
Published by

Frost, Leslie Elaine.

Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children's Plays of the Federal Theatre Project.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

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“I LOOKED HIM RIGHT SQUARE IN THE EYE”

Being African American in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*

The following photo of three unsmiling African American puppeteers gazing down at three widely grinning black puppets represents the contradictory racial politics that plagued Federal Theatre Project Negro Units. While the image connotes African American control of theatrical representation, lines of control extended well beyond the stage and usually did not end in black hands. Though set up in 1936 following the suggestion of noted Harlem actor Rose McClendon, the Negro Units were often organized under white community sponsorship and therefore under white administrative and artistic control.\(^1\) Separate units segregated black performers and backstage workers from other units and too often failed to offer an “alternative national Negro theatre” called for by prominent black cultural critics that would emphasize and cultivate racial pride in an African and African American heritage.\(^2\) Even in the beginning, the failure of the FTP Negro Units to work toward this theatre is registered in a 1935 *Afro American* editorial:

The illness of Rose McClendon, figurehead “director” of the project, leaves the entire administration up to whites, with eight of eleven executives of the production company of the other race. This condition has already been the subject of many protests by citizen’s groups, who felt that capable colored theatre directors could be found if an effort were made.\(^3\)

Instead of an African American director, the celebrated John Houseman–Orson Welles duo would take over leadership of the Harlem Negro Unit.
Indeed, from inception to final year of operation, when there were only ten remaining Negro Units, productions played to mixed audiences and followed scripts mostly written by whites.⁵

Productions in all cities contended with racial politics based on the political and social character of the particular African American and theatre communities and the relationship between local and regional FTP and WPA administrators and supervisors. Though varying circumstances shaped each unit’s overall tenor, dictated in large part by production schedule and audience response, all of the units struggled against racism and the perpetuation of African American stereotypes that dominated white theatrical representations of blacks. And though plays consciously attempted to combat these stereotypes, they were mostly white social realism plays sympathetic to the idea of racial equality but largely ignorant about the realities of African American life. These plays used portrayals of blacks to push social justice agendas framed by white cultural experiences. A very few militantly leftist racial plays were produced by the FTP: Stevedore, written by George Sklar and Paul Peters, and two plays by African American playwrights written for the FTP, Turpentine, by J. Augustus Smith (who was African American and co-wrote with Peter Morell, who was white), and Big White Fog, by Theodore Ward. The Seattle Negro Unit was a marvel, creating and producing plays reflecting African America; the company performed Natural Man, a retelling of the John Henry folk tale, written and composed by unit members Theodore Brown and Howard Biggs, and members wrote and produced a highly praised An Evening with Dunbar, built around key poems and with original music by Biggs.⁶ But of far greater number in the FTP repertoire were the minstrel-based comedies of the American popular stage.

The children’s theatre stage seems to bear out this criticism of the Federal Theatre’s racial politics. Rena Fraden notes in Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre that “The Negro unit in Chicago would perform realistic plays about black life [for adults] and minstrel shows for children.”⁷ Many materials support this analysis. There were at least three versions of Little Black Sambo produced by federal theatre, two of which were for puppet shows; the Library of Congress archive holds a fourth script, an adaptation for marionette theatre by Edwine Noye Mitchell that was probably distributed by the Junior League but never produced by the FTP. Two versions of the Newark marionette theatre script by Robert Warfield that played October 4, 1937, are on file, as is a puppet version by Molka Reich that opened September 17, 1936, in Miami.⁸ Scripts for a Miami production and an archived Junior League script linguistically match the visual racism and minstrel characterization of the Washington photo.⁹ A production script for Seattle’s Brer Rabbit and the
Tar Baby depicts a narrative steeped in minstrel caricature. Extant photos of the Cincinnati production of Little Black Sambo demonstrate that its black performers wore blackface. But the Chicago Negro Unit’s version of Little Black Sambo as written by Charlotte Chorpenning and directed and scored by Shirley Graham reimagines the children’s tale as an Africanized narrative of liberal self-actualization. As written, the Chicago Sambo, like Chorpenning-scripted characters in Cincinnati, Seattle, and Philadelphia, is a poetic, responsible, clever boy. The Chorpenning-Graham adaptation, titled Little Black Sambo and produced by the Negro and Children’s units that used African American actors, was staged intermittently at Chicago’s Great Northern Theatre from August 29, 1938, to June 30, 1939. Chorpenning is also credited with the script used for a Cincinnati Children’s Theatre production that opened November 5, 1938. Similarly, a script and photo for the Newark production, performed by a puppet unit and not a Negro unit, indicates an unusual production that uses minstrel caricature to level a witty and provocative critique of American racism.

This chapter examines several federal productions based on Helen Bannerman’s The Story of Little Black Sambo in the context of the American blackface minstrel tradition that pervades archived Federal Theatre materials for children and adults. I begin with an analysis of Turpentine, an adult play that opened at the Lafayette Theatre in June 1936 as an example of a Popular Front antiracism play whose social realist interest in the common worker and “the folk” interrogated racist caricature and whose expression of primitive lives and emotionally raw characters dovetailed uncomfortably closely with minstrel stereotypes. The chapter then turns to children’s productions of The Story of Little Black Sambo and Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby also rooted in a fascination with the expressive folk and thus the form of the folk play, to analyze these productions’ complex and shifting norms of African American representation. Against the progressive Chicago and Newark productions, literary topoi of blackface minstrelsy in the Reich and Mitchell plays stage dysfunctional family relationships that provoke laughter at the danger to the small black child in the jungle.

The federally produced versions of The Story of Little Black Sambo offer a remarkable snapshot of American attitudes toward race. Within the context of materials that bear the marks of America’s long tradition of racist caricature, Chicago and Newark federal theatre productions of The Story of Little Black Sambo register striking success in transforming America’s most denigrating racial stereotype. In both the three-act extravaganza in Chicago and the obscure, one-act puppet play in Newark, the tale’s central character
is depicted as an assertive, quick-witted child who successfully overcomes his powerful assailants. Both the Chicago and Newark versions of *Little Black Sambo* focus on Sambo’s capacity for fantasy to sever the name “Sambo” from its historical representational framework and insist on the universality of the title character’s search for self-fulfillment. Graham’s Chicago production linked the story to a reimagined Africanness, while the Newark production incorporates a popular American icon to claim the small boy who ventured into the jungles and outwitted the tigers as a symbol of racial pride. Both productions overturn minstrel caricatures of African American children and families to emphasize loving, supporting relationships. By so valuing the black child, they participate in a Popular Front culture with political origins in anti-lynching and social origins in movements and organizations that broadly imagined an American “brotherhood” of class and racial equality.

“WHAT! NO PROPAGANDA?” exclaims a subhead in a glowing review of the Chicago production of *Little Black Sambo* for the *Herald and Examiner*. The dig at the FTP’s Popular Front politics misses the spectacular success of the Chicago *Little Black Sambo’s* Popular Front ideals. *The Story of Little Black Sambo* provides a parable of white on black violence in the era of Jim Crow. This federal transformation of the Sambo stereotype, the most widespread and demeaning figure of minstrelsy, took place against the broad cultural acceptance of its legitimacy, even as the trial of nine African American boys for the rape of two white women, known internationally as the Scottsboro Boys case, had drawn widespread attention to the deplorable conditions for African Americans in the South under the law. By the time federal Sambos were being chased by federal tigers across stages in the North and South, the Scottsboro Boys had been pursued by the Alabama jurisprudence in the public eye for six years. Although no physical evidence pointed to a crime, the nine defendants had been nearly lynched, had been convicted and sentenced to death (excepting in the case of Roy Wright, who was twelve when arrested), had had their case reviewed twice by the Supreme Court, and had become a cause célèbre and focus of numerous demonstrations, rallies, and marches. The “Scottsboro nine” had drawn together the NAACP and the Communist International Legal Defense in the formation of the Scottsboro Defense Committee in 1935. Newspaper stories in America and Europe on the trials had exposed the hunger of the lynch mob and the all-white Southern courtroom for the destruction of the young, black, male body.

