The jazz singer may have killed silent movies; within the film, how-
ever, he kills his father. Sarris's extraordinary formalism ignores the connection on which the film insists, between the death of silent movies and the death of the Jewish patriarch. Cantor Rabinowitz expects Jackie to become a cantor, like generations of Rabinowitzes before him. Jackie, however, wants to sing jazz. Familiarly and musically, Cantor Jake Rabinowitz would lose his own voice. Kol Nidre, the chant on the Day of Atonement for the forgiveness of sins, takes the place of Jackie's singing in the movie's opening scenes. But Jackie does not want to submerge his individual identity in ancient, sacred community. The result is family war. His father beats the young Jackie for singing "raggy-time" songs. He throws the grown Jack Robin out of his house. Jazz was the emblem of generational revolt in the Jazz Age; critics charged it with destroying the family. Jackie's decision to become a jazz singer kills his father. The cultural guilt of the first talking picture is assimilation and parricide.

The Jazz Singer explicitly links its twin killings, of silent movies and the Jewish patriarch, since Vitaphone carries the generational conflict in its three revolutionary scenes—the first, character-embedded, singing voice; the first lip-synchronized singing and first lines of speech; and the first di-

ologue. Together these scenes form an oedipal triangle—antithesis, thesis, synthesis—with the Jewish mother at the center. Cantor Rabinowitz stops Jackie's singing in the first scene, thus returning the film to silence, when he drags his son from the stage. Jack talks for the first time in the second scene, at Coffee Dan's; after the heroine, Mary, admires his song, his first spoken words introduce the Jewish/gentile romance.

Jewish father stops the voice (antithesis); gentile woman elicits it (thesis). There is no dialogue at Coffee Dan's, though; Jack only speaks from the stage to announce his next number. When he returns home, in the climax at the center of the film, he sings and speaks to his mother. Sara Rabinowitz frantically caresses her son and murmurs an embarrassed few words as she and Jack play a love scene. Jack sings "Blue Skies" to his mother, tells her he'd rather please her than anyone he knows, steals a kiss from her, promises to buy her a new dress, says he will hug and kiss her in the dark mill at Coney Island, returns to the piano to play a "jazzy" version of "Blue Skies," and asks her if she liked "that slappin' business" on the keyboard. "Slapping" was the jazz term for pizzicato playing; the sexual origins of the word jazz—in copulation—have never been more spectacularly, or inappropriately, present. A small door opens in the background, the tiny figure of the patriarch appears, the camera isolates his menacing head and shoulders, and a voice from the mouth bellows, "Stop!" (fig. 4.2).

In stopping at the same time the music and the romance between son and mother, Cantor Rabinowitz ends speech. For the first and only time in the film there is an extended period of silence, until finally mournful Eastern European music—replacing "Blue Skies"—returns. Johnson's singing will be as well, but "Stop!" is the last spoken word in the film. Mother and son try to placate the father, in gestures and intertitles, but fail. Cantor Rabinowitz sends Jack from the house in silence, but the damage to silent pictures and the father has been done. "There is one moment in The Jazz Singer that is fraught with tremendous significance," Robert Sherwood recognized in 1927. "Al sits down at the piano and sings 'Blue Sky' to his mother. . . . His father enters the room, realizes that his house is being profaned with jazz, and shouts 'Stop!' At this point the Vitaphone withdraws. . . . Such is the moment . . . when . . . I for one suddenly realized that the end of the silent drama is in sight." Jack's father may have the power to stop speech in this film, but it will cost him and silent movies their lives. In choosing The Jazz Singer as the first talking picture, "the itinerant peddlers, junk-dealers, and sweatshop entrepreneurs who had parlayed
their slum-located storefront peepshows into,” one of the country’s major industries were telling their own story. 22 The Jazz Singer advertised itself as a Hollywood biography: “One of the most unique features of The Jazz Singer,” the souvenir program boasted, “is the fact that it nearly parallels the life of Al Jolson.” Like Jakie Rabinowitz, Jolson became a blackface performer against the wishes of his cantor father, and Sampson Raphaelson wrote the short story on which the movie was based after hearing Jolson sing. The jazz singer falls in love with a gentile dancer; Jolson, divorced from one gentile dancer by the time he played the part, was about to marry another. 23

The Jazz Singer is less Jolson’s individual biography, however, than the collective autobiography of the men who made Hollywood. Neal Gabler has shown how the Jewish moguls created Hollywood against their paternal inheritance. Doting on their mothers and in rebellion against their failed Lusmenschon fathers, the moguls Americanized themselves by interpreting gentile dreams. They normally hid their “parricide,” as Gabler calls it, “against everything their fathers represented,” their “war against their own pasts”; but the first talking picture brought that story to the screen. The Jazz Singer displays the history of the men who made Hollywood. 24

Perhaps because its parricidal implications disturbed them, Harry, Al, Jack, and Sam Warner stressed the harmonious generational cooperation that had produced The Jazz Singer. As the souvenir program explained, “The faithful portrayal of Jewish home life is largely due to the unobtrusive assistance of Mr. Benjamin Warner, father of the producers, and ardent admirer of The Jazz Singer.” Paternal approval, as J. Hoberman writes, was enlisted for paternal overthrow. 25 The Warner brothers’ patriarch, moreover, was being implicated in a Jewish home life of shouting, beating, exile, and death. In the end, though, the Warner who paid for generational rebellion in The Jazz Singer was not Benjamin Warner but his youngest son, Sam.

Benjamin Warner was poor and devout. Sam, however, was antireligious, and after his older brothers married Jewish women uninvolved in show business, Sam chose in 1925 a gentile dancer. As his wife, Lina Basquette, recalls, Sam’s brothers were furious at him for marrying “a little eighteen-year-old shiksa.” Lina, who had a Jewish grandfather, would shortly be cast as the Jewish daughter in The Younger Generation, another tale of filial impiety filmed the year after The Jazz Singer. But Sam’s attraction to her lay elsewhere; she remembers him asking that she wear her gold cross for his dinner meeting with Western Electric executives in a restaurant that did not serve Jews. When Sam chose for his wife an established member of Ziegfeld’s Folies, he was marrying up—in terms of status (stage vs. screen), religion (Christian vs. Jew), and class (her family wealth and salary placed her above him). 26

Sam Warner had brought his brothers into the motion picture business, was the enthusiast for sound, and was in charge of the Vitaphone project. (His brothers called it “Sam’s toy phonograph.”) Since the Warner Bros. investment in sound was part of a coordinated strategy to expand the small studio’s market share and challenge the preeminence of Hollywood’s big three (and not, as was once thought, a desperate attempt to stave off bankruptcy), Jack Robin was enacting Sam Warner’s upward mobility through Vitaphone. Sam did not normally make movies, but he came west to supervise The Jazz Singer’s production. After Jolson ad-libbed his famous line at Coffee Dan’s, Sam reshoots Jack Robin’s homecoming, added dialogue, and thereby created the love scene with the mother. 27

Jack faces the crisis of his life after his father forces him to choose between his mother and jazz. In the film’s climax, he is torn between replacing his dying father to sing Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur, the holiest night of the Jewish calendar, or going on with the vaudeville show. Kol Nidre is sung on the one evening each year when the skies open and Jews
can speak directly to God to ask for forgiveness of sins. Jack’s sin would be to choose vaudeville stardom (“Blue Skies”) over Kol Nidre. The Warner brothers, also flirting with blasphemy, premiered The Jazz Singer on the night before Yom Kippur—the night, in the film, when Jack learns that his father is dying and that he must choose between show business and filial piety. Mixing movie time with worldly time, the studio wanted Cantor Rabinowitz’s death and Jack’s Kol Nidre to fall as close as possible to the actual Jewish holiday. But this evocation of the Jewish anarchist “Yom Kippur Ball,” a satanic night of feasting to blaspheme the holy fast, could not be enjoyed by the Warner brothers. The night before Cantor Rabinowitz was to die in New York, Sam Warner died in Los Angeles. As Jolson’s white teeth flashed out from his open black mouth, an infection of the Warner brother’s tooth grew inward and poisoned his brain. Sam died of an abscess at the age of thirty-nine. The “screaming and wailing” mother at his deathbed (I’m quoting Lina Basquette) appeared again the next night onscreen at the deathbed of the Jewish patriarch. Sam’s dream of bringing together Jewish mother and gentle wife, fulfilled by the dying Cantor Rabinowitz, happened first over his own deathbed. Sam was buried on Yom Kippur eve, and his three brothers, in Los Angeles to arrange the funeral, missed the movie premiere.38

Reflection and perhaps agent of generational war to the death, The Jazz Singer can hardly be accused of glossing over family conflict. The Jazz Singer exemplifies the hysterical text, in recent readings of film melodrama, exposing the familial conflicts buried in the name of realism. Because The Jazz Singer depicts the costs of assimilation to family and immigrant community alike, as well as the threat of self-oblitetration faced by the son, Hoberman calls it “the bluntest and most resonant movie Hollywood ever produced on the subject of American Jews.”29

But The Jazz Singer’s ending, and its overall family frame, link this hysterical Jewish melodrama not to exposure but to flight. At the film’s most hysterical moment, Jack sings first Kol Nidre at the synagogue over his father’s dying body and then “My Mammy” to his mother and girl friend at the Winter Garden Theater. The movie was promising that the son could have it all: Jewish past and American future, Jewish mother and gentile wife. That was not what happened in Hollywood. The moguls left their Jewish wives for gentile women in the 1930s and mostly eliminated Jewish life from the screen. They bade farewell to their Jewish pasts with The Jazz Singer. Although Americanized Jews ultimately would retain Jewish identities, there was no going back to the Lower East Side.30

The Jazz Singer’s happy ending is present neither in the original short story nor in the popular Broadway play. A last-minute addition during the filming (like the “Blue Skies” scene), the blackface “My Mammy” hardly wipes away the conflict that dominates the film. Jack is a “cultural schizophrenic,” in Peter Rose’s phrase; the movie allows no easy, harmonious reconciliation between Jewishness and America.31 But to weigh the costs displayed within the movie against its happy ending accepts The Jazz Singer on its own terms, thus transforming Jewish history in the United States into family melodrama.

