

## PART 1

# Made in America

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*The elements that went into vaudeville were combed from . . . the four corners of the world. . . . There were hypnotists, iron-jawed ladies, one-legged dancers, one-armed cornetists, mind readers, female impersonators, male impersonators, Irish comedians, Jewish comedians, blackface, German, Swedish, Italian and rube comedians. . . . Vaudeville asked only that you own an animal or an instrument, or have a minimum of talent or a maximum of nerve. With these dubious assets, vaudeville offered fame and riches. It was up to you.*

Fred Allen, *Much Ado About Me* (1956)



## CHAPTER 1

# Uncle Sammy and My Mammy

## I

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“Owl Jolson,” the hero of a 1936 Warner Bros., Looney Tunes, and Merry Melodies cartoon, is thrown out of his father’s house because he wants to sing “jazz.” The father, identified by accent and demeanor as an Old World music teacher, had welcomed the hatching of Owl’s older siblings—“another Caruso!” “another Kreisler!” “another Mendelssohn!”—but Owl pops out “a crooner.” “Shtop! Shtop!” shouts the father as the fledgling bursts into song. Setting off on his own, the self-made American rebel auditions for a radio talent show. Failed contestants drop through a trap door whenever the judge bangs his gavel. But Owl wins the contest, and with it the approval of his entire family, by singing, “With a cheer for Uncle Sammy, and another for my mammy, I love to sing.”

This animated film, titled *I Love to Singa*, is in part an ephemeron from the temporary 1930s decline of the most popular entertainer of the first half of the twentieth century. It advertised Al Jolson’s effort to revive his flagging career on radio. It also promoted what would turn out to be another in his series of unsuccessful films, *The Singing Kid*, which opens and closes with the song cheering for “Uncle Sammy and my mammy.” Yet both the cartoon and the failed feature were situated between two of the most widely seen movies of classic Hollywood, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Jolson Story* (1946). The paternal “Shtop!” at Owl’s birth quotes the famous word with which the jazz singer’s cantor father interrupts the son playing piano for his mother, thus returning the first talking picture to silence. Beginning with paternal disapproval and ending with familial embrace, the cartoon bridges the gap between the generational conflict of the 1920s film and the Americanization of the old people as well in the post–World War II, postimmigration, postgenocide *Jolson Story*.

*I Love to Singa* overrides the details of its historical moment, how-

ever, in the way it links art to politics. Popular culture Americanizes Owl Jolson, defeating Old World high culture. How, then, does Uncle Sammy employ “My Mammy” in that process? The film jazz singer had Jewish origins, like Kreisler, Mendelssohn, and Jolson, and, as is attested by the record collections of numerous grandfathers—mine and the protagonist’s of Clifford Odets’s *Awake and Sing*, for instance—the Italian, Caruso, was also an idol in immigrant Jewish households. The Owl Jolson cartoon subsumed immigrant popular music—opera and *The Jazz Singer*’s cantorial chants—under a European elite label. What took the place of foreign influence, in the cartoon as in the first talking picture, was the sound of the man known as “the mammy singer.”

“Uncle Sammy” merged the patriotic icon of Uncle Sam with a familiar figure in American Jewish families—I had one—Uncle Sammy. But that hybridization, too ethnic for universal American appeal, was just another sign of Jolson’s foundering for an audience in the 1930s: “Uncle Sammy” was New York provincial.<sup>1</sup> Jolson’s act of genius was to gather immigrant Jews and other Americans together under Uncle Sam’s banner by invoking a second patriotic icon. Appearing in her Jewish incarnation in the plot of *The Jazz Singer*, she is named in the song Jolson sings in blackface to climax and end the film: “My Mammy.”