Blackface minstrel shows of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries staged a division between black and white humanity that perhaps facilitated and certainly supported a juridical difference that denied American justice to defendants such as the Scottsboro nine. Scholars Eric Lott and Michael Rogin
have noted blackface minstrelsy’s cultural function as a negotiation tool by which racial boundaries were policed and by which new ethnic, northern, urban working-class Americans entered “whiteness.” By donning blackface, both scholars have suggested, performers signaled both their fascination with and opposition to blackness and to a racially oppressed people. The blackface performance itself signaled a masquerading whiteness.\textsuperscript{16}

The blackface routine, as described by Lott

\ldots was configured at the height of its popularity as a semicircle of four or five or sometimes more white male performers \ldots made up with facial blacking of greasepaint or burnt cork and adorned in outrageously oversized and / or ragged “Negro” costumes. Armed with an array of instruments, usually banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, and tambourine, the performers would stage a triparte show. The first part offered up a random selection of songs interspersed with what passed for black wit and japery; the second part (or “olio”) featured a group of novelty performances (comic dialogues, malapropistic “stump speeches,” cross-dressed “wench” performances, and the like); and the third part was a narrative skit, usually set in the South, containing dancing, music, and burlesque.\textsuperscript{17}

Blackface routines introduced or popularized negative caricatures such as Sambo, Zip Coon, Mammy, and the pickaninny that denigrated black manhood, womanhood, and childhood. After the Civil War, blackface minstrelsy promulgated the idea that African Americans pined for the old system destroyed by war. At the same time, however, blacks also began donning burnt cork for the stage.\textsuperscript{18}

Lott’s study of pre–Civil War minstrelsy, \textit{Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class}, locates its performance at the nexus of white desire for and fear of the black male body and in the material relations of slavery, his “love and theft.” He argues that minstrelsy safely facilitates “an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures, a shape-shifting middle term in racial conflict. \ldots ” As performance it demonstrates “both a drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries.” He writes:

The very form of blackface acts—an investiture in black bodies—seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of “blackness” and demonstrates the permeability of the color line. \ldots It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that
made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure.\textsuperscript{19}

Minstrel shows began to disappear in the 1920s as film began to dominate American popular culture. Rogin's study of Jewish performances of blackface in early Hollywood films argues that blackface's racial masquerade turned ethnic and immigrant groups into Americans. Like Hollywood itself, he suggests, blackface performance provided a common imagined community for diverse groups predicated on the "surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans represent something beside themselves."\textsuperscript{20}

Denied Americanness, then, were the negative racial stereotypes minstrelsy performed, the Sambos, mammies, Zip Coons, and pickaninnies; denied both representation and the rights of Americans was the racial group these negative stereotypes purported to represent.

As minstrel characterizations dominated both old and new American mass entertainment, press reaction to Negro Unit theatre often exposed the gulf between stereotypical audience expectations and government-funded performances that challenged American racial attitudes. \textit{Turpentine} followed the enormously popular "voodoo" \textit{Macbeth} to the Lafayette Theatre.\textsuperscript{21} Both productions generated commentary about the spectacle of African Americans playing serious roles in serious dramatic productions. Calling on perhaps the only major African American representations its reporter knew, this review of \textit{Turpentine} ran in the \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, June 27:

\begin{quote}
It was Summertime in Harlem last night and turpentine in the Florida swamplands, the scene of the Negro Theater’s new drama, “Turpentine.” And although it was Summertime, the living was far from easy, for the Negroes who shuffle [sic] and run across the stage of the Lafayette are as far removed from the inhabitants of Catfish Row as the first production of this Federal Theatre unit, “Macbeth,” was from Shakespeare.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

If the \textit{Eagle's} reference to \textit{Porgy and Bess} suggests both the paucity of a black stage tradition within which to appropriately situate \textit{Turpentine} and an uncomfortable yoking of primitive and plantation, reviews of popular productions suggest pervasive and insidious white stereotypes of performers as well. Reviewing \textit{Macbeth}, Brooks Atkinson wrote in the \textit{New York Times} that “with an eye to animalism . . . they turned the banquet scene into a ball.” Percy Hammond noted that “They seemed to be afraid of the Bard, though they were playing him on their own home grounds.” Burns Mantle assumed the audience applauded because of its regular gaiety. Arthur Pollack relied
on stereotypes of African Americans as childlike and imitative. He wrote, “It (Macbeth) has a childlike austerity . . . with all its gusto,” and “They play Shakespeare as if they were apt children who had just discovered him and adored the old man.”

Excoriating the reviews that expressed stereotypical assumptions about African American actors, Roi Ottley wrote in *New Theatre*:

> The Broadway reviewers . . . journied [sic] to Harlem with the idea of seeing a mixture of Emperor Jones and Step an’ Fetchit, with burlesque thrown in to season a palatable opinion many of their readers have of the Negro. This was best evidenced by their reviews the following morning.

The malapropisms and childlike geniality that characterize blackface minstrel characters dominated African American representations on the 1930s stage and screen, competing against and often coinciding with performances that showcased the “natural” abilities of African Americans such as playing music, singing, and dancing. In this context, antiracist Popular Front theatre often utilized social realist and folk play tropes to produce a new African American figure. Ottley’s *Macbeth* review heralds this change:

> In Harlem’s opinion the Federal Theatre Project’s production of “Macbeth,” at the Lafayette Theatre, was an eminent success. After years of playing distasteful stereotype and idiomatic roles in the American Theater, the Negro at last was attaining the status of an actor. It is generally believed that the Negro is a “natural” in an idiom part. Broadway producers and directors have therefore felt that the Negro has no need of real direction or training. They only think of the Negro portraying Negro roles, but not an actor in the sense of interpreting universal emotions.

> The Negro has become weary of carrying the white-man’s blackface burden in the theatre. In “Macbeth” he was given the opportunity to discard the bandana and burnt cork casting to play a universal character.

In such rare cases as *Macbeth*, black actors played roles not written to describe an “African American” experience. Yet social realism plays that addressed African American conditions, with their emphases on folk and working-class heroes, still participated in racism’s pervasive binary that opposes black emotionalism to white intellectualism. Social realist FTP plays such as those by Paul Green, Smith and Morell, and Paul Peters and George Sklar created complex black characterizations whose untutored magnificence was signaled
by the height of their often inarticulate emotional passion. White social real-
list plays used black bodies to mount critiques of the status quo as envisioned
by whites. Reviewing *In Abraham’s Bosom*, Federal Theatre playreader H. L.
Fishel writes, “Mr. Green does not give us an insight into negro psychology
since he sees that for the negro which the negro does not see for himself.”
Though sympathetic to African American oppression, white social realist
playwrights too often drew on essentialist ideas of race.

When the New York Negro Unit’s production of *Turpentine* opened in
Harlem in 1936 with a racially mixed cast, the press thrilled to the cultural
anomaly of a black man performing whiteness in a serious drama. “A Negro
actor will have the rare distinction of playing a white man,” noted Women’s
Wear on June 24, 1936. “Reversing a familiar order, a colored actor, Thomas
Moseley, will play a Southern colonel,” wrote the New York News the same
day. “Numerous white actors have adopted black faces, but this process will
be reversed,” added the Bronx Home News on June 25.

Invoking the spectacle of reverse minstrelsy, the press comments reveal
the extent to which staged race was the prerogative of whites and hint at the
fluttering anxiety Moseley’s destabilizing presence may have caused white
audiences and critics. His performance signified more than a black man
“adopting” whiteface. His presentation of whiteness also calls forth a social
order in which race is both reversible and interchangeable, in which black
becomes white both in color and in socioeconomic status and in which the
ontology of upward mobility erases racial hierarchies. In Moseley’s embod-
ied performance, in a production that insists that a black man can be a white
Southern colonel, old man minstrelsy is not so much reversed as undone. The
performance insists upon a racial equality where black can stage white and all
can be as white. As the United States Congress was unable to muster the votes
to pass an anti-lynching law, *Turpentine* suggests that the violence called forth
by the black body can be appeased by the erasure of that body into a reassur-
ing whiteness.

*Turpentine* tells the story of black workers who are underpaid, starving,
and brutalized in an isolated Florida turpentine camp. They strike for better
conditions; the play ends with the white sheriff’s firing into a church where
the strikers are gathered. Within the context of the play’s politics, Mosely’s
performance subsumes race under class, coding white as a class position and
not a racial identity and thus reproducing visually a class-based political ide-
ology through which to read the larger narrative of oppressed workers, par-
icularly since the cast of the play was racially mixed. His performance can
thus describe both the colorblind tenets of thirties liberalism and the very
different but equally colorblind ones of American Communism.
As blackface and racial role reversal, Mosely’s display of racial interchangeability visually recalls the tug of the old plantation system and minstrel performance. He is adopting not simply whiteface, but power within a racially hierarchized system. This mounts a challenge to expectations of the roles open to African American performance, yet the challenge is undercut by the minstrel associations of staged race reversal. If his greasepaint makes a political point, his class position recalls pointed blackface minstrel jokes denigrating black cultural aspirations as unsuccessful strivings for whiteness in the figure of Zip Coon. Mosely’s character is overdetermined, and the class marked by race as staged by blackface minstrelsy undercuts the import of social realism’s daring experiment. Thus, as publicly labeled racial masquerade, Moseley’s performance can be read as not so much a liberating dream of America’s racial future but rather as the limits of that dream imposed by the lingering traces of a conflicted racist history.

*Turpentine* was not popular with the black audiences of Harlem. Audience surveys suggest that the Harlem audience wanted to see plays that dealt with the issues they faced in their own community, and not the faraway struggles of the Southern working poor. But *Turpentine* was unpopular within the Harlem community—though critically appreciated by the community that traveled uptown to see it—not only because of its setting in the South, but because of its depiction of poor, uneducated, “primitive” African Americans. While the leftist focus on class struggle caused its playwrights to focus on the working poor and to celebrate folk art as reflective of class vitality, representations of working-poor African Americans in the South could not help but raise the specter of slavery and its concomitant representational framework of minstrelsy and plantation mythology. *Turpentine*’s unpopularity focuses attention on the manner in which interest in “folk” plays, or plays about and reflecting the ethos of the “common man,” and an untutored and expressive artistry could dovetail uncomfortably close to negative stereotypes about poor and uneducated blacks. As Henry Louis Gates notes in “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of Black” about the Harlem Renaissance’s New Negro,

its “success” depends fundamentally upon self-negation, a turning away from the “Old Negro” and the labyrinthine memory of black enslavement and toward the register of a “New Negro,” an irresistible, spontaneously generated black and sufficient self.