The struggle of sons against fathers was an immigrant social fact, but the documents that chronicle that story join generational conflict within the community to hostile, external pressure upon it, a context that is wished away by the first talking picture. All Jack’s problems are with his father; none are with the gentiles. Cantor Rabinowitz’s hostility to American entertainment is not balanced by any American hostility to Jews. The Jazz Singer culminates the tradition of ethnic films that emplotted generational conflict over intermarriage rather than racial prejudice. Jack’s judenfrei-ing of the Rabinowitz name, so central to the story, as we shall see, responds only to the attractions of Americanization, not to prejudices against Jews.32

Also excised from The Jazz Singer are the social struggles that united Jews, often across generations, in trade unions, radical movements, businesses, and community organizations. Instead of pitting Jews against nativism, The Jazz Singer pits father against son. By domesticating the problem of the Jewish son, as critics of family melodrama would predict, The Jazz Singer lets America off the hook and fragments Jewish community. Shifting from ethnocultural to generational conflict, the film celebrates not the Jew as pariah, united with other outcast groups, but the Jew as parvenu.33

Two historiographical approaches interpret the 1920s, an older one by way of ethnocultural conflict and a newer one stressing the alliance between youth revolt and the culture of consumption. Provincial, backward-looking nativism triumphs in the former view, which makes the 1920s the last decade of the nineteenth century. Urban, entertainment-centered self-fulfillment triumphs in the latter view, which makes the 1920s the harbinger of the future. The Jazz Singer, visible evidence for the more recent historiography, supports the older by what it hides, for its protagonist rises from the defeat not only of his cantor father but of radical, ethnic-based politics as well.34

F. Scott Fitzgerald, who “claimed credit for naming” the Jazz Age,
understood that it “extended from the suppression of the riots of May Day 1919 to the crash of the stock market in 1929.” “The general hysteria of that spring,” Fitzgerald wrote in his introduction to the short story “May Day,” “inaugurated the Age of Jazz.” The story itself follows May Day hysteria from the mob invasion of a Socialist newspaper to a Delmonico’s party with its “specially-hired jazz orchestra.”

The year 1919—that of the great steel and Seattle general strikes, the red scare, race riots, woman’s suffrage, and prohibition—gave birth to the nativist politics and the depoliticized youth revolt of the 1920s.

The shift from radical protest to popular culture, enforced by continuing nativism, made possible The Jazz Singer. The Jazz Age introduced modern anti-Semitism into American politics, as traditional rivalry between immigrant and old-stock Americans coalesced with ideological racism. (Fitzgerald’s mob knocks down a “gesticulating little Jew with long black whiskers.”) The anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan (legacy of Birth of a Nation) flourished in the 1920s, attacking Jewish
control of the motion picture industry. Three years before The Jazz Singer, the racist immigration law of 1924 pretty well closed immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. “By far the largest percentage of immigrants [were] peoples of Jewish extraction,” the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization had warned. Testifying as an expert witness before the committee, Lathrop Stoddard, coauthor of The Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy, dismissed Franz Boas’s
denial of racial differences between immigrants and old-stock Americans as “the desperate attempt of a Jew to pass himself off as ‘white.’” The Jewish percentage of net migration to the United States, 21.2 percent in 1920, was reduced by the law to close to zero. The Jazz Singer premiered six weeks after the judicial murder of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the final victims of the postwar red scare. (Harvard president A. Lawrence Lowell, who determined that Sacco and Vanzetti had received a fair trial and should be executed, banned African American residents from the college dormitories, and proposed Harvard admission quotas for Jews.)

Nativist pressure created The Jazz Singer’s invisible frame. The movie emerged from the moguls’ wish to evacuate anti-Semitism from the Jewish question. That wish derived not from Jewish power—Henry Ford’s ravings about “Jewish supremacy in the motion picture world” notwithstanding—but from just the context of gentle suffering that the moguls did not want to acknowledge on film. Wishing away anti-Semitism required leaving Jewishness behind, looking forward to the disappearance of the Jews. Anti-Semitism is The Jazz Singer’s structuring absence. The visible cost it leaves behind is borne by Jolson as he plays not a Jew but a black.

A large image of Al Jolson in blackface rises above the title of Andrew Sarris’s essay “The Cultural Guilt of Musical Movies” (fig. 4.3). That picture, returning to haunt the text that represses it, insists that one can understand neither the cultural guilt of slaying silents nor the cultural guilt of slaying the father without hearkening to yet a deeper layer, the cultural guilt of exploiting blacks. Riveting sympathetic attention on parents and son, who are united by the movie’s affect as they are divided by its plot, The Jazz Singer blacks out the non-Jewish group behind the blackface mask. White-painted mouth and white-gloved hands sing and gesture in blackface performance. Black holes in space fragment, stand in for, and render invisible the broken-up, absent black body. The lips that speak Jack’s personal voice are caricatured, racist icons. Jack Robin rises through blackface, as vaudeville entertainer, lover, and Jewish son.
Jolson's blackface performance dominates the crisis and resolution of the film. Blackface carries The Jazz Singer both backward to the origins of mass entertainment and forward to American acceptance. The sign of what has been left behind appears not in collective Jewish identity but in the instrument of the jazz singer's individual success, the pasteboard mask that points to another American pariah group, African Americans.39

III

"This is the turning point represented by Griffith," writes Pascal Bonitzer.

What we have here is a cinematic revolution. With the arrival of montage, the close-up, immobile actors, the look (and its corollary—the banishment of histrionics) an entire facade of the cinema seemed to disappear and be lost forever; in a word, all the excrement of vaudeville. The cinema was "innocent" and "dirty." It was to become obsessional and fetishistic. The obscenity did not disappear, it was interiorized, moralized, and passed into the register of desire. . . . As the body became more or less immobilized and the look was enthroned, morality, perversion, and desire intervened for the first time in the cinema.39

Griffith, however, did not banish histrionics forever from film. The Jazz Singer revived them, innocent and dirty, with blackface. Blackface was the legacy of vaudeville entertainment and the silent screen; The Jazz Singer's success presided over the beginning of their end. The first talking picture went backward in order to go forward and enter the era of sound. It revived the roots of movies one more time.

Vaudeville, which succeeded blackface minstrelsy as the most popular American entertainment form, was in turn displaced by movies. Each of these spectacles, though, was linked to its predecessor. Vaudeville absorbed minstrelsy, as Jewish vaudeville entertainers like George Burns, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, and Jolson himself (Heywood Broun called him "the master minstrel of them all") gave blackface a new lease on life. One-reelers, in turn, were originally run in vaudeville shows, and live vaudeville coexisted with silent movies in the 1920s motion picture palace. Silent films complemented vaudeville because they could not reproduce its noise—its musical numbers, sound effects, jokes, and patter. Early sound-movie shorts returned to film origins—newsreel documentaries (mainly Fox) and vaudeville performances (mainly Warner Bros.)—to show that they could improve on silent pictures. The silent versions of these shorts had exposed the limitations of the stage; the sound versions revealed the shortcomings of the silents.43

The Jazz Singer condensed into a single feature film the entire history of American popular entertainment, from minstrelsy through vaudeville and silent films to talking pictures, for the first feature film to bring lip-synched sound into the narrative incorporated vaudeville minstrelsy as well. Warner Bros. did not plan this history lesson; rather, it was responding to audience cues. The studio chose the European costume drama Don Juan as its first feature with sound effects and music, and filled the opening "Vitaphone Prelude" of short subjects with prestige opera arias and classical music. The popularity of the single vaudeville skit on the program convinced Warner Bros. to emphasize vaudeville in future filmic undertakings. "Al Jolson in a Plantation Act" was the hit of the second Vitaphone Prelude. The studio built a plantation set featuring corn tassels and watermelons; emerging in blackface from a slave cabin, Jolson sings two songs, "When the Red Red Robin Comes Bob Bobbin' Along" and "Rock-a-Bye My Baby with a Dixie Melody." The red robin supplied Jackie Rabinowitz with his American name, "Dixie Melody" with his mammy. Jolson was preceded by Sam Warner's film of a jazz quartet and followed by George Jessel (who was starring in The Jazz Singer on Broadway); by surrounding Jolson with jazz and The Jazz Singer, this Vitaphone Prelude set the stage for the first talking picture.43

The Jazz Singer is an "interiorized, moralized" oedipal narrative, to recall Pascal Bonitzer's words. But the "desire" that carries it forward is Jack's "innocent and dirty" desire—sung as "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face"—to become a histrionic, vaudeville performer. Classical movies, culminating in sound, may have replaced stock vaudeville caricatures with individualized, interior characters, but Jack develops his character—expresses his interior, finds his own voice—by employing blackface caricature. Blackface reinstated the exaggerated pantomime that restrained filmic gestures had supposedly displaced. "Characterization," to use David Bordwell's oppositions, employed rather than replaced "restless movement." The close-up, montage, and rudimentary shot-reverse shot editing establish the register of desire between Jack and Mary, but reverse shots at Coffee Dan's are subordinated to Jack's performance, and after their first vaudeville encounter he plays all their love scenes in blackface.44 Blackface supports its antithesis, the film techniques, character development, and triumph of sound that will ultimately take its place. It does so by splitting the protagonist into forward- and backward-looking
halves. The jazz singer rises by putting on the mask of a group that must remain immobile, unassimilable, and fixed at the bottom.