“The ‘mammy’ of whom we have so often heard,” as NAACP founder, Mary White Ovington, called the African American mother, nursed the master’s child as well as her own. In domestic service in millions of American homes (the percentage of black women in paid employment was several times higher than that of whites, and the difference for mothers was even greater), “mammy” bestowed “her loving care” on other families at the expense of “her own offspring”; indeed, Ovington attributed the higher infant mortality rate among African Americans to the fact that “mothers who go out to day’s work are also unable to nurse their babies.” Even if Ovington’s specific interpretation was distorted by progressive maternalism, she understood that “mammy” nurtured whites—that is, supplied material support and a symbolic, imagined community—at the expense of blacks. She knew, too, that the mammy of unconditional love was actually a domestic worker (not least in urban, Jewish households); that forcing her to compensate for immigrant family rupture effaced the distinctive maternal losses imposed by slavery; and that desexualization was the price the black mother paid for public acceptance. Ovington understood that the condition for displays of interracial intimacy was the color line.<sup>2</sup>

Segregation was only half of white supremacy, however, for it coexisted alongside racial cross-dressing. A single image inspired the present



Figure 1.1. Al Jolson sings “My Mammy” in *The Jazz Singer*. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. © 1927 by Warner Bros.

study: Al Jolson, born Jakie Rabinowitz in *The Jazz Singer* and reborn as Jack Robin, singing “My Mammy” in blackface to his immigrant Jewish mother (fig. 1.1). How could blacking up and then wiping off burnt cork be a rite of passage from immigrant to American? To whose mother is the man born in the Old World Pale of Jewish Settlement really singing? “My Mammy” forces us to consider these questions by condensing into a single figure the structures of white supremacist racial integration that built the United States: black labor in the realm of production, interracial nurture and sex (the latter as both a private practice and a unifying public prohibition) in the realm of reproduction, and blackface minstrelsy in the realm of culture.

Minstrelsy was the first and most popular form of mass culture in the nineteenth-century United States. Blackface provided the new country with a distinctive national identity in the age of slavery and presided over melting-pot culture in the period of mass European immigration. While blackface was hardly the only distinctively American cultural form, even in black-white relations and especially for African Americans, it was a dominant practice and it infected others. My subject—for one cannot study everything—is its place in motion pictures. Minstrelsy claimed to speak for both races through the blacking up of one. Jolson’s blackface “My Mammy,” in the service of Americanizing immigrants, pretended to the absence of conflict between black and white.

After “My Mammy” and a montage of Jolson’s other hits opens *The*

*Singing Kid*, Jolson cheers for Uncle Sammy and his mammy on one New York rooftop as the black bandleader Cab Calloway joins in on another. The separate-but-equal verses on separate-but-equal skyscrapers illustrate Jolson's awkward efforts to incorporate actual African Americans into his 1930s films. The trouble arose not from the question of just whose mammy he was singing about, since segregation was already the long-established tool of racial harmony. By the 1930s, however, whites in blackface were giving way to African American motion picture actors. What disturbs the films where Jolson performs alongside African Americans is that he continues to appear in the burnt cork that had raised him to stardom. The presence of Jolson among the people he was supposedly representing better than they could represent themselves split in two the blackface figure of American unity.

No such problem troubled *The Jazz Singer*. With Jolson cheering for "my mammy" and Uncle Sam, blackface as American national culture Americanized the son of the immigrant Jew. In his 1914 afterword to *The Melting Pot*, a play about Jewish-gentile intermarriage that fixed its title on the United States, Israel Zangwill explained, "However scrupulously and justifiably America avoids physical intermarriage with the negro, the comic spirit cannot fail to note the spiritual miscegenation which, while clothing, commercialising, and Christianising the ex-African, has given 'rag-time' and the sex-dances that go to it, first to white America and thence to the whole white world."<sup>3</sup> Zangwill was naming the exclusion unthinkingly exposed by Fred Allen in the epigraph to this chapter when he listed "blackface" and not black performers among the Irish, Jewish, German, and other vaudevillians allowed to perform under the sign of their own ethnicities. Absent in substance, African Americans made their contribution in spirit. And "spiritual miscegenation" between black and Jew not only appealed to mother; it also sacramentalized under burnt cork the earthly miscegenation between Jewish son and his once taboo object of desire. For the jazz singer was marrying outside his community the figure still "scrupulously and justifiably" forbidden to African American men: the all-American (to distinguish her from mammy) "girl."