African American cultural critics celebrated the folk play, but the “culturally willed myth” (to use Gates’s phrase) of the New Negro made such celebration, particularly with rural Southern inflections, problematic.
The significance of the folk play in perceptions of *Little Black Sambo* is expressed in Production Book notes from the Goodman Theatre production. Graham writes: “The Costumes of the people should be suggestive, merely, not accurate to any place or period, since the play is drawn from the folklore of all jungle peoples. . . .” Written by a Scottish white woman living in India, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* had become—by virtue no doubt of its simple characters, its human–animal interactions, its preindustrial time frame, and its jungle setting—a “jungle peoples” folk play.

But the Chorpenning–Graham production is not of “the folklore of all jungle people” any more than is Bannerman’s book. The Chorpenning–Graham production features Chorpenning’s pragmatic, clever, lyrical child besting tigers in Graham’s Africanized setting. It draws on modernist aesthetics to herald a new American racial identity grounded in a Popular Front assertion of African American inclusion.36 In a decade when modernist primitivism had been too often reduced to inherently racist stereotypes of African American emotionalism and irrationality, Chorpenning and Graham succeed in creating a black character who is distinctively and positively African and American. In an era when, as David Chinitz notes, “The legacy of 1920s primitivist discourse. . . left Africa, the African American, and jazz all but defined in terms of the primitive,” Graham’s production used African motifs in set, costume, and music to frame a tale that was distinctly American in its rags-to-riches narrative arc that describes how a boy’s ingenious and plucky self-sufficiency wins him his heart’s desire.37 African artistry is depicted as transformative, and thus is liberated by narrative from essentializing African heritage as contributing to a stereotypical and reductive primitivism. The play lifts Sambo from the character’s demeaning history.

Played out in this federal partnership between Chorpenning and Graham is a performance of what Anthony Appiah terms W. E. B. du Bois’s “antithesis in the classic dialectic of reaction to prejudice.” If the thesis in the dialectic is “denial of difference,” Appiah argues, then a du Boisian antithesis accepts difference, positing that differing racial groups provide complementary contributions in service to human advancement. In “The Conservation of Races,” du Bois argued that because race was fundamentally a sociohistorical construct, and that as each race had contributions to make borne of its particular history, then because their message had not yet been articulated to the world, African Americans should strive together to “work out in its fullness the great message we have for humanity.”38 His argument rejects assimilation to recognize that complementary racial contributions best forward human progress. In the Chorpenning–Graham production, the motifs that signal Sambo’s Africanness create markings of ethnic identification that perform two primary functions. In a play that celebrates a boy’s desire to articulate in
FIGURE 8. *Little Black Sambo (Chicago Illinois).* George Mason University. Fenwick Library. Special Collections and Archives
poetry his sense of beauty and wonder inspired by an Africanized landscape, they create a du Boisian celebration of African heritage. Within a narrative of liberal self-actualization, the motifs bring an African ethnicity to a universalized American boy. Thus they signal Sambo’s place, and the place of African American children, within pluralistic twentieth-century American society.

The Story of Little Black Sambo is practically unavailable in school libraries today, but in the thirties, it was widely recommended by librarians and educators as a positive portrayal of African Americans. Certainly when compared with the (also green-umbrella-carrying) Bumpo of The Story of Dr. Doolittle and the caricatures of African Americans in popular series books through the first half of the twentieth century, the characters in The Story of Little Black Sambo avoid the worst excesses of racism in their very simplicity. Written and illustrated by Helen Bannerman for her two daughters while the family was living in India, the story seems to be set in India even as it seems to depict African Americans. Bannerman later sold the story, drawings, and copyright; The Story of Little Black Sambo was first published in 1899 in London as the fourth in the small sized “Dumpy” books. It was instantly successful, with more than 21,000 copies sold in the first year. The Story of Little Black Sambo was first published in the United States in 1900.

The original has pictures and text on facing pages. It begins simply: “Once upon a time there was a little black boy, and his name was Little Black Sambo.” On the facing page is a drawing of a dark-skinned child with curly hair and brown eyes; he wears a loincloth. The story tells of how Little Black Sambo, whose parents have given him a green umbrella, blue trousers, a red coat, and “purple shoes with crimson soles and crimson linings,” goes into the jungle, where he is beset by four tigers. In order to avoid being eaten, he gives all of his clothes, piece by piece, to the tigers. The tigers, in a fight over which is most grand, grab each other’s tails and chase each other around a tree until they turn into melted butter. While Sambo picks up his clothes, Black Jumbo, his father, scoops up the melted butter and takes it home. Black Mumbo, Sambo’s mother, makes pancakes, and eats 27 of them to Jumbo’s 55 to Sambo’s 169.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, neither librarians nor educators were publicly concerned about the racial stereotyping in the pictures and text of the story. Yet the influence of the minstrel show on Bannerman’s original drawings is unmistakable. Black Mumbo is drawn with a kerchief over her head, a dumpy head atop a no-necked body, and with a big-featured, lip-thrust face and sloping forehead. Black Jumbo is as great a caricature, drawn in classic minstrel clothing and standing with overturned wrist on hip and holding a red umbrella while smoking a pipe. Both parents are barefoot, as also is Sambo.
Bannerman’s drawings emphasize blackface minstrelsy visually as the name Sambo does linguistically. Sambo, “a Darwinian loser and preindustrial primitive, became the nation’s demeaned alterego . . . ,” writes Joseph Boskin. He was to whites slow-witted, loosely-shuffling, buttock-scratching, benignly-optimistic, superstitiously-frightened, childishly lazy, irresponsibly-carefree, rhythmically-gaited, pretentiously-intelligent, sexually-animated. His physical characteristics added to the jester’s appearance: toothy-grinned, thick-lipped, nappy-haired, slack-jawed, round-eyed.

Sambo graced the minstrel stage, but he was much more. Sambo existed as artifact, image, and theatrical buffoon. Boskin writes:

As one of the earliest minority images to be translated into a cultural form, Sambo had become a multipublic figure by the eighteenth century, appealing across the social landscape. When, in the mid-nineteenth century, the figure was presented in the minstrel theatre, its long passage into the other levels of culture was virtually assured.

As Gates notes:

By 1900, when Booker T. Washington called for A New Negro for a New Century, it would have been possible for a middle-class white American to see Sambo images from toaster and teapot covers on his breakfast table, to advertisements in magazines, to popular postcards in drug stores. Everywhere he or she saw a black image, that image would be negative.

Drawings for subsequent American editions of The Story of Little Black Sambo drew upon the Sambo caricature’s widespread cultural resonance. A Cupples and Leon 1917 publication, with illustrations by John B. Gruelle, has mother and son barely human, with thick white lips, round circle noses, and popping eyes with black-dot pupils. A 1908 Reilly and Britton edition that appeared with “The Story of Topsy” from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and drawings by John R. Neill, shows frighteningly staring eyes, enormous lips, wildly kinked hair, and pierced ears. In this version, Sambo looks like a miniature adult, with a full-formed musculature, big hands, and bowlegs. His mother is a classic Mammy caricature straight out of plantation stories, a doughy mass, with her chin hanging over the beginnings of an ample bosom, wearing a polka-
dotted kerchief and matching apron. As the drawings emphasized minstrel caricature, publications changed the locale from India to a stylized Africa or generic American South.

The Story of Little Black Sambo’s history of egregious racist caricature obscures the book’s very real charms for children. The pleasure of reading it is most obviously felt in the sweet satiation of its final feast. There are other pleasures, of course. Sambo’s tiger triumph is vividly inspiring. Like the Babar books, The Story of Little Black Sambo speaks of a distant geographical location all the more alluring because its improbability of difference is real, an allure that extends to its fascination with the jungle and its celebration of dressing up. If the large, capacious Babar books of the 1930s (of which there was one FTP puppet theatre production in New York) invite the young reader to climb into them, The Story of Little Black Sambo makes itself deliciously sized for children’s hands. But the almost unbearable rightness of fearsome, child-eating, clothes-snitching tigers turning into soft sweet butter for pancakes almost too numerous to count, pancakes enough to satisfy the terrible hunger that follows terror, is the pleasure of its climax. Like Max’s dinner waiting when he returned from Where the Wild Things Are, the meal at the end of The Story of Little Black Sambo symbolizes the security of home. Flanked by his parents, the small boy who has ventured into the jungle and been stripped of his clothes by ferocious tigers ingests the very terror that pursued him. His mother makes the pancakes. His father brings home the butter. He is the center of his family and he is loved. It’s obvious in the eating.

Most who argue that Bannerman’s book with her original illustrations is not racist cite Sambo’s triumph over the tigers as a feat of skill and intelligence. But the book equally poses Sambo as a young dandy whose taste in clothes is mirrored by animals. Sambo barters away the only precious things he has because he cannot conceive of them not being universally desirable. The book’s simple narrative does not tell readers that Sambo is resourceful, but both it and the corresponding illustrations suggest that he is vain. What is unambiguous is its construction of a loving nuclear family that is reunited in happy plenitude at the book’s end.