Jack Robin and his black double emerge as split halves of a single self when Jakie Rabinowitz changes his name. “Last time you forgot and addressed me Jakie Rabinowitz,” the vaudeville performer writes his mother. “Jack Robin is my name now.” Before a last-minute change in production, the next scene was to show him in blackface for the first time, together with the intertitle “Orchard Street would have some difficulty recognizing Jakie Rabinowitz of Beth-El choir under the burnt cork of Jack Robin.” The revised scene brings Jack and Mary into intimate contact, however, with the shooting script directing Jack to put a black hand on Mary’s white arm as an intertitle speaks the false prophecy of one dancer to another: “He aint got a chance—no Mammy singer for Mary.” “Playing a romantic scene in blackface” proved too risky “an experiment,” as the screenwriter, Alfred Cohn, feared it might.45 Jack in his dressing gown and a black maid in the wings are residues of the original plan, as Jack courts Mary in whiteface; even so, blackface’s source in split Jewish identity remains. “It talks like Jakie but it looks like a nigger,” says the old Jew, Yudelson, in the shooting script when he first sees Jack in blackface; the intertitle changed “a nigger” to “his shadow” (for Jack’s blackface shadow, see fig. 4.4). Two Al Jolson heads dominate The
in the play.) Trying to escape the law of the father, Jack refinds it in his split mirror reflection. The Jazz Singer is, and knows that it is, a doubles movie.49

Other motion pictures that employ the magical doubling device—German expressionist movies and films from the vaudeville comic legacy in particular—also fail to conform to models of the classic narrative film. Silent film’s fascination with double exposure, with allowing twin performances by the same actor, coincided with the arrival in the United States of (in its first version) the German expressionist film The Student from Prague. Although vaudeville-derived slapstick was the favored fictional genre of early cinema, slapstick, writes Eileen Bowser, “was vulgar, amoral, and anti-establishment, and reformers in the post-1908 period wanted it suppressed.”47 Here I compare The Jazz Singer with two doubles films, The Student from Prague (1913, 1926; the brief analysis here conflates the two versions) and Charlie Chaplin’s vaudeville-derived The Idle Class (1921).

Blocked mobility, according to Thomas Elsaesser, generates the double on the German silent screen. These films typically signal a social obstacle in their openings and then shift to the fantastic.48 The Student from Prague, after beginning with a depiction of infantilized student life from which the protagonist is estranged, introduces the old (Jewish-looking) Scapinelli. Scapinelli arranges for the student to rescue a young countess, magically produces gold, and then takes payment by splitting the student in two. Scapinelli seizes the student’s mirror image; out of ego’s control, it comes between the student and his love. The double interrupts one kiss in the countess’s bedroom, another at the Jewish cemetery. Interrupting eros, it enacts forbidden aggression, killing in a duel the aristocratic rival the student has promised not to harm. Liberation of his shadow side finally destroys the student; shooting into the mirror (in the 1926 version), he kills himself. Scapinelli, apparent permission-giving alternative to the countess’s father, turns out merely to reproduce him.49

Like Jakie Rabinowitz, the student from Prague splits in two to fulfill transgressive desires. But there is no Scapinelli in The Jazz Singer. Whereas a black magician controls the student’s double, Jack Robin controls his own black double. It does his bidding; it brings him success. Jack is the “master minstrel,” in the souvenir program’s words; his blackface double is his slave. (Jolson was the credited author of “Me and My Shadow,” a routine in which the black tap dancer Eddie Chester copied the movements of the Jewish song-and-dance man Ted Lewis. One-

reelers from the 1920s imitated that device by having an African American shadowbox a white.) Instead of W. E. B. Du Bois’s “two souls . . . warring . . . in one dark body,” in The Jazz Singer two bodies, one blacked and one white, heal Jack’s single, divided soul.50

Contrast the cooperation between the two Jack Robins with the conflict between the tramp and the man of leisure in The Idle Class, both played by Charlie Chaplin. Mistaken identity at a fancy dress ball gives the tramp temporary access to the rich man’s wife and authorizes slapstick violence by the poor Chaplin against his rich double. This anarchic, rebellious, gestural residue of nickelodeon silent shorts makes fun of the rich, to be sure. Nonetheless, it requires that the classes end where they began, that the tramp return to the road and not displace his double in the family. Otherwise there would be no difference between them, and the film would lose its humor and its social point.

Blackface functions in precisely the opposite way in The Jazz Singer. It allows the protagonist to exchange selves rather than fixing him in the one where he began. Blackface is the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American. By putting on blackface, the Jewish jazz singer acquires that which is forbidden to the tramp and the student: first his own voice, then assimilation through upward mobility, finally women.

First his voice. Young Jakie Rabinowitz never appears in blackface, to be sure, but he gets the first individual voice in feature films by singing (as the shooting script puts it) “in the most approved darkey manner.” As Jakie shuffles on the stage (fig. 4.6), Yudelson reports to Cantor Rabinowitz in an intertitle that he is singing “raggy-time songs”; the original shooting script called them “nigger songs.”51

Whose sound is it, then, that comes out of the Jewish son’s mouth? Jakie finds his voice through black music; Jack will succeed as a blackface singer. The movie insists on the black origins of jazz (I will return to its use of that claim), but it also wants the music to have Jewish roots, and so represents jazz as the link between Jews and America. The texts—original short story, play, movie shooting script, and intertitles—transfer Jewish sacred music to American jazz. The images put blacks into the picture.

“In seeking a symbol of the vital chaos of America’s soul, I find no more adequate one than jazz,” wrote Sampson Raphaelson in the preface to his published play, reprinted in the souvenir program of the movie. The intertitle that follows the movie credits, “Jazz is prayer,” appears to a background of mournful, East European music. “Distorted,
sick, unconscious of its destination,” Raphaelson explained, jazz linked polyglot, New World America to the ancient, wandering Jews. “Carrying on the tradition of plaintive religious melody of his forefathers,” as the narrator puts it in “The Day of Atonement,” Raphaelson’s short story from which The Jazz Singer was derived, “Jack was simply translating the age-old music of the cantors—that vast loneliness of a race wandering ‘between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.’”

Raphaelson’s words foreshadow the sacrifice of the short story and Broadway jazz singers on the paternal altar. The movie protagonist, who sings in blackface as his antecedents do not, gives birth to a new identity. “You taught me that music is the voice of God,” Jack tells his father in the movie. “My songs mean as much to my audience as yours to your congregation.” “He sings like his Poppa, with a tear in his voice,” says Sara when she hears him in blackface as the cantor is about to die. “He’s not my boy anymore. He belongs to the world.” In blessing Jack’s movement from cantor’s son to jazz singer, Sara sustains his claim that entertainment was the new American religion. When the white-robed and skull-capped Jack replaces his father on Yom Kippur (fig. 4.7, “a jazz singer singing to his God,” says the intertitle; the shooting script had “stage’s greatest blackface comedian”) and then puts on wool cap and burnt cork to sing “My Mammy” (fig. 4.8), he is ex-

changing one religious robe of office for another. The “island communities” of traditional America would be homogenized by idols of consumption. If political progressivism had failed to regenerate America, the Jazz Age would bring the younger generation of classes and ethnic groups together around the performer as commodity fetish.

Insisting on the shift from Hebraic particularism to American universalism, neither Raphaelson nor the intertitles acknowledge blackface as the instrument of that transformation. One would never know from Raphaelson—any more than from Henry Ford’s accusation that the “Jewish jazz trust makes you sing”—that African Americans and not Jews had created jazz. Blackface gives back to the racial shadow the music taken from its substance.