## II

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Jump forward half a century from "Uncle Sammy and my mammy." In mid-November 1993, perhaps in anticipation of Thanks-

giving, both *Time* and *Newsweek* published cover stories on the problem of race in the United States. The *Time* cover, visualizing anxiety over the new immigration, placed photographs of real people of various nationalities—"Middle Eastern, Italian, African, Vietnamese, Anglo-Saxon, Chinese, Hispanic"—across the top and down the side of the cover, women along the  $x$  and men along the  $y$  axes of a chromosome-linked graph. Computer software, known as "Morph" (for Metamorphosis 2.0), produced at the meeting points of the graph axes a simulation of the results of extensive intermarriage. *Time's* cover girl, her large image superimposed on the forty-nine small ones (adding up to the number of states in the Union), represented the all-American synthesis.

What might seem a bold depiction of miscegenation in the new melting pot was, however, doubly contaminated. For one thing, the pictorialization of distinctive national origins was a throwback to nineteenth-century theories of pure racial types. Just as earlier "scientific" racism gave precise numerical values to brain size and facial bone structure, so *Time* produced a "new face of America" that was "15% Anglo-Saxon, 17.5% Middle Eastern, 17.5% African, 7.5% Asian, 35% Southern European, and 7.5% Hispanic."<sup>4</sup> This mathematics was doubly imaginary, since the percentages bore no relation to any actual or prospective distribution of nationality groups in the United States.

*Time's* foray into computer dating might seem to indicate approval of the miscegenation that scientific racism condemned, for the magazine's art directors confessed to falling in love with the cover girl they had created. However—second problem—the price of the attraction was a similar look across all the supposedly different nationalities. In the enlarged living-color chart inside the magazine, all forty-nine faces, even the real people born before computer sex, are rendered in polite, pastel shades of light yellow-brown. (Choosing original pure types of the same, youthful age intensifies the sameness displayed in the name of variety.) Not only are the two photographed "Africans" close in color to the unmorphed Asians, Hispanics, and Anglo-Saxons, but their features are Caucasian as well. The *Time* table not only whitens its Africans; it blots out the two largest racial minorities in the United States by subsuming (dark-skinned) Latinos under "Hispanic" and including no one labeled African American at all. The intermarriage chart purifies African Americans in words (by calling them Africans) as it eliminates the dark majority in images. (They would return in the infamous darkening—blackening up—of O. J. Simpson's face on the *Time* cover half a year later.)<sup>5</sup>

Celebrating the melting pot by whitening its blacks, *Time* is inadver-

tently faithful to the historic character of assimilation. Since well before *The Melting Pot* and *The Jazz Singer*, marriage across ethnic and religious lines has symbolized the making of Americans. African Americans were excluded from that process, however, legally as well as symbolically: twenty-four states forbade white-and-black intermarriage until the 1967 Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia*. The *Time* cover responds to the changed legal and moral climate by homogenizing all its peoples of color and making the black man and woman virtually invisible. Nevertheless, the repressed returns in the title *Time* gave to its new melting pot: “Rebirth of a Nation.” The magazine was invoking (without, one assumes, full consciousness of its meaning) Hollywood’s founding motion picture, *Birth of a Nation*, where Ku Klux Klan punishment of the black desire for miscegenation married North to South onscreen and united immigrants and old-stock Americans in the film audience. In “Rebirth” as in *Birth*, moreover, the inclusion of some people is predicated on the violent exclusion of others; for even after restricting marriage partners by age, color, and aesthetic ideal of facial beauty, Morph still produces monsters—only now, in keeping with homophobic demonology, they are sexual instead of racial. Just as *Birth* invented and then lynched a black rapist beast, so Morph generated, and its programmers destroyed, a grotesque alter ego of the cover girl, “a distinctively feminine face—sitting atop a masculine neck and hairy chest.” *Time*’s jokey, eugenic-inflected elimination of the monstrous birth stands in for the unacknowledged racial cleansing.<sup>6</sup>

