

A United Construction: Whiteness in *The Birth of a Nation* & *The Jazz Singer*

Marisa Warman Hirschfield

Fade in. The year is 1915. Tens of millions of people flood into cinemas to watch the newest sensation: D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. These spellbound moviegoers see an ahistorical recount of the Civil War and its aftermath like no other. The film follows two white families. The Stonemans are Northern Radical Republicans who venture to Piedmont, South Carolina, to oversee Reconstruction. The Stoneman patriarch brings his biracial protégé, Syllas Lynch, with him. Lynch soon becomes lieutenant governor and attempts to build a "Black Empire." Conversely, the Camerons are Southern Democrats who adamantly oppose Reconstruction and the receding power of the white race. After witnessing the violence, ineptitude, and progressive agendas of Black-faced men like Lynch, Ben, the eldest Cameron son, revives the Ku Klux Klan. Over triumphant orchestrations, the Klan parades around Piedmont, lynching and violently intimidating Black people.¹ The movie becomes Hollywood's first blockbuster.²

Cut to twelve years later. *The Jazz Singer* is released. It centers Jakie Rabinowitz, a Jew who yearns to become a jazz singer. He changes his name to Jack Robin and abandons his family. When he returns decades later, his father, who is a cantor, is gravely ill. He needs Jack to take his place on Yom Kippur, the holiest high holiday—but it is the same night that Jack is scheduled to make his Broadway debut. Now, Jack must decide whether to appease his father and his faith or follow his dreams. He ponders this crossroads as he puts on Blackface for his

¹ *The Birth of a Nation*. David W. Griffith Corp., 1915.

² "100 Years Later, What's The Legacy Of 'Birth Of A Nation'?" NPR, February 8, 2015.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation>.

Broadway role, awaiting his dress rehearsal. In the end, he performs both in synagogue for the high holiday and on Broadway, in *Blackface*, a day later.³

Most scholars, historians, and everyday consumers watch these films and study their depictions of Blackness. But these films really say nothing significant about the Black race. Black people were left wholly out of the filmmaking process. They were even left out of their own bodies; white actors were in *Blackface*. Thus, the real sociopolitical value lay in these films' efforts to define *whiteness*. It was white people that glorified the Klan's victory, and it was white people that put Jack Robin in *Blackface*. It is white character—not Black caricature—that begs exploring. *Birth*, with its overt racism, and *Jazz*, with its inadvertent subjugation of Black people, are necessary artifacts in understanding early twentieth century whiteness. Though *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Jazz Singer* approach the politics of race in fundamentally different ways, they both work to construct a united white identity.

In her book *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, Susan Gubar describes *The Birth of a Nation* as white people's "declaration of war on blacks."⁴ When white characters put on *Blackface*, she writes, they were actually putting on warpaint. When they used *Blackface* to represent the evils of the Black race, they turned the "lynched into the lynchers."⁵ Whites became the victims, not perpetrators, of racial violence. Therefore, they necessitated war for their own safety. "The birth of the American nation and its film industry is predicated upon the death of African Americans," Gubar contends.⁶ The American nation, *Birth* suggests, was born a white nation.

³ *The Jazz Singer*. United States: Warner Bros., 1927.

⁴ Gubar, Susan Kamholtz. 2000. "Sprit-Murder at the Movies." In *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), p. 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Similarly, Michael Rogin, in his renowned book *Blackface, White Noise*, views *Birth* as a violent display of white supremacy.⁷ He goes on to contrast *Birth* and *The Jazz Singer*: “Birth makes war on blacks in the name of the fathers. The Jazz Singer's protagonist adopts a black mask and kills his father.”⁸ Rogin, unlike many other scholars, understands *Jazz* to be a subtle endorsement of white supremacy. When *Jazz*'s main character, Jack Robin, formerly Jakie Rabinowitz, puts Blackface on, he “transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American.”⁹ In other words, he uses it as a means of assimilation. In *Birth*, Blackface was warpaint. In *Jazz*, Blackface was a strategy to elevate Jews over a group that “must remain immobile, unassimilable, and fixed at the bottom.”¹⁰ The movies, Rogin writes, “exploit Blacks in opposite ways.”¹¹ Still, in effect, they do the same thing: degrade Blacks in order to uplift whites—or those desiring to be white.