Much of the early success of Jolson’s generation of Jewish entertainers was, as Irving Howe puts it, “gained from acts done in blackface,” and Jews had almost entirely taken over blackface entertainment by the early twentieth century. In addition to Jolson, Eddie Cantor, George Burns, George Jessel, Fanny Brice, and Sophie Tucker all got their start in blackface. Jolson’s early blackface skit “The Hebrew and the Coon,” like the collaborations between Octavius Roy Cohen and Spencer Williams making minstrel films for black audiences, simply recycled
stereotypes. But Jewish songwriters and blackface performers also made something new. The shift from minstrelsy to vaudeville, writes Gary Giddins, carried race down to the Lower East Side, and Jewish musicians turned to African American–derived music to create the uniquely American, urban melting-pot sound of the Jazz Age. Irving Berlin (with whose “Blue Skies” Jack Robin seduces his mother) scored his first big success in 1911—and the biggest hit yet for Tin Pan Alley—with the minstrel number “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” (Berlin had written “Yiddle on Your Fiddle Play Some Ragtime” two years earlier; he’d gotten his start as a singing waiter at Nigger Mike Salter’s saloon and dance hall.) “Originating with the Negroes,” as John Tasker Howard expressed the consensus of enthusiasts and detractors alike, “jazz . . . has become a Jewish interpretation of the Negro.” “There is one vocation, all known members of which could pass a synagogue door unchallenged,” announced Variety in 1920, because those who composed “The Syncopa ted Symphony” were all Jews.55

“We speak of jazz as if it were the product of the Negro alone,” wrote Isaac Goldberg the month before The Jazz Singer premiered. “True enough, its primary associations, like its rhythms, are black, deriving ultimately from the African Southland. . . . It reaches from the black South to the black North, but in between it has been touched by the com-

mmercial wand of the Jew. What we call loosely by the name is thus no longer just black; musical miscegenation set in from the beginning, and today it would be a wise son if it knew its own father.” Jews had made more than a commercial impact on jazz, Goldberg continued; although the “Negro ancestry” of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin was “certainly questionable,” the “musical amalgamation of the American Negro and the American Jew” is what gave birth to jazz. The Baltimore Afro-American excerpted Goldberg’s essay under the headline “Jazz Indebted to the Jews.”56

“Musical miscegenation” was only part of the uniquely cooperative relationship between Jews and African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century. Nativist coalescence of race and ethnic stereotypes into a single, monstrous alien pushed Jews to think of themselves as allied with other minorities. The Yiddish press, protesting against lynchings and other antiblack violence, likened race riots against blacks to pogroms against Jews. Wealthy German Jews made common cause with “talented tenth” educated members of the black middle class in the struggle for civil rights; Jewish clothing unions organized black workers even as AFL craft organizations excluded them; and Jewish philanthropy and legal services supported black civic institutions and court fights. In fighting for our rights, explained the black writer James Weldon Johnson, Jews also fight for their own.57

It is against this background of interracial cooperation that Irving Howe accounts sympathetically for the Jewish attraction to blackface. “Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another,” he writes. “Blacking their faces seems to have enabled the Jewish performers to reach a spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their Jewish selves.”58

Blackface, according to Howe, expressed Jewish solidarity with another pariah group. This filial piety to the blackface Jewish fathers makes Howe himself an easy target for a Jew from the next generation, who risks imitating by reversing The Jazz Singer. For to attack blackface may simply be another way of putting it on, as the (gray-bearded) Jewish son writing these lines, like Jolson before him, uses blacks to declare his independence from the patriarch, Irving Howe—and thereby, like the blackface singer, pretends to speak for blacks as well. Still, even at the risk of contaminating the questioner, it is necessary to ask, after Howe, what Jewish “woe” and which “Jewish selves” the jazz singer’s blackface ventriloquizes.59

Blackface may seem not to express Jewishness at all but to hide it, so
that even your own mother wouldn’t know you. “Jakie, this ain’t you,” says Sara when she first sees her son in blackface. But why should the member of one pariah group hide his identity under the mask of another? Where Howe sees only solidarity, I see transfer as well. Switching identities, the jazz singer acquires exchange value at the expense of blacks.

Miscegenation was regression, in racialist theory, because the dark drove out the light. Blackface mimed that process in order to reverse it. Stereotypes located within both pariah groups were exteriorized as black, embraced as regenerative, and left (along with actual blacks) behind. Put Yiddish and black together, wrote Goldberg, “and they spell Al Jolson.” Take them apart and their doubling supports the flight of Jack Robin from them both. By giving Jack his own voice, blackface propels him above both his father and African Americans into the American melting pot.

Like the Jewish struggle for racial justice, the black-inspired music of urban Jews was a declaration of war against the racial and ethnic hierarchy of Protestant, genteel culture. Urban entertainment created an alternative, polyglot world, in which the children of Jewish immigrants found new, cosmopolitan identities among Jews, other immigrants, children of old-stock Americans—Randolph Bourne, Hutchins Hapgood, Carl Van Vechten—and African Americans as well. The jazz singer’s parricide spreads, from that perspective, out to the paternal cultural guardians of the dominant society. But The Jazz Singer refuses that self-interpretation. As Jeffrey Melnick proposes, moreover, far from homogenizing themselves into an undifferentiated whiteness, Jewish entertainers in the early twentieth century were creating new, expressive ways of being Jewish American. But the second-generation ethnic vitality of Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and the Lower East Side rarely found its way from New York City commercial culture to the Hollywood screen, at least where the depiction of Jews was involved. The Jazz Singer divides America between Old World parents and (so far as outward appearances are concerned) a fully assimilated second generation. Screening out the polyglot Americanizing metropolis of the immigrant children, The Jazz Singer confines rebellion within the Jewish family. Substituting blackface, which doubled for ethnic and racial variety, the movie points in spite of itself to another truth about the melting pot—not the cooperative creation of something new but assimilation to old inequalities.

Blacks may have seemed the most distinctively American people, the furthest from the Old World identities of Americanizing immigrants, but integral to that distinctiveness was their exclusion from the ethnic intermixture that defined the melting pot. For Jews and blacks were not moving in the same direction in the 1920s. As nativists attacked aggressive Jews and praised black subservience, Jewish philanthropists and lawyers believed that a public Jewish presence in the fight for racial equality would only provoke anti-Semitism. Better to litigate and finance civil rights for African Americans, as David Levering Lewis explains their position, “and fight against anti-Semitism by remote control.” When Hasia Diner, the historian of Jewish support for racial justice, calls Jews “mouthpieces” for the more powerless blacks, she inadvertently invokes the cultural form, blackface, that spoke for assimilating Jews and silenced African Americans.

The 1920 census, eliminating the distinction between “mulatto” and “Negro” and introducing the category “children of foreign-born,” was redefining the in-between statuses that threatened Anglo-Saxon purity: mulattoes were nothing but black; children born of European immigrants in the United States were less than white. The whiteness of Jews was particularly questionable, since a common set of racial stereotypes, which bore fruit in the 1924 immigration restriction bill, bound together Jews, Asians, and blacks under the orientalist umbrella. But orientalism also had a redemptive meaning in the Jazz Age: it signified racially alien, primitivist qualities, embraced by Jewish and black musicians, that would revivify American life. The first Yiddish theater on the Bowery was called “The Oriental.” In Oriental America premiered in 1896 as the first all-black Broadway show. Twenty years later—about the time the New Orleans jazz clarinetist Johnny Dodds was recording “Oriental Man”—George and Ira Gershwin wrote a song about four New York violinists from “Darkest Russia,” Mischa, Jasha, Tascha, and Sasha: “Sentimental Oriental gentlemen are we.” The Oriental sound in jazz, wrote Carl Engel in the Atlantic Monthly, owed more to the river Jordan (he was referring not to the Negro spiritual but to its biblical source) than to the Congo.

The conflation of racial minorities into a single, orientalist alien associated Jews with blacks. That identity traps the hero of “The Day of Atonement,” who shares “the oriental instinct for undulation” with a Jewish woman in the story; he wants the shiksa. His gentle girl friend admires what she sees as his “careless, happy” dance rhythm; moody and self-doubting, however, he wishes he could “dance standing straight” as she does. As the Cornell Sun editorialized in 1924, the same year Raphaelson wrote “The Day of Atonement,” “the innate racial charac-
teristics of Jews so conflict with Christian customs and prejudices that happy marriages are impossible.” Although the short story ends on an ambiguous note, when the reader takes leave of the protagonist he has been repossessed by his past.65

Raphaelson’s Jake Rabinowitz, deprived of the magic of burnt cork, is threatened by the fate of Sam Warner; the movie jazz singer enacts Al Jolson’s liberation. Blackface plays no role in the short story save for a disparaging reference to “a certain blackface comedian” who, unlike Jack, fails to sing from his soul.66 Blackface, by penetrating to the movie jazz singer’s soul, provides him with the way out of his communal body. Unlike the hero of the short story, Jack Robin plays a person of color instead of being confused for one. By painting himself black, he washes himself white. “The cry of my race” pulls Jack back to his family when he sees his father behind his own blackface reflection in the mirror (fig. 4.9). Blackface, by contrast, liberates the performer from the fixed, “racial” identities of African American and Jew. “The black man should not try to become an imitation white man,” warned President Warren Harding (Jolson wrote his campaign theme song), even as Jolson was playing an imitation black man.67 Freeing Jack from his inner blackness, blackface frees him from his father.

Blackface also gives Jack access to allegedly black qualities—intense emotionality and the musical expression that results from it. In part these were white fantasies, in part black achievements (jazz), and we will be examining The Jazz Singer’s relation to both. Whatever their origins, the blackface singer makes those qualities his own. His “musical miscegenation” produces the excitement of racial contact without its sexual dangers, for Jack’s child is his music and his own reborn self. As disguise, blackface capitalizes on identity as sameness; under burnt cork, the Jew could be a gentile. As expression, blackface creates individual identity as difference from one’s origins. Interiority generated and repressed by the culture of origin finds public form via the blackface mask. Evoking an imagined alternative community identity, blackface frees the performer from the pull of his inherited, Jewish, communal identicalness. The depersonalizing mask reaches a substrate of emotional expression out of which a new selfhood is born. Variety explained, “As soon as [Jolson] gets under the cork, the lens picks up that spark of individual personality solely identified with him.” Supplying his spontaneity and freeing him to be himself, blackface made Jolson a unique, and therefore representative, American.68

Freeing the son from the Jewish father on the one hand, the black

pariah on the other, Jack’s blackface is racial cross-dressing. Just as the white man in classic American literature uses Indians to establish an American identity against the Old World, so the jazz singer uses blacks. If regeneration through violence against Indians won the West, then rebirth through mass entertainment (expropriating black music) won the city. Cross-dressing, says Sandra Gilbert, allows the white man to acquire the envied (fantasized) qualities of the other sex (here race) and yet reassure himself of his own identity: I am not really black; underneath the burnt cork is a white skin. As Elaine Showalter puts it, cross-dressing allows the white man to speak for women (here blacks) instead of to them, and show the actual members of the stigmatized group how best to play themselves.69

In The Jazz Singer, however, blackface does not simply substitute racial for sexual cross-dressing; rather, the movie’s romance unites the two. The blackface shadow points to forbidden women; but whereas the double usually signifies sexual catastrophe, as for the Prague student and the tramp,70 Jack’s double gives him access both to his mother and to her gentile rival. Blackface takes Jack from his mother to Mary, expresses their conflicting demands on him, and finally acquires them both.