The Chorpenning–Graham three-act production follows the basic Bannerman story with the addition of a subplot centered on a group of monkeys. An extant playscript includes director’s notes for an earlier production at the Goodman Theatre and gives some idea of staging. According to the notes, the same backdrop was used for all scenes, “an imaginative and colorful impression of the jungle, with all sorts of greens predominating, and brilliant suggestions of jungle flowers giving needed variety. . . .” The notes continue:
To this set, unchanging (except for lighting) we added for the scenes in the clearing, the hut in which Sambo lived. It was round, with a pointed roof, and set on a platform two and a half feet high, with a flight of several steps running down. . . . The roof was thatched high with dry cornstalks; the whole unit was put on rollers so that scene changes were very swift. On the other side of the stage a fire, with a large metal pot so placed that it caught the glow, added interest.

Costuming notes say:

In the Goodman production, Sambo used a dark brown wash over his whole body (not black, which would have made him too comic)—and wore a loin cloth colored like the most brilliant tawny foundation used for the tigers. A three-strand chain of shells hung well down over his chest. Mumbo, also brown, wore a modification of a Hindu sari, with a turban not exactly like any ever worn anywhere, but very becoming to her. Jumbo wore a loose outer garment belted in at the waist, and open down the front, showing his brown body and loin cloth when he moved. His turban was also an original affair. All three went barefoot.48

The notes suggest a fascination with the primitive borne out by extant photos of the production. Graham Africanized the costumes, giving Mumbo an African-style headdress and Jumbo a brightly patterned loose shift and baggy pants. Though in sketches Sambo is shown in matching shorts and jacket, throughout much of the play he wears a loincloth.49

In addition to directing the federal production, Graham wrote its original music, described as “inserted incidental music . . . which harmonizes with the African motif.”50 As Graham noted in her “Director’s Notes,”

We stressed the Negro character of the play by the play of brilliant colors, decided use of percussions, intensity of rhythm and in a definite minor melodic line of the music. Thus, again this negroid quality came through without effort and without getting away from the naïve charm of the script.51

Before the curtain rises, music is faintly heard; the play begins with Sambo grinding corn near the hut, but looking off into the jungle and gradually ceasing to work as the music swells. The animals that will drive the plot, the monkeys and tigers, enter the stage and then dart off when one of
the monkeys accidentally rolls a drum. Sambo works half-heartedly for a moment, then leaps up and bursts into song:

I hear the wind. / It says it is going away. / I am going, too / We go, go, go. / Through the cocoanut [sic] trees. / Where the monkeys are, / Where the elephants are, / Where the tigers are. / I ride on the back of an elephant. / We ride, ride, ride. / Plop, plop, plop. / To the end of the world, / Then we ride, without ground, / Without tree, / Only on the wind, Only on the water, / Only in a dim place—

The song’s lyrics suggest the breadth of Sambo’s imagination, even as it prepares the audience to consider the symbolic aspects of the trip to the jungle that the familiar storyline demands. When his mother chides him for singing when he should be grinding corn for pancakes, Sambo says his father would grind for him, “He likes to have me make songs.” Early in the play, Mumbo is set against Jumbo; the former is practical, in charge of finances, and hardworking. When Jumbo returns from the bazaar, we see the future of the singing, impractical Sambo; instead of buying the food Mumbo has ordered, Jumbo spent the money on blue and red cloth for clothes Sambo wanted.

In the Bannerman book, his parents gave Sambo the colorful clothes. Against the drawing of a grinning Sambo holding his green umbrella with one arm outstretched as if in acceptance of applause, the text asks, “And then wasn’t Little Black Sambo grand?” On the next page, it continues, “So he put on all his Fine Clothes, and went out for a walk in the Jungle.” In the Chorpenning play, Sambo goes into the jungle because he makes a deal with Mumbo: if she will make the clothes from the cloth, rather than returning it to the bazaar and buying the food, he will somehow get eggs, milk, sugar, and butter for her. She agrees because she thinks Sambo needs not only to learn to work, but to value the food that keeps them alive. Sambo has no money, so he asks Jumbo where the bazaar sellers get the food and realizes that he can find the raw ingredients or substitutes in the jungle. Rather than a parading of finery, his journey to the jungle is a quest for items of exchange that Mumbo values equally to the clothes.

This thematic shift focuses narrative and dramatic tension on whether the child will provide for his family and keep his word, not on the child’s danger. Furthermore, once in the jungle, Chorpenning’s Sambo is not first beset upon and frightened by a tiger. Rather, he befriends a monkey who has been the butt of all the other monkeys’ jokes. The monkey promises to get Sambo ostrich eggs in exchange for a trick of his devising for her to play.
on the others. As she frolics off to fetch the eggs, two tigers happen by. One asserts, “We are the finest beasts in the jungle,” and the other seconds, “No one dare be as fine as we are.” Sambo responds, “I never thought of being fine,” and the tiger questions, “Then why have you got a black and white and yellow skin like ours?” When Sambo explains that part of his coloring is his clothes and beads, the tigers insist that he remove them, which he politely refuses to do on the grounds that he would then be naked. The tiger rejoins, “You wish to make the animals think you are as fine as we.” Sambo responds, “Nobody in the world would think that, Mrs. Tiger.”

This exchange introduces the distinctions between Sambo and the monkeys and tigers that will be drawn on again to interrogate similarities provoked by the child of the jungle entering the jungle and talking to the animals. It provides a significant point of departure from the logic of the picture book, which suggests that Sambo walks into the woods in his new clothes to show them off. When he gives them to the tigers one by one, it is because he and the tigers recognize that the grandeur of which all equally want to take part is located in the clothing. If Sambo’s coloring is a point of recognition by the tigers, whose antagonism is provoked by a grandeur that is like theirs, and thus insistent upon Sambo’s animality, then his dismissal of similarity sets him apart. Indeed, the tigers decide to watch the monkeys’ response to Sambo; if they think he is fine and grand, “We will eat you in our burning mouths.”

The monkeys do gather round the boy and say he is the grandest of all, but Sambo saves himself by singing a song about the animals that ends:

The tiger walks in the jungle paths,
The grasses bow as he goes past,
They bend and whisper praise,
He stands, he stands in the sun, he shines,
His beautiful body all patterned,
The beasts bow low, they sing, they shout, they praise!!!
I am the tiger. You are the beasts!!
Everything lives, everything dances, everything sings.53

The monkeys bow to him as “the tiger” as Sambo leads the dance to where the tigers are sitting so the monkeys are bowing and shouting to them. “They sing about us. They bow to us,” says one. “They don’t notice him,” notes the other. Sambo’s safety among the powerful jungle beasts is predicated upon dramatic and literary skills that allow him to successfully stage tiger worship.

But the tigers’ jealousy of Sambo is based not on his beautiful colored
clothing, which in this play he hasn’t yet received, but on his glorious combination of black skin, white beads, and loincloth, which he tells them (in lines seemingly cut from the FTP production) that “I asked my mother to make my loin cloth yellow because it is beautiful like the moon at night . . .” “Take it off,” interrupts a tiger. In this play, Sambo’s beautiful brown washed skin, though described by the tigers as black, is the source of his beauty, their envy, and the monkeys’ desire to worship.

This scene introduces a theme that weaves throughout the production: skin color as reason for pride and arrogance and therefore skin color as provoking danger. While the tigers are colored much like Sambo, they wish to differentiate him from themselves and literally to strip him of that which makes him beautiful like them. Without his loincloth, Sambo is only black, and black alone is not like a tiger. Sambo’s delight in his clothes is very carefully allied with his reason for song-making; he loves beauty in the disinterested spirit of a poet and a creator. Once the monkeys worship them and the tigers relax from the threat embodied by Sambo, he asks the mother tiger for a jug of milk. She replies, “You are not grand enough even to look at tiger’s milk,” and a second later adds, “You aren’t fit to have a drop of the milk that makes my wee wonderful tiger babies grow their beautiful stripes.” Sambo tells them he wants the milk so his mother can make pancakes and sew him blue trousers and a red coat. The tigers come back to find out what the red and blue colors mean:

BOULANE: I am Boulane the tiger. I want to know what you meant by a beautiful little red coat and beautiful little blue trousers. Are you trying to find something finer than our black and yellow stripes?

DACURA: And I want to know.

RONGA: And I want to know.

BOULANE: Why do you change from colors like ours to be like a parrot or a bird of paradise? Do you think you will get more praise from the jungle folk?

SAMBO: I’m not thinking about praise.

DACURA: Everyone thinks about praise.

SAMBO: I’m thinking about how beautiful, beautiful, beautiful they are. That’s all I’m thinking about.54

When the tigers ask him why he wants his clothes to be beautiful, Sambo replies, “I don’t know. My father never told me. It’s the way I am.” And Boulane responds, “In your muscles that do not show, you feel that you will be
grander than we.” Sambo turns the tables on the tigers by asking which is the grandest of them. They argue, and the argument at one point centers on the fact that a tiger that is not present has “more white than you. If the white on your coat makes you grand, then Koumba is grander than either of you.” The tigers appeal to Sambo to choose the grandest, and he says that until he sees the tiger with the most white, he cannot judge.