In *Birth*, white people are inaccurately portrayed as victims of Black-faced government officials and rapists. Gus, a Black-faced man, tells Flora Cameron that he wants to marry her. She is terrified, and vows to jump off a cliff if he comes near her. Indeed, she jumps. Ben Cameron, her brother, finds her dead, and orders the newly-emergent Klan to lynch Gus. The trial consists of a Klan member momentarily taking off his hood to declare “guilty.” Gus, an exemplar of freedmen, was a sexual predator—so whites were the prey. In another scene, drunken Black representatives in a House meeting eat fried chicken, barefoot, while passing legislation requiring whites to salute Black officers on the streets. A “helpless white minority” looks on.¹²

⁷ Rogin, Michael. "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice." *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992): 417-53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343811>.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 419.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 434.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 431.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 419.

¹² *The Birth of a Nation*. David W. Griffith Corp., 1915.

Whites were threatened by Southern Blacks' newfound freedom, both in the social sphere and in government. Gus signified the diminution of whites' safety. Radical legislators signified the revocation of whites' rights. It is this white retreat into victimhood that catalyzed abundant racial violence. From 1877 to 1950, over 4000 Black people were lynched.¹³ It is because whites felt powerless that they sought power. It is because they felt their collective stature being lynched, that they lynched.

In *The Jazz Singer*, the main character masks his Jewish identity in order to align with white people, who are not in peril, but in power. The whole movie builds to the moment where Jack stands in front of a mirror in his Broadway dressing room, looking at himself in Blackface. The mirror then transforms into a portal to the synagogue, where he should be chanting Kol Nidre at his dying father's request. "I'd love to sing for my people—but I belong here [on Broadway]," Jack says.¹⁴ Contrary to how it may superficially appear, Jack's internal battle is not between Broadway and synagogue, but between whiteness and Jewishness. Putting on Blackface makes Jack feel white, as it diminishes his Jewishness. When he performs in Blackface, his slight Yiddish accent disappears, replaced by a Southern cadence.¹⁵ He abandons "his people," not to join Blacks, but to join whites in their position of power over Blacks. Historical context provides support for this interpretation of Jack's Blackface. The real-life twentieth century Jewish identity struggle is reflected in his urge to be white. The *New York Times* called the Lower East Side, largely a Jewish enclave, an "eyesore"; Leo Frank, a Jewish man, was lynched for a crime he did not commit; quotas restricted Jews from entering America

¹³ "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." Equal Justice Initiative, 2017. <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.

¹⁴ *The Jazz Singer*. United States: Warner Bros., 1927.

¹⁵ Stark, Seymour *Men in Blackface: True Stories of the Minstrel Show*, (Bloomington, IN, 2000), p. 119.

and its prestigious universities.¹⁶ Jews had to choose between acculturating for respect and maintaining their ethnic and religious identities. Because Jack clings to his vaudevillian persona, he chooses acculturation to white America.

Birth's white victimhood narrative attempted to justify legislative white supremacy. In the movie, Black people are portrayed as politically corrupt. They cast multiple ballots and deny whites from casting any at all. Blacks had the political power and whites were disenfranchised. The Klan, thus, springs into action. At “the next election”, dozens of white-hooded men stand with bayonets pointing at the voting booths. Black men cast their ballots for candidates deemed appropriate by whites, or they risked death.¹⁷ Griffith, the director, saw this as a warranted response to the voter suppression whites supposedly endured. In reality, though there were attempts to temporarily rescind Confederates’ rights to vote, it was freedmen who were systematically denied the franchise. Literacy and poll taxes were legal and commonplace in many southern states.¹⁸ Most Black people, having been only recently freed from slavery, hardly had the means to pay a fee for their ballot, let alone an education. If, by some chance, they could afford to vote, additional laws stood in their way. The 1898 Constitution of Louisiana held that a man could vote only if he, his father, or his grandfather was eligible in 1867.¹⁹ Given that the Fifteenth Amendment was not ratified until 1870, most Black people could not vote in 1867. This “Grandfather Clause” was ruled unconstitutional in 1915, the year *Birth* was released.²⁰ Poll

¹⁶ “East Side Street Vendors.” *The New York Times*, July 30, 1893. <https://www.nytimes.com/1893/07/30/archives/east-side-street-vendors-their-push-carts-obstruct-many-streets.html>; Zelizer, Julian E. “Trump Needs to Demilitarize His Rhetoric.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, October 29, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/americas-long-history-anti-semitism/574234/>.

¹⁷ *The Birth of a Nation*. David W. Griffith Corp., 1915.

¹⁸ Smith, Clint. “Black Voters Understood What the Stakes Were.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, January 7, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/black-voters-understood-what-stakes-were/617574/>.

¹⁹ Louisiana. *Constitution of the State of Louisiana: Adopted In Convention At the City of New Orleans, May 12, 1898*. New Orleans: H. J. Hearsey, convention printer, 1898.