Although the rate of intermarriage between Jews and Christians in the early twentieth century, at 1.17 percent, was close to the nearly zero
percentage rate of marriages between blacks and whites, popular-culture productions sanctioned the one and forbade the other. The *Bintel Brief* section of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, which responded to urgent readers’ requests for help with their daily lives, got its start with advice about intermarriage. The intermarriage melodrama, strongly rooted in the nineteenth century, took on new life in motion pictures and Broadway shows. Intermarriage, first between Orthodox and nonobservant Jews, then between Jews and Christians, encapsulated the problems of Americanization as portrayed in immigrant silent film. *Abie's Irish Rose*, the longest-running Broadway play of the 1920s, followed the dramatic convention of marrying Jewish men to Irish American women, as did the highly publicized romance between Irving Berlin and Ellin MacKay. (Berlin called the Tin Pan Alley number about his love affair “Society Rose.”) May MacAvoy was the stage name of the actress who played the object of Jack Robin’s affections.

White immigrants intermarry and blacks do not in ethnic silent film, but that did not deprive blackface of a role in the intermarriage process. The Broadway show second only to *Abie's Irish Rose* in popularity at the end of the Jazz Age was *Green Pastures*, a religious fable in which simple, southern black folk move from being God’s chosen people to embracing Christ. “De Lawd” leads the “Hebrews” out of bondage in *Green Pastures*, in the familiar linking of Jewish Egyptian to black American slavery. However (in an allegory that could be read as justifying the end of Reconstruction), God’s chosen people fall into dissolute behavior until they take up their “burden” and worship the man who carries the cross. *The Jazz Singer* brings *Green Pastures* together with *Abie's Irish Rose*, for by putting a black face on ethnic intermarriage, it blacks up the conversion of the Jews.

A white bride benefited as did no black from the wedding ceremony; nonetheless, by miming the most tabooed romance in American culture, that between black man and white woman, blackface disempowers both threatening participants. As doubling unifies the immigrant son, fragmentation disassembles not only the blacked-up, emptied-out, African American body but also the female chorus line. The plot diminishes Mary from career woman who gets Jack his break to suppliant and admirer, a member of the audience mesmerized by Jack. She is also assimilated, as the object of the gaze, to the line of showgirls—mechanized, fetishized, assembly-line body parts of what Siegfried Kracauer called in 1927 “The Mass Ornament”—whom the souvenir program shows in Jack’s power (see fig. 4.5).

The Jewish star does not triumph by dominating women, however. Blackface is not the instrument of aggression, which is how doubling functions in its comic (tramp) and gothic (student) forms. The student from Prague is passive, gender destabilized—half a man whose double takes charge. The double’s aggression blocks access to the higher-status woman, whereas the aggressive tramp temporarily gets her; yet in contrast to both, the aggressive, self-confident Jack Robin (at Coffee Dan’s and in the love scene with his mother) is feminized in blackface. He plays not the black sexual menace of Reconstruction, progressive, *Birth of a Nation* fantasy, but the child Negro of the restored 1920s plantation myth. In a decade when Jewish aggression was feared and blacks kept secure in their place, and when white collegians considered blacks less aggressive than Jews, the black mask of deference enforced on one parish group covered the ambition attributed to the other.

Enacting submission made Jolson, as the souvenir program put it, “the master not only of laughter but of pathos.” Prominent teeth and grinning mouth had established the minstrel as a needy, greedy, oral self. Minstrelsy made African Americans into lazy, bestial creatures of physical need, the underside of hardworking, ambitious, white Protestants. Jolson played blackface trickster on Broadway, but not in his movie hits, *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool*. Drained of the sexuality and aggression that were permitted only as self-ridicule, *The Jazz Singer* left behind a pure figure of longing (fig. 4.10).

Jack appears between Sara and Mary in two scenes—the two in which he wears blackface. The first scene (fig. 4.11), in which the singer displays his divided loyalties, flirts with racial-as-sexual cross-dressing. Neither Jack nor Mary appears in the everyday clothes that signify sexual difference. Jack wears black skin as his costume; in tight-fitting pants and shirt, he is blacking his face and putting on a black wool wig. Mary, undressed in scanty dance costume, is all white. Her visible limbs convey a phallic power that, her availability for the male gaze notwithstanding, accentuates the blackface performer’s passivity. To complete the disorientation, Mary wears a giant tiara on her head. In the scene’s opening, Mary towers over the seated Jack (fig. 4.12). As one sexual signifier floats from Jack to Mary, another slides from Sara to Jack. When his mother enters, “he starts to kiss her,” the published shooting script explains, “then remembers her [sic] makeup.” Jack actually remembers his burnt cork; the editor’s *sic* underlines the fact that the makeup is on the wrong sex—and, a souvenir-program production still indicates, it is Mary who first showed Jack how to use it (figs. 4.13, 4.14).
Neither menacing nor comic, neither anti-Semitic nor consciously antiblack, Jack’s racial cross-dressing has a transvestite component. It masks self-assertiveness in racial as sexual drag. Whether as woman-identified or merely (some viewers may think) as child, Jack gains through blackface the ability to leave home and have it too. Putting on the mask of weakness, the upwardly mobile immigrant acquires the American girl without losing the Jewish mother.

Whiteface imposed a choice on Jack Robin: either Mary (“Toot, Toot, Tootsie”) or Sara (“Blue Skies”). The two women come together in blackface, when Jack sings first about the agony of choosing, then about the ecstasy of double possession. As Jack sings “My Mammy” at Jolson’s Winter Garden Theater, the camera cuts from the blackface performer onstage to the two adoring women, one in the audience and the other in the wings. Doubles are traditionally fraternal rivals for a single woman, as in The Student from Prague and The Idle Class. Here, the blackface shadow, by doubling the mother instead, acquires two women for his white substance.

Emblematic of division in both play and shooting script, blackface performs ecstatic synthesis in the movie’s finale. The jazz singer moves from Sara to Mary, from the Jewish woman with an earthly husband (called by God to sacrifice his son) to the Christian woman without one.
At the same time, the most powerful erotic bond remains that between mother and son. Maternal hysteria in the “Blue Skies” scene, in Martha Fineman’s interpretation, expresses less incestuous desire and more the anxiety of loss; Sara wants to hold her family together. It is hard from the son’s point of view not to feel the intermixture of Oedipus and separation anxiety in the maternal home. Camera cuts during the climactic “My Mammy” incorporate Mary, but most fundamentally they bring the performer back home, for the intensified emotion released through burnt cork erupts in the maternal name. The son returns on top, since the editing that concentrates frontally on Jack’s performance locates the immigrant spectator above his mother and the rest of the audience in the place of maternal adoration. Jack sings on bended knee at the Winter Garden Theater (see fig. 1.1), but this staged, blackface courtship ritual frees him from the sexualized mother at home to give him back at a safe distance—“I’d walk a million miles for one of your smiles”—the purely nurturing one. The body in motion of “Blue Skies” reduces not to Birth of a Nation’s castrated black phallus but to exaggerated white lips that give and ask for nurture.

Blackface allows Jack to play Freud’s *fort/da* game, where the child loses his mother and gets her back, by linking the black mammy to the Jewish mother. Captioning its photograph of The Jazz Singer’s last frame with Jolson’s final word, “Mammy!,” Photoplay explained: “Here you behold Al Jolson, piteously imploring the world in general to take him back down South to Georgia, Alabama, or Virginia, to the sunny cotton fields, the little old cabin on Mammy’s knees.” In accepting that Jolson had a southern mammy, Photoplay was countering the stereotype of the ambitious, rootless, cosmopolitan Jew, the anti-Semitic turn taken by agrarian nostalgia in the Jazz Age.