Sambo’s triumph proceeds from his ability to befriend the animal that is not like the others and raises another theme that will be repeated: the difference between monkeys and men. The monkeys do not recognize similarity between themselves and Sambo as do the proud tigers; rather, in the face of the tigers’ calling Sambo a beast in their comparison with him, the monkeys consistently refer to the family as “men.” While Sambo’s song is a virtual sound bite of evolution from fish to tiger that allies all the animals and only sets him apart as performer, the monkeys do not recognize the child as like creature, saying he is smarter than any monkey. The play overturns the pejorative connection between monkeys and men that underlies so much of racist caricature in American cultural production.

With his monkey friend Malinke’s help, Sambo gets all the pancake ingredients except butter. He makes sugar out of sugar cane himself. But when his mother sends his father to the bazaar for butter, his father buys a green umbrella and purple shoes with crimson soles and linings for his son instead, and Sambo offers to return to the jungle for the butter. Though he returns from the jungle successful, he must fight off not only the tigers in this production, but the jealous monkeys who trap him and set him out for the tigers to kill. While Sambo is lost, his mother chants to drumbeats that she hopes will call him home:

The drum beats  
My heart beats  
When will my child come home?  
I wait, I wait,  
My breath comes fast. . . .

In highlighting the mother’s fear for her child in lines scored by rhythmic drumbeats, the play allies Mumbo’s fear for her child with the primitive and the African. In training her child to be responsible and brave, she exhibits a mother’s fearful heart as she waits for her child’s return. Sambo’s safe homecoming brings the play to a close, with Mumbo’s, “To all, the drum in my heart beats thanks” echoed by Sambo and Jumbo. The curtain falls as the family begins to eat.
Federal theatre worked on a large canvas, and so to present the Chicago production of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* as its triumphant center is to show only part of the picture. In the Miami puppet and the Junior League version of the story, the symbolic equation of food and love is subsumed under the signs of the blackface minstrelsy. Visually dominating, expelling burlesque dialect and what passes for African American humor, the blackface minstrel mouth and its association with primitive orality testifies to a gaping need, a ravenous appetite, an insatiable orifice, even as it is metonymic for the grinning, giving, bountiful servant. “Weel about and turn about and do jis so / Ebry time I weel about and jump Jim Crow” seems distant from tigers twirling round a tree into butter. But the racial burlesque that underlies Bannerman’s naming and provided the source of her visual characterization overtly structures the Miami FTP production. If so much of the book’s pleasure resides in participating with Sambo as that which would kill him turns into food making him stronger, these federal scripts deny the recognition and identification integral to the participation of that pleasure. As it did in minstrel shows, comedy resides in caricatured staging of the African American oppressed, in displaying and ultimately negating the threat posed by the excluded upon whom a unified American family rests.

The dependence of federal *Little Black Sambos* on minstrel characterization and the minstrel forms—music, dancing, and verbal play—shifts the focus of the food within the story and in so doing shifts the focus of family. Their primary debt to minstrelsy is the gaping minstrel mouth painted on the puppets. As Boskin writes, “Being puppets, they wore perpetual grins against coal-black faces with wide eyes and thick red lips.” As the photo from Washington, DC, makes clear, this particular FTP marionette Sambo did not have fine clothes with which to parade in the jungle. He is barely dressed in overalls. His mother wears a servant outfit with bandana, and his father working clothes. Their home contains the standard portraiture of melodrama or farce; before a word has been spoken, the audience has been informed by a wealth of signs as to how to read the show.

The plays’ emphases on minstrel characterizations—distortions of dialect, malapropisms, and the inversion of gender norms and gendered behavior, combined with the minstrel forms of exaggerated dance, emphasis on song, and what passes for African American verbal play—invert the family structure celebrated as the ideal. In these plays, communication is based on telling lies, threatening violence, and congratulating self-promotion. The head of the family is female, and she is a threatening (violently rather than sexually) figure. In these three-scene productions, minstrel characterization and form disrupt the narrative flow and the dependence on reassur-
ing repetition that in the picture book builds the pleasures that culminate in the final feast. In so doing, the Miami and Junior League plays shift the emotional center from the family to Sambo’s interaction with the tigers and from the family feast to the tigers’ hunger. Both plays draw out the spectacle of Sambo’s fear in the face of the tigers’ threatening desire for him and shift emphasis at the end from shared meal to the family members’ individual antics. “Jumbo does cakewalk,” tersely notes the Junior League script; Mumbo flips pancakes while Sambo and Jumbo dance in the Miami version. The shift spatially breaks up the family.

The script used in the one-act, three-scene Miami version begins and ends in Mumbo’s kitchen and sandwiches the jungle in between. Notes at the beginning of the scene direct “At rise of curtain, MUMBO at stove singing Negro spiritual—’Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.’ Negro dialect throughout. Tigers, etc.”

MUMBO: Sambo, Sambo. Where is that pestiferous child? Sambo? Sambo
Where is you at?
SAMBO: Here I is, Mumbo.
MUMBO: Come in here this instant. Where you been, chile? Come yere to yo’ mammy.
SAMBO: Oh, Mumbo, I was havin’ do bestest time. I was in the swimmin’ [sic] all the de morning, in de ribber.
MUMBO: Ain’t I been told you not to go swimmin’ in dat ribber? You want to be et up by dem crocodiles?57

Sambo lies to Mumbo, saying a crocodile ate his clothes, and then bursts into a song-and-dance routine about his swimming prowess that makes her laugh. Mumbo’s brief maternal fears forgotten, she laughs, “You sure is the beatenest child. I reckon you’ll have to wear your new Sunday go-to-meetin’ clothes effen de crocodile done et up your other ones. Anyway, I want you to go down to the market store for me and buy some shortenin’ for de shortenin’ bread.” Sambo pleads, “Mammy, ef I sees some watermelon, kin I bring dat home, too?” Mumbo says yes, and then warns him not to get mud on his new clothes or she’ll tell Jumbo to get him no more, at which point Jumbo enters with:

JUMBO: What do I git no more of? And why? (sees Sambo—looks him over) Well, if you ain’t the grandest looking child I ever did see—you sure do your pappy proud. Don’t he, Mumbo?
MUMBO: Well, he sure look good, but he is the beatenest chile fer getting’ into trouble. Tell your Pappy how you done lost all your clothes.

SAMBO: Oh, I done took a swim in de ribber and a feericious crocodile et em all up.

JUMBO: Effen you ain’t careful, boy, next time you’ll get et stead o’ your clothes. Den where’ll you be? Tell me dat?58

Then telling Sambo to hurry because “I’se hungry,” Jumbo adds, “Don’t swim no more, or I’ll whack you good!” while stage directions note that he laughs. Sambo exits into the dangerous jungle with “Yassum, yassum, I’ll take care nothin’ don’t happen to me, nor my fine clothes. Won’t I be grand, though (sings) all dressed up in my finest clothes from my head to my toes. Folks will stare at me, I know. Way down in the jungle.”

In scene 2, Sambo stops by the river to swim to sing about his beautiful clothes in loving detail. He is quickly confronted with the first tiger, who says, “Grr, oh, how do you do, little Black Sambo, if you don’t look delicious today—mum—mum—And where are you going?” Sambo replies, “Oh—how do you do Mr. Tiger. I got to do an errand for my Mammy down to the market. I’m late already—guess I better hurry—goodbye Mr. Tiger.” The tiger replies, “Well, well, not so fast my little tender one. I’m also late, late for my dinner. I’m so sorry if I seem to cause you too much inconvenience, but I am hungry, and must not delay my lunch any longer. So please stand still and I’ll begin at once—I promise not to hurt you any more than necessary.”59

Until the tiger arrives, Sambo’s speech has been written in dialect, but with the tiger’s racially unmarked speech, Sambo (mostly) loses his own until he returns home. Not only is the dialect in the Reich script uneven, but while it follows some of the conventions for minstrel speech, it doesn’t follow them all. She seems to only occasionally have followed familiar dialect substitutions: the voiced bilabial stop /b/ for the voiced labiodental fricative and substituted voiceless apicoalveolar stops /t/ and /d/ for the voiceless apicodental fricative /th/. The script doesn’t delete the present tense of “to be” nor does it use the present tense to describe actions in the past. What seems to be the case is that the writer was familiar enough with minstrel conventions to indicate the genre in which the play was to be situated, but not familiar enough to successfully recreate minstrel speech. Even the mispronunciations “feericious” and “pestiferious” seem like labored attempts to simulate distorted dialect for comic affect. But the dialect serves to construct a reading of the family dynamics by its allusion to minstrel speech and malapropism. Named “mammy” by her son, Mumbo demonstrates a nonmaternal lack of concern
for her child’s safety situated in the minstrel stereotype of the black mother. Mumbo invites the audience to laugh at her child’s danger along with her.

Sambo offers his red coat in exchange for his life and convinces the tiger that he will be the grandest tiger: “go on down to the deep pool and look for yourself.” Tiger number two says “Grrr—oh how I feel. No dinner. Oh there’s Sambo—good—I’ll eat you right up and maybe that will make me feel better. Oh my stomach. Hurry now. I am going to gobble you right up. Grrr. Don’t stand there like a ninny. Didn’t you hear me say I was going to eat you right up . . .” Sambo responds, “Oh please Mr. Tiger, please don’t eat me! I’d be very bad for your stomach and besides, I don’t want to be eaten.” The second tiger responds that what Sambo wants “has nothing to do with it.”