*Newsweek* made up for *Time*’s erasure of African Americans by illustrating its contemporaneous cover story, “The Hidden Rage of Successful Blacks,” with a wary, scowling African American man half hidden behind a smiling black mask. *Newsweek* was showing that blacks were still forced to don blackface, to minstrelize themselves to ward off white retaliation. In giving voice in the issue to several African Americans, *Newsweek* advanced well beyond *Time*.<sup>7</sup> One would not know from the *Newsweek* cover, however, that historically blackface permeated American culture in performances not by blacks, but by whites. Even as *Time* and *Newsweek* made visible, they also falsely separated miscegenation from racial cross-dressing. When these are put back together, the news-magazine covers expose what they separately covered over: in the making of American national culture, whites in blackface acted out a racially exclusionary melting pot.

*Newsweek* did feature on an inside page a white man under burnt cork, Ted Danson, who had blacked up at a roast for his then com-



panion, the African American movie star Whoopi Goldberg. Danson's "blackface thing," in the words of Karen Grigsy Bates, his belief that it would be funny to become "a living stereotype that has haunted African Americans for a century," generated near-universal condemnation. Unremarked upon was that Goldberg's stage name was taken from Eddie Cantor's title song, "Making Whoopee," of his Jewish blackface film.<sup>8</sup>

Danson and Goldberg (she wrote his lines) mistakenly thought they could get away with blacking up to mock (or were they exploiting?) racial and sexual stereotypes. The actress's reappropriation of blackface, like her interracial romance, may seem like racial progress. So, too, does the movie that cast Danson with Goldberg, *Made in America*, whose miscegenation theme was forbidden to the screen before the civil rights revolution. Even more up-to-date was the plot device that brings Whoopi and Ted together in the first place: Whoopi's daughter's apparent discovery that a white man was her mother's anonymous sperm donor. Like other recent movies, *Made in America* capitalizes on both the continuing frisson over interracial sex and the enlistment of romance in the quest for racial harmony. But just as *Time*'s computer dating simulation endorses miscegenation by separating it from sex, so *Made in America* celebrates interracial sex by cutting it off from reproduction. The movie that seems to be making fun of the mother's belief that black pride requires racial purity ends up by granting her wish. Although the daughter's search for her biological father allows Ted to "make" her mother, in one meaning of the title, the daughter turns out to be made in America by a black sperm donor after all. Uncle Sam may have moved beyond spiritual miscegenation with the black mother, but he manages to provide the black mother and child with the necessary surrogate white father without violating racial descent.<sup>9</sup>

*Made in America* brings up-to-date the film tradition, once highly visible and now mostly forgotten, that is the subject of this book. The movie's title is a quadruple entendre, alluding not only to sex, babies, and melting-pot patriotism but also to the product for sale, *Made in America* itself, racialized entertainment as commodity. Blackface and miscegenation were also selling *Time* and *Newsweek*, as they had sold mass culture from its American origins. A sales campaign of the 1993 holiday season capitalized similarly on the "made in America" theme. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," declared a seductive female radio voice, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. Those are life, liberty, and

the pursuit of happiness. America built a nation around this idea. Leave it to Club Med to build a vacation around it.”<sup>10</sup>

Using the American creed to sell vacations may seem like a perversion of the Declaration of Independence. To be sure, Club Med was more politically enlightened than the founding fathers. When the ad repeated Jefferson’s words a second time, it added “and women” to “all men.” The female voice-over was promising other women that they, too, could pursue happiness and not just occupy the object-of-pursuit position. Spoken as a female come-on, however, the inclusion of women appears a further profanation, sexualizing as the voice commodifies the sacred text. But the unspoken in the Club Med ad—what is displayed on the *Time* and *Newsweek* covers—brings the copy closer to the original. The Declaration of Independence demanded freedom for a nation built on slavery. Club Med promises mostly upscale white Americans service, to be delivered by—in their native habitats—mostly third world peoples of color. Instead of dismissing the Club Med ad, let it transport us back to Independence Hall.