Immigrant Jews did share the experience of loss with other mobile Americans, although to conflate it with the slave trade (the conflation that gave mammy her synecdochic power) was egregious. Sophie Tucker ( born to Jewish parents in Poland, though Jean-Paul Sartre thought she was black)—who’d begun in New York vaudeville doing blackface in the afternoon and whiteface at night, and who learned her signature song “Some of These Days” from her black maid—introduced “My Yiddishe Momma” in 1925. Singing Yiddish on one side of her record and English on the other, Tucker sold a million copies. Here, too, blackface expresses the “Jewish . . . woe,” to recall Howe, of leaving the maternal home.
ish mammy to passivity. African American actresses—Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers—were confined to mammy roles when finally allowed access to the screen. But classic blues performers in African American communities like Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters gave mama another meaning, and Tucker, who recorded “Shake That Thing” as well as “Eli, Eli,” was a “Red Hot Mamma” indebted to them. “Papa likes the women, mama likes the men,” sang Rosa Henderson. Sarah Martin’s “Mean Tight Mama” goes “to sleep at break of day.” As Bessie Smith put it, “Mama wants some lovin’ right now.” Edith Wilson sang mammy songs in blackface to whites, ultimately advertising pancakes as Aunt Jemima; prior to that, however, she had performed for African Americans as a blues mama. And Hattie McDaniel, before she was turned into the most famous motion picture mammy of all time, answered back to “My Mammy’s” suppliant or grinning open mouth (whose connection to screen mammies will be explored in chapter 6) in her own composition, “Dentist Chair Blues.” Displacing the mouth downward—see the epigraph to this chapter—McDaniel and her piano player, “Dentist Jackson,” perform the before, during, and after of sexual intercourse. Contra Jolson’s “mammy” and her own future screen persona, McDaniel gives (musical) pleasure by (miming) taking it in for herself.84

Some black women who were left behind sang railroad blues; others, deciding whether to stay or go, refused to submit passively to loss. “There ain’t no use to sniffle, whimper, and whine,” Hattie McDaniel sang in another of her blues, “cause it’s your mama going to give you the gate.” Ethel Waters—“no man’s mama” before she ended her career as a film mammy—gave singing lessons to Sophie Tucker. Little response came from Jack Robin’s mammy like the one Waters gives a year later to another kneeling man who thinks he can come and go at will: “Stand up when you’re making your pleas, no use wearing out your knees; get up off your knees, papa, you can’t win me back that way.”85

The final shot of The Jazz Singer fades out on Jolson with his arms outstretched, absolutely perpendicular to his body. The image evokes, in the Uncle Tom’s Cabin tradition, Christ on the cross. “Don’t you think Al Jolson is just like Christ?” remarked Zelda Fitzgerald. She might have been thinking of the Uncle Tom that Edwin Porter brought to the screen, crucified for a flogging with his arms tied to a stick of wood. Blackface Jack’s sacrifice, however, empowers the man behind the mask. The title of Hortense Spiller’s essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” names the denial to slaves of the power and protection of the law of the father, the effort to reduce them to maternal flesh. The blackface inver-

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Figure 4.14. “May McAvoy teaches Jolson the art of movie makeup,” from The Jazz Singer Souvenir Program. Courtesy of Dover Publications.
sion—papa’s baby, mammy’s maybe—uses a surrogate black mammy to escape a real white father. In a sinister version of the psychoanalytic phrase, blackface is a regression in the service of the ego.86

As a song of repentance for sins he knows he will repeat, “My Mammy” is a blackface Kol Nidre, but it no longer asks forgiveness from the Jewish Father God. The Lithuanian Jew who’s lost his mother (Jolson’s died when he was eight) and longs in blackface for a mammy is giving up his Jewish faith for an American dream.87

The Jazz Singer’s blackface exteriorizes Jewishness, embraces the exteriorized identity as regenerative, and then leaves it behind. The linguistic ambiguity of that “it” has a cultural referent, for however thoroughly blackface relinquishes the Jewish past, it more thoroughly abandons blacks. Yankee, frontiersman, and black, wrote Constance Rourke, were the three humorous masks for establishing a uniquely American identity; urban Jews, racially stigmatized, chose the black.88 But a sinister paradox inheres in this choice. Assimilation is achieved via the mask of the most segregated; the blackface that offers Jews mobility keeps the blacks fixed in place. By wiping out all difference except black and white, blackface turns Rabinowitz into Robin, but the fundamental binary opposition nevertheless remains. That segregation imposed on blacks, silences their voices and sings in their name. Replacing the Old World Jew, blackface also replaced the black.

IV

The most obvious feature of The Jazz Singer, unmentioned in all the critical commentary, is that it contains no jazz. Al Jolson may have saved minstrelsy from extinction by giving it a syncopated beat, as Hoberman claims, but he did so by blocking out jazz.89 The “jazz” of the Jazz Age, to be sure, was not the music of Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Fletcher Henderson. Paul Whiteman, who led the most popular band of the 1920s and sold millions of records, was acknowledged “King of Jazz.” “Mr. Jazz Himself” is a 1917 Irving Berlin song, and Jolson gave “Boston’s first jazz recital” in 1919 (the quote is from the Boston Advertiser). Gershwin was “King George the First of Jazz.” “Jazz,” proclaimed Raphaelson, “is Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, George Gershwin, Sophie Tucker”; Tucker’s billing changed in the course of her career from “World Renowned Coon Shouter” to “Queen of Jazz.” As Amiri Baraka puts it, “Jazz had rushed into the mainstream without so much as one black face.”90

Blackface did the work of black faces, standing not for what is now called jazz but for the melting-pot music of the Jazz Age. Almost without exception, popular-culture writing in the 1920s treated Negro primitivism as the raw material out of which whites fashioned jazz. Savage, not polyphonic, rhythm was heard in black music. Jazz was identified with freedom as emotional release rather than as technical prowess. Praise for jazz scores went to white arrangers like Ferde Grofe, as if the sounds made by Duke Ellington, Don Redman, and Jelly Roll Morton came from nature. Improvisational skill, instead of being recognized in African American musicians, was overlooked as being central to jazz, and instead was attributed to such performers as Jolson. It took a decade before a critic linked jazz improvisation to the act of speech; that delayed insight suggests both why the first talking picture wanted to lay claim to jazz—sensing the link between jazz, speech, and individual freedom—and why, in a racially hierarchical society, The Jazz Singer assigned freedom to a blackface ventriloquist rather than to an African American jazz musician.91

As an “industrialized folk music,” jazz allegedly combined the sounds of the jungle and the metropolis.92 But Jolson’s success, contemporaneous with Ulrich B. Phillips’s celebratory Life and Labor in the Old South, points to the importance of slavery for the new music as well.93 Blackface began under slavery, when blacks were forbidden access to the stage. The Jazz Singer returns them to the plantation. Jackie sings “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee” to begin the sound revolution in talking pictures; Jack sings “My Mammy” to end the movie. “Swance,” sung by Jolson in blackface, catapulted George Gershwin to fame. L. Wolf Gilbert, born in Odessa, composed “Way Down Yonder” about Mississippi not the Ukraine; he wrote the lyrics for “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee.” The Jazz Age rediscovered Foster’s “I Dream of Jeannie,” making the connection for the first time between Foster’s always popular plantation music and his heretofore neglected sentimental home songs. The first usage of jazz as a verb noted by the OED, from a 1917 New York newspaper, derives the word from “old plantation days.”94

Jazz, in the dominant Jazz Age myth, began with plantation folk, and white melting-pot musicians made it an artform for modern times. Jazz was indeed a melting-pot music, but it did not have primitive pure racial roots, and its “musical miscegenation” reached fruition inside urban African American communities. Jazz originated not on the plantation but
in New Orleans. As Alan Lomax put it, “French opera and popular song and Neapolitan music, African drumming . . . , Haitian rhythm and Cuban melody, native Creole satiric ditties, American spirituals and blues, the ragtime and popular music of the day—all these blended in the rich gumbo of New Orleans music. . . . But the taster, the stirrer, the pot-watchers for this gumbo was the New Orleans colored Creole . . . [and] the black-skinned American musician.” If “an interracial marriage was consummated” and “the child of this union was jazz,” in Lomax’s version of the melting pot, it was a “black and tan wedding,” a “musical union” of equals.95 The music they made did not celebrate or yearn for a lost, innocent paradise. Night spots with African American bands that catered primarily or exclusively to whites had names like New York’s “Cotton Club” and the “Plantation Club,” but urban sophisticates like Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington who played there mostly did not evoke the sunny South. And when blacks in blackface did call up plantation nostalgia, they were usually appealing to whites. While Jolson waited for the Robert E. Lee, the African American sitting on the safety valve during the steamboat’s race from Natchez to New Orleans (Porter omitted this detail from Uncle Tom’s Cabin) was in danger of being blown up.96

African American jazz was the music of the cosmopolitan New Negro, from New Orleans to Chicago, Kansas City, Harlem, and San Francisco. Blackface minstrelsy in the Jazz Age, by contrast, ventriloquized blacks as rural nostalgia. No longer an exclusive elite institution, as under slavery (“the last of the Cavalier societies” according to Gone with the Wind), the plantation supplied a home for the democratic mass. It did so on screen and musical stage rather than in lived communities, not, in Gunther Schuller’s words, by providing “a deeply felt musical expression of a certain ethnic group [but as] a rather superficial derived commercial commodity.”97 One should not confuse socially rooted aesthetic judgment of slowness, however, with lack of psychosocial reach. By domesticating the primitive, in the renderings of Jolson and other songwriters and performers, the plantation supplied the lost and longed for, innocent origins of jazz. In joining a lost southern to a lost Jewish to a lost maternal past, blackface “jazz” restored them all.

The Jazz Singer’s blackface facilitated upward mobility in the competitive, urban present by symbolizing the peaceful, rural past. As Raymond Williams has argued for England and T. J. Clark for France, urban parvenus required the myth of the stable countryside.98 The plantation fulfilled that function in the postbellum, industrializing United States, an American agrarian myth that imprisoned blacks. The Birth of a Nation invented black, Reconstruction aggression to unite North and South against it. The Jazz Singer watered down revolutionary, black modern music in the name of paying it homage. Like the other doubles movies, The Jazz Singer is also about blocked mobility. But whereas the tramp and the student from Prague are defeated by their doubles, blackface blocks mobility for the black double (and the woman) so that his white alter ego can rise.