The third tiger pauses in telling Sambo she will eat him up to ask “Did you bathe today?” Sambo’s dialect briefly and incompletely returns with his answer, “Yassum, I done swum in the river today, but I wouldn’t taste awful good.” The tiger doesn’t believe him and he persuades her that she will be even prettier wearing his purple shoes on her tail. And finally, he convinces the fourth tiger to shade himself with the umbrella, at which point Sambo cries, “Oh Mumbo sure’ll lick me. Losing all my clothes. Boo-hoo.” The tigers leave, but their return fighting over who is grandest forces Sambo up the tree. The scene ends with him laughing down at the tigers.

Scene three opens with Jumbo snoring at the kitchen table. He wakes and worries briefly that Sambo went swimming and lost his new clothes. Mammy says, “You sure ought to give that young one a few licks, so he’ll mind,” Jumbo laughs and says, “Lawsy ’magine me lickin’ that young one,” as Sambo returns singing, all dressed in fine clothes, with tiger butter on a palm branch and his story to tell. When he tells his story, Mumbo interrupts with, “Child, is you fabricatin? If you gave them all your clothes, how come you have all your clothes on? Orate me that.” Even though Sambo actually tells the truth, Jumbo leaps in admiringly, “You sure can tell ’em, boy! Chip off de ole block, dat’s wot.” The play ends with Sambo singing and Sambo and Jumbo dancing while Mumbo is frying and flipping pancakes.

The Newark puppet production with its odd and unsettling script by Robert Warfield also begins in the kitchen, although in this case the kitchen is a cauldron outside of a hut where “MUMBO is stirring big pot; then moves over to basket, takes out red coat and looks at it. Comes to front and holds up coat for JUMBO’s inspection.” The scene begins with an exchange between Mumbo and Jumbo:

MUMBO: Jumbo! Jumbo! Look-a-heah and see ef’n dis coat looks fitten to wear. I ain’t made anything so litty bit as dis heah coat in all my
life befo.’ That Sambo looks so scandlous in his lil’ white shirt, I ‘lowed I betta make him some shore ‘nuff clothes. What he wea-
rin’ right now don’t come furder dan his waist. (NEGROS SONG, SINGING OFF STAGE.)

JUMBO: (Enters carrying his brass pot; sets it down) Well! Well! Mumbo, it mought’n fit him, but it shore is a bee-u-ti-ful coat. Is de tail of his shirt g’wine to show ’neath de coat? Looks kinda funny to me.

MUMBO: You is crazy man! ’Course I’m gwine to make dat chile a pair of trousers. Look! Here dy are, most done. I reckon our son’ll look like a Rajah’s son pretty soon. Praps dey’ll let him in the school when dey see him in all his fine clothes. Dey tell me the teachers are mighty ’ticular ’bout the ’pearance of de school chilluns, now dey got chairs to set on, stid of squattin’ on de floor.62

After Sambo enters, pulling a dog by the tail, his mother tells him to try on the clothes. Stage directions instruct, “Sambo takes clothes and goes back of hut. Mumbo and Jumbo sing duet. Sambo returns, struts around; squats in front of dog. Sneezes. Mumbo wipes his nose.” Then Sambo says, “Mammy, Ah shore is glad to have somethin’ to wear besides mah little white shirt. . . . Seems like Ah was sneezin’ ’most all de time.” Mumbo replies, “Dat’s a fact, chile, you certainly ketches cold mighty easy—maybe dese here clothes g’wine stop dat.”63

Then Sambo catches sight of his bare feet and begins to cry, telling his mother that he won’t be allowed in school without shoes. Jumbo offers to go to the bazaar “an’ fetch de findin’ for lil’ Sambo’s first man’s costume. Mumbo, give me some money.”

In scene two, Sambo is strolling in the jungle. He says:

Oh man! Is I happy? Yes sah! I is. I’se got me a coat, I’se got me green trousers, purple slippers with crimson soles and crimson linings and a blue umbrella. What I care ef’n school keeps or not. I’se g’wine tek a lil’ walk in dis heah jungle. Ah jest can’t bear to keep may purty clothes in de dark house. (TIGER GROWLS) Ah fought Ah mought meet up wid some folks to show mah clothes to, but Ah shore don’t want to meet up wid any tigers.

TIGER: Good morning, little fella.

Up until this point, the script draws on minstrel caricature for characterization and malapropism and what passes for African American verbal play
FIGURE 9. Little Black Sambo (Newark, New Jersey). George Mason University. Fenwick Library. Special Collections and Archives.
as humor. And, as with the Reich script, Sambo is then put through the same spectacle of beasts threatening the little African American child that so delighted the Miami script, and again with the introduction of the tigers scripted Sambo loses his dialect. The Newark script, however, adds a contemporary note. When Sambo is begging the third tiger not to eat him and to take his shoes instead, he says, “You look like a sensible tiger.” The tiger responds, “You bet I am. Not only am I the smartest tiger in this neck of the woods, but I am also the handsomest one!”

SAMBO: Of course you are. But it looks like you’re going to get some keen competition from two of your friends. I gave one of them my beautiful red coat and the other one got my pretty green pants.

TIGER: Oh . . . so! I’ll bet that would be Benny and Adolph. Those two guys are always cuttin’ in on my territory.  

Sambo returns home and runs to his mother as she cries, “Whatever happened to you?” Sambo answers, “Oh mummy, did I have the time. I met three real Tigers.” She replies, “Didn’t your daddy tell you to stay out of the jungle?” (which Jumbo actually does not in the archived scripts). Sambo says, “Aw, what’s the jungle? Nothin’ but a bunch of overgrown trees. Me, I’m brave, I’m not afraid of anything, not even tigers or jungles. Bring em on. Me and Joe Louis are brave guys.” Mumbo asks him why he is carrying his clothes, and Sambo says, “The tigers took ’m off of me! They said they’d eat me if I didn’t turn ’em over.”

Describing a fantasy in which he beats up the tigers, Sambo continues:

When there was just one ol’ tiger, he said, “Sambo, you give me your new coat or I’ll eat you!” But I just laughed in his face and said, “Go on you ol’ tiger, I ain’t afraid of you, you better go on now or I’ll bop you in the nose!”

MUMBO: My, what a brave little boy you are, Sambo!

SAMBO: Sure, an’ a secon’ ol’ tiger came up an’ said he would eat me up if I didn’t give him my new pants! But I jus’ said to him, “Mr. Tiger, if you don’t want me to kick you right in that ol’ snoot of yours, you better run on along home to Mrs. Tiger!”

MUMBO: And did he go, Sambo?

SAMBO: What else could he do when I looked him right square in the eye?

MUMBO: You sure make me proud of you, son!
SAMBO: But then the fun started. Another ol’ tiger snuck up on me behind and held my arms while his two pals took off all my bran’ new clothes!

MUMBO: My God! Then what did you do?

SAMBO: Then I got sore. I ripped myself loose from that ol’ third tiger and bopped ‘im right square between the eyes with a left hook just like Joe Louis! Then I grabbed the other ol’ tiger by the tail and swung him around in the air until he got dizzy, an’ then I socked the third tiger with the one I was swinging around . . .

As has no doubt become clear, Mumbo is a different character from the first scene, and the Sambo in these pages bears no relation to the child who entered the first scene dragging a dog by the tail. Presented first are negative characterizations in which each character performs to stereotype and the dialogue seems designed merely to forward the humorous situation these stereotypes provoke—the mammy figure whose coarseness is figured by her cauldron cooking, her ignorance of delicate sewing, and her neglect of her child’s nakedness, the father figure who must borrow money from his wife to purchase the food, the child whose bare bottom is exposed as he is sneezing at his animal companion on the floor.

These caricatures are abandoned when Sambo returns home from the jungle. Mumbo becomes Mummy and listens to an excited Sambo retelling his exploits where instead of tricking the tigers, he beats them up, like Joe Louis. Instead of characters who function as stereotypes who play off of each other, Mumbo and Sambo create a close-knit mother-and-son dynamic. She listens to him and asks questions that respond to his imaginative retelling of his adventures. His exploits and his vision of himself grow in stature in response to her interest and admiration. His description seems less a lie than an imaginative retelling of a dream deferred.

Only the second African American holder of the World Heavyweight title, Joe Louis knocked out Nazi boxer Max Schmeling in the 1938 heavyweight title fight, one of the key events of the decade. Louis was a heroic figure who carried the hopes of the African American community for a symbolic blow to white racism and in the bout was pitted as the American champion against the Nazi champion—democracy against fascism—as Germany’s aggression was heightening. Louis’s only defeat before gaining the title in 1937 had been to Schmeling in 1935.

Though it was a less iconic event, Louis also fought and knocked out the representative of the other major European Axis power, Italian champion Primo Carnera. Later that summer, in August 1935, there was a race riot in
Jersey City between members of the African American community and the Italian-American community in which more than a thousand people armed with knives, baseball bats, bottles, and stones were involved. “The blacks in Jersey City had ridiculed the Italians for ‘Mussolini Darlings’ poor showing. The Italian Americans retorted by boasting about what fascist arms would achieve in Ethiopia,” writes William R. Scott in a *Journal of Negro History* article about the incident. On October 4, interracial fighting broke out in Brooklyn and Harlem. When Adwa fell later that month, blacks in Harlem attacked Italian street vendors and there were calls for national boycotts of Italian-owned businesses.