The racialized foundations of the United States erupt on the surface of the three drafts of the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration has now been rendered a visibly hysterical text by the editors of Jefferson’s autobiography (in which Jefferson included the Declaration), who use three typefaces to distinguish between the passages of Jefferson’s original that remain in the final document, those excised by the convention, and those added to Jefferson’s version. Although the entire Declaration shows the marks of multiple authorship, only the section on slavery is made incoherent by their omnipresence. Jefferson himself sought to blame the king of England for inflicting slavery and the slave trade on the colonies, although the crown’s effort to regulate the trade in slaves, sugar, rum, and molasses was actually a cause of the Revolution. But Jefferson’s displacement of the crime was too antislavery for other southern delegates, and the final version retains only the accusation against George III of inciting slave insurrection.<sup>11</sup>

The Declaration of Independence, as its multiple drafts expose, bequeathed a Janus-faced legacy to the new nation: the logic (as in the Club Med ad) that the equality to which white men were born could be extended to women and slaves, and the foundation of white freedom on black servitude. Slavery’s deep embeddedness in the United States produced the Declaration’s slide from condemning slavery for inflicting bondage to blaming slaves for demanding freedom. And—it will come as no surprise to readers of *Time* and viewers of *Made in Amer-*

*ica*—as that reversal infected Jefferson himself, it took a sexualized turn. Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* appended to his proposal to emancipate slaves speculations on the natural inferiority of Africans. Because black men desired white women, wrote Jefferson, they could not be freed without "staining the blood" of their former masters.<sup>12</sup> Although the father of the Declaration favored returning slaves to Africa, his twin policies of segregation—the removal of Indians as well as slaves—worked only in Indian policy. Jefferson's wish to "remove [blacks] beyond the reach of mixture," conflicting as it did with actual white dependence on African Americans, issued forth in a quadruple fantasy: that interracial sex was a barrier to emancipation, that it stained blood, that it was driven by black and not white practices, and that colonization in Africa could solve the problem.

Slave owners like Jefferson—including his own father-in-law and nephew, and likely Jefferson himself—produced children whose condition followed that of their slave mothers. Claiming that it was the black desire for white that required the separation of the races, Jefferson inverted a white male desire for black. In his day, that desire took the forms of labor and sex, chattel slavery and miscegenation. As expressive performance—in the form of blackface minstrelsy—white possession of black would help produce a second, cultural, Declaration of Independence during the Age of Jackson.

Nonetheless, there was always a contradiction between the logic of natural rights and white supremacy. Almost from the moment of its inception in the late nineteenth century, the immigrant Yiddish press began to protest against the denial of equality to African Americans. "POGROM IN PENNSYLVANIA" is the headline Alfred Kazin remembers above a 1920s *Jewish Daily Forward* report of a lynching. Lynchings and race riots, pogroms in the promised land, were, in the oft-repeated phrase, "a stain of shame on the American flag." Consciously invoking the Declaration of Independence, the phrase unknowingly reproached Jefferson for blaming the "stain" on victimized black bodies. Many Jews who were entering the melting pot had their own stain of shame, however—burnt cork—for by the turn of the twentieth century Jewish entertainers were the major blackface performers. And their stain is the link between Jefferson's Declaration and blackface Ted Danson's *Made in America*. Jews in the entertainment business—vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, Hollywood—were creating mass culture for the immigrant, industrial age. In the cultural production of America, Jewish blackface was playing a role.<sup>13</sup>

## III

*Blackface, White Noise* investigates the neglected roots of motion pictures—the dominant popular culture form of the first half of the twentieth century—in the first and most popular form of nineteenth-century mass culture, blackface minstrelsy. Motion picture blackface, I propose, inherited the function of its predecessor: by joining structural domination to cultural desire, it turned Europeans into Americans.

