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'Mary Poppins,' and a Nanny's Shameful Flirting With Blackface

Daniel Pollack-Pelzner

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Julie Andrews's soot-covered face in the 1964 film "Mary Poppins" stems from racial caricatures in books.
Disney

"Mary Poppins Returns," which picked up four [Oscar nominations last week](#), is an enjoyably derivative film that seeks to inspire our nostalgia for the innocent fantasies of childhood, as well as the jolly holidays that the first "Mary Poppins" film conjured for many adult viewers.

Part of the new film's nostalgia, however, is bound up in a blackface performance tradition that persists throughout the Mary Poppins canon, from P. L. Travers's books to Disney's 1964 adaptation, with disturbing echoes in the studio's newest take on the material, "Mary Poppins Returns."

One of the more indelible images from the 1964 film is of [Mary Poppins blacking up](#). When the magical nanny (played by Julie Andrews) accompanies her young charges, Michael and Jane Banks, up their chimney, her face gets covered in soot, but instead of wiping it off, she gamely powders her nose and cheeks even blacker. Then she leads the children on a dancing exploration of London rooftops with Dick Van Dyke's sooty chimney sweep, Bert.

This might seem like an innocuous comic scene if Travers's novels didn't associate chimney sweeps' blackened faces with racial caricature. [“Don't touch me, you black heathen,”](#) a housemaid screams in “Mary Poppins Opens the Door” (1943), as a sweep reaches out his darkened hand. When he tries to approach the cook, she threatens to quit: [“If that Hottentot goes into the chimney, / shall go out the door,”](#) she says, using an archaic slur for black South Africans that recurs on page and screen.

The 1964 film replays this racial panic in a farcical key. When the dark figures of the chimney sweeps [step in time](#) on a roof, a naval buffoon, Admiral Boom, shouts, “We're being attacked by Hottentots!” and orders his cannon to be fired at the “cheeky devils.” We're in on the joke, such as it is: These aren't really black Africans; they're grinning white dancers in blackface. It's a parody of black menace; it's even posted on a white nationalist website as evidence of the film's racial hierarchy. And it's not only fools like the Admiral who invoke this language. In the 1952 novel “Mary Poppins in the Park,” the nanny herself tells an upset young Michael, [“I understand that you're behaving like a Hottentot.”](#)

“Mary Poppins Returns,” set in the 1930s, seems to offer a more racially inclusive vision of the Banks's London (at least among the working classes). But a key sequence of the film plays into a much more fraught history from a suppressed part of Mary Poppins's past.

In Travers's first “Mary Poppins” novel, published in 1934, a magic compass transports the children around the world, including a stop where they meet a scantily clad “negro lady,” dandling “a tiny black pickaninny with nothing on at all.” (“Pickaninny” has long been seen as an offensive term for a black child.) She addresses Mary Poppins in minstrel dialect and invokes the convention of blacking up: “My, but dem's very white babies. You wan' use a li'l bit black boot polish on dem.”

This episode proved so controversial that the book [was banned by the San Francisco Public Library](#), prompting Travers to drop the racialized dialogue and change the offending caricature to an animal. (A number of British authors built on the tradition of turning American minstrelsy into animal fables: Beatrix Potter and A. A. Milne [both cited Uncle Remus dialect stories, including “Br'er Rabbit” tales](#), as inspiration.)

In Travers's 1981 revision, the “negro lady” became a hyacinth macaw who speaks genteel English. Travers, who was born in Australia to Anglo-Irish parents, [claimed that](#) black children loved reading the “pickaninny dialect” in her book, but that she made the change because she didn't wish to see “Mary Poppins tucked away in a closet” by meddling adults.

I was surprised to see that hyacinth macaw pop up in “Mary Poppins Returns.” In the middle of a fantasy sequence, Emily Blunt's nanny bounds onstage at a music hall to join Lin-Manuel Miranda's lamplighter for a saucy Cockney number, [“A Cover Is Not the Book,”](#) which retells stories from Travers's novels. One of these verses refers to a

wealthy widow called [Hyacinth Macaw](#), and the kicker is that she's naked: Blunt sings that "she only wore a smile," and Miranda chimes in, "plus two feathers and a leaf."

In the 1981 revision of "Mary Poppins," there's no mention of her attire; you'd have to [go back to the 1934 original](#) to find the "negro lady" with "a very few clothes on," sitting under a palm tree with a "crown of feathers." There's even a straw hut behind Blunt and Miranda that replicates [Mary Shepard's 1934 illustration](#). (The hut was removed in the 1981 revision.)



"A Cover Is Not The Book" Clip | Mary Poppins Returns

Video by Walt Disney Studios

The lesson of this music hall number is that "a king may be a crook," a clue that Colin Firth's kindly banker in the film might be more nefarious. As Eric Lott and other cultural historians have documented, there was an important connection between blackface performance and American and British working-class audiences; minstrelsy offered both a chance to define their whiteness in opposition to black caricature and to thumb their noses at employers through the minstrels' antics.

When T.D. Rice, a popular white minstrel performer, crossed the Atlantic in the 1830s, [his manager recalled](#) that he inspired chimney sweeps and apprentices, who "wheeled about and turned about and jumped Jim Crow, from morning until night, to the annoyance of their masters, but the great delight of the cockneys."

These chimney sweeps with minstrel dances were only a step in time away from Dick Van Dyke's soot-faced Bert, needling the admiral on the rooftop, or Miranda's lamplighter in "Mary Poppins Returns," who worked for Bert as a child. The minstrel

stage convention of the “pickaninny” rendered black slave children as cheery performers who, the historian Robin Bernstein argues, were [“comically impervious to pain”](#) inflicted by their labor. Similarly, the dark-lit grins and unflappable footwork of the lamplighters turn their dangerous labor into comic play; “smile and smirk,” they sing, is Cockney rhyming slang for “work.”

That minstrel history runs not only through Travers’s books; it’s also a mainstay of Disney musicals, including the jiving blackbird credited as Jim Crow in the 1941 “Dumbo” (“I be done seen ’bout ev’ything when I see an elephant fly”).

Blackface minstrelsy, in fact, could be said to be part of Disney’s origin story. In an early Mickey Mouse short, a 1933 parody of the antislavery novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” called [“Mickey’s Mellerdrammer,”](#) Mickey blacks his face with dynamite to play Topsy, a crazy-haired, raggedy-dressed, comically unruly black child from the book whose name had become synonymous with the pickaninny stereotype.



Mickey Mouse as Topsy in a 1933 short.

Disney



Meryl Streep as a different character called Topsy, opposite, from left, Pixie Davies, Nathanael Saleh and Emily Blunt in "Mary Poppins Returns." Jay Maidment/Disney Pictures

In "Mary Poppins Returns," the name of the crazy-haired, raggedy-dressed, comically unruly character (played by Meryl Streep) is also [Topsy](#). She's a variation on a Mr. Turvy in the novel "Mary Poppins Comes Back" (1935), whose workshop flips upside-down.

Even if these characters' shared name is accidental, it speaks to a larger point: Disney has long evoked minstrelsy for its topsy-turvy entertainments — a nanny blacking up, chimney sweeps mocking the upper classes, grinning lamplighters turning work into song.

In this latest version, Mary Poppins might be serenading Disney genres, outdated but strangely recurring, in the Oscar-nominated song "The Place Where Lost Things Go," when she reminds us that "Nothing's gone forever, only out of place."

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