Jazz may have been the Jazz Age’s name for any up-tempo music (Tin Pan Alley was selling most of its product under the heading of “jazz”), but the indiscriminate use of the term no more excuses The Jazz Singer’s missing sound than blackface compensates for the absence of blacks. Signifying the omitted referent claims possession of it, for urban mass entertainment let it be known it was capitalizing on its origins. Just as African American performers introduced the cabaret songs that first underlay modern urban nightlife, and then were replaced by whites, so they invented jazz. And just as the first sound picture returned to and domesticated the “slum” origins of movies, so it expropriated jazz. In the thematized, generational, Jewish story, the “white noise” of the title of this chapter is the sacred chant that silences the jazz singer’s voice. In the silenced, racial, black story, Jolson’s white noise obliterates jazz.99*

* The Jazz Singer returned twice in 1994, in Woody Allen’s Bullets over Broadway, set in the 1920s, and in Whoopi Goldberg’s Corrina, Corrina, set in the 1950s. Their variations on the Jewish/black theme mark the distance we have traveled since 1927. Allen’s homage to Jolson opens with the version of “Toot, Toot, Tootsie” that Jolson sang in The Jazz Singer, modified into real jazz; features a grotesque Manny; and plots the Allen character’s triumph over a show business gangster who could be modeled on Johnny Costello, the man Ruby Keeler left for Jolson. Goldberg plays a black housekeeper in Corrina, Corrina who revivifies a Jewish family (named Singer) after the little girl’s mother has died. Corrina restores speech to the silent daughter, Molly. She saves Manny Singer’s job in an advertising agency by jazzing up his singing jingles. A “black culture donor,” to borrow the phrase Cecil Brown has applied to two other major movies of 1994, Pulp Fiction and Forrest Gump, Corrina rescues Manny and Molly from suburban sterility by introducing them to black life, faith, and love. Goldberg presides over a sound track that opens with Sarah Vaughan’s version of George and Ira Gershwin’s “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” closes with Stevie Wonder’s “We Will Find a Way,” and moves between jazz, gospel, and rhythm and blues. We expect Manny and Uncle Sammy to marry in this contemporary version of musical miscegenation, but the couple must first overcome Manny’s emotional rigidity. When Manny Singer and Corrina Washington reconcile and embrace, in the film’s penultimate scene, he buries his weeping face in her arms. Cut to Molly teaching “This Little Light of Mine” to her grandmother, who repeats the lines in a heavy Yiddish accent. (Cf. Cecil Brown, “Doing That Of’ Oscar Soft Shoe,” San Francisco Examiner, Image Magazine, Mar. 26, 1995, 25-27, 28-41.)
The Jazz Singer retains its magic because, like no picture before or since, it is a liminal movie. It goes back and forth not only between sound and silence, music and intertitles, blackface and white, but also between Kol Nidre and “The Robert E. Lee,” Jew and gentile, street and stage, male and female. Jack’s putting on and taking off of blackface is synecdochic for the movie’s reversibility, its promise that nothing is fixed or lost forever.106 Going back to the innocent, dirty origins of movies in order to go forward into sound, blackface was talking pictures’ transitional object.101 It gathered together the shift from gesture to look, pleasure to desire, vaudeville to Hollywood, immigrant community to mobile individual, silence to sound—and only then did it become dispensable.

Blackface emancipated the jazz singer from Jews and blacks by linking him to the groups he was leaving behind. The same paradoxical relation applies to speech as well. “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet’ was the perfect opening for the new age, a slang wisecrack that banished the universalized mime of the silent era,” writes Robert Ray. But far from replacing the “declaratory, grandiose, and abstract” gestures of silent film with a more “intimate, vernacular, and specific” realism, the more primitive, histrionic blackface technique displaces the more advanced, interiorized one during the course of the movie.102 Jack never appears in blackface before his father’s prohibition stops speech. Blackface, in silent scenes and song, dominates the rest of the film. Jack sings in whiteface before the paternal “Stop!”—in blackface thereafter.

The first talking picture’s regression from speech to blackface may seem fortuitous, since the two speaking scenes were ad libbed, on-the-spot collaborations between Al Jolson and Sam Warner. But no overarching conscious plan was required to give The Jazz Singer its telos. When Jack loses the power of speech, he splits in two. Blocked from overthrowing the father directly, he regresses to blackface’s imaginary realm of music, image, and the specular, histrionic self. That step backward prepares a fuller victory. In whiteface speech Jack was first divided, then silenced; hearing a cantor sing “Yahrzeit,” the anniversary song for the dead, the jazz singer feels the absence of what he left behind. Although Jack hallucinates his father’s face in Cantor Joseph Rosenblatt as the cantor sings “Yahrzeit” in Yiddish, the满满二Rows was “the mother tongue, the language of women and of the uneducated masses,” and

*René Clair revised the gothic double tale for the age of mechanical reproduction in the first international English-language film, The Ghost Goes West (1935). In a spoof of Neufortesu, the ghost first haunts his ancestral Scottish castle. There he blocks the romance of his double (played by the same actor) and descendant. When a supermarket magnate buys the castle and reconstructs it in Florida, the castle turns from ancestral burden into tourist attraction and moneymaker. Advertised like a P. T. Barnum exhibit, the ghost now promotes romantic as well as capitalist freedom. To mark the shift from uncanny doubling to commodified, mass-produced entertainment, Clair brings on a klitz-wearing marching band. The first four members are African Americans; the rest of the long line (shades of Sir Walter Scott) are whites in blackface. (See Gerald P. Noxon, “The European Influence on American Film,” in Sound and the Cinema: The Coming of Sound to American Film, ed. Evan William Cameron [Pleasantville, N.Y., 1980], 145.)
the cinematic demands for realism, which were intensified by the coming of sound. Speech gave voice to complex inner emotions that pantomime and intertitles were unable to represent, and it devalued techniques that distracted from diegetic self-sufficiency. Just as sound fostered cinema's aspiration accurately to reproduce reality—to replace shadow with substance—so it did away with blackface as speech. If blackface was the victim of the technological revolution for which it had fronted, then Sarris's cultural guilt of movie musicals returns, pointing not only to the slaying of silent pictures in general but to the specific destruction of blackface.109

On the other hand, the talkies did not kill blackface immediately, and the terms of its death and continued life explain how cultural guilt can attach to the destruction of the vicious blacking-up practice. For sound entered into an already-existing bifurcation in classic Hollywood between spectacle and story. Musicals and comedies had vaudeville roots, and though they brought performance together with plot, they often subordinated narrative to display.110 Talking pictures in other genres intensified the aspiration to verisimilitude that had defined movies since Griffith. *The Jazz Singer*, however, rescued blackface as pleasure principle while undercutting it as realism. The first movie musical, *The Jazz Singer* was also the first movie to work musical numbers into its plot.111 This conjunction of narrative and spectacle ultimately vindicated not verisimilitude but a utopian plenitude of feeling. “My Mammy” set the precedent for production numbers in talking-pictures Hollywood. Without encompassing *The Jazz Singer*’s social and technological spread, minstrels under cork (as we shall see in chapter 6) sang and danced the emotional intensity that blackface performance enabled. The classic Hollywood musical would locate itself squarely within the blackface melting-pot tradition.112

But if *The Jazz Singer* initiated the movie musical—Hollywood poetry—it did undermine the use of burnt cork in Hollywood prose. And cultural guilt inheres in that disappearing act as well. For blackface condensed two social meanings: heightened authenticity and American acceptance for the (Jewish) individual, subordination for the anonymous (black) mass. *The Jazz Singer*’s self-awareness about the former called attention to the role of performance in creating individuality. And while this self-understanding anticipated postmodern celebrations of performance, when read against the grain the movie in fact exposes the imprisoning structure of the performative. Although white actors performed under cork in musicals and comedies, to play blackface dramatic roles violated cinematic conventions of realism. Since sound increased film’s ability convincingly to counterfeit reality, blackface-as-reality only got in the way. Calling attention to the figure behind the mask, it exposed the illusion that the individual was in charge of his or her voice, that it issued forth from an authentic interior. Better to bequeath spoken blackface to actual black people who, most importantly in the southern genre (its centrality to talking-pictures Hollywood is addressed in chapter 6), played the parts minstrelsy had prepared.

Blackface was not just left behind, however—for production numbers, nostalgia, or African Americans; it was universalized as well. During the period when it was perfecting Vitaphone, Western Electric was also conducting an experiment at the site of production. The “Hawthorne experiment” is as germinal in industrial sociology as *The Jazz Singer* is in the history of film, and the two have speaking in common. Getting workers to talk and feel listened to, the company discovered, increased productivity more than did the effort to create silent, efficient human machines.113 Talk, encouraged as inner self-expression, functioned as social control. In production as in consumption, in work as at play, the company stood behind the workers’ words, Jolson to their blackface. “Master Minstrel” Al Jolson models the dreams of his fans, dreams produced socially for private consumption and ventriloquized as one’s own. Freed from traditional cultural and communal restraints, the jazz singer becomes a component part of standardized organizations and standardized dreams. To cover up that mode of production, blackface realism had to go. For it exposed the illusion that the individual was speaking and not being spoken for—whether by language, capital, the mass consumption industries, or by the locus of all three for thirty years after *The Jazz Singer* (returning to capture the White House in the 1980s), talking-pictures Hollywood.