Frederick Jackson Turner began his classic frontier thesis with the words, “The wilderness . . . strips off the garments of civilization and arrays [the colonist] in the hunting shirt and moccasin. . . . The outcome is . . . a new product that is American.”<sup>14</sup> Like the myth of the West, blackface was a form of racial cross-dressing.<sup>15</sup> Current writing on gender, race, and popular culture celebrates the subversive character of cross-dressing for allegedly destabilizing fixed identities. Such accounts need to consider history if they are to carry conviction, for far from being the radical practice of marginal groups, cross-dressing defined the most popular, integrative forms of mass culture. Racial masquerade did promote identity exchange, I argue, but it moved settlers and ethnics into the melting pot by keeping racial groups out.

History, not biology, distinguishes ethnicity from race, making the former groups (in the American usage) distinctive but assimilable, walling off the latter, legally, socially, and ideologically, to benefit those within the magic circle and protect the national body from contamination. Although inherent and immutable differences supposedly keep racial groups distinct, the racial label is a shifting one. Anglo-Saxonists postulated a racial divide between old immigrants to the United States and groups that are now called white ethnics. During the period of mass European immigration, roughly the 1840s to the 1920s, the racial status of Irish, Italians, Jews, and Slavs was in dispute. As anti-Semitism racialized Jews in Europe, however, European immigrants to the United States were coming under the banner of a new racial invention: whiteness.

“No one was white before he/she came to America,” wrote James Baldwin. “It took generations and a vast amount of coercion before this became a white country. . . . There is an Irish community. . . . There is a German community. . . . There is a Jewish community. . . . There are English communities. There are French communities,” Baldwin explained. “Jews came here from countries where they were not white,

and they came here in part *because* they were not white. . . . Everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket, the price was to become 'white.' ” The differentiation of white immigrant workers from colored chattel, a process organic to the creation of race-based slavery at the origins of the United States, was repeated for the waves of European immigrants that came to these shores after slavery had come to an end. Minstrelsy and Hollywood were venues for that sorting-out procedure.<sup>16</sup>

By transubstantiating the forbidden mixture of bodily fluids into a burnt cork-covered white face, blacking up mocks any claim of division between the personal and the political. Blackface is grounded in mammy, since the nurturing figure that deprived black men and women of adult authority and sexuality gave white boys permission to play with their identities, to fool around. Instead of assigning Uncle Sam to political iconography, mammy to a circumscribed domestic space, American national politics and culture, I will argue, issued forth from the “spiritual miscegenation” between the two. Together they provided white Americans with their imagined community, their national home.

This study examines the conjunction between blackface and Americanization, a meeting that hardly exhausts the multiple significances of either term. I will focus neither on Uncle Sam nor on mammy (though both will often appear in these pages), but rather on the acculturating Jewish male entertainers and producers who negotiated between them. Those figures appear in some of the films we will be looking at; they are implicated in various ways in others that have no explicit Jewish theme. Visible Jewish absence is significant not because of some invisible Jewish power operating behind the scenes, but rather because of the already racialized culture that immigrant Jews entered, which they had no role in originally creating. Part One sets that stage. Parts Two and Three, beginning with Al Jolson’s jazz singer, examine how Hollywood blackface helped engender white America.

The Hollywood version of the American story is necessarily partial. With respect to Jewish blackface, it picks up the tale at the end of mass immigration, removing it in both space and time from the polyglot immigrant cosmos of New York’s Lower East Side. An ethnography of stage blackface, vaudeville, the sheet music business, and Broadway, or a study of early, New York-based silent film, would offer a rawer, more variegated picture of Jewish blackface than the view from Hollywood.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, traces of New York, though we cannot take them at face value, are thematized in Jolson’s *Jazz Singer* and Cantor’s *Whoopie!*, both made from Broadway plays and both featured in the pages that follow.

Those films illustrate Hollywood's reach: no single institution in the first half of the twentieth century had more mass cultural importance than the motion picture business.