Louis’s victory over Carnera provided the event that sparked the Jersey City controversy, but the context of this northeastern insurgency was a widespread African American interest in fascist aggression toward Ethiopia, grounded in no small part in the Black Nationalism sentiments of Garveyism and the back-to-Africa movement. As Scott writes, “the Italian invasion of Ethiopia evoked an emotional attachment with the ancestral homeland which, in the opinion of some contemporaries, was far more intensifying than Marcus Garvey’s vision of a free, redeemed, and mighty nation.”

The Newark version of *Little Black Sambo* opened on October 3, 1937, on the two-year anniversary of Mussolini’s invasion. If the boy Sambo is like the fighter Joe Louis who fought the champions of both major fascist dictatorships, and the first two tigers, Benny and Adolph, are recognized as Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, then the third tiger to which Sambo is forced to give not only his shoes but his green parasol is perhaps a contemporary figure as well. If so, Sambo’s boast that the tiger was scared from taking his clothes from him, “What else could he do when I looked him right square in the eye?” and Mumbo’s response, “You sure make me proud of you, son,” carries extraordinary resonance.

Reading the first scene through the events surrounding the fights of Joe Louis shifts interpretations of Mumbo’s hope that her son would be allowed to go to school. As the play opens, it might seem that she predicates educational opportunity on appearance and hopes to turn her son into a young dandy who will find the doors of the school opened to him. But read through the context of the play’s latter half, education might be closed to Sambo even if he looks like a rajah’s son. Mumbo’s provision of clothes and Jumbo’s of shoes speak of parents striving to better the conditions of their son’s life.

Both the school lines in the first scene and the Mussolini/Hitler reference are removed from a second script, which is also attributed to Warfield. Also removed is the reference to Sambo’s “scandalous” little white shirt, which is
replaced by a “little gingham skirt.” In the second script, singing and dancing seems to have been added to replace some of the more controversial material. The overall structure is similar, but lines have been changed throughout and there is a much greater emphasis on singing. Sambo enters singing “Sometimes ah feel like nobody cares about me.” Though Mumbo’s lines about school are removed, after Sambo tries on his clothes and looks down at his feet, “He begins to whimper, ‘PAPPY.’ When his father asks what’s wrong, Sambo replies, ‘Pappy, ma feet don look right showing out so naked from under ma bran new breeches. The teacher won’t let me in de school less’n ah have something on mah feet.’” This provokes the third song of the first scene, “Gonna Get Shoes.”

As in the first script, the third tiger is dissuaded from eating Sambo by the parasol and shoes, and says, “Alright, you look pretty skinny anyway.” Instead of the Mussolini/Hitler reference, the tiger says, “Oh, yeah! I’ll show them mugs a thing or two. First I’ll eat you and then—” The dialect reappears in both scripts after Jumbo returns home triumphantly bearing the tiger butter and the truth about Sambo’s tiger troubles is out. Both parents tease Sambo, drawing out his tale until he has also beaten up a rhinoceros, an elephant, a crocodile, and a lion. Jumbo then says, “Then you can go to the bazzar [sic]. I forgot to get sugar!” Sambo says, “Who, me? Me walk through that jungle with the sun goin’ down? Uh-uh, I should say not! No-oo-oo.” With Mumbo’s response to quiet him, the dialogue returns: “Hush yo’ cryin’ honey. You jes’ set while Mama’s gonna bring back a heap o’ fo’ you [sic].” Then we find out that Jumbo’s borrowing act in the first scene is complicated by his “Hope you made plenty [of pancakes], Mummy, case workin’ twelve hours a day on that railroad sho’ makes a man hungry.”

The final scene, after the feast that takes place with the curtain down in the first script and offstage in the second, focuses on how both Jumbo and Sambo have a stomachache after having eaten so many pancakes. The absurd appetite in the book is here turned into a commentary about the joy of excess in a world of lack. Sambo says, “It hurts here Mummy. What yo’ spec’ I’se got?” Mumbo answers, “Lans sake chile. Expec’ yoh can eat 169 pancakes without yo’ lil tummy feeling it? (RUBS HIS BELLY).” The curtain comes down after Sambo says:

Dis shore was a ’citin day for Sambo. Ah gits mah fust breeches an’ Ah meets all dem Mr. Tigers an’ now Ah eats dem, ’stead of dem eatin’ me. Hoopla, an’ Ah feels like Ah’d nevah be hungry again. One huner and sixty nine pancakes. Whooppee! Ah wouldn’t mind meetin’ tigers every day eff’n we could have pancakes right after.”
Given the topical cultural and political references in the play, it seems that in this final speech, Sambo is not only reflecting upon a very fine day, but asserting a new Sambo. He has bested his tormenters and *eaten* them. In the Miami script, the audience is denied the pleasure of the feasting, of the satiation that provides such full narrative closure in the picture book. In this *Little Black Sambo* we have not only the feast but Sambo musing afterward that he would be happy to take on and eat such tormentors every day.

A third script in the files was never produced by the FTP but was distributed by the Association of Junior Leagues of America, Inc. This play, which provides for “no royalty on *free* performances for *underprivileged children*” [emphasis theirs] begins in the jungle with “Large Black pot tripod L. Black Mumbo bending over pot” as Mumbo says, “Jumbo! Black Jumbo! What is dat no count niggah?” The exchange continues:

**JUMBO:** Who dat callin’ Black Jumbo?

**MUMBO:** You knows berry well who callin’ you. Don’t you go pretendin’ you can’t reckernize the voice ob your lawful wife! What’s mo’ ’twas lil Black Sambo’s own Mudder callin’ you an’ don’t ferget it!

Mumbo says Sambo has been good for “three whole days” and that she wants to give him a present; she has been sewing clothes and wants Jumbo to get something from the market. After Jumbo exits, Sambo enters on a cartwheel as Mammy sings “Hush-a-bye ma lil pickaninny, etc.” Sambo speaks the memorable lines “I’s lil Black Sambo, I is, I is! I’s lil Black Sambo, I is! Hello, Mammy!” Sambo gets his new clothes and feels so grand he wants to walk in the jungle; he is beset, gives the clothes away, the tigers fight, and he gets the clothes back as Jumbo scoops up the tiger butter. The play ends with Sambo’s line “You bettah git me ’bout 169 (pancakes), Mammy, ’cause I is so hungry” and the stage directions “(JUMBO does the cakewalk).”

In all the puppet productions, including the Junior League script, Sambo addresses the tigers as Mr. and they in return call the boy by his first name, thus reproducing Southern black to white forms of address. This reproduction is perhaps no accident; it is perhaps not sheer carelessness that causes Sambo to lose his dialect upon confrontation with the tigers. Perhaps to oppose blackface and white speech so closely was to name too clearly the referent of ferocious hunger, an act of naming the Newark script subversively plays with and table-turning its end celebrates. Sambo’s threatened body recalls nine Southern black boys facing the death penalty for an accusation of rape unsubstantiated by evidence. It recalls old Southern tourist postcards that showed black children clinging desperately to treetops and
gazing down popeyed at grinning alligators on cards whose message read “Come on Down!” African American children and youth as natural prey in the American jungle is a part of U.S. cultural history.

The significance of the blackface minstrel-based Little Black Sambo plays lies in their continuing denial of black inclusion into the increasingly universalized protected child. By the 1930s, practically all children were recognized as deserving the rights and privileges of schooling, play, decent food, and health care. Both in adhering to and in subversively overturning the racist stereotypes of African Americans, these federal Little Black Sambo puppet shows, mostly forgotten and lying neglected in FTP files, detail the structure of racial feeling that enabled such exclusion.

Underscoring the complex racial representations within federal theatre is the Seattle production of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, wherein it is precisely such mother love that is denied the mother figure. Although possessing a very different history, Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories have, much like The Story of Little Black Sambo, enjoyed favor among white audiences as authentic folktales. The Seattle FTP adaptation Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby by Ruth Comfort Mitchell and Alfred Allen used minstrel stereotypes and denigrating family characterizations much like the Miami puppet play had.72 Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby opened May 7, 1938, in Seattle.

As Tina Redd writes in her dissertation chapter on the Seattle unit,

With the exception of a censored production of Lysistrata, Seattle’s production history, critical recognition, and audience support combined, suggest that this Federal Theatre Negro Unit had achieved many of the goals established in Harlem, despite the fact that Negroes made up little more than one percent of the city’s overall population.73

Redd also notes that initial directors Florence and Burton James contributed to the unit’s early vitality and initial leftist slant.74 They wrote, “As directors we see the theatre then as a social force in which is mirrored the contemporary scene,” and with the establishment of the Negro Unit under their directorship proceeded to delight the general labor community of Seattle with their production of Sklar and Peter’s Stevedore.75 The James duo would leave the project, however, by the time Brer Rabbit was produced under the direction of Esther Porter Lane.

Brer Rabbit opens with “an old-fashioned darky of the child and laughter-
loving type, [sic] comes down the center aisle of the theatre. SHE is dressed as in the plantation days before the war, and sings as SHE walks, in a low plaintive croon . . .