That, at least, is the conclusion suggested by an extraordinary picture published in a film magazine as part of the fiftieth-anniversary celebration of *The Jazz Singer* (fig. 4.15).114 The picture is captioned with the magazine’s version of the first words of speech in a feature movie, Jolson’s “Wait a minute, I tell ya. You ain’t heard nothing. You want’a hear ‘Toot Toot Tootsie?’ The photo shows a white man sitting on a throne-like chair, with rows of identical-looking blackface drummers seated around and behind him. One figure in blackface stands front and center, his arms outstretched in song. A blowup reveals the singer to be Jolson himself. But Jolson sang “Toot, Toot, Tootsie” alone in whiteface in *The Jazz Singer*; this image reabsorbs him back into a minstrel troupe.
He represents the rows of blackface automatons, themselves synecdoche for the reproduction of identical identities in film technology and mass society. The image thus undercuts the caption that misidentifies its picture. Unmentioned—like blackface itself—in the article that prints it, the photograph makes visible the link between blackface and sound that is repressed in the text. For this silent picture assigns control over speech not to democratic, individual, or collective voices, but to the unidentified king of blackface, his authority sustained by the interchangeable identities of those who sing his song. This unmarked man sitting on his throne does not appear in The Jazz Singer. He runs the minstrel show in Mammy, the Jolson film that actually contains this scene. Call him Uncle Sam.

In 1890, when Philip Krantz and Abraham Cahan were starting a Yiddish-language socialist newspaper (the Arbeiter Zeitung), Cahan proposed launching the venture with an article on cannibalism in Africa. Krantz, wholly focused on promoting socialist doctrine on New York’s Lower East Side, objected. Cahan was also a socialist and went on to edit the Jewish Daily Forward for half a century. But just as he had moved from Russian to Yiddish to reach Jewish immigrants in their own language, so he believed that African cannibalism would attract an audience for Krantz’s doctrinal statement, “Our Program.”

Cahan had read the article he proposed to translate and publish, “Life Among the Congo Savages,” in Scribner’s. This popular journal offered its readers a mixture of fiction by such writers as Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Robert Louis Stevenson; political articles—Theodore Roosevelt’s account of leading his white and colored troops up San Juan Hill appeared within the decade; and displays of exotic peoples. The newspaperman turned explorer Henry M. Stanley was often featured. Closer to home, Jacob Riis’s “How the Other Half Lives,” his tour through the urban jungle, appeared four months before the article on Congo savages. The documentary, classificatory impulse that attended imperial expansion was taking in not only exotic non-Europeans but urban immigrants as well. Cahan himself, “discovered by [the] . . . renowned . . . literary Columbus” William Dean Howells, as Theodore Dreiser put it, was soon publishing stories in English about the Lower East Side. The genteel readers of Scribner’s could make the connection between the “benighted savages in the heart of Africa” and Riis’s “street Arabs”; between the “cannibal orgies” on the Dark Continent and the “dark hallways and filthy cellars” at home, “crowded, as is every foot


Chapter 4. Blackface, White Noise


7. This paragraph and the next derive from Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision." Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, is quoted 214.


10. See Fiedler, *Love and Death*.


22. Hoberman, “Is ‘The Jazz Singer’ Good for the Jews?” 32; Hoberman is the first to make this point.


32. Harry Warner planned a film about anti-Semitism; he made *The Jazz Singer* instead. Where silent films depicted anti-Semitism, they located it in Rus-


41. *Jazz Singer* Souvenir Program, 15.


45. Carringer, ed., *Jazz Singer*, 61. A decade later a Jolson film took the risk. “If I didn’t have this black on, I’d kiss you,” Al Howard (Jolson) says to Dot (Jolson’s wife, Ruby Keeler) at the end of *Go Into Your Dance*. “Don’t let a little black stop you,” she replies.


54. Quoted in Bennett, *Party of Fear*, 204.


59. Ralph Ellison accused Howe of "appearing...in blackface" by playing the loyal son of Richard Wright, prescribing the kind of (social protest) fiction that the reprobates Ellison and James Baldwin should write. See Ellison, The World and the Jug, in Shadow and Act, 109-11, 124.

60. This is the claim of Ruth Perlmutter, "The Melting Pot and the Humoring of America: Hollywood and the Jew," Film Reader 5 (1982), 248.


67. Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, 44 (Harding quote); Goldman, Jolson, 113.


70. Rank, The Double, 4-7, 11, 33, 73. The student's rescue of the count's daughter from a runaway horse, which initiates their tragic romance, is replayed as the tram's comic fantasy.


74. Petro, Joyless Streets, 110-21, 155-58; Jim Pines, Blacks in Film: A Study of Racial Themes and Images in the American Film (London, 1975), 17, 19; Williamson, Crucible of Race; Fass, The Damned and the Beautiful, 482. Jolson invented a blackface trickster servant, Gus, for his Broadway shows; Gus was the name of the lower-class rapist in Birth of a Nation.

75. Goldman, Jolson, 65, 69; "Jazz Singer" Souvenir Program, 6-7; Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, 251-56; Seldes, "Daemonic in the American Theater," 178.

76. Carringer, ed., Jazz Singer, 120.


78. Rank, The Double, 75.

79. Martha Fineman, comment at Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.


82. Miles Krueger, ed., The Movie Musical from Vitaphone to 42nd Street as Reported in a Great Fan Magazine (New York, 1975), 4; John Higham, Send These to Me: Immigrants in Urban America (Baltimore, 1984), 180-87; Steinberg, Ethnic Myth, 228.

83. Sophie Tucker, Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker


86. Zelda Fitzgerald quoted in Nancy Milford, Zelda (New York, 1970), 123; thanks to Harry Stecopoulos for calling this comment to my attention. See also Spillers, “Mamma’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 79–80; Ernst Kris, Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art (New York, 1952).

87. See Goldman, Jolson, 4, 74, on Jolson and his mother. For the link between Kol Nidre and “My Mammy,” as for so much in my approach here, I am indebted to Norman Jacobson; however, he would (I am fairly sure) like to be held no more responsible for the analysis than Cantor Rabinowitz for Jack’s music.

88. Rourke, American Humor, 95–104.


90. Shaw, Jazz Age, 41–44; Goldman, Jolson, 102; Goldberg, Gerzahn, 3; Slobin, “Some Intersections of Jazz, Music, and Theater,” 35 (quoting Raphaelson); Tucker, Some of These Days, 34, 38, 62, 139; Leroy Jones [Amiri Baraka], Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York, 1963), 99.


97. Schuller, Early Jazz, 252. See also Newton, Jazz Scene, 201–2.


100. Thanks to Michael Fried and Ruth Leys for this perception.


104. Garber, Vested Interests, 12, 34, 50.

105. See Geza Roheim, Magic and Schizophrenia (Bloomington, Ind., 1955); Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), 8–9, 14–24, 45, 52–54, 72–86; Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing (Chicago, 1986).


Chapter 5. Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Pictures


2. The quotations are from, respectively, Herbert Ward, “Life Among the Congo Savages,” Scribner’s, Feb. 1890, 135, 152-54, 186; and Jacob A. Riis, “How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements,” Scribner’s, Dec. 1889, 655, 657, 659. See also Frederick E. Hoxie, “Exploring a Cultural Borderland: Native American Journeys of Discovery in the Early Twentieth Century,” Journal of American History 79 (Dec. 1992): 969-95; Sanders, Downtown Jews, 197-204; Amy Kaplan, The Social Construction of American Realism (Chicago, 1988), 109 (Dreiser quote); Curtis, Apes and Angels. Sanders identifies Stanley as the author of the article Cahin translated, but Stanley’s Scribner’s article (see note 3) was in fact published the year after the first issue of the Arbeiter Zeitung. Ward’s travel account, which centers on cannibalism, as Stanley’s does not, must be the essay in question. It appeared one month before Cahin’s translation. At the same time that Stanley and Ward were reporting from Africa and Riis from the Lower East Side, Scribner’s also published John G. Bourke’s “The American Congo” (May 1894, 590-610), on Mexico. (Thanks to Gaston Alone for donating this reference.)


7. Raphaelson, Jazz Singer, and “Accent on Youth” and “White Man” (New York, 1935). Raphaelson copyrighted White Man in 1926 under the title Harlem Nights. He could never get it produced.


9. The novel Imitation of Life, which centers on the relations between a Jewish employer and her black servant, was influenced by Hurst’s relationship with the black writer Zora Neale Hurston. The film converted the Jewish woman into a gentle (played by Claudette Colbert). Hurst also wrote the screenplay for the Jewish generational-conflict film The Younger Generation (1929). On Hurst and Hurston, see Gay Wilelms, “White Patron and Black Artist: The Correspondence of Fannie Hurst and Zora Neale Hurston,” in The Library Chronicle (Austin, Tex., 1986), 21-43. Thanks to Elizabeth Abel for this reference.

10. Raphaelson, Accent on Youth; William Paul, Ernst Lubitsch’s American Comedy (New York, 1983), 20-21, 207, 294. Raphaelson also wrote the screenplays for Design for Living, Ninotchka, and Heaven Can Wait.


12. See Melnick, Ancestors and Relatives.

13. We will return to the civil rights film’s version of that contrast in chapter 7.

14. Nasaw, Going Out, 16-78.

15. See chapter 4, above; and Gabler, Empire of Their Own; May, Screening Out the Past; Hansen, Rabbi and Babylon, 64 (Zukor quote).