Hollywood's importance in making Americans, in giving people from diverse class, ethnic, and geographic origins a common imagined community, is by now a commonplace. What has not heretofore been noticed is that the four transformative moments in the history of American film—moments that combine box office success, critical recognition of revolutionary significance, formal innovations, and shifts in the cinematic mode of production—all organized themselves around the surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans represent something beside themselves.<sup>18</sup>

With Edwin S. Porter's film trilogy of 1902–3, encompassing the West in *The Great American Train Robbery*, the city in *The Life of an American Fireman*, and the South in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the history of American movies begins. It begins with race. Porter introduced national narratives and stylistic inventions into the welter of foreign imports, documentary actualities (real and staged), cinematographic tricks, and unmotivated short scenes of comedy and violence that constituted primitive cinema. Bringing the most-performed theatrical spectacle of the late nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, into the movies marked the transition from popular theater to motion pictures that characterized the pre-history of classic Hollywood. The most lavish and expensive film to date, and the first to use intertitles, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first extended movie narrative with a black character and therefore, since African Americans were forbidden to play serious dramatic roles, the first substantial blackface film. Straddling the border between blackface and motion pictures, and undercutting Stowe's novel, Porter's one-reeler introduced the plantation myth into American movies.<sup>19</sup>

D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) originated classic Hollywood cinema in the ride of the Ku Klux Klan against black political and sexual revolution. (Inadvertently underlining the status of the black menace as white fantasy, *Birth's* two rapists and its mulatto seductress were whites in blackface.) "The longest, costliest, most ambitious, most spectacular American movie to date," its technique, expense, length, mass audience, critical reception, and influential historical vision all identify *Birth* as the single most important movie ever made. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with Porter at the camera, derived from the artisanal mode of film production; *Birth* confirmed the period of directorial control.<sup>20</sup>

*The Jazz Singer* (1927) was the founding movie of Hollywood sound,

and it introduced the most popular entertainer of his day, the blackface performer Al Jolson, to feature films. *The Jazz Singer* was a pure product of the studio producer system, a production assembly line that turned out film after film. Alan Crosland directed *The Jazz Singer*, but Warner Bros. was in charge. Finally, David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was perhaps the first example of the producer unit system, the method of making films that would come to dominate Hollywood, where an entrepreneur assembled the team for a single blockbuster. *Gone with the Wind* established the future of the technicolor spectacular by returning to American film origins in the plantation myth. *Birth* was the most widely seen movie of the silent period, *The Jazz Singer* broke all existing box office records, and Jolson's blackface sequel, *The Singing Fool* (1928), became the leading money-maker of the 1920s. All three were eclipsed by *Gone with the Wind*, Hollywood's all-time top box office success. Far from playing themselves in *Gone with the Wind*, black actors and actresses were assigned roles minstrelsy had already defined.<sup>21</sup>

American literature, critics from D. H. Lawrence to Richard Slotkin have argued, established its national identity in the struggle between Indians and whites. American film was born from white depictions of blacks. The white male hero of so much of our classic literature frees himself from paternal, Old World constraints and declares his American independence against Indians; white over black, to apply Winthrop Jordan's formulation, defines these transformative films.<sup>22</sup> The alternative racial roots are not arbitrary, for just as the frontier period in American history generated the classic American literature, so American film was born in the industrial age out of the conjunction between southern defeat in the Civil War, black resubordination, and national integration; the rise of the multiethnic, industrial metropolis; and the emergence of mass entertainment, expropriated from its black roots, as the locus of Americanization.

On the one hand, however, the frontier myth was hardly confined to the nineteenth century. It flourished in the industrial age, and its multiple uses made the western the most popular film genre in the silent period and during much of the history of sound.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, racialized sectional conflict, urban immigration, and mass culture originated not with Hollywood but nearly a century earlier, and their most important original cultural progeny was minstrelsy. Indeed, whereas the racialized character of mass entertainment appeared on the blackface surface in the decades surrounding the Civil War, and later in the Hollywood western, very few movies organized themselves around the racial subordination of African Americans. Motion pictures normally buried their