The woman is singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and as she reaches the stage, “turns, faces the audience, and continues the croon, pleadingly—)"

I'se feelin' so mon'Il, so sad an' fo'lorn!
De chillen, dey's all run' away!
I watch an' I wait, but dey sho' nuff gone . . .
I'se longin' fo' de good ol' day!

A little girl who is lonely in the “big house” because the babies are too young to talk answers “Mammy’s” lamentations. The girl answers Mammy’s “Wonn’ nobuddy come? Ain’t dey no lil’ chillen now’ days?” by running down the aisle dressed in pre–Civil War hoopskirt and dress with “I’ll come! Mammy, I’ll come! Wait for me! I’ll come!” Mammy “rapturously” replies “Bless de Lawd! One ob de chillen’s come back!” and “flinging her arms” about the child says, “My honey-bud! Des come right erlong wif Mammy.” As the two disappear inside “DARKEY FIELD HANDS (coming from the hoeing of the cotton, cross the stage, singing old time plantation melodies).”

In an interview with Lane collected by George Mason University, Lane remembers the actor who played the Mammy because of her refusal to carry the portrayal to a certain point. Lane explained that the woman sat out front and started as a mammy telling stories out on the side to get us going on the whole Joel Chandler Harris stuff. And thoughtlessly, in those days, I had costumed her or asked her to be costumed in an Aunt Jemima red kerchief with little knots here and little knots there and she looked adorable. And then I found something was wrong, they were unhappy, she wasn’t singing very well and, you know, the scene wasn’t clicking. And they finally said, “Anything but that.” And her mother had been a slave, her grandmother had been a slave, and even in those days, “I’ll do anything but I won’t put a red kerchief on my head.”

The cut frame is built around Mammy’s explanations that babies have a language all their own that they share with animals, while what remains is the explanations themselves; in the cut version Mammy begins the story at the girl’s request and the scene changes from her cabin to the woods as her voice becomes increasingly drowsy and the lights dim.
The actor next appears in act 2, which begins at Brer Rabbit’s house. Miss Molly Cottontail who is “(plainly the darky MAMMY of 1) . . . stands in the doorway, talking into the house, sputtering wrathfully”:

‘Pears lak I don’ got de tormintenist chillen ob de weepin’ worl’! Kyarin’ on dis-a-way, lak yo’ nebber had no raisin! Ain’ nebber seed yo’ so rambunkshus!. Hucombe yo-all so onery? I’se des plumb beat out, das what I is! I ain’ drawed a peaceful bref since sun-up. Look lak de good Lawd wanter chasten my sperrit, gibbin’ me all dese boddermints! I’se des daid on my feet, das whut I is! (rousing a little) But yo’ hyar me! Ef de Lawd don’ ’flict my sperrit, den I’se gwinter ’flict yo’ hide! (She picks up a switch and shakes it threateningly in the doorway) De nex’ chile whut lets out de firs’ squid-geon ob a squeal, I’se gwinter to frail him if hit’s de las’ act!

The kind and gentle, forlorn Mammy wishing for her children to return is transformed into a violent mother figure. This characterization accords with a racist stereotyping of black women dependent on a plantation ethos that insists that African Americans display appropriate familial behaviors only under the influence of the larger “plantation family.” In an inversion of normative gendered familial relations, black women are shown as violent and threatening and domineering within their own families. The mammy of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby is only nurturing to the white children, and her call at the beginning of the play is only to them and, significantly, constitutes a longing for the return not only of the white children, but for the system that produced them.

Analogues to children’s theatre’s conservative and sometimes racially oppressive productions are found in adult theatre files. The FTP’s National Service Bureau, which had a theatre library of five thousand volumes, produced both “A List of Negro Plays” and “56 Minstrels” for distribution to theatre groups and use by Federal Theatre units in 1938. In a foreword to the “Negro plays,” authored by white and black playwrights, John Silvera acknowledges:

The number of plays written for Negro actors has up to now been almost negligible; what has been done, however, gives a clear indication of the possibilities that lie within the race group. It can be truly said that by his acting, his dance, and his music the Negro has left an indelible imprint on the American stage. A few memorable characters have been created and it is these that best reflect the ideals if not the tradition of the Negro theatre. In presenting this group of representative plays, Federal Theatre attempts
to further these ideals and to assist in broadening the dramatic horizon of a gifted race.

Silvera adds that though both black and white playwrights were writing about the American black experience, only white perspectives on blacks had received wide dramatic success. Noting that a white-controlled theatre circulates and reifies white perception of the black American experience, he writes:

The rich field of Negro drama has attracted both White and Negro authors but the majority of Negro plays that have received public attention have been written by White persons. Compared with his efforts in other forms of literature, particularly poetry and the novel, the Negro author has done little in this fertile field. In censuring his choice of endeavor, we must however, bear in mind the fact that writing for the stage has been subjected to commercial dictation and Negro themes find little market for expression. Federal Theatre hopes to stimulate further writing and through its National Service Bureau offers assistance on research, problems of direction and stagecraft, to authors, schools, and nonprofessional groups alike.

A young African American playreader, Silvera co-wrote the Living Newspaper on American race relations *Liberty Deferred*, a production that would never actually reach the stage. He writes further after the table of contents:

Perhaps no subject in American literature is as alive and moving as that of the Negro in his relations to his own and to other races. More and more has the place of the Negro in his community, his efforts to combat repression, racial, economic and political, become the theme for dramatic presentation. Most of the plays herein presented deal with the social and economic phases of this struggle. They are important as representing a definite break with the traditional concept of the Negro as a music-hall, tap-dancing comic figure.

“A List of Negro Plays” contains brief descriptions for each play that include the author’s name, publisher’s name and address, synopsis, and playreader commentary.

This format is followed as well for each of “56 Minstrels,” which contain as well “type” (“colored minstrel act for young people”), cast number, running time, and sets. If the overriding presence of social realism in the “Negro plays” gathered for distribution indicates an attempt to build an American
theatre that recognizes and reflects the complexity of African American history and psychological subjectivity, as well as adherence to Popular Front social realism, the minstrel list indicates the widespread cultural resistance to that effort. The minstrels were compiled by the Music Vaudeville Service Department, which seems to have gotten most of its performances from the catalogues of the T. S. Denison & Company and the Dramatic Publishing Company of Chicago and the Willis N. Bugboo Company of Syracuse. In addition to the compilation, vaudeville performances with titles such as *Dixie Minstrels, The Dixie Dandies, All American Minstrels, Swanee Minstrels,* and even *Federal Theatre Minstrels,* titles that do not appear in the collection of minstrel acts, appeared on federal stages across the country. *Plantation Days* was performed by Negro Units in Oakland and San Francisco and by a puppet theatre in Jacksonville, Florida.82

The presence of federally staged and collected minstrel shows reflects the talents of those performers on the welfare rolls and the types of roles available to them historically as well as audience tastes. The conflicted attitudes that appear on the FTP playreader reports for minstrel skits reflect how pervasive was minstrelsy in the common culture. In their language and assessments, readers reveal discretely different attitudes toward the blackface minstrel tradition in American entertainment, yet all display a comfortable familiarity with the material. A “poem” titled “Nigger Baby,” by Bertha M. Wilson and published by the Penn Publishing Co. of Philadelphia, is rejected by one reader, who writes, “This effort is too hackneyed for present day audiences.” The reader writes the following synopsis:

The poem deals with a little colored girl similar to Topsy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which the person reciting the poem reveals herself to be white when, at the finish, she removes some of the burnt cork.

Another reader rejects the same piece with this comment and synopsis:

One can imagine grandniece Agatha inflicting this recitation on Sunday evening guests in the parlor way back when audiences were seen and not heard, but nowadays there’s the Bronx cheer to be reckoned with, therefore it would be wiser to allow this material to be placed in the limbo into which the passing of many years has placed it.

The little darkie Miss tells all about her dollie, her dancing and her love of watermelon and lastly reveals she is not really a little darkie, having created her brunette complexion with ink and shoe blackening.83
A reader for the minstrel show “Alabama Attaboy Minstrels,” by Arthur Leroy Kaser (author of 19 of the “56 Minstrels”), recommends it as a “good first part of a minstrel show.” A second reader concurs, though with unexplained “reservations,” writing that it is a “fairly amusing minstrel crossfire with at least one gag which is new to this reader.” A third rejects the same “as material no longer considered worthy entertainment. Dialogue, puns and jokes are very old and no longer amusing.” The reader characterizes it as “usual minstrel material—gags, duologues [sic] and jokes of a ‘passe’ period.”

Acknowledging racially denigrating stereotypes in FTP productions, however, does not negate the achievement of key federal plays for children in registering the expanding range of possibilities for African American representation. A second review to the one that opened this discussion, for the Chicago Evening American, begins

“Yep,” said the wide-eyed nine year old. “It’s Little Black Sambo alright. . . .”

It’s a play, for children, but truth to tell, the half child, half adult audience enjoyed it equally. Every one of them remembered the old, old story of a Jungle Sambo who wanted a red coat, blue trousers, green umbrella, and purple shoes more than anything else in the world. . . .

Much like the audience of the Newark production, perhaps those in Chicago saw the old, familiar story—and nothing more. But it would not have been that with which they had been presented. Not Sambo, little or otherwise.