²⁰ *Guinn v. United States*, 238 U.S. 347 (1915).

taxes and literacy tests remained legal until the 1960s—perhaps in part because of *Birth* and other propaganda’s fearmongering about the Black vote.²¹ The movie was an endorsement of voter suppression; it viewed Blacks voting as a menace to white power.

Unlike *Birth*, *The Jazz Singer*’s racial themes sought to influence individuals, rather than comment on national political matters. Jack’s story is a mostly personal one. It is about him, his family, and their trials and tribulations; it seems intimate. In an argument with his father, Jack tells him: “You’re from the old world! If you were born here you’d feel the same way I do.”²² This is one of the few moments in which the immigrant-native dichotomy is explicitly discussed. Still, it is not large-scale or critical of policy. The movie does not advocate for widespread assimilation, nor does it condemn antisemitic immigration quotas. It tells the story of Jack, his father, and their familial endeavor to understand the Jew’s place in America. Racial identity was not just a political and legislative dilemma. Individuals grappled with racialization, just as the government did. *Jazz* simply depicted a struggle, and encouraged its viewers to confront that within themselves.

Though *Birth* and *Jazz* are often contrasted, both films rely on diminishing social and ethnic differences to accentuate racial differences. Towards the end of *Birth*, the Confederate Camerons seek shelter as Black renegades attack them. They find a small cabin in the woods. It is occupied by Northerners, who decide to let the Camerons in. A title card reads: “The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their aryan birthright.”²³ Their whiteness was so vital that they trivialized the most infamous and bloody rivalry in American history. *Birth*’s whole plot depends on Northerners being exploitative, violent, and

²¹ See "The Constitution of the United States," Amendment 5 and The 1965 Voting Rights Act.

²² *The Jazz Singer*. United States: Warner Bros., 1927.

²³ In this context, aryan refers to the white race.

unscrupulous. As soon as Northerners' whiteness is threatened, Southerners abandon these descriptors and come to their defense. These foes killed each other's sons—but it does not matter, *Birth* shows us, for their whiteness is now under attack.

In *Jazz*, the battle is not between North and South, but between ethnicity and race. Jack uses Blackface to escape his Jewish ethnicity. He hides not in a cabin—but behind a Black mask. "It talks like Jakie, but it looks like a n****r," says Yudelson, a Jewish character, upon seeing Jack's makeup.²⁴ Jack changes his surname from Rabinowitz to Robin. His love interest is a shiksa, a gentile. He, in every way that he can, minimizes the importance of ethnic difference to underscore racial distinctions; there is no Jewish, or Irish, or Chinese, only Black and white. When he puts on Blackface, he chooses whiteness. As scholar Michael Rogin puts it: "by painting himself black, he washes himself white."²⁵ In *Birth* and in *Jazz*, whiteness is the single unifying factor.

The Birth of a Nation and *The Jazz Singer* are more in dialogue with one another today than they have ever been before. In the early twentieth century, the movies worked in tandem to define whiteness. *Jazz* made Jews white; *Birth* made whites supreme. Today, the films' messages seem to build further on each other. The extremist ideology that *Birth* inspired complicates defining whiteness, especially for Jews. White supremacist groups like the KKK have consistently promulgated that Jews are not white: protesters in Charlottesville chanted "Jews will not replace us"; a Confederate enthusiast at the January 6th Capitol insurrection wore a "Camp Auschwitz" sweatshirt; before David Duke became the Grand Wizard of the KKK, he founded the White Youth Alliance at Louisiana State University, where he paraded around in Nazi

²⁴ The shooting script says "n****r", but it is changed to "shadow" in the final movie; *The Jazz Singer*. United States: Warner Bros., 1927.

²⁵ Rogin, Michael. "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," p. 440.

attire.²⁶ Ninety-two percent of American Jews consider themselves to be white, though white supremacists consider Jews to be a different race.²⁷ Even almost a century after *Jazz*'s release, the Jew-white question is unresolved. The reverberations of *Birth*'s white supremacy has made the answer to this question even more challenging.

These movies, with their cinematic potency, vile racism, and portrayals of immigrant life and American pseudohistory, remain crucial to understanding whiteness—for it is a shape-shifting species. It is a species that often excludes others from enjoying its fruits: Jews, Blacks. But it is also a united species: in Charlottesville, at the Capitol, on college campuses. *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Jazz Singer* will remain relevant as long as whiteness does. It might be a while before these films fade out.

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²⁷ Alper, Becka, and Alan Cooperman. “10 Key Findings about Jewish Americans.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/11/10-key-findings-about-jewish-americans/>